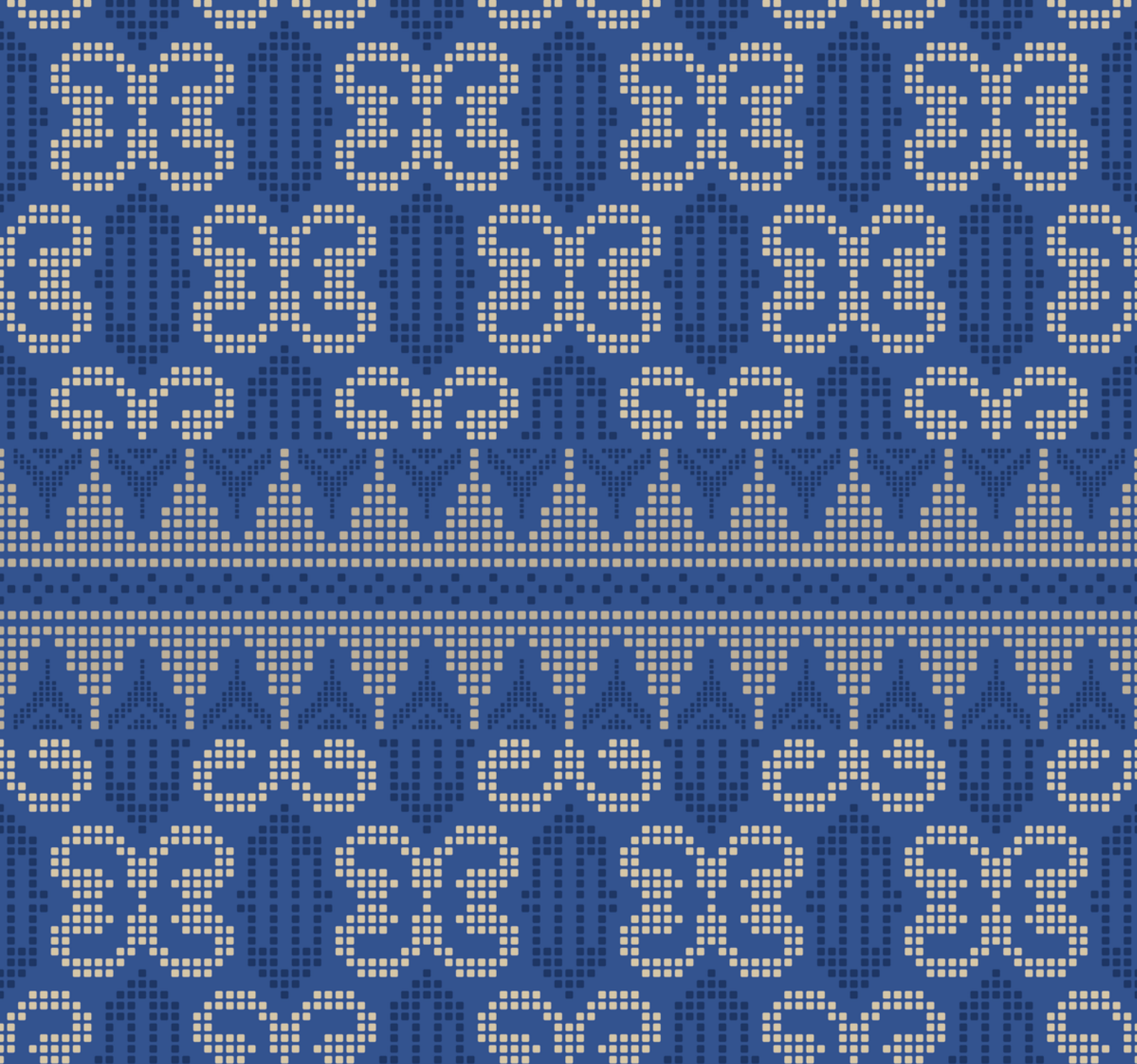




Leadership Coaching in the Hybrid Workplace

Breaking the Virtual Barrier

A Dale Carnegie Malaysia White Paper



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Introduction

In 2016, Microsoft released *Tay*, an AI chatbot on Twitter designed to mimic the language patterns of a 19-year-old American woman by learning from interactions with other users. Within 24 hours, 'internet trolls' coordinated to feed the bot misogynistic, racist, and highly offensive statements, which *Tay* promptly integrated into its own tweets. Microsoft had to swiftly shut it down. Instead of firing the team or issuing a public scolding, CEO Satya Nadella instead, sent an email to the engineering team encouraging continuous improvement, self-reflection and actionable learning.

