

## A CASE STUDY

## Frank's International and AMA: Partnership for Worldwide Talent Development

### OTHER HIGHLIGHTS

#### AMA RESEARCH AMA MEMBER SURVEY

Page 10

#### EXECUTION IS A PEOPLE PROBLEM, NOT A STRATEGY PROBLEM

Page 14

#### COACHING CULTURE: AN EPIPHANY OF PERSPECTIVE

Page 24

#### 8 STEPS TO BUILDING AN ENGAGING, EMPLOYEE-CENTRIC CULTURE

Page 32

#### COACHING CULTURE IS HUMAN CULTURE

Page 40

#### THE ROVER APPROACH: EXPLORING INNOVATION IN A COACHING CULTURE

Page 46



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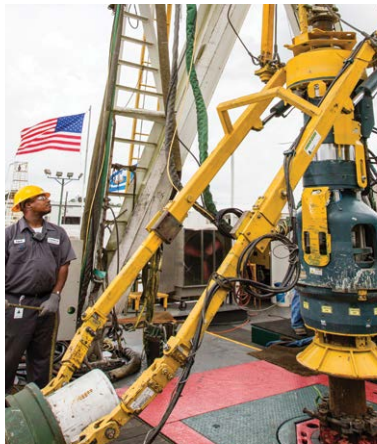


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## A CASE STUDY

### Frank's International and AMA: Partnership for Worldwide Talent Development

Frank's International turned to AMA to align its talent worldwide with a proven leadership development program.

Page 4

## 28 Rethinking Whether Executive Coaches Should Give Advice



## 44 Why Every Organization Should Teach Its Managers How to Coach



## FEATURES

**4 AMA and Frank's International: A Case Study** When Frank's created a global Leadership and Management Development program to better align leadership development opportunities worldwide, the company looked to AMA as a partner that could support a global rollout.

**14 Execution Is a People Problem, Not a Strategy Problem** When employees are happy and motivated in their careers, it makes what they say about the company they work for that much more appealing to both potential new talent and customers.  
*By Peter Bregman*

**20 Empathy Is the Superpower of Coaching** Change can trigger fear about what the future will hold, regret about how we spent our time, or anger. In a great coaching relationship, empathy is the lifeblood that helps us move through all of that.  
*By Jackie Acho*

**24 Coaching Culture: An Epiphany of Perspective** Feedback has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Coaching is more of an ongoing pursuit, engaging associates thoughtfully and allowing them to assess and come to their own conclusions.  
*By Gene Tiernan*

**28 Rethinking Whether Executive Coaches Should Give Advice** While the inquiry-only approach to coaching can be extremely effective and enormously worthwhile, it shouldn't preclude executive coaches from offering clear, well-timed advice when needed.  
*By Chris "Mitch" Mitchell*

**32 8 Steps to Building an Engaging, Employee-Centric Culture** A unified corporate culture is vital. It's not all about accolades, awards, and status—it's about being successful. Simply put, a strong company culture builds identity, helps with talent—retaining and attracting it—and elevates your brand's image.  
*By Vic Keller*

**36 Unlocking Employee Potential for Extraordinary Results** Happy and fulfilled employees deliver the best products and services, and the best leaders know how to create and maintain an environment in which each individual can thrive.  
*By David Hassell*

**40 Coaching Culture Is Human Culture** The ultimate outcome of an organization backed by leadership coaching is a more human workplace with leaders who voice emotion and recognize and support it in others.  
*By Jerry Colonna and Khalid Halim*

**44 Why Every Organization Should Teach Its Managers How to Coach** Do you coach your team members? You probably think you do, but most managers and leaders have an incorrect view of what coaching is.  
*By Russ Terry*

**46 The Rover Approach: Exploring Innovation in a Coaching Culture** As more organizations adopt a coaching culture and recognize the value of nurturing talent, there's a growing opportunity for those organizations to build on their foundation with a toolset that utilizes innovative technologies to forge new ground.  
*By Melissa Tait*

## DEPARTMENTS

**2 EDITOR'S PICK**  
**Coaching Goes Beyond Telling People What to Do**

**3 FROM THE DESK OF THE CEO**  
**Coaching: The Key to Bringing Out the Full Potential of Your Talent** Coaching serves multiple functions—ensuring employees meet performance goals in the here and now and developing talent for a brighter future.  
*By Manny Avramidis*

**10 AMA MEMBER SURVEY**  
**Ensuring Engagement and Satisfaction at All Levels: Challenges and Opportunities** In April 2019, AMA conducted a survey of 521 of its members. Among its findings, organizations seem to be successfully attending to key intrinsic employee motivators—autonomy and opportunity for skill development—but they need to be more attentive to all types of direct report/manager relationships (whether frontline worker to supervisor or vice president to director).  
*By Haywood Spangler, PhD*



# Coaching Goes Beyond Telling People What to Do

**A**s a manager, how do you mentor your people? In day-to-day work, you tell them what they need to do, and the deadlines for completing their tasks. If there is a problem, you're the one coming up with the solutions—maybe with the input of your subordinates, and maybe not.

But as a leader, you need to go beyond managing your people. When an employee comes to you for advice on a problem that is not one you can make a decision on, for whatever reason, do you have the skills to help that person find a solution?

*AMA Quarterly* has several articles in this issue addressing the many facets of coaching. Jackie Acho writes about how empathy is the superpower of coaching—because coaching asks people to change, and change can make them afraid, good coaches are empathetic.

Gene Tiernan links coaching to giving advice and understanding strengths and weaknesses, not to performance review-style criticisms.

Russ Terry, a life coach and an AMA faculty member, talks about how every organization should teach managers to coach, and describes the ways AMA courses can create good coaches through the GUIDE process.

Peter Bregman, another AMA faculty member, shares some advice about how to institute training for coaches. According to him, "people need to be hyperaligned and laser-focused on the highest-impact actions that will drive the organization's most important outcomes."

To show what a path to success looks like, AMA and Frank's International share a case study that demonstrates how AMA helped the company put together specialized training programs for its staff around the world.

AMA also shares a member survey that reveals the challenges of encouraging engagement and success at all levels.

As Terry covers in his article, AMA has courses that can give managers the skills they need to be superlative coaches. Check out the catalog today.

Christiane Truelove  
Guest Editor, *AMA Quarterly*

## AMAQUARTERLY

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# Coaching: The Key to Bringing Out the Full Potential of Your Talent

**C**oaching is an essential component of good management. On one level, coaching is an ongoing process that empowers managers to ensure alignment and execution on strategic goals. Managers can use coaching sessions to ensure the business stays on track, adjust performance, provide direction, and praise progress.

And yet it's more than that. Coaching provides the structure to help employees be more. A good coach can inspire employees to new levels of performance and help them transition into more responsibility. Coaching, then, serves multiple functions—ensuring employees meet performance goals in the here and now *and* developing talent for a brighter future.

Too often, coaching gets lost in day-to-day activities and is treated as a once-a-year event. Managers will take the time at the beginning of the year to set the strategy and create goals with employees to meet key milestones. But management is not a set-it-and-forget-it activity. Treating it as such leads to employees being surprised by a review. To make meaningful behavior changes, employees need to get feedback immediately after an activity or goal has been met. In addition, goals will need to be adjusted as the marketplace changes.

This is why coaching is such a crucial tool for managers and leaders. Providing the appropriate level of feedback and coaching to your team members will improve your ability to execute on your organizational strategy. Coaching sessions also help both the manager and employee set aside time to reevaluate goals, skills, and resources against a constantly shifting business environment and recalibrate based on the latest information.

Coaching builds trust in organizations. Employees always know how they are doing and what their manager thinks of their work. It's a mechanism that allows the manager and employee the opportunity to discuss performance on a regular basis.

Yet for all the discussion around coaching, it can be tricky. Having an effective coaching session relies on the manager's ability to:

- **Prepare.** Managers need to gather data and enter the coaching session with clarity on what needs to be discussed and how these items affect the business.
- **Have constructive and critical conversations.** Coaching sessions can be difficult, and the manager needs to be fully prepared to engage in a productive conversation about performance.
- **Create a climate of trust.** Trust between the manager and employee is a critical component of effective coaching sessions. Employees need to be prepared and open to the coaching conversations. Openness is a result of trust. If an employee believes that the coaching session is a way to discuss performance goals and have a constructive conversation, then the employee will come to the meeting open and ready to learn.

Coaching, then, is a higher-level skill for managers that needs to be honed through practice and reinforcement. At AMA, we train managers how to coach through experiential learning. When people can practice these skills and get feedback on things like *how* they interact with others, their ability to empathize and communicate with employees, and their ability to refocus conversations back to strategic goals, it helps them master skills outside the work environment. Because a good coach can mean the difference between mediocrity and excellence.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Manny Avramidis'.

Manny Avramidis  
President and CEO  
American Management Association







# FRANK'S INTERNATIONAL

## Aligns Its Talent Worldwide with a Proven Leadership Development Program

Since 1938, Frank's International has been setting the bar in tubular and oil and gas services worldwide. Born in Frank Mosing's garage more than 80 years ago, Frank's International has emerged as a leading global provider of highly-engineered tubular running services, tubular fabrication, and specialty well construction and intervention solutions. Frank's U.S. headquarters are in Houston, Texas, and the company has more than 3,000 employees across its global network of locations.

Building on its legacy of innovation, safety, and quality service, the organization draws its strength from its One Frank's company culture and values, which have fueled its competitive advantage. However, aligning a corporate commitment to excellence across approximately 50 countries and 6 continents requires exceptional leadership.

### THE CHALLENGE

While Frank's had a long-standing commitment to learning and development, it created a global Leadership and Management Development program to better align leadership development opportunities worldwide. "As part of our One Frank's initiative, we are now providing enterprise-wide learning and development opportunities to our employees and connecting our leaders in a more closely knit, well-aligned global management team," says Meta Rousseau, director of corporate learning and development.

The new One Frank's Leadership and Management Development program includes well-designed practical, interactive, and relevant learning experiences through which it develops and supports a competitive, multiskilled, and internally motivated workforce. This program became the first such solution implemented enterprise-wide, serving Frank's International across geographical and organizational boundaries.

When launching this new program, Frank's International looked for a partner that could support a global rollout. "As we planned to implement this program worldwide across Frank's, our primary concern was excellence. We wanted to provide our employees with relevant, meaningful, and enjoyable learning experiences through which we could strengthen our culture and build a well-integrated body of managers across the organization," Rousseau says. For such a large endeavor, Frank's needed a strong partner with proven content, a global footprint, and skilled facilitators.

"We did not want just a long-arm vendor," she adds. "We wanted a true partner, a knowledgeable advisor who is clearly committed to continuous improvement and who would be willing to listen, adjust to our requirements, and give us the best they could."

"The proposal from AMA was head and shoulders above the rest," Rousseau says. "We knew what we wanted, and it was



clear that AMA paid close attention to our requirements and made sure that they could meet them. Proposals are often just a canned response, but AMA's proposal was crafted for us and it made an important difference.... They asked questions, listened and advised, engaged in brainstorming, and fine-tuned everything to meet our criteria."

Frank's requirements included:

- A strong partner, globally recognized for consistent excellence
- A world-class, stable, and proven leadership and management curriculum
- Global delivery capabilities
- A pool of seasoned facilitators who could provide experiential learning
- Public, open-enrollment classes available to supplement the initiative

## AMA PROGRAMS OFFER CONSISTENCY AND SCALABILITY

Organizations are often hyperfocused on finding learning solutions that solve problems in the now. Frank's had the foresight to engage a partner who could support them in their future needs as well.

One of Frank's partnership requirements was learning that could be delivered consistently, worldwide, and with

flexible curriculum offerings to accommodate future growth. Frank's also wanted content and best practices that could be offered internally through the Leadership and Management Development program as well as through public classes, so that if somebody missed a workshop or had an immediate need, they could attend a public class, enjoy the same quality learning experience, and receive credit for the learning experience in the Frank's Learning Management System.

AMA offers learning in a variety of formats to best fit an organization's needs and learner schedules. Offerings include classroom and virtual facilitator-led training as well as digital microlearning and on-demand webinars across both public and corporate delivery platforms. Consequently, AMA is able to meet Frank's requirements today and in the future.

"Excellence is important to us, and we consistently aim to provide only the best to our employees," Rousseau says. "AMA courses are implemented across a wide range of industries and organizations, in different countries and cultures around with world, and continuously refined in the process. This is an important benefit for us."

## REAL LEARNING NEEDS TO BE RELEVANT TO EVERYDAY WORK

"Lecture and discussion could be effective," Rousseau says, "but it is just one instructional strategy and not always the best or the most successful way of learning.... I think 90% of the success of our Leadership and Management Development program is the way in which our workshops are delivered, and that's where AMA is a tremendous partner for us. We were looking for professionals that know how to facilitate learning, how to combine a variety of instructional strategies to maximize impact, and who would not be content to simply talk to a captive, passive audience."

## THE RIGHT PARTNER FINDS THE RIGHT TALENT FOR BEST RESULTS

Finding the right facilitators is not just a matter of identifying subject matter experts or specialists in experiential learning. Every organization is unique, with a distinctive corporate culture and different challenges, nuanced by local cultures, relationships, and personalities. Finding the right fit requires a commitment to excellence, a sincere interest in the organization and its people, and an understanding of ways in which the curriculum can support and sustain long-lasting behavioral change.

Rousseau explains, "The facilitators that AMA provides for us are now part of our One Frank's team, and we are sincerely grateful for the value that they are adding to our organization."

"While our workshops are well-focused, the atmosphere is relaxed and comfortable. We enjoy working and learning



# Participant Response to the AMA Experience Is Overwhelmingly Positive

“Engaging, real-life scenario role-playing very helpful in learning to apply leadership style and development strategies.”

“Great techniques shared in a dynamic class.”

“Extremely worthwhile tools that I will be able to use in my everyday work.”

“I really enjoyed the course and the informal, fun approach to presenting the material. The facilitator is a wonderfully engaging presenter, very easy to listen to, and the course was just the right mix of theory and practical demonstration.”

“This has more than met my expectations. Everything discussed was relevant, engaging, and memorable.”

“The ideas, tools, and information given to us were very valuable.”

together, and we learn as much from each other as from the facilitators,” she adds.

AMA drafted leader guides for each session to ensure consistent delivery by facilitators regardless of location or time. The agendas outline the goals, learning objectives, and instructional strategies that enable participants to reach these objectives. Small group exercises and scenario-based activities such as role-plays are typically preceded by brief information-sharing discussions and followed up with small group reports and collaborative evaluation of solutions and findings. “This is the rhythm that we follow in all of our workshops, which means that most of the time is spent in small group work. It is engaging and meaningful because people learn as much from each other as from the facilitator,” Rousseau says.

