



# Creative Management for Creative Teams

Business Coaching and Creative Business



Mark McGuinness

[www.wishfulthinking.co.uk](http://www.wishfulthinking.co.uk) - inspiring creative professionals

*Photo by urbancow*

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Web: [www.wishfulthinking.co.uk](http://www.wishfulthinking.co.uk)

Blog: [www.wishfulthinking.co.uk/blog](http://www.wishfulthinking.co.uk/blog)

E-mail: [wish@wishfulthinking.co.uk](mailto:wish@wishfulthinking.co.uk)

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# 1. Introduction: Why Coaching?



*Photo by Jeff Poskanzer*

As a creative director, business owner or manager of a creative team, the chances are you already coach your people to an extent - and you may be better at it than you realise. But there's also a fair chance that you have received little support in developing your people management skills.

In the creative industries, so much attention is lavished on creative 'talent' and the products of creativity that vital aspects of the creative process are often overlooked. Such as the massive influence (positive and negative) managers and creative directors have on the creativity of their teams. While many individual managers are doing an excellent job of managing and developing their teams, there is little wider recognition of people management in the creative sector.

It's hard to develop a skill that goes unrecognised. And you don't need me to tell you that managing temperamental creatives can be one of the most challenging jobs going.

So how do you meet the challenge? I'm willing to bet that you find most books on management a bit of a turn-off. You've probably left or avoided the corporate world because it's not an environment you feel comfortable with. I know how you feel. As a poet who moved from consulting for large organisations to specialising in the creative sector, I can clearly remember the day I walked into an ad agency and instantly felt at home. Call me superficial, but given the choice between cubicles and suits, or a colourful studio with electric guitars and table football on standby, I know which I prefer.

But creativity needs more than bean-bags and Playstations. And if creativity is your business, you know there's a lot more to it than 'thinking outside the box'. For one thing, you probably have to think *inside* a few boxes - such as the budget and brief, and your client or audience's tolerance levels. So while you need to encourage blue-sky thinking and risk-taking, you also need to make things happen on time, on budget and to keep the end users happy.

Give people too much creative freedom and they may have a blast working on the project - only to end up frustrated when the client or audience 'don't get it'. But if you play it too safe, your creatives will feel constrained and everyone will be underwhelmed by the final result.

Not an easy balancing act to pull off. Even before you factor in a few creative egos. Plus the fact that creative people are not satisfied with just doing the job - they want to be challenged and inspired on every project, every day. They want opportunities to learn and hone their skills. And if they don't get them in your team, sooner or later they'll start to look elsewhere.

A lot of it comes down to what you say and do with people day-in-day out. How well you listen. What questions you ask. How you deliver tricky feedback. How well you find the right fit between people's talents and motivations and the task in hand. How easily you pick up the subtle signals that alert to you to problems before they blow up in your face. In short, how well you facilitate the idiosyncratic creative process of everyone on your team .

Now 'business coaching' may not sound like the most inspiring activity in the world, but it does offer you an effective approach to managing and developing creative people. It's not a miracle solution, or a step-by-step model, but it provides practical answers to the following questions:

- How can you allow people creative freedom while keeping a grip on deadlines and deliverables?
- How can you develop people's skills while keeping them productive?
- How can you stimulate creative thinking in others?
- How can you avoid the temptation to micro-manage people?
- Why don't people do what they're supposed to do?
- How can you keep people motivated while giving them bad news?
- How can you be yourself while adapting to others' needs?
- When is it better to keep your mouth shut?

This e-book introduces the core principles and skills of business coaching. It considers the role of the manager and how coaching complements other management styles. It describes the most common model for structuring coaching sessions. It also challenges you to think about coaching as an informal process, in which every workplace conversation becomes a coaching opportunity.

The e-book also touches on ways a coaching consultant can help you and your colleagues develop your effectiveness as a management team - but I don't assume you need a consultant to get started. After all, you've probably done a lot of great coaching already, without necessarily

putting that label on it. Hopefully the e-book will raise your awareness of your existing skills and encourage you to do more of 'what works' in future.

Some of the material in the e-book is similar to that found in other books on business coaching (a few of which I recommend in Chapter 13). What is different is my emphasis on the specific challenges facing leaders of creative teams, and how coaching can develop the individual and collective creative talent of a business.

I hope this e-book gives you some food for thought about the challenges you face in managing talented creative professionals - and some ideas that will make your job a little easier and more rewarding.

Mark McGuinness

March 2008

## 2. What Is Business Coaching?



Photo by [urbancow](#)

Here's my simple definition of business coaching:

A focused conversation that facilitates learning and raises performance at work

The 'coach' can be either a manager or an external consultant. The 'coachee' (yes, I know it's a horrible word, I'll avoid it as much as I can) can be anyone who wants to get better at their work.

While coaching sometimes takes place in designated coaching sessions it is also used by many organisations as a style of management, and takes place in a series of informal discussions between managers and their staff as they go about their daily business. In Eric Parsloe and Monica Wray's words, this is coaching as 'the way we do things round here' (*Coaching and Mentoring* - see Chapter 13 for details of books).

There are many other definitions in the business coaching literature. Some focus on coaching's collaborative, conversational style:

Coaching is a collaborative, solution-focused, result-oriented and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and personal growth of individuals from normal (i.e. non-clinical) populations. (Jane Greene and Anthony M Grant, *Solution-Focused Coaching*)



Other definitions emphasise the dual function of coaching - improving performance and facilitating learning. For example:

‘A manager’s task is simple – to get the job done and to grow his staff. Time and cost pressures limit the latter. Coaching is one process with both effects.’

(John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance*)

• Coaching is an approach to management – how one carries out the role of being a manager

• Coaching is a set of skills for managing employee performance to deliver results

Being a coach means that you see and approach the role of a manager as a leader: one who challenges and develops your employees’ skills and abilities to achieve the best performance results.’

(Marty Brounstein, *Coaching and Mentoring for Dummies*)

Here are some of the distinguishing characteristics of business coaching conversations.

### **A collaborative style**

The words ‘coach’ and ‘coachee’ are slightly unfortunate in implying that the coach is a senior person who is there to dispense wisdom and advice. In fact, coaching can take place between peers and even ‘upwards’ with a more junior person coaching a senior, as well as in the classic manager-team member relationship.

Coaching is a collaborative process, in which people have clearly defined roles: the coach is responsible for keeping the conversation focused on a clearly defined goal, facilitating the other person’s thinking, keeping track of progress and delivering constructive feedback; the coachee is responsible for generating ideas and options, taking action to achieve the goal, and reporting progress.

One of the commonest ways for coaching to get stuck is when these responsibilities are confused - for example, if the coach becomes attached to a particular way of doing things, and starts to tell the coachee what to do.

### **Focusing on goals rather than problems**

One definition of coaching is that it is a ‘goal focused conversation’ - the goal is defined as quickly as possible, and the rest of the conversation is directed towards achieving it. Throughout the conversation, the coach will be keeping the following question in mind: ‘How is this discussion helping this person achieve their goal?’. If the goal is lost sight of, it is the coach’s responsibility to bring it back on track.

Even when the conversation begins with a problem, as quickly as possible the coach and coachee work to define what the solution will look like. Coaching then focuses on how to reach



that solution. This can take a bit of getting used to - our habitual tendency is to spend a lot of time analysing problems to work out what caused them and who was to blame. A coach does not assume this is necessary - often all you need to do is clearly define what you want to happen *differently* in future and work towards that.

### **Listening more than you talk**

Good business coaches are not bigmouths. While sports coaches often need to shout at players and 'fire them up' for a game, business coaching is very different. Watch a business coach or manager during a session and you are likely to see her doing most of the listening and creating space and time for the other person to talk. It will be obvious that the coach is giving the other person their undivided attention.

For the person being coached, this can be a powerful experience - when was the last time someone in your workplace put everything aside and made it clear that they were 100% focused on listening to you and helping you reach your goals? Being the focus of attention in this way can make a refreshing change - it also makes it clear that you will be expected to deliver on the commitments you make during the conversation.

### **Asking questions instead of giving advice or instructions**

Even when a coach 'knows' the answer to a question, s/he will typically ask the other person for his ideas rather than tell him. This is because one of the main aims of coaching is to facilitate someone's thinking and get them to use their own creativity and initiative. If you tell someone what to do, you take away a learning opportunity and condition them to rely on you for guidance.

This can be difficult for new managers, or those who have a lot of expertise in the area in which they are coaching - the temptation to tell someone how to do it or even do it yourself can be irresistible! The ability to act as a facilitator rather than a performer or instructor is one of the hallmarks of an outstanding coach.

### **Giving observational feedback instead of making judgments**

Coaches have a low tolerance for poor performance, so they deliver feedback in the way that is most likely to effect a change in behaviour. This often means avoiding pronouncing judgement in favour of giving specific, observational feedback that helps people examine their own performance and come up with better options for the next time.

So a coach would be unlikely to say 'You didn't handle that meeting very well' - this is a vague judgement that could mean anything and immediately puts the other person on the defensive. Instead, the coach might ask 'Did you see the look on the client's face when you told her we couldn't change the text at this stage?' - which draws attention to the consequences of a specific action and invites reflection on whether it would be better to do things differently in future.