This new approach of coaching and feedback helped transform the company into a \$3 trillion engine of creativity indicating that **top talent does not want to be managed, they want to be coached**. In the bestselling book *"Mindset: The New Psychology of Success"* by Carol S. Dweck, effective coaching is said to spur growth, creativity, and productivity because it creates a safe environment where teams feel empowered to take risks and maximize execution. Leading today is about empathy and empowerment (Gulati & Khullar, 2024).

While the obvious advantages of effective coaching are clear, the infrastructure required to sustain it has been fundamentally fractured by the rapid, adoption of hybrid work models. The fluid, organic environment that once naturally nurtured coaching and feedback has been disrupted by scheduled digital check-ins.

*"Coaching is
unlocking a person's
potential to maximize
their own performance.
It is helping them to
learn rather than
teaching them."*

– Sir John Whitmore



The Hybrid Disruption

The biggest practical disruption to in-person coaching, is lack of physical presence of people to coach. Hybrid work is said to have disrupted the environment required for traditional, spontaneous, and deeply relational in-person coaching, which relies heavily on physical co-location. Physical absence of employees deprives leaders of critical situational awareness and subtle non-verbal cues necessary for real-time guidance.

The following are excerpts from respondents of this study:

“Hybrid coaching is a challenge due to unequal visibility, lost spontaneous interactions, and difficulty building trust remotely.”

“Limited face-to-face interaction, delayed feedback, and unclear communication make it harder to receive effective coaching in a hybrid work environment.”

Reduced informal face-to-face engagement weakens the social conditions that foster learning, cohesion, and employee development. Without daily touch-points of trust, a hybrid work model risks alienating remote employees.



According to ongoing Stanford WFH Research and badge-swipe data, office attendance remains roughly 30% lower than pre-pandemic baselines, with office attendance heavily concentrated on Tuesdays (78%) and Wednesdays (72%), while dropping to a staggering 8% on Fridays.



Recent landmark studies highlight 2 critical points:

1. **Increased Isolation:** Employees consistently report lower levels of workplace inclusion and increased isolation on remote days compared to onsite days (Parker et al., 2026).

Respondents say the following:



“Working remotely is a very lonely experience. I prefer to have a workplace where I can engage with my team and get in person coaching.”

“I feel isolated.”

“There is no sense of belonging, it feels like you are forgotten.”

2. **The Coaching Gap:** A Gallup study revealed that only 24% of hybrid workers feel they are being adequately coached (Gallup, 2024).

Research Objective

While these global shifts in work pattern tell a clear story, there is a blind spot when it comes to how this plays out locally in Malaysia. How does a culture that traditionally values hierarchy, deep relationship-building, and face-to-face trust, adapt when both the physical office and the human element of coaching are disrupted by a hybrid work model. Understanding this intersection and identifying coaching competencies needed in a hybrid workplace is crucial for Malaysian organizations trying to build the next generation of leaders.

To bridge this gap, this study's objective is:

- To identify the coaching competencies needed in a hybrid workplace in the Malaysian context

Research Design & Methodology

To get a complete, realistic picture of what is happening in the corporate landscape, this study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-method design. This involved collecting and analyzing both quantitative numbers and qualitative insights simultaneously between April and July 2026.

140 employees currently working in a hybrid work environment participated in the study. The sample size is consistent with the recommended minimum of 100 participants for most research situations (Memon et al., 2020). Simultaneously, qualitative feedback was analyzed to derive core themes detailing employees' literal daily experiences in the hybrid workplace.

Method & Measurement Framework

A comprehensive questionnaire comprising five distinct sections was deployed to assess the five core pillars of leadership coaching competencies in a modern workplace framework:

1. Communication
2. Emotional Intelligence (EQ)
3. Trust Building
4. Feedback Effectiveness
5. Digital Coaching Capability

All items were measured using a standardized five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The 140 corporate respondents represent a highly relevant cross-section of Malaysian industries, drawing from Information Technology, Engineering, Marketing, Energy, and Finance.