## SETTING A HIGH BAR FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Frank’s and AMA created a global Leadership and Management Development program with progressive levels to meet the needs of Frank’s employees:

- Leadership and Management Fundamentals
- Finance and Accounting for Non-Financial Managers
- Leadership and Finance for Senior Management

Plus, specialized content such as:

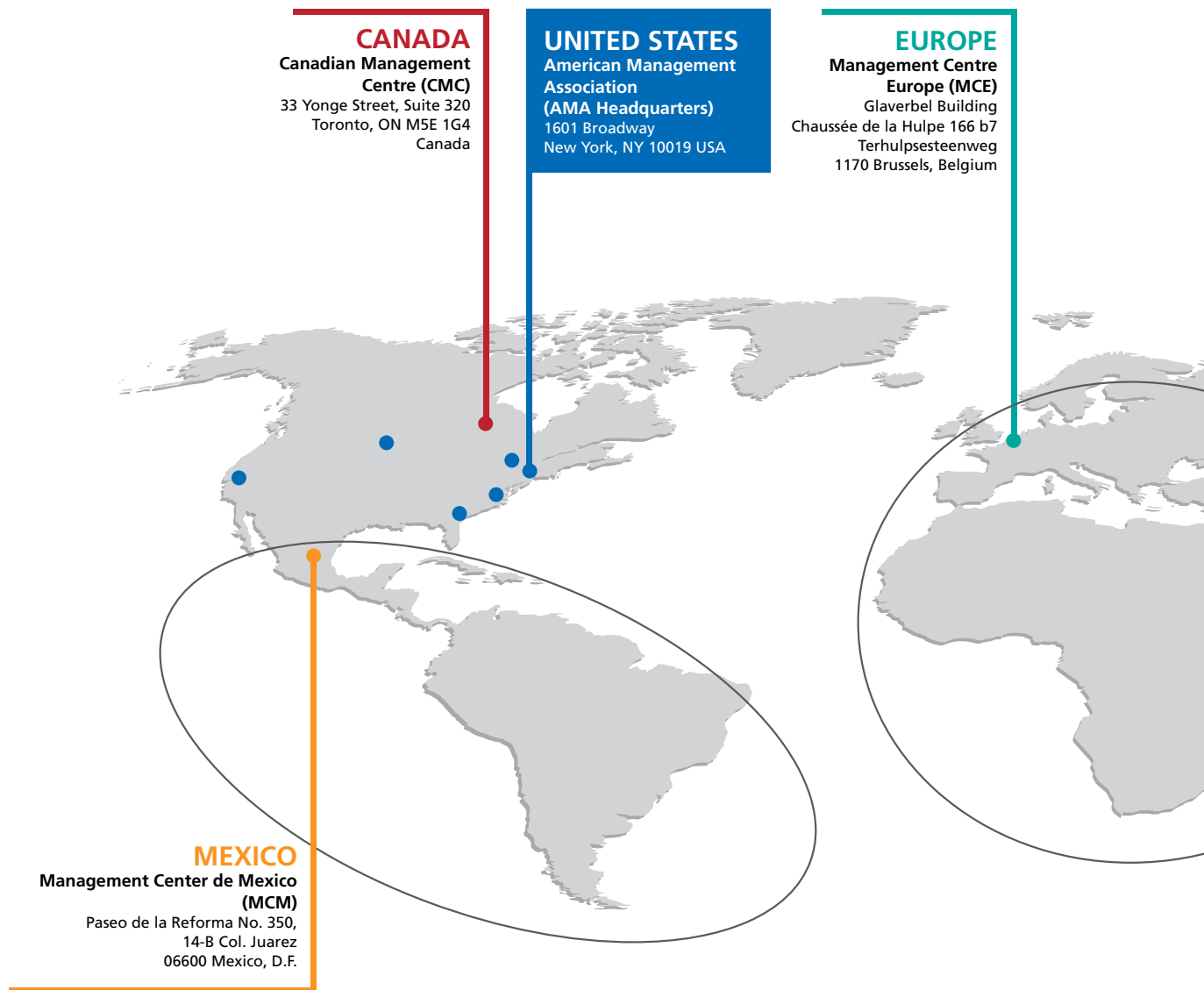
- Virtual DISC Training for the Global HR Staff
- 360 Implementation

Frank’s new Leadership and Management Development program is the first global learning and development initiative rolled out across the organization. It set new standards for excellence through its focus on participatory, interactive learning. Not only do the Frank’s workshops consist largely of experiential small group work, they also allow Frank’s to move away from printed materials and toward the use of open laptops and digital content. Participants can annotate and personalize their learning materials for quick reference and reinforcement post-workshop.

Due to the positive response by employees, Frank’s is now moving toward greater interactivity in additional curriculum areas. Managers who attended the AMA workshops are supporting a wider variety of instructional strategies and are asking for engaging exercises that enable employees to work and learn together.

“It is a privilege to work with a strong partner,” Rousseau says. “It’s all about relationships and understanding what the customer wants. When we encounter difficulties, we work through it toward common solutions. I’m sincerely grateful for the way we are able to work together with AMA across One Frank’s.” [AQ](#)

# AMA's International Presence



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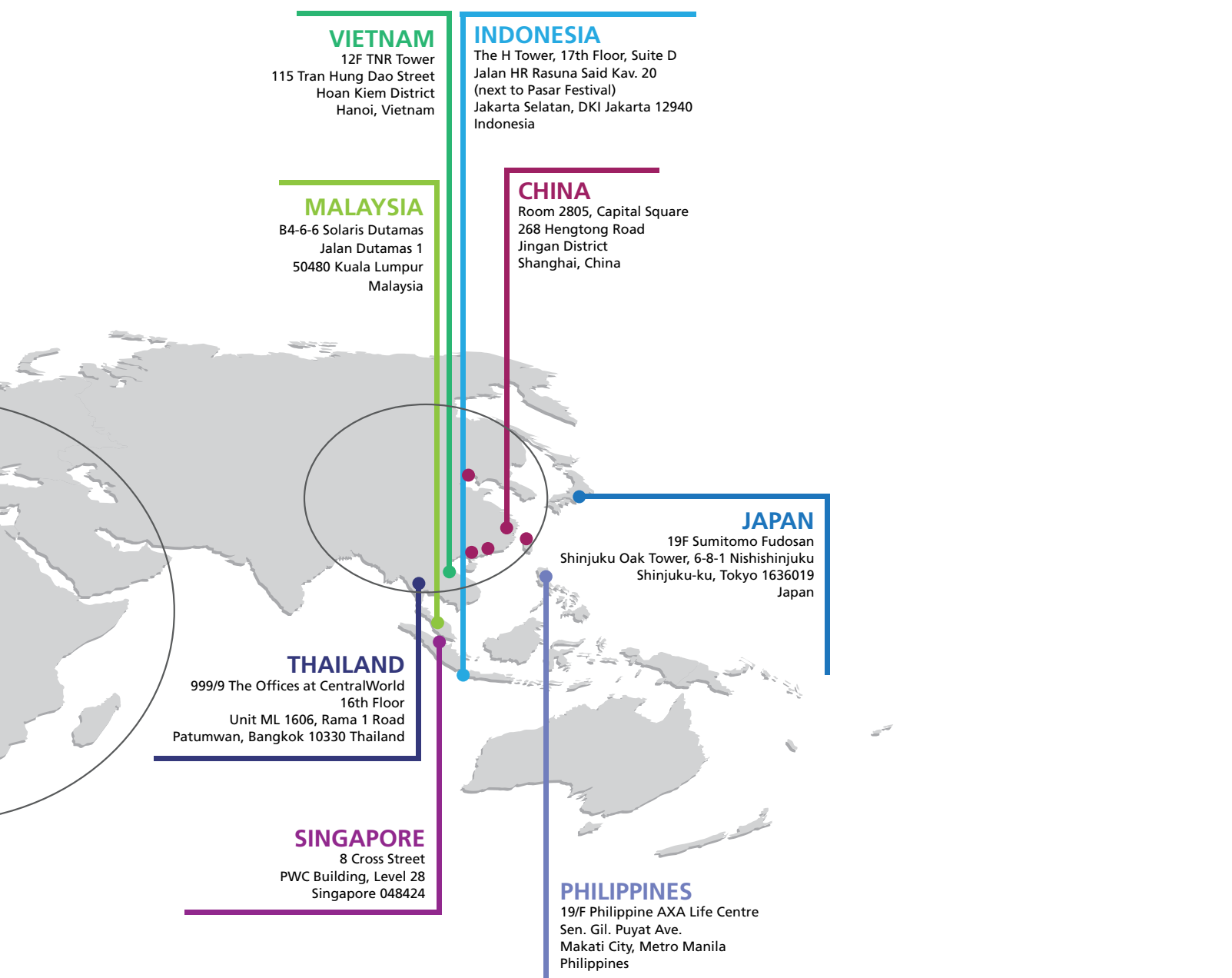
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# AMA MEMBER SURVEY

## Ensuring Engagement and Satisfaction at All Levels: Challenges and Opportunities

BY HAYWOOD SPANGLER, PhD



### Scope of Research

#### Satisfaction does not always result in engagement

With an eye toward retaining employees and recruiting top talent, organizations have measured employee satisfaction for a number of years. Satisfaction is usually synonymous with happiness, and many professionals have believed that happy employees become long-term employees. While a correlation between employee satisfaction and long-term commitment exists, satisfied employees are not necessarily engaged employees. Engagement is synonymous with diligence, or willingness to expend effort.

Engaged employees show initiative, are self-sufficient problem solvers, and work to achieve goals. Employees may be satisfied with their jobs, but satisfaction does not guarantee that employees function at the highest levels, which best serves their organizations.

Therefore, organizations have realized they need employees who are both satisfied and engaged. Researchers have identified aspects of employees' experience that, when measured, indicated employees' level of both engagement and satisfaction. These aspects are: 1) employees' relationships with their immediate supervisors; 2) employees' sense of autonomy; and 3)

employees' opportunities to use their skills and abilities to their fullest extent.

In April 2019, AMA conducted a survey of 521 of its members. The survey's 12 items asked members about these three aspects of their experience. Respondents come from a broad spectrum of industries, ranging from biotechnology and law to mining and manufacturing. Forty-nine percent of those surveyed have worked for the same organization for over 10 years, while another 12% have worked for their organizations for at least seven years. Sixty-four percent of respondents are women, 33% are men, and 3% chose not to indicate a gender.



## Key Finding No. 1

Of respondents reporting potential disengagement and dissatisfaction, more than 25% are well-compensated senior leaders.



Four survey items asked respondents about their relationships with their immediate supervisors. Sixteen percent of respondents indicated that they have poor relationships with their immediate supervisors. These respondents indicated that their supervisors do not give them what they need, including proper direction, to ensure their best efforts. They indicated that their supervisors don't understand how they take in and process information and don't effectively delegate authority or give the

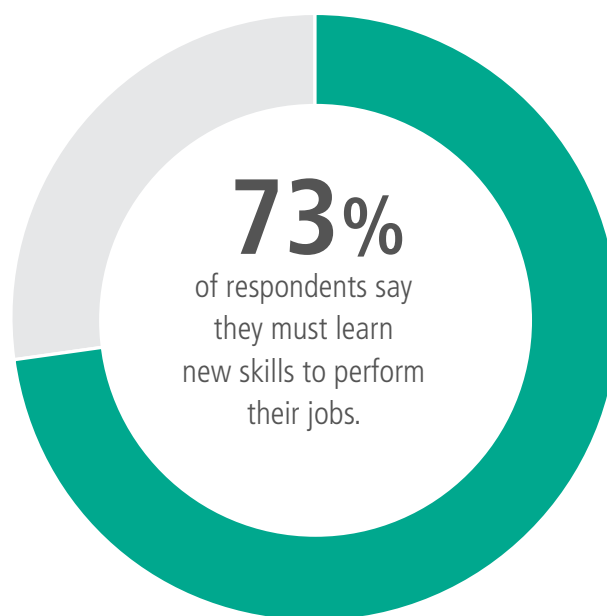
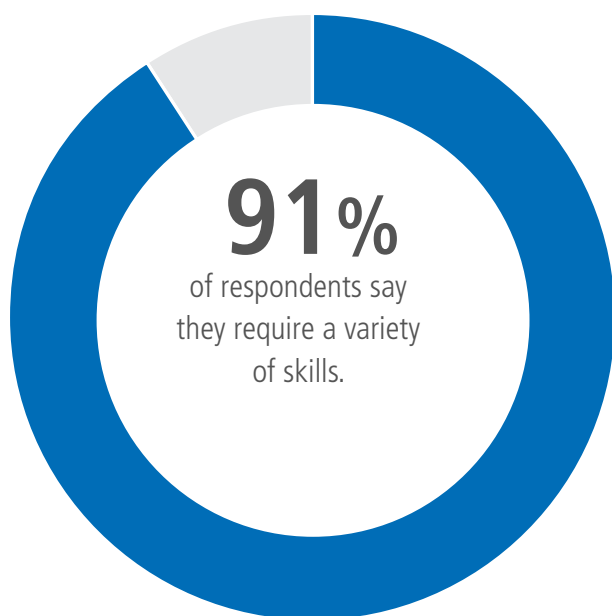
appropriate latitude to solve problems on their own.

On the surface, it may not seem that 16% of respondents is a significant amount. Likewise, superficially, it may seem probable that these respondents are entry-level individual contributors who are not well compensated. In contrast to these assumptions, only 5% of these respondents are new managers, while 26% are experienced managers and senior leaders. Moreover, 80% of these respondents are 40–69 years old,

and 60% of these respondents earn from \$100,000 to over \$200,000 annually. In other words, of the respondents potentially disengaged from their work and dissatisfied with their jobs, more than a quarter are experienced professionals and more than half are in upper-income brackets. This should be a red flag for organizations. Disengagement at a senior level can have even more significant implications than disengagement among individual contributors.

## Key Finding No. 2

A large majority of respondents report that their work requires a variety of skills and demands constant development of new skills.



Four survey items asked participants about the skills they use to do their jobs. A large majority, 91%, either agree or strongly agree that the tasks they perform require a variety of skills (4.2% were neutral). Similarly, 73% either agree or strongly agree that their work tasks require them to learn new skills, which they find valuable (15.8% were neutral).

These statistics suggest that survey respondents experience a strong sense of autonomy as they work and that they enjoy a number of regular opportunities to use skills and gain new skills they value. Both of these types of experiences facilitate engagement and satisfaction (and, consequently, retention; as noted above, 49% of survey takers have worked for their current organizations for 10 or more years). Thus, the minority of respondents reporting experiences that can hinder engagement and satisfaction is counterbalanced by a majority who report other types of experiences that can promote and sustain engagement and satisfaction.

### Business implications of the key findings

Organizations need all employees, at all levels, to be both engaged and satisfied with their jobs in order to achieve efficiency, employee retention, and profit maximization. Thus, while it is reassuring to see that a large proportion of respondents experience the autonomy and opportunity for skill development associated with engagement and satisfaction, it is disconcerting to know that one-eighth of respondents, at all levels of their organizations, report experiences that undermine these.

Organizations seem to be successfully attending to key intrinsic employee motivators—autonomy and opportunity for skill development—but they need to be more attentive to all types of direct report/manager relationships (whether frontline worker to supervisor or vice president to director). The possibility that more than 25% of well-compensated, experienced senior leaders could be disengaged and dissatisfied is potentially

too costly for any organization to ignore. Organizations should bear in mind the value of management and leadership skills training, even at senior levels, where, at first glance, such training may seem unnecessary or optional.

Likewise, having such large majorities of respondents report the necessities of honing their skills and obtaining new skills suggests that ongoing training in multiple areas, beyond management skills—such as critical thinking, financial acumen, or data analysis—is essential in developing and sustaining high levels of employee engagement and satisfaction. [AQ](#)

*Haywood Spangler, PhD, MDiv, is the founder and principal of Work & Think LLC. He is a corporate consultant, researcher and author. He formerly interned as a biomedical ethicist at the University of Virginia Medical Center and was an instructor of business ethics at the University of Virginia McIntire School of Commerce. His Spangler Ethical Reasoning Assessment® (SER®) is used across industries and around the world, enabling individuals to combine critical thinking and values to make complex decisions.*





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# Execution Is a PEOPLE PROBLEM, Not a STRATEGY PROBLEM

BY PETER BREGMAN

Paul,\* the CEO of Maxreed, a global publishing company, was having trouble sleeping.

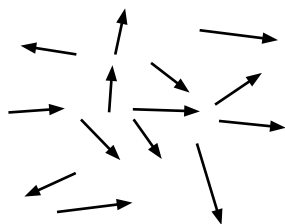
Publishing is an industry that's changing even faster than most other fast-changing industries, but Paul wasn't awake worrying about his strategy. He had a solid plan that took advantage of new technologies, and the board and his leadership team were aligned around it. Paul and his team had already reorganized the structure—new divisions, revised roles, redesigned processes—to support their strategy.

So what was Paul worrying about? People.

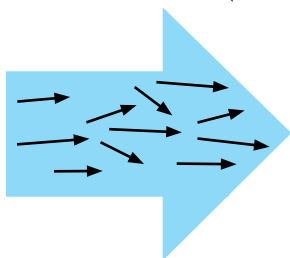
Which is precisely what he *should* be worrying about. However hard it is to devise a smart strategy, it's 10 times harder to get people to execute on that strategy. And a poorly executed strategy, no matter how clever, is worthless.

In other words, your organization's biggest strategic challenge isn't strategic thinking—it's strategic acting.

If I were to depict the challenge graphically, it would be going from this:



To this:



The conundrum is how to get from the first graphic to the second one. Most organizations rely on communication plans to make that shift. Unfortunately, strategy communication, even if you do it daily, is not the same as—and is not enough to drive—strategy execution.

Because while strategy development and communication are about *knowing* something, strategy execution is about *doing* something. And the gap between what you know and what you do is often huge. Add in the necessity of having everyone acting in alignment with each other, and it gets even huger.

