

Leveraging Coaching Skills for People Development

Introduction

The field of Coaching has some helpful perspectives, approaches, and skills that a leader can draw on as they work to support the development of others. Professional coaches, like those we have at TREC, receive significant training and coaching certification. We are not advocating that you see or present yourself as a coach but rather see how you can be more coach-like where appropriate. Interestingly, of the “emotional intelligence” six leadership styles identified by Daniel Goleman, the Coaching Style is the least utilized by leaders, and it has a clearly demonstrated positive impact.

We have distilled some of the best concepts, tools, and skills from the practice of coaching and made them relevant to your role as a leader or peer.

What is Coaching and its Purpose

Coaching is a way of helping others develop primarily through a process of discovery - THEIR discovery – by them getting perspective, seeing different possibilities, identifying possible approaches, trying something and then reflecting on how that worked and what next time could look like. Coaching in sports is not the best analogy, at least based on the images we have of a coach yelling at their players, pointing fingers, telling them what to do.

Coaching can include all of the following:

- Conversation. An on-going dialogue to achieve the stated and “discovered” goals (which could be about taking action or increasing understanding)
- Support. The coach supports the coachee in doing the work that is needed to be successful ~ it is a process of discovery
- Trust-based learning – requires and builds trust
- Supportive acknowledgment (e.g., "You have worked really hard to find ways to communicate effectively with ___")
- Mutual learning
- A lot of listening
- Some reflection, paraphrasing, and questioning (e.g., "So you're saying that you would really like to have more responsibility at work, specifically in terms of _____.").

Throughout all this, the coach offers presence, active explorative dialogue, and “at times” their own experience.

How is coaching different than ...?

- **Leading** – Motivating and enrolling others in following you towards a vision or goal.
- **Managing** – Organizing, setting goals, monitoring, directing others to get work done.
- **Consulting** – Consultants typically use a problem-finding, problem-solving approach, combined with the “expert model” of diagnosis and proscribe.
- **Mentoring** – Mentors typically share their skill-specific expertise and experience with the person they are mentoring

Coaching – Coaching assumes the recipient is creative, resourceful and whole. In a collaborative relationship based on listening, questions and feedback the coach helps the recipient build awareness, develop solutions, take action, learn and develop skills and capabilities.

When Coaching style may or may not be appropriate

A Coaching-like approach as a leader is not a panacea. It might be appropriate when someone seeks out some support over time when they feel like they are “stuck.”

A coaching-like approach would not be appropriate when addressing a performance issue that needs a “courageous/challenging conversation.” In fact, for some leaders who are uncomfortable with being direct the idea of “let me see if I can deal with this ‘problem’ with some coaching” could be very problematic and unhelpful as a starting approach. *In this situation, getting into a more coaching-like approach might be helpful once the real issue is on the table and the other person is authentically interested in learning and changing.*

What type of Coaching is appropriate to use as a leader?

A formal coaching relationship is not one where one person holds formal authority over another, i.e., a boss-subordinate relationship. A boss being a “coach” is not what we’re after here. We’re talking about how you can appropriately bring coach-like perspectives, approaches, and skills to support the development of someone else. That someone else might be a direct report, a peer, a friend. Unless you have a clear relationship where someone asks you to coach then over time in a formal process, then you’re not a coach – you’re someone trying to help someone, and you can very mindfully bring some coach-like things to the table.

What might “informal” coaching look like as a leader? How might it start?

You might have an employee who is trying to figure something out – a problem to solve, how to approach an opportunity – and they ask for your support. This is not your cue to think “ah ha, a coaching opportunity!” and you launch into a series of probing questions. Is this someone who is stuck or missing some critical skills or perspective? Is this someone who wants to invest time in right now and probably in a few more conversations? If not, then this might be someone who needs a quick answer, or a handful of pointed questions to see if they can figure it out themselves or what the real need is.

Have you “earned the right” to coach?

