



Leading & Coaching Through Conflict

Introduction

For decades, managers were often promoted due to their technical proficiency rather than their potential as leaders. When moving into these new roles, the main focus was on knowledge transfer, thereby raising the level of performance of the team. This command-and-control model worked well in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ Today we are in a time of faster, more pervasive changes, and younger employees are typically more comfortable with new technologies than their more senior colleagues or leaders.² In addition, how work is being performed has also changed, and more employees are operating with a greater sense of autonomy due to technology-enabled remote work and increased use of virtual teams. This was a trend before the COVID-19 pandemic and has since been accelerated by it. In this environment, employees are looking for managers to provide support in solving problems, opportunities for development and advancement, and connection to a larger mission. With this shift in expectations, coaching skills are no longer a “nice to have” skillset for managers, but a must-have. Coaching skills have become a key differentiator for high-performing leaders and their teams. Now, engaging in regular coaching conversations with employees is a large part of the job for managers. Coaching and leading are synonymous in today’s environment, where employees are looking to their managers for inspiration and connection to a larger goal.

Over the last eighteen months, there has been a rise in workplace conflict and several themes have come to light. There has been increased conflict between employee and employer that has been seen in headlines in the news. These conflicts are often driven by changes to working lives, strict scheduling policies, two-tier remote working plans, or other similar policy changes. With more organizations returning to in-person work and hybrid schedules, this theme is likely to continue. There has been a significant shift in personal priorities for a large part of the workforce. Many people are engaging in self-examination, and some are reprioritizing their lives, putting personal needs and dreams before work. Others have felt they were treated unfairly during the pandemic, and this has impacted how they feel about their employer. Regardless of what is at the heart of their conflict, more employees are speaking up, many of them leaving their jobs, prompting the prediction of a “Great Resignation” and additional economic disruption.³

During the past eighteen months, there has also been a rise in conflict within teams. Some of this increase is directly related to the pandemic, such as colleagues not respecting

¹ Ibarra, H. & Scoular, A. (2019). *The Leader as Coach, How to unleash innovation, energy, and commitment*. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved: <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-leader-as-coach>

² Cassady, K. (2017). *3 Ways Technology Influences Generational Divides at Work*. Entrepreneur. Retrieved: <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/290763>

³ Shields, A. (2021). *The Impact of Covid On Workplace Conflict*. Forbes. Retrieved: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/annashields/2021/07/28/the-impact-of-covid-on-workplace-conflict/?sh=1b317022ccb>

social distancing or safety protocols, others are indirectly related, referring to team conduct on video calls. There has been greater team conflict related to equality, with employees feeling they are not being treated fairly. Intergenerational tensions around work styles and expectations have been exasperated as well and with the prediction of continued use of flexible schedules, this will continue to require focus. Reported too was the increase in interpersonal conflicts. These are often rooted in the increased stress from working from home often competing for space, and bandwidth all while taking care of family members. All of this adds to an increased sense of being overwhelmed.

Regardless of the level or cause of the conflict more employees are speaking up. This is having an impact on employees, and the team's functionality, along with the organization's reputation. Traditionally conflict is seen as a negative and a drag on the organization, but through their engagement of speaking up employees are giving leaders an opportunity to partner and resolve meaningful issues. There is a tremendous need for managers to step in and engage in more effective coaching conversations to help employees to resolve conflict to preserve the function of teams and the well-being of employees. Managers who are engaged in regular coaching conversations with employees are in a unique position to impact and support employee growth and to address conflict quickly and effectively.

What Coaching IS

Coaching is often couched as a performance management conversation that sounds like, "Here's what you are doing wrong; I will coach you through this and show you how to fix it." What a coaching conversation should be is a dialogue where the manager helps the employee utilize what they already know in order to make decisions and solve problems.

