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# Coaching for Leadership

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In an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, the ability of groups of co-workers to operate as an effective team in pursuit of the organisation's objectives is vital. As we have seen in previous chapters, crises require teamwork of a highly developed order. It is essential to be able to mobilise effectively in response to ambiguous and rapidly changing challenges which bring pressure and perhaps even fear. Adopting a coaching approach offers leaders a way of developing this capability within their teams and organisations. Coaching is a practical approach that can be used with all levels of staff to improve performance, to develop people, to build teams, and to enhance organisational resilience.

**This chapter asks questions that encourage you to reflect on your own practise, including:**

- What is coaching?
- What are the skills needed for effective coaching conversations?
- How might a manager use a coaching approach to enhance the performance and development of individuals who work for them?
- How might you coach yourself?
- How can you coach the team that you lead?
- How can you develop a coaching culture within your organisation?


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## What Is Coaching?

Any thesaurus is likely to offer some or all of the following suggestions for the noun '*coach*': *trainer, teacher, instructor, tutor, football coach*—all of these suggest that a coach knows what needs to be done and can tell the other person what to do and how to do it. This is probably what is in the mind of most managers when they talk about coaching their team; they draw on their knowledge, skills, and experience to advise and guide subordinates.

In this chapter, however, we'll be exploring a different view of coaching—a technique I have refined over more than twenty years and for which each term has been carefully defined.

> Coaching is a relationship of rapport and trust in which the coach uses their ability to listen, to ask questions and to play back what the client has communicated in order to help the client to clarify what matters to them and to work out what to do to achieve their aspirations (Northose, 2007).

My approach to coaching is primarily non-directive. I use my listening and questioning skills to manage conversations, encouraging the other person to clarify their goals and to decide upon actions that will help them to achieve these. In this chapter, I'll assume that you already know how to tell people what to do—in part, because in your own career it's likely you yourself have been told what to do by someone higher up in your organisation.

## Telling People What to Do

A manager—by definition—is someone who achieves results through other people rather than exclusively through their own efforts. Writing one hundred years ago, the French mining engineer and executive Henri Fayol set out a general theory of management or, in his term, Business Administration (from which the MBA degree takes its name). He was the first person to describe management as a top-down process based on planning and the organisation of people. He listed five functions which a manager needs to perform:

- Plan
- Organise
- Co-ordinate
- Command
- Control

Command and control is a widely accepted, often very effective view of management in organisations. In setting out an alternative, primarily non-directive view of coaching in this chapter, I want to make clear that I am not suggesting the conventional top-down view to be wrong or inappropriate, rather I wish to present a different approach to leadership and the role of coach in particularly challenging circumstances.

## The Directive to Non-directive Spectrum

I find the idea of a spectrum of behaviours from directive to non-directive a useful framework to think clearly about the choices you make when engaged in conversation—as a manager, coach, consultant or teacher—with another.

At the directive end of the spectrum, you might give an instruction, offer advice or guidance or make a suggestion. You know, or may have a clear opinion of, what the other person needs to do; when you tell them this, you are looking to give them a solution.

At the non-directive end of the spectrum, on the other hand, you utilise the conversational skills set out in my definition of coaching—listening, questioning, and playing back—to help the other person think through their situation and, if appropriate, to set goals and make an action plan. You are looking to draw out the solution from the other person.

We continually have to make choices about what approach to take—both in an overall sense and in how we respond within a conversation. In choosing whether to be directive or non-directive, it's important to be clear in your own mind what approach you are taking and why you're taking it.

**Case Study**

Let me give an example: a new member of staff asks you how to work on the office photocopier. There is a clear answer to this question, and you yourself know it. It makes sense and saves time to simply to tell them what to do. Some months later, that same member of staff asks you if they should accept a job offer in another department within your organisation. You could tell them what you think—or you could engage in a coaching conversation to help them work out what is the best choice for them. In terms of career development, they may live with the consequences of their decision for many years. The choice may be finely balanced, with pros and cons, and what matters to them in their career may be very different from what matters to you. It may be much more useful to listen and ask questions to help them clarify their thinking than to tell them what you think.

In my experience of helping managers learn how to coach, I find that they often struggle with the idea that there is a powerful alternative to telling people what to do. They are so used to telling, that it's difficult to restrain themselves from giving advice or making suggestions.

**Reflection: How Directive are You?**

- When one of your team—or a colleague or friend—comes to you with a problem, how likely are you to respond from the directive end of the spectrum with instructions, advice, guidance or suggestions?
- How often do you respond from the non-directive end by listening and asking questions?

