

INTRODUCTION TO ESSENTIAL COACHING SKILLS FOR LEADERS

TRANSLATING LEARNING INTO CHANGE: FROM AWARENESS TO ACTION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Just as you can lead a horse to water but not make it drink, you cannot force someone else to learn. But you can invite and foster awareness, and explore how that awareness gets applied so it becomes learning.

This is an important distinction: **Awareness does not necessarily equate to learning.**

Awareness alone does not provide the depth of integration (learning) that leads to lasting change.

You can be aware of something without that awareness changing your thinking, feelings, mindset or behavior. Turn that awareness into learning, however, and a life is changed.

A toddler may be aware of the word “hot” and even understand the oven is hot. But until he translates that understanding into a meaning that shapes behavior, he has not learned. When his thinking progresses from “oven = hot” to “I will not touch the hot oven because it will hurt,” he has learned, and his behavior will change accordingly.

To support learning in a coaching approach:

- 1) Notice and illuminate any new awareness demonstrated by your coachee.
 - *That sounds like a new awareness. OR*
 - *I just heard your voice shift when you said xxx. What was that? OR*
 - *What just occurred when you considered xxx?*
 - *Are you saying you now see this in a new way?*
- 2) Wait for your coachee to respond. Allow time for reflection. When new awareness is dawning, people may need time to sit with their thoughts.
- 3) Be curious. Invite exploration.
 - *What impact does this new awareness have?*
 - *What changes because of this?*
 - *What is now possible because of this insight?*
 - *How do you use this?*
 - *How does this support you with reaching your goal of xxx?*
- 4) Confirm what you hear, possibly by recapping or distilling.

Bottom line here:

The coach needs to be fully present to the nuances in conversation and behavior that tell you a shift or insight has occurred or is in process.

This helps expand the awareness into learning and begins to anchor the learning to make it real and applicable in the coachee's life.

But what lies beyond learning? How do you as a coach support the coachee with translating learning into real, lasting change?

In a word: Action.

At some point in coaching, your coachee will need to take action in order for change to be demonstrated. More than that, being in action can *support* change *as it takes place*, rather than simply verify change has already occurred:

- ☀ Taking action allows you to test new ideas, perspectives and ways of thinking.
- ☀ It gives you a way to apply previously unknown strengths or new skills.
- ☀ When set in the context of learning and growth, taking action helps boost confidence and develop greater resilience to withstand setbacks.

**Action is about much more than reaching results:
It is an integral part of the ongoing learning process in coaching.**

There is no invitation to learning in a “telling” approach. For example, a novice coach (or consultant, or parent) will say, “*You have this goal of xxx, so go do yyy in order to meet your goal.*”

A coaching approach utilizes the opportunity for learning within *any* part of the conversation surrounding action: from identifying actions to confirming commitment to regrouping after the fact.

The opportunity for learning is not exclusive to the coachee. Masterful coaches learn from and with their coachees, as well as about them. Coaches use this learning to inform their listening, refine inquiry and spark even greater awareness for the coachee.

When learning is a backdrop for the conversation, you collaborate and confirm, even while discussing a plan of action. This helps you remain in partnership and avoid assuming, which in turn boosts coachee engagement and commitment.

When you avoid assuming, you remain curious and remember to ask about the coachee's readiness to move into discussing actions to be taken:

Is it time for us to explore how you apply this awareness?

Is this a good place to look at next steps?

You mentioned wanting to xxxx; are you ready to act on that?

If the coach moves into telling or leading the coachee, it might sound like this:

- ⊗ Asking, "How do you put that into action?" While this is a potentially useful question, this example shows it being delivered without confirming the coachee's readiness to move to action.
- ⊗ Telling the coachee, "You need to do xxx, yyy and zzz before we meet again." Here, the coach assumes s/he knows the appropriate actions and timing for the coachee.
- ⊗ Rushing to address action because a coaching interaction is coming to a close; the coach includes *actions* as a tick-mark on a checklist rather than as part of a learning conversation. *We have about two minutes remaining, so tell me what your first step will be.*

*****NOTE:** As a leader of others who is responsible for production and performance, there will be times you may need to use these questions as part of your approach. Just be aware that you also need to confirm and reconfirm your coachee's willingness and readiness to be in action, otherwise this can be a setup for failure.

Bottom line: As part of the learning process, it is essential the coach remain curious and in exploration and discovery mode, even while discussing actions.

So, if the coach is not driving the actions, how exactly do you use a coaching approach to create forward movement with action?

- 1) Check-in and confirm when it is time for the conversation to move to discovery related to actions.
 - a. *Is this a good place for us to (move to exploring actions)?*

- 8) Explore commitment levels and reality of any goals established.
- a. *How important is this to you, really?*
 - b. *What tells you that you will get this done by xxx?*
 - c. *Given everything else you have on your plate right now, how realistic is this?*

As demonstrated above, this approach to a conversation on actions includes exploring commitment. **To increase probability of success, any exploration of actions requires an exploration of commitment and in turn, accountability.**

But accountability in coaching is about much more than meeting agreed-upon performance parameters. Opportunities for accountability begin with the first conversation regarding a coaching engagement.

The Role of Accountability in Coaching

In terms of behavior, performance and action, accountability is commonly understood to mean *the state of being answerable for something and/or having the responsibility to report on that something.*

When you consider responsibility and answerability, and include the context of human development, notice how this impacts your perspective:

You begin to see how your role as a coach is to support coachees with becoming more accountable to themselves, far beyond the actions they do or do not take.

