



How Great Leaders Coach

Eight coaching competencies to
guide your leadership practice.

This small ebook is the product of working with 100s of leaders in organizations to have more effective and purposeful conversations at work.

The eight core competencies included here emerged from the many iterations of the cohort-based course, Leader as Coach. I am deeply grateful to all those who have taken this journey with me, who have shown up with openness, vulnerability, and a willingness to jump into work of coaching. I have learned a great deal from our time together in the classroom, the meaningful challenges you bring, your experiences, and your questions.

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Why coaching?

When I stepped into my first executive role many years ago, nothing went as planned. Thankfully, rather than fire me, the organization was willing to pay for an executive coach. I assumed our sessions would be straight-forward and directive — I would share a challenge and my coach would provide frameworks for me to overcome that challenge. But that's not what happened.

Instead, she directed my attention to how I was seeing the situation, to the ways in which I was contributing to the circumstances I said I didn't want, and to my specific strengths and creative approaches to problem-solving. We used the challenges I faced at work as material for deep and lasting change, and through that process I became the leader I always wanted to be.

Inspired by this experience, I enrolled in a year-long professional coaching program so that I could offer coaching to my team. However, the faculty informed us we couldn't coach our direct reports due to concerns around confidentiality and power dynamics. And while it is true that you can't professionally coach your team, it is entirely possible for leaders to apply a wide range of coaching techniques and methodologies in organizational settings.

I took what I learned in the program and applied it to my team. I learned how to balance business outcomes with career growth opportunities, to create space for others, to listen deeply, to honor dignity in difficult conversations, and to build a


trusting environment where people felt safe to hold the complexities of life alongside the demands of the organization. It was the best team I've ever been a part of.

Ever since that time, I've been thinking about the most salient aspects of coaching that can be applied to leadership practices, and the competencies that support the transformative conversations of leaders who coach. Combining my executive leadership experience, learnings from my MBA program, and insights from more than a thousand hours of coaching leaders, the cohort-based course *Leader as Coach* was born, along with the eight competencies included in this ebook.

Folks who have gone through the course report, among other things, that they do less work in conversations which leaves them with more energy; that conversations are now more effective and efficient; that the answers they hear from their team are more creative and interesting; that the quality of work improves; that relationships deepen; and that they are able to see the bigger picture more clearly.

While coaching is not a panacea, it has an important place in organizational life. As long as organizations are made of people, there will be a need for humanistic approaches to leading, directing, delegating, relating, holding accountable, and celebrating. Because of its innate ability to honor the creativity, strength, inner-knowing, and wisdom of each individual, coaching is both a skillset and mindset that enables true collaboration, innovation, and creativity.

1. Cultivate Curiosity
2. Always Be Learning
3. Listen Beyond the Words
4. Honor Emotions
5. Build Partnership
6. Create Space for Thinking
7. Acknowledge Multiple Truths
8. Look to the Future



Cultivate Curiosity

METHOD & MATTER

“Curiosity in coaching isn’t about gathering information so you can decide what to do. Instead, it acts in service of the learning and growth of the person you are working with. It illuminates areas for exploration so that you can discover what is hidden from view. Questions that come from genuine curiosity can be evocative or provocative, an invitation to pause, reflect, and deepen understanding.” — Andrea Mignolo

Curiosity is the heart of effective coaching. When curiosity fills us, there is no room for judgment, which creates space for inquiry, learning, and growth. A leader’s curiosity facilitates curiosity in others so that they can find their own solutions to the opportunities and challenges in front of them.

Leaders who are curious let go of needing to have the answers, using curiosity to encourage the person they are working with to deepen their awareness and explore new possibilities for action. This shift from “fixing mode” to “learning mode” invites a leader to do less, conserving energy that would usually be spent solutioning. When leaders adopt this approach individuals are more willing to take ownership of their own growth and development, and teams become more engaged.

Curiosity also fosters great collaboration. Impactful coaching

conversations require both participants to be curious and open in order to uncover new perspectives, insights, and solutions. Curiosity creates a willingness to be in the not-knowing *together*, present and open to what might be uncovered. It loosens fixed perceptions about how things are and invites wonder about how they might be. It allows us to see patterns clearly, to notice when something new is emerging, and to sense small shifts that others might miss.