Coaching – at least in any systematic way over time – is not something you “do” to someone nor is it something you unilaterally decide you are going to engage in. It is something you do WITH others. Which means they have to be willing, enthusiastic partners – not hapless targets of your desire to coach.

Our colleague Gregg Thompson, a master coach and trainer, suggests you only earn the right to coach if you have three things:

1. **Authenticity** – you are clear about your personal values and act on them every day.
2. **Self-esteem** (not to be confused with egoism) - aware of your own strengths so you can focus on others’ challenges without having to work on your own insecurities at their expense.
3. **Noble intentions** – your primary purpose is to help someone, and your subordinate and other needs to do so

If you have earned the right to support others through some coach-like approach, then you can work on the skill of it – but not before.

How Coaching Happens:

Coaching Process – Coach Focus

Though not necessarily a linear process, coaching typically moves through three phases; trying to jump a step to get to “solutions” quickly, for example, may feel efficient and helpful but is more likely to result in an outcome that is short-lived or misses the real opportunity or problem.

1. What’s going on?

Help raise your coachee’s awareness of the current situation. Be curious and use simple, powerful questions. Help your partner explore: context, impact, scope, issues, multiple perspectives, the difference between facts and assumptions, what is significant here.

2. What could be?

Help your coachee explore where they would like to be, their goal, and explore as many options as possible about how might they get there.

- Be curious and use powerful questions to help your partner:
- Get a crystal clear picture of their goal.
- Brainstorm different paths that they could take to start moving towards their goal.
- Choose one of the paths they think would be best for them.

3. How did it go?

Help your coachee review the results they got (successful or less so) and what led to those results and what they would like to do differently or the same again?

- Explore what they learned and celebrate the learning.
- Evaluate the return for the effort they put in? Was it enough return, was it enough effort or too much?

4. What's Next

Help your coachee identify next steps, decide on a course of action, and commit to taking action.

- Find out when they are prepared to take that action (exact date and time).
- Find out how you will know for sure that they have completed their commitment.

What this could look like in practice:

- Manager and employee mutually and formally agree to engage; not “let me give you some coaching.”
- Clear focus, e.g., “I want to be able to ...”
- Clear process for discussions
 - E.g., “Let’s start with talking about...” What, why, (see “Types of questions” below)
 - Identify possible goals, actions you could take
 - Agree on a timeframe for taking action and then next conversation
 - Agree on what will tell us enough coaching
- Some structure, e.g., set schedule; commitment to take action; accountability on results
- Not indefinite. Set number of meeting, end date, and other parameters

The Coach's Five Key Orientations:

If you think you are bringing some coach-like approach to a development situation then you hold these broad intentions or orientations:

1. **Listening**
2. **Curiosity**
3. **Intuition**
4. **Self-management**
5. **Action and learning focus**

Key Coaching Skills:

1. **Deep listening**
 - Works, energy, vision, values, commitment
 - Listen for understanding
2. **Self-management**
 - This is about them not about you
 - Discern what you will say and offer – less is more
 - More questions than speaking
3. **Practice and model inquiry and discovery AND silence**
 - Ask open-ended questions the explore perspective and understanding
 - “Tell me more,” “What leads you to think that?” “Are there other ways of seeing this?”
4. **Acknowledge effort and results**
 - Help coachee see they are related and yet not the same.
 - Highlight what you see – help them manage this
5. **Expressing intuition – yours and supporting theirs**
 - Test your assumptions and understanding – “so you’re saying ___?”
 - I have a sense that ___ may be a factor here is that true for you?
 - What is your gut instinct? what’s your first thought?
6. **Keeping the focus on “what the coachee wants.”**
 - What do you want to be different than it is now?
 - What do you want to accomplish?

7. Keeping the focus on “what will get the coachee there.”

- What do you need to do (decide, begin, stop, end)?
- Whom do you need to involve?
- What is it going to take on your part?

8. Effective feedback/assessments

- What contributes well to their success and results?
- What interferes with their success and results?

