

## THE LEADER'S KEYS TO COACHING

How to identify the key elements of effective coaching in business

By Gail Reichert

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### Why is coaching a hot topic in today's business environment?

Coaching is hot in today's business world of performance improvement. I believe this has happened for many reasons - here are a few:

**Life is fast, change is constant, time is money** - no longer do people in organisations have the luxury of developing at a steady and predictable pace. When new skills, new behaviours or a change in attitude is required, most likely it is needed right now. Leaders in organisations can't wait while a course is developed, sourced or scoped. They don't have the time to indulge while people patiently chip away at old habits. To take advantage of opportunities, to respond to rapidly changing markets, people need to develop new skills, behaviours and attitudes immediately. Coaching can deliver significant results quickly.

**You can't get enough of them** - there's a shortfall in skilled people. So if you can't recruit them, or can't keep them, then you need to work with what you've got. Coaching can help reduce turnover and increase retention, because the one-to-one contact that occurs during a coaching event increases the engagement and involvement of employees. Coaching can develop skills on-demand, just-in-time. It reduces the amount of time an employee is off the job and increases efficiency because learning is tailored to their specific and immediate needs.

**People need people** - it is vital employees have a sense of belonging in an organisation if they are to perform to their potential. One sure way of building a sense of team and belonging is to increase the amount of 'transformational' contact between people. When a leader intentionally and skilfully coaches a team member, the sense of belonging for both leader and team member increases. Coaching can create personal transformation and engagement faster than any other human interaction.

**We trained them and nothing changed** - a training event is designed to enable performance; training will never cause performance<sup>1</sup>. Coaching before and after any

<sup>1</sup> Refer to Leader's Edge Resources page at [www.leadersedge.co.nz](http://www.leadersedge.co.nz) - Article: What if you trained them and nothing changed.

training event will increase the impact of the training tenfold. When a leader actively involves themselves in the learning of a team member by linking the development need to the key results of the individual, and helps them integrate and apply the learning after the event, the rate of improvement is exponential. Coaching leverages investment in other learning initiatives.

## What is coaching?

Coaching describes a relationship between someone who wants or needs to change, and someone who can guide that person to change. The change could be as simple as learning a fundamental skill, or as complex as developing a specific element of emotional intelligence. The coach is a person who can stimulate change in another through skilful questioning, feedback, feed-forward and focused attention.

Most commonly in the current business environment, coaching is considered to be a relationship where the coach guides and provokes a person into discovering their own solutions. The coach emphasises the future and the positive. They provide reinforcement for changes that have been achieved, and encouragement for future development.

Coaching is not telling. Telling is a strategy for 'push change'. When you push someone, they will almost inevitably push back. Telling equals resistance which equals no change. Coaching is inquiring. Coaching endeavours to create personal insights and connections for the individual, so that they are naturally 'pulled' towards change by the energy created from their own insights.

*"Human brains are so complex and individual that there is little point in trying to work out how another person ought to reorganise his or her thinking. It is far more effective and efficient to help others come to their own insights."*<sup>2</sup>

## What do good coaches do?

Good coaches do the following fundamental actions to create change in their coachees:

**Build rapport** - they tune in to the person, get on their wavelength so they can truly come to grips with where the other person is at. In NLP<sup>3</sup> terms, they match, mirror and pace the 'beingness' of the other person. In practical terms they close their mouth and open their ears. Listening actively and reflectively is a fundamental skill of a good coach. How else could they craft their probing questions unless they are paying attention entirely to the person with whom they are relating?

Why is building rapport an essential element? Because until a coachee feels and senses they are being heard and understood, they are most likely to be resistant to inquiry. 'People can detect the difference between authentic inquiry and an effort to persuade them.'<sup>4</sup> We have an in-built sincerity detector that can spot a disingenuous inquiry before the words have even left the mouth. Good coaches are in integrity, highly skilled at identifying the emotional state of others, and highly skilled at establishing and building rapport.

**Provoke and cultivate personal insights in the coachee** - recent studies from the world of neuroscience provide us with two interesting facts. Firstly, one study

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<sup>2</sup> & <sup>4</sup> The Neuroscience of Leadership - David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz. Downloaded from <http://www.strategy-business.com/press/freearticle/06207> September 2006

<sup>3</sup> Neuro-linguistic programming - the study of how people achieve excellence. For more information on NLP training refer to [www.metamorphosis.co.nz](http://www.metamorphosis.co.nz)

found sudden bursts of energy in the brain just prior to moments of insight. Secondly, when people solve a problem themselves, the brain releases a rush of neurotransmitters like adrenaline. In practical terms this means that personal insights and the action of successfully solving problems are energising. Neural pathways are established in the human brain by repeated bursts of energy over the same track - much like a track in sand that is made more distinct as more people walk over it. The track will remain distinct while people (bursts of energy) continue to tramp that way, but will fade and become indistinct if unused.

The coach asks well-crafted questions after listening for the assumptions and beliefs of the coachee that the coachee is not conscious of. For instance, in a recent senior management team retreat, we asked the question: *If this is our vision, what values need to be demonstrated in order to have our vision become a reality?* That question sends their brains on a search for relationships and possibilities, and because the vision was already graphically represented, they were able to search in images and experiences as well as words. Another example quoted in *The Neuroscience of Leadership* is: *What do you need to do to resolve challenges like this?*

**Focus attention on what they want to achieve** - Because you've found out in the previous paragraph that neural pathways are established by energy generated as a result of an insight or problem solved, you'll understand that more attention on the same pathway will strengthen that pathway. So leave behind the stuff you want to stop - pay it no attention. Do pay attention to and strengthen behaviour you would like to continue, while ignoring unwanted behaviour.

