

### Pre-reading 4: Coaching principles, dynamics and questions

The ALL-SR project is investigating how **coaching** can help adult literacy learners to develop the skills, strategies and confidence they need to become more effective **self-directed learners**.

This final pre-reading consists of extracts from Sir John Whitmore's book, *Coaching for Performance*. Sir John is very well-known in the field of coaching and closely associated with the GROW model. His book is directed at managers, but I think the principles, dynamics and example questions he offers in these extracts are universal and provide a good starting point for us in our pilot.

*That said, please read the material here **critically**. You do **not** have to accept or agree with it. Please note any issues or questions that arise for you and feel free to contact me with any concerns.*

*Also, please be mindful that what we are trying to do is new to all of us – you, me and our learners. If that seems a little daunting, please don't worry. Our job is just to explore this approach and see how it feels – to us and our learners. All we need at this stage is to be clear about our basic aims and objectives.*

*Please feel free to contact me ahead of Monday if you have any immediate concerns.*

As ever, please make brief notes on your response to the items (which include two short tasks), so as to support any discussion we have on Monday. Looking forward to seeing you then!

#### 4.1 Extracts from Sir John Whitmore's book, *Coaching for Performance*<sup>1</sup>

This item aims to help you develop your understanding of the principles and dynamics that inform coaching.

Please read it with the aims, objectives and rationale of our pilot in mind, i.e. to test whether a coaching approach can help adults with limited language and literacy to become more effective **self-directed learners**, able to recognise and benefit from the many language- and literacy-learning opportunities that arise naturally in the course of daily activity (including work), thus enabling them to go on learning outside of and beyond the classroom.

#### 4.1 Principles and dynamics of coaching

##### What is coaching?

Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.

##### How does coaching aim to do this?

Building awareness, responsibility and self-belief is the goal of a coach.

The underlying intent of every coaching interaction is to build the coachee's self-belief. Self-belief is built when we make decisions, take successful actions and recognise our full responsibility for both.

Responsibility demands choice. Choice demands freedom.

<sup>1</sup> Source: Whitmore, J. (2002), *Coaching for performance (Third edition)*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing. Please note that the questions in blue and any notes in square brackets are mine.

A skilful coach rarely provides or prescribes solutions.

Blame evokes defensiveness – defensiveness reduces awareness.

Building awareness and responsibility is the essence of good coaching.

### What is 'awareness'?

Awareness is knowing what is happening around you. Self-awareness is knowing what you are experiencing.

We define awareness as high-quality relevant input. [*Compare 'awareness' to the concept of 'noticing'*]

Change follows naturally and unforced once quality feedback or input is received.

Responsibility is the other key concept of goal of coaching.

### Why is 'responsibility' so important?

When we truly accept, choose or take responsibility for our thoughts and our actions, our commitment to them rises and so does our performance.)

To feel truly responsible invariably involves choice.

If I give you advice and it fails, you will blame me – which is a clear indication of where you see the responsibility lying. I have traded my advice for your responsibility and that is seldom a good deal.

### What does coaching aim to achieve?

Self-belief, self-motivation, choice, clarity, commitment, awareness, responsibility and action are the products of coaching.

Qualities of a coach: Patient, detached, supportive, interested, good listener, perceptive, aware, self-aware, attentive, retentive

### Is subject-matter expertise a help or a hindrance?

It is very hard for experts to withhold their expertise sufficiently to coach well. [*Why is not withholding expertise a problem? Because it stops the learner developing their own awareness, taking responsibility and developing their own solution.*]

Our potential is realised by optimising our own individuality and uniqueness, never by moulding them to another's opinion of what constitutes best practice.

We must understand the effect we are trying to create – awareness and responsibility – and what we say/do to create that effect.

### Why does coaching revolve around asking questions?

It is questions that best generate awareness and responsibility.

The coach must be fully attentive to coachees' answers to questions. Trust will be lost if he isn't, but also he will not know the best question to ask next. It must a spontaneous process. Hear the person through and then pause if necessary while the appropriate question comes to mind.

It has been said that since we were given two ears and one mouth, we should listen twice as much as we speak. Perhaps the hardest thing for a coach to learn to do is shut up!

