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## How and why do managers use coaching skills?

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### Abstract

While the evidence base for coaching has been increasing rapidly in the past decade, relatively little is known about how managers coach, what approaches they use, the purposes for which they use coaching and the benefits they experience. This paper provides a brief overview of the coaching literature in relation to the managerial context, outlines the method used in the research reported here, summarises the findings of a survey conducted among Australian managers in March 2012 to explore the above questions, draws conclusions and makes recommendations for further research. Whilst a coaching approach might be initially challenging and time-consuming to adapt, the range of reported benefits suggests that it results in positive outcomes for managers, employees and their organisations.

### Keywords

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### Disciplines

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## **HOW AND WHY DO MANAGERS USE COACHING SKILLS?**

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COMPETITIVE PAPER

## **HOW AND WHY DO MANAGERS USE COACHING SKILLS?**

### **INTRODUCTION**

While the evidence base for coaching has been increasing rapidly in the past decade, relatively little is known about how managers coach, what approaches they use, the purposes for which they use coaching and the benefits they experience. This paper provides a brief overview of the coaching literature in relation to the managerial context, outlines the method used in the research reported here, summarises the findings of a survey conducted among Australian managers in March 2012 to explore the above questions, draws conclusions and makes recommendations for further research. Whilst a coaching approach might be initially challenging and time-consuming to adapt, the range of reported benefits suggests that it results in positive outcomes for managers, employees and their organisations.

### **DEFINITIONS**

There are many different definitions of coaching, but as this paper relates to the context of coaching in organisations, it will use the definition of the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (2007):

*‘Business coaching is the process of engaging in regular, structured conversation with a "client": an individual or team who is within a business, profit or nonprofit organization, institution or government and who is the recipient of business coaching. The goal is to enhance the client’s awareness and behavior so as to achieve business objectives for both the client and their organization.’*

Coaching managers are managers who coach in a work context. The person being coached is referred to as the coachee. Managers may coach in formal coaching sessions or informally when an occasion arises to discuss an opportunity or an issue using a coaching approach (Ellinger, Beattie et al. 2010; Hunt and Weintraub 2010; Wheeler 2011). Coaching by managers is becoming increasingly popular, with Clutterbuck (2009) reporting that a majority of organisations surveyed claimed that line managers could be effective or very effective coaches. Furthermore, previous research has confirmed a positive correlation between coaching and employee satisfaction, individual performance and organisational goals (Ellinger and Ellinger 2009, Wheeler 2009).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this section we provide an overview of the literature on managerial coaching, particularly in regard to the principal coaching skills, such as listening, questioning, goal-setting and feedback. We also summarise briefly relevant research on team coaching and use of coaching models.

### **Listening and questioning**

Coaching is generally described as non-directive (Cox, Bachkirova et al. 2010). However as managers are used to providing solutions, they can find it hard not to offer answers or advice, sometimes before an employee has even finished outlining an issue. This can result in solving the wrong problem, not understanding the detail, or in the employee not having ownership of the solution. Moreover, an existing solution may not be as strong as one that emerges through collaboration. In this context one of the most important coaching skills, is the skill of listening. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) argue that listening makes people feel engaged, interested, included and cared for. Given the increasing focus in many organisations on

employee engagement, it is important for managers to learn how to listen at a deep level. Through effective listening and questioning the coachee is prompted to articulate their thoughts and challenge their own assumptions (McCarthy and Ahrens 2011). As they get used to coaching conversations, employees learn to find their own answers, rather than continually coming back to the manager for solutions. Although it may take longer initially, a coaching approach will thus save the manager time in the long run. A further benefit is that in listening to the answers to their questions, coaching managers understand the thinking and motivation of their team members better than non-coaching managers (Whitmore 2009a). This is confirmed by Garvey, Stokes et al. (2009:159) who argue that coaching and mentoring offer 'real and tangible opportunities for deep understanding of attitudes and behaviour'.

