

# PEAK COACHING MODEL PT 1 – POTENTIAL & INTERFERENCE

## WHAT IS COACHING?

This first part of the book is about describing in depth a coaching model that I have developed gradually in my firm Peak over the last 10 years. It is possible to coach others with a few simple tools and techniques that could be gleaned from a book a fraction of this size. However, these behaviours tend not to endure in the face of pressure to achieve results and so it appears my challenge is to bring about a change in your *thinking* so that you can internalise these coaching principles and eventually use them without thinking about it. For this reason I intend to go into some detail.

To begin with let me be clear about exactly what I mean when I talk about coaching. Coaching is a relatively new field and as such it is often confused with other methods such as training and counselling. Some managers are using coaching as a new

label for behaviours they've used for years such as telling people off and dictating the precise ways things must be done. We must be careful that coaching is not seen as 'old wine in new bottles'.

On our training programmes we often ask participants to list and discuss exactly what coaching is and what it isn't. The following points would be typical:

### **Coaching is . . .**

- About drawing out, not putting in
- Helping others to learn as opposed to teaching them things
- Motivational and enjoyable
- Performance focused but people centred
- About releasing potential
- Helping people move out of their comfort zones

### **Coaching is not . . .**

- Telling people what to do and how to do it
- The same as instructing, training or counselling
- Offering uninvited feedback
- Rescuing people and having all the answers
- Only for poor performers
- A disciplinary measure

Coaching is fundamentally about helping people fulfil their *potential* by allowing them to recognise the things that hold them back and by helping them discover ways around them. It is at the level of potential then that our detailed examination must start.

## POTENTIAL

### **What percentage of people's potential do you see at work?**

I have asked this question dozens of times at seminars and training courses and have yet to get an answer of 100% or even close. Most responses come in the 30%–60% range suggesting that there's a lot of ability out there that remains untapped. That's a pretty strong business case for having effective coaching at work I would suggest. After all, you pay for 100% potential, but how much do you actually get?

But how do people even form a view? On what do we base our estimates? Asked to justify their answer people will point to a variety of explanations. I remember one lady telling me about a member of her team who was difficult and unpopular at work yet who achieved great results as a youth volunteer in his spare time. On another occasion somebody highlighted the many working mums tucked out of sight in mundane roles despite being able to run a household, raise children and run the family finances at the same time. What if work was organised in such a way as to give people a chance to let these hidden talents shine through?

Often the answer is 'I've absolutely no idea what percentage of people's potential we see at work!'. We can fairly easily see the *results* or outcomes of using potential by way of the amount or quality of a person's work; their performance in other words. But judging how much of their potential was used to bring this about is difficult, time consuming and arguably unnecessary. Unless we want performance and results to improve of course, in which case it's vital to understand how much capacity for improvement there might be.

I believe there is a compelling case for organisations to spend more time considering potential. Businesses obsess over performance

and results and rightly so as this is how we determine how well we're doing, but in terms of making changes and improving things we need to start thinking in terms of potential; what we *could do* just as much as what we *have done*.

Unfortunately the world of work is not organised this way. It is hard to make a case for retaining an employee who is under performing but who we sense could go on to great things. Employers understandably hedge their bets and seek to buy proven potential directly from the labour market. Top jobs are to be filled only by those on the graduate development programme. External candidates must have the 'right' MBA and so on. But just as with the Stock Market, past performance is no guarantee of future results. What people have done is not necessarily linked to what they could do. Nevertheless, we can't employ people based on a leap of faith or retain poor performers on the basis of benefit of the doubt, but we do need to manage them in such a way as to give them every chance to let their potential come out.

Potential is by definition latent – i.e. hidden or under-developed – and so we cannot ask prospective employees to bring a sort of 'certificate of potential' with them to the recruitment or promotion interview. We have, instead, to take a view on how much potential a person may have and this view is likely to be informed by our own beliefs and values and by our own experience at work.

## **THEORY X AND THEORY Y**

Perhaps the most popular and accessible piece of management research on this point was presented by Douglas McGregor [17] with his Theory X and Theory Y suppositions about management behaviour.

According to McGregor, Theory X Managers take the view that people:

- essentially dislike work and will avoid it all together if possible
- are motivated only by money or fear
- need discipline and constant supervision
- can't be trusted
- avoid responsibility
- lack loyalty and commitment
- lack creativity – except in finding ways to avoid work!

