Executive Guidance

The Connector Manager Performance Advantage

And Why Other Approaches Do More Harm Than Good
The Manager Coaching Crisis

There are millions of people managers in the world today — millions of diverse individuals working in different sectors and industries around the globe with one commonality: Each must drive outcomes with and through others.

Managing people has always been challenging. As one executive client described it, “Managers are asked to lead and advocate change, run business as usual, satisfy increasing external regulation, and coach and develop their teams. So, from a manager's perspective, understanding how best to prioritize their time is increasingly difficult.”

As if it wasn’t hard enough to get this laundry list of activities done, the circumstances of people management have become more complex. Today the average manager oversees nine direct reports; that’s nine people for whom the manager must offer regular individualized coaching and feedback, onboarding support, career development and more. That’s also nine people for whom work expectations have shifted dramatically due to demographic change, business digitalization and shifting skill needs.

Take the instance of an auto insurance claims manager. In the past, this manager could have relied on personal knowledge of claims to guide employees on how to resolve customer issues over the phone. Today, after the company’s growth ushered in an increasingly young and diverse workforce, the manager has a team of millennial and Gen Z employees who don’t just want answers — they want more feedback and coaching to grow into their careers. Aside from employee preferences, the company’s claim reporting channels have diversified, requiring claims staff to handle inbound claims from multiple digital platforms and build technical capabilities beyond those the manager ever needed to do the same job. The manager is now expected to provide more coaching and feedback on skill areas in which they have little experience or knowledge.

It’s perhaps no surprise, then, that much of today’s coaching simply isn’t effective. Seventy percent of employees told us they haven’t mastered the skills they need for their current jobs, and managers are becoming dubious about their own coaching abilities. Forty-five percent say they lack confidence to develop employees on the skills they need today.
Despite this self-reported concern about coaching abilities, the average manager is expected to spend more time coaching their employees than they currently do. In fact, HR leaders say managers should spend a full 30% of their time on coaching and development in response to a range of needs — although managers themselves actually spend less than 10% of their time on these activities.

When managers get it right, the benefits of good coaching are clear. Our research shows that employees who report to effective manager coaches are 40% more engaged, exhibit 38% more discretionary effort and are 20% more likely to stay at their organizations than those who report to ineffective coaches.

Those dynamics can’t be ignored as you try to attract, retain and develop critical talent and future-proof your workforce. Bottom line, managers who are effective coaches are good for your employees and your organization.

Knowing this, we embarked on a multiyear study of thousands of employees, managers and senior leaders around a simple question: “What are the best managers doing to develop employees in today’s workplace?”

Ultimately, our study tested the conventional wisdom of what it means to be a manager and found that the approach to coaching and development that most organizations are promoting today actually does more harm than good. More importantly, we found an approach with an outsized positive impact on employee performance: the Connector manager approach.
Everything manager is one of four types

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CHAPTER 1

Four Manager Types, Not Created Equal
Every manager is one of four types

In seeking to identify the best-performing managers, we assessed manager approaches to staff development and determined their impact on employee performance.

Our analysis yielded a startling conclusion: Every manager, regardless of level, falls into one of four distinct natural approaches to coaching and development. Moreover, the four manager profiles occur in almost perfect fourths across industries, geographies and workplace demographics.

Each type of manager is represented by many people you know — and one of these types is you.

**The Teacher Manager**
- Provides advice-oriented feedback and directs employee development
- Relies on their own strong track record as an individual contributor
- Considers their approach to be correct in part because of their experience and expertise

**The Cheerleader Manager**
- Empowers employees to take development into their own hands
- Gives positive feedback and shies away from criticism
- Doesn’t obsess over details when giving coaching and feedback

**The Always-On Manager**
- Provides frequent feedback and coaching and drives employee development
- Regularly goes the extra mile to give employees in-the-moment coaching and feedback, even when they lack personal experience
- Ensures they drive all employee development

**The Connector Manager**
- Creates a positive team environment while providing targeted feedback to employees
- Focuses more on building quality relationships than on the quantity of feedback they give
- Connects employees to others for development when they lack expertise in a given area

Source: Gartner
One clear winner, one loser

Most senior leaders and HR executives assume the Always-On manager’s continuous and frequent coaching approach is critical for driving employee performance. The Always-On approach seems especially fitting in today’s complex, fast-shifting and uncertain work environment, where employees crave (and need at times) frequent coaching and feedback.

