

The background is a vibrant blue with a complex geometric pattern. It features a central starburst or sunburst design with multiple points radiating outwards. Surrounding this central element are various concentric circles, arcs, and straight lines, creating a sense of dynamic movement and energy. The overall aesthetic is modern and professional.

INSPIRATIONAL MANAGER

**HOW TO BUILD
RELATIONSHIPS THAT
DELIVER RESULTS**

2nd EDITION
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Inspirational Manager

What this tells us

All three conversations are about power and focus. According to the situation, you take on the power or give it up for others. The coaching context requires that you put aside your power in order to help people understand and make their own choices.

Coaching interventions

Getting to grips with the complexities of coaching will take more than reading this chapter, so find out if your organisation can offer you a course internally or book you a place on one designed specifically for managers. This said, there are a few basic interventions that will start you off and enable you to experiment with coaching your team on specific issues.

Remember, your aim is to encourage the other person to explore their own thinking rather than just tell them what to do, so you need the questions and comments that will open their minds to other options. You will achieve this through:

- ▶ active listening
- ▶ offering supportive comments
- ▶ providing creative ideas.

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Active listening

This is the most important element of your coaching toolkit and the best gift you can offer to your coachees. It is extremely rare to have someone truly listen, so never underestimate the impact you will have by doing just that! Most people listen for a gap so that they can add in their own experience or tell the person what to do. Active listening, on the other hand, takes in all the elements of what is being said and explores them fully.

There are three elements to active listening.

- ▶ *Reflecting back* – Take the words the person has just used and repeat them back – that is, ‘I hear you feel exhausted, trying to get the project up and running’. It feels odd to do this initially, but it can be very useful for the coachee to hear exactly what they have said. It helps them clarify whether this is really how they feel or it is just one aspect of the issue.
- ▶ *Questioning to understand* – In coaching it is important not to make assumptions, so repeat what you have understood and ask if that is right. For example, ‘So you are saying that you felt ignored when the person spoke that way – is that right?’ This has a three-fold purpose:
 - you can make sure that you truly understand what is being said and give your coachee the opportunity to provide you with a fuller picture
 - it enables the person to explore their own thinking further as they hear it repeated by another person
 - it makes it very clear that you are listening fully and are interested in what they are saying, which contributes to trust building.
- ▶ *Summarising* – This is another technique that enables the coachee to consider the subject matter. Your task as the coach is to pause periodically to summarise the discussion so far. It is a form of reflection but brings the whole piece together and it will be helpful for the coachee to hear the links you make between the different elements of the situation.

This is called active listening because you don’t just listen quietly, you use what you have heard to help the speaker clarify, explore and understand more fully what they are saying. The impact of hearing someone else speak your own words is remarkable. It makes them very real, provides another level of meaning and makes very clear that you are not alone with your issue.

Active listening also demonstrates why it is so important for inspirational managers to focus fully on other people. If you are primarily self-focused (see Chapter 5) you can’t provide the quality of listening required for an effective coaching session. In active listening you are paying attention to

the nuances of what is being said, taking heed of every element of the conversation and linking from one part of the discussion to another. There is no room for thinking about how you are coming across or what you want to say because you are totally other-focused.

Offering supportive comments

It can be really useful to offer supportive comments with a desire to help and move forward. These include.

- ▶ Comments and body language that show you are listening. These are little gestures that you probably do anyway when taking in what someone is telling you:
 - nodding your head
 - comments that demonstrate you are tracking the conversations, such as, ‘I see’, ‘Mmm’.
- ▶ Acknowledgement of the impact of a situation, such as, ‘I imagine that must have felt really exciting’, ‘I get the impression you were longing to speak out’.
- ▶ Bringing in a little humour. When appropriate, this can lighten the atmosphere in a helpful way – ‘I have a picture of you bouncing off the walls of the office!’, for example. This can also help the coachee gain a perspective on events rather than drown in their own concerns.
- ▶ Validation of their experiences and reactions, such as, ‘It sounds to me as if your actions have had a positive effect on the situation’; ‘I think that I might have kept quiet at that point, too’.
- ▶ Sharing personal experiences. This can be useful as long as it is totally relevant and you mention it with the intention of helping the other person move forward. To hear that they are not alone in struggling with a situation is really useful and can take away some of the pressure. ‘I can really understand that feeling of being overwhelmed by work’, for example.

