

COACH HURT: UNDERSTANDING SERVICE FAILURES IN COACHING AND MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH THE LENS OF CONSUMER DISSATISFACTION

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ABSTRACT

Coaching and mentoring relationships represent high-stakes service exchanges where knowledge, advocacy, and support are exchanged for professional growth. When these relationships fail, the consequences resemble consumer dissatisfaction yet carry deeper relational and developmental harms. This research conceptualizes this kind of harmful “coaching service failure” (hereafter referred to as Coach Hurt) as a distinct category of relational service but within coaching and mentoring contexts. We argue that Coach Hurt extends beyond traditional service failure because recovery is not limited to compensation or apology, but instead requires rebuilding trust, restoring psychological safety, and re-establishing developmental alignment. Drawing on service failure, complaint behavior, and psychological contract theory, this paper categorizes manifestations of Coach Hurt, examines its implications for consumer dissatisfaction and organizational effectiveness, and outlines recovery strategies organizations can adopt. By situating Coach Hurt within the consumer satisfaction and complaint behavior literature, this paper expands the scope of service failure theory and highlights new directions for both research and practice.

CASE VIGNETTE: THE VANISHING MENTOR

When Amina was promoted to a managerial role, her coworker Carla was assigned to mentor her through the transition. Ten years her senior and with greater organizational experience, Carla initially offered encouragement and advice. Soon, however, she became increasingly unavailable: rescheduling meetings, offering vague feedback, and prioritizing her own projects. When Amina faltered during a high-stakes client presentation, Carla publicly joked about the mistake rather than offering constructive feedback. Later, she disclosed Amina’s struggles in a leadership meeting, further undermining her mentee’s credibility. What began as a developmental exchange of guidance, effort, and trust deteriorated into a failed service encounter between provider and recipient. The unfulfilled expectations, public embarrassment, and breach of confidentiality created deep dissatisfaction and disengagement, an instance of relational service failure in which no recovery was attempted. Over time, Amina withdrew from strategic projects

and her firm's leadership program, and her disengagement sent ripples through the team, discouraging others from seeking mentorship or advancement. (This case is a composite based on mentoring experiences of the authors.)

Coaching and mentoring relationships are designed to foster professional development, leadership growth, and career progression. Organizations invest heavily in these programs, expecting that effective coaching will enhance both employee satisfaction and performance. Yet, as with other service exchanges, outcomes vary: some relationships thrive, while others deteriorate into experiences of dissatisfaction and disengagement. Failures stemming from neglect, misguidance, or breaches of trust can produce lasting professional and emotional harm (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000).

Although coaching and mentoring are often framed as unequivocally positive, their breakdowns mirror the service failures long studied in consumer research. We introduce the construct "Coach Hurt," defined as a relational service failure in coaching or mentoring contexts, characterized by unmet expectations, breaches of psychological safety, or misuse of authority, resulting in dissatisfaction, disengagement, and diminished developmental outcomes. The term draws on linguistic expressions such as church hurt and brand hate (Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009), which capture the emotional residue of relational trust violations. Here, the phrase serves not as colloquial shorthand but as a theoretically bounded construct that integrates insights from the service failure, dissatisfaction, and psychological-contract literatures. This definition situates Coach Hurt within the service failure and consumer-dissatisfaction tradition while recognizing its distinctive relational and developmental dimensions. Past studies have demonstrated how unfavorable service encounters generate dissatisfaction (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990), how complaint handling shapes relationship marketing (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998), and how recovery influences satisfaction trajectories over time (Smith, Bolton, & Wagner, 1999; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Yet few studies have examined these dynamics in coaching and mentoring, where service expectations are deeply personal, and outcomes affect identity, confidence, and career mobility.

Failed mentoring marked by poor communication or neglect may cause mentees to withdraw from future developmental opportunities, a form of avoidance behavior parallel to consumers' reduced repurchase intentions after service failure (Straus, Johnson, Marquez, & Feldman, 2013). Equally critical is the role of psychological safety: the belief that one can learn, err, and seek feedback without fear of ridicule (Edmondson, 1999). Breaches of this safety, as in Coach Hurt episodes, disrupt open communication and learning, undermining both individual growth and organizational creativity (Newman, Donohue, & Eva, 2017). Sustained psychological insecurity further erodes workplace trust and collective efficacy, creating systemic dissatisfaction that extends beyond the dyad (Rosander, Hetland, & Einarsen, 2022).

