

An Extract from

Coaching for Performance

GROWing People, Performance and Purpose

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Chapter 1

What is Coaching?

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Coaching focuses on future possibilities, not past mistakes.

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines the verb to coach as to 'tutor, train, give hints to, prime with facts'. This does not help us much, for those things can be done in many ways, some of which bear no relationship to coaching. Coaching is as much about the way these things are done as about what is done. Coaching delivers results in large measure because of the supportive relationship between the coach and the coachee, and the means and style of communication used. The coachee does acquire the facts, not from the coach but from within himself, stimulated by the coach. Of course, the objective of improving performance is paramount, but how that is best achieved is what is in question.

THE SPORTING ORIGINS OF COACHING

For some reason we have tennis coaches but ski instructors. Both for the most part, in my experience, are instructors. In recent years tennis instruction has become somewhat less dogmatic and technique based, but still has a very long way to go. Ski instruction in Britain has moved a long way from where it was toward coaching, but European ski instruction is still of the 'Bend zee knees' variety and lags behind the United States.

The Inner Game

The teaching of both these sports, and also golf, was tackled over two decades ago by Harvard educationalist and tennis expert Timothy Gallwey, who threw down the gauntlet with a book entitled *The Inner Game of Tennis*, quickly followed by *Inner Skiing* and *The Inner Game of Golf*. The word 'inner' was used to indicate the player's internal state or, to use Gallwey's words, 'the opponent within one's own head is more formidable than the one the other side of the net'. Anyone who has had one of those days on the court when he couldn't do anything right will recognize what Gallwey is referring to. Gallwey went on to claim that if a coach can help a player to remove or reduce the internal obstacles to their performance, an unexpected natural ability will flow forth without the need for much technical input from the coach.

At the time his books first appeared, few coaches, instructors or pros could believe, let alone embrace, his ideas, although players devoured them eagerly in best-seller-list quantities. The professionals' ground of being was under threat. They thought that Gallwey was trying to turn the teaching of sport on its head and that he was undermining their egos, their authority and the principles in which they had invested so much. In a way he was, but their fear exaggerated their fantasies about his intentions. He was not threatening them with redundancy, but merely proposing that they would be more effective if they changed their approach.

The Essence of Coaching

And Gallwey **had** put his finger on the essence of coaching. **Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.**

This was not new: Socrates had voiced the same things some 2000 years earlier, but somehow his philosophy was lost in the rush to materialistic reductionism of the last two centuries. The pendulum has swung back and coaching, if not Socrates, is here to stay for a generation or two! Gallwey's books coincided with the emergence in psychological understanding of a more optimistic model of humankind than the old behaviourist view that we are little more than empty vessels into which everything has to be poured. The new model suggested we are more like an acorn, which contains within it all the potential to be a magnificent oak tree. We need nourishment, encouragement and the light to reach toward, but the oakreeness is already within.

If we accept this model, and it is only contested by some aging flat earthers, the way we learn, and more importantly the way we teach and instruct, must be called into question. Unfortunately, habits die hard and old methods persist even though most of us know their limitations.

Let me extend the acorn analogy a step further. You may not be aware that oak saplings, growing from acorns in the wild, quickly develop a single, hair-thin tap root to seek out water. This may extend downwards as far as a meter while the sapling is still only 30cm tall. When grown commercially in a nursery the tap root tends to coil in the bottom of the pot and is broken off when the sapling is transplanted, setting back its development severely while a replacement grows. Insufficient time is taken to preserve the tap root and most growers do not even know of its existence or purpose.

The wise gardener, when transplanting a sapling, will uncoil the tender tap root weight its tip and carefully thread it down a long, vertical hole driven deep into the earth with a metal rod. The small amount of time invested in this process so early in the tree's life ensures its survival and will allow it to develop faster and become stronger than its commercially grown siblings. Wise business leaders use coaching to emulate the good gardener.

Universal proof of the success of new methods has been hard to demonstrate because few have understood and used them fully, and many others have been unwilling to set aside old proven ways for long enough to reap the rewards of new ones. Recently, however, as much through necessity as progress, worker participation, devolution, accountability and coaching have found their way into business language, and sometimes into behaviour too.

