



Footprints Report

Department of Defense
Coaching Program

Supervised by
Dr. Chatham Sullivan with
Vanessa Alzate

Note: This report summarizes findings from a beta pilot. While results are grounded in detailed analysis, they reflect early patterns rather than final conclusions. We share them here as part of an ongoing learning process.

Footprints™ (Powered by Kirkpatrick)

Footprints is an AI-powered platform that captures and quantifies the real-world value of initiatives, programs, and organizational investments. At the heart of every analysis are four questions:

- Did it work?
- Was it worth it?
- What made the difference?
- And why?

To answer those, we deploy Big Foot—our AI agent trained to gather evidence, trace impact, and deliver findings you can trust. His job is to analyze what changed, how it changed, and what that change was worth.

This report is organized into six sections:

1. Summary of findings
2. The Big Foot Method – How the analysis works
3. Stories of Impact – What the coaching looked like on the ground
4. Levers of Impact – The mechanisms behind the results
5. Make It Better – What would raise the impact score
6. Closing – Final reflections and implications

1. Summary

6.5/10 Footprints score (Windfall ROI). Participants loved the coaching, many became coaches themselves,

and several delivered documented wins for their teams and missions. The program outperforms our benchmark set by a wide margin and likely returns several times its $\pm \$10$ M annual investment. Still, system-wide impact is uneven—we believe an 8+ score is within reach.

2. Method

The question we hear most often is: **How do you know this is valid?**

Big Foot's answer is a rigorous, multi-source synthesis grounded in evidence. Each Footprint analysis draws from four core inputs:

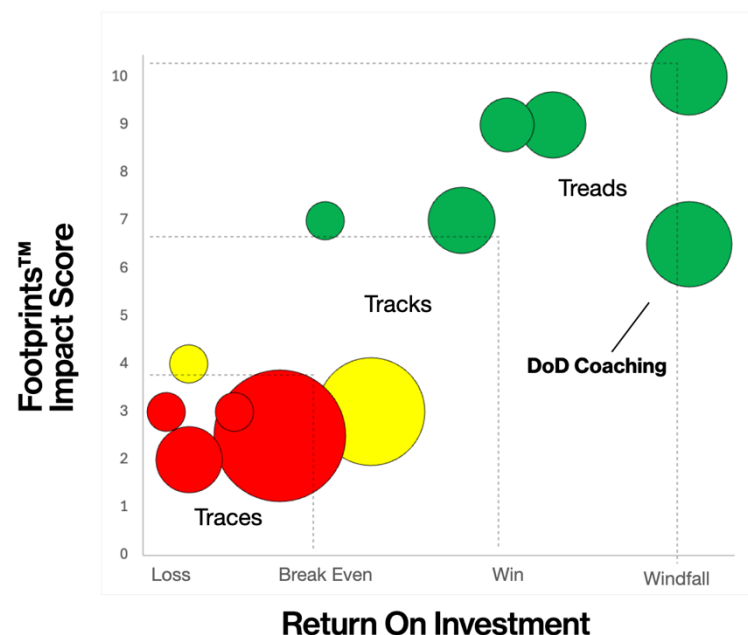
Program Intake. At the outset, we capture detailed

initiative—its goals, scope, design, scale, and investments. This establishes a baseline for evaluation.

Causal Interviews. We conduct deep-dive interviews designed to trace cause-and-effect. For each participant, Big Foot maps chains of impact—connecting what the initiative triggered, what changed, and what happened next.

Many interviews contain multiple chains. When those chains repeat across participants—with specificity, coherence, and plausibility—we gain high confidence that real value was created.

Impact Score. From the full body of evidence, Big Foot assigns an objective **0–10 impact score**, grounded in



information about the

concrete episodes: moments

when the initiative produced a meaningful shift in behavior, mindset, work practices, or outcomes.

Each episode is rated across three dimensions:

1. **Engagement** – Did it resonate?
2. **Change** – Did it alter behavior?
3. **Impact** – Did it deliver meaningful value?

This score becomes a **universal yardstick**—comparable across programs, teams, and even organizations.

