

# Coaching as a Learning Tool

BY KRISTIN COBBLE AND ED GUROWITZ

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Over the past several years, coaching has emerged as a powerful new model for leadership and management. Because coaching is a time and cost-effective way to support the learning process, it also can be an ideal tool for managers wishing to build a participative learning culture. This article describes four different models of coaching and illustrates how each facilitates organizational learning.

## Four Models of Coaching

Writers such as Timothy Gallwey and John Whitmore define coaching as helping others unlock their potential and improve performance.

Coaching differs from traditional management approaches in that it focuses less on telling employees how to complete a task and more on asking them good questions to lead them to discover their own answers. Coaching contrasts with conventional leadership methods in that it centers more on the follower than on the leader. In effect, it turns traditional models of leadership and management upside down.

Several types of coaching are effective in business settings; however, some are more useful than others in promoting organizational learning.

### Expert Coaching

An expert coach focuses on delivering knowledge and information accurately and articulately. Classroom training centered on a dynamic presentation or lecture is an example of expert coaching. Though expert coaching represents a quick way to introduce beginners to content-rich subjects, it does not create deep learning.

A leader can use expert coaching to impart a large amount of information to employees at an intellectual level, but this technique does not give learners an opportunity to explore the subject in depth. They may walk away thinking they “get it,” when in

actuality they have only a surface-level understanding of the topic. The danger is that they may not be motivated to develop further mastery of the subject, and therefore may not change their behavior and performance.

### Facilitator Coaching

Facilitator coaching involves helping teams and individuals manage processes—such as meetings—more effectively. An outside consultant helping a team manage the process of developing a vision might serve as a facilitator coach. Using this approach, a coach can also help groups learn to question their mental models and to develop team learning capacity. If coaches have predetermined outcomes they want coachees to reach, however, the coachees may feel manipulated.

### Mentor Coaching

Mentor coaching is highly valued in today’s business environment. A mentor trains, develops, and promotes a learner who, in return, works on the mentor’s projects. The mentee learns and grows, gaining valuable experience, while the mentor’s projects move ahead. However, mentor coaching often reaches a limit when the coachee develops to the level where she is ready and eager to pursue her own commitments. At that point, the relationship may end, with a loss of the junior employee’s contribution to the project and of the mentor’s ongoing guidance.

### Generative Coaching

Generative coaching fosters a relatively rare and special relationship between coach and coachee. It requires a coach to act as a “steward in service of the coachee’s goals, completely independent of the coach’s immediate interests and projects. For example, a generative coach would encourage a coachee to grow and pursue his own vision rather than let him remain in a company that is a poor fit. Generative coaching focuses on developing the employee’s creative abilities; its strength lies in giving individuals the tools to initiate and implement organizational agendas that are not

mere extensions of the status quo. This approach also provides a powerful model for developing an individual’s or team’s vision; however, its effectiveness diminishes when someone has the “right” answer to the problem or issue.

Expert and facilitative coaching can be low-cost, time-effective methods of promoting organizational learning. However, for long-term change, mentor and generative coaching provide more effective tools for creating an organizational culture in which learning forms the basis for work and relationships.

# Generative Coaching

BY KRISTIN COBBLE AND ED GUROWITZ

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In "Coaching as a Learning Tool," *LEVERAGE* No. 2, the authors identified creative coaching as a way to support organizational learning. Here, they discuss its application in more depth.

Across industries, many employees are burnt out. People are taking on more responsibility, working longer hours, and feeling less effective than ever before. Most managers recognize this pattern of rising stress, but don't want to risk reducing competitiveness by increasing payroll. Thus, organizations are faced with the challenge of improving performance without asking employees to work harder or longer. Generative coaching which develops a coachee's ability to create breakthrough results, offers managers a way to help employees maximize their performance.

Generative coaching fosters a special relationship between coach and coachee. It requires a coach to act as a "steward" in service of the coachee's goals, completely independent of the coach's immediate interests and projects. This approach is designed to help individuals, teams, and organizations create results that are beyond what seem possible.

