



# Coaching Skills: The Missing Link for Leaders

For years, coaching has been regarded as a useful strategy for individual and organisational development. In their 2006 research paper, “Keen to Help? Managers’ Implicit Person Theories and Their Subsequent Employee Coaching,” Heslin, Vandewalle, and Latham noted that manager coaching can facilitate employee development and performance, can have a positive impact on productivity, and can guide and inspire improvements in an employee’s work performance to master their projects and tasks. Unfortunately, as the authors of the paper noted, most organisations struggle with getting their managers to adopt and use coaching behaviours. In order to further understand the impact of leader coaching behaviours, the researchers at The Ken Blanchard Companies® embarked on a study to identify the correlations between leader coaching behaviours and the resulting correlation between trust, affect or emotion, and work intentions of their followers. *See Figure 1 for the hypothesized pathway model.*

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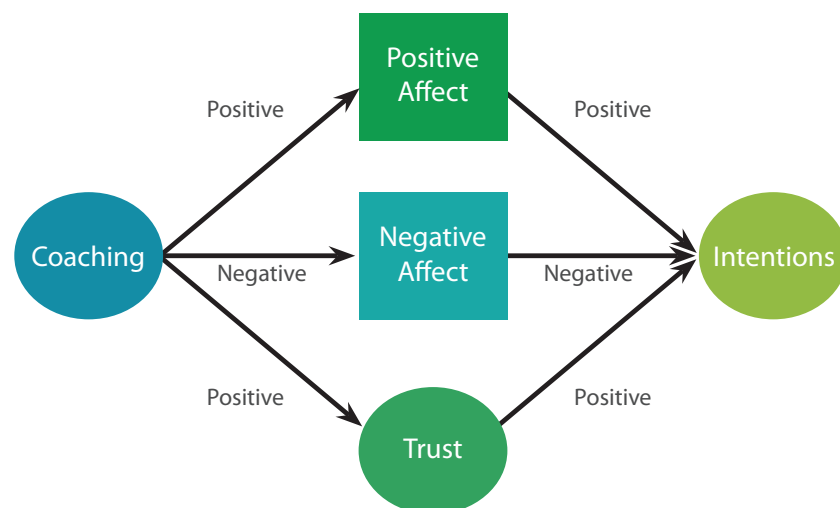
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Most organisations struggle with getting their managers to adopt and use coaching behaviours.

The study hypotheses were

1. There would be a positive correlation pathway between coaching and trust and coaching and positive affect
2. There would be a negative correlation pathway between coaching and negative affect
3. There would be a positive correlation pathway between trust and work intentions
4. There would be a positive correlation pathway between positive affect and work intentions
5. There would be a negative correlation pathway between negative affect and work intentions

**Figure 1 – Hypothesized Pathway Model**



Approximately 1,850 people participated in the study, including human resource, learning and development, management, and nonmanagement professionals. These professionals represented domestic and international organisations. For the demographic breakdown of the respondent base, please see Appendix 1. The study was distributed using the Qualtrics software platform. Respondents were given the opportunity to opt out of the study at any point. The data were analyzed using RMediation and MPLus.

The study included several validated scales to measure the various dimensions of coaching, trust, affect or emotion, and intentions (i.e., intent to remain with the organisation, exert discretionary effort, endorse the organisation, perform well, and be a good organisational citizen).

The measure used for coaching was Heslin's (et al.) Employee Coaching Measure and the defined behaviours included Facilitation (acting as a sounding board, helping the direct report develop ideas), Inspiration (expressing confidence in the direct report's ability to improve, and encouraging continuous development and improvement), and Guiding (providing guidance and feedback and providing

constructive feedback regarding areas for improvement). The scale measures ten items on a 5-point Likert scale with response possibilities ranging from Not at all to To a very great extent.

The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS) constructed by Watson and Clark was used as the measure of affect. The PANAS, a semantic differential measure, has ten descriptive items such as Upset, Alert, Inspired, and Nervous, and uses a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Not at all to Strongly.

McAllister's 11-item Trust scale was used to measure Affective Trust (I can talk freely to my leader to discuss difficulties I am having at work and know that he or she will want to listen) and Cognitive Trust (Given my leader's track record, I see no reason to doubt his or her competence and preparation to do the job). The scale uses a 7-point Likert scale with response possibilities ranging from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree.

