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# Coaching Employees to Reach Optimal Performance

**Charge Up Your Performance  
Management Playbook**

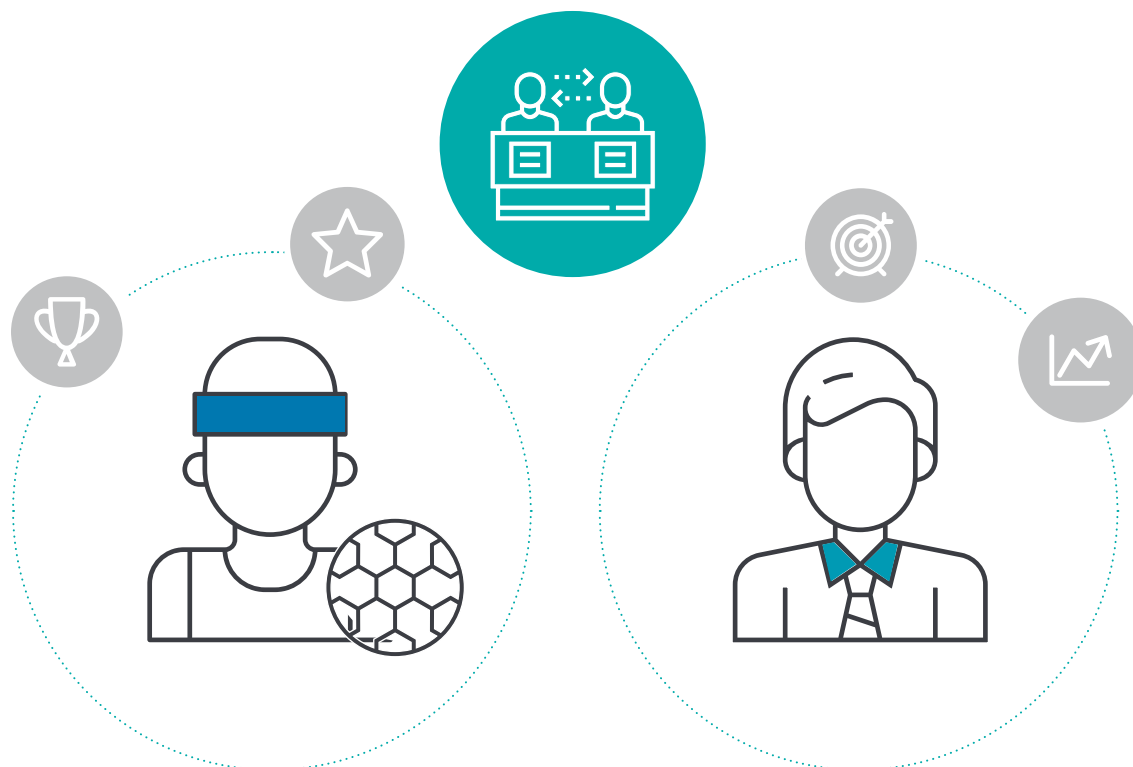
## What does an athlete have in common with a typical employee at a high-performing company?

### Picture this:

- A soccer player huddles with her coach and teammates, talking through the play they are about to run.
- An aspiring track runner and his coach create a training plan together, then meet daily to discuss his performance during recent workouts and training drills.
- A tennis pro in a crucial match uses a timeout to confer with her coach, who helps her recognize a weakness in her opponent's form that she couldn't see as clearly in the heat of competition.

Elite athletes have almost unparalleled skills, but they don't get there overnight and they don't get there alone. They have coaches: experienced, trusted advisers who spend countless hours with them, providing insights and advice. It is widely accepted that professional athletes need meaningful, frequent coaching to succeed— but why don't organizations feel the same way about their business professionals?

