

# The Coaching Habit Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever

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**DO MORE GREAT WORK**

# **You Need a Coaching Habit**

Everyone  
now knows  
that managers  
and leaders  
**need to coach  
their people.**

**T**he leadership press has endless articles about it. Assorted gurus suggest that coaching is an essential leadership behaviour. The number of executive coaches seems to be multiplying according to Moore's Law. Even Dilbert mocks coaching—and there's no surer sign of mainstream success than that.

Daniel Goleman, the psychologist and journalist who popularized the concept of emotional intelligence, put a stake in the ground more than fifteen years ago in his *Harvard Business Review* article "Leadership That Gets Results." He suggested that there are six essential leadership styles. Coaching was one of them and it was shown to have a "markedly positive" impact on performance, climate (culture) and the bottom line. At the same time, it was the least-used leadership style. Why? Goleman wrote, "Many leaders told us they don't have the time in this high-pressure economy for the slow and tedious work of teaching people and helping them grow."

And remember, this was in the halcyon days of 2000, when email was still a blessing, not a curse, globalization was just warming up, and we hadn't yet sold our souls to our smartphones. My experience these days, working with busy managers around the world, tells me that things have, if anything, got worse rather than better. We're all stretched more thinly than ever. And while "coaching" is now a more commonly used term, the actual practice of coaching still doesn't seem to be occurring that often. And when it does, it doesn't seem to work.

### **You've Probably Already Tried. And Failed.**

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The odds are you've already come across coaching in some form. Research in 2006 from leadership development firm BlessingWhite suggested that 73 percent of managers had some form of coaching training. So far so good. However, it seems it wasn't very *good* coaching training. Only 23 percent of people being coached—yes, fewer than one in four—thought that the coaching had a significant impact on their performance or job satisfaction. Ten percent even suggested that the coaching they were getting was having a negative effect. (Can you imagine what it would be like going into those meetings? "I look forward to being more confused and less motivated after my coaching session with you.")

You're probably  
**not getting**  
very effective  
coaching, and  
you're probably  
**not delivering**  
very effective  
coaching.

So, in summary: You're probably not getting very effective coaching; and you're probably not delivering very effective coaching.

My guess is that there are at least three reasons why your first go at developing a coaching habit didn't stick. The first reason is that the coaching training you got was probably overly theoretical, too complicated, a little boring and divorced from the reality of your busy work life. One of those training sessions, perhaps, where you caught up on your email backlog.

Even if the training was engaging—here's reason number two—you likely didn't spend much time figuring out how to translate the new insights into action so you'd do things differently. When you got back to the office, the status quo flexed its impressive muscles, got you in a headlock and soon had you doing things exactly the way you'd done them before.

The third reason is that the seemingly simple behaviour change of giving a little less advice and asking a few more questions is surprisingly difficult. You've spent years delivering advice and getting promoted and praised for it. You're seen to be "adding value" and you've the added bonus of staying in control of the situation. On the other hand, when you're asking questions, you might feel less certain about whether you're being useful, the conversation can feel slower and you might feel like you've somewhat lost control of the conversation (and indeed you have. That's called "empowering"). Put like that, it doesn't sound like that good an offer.

## But It's Not That Hard. Really.

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At my company, Box of Crayons, we've trained more than ten thousand busy managers like you in practical coaching skills. Over the years, we've come to hold these truths to be self-evident:

- Coaching is simple. In fact, this book's *Seven Essential Questions* give you most of what you need.
- You can coach someone in *ten minutes or less*. And in today's busy world, you have to be able to coach in ten minutes or less.
- Coaching should be *a daily, informal act*, not an occasional, formal "It's Coaching Time!" event.
- You can *build a coaching habit*, but only if you understand and use the proven mechanics of building and embedding new habits.

But why bother to change things up? Why would you want to build a coaching habit?

## Here's Why It's Worth the Effort

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The essence of coaching lies in helping others and unlocking their potential. But I'm sure you're already committed to being helpful, and that hasn't led to your coaching more often.