### 3. Coaching Is Not Training, Mentoring or Counselling



*Photo by Jon*

In the previous chapter I answered the question **What Is Business Coaching?** Now I'll sharpen up that definition by distinguishing coaching from other approaches - training, mentoring and counselling.

#### **Coaching is not Training**

While training and coaching both promote learning, they do so in different ways:

- **Training** is about teaching specific skills or knowledge - **Coaching** is about facilitating someone else's thinking and helping them learn by working on live work issues.
- **Training** usually takes place off-site or in dedicated training sessions - **Coaching** takes place in the office and (when carried out by a manager) can be integrated into day-to-day workplace conversations.

- **Training** is more typically carried out in groups - **Coaching** is usually a one-to-one process and is tailored to the individual's needs.
- **Training** is usually delivered by an external consultant or dedicated internal trainer - **Coaching** can be delivered by an external consultant or by a manager.

Although they are distinct activities, training and coaching can work very well when used together. One classic obstacle encountered in business training is the difficulty of transferring skills and enthusiasm from the training room to the workplace. Coaching is an excellent way of helping people apply what they learn from a course to their day-to-day work.

A research study found that post-course training had a dramatic effect on the effectiveness of one training programme - the paper is available [here](#) or via [Amazon](#).

### Coaching is not Mentoring

There are some superficial similarities between coaching and mentoring, as they are both typically one-to-one conversations aimed at facilitating professional development, but there are also significant differences:

- A **Mentor** is usually a more senior person who shares experience and advises a junior person working in the same field - A **Coach** is not necessarily senior to the person being coached, and does not typically give advice or necessarily pass on experience; instead s/he uses questions and feedback to facilitate the other person's thinking and practical learning.
- A **Mentor** is not typically the line manager of the person being mentored, but someone who is available for advice and guidance when needed - **Coaching** is frequently delivered by line managers with their teams.

### Coaching is not Counselling

Again, there may be a superficial similarity in that both of these activities are one-to-one conversations, but their tone and purpose are very different:

- **Counselling** and therapy typically deal with personal problems - **Coaching** addresses workplace performance.
- **Counselling** usually begins with a problem - **Coaching** can begin with a goal or aspiration.
- **Counselling** is sought by people having difficulties - **Coaching** is used by high achievers as much as beginners or people who are stuck.
- Many (but not all) forms of **Counselling** focus on the past and the origins of problems - **Coaching** focuses on the future and developing a workable solution.

## 4. Different Types of Coaching



*Photo by Monica's Dad*

Following on from the differences between Coaching, Training, Mentoring and Counselling, this chapter will look at different types of coaching. These should not be seen as rigid categories but areas of specialisation, and many coaches work in more than one of these areas.

### **Sports coaching**

This is what many people think of when they hear the word 'coach'. The term 'sports coach' encompasses a wide range of roles and approaches, from the football manager on the touchline, through one-to-one coaches for athletes and players, to specialist coaches for fitness and health. There are also coaches who focus on the 'mental game', helping sports players fine-tune their psychological preparation for high-pressure events.

Several coaches have bridged the gap between sports and business coaching. Tennis pro Timothy Gallwey proposed a radical new approach to tennis coaching in his book *The Inner Game of Tennis*, which he later adapted for business in *The Inner Game of Work*. Another coaching classic is *Coaching for Performance* by John Whitmore, a former champion racing driver, which is chiefly concerned with coaching as an approach to management in business. Another example of

a cross-over between sports and business coaching is *The Little Book of Coaching* by business author Ken Blanchard and the American football coach Don Shula.

## **Life coaching**

A life coach works with clients to help them achieve their goals and reach fulfilment, in the personal and/or professional sphere. Finding a healthy balance and integration between work and personal life is often a key feature of life coaching. Coaching can encompass a wide range of issues, from inner work on thoughts and emotions through relationships with significant others, to very specific career goals and practical action plans.

The difference between life coaching and business coaching is often one of degree of emphasis, and will depend on the individual coach and client. Broadly speaking, in life coaching the main focus of attention is on the client's life as a whole; while in business coaching, the main focus is on someone's work, while recognising that truly effective professional development requires a healthy balance between work and other areas of life.

Another difference between life coaching and business coaching is that life coaching clients are more likely to be private individuals, whereas business coaches are more typically employed by organisations. There are exceptions - some companies engage life coaches to help their employees balance their personal and professional needs, and business coaches are also hired by individuals to help them achieve their career goals.

## **Business coaching**

Business coaching is primarily concerned with improving performance at work and facilitating professional development. Formerly confined to senior management and known as 'Executive coaching', the more general term 'Business coaching' recognises the importance of coaching for people at all levels within an organisation.

Whereas coaching was formerly identified with external consultants brought in to provide a fresh perspective and specialist expertise, many companies now expect their managers to act as coaches for their teams. In the next two chapters, I will look at the differences in the type of coaching provided by external consultants and managers.

## **My version of business coaching - 'coaching creative professionals'**

I'm a slightly unusual business coach in that I work mostly with creative professionals. I describe myself as a business coach rather than a life coach because the main focus of my coaching is on my clients' work - their creative process, their working relationships and their professional goals.

Working within the creative industries however, the line between the personal and professional is often blurred, since most artists and creatives seek to make a career out of their passion rather than to keep the two separate. I describe my clients as 'creative professionals' to emphasise the importance of balancing creativity, authenticity, and a professional approach to high-level creative performance.

This may be a good place to point out that I do not believe the term 'creative' should be reserved for the creative department - it includes everyone involved in the creative process, whether as writer, artist, designer, performer, programmer, director, manager, producer, editor, account handler, planner, marketer or client. And maybe even the artist formerly known as 'the audience'.



## 5. The External Coach or Coaching Consultant



*Photo by Francois Schnell*

Having looked at **Different Types of Coaching**, in this chapter and the next I will outline the two basic roles for coaches in business: the external coach (or coaching consultant); and the internal coach (usually a line manager).

### **The external coach**

An external coach is a consultant brought into the organisation to work with individuals and/or teams, usually in sessions lasting 1-2 hours. Ideally the coaching conversation is a face-to-face meeting, at least for the first few sessions, although the phone and now webcam are increasingly used, as they allow for greater flexibility in scheduling appointments. Coaching sessions are often interspersed with e-mail reports on agreed action items.

Below are some of the advantages of using an external coach. It is important to remember that these advantages do not make external coaches intrinsically 'better' than internal (manager) coaches - just different. The two roles complement each other.



In many respects, the position of an external coach is a privileged one, since she is free from many of the restrictions that apply to managers - so there is a responsibility to use these advantages wisely, for the benefit of the individuals being coached and the organisation as a whole.

## **Advantages of using an external coach**

### **A fresh perspective**

An external coach brings a fresh perspective on people and events in the organisation. This means she can notice patterns and make connections that are not apparent to those on the inside. So she can act as a valuable 'sounding board' for people's thinking - by asking questions, listening and giving feedback from her perspective as an outsider.

### **A strong focus on the client's needs**

Because the external coach does not have the direct responsibilities of a manager, it is relatively easy to devote her entire attention to the client's needs during the session. This can lead to an intensive, high-energy form of coaching that can produce significant results in a short time. In longer term coaching, it can provide a very strong foundation for an individual's development.

### **A confidential forum for discussion**

Because the coaching session is confidential between coach and coachee, people sometimes feel more comfortable discussing sensitive information or personal concerns with an external coach than with their line manager. This can lead to resolution of 'unspoken' problems that have been interfering with critical business processes.

### **Highly developed coaching skills**

External coaches have typically received a more extensive coaching training than managers, and have spent more time coaching people. This means the organisation benefits from highly developed coaching skills and a wealth of coaching experience.

### **Specialist expertise**

In addition to their core coaching skills, many external coaches have specialist expertise that makes them particularly suited to certain coaching assignments. Specialisms can include leadership, sales, negotiation, mediation, presentation skills, creativity, psychology and emotional intelligence.

## 6. The Manager as Coach



*Photo by wili\_hybrid*

Following on from the last chapter about **The External Coach or Coaching Consultant**, this one looks at the role played by a manager as a coach for his or her team.

Many people, when they hear the phrase 'business coach' think of an external consultant. Yet managers can have a powerful influence on their teams and the organisation as a whole when they adopt a coaching style of management. As a way of managing people, coaching differs from the traditional corporate 'command and control' approach in the following ways:

- collaborating instead of controlling
- delegating more responsibility
- talking less, listening more
- giving fewer orders, asking more questions
- giving specific feedback instead of making judgments

This is not simply a case of 'being nicer' to people - delegated responsibility brings pressure to perform and coaching managers maintain a rigorous focus on goals and results.

The role of the manager-coach is very different to that of an external coach. Whereas an external coach has the luxury of a laser-like focus on the coachee and his development and performance, the manager-coach needs to balance the needs of the coachee, other team members and the organisation as a whole.

Some people argue that it is impossible for a manager to act as a coach, given her position of authority over her team. While authority is an important issue, it need not be an insurmountable obstacle - as long as there is genuine trust and respect in the working relationship. It is also a fact that coaching frequently takes place between peers and even upwards on occasion, with some enlightened bosses happy to be coached by their team members.

