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Bringing Science to the Art of Coaching

by Jack Zenger and Kathleen Stinnett

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Interest in helping leaders to become better coaches is at an all-time high. Surveys show that employees want a great deal more coaching than they receive. There are two signs that corporate America is finally trying to respond. First, they are training managers to be better coaches; second, they are using external coaches. With all this invest- ment, what can be done to ensure that it pays off with the highest possible re- turn? There is great inconsistency in the quality and effectiveness of coaches, and the field is attracting more people at a rapid rate.

To expand and improve the art of coaching triggers a series of extremely

We have found strong statistically significant relationships between leadership effectiveness and a variety of desirable business outcomes.

important questions for which we've not had good answers. The future success of coaching may lie in our ability to find answers to these basic questions. The purpose of this paper is to highlight how many of these questions may be addressed in large part by:

- Applying research from a variety of allied disciplines.
- Applying lessons learned from other successful initiatives that are closely related to coaching.
- Using research conducted in business and public service organizations.

The Key Questions
The questions are:

1. To what degree does coaching really pay off? Is this just one more in a long line of management fads?
2. How can we increase the effectiveness of each coaching session?
3. How can the process of coaching be made more consistent?
4. What is the appropriate goal for coaching, and how much change can we expect?

5. What is it about the coaches' personality or behavior that makes the most positive impact?

The Need for Evidence
In the book *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Non-sense: Profiting from Evidence-Based Management*, Pfeffer and Sutton show how companies can improve performance and overcome their competition through evidence-based management.[1] They point out that a very small percentage of what managers do is based on any solid data. This analysis appears to have been spawned by the research on medicine from Dr. David Eddy,[2] who suggested that in 1985 only 15 percent of what physicians did had any scientific evidence to support it. Twenty years later, that number had only risen to somewhere between 20–25 percent.

Let's face it: the practice of coaching in our industry is relatively new. Until recently, most coaching happened somewhat informally. Before that, some organizations

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[1] Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton, Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense: Profiting from Evidence-Based Management (Harvard Business School Press; March 2006.
[2] "Medical Guesswork," by John Carey, Business Week, May 29, 2006, p. 72-79.

offered more formal coaching to those leaders who needed "fixing." It is therefore not surprising that corporations and large public agencies have not invested in pushing the state of this art into a more scientific realm. As the practice of coaching continues to grow, more and more organizations are attempting to measure the benefits of coaching and calibrate their return on investment. This leads to a heightened interest in improving the process and making results more predictable.

The good news is that there are related disciplines that have conducted extremely relevant research. Corporate coaching practices may benefit from the application of these related disciplines in which greater budgets exist for such research, and where the consequences of success and failure are so enormous. This paper attempts to tap into that relevant research that addresses our key questions and issues.

Question 1
Does coaching really make a difference?

Our research within corporations and

Fig. 1 – Coaching Effectiveness vs. Employee Commitment

Results based on study of 2,240 global leaders

public agencies provides useful answers to this first question. Analysis of hundreds of thousands of 360-degree feedback instruments sheds light on the effectiveness of coaching.
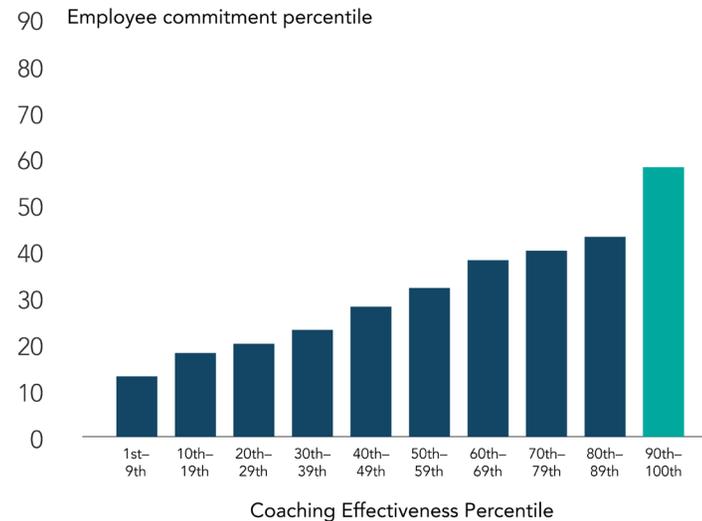
When we study the leaders who are most effective at coaching, we can see some clear correlations between a leader's coaching effectiveness and its impact on their direct reports. Consistently, our data show strong correlations between

a leader's coaching effectiveness and measures of employee commitment and engagement.

