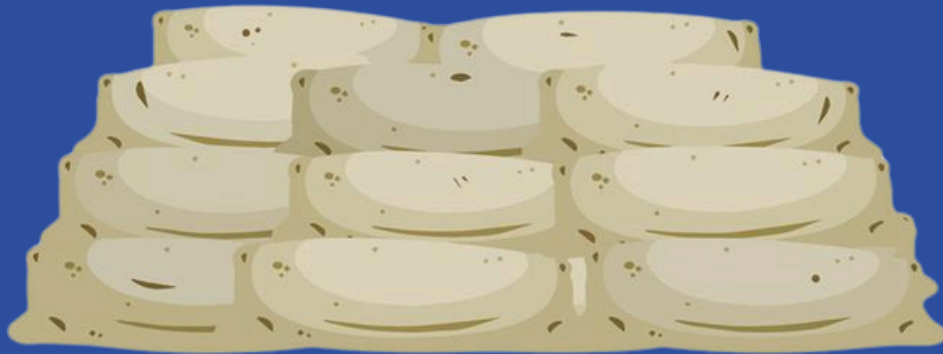


# War Stories From the Coaching Trenches

**2025 Survival Advice for Managers and Coaches**



## Introduction

Back in 2017, when we wrote the first version of this piece, the workplace looked very different. Coaching was already a critical tool for developing talent and driving performance, but the way we worked—and the way we coached—was far more predictable. Fast forward to 2025, and the landscape has shifted dramatically. Hybrid teams, AI-driven insights, and constant market disruptions mean that coaching is more complex, more data-driven, and arguably more essential than ever.

One thing, however, hasn't changed: coaching isn't just about the employee. It's a two-way street. The best coaching relationships don't just support employees—they also empower managers and leaders to coach effectively, set realistic expectations, and avoid burnout. Because even the most well-intentioned coaching can become a losing battle if we ignore our own limits.

Over the years, we've collected countless stories from the trenches of workplace coaching, and the same themes continue to emerge. So, as we revisit and refresh this piece for 2025. Many of the pieces of advice are timeless, but we've updated them and added a few for the world you're managing in, now.

Let's look at the most enduring (and updated) lessons to help coaches and managers stay effective, engaged, and, most importantly, sane.

### **1. Don't be working harder than your employees.**

When we coach employees, most of us are in our roles because we care. We want people to succeed, and we work hard to help them turn things around when they struggle. But sometimes, we have to ask ourselves: Are we putting in more effort than they are?

Some employees appreciate the support, meet us halfway, and actively work toward their goals. Others, well... don't. They may be disengaged. They may be in denial. They may just not care. If you find yourself rowing the boat alone while they lounge up front, it's time to take a step back.

If an employee isn't matching your investment in their development, call them on it. If they continue to coast, it's okay to let them sink or swim. Your level of investment in an employee's success should mirror their own. Anything more isn't fair—to them, to you, or to the rest of your team.

And here's something interesting: When employees notice you dialing back your efforts, it sometimes sparks them to step up. If that happens, great—meet them where they are. If not, you'll have a clearer picture of who is truly engaged, and you can start thinking about next steps.

## **2. Don't be the smartest person in the room.**

Look around at your team. In any given meeting, who is the smartest, most knowledgeable person there? If the answer is always you, you might have a problem.

There's no shortage of wisdom on this:

- "Never hire someone who knows less than you do about what he's hired to do." - Malcolm Forbes
- "I hire people brighter than me and I get out of their way." - Lee Iococca
- "Hire people who are better than you are, then leave them to get on with it. Look for people who will aim for the remarkable, who will not settle for the routine." - David Ogilvy

Yet despite knowing this, too many leaders still surround themselves with people who don't challenge them, whether out of ego, fear, or habit. Coaches, in particular, can fall into this trap for a different reason—we gravitate toward people who need us. It can even feel intimidating to coach someone who catches on faster than we do.

But here's the truth: your job isn't to be the smartest person in the room—it's to build a room full of smart people and help them thrive. If you're always the expert, you're limiting your team's potential. The best leaders don't hoard knowledge; they curate it. The best coaches don't need to be a chapter ahead in the book—they just need to make sure everyone's learning.

So the next time you're hiring or promoting, resist the temptation to go for the "fixer-upper." Instead, build a team that challenges you—and then get out of their way.

