

## Improving corporate coaching through structured feedback and positive reinforcement in a telemarketing setting<sup>1</sup>

*Álvaro Viúdez González<sup>2</sup>*  
*No academic affiliation*

### Abstract

This study investigates the effects of structured feedback and positive reinforcement on coaching quality within a telemarketing company. A corporate audit template was developed, consisting of five competency levels, allowing superior managers to provide personalized feedback to intermediate managers on the quality of their action plans for enhancing agents' performance. Additionally, five custom-designed badges, resembling the order of colors on karate belts, were implemented to publicly recognize the coaching quality of intermediate managers. These badges served as positive reinforcement for adhering to the criteria outlined in the audit template. Results revealed a significant improvement in coaching quality, as measured by the audit template, from pre-treatment to post-treatment and during a three-month follow-up period. The study also emphasizes the importance of utilizing scientific psychology to enhance performance beyond traditional methods such as in-class learning.

**Keywords:** *feedback; positive reinforcement; shaping; coaching; telemarketing*

### Resumen

Este estudio examina el impacto del uso de feedback estructurado y refuerzo positivo en la calidad del coaching en una empresa de telemercado. Se creó una plantilla de auditoría corporativa estructurada en cinco niveles de competencia para que los superiores pudieran brindar retroalimentación personalizada a los gerentes intermedios sobre la calidad de sus planes de acción para mejorar el rendimiento de los agentes. Además, se diseñaron cinco distintivos personalizados con un fondo que emula el orden de colores en los cinturones de karate. Estos distintivos, uno para cada nivel de competencia, funcionaron como un reconocimiento público de la calidad del coaching de los gerentes intermedios. Por lo tanto, los distintivos sirvieron como refuerzo positivo para el comportamiento de cumplir con los diferentes elementos de la plantilla de auditoría. La calidad del coaching, medida mediante los resultados de la plantilla, mostró una mejora significativa al comparar las condiciones previa y posterior al tratamiento, así como durante un seguimiento de tres meses. También se discute la importancia de utilizar la psicología científica para mejorar el rendimiento más allá de los métodos clásicos como el aprendizaje en clase.

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<sup>2</sup> Correspondencia: Calle Amor, 48 (41006, Sevilla). Correo electrónico: [alvaro.viudez@gmail.com](mailto:alvaro.viudez@gmail.com)

**Palabras clave:** *feedback; reforzamiento positivo; moldeamiento; coaching; telemarketing*

## Introduction

Feedback plays a crucial role in performance evaluation and improvement within organizational settings. It involves providing verbal descriptions, whether written or spoken, that inform individuals about the quality and/or quantity of their behavior (Aljadeff-Abergel, Peterson, Hagen, Wiskirchen, & Cole, 2017). The timing of feedback can vary, with it being given either as a consequent following a trial or as an antecedent preceding the next one (Aljadeff-Abergel et al., 2017).

Research conducted in laboratory settings has identified various factors that influence the effects of feedback on performance. These factors include task variety, autonomy, feedback accuracy, and the visibility of feedback (Dodd & Ganster, 1996; Lee, Lim, & Oah, 2020; Palmer, Johnson, & Johnson, 2015).

In organizational contexts, performance feedback offers distinct advantages over other management methods. It has a low economic cost, is relatively simple to implement, and helps reduce the reliance on aversive approaches (Prue & Fairbank, 1981). For an in-depth review of this topic, refer to Alvero, Bucklin, and Austin (2001).

It is important to note that different types of performance feedback exist. Waldersee and Luthans (1994) conducted a study comparing the effectiveness of corrective feedback versus positive feedback among 111 employees from fast food restaurants. The findings revealed that corrective feedback was more effective in improving performance when compared to positive feedback (Waldersee & Luthans, 1994). These results underscore the significance of addressing areas in need of improvement to enhance overall performance. Additionally, the research literature highlights the efficacy of positive reinforcement-based consequences in organizational settings (Wei & Yazdanifard, 2014).

