



How Connector Managers Coach to Drive Performance

Feature Article

Picture the average manager at your organization — let's call her Kate.

Every day, Kate arrives in the office, turns on her computer, scans her first few unread emails and rushes into her first of many meetings. By lunchtime, her head is spinning from budget conversations and strategy-setting sessions. She opens her calendar to see that she has a coaching conversation with her new direct report, Mathias, in an hour. How does she prepare? What kind of coaching does this employee need? How can she make sure she provides the high-quality coaching she wants to give and L&D expects?

Kate's story is all too common in organizations today. Employees need coaching and L&D relies on managers to provide it, but managers are overwhelmed and lack the guidance they need to coach effectively.

This article will explore what is difficult about coaching, how the Connector Manager approach enables managers to be great coaches and how some L&D functions have begun building Connector Manager coaches.

What's Hard About Coaching?

Kate knows it's her responsibility as a manager to coach and develop her direct reports. She's also seen uncontested data showing coaching is important to employees' performance and career growth. Employees who report to good coaches are 37% more satisfied with their jobs and organizations, 29% more committed to the organization and 40% more likely to stay at the organization than those who report to

ineffective coaches. Ultimately, managers who are effective coaches are good for employees and organizations.

In pursuit of these excellent results, many L&D functions ask managers to provide continuous coaching. Continuous coaches aim to give their employees an ongoing stream of informal feedback and guidance. Kate, for example, always looks for the opportunity, during a project or after a key meeting, to provide in-the-moment feedback.

Coaching is a one-on-one interaction in which one individual enables another to develop skills, attitudes or behaviors to help them maximize their performance in their current role or future career.

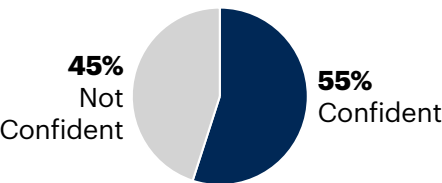
L&D teams spent 11% more of their budgets on developing their managers last year, yet investing in developing managers as coaches doesn't pay off.¹ Only 55% of managers are confident in their ability to coach and develop employees. On the other side of the coin, 65% of employees report their managers are ineffective at coaching (see Figure 1).

Considering L&D's extensive investment in coaching, why are so many managers still ineffective coaches? There are a few key reasons:

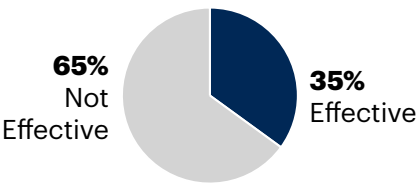
- Employees spend most of their time working alongside their peers — not their managers — leading to fewer and fewer managerial interactions.

Figure 1: Maximum Impact on Employee Performance by Manager Type

Managers' Confidence in Their Ability to Coach and Develop Employees



Employees' Perception of Their Managers' Coaching Effectiveness



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

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- Work structures have become more complex, requiring managers to collaborate and influence throughout their organizations. This leaves them with less time to develop their employees.
- As individuals, managers don't and can't possess all the skills and expertise required to provide support to direct reports.

Luckily, our research reveals a better approach. Rather than asking managers to coach continuously, the best L&D functions develop Connector Managers, who help their employees navigate through their development and growth. Such managers provide guidance on how to develop and who can help them. They identify opportunities to provide feedback on key development areas and are interested in creating an overall positive learning environment for the entire team. Using this approach, Connector Managers can improve employee performance by up to 26% (see Figure 2).