By framing Coach Hurt within the broader consumer dissatisfaction and complaint behavior literature, this paper extends the scope of service failure theory into developmental settings. It examines the antecedents and manifestations of Coach Hurt, explores its psychological and professional consequences, and identifies opportunities for recovery and prevention, thereby enriching both the theory and practice of service satisfaction in relational contexts.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Coaching and mentoring, often under the supervision of a manager, are widely recognized as critical mechanisms for career development, professional growth, and organizational success (Higgins & Kram, 2001; Scandura, 1998). While positive coaching and mentoring relationships contribute to job satisfaction, career advancement, and psychological well-being, negative experiences such as mismatched expectations, toxic dynamics, or mentor neglect can lead to dissatisfaction and disengagement (Eby et al., 2000). This section situates Coach Hurt within existing research on service failure, psychological safety, and mentoring dysfunctions, emphasizing its connection to consumer dissatisfaction and complaint behavior frameworks.

Service Failure in Intangible Services

Service failure has been extensively examined in consumer-behavior literature, particularly where customers experience dissatisfaction due to unmet expectations (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Most studies focus on transactional failures such as poor service delivery, product defects, or miscommunication (Tax et al., 1998). However, coaching and mentoring represent intangible, relational services in which value is co-created through trust, communication, and mutual commitment (Liu & Mattila, 2015). When those expectations are violated, dissatisfaction arises in ways parallel to consumer service failures but with deeper relational and professional consequences. The fallout often extends beyond immediate disappointment to long-term disengagement, reputational damage, and career setbacks, illustrating that relational service failures can be as consequential as transactional ones.

Psychological Safety and the Impact of Relational Failures

Psychological safety is the belief that individuals can express themselves without fear of negative consequences and is essential to effective coaching and mentoring (Edmondson, 1999). When this safety is compromised, mentees or employees may withhold feedback, avoid professional-development opportunities, or lose confidence (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2009). Such conditions can derail career progression and create a self-perpetuating cycle of disengagement. Coach Hurt, as a form of relational service failure, erodes psychological safety and generates the same behavioral responses observed in dissatisfied consumers: withdrawal, silence, and avoidance. In developmental contexts, these outcomes suppress learning and innovation and can damage team performance.

Dysfunctional Mentoring and Systemic Failures

Dysfunctional mentoring relationships are a well-documented source of career dissatisfaction and professional harm (Eby et al., 2000). Negative experiences, including neglect, manipulation, favoritism, or unethical behavior (Scandura, 1998), mirror the breakdowns in service quality that drive consumer complaint behavior. Moreover, organizational systems that tolerate poor coaching practices or lack feedback mechanisms can perpetuate Coach Hurt, amplifying dissatisfaction at both the individual and collective levels (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

Drawing from the literature on service failure, psychological safety, and mentoring dysfunctions, Coach Hurt can be conceptualized as a unique form of relational service failure. Understanding its mechanisms and consequences advances both consumer-satisfaction theory and

organizational development practice by illustrating how expectation violations, relational breaches, and ineffective recovery efforts lead to dissatisfaction in professional settings.

Defining Coach Hurt

Coaching and mentoring relationships are intended to provide guidance, support, and professional development. However, when these relationships fail due to mentor neglect, toxic behavior, or misaligned expectations, they can result in the distinct form of relational harm we call Coach Hurt. This phenomenon extends beyond simple dissatisfaction, undermining psychological safety, disrupting career trajectories, and diminishing overall well-being (Edmondson, 1999; Eby et al., 2000).

Conceptualizing Coach Hurt as a Relational Service Failure. Service failure research typically examines dissatisfaction in commercial contexts such as product defects, poor service delivery, or inadequate recovery efforts (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Coach Hurt, by contrast, represents a relational service failure in which the intangible, trust-based nature of the exchange magnifies the negative impact of failure (Liu & Mattila, 2015). Unlike transactional service failures, where compensation or apology may restore satisfaction, Coach Hurt often carries enduring emotional and professional consequences that make recovery more complex (Tax et al., 1998).

Framing Coach Hurt through the lens of consumer satisfaction and complaint behavior provides a valuable model for understanding how individuals react when developmental expectations are violated. Just as dissatisfied consumers respond to service failures through avoidance, exit, or voice behaviors (Singh, 1990, 1991; Grégoire et al., 2009), mentees experiencing Coach Hurt may remain silent, quietly withdraw, or warn others about the risks of mentoring. These reactions depend not only on what went wrong but also on how the harm is recognized and addressed.