The present study aims to enhance the corporate coaching method within the telemarketing field. While prior research has already demonstrated the benefits of structured coaching approaches (Tilka & Johnson, 2018), this study focuses on improving corporate coaching by involving superior managers in auditing and providing a combination of positive and corrective feedback on the performance of intermediate managers. This builds upon previous findings that indicate the effectiveness of feedback provided by supervisors compared to peers or the job incumbent (Becker & Klimoski, 1989).

The corporate coaching method implemented in this study utilizes an action plan based on performance metrics, including evaluation, root cause analysis, and detailed actions to be taken by the agents. Although it was not recommended, some agents may have had multiple active action plans, though this was infrequent.

Unlike traditional approaches that relied on in-class training, this study sought to improve coaching sessions through a different approach: learning by doing and providing on-floor feedback and positive reinforcement. Scott, Farh, and Podsakoff (1988) demonstrated that explicit feedback and positive reinforcement do not harm performance, even in the absence of these reinforcers. The present study aims to evaluate this assertion as well.

## Method

### *Participants and setting*

Seven intermediate managers (1 man and 6 women) and their superior manager (woman) participated in the present project. The participants were aged between 23 and 35 years old, with work experience ranging from 3 to 10 years in the company. Both the first-level managers and the superior manager had previously worked as agents in the call center before being promoted to their current roles. Prior to becoming intermediate managers, they received formal in-room training, which included coaching abilities similar to those described in the current project.

Each intermediate manager was responsible for a group of 15-18 agents whom they coached and supported in their daily job tasks. This involved providing guidance on appropriate metrics, agreeing on action plans to improve metrics, and other related activities. The superior manager, who had previously been an intermediate manager, was responsible for overseeing these seven intermediate managers. Her role encompassed operational coaching, such as guiding intermediate managers on proper coaching techniques, creating and updating dashboards, as well as other managerial functions including financial accountability, workforce dimensioning, and meetings with the CEO. The corporate structure underlying the present project is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Operational structure of the call center roles and relevant functions.

### *Materials*

A scorecard was developed using Microsoft Excel 2013 to evaluate the quality of coaching sessions. The scorecard comprised 20 "yes-no" items organized into five competency levels, with each level consisting of a minimum of 2 and a maximum of 5 items. The criteria for grouping the items were established through discussions with project stakeholders and experts from the quality and training departments. Most of the

items were derived from a previous corporate audit scorecard based on ISO 9001:2015 standards. However, they had not been previously categorized in this manner, nor had a structured project or implementation system been put in place.

Individual items cannot be shared to protect corporate privacy. However, the content of each competency level was based on the following:

*Competency level 1: Objective knowledge of the agent*

The first competency level focused on accurately gathering and evaluating data on agents' performance to prepare coaching sessions, including the evolution of performance metrics. This data was readily available to first and superior managers through a performance manager corporate tool. Additionally, this assessment required conducting a root cause analysis to identify the behaviors with the greatest impact on the metrics. Examples of items resembling the originals include:

- At least one metric was measured to demonstrate how the agent's behavior impacts the business.
- The agent's behavior was operationalized and linked to the measured metric.

These items were considered fundamental, as high-quality coaching sessions would be impossible without relying on accurate and correct data.

*Competency Level 2: Quality of the action plan*

The second competency level aimed to ensure that intermediate managers created actionable and effective plans to address the root causes impacting performance metrics. These action plans needed to be concrete, measurable, and include specific goals and feedback methods. Merely stating that calls should be shorter to achieve a 350-second goal, for instance, would not constitute a useful action plan. Examples of items resembling the originals include:

- At least one alternative was provided to the agent to guide them in solving the issue, with specific examples.
- Measurable and reasonable goals were established for the relevant metric.

