

EAP Training for Managers: Shifting the Paradigm from Managing to Coaching

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ABSTRACT. *Life Solutions EAP offers a coaching skills course for managers, underscoring the strategic role EAPs play in enhancing manager effectiveness through targeted training. This article describes the results of a program evaluation of the changes in managers' knowledge of and perceptions about coaching concepts and strategies after participation in this training. Seven rounds of the six-week course were delivered to 109 managers from 20 employer groups; 93 of these participants completed both the pre and post versions of a questionnaire examining beliefs and understanding of coaching concepts and strategies. Data were analyzed using paired t-tests and correlational analyses. The results suggest that coaching skills training was associated with expected improvements in the managers' beliefs about employees' potential for change and growth and also increases in self-reported levels of coaching-related behaviors. Other tests revealed that the amount of within-person change over time occurred to a similar level across different outcome measures – but mostly for the behavior aspects of coaching. Introducing coaching training for managers may be an effective value-add to enhance the relationship between the customer organization and the EAP. Limitations and implications are also discussed.*

Introduction

There is widespread agreement that the social and emotional skills of the manager are critical to employee engagement. Research on emotional intelligence¹ as well as a 2013 Gallup survey, *State of the Global Workplace: Employee Engagement Insights for Business Leaders Worldwide*,² provide evidence supporting this belief. With only 29% of employees in North America reporting they are engaged at work according to the Gallup survey, lower productivity and morale are the unfortunate natural consequences.² A quality relationship with the manager is identified as one key factor in reversing this problem.²

Fortunately for Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), managers have always been a critical constituency for consultation, coaching and training. Being in the “people business,” EAPs provide management services that increase competencies, such as the ability to create nurturing relationships with employees, which results in improved feedback and in skills and strengths more effectively aligned with job demands.

Coaching skills have also been recognized as effective in creating a work environment

conducive to improved performance. Heslin and colleagues stated: "Large organizations are increasingly expecting managers to coach their employees."³ In their study, employee coaching was found to be a key managerial task at companies that included KPMG, McKinsey & Company, Motorola and YUM! Brands, Inc.

Coaching Skills Training for Leaders

To support this approach, Life Solutions EAP developed a new training for managers in 2013. The course is called "Developing Engaged and Creative Employees: Coaching Skills for Leaders." The goal of offering this training is to both broaden the organizational services the EAP provides and to underscore the vital role EAPs play in "... applying the principles of human behavior with management ... to optimize the organization's human capital."⁴

The objective of the course is to modify managers' conceptual approach to the task of overseeing employees' performance. The course is based on the belief that a way to improve employee performance is to reorient managers from a traditional top-down, command-and-control paradigm to more positive, developmental, and frequent interactive relationships with their direct reports.

Course content included material explicitly detailing common biases about people's potential for change and personal growth, using Implicit Person Theory (IPT).⁵ IPT suggests that some people assume that personal attributes are static and do not change (termed entity IPT), resulting in the formation of quick initial impressions of others that are resistant to change; other people believe that personal attributes are malleable and, hence, can be developed (incremental IPT). Applying IPT to the workplace, managers with an entity outlook would be unlikely to see the value of trying to help employees improve their performance; managers with an incremental approach would

be more likely to recognize the situational and interpersonal determinants of behavior and see value in supporting supervisees to improve.³ IPT theorists have shown among teachers and others a relationship between an incremental belief about ability to change some personal attributes and the use of helping behaviors.³ Organizational management researchers also have shown that managers' IPT beliefs influence employee coaching, predicting employee performance evaluations as well as managers' willingness to coach poorly-performing employees.³

Managers with an "entity framework" are both more likely to miss a decline in the performance of a previously productive employee and to fail to notice or acknowledge performance improvements in others, leading to employee frustration, resentment and/or withdrawal.⁶ The coaching course encouraged participants to move toward an incremental IPT view of employees' capabilities such that employees can successfully make small changes and improvements over time in their work.

Course Description of Training from EAP

Positive psychology,⁷ strength-based thinking,⁸ and Bowen systems theory⁹ provided the conceptual context for the course. The material was structured into four-hour sessions that were provided once a week for six consecutive weeks. The course content included modules on the following topics:

- **The Coaching Model:** An examination of the distinction between traditional management and the coaching approach.
- **Communicating for Engagement:** Exploration of the role of internal motivation and deep listening in advancing the coaching process.
- **Managing Change in the Workplace:** A review of the relationship between beliefs

about the malleability of individual change and coaching and the role of the manager during large-scale organizational change.

