



# The Extraordinary Coach

How the Best Leaders Help Others Grow

by John H. Zenger and Kathleen Stinnett  
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320 pages

## Focus

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## Take-Aways

- Coaching offers numerous career-building benefits to employees, such as extra self-reliance and clearer goals.
- Often, managers do not coach their employees because they do not know how.
- Managers generally fail to plan their coaching sessions adequately.
- Even when they think they are coaching, most managers just conduct project reviews and status updates.
- When most managers coach, they talk too much or ask leading questions instead of open-ended ones.
- Managers should listen patiently to everything their staffers say.
- Most managers think coaching is giving advice and solving the employee's problems.
- Real coaching helps employees learn to develop solutions on their own.
- Coaches can use the "FUEL Coaching Framework" to structure coaching sessions.
- "FUEL" stands for "frame the conversation," "understand the current state" of the employee's work, "explore the desired state" and "lay out a success plan."

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall  
**7**

Applicability  
**8**

Innovation  
**6**

Style  
**7**

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## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) What primary benefits coaching offers, 2) What skills managers should develop to be effective coaches and 3) How to coach your employees.

### Recommendation

Managers who try to coach their employees often make wrongheaded assumptions about what their staffers think. They offer unhelpful advice about what staffers should do to improve their work, and this is exactly what coaching should not be. Human Resource Development Hall of Famer John H. Zenger and his colleague Kathleen Stinnett spell out everything for managers who haven't a clue about coaching or how to conduct coaching sessions. *getAbstract* recommends discovering whether you need this helpful manual in much the same way that the authors suggest using when you conduct coaching sessions: by asking questions. Do your employees need coaching? Do you feel ready to coach? What can you do to learn more about being a coach? Would reading thoughtful information about coaching help? If so, this is the book for you.

## Summary

### Coaching: A Win-Win for Employees and Companies

Coaching helps employees develop at work, grow professionally and become more self-reliant. It increases their accountability and makes them feel valued. Coaching helps companies by building employee engagement, reducing turnover, motivating people to work harder, and strengthening the bonds between managers and staff.

Coaching encourages employee behavior that is good for business, like being innovative, thinking strategically, taking chances and exercising critical thinking. Through coaching, workers learn to seize the initiative and become accountable. Coaching offers 10 significant benefits:

1. **“Giving new meaning to work”** – The coaching experience signals to employees that their company and their supervisors value them, want them to do well and will take active steps to help them succeed.
2. **“Engaged and committed employees”** – Coaching occurs one-on-one. Employees appreciate the time their managers take to help and support them. This makes staffers more enthusiastic about work and more secure about their place in the firm.
3. **“Higher productivity”** – Coaching gives workers focus, shows them that their managers are paying close attention to their productivity and helps them set up efficient routines.
4. **“Stronger culture”** – The way people treat one another and the level of mutual respect among colleagues up and down the command chain shape an organization's corporate culture. Coaching demonstrates that higher-ups want to help the company's employees advance.
5. **“Strengthened bonds between supervisor and employee”** – Coaching sessions bring managers and employees together.
6. **“Healthier individuals”** – Coaching boosts employees' self-esteem and morale.

*“Coaching is a highly beneficial skill set that can be applied to a variety of problems or issues.”*

*“Coaching is an important tool for leaders to use to improve performance and to help people grow.”*

*"Only slightly more than one out of 10 people would turn first to their immediate supervisor if they had a problem."*

*"Most managers...admit to holding performance review discussions but less frequently to engaging in career development discussions."*

*"Too often, leaders feel that the best way to add value is to be a problem solver. In reality, sometimes the only problem that can be solved is that the employee knows that she is not alone – that her leader is truly on her side."*

*"When we are tempted to solve someone else's problem, we become a roadblock to that person's solving her own problem."*

7. **"Resilience"** – Coaching helps workers become more self-sufficient and better able to bounce back from problems.
8. **"Heightened creativity"** – During coaching, employees find their own solutions to improving their work lives. This creative activity fuels positive self-discovery.
9. **"Increased risk taking and exploring"** – Coaching motivates employees to investigate new pathways for achieving their goals.
10. **"Mind-set of an owner versus a hired hand"** – Employees are adults, so they naturally rebel against bosses telling them what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Coaching enables employees to accept responsibility for their own activities. Through coaching, employees take ownership of their jobs.