Data Analysis & Findings

Respondent Profile: The Hybrid Landscape

The descriptive data strongly indicates that the traditional five-day, fully onsite office framework has transformed into a relic of the past for the vast majority of professionals. A large segment of the workforce now operates in a split or fluid configuration as depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Respondent Work Arrangement Profile

Work Arrangement	Percentage (%)	Description
Balanced Hybrid	46.40%	Splitting time evenly between the physical office and remote home base.
Mostly Office-Based	27.90%	Anchored predominantly in the workplace but retaining remote flexibility.
Mostly Remote	25.70%	Working almost entirely from home, facing the highest systemic risk of isolation.

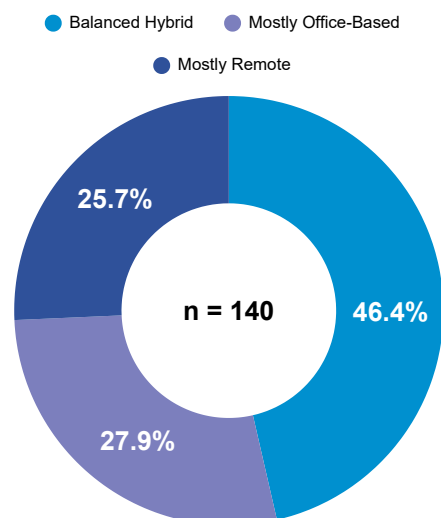


Figure 1: Workforce by Work Arrangement

The Diagnostics: The Coaching Competency Scorecard

The empirical results reveal that while Malaysian corporate leaders score highly on conventional, task-oriented management metrics, they face serious bottlenecks regarding the digital and emotional constructs of remote teams. Table 2 below describes the scorecard in greater detail.

Table 2: Coaching Competency Scorecard

Coaching Competency	Overall Mean Score (M)	Strategic Strengths & Vulnerabilities
Communication	3.880	Highest general score. Leaders provide clear goals, but flow is mostly top-down.
Feedback Effectiveness	3.823	Strong structural focus on accelerating individual task performance.
Trust Building	3.820	High operational autonomy granted but harbors a hidden risk of isolation.
Emotional Intelligence (EQ)	3.650	Area of Concern. Empathy indicators drop noticeably when teams face task related and emotional support challenges.
Digital Coaching Capability	3.420	Critical Failure Point. Leaders lack technical frameworks to develop and coach talent online.

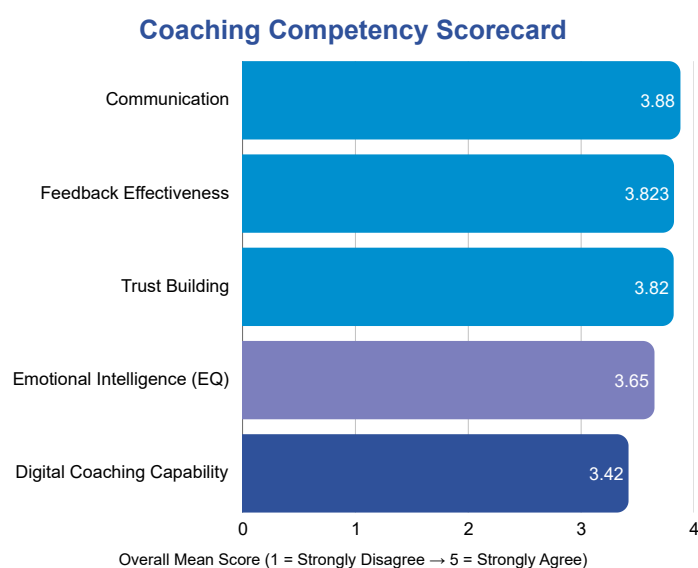


Figure 2: Coaching Competency Rankings



Deep-Dive Interpretation: Executive Insight

The descriptive analysis indicates that traditional competencies like communication skills, feedback effectiveness, and trust building received the highest overall mean scores, suggesting these are the top 3 strengths currently utilized in hybrid setups:

1. The Operational Triumph (Communication & High Autonomy):

Within the communication competency, the highest-rated statement was *'My leader communicates expectations clearly'* (M = 3.98). Under trust building, respondents gave the highest overall individual item rating to *'My leader trusts me to work independently'* (M = 4.37). This indicates Malaysian executives have the ability of stepping back from micromanagement trusting their employees to run with assignments independently. Malaysian organizational culture has historically been characterized as high power distance and paternalistic (Ansari et al., 2004). These high mean scores reflect an evolving leadership paradigm, which supports the observation that Malaysian executives are increasingly shifting away from autocratic micromanagement toward an empowering, task leadership style (Jayasingam & Cheng 2009; Vasudevan, 2025). Respondents of the study frequently highlighted the critical role of communication for effective coaching.