Research on service recovery demonstrates that timely, fair, and emotionally intelligent responses can restore satisfaction and even strengthen relationships, a dynamic known as the service recovery paradox (Tax et al., 1998). Coaching can benefit from the same principles. Effective recovery requires more than an apology; it involves addressing the emotional, procedural, and relational needs of the person harmed (Davidow, 2003, 2004), particularly given that recovery efforts shape not only the complainant's reactions but also those of observing others (McClure et al., 2019). When coaches or organizations create space for dialogue, acknowledgment, and genuine repair, they convert failure into an opportunity for renewed trust and developmental growth; when such recovery is absent or perceived as unjust, dissatisfaction may persist and intensify (Aron, 2016).

In this way, Coach Hurt extends service failure and recovery theory into developmental contexts, showing that the path from dissatisfaction to renewed engagement depends not only on corrective action but also on empathy, psychological safety, and relational accountability.

Manifestations of Coach Hurt

Coach Hurt can take several forms, ranging from unintentional neglect to more overt or manipulative harm. Although these behaviors vary in intensity and intent, they share a common thread: each disrupts the developmental purpose of the relationship and produces lasting emotional and professional consequences. Prior research on dysfunctional mentoring relationships provides a foundation for categorizing these breakdowns into three primary manifestations (Scandura, 1998;

Eby et al., 2000), each corresponding to a recognized type of service failure: process, interactional, or relational.

Neglectful Coaching: Process Failure. This occurs when a coach or mentor is consistently unavailable, disengaged, or inattentive to the mentee's evolving needs. Missed meetings, vague feedback, or a lack of follow-through represent breakdowns in the service delivery process. The result is unmet expectations, frustration, and a sense of abandonment (Higgins & Kram, 2001). As in Amina's case, chronic unavailability and inconsistent support exemplify how process failures create dissatisfaction and prompt mentees to silently exit or disengage rather than voice complaints.

Manipulative or Toxic Coaching: Interactional Failure. In this manifestation, the coach misuses influence or authority to advance personal goals through favoritism, gatekeeping, or misleading advice. Such behaviors distort the developmental exchange and violate norms of fairness and respect (Ragins et al., 2000). Interactional failures undermine trust and psychological safety, leading mentees to doubt their own competence or to attribute blame externally, both of which intensify dissatisfaction and reduce the likelihood of constructive voice.

Mismatched Expectations: Relational Failure. Some coaching relationships deteriorate not from neglect or manipulation but from misaligned goals, unclear boundaries, or differing assumptions about roles and responsibilities (Eby et al., 2000). When expectations are not discussed or revised early, both parties experience disconfirmation, the core driver of dissatisfaction in service-encounter models (Oliver, 1997). Amina's experience illustrates this dynamic: she expected strategic advocacy, while her mentor saw the relationship as routine oversight, producing quiet disappointment and eventual withdrawal.

Consequences Across Manifestations

Across all three forms of failure, Coach Hurt erodes trust, diminishes confidence, and discourages future help-seeking. This is a pattern analogous to consumers' avoidance and negative word-of-mouth following service failure (Singh, 1990; Grégoire et al., 2009). These relational breakdowns also carry collective costs including reduced team cohesion, impaired learning, and weakened leadership development (Carmeli et al., 2009). Recognizing Coach Hurt as a multidimensional service failure construct highlights the need for proactive recovery mechanisms that rebuild satisfaction and restore psychological safety.

Research on psychological safety underscores the risks associated with failed coaching relationships (Edmondson, 1999). When individuals experience Coach Hurt, they often become less willing to seek feedback, take developmental risks, or engage in future mentoring relationships (Carmeli et al., 2009). Similar to dissatisfied consumers who reduce repurchase or referral intentions after a service failure (Agarwal et al., 2016), mentees who experience relational breaches frequently respond with withdrawal, silence, or avoidance, behaviors that limit learning and innovation.

The effects extend beyond the individual to the organizational level. Coach Hurt can contribute to emotional exhaustion, reduced engagement, and higher turnover, collective symptoms of systemic dissatisfaction that weaken psychological safety climates and undermine performance (Ragins et al., 2000). From a service failure perspective, these reactions represent the post-failure stage in the satisfaction process: when unmet expectations and unaddressed harm diminish loyalty and trust, and recovery efforts become more difficult to initiate.