Let's just stop for a moment and consider how a manager would treat people if she held this view. I think it's likely she would:

- put tight controls in place to ensure people are working when they should be
- exercise firm control over all activities and have rigorous reporting procedures in place
- Define work to a fine level of detail and prescribe precisely how tasks should be carried out
- remind people often that the organisation pays their wages and how easily they can be replaced

Let's now think about how people are most likely to react if this is how they are treated. I would assume that they would:

- do what they need to do to get the job done, but no more
- resist change
- refuse to take on extra responsibility without more pay
- resist at all costs requests to work more flexibly

I can't imagine that creativity and innovation would flourish in such an atmosphere.

Theory Y managers, on the other hand, take the view that people:

- have psychological as well as economic reasons for working
- are motivated by achievement, recognition, praise, etc
- work to their own standards – often higher than the boss’s
- are totally trustworthy
- seek responsibility
- are keen to be loyal and committed
- are a great source of ideas

How would a manager treat her staff if she believed Theory Y to be true? Perhaps she would:

- offer praise and encouragement, thanking people publicly for their efforts
- look for contributions from team members in terms of what needs doing and how it should be done
- set objectives for the team and then leave them alone to carry them out

Treated this way, I think it’s reasonable to expect that her team would:

- justify the faith she has shown by getting results
- put in the extra effort when required
- take on extra responsibility
- be loyal in difficult times

Neither of these views is right or wrong and each is clearly quite extreme. Most managers are probably a blend of parts of each and their views will probably change depending on how things are going when you ask them.

The question therefore becomes if neither view is right, wrong or permanent, which view is more *useful* to us as managers who coach?

Theory Y would seem to offer the greatest scope for achieving improved results because of a concept known as the self-fulfilling

prophecy. As we saw above, if we treat people as if Theory X were true they will tend to behave in a way which reinforces that belief. The same is true for Theory Y.

## SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECIES

Researchers refer to three kinds of self-fulfilling prophecy, one of which creates a negative result.

The Galatea effect refers to self-belief, the idea that if you believe you can succeed you will. High-performers in any field are blessed with strong self-belief. They trust themselves to succeed, take an optimistic view of most situations and see ‘failures’ as learning opportunities.

When coaching someone over the long term you’ll almost certainly want to help people access this state of mind, but it may take some time and patience if they’re carrying a lot of negative baggage. In which case the second kind of self-fulfilling prophecy may be useful.

The Pygmalion effect describes the notion of believing in others’ ability to such an extent that they begin to believe in it themselves. In George Bernard Shaw’s play, *Pygmalion*, Professor Henry Higgins is able to pass off flower girl Eliza Doolittle as a duchess through a combination of appropriate training and, more importantly an unwavering belief that she could succeed.

In his book *The New Alchemists* [6] Charles Handy examined the key attributes of successful business and social entrepreneurs. Many of the entrepreneurs interviewed spoke of having someone in their background who believed in them no matter what. Handy refers to such people as sewing golden seeds but I think coaching is as good a term as any for describing what they do.

Finally, we need to be wary of the Golem effect, which like Theory X suggests that if we expect people to do badly they won’t disappoint.

Some years back whilst I was still working at the bank, a memo arrived explaining that due to the Data Protection Act coming into force we could have a look at our staff files if we wanted to. Previously these had been kept under lock and key and were considered none of our business. I thought it would be great to find out what had been written about me at appraisal interviews and so on down the years, so I responded to the memo and arranged to look at the file. Most of the content was boring stuff but there at the bottom of the file were my original interview notes completed at the time of my application as a 15 year old schoolboy. Most of this sheet was taken up with administrative detail but the interviewer's comments caught my attention. The final line on the page read: 'Mr Somers is worth taking on as a low-achiever'.

Now, the point of this anecdote is not to suggest that the interviewer was completely wrong and that in fact I went on to set the world of banking on fire because I didn't. What's more to the point is to think about the impression such a comment created in the minds of my first managers. It's likely that I would have been given the most menial tasks, being a low-achiever and that any mistakes I made would confirm the view that I was a low achiever. Thank goodness it was more than 10 years before I realised that such a comment had been made or I'd have ended up believing it too!