Of course, curiosity isn’t just the questions a leader asks but also the mind-set a leader inhabits. It’s an orientation towards life that invites openness and wonder about what is happening and what might be possible. When leaders embody curiosity they facilitate insight, awareness, and innovation in individuals, teams, and organizations.

Leaders who cultivate curiosity:

1. Consistently demonstrate genuine interest in different perspectives by leading with questions before offering solutions.
2. Model openness by regularly examining and sharing their own assumptions.
3. Create an environment where exploring different viewpoints is the norm.
4. Transform mistakes into learning opportunities through skillful questioning.
5. Demonstrate comfort with uncertainty and not-knowing, encouraging others to do the same.
6. Foster a team culture where curiosity leads to innovation and deeper understanding.



Always Be Learning

“Real learning gets to the heart of what it means to be human. Through learning we re-create ourselves. Through learning we become able to do something we never were able to do. Through learning we re-perceive the world and our relationship to it. Through learning we extend our capacity to create, to be part of the generative process of life. There is within each of us a deep hunger for this type of learning.” — Peter Senge

The world is constantly changing. Learning helps us embrace this so that our perceptions, understandings, beliefs, and mental models can be updated with new experiences and insights. The only constant is change, therefore the only sustainable approach to adaptation is to keep learning — learning from our experiences, interactions, changing circumstances, and outcomes.

This approach to learning is a little different from how we are used to thinking about learning. Traditional learning is about assimilating new information and developing new skills. Learning through coaching is about reflecting on our intent, actions, and assumptions and transforming whatever insights arise into knowledge. This is less about going to conferences and workshops and more about a willingness to learn (and be changed) from everyday interactions and experiences.

Learning can be applied to every level of organizational life, from challenges in the macro environment to supporting the individuals we work with. When it comes to coaching, leaders who continuously learn remain open to the dynamism of people. The danger that plagues leaders who refuse to learn leads to static assumptions about people and their capabilities. Being open to learning allows leaders to honor the uniqueness of each individual on their team, working to co-create customized approaches to growth and development.

With a learning mindset, leaders understand that everyone is doing the best they can with the awareness and resources available to them. It is the role of the coach, in partnership with the person they are working with, to uncover ways to increase this awareness and resourcefulness so that new insights, possibilities, and actions become available.

Leaders who are always learning:

1. Systematically extract insights from experiences and share these learnings with others
2. Proactively create feedback loops that enhance their leadership effectiveness
3. Model learning agility by openly testing new approaches when current ones aren't working
4. Share their learning journey, including vulnerabilities and mistakes, to normalize continuous learning
5. Consistently create opportunities for team members to identify and act on learning opportunities
6. Build learning systems that benefit the entire organization



Listen Beyond the Words

“Listening is at the heart of the issue of mutual respect and mutual legitimacy. We have a fundamental stance of openness in our listening when we hold the person as a “legitimate other”, which means a person of equal validity, not better and not worse. Holding another as a legitimate other is a Way of Being - it occurs in language, emotions, and our body.” — Alan Sieler

When we listen to people we pay attention to their words. But true listening goes beyond the words. To truly listen to another is to quiet default responses and default ways of seeing the world, so that we can be open and present to what is being shared. We can sense what the person we are listening to cares most about and we can honor the inner coherence of how they make sense of the world. This kind of listening is a form of attunement, a way of deeply understanding another person, and an essential part of transformational change.

Think back to the last time you felt *truly* listened to. What happened in that conversation? My guess is that something started to shift for you - maybe in the space of listening you started to deepen your awareness of something important, or processed and let go of something that had been lingering. You probably began to feel more settled and clear. And the person

listening didn’t “do” anything besides listen! Such is the power of listening.

