

# Unbundling the Engineering Manager

## A Low-Risk Model for Adding Dedicated Coaching and Organizational Effectiveness to Engineering

### Executive Summary

Engineering organizations traditionally bundle a remarkable number of responsibilities into the Engineering Manager role.

Technical leadership. Delivery. Performance management. Career development. Feedback. Coaching. Conflict resolution. Team health. Change management. Organizational sensing.

These responsibilities are related. They do not necessarily need to be performed by the same person.

This paper examines an alternative: adding a dedicated Technical Coaching or Engineering People Partner capability that operates horizontally across the engineering organization.

The idea is not to eliminate Engineering Managers.

It is to recognize that some of the capabilities traditionally bundled into engineering management can be separated, specialized, and delivered across teams.

And adopting the model does not require an organizational transformation.

A company can introduce one coach alongside its existing structure without eliminating managers, changing reporting lines, reorganizing teams, or replacing existing People processes. The capability can sit within Engineering or operate as a dedicated People partner to Technology. Responsibilities can remain exactly where they are initially and shift only where specialization proves valuable.

In that sense, the model can be **additive before it is transformative**.

A 15-month implementation inside a 125+ person R&D organization provides one real-world case study. A dedicated Technical Coaching function worked across Engineering, QA, Product, Design, Project Management, and technical leadership while maintaining direct access to senior R&D leadership.

Across the implementation:

- More than **130 people** participated in more than **1,000 individual coaching sessions**
- **98.3%** of people in the final coaching dataset returned for multiple sessions
- **92.4%** participated in five or more sessions
- The median coaching relationship lasted **391 days**
- **364** recorded post-session responses averaged **9.4 out of 10**
- **84.1%** of responses rated the experience 9 or 10

- **96.7%** rated it 8 or higher

Those numbers demonstrate adoption and perceived value. They should not, by themselves, be treated as proof of organizational impact.

The stronger argument comes from what the horizontal role made possible: earlier intervention in performance problems, leadership development, conflict mediation, career architecture, organizational sensing, support for difficult organizational changes, and individualized adoption of a broader AI strategy.

The implementation suggests a broader organizational design question:

**What if engineering organizations treated coaching, development, and organizational effectiveness as dedicated infrastructure rather than secondary responsibilities distributed among already-busy managers?**

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## 1. The Engineering Manager Is a Bundle

The conventional engineering organization often follows a familiar hierarchy:

**CTO / VP Engineering**

↓

**Directors / Senior Managers**

↓

**Engineering Managers**

↓

**Engineers**

The Engineering Manager occupies an unusually broad role within that structure.

Depending on the organization, one person may be responsible for some combination of:

### **Technical leadership**

- Architecture and technical direction
- Engineering standards
- Technical decision-making
- Code and system quality

## **Delivery**

- Planning and prioritization
- Project execution
- Coordination
- Removing blockers

## **People management**

- Performance management
- Feedback
- Compensation
- Promotions
- Difficult conversations

## **Development**

- Career coaching
- Skill development
- Development plans
- Mentoring

## **Team health**

- Conflict resolution
- Engagement
- Psychological safety
- Communication
- Team dynamics

## **Organizational leadership**

- Communicating leadership priorities
- Identifying organizational problems
- Escalating risks
- Supporting change
- Talent planning

There are good reasons this model became common. Engineering Managers are close to both the work and the people doing it, and strong Engineering Managers can perform many of these responsibilities exceptionally well.

But the model contains structural tensions.

The person accountable for delivery is also expected to protect time for development.

The person evaluating an employee's performance is also expected to be the employee's trusted coach.

The person accountable for a team's results is also expected to objectively diagnose dysfunction within that team.

And when a manager is part of a problem, that same management relationship may be the employee's primary mechanism for surfacing it.

These are not necessarily failures of individual managers.

They are properties of the role.

The Engineering Manager is, in effect, a bundle of organizational capabilities.

The useful question is not whether that bundle is wrong.

It is whether every capability in the bundle must remain there.

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## 2. Unbundling Does Not Mean Eliminating

The word *unbundling* can imply dismantling something.

That is not the proposition here.

Unbundling means recognizing that technical leadership, delivery leadership, coaching, career development, performance support, conflict resolution, and organizational sensing are distinct capabilities, even when several happen to reside in one role.

Once those capabilities are recognized separately, organizations gain options.

Some may remain with Engineering Managers.

Some may be shared.

Some may benefit from dedicated specialists.

