

Coaching Conversations: 7 essential behaviors

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Everyone has untapped creativity. The mistake many managers make, however, is trying to instill or install creativity into people, rather than removing the interference (fears, uncertainty, and negative voices) that blocks it. For example, imagine a new employee who works for days on a presentation. The manager reviews it and says, “It’s nice, but it has too many slides, and the colors are off.” Suddenly, the employee is less engaged and less capable of being creative. As a leader, are you unlocking creativity or are you creating interference that stifles it? Check out my article for 7 behaviors that will reduce interference and help you coach more effectively.

Good coaching drives results. When coaching is not done well you don’t just get the same results, you actually risk getting worse results. To be great coaches, leaders need to learn and practice *seven essential coaching behaviors*: 1) Believe in performers’ greatness 2) Act as a mirror 3) Create a context of possibility 4) Get clear about responsibilities 5) Create a safe environment 6) Help bring focus and 7) Become comfortable with uncertainty

Today coaching is recognized as the #1 talent management best practice, and is now as regularly practiced in the workplace as it has always been in sports and music. Leaders who consistently implement these seven essential coaching behaviors will begin to have better coaching conversations, and make a meaningful difference in business. In this article, we will define and explore each of these behaviors and show how every leader can become a stronger coach through the implementation of each one.

1. Believe in Performers’ Greatness: Effective coaches believe that their coachees have untapped greatness within them; their intention is to free up that greatness. There is much research showing that what we believe about the people we coach is a key driver of their performance—it’s often called the Pygmalion Effect¹. What a coach pays attention to creates their beliefs and what a coach believes, drives and filters what they pay attention to. These create what are called self-reinforcing loops. So if the coach believes their coachee has talent, they are more likely to bring it out and vice versa. It’s a statement of the obvious, but if we don’t believe that our coachee has untapped greatness why would we waste both their and our time trying to coach them?

2. Act as a Mirror: When we comb our hair in the morning, we look in a mirror in order to have an accurate perception of what we are doing. In order to know whether we have an accurate perception of our own thinking and/or behavior, we need a mirror. Great coaches serve as a mirror for the coachee by providing objectivity to help them more accurately observe their own thinking and behavior. They use words and phrases such as, “My perception is...,” or “How it shows up to me is...”. The coachee is then better able to know whether what they think they are doing is what they are actually doing. **Attention Beliefs Self-Reinforcing Loops**: A self-supporting process in which what you pay attention to influences your beliefs and conversely, what you believe influences what you pay attention to.

3. Create a Context of Possibility: One person’s “noise” is another person’s inspirational music. Art that looks inspirational to one person, looks “blah” to someone else. Cricket arouses the passion of sports fans in countries such as England, India, and Pakistan and bores Americans to death. People act based upon how the world shows up to them, in other words, their beliefs about the world. Great coaches come from a mindset of possibility which helps coachees see the world differently. Coachees can begin to think of options beyond the limitations their beliefs and assumptions have created. The coach brings a set of beliefs and assumptions that allows for a dialogue in which the coachee is able to see more possibilities than before.

4. Get Clear about Responsibilities: One thing that separates great coaches from other leaders is that

great coaches are clear that their role is not to be the “expert” giving answers to the coachee. They recognize that providing solutions (giving advice), however well intended, can have a long-term consequence—it can disable the coachee over the long term. Unintentionally, it can create reliance on the coach’s expertise and a tendency for the coachee to avoid taking ownership and finding solutions. Think of the child whose parents give them the solutions to their math homework!

Great coaches see their role as helping the coachee find solutions in a way that they will be able to do it for themselves in the future. In other words, their role is not to fish for the coachee but to teach them how to fish. An important consequence of this is that the coachee gets to experience ownership of both the problem and the solution and therefore gets the acknowledgement for the success, with the coach becoming almost invisible to the outside observer.

5. Create a Safe Environment: One of the most important factors in accelerating a person’s learning, and therefore their performance, is a safe environment. The fastest learning takes place in childhood when we are open to all experiences. What slows down this extraordinary ability—and it’s an ability everyone has—is the internal conversations that go on in our minds, the ones that say, “Don’t screw up,” or “Everyone’s watching,” or “Don’t trust him.”

We develop these internal dialogues in response to the threats that life throws at us including, toddlers being shouted at by their moms or dads, being told we’re stupid in school, and being advised we don’t have the talent at work. Once we develop those internal conversations (usually in response to the threats that show up in our lives) learning slows down.

Perhaps the biggest single contributor to creating this safe environment is the coach being non-judgmental about the coachee. The coach may have opinions about what will generate the desired outcomes, but she or he should listen to and observe what the coachee thinks, says, or does without passing judgment about whether it is good or bad, right or wrong. Great coaches create a safe environment for the coachee where the coachee can “look in the mirror” without fear of judgment.

The coach brings a set of beliefs and assumptions that allows for a dialogue in which the coachee is able to see more possibilities than before. Great coaches do not take responsibility for solving the coachee’s issues. They take responsibility for freeing up the coachee to take responsibility for solving those issues.

6. Help Bring Focus: To me there are four important factors that impact human performance—knowledge, faith, fire, and focus. And while they are each important, the most important one is focus because it drives everything we do. It’s what separates our good days from our bad days at any level of performance. When we are focused, we do things well whether it’s solving a problem, having a tough conversation, or playing golf. When we are focused, our minds are quiet and undistracted. Focus is the driver of human performance, and great coaches help their coachees discover what’s important to focus on and how to sustain that focus over time.

7. Become Comfortable with Uncertainty: Effective coaching gets past symptoms and addresses root causes. It will help a coachee become aware of and test the underlying assumptions that drive their view of the world and therefore their behavior. This often results in coaching discussions that go in directions that neither the coach nor the coachee anticipated. Then the coachee becomes more aware of the preferences and biases that are driving their actions. Great coaches are comfortable with the uncertainty that goes with not knowing where the path of a coaching conversation might lead and what the discussion might reveal.

There are, of course, many more things that great coaches do. But these seven behaviors have stood out to me as being present in all the great coaches I have seen, whether they were sports coaches, music coaches, or leadership coaches. My invitation to you is to think about which of these behaviors

you might begin implementing to have better conversations, to create more of an impact, and improve your abilities as a leader and as a coach. LE

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