Harvard Business Review

REPRINT F1803A
PUBLISHED IN HBR
MAY–JUNE 2018

ARTICLE
IDEA WATCH

Managers Can't Be Great Coaches All By Themselves

The best ones are connectors.

This document is authorized for use only by ANDREW MAGGS (ANDY.MAGGS@AREMA.CO.UK). Copying or posting is an infringement of copyright. Please contact customerservice@harvardbusiness.org or 800-988-0886 for additional copies.

THE BEST ONES ARE CONNECTORS.

MANAGERS CAN'T BE GREAT COACHES ALL BY THEMSELVES

In a utopian corporate world, managers lavish a constant stream of feedback on their direct reports. This is necessary, the thinking goes, because organizations and responsibilities are changing rapidly, requiring employees to constantly upgrade their skills. Indeed, the desire for frequent discussions about development is one reason many companies are moving away from annual performance reviews: A yearly conversation isn't enough.

In the real world, though, constant coaching is rare. Managers face too many demands and too much time pressure, and working with subordinates to develop skills tends to slip to the bottom of the to-do list. One survey of HR leaders found that they expect managers to spend 36% of their time developing subordinates, but a survey of managers showed that the actual amount averages just 9%—and even that may sound unrealistically high to many direct reports.

It turns out that 9% shouldn't be alarming, however, because when it comes to coaching, more isn't necessarily better.

To understand how managers can do a better job of providing the coaching and development up-and-coming talent needs, researchers at Gartner surveyed 7,300 employees and managers across a variety of industries; they followed up by interviewing more than 100 HR executives and surveying another 225. Their focus: What are the best managers doing to develop employees in today's busy work environment?

After coding 90 variables, the researchers identified four distinct coaching profiles:

Teacher Managers coach employees on the basis of their own knowledge and experience, providing advice-oriented feedback and personally directing development. Many have expertise in technical fields and spent years as individual contributors before working their way into managerial roles.

Always-on Managers provide continual coaching, stay on top of employees' development, and give feedback across a range of skills. Their behaviors closely align with what HR professionals typically idealize. These managers may appear to be the most dedicated of the four types to upgrading their employees' skills—they treat it as a daily part of their job.

Connector Managers give targeted feedback in their areas of expertise; otherwise, they connect employees with others on the team or elsewhere in the organization who are better suited to the task. They spend more time than the other three types assessing the skills, needs, and interests of their employees, and they recognize that many skills are best taught by people other than themselves.

Cheerleader Managers take a hands-off approach, delivering positive feedback and putting employees in charge of their own development. They are available and supportive, but they aren't as proactive as the other types of managers when it comes to developing employees' skills.

The four types are more or less evenly distributed within organizations, regardless of industry. The most common type, Cheerleaders, accounts for 29% of managers, while the least common, Teachers, accounts for 22%. The revelations in the research relate not to the prevalence of the various styles but to the impact each has on employee performance.

The first surprise: Whether a manager spends 36% or 9% of her time on employee development doesn't seem to matter. "There is very little correlation between time spent coaching and employee performance," says Jaime Roca, one of Gartner's practice leaders for human resources. "It's less about the quantity and more about the quality."

The second surprise: Those hypervigilant Always-on Managers are doing more harm than good. "We thought that category would perform the best, so this really surprised us," Roca says. In fact, employees coached by Always-on Managers performed worse than those coached by the other types—and were the only category whose performance diminished as a result of coaching.

The researchers identified three main reasons for Always-on Managers' negative effect on performance. First, although these managers believe that more coaching is better, the continual stream of feedback they offer can be overwhelming and detrimental. (The Gartner team compares them to so-called helicopter parents, whose close oversight hampers children's ability to develop independence.) Second, because they spend less time assessing what skills employees need to upgrade, they tend to coach on topics that are less relevant to employees' real needs. Third, they are so focused on personally coaching their employees that they often fail to recognize the limits of their own expertise, so they may try to teach skills they haven't sufficiently mastered themselves. "That last one is a killer—the manager doesn't actually know the solution to whatever the problem is, and he's essentially winging it and providing misguided information," Roca says.

When the researchers dove deep into the connection between coaching style and employee performance, they found a clear winner: Connectors. The employees of these managers are three times as likely as subordinates of the other types to be high performers.