When top athletes (and employees) receive personalized, continuous coaching from effective coaches, they can adjust their performance and improve almost daily. While this level of engaged and ongoing coaching has been a base expectation of sports coaches for ages, it's a relatively new shift for many organizations—and one that begins with a fundamental reimagining of performance management process and philosophy. Rather than coaching or feedback being delivered retroactively, it's delivered on a continuous basis in the flow of work, and rather than leaving the quality of the coaching to chance, organizations are investing in developing the coaching skills of their leaders—from C-Suite to frontlines.



# Coaching: Performance Management Gets Personal

If you feel negatively about performance management, you're not alone: across organizations, performance management has a -60 net promoter score<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, employee expectations regarding growth and development are changing: a perceived inability to learn and grow is now the #1 reason people are leaving their jobs<sup>2</sup>. Organizations are trying to adapt to this new reality. According to the [2019 Deloitte Human Capital Trends Report](#), "Organizations are investing in many programs to improve life at work, all focused on improving the day-to-day experience workers have." And their efforts stretch beyond well-being or engagement initiatives and into the heart of talent programs like performance management, where we're seeing organizations reimagine their approach and definitions of success.

## Putting People over Process

Annual performance reviews and ratings are usually more about complying with human resources (HR) mandated processes rather than meeting the needs of employees. While a single rating over the course of a year might be enough to feed the compensation machine, it fails to provide the insights needed to help an individual improve their performance or grow meaningfully in the flow of work. That's why many organizations are moving away from static, once-annual reviews towards brief performance assessments conducted multiple times a year, and short, frequent, and often less formal coaching conversations. This shift recognizes that the goal of performance management should be less about producing a single metric and more about helping employees feel valued and engaged so that they perform at their best.

## Establishing Trust

Trust is foundational to any coaching relationship; when employees are supported by continuous coaching from someone they trust to have their back, they develop the psychological safety required to reflect honestly on what drives—and inhibits—their performance. Trust also makes it easier for employees to take their performance to the next level by seeking out opportunities for development, taking risks, and trying new things.

With the support of their coach built on a foundation of trust, employees understand that even if they fail while trying something new or difficult, their coach will still be there to help them use the failure as an opportunity for learning and personal growth—rather than use that failure as a cudgel during their next performance review.

Coaching and managing are not one in the same. Whereas managing focuses on setting clear expectations, aligning on processes, and driving towards business outcomes, coaching is more focused on professional development, personal growth, attaining or improving a skill, and recognizing long-term development goals, innate individual strengths, and short-term work priorities in ways that provide the employee clear next steps and observable measures of success.

Coaching can include:

- Helping an employee recognize and leverage their strengths and passions
- Discussing a professional challenge or difficult project with an employee and helping them identify the right next steps
- Saying "Thank you!" or in some other way recognizing hard work or success
- Advocating to give an employee the resources they need to succeed
- Providing real-time feedback, even when it's tough, to support the employee's future success
- Helping an employee navigate a personal or professional setback by demonstrating understanding and empathy

# Continually Adjusting Performance: Coaching in the Flow of Work

Top athletes, like high-performing employees, need ongoing coaching. What if a soccer team loses a game and then receives no coaching afterwards? How would they know what and how to improve? We wouldn't expect their performance in the next game to be any better—and it might actually get worse. Unfortunately, in a traditional performance management approach, employees work every day with little to no direction or feedback on their performance, except an annual review and rating. This lack of coaching and feedback in the flow of work can lead to a confused, stagnant employee and a frustrated, under-resourced manager.

## Continuous Coaching

Continuous coaching can better prepare organizations for the rapid pace and changing nature of work. The road to success includes frequent performance check-ins and future-focused conversations. Just like the soccer coach providing direction to their players throughout a game, huddling with them to discuss their roles and actions at critical points, we help managers to coach team members “in the flow” of work.

Check-ins, already a part of performance management at many organizations, are intended to be short, frequently occurring touchpoints where a manager and employee can candidly discuss ongoing work priorities and development opportunities. These conversations have been linked to improved performance and engagement and usually happen once or twice a month<sup>3</sup>. Once coaching becomes widely integrated into an organization's performance management approach and overall culture, check in conversations often become more informal, and coaching is seamlessly integrated into day to day work activities and conversations.

