



# The New Leadership Frontier: Coachability

by Joe Folkman, Jack Zenger & Kevin Wilde

A good deal of pressure is currently placed on leaders to be better coaches. However, in following that path, leaders are taught to give feedback but seldom how to receive it. A simple Google trends search shows that the search term “How to Give Feedback” outranks “How to Receive Feedback” by 10 to 1. All the focus on the recipient’s success is placed on the shoulders of the coach. Why are we so blatantly ignoring the other half of the coaching equation?

It may be because most assume receiving feedback is much simpler than giving it. All it

requires is a gracious, “Thank you for the feedback,” and then the magic occurs. Right? The coach does all the work of analyzing, supporting, directing, and cheering you on, and all you need to do is “be coached?” While this may sound ridiculous, this one-sided coaching situation is more prevalent in organizations than we realized.

## **An Introduction to Coachability**

Years ago, Zenger Folkman and Kevin Wilde joined together to perform a large study on a group of executives at a Fortune 500 company in the food industry.

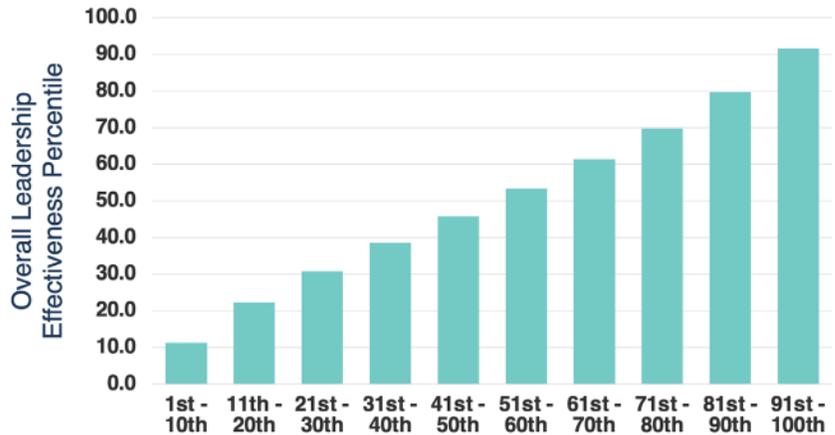
They examined a group of talented executives who had been promoted but were now falling off the career track. Two findings described in Wilde's book, *Coachability: The Leadership Superpower*, provided the most insight in searching for clues on what went wrong.

1. While the boss knew the leader was on the path to derailment, the failing leader didn't recognize it. They lived with significant blind spots.
2. One item on their 360-degree feedback report highlighted the largest difference between successful and derailing leaders: "Does this leader seek and respond to feedback?"

Derailing leaders were rated 30% lower on this question, which enabled and expanded

Highly coachable leaders are far more effective leaders.

**Figure 1. Coachability and Overall Leadership Effectiveness**



Results based on 51,642 leaders Coachability (Practices Self-Development)

their blind spots with others. During the follow-up interviews, senior managers often noted that derailed leaders were simply not coachable.

The boss saw the derailment coming, while the uncoachable leader was clueless.

### A Growing Decline in Coachability

We created a coachability index using Zenger Folkman's global database and identified two alarming trends. First, early in their careers, leaders are seen as very coachable—rated above the 70th percentile when they are 30 or younger. By age 40, this drops to the 50th percentile. Leaders continue to decline, and by age 55, they are at the 40th percentile.

This occurs regardless of a leader's level.

Second, coachability declined as leaders moved upward in the hierarchy. The most senior leaders were at the 50th percentile, compared to supervisors at the 86th percentile.

A clear warning: your most coachable days may be behind you, and your coachability tomorrow will be lower than today unless you start behaving differently.

### The Benefits of Coachability

Just as startling as the damages caused by a lack of coachability were the benefits of those who excelled at it. Highly coachable leaders are recognized as more effective leaders. In fact, the most coachable leaders (the top 20%) were 4x more likely to be rated as highly effective overall leaders versus the bottom twenty percent. (Figure 1).

But what about the impact on the other levels? The analysis of over 100,000 leaders showed three times higher levels of employee engagement, motivation, and discretionary effort for high versus low-coachable leaders. (Figure 2). This also led to higher levels of employee retention, productivity, sales, and customer satisfaction. Their teams demonstrated greater adaptability, stronger performance, and higher promotability potential.