Competency levels 1 and 2 could be audited using the corporate tool where intermediate managers uploaded their action plans, eliminating the need for direct one-on-one observation.

*Competency level 3: Quality of the face-to-face session*

Once a complete action plan design had been evaluated in competency levels 1 and 2, competency level 3 assessed how effectively that action plan was communicated during one-on-one sessions with the agent. The items in this level focused on ensuring the agent's comprehension of the action plan and balancing constructive feedback on areas needing improvement with recognition of good behaviors and achievements. Examples of items resembling the originals include:

- The agent's comprehension of the action plan was ensured by asking relevant questions to gauge their understanding.
- In addition to pointing out areas for improvement, good behaviors and metrics were acknowledged and celebrated.

*Competency level 4: Optimal digitalization of the action plan in the corporate tool*

Having fulfilled competency levels 1-3 ensured a coaching process of good quality. By competency level 4, intermediate managers were expected to digitize the action plans effectively in the corporate tool, making them easily readable, understandable, and auditable for other supervisors. The items in this competency level focused on the proper use of the tool, organizing information appropriately, and ensuring clarity. Examples of items resembling the originals include:

- The action plan and follow-ups were accurately registered in the corporate tool.
- Each component of the action plan (goals, behavioral changes, follow-ups, etc.) was clearly separated for improved clarity.

*Competency level 5: Empowering the agent*

Competency levels 1-4 primarily involved the leadership of the intermediate manager, as they assessed performance metrics, created action plans, communicated those plans, and so on. However, when reaching competency level 5, intermediate managers should become experts in the coaching method and empower the agent to take ownership of their own success. This level focused on equipping the agent with the necessary tools to evaluate data, conduct root cause analyses, design relevant actions, and drive their own positive changes. Examples of items resembling the originals include:

- The intermediate manager assisted the agent in understanding which metric their behavior was impacting and to what extent.
- The agent, with some guidance from their intermediate manager, provided specific examples of positive behaviors that could improve the metric.

Competency level 5 aimed to transition the coaching relationship from dependency on the intermediate manager to empowering the agent to drive their own continuous improvement and success.

The scorecard included a separate tab for assessing each intermediate manager and a final tab displaying a line graph illustrating the evolution of the percentage of correct items over time for each manager.

Additionally, custom-made badges were designed to be worn on the corporate identification card. These badges denoted different coaching levels, ranging from 1 to 5, with each level represented by a background color of white, yellow, green, blue, and black, respectively, following the color order of karate belts. Each intermediate manager received the corresponding badge based on their current competency level.

*Procedure*

Two one-hour in-class training sessions, one for each group of participants, were conducted to explain the methodology of the project. The superior manager attended both sessions and played a key role in helping intermediate managers understand the significance of the study. During these sessions, the complete audit scorecard was reviewed, along with examples of desired and undesired action plans, and the different roles involved in the project were explained:

- Intermediate managers were responsible for enhancing the quality of the coaching method with feedback from their superior manager. They created one action plan per agent per month, typically working with an average of 15 agents in their teams.
- The superior manager audited two action plans per week using the scorecard and provided feedback to the intermediate managers.
- The project manager was responsible for designing and explaining the project, training the superior manager on the use of the audit scorecard, conducting weekly result reviews, and reinforcing the superior manager's behavior.

When the superior manager conducted an audit, feedback was provided based on the competency level of each intermediate manager. For instance, if an intermediate manager was at competency level 3, the feedback would cover items from competency levels 1-3.

Following the audits, the intermediate and superior managers would meet to review the audited action plans and the assessment of the items. During these discussions, both managers would go through the scorecard (see Figure 2) and the audited action plans. The superior manager would commend the intermediate manager for correctly meeting the items and provide specific actions and examples on how to improve the items that were not met. The feedback conversations were designed to incorporate a combination of positive and corrective feedback, serving as positive reinforcement for desired behavior and as an antecedent stimulus for the development of other required behaviors. These feedback sessions occurred biweekly, providing infrequent yet highly specific feedback, which research has shown to be more effective than frequent, nonspecific feedback (Park, Johnson, Moon, & Lee, 2019).

