The Practice of Coaching by Managers: Impacts of Organizational, Cultural, and Other Supports and Hindrances

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Leaders and managers have been using coaching as one style of interacting with subordinates for years. It continues to be seen as an effective technique in creating both a healthy climate and enhanced performance. Specific research relating management’s use of coaching style and culture is sparse at best. However, research on leadership styles that have related concepts, such as transformational leadership, seem to indicate that: 1) There may be particular types of cultures that support management’s use of coaching; and 2) There is little evidence that culture inhibits it. In addition, the author draws on his own experience to describe additional elements that appear to support or hinder the use of coaching by managers.

One of my practice areas is teaching coaching skills to managers in an MBA program. During these courses, I have them practice these skills in real situations back at their workplace and then write about them. We often debrief these situations in class. It is interesting to watch these managers learn different and more effective ways of coaching their direct reports. For the most part, these managers are successful at applying these skills. For some, it is a review and enhancement of skills; for others, these skills are new. I often wonder to what extent these managers will continue to use a coaching style in the future. What factors help and hinder the use of a coaching style? To what extent are their respective organizational cultures a contributing factor?

In this article, I will do two things: First, I explore the relationship between a manager’s use of coaching style and culture. Besides having a curiosity about this, my practical reason is to understand how much I, or others, need to take an organization’s culture into account when teaching and training managers to use a coaching style. Second, I identify some of the supports and hindrances to managers using a coaching style. These elements may or may not be culturally driven.

**COACHING STYLE AND CULTURE**

The definition of coaching style that I am using for this paper comes from the Harvard Business Review article by Daniel Goleman (2000). In this article, he cites research done by the consulting firm Hay/McBer that identified and described six distinct leadership styles, of which Coaching was one. The other five styles were defined as Autocratic, Democratic, Affiliative, Pacesetting, and
Authoritative. The model conceptualized these six styles, based on their popularity in use, and a history of validity and reliability studies that goes back more than twenty years. A description of the Coaching style is as follows:

The primary objective of the Coaching Style is the long-term development of others. A manager using the Coaching Style helps individual identify their unique strengths and weaknesses. This typically involves sitting down with the employee and conducting a candid, mutual assessment of the employee’s strengths and weaknesses in light of his or her aspirations. The manager helps the employee to establish a development plan, and provides ongoing support and feedback. (Goleman 2000, p. 86)

While this part of the definition addresses the situation where the purpose of the manager-employee interaction is the employee’s development, historically a coaching style also has been used to develop the employee’s performance during organizational task activities. Theories from Blake and Mouton (1964) and Hersey and Blanchard (1969) are some of the earlier theories that address this use of coaching or “coaching-like” management behaviors. Drawing on those historical models and others, the definition of coaching style I reference in this article includes the following behaviors as well:

- Use task-oriented issues to direct employees to concentrate on self-improvement;
- Encourage employees to rethink plans and ideas, rather than supplying answers;
- Provide both positive and negative feedback on both performance and underlying skills;
- Encourage employees to reach high standards of performance and self-improvement;
- Put as much focus on employee skill development as employee results; and
- Share stories of their own challenges and self-learning for employees’ benefit.

Is there a relationship between organizational culture and use of the coaching style? From a theoretical perspective, there is a conceptual connection between the two. Edgar Schein defines organizational culture as a pattern of shared, basic assumptions that are considered valid, and as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel (2005). These “basic assumptions” are manifested in espoused values, and in observable organizational artifacts such as language, behaviors, products, physical settings, work processes, etc.
For example, an organization might have an espoused value of productive work and a related basic assumption that “People are only productive or adding value if they are busy.” Given that underlying assumption, some of the artifacts that we might see in this organization are that people take few breaks, come in early, leave late, and eat lunch at their desks. It is important to note that these artifacts might have other meanings as well. That is, in order to determine the cultural significance of the “artifact,” there needs to be an understanding of the meaning according to that culture. To illustrate another, equally valid interpretation, the reason people might eat lunch at their desks is because there is no onsite lunch room.

