

Call & Response Reinforcement



align **4** profit

“The way positive reinforcement is carried out is more important than the amount.”
–D. F. Skinner



Two poles of Call and Response



In my paper, Call and Response Coaching, I explained how the technique was inspired by the sub-Saharan Africa performance practice of the same name.

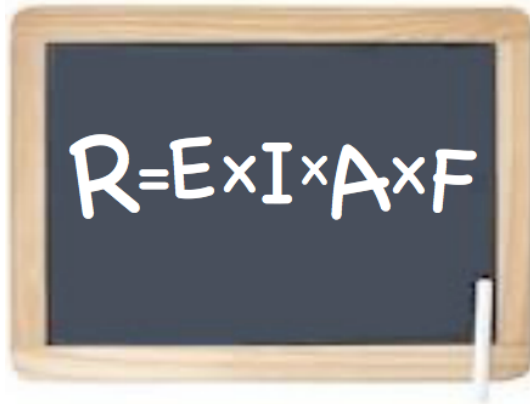
I contrasted Call and Response with traditional leadership and coaching that focuses almost exclusively on debating forcefully to influence others, presenting views, arguing strongly, and spouting off demands. I recommend, instead, that coaches embrace the more enlightened practice of cooperative, give-and-take conversation to achieve High Commitment and High Performance.

We looked at how to attract commitment by toggling between questions and statements the way a magnet attracts using the positive and negative forces in its magnetic field. And I showed how Call and Response Coaching can influence and empower higher commitment and enable higher performance in two ways—as Reinforcement and as Redirection.

In this paper, I'll examine **Reinforcement**.



Setting Expectations



In the Reinforcement Call, you encourage and reward your team on what they are doing well, so that, in Response, they not only keep doing it, but learn to accept and own the positive behavior.

Before you can reinforce, however, it's necessary to make clear what you expect your employees to do and how they should perform their jobs. Your expectations need to be clear, succinct, time-bound, and clearly associated with specific tasks and job functions.

In the Call and Response paper, you encountered the Expectation Formula—coaching Results (R) will be multiplied by the quality of the Expectations (E) you set times the level of Involvement (I) you encourage times the amount of solution Adoption (A) you achieve times the Follow-through (F) you accomplish.

Involvement and Adoption

When you involve others (prompt a Response) in generating solutions, those you wish to influence will become much more likely to take responsibility for Adopting the solutions they helped create.

So much for the review. Let's focus now on Reinforcing behavior that aligns with your Expectations.

A vertical stack of four hands giving thumbs up, with the top hand slightly offset to the right.

Begin with Celebration

To keep everyone on your team performing at their very best, your coaching needs to begin with positive reinforcement that will help them remember what they did and get in the habit of repeating it.

Drive-by Encouragement

It's simply not enough to say, "Thanks," "Good job," or "Well done." When people are not specifically aware of what they have done to deserve praise, they will not necessary be able to repeat the behavior.

Effective Reinforcement Coaching demands a mindful and robust approach to feedback—intentional conversations aimed at supporting the employee in the continued use of the desired behavior.

Celebrate and Reinforce

Using Call and Response techniques, congratulate your employee with a combination of statements and questions that will help him or her accept and own the behavior.

Let's see how you can do it in a way that will enable your employees to remember and repeat the behavior you want to reinforce.



The FORCE inside effective Reinforcement



When Reinforcement feedback measures up to the five qualities listed below, you will make a lasting impression.

Frequency Provide your Reinforcement Call and Response Coaching as often as possible. Start immediately, if not sooner. Otherwise you'll lose your enthusiasm or put it off till later, and your employee will hold a less-fresh memory of what you're talking about. Repeat your Reinforcement frequently to keep it fresh.

Observation Before you engage your employee, observe and isolate the most defining details of the attitude, skill, or knowledge he or she has demonstrated. Be specific and base your feedback on the behavior, not the value you place on it.

Results Focus your feedback on the positive results the behavior has on your team, the department, and the organization. Discover together what positive outcomes might result in the context of the employee's performance criteria as well as the organization's values and strategic goals.

Commitment Don't conclude without making sure your employee understands, accepts, and owns what the two of you have discovered.

Engagement Commitments can die unless you keep your employees engaged and hold them to their promises.



The FORCE inside effective Reinforcement

“That was a fine job on the presentation you did last month, Kelly. Overall you did well. Keep up the good work!”

Rather than leave these qualities as abstract notions, let’s put them to work. Read the quote on the left. Imagine that it’s a boss, Max, congratulating Kelly, his direct report.

How many of the 5 Qualities of Effective Reinforcement did Max hit? How many did he miss? Here they are again, below, for your reference:

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The FORCE inside effective Reinforcement

“That was a fine job on the presentation you did last month, Kelly. Overall you did well. Keep up the good work!”

Okay, that was easy. You probably assessed pretty quickly that Max missed them all. Let me be a little more specific.

Frequency Last month? Does Kelly even remember the presentation he’s talking about? Make it a habit to debrief your team after every presentation? While the adrenaline still flows and the memories remain fresh. Then keep reminding them.

Observation Overall? Over all what? What skills made Kelly shine? Do they happen to be the one’s she’s working on? Or was it Kelly’s attitude or knowledge that impressed Max? Don’t spare the details.

Results Max made no attempt whatsoever to help Kelly discover for herself the results of “fine job” or how they will affect her, her career, the team, or the organization. Max’s drive-by compliment has been wasted for lack of relevance. Make your positive feedback stick by helping your employees see just how and why their hard work matters.

