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When Coaching Fails – and How to Make it Co-owned and Effective



Prof. Nicky Terblanche and Senior Researcher Frederik Kruger of Stellenbosch Business School explore coaching when it fails and offer practical solutions for HR leaders and managers to design coaching that is clear, co-owned, and supported by the organisation — not just the coach and coachee.

Related research: The coaching flipside: Factors underlying unsuccessful workplace coaching interventions and the implication for human resource development, Kruger & Terblanche August 2024, Human Resource Development Quarterly 36(2):175-191, DOI:10.1002/hrdq.21548



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THE 3 Ps IN A CoBS POD



PERCEIVE

with a set of key takeaways



PROJECT

with food for thought: on yourself, your organisation and the wider context



PERFORM

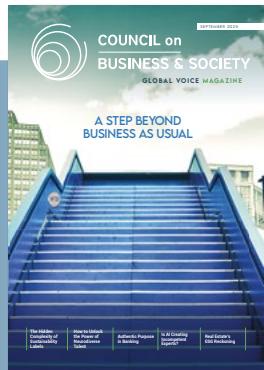
by putting it all into practice using action tips



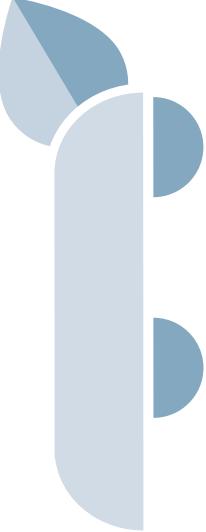
• PERCEIVE

with a set of key takeaways

- The vast majority of coaching is overwhelmingly successful, and coaching can be a powerful development tool – but when it fails, it can quietly erode trust, engagement, and belief in the organisation's commitment to growth.
- Not all coaching is beneficial. Some coachees report leaving their coaching sessions confused, frustrated, or disengaged – and the negative effects can outweigh the intended benefits.
- Coaching often fails when expectations are mismatched. Without a clear purpose, roles, and goals, sessions lack direction and coachees may not even understand why coaching was initiated.
- The coaching relationship is the engine: Weak rapport, poor listening, low psychological safety, or confidentiality concerns can turn coaching into something that feels like evaluation rather than support.
- The organisation is always present in the background. When coaching serves corporate agendas more than the individual, or when HR/leadership provide little follow through, coaching feels disconnected and inauthentic to the coachee.
- Failed coaching can damage morale and reduce trust in development programmes, leading people to disengage and question whether growth is truly supported.
- A stronger approach is to treat coaching as a shared responsibility among coach, coachee, and the organisation – expanding the “working alliance” to include the organisation as an active third player.



Read the full research insight in Global Voice magazine #33

A vertical decorative graphic on the left side, consisting of three overlapping semi-circles in light blue, medium blue, and grey, with a small white circle at the top.

PROJECT

with food for thought

- How is coaching typically initiated in your organisation, and what meaning do employees attach to being "sent" to coaching? What signals might unintentionally create confusion or stigma?
- In what ways is psychological safety built (or undermined) in coaching relationships in your organisation, and how do confidentiality and perceived conflicts of interest influence openness?
- What happens after coaching sessions end in your organisation, and how are insights translated into day-to-day behaviour, team practices, and performance routines? Where does follow through tend to break down?
- If you considered the organisation as a third "player" in the coaching alliance, what responsibilities would it need to assume (design, governance, support, evaluation) to make coaching more credible and effective?

A white speech bubble with a shadow, containing the word "Thoughts" in a green script font.



● PERFORM

by putting it all into practice



CHECKLIST

USE DIRECT, OPERATIONAL ACTIONS TO REDUCE THE RISK OF FAILED COACHING AND INCREASE IMPACT:

- Define the purpose of coaching upfront: Specify the development goal, scope, and success criteria in plain language.
- Run a three-way contracting session (coachee–coach–organisation): clarify roles, boundaries, confidentiality rules, and what will (and will not) be reported back.
- Protect psychological safety: Separate coaching from performance evaluation and remove any real or perceived reporting lines between the coach and the coachee's manager.
- Create a coaching support system: Assign an HR sponsor to check process quality (not content), remove blockers, and coordinate follow-up.
- Align expectations early: Use a short pre-coaching questionnaire to capture coachee goals, manager goals, and organisational expectations. Reconcile differences before coaching session 1.
- Each coach has his or her own approach. Engage with the coachee to decide how the sessions are run and what happens between sessions.
- Train managers to support coaching: Require them to provide time, opportunities to practice new behaviours, and reinforcement – without asking for confidential content.
- Monitor coaching quality: Collect anonymous pulse feedback at mid-point and end-point; address red flags immediately (trust, clarity, usefulness).
- Close the loop responsibly: Run an end-of-engagement review focused on outcomes and next steps, then embed learnings into development plans and team routines.



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