

Jim's Profit Accelerator 5: Success Requires Practice, but Excellence Demands a Coach

Party Quiz: Name one world-class achiever in any endeavor who made it without a coach? That's right: we lost the game too; can't think of a single one.

- Thomas Edison's coaches included his mom, who home-schooled him, and Franklin Leonard Pope, who helped him create an electric vote recorder, his first patent.
- Albert Einstein's teachers included Max Talmud, who introduced 10-year-old Einstein to books on science, math, and philosophy, such as Kant's [*Critique of Pure Reason*](#) and [*Euclid's Elements*](#).
- Abraham Lincoln famously relied heavily on his cabinet of advisors, most of whom had views different from his.
- Nashville's Lee Co. used digital systems to connect their diminishing staff of seasoned experts with hundreds of technicians spread all over the state fixing commercial building equipment.

Talent and hard work are the foundation, but excellent performance develops with another person alongside, doing very precise things. That person's intense focus must be on the details of what you're doing as you learn, and actively pointing out what's good and what needs improvement, in detail. But first, why go for excellence when good enough seems to work

SPEED BUMP: Speed requires skill.

Skill is a foundation for speed. This is so obvious that we ignore it, because we accept the skill level of ourselves and most of our people. It's not that we wouldn't like improvement; it's that effective change is an occasional thing too often, instead of regular, intentional improvement under the watchful eye of a skilled teacher. To build an organization that stands out and endures, it takes more than a great idea pretty well executed.

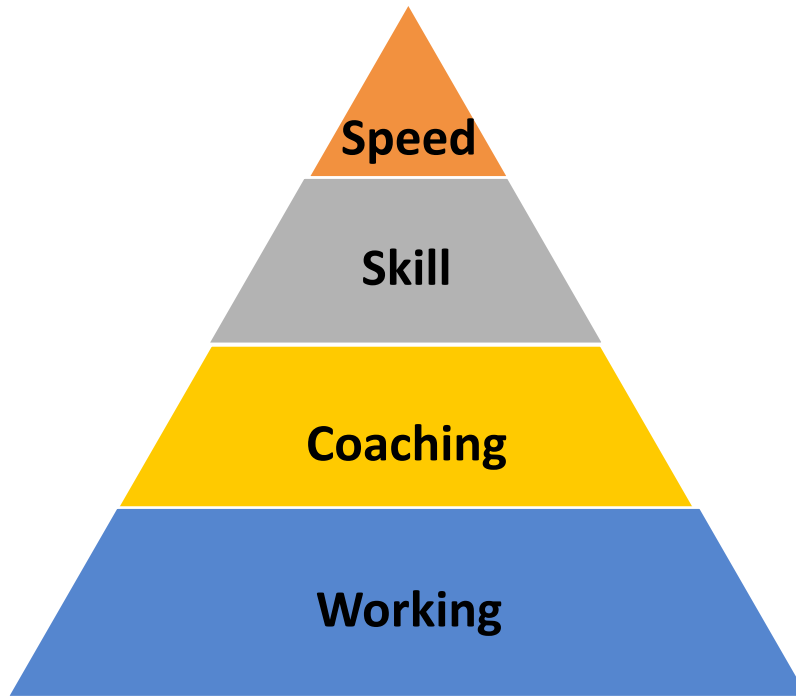


Figure 1.

Why does every winning NASCAR driver have an earphone listening to a “coach” in the pit? It’s not that the driver isn’t skilled; winning demands more and more skill to keep up. The coach watches and guides—all at 180 mph!

Starbucks roared across the world and stumbled. Its recent recovery was not just about the menu. It was a new system of instilling specific behaviors into their 300,000-plus partners (employees) in 21,000 stores! The easy part was figuring out menu and equipment (and that wasn’t easy). Here are two steps that drove their new burst of success:

1. Teaching baristas the “new right way.”
2. Helping them to keep doing things the “new right way.”

The heart of their success is **System Coaching**. It requires this information:

1. What are the critical details of the process?
2. How do you know if you did it right?
3. What do you change to do better?