In short, as coaches we need to take a positive view of people. We need to believe they can before we decide that they can't. Yes there's a chance that people might not succeed and we might be disappointed but the alternative is to keep people small.

This is a good time to introduce the first in a series of 'The Laws of Coaching' which will crop up throughout the book.

### **1ST LAW OF COACHING**

If you treat people as small, small is where they'll stay.



## PERFORMANCE

Our job as coaches then is to convert as much potential as possible into performance, but of course performance means different things to different people. An actor will have a different view to an athlete and a team leader may have a different view to a team member when it comes to defining performance.

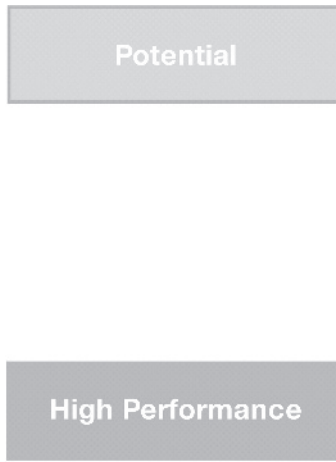
In the world of work it seems that performance usually amounts to being about one of five things:

- Increasing revenue – sales or other income streams
- Providing an excellent service
- Reducing cost
- Increasing or maintaining quality
- Reducing time, e.g. in production lines or in bringing a new product to market

Each of these areas of performance can improve as a result of effective coaching, and often coaching is sought because things aren't going well in some of these areas. But these very broad areas of work performance are really *outcomes*, i.e. the results and consequences of people's ability to perform in a host of other areas, increasing personal productivity, increasing team productivity, generating leads and opportunities, making presentations, managing others' performance, and so the list goes on.

As coaches we need to be sure we have an agreed understanding with our coachees of what performance actually means in their role and how we would know if it had been improved. We'll also see later on that if we want to establish a strong business case for coaching and measure its success then having a clearly defined and shared interpretation of performance is absolutely vital.

Living in the real world, one thing is certain: there will always be a gap between potential and performance (life wouldn't be much fun if there wasn't) and we need to look at ways of closing the gap so that more potential is converted into high performance.



**Figure 1.1** The gap between potential and high performance.

In the same way that we need to think carefully about judging potential and defining high performance, we need also to recognise that the gap between the two could exist for a variety of reasons and there could be different ways of closing the gap.

Suppose you have a member of your team whose job it is to produce the monthly sales figures. This they do by using the table function in a word processing programme. Unfortunately, this programme does not have the flexibility to produce the ratios and percentages that you need to really understand whether sales are going well or not.

In terms of high performance you need a detailed analysis and in terms of potential we can assume that as your team member can find their way around the word processing package they'd have the potential to use other similar programmes.

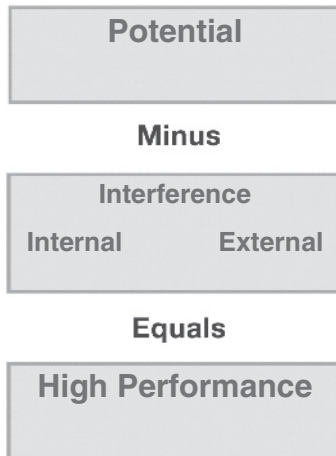
The performance gap here is to do with knowledge. If they knew how to use a spreadsheet programme they'd be able to produce a more useful set of monthly sales figures.

Such a performance gap is straightforward to fill. Find a course or a CD package that teaches how to use the spreadsheet programme and away you go. Simple.

Now suppose you have a team member whose job it is to handle customer complaints. This they do in accordance with your organisation's policy and procedures but always with a slightly abrasive edge. They have had all the necessary training and up until recently were one of your best performers on complaint handling. Lately though there seems to have been an increase in escalated complaints and other team members are getting tired of having to sweep up.

Here the performance gap is much less obvious and unlikely to be closed by sending your team member on refresher training. In fact, that would just make things worse. The gap here is a subtle one concerning attitude or state of mind and needs a similarly subtle response.

In these situations we need to recognise that the gap between potential and high performance doesn't need filling it needs *shrinking*. In other words we need to remove the things that interfere with potential being converted into high performance.