- **Renewal and Resilience:** Presentation of the benefits of engaging in positive thinking on both the coach-manager and the employee; applying what is known about resilience to advance engagement and performance.
- **Coaching for Creativity:** An exploration of insights about creativity and the use of these insights to coach employees.
- **Pulling it All Together:** A review of all concepts presented, using interactive learning exercises.

To evaluate this training, we also developed the Life Solutions EAP Management Training Evaluation Questionnaire to test the effectiveness of this new course on managers' beliefs about and their approach to working with their direct reports.

Methods

Training Context. The sample was recruited from 2013 to 2016 and consisted of supervisors and managers participating in a coaching training offered by Life Solutions EAP to its book of business. Companies represented a variety of workplace settings: health care, small manufacturing, legal practices, university academic departments, engineering firms, social services, and unions, among others. Managers came to one central location to participate in the training. Participation in the training was voluntary and the cost of the training was funded by the employers.

Data Collection. Participants were asked to complete the Life Solutions EAP Management Training Evaluation Questionnaire at before the start of the first session and again at the end of the last session. This process provided two

points of data spanning a period of six weeks representing pre- and post-training.

Measures. Course participants' understanding of and beliefs about the targeted coaching concepts and skills were measured by a questionnaire that was developed by adapting other published instruments and aimed to measure understanding of and beliefs about key coaching concepts and managers' perceptions about how they relate with their employees.

Four published tools were adapted and combined to develop the Life Solutions EAP Management Training Evaluation Questionnaire. These included the Learning Goal Orientation Scale,¹⁰ domain-general Implicit Personality Trait Scale,¹¹ the Perceived Quality of the Employee Coaching Relationship scale (PQECR),¹² and the Behavioral Observation Scale.³ Permission was received from the original authors of all four scales for use in our evaluation project.

Measures of Coaching Beliefs and Concepts

Our first source of items was the Learning Goal Orientation scale. It measures whether managers believe their role is to help subordinates learn and develop. For example, "People prefer to work on tasks that force them to learn new things." This is an 8-item scale.

The domain-general IPT Scale was our second source of items. It assesses implicit beliefs about both ability and personality, beliefs which are associated with a manager's perception of employee performance. A sample question from this 8-item scale is, "People can do things differently, but the important parts of who they are can't really be changed." We created three measures from this scale (see Table 1).

Measures of Coaching Behaviors

Our third source of items was the PQECR. It assesses managers' perceived proficiency on

four kinds of coaching behaviors with their direct reports: the *genuineness of their relationships* (example: “I try to demonstrate that I truly care about my employees”); the *effectiveness of their communication* (“I make it easy for my employees to talk with me about their job performance”); their *comfort with relationships* (“My employees are content to discuss their concerns and troubles with me”); and their tendency to *facilitate development of their direct reports* (“I help my employees identify and build upon their strengths”). Each of these four sub-scales of the PQECR has three items.

Finally, the Behavioral Observation Scale explores a broad range of coaching behaviors that managers can provide such as constructive feedback, facilitation of creative thinking, demonstration of confidence that employees can develop and improve, and support for employees to take on new challenges. An example is: “As a supervisor, I encourage continuous development and improvement.” This scale had 10 items.

In total, the outcomes questionnaire measured nine domains of managerial beliefs, knowledge and self-reported behaviors that can influence managers’ performance with their employees.

Likert-type response options were used for each item on the questionnaire and ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A total score was calculated for each outcome by adding the various items for that measure.

Analytic Sample. A total of 109 managers participated in the seven different trainings. This was an average of 15 managers for each course. From this group, 93 managers (85%) submitted both a pre- and post-survey and thus were included in the analytic sample.

Data Analysis. The second author, who was not involved in training development, implementation or data gathering, was provided

de-identified pre and post questionnaire data. He entered the pairs of scores on the nine measures that were matched for each participant into a database. The data was analyzed using SAS software.¹⁴ Comparisons of the extent of change in each measure were conducted using paired sample *t*-tests. In this kind of statistical test, the variance between participants at the start on a particular measure is minimized as each person serves as their own control by comparing their post score against their own pre score. The average amount of change (or difference in scores) across all of the participants is the test result.

