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ARTICLE
LEADERSHIP

The Leader as Coach

How to unleash innovation, energy, and commitment

by Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular

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LEADERSHIP

How to unleash innovation, energy, and commitment

The Leader as Coach

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LEADERSHIP

Once upon a time,

most people began successful careers by developing expertise in a technical, functional, or professional domain. Doing your job well meant having the right answers. If you could prove yourself that way, you'd rise up the ladder and eventually move into people management—at which point you had to ensure that your subordinates had those same answers.

As a manager, you knew what needed to be done, you taught others how to do it, and you evaluated their performance. Command and control was the name of the game, and your goal was to direct and develop employees who understood how the business worked and were able to reproduce its previous successes.

Not today. Rapid, constant, and disruptive change is now the norm, and what succeeded in the past is no longer a guide to what will succeed in the future. Twenty-first-century managers simply don't (and can't!) have all the right answers. To cope with this new reality, companies are moving away from traditional command-and-control practices and toward something very different: a model in which managers give support and guidance rather than instructions, and employees learn how to adapt to constantly changing environments in ways that unleash fresh energy, innovation, and commitment.

The role of the manager, in short, is becoming that of a coach.

This is a dramatic and fundamental shift, and we've observed it firsthand. Over the past decade, we've seen it in our ongoing research on how organizations are transforming themselves for the digital age; we've discerned it from what our executive students and coaching clients have told us about the leadership skills they want to cultivate in themselves and throughout their firms; and we've noticed that more and more of the companies we work with are investing in training their leaders as coaches. Increasingly, coaching is becoming integral to the fabric of a learning culture—a skill that good managers at all levels need to develop and deploy.

We should note that when we talk about coaching, we mean something broader than just the efforts of consultants who are hired to help executives build their personal and professional skills. That work is important and sometimes vital, but it's temporary and executed by outsiders. The coaching we're talking about—the kind that creates a true learning organization—is ongoing and executed by those inside the organization. It's work that all managers should engage in with all their people all the time, in ways that help define the organization's culture and advance its mission. An effective manager-as-coach asks questions instead of providing answers, supports employees instead of judging

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Companies are moving away from traditional command-and-control practices and toward a model in which managers give support and guidance rather than instructions.

them, and facilitates their development instead of dictating what has to be done.

This conception of coaching represents an evolution. Coaching is no longer just a benevolent form of sharing what you know with somebody less experienced or less senior, although that remains a valuable aspect. It's also a way of asking questions so as to spark insights in the other person. As Sir John Whitmore, a leading figure in the field, defined it, skilled coaching involves "unlocking people's potential to maximize their own performance." The best practitioners have mastered both parts of the process—imparting knowledge and helping others discover it themselves—and they can artfully do both in different situations.

It's one thing to aspire to that kind of coaching, but it's another to make it happen as an everyday practice throughout the many layers of an organization. At most firms, a big gap still yawns between aspiration and practice—and we've written this article to help readers bridge it. We focus first on how to develop coaching as an individual managerial capacity, and then on how to make it an organizational one.

You're Not as Good as You Think

For leaders who are accustomed to tackling performance problems by telling people what to do, a coaching approach often feels too "soft." What's more, it can make them psychologically uncomfortable, because it deprives them of their most familiar management tool: asserting their authority. So they resist coaching—and left to their own devices, they may not even give it a try. "I'm too busy," they'll say, or "This isn't the best use of my time," or "The people I'm saddled with aren't coachable." In Daniel Goleman's classic study of leadership styles, published in this magazine in 2000, leaders ranked coaching as their least-favorite style, saying they simply didn't have time for the slow and tedious work of teaching people and helping them grow.

Even if many managers are unenthusiastic about coaching, most think they're pretty good at it. But a lot of them are not. In one study, 3,761 executives assessed their own coaching skills, and then their assessments were compared with those of people who worked with them. The results didn't align well. Twenty-four percent of the executives significantly overestimated their abilities, rating themselves as above average while their colleagues ranked them in the bottom third of the group. That's a telling mismatch. "If you think you're a good coach but you actually aren't," the authors of the study wrote, "this data suggests you may be a good deal worse than you imagined."

