

Transformational Coaching

7 Keys to Realise Potential & Raise Performance

A Guide for Professional Coaches, Managers and Leaders.

by Peter Milligan

*"You don't inspire people by showing how powerful you are;
you inspire people by showing how powerful they are."*

- Alexander den Heijer

The power of effective coaching to transform individuals, teams and the performance of organisations should never be underestimated.

Equally, we should never assume that coaching is nothing more than simply asking some good questions and helping someone set some goals.

Those of us who are committed to constantly growing our skill in coaching, understand that it is closely correlated with our own developmental journey.

I have been using coaching in my leadership development work over the past 25 years so here are my thoughts on 7 essential aspects of effective coaching.

1. Build and Maintain Trust

Trust is the most essential foundation of a powerful collaborative coaching relationship. When trust is missing, that power is lost.

To appreciate why trust can be withheld, we need to appreciate human vulnerability and the normal desire to protect it. This can only happen when we're in touch with our own. We then have empathy and compassion (the capacity to "suffer with" another).

When you can say, "me too" and the other person feels understood, they are more willing to explore their inner world (thoughts and feelings) which is where resistance to change can be found and released.

Some purists in the coaching world say coaches should never share their own stories. In my experience, that's nonsense. Whilst you shouldn't hijack the session and make it all about yourself, the truth is that shared human stories of struggle and success help us connect and learn together.

The brilliant work of Brene Brown has highlighted the power of vulnerability. Like her, I have struggled with vulnerability. For a long time, I wanted to be Perfect Peter and told myself that I had no right to help anyone else until I was. What I know now, is that *perfection weakens connection*.

A former colleague of mine learned this very quickly. He met with someone who was potentially his first coaching client. In his desire to impress the person, he listed his qualifications and extensive career achievements until the potential client eventually said, "Stop it; you're scaring me!"

Here are three ways to build trust.

a) Promise complete confidentiality (and be careful to maintain it).

To go on the developmental journey, people need to know that it's safe to reveal and explore their private thoughts and feelings in your presence. If they suspect these might be shared (deliberately or carelessly), they will hold back. Professional coaches always explicitly "contract" on this important issue with all relevant stakeholders.

b) Practice feeling love and compassion towards everyone you meet.

Being human, your assumptions and prejudices may get in the way. Even if we don't openly criticise the other person, they can still sense our judgement. So be more forgiving and understanding. Ironically, acceptance is usually a precursor to change. When people feel understood, they relax. When they relax, they are more open to other perspectives and options.

c) Share some relevant aspects of your own journey, "warts and all."

By being open and willing to laugh at, and learn from, your own folly, you are leading by example. You are making it okay, not to be okay. People relax in the presence of a person who is "comfortable in their own skin", someone who is both confident and humble at the same time.

2. Be Fully Present and Attentive.

The best gift you can ever give anyone is your full attention.

It helps to communicate in an environment with less distractions and external noise. However, it isn't *external* noise that is most concerning.

What is most damaging to good listening, is the "noise" INSIDE us. Our prejudices, assumptions and opinions; our guilt and regrets about the past; our fears and concerns about the future. These are all pollutants to our personal presence.

I remember being in a 45-minute review meeting with two people including a senior sponsor of my work. This man kept checking his phone and clearly had a lot on his mind that morning. It occurred to me later that it would have been more productive and satisfying for all of us if we'd just had a 15-minute meeting where he was fully present.

We live in a noisy, busy culture with minds to match. Coaching works partly because it carves out some time from the busyness of the business. It is even more powerful when there is high quality attention being given by both people in the room.

Here are three ways to build presence:

a) Calm your mind before the conversation.

Take a couple of minutes to relax and ground yourself. Whatever you were thinking about beforehand, let it go – you can come back to it later! Take some slow, deep breaths and relax. Notice your breathing, feel your feet on the floor and the energy in your body.

b) Practice noticing thoughts and seeing them as temporary visitors.

The most powerful thing about human beings is our capacity for awareness. We can observe thoughts passing through the mind. True freedom is being able to hold a belief lightly without the belief holding you. Treat thoughts like visitors to your home. You don't have to let them move in and take possession!

c) Become an observer rather than a judge.

Notice what is being said (and not said). Listen to the words, the structure and patterns of communication. Notice people's body language, facial expressions and tone of voice, and notice your own. Judgement is anathema to presence. Just be mildly curious about where it might go. Be willing to share your present observations of self and other in a spirit of inquiry.

3. Be wary of collusion.

Building rapport helps to build a relationship. As Anthony Robbins once said, "People who are like each other, like each other."

However, our desire to connect and be liked can start to undermine good coaching. Seeing things through someone else's eyes is a great skill but remember that their perspective is just *one* aspect of truth. There are always other sides to any story.