The reason strategy execution is often glossed over by even the most astute strategy consultants is because primarily it's not a strategy challenge. It's a human behavior one.

To deliver stellar results, people need to be hyperaligned and laser-focused on the highest-impact actions that will drive the organization's most important outcomes.

But even in well-run, stable organizations, people are misaligned, too broadly focused, and working at cross-purposes.

This isn't critical only for a changing company in a changing industry like Paul's. It's also true for fast-growing startups. And companies in turnaround situations. And those with new leadership. Any time it's critical to focus on strategy—and when isn't it?—the most important strategy question you need to answer is: How can we align everyone's efforts and help them accomplish the organization's most important work?



That's the question Paul reached out to ask me. Below is the solution we implemented with him at Maxreed. We call it The Big Arrow Process, and it represents my best thinking after 25 years of experimenting with this very challenge.

## DEFINE THE BIG ARROW

We worked with Paul and a small group of his leaders to identify the most important outcome for Maxreed to achieve over the following 12 months. Their Big Arrow had to do with creating a strategy and product roadmap that was supported by the entire leadership team. The hardest part of this is getting to that *one* most important thing, the thing that would be a catalyst for driving the rest of the strategy forward.

Once we defined the Big Arrow, we tested it with a series of questions. If you answer "yes" to each of these questions, it's likely that your Big Arrow is on target:

- Will success in the Big Arrow drive the mission of the larger organization?
- Is the Big Arrow supporting, and supported by, your primary business goals?
- Will achieving it make a statement to the organization about what's most important?
- Will it lead to the execution of your strategy?
- Is it the appropriate stretch?
- Are you excited about it? Do you have an emotional connection to it?

Along with that outcome clarity, we also created behavioral clarity by identifying the most important behavior that would lead to achieving the outcome. For Maxreed, the behavior was about collaborating with trust and transparency. We determined this by asking a few questions: What current behavior do we see in the organization that will make driving the Big Arrow harder and make success less likely? We then articulated the opposite, which became our Big Arrow behavior.

## IDENTIFY THE HIGHEST-IMPACT PEOPLE

Once the Big Arrow was clear, we worked with Paul and his HR partner to identify the people who were most essential to achieving the goal. Doing this is critical because you want to focus your efforts and resources on the people who will have the most impact on the Big Arrow. In the case of Maxreed, we identified 10 people whose roles were core to the project, who already had organizational authority, and who were highly networked. With other clients, we've identified many more people at all levels of the hierarchy. As you think about who might be the appropriate people, ask the questions: Who has the greatest capacity to affect the forward momentum of the arrow? Who is an influencer in the organization? Who has an outsize impact on our Big Arrow outcome or behavior? Those are the people you should choose.

## DETERMINE WHAT THEY SHOULD FOCUS ON

Once we established the key people, we worked with each of them and their managers to determine their:

- Key contribution to moving the Big Arrow forward



- Pivotal strength that will allow them to make their key contribution
- Game changer, the thing that, if the person improves, will most improve their ability to make their key contribution

One of the things that makes this process successful is its simplicity. It's why we settled on *one* pivotal strength and *one* most critical game changer. Strategy execution needs to be laser-focused, and one of the biggest impediments to forward momentum on our most important work is trying to get forward momentum on *all* our work. Simplicity requires that we make choices. What will have the biggest impact? Then we make that one thing happen.

## HOLD LASER-FOCUSED COACHING SESSIONS

Once we made sure the right people had the right focus, we coached in laser-focused, 30-minute one-on-one coaching sessions. Coaching is often used in organizations to fix a leader's flaws, but that is not the focus of this kind of coaching. Here, the leaders were coached to focus on making clear headway on their key contribution to the Big Arrow. These conversations only focus on larger behavioral patterns to the extent that they are getting in the way of the task at hand.

## COLLECT AND SHARE DATA

Because we were coaching multiple people, we were able to maintain strict confidentiality with the individuals being coached while collecting data about trends and organizational obstacles they were facing, which we reported to Paul and his leadership team. This wasn't just opinion survey data; it represented the real obstacles preventing Maxreed's most valuable people from driving the company's most important priorities forward.

One of the main challenges we uncovered was a lack of cross-functional collaboration. Armed with that insight, Paul was able to address this issue directly, getting the key people in a room together and speaking openly about the issue. Eventually, he initiated a new cross-functional Big Arrow process that included leaders from the groups that weren't collaborating. Identifying what they needed to achieve together broke down the walls between the groups.

## AMPLIFY PERFORMANCE

While Paul removed organizational obstacles, coaches continued to help Maxreed's most critical people address the particular obstacles and challenges they faced as they delivered their key contribution. Coaches addressed the

# The Magic of 30-Minute Meetings

BY PETER BREGMAN



Five years ago, after becoming frustrated with my fruitless tendency to juggle multiple activities at once, I tried an experiment: For one week, I would not multitask and see what happened.

The experiment changed everything for the better. My relationships improved, my stress dissolved, and my productivity soared. There is zero downside to focusing on one thing at a time without distraction.

One of the side benefits of my focusing on one undistracted task at a time was a new and almost unbearable impatience for wasted time. In the past, if I was on a call that wasn't going anywhere, I would do email or surf the web. In my post-multitasking world, staying focused on a dragging call was painful.

Which is how I stumbled on the single most life-changing, business-transforming revelation of my last five years:

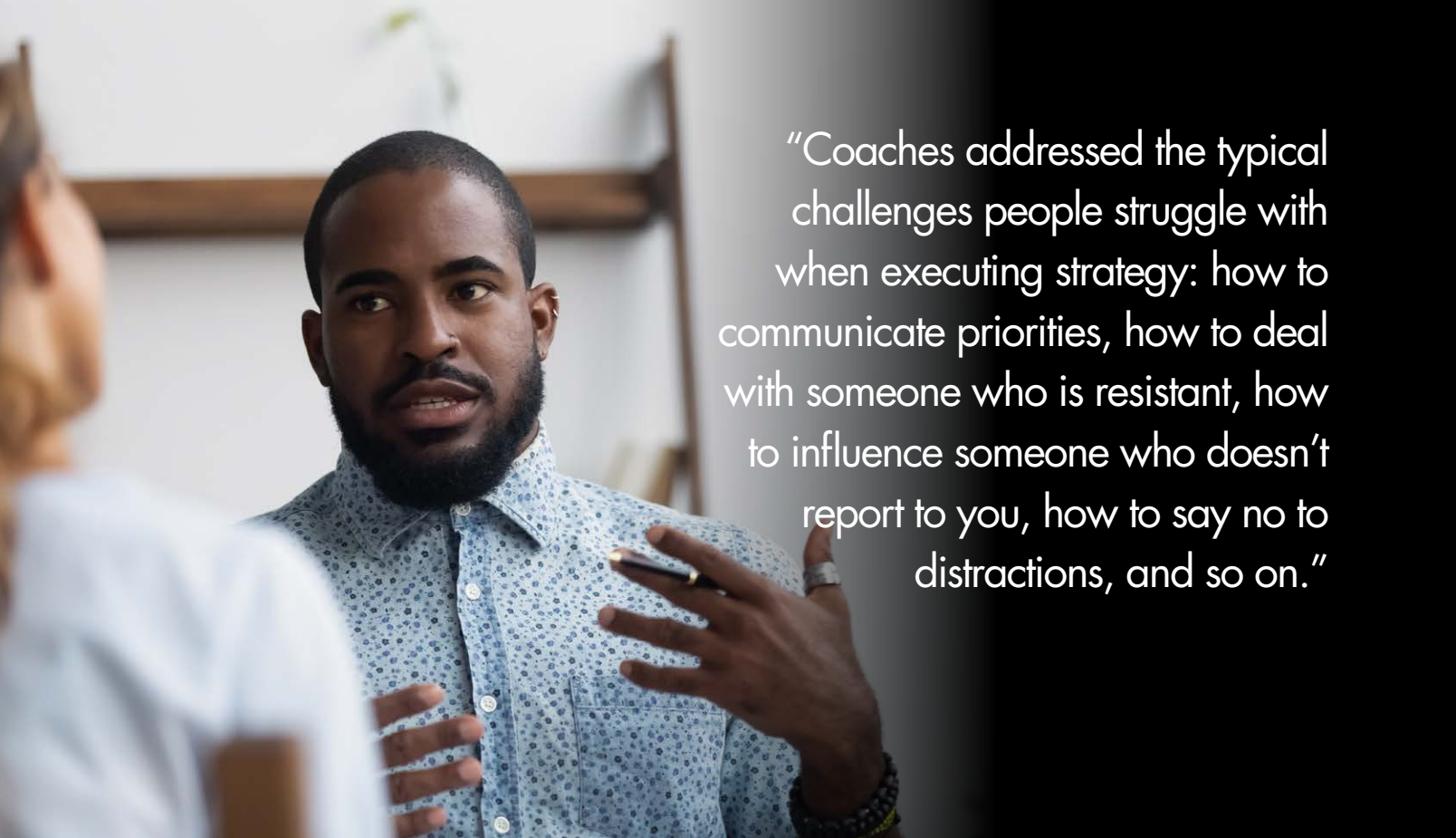
Compressed time.

First, though, a caveat. There are some things in my life—dinner with friends, writing, sleep, unstructured time with my family—that deserve to live in the spaciousness of stretched-out time.

But other things—like most meetings and tactical work—could benefit from compressed time.

Often we schedule one-hour time slots. Why? How did an hour become our standard time allotment for so many meetings, phone calls, and appointments?

As my impatience with wasted time grew, I tried a new experiment: I cut the time I allot for many activities in half.



“Coaches addressed the typical challenges people struggle with when executing strategy: how to communicate priorities, how to deal with someone who is resistant, how to influence someone who doesn’t report to you, how to say no to distractions, and so on.”

“If you have half the time to accomplish something, you become hyper-aware of how you’re using that time. And hyper-focused during it.”

I started with something easy. I used to work out for an hour a day. Now it’s down to 30 minutes. My results—weight and conditioning—improved.

Here’s why: my intensity is higher (I know I only have 30 minutes), I eat better (I don’t rely on my workout to keep slim), I integrate movement more into my day (I don’t rely on my workout to take care of all my fitness), and I never miss a workout (I can always find 30 minutes).

If you have half the time to accomplish something, you become hyper-aware of how you’re using that time. And hyper-focused during it. Most of my phone calls are now 30 minutes or less. My podcast is 15 to 20 minutes. Even many of my conference calls, with multiple parties, are 30 minutes or less. People on the calls, aware of the time constraint, are more thoughtful about when they speak, and more careful not to follow tangents that aren’t useful.

People also listen better because, when things are moving faster, we tend to be more alert. We know that a single distracted moment will leave us behind. And, since that keeps us more engaged, we end up having more fun in the process.

Nowhere has this impact been more transformational—and more evident—than in the leadership coaching we do at Bregman Partners. For the past several years, all the coaching we do is accomplished in 30-minute sessions.

The obvious advantages are obvious: Everyone saves time and money. But here’s what’s less obvious: The coaching isn’t simply as powerful, it’s vastly more so. When the coach and the client both know they have only 30 minutes, they move into high gear.

- Clients show up. Just as with my workouts, people are far less likely to skip a 30-minute session than they are an hour.
- Everyone is on time. Every minute counts in a 30-minute conversation and they know it. The session gets started more quickly, as the relationship is built on doing good work, not small talk.
- People are much more likely to come prepared. There’s no time wasted on tangents and going-nowhere conversations. Clients know what they want to cover and have put some thought into it beforehand.
- The time pressure enhances focus and attention. People don’t focus on three issues; they tackle the single biggest opportunity or persistent, intractable obstacle. And they move on it. Focus leads to success.
- Coaches are more willing to be courageous, and clients are more willing to be prodded. In a 30-minute session, coaches can’t

typical challenges people struggle with when executing strategy: how to communicate priorities, how to deal with someone who is resistant, how to influence someone who doesn't report to you, how to say no to distractions, and so on. The coaching prioritized helping people build relationships on their own teams and across silos, which was supported by the data and the Big Arrow key behavior of collaborating with trust and transparency. Individuals aligned with the goals of the organization to drive continued growth and success.

While the Big Arrow process is ongoing, we sent out a survey to people being coached as well as others outside the program to assess progress being made by the key contributors. Compared to before the coaching, are they more effective or less effective at making their key contribution, achieving the outcomes of the Big Arrow, and addressing their game changer?

There were 98 responses to the survey:

**Key contribution:** 90% said either more effective or much more effective.

**Big Arrow:** 88% said either more effective or much more effective.

**Game changer:** 84% said either more effective or much more effective.

In other words, the key contributors were getting massive traction in moving the organization's most important work—its key strategy—forward. This data was confirmed by Paul's own observations of the progress they've made on their Big Arrow outcome, a strategy and product roadmap that is supported by the entire leadership team.

Maybe most important, the broader organization was noticing. Which, of course, is how you start a movement.

Paul is still working hard to continue the momentum of the strategic shift. That's the point, really: Strategy execution is not a moment in time. It's thousands of moments across time.

But now, at least, it's happening. [AQ](#)

*Originally published at HBR.org. \*Names and some details have been changed to protect privacy.*

*Peter Bregman is the CEO of Bregman Partners, a company that helps successful people become better leaders, create more effective teams, and inspire their organizations to produce great results. Bestselling author of 18 Minutes, his most recent book is Leading with Emotional Courage. He is also the host of the Bregman Leadership Podcast.*

“You need to be willing to interrupt, thoughtfully and for the greater good of moving ambitiously toward what is most important.”

waste time beating around the bush. They get to the point faster and earlier, interrupt more bravely, and ask more provocative questions.

- Clients get more done in between coaching sessions. I'm not sure why this is. But here's my hypothesis: Leaders at all levels need to be highly skilled at getting to the point quickly and efficiently. The compressed, focused coaching session hones the skill of getting to the point quickly, focusing on the most essential elements of a situation, and taking action.

The downside? I haven't seen one yet.

Try it yourself. Transition some of your hour-long meetings to 30 minutes. As you do, consider these three steps as a way to make the 30 minutes most powerful:

1. Read what you need to beforehand and tell everyone else to do the same. Think about your questions and concerns. Decide what's important to you and what you can let go of. Ask yourself the most important question: What outcome do you want?

2. Decide on the one thing that will make the biggest difference, and spend the 30 minutes on that issue, topic, or opportunity. Get started right on time, no matter who isn't there, and be bold and disciplined at keeping the conversation on track. Let go of anything that is less critical. Make decisions quickly, even if they are imperfect. Getting traction on a single thing is far more useful than touching on many without forward momentum on any.
3. The sign of a great meeting isn't the meeting itself. It's what happens after that meeting. Save at least the last five minutes to summarize what you learned, articulate what was valuable, commit to what you are going to do as a result of the meeting, and clarify how you will assess the success of your next steps.

You will need these “get to the most critical point fast” skills—and the courage to use them—if you are going to make the most of your time. You need to be bold, and even provocative. You need to be willing to interrupt, thoughtfully and for the greater good of moving ambitiously toward what is most important. You need to let go of things that don't really matter.

And you need to be fully present. No multitasking. No texting under the table. No distractions. Which is also the upside: You get to be fully present in what you are doing.

There is a cost. While it's energizing, it also takes a lot of energy to be so focused, even for a short amount of time. It's a sprinter's tactic.

On the other hand, when you cut your meetings and other activities in half, you'll have a lot more time to relax at dinner with friends, write, sleep, and spend unstructured time with people you love.

*Originally published at HBR.org.*



# Corporate Learning Solutions





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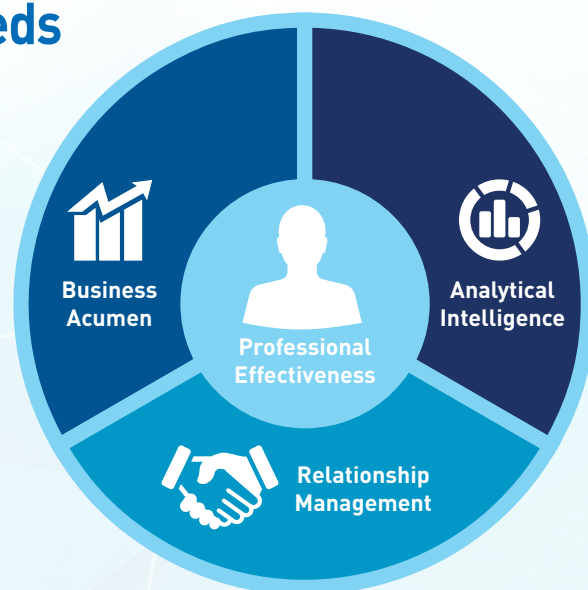
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# EMPATHY

## Is the Superpower of Coaching

BY JACKIE ACHO

Take a moment and think about your best coach.  
What was she like? What did he do that was special?

