GUIDE FOR HR LEADERS

Coaching that *sticks*

How HR leaders can help managers build lasting habits



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The manager effectiveness problem isn't a training problem

Most HR teams have already asked the obvious question: how do we train better managers? It's not the wrong question. It's just an incomplete one.

U.S. organizations **pour $340 billion into employee development, training, and leadership programs** combined each year. But Gallup found that **only about 31% of employees are actually engaged** at work, the lowest it's been in over a decade. Something in that gap isn't a training problem.

$340B

spent each year on employee development, training, and leadership programs

31%

of U.S. employees are engaged at work

Sources: The Josh Bersin Company; Gallup

Ask HR leaders where it actually breaks down, and two answers come up more than any others: managers don't have the time to coach on top of everything else they're carrying, and even the ones who know how to give feedback or hold a hard conversation don't do it consistently.

Those two things tend to feed each other. A manager stretched thin defaults to whatever's fastest. Coaching rarely feels fast in the moment, even when it saves time later.

This number explains why the gap matters so much: Gallup also found that **70% of the variance in employee engagement traces back to the people manager**. That means engagement doesn't depend on mission statements or benefits packages, but on managers in the day-to-day — whether they show up for check-ins or cancel them, whether they recognize good work or leave it unnoticed.

70%

of the variance in employee engagement traces back to the people manager.

Source: Gallup

That's both good and bad news. Good, because it means managers (and the people who develop them) have real influence over outcomes. Bad, because it means getting manager behavior right is higher stakes than we might have thought.

So the right question isn't, "How do we train managers to know what good coaching looks like?" Most of them already do. The better question is, **"How do we help managers consistently practice the behaviors that make them effective?"**

Knowing and doing are two different skill sets. It's time to close the distance between them.

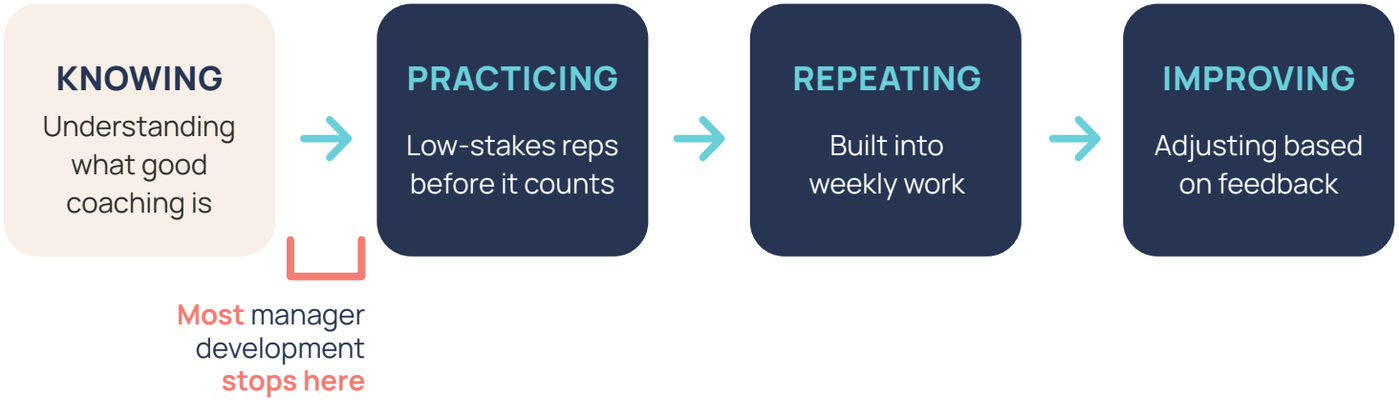
Knowing vs. doing

Most managers already understand what good coaching looks like. They've sat through trainings, and many have had their own experience with a leader. They can define the behaviors and know what great coaches should be doing.

But knowing and doing are still two different jobs.

A manager can leave a training session fully convinced that weekly feedback matters, only to walk back into a day with 400 unread messages and a direct report waiting outside their door. They still know the importance of that weekly feedback, but it loses out to whatever's most urgent in that moment.