Coaching well can be hard for even the most competent and well-meaning of managers. One of us (Herminia) teaches a class to executives that makes this clear year after year. The executives are given a case study and asked to play the role of a manager who must decide whether to fire or coach a direct report who is not performing up to par. The employee has made obvious errors of judgment, but the manager has contributed significantly to the problem by having alternately ignored and micromanaged him.

IDEA IN BRIEF

THE SITUATION
To cope with disruptive change, companies are reinventing themselves as learning organizations. This requires a new approach to management in which leaders serve as coaches to those they supervise.

THE CHALLENGE
In this new approach, managers ask questions instead of providing answers, support employees instead of judging them, and facilitate their development instead of dictating what has to be done. But most managers don't feel they have time for that—and they're not very good at it anyway.

THE SOLUTION
Companies need to offer their managers the appropriate tools and support to become better coaches. And if they want to be sustainably healthy learning organizations, they must also develop coaching as an organizational capacity.

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With the right tools and support, a sound method, and lots of practice and feedback, almost anybody can become a better coach.

When presented with this scenario, nine out of 10 executives decide they want to help their direct report do better. But when they're asked to role-play a coaching conversation with him, they demonstrate much room for improvement. They know what they're supposed to do: "ask and listen," not "tell and sell." But that doesn't come naturally, because deep down they've already made up their minds about the right way forward, usually before they even begin talking to the employee. So their efforts to coach typically consist of just trying to get agreement on what they've already decided. That's not real coaching—and not surprisingly, it doesn't play out well.

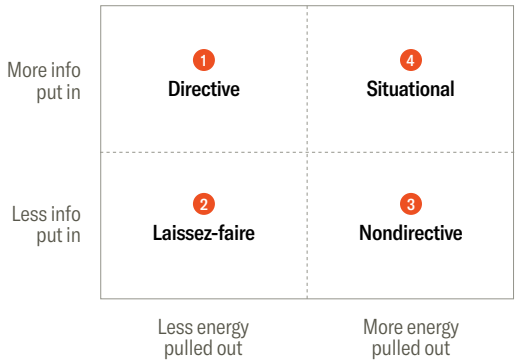
Here's roughly how these conversations unfold. The executives begin with an open-ended question, such as "How do you think things are going?" This invariably elicits an answer very different from what they expected. So they reformulate the question, but this, too, fails to evoke the desired response. With some frustration, they start asking leading questions, such as "Don't you think your personal style would be a better fit in a different role?" This makes the direct report defensive, and he becomes even less likely to give the hoped-for answer. Eventually, feeling that the conversation is going nowhere, the executives switch into "tell" mode to get their conclusion across. At the end of the exercise, no one has learned anything about the situation or themselves.

Sound familiar? This kind of "coaching" is all too common, and it holds companies back in their attempts to become learning organizations. The good news, though, is that with the right tools and support, a sound method, and lots of practice and feedback, almost anybody can become a better coach.

Different Ways of Helping

To get managers thinking about the nature of coaching, and specifically how to do it better in the context of a learning organization, we like to present them with the 2x2 matrix in the next column. It's a simple but useful tool. One axis shows the information, advice, or expertise that a coach *puts in* to the relationship with the person being coached; the other shows the motivational energy that a coach *pulls out* by unlocking that person's own insights and solutions.

Styles of Coaching



At the upper left, in quadrant 1, is *directive coaching,* which takes place primarily through "telling." Mentoring falls into this category. Everybody knows what to expect here: A manager with years of accumulated knowledge willingly shares it with a junior team member, and that person listens carefully, hoping to absorb as much knowledge as possible. This approach has a lot to recommend it, but it has some downsides too. Because it consists of stating what to do and how to do it, it unleashes little energy in the person being coached; indeed, it may even depress her energy level and motivation. It also assumes that the boss knows things that the recipient of the coaching does not—not always a safe assumption in a complex and constantly changing work environment. Additionally, because it allows leaders to continue doing what they have always excelled at (solving other people's problems), it does not build organizational capacity well.

