

How to Build a Coaching Culture

The rapid pace of change in the life sciences sector—driven by new strategic priorities, M&A activity, evolving work models, and breakthrough technologies—demands a new approach to leadership and the culture their organisation needs to advance and thrive. A coaching culture empowers teams to navigate challenges and change with greater agility and resilience.

The life sciences industry, particularly biopharma, is going through significant upheaval. Widespread layoffs and reorganisation have recently become commonplace, especially within biopharma giants. Earlier this year, for example, Pharmaceutical giant Bayer announced it was getting rid of bosses and asking nearly 100,000 workers to 'self-organise' to save \$2.15 billion. Novartis has also embraced a "lean management" strategy by cutting hierarchical layers and encouraging teams to operate more independently. Another biopharma giant, Roche, has been developing more flexible, agile organisational structures and building a culture of self-organising teams for a couple of years.

This trend is part of a broader push toward creating organisations that are more agile and capable of adapting quickly to external forces in the pharmaceutical landscape. However, the drive to become more agile puts employees under increasing pressure. Many may be moving into roles they may not have yet been fully prepared for, while others must quickly adapt to new responsibilities and a new approach. The result is often a lack of clarity and a feeling of insecurity and frustration, leading to low levels of engagement and a downside in well-being.

Enter Coaching on a **Systematic Level**

Research from the Institute of Leadership, the International Coaching Federation, Gallup, and McKinsey show that a coaching culture improves employee engagement, collaboration, and performance. In short, a **coaching culture** is no longer just a 'nice to have'— **it's a necessity**.



This is particularly critical in the biopharma sector, where the stakes are high, and the ability to innovate and adapt quickly can determine organisational success. In the current climate, coaching should span every level and area of the organisation, from leaders to managers, from R&D to regulatory and commercial functions.

Coaching helps align teams, ensures psychological safety, helps solve problems faster and contributes to an environment of trust where employees can perform at their best, even when faced with uncertainty or change.

What defines a thriving coaching culture?

A thriving coaching culture is not a series of standalone coaching sessions. It is integral to everyday operations. Where complex problem-solving comes with the territory, coaching can bring clarity and alignment. As changes like layoffs force employees into new roles and executive teams and boards map new strategies, organisations must provide the right tools, mindset and culture for success. A coaching culture enables employees to learn on the go, develop a growth mindset, and thrive in new roles, fostering an environment of collaboration, innovation and resilience.

Key Practices

- **Daily integration:** Leaders must ensure coaching principles are part of everyday interactions, not limited to annual performance reviews.
- **Timely feedback:** A feedback-rich culture helps employees quickly adjust to new roles and responsibilities, providing clarity and direction.
- **Psychological safety:** Teams need to feel safe expressing concerns, experimenting with new ideas, and taking calculated risks—especially in regulatory and clinical settings where innovation is critical.

Leader as Coach

Leadership is the foundation of any coaching culture. Leaders should not only advocate for coaching, but they must also switch to their “leader as a coach” hat. This ensures that collaboration flows smoothly across different departments, from R&D to commercial, helping to bridge any gaps caused by restructuring.

How can business leaders integrate coaching without disrupting existing workflows?

Integrating a coaching culture into a high-stakes environment might seem daunting for leaders. However, a coaching mindset can be seamlessly woven into daily interactions without disrupting workflows. Leaders can integrate coaching into daily check-ins, team meetings, and even impromptu conversations. By doing so, they can help employees adjust to their new roles and improve their performance without slowing down vital projects.

A critical component of Open Water's [connected programs](#) is to help leaders and managers understand the different coaching styles and enables them to adopt a flexible style of coaching that is relevant and helpful to the person or teams they are coaching.

Case in point

A global CRO enrolled its managers on the [Open Water Connected Manager Program](#). The goal was to upskill and support their workforce during an intense period of transition and change. Part of the program is geared towards helping managers coach their teams and includes peer-to-peer coaching forums to demonstrate the power of coaching to the managers on the program.

After six months:

100%

of the participants reported feeling better equipped to manage their teams and an environment of trust and psychological safety.

80%

reported improved resourcefulness, personal effectiveness and performance.

4 ways to achieve seamless integration:

Powerful questioning

Ask open-ended, thought-provoking questions that challenge employees to think critically and reflect on their responsibilities.

Listen with a “Third Ear”

Empathy requires you to be fully present, acknowledging not just the message but the emotional context. Pay attention to tone, body language, and pauses, and respond in a way that shows you understand, even if no immediate solution is required.

Group coaching

Use coaching principles in team meetings to resolve complex challenges and strengthen collaboration between departments, business units and partnerships.

Real-time coaching

Weave coaching into daily interactions, offering feedback on the spot to guide employees through transitions and complex projects like clinical trials or regulatory filings.

GOALS

What do you want?

REALITY

What's happening now?

OPTIONS

What could you do?

