

# Coaching with impact



Increasingly recognised as a key skill for teachers and heads, coaching can have much to offer schools – but what is it and how does it work? **Nick Austin** and **Richard Churches** explain

There are not many staff rooms or training rooms in Britain where you will not hear the word ‘coaching’ bouncing off the walls. Definitions of coaching, however, vary considerably and often get confused with the term ‘mentoring’. In part, this confusion has arisen from several pieces of research in the 1980s, in university education departments, where ‘coaching’ and ‘mentoring’ were used interchangeably. Today there is more consistency, with ‘coaching’ increasingly applied to forms of personal development and performance improvement that use a questioning-challenging style. In this sense, coaching can be seen as a set of specific skills within a continuum of mentoring approaches. At one end of the continuum

a ‘mentor’ shares technical knowledge and skills with the person they are supporting. At the other end, a process-driven approach challenges thinking through the use of questions (see figure 1).

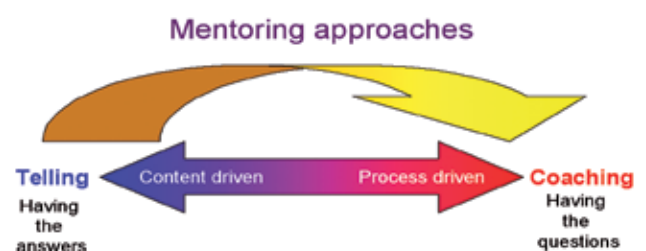


Figure 1: Mentoring approaches and the use of questions and answers

Adopting a coaching approach inevitably demands certain behaviours and attitudes. In particular, there is less input from a mentor and more response from the 'coachee'. In mentoring, the 'mentee' does most of the listening and questioning while the mentor passes on their experience (in a traditional teaching-type mode); in coaching the roles are reversed and the coach does the listening and questioning – while the 'coachee' thinks, answers and responds.

Taking the role of a coach also requires a shift in attitude. At the heart of effective coaching is the belief that people have all the internal resources they need to be effective. Of course, there will always be times when people 'don't know what they don't know' and a shift along the continuum is required. As a coach, finding yourself in such a position may well lead you to question whether the topic was an appropriate one for coaching or not. The attitude of the 'coachee' is also critical for the coaching relationship to be successful. In coaching the 'coachee' needs to bring a willing attitude and be prepared to take responsibility for their learning journey and future actions.

The importance of interpersonal skills and intrapersonal development for schools, teachers and children is increasingly being recognised by a number of writers, such as John West-Burnham. Because coaching is about interpersonal skills and intrapersonal change, highly effective coaching often incorporates strategies from a range of helping and therapeutic disciplines (including psychology, neurolinguistic programming (NLP) and psychotherapy) and you may well find yourself, as you develop as a coach, becoming more and more interested in these related areas. (If you have done any training in NLP you will notice some elements of it in this article.)

That said, coaching is not counselling, nor is it therapy (see figure 2), and it is important to have clear boundaries and ground rules in mind. In particular, it is good to avoid delving into people's pasts. Focus on the present and future in your questioning style and keep to the content that has been agreed for the session: improving performance in a work context, developing as a leader, and so on.

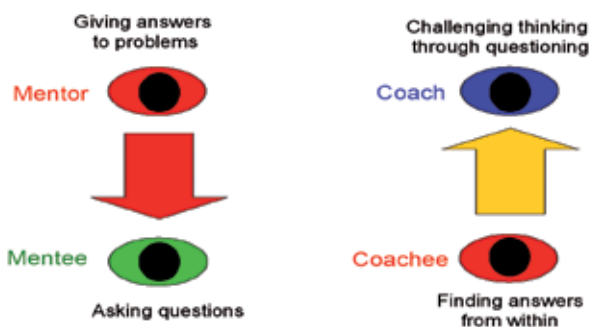


Figure 2: Mentoring v coaching methods

## The impact of questioning

So why is questioning so important and how does it have an impact? New thinking from neuroscience and psychology suggests that most of our behaviours are automatic (done without thinking-awareness) and are triggered by external stimuli. Do you remember turning the last page of this magazine? When did you do that? What made you do it? Have you ever driven somewhere and lost track of the process, arriving with pieces of the journey missing from your mind? Thinking deeply about what we are doing, and having awareness, gives us the potential to change behaviours that would otherwise be automatic. When we ask a question, as a coach (particularly an effective one), people have to think. When they are thinking, there is the potential for behaviour change.

It is this process that sits at the heart of effective coaching. As Michael Fullan puts it, in relation to school improvement in general, real breakthroughs in development come not just from the doing, but also from 'thinking about the doing'.

