It’s Game Time:
Your Practical Employee Coaching Playbook
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Can you imagine Bill Belichick — head coach of the New England Patriots — waiting until the end of the season to give his players feedback? Of course not. (If that were the case, his team would never have made it to the Super Bowl — six times with his coaching.)

The same idea holds true in the workplace. It’s the coach’s job to continually review the team’s performance and give players (your employees) suggestions for improving their game.

And there are plenty of incentives to do so. The right coaching, at the right time, can pay huge dividends for employers seeking greater loyalty, productivity and contribution.

But let’s face it. Coaching often requires a significant financial investment — either in time or money. Right? Wrong.

The truth is, coaching can be easier — and more cost-effective — than you think. Your organization can make huge strides in small bits of time and for not a lot of money.
“Every employee needs and deserves coaching because there is a staggering amount of untapped potential and productivity in EVERY organization. Only a coaching approach can break through routine, bureaucracy and cookie-cutter management to enable an individual to align their personal purpose, values and strengths with the organization. THIS is how you drive bottom-line results.”
— Amy K Musson, Amy K Coaching

Plus: The rewards for coaching are huge.
According to a Bersin by Deloitte research study, organizations that are highly effective at coaching were approximately:

- **30%** more likely to have strong business results
- **33%** more effective at engaging employees

They also enjoyed:

- **42%** higher employee productivity
Research from Human Capital Institute (HCI) and International Coach Federation (ICF) cements the idea that having a strong coaching culture is good for business. According to the study:

- 81% see improved team functioning
- 79% see higher employee engagement
- 70% increased productivity
- 67% faster onboarding
- 71% faster leadership development

If your company is already investing in learning and talent development programs, adding employee coaching can make your existing programs more effective. And if you’re not already investing in employee development, now’s a great time to start tapping into the benefits.

Not only does coaching make people more productive and engaged; it can also help your company achieve its goals.

POP QUIZ

Do You Know How the Word “Coach” Got Its First Play?

According to Wikipedia, the English term “coach” traces its origins to the Hungarian word for a means of transport: kocsi, meaning “carriage.” Coaching has been used in language to describe the process used to “transport people from where they are, to where they want to be.” At Oxford University around 1830, the word was first used to describe a trainer or instructor; it was slang for the person who “carries” or tutors a student through an exam. Usage then spilled into the sports world in 1861.
Chapter 1
So you’re interested in coaching … but where do you start? Your managers. They are on the front lines and are working with your employees daily. While teaching managers to become good coaches is a smart (and highly cost-effective) option, some training is likely required.

**To become good (or better) coaches, your managers will need to:**

- **Develop listening skills:** This helps build better workplace relationships and helps employees feel understood.
- **Build trust:** When the sense of trust is strong, employees are more receptive to performance feedback and guidance.
- **Become more supportive, encouraging and motivating:** These traits can make people feel good, creating positive morale and driving workplace productivity.
- **Improve their ability to deliver praise and feedback:** Employees crave both praise and feedback, but the latter needs to be packaged so it motivates better performance.³

While some managers may come by these traits naturally, others don’t. Personality styles, communication styles and management philosophies do come into play — and all managers are different.

**Kicking Off Your Coaching Venture**

First, forget the notion that you need to go crazy with high-end training. For most companies today, that’s not a viable option. Extensive training is not only expensive, it keeps managers from their top priority — getting the job done. Fortunately, turning managers into better coaches can be as simple as providing some minimal training.
But how much you do — and how often you do it — largely depends on your organization’s budget, time allocated to the program, skills gap and other criteria. Suggested basic training could include:

**Directed Reading**

Reading even a few articles on the subject of coaching is a great start. Simply select a handful of articles on the importance of coaching, and let managers work through them at their own pace. Depending on how information flows through your organization, consider sharing the articles in a coaching newsletter, or via posts to the company intranet or collaboration portal. Additionally, high-value reading can be assigned to managers in your Learning Management System.

Two suggestions:

- **Harvard Business Review (HBR) Guide to Coaching Your Employees**: Easy-to-read and highly affordable (around $20), this collection of essays touches on a variety of topics, plus practical coaching tips managers can start using immediately.

- **Online searches for “employee coaching”**: Just a few clicks and you’ll tap into a multitude of books, blog posts and other resources you can share with your managers.
E-Learning Modules
Of course, there’s no shortage of quality e-learning courses available on the topic of employee coaching. These sessions are very affordable and typically run less than 20 minutes each. Many courses are also customized to specific vertical markets, enabling managers to learn from relevant industry examples.

