AN EXPLORATION OF THE COACH APPROACH TO MANAGING AND LEADING

A WHITE PAPER FOR MANAGERS, LEADERS AND PROFESSIONAL COACHES

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations have embraced the practice of coaching to grow their human capital and advance their goals and mission. Managers and leaders who use the coach approach to management and leadership are better equipped to develop their team members' value to their organizations, as well as influence their career paths.

While the use of coaching skills by managers and leaders is recognized in organizations worldwide, very little research exists on how to define it, measure it, and apply it. Do we really know what a good coach approach looks like? Do we understand the full impact it has on manager-employee relationships or how it affects employee engagement and development? We set out to find the answers.

The goals of the study were to examine the use of coaching skills by managers and leaders to gain answers to the following questions:

- How should the use of coaching skills by managers or leaders be conceptualized?

- When do managers or leaders utilize coaching skills?

- How is the use of coaching skills received by team members?

- What are the potential benefits for managers to use coaching skills?

- What impact does the use of coaching skills by managers and leaders have on their relationship with their team members?

- Is the use of coaching skills related to increased job satisfaction?

Using a mixed methods approach, including a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and a team member survey, we identified topics and core insights that suggest participative leadership and management styles in organizations are related to the coach approach used by managers and leaders. We also created a coaching composite scale that allows organizations to measure the frequency of use of coaching skills by managers and leaders.

Our research was conducted in two phases. Phase I included the literature review and semi-structured interviews with developers of training curricula for teaching managers and leaders the use of coaching skills. Questions explored the elements of effective coaching, skills a manager or leader should learn, and the benefits to using those skills. In Phase II, to validate the information we had assembled, we conducted semi-structured interviews with managers and leaders and human resources (HR) personnel. We concluded this phase with an online survey of managers' and leaders' team members.

PHASE I

Literature Review

We surveyed the existing literature on the use of coaching skills by managers and leaders. From this literature, we identified and defined four key activities:

Leading—guiding in a direction and motivating team members to work toward a vision

Managing—working with team members to accomplish daily tasks and meet organizational goals

Coaching—facilitating growth and change by evoking an individual's own resourcefulness

Mentoring—sharing knowledge and wisdom to educate and develop a less experienced individual

> While coaching is primarily a participative activity, mentoring is primarily directive.
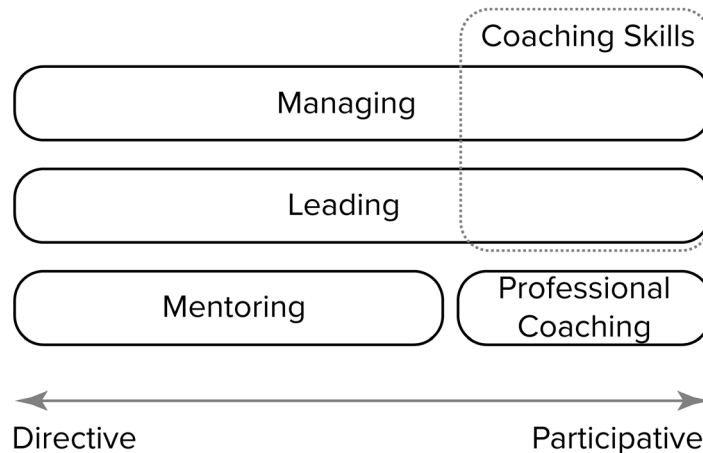

Figure 1. Directive-Participative Spectrum

Next, we looked at past studies and resources that included coaching skills in managing and leading, as well as mentoring and coaching. Figure 1 shows the directive-participative spectrum and its relationship to various activities. Managing and leading span the directive-participative spectrum. While coaching is primarily a participative activity, mentoring is primarily directive.

This led us to examine further literature on the differences between professional coaches and managers and leaders who use coaching skills. Although they share some similarities, there are key differences between the two groups. For example, managers and leaders usually have little or no training in the use of coaching skills. Also, the degree of structure in their process and approach varies. Professional coaching is more formal and structured than managing and leading using coaching skills. Table 1 illustrates some of the significant contrasts between the two sides.