**Figure 1.2** potential less interference equals high performance

## **EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE**

Let's talk firstly about what I call external interference. By this I mean the things that go on around us at work which may make it difficult for us to work near to our potential. Once again we'll refer firstly to a typical list of such things produced by the many people I have asked to consider them:

- Management
- Restrictive policies and procedures
- Blame culture
- Ideas not accepted
- Lack of opportunity

Let's deal with each of these in turn.

### **Management**

Now how's that for irony. We, the very people who are supposed to mobilise the abilities of people at work are seen as actually getting in the way. This seems to be due to the prevalence of Theory X thinking amongst the management ranks. This style of thinking and subsequent behaviour is perpetuated by a lack of alternative role models. I remember once attending a meeting to discuss the possibilities of implementing a coaching programme for a prospective client. After the usual small talk his opening line was 'Well I've brought you here because I used to get them working by shouting at them, but apparently you can't do that anymore'. Well, shout at people all you want but is this really how we're going to tap into their discretionary effort?

## **Restrictive policies and procedures**

Obviously places of work need rules and systems and to establish acceptable practices. Without them there would be anarchy. But in these times when competitive pressures are increasing the need for people to work with their imagination and to think creatively such rules can be overdone. This is not restricted to obviously creative endeavours like marketing or advertising. From the factory floor to the retail sales floor we need people to be able to take action and make things happen particularly if directly involved with customers. So many practices from signing-in sheets to six-page expenses claim forms seem to be there because of a lack of trust in the workforce. Why would any organisation employ people they can't trust?

## **Blame culture**

What happens in your organisation when things go wrong? Is judicious risk taking extolled in the business plan and then utterly condemned in practice? Against this background is it any wonder that people keep themselves small, safely tucked up in their comfort zones and keeping their ideas to themselves?

## **Ideas not accepted**

On a similar note, what happens in your organisation when somebody has a good idea? Is there a means to capture ideas, to nurture them and let them grow, or are they left to wither on the vine choked by an endless stream of position papers, inception reports or suggestion scheme submissions?



**Cartoon 1.1** Blame culture

This factor is exacerbated the greater the distance on the hierarchy between those who generate ideas and those who can choose to act upon them. It is once again ironic that in most structures it is the former who are closest to the customers and the latter who are many steps removed.

## **Lack of opportunity**

This can come in many guises. Perhaps you've got great potential but because you weren't hired on a graduate intake stream you are barred from applying for the top jobs. Perhaps your circumstances make it difficult to attend the training programmes you'd need to progress. Perhaps you're too young or too old, too black or too white, under qualified, overqualified, inexperienced or over experienced, a female in a male dominated set-up or vice versa. Even today there are so many discriminations that still prevail, despite the efforts of many to eliminate them. The simple truth is that it is clearly nonsense for any organisation to deny itself access to talent wherever it may lie.

These are but examples of common sources of external interference and I realise many of you reading this will have limited ability to influence them in your own organisations, Nevertheless, I would encourage you to grasp any opportunity to examine these areas to see whether they encourage or discourage high performance and make changes where you can.

We must accept that some of the issues we've spoken about in this section are a necessary part of the fabric of working life. In many ways people's reaction to them is more crucial and this is what we'll consider next.

## **INTERNAL INTERFERENCE**

A typical list of sources of internal interference would likely include the following:

- Previous negative experience
- Negative expectations
- Negative self-talk
- Fear of failure

## **Previous negative experience**

My first assignment as an independent consultant was a disaster. I was asked to facilitate some sales training for a group of sales managers from a major airline. I misjudged the ability of the group and was ill-prepared to answer their questions. I got my timings all wrong and my sessions overran leaving my co-facilitator some serious remedial work to rescue the project.

Some months later I found myself assigned to a similar project. Reflecting on the first experience I was beginning to worry that the same thing would happen again which, given what I now know about self-fulfilling prophecies, it probably would have done. Luckily my coach at the time was able to help me make rational sense of my first experience, to put it into some perspective and, most importantly, take action in terms of preparation to avoid repeating the same mistakes.

## **Negative expectations**

You'll like this, not a lot, but you'll like it.