Blanchard's Work Intention Inventory (WII) was also included; it uses five intention measures, including Intent to exert discretionary effort on behalf of the organisation (I intend to volunteer to do things that may not be part of my job), Intent to perform (I intend to work efficiently to achieve all my work goals), Intent to endorse the organisation (I intend to talk positively about this organisation to family and friends), Intent to remain with the organisation (I intend to stay with this organisation even if offered a more appealing job elsewhere), and Intent to be a good organisational citizen (I intend to respect this organisation's assets). From earlier research, Blanchard found that these work intentions ultimately predict behaviour. When the scores in the five intention scales are high, it's an indication of the presence of positivity and high levels of work passion. The five intention scales each contain three items and use a 6-point Likert scale with response possibilities ranging from To no extent to To the fullest extent.

## Findings

Based on the analysis, the following correlations were supported. This is illustrated in the Final Pathway Model below. See *Figure 2*.

- There is a large positive degree of correlation between coaching behaviours and positive affect, meaning that leaders who are perceived as using coaching behaviours (Facilitating, Inspiring, and Guiding) create a sense of positive work affect or emotion in their followers.
- Coaching and trust also have a large positive correlation, meaning that individuals who perceive their managers as exhibiting coaching behaviours are more likely to trust their leaders. It should be noted that the correlation between leader coaching and follower trust is particularly large. While we opted not to include the numbers for the correlation coefficients in the pathway model, anything over .260 is considered large and the correlation between coaching and trust is .854, which is very high.
- We found a large negative correlation between coaching and negative affect, meaning that employees who perceived their leader as frequently using the coaching behaviours tend to have significantly lower negative affect.
- There is also a medium negative correlation between negative affect and

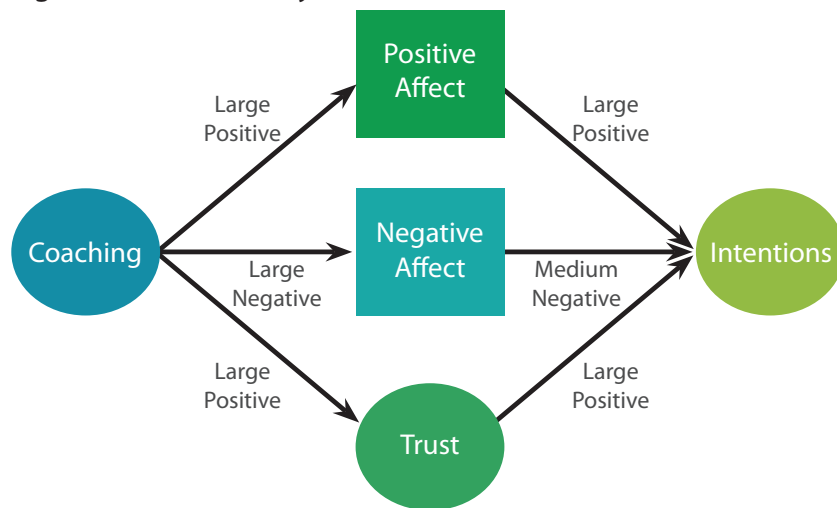
Leaders who are perceived as using coaching behaviors (Facilitating, Inspiring, and Guiding) create a sense of positive work affect or emotion in their followers.

Individuals who perceive their managers as exhibiting coaching behaviours are more likely to trust their leaders.

intentions, meaning that employees with high negative affect scores had low scores on intent to remain, perform, endorse, use good organisational citizenship behaviours, and exert discretionary effort in regard to their organisations.

- Positive affect and work intentions have a large positive correlation, meaning that one's positive affect at work results in positive work intentions and the desire to go above and beyond for their organisations.
- Trust and work intentions have a large positive correlation, meaning that people who trust their leaders have higher work intentions.

**Figure 2 – Final Pathway Model**



## The Importance of the Coaching Role in Day-to-Day Management

Despite the strong correlation between coaching behaviours and positive intent and trust, organisations can struggle with getting their managers to adopt and use coaching behaviours.

And while Helsin's study supported the notion that training can improve the quality with which managers coach their employees, very few organisations take a proactive approach to teaching their managers these skills. As a result, most managers don't develop or use coaching behaviours. A study conducted by Arnott and Sparrow (2004) with 1,153 organisations revealed that only five percent of organisations claimed to have managers who had been trained to coach their team members, even though 73 percent recognised it as a top leadership need.

In addition, coaching appears to be a small part of the job description for most managers. Nearly half of respondents in Arnott's (et. al.) study reported spending less than 10 percent of their time coaching others when, in today's work environments, coaching behaviours should comprise a much larger percentage of a manager's time.

