

Like many adolescents, I had a number of coaches through the various sports I did in school. It started with soccer, skiing, lacrosse, then on to running and cycling. By the time I finished college, I had probably had over a dozen different coaches throughout those years.

It was during college that I first had the opportunity to work in a job where the manager/employee relationship went beyond the typical authoritarian relationship so common to the paper routes and food service jobs I had previously held. My last couple of years at college, I had to support myself by working full time for an agency providing housing services for mentally ill adults. No longer was my immediate superior simply giving me assignments and making sure I completed my responsibilities, now my input was valued, and I was given the opportunity to work more in a manner that I chose. It was in this setting that I first saw a business associate (my manager in this case) as a "coach". The metaphor worked for me: We were working together for the benefit of our "team", in this case the team being our clients and our agency. My manager provided guidance and instruction, and I responded by putting forth my best effort. I must have enjoyed that first experience, as that first manager eventually became my wife.

After college, my career in the information technology industry started. First as a programmer, then managing a team of programmers, and then on to a series of management jobs in the area of strategic outsourcing. Throughout this time, I always tried to cultivate relationship with my superiors where they felt they could "coach" me, and as I rose in the company I tried to play the coaches role for the people working on teams I managed. I was fortunate throughout my IT career to always have productive teams working for me. Without discounting the talents and professionalism of those I supported, I have to believe the environment I tried to create had something to do with the success of the teams I worked with.

I was also fortunate to have one particular mentor throughout the majority of my IT career who acted as my best supporter. Although he never used the word, I really felt like he was one of the best coaches I ever had. He always put people first in the way he did business, he was unfailingly honest - even with bad news - and he was loyal to the people who were loyal to him. He will likely always be a role model to me in the way I conduct my professional life.

What coaching means to me is a combination of teaching, supporting, mentoring, and cheerleading. A coach needs to be well versed in the skills required of the people they coach, they need to be able to teach those skills where required. They need to be able to support their clients, both in terms of giving them the tools they need to succeed, as well as imbuing the confidence needed to succeed. Mentoring to me implies providing honest feedback in a well-timed fashion, knowing when to point out deficiencies, and when to praise. Finally, a coach needs to be his or her clients' top cheerleaders. The enthusiasm and excitement with the performance of clients cannot be underestimated in its positive contribution to success.

I recently left the IT industry in order to pursue a career as a cycling coach. I had started racing bicycles in college, eventually becoming a national caliber racer myself. Bicycle racing has always been my passion, and while I never quite had the talent to make it as a professional, it consumed my thoughts. It made sense to me to follow that passion, and to indulge my desire to teach. My job title is now “coach”, and I’m proud of it. I like to believe that my experiences as a recipient of coaching, both good and bad, has led me to want to be the best coach I can possibly be. Again, I’ve been lucky to attract talent. Last December one of my clients achieved what I never came close to as a racer, a US National Championship. As I write this article, I’m off to Belgium to watch that same rider, along with several other coaching clients, represent the US in a World Championship. I don’t know if he’ll win, but I know that he and I will share in the experience and both be the richer for it.