

Understanding the Challenges Inherent in Distance Coaching for Leaders

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Abstract

Manager and leader coaches struggle to develop trust and to have open and honest dialogue regarding performance challenges and roadblocks and these challenges are exacerbated when it comes to coaching team members virtually across time, space, and culture. The purpose of this study was to research what is already available on the challenges of managers and leaders who coach distributed teams. In order to answer the research question, the researcher conducted interviews as the data collection method. The data collection yielded important information and found that there are different challenges faced by managers and leaders who coach distributed teams. A participative, or coaching style improves employee engagement, reduces attrition, and enhances employee performance and growth but the positive outcomes decline as electronic dependence increases. Traditional or fixed mindsets are an obstacle to developing effective manager or leader coaches for virtual teams. This researcher recommends in addition to teaching the skills necessary to use a coaching or participative style of leading, organizations should also teach specialized virtual facilitative skills that ensure the success of managers and leaders who coach distributed team members.

Introduction

Introduction Statement

Organizations are interested in accelerating innovation and problem solving by using coaching. Coaching is a desirable skill that can elevate performance conversations, design thinking and agile methodologies. Manager and Leader coaches struggle to develop trust and vulnerability to have open and honest dialogue regarding performance challenges and roadblocks. These challenges are exacerbated when it comes to coaching team members virtually across time, space, and culture. This is Distance Coaching.

Leaders who connect with team members as people (genuinely caring about intrinsic values and goals) rather than as a means-to-an-end can increase loyalty and engagement. Asking provocative questions without creating defensiveness accelerates problem solving. Organizations want leaders to use a coaching style virtually, but leaders often resist because they find it difficult to truly connect and build relationships using virtual platforms. This study is intended to clarify the challenges faced and identify ways to overcome them, and in doing so, to benefit business.

The researcher is a certified coach who coaches professionally in virtual settings. The researcher developed a methodology and wrote a book that is used to develop leaders to use a coaching mindset and skills. One such business the researcher is currently working with is a Fortune 500 IT organization. Following a three day in-person session, six to eight session participants attend an hour-long, virtual coaching session once monthly for three months. The purpose of the virtual session is to reinforce the in-person learning and to create sustainable culture change by practicing and overcoming challenges to implementation. Distance coaching is often identified as one of the primary challenges. This study will provide meaningful information to businesses and enhance the researcher's ability to impact business outcomes by uncovering ways to overcome or minimize the primary implications to distance coaching.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to research what is already available on the topic as an initial cursory review. The researcher explored the specific obstacles and had an interest in ways to overcome them. Ultimately, the researcher sought to evaluate the potential to write a book on this topic because Distance Coaching is the reality for today's manager.

Research Problem

Without trust business success is at risk, and building trust is more challenging without face to face connection. The need to accelerate change requires today's leader to communicate efficiently but while elevating the conversation to maximize creative problem solving. Virtual platforms facilitate meetings when there are team members spread across various geography's, but they also create a barrier to connecting with others. Research implies that millennials want more feedback and coaching, yet many managers are ill-equipped to deliver both on-track and off-track feedback virtually, or otherwise, to enhance another's success. Effectively delivering feedback is an opportunity to accelerate the cadence of the learning and performance cycle in business.

Leaders who use coaching skills have higher levels of employee engagement, better work relationships, and improved retention. Leaders who use a participatory, or coaching style facilitate creative problem solving and exponentially impact business results. Leaders who primarily use a directive or authoritarian style become the primary problem solver and use a “tell” versus “ask” approach to leading.

Research question

Understanding the Challenges Inherent in Distance Coaching for Leaders, a study to explore the primary obstacles leaders encounter when Distance (virtual) Coaching.

Methodology Description

In order to answer the research question, the researcher conducted interviews as the data collection method. The researcher sought the insights of industry experts on the challenges that are inherent in Distance Coaching. The researcher will also explore the expert’s perspectives on strategies to overcome these challenges with antidotal and qualitative data points.

Summary of Overall Project

Conclusions from the brief literary review and the subject’s responses indicate the need for additional research on the challenges encountered by managers and leaders who coach distributed teams. This area of study is relatively new, and the literary review by this researcher sought to find information on how to support the development of managers and leaders use of coaching skills virtually. The information uncovered did validate that managers and leaders who coach face greater complexity than professional coaches and the complexity increases when teams are distributed rather than co-located. The subject interviews provided important implications on fixed mindset, creating even more questions on mindset’s impact on the development of skill and behavior. The subjects also had various opinions on coaching distributed teams. This further reflects the need for a deeper review of the specific challenges of Distance Coaching, and ways to overcome them.

