



TRANSFORMING LEADERS INTO COACHES

Alan is serving his last working day, after a distinguished 19-year tenure at this manufacturing firm. At his farewell dinner, several peers and function heads took a trip down memory lane to recall and relive the highlights of his journey — moments that shaped his career, witnessed by all of them. Four of his team members then raised a toast: in all four short speeches, there are diverse lived experiences, peppered with richly colorful moments. But there is one common thread — all four were able to recollect tough times, how they struggled to handle challenging business situations, how each received personalised handholding from Alan during those periods, and how much they have learned from him. That last testimony — ‘the learning’ — stood out as a tangible takeaway and an authentic moment of gratitude. All four of them paused while speaking, and you could sense the palpable ‘lump-in-the-throat’ in that pause. It was a moment of pure emotion. You could see the mist forming in Alan’s eyes... and then the thunderous applause took over!

As most management authors and speakers keep reminding us, 'Every Manager is not a Leader.'

- Managers know how to make business decisions, assign responsibilities, supervise the team, troubleshoot issues, and get the job done.
- Leaders empower their teams to make decisions, retain accountability for the outcomes, build a collaborative culture, and ensure that the team stays motivated and engaged.

Organisations invest time and resources to train managers in various leadership skill sets. In the end, some of them mature to become 'Leaders,' while others remain 'Product/Process/Project Managers.' And then some realise that 'being a leader isn't enough.' **There are individuals, like Alan, who discover that the only way to leave a lasting legacy is to devote purposeful energies towards grooming and developing the team to navigate new terrains, scale new heights, and go beyond.**

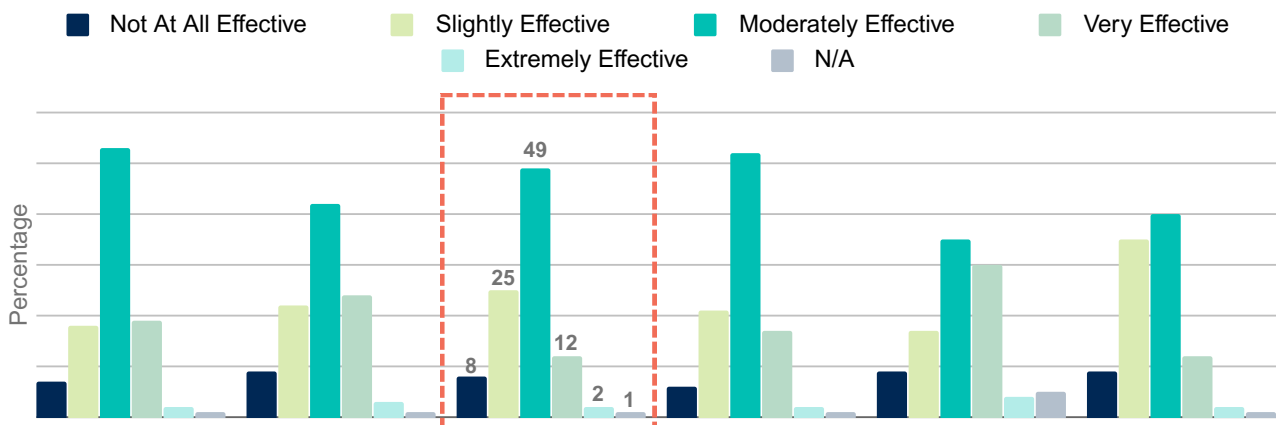
Alan wasn't just a popular leader; he was a successful coach.



The Problem Statement

In a survey conducted in 2023, encompassing 80,000 respondents from over 300 companies worldwide, a striking finding emerged: **'Only 12% of leaders offer high-quality coaching and feedback'**.

How effective is your company's Performance Management process today in producing the following outcomes



Source : Global Performance Management Report 2023, © The Talent Strategy Group

So, is this a skill-issue or a will-issue (on the part of leaders)? Perhaps it is a little bit of both.

Performance gaps:

When an employee's performance falls short, the numbers (KPIs/metrics/targets) alone don't reveal the complete picture. Most performance review conversations sound like transactional formalities: 'You have only met N% of the numbers, so I am going to give you an 'R' rating.' An analysis of the 'results' only tells the leader what is going wrong. However, an exploratory conversation on the 'effort that went in' can unveil why things are going wrong and how the leader can better support the employee.

