



How to Have a Coaching Conversation

A Basic Guide to Conversations that Lead to Discovery



By

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Dedication

This guide is dedicated to the men and women of the private sector, public sector, non-government organizations, and faculty & staff and alumni of the University of Technology, Jamaica (UTech), who sacrificially invest their time to serve as mentors to the students of UTech. It is also dedicated to anyone who believes that conversation with others is a privilege, and desires to use it to do far more than just tell, but also to create a safe space for discovery.

About the Author



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How to Have a Coaching Conversation

“*What is a Coaching Conversation?*” you may wonder. A Coaching Conversation in the context of the Life Coaching industry, is a conversation in which the coach creates a safe space in which he/she engages clients by asking effective questions which challenge clients to think deeply about significant matters they face, in order to receive clarity and arrive at the best decision(s) for their life. The coach intentionally de-emphasizes his/her opinion on what clients should or should not do about the matter in question. Instead, the coach challenges clients to identify their

- Goals (*What do you want?*)
- Values (*Why is this important to you?*)
- Emotions (*How do you feel about it?*)
- Action Plan & Accountability (*What are you going to do? And by When?*)

Of course using a coaching approach to conversations should not be limited to formal coaching relationships. The opportunity to facilitate someone making their own meaningful discovery about what action they should take for a better life outcome is a worthwhile goal in any relationship; and is useful in interactions with persons of any age, whether personal, familial or professional. This **How to Have a Coaching Conversation Guide** is a simple resource that explains the ideal context and techniques relevant to engaging in an effective coaching conversation. The persons we speak to daily have more to gain when we allow them, with sensitivity, the opportunity...to reflect on the rich information they already have within them, rather than hasten to respond to what we too often comfortably interpret as a request of “*Please tell me what to do...*”

Preparing for the Conversation

To have an effective coaching conversation we need to prepare. You do this in two ways 1) Being self-aware and adjusting any attribute or element in you or within your context that might negatively interfere with the coaching conversation.

2) Being aware of attributes of the other party, so that the content of the conversation is appropriate and targeted to maximize effectiveness.

Self-Awareness – We can develop our self-awareness by paying attention to the following:

- *Being Present* - Be present in the conversation by taking the time to set an intention for having the conversation. As Susan Scott, author of the book “Fierce Conversation” recommends, *make up your mind to be here in the conversation, prepared to be nowhere else.*
- *Your Energetic Make-up* – In the field of Coaching or Personal Development you may hear talk of ‘energy.’ This is based on the concept that the human body is an energy system and that there are constructive and destructive forces within us, and these forces are conveyed by our thoughts/beliefs (attitudes). According to psychologist and master coach Bruce Schneider, we live with two types of energy. 1) *Catabolic Energy* – this is negative/destructive energy and 2) *Anabolic Energy* – this is positive energy

that builds us up. Energy is also defined as *available power to take action*.

When our energy is catabolic or negative, we have less power available to us to take action in daily life. When our energy is anabolic or positive, we have more power available to us to take action in daily life. Each person has an average energy level which is more or less positive or negative. Every day we can sense the energy of others around us, and we in turn respond to the energy level of persons with whom we interact, and they to us.

For an example of sensing negative energy, think about the last time you entered a room after there had been a quarrel or serious disagreement.

Alternatively, think about how you feel when you are very angry or very depressed. Typically your feelings are negative and your energy is drained.

In contrast, think about the last time you saw children outside playing and enjoying themselves. You feel their joy, and observe that their energy level is up. Now think about how seeing those children or being in their presence makes you feel in terms of your own energy. Therefore, before we begin our conversations, we need to check our energy and ensure it is positive so that our conversation impacts the other person positively.

- *Being Non-Judgmental* – Avoid the tendency to observe the ways in which others are different from you, or make choices that you would not make, and

then condemn them to a certain fate or outcome, or become close-minded or withdrawn in your interactions with them.

- *Our Communication Style* - Be more of a listener than a talker.
- *The Setting* – Select a context for your conversation in which you intentionally eliminate or significantly reduce the chance of interruptions or distractions by humans or technology.

Awareness in Relation to the Person/Group to be Coached

Because your coaching conversation is purposeful in providing support to another person, it will be helpful if you can anticipate certain things about the person, which you could use to guide your conversation.

- *Specific challenges of person/group* – Find out what you can about the person you will have the conversation with. You can also think about this based on general demographics relevant to the group the person belongs to. Spend time to reflect on the typical problems associated with the group based on for example, *Gender, Age, Profession, Marital Status, and Educational Status*.
- *General blocks to growth and action-orientation* - Beyond the issues that we may identify based on a person's demographic data, there are some general challenges with thinking about self, others, life and the future that persons typically face, and which prevent them from taking positive action

and being solution-oriented in how they live their lives. One way of understanding this is with the acronym GAIL. The GAIL acronym represents 4 main energy blocks that reflect how people think about their challenges. They are explained in greater detail below. (Institute of Professional Excellence in Coaching, www.ipeccoaching.com)

- **Gremlin** - our inner voice that tells us directly or indirectly *that we are just not good enough*. It is fear-based thinking, and the most personal and powerful of all the energy blocks. An appropriate way to deal with a Gremlin is to understand and acknowledge that it exists. Acknowledge the message it is sending you, in order to shut you down, keep you safe and locked into your comfort zone, and then remind yourself that the message is not true.