## Awareness and Responsibility

In 1992, John Whitmore published *Coaching for Performance*, now a classic and hugely influential text in coaching circles in the UK and beyond. In his book, Whitmore argues that the essence of what you are trying to do as a coach, or a manager using a coaching approach, is to raise the other person's AWARENESS and encourage them to take RESPONSIBILITY for action. He summarised this in the following equation:

$$\text{Awareness} + \text{Responsibility} = \text{Performance}$$

In other words, someone who knows what needs to be done (and who is capable of doing it) and who also takes responsibility for doing it will perform—whatever, performance means in the context. It may be completing a report, making a sales call, hitting a golf ball, or managing a team.

Whitmore adds that *Awareness without Responsibility is just Whingeing*. Someone who's very clear on what's needed but doesn't actually *do* anything is simply moaning.

For a manager taking a coaching approach (in the sense that we're discussing), the challenge is, first, to help your people to be clear about what they need to do and, second, to give them responsibility for taking action. With awareness and responsibility, they will perform.

## The Skills of Coaching: Listening

My definition of coaching includes the three key conversational skills: listening, questioning, and playing back. Let's look at these in turn.

Listening is the fundamental skill needed to coach well. Everything you say or do in a coaching conversation follows listening in an effort to understand

the other person. The questions that you ask, and the summaries that you play back, flow from what you've understood. And even if you want to move to the directive end of the spectrum and offer, say, a suggestion or advice, this will be more relevant when it's based on a good understanding of the other person and their situation.

There are different levels of listening, which you might imagine as a ladder:

- The lowest level is simply **not listening** to what the other person is saying.
- Then there's **listening, waiting to speak**—this is when your focus is on what you're going to say when they stop talking, and is likely to mean you've stopped listening.
- Further up comes **listening to disagree**—this is when you have a strong point of view that you hope will prevail, you therefore listen very selectively to the other person for weaknesses in their perspective. Listening to disagree is about winning or losing an argument. In some situations, this is really important, but not in coaching.
- Finally, **listening to understand** is the quality of listening that you need to bring to a coaching conversation. You are listening with empathy to appreciate the other person's position. You may also be paying attention to their non-verbal communication, picking up clues from their body language, facial expression or tone of voice. This can be particularly important when they're talking about something personal with a high emotional content.

**Reflection: How Do You Listen?**

Over the next few weeks or months, check in with yourself as to how you're listening. Notice which of the four levels of listening you're using.

You might also look for any patterns in your level of listening.

- Who do you listen to, and who do you not listen to?
- When do you listen to disagree?
- In what contexts do you really listen in order to understand?

As well as appreciating more fully the other person's perspective, there is a further really important advantage in listening to understand another person. Recall that my definition begins *Coaching is a relationship*: as a manager, you have a relationship with each of the people who works for you. It may be a close or a distant relationship, but it's a relationship. Listening to understand—and playing back reasonably accurately your understanding—shows

the other person that they've been listened to and, hopefully, understood. This helps to deepen the relationship between you.

In her book *Turning to One Another* (2002) there is a quote from Margaret J. Wheatley which captures the power of this:

> Why is being heard so healing? I don't know the full answer to that question, but I do know that is has something to do with the fact that listening creates relationship.

## The Skills of Coaching: Questioning

A second vital skill in coaching conversations is questioning. You can use questions not merely to gain information but, more importantly in a coaching context to focus the thinking of the other person. Your questions can help to raise their awareness and/or encourage them to take responsibility for action.

It's useful to distinguish between closed and open questions. A closed question can be answered *Yes* or *No*, or a similarly short answer. For example:

1. Is this an interesting chapter?
2. Do you think you will use the above ideas on listening as a manager?
3. Should all managers be able to coach?

In a conversation, closed questions not only gather little information but, more importantly, seldom stimulate much thought in the other person.

Generally, an open question will be more useful. You will gain more information, and the other person will be prompted to think. Here is a rewording of the above closed questions:

1. What is interesting in this chapter?
2. How might you use the above ideas on listening as a manager?
3. In what situations would a manager find it useful to be able to coach?

I encourage you to practise asking open rather than closed questions in your conversations and meetings.

Occasionally, a closed question is appropriate. As an illustration, you might have used a coaching approach to help someone think through the pros and cons of a job opportunity. It may now be time to encourage them to make a decision, and you might, for example, ask, *so, are you going to apply for this job?*

It's also useful to ask short rather than long or complicated questions, and to ask one at a time rather than multiple questions. In her book, *Coaching Skills: A Handbook* (2004), Jenny Rogers writes:

> As a coach, when you ask long questions, you are at risk of turning the spotlight of the coaching onto yourself. Long questions normally come out of uncertainty […] As a coach, you cannot afford the luxury of doing your thinking out loud.

