Tools of the trade

Carol Wilson looks at some of the tools that can be useful in the coaching toolkit

Coaching is fundamentally a simple process: a way of being and communicating that is aided by a small number of guidelines and rules. It is perfectly possible, and indeed quite common, to deliver a session which can change the course of someone's life or business, using no more than the foundation coaching skills of listening, questioning and clarifying, supported by structured coaching models like GROW and EXACT for goal-setting.

After mastering the basics, coaches usually start to discover other tools, which may be nearer or further away from pure coaching but which can be useful when applied in conjunction with it.

How this often happens is that new coaches come up against various challenges in their first few months of sessions, so they research, read or talk to other coaches, and hear of methods and techniques which have helped others in the same position. Extra training seems called for but it is not cheap, and few of us have an abundance of time these days to do courses, never mind practise to become proficient, in which case the new learning will soon be all forgotten. So how do we decide which of the many tools available we should choose to follow up?

The first step that most new coaches take is to seek out and mix with other coaches, at meetings, in societies, in networking groups or through contacts they have made at work or during training.

Coaching can be an isolating process and finding out what others in the profession are doing may alleviate this isolation. Almost immediately our new coaches will hear people talking about tools and methods they have not heard of at all; it can be bewildering to know where to start in acquiring more knowledge.

On top of all this, some coaches come from related backgrounds, such as counselling, therapy or sport, and from time to time they incorporate techniques from their previous professions into their new coaching one, often with great success.

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qualifications to their names, and admire them enormously. For most of us, though, the choice is more limited, due to time, budget or the particular focus we have on our careers.

Organisations face the same quandary when looking to hire coaches: should they ask for NLP-trained coaches or systemic coaches? What sort of training does a coach need to be effective? Is a degree in psychology necessary?

The hard part starts when the coach or HR manager researches the field to find out what is out there and how essential, or even useful, any of it is. Because of this, I included a section about coach-

ing-related tools in my book *Best Practice in Performance Coaching* (Kogan Page, 2007).

Over the next few months, I am going to share my research in a series of articles for *Training Journal* on a large number of tools which can be useful in coaching, for the benefit of new coaches deciding how to conduct their continuing professional development, for corporate coaches who need some familiarity with tools organisations might be using, and for executives charged with choosing coaches in an unregulated industry. These will include the Change Curve, Myers Briggs, Johari Window, Situational Leadership, Clean Language, Cultural Transformation, Transactional Analysis and many more.

Each generation learns from, and develops, what has gone before, so it is well to be aware of the chronology of the various theories, exercises and diagrams.

The Situational Leadership model (figure 1), for example, is widely used in organisations today and was developed by Ken Blanchard and Paul Hersey in the 1960s. It comprises four quadrants, depicting the style of leadership that a manager may need to adopt in any given situation. So far so good, but one of those quadrants is called 'coaching'.