By defining Coach Hurt as a distinct form of relational service failure, this research connects mentoring dysfunction to established models of dissatisfaction and complaint behavior.

Doing so provides a framework for examining not only the emotional and professional costs of relational breakdowns but also the recovery mechanisms, such as apology, feedback, and re-engagement, that can restore satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term commitment in developmental service exchanges.

Theoretical Implications of Coach Hurt

The concept of Coach Hurt extends multiple theoretical frameworks in consumer behavior, organizational psychology, and mentoring research. By positioning it as a relational service failure, this framework links the emotional and behavioral dynamics of failed coaching relationships to established models of expectation disconfirmation, psychological contract violation, and social exchange. These theories collectively explain how unmet expectations produce dissatisfaction, how perceived injustice or betrayal intensifies that dissatisfaction, and how recovery, or its absence shapes loyalty, trust, and engagement.

Service Failure and Recovery in Intangible Services

Traditional service failure models emphasize that dissatisfaction arises when service outcomes fall short of expectations (Oliver, 1997; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Expectancy–disconfirmation theory holds that satisfaction is a function of perceived performance relative to expectations, while recovery efforts determine post-failure outcomes. In coaching and mentoring contexts, value is co-created through trust, emotional investment, and ongoing interaction (Liu & Mattila, 2015). When these relational expectations are violated through neglect, misuse of authority, or inconsistent support, mentees experience disconfirmation, leading to dissatisfaction and potential withdrawal. Unlike transactional failures, however, Coach Hurt cannot be remedied through tangible compensation; recovery requires relational repair, trust rebuilding, and the reestablishment of psychological safety (Tax et al., 1998).

Psychological Contract Violation in Coaching Relationships

Psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995) explains the implicit, often unspoken expectations that define professional relationships. When a coach explicitly or implicitly promises guidance, advocacy, or confidentiality, these expectations form part of the perceived shared psychological contract. Violations, whether through neglect, broken promises, or exploitation of power, create emotional reactions consistent with the violation stage of dissatisfaction: anger, betrayal, and loss of trust (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). These reactions align with the complaint behavior literature, in which consumers attribute failure to provider control and respond with voice, exit, or negative word-of-mouth (Singh, 1990; Grégoire et al., 2009). Within developmental relationships, these same processes manifest as silence, disengagement, or avoidance of future mentoring.

Social Exchange and the Relational Consequences of Coach Hurt

Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) further clarifies the long-term implications of Coach Hurt. Coaching relationships operate through reciprocal investment: mentees offer effort, openness, and loyalty in exchange for feedback, sponsorship, and

growth opportunities. When reciprocity fails, the perceived imbalance triggers emotional withdrawal and reduced organizational commitment, paralleling consumer responses to perceived inequity in service relationships. As with dissatisfied consumers, mentees experiencing Coach Hurt may exit the relationship, warn others, or disengage from future developmental exchanges, signaling a collapse in relational loyalty.

Integrating these theoretical perspectives reveals that Coach Hurt follows the same structural sequence observed in consumer dissatisfaction research: expectations → disconfirmation → attribution → complaint/exit behavior → recovery or continued dissatisfaction. Framed this way, coaching becomes a form of internal service exchange governed by the same psychological mechanisms as external consumer relationships.

Building on the preceding frameworks, Coach Hurt's outcomes mirror the post-failure responses identified in the consumer satisfaction and complaint behavior literature (Singh, 1990). When relational expectations are violated and recovery is absent or insufficient, mentees engage in one or more of three characteristic responses: emotional withdrawal, negative word-of-mouth, and reduced organizational loyalty, responses that parallel private, public, and exit behaviors observed in dissatisfied consumers.

Emotional Withdrawal: Private Response. When a coach fails to meet a mentee's relational and developmental expectations, the mentee may emotionally retreat. This withdrawal is not always visible: it manifests as reduced engagement, hesitation to seek support, or reluctance to pursue future mentoring opportunities. As in Amina's case, disengagement from projects or leadership programs often reflects a self-protective response to repeated disappointment rather than a lack of ambition. Emotional withdrawal thus parallels the private response pattern in consumer contexts, where dissatisfaction is internalized rather than expressed.