The resulting model can be represented simply:

### **Vertical leadership**

CTO / VP Engineering

↓

Directors

↓

Engineering Managers / Technical Leaders

↓

Engineers

+

### **Horizontal capability**

Technical Coaching / Engineering People Partner

↔ Senior Leadership

↔ Directors

↔ Engineering Managers

↔ Technical Leaders

↔ Engineers

↔ Adjacent R&D Functions

The vertical structure preserves accountability.

The horizontal structure creates dedicated capacity across it.

This distinction is fundamental.

**The coach does not need to replace leadership. The coach can increase leadership's capacity.**

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## **3. A Model That Can Be Added Without a Reorganization**

Many organizational innovations carry significant adoption costs.

They require reporting-line changes, new management structures, altered titles, redesigned processes, or a broad philosophical commitment before the organization knows whether the idea will work.

A horizontal coaching function does not have to.

An organization can add the capability while leaving its existing operating model intact.

Engineering Managers can remain Engineering Managers.

Directors retain their teams.

Technical leads retain technical authority.

HR retains its formal responsibilities.

Existing performance processes can remain in place.

The new function adds dedicated capacity for work the organization is already attempting to perform: development, coaching, feedback, leadership support, conflict mediation, change adoption, and organizational sensing.

This creates several possible adoption levels.

## **Augment**

A coach is added alongside the existing structure.

Managers retain their current responsibilities, while employees and leaders gain access to a dedicated coaching resource.

No significant organizational change is required.

For many organizations, this may be the permanent model.

## **Share**

As the function establishes trust and demonstrates value, certain responsibilities can become intentionally shared.

Career development may involve both manager and coach.

A manager preparing for a difficult performance conversation may work with the coach beforehand.

Conflict may be mediated through the coaching function.

Leadership development may increasingly move to the specialist.

Organizational patterns identified through coaching may inform senior leadership.

## **Unbundle**

Organizations that want to go further can intentionally separate technical leadership from a larger portion of traditional people-management work.

That was closer to the model examined in the case study in this paper.

There is no requirement to progress from Augment to Share to Unbundle.

The important principle is that **an organization can begin receiving value before changing its structure.**

## 4. Where the Capability Can Live

The model is also flexible in where it sits organizationally.

Two configurations are particularly natural.

### Embedded Within Engineering

A Technical Coach can report within the engineering organization, potentially to a CTO, VP Engineering, or other senior technology leader.

This configuration offers several advantages:

- Strong connection to engineering strategy
- High technical credibility
- Direct access to technology leadership
- Deep familiarity with engineering roles and practices
- Clear integration with technical and organizational change

This was closest to the implementation examined here.

### A People Partner Dedicated to Technology

The same capability could reside within People while operating as a specialized partner to Engineering or Technology.

Structurally, this resembles a People Business Partner.

Functionally, however, the emphasis is different.

The role is deeply embedded in the engineering environment and oriented toward coaching, development, leadership effectiveness, organizational sensing, and engineering-specific change rather than primarily toward HR policy and process.

Both configurations can work.

The critical requirements are less about the box on the organizational chart than about **technical credibility, trust, leadership access, and clearly defined boundaries.**

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## 5. The Horizontal Advantage

Most management systems are vertical by design.

Information generally moves through reporting relationships.

An engineer talks to a manager. The manager talks to a director. The director talks to a VP.

This creates accountability and local context.

It also creates information boundaries.

A manager may understand one team extremely well.

A director may understand several teams.

A horizontal role develops a different form of visibility.

It can work across teams, levels, disciplines, and reporting relationships.

That creates **organizational visibility without direct organizational authority**.

Consider a simple example.

One engineer struggling to understand expectations may have an individual problem.

Eight engineers across five teams struggling with the same expectation may indicate an organizational problem.

A vertical system can discover that pattern.

A horizontal role is structurally positioned to encounter it repeatedly.

That changes the nature of coaching.

The conversation is no longer valuable only because it helps the person in the room.

It also becomes a sensor for the organization.

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## 6. Coaching as Organizational Infrastructure

It is easy to interpret a Technical Coach as someone employees visit for career advice.

Career development is part of the role, but that framing significantly understates its potential.

In the implementation examined here, coaching touched:

- Career growth
- Technical development

- Leadership
- Performance
- Feedback
- Communication
- Interpersonal conflict
- Confidence
- Team effectiveness
- Organizational change
- Workload and burnout
- AI adoption
- Changing engineering practices

The function therefore operated at two levels simultaneously:

### **Individual**

Help a person understand a problem, make a decision, develop a capability, change a behavior, or navigate a difficult situation.