As a professional coach I regularly meet with a supervisor. Her role is to help ensure that I am coaching as effectively as I can. She often reminds me to be careful not to collude with the client. I've had people describe a situation or person so passionately and articulately that I started to accept what is true for them as THE truth. If I simply reinforce their version of reality without helping them to try out different perspectives and approaches, I'm not expanding their awareness or supporting their growth.

Here are three ways to avoid collusion:

a) Keep asking if there might be any other equally valid perspectives.

While showing that you accept the person's perspective as very real for them, gently explore other possible perspectives in a spirit of curiosity.

b) Encourage communication with those who see things differently.

When I listen to my clients, I generally find the amount of complaining ABOUT another person is inversely proportional to the amount of talking WITH them to share and resolve concerns. Real communication with effective listening helps build the understanding needed for true collaboration.

c) Remember that respect does not have to mean agreement.

People often worry about conflict and being disliked for taking a different position. (That's often why they hold back with the person and complain behind their back instead). It's quite safe to disagree if you still respect them and they know that. So be honest with yourself. Do you enjoy making them wrong, perhaps so you can feel superior? If so, clean that up! When people feel intrinsically respected by you, they'll be more inclined to consider any different perspective you bring to the table.

4. Assume there is unrealised potential waiting to be discovered.

Over 25 years ago I came across a simple but powerful metaphor which I keep in mind and regularly share. Every one of us is like a diamond, covered in layers of unpleasant excrement which we keep trying to hide with a layer of pretty nail varnish.

The diamond represents light and love (something eternal and beautiful). The excrement represents fear, guilt and shame. It's the underlying feeling of being bad, inadequate and unsafe. The nail varnish is our attempts to cover up our own darkness, trying to pretend to ourselves and others that it isn't there and we are okay.

It's ironic because in trying to conceal the unpleasant stuff, the real value and beauty underneath gets forgotten and remains hidden.

Whether you're a professional coach or simply a leader wanting to bring the best out of others, you may find the metaphor helpful.

When I see people (including myself!) trying too hard to impress others, or being arrogant, negative, defensive or aggressive, I recognise a struggle between the dark stuff and the attempts to cover it over. When I see people (including myself!) being charismatic, joyful and loving, I think of it as that precious diamond shining through.

A good coach/leader understands that every human has some unpleasant dark stuff and a "veneer." Rather than just react to it (deciding that this is a seriously flawed person and nothing more), they remember to look deeper for the hidden "diamond."

Here are three ways to tap into unrealised potential:

a) Search for the hero inside.

Listen carefully to their stories. At times in their life they will have taken risks, made mistakes, learned lessons and lived to tell the tale. Notice what personal qualities were shown and help them to "re-cognise" them and remember these qualities are still available to them.

b) Recognise that every weakness is a strength taken too far.

Being over-sensitive shows an ability to feel emotions, a quality that is valuable for empathy. Being aggressive shows powerful energy and drive that could be harnessed and directed more effectively. Coaching helps people to recognise how to utilise the qualities they already have rather than making them wrong.

c) Be willing to challenge them from love, not criticism.

If you are going to share your disappointment with someone's attitude or performance, check your intent. Is it mainly about *you*; *your* needs and *your* frustrations? If so, they will know that and not find any intrinsic motivation to change. If, however, you genuinely want them to be successful and fulfilled, they will sense that you care and are more likely to take on board your feedback and rise to the challenge.

5. Remember that you are always dealing with systems.

During my training, I met a child psychologist who said, “Whenever there is a ‘problem child’, I want to see the family.” I never forgot his message. A child does not exist in isolation; they are part of a system called a family. That system could somehow be contributing to the challenge, and so it also could help resolve it.

The same applies to the relationship between any person and their organisation. (It is also worth remembering that, as a leader or coach, we are also part of the system when we are involved).

When working with any individual, remember they are part of many different systems. It is valuable to understand the dynamics of the team(s) they belong to and the culture of the organisation. I often say that I prefer to coach “the whole person” which means also having some insight into their lives beyond work. Sometimes our sessions have been around some personal challenges that, if ignored, can undermine their work.

Here are three ways to work effectively with the systems:

a) Get to know more about the organisation.

Take a closer look. What is the origin story? Where is it placed in the current market? Is it growing or shrinking? What are the ambitions? Who are the current leaders? Be highly observant when stepping into an organisation. Notice the physical space and sense the culture. What are the people like and how do they interact with you, customers, and each other? Find out what is expected of people, what seems to be important, what is rewarded and criticised. What are people worried about or complaining about?

b) Get to know more about the team(s).