### 3. Choose which rocks to die on.

As managers and coaches, we love to fix things—it's practically in the job description. We see a problem, we want to solve it. But if we try to fix everything, we fix nothing.

If you've ever gone a little overboard in a Word document with bold, italics, and underline, you know the lesson: emphasizing everything emphasizes nothing.

The same is true for leadership. Not every issue is worth your time, energy, or sanity. If you push hard on every problem, your employees won't know what really matters. Worse, you'll burn out. Instead, be strategic about which battles you fight.

This doesn't mean letting things slide. It means prioritizing what will have the biggest impact. It means recognizing that sometimes, letting go of a minor issue gives your team the space to grow. It means knowing when to push, when to guide, and when to let things unfold on their own.

So take a deep breath. Say it aloud: "I can't fix everything." Feel better? Good. Now, choose wisely.

### 4. You're a boss, not a buddy.

Ouch. Hard to hear? Maybe. But it's true.

As human beings, we crave connection. We spend a huge chunk of our lives at work, and it's natural to want to build close relationships with the people around us. But there's a reason the saying goes "it's lonely at the top."

The reality is that bosses can't be good friends and still be good bosses. Finding the right balance between being approachable and maintaining authority is one of the toughest challenges of leadership. Lean too cold, and you risk alienating your team. Get too close, and you risk losing objectivity.

Too distant, and you might:

- Make employees think you don't care.
- Earn a reputation for being harsh or disconnected.
- Fail to inspire or understand your team.

Too familiar, and you might:

- Struggle to give honest feedback.
- Play favorites without realizing it.
- Overshare or blur professional boundaries.

This doesn't mean you have to be robotic. Great leaders connect with their teams, show empathy, and build trust. But at the end of the day, your job isn't to be liked—it's to create an environment where your employees can succeed, grow, and perform their best.

## **5. Be Demosthenes, not Cicero**

Yes, that title is a little high-brow, but give us a moment, while we prove an important point!

Demosthenes and Cicero were both brilliant orators in the ancient world. Cicero was famous for his dazzling speeches—people loved listening to him. They clapped, they cheered, they left the forum talking about how brilliant he was.

Demosthenes? He didn't just impress people—he moved them. When he spoke, his audience got fired up. They didn't just clap. They grabbed their weapons and marched off to war.

There's a big lesson here for managers and coaches: do you want to sound smart, or do you want to make an impact?

We've all been in meetings where people talk just to hear themselves talk. We've all had bosses who loved their own cleverness but never actually inspired action. That's Cicero leadership. It's all polish, no fire.

Demosthenes leadership is different. It's about clarity over cleverness. It's about knowing that the goal of coaching isn't to sound impressive—it's to make employees better, more confident, and more effective.

So the next time you're leading a meeting or coaching a team member, ask yourself: Am I making a point, or making an impact? Be Demosthenes, not Cicero.

## **6. Learn to recognize narcissists.**

It's a lucky workplace indeed that doesn't have any narcissists in it. It's not uncommon to find people on any team who consistently put their needs above everything else, and expect to be adored. They aren't always easy to spot at first. In fact, narcissists can even be productive top performers before their flaws overwhelm their relationships. But in the end, narcissists are poisonous to teams and virtually impossible to coach. They are hard to manage because they are contemptuous of criticism and anyone who seeks to help them improve. They only want to hear praise. Narcissists also will rarely ever try to change their behavior.

Here are a few red flags that someone may be a textbook narcissist:

- They let others do the work, but take all the credit
- They dominate the conversation, talking about themselves
- They are all talk, and no action
- They feel they are entitled and the exception to the rule
- They feel they don't get enough praise
- They resist efforts to coach them, feeling they have already earned promotion
- They are highly sensitive to any criticism
- They lie, sabotage, deflect, or cast blame on others
- They are arrogant, making others feel inferior, or a workplace bully
- They are highly manipulative or try to undermine you as a leader

Once you've identified a narcissist, what should you do? Well, some of the behaviors above, if documented, should be enough to remove the employee from your team. Experts advise that even high-performing employees are not worth keeping if they are toxic to the rest of the team. Your first job is to protect your team, and they cannot thrive in an environment that is made unsafe by narcissism. One Harvard [study](#) showed that "it saves a company approximately \$5300 to hire a superstar employee, but saves a company approximately \$12,500 to avoid a toxic employee."