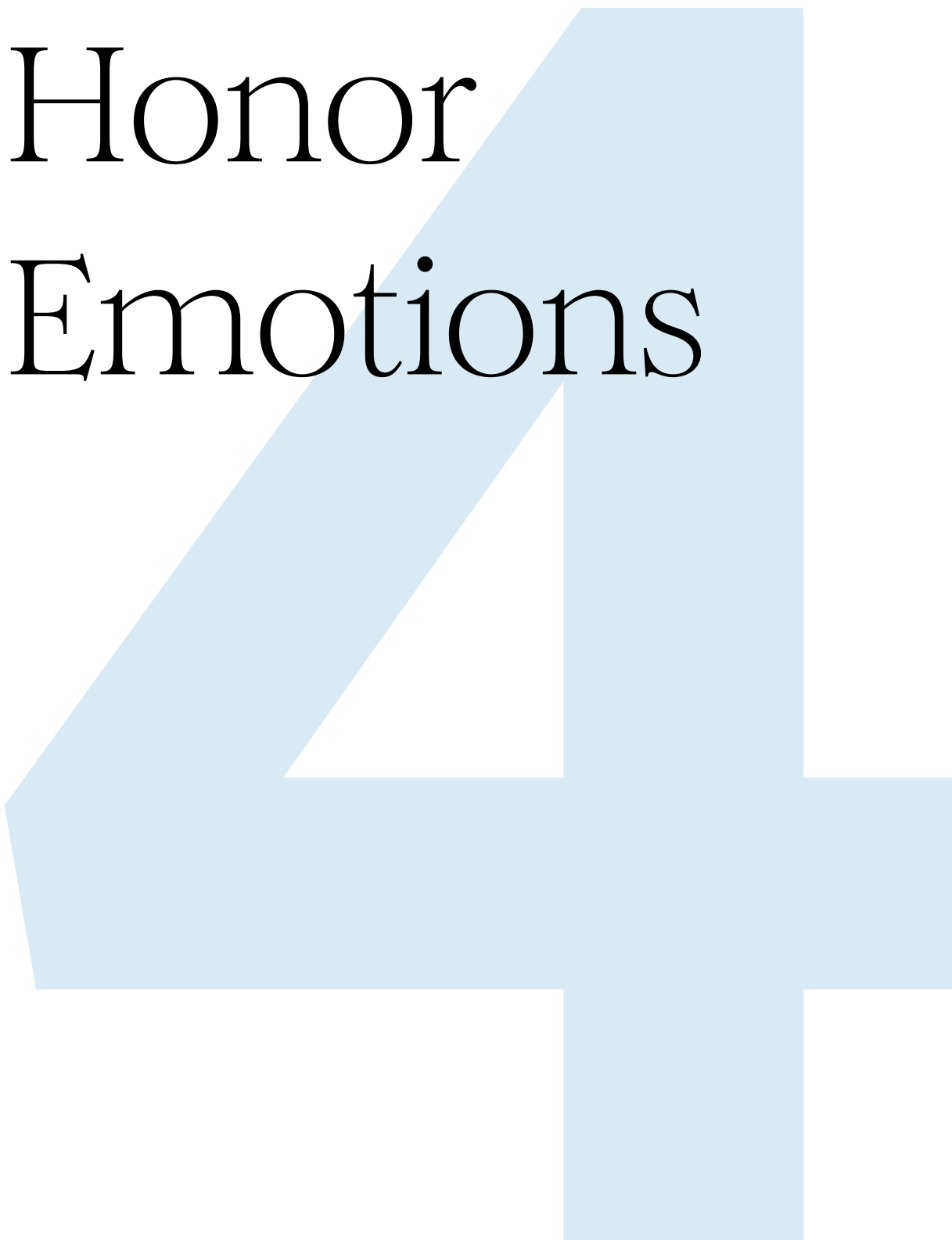
Leaders can also do this for themselves, with inner listening. By bringing attention and kindness to their inner landscapes, leaders build their capacity to be attentive and kind to others. Attending to inner conflicts with kindness can soften self-judgment and lead to deeper levels of well-being.

When leaders practice and demonstrate listening beyond the words to create stronger connections in their organization, they report a noticeable increase in trust, a deeper understanding of others, and that empathy more readily imbues conversations.

Leaders who listen beyond the words

1. Demonstrate sophisticated awareness of non-verbal communication including tone, energy, and body language
2. Practice disciplined reflection to ensure accurate understanding without interpretation
3. Create environments where deep listening is valued and practiced
4. Skillfully use silence and space to promote deeper thinking and expression
5. Model self-awareness by managing their own reactions while listening
6. Foster psychological safety through their listening presence

Honor Emotions

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“Emotions don’t get in the way of rationality; they lead the way, because they’re vital to everything we think and everything we do. Emotions aren’t the problem; they’re pointing to the problem, and they’re trying to bring us the precise intelligence and energy we need to deal with the problem.” — Karla McLaren

As humans we may think of ourselves as rational, unemotional creatures. And yet! Without our emotions we wouldn’t be able to make even the simplest of decisions. Unfortunately, the majority of organizations have yet to fully embrace emotions and often treat them as unwelcome guests rather than important messengers that carry useful information.

