HBR Guide to
Coaching Your Employees

Ask before you tell
Tailor your feedback
Foster steady growth
Introduction

by Ed Batista

After graduating from business school, I was hired by a founding board of directors to launch a new organization, the Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network. I had shared a leadership position before, but this was my first time as a solo chief executive, and I believed it was my responsibility to come up with the best ideas myself and champion them aggressively.

This approach led to a number of conflicts with my directors. A mentor of mine on the board took me aside and said, “We think you’re a talented young guy, but you have some rough edges. We’d like you to invest in yourself and get a coach.” One of my former professors had a coaching practice, and I asked her to take me on as a client. That was one of the best things I’ve ever done.

Being coached helped me understand that I could have the greatest impact as a leader not by doing more than everyone else but by empowering other people to do more and motivating them to do their best. This meant
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letting go of certain responsibilities and recognizing the limits of my expertise. I didn't need to have all the answers—I just needed to ask the right questions. In short, I came to realize that effective leadership looks a lot like coaching.

While few coaching clients ultimately decide to become coaches, as I did, my positive experience of coaching is typical. The tremendous growth in the field over the past 20 years has been driven by consistent reports from clients who feel more effective and fulfilled as a result of the coaching they've received. And it doesn't just help at the individual level. While researchers can't yet precisely measure coaching's effect on organizational performance, numerous studies (published in the Journal of Management, Consulting Psychology Journal, and other publications) show a positive impact.

It's no coincidence that the increased demand for coaching has accompanied the shift from command-and-control hierarchies to flatter, more distributed organizations. In the 1950s management thinker Peter Drucker coined the term "knowledge worker" to describe a newly emerging cohort among the white-collar ranks; today most professionals fall into this category. Because they require (and desire) little or no direct supervision and often know more about their tasks than their managers do, knowledge workers usually respond well to coaching. Unlike directive, top-down management, coaching allows them to make the most of their expertise while compelling them to stretch and grow. As their manager, you set overall direction for them—but you let them figure out how best to get there.
Many senior managers and HR executives have come to view coaching as an investment in high potentials or as a perk for stars. That said, you may have to convince your employees and colleagues of its value. People in some organizations still see coaching mainly as a corrective measure for underperformers. If you work in a culture like that, you’ll need to encourage those around you to participate. And you may need to be persuaded yourself. Daniel Goleman noted in his classic Harvard Business Review article “Leadership That Gets Results” (March–April 2000) that despite coaching’s merits, it was used least often among the management styles he studied. Leaders told Goleman that they didn’t have time to coach their employees, and you may feel the same way.

If so, I urge you to give it a try and gauge the return on your investment. My experience as a coaching client, as someone who teaches coaching to MBAs, and as a professional coach has shown me the value of coaching as a management technique, and a large and growing body of research reinforces this conclusion. While external coaches like me will always play an important role in supporting leaders and their teams, coaching isn’t our exclusive domain. It’s an essential management tool. It takes time and effort, but the material in this guide will help you integrate coaching methods into your own management style.

There’s no “right” way to coach, so you’ll have to decide for yourself which approaches described in the articles that follow work best for you and your direct reports. Like any new skill, coaching requires practice, and you’ll need to step outside your comfort zone as you experi-
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ment. Don't be too quick to write off a technique just because it feels awkward at first.

Coaching presents every manager with challenges. You may have to reconsider your leadership style and how you add value. You may feel reluctant to surrender control or to give people room to make mistakes, and you'll almost certainly be tempted to jump in with solutions when they're struggling with a problem. But those challenges get easier the more you coach, and the payoff is enormous: You'll tap your employees' full potential while leading more strategically.

Last year a client who'd founded a successful company concluded that his management style was holding back the firm. He and his senior managers had so many tactical responsibilities that they weren't truly leading. They were putting out fires, with a limited capacity to take a longer view and make the systemic changes the business needed.

So my client decided to restructure his role, delegating some tasks to his senior managers. He coached them as they assumed these duties, prompting them with questions to solve problems in creative new ways rather than simply telling them what had worked in the past. They, in turn, took the same approach with their direct reports.

As a result, the company's management team raised its sights and focused on more-strategic issues, which had a positive impact on the business. And my client found that he was actually more productive while spending less time in the office. When he sold the company and stepped down from his leadership role, he left with con-
idence that the management team would adjust seamlessly, and the business has continued to thrive.

That's what's possible when you coach your employees. That's why it's absolutely worth your time. And that's why you'll find this guide an invaluable addition to your leadership reading.