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So let's look at why coaching others helps *you*. It lets you work less hard and have more impact. When you build a coaching habit, you can more easily break out of three vicious circles that plague our workplaces: creating overdependence, getting overwhelmed and becoming disconnected.

### **Circle #1: Creating Overdependence**

You may find that you've become part of an *overdependent* team. There's a double whammy here. First, you've trained your people to become excessively reliant on you, a situation that turns out to be disempowering for them and frustrating for you. And then as an unwelcome bonus, because you've been so successful in creating this dependency that you now have too much work to do, you may also have become a bottleneck in the system. Everyone loses momentum and motivation. The more you help your people, the more they seem to need your help. The more they need your help, the more time you spend helping them.

Building a coaching habit will help your team be more self-sufficient by increasing their autonomy and sense of mastery and by reducing your need to jump in, take over and become the bottleneck.

### **Circle #2: Getting Overwhelmed**

You may also be *overwhelmed* by the quantity of work you have. It doesn't matter if you've mastered all the productivity hacks in

the world; the faster you dig, the faster the world keeps flooding in. As you're pulled in different directions by proliferating priorities, distracted by the relentless ping of email and hustling from meeting to meeting, you lose focus. The more you lose focus, the more overwhelmed you feel. The more overwhelmed you feel, the more you lose focus.

Building a coaching habit will help you regain focus so you and your team can do the work that has real impact and so you can direct your time, energy and resources to solving the challenges that make a difference.

### **Circle #3: Becoming Disconnected**

Finally, you may be *disconnected* from the work that matters. My previous book *Do More Great Work* had as its foundation the principle that it's not enough just to get things done. You have to help people do more of the work that has impact *and* meaning. The more we do work that has no real purpose, the less engaged and motivated we are. The less engaged we are, the less likely we are to find and create Great Work.

Building a coaching habit will help you and your team reconnect to the work that not only has impact but has meaning as well. Coaching can fuel the courage to step out beyond the comfortable and familiar, can help people learn from their experiences and can literally and metaphorically increase and help fulfil a person's potential.

WHAT PEOPLE  
THINK OF AS THE  
MOMENT OF DIS-  
COVERY IS REALLY  
**THE DISCOVERY  
OF THE QUESTION.**

Jonas Salk

So you're up against the Bind, the Grind and the Resigned. And building a coaching habit is a way of breaking through to a better way of working.

## The Seven Essential Questions

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At the heart of the book are seven questions that will break you out of these three vicious circles and elevate the way you work. The questions work not only with your direct reports but also with customers, suppliers, colleagues, bosses and even (occasionally and, obviously, with no guarantees offered) spouses and teenage children. These questions have the potential to transform your weekly check-in one-to-ones, your team meetings, your sales meetings and (particularly important) those non-meeting moments when you just bump into someone between scheduled events.

The *Kickstart Question* is the way to start any conversation in a way that's both focused and open. The *AWE Question*—the best coaching question in the world—works as a self-management tool for you, and as a boost for the other six questions here. The *Focus Question* and the *Foundation Question* are about getting to the heart of the challenge, so you've got your attention on what really matters. The *Lazy Question* will save you hours, while the *Strategic Question* will save hours for those you're working with. And the *Learning Question*, which pairs

with the *Kickstart Question* to make the Coaching Bookends, will ensure that everyone finds their interactions with you more useful.

## **Shall We Begin?**

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Are you ready to go? I'm sure you're keen to get to the Seven Essential Questions, but before we go there, we're going to take a short detour into the nitty-gritty of how to change your behaviour. There's no point in giving you useful tools unless you can put them into action. The next chapter, on the New Habit Formula, helps with that. In it you'll learn why the starting place for a new habit isn't the new behaviour after all, why sixty seconds matter so much and how the New Habit Formula can be your engine for focused behaviour change.

# 1: The Kickstart Question

**In which  
you discover  
the power of an  
opening question  
that gets the  
conversation  
happening fast  
and deep.**

## Breaking the Ice

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**A** good opening line can make all the difference. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...” “Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?”