That said, coaching is not always the answer. There may be times when all team members are productively getting on with their work, and the right approach to managing them is to leave them alone. This approach, which we call *laissez-faire,* appears in quadrant 2.

At the bottom right, in quadrant 3, is *nondirective coaching,* which is built on listening, questioning, and withholding judgment. Managers here work to draw wisdom, insight, and creativity out of the people they're coaching, with the goal of helping them learn to resolve problems and cope with challenging situations on their own. It's an approach that can be highly energizing for those being coached, but it doesn't

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You need to do more than teach individual managers how to coach better. You also need to make coaching an organizational capacity.

come naturally to most managers, who tend to be more comfortable in "tell" mode.

At the top right, in quadrant 4, is *situational coaching,* which represents the sweet spot in our framework. All managers in a learning organization should aspire to become expert at situational coaching—which, as its name suggests, involves striking a fine balance between directive and nondirective styles according to the specific needs of the moment. From our work with experienced executives, we've concluded that managers should first practice nondirective coaching a lot on its own, until it becomes almost second nature, and only then start to balance that newly strengthened ability with periods of helpful directive coaching.

The GROW Model

One of the best ways to get better at nondirective coaching is to try conversing using the GROW model, devised in the 1980s by Sir John Whitmore and others. GROW involves four action steps, the first letters of which give the model its name. It's easy to grasp conceptually, but it's harder to practice than you might imagine, because it requires training yourself to think in new ways about what your role and value are as a leader. The four action steps are these:

Goal. When you begin discussing a topic with someone you're coaching, establish exactly what he wants to accomplish *right now.* Not what his goals are for the project or his job or his role in the organization, but what he hopes to get out of this particular exchange. People don't do this organically in most conversations, and they often need help with it. A good way to start is to ask something like "What do you want when you walk out the door that you don't have now?"

Reality. With the goal of your conversation established, ask questions rooted in *what, when, where,* and *who,* each of which forces people to come down out of the clouds and focus on specific facts. This makes the conversation real and constructive. You'll notice that we didn't include *why.* That's because asking why demands that people explore reasons and motivations rather than facts. In doing that, it can carry overtones of judgment or trigger attempts at self-justification, both of which can be counterproductive.

During this stage, a good reality-focused question to ask is "What are the key things we need to know?" Attend carefully to how people respond. Are they missing something important? Are they talking about operational issues but forgetting the human side of the equation? Or the reverse? When you ask people to slow down and think in this way, they often lose themselves in contemplation—and then a light comes on, and off they go, engaging with the problem on their own with new energy and a fresh perspective. This step is critical, because it stops people from overlooking pertinent variables and leaping to conclusions. Your job here is just to raise the right questions and then get out of the way.

Options. When people come to you for coaching, they often feel stuck. "There's nothing I can do," they might tell you. Or "I have only one real option." Or "I'm torn between A and B."

At this point your task is to help them think more broadly and more deeply. To broaden the conversation, sometimes it's enough to ask something as simple as "If you had a magic wand, what would you do?" You'd be surprised how freeing many people find that question to be—and how quickly they then start thinking in fresh, productive ways. Once they've broadened their perspective and discovered new options, your job is to prompt them to deepen their thinking, perhaps by encouraging them to explore the upside, the downside, and the risks of each option.

Will. This step also doesn't usually happen organically in conversations, so again most people will need help with it. The step actually has two parts, each involving a different sense of the word *will.*

In the first part you ask, "What will you do?" This encourages the person you're coaching to review the specific action plan that has emerged from your conversation. If the conversation has gone well, she'll have a clear sense of what that plan is. If she doesn't, you'll need to cycle back through the earlier steps of the GROW process and help her define how she'll attack the problem.