Correlation analyses also were performed to test the relationships among the extent of self-rated improvements on each coaching component. We created difference scores of the pre and post scores for the nine measures and then correlated the difference scores with each other. To correct for inverse directions of improvement between measures with different response coding directions (i.e., when improvement was indicated by a higher score on one variable but by a lower score on the second variable - see measures #3 and 4 in Table 3 - Appendix), the complement of the correlation was calculated. Thus, in every test we conducted, a positive correlation would indicate that improvement on one measure was associated with a similar direction of change on the other measure in the correlation pair.

Results

The results are presented in three parts. We start with the level of improvement in the coaching belief measures and then reveal the level of improvement in measures of coaching behaviors. This is followed by the correlational analyses examining within-person consistency in the level of change on all of the different measures.

Change in Coaching Beliefs. All four of the measures of coaching beliefs showed a change

in the expected direction after the training, with three being statistically significant. See Table 1 for details. Having a general orientation that the role of the manager is to help employees to learn was increased, on average, by 16% among the managers who participated in the training. Similarly, having a belief that employees “can make personal changes” increased on average by 16%. The two negatively phrased items also showed improvements: Having the belief that “new and different skills cannot be learned” by employees was reduced by 14%; and having the belief that “employee characteristics are static” was reduced by 9% (although not significant).

Table 1: Coaching Beliefs - Pre and Post Mean Scores and Average Level of Improvement After Training

Measure	Mean Score (Standard Deviation)		
	Pre	Post	% of Improve
<i>Learning goal orientation to being a manager</i> (8-item scale)	26.5 (5.0)	30.7 (4.8)	16%*
<i>Belief that employees can make personal change</i> (3-item scale)	9.7 (2.2)	11.2 (2.7)	16%*
<i>Belief that new and different skills cannot be learned**</i> (4-item scale)	11.1 (3.4)	9.6 (3.6)	14%*
<i>Belief that employee characteristics are static**</i> (1-item scale)	2.2 (0.8)	2.0 (1.1)	9%

N = 93. * $p \leq 0.05$

**Lower scores indicate better outcome

Change in Coaching Behaviors. All five of the measures of coaching behaviors showed a statistically significant change in the expected

direction after the training. See Table 2 for details. The greatest degree of change was for the manager behaviors of trying to facilitate employee development (a 17% average increase). Developing a genuine relationship between manager and employee increased by 8%. Encouraging effective communication increased by 8%. Comfort with the manager – employee relationship increased by 10%. Engaging in a variety of coaching related managerial behaviors increased by 10%.

These positive findings for the behavioral aspects of coaching style are consistent with the positive findings obtained above for the more attitudinal measures that assessed beliefs about have a coaching approach to being a manager.

Table 2: Coaching Behaviors - Pre and Post Mean Scores and Average Level of Improvement After Training

Measure	Mean Score (Standard Deviation)		
	Pre	Post	% of Improve
<i>Genuineness of relationship</i> (3-item scale)	12.6 (1.5)	13.5 (1.3)	8%*
<i>Effective communication</i> (3-item scale)	11.7 (1.6)	12.7 (1.4)	8%*
<i>Comfort with relationship</i> (3-item scale)	11.2 (2.0)	12.4 (1.7)	10%*
<i>Employee development</i> (3-item scale)	10.7 (2.1)	12.4 (1.6)	17%*
<i>Coaching behaviors index</i> (10-item scale)	39.0 (4.8)	42.9 (4.6)	10%*

N = 93. * $p \leq 0.05$

Correlations Between Change in Coaching Concepts and Behaviors. There were also significant correlations among improvement over time in one outcome measure with improvements over time in another outcome

measure. Given that several of these outcome measures get at different aspects of similar general constructs (i.e., the core themes featured in the training), it was expected to find some level of convergence among the extent of change in these measures. See the Appendix with Table 3 for the correlation matrix.

The correlations of improvements between the five behavioral measures of coaching were all positive and mostly of medium size, ranging from $r = .19$ to $.49$, with an average effect across the ten tests of $r = .31$. This pattern of results indicates a similar degree of change had occurred within-person for all of the coaching behavior outcome measures from before to after the training. These findings suggest the adoption of various coaching skills over the six weeks of the training period. Improvement in the Coaching Behaviors index was also correlated with improvement having a learning goal orientation toward employees ($r = .22$) and with a reduction in the belief that employee characteristics are static ($r = .37$).

In contrast, the correlations of change on the four belief-oriented measures, only one pairing reached statistical significance and the average effect across all of pairs in the set was $r = .16$.