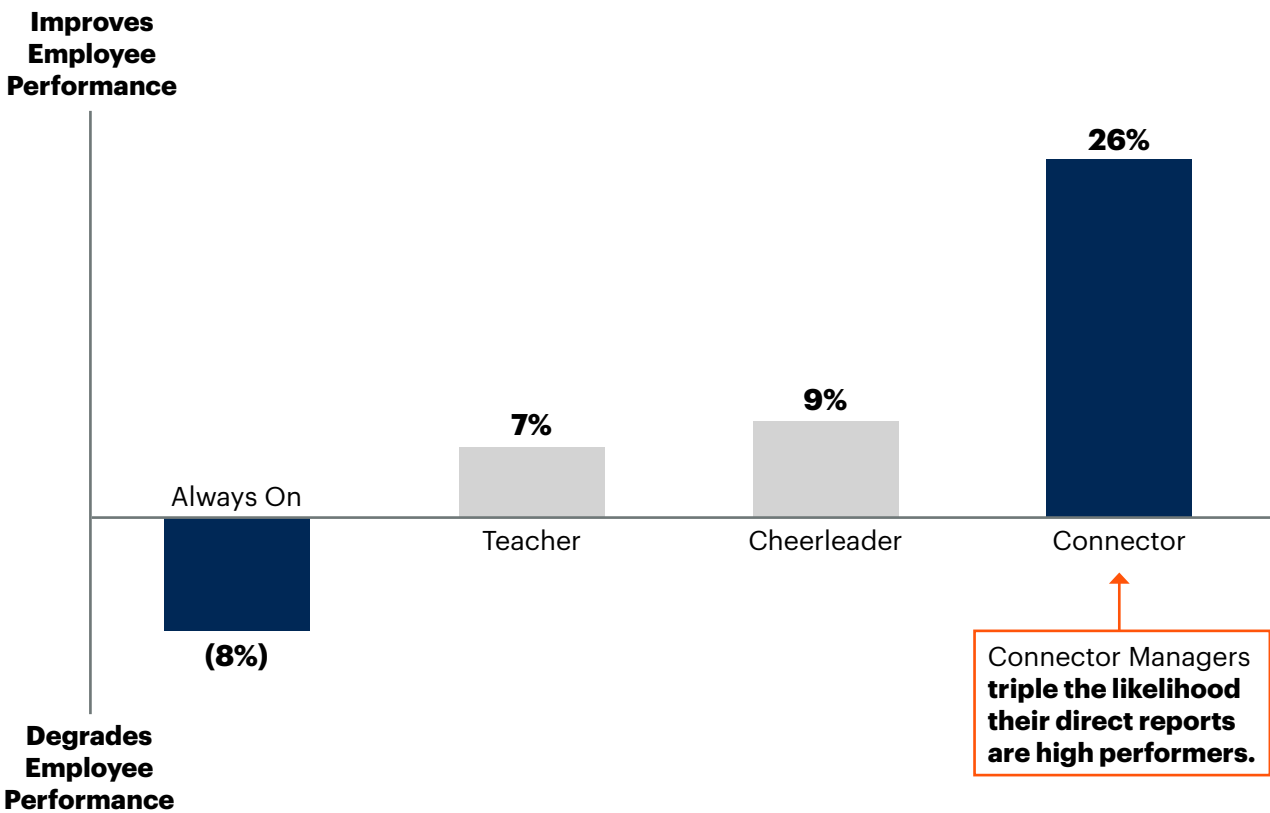
Who Are Connector Managers?

Three key Connector Manager components maximize the benefits of the approach (see Figure 3):

- 1. Personalize for Employee Resonance** — They personalize development moments with direct reports to ensure individual coaching and development is relevant.
- 2. Power the Team for Peer Development** — They create a team environment that unlocks the power of peer-to-peer learning.
- 3. Partner for Best-Fit Connections** — They support employees in extracting maximum learning from connections throughout the enterprise.

The Connector Manager's biggest asset is that — even when they can't provide development or coaching themselves — they always enable employees to access the coaching and development they actually need. This enables Connector Managers to improve their coaching efforts' results without spending additional time; compared to other managers, they just spent their time more wisely (see Figure 4).

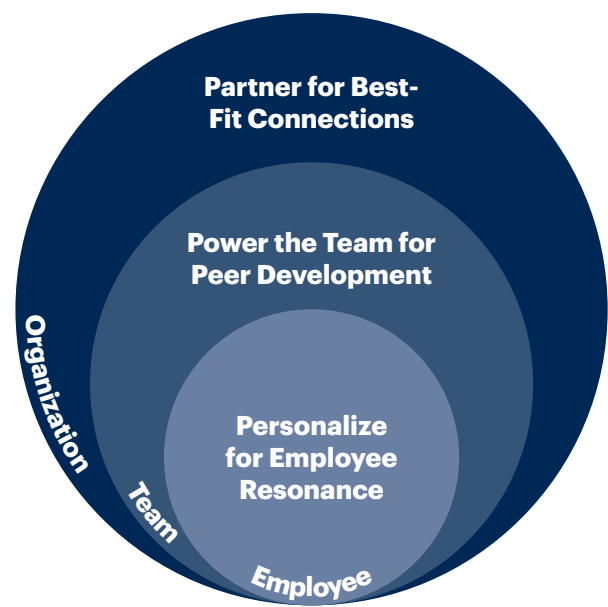
Figure 2: What Connector Managers Do
Maximum Impact on Employee Performance by Manager Type