Two suggestions:
• **OpenSesame** *(opensesame.com)*: This site consolidates e-learning resources across a multitude of verticals and offers a wide variety of titles for purchase.
• **Kantola Productions** *(kantola.com)*: This company offers a full listing of Stanford Business e-learning options, which are also very cost-effective (around $20–$50 per course).

Simple Role-Play Exercises
When it comes to coaching (or learning any new skill), practice always makes perfect. Even managers who already have some coaching experience can benefit from doing simple role-play exercises with a group. And managers with zero coaching knowledge will benefit by walking away with concrete examples of good coaching in action.

Two suggestions:
• **Instructor-led courses**: Hiring an external professional to conduct coaching workshops and facilitate role-play exercises would certainly be money well spent — but it’s not the only option.
• **Using internal expertise**: Perhaps you already have some managers, instructors or internal leaders who are gifted in coaching. For a cost-effective way to kick-start some learning, use this in-house talent to facilitate coaching discussions and/or basic role-play exercises. Simply getting new managers to practice and demonstrate active listening and delivering feedback is a giant step in the right direction.
Coaching Discussion Groups
Feeling social? Social communities give your new, promising coaches one place to find answers to their questions and engage in discussions about what’s working. The group can also be a central home for documents, recorded meetings and training, significantly improving the accessibility of materials.

Use the Blended Approach
To give your managers a well-rounded introduction to coaching, consider doing a bit of everything. Create a customized coaching plan that involves elements of each type of learning: directed reading, e-learning, group discussions and role-play scenarios. This will give your managers a solid foundation on the topic and provide some good guidance for moving forward.
Chapter 2
You may be saying to yourself: “Sure, coaching is a smart idea … but who has the time?” If so, you’re not alone. Today’s business pace moves faster than ever — and getting managers on board with coaching will be difficult if you can’t show them how little time it actually takes.

Fortunately, effective coaching can be done in small slivers of time — even as little as 15 minutes a day, writes Daisy Wademan Dowling, leadership author and executive coach.4

Become a “3.1% coach.”

In order to have maximum impact in minimum time, Dowling suggests becoming a “3.1% Coach”:

“Limit your people-development activities to no more than 15 incremental minutes per day (that’s 75 minutes a week, or 3.1% of a hypothetical 40-hour workweek). Then apply the ‘smart coach approach’ to leverage that tiny slice of time for results.”4

Dowling’s “smart” approach suggests using down time, such as calling your employees while walking back from a meeting or driving to an appointment. Read the full article for more tips, including four fast-and-simple ways to fit coaching into your busiest days.

Try “nano-coaching.”

Another expert — training guru Elliott Masie — proposes an idea called “nano-coaching.”5 He suggests coaching can be done in just two to three minutes a day using email, instant messaging or short phone calls — a smart strategy for making a big impact in a small amount of time. Read more of Masie’s tips here.
Leverage technology. Today’s technology can make connecting with employees faster and easier than ever. Technology is a critical element to coaching as teams are oftentimes dispersed around the globe, making ongoing face-to-face interactions impossible. There are certainly tools like audio conferencing and email that can facilitate discussion, but these can be taken a step further with web conferencing/virtual meeting tools that introduce an added level of engagement.

Web conferencing/virtual meeting tools not only enable audio discussion and sharing of screens, but also allow for webcam sharing to see one another face-to-face — even if only used for the first few minutes of a discussion. The face-to-face communication helps foster a more personal connection and aids observing and responding to body language, which is often critical when providing guidance in a coaching moment. Virtual meeting tools may also allow for “instant replays” or playback: Sessions can be recorded, making it easy for the employee to go back and digest key pieces of information that might otherwise be missed.

In addition, social workspaces might be introduced to maintain an offline stream of communication. The manager and employee can post meeting recordings, files and recommended content, enabling an ongoing coaching discussion that can be maintained in one place.

This technology, especially when combined with mobile devices, can help even the busiest managers squeeze coaching into their schedules — virtually anytime, anywhere. Leveraging these ideas, along with email, text messaging, WhatsApp and other real-time innovations can enable managers to deliver coaching in bits and bytes.
Chapter 3
By now, you’re already realizing that coaching can easily be taught — and it doesn’t have to cost a fortune. You’ve also read some time-saving tips that can help your coaches deliver effective coaching, even on the busiest of workdays.