Today, theories of Emotional Intelligence are helping leaders understand the role of emotions and the fact that, when handled skillfully, they can become an important part of individual, team, and organizational success. Emotions often show up to alert us to something important happening in our environment that we need to be aware of. Different emotions carry different messages and the more we can detect and name these emotions (known as emotional granularity), the more information we have to understand how to respond to a situation.

Coaches and leaders who develop fluency and skill in working with emotions find greater ease in what used to feel like “challenging” conversations. When emotions themselves are seen as intelligent messengers that carry important information, then it becomes easier to name, express, and honor them. When this happens we begin to create an environment of trust and safety within our teams and organizations.

Leaders who honor emotions:

1. Create psychological safety for emotional expression in the workplace
2. Maintain consistent presence and composure during emotionally charged situations
3. Demonstrate sophisticated understanding of how emotions influence organizational dynamics
4. Model appropriate emotional expression while maintaining professionalism
5. Help others understand and learn from their emotional experiences
6. Build organizational practices that recognize emotions as valuable data



Build Partnership

METHOD & MATTER

“When we lead, we are making ourselves the expert. Any implication of ‘I’ll tell you’ or even ‘I’ll lead’ implies ‘I know better’ and that is taking power in a conversation. Partnership in coaching, I think, is about bringing ourselves to the room and doing enough and not too much. Co-creation means starting every conversation by rightsizing what we are doing today. When we start every conversation in partnership, we get to the heart of the matter sooner.” — Claire Pedrick

Successful coaching relationships are built on partnership, and true partnership demands a shift in power. Leaders who coach are able to pause their own ideas about the “right” way to approach a challenge or opportunity and to acknowledge the power of the person they are working with - their power to find a solution, their power to find their own way, and their power to make it through the messy middle of uncertainty.

For a coaching conversation to fulfill its purpose of connecting a person with their inner knowing, the coach has to step back and create space for the coachee to take the lead. This doesn’t mean the coach is passive, but that they have enough self-awareness to know when to support and when to step into the conversation more actively.

Leaders encourage partnership from the beginning of the coaching conversation by working to identify the focus of the conversation as well as measures of success. They are comfortable using silence as a tool to encourage deeper reflection and trust the inner wisdom of the person they are working with.

This also requires that leaders bring self-awareness to any desire or tendency to want to help or rescue. Bert Hellinger, a psychotherapist and creator of Family Constellations, writes that, “Giving up wanting to help or rescue people is essential if you sincerely respect them,” which perfectly encompasses the idea of partnership in a coaching conversation.

Leaders who build partnership:

1. Excel at co-creating clear expectations and goals with team members
2. Demonstrate flexibility in their leadership approach based on individual needs
3. Systematically create opportunities for others to lead and make decisions
4. Include team members in decision-making processes that affect their work
5. Balance providing direction with supporting autonomy
6. Create organizational structures that promote partnership at all levels



Create Space for Thinking

“A coaching approach builds this awareness by creating space for others to think, where deeper questions can be voiced and explored. In this regard, coaching conversations can essentially be thought of as learning conversations, places of pause where new meaning is made. Conversations that support an increased capacity for individuals and teams to sit with uncertainty, to deeply and thoroughly consider an issue, to reflect on their own contributions to the issue, and to use curiosity as a launchpad for innovation.” — Andrea Mignolo

In organizational life we are driven by the urgency of the day to day. By contrast, coaching conversations provide an opportunity to slow down, reflect, and get curious about what we’re doing and the results we are (or are not) getting.

To create space for thinking, coaches shift the cadence of the conversation, slowing things down and bringing attention to what is emerging in the present moment. Rather than focusing on status updates and coordination of work, the coach creates a space of exploration and wonder on behalf of the coachee.