The second part involves asking people about their will to act. "On a scale of one to 10," you might ask, "how likely is it that you will do this?" If they respond with an eight or higher, they're probably motivated enough to follow through. If the answer is seven or less, they probably won't. In that case you'll again need to cycle back through the earlier steps of the process, in an effort to arrive at a solution they are more likely to act on.

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COACHING 101

Start with a few basic steps.

Assess the situation. Decide what kind of coaching is necessary. Full situational coaching—balancing directive and nondirective coaching moment by moment—isn't always the answer. There will always be scenarios in which people simply need to be told what to do. At other times—if, say, they're struggling with deeply important career decisions—it might be appropriate to offer nondirective coaching but nothing more. It's also possible that your people don't need any coaching right now but would really value an ear later. Ask them.

Listen. Here's a good rule of thumb for most situations: Shut up and listen. Absorb what people tell you, and be alert to what their tone of voice and body language convey. Don't respond as you usually might; instead, listen just to understand. Occasionally repeat back what you hear, to make sure you have it right, but avoid jumping in. Leave room for silence, especially at the end of your conversation. The most important things often emerge from that silence.

Ask open-ended questions. Yes/no questions shut down thinking. Open-ended ones expand it. The coaching thought leader Nancy Kline uses a provocative one that goes roughly like this: "What do you already know, without being aware of it, that you will find out in a year?" But the questions don't have to be complex or clever. Sometimes the simplest—such as "What else?"—are the best. What's vital is that they demonstrate your authentic interest and belief in the person you are coaching. That's something to work hard on, even if the person's performance to date has you doubtful. If you can sincerely suspend judgment, you may be surprised!

Practice nondirective coaching. Practice makes perfect. Try nondirective coaching outside of work—perhaps in some pro bono or other extracurricular role. Practice it in a disciplined, sustained way until you have confidence you're doing it well. You'll know you're getting good when the people you're talking with start to have "Aha!" moments or thank you profusely even though you feel you didn't tell them anything.

Of course, workplace coaching usually takes place outside of formal coaching sessions. Most often, it happens in brief exchanges, when a manager might respond to a request for help by posing a single question, such as "What have you already thought of?" or "What really matters here?" When more of those interactions occur—when you notice your managers growing increasingly inquisitive, asking good questions, and working from the premise that they don't have all the answers—you'll know you're on the right track.

Coaching as an Organizational Capacity

So far, we've focused on coaching as a managerial skill. That's a vital first step, but to transform your company into a genuine learning organization, you need to do more than teach individual leaders and managers how to coach better. You also need to make coaching an organizational capacity that fits integrally within your company culture. And to succeed at that, you must effect a cultural transformation that involves the following steps.

Articulate the "why." Managers and professionals are busy people. If coaching strikes them as simply the latest fad being pushed by HR, they will roll their eyes and comply with the requirements as minimally as possible. If you want them to embrace coaching as not just a personal skill but also a source of cultural strength, you'll have to make clear why it's valuable for the business and their own success.

A good "why" inevitably connects coaching to an organization's mission-critical tasks. Consider the example of the international law firm Allen & Overy. When David Morley, then the senior partner, decided to make coaching a key part of the firm's leadership culture, he began talking with his colleagues about the importance of high-value conversations. Morley is an alumnus of one of our (Anne's) leadership coach trainings. "My pitch," he told us, "was this: 'As a senior leader, you have roughly 100 conversations a year that are of particularly high value—in the sense that they will change your life or the life of the person you're talking to. We want to help you acquire the skills to maximize value in those 100 conversations, to unlock previously hidden issues, to uncover new options, and to reveal fresh insights.' That resonated. Almost everybody in a key leadership position at the firm recognized that they struggled with how to make the most of those conversations, and they could readily see that they lacked skills."