On the horizontal axis of Figure 1, we show increasing coaching skill on the part of leaders as seen through the eyes of direct reports, peers, managers, and others. On the vertical axis we see the impact on employee commitment.

Much has been written on the importance and impact of having highly committed

If people seek to be perceived as great leaders, it behooves them to know which competencies really make a difference in their organizations.

and engaged employees. Studies have shown that an increase in employee satisfaction typically leads to an increase in customer satisfaction, which ultimately impacts the bottom line of the organization. So how do leaders impact employee satisfaction? It appears that one very strong lever that leaders can use is to improve how well they coach and develop their employees.

In a competitive job environment, many organizations focus on attracting and retaining talent. We know that one of the best predictors of people leaving an organization is their indication that they frequently think about quitting. (The only other more powerful predictor of turnover is when people actually announce their intention to leave.)

When we correlate coaching effectiveness with intention to stay, we find that effective coaching more than doubles the likelihood that people won't even consider leaving the organization.

Fig. 2 – Coaching Effectiveness vs. Percent of Employees Who Think About Quitting

Percent of employees who think about quitting their job

Coaching Effectiveness Percentile
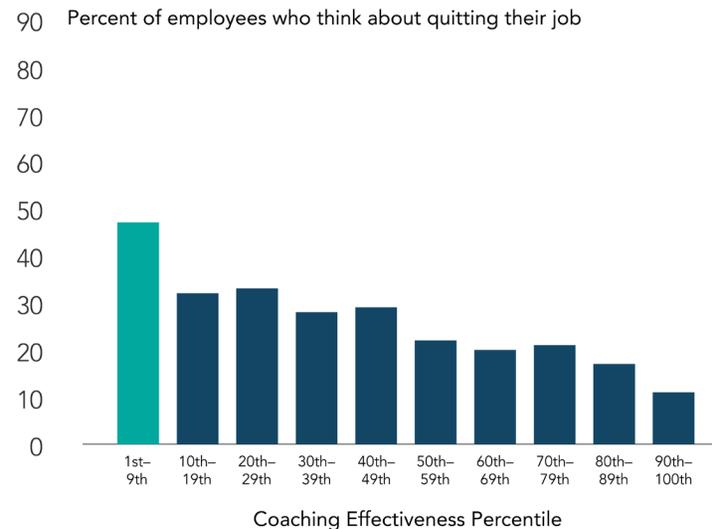
Results based on study of 2,240 global leaders

In our research, we also found that the results produced by the highest performing coaches were correlated with the following outcomes:

- Greater willingness to "go the extra mile" for the organization.

- Increased levels of employees reporting that the company is "a good place to work."
- Increased employee satisfaction with decisions impacting their work.
- Increased feelings of being valued as an employee by the organization.
- More than double the number of employees who were inspired to "put forth a great deal of effort every day."
- Increased employee perception that their manager is doing a good job.

While this is just a sampling of hard data that confirms the impact of coaching, we hope such data convinces every leader that this is not a current fad lacking serious business consequences. Coaching is not something that should be perceived of as merely "nice to do."

Question 2
How can we increase the effectivencess of each coaching session?

On this topic we turn to research from the world of counseling and therapy. As we do, however, let's be extremely clear that we are not suggesting that a manager who conducts a career discussion with an employee is performing the same role as a trained therapist. The differences are huge.[3]

Research from the world of counseling and therapy suggest that two important actions taken by the counselor can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the therapy:

1. Asking the client what they would like to discuss.
2. Asking the client for feedback at the end of each session.

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[3]Therapists often deal with severe psychological disorders and patients who may be in crisis. Treatment is intensive and often protracted in time. By contrast, the coach may offer guidance on a short-term basis on more focused issues. The therapist is often dealing with all aspects of a person's life, while the leader-as-coach is focused almost exclusively on the person's work life.

Becoming good at one competency appears to make people better at another. This is the "cross-training effect."