Survey Validation. Finally, we validate the qualitative findings through a 4-item pulse survey based on our standard scale. This helps confirm that the observed effects aren't isolated anecdotes, but part of a broader pattern.

We then benchmark everything—score, signature effects, and mechanisms—against our growing database of programs from leading organizations across sectors.

3. Stories of Impact

Big Foot doesn't just crunch numbers—he listens for meaning. In every analysis, we reconstruct a range of stories

that reveal how the program actually landed on the ground.

We don't cherry-pick the flashiest examples. We look for **representative cases** that show the program at work in different contexts—new leaders, complex missions, stretched civilians, and seasoned command.

Here's what impact looked like.

Story 1 – Major Davids Makes His Mark

Major Davids, new to his role and the lone Army officer in a civilian-heavy cybersecurity division, felt “stuck,” micromanaged, and like a “fish out of water.” He knew he could contribute more to the mission.

Coaching created a safe space to test a bolder approach. Working with his coach, he decided to embed himself with the civilian computing security teams, attending all their customer meetings—without waiting for formal tasking.

That self-assignment changed everything. Contractors quickly leaned on Davids as the government voice who could unlock bureaucracy and mediate between civilian contractors and Army leadership. Mission partners returned calls when his .mil signature appeared. Stalled

diagrams and approvals started flowing.

Inside the division, his boss's trust grew. Davids began taking meetings without his supervisor present, providing decisions first and back-briefs later, which opened up bandwidth and cut rework cycles.

In the cybersecurity teams, project traction improved (“eight times out of ten we'd get what we needed the same day”), and Davids has since been appointed spokesperson for high-visibility cloud efforts—while training as a coach himself, extending the impact he first experienced.

Story 2 – Fighting in Space

Three years ago, Commander Logan stepped into coaching unsure what to expect. At the time, he was leading a high-stakes orbital defense unit, developing the playbook for what it meant to fight in space.

He brought a challenge to his coach: how to lead better—and keep top talent—in a mission where failure wasn't an option. Recruiting was easy in Space Force. Given the level of talent, retention wasn't. And churn posed a real risk to the mission.

With his coach, Logan reframed the command's vision:

"Our people make the mission possible—invest in them first, so the mission endures."

They rehearsed how to communicate that vision—leveraging Logan's directors as amplifiers. The effect? "I don't want to overdramatize," he said, "but our retention numbers went up." So did Climate Command scores.

In a field where talent is constantly poached by private industry, keeping skilled Guardians mattered. Logan credited the shift in tone, trust, and communication as critical to keeping the team intact—and mission-ready.

Story 3 – Transforming Performance In Role

Aja, a civilian pivoting from purchasing to high-stakes IT contracting, entered coaching "unsure, anxious, and buried in busywork."

Her coach's hallmark was relentless, probing questions: What results do you want from this rotation? How will you measure them? What's under your control today? Together they drafted SMART objectives and scripted a candid proposal to her demanding branch chief.

Armed with that plan, Aja secured meaningful tasks from her supervisors—modifications, performance work statements. She focused on value rather than clerical overflow. Weekly Thursday check-ins (also scripted in coaching) kept her workload aligned with her own learning goals and mission expectations. Aja learned to tailor her language to each supervisor, a skill first rehearsed in sessions.

The tangible payoff: a successful contracting certification exam, recognition as a go-to rotational analyst in her function, a sense of doing more meaningful work that supports the mission—and a personal breakthrough: budgeting time and money for long-deferred passions, proof that professional confidence spilled into life balance.

4. Impact Levers

Stories like the ones above aren't just compelling anecdotes—they reveal a **persistent pattern of impact**. Across interviews, several patterns repeated with such regularity that they surfaced strong, evidence-based hypotheses about what actually causes the change.

These **causal mechanisms** matter. They explain why coaching works when it works—and they point to practical ways to strengthen the program and better understand the culture it operates within.

Below are the six most reliable levers we observed.

1. Internal Clarity → External Action

Coaching helped people translate emotion into structure.

