

# Tip sheet

## Coaching virtually during COVID-19

**Maintaining business continuity during COVID-19, especially when teams are working remotely, means you will need to adapt some of your management style. Setting clear expectations around what work needs to be delivered and how the work will be done makes leading a virtual team much easier.**

Most managers find they default to a more tactical style of management when co-located with their team. Working remotely or in an office/remote location hybrid requires a more strategic, direction-setting style. Doing this not only empowers your team to be more directly responsible and accountable for their work, it also makes it easier for them to monitor and report on their progress. See our tipsheet on managing for outcomes for guidance on how to do this.

The other skill you may need to build is coaching, because you have less opportunity to be 'hands on' and will need to rely on your employees being able to set their workplans each day and adhere to them. It's also a way to be social and collaborative with your team during this time, as you're supporting and encouraging them to find their own solutions, rather than being directive.

### Managing vs coaching: what is the difference?

The key differences can be summarised this way:

Managing	Coaching
Directive and task-oriented: what, how and when, including templates, examples, etc.	Guidance and support for the team member to develop their own plan towards outcomes
For less experienced employees who may be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• New in a role</li><li>• New to the company</li><li>• New to the client/customer</li><li>• New job responsibilities or tasks</li></ul>	For more experienced employees who may: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have extensive experience</li><li>• Have demonstrated competency</li><li>• Be growing new competences</li><li>• Be trying new approaches</li></ul>
Dictating	Collaborating, recommending
Advice giving	Allowing others to discover the solution
Manager as expert	Manager as shared learner
May be necessary in a crisis	Better when there is time for trial and error
Easy to default to doing	Need to be disciplined about doing it

# Tips for coaching

**Reflect on your current management style and how it aligns with either the 'managing' or 'coaching' column in the table above, or what situations (like time stress) might lead you to adopt one style over another.**

**Write down a plan for what you can adjust about how you manage and relate with your team.**

**How can you adapt the language you use and the way you frame the check in conversations to resist providing instructions, but instead encourage your team to proactively set their goals and only come to you for problem solving when two heads really are better than one?**

## Holding back, rather than giving answers

Knowing when to manage or to coach your team is a skill but changing your management style can be achieved with practice and reflection. Plan ahead to look for opportunities where you can coach, or at least delegate more responsibility to your team members for team outcomes. Resist the temptation to jump in and provide guidance but instead, hold back and create an opportunity for the team member to develop:

1. Make very clear what outcomes and outputs your team member is responsible to deliver, including the timeframe, quality and any other measures of success. Have you ensured they have the right training, information and support to succeed?
2. Reconsider how often you meet for one on one project update meetings. Will you drop back the number of work updates they provide to give them more time to work independently?

## Transfer ownership for shared goals

A key aspect to the coaching relationship is that it sets up a dynamic where the onus for decision-making is transferred from yourself to the employee. They now have responsibility for delivering on the work, even though you retain the right to intervene if its necessary or they ask for help.

Coaching your team members goes hand in hand with managing for outcomes, in that it involves being less 'hands' on as a manager and allowing your team members to find their own way to achieve an outcome, with support. Coaching your team will mean that they experience more autonomy in their role, which is key to employee engagement and willingness to go above and beyond.

Sometimes you will need to take the steering wheel and switch back to a 'managing' style rather than 'coaching'. Determine which style is appropriate based on the task at hand rather than the individual. Often, people will need a combination of styles depending on the complexity of the task assigned, their experience with the task, and the skill and experience levels needed to complete it.

## Be a resource, and clear a path

Providing support to team members when you are taking on a coaching role is about adopting a facilitation role and removing obstacles. This means that you use your personal and professional experience and knowledge to provide feedback, help broaden their perspective so they can see things differently, and use the analogies, scenarios and examples you have gathered throughout your own career to facilitate their learning. Removing obstacles is about stepping in to intervene when the authority of your position can open a door with a client, stakeholder or executive, when perhaps the team member's own level of authority would hold them back. Other examples of obstacles that you as a manager coach could assist to remove are:

- Blockages team members face personally due to assumptions others could make about their disability. A different example is a habit or trait that could do with your guidance with a difficult stakeholder;
- Trouble getting other team members to listen to or collaborate with the team member you are coaching;
- Organisational systems or processes that are blocking a project's progress, and may need your intervention.

**“Try to step into your team member's shoes to experience their perspective”**

## Frame questions to prompt their thinking

Question framing requires you to ask questions and listen for the answers more than talking and providing guidance. You can do this by asking open-ended questions that sound like you genuinely don't have an answer ready to give, but prompt your team member towards a solution to a problem. Try to step into your team member's shoes to experience their perspective rather than dominate it with your own.

Below are examples of the kinds of questions you can ask that help your team member discover a solution or plan for their work. Use active listening skills to listen to their responses and draw out the team member's capacity for problem solving:

- What approach do you think is best for the result you are you trying to achieve?
- Why are you hoping to achieve this goal?
- On a scale of one to 10, how committed/motivated are you to doing it?
- What is happening now (what, who, when, and how often)? What is the effect or result of this?
- What are your options?
- Tell me more ... or go on ...
- Who else might be able to help? Who else could you ask?
- What roadblocks do you expect or require planning? How can these be overcome?
- How will you know you have been successful?

The GROW model offers excellent examples of how you can effectively use exploratory style questions as you coach team members through each step of a project: <https://www.thebalancecareers.com/coaching-questions-for-managers-2275913>

The next step is to cement it into a clear plan for the project. Again, coach your team member to put together a first draft of a project plan and then work with them as a development opportunity to share your experience and tips for project management. If you would like to know more about this step check the 'Managing for Outcomes' tip sheet for practical ways to do this.

## Time can be a barrier to effective coaching

If you have used a more directive style of management for a long time, adopting the less hands-on coaching style will take time, effort and possibly some training and support to on technique to really change your behaviour. You will need to understand the limits of your own knowledge and when it's time to refer your team member to someone else for further expertise (which requires you to have a diverse network to call on). You will also need to be able to assess and reflect on your personal and professional performance in coaching effectively, and be committed to continuous improvement. This will be easier to do if your organisational culture, HR support and business strategies all align with the coaching approach to managing your team.

Work commitments, short timeframes and the pressures on you as a manager will easily get in your way, making it important to ensure you have the support of your executive and HR. Seek guidance and permission on which longer-range projects your organisation is working on that could be a better fit for adopting a coaching style, and know when to switch back to the more directive style of managing when it is required. Better still, consider working with your peers within the organisation to create a supportive network of others who are all developing their own skills of coaching and will remind each other to stick at it!

**This tip sheet will be enough to get you started, but if you feel you need more help or to go deeper, post your query on our LinkedIn group, talk to your manager or a trusted peer, or consult with your HR representative to explore any courses your agency may have access to.**

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