### **Goal-setting for Coaching Managers**

The coaching manager and their coachees are located in an organisational context, with a focus on organisational priorities. Care needs to be taken with alignment. Green and Grant (2003) say that managers should set goals that fit with the inner needs and values of their team members. Coaching can help people get clarity about their values and about how aligned they feel with the values and goals of the organisation. The coaching manager can help people gain clarity about their motivation, aspirations, and commitment to change (Riddle and Ting 2006). The coaching manager can help team members to visualise the future, generate options for achieving the goal, clarifying how each individual can contribute, and give feedback on progress towards achieving it. While there are many approaches to coaching, some appear more useful in the managerial coaching context. Solution-focused coaching is goal-oriented and hence useful for coaching managers, according to Ellinger et al. (2010). This approach may also suit managers as it can be more directive than other coaching

approaches, with the coach sharing his mental models (Cavanagh and Grant 2010). A systems approach to coaching can also be useful in organisations, helping employees to see where they fit in the broader context (Barner and Higgins 2007). Even when goals are set by the organisation, the coach can help the coachee align their intrinsic and extrinsic drivers with the organisational goal, according to Rostron (2009). Without this alignment, goals may be completed mechanistically without true engagement or worse, promote negative collusion and unwanted behaviours which nonetheless meet the set goals (Garvey, Stokes et al. 2009).

### **Feedback**

Coaching conversations between managers and employees help people make progress towards organisational goals and in their professional development. For these coaching conversations to be useful, managers need to be able to give feedback constructively.

According to Folkman (2006), coaching helps people accept feedback, which is particularly useful if there is a discrepancy between how people see themselves and how other people see them. Previous research has found that improvements are more marked when feedback is used as part of a coaching approach (McDowall and Millward 2010).

### **Team Coaching**

Team coaching is a relatively new area for coaching research e.g. Thornton (2010) and Hawkins (2011). Mathieu, Maynard et al. (2008) suggest that coaching teams can have a positive effect on self-management, team empowerment and other factors which contribute to team effectiveness. One of the few longitudinal studies of managers coaching teams, Shipper and Weer (2011) found that coaching enhanced commitment and reduced tensions, leading to increased team effectiveness. A study of coaching a group of managers helped reduce their stress, increased their networks, and improved their communication and other soft skills

(Scamardo and Harnden 2008) while another explored the use of coaching to help teams make better decisions (Ben Hur, Kinley et al. 2012). Although Brown and Grant (2010) acknowledge that team coaching may be done either by the team leader or an external coach, most of the limited research conducted to date has focused on the external coach, one of the rare exceptions being the conceptual paper on team theory developed by Hackman and Wageman (2005).

### **Coaching Models**

Participants in short coach training programs typically learn about a single coaching model, e.g. GROW (Goals, Reality, Options and Wrap-up/Will). This model is widely attributed to Sir John Whitmore, although he himself states that he was the first to publish it, rather than its sole developer (Whitmore 2009b). Megginson and Clutterbuck (2009) warn that coaches who stick rigidly to a pre-defined model may miss important clues that they coachee is providing either in the words they use or through their body language. Connor and Pokora (2007) also stress that a coaching framework should not be used to limit exploration, but rather used to set a general direction and set aside where appropriate.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

Invitations to participate were sent to 9053 general managers and HR managers in a broad range of public and private sector organisations across Australia, with a minimum of 200 employees. General managers and HR managers were chosen as likely to be aware of coaching practices in their organisation. However this may not be the case, i.e. some managers may use a coaching style even if this is not an official organisational approach. Invalid email addresses reduced the total to a sample of 8834. Responses were received from 580 participants, a response rate of 6.6%. No reminders were sent to recipients of the



invitation to participate. While very low as a % response rate, the often in-depth answers as well as the high number of requests to receive a report of the findings nevertheless indicate that the topic is of interest to many managers in Australia. The low response rate is not unexpected, as coaching is still emerging as a set of leadership skills. Hence although the survey is not a representative view of all Australian managers, it nevertheless provides data from a considerable number of organisations. The responses give interesting insights into managers' reasons for coaching, the coaching skills they use, the training they have had, the difficulties they encounter and the benefits they have experienced. The survey comprised a mixture of closed responses where participants could choose from a pre-defined list and open free text responses. In this paper we focus on the following questions: Who is coaching whom? When do managers coach? What approaches to coaching do managers use? Why do managers coach?

