

A person wearing a VR headset is shown in profile, looking towards the right. The background is a vibrant blue with intricate, glowing white and light blue digital patterns, including circular data visualizations and geometric shapes. The person's hand is visible, pointing towards the 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

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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



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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](#)

Melissa Tait has more than 20 years of experience in technology and innovation in an agency environment. She is currently the senior VP of technology and managing director at Primacy, a full-service digital agency that embraces a coaching culture and specializes in innovation, design, technology, and marketing.