To become a generative coach, a manager needs to learn to help employees (1) set inspiring goals, (2) deal with inevitable breakdowns, and (3) recognize accomplishments.

## Setting Inspiring Goals

Begin by working with coachees to define three levels of outcome: *breakthrough achievable*, and *predictable*. Establishing goals at three levels enables coachees to both motivate themselves and effectively measure their progress.

The *breakthrough* outcome requires out-of-the-box thinking and action. It goes beyond improving systems that are already in place to creating something entirely new. A good question to help define a

breakthrough objective is, "What result would we like to accomplish, even though we have no idea how we would do it?"

The purpose of breakthrough outcomes is not necessarily to reach them but to *strive* for them. It is not inspiring to attempt something you already know you can do. So, for example, a chemical manufacturing company was losing money because a processing machine regularly required two days of down time.

Reducing down time to just 10 hours would mean a major jump in productivity so the company set that as their breakthrough goal. However, you cannot measure people against breakthrough outcomes, because they then will only commit to outcomes they know they can achieve. It is important to set both the achievable and predictable goals to have benchmarks by which to measure employees. To determine an *achievable* outcome, ask, "What would be a reasonable goal? What are we pretty confident that we can achieve?" Finally, the *predictable* outcome describes the system's natural development. Ask, "If we continue on our present course, what is the likely outcome?" For example, just by maintaining their continuous improvement processes, the manufacturing company could reduce down time by one hour—which would be a predictable result. And by pushing themselves significantly, they were likely to reach the achievable goal of reducing down time by five hours.

If a team doesn't create the breakthrough outcome they specified, they may still achieve breakthroughs. In this example, by striving for the seemingly impossible goal of only 10 hours of

down time, the chemical company came up with a brand-new process that took a total of 16 hours.

Although this result was longer than the goal, it was still an awesome accomplishment compared to the original 48 hours of down time. In fact, they were even able to patent the new process.

Once you agree on the three levels of outcome, be sure to record them. You'll find that, as an individual or group begins to create results, they usually see the goals they previously identified as breakthrough as being achievable. At the beginning of a project, coachees often say, "It will never work." Halfway through they begin to forget they ever thought it was an impossible task. The organization as a whole can also fall prey to this sort of amnesia. A written record of the original challenge helps everyone recognize improvements in performance.

## Dealing with Breakdowns

As coachees start to work on tasks that move them toward meeting their objectives, they are bound to encounter barriers to their efforts. Through this process, you can help them benefit from rather than become discouraged by, breakdowns. When a problem occurs, help coachees view it as a chance to gain information critical for accomplishing their goal. Problems show you what isn't working and what needs to be addressed to create the desired results. Ask questions such as, "What happened? What can we learn from this? What is missing?" By treating breakdowns as opportunities to learn, coachees overcome feelings of defensiveness and are able to see possibilities not otherwise visible.

## **Recognizing Accomplishments**

Most of us do not sufficiently distinguish between results and accomplishments. But in the generative coaching process, the difference is critical. A result is a specific outcome. It is a fact-you either did something or you didn't. For example, if your goal is to create a new product by May and you fulfill this objective, the new product is a result. If you do it by July, not May, another result is that you complete the task three months behind schedule.

An *accomplishment*, on the other hand, is a future possibility that results from the process of striving to achieve a goal. In the example above, one accomplishment may be that the team members become strong candidates for management positions because, while creating a new product, they showed an ability to innovate and collaborate.

Recognizing the link between results and accomplishments lets coachees see how their work is building the future, both in terms of concrete achievements and enhanced capabilities. Seeing the impact they can have on their organizations gives employees the confidence to take on even larger projects.

## **Identifying Future Challenges**

Generative coaching's strength lies in giving individuals the tools to initiate and implement organizational agendas that go beyond the status quo. As employees begin to consistently create breakthrough results, they will want to take on larger and larger endeavors. As a generative coach and manager, you will then need to learn to identify organizational challenges big enough for their appetite and skill.