



BUILDING A COACHING  
COMPETENCY IN LEADERS

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*“Treat people as if they were what they ought to be and you help them to become what they are capable of being.”*

- Johann W. von Goethe

Managers face intense pressures every day: financial constraints, information overload, public opinion, and an accelerating pace of change. Yet increasingly, the key success factor for managers is how effectively they coach their teams. Building a coaching competency in managers who lead others can have a great impact on employee engagement and productivity. How can we help managers develop a coaching presence when they are under so much pressure to perform?

Interviews with top executives suggest that there are three components to helping managers become effective coaches: adopting a coaching mindset, defining and training on core competencies, and connecting these competencies to a talent management framework. In an environment with many competing priorities, especially where lean management has become “the new normal”, a manager-as-coach program will be most successful if it is integrated with your talent agenda.

### **It's All About Mindset**

How do the mindsets of a manager and a coach differ? A manager, either at supervisory or executive levels, often must focus on results – whether that means financial results, improving operations, developing products or generating new business. They're applying quick judgments every day – sorting performance, finding gaps, managing risks. For a coach, the mindset is more about learning what their client is thinking and feeling – getting to the heart of their motivation, without pre judging the answer. Careful listening and open-ended questioning are the coach's key tools.

Many managers make time to coach when business is going well. It's in times of stress that these two mindsets come into conflict. We see implied tradeoffs between results and coaching: “We can carve out time for development next week. Right now, we need to get the job done.” Yet often, when managers move into directive task-oriented mode, they may ask fewer questions of their employees, and miss key information that will help get the job done. For this reason, success is the ability to adopt a coach mindset even on a tough day.

A recent study of sales managers and sales representatives

by Dawn Deeter-Schmelz et al. showed that managers and employees have quite different views of what makes a good leader. The reps said that key success factors for a manager were open communication, support and adaptability to help them achieve their goals. Managers, on the other hand, focused more on their organizational skills and their own selling skills – which were not cited by the reps as a success factor. Imagine a manager focused on “showing” others how to sell and setting up highly detailed processes: they believe they are investing in their team, when all their team wants is for their leader to listen, adapt to their style and support them.

A key element in adopting a coach mindset is for the manager to view their employees as if they were clients – letting the employee suggest what they most need, whether that's honest pushback, support or a mix – and then tailoring management style to that employee's mix of strengths. In some circles, this is controversial – how can we manage differently for each employee? Won't this eat up all our time? Yet our interviews suggest that coaching, and treating employees as clients don't have to take a lot of time, nor does it mean sacrificing results. It's mastering key questioning and listening techniques, and starting in a different place – “How can I help you meet your goal?” – rather than assuming that financial incentives alone will motivate employees to achieve results.

Daniel Pink writes that to motivate others to achieve results, managers need to offer them a sense of autonomy, an opportunity to prove mastery, and a social or aspirational purpose that rises above the individual task. In his research, financial incentives take a back seat to these emotional needs. Why, he asks, would individual contributors with paying jobs dedicate many uncompensated hours to developing free open-source software? Autonomy, mastery and purpose play a large part. With more millennials populating the workplace, values such as autonomy, mastery and purpose are growing in importance, while loyalty to hierarchical organizations is declining. For this reason managers have their own incentive to take a chance on coaching to retain the best people, since coaching can be a powerful way to support a sense of autonomy and clarify one's purpose. Yet managers and the organizations they belong to also need structure to define what coaching looks like.

### Competencies: How Do We Measure Success?

To build coach competencies in an organization, we first need to define what makes up good coaching. Often, a barrier to managers becoming better coaches is that “coaching” sounds intangible, or is confused with “being friendly” or “giving a pep talk.” We see people being described as good coaches because they are extroverts – yet often these same executives have strong tendencies to “tell” instead of ask questions. Instead, we’d suggest that coaching competencies can be broken down into specific areas that can be taught and measured.

As a starting point, we’ve adapted Columbia University’s coach competency framework (Maltbia et al.), which is based on action learning research and can be applied across geographies and functions. The Columbia model (below) focuses on three main areas, grouped into columns. The first, co-creating relationships, focuses on tone, presence, nonverbal connection, establishing safety, and managing your own emotions. The next, making meaning with others, focuses on using powerful questions to elicit information, listening carefully without imposing judgments, and testing assumptions to draw out any hidden issues. Finally, helping others succeed focuses on creating a more positive environment for employees – reframing their challenges as opportunities, contributing advice and ideas, and bringing the manager’s own business acumen to bear in problem solving.