To make it clear when something is just your opinion, begin sentences with:

- ▶ ‘I imagine ...’
- ▶ ‘I notice ...’
- ▶ ‘I’m curious about ...’
- ▶ ‘I think ...’
- ▶ ‘It sounds to me as if ...’

The main question to ask yourself is ‘Why do I want to make a supportive comment?’ Is it because you truly feel that it will help the other person expand their understanding or because you want to steer the conversation in a particular direction? If it is the former, then go for it; if it is the latter, then put the thought on one side for later.

Providing creative ideas

You may well have some really good ideas during a coaching conversation and it is important to add them in if you feel they will be of value. Again, your first question needs to be, ‘Am I offering up the idea for the benefit of the other or because I want to influence their behaviour?’

- ▶ If ideas come to you during the discussion, make a quick note so you don’t forget them.
- ▶ Consider whether the idea is relevant in this setting or not. Will it really take the person forward in a positive way?
- ▶ If you decide that there is real value, give two or three additional ideas for the coachee to consider, so that there is no risk they take your one idea as an instruction.
- ▶ If the coachee doesn’t pick it up, don’t force it on them – this is their discussion not yours.
- ▶ If you still believe that the idea is of value, find a way to use it yourself.

The main challenge is to give up your attachment to being right. The only ‘right’ in this discussion is what is appropriate for the coachee.

Stages in a coaching session

There will be times when it is appropriate to sit down with one of your people for a coaching session to concentrate on a specific learning need or work issue. Using specific coaching techniques and methodology will maximise learning and model how to think through issues in the future.

While the coachee will dictate the content of the conversation, your job as coach is to manage the process carefully to ensure that all the following stages are covered in the time frame:

- 1 prepare for the coaching conversation
- 2 set the agenda
- 3 explore the subject
- 4 discuss the options
- 5 come to a conclusion and set an action plan.

1 Prepare for the coaching conversation

You may need a moment of personal time to reorientate yourself to a coaching style, especially if you have just been working on your own or contributing to a business meeting. You need to make the shift to focusing on the other person, so giving some thought to your own needs first will enable you to then turn fully to the other.

Once you are ready for the session, begin by setting some clear parameters for the discussion.

Action

- ▶ Find a quiet location where you will be undisturbed for the duration of the discussion.
- ▶ Agree that this is a coaching discussion so the person knows what to expect. Doing this formally also helps to shift the power dynamic from a manager-direct report to coach-coachee relationship.
- ▶ Agree a clear time frame together so you can relax and not worry about other work demands.

2 Set the agenda

Once you know that the person needs to explore an issue, ask them to tell you exactly what it is they need. Never assume that you know already or attempt to use this time for your own agenda. If you need specific outputs from the person, set a time for that specific discussion rather than attempt to hijack coaching time.

Sometimes your coachee will have a very clear idea of what they want from the discussion, so can tell you exactly the line they want to explore. Other times, they may have a general theme and need you to help them pin down which is the most important aspect to explore. If so, then this is the first step in your coaching process and may even be the subject matter itself.

Action

- ▶ Ask the person to outline the subject matter they want to explore.
- ▶ Find out why it is important – this will spell out the external factors involved.
- ▶ Be as specific as possible about what they need to clarify, decide and act on as a result of the coaching.
- ▶ Find out what a 'good' result will look like by the end of the discussion.
- ▶ Make notes of the agenda to help you stay on track.

3 Explore the subject

The third stage in coaching is to explore fully the issue at hand. As obvious as this sounds, it is something that happens rarely in day-to-day conversation. Think back to the last time you talked to a colleague about a difficulty you were facing. Did they listen well and ask you to elaborate on your thoughts about it? Probably not. It is much more likely that your colleague listened until they got the gist of the problem, then gave you their opinion or advice!

Learning about other people and understanding their perspective is a fundamental driver for an inspirational manager. Not only do they really