Negative Word-of-Mouth: Public Response. Just as dissatisfied customers warn others about poor service, mentees who experience Coach Hurt may quietly dissuade peers from seeking mentorship, reflecting the central role of negative word-of-mouth in responses to dissatisfaction (Arora et al., 2021), particularly when they perceive systemic neglect or unaccountable coaches. The reputational damage spreads through informal channels: hallway conversations, peer discussions, and silent refusals to participate in developmental programs. This form of public response functions as relational complaint behavior (Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002), eroding trust in formal coaching initiatives and undermining organizational credibility.

Reduced Organizational Loyalty: Exit Response. Perhaps most consequentially, damaged coaching relationships can weaken an employee's attachment to the organization itself. When individuals perceive that their growth has been hindered or that toxic or neglectful coaching behaviors are tolerated, they may seek opportunities elsewhere (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). In cases such as Amina's, the failed relationship not only ends the mentoring connection but also accelerates departure from the organization. Viewed through the lens of social exchange theory, this represents an exit response analogous to consumer defection following unresolved service failure.

Taken together, these reactions underscore that Coach Hurt is not simply an interpersonal breakdown but a breach in the broader relational contract between employee and organization. Repairing such ruptures requires more than individual reflection; it demands systemic recovery mechanisms, structures that reinforce reciprocity, establish accountability, and align coaching relationships with both personal and institutional goals. Only through such organizational-level recovery can loyalty, trust, and satisfaction be restored following relational service failures.

THEORETICAL INTEGRATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The concept of Coach Hurt draws upon and connects multiple theoretical frameworks, offering a comprehensive understanding of relational service failure in professional development contexts. At its core, Coach Hurt bridges longstanding research in consumer satisfaction and service failure, traditionally centered on transactional exchanges, with the relational complexity of coaching and mentoring. By integrating insights from service failure theory, psychological contract theory, and social exchange theory, this framework deepens our understanding of how trust violations, unmet expectations, and power imbalances unfold in developmental relationships and why they can be especially damaging when unacknowledged or unrepaired.

Integrating Theoretical Perspectives

Service failure research has long emphasized expectation management, recovery efforts, and emotional responses in customer-provider (Tax et al., 1998; Maxham & Netemeyer, 2002). Applied to coaching, these principles explain how mentees react to perceived neglect or mistreatment: sometimes through quiet disengagement, other times through persistent skepticism toward developmental initiatives. Psychological contract theory highlights the implicit agreements that underlie coaching relationships: expectations of availability, advocacy, and growth opportunities (Rousseau, 1995). When these expectations are violated, perceived breaches erode not only the mentoring relationship but also broader institutional trust (Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Finally, social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) clarifies why mentees experiencing Coach Hurt may emotionally withdraw or reduce their organizational commitment: when reciprocity fails, so too does the incentive to invest in the relationship.

Directions for Future Research

Building on these theoretical pillars, Coach Hurt provides a foundation for new empirical exploration of dissatisfaction, complaint behavior, and recovery within developmental service exchanges. Several promising research directions emerge:

Longitudinal Effects on Career Outcomes. Future research should examine how early experiences of Coach Hurt influence long-term professional engagement, confidence, and mobility. Do relational service failures create enduring avoidance of mentoring, slower advancement, or diminished leadership aspirations? Understanding these trajectories would parallel consumer research on post-failure loyalty and behavioral intentions.

Intervention and Repair Models. There is a critical need to identify mechanisms that effectively repair damaged coaching relationships. Studies could test which service-recovery strategies, including structured mediation, reassignment, or facilitated reflection, best restore trust and psychological safety. Future work might also assess how the timing and severity of harm shape the likelihood of successful recovery, echoing findings from consumer recovery research (Davidow, 2003, 2004).

Organizational Safeguards and Systemic Prevention. Further inquiry should explore institutional conditions that either mitigate or perpetuate Coach Hurt. This includes examining mentorship program design, accountability structures for mentors, and cultural norms that influence whether mentees feel empowered to speak up or remain silent. Feedback systems, mentor training, and oversight mechanisms may serve as the organizational equivalent of service quality assurance systems that prevent consumer dissatisfaction.

Cross-Cultural and Contextual Variations. Expectations and expressions of mentorship differ across cultural, industry, and organizational settings. Comparative studies could reveal how hierarchical norms, formality, or communication styles moderate the manifestation and consequences of Coach Hurt. Such work would parallel cross-cultural research on service quality and consumer complaint behavior.

Digital and Hybrid Coaching Contexts. As mentoring increasingly occurs through digital and hybrid modalities, new forms of relational distance and breakdown are emerging. Investigating Coach Hurt in virtual contexts could uncover how technology mediates trust, empathy, and perceived availability, variables central to both service satisfaction and recovery.