One illustration of this involves a time when I was in a client’s central office and observed that there were potted plants set on top of the dividers between all the work stations. My assumption at first was that this was for either aesthetic reasons or environmental reasons. However, the client told me that they had found that their open office configuration, with low barriers between workstations, had become too noisy, and people could not concentrate. Their solution was to put hundreds of plants on top of the dividers to act as noise barriers. This underscores the point that artifacts can have different, contextually influenced meanings.

We can apply the same line of thinking to the issue of coaching style and culture. If there are supporting, underlying assumptions about the benefits of a manager’s use of a coaching style, then we would expect to see evidence of a coaching style being used. Some of those assumptions might include the importance of developing employees, employee empowerment, requirement or endorsement of certain styles of leadership, etc. Such values and assumptions would support and possibly require the use of a coaching style by managers.

However, the inverse may not be true. That is, the presence of coaching style behaviors does not necessarily imply that there is a culture of coaching. It may be that the culture allows for various styles of management; some managers just choose to use coaching style. In a similar fashion, eating lunch at their desks may not imply that employees are a hard working group!

Some years ago when I was a line manager, we were trained in a systems thinking process. Some of my manager peers loved it; some did not. All of us were encouraged to use its tools going forward. As time went on, the tools that we learned in the training were neither required nor reinforced. Some of us kept using them, while others did not. Although there was evidence of systems thinking tools being used by managers, it was not embedded in the culture in any way. Similarly, we might also see coaching being practiced by a variety of managers in an organization without it being required and supported by the culture.
As a result, there may be a relationship between culture and coaching style. However, the nature of the relationship must be determined through inquiry into that specific organization. A “coaching culture” or “culture of coaching” requires that some specific values and related assumptions are developed and adopted by an organization which necessarily support and require the use of a coaching style by managers. By this rationale, teaching managers how to use a coaching style may add value, increase its use, and introduce coaching into a culture; it does not necessarily change the culture to support or require coaching. I assert that the fact that some (or even many) managers use coaching does not mean that there is a coaching culture.

What does the research say on this?
While there is strong theoretical linkage, there is very little research around coaching as a leadership style or relating a coaching style of leadership with culture. The Hay/McBer study cited above positively relates coaching style to the climate of a team (Goleman 2000). Climate as defined by Hay/McBer is a narrower definition than culture, addressing how it feels to work in a particular environment. The driver dimensions for climate include Flexibility, Responsibility, Standards, Rewards, Clarity, and Commitment, which tend to enable a productive and healthy working atmosphere.

At the same time, there is a larger body of research about leadership style and some research around the relationship to leadership style and culture. Because some of the researched leadership styles have behavioral and conceptual similarities to a coaching style, we might find some of this research helpful.

There are two sources I believe shed some light on this topic. First is the research conducted by Cameron and Quinn on the “Competing Values Model of Culture.” Within their writings and research, they demonstrate that certain styles of leadership are correlated to certain types of culture (1999). The second source is research on the concept of transformational leadership.

Cameron and Quinn proposed a cultural model that is more clearly defined, descriptive, and narrower than Edgar Schein’s conceptualization of culture. It is widely used, both as a model for cultural examination and as a basis of several popular cultural assessments. In their “Competing Values” model, they describe four different cultural tendencies:

- Cohesion, human resource development, and participation (Clan Culture);
- Efficiency, functioning, and control (Hierarchy Culture);
- Innovation, creativity and growth (Adhocracy Culture);
- Competitiveness, goal achievement, and productivity (Market Culture).
Organizations, business units, and functional areas generally have elements of all four of these cultural types. However, their research indicates that many have at least one, and maybe two, that are dominant. Their theory and research also correlates various leadership styles with the various cultural tendencies.

They characterize the leadership style in the Clan Culture as being one of a “facilitator,” “mentor,” and “team-builder.” While none of these terms is the same as coaching style, there appears to be a conceptual link to the behaviors of coaching. Both mentoring and facilitating have the interests and the “empowerment” of the person in mind. In addition, a primary method of the Clan Culture is to develop their people, also the intended goal of the coaching style. As a result (and to the extent that their research is valid), we can logically assume that we would find more coaching style behaviors (artifacts) in leaders in a Clan Culture than in other cultures.