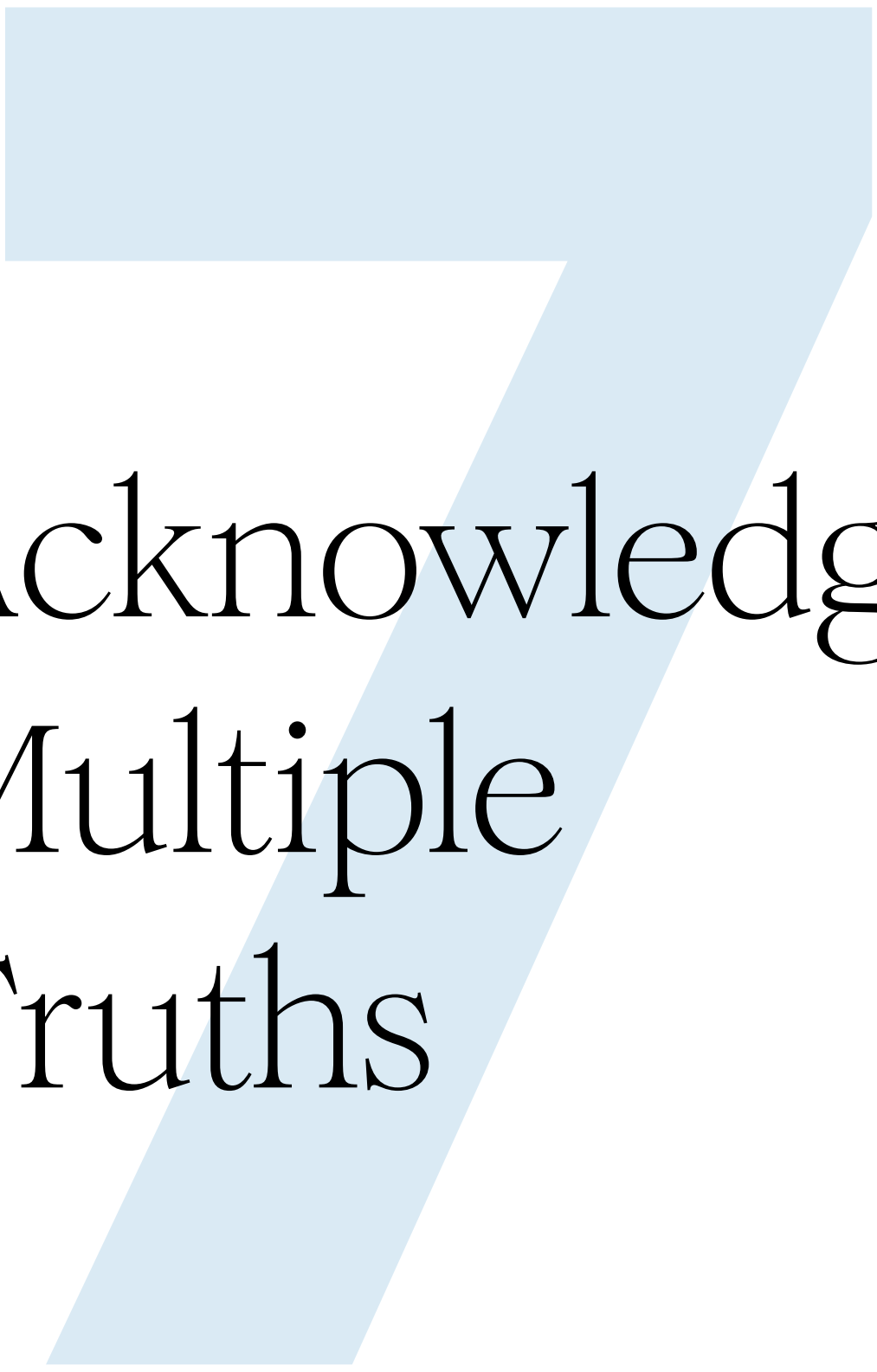
Creating space for thinking is an approach to learning that is facilitated through conversation. This can happen in 5 minutes or in 50. Time is not the deciding factor in creating space to think, but rather willingness. It can feel jarring to slow down and turn

attention towards thinking. And yet, the very slowing down creates the opportunity to improve the quality of our work, relationships, and decisions.

The role of the coach in creating this space is to ask questions that encourage people to think for themselves, to increase awareness, and to develop new approaches to opportunities and challenges that can be tested out in practice. Coaches aim to provide such a high quality of attention that the coachee is directed back to their own thinking again and again. In this thinking space creativity, innovation, and new possibilities can flourish.

