# Coaching is [not] a Magic Bullet for Managers

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*"Most discussions of decision making assume that only senior executives make decisions or that only senior executives' decisions matter. This is a dangerous mistake."*

-- Peter F. Drucker

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Those who know me a bit, are surely aware that I am a strong believer in the 'magic' of coaching. I am a trained executive coach and a passionate promoter of coaching in organizations. I have trained over 100 managers in the past two years to coach their direct reports and helped several companies establish what we came to call a 'coaching culture'.

So is coaching the magic bullet for managers? Like a lawyer, I would like to answer: "It depends."

Let's first have a look at some of coaching's key features that distinguish it from other leadership styles.

**1. Building trust with coachee**

Coaching is only effective if the coach (or manager who acts as a coach) is able to first establish at least a basic level of trust with the coachee (or direct report). While trust may be useful for other leadership styles as well, it is particularly important when coaching.

**2. Giving ownership to coachee**

- This means that the coachee retains ownership over what to do and how to do things. The coach must refrain from doing two things. First, he must avoid giving advice because advice would take ownership away from the coachee. Second, he must also avoid being judgmental because if the coach (particularly the manager acting as coach) states a judgment, then the coachee's opinion is likely to be influenced by this judgment and ownership is at least partly taken away.


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3. **Sharing rather than advising**

Sharing means that we put our knowledge, experience, etc. out there and do *not* expect the coachee to necessarily accept it - we leave it up to her/him to integrate or not what we share. Also, as a coach, we share our own thoughts or ideas only towards the end of the conversation in order to encourage the coachee to think on his own.

## When coaching is not recommended

While I believe (and know from own experience) that coaching is a highly effective leadership style in many situations, it is not the best approach in all situations.

Here are some situations where coaching in its pure form might not be the best possible approach:

1. **In case of emergency**

If you had some training in coaching as a manager and started applying it, you certainly noticed that coaching is more time consuming than most leadership styles. This is because supporting the coachee without taking away the ownership requires the coach to ask several open-ended questions and give time for the coachee to think things through.


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In the case of an emergency, you simply might not have the time to coach your direct report and may instead prefer to use a more directive style, e.g., to give clear orders. Of course, there is perhaps a greater risk that you may make wrong decisions but in such cases, failure to make immediate decision and subsequent action could prove fatal.

***Example:*** *At 9am, the CEO asks the Financial Director to have an additional report ready for the board meeting scheduled at 10 a.m. The Financial Director needs to ask the Controller to compile the necessary figures within 30 minutes. Obviously, there is no time for discussion. Therefore, the Financial Director needs to clearly say what needs to be done and how he wants it done.*

### 2. In case of low competence of the coachee

Giving ownership makes sense only if you can expect the coachee to come up with at least somewhat intelligent ideas and suggestions. If the coachee has very little or no competence in a certain subject matter, you will need to share your expertise and give advise what to do and how to do things.

But don't be mistaken. I noticed that managers often underestimate the capability of their people. Also, I found that particularly in Asia, staff often believes that the manager should know better. The managers I trained in coaching their people find it useful to ask themselves: "Who is closer to the issue at hand, my staff or me?" Based on that, they often decide who should have ownership. Also, they realized that they might need to clarify the roles of manager and staff with their direct reports.


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***Example:*** *You are the Marketing Manager and have a new hire directly from the university. She has joined only two weeks ago and has very limited knowledge in your industry. For the next 8-12 weeks or so, you will need to be more directive in your leadership approach until she becomes more competent.*

### 3. In case of clear boundaries

As a manager you have the responsibility to assure that the company's guidelines and regulations are being followed. You also have to follow certain boundaries which you have established for your area of responsibility. Boundaries in this context are non-negotiable and therefore giving ownership might not be appropriate. In such cases, you will need to apply a more directive leadership style.

***Example:*** *According to the company guidelines, any complaints from customers received by email must be answered within 24 hours during work days. Any suggestions of your staff that interfere with this regulation can not be accepted.*

## Conclusion

Coaching is an excellent leadership approach to develop highly engaged employees. However, it is not a 'Magic Bullet' for all situations. For example, in cases of emergency, low competence of the coachee, and presence of clear boundaries, other leadership styles - perhaps more directive approaches - are more appropriate.


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He is the author of the book "The Groupness Factor" ( see http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm ) which was published in August 2005. Charlie's articles were printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive and CareerTimes.


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