### **System**

Identify why multiple people may be experiencing similar problems and determine whether the organization itself should change.

Over time, hundreds of conversations can reveal recurring signals: unclear expectations, ineffective feedback, leadership gaps, organizational friction, resistance to change, career ambiguity, performance patterns, team dysfunction, and opportunities for process improvement.

That creates a feedback loop:

**Listen → Coach → Detect patterns → Inform leadership → Improve the system → Listen again**

This is where coaching begins to function less like an employee benefit and more like organizational infrastructure.

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## **7. A Different Trust Relationship**

Traditional management contains an unavoidable dual relationship.

Managers want employees to speak openly about uncertainty, mistakes, frustrations, career concerns, interpersonal problems, and areas where they are struggling.

Managers also evaluate those employees.

Strong managers can create substantial trust despite that tension.

The tension nevertheless exists.

A dedicated coach occupies a different structural position.

Employees can discuss problems without assuming that every conversation is becoming part of their performance record.

But the coaching function cannot simply become a private organizational confessional.

It also has a responsibility to the health of the organization.

The model therefore depends on a critical distinction between **individual confidentiality and organizational sensing**.

Specific conversations remain private where appropriate.

Patterns do not have to.

When similar concerns appear repeatedly across teams, leadership can hear:

**“There is a pattern.”**

without hearing:

**“Here is what this particular person told me.”**

Done well, this allows an organization to learn from employee experience without destroying the trust that made honest conversations possible.

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## 8. Case Study: A 15-Month Implementation

The model described above was implemented for approximately 15 months inside a 125+ person R&D organization.

Rather than relying primarily on traditional Engineering Managers, the organization placed substantial responsibility for architecture, execution, technical decisions, and engineering quality with highly technical leaders.

A dedicated Technical Coaching function provided much of the development, feedback, performance support, leadership coaching, conflict mediation, career development, change support, and organizational sensing capacity.

The role worked across Engineering, QA, Product, Design, Project Management, and technical leadership, with regular access to the CTO and other R&D leaders.

This provided an unusually broad test of the unbundling concept.

But organizations do not need to reproduce this structure to use the capability.

The case study demonstrates that these responsibilities **can** be separated.

A conventional engineering organization can choose to separate far fewer of them.

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## 9. Evidence of Adoption

A voluntary coaching model depends on trust and repeated use.

The final coaching dataset contained **929 recorded sessions with 119 people**.

Among those participants:

- **98.3% returned for multiple sessions**
- **92.4% participated in five or more sessions**
- The median coaching relationship lasted **391 days**

Across the full 15-month implementation, including people outside the final dataset, the function reached **more than 130 people through more than 1,000 individual coaching sessions**.

Post-session satisfaction data provided another signal.

Across **364 recorded responses**:

- Average satisfaction was **9.4 / 10**
- **84.1%** rated the experience 9 or 10
- **96.7%** rated it 8 or higher

These measures demonstrate adoption and perceived value.

They do **not** establish that coaching caused broader organizational outcomes.

That distinction matters.

A credible evaluation of this model should separate three questions:

### **Did people use it?**

The repeat-engagement data strongly suggests they did.

**Did people value it?**

The satisfaction data strongly suggests they did.

**Did it improve organizational outcomes?**

That requires different evidence.

The implementation provides several examples worth examining.

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## 10. From Coaching to Organizational Outcomes

### Recovering Performance Before Formal Escalation

An engineer approaching a formal performance process was struggling after a team change.

Rather than treating the situation immediately as a fixed capability problem, the organization created a lower-risk opportunity better aligned with the employee's strengths and paired it with intensive coaching around expectations, accountability, and execution.

The employee succeeded and later grew into a leadership role.

The broader lesson is not that coaching can rescue every struggling employee.

It is that performance problems contain diagnostic information.

The cause may be capability.

It may also be role fit, unclear expectations, communication, confidence, motivation, management, or environment.

An additional coaching relationship creates another opportunity to distinguish among them before the organization makes a high-consequence decision.

### Turning Conflict Into Partnership

In another case, an employee and leader had developed a significant breakdown around feedback and communication.

Separate coaching created space for each person to examine the situation independently before mediation brought the perspectives together.

The working relationship improved substantially, and the employee reported feeling more included and valued.

The intervention did not remove managerial accountability.

It created another mechanism for restoring the relationship.

## **Making Organizational Change Work**

When working patterns changed significantly for a distributed team, individual conversations surfaced concerns early and gave leadership visibility into where resistance was coming from.