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

Figure 3: What Connector Managers Do

What a "Connector" Does

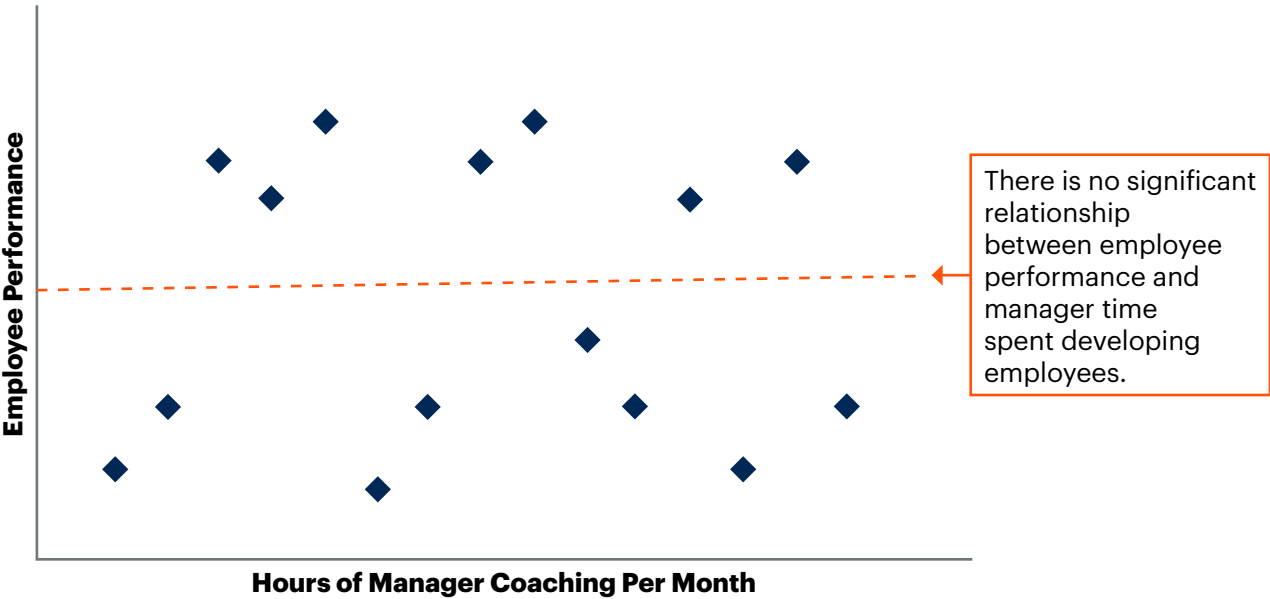


Core Manager Activities

- Onboard new employees.
- Provide feedback.
- Communicate performance standards.
- Identify employee skill gaps.
- Promote on-the-job development.
- Have career conversations.

Source: Gartner (August 2018)

Figure 4: Employee Performance Versus Hours of Manager Coaching



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

How Does a Connector Manager Coach Differently?

When coaching, Connector Managers do two key things that have an outsize impact on their results (see Figure 5)

- 1. They take an employee-centric approach, assessing what type of direction and support their employees need in a given situation. This means their coaching is personalized to the individual's needs and preferences.
- 2. They use a broader coaching network. They recognize that while they don't always have all the skills and expertise their direct reports may need, they can connect their direct report to the necessary support elsewhere in the organization.

It's easy to see how such an approach could help Kate, our overworked manager. It enables her to be a good coach, even amid her busy schedule.

