



# COACHING AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL

Terri Bianco  
CPS HR Consulting



## INTRODUCTION

The concept of management was invented during the Industrial Revolution. It has since progressed through various theories, ideologies and practices. The overriding purpose of management from that era was to ensure employees produce and perform according to certain standards. They were tasked to get as many widgets out of the factory door as possible, and failure to do so had consequences. While today's work environment is vastly different, much of management theory from the last century prevails.

The invention of the Internet represents as significant an impact on our workplace and our society as the earlier invention of the automobile. In the latter, mass production moved workers from farm to factory; in the former, it has moved workers from working with products to working with information – becoming knowledge workers. In today's workplace, employees create, manipulate, systemize, communicate and disseminate information through technology. They have the knowledge to do so and the resulting paradigm shift from work of last century to that of today's workplace is the assets of an organization are no longer in the machinery left on the factory floor. The assets are the knowledge workers and the way they handle – *manage* – the organization's information. Or as Harvard Business Review puts it:

*When all the value in an organization walks out the door each evening, a different managerial contract than the command-and-control mindset prevalent in execution type work is required.*

This paper looks at the desirability of shifting the approach to managing employees further away from the traditional carrot-and-stick approach to one that lends itself more to coaching, allowing the employees freedom to express their needs and desires. Doing so responds to shifting demographics and changes in the workplace. It recognizes the move from top-down hierarchies to flatter, more distributed organizations. It is in response to the continual influx of new technology and new information, and the prominence of workers who often require little or no direct supervision and often know the tasks better than their managers do.



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## WHAT IS COACHING?

At its core, coaching revolves around asking questions that help people discover answers that are right for them. It stretches people's thinking. They become more creative in their decision making, solve problems on their own and enjoy more clarity and innovation. As a manager, supervisor or leader it means a style of management primarily characterized by asking employees questions about their needs, obstacles, goals and achievements. This, in turn, assists them to fulfill their immediate responsibilities more effectively and to advance their development as professionals over time. The manager becomes a thinking partner with the employee through structured and consistent dialogue.

While training goes a long way to improve employees' skills or performance, coaching tags along with the employee to implement and build on those skills in the workplace. Research shows regularly applying learning in the workplace over a sustained period of time offers the best method to embody introduced changes or techniques for improved performance, behavior and alliance with others.

Coaching is not about fixing someone. It's not about therapy or giving advice. The coach ensures the person being coached always steers toward a goal, achievement, improvement and success as identified by the employee/coachee often, but not always, augmented by the coach/manager. There are good reasons for coaching employees and proven processes and skills to do so effectively. While these processes are described below, it is recommended managers who wish to embrace coaching as a management tool receive training to do so successfully. That said, a willingness to shift the approach from managing employees (telling them) to one of coaching employees (asking them) begins the process that can then be tailored to individual managers and their organizations.

## EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Embracing the role of manager-coach gives employees opportunities to take ownership of their own improvements and gives managers insights and a refreshing approach to their profession by eliciting, not directing, creativity and high performance from others. Without coaching, employees continue to come to the manager for answers instead of finding their own solutions, and that, in turn, can slow down productivity and creativity, something that is not sustainable in today's workplace.

Statistics about the lack of employee engagement in today's workplace are dismal at best, and all are well south of 50 percent. Translating those statistics to human form, half of employees within an organization are basically not there. Or, said differently, all employees are there, but only half the time. Individuals generally fall into three areas of engagement:

*Actively Engaged* – They are focused on the task with commitment and persistence; embrace what the organization does and highly value it. Take ownership of their jobs.

*Partially Engaged* – They comply with what is required without necessarily being engaged. They do what they are told by supervisors to get the job done but do not think the job warrants more effort than they are giving. If their salary were lowered for any reason, they would seek other work.

*Disengaged/Actively Disengaged* – They are often rebellious. They distrust their supervisor or manager. They take shortcuts and often focus on things other than work. They do not miss an opportunity to share their feelings about management with coworkers.

Dale Carnegie Training Institute, in a study of more than 1,500 employees in 2016, discovered:

29% were totally engaged  
45% were partially engaged  
26% were disengaged

The Gallup Organization's most recent poll posted January 28, 2015 cites employee engagement among U.S. workers at 31.5 percent during 2014.

