

Why coaching, not gadgets, is key to getting the most out of employees

By [Grace McCarthy](#)

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Forget the [gadgets](#) and "lifehacks" to increase productivity, my [research](#) with Julia Milner shows that managers need to become coaches to get the best out of their employees.



Coaching means many things, from simply listening to staff, to helping them set personal goals.

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Coaching means many things, from simply listening to staff, to helping them set personal goals or understand the company's objectives. When employees understand the business goals, they can make their own decisions and not wait for someone to tell them what to do.

When employees are listened to, they feel valued and empowered. They have greater ownership and commitment to actions that they themselves have identified as necessary. As one manager in our study noted:

“ When you coach people rather than command people, you almost always win their hearts and minds, so loyalty, trust and confidence are built.

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[Our research](#) shows manager coaching led to improvements in productivity, engagement and customer service. One manager reported that coaching led to an increase in output from 35% of the target to greater than 100% within 12 months. One organisation improved customer service by 450% within five months of introducing manager coaching.

Coaching also transformed some underachievers into star performers. For example, one employee who was described as “very lacking in self-confidence” developed enough confidence to apply for a promotion and became a highly effective

manager. Coaching had helped the employee to identify solutions, by providing advice and expertise when needed.

Coaching in practice

Coaching is a conversation between two or more people to find a way forward together. The participants reflect on the current situation, agree on a goal, and identify options and actions for moving toward the goal.

In practice there are four things managers should do during coaching:

1.
Genuinely listen to their employees, allowing time to think out loud and come up with their own ideas.
2.
Ask questions that help employees develop their thinking. If an employee identifies a problem the manager can ask what solutions they can think of.
3.
Work with employees to set goals. Create an energising dialogue to make this task more than ticking boxes.
4.
Give constructive feedback to help employees align with organisational goals and develop professionally.

The majority of the 580 general managers and human resource managers who participated in [our research](#) coached their employees at least once a week.

Organisations in our study used quarterly coaching sessions to set employee expectations, monthly sessions to review progress, and weekly sessions with new employees or employees in new roles. Informal coaching happens whenever opportunities arise – for example, discussing an incident the manager has observed and identifying alternative approaches. The employee can take ownership of the situation by choosing what alternative to implement.

Of course, implementing manager coaching is easier said than done. [Most training](#) in coaching does not address the complexities of the manager as coach.

For example, what should a manager do if an employee tells them something in confidence that they would not normally tell a manager? The best way to deal with this is by being honest and upfront about what can and cannot be kept confidential.

Managers also find it difficult to make time for coaching, although they may save time in the long run as employees don't need their advice as often. This frees up managers to spend more time thinking strategically.

Managers in our study spent more time with new employees or employees in new roles than with employees who were already comfortable in their roles. They also recommended choosing the right time to coach – for example, not starting a session in the middle of a crisis.

You've probably heard of "[executive coaches](#)". These people are like consultants who work one on one with managers on how to improve their leadership style, act as a sounding board for their ideas, or manage work-life balance.

But, as our research shows, there's no reason for coaching to be restricted to outside consultants – managers should [coach their own employees](#).

Coaching achieves fantastic outcomes for employees, for the organisation and for the managers themselves. As one manager in our study said:

“ Staff who believe their managers and organisations care about them by investing their time in coaching them are naturally more positive, happier whilst working. They are great team players. Their skills improve, they get promoted. Most importantly this flows on to how your customers are treated. Treat staff well and they treat your customers well. Your business then flourishes.

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If managers don't know where to start, they should begin by listening to employees. They may be surprised by how much staff know and how much they appreciate being asked.

The greatest reward for a leader is seeing their staff develop and grow. Coaching is a practical way to achieve this.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[[<https://theconversation.com/profiles/grace-mccarthy-120905> Grace McCarthy]], Dean Sydney Business School, [[<http://theconversation.com/institutions/university-of-wollongong-711> University of Wollongong]].

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