When these relatively simple actions are implemented, success soars upward. These steps increase the likelihood that the client will take action and also continue working with the therapist.

Focusing the Conversation
The first action implies that the coach should talk about things that are of greatest interest and value to the person being coached. While this concept seems obvious, our experience is that most leaders feel it is their right (or possibly their duty) to set the agenda in coaching conversations. Leaders often talk about issues that are of concern to them or that they believe would be of value to the person being coached. However, these are often not in response to any direct question to the person being coached.

To assist coaches in ensuring that the conversation is focused on topics most important to their direct reports, a checklist could be given to the employee, with the request that the employee review the topics on that list and come to the first scheduled coaching discussion with four or five selected topics. This sends several important messages:

- The coach wants the person being coached to feel some control of the process.
- The coach respects the employee's wishes.
- This is not just an event, but the beginning of a long-term coaching relationship designed to be of help to the person being coached.

A sample of what a list could contain is shown in the Coaching Topic Checklist. By having a series of topics identified with the direct input of the employee, the conversation is now guaranteed to focus on topics that are of genuine interest to the person being coached.

This does not suggest that there shouldn't be times when the coach should suggest a topic that would be of value to be person being coached. Indeed, we strongly recommend that. However, when the topics discussed are ones selected by the person being coached, success becomes more likely.

Asking for Feedback
Duncan and Miller[4] conducted research that provides strong evidence that when therapists asked for and received immediate feedback from their patients, attrition rates were cut in half and effectiveness improved 65 percent. The implication for coaches is clear. If coaches open themselves up to personal feedback, they will have more effective coaching discussions and will also become much better coaches. Our own research confirms that the best leaders-as-coaches not only excel at providing feedback, but also excel at asking for feedback. The very nature of asking for feedback allows the coaching relationship to embody the spirit of a collaborative, two-way conversation.

The Feedback Form is an example of a questionnaire that could be used by a coach to simply hand to the person being coached with a gentle request that states, "I'd like to know how our discussion went

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[4]Duncan and Miller's work can be found at: www.talkingcure.com. This group is dedicated to bringing more science to the practice of counseling.

Coaching Topic Checklist

On the following checklist, please mark three topics that are of most interest to you. If something important is not listed, add it to the list and mark that as your choice. We'll use this list in the coming months as a tool for structuring our conversations.

	Low									High
1. The progress I am making in my current position.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
2. How successful I am feeling in my current position.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
3. How I could contribute more to the department in my current role.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
4. How I could learn more while in my current role.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
5. How I could expand my role and responsibility.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
6. How to improve the way I work with other units/areas in the department.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
7. How my team could be more efficient and productive.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
8. How to gain more specialized experience in this position.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
9. Ways to improve the manner in which I get things accomplished.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
10. How I could become more innovative in my role.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11. How to achieve better work/life balance.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
12. How best to prepare for career opportunities in the firm.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
13. How to handle a specific challenge I am facing in my work.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
14. How to overcome any major weaknesses that those above me in the organization perceive me to have.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
15. How to identify and magnify those important strengths I possess.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
16. Things I should know, but I'm not aware of.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
17. Other:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
18. Other:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Feedback Form

Please rate the following statements on a 1 to 5 scale, with 1 = low and 5 = high.

	Low				**High**
1. The conversation focused on the most important issues to me.	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

2. This conversation was a good use of our time.	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

3. The purpose and outcomes of this discussion were clarified early in our conversation.	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

4. The general process and flow of this conversation worked well to meet our goals.	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

5. I felt that you listened to me and understood my points of view.	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

6. I am leaving with some specific action steps to pursue.	1	2	3	4	5

Comments:

from your perspective; please take a minute and answer these questions."

Question 3
How can the process of coaching be made more consistent?