A coaching conversation is unique in that it provides the following:

- Has a clear goal for the discussion itself
- Focuses on the employee
- Enables decision making
- Is action-focused

While coaching is often thought of as a developmental process, it is also a skill set that is highly effective for managers and leaders to use with their teams to set direction, delegate responsibilities, build capacity, and manage conflict.

For coaching to be effective, it requires a trust-based relationship between the manager and employee that is rooted in continual dialogue. It is important for managers to develop their coaching style and become comfortable with a coaching model to help guide the conversation. A coaching model or framework is useful to keep the conversation focused on its goal, support decision-making, and plan for action.

There are four main styles for coaching an employee: Directive, Laissez-faire, Nondirective, and Situational. Each style has its own strengths and drawbacks which are based

on its focus on either increasing knowledge or uncovering existing knowledge, as well as the level of energy generated.⁴

Styles of Coaching

Focus on adding knowledge	1. Directive	4. Situational
	2. Laissez-faire	3. Nondirective
	Less energy generated	More energy generated

1. Directive coaching is the “tell method” of coaching. The manager shares their knowledge with the employee on what to do and how to do it. This style assumes that the manager is the expert and knows more than the employee- not always an accurate assumption in today’s world. This style does little in the way of driving the motivation of the employee and may even serve as a demotivator. Because it allows the manager to continue to solve employees' problems, it does not build capacity within the organization. When coaching a conflict, this style may seem heavy-handed and does not lead to a collaborative resolution.
2. Laissez-faire coaching is doing nothing and letting employees learn and operate on their own with no interference. Here the manager is giving the employee an assignment and getting out of the way. With this style, no strategic development is conducted, and no capacity is built within the team. Using this style to coach through a conflict would be avoiding it; this allows the situation to fester and potentially impact the team and break trust and confidence in the leader.
3. Nondirective coaching is an inquiry method of coaching. Here the manager engages the employee with active listening and powerful questions to draw out existing knowledge, and creativity to enable employees to solve their own challenges. This process builds problem-solving capacity within the employee and can be highly energizing. This style does not usually come naturally to most managers and requires them to develop coaching skills to be successful. When coaching through a conflict, the goal that is being focused on is the manager’s rather than the employee’s so this can be a difficult style to use purely when coaching through a conflict.

⁴ Ibarra, H. & Scoular, A. (2019). *The Leader as Coach, How to unleash innovation, energy, and commitment*. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved: <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-leader-as-coach>

4. Situational coaching seeks to strike a balance between directive and nondirective coaching, depending on the needs of the employee in each situation. It is recommended that managers focus on developing their non-directive coaching skills and comfort level for a while before they try adding in the directive approach. There is a very fine line that separates directive and situational coaching, and it is easy to cross over to only engaging in directive coaching. This is the ideal style for coaching through a conflict because the goal of the conversation is the manager's goal. By engaging in active listening and using powerful questions, the manager and employee can collaborate to come to a resolution around the conflict.

Coaching Presence

Coaching conversations require a strong sense of psychological safety, where the employee is comfortable being open to brainstorming and examining their own thought process with transparency. For this psychological safety to exist, managers need to develop a coaching presence. This is done by practicing active listening, developing a mindfulness practice, and deep self-reflection to build self-awareness. The components of a coaching presence are as follows:

- Fully engaging – using active listening and being invested in achieving the goal of the conversation.
- Focusing on the employee – a coaching conversation is all about engaging with the employee to draw out existing capabilities.
- Asking questions – the manager is in the role of asking powerful questions to drive thinking rather than providing advice.
- Remaining calm – staying grounded and even-keeled in a stressful situation to provide psychological safety so that the employee will be forthright and honest.
- Being self-aware – the manager is aware of their communication style and non-verbal communication.
- Exhibiting a growth mindset – the manager is open to learning from the employee's perspective.
- Being emotionally intelligent – the manager can identify and manage his/her own emotions as well as identify the emotions of the employee and pivot his/her engagement style to be effective with the employee.

