

How to Create an Effective Internal Coaching Program

Effective Internal Coaching. A “How-To”

According to EdFuel’s *Hidden in Plain Sight* report, 85% of systems-level education leaders cited a lack of internal opportunities for development and career advancement as the top drivers of attrition. When asked to specify the most effective development opportunities, the majority of leaders identified on the job learning and coaching/mentoring as critical to their success and desire to stay in their organizations. The research confirms that teams that focus on growing and developing their people in intentional and effective ways, through coaching for example, are retaining their most talented individuals in an environment where talent is hard to come by.

It is rare that an organization is able to afford an external professional or executive coach for all employees. For most organizations, budgets are tight and there aren’t enough funds to afford a coach for all of the valuable employees each organization needs to retain. While hiring an external coach can be beneficial, an internal coach to the organization can often have more of a positive impact and an expanded reach in terms of influence and change.

It is challenging to write a “how to” guide on internal coaching because so much of it is about mindsets, relationships, and adaptive learning and skillsets. To bring effective internal coaching to an organization, this guide is not, by itself, sufficient. To make the principles come to life requires a lot of attention to one’s organizational culture, adaptive change, and reorienting the mindsets around coaching and development as a core priority. That being said, the following guide can help you begin to develop the right set of mindsets and skills needed to be a strong internal coach, develop a coaching program, and ultimately retain and grow the talent needed to create and nurture successful organizations.

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Mindsets.

When it comes to developing successful internal coaching systems, there are organizational mindsets as well as individual mindsets that are beneficial to have in place. Below, you can find a number of mindsets, both organizational and individual, that will help orient your team around making coaching and development a core priority.

Coaching versus Managing

Many people conflate managing with coaching. Especially when it comes to developing team members, these are two distinct skill sets. While both are important, people often tend to lean on managing when what would further professional development for most employees, especially high performers, is coaching.

| Coaching Is | Managing Is |
|--|---|
| <p>Definition: Partnering with coachee in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Coaches honor the coachee as the expert in his or her life and work and believe every client is creative, resourceful and whole. Standing on this foundation, the coach's responsibility is to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discover, clarify, and align with what the coachee wants to achieve • Encourage coachee self-discovery • Elicit coachee-generated solutions and strategies • Hold the coachee responsible and accountable | <p>Definition: To exercise executive, administrative, and supervisory direction of a staff member or employee.</p> |
| Less directive | More directive |
| Goal oriented | Task oriented |
| Manager facilitated | Manager led |

| Coaching and Managing Are Not... | These Things Are |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Therapy | Therapy is the treatment of disease or disorders, as by some remedial, rehabilitating, or curative process. Often focuses on the past. |
| Mentoring | Mentoring is someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person. Generally focuses on giving answers and advice based on personal experience. |
| Consulting | Consulting is providing professional or expert advice. Generally involves written work product and delivering an expert solution. |

| Example of Coaching | Example of Managing |
|--|--|
| Employee has been assigned a project. Coach says, "As you think about this project, where do you want to grow and stretch yourself?" Employee identifies wanting to grow in project management skills. Coach digs deeper, asks what about project management skills they want to work on and listens. Employee identifies staying on top of due dates and analyzing/readjusting as | Manager assigns employee a project and asks the employee to create a project plan. Employee writes and submits the project plan and manager gives quick feedback for |



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needed as that has been an issue for them in the past. Coach asks what they think they might need to do in the next 4 weeks to really focus on growing in this skill. Employee identifies a few ideas and the coach helps them narrow down the list to 2 clear and measurable next steps. Coach asks, “How can I help you hold yourself accountable to these 2 next steps?”

revisions. Once revised, employee begins executing and they check in on progress each week.

Benefits of a Strong Organizational Internal Coaching System

As an organization, adopting a strong internal coaching system allows for many benefits including a team-wide culture that values and nurtures growth and development, which research shows is what is needed to retain high performing employees. In order to create this internal coaching structure, leaders in your organization must operate with and believe in the benefits of internal coaching, some of which are listed below. If the entire team is clear on the advantages of this structure, and holds these as beliefs, the implementation and execution of a strong program can follow.

| Benefits to Internal Coaching | Description |
|---|---|
| Increased opportunity for employees to build skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An internal coach has access to many more moments where one can provide almost real time coaching, rather than 1 hour/week like most external coaches • This type of quick and immediate feedback does not take up much time and is highly effective, especially when building skills |
| Increased opportunity for managers to build skills | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching can be satisfying and can increase job satisfaction for those who lead it as well as for those to take part in it • Provides an opportunity for managers to grow skills that will positively impact varying aspects of their work |
| Becomes part of organizational culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong internal coaching that happens frequently builds a culture of feedback and growth organizationally • Employees will see coaching and development as part of the culture |
| Stronger relationships | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If done well, coaching can lead to incredibly strong relationships, which leads to increased satisfaction and retention rates • If you already have a strong relationship with the employee, this can allow you to take the coaching even further and push to build an inclusive and culturally responsive coaching relationship |
| Stronger employee retention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research shows that employees are 5 times more likely to stay in an organization if they feel that they are valued and are being developed (EdFuel, Hidden in Plain Sight) • This is especially important for teams with diverse staff members as it builds a stronger, more inclusive environment when done well |