One common, but not particularly helpful in coaching, is a leading question, that is, one which already contains or heavily suggests an answer. For example, those beginning *Do you think it would be a good idea to…* which is more of a statement or suggestion than a question. I encourage you, if you want to make a suggestion, to do this cleanly and clearly. In the example, you might say, *I think it would be a good idea to do … What do you think?* Don't dress up your suggestions or advice as questions.

Questions to be sparing with in coaching are those that begin with *Why?* Although technically an open question, it may put the other person on the defensive, feeling that they have to justify themselves or their actions. A rewording and softening of a *Why?* question might be:

- *I'm wondering what led you to do that.*
- *What do you think that this will achieve?*

**Reflection: What Kinds of Questions Do You Ask?**

Over the next few days, pay attention to the questions you yourself ask in meetings or one-to-one conversations. Notice when you:

- Ask closed questions.
- Ask simple, open questions.
- Ask leading questions which contain advice or a suggestion.
- Ask multiple, complicated questions.

When you are tempted to ask a leading or complicated question, pause for a few seconds and frame a crisp question that focuses on what you *really* want to know. Notice how few words you actually need.

## The Skills of Coaching: Playing Back

Some coaching textbooks focus on listening and questioning as the key conversational skills in coaching. Reflecting on my own practice as a coach, I realised that I often used a third skill in coaching conversations—playing back to the client what they'd told me. This is a powerful way of showing that

you've been listening, which helps to build the relationship. It's also very useful in managing and structuring a session and can provide a useful segue from one part of the conversation to the next.

I use three forms of playing back. First, I might summarise an extended piece of conversation. Second, I might paraphrase what someone's said, changing their words into a different expression; this might be helpful but runs the risk of getting the meaning of what they've said wrong. An additional way therefore is when I play back using the exact words of the client—I call this 'reflecting back'. Sometimes, there is a real power in the precise word or metaphor that the other person has used. I might simply repeat their words with an inquisitive tone, or I might say, *Tell me more about [their exact words]*.

Although I use summary a lot in coaching conversation, I invariably leave it to the client to make the final summary. I might end a conversation by saying something like, *As we draw to a close, tell me what you're taking from today's session*. Or perhaps, *summarise what you're going to do as a result of today's conversation*. Note that the focus of these two summaries is different, with the latter emphasising action; this might not be appropriate if the client didn't reach this point in the discussion. I'm sometimes surprised that what they summarise as important, wouldn't have been what I'd have picked out. My belief is that what they're taking from a session is more important than what I think.

## Challenges for a Manager-Coach

The question of how directive or non-directive you wish to be is particularly important if you are a manager. You have legitimate objectives to achieve and need to satisfy the demands of your own superiors. Helping a subordinate to achieve their personal objectives might conflict with this. Another challenge for a manager-coach is regarding confidentiality—the person may have good cause to be guarded in what they share with you. And it can be that the key issue they want help with is their relationship with you. For these reasons, it's often easier for an external coach to work with a client.

Jenny Rogers (2016) reflects these additional factors when she writes:

> As a boss, it is entirely probable that you are part of whatever problems your coachee has and this can be difficult to see let alone acknowledge. Also, it is always more difficult to promise confidentiality, encourage or expect complete disclosure, set aside your own considerations or remain detached from the possible outcomes. As a boss you have a stake in the outcome, whereas when you are purely a coach you do not.

## The Coaching Dance

A useful way of looking at the challenge of balancing your objectives as a line manager within an organisation with the individual objectives of one of your team is the idea of the coaching dance. I first heard about this from David Hemery, who won the 400 metres hurdles in the 1968 Mexico Olympics and who later went on to help many managers learn how to coach.

Hemery suggests that it's important to distinguish clearly when you are **telling** someone what you want them to do and when you are **asking** them for their ideas. A simple example is that you might **tell** one of your team that you must have a report by Friday morning and then **ask** them what they need in order to complete the report by then. They will know better than you what else they have on this week, how they like to work, and where they are struggling. You can tap into their knowledge and ideas and help them identify a clear plan of action. And you might also ask what support they need from you.

It's called the coach dance because it's about moving skilfully and gracefully (and appropriately) between telling and asking. I encourage you to have this idea of the coaching dance in mind when you converse with the people who work for you. Be clear when it's appropriate to tell them what you want or what you think, and when it will be more useful to ask them what *they* want or think.