## **FINDINGS**

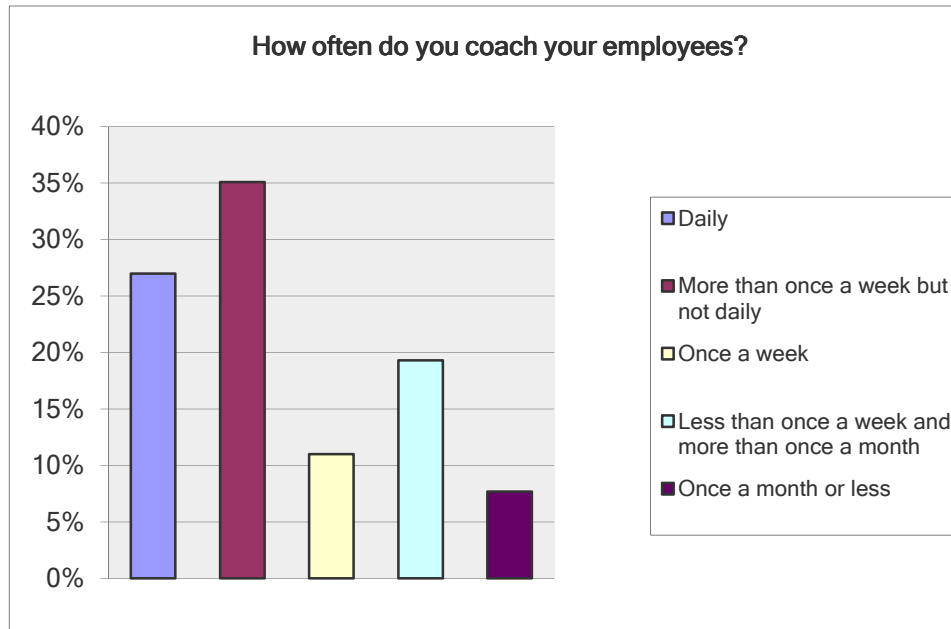
### **Who is coaching whom?**

94% of respondents coached direct reports, with 66% coaching peers, 36.1% coaching people senior to them in their organisation and 39.8% coaching people outside their organisation. 61.4% coached both individuals and teams while 38.6% coached individuals only, reflecting the fact that most managers work through teams.

### **When do managers coach?**

The frequency of coaching varied, depending on the purpose and format of coaching and who was being coached. Frequency also varied over time, for instance a new employee might receive some coaching daily but later progress to weekly. Some organisations have set frequencies such as monthly or weekly, while others use it as required, rather than as a set

event, in other words as part of their normal leadership style. The averages reported by respondents are shown in Fig.1.



**Fig. 1 Frequency of coaching**

### **What approaches to coaching do managers use?**

As shown in Fig. 2, the most common coaching skills used by managers were active listening (94.6%), questioning (91.6%) and feedback (89.9%) and goal setting (77.8%). Only 16.8% reported using specific coaching models.



**Fig.2 Coaching Behaviours Used by Managers**

Participants noted that they help people problem solve (rather than problem solve for them) and that being non-directive is important so that the employee is engaged and empowered through the process. Helping people to identify and focus on issues within their control was also valued. Rapport and empathy enhanced the coaching process. Respondents stressed the importance of using different techniques as appropriate, hence the value of having a variety of approaches available.

