

## “Let’s talk about a Coaching Culture”

*The big reward for implementing a Coaching Culture is consistent strategy achievement.  
It all starts with a conversation.*



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### What is a Coaching Culture?

Imagine watching a Manager and a Direct Report having a conversation. What you are observing is the ultimate manifestation of a Coaching Culture. If that conversation is conducted properly and in the right context, your organization will achieve its strategy and grow. If it doesn’t, your organization will not prosper, and will possibly fail.

Stepping back, a Coaching Culture is one of strategy-driven, sustainable continuous improvement that imbues an organization at all levels and at all times.

We all know the metrics on the benefits of coaching – over 500% ROI, coached employees outperforming their peers by 20%. It is important to note though, that “coaching” in a Coaching Culture very much includes, but very much goes beyond, the traditional focus on skills and knowledge development. In this broader understanding, coaching is the functional heart of *all* employee development and is the means by which organizations grow and consistently achieve strategy.

A Coaching Culture is embedded in a framework of accountability which is itself an extension of strategy. It is both the product and function of employee engagement, and ultimately relies on the personal connection between a Manager and her Direct Report, the goal of which is to improve performance.

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But where does that personal connection come from? What are its benefits? How do you foster its growth?

## Coaching Culture and Accountability

A Coaching Culture can exist only within an organizational framework of accountability. Indeed, it is at the same time both the product of accountability and its prime generator. In an accountability framework, an organization is strategy-focussed, with a structure directly aligned with that strategy and populated with the right resources. Most importantly from the perspective of a Coaching Culture, Managers clearly define the roles and accountabilities of Direct Reports (DRs), DRs commit to complete their work as specified, and Managers hold them to the agreement. What follows hierarchically is that a Manager is held accountable to her own Manager for the output and working behaviours of DRs.

As an extension of that accountability, a Manager is obliged to employ what we refer to as the core leadership practice of “connecting”. This goes beyond monitoring effectiveness, and includes personally knowing and understanding Direct Reports and their potential. This is no mere performance diagnostic tool, it is a precondition for engagement. An employee will not commit and align themselves to the goals of the organization without being engaged by their Manager and provided opportunities to learn and grow. Among the innumerable studies of engagement, it was found that engaged employees are at least 18% more productive than otherwise. In an accountability framework, and in a Coaching Culture, creating the oft referred to “great place to work” – the fallout from effective engagement – is both a means to the end of achieving strategy, and an end in itself.

Furthermore, in an accountability framework a DR has a single Manager whose position in the organizational structure permits a broader perspective, thereby allowing for a better understanding of the context of the DR – his strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the team and the work at hand.

## Performance Management

If Managers are accountable for DR output, then the removal of interferences to a DR’s potential is the goal of a Manager-DR relationship. Recall Timothy Gallwey’s formula, “Performance = potential minus interference”:  $P = p - i$ . The removal of interference is the foundation of a Coaching Culture and is the functional aspect of the broader definition of “coaching”: conversations that move a person from a current state to a future, desired end state.

It follows that a Manager accountable for a DR’s output is a Manager that ensures a DR gets coached. Effectively, Managers are accountable for performance management, and the one-on-one Manager-DR relationship is the methodology.

Who better then to understand the coaching requirements of a DR than their Manager? The Manager is accountable for the DR’s output, is accountable for knowing and understanding their DR, and is the most involved in the context of the DR with respect to the team and the work.

Whenever possible, coaching should be done by the Manager herself. Regarding an interference the Manager herself has experience overcoming, this should be happening naturally. This could be as straightforward as a competency-related issue, where the Manager can bring skills and knowledge regarding the specific work on which she and her team are working, or as oblique as more general issues of attitude and motivation. In either case, in addition to the removal of the interference, the Manager is fulfilling their accountability to more fully know and understand their DR which, in turn, contributes to employee engagement.

It does not necessarily follow that Managers *always* do the coaching themselves. There are innumerable instances where the most effective mechanism for the removal of interference would be an asset outside the team, or even outside the organization. That asset could include training (as versus “coaching” per se) as long as it is in service of the Manager-DR coaching relationship. What’s important is that the interference is identified by the one person most able to do so, that the solution

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## Why Organizations Resist a Coaching Culture

- Lack of understanding of what it means to be a leader
- Lack of understanding of what coaching really means
- Confusion throughout the ranks about their roles
- The tyranny of “do”: task trumps all; people-growth is far down the priority list
- The organization lacks a clear strategy
- The organization suffers from a lack of a strategy-focussed framework
- Entrenched processes that impede rather than assist
- Distracted by the organizational design flavour of the month
- No one is driving a Coaching Culture
- Short term focus on the costs as versus benefits of a Coaching Culture
- Implementing a Coaching Culture and accountability is hard work and requires discipline

is brought to bear, and that the Manager actively participates in, or at least monitors, the execution of the solution and judges its efficacy.