Engaged	31.5
Not engaged	51.0
Actively disengaged	17.5

Engagement was highest among managers at 38.4 percent, outpacing all other categories. Millennials showed as the least engaged generation at 28.5 percent.

It is estimated that, by 2020, half of all employees will be Millennials. This generation has had technology at its fingertips since birth. Not only does this give them technological savvy, it also provides the mindset of autonomy. On the web, one can search, learn, explore, be entertained, be intrigued and produce. And it is all by the individual's own choice.

When these employees come to work, it is anticipated they will fulfill their duties and in most cases must let go of that sense of autonomy and freedom to choose. Hard to do. Hard to stay engaged. Yet with coaching, there is an opportunity for managers to tap into that desire to choose and to work with their millennial employees, among others, on how to improve their work effort, their professional growth and their engagement in the workplace.

## EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

The State of California Government Operations Agency conducted a survey developed by CalHR in 2015 from its comprehensive database of all State employees. This survey uncovered data and chosen statements relative to how employees view their jobs. In the Summary of Final Results they found that:

*Mean levels of agreement with ten statements about employee engagement on a four-point scale where one equals strongly disagree and four equals strongly agree tended to fall below the level of somewhat agree.... Receiving the lowest scores were: “I receive recognition for doing good work” and “People where I work are accountable for results.”*

Among virtual workers isolated from managers and colleagues, the number-one driver of employee engagement is recognition – being acknowledged for work, being noticed, feeling included. Since so many employees work in stations or locations separate from managers and even colleagues, the idea of “virtual” or “remote” extends beyond those who are teleworking. Indeed, most employees work remotely, whether from their laptops and within their cubicles or out in the field, communicating from a vehicle. As with all workers, feeling valued, confident, inspired, enthused and empowered are the key emotions that lead to engagement.

## COMMUNICATION, TRUST AND PURPOSE

Beyond employee issues of engagement and a need for recognition, many work environments suffer from a lack of trust, usually associated with poor communication. Work is increasingly fast-paced with seemingly endless stacks of tasks to be performed. It is easy to take on the challenges of work without stopping to reflect on its purpose, how it fits with organizational goals, values and vision and to be given chances to share those reflections with others, thereby building trust and enhancing communication.

While coaching cannot solve all these problems, it can steer the culture of the organization toward a more collaborative effort instead of one where titles and roles undermine the true purpose and enjoyment of work. When managers and employees enter into a coaching relationship, significant opportunities arise for acknowledgement, mutual recognition of values and strengths, and shared purpose and trust. It offers an opening for managers to share their vision and enlist the support of employees into that vision. There are opportunities to discuss values, to be vulnerable and to vastly increase communication. It takes dedication, it takes time, and it is well worth the effort.

*“You must capture the heart of a supremely able man before his brain can do its best.”  
— Andrew Carnegie*

## COACHING FUNDAMENTALS

The foundation of any successful coaching endeavor includes these fundamental elements:

1. **Relationship/Partnership** – Commitment to a mutually respectful and fruitful relationship. If the relationship is already established, it needs to be refreshed in the context of a coaching relationship. If new, the relationship begins as a coaching relationship with both parties aware of and committed to that relationship.
2. **Mutual trust** – Essential to a successful coaching relationship. This can be built through communication, listening, modeling behaviors, shared vulnerabilities and mutual accountability. Through one-on-one meetings, purposeful questioning strategies and mutual sharing of weaknesses or misunderstanding, including apologizing, trust can be solidly created and maintained.
3. **Freedom to Communicate** – Manager encourages employee to speak openly and simultaneously opens up to receiving what the employee has to say. If appropriate, transparent communication regarding organizational decisions or policies can be discussed to the extent they involve the employee. Should that be the case, it comes with a mutual agreement that confidential conversations remain within the sanctity of the coaching sessions.

## COACHING PROCESS

There are as many reasons to coach as there are people wanting to make changes. Typically powerful coaching relationships yield results in areas of a person's professional life that they most want to improve. They may include:

Communication skills  
 Management techniques  
 Supervisory skills  
 Career goals  
 Presentation skills  
 Meeting management  
 Leadership  
 Decision making skills

Interpersonal skills  
 Emotional intelligence  
 Stress reduction, balance  
 Relationship conflicts  
 Obstacles to delegating  
 Overcoming resistance to change  
 Dealing with difficult people  
 Strategic thinking

While the three Coaching Fundamentals ensure a successful coaching program, the steps of the process and how each is implemented can vary from manager to manager depending on the style and appropriate approach in each situation. In short, there is no one-size-fits-all in terms of the coaching relationship, but, with that said, the steps below have proven successful.