Powerful Questions

Powerful questions are the tools of coaching. In a coaching conversation, the manager needs to focus on asking the right questions to uncover the existing knowledge or creativity needed by the employee to accomplish their goal. Powerful questions are open-ended questions that explore ideas and spark creativity. They are used for a variety of tasks within a coaching conversation to:

- Make sense of complex issues
- Draw out perspectives or generate consensus
- Brainstorm
- Solve problems

- Uncover risks and unintended consequences
- Find opportunities
- Make decisions

Attributes of a powerful question include:

- It is a concise, single question
 - What do you want to get from this conversation?
- It is open-ended and provokes deep thinking
 - What is the most challenging aspect of this?
- It is slightly provocative and maybe a little unsettling to engage values
 - How have you contributed to this situation?
- It is ambiguous enough to spur thoughts around the nature of the question itself
 - If you could do anything right now to change this what would you do?
- It does not have any assumptions and is not leading
 - How did we get here?
- It focuses on action or personal change so that it feels real, rather than hypothetical or academic
 - Which of these ideas do you like enough to pursue?
 - What is your next step?

De-Escalating Conflict

When engaging in conflict, strong emotions can take over, escalating the conflict and making it more personal, which can damage relationships and trust. To keep the conflict from becoming personal, focus on the situation and specific behavior or action, and not on personality or motivations. This depersonalizes the focus, so the employee does not feel personally attacked. The employee will be more likely to engage in resolving the issue. Throughout this conversation, managers must remain calm, especially if things get heated. When managers are not able to maintain their composure, conflict frequently becomes destructive to trust.

Here are some strategies for helping to de-escalate a heated situation. Use active listening to understand not only what is being said, but also the thought process behind the message. Pay attention to nonverbal cues such as body language, posture, arm gestures, and facial expressions. Listen for words that are repeated and emphasized to understand what is important to your employee. Also listen for emotions in their word choices, pace, tone, and volume they are using. Paraphrase back what you heard in a neutral tone, making sure to be an honest reporter. Also, acknowledge any emotions that you sense. This demonstrates that you are trying to empathize and are paying attention to the employee. If there are any incongruent messages between what was said and how they said something, ask for clarity. Not only will this let the employee know you are paying attention, it will signal that you care about what they mean.

Be transparent in your goal and thinking. People respond positively when they feel they are being leveled with.

Emotions are a natural and normal part of our thinking process, and when ignored they tend to get stronger rather than go away. Pay attention to your emotional state. If you are

getting emotionally triggered, acknowledge it to yourself; take a deep breath to slow down thinking and refocus on your topic. Make sure that your posture is straight whether sitting or standing straighten your back, roll your shoulders back and level your chin. This posture is one of calm and control, so in addition to helping you maintain your calm, it sends a message of calmness through your body language.

GROW Model

The GROW coaching model developed by Sir John Whitmore, Graham Alexander, and Alan Fine, is an effective model for situational coaching. GROW is an acronym for Goal, Reality, Options, and Will, which are the four stages of a coaching conversation. When coaching for development, the focus is on the employee's goal and how to achieve it. The GROW model provides a guide for this coaching conversation. Following the GROW model, an employee being coached will be able to identify their goal, the current state, options for action and, specific steps towards achieving it. (Fine & Merrill, 2010)

Goal – What is the goal of the conversation?

Reality – This stage focuses on what is going on in the present time. The coach will ask questions around, who, what, where, and when. These are questions that ground the conversation in facts, making it real. “Why” questions get into reasons and exploring motivations rather than facts and lead to judgments, which can be counterproductive in solving problems or making decisions.

- What is happening now?
- What have you tried and what were the results?
- Who have you engaged with?
- Who may be able to help you with this?
- When does this need to happen?
- Where do you see this going?

In this stage of the conversation, the coach is helping the employee slow down and engage with the facts of the situation.

