

Coaching and the Power of Self-Assessment

Abstract: While virtually everyone would agree that coaching is a powerful way to build talent and engage team members, there is a surprisingly large variance in the definition of coaching and its intended use. In this article we provide a definition, outline a model for a coaching conversation, and highlight the importance of self-assessment in coaching.

Coaching seems to have come of age in businesses today. Seen as a simple, effective way to build talent (critical as organizations emerge from a crippling economy) and engage team members (key to retaining top talent), coaching is the “new big thing” in management and leadership development circles. The problem is that for many, coaching isn’t working.

Coaching Defined

For some, the problem is the definition of coaching – coaching may be seen as a “kinder, gentler” way of telling someone to shape up or else: “Hugo is slacking off again, so I guess it’s time for another coaching session....” Certainly, as a leader you need to address Hugo’s unacceptable performance and help raise it to at least acceptable, but that’s a corrective action (or performance improvement or problem solving) conversation, NOT coaching ... at least how we define it. Coaching is used to take acceptable – even good – performance to GREAT! It’s tapping into the talent that many of your better performers wish to release – and who want your help in doing so.

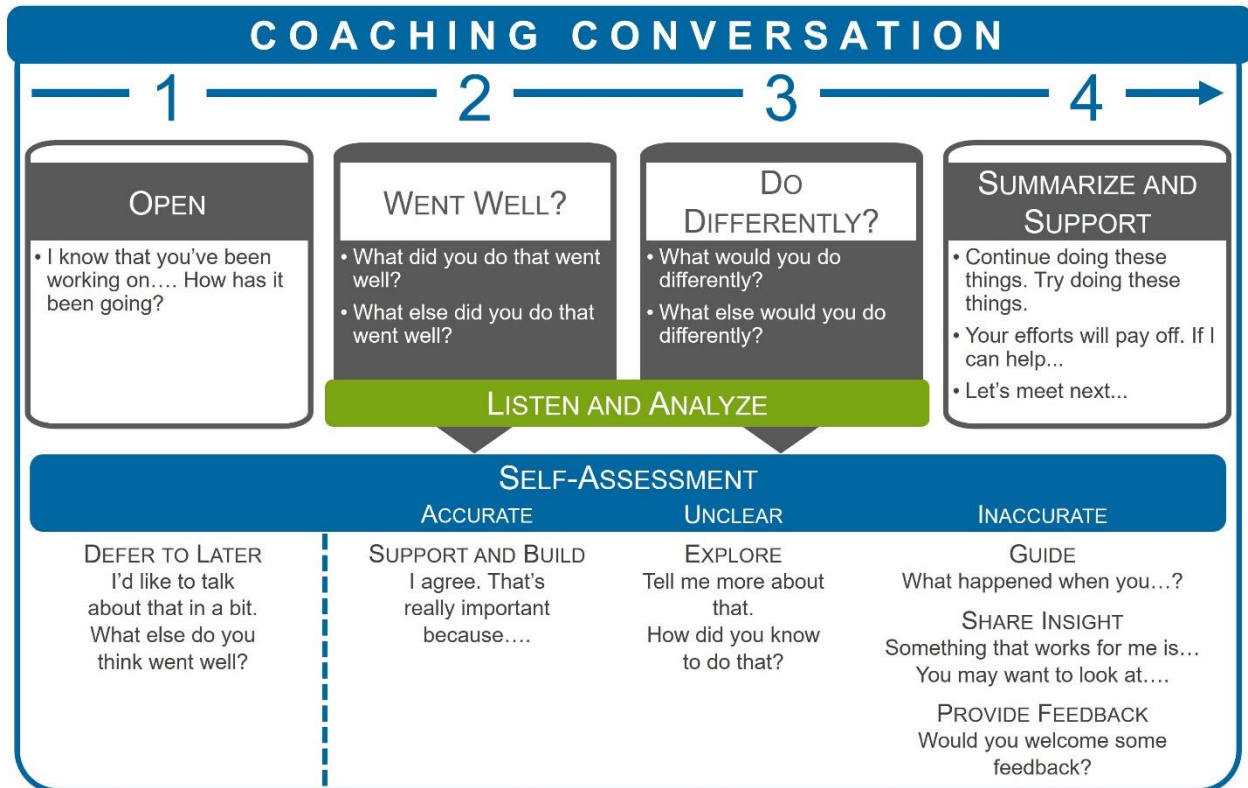
As leaders, we tend to focus our attention on performance problems; with the limited time we have, that’s natural. However, that leaves those who DON’T need immediate attention – our consistent performers – left starving for growth and developmental opportunities. Coaching is for THOSE individuals – who have both the willingness and the potential to grow and develop.

Developing this untapped and eager talent pool will be the best thing you’ve ever done as a leader! If you do it right!

A Simple Coaching Model

Ask any leader if coaching is important and 99 times out of 100 you’ll get a resounding, “ABSOLUTELY!” Ask any leader why they don’t coach more (or at all) and the answer is usually, “I don’t have time!”

