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## A Manager's Guide to Coaching Their Team

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### A familiar scene?

You've allocated a task to a member of your team and it comes back only half done. Instead of sending it back, you finish it off yourself "because it will be quicker". Sound familiar?

Or maybe, you've held onto a piece of work instead of delegating it "because they won't do it as well as me"?

Or the knee-jerk "here's how to do it" response when a team member comes to us with a problem rather than supporting them to work it out themselves?

And then we wonder why we're rushed off our feet with too much to do and a needy team!

### Why bother?

Shifting from directing to coaching means evolving from giving answers to supporting growth. When we direct, we solve today's problem; when we coach, we develop problem-solvers for the future.

Coaching builds a team that thinks independently rather than one that waits for instructions. It transforms our role from the person with all the answers to the person who helps others find theirs.

The real power of coaching is that it creates a multiplier effect - instead of your individual expertise being the bottleneck, you're unlocking the collective intelligence and creativity of your entire team. This not only leads to better solutions but also increases engagement, builds confidence, and prepares your team members for greater responsibilities.

It's not about abandoning direction completely, but rather knowing when to guide versus when to empower. The most effective managers flex between styles based on the situation, the individual's development level, and the stakes involved.

### So, what is a coaching style of management?

It's an approach to leadership where managers help team members develop their own solutions through guided problem solving, thoughtful questions, and supportive feedback rather than providing direct answers or instructions.

At its core, coaching as a management style is about developing people's capabilities and independence rather than simply directing their actions.

The following pages provide some practical tools & tips to build your coaching practice as a manager of people and teams.

It's not about learning to be a coach; it's about adding another style to our toolbox that allows us to lead effectively and our team to flourish.

## The power of questions

At its heart, adopting a coaching style of management means learning to ask some great questions that get our team members to think things through more effectively and identify their own solutions to whatever challenge or problem it is they've come to us with.

We can also use it as a way of helping our team members reflect & learn, help us understand what's going on for them, explore their concerns and worries & motivate themselves to take action.

Coaching Questions are a great way to help team members take individual responsibility, grow new skills & take the initiative, all while providing an essential safety net – for them, and for you!

## What makes for a great coaching question?

1. Generally **open questions** are better than closed ones:

*Closed question:* Will you be able to meet the deadline?

*Open question:* What do you need to do to meet the deadline?

Open questions encourage the team member to think through the question, plan out the work and identify for themselves any delivery risks. Their answers can also give you more confidence that they understand the task & know what they're doing.

2. Usually **What** questions are the most powerful – as in, '*What* are you worried about?' rather than '*Why* are you worried?'.

'What' questions are specific & tend to focus thinking on actual issues, concerns or actions; 'Why' questions imply judgement and often trigger justification, not reflection.

3. Having a **forward focus** on actions & solutions rather than looking back at problems & history is more effective.

Replace 'What went wrong?' with 'What will you do (differently) next time?', for example.

4. Being **genuinely curious** and asking questions in that light is essential. Be interested in what your team member thinks, what they might see that you don't and where that leads in terms of an answer.
5. Finally, knowing when to **ignore the rules** and simply ask the question that 'feels right' is the goal. When we're genuinely curious, focused on finding the solution & believe in the ability of our team with practice, the right questions come naturally!

## Are closed or directive questions always wrong?

The simple answer is not always.

When you've gone through a good coaching process with your team member, you'll want to move things on to action. Asking closed questions at that stage, to gain commitment from your team member & galvanise them to action can be a great way of closing it off and kick starting the work.

***For more about how to delegate, see the Mastering Delegation resource guide from our Leadership in Business series.***

## **Powerful Coaching Questions for Different Situations**

### **1. Taking the Temperature**

- What's working well for you right now?
- What's not working so well?
- If you could change one thing about how we work as a team, what would it be?
- What difference would that make to how we work?
- What do you enjoy most about what you do?
- What would you happily stop doing?
- On a scale of 1 – 10, how much do you enjoy your role?
- What would 10 look like?
- What would make things 1 point better?

### **2. Taking action/Exploring options**

- Where are we trying to get to?
- What's getting in the way?
- What's the most important thing we need to achieve?
- What are all the different options we could try?
- What are the pros & cons of our options?
- If you knew you couldn't fail, what would you try?
- What would be a good first step?
- How will we know we've been successful?

### **3. Delegating**

- Talk me through how you're going to tackle this.
- If we do that, what might happen?
- What impact would that have?
- What might go wrong?
- How would we handle that?
- How can we minimize the risk?
- Who else need to be involved or told about this?
- When should our next check in be?
- Where do you expect to be by then?
- What else do you need from me to get started?

### **4. Problem Solving**

- What do we know about this problem?
- What don't we know?
- How can we find out?
- What are we assuming?
- Who else might have useful information?
- What would success look like for this problem?
- What have we already tried?
- What have we tried in other situations?
- What haven't we tried yet?

## 5. Providing Feedback & Encouraging Reflection

- How do you think that went?
- What worked well?
- What wasn't so good?
- What caused that performance – positive & negative?
- Focusing on your own contribution, how did that go?
- On a scale of 1 – 10, how happy were you with your contribution?
- What would make it a 10?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What would you definitely do again?
- What's your main learning from this experience?

### When they're stuck:

- Take a step back, what's the main issue?
- What extra information would help to understand what's going on?
- What have you dealt with before that's been like this?

### When they're not confident:

- Which bits feel most familiar/are you most comfortable with?
- What step could you take today?
- On a scale of 1-10, how confident do you need to feel before acting?
- What would make you feel more comfortable?

### When they're overwhelmed:

- Let's break this down into smaller parts.
- Where would be a good place to start?
- What needs to be dealt with now and what can wait?
- Who else could help with some of this?
- How much of this do we need to fix to get a result?

### When they're ready to grow:

- What did you learn from that situation?
- What would you change and what would you keep next time?
- What one or two things will make you even more effective next time?
- What patterns do you recognize in the things you find easy and hard?

## A Universal Coaching Question!

One of the most powerful coaching questions to ask is **'What else?'**

As in:

What else could we do?

What else could be causing it?

What else is important?

What else do we need to think about?

'What else' questions encourage team members to think beyond the obvious solutions, reasons and problems. Often the *real* issue or solution lies in the 'What else' answer!

## FRAMEWORKS TO BUILD STRUCTURE

It's all very well having a toolkit of questions and knowing the principles of how to ask great questions, but without a structure it can feel a bit daunting.

Below are some simple models to hang your questions around.

### A. The GROW coaching model

There are any number of different coaching models available. One that's easy to remember and use, and is good for many different situations is the GROW model developed by John Whitmore.

Combining the questions on pages 3 & 4 with this model can provide a useful structure for coaching style conversations in lots of different situations.



### B. A simple debrief/reflection model

Equally, having a structure for debrief/reflection conversations can also be useful.

Here's a simple one widely used in health & care professional settings but equally applicable to business & management.



### C. Performance = Potential – Interference

The final model is one developed by Timothy Gallwey, originally about sports performance but later adapted to the world of work.

For a people manager, the key concept is that our role is to help our team member identify what the 'interference' is that risks getting in the way of their best performance.

Interference can be *internal* (our thoughts, worries, mental blocks that get in the way) or *external* (skills, knowledge and resources gaps, the actions of others and sometimes the rules & procedures that make progress hard).

Asking coaching questions can bring these to the surface, as well as create collaborative solutions & help us put our focus in the right place to support our team member.