Table 1. A Comparison of the Use of Coaching Skills by Professional Coaches and by Managers and Leaders

Skill	Professional coaches	Managers and leaders using coaching skills
Who sets the agenda?	Client	Organization, manager, employee
Confidentiality	Unless ethics violation or ordered by court of law	Partial or none
Session structure	Structured, private	Unstructured, conversational
Training	Extensive	Minimal
Boundary maintenance	Straightforward	Complicated
Relationship	Equal	Hierarchical
Loyalty	Client	Organization
Ethical code	Coaching body	Organization
Coaching agreement	Written contract	Verbal or none
Goals	Client	Organization, manager, employee

Given the important differences between professional coaches and managers and leaders who use coaching skills, we next focused on how coaching skills fit within the activities of managing and leading.

We affirmed that managers and leaders who are more directive are likely to experience obstacles when adding coaching skills to their skillset. Coaching is about creating a partnership, which isn't likely to occur if the manager or leader needs to have all the answers and make all the decisions.

We gleaned from the research that softer approaches to directive managing and leading are possible. Mentoring is one example. That said, there may be times when even the most participative manager may need to be directive (for example, during an emergency or when the situation calls for an urgent response).

Finally, we reviewed some of the research that has focused on the application of the coach approach and its effectiveness. Not surprisingly, managers and leaders say the primary reasons for using coaching skills are to enhance performance and professional growth. However, study results are mixed, which may indicate that coaching skills are better for improving job satisfaction and developing employees than for enhancing performance.

Interviews with Curricula Developers

We used the insights gathered from our review of the literature to develop an interview guide. We conducted 10 interviews with developers of subjects and materials used in programs for teaching coaching skills to managers and leaders. The semi-structured interview format gave the participants the freedom to express their views in their own terms, while allowing us to openly explore themes as the interview progressed. Our interview notes along with notes from the literature review were then coded and analyzed for intercoder agreement. A final set of codes was available for use in Phase II.

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PHASE II

In the next phase of our study, we sought inputs from the target audience of our efforts: managers, leaders, HR personnel who support managers and leaders, and team members.

Interviews with Human Resource Professionals, Managers and Leaders

We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with participants from organizations that we identified as having strong coaching cultures. All the professionals we interviewed leverage coaching skills in their day-to-day role. The detail collected during these interviews was then coded using the codes obtained in Phase I.

Team Member Survey

We gathered team members' inputs through an online survey. A link to the survey was emailed to people who had either taken part in previous ICF or Human Capital Institute research studies or were known by our research team. We collected responses from a total of 154 participants, who represented a broad group of management roles across a variety of industries. Sixty percent of respondents were female and 88% were 40 years old or older. North American residents were highly represented with 49% of the respondents, followed by Europe (20%), and Asia (15%).

The survey used rating scale questions and both open-ended and closed-ended questions to gather information about a specific manager or leader whom the participant felt has had the most positive impact on his or her career development or job performance.

Survey Rating Scales

We used several previously validated scales to assess specific aspects of the job experience, including the team member/ manager relationship, team member engagement, team member's intention to quit, and the team member's opinions of their manager or leader. These measures were included to see if a relationship exists between the use of coaching skills and these outcomes.

We were also interested in measuring the directive-participative management style of the manager or leader the participants referenced in their survey answers. To do that, we developed a paired set of questions to find out (1) how often

the manager or leader used specific coaching skills and (2) the extent to which these skills' application impacted the team member's career development and job performance enhancement.

We believe the questions from the survey, which focused on coaching frequency, are useful for future applications and recommend them as a manager and leader coaching composite scale.

Manager and Leader Coaching Composite (MLCC Scale)

Response options are Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Frequently, and Always.

- How often did this manager or leader ask a question that initiated learning?

- How often did this manager or leader focus his or her complete attention on your conversation and spontaneously build on your relationship?

- How often did this manager or leader make an effort to develop a collaborative and trusting relationship?

- How often did this manager or leader actively listen and reflect on what you were saying or not saying?

- How often did this manager or leader use language that was direct?

- How often did your interactions with this manager or leader lead to greater awareness, insight, or understanding?

- How often did this manager or leader work with you to design actions that will most effectively promote your growth or job performance?

- How often did this manager or leader work with you to plan and set goals that will most effectively promote your growth or job performance?