Another time when you might usefully move between telling and asking is in the area of feedback. Let's imagine that your employee did complete the report by Friday morning. You could give them feedback, telling them what you thought was good or poor in their report. Or you could ask them first what they thought they did well and what they could have done better. They might well cover all the points that you would have made—and, if they miss something important, you can go on to add this. Distinguish between **giving** feedback and **generating** feedback—in other words, dancing between asking and telling.

## Performance and Development Reviews

Managers often think that they don't have time to spend on coaching conversations due to the pressures of their job. One situation which lends itself well to a coaching approach is the annual performance and development review meeting. I do hope you treat this as a valuable opportunity to engage in a rich and productive conversation, not just a time to fill in a form to keep the HR department happy!

You can use the idea of short, open questions to structure the conversation. Here are a few suggestions which you can adapt for your own context.

**Performance**

- How would you assess your performance over the last twelve months?
- What did you do well?
- Where could you have contributed more?
- What do you want to achieve over the coming year? (This is likely to call for the coaching dance—you and your organisation may have some clear views on what the person needs to achieve over the coming year.)
- How can I support you?

**Development**

- What are your development goals?
- What will you do to pursue these goals?
- How can I support you?

## The GROW Model

In his book *Coaching for Performance*, John Whitmore popularised the GROW model, which is now a widely used way of structuring a coaching conversation to help someone explore an issue and then to decide what to do. In other words, to raise their AWARENESS and then to encourage them to take RESPONSIBILITY for action. A simplified version of the model, which creates the acronym GROW, is:

| | |
|---|---|
| **G**oal | What are you trying to achieve? |
| **R**eality | What is currently going on? |
| **O**ptions | What might you do? |
| **W**ill | What will you do? |

Note that these are overview questions. The more detailed questions you ask will emerge from listening to the other person. It might be, for example, that you need to spend time clarifying the Goal and then the actions become obvious. Or, the Goal might be clear, but the constraints of the current Reality

are large and need careful unpicking. Or, you might find that there are no practical Options to achieve the Goal and so you may need to return to modify (or perhaps abandon) the original version of the Goal. It's a framework to be used flexibly, not mechanically.

**Case Study: Using the GROW Model to Coach Yourself**

Think of an issue or problem that you yourself are currently facing, in either your working life or in your life outside work. It needs to be a real issue—something that matters to you and where you're not sure what to do.

Write down in a sentence what the issue is.

Then, ask yourself some crisp, open questions to think the issue through in a structured way using the four aspects of the GROW model. You might need to spend different amounts of time on different steps.

Here are some possible questions to expand on the four aspects:

## Goal

- What do I want to achieve?
- Where would I like to be in twelve months' time?
- If I succeed in achieving this goal, what will that look like?

## Reality

- What's going on now that makes this an issue?
- What are the constraints?
- What resources do I have?
- Who can assist me here?

## Options

- What options do I have?
- What are the alternatives?
- If I were bold (or less fearful), what would I do?

## Will

- Which of these options seems the most practical?
- Which option will I choose?
- What specifically will I do to carry out this option?
- What timetable will I set myself?
- How will I review my progress?

## What is a Team?

Just because a group of people report to the same boss, or share the same office, it does not follow that they are—or that they need to be—a team. They might simply be a group of people who may have some things to communicate to each other, but they essentially do different things and have no requirement to be a team.

In their book, *The Wisdom of Teams* (1992), Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith offer a definition of a team that explains the difference between a group and a team:

> A team is a small number of people with complementary skills committed to a common purpose, performance goals and ways of working together for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

## What is Team Coaching?

Team coaching can be viewed as an intervention to help a team to:

- Clarify and achieve their collective goals.
- Communicate and interact with one another effectively.
- Constructively explore and resolve differences within the team
- Make wise decisions.
- Engage effectively with key stakeholders outside the team.

In her chapter on team coaching in the book *Excellence in Coaching: the Industry Guide* (2016), Kate Lanz writes that, 'In essence, teams are all about relationship'. She adds that, 'The quality of relationships enables the team to get to true clarity of purpose, develop effective use of resources and focus on delivering the task'.

As leader, you may wish to engage an external coach to work with your team. Team coaching is about much more than the facilitation of away days or strategy retreats. Rather, it's about enabling the team to manage itself. In his book *Coaching the Team at Work* (2007), David Clutterbuck crystallises the difference: '*facilitation is about external management of the dialogue whereas team coaching is about empowering the team to manage its own dialogue*.' The goal of the team coach is to help the team to become self-sufficient.