Framed within these established theoretical models, Coach Hurt lays the groundwork for future scholarship that moves beyond surface-level dissatisfaction to examine the emotional, developmental, and organizational dimensions of relational service failure. By extending consumer satisfaction theory to internal, trust-based services, this framework highlights the organizational responsibility to recognize, prevent, and repair mentoring breakdowns. Ultimately, Coach Hurt invites a new wave of research focused on the emotional and developmental stakes of coaching gone wrong, and the recovery processes through which organizations can transform relational harm into renewed trust and engagement.

MANAGERIAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COACH HURT

As coaching and mentoring become central pillars in talent development, leadership pipelines, and employee-engagement strategies, the practical implications of Coach Hurt cannot be overstated. Although organizations often treat coaching as an unqualified good, this research demonstrates that poorly managed relationships can backfire, harming morale, eroding trust, and accelerating attrition. Recognizing and addressing Coach Hurt is therefore not merely a matter of interpersonal ethics but a strategic imperative for human resources professionals, leadership development specialists, and organizational designers.

Identifying Coach Hurt: Early Warning Signs

Effective intervention begins with early detection, yet signs of relational breakdown are often subtle or misinterpreted as personal disengagement rather than as responses to service failure. Early indicators include:

Inconsistent Support or Communication. Frequent cancellations, vague or perfunctory feedback, and inattentive engagement signal relational neglect rather than simple time pressure (Scandura, 1998). Such process failures violate mentees' expectations for reliability and responsiveness.

Psychological-Contract Breaches. When promises of advocacy, development, or sponsorship go unfulfilled, mentees experience these gaps as violations of trust (Rousseau, 1995; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Breaches are especially damaging when coaching is framed as a route to advancement.

Emotional Distress or Withdrawal. Mentees who feel overlooked or unsupported may experience lowered motivation and confidence, leading to "quiet quitting" or the silent loss of high-potential talent (Carmeli et al., 2009). Organizations should monitor for these subtle cues through regular check-ins, confidential feedback loops, and non-punitive reporting channels.

Strategies for Addressing Coach Hurt

When signs of Coach Hurt surface, timely and compassionate responses are essential. As with external service recovery, effective repair must restore both function and trust. Key strategies include:

Providing Alternative Mentors. Allowing mentees to request a mentor change without stigma ensures that one negative relationship does not derail professional growth. Similar to customer reassignment to a different agent or sales representative following a service failure, choice and flexibility promote renewed engagement (Eby & Allen, 2002).

Training and Development for Coaches. Many instances of Coach Hurt are unintentional, rooted in limited emotional intelligence or awareness of power dynamics. Training in ethical mentoring, cross-cultural communication, and psychological safety can prevent relational harm before it occurs (Carmeli et al., 2009).

Creating Safe, Structured Reporting Mechanisms. Feedback systems should move beyond annual surveys. Confidential debriefs, mentorship “health checks,” and HR-managed resolution pathways can surface issues early and provide corrective options. Accountability should be proportional: chronic offenders removed from programs, and unintentional offenders offered opportunities for development and reflection.

Preventing Coach Hurt: Organizational Best Practices

Proactive prevention remains the most effective safeguard. Organizations should treat mentoring as a formalized service system: structured, monitored, and accountable. Recommended practices include:

- **Clear Coaching Agreements:** At the relationship’s outset, mentors and mentees should co-create written or verbal agreements that clarify goals, expectations, communication norms, and boundaries (Rousseau, 1995). These contracts reduce mismatched assumptions.
- **Ongoing Evaluation and Alignment:** Regular check-ins ensure that both parties remain aligned and that the relationship continues to deliver intended developmental value (Liu & Mattila, 2015).
- **Mentoring Networks Over Single Assignments:** Encouraging mentees to build a portfolio of mentors diversifies input, balances power, and reduces over-dependence (Higgins & Kram, 2001).
- **Cultural Reinforcement:** Embedding mentoring within a culture of trust and feedback, by recognizing exemplary mentors, supporting those who seek help, and linking mentoring to DEI and leadership initiatives, normalizes psychological safety and reduces systemic risk.