But as we pitted the manager types against one another to gauge their impact on employee performance, our quantitative analysis yielded two conclusions that surprised even us:

2. Connector managers triple the likelihood that their direct reports are high performers.

Number of respondents = 7,309 employees
Source: 2017 Gartner Manager Effectiveness Survey
CHAPTER 2

The Myths Behind the Always-On Manager
How Always-On managers have managed to endure

If Always-On managers actually do more harm than good — degrading employee performance by up to 8% — how has this type of manager become so popular?

Our analysis identified three myths perpetuating the belief that the Always-On manager approach to providing continuous coaching and feedback is effective. As a leader, debunking these myths can help you avoid steering your manager population in the wrong direction.

**Myth No. 1:**
The more time managers spend coaching and providing feedback, the better

Our research finds that there is no significant correlation between time spent coaching and employee performance.

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**Employee Performance Versus Hours of Manager Coaching**

There is no significant relationship between employee performance and manager time spent developing employees.

Number of respondents = 7,309 employees
Source: 2017 Gartner Manager Effectiveness Survey
Ironically, Always-On managers are so committed to guiding employees at every opportunity that it becomes hard for employees to focus on areas that need real improvement. One employee we interviewed, a sales representative in the pharmaceutical industry, wearily described his days being shadowed by an Always-On manager, and said the marathon of manager coaching was like “drinking from a feedback firehose.” He was left disempowered and second-guessing himself.

As a leader, you can help your managers do better: Decouple the time spent coaching from the implied quality.

**Myth No. 2:**
Managers are expected to always know what’s best for their employees

Our research finds that only 18% of employees believe their managers understand their work. A dismal statistic on its own, this challenge compounds when you consider that Always-On managers always set the agenda for development from the top down. If managers don’t even understand their employees’ jobs, how can they provide relevant coaching and feedback?

As a leader, rather than asking managers to drive the development agenda in every coaching interaction, consider asking managers to recalibrate their relationships with employees by asking a series of probing questions about their motivators, preferences and work aspirations.

**Myth No. 3:**
Managers are the best source of coaching and feedback for their employees

Managers can’t be expected to know every answer, especially in today’s fast-changing work environment. Unfortunately, Always-On managers fall prey to the idea that some guidance is unequivocally better than no guidance. As a result, they can provide the wrong advice, which can have considerable negative business impact.

As a leader, emphasize that managers should only directly coach on areas in which they have expertise or strength. Focus on enabling managers to build awareness of their own strengths and development areas, so they know when to lean in — and when to defer to others for coaching.
CHAPTER 3

Why the Connector Manager Wins ... By a Mile
The outsized impact of Connector managers

Connector managers elicit performance by connecting employees to the right people and resources at the right time. In doing so, Connectors boost employee performance by up to 26% and more than triple the likelihood that a coached employee will be a high performer; their performance impact is head and shoulders above any other manager approach.

Connectors also boost employees’ discretionary effort, engagement and intent to stay — all critical outcomes for enterprise performance.

Interestingly, Connector managers perform the same core coaching activities as other managers and don’t spend any more time coaching than the other types. Rather, they prioritize their coaching time differently. Uniquely, Connectors make three essential connections for the employee, team and organization.

Source: Gartner
Employee connection: (Really) get to know your employees

The employee connection involves all the individual interactions managers have with their employees, from providing direct feedback and coaching to sharing performance expectations. Establishing these relationships with direct reports is not just basic to a manager’s job, it’s also the foundational connection that Connector managers make.

Connectors dedicate more time and energy here than anywhere else, building a deep and rich upfront relationship with employees, helping them accurately identify needs, interests and aspirations. But how can all managers do this effectively and at scale?

Consider the example that one leader divulged to us: As a director at a professional services firm, she had been asked to manage onboarding and career development for over 100 new college graduate employees starting their first jobs. Having started in the same position several years earlier, the leader knew these employees would be “go-getters,” seeking lots of feedback and hoping to advance quickly.

The leader’s natural inclination was to offer feedback on every project, interaction and activity, but she quickly recognized it would be impossible to maintain that level of oversight with 100+ people individually. She knew she would have to do the upfront work to understand their needs and then find ways to empower them to be proactive about their development.

