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Coaching Mindset vs Coaching Skills: Unravelling the Intricacies



The dynamics of effective coaching are multi-faceted, encompassing an intricate blend of specific skills and a distinct mindset. The ability to differentiate between these two aspects — Coaching Skills and Coaching Mindset — is fundamental to understanding the overall coaching journey. Here we delve deeper into this distinction, exploring the nuances that separate and synergize these two integral components of successful coaching.

There exists a widespread misconception that coaching is simply a set of skills, such as listening, questioning, and the GROW model. It is assumed that these skills, once learned, will transform the learner into an expert coach or coaching manager capable of applying a coaching approach in any situation.

This is not always the case. To embody a true Coaching Mindset, it is the intention behind the words which matters. While the skills on the left of the diagram below make coaching possible, it is the qualities on the right which bring the Coaching Mindset to life:



Coaching Skills v Coaching Mindset

The Coaching Mindset is not simply a matter of asking questions framed in the GROW model and listening to the answers. The Coaching Mindset can be applied in diverse situations, including directive management - instructing or correcting people - and when mentoring others by sharing knowledge and experience.

A case in point involves a trainee who, after attending our coaching course, was confronted with the unenviable task of dismissing an employee. Rather than bluntly delivering the bad news, the trainee engaged the employee in a GROW conversation. To the trainee's astonishment, the outcome was that the employee came to the conclusion that he should resign - and then expressed gratitude for the coaching session.

The trainee had fully internalised the Coaching Mindset, creating a safe environment where the employee could scrutinise his needs, desires, and options, eventually making the decision to remove himself from a situation that was not beneficial to anyone involved.

The question then arises: how do trainee coaches cultivate this Coaching Mindset, and how do they recognise they are doing so instead of merely presenting a set of questions copied from their coaching manuals?

For some, the pathway is blocked by their own experiences of poorly communicating role models in terms of parents, teachers, or bosses. We learn how to relate to others through a kind of osmosis, absorbing what goes on around us. If one is lucky enough to grow up surrounded by inspiring, positive, empathetic family members (or teachers, or leaders) a Coaching Mindset will probably come quite naturally. For these lucky people, the study of coaching skills can refine this attitude and help them understand why their approach works well. For those who have not been so fortunate, the good news is that the skills required to develop a Coaching Mindset can be learned and embedded.

Five steps to acquire the Coaching Mindset

1. Learn and embed coaching skills

The techniques usually referred to as 'foundation coaching skills' can unleash the qualities required to become an inspiring leader, an empathetic friend, a great parent or teacher, as well as an effective coach. But learning these skills is only one step towards acquiring a Coaching Mindset. It is necessary to practise them until they are second nature, and the rule book can then be thrown away.

Recent advances in neuroscience evidence that while we can undertake any number of habitual tasks at the same time, we are able to concentrate on only one non-habitual task. For example, we can drive along a familiar route while rehearsing a forthcoming presentation in our minds, but if we have to follow an unfamiliar route, we will still be able to drive the car but not rehearse the presentation. A learner driver, managing a car for the first time, would be able to concentrate only on driving it.

Applying this analogy to leadership, a manager who has not fully integrated coaching skills will be able to use them in a situation where nothing unusual is happening. But in times of stress, their 'one-track' focus will be fully engaged in the stressful situation, and if the skills are not embedded to the point where they are automatic, they will be abandoned in favour of the person's habitual response to stress. And all this of course applies to how we conduct our relationships in general, at home and at work.

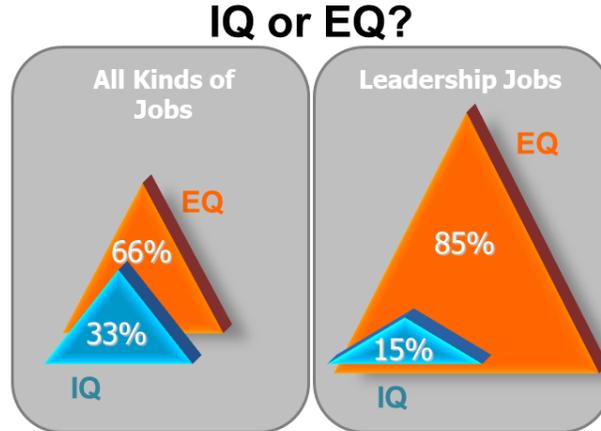
A one- or two-day course in coaching skills is unlikely to ingrain them to the point of fluency. Investing in additional training and practice exponentially enhances the likelihood of creating a Coaching Mindset in the individual, and hence a Coaching Culture in an organisation.

2. Believe in People

An inherent component of a Coaching Mindset is an unwavering belief in human potential. Coaches must maintain an optimistic outlook on people's capacity for growth and change. This optimism helps fuel the self-confidence and motivation in whoever they coach, manage, or otherwise interact with. Look at what people are, not what they are not.

3. Leverage Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence refers to qualities like empathy, self-awareness, and emotional control. It forms the basis of the Coaching Mindset and plays a crucial role in effective leadership, as highlighted by the work of Daniel Goleman, who coined the term "EQ". After extensive research Goleman came to the conclusion that EQ is twice as important as IQ in the workplace in general, and nearly six times as important in leadership roles:



The importance of EQ over IQ

Emotional intelligence is the foundation upon which the Coaching Mindset stands.