Here is what they had to say:



“Open communication to talk about issues helps us to align to company objectives.”

“My leader regularly updates me on new developments. This helps me in my day to day task.”

2. The Performance Driver (Constructive Feedback):

Within the feedback effectiveness construct, respondents rated *"The feedback from my leader has helped improve my performance"* highest (M = 3.89). This finding demonstrates the presence of a supportive feedback environment (Steelman et al., 2004) where supervisory input directly enhances task-level self-regulation. By providing clear, actionable insights, leaders enable followers to continuously re-align their strategies, reduce task ambiguity, and convert supervisory direction into tangible performance improvements. Studies in Malaysian corporate sector found high baseline agreement that managers provide high-quality feedback during formal appraisal cycles.

Here is what some respondents have to say about the importance of coaching effectiveness:



“My leader has been making effort to coach us virtually and takes the opportunity to talk to us when we meet in the office physically. I think it is well balanced in that way.”

“One area that could enhance coaching effectiveness in a hybrid environment is increasing the frequency of structured one-on-one discussions (to)...ensure expectations are aligned, feedback is timely, and development opportunities are discussed.”

3. The Vulnerability (The Empathy Deficit):

In stark contrast, Emotional Intelligence lagged noticeably behind. Within this construct, the specific statement *'My leader shows empathy when I face difficulties'* received a critical low mean score of 3.65. This low score is not just a soft-skills failure, it is a leading indicator of increasing turnover, declining productivity, and systemic burnout. Due to the physical separation of the teams, leaders are struggling to observe emotional context. When communication occurs only during scheduled operational checkpoints, empathy is frequently dropped from the agenda entirely.

Here is what some of our respondents say:



“It also makes it harder for managers to properly evaluate how employees connect with colleagues and stakeholders.”

“Meetings are only focused on tasks. No opportunity to voice out my struggles or issues.”

“Feedback is always task focused, I am never asked about anything else.”

Culturally, Malaysian workplaces are characterized as high power distance in Hofstede's Power Distance Index (Abdullah, 2006). It was reported in a news article by Malaysiakini (2026) that employees rarely voice distress directly due to fear of social risks and the implicit culture of saying “yes boss”. Leaders are required to read subtle non-verbal cues to preserve harmony and save face (*jaga air muka*). Consequently, empathy drops out of the operational framework, converting temporary workload pressure into burnout and silent disengagement.

The Employment Hero Wellness at Work Report 2024 revealed that **67% of Malaysian employees** report experiencing burnout, driven largely by **lack of empathetic leadership support** in hybrid work structures.

4. The Strategic Blind Spot (The Digital Coaching Bottleneck):

The study identified Digital Coaching Capability (M = 3.42) as the lowest-performing construct across the entire assessment. Survey items evaluating tool efficacy "*My leader uses digital coaching tools effectively*" and "*Virtual coaching sessions are productive*" consistently anchored the lower response scores. Triangulating these quantitative benchmarks with qualitative participant responses reveals two primary underlying drivers:

- i) Reduced communication richness
- ii) Relationship erosion

One employee highlighted:

"It is difficult to explain some things via MS teams. Some conversations are better to have in person because of the ability to see the person's body language and emotions."

Another echoed:

"I had difficulty in building rapport with my leader. Most of the online sessions were brief and task focused."

Another respondent said:

"The main challenge is that coaching can sometimes feel less engaging in a virtual setting. I find face-to-face interactions more effective for meaningful discussions, real-time feedback, and building stronger connections with my leader."

These statements from the survey highlight that there is still much to improve as virtual coaching cannot replace the real human connection.