It is worth reflecting back to coachee from time to time and summarising points. This will ensure correct understanding and reassure the coachee that he is being fully heard and understood. It also gives the coachee a second chance to check on the veracity of what he has said.

In most coaching sessions someone needs to take notes. When I am coaching I like to take the notes so the coachee is free to reflect.

### How might coaching be summarised?

Coaching is based on:

- Context: Awareness and Responsibility
- Skills: Effective questioning  
Active listening
- Sequence: **G** – Goals: What do you want?  
**R** – Reality: What is happening now?  
**O** – Options: What could you do?  
**W** – Will: What will you do?

## 4.2 Coaching questions

### What sort of questions help raise awareness and responsibility?

Questions should follow the interest and the train of thought of the coachee, not of the coach. If the coach leads the direction of the questions he will undermine the responsibility of the coachee.

What if the direction in which the coachee is going is a dead-end or distraction? Trust that the coachee will soon find that out for himself.

Paradoxically it may also be valuable for the coach to focus on any aspect that the coachee appears to be avoiding. 'I notice that you have not mentioned... Is there any particular reason for this?'

Questions should begin broadly and focus increasingly on detail. This demand for more detail maintains the focus and interest of the coachee.

Open questions requiring descriptive answers promote awareness, whereas closed questions are too absolute for accuracy and close the door on exploration. They [*closed questions*] do not even compel someone to engage their brain. Open questions are much more effective for generating awareness and responsibility.

The most effective questions for raising awareness and responsibility begin with words that seek to quantify or gather facts, words like *what, when, who, how much/many*. *Why* is discouraged since it often implies criticism and evokes defensiveness and *why* and *how*, if unqualified both cause analytical thinking, which can be counterproductive. Analysis and awareness are impossible to employ simultaneously to full effect. *Why* questions are better expressed as *What were the reasons...* *how* questions as *What were the steps...* They evoke more specific factual answers.

Here are a few of the questions I consistently find to be helpful in coaching.

'What else?' used at the end of most answers will evoke more. Plain silence, while allowing the coach to think, often evokes more too.

'If you knew the answer what would it be?' is not as daft as it sounds, since it enables the coachee to look beyond the blockage.

'What is the hardest/most challenging part of this for you?'

'What advice would you give to a friend in your situation?'

'Imagine having a dialogue with the wisest person you know or can think of. What would he or she tell you to do?'

'I don't know where to go next with this. Where would you go?'

'What would you gain/lose by doing/saying that?'

'If someone said/did that to you, what would you feel/think/do?'

**Task 1.** Below are some more questions from John Whitmore's book. Decide which part of the GROW sequence each question belongs to. For e.g. if you think Q1 belongs in the Goal setting stage, mark it 'G', if you think it belongs to the Reality scoping stage, mark it 'R' etc. If you think a question fits more than one stage, mark it accordingly. There are no hard-and-fast answers – this is just to get you thinking.

1. Is there anything else you want to talk about now or are we finished?
2. On a one-to-ten scale, how committed do you feel to doing what we have agreed? What stops it being a ten?
3. To what extent does this meet your objectives?
4. What action steps have you taken on it so far?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of that?
6. What could I do to support you?
7. What else could you do?
8. What intermediate steps can you identify, with their time frames?
9. What is really the issue here?
10. What is the present situation in more detail?
11. What obstacles will need to be overcome?
12. What stopped you from doing more?
13. What support do you need?
14. What ways could you approach this issue?
15. What would you like achieve in the long term, related to this issue? What is the time frame?
16. What, if any, internal obstacles or personal resistances do you have to taking action?
17. When exactly are you going to start and finish the action step?
18. Which of these solutions feels best to you?
19. Which would give the best result?
20. Which would give you the most satisfaction?
21. Would you like to add a suggestion from me?

**Task 2.** In preparation for Monday, please jot down a short (anonymous) description of the learner you will be coaching (or if you do not yet know this person, a learner you have worked with). Include age, gender, language and literacy level, job role, learning goal and any relevant personal qualities, circumstances, etc.