

Self-directed learning: managing yourself and your working relationships

A COACHING STYLE OF MANAGEMENT

In this chapter we look at how you might use a coaching approach in managing people. We begin by exploring what we mean by coaching, which I regard as being primarily non-directive. We then revisit the basic conversational skills that we explored in the previous chapter on conversations, and consider their use in coaching. We go on to focus on coaching as a line manager and explore the idea of a coaching dance where the manager moves skillfully from telling, on the one hand, to asking, on the other. We end by considering coaching a team rather than an individual.

What is coaching?

When most people think of a coach they have in mind a sports coach. I myself take tennis lessons, and my tennis coach has clear views on what good tennis strokes look like, how best to grip the racquet and where to position yourself on the court. And I am happy to listen to his instructions and advice, trying to incorporate these into my game.

There are other approaches to coaching, however. I do a considerable amount of one-to-one coaching, and take a primarily non-directive stance. When coaching, I only occasionally make suggestions and rarely give advice.

Thus there isn't an agreed definition or view of what coaching is. Here is the definition that I use as the basis of my own practice as a coach.

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 has been communicated in order to help the client to clarify what matters to them and to work out what to do to achieve their aspirations.

There are a number of points I'd like to highlight in this definition.

First and foremost, coaching is a relationship between two people. The definition offers a couple of pointers to the nature of an effective coaching relationship – one based on rapport and trust.

Second, the definition states that the role of the coach is to help the client to articulate their goals and how they will set about achieving them. Non-directive coaching is about facilitating, not instructing, advising or guiding.

Third, the definition notes the three basic conversational skills used in coaching - listening, questioning and playing back.

Awareness and Responsibility

In *Coaching for Performance* John Whitmore offers this equation which sits at the heart of what you're trying to do in coaching non-directively:

Awareness + Responsibility = Performance

In other words, to coach effectively you are trying to do two things – to help the other person to become more aware of what they need to do and how to do it, and to encourage them to take responsibility for acting. The fundamental premise is that someone who is aware of what to do and who takes responsibility will perform effectively - whatever performance means in their context. It might be delivering excellent customer service, leading a sales team, hitting a tennis ball well, etc.

*In workshops, John Whitmore used to add that **awareness without responsibility is just whingeing**. In other words, someone who is well aware of what they need to do about an issue but who takes no responsibility for acting is simply whingeing.*

The GROW model

The GROW model, developed originally by Graham Alexander in the 1980s in his work with senior executives, is a very practical framework to structure a conversation to enable another person to think through their situation and come up with a plan of action. The GROW model can be summarised as:

Goal	What are you trying to achieve?
Reality	What is currently going on?
Options	What could you do?
Will	What will you do?

It is important to emphasise that the GROW model is not coaching – it is merely one way of structuring a conversation. Helping someone think through the pros and cons of a decision is an example of another way of structuring a coaching conversation. You can use also the GROW the framework on your own to work systematically through an issue and create an action plan. And, as we shall consider at the end of the chapter, you can use the model to help a team to address an issue. If you use the GROW framework to structure conversations you will find that you need to use it flexibly. With some issues you may spend a lot of time clarifying the goal, and indeed sometimes once a problem is stated clearly the solution becomes obvious. With other issues the goal may be clear but the current reality complex and worthy of considerable exploration. Or you may find that there are no practical options to achieve the goal and you need to track back to modify or perhaps abandon the goal.

Coaching or mentoring?

A question that I am often asked is: *What is the difference between coaching and mentoring?* My usual answer is that until you define your terms they mean the same thing.

Here is a definition of mentoring that parallels the definition of coaching offered earlier in the chapter:

Mentoring is a relationship of rapport and trust in which one person draws on their experience, expertise and knowledge to advise and guide a less experienced person in order to enhance their performance or support their development.

Thus I am positioning mentoring more towards the directive end of the spectrum. To mentor effectively you need to have been in a somewhat similar situation as the other person so that you have relevant experience, expertise or knowledge to pass on. Someone once said to me that he could coach Barack Obama but he couldn't mentor him – assuming, of course, that Barack Obama was willing to be coached by him.

I think a really good mentor can operate non-directively too, choosing judiciously when to share their views and when simply to help the other person to think things through for themselves. I also believe that coaching and mentoring both have important but different roles to play in a portfolio of development possibilities offered to the staff of an organisation.

The three conversational skills in coaching

In the chapter on conversations we noted four key conversational skills – listening, questioning, playing back and voicing. Although there may be times in coaching – for instance, when the coach chooses to challenge the client – when the ability to voice your own views confidently and assertively is required, I think that the first three skills are the key ones in managing coaching conversations. We explored these in some detail in the previous chapter on conversations. Let's look at them again briefly in the context of a coaching conversation.