But how does coaching fit within your existing talent management programs? According to Charles DeNault, Sr. Director of Product Marketing at Saba, once managers become effective coaches, getting them to help improve your talent and learning programs can be fairly straightforward — and highly beneficial — if you follow these steps:

1. **Map out the manager’s role in your plan.**
   Carefully consider the role your manager “coaches” can play while you’re still building out a talent management program. Take the time to map out what they can do, and when they can do it. For example, before an employee starts a course, specify that the manager should meet one-on-one to discuss why the employee is a good candidate for this training and what the manager hopes the employee will get out of it. After the course, suggest that they meet again to discuss whether the training was a success — and more specifically, how the employee can put their new knowledge to work.

2. **Be clear in setting expectations for managers.**
   Not every manager will understand exactly what you expect of them without some clear and concise instructions. One suggestion is to offer a live webinar that clearly outlines what you want them to say and do.
Be sure to record the session, so your managers can refer back to it later. Or, outline the process details in written format (and make this available online), so managers can refer back to it during the process, if need be. By telling managers precisely what you expect, they’ll be better prepared to deliver.

3. **Strive for consistency.**

Make it easy for managers to follow your lead by providing a consistent set of resources and training materials for each program where coaching is incorporated. Think about using a common format, consistent delivery mechanism and standard archive location for all the resources, regardless of the specific program. Your managers will have an easier time finding what they need, and they’ll spend less time getting up to speed.

**Aim for commitment, not just compliance.**
As with any good relational tool, coaching can only be effective when both parties care, are involved, and are committed to its success.

That’s why it’s important to remember your goal: Aim for commitment, not just compliance.

Why? The old ways of changing employee behavior (including progressive discipline and traditional performance appraisals) simply don’t work. Sure, they may lead to resentful compliance, but these strategies rarely address the real performance issues at hand. And they don’t inspire employees to become what you want: fully committed and high-performing members of your team.

Employee coaching is the better approach because it can eliminate the need for discipline altogether.

How Do You Ensure Your Team’s in the Game?

Follow These 7 Tips for Getting Employees On Board

Without some level of employee commitment, coaching will fall on deaf ears — and the whole conversation goes nowhere. But we’ve got seven tips to help your coaching cause.
Emphasize learning.

To keep employees engaged, change how you talk to them. When setting goals, for example, discuss what they can learn from those tasks and experiences. Most people really want to learn — and it’s not threatening in any way. When we learn, we don’t expect to be perfect, but we do want to do well and improve. It encourages the right behavior, without any of the negativity.

Be inclusive.

According to a recent article by Jessica Burnette-Lemon, research about how the brain works may shed clues on how leaders can affect employee change. In the article, UK-based consultant Hilary Scarlett said, “Our brains are wired to be social, and social rejection has an impact on our IQ. So make sure every member of the team feels part of the manager’s ‘in group.’”

Tip #1 Build trust.
Employees need to know that their leader is providing coaching for the purpose of personal development — not just to get the job done. Taking the time to listen, setting a good example, offering praise, keeping people informed and being non-judgmental can go a long way toward building that trust.

Tip #2 Focus on the positive.
For coaching to work, employees need an open mind and a growth mindset. So instead of telling people what they’re doing wrong (which is negative and threatening), tell them what they’re doing right. Tell an employee that you appreciate the fact that their reports were delivered on time or that you’re impressed by their diligence with arriving to work on time. Then propose alternate behaviors for the problem areas, taking the time to carefully explain how you’d like to see things done in the future.

Tip #3

Tip #4

Tip #3 Emphasize learning.

Tip #4 Be inclusive.

“Anyone who’s played a sport knows that a coach will push you far harder — and help you achieve things far greater — than you would have done on your own.”

— Larry Braman, President, Global Career Consulting and Placement
Encourage small, incremental changes.
Instead of overwhelming employees with a laundry list of changes, identify the most important improvements and feed employees only a few at a time. Celebrate those “wins” before moving on to other improvements — and don’t forget to recognize the small, incremental achievements along the way.

Quick Tip
Follow these pointers for better coach-employee communication:

- Nurture employees’ need to feel a sense of growth by making learning resources available and even setting learning goals.
- Make sure to articulate your expectations clearly, so there’s no confusion about what you want.
- Ask permission before giving feedback.
Chapter 5
Finally, you can use a standard employee survey, and if coaching is only used in certain business divisions, you can segment your survey populations to compare results between coached and non-coached divisions.

