

INSIGHT GUIDE #35

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

How can managers use coaching at work?

Almost every manager is now expected to be able to use coaching as part of their management toolkit. But is coaching the be-all and end-all of management? Is coaching the only management skill a good manager needs? In this guide we argue that the best managers have a wide range of styles, which

they can adapt to different people and different situations. While good managers might be able to use coaching as their default style of leading their teams, they can also engage in consultative, directive and pace-setting styles to deliver results when the circumstances demand.



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Different styles of leading?

Warren Bennis has been credited with first recognising that

if the only tool a manager has is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail.

But people are complex, dynamic and, to quote another hero of mine, Phillip Larkin, they display 'the million-petalled flower' of human existence. It is thus not surprising that leaders need subtle, adaptive ways to communicate, engage, influence, develop, inform and direct those who work with them.

This idea of varying one's leadership style, known as situational leadership, was popularised by Hersey and Blanchard (1982). They suggested that effective leaders should operate using four styles, varying the style depending on the competence and confidence of their team members, to offer them 'telling', 'selling', 'participating' and 'delegating' styles (see Table 1) and vary these styles based on the level of competence and commitment of their team member. While highly competent and highly motivated individuals could be managed through delegation, the low-competence and low-motivation individuals needed the 'selling' style.

Table 1 Summary of situation leadership model

Situation	Terminology	Description
Unable and unwilling	Telling	Instruction, direction, autocratic
Unable but willing	Selling	Persuasion, encouragement, incentive
Able but unwilling	Participating	Involvement, consultation, teamwork
Able and willing	Delegating	Trust, empowerment, responsibility

The model subsequently spawned a host of different situational leadership models. One of the most popular provides an updated perspective for leaders on the circumstances in which six different approaches may be helpful (Goleman, 2000). Goleman notes that none of the six styles are either right or wrong by themselves, they can just be more effective in one situation than another, for most people.

1. The **directive leadership** style may be viewed as traditional leadership, giving instructions and telling people what to do. This can achieve results and is highly effective in times of a crisis – when the fire bell rings, you need to direct people to leave the building. However, the directive style should be used with caution. Overuse, or use as an everyday style has a toxic effect in the modern workplace, and is likely to lead to increased conflict and employee turnover.
2. The **pace-setting leadership** style motivates the team by setting goals. While goals motivate, the drive for continuous improvement can also have a toxic effect in the long run. Employees need periods of time to consolidate; without such periods, turnover or absenteeism can rise as employees look for a break from the constant demands for higher, faster, stronger.
3. The **visionary leadership** style aims to engage and motivate team members through communicating a compelling vision for the future. What's important is that the vision fits with the values and beliefs of the team, and is communicated in a language and style that the team can relate to. It's important for each team member to understand how their work fits into the larger vision for the organisation. When giving feedback, the main criterion is how the work contributes towards achieving that vision.
4. The **affiliative leadership** style aims to keep employees happy, creating harmony and increasing loyalty by building strong emotional bonds. The affiliative leader does this by taking their direct reports out for a meal or a drink to see how they're doing, and takes time out to celebrate group accomplishments.

5. The **democratic leadership** style aims to increase responsibility by letting team members have a say in decisions that affect their goals and how they do their work. By listening to employees' concerns, the democratic leader learns what to do to keep morale high.
6. The **coaching leadership** style focuses on developing each employee to their full potential by allowing team members to play to their strengths. The coaching leader encourages employees to establish long-term development goals and helps them progress towards these goals through regular developmental conversations.

Great leaders use all six styles, but the very best leaders use the last four in the series (visionary, affiliative, democratic and coaching) significantly more than the first two (pace-setting and directive). While the latter can be useful, when overdone they have a negative effect on morale, performance and turnover.

I would argue that if one were to adopt a default style, a coaching style works best for high-tech, professional and creative environments where the workforce is highly educated and well trained. Employees in these environments have high expectations of how they prefer to be treated; they are often highly mobile, and often have great ideas to solve the problems they face. What they need is a management style that motivates them and encourages them to take more responsibility and solve their own problems. The coaching leadership style, focused on learning and development, is ideal for these environments. Of course, coaching should not be considered a silver bullet to be used in every situation in these environments. A blend is almost always what's required, whether working in a kindergarten with nursery assistants or in chambers with a legal team.

While there are multiple circumstances in which managers can deploy a coaching style, I have suggested five in the box below.



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Five situations to apply a coaching style

The coaching style fits in many situations, but is particularly helpful when:

1. **Developing new skills:** A coaching style could be used to help team members develop a new skill. Using coaching helps the team member to explore set goals, develop a plan and receive support and encouragement as they test out the new skill.
2. **Encouraging delegation:** The style can be used to encourage greater self-responsibility. When team members come with a problem, rather than offering a solution, the leader can use a coaching style to help the team member think through the issue, come up with their own solution and implement it.
3. **Conducting an annual appraisal:** Instead of this being a one-way conversation from the manager to team member, the manager can use a coaching style to encourage the team member to review their own performance, using the previous year's objectives and evidence-based performance data (sales etc), as well as encouraging them to set their own goals for the coming year.
4. **Developing self-awareness:** Part of development is helping team members to become more aware of themselves, their environment and their impact on others. The coaching style encourages team members to become more aware through encouraging a more reflexive stance.
5. **Making a decision:** The coaching style can help team members to clarify what they want to achieve, identify and evaluate alternative courses of action (with the various pros and cons of each option) and set a plan of action with milestones to track their own progress.

Henley Centre for Coaching

The Henley Centre for Coaching is a global leader in coaching research and coach training. We are the only triple-accredited coaching provider in the world offering both postgraduate university qualifications in coaching and accreditation from the Association for Coaching (AC), the International Coach Federation (ICF) and the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC).

The Centre provides formal accredited coach training through our *Professional Certificate in Executive Coaching* and *MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change*, and accredited supervision training through our *Professional Certificate in Supervision*. These programmes are delivered in the UK at our Greenlands campus, and at venues across the world.

The Centre provides continuous professional development for coaching professionals through masterclasses, webinars, conferences, and via online access to journals, ebooks and coaching research. These are all delivered through our online learning platform, meaning coaches can connect from anywhere in the world to engage in professional development.

The Henley coaching team consists of leading practitioners and academics who have shaped the coaching profession since the late 1990s. They have written many of the most popular coaching books and they continue to publish in leading management journals and to contribute at conferences worldwide. Their writing, thinking and research informs our teaching and ensures our programmes are at the cutting edge of coaching practice.

The Centre offers annual membership to all professional coaches, providing a virtual-learning environment where the members shape research and practice in coaching. Check out our website for details on how we can help you and your business come to life.



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Jonathan is a tutor on the Henley coaching programmes, and the author of over 100 scientific papers and 30 books on coaching, leadership and change.

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