Strong Evidence: Coaching Matters

Managerial coaching, also referred to as developmental, employee, or performance coaching, in practice, is often a largely unstructured process of giving continual individualized attention and guidance to subordinates with the goal of boosting their performance and addressing their challenges. Increasingly, organizations are stressing the importance of managers coaching and developing their direct reports. Despite the rising popularity of this concept in practice, scholarship on managerial coaching remains underdeveloped in several critical regards.

First, there is a lack of consensus on what managerial coaching entails as no study has compared coaching quality (skill) against coaching quantity (frequency) in influencing employee performance and “bottom line” consequences. Fortunately, a recent study published in Personnel Psychology responds to these gaps in the coaching literature by developing a clear definition of managerial coaching in terms of key behaviors identified in previous research, testing a predictive model that links managerial coaching to objective, annual goal attainment, and examining whether coaching skill and frequency have differing and interactive effects on subordinate performance.

These scholars addressed the discrepancies in how managerial coaching is defined by conducting an extensive literature review. They identified three common elements and synthesized them to create a multidimensional definition to guide research and practice. They defined managerial coaching as (1) giving continual constructive, developmental feedback to subordinates, (2) acting as a behavioral model of good performance, and (3) collaborating with each subordinate to establish engaging, challenging goals that motivate performance. Given this definition, managerial coaching is now conceptually distinct from executive coaching, training performance appraisal, and performance feedback.

Second, the study explored the impact of coaching skill and frequency on objective performance by shaping the clarity of the team’s role. They focused on team-level role clarity as a key mediating state because feedback intervention theory and goal setting theory both propose that effective coaching clarifies performance-relevant behaviors and thereby improves a subordinate’s understanding of his or her responsibilities and objectives.

Data were collected over one year from 1,246 sales representatives in 136 teams within a global pharmaceuticals firm. Within the company, salespeople operated in district teams of 6-12 representatives led by one district manager. Managers’ coaching skill was evaluated through ratings of a role-play exercise done with the 136 district managers. Coaching frequency was defined as the number of field visits that a district manager completed with each salesperson during that year. Objective performance
was measured through end-of-the-year sales goal attainment. Lastly, perceptions of team role clarity were determined through surveys given to all sales representatives.

Results of the study indicate that **managerial coaching skill has a significant, direct effect on sales goal attainment** and a **moderating effect on the relationship between coaching frequency and sales goal attainment**. Furthermore, when mediated by higher team role clarity, coaching skill yields a weak but significant indirect effect on sales goal attainment. The relationship between coaching frequency and sales goal attainment was shown to be negative. However, to clarify this negative relationship, results illustrated that the lowest performance was linked to unskilled managerial coaches conducting frequent coaching interactions. Conversely, those **managers with high coaching skill achieved strong sales goal attainment no matter their level of coaching frequency**. Therefore, **coaching frequency does not outweigh coaching skill in eliciting strong performance**.

Results also indicated that coaching skill and team role clarity explain 21% of the variability in sales goal attainment between districts, demonstrating that **strong coaching skills and high team role clarity yield better performance and financial value**. The key take-away is that, **as a manager, you should focus on the quality of your coaching rather than the quantity of your coaching as well as cultivate high team role clarity in your subordinates**. Engage in activities, courses, readings, and mentorships that will increase your managerial coaching skill and continually promote your subordinates’ understanding of their responsibilities and objectives through downward and upward feedback, clearly defined performance standards, and consistency.

**Reference Article**