There are times and situations where bringing in an external coach may be a better option. You might consider bringing in an external coach when:

- Managers and leaders lack strong coaching skills
- There are culture challenges between employee and their manager (or whoever their coach would be)
- There are culture challenges within the organization
- The organization could benefit from fresh perspectives



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Coaching Mindsets

As noted, there are many benefits that come with a strong internal coaching system and the organizational mindsets needed to create that structure can be found in the section above. Additionally, there are mindsets that each individual needs to operate with when being a strong coach. As an effective coach, you should bring your own authentic style and beliefs to your practice, while also balancing and meeting the unique needs and styles of your employees. Below you can find five foundational mindsets that can support individuals in becoming strong coaches.

| MINDSET | DESCRIPTION | WHAT THIS COULD LOOK LIKE/SOUND LIKE |
|---|--|---|
| All people can grow | All people are somewhere, but they don't have to stay there – they can grow. The key is to meet them where they are. | An employee is making unfair judgments about one of their colleagues and is very frustrated. Rather than assume that the employee can never grow past this point, the coach understands that the employee is able to grow and ultimately, build a relationship with this individual that will lead to strong work product. The coach decides to meet the individual where they are by asking, "What impact does this relationship have on your work?" |
| Withhold judgment | If a coachee feels that they are being judged, they will not feel safe, and thus will not grow. This mindset builds on the one above. | An employee is making unfair judgments about one of their colleagues and is very frustrated. The coach, rather than get frustrated and say they are being unfair, might say, "You sound frustrated and I can tell by your body language that you are very tense. Tell me more about where you think this frustration is specifically coming from?" The employee shares that the person doesn't know how to do their job and is always putting other people down. The coach might say, "So I hear you saying they don't meet what you believe a level of competence for their role is and they also are putting other people down. Which of those might impact your frustration levels the most?" Eventually the coach will help the employee analyze their own judgments and biases toward their colleague. |
| Don't be tied to the outcome | If you focus too much on one outcome, you may miss an even better outcome that you hadn't considered. The coachee must generate the outcome. | At the beginning of a coaching conversation ask, "What are you hoping to get out of today's conversation?" or "What are the 3 biggest things you'd like to work on in your role?" |
| People have the "answers" within themselves, it is your job to uncover them | People are different and have different skills and ways of approaching issues. Your job, as a coach, is to help the person uncover what skills or ideas they already have and build on those. This uncovering of a new or different way of operating is often referred to in coaching as "the answer". | An employee is making unfair judgments about one of their colleagues and is very frustrated. Rather than just jump in and tell them how to handle the situation, the coach uses questions to uncover how the employee wants to move forward. At the end of the conversation they might say, "out of all of the things we've discussed, what feels most important to you to ensure you move forward with this person?" and "how can I help hold you accountable to that?" |
| It is your job as the coach to meet the style and needs of your coachee | In order for coaching to be successful, the coach must be willing to adjust their coaching style and practices to meet the needs of their coachee. | At the beginning of a coaching relationship the coach asks questions such as, "How do you best like to receive positive and constructive feedback?", "How would you describe your working style?", "What type of coaching relationship would you like to have between the two of us?" and "What do you need from me during our time together?" The coach internalizes those answers and then seeks to adjust their coaching style and approach to meet what the coachee has shared. |

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Skills.

Building organizational and individual mindsets is critical to creating a strong internal coaching system. Once the beliefs are in place, the next step is building and refining the skills of employees who will serve as coaches. There are 3 sets of skills that are essential to being a strong coach, whether internal or external. See below to learn more about active listening, powerful questions, and goal setting.

Skill One: Active Listening

A coach's number one job is to help their coachee uncover the "answer", or a new and different way of working more effectively, within themselves. Doing this requires active listening above all other skills. This can be challenging because research indicates that, on average, adults only listen for up to 17 seconds at a time. This does not allow for the type of depth and understanding that is needed to truly hear and empower a coaching subject.

To increase your listening abilities, focus on both the level of listening you are engaged in and on improving your paraphrasing abilities.