9. Focus on accountability and impact

- Help the coachee be clear on intention, action, AND if the action is completed generating the results desired

10. Focus on learning

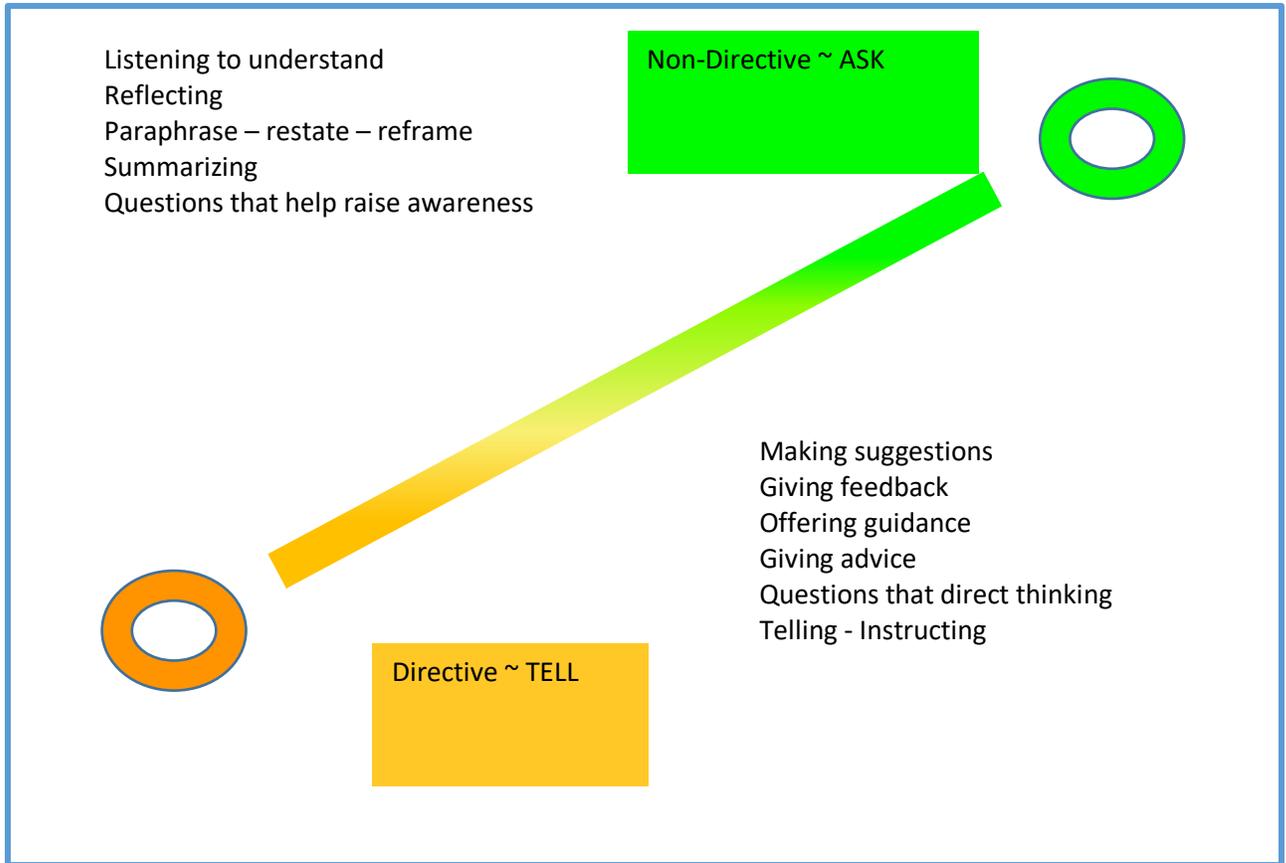
- What was learned in the process, the results, the follow-through, success, the failure

Coaching happens through questions:

Questions	Powerful & More Helpful	Not Powerful, Helpful
Characteristics	Short Simple Open ended (how, what, who, when) Curious	Long Complex Multiple, serial Yes/no response Disguised solution
Impact	Recipient does the work. Recipient understands a bigger picture. Recipient creates options. Recipient commits to action.	Coach does the work. Recipient gets coach’s knowledge. Recipient gets resistant. Recipient doesn’t learn.