Articulating the "why" can also involve helping people see the collateral benefits of coaching. That's what worked at the Berkeley Partnership, an international management consultancy, where many partners who have received our training in coaching tell us it has significantly enhanced their ability to serve their clients. According to Mark Fearn,

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FURTHER READING

COACHING ADVICE

"Coaching for Change"
Richard Boyatzis, Melvin Smith, and Ellen Van Oosten
HBR, September–October 2019

"Every Manager Needs to Practice Two Types of Coaching"
Dick Grote
HBR.org
September 30, 2016

"4 Reasons Managers Should Spend More Time on Coaching"
Joseph R. Weintraub and James M. Hunt
HBR.org, May 29, 2015

"Overcoming the Toughest Common Coaching Challenges"
Amy Gallo
HBR.org, April 15, 2015

one of the firm's founders, Berkeley partners are now better equipped to respond when clients ask for assistance with big, messy, sometimes ill-defined problems that often extend far beyond the firm's initial brief. Having developed their coaching skills, partners have become better at recognizing situations in which they don't have to provide answers; they understand that in such cases, they may be able to offer more value by listening attentively, asking the right questions, and supporting clients as they work out the best solution. "Now that we've added coaching expertise," Fearn told us, "our task can sometimes be just digging the answer out of them, creating a space to think."

Model the behavior. If you want the people you work with to embrace coaching, you first need to embrace it yourself.

Nobody has done this better than Satya Nadella, the CEO of Microsoft. As noted in a London Business School case study that Herminia cowrote, when Nadella took the reins, in 2014, he was only the third chief executive in the company's four-decade history. During the 14-year tenure of his predecessor, Steve Ballmer, revenue had tripled and profits had doubled, but by the end of that time, the company had lost its momentum. A culture of inspection and judgment prevailed, and the managerial mindset was fixed: Managers evaluated direct reports according to how well they mastered skills and generated numbers that would allow them to reproduce the successes of the past.

This culture had contributed significantly to Microsoft's remarkable run of dominance in the world of personal computing. But as the energy in the tech sector shifted to smartphones and the cloud, the old management practices began to impede progress. By the time Nadella took over, risk aversion and internal politics were hampering cross-divisional collaboration, senior leaders were resisting open-source innovation, and the company's stock price had stalled. Additionally, technologies were changing so quickly that managers often had out-of-date knowledge and practices, but they kept passing these down because that's what they knew how to do.

Nadella quickly realized that Microsoft needed a cultural transformation. To regain its momentum and assert itself as a force in this new landscape, the company had to move away from its entrenched managerial style and instead develop what the Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has called a growth mindset, in which everybody in the organization was open to constant learning and risk-taking. As Nadella himself aptly put it, the leaders of the company had to shift from being know-it-alls to being "learn-it-alls."

Nadella understood that the process had to start with him, so he began modeling the behaviors he wanted Microsoft's managers to adopt. He solicited thoughts from everybody he talked to and listened empathetically to what they had to say. He asked nondirective questions, demonstrating that his role was to support rather than judge. He encouraged people to be open about their mistakes and to learn from them. "He's with you," said Jean-Phillipe Courtois, a member of his leadership team. "You can feel it. You can see the body language. It doesn't matter if you're a top executive or a first-line seller; he has exactly the same quality of listening."

Modeling is powerful because it shows that a leader walks the talk. Moreover, it builds momentum. Researchers have found that when people are in doubt about what behavior is appropriate, they copy the actions of others—particularly those who have power and status. So it's not surprising that in these times of rapid change, which inevitably bring business uncertainty, employees look to their leaders for cues to follow. If they notice that their leaders are working to foster learning and cultivate the delicate art of leadership as conversation, they will do likewise.

Build capability throughout the organization. After Nadella became Microsoft's CEO, the corporate climate changed and the company's performance surged. But Nadella was not single-handedly responsible. With more than 130,000 employees, he depended on the members of his leadership team to tailor the growth mindset to the unique requirements of their individual businesses. For Courtois—who in 2016 assumed control of Microsoft's global sales, marketing, and operations—that meant transforming the culture from one of command and control to one of coaching.