One of the reasons managers don’t coach more often than they do is that they don’t know how to start. There’s that nagging sense that if you could just get going, you’d be fine. But how do you get going? And if you’ve ever felt stuck in a conversation that seemed a little superficial or boring or simply not that useful, then one of these three situations might be at play: the Small Talk Tango, the Ossified Agenda, or the Default Diagnosis.

### **The Small Talk Tango**

Make no mistake, there’s a place for small talk. It’s a way of reconnecting and engaging with a person, of building relationships, of remembering that other people are human and

reminding them that you're human, too. And yet you've felt that sinking feeling when you realize that you've used up eight of your fifteen allotted minutes talking trivia. Those moments when you think, *Seriously, do we always need to discuss that, say, it's cold and snowing in Canada during the winter? Or that sports team, will they ever get any better?* Small talk might be a useful way to warm up, but it's rarely the bridge that leads to a conversation that matters.

### **The Ossified Agenda**

This situation is commonly found in standing meetings—same time, same people, same place, same agenda. It becomes a dreary recitation of facts and figures, a report that sheds little light and seems to drain energy from the room. The agenda might have been perfect a week, a month or a year ago, but now it's putting process in front of what really matters.

### **The Default Diagnosis**

There's no question or conversation about what the issue is. You're sure you know what it is. Or they're sure they know what it is. Or maybe you both think you know what it is. And so . . . *bang!* You're off to the races, pursuing something that, if you're lucky, is approximately-ish the real topic. This response is comfortable and feels like progress because you're solving something. But you're in the wrong hole. Digging faster or smarter isn't going to help.

## The Kickstart Question: “What’s on Your Mind?”

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An almost fail-safe way to start a chat that quickly turns into a real conversation is the question, “What’s on your mind?” It’s something of a Goldilocks question, walking a fine line so it is neither too open and broad nor too narrow and confining.

Because it’s open, it invites people to get to the heart of the matter and share what’s most important to them. You’re not telling them or guiding them. You’re showing them the trust and granting them the autonomy to make the choice for themselves.

And yet the question is focused, too. It’s not an invitation to tell you anything or everything. It’s encouragement to go right away to what’s exciting, what’s provoking anxiety, what’s all-consuming, what’s waking them up at 4 a.m., what’s got their hearts beating fast.

It’s a question that says, *Let’s talk about the thing that matters most.* It’s a question that dissolves ossified agendas, sidesteps small talk and defeats the default diagnosis.

And once you’ve asked it, you can use a framework I call the 3P model to focus the conversation even further. But before we go on to the 3P model, it’s useful to understand the difference between two types of coaching.

## Coaching for Performance vs. Coaching for Development

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Some institutions distinguish between coaching for performance and coaching for development. *Coaching for performance* is about addressing and fixing a specific problem or challenge. It's putting out the fire or building up the fire or banking the fire. It's everyday stuff, and it's important and necessary. *Coaching for development* is about turning the focus from the issue to the person dealing with the issue, the person who's managing the fire. This conversation is more rare and significantly more powerful. If I ask you to think back to a time when someone coached you in a way that stuck and made a difference, I'll bet that it was a coaching-for-development conversation. The focus was on calling you forward to learn, improve and grow, rather than on just getting something sorted out.

The 3P model is a straightforward way to create focus, make the conversation more robust and (when appropriate) shift the focus to the more powerful level that's coaching for development.

## Deepen Focus with the 3Ps

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The 3P model is a framework for choosing what to focus on in a coaching conversation—for deciding which aspect of a challenge might be at the heart of a difficulty that the person is

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INVITE US IN.

Nancy Willard

working through. A challenge might typically be centred on a project, a person or a pattern of behaviour.

## Projects

A project is the content of the situation, the stuff that's being worked on. It's the easiest place to go to and it will be the most familiar to most of us. We spend our days finding solutions to challenges, and our eyes are almost always on the situation at hand. This realm is where coaching for performance and technical change tends to occur. Often, the art is in knowing how to start here and then seeing whether the conversation would benefit from including one or both of the other two Ps.

## People

Have you ever thought, *Work would be easy if it weren't for all these annoying people?* Surely it's not just me. Certainly, situations are always made more complex when you—in all your imperfect, not-always-rational, messy, biased, hasn't-fully-obtained-enlightenment glory—have to work with others who, surprisingly, are also imperfect, not always rational, messy, biased, and a few steps short of full wisdom and compassion.