To enhance future studies, the researcher recommends a larger sample utilizing an electronic survey of leaders and managers who practice Distance Coaching. This survey would specifically encompass questions on mindsets, frequency for formal and informal team member interactions, use of virtual platforms and facilitation, a self-evaluation of directive vs. participative behaviors, relationship building, and nurturing autonomy and problem-solving skills in others through coaching skills.

Literary Review

Introduction Statement

In order to answer the research question, the Literature Review focused on the major theme of managers and leaders use of coaching skills across the distance of time, space, and culture. This included topics specific to Managers and Leaders coaching and Virtual Leadership.

Understanding the Challenges Inherent in Distance Coaching for Leaders

In Sut Wong and Marthe Berntzen, 2018 article *Transformational Leadership and Leader–Member Exchange in Distributed Teams: The Roles of Electronic Dependence and Team Task Interdependence* investigated challenges specific to leading a digital workforce and ideas on how to overcome these challenges. The authors were able to support a correlation between high electronic dependency and lower quality Leader Member Exchange (LMX). They were further able to support that the positive impact of Transformational Leadership on LMX that is found in co-located teams is negatively impacted when there is high electronic dependency and high task interdependency.

Wong, & Berntzen (2018) found that in a traditional co-located workplace, transformational leadership has been proven to enhance engagement, workplace satisfaction, self-efficacy, organizational citizenship behaviors, and to positively affect intrinsic motivations (p. 381). Based on prior research, the authors assert that a digital team’s performance can lag that of traditional co-located teams. A distributed team’s lag in performance has a relationship with the diminishing returns of transformational leadership and LMX for virtual leaders. Transformational leadership behaviors “focus on transcending work goals, purposes, and higher-order intrinsic needs” (Wong, & Berntzen, 2018, p. 381). The behaviors also encompass articulation of a vision, collaborating on goal setting and expectations, and providing followers with individualized support and intellectual stimulation. The use of a transformational leadership approach has a positive impact on quality LMX relationships.

“LMX quality refers to the quality of the distinct dyadic relationship between the leader and an individual follower” (Wong, & Berntzen, 2018, p.382). High-quality relationships operate with mutual trust, support, and higher levels of interaction where both members contribute to the other’s success. “LMX has proven to be one of the most predictive leadership factors influencing follower’s outcomes” (p.387). According to earlier research, digital teams are more likely to be plagued with higher occurrences of poor organizational citizenship behaviors, communication issues, and task conflict. They also are more likely to experience lower levels of team satisfaction, knowledge sharing, and trust (p.382). This is a significant challenge for organizations because according to the Remote Leadership Institute, “70 percent of managers at *Fortune* 100 companies have at least one remote team member” (Hirsch, 2017). According to the “Project Management Institute, 90 percent of teams have at least one member (usually more) who are not co-located” (Eikenberry & Turmel, 2018, p. 378).

In their article, Wong and Berntzen (2018) emphasize the importance of continued exploration on the challenges of virtual leadership. The use of digital teams is on the rise, and while negative impacts and outcomes have been identified when distributed teams are compared to co-located teams, there is still limited research on the challenges facing virtual leaders. The authors intended to add to this scarce body of work by validating the leadership challenges when there is high electronic dependence and when teams also have high task interdependencies. They also sought to uncover some practical ways to overcome some of the challenges the virtual leader faces. Toward that end, the authors completed two independent field studies, across three organizations in the IT and manufacturing industries (p. 384). These studies focused on LMX when a team had high electronic dependence and task interdependence. The authors tested two hypotheses:

“Hypothesis 1 (H1). Electronic dependence will moderate the positive relationship between transformational leadership and LMX quality such that the relationship is less positive when electronic dependence is high” (Wong, & Berntzen, 2018, p. 383).

“Hypothesis 2 (H2). Task interdependence, electronic dependence, and transformational leadership will interact in predicting LMX such that the relationship between transformational leadership and LMX will be negative when task interdependence and electronic dependence are high” (Wong, & Berntzen, 2018, p. 384).

Both studies confirm that utilizing transformational leadership has positive implications for LMX and that those results are stronger when electronic dependence is low. This aligns with a study performed by the ASTD forum in 2012 showing that as virtual distance accumulates performance dramatically declines (Dennis, Meola & Hall, n.d). While both hypotheses were supported by the two studies, and H2 has potential implications for this researcher, H1 is focused specifically and more generally on the question raised regarding the challenges facing leaders who coach virtually. H1 supports that virtual leaders face greater challenges than those who lead in a co-located workplace (Wong, & Berntzen, 2018, p. 387) and those challenges specifically impact trust and the quality of the interaction between the leader and their distributed team members.