In his book *Coaching for Performance* John Whitmore raises the issue of managerial responsibility and authority, and asks 'Can the manager, therefore, be a coach at all?':

Yes, but it demands the highest qualities of that manager: empathy, integrity and detachment, as well as a willingness, in most cases, to adopt a fundamentally different approach to his staff... he may even have to cope with initial resistance from some of his staff, suspicious of any departure from traditional management. (p.16)

## **Advantages of manager-coaches**

### **In-depth knowledge of people and the organisation**

However well an external coach listens and observes, she does not have the same level of exposure to the organisation and its people as a manager, so will never have the same depth of knowledge about them.

### **Longer term relationships**

Because managers spend more time with their team members, they have the opportunity to get to know them better and build a solid foundation of mutual trust and respect, which is essential to an effective coaching relationship.

### **More opportunities for influence**

Managers' contact with staff is not confined to formal coaching sessions - they are constantly interacting with their team members and have many opportunities to influence them.

## **So what's in it for the manager?**

It's probably fairly obvious that coaching benefits the people being coached - but what about the manager? If you are a busy manager, can you afford the time and effort required, when you already have plenty of other demands to cope with?

I would argue that coaching is not a case of 'giving up' your time and energy to helping others achieve their goals and solve their problems - it will also benefit you in the following ways:

### **A more committed team**

Empowerment is a powerful motivator. When you make a genuine effort to include people in setting their own goals, making decisions and implement their own ideas, they are likely to become more committed and focused at work.

### **Better team performance**

Because of its dual functions of managing performance and developing people, coaching leads to better individual and collective performance. The ongoing learning process means that the upward curve can get steeper over time.

### **Better working relationships**

Good coaching promotes trust and collaboration, and leads to better working relationships. It doesn't mean you become everyone's best friend, but it does mean working relationships can get easier and more enjoyable (or in some cases at least less stressful) for all concerned.

### **Better ideas**

When you get into the habit of asking questions to draw out people's creativity, you may be pleasantly surprised at the quality of ideas people come up with. After a while, you may not need to ask every time - they will get into the habit of bringing you suggestions.

### **Better information**

If you are genuinely coaching people in a collaborative, open spirit, people will feel more confident in coming to you with vital information - including telling you the 'bad news' while there is still time to do something about it.

### **Investing time to gain time**

There is no doubt that in the short term it's often quicker to 'take charge' and give orders instead of coaching. That's fine for 'fire fighting', but in the long term, the more you direct, the more people will rely on you for directions, and the more of your time will be swallowed up by it. If you invest time in coaching however, over time your people will require less and less direction, and you will be confident in delegating more and more to them - freeing up your time for the tasks only you can accomplish.

## **Comparing external and internal coaches**

If we compare the advantages of using coaching consultant and having managers act as coaches, we can see that they are complementary:

External (consultant) coach	Internal (manager) coach
A fresh perspective	In-depth knowledge of the organisation and people
Strong focus on the individual	Balancing individual and team needs
Effective short-term interventions	Longer-term relationships

The decision on which type of coach to use, or whether to use a combination of the two, will depend on the needs of the individual, team and organisation.

### **'Coaching the coach'**

One very common way for external and internal coaches to work together is when a coaching consultant is brought in to 'coach the coach' - i.e. to help a manager develop his coaching skills. This can be a very effective (and time-efficient) way of helping managers develop their skills, particularly with experienced managers who know the basics and want to refine their skills or deal with more complex people management challenges.

Another form of coaching the coach is when managers coach each other on developing their coaching skills. Coaching has the biggest impact on an organisation when it 'cascades' through the management ranks, with senior managers coaching juniors to be better coaches, who in turn coach their juniors (and sometimes vice-versa). At this point, coaching behaviours become the norm - part of 'the way we do things round here'.

# 7. Coaching and Leadership

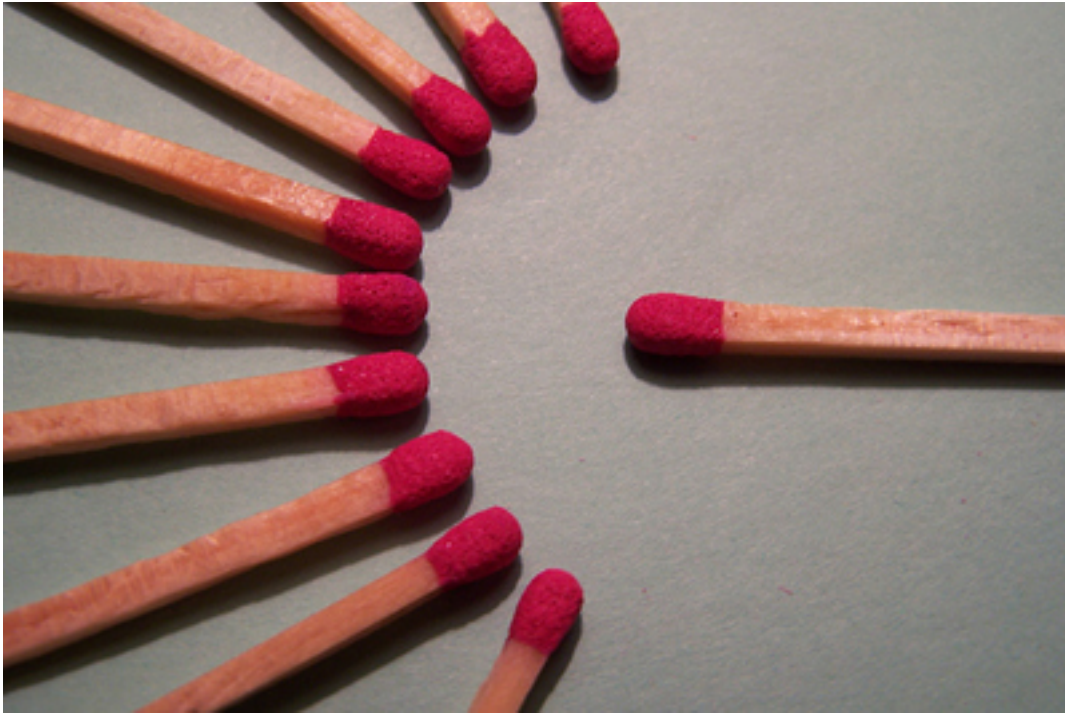


Photo by [Thiru Murugan](#)

As a business coach myself, you won't be surprised to hear me advocate coaching as an effective approach to leadership. But there's there's no one-size-fits-all approach when dealing with people, so it's important to see coaching in context, to understand where, when and how it can be effective for leaders - and what the alternatives are.

In their well-known book *Leadership and the One Minute Manager* Ken Blanchard, Patricia Zigarmi and Drea Zigarmi present coaching as one of four basic leadership styles - Directing, Coaching, Supporting and Delegating. They argue that managers need to be flexible in adopting the most effective style for any given situation. In a similar spirit, Daniel Goleman wrote an article for the *Harvard Business Review* called 'Leadership that Gets Results', in which he argued that managers should utilise 'a collection of distinct leadership styles - each in the right measure, at just the right time'. The analogy he used (no doubt familiar to corporate executives) was of a bag of golf clubs:

Over the course of a game, the pro picks and chooses clubs based on the demands of the shot. Sometimes he has to ponder his selection, but usually it is automatic. The pro senses the challenge ahead, swiftly pulls out the right tool, and elegantly puts it to work. That's how high-impact leaders operate, too.

What makes Goleman's article really interesting is his presentation of a research project carried out by the consulting firm Hay/McBer, into the relative effectiveness of different leadership styles. He begins by identifying six basic leadership styles:

1. **Coercive** - demanding compliance
2. **Authoritative** - mobilizing people towards a vision
3. **Affiliative** - building relationships and promoting harmony
4. **Democratic** - promoting consensus through participation
5. **Pacesetting** - setting high standards by example and demanding the same of others
6. **Coaching** - delegating responsibility and developing people for success

Here's Goleman's characterization of the coaching style of leadership:

Coaching leaders help employees identify their unique strengths and weaknesses and tie them to their personal and career aspirations. They encourage employees to establish long-term development goals and help them conceptualize a plan for attaining them. They make agreements with their employees about their role and responsibilities in enacting development plans, and they give plentiful instruction and feedback.

I'm not sure I agree that good coaches habitually give 'plentiful instruction' - coaching usually involves asking questions rather than giving instructions - but that aside, this is a good summary of the coaching style of leadership. As Goleman points out, 'Coaching leaders excel at delegating' - the key to their leadership is their ability to help people identify their personal and professional goals, and act as facilitators, letting individuals take responsibility for their own success.

Once the researchers had defined these six leadership styles, they assessed the impact of each style on 'climate', a term devised by psychologists to assess the 'working atmosphere' of an organisation. Climate is defined in terms of the following six factors:

1. **Flexibility** (freedom to innovate without being shackled with red tape)
2. **Responsibility**
3. **Standards** (set by people in the organisation)
4. **Rewards** (how accurate and fair these are)
5. **Clarity** (about mission and values)
6. **Commitment**

According to the researchers, of the six leadership styles, two of them - Coercive and Pacesetting - had a negative impact on climate. It's no great surprise that Coercive was the least effective leadership style, except in emergencies. Few managers who really think about impact of their behaviour on others are likely to habitually coerce people into obedience. Perhaps more



surprising was the fact that the Pacesetter style had a negative effect on climate. After all, isn't setting a good example one of the things we expect of a leader?