To advance to a new competency level, the intermediate manager had to fulfill every item from the current and previous levels in two consecutive audits. Upon meeting this criterion, the superior manager publicly congratulated the intermediate manager and changed their badge on the corporate identification card. Figure 2 illustrates an example of how the scorecard worked: During moments 1 and 2, the intermediate manager did not fulfill every item from competency level 1 and therefore wore a white badge. Once every item from competency level 1 was met twice in a row (moments 3 and 4), the intermediate manager advanced to competency level 2 and received the corresponding yellow badge.

If an intermediate manager failed to meet the items from previous competency levels in two consecutive audits, their badge and competency level would be downgraded. However, such situations did not occur during the project implementation.

A follow-up audit was conducted three months after the project's conclusion to evaluate the stability of the changes. This audit involved five out of the original seven intermediate managers who remained in the same role.

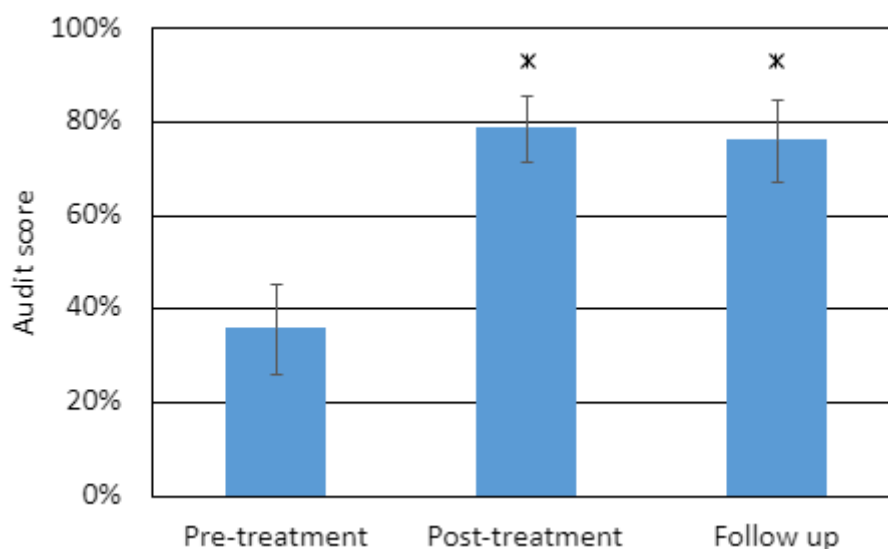
|    | A        | B  | C                | D          | E          | F          | G          |
|----|----------|--|------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| 1  |          |  |                  | Agent name | Agent name | Agent name | Agent name |
| 2  | Level    | Objetivo                                   | Item Description | Moment 1   | Moment 2   | Moment 3   | Moment 4   |
| 3  | <b>1</b> | <b>Objective knowledge of the agent</b>    | Item 1           | YES        | YES        | YES        | YES        |
| 4  |          |  | Item 2           | NO         | NO         | YES        | YES        |
| 5  |          |  | Item 3           | YES        | YES        | YES        | YES        |
| 6  |          |  | Item 4           | NO         | YES        | YES        | YES        |
| 7  | <b>2</b> | <b>Quality of the action plan</b>          | Item 5           | NO         | YES        | YES        | YES        |
| 8  |          |  | Item 6           | NO         | NO         | NO         | YES        |
| 9  |          |  | Item 7           | NO         | NO         | NO         | NO         |
| 10 |          |  | Item 8           | NO         | NO         | YES        | YES        |
| 11 |          |  | Item 9           | NO         | NO         | NO         | NO         |
| 12 | <b>3</b> | <b>Quality of the face-to-face session</b> | Item 10          |            |            |            |            |
| 13 |          |  | Item 11          |            |            |            |            |
| 14 |          |  | Item 12          |            |            |            |            |
| 15 |          |  | Item 13          |            |            |            |            |
| 16 | <b>4</b> | <b>Optimal digitalization of the plan</b>  | Item 14          |            |            |            |            |
| 17 |          |  | Item 15          |            |            |            |            |
| 18 | <b>5</b> | <b>Empowering the agent</b>                | Item 16          |            |            |            |            |
| 19 |          |  | Item 17          |            |            |            |            |
| 20 |          |  | Item 18          |            |            |            |            |
| 21 |          |  | Item 19          |            |            |            |            |
| 22 |          |  | Item 20          |            |            |            |            |
| 23 |          |  | TOTAL            | 2          | 4          | 6          | 7          |