Leila Ford began her coaching unsure of her footing in a high-stakes rotation. By the end, she was writing her own goals, aligning them to the mission, and presenting them confidently to leadership.

"I felt confident writing those," she said. "My supervisor wanted to know how I helped the mission—and now I could make the case."

That shift—from uncertain to intentional—is the most common signature of this program when it works. Each moment of impact described a similar causal arc: coaching helped them sort themselves out—then speak and act more clearly in the world.

2. The Power of Questions

One of the strongest causal mechanisms across the interviews was the **quality of the questions**—not just those the coach asked, but how those questions rewired participants' thinking.

Again and again, people said some version of the same thing:

"She asked me something I never would've asked myself."

Many participants internalized the questioning style. One client described reviewing her notes and using her coach's prompts to self-check before making decisions. Questioning, in this sense, became a **transferable habit of mind**—one that quietly scaled through modeling and repetition.

When people are overwhelmed, they tend to default to action or avoidance. What coaching introduced was a reflective wedge—just enough space to notice. That wedge made room for new behaviors to emerge: asking for help, initiating projects, setting boundaries, or staying calm when things got messy.

3. Values as a Lever for Action

Across interviews, coaching surfaced a surprisingly potent effect: it helped people name what actually mattered to

them—and then align their decisions accordingly.

For one client, the realization that her identity was tied to overworking led to a quiet but lasting recalibration of how she showed up with her kids.

For another, the death of her father clarified that *time* was a core value—and coaching helped her reorganize her life around that recognition.

In both cases, values weren't abstract or decorative. They became operational. Coaching helped them see the gap between what they were doing and what they cared about—and then move.

4. Accountability

A quiet but consistent arc emerged in the high-impact stories:

- First, the coach helped the person **anchor** in their values.
- Then came a **clarifying insight** about a decision or dilemma.
- Then **action**.
- And for a few, a final phase: **accompaniment**.

Accountability was a relationship of support, check-in, and calibration.

Coaching rarely worked with a one-time epiphany but a slow walk with someone beside the

client—someone who helped them hear their own voice more clearly and follow it.

5. Getting Unstuck

Several participants used the same metaphors to describe their pre-coaching experience: stuck, foggy, gray.

"It was like juggling fires," one said. "I wasn't sure where I was going."

Coaching didn't fix things overnight, but it offered the first real point of traction. In many cases, people weren't blocked by lack of capability—they were blocked by inertia.

Coaching helped them start again. "I wasn't just reacting anymore," one said. "I had a direction."

One of the most underappreciated aspects of coaching is that it opens space—not just mental space, but **possibility space**.

People found themselves imagining things they hadn't considered before.

For several clients, coaching unlocked the confidence to ask for more meaningful assignments—and in doing so, changed how they were seen by his supervisors.

In story after story, coaching didn't work by pushing people

toward a preset destination. It worked by helping them **see a door they hadn't noticed—and walk through it.**

5. Can You Make It Better?

Big question. You got a 6.5.

What would it take to break 8?

We think it's possible. And here's why.

On the post-program survey, we saw a clean normal distribution—median scores aligned almost exactly with what Big Foot projected based on the interviews. But look closely, and you'll notice a **fat tail**: around **20%** of ~200 respondents gave answers that strongly suggest the highest level of impact. These participants didn't just love the program—they changed their behavior *and* delivered

measurable outcomes tied to mission or organizational performance.

So what explains that spike?

	% of Respondents	Impact Score
Air Force	36	6.72
Defense Agency	25	5.95
Army	13	7.15
Navy	13	6.75
Space Force	6	7.11
Other	7	5.5

It wasn't department. Big Foot checked. Scores stayed within a single standard deviation across branches.

But when we dug into the transcripts, a pattern emerged:

High-impact stories often came from participants who were:

- In a **new role**

- Doing **novel** (versus standard or procedural) work
 - Operating in **joint-force or cross-boundary** contexts
- Not always—but often.

Coaching was especially powerful “in the seams.”