Connectors anchor their time in active listening and asking questions that build trust and help them understand employee context. This upfront investment yields dividends, ensuring that Connectors provide more targeted development at the right times and on the right skill needs.

The Employee Connection

- Overinvest in diagnosis.
- Coach the person, not the problem.
- Be positive, but be prepared to be tough.
The leader at the professional services firm began by holding a day of in-person office hours every month. Over time, she learned to target her inquiry during her interactions to establish a deep-enough understanding of each employee. Eventually, she found that these questions tended to yield the most productive conversations:

- What do you find exciting and motivating about your role?
- What change(s) would make you happier about your role?
- What motivates you in your life outside of work?
- If there’s one thing you want to walk away with from our conversation today, what is it?
- What do you need most from me at this stage in your career?

As a leader, you can focus on helping managers master three key activities to begin building the employee connection:

1. **Overinvest in diagnosis.** Connector managers build trust, ask context-specific questions and listen to their direct reports to better understand their needs, interests and aspirations.

2. **Coach the person, not the problem.** Connectors flex their coaching approach based on an individual’s development needs and receptivity.

3. **Be positive, but be prepared to be tough.** Connectors prioritize strengths-based feedback, but they are also comfortable being critical when it’s needed most.

**How to get started**

- Create question inventories and coaching guides for managers to build their relationships with employees through asking questions, not just giving guidance.

- Hold peer consulting sessions for managers to practice active listening and diagnosing on each other, in a safe space.
Team connection: Make development a team sport

Our research finds that approximately one-quarter of employees already count on teammates as a primary source of feedback. However, while most employees are willing to share knowledge and discuss strengths with their peers, very few are willing to openly share their skill gaps. This difference is likely attributed to our natural desire to hide signs of vulnerability or weakness. There is significant progress still to be made in making development a team sport.

Consider the potential harmonizing power of your own team. Let’s say you have five direct reports. With five employees per team, there are nearly 25 connections that can occur between teammates to help them improve their skills. Most managers miss these opportunities, focusing the team on getting things done, rather than developing a finely tuned unit of high performers. Connectors take a different approach, setting employees up to more intentionally share skills and boost each other’s performance within team interactions.

In one company, we found an elegant example of this practice through an exercise dubbed Each One, Teach One. As part of Each One, Teach One, managers convene their teams regularly for skill sharing. Each person on the team, including the manager, identifies a skill they are willing to teach to others. The manager creates transparency around skill strengths and communicates the importance of peer development. Individuals are free to set up development sessions with anyone on the team who excels at skills they would like to develop.

Perhaps it’s surprising, but making the team connection relies less on a manager’s ability to explicitly match employees for coaching and more on their actions to craft an open environment for skill sharing to occur organically.

Connector managers start building this team ecosystem by leveraging the intelligence they gathered during the employee connection. Their foundational understanding of what drives and motivates each employee helps them tailor the broader team environment to match employees’ individual motivators and create a productive and trusting space.

The Team Connection

- Use motivators to tailor the team environment.
- Identify and embrace individual differences.
- Make peer skill sharing a ritual.
To deliver greater value in team skill sharing, managers can do the following:

1. **Use motivators to tailor the team environment.** Connectors work to understand what engages individuals and teams so they can create their own personalized approaches to management and ensure that individuals on their teams work toward common goals.

2. **Identify and embrace individual differences.** Connectors encourage individuals within their teams to share their distinct opinions, backgrounds and experiences, and they use these differences to build team trust, develop new skills and improve outcomes.

3. **Make peer skill sharing a ritual.** Connectors make it easier for employees to develop their peers by institutionalizing the sharing of information, strengths and needs across the team.

**How to get started**

- Understand what motivates your team individually and collectively to begin creating a highly motivating team environment.
- Signal your own vulnerability and willingness to sharing skill gaps to make vulnerability a norm.
- Create rituals for skill sharing on the team (for example, Each One, Teach One).
Organization connection:
Ensure better, not just more, connections

Sometimes the right development connections aren’t available within an employee’s direct reporting lines, teams or even within their known professional and social networks. Although larger organizations almost inevitably have highly skilled pockets that employees could turn to for rapid skill sharing, these skill pockets can be hard to identify in their organization. Beyond mere visibility, this challenge can be compounded for managers of smaller teams, in smaller companies or in niche job areas.