WHAT'S NEXT

What will you do?



By integrating coaching into existing workflows, leaders can promote a culture of continuous improvement. This approach helps employees feel supported in their growth and allows life sciences organisations to meet their ambitious targets, such as accelerating drug development or ensuring regulatory compliance.

What are the common challenges when establishing a coaching culture, and how can they be overcome?

As life science companies grapple with challenges and change, it is resistance from people that makes building a coaching culture harder. Employees - indeed many leaders and managers too - may doubt the value of coaching, especially when already overburdened with new responsibilities. Leaders may also question whether coaching is high-impact enough to fit into a fast-paced, high-pressure environment.

Overcoming these challenges requires transparency and communication:

- **Address concerns head-on:** Colleagues might feel sceptical about the time commitment or its impact. Reassure them that coaching will support an employee's ability to perform, not hinder.
- **Build coaching capability:** Offer development programmes that help leaders at all levels adopt a coaching mindset, making incorporating coaching into daily interactions easier.
- **Celebrate success stories:** Publicly highlight coaching successes to demonstrate the tangible benefits of a coaching culture and its impact on team performance and engagement.

Another challenge is when coaching becomes silo-restricted to specific departments or leaders. Life sciences companies must take a systemic approach, embedding coaching into every part of the organisation. This ensures that medical affairs, R&D, regulatory, and commercial teams work together towards shared goals to deliver innovative treatments or improve patient outcomes.



How does a coaching culture enhance engagement, retention, and overall organisational performance?

Change and uncertainty put a strain on employees; engagement and retention have never been more critical. A coaching culture can provide the support and development needed to retain top talent, build resilience, promote wellbeing and drive higher performance across teams.

Coaching makes space for open dialogue and joint problem-solving in life sciences, where collaboration between different business units is vital. This is particularly important for cross-functional teams working on complex projects like clinical trials or new product launches.

Benefits for organisations:

- **Higher retention:** Employees who feel supported by their leaders and peers are more likely to stay, even in a rapidly changing environment. This can significantly reduce turnover and improve engagement and well-being.
- **Enhanced collaboration:** By promoting a coaching mindset, leaders encourage teams to share knowledge, break down silos, and work together on key initiatives across medical affairs, R&D, regulatory, and commercial teams.
- **More effective leadership:** Coaching helps leaders develop empathy and flexibility, important traits for managing teams during periods of uncertainty and change.

How can life sciences organisations measure the success of a coaching culture?

Measuring the success of a coaching culture requires alignment with broader business goals. In biopharma, this could mean tracking innovation, agility, and talent retention metrics—particularly after organisational changes like mergers or restructuring.

Key Success Metrics:

- **Innovation:** Track the number of new ideas or solutions generated in clinical processes, drug development, or regulatory compliance. A coaching culture often correlates with higher levels of creativity and problem-solving.
- **Agility:** Measure how quickly teams adapt to changes, such as new regulations or shifts in market demand. Companies with coaching cultures tend to pivot faster and respond more effectively to external pressures.
- **Retention and leadership development:** Use 360-degree feedback to evaluate leadership effectiveness, gathering input from peers, direct reports, and external partners. This provides a holistic view of the impact coaching has on team dynamics and leadership growth.
- **Measure employee engagement and wellbeing:** Go beyond usual metrics and look out how employees are taking ownership of their own career growth and development.

Ultimately, when there is a coaching culture, there will be a noticeable uplift in the overall company culture with a clear sense of cohesion, purpose, and shared values. Employees will feel more open to give feedback and will feel empowered, valued, and invested in the success of the organisation.

Advice for leaders **hesitant** about investing in a **coaching culture**

In an industry marked by constant change, uncertainty, and increasing pressures on employees, life sciences leaders must instead ask themselves:

“**What’s at stake if we don’t invest in a coaching culture?**”

- **Understand the long-term value:** Investing in a coaching culture is not an expense but a strategic decision to build resilience and agility within your teams—essential traits for long-term success in life sciences.
- **Partner with experts:** Work with a people & change partner who understands the life sciences sector and its unique challenges. These experts can guide your organisation through the complexities of embedding coaching into daily practice, ensuring alignment with your broader business objectives.

In today’s competitive market, companies with strong coaching cultures retain top talent, reduce time-to-market for new drugs, and drive increased collaboration between R&D, regulatory, and commercial teams. By embedding coaching across the organisation, life sciences companies can become more agile and better equipped to meet the demands of a fast-moving industry.

Valuable Resources to help you build the case for a coaching culture:

[Building a coaching culture: The LEAD Framework](#)

[Why Coaching Culture Matters](#)

[Coaching Mindset for Growth](#)

[Coaching in the Workplace: How to Create a Culture that Fosters Autonomy, Creativity, and Innovation](#)

[Creating a Coaching Culture – The Leadership Institute](#)

[Choosing to Grow – The Leaders Blueprint - McKinsey](#)



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