Options – After focusing on the reality of their situation many employees feel stuck, feeling that there are no other options for action other than what they have already tried. In this situation, the role of the coach is to help expand the thinking beyond what has already been considered by asking, “If you could do anything to resolve this, or to accomplish this what could you do?” or, “If you had a magic wand, what would you do?” Both questions generate new thinking quickly because based on the questions, anything is possible.

From the list of options that this generates, the coach encourages the employee to go deeper with each idea, examining the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each. Then in preparation for the next step, the coach asks, “Are there any of these ideas that you like enough to explore further?” and, “Which ones?” If there are not any options to the employee's liking, the goal is revisited to determine whether it is realistic.

Will or Way Forward – This is where the rubber meets the road. Coaching conversations lead to a decision and action. The manager sets the stage saying something like, “Based on the options you have identified as ones you are interested in exploring on a scale of 1 – 10, “1” being not likely and “10” being very likely to act, how likely are you to take action?” Based on the ratings anything with a score lower than an “8” gets dropped. If they are at an “8” or higher ask, “What will your first step be in taking action with this solution? And when will you take it?” The answers need to be specific and clear for accountability.

If there was not an option ranked with an “8” or higher go back through the GROW process, starting with a goal that is important enough to them to want to take action.⁵

GROW for Conflict

When coaching through a conflict with an employee, the GROW model needs a slight modification because the nature of the conversation is different. In this coaching conversation, the focus is on the manager’s goal, not the employee’s goal.

Before engaging in this conversation, managers need to take some time to prepare. Make sure to gather all the facts around the issue of the conflict, get any related data, and specific examples. Then take some time and take yourself through the GROW process to get clarity on your Goal, Reality, Options, and Will. When coaching through conflict, the goal is usually to get the employee’s buy-in to work together to come to a resolution. Take some time to walk through the options of what you can do should you not reach your goal, and then decide on which one you will take. With that clarity and the notes from this process, walk through a modified conflict GROW process.

Goal – What is your goal for this conversation? “I would like to talk with you about _____, can we do this now?”

Flow of conversation – Layout how you would like this conversation to go.

“I would like to share with you my perspective of what is happening with, _____ and then I would like to hear yours.

If I am right about what is going on I would like to talk with you about how to resolve this. If I am wrong, then I will have learned something, and we can move on.”

Reality – Lay out the facts of what you are seeing as the current situation. Make sure this is as objective as possible focused on situation, action, and results. Then ask for their perspective of what is going on.

Use active listening to demonstrate that you understand what they are saying.

Listen for areas of agreement and call them out. These areas where you agree are where collaboration will begin.

Options – This conversation is an invitation to work together to resolve the conflict. If the other party is willing to work together to identify a way forward, then go on to the next section. If they are not willing to partner with you in finding a solution, then explain what your next step will be.

⁵ Fine, A. & Merrill, R. (2010). *You Already Know How to Be Great*. New York, NY: Penguin Group Inc.

Will or Way Forward - Next steps. Identify the specific next step and when it will be taken.

With the modified GROW model completed, read through your answers, and try to imagine your employee's response; write them down. This will help you to reframe the issue from another perspective and to prepare you for some potential examples of resistance. Do not think of this as writing a script, because you will be the only one with a copy of it. Once you have thought through this issue from the perspective of your employee, make any adjustments that you feel are needed, then practice delivering your side of it out loud to a mirror. It is important to hear your words out loud and how they sound. Next reach out to a mentor, manager, or trusted colleague to role-play this conversation with you. Of course, this will not be the same as the actual conversation, but that's not the point. The purpose of the role play is to get comfortable in engaging in a conversation around your goal rather than just delivering it as a monolog. It will also allow you to get feedback on how the conversation feels to your partner, and to make sure your points are clear. Once you are comfortable, schedule your conversation.

Conclusions

Coaching is engaging in goal-focused conversations that build trusted relationships between managers and employees. Coaching skills are essential for managers today in our era of consistent and accelerated change. Managers who coach are more effective at managing teams with complex projects and proactively resolving conflicts before they escalate.