



# Coaching for Science Staff

***Getting More Value Out of Your Science  
Talent Through Coaching***

By Jerry Fletcher and Jerry Straks

***Coaches lacking a science background often do not recognize that the challenges they perceive with science staff are aspects of the very strengths that make them good at science.***

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**In Memoriam  
Jerry Lee Fletcher  
1941 - 2007**

Esteemed colleague, respected coach, good friend.



**Contact:** [ScienceCoach@PetraCACI.com](mailto:ScienceCoach@PetraCACI.com)  
or 510-789-8936  
[www.PetraCACI.com](http://www.PetraCACI.com)

# Coaching for Science Staff

## ***Getting More Value Out of Your Science Talent Through Coaching***

### **Introduction**

Have you found that your science staff (scientists, engineers, and other technical staff, including R&D managers and executives) could benefit from coaching but are much more resistant to it than other parts of your organization?

There are solid reasons for this. Knowing them will make it possible for you to use coaching to improve your competitive advantage and harvest more value from the science side of your business.

### **First, science staff know their market value.**

The war for talent in biotech, high tech (particularly web-based high tech), and other science-based industries is fierce and certain to become more intense. As each sector grows, the talent pool becomes thinner. Science staff are constantly being approached by headhunters, giving them little motivation to improve how they function in an organization.

### **Second, science staff are typically very smart by conventional tests of intelligence.**

As a result, they are often quick to judge other people, especially people less mentally quick than they are. We often hear complaints that they are difficult to interact with. This is predictable if one is not comfortable with an argumentative style that is hard-nosed, intellectual and data-based. It is not unusual for them to tend to have a degree of disdain for those they label as “pseudo-scientists.” They will challenge any claims made by new people to test their intellectual mettle.

### **Third, science staff are likely to be wary of anyone “messing with their heads.”**

They are drawn to “the life of the mind.” Their minds are how they make their mark. They protect the source of their talent quite fiercely.

### **Fourth, science work involves objectivity, work with numbers, and rigorous testing of hypotheses.**

Science typically involves long hours in laboratories or working with advanced computer programs. People drawn to science work typically are not drawn to warm, interpersonal conversation. By contrast, they challenge assumptions and question statements that can't be supported by numbers.

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**Fifth, science uses special jargon and a science-based corporate culture will reflect that unique language.**

Inability to understand and be conversant with science language and concepts can make conversation very difficult and can reduce a coach's credibility in the minds of science staff. An individual who spends 50 hours a week thinking about a mathematical model for predicting the properties of organic polymers or interpreting results from the Chandra x-ray telescope in earth orbit is going to reference that work in ordinary conversation.

**Sixth, science staff can often be oblivious to the value of interpersonal skills in their work.**

While it is as dangerous to stereotype scientists as it is for any other subgroup, and there are many exceptions to any stereotype, scientists and engineers are more likely than the general population to have underdeveloped interpersonal skills. They are also more likely to be unaware of that underdevelopment or what to do about it. Finally, since most of their interactions are with other science staff with similar interpersonal skills, there is often little motivation to do the hard change work to learn such skills and practice them regularly.

Simply put, most coaches are woefully unprepared to meet these challenges. They tend to come from the softer sciences – psychology, social work, education, and a variety of other professions – rather than the hard sciences. They find it difficult to establish the level of acceptance and trust that is essential for effective coaching of science staff. They do not recognize that the challenges they perceive with science staff are aspects of the very strengths that make them good at science. They then mistakenly try to blunt those strengths rather than build upon them.

**Why Coaching Can Work for Scientists**

After the coach and client build the critically necessary rapport and trust, coaching is an excellent vehicle for change for science staff. The coaching process is quite congruent with science staff values and preferences. For example:

**Coaching keeps the responsibility for change and improvement on the people involved.**

The coach does not intervene but helps the client learn how to be more effective. Scientists and science staff respond well to this--after they trust the coach. They are used to being in charge of themselves and are typically open to improvements that they help design.