Levels of Listening

There are four primary levels of listening. **Your goal as a coach is to engage at Level 2 Attentive Listening at minimum and Level 3 Empathetic Listening as often as you can.** To gain a deeper understanding of levels of listening and how to use them, listen to the audio samples.

| LEVEL | DESCRIPTION | SAMPLE |
|-------|---|---|
| 4 | CONTEXTUAL LISTENING: Understand the situation surrounding the content; make connections to the context during the conversation. | |
| 3 | EMPATHETIC LISTENING: Comprehend your partner's feelings, not just the content. Look for non-verbal cues. Ask yourself – what are they feeling? How are they seeing something? What is important to them? Restate what you believe they are saying. | Level 3 (2 minutes) |
| 2 | ATTENTIVE LISTENING: Listen for the content; be curious about what your partner is saying; restate what your partner said. Non-judgmental, taking in information objectively and without bias. | Level 2 (1 minute) |
| 1 | SELF-FOCUSED LISTENING: Frequent type of listening that happens in social situations. Characterized by thinking "How does this relate to me?" and "How can I make a connection?" | Level 1 (42 seconds) |

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a critical part of active listening. The majority of a strong coaching conversation consists of listening and paraphrasing. Paraphrasing allows your coachee to hear back what they were saying, in a drilled down, clarified way. Even if your paraphrasing isn't correct, it still helps them make sense of their own thoughts.

| PARAPHRASING STEMS | SAMPLE |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• So...• In other words...• What I'm hearing, then is... Is that correct?• To make sure I understood... Am I missing anything?• As I listen to you, I'm hearing... Is there anything else you feel I should know? | Level 2 Listening (1 minute) |

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HOW TO PRACTICE:

- 1) Find a partner and ask them a meaningful question such as: **“Who is one of the most important people in your life?”** OR **“What was your most significant professional accomplishment in the last 12 months?”** OR **“What was a professional challenge you’ve had at work in the last couple of years?”**
 - a. Practice empathetic listening as your partner answers. Paraphrase what they are saying, look for non verbal cues, and seek to truly hear them.
 - b. At the end of the 5 minutes ask them if they felt heard and what you could do better next time.
 - c. Reminder: you are only listening and paraphrasing, do not ask any questions.



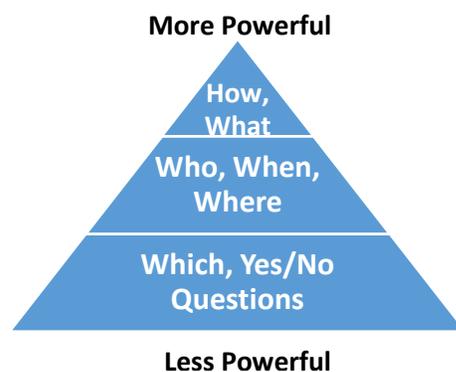
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Skill Two: Powerful Questions

Once you have mastered active listening, the next stage of effective coaching is powerful questions. Powerful (or focused) questioning means using open-ended questions to take a participant deeper into their own experience and closer to what matters most.

Questions that cause a person to think more deeply and give more thought to an answer are more powerful. The key is to ask a question that may cause the person to dig deep or consider a possibility that they had not previously identified. Additionally, a powerful question should be no more than 5-7 words so that a listener is very clear on what is being asked of them.

Below, find a sample of powerful questions that can be using in coaching conversations. While this is not an exhaustive list, it is a good starting point.



| What? | When? | How? |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was the moment? - What happened? - What were you feeling? - What did you discover? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When was this? - When else has this happened? - When else have you felt this way? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you get through it? - How did things change afterwards? |
| Who? | Where? | Why? |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Who supported you? - Who inspires you? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where do feel most successful/strong? - Where do you feel most safe/supported? - Where do you want to go next? | <p><i>- Avoid questions that begin with why. They can be hard to answer. For some people, "why" can sound judgmental, critical, or existential.</i></p> |

GO CLOSER TO WHAT MATTERS MOST

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What's most important for us to talk about right now? - What matters most right now? - What do you really want? - What do you mean by that? - Where should we go with this? - What's the bottom line? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What options are you looking at? - Which option seems most viable? - What have you not yet tried that might work? - What else? What else? What else? - What's next then? - What support will you need? |
|--|---|

SAMPLE CONVERSATION

Listen to the following [conversation](#) (5 min), which incorporates active listening, paraphrasing, and powerful questions.

HOW TO PRACTICE:

- 1) Find a partner and ask them a meaningful question such as: **“What is one of your favorite memories?”** OR **“What was your most significant professional accomplishment in the last 12 months?”** OR **“What was a professional challenge you’ve had at work in the last couple of years?”**
 - a. Practice your empathetic listening.
 - b. After you’ve listened, ask a powerful question. Repeat this process 2 or 3 times.
 - c. After 5 mins. ask if they really felt heard, had any “aha” moments, and what you could do better next time.