However, if you need to work through the behavior, cannot show the narcissist the door, or aren't sure their behavior meets the threshold for narcissism, try these techniques for the short and long term:

- Put things in writing - use your coaching and feedback platform to record your conversations and agree on goals.
- Get a witness related to the above, and try not to get into a he said/she said situation with these employees. Bring in HR or a witness if you see things potentially going sideways.
- Use the "gray rock" method - This practice basically means: don't take the bait or give them ammo. Be uninteresting as a target. Respond to a narcissist in monotone speaking patterns; don't get into your personal life; and don't get emotional with them. If they can't feed off you, they'll move on.

Consult with experts - If you suspect you have a narcissist on your team, get help. Consult with your boss and HR to determine the best way to deal with the situation. Don't try and go it alone.

## **7. Business isn't sports.**

One of the downsides of "coaching" is how easily we can conflate the language and techniques of business coaching with that of sports coaching. Coaching in the workplace is often compared to coaching in sports. And sure, there's some overlap:

- Coaches understand that they must nurture individual talent
- Coaches know the need for goals and game plans
- Coaches see the value of teamwork and cooperation
- Coaches develop for the long-term, planning beyond just one season

At the same time, these are different worlds with different rules, and it is a mistake to treat them as the same.

Sports coaching typically has one specific end goal. To win. Athletic development, training and growth are in service of getting that W, which makes it a very black and white world, in terms of measuring success.

In our business organizations, by contrast, we cannot define growth only in terms of wins and losses. Sometimes it's hard to even define win or loss—and failure is a necessary part of growth. Great sports coaches do often recognize this, but still, the culture of athletics is permeated by a zero-sum philosophy: when I win, you lose. If you are not a winner, you are a loser. Most of us have encountered a boss who made us feel this way.

Not all employees respond well to zero sum techniques. Nor should they. In business there is such a thing as a win-win outcome, and real business success is almost always about finding it. Some employees love the feeling of competition that comes from sports-style coaching techniques. But others—particularly those who have not been exposed to sports—even find them to be counter-productive, discouraging or demeaning.

Sports coaching has its uses. But it's important to approach each employee as an individual, and to use feedback and coaching techniques that they are most likely to respond to – like development plans and competency benchmarks that help them to build their skills. That means choosing a coaching platform that has some real flexibility built in, and being thoughtful about where, when (and if) you ever apply “advice from the famous sports coaches.”

## **8. Don't waste time treating symptoms instead of the problem.**

There's a lot of timeless, great advice for managers and coaches in Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman's now classic business book, *First Break All the Rules*. But one of the pieces that has stuck with us for a long time is what they say about not addressing symptoms, but finding the root causes of problems to get to the real issue and find better solutions.

“Great managers ask why” they tell us, and then address that, rather than asking “what” or “how” and stopping there.

As managers, it is so easy to get sucked into treating symptoms. As coaches, they can bog us down forever. If an employee is consistently late with a weekly report, for example, it is fast and simple to point it out and set it as something to work on, or even criticize them or privately jump to conclusions about why that is happening.

The truth is, unless you ask, you have no idea.

Perhaps the weekly report is late because they are having difficulty with new software. Perhaps they are such perfectionists that they spend too much time with the numbers, checking and cross-checking. Perhaps they have pressures with colleagues, or at home, that are eating away at their time and causing time management issues. Maybe there is a dependency for the report that is delaying them, and they have been reluctant to call out. You simply won't know if you don't ask.

More importantly, there could be a serious underlying problem that is going unaddressed—or even being exacerbated by your focus on the symptom. If you only focus on the surface problem—"fix your deadlines"—you miss the opportunity to actually solve it. Worse, you might unintentionally make things harder.

What to do instead?

- Dig deeper. Ask "why" multiple times. Get to the real issue.
- Listen before you assume. The best coaches don't jump to conclusions.
- Solve for the root cause, not the behavior. A reporting issue isn't always a time management issue. A performance problem isn't always about motivation.

Coaching isn't just about fixing mistakes—it's about understanding them. If you get this part right, you'll save yourself (and your employees) a lot of frustration.

## **9. Coach, know thyself.**

As coaches, we spend so much time analyzing others that we forget to analyze ourselves. But here's the truth: your mindset shapes your coaching more than any strategy ever will.

