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## **ARTICLE** **COACHING**

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*by Dick Grote*

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# Every Manager Needs to Practice Two Types of Coaching

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Performance reviews haven't [disappeared](#) quite yet. "Despite all the buzz about abolishing formal performance reviews, the vast majority of organizations continue to employ traditional vehicles for sharing performance-related information," reported a recent [study](#) by Human Resource Executive. A similar WorldatWork [investigation](#), of practices like ratingless reviews and crowdsourced feedback, discovered that, in spite of all the chatter, these newfangled techniques are actually being used by only a fraction of large organizations.

If the traditional performance appraisal still rules, what has changed? There's demand for more-frequent conversations. Both studies discovered that companies are putting far more emphasis on increasing the quality and frequency of the feedback managers are providing their employees. "Boosting dialogue" (as the *WorldatWork* report calls it) tops the list of the elements that companies in both research studies consider most important. And in the HRE research, 77% of HR executives in the organizations studied report that their top performance management priority is encouraging more-frequent conversations (i.e., weekly or monthly, as opposed to annually).

Frequent coaching makes sense for many reasons. The annual appraisal discussion is accompanied by high anxiety levels when it's the only time the boss talks about performance. Goals and priorities change more often than a once-a-year appraisal can accommodate. Coaching can redirect effort toward revised priorities. Employees can better learn from experience when the analysis follows quickly on the event. People are more likely to ask for help if guidance is offered in informal reviews. And coaching that is focused on reinforcing effective performance is particularly valuable.

Confirmation that companies are on the right track in demanding frequent coaching sessions comes from Google's "[Project Oxygen](#)," the company's rigorous, data-based analysis of what makes great managers. Technical expertise made a difference, but only a small one. The single most important differentiator between good and great managers? "Be a good coach."

As you're looking to increase the quality and frequency of the feedback you give your employees, recognize that there are two quite different types of coaching.

### **Calendar-Driven Coaching**

Increasing the number of scheduled discussions will positively impact both employee performance and the perception of your effectiveness as a manager. But to have a high payoff, these scheduled sessions need to be more than a quick "How's it going?" chat. Calendar-driven, scheduled sessions should:

- occur in formal, structured, sit-down meetings
- be initiated, led, and controlled by the manager
- cover work conducted over time, not a singular event or project
- provide a forum for discussion and review of multiple events and competencies

Finally, both parties should clearly recognize these sessions as a feedback event.

While coaching sessions can be scheduled at any time, it's easiest to make them part of the ongoing routine by setting a date for a status check-in at the close of the annual performance discussion. Three months is a reasonable timeframe. Writing down a specific date on each person's calendar increases the probability that the meeting will actually happen. Of course, the date may have to be moved later, but treat it like a routine dentist appointment — you may have to reschedule, but you're

not going to stop going to the dentist. After that first session, set a date for the next follow-up in another three months.

During calendar-driven coaching session, start by asking, “What were the major events that have taken place since the last time we sat down like this?” Then spend the next 30–45 minutes reviewing successes, problems, and lessons learned. You can use the “do more/do less/continue” framework to guide the discussion.

The success of these sessions doesn’t fall entirely on you as the manager. Make the employee a joint partner. A few days before the scheduled session, ask the individual to email you a list of the things he would like to cover in the meeting.

### **Event-Driven Coaching**

Another kind of coaching session is not sparked by a date on the calendar; it arises spontaneously after some specific incident or activity. Incident-driven feedback should:

- occur whenever discussion is needed
- focus on a discrete incident
- be triggered by a “teachable moment”
- be a routine part of day-to-day work
- rely on two-way accountability and interaction — either the boss or the employee can initiate the coaching discussion

This type of coaching may not even be recognized as a feedback session.

You can even hold an effective event-driven coaching session while you and your team member are walking down the hall after a meeting ends. Start by asking an informal question:

- “How did you think the meeting went?”
- “What was your reaction to so-and-so’s recommendation?”
- “Which parts of your presentation do you think went best?”

Then provide your own insights — agreements, disagreements, and “in additions.” Finally, point out what the individual should take from the discussion. Make sure that your core message is clearly heard.

The best technique I’ve seen for structuring these coaching sessions may be the [after-action review](#) (AAR) procedure developed by the U.S. Army in the 1990s. AAR is a structured review or debrief process for analyzing what happened, why it happened, and how it can be done better by the participants and those responsible. To make AARs work in a business context, focus on discussing a couple of key questions while everything is fresh in peoples’ minds:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What did happen?
- What are some improvements?
- What are some sustainments?
- What can be done to improve the training next time?

There are tools, such as [this one](#), that can help you run an AAR meeting.

Whether the coaching session is one that's been on the calendar for months or one that arises spontaneously on a chance encounter, remember that people want feedback, more-frequent is better than less, effectiveness is contingent on a strong manager-employee relationship, and — most of all — trust determines success.

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