Ed Batista is an executive coach and an instructor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He writes regularly on issues related to coaching and professional development at www.edbatista.com, and he is currently writing a book on self-coaching for Harvard Business Review Press.
Chapter 1
Cultivate the Mind-Set and Skills to Coach Effectively

by Candice Frankovelgia

Do you ever say to yourself (or others), "This person just doesn't get it" or "This person will never have what it takes"? If so, you may have what Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck calls a fixed mind-set, which will severely limit your ability to make a difference as a coach. Low expectations rarely yield growth and often lead to frustration on both sides. You may occasionally encounter someone who truly can't develop, but the real barrier is most often the belief that the person won't make progress.

Adapted from the Center for Creative Leadership's course "Coaching for Greater Effectiveness." For further information, visit www.ccl.org.
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It's easy to fall into this trap. After you’ve acquired a lot of experience and knowledge in your field, doing things yourself may seem simpler and faster than helping your direct reports improve their critical thinking, technical, or organizational skills. But that's a short-term solution that leads to long-term problems. If you keep providing all the answers, people will keep lining up at your door looking for them.

Shifting Your Mind-Set

In the end, it's actually less time-consuming to embrace a growth mind-set—one that assumes your people can learn. If you invest in their coaching and development early on, you'll reap benefits later: They'll start solving more of their own day-to-day problems, freeing you to focus on strategic issues and developing more leaders.

Shifting to a growth mind-set takes effort. In the coaching workshops I teach to managers, participants talk about how hard it can be at first—but once they make the switch, they start seeing better outcomes.

An R&D director at a manufacturing company had an employee who struggled to give clear, concise, organized presentations. When that person asked for input on a draft slide deck, the manager's impulse was to mark it up with suggestions to reorganize the information and cut down on the length. But then she caught herself. She called the employee in for a conversation and asked clarifying questions: What are the key points you want to convey? How much does your audience already know? What points will be difficult for people to grasp? If you were in their place, would this presentation help you reach your
goals? What can you do to bring it more in line with what your stakeholders are hoping to achieve? With renewed energy and focus, the employee went back to work and improved the presentation without heavy-handed intervention from the manager.

A growth mind-set can feel risky because it forces you, the coach, to develop skills of your own that go beyond subject-matter expertise. You must ask questions and really listen without jumping in to provide what you believe is the "right" answer. And you must be honest about the performance you expect and where your employee stands, to make sure you're on the same page about the development work that needs to be done. Otherwise, you're resigning yourself to the status quo—so why even bother to coach?

**Sharpening Your Coaching Skills**

Here are the key skills you'll need to hone before you can help others learn and grow:

*Reconciling intent and impact*

You can gauge an employee's impact on the organization by observing him in action and using performance metrics such as satisfaction surveys and sales figures. But you won't know his intent—the driving force behind his behavior—unless he shares it with you.

When employees underperform, there's often a gap between intent and impact, and that can lead to great misunderstanding and frustration. Coaching them effectively involves clarifying their intent so you can close that gap. How? By asking them what impact they *meant* to
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have. For instance, you might say to someone, “You were quiet at the last sales meeting—can we talk about why?” You and others may have viewed his silence as resistance or disengagement, but perhaps he was just trying to cede the floor for a change, knowing that he can be domineering in group discussions.

Once you’ve asked the question, listen closely to the answer. (See the sidebar “Active Listening Tactics.”) Discuss behaviors that confuse or surprise you, especially those that don’t match the intent he describes.

### ACTIVE LISTENING TACTICS

**Pay attention.** Build rapport by giving your full attention. Maintain comfortable eye contact and an open posture (avoid hunching, crossing your legs, or hunkering behind a desk). Be genuinely curious. Allow time and opportunity for the other person to think and speak. Avoid distractions such as e-mail.

**Notice nonverbal cues.** “Hear” the speaker’s nonverbal messages and body language. Do the tone of voice and facial expression match what’s being said? If not, comment on what you notice and ask your employee to tell you more about it.

**Affirm what you hear.** Indicate understanding: “I hear what you are saying” or “I’m following you. Could you say more?” This simply means that you are listening closely—not that you agree.
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You're likely to miss out on critical information if you find yourself:

- talking more than listening
- suggesting solutions before the employee has the chance to do so
- interrupting
- thinking about what you want to say next instead of focusing on what your employee is saying

**Reflect what you see and hear.** Reflect (like a mirror) the other person’s emotions without agreeing or disagreeing: “You seem worried about...” This encourages the speaker to express feelings and deepen exploration.