Was it a middle school teacher, a high school track coach, or someone in your career? Maybe you remember a quotable line or two from the coach's advice, but chances are, most of that has faded away. What you can easily recall is how capable, talented, even joyful you felt with that person. Maybe you were not a natural and had to work hard. The coach cleared away the clutter of your doubts and distractions, helped you prioritize your time and attention, and taught you the skills you needed, as you needed them. Working with the coach was like stepping on the moving walkway at the airport. You did the walking, but it felt more like flying, and you arrived at your destination in record time.

Now, think about a time when you were a great coach yourself. Think about people who were grateful for your help. What did you do? How did they respond? How did you feel about those people? If it's been a while, the specifics are probably fuzzy. Most likely, you were invested not just in teaching them skills but helping them grow. You shared the knowledge they wanted to learn, but you came to know them as people. You saw the light inside them, perhaps before they realized it themselves. The ones you most fondly remember may not have been naturally gifted at first, but their potential was catalyzed by the work you did together. Something

happened in the space between you that made conversations more open, sharing unfettered, and learning effortless.

Great coaching is not easy, because it is always asking people to change. Sometimes people are not ready to change. Even when they are, change is difficult. It requires a rewiring of our brains that can be time-consuming and even painful. Change requires loss, even when it's good. It can trigger fear about what the future will hold, regret about how we spent our time up until now, or anger. In a great coaching relationship, empathy is the lifeblood that helps us move through all of that.

### EMPATHY IS OUR SUPERPOWER

What is empathy? Empathy is the ability to feel and understand the inner emotional experience of another and have an appropriate emotional response. It was translated from the German word *Einfühlung*, meaning "infeeling" or "feeling into," coined in philosopher Robert Vischer's PhD thesis in 1873. Empathy is a word we use to represent a complex soup of cognitive, emotional, and physical responses that are a unique part of the human experience. Empathy is not fusion. If someone is down in the dumps and you climb down into the hole and stay there, you will not be much good to that person.



Empathy is not manipulation either—merely getting someone to do what you want him to do.

Empathy is generally differentiated into two major components:

- Cognitive empathy is a thinking activity. Some people call it imaginative empathy. It occurs in conscious awareness. It is the ability to identify and understand another's feelings. Sometimes we call this kind of empathy "perspective taking." Cognitive empathy allows me to know what you are feeling, but it doesn't mean that I have to share that feeling.
- Affective empathy is a feeling activity. It is also called emotional empathy or primitive empathy. It is unconscious and happens automatically, outside of our awareness. It is the ability to share another's emotions. Affective empathy allows me to feel what you are feeling. We feel it in our bodies before we even recognize it as an emotion.

In the best coaching relationships, the future is co-created between people. The coach brings particular expertise or a process of discovery. The person being coached brings his skills, his emotions, his stories about the past, and his ideas about the future. That future takes shape in the conversation. We often talk about "meeting someone where she's at." What that really means is empathizing, both ways.

Great coaches work from the head (cognitive empathy) and the heart/body (affective empathy), imagining the perspective of another from what she says, but also taking in the state of

her being as communicated from the body, without words. Great students empathize too. Learning something new is an imaginative activity, starting with understanding what the other person is offering (cognitive empathy). Open students also absorb, for good and bad, the emotional content of the lesson (affective empathy). They know, regardless of the words (such as through tone, facial expressions, the way someone holds his body), whether the interaction inspires joy or fear. They feel whether they are being seen clearly or manipulated.

Great coaching relationships grow the capacity for full, mature empathy in both people. It is a safe space to be open, vulnerable, and empathic. With that current of essential humanity flowing between people, great coaching relationships feel good and deliver the biggest superpower of all: empathy.

## MAKING SPACE FOR EMPATHY

Most of us do not have a perfect capacity for empathy all the time. Distractions get in the way of our imagination. Emotions, even unconscious ones, can engross our bodies whether we want them to or not. How do we grow our capacity for empathy? You cannot so much train empathy into someone as make space for him to practice. Just as you cannot think your way into six-pack abs, developing empathy takes exercise.

We develop our foundation for empathy early. We learn from





“Another way of understanding the connection between affective and cognitive empathy is through the concept of ‘conscience.’”

our first coaches, our parents. Affective empathy develops first and lays the foundation for cognitive empathy. It starts in our bodies, the day we are born or even in utero. It develops before we have words, back when we communicated with bodily feeling states. Remember that? You probably don’t have cognitive memories, but according to child development experts, people do have “feeling memories” of the time before words. Everyone who was ever an infant has experience with bodily empathy. This means you.

Despite the fact that affective empathy is a life-giving force, it is often the forgotten stepsister of what we think about when we use the word “empathy”—which is the cognitive type. Some scientific fields omit affective empathy altogether from working definitions of empathy. The unconscious nature of emotions means they are a challenge to quantify with basic scientific tools, requiring special creativity and cross-disciplinary study.

Acknowledging affective empathy can also be inconvenient. It can feel like a square peg in the round hole of a society that favors efficiency and devalues caring work—the type of work that develops this kind of empathy. Thanks to better neuroscientific imaging techniques and evolutionary biology’s growing interest in the field, however, affective empathy is making a comeback.

Here is something most people usually don’t discuss when it comes to cognitive empathy: It is selfish first. One must know

himself before he can relate to others. A concept of selfhood is a prerequisite to mature empathy. We take for granted our perspective as individuals in a community, but sense of self wasn’t always possible, collectively or individually. Over time, the awakening of a sense of self brought our species out of the collective prehistoric fog of our hunter-gatherer forebearers. Individuality continued to grow. Today, sense of self is especially evident in countries such as the United States, which exalts it.

On an individual level, it isn’t until 18 to 24 months of age that a child begins to develop a sense of self. Have you ever seen a toddler discover and love on herself in a mirror? What you witnessed was not just adorable; it was the signal of important and relatively unique brain development called mentalization. When a child reaches mentalization, she is able to recognize another person’s mind as different from her own, consciously understanding that thoughts and feelings underlie behavior. It is at this point that children have the capacity to develop cognitive empathy, the ability to imagine another perspective. Empathy becomes represented in thoughts.

Once the capacity for cognitive empathy emerges, empathy development becomes conscious and more deliberate, utilizing a new set of tools. While empathy continues to be shaped by its affective foundation, new forces based in language and ideas begin to make their mark. Education is one such tool. The use of rewards and punishment, such

as praise or shame, is another. All of these cognitive tools are at their best when the cognitive continues to work with the affective. When the cognitive (imagining abstractly how another person feels) becomes disconnected from the affective (actually feeling tangibly in our bodies the way another person feels), problems ensue.

Another way of understanding the connection between affective and cognitive empathy is through the concept of “conscience.” What people generally refer to as “conscience” can be a mediator between our affective state (how we feel), our cognition (how we think about how we feel), and our behavior (what we do about it). When we think or do something that contradicts our affective empathy template, we may feel pain in the form of cognitive dissonance (a feeling that does not follow the story we tell ourselves). This dissonance signals us to reassess our thoughts and behaviors with the chance of making things “right.” In this sense, “right” means a realignment of our affective and cognitive states. “Right” can also mean “moral.” When this mediator is no longer working properly, our thoughts and actions fail to be properly informed. Sometimes coaching requires bridging that gap between cognitive and affective empathy, so that we feel resonance, inside and out.

## SECOND CHANCES TO LEARN EMPATHY

If someone was not gifted by their parents with healthy empathy, the good news is that neuroplasticity allows us to continue developing our capacity for empathy until we die. How? Remember that empathy is selfish first. You cannot give what you do not have. Taking care of your physical, emotional, and spiritual needs outside of your relationships is not narcissistic. It is necessary. It’s easy to get burned out as a coach if you never attend to yourself. Eat well, exercise, do yoga, meditate, take walks—whatever your body and spirit need to feel fed. Then, care for others: friends, spouses, aging parents, and especially children. Allocate time in a way that allows for both. Work your work around those priorities. It is simple, but it’s not easy because time is often short. It is worth it though, because it makes space for you to develop your capacity for empathy.

After early childhood, becoming a parent brings the second most explosive development of our capacity for empathy. It only makes sense. The parent-child dance takes two. The music is empathy. Sure enough, neuroscientists are now finding that hands-on parenting increases empathy in the brain. What a mix-up it is, then, that the United States ranks last in the developed world for parental leave. Last. We are depriving both parents and children of their superpower of empathy. The results can be painful.

## DO YOU KNOW A CORPORATE PSYCHOPATH?

If you are empathic by nature, taking care of yourself includes being mindful of the time you spend with people who


struggle to empathize. Sometimes, they are clients who have been referred to a coach to improve their “people skills.” Neuroscience professor Simon Baron-Cohen has shown a correlation between evil behavior and absence of empathy, including that of borderlines, narcissists, and psychopaths.

Studies show that corporate psychopaths create toxic work environments that lead to conflict, low worker morale, and poor performance. Corporate psychopaths promote conflict by pitting people against each other and bullying subordinates. They neglect their managerial and leadership responsibilities, take credit for the work and ideas of others, and blame others for their own mistakes. Sound familiar? In the news, if not personally?

Even if you do not see extreme empathy deficits, the 70% of people disengaged at work, as Gallup’s State of the American Workplace: 2010-2012 report shows, is a glaring symptom of a general lack of connectivity and empathy. People with empathy deficits are a product of their environment. They may have started out empathic but were encouraged to lean out of their empathy by a system that rewarded “survival of the fittest” and marginalized the empathy they learned as children. The lack of empathy can be situational, triggered by circumstances. Most of us feel zero situational empathy from time to time—no empathy, no remorse. Have you ever done something you regretted later? Have you ever overlooked someone for the sake of efficiency? Most of us have.

## IT IS JUST A MATTER OF TIME

There is a good chance that in the future, we will have a new way to work. Different aspects of our networked economy are likely to impact how we allocate time in the future. As more people lean into their superpower of empathy, they will migrate away from jobs that make no space for life outside of work. People will choose empathy. It is only human. Coaches can help people recover their humanity and steward empathy in their organizations.

Empathy is part of the solution too. Empathy collapses time. Think back to your most beautiful coaching relationships, both when you were the coach and when you were coached. In the best times, did it not feel as though you could do anything? Time was not a concern. Maybe time even stood still. That time, our most precious and limited resource, is one of the biggest gifts of a great coach. Time well spent, so you have few regrets. Time well-planned, so you look to the future with calm hope. Time in which empathy flows, so you have the courage to know yourself, change, and grow. 

*Jacqueline Acho, PhD, is co-author of Empathy Deficit Disorder: Healing from Our Mix-Ups About Work, Home, and Sex (Acho & Basilion, 2018), excerpts of which are included in this article. You can reach her at [www.jackieacho.com/](http://www.jackieacho.com/) or tweet her @jackieacho.*



# Coaching Culture

## An Epiphany of Perspective

BY GENE TIERNAN

One of the great joys of being a manager  
is developing talent.

It's an honorable pursuit to help reports, direct or indirect, discover their full potential and to be a mentor as each develops his or her career. There are few things more rewarding than having a former employee/mentee contact you after years have passed and learning that you were an inspiration along this person's path to professional satisfaction, growth, success, and perhaps even greatness.

At a time when businesses are running lean, the ability to develop employees has become more challenging. Hiring and/or developing individuals ahead of the curve is a rare luxury. Businesses tend to hire only when absolutely necessary, and then the employees need to make an immediate impact at full capacity. Of course, this outcome is a rarity. Depending on the role and the business cycle, it can take a good three, six, or even nine months for an associate to be fully up and running at a base level, learning the ropes and finding ways to add their own mark to how things are done.

As a result, most companies have fallen into the commonplace "you need to hit the ground running" requirement, and formal

check-in periods with management are more "check the box" exercises where a review is done quarterly, semiannually, and/or annually. As managers typically wear many hats, these reviews become tasks with imposed deadlines in a one-size-fits-all format, and in truth reflect a moment in time rather than a holistic assessment. Events that happened most recently are likely to be top of mind and thus what's being evaluated. This combination of numeric and/or qualitative assessment can run the risk of feeling critical, impersonal, and irrelevant, rather than insightful, holistic, and affirming.

### A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

I have spent a lot of time thinking about how I could be a better manager, and how coaching rather than criticizing has been more effective as I've fine-tuned my approach to managing teams. From a top-down HR policy perspective, formal reviews are typically a necessary evil, but I have changed my mindset from "performance review" to "career path advisement." When focusing on the individual, one





can understand strengths, weaknesses, and motivations looking forward, rather than criticizing and critiquing past performance to date.

I have had the good fortune throughout my career to serve as a business leader, a service provider, and a trainer, mostly in the marketing space and across multiple industries. Through these experiences, I've honed an approach that on its surface may be obvious, but it has played itself out as a sort of epiphany for me. For years I had managed individuals, teams, offices, and leadership in very traditional ways. Reviews had little impact on promotions and raises, but rather created more of a paper trail to address issues and ensure we'd had our eyes on associates and made efforts to develop each. Much of it was bureaucratic and from the top down, and all knew that.

It was when I played a role as a trainer that I was best able to see things more clearly. Teaching forced me to look at things differently, removing me from focusing internally to looking at the bigger picture from the periphery. This allowed me to break down processes and understand intentions so I could develop and apply some best practices that I adhere to today.

## COACHING VS. FEEDBACK

Feedback is given at a point of time. It has a beginning, a

middle, and an end, ideally closely relevant to a situation. It establishes a judgment. This is not bad or without merit, but it is a response to some "thing."

Coaching is more of an ongoing pursuit, engaging associates thoughtfully and allowing them to assess and come to their own conclusions. Coaching offers a sideline view to be presented to associates while allowing them to respond with their own POV and perspective. Ideally this becomes a risk-free discourse over time so that the leader and associate come to an approach and a decision together.

I approach managing more as a marketing and service effort. As such, I see managing people more as "coaching" than "playing boss." I had a mentor who ran several successful businesses that lived by his words, "Hire good people, then step back and let them do their jobs." He would be on standby to coach as necessary and truly had an open-door policy, advising his reports to tell him the problem and the proposed solution so that he could share his perspective. More often than not, the associates could then wrestle any challenges to the ground on their own. Just like in sports, this "lead coach" can offer strategy and perspective to help the players move in a unified direction, performing as they see best from their perspectives on the field, empowered yet guided. This approach works. I've seen it firsthand, and I employ it even now.



## THE SERVICE MINDSET: A FIRST LOOK

What is key is a service mindset. I'll get into this in more detail later, but at a glance, a coach's job is not to put people in a box, but rather to guide and inspire. When you put yourself in the mindset of treating teammates as clients rather than service providers, it is truly amazing to see how your perspective changes as their ambition grows.

As an account leader at a creative agency, I had the good fortune to have a "dream" client—a brand leader who recognized the value of an agency partner and wanted to do great things together. He explained that his company went to great efforts to build a first-rate agency roster, and my agency passed the test. He said, "You know, if you guys fail, it's probably my fault. You've been deemed the best of the best—if you are not successful, I am not successful. If things aren't great, I have to ask myself why—to blame the agency is a cop-out, since I approve all you do." I can't tell you how rare this perspective is, but I can tell you our team developed some of the best, most innovative and creative work of our careers. Pick up any trade magazine, and you'll see that agencies are fired daily. It's easy for a client or brand to blame the outsider, the agency. But when clients take ownership and get the best out of their team, we all succeed together.

A good leader, a good coach, can have that same perspective. Say to associates, "We hired you because we see how great you are. If you don't succeed, I must ask myself what I'm doing wrong, since I know your capability for success is endless." That mindset, internalized and consistently applied, will yield great work, I can assure you.

## BUILD POSITIVITY

To use marketing as a metaphor, in the end positivity is the outcome we seek—positivity from several shared perspectives. Whether company, manager, or associate, we all want the same things: success, satisfaction, rewards, growth, and acknowledgement. These are not ends in and of themselves, but rather the means to an end—career contentment.