Additional information uncovered in this article that is of interest to this researcher:

- a lack of material, social and symbolic cues, may hinder a sense of belonging for virtual team members (p. 387)
- higher quality and frequency of communication can positively impact trust (p. 387)
- a richer media videoconferencing tool with both visual and audio capabilities enhances communication quality (p. 389)
- Virtual leaders often benefit from communication skills training (p.389)
- Virtual leaders may need specialized training for leading a distributed team (p. 389)
- Leaders should strive for an initial, face-to-face introductory meeting at the onset of a new virtual relationship (p. 389)

- Leaders should adapt their own behaviors to assert their values (p. 389)
- Leaders should show team co-presence and take an active role in team processes that initiate group communication, idea discussion, problem solving, etc. (p. 389)

In DiGirolamo and Tkach's, 2019 article *An Exploration of Managers Using Coaching Skills*, the authors contribute to a body of research that is scarce on "how best to conceptualize and define" the best use of coaching skills among managers. Their findings suggest that managers use of coaching skills is best defined as a "style of participatory management or leadership." This style contributes to increased employee engagement, improved work relationships, and reduced intention to leave. The authors also clarify the unique differences that exist for managers versus professional coaches who use coaching skills. Specifically, differences include the dynamics of the Directive – Participative Spectrum, the alignment of individual and organizational objectives, and the impossibility of managers maintaining 100% confidentiality. "The role of the managerial coach, in many respects, is more challenging than that of the external coach."

DiGirolamo and Tkach (2019) used a mixed methods approach which included literature review, semi structured interviews with curricula developers of coach training for managers, human resource personnel, managers and leaders, and a team member survey (p.10). According to a "2016 study conducted by Human Capital Institute and the International Coach Federation, 80% of organizations use a coach approach" and most plan to expand coaching among managers and leaders (p.2). Defining coaching was a key element of the author's study. A thorough evaluation of the terms Leading, Managing, Coaching, and Mentoring ensued. The authors determined that "Leaders motivate team members to produce change, to innovate, to disrupt" while "Managers work to ensure goals are met and generally work within tighter constraints." According to Gallup (2019), "the need for disruption in how employees are managed has never been more urgent (p. 904). In some way's managers operate with an abhorrence for change as they seek to execute and maintain control. Ultimately, the coaching utilized by managers and leaders was defined as "a style of participative management or leadership that integrates coaching skills into daily interaction in order to maximize individual and organizational growth" (p. 7). This is different than mentoring, which is best defined as "sharing knowledge and wisdom to educate and develop a less experienced individual." Understanding these terms is critical for today's leader, because "today's worker, particularly millennials" (Gallup, 2019, p. 912) want to be coached (Gallup, 2019, p. 912). Gallup defines coaching as managers participating with employees to provide "clear expectations, accountability, rich purpose, and ongoing feedback and coaching." Gallup's research supports that employees who have managers that collaborate with them on setting goals "were nearly four times more likely to be engaged than other employees" and those "who receive daily feedback from their manager are three times more likely to be engaged" (p. 933) than the employee who has one annual feedback session during a traditional performance management conversation.

The researchers, DiGirolamo and Tkach (2019), sought to clarify key differences between professional coaches and managers or leaders who coach. One of the key differences that differentiate a manager or leader coach and a professional coach is the need for managers to operate on a continuum between authority and the flexibility they are willing to grant their subordinates (p. 3). This is described as the Directive-Participative Spectrum. Not surprisingly, on the directive side of the continuum, managers solve problems and then communicate direction to the team. On the participative side of the continuum, managers practice collaborative problem solving and generate solutions collectively with team members (p. 4). Leaders who can calibrate their behavior depending on what the situation calls for, either a direct or participative style, are more successful (p. 3).

Other factors that differentiate managers and leaders who coach from professional coaches is that “managers and leaders utilize a more conversational approach than structured sessions” (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019, p. 5) and are less likely to have well-defined coaching agreements with team members. While confidentiality is a significant element that builds trust between professional coaches and their clients, managers and leaders may be at odds with their “duty to divulge these confidences with others on the management team” (p.5). Managers also have responsibility for organizational goals which may conflict with the growth and development goals of their team members. In professional coaching the relationship is said to focus on the client’s agenda, or the person receiving coaching. Managers have a duty to focus on the organization’s agenda, as well as the team member they are coaching.