In fact, the pacesetter style destroys climate. Many employees feel overwhelmed by the pacesetter's demands for excellence, and their morale drops. Guidelines for working may be clear in the leader's head, but she does not state them clearly... Work becomes not a matter of doing one's best along a clear course so much as second-guessing what the leader wants. At the same time, people often feel that the pacesetter doesn't trust them to work in their own way or to take initiative... As for rewards, the pacesetter either gives no feedback on how people are doing or jumps in to take over when he thinks they're lagging.

This reads to me like an inverted coaching style - the emphasis is on the leader rather than the team, outcomes are not clearly described or checked for mutual understanding, responsibility is not delegated and feedback is either non-existent or clumsily delivered.

Moving onto the styles with a positive impact on climate, the most effective leadership style was 'Authoritative'. Again, this is no great surprise - the core function of a leader is to identify a goal and inspire others to achieve it.

The authoritative leader is a visionary - he motivates people by making clear to them how their work fits into a larger vision for the organization. People who work for such leaders understand that what they do matters and why. Authoritative leadership also maximizes commitment to the organization's goals and strategy. By framing the individual tasks within a grand vision, the authoritative leader defines standards that revolve around that vision. When he gives performance feedback - whether positive or negative - the singular criterion is whether or not that performance furthers the vision.

The three remaining styles (Affiliative, Democratic and Coaching) scored lower than Authoritative, but all had a positive impact on climate, scoring about the same as each other. So each of these styles is clearly important for a well-rounded approach to leadership, although none of them stick out as more important than the others.

Where coaching did stick out like a sore thumb however, was in the fact that it was the **most neglected** of the leadership styles:

Of the six styles, our research found that the coaching style is used least often. 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. But after a first session, it takes little or no extra time. Leaders who ignore this style are passing up a powerful tool: its impact on climate and performance are markedly positive.

When I first read this article it confirmed my feeling that coaching is the tortoise compared to the hare of some charisma-based leadership styles, or the more glamorous, guru-centric approaches to personal development. I'm not saying there isn't value in a charismatic, high-energy approach, but I do wonder about the end product. For example, I sometimes hear people report amazing experiences on personal development weekends with a famous speaker, from which they return full of plans and enthusiasm - but a few weeks later there's nothing much to show for it. When asked, they usually say that it was a valuable experience to see such an inspiring speaker, but that they were probably being a bit unrealistic in some of the plans they made.

Similarly, the danger with a Pacesetter leadership style is the fact that the focus is on the leader rather than the team. By comparison, coaching might look a less dynamic style of leadership - the leader listens more than she talks, asking questions and making sure commitments are recorded and followed up - but it does ensure that things get done. And the person being coached is centre-stage, with all the opportunity and responsibility that implies. As Goleman puts it:

Although the coaching style may not scream 'bottom-line results,' it delivers them.

# 8. Key Coaching Skills



*Photo by StaR\_DusT*

Having looked at the big picture of **Coaching and Leadership**, I'm now going to focus on the small picture of the key skills involved in coaching.

- Goal setting
- Looking
- Listening
- Empathising
- Questioning
- Giving feedback
- Intuiting
- Checking

Most of these appear on any standard list of coaching skills, with one or two additions of my own. Some of them, such as goal-setting or giving feedback, are to some extent susceptible to being broken down into discrete steps and taught; others, such as empathising and intuiting, are

abilities that a coach naturally possesses, or which emerge over time as a result of practising the other skills.

## **Goal setting**

Coaching is a goal-focused (or solution-focused) approach, so the ability to elicit clear, well-defined and emotionally engaging goals from a coachee is one of the most important skills for a coach to possess. Like many aspects of coaching, there are both formal and informal aspects of this ability. On the formal side, a coach needs to know how and when to introduce goal-setting into the coaching process, and will usually be familiar with models such as SMART goals (a SMART goal is Specific, Measurable, Attractive, Realistic and Timed). On the informal side, a coach will typically have the habit of thinking and asking questions from a goal-focused mindset. For example, 'How does doing x help you reach your goal?' helps the coachee to evaluate whether what she is doing will help or hinder her.

Another common habit of a good coach is reframing problems as goals - e.g. if a coachee talks about the problems he is having with a 'difficult' colleague, the coach might ask 'What needs to be happening for you to have a workable relationship with this person?'

## **Looking**

A good deal is rightly written about the importance of listening in coaching, but looking is often (ahem) overlooked. When running coaching skills seminars, I often say to the trainee coaches 'The answer is right in front of you'. Meaning that the person's body language tells you a huge amount about her emotional state and level of commitment, yet it's so easy to ignore that if we are too focused on our own ideas about what needs to happen next.

Another obstacle to looking is a company culture in which people have been conditioned to focus on processes and tasks at the expense of human relationships, so that people can stop seeing each other as human beings, but merely 'managers', 'staff' or [insert job title here]. This is often compounded (in the UK at least) by a general sense that 'it's rude to stare' - with the result that the coach literally stops seeing what is in front of her eyes, and misses valuable information about how the coachee is thinking and feeling. The good news is that as soon as coaches are encouraged to actually look at the person in front of them, they nearly always 'get' how the other person is feeling, and this opens up new options for moving the conversation forward.

## **Listening**

This is often referred to as 'active listening' to emphasise the difference between passively taking in what the other person is saying and actively engaging with them and showing that you are giving them your undivided attention. This involves putting your own concerns and idea 'in a box' while you listen, so can be particularly challenging for manager-coaches, but it's a skill well worth developing.

You can probably remember the last time someone put everything else aside and gave you their full attention - it's a powerful experience, partly because it's so rare. By listening intently to someone else, you send a powerful double message - firstly, that you are there to support them in

whatever they are doing, secondly, that you are paying attention and expect them to follow through on any commitments they make. There are various techniques and models used to teach active listening, but the easiest and most genuine approach is simply to become genuinely interested in the other person and curious about what they can achieve.

## Empathising

Empathy develops naturally out of looking and listening. If you do this attentively, you can start to 'get a feeling' for the other person's emotional state. Some people experience empathy as a powerful physical sensation - they literally seem to feel the other person's emotions. (Scientists have linked this phenomenon to the operation of mirror neurons.) For others it's more like being able to imagine what it's like to be 'in the other's shoes'. The ability to empathise with the coachee is critical to the coaching process, as it not only helps the coach to accept the other person on their own terms, but also sometimes to 'tune in' to emotions and thoughts of which they are not fully aware. E.g. 'I'm starting to feel quite angry when I hear you talk about what your boss said to you - was that how you felt?'

Focusing on someone else for a sustained period can be tiring at first, but if you stay with it you will experience one of the great secrets of coaching - that empathising with another person can be a fascinating and enjoyable experience for you as well as the coachee. I often find myself looking forward to coaching sessions partly because I know it will take me outside my usual self-oriented state - at the end of the session, when I come back to my own concerns, I'm likely to see them with a fresh eye.

## Questioning

If I had to pick one thing that distinguished coaching from other approaches to communication, management and learning, I would say 'Questions'. At the heart of coaching is a willingness to put aside one's own ideas about the 'best/right/obvious way' to do something, and to ask a question to elicit someone else's ideas about how to approach it. For me as a coach, asking questions is an expression of my curiosity about life in general and human creativity in particular. For coachees, being asked a question can do three very important things:

1. **Focus attention** - questions are not directive, but they are influential. They prompt the coachee to look for a new idea or solution in a particular area. Experienced coaches are adept at using questions to help people step outside the 'problem mindset' and look for answers in unexpected places.
2. **Elicit new ideas** - however 'obvious' the answer may seem to the coach, it's amazing how often a coachee will come up with several different and often better alternatives. Unless you ask the question, you risk leaving the coachee's creativity untapped.
3. **Foster commitment** - there's a huge difference between doing something because someone has told you to or suggested it, and doing something that you have dreamt up yourself. Even if a coachee comes up with the same idea the coach had in mind, the fact that she has thought it through herself means she will have a much greater sense of ownership and commitment when putting into practice.

## Giving feedback

This is always a hot topic when I run coaching seminars. It's a big subject, but the key to delivering effective coaching feedback is that it is **observational and non-judgemental**. If you provide clear, specific feedback about the coachee's actions and their consequences, then the chances are the coachee will be perfectly capable of evaluating his performance for himself.

Giving 'negative feedback' is often a delicate process, but the following principles will make it easier and more effective for everyone concerned:

- **Make sure you've already given plenty of positive feedback.** If you have a track record of giving open, honest praise to someone, it makes it far easier than if you only jump in to criticise when things go wrong.
- **Appreciate (or at least acknowledge) the PERSON - deliver feedback on specific BEHAVIOUR.** You don't need to rebuild someone's personality to help them learn and change, merely to them do something different.
- **Focus on the FUTURE more than the PAST.** Sometimes it's helpful to analyse the past and what went wrong, but beware of getting stuck in accusations and defensiveness. If this happens, switch to finding new options for the future.
- **Avoid blame, make REQUESTS.** Faced with blame, all we can do is defend ourselves. Faced with a request, we have the option of accepting, rejecting or negotiating. One keeps us stuck, the other may get us unstuck.