Many leaders are clueless about how to handle such an exploratory conversation,

using empathy. This is a skill-issue.

Attitudinal gaps:

When an employee's behavior consistently triggers complaints or escalations from customers, stakeholders, or coworkers, it is often a subconscious pattern the employees themselves may not be aware of. This could be due to a poor communication style, a lack of collaborative approach, or even a personality flaw. Consequently, most employees are highly resistant to any form of 'behavioral feedback.' Initiating discussions on their attitudes can lead to an awkward or uncomfortable atmosphere.

Leaders know this – hence there is a strong tendency to avoid unpleasant conversations. This is a will-issue.



Capability gaps:

An employee is hired for a distinct set of job capabilities, including knowledge, skill sets, and mindsets. Unfortunately, in a VUCA/BANI world, the pace of skill redundancy has accelerated across all industry sectors. When an employee shows no effort to upgrade themselves with new-age capabilities, the responsibility for their development falls on the leader's shoulders. In such scenarios, a typical leader's response is to refer the employee to HR for capability enhancement.

Leaders often assume that company-sponsored training programs (organised by HR) are the only way to upskill employees. They assume that they have no active role to play. This is partly a skill-issue, and also a will-issue.

There is a credible reason why more organisations today are investing in formal training and certifying their leaders as 'Coaches.' **The aforementioned gaps can be addressed through various methods, but research consistently shows that the most impactful avenue is when a leader dons the hat of a 'Coach.'**

The Solution

Coaching is not a transaction. It is not an extended appraisal discussion. It is not an 'agony-aunt' venting outlet. It is not a motivational pep-talk.

At its fundamental level, coaching is a developmental conversation with a clear agenda, a focused approach, and visible outcomes. A typical coaching cycle includes a series of twelve conversations spread over six months at a minimum.

At an advanced level, coaching is a relationship between a leader and their protégé—a relationship built on mutual trust, a hunger for learning, shared goals, and proactive interdependence.

Performance Coaching:

When a team member's performance falls below expectations, the typical managerial response is to assess, identify the root cause, and offer advice or solutions—a classic supervisory approach. However, effective coaches curb this instinct. They start with a commitment to help, placing less emphasis on 'results' and more on 'efforts.' Utilising empathetic listening, they gain a deeper understanding and remain open to intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing the employee's performance. Healthy debates explore alternative approaches, and sessions conclude with a clear 'call-to-action.' Good coaches make themselves available 24/7 for precise leadership support.

Follow-up sessions at intervals allow leaders to track progress and continue coaching on areas of development. A robust Individual Development Plan (IDP) and a tool-based dashboard aid this process significantly.

Behavioral Coaching:

Receiving negative remarks about a team member's attitude can be disheartening for any leader. However, as a leader, you have the best vantage point to observe repetitive instances of undesirable behavior. Documenting these instances provides the foundation to approach the conversation. It's crucial to distinguish 'perceptions' from 'facts' and separate gossip from reality. Reassurances of confidentiality and a fact-based approach build trust. A warm developmental tone is more effective than an accusatory one. Sharing anecdotal stories of similar behavioral incidents from the coach's past adds a relatable and humane touch. Non-judgmental listening clarifies the team member's perspective, and open-ended questions about handling delicate situations differently lead to numerous possibilities.

An easily accessible Leader's Journal, based on the renowned Critical Incident Diary format, proves to be a tremendously beneficial aid to the coach, assisting in tracking the evolution of attitudes and behaviors with time and patience.

Career Development Coaching:

It is no secret that every team member takes great pride in his/her qualifications and degrees/diplomas. At the same time, there is ample evidence all around us that rapidly emerging new-age skills are making traditional skills obsolete, in every domain.

Recent surveys (in 2022 & 2023) have shattered several myths. Here are two popular misconceptions.

Myth 1: Many employees want to keep doing what they are good at and resist moving out of their comfort zone.

Reality: an overwhelming percentage of the Gen Z population wants to continuously upgrade their skill sets. They just don't know what are the skill-upgrade opportunities available within the Company; they don't know whom to approach!

Myth 2: Most workers imagine vertical growth (promotions) as the only barometer of career growth.