Managers who more naturally lean toward a participatory style of leading will find coaching skills compliment their approach. A 2011 study “estimates that “bad” managers make up 50% or more of the management population” (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019, p. 6). These managers often have weak interpersonal skills and may possess a “short term focus, limiting mindsets, and an unwillingness to give up control.” Managers who practice a more directive approach to leading will be more challenged to adopt a coaching approach. “Making an intentional shift to add coaching skills to managers and leader’s toolkit” may be an important consideration in building a coaching culture (p.7) but the reality for organizations is that half of the manager population may not easily adapt to a participative, relationship driven approach to leading.

The study identified nine coaching frequency items that represented the manager or leader coaching composite scale. They are as follows (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019, p. 15-16):

1. How often a question was asked that initiated learning.
2. How often leaders focused “complete attention on the conversation and spontaneously built on your relationship.”
3. How often an effort was made to “develop a collaborative and trusting relationship.”

4. How often the leader “actively listened and reflected on what you were saying or not saying.”
5. How often the leader “used language that was direct.”
6. How often “interactions led to greater awareness, insight or understanding.”
7. How often the leader “worked with you to design actions that effectively promoted growth or job performance.”
8. How often the leader worked with you “to plan and set goals that will most effectively promote your growth or job performance.”
9. How often the leader “worked with you to manage your progress and hold you accountable for working toward career or job performance goals.”

“The scale items cover the coaching construct quite well and exhibit very good psychometric properties” (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019, p. 17). The study showed that the use of coaching skills is related to good working relationships, improved employee engagement, and significantly influences team member growth and development.

Critique of Understanding the Challenges Inherent in Distance Coaching for Leaders
In Sut Wong and Marthe Berntzen’s, 2018 article *Transformational Leadership and Leader–Member Exchange in Distributed Teams: The Roles of Electronic Dependence and Team Task Interdependence* the authors validate a key premise of this researcher’s observation; that coaching a virtual team has a different set of challenges than when a leader’s team members are co-located. The research provided by Wong and Berntzen link specifically, because of the emphasis on the impact of electronic dependence on Leader Member Exchange. The article also provides valuable information on why these challenges exist and some practical approaches to addressing them. This article further supports the development of questions to better understand the perspective of virtual leaders and the challenges of coaching a virtual team.

In DiGirolamo and Tkach’s, 2019 article, *An Exploration of Managers Using Coaching Skills*, the authors define coaching skills, the implication that managers use coaching skills as a participative approach to leading, and how this type of coaching is different than professional coaching. Having a clearly articulated foundation and definitions of coaching for managers and leaders is an important element for this researcher to fully answer the research question, and to *Understand the Challenges Inherent in Distance Coaching for Leaders*. The challenges that coaches face generally, can also be compared to the challenges faced when coaching from a distance.

Conclusion Statement

From this brief literature review, this researcher learned about the challenges faced by leaders who manage distributed teams. As distance increases performance declines for distributed teams. The literature review also provided clarity on key definitions related to leaders and managers who coach. Furthermore, this researcher asserts the similarity between the construct of coaching as a participative style of leading (DiGirolamo & Tkach, 2019) and using a transformational leadership style (Wong & Berntzen, 2018).

The similarity holds significance when considering the impact of transformational leadership on leader member exchange for virtual leaders. Another study found e-leaders focus more on task but must “pay close attention to socially-related activities to motivate team members and enhance their involvement and participation in effective work achievement” (Jawadi, Daassi, Favier, & Kalika, 2010) further validating that different challenges exist for managers and leaders who coach across distance.

This literary review has provided the researcher with a baseline for defining coaching and coaching skills for managers and leaders, challenges related to leading a distributed team, and how those challenges impact the quality of the LMX relationship between a leader and their team member. The negative impact to LMX quality for managers and leaders who distance coach, is an indicator that developing leadership and coaching competencies is more complex for managers and leaders who coach virtually.

