

# How leaders use coaching skills to create lasting change



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## How can we support our team members to achieve lasting behaviour change and improve their performance?

The transfer of learning from training is often cited to be woefully low. So, if training cannot achieve lasting behaviour change, what is a viable alternative? We propose that when leaders use coaching skills on a daily basis with their team members, they hold purposeful conversations resulting in greater collaboration, increased awareness and responsibility, higher performance and, ultimately, sustained behaviour change. Leaders as coaches achieve this by adopting a coaching mindset; for example, being open and curious, adopting a non-judgemental attitude (they ask rather than assume) and having a growth mindset (they believe people can learn and change).

However, it is not just how leaders as coaches think that makes a difference – the things they do are key as well. Here, we outline four of the key coaching behaviours that successful leaders as coaches incorporate into their conversations with others.

## 1. Listening

When someone listens to us, we feel truly heard. It sends the message that we have something worth listening to, something of value. Leaders as coaches truly listen and pay attention to their team members. This means that when their team member is speaking, they are not:

- thinking about what they want to say next
- comparing what the person is saying to their own or others' experiences
- forming judgements or hypotheses on why the person is saying the things they are sharing
- distracted by anything around them

To truly listen is a skill and, importantly, a skill that is underdeveloped in many of us. The next time you are listening, use the checklist above to identify whether you were meeting the criteria for truly listening.

## 2. Asking questions

When we are asked a question, our thinking may be challenged in a new way. As leaders, we are used to being asked for our advice, making decisions and telling people what needs to happen next. However, when we take a coaching approach to leadership, we shift away from telling and towards asking. When we are asked a question, it forces us to take responsibility to come to our own conclusions and therefore provides increased accountability for our actions. A simple way to start this shift from tell to ask is the next time a team member asks for your view, pause and ask, 'What do you think?' first.

## 3. Setting goals

A large component of coaching is establishing a goal that the team member would like to work on. Goals are a powerful motivator that research consistently links to high performance. Goals direct attention and effort towards goal-relevant activities and away from goal-irrelevant activities, helping team members to work in an efficient way. Leaders as coaches can ask questions to help team members identify their goals, such as:

- What do you want to achieve?
- What makes this goal important to you?
- What will be different if you achieve this goal?
- How will you know when you have achieved this goal?

## 4. Focusing on actions

Once a goal has been established, the leader as coach can enable the team member to focus on the actions they need to take to achieve their goal. Using questions to explore their options ensures that team members experience a heightened level of responsibility and commitment towards their goal. For example:

- What do you think you could do to achieve this goal?
- What have you done already?
- What have you noticed other people doing who are successful in this area?
- What else could you try?

By asking questions such as these, team members are prompted to reflect at a deeper level, encouraging them to consider a greater range of actions than they may have considered alone. Asking team members to suggest actions, rather than the leader suggesting actions, also increases buy-in and commitment. We are far more likely to follow through with an action when we have thought of it ourselves!

Finally, leaders as coaches can really facilitate a shift in behaviour for team members by supporting them to create implementation intentions. Implementation intentions are statements that specify how an action will be implemented and, importantly, how unexpected challenges hindering actions will be overcome. For example, when situation x arises, I will perform response y. Forming implementation intentions enables behaviour change by making desirable behaviours easily accessible from our unconscious. Leaders as coaches can support team members to form these implementation intentions through questioning. For example:

- When will you complete this?
- What might stop you from achieving this?
- What will you do, if this happens, to stay on track?
- How will you plan to deal with these challenges?
- What can you do to help yourself stay on track with these plans?
- How will you monitor your performance?
- What can I do to support you?

Coupled with a coaching mindset, these four coaching behaviours (listening, asking questions, setting goals and focusing on actions) can be integrated into purposeful conversations, which can create lasting behaviour change and tangible improvements in performance.

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