Commitment Max left the scene without getting confirmation from Kelly. Maybe she thinks she didn’t do so well and needs to have that misconception corrected. Don’t let your compliments fall flat and weaken your credibility.

Engagement Doesn’t look like Max is on the path of engagement. If you don’t get a commitment, you certainly can’t hold your employee to it.



The FORCE inside effective Reinforcement

“Excellent presentation, Kevin.
Let’s talk about it...”

“I know you’ve been working to
improve your presentation
skills, Kevin.
I noticed that you adapted the
proposal on the fly to
incorporate several client
suggestions. How do you think
that approach worked?”

Not long after her stunningly wonderful presentation, Kelly was promoted. Now she has a team working for her. Recently, she put Kevin in charge of an important presentation. Since both had been to CoachQuest, Kelly’s reinforcement approach was exemplary! Let’s break it down.

Frequency Kelly congratulated Kevin immediately after the presentation, while they were packing up. Instead of hitting him with a drive-by compliment, she initiated a Call and Response coaching conversation. She touched upon a few specifics as they headed to the parking lot, then scheduled a one-on-one for the same day back at the office. Sounds like she’s going to give frequent reminders.

Observation Since Kelly did not spare the details in her reinforcement, I’m not going to cite her entire conversation here. But you can see that she began by addressing an issue she knew Kevin was working on.

Before the one-on-one, referring to notes she took during the presentation, Kelly listed specific points she knew would grab and hold Kevin’s attention. She focused her remarks on what she observed and asked Kevin questions about what he experienced.

When Kevin asked questions, Kelly probed for clarification. She knows that making assumptions about what someone is asking can drive a coaching session off track. Paying careful attention to Kevin’s answers, she kept their coaching conversation heading in the most productive direction.



The FORCE inside effective Reinforcement

“What do you think your improved skills will do for the growth of this account...?”

Results It’s not enough, Kelly knew, to simply help make Kevin feel good about improving his presentation skills. Convinced that Kevin understood that he was making progress, she questioned him next about the significance of his performance.

Kelly helped Kevin frame his progress in the context of the success of the current project and what that success would mean for the team, the organization, and his career—in the long run and for his more immediate goals.

The answers to these questions helped Kelly align Kevin in all these contexts.

“Are we in agreement on everything we talked about today?”

Commitment Kelly made sure Kevin accepted everything they talked about. She didn’t want to leave Kevin with any lingering questions or misconceptions.

Kelly knows there’s no better time to strengthen commitment than when a team member is feeling good about his performance.

“Good. I’m going to follow up with you on this in the next couple of days...”

Engagement Before closing the conversation, Kelly let Kevin know that his commitment carried weight with her—that she intended to engage him again soon.

The cycle of Call and Response Reinforcement Coaching should never end. Kelly knows that and will not let Kevin’s commitment lose its force.



Reinforcement Don'ts



Don't jump to confusions!

You can't live in this world without making assumptions. There's simply not enough time in anyone's life to get to the bottom of everything. Especially at the pace we move today. But making assumptions or jumping to the wrong conclusions creates confusion, which makes for misdirection in your coaching.

Chris Argyris, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School, says that we often convert what we presume to be objective data (observations) into subjective opinion (ungrounded assessments).

When these ungrounded assessments become the foundation for feedback, your coaching efforts work against you. Always check your assumptions with probing questions. And listen carefully to the answers.

Don't leave it up to chance

Sure you've got a great memory. But memory is malleable. Time changes what you remember. When you list your observations, document your evidence, you not only get more to go on when you coach, you're also more confident that it will be accurate. Your convictions will be stronger, and you'll be more convincing and persuasive.

CAUTION: No matter how convinced you may be, allow for a shift in your thinking. Rather than holding fast to your own reasoning, be prepared to tentatively adopt the concerns and reasoning of your employee.



Reinforcement Don'ts



Don't take No for an answer

Some people, it seems, just can't handle compliments. Here are a few reasons why.

False Modesty An extreme display of modesty may be a very proud person's way of trying to appear virtuous. Use evidence to bolster your reinforcement and get affirmation before false modesty causes them to neglect accepting and owning the positive feedback.

Comparison When employees consistently compare themselves as inferior to their peers, use evidence to counter their claims. If what they claim is true, halt the comparison. Show your employees their unique qualities in terms of what they are worth to the team and the organization.

Suspicion Your employee may discount a compliment for fear that it heralds more work coming their way. Naturally suspicious people may distrust positive feedback, seeing it as a tool to manipulate them. In this case, cool your compliments, don't immediately associate them with requests for favors or taking on more work. Using questions, give them the opportunity to more actively guide their fate.

Hot Potato If your compliments consistently elicit comeback compliments, you may be dealing with someone who needs to please. Show them how to take a compliment by accepting it, but don't associate compliments coming your way with favors.



Next Steps

Cognitive Science

Although inspired by the sub-Saharan Africa performance practice of the same name, Call and Response is based in cognitive science. Studies conclude that adults become more engaged, learn better, and become more committed to their actions when encouraged to address their situations and come up with their own solutions.

Based on that research, this paper has given you a taste of the science behind the Reinforcement side of Call and Response Coaching.

If you would like to make sure you are putting this powerful process into practice as effectively as possible, please feel free to [email me](#) or call 972-608-0400 for a one-on-one or team coaching session.

Call or email also, if you would like to introduce a friend or colleague to CoachQuest Leadership Coaching.

Next time—[Call and Response Coaching: Redirection](#)