In their free-text responses, managers gave examples of specific types of questions they used such as miracle and scaling questions. They also mentioned a variety of techniques including, positive reframing, envisioning, use of metaphors, SMART goals, working through hypotheticals, role playing, demonstration and observation (e.g. staff observe manager with client and vice versa). Managers drew on techniques they had developed over their career such as brainstorming, motivational interviewing, convergent and divergent brainstorming. The somewhat lower response rate to goal setting than to listening, questioning or feedback may be because managers do not always find it easy to use a coaching approach to goal setting, being constrained by the goals of the organisation, rather than the coachee being free

to choose a meaningful goal. As noted in the literature review, e.g. Rostron (2009), Garvey et al. (2009), even when goals are set by the organisation, there must be some alignment with the individual's own drivers. This can therefore be a more demanding conversation than filling in a template of 'SMART' goals.

While many participants used the ubiquitous Grow model, others used variations of it such as Growth (Goals, Reality, Options, Will, Tactics, Habits). Other models mentioned included solution-focused, strength-based, narrative, ontological and integral coaching. While use of a single model such as Grow was common, many managers stressed that they used a range of models, depending on the needs of the coachee, the context, and the coach's background and training, e.g. use of NLP.

The diversity of models and tools used show that managers have a large toolbox from which they select according to the situation and the coachee. It also indicates that managers possess a more in-depth understanding and knowledge of coaching than was expected, given that many have only had short formal training courses. From the free text responses, it would appear that managers draw on their past experience and blend as appropriate in a coaching approach. For example, one respondent combined transformational leadership, participative leadership and transdisciplinary leadership with Stephen Covey training, while another applied their organisational approaches to leadership development, development planning, coaching and mentoring. Yet another referred to the written and oral examples that he/she had gathered over 24 years of divisional management. Many respondents commented that much of their awareness of coaching approaches comes from self-directed learning. 38.8% noted that they were wholly self-taught, a further 22% reported that they had had less than a

day's coach training while 23.7% had had informal coach training by a colleague or supervisor.

### Why do managers coach?

As shown in Fig. 4, the most common purpose of coaching reported by managers was helping employees to develop (97%). Next highest were improving good performance (76.1%), helping employees set goals and targets (75.5%), communication (75.3%), motivation (74.8%), employee engagement (73.8%) and team development (72%).

Although 67.5% said they used coaching to address poor performance, some respondents said specifically that they did not use coaching to address poor performance. 63.2% said they used coaching to help employees transition to a new role. Other responses included helping employees develop confidence, addressing gender or cultural issues, raise self-awareness, develop an ability to think and reflect, and develop more of a systems approach and breaking down silos in organisations.



### Fig.3 Purpose of Coaching by Managers

A huge 93.3% of respondents had experienced benefits as a manager from adopting a coaching approach and 98.3% had observed benefits for the people they coached. Positive organisational outcomes reported by respondents included:

- productivity increased from 35% of target to >100% of target in 12 months
- customer service went up 450% in five months by change of structure and coaching
- vastly improved sales performance
- successful union negotiations

By far the most common benefit quoted by respondents related to staff engagement and empowerment. For example, one manager explained his reasons for adopting coaching as follows:

*“I adopted a coaching style when I realised that by 'protecting' my staff by keeping all the high-level stuff away from them, I was depriving them of all sorts of opportunities. It is far more beneficial to let the high-level aspects of my role touch them too, so that they can learn what I do. This minimises disruption to our service when I am not available for some reason. Some of the other benefits are high engagement, excellent outcomes, happy workers, low turnover and fantastic recruitment because everybody wants to come and work in a high-performing team.”*

Another manager described the benefits he had experienced as follows:

*“Employees are empowered to make their own decisions; they learn and are more willing to make mistakes because they know they are supported; they understand the direction and have boundaries but room to move within those boundaries; increases sharing of knowledge and ideas across the team; as a manager I don't know*

*everything and I will frequently learn something new just by paving the way for someone else.”*

Improvements in communication were also common, e.g.:

*“I have a greater connection with staff and they are more open with their communication of issues and problems.”*

*“Once people are aware what coaching is and trust the coach, I find that they open up more. This means communication generally improves, even outside coaching.”*

Coaching managers reported huge satisfaction and joy in seeing a person they had coached do well in a particular task, in their role, in their organisation and in their careers. Prior to coaching, employees were not always clear on the knowledge, skills, expectations and approaches needed to succeed.

