



Expanding possibilities for action

Coaching as Inquiry

- **Uncovering, recovering, discovering answers**
- **Active listening in practice**
- **Coaching as appreciative inquiry for managers**

Katherine Holt, Ph.D.

Insight 02

November 2003



Copyright © 2003 Peakinsight LLC.
All rights reserved.

Every time I hear a manager equate coaching with providing direction or offering suggestions, I cringe inside. Yet I know some people practice “coaching” that way, especially when passing along knowledge or giving expert advice as a mentor. However, I believe that true coaching involves more asking than telling, more listening than speaking.

Uncovering, recovering, discovering answers

Coaching involves helping people discover their own answers. Think of coaching as a process of uncovering, recovering, and discovering. For example:

- **Uncovering:** What has the person observed? What does the person believe? What values or mental models drive the person’s behavior? What does the person enjoy doing? What activities are most meaningful?
- **Recovering:** What has already been learned (e.g., through previous assignments or participating in a leadership course)? When has the person been successful in using the skill/behavior in other situations?
- **Discovering:** What can the person find out about the dynamics of the situation, including the implications for particular choices? What can be learned about the perspectives and expectations of others?

Coaching can uncover what the person already knows about the situation. It can encourage the expression of deep needs and feelings. It can reveal key drivers. It can help people be more explicit about their intentions, and do more to enact them. It can help infuse actions with meaning and bring more joyful fulfillment.

Through the recovery process, the coach can put people in touch with what they already know how to do. People have enormous wisdom that they don’t always tap. Coaching can bring this knowledge to the forefront so that it can help inform the actions being taken.

The discovery process develops insight about:

1. Possibilities (What if?)
2. Choices (What else could you do? How else could you respond?)
3. Support (Who can help?)
4. Action (What can you do first? next?)
5. Learning (What worked? What didn’t? What would you do differently next time?)

In the discovery mode, the coach encourages mutual exploration. It is a co-creative process. We are partnering to weave a tapestry together. Both of us are choosing threads and participating in the design of the conversation. Meanwhile, the coach decides when to hold up a mirror, when to challenge, and when to encourage. All this can be done with questions.

Active listening in practice

The primary tool for inquiry coaching is active listening. This involves using open-ended questions (i.e., questions that cannot be answered “yes” or “no”). Many examples of open-ended questions are included in this article.

Active listening also involves using body language that conveys receptivity. In most cultures, it’s helpful to make eye contact with the other person. And maintaining an open posture shows more receptivity than crossing one’s arms. Sitting together at a round table or at right angles will communicate more approachability than staying seated behind a desk.

By paraphrasing and/or summarizing what has been said, you confirm that the other person has been heard. You can do this even when you don't necessarily agree with what was said. Listening without pre-judgment is a form of honoring and respecting the other person. It conveys appreciation for the other person's perspective.

The coach needs to be "present" and tuned into the other person's emotions. Emotions are revealed in many ways, such as body language, vocal timber, and particular word choices. You can use reflective language to acknowledge or ask about those emotions (when appropriate). This often takes the coaching dialogue to a new level of communication, especially when you can convey empathy without feeling compelled to address or "fix" everything that gets expressed.

At the outset of a coaching engagement, I ask many questions. I explore the person's goals, both short-term and long-term. We look at what kinds of results are being achieved, and where the person has been most successful. I look for positive themes to help people leverage their strengths in a more intentional way. We explore areas of concern as well, such as what behaviors are not producing the desired result. I ask questions about organizational context, because there are always system dynamics to consider. I try to find out what the person knows about the expectations of key stakeholders, and whether their perceptions match the person's self-image.

I often start subsequent coaching sessions by asking "What's on your mind today?" With this question, I'm trying to find out what's most important at this moment, as well as whether/where the person is feeling stuck. I ask additional questions to identify the possible source of key issues. Then I probe those areas to help people discover (or recover) some possible solutions.

Coaching as Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for managers

Coaching inquiry can be difficult for some line managers to appreciate at first. But once they experience and learn to practice learn this form of coaching, it can open up new avenues for empowerment as well as behavior change.

Managers doing coaching can use a simple metric called the "Talk/Listen Ratio" to evaluate the proportion of time they already spend talking vs. listening in particular situations. This helps increase self-awareness and can be used to solicit feedback from others. It can help people gauge their progress if the goal is to do more listening.

The inquiry form of coaching has some similarities to the "Appreciative Inquiry" (AI) process that has become popular in OD. As described in the *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*, the AI process consists of four steps:

1. Discovery: Appreciating the best of the current situation.
2. Dream: Imagining what is possible.
3. Design: Constructing the ideal situation.
4. Destiny: Sustaining the effort and making adjustments as needed.

Managers doing coaching can follow a similar 4-step process to inquire about what is happening, help someone envision what is possible, identify goals and construct a plan to achieve particular objectives, and follow through to ensure that the plan is implemented.

Curiosity is a key asset for coaching. It's easy to ask questions when one is genuinely interested and curious about what is happening. People will open up and keep talking if you use questions and encouraging phrases such as:

- Tell me about...
- Say more...
- What else...

People have a story to tell. They are hungry for other people to listen. The inquiry form of coaching can help you draw out these stories and affirm what people are already doing. By reframing what is said, you can sometimes add a new dimension to these stories as well. You can use the process of coaching to help people experience more meaningful lives at work.

Resources

For more information about active listening and appreciative inquiry, please read:

Appreciative Inquiry Handbook by David L. Cooperrider, Diana Whitney, and Jacqueline M. Stavros. Bedford Heights, OH: Lakeshore. 2003.

People Skills by Robert Bolton. New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster. 1986.

About the author



Katherine Holt coaches global leaders to achieve personal and organizational change. She has coached nearly 1,000 individuals over the past 20 years. She has also trained managers as well as other coaches in the art of coaching. Katherine worked at Personnel Decisions International (PDI) for 16 years, where she was the primary architect for The PROFILOR®, the most widely used 360°-feedback tool in the world. She managed PDI's office in Japan from 1994-2000, and was recognized as one of the top executive coaches in Asia-Pacific during those years. After repatriation, Dr. Holt left PDI to start Peakinsight LLC and focus on helping people build more sustainable organizations.

Feedback

Please tell me about your experience with Coaching as Inquiry. You can reach me by phone at 970-247-1180 or by email at katherine@peakinsight.com.

Future Insights

Do you have an interesting tool or process that gets amazing results? Please consider sharing it with Peakinsight readers as part of the Insight series. For details on submitting articles for publication, please send email to insight@peakinsight.com.