## Intuiting

Like empathy, this is either an innate ability or emerges from practising the other coaching skills. Sometimes during a coaching session you can get a sudden thought or feeling about the coachee or the subject under discussion - it's as if something were prompting you to ask a question or share what you're thinking/feeling. It doesn't matter whether you call this a hunch, an intuition, a sixth sense, mirror neurons or your unconscious mind - what does matter is how willing you are to trust this feeling and act on it. Sometimes the effect can be like a thunderbolt - the other person can't believe how you've 'picked up' something vitally important that they hadn't been fully aware of. Other times, the coachee looks at you blankly and it turns out your 'insight' is either obvious or useless. Because of this uncertainty, it's very important not to get too attached to our coaching intuition, and to always check whether it matches the coachee's reality...

## Checking

I've not seen this listed as a separate skill in coaching books, but for me it's one of the most important habits for a coach to get into, and it can take considerable skill to know what, when and how to check. It might seem pedantic or boring relative to the ideas and energy encountered elsewhere in the coaching conversation, but if you don't keep checking, you risk letting all that creativity and enthusiasm evaporate. Here's a brief (ahem) checklist of things I typically check in coaching sessions:

- **Checking understanding.** Making sure that I've understood what the coachee is saying. Often involves asking 'dumb questions' and summarising the answers in the coachee's own words.
- **Checking that the client is happy.** A verbal agreement is no good unless the person is also enthused or at least congruent in taking action on the goal. I'm constantly checking this by looking and listening for nonverbal cues, but at key points I also ask directly 'Are you happy with this?'
- **Checking that all the bases have been covered.** Exploring some areas in depth can mean that other areas are overlooked. The coach can help overcome this tendency by asking questions such as 'Is there anything else you need to consider?', or 'Do you know enough to move forward on this?'
- **Checking whether the coachee has taken action.** If the coachee commits to doing something, you need to have an agreed means of reporting on this. Ideally the client should own this process, but the coach also needs to keep an eye on it, to ensure that things don't get forgotten.
- **Checking whether the goal has been reached.** This might sound obvious, but sometimes coachees can get so involved in working on a goal that they don't register when they have achieved what they set out to do. Alternatively, they may have a sense of 'problem solved' but on closer inspection, there's still more to do. So a coach can perform a valuable role by asking some probing questions towards the end of the coaching process, to check whether the client is happy with the outcome.



# 9. The GROW Coaching Model



Photo by [exportryan](#)

The GROW model is probably the most common coaching model used in business. It was devised by Sir John Whitmore and described in his book *Coaching For Performance*. It offers a way of structuring coaching sessions to facilitate a balanced discussion:

**GOAL** - defining what you want to achieve

**REALITY** - exploring the current situation, relevant history and likely future trends

**OPTIONS** - coming up with new ideas for reaching the goal

**WHAT/WHO/WHEN** - deciding on a concrete plan of action

In practice, since most coaching is driven by questions, this means that different types of question are used at each stage:

- **GOAL** - questions to define the goal as clearly as possible and also to evoke an emotional response.  
'What do you want to achieve? What will be different when you achieve it? What's important about this for you?'

- **REALITY** - questions to elicit specific details of the situation and context.  
‘What is happening now? Who is involved? What is their outcome? What is likely to happen in future?’
- **OPTIONS** - open-ended questions to facilitate creative thinking  
‘What could you do? What ideas can you bring in from past successes? What haven’t you tried yet?’
- **WHAT** - focused questions to get an agreement to specific actions and criteria for success  
‘What will you do? When will you do it? Who do you need to involve? When should you see results?’

Used judiciously, the GROW model offers an excellent framework for structuring a coaching session. It is particularly useful for beginners, helping them to see the wood for the trees and keep the session on track. However, Whitmore is at pains to emphasise that models and structures are not the heart of coaching:

GROW, without the context of AWARENESS and RESPONSIBILITY, and the skill of questioning to generate them, has little value.

I prefer to think of the GROW model as a compass for orientation rather than a rigid sequence of steps to be followed. I don’t think I’ve ever taken part in a coaching session that began with Goals, then progressed smoothly through an analysis of Reality, then brainstormed Options before settling on the What?/When?/Who? and How? of an action plan.

Coaching can begin at any of the four stages of the GROW model. A coachee might begin by telling you about something she wants to achieve (Goal), a current problem (Reality), a new idea for improving things (Options) or by outlining an action plan (What). As a coach, it’s usually a good idea to follow the coachee’s lead initially by asking a few questions to elicit more detail, then move onto the other steps.

Personally, I always start a coaching conversation by asking a goal-focused question (e.g. ‘So what do you want to achieve?’) as a way of setting the tone for the discussion. Sometimes the coachee replies with a description of a problem (Reality) which is fine - I’ll listen, probe for a few details then as soon as possible return to Goals, to keep the conversation focused. On the other hand, if someone comes to me full of ideas and enthusiasm (Goals, Options), I’ll do my best to help them maintain this while taking account of hard facts (Reality) and getting a commitment to specific action (What). As so often with coaching, the important principle is balance.

# 10. Formal and Informal Coaching



Photo by [timbomb](#)

The word 'coaching' conjures up an image of a one-to-one session scheduled in the diary, focusing exclusively on the coachee's goals and how s/he can work towards them. And a lot of coaching does take place in this format, particularly when delivered by an external coach.

For a manager-coach however, the picture is not quite so clear. Formal coaching sessions are a powerful way of using coaching with her team, and should never be undervalued - yet she also has the option of using coaching informally, integrating the coaching approach into her everyday conversations with her team, so that it becomes part of her basic approach to management. In their book *Solution-Focused Coaching*, Jane Green and Anthony Grant talk of a 'coaching continuum':

In-house workplace coaching lies on a continuum from the formal structured workplace coaching at one end to the informal, on-the-run workplace coaching at the other - what you might call corridor coaching: the few minutes snatched in the corridor in the midst of a busy project.

The two types of coaching are not mutually exclusive - many effective coaching managers use both styles in complementary ways.

Formal coaching	Informal coaching
Used explicitly	Used explicitly or implicitly
Scheduled appointments	Everyday workplace conversations
Programme with beginning and end	Ongoing process, a style of management
Most of the conversation in 'coaching mode'	Manager can switch from coaching mode to other management styles

## Formal coaching

The most obvious characteristic of formal coaching is that coaching is being used **explicitly** - during the coaching session both parties are clear that they are engaged in 'coaching' and are committed to this process as well as the outcome.

Formal coaching usually takes place during **scheduled appointments**, so that time is set aside specifically for coaching work. By having dedicated sessions, the manager sends a powerful signal to individual team members that their development and success is important, and that she is there to provide support.

When a series of appointments are scheduled, coaching becomes a clearly defined **programme**, with the possibility of a definable **beginning and end**. This can have a motivating effect, with the well-known phenomenon of 'deadline magic' coming into play towards the end of the coaching process, when both coach and coachee focus their efforts on achieving the goal(s) within the allotted time.

The clear parameters of formal coaching mean that both coach and coachee tend to spend most coaching sessions in **coaching mode** - i.e. with the coachee doing most of the talking, and the coach primarily engaged in listening, asking questions and giving feedback, as described in the chapter on **Key Coaching Skills**.

## Informal coaching

Informal coaching is a bit of a grey area - because coaching is used **implicitly**, as part of the everyday conversation between the manager and her team, it may be that neither party would describe the conversation as 'coaching'. Some team members are uncomfortable with the word 'coaching' or the idea of being coached - but respond well to a manager who takes the time to listen carefully to them and ask questions that empower them to find their own way of meeting a challenge or solving a problem, without being told what to do. Or a manager may be so familiar with the coaching approach (or it may be so similar to her natural communication style) that she may not consciously decide to 'coach' someone but instinctively listen and ask rather than 'tell and sell'.

Informal coaching does not take place in scheduled appointments but in **everyday workplace conversations**. These conversations may be short or long, one-to-one or within a group, task-

focused or people-focused - what qualifies them as coaching is not a formal model or structure, but a style of conversation.

The **coaching style** of management is one in which the manager typically takes a 'step back' in order to empower team members and elicit their commitment and creativity, helping them to both get the job done and learn something new in the process. So instead of giving orders or dispensing knowledge, the manager asks questions and listens to see what team members come up with. For a manager-coach, coaching is not something that begins and ends with the coaching session or programme - asking questions, listening, empathising and giving observational (rather than judgmental) feedback are elements of her personal communication style. For a coaching organisation, the coaching style is simply 'the way we do things round here'.

Because informal coaching is a way of doing things rather than a clearly defined programme, there is no overall beginning and end, but an **ongoing process**. The coaching conversation becomes open-ended, with markers such as goal-setting and review occurring along the way, not as book-ends but part of a larger process of learning.

As informal coaching is not confined to formal sessions, the coaching style is not used exclusively but according to the demands of the situation, as part of a **range of management styles**. During a given conversation a manager may switch in and out of coaching mode, as well as using other management styles, as described in the chapter on **Coaching and Leadership**.

### **Which style should I use?**

Neither style is better or worse than the other, and many managers use both. Which one you use will depend on a range of factors:

#### **The manager's preference**

Some managers are comfortable with scheduling formal coaching sessions and having a clearly structured coaching programme - others' toes curl up at the very thought. When working with people, it's vitally important to be yourself and use or adapt an approach that you feel comfortable with. So make sure you are honest with yourself and your team about your own preferences and work with, not against them. On the other hand there's nothing wrong with a bit of creative experiment - I've seen some managers achieve great results by starting the first coaching session by saying 'Well this is a new approach for me and to be honest I'm not sure whether it's my style, but let's try it out and see how it goes...'.

