

# A Coaching Perspective on Meaningful Conversations

## A Focus on Strengths

In Gallup’s May 2023 publication, “Culture Shock,” they identified that managers account for 70% of employee engagement. This is a continued endorsement of their work, “It’s the Manager,” from 2019. In particular, Gallup identified that “meaningful feedback” was the key to achieving that level of engagement.

From my career-long experiences and as a consultant, particularly with hundreds of leadership and management training experiences, the solid work from Gallup’s research and Marcus Buckingham’s “Love + Work” clearly support these points.

But what about the relationship between a manager, a leader, or a professional **and a coach**? In this article, I’ll argue that these same principles can and should guide a coaching relationship.

### It Starts with Strengths

Assessing strengths with the CliftonStrengths assessment, now completed by over 30 million people worldwide, is the start of a positive approach to coaching. This is important in all coaching, from career work for resumes and interviewing to leadership development. Starting with the deep dive of the CliftonStrengths 34 report, understanding can be accelerated even further with specialized reports for leaders, managers, and sales.

In the assessment phase of a coaching relationship, which for my clients, also includes an assessment of preferences, e.g., the MBTI, and Emotional Intelligence, e.g., EIQ-2 360°, the focus of the assessment is on the individual being coached.

EXECUTING							INFLUENCING							RELATIONSHIP BUILDING							STRATEGIC THINKING												
People with dominant strength in the Executing domain know how to make things happen. When you need someone to implement a solution, these are the people who will work tirelessly to get it done.							Those with Influencing strengths help their team reach a broader audience. . . When you need someone to take charge, speak up, and make sure your group is heard, look to someone with the strength to influence.							Those with Relationship Building strengths are the essential glue that holds a team together. Without these strengths on a team, in many cases, the group is simply a composite of individuals.							People with great Strategic Thinking strengths are the ones who keep us all focused on what could be. They are constantly absorbing and analyzing information and helping the team make better decisions.												
Achiever	Arranger	Belief	Consistency	Deliberative	Discipline	Focus	Responsibility	Restorative	Activator	Command	Communication	Competition	Maximizer	Self-Assurance	Significance	Woo	Adaptability	Connectedness	Developer	Empathy	Harmony	Includer	Individualization	Positivity	Relator	Analytical	Context	Futuristic	Ideation	Input	Intellection	Learner	Strategic
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6	9	32	25	23	22	11	10	30	19	17	20	31	1	13	8	27	16	28	26	29	33	34	12	21	2	7	15	24	18	5	14	4	3

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In the manager context, the managers and their teams are all aware of their strengths. As part of an early session of a coaching contract, after the client has received their CliftonStrengths results with initial feedback, sharing the coach's strengths with the client can create a similar connection. This can be enhanced with a brief sharing around the "top five" or the full results from the "team grid." Two questions can guide a discussion that takes the relationship to a different level – different from the many coach-client. Here are two valuable shares:

- Some things I learned about my coach/client:
- Some ideas about how we could complement each other to achieve success:

## Recognition or Appreciation for Recent Work

While the main focus of coaching sessions, particularly in the early sessions, is going to be focused on the priorities of the clients, focusing on recognition of strengths-based accomplishments does more than maintaining a positive approach. This can be quickly addressed with a two-question introduction to a session:

- What's an example from last week where you were really "in the zone" with your strengths?
- Last week, to what extent were you able to use your strengths?

Continuing to focus on recognizing positive accomplishments throughout a coaching relationship will build on the relationship and foster a collaborative approach to problem-solving. In a coaching relationship, it is crucial to acknowledge and appreciate the client's recent accomplishments and progress. Recognizing their efforts and highlighting their achievements can boost their confidence and motivation. A coach can provide specific and meaningful feedback on the client's work, emphasizing the value and impact of their contributions. This recognition helps clients build a positive self-image and encourages them to continue their growth and development.

## Collaboration and Relationships

Coaching is a collaborative process that focuses on building a strong relationship between the coach and the client. A coach acts as a trusted partner, working together with the client to explore their goals, challenges, and opportunities. The coach creates a safe and supportive space where clients can openly express their thoughts and feelings. By fostering a collaborative environment, the coach encourages the client to take an active role in their development,

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enabling them to gain insights, explore alternative perspectives, and co-create strategies for success.

Collaboration is further developed by the extension of the CliftonStrengths Team Grid beyond the 1:1 introduction noted above. Particularly when coaching a team, the sharing and discussion of this information is invaluable.