That's not a motivation problem. It's a practice problem. Behavior change happens in a sequence, not in a single session:



Most manager development stalls at the first arrow, **Knowing**. Getting past it means building in low-stakes opportunities to practice a hard conversation or a piece of feedback before the moment that actually counts. That way, the behavior is already familiar when the pressure is real.

Let's focus on the other three parts of this sequence.



The 4 habits for great coaching

Effective coaching isn't a single skill. It's four habits, repeated consistently:

1. CREATE CLARITY.

Create clarity around what matters most right now, what success looks like, and who owns what. **Less than half of U.S. employees** say they know what's expected of them at work. That points to a problem with setting clear expectations, not problems with your talent. It's also rarely a one-time conversation — priorities shift, and managers who create clarity well tend to repeat it out loud more often than feels necessary.





2. HAVE MEANINGFUL CONVERSATIONS.

Those conversations should be real check-ins, not just status updates. Just **16% of employees** said their last conversation with their manager was extremely meaningful.

That doesn't mean every one-on-one has to be a long, in-depth conversation. Meaningful check-ins touch on what actually matters to the work and to the person doing it: progress, roadblocks, what's coming next, and how they're doing. Gallup has found that one meaningful conversation per week builds high-performing relationships more than any other leadership activity. Even fifteen minutes counts, as long as it happens regularly.

Managers should be asking, "How are things going? What's in your way? What do you need from me?" Then they should listen to the answers.

Employees tend to remember the managers who cared about them, and that care comes through in these small, repeated conversations.

3. GIVE USEFUL FEEDBACK.

Timely, specific, and ongoing — constructive feedback is as much recognition as it is redirection. Right now, **only 26% of employees** say the feedback they get actually helps them do better work.

Much of that gap comes down to timing. Feedback saved for a quarterly or annual review arrives long after the work it's about has been completed, when it's too late to change anything. Useful feedback happens close to the moment and sounds more like, "Here's what I'm seeing, and here's the impact it's having."

That applies to good work as much as to course corrections. Recognition tells an employee what to keep doing, and it's often the easiest form of feedback for a manager to make routine.

4. COACH FOR OWNERSHIP AND GROWTH.

Instead of solving an employee's problem for them, help them think it through. Ask, "What do you think? What are your options? What will you do next?"

This one is worth naming directly for high-capacity managers, who tend to absorb their team's problem-solving alongside their own and end up carrying two jobs instead of developing one team.

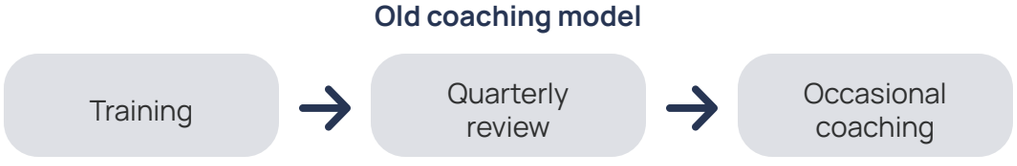
None of these is complicated. What's hard is making them habitual instead of occasional. Effective management isn't just one big moment — it's the accumulation of small behaviors, repeated over time.