FROM SPORT TO BUSINESS

Even if some managers were philosophically sympathetic to the Socratic method, practical models of coaching were less available than academic theses that supported the idea. Tim Gallwey was perhaps the first to demonstrate a simple but comprehensive method of coaching that could be readily applied to almost any situation. It is hardly surprising that Gallwey found himself lecturing more often to business leaders in America than to sports people, although I suspect they hoped their golf would improve too. He has just published *The Inner Game of Work*. Gallwey's earlier books did not attempt to teach coaching, but rather identified the issues we so often face in sport and business and gave clues as to how to overcome them ourselves. The coaching method was too vulnerable to distortion by the prevailing attitudes and beliefs of the would-be coach for it to be taught through a book alone, and that is a limitation of this book as well.

Many years ago I sought out Tim Gallwey, was trained by him, and founded the Inner Game in Britain. We soon formed a small team of Inner Game coaches. At first all were trained by Gallwey but later we trained our own. We ran Inner Tennis courses and Inner Skiing holidays and many golfers freed up their swings with Inner Golf. It was not long before our sporting clients began to ask us if we could apply the same methods to prevailing issues in their companies. We did, and all the leading exponents of business coaching today graduated from or were profoundly influenced by the Gallwey school of coaching.

Inner Business

Through years of experience now in the business field, we have built and elaborated on those first methods and adapted them to the issues and conditions of today's business environment. Some of us have specialized in teaching managers to coach, others have acted as independent coaches for executives and for business teams. Although we are competitors with one another in the field, we remain close friends and not infrequently work together. This in itself speaks highly of the method, for it was Tim Gallwey who suggested that your opponent in tennis is really your friend if he makes you stretch and run. He is not a friend if he just pats the ball back to you, as that will not help you to improve your game, and isn't that what we are all trying to do in our different fields?

Although Tim Gallwey, my colleagues in Performance Consultants and many others who now practice coaching in the business arena all cut our teeth in sport, coaching in sport itself has changed little overall. It remains rooted in old behavioural models and is instruction based. It is at least a decade behind in terms of the methodology of coaching in business today. That is because when we introduced coaching into business 20 years ago, the word was new to business and did not bring with it the baggage of a long history of past practice. We were able to introduce new concepts without having to fight any old ones associated with coaching.

That is not to say that we met no resistance to coaching in business; we still do at times from people who have remained strangely insulated from or blind to the changes in values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Coaching as a practice in business now is here to stay, although the word itself might disappear as its associated values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours become the norm for everyone. For the time being some definition remains in order.

Mentoring

Finally, since I am defining coaching, I should perhaps mention mentoring, another word that has crept into business parlance. The word originates from Greek mythology, in which it is reported that Odysseus, when setting out for Troy, entrusted his house and the education of his son Telemachus to his friend, Mentor. "Tell him all you know," Odysseus said, and thus unwittingly set some limits to mentoring.

A modern-day Mentor was Mike Sprecklen, the coach to the all-conquering rowing pair, Holmes and Redgrave. "I was stuck, I had taught them all I knew technically." Sprecklen said on completion of a Performance Coaching course, 'but this opens up the possibility of going further, for they can feel things that I can't even see.' He had discovered a new way forward with them, working from their experience and perceptions rather than from his own. Good coaching, and good mentoring for that matter, can and should take a performer beyond the limitations of the coach or mentor's own knowledge.

In practice and in business, mentoring has by and large come to be used interchangeably with coaching. I quote from David Clutterbuck's book *Everyone Needs a Mentor*:

"In spite of the variety of definitions of mentoring (and the variety of names it is given, from coaching or counselling to sponsorship) all the experts and communicators appear to agree that it has its origins in the concept of apprenticeship, when an older, more experienced individual passed down his knowledge of how the task was done and how to operate in the commercial world."

Eric Parsloe, in his book *Coaching, Mentoring and Assessing*, does make a slight distinction by suggesting that coaching is:

"directly concerned with the immediate improvement of performance and development of skills by a form of tutoring or instruction. Mentoring is always one step removed and is concerned with the longer-term acquisition of skills in a developing career by a form of advising and counselling."