Methodology

Introduction Statement

Research Methodology (n.d.) defines methodology in research as a philosophical framework “or the foundation upon which the research is based.” This researcher philosophically aligns with the interpretivist approach, meaning that “the researcher as a social actor to appreciate differences between people.” This is foundational to the approach because of the significant implications of coaching across distance, time, and culture. The initial approach to data collection is qualitative and seeks to answer the research question; *What are the primary obstacles leaders encounter when distance (virtual) coaching.*

The researcher developed four structured questions to ask industry experts. The interviews will utilize a semi-structured approach as the data collection method. “In semi-structured interviews, the interviewer prepares a set of the same questions to be answered by all interviewees” (Research Methodology, n.d.). Asking the same question of each subject enhances researcher objectivity and limits bias. The interviewer will clarify or ask additional unstructured questions to further expand on ideas after the subject has responded to the initial structured question. The interviewer is careful not to demonstrate a reaction of agreement or disagreement to the subject’s responses to avoid influencing the subject. Unstructured dialogue will allow the researcher to further clarify questions based on observations and literary reviews without invalidating the interviews.

Subjects

The researcher identified three interview subjects. The first is a leading expert in the field of coaching who was identified through the researcher’s network. The second subject was an author who was identified from an article written on the research topic. The third attempt was from a large coaching consultancy who was unable to identify a subject matter expert. The subjects were sought out for their business acumen, practical experience, and academic expertise. The various perspectives lend themselves to expanding the researcher’s scope of information on the topic.

Subject 1 – Founder & retired CEO of an international coach training business. This subject is a co-author of one of the best-known books on coaching. She has 25 years of coaching and leadership experience and is recognized world-wide as an expert and early contributor to the coaching industry.

Subject 2 – The head of coaching programs for the International Federation of Coaching, and the author of multiple research papers on managers and leaders coaching. He has decades of experience working with organizations and managers and leaders who coach.

Subject 3 – A Director who is implementing coaching for managers in a major division of a fortune 500 IT organization. As a manager, he has used coaching skills for eight years with his team and believes it is critical skill set in today’s organization.

Instrument

The researcher developed open-ended questions to allow the subjects the maximum flexibility to respond. The literature review uncovered specific examples of ways to overcome the challenges leaders face when coaching virtual teams. While the researcher was tempted to restructure the questions to incorporate the new information, the decision was made not to do so, and rather to validate the literature review, or to uncover new information without tainting the subject's responses. This approach minimizes researcher bias and is an important step in building a base of knowledge on an emerging topic. Each subject was asked the following questions:

Question 1 – *Describe the most significant challenge in developing leaders to effectively coach their team?*

Question 2 – *How does virtual or distance coaching impact those challenges for leader coaches?*

Question 3 – *What ideas have you seen or experienced to successfully overcome the challenges to develop effective virtual leader coaches?*

Question 4 – *What metrics were used to validate the success of those approaches? Or, looking back, how would you measure the success of those ideas going forward?*

Procedure

The researcher conducted separate interviews with each subject over a web-based platform or in-person. Virtual interviews were necessary with two of the subjects due to geographic distances.

Conclusion Statement

The results of the data collection will be tabulated in the Results Section of this project.

Results

Introduction Statement

The following is a tabulation of the results of the data collection.

Instrument Results

The following is a simple tabulation and paraphrase of the subjects' responses to the instrument questions.

Question 1 – *Describe the most significant challenge in developing leaders to effectively coach their team?*

Subject 1—By the time people have risen to that level of success they are invested in acting a certain way...getting them to let go and try something different is hard. They have to be willing to let go of what has always been their success factor. There is also an illusion that it takes more time. The third thing is that organizations are so results focused. It feels risky to slow down and take the time to move away from focusing on results to focusing on the relationship.

Subject 2—Based on many years in the corporate world and in consulting, I think the most significant challenge is developing interpersonal skills in leaders. Leaders are frequently chosen for their technical skills, and those individuals are often lacking in the interpersonal ones.

Subject 3—Getting people to consciously look for opportunities to coach people...to break the habit of just doing status checks and report-outs. It's also a new skill and it's hard to get people to take the time to practice. We get so busy that we don't check in with people about what's important to them, their values. It's easy to get busy with the tactical and not look at the strategic. It's a trap that is easy to fall into. Managers don't always see the direct correlation between the coaching and their results. This is because the change in behaviors takes time to impact the bottom line.

Question 2 – *How does virtual or distance coaching impact those challenges for leader coaches?*

Subject 1—In my own experience I prefer coaching over the phone or using Zoom. Coaching at a distance or managing a distributed workforce benefits from interacting in a fluid, connected way. In some ways coaching seems easier from a distance and it clearly makes leaders more effective.

Subject 2—It makes it much more difficult to have a rapport and inhibits spontaneous interactions. Research on virtual teams has pointed out the need for early face-to-face interactions to build bonds, and this is no different.