Consider the impact continuous coaching can have:

- If an employee facilitates a workshop for the department on a Tuesday, and the manager and employee's next scheduled check-in is the following Monday, it's likely that both will have forgotten the details of how the workshop went.
- Instead, if the manager and employee take just a few minutes to debrief right after the workshop, the potential for impactful coaching is much higher. The manager can emphasize what the employee did well and help the employee identify how they might improve in the future. The employee can also reflect on how they felt it went and ask the manager any questions.



# Effective Coaches: They are Made, Not Born

Athletes aren't the only ones who need training...

The capability and training of a coach is just as important as the development of the person being coached. Organizations have an enormous opportunity to elevate employee performance by including coaching programs and processes as a key component of their overall performance management approach: Those with performance and development coaching are more likely to have better business and financial outcomes than organizations that lack such programs<sup>4</sup>.

But it's not that simple. Coaching is often cited as a major skill gap for organizations hoping to transform their performance management designs: manager's inability to coach effectively has been identified as a top barrier to effective performance management<sup>5</sup>. In fact, one of the biggest challenges our clients discuss with us is the fact that while their best managers are naturally coaching their teams, most have been promoted because of their technical acumen, not their people skills. Organizations can anticipate the challenges that come with the change in responsibility and better prepare their coaches in order to ease the transition.

## Common Coaching Hurdles

Rather than focusing on technical or administrative tasks, managers are now encouraged to spend more time talking with, giving feedback to, and celebrating their direct reports. For some, these coaching behaviors may be unfamiliar, uncomfortable, too 'touchy feely,' or at the bottom of the priority list.

Let's unpack three of the challenges we often hear from leaders in organizations who adopt coaching as part of their performance management approach:

**"I became a leader because of my technical expertise—I don't have any experience coaching teams."**

This is the case for so many leaders; at many organizations, the path to career success requires at least some time spent leading teams. We often challenge our clients not to see technical expertise and coaching as mutually exclusive—and understand that both are critical to success as a leader.

**"This stuff is too touchy feely—we are here to do a job, not make everyone feel good."**

In our experience, caring leaders have higher performing teams. Caring doesn't mean that leaders must shelter employees from challenges or stressful situations—it means that they know what inspires and motivates them. Coaches use that knowledge to make employees the best they can be in their roles.

**"Why should I have to recognize or praise someone for just doing what's expected of them?"**

Managers are responsible for creating conditions that enable employees to come to work engaged and motivated so they can help the organization meet its strategic objectives. The value of recognition is often overlooked, but it's associated with increased levels of engagement and lower rates of turnover<sup>6</sup>. Managers should learn to give positive feedback and recognition frequently (research indicates the ratio of appreciative to constructive coaching over time should be 6:1) and notice the real—and very positive—effects it can have on their people<sup>7</sup>.