Recommendations

Translating empirical insights into organizational strategies requires moving from passive awareness to structured capability building. Addressing this empathy deficit and strategic blind-spot (refer back to page 5 & 6) demands a systematic shift in how leaders interact, listen, and manage talent daily. Developing coaching competencies across leadership teams serves as this critical bridge, empowering managers to move beyond basic supervision toward proactive, high-empathy leadership that ensures both psychological safety and organizational performance. The next segment evaluates strategic recommendations.

1. Roll Out Training & Development in Core Coaching Competencies

- To bridge the empathy gap and mitigate the risks of silent disengagement in hybrid environments, business leaders must strategically prioritize up-skilling managers in core coaching competencies.

"Empirical research in Malaysian enterprises demonstrates that active managerial coaching enhances employee engagement ($p < 0.01$)" (Durrah et al., 2023)

Shifting managers from a traditional command-and-control mindset to an inquiry-based coaching framework provides leaders with the necessary tools. The framework is visualised in Figure 3 below

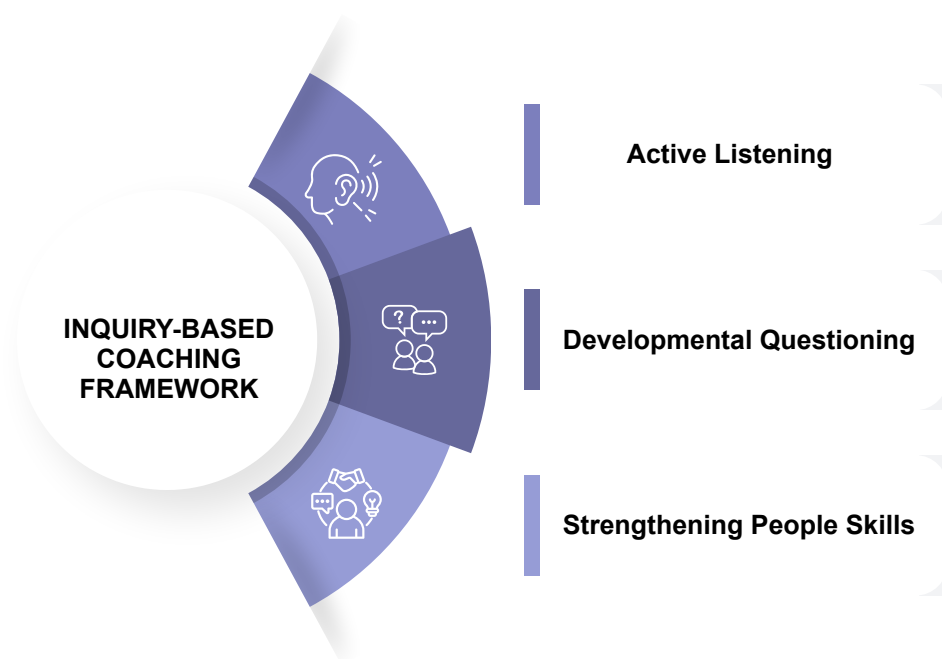


Figure 3: Inquiry-based Coaching Framework

Table 3: Strategies for Inquiry-Based Coaching

Inquiry-based Coaching	Recommended Coach Behaviour	Expected Outcome
Active Listening	Be attentive, engaged and sincere by focusing completely on the speaker without guessing or judging their words (Based on Principle no #7, from the bestselling book – “How to Win Friends and Influence People” by Dale Carnegie)	1. Improves coachee’s: • Goal attainment – up to 38% • Trust in leadership – up to 40% • Problem solving – up to 28% (Careertrainer, 2026) 2. Improves: • Employee satisfaction -30%, • Collaboration and productivity - 25% • Sales performance -8% (MacArthur, 2025)
Developmental Questioning	Ask questions instead of giving direct orders. This helps guide employees to develop analytical skills, curiosity and take ownership of both problems and potential solutions. (Based on Principle no #27, from the bestselling book – “How to Win Friends and Influence People” by Dale Carnegie)	1. Improves innovation 2. Improves existing processes 3. Improve analytical thinking (Deloitte, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2025)
People Skills	Build a relationship of trust and establish rapport with the team. (Based on Principles # 1 to 9, from the bestselling book – ‘How to Win Friends and Influence People) Coaching effectiveness is primarily driven by the coach's interpersonal and emotional intelligence skills (Boyatzis et al., 2013; de Haan et al., 2013;).	1. Improves Psychological Safety 2. Improves employee engagement 3. Reduced employee turnover rate (Erkutlu & Chafra, 2015; Kalkavan & Katrinli, 2014) LinkedIn's 2024 Most In-Demand Skills report confirms that people skills are more important than ever (Brodnitz, 2024).