Using “Directive” and “Non-directive” questions and approaches

Depending on the purpose of a question (see *Question Types section*) you may ask questions that are more or less directive. This can be a tricky place to navigate: being directive can be very helpful, or it can totally take your partner out of curiosity and discovery and into compliance or shut them down. It is a good practice if you want to be more directive to ask the other person if they are interested in what you want to offer or ask.



What types of Questions Should I Use?

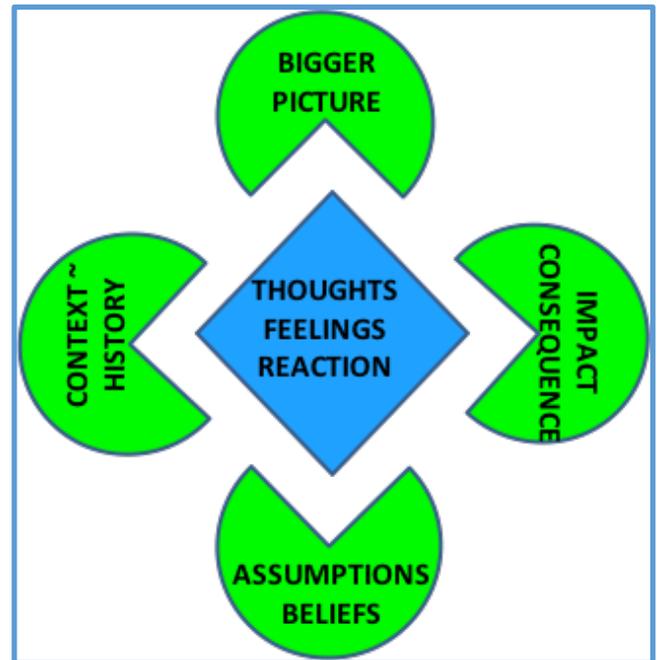
Asking a good question at the right time delivered without attachment is a skill. It starts with knowing WHY you want to ask a question. Are you genuinely interested in the other person? If you’re in “problem-solving, solution-disguised-as-question” mode then you aren’t interested in other person figuring anything out themselves, you want them to arrive at your solution or perspective. That’s not coaching.

When asking a question, what is it you're going for? The diagram below suggests a focus for your questions. At heart is the other person – their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to their experience. The right questions help draw that out but sometimes the person you are coaching may not know or express their thoughts, feelings, and reactions, or may have a habitual or biased and limited sense of them that is limiting perspective and options.

Questions about the outer boxes can help someone get more insight into the inner box, questions that draw out

- The bigger picture
- Context and History/Experience
- Assumptions and Beliefs
- Impact and Consequence

A staff member may know their thoughts or ideas about a project, work, meeting, etc., but could benefit from some questions and coaching to get at feelings and reactions. The expanded awareness helps them know their experience better, develop skills, gain confidence and expand perspective. Who doesn't want that?



Sometimes leaders as coaching can really support and develop folks by sharing their own thinking in how they consider the aspects contained in the outer four boxes. In other words, having them share their thinking out loud about something. The Idea is to expand that center box out and make it bigger, helping people to be able to develop the skills in doing it themselves along the way.

Short List of Possible Questions

What seems to be the trouble?
What seems to be the main obstacle?
What is stopping you?
What concerns you the most about _____?
What was your part in this?
In the bigger scheme of things, how important is this?

What do you want?
What will that get you?
What have you learned?
How will you know?

What are some options?
If you had to do it over again, what would you do?
How could you change the situation?
What resources are available to you?
What do your values tell you to do?

What information do you need before you decide?
What do you need to do?
What will you do?
When will you do it?
What's next?

How can you make this work?
What's keeping you stuck?
What's it going to take on your part?
What support do you need to accomplish this?
If you do this, how will it affect _____ ?
What else do you need to take into consideration?

For instance?
Like what?
Such as?
What else?