#### **The coachee's preference**

It goes without saying that this is at least as important as the manager's preference. Some coachees love the idea of having dedicated time for their own coaching and development work, as well as clearly defined goals and a structure for achieving them. Others, particularly in creative agencies, are deeply suspicious of any kind of formal structure for this kind of work, and much prefer to do things in a more informal, casual way. Ignore this at your peril!

#### **Company culture**

Just as individuals have preferences, so do organisations. Approaches that are well-received in a large broadcaster or newspaper may be unworkable or inflammatory in a small

agency or studio. This doesn't mean you can't try something new, but you may have to be creative about how you sell it to people within the company.

### **The kind of task**

It's difficult to generalise about this, as I've seen both formal and informal coaching used successfully with a wide range of tasks and goals. However for 'big picture' goals such as a large new project, a person's career or annual goals, a formal coaching session can be a powerful way of setting the scene and getting people focused. There are also many instances in which a smaller or ongoing issue may not merit a formal meeting, but a brief chat by the proverbial water cooler is just the job to tease out a problem and get things moving again.



# 11. How Coaching Creates Creative Flow



Photo by [frumbert](#)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a psychologist who has devoted his career to researching happiness and fulfilment. His research has shown that although people enjoy indulging in pleasure, such as eating and drinking, sex and shopping, this eventually wears off, leaving us feeling unsatisfied. True happiness comes from learning and developing our skills to overcome meaningful challenges. When we are fully absorbed in doing this, we experience what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow':

Flow – 'An almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness.'  
(from *Creativity* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi)

When we are in flow, we are fully absorbed in whatever we are doing and find it easy to achieve peak performance. The experience is accompanied by intense feelings of pleasure and satisfaction.

Flow can occur in many spheres of human activity, physical and mental. Athletes call it being in the 'the zone', but we don't have to run a marathon or win an Olympic medal to experience flow - we have all experienced the enjoyment of becoming absorbed in doing a task well.



Flow is particularly common in artistic and creative spheres, during those times when ideas, images, feelings and/or words seem to flow easily and the work takes on a momentum of its own. Many artists make big sacrifices in other areas of their lives so that they can pursue creative flow. Professional creatives have typically had powerful experiences of flow, and can relate to the intense feeling of satisfaction when they enter flow – and equally intense feelings of frustration when they are unable to get into flow in their work.

Creative flow is intensely satisfying for the individuals who experience it. From a business perspective, this is more than just a ‘nice experience’ however - as Csikszentmihalyi points out, **flow occurs during periods of peak performance - so if you want your creative team to perform better, one of the most important things you can do is to help them achieve creative flow more often.** Not only will this raise their creative performance, it will also increase their motivation to work - which in turn raises performance, in a virtuous circle.

Csikszentmihalyi identifies the following nine characteristics of flow:

1. **There are clear goals every step of the way.** Knowing what you are trying to achieve gives your actions a sense of purpose and meaning.
2. **There is immediate feedback to your actions.** Not only do you know what you are trying to achieve, you are also clear about how well you are doing it. This makes it easier to adjust for optimum performance. It also means that by definition flow only occurs when you are performing well.
3. **There is a balance between challenges and skills.** If the challenge is too difficult we get frustrated; if it is too easy, we get bored. Flow occurs when we reach an optimum balance between our abilities and the task in hand, keeping us alert, focused and effective.
4. **Action and awareness are merged.** We have all had experiences of being in one place physically, but with our minds elsewhere – often out of boredom or frustration. In flow, we are completely focused on what we are doing in the moment.
5. **Distractions are excluded from consciousness.** When we are not distracted by worries or conflicting priorities, we are free to become fully absorbed in the task.
6. **There is no worry of failure.** A single-minded focus of attention means that we are not simultaneously judging our performance or worrying about things going wrong.
7. **Self-consciousness disappears.** When we are fully absorbed in the activity itself, we are not concerned with our self-image, or how we look to others. While flow lasts, we can even identify with something outside or larger than our sense of self – such as the painting or writing we are engaged in, or the team we are playing in.
8. **The sense of time becomes distorted.** Several hours can ‘fly by’ in what feels like a few minutes, or a few moments can seem to last for ages.
9. **The activity becomes ‘autotelic’** - meaning it is an end in itself. Whenever most of the elements of flow are occurring, the activity becomes enjoyable and rewarding for its own

sake. This is why so many artists and creators report that their greatest satisfaction comes through their work. As Noel Coward put it, “Work is more fun than fun”.

## How coaching creates creative flow

Flow can be unpredictable and elusive. It requires a delicate balance of many different elements, so it cannot be controlled – in fact, a controlling mindset tends to interfere with it. But through coaching it is possible to influence performance in a way that increases the likelihood of achieving flow. And it should be taken as read that the following needs to be applied with sensitivity to the needs of each individual. Here are some ways that you can use coaching to help people achieve creative flow:

1. **There are clear goals every step of the way.** Goals are central to coaching - it has even been said that without a goal, you are not coaching. For any given task or project, ensure that the goal is clearly understood by all parties, and has the right balance between an inspiring challenge and a measurable target.
2. **There is immediate feedback to your actions.** Delivering genuinely constructive feedback is another fundamental coaching skill. By providing clear feedback on people’s creative **work** and their professional **behaviour**, you help your team to gauge their performance relative to the agreed goals. When dealing with highly skilled (and sometimes sensitive!) creatives, it is critically important to deliver feedback in a way that is appropriate to individual motivations, personalities and working styles.
3. **There is a balance between challenges and skills.** Take care to match tasks to people’s abilities and help them to develop their skills, through coaching them yourself or offering other training or development opportunities. You should also notice whether someone is trying too hard or not enough, and compensate by switching to a supportive or challenging style of coaching accordingly.
4. **Action and awareness are merged.** When we are congruent, our actions, thoughts and feelings are all directed towards a single goal. Every person you manage or coach will be giving you many verbal and nonverbal signals that indicate their level of **congruence**. If you are sensitive enough to notice **incongruence**, you can address the concerns or conflicting priorities that are interfering with focused work - see 5.
5. **Distractions are excluded from consciousness.** If an individual is finding it difficult to focus on his/her work, you can use coaching as a forum for resolving the distracting issues. If there are perceived **conflicting priorities**, you can negotiate or explain the real priorities. If the individual is being held back by a **lack of confidence** or **personal problems**, you may be able to help by coaching them, or referring them to an appropriate specialist. If there is **interpersonal conflict**, you can address it by coaching the people involved and mediating between them. As a manager or director, you may have the authority to minimise **external distractions** such as noise or demands from other workers.

6. **There is no worry of failure.** Coaching works on the assumption that it's OK to make mistakes - as long as you learn from them. By delivering accurate feedback about performance and demanding that people learn from their mistakes, you ensure that failures become less frequent and less damaging. By creating an accountable but supportive environment, you help your people to spend less time worrying about failure and more time pursuing excellence.
7. **Self-consciousness disappears.** All artists and creatives have had the experience of being fully absorbed in a creative task, and entering the altered state of consciousness called 'flow'. As a coach, you can raise the individual's awareness of the flow state - such as the elements of visualisation, auditory imagination and physical sensation - and help identify the actions, environments and other triggers that lead to flow.
8. **The sense of time becomes distorted.** Although it is possible for a coach trained in hypnosis to use suggestion to create an altered sense of time, this is not necessary or desirable in a business context! For practical purposes, it's best to regard this element of creative flow as a by-product of the other elements, and to simply notice the signs in others. For instance, are people clock-watching and eager to leave, or do they seem absorbed in their work and oblivious to the passing of time? Remember, this is not about monitoring their 'timekeeping', but noticing how absorbed and self-motivated they are.
9. **The activity becomes 'autotelic' - meaning it is an end in itself.** 'Time flies when you're having fun' - a wise coach will bear this in mind, and pay attention to the levels of enjoyment within a creative team. This doesn't just mean whether people are nice to each other or can share a laugh (although that certainly helps) but whether they find **the work itself** enjoyable and stimulating. If they do, then you don't need to worry about 'motivating' them - and you can all concentrate on creating work that exceeds expectations.

# 12. The Business Impact of Coaching



*Photo by Joi*

Having spent a lot of time outlining the What and How of coaching, it's time to revisit the Why - the key benefits to a business where coaching is an integral part of managing performance and developing people's talents.

I've left this till late in this guide because until we're clear about what coaching is and how it works, it's hard to consider its impact on an organisation. With all complex 'people skills', it is hard to draw a straight line between particular skills and practices and business results. This is particularly true of coaching, as it is essentially a facilitative approach. Whether managers or consultants, coaches act as catalysts for various processes within an organisation, which means it's often hard to separate out the different elements that contribute to success.

However we can identify factors that coaching seeks to influence, and consider how it does this. In each case, note how the personal benefits (to both coaches and coachees) are intimately linked to the business benefits. Ideally a company should be looking for a dynamic balance between the two, especially in the context of a creative business.