Positivity perpetuates. When a coach gets his or her entire team focused around positive outcomes, rather than simply the task at hand, the outcome becomes a greater motivator. This has a snowball effect, since positive outcomes make everyone want to get up and come to work to do great things, rather than just show up to do what needs to be done. With this comes inspiration, fulfillment, and better teamwork. A coach who inspires this positivity makes his or her own life easier—and once the coach gets the ball rolling, it picks up speed.

## ALIGN EXPECTATIONS

Clarity is paramount. Coaches must be explicit in terms of what success looks like. Everyone must march to the same drum and understand how each person's role will yield that success. We see this everywhere in life; misunderstandings lead at least to disappointment and confusion, and at worst, to failure.

Expectations should not focus only on the little things, as important as they may be. We all know the devil is in the details, and so they are important, but if a coach sets up an environment that is more focused on completing tasks well and not on the bigger-picture reasons the tasks are being

## “Individuals are more likely to be inspired by what they may accomplish, rather than just what they may do.”

done in the first place, the team will necessarily fall into the trap of naval-gazing, as that’s the top-down expectation.

Individuals are more likely to be inspired by what they may accomplish, rather than just what they may do—even if they do it very well. A coach will be best served by keeping the team focused on the ultimate accomplishment, so the team has an eye toward how to build that better mousetrap, not just building the existing mousetrap at its best. The best coaches figure out how to get the best out of their people, so they change the game, not just play the game as it has always been played.

### THE SERVICE MINDSET: A DEEP BRIEF

Let’s get back to approaching coaching as a service, rather than a top-down function. What a difference it is to look at an employee and strategically think, “What can I do to make this person great in service of our goals?” rather than “What do I need to tell this person to do so we meet our goals?” Based on my experience in the service industry, there is no question that creating a brief and getting all on board before any actions are taken is the best way to get folks aligned. The core elements are the same whether you’re kicking off a campaign, an innovation, or any other business goal, and they can be instrumental in setting expectations.

**Objective.** Have a clearly articulated statement of what you need to accomplish, not just what you need to do. It’s easy to allow oneself to be very busy doing things but accomplishing nothing. Clarity can help minimize this problem.

**Strategy.** Get each individual and team aligned on how you are going to get to your key accomplishment(s). The best outcomes occur when the coach can help the team and its individuals arrive at the “how,” so that each feels ownership and can pave a path toward that goal.

**The single most important thing.** There’s a lot of minutiae that can create chaos. Everything cannot be equal in importance. A coach must reduce the noise so the team and individuals know what’s most important. Only one thing can be most important; other things may be important too, but a coach must ensure that all are aware of the hierarchy of importance. That way, people won’t put great effort against doing rather than accomplishing.

**Desired outcome/success metrics.** A coach must clearly articulate what success will look like—again, not just what will get done, but what will be accomplished and how that affects the business. Metrics can be a bit definitive and are good to establish up-front where applicable. More often than

not, HR-implemented reporting will have metrics based on some criteria. But for a coach, it’s typically a bit “softer.” It’s more about relationship and personal development than numeric absolutes. If you can create metrics that make sense and don’t diminish the relationship, great. But if not, recognize the softer value of having more frequent 15-minute informal check-ins, 100% focused on that individual’s growth rather than task performance, and evaluate the person through more “human” considerations. Don’t diminish the value of relationship and personal growth to make something fit into a number rating.

**Desired response.** From the associate’s perspective, describe how you want them to respond to the experience of working with you. What do you want them to feel? What do you want them to think? What do you want them to do? Stating it in the first person allows you to put yourself in that associate’s shoes. Would you rather hear, “I got my job done well and did everything I was asked to do, so everyone should be happy with my performance,” or “I’ve come a long way thanks to my manager’s help in XYZ ways. I feel great—I never dreamed we’d accomplish what we did. I love working here and can’t wait to do something great again”?

**Positivity.** In the end, each individual and team should feel positive about what they’ve done; if they don’t, then the coach needs to reevaluate. The best people on a team are those who feel invested and good about the business and themselves. If the feeling is one of negativity, or even neutral, then the team is uninspired and the work will be too.

### RELATIONSHIP RESET

Being a great coach is not “one and done.” The successful coach doesn’t give a pep talk before a game and then stand in the shadows. It’s an ongoing process that requires listening and observing to inform guidance. And that means listening for and eliciting feedback on your own performance. No one knows what motivates your associates better than they themselves. The best coaches keep perspective from the sidelines and constantly adapt toward incremental successes, in constant communication with the team and its players individually. When done well, it is rewarding for all involved. As a manager, it could mean that you’ve motivated, guided, and influenced someone’s career—and perhaps even his or her personal life—in positive and wonderful ways.

And what could be better than that? [AQ](#)

*Gene Tiernan is managing director, teamDigital, a digital marketing and promotions company.*



# Rethinking Whether EXECUTIVE COACHES Should Give Advice

BY CHRIS “MITCH” MITCHELL

The conventional wisdom in executive coaching  
has long been that coaches shouldn't give advice:  
“Never tell, always ask.”

By this principle, the best coaches should only put forth provocative and expansive questions in search of the wisdom and perspective already within their clients.

This approach is based on the often-incorrect assumptions that coachees have the necessary answers inside them and have sufficient time for a lengthy “inquiry-only” coaching process. It also stems from people mistakenly equating executive coaching with fields such as life coaching and relationship coaching instead of the more goal-oriented academic and athletic coaching.

While the inquiry-only approach to coaching can be extremely effective and enormously worthwhile, it shouldn't preclude executive coaches from offering clear, well-timed advice when needed. Such direction can be critical for leaders and organizations, adding tremendous value to coaching engagements.

## EXECUTIVE COACHING IS GOAL-ORIENTED (THINK GOLF)

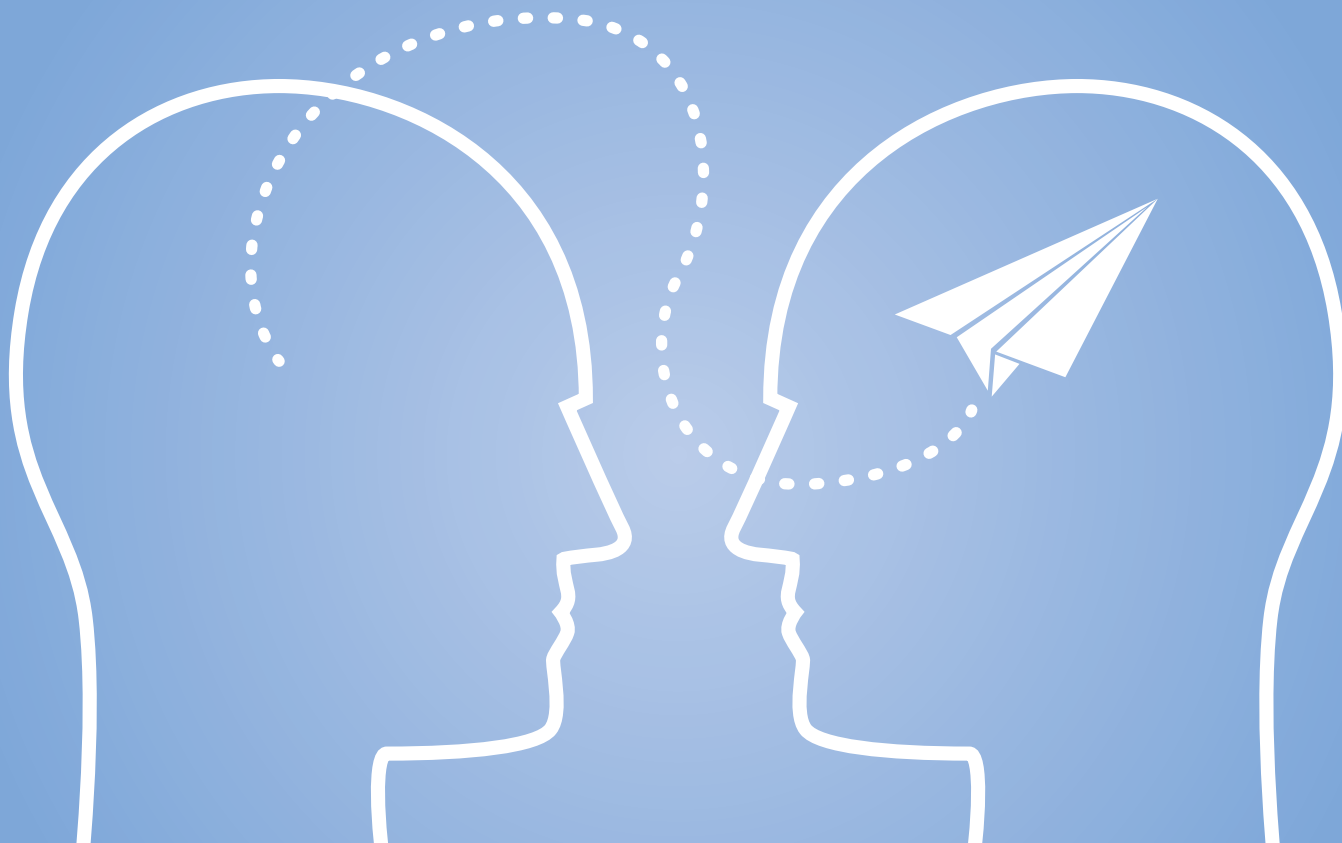
Executive coaching is designed to help individual leaders take their organizations to the next level by developing skills and awareness they might have difficulty acquiring on their own. When effective, it can be invaluable, especially among those who have just joined a complex organization and are learning the culture. It can further assist those serving in top leadership positions for a long time who have an outside

influence on the direction and culture of an organization but are isolated from its inner workings as a result of their high-level responsibilities. Because of their power, they're also less likely to be informed of hard truths regarding such issues as their management abilities and blind spots.

In this respect, executive coaching carries extremely high stakes. It represents a singular means of facilitating such opportunities as onboarding and piercing the bubble often surrounding those in the loneliest top jobs. What's more, its success can impact shareholder value, employment prospects, and the long-term viability of organizations. It's designed to foster a specific kind of outcome: effective, efficient leadership, strategy and operations, and positive, sustainable growth.

The goal-oriented nature of executive coaching makes it comparable to academic coaching (tutoring) and athletic coaching. In these fields, an experienced guide is tasked with helping a coachee reach a specific outcome—for example, an exemplary grade on an exam or an improved golf game. There are clear and measurable markers of success and failure.

And yet, executive coaching is often equated with other forms of coaching, such as life coaching and relationship coaching—fields in which experienced professionals help individuals who might otherwise feel stuck identify their goals and develop actionable plans forward. What's notable



about these types of coaching is that the problem being solved for has no right answer. If a person is determined to leave a lucrative job for the teaching field, his or her life coach is tasked with helping formulate a plan to accomplish this goal. The same can't be said for academic, athletic, or executive coaches.

Being equated with less outcome-oriented forms of coaching has led to the conventional wisdom that executive coaches shouldn't give advice, but rather ask the "right" questions that allow coachees to discover their own answers. This inquiry-only model guides the practice of life coaching and relationship coaching, and it can yield great success. Yet it significantly limits the value of executive coaching, just as it would limit the value of athletic or academic coaching, because sometimes it's most effective to simply show someone how to correctly swing the golf club.

## **ASSUMPTIONS DON'T ALWAYS PROVE TRUE**

The inquiry-only model is championed by many executive coaching professionals because of prevailing assumptions that are only sometimes true.

The first assumption behind the "never tell, always ask" conviction is that the coachee already has all the answers within him or her. In other words, it's the job of an effective coach to bring out the individual's untapped wisdom, perspective, and inner knowledge by asking the right questions.

This approach can indeed be helpful. A series of deep and expansive questions can guide executives to see themselves

and their situations differently. Prompted effectively, they can begin to think outside many of the boxes in which they've long been stuck.

The problem is that sometimes the coachee simply doesn't have the answer, either because of limited knowledge, experience, or self-awareness or other factors impeding his or her perspective. Even the most provocative questions won't help this executive overcome his or her blind spots, which can have enormous consequences for an organization, its investors, and its employees.

The second assumption is that there is always enough time to apply the "never tell, always ask" approach, which can be a lengthy process. It can even impede an organization's progress if an executive's so-called inner knowledge points him or her down a self-defeating path or one that will create unnecessary pain and dysfunction within a company. With time exceedingly precious, this route is best avoided by providing clear, direct guidance.

Let's review two case studies that exemplify how these assumptions don't always prove true and show the effectiveness of clear, well-timed direction and advice.

## **ACHIEVING GROWTH BY EMPOWERING OTHERS**

When I first met Ryan, CEO of a private, midsize healthcare company, his board had recommended coaching as a tool to help him continue to meet the organization's goals. Upon joining the company six years earlier, Ryan had achieved new financial milestones, immersing himself in every area



“The gatherings also revealed untapped potential in the group of executives, stymied by micromanagement but still passionate about the business and dedicated to making it better.”

of the business and giving up evenings and most weekends with his family. Now that growth was slowing, he thought a “jolt” from the right coach could help him clear the hurdles limiting the company’s progress.

The source of Ryan’s problem quickly became clear: He had grown the organization to the point that it now required greater empowerment of his executive team and less personal quarterbacking. He could no longer attend every important meeting and focus on every organizational need. Yet the company still operated under this paradigm, slowing key initiatives and sowing dysfunction.

Ryan didn’t see the situation this way. In his mind, his colleagues were doing a good job of “keeping the train on the track” but hadn’t shown an ability to solve deep problems. As the company leader most deeply immersed in the business and the competitive landscape, he sought to be the focus of the coaching engagement.

I originally tried posing questions about the company’s predicament with the intention of spurring deeper reflection, but Ryan held firm. He saw no reason to dedicate time and resources on personnel he considered “nonvital.” Further, he correctly perceived that many of these executives were unhappy and didn’t want to make investments in them only to see them leave.

This is the point in a coaching engagement when it’s best to start giving direct guidance and advice.

For example, I advised Ryan to make team alignment and empowerment his top priorities for the coaching engagement. Though initially reluctant, he ultimately agreed to this area of focus. I guided him through careful planning

of offsite gatherings that would create safe spaces for his executive team to have candid conversations about the group, their work together, and the company’s thorniest challenges.

At these offsite meetings, Ryan’s team ultimately helped him face the reality that he had created an organizational culture that couldn’t function in his absence and was thus impeding growth. The gatherings also revealed untapped potential in the group of executives, stymied by micromanagement but still passionate about the business and dedicated to making it better.

In just a few months, Ryan shifted his focus to more future-facing issues and initiatives, allowing his newly empowered team to troubleshoot the company’s day-to-day problems independently. His work-life balance dramatically improved, as did his relationships with team members, who—following Ryan’s example—sought to better empower those reporting to them. In 18 months, the company began again to meet growth targets.

Coaching helped Ryan evolve as a leader and transformed the organization, but only through direct advice. He didn’t have all the “answers” to his leadership gaps inside him. At key points in the journey, he needed more than just questions.

## **SLOWING DOWN TO GO FAST**

As the newly hired COO of a fast-growing start-up, Lisa had strong experience and a track record of success, albeit all at the same company. This was her first shift into an entirely new organizational culture since she had left graduate school for full-time employment.





Lisa's new company had wisely engaged a coach to help ease her transition and accelerate her effectiveness at the onset of her employment. She and I spent a full day and a half getting to know each other offsite and determining what success would look like once the coaching process was complete.

Lisa's competence and enthusiasm were striking from the start. She was energized, focused, and determined to prove to the CEO and board of directors that they had chosen well by hiring her. She had a range of ideas about how the company could meet its aggressive targets and was determined to "hit the ground running" by making significant, immediate changes. As a seasoned coach, I saw in Lisa someone clearly seeking to do too much too soon.

To best serve the company, I had to advise that Lisa slow her pace and concentrate on onboarding in advance of advocating for bold, new initiatives and tactics. She needed to listen much more than she thought and receive an immersive education in the brief but dramatic history of the company. This would be crucial in helping her gain the trust of her subordinates, some of whom were wary of additional change and entertaining other job offers. She further needed to understand routes to success already explored and dismissed and the reasons why so as not to duplicate efforts, frustrate colleagues, and ultimately slow her pace when the company was counting on her to meet targets within a designated time frame, after her immersion.