**Paul Daniels**

Some people see the glass as half empty and for others it's half full. Some people expect the best to happen while others assume the worst. Critics of the coaching approach often accuse coaches of insisting every situation be viewed with breathless, naive optimism, but really the point is this: We tend to attract the situations we think about the most and so expecting the worst to happen increases the chances that it will. Coaching helps people shine a light on their expectations and check whether they are accurate or based on false assumptions.



## **Negative self-talk**

Many people are in constant conversation with themselves, but the nature of this internal dialogue can have a profound effect on how well they might perform. 'You're gonna blow it you fool', 'Who do you think you are?', 'Why on earth would anyone buy from me?' and 'I'm so tired' are just some of the ways in which we get in our own way and make things more difficult than they need be.

## **Fear of failure**

This is a classic but is based on an entirely false premise. Failure is an abstract concept; there is actually no such thing as failure. There are only results. We take action and results ensue. These are either results we want or do not want. They are either expected or unexpected but they have no absolute link with success or failure. This exists only in our own minds. In my experience it's the consequences of 'failure' that people really fear in an organisational setting. They fear that they'll be told-off or embarrassed or that they'll miss out on promotion or whatever. There's a clear link with the blame culture phenomenon we looked at before. How do you want people in your organisation to feel when something has gone wrong? Do you want them to go and hide in a corner or pick themselves up, learn from it and move on?

You cannot fail at anything until you give up.

### **Richard Denny**

I stress again that these are only examples and this list is far from exhaustive. They differ from external sources of interference in that they are *felt* rather than observed. They can have a huge effect

on reaching one's potential but it also follows that coaching can pay huge dividends in dealing with them.

At the core of each of these symptoms runs a central theme which we'll call Limiting Beliefs. In many ways the factors we've discussed serve to militate against my potential *only* if I believe them to be true. Let's examine this in more detail.

## **LIMITING BELIEFS**

There's much talk in self-help and business improvement literature about beliefs. There's also much talk about vision and values, culture and ethos and much blurring at the edges of them all. So let me firstly be clear about what I mean when I talk about beliefs. It's those things you hold to be 'true'. For example, 'the purpose of business is to make money'.

I attended a seminar recently and the first speaker clearly held this particular belief. At one point he said that he defied anybody to claim that they were in business for any reason other than making money. A hand went up and a young man explained that no, for him business was about providing opportunities for people and building something from scratch. This was particularly galling and embarrassing for the first speaker as the young man was due to speak next and was clearly not 'on message'.

Limiting beliefs are therefore those that interfere with our potential being released. They are the things which we hold to be true that prevent us taking action or doing things differently. Here are some I've come across on many occasions:

- I will be in trouble if I get this wrong
- Senior management will never support this idea
- I'm the manager, I'm supposed to have all the answers
- I have to win at all costs
- I am working, I am not here to enjoy myself

Some of you might believe some of these statements to be ‘true’ for you, and you might be right. Beliefs can never be proved as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ or they’d be facts and not beliefs.

Our role as coaches is not to agree or disagree with such statements of belief; rather it is our job to encourage deeper thought and challenge the assumptions on which such beliefs are often formed.

Let’s imagine we’re coaching someone who wants to implement a new shift rota because they feel it will be fairer and more efficient but who also articulates the belief that *I will be in trouble if I get this wrong*. Some might say, ‘don’t be silly’ or ‘of course you won’t’ or ‘to hell with them, do it anyway’, but this is unlikely to prove helpful as none of these responses challenge the basis of the limiting belief. Instead we could ask, ‘How do you know you’ll be in trouble?’, ‘what sort of trouble will you be in?’, ‘have you been in this situation before?’, ‘do you know other people who’ve handled this situation?’, ‘What can you do now to ensure it won’t go wrong?’.

We can see that these questions would encourage our coachee to think in greater detail about why they believe they would be in trouble and to consider whether to risk it. None of our questions are judgemental and so we are unlikely to get into an argument over who’s right and who’s wrong.

Simply inviting the people we coach to re-consider the basis of their limiting beliefs is often enough to leave them feeling mobilised to do something in spite of them. Other times, when the belief is deep rooted, it may be necessary to explore further and to consider how such beliefs come to be formed.

## **LIMITING BELIEFS ARE BASED ON EVIDENCE**

Jo and Sam both work on the Organisation Development (OD) section of a large local authority and their work involves submitting

proposals for OD projects to the Senior Management Team for approval.