## **Commitment**

It's impossible to *create* commitment - but you can *encourage* it by giving people an opportunity to (a) work towards goals they find personally meaningful as well as delivering business results, and (b) use their creativity and initiative to do the job in their own way. Coaching offers a wealth of options for doing both of these. In fact, the coaching approach is founded on the assumption that the coach's role is to act as a facilitator, while the coachee has the biggest emotional investment in the goal and the responsibility for committing to action.

## **Creativity**

Following on from **Commitment**, because the coach is a facilitator, asking questions, listening and giving feedback in order to stimulate the coachee's thinking, it is a highly creative process. Not in an abstract, fuzzy way, but in challenging people to come up with ideas that are new, useful and practical - and then to put them into action and see them through. For more on coaching and creativity see the chapters on **How Coaching Creates Creative Flow** and **Why Coaching Matters to Creative Businesses**.

## **Empowerment**

When people are given the opportunity to pursue meaningful goals using their own ingenuity and initiative, this results in high levels of empowerment within an organisation. There are obvious benefits to the team members being empowered in this way - in terms of using their skills and talents to the full and gaining the satisfaction, recognition and rewards of doing so. And having these people work at full capacity obviously benefits the organisation too. But it is not so commonly noticed that delegating responsibility and empowering people has huge benefits for the managers themselves - when they can genuinely empower people, managers are able to free up their time and energy from micromanaging and use it for the 'big picture' thinking and action that is crucial to the company's success.

## **Accountability**

Commitment, creativity and empowerment are all very well, but if left unchecked they can create more problems than they solve. Coaching balances these freedoms with a strong emphasis on accountability: goal-setting, questioning, listening, giving feedback and reviewing progress all enable managers to monitor progress, detect problems and help people to correct mistakes, solve problems and deal with unexpected outcomes. This ensures that good intentions and creative freedoms deliver tangible results.

## **Performance improvements**

Because coaching balances creative empowerment with rigorous monitoring of results, it can have a big impact on performance. Other reasons for its success in raising performance are the facts that it is highly focused on the day-to-day realities of work, and the typical format is one-to-one - so it is very flexible in adapting to the specific needs of the individual and the situation.

When these individual improvements are multiplied and co-ordinated by 'cascading' coaching throughout the company (i.e. so that managers are coaching each other throughout the levels of the organisation) then the impact on performance can be dramatic.

### **Morale and retention**

It's fairly obvious that staff who are empowered and supported to use their talents in the pursuit of meaningful (to them) goals are likely to be happier than if their enthusiasm is thwarted by old-school 'command and control' approaches to management. But the impact on company morale and staff retention are easier to overlook. In their classic study of the effect of management behaviours on business performance, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman make the findings of their research crystal clear:

Our research yielded many discoveries, but the most powerful was this: Talented employees need great managers. The talented employee may join a company because of its charismatic leaders, its generous benefits, and its world-class training programs, but how long that employee stays and how productive he is while he is there is determined by his relationship with his immediate supervisor. (*Break All the Rules*, p.11)

Coaching offers the 'immediate supervisor' a set of principles and practical tools for managing this relationship in the most productive and satisfying way for all concerned - increasing the chances that the talented employees will hang around and do their best work in your company.

### **Skills and knowledge**

Coaching focuses on learning on the job, ensuring that results are delivered and lessons are learned simultaneously. Over time, this results in a more highly skilled workforce who are able to take on more ambitious work and complete it to a higher standard.

### **Intellectual capital**

In addition to developing skills and knowledge, continuous coaching will contribute to the development of the company as a **learning organisation**. When learning is an ongoing, integral element of an organisation it enhances not just its operational efficiency but also its 'intellectual capital' - a vital asset in a knowledge-driven economy. In their book *Coaching and Mentoring*, Eric Parsloe and Monica Wray present the case for the learning organisation, beginning with the premise that 'we are moving into an era of global, information technology-driven organisations'. They argue that 'Storage, transfer and retrieval of information is essentially technology-driven, but application of that information is people-driven' and that 'Only organizations, and individuals, that actively manage their learning processes will be successful - or indeed will survive!' (*Coaching and Mentoring*, p.17). Their 'new agenda for the learning organisation' includes 'encouraging as many people as possible, and certainly all managers, to become coaches to ensure learning occurs in the workplace and elsewhere' (p.22).

Jane Greene and Anthony Grant make a similar case for coaching in a knowledge economy:

We are moving from an industrial era in which wealth lay in raw materials, machinery, goods – what Karl Marx called ‘the means of production’ – into a world where wealth and power lie in ideas, imagination, knowledge and the information you control. (*Solution-Focused Coaching*, p.4)

They quote an article from *HR Focus* magazine, January 1996, stating that ‘The emergence of the knowledge-based economy requires managers to act as coaches’.

These writers present coaching as a vital approach for all companies managing learning and performance in a knowledge economy. I believe coaching becomes even more valuable in the context of the creative economy and creative industries - where 'ideas, imagination, knowledge and the information' are the lifeblood of every creative business.



# 13. Why Coaching Matters to Creative Companies



*Photo by wili\_hybrid*

Having looked at **The Business Impact of Coaching**, I'm now going to focus specifically on companies in the creative industries - such as advertising agencies, design studios, TV broadcasters, computer games developers - and explain why I believe coaching is vitally important to their success.

In this context I should really refer to coaching as 'coaching' or even ~~eeaching~~ - creative people are often suspicious of 'management speak' and [my research](#) showed me that many of them put the word 'coaching' in that category. No problem. I'm not a huge fan of the word myself. I'm more interested in what people *do* than in what label we use for it.

And what I've noticed are lots of managers, creative directors and other leaders of creative teams using skills that are very similar to classic coaching behaviours - i.e. lots of listening, asking questions, observational feedback, defining the goal/brief and then stepping back and allowing people to find their own way of achieving it. It's as if these managers, many of whom have never read a book on coaching, using a coaching-style approach intuitively, because they find it the most effective way to get the best out of creative people.

So why are these coaching behaviours effective at facilitating high-level creative work?

## Questions

We have already seen, in **Key Coaching Skills**, that questions are one of the hallmarks of the coaching style of management. They are also key drivers of creative endeavour. Many great creative discoveries and inventions have begun with questions - What if we did things differently? What if we could travel to the moon? What happens if we start connecting up all these computers?

## Looking and listening

In his classic book on creative thinking, *A Whack on the Side of the Head*, Roger von Oech quoted Nobel Prize-winning physicist Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, who said: 'Discovery consists of looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different'. We all spend a lot of time looking at each other, yet it is surprising how little we often see. Much of the time we are too preoccupied with our own ideas and needs to really focus on the other person. Coaches spend a lot of time looking at people and listening to them carefully - and noticing little clues in the way they speak or act. These clues can be the difference between success and failure in a working relationship - particularly when dealing with notoriously complex and sensitive creative types.

## Different perspectives

According to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 'The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function'. Combining multiple perspectives is central to creativity - and to coaching. Good coaches are able to empathise with coachees and see the world from their point of view - even if they don't necessarily agree with their opinions. Many classic coaching questions prompt people to examine a situation from new perspectives, e.g. 'What would person X say about this problem?', 'What's good about being stuck?', or 'What's the view from Mars?'

## Exchanging information and ideas

Related to different perspectives is the importance of exchanging information and ideas for creativity to happen. The most obvious recent example is the massive surge of creativity and innovation facilitated by the growth of the internet, perhaps the ultimate information exchange. Creative exchanges are integral to coaching, a conversational medium that facilitates better communication and the sharing of ideas.

## Intrinsic motivation

One of the key findings of the research on creativity is that creativity is highly correlated with intrinsic motivation - i.e. when we are working for the joy of the task itself, we are likely to be more creative than if we are working in order to achieve something else (extrinsic motivation). For

example, the poet Anne Sexton told her agent that although she would love to make a lot of money by writing poems, she had to 'forget all about that' in order to actually write them.

Coaching facilitates intrinsic motivation by asking questions and delivering observational feedback in a way that helps coachees focus on the task in hand. *In The Inner Game of Tennis*, coach Timothy Gallwey says he noticed that it didn't seem to matter whether he praised or critiqued tennis players, as both had a negative effect on their performance. Even his well-intentioned praise had the effect of making them take their eye off the ball, since they started judging themselves and hoping their next shot would be as good as the last one. So he stopped praising them and instead asked them to notice whether the ball was spinning clockwise or anticlockwise as it flew towards them - in order to answer this, they had to focus on the ball itself, and they were much more likely to return the ball over the net.

### **Creative flow**

At its most intense, intrinsic motivation and absorption in creative work can lead to creative flow, described by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi as 'An almost automatic, effortless, yet highly focused state of consciousness'. Creative flow is the state of mind in which peak creative performance is achieved - see **How Coaching Creates Creative Flow**.

### **Individuality**

Creative people are famously idiosyncratic, and there is no 'right way' or 'best practice' in creative work. Coaching typically takes place in one-to-one discussion and demands that the coach adapts her approach to the coachee's personality, learning style and situation - so it is ideally suited to working with all the kinks and nuances of an individual creative talent.

### **Learning on the job**

Coaching deals with live work issues, not abstract or hypothetical situations. It focuses on the realities of the current situation and develops creative options that are then tried and tested. This is a good fit with the culture of many creative industries, where off-site training may be rare but there is a long tradition of learning on the job through a process of osmosis, support and challenge from peers and managers.