## SELECTION

Managers would do well to pick one or two employees to begin coaching, both so the manager can learn and experience the value of coaching and also so the culture of coaching can take root. From there, it is easier to add more people to those whom the manager suggests receive coaching.

Initially, the manager may select those on his or her staff who are already relatively successful in their positions and could benefit from some added development. Or, a manager may select a new hire who shows lots of promise. These are the “stars” who would tend to accelerate with some coaching on specific areas in which they know they need improvement. These are the most coachable and easiest to approach.

Keeping in mind that coaching is not about “fixing” anyone; managers may nonetheless identify those whom they think are capable of so much more than they are doing. Perhaps these employees are not aware of their talents or lack the confidence to think they can achieve more than they are. Coaching can serve as a nudge and open avenues for them that give them higher self-esteem and benefit the team or organization.

Those who definitely need improvement – fixing – fall into the category of Intervention Coaching. This means they did not ask to be coached; they were told they needed to be coached. This approach is typically not successful unless the employee understands the value of coaching and buys into it, becoming coachable. Failing that, it is better to continue to manage.

## OPENINGS/TIMING

A challenge for managers is the mind-shift from the role they are playing as a manager to one as a coach. Thus they need to completely understand what that role means to them, and how they feel about it. When suggesting the idea of coaching to employees, it must be done with some certainty of its value, expressed in a positive way lest it be seen by the employee as a sign they have done something wrong.

Opportunities to approach employees can come at various times: one-on-one consultations, performance reviews, changes in circumstances, an employee who needs to learn a new skill or who has taken a different position all serve as openings to offer coaching. It is also quite possible the employee requests some help, some coaching, on a particular obstacle to achievement. It is useful for a manager to observe the employees they have in mind for a coaching relationship and look for the timing and the opportunities to step in and suggest coaching.

A manager for example, might say in a one-on-one with one of his highly skilled employees, “You know, you are doing really well here. I have seen you grow into this job so much. You really don’t need me to manage you, watch over you. But I would like to shift to a coaching relationship with you to further accelerate your career. How do you feel about that?”

An employee may be frustrated by his added work dealing with the public. Perhaps he is more of a detail-oriented, behind-the-scenes worker who has been given this added assignment involving communication. At the time the new assignment is given, a manager can offer coaching that, on the surface, is meant to guide the person in the specific task of working with the public, but might also expand to include building his confidence and overall improvement in his communication skills.

Another opening might occur in a staff meeting where the manager says he is offering coaching to anyone who might be interested with a thorough explanation and education about what that entails. This opens up the playing field to all employees, but if the manager feels they are all “stars,” it can become a positive shift of style and empowers employees to take a look at themselves to see if they are ripe for performance improvement.

## ESTABLISH COACHING RELATIONSHIP

If the explanation or understanding of coaching has not been accomplished when the manager approaches an employee to offer coaching, it should be established in the initial meeting. The manager needs to explain the concept of coaching and gain mutual understanding from the coachee as to what it means, what it involves, and what it is intended to accomplish. In short, both need to have coaching competence well-established.

From there it is an easy step to outline what protocols or agreements would be followed during the coaching program. How many sessions? How often? How long? What pre- or post-work will there be? How do we communicate? When? These are discussed and agreed to by both parties.

## AGENDA

Once the protocols are established, the employee is there to identify what he or she wishes to accomplish or achieve from coaching. This can range from a specific to an overall behavior change. It can focus on getting a promotion or overcoming nervousness, dealing with a difficult colleague or advancing their skills in a certain area. The employee’s agenda drives the coaching relationship. It is about what he or she wants or desires. In that way, when the manager guides – through questioning strategies, paraphrasing and feedback – the employee is focused and takes ownership. It is his or her “thing,” and the relevance to achieve becomes considerably stronger than if the employee were told to resolve something.

