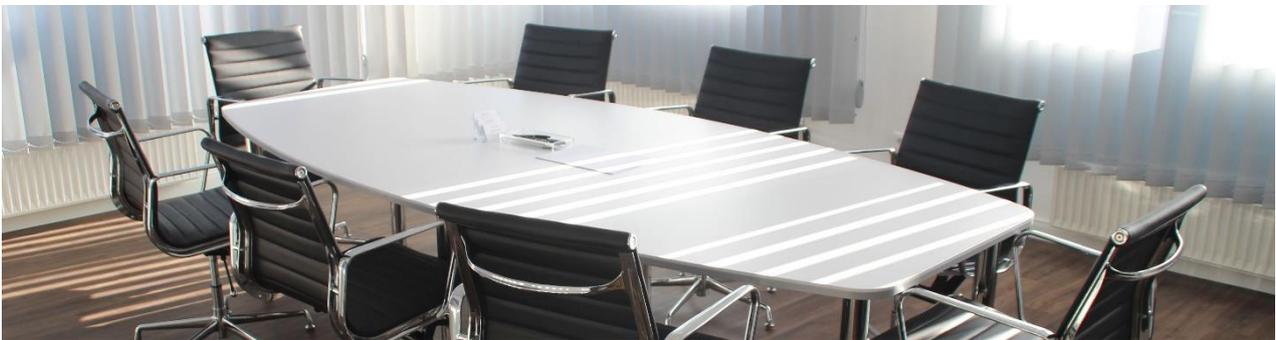




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Team Coaching with GROW: The Generative Thinking Meeting



Summary

Set up: Contracting

Step one: the Goal stage of GROW

Step two: the Reality stage of GROW

Step three: the Options stage of GROW

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Finalising: Appreciations and Closure

A Generative Thinking Meeting is one which engages the best thinking, opinions and collaborative solutions from everyone present. It reduces domination by more senior or more vociferous participants and encourages contributions from more junior or quieter members. The GROW model below provides an excellent supporting framework for such a meeting, topped and tailed by the coaching techniques of Contracting and Closure described in this article.

The generative thinking approach can be applied successfully to any type of meeting, whether between manager and report, for team building sessions, or for discussions between colleagues or clients. Using the GROW structure keeps people focused, raises energy, reduces conflict and saves time.



Throughout the meeting participants are repeatedly asked to think in positive terms, or give positive feedback to each other. New developments in neuroscience prove that positive thoughts stimulate the growth of nerve connections and improve our ability to analyse and think. You can find more information on this in 'Psychology Today' at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/prime-your-gray-cells/201108/happy-brain-happy-life>.

The four steps of GROW are undertaken chronologically. Within each section, any or all parts of GROW may be utilised and other coaching skills will undoubtedly prove useful where appropriate. Below is a suggestion of how you might run such a meeting as a facilitator:



Set up: Contracting

It is important at the start of any meeting or new working relationship to ensure that everyone present knows what to expect, not the least the person who is running it. Questions like these will help to create understanding and generate empathy:

- *If we are collaborating at our best today, what might this create?*
- *What do we want to do and how do we want to be in order to get the most out of our time and to achieve our objectives?*
- *What do we want from ourselves?*
- *What do we want from each other?*
- *What do you want from me?*

Suggestions can be written on a flipchart and referred to throughout the meeting, or over a period of days or weeks if you are running a conference or a training course. For example, if the group has agreed during contracting that punctuality is important, and someone returns late from a break, referring back to what was agreed during the contracting stage is less abrasive than a rebuke.

Your role as facilitator, during this and all stages, is to speak as little as possible, encouraging people to discuss the topics with each other rather than directing all their comments to you. This is particularly important where the other participants of the meeting report to you because it creates a more same-level, peer-to-peer relationship where people feel free to speak up, instead of just agreeing with you because you are the boss.

You might ask the permission of the group to intervene at some point in the future if the focus of the meeting is going off track, or if someone is talking repetitively or interrupting the others. That sets up the opportunity to cut in later without causing offence.