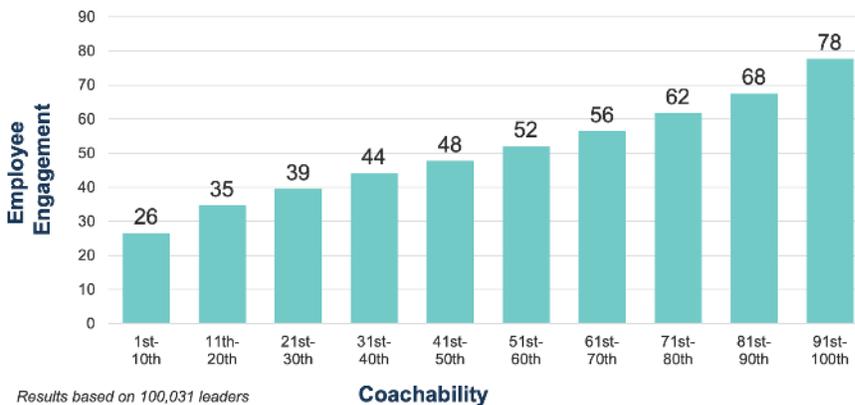
All that from a leader who simply demonstrates the importance of seeking and responding to feedback.

### A Return to Coachability

Most people wince whenever someone remarks, “Hey, got a

Being coachable gives you a chance to create and contribute to your growth potential.

**Figure 2. Coachability and Employee Engagement**



minute? I’ve got some feedback for you.” We instinctively resist that feedback.

- What if it means more work?
- What if it has no merit?
- What if it changes how we view our worth?

Over time we have faulty assumptions that start creeping into our thinking, and we drift away from our coachable learning zone. But noticing and managing the resistance unlocks the power of your coachability.

Being coachable gives us a chance to create and contribute to our growth potential, and that is why all leaders need to return to that state of coachability once welcomed.

### A Roadmap of Coachability

In *Coachability: The Leadership Superpower*, Wilde clearly defines

coachability: “A coachable leader values self-improvement and operates consistently in a learning zone by applying the practices of seek, respond, reflect, act.”

His research shows that all the elements of coachability can be pulled together into a roadmap that can guide your development. These five parts are in your control: how much you VALUE self-improvement (your mindset to live in your learning zone) and the specific practices of seek, respond, reflect, and act.

#### 1. Value Self-Improvement—

Coachable leaders value living in their learning zone as they confidently regard themselves as a work-in-progress, not finished perfection. They value feedback from others as a learning opportunity.

#### 2. Seek—Coachable leaders seek input from others on



how they can improve. They welcome feedback and advice from those around them.

3. **Respond**—Whether incoming feedback is a result of asking for it or not, coachable leaders respond in an open way. They don't interrupt. Instead, they probe to fully understand and show appreciation for the input.
4. **Reflect**—Coachable leaders separate openness and curiosity while receiving feedback from later reflection and analysis of the message. They take time to consider if the feedback has merit and look for ways they can use it to grow.
5. **Act**—When deciding to act on feedback, coachable leaders start with a mindset

of experimentation and achievement in small steps. Once momentum builds from early action, they apply sustainability strategies so the new behavior becomes a habit.

Some, especially those earlier in their careers, may excel in these practices, and just need to fine-tune them a bit. For most of us, though, we've fallen out of practice and are unintentionally drifting toward being trapped by faulty assumptions and complacency.

Can you recall your last teachable moment?

You might have made a mistake, something didn't go as planned, or even something went better than expected. Someone might have helped you recognize the

lesson, or maybe the power of the moment caused you to reflect on your own.

These are the coachable "I'll never forget that" moments that propel us to be better!

But there are times when the powerful lesson is left waiting; it passes by and is never regarded as we rush on with our busy lives. We miss the signals that could help us improve and ignore the blind spot until one day, we change lanes, and it's too late.

Every day there are coachable moments that MATTER. These moments accelerate our growth as more trusted and capable leaders. COACHABILITY—it's the vital capability where ALL development begins!

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