Think about it:

- If you believe an employee will fail, they probably will.
- If you expect a difficult conversation, it'll likely be difficult.
- If you carry stress, frustration, or bias into a meeting, it will color the outcome.

It's human nature—our expectations influence what happens. That's why the best coaches and managers check themselves first.



Ask yourself:

- Am I walking into this conversation with an open mind?
- Am I assuming failure instead of seeing potential?
- Am I letting my emotions shape my decisions?

You can be empathetic without being reactive. You can be supportive without over-investing. And you can be a great coach without losing sight of your own growth. Because the better you understand yourself, the better you'll be at helping others do the same.

## **10. Don't interrogate employees, listen to them.**

The more senior you are, the less you should be talking and the more you should be listening. Yet, in most workplaces, the opposite happens.

Consider this story from the real world:

“Early in my career, I had a boss who would randomly stop me mid-task and ask, ‘How are things going?’ If I hesitated for even a second—because I had just been 318 rows deep in Excel—he'd pounce: ‘You seem nervous. Is something wrong? Why did you choose that exact word? What are you hiding?’ He was a former interrogator. And it showed.”

There are a few things going wrong here:

- Silence makes people uncomfortable. Many managers can't handle a pause, so they fill the space—or worse, push employees into defensive answers. Let silence breathe.
- Bias gets in the way. If you ask a question already thinking you know the answer, you'll shape the conversation to confirm your assumptions. Ask open-ended questions instead.
- Employees don't need you to solve everything. Coaches love to “fix” problems. But jumping in too soon means you miss deeper issues—and employees don't take ownership.

Impactful, collaborative coaching should always be a two-way street between coach and coachee. Want better answers? Be patient. Be curious. And most of all—listen.

## **11. Cut Through the Noise in a Distracted World**

Attention is the new currency. Between endless notifications, back-to-back meetings, and the pull of work-life balance, employees are more distracted than ever. And that makes coaching harder.

The best coaches in 2025 don't just focus on what they say—they also focus on when and how they say it, choosing technology with built-in flexibility and configurability to enhance coaching interactions and create an environment of continuous growth and outstanding results.

Here's how to coach in a world full of distractions:

- Make coaching intentional. Schedule time for meaningful conversations.
- Coaching isn't a drive-by task—it's a relationship.
- Keep it short, but impactful. Employees are juggling a lot. Don't waste their time (or yours). Make your feedback clear, concise, and actionable.
- Cut through the noise. Not every message needs a meeting. Some feedback works better in a quick voice note, a shared document, or a structured check-in. Use an agile coaching infrastructure that flexes with your business and is always relevant.
- Know when to step back. If someone's overloaded, coaching might not be what they need. Sometimes, they just need space to process and prioritize.

The modern workplace is noisy. Great coaching breaks through the noise—and makes an impact when it matters most.

## 12. Bridge the Gap Between Generations

For the first time in history, the workforce spans five generations—from Baby Boomers to Gen Z, with Gen Alpha not far behind. Each group brings different expectations, communication styles, and motivations, making coaching more complex than ever.

The best coaches in 2025 know that one-size-fits-all coaching doesn't work. Here's how to adjust:

- Understand what drives each generation. Boomers value experience, Gen X values independence, Millennials value purpose, and Gen Z values flexibility. Coaching that resonates takes these factors into account.
- Adapt your communication style. Some employees prefer direct conversations; others prefer structured written feedback. Meeting employees where they are increases engagement.
- Be open to reverse mentorship. Younger employees have insights too—especially in tech, digital trends, and new ways of working. Don't just coach—learn from them.
- Create a culture of knowledge-sharing. The strongest teams blend wisdom with fresh ideas. Encourage collaboration between generations so everyone grows together.

Coaching in 2025 means being flexible, curious, and adaptable. The best coaches don't just teach—they bridge the gap between generations, making work better for everyone.

## **Closing Thoughts: Coaching That Lasts**

Workplace coaching was already changing fast when we first wrote this piece in 2017. In 2025, it's even more complex—with hybrid teams, shifting expectations, and the constant challenge of keeping employees engaged.

Coaching isn't about being the most intelligent person in the room or having all the answers. It's about building people up, improving them, and knowing when to step in or step back.

So, as you coach your teams this year, take a moment to check in with yourself, too. Because great coaching starts with great leadership—and that starts with you.

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