If there are elements that have to happen, which are not up for discussion, you must be honest about them. There is no point in asking teams for their own ideas and solutions if they cannot be acted upon because of existing organisational limitations. People will feel duped, or that they are being humoured, which reduces empathy and willingness to cooperate.

If you want to, or must, add a suggestion or an instruction, asking the group's permission to do so will render individuals more open to ideas and ready to listen - again, this is particularly important if you are also the most senior person present. See my article on "Permission Protocol" for ways of managing this.

If the participants are familiar with GROW, you can confirm that the meeting will follow that structure. If not, it is fine to just follow the framework without explaining it.



Step One: the Goal stage of GROW

People are much more engaged when they have participated in creating an objective than when one is imposed upon them. Where that is not possible, you should simply announce the objective at the start. So either:

'First of all I'd like us to find out what each other's objectives are, and then see if we can combine that into a goal that engages all of our individual objectives.' (Notice that the words 'we', 'our' and 'each other' take precedence here, not *'I want to find out what your goals are'*, which would set the leader above as the listener and judge of their goals.)

Or, if the meeting is about a prescribed goal which has to be achieved, like moving to a new office, you can simply announce:

'Our objective for this meeting is to ensure that our move goes smoothly.'

Always make sure the goal is positively stated and focuses on the desired result, not what people are trying to get away from - i.e. not:

'Ensure that our move does not cause too much disruption'

It is also important to ensure that the objective you bring is the end goal for the meeting, not a strategy towards it, i.e. not:

'Find out what we need to do for our move'.

Unless of course the meeting is specifically about planning the actions required for the move.

In both cases, the next step is for everyone present to state their own objectives for the meeting. If the goal has been supplied, then these will be about what each participant needs to aim for personally in order to ensure that the given goal is met.

If any generative thinking is going to take place, then it is essential that each participant is allowed to talk for as long as they wish without being interrupted. As Nancy Kline advises, people often find that their ideas develop when spoken out loud, so knowing there will not be any interruption helps them to follow their train of thought more clearly (Kline 2002).

Where time permits, or if the group is large, participants can be divided into smaller sets for discussions, and then a spokesperson from each set can present that set's agreed objective. If time is limited, participants should be advised of a time limit in advance, which could be anything from several minutes to just one word. All the objectives can be captured on a flip chart and, where an objective turns out to be too long to write down easily, this presents an opportunity to start the refining process which constitutes the next stage, by requesting

'Could you say that more succinctly?'

Where a group objective is to be formed by the participants, the next step is to assist them in whittling the possibilities down to one objective. Ask which objectives could be linked, or whether anyone feels their objective could be covered by another. Encourage the group to take the responsibility of arriving at a single objective themselves, through discussion that ideally will not include you at all. If necessary, you can step in to get the conversation back on track if anyone veers away from the task in hand, for example into what is happening, or has happened, or what should be done about it, or – worst case scenario – people start complaining about the actions or attitudes of other members of the group. The easy way to handle such an intervention is to refer back to what was agreed at the contracting stage, or asking permission to 'park' that topic for discussion at a later stage or a more relevant meeting.

Here is an example in practice:

1. The facilitator requests every individual to state their objective for the meeting and ensures that everyone has time to say their piece without being interrupted.
2. While people are speaking, the facilitator writes all the objectives on a flip chart, interacting with each individual to refine their objective into a short phrase, and repeating each final objective out loud.
3. When all the objectives are on the flipchart, the facilitator reads them out and asks:

'Does anyone have an objective which is not represented?' If any arise, they should be added to the flipchart.

'Which objectives are linked or could be combined?' This is asked of the whole group, and during the ensuing discussion, the facilitator draws lines, amalgamates and makes suggestions where appropriate, always making it a priority to ask for the group's ideas instead of injecting the facilitator's own.

4. When that is complete, the facilitator asks:

'Now we have these broad goals. Can you see a goal which is not the one you came up with but which you feel able to agree that it represents your own objective?'

When asked questions like these, the group will eventually whittle the various objectives down to one. In the unusual event that one individual does not feel their objective is represented, it may be necessary to suggest 'parking' that objective for a separate meeting.