**Strategy #2:**

Create “pulse” employee surveys.

If you make your assessments too long, nobody will respond. Consider creating a short “pulse” survey with just one or two questions. Using a simple 1–10 rating scale, ask employees: “How well does your manager deliver praise and feedback?” or “How well does your manager understand the challenges you face in your job?” Use those answers as a benchmark and repeat the exercise 60 or 90 days after the manager’s training ends, to see if you’re seeing some winning results.

So you recognize the value of coaching — and you’re already investing time and money training your managers. How do you know if it’s working?

You need to gather feedback and measure performance improvements. Here are several strategies to consider:

**Strategy #1:**

Tap into feedback mechanisms you already have.

You can use your annual performance review to gather some insight (simply add some coaching topics to the review template). Another option is using a 360-degree survey to gather feedback from both employees and the manager’s manager, which gives you a more accurate picture of their coaching skills.
Strategy #3: Gather informal feedback.
You don’t always need to gather written responses to gauge the effectiveness of your coaching programs. You can also sit down with employees on an informal basis to hear about how things are going. Even sitting in a lunch room with a handful of people can give you excellent insight about whether a manager is demonstrating good coaching skills.

Strategy #4: Ask managers to rate themselves.
Creating a quick survey and asking the managers to self-evaluate is another way to gather keen knowledge about their coaching progress. Ask: “Have you noticed any difference in your employees’ engagement levels?” or “Have you seen an improvement in their overall performance (or your team’s business results)?”
Dennis Matthies is the creator of the terms Precision Questioning™ and Precision Answering™. Dennis studied physics at M.I.T. and philosophy at Stanford University, where he taught for almost 30 years. He developed innovative techniques for problem solving, decision-making and accelerated learning, and he continues to teach, write and develop new ideas related to core skills needed by people who are doing work that is learning intensive.

“No two people have the same interests or learn in the same way. Every session gives me lessons about what to coach and how to coach. It isn’t obvious to them that, in the end, I really do learn as much from them as they learn from me.”

“Coaching is a work of love. So is learning.”

“We aren’t ‘motivating’ the people we coach. We are bringing them into the field that is created by our own energy and curiosity.”

“Less: Do this. More: Experiment with this.”

“Let’s not just coach; let’s also teach them how to coach themselves.”

“I happily spend two hours for every hour we spend together. During that time I review, summarize, anticipate what’s next, and imagine future directions. This reflection makes it possible for me to personalize the coaching. It also feeds my creativity and gives depth to our relationship.”
Chapter 6
Whether you’re directly involved in HR talent and learning programs or not, you likely recognize the value of coaching — for improving not only your learning and talent programs, but also your workforce productivity.

In the end, coaching is a venture that’s well worth the time and energy. In fact, coaching is increasingly viewed as an opportunity to enhance employees’ engagement levels, loyalty, retention and overall satisfaction.

And when you consider the minimal time and financial investments needed to get your coaching program off the ground, it’s hard to argue with the sense of urgency.

Are you ready to take your teams to the next level? Then it’s time to get serious about coaching. Take these suggestions and use them to get your teams moving in the right direction today.

**READY, SET, GO!**

Stay On Top of Your Game

Join online discussion groups devoted to coaching, such as the Employee Coaching group on LinkedIn. Here you’ll connect with others who are interested in coaching and may have resources and knowledge to share.
References


2  Human Capital Institute (HCI) webcast presenting findings from the 2014 “Building a Coaching Culture” study. Research was conducted in partnership between the International Coach Federation (ICF) and HCI. (coachfederation.org/about/landing.cfm?ItemNumber=3674&navItemNumber=3675)


SABA. It’s Game Time: Your Practical Employee Coaching Playbook
For more information on coaching, personalized development and employee performance, check out these related resources from Saba:

- **eBook**  Winning Your Workforce: The Essential Guide to Improving Retention and Employee Performance
- **Talent Talk Article**  Find Time to Coach Your Millennial Employees — Even Those Over 50
- **Blog Post**  Coaching Skills: Critical for Management and Talent Programs, But Not Selecting Managers?
- **OnDemand Webinar**  Coaching: The Key to Better Learning and Talent Programs
- **Product Video**  Learning@Work

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