Coaching MUST be simple and efficient or leaders won’t do it. Having created leadership development programs for hundreds of organizations over 30 years, Entelechy has refined its coaching model to address the leader’s need for simplicity and efficiency.



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As you can see in the model, the leader/coach guides the conversation by asking questions. In fact, there are really only three core questions that the leader/coach asks:

- 1) "I know that you've been working on your [job-related skill] since we last got together two weeks ago; how has that been going?"
- 2) "Regarding [the job-related skill], what went well?"
- 3) "What can you identify as something you will do differently moving forward to be even more effective?"

While there are nuances, Entelechy's Coaching Model has as its core only three questions, making it simple to apply and easy to personalize. Importantly, the model also leverages what we know about developing adults, which makes it extremely effective.

Coaching Ain't Telling

There are many reasons that asking questions to guide the conversation is more effective than telling. Adults, when they are told how to improve, often react by rationalizing why they did what they did or discounting the advice. Most individuals know what they did well and what they could do differently; telling them what they already know doesn't really help them improve. When we as adults come up with our own developmental plan, we're more likely to buy-in and implement the plan.

The reason asking questions is so effective in coaching is because questions help develop one of the most powerful muscles we as adults have – self-assessment. Only by asking questions will the leader/coach know if the team member knows what they did well and what they might do to make things even better.

For example, let's say that a team member is striving to improve their meeting management skills and the leader/coach sat in on a meeting the individual conducted yesterday. The coaching conversation might sound like the following:

Coach (opening performance probe): Tanya, I know that you've been working on your meeting management skills since we met two weeks ago, and you've had a chance to plan and conduct several meetings including the one I sat in on yesterday. How's it been going?

Tanya: Overall, I think it's been going pretty well!

Coach (first "what went well" question): Great! What's been going well?

Tanya: Well, I've found that providing an agenda ahead of time really helps attendees focus their attention.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): You're right; in addition, having an agenda helps people determine if they really need to be at the meeting.

Coach (second "what went well" question): What else have you done that has helped your meetings?

Tanya: I've become a little more focused in facilitating discussions. In the past, I tended to let things ramble too much and we would get off track.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): I bet that also helps with making sure you end the meetings on time.

Coach (first "do differently" question): Thinking ahead to future meetings, what do you think you will do differently to make the meetings even more effective?

Tanya: Well, I'm thinking that I need to do a better job of assigning action items; seems like there was some confusion on who was supposed to do what after last week's meeting.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): Yeah, I agree. I think your assigning action items in yesterday's meeting worked well; we'll see in next week's meeting if the tasks were completed.

Coach (second "do differently" question): In addition to assigning tasks, what else could you do differently to make upcoming meetings even more effective?

Tanya: Hmm... Well, we did start a bit late yesterday waiting for two team members. I know the others were getting a little frustrated. I think I should just start the meeting, regardless of who's running late.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): I agree. I've found that if you let meetings start to slide, soon others stop showing up on time.

Coach (summarizing and supporting): Tanya, you're doing a great job on building your meeting management skills! Keep providing the agenda ahead of time and continue your tighter control over conversations. Over the next couple of weeks, focus on assigning action items and starting on time. If you'd like to touch base before our next coaching session, I'm here! I love the progress you're making!

Method to the Madness

Note that we ask the questions in a specific order. By asking "what went well" questions first, we create a positive coaching environment. And by asking for what went well, we ensure that we identify the behaviors/skills we want repeated. By asking "what would you do differently" questions last, we leave the coachee with the developmental priorities fresh in mind. Note also that by asking each question twice, we force the coachee to dig deeper in their self-assessment. We've found that the first response is often obvious; the second response usually requires a bit more reflection.

By asking questions, we're able to determine what our team members need from us. For example, if the coachee in our earlier example didn't know how to facilitate discussions, we could share some insights or even send them to a training. If they didn't pick up on the fact that team members were getting frustrated by the late meeting start, we could have offered tips to help them gauge the mood of the team. The only way to discover what the coachee knows or doesn't know is by asking questions and listening.

Of Course, There's More to It

The great thing about the coaching questions is that they are easy to use outside of formal coaching sessions. For example, when you're debriefing a recently completed project with the team, you may ask, "So, how do we feel the project went? What went well? What might have we done to make the project even more successful?"

Most importantly, by developing the self-assessment muscle through the use of the coaching questions, you'll find your team members asking the questions of themselves without your prodding. And isn't that what we're all looking for – engaged team members improving their performance and contributing in increasingly meaningful ways to the success of the team and the organization?

About Entelechy

Entelechy partners with leading global organizations to design and deliver leadership development programs that drive permanent change and bottom-line benefits. Entelechy's flagship leadership development programs, *Aspiring Leaders*, *Unleash Your Leadership Potential*, and *Leading Leaders*, transform leaders as they progress through their careers. To learn more about Entelechy, please visit unlockit.com or connect on [LinkedIn](#).