### Teaching The Competencies

From a curriculum perspective, the first column (co-creating relationships) can often be addressed effectively within traditional training settings. The first area, Relating, can be developed through communications workshops and through interpersonal, cross-divisional problem solving workshops where managers are taken out of their hierarchical roles and asked to collaborate with peers. The second area, Coach Presence, can be addressed in workshops focusing on emotional control. We would suggest that emotion management ought to receive a greater share of focus in training curricula and leader evaluations, since stress can often derail a manager’s best intentions. Individual coaches for managers can also be helpful in these situations: as they are coached themselves, they develop a better understanding of how to bring a coach presence to meetings with their team. At American Express, for example, training, coaching and evaluation addresses “Developing Personal Excellence,” a leadership competency that measures ability to maintain an even keel and professional demeanor. The third area, leveraging diversity, is returning as a priority in many organizations after years of budget cuts; diversity and inclusion education can be a wonderful entry point to a manager-as-coach orientation, as it focuses on empowering multiple styles and paths to success.

The second group of competencies, “Making meaning with others,” which includes questioning, listening and testing assumptions, can best be taught through hands-on coaching practice,

## Framework for Coaching Competencies



since the skills are most apparent in a 1:1 or 1:small team setting. This can mean bringing in a coach training organization, assigning coaches to individual leaders and/or taking part in executive education that focuses on coaching. For example, a strong manager-as-coach program can begin with a focus on David Kolb's cycle of question types - helping managers practice different types of questions to improve the flow of communication in their teams:

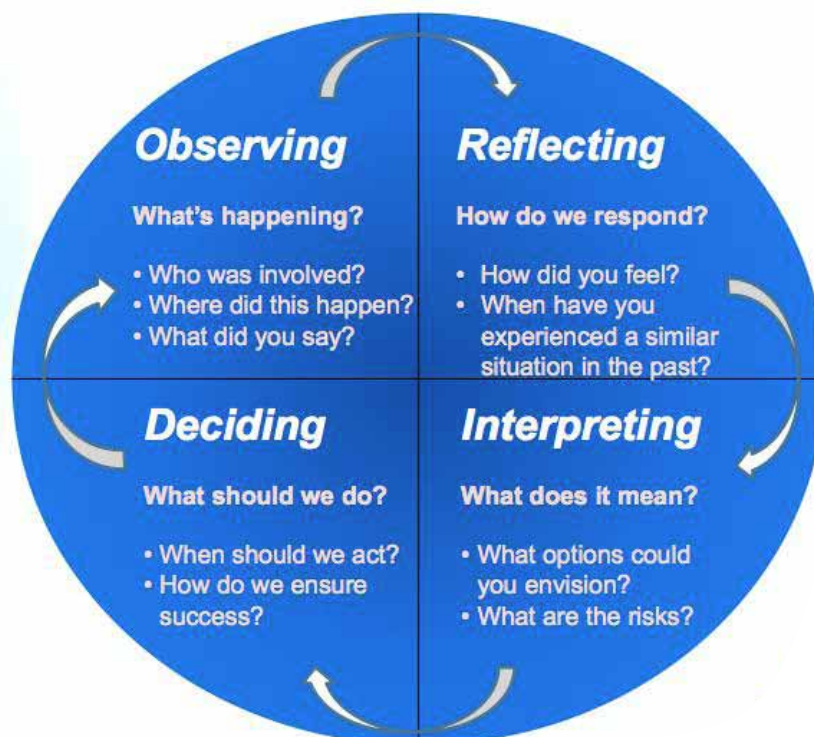
Kolb's work suggests that we can teach managers to ask more effective questions by following a cycle that helps the employee articulate their thoughts. Kolb's cycle begins with observational, objective questions: getting a sense of what is happening, what facts are before us. He then suggests a move to reflective questions - how does the employee / coachee feel about the situation? Does something feel "off"? Managers are prone to skip this reflective step, yet it can be a rich source of information and understanding. Kolb then moves to an interpretive mode - asking what the facts mean, or what we're not seeing. This empowers the employee to supply their own interpretation, or to enhance the manager's understanding. Finally, the manager-as-coach can move to decisional questions - asking what actions the employee suggests taking. We've observed that many managers ask almost all decisional questions

- the ones that focus on results and action. Yet to be effective coaches, they would benefit from starting earlier in Kolb's cycle - understanding the situation before pushing for a decision.