Recognizing and preventing Coach Hurt thus parallels managing service quality in customer contexts: early detection, responsive recovery, and continuous improvement sustain loyalty and trust. By treating developmental relationships as strategic service exchanges, organizations can preserve the benefits of coaching while mitigating the relational failures that quietly erode engagement and performance.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICYMAKERS

As organizations increasingly invest in mentoring and coaching as integral components of leadership development, talent retention, and employee well-being, the recognition of Coach Hurt

must be matched by strategies for prevention, repair, and accountability. Practitioners and policymakers must move beyond treating mentoring as a one-size-fits-all intervention and instead design systems that reflect the relational complexity and potential risks of these high-stakes developmental exchanges.

While this research establishes a conceptual foundation for understanding Coach Hurt, several areas of policy, practice, and system design are ready for implementation and empirical evaluation.

Leveraging Technology to Monitor and Support Coaching Quality

Digital platforms, including AI-enabled mentoring tools, can play a constructive role in tracking mentoring interactions, identifying engagement patterns, and surfacing early warning signs of neglect or dissatisfaction. To maintain ethical integrity, such tools must include safeguards that protect privacy and prevent bias. Dashboards, automated check-ins, and sentiment analysis can provide mentors and administrators with real-time insights into relationship health, supporting proactive intervention without creating surveillance concerns (Liu & Mattila, 2015).

Institutionalizing Psychological Safety as a Measurable Outcome

Although many organizations champion psychological safety rhetorically, few assess it systematically. Future mentoring programs should treat psychological safety as a measurable outcome, tracked through pulse surveys, qualitative feedback, and third-party reviews, rather than a byproduct. Institutions might also establish peer-support systems or coaching ombuds roles to provide safe channels for mentees to voice concerns and seek resolution before disengagement becomes permanent (Edmondson, 1999; Rosander et al., 2022).

Developing Ethical Standards and Competency Models for Mentors

Just as professional coaches and counselors adhere to formal ethical codes, mentors in structured programs should be guided by clear standards of practice. These standards should address confidentiality, power awareness, feedback literacy, and boundary management. Accrediting bodies, HR consortia, and academic institutions can collaborate to develop competency frameworks and certification pathways for mentors, paralleling credentialing systems in other helping professions.

Embedding Coach Hurt Awareness in DEI and Belonging Initiatives

Coach Hurt is not expected to affect all mentees equally. First-generation professionals, employees from marginalized backgrounds, and individuals navigating identity-related challenges may be particularly vulnerable to subtle forms of exclusion or neglect. Organizations should integrate Coach Hurt awareness into diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives by training mentors in cultural competence, inclusive feedback practices, and the recognition of identity-based power dynamics. Such integration reinforces the connection between relational safety and organizational belonging.

Policy Incentives for Ethical Mentoring Practices

Policymakers and educational leaders can reinforce ethical mentoring through funding and accountability mechanisms. Higher-education institutions might include mentoring quality in promotion or tenure evaluations, while public-sector agencies could link leadership development grants to evidence of mentoring effectiveness. These policy-level incentives would signal that the

quality and ethics of mentoring are as vital as its presence, positioning Coach Hurt awareness as an essential dimension of workforce development and institutional trust.

Collectively, these initiatives align with service quality and satisfaction frameworks by emphasizing early detection, consistent evaluation, and equitable recovery. By embedding these principles in organizational design and policy, practitioners and decision-makers can ensure that mentoring fulfills its developmental promise without perpetuating unrecognized harm.

Conclusion: Advancing the Understanding of Coach Hurt

The concept of Coach Hurt provides a crucial lens for examining the unintended negative effects of coaching relationships in professional and educational settings. While coaching is widely regarded as a valuable tool for career and personal development, this framework underscores that developmental relationships can also produce relational service failures through neglect, mismatched expectations, or psychologically damaging interactions (Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2008; Scandura, 1998). Understanding Coach Hurt is essential for organizations, educators, and policymakers seeking to design effective, ethical, and sustainable mentoring and coaching programs.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This research integrates consumer satisfaction, services marketing, and mentoring and coaching literature by introducing a novel framework that conceptualizes Coach Hurt as a distinct phenomenon with unique antecedents, consequences, and recovery pathways. Whereas prior research on mentoring dysfunctions emphasizes negative experiences broadly, Coach Hurt isolates the mechanisms of service failure, including how coaches, intentionally or unintentionally, fail to meet relational and developmental expectations (Eby & Allen, 2002; Ragins et al., 2000). By filling this conceptual gap, the framework contributes to scholarship on psychological safety, service dissatisfaction, and organizational coaching culture (Edmondson, 1999), extending consumer-satisfaction models into internal, trust-based exchanges.