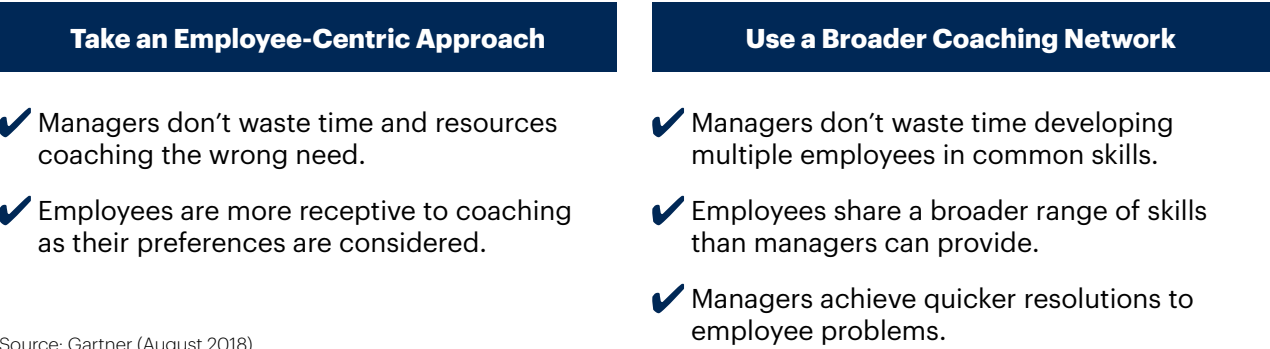
Employee-Centric Coaching

To take an employee-centric approach to coaching and development, Connector Managers have to understand the true coaching needs and preferences of their employees. An employee's coaching needs may not always

be obvious. Where many managers go wrong is failing to dig deeper to understand the true, underlying cause of an employee's behavior. As a Connector Manager, for example, Kate might take five minutes to think about the kind of coaching Mathias might currently need from her. If she thinks Mathias, as a new hire, would be excited to demonstrate his skill set by diving straight into a project, her coaching could help him apply his existing skills in his new role. However, because she will still want to hear Mathias articulate his interests and coaching needs, she'll likely kick off the conversation by talking about his skills and projects. She'll only mention the organization's and business's needs, to provide context for his project assignments, toward the end of the conversation.

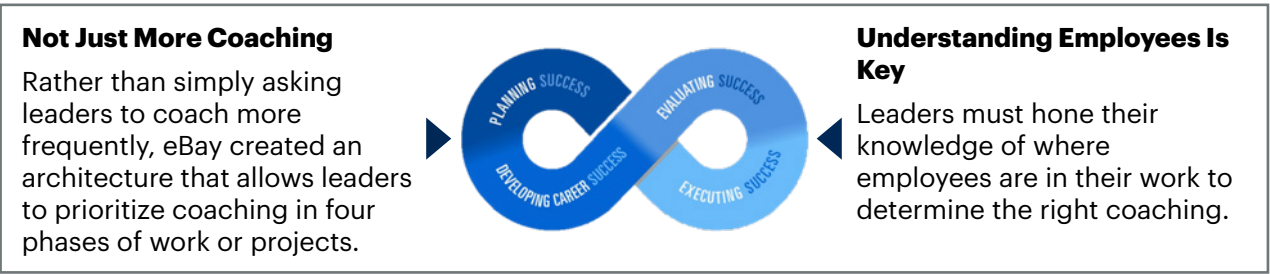
As organizations begin to recognize diagnosing employees' coaching needs is difficult for managers, some have found effective solutions to this problem. eBay, for example, created a simple, easy-to-understand framework for what coaching conversations managers should have, when they should have them and why. At eBay, managers' role is to drive performance success (Figure 6). To support this, the company's L&D team specifies four types of coaching

Figure 5: What Connector Managers Do Differently



Source: Gartner (August 2018)

Figure 6: How eBay Fosters Leaders' Coaching Ability



Source: Adapted from eBay

conversations, mapping each to when they should occur based on employee indicators (see Table 1). While the best managers may do this instinctively, eBay scales that capability throughout its manager population, effectively building more Connector Managers.

Facilitating Best-Fit Connections

When Connector Managers are not the right people to provide coaching on a particular topic or skill, they immediately connect their employees with others for best-fit development. A best-fit connection is between two employees who are professionally and personally compatible and can exchange advice, information and knowledge to enable skill development. Best-fit connections have a clear development or skill-building purpose, which Connector Managers help their employees identify to make the most of the coaching opportunity.

Connector Managers also recognize the power of their teams for coaching and development — an easily accessible source many managers underuse. By considering the

team as a development source, managers can save a great deal of their limited time. They can upskill multiple employees at once or direct an employee to a teammate for guidance. To leverage the whole team effectively for coaching and development, though, managers need to ensure transparency of individual strengths, skill sets and development goals.