At their simplest, questions fall into two categories: open and closed. Closed questions, prompting the answer 'yes' or 'no' (or a single predictable response – 'leading' questions), rarely enrich or expand thinking. While closed questions are an essential tool in committing someone to action (asking "when will you do this?", for instance), open questions encourage more creative, in-depth responses which explore possibilities, unravel previously untapped ideas and resources and give greater clarity to someone's internal map. One question to use with caution in coaching (although a great question to prompt critical thinking about lesson content) is the question 'why'. Why is a question that, in a personal development/support context, can sometimes be interpreted as a challenge to values, identity and beliefs.

Questions help people to understand the situation from a variety of different perspectives, and when questions are insightful they can inspire people to transcend the limitations of their current thinking. If you always see an issue as a problem, you tend to approach it the same way each time and therefore come up against the same barriers. However, if you view a problem as an opportunity for change then it stimulates new thought processes. For example, rather than focusing energies on oneself in a situation, consider what the issue would be like if you focused on others instead – what new ideas might you come up with?

One helpful way to conceptualise the 'reframing' of a person's thinking through questioning is the 'coaching compass'. If you hear someone consistently talking about a problem from the perspective of 'self' ask a question about the opposite (e.g. what would other people say?). The coaching compass can be populated with an almost infinite range of 'frames'. Figure 3 shows some of the commonest frames that you will come across while coaching.

### The coaching compass



Ask a question to take the 'coachee' somewhere else in their thinking, if they cannot see beyond a particular barrier or way of thinking.

Figure 3: The 'coaching compass'

Questions have the power to elicit more information, to dig deeper and uncover a range of information, taking people from the surface level of the language they use to uncover to deeper meanings of what they say. In so doing, questions can reveal both the 'coachee's' internal view of the world, and their belief systems and values – what's really important to them. At the deep level, questions affirm, challenge and ultimately help the 'coachee' to re-evaluate closely held principles and values, enabling new thoughts and perspectives to surface and emerge. In effective coaching, questions become much more than a mechanism for the exchange of information: they are a catalyst for change, creativity and new solutions – releasing the 'coachee' from 'straitjacket' thinking and the limits of their own beliefs.

There may be times when the coach (while listening intently) feels at a temporary loss as to what the next question should be in order to take the 'coachee's' thinking forward. At such times, the temptation to step into the 'telling' space, or relate one's own experiences, can be hard to resist. A better approach is to ask an 'exploring phrase' or 'rescue question' ("tell me more about that", "what else...?", "and that's like what?"). Another strategy that can be used (with plenty of rapport and care) is the pause. Silences allow the 'coachee' to go back inside their mind, to listen to what they have just said, and check with their internal state and emotions. At such times, more questions can actually interrupt productive thinking, or take someone away from a



particular train of thought that may have yielded insightful new directions. In coaching, silence really can be golden – so always wait for a response.

### Getting started

There are a number of models and structures that you can apply to support the coaching process. Most models focus on asking questions to help the 'coachee' to move from a present state (or position) to a preferred, 'idealised', or desired place. Whether you start by exploring the current situation, or begin by coaching the person to identify what they want in the future, will vary according to the person that you are working with. However, the critical first step is to identify the gap between desire and reality, in areas such as actions, attitudes, awareness, beliefs, knowledge, skills and understanding. We are all different. Some people have a preference for exploring the reality and/or the present situation first. Others prefer to begin with the big picture and/or future ideas. As with all interpersonal skills, having rapport (mutual trust) is critical. There is no point in working against the psychological preferences of the person you are coaching. The quality of your attention often determines the quality of the other person's thinking and really listening can ignite the mind. This said, at the heart of coaching, is also the process of challenging people to think differently and in ways that are not their first port in a storm.

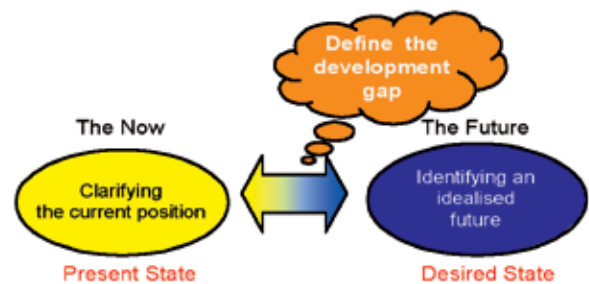


Figure 4: The 'development gap'

Establishing the development gap (see figure 4) may take time and require you to move between clarifying the current position and the idealised future. A key skill is to question in such a way that you explore the situation from all sides, developing a rich picture for both yourself and the 'coachee'. Our working memory is limited to seven, plus or minus two, pieces of information and typically people will delete, distort or generalise large amounts of their experience when asked about it. Some of the deleted information may well be critical to helping the person to make a decision, or to become clear about their next steps.