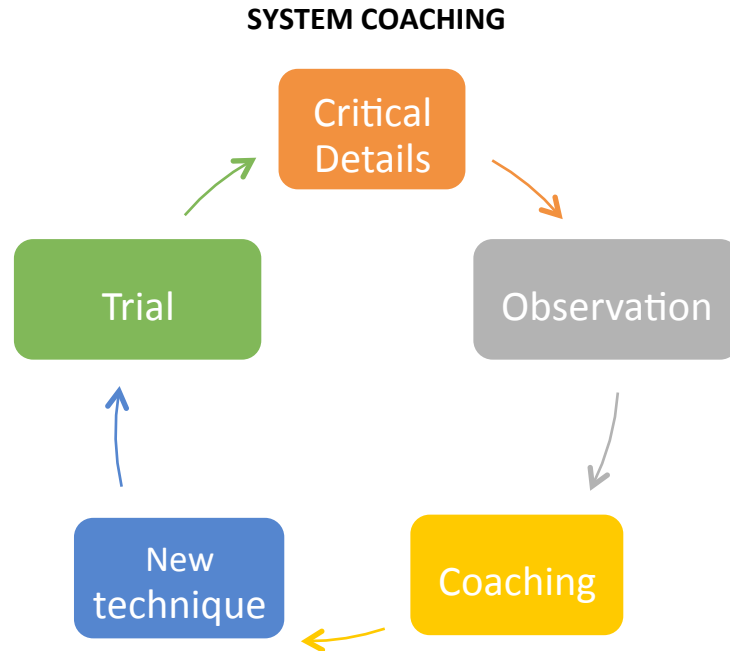


Figure 2.

Coaching virtually eliminated accidents within six months in a metal manufacturing company where I worked. Employee morale improved, and worker compensation insurance costs dropped in half. The quick change was driven by a coach who knew what mattered and who to teach to get the result.

Batting practice in baseball follows this pattern exactly:

- The coach (an expert in both technique and teaching) watches the batter hit balls. It's seldom much of a discussion in a classroom.
- The batting cage minimizes distractions and maximizes practice swings per minute.
- It's: pitch, hit, pitch, hit, pitch, hit... Stop for adjustment from the coach, repeat.
- The coach looks for words and examples that the hitter can apply, tries one, watches what happens when the hitter tries the ideas, then repeats or adjusts.

This learning pattern is common where excellence is a condition of professional survival: athletes, surgeons, pilots, you get the idea.

SPEED BUMP: Teach the fewest details with highest impact on outcome (Leverage).

Apply this computer science tenet: shifting just 10 percent of a peak load in a congested network can cut congestion dramatically more than 10 percent. Our brains are congested networks; a learner's performance can accelerate if the teacher cuts the input to a few essentials. Of course, the teacher must know what's essential!

My best windsurfing teachers had this in common:

1. Show me a few details of technique.
2. Watch me try it.

3. Sail alongside and yell instructions as I sailed.
4. Review the instructions back on the beach.

The better the instructor, the better I sailed. What are the minimum requirements for successful coaching?

- A “batting cage.”
- A teacher who has pulled out high-leverage details from the process. (High leverage means high impact on results.)
- Someone who knows how to transfer the skill to another person.
- A batter who wants to learn.

Classic process improvement focuses mostly on simplifying work processes, but, ultimately, success is more about the teacher than the process. Make it work for you:

1. Find a coach in every major work team.
2. Challenge each team to find a leverage learning spot and improve it every month.
3. Track and report the impact of the skill growth.
4. Recognize coaches publicly.

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Jim Grew is an expert in CEO-level strategy and executive leadership whose clients refer to him as the Business Defogger and Accelerator. Jim helps leaders swiftly discover the hidden opportunities within their businesses and exploit them for dramatic results. Nearly three decades of success as a COO and CEO coupled with his experience running nine thriving businesses provide the foundation for his consulting work as president of the Grew Company. He presents regularly to industry groups, mentors business leaders, and shares insights on his blog, BizBursts.com: <http://bizbursts.com/>. He holds BA and MBA degrees from Stanford University.

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