4. Give control instead of taking it

Let go of the need to control a conversation, and instead follow the lead of your coachee. A coaching session is about exploring the needs, ideas, and ultimately insights and inspiration of the coachee. It is not about the coach, the coach's ego, or the coach's potential urge to rescue the situation by stepping in with ideas and solutions.

As a manager having a conversation or review with an employee, the needs of the business must come first, but coaching principles can still be applied. Encouraging a team's comments and reflections instead of trying to direct them may lead to unanticipated ideas and breakthroughs for the business.

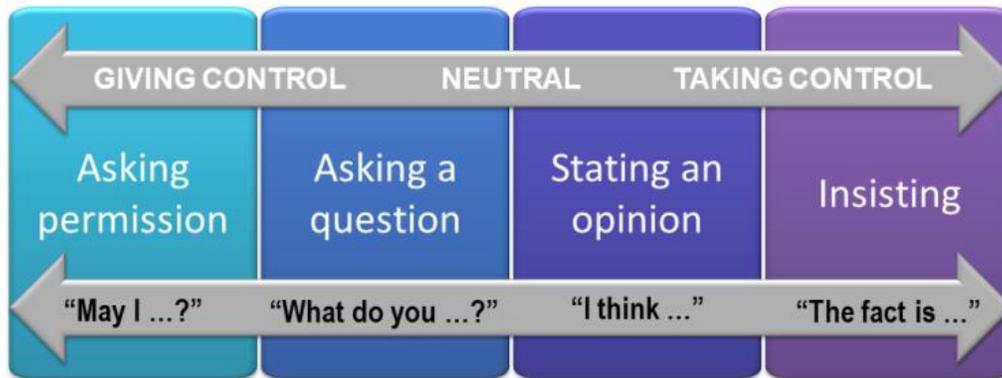
In meetings, make it a practice to tap into the collective skills and knowledge around the table. Not only are you likely to garner some new ideas, but people will also start to enjoy your meetings. Interestingly, the more they're allowed to contribute and control, the more they will respect you as a leader. In my experience of 20 years as a board director followed by 20 years as a coaching consultant, nothing engenders loyalty like a leader with a Coaching Mindset.

Control is a fundamental need of the human race, going back to the time when control of our environment meant the difference between life and death - perhaps being eaten by an animal or dying of cold. All too often, when we feel control slipping away in the workplace today, it feels like a life-or-death situation all over again. Panic sets in, triggering the primeval responses of flight, flight or freeze, and the blood drains from our heads to our legs, in readiness to run, which leaves us less able to think clearly just when we need it the most.

When you follow and ask questions, particularly with people who are in a less senior position than you are, you are endowing them with this sense of control. Everyone will feel more relaxed, able to think more clearly, cooperate and collaborate, and put their best ideas forward.

5. Respect boundaries

There are invisible boundaries in conversations and relationships which can occasionally be infringed without the infringer being even aware of it. The diagram below is taken from my article '[Permission Protocol](#)', which explains how to honour personal boundaries through a simple technique of asking permission:



Awareness of personal boundaries

Boundaries, like cultural norms, can differ significantly from person to person, shaped by their upbringing, their educational or work experiences, and any other influences they might have been exposed to. Understanding these personal cultures, and seeking permission to navigate them, can foster respect and create a healthy team environment. The stages that a team might go through were identified by Bruce Tuckman and are described in my article '[Bruce Tuckman's Forming, Storming, Norming & Performing Team Development Model](#)'. Whether dealing with a team's initial optimism and energy at the 'Forming' stage, or navigating through the conflicts and misunderstandings of 'Storming', recognising and honouring boundaries can ensure a more harmonious journey towards 'Norming' the team.

Jock Lowe, former Flight Operations Director for British Airways and the Concorde fleet, used to remind his pilots that their enemy was not within the cockpit, where conflicts sometimes surfaced among the team, but outside, where a problem might cause the plane to fall from the sky. Squabbling among co-pilots, or a fear of speaking up to a bully, could divert the team's focus from the ultimate task at hand – ensuring the safety of the flight.



An organisational team's enemies are less dramatic, and more likely to be competitors in business, but they could have the effect of lowering end-of-year bonuses, or even bringing about the demise of the organisation. The same can happen with a political party or a non-profit organisation. If the organisation is a hospital, the team might be risking the wellbeing of their patients.

Our sense of control is increased when people ask our permission. This is reflected in the fact that the safer people feel at work, in terms of a blame-free and supportive environment, the more risks they will be prepared to take, the more confident they will feel and the higher their performance and loyalty will be.

Fundamentally, permission is a tool which creates and respects the types of boundaries essential for harmony in relationships. Read more in my article on ['Permission Protocol'](#).

Conclusion

In the realm of coaching, both skills and mindset play vital roles. Skills offer a tangible framework for supporting a coachee through their journey, while mindset underpins the philosophical approach to coaching. The interplay between these two aspects creates a fertile ground for transformation, fuelling the magic that a coaching approach can bring about. Understanding this dynamic can help coaches and managers alike to appreciate and navigate the coaching journey more effectively.

The Coaching Mindset lies in our hearts, values, and attitudes. Coaching Skills give us the means of expressing it.

About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *'The Work and Life*

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