- How often did this manager or leader work with you to manage your progress and hold you accountable for working toward your career or job performance goals?

RESULTS

Central Themes

As our research team began to assess all the data collected, two central themes emerged.

The first theme that surfaced was how the use of coaching skills is related to empowerment and engagement. In the survey, many team members shared that the manager or leader they selected as the basis for the online survey gave them responsibilities, allowed them to take risks, provided them with the autonomy to make decisions, trusted their judgment, removed barriers, and permitted them to learn from their mistakes.

As we continued to work the data, another theme that was revealed was team member development. Across all groups, there were frequent mentions of managers and leaders who challenged their team members to reach their full potential and who encouraged self-awareness and self-reflection. Other recurring responses were managers and leaders who facilitated learning, delivered constructive feedback, helped develop critical thinking skills, and provided training opportunities.

Correlations and Disconnects

Our analyses indicated a clear relationship between the use of coaching skills and the working relationship of the manager or leader and their team member. Team members reported that they felt supported, respected, cared for, valued, trusted, and treated as equals. It was important that their manager or leader trusted them, which was linked to feelings of empowerment.

Our factor analysis of the items in the survey and the similar patterns of responses showed several items that hang together to create the following two constructs:

Learning and Goals

• Work to plan and set goals

• Work with you to manage progress

• Ask a question that initiated learning

• Work with you to design actions

Team Member Experience

• Focus his or her complete attention

• Actively listen and reflect

• Develop a collaborative and trusting relationship

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While our Manager and Leader Coaching Composite scale was not created using rigorous scale development methods, it resulted in good values and reflects logical coaching constructs for learning, learning goals, and team member experience. As these three areas fall outside of traditional coaching scales which focus on managing, leading, or mentoring, the MLCC has potential as a mainstream manager or leader using coaching skills scale; we can also envision its application in follow-on studies, including Phase III where we want to identify specific elements of effective coaching to be used in applications for manager and leader training.

We identified several distinctions between managers and leaders who use coaching skills and professional coaches. Most notable was the conflict managers and leaders experience when using a coach approach, at times feeling the need to tell team members exactly what to do and how to do it (directive), while at other times empowering them and involving them in decision making (participative).

The difference in the levels of coaching skills training between professional coaches and managers and leaders was also apparent. While education and certification are expected of the professional coach, training and education for managers and leaders is an emerging field—and an opportunity for all coach trainers.

The Confidentiality Factor

In our literature reviews, the topic of confidentiality came up frequently. We found several authors who pointed out the potential conflicts that may come up when a manager acts as both manager and "professional" coach. Confidentiality plays a significant role in building trust in a formal coaching relationship. For a manager or leader, on the other hand, upholding confidentiality may not always be possible given their obligations to the organization. In that case, it may be unrealistic to expect the same level of confidentiality found in a formal coaching relationship.

To explore this idea, we included an item in the survey to discern whether there was a written, verbal, or implied agreement regarding confidentiality or goals in place. Only 8% indicated that such an agreement existed, while 47% said there was an implied agreement. The remaining responses were split between no agreement (24%) and a verbal agreement (21%).

For those who had some level of agreement in place, 85% said they believed it had some level of positive impact on their career development, job performance enhancement, engagement, or other important aspect of their job or growth.

CONCLUSIONS

The data gathered in this study provide a real-world view into the current approach to managing and leading.

What we see are managers and leaders who are guiding and influencing their team members through communication— conversation and questioning—not professional coaching (defined by ICF as partnering with an individual in a thought-provoking and creative process to inspire and unlock their full potential).

We see a lack of written coaching agreements, varying levels of confidentiality, and less coach-specific training. The managers and leaders interviewed for this study reported many obstacles that restricted their use of coaching skills.

However, both the qualitative and quantitative data indicate that the application of coaching skills positively impacts manager-employee relationships. Managers who exercise a participative style of management rather than a directive style enable better manager-employee working relationships. In turn, this can increase employee engagement—the connection and commitment employees exhibit toward their organization.

Finally, the results suggest that the use of coaching skills by managers and leaders could best be interpreted as a form of participative management, which focuses on building relationships, influencing individuals to advance their learning or skills, and increasing job satisfaction.

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For further information see:

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