Gremlin Example: A person may develop the habit of doing just enough to get-by and not working to full capacity, because of an early childhood experience in which they did excellently but was passed over because they weren't the favourite child in the family or in the class. That person would have embraced the thought from childhood that *"Effort and excellence doesn't make a difference, so why bother?"*

- **Assumptions** - refer to our fixed expectation that because something happened a certain way in the past, it will happen again.

Assumption Example: A job hunter may think *“I have gone on five interviews and have not landed a job; this upcoming interview will not be different.”* A good coaching response to an “Assumption” is to ask *“Because this happened in the past, why must it happen again?”*

- **Interpretations** – are opinions or judgments we create about an event, situation, person or experience and believe it to be true.

Interpretation Example: A person may be at a social event and think of another guest, *“Because that person wears expensive clothing and speaks well, he/she will not be open to getting to know me.”* Appropriate coaching questions in response to an “Interpretation” are: *“What’s another way to look at that”*
“What would someone with a completely different point of view say about this?”

- **Limiting beliefs** – are things we believe about self, life, the world, or others, that holds us back in some way.

Limiting Belief Example: A student may think after election for the first time to a new position, *“Because this is my first leadership position my colleagues won’t listen to and respect me.”* Appropriate open-ended coaching questions for Limiting

Beliefs can be: *How true is that belief really? Where did you get that idea?*

Learning Coaching Techniques

Similar to any credible profession, specific techniques are used in Coaching to ensure that coaching conversations are productive and positively impacting.

Mastering these skills is essential to ensure positive outcomes in coaching conversations. Below a few basic coaching skills are highlighted.

- **Posing open-ended questions** – the main and most powerful coaching skill is posing open-ended questions to the person you are chatting with. Your questions become powerful and very effective when they are formulated based on how well you have listened to the person. In posing open-ended questions, you give the person the opportunity to dig deeper into their own ideas and emotions about the matter they are dealing with. This way you facilitate the person in a process of discovery, in which they become their own solution provider, and are able to re-connect with their own gifting, skills, ability and competence, in order to make the best choices for their own life.

Open ended questions are future oriented, solution-focused. Examples include:

- *What has worked for you in the past?*
- *How do you think it will work out?*
- *Who are you when you make that choice?*

- *When will you take action on it?*
- *Where will that decision lead?*

Although beginning a question with “Why” qualifies as an open-ended question, it is best to avoid using “Why questions” as the word “Why” may be interpreted as an accusation and make the other person defensive. It also provides the person with an opportunity to respond *“I don’t know!”*

- **Ensuring Accountability** – Remember to include the element of ‘accountability’ in your coaching by exploring what the person has decided to do. For example, you may ask *“What will you do next?”* and also raise the importance of including a deadline for action by asking, *“By when will you do that?”*
- **Gaining Buy-In** – Because a coaching conversation is a collaborative experience, it is very important as you chat with the person to check-in often to determine whether you and the person have the same understanding of the situation or the chosen course of action. You can check for buy-in by asking *“What do you think of that?”* or *“I am not sure what you think about this?”* This is especially helpful in correcting the tone of the conversation if you slipped up and found yourself *‘telling the person what to do’* instead of guiding the person in digging deeper for answers. So whenever you find yourself telling versus asking, definitely break the cycle by asking *“So how*

do you see this?" that way you return the responsibility for solutions to the person.

- **Acknowledging & Validating** – Similar to getting “Buy-in” throughout the conversation, acknowledge and validate the person often throughout the conversation. This is a way of making the person feel safe and encouraged to explore their issue with you.
 - *Acknowledge* – You acknowledge the person by re-stating what you heard them say, to signal that you are listening carefully to them. It also helps the person ‘hear them self’ think. You may use phrases such as:
 - *What you are saying is...*
 - *In other words...*
 - *It sounds to me that...*
 - *Validate* – You validate the person, especially when they are emotionally charged about a matter, by letting them know that they have a right to feel as they do. It does not mean that you agree with their feelings. It does not mean that you are saying that the feelings are right or wrong. In addition, you are not saying that you understand the situation or you know how they feel. What you are doing is illustrating that you see the connection between how they are thinking about the matter and their emotions. You may use phrases such as:

- *Of course you are upset because _____* (Re-state your understanding of their interpretation of the issue. Wait for the person to indicate whether you have grasped what they are experiencing correctly.)
- *Based on your values, it makes sense that you feel _____ about the situation.*
- **Listening – There are 3 levels of listening**
 - *Level 1 Subjective Listening* – This occurs when you interpret what the person is saying, by placing yourself at the centre. So the person shares an experience and you respond by saying “*When that happened to me, I did....*”

Subjective Listening Example

Person: I have been paying my way through university, it has not been easy

Coach: When I was your age, I had to work and go to school part-time. I had nobody to help me.

