

ARTICLE

Treating your leadership pipeline as a strategic asset: Leaders as coaches

Our experience suggests four capabilities leaders need to develop to become effective coaches.



Only about two-thirds of directors and CEOs surveyed recently were very or entirely confident in their leadership team's ability to deliver on the organization's strategic plan, and only about half were confident that their organization's executive attraction, development, and retention strategy was positioning the organization well for the future.¹

Individual coaching can be a very valuable tool as companies seek ways to help their leaders develop the capabilities they need to lead now,² as well as to engage executives by more actively investing in their development. Yet coaching is a tool most companies don't use enough—a survey of HR leaders found that only 12% said that more than half of their company's executives received coaching in a typical year³—and when they do, they don't always make as much use of it as they could.⁴

Furthermore, even companies willing and able to invest in professional coaching for their senior leaders generally don't provide individual coaches throughout their leadership pipeline. In that context, companies that are helping leaders themselves learn to act as coaches—as one part of their broader leadership skill set—are finding it an increasingly valuable way to support their less senior executives. Our experience suggests four capabilities leaders need to develop to become effective coaches.

When coaching works—and why it can be hard for managers

Coaching done most skillfully is distinct from other related development practices such as training, consulting, or mentorship. Coaching is not about transferring knowledge but about drawing out of someone the potential that is there but not being deployed. In true coaching, the coach's job is to ask the right questions and to support and challenge the leader's thinking, while the leader does the actual problem solving. If straightforward knowledge transfer is the main need for a leader, coaching is not the right avenue. But when a challenge has to do with changing a leader's values, beliefs, roles, relationships, or ways of working, coaching is appropriate. It can help leaders build on strengths, address a gap, or both, in the context of how that leader affects others.

Coaching can be especially difficult for leaders working with their team members because a manager often considers much of their role to be their ability to direct and guide team members by solving complex problems rather than supporting and challenging others to take ownership and work through problems on their own. So, to succeed as a leader-coach, an executive may have to break old habits and apply a new set of behaviors.

Coaching as a leader

In our experience, there are four capabilities that leaders need to develop and apply to be a good coach: a growth mindset, active listening, asking powerful questions, and giving specific and timely feedback to those around them. These skills cultivate a culture of learning and are helpful to managers outside the coaching context as well.

1 "CEO and board confidence monitor: A worried start to 2024," Heidrick & Struggles, January 17, 2024, [heidrick.com](https://www Heidrick.com).

2 Regis Chasse, Steven Krupp, and TA Mitchell, "The connecting leader: Four imperatives for leaders today," Heidrick & Struggles, May 24, 2024, [heidrick.com](https://www Heidrick.com).

3 Heidrick & Struggles proprietary data from a summer 2022 survey of 101 HR leaders.

4 David Peck, "Developing future-ready leaders: When—and when not—to invest in coaching," Heidrick & Struggles, [heidrick.com](https://www Heidrick.com).

Learning mindset

For a leader acting as a coach, having a learning mindset⁵ entails the following:



Fixed mindset

- Being convinced from the outset that you know the “right” answer
- Drawing conclusions or judgments about the situation quickly without exploring the issue deeply
- Delivering prescriptive advice to fix the problem
- Focusing on your own success
- Being skeptical that individual change is likely to occur



Learning mindset

- Embracing curiosity, eager to seek out new information to evolve your perspective
- Awareness of judgments and the ability to set them aside to fully explore an issue
- Asking questions to help the coachee identify the most beneficial solution
- Relishing the success of the team
- The belief that individual change is possible and necessary

At a large pharmaceutical company, the ability to handle enormous workloads and pressure was a leadership currency. One senior leader was known for her ability to handle both with aplomb. However, she sensed that her team was exhausted and the “leadership culture of appearing bulletproof” was exacerbating their ability to manage through the exhaustion. Through her own coaching, the leader decided to start her team meetings with each person checking in with the group. She began, announcing that she was exhausted. Relief was apparent on all the team members’ faces, and everyone said the same. The leader then invited the group to address the exhaustion from a learning mindset perspective, challenging the team to move from a mindset that a leader is born to handle pressure to one that everyone can learn to handle pressure. That day, the leadership team openly discussed which business issues they could address and what support they really needed. Those leaders then cascaded downward both the practice of checking in and the willingness to develop a mindset that pressure can be collectively mastered through practice and mutual support.

⁵ This is adapted from Carol Dweck’s theory of a growth mindset vs. a fixed mindset. For more, see Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2007; and Harvard Business Review Staff, “How companies can profit from a ‘growth mindset,’” *Harvard Business Review*, November 2014, hbr.org



Active listening

Active listening is the ability to focus completely on what a team member is saying and not saying (through, for example, facial expressions, tone, or body movements), to understand what is being communicated, and, importantly, to demonstrate to the speaker that they fully understand. Most people believe they are good listeners, when in reality, we see over and over, they are often distracted or thinking about how they plan to respond rather than being fully present. Indeed, a common complaint from team members is that their manager does not spend enough time listening to them and valuing their thoughts and opinions, so developing the ability to actively listen is one that can pay dividends to managers beyond the coaching context.