**Paraphrase what you hear.** Periodically restate basic ideas to check your grasp of key points: “If I understand, your idea is... Did I get the essence of it? If not, please tell me more.”

**Summarize key themes.** Briefly sum up the other person's point of view to show you’ve listened and to check your understanding: “It sounds like your main concern is...” or “These seem to be your main points... Is that right?”
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- using body language that signals impatience or distraction—checking your e-mail, accepting phone calls, leaning back in your chair

- saying what you would have done differently in the same situation

As a rule of thumb, ask more than you tell—aim for a ratio of about 4:1. If you flip that ratio, you're teaching, not coaching. Though teaching plays an important role in developing others, it's limited to what you know. Coaching is an interactive opportunity to discover and create previously unknown solutions. (See the sidebar “Teaching Versus Coaching”)

Always assume positive intent, even when dealing with difficult behavior. People usually mean well—and if you give them the benefit of the doubt, they'll be more forthcoming about their intent and more receptive to feedback.

Recognizing your biases

Your own preferences can get in the way of discovering others' intent. Maybe you have a gut reaction against certain personality types or struggle to identify with colleagues whose work styles differ from yours. Whatever your biases, recognizing them allows you to move past them by inquiring about intent rather than jumping to conclusions or filling in the blanks.

To spot your biases, use frustration as your guide. Think about what gets on your nerves at work and then ask a few trusted colleagues for feedback. What do they think your bugbears are? Compare their thoughts with yours—look for similarities and patterns.
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TEACHING VERSUS COACHING

To develop employees' skills, you must first decide whether to teach or coach. Are you working with an in-experienced colleague or one who requires immediate improvement? If so, you'll want to teach, which means showing or telling her what to do. Otherwise, you're probably better off coaching—asking questions that prompt her to think and solve problems on her own. That way, your employee will gain the independence and confidence she needs to grow, whether she's trying to achieve greater mastery in her role or take on new responsibilities.

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<th>Approach:</th>
<th>Used for:</th>
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<td>Teaching:</td>
<td>Instructing</td>
<td>Having an employee shadow you on a task or project, such as a joint sales call, so she can learn by observing you</td>
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<td>a directive approach</td>
<td>Providing answers</td>
<td>Explaining the business strategy to a new hire</td>
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<td>Coaching:</td>
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<td>Allowing someone to learn on the job, even if it means risking mistakes</td>
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<td>a supportive approach</td>
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<td>Serving as a resource</td>
<td>Providing helpful contacts so your employee can learn from others, not just you</td>
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That exercise helped one manager recognize her tendency to jump right into action rather than spend time defining and aligning processes. She noticed how impatient she became when team members kept pulling conversations back to “process” instead of “just getting the work done.” When she asked them for candid feedback on this, they explained that her impatience actually slowed them down (the last thing she wanted to do) because they often had to loop back to clarify expectations with her. So her impact—as well as her team’s—didn’t match her intent. She met her employees halfway by doing a better job of clarifying expectations up front. She also encouraged them to make more adjustments on the fly so they wouldn’t get paralyzed by planning and slavish adherence to process. As the general level of impatience and frustration dropped, the group began to operate more efficiently and enjoyed the work more.

**Matching people’s skills with big-picture needs**

As a coach to your employees, you’re not just helping them grow for their own sake—noble as that is. You’re also boosting their ability to support the company’s mission and goals. By explicitly connecting their skills with big-picture needs, you’ll give them a sense of purpose and belonging, which will motivate them to grow. If you explain how improving their communication skills will make the team more efficient, for example, or increase sales to clients, they’ll be more likely to take their development in that area as seriously as you do.

How can you get better at connecting the dots between their skills and the organization’s needs? There’s
no magic here—again, you’ll get a wealth of information simply by asking. Where do they feel their skills are best used? What excites them about their work? What areas do they struggle with? What would they like to do more of? Less of? How do they see all that fitting into the organization’s objectives? (For more on channeling employees’ passions and strengths, see chapter 2, “Using Brain Science to Get the Best from Your People.”)

Make it clear that you’re looking out for their interests as well as the company’s. They’ll be eager to help you figure out how they can best serve the organization—and how the organization (and you) can best serve them.

Developing a growth mind-set means you’re learning right along with your employees. The more coaching practice you get, the sharper your skills will become—but give yourself a running start by favoring inquiry over advocacy. Ask questions about others’ intent, your own biases, and individuals’ place in the big picture. And resist the temptation to coach by explaining how you do things. With prompting, not lecturing, your employees will discover solutions of their own and make greater, more lasting progress toward their developmental goals.

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