Good coaches focus the attention of their coachee on what they **do** want to achieve. Combine this with the questioning approach and you'll understand that solution-focused questioning facilitates self-insight, which generates change. Got it? As a coach, it's not about how much I know, or how I give advice, it's about how I enable and guide a client to those ah ha! moments. As Rock and Schwartz say in their article, *'Leaders can make a big difference by gently reminding others about their useful insights, and thus eliciting attention that otherwise would not be paid.'*

**Recognise the achievements of their coachee** - That's right! Positive reinforcement strengthens the success feelings of the coachee, and reinforces those neural pathways. And because long-term memory is mediated through emotion, the feel-good factor helps anchor the success for future reference. Good coaches make encouraging comments as a signal to do more of something. 'Yes, great work, that's it!' - these are the simple positive reinforcers that will increase the likelihood of repeat performance. Coaches must be alert to how much and what sort of positive reinforcement is just right for each individual coachee. For some it will be a little and often. For others that can be distracting, and a general celebration at the end of an activity is the way to go. If in doubt, coaches ask their coachees how they like to receive positive reinforcement.

## How can you tell a good coach from others?

If you're wondering how to distinguish a good coach from others, ask them about these things:

**Can they describe what they do and why they do it?** - If they can't describe what and why they do certain things, then it's likely their actions are random and unintentional. They may get success in certain circumstances, but not be able to repeat it in similar situations. A good coach will follow a process and be able to describe their key skills and when they use them.

**Do they have referrals and testimonials that support change they have facilitated?** - Ask to talk directly to people who have been coached or leaders of people who have been coached. A good coach will agree beforehand on what the objectives are, and their coachees will be able to describe the changes the coach helped facilitate.

**Do they have a range of strategies and techniques?** - Even though a good coach will follow a process, they will also adapt and flex to the individual they are coaching. If a coach has a rigid and predictable way of doing things, then it's likely they are attached to their process with more attention on themselves than on the coachee. A good coach is constantly interpreting what is happening in the moment, and keeps the outcome in mind while modifying the way of achieving the outcome. For instance, if a probing question elicits a resistance response, they should firstly recognise the resistance, and then secondly pause to rebuild rapport before redirecting the conversation in another way.

## Who could coach?

In the business setting almost everyone who has people reporting to them could use a coaching strategy. For instance:

- Senior leaders coach some or all of their senior management team
- Senior management team coach their direct reports
- Newly appointed leaders can be coached by more senior colleagues
- Specialists and subject matter experts can coach others in a skill development role
- Trainers and learning & development specialists can coach on-the-job skills
- Team leaders can coach their team members
- Senior management team members can coach each other
- Learning & development advisors can coach newly appointed leaders

More businesses and individuals are now engaging external coaches to support their development. While I believe there is merit in engaging external coaches at senior leadership levels, I believe that any business will have a more 'engaged' workforce if they train their leaders at all levels on the skills of coaching.

**At the senior level** it is often difficult if not impossible to find an internal coach who can be neutral and unattached. That's why judicious selection of external coaches at senior level can create more sustainable and effective results. At the senior level ensure any coach has the ability to think strategically, and to enter into the world of their coachee. Even if they have superior coaching skills, if they lack business acumen and a strategic viewpoint, it is unlikely they will be capable of framing questions that will provoke senior leaders' personal insight. An external executive coach must have the ability to challenge, confront and surprise - they must be willing to 'speak truth to power', because if they can't do that, they won't be able to stimulate new thinking in the executive.

## What if a business doesn't support coaching?

If a business doesn't support a coaching culture, then it's likely that people are performing at significantly less than their full potential, and that the intellectual capital of the organisation is being wasted and lost. A decision to support a coaching culture isn't just about people, it's about doing business more efficiently and effectively. If you want to slow down the learning in your organisation, have a less engaged workforce and spend more money on training, then don't promote coaching.

## Coaching resources

**Leader's Edge** supplies the following coaching services:

- In-person and telephone coaching for mid- to senior-level executives
- We train your people in effective coaching skills and processes
- We work with organisations to help them set up and administer coaching programmes

Follow the link to [www.leadersedge.co.nz](http://www.leadersedge.co.nz)

To arrange a free introductory 45 minute session with Gail Reichert, email [introductory@leadersedge.co.nz](mailto:introductory@leadersedge.co.nz) or phone on +64 9 427 9598

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My colleague Stephanie Philp of **Metamorphosis** Ltd, runs training programmes and follow-up coaching in NLP (neuro-linguistic programming), both in-house and public programmes

Follow the link to [www.metamorphosis.co.nz](http://www.metamorphosis.co.nz)

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I recommend the following books:

- Influencing with Integrity - Genie Z Laborde
- Words That Change Minds - Shelle Rose Charvet
- NLP Advanced psychological skills for the thinking manager - David D Howie
- Listening - The forgotten skills - Madelyn Burley Allen
- Learned Optimism - Martin Seligman
- Authentic Happiness - Martin Seligman

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In addition to the coaching services listed above, you can use Leader's Edge for the following:

- Sorting out problem behaviours in teams
- Performance improvement and organisational development consulting
- Facilitation of strategic planning and vision-building activities
- Thought-partnership on organisational performance issues

Gail is a performance improvement consultant, Chartered Accountant and NLP Practitioner. To find out more about her click through to [www.leadersedge.co.nz/ourpeople.htm](http://www.leadersedge.co.nz/ourpeople.htm)

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