For example, as Kate finishes her conversation with Mathias she may decide he needs more support in developing the writing skills he is using in his project. Though a passable writer, Kate knows a teammate, Ren, is far better. After the coaching conversation with Mathias, Kate immediately sends an email to Ren, asking if she’s willing to meet with Mathias and coach him through the writing portion of his project. In their next check-in, she and Mathias discuss how he might make the most of this development conversation and plan another follow-up after his meeting with Ren.

Accenture helps its managers make these quality coaching connections. The company realized its teams had untapped development potential.

Table 1: eBay Coaching Conversations
Illustrative

	Employee Indicator	What
Planning Success	When employees are starting new projects or assignments and at the beginning of the year	Coaching that establishes clear outcomes, resource needs, implementation ideas and measures
Executing Success	When employees are in the middle of implementing their assignments	Coaching that keeps execution on track, brainstorms problem solutions and works with key stakeholders
Evaluating Success	When employees have completed projects or assignments, or at the annual performance evaluation cycle	Coaching that drives intentional learning and recognizes contributions and impact with commensurate rewards
Developing Career Success	When employees would benefit from real-time development and are ready to focus on longer-term career interests	Coaching that identifies real-time development needs and addresses interests and actions for career development

Source: Adapted from eBay

It therefore created the “team experience,” centered on transparency and team-driven ownership, and powered by managers. At Accenture, individuals assess their capabilities and leverage collective team strengths to maximize performance impact. Managers (or “team leads”), have ongoing conversations with their direct reports about embracing and applying their strengths and talents to achieve their personal goals and help their teammates improve on development areas (see Figure 7).

Conclusion

Kate can become a successful Connector Manager by making just a few adjustments to her coaching approach. From keeping the conversation employee-centric to leveraging skills on her team and across the organization,

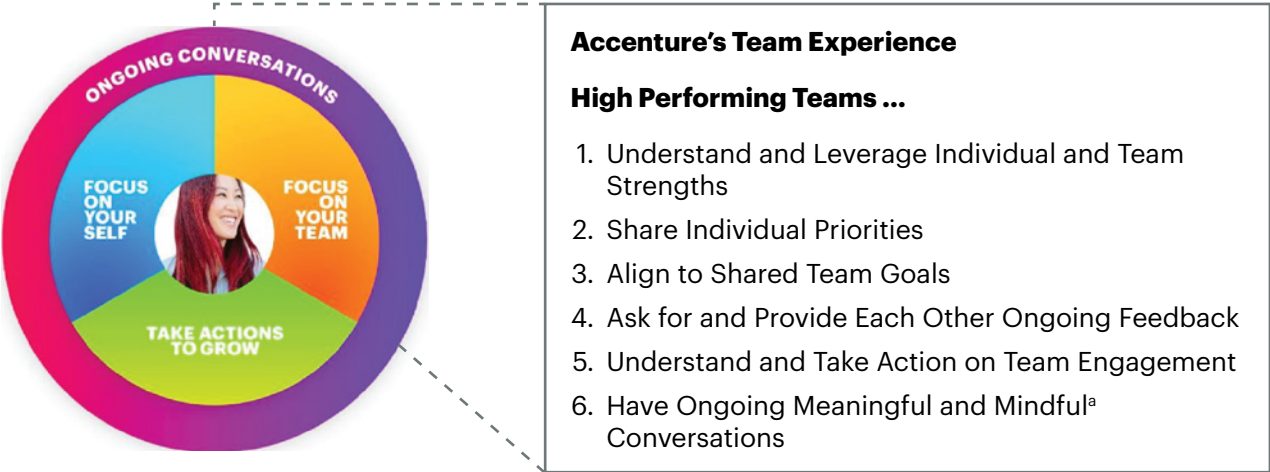
Kate can simply and effectively provide the excellent coaching she wants to and that her direct report needs.

While improving managers’ coaching ability may seem like a daunting task, the Connector Manager approach provides a great model for success. By prioritizing employee centricity and facilitating best-fit connections, Connector Managers can have an outsize impact on their direct reports’ and teams’ performance. L&D teams should consider how the examples from eBay and Accenture could be applied in their organizational context to enable managers to coach like Connector Managers.

To find out more about building Connector Managers search our website for: A New Manager Mandate

¹ Gartner 2017 Learning and Development Agenda Poll; Gartner 2017 Head of L&D Manager Effectiveness Survey

Figure 7: Accenture’s New Performance Achievement Experience



Source: Accenture

^a Meaningful and mindful conversations address the whole person — both their personal and professional needs — to help an individual thrive and flourish at Accenture.