To understand how Connectors work, consider this analogy from the world of sports: A professional tennis player's coach may be the most important voice guiding the player's development, but she may bring in other experts—for strength training, nutrition, and specialized skills such as serves, lobs, and backhands—instead of trying to teach everything herself. Despite this outsourcing, the coach remains deeply

COPYRIGHT © 2018 HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING CORPORATION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

This document is authorized for use only by ANDREW MAGGS (ANDY.MAGGS@AREMA.CO.UK). Copying or posting is an infringement of copyright. Please contact customerservice@harvardbusiness.org or 800-988-0886 for additional copies.

IN PRACTICE

JASON TRUJILLO
"A MANAGER CAN'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS"

A 107-year-old company in a fast-changing industry, IBM has a history of adapting to shifts in technology. It's currently in the midst of one such change, as its customers migrate to cloud-based, software-as-a-service solutions. Jason Trujillo, IBM's director of leadership development, spoke with HBR about how the shift to Connector-style coaching is helping drive that change. Edited excerpts follow.

Why are you making this shift now? IBM's cultural transformation is aligned with the reinvention of our business, with almost half our revenue coming from businesses we weren't in six years ago. We've fully embraced design thinking and agile methodologies, which changes the way we work and assemble teams to drive value for our clients. It requires more Connector behaviors from all IBMers. We're systematically creating opportunities for learning through peer-to-peer coaching.

What are the advantages of this approach? It's more market driven. Too often learning and development teams focus on creating and pushing out new kinds of programs for employees—the incentive is really around creation. This approach recognizes that there's a lot of value in "pull"—when people seek what they need. It also offers advantages in cost and speed. Rolling out training to 370,000 people requires a lot of resources and significant time. Connecting with peers is more efficient, and as this approach has taken hold, it's driven a much more viral network effect.

How do employees find colleagues with the right skills to coach them? We created a marketplace platform called Coach.me for coaching needs and solutions. Whether someone needs to learn a hard skill, like writing a certain kind of code, or a soft skill, like improving how she gives feedback, the platform connects her with colleagues who can help. This puts people in control of what they need. And it's connected to our digital learning platform, Your Learning.

What's the incentive for people to spend time coaching a colleague they've never met? We've made it part of our performance management process, which focuses on five elements: business results, client success, innovation, responsibility to others, and skills. We're creating broad awareness that by helping one another, we're helping IBM grow.

Is there a risk that outsourcing coaching to peers will lead managers to shirk development tasks? We don't allow managers to abdicate that responsibility. As a manager, I'm still responsible for the success of my employees. I need to demonstrate and model the right behavior, of constantly learning to keep pace. Our CEO, Ginni Rometty, says very clearly that to be successful at IBM, you need to learn at the exponential pace the market demands. You need the right skills. As for how you get those skills, this approach recognizes that a manager can't have all the answers.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACK GARLITOS

This doc[illegible]orized for use [illegible] Copying or posting is an infringement of copyright. Please contact [illegible]siness.org

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

involved, identifying expertise, facilitating introductions, and monitoring progress.

Encouraging managers to adopt Connector behaviors may require a shift in mindset. "Historically, being a manager is about being directive and telling people what to do," Roca says. "Being a Connector is more about asking the right questions, providing tailored feedback, and helping employees make a connection to a colleague who can help them." The most difficult part is often self-knowledge and candor: Being a Connector requires a manager to recognize that he's not qualified to teach a certain skill and to admit that deficiency to a subordinate. "That isn't something that comes naturally," Roca says.

To get started, the researchers say, managers should focus less on the frequency of their developmental conversations with employees and more on depth and quality. Do you really understand your employees' aspirations and the skills needed to develop in that direction? Next, instead of talking about development only one-on-one, open the conversations up to the team. Encourage colleagues to coach one another, and point out people who have specific skills that others could benefit from learning. Then broaden the scope, encouraging subordinates to connect with colleagues across the organization who might help them gain skills they can't learn from teammates.

For employees, one message from this research is that you're better off working for a Connector than for one of the other types. So how can you recognize whether someone is in that category—ideally before accepting a position? Roca suggests asking your prospective boss about his coaching style and discreetly talking with his current direct reports about how he works to upgrade subordinates' skills.

For managers and subordinates, the research should redirect attention from the frequency of developmental conversations to the quality of interactions and the route taken to help employees gain skills. Says Roca: "The big takeaway is that when it comes to coaching employees, being a Connector is how you win."

HBR Reprint F1803A

ABOUT THE RESEARCH "Coaching vs. Connecting: What the Best Managers Do to Develop Their Employees Today," by Gartner (white paper)

This document is authorized for use only by ANDREW MAGGS (ANDY.MAGGS@AREMA.CO.UK). Copying or posting is an infringement of copyright. Please contact customerservice@harvardbusiness.org or 800-988-0886 for additional copies.