Patience doesn't come naturally to leaders like Lisa, but my counsel that she set aside her operational goals for a months-long period of intensive listening worked wonders. While initially frustrated with the listen first and listen more approach, she acquiesced to following a "playbook" for new leaders designed to help her learn the corporate culture, ironically speeding her assimilation. This allowed her to expediently approach her "real work," once ready, with much deeper strategic insight and the trust of her subordinates

and superiors. It was no surprise to learn that her ideas ultimately helped the start-up gain added market share and cut costs well ahead of schedule.

Lisa had all the skills necessary to do her job but would have likely failed to meet her goals without a coach willing to explicitly tell her to slow down and build trust. Advising patience helped expedite her full onboarding, aligning her with her team so she and the company could more quickly succeed.

## COACHING AS CRAFT WORKS BETTER WITH THE RIGHT TOOLKIT

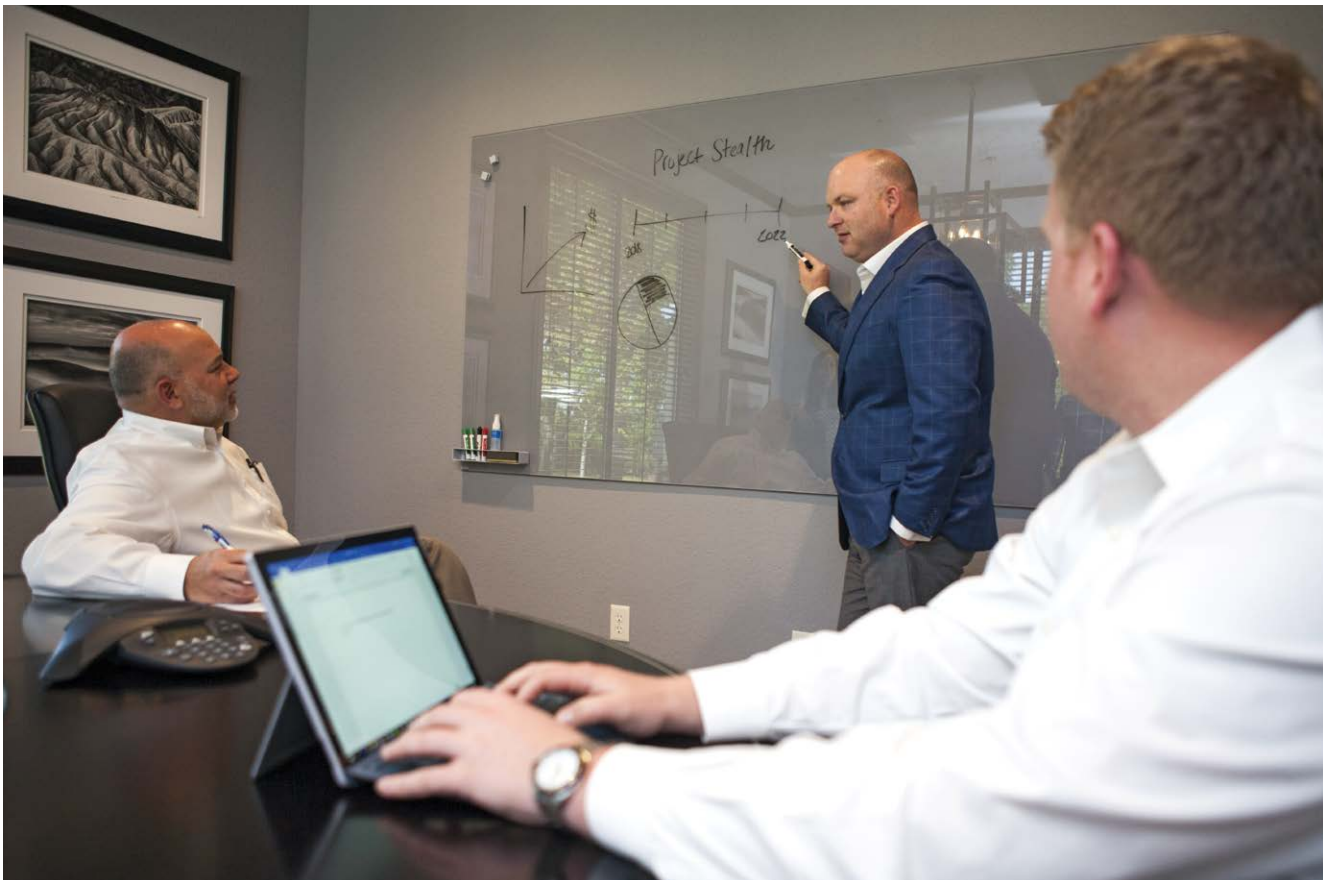
Executive coaching shouldn't be defined or measured by any set process or philosophy. As a goal-oriented practice, it's effective simply when it helps a coachee get to where an organization needs him or her to be, in the best and quickest way possible. Imposing limitations on what constitutes "good" or "pure" coaching doesn't reflect the needs of clients and the complexity of individuals who will sometimes respond to inquiry-only approaches and sometimes require clear guidance to overcome limitations and blind spots in the most expedient time frame. Adding the most value to a coaching engagement requires an openness and expertise in both methods. If executive coaching is best considered a craft, it works far better with the right toolkit. <sup>AQ</sup>

*Chris "Mitch" Mitchell is a principal at FMG Leading with more than 25 years of executive coaching experience. His methods bring a holistic approach to leader development, focusing on the tensions and gaps in leadership, while engaging individuals as complete, integrated systems. Mitchell helps executive leaders thrive by managing essential habits and skills, such as the ability to compartmentalize personal and business issues, manage priorities, and overcome fear in performance, productivity and presence. He has guided numerous executives through times of upheaval and transformative change.*

# 8 STEPS

## to Building an Engaging, Employee-Centric Culture

BY VIC KELLER



The company's foundation is its culture. Foundation cracks lead to instability. Instability leads to system failures.

A unified corporate culture is vital. It's not all about accolades, awards, and status—it's about being successful. Simply put, a strong company culture builds identity, helps with talent—retaining and attracting it—and elevates your brand's image.

I believe a strong company culture is achieved through the balance of aligning good people with a clear vision and strategy. Leveraging an impactful company culture to help drive a profitable financial model is the heartbeat of any successful business, and the motivation behind my leadership philosophy.

## CREATING AN ILLUSION OF WORKPLACE HAPPINESS

Most progressive companies do an exceptional job of portraying a positive culture. And yet, despite all the time and energy focused on these employee-centric environments, one-half of the U.S. workforce still tests positive for employee unhappiness. I believe this is because there is a disconnect between what company "culture" means to leadership and what it means to associates. More often than not, company leaders strategically align their cultures with increasing accomplishment and achievement. Culture becomes a strategy for growth. However, what culture means to associates relates more closely to personal fulfillment.

These same companies consistently talk about how they have a great culture or are working to build one. But in my experience, when you dig below the surface for the true effect these company cultures have on employees, very few of them actually translate to real employee happiness.

Many company leaders recognize that employees want to feel purposeful in their work, and thus try to define and build a culture around purpose. This is a step in the right direction, but ultimately this kind of culture still stems from the leadership's strategic desire to achieve. To make a broader change in the perception of "work culture" in today's society, business leaders must shift the desire to cultivate a culture that achieves company success to a culture of actually providing the workforce with true fulfillment. If we can do that, we can expect a significant increase in employee happiness across the country.

Companies can no longer depend on loyalty in today's workforce, especially within the Millennial generation that values culture and purpose over title and loyalty. If a company breeds an unhappy workforce, then employee turnover rates will inevitably climb, negatively impacting productivity and profitability and ultimately compromising employee health and well-being.

## HOW DO YOU IMPROVE A COMPANY'S CULTURE?

Setting the tone for a company's culture starts at the top. Period. You beat your competition by retaining and recruiting

great talent, and you retain and recruit great talent with a great culture. People want to be on your team. If you look at the companies listed on any "Best Places to Work" list, almost every one of them in the top 20 has a remarkable company culture. Great culture translates to great human capital. Hilton, Salesforce, Cisco, American Express—all of these companies have an environment that employees buy into because they feel it's:

- Aligned
- Integrated
- Authentic
- Immensely successful

In private equity, I get to see the good, the bad, and the ugly of company cultures. Many businesses say they have a great culture, but so few actually do—or worse, they don't know they don't. The company's foundation is its culture. Foundation cracks lead to instability. Instability leads to system failures.

Here are my eight founding blocks for building a successful company culture. Think of it as the keys that start the engine of success:

**1 Know your workforce.** Many companies don't see their workforce as a primary tool for success. That's unfortunate because knowing your workforce enables leaders to be intentional about crafting an authentic culture that speaks to their employees. It helps guide innovation in areas ripe for growth. Your workforce is like a focus group for success—listen to them and learn how to grow. Mary Barra, the general manager of General Motors, did an exceptional job of this when she assumed her leadership role. Within the first month, Barra was touring plants, talking to people on the floor, learning their fears and aspirations, and understanding what incentivized and inspired them. Her No. 1 objective was to know her workforce in order to propel GM to one of the top global companies recognized for good culture. And it worked.

**2 Foster work-life integration.** Just because you go to work doesn't mean you stop living. A popular concept for leaders is to push the notion of work-life balance, but all that really means is to make your time spent working equal to that spent not working. Balance is not a bad thing, but in this context, it compartmentalizes life and work. In my opinion, leaders should instead foster a work-life integration environment where time at work feels fun and life freedoms are accepted. Work should complement life, not compartmentalize it.

**3 Deliver purpose.** Simply put, define your "why." At Ancor Capital Partners, where I am a managing partner, we have an incredible medical technology company in our portfolio that provides products and services to both the pharmaceutical and healthcare industries. It's truly transforming the way healthcare uses real-world data to





Vic Keller is the founder of more than 10 companies including the ZAK Automotive Companies, which were acquired by Berkshire Hathaway Inc. in 2015.

accelerate research and generate evidence that provides enhanced decision-making capabilities for the market. In effect, we're enhancing the efficacy of drugs that work in many different therapeutic areas to improve quality of life.

And yet, in the first month of our partnership, we learned that the company leadership hadn't put in place the time to really educate and relay to employees just how impactful their work is in the industry they serve. This spurred a new project to bring all associates together in a monthly review to discuss not the typical business achievements, results, or monetization updates, but rather specific examples of how the work we do directly impacts patients' lives. We are taking the opportunity to qualify for the workforce that the work we're doing is truly changing lives and that while healthcare is an obvious place to hone our purpose, there is further opportunity that extends to other industries as well. It has been amazing to see the change in employee camaraderie, community, and work ethic since the inception of these review meetings. Delivering purpose goes a long way toward cultivating employee fulfillment.

**4 Encourage entrepreneurialism.** A company built with an entrepreneurial spirit at the core empowers rank-and-file employees to challenge senior-level management, even the CEO or founder, in the way a product is made or a process is run. In these environments, the hierarchical scales are evened both physically, with open-office floor plans, and figuratively, with open lines of communication. To have an entrepreneurial spirit is to create tension by challenging the way things are.

**5 Have a smile policy.** Having an open-door policy is one thing, but having an open door with a smile is the real deal. Leaders can say they have an open-door policy to encourage transparency, but no employee is going to saunter into a leader's office if they look uninviting—even if the door is open. Leaders must invite the conversation to deliver true transparency. The best way to do that is with a smile when someone comes knocking. Start by saying "good morning" with a smile. Beyond basic manners, it's such a simple act that shows your team members you care.

**6 Take time to celebrate.** Celebrating a birthday is still a big deal—it's a party! This may seem sophomoric, but celebrations are infectious. A leader who celebrates birthdays gives employees permission to inject fun into the workplace. It's the easiest way to break down walls and create camaraderie. Leaders who celebrate let employees know they're human and that celebrating life is worth a break.

**7 Make HR the concierge, not the police.** As the department whose sole purpose is to manage the company's workforce, HR should always be positioned as a support department for employees. In essence, leaders in HR should act as a concierge for employees rather than as police. For example, when it comes to company communication, leave out the policy-driven terminology. PTO should be called what it is: vacation, family time, a brain break, and so on. Tell employees that they deserve the time off and that they earned it. This shifts employees' perspective

away from a disengaging authoritarian leadership and shows them that their company cares.

**8 Take time to give back.** In a recent PwC survey, “Workforce of the future,” Millennials reported that the impact they have on the environment is just as important as their salary. You will find that most teams are enthusiastic and motivated to give back. I can relate. Giving back has always been a priority in my life, both personally and professionally. At one of my former companies, we established an initiative to give back to our community on a regular basis. Finding the right charities to wrap our arms around as a company was a privilege, not only for the leaders but for the associates as well. We invited everyone to lend a voice in the selection process and crafted a meaningful way to serve the community in which we all belonged. As a Dallas native and the founder of a Dallas-based company, it was important for me to find creative ways to lend a hand to those in need in our great city.

Almost every team I have worked with enjoys stepping away from the office and jumping into community volunteer projects. Volunteering benefits everyone involved. Donating time for service projects as a company also paves the way for team building and leadership development and growth. One major caveat: For volunteering to truly impact the organization, the company’s culture must support and value

philanthropic endeavors 100%. Without this support and buy-in, the program fails.

There is a reason that Google pulls up more than 2.7 billion search results for the term “company culture.” The culture of a company is important. It’s meaningful, impactful, and directly affects all who work within it. Therefore, it should be given due respect and crafted with intention.

When I’m asked who inspires me, my answer is always the same—Richard Branson. While I don’t know Branson personally, I’ve followed his career since I was a young professional. I have always admired how he gives permission to entrepreneurs and business leaders to be outrageous in their culture-building and to always put people first. He has done a great job of advocating to the world that people can build incredible companies that do important work but still have a ton of fun along the way. I couldn’t agree more.

Go have fun. Build an outrageously great culture. **AQ**

*Vic Keller is managing partner for Dallas-based private equity firm Ancor Capital Partners and CEO of STATinMED Research. Keller brings deep operational expertise across multiple sectors including automotive, financial services, private equity, manufacturing and distribution and technology. He is an entrepreneur by nature and has over 20 years of experience in establishing, growing, and optimizing both national and international companies.*

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# Unlocking Employee Potential for EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS

BY DAVID HASSELL

Happy and fulfilled employees deliver the best products and services, and the best leaders know how to create and maintain an environment in which each individual can thrive.

Over the years, various management and leadership theories about creating an environment of empowered employees have germinated. One debate I often hear among Silicon Valley leaders is whether their organizations are a sports team or a family. For example, Netflix's Reed Hastings often speaks about how his company made a conscious decision that they function like a sports team. In general, the family tends to prioritize relationships over results, and vice versa for the sports team.

Personally, I don't think we need to choose. I believe there is a

way for organizations to compassionately care for their people while simultaneously measuring performance and results.

Over the past several years, my colleagues and I have proven out a concept whereby we create the healthiest, most nurturing environment for employees, resulting in extraordinary performance company-wide.

The methodology I am referencing is called Best-Self Management. And it works. We implemented it first at 15Five, where I am a co-founder and CEO. Even in the typically high-turnover, low-loyalty tech industry of Silicon



Valley, our company has seen only three teammates voluntarily leave since our founding in 2011. I think the results speak for themselves. If we measure ourselves based on the benchmark of revenue per employee developed by Tomasz Tunguz at Redpoint, we were recently producing approximately twice the average revenue per employee of companies at a similar size and stage, and in 2018, our team nearly doubled our annual recurring revenue while burning very little cash.

So, what is best-self management? What modern organizations need most from their people is completely aligned with what those same people want for themselves. That is, an opportunity to work in an environment where they can truly thrive and put their unique strengths and talents to work in the service of a mission they believe in. Think of it like the way a plant or tree will naturally grow into its full potential, if it is only given the right conditions for its unique nature (such as soil, altitude, air, water, sunlight, etc.).

## THE FIVE PILLARS OF BEST-SELF MANAGEMENT

While we've engineered and integrated many cultural touchstones over the years, there are five key practices I'd like to speak to that truly support best-self management:

**Growth mindset.** There are two mindsets in humans, a growth mindset and a fixed mindset, according to the book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Ballantine Books, 2006) by Carol Dweck, a Stanford psychologist studying behaviors. Individuals with a fixed mindset believe that all traits are fixed, including skills, personality, intelligence, and work ethic. Conversely, those with a growth mindset believe traits are malleable and can be improved or evolved over time.