Some managers tell us that they understand this approach in theory, but it's very hard for them day to day to "slow down" and start at the beginning when they're facing a deadline. For this reason, we've seen greater success teaching questioning and listening skills through hands on, 1:1 coach practice, which gives managers an opportunity to try strategies and see how they impact others directly.

In the third group of competencies, Reframing can also be effectively learned through coaching practice or in small group discussions such as a peer coaching group. Often, an outside perspective can help an employee take a challenging issue and look at it in a new way. Reframing can be a manager's most powerful tool to achieve results, since it can shift focus from an "impossible task" to an "achievable task" (more likely to be done on time and well). Once Reframing is accomplished, the employee often will be more open to a manager's contributing ideas, advice and business acumen. Note how these contributions come last in our model; often, managers today lead with their advice and may miss the opportunity to coach.

### Kolb Cycle of Powerful Questions



## Action Planning: Building Coaching into your Talent Management Framework

We'd suggest that to build a strong coaching competency in leaders, an organization needs not only training and coach practice, but also a way to connect coaching to talent management, evaluation and promotion frameworks. A focus on coaching can begin even before managers join the organization – by changing recruiting priorities to bring in managers who can demonstrate an ability to listen, not only managers who can talk about their past performance. Below, we've compiled ten key ideas from our work with top executives on action strategies:

**1. Start early.** Developing a strong “bench” of manager-coaches starts with recruiting. It's easier to set expectations for a manager entering the role, than to jump in with fixes after a team dynamic has gone south. Think about adapting reference checks, interview questions and assessments during recruiting to focus on a manager's ability to listen and coach others.

**2. Set an example during onboarding.** Many managers say that they are wooed extensively during recruiting, yet then left to their own devices, only to be approached a few weeks later with rapid-fire questions about their plan and their results. Ideally, leaders with some veteran status in an organization can adjust their calendars to provide and model coaching to new managers.

**3. Get a coach.** Assign senior managers their own coach, at the same time that they're learning to coach their team. This gives them a role model for how to ask coaching questions, as well as a sense of safety to try new things.

**4. Take a hard look at your 360 degree assessment tool.** What exactly is it measuring? Does it include the word “coach” or a definition of coaching?

**5. Show, don't tell.** In training programs or on your corporate intranet, showcase video clips of what good coaching looks like (and bad). Discreetly identify people your managers can watch, envy, and then shamelessly copy.

**6. Rethink training curricula.** Include more hands-on opportunities to practice coaching, or even “challenging

conversations”, and see yourself on video. Reduce the number of brown bag workshops or last minute training classes. And think about relabeling “soft skills” workshops with an inspiring name that will reinforce the importance of communication and coaching. NiSource, a major energy company, is integrating coaching as a primary goal of development for managers, and has moved away from “soft skill” workshops.

**7. Offer upward recognition.** This costs nothing and can truly change behavior. Post stories on your intranet of employees who nominate their manager for awards, with real, detailed descriptions of what makes the manager a star.

**8. Choose metrics.** If you are focused on increasing internal promotions, track the percentage of senior roles you are filling internally, and who were the managers who groomed those internal promotes. If broad based employee engagement is your goal, consider adding a “coaching” question to your employee survey and track which managers receive top box scores.

**9. Link compensation to coaching behavior.** Take a close look at how often you prioritize people leadership when it gets down to compensation ratings. Some companies have even considered separate bonus pools for people leadership, delinked from results-based bonus pools.

**10. Provide peer support.** Bring your managers together in a group once a month to try new techniques and get each other's input on challenges. Someone may emerge as the role model everyone wants to emulate.

**In summary:** Building a coaching competency in leaders is a growing priority for learning and development. Detailed competency models such as the Columbia nine-part framework, combined with hands-on practice, can help managers build skills experientially. As managers practice “treating people as they ought to be,” encouraging autonomy, mastery and purpose, they will see surprising results – perhaps better results than when they focused only on status and decisions. For an organization looking to build coaching skills, it is key to integrate coach education and competency evaluation into the existing talent management framework.