In addition to Cameron and Quinn, there has been some research relating the concepts of transformational leadership and culture. The concept of transformational leadership is a component of Bass and Avolio’s full range leadership theory (1994), an addition to Burns’ (1978) transforming leadership concept. It has been widely researched. The theory distinguishes three types of leadership: transformational, transactional, and laissez faire. Each type of leadership has its own characteristic elements. The behaviors of transformational leadership contain Individualized Consideration, Intellectual Stimulation, Inspirational Motivation, and Idealized Influence. It is for the concept of individualized consideration that we find rational and logical correlates to coaching style. Individualized consideration is the extent to which a leader attends to the needs and concerns of his or her followers by providing social and emotional support. This involves mentoring followers, maintaining frequent contact, encouraging followers to self-actualize, and empowering them (Harms & Crede, 2010). It is evident that these attributes of individualized consideration have their correlates and conceptual similarities both with a goal (individual development) and the methods (foster learning, encourage development, empower personal choice and action) of the coaching style.

There is a large body of research that has been done with the concept of transformational leadership that positively relates it to leader performance and effectiveness ratings, follower satisfaction, and motivation (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). However, there is not much research that makes a particular relationship of Transformational Leadership and Culture. Of the few I have reviewed, several found positive correlations between Transformational Leadership and Culture.

Schimmoeller (2006) concluded that organizational culture affects leadership styles. His study found a positive correlation between Transformational and Transactional Leadership and both the
Clan and Adhocracy cultural archetypes as described by Cameron and Quinn (1999). Block (2003) indicated that Transformational Leadership had a positive correlation with organizational culture and also has a positive relationship with building relationships. Casida (2008) also found that Transformational Leadership Style was positively correlated to Organizational Culture.

Although the research is sparse, there does seem to be some indication that Transformational Leadership may be correlated to particular organizational cultures. To the extent that the concept of coaching is related to Transformational Leadership, logic suggests there might be a correlation with the use of the coaching style with particular organizational culture. This is an area for more specific research.

**What does the combination of theory and research say about the relationship of organizational culture and the use of a coaching style?**

In my opinion, there is not sufficient research on coaching style and culture to draw any confident conclusions about their relationship. At the same time, other theories and research around leadership styles can be used to support some logical assumptions and relationships (which then could be tested). These include:

- To the extent that the coaching style is a set of observable behaviors, it is an organizational artifact and would be linked to culture in some fashion. However, whether a particular culture supports, hinders, or is neutral about manager’s use of coaching cannot be determined by its presence alone. The relationship to culture would need to be explored.

- Based upon Cameron and Quinn’s Competing Values cultural model, coaching style (to the extent that it relates to mentoring, facilitating, and team-building) may be positively correlated with the clan culture.

- Other research indicates a positive correlation between transformational leadership and culture. To the extent that the individual consideration component of transformational leadership is related to coaching style, there may be a basis to assume positive correlations between particular cultural characteristics and coaching style. With the growth of the coaching field, it would be a benefit for further research to be done on these assumptions.

**WHAT SUPPORTS OR HINDERS THE USE OF COACHING STYLE BY MANAGERS?**

Based upon my experience in coaching, consulting to, and teaching hundreds of leaders over the past dozen years, as well as being a line manager myself, I have some observations that merit
discussion (while acknowledging any subjective and cultural biases that accompany such reflections). At the same time, some of the data that I have observed and heard frequently from my students and clients is ubiquitous enough to merit my confidence in making the following points.

First, from a practical perspective (and as mentioned above), it is often difficult to determine if “supports” or “obstacles” found in the culture are situational or personal. For example, I was coaching a leader whom I perceived to be a good coach with his people. I worked with him and his team over a year and a half period. At one point, he reported to me that he was being criticized and challenged by his boss about his ability to hold certain people accountable. From my client’s point of view, he was both holding them accountable, and coaching them and letting them learn from certain mistakes; however, his boss’s perspective was that he was being easy on them. Though I happen to view this culture as hard-driving and not particularly supportive of development, it is difficult for me to say whether my client’s boss’s perspective reflects the culture or just his personal perspective. Without gathering sufficient data (for example, through having cultural discussions with enough stakeholders), it would be difficult to draw a conclusion.

