

# Strategic commentary

## From buzzword to reality: what it really takes to create a culture of success through coaching

*Thought leaders share their views on the HR profession and its direction for the future*

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“C”ulture of coaching” has become a buzzword. Lots of leaders talk about it but sometimes without the clarity required to implement the real thing. This article defines a culture of coaching, why it is good to have one and how leaders of human resources (HR) can help their organizations create this kind of culture.

A culture of coaching has the following eight characteristics:

1. Employees at all levels are committed to ongoing professional development. Every employee is proactive in creating a plan, getting their manager's support and implementing their plans. Every manager supports their direct reports in doing what they need to do to develop new capabilities and advance.
2. People gladly ask for and consider feedback to get better – without getting defensive or taking things personally.
3. Managers are skilled at having coaching conversation with employees to help them solve their own problems and develop new capabilities.
4. Coaching and mentoring others is part of the job description, especially as one

progresses from management to leadership.

5. Team members collaborate effectively with one another.
6. The organization acknowledged and rewards people based on their ability to develop others to success.
7. The organization not only invests in coaching, training and other proven development opportunities, but also recognizes that the primary way that people develop is through challenging work assignments and relationships with others in the organization.
8. The most senior leaders model the behaviors of being coachable and also being great coaches and mentors.

A culture of coaching provides a number of benefits to the organization. Most importantly, it is an excellent way to develop leaders. That is because coaching forces people to think on their own and keep getting better. Second, research by the International Coach Federation and other organizations shows that coaching improves employee loyalty and their relationships up, down and across the organization. When people have strong relationships, it is easier for them to get things done. Third, coaching teaches people to

collaborate effectively, which helps to generate better ideas and overcome obstacles to execute them, whether inside a business unit or across silos. Finally, coaching enables people to ask great questions, listen better and learn to adapt their communication style to the situation and other people.

HR leaders and their organizations create a culture of coaching by executing the following tactics:

- They train managers to know how and when to coach others.
- They create formal evaluation and rewards based on how well people coach, mentor and develop others. At the same time, they reward people who are proactive in executing their development plan, including being coachable.
- They put in place a 360-degree feedback process that does not go through HR for review purposes but is rather used purely to enable people to give and receive advice. Otherwise, employees will game the system and will not give honest feedback.
- They train people in the skills required to collaborate and work effectively in teams.
- They make sure that senior leaders are the most visible models of coaching, being coached and constantly working to get better.
- They develop a strong internal coaching organization. Note that a best practice is to rotate great people into coaching roles, the way that the US Marines use decorated leaders to lead their training. This strategy sends a

strong signal that the organization is serious about coaching.

- They set clear metrics to measure the success of coaching.

Sometimes organizations go to extremes and make mistakes when implementing a culture of coaching. I have observed three common mistakes.

First, a number of organizations pride themselves on being collaborative as part of a coaching culture. However, they are so collaborative that it is hard to get anything done. Everyone feels that they have veto power and that they are in a democracy, not a company; a single “no” from even a minor stakeholder can derail the idea. Everyone thinks they are entitled to have a seat at the table and even get offended if they are not invited to meetings where their participation is not essential. At the same time, some people use the collaborative culture to avoid accountability. Rather than lead or resolve conflicts, they take a more passive approach, hoping that others will step in and decide for them. Finally, some people use collaboration as a tool to coerce or reinforce their power. For instance, “You don’t agree with me and so you are not being collaborative”.

The second mistake is that some organizations do not understand what coaching really is. They do it wrong. I interviewed employees at a major investment firm that thought it had a culture of coaching. However, employees shared that they called this kind of coaching “tortuous self-realization”. They felt that managers used a coaching style too frequently and wasted their time by

asking Socratic questions, expecting that employees would eventually figure out the answer if they were asked enough leading questions. In contrast, effective coaching is about going into the unknown, developing creative solutions to problems. It is appropriate when the manager is willing to be flexible on the outcome, how to achieve the outcome or does not know the answer and is willing to brainstorm and explore. There are clear competencies that define good coaching, and organizations should invest in disseminating them.

Third, as with any initiative to change the culture, you cannot implement a culture of coaching piece meal. For instance, some organizations start and stop the process with a half-day training about coaching skills. You cannot create a culture of coaching with a few check-the-box training workshops. Similarly, senior leadership needs to go first and model the culture. If they are not on board and modeling both the willingness to be coached and the ability to coach, employees will not take the initiative seriously either. Finally, performance reviews and compensation needs to reinforce the coaching behaviors you want to see. Culture change is a complex, long-term initiative that requires commitment, resources and systems.

You and your organization can create a culture of success through coaching. You just have to be willing to do what it takes and avoid common mistakes.

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