Alternatively, as the leader of the team, you might choose to adopt your own coaching approach. This has parallels with taking a coaching approach to managing an individual, which we discussed earlier. There will be times when you will be telling the team what is required—perhaps because you are following a wider organisational agenda—and times when you are consulting the team to gather their views and insights.

**G**oal What are we trying to achieve? *It may be more difficult to get agreement on this with a group than with an individual, since different people may well have different views.*

**R**eality What is the current reality? *Again, there might be very different perceptions and perspectives.*

**O**ptions What options do we have? *There is an advantage in working with a team here as you can draw on and build upon the ideas of a number of people.*

**W**ill What will we do? *Again, making a collective decision might be more challenging, particularly if you are seeking consensus and commitment. It may be that you need to take the decision yourself as the team leader.*

**Case Study: How Well Developed Is Your Team?**

Each phrase in Katzenbach and Smith's definition of a team has been carefully crafted. Here are some questions to assess how well your team satisfies the elements of the definition.

- How many people are in your team? (In their research, Katzenbach and Smith found that most high-performing teams had less than ten members.)
- What is the purpose of the team? To what extent is this shared by everyone in the team?
- What are your key performance indicators? How committed are individuals to achieving these?
- What attitudes and behaviours characterise how your team work together? What could you do differently to collaborate more effectively?
- To what extent do people feel accountable to one another?

## Creating a Coaching Culture

In their book, *Building and Sustaining a Coaching Culture*, David Clutterbuck, David Megginson, and Agnieszka Bajer note three key aspects of organisational culture:

- Culture is created over time through the interaction of people and their environment.
- Culture creates consistent patterns of meaning and behaviour that bind people together and make them unique as a group.
- Coaching is a combination of visible and invisible elements that exist on multiple levels.

In her book *The Coach's Coach*, Alison Hardingham explains that a coaching culture in an organisation is one 'where people coach each other all the time as a natural part of meetings, reviews and one-to-one discussions of all kinds'. She illustrates this with an example from one firm:

> The message 'coaching is a normal part of what successful people do around here' is communicated loud and clear. For anyone wanting to establish a coaching culture, that is the message that has to be got across. And it will be got across by actions, not words.

There is a saying sometimes found in literature concerning organisational culture that 'a fish rots from the head'. To create a coaching culture requires the active commitment from the person at the top of the organisation. While it may be possible to create an oasis within the organisation where coaching is used as a management style, there will inevitably be tensions when engaging with the rest of the organisation where the management style is more traditionally command and control.

Shifting the culture of an organisation takes time, potentially several years to establish. In pursuing this goal, as in many other aspects of leadership, actions speak louder than words. If you are sincere about wanting to establish a coaching culture in the organisation that you lead, recognise that this needs to work at all levels of the organisation, including among the top 'team'. It isn't something that only middle managers need.

**Reflection: Establishing a Coaching Culture within Your Organisation**

Here are some questions to consider if you are a leader seeking to establish a coaching culture within your organisation. As in the previous exercises in this chapter, these are short, open questions to focus your thinking. In terms of the GROW model, the questions explore reflect on Reality before looking at a possible Goal. This is often a more natural way to use the framework in conversations. The questions skip Options and go to Will.

### Reality

- How committed are you to establishing a genuine coaching culture in your organisation?
- What do you see as the challenges in undertaking this?
- What resources or people can you draw upon to assist you in this?

### Goal

- If you are successful in establishing a coaching culture, what would you see happening in your organisation?

### Will

- What actions will you take to pursue this goal?
- What deadlines will you set?
- When and how will you review progress?

## Summary of Key Learning Points

- In contrast to a directive, command and control style of management, a coaching approach operates primarily from the non-directive end of the spectrum to help someone clarify what matters to them, and to work out what to do to achieve their aspirations.
- The key conversational skills in coaching are listening to understand, asking open questions, and playing back your understanding.
- The questions you ask as a coach are designed to raise awareness in the other person and to encourage them to take responsibility for action: Awareness + Responsibility = Performance.

- As a line manager, you can apply the coaching dance to move skilfully between *telling* someone what to do and *asking* them for their ideas.
- You can use the GROW model to structure a coaching conversation or to coach yourself on an issue you are facing.
- You can apply the basic ideas of individual to team coaching, though this is inevitably more complicated.
- Creating a coaching culture in which people naturally coach each other demands the active commitment of the person at the top of the organisation and will take time to establish.

## Further Reading

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