Leaders who create space for thinking:

1. Consistently manage the pace of conversations to allow for deeper reflection
2. Ask questions that expand thinking and surface new possibilities
3. Use silence strategically to deepen processing and insight
4. Structure interactions to promote discovery rather than directive advice
5. Help others explore multiple perspectives without rushing to solutions
6. Build organizational practices that value thinking time



Acknowledge Multiple Truths

“This may be an obvious statement, but it must be said: The way you and I see things is just that – the way we see them. The way we see things has nothing to do with the way things are. Remember, we are always interpreting. We claim that nobody has pure Objectivity. Nobody knows what’s truly going on. All I know, and all I can know, is what’s going on for me. All you know, and all you can know, is what’s going on for you.” — Chalmers Brothers

We are each unique observers. We bring our experience, perspective, beliefs, and learning (among other things) to how we pay attention to, and interpret, the world around us. Each of us picks up on and creates meaning from different subsets of data. I’m sure most of us have had the experience of participating in a meeting where it felt like everyone was in alignment, and then afterwards realizing each person walked away with very different ideas of what had happened!

Leaders who coach work with awareness of the human capacity to create interpretations of the world around us. They know that interpretations help us move quickly and efficiently, but *sometimes* our interpretations get in the way of taking effective action. Coaching conversations bring awareness and discernment to the data being used and the interpretations that follow.

Often interpretations are mistaken for data, which can be the source of misunderstanding and conflict.

Embracing the idea that conversations are overlaps of multiple truths and acknowledging that none of us has access to The Complete Truth pushes leaders to deepen their curiosity. When each person’s experience is recognized and deemed important, valid, and incomplete, coaching conversations can begin to map out a more complete picture of what is happening. This includes questioning assumptions, looking for other possible interpretations, and making distinctions between data and interpretations.

Leaders who acknowledge multiple truths:

1. Actively seek out and integrate diverse perspectives
2. Help others understand and appreciate different viewpoints
3. Demonstrate skill in separating observations from interpretations
4. Approach misunderstandings with genuine curiosity rather than judgment
5. Create environments where conflicting viewpoints can coexist
6. Build inclusive practices that honor diverse ways of seeing and knowing



Look to the Future

“Tandem bicycles move forwards. Moving a bike backwards is tricky. Coaching is different from counselling and therapy because it is about the present and the future. Paying attention to some things in the past might be useful to the thinker and the general direction of travel still needs to be forwards.” — Claire Pedrick

Coaching focuses primarily on the present and exploring future possibilities. While events in the past may be the catalyst for some coaching conversations, the details of what happened are less important than the impact that the past has on the present moment.

Effective coaching pays special attention to how a person is making sense of the world around them. What interpretations and beliefs are at play that limit their view of what is possible? Through focused attention on the ways the issue continues to be unresolved in the present, the coach guides the coachee to a deeper awareness of what is sustaining the current circumstances. As clarity increases, the coach turns towards the future by inviting the coachee to think about what new actions they want to take given what they have learned in the conversation.

The future orientation of coaching conversations facilitates optimism and

courage that leads to committed actions. Rehashing the past rarely releases the energy required to create new futures. But when we stay grounded in the present with our eyes directed toward future horizons, we generate the strength and commitment needed to step into the unknown in new and vibrant ways.

Leaders who look to the future:

1. Consistently redirect conversations from problems to possibilities
2. Excel at helping others articulate and pursue desired outcomes
3. Support the creation of specific, actionable plans
4. Establish clear and effective accountability measures
5. Demonstrate reliable follow-through on commitments
6. Create organizational practices that balance present action with future vision

What's next?

If you are interested in learning more about bringing coaching skills into your leadership practice, there are a few things I can recommend:

1. Check out [Leader as Coach](#), a seven week cohort-based course designed around the competencies in this ebook.
2. Sign up for the free newsletter, [Words Make Worlds](#), that explores the Coaching Leadership style.
3. Browse the [Leader as Coach Library](#) for books that can support you on your journey. Special mention goes to:
 - [Language and the Pursuit of Leadership Excellence](#)
 - [Simplifying Coaching](#)
 - [The Power of Emotions at Work](#)
 - [Discussing the Undiscussable](#)
4. Reach out with questions or share comments (I love to hear from folks):
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