That said, my primary observation around coaching style and culture is that culture can indeed influence the use or non-use of coaching style by managers, but culture is rarely (not never) strong enough by itself to force a manager to use a coaching style or to prevent its use. This premise has been supported by both my coaching and teaching. My clients and students rarely report “cultural obstacles” to their practicing a coaching style. Some obstacles may be embedded in the culture (such as time constraints and a directive management style); however, those seem insufficient to prevent managers from using a coaching style if both motivated and skilled to do so.

I also make a distinction between the manager’s use of a coaching style and the completion of an annual talent review or Professional Development Plan (PDP). I have experienced organizations where managers are accountable to complete annual PDPs with their direct reports. Managers work with the employee to complete the task of an annual performance review with the drafting of an associated PDP. This may imply a coaching style but does not necessarily indicate that coaching (as defined above) has taken place. In effect, an organization may require an annual PDP but do nothing to support a coaching style of management. As long as they “check the box,” they are OK.

In fact, in a recent class, I took a survey of my students about their manager’s use of a coaching style and the frequency of formal development planning meetings. The results are shown below in

Although the research is sparse, there does seem to be some indication that Transformational Leadership may be correlated to particular organizational cultures.
Table 1. Although it is a small sample, there are several evident patterns which are both suggestive and seemingly nonrandom. First, it appears that the use of a coaching style is strongly positively correlated with more frequent formal development reviews. Second, the presence of the “once a year” development review does not seem to have any correlation with the use of a coaching style. Finally, there seems to be a positive correlation between an absence of development reviews and nonuse of coaching style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Formal Development Planning</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than once a year</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a year</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than once a year</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never</td>
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Even with the small numbers of respondents, the relative number of responses that populates the upper left box points to more than a chance distribution and suggests a strong correlation between frequency of coaching style and formal development planning.

With such a small sample, these suggested relationships seem to merit more investigation. At the same time, they fit with my anecdotal observations that the mere completion of a development planning meeting has little, if anything, to do with the actual practice of coaching by a manager. I believe this latter observation and assessment, if grounded, has implications for large companies that believe they can drive coaching behavior through requirements. Checking the box “Hold an annual development review” may give a false impression of the extent to which coaching conversations are taking place.

In my coaching practice, I do pay attention to cultural themes. Further, when training and teaching clients how to use a coaching style with their reports, I have found it important to pay attention to the things that help and hinder such performance.
Four key elements that impact a manager’s use of a coaching style

The first and the most intractable element is the unequal power relationship between a manager and her subordinate. This power difference is not personal but embedded in the structure of the organization. Some of a manager’s primary responsibilities are to hire, fire, evaluate, and hold her employees accountable for performance and results. This is not an accountability the manager can temporarily put aside during a coaching session. As a result, what an employee chooses to share for the manager to consider will always be filtered by that employee’s sense of safety and trust. There may be things from the employee’s perspective (for example, their hopes, fears, vulnerabilities, self-evaluations, or work problems that may or may not be visible) that may not get revealed. In the majority of my coaching engagements, while there are considerations relevant to the client’s development, the client is hesitant to put them on the table with their boss (or anyone else in the organization). For example, one coaching client was not getting along with her coworkers on a project team. From my perspective, it was not a fatal flaw; her manager even might have been able to help. However, she did not choose to share her challenge because she was afraid it would reflect poorly on her. Although I often see my value as facilitating a conversation between my client and his or her manager, there are times when it just does not happen, no matter how encouraging I am.