### **Influence rather than authority**

Creative people are typically not impressed by fancy titles and formal authority, only by talent and results. If you want to get the best out of them, you will need to exert influence rather than rely on authority and giving orders. Coaching offers a practical approach to exerting influence and stimulating people to find creative solutions to challenges. Crucially, it is a facilitative approach, enabling you to create a space for others' creativity - thus minimising the risk of ruffling creatives' feathers by intruding into their territory!

## **Creative capital**

We saw in **The Business Impact of Coaching** how coaching helps learning organisations increase their intellectual capital. In his book *The Creative Economy*, John Howkins extends this into the concept of creative capital:

It seems reasonable to treat creativity as a capital asset. It has the essential qualities. It results from investment, which the owner may increase or vary; and it is a significant input to creative products. It is a substantial component of human capital. According to George Bernard Shaw, the only sensible definition of capital was Stanley Jevon's casual remark that it was 'spare money'. We could call intellectual capital 'spare ideas', and creative capital 'spare creativity'. Creative capital ... may have been included in some varieties of intellectual capital, but only on the edge. It needs to be fully recognized.

Describing the conditions for developing this capital, he says 'Creative capital gains most when it is managed and made purposive ... The creative manager uncovers the intellectual assets that lie hidden in companies and, ultimately, in our minds'. As the above examples show, coaching is one of the most effective means of uncovering these 'hidden assets' in the minds of creative workers - and therefore a vital way of increasing the value of any creative business.

# 14. Recommended Coaching Books



*Photo by photogl*

## **Coaching for Performance - John Whitmore**

A classic book, by former racing car champion Sir John Whitmore. With Timothy Gallwey (see below) he formed Inner Game Ltd, which introduced principles from their sports coaching into the business arena. Whitmore emphasizes the facilitative nature of coaching in this definition: 'Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them'. He goes on to show how the real value of coaching skills such as listening, asking questions and giving nonjudgmental feedback is in enabling coachees to develop their awareness and responsibility through decisions and action. The book also introduces the GROW model, which is now a widely adopted framework for coaching in business.

## **Solution-Focused Coaching: Managing People in a Complex World - Jane Greene and Anthony M. Grant**

An excellent introduction to coaching, and one of the few coaching books that acknowledges the influence of Solution-Focused Brief Psychotherapy and Hypnotherapist Milton Erickson on coaching. Another distinctive feature of the book is the way it highlights the importance of coaching in a knowledge economy - 'a world where ideas and power lie in ideas, imagination, knowledge and the information you control'. The breadth and depth of the authors' knowledge is impressive, but they wear their learning lightly - the book is clearly written, with lots of practical advice and concrete examples. The design is quite funky too. All of which makes this one of my favourite coaching books, one I can keep returning to for inspiration.

## **The Inner Game of Tennis - Timothy Gallwey**

Another coaching classic, and another book written by a sportsman-turned-business-coach. Tim Gallwey writes that he has been obsessed with the 'inner game' of sports performance ever since he missed an easy chance to win a high-stakes competitive tennis match. This book offers a fascinating account of his experience of coaching tennis players to overcome the mental obstacles to success. He describes human beings as divided into 'Self 1' (rational, controlling, judging) and Self 2 (spontaneous, present, instinctive). Left to its own devices, Self 2 can learn easily and reach peak performance - but Self 1 typically interferes, making the player tense up by trying too hard and judging his/her own performance instead of focusing on the ball.

What has this got to do with creative work? Well Gallwey wrote the book for tennis pros, not creative pros - but anyone who has experienced difficulty with an over-active Inner Critic or the 'almost automatic, effortless' state of creative flow should have no problem relating to Gallwey's Self 1 and Self 2, and adopting some of the principles of the Inner Game approach. In Gallwey's recent book *The Inner Game of Work* he explains how the Inner Game principles apply to the world of business and management. This is another very good book, which I also recommend, but for me Gallwey's approach to tennis resonates as a powerful analogy for all kinds of work. Maybe it's because in sport the goals, rules and outcomes are so sharply defined that it makes the issues crystal clear and memorable. So I recommend you read *The Inner Game of Tennis* first.

## **The One Minute Manager Meets the Monkey - Ken Blanchard, William Oncken Jr and Hal Burrows**

If you feel overwhelmed by managerial responsibility and feel as though nothing will get done unless you supervise it personally, I highly recommend this book - I've lost count of the number of managers who have told me it has removed a huge amount of stress from their lives. One of several sequels to *The One Minute Manager*, this book has two main virtues: 1. It's short - 130 large-type pages. 2. It makes a powerful idea very memorable and easy to apply in practice. The Monkey is the responsibility for the next move on any given task. As a manager, you are accountable for everything, so it's only human nature to want to take responsibility for everything people are doing in your team - i.e. to 'pick up the Monkey' and start making decisions for them and telling them what to do. Unfortunately you are not superhuman\* so you can't do everything. You have plenty of Monkeys of your own, without trying to deal with other people's. And when



you take away people's capacity to decide for themselves, you risk demotivating them and training them to depend on you for everything. This book does an excellent job of showing how you can reverse this cycle, empower your people by delegating tasks and decisions - and 'insure' yourself and your team members against failure.

### **Why Employees Don't Do What They're Supposed to Do - and What to Do About It - by Ferdinand Fournies**

If you are a manager trying to deal with 'difficult' people in your team, this book is for you. I've never worked with a group of managers who didn't become very animated when I asked them Fournies' question 'Why don't people do what they're supposed to do?'. Unfortunately, many of the 'obvious' answers to the question - 'because they're difficult, lazy, stupid, prima donnas' etc. - actually make your problem worse. After all, if someone is plain lazy, what can you do about it? Not much. Fortunately, as Fournies points out, to be an effective manager you don't need to rebuild their personality - just influence their behaviour. To help you do this, he gives 16 answers to the question that actually give you practical options for solving the problem. Some of my favourites are 'They think they are doing it', 'They think their way is better' and 'They are rewarded for not doing it'. This is fairly typical of Fournies' direct and prescriptive writing style, which some people find annoying. Personally I find it entertaining and he's got the ideas to back it up. This is a book that has saved me a lot of frustration - hopefully it will do the same for you.

### **Coaching and Mentoring: practical methods to improve learning - Eric Parsloe and Monika Wray**

A book that gives an excellent overview of the coaching profession and methods, as well as practical advice on core skills, especially feedback, listening and questioning. It begins with a survey of the origins of coaching - in sports, psychotherapy, academia and the corporate world, and situates coaching as an essential catalyst for the learning organisation, which in turn is key to success in a knowledge economy. The book then introduces the main styles, models and theories of coaching, before giving practical advice on three core coaching skills - giving feedback, observational listening and asking questions. I particularly like the final sections of the book, where Parsloe and Wray emphasise the value of simplicity in coaching: 'Success comes from doing simple things consistently'. Simple things like 'make sure you meet', 'keep it brief' and 'ask, don't tell'.

### **First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently - Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman**

Not strictly a coaching book, but I'm including it as it's a thought-provoking and useful read for managers who want to raise their team's performance through coaching. It is also based on a key coaching principle - find out what works well and build on it. Buckingham and Coffman did this via their research with Gallup, which focused on the questions 'What do the most talented employees need from the workplace?' and 'How do the world's greatest managers find, focus and keep talented employees?'. This led them to four key principles for facilitating outstanding performance:



1. **Select for talent** - instead of hiring people on the usual basis of experience, brainpower or willpower, find people who have a talent for the specific kind of tasks the role requires.
2. **Define the right outcomes** - and let people find their own way to achieve them.
3. **Focus on strengths** - give people every opportunity to excel at things they are already good at, and don't waste time trying to fix all their weaknesses.
4. **Find the right fit** - don't blindly assume that career advancement = moving into a managerial role, whether or not people are suited or attracted to it. If someone has the talent and inclination to manage others, give them the opportunity, but if they have different skills and preferences, give them opportunities to advance their career without having to move into a 'hands off' managerial role.

\*If you *are* superhuman, please accept my apologies and send me an [e-mail](#). I'd love to know why you're reading my e-book and what you think of it.

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**Kyle Potts, Lifehacker**

# 16. About the Author

## Mark McGuinness

I'm a poet and a business coach specialising in the creative industries and professional artists and creatives. I deal with the 'people factors' in the creative process - the [imagination](#), [collaboration](#) and [direction](#) that are essential for creative and commercial success.

I've spent over 10 years coaching creative professionals in all kinds of media - including novelists, actors, graphic designers, visual artists, classical and popular musicians, DJs, composers, copywriters, film directors, programmers and architects. I've also delivered coaching, training and consulting for organisations including Channel 4, the BBC, Transport for London, Gist, Vodafone, BT, Servier Laboratories, the Arts Council, Arts & Business and the University of Warwick.

My creative and business interests have converged with [Wishful Thinking](#) - a specialist consultancy for creative professionals and agencies, studios and other companies in the creative industries sector. I write the [Wishful Thinking blog](#) to provide practical tips and inspiration for creative professionals of all descriptions.

I originally qualified as a psychotherapist and have an MA in Creative & Media Enterprises from the University of Warwick. My MA [research dissertation](#) was on approaches to coaching and people management in the UK creative industries. If you are interested, you can [listen to my research interviews](#) with managers, directors and development professionals in the creative sector.

[E-mail me](#) if you have any questions about developing coaching skills within your organisation.