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Skill Three: Goal Setting

One of the things that makes coaching so effective is that the coach is helping push the coaching subject towards a self-identified goal and consistently bringing them back to reflect on said goal. Coaching can happen without goal setting, but to drive organizational culture and make meaningful change, effective goals must be set. See below for some key guidelines to setting goals as a coach.

| KEY GUIDELINES | DESCRIPTION | RESOURCES |
|--|---|--|
| Goals must be chosen by the coachee | At the beginning of a coaching relationship, a coach should ask the coachee what exactly they are hoping to work on and what goals they would like to set to get there. It is possible to get input from other people as the goals are being developed (e.g. supervisor, manager), but the goals cannot be dictated by anyone but the coachee. | Sample Conversation (2 minutes 30 seconds) Elena Aguilar, <i>Art of Coaching</i> , Work Plan |
| Use SMART goals | Ensure the goals you set together are SMART goals: specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented, and time bound. | University of Virginia, Writing SMART Goals |
| Goals can change | At the beginning of each conversation, revisit the goals that were set and ask, “Are these still the right goals to be working toward?” If not, the coachee will not be as motivated to work toward them. If the coachee says no, use powerful questions to understand why these are no longer the correct goals and what the right goals might be. | Sample Conversation (1 minute 45 seconds) |
| Check in on goals continuously | At the beginning of each conversation, revisit the goals that were set and ask, “Are these still the right goals to be working toward?” If the employee says yes, then ask, “what progress have you been making toward the goals?” and “what has been challenging?” | Sample Conversation (4 minutes) |
| Identifies and targets early successes | Based on the information the coach has gathered about the coachee, and the goals they have set, the coach should seek to identify, target, and bring to the surface early successes to continue to build confidence and momentum in the coaching relationship. | Sample Conversation (4 minutes) |



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Best Practices for Effective Implementation.

In order for coaching to become an organizational practice, leaders must be committed to building a culture of coaching. See below for five best practices to consider as you seek to build that culture.



Best Practice #1: Anchor Down

Anchor internal coaching as an organizational priority or as part of the organizational culture

When seeking to build an internal coaching structure, it is incredibly important to name it as a priority and highlight it as part of the culture consistently. Leaders should seek to clarify that a commitment to coaching is a commitment to the process and not the outcome. The focus on coaching is meant to foster a learning organization where staff supports one another and helps each other get better. There is no expectation of perfection.

Other ways to do this:

- Add “internal coaching” to the yearly strategic plan and priorities
- Highlight those who have been coaching and/or coached in various ways (staff meetings, newsletters, etc.)
- Create incentives for those who are coaching and being coached



Best Practice #2: Flip the Script

Create a space for junior employees to provide coaching moments for senior employees

In order to build a culture of coaching, leaders must practice what they preach. If coaching is beneficial for junior employees, then it is equally beneficial for more senior employees. Create a consistent space for junior employees to provide coaching moments for senior employees. Focus the coaching on 5-minute coaching opportunities around specific areas such as meetings, check-ins, or events.

Other ways to do this:

- If finding formal time on the calendar is challenging, encourage senior leaders to informally ask for feedback from more junior employees after they lead meetings, check-ins, or events.



Best Practice #3: Calibrate Among Peers

Be deliberate about creating time to compare coaching styles and successes

While the content of what you are coaching on should be kept confidential in order to maintain trust between the coach and coachee, it is beneficial for coaches to learn from one another as you seek to build an organizational culture of coaching. Be strategic about scheduling time for people at different levels in the organization to talk about coaching best practices, compare coaching styles, and share their coaching success stories without divulging the content of their coaching.

Other ways to do this:

- Brown bag lunches focused on coaching
- Whip rounds during team meetings to highlight coaching styles or successes



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Best Practice #4: Name the Hat

Be clear about when you are coaching versus when you are managing

It is important for the coach and the employee to be able to distinguish between when coaching and managing are happening so that they can both approach those moments differently.

Example: One way that often gets used is managers will say, “Right now I am wearing my coaching hat” or “Currently, I am wearing my management hat”. This allows employees to know what to expect and how to move forward in the conversation.

Other ways to do this:

- Set clear expectations for what it looks like/sounds like to coach versus manage, why you do each one, and when each may happen
- Be sure to give yourself time to adjust into the mindset of coaching, don't just assume it will happen naturally (approaching it from a place of growth rather than a place of performance)



Best Practice #5: Short and Snappy

Seek opportunities for 5 minute feedback/coaching

Part of what is so valuable about being an internal coach is that you have the ability to do 5-minute quick feedback and coaching right after a meeting or event. Those five minute opportunities can be exponential growth opportunities if they happen consistently and the coaching is strong.

Other ways to do this:

- Be sure to seek out opportunities for 5-minute coaching and put them on your calendar as a manager because often, those can be easy to deprioritize.
- The employee will remember the coaching the closer it is to the event (i.e. within 5-10 minutes of a meeting or event ending).
- Coach in regular, brief blasts. You do not have to gear up for a big production to coach effectively and develop your employees.



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