With this expanded perspective on accountability, your coachees become:

- ✓ Answerable for their thinking, perspective and choices.
- ✓ Responsible to tell themselves the truth and to develop the capacity for being present in ways that allow truth to surface.
- ✓ Accountable not just for keeping agreements but for how and why they enter into the agreement in the first place.

This is an evolved form of accountability, requiring deeper levels of self-awareness, connection and engagement. Part of your job as a coach is to invite the self-awareness and inner development that foster this evolved accountability.

In order for you to invite accountability with your coachee, you need to **be clear about what you are accountable for as a coach:**

- To be fully present and authentic.
- To create and hold safe space, which includes maintaining confidentiality, and honoring and reflecting the wholeness of the coachee.
- To keep your word when you commit to anything with your coachee, including any terms/conditions and deliverables of your Coaching Agreement.
- To listen without bias, deeply, cumulatively and in ways that allow you to learn about your coachee.
- To remain curious about who your coachee is, how s/he thinks, learns and creates; what will serve her/him best at this time; what opportunity for growth is beckoning and what's needed for them to fully embrace that opportunity for growth.
- To speak truth with compassion - and without flinching - doing so in service to your coachee's growth.
- To clarify and confirm, to reflect, encourage, champion, invite and challenge.
- To refrain from injecting your bias, filters, needs, agenda or attachment to outcome into the coachee's space, thinking, process or outcomes.
- To be clear about the objectives of the coaching *and* the measurements of success.

What is your coachee accountable for?

- To show up on time for your coaching interactions or to give you the required amount of advance notice to reschedule.
- To be fully present for your coaching interactions, to the best of their ability.
- To be fully committed to engaging in the coaching process including a willingness to try on new perspectives, explore different ways of thinking, and remain open to learn, grow and change.
- To speak and invite truth, beginning with telling him/herself the truth.

- To follow through with taking action as agreed during your coaching interactions, to the best of her or her ability at any time, **and address when this does not occur.**
- To fulfill any terms and conditions specified by your Coaching Agreement.

As with the coaching conversation regarding action, any discussion of accountability includes learning opportunities, for both coach and coachee.

Notice how you use your curiosity as a coach to illuminate and embrace learning opportunities related to actions and accountability.

FAQ regarding coaching for action:

1) What if the coachee says s/he will take action and then does not?

- **Before action is taken**, confirm an agreement for a follow-up conversation to debrief the coachee's experience regarding the action. *Remember to partner.*
- During the follow-up conversation, ask the coachee for an update regarding the agreed-upon action.
- Ask the coachee to share his/her thoughts on the lack of action and reasons behind it.
- Acknowledge or share an observation if you notice or suspect resistance operating, and invite an exploration related to the resistance.
 - To the degree you can do so authentically, celebrate the resistance as holding potential insights or learning for the coachee. This helps mitigate shame and makes it easier for truth to surface.
 - If resistance is running, explore to determine if it is paralysis by analysis, perfectionism, first-time-itis, distraction. Or ...?
- Revisit the appropriateness of the action.
 - Does the planned action need to be changed or refined?
 - Does the goal or objective supported by the action need to change?
 - Are additional resources needed?
- Revisit the coachee's commitment levels to the action and overall goal.
- Acknowledge/articulate consequences of non-action.

- Listen for clarity, conviction and commitment regarding what, when and how action will occur after this follow-up conversation.
- Schedule your next follow-up conversation.

2) What if action(s) and outcomes are specific requirements related to the coachee's employment?

Before you proceed with any coaching interaction related to serious performance correction:

- ⇒ In organizations large enough to have a Human Resources Department, be sure to review the situation with the appropriate HR representatives before engaging in corrective conversations. Be very sure you follow any organizational guidelines especially in situations with the potential to lead to an employee termination.
- ⇒ If necessary, condition the coachee's listening by letting them know if this is a Serious Conversation (part of or leading to a potential termination process if his/her behavior continues not to meet required performance parameters).

Then proceed with the necessary coaching interaction:

- Confirm the coachee's understanding of any requirements for success in the current job.
- Confirm the coachee's commitment to success in the current job.
- Challenge the coachee regarding what s/he chooses:
 - *Do you choose to be successful (in this job, with this project)?*
- Assuming the answer is yes, you may need to continue challenging the coachee – in support of his/her learning and desired forward movement. You can use some version of the following questions:
 - *On a scale of 1-10, how committed are you to being successful (with this job, task, project...)?*
 - *How will you clearly demonstrate this commitment? OR*
 - *What is needed for that commitment level to be 100%? OR*
 - *If you match your behavior to your stated commitment level, what would change (or how would that look, or what would you do next...)?*
- Use your listening and language skills to **clearly** confirm:
 - What the coachee is willing **and able** to commit to at this point.
 - What truth might want to surface. (What's really going on here?)

- What constitutes agreed-upon, specific and measurable evidence of any commitments.
- What additional resources (systems, structures, support) are needed.
- What the consequences of inaction or inappropriate action will be.
- What your next steps are in the coaching, either way – if the coachee successfully takes action or if they do not.

3) What if the coachee appears to be in action, possibly excessively so, but does not accomplish desired results?

- Acknowledge and/or share your observation.
- Ask coachee to share his/her thinking about the situation.
- Revisit the coachee's goals and/or primary objectives.
 - Listen for depth of connection to the goal/objective.
 - If you do not hear clarity, commitment and conviction regarding the goal, acknowledge this and ask how appropriate the original goal is at this time.
- Invite exploration related to the actions that are being taken.
 - How does the coachee see these actions serve him/her/the project/the team/the mission?
 - What possible benefit is the coachee realizing from actions that may not be aligned with the primary goal?

Define Your Learning

What do you now understand about the coaching approach to actions and accountability?

How do you apply this awareness in your coaching?