*“I have a number of lower level individuals who through my coaching support have progressed to the various levels of management as appropriate to their skill levels. To see shy unsure individuals develop into assured professional team leaders and managers is a joy to see. To observe a team leader, lead a group and give strong direction and follow advice that you have suggested is a positive result.”*

Coaching appears to be particularly useful when employees are new or new in their roles:

*“I have coached an employee who transferred into my team, some 5 years ago. Through-out this time, we have set goals, set action plans, regularly met, training provided, and continued with open communication. Coaching was particularly beneficial whenever anything got tough or the employee became worried or feeling out of their depth - to ease through the situation and come out the other end. The*

*employee has achieved each goal set and developed her career in a relatively short period of time. She has total respect and trust from management even though she is one of the youngest in the team.”*

Several respondents reported transformations in their coachees, relating to improvements in confidence. This in turn freed up the coaching manager to focus on other priorities and allowed for planned succession. Coaching also helped managers better understand the capabilities and passion of their employees and hence put them forward for appropriate roles when available. One example of improvement noted:

*“The best experience I've had is working someone who was very lacking in self-confidence and didn't recognise their own talent and capability. I encouraged them to take on a more responsible position, told them they could do it, showed confidence in them, supported them, provided advice and expertise when required but helped them to identify solutions and take the initiative. The person is now a manager, has become an extremely self-confident, self-assured person who recognises their own capability, knowledge and expertise. I am so proud of them and how far they've come.”*

Coaching teams also resulted in real benefits:

*“Whilst I knew in theory that coaching is effective, it was a revelation to me how effective the investment in coaching as a manager could be. I invest my time in listening to and coaching my team and they rapidly progress to problem solving and thinking in different ways. “*

*“I recently used GROW and a values model to assist my team in developing our 12 month action plan. Previously, the team would have looked to me for the answers and direction, but this way we had more buy in.”*



*“Managers who don't coach often have underperforming teams, with many of the underperformers going under the radar with no consequence for unacceptable behaviours, generally resulting in low team morale, and worse still staff are not promoted from within because their skills have not improved or grown. High performing teams result when managers coach, it's the only way.”*

Respondents acknowledged that it sometimes takes time and patience to implement a coaching approach:

*“Continual poor performance by a member of the team had to be turned around. The team was not happy and our stakeholders were not happy. Coaching was not working because I was being a little too impatient, I was trying to get results quickly without guiding the individual to the conclusion. (To be honest I was probably not coaching at all, and to be honest I was not trusting the process.) With my manager getting impatient I went back to square one, because I knew the individual was worth the effort, they had potential, they had the right values. So we started again by listening, I learned and so did they. He is now heading in the right direction with a bright future, we understand each other and he understands what he needs to do to progress, I now have a great team.”*

It can be seen from these quotes that managers sometimes struggle with the business imperative of getting a quick result and adopting a coaching approach which may initially take longer. 69% reported that it was difficult to find the time to implement coaching. However the range of benefits experienced and the positive business and personal outcomes clearly mean that for these managers, it is worth persevering with a coaching approach.

## **DISCUSSION**

As managers are thought to have only limited training in coaching, it was expected that respondents to this survey would probably be familiar with a limited range of coaching models and techniques. The Grow model did indeed prove to be the most common model which respondents cited. However, they also mentioned several others. It may be that the limited training they have received drives those with a passion for coaching to self-directed learning, and indeed some respondents mentioned this. Some respondents also spoke very strongly about the need to vary a coaching approach according to the coachee and the context, in other words a situational or contingent approach to coaching. This is in keeping with the emerging debate in coaching research on the value of eclecticism (Kauffman 2010; Grant 2011; McCarthy 2011; O'Hara 2011) and the importance of choosing approaches which best serve the coachee. The diverse nature of disciplines which influence coaching (e.g. adult learning, leadership and psychology) enables managers to draw not only on coaching techniques but on all they have learned in their careers. In this way, managerial coaching may well be more eclectic in the range of tools and techniques used than coaching by full-time internal or external coaches.

