

FAST LEARNERS:

The evolution of the leader coach

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THE LEADER AS COACH

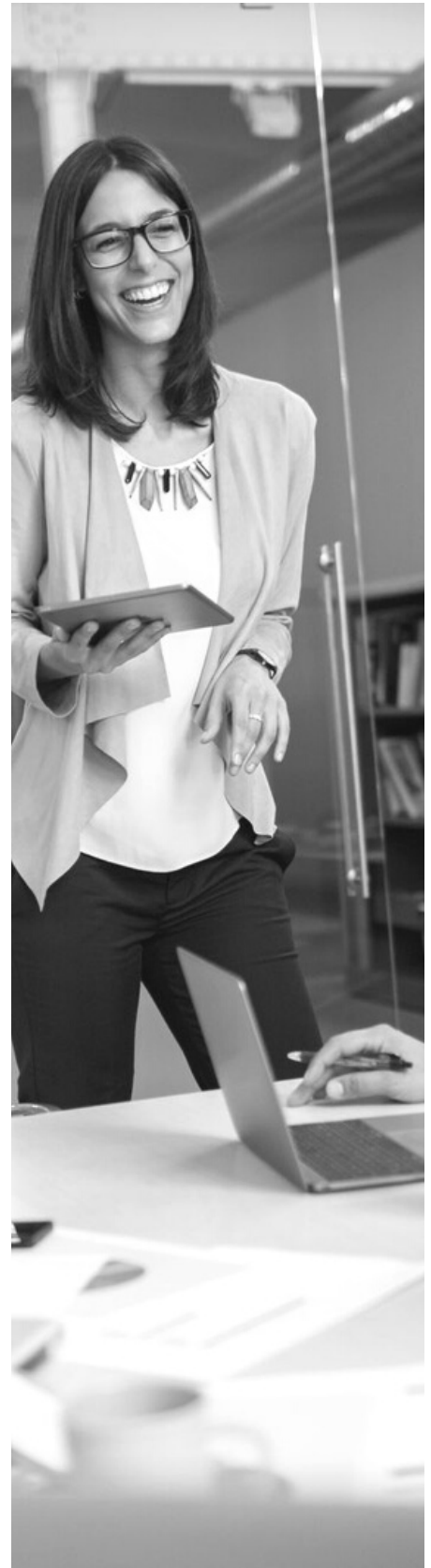
This article is a summary of some of the key concepts in a recent HBR article, *The Leader as Coach*, which contains a simple but fundamental observation: the role of the manager, in short, is becoming that of a coach.

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The logic is that as our environment becomes more complex (and this article was written pre-COVID), managers can no longer be regarded as the technical super experts in their field. Instead their role is also to support and guide employees as they learn to adapt in ways that ensure innovation. This has become even more pronounced in the current environment: the world is changing in unprecedented ways and companies are having to adapt faster and further than ever before. We need the best efforts of everyone in our organization, not just the smarts of our leaders and managers.



THEY'RE NOT AS GOOD AS THEY THINK

What does the manager and coach do in a practical sense? According to Ibarra and Scoular they:

- Ask questions instead of provide answers
- Support employees rather than judge them
- Facilitate their development rather than instruct them

Most managers think they're pretty good at coaching. Unfortunately, most employees have a different view. 24% of executives significantly overestimated their abilities relative to the responses provided by their teams.

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COMMON MISTAKES

The article talks about the mistakes people make in coaching e.g. going into a session with a predetermined idea of what they want their team member to say, and leading them in that direction. In our experience, some managers think they're providing coaching and report to their leaders that they're doing it, but their employees don't realise they're even being coached. Other managers think that the best coaching is to lead by example, which actually means just doing their job and hoping their employees get the idea for themselves.



FRAMEWORKS

The article discusses a couple of frameworks – the coaching matrix and the well-known GROW model. But it also makes the point that the real value of coaching lies in a company-wide commitment to a culture of coaching rather than command and control. Coaching is a skill that can be learned, but it has to be developed at scale, from the executive meeting room to the shop floor.

Coaching is the precondition to a true learning organization, and the organizations that are going to come through the next few years in the best shape will be as a result of being the best and fastest learners.

CHALLENGES

The biggest challenge for coaching is with technical organizations led by people who have been in their roles for a long time and who are genuine subject matter experts. They've reached their positions because of what they know, but because they have been in this position for so long, their work has become instinctual. This is often the biggest barrier to developing their skill in coaching – the enemy of learning is knowing. It's very difficult to develop genuine bench depth in organizations like this, and succession is a key risk (see my blog on this topic [here](#)).

As the article points out, there is still resistance to coaching, which a lot of senior people feel is too “soft” or too time consuming. Often what they actually feel is that it deprives them of their most familiar management tool: control. Do it my way.

And even if they know they should be coaching, they hide behind busy-ness and priorities. Often what they're actually hiding is a lack of confidence. Most managers will tell you they would like to spend more time coaching, but they don't have time. Actually, what they're telling you is that they don't feel very confident about it.



COACHING AND THE ACTIVE LEARNING SYSTEM

Coaching is at the heart of our Active Learning System. Not only do we cover aspects of coaching in several of the courses, it also underpins the skill development in all of the courses relating to managing other people. It's a central part of our management philosophy – you can hear more about that in our [podcast](#).



We built coaching right into the heart of our Active Learning System.



