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5 Coaching Mistakes Managers Make and What to Do Instead

THE MANAGER TRACK · EPISODE 334 CLIFF NOTES

The main messages from the episode: how to tell when a conversation needs coaching, the 5 mistakes that make well-meant coaching backfire, the exact lines to use instead, and how to coach in a Slack reply.



01 The core idea

A lot of managers have heard "ask, don't tell" and take it seriously. They ask questions in a one-on-one and walk out thinking it was a good coaching conversation. Their employee walks out thinking, "Why didn't she just tell me what she wanted?"

WHAT COACHING MEANS HERE

Question-oriented guidance. You help someone think through a problem so they reach a decision they actually own, instead of you handing them your own decision.

The definition leaves two things out. It doesn't say coaching is the greatest leadership tool, and it doesn't say you never give an answer. Coaching is one way of leading, alongside directing, teaching, and giving feedback. The skill is knowing when coaching is the right fit.

3,761

leaders rated their own coaching skills, and the people around them rated the same skills

24%

overrated themselves compared with how others rated them

1 in 4

thinks they are a better coach than their team would say

Source: Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, "People Who Think They're Great Coaches Often Aren't," Zenger Folkman, first published in Harvard Business Review. On nearly every other competency, leaders tend to underrate themselves. Coaching runs the other way.

02 Mistake 1: Coaching when they need an answer

A new analyst, three weeks into the job, asks how to pull a report from a system she's never used. You ask, "Well, what do you think you should do?" She doesn't know. That's why she asked. Now she's inventing an answer to look competent, and a two-minute question has turned into a test.

Questions work when the person has the knowledge and needs help thinking. They don't work when the knowledge isn't there yet. In *Why Employees Don't Do What They're Supposed to Do*, Ferdinand Fournies puts three reasons at the top of the list: people don't know why they should do it, how to do it, or what they're supposed to do. None of those get solved by asking, "What do you think?"

THE GAP	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE	YOUR MOVE
Skill gap	They've never done it.	Teach.
Clarity gap	They don't know what good looks like.	Tell them.
Thinking gap	They have what they need and are stuck on judgment, priorities, their way of thinking, or confidence.	Coach.

ASK THIS FIRST

"Have you handled something like this before, or is this new territory for you?"

IF IT'S NEW TERRITORY

"Here's what I'd do, and here's why. Next time something like this comes up, take a first pass and then bring me your thinking."



03 Mistake 2: Advice in disguise

These have question marks at the end, and they are still instructions. Your employee hears them exactly that way.

WHAT YOU ASK	WHAT THEY HEAR
"Have you thought about talking to finance first?"	Talk to finance first.
"Do you think it would be better to wait until Q2?"	Wait until Q2.
"What if you just told the client, no, we can't do that?"	Tell the client no.

Michael Bungay Stanier calls this urge the advice monster. You solved the problem in your head while they were talking, and since you know you're supposed to ask, you put your solution into question format. Now you get the downside of both: they don't get clear direction, and they don't get to do their own thinking. They spend the conversation guessing what you want and which parts were directives.

WHEN YOU HAVE A VIEW, SAY IT AS A VIEW

"I have a view on this, and I'll share it in a minute. But first, can you walk me through how you're seeing it?"

Real questions

- What have you already tried or ruled out?
- Which part of this are you unsure about?
- If this was entirely your call, what would you do?

If their answer would annoy you, you weren't asking with curiosity. You were making a judgment.

04 Mistake 3: Forgetting your title is in the room

When you're someone's manager, your ideas don't land as ideas. You say, "One thing you could try is restructuring the deck." You meant one option among several. They restructure the deck. When the person who writes your performance review thinks out loud, treating it as a to-do is the safe move, and your team is being rational.

Fix 1: Label what you're saying

AN IDEA "I'm thinking out loud here. This is an idea, and you're free to drop it."	A STRONG PREFERENCE Say that it's a preference, so they know where you lean and that it's still their call.	A REQUIREMENT "This one is a requirement. How you get there, though, is up to you."
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Fix 2: Speak last

If you give your take first, every answer after it is shaped by it. Ask for theirs, let the pause run even when it feels long, then add yours if it's still needed.



05 Mistake 4: Coaching to dodge a direct conversation

Someone on your team has been late on deliverables three times. Instead of saying so, you open with, "How do you feel the project is going?" You're hoping they bring it up so you don't have to. If they answer, "It's going pretty good," your back is against the wall, and the opening question starts to look like a setup.