When you're talking about people, though, you're not really talking about them. You're talking about a relationship and, specifically, about what your role is in this relationship that might currently be less than ideal.

## Patterns

Here you're looking at patterns of behaviour and ways of working that you'd like to change. This area is most likely where coaching-for-development conversations will emerge. They are personal and challenging, and they provide a place where people's self-knowledge and potential can grow and flourish. And at the moment, these conversations are not nearly common enough in organizations.

It's not always appropriate to be having a conversation with this focus. Often enough, having only a project-focused conversation is exactly the right thing to do.

## Putting the 3Ps to Use

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"What's on your mind?" you ask.

"The [insert name of thing they're working on]," they say.

"So there are three different facets of that we could look at," you offer. "The *project* side—any challenges around the actual content. The *people* side—any issues with team members/colleagues/other departments/bosses/customers/clients. And *patterns*—if there's a way that you're getting in your own way, and not showing up in the best possible way. Where should we start?"

It doesn't matter which one they pick—it will be a strong start to the conversation. And when they're done discussing that P, you can just take them to one of the other two Ps and ask, "If this was a thing, what would the challenge here be for you?"

And you'll likely have a deeper, more robust and richer conversation.

## Build Your New Habit Here

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### WHEN THIS HAPPENS...

*Write out the moment, the person and perhaps the feelings that are your trigger.*

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The typical trigger for this question is the start of some sort of conversation. Your direct report pops into your office for some advice. A customer calls you up. Your boss summons you into her office. A colleague sits down with you at lunch and asks if you have ten minutes to talk. You have a regular one-to-one with someone on your team. You're feeling anxious because the conversation hasn't really got started even though it's been going for a while. The trigger could even be an email or instant message from someone.

**INSTEAD OF...**

*Write out the old habit you want to stop doing. Be specific.*

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The old habit could be doing small talk and more small talk, moving straight into advice-giving mode, defaulting to the standard agenda or telling the person what the topic of conversation is. It's likely to be something that's less about curiosity and more about your controlling the direction of the conversation.

**I WILL...**

*Describe your new habit.*

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It's likely to sound a lot like, "I will ask them, 'What's on your mind?'" If the trigger comes in the form of an email or IM, you're allowed to just send a question in reply.



### **WATCH IT WORK**

Watch the short videos at [TheCoachingHabit.com/videos](https://TheCoachingHabit.com/videos) to deepen your learning and help turn insight into action.

**STARTING STRONG** "What's on your mind?" is a terrific opening question, but it's not the only one. In this video, Michael shares other options for starting your conversations more strongly and more quickly.



### **FROM THE BOX OF CRAYONS LAB**

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"What's on your mind?" is the Facebook question. Or at least, it was. And then it wasn't for a while, as it was removed as the prompt. And then, soon after, it was the question again. I'm guessing Mark Zuckerberg and his team figured out that this question was the best they had.

So it's a question that's used by tens of millions of people every day to cue reflection and sharing. When we asked

Lindsay, our Box of Crayons researcher, to dig into the science behind why the question works so well, she directed us to one of the fundamental truths that neuroscience has laid bare: we are what we give our attention to. If we're mindful about our focus, so much the better. But if we're unwittingly distracted or preoccupied, we pay a price.

A 2010 study started by making the point that any time we have something on our mind, it's literally using up energy—even though it accounts for only about 2 percent of your body weight, your brain uses about 20 percent of your energy.

But more than that, what you're holding in your mind will unconsciously influence what you can notice and focus on. When you're thinking of buying a red Mazda, you suddenly start noticing all the red Mazdas on the road. Whatever you're thinking about can also influence the choices you make, so you might not, in fact, make the optimal choice.

Asking the Kickstart Question works as a little pressure-release valve and helps makes explicit something that might be unduly influencing the way you work. The question releases the challenge from where it may well be rattling around in a slightly unformed and unclear way that is, unbeknownst to you, narrowing the way you're seeing the world.