While the overwhelming majority (97%) of respondents used coaching for developmental purposes and 76.1% used coaching to improve good performance, 67.5% also used coaching to address poor performance. Some however stated specifically that they did not use coaching to address poor performance. This mirrors a shift in the broader coaching literature, from an earlier emphasis on coaching for remedial purposes to its present conceptualisation as developmental coaching (Ellam-Dyson and Palmer 2011; Nelson, Boyce et al. 2011). In the managerial context, a manager who experiences the power of coaching for developmental

purposes may well want to use the same techniques to address poor performance. Alternatively some managers may choose to separate their roles into those of coach, mentor and director, where coaching is kept for developmental purposes, while performance issues are addressed by the director role. Once a performance issue has been identified and both parties agree on the need to address it, the manager may adopt either a mentoring or a coaching style to help the person find ways to address and commit to change. As some respondents to this survey noted, a manager cannot always use a coaching style, although their employees may expect them to.

As noted in the literature review, group and team coaching are a relatively recent focus for coaching research, e.g. Scamardo and Harnden (2008) and Shipper and Weer (2011). From this survey, it appears to be an area where practice is ahead of the evidence-base, as almost two-thirds of respondents coach teams as well as individuals. As with individual coaching, most of the research which has been done has focused on coaching by a coach external to the group rather than coaching of the manager of the group or team leader. The prevalence of team coaching by managers suggests that empirical research is urgently needed to identify the team coaching practices most effective in the managerial context.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Despite the difficulties which managers may face in deploying a coaching approach, the respondents to this survey were very positive about the benefits, for themselves personally, for the people they coached and for their organisations. With such an impressive array of benefits, albeit seen here through self-reports and not independently verified, it is not surprising that coaching is increasing in popularity as a leadership approach. These benefits support the business case for adopting coaching as a preferred leadership style both with

individuals and with teams. However it is also clear that much research is needed into coaching by managers.

The contribution of this paper is to shine a light on the under-researched area of managerial coaching and provide a snapshot of current practices in Australian organisations. More research is needed on what forms and models of coaching are effective within the manager–employee relationship and into team coaching. For example, systems coaching (Barner and Higgins 2007) and solution-focused coaching (Cavanagh and Grant 2010) appear to be more closely linked to an organisational context than narrative coaching (Lapp and Carr 2008; Drake 2010; Carr and Lapp 2011) but this remains to be verified.

Evidence for the effectiveness of different coaching approaches in the managerial context could then form the basis for tailored coaching training for managers. Short training programs appear to be useful in equipping managers with basic coaching skills such as listening, questioning, goal-setting and feedback, but may be less appropriate for teasing out the complexities of the role of manager as coach and for learning how to coach teams. Some form of on-going support, peer supervision or community of practice may help managers to develop their skills further as appropriate for their particular context. Currently it appears that many managers in Australia have had limited coach training but have expanded their repertoire of models and techniques through self-directed learning and using in their coaching what they have learned in other contexts. Such research would need to go beyond simple calculations of Return on Investment to explore the perspectives of managers, their teams and organisational stakeholders.

Furthermore, interviews and case studies relating to the challenges of goal-setting in a managerial coaching framework would provide insights and examples of good practices which others might benefit from, and form the basis for an approach to goal-setting specific to this context which would both engage with the organisation's agenda and with individual values, thereby encouraging individual responsibility and commitment. Validation of the benefits reported would strengthen the evidence-base for coaching and support the business case for investing in coaching as a way to lead and develop their people. Research into cross-cultural coaching of individuals and teams is also necessary as workplaces are increasingly multi-cultural and many managers have to contend with the added complexities of cultural issues in their coaching.

This paper thus provides interesting insights into how, when and why managers use coaching skills but much research remains to be done to enable us to fully understand what makes this approach so effective.

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