Listening

The fundamental skill in non-directive coaching is the ability to listen empathically to understand your client and their world. Note too that it is important to communicate to the client your understanding. A key way of conveying this is by playing back to the client your understanding, and we shall look at this below. There are two linked but distinct reasons why it is so important for a coach to listen well to a client. First, you need to understand their world – their reality, their hopes, their aspirations, their fears, and the things that are stopping them from taking action – in order to respond with an appropriate question or intervention or silence. In *The Coach's Coach*, Alison Hardingham says that in her view active listening is the single most important skill for a coach. It is what enables the coach to understand the coachee's and her world. Every other intervention the coach makes has to be based on that understanding, and the more complete that understanding is, the more effectively the coach will intervene.

This might seem a good enough reason to claim that listening is vital to good coaching. However, the second reason is even more fundamental. In *Turning to One Another*, Meg Wheatley writes: "Why is being heard so healing? I don't know the full answer to that question, but I do know that it has something to do with the fact that listening creates relationship."

Listening, as Meg Wheatley says, creates relationship, and good coaching is first and foremost about the relationship between you and your client. In listening to your client, you show them respect, and this helps to build the relationship between the two of you.

An adjective that captures the quality of listening needed to coach well is *attentive*. In *Time to Think*, Nancy Kline describes attention as “the art of listening with palpable respect and fascination”. She writes, “The quality of your attention determines the quality of other people’s thinking.”

So, while listening is important in all forms of coaching, listening with respect and attention is especially and fundamentally important in non-directive coaching.

Questioning

If attentive listening is the most important skill you need to coach well, then questioning is the next most important. Listening and questioning go hand in hand – good coaching questions emerge from listening with empathy and curiosity to the client.

A good coaching question is one that makes the client think. For example, they may think more deeply about something they’ve just said, or they may think through the consequences of a possible action, or they may face up to some contradiction in what they’ve been saying.

In considering the kinds of question you might ask as a coach, it is very useful to distinguish between open and closed questions. Open questions are usually more useful than closed ones because they prompt more thinking in the client.

The word I like to use to describe the right question is *crisp*. A crisp question – simply and concisely expressed – helps to focus the client on the most useful issue for them at that moment in time. A simple statement such as *Tell me more about* is in coaching effectively a very open question, an invitation to the client to think.

Similarly a simple question beginning with *what else...?* Can often be a good question to encourage more thinking in the client.

Playing back

For a number of years I reckoned that there were two basic skills needed to coach successfully – the ability to listen well and the ability to ask effective questions. More recently, reflecting on what I actually do when I am coaching, I have come to the view said that there are three basic skills – listening, questioning and playing back to the client what they have said or perhaps communicated non-verbally. You might regard playing back as one important aspect of listening, but I think that it is worthy of being considered a separate skill.

I use three main ways of playing back to the client my understanding of what they’ve said. First, I will *summarise* to play back my understanding of the key points. Second, I will *paraphrase* what the client has said, turning their words into a different formulation. Third, I will *reflect back* to the client what they have said, repeating their exact words.

There are a number of possible benefits from playing back to the client your understanding of what they’ve communicated. First, if your playback is reasonably accurate, it conveys that you have listened and understood what they’ve been saying. Second, it lets you check and possibly amend your understanding.

Third, it may allow the client to amend their own understanding as they hear their thinking played back to them. Fourth, playing back your understanding of the client’s

world shows respect and so helps to build the relationship of rapport and trust that is at the heart of non-directive coaching.

Just as you can use questions to structure a coaching conversation, so too you can use play back to punctuate the conversation. The use of summary, paraphrase and reflection give the client the opportunity to look again at their situation,. It also gives you space to consider what to say or do next in the coaching conversation - this is another highly practical benefit of playing back!

The manager coach

So far in this chapter we have been looking in general terms at coaching, with illustrations that refer to someone who is not necessarily a line manager coaching an individual. If you are a manager who wants to use a coaching approach, you have in many ways a tougher job than someone from outside the organisation working as an executive coach. You have a direct interest in the results delivered by your staff. Your performance may be measured in part by their performance, and you may have strong views on how things should be done. It can be a real challenge to let go of control and use a coaching style to empower your people. On the other hand, while an external coach is keen for the client to succeed, they do not have the same responsibility for performance as a manager has.

It will help both you as the manager and your staff if you are clear about what the givens are in a situation. As a simple illustration, if a report must be ready by Friday, state this clearly and then work in a coaching style with your staff on how this can be done. An inexperienced manager coach can fall into the trap of asking leading questions to get the staff to the answer that they want – in this example, of the report due in for Friday. This will come across as manipulative and dishonest.