Subject 3—There is something about the impromptu nature of someone being able to walk in your office which means that virtually communication has to be more formal. It

works both ways, so having to be more structured and scheduled for the one-on-ones impacts our ability to build relationships naturally. And it's easy to cancel one-on-ones so communication can be less frequent.

Question 3 – *What ideas have you seen or experienced to successfully overcome the challenges to develop effective virtual leader coaches?*

Subject 1—Zoom is the bomb. I think it is the next best thing to being there. The technology that is available helps. Not sure everyone takes advantage of it.

Subject 2—If you're referring to a leader using coaching skills, I think the skills used face-to-face are the same as those used virtually. Leaders should first try to work with team members to let them discover the answer to problems on their own and provide minimal guidance unless there is a need to be directive.

Subject 3—I have great hope that coaching circles and virtual pods give people the support that they need as they learn to coach. I know that without that kind of support it is going to die. The majority don't have the structure to practice enough. I think virtual pods do two things: keeps the conversation alive and gives the organization a bit of a sense of what's going on. It's a skill that people have to practice and if they don't, they won't feel comfortable with it and therefore they won't do it.

Question 4 – *What metrics were used to validate the success of those approaches? Or, looking back, how would you measure the success of those ideas going forward?*

Subject 1—I don't think it changes when you are developing coaches for distributed teams. It's through observation. Listen for the effect they are having on the client. Are they moving the client forward? I don't think it is different in-person or over distance. Keep your attention on the things that make the difference in the interaction: connected interaction, pointed feedback, and evaluation, and not just checking the box but the quality of the client experience. One of the biggest challenges may be getting people use to the idea that they are not able to connect if they are not skin-to-skin. I also think coaching from a distance requires that we hold ourselves more accountable. It is not an opportunity to multi-task. You have to be even more present. As a coach I realize that learning requires that one first has to recognize that this is possible and then learn how to do it.

Subject 2—To me, the only measures of success are team member tenure, productivity, and growth. Furthermore, the only measure of our behavior is the reflection in other people's responses to our behavior.

Subject 3—As far as the pods go, if people are showing up or not showing up we can tell if people are seeing value. It might be interesting in a year to take some kind of pulse on the organization by doing a survey on if they would like to be coached.

Conclusion Statement

The results will be analyzed in the Conclusion Section of this project.

Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary of Data Collection

The data collection yielded important information in pursuit of answering the research question and found that there are different challenges faced by managers and leaders who coach distributed teams. Two of the interview subjects are recognized experts in the field of coaching. They shared both similar and conflicting views on the challenges faced when developing managers and leaders to effectively coach team members across the distance of time, space, and culture. The third subject was a manager who coaches in a large IT organization, and who has experienced first-hand an initiative to develop coaches in his organization. The two recognized expert points of view included one of the most successful CEOs in the coach training industry and the head of coaching programs research for the International Coaching Federation. Both were engaged and were interested in the topic. Both would say their focus has not been specifically on the topic of Distance Coaching by leaders and managers in organizations. The third subject was interested in finding ways to enhance the development of virtual coaching for leaders and managers in his organization. The questions were open-ended and gave subjects the opportunity to respond as they saw fit. The second subject answered the questions in writing before the interview, and the researcher left those responses in their original written form to preserve the integrity of those responses. The third subject was interviewed in-person.

Conclusions from the Data Results

More than 80% of organizations today expect managers and leaders to use a coaching approach and that percentage is expected to grow. The number of those managers and leaders who are leading virtual teams, is also on the rise. Managers and leaders who use a transformational or participative approach to leading, meaning among other things they ask more than tell, could be said to use coaching skills. This style of leading improves employee engagement, reduces attrition, and enhances employee performance and growth. When effective, this approach has been shown to build trust and improve the quality of the relationship between the leader and team member. That same quality declines as electronic dependence increases (Appendix #1). Coaching as a manager or leader is more complex than professional coaching and those managers and leaders who coach distributed team members face different challenges than those who coach co-located teams.

