

Fleet Safety: Don't Overlook the Interaction Between Driver and Supervisor in Coaching Sessions

By Seth Walker, Nicholas Matey & Alison Betz, ABA Technologies, courtesy of [automotivefleet.com](https://www.automotivefleet.com)



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We met Matthew Betz, a recent *Automotive Fleet* [Hall of Fame](#) inductee, a few weeks ago when he visited Colorado. Our conversation touched on many industry topics, but one topic stood out — the interactions between managers and employees in coaching meetings related to safety behaviors.

When done well, coaching is a powerful tool to improve safety performance and develop rapport with employees. However, Betz pointed out that coaching, more often than not, is ineffective.

In May of 2024, Betz wrote an article titled, [“Why Won’t My Drivers Do What I Need Them to Do?”](#). In his article, he discusses common mistakes organizations make when attempting to change driver behavior and several strategies based on behavior science

that produce robust, long-term changes in driver behavior.

In this article, we want to expand on a critical piece of the behavior-change puzzle: the interaction between manager and employee during coaching sessions. Our goal is to briefly describe factors that influence behavior, describe how coaching interactions can become problematic, and leave you with strategies to remedy the issue in the workplace.

Why Drivers Engage in Unsafe Behavior

Before we explore coaching interactions, consider these three well-supported factors that influence behavior. The first two factors, time and effort, greatly influence behavior. If a task is too time-consuming or effortful, people avoid it or take shortcuts.

On your next commute, you’ll notice people speeding or breaking safety rules to save a few minutes. Third, our experiences with

others, especially those that are negative, influence our future interactions with them.

These three factors will recur in different forms throughout the remainder of the article.

Does This Look Familiar?

Upon receiving a telematics report indicating several instances of unsafe driver behavior, a manager reaches out to their employee and requests an end-of-day meeting. During the meeting, the manager stated, “Our company prioritizes employee safety. Based on the report I received, you have had more than our allowed number of infractions. You need to stop driving so unsafely.”

The employee may blame the unsafe behavior on other factors or may be dismissive in the coaching session. The unsafe driving behavior will continue over the coming months. The manager will have several meetings with the employee to reiterate the seriousness of the safety issues until the manager pursues disciplinary action.

Causes of Problematic Interactions

Frequent Coaching Is Critical To Good Performance but Takes Effort

Coaching consistency and accuracy are key to improving performance. Unfortunately, several factors can demotivate managers from providing consistent and accurate coaching.

For managers, providing safety coaching can involve undesirable tasks like extra documentation, reporting requirements, or uncomfortable interactions. When a person is presented with the dilemma of either saying something and creating more work for themselves or refraining and avoiding extra duties, some will invariably choose the latter.

Additionally, coaching sessions lead to awkward or difficult interactions, and the nature of these interactions may make managers hesitant to deliver coaching in the future. Some managers may inaccurately report that

employees are acting safely or skip coaching altogether to avoid confrontation.

Inaccurate reporting and avoidance can lead to extreme outcomes in high-stakes scenarios like driver safety, where unsafe behavior places employees, managers, and companies at risk.

Employee Behavior Is Not Changing

The purpose of coaching is to produce changes in employee performance. When that change occurs quickly and consistently, it encourages the manager to use coaching in the future. When coaching fails to produce quick and clear results, managers become less likely to provide coaching in the future and may view coaching as difficult or time-consuming.

Managerial practices are often a product of what has worked in the past, especially if outcomes are immediate and consistent. When coaching fails to produce change, managers are more likely to resort to punitive tactics, regardless of their desirability from a company leadership or employee perspective.

The Employee Is Dismissive or Reactive

We have all experienced situations where well-intentioned coaching was received poorly. People can become reactive when they feel criticized. They may blame performance on factors “outside of their control”, react emotionally, and lose sight of the greater purpose of managerial coaching: performance improvement.

Alternatively, an employee may be dismissive, acting like the manager’s emphasis on the performance issue is an overreaction.

When two people have a history of negative interactions, they tend to avoid each other in the future. Avoidance can be physical or more nuanced, like having briefer interactions, communicating less effectively, and sharing minimal information with each other.

When an employee regularly receives coaching poorly, they discourage future coaching attempts by their manager. Problematic interactions lead to poorer performance and reduce manager-employee engagement and satisfaction.

Addressing Problematic Coaching Interactions

We emphasize that if you have a pulse, you are susceptible to problematic interactions. Every organization experiences these interactions to a certain degree, and addressing them can pay off in dividends.

Often, companies can avoid costly and complex behavior change initiatives by focusing on fixing the systems that they currently have in place. By ensuring that current coaching systems function well, companies can produce a culture where managers navigate challenging conversations without hesitation, employees are receptive to coaching, and leadership feels confident that they are keeping their employees safe.

Emphasize Accuracy

Teach your managers to recognize situations where they are likely to deliver inaccurate coaching. Help managers identify and prioritize the critical information they should use in their coaching interactions. Teach them to design coaching interactions that are flexible and easy to evaluate over time.

Building skills around effective coaching makes coaching easier and less time-consuming to deliver.

Help Your Managers Understand Human Behavior

Your managers do not need a Ph.D.-level understanding of human behavior, but they should have a basic idea of how teams of individuals interact. Help your managers understand the power of positive reinforcement, how specific types of quotas and performance goals may incentivize unsafe

behavior, and how to navigate challenging situations in a respectful manner.

Teach Employees to Receive Coaching Well

Help your employees understand why they are receiving coaching and reorient them to the greater purpose of maintaining a safe, respectful, and productive work environment. Teach employees what is expected of them in coaching meetings.

Additionally, empower employees to provide feedback to their managers and encourage a culture within your company that is comfortable, relaxed, and respectful when discussing serious issues.

Identify When Coaching Will Actually Work

Coaching can fix many issues, but it is not a magic bullet. Some workplace concerns require additional support or a completely different approach. Leadership should identify the most appropriate time to prescribe managerial coaching for the greatest return on investment.

About the Authors:

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