I advocate an advising or counselling format as in Parsloe's mentoring, as opposed to instruction, but I apply it with equal validity and effect to immediate performance improvement and to skill development, both short and long term. It can be 'hands on' and it can be 'one step removed'; either way I call it coaching. Whether we label it coaching, advising, counselling or mentoring, if done well, its effectiveness will depend in large measure on the manager's beliefs about human potential.

Potential

The expressions ‘to get the best out of someone’ and ‘your hidden potential’ imply that more lies within the person waiting to be released. Unless the manager or coach believes that people possess more capability than they are currently expressing, he will not be able to help them express it. **He must think of his people in terms of their potential, not their performance.** The majority of appraisal systems are seriously flawed for this reason. People are put in performance boxes from which it is hard for them to escape, either in their own eyes or their manager’s.

To get the best out of people, we have to believe the best is in there – but how do we know it is, how much is there, and how do we get it out? I believe it is there, not because of any scientific proof but simply from having to find reserves I did not know I had while competing in professional sport, and from observing how people exceed all their own and others’ expectations when a crisis occurs. Ordinary people like you and I will do extraordinary things when we have to. For example, who would not produce superhuman strength and courage to save their child?

The capacity is there, the crisis is the catalyst. But is crisis the only catalyst? And how long are we able to sustain extraordinary levels of performance? Some of this potential can be accessed by coaching, and performance can be sustainable, perhaps not at superhuman levels but certainly at levels far higher than we generally accept.

Experiment

That our beliefs about the capability of other have a direct impact on their performance has been adequately demonstrated in a number of experiments from the field of education. In these tests teachers are told, wrongly, that a group of average pupils are either scholarship candidates or have learning difficulties. They teach a set curriculum to the group for a period of time. Subsequent academic tests show that the pupils’ results invariably reflect the false beliefs of their teachers about their ability. It is equally true that the performance of employees will reflect the beliefs of their managers.

For example, Fred sees himself as having limited potential. He feels safe only when he operates well within his prescribed limit. This is like his shell. His manager will only trusts him with tasks within his shell. The manager will give him task A, because he trust Fred to do it and Fred can. The manager will not give him task B, because he sees this as beyond Fred’s capability. He sees

only Fred’s performance, not potential. If he gives the task to Jane instead, which is expedient and understandable, the manager reinforces or validates Fred’s shell and increases its strength and thickness. He needs to do the opposite, to help Fred venture outside his shell, to support or coach him to success with task B.

To use coaching successfully we have to adopt a far more optimistic view than usual of the dormant capability of people, all people. Pretending we are optimistic is insufficient because our genuine beliefs are conveyed in many subtle ways of which we are not aware.

Application

When and where do we use coaching and for what? Here are some of the more obvious opportunities to apply coaching at work:

Motivating staff	Appraisals and assessments
Delegating	Task performance
Problem solving	Planning and reviewing
Relationship issues	Staff development
Team building	Team working

The list is endless, and the opportunities can be tackled by using a highly structured approach, the formal coaching session. The coach/manager can equally choose to retain a degree of structure but be less formal – superficially it might sound like a normal conversation and the term coaching might not be used. Far more pervasive than either of these uses, and perhaps more important, are the continuous awareness and employment of the underlying principles of coaching during the many brief daily interactions that occur between manager and staff. In these cases we would not describe the interaction as coaching, and it might consist of no more than a single sentence – probably a question. However, the wording, the intention and the effect of that sentence would be different. Here is an example:

An employee, Sue is working on a task that had been discussed and agreed with her manager the previous week. She has a problem and goes to find her manager:

SUE: I did what we agreed but it isn't working.

MANAGER: You must have done something wrong! Do it this way instead...

No coaching there, but here is an alternative based on the coaching principles:

SUE: I did what we agreed but it isn't working.

MANAGER: I just have to go and see George for a minute. See if you can find out exactly where and when the blockage occurs, and I'll be back to help you find a solution.

Ten minutes later when the manager returns:

SUE: I've got the solution, it's working fine now.

MANAGER: Great. What did you do? Did it affect anything else?

SUE: This was the problem, and I got round it like this... There are no other effects, I checked them out.