**Coaching helps the client see new possibilities in areas of challenge.**

Coaching works within the client's frames of reference, values and priorities, enhancing the client's awareness of sources of friction. Coaching leverages the client's own wisdom in finding new options, new perspectives, and new behaviors. Applying their science skills to resolve previously intractable interpersonal challenges is often very exciting to science staff.

**Coaching provides the encouragement, support and accountability science staff need over an extended period to build new habits.**

Science staff generally have such ferocious curiosity and intense focus that all else is easily forgotten or ignored. Coaches are specially trained to utilize the latest research about the brain to help science staff adopt new habits by

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building on the neural pathways that already exist. Coaches supply the patience, persistence, encouragement and support that science staff need to set realistic goals for change. While changing science staff habits takes longer, the changes are generally long-lasting.

**Coaching helps leverage science staff strengths on their own behalf.**

Innovation in science usually comes from putting what one already knows together in new ways. Scientists already know a lot and usually don't need a "consultant" to teach them how to do their jobs better. Coaches help people discover new ways of putting their knowledge together for greater leverage.

**Coaching provides a safe, supportive environment in which science staff can come to intellectual terms with new values and soft skills while they work through the frustrations that accompany initial attempts.**

Many scientists and engineers move into management at some point in their careers. Coaching can help prepare those that do or those that want to make such a move expand their career horizons. Developing the needed interpersonal skills, business orientation, and practices of good leaders as a result of professional coaching can give them more career options, increase their effectiveness, and enhance their job satisfaction. Coaches know how to pace this learning for optimum success, all while providing the encouragement, support and accountability needed for sustainable success.

**Why Science-Trained Coaches Succeed**

Science staff's willingness to search through what they already know to create behavioral innovation requires a belief that there will be an "equity of exchange" with the coach. "Equity of exchange" simply put is the belief that the scientist will receive equivalent or greater value from the coach than they are expected to give in the conversation. This requires the scientist to see the coach as credible and having something to offer.

Though coaches are not providing the answers, it helps if the scientist knows that the coach has a background in science so that they will be willing to explore their own rich database of knowledge and find new innovations. Science-trained coaches are able to establish the needed rapport and trust difficult for non-science-trained coaches to develop.

\* \* \*

Now imagine that there is available to you a group of excellent, qualified coaches who are also scientifically trained or very experienced in working with science staff. To them, all of the above factors would be delightful challenges and opportunities, instead of threats.

**We are such a group**

Put simply, we *like* scientists and science staff. We find their interpersonal challenges interesting and ones we typically have struggled with ourselves. We are instantly recognized as "one of them." We speak the language and understand the culture of science work. We are smart enough to be unintimidated by scientific argument. We hold our own in the face of tough interrogation. We know how to improve scientists' interpersonal skills and improve their productivity in organizations without "messing

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with their heads”—all while preserving their strengths.

However, there aren't many of us. We have scoured the ranks of certified coaches looking for those with scientific training or experience and have assembled the best of them. As we have discovered, you cannot find them using normal search processes.

### **Typical Issues Encountered by Companies NOT Coaching Scientists and Engineers**

The bumps, roadblocks, and dysfunctions of R&D work are many and differ from one situation to the next. Some of the problems which we often see include:

- Complaints about difficult personalities and personality conflicts
- Teams that don't jell
- Work that is behind timelines due to problems that aren't obvious
- Managers who lack the training and experience to manage science staff
- Problems balancing scientific rigor with business realities
- Loyalty to the profession (publishing papers and participating in standards groups) over loyalty to the company

Each of these challenges can be addressed through our unique coaching program for scientists and science staff.

### **Benefits of Scientists Coaching Scientists**

Bringing our unique coaching program to your science staff will provide:

- Reduced science staff conflict with each other and with the rest of the organization
- Reduced science staff resistance to information sharing
- Higher morale among science staff and those with whom they interact
- More productive dialogue between science staff and marketing
- Improved retention of your best and brightest science staff
- Better science staff working relationships with their superiors, their colleagues, and the rest of the company
- Enhanced effectiveness of science staff in management and leadership positions
- Increased career options for science staff

In these days of fast-paced markets and stiff competition, your coaching program for science staff can become an important source for your **competitive advantage**.

