

Career Coaching

Most Managers Don't Know How to Coach People. But They Can Learn.

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Summary. Are you successful at coaching your employees? Many executives are unable to correctly answer this question, because they *think* they're coaching when they're actually just telling their employees what to do. This behavior is often reinforced by their peers, and is hardly an effective way to motivate people and help them grow. Instead, research suggests, coaching leaders in how to be coaches can pay dividends, but only if you start by defining "coaching" and give ample room for self-reflection and feedback. [close](#)

Are you successful at coaching your employees? In our years studying and working with companies on this topic, we've observed that when many executives say "yes," they're ill-equipped to answer the question. Why? For one thing, managers tend to *think* they're coaching when they're actually just telling their employees what to do.

According to Sir John Whitmore, a leading figure in executive coaching, the definition of coaching is "unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them." When done right, coaching can also help with employee engagement; it is often more motivating to bring your expertise to a situation than to be told what to do.

Recently, my colleagues and I conducted a study that shows that most managers don't understand what coaching really is — and that also sheds light on how to fix the problem. The good news is that managers can improve their coaching skills in a short

amount of time (15 hours), but they do have to invest in learning how to coach in the first place. This research project is still in progress, but we wanted to offer a glimpse into our methodology and initial findings.

First, we asked a group of participants to coach another person on the topic of time management, without further explanation. In total, 98 people who were enrolled in a course on leadership training participated, with a variety of backgrounds and jobs. One-third of the participants were female and two-thirds were male; on average, they were 32 years old and had eight years of work and 3.8 years of leadership experience. The coaching conversations lasted five minutes and were videotaped. Later, these tapes were evaluated by other participants in the coaching course through an online peer review system. We also asked 18 coaching experts to evaluate the conversations. All of these experts had a master's degree or graduate certificate in coaching, with an average of 23.2 years of work experience and 7.4 years of coaching experience.

Participants then received face-to-face training in two groups of 50, with breakouts in smaller groups for practice, feedback, and reflection around different coaching skills. At the end, we videotaped another round of short coaching conversations, which were again evaluated by both peers and coaching experts. In total, we collected and analyzed more than 900 recorded evaluations of coaching conversations (pre-training and post-training), which

were accompanied by surveys asking participants about their attitudes and experiences with leadership coaching before and after the training.

The biggest takeaway was the fact that, when initially asked to coach, many managers instead demonstrated a form of consulting. Essentially, they simply provided the other person with advice or a solution. We regularly heard comments like, “First you do this” or “Why don’t you do this?”

This kind of micromanaging-as-coaching was initially reinforced as good coaching practice by other research participants as well. In the first coaching exercise in our study, the evaluations peers gave one another were significantly higher than the evaluations from experts.

Our research looked specifically at how you can train people to be better coaches. We focused on analyzing the following nine leadership coaching skills, based on the existing literature and our own practical experiences of leadership coaching:

- listening
- questioning
- giving feedback
- assisting with goal setting

- showing empathy
- letting the coachee arrive at their own solution
- recognizing and pointing out strengths
- providing structure
- encouraging a solution-focused approach

Using the combined coaching experts' assessments as the baseline for the managers' abilities, we identified the best, worst, and most improved components of coaching. The skill the participants were the best at before training was listening, which was rated "average" by our experts. After the training, the experts' rating increased 32.9%, resulting in listening being labeled "average-to-good."

The skills the participants struggled with the most before the training were "recognizing and pointing out strengths" and "letting the coachee arrive at their own solution." On the former, participants were rated "poor" pre-training, and their rating improved to "average" after the training was completed. Clearly, this is an area managers need more time to practice, and it's something they likely need to be trained on differently as well. Interestingly, the most improved aspect of coaching was "letting coachees arrive at their own solution." This concept saw an average increase in proficiency of 54.1%, which moved it from a "poor" rating to "slightly above average."

More generally, multiple assessments of participants by experts before and after the training course resulted in a 40.2% increase in overall coaching ability ratings across all nine categories, on average. Given that this was a very short training course this is a remarkable improvement.

What can organizations learn from our research? First, any approach to coaching should begin by clearly defining what it is and how it differs from other types of manager behavior. This shift in mindset lays a foundation for training and gives managers a clear set of expectations.

The next step is to let managers practice coaching in a safe environment before letting them work with their teams. The good news, as evidenced by our research, is that you don't necessarily need to invest in months of training to see a difference. You do, however, need to invest in some form of training. Even a short course targeted at the right skills can markedly improve managers' coaching skills.

Regardless of the program you choose, make sure it includes time for participants to reflect on their coaching abilities. In our study, managers rated their coaching ability three times: once after we asked them to coach someone cold, once after they were given additional training, and once looking back at their original coaching session. After the training, managers decreased their initial assessment of themselves by 28.8%, from "slightly good" to

“slightly poor.” This change was corroborated by managers’ peers, who reduced their assessment by 18.4%, from “slightly good” to “neither good nor bad,” when looking back at their original observations of others. In other words, if managers have more knowledge and training, they are able to provide a better self-assessment of their skills. Organizations should allocate time for managers to reflect on their skills and review what they have done. What’s working, and what they could do better?

Our research also supports the idea of receiving feedback from coaching experts in order to improve. The risk of letting only nonexperts help might reinforce and normalize ineffective behaviors throughout an organization. Specifically, coaching experts could give feedback on how well the coaching skills were applied and if any coaching opportunities have been missed. This monitoring could take the form of regular peer coaching, where managers in an organization come together to practice coaching with each other, or to discuss common problems and solutions they have encountered when coaching others, all in the presence of a coaching expert. Here managers have two advantages: First, they can practice their coaching in a safe environment. Second, coaches can discuss challenges they have experienced and how to overcome them.

If you take away only one thing here, it’s that coaching is a skill that needs to be learned and honed over time. Fortunately, even a small amount of training can help. Not only does a lack of training

leave managers unprepared, it may effectively result in a policy of managers' reinforcing poor coaching practices among themselves. This can result in wasted time, money, and energy.

Editor's Note: Due to an editing error, the original published version of this article did not include the author's final edits. The piece has been updated.

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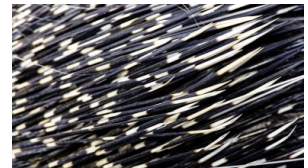
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