Overall, significant effects occurred in 15 of 36 possible correlational tests (see Table 3). These findings indicate that the amount of within-person change over time had occurred to a similar level across the different outcome measures for many participants – mostly for the behavior skill aspects of coaching.

Discussion

The key findings from this evaluation indicate that a six-week training course on developing a coaching oriented approach and specific coaching skills may be helpful in modifying managers' beliefs about employees' capacity for change. The significant changes in scores on almost all of the measures suggest the adoption

of many of the coaching fundamentals that were emphasized during the training. Managers demonstrated greater belief in the importance of genuineness, effective communication, comfortable relationships, development facilitation, and in the belief that people can make personal changes. The converse belief that peoples' characteristics are static, was decreased. The course also emphasized managers' responsibility to frequently and positively acknowledge direct reports' contributions and progress, for the purpose of creating work environments conducive to improved performance.

Correlational data also provided evidence that improvements were obtained to a similar degree across many of the related concepts – especially for coaching related behaviors. This suggests that participants came to cognitively link together several of the different concepts taught in the course.

Anecdotal evaluations of the course experience were also very positive. For example, one union leader commented:

“Although there are many positives about this coaching course, I realize that I hired good people to work for me and I have to allow them to perform their duties without my interfering. I monitor them as any manager should do, but being thrown into this position, I did not want to fail and thought that by micro managing, I would lessen that chance. I found that allowing the employees to do what they can and assisting them when needed achieves far reaching results and allows them to have the feeling of accomplishment that they well deserve.”

Limitations of the Study

We can conclude that there were many positive changes that followed the training, however we cannot assume a causal relationship between the training and these outcomes. This was because we used a single group study design

that did not also assess the same outcome measures in a different second group of managers who did not receive the training. Furthermore, this evaluation assessed only self-reported changes in beliefs and behaviors and thus did not measure: whether, or to what degree, managers actually employed new coaching skills on the job; whether their direct reports noted positive changes; or, whether managers' own performance improved after the course. The existence of other random factors that may have affected the results cannot be ruled out. In addition, basic demographic and work context information about the participants was not collected, making it impossible to assess the potential influence of these kinds of variables on changes in the outcomes.

Future Recommendations

Next steps would be to try to replicate the results and to study the effectiveness of the different components of the training materials and process and the reliability and validity of the questionnaire in order to attempt to replicate the results. It would be better to also gather observable data or company data records about managers' actual pre- and post-course coaching behaviors to be able to compare with self-reported data. The relationship of having improved manager coaching approaches on the additional outcome of employee engagement could also be examined. The persistence of outcomes from the training over time could also be examined (i.e., collecting follow-up data at six months later). In future research, demographic information (years worked in current role, years with company, number of direct reports, age, gender, and so on) could be obtained and analyzed as independent variables that might influence managers' response to course content.

Applicability to EAP Professionals

The results of this evaluation of a manager training program provided by a large regional

EAP show that a paradigm shift from a traditional management model to a coaching approach is possible through training provided by the EAP. In this way, EAPs can be a strategic partner of their customer companies in supporting the professional development of the managers and supervisors at the company – who are a key constituency for EAPs. By improving managers' ability to participate in effective performance improvement processes of their employees, coaching training from the EAP can support overall organizational health through improved employee well-being and productivity. These kinds of outcomes can raise the profile of the EAP within the larger organization. Offering coaching training courses for managers can enhance the value-add that EAPs can provide to the business.

Note: The complete questionnaire instrument used in this project is available from the first author.

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Appendix

Table 3. Correlation of Change (Degree of Improvement) Between Outcome Measures

Conceptual Theme:		Beliefs				Behaviors				
Measure		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Learning Goal Orientation	1.00	.07	-.01	-.12	.08	.15	.07	.08	.22*
2	Belief that people can make personal change		1.00	-.48*	-.16	.22*	.07	.16	.23*	-.01
3	Belief that new and different skills <u>cannot</u> be learned			1.00	.14	-.13	-.02	.01	-.05	.10
4	Belief that peoples' characteristics are <u>static</u>				1.00	.05	.09	.13	.05	.37*
5	Genuineness of relationship					1.00	.40*	.40*	.24*	.37*
6	Effective Communication						1.00	.49*	.19	.29*
7	Comfort with Relationship							1.00	.20	.31*
8	Facilitating Development								1.00	.25*
9	Coaching Behaviors									1.00

$N = 93$. * $p \leq 0.05$ significant