Figure 2. Scorecard template for a particular intermediate manager. Detailed descriptions on the “Item Description” column have been substituted for the item number to improve clarity of the figure.

However, the project concluded abruptly after two months due to a strategic decision made at the corporate level. The implementation of a new global corporate project prompted the termination of the coaching initiative described in this study. Although the project ended prematurely, the insights gained during the limited duration provided valuable information on the effectiveness of the coaching methodology and its potential impact on intermediate managers' performance.

### Results

During the course of the project, all intermediate managers successfully completed competency level 1, and one manager achieved proficiency in both competency levels 1 and 2. However, due to the premature termination of the project, assessments for competency levels 3 and above were not carried out. Therefore, this report focuses solely on the data pertaining to competency levels 1 and 2, which constitute a comprehensive evaluation of the maximum audit score. The average audit score and standard deviation for the various conditions are depicted in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Average audit score in the pre-treatment, post-treatment and follow up. Error bars indicate the standard deviation, and asterisks indicate statistically significant differences ( $\alpha = .05$ ) when compared with pre-treatment.

A Shapiro-Wilk test revealed a significant departure from normality when comparing the pre-treatment and post-treatment conditions ( $W = .732$ ,  $p = .008$ ), while the data comparing the pre-treatment and follow-up conditions showed normality ( $W = .956$ ,  $p = .777$ ). As a result, non-parametric tests were used for the pre-treatment vs. post-treatment comparison and parametric tests for the pre-treatment vs. follow-up comparison.

A right-tailed Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated a statistically significant increase in intermediate managers' audit scores in the post-treatment condition (Mdn = 80%) compared to the pre-treatment condition (Mdn = 40%),  $Z = 2.30$ ,  $p = .01$ . Similarly, when comparing the follow-up condition ( $M = 76\%$ ,  $SD = 8.94\%$ ) with the pre-treatment condition ( $M = 35.71\%$ ,  $SD = 9.76\%$ ), a t-test revealed a significant difference,  $t(4) = 6.33$ ,  $p = .002$ .

## Discussion

The present study demonstrated a significant improvement in the quality of corporate coaching for intermediate managers through structured feedback and positive reinforcement. Both the pre-treatment vs. post-treatment and pre-treatment vs. follow-up comparisons showed significant differences when assessing the scores on the corporate audit template for auditing intermediate managers' action plans. Each intermediate manager showed improvement, with a maximum post-treatment score of 90%, albeit the study's interruption due to corporate reasons.

The feedback function described by Mangiapanello and Hemmes (2015) aligns well with the function of feedback in this study, as it described characteristics of the audited action plans and provided examples and scores for improvement. While this project did not define the specific coaching methods and action plans, the treatment package implemented in this study applied behavioral concepts, including a logical structure (shaping), feedback on areas of improvement, and explicit congratulations and recognition (positive reinforcement).



It is worth noting that despite receiving training on proper coaching and action plans for over two years, intermediate managers initially had low audit scores (Mdn = 40%). However, after participating in the project for two months, their scores doubled. The superior manager was astonished by the transformation and shared this methodology with other superiors, leading to consistent improvements in the quality of action plans. Intermediate managers began referencing agents' performance metrics, providing detailed examples of behavioral changes, and setting specific goals, among other improvements.

