



Coaching Programmers

“Boss, I Want a Coach.”

How to Convince Your Manager to Invest in Your Future

“Results of a coaching poll of mostly FORTUNE 1000 companies: The respondents were executives from large companies who had participated in either ‘improvement’ or ‘growth’ oriented coaching for 6-12 months. The survey demonstrated that the participants valued the coaching at 6X the cost paid by their company. - *Fortune Magazine* (2/19/03)

Introduction: It’s All About the Plan

If you want to achieve a big, complex goal in your professional life, it’s very likely that a professional coach can be a great help in getting there. If it’s important enough to you, you can simply hire a coach yourself, but many companies are willing to underwrite all or part of the cost of coaching if you can show that it’s in their interest as well as yours. So, to get your boss to pay for your coaching, you need a plan. It’s important to identify that goal as precisely as you can. You might start out with a general idea, “*I want to be a better manager.*” Then write down as many things as you can that would help you improve your management skills. Look over your list, shuffle it, combine items, split items until you can state the goal crisply. For example, you might refine your goal to “*I want to learn to give people feedback that helps them do their jobs better, without hurting their feelings or feeling guilty about it myself.*”

Step 2: Write a Proposal

To get the most out of a coach, and to sell your boss on the benefits, you need to establish as clearly as you can what you want to accomplish with the coach. Write a 1-page proposal to your boss, being as specific as you can. Your proposal should answer the following questions:

1. What goal do you hope to accomplish?
2. How will achieving your goal benefit you, and how will it benefit the company?
3. How long do you estimate it will take to reach your goal?
4. How will a coach help you accomplish your goal?

5. How much will the coaching cost?
6. How can you measure the success of the coaching?
7. What special skills should coach candidates have to be effective?

Step 3: Make the Pitch

When you’re comfortable that your proposal is a strong sales pitch, it’s time to present it to the person who can make the decision to hire a coach. Sometimes it can be difficult to identify this person, and sometimes you will have to pitch it to multiple people. First, talk to your immediate boss about getting coaching - he or she might have budget for just such a thing, or might be able to get funding for it on your behalf. You might raise the issue during a regular meeting, or you might schedule a special meeting with your boss “to talk about some career development ideas.”

Give your boss a copy of the proposal, and explain it as well as you can, emphasizing the benefit to yourself, to her, and to the company. Show that you’ve done your homework by answering her questions completely. At the end of your meeting, ask for approval: “So, is it okay if I go ahead and contact a coach?”

If she isn’t convinced, then ask nicely, “Would you mind if I took this up with your boss, or with the Human Resources department?” The next level of manager might be the person who can make the decision, but don’t ever go behind your boss’s back.

Step 4: Counter Your Boss's Objections

It's possible that your boss will simply say, "Okay, go ahead." but more likely she will have some questions and specific problems that you will have to answer or negotiate around. Here are some of the common ones:

- "Why should the company pay for this?"
- Explain that the company will be getting a great benefit: improved efficiency and productivity from yourself, so it's appropriate that the company invest in you and your future.
- "How do I know that it will help?"
- Offer to define some specific milestones that will show whether the coaching is helping you achieve your goal. Then, meet with your boss regularly to review where you are on your path through those milestones.
- "We don't need to hire a coach: I'll be glad to coach you."
- Thank your boss nicely, but explain that boss/worker coaching almost never works out because the differences in position make it impossible for the two of you to adopt an effective coaching relationship. Besides, what if one of your issues is your relationship with her?
- "Why don't you use our Employee Assistance Program?"
- Explain politely that EAPs are for short-term counseling and therapy for workers with psychological problems, and that's not your situation: you're feeling fine but you need longer-term help in getting to an important goal.
- "Human Resources does all of our coaching."
- This is similar to your boss offering coaching: HR people are seldom trained in coaching, and the fact that they get their paycheck from the company puts them in an automatic conflict of interest.
- "Coaching is too expensive."
- Be ready with facts and figures to show that coaching is a small fraction of your paycheck, and that it will be paid back many times in increased productivity (See the quote in the introduction.) If you have to, offer to pay part of the cost yourself - you may shame her into approving the whole cost.
- "We can't afford it right now."

- Explain to your boss that by approving the coaching she is making an investment in your future with the company. Then ask, "If we can't afford it now, when can I expect to get your support?" Don't leave until you get a real date.
- "If I give you coaching, everyone will want it."
- Actually, that's probably not true: only people motivated to achieve something big ever ask for coaches. And if lots of people do ask for coaching, that's a good thing, because the company has an opportunity to boost its efficiency.

Conclusion: After She Says 'Yes.'

When your boss finally approves the coaching, thank her for investing in your future and tell her you appreciate her support. Then work as hard as you can to make it pay off for you. Make the coaching a real priority, not just something you do after you've finished all your other chores. Keep your boss informed about how it's going: what you've achieved and what you're stuck on. If you need more support from your boss, don't hesitate to ask for it. You'll impress her greatly by your commitment and make it much more likely that the next time you or one of your colleagues needs a coach, she will agree immediately.

About Bruce Taylor



Bruce Taylor is the principal of CoachingProgrammers.com, an executive coaching firm located near Boston, Massachusetts. Bruce helps software organizations of all sizes to create low-stress, supportive, adaptable working environments, so that the engineers, leaders, and managers can work as effectively as possible. He provides executive coaching for senior managers who are creating superior organizations, management coaching for technical leaders who are adapting to new agile practices, and individual coaching for engineers who are upgrading their skills. Bruce has a Masters in Computer Science from Duke University, a Masters in Community Psychology, and a Certificate in Job Stress and Healthy Workplace Design, both from the University of Massachusetts.