### **Design Components of a Coaching Program for Science Staff**

We believe that every program needs to be designed for the particular company and the particular set of dysfunctions found in the science side of their enterprise. However, based on our experience, here are a number of aspects that we commonly design into the program:

1. **Careful Inquiry.** What aspects of the company and the culture do the science staff feel are frustrating them? What aspects work well? What challenges excite them? What are the rewards that they are looking for? We use data from answers to

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such questions, carefully reported and quantified, to help science staff recognize opportunities for change.

**2. Perspective Building.** Many science staff fail to understand the relationship between what they do and the overall success of the company. Their normal professional interactions rarely, if ever, enhance that understanding. From the role of press releases in raising stock price to raising money for future work, science staff are often in the dark. We arrange specially tailored presentations by senior executives about science staff roles and where they fit, and find they are extremely helpful.

**3. Boundary Bridging.** Science staff may not understand what other parts of an organization need from them, nor how to provide it so that it is useful. For example, in biotech certain experiments need to be run in certain ways to provide critical data for regulatory approval. Science staff, left to their own devices, might not design the experiments in that particular way. We help them maintain their sense of professional integrity within the context of meeting the requirements fixed by law.

**4. Measurement of Improvements.** Science staff are often uniquely receptive to careful measurements of improvements in their performance. What they can measure, they can understand. We help them design ways to measure their progress.

**5. Conflict Management.** Science staff are rarely comfortable with managing interpersonal conflict and may unwittingly make it worse. We provide training and coaching in techniques to help them keep conflicts from escalating.

**6. Potential Downsides to Strengths.** More than most, science staff have great and often unbalanced strengths. Coaching can help them see that any strength, overdone, results in a weakness. For example, winning is important to science staff (winning an argument with data; being first to publish). However, needing to win all the time, in everything large and small, can make it impossible to work well with others. We help them find and value balance.

**7. Continuous Improvement.** Science staff can improve their effectiveness over time if they work on it continuously and break things down into small steps. Science-trained coaches understand the pace and difficulty of change for science staff. We understand as trained scientists that it may take longer and look different when science staff do it, though the results often last longer.

**8. Life Balance.** Science staff tend to forget to take time for themselves, their families, exercise, or other aspects of their lives that are critical for long-term productivity. Even though not appearing to be directly related to the goals of the organization, addressing life balance can greatly improve day-to-day contribution. We help science staff make progress in these areas.

**9. Information Sharing.** Science staff are intensely interested in sharing information with colleagues, while simultaneously being acutely sensitive to the need for equity of exchange. When they give much more than they receive from such an exchange, they feel used. They soon determine the cost exceeds the benefit, ending their sharing. We help them identify appropriate boundaries and learn to control and manage such exchanges so they do not feel used.

Because we understand that every organization has its own unique set of challenges, we design a coaching approach to fit each client company that judiciously incorporates a subset of these factors.

## Creating a Culture of Sustained Scientific Contribution

The purpose of our coaching program is to build on the strengths of your science staff, improving the functioning of individual science staff and enhancing the contribution of R&D to the overall success of your company.

The biggest challenge for science-driven companies is getting the best work out of science staff after they are hired. While turnover is one problem, another is generating far less value from the science side of the enterprise than could be or needs to be achieved. Companies that consistently get the best, sustained contributions out of their science staff will tend to have lower turnover. More importantly, they will have a competitive advantage that cannot be easily overcome.

**Talent can be purchased. Creating a culture that sustains scientific contributions at the highest level is much more daunting and difficult to create.** Coaching of individuals and teams has been shown to have significant impact on individual and team productivity, including creation of a culture of sustained productivity. Coaching can create the sustained science staff productivity a science-based company needs for long-term success.

If you have hesitated to institute a coaching program for the scientific side of your enterprise because they are resistant to being coached, you need look no further.

We are the **solution** to your problem. Please contact us for more information and a free assessment of the applicability of our science staff coaching solutions to the challenges you face.

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