Coaching someone is like an iceberg: it's about not just what you can see from the surface (a small percentage of the whole) but also from deep underneath. The richer the detail of the idealised vision you can elicit from the person you are supporting (particularly sensory information), the more likely they are to feel a sense of connection and motivation between themselves and their goal or outcome.

Ask questions like these:

- As you imagine yourself in the future doing that, what do you see?
- What do you hear (in terms of the sounds around you, what other people are saying and in relation to your own internal dialogue)?
- What are you feeling (emotionally and physically)?

The next stage in the process is one in which the coach supports the 'coachee' to explore the possible options, and potential routes, on their journey from current reality to future possibility. Don't be content with just pulling out a few options. The last thought is often the most significant. Use questions that target values to help the 'coachee' to 'sort' for a best-fit option. As with all helping approaches, it is important to pause and summarise what you hear throughout the process, both to ensure clarity and to show active listening and rapport.

Of course, there is also a real world out there beyond the mind of the person you are supporting. Therefore, the final stage is critical. Ask challenging questions to ensure commitment to the goal, and first steps in the process, by moving to a more closed questioning approach: when, where, with whom? Get the specifics and ensure that the person has a really clear plan of action – with dates and resources mapped out (see figure 5).

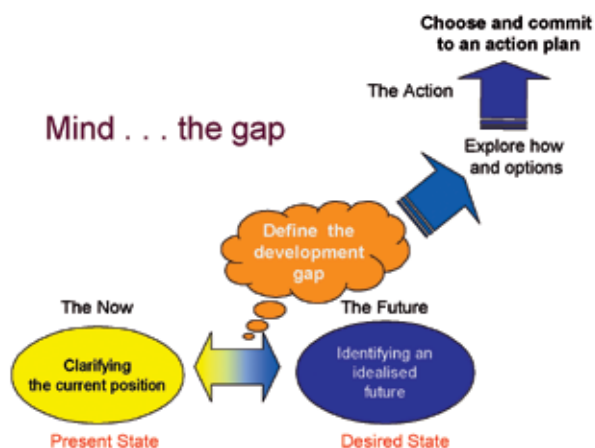


Figure 5: Acting on the development gap

### Coaching as a leadership style

In recent years a number of writers, such as Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, have pointed to the importance of questioning skills and coaching as a leadership style. At an organisational level the same processes of distortion, deletion and generalisation can also have a significant effect. Have you ever watched a senior leader in your school, or team leader, come up with a vision for the school (or department) you work in, but fail to ask people what they think at a deep level? How quickly were holes in the vision exposed behind the scenes by those who were not on board, and how useful and welcome would that knowledge have been for the leader?

Effective schools share and distribute leadership and construct their visions based on a combination of idealised future, current reality and an understanding of the organisation's development needs. The power of coaching, as a leadership style, is that it unleashes a shared responsibility for the realisation of the vision, crystallising a sense of common purpose and motivating teams and individuals.

The benefits for children can be palpable too. Research consistently shows that effective questioning in the classroom has a positive impact on learning, particularly the use of 'higher-order' (critical thinking questions) and open-ended questions. The evidence suggests that it is particularly important at the start of the learning and that questioning should take up a significant part of the lesson. Effective teachers also ensure that there is a high proportion of non-evaluative questioning (to ensure motivation and participation), open questioning and a focus on process questions. As in one-to-one coaching, it is important for teachers to leave sufficient time for children to process their answers in their minds.

Evidence from research into school improvement is also compelling. CfBT Education Trust and Institute of Education (University of London) research, by Sara Bubb and Peter Earley, into effective staff development and school improvement, identified coaching, mentoring, observing and developing others as some of the factors for success. Specifically, their study identified coaching as one of the most useful kinds of development both for teachers and support staff. They conclude that "schools should move towards a more personalised approach to staff development and learning, in the same way that there is talk of personalising learning for pupils there must be the equivalent notion for the school workforce".

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### Further reading

- Bubb, S; Earley, P (2008), *From self-evaluation to school improvement: the importance of effective staff development*, CfBT Education Trust
- Churches, R; West-Burnham, J (2008), *Leading learning through relationships: the implications of neurolinguistic programming for personalisation and the children's agenda in England*, CfBT Education Trust
- Churches, R; Terry, R (2008), *NLP for Teachers: How to be a highly effective teacher*, Crown House
- Terry, R; Churches, R (2009), *The NLP for Teachers Resource Book*, Crown House