What’s implied is that a Coaching Culture flows from Managers facilitating an environment where coaching is a natural extension of the relationship with their DRs. Coaching becomes proactive, not reactive; the default, not the exception.

A Coaching Culture is the noblest manifestation of a system of accountability. It goes back to the relationship between a Manager and a Direct Report that focusses specifically on personal growth, reinforcing on a self-affirming level the terms of accountability. A Coaching Culture embeds into your organization a directly personal culture of engagement and growth.

## Talent Management

If performance management is the accountability of a Manager, then talent management is the

accountability of the Manager-once-Removed (MoR).

Regarding the work of the team or business unit, the MoR enjoys an even broader perspective than the Manager. As such, they are in the best position to effectively identify talent potential and mentor a DR (or, from the MoR’s perspective, his Subordinate-once-Removed). Talent management is not solely the identification, growth and retention of high-potential employees – talent management for talent management’s sake – it is the primary means of succession management. A Manager should not be finding her own replacement; this is the accountability of the Manager-once-Removed.

Mentoring is therefore distinct from coaching in its time horizon. An employee is coached for the job he has now, whereas he is mentored for his job of the future. Despite the further time horizon, mentoring is still strategy-aligned. To maintain that alignment, though, requires clarity from senior executives on the longer term goals of the organization.

Executive coaching – coaching at senior levels – is by its nature both capacity-focussed performance management, and retention- and succession-focussed talent management. It is most often performed by an external coach – internal assets for coaching at senior levels are limited, and internal exposure to these coaching discussions may be inappropriate. Examples of coaching at this level include the development of advanced interpersonal skills required by senior executives, or, more generally, providing a sounding board to assist the executive in strategy development.

Whatever the issue of the coaching, even at the highest levels the manager of the senior executive identifies, initiates and monitors the coaching. This extends even to the CEO-Board of Directors relationship.

Talent management at any level implies an outlook beyond the tactical execution of strategy, and its more distant time-horizon relates directly to sustainability in a Coaching Culture.

## Sustainable Continuous Improvement

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In a Coaching Culture, employee development never stops. Although at times coaching may be issue-focussed, each Manager is also accountable for continuously identifying opportunities in, and interferences to, potential. The result is an ongoing, increasing capability in employees, teams and ultimately, entire organizations.

What follows is sustainable continuous improvement – a learning organization. A framework of accountability ensures that a Coaching Culture is institutionally embedded, and a Coaching Culture ensures that there is an ongoing cycle of improvement. Further, in a formalized Coaching Culture, improvements are captured and learning becomes the foundation for additional learning. This has enormous implications for processes such as innovation. Consider the inverse: without a Coaching Culture, learning and innovation become mere one-offs – temporary wins, but missed future opportunities.

## Creating a Coaching Culture

There are three prerequisites for a Coaching Culture: a framework of strategy-based accountability, learning needs to be a corporate strategic imperative and Managers need to have the skills to coach.

In an accountability framework, a Coaching Culture can be made part of the work to which employees commit to complete. If all Managers are accountable for coaching, then, by the nature of the framework, coaching will imbue your organization at all levels.

But, accountability is not the entire answer; Managers must *believe* in coaching and have a sense of personal responsibility to coach. This multiplies the value of coaching from something that is done, to something that is done well. Fostering this sense of responsibility is entirely a function of executive leadership. Learning must be at the heart of the organization's corporate culture, and that can only spring from executive deliberation on vision, values and strategy. Leaders must fire the imagination of employees regarding the potential for coaching and learning. More

prosaically, they must also endorse, recognize and reward coaching.

In turn, the organization must ensure that there is in place a development and support system for coaching. Good coaches are not born, they are grown. Effective coaching requires specific skill sets and the organization must develop those through programs, processes and resources.

## Summary

A Coaching Culture, and its prerequisite accountability framework is initiated from, and is driven by, strategy. Its foundation is the relationship between a Manager and a Direct Report and its magnifier is engagement and a corporate culture that promotes learning and development as an organizational value and a strategic imperative. Its result is sustainable continuous improvement, growth and the consistent achievement of strategy.

When next you observe a Manager and a Direct Report in conversation, ask yourself if this is the foundation of your future success.

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