- *Level 2 Objective Listening* – This occurs when you focus on the person and do not include yourself in the interpretation of what is being shared. It is very effective in communicating that you have been carefully listening.

Objective Listening Example

Person: I have been paying my way through university, it has not been easy

Coach: That is very admirable of you. Just think of it, you are now half-way your course of study. You have shown serious determination and it is paying off.

- *Level 3 Intuitive Listening* –This type of listening requires that you incorporate all your senses in interpreting the speaker’s message. You pay attention for example, to the person’s words, the non-verbals, the tone of voice, the energy level, and expression of feelings, including what the person has not said. **It is the most powerful form of listening** as it really enables the listener to connect with the speaker and communicate that ‘understanding’ has taken place.

Intuitive Listening Example

Person: I have been paying my way through university, it has not been easy.

Coach: You have taken on a formidable challenge and have done well, but it sounds like you are somewhat exhausted and worried about how you will manage for the new school year?

Having the Conversation

Coaching relationships can be long-term such as with a professional coach and client, or with a manager and his/her direct report. In long-term coaching relationships there is the opportunity to discuss the goals or matters of concern over several sessions. However, very often a coaching opportunity may be a one-time engagement, such as discussing a dilemma faced by a family member or close friend or a colleague at work. Notwithstanding the short timeline, with practice and proper preparation, in just one conversation, you can still lead the person you are coaching to discover important insights that will help them move forward in their life with clarity, joy and confidence. Below is the outline of a coaching model entitled GROWTH, which can serve as a protocol to guide a one-time coaching conversation. The GROWTH model was derived from the GROW goal setting and problem solving model developed in the United Kingdom. Let's look at what the acronym GROWTH means and related questions to pose when using it in coaching conversations.

- **G**oal - Ask open-ended questions that help the person discuss the issue he/she is facing and explore what outcome(s) the person would like to experience.
 - *What challenge are you facing?*

- *What would you like to see happen?*
- *What would make you feel that this matter is resolved?*
- **R**eality - Ask open-ended questions that help the person express the current state of things.
 - *What is the situation now?*
 - *What is happening that is preventing the matter from being solved?*
- **O**ptions - Ask open-ended questions that help the person examine their options.
 - *What are some ways that you could deal with this?* Here you may encourage the person to freely brainstorm ideas without judging whether he/she can afford to pursue the particular option. This way you encourage the person to think creatively so that ideas flow. Then as a next step, you ask the person to review their list and pull out the realistic options, and prioritize in terms of relevance.
- **W**hich choice – Ask open-ended questions that help the person review the options they have identified and choose one based on what will be most effective.
 - *Which of those options will work best for you?*
 - *What about that option appeals to you?*
- **T**imeline - Ask open-ended questions that help the person commit to a timeline to execute on the option they have selected.

- *So by what date will you need to complete this?*
- *What is your first step and when will you start?*
- **H** abits - Ask open-ended questions that help the person acknowledge any habits that may get in the way of them taking action on the option they have identified.
 - *What do you know about yourself that would prevent you taking action on this?*
 - *What could hold you back from following through on this?*

Closing off your Coaching Conversation

Close of your coaching conversation by using it as an opportunity to help the person re-focus on what has been discussed and discovered through the conversation. Explore the following with the person you are coaching:

- What they have identified as their main goal
- What decisions they have made in relation to pursuing their goal
- What timelines they will hold themselves accountable to
- What impact the conversation had on them
- Congratulate them on being solution-oriented and wanting to move forward with their life.
- Mention highlights of the conversation that caused you to admire them, and/or their approach, and/or their level of insight.
- Wish them well

Evaluating the Coaching Conversation

Given that a coaching conversation is an intentional conversation to provide support to a person around a significant matter of interest to him/her, then as persons committed to growing in our interpersonal skills, it is *recommended and beneficial* to do some reflection after the conversation. This will highlight areas for further development as you hone your coaching skills.

- **Reflection for Personal Growth**

- Seek the person's feedback - In closing off the coaching session you would ask the person, what impact the conversation had on them, and make a note of their response to contribute to your reflection after the person has left.
- Self-reflection – Here are some questions you may think through to evaluate your conversation. Write down your answers so you have them available for review.
 - Was I present in the conversation?
 - Why not?
 - Who did most of the talking?
 - What level of listening did I engage in?
 - Did I sufficiently acknowledge & validate?
 - Did feelings, issues, solutions, get expressed?
 - Did I show curiosity, interest, and respect?

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