Take the example of a 15-employee retail company, in which a digital marketing manager was asked to quickly learn the ropes of e-commerce and help develop the company’s online sales. After an outstanding first year of growth, the CEO and founder (this employee’s manager) found the employee plateauing in his role, with no peers to turn to for guidance or support. Instead of letting the employee struggle, the CEO realized he needed to help him make a development connection outside the company.

Connector managers understand that best-fit development connections are critically important in boosting employee performance, and help their employees build bridges across and outside of the enterprise to make the best (not just the most) connections. But how?

In the case of the retail company CEO, the manager directed the employee to sources he refers to as “benevolent outsiders,” including:

- Peer companies that shared either industry, geography, orientation or growth stage
- App and technology partners that the company was already paying for a service or product that would want to see the company thrive
- Customers with an emotional connection to the business

While external connections are one good option for best-fit development, for most organizations, it’s equally possible to find these sources internally. Making these enterprise-level coaching connections requires seniority and budget to do at scale; however, this connection is a particularly ripe opportunity for senior leaders to take charge.

The Organization Connection
- Become mapmakers.
- Develop warm-up and cool-down routines.
- Model best-fit connections.
Consider how you can contribute your leadership to help managers forge these components of the organization connection:

1. **Become mapmakers.** Connector managers help employees understand where the best-fit connections might be within or outside the organization. This doesn’t require managers to build a literal organization chart but rather to leverage key points of contact to help identify where skills may be prevalent.

2. **Develop warm-up and cool-down routines.** Connector managers play the role of an “activist coach,” holding one-on-one meetings with employees to help them prepare to extract the most value from their connections and reflect on lessons learned after the fact.

3. **Model best-fit connections.** While Connector managers connect their employees with individuals across and outside the organization for development, they themselves also serve as connections.

**How to get started**

- Brainstorm connection sources for your function or business unit, or even conduct organizational network analysis to source lists of informal leaders or strong influencers.
Conclusion

The role of the manager in coaching and developing people has rightfully become a high priority for organizations today. In an environment of heightened change and complexity, managers serve as the key conduit between an organization and its staff, helping employees continuously align to changing performance standards, learn new skills, grow in their careers and much more.

The quality of manager coaching varies widely, and many organizations could pay dearly by betting on the wrong approach. As you consider your business's approach to people management, take note of these realities:

• Most organizations today prioritize building Always-On managers who coach frequently across a variety of employee skills and activities. This type of manager actually degrades employee performance by up to 8%.

• By contrast, the Connector manager approach drives positive employee outcomes across the board. Regardless of industry, function or region, Connector managers can improve employee performance by up to 26%, can increase employees’ discretionary effort by up to 38% and can improve employee engagement by up to 40%, to name just a few outcomes.

• Connectors make three core development connections for their employees: The employee connection, the team connection and the organization connection.

• To make the employee connection, managers should prioritize getting to know their employees better, using diagnostic conversations to ask more questions. The employee connection helps managers personalize their approach to coaching and feedback and serves as a foundation for the other two connections.

• To develop the team connection, Connector managers should build an open and highly motivating team environment that recognizes and encourages peer-to-peer skill sharing. The team connection serves as a highly productive, self-contained ecosystem for learning.

• To forge the organization connection, Connector managers don’t need to physically introduce employees to best-fit development connections across the business. Rather, managers should help employees source high-quality connections by giving them visibility into skills across the organization and helping them prepare to extract value from each exchange.
A Leader’s Guide to Developing Employees Across the Enterprise

Discover insights, tools and templates to support employee coaching and development efforts. Visit gtnr.it/connector-manager-ebook to access resources for your function.

**HR Leaders**
Research: See how HR can build Connector managers who are in tune with employee needs

Article: Learn how to improve performance by enabling ongoing, but not constant, employee feedback

Article: See why a “connected learner” approach is more effective than continuous learning at helping employees reskill for the digital age

Article: Understand budget-friendly manager development approaches that improve employee performance

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Research: Discover how to help your staff identify and pursue work that motivates them

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As a senior leader, your role and reach go well beyond the frontline manager role, so your own impact as a Connector also has the potential to ripple outward across the managers you manage. Do you know what kind of manager you are?

To learn more about how Gartner can support you on this journey, contact our Become a Client team:

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