In their book *Coaching in Organizations*, authors Madeleine Homan Blanchard and Linda Miller of The Ken Blanchard Companies define coaching as a deliberate process using focused conversations to create an environment that results in accelerated performance and development. Homan Blanchard and Miller advise

that when training managers to be more coach-like, organisations should consider a set of skills that are essential for activating a four-phased coaching process. And the authors maintain that in order to become more coach-like, managers must move away from some of their natural tendencies (telling people what to do, making assumptions, and solving problems) and adopt a coaching mindset (asking what needs to be done, brainstorming, checking in when something feels off, and helping others solve problems).

## Four Essential Coaching Skills

Coaching takes place through conversations. Homan Blanchard and Miller maintain that having the right skills can help managers have more effective interactions with their people. These skills are both people and results oriented, and promote clarity and a positive sense of regard.

### Listen to Learn

Listening is one of the most important skills for managers, regardless of tenure. Being listened to makes their direct reports feel valued and heard, which helps build trust. Listening at a deep and purposeful level requires a shift in mind-set. Effective managers listen to learn something they might not have known before. They listen for opportunities to hear a different perspective, to hear new ideas or insights. They listen in service to the person and to the conversation.

In a listening situation, managers need to be aware of their aims and intentions. Are they listening because they want to offer advice, solve the problem, or share a similar personal situation? Or are they listening with an open mind, listening for what the person is really saying, with the intent of understanding? In any interaction with a direct report, it's crucial that managers do the latter. Any other behaviour isn't active listening and can be frustrating to employees. Effective managers focus on what the other person is saying and respond so that their direct reports feel heard, valued, and better able to resolve challenges.

### Inquire for Insight

Managers who are great coaches draw the brilliance out of their people. They ask questions that allow their people to share insights and ideas that can benefit projects, tasks, and the team in general.

Asking questions will also help managers understand their employees better. When inquiring for insight, it's important to focus on the future rather than the past and to avoid placing blame. Managers should:

- Ask open-ended questions
- Focus on moving forward, not on the past
- Emphasise *what* and *how* rather than *why*
- Encourage the direct report to recap after the conversation ends in order to check for understanding
- Be open-minded

Managers must move away from some of their natural tendencies (telling people what to do, making assumptions, and solving problems) and adopt a coaching mindset (asking what needs to be done, brainstorming, checking in when something feels off, and helping others solve problems).

## Tell *Your Truth*

Being direct and candid can be a challenge for anyone, especially first-time managers who often stay silent for fear of hurting or offending others. But done properly, telling your truth with others can be empowering to both parties.

Because the goal is to create purposeful action through clarity, telling your truth is an opportunity to share observations or give feedback that will help the employee accomplish the goal. When employees know that their manager will tell the truth, all feedback becomes more credible and useful. And when the first two steps, listening to learn and inquiring for insight, are done well, managers earn the trust required to have potentially challenging conversations. Managers who listen and inquire find that it builds confidence and creates a safe environment in which both the manager and the direct report can share their feelings honestly and respectfully.

## Express Confidence

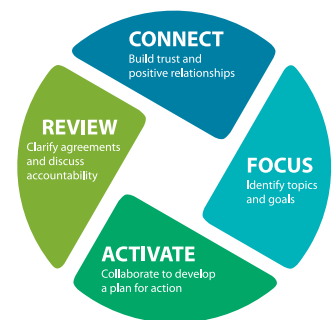
People are far more likely to stretch themselves and do their best work for managers who are advocates and champions for them. Managers who acknowledge the person and maintain a respectful, positive regard for his or her contribution are building the confidence of the people they manage. It's important to separate the subject matter from the person. Expressing confidence allows a manager to preserve a good relationship regardless of the type of conversation being held. Expressing confidence in the person builds self-assurance and enthusiasm. It's important that managers

- Highlight relevant qualities or skills in others
- Cite previous successes
- Build self-assurance and enthusiasm
- Offer support as needed

## The Coaching Process

Managers who use a coaching approach use a variety of skills and behaviours in order to match the needs of the person being coached. Homan Blanchard and Miller's research suggests that leaders overlay the four skills previously outlined in conjunction with a coaching process composed of Connecting, Focusing, Activating, and Reviewing behaviours.