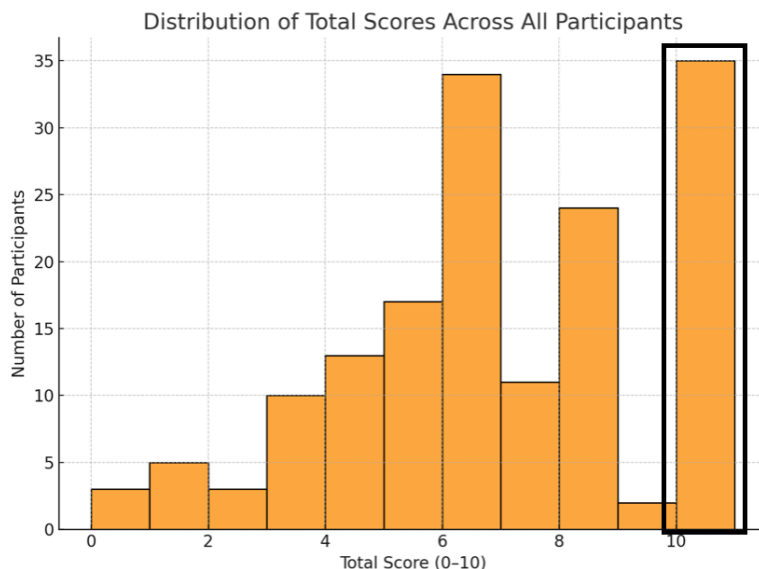
The program showed the greatest lift in places where **cultures, roles, or mindsets collide**—military and civilian, air and ground, strategy and operations.

In these contexts, coaching helped people shift languages, reframe expectations, and navigate across systems more effectively. A standout example: the commander who used coaching to create a playbook for protecting national assets in space. That kind of clarity and integration was only possible because coaching met him in the complexity.

◆ **Recommendation #1:**
Target coaching to settings that are novel, complex, and uncertain.

That's where the lift is strongest—and the organizational returns most visible.

Big Foot also observed something else:



The **type of impact** varied widely.

Many people used coaching for personal clarity, work/life balance, or role-specific growth. And it worked. The results were real—better relationships, calmer minds, stronger confidence. Others used it to advance in their careers or take on new responsibility.

Impact by Type

Personal	40%
Performance in Role	25%
Career	25%
Mission	10%

But coaching was **less frequently used** to address **mission-critical problems**—the hard tasks, team dynamics, and thorny objectives that sit closest to operational value.

That might be a missed opportunity.

There's clear evidence that coaching **can** help in these areas—and when it does, the impact is often amplified. We believe coaching is an **underutilized tool** for mission performance.

What would help?

Coaching engagements could more explicitly prompt clients to ask:

“How does this affect the work that matters most?”

◆ **Recommendation #2: Train coaches to help clients connect coaching to mission and task-level challenges.**

That's where untapped value lives.

6. Closing

Coaching helped clients grow, lead more effectively, and in some cases, deliver real, documented wins for their teams and missions.

The initiative earned a 6.5 out of 10—solidly in the zone of meaningful personal and professional impact, with signs of localized mission-level effect. That's an exceptional outcome for a coaching program. Based on available data, it likely produces surplus value many times greater than the ~\$10M annual investment. By our benchmarks, it earns the highest possible ROI signal: a windfall.

And yet: this isn't the ceiling.

Right now, the program generates energy and traction. It helps people move. Not always visibly. Not always all

the way. But reliably. It shifts how people think, act, and relate to others—at work and beyond. DoD coaching is not a one-size-fits-all tool. It's a catalyst. And what it catalyzes depends—on who receives it, when they receive it, and what kind of terrain they're standing on.

What it doesn't yet do is deliver impact at organizational scale—at least not consistently.

That's not a flaw. It's an opportunity.

One final insight.

Coaching showed more consistent impact than most of the leadership and management training programs in our growing dataset. Why?

One reason may be the learning/doing gap. Training often struggles to transfer insights from the classroom to the real world. Coaching sidesteps that gap by embedding itself in live terrain—on the pulse of real challenges, decisions, and dilemmas.

In that way, coaching isn't just a program. It's a new kind of leadership infrastructure—one that turns reflection into motion, and motion into meaning.