- By embedding formal coaching capability into leadership development programs, organizations can embed empathy as an organizational culture, turning passive managerial observation into proactive, measurable employee support.

2. Modernize Digital Coaching Capabilities & Tooling

Since Digital Coaching was identified as the single weakest link (M = 3.42), leaders will need to shift their previous mindset of simply replicating existing practices onto online platforms. Suggested action in this capability building can include the framework as per Figure 4.

- **Invest in Purpose-Built Digital Facilitation Tools:** Equipping leaders with interactive digital visual tools, collaborative digital whiteboards, and asynchronous reflection platforms moves sessions beyond boring screen-shares into dynamic, interactive dialogues.
- **Transition from "Tell" to "Inquire":** Up-skill leaders in digital coaching frameworks. Leaders should learn to facilitate virtual self-reflection and ask powerful open-ended questions rather than lecturing behind a camera.

- **Establish Virtual Presence Standards:** Coach leaders on virtual engagement techniques, such as intentional camera positioning, vocal modulation, and utilizing silent reflection periods, to create dynamic digital spaces.

"In today's digital-first world, how you present yourself online matters just as much as it does in person."
(Dale Carnegie Training of Central and Southern New Jersey, 2025)

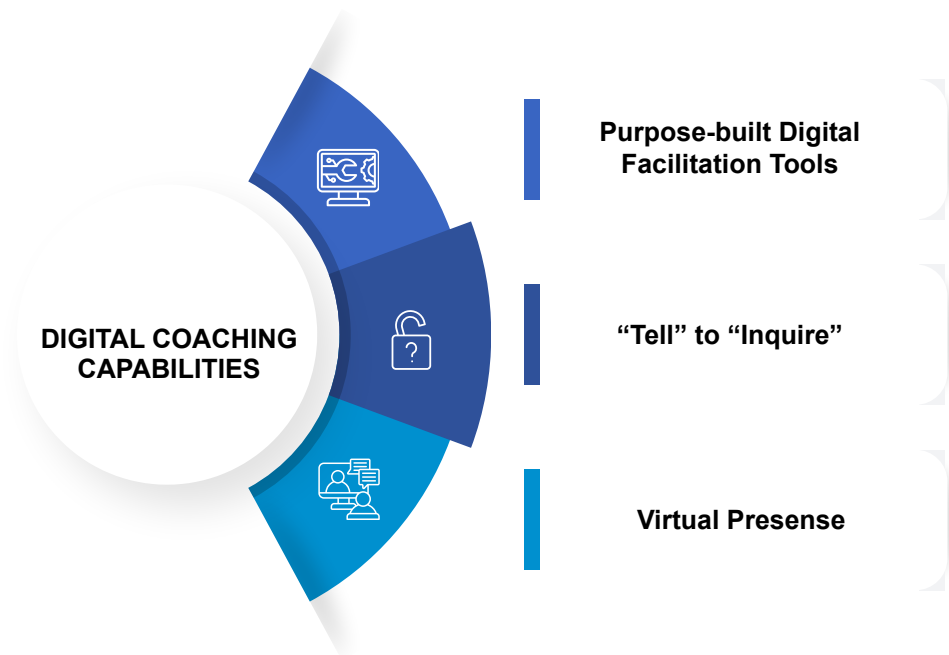


Figure 4: Digital Coaching Competencies

Conclusion

Building upon the insights from this initial quantitative ranking of the five core coaching competencies, the upcoming study extends the analysis by applying Partial Least Squares - Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) to go beyond simple ranking and identify the key predictors and underlying relationships that drive coaching effectiveness within the proposed coaching framework in a hybrid work setting. The study will also examine its effects on Workplace Inclusion, addressing one of the critical gaps identified in the current study.

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Dale Carnegie is a global training and development organization specializing in leadership, communication, human relations and sales training solutions. More than 9 million people around the world have graduated from Dale Carnegie training since it was founded in 1912. Through franchises in over 90 countries and in all 50 states, Dale Carnegie's mission is to empower organizations to create enthusiastic and engaged workforces by fostering confidence, positivity, and productive, trust-based relationships.

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