Another area where a manager has a tougher challenge than an external coach is around confidentiality. Organisations are political institutions in which people earn a living. Even if someone has a sound working relationship with a manager, they will probably and quite wisely put limits on how open and honest they will be. An honest admission of weakness might count against someone next time there is a promotion opportunity. Individuals will usually be more open and honest with a confidant who is from outside the organisation.

The coaching dance

David Hemery, who won the gold medal in the 400 meters hurdles in the 1968 Olympics and who has helped many managers learn how to coach, uses the notion of a **coaching dance** to describe how a manager can move from **tell** to **ask**, and back again. Returning to the previous illustration, a manager needs to be clear when they are telling (*I must have the report by Friday.*) and when they are asking (*What might you do in order to finish this by Friday?*).

The challenge to a manager coach is to know which situations call for which approach, and to be able to move skillfully from one mode to another.

The coaching dance, which is summarised in Table 9.1, contrasts a *manager centered* approach where the manager is *pushing* the performer for results and a

performer centered approach where the manager is seeking to *pull* results from the performer.

Table 9.1 The coaching dance

THE COACHING DANCE		PERFORMER CENTRED (Pulling) (Asking)
<p>MANAGER CENTRED (Pushing) (Telling)</p>		
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Set by the manager</p>	GOALS AND TARGETS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss and agree with performer
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Reward and punish <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage</p>	MOTIVATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask what interests performer • Performer challenges self
<p><input type="checkbox"/> Pass judgements <input type="checkbox"/> Praise and criticise <input type="checkbox"/> Give feedback to performer</p>	FEEDBACK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw out performer's experience • Help performer to generate feedback
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell what went well and what didn't • Show how it could have been done • Give information 	LEARNING	<p><input type="checkbox"/> From self awareness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By reflection and discovery

In a manager centered approach the manager sets **goals and targets**. In a performer centered approach goals and targets are discussed and agreed, and the performer might also set themselves some personal challenges.

In a manager centered approach the manager uses a variety of carrots and stick to **motivate** the performer. In a performer centered approach the manager will find out from the performer what will motivate or interest them. If it's appropriate, they will try to build this into the task to be done.

The manager centered manager will give **feedback**, which is based on their judgement and which may contain a mix of criticism and praise based on this judgement. The performer centered manager will seek to generate feedback in conversation with the performer, asking first how the performer viewed their performance before adding their own perspective – if this is necessary. People often know when they've made a mistake without having to be told.

Finally, as far as **learning** goes, the manager centred manager will be in tell mode, stating how they think the task could have been done better. The performer centred

manager will be helping the performer to clarify and articulate what they think they've learnt.

If you are a line manager using a coaching style you need to balance both halves of the manager coach role. If you can adopt both a *telling* approach and a *listening and questioning* approach – and if you can recognise which situations call for which – then you have more flexibility and will be more effective than a manager who is locked into *tell* only.

To underline the point, knowing when to and how to tell someone what to do is a valuable part of a manager's toolkit. For some managers, however, *telling* is the toolkit!

Coaching a team

The key notions of coaching summarised above apply equally to coaching a team or an individual. Your basic challenges are to raise awareness and generate responsibility within the team, and you do this through conversation and relationship with the team, using the skills of listening, questioning and playing back. You can use the GROW model to help your team to think through a challenge. It may well be easier to generate options because a number of people can build on each other's ideas. On the other hand, it is generally far more difficult for a group of people to reach a decision to which all are committed than it is for an individual to resolve to do something.

In *Growing People* I wrote that, "Because you are dealing with a number of people, coaching a team is more complicated than coaching an individual. There may be complex group dynamics going on within the team that affect how it operates and which might be difficult to fully understand." This is to put it mildly! One of the challenges in coaching or managing a team is simply to be able to notice not only what is going on for each individual but also to get a sense of the various inter-relationships between individuals and between different subgroups. Becoming aware of factors such as these, and working out how to respond, is several orders of magnitude more complicated than working one-to-one. Just as a team can be more than the sum of its parts, so too coaching a team is more than coaching the individuals in the team.

In *Effective Coaching* Myles Downey talks about

"the obvious distinction between individual and team coaching: there are more people involved. At the surface level this means that more time is spent in the process of coaching. An individual can get to a level of clarity and make a decision relatively quickly. In a team that process takes much more time as each person needs to be heard, disagreement handled, consensus and commitment built. Now look beyond the surface, look to the interrelationships in the team, the dynamics and evolution of the team, and a whole new ball game emerges."

As the manager of a team, you will sometimes be working with the whole group and sometimes with individuals. There may also be natural sub-teams within the overall team that you work with. Your success as a leader in getting the best out of your people will reflect how well you build constructive workings relationships with each of them.

As we consider in the next chapter, in the same way that you offer challenging experiences to help individuals develop, you also need to spot opportunities that will



provide your team with fresh challenges and help them collectively to learn from their experience.