Coaching can feel kinder than saying the hard thing, so it becomes a hiding place. This is avoidance with good manners.

There's a second version of this mistake: never stating the expectation in the first place. You can't coach someone toward a standard they've never heard. When they miss it, it looks like a performance problem, when it's often a clarity problem the manager created.

The order matters

- 1 **State the expectation**
"Send me the draft by Thursday afternoon. Make sure you check for errors first, so I have a day before it goes to the client."
- 2 **Name the gap, plainly**
"The last three drafts came in Friday morning. That's a gap I want to talk about, because without Thursday afternoon I don't have time to review it before it goes to the client."
- 3 **Then coach**
"What is getting in the way?" Then: "What will you do differently starting this week, so the report is ready for my review on Thursday afternoon?"

CHECK BEFORE A ONE-ON-ONE

Could this person tell me in one sentence what I expect from them on this? If you're not sure, start there.

06 Mistake 5: Ending without a commitment

You asked good questions, they had a realization, there was real energy in the room, and two weeks later you're having the same conversation. A coaching conversation is finished when there's a specific action, an owner, and a date, and the commitment comes from them in their words. If you summarize it for them, you've taken the ownership back.

Questions to close with

- So what are you going to do? And by when?
- How will I know it happened?
- What could get in the way, and what is your plan if that does?

Then follow up

Put the commitment in your notes and open the next one-on-one with it: "How did that go?" If you never come back to a commitment, your team learns that commitments made in your meetings are optional. The same goes for delegated work.



07 Coaching in writing

When people picture coaching, they picture two chairs, a closed door, and 30 minutes on the calendar. Yet a large share of your daily contact with your team happens in Slack, Teams, email, and comments, and those messages tend to become all advice, all the time. Question-oriented guidance works in writing too, often in about the same number of words.

THEY SEND	THE ANSWER REPLY	THE COACHING REPLY
"The vendor pushed the date again. What should I do?"	Tell them what to do.	"What are the options as you see them, and which one are you leaning toward?"
A draft for your review	Rewrite it or give detailed edits.	"Who is the reader in your mind, and what do you want them to do after reading this? Take another pass with that in mind."

Why writing helps

- The person gets time to think before answering, which helps people who don't think out loud.
- The question stays on the page, so you both have a record to come back to.

Two caveats

- Mistakes 1 to 4 still apply. If they need an answer, give the answer. A performance gap is a live conversation, not a Slack thread.
- Keep it to 1 or 2 questions. Five questions in one message reads like an interrogation.

08 Before your next one-on-one

Use this for one upcoming conversation. Decide the mode before you walk in.

Conversation with _____

Topic _____

This conversation needs: ☐ Teach ☐ Tell ☐ Coach

My first question, or the answer I'll give _____

The commitment I'll follow up on _____

- ☐ I know whether this is a skill gap, a clarity gap, or a thinking gap.
- ☐ If I have a view, I'll share it as a view after I hear theirs.
- ☐ Every idea I raise is labeled as an idea, a strong preference, or a requirement.
- ☐ If there's a performance gap, I'll state the expectation and the gap before I ask anything.
- ☐ The conversation ends with an action and a date, in their words.
- ☐ The commitment is in my notes for the next one-on-one.



09 The 5 mistakes at a glance

THE MISTAKE	DO THIS INSTEAD
1. Coaching when they need an answer	Check for a skill gap, a clarity gap, or a thinking gap. Teach, tell, or coach accordingly.
2. Advice in disguise	State your view as a view, and ask questions you don't already have the right answer to.
3. Forgetting your title is in the room	Label your ideas and speak last.
4. Coaching to dodge a direct conversation	State the expectation, name the gap, then coach.
5. Ending without a commitment	Close with what, by when, and how you'll know. Then follow up.

The goal of coaching is that the other person leaves more capable and with more clarity than they came in. Questions are one way to get there.

10 Try this week

- 1 Pick one conversation you have coming up**
Before you walk in, decide which mode it needs: teach, tell, or coach.
- 2 Pick one written message**
Reply with a question where you would normally reply with the answer.

Be easy on yourself with this. Coaching is a muscle. The first few times it will feel slow and sometimes awkward, and that's part of turning it into a habit.

Keep going

The Leadership Accelerator is Archova's 90-day manager readiness program for new and early-stage managers. It covers when to coach and when to direct, feedback, delegation, time management, tough conversations, and conversations that end in real commitment, in a small cohort with group calls, on-demand training, and one-on-one support.

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