The first question was, “*Describe the most significant challenge in developing leaders to effectively coach their team?*” A theme that emerged was that some challenges faced by managers and leaders who coach is a matter of mindset, or established patterns of behavior, bias, and beliefs. Managers who are more practiced at being directive rather than participative may struggle to let go of control and nurture autonomy in others. The second subject asserted that individual contributors with strong technical skills are often promoted into leadership positions. The transition from technical to interpersonal capabilities to drive performance is a significant shift in behavior. These leaders often lean into their technical expertise and utilize mentoring more than coaching. Finally, the pressure for managers to produce results can create perceived constraints that minimize

the importance and focus of building authentic relationships with team members. The beforementioned mindsets are potential roadblocks for all managers and leaders and there are further implications for those coaching distributed team members. Bias and beliefs play a role in how managers, leaders, and the coaching industry view Distance Coaching. The common beliefs and bias that this study uncovered were two-fold. The first, is managers and leaders generally think they don't have the time to coach or that time differences create additional constraints and concerns. In this researcher's experience, it does take time to develop the skills to be effective coaching in shorter increments of time. The second belief that may create an obstacle is that managers find it difficult developing a connection when coaching doesn't take place in-person. In part this belief is substantiated in various studies, one of which was part of this researcher's literary review. Distributed team members experience a "lack of material, social and symbolic cues (that) may hinder a sense of belonging for virtual team members" (Wong & Berntzen, 2018, p. 387). The impact for virtual team members is reminiscent of the experience of "out-groups" from Leader Member Exchange theory (Penn State, 2013).

Coaching is a relatively new industry and limited research exists to validate the challenges faced by managers and leaders who are coaching, much less those who are coaching distributed teams. The development of coaching skills for managers and leaders seems to generally follow a similar path for both in-person and virtual coaching. There is a possibility that a traditional mindset exists within the coaching industry that impacts how virtual coaches are developed. This researcher has developed hundreds of managers and leaders who coach virtually, and the concern that virtual coaching is more difficult is widely held by virtual managers. There are different challenges for those who coach distributed teams and an opportunity exists to develop and provide the tools managers and leaders need to overcome them.

The study by DiGirolamo & Tkach (2019) clarifies key differences between a professional and a manager or leader coach. These differences are largely due to aligning individual and organizational goals and knowing which situations call for directing versus facilitating. It is also more complex for managers and leaders to build trust because their loyalty is split between the organization and the team member.

The second question was, "*How does virtual or distance coaching impact those challenges for leader coaches?*" The coaching industry subjects agreed that the coaching skills were the same for managers and leaders for co-located and virtual team members. The subject experts had different points-of-view when asked if they felt Distance Coaching was more challenging than in-person coaching. Admittedly, some had not given it significant consideration but two of the three felt the loss of spontaneous interaction took a toll on building trust and relationship. The variance in opinion further supports the need for additional research on this topic. These varied points-of-view can be seen in the questionnaire summary table (Appendix # 2).

The third question was, "*What ideas have you seen or experienced to successfully overcome the challenges to develop effective virtual leader coaches?*" The observations were varied on how best to overcome challenges or effectively support the development

of Distance Coaches. These observations included a focus on teaching how to ask questions so that team members could solve their own problems before directing, fully utilizing platforms like Zoom, and providing support with virtual communities of practice following training.

The fourth question was, *“What metrics were used to validate the success of those approaches? Or, looking back, how would you measure the success of those ideas going forward?”* There was also a difference of opinion in terms of measuring the effectiveness of these strategies. One felt it was ultimately through observing the quality of the interaction and the relationship, another said it was also through organizational metrics on retention, productivity, and growth, and the final subject suggested measuring involvement in coaching groups following the initial learning event as a way to evaluate perceived value. The various points-of-view further reinforces the opportunity to conduct additional research to validate the best tools for overcoming obstacles to Distance Coaching.

Recommendations

There are several factors that were identified in this study that challenge managers and leaders to be effective at Distance Coaching. Traditional or fixed mindsets are an obstacle to developing effective manager or leader coaches for virtual teams. These mindsets inhibit coaching skill development and the behavior transfer that enhances quality relationships between virtual leaders and their team (Appendix # 3). There are also skills that can be taught and developed in the areas of interpersonal communication, coaching, and leadership. These skills are like those needed for co-located teams, but it is even more critical to become masterful for the virtual leader coach. This researcher recommends in addition to teaching the skills necessary to use a coaching or participative style of leading, organizations should also teach specialized skills that ensure the success of managers and leaders who coach distributed team members. These skills would encompass how to facilitate dialogue utilizing a virtual video and audio platform.

The literary review and two of the subjects interviewed validated that there is a very real impact on the quality of LMX due to missing spontaneous interaction and connection for those Distance Coaching. There must be a deliberate focus on the cadence of quality interactions to build relationships with distributed team members. This researcher recommends additional evaluation is needed to understand the optimum frequency of brief spontaneous dialogue and more formal one-to-one and team meetings. Part of that evaluation should encompass the impact of video cameras being utilized to add visual cues and ensure full participation and focus.