The answer to this question may come in part from studying another type of conversation that organizations pay a great deal of attention to: the selection interview. Much research has pointed to the evidence that behavioral interviewing, or performance-based interviewing, can be a predictive method for determining the future success of a job candidate. This technique calls for the interviewer to ask specific questions regarding past activities and behavior, rather than the vague "tell me about yourself" or "describe your most positive qualities" questions. For example, the behavioral interviewer may ask how people handled a specific situation in the past or pose a specific hypothetical situation and ask the interviewee how they would handle it. The more specific the question, the more reliable and therefore more predictive the answer will be. Interviewers are prepared with a set of scripted questions that elicit more precise answers

90th percentile
The leadership effectiveness of a leader who has five strengths.

and utilize them consistently with each candidate.[5]

Behavioral interviewing and coaching have several common elements.
- Both consist of an interview/dialogue that has a clear purpose.
- These conversations or dialogues usually occur sporadically for the typical business leader.
- There is seldom much formal training on how to conduct these conversations.

- Opportunities for practice are not easy to find; "practice" usually happens in real time.
- Each of them provides a huge payoff when done extremely well. Both employees and organizations are the beneficiaries.

To apply the lessons learned from behavioral interviewing to the practice of coaching, we might suggest the following:
- Provide leaders with training and the

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[5]Many lessons have been learned over the years as the effectiveness of behavioral interviewing has been studied. For example, one study documented that training the interviewers contributed more to the interview validity than taking notes, standardizing interviewers, or the format of the interview (Huffcutt, A.I., & Woehr, D.J. 1999). Further analysis of employment interview validity: A quantitative evaluation of interviewer-related structuring methods. Journal of Organizational Behavior).

Being good at one thing is sufficient for some athletes or musicians, but seldom for leaders. Our research confirmed that a combination of competencies is the key to being highly effective.

opportunity to practice applying the process and skills necessary to facilitate effective coaching conversations. Ensure that the training focuses on effective questioning and listening skills, designed to thoroughly discover the situation from the coachee's point of view.

- Provide line managers with a clear structure to follow in coaching conversations. This structure may be as simple as the FUEL formula:

1. **Frame the Discussion**, explaining what is hoped for in terms of outcomes, issues of confidentiality, and what role each person will play.
2. **Understand the Current State**, which entails clarifying the current situation as seen by the person being coached. (This is where a checklist can help launch the discussion in an optimum direction.)
3. **Explore the Desired State**. This involves the coach helping the person to think about what ideally would occur from that person's point of view.
4. **Lay Out a Plan of Action** that will enable the person being coached to achieve that goal.

While such a structure is obviously broad and general, it provides a needed framework for the coach to follow. Coaching improves when the leader-as-coach has a clear track to run on, versus operating in a completely unstructured, free-wheeling approach to the discussion.

Question 4
What is the appropriate goal for coaching, and how much change can we expect?
In the coaching process, the coach is trying to help bring about the greatest amount of positive change in the person being coached. In most cases, positive change is defined by what the person being coached wants to achieve, though it may be defined in part by what the coach sees as needing to be changed.

We certainly aren't the only people with positive change as our measurable objective. One group that is extremely focused on producing measurable change is counselors working with drug and alcohol addicts. Because of the social and economic significance of their work, along with the number of people

engaged in doing it, they have engaged in extensive research. Their findings appear to have enormous relevance to what a corporate coach is attempting to do.

One prominent researcher is James Prochaska at the University of Rhode Island.[6] He and his colleagues collected data on over 6,000 cases of drug and alcohol addiction. His work has been given the somewhat overwhelming title of a "trans-theoretical model," which comes from the fact that he was trying to rise above any one model of therapy to see what universal principles might underlie them all. His conclusion was simple and yet extremely powerful. Change is not one giant leap, but a series of successive steps.

He identified the following stages in the change process:
1. Pre-contemplation (I've not thought about it, or I'm not ready yet.)
2. Contemplation (I'm ready to seriously consider some change.)
3. Preparation (I have a plan.)
4. Action (I'm now ready to take action.)
5. Maintenance (I'm willing to keep at it.)

Prochaska's research concluded that counselors who saw their task as moving someone in a giant leap over these five stages had the least success. Those with greatest success saw their role as helping people to move from one stage to the next, while always showing great respect for where the person was in the change process.

It seems to us that this links nicely to the research from the Corporate Leadership Council regarding what organizations could do to effectively develop leaders.[7] One of the two most powerful steps shown from their research was for each leader to have a personal plan of development to which they were personally committed.