Reality: in today's horizontally interlinked organizational structures (visible everywhere post-pandemic), growth opportunities arrive in the form of cross-functional mobility, diagonal role-change, portfolio expansion, and various other non-vertical paths. Employees need someone to guide them on the 'means to harness these opportunities'. **The Gen Z workforce understands that a mere designation change (while continuing to do the same job) is not career-growth, as there is no learning!**

Leaders need to capitalise on tapping into the vast talent potential within their teams. The first step is mapping the Skill-Progression-Journey for every unique role.

The second step involves engaging in multiple conversations with the employee to showcase 'next-level-capabilities.' Once the employee reveals a preference for the tentative 'next role,' the leader assists them in charting the **EEE*** learning progression, complete with milestones and timelines. All these conversations fall within the ambit of Career Development Coaching.

***EEE : Education + Exposure + Experience (three universal modes of learning)**

When a leader dedicates time and energy to structured coaching sessions with their scalable talent, the best and brightest in the team are steadily groomed for greater responsibilities. This proactive approach not only nurtures talent but also contributes to an organic succession plan for the leader. Interestingly, for many companies, the concept of an 'Asset Pipeline' remains a distant dream. However, forward-thinking firms have recognized the value in this and are taking steps to train and certify all managers across the board as coaches.

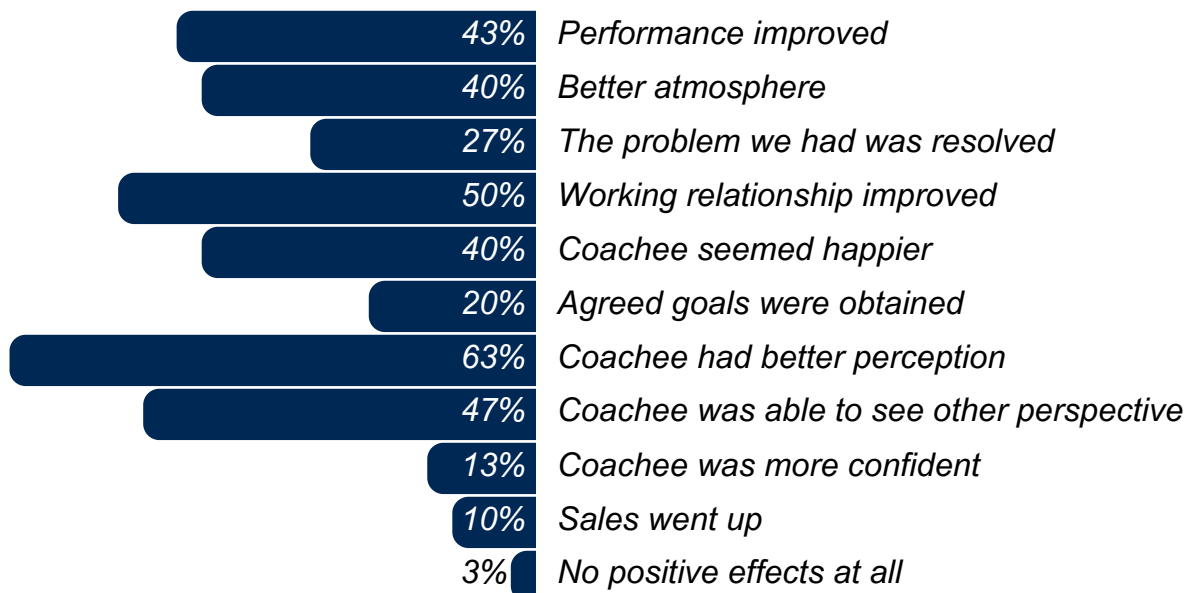
Insights

This research presents survey outcomes on the benefits of coaching from the coachee's perspective

Source : International Coaching Federation

***Coachee = the recipient of Coaching**

***What positive effects, if any, did you see from the coaching?
(Tick and that apply)***



Conclusion

For leaders to transform into coaches, two finer nuances demand attention. The first is 'Priority'—how much time are they willing to take away from business activities to invest in people development. The second is 'Proficiency'—how much effort are they willing to put in to master the skills and techniques required to be a proficient coach. The onus lies on the leader to gear up for this transformation!



By
Abhishek S.
Senior Director, Learning Academy
PERSOLKELLY Consulting

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