### Why Managers Don't Coach

Despite these advantages, many managers do not coach their employees. They claim to have no time for coaching, yet coaching sessions take only 15 to 20 minutes per topic per worker. Other managers assert that their own bosses don't coach them and that they're just emulating their leaders. More may say their employees don't require coaching, yet the employees who are already among the most productive often benefit most from coaching. So why do so many managers avoid coaching? Perhaps they fear discussions that might prove uncomfortable. Maybe they doubt they have the wisdom to coach. Perhaps their employees never asked for coaching. And many managers don't coach because they don't understand what it involves, how to do it or how much it can accomplish.

### How Managers Coach Badly

Managers might say that they already offer their staffers some degree of coaching, but their employees would insist that they are not getting it. Conversations that many managers regard as coaching sessions prove to be nothing more than project-review meetings. Indeed, when managers meet one-on-one with their employees, they generally spend about 90% of their time discussing work status updates. Such meetings, while important to the work at hand, do not help employees grow in their jobs. And while most managers routinely conduct performance reviews with their employees, they seldom hold career development sessions.

Most managers don't coach enough, and when they try, few do the job correctly. For example, they don't plan or structure the "coaching conversation," and they do all the talking instead of doing most of the listening. They tend to emphasize hard data or facts and to ignore the employee's emotions. They try to solve problems immediately instead of framing a productive, career-building conversation.

Managers who don't know how to coach render advice instead of asking employees for their ideas and opinions. They ask leading questions instead of open-ended questions. They try to uncover information that abets their limited understanding of the employee rather than trying to learn what the person thinks and feels. They jump on the first potentially viable solution that appears instead of developing a menu of alternatives. They hope that the people they're coaching will change and grow; instead, they should insist on personal accountability. Many managers automatically assume that the staffers they're coaching are ready to institute change, however individuals generally work through change in stages. Most managers mistakenly focus on career development and advancement for each staffer annually, rather than as a matter of regular routine.

*"All the known drivers of productivity can be increased through the leader's coaching."*

*"Being willing to engage in the coaching conversation is the best gift that you can offer."*

*"Coaching helps individuals discover answers within themselves and helps them feel more personally empowered."*

*"Not every conversation is, nor should it be, a coaching conversation."*

## Core Skills, Competencies and Qualities

When managers are coaching they must not give in to certain natural tendencies or habits they may have developed over the course of their careers. For example, while most managers are proven problem solvers, they must step back and let employees develop solutions for themselves. Coaches do not work out other people's problems; they help staffers develop, grow and figure out how to correct their own difficulties. Yet, paradoxically, coaches and managers must offer feedback and guidance. However, many people resent a boss's counsel and almost never follow it, good or bad. Giving advice is almost always worthless, even if your recommendations prove worthwhile. So if giving advice is bad coaching, what's good coaching? To be effective, a superior coach performs the following duties:

- **"Builds a strong relationship"** – As a coach, help your staffers grow professionally. Promote trust. Foster good workplace relationships and strong collaboration.
- **"Communicates effectively"** – Frame the coaching conversation. Listen attentively. Ask open-ended questions about your employees' situations to help them gain perspective and personal awareness. Suggest multiple directions for the coaching conversation and its outcome. Give helpful feedback and welcome receiving it.
- **"Facilitates action and results"** – Guide your staff members to answers to their problems. Spotlight all coaching goals. Negotiate employee expectations about coaching. Assist staffers in setting professional goals and performance benchmarks. Work with them to imagine beneficial futures. Push them to consider the many alternative consequences of various actions. Encourage your employees to innovate.
- **"Provides ongoing support"** – Support your workers and give them valuable recognition. Follow up with them after your coaching sessions. Encourage them to be self-accountable for their promises to change – and accountable to you as well.

