

How to Develop Awesome Internal Project Performance Coaching Results

By Tom Richert

Why Develop Internal Project Performance Coaching?

Project performance coaching is a process. It involves:

1. Investigating how well the project is meeting and improving performance protocols.
2. Interpreting what observations mean in terms of team performance, and
3. Recommending interventions to help the team meet its goals.

'Lean coaching' is a term for this work. Lean coaching practices are an effective vehicle for improving performance. I refer here to 'project performance coaching' because the focus needs to be on performance improvement to obtain the results you want from internal coaching.¹

Internal coaching refers to coaching from people who are members of your organization. Internal coaches can play a vital role in helping leaders such as senior executives. As a senior executive you may only want to coach your direct reports. Yet, you remain responsible for setting and exceeding performance standards for your projects. Your internal coaches can assist you with that work.

Here is a summary of how project stakeholders should view internal coaching.

- Project owners have the most to gain from internal performance coaching. High performance standards are fundamental to developing facilities that better serve their organization's staff and customers. Project owners with in-house project managers also benefit from process improvement. Internal coaching can support improvements group management and administrative practices.

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- Builders benefit from internal coaching that builds their project leaders' skills. Leaders learn to manage workflow and mitigate risks early. This gives clients peace of mind that the project will succeed. Fast, high-quality work boosts builders' profit velocity, a contributor to net operating margins.
- Trade contractors benefit from internal coaching through productivity gains when they apply the performance practices to their work. Many trades use performance standards in procurement and material handling. They also use them for prefabrication to improve their on-site performance. Internal coaching can help trade contractors maintain and improve their standards.
- Architectural and engineering firms benefit from internal coaching that helps them assess design options to identify an optimal approach. Performance coaching can also help the different design disciplines coordinate their work. This improves the quality of design and construction documents.

What Makes a Good Internal Project Performance Coach?

The following qualities contribute to internal coaching capabilities.

- Experience. This is experience teaching practices and observing work. It is about giving assessments that inspire others to excel. A new coach's best initial experience is to work alongside an experienced coach. The new coach should observe the experienced coach work with others. Following each coaching session the coaches should discuss what coaching succeeded and what they could improve.

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- Curiosity. Curiosity builds knowledge; tacit, procedural, cultural, and explicit. Like experience, knowledge requires time to build through observation and learning. Curiosity accelerates that learning.
- Authenticity. This form of authenticity relates to how coaches teach and guide performance standards and practices. Many lean practices have been partially taught. This has led to inauthentic use of the practices and a loss of effectiveness. A coach needs to become an expert authority in the practices they coach.
- Candor. When a practice is missing or inauthentic, a coach needs to bluntly report this to the people involved. Without this candor, a coach risks wasting the investment in coaching.
- Ability to Encourage Critical Thinking. A coach can suggest ways to improve. But it's important that people are encouraged to assess all recommendation. They then can act on the improvements they determine most helpful.
- Detachment. A coach, who usually does not serve as a full-time project team member, provides the team with a broad perspective on its performance. Coaches need to help people work on narrow challenges to improve the project. They can do so because they can detach from the immediate impacts of those challenges.
- Strategic Systems Thinking. Designing the project's social architecture and workflow is a strategic concern. Project leaders must view the project as a unified system. A good coach helps project leaders optimize work holistically.

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There are two common paths toward developing internal coaching. One is meandering trial-and-error learning after assuming a coaching role. In contrast, the following steps outline a direct path.

1. **Develop Fundamental Design and/or Construction Industry Expertise.** Conceptually, someone from outside the building industry can coach design professionals and builders. But they lack the experience to connect easily with project professionals. Serving as a project coach should not be a person's first job in the industry. I recommend at least ten years of well-rounded industry experience as the initial step toward becoming a coach.
2. **Find a Mentor with Experience Coaching.** This will be a person you can learn from by working with them. If a mentor is unavailable find someone who will provide guidance as you develop your coaching skills. Make sure to assess that person as a capable coach with authentic knowledge of effective performance practices.
3. **Attend Industry Workshops² and Read Books.** Authors to read include Steven J. Spear, Jim Benson, Jeffrey Liker, Niklas Modig, and Mike Rother. Look for more authors whose work inspires while it informs.
4. **Support Training and Coaching by Others.** If working as an internal coach in an organization with other coaches, assist as many of those coaches as practical for learning from them. Assess the other coach's training and coaching methods. Identify areas for improvement.
5. **Begin Small.** Start with learning, then teaching and coaching a small set of performance practices. You can learn to coach additional skills as you

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develop. The Last Planner System^{®3} is a good starting point, because it improves project coordination. A mentor should observe your early Last Planner System coaching sessions. They can correct misunderstandings you have regarding the system. Do not rely on YouTube videos. Many videos provide inaccurate descriptions of system practices.

6. **Build New Capabilities.** The capabilities you decide to build depend on the phase of work you support; design, construction, or both. There are many project performance skills beyond the Last Planner System.
7. **Write, a Lot.** Publish your writing, whether on a blog, LinkedIn, or in a book. Choosing to publish requires you to apply critical thinking about the skills you are coaching. It also leads you to consider how you are helping others to improve their performance.
8. **Codify Your Approach.** You should have and understand your project performance coaching framework. This can take some time to develop and will change as you grow.

Summary

An internal project performance coach helps improve your projects and your organization. Improvement means completing high-quality work with minimal expense and on time. All while cultivating healthy professional relationships. An internal performance coach develops and enhances proven team skills that drive results.

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About RisingTerrain

RisingTerrain LLC is a capital project performance consultancy. We support clients across the U.S. in a wide range of sectors. These include healthcare, technology, manufacturing, pharmaceutical, and government. The firm continually improves its consultancy to better coach project leadership skills to client project leaders.

We help project teams perform better. We equip them with the skills required to lead and deliver quality projects with minimal costs and time expended.

We support internal coaching capabilities, developing subject matter expertise within client organizations.

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¹ This is not to suggest that you should devalue lean design and lean construction practices. These practices are practical and provide a solid foundation for my project coaching. Unfortunately, too many have promoted lean jargon. They have done so at the expense of authentic lean practices. As a result, some dismiss 'lean' as a fad, or worse, an ideology. This is not only my assessment; I've heard similar assessments from clients.

² Try workshops and program by the Lean Construction Institute and the Lean Enterprise Institute. They are good starting points. Every organization should aim to set project performance standards based on its values and mission. Lean practices have decades of development, and proven results. As such they provide an effective foundation for any set of project performance standards.

³ The Last Planner System[®] is a registered trademark of the Lean Construction Institute.