**Connecting** helps managers build trust and rapport by simply showing that they care about their employees as people. Connecting can be as simple as asking questions that demonstrate attentiveness and interest. A key quality is openness. Being open means that managers have a desire to get to know the person they are interacting with, want to hear what he or she has to say, and are willing to share about themselves in return. It's key to be fully present when connecting with others in order to make them feel cared for.





**Focusing** allows managers and their employees to identify topics to be discussed. By focusing, the manager is attentive and probes to establish the most important conversation for the direct report. Asking things like, “What’s most pressing for you right now?” and “What specifically do you need to get clear about?” can help create focus. Focusing can take up to half of the coaching conversation. To use coaching behaviours effectively, it’s important to be aware enough to change direction if needed. One way to do this is to confirm the specific focus before moving into action. Taking the time to establish the right focus for the conversation will ensure that the time will be spent—and the employee will walk away from the conversation—with something useful. Failure to get the focus right will often result in solving the wrong problem, or worse, a feeling on the part of both parties of having wasted time.

**Activating** allows the manager and direct report to collaborate to develop a plan of action. The Activating step can include brainstorming, scenario planning, and consulting others, which will result in a list of clear actions that the employee can commit to. Once the actions are determined, the manager can ask questions to help anchor the action and ensure accountability, such as, “What else do you need right now to move forward?” “What will you do if you encounter an obstacle?” or “How will you proceed if the person you are counting on doesn’t cooperate?” These questions encourage direct reports to think down the road and create proactive problem-solving strategies.

**Reviewing** ensures clear agreements and accountability. It also confirms that both parties agree on what the actions and outcomes should be. Managers encourage team members to do the review. When team members do the review rather than the manager, it increases buy-in, clarity, and the probability of follow-through.

## Conclusions

Both commercial and academic literature make a strong argument for the positive results stemming from managers becoming more coach-like. Coaching has a positive impact on follower trust, affect and work intentions, and ultimately on performance and productivity.

Yet it’s naïve to think that leaders can make the leap to becoming more coach-like without the proper training required to develop the mind-set and the necessary behaviours. Arnott and Sparrow’s study showed a clear gap in regard to what managers need in order to become more coach-like and what they actually receive.

This paper finds that coaching is a powerful managerial tool. Organisations can develop and facilitate the appropriate culture, training, and support that managers need to adopt the coaching behaviours that will make them effective.

## APPENDIX 1

### Demographic Breakdown of Respondent Base

#### Manager/Non-Manager

Managers	66%
Non-Managers	33%

#### Gender

Male	41%
Female	58%

#### Range of Year of Birth

1926–1942	.5%
1943–1960	30%
1961–1981	60%
1982–present	9%

#### Level of Education

GED	3%
High School Diploma	9%
2-Year Degree	9%
4-Year Degree	34%
Master’s Degree	39%
PhD	8%

#### Global Location

Australia/New Zealand	2%
Canada	4%
Europe	13%
Africa/Middle East	2%
Latin America	3%
United States	68%

## About

### The Ken Blanchard Companies®

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## About the Researchers/Authors

**Madeleine Homan Blanchard** is a Master Certified Coach, author, and speaker. Madeleine has been a coach since 1989 and is a cofounder of Blanchard Coaching Services. She is an expert in the field of neuroscience and a pioneer in the field of coaching; she has authored several books including *Coaching in Organizations: Best Coaching Practices from The Ken Blanchard Companies* and *Leverage Your Best, Ditch The Rest: Learn the Coaching Secrets Top Executives Depend On*. She is also the developer of Blanchard's Coaching Essentials and First-time Manager programs.

**Linda Miller** is a Master Certified Coach, author, and speaker for The Ken Blanchard Companies. Linda holds two master's degrees and specialises in creating healthy dynamics and change in organisations. She is coauthor of Blanchard's training program First-time Manager, which teaches the essential skills that every new manager must master in order to succeed in the workplace, and Coaching Essentials® for Leaders. She has also authored two books, including *Coaching in Organizations: Best Coaching Practices from The Ken Blanchard Companies*.

**Dr. Drea Zigarmi** is coauthor of *Achieve Leadership Genius* (2007) and *The Leader Within* (2005), and codeveloper of a number of The Ken Blanchard Companies' products, including Situational Leadership® II and the widely used Leader Behavior Analysis II® instruments. In addition, he is a professor at University of San Diego.

**Dobie Houson** is Director of Marketing Research for The Ken Blanchard Companies and is responsible for competitive, market, and customer intelligence.

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