One executive described a challenge to a peer by saying, “I have had a pretty good career. I have been able to reach heights and deliver impact I did not think was possible when I began. Now I want to be able to give back to my reports—to move beyond my own achievement goals.” His colleague responded by saying, “Why did you choose the term ‘pretty good’?” The leader paused for a long while. Then he replied with a pained look on his face, “I said it at the time as a way of being self-effacing, but underneath that is a painful story, a story of choices I made for the best interests of my family. I think that might have cost me a chance of being an admiral. That has been buried and stuck in me for years in a way that I had never fully appreciated until now. I need to go back and have a conversation with a leader I served with to clear the air. I think it impacts me as a current leader because I bring such judgment to leaders around me who I believe rightly or wrongly seem solely focused on career advancement.” This example displays how active listening can take someone to a deep level very quickly.



Powerful questions

As the example above also shows, asking deeply curious questions can help a team member look at and hopefully go beyond their current limiting perspective or thinking that is not enabling them to meet their current challenge. This, too, is a skill that’s useful for every leader, since many employees feel disempowered when their leaders don’t ask them for their perspectives.

Powerful questions are forward looking, facilitate action, and promote ownership. One young CFO had been given feedback by his company’s board that his demeanor at meetings was undermining the board’s trust in his competency: he spoke too quickly, appeared to be dismissive of questions, and was aloof yet also too casual in his approach. The CFO vowed to improve his presentation skills, focusing on specific behaviors noted in the board’s feedback. But despite working hard for six months, he had little success in changing the board’s view of him. What finally made the difference was when the CEO asked him, “What does it mean to ‘be in relationship’ with a board member?” As the CFO thought through his answer, it fundamentally changed how he thought about the issue and moved his mindset from a focus on his own behavioral mechanics to trying to listen, observe, and get curious about individual board members’ cognitive and emotional needs. By deeply listening, seeking to understand not only what board members were asking but also why, he began building trust in a way that allowed board members to see the efforts he was making to improve. He went from a question mark in the board’s estimation to one whose counsel they sought both in and outside of board meetings.

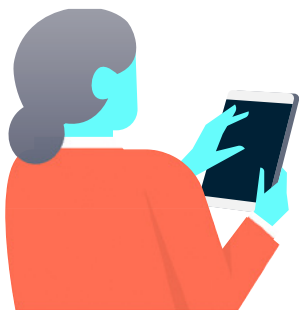


Timely, specific feedback that creates a culture of learning

Too many leaders don't provide feedback that is timely, specific, and actionable, often because they fear it will hurt their relationship with their team members. In fact, most leaders provide feedback only annually or semi-annually, in evaluative performance reviews that often affect compensation and chances for promotion. Leaders who are thinking as coaches approach feedback fundamentally differently, instituting a feedback culture that is designed to develop and grow the team. This means adopting practices that invite timely feedback specific to the work getting done. One example is the military-inspired practices of before- and after-action reviews. Other important elements are for the leader to make distinctions between coaching feedback and evaluative feedback, to adopt a growth mindset, and to recognize that growth comes from learning from mistakes, including the leader's own. All this requires a culture of trust, because without trust, no one hears feedback constructively.

In this case, leaders are in some ways better positioned than external coaches, because they typically have the benefit of frequently observing their team members in action. A leader will both understand the issues a team member is facing and be able to provide them with timely feedback focused on achieving a specific goal and not tied to any formal review process. Furthermore, an organization with many leaders who act as coaches can accelerate change across large parts of the organization.

How leaders learn coaching skills



Learning coaching skills, like learning leadership skills, is an adaptive practice. People best learn such skills through what are called "learning loops," which consist of conceptualizing an experience (What would it mean to deeply listen to my direct report?); experiencing something (I tried to listen, but I can't help offering strong opinions); reflecting on why it happened that way (I am used to driving discussions; I feel a loss of control); and integrating their insights into their view of the world (I need to change my perception of how we get to a successful outcome). Organizations that do best at helping their leaders develop coaching skills allow for learning loops both in and outside the classroom. Ideally, leaders start with an introduction to coaching skills and the opportunity to practice on each other before taking those skills back to their teams. We find that connecting this work to larger leadership development programs is powerful because leaders have opportunities to lean into the coaching skills throughout.

Conclusion

As CEOs continue to seek ways to build more robust leadership pipelines, coaching is an important tool. Leveraging senior leaders as coaches to develop their successors is straightforward and is a powerful multiplier to improve overall effectiveness, specific leadership skills, and overall organizational performance.

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Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Amy Miller for her contributions to developing this article, as well as our Heidrick & Struggles colleague David Peck.

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