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# Your Leadership Toolbox: A Coaching Approach



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## **How you can use tips from coaches to adapt to a world in flux.**

*Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving. – Albert Einstein*

We need instant adaptability to the new skillsets in the unknown future of work. The Covid-19 pandemic is a prime example of how change is accelerating and requiring us to adapt instantly. We often hear about the **skillsets** we will need but not enough about how executives will adapt to them. A “coaching approach” can help managers and their teams keep up with our rapidly changing world.

In essence, a coaching approach is a reflective state requiring a certain level of knowledge, consciousness, awareness and motivation. Any manager willing to use this approach must be able to act as a catalyst in the personal development of another person. Naturally, I’m not suggesting that all managers become professional coaches but rather that they include a coaching approach in how they lead.

By 2025, analytical thinking, creativity and flexibility will be among the most sought-after skills. We will need to learn, unlearn, and learn and unlearn. Important **future-focused skills** like analytical thinking, active learning, complex problem-solving, critical thinking and creativity are concerned with the way humans think, learn, solve problems and innovate – the **core competencies of coaching**.

As the psychiatrist Milton Erickson said, “Every person has abilities not known to the self.” **Coaches** wield certain tools to partner with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential. Some of these tools are:

- Listening deeply
- Asking powerful questions
- Crafting a reflective space
- Focusing on human potential

## **Listening deeply**

According to psychologist **Carl Rogers**, we all have a natural urge to judge, evaluate and approve (or disapprove) another person’s statements. However, we can achieve real communication and avoid this evaluative tendency when we listen with understanding. This means we attempt to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person’s point of view and to sense how it feels to the person, through their personal frame of reference.

As a manager, do you sometimes feel that, when you’re talking with your colleagues, you’re planning your response before they’ve even finished their sentence? Then you might need the coaching approach. It is about taking a genuine interest in what the other person is saying. The ability to focus requires some training of the mind. Our awareness of another person’s mental state is related to how well we know our own mental state, as psychiatrist **Daniel J. Siegel** wrote. Deep listening is only possible with a reflective mindset, not an impulsive one. You certainly need to practise being there in the “now” by focusing on the other person. Yet, the pre-condition of being aware of others is to become aware of yourself. INSEAD Professor **Manfred Kets de Vries** repeatedly reminds his students of the engraving on the temple of Apollo in Delphi, “*Know thyself*”, to emphasise the value of **self-awareness**.

## **Asking powerful questions**

Powerful questions are open-ended questions. When you ask a closed-ended question, like a yes or no query, you cut yourself and your interlocutor off from the opportunity of deep listening. Why are open-ended questions important? They can lead to discovery, insight or even a commitment that fuels further action. Managers must become accustomed to asking good open-ended questions. The practice naturally engages partnership.

This is especially true when responding with a “how” versus a “why” question. In virtual workplaces, such as during a Zoom meeting, more tolerance and sensitivity is necessary when posing questions. Consider the (closed-ended) question, “Did you reach your target?” If the answer is no, the next question is naturally “Why not?” Sitting on the Zoom with a bunch of colleagues will increase their anxiety and may be demotivating. Now, contrast this with “How can you reach your target?” or “From today forward, what can you do differently to experience more progress?” These questions inform, create awareness but also encourage the worker. They create space for learning.

The power of open-ended questions is that they generate more open-ended questions. In the workplace, this can create a ripple that can reach far into an organisation. **Open-ended questions** are credited with creating better team relationships, accelerating solutions and creating inclusiveness for high-performance management.

Powerful open-ended questions have the potential to enhance creativity and a reflective state of mind may open countless opportunities in this new world, especially in terms of innovation. It is no coincidence that the most innovative companies encourage **questions**.

### **Crafting the “coaching position” as a reflective space**

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a powerful example of disruptive change; however there is much more to come. Just recently natural historian **David Attenborough**, called climate change “the biggest threat to security that modern humans have ever faced” during a UN Security Council meeting. In the world beyond the current pandemic, we might face larger scale disruptions that will further fuel uncertainty and require the use of new skillsets. It will be much more crucial for managers to be in a reflective state of mind than in an impulsive one. This will create space for focusing on the now and our long-term purpose. The ability to harness a reflective space is vital for leaders in uncertain times.

Feeling threatened overwhelms our perception. When we react to a situation, we revert to our primitive behaviour without flexibility or compassion. Without the learned behaviour that teaches us to stop and to reflect, we become unable to resist these influences that push us to live in an **automated** way.

The coaching position asks that we remain neutral and look at the situation not only through our own eyes, but through the eyes of others. Imagine the situation from different altitudes, depending on how the parties involved would evaluate it. It is only by considering different perceptions that we can keep a reflective state of mind instead of acting impulsively. INSEAD Executive Master in Change professors use the metaphor of standing ringside at a boxing match. Those on the sidelines can remain in a reflective state in a challenging situation.

### **Focusing on the potential of human growth**

We don't yet have a clear picture of the future of work and what skill sets will be necessary, but we can continue to learn, unlearn and learn again in this disruptive world. The pandemic has shown that we must cope with persistent change; the climate crises call for us to work within as an ecosystem. Attenborough **highlights** humanity's unique attribute: "We alone are able to imagine the future."

The coaching approach could be a very powerful tool not only to imagine the unknown future but also to design it in the most sustainable way for the whole ecosystem.

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/your-leadership-toolbox-coaching-approach>

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#### **About the author(s)**

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