## "The FUEL Coaching Framework"

Use the FUEL framework process to structure your coaching sessions. This flexible armature provides useful guidelines and directions to help you plan your coaching conversations. Work through each stage of the process by asking open-ended questions. During each stage, the employee, not the coach, must do the majority of the talking. The FUEL coaching framework has four separate aspects:

1. **"Frame the conversation"** – Establish the conversational focus and context, as well as a target for the coaching session. Identify the issues you need to examine by asking, for example, "What is the most important thing for us to focus on?" Name the desired conversational outcome and set goals ("By the end of this conversation, I would like to accomplish..."). Next, secure agreement on the conversational process ("Here's how I thought we could proceed..."). Create a contract that establishes the importance of the sessions. That will help you avoid nonproductive chatting or complaining. Make sure your employee – not you – selects the discussion topics.
2. **"Understand the current state"** – Establish the employee's point of view ("How do you see this situation?"). Discuss the consequences workers face if they don't change ("What are the long-term implications?"). Depending on the circumstances, discuss your viewpoint of the issues at hand, but tread lightly. This is the toughest phase of the FUEL process. The purpose of this phase is to help your employee develop a new awareness of the issues under discussion. Let your staffer find his or her own way. Avoid digging for too many details; let them emerge naturally from the conversation.

*"In many – if not most – coaching conversations, your perspective will not add a great deal of value to the situation."*

*"Advice typically isn't perceived as having value."*

*"People usually resist advice and seldom follow it."*

*"Even if the [employee] asks you for advice, don't take the bait!"*

3. **"Explore the desired state"** – When establishing goals for the coaching session, bigger is always better. Ask, for example, "What would you like to see happen here?" Discuss various options ("What might be some approaches you can take?"). Another productive question for this stage is, "What else might work?" Always try to develop at least three options. Discuss any potential roadblocks ("Where would the biggest resistance to this change come from?"). Make sure that your employees develop their own solutions in these individual sessions. The worker and the coach should never settle on the first solution they come up with. As the coach, you should not give directions; instead, you should open pathways and act as a brainstorm sounding board for your staffer.
4. **"Lay out a success plan"** – Develop action and follow-up plans regarding all the goals you and your staffer established during coaching. Ask, for example, "What specific actions will help you achieve your goal?" At this stage, details and specificity will help clarify the way forward. Establish a timeline for all actions and discuss how your employees can secure support for achieving their goals. Set progress milestones. Personal commitment and accountability are crucial.

### Some Additional Thoughts

Your employee must assist your coaching efforts by supplying useful feedback, and both of you should strive to develop individual self-awareness. You can turn to a variety of "feedback mechanisms" such as a 360-degree "multirater" process. Here, the coached person and his or her "direct reports...peers and...manager" fill out a confidential, anonymous questionnaire about the staffer's leadership abilities. The report of the compiled results gives the staffer a thorough, thoughtful leadership skills assessment.

Speaking candidly to one as the coach and the coached employee also creates a constant, self-refueling loop of information and trust. The more positive and specific your data, the better, but always ask permission before offering your feedback. "Reinforcing feedback is a wonderful tool for creating greater engagement," so express any negative feedback in a way that assures your employees that you are on their side. You might say, "I would like to share some feedback with you. It may be hard for you to hear, and it is also hard for me to deliver." Use the "drip irrigation" technique for negative feedback: Divulge only a little at a time. As the process moves forward, schedule an increasing number of coaching sessions. When you coach, always remember that your employees have complex dimensions to their lives outside of work. Adjust your coaching accordingly.

At first, coaching conversations may seem unnatural or even artificial to you and your employees. Prepare for this in advance by "signaling the lane change." Be explicit that you are purposely trying something new – coaching – and that you are working hard to improve your skills and develop expertise in this new, difficult area. Your employees will then understand how the management-staffer dynamic is about to change and will be more accepting. Be patient and open to the process: "Changing any behavior often requires a fair degree of effort, in addition to intention and commitment."

## About the Authors

**John H. Zenger** co-founded Zenger/Folkman, an executive education firm where **Kathleen Stinnett** is a senior consultant and executive coach.