I have lost count of the number of times managers have confessed to me their confusion about this. And they are right to be confused, because the term 'coaching' simply did not have its current meaning ('self-directed learning')
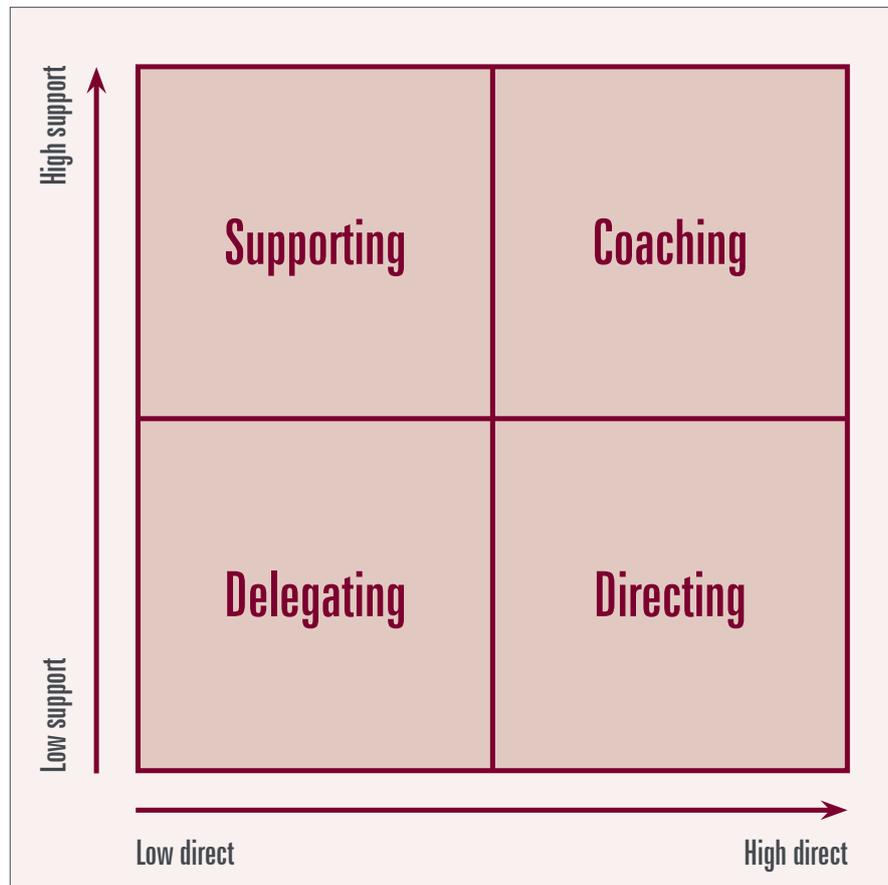
High support

Low support

| Supporting | Coaching |
| Delegating | Directing |

Low direct → **High direct**

Figure 1

when Blanchard and Hersey created their model; by coaching, they were referring to the word's syntactic root, 'coaxing', and it was meant to denote a way of leading and persuading staff to adopt the manager's solution. It has no real bearing on the meaning of performance coaching as defined by Sir John Whitmore in his 1993 book *Coaching for Performance* (Brealey), which urges managers to encourage their staff to come up with the solutions themselves.

"Now that we're being asked to coach in a management style," managers say to me, "does that mean these other three quadrants are wrong?"

I am happy to say it does not, and the new learning can stand on the shoulders of the discoveries made in the 1960s. A coaching style is about attitude and behaviour, not about what the

manager has to do or achieve. Say, for example, a manager has to fire someone. Now, you cannot get much more directive than that. Yet coaching is not meant to be directive, so the brains of managers who have attended a two-day coaching course start to spin. However, it is perfectly possible to fire someone *in a coaching style* – emphasising their good points, keeping the reasons to specific information, speaking kindly and encouraging them for the future; or you can be Alan Sugar and make them cry. No prizes for guessing which one is the coaching approach.

Because of this change in meaning, the Situational Leadership model has had its boxes tampered with a good number of times, sometimes substituting 'selling' or 'persuading' for 'coaching'. Clearly, unless we have a good picture of the evolution

and the broad scope of models like this, there are all sorts of ways in which we can come unstuck.

Most of the psychological management tools developed over the last 40 years are useful in raising people's awareness about themselves and others: how their behaviour affects other people and how other people's behaviour affects them. However, there are also a number of yawning pitfalls and, for each model, I will be exploring the pros and the cons.

Another example is the Myers Briggs' personality defining tests (figure 2). Almost universally used in business today, they can be a revelation to people in terms of clarifying their motivation and preferred ways of working:

The test works by defining what combination of the above labels is prevalent in the candidate. However, the danger comes when the label on the tin starts dictating the contents; for example, once you discover you are an introvert you might stop trying to master the art of public speaking, because you no longer feel you have the wherewithal to do that. I use this example advisedly; having masqueraded as an extrovert all my life, I discovered through Myers Briggs that the reason I had to have 'solitary' time was not because I was a neurotic, but because that is how introverts recharge their batteries. Nothing used to terrify me more than standing up in front of an audience and, if I had received the Myers Briggs judgment 30 years ago, I would quite likely never have developed my current highly enjoyable (by me at least) career as a speaker and trainer.