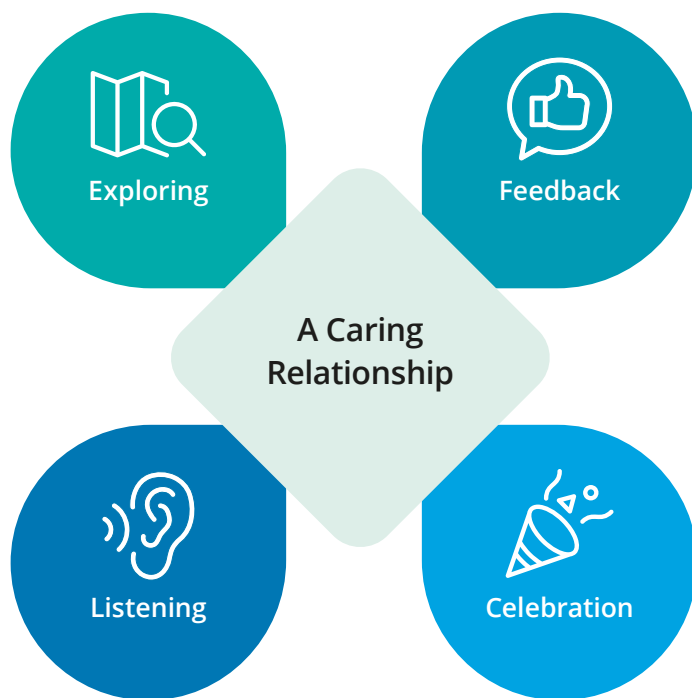
### Build the Coaching Muscle

Coaches need to be effective at building meaningful relationships, inspiring employees to solve problems, and providing future-focused feedback and guidance. In addition, managers will need to understand the practical implications of the coaching program, such as how frequently they are expected to meet with employees and how this affects the existing performance management process.

To address skill gaps and prepare managers, organizations should prepare a mix of training resources—consider both in-person and “always on” e-learning content to establish foundational skills. Learning experiences should feature “real-world” examples of coaching opportunities and scenarios to help managers practice key coaching conversations. Ongoing training should also be made available—consider microlearnings and how to integrate coaching content into other developmental programming, such as new hire training and onboarding for manager-level roles. Organizations should also consider creating manager peer networks to support each other, share ideas, and continue to develop their skillsets as they start coaching their employees. To reinforce coaching capability development and clarify expectations of coaches, talent leaders should consider how to create coaching accountability. Many organizations approach this through a mix of upward feedback, identifying and tracking key coaching metrics, and adjusting manager performance criteria—and even considering coaching capability before promoting employees to a manager role.

### Case Study

Coaching in Action: The Power of a Caring Relationship



Five-part coaching model, centered around a caring relationship

- Exploring: Going below the surface to better understand who the employee really is and “what makes them tick”
- Listening: Uncovering the truths that underlie what’s being said—the employee’s background, interests, passions, and even fears
- Feedback: Providing guidance to the employee that enables greater performance and sustained development
- Celebration: Noticing, acknowledging, and recognizing the employee’s contribution and impact

Let's consider the following scenarios...

#### Scenario A:

**Micaela** is a team leader at a large health care organization. **Tyler**, one of her team members, has been having difficulty meeting his performance goals since he joined the team a year ago. Although they don't meet often, Micaela has been growing frustrated with Tyler—he gets defensive when she gives him feedback or asks him for updates on reaching his goals.

#### Scenario B:

**Raquel** has been in the same role at her organization, a mid-sized bank for three years. Over the course of that time, she has built a strong relationship with her manager **Jonah**. Through their coaching conversations, Jonah has learned Raquel's unique strengths and where she wants to go in her career. He's asked questions about what she likes and values and gives her kudos when she succeeds on projects and tasks. He knows she's passionate about the work they currently do, but when he hears about an open role in another department at the bank, he tells her she should apply.

Consider the differences in the relationships and outcomes between Micaela and Tyler versus Raquel and Jonah. Which employee is more engaged? Who can make the bigger long-term impact on their organization?

## The End Result



*Tyler feels like Micaela never notices when he does something right—the only feedback he gets is critical. Tyler is finding himself becoming less engaged with his work and is looking for other jobs.*



*Raquel, however, has been promoted to the new role and is a team leader herself now—acting as coach to her team members, helping them hone their performance and find new ways to develop.*

Leaders in high-performing organizations act as coaches, playing a “human-centered role in creating the conditions for workforce success.”<sup>89</sup> A coaching relationship, built on trust, provides an opportunity for managers unpack and embrace the complex motivations and drivers of employee behavior—an organizational mandate as we face the realities of the future of work. This not only helps managers bring out the best performance in their people, but also creates a more human experience within the organization.

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## Endnotes

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