The noteworthy high audit scores observed three months after the project's conclusion indicate that intermediate managers continued applying the learned behaviors even after the feedback and explicit reinforcement ceased. This finding supports the embedding of the project's rationale in the corporate culture. It aligns with previous research by Scott, Farh, and Podsakoff (1988), suggesting that explicit external reinforcers do not necessarily decrease performance when they are no longer present.

The colored badges serve as an example of these extrinsic reinforcers. When intermediate managers wore the badges, the promotion to the next level was publicly recognized by their superior and peers, acting as positive reinforcement for fulfilling the competency level items on the audit scorecard. This reinforcement was contingent on improving their action plans based on prior feedback from the superior manager.

The findings of this study provide further support for previous research (Becker & Klimoski, 1989) indicating that performance feedback from supervisors is more effective in improving coaching skills. In this study, superior supervisors provided structured feedback to intermediate supervisors, resulting in rapid and sustainable improvement.

The frequency of feedback in this study was biweekly, which may be considered infrequent compared to the daily coaching interactions. However, the specificity of the feedback played a crucial role in its effectiveness, aligning with the findings of Park, Johnson, Moon, and Lee (2019), who demonstrated that infrequent specific feedback is more effective than infrequent global feedback. These results support the notion that infrequent yet specific feedback can lead to significant improvements.

The feedback provided by the superior manager encompassed a combination of positive and corrective feedback, following the approach proposed by Waldersee and Luthans (1994). This combination proved interesting in the context of the treatment package, as it contributed to its effectiveness and social validity. Although social validity was not explicitly measured in this study, informal conversations with participants indicated a high level of acceptance for the project. Positive feedback served as a positive reinforcement for effective behaviors at the individual level and as a conditioning process to make feedback meetings with the superior manager more engaging. Corrective feedback focused on areas of improvement, often accompanied by examples of more effective behavior drawn from real peers' action plans.

### **Limitations**

Despite the positive reputation gained internally and the demonstrable improvements observed, the project had to be terminated due to corporate instructions to implement a different initiative. The new corporate project lacked structure and scientific basis, but corporate policies prioritized its implementation. As a result, no data could be obtained regarding the effectiveness of the procedure for competency levels 3 and above.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of data on agents' performance metrics. While it can be reasonably assumed that improvements in the structure and communication of action plans would positively impact agents' daily work, the premature conclusion of the project prevented the collection of such measures.

Additionally, it would have been valuable to have a treatment group without the use of colored badges to isolate the effects of these extrinsic reinforcers. Previous studies have explored the impact of monetary rewards as extrinsic reinforcers (Scott, Farh, & Podsakoff, 1988; Wei & Yazdanifard, 2014), but analyzing the distinct nature of the badges used in this study would provide further insights.

### Conclusion

Despite the early conclusion, the project demonstrated promising outcomes. The scorecard and badge system proved effective in assessing and recognizing the competency levels of intermediate managers. The feedback sessions between the superior and intermediate managers fostered a culture of continuous improvement and positively influenced the quality of coaching interactions.

The limitations of the project should be acknowledged. The abbreviated timeline prevented the assessment of competency levels beyond level 3. Additionally, the sudden termination limited the ability to evaluate the long-term impact and sustainability of the coaching program. Future research could explore the extended implementation of the coaching methodology and its effects on intermediate managers' performance and overall organizational outcomes.

In conclusion, the project employed a comprehensive methodology to improve coaching effectiveness among intermediate managers. The scorecard, badge system, feedback sessions, and audits played crucial roles in enhancing the coaching process. While the project faced limitations due to its premature conclusion, the findings provide valuable insights for organizations seeking to enhance their coaching practices and develop their managerial talent.

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