Step Two: the Reality stage of GROW

At this stage all the participants are given time to state how they see the current situation without being interrupted. You can interject only to ensure that the participants stay within this Reality stage of GROW rather than about the past or

the future. You can contribute your own view of the Reality, and this is best done at the end rather than at the beginning. Be sure not to speak for longer than the other participants did, and if you are their leader, ensure that your language is not at all dictatorial.

Now that everyone has had their say, you can open up the floor to a general discussion. Again, you should say as little as possible. Your job is to ensure that everyone in the room has a chance to speak, particularly the quieter members, that everyone's words are respected and that no-one is allowed to interrupt - except for you, as facilitator, if someone is going off track or becoming repetitive. Always ask permission and it is often useful to refer back to the Contracting stage.

If time permits, participants can ideally be broken up into small groups, from pairs up to sets of six, to discuss the Reality of the situation or, if they are trained in coaching skills, they can coach each other in pairs.

These guiding questions may be useful:

- *What is going well for you in the current situation?*
- *What are you finding challenging?*
- *What assumptions are you making?*
- *What responsibility can you take for your part in the current situation?*
- *What is your freshest thinking?*



Step Three: the Options stage of GROW

Once the group has a clear objective and all the perspectives about what is currently happening have been aired and listened to, now you can move on to what might be done about it. Without this GROW structure, people tend to move straight from what they want into what they want to do about it. Or, quite often, what they don't want and what they want to be done about that. That type of thinking is a recipe for getting stuck down in conflict, which only increases through discussion and makes progress towards solutions where everyone has buy-in impossible.

The value of refining goals is that defining what they want makes people feel happier, more optimistic and more energetic. More importantly, obstacles seem to reduce in size and solutions start to present themselves.

The value of exploring the current reality of a situation is that people gain a clear picture not only of what is lacking, but what is good about it, acknowledging resources in terms of practical needs and people power that they had not recognised before.

By now, solutions and next steps will be presenting themselves, and a discussion on what to do can profitably take place. First of all, make it a brainstorm. The remit of the Options stage of GROW is to uncover not just what people want to do, but what anyone might do in the situation. Try to get all the options on the table, as they may light up new ideas that had not been previously thought of. This can be done through general discussion, small groups or co-coaching. It is usually helpful to split people into smaller factions before having a general discussion. This is because people are much more likely to state a new possibility in the safety of a small group rather than air it publicly. Through discussion within the small group, they can develop their thoughts until they have the confidence to make the suggestion to the whole room – and to their boss, if that is who you happen to be.

If the goal is complex and has several different streams of action to it, one way of doing this is to set up a number of flipcharts around the room, one with each aspect of the goal. Then people can

walk round and write their ideas for actions on the flipcharts. You can read these out and generate discussions about them.



Step Four: the Will stage of GROW

Now is the time to tie ideas down to action. It is essential at this stage that someone 'owns' each action and is committed to going away and carrying it out. This is why this part of GROW is 'W' – having the will to act, not just making a list of actions. Progress on the actions committed to will need to be monitored over the coming months which, depending on your role, may be something you will do, or you could ask someone to volunteer to be the monitor, checking on progress and reporting to the rest of the group.

You might say:

- *Now let's get clear on what action we are going to take. I suggest we aim to have someone committed to carry out each action, not just a list of actions*
- *Who is prepared to record the actions, follow up by sending round a draft and monitor that the actions get done after this meeting?*
- *What can you personally commit to doing?*
- *What else must be done?*
- *Who can commit to doing that?*



Finalising: Appreciations and Closure

Now is the time to wind up the meeting with consolidation and celebration, a time for everyone to see how far they have come, and a time for appreciations and praise. You can also acknowledge what has been 'parked' for a later date at this stage and ensure that there is a way to remember it.

You might ask people:

- *What do you personally feel has been achieved?*
- *How do you feel about it?*
- *What are your biggest takeaways?*
- *Who would you like to thank?*
- *What do you appreciate most about the group or any particular individual?*
- *What do you appreciate about the person sitting to your right?*

You can bring the generative thinking meeting to an end by giving the group your own appreciations – whatever you can authentically and genuinely praise about their behaviour or performance.

References

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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 of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.