Another aspect to take into account is that when coaches start to build a corporate practice and find themselves sitting in offices opposite L&D managers, they will almost undoubtedly hear references to all manner of techniques with fancy names that the organisation may roll out to all of their managers as a matter of course.

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At the very least, the coach needs to be aware of what the executive is talking about and be able to discuss it on an intelligent level; in some cases, it is essential to have enough understanding of the process to be able to review the results with coachees as well.

For example, results of 360 feedback can destroy someone's confidence (and I have witnessed this) if they are not delivered with the greatest sensitivity and forethought. This type of survey involves asking everyone a manager comes into contact with through their work what they think of the manager from a variety of perspectives; for example, staff, bosses, peers and customers might be asked to complete a series of questions about the manager's style, efficiency, competence, strengths and weaknesses *et al*. The feedback is all given anonymously and summarised into a report.

Handing someone a piece of paper with this type of information on it, in the knowledge that it may have been read by the HR department, the board and possibly others, and with feedback that may be startling and depressing to the recipient, is not the way to deliver a 360.

The giving of feedback has almost become a mantra in business today and it is often interpreted by managers as feedback of the negative kind; in some organisations, managers are given the idea that they have some kind of duty to give negative feedback wherever possible and they are somehow shirking in their duty if they fail to do so. The effects can be disastrous if not tempered by politeness, sensitivity, a large dollop of common sense and a simple reflection on what will best develop the person at this time – constructive feedback, positive

feedback or simply shutting up and letting them get on with it?

I always stress that coaching itself is the tool, not the master, and the biggest strength a coach has is his or her own intuition; I believe it is this that should dictate how the basic skills are used. I think that for most coaches, intuition also plays a large part in deciding how to move forward and where to head in terms of continuing professional development.

Then again, learning styles come into it too. Let me ask a question; you no doubt have a computer and when you look at your desktop, or open a folder, do you have your files listed as icons or lists? Most people are quite definite about their choices here. Many leap to the conclusion that, because they like icons, they are visual and intuitive, not systematic, but when I put this question to a roomful of engineers, the very large majority preferred icons, whereas a room full of arts folk mostly said lists.

I myself am a list person yet highly creative, with barely a scientific 'O' level to my name. I think we are divided into people who like looking at diagrams and those who find it easier to read lists, and icons appeal to the diagram people. Some find that their eyes slide off diagrams and others say they recoil in horror from a list.