Measuring the effectiveness of the quality of the coaching relationship requires various measurement methods. Expert observation and feedback at the individual level is one way to identify effectiveness. Using metrics at the organizational level is a means to understand the impact at a systems level, though it can be challenging to isolate the many variables that can play a part in retention, productivity, and individual growth. This researcher recommends administering a self and 360 survey. A self-survey at the onset would provide a baseline for a virtual leader’s mindset and self-evaluation of

coaching and facilitation skills. Ninety days after a learning workshop a self- and 360 could be administered to evaluate the impact on the team members being coached.

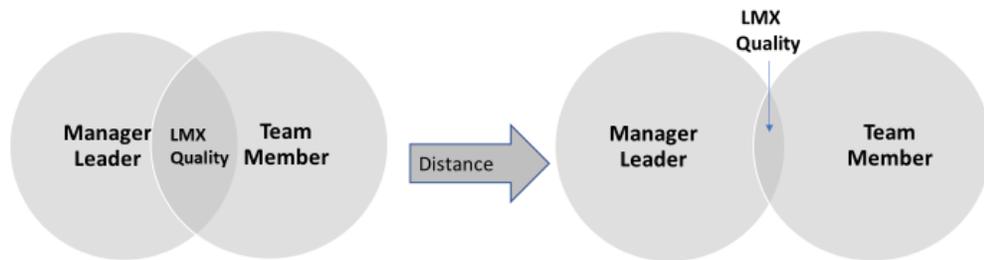
For leaders to change behavior the skills taught must be translate into consistent behavior. This requires practice. Creating communities of practice through group skill reinforcement pods is one approach. This researcher recommends further evaluation to determine the appropriate cadence, timeframe, and context that maximizes skill transfer into consistent behaviors. The success that is achieved from practice is another factor in impacting mindset.

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Appendix

Impact of Coaching over Distance



Appendix 1

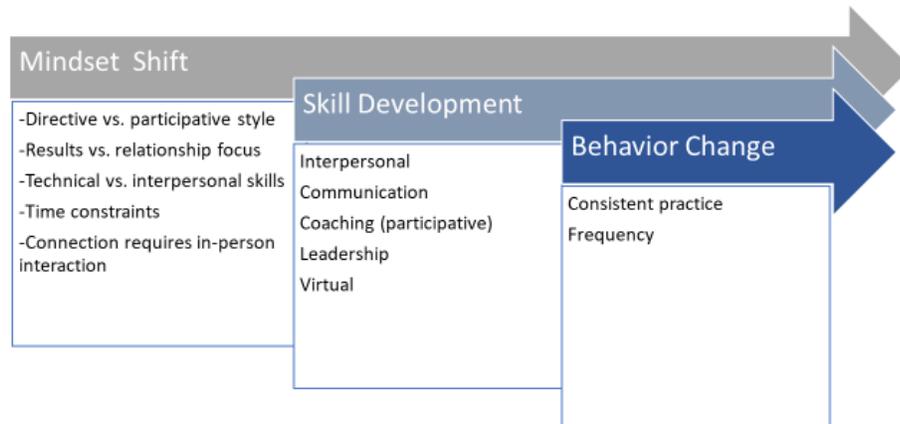
Survey Highlights

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
S1	Mindset	n/a	Zoom	observation
S2	Skill	spontaneous	participative	metrics
S3	Behavior	impromptu	virtual pods	activity

Appendix 2

Appendix

Challenges Developing Distance Coaches



Appendix 3

Biography of the Author

The author received her Bachelor of Science Degree in Business with an emphasis in Marketing from Regis University in Denver, Colorado. She held progressively senior roles in line and staff positions at Wells Fargo Bank, culminating in the Senior Vice President role as delivery manager and sales liaison for the Western Banking Group. As the delivery manager and sales liaison, she was accountable for business performance, sales leadership training, sales measurement and reporting, and sales development for a multistate region. Following her work in financial services, she consulted on the people and process side of change initiatives for a technology company as a partner and engagement manager.

The author founded Xponents, an organizational performance consultancy, in 2003. She is a certified coach through International Coach Federation. She also holds certifications in Myers Briggs Personality Type Indicator, Emotional Intelligence ^{2.0} (Self and 360°), Human Patterns, and Team Diagnostic International. She is the author of the book, *The Cycle of Transformation: Igniting organizational change through the leader coach*.