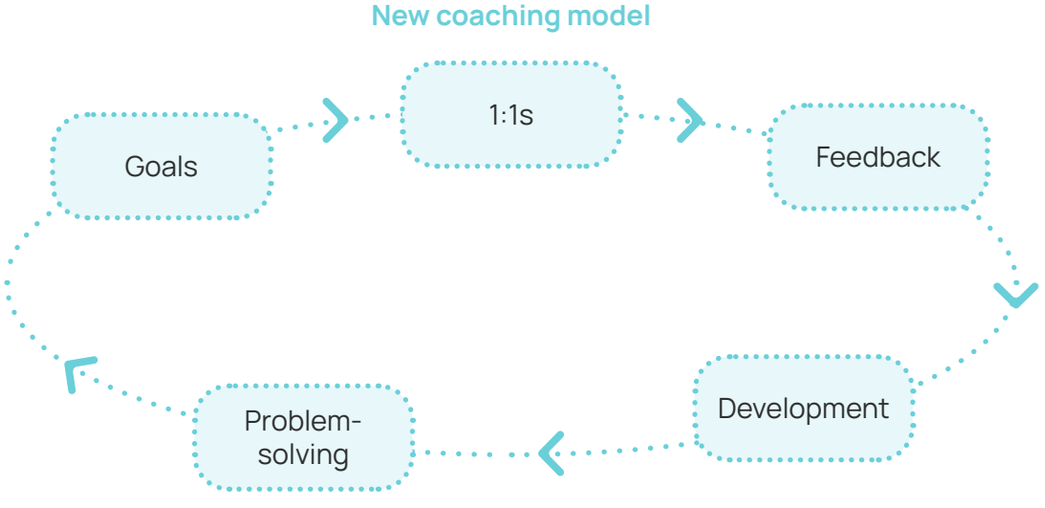


3 rules for building good coaching habits

RULE 1: Put coaching inside the flow of work

Coaching used to mean putting on a coaching hat and finding time for yet another meeting, carved out of an already-full calendar. That model isn't wrong, exactly. It's just not sustainable at scale.





Coaching should happen where performance already happens, not separately.

Think of a manager with eight direct reports. He leaves each 1:1 certain that he and the employee are aligned, only to find out weeks later that they walked away with a different understanding entirely.

The fix isn't a longer meeting or a stricter agenda. It's keeping track of what was actually discussed and decided, in the moment, so there's a shared record instead of two competing memories. Do that consistently, and it starts to feel less like "he said, she said" and more like reviewing game tape together — both people can see what was actually said, not what each of them remembered.

Moment	Coaching opportunity
Goal setting	Clarify priorities and expectations
1:1s	Discuss progress, roadblocks, support
Project check-ins	Give feedback, course-correct
Recognition	Reinforce what's working
Career conversations	Connect current work to growth
Problem-solving	Ask questions instead of handing over answers

HR action item

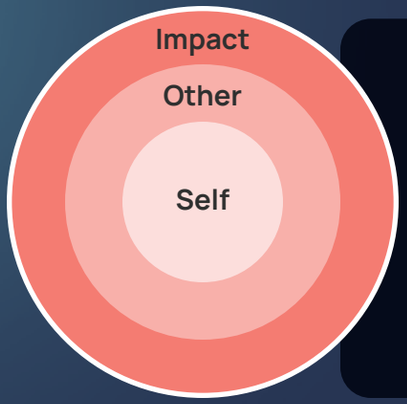
Audit where managers currently stand when it comes to coaching.

- ❒ Where does coaching already happen?
- ❒ Where could it?
- ❒ Which conversations are too focused on status to leave room for anything else?

RULE 2: Help managers see themselves more clearly

Managers can't change their behavior if they can't see. That's the whole of Rule 2.

Three kinds of awareness help build strong coaches:



Impact-awareness:
How is my leadership actually landing?

Other-awareness:
What does this specific person need from me?

Self-awareness:
How do I tend to communicate, lead, and respond under pressure?

Right now, **only about three in ten U.S. employees believe their opinions count** at work. That's a sign that most managers are operating with limited visibility into their own impact.

There are four ways to build that visibility into the workflow:

1. **Ask for feedback.**
   Create real mechanisms for employees to say what's working and what isn't. Offer more than just an annual survey. Managers need tools that enable them to give real-time feedback that employees can apply right away.
2. **Review patterns.**
   This is where the data actually earns its keep. A team member who's historically been reliable suddenly missing goals for a few weeks running, or shifting the language they use in check-ins — those are early signals a manager can act on before a real problem shows up in a quarterly review.
3. **Communicate intentionally.**
   Think about the timing and cadence of your messages, not just the content. Decide ahead of time what a team member needs to hear and when, rather than leaving recognition or check-ins to whenever there's a spare minute.
4. **Use AI as a thinking partner.**
   Rehearse a hard conversation before having it. Ask for a second read on a message before sending it. Generate a few tailored questions for an employee who's clearly struggling but hasn't said why. This is one of those low-stakes opportunities to practice giving hard feedback before the moment that it isn't. It's also where AI is most useful, built into the flow of coaching itself, not bolted on as a separate tool a manager has to remember to open.