This is all about learning styles and how we take information in. Our brains are wired differently, one from another, and it is pointless to struggle on with diagrams when your mind is more comfortable with lists. This is an important consideration in deciding what sort of extra techniques are worth investing in. If quadrants stir your soul, there are plenty out there and you can choose from Situational Leadership, Myers Briggs, Learning, Communication (and almost any other kind of) Inventory, and Belbin team roles to name but a few. Many of these are available in list form too, or you can copy and paste the catego-
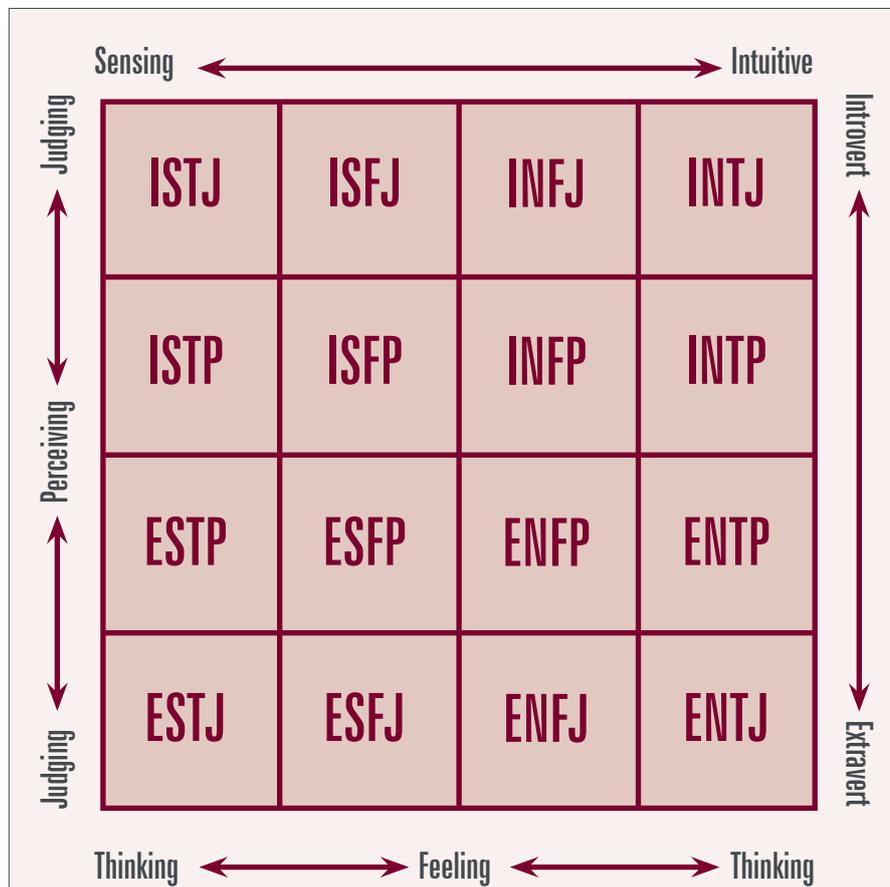

Figure 2

COACHING FEATURE

ries and re-jig them into a way you find them easier to deal with.

The first non-coaching tool I was drawn to was David Grove's Clean Language. I have found this highly effective to use and deeply satisfying to work with; it is based on a very intuitive process of following coachees' metaphors and supporting them in gaining new insight from the images. I have worked with David for some years now in developing his more recent techniques of Emergent Knowledge, which involve exploring people's minds spatially by moving them around the room, or in different positions, or asking questions which will explore their internal psychological space.

The funny thing is that, when we run workshops together, David draws diagrams on the flip chart and I make lists. He struggles with rows of written words, will create dozens of drawings during a seminar, and encourages people to draw a representation of everything that they see in their sessions, whereas I just keep on writing my lists. Yet we are delivering the same techniques and are equally passionate about them.

When running workshops of any kind, I try to vary the representations so that the list people and the diagram people both have a chance of 'getting it', otherwise they will just tune out as it all becomes too difficult. The sticky moments for me are in one-to-one coaching when, occasionally, I have found myself with a coachee who is only able explain everything to me, or to himself, by drawing diagrams on my note pad instead of answering my questions. But whatever our natural bent, we can always master another way if we make enough effort. Indeed, until I understood different learning styles, I experienced what I considered to be moments of brilliance and others of great stupidity, and I would wonder how my brain could be so sharp at some times and dense at others; it never occurred to me that the effect

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was caused by the way the subjects were represented.

Harking back to the dangers of labelling people, it is a fact that, once one is identified as a list person, diagrams became that much harder to decipher. Previously I just got on with it.

This is something we will come back to during our exploration of the various tools that a coach can use, and it harks back to the philosophy that coaching skills are the servant not the master; I believe that effectiveness lies 20 per cent in the skills and 80 per cent in the person using them.

Therefore, going back to our first question of whether a coach needs to learn anything other than pure coaching skills, the answer is no. On the other hand, will coaches and their coachees benefit from a bigger toolbox? Almost undoubtedly yes.

The key for a coach working with any of these models is to approach them in a coaching style, honouring people's rights to privacy and respect, and using the techniques as tools not to evoke judgment in the coachee, whether of self or others, but the three principles of coaching: awareness, responsibility and self belief. ∎

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