

THE RESOURCE

HR INSIGHTS

VOL. IX, ISSUE V

magazine

eyes of industry leaders



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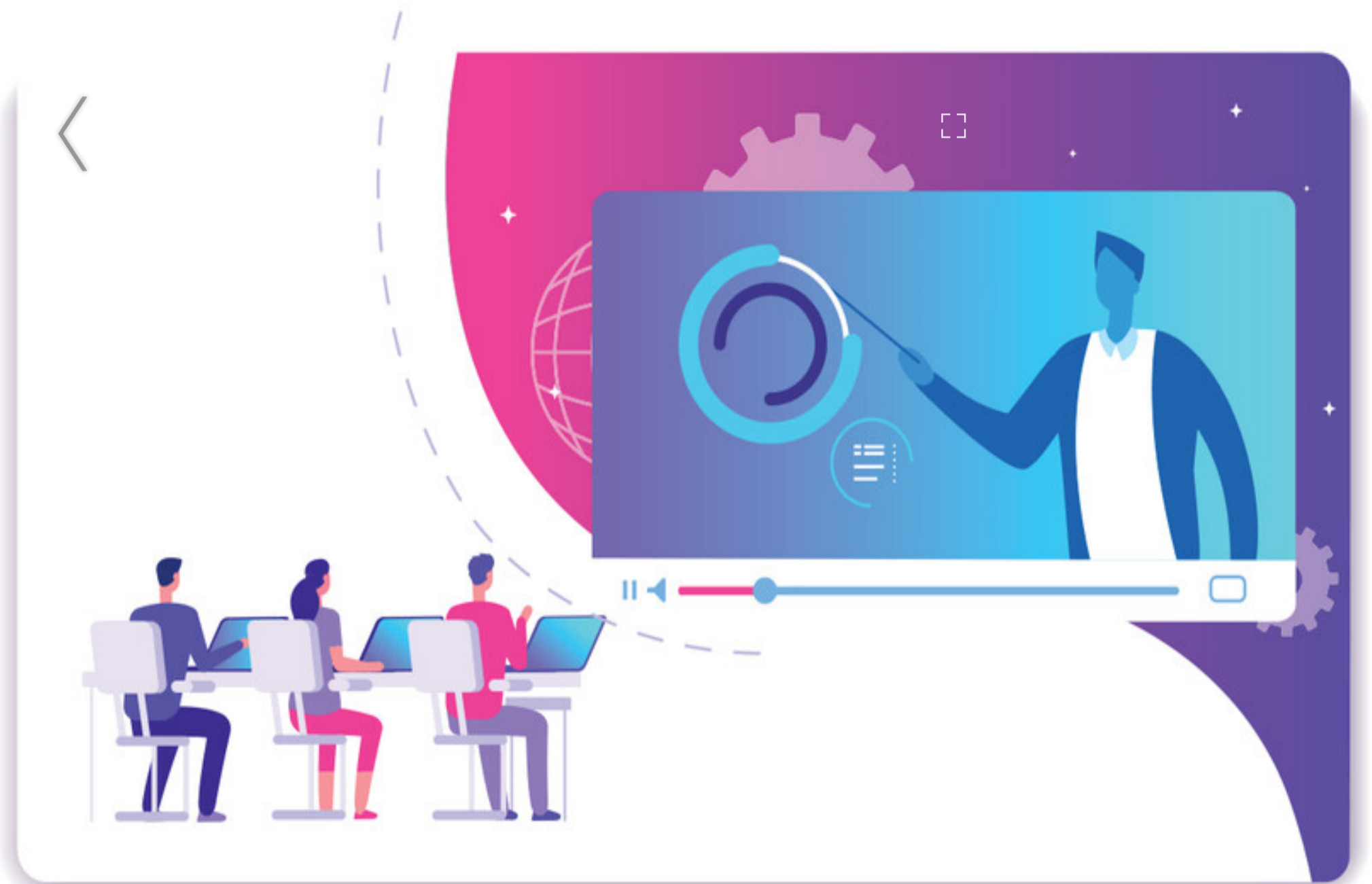
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Coaching from Afar

BY VALERIE GRUBB



Coaching tops the list of skills that many executives look for in their frontline managers, and for good reason: effective coaching can dramatically increase employee engagement and intrinsic motivation. Considering that only about one-third of U.S. workers are engaged and managers have a huge influence on employee engagement (they “account for at least 70 percent of the variance” in those metrics!), it’s clear that managers need to ramp up their coaching skills.

What is effective coaching?

As a developmental and inquiry-oriented tool focused on future behavior, coaching helps employees move ahead by releasing their potential (even if they don't know they have it in them!). Good coaching can yield benefits for employees, for their managers, and for their organizations. It enables employees to take on more responsibility and become more accomplished, for example. Other potential benefits include greater employee retention and higher quality work.

To be an effective coach who helps employees develop greater intrinsic motivation, a manager should use the following strategies:

- **Support employees—and challenge them, too.**
- **Listen.**
- **Ask challenging questions, but don't hand out answers.**
- **Provide a new lens.**
- **Offer a wider range of options.**
- **Emphasize ownership and accountability.**

How does coaching change when everyone is working from home?

Coaching is defined by interpersonal interactions. The continually evolving nature of the coaching relationship is further complicated today by the fact that managers and employees are no longer working together onsite. During these times of widespread work-from-home arrangements, managers have to be even more intentional in their efforts to motivate and engage employees. Coaching from afar is possible during these challenging times. It just requires a slight shift in approach, intentionality, and mindset.

First, keep in mind that good coaching is good coaching. That holds true whether a manager and an employee are seated on opposite sides of the same desk or are looking at each other in a virtual meeting. Regardless of the setting, the foundations of effective coaching remain the same: intentionality and consistency.

Even when everyone has the best of intentions to communicate regularly, “out of sight, out of mind” can still rear its ugly head. And even when everyone is in the office, it's easy for managers



to focus on the tasks on their own plates and not spend enough time checking in on—and developing—their direct reports. When everyone's in a shared physical workplace, at least there's the possibility of having ad-hoc meetings (“Hey, glad I caught you! Let's go grab a quick coffee and chat!”). But those aren't even an option when everyone is geographically scattered.

That's why when everyone is working remotely and not seeing each other regularly in the office, it's more critical than ever to schedule—and follow through on—weekly check-ins. At the start of each week, managers need to block out time on their calendars for employee coaching, then treat that time as sacred (because frequent rescheduling sends a “you're not a priority” message to employees). Because they need to be fully present (and free of distractions) to provide good coaching, managers should be sure to choose times when they can truly focus their energies on being the coaches they wish they had had.

These meetings aren't just for making sure that projects are on schedule. Even though the concept of an “office” has changed recently, that doesn't mean that employees, companies, and managers have stopped pursuing growth opportunities and working toward goals. Coaching is still essential. In fact, it may even be more essential than ever now, as employees increasingly look to their leaders for guidance during these uncertain times.

Valerie M. Grubb of Val Grubb & Associates Ltd. (www.valgrubbandassociates.com) is an innovative and visionary operations leader with an exceptional ability to zero in on the systems, processes, and personnel issues that can hamper a company's growth. Grubb regularly consults for mid-range companies wishing to expand and larger companies seeking efficiencies in back-office operations. She is the author of *Planes, Canes, and Automobiles: Connecting with Your Aging Parents through Travel* (Greenleaf, 2015) and *Clash of the Generations: Managing the New Workplace Reality* (Wiley, 2016). She can be reached at vgrubb@valgrubbandassociates.com.