HR action item

Audit how managers currently get feedback on their own performance.

- ❒ Is the only signal an annual survey?
- ❒ Where could real-time feedback fit instead — pulse checks, pattern data, a coaching conversation?
- ❒ If a manager's leadership isn't landing the way they think it is, how would they even find out?



Companion resource: Get LeAnne's **30 Open-Ended Employee Engagement Questions.**

Get the resource →



RULE 3: Design the environment around the good habits

Training alone doesn't create lasting behavior change. What sustains it is the environment around the manager — the culture and systems that make good coaching behavior easy to practice and hard to ignore.

Here's why training alone falls short: send a manager through a conflict management course, then tell them to go be empowered to use it, and most won't. That's not because the training was bad, but because their day-to-day doesn't give them the chance to practice the skill.

If you build that coaching skill into an existing rhythm or template instead — something they touch every week rather than once a year — the return on that same training multiplies.

You can ask HR these four questions about every behavior you want to see more of:

1. **Expectations** — What do we actually expect managers to do? If you asked them what's expected of them, specifically, as a manager, would they be able to answer? A surprising number have never heard it named that plainly.
2. **Rhythms** — Where does this behavior happen in the work? Can it live inside 1:1s, goal-setting, reviews, check-ins?
3. **Feedback** — How do managers know how they're doing? What loop tells them?
4. **Reinforcement** — What keeps the behavior going after the novelty wears off?



HR action item

Pick one important coaching habit your organization values.

- ❒ Where does it actually show up in a rhythm today (or does it only live in a training deck)?
- ❒ How would a manager know if they're doing it well?
- ❒ What keeps the behavior alive once the initial push fades?

These four questions are one of the most useful frameworks to keep on hand. Reference them whenever you're deciding how a new process should work.

What the 3 rules look like in practice

Here's how each of the three rules for building good coaching habits might show up inside a real workflow. These examples don't require an immediate overhaul of systems or processes. They're small, deliberate changes to processes that usually already exist.

Rule	What it looks like
1. Put coaching inside the flow of work	Creating a 1:1 template with a required "priorities this week" field, so alignment gets checked every week instead of assumed until a quarterly review proves otherwise.
2. Help managers see themselves more clearly	Send a short monthly pulse question to each manager's team — something as simple as "Did you get useful feedback this month?" — routed directly back to the manager, not just filed away with HR.
3. Design the environment around the behavior	Give recognition that's tied to the performance review cycle itself, so noticing good work becomes a recorded input to the review instead of a separate, easy-to-skip step.

The common thread here is that none of these examples asks a manager to do something extra. They take a behavior that already matters and give it a place to live inside work that's already happening.

That's a smaller ask than most manager development programs make, and a much easier one to sustain past the first few weeks.



4 conditions HR can build

Manager effectiveness was never really a knowledge problem. Most managers already know what good coaching sounds and feels like.

What separates the managers who drive engagement from the ones who don't is repetition — good habits that are practiced day to day and supported by an environment that makes the right behavior the easy behavior.

HR can build four conditions that make that repetition more likely:



Define good coaching habits

Name the two or three things that matter most, specifically enough that a manager could repeat them back if asked.



Build coaching into the work.

Attach those behaviors to a rhythm managers already have — a 1:1, a review, a check-in — instead of adding something new to their plate.



Help managers see their impact.

Give them a way to get feedback on how their leadership is really landing with their employees, rather than just letting them make assumptions.



Reinforce good coaching habits.

Keep good coaching behavior alive through recognition, reviews, and how leadership models it, so it sticks around after the enthusiasm wears off.

If you're ready to start building these rhythms into your own organization, Betterworks brings goals, 1:1s, feedback, and development into one place, making coaching part of the day-to-day.

Start here →



This ebook is based on a live webinar with LeAnne Lagasse, hosted by Betterworks.

Watch the full conversation →

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LeAnne spent 14 years on the communication faculty at Texas Tech University before starting her own practice in 2017, where she now helps HR leaders and executives build stronger managers and higher-performing teams. She's a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach, holds the SHRM-SCP credential, and was inducted into HR Southwest's Speaker Hall of Fame in 2026.

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