Herminia has studied Microsoft's revival in depth, so we have a clear understanding of how things unfolded. Courtois recognized that the "why" of the shift to coaching was Microsoft's move to a cloud-first strategy. The fundamental economics of cloud computing are based on the premise that customers will pay only for the resources they use (how long a server is utilized, say, or how much data bandwidth is being consumed). With revenue growth now depending more

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COACHING THEORY

Coaching for Performance: The Principles and Practice of Coaching and Leadership
Sir John Whitmore and Performance Consultants International
Nicholas Brealey, 2017 (fully revised 25th-anniversary edition)

Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind
Nancy Kline
Cassell Illustrated
1999

Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling
Edgar H. Schein
Berrett-Koehler, 2013

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heavily on consumption of Microsoft's offerings, everyone at the company had to become adept at having conversations in which they could learn what they did not already know—how to serve the unmet needs of their customers. And with the availability of powerful digital tools that provided everyone with real-time data on key metrics, it no longer made sense for managers to spend their time monitoring and controlling employees. So, after a restructuring effort aimed at giving Microsoft's sales teams the right technical and industry skills to accompany corporate customers as they moved to the cloud, Courtois followed up with workshops, tools, and an online course designed to help the company's managers develop a coaching style of leadership.

"If we want to get the transformation all the way through the organization," he told us, "our biggest challenge is to reboot our people managers. 'People manager' is a job. You're not just a sales manager, where you have a quota, a territory, customers, partners, and goals to achieve. You're actually someone whose mission it is to pick, grow, and motivate the best capabilities to build customer success."

Remove the barriers. As in many organizations, managerial life at Microsoft had a rhythm dictated by quarterly business reviews. One of those, an annual gathering known as the January midyear review, was one of the most visible manifestations of the command-and-control culture.

Over time, the midyear review had developed into a kind of corporate theater in which the C-suite team, adopting an interrogatory stance, would grill senior managers from around the world on their progress and plans. This format of "precision questioning" ended up having "a fear impact on people," said one executive, "because they felt like they were going into that meeting to be judged personally. So they felt they had to paint the best picture they could without showing any mistakes or failures." Stories abounded of senior managers anxiously beginning their preparation well before the December holiday period. In other words, to make a good impression, a raft of the company's most valuable people were diverting more than a month of their time to preparing for an internal review.

As part of the shift to a learning culture, Courtois had already encouraged his team to abandon precision questioning in favor of a more coaching-oriented approach that involved asking questions such as "What are you trying to do?" "What's working?" "What's not working?" and "How can we help?" But old habits die hard. Only after Courtois eliminated the midyear review—thereby removing a significant barrier to change—did everybody understand that he meant business.

Something similar happened at Allen & Overy, where year-end appraisals and rankings had become a largely unproductive ritual. In its push to become a learning organization, the firm recognized that these exercises were a deterrent to the kinds of open and supportive conversations that employees needed both to develop professionally and to advance the organization's mission. It therefore abandoned that performance review system and now trains its partners to engage year-round in coaching conversations with associates, providing them with real-time feedback on their work. Employees report that these conversations create a new and useful level of dialogue about their career development. And once again, there are collateral benefits. Although the program was designed for internal use, it has made the organization's senior leaders more comfortable in conducting unstructured conversations in other contexts, especially during high-stakes client negotiations—and that, in turn, has led to higher revenue and deeper client relationships.

WE LIVE IN a world of flux. Successful executives must increasingly supplement their industry and functional expertise with a general capacity for learning—and they must develop that capacity in the people they supervise. No longer can managers simply command and control. Nor will they succeed by rewarding team members mainly for executing flawlessly on things they already know how to do. Instead, with full institutional support, they need to reinvent themselves as coaches whose job it is to draw energy, creativity, and learning out of the people with whom they work.

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