Coaching also gave employees a place to work through the practical and personal consequences of the change.

The transition was implemented with **zero known attrition attributable to the change**, while enabling the closer collaboration a related engineering initiative depended on.

## **Translating an AI Strategy Into Individual Adoption**

When leadership established a broader AI-adoption strategy, the challenge was not simply tool availability.

It was behavior change.

Employees resisted or struggled for different reasons.

Some lacked skills.

Some lacked confidence.

Some questioned the usefulness of the tools.

Some perceived AI as a threat to professional identity.

Others simply did not know how to integrate it into their work.

A centralized mandate could establish direction.

It could not address every individual's reason for not changing.

Repeated one-to-one conversations created a mechanism for translating organizational strategy into individualized adoption.

## **Building Performance and Development Infrastructure**

The function also contributed to career ladders, competency rubrics, self-assessment mechanisms, development plans, feedback practices, and performance-management clarity.

The result was not simply more coaching.

It was infrastructure that allowed employees and leaders to have more specific conversations about expectations, performance, and growth.

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## 11. The Economics of Attention

Engineering organizations typically evaluate management structure in terms of headcount and reporting ratios.

Another scarce resource deserves equal attention:

### **leadership attention.**

Consider the work that may occupy an Engineering Manager or senior technical leader:

- Career conversations
- Development planning
- Difficult feedback
- Interpersonal conflict
- Performance documentation
- Employee engagement
- Organizational communication
- Change management
- Leadership development

Every one of these activities is valuable.

But they compete with architecture, engineering strategy, technical quality, execution, mentoring technical decisions, and solving difficult systems problems.

The question is therefore not:

### **“Should managers do people work?”**

Of course they should.

The better question is:

### **“Which people capabilities benefit from dedicated expertise, and which require direct managerial ownership?”**

Engineering organizations already make this distinction elsewhere.

Security specialists do not eliminate every engineer's responsibility for security.

Site Reliability Engineering does not mean application engineers stop caring about reliability.

Developer Experience specialists do not absolve teams from caring about developer productivity.

Specialization creates leverage while responsibility remains distributed.

Coaching and organizational effectiveness can be approached the same way.

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## 12. How Much Can One Coach Cover?

The 15-month implementation provides an interesting initial data point for scale.

One dedicated coaching function served a population of more than **130 R&D professionals**, conducting more than **1,000 individual sessions** while also contributing to organizational initiatives, leadership development, performance systems, and change efforts.

That suggests that this is not necessarily a one-coach-per-team model.

A horizontal function can create leverage across a substantially larger population.

As an initial operating hypothesis, **roughly one dedicated coach for every 100-200 technical employees** may be a useful range for organizations exploring the model.

That should not be interpreted as an established industry benchmark.

The appropriate ratio will depend on several factors:

- How much responsibility the coach owns
- How frequently employees engage
- Whether Engineering Managers remain in place
- Organizational complexity
- Geographic distribution
- Leadership maturity
- The amount of systemic work expected from the role
- Whether the coach serves Engineering alone or adjacent R&D functions

The more important point is that the model can be **organizationally lightweight**.

A company with 100 or 150 engineers does not necessarily need a coaching department.

It may need one well-positioned person.

That makes the model particularly interesting for engineering organizations large enough that senior leaders can no longer maintain meaningful individual visibility, but not so large that an extensive specialized people infrastructure already exists.

## 13. Traditional Model vs. Horizontal Capability

| Capability                   | Traditional Model         | With a Horizontal Coaching Layer                                             |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Technical direction          | EM / Tech Lead            | EM / Technical Leader                                                        |
| Delivery                     | EM / Delivery Leadership  | Existing ownership remains                                                   |
| Architecture                 | EM / Senior Engineers     | Existing ownership remains                                                   |
| Performance accountability   | Engineering Manager       | Manager retains accountability; coach can support diagnosis and intervention |
| Career development           | Engineering Manager       | Manager + dedicated coach                                                    |
| Leadership development       | Manager's manager         | Leadership + dedicated coach                                                 |
| Feedback                     | Engineering Manager       | Manager + coach                                                              |
| Conflict resolution          | Manager / HR              | Manager + coach + HR where appropriate                                       |
| Organizational sensing       | Management hierarchy / HR | Management hierarchy + horizontal coaching signal                            |
| Change adoption              | Management hierarchy      | Leadership + individualized coaching                                         |
| Cross-team pattern detection | Directors / HR            | Dedicated horizontal function                                                |
| Employee development         | Manager-dependent         | Dedicated capacity across teams                                              |

The important difference is not that the traditional model lacks these capabilities.