The implication of that research is that most leaders today don't possess such a personal plan for their own development of leadership skills. In fact, our research suggests that less than 10 percent do. Thus, most leaders are at Prochaska's

Stage 1—they're not even thinking about it. Being given some feedback (often from 360-degree or multi-rater instruments) and receiving help in creating a plan helps moves them from Stage 2 to Stage 3. They then must take personal responsibility and move from Stage 3 to Stage 4, and ultimately to Stage 5. The irony is that organizations desperately need more leaders to be at Stage 5, while most have not suited up to even enter the race. As more baby boomers retire and the quest for talent becomes more intense, this problem will be compounded.

One of the helpful roles a coach plays is to help the person move through each of these changes, monitor the frequent backward lapses, and create a greater sense of accountability to make personal change happen.

Question 5
What is it about the coaches' personality or behavior that makes the most positive impact?

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[6]Prochaska, J.O., Norcross, J.C., & DiClemente, C.C. (1994). Changing for Good. New York, NY: William Morrow.
[7]"Not All Programs Are Created Equal", in the Corporate Leadership Council's Voice of the Leader: A Quantitative Analysis of Leadership Effectiveness and Development Strategies, 2001, p. 37b

We reiterate here that there are many groups in other helping fields interested in helping people change. These include counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, priests, pastors, and social workers. Let us hasten again to note that there are major differences between what these helping professionals do and what coaches in industry should be doing. However, there are also some commonalities. All are involved in conducting "motivational interviews" with people.

William Miller and Stephen Rollnick have compiled an enormous body of research on what leads to success in conducting such interviews, including the attitudes and behavior of the person conducting them.[8] Their conclusion is that three key elements create the necessary conditions for successful change to occur. These elements include:

1. Collaboration between the people involved in contrast to contention between those parties.

2. The "helper" seeks ideas and insights from the person being helped, in contrast to assuming the posture of educating the patient.

3. Maintaining the autonomy of the person being helped (meaning the right and capacity for self-development) in contrast to the helper displaying authority over them.

While these again sound deceptively simple, they hold great messages for the coach in a business setting:

- Coaching will not succeed if there is tension or contention between the parties. Coaching is not something you can do "to" someone, but it succeeds best when it is done "with" the person.

- If the helper assumes a position of power or status and conveys the message, "I have the answers, and I'm going to teach you these correct ideas," there will be less success than if the coach continually seeks ideas and insights from within the individual. Indeed, the greatest success comes when the client's view of coaching issues, the potential solutions, and the ideas about the best process for change all come together to form a theory for the client, and the helper

uses the client's theory of change to assist them in moving through the change process. In this context, the helper serves to reinforce the client's theory for change, apply experience to it, help to interpret it, and generally use the client's thinking in place of the helper's own agenda.

- The more the coach plays the "I'm the boss" card, the less effective the coaching will be. Yes, there are times, especially if it involves a performance issue, that this may be inevitable or appropriate. Difficult discussions regarding performance issues should occur less than 15 percent of the time in the grand scheme of corporate coaching.

Finally, the work of these two researchers identifies an interesting phenomenon. The greatest improvement they observed did not occur during sessions they had with their patients, but in between sessions. The translation of that into corporate coaching seems obvious. We've long known that most of what people learn is

[8]Miller, William R. and Rollnick, Stephen, Motivational Interviewing (2002). Guilford Press, New York, 2002.

absorbed casually and informally on the job, but virtually nothing has been done to enhance that and recognize its power. Helping people to be more observant about what takes place daily on the job, and to attempt new behaviors in the course of daily work, would appear to be some obvious applications of this insight.

Another important insight from this research is that the greatest gains come in the early stages of any counseling relationship. Short-term therapy is becoming increasingly popular in the world of counseling. Corporate coaches should anticipate that some of the greatest gains will occur within the first sessions of coaching on a given topic, and that there will normally be a leveling off in the change process on that topic.

Conclusion

Coaching, like the broader disciplines of leadership and management, will always contain many characteristics of an art form. No two people will practice it exactly the same way. The applications are so complex and different, merely being responsive to the situation calls for new and different behavior. It will never be a pure science.

The world of coaching in business organizations and large public agencies can gain a great deal from embracing good ideas and practices from every source, including the major helping professions. Only in that way will it ever achieve its potential contribution to every organization.

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Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.

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