MANAGER: Sounds fine to me. See what you can do when you try!

The manager's sentence, not even a question this time although an implied one – 'See if you can find out exactly where and when the blockage occurs' – embraces the two key principles of coaching – AWARENESS and RESPONSIBILITY. Also in this brief interaction the manager showed no blame or irritation, presented himself as a partner in the cause, and at the end reminded Sue that she had solved the problem herself and that she is more capable than she thinks.

I have argued the importance of managers recognizing the potential that lies within everyone they manage and of treating them accordingly. It is, however, even more importance for people to recognize their own hidden potential. We all believe we could do better to some extent, but do we really know what we are capable of? How often do we hear or make comments such as 'Yes, she is far more capable than she thinks'?

In bold below are three revealing questions that I invite you to ask and answer, before you read the answers underneath each.

What percentage of people's potential manifest itself in the workplace on average?

Individual answers given by delegates on Performance Coaching programs range from single figures to over 70 percent, but the average for any group turns out remarkably often to be about 40 percent.

What evidence do you have to support your figure?

The three most consistent answers are:

- The things that people do so well outside the workplace.
- How well people respond in a crisis.
- I just know I could be much more productive.

What external and internal blocks obstruct the manifestation of the rest of that potential?

The external ones most frequently cited are:

- The restrictive structures and practices of my company.
- The lack of encouragement and opportunity.
- The prevailing management style of the company/my boss.

The single universal internal block is unfailingly the same, variously described as fear of failure, lack of confidence, self-doubt and lack of self-belief.

I have every reason to suspect that this last answer is true. It is certainly true for me. In a safe environment people tend to tell the truth about themselves. If lack of confidence and so on is perceived to be true, then in effect it becomes the case anyway. The logical response would be to put every effort into building employees' self-belief and coaching is tailor made for that, but many business people are anything but logical when the need for a change in management behaviour is raised. They far prefer to hope for, look for, pay for or even wait for a technical or structural fix, rather than adopting a human or psychological performance improvement, however straightforward it may be. There is another reason as well.

Building others' self-belief demands that we release the desire to control them or to maintain their belief in our superior abilities. One of the best things we can do for them is to assist them in surpassing us. Children's most memorable and exciting moments are often the first occasions on which they beat a parent at a game of skill. That is why in the early days we sometimes

allow them to win. We want our children to overtake us and we are proud when they do – would that we could be so proud when our staff do the same! We can only gain, through their greater performance and from the satisfaction of watching them and helping them grow. However, all too often we are afraid of losing our job, our authority, our credibility or our own self-belief.

Self-Belief

Since self-belief is key to the manifestation of potential and performance, it is imperative to build a track record of successes. Nothing succeeds like success. In coaching it is paramount that the coachee produces the desired results from the coaching session, without fail. It is incumbent on coaches to understand this and ensure that they have helped the coachee to optimal clarity and commitment to action, including pre-empting all obstacles. Coaches are often afraid to pursue a coachee to certain success because they fear being seen as aggressive. Nevertheless, coaching that does not result in success – and the coachee's own recognition of that success – will only cause a reduction in self-belief and undermine the primary objective of the coaching.

For people to build their self-belief, in addition to accumulating successes they need to know that their success is due to their own efforts. They must also know that other people believe in them, which means being trusted, allowed, encouraged and supported to make their own choices and decisions. It means being treated as an equal, even if their job has a lesser label. It means not being patronised, instructed, ignored, blamed, threatened or denigrated by word or deed. Unfortunately, much generally expected and accepted management behaviour embodies many of these negatives and effectively lowers the self-esteem of those being managed.

Coaching is an intervention that has as its underlying and ever-present goal the building of others' self-belief, regardless of the content of the task or issue. If managers bear this principle in mind and act on it persistently and authentically, they will be staggered by the improvement in relationships and in performance that result.

Coaching is not merely a technique to be wheeled out and rigidly applied in certain prescribed circumstances. It is a way of managing, a way of treating people, a way of thinking, a way of being. Roll on the day when the word coaching disappears from our lexicon altogether, and it just becomes the way we relate to one another at work, and elsewhere too.