It is **where the organization places dedicated capacity for them.**

## 14. What the Model Requires

Low structural risk does not mean automatic success.

Several conditions are essential.

### **Technical Credibility**

A coach working with engineers must understand the environment well enough to recognize technical context, engineering incentives, role expectations, and the realities of software delivery.

The coach does not need to be the organization's strongest engineer.

The coach does need enough credibility that engineers do not have to translate their world before discussing their problems.

### **Trust**

Employees must believe that coaching exists to help them think, grow, and navigate difficult situations.

Without trust, the organizational sensing advantage disappears because the conversations remain superficial.

### **Leadership Access**

A coach who can identify systemic problems but cannot influence the system risks becoming someone who merely helps employees tolerate organizational dysfunction.

The role requires meaningful access to leaders capable of acting on patterns.

### **Clear Boundaries**

The organization must define the relationship among coaching, management, HR, technical leadership, and formal performance processes.

Managers must know what they still own.

Employees must understand confidentiality.

HR must understand when it needs to become involved.

Ambiguity here can undermine the model quickly.

### **Pattern Recognition**

Conducting many one-to-one conversations is not enough.

The function must be capable of recognizing recurring organizational signals and translating them into useful insight without violating individual trust.

Without that capability, coaching remains primarily an individual benefit.

With it, coaching becomes organizational infrastructure.

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## **15. What the Model Does Not Solve**

A dedicated coach cannot compensate indefinitely for poor leadership.

It cannot fix a fundamentally unhealthy culture through individual conversations.

It should not become a substitute for competent HR, clear performance accountability, good technical leadership, or sound organizational design.

And the model introduces risks of its own.

A coach who becomes too aligned with leadership may lose employee trust.

A coach who becomes too aligned with employees may lose organizational effectiveness.

A coach without sufficient technical credibility may struggle to engage engineering teams.

A coach without leadership access may identify patterns without being able to influence them.

An organization that poorly defines responsibilities may create confusion instead of leverage.

These are meaningful risks.

But importantly, most do not require a large structural commitment to discover.

Because the model can be introduced additively, organizations can evaluate engagement, trust, outcomes, and role boundaries before expanding it.

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## **16. A Low-Risk Organizational Experiment**

This may ultimately be the most practical argument for the model.

An engineering organization does not need to believe this entire paper to test the idea.

It does not need to eliminate Engineering Managers.

It does not need to change reporting lines.

It does not need to redesign its performance process.

It does not need to declare a new management philosophy.

It can add one technically credible coaching and organizational-effectiveness specialist to an engineering population of roughly 100–200 people.

Give that person access across teams and levels.

Establish clear confidentiality boundaries.

Connect the role directly to engineering and People leadership.

Measure who uses it.

Measure whether they return.

Measure what they value.

Observe what organizational patterns emerge.

Track interventions and outcomes.

Then decide what, if anything, should move.

The organization may discover that the role is most valuable purely as an augmentation to excellent Engineering Managers.

It may discover that certain responsibilities are better shared.

It may discover that some responsibilities can be separated more fundamentally.

Or it may discover that the model does not fit its environment.

All four are useful results.

The organization does not have to transform first in order to learn.

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## Conclusion

Engineering organizations routinely decompose complex technical systems into specialized components.

They do so because specialization can improve expertise, scalability, observability, and reliability.

Organizational systems deserve the same scrutiny.

The Engineering Manager is not an immutable unit of engineering organization design.

It is a bundle of responsibilities that evolved because placing those responsibilities together has often been practical.

Sometimes that remains the right design.

Sometimes specialization can create additional leverage.

A horizontal Technical Coaching or Engineering People Partner function offers one way to test that proposition without dismantling what already works.

The evidence from one 15-month implementation is encouraging: more than 130 people engaged in more than 1,000 sessions; nearly every participant returned; relationships persisted for more than a year; satisfaction averaged 9.4 out of 10; and the function extended beyond individual development into performance, leadership, conflict, organizational change, AI adoption, career architecture, and organizational sensing.

That evidence does not establish a universal model.

It establishes something more modest and potentially more useful:

**these capabilities can be separated, they can operate at meaningful scale, and an organization can test the value of doing so without betting its structure on the outcome.**

The result does not have to be the elimination of management.

It can simply be better allocation of the work management is trying to accomplish.

**Vertical accountability. Horizontal capability.**

And where specialization creates leverage, the bundle can be unbundled.