Dweck's studies show that individuals exhibiting a growth mindset are more resilient and open to challenge and aren't afraid of failure. Alternatively, those with a fixed mindset are more likely to avoid challenges that might reveal their inadequacy.

In the workplace, managers need to understand which one of these buckets their people fall into. For instance, if you take a growth approach with a fixed person, this could be counterproductive because it may be seen as an attack on his or her performance. Best-self managers preempt this by orienting their teams toward a collective growth mindset as the foundation.

**Managing strengths.** In his book *The Big Leap: Conquer Your Hidden Fear and Take Life to the Next Level* (HarperOne, 2010), Gay Hendricks says we all fall into four zones of doing—the Zone of Incompetence, the Zone of Competence, the Zone of Excellence, and the Zone of Genius. While the Zone of Excellence and Genius can be easily confused when seen from the outside, the difference between the two is passion.

In the Zone of Excellence lie skills that we've likely honed because of social recognition and monetary rewards, or

**"People want an opportunity to work in an environment where they can truly thrive and put their unique strengths and talents to work in the service of a mission they believe in."**

because we've been asked to contribute in that way. However, tasks that fall into this zone could actually be draining over time and do not necessarily fulfill us. In the Zone of Genius, we have an even greater potential to make our biggest impact, and where we have a sense of passion, we gain fulfillment and positive energy.

Here's an example: A couple of years ago, I asked our head of marketing to list all of her responsibilities and mark which ones gave her energy and which ones drained her. She was so good at everything she did that I was shocked to see that she considered nearly 50% of her activities as draining and work she'd prefer not to be doing!

She admitted that it had been weighing on her and that she'd been having thoughts of possibly looking for another job. We hired a marketing coordinator whose Zone of Genius accommodated for the very things she found draining. By offloading those tasks, we now had two employees spending most of their time in their Zone of Genius and stepping up into the next level of performance and contribution.

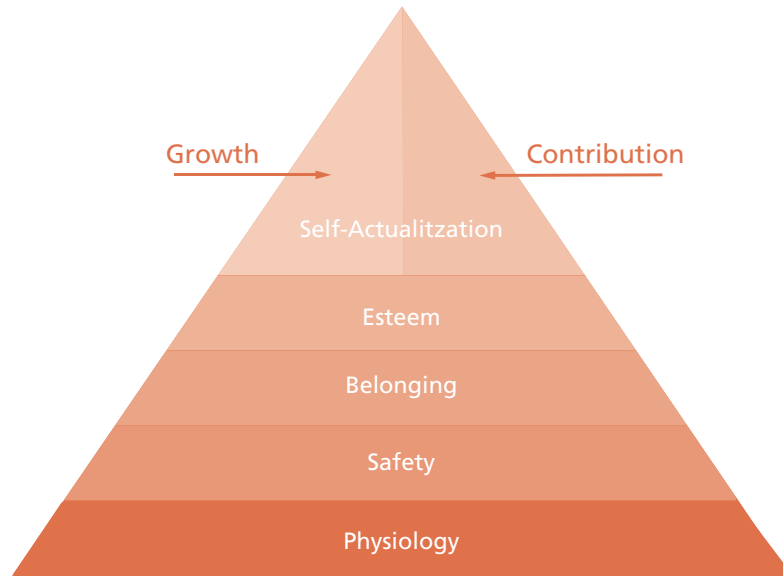
**Psychological safety.** Decades ago, psychologist Abraham Maslow observed that humans are naturally wired to become their best selves when fundamental needs are met. But when lower needs are threatened, all our attention goes there.

In the organizational setting, managers need to be mostly concerned with Safety, Belonging, and Esteem in the pyramid on page 38. Unfortunately, most organizations inadvertently create a feeling of threat and insecurity for their people, where they don't feel safe or don't feel they belong.

This is significant because it corresponds directly with our brain states—survival state (brain stem), emotional state (limbic system), and executive state (prefrontal lobes).

When confronted with a stimulus, the first two "brains" ask the questions *Am I safe? Am I accepted/loved?* If the answer to either of them is no, then an employee will exhibit defensive behaviors and is more likely to act in ways that seem to protect than to be open, curious, and fully contributing. This ultimately breeds gossip, internal politics, lack of

## Maslow's Hierarchy



trust, withholding of information, and other toxic workplace behaviors.

However, if the needs of safety and belonging are met, they give rise to a state of psychological safety. When people feel both respected and accepted, they are naturally inclined to thrive through challenge, creativity, passion, and intuition. This is where employees make their greatest contributions.

A critical element of best-self management is designing cultures that meet the needs of safety and belonging to create psychological safety, and to allow people to work in their Zone of Genius.

**Intrinsic motivation.** When employees wake up each day and are intrinsically motivated to do great work and bring their best, the quality of their contributions far exceeds anything motivated through mere external factors. Leaders can pinpoint which tasks motivate their employees most and offer more opportunities in those roles.

Intrinsic motivation results from having a connection to others, working autonomously, continuing to get better at the job, and gaining a connection to something greater than ourselves that offers a deep sense of purpose.

**Positive psychology.** While the majority of traditional psychology focuses on illness, positive psychology is all about happiness, well-being, and the factors that contribute to a fulfilling life. If you're interested in learning more about this field, Shawn Achor gives a wonderful and hilarious overview of positive psychology in his TED talk, "The Happy Secret to Better Work."

The basic thesis is that our brains are by default wired to survive and not to thrive. In the workplace, people who feel threatened in any way are not able to access their highest and unique levels of creativity. However, we can retrain our brains to be more positively oriented by doing things such as meditation and mental exercises focusing on gratitude. When people are retrained to have a positive outlook and given time to reflect, that transformation can be greatly beneficial to overall business results.

### PUTTING BEST-SELF MANAGEMENT INTO ACTION IN YOUR OWN ORGANIZATION

Leaders can create cultures that result in better business results and personal fulfillment by integrating the following five practices into their organizations:

**Best-self discovery.** Managers need to initiate a best-self discovery process with each of their direct reports. This helps employees self-reflect and get feedback from peers and other assessments to better understand what drives them and what their strengths are, and then clarify this into a statement for themselves around their potential unique ability or Zone of Genius. This is a process that should be returned to and refined periodically as people grow and develop.

**Weekly check-ins.** Check-ins shouldn't be reserved for only once a month or once a quarter. Weekly check-ins can be done asynchronously and in a lightweight manner. Employees need a place to regularly share their successes, challenges, progress on goals/objectives and key results

“Managers can open dialogues where employees feel comfortable coming forward and sharing aspects of their role that make coming into work each day fulfilling.”



(OKRs), weekly priorities, and peer appreciation, and receive coaching and feedback along the way.

Via these check-ins, managers can gauge how their direct reports are doing at work and in their personal lives.

**Personal objectives.** Set personal training plans for employees that focus on the skills they are great at and where they can improve. Training plans should be a living document and reflect progress.

Managers need to support each employee in setting at least one personal development objective alongside his or her OKRs during each quarter or other period of time for which you set goals. Learning and growth never end, and everyone should be focused on their next phase of growth.

**Regular 1-on-1s.** Managers should conduct regular 1-on-1s, ideally done in person, or via video for distributed teams, to go deeper on key issues that are surfaced through the weekly check-ins. These regular coaching sessions should be scheduled as frequently as you see fit.

I personally like a cadence of every other week, but these 1-on-1s can range from as frequently as weekly to as infrequently as once per month.

**Best-self reviews.** This is an opportunity to reframe the outdated and reviled annual performance review—which research suggests does not even work at evaluating performance, let alone improving it—to support someone in being and becoming their best self, where high performance is the natural by-product. Managers can open dialogues

where employees feel comfortable coming forward and sharing aspects of their role that make coming into work each day fulfilling. In doing so, managers can support employees in driving them toward doing tasks that help them reach their best-self.

We put a high degree of attention on helping to reflect and refine people's strengths, plan out their personal development objectives, and continue to focus them on their own personal growth and development journey. The process is much more lightweight than a typical performance review and can be done as frequently as once per quarter, but ideally no less than twice per year to keep this time focused on larger personal development roles.

To achieve any measure of success, organizations today need people who are passionate, committed to the mission, and loyal. I believe that the Best-Self Management methodology is a win-win for people, organizations, management, and leadership. It can truly help organizations and leaders address the hidden factors that stimulate sustainable growth and development in each employee.

One thing to keep in mind is that for it to work successfully, you as leaders need to genuinely and authentically care about your people. If you do this, you will be able to create an empowered environment where your people can produce extraordinary results. [AQ](#)

*David Hassell is the CEO and co-founder of 15Five, a creator of continuous performance management software and apps.*



# Coaching Culture Is HUMAN CULTURE

BY JERRY COLONNA AND KHALID HALIM



In the book *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu warns leaders not to engage in battle when angry. Anger is blinding.

It can result in disaster and lead to grave mistakes. And while few corporate leaders are able to admit when they are angry, they lead battalions and make decisions every day.

A coaching culture forces leaders to sit with and face those uncomfortable feelings so that the workplace does not become a battlefield. The ultimate outcome of an organization backed by leadership coaching is a more human workplace with leaders who not only voice emotion but also recognize and support it in others.

## THE INFALLIBLE LEADERSHIP FACADE

When it comes to courage, many leaders try to project an image of infallibility. Further, they believe that if a leader shows fear, that emotion can become contagious, causing teams to lose faith in an organization. The facade is unrealistic and superhuman. The thought that follows is that employees will leave an organization if leadership shows emotion. The opposite is true.

Employees tend to leave organizations that have leaders who haven't spent time working on self-inquiry. Getting a leader to admit that she is scared is one of the hardest things to do, but it is also the only way to show teams that they are human. Admitting fear is where real courage lies—not the fake kind of courage that comes with bravado.

There's safety in knowing that all humans suffer in the same ways. From the top to the bottom of an organization, each member of a team experiences the same basic emotions. Tirelessly working to stifle those emotions is, well, tiresome. Emotion suppression can also lead to aggressive behavior.

Build a culture of openness beginning with leadership. Allow teams to admit frustrations and fears. Ensure that leaders participate actively and honestly in those conversations. Enforce the fact that everyone is human and nobody is untouchable. Learn to set ego and resistance aside and accept all ideas. This creates a safe atmosphere.

Innovation is the cornerstone of a successful organization. Developing new ideas and products is not only exciting, it is essential to the lifespan of any company. But it's also easy for companies to get stuck in a creative rut. It's likely that somebody on a team has a new idea. It is likely that team members with new ideas do not present them for fear of failure.

Or, worse, an idea might succeed and result in uncomfortable change. Suddenly, there would be a shift in culture that requires adaptation. Give teams the space to fail spectacularly, and try again. Discuss the feelings of fear and change and what comes next. Find the lesson in failure. This process will spark further creativity and foster a culture of clear communication.

## WHAT IS A COACHING CULTURE?

The purpose of coaching is to move people from where they are to where they want to be. Most organizations considering a coaching culture have been stuck in the same place for a long time. Building a culture that is more open and accepting is the way to move forward. It's a continuous learning process that asks the same basic question over and over again until the root of every matter has been unearthed. That question is: What am I really afraid of?

The process is frightening and often paralyzes a leader and his or her team. When leaders find themselves in a situation gripped by fear, the immediate reaction can be outrage or frustration. But the most effective action is to stop, slow down, and drop into inquiry. Fear is a reactive state; we can only react to what is in front of us. It is when we ask a question that we open a window of possibility that we would not otherwise consider. This is where the opportunity for innovation happens.

Type the word "resiliency" into Google and count the number of article hits. It's somewhere in the hundreds of thousands. It's a sexy word with thousands of different opinions on how to be "resilient" and why it's important to be so. A less sexy word is "grit," but it's the right one. Grit is the way that we hold fast and steady onto truth and don't let go—not because we can't but because we believe in a team's ability.

We trust the process and the people behind the process, but we do so with an openness and kindness. We forge ahead and get the task done in a communicative and safe environment that allows for all emotions and opinions to be voiced. That's grit, and it's what we need to push our teams forward and trust that the work we are doing is the right work.

## HOW TO DEVELOP A COACHING CULTURE

At the heart of every company decision should be this question: Am I building a company that I would like to work for? If you could be the proverbial fly on the wall, would your company make you shudder or smile? Without inquiry, we may build organizations that are far from our own belief systems—ones that we'd never stand behind or work for.

Developing a coaching culture can mean going back to the drawing board by asking some qualitative questions:

- Do we have a clear vision? Are we executing for it?
- How are we currently interacting with clients? Does this need to change?
- How are we treating our employees? Are we creating safety and belonging?
- Do we know what problem we are solving? How can we keep this goal in mind?
- How can we keep growing without stifling creativity?



These questions have to be asked and answered regularly. They are guiding stars, and they are meant to be guideposts in case we get lost along the way. The answers to those questions are meant to be acted on by leadership. A coaching culture cannot develop unless leadership acts accordingly and leads by example.

So often, we see organizations guided by company philosophies that are meant to be followed by employees but that leadership largely ignores. This won't work. At the very origin of the word "coaching" is the word "teaching," and one cannot exist without the other. But there's a fine line between leading by example and disallowing discussion.

With teaching comes immense responsibility. Great leaders guide and challenge employees helping them (and, in turn, the organization) grow. This includes accepting new ideas and cultivating those ideas whether they result in success or failure. Guiding employees and creating open communication channels not only are at the crux of growth, but they also lead to a more productive and trusting workplace.

Many leaders do not know how to coach. To them, teaching means providing a quick solution to a problem without discussion. This is the way that many leaders have been doing business for years, and it's a hard habit to break. But it can be done using two basic human skills that are often overlooked: listening and discussing.

Teach management to ask questions and discuss problems instead of providing solutions, and to work on the art of active listening. These skills can be honed through listening and communication exercises during leadership training.

As a leader, your team often comes to you with problems to be solved. The default reaction is to be helpful and provide an

answer to the problem. But this is not how a coaching culture is built. Remember, coaching is about taking people from where they are to where they want to go.

So when presented with a problem (where the team does not want to be anymore), you can start the coaching conversation by simply asking: Given all of this, what would you like? (Where do you want to go?) This is the start of inquiry, but it is important to remember that where we want to go is usually not about getting what we want, but about what that makes possible and the opportunities it opens up for us.

So the next question to go deeper into inquiry is to respond to the answer to "What would you like?" with the question "What will having that do for you?" With each answer, ask again, at least three times, "What will having that do for you?" to go deeper and deeper into what is really being asked for. Most important, with this inquiry, the solution is self-generated instead of given by the leader.

A coaching culture also generates a greater sense of responsibility. When employees are allowed to grow and change, work becomes personal. Projects that would otherwise be checks on a list turn into engaging challenges filled with purpose. That purpose results in engaged employees committed to building better projects and striving for a stronger organization. In other words, coaching creates a company that you would like to work for.

## HOW TO DEAL WITH RESISTANCE

Sometimes coaching is incorrectly used as a form of reprimand. When this happens, employees will resist. If you have recently implemented a coaching culture structure and find regular employee resistance, consider how and when leadership has used coaching methods.



“When employees are allowed to grow and change, work becomes personal. Projects that would otherwise be checks on a list turn into engaging challenges filled with purpose.”

Are employees being scolded under the guise of coaching when something goes wrong? More often than not, this is the underlying issue when coaching fails. Nobody likes to be pulled into the corner office and taught a condescending lesson after making a mistake. It's important that leadership understand what coaching is and isn't.

A coaching culture is a dynamic culture. Leading by example and guiding teams every step of the way are not things that happen only when something goes awry. Teaching, in this sense, must be woven into an organization's culture so that it happens at every turn.

If implementing a coaching culture is being met with heavy resistance, it's likely that coaching is being used as a form of lecture. This won't suffice. But it's hard to be certain where resistance is coming from without asking questions.

Find out why people dislike a newly implemented coaching structure. Ask people to name the emotions that arise when discussing the changes. Work together to discern how to implement further changes that everyone feels good about.

The simple act of sitting down to discuss resistance is, in fact, part of dynamic coaching and should become the go-to method used regularly (not just when problems arise). As soon as employees learn that the workplace is now a safe place where discussion happens, a coaching culture will begin to take root.