Practical Implications

Although most discourse around mentoring focuses on benefits, Coach Hurt highlights the organizational risks of poorly managed or misaligned coaching relationships. These relational breakdowns can erode trust, reduce engagement, and disrupt leadership pipelines, creating systemic dissatisfaction. Consequently, mentoring must be managed as a strategic service system requiring structure, evaluation, and ethical accountability rather than a purely informal or goodwill activity.

Redefining Mentoring as a Strategic Asset. Too often, mentoring is treated as a side activity, even when delivered as a formal program. Recognizing the potential for Coach Hurt calls for reframing mentoring as a professionalized, high-impact process central to talent development and retention. This shift justifies investment in mentor training, program design, and outcome measurement, positioning mentoring as an institutional asset that drives satisfaction, trust, and loyalty.

Equipping Mentors with Emotional Intelligence and Power Awareness. Many instances of Coach Hurt stem from limited self-awareness rather than malice. Mentors must be trained in emotional intelligence, empathy, and boundary management, competencies as vital as technical expertise. Developing these skills enhances relationship quality, mitigates perceived power imbalances, and prevents service quality failures.

Building Multi-Mentor Models and Redundancy into Development Pathways. Encouraging mentees to engage with multiple mentors diversifies feedback and sponsorship sources, reducing dependence on a single relationship and minimizing the risk that one failure will derail development (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Such networked approaches foster resilience and relational equity.

Making Feedback Loops and Safe Escalation Channels Routine. Mentoring programs should include structured mechanisms for mentees to provide confidential feedback on relationship quality. Regular surveys, facilitated reviews, or HR check-ins serve as early detection systems, akin to customer-satisfaction monitoring in service settings, allowing prompt corrective action before disengagement or attrition occur.

Acknowledging and Repairing Harm When It Occurs. Even robust systems cannot prevent every failure, particularly when recovery is delayed, minimized, or perceived as unfair (Aron, 2016). When Coach Hurt arises, organizations should respond transparently and promptly through mediation, reassignment, or structured reflection. A recovery mindset, drawn from service failure (Tax et al., 1998) can restore trust and reinforce a culture of psychological safety and ethical leadership.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study introduces Coach Hurt conceptually, its relational, emotional, and developmental complexity invites deeper empirical study across disciplines.

Longitudinal Studies on Career Impact. Long-term research could examine how early experiences of Coach Hurt influence career engagement, mobility, and leadership aspirations. Do relational service failures discourage future mentoring participation or affect perceptions of organizational support?

Measuring Psychological and Emotional Consequences. Empirical work should assess the psychological toll of Coach Hurt, including effects on self-efficacy, emotional exhaustion, and perceived fairness. Mixed-methods studies combining validated scales and qualitative narratives could capture both scope and nuance.

Interventions and Recovery Models. Future studies should test how timing, tone, and content of recovery efforts shape post-failure satisfaction and re-engagement, paralleling service recovery research (Davidow, 2003, 2004). Experimental designs could isolate which interventions, such as apology, reassignment, and leadership acknowledgment, most effectively rebuild trust.

Comparative Studies Across Contexts and Cultures. Cross-sector and cross-cultural analyses could examine how hierarchical norms, communication styles, and organizational structures shape perceptions and the impact of Coach Hurt. Such research would illuminate culturally responsive prevention and recovery strategies.

Vulnerable Populations and Identity-Sensitive Dynamics. Coach Hurt may disproportionately affect underrepresented or marginalized mentees. Studies examining the intersection of identity, power, and psychological safety can guide inclusive mentoring policies and DEI initiatives.

Technology-Mediated Coaching and the Risk of Relational Distance. As virtual and AI-assisted mentoring proliferate, researchers should explore how technological mediation alters trust, accountability, and empathy in coaching exchanges. Understanding digital service failures will be crucial as coaching increasingly occurs in hybrid environments.

By advancing the understanding of Coach Hurt, scholars and practitioners can jointly strengthen mentoring systems that maximize developmental benefits while minimizing relational harm. Coaching relationships remain pivotal to professional growth, but they are not immune to dysfunction. Recognizing and addressing Coach Hurt ensures that mentoring fulfills its intended purpose: empowering individuals, fostering learning, and building organizational cultures grounded in trust, psychological safety, and sustained satisfaction.

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Managing Editor: Newell D. Wright

Submitted: 24 April 2025

Revised: 5 December 2025

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