Jo believes that *Senior Management do not support new ideas*. She backs this up by explaining that her budget submission for this year was turned down flat and that this particularly upset her given that her previous year's budget had been approved. She goes on to point out that in the last six months 6 out of 10 project inception reports had been declined. She feels that senior management are just too conservative and tend to reject anything new.

Sam believes that *Senior Management are supportive of new ideas*. To illustrate this he points out that although his budget for this year was turned down, last year's submission, which was far more radical, was approved. He says that four out of every 10 project inception reports are approved and that many of those rejected should never have been submitted in the first place. In Sam's view the Senior Management Team are very conservative and so need a compelling case to support a new idea.

Same roles, same circumstances, same Management Team, but utterly polarised beliefs about them.

Believing the Senior Management Team to be unsupportive Jo is likely to work on her budgets without any real enthusiasm and to do only what is necessary on her reports knowing they'll probably be rejected anyway.

Believing the Senior Management Team to be supportive, Sam is likely to produce a highly detailed budget submission and to make sure his reports show a strong supporting case for his suggestions.

Jo is likely to be turned down, Sam is likely to be supported, adding further supporting evidence to each of their beliefs.

The reinforcement of beliefs is further strengthened by an area of our brain known as the Reticular Activating System (RAS). Our RAS is a filtering system that prevents us being overloaded

by the huge amount of stimuli that assail our senses every day. Have you ever noticed that if you see a car with an unusual colour that you suddenly seem to see them everywhere? This is your RAS at work. Cars of that colour were always there but your RAS has now been alerted to notice them.

In our story above, Jo's RAS will provide lots of supporting evidence to reinforce her belief about the senior team. Her brain will filter out anything that runs contrary. Sam's, on the other hand, will do the opposite, providing proof that the team are supportive and confirming his beliefs.

The message for coaches is a simple one. If you uncover a limiting belief, challenge the evidence. Offer an alternative point of view and encourage your coachees to widen their perspective and to consider other points of view. You may not take away limiting beliefs overnight, but you can certainly loosen their hold.

## SUMMARY

The fundamental role of the coach is to minimise interference so that more potential can be turned into performance.

Even today work seems to be organised in such a way as to make it difficult for people to reach their potential, but there is increasing pressure to get the people side of business right. Already some big corporations are including reports on their 'human capital' in their annual report and accounts. It can surely not be long until shareholders begin to hold boards to account and demand proof that their Human Resource Management is as strong as their Financial or Commercial Management.

The potential is all there to begin with. We need to take the view that the staff in any organisation are a resourceful group of people with the ability to help the business achieve its aims. Such

a strong philosophical standpoint will reap dividends as the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy takes hold. In the short-term there may be people who take advantage, who are lazy, disloyal and intent on high-jacking progress, but we cannot structure the whole organisation to try to prevent this. As a high performance culture takes shape such people become increasingly marginalised and can no longer muster support for their subversive behaviour. We need to give every opportunity for people to perform, but respect people's choice to reject these opportunities. In these cases we must provide a dignified means of exit so that people may move on with their self-belief intact.

Potential is suppressed by a host of external and internal sources of interference. Key amongst the external factors is the management style of the organisation. People will deduce the prevailing management style based on a number of indicators but probably the most compelling is the behaviour of the most senior team. People these days demand that the leadership team 'walk the talk'. Post Enron and other scandals there is a growing feeling that business ethics must once again come to the fore. Organisations are responding by articulating statements of Corporate and Social Responsibility but these initiatives must be seen as genuine by employees or they'll be dismissed as just another management fad.

A greater challenge is to identify sources of internal interference. There are few people working in 'the zone', most are dogged by low confidence, fear of failure and subsequent reprisal, doubts about their future and a fundamental limiting belief that they are somehow not good enough.

Coaching is the means by which leaders and managers can deal with these and other challenges. Coaching is *performer centred* which means it's an approach that sees the individual as hard-wired with all they need to achieve results. Coaches do not rescue or save people, rather they facilitate learning and liberate talent.

Coaching at work needs also to be *performance focused*. It's about getting people to be bigger and better at what they do. It's difficult to see that such a move could produce anything other than a positive result.

Of course the challenges of working life mean that it is not enough to produce high performance on an occasional basis, we need to keep it there.