The second element is the people orientation of the manager. In his book, The 2R Manager, Peter Friedes (2002) discusses balancing “relating” and “requiring” activities with employees. This concept is not new and has been presented in various forms in management theory, including Blake and Mouton’s Leadership Grid, Fielder’s Contingency Theory, and Hersey and Blanchard’s Situational Leadership. These theories discuss this as a leadership style that can be developed. There is also a body of psychological literature around temperament and personality, indicating that people have various, deeper proclivities or abilities to relate to or engage people. Partially based upon the “Big Five” theory, the Hogan Leadership Forecast Series measures two such traits called Sociability and Interpersonal Sensitivity (Hogan Assessment Systems, Inc., 2002). To the extent that these are key characteristics of effective coaching, they will have an impact on the manager’s ability to coach and coach well.

It is my observation that some managers have a difficult time appreciating the importance of, let alone learning, coaching skills. Fortunately, they have been in the minority. However, when I have met such managers, they didn’t develop sufficient skills for me to be confident that any behavioral changes would last. In fact, one of the perceptions mentioned by my students who have “coaching style” managers is the manager’s apparent comfort with “people” issues or that they are “personable.”
I was working with a manager several years back. It was a short session with him and then with his direct reports. He had received upward feedback in written form; my job was to facilitate a discussion with his direct reports to help him clarify his strengths and weaknesses. When we met, he sat back and told me that he did not trust the feedback, was not interested in the feedback, and that his team was a bunch of whiners and complainers. Given that, I asked him what would make our time together successful? He said that as long as he had to go through this exercise (this was a mandatory program for all managers in this company), he wanted to hear from his folks...but he would not trust their feedback. Part of this process was for me to talk to his folks without him in the room. When he left the room, his employees said that they were afraid of him and would not talk to him directly. The team and I did some rapid prototyping and developed a feedback product that we could live with. However, the more important conclusion from this story is that this manager’s words and actions displayed some historical, deep-seated dissatisfaction and mistrust of his staff (and of the nondiscretionary context in which this exercise occurred). There was no chance he was ready, willing, or able to coach any of his reports.

The third element is the perceived time needed to coach. Many managers with whom I have worked told me unequivocally that they do not (and cannot) spend as much time with their employees as they should. In most cases, they know it, believe it, and are not comfortable with this. Although this seems to be beyond their control, there are a couple of things that have convinced some managers to try on the coaching hat. One is that coaching does not necessarily mean an hour-long conversation. Using a more developmentally focused question in the middle of any conversation can approximate a “mini” coaching intervention. As I have learned from Laurie Wessels, my class co-developer, the well-placed question, “What is most important?” can have transformational impact on a conversation. The other thing is that there is some research that indicated that a transformational style (and its coaching elements) may actually be more efficient than a transactional style. It could very well be that the time spent coaching actually improves overall efficiency and productivity in both the short and long run. However, more research needs to be done to confirm this.

The last element is skills. Most of the leaders that I work with are hungry for ways to develop their direct reports. However, challenged by lack of time, competing priorities, and performance pressures, they typically revert to their own habitual approaches: Do it themselves, or tell someone how to do it. Nevertheless, it has been a pleasure to assign class participants, often competent managers, to try a coaching style and to hear their success stories and breakthroughs. I do believe that skills development, for those
who have ears and are willing to make the investment, has a big payoff. It does require the persistence, recurrence, and patience to begin to develop a new habit.

**SUMMARY**

Below are the conclusions I’ve tentatively drawn, based on my personal experience and what I have presented in this article:

1. Culture and coaching style are theoretically and empirically related; more research needs to be done to understand the relationship. This research is probably best pursued around the relationship of leadership style and culture where some research has already been done.

2. It is difficult for culture either to force a manager to use a coaching style or to inhibit its use. Coaching is such a one-on-one activity that it seems to be within the control of the manager more that other, more public, behaviors. However, modeling such behavior by one’s manager and other leaders may increase the likelihood of valuing and adopting the practice.

3. It is probable that drafting once-a-year development plans aren’t correlated with a manager’s use of a coaching style.

4. Skills training and a manager’s experience when successfully applying coaching skills seem to support further use of a coaching style and are a good way to embed coaching practice with managers. Research needs to be done about the sufficiency of the training and the sustainability of the practice.

**RESOURCES**


**REFERENCES**


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