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8	20	9	32	18	30	28	13	6	5	11	15	21	23	25	34	24	29	2	27	16	33	22	7	26	19	17	31	12	1	14	10	4	3
4	16	13	20	27	22	29	15	14	34	33	18	30	25	26	28	17	11	8	6	9	7	10	19	5	12	24	32	21	31	3	1	2	23
21	9	7	31	34	25	19	15	28	18	26	29	32	11	16	24	33	23	13	6	4	27	14	20	8	2	22	30	12	10	1	3	5	17
21	8	1	9	3	11	16	5	24	27	13	29	14	28	18	15	32	22	6	12	25	23	33	20	30	2	4	31	19	26	17	10	7	34
2	10	12	21	26	8	27	4	30	19	33	14	34	9	22	31	20	15	18	11	1	29	16	5	6	3	24	25	32	23	17	13	7	28
5	15	13	30	29	28	12	21	33	7	11	23	27	1	10	16	22	25	14	26	34	32	24	4	17	19	20	31	18	6	3	9	2	8

There are multiple options for developing awareness and growth for a coach working with a team. Here are two questions I've found particularly valuable.

- What is your unique contribution to the team?
- How do your similarities and differences contribute value to the team?

### Current Goals and Priorities at Work

Understanding the client's current goals and priorities at work is essential for effective coaching. A coach helps the client clarify their objectives and align them with their personal values and aspirations. By exploring the client's professional goals, the coach can assist in creating a roadmap for achieving those goals. They can provide guidance on setting SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals, breaking them down into manageable steps, and holding the client accountable throughout the process.

While making sure goals are S.M.A.R.T. is important, success – and motivation – can be accelerated if the goals are also connected to strengths. It's a valuable formula to keep in mind:

$$\text{Success} = \text{S.M.A.R.T. Goals} + \text{Strengths}^2$$

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### Length of the Conversation

From a manager's behavior perspective, the reality goes from "absent to micro-managing." I recall a training project with a manufacturer where the department manager walked into his office in the morning, closed the door, and never left until the end of the day. On the flip side, in a professional services firm, the department head micro-managed the entire team, even nitpicking an important communication she had forgotten she had written.

The hybrid work era has a dramatic impact on this for managers, potentially increasing the dangers of not staying in touch with the team. Fortunately, for a coaching relationship, absence would lead to no coaching and no income.

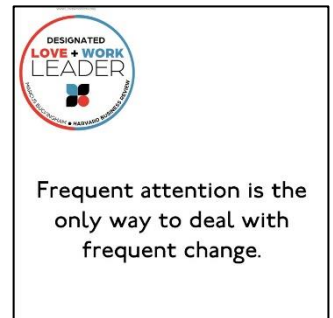
However, here's where the frequency and length of contact matter. According to Gallup's latest research, these meaningful conversations need to occur weekly but only need to be 15-30 minutes in length.

One of the many lessons I learned from multiple learning opportunities at the Disney Institute was from a transportation supervisor. He replaced longer, formal "performance appraisal" meetings with weekly, ten-minute "track talks," checking in with each of his team members.

The applications for coaching here are clear. "Express Coaching" sessions, as an alternative to longer, traditional "50-minute hour" sessions, have become a recognized alternative.

An upfront agreement to ensure weekly sessions, with shorter lengths, would put the Gallup information for managers clearly in sync with the coaching environment. I'm working with one client to institute a first-thing Monday morning "check-in" session.

The duration of coaching conversations can vary depending on the needs and preferences of the client. Some discussions may require more time to explore complex issues, while others may be focused and concise. A skilled coach understands the importance of adapting the length of conversations to optimize the client's learning and growth. They can facilitate meaningful discussions within the available time frame, ensuring that key topics are addressed, insights are gained, and actions are identified. Effective time management during coaching sessions allows for a productive and efficient coaching relationship.



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### Summary

Gallup attributes 70% of employee engagement to the manager, with “meaningful conversations based on five factors:

- Recognition or appreciation for recent work
- Collaboration and relationships
- Current goals and priorities at work
- Length of the conversation
- Employee strengths or the things they do well

Following the same principles, there can be significant success in coaching relationships. By incorporating these principles into a coaching relationship, managers, leaders, and professionals can create an environment that fosters meaningful conversations, supports growth and development, and ultimately enhances individual and organizational success.