If the manager hears from the employee that he or she wants to accomplish X and the manager feels or knows that this employee would do well to accomplish Y, there still remains the opportunity for the manager to introduce what he or she feels is needed. But first the coaching tackles the need or needs identified by the employee. In that way, as he or she sees how it works, the manager can more readily say: “Since X worked so well, how do you feel about tackling Y?”

## COACHING METHODS

Questioning strategies serve as the primary coaching skill. The manager-coach asks clear, purposeful, open-ended questions designed to uncover the employee’s thinking, reasoning, feelings or desires. Questions are followed by focused listening on the part of the manager, paraphrasing what he or she heard, whether fact, feeling or intention. More questioning follows along the lines of the samples below:



- What are your career objectives right now?
- How can we start moving in that direction?
- What is missing from your job that, if it were in place, would make a difference to you?
- How have you handled this situation in the past?
- What options have you tried to resolve this? What else could you try?
- If you were to give me tips on how best to coach you, what would you tell me?

Other methods include manager and employee brainstorming solutions, dialogue/discussion, practicing techniques, role plays, requests for action, and coaching conversations designed to uncover underlying beliefs or thoughts that might be holding the employee back from his or her full achievement. These latter conversations tend to fall in the purview of professional coaches, yet in an established, safe and trusting coaching relationship, they are fair game.

## PRE- AND POST-COACHING WORK

Asking the employee to complete a form or answer a set of questions ahead of a scheduled coaching session helps to focus the session and keep it from going off-task. It also gives the manager time to prepare for the session, think through questions, techniques, resources or suggestions he or she might make during the session.

Job-embedded assignments or “homework” is an important part of a coaching session as it gives the employee a task or technique to try out what he or she has just learned or discussed. The homework comes out of the session and relates back to it. It can range from reading a pertinent article to practicing a communication technique to tackling a new assignment to self-observation of feelings or beliefs.

## COACHING SESSIONS

The session typically begins with the pre-work questionnaire. The manager inquiries about the coachee’s thinking when answering the questions; what is he or she after in the session? Open-ended questioning strategies, dialogue and coaching conversations get underway. At some point, the homework is debriefed. “How did it go?” “What did you feel about that?” “Bravo! Sounds like you did well!” Or, “how might you have done this better?”

From there, the manager and employee can revisit the agenda or take on new challenges. The employee might identify action plans of his or her own in addition to the homework assigned. The next session is set up (if not already scheduled), and both celebrate success – whether a high five, an exchange of a joke, an “atta boy” or any other means of identifying that hard work is being done in coaching and the effort on both parts needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. This should be a fixed part of a coaching session and something both can rely on as a tradition within their relationship.

## CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

There are challenges for managers to take on the mantle of coach. Managers have achieved their position through hard work. As in the statistics above, managers are the most engaged of all employee groups. On top of that, not all employees *want* to achieve or get better at what they do. They do need to be told what to do, how to improve.

So in today's workplace, managers really need to be both manager and coach. There are times when managing is called for; others when a coaching approach would yield better results. The challenge is in knowing when to manage and when to coach and, most importantly in order to maintain trust, to be clear what hat is being worn – manager or coach.

Managers manage when they have to come from their vast experience and knowledge to get a complex requirement or a directive across. Typically it's best to manage where immediate needs are present; specific outcomes need to be reached quickly and efficiently. Strong management skills are required when handling a crisis, working with new and inexperienced personnel, meeting deadlines and mandates from above their own status or position.

## SUMMARY

Managers coach to engage already-independent thinkers and knowledge workers. Enlightened managers are already doing some form of coaching. They guide employees in their work, clearing paths for them and supporting them in short- and long-term goals. They generate trust, collaborative effort and higher morale. A manager-coach openly shares thoughts and his or her vision and invites open discussion of values. Most importantly the manager as coach focuses on the success of the employees. The manager will not succeed unless those employees succeed, so the strength of the coaching relationship lies in a collaborative team effort.

Coaching offers a refreshing approach to managing. With a focus on *asking* employees instead of *telling* employees, the manager can relax, sit back and listen. There is no need to plan every move, make every decision or answer all the questions. Once underway, coaching relationships thrive. Each learns from the other. It becomes possible to shed the "Master of the Universe" regalia and be more human, more approachable, closer to employees, more trusting and more trustworthy, too. In turn, employees will become more engaged in what they do because they had some say in it, some ownership. And they will gain the recognition and acknowledgement they truly desire from their busy managers.

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