Sometimes the coach isn't the learner's manager, it's someone in a senior position with coaching responsibilities. This is why we call that role 'Leader Coach'.

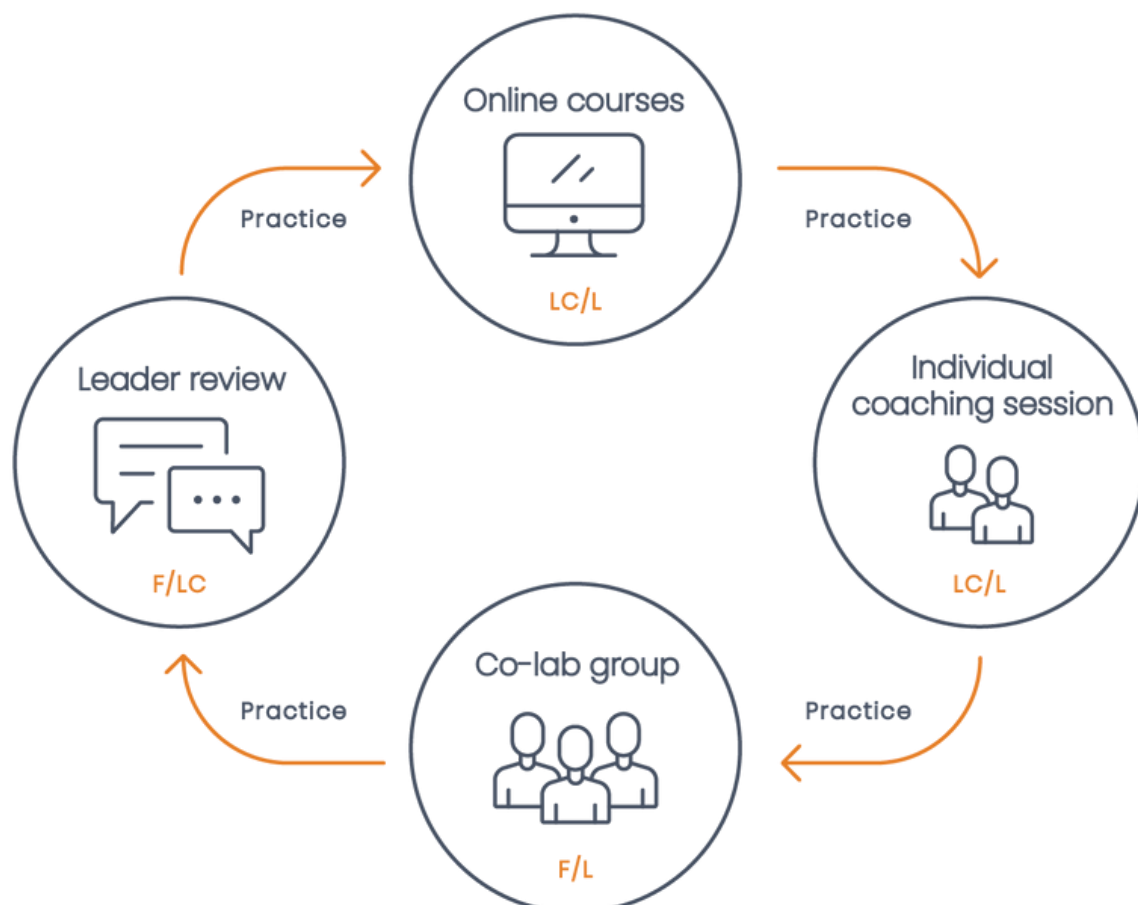


HOW THE ACTIVE LEARNING SYSTEM WORKS

Here's how it works: having reviewed the online course content, learners then discuss it with their Leader Coach. We recommend that these individual coaching sessions are scheduled for 15 minutes, which we've found reduces the temptation to avoid/cancel/defer them. These coaching sessions are a wonderful opportunity for a Leader Coach to customize the content, helping the learner put the learning into the organization's context and to practice their coaching skills of listening and guidance.

After the co-lab group session, the facilitator and the Leader Coach meet to discuss the learner's progress and any issues. It's also an opportunity for a facilitator to guide the Leader Coach on their coaching.

To help build the Leader Coach's confidence, we've developed the Active Coach Playbook, which is a companion program to Active Manager and Active Team Leader (our [programs](#)). It contains valuable training in coaching, as well as material to help them prepare for their session with the learner – including how to deal with some of the challenges that might arise.



SUMMARY

Coaching is a key process in a learning organization and developing genuine Leader Coaches is a key activity in how the Active Learning System transforms organizations.

If you're interested in a chat with us about coaching for leaders, please email us on hello@thebreakthrough.co and we'll book in a time.

REFERENCES

The Leader as Coach by Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular From HBR November–December 2019 Issue <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-leader-as-coach>

MORE RESOURCES

Dr Mike's Blog, Deepen your bench <https://thebreakthrough.co/blog/deepen-your-bench>

Business Leader Breakthroughs Podcast [EP63] Coaching – What Is It and How to Do It Right <https://thebreakthrough.co/podcast-episodes/ep63>

ABOUT US

Dr Mike is one of New Zealand's leading keynote speakers and business advisers with a unique background in strategy consulting, senior leadership and business education.

Since 2003, we've been running learning and development programs for business leaders and managers. Our purpose is to create more human workplaces through management training that sticks. Our approach leads to permanent and significant behavior change among learners – and their leaders. Without a single workshop.