## NO MAGICAL METHOD

Becoming a more human organization isn't an overnight fix. There's no handbook that can be read or wand that can be waved. Growth is continuous, as are the problems and emotions that arise every day. True self-inquiry is an


ongoing process that requires work (hard work). It's also work that will be met with a lot of resistance because it is uncomfortable and unfamiliar. But it is essential to the innovation, growth, and environment of any organization.

Most organizations take pride in creating a happy culture, a laid-back culture, or an open culture, but few focus on shaping the humans that are part of that culture. Implementing an open-door policy is not enough. Leaders must adopt coaching strategies, learn to be teachers and guides, and welcome creativity from every level. When leaders turn into mentors and employees learn that the workplace is a safe place, change begins.

The most important point about building a coaching culture is recognizing that this change impacts an entire organization from the top down and bottom up. It's not contained within the walls of management, but it must begin with introspective leaders who ask the tough questions.

Keep those questions nearby, look at them regularly, and remember to sit still in the face of fear to avoid an unexamined negative reaction. Remember, too, that failure is beautiful and always results in lessons learned. Self-inquiry through a coaching culture not only helps leadership unpack uncomfortable feelings but also allows leaders to recognize the same feelings in others, resulting in a more human workplace. [AQ](#)

*Jerry Colonna and Khalid Halim are cofounders and the CEO and CFO, respectively, of Reboot.io, an executive coaching and leadership development firm dedicated to the notion that better humans make better leaders. Colonna is the author of Reboot: Leadership and the Art of Growing Up (HarperBusiness, 2018).*



# Why Every Organization Should Teach Its Managers HOW TO COACH

BY RUSS TERRY

Do you coach your team members? You probably think you do, but most managers and leaders have an incorrect view of what coaching is.

Here's how: Often managers will say, "I'm coaching my employees," but what they really mean is, "I'm telling my employees what to do and giving them advice on how I would handle a situation differently/better."

Listen up, folks. That's not coaching, that's telling. Telling has its place here and there. When appropriate, you can put on your "manager hat" and tell an employee something. However, if you want team members to be more likely to accomplish their goals, which hopefully align with your goals and the company's goals, then true coaching is a better way to go.

## OPEN QUESTIONS, ACCEPTING TONE ARE KEY

Your employees are human beings. As humans, we are much more invested in a solution if we come up with it. An excellent coach asks open-ended questions to help someone determine the answer that's right for him or her, which may not be the answer we would have provided. Chances are, it's still a great way to resolve the matter at hand.

Here's an example. Many years ago, I had a coaching client who was working 15-hour days. Her solution was...to sell her house! I thought, Hmm, that's not the answer I would've chosen, but let's see where this goes. (More on that later.)

Her thinking was that if she lived in a different area, with more nature, she would be inspired to spend more time enjoying all that beauty, not inside in front of her laptop. So she decided to move, and that solved the issue. Fast-forward a year and,

empowered by the first move, she moved again, this time halfway across the country. A few years later, she met an amazing guy in that new city, and last year they had the most incredible wedding overseas. How's that for a happy ending?

What can start as a professional discussion in a coaching session can have an amazing result in someone's personal life. How cool is that? Want to be pivotal in someone's life? I sure do!

A minute ago, I promised to come back to the "not the answer I would've chosen" statement. That's a key to great coaching. You want to approach it with an open mind—a blank slate, if you will. Let people come up with the answer that's right for them. They know themselves better than anyone, including you. This means asking *no*, none, zero, zilch "suggestion questions." Examples of these include:

- Have you thought about...?
- Do you think you should...?

Both of those are *your* solutions that are not-so-cleverly disguised as questions. Please don't do that. We beg of you. Instead, ask open-ended questions, which start with "how" and "what." These will lead to robust answers that the person comes up with. For example:

- What do you want to accomplish in our discussion today?
- How can you make that happen?
- What was your reasoning for going down that path?

Notice that we didn't say "why" in that last question.

“Why” puts people on the defensive. Think about it: “Why did you do that?” sounds accusatory. “What was your reasoning?” is more neutral.

As a coach, you want to have a positive or, at worst, neutral tone, and certainly not a negative tone. Tone is the vibe or mindset in a coaching discussion. It should be curious. You want to understand the person better, including two very important aspects of every human being: the emotions he or she is experiencing and the motivation for doing something. Many newer coaches skip over these crucial aspects and head straight into solution mode. Just as we shouldn’t give people the solution, it’s also beneficial to help them explore the situation in some detail before they come up with the solution that’s best for them.

## DON’T IGNORE EMOTIONS

Similarly, if people haven’t released some negative emotions, it’s helpful to do so before they get into answer mode. When someone expresses emotions to you—explicitly or implicitly—it’s important to show that you’re listening and comment on those emotions, rather than ignore them.

The best thing to do here is to acknowledge and validate. A good example of A&V is:

**A:** I can see you’re quite upset.

**V:** It’s natural to feel that way. Most people in your position would be upset.

If you were to ignore their emotions, they will feel that you’re not listening to them. Then, they won’t share as much with you, and you can’t coach them if they don’t reveal stuff. Also, when they share their emotions, they will likely vent about what’s bothering them. That too is an important step, because it helps them release the negative emotions and start to move into a positive, solution-oriented mindset.

## WHERE TO GAIN COACHING SKILLS

Curious to learn more, get some practice coaching, and receive feedback on it? Well, American Management Association has just the courses for you:

- *Coaching for Optimal Job Performance:* This class is intended for supervisors and managers.
- *Coaching: A Strategic Tool for Effective Leadership:* This course is suited for higher-level management and leadership.

In both AMA coach training courses, we share with you a GUIDE on how to coach. Here is what we teach:

**G**—Gather data

**U**—Understand the impact

**I**—Interview to discuss actions and motivation

**D**—Develop an action plan

**E**—Execute plan; examine results

At each stage in the process, ask your team members open-ended “how” and “what” questions to get them to come up with the best solution for them. Some good example questions include:

**G**—How are you? (A simple question like this can lead to big answers.)

**U**—What’s the impact of this situation on you?

**I**—What was your thought process in taking those steps?

**D**—So, what’s next?


**E**—What specifically will you do? By when?

One of the many cool parts about coaching is that you don’t know where the discussion will lead next. Your subsequent questions are all dependent on the answer the person gives you. An excellent coach exhibits powerful intuitive listening. This means that as a coach, you should not have a predetermined opinion on what the person should do or an agenda for where you want the discussion to go.

Often folks are overwhelmed with lots of ideas swirling around in their minds. A coach helps them filter or funnel all those possibilities down to *one* thing to discuss today.

As you navigate the coaching discussion, see where it leads and ask the person open-ended questions to choose the best path at that moment. You’ll notice that the example question for the D in GUIDE is “So, what’s next?” In some cases, when you get to this step (develop an action plan), the topic may be different from the subject the team member originally mentioned in your coaching session. No problem! Often, as someone discusses the various things happening, his or her priority for the session shifts. Go with the flow. GUIDE (pun intended) the person with your powerful open-ended questions.

Just because we give you the GUIDE here, that does not mean that every manager in your organization shouldn’t attend our coach training classes. It’s important to learn how to coach, get practice and feedback from one of our seasoned coaches, and then practice some more with more feedback, before you’re ready to coach your team members.

Also, you’ll want to witness powerful coaching demonstrations. At least once or twice in each class, you will see your facilitator coach a participant. It may even be you! Get ready to hear lots of “wows” and “That was really great” comments. Magic can happen, and we want you there to experience it. Just think, you could then be on your way to creating magic back at your organization. How cool would that be? 

*Russ Terry is a life coach who helps people accomplish their goals, reach their full potential, and live a more robust, healthy life filled with family, friends, outside activities—and career satisfaction. Terry is also an AMA faculty member who teaches courses on leadership and management. He can be reached at [www.russterrylifecoach.com](http://www.russterrylifecoach.com)*



A person wearing a VR headset is shown in profile, looking towards the right. The background is a deep blue with intricate, glowing white and light blue digital patterns, including concentric circles, lines, and abstract shapes that suggest a high-tech or virtual environment. The person's hand is visible, pointing towards the digital interface.

# THE ROVER APPROACH

## Exploring Innovation in a Coaching Culture

BY MELISSA TAIT

If you have been following our nation's pioneering space exploration, you're aware of the Mars Rover missions.

The most recent rover, Curiosity, acquired that nickname for its mission to explore new terrain, collect soil samples, investigate what is beneath the surface, and use data to probe for answers for possible signs of life. A coaching culture has a similar mission to the Mars Rover. This culture is shaped by the drive to understand what is beneath the many layers of an organization, to help employees discover the opportunities within that organization where they can make an impact, and to probe the possibilities of thriving in a new land that is shaped by myriad mindsets.

As more organizations adopt a coaching culture and recognize the value of nurturing talent, there's a growing opportunity for those organizations to build on their foundation with a toolset that utilizes innovative technologies to forge new ground.

A key premise of a coaching culture is to enable a mindset where employees are empowered to provide solutions-

focused decisions and feel valued while doing so. To do this effectively, employees must be able to assess a situation, think about a challenge from a variety of perspectives, and establish empathy. Employees must also be able to give and receive feedback with balance and with trust. Trust is the cornerstone of employee accountability—for both the coaches and the trainees—and trust is required for demonstrating the value of a coaching culture that ultimately delivers diverse competencies and points of view with each proposed solution.

Traditionally, coaches support their teams by exploring questions with an employee rather than directing an employee on what to do and how to do it. They do this over time and in the setting of a one-on-one meeting. With the evolution of immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), along with other innovations

including artificial intelligence, voice assistants, and machine learning, coaches and employees are going to have a greater opportunity to learn from one another in a far more impactful and engaging way.

## THE POSSIBILITIES OF VR AND AR IN LEARNING

For those who are new to these technologies, here is a quick primer on what they are and how they work. Virtual reality currently comprises a headset that a person wears to view a 360° video. The user also wears a set of headphones that provide 360° spatial audio. With these devices, users experience the sensation that they are completely immersed in the content that they're viewing and have a limited sense of their actual physical surroundings. Augmented reality can deliver an immersive yet impactful experience via phone, tablet, or even headset. The AR headset provides a user with the ability to view an augmented, digital layer of content—whether that's data, video, or imagery—on top of the real-world physical surroundings. Envision the technology that you would see in *Iron Man* or *Minority Report*—it's not as sci-fi as you think. These digital experiences can enable an immensely engaging experience that can be shared with multiple people in numerous settings.

Now, let's begin with how VR can enable a more robust coaching experience. Its success starts with science. The human brain contains a set of specialized neurons called mirror neurons. A mirror neuron is a nerve cell in the brain that is triggered when a human goes through an action or witnesses another human going through that same action. The neuron "mirrors" the behavior of the other, as though the observer were going through the motion on their own. Consequently, mirror neurons help a human generate empathy.

Taking this one step further, neuroscientists believe that this mirror neuron system gives virtual reality its power to create empathy and to build connections across divides of race, gender, age, and class, as explored by researchers at the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley. When testing VR experiences, Chris Milk, a leading innovator in the VR space, claims in his 2015 TED talk, "virtual reality connects humans to other humans in a profound way I've never before seen in any other form of media, and it can change people's perception of each other."

Since garnering empathy is a critical component of coaching, VR becomes a powerful platform to utilize in training and strengthen a person's emotional intelligence. How are some companies integrating this platform into their coaching programs? Healthcare organizations, especially those with Medicare customers, are beginning to require their employees to go through empathy training so they can better understand what their members experience in daily life and when they engage with their brand. If their employees can establish empathy and have greater insight into a given

"Envision the technology that you would see in *Iron Man* or *Minority Report*—it's not as sci-fi as you think."

scenario, they will be better equipped with the ability to ask the right questions, think through the situation from varying perspectives, and in turn make an intelligent, well-informed decision without the need for managerial direction. Similarly, home insurance providers are utilizing VR to train their call center staff on how to consider a customer's mindset when a customer calls to report damage from a fire or natural disaster. Other organizations are training their employees on how to have a more inclusive mindset when disabled customers engage with their brand.

These VR solutions don't solely provide content consumption in a 360° setting. They can also place trainees into a scenario where they are prompted to think differently and can test their responses in a safe environment, ultimately building up confidence and success. In addition to coaching trainees, VR provides an opportunity to train an organization's coaches as well. With the same platform, coaches can test their ability to listen, ask the right questions, give feedback, provide structure, and show empathy, all within a virtual environment in preparation for team interaction. Navigating through these empathy experiences will help people feel what it's like to be vulnerable, and if a person is able to practice vulnerability, he or she will be more open to new and sometimes risky experiences.

Augmented reality can supplement a VR training platform with one that provides more in-the-moment training across locations and with multiple people. When wearing an AR headset, a person is still able to view and hear his or her real-world surroundings. While doing so, he can also see and hear digital content layered on top of that view. Additionally, the melded view of both the real and augmented content can be viewed by other people via a mobile device or laptop, giving those people the ability to advise the trainee via audio or visual cues.

This type of training platform is great for giving a coach the opportunity to guide an employee through a real-world setting. Manufacturing companies can have remote coaches virtually walk alongside employees on the floor while guiding them through how best to respond to machinery implementations or challenges. Airline manufacturers are using AR to help coach future pilots in flight navigation and mechanics in engine maintenance. Doctors can help coach residents through procedures, and healthcare providers can coach their nurses and customer support staff. Insurance



“Airline manufacturers are using AR to help coach future pilots in flight navigation and mechanics in engine maintenance.”

adjusters can review damage onsite and can receive in-the-moment remote coaching guidance while still allowing for the adjusters to arrive at their own decisions. AR headsets provide the power of generating empathy mixed with an ability to influence real-time decisions, offering the structure and support that successful coaching programs require.

## AI AND VOICE ASSISTANTS IN LEARNING

Artificial intelligence (AI) is intelligence demonstrated by machines where data is collected, analyzed by algorithms, and then produced into contextual trends, human interpretations, and even simulated conversations all grounded in that data. Machine learning is an extension of AI, as it demonstrates a machine's ability to learn from data inputs and teach itself so it can improve the relevancy of its results and conversation over time. Voice assistants allow people to engage in a conversation with a computer via voice. Devices such as Google Home and Amazon Alexa are readily available and part of the consumer-facing, emerging technology space.

With artificial intelligence, machine learning, and voice assistants, there is a wealth of opportunity to enhance coaching both now and in the future. Let's go back to the topic of eliciting feedback and encouraging employees to ask questions so they can address challenges and derive their own solutions. Today, there are applications that can request employee feedback, read comments, interpret employee sentiment, and use this data to give managers suggestions on how to strengthen their coaching techniques.

Now, think about how voice assistants can be integrated into the mix. Some organizations require their coaches to meet with their employees in a one-on-one setting once a week. Open your mind and imagine a voice assistant, such as Amazon Alexa or Google Home, sitting in the room while coaching conversations are occurring. With a mix of artificial intelligence and machine learning, the voice assistant can capture the conversation and pose contextually relevant questions that may help the trainee think through a challenge from a different perspective and help the coach

realize questions that he or she may ask to strengthen the trainee's skill set. The more conversations the voice assistant listens to, the more data it captures, and the more it can learn and evolve its interpretive responses. Such a solution might provide coaches with an epiphany uniquely identified from real-time data analysis of the conversation. Even strong coaches may have biases because they know their employees well—they may be more empathetic to a set of circumstances surrounding a given employee and that may skew their interpretation of the situation. A coaching solution built on AI, machine learning, and voice assistant can supplement what a coach knows and feels about an employee with a suggestion that is grounded in data and may therefore be more benign.

A coaching culture's strength is in the cultivation of diverse mindsets and in the development of a multitude of unbiased perspectives that can be used to formulate decisions. It is not based on the single-mindedness of a central source of management. A coaching culture ultimately yields creative thinking and deeper insights through experiences that those individuals might not have normally experienced. Coaching is fostering a safe risk-taking environment to push new limits in seeking possibilities of doing things differently. It nurtures and motivates exploration in what can be achieved versus what has been done.

As many organizations take their first steps into a realm of employee reflection and insights, they must also be aware of the opportunities that lie ahead with our ever-evolving world of technology innovation. To be a pioneer in a coaching culture, explore these new technologies and use myriad mindsets to invent and innovate emerging experiences while demonstrating a willingness to wander through new terrain. [AQ](#)

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