Every person is in at least one team. Leaders typically lead a team and are part of a leadership team. I encourage my clients to map out and understand their stakeholders, the people with whom they need to work well. As an external coach, I get permission to speak to people such as the line manager and other team members. One option is to gather feedback for the person via interviews. This can also provide insight into the people you are interviewing!

c) Get to know more about the “whole” person.

Every person is also part of a world beyond their workplace. When working with a coach, some may choose not to share much of their personal life and history. I generally find that those willing to share more openly tend to gain more value. Family issues (past or present), cultural differences, and any concerns relating to health or personal challenges can affect how a person is at work. I have helped clients gain more energy and motivation at work by offering useful tools and techniques that also help them to deal with their world outside of work.

6. Pay attention to both the inner and outer work.

Many years ago, I was working with a team of senior managers at a major international airport. The organisation was making major changes that needed to be implemented as quickly as possible. I sat and watched as plans and timelines were created and displayed around the room. During that morning, barely a mention was made as to how to engage the teams, the very people who would need to buy into and implement the changes. Maybe it was felt to be unnecessary; or perhaps just too hard.

I thought about key employees losing focus and motivation, worrying about job losses, and getting stressed by the extra workload. All at a time when *extra* attention, energy and commitment would be required.

After lunch, I stepped to the front of the room and drew a simple diagram, called “Working Above and Below the Line.” The line represents a border between the visible “outer world” and the invisible “inner world” below it. Directly above the line was the “Doing” (required activities) that underpin the “Having” (desired results). Below the line was the “Being” (hidden thoughts, emotions, values, confidence, etc.).

I reminded the team that the “invisible” was too powerful to ignore. It could undermine the “visible,” but also has the potential to support it. Like a house, the visible structure above the ground won’t be sustained without a solid foundation below the surface.

I believe that good coaching work pays attention to factors both above *and* below the line. Leaders who spend a disproportionate amount of time focussed above the line, should be encouraged to consider factors below the line (and vice versa).

Here are three ways to balance the inner and outer work:

a) Invest time with the people you need on board.

When Justin King joined Sainsburys (one of the UK’s leading supermarkets) as CEO he made no major decisions until he’d spent time meeting a lot of people in the business. Not only did he learn more about the company, but the people would have felt heard and more willing to support change. This “intangible” (higher level of engagement) set a foundation for delivering tangible results.

b) Make sure people feel connected to a sense of purpose.

In his popular TED talk, “How leaders inspire action,” Simon Sinek draws three concentric circles. The outer one is WHAT we do, the next is HOW we do it, and inner core is WHY we do it. The core provides inspiration, purpose and meaning. The more you help people feel personally aligned with the purpose of the organisation, the more innovation and discretionary effort you will see.

c) Ensure ideas move quickly into action.

One of the biggest frustrations of professional coaches is that their clients leave a session with brilliant insights and bold intentions, but don’t act on them. Doing something new or different can be uncomfortable. A skill is only built when we move from idea to activity. *Small steps are more productive than just big ideas.* If possible, get them practising whilst with you, or doing something immediately afterwards and then sharing the results and their learning.

7. Stay open to learning.

You will be more effective at coaching and leading others when you see yourself as being on a developmental journey too. Firstly, it gives you more empathy for those you are expecting to step beyond their comfort zone! Secondly, it encourages and inspires them to know that you are willing to step beyond yours.

I regularly meet with my supervisor who helps me to keep improving my professional practices. In addition, I occasionally engage an experienced coach to also challenge and support me on my own learning journey.

Coaching is different to traditional education where the teacher is held as the superior who holds and dispenses knowledge. As a leader or coach, you may know some things they don't, but they also know things you don't. The coaching will be far better when you see yourselves as peers on a learning journey called life.

Over time, we can get better at self-coaching as we develop greater self-honesty and more awareness of self, others and the surrounding systems.

One thing is for sure: life will always continue to deliver new challenges to stimulate further growth!

Here are three ways to demonstrate your openness to learning:

a) Be coachable and get coached.

We can learn from anyone, especially when we stay curious, seek the perspectives of others, reduce our defensiveness and have the courage to step beyond what is known and comfortable. From time to time, seek support from someone with the coaching skills and experience to take you even further.

b) Read, listen, watch, and work with other leaders, coaches and teachers.

Some focus upon producing results in the *outer* world. Some specialise in mastering your *inner* self. Give yourself a balanced diet of the two.

c) See learning as an intrinsically joyful process.

When we were small children, learning was fast and fun. We didn't worry about being "wrong," we just tried stuff out to discover what would happen. Sooner or later, most of us were socialised to avoid making mistakes and looking "stupid." That old programming can slow your progress, so look to rediscover some of that playful spirit when it comes to learning, while still being a responsible adult.