

# The Inner Work of Good to Great

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## Organisations need fully functioning human beings

In today's demanding and complex environments, organisations increasingly need people who are more fully functioning human beings. We need individuals who are self-confident and strong, yet cooperative and sensitive to others; people who can be creative and inspirational as well as responsible, thoughtful and objective. We want resourceful self-starters who can accept direction; we need leaders who are self-aware and communicative, with high rationality and high emotional intelligence. In short, we need a population of people who are able to operate consistently at something approaching their best.

To me, coaching is unarguably the best vehicle that has yet arisen to elicit and support the optimal growth and development of well-functioning adults. It is a key element in creating sustainable, integrated, high achievement of both individual and organisation.

In this brief paper I address some of the key distinctions that make the coaching approach so productive, and consider its positive impact on individual and organisational effectiveness. I also give some attention to the value of incorporating coaching attitudes and behaviours into the management style and culture of an organisation. My perspective comes mostly from my experience as a professional coach, external to the client organisation, but I believe the lessons I have drawn also apply in general terms to coaching delivered by suitably trained individuals within an organisation.

## Seeking the conditions for thriving

There are many approaches to development which focus on the acquisition of specific knowledge or behaviours, or transferring the fruits of experience from one person to another. Consulting, training and mentoring are all valuable in contexts where the sharing of previous experience, information or skill is necessary.

But our real challenge is to move to a different paradigm that is not based on (and limited to) the transfer of knowledge or ability from one person to another. The question is: how can we create the optimal conditions that stimulate individuals to realise their own potential? Or perhaps: how do we liberate the innate tendency of all human beings to continually regenerate and flourish?

Where the purpose is the development of the individual, advising, telling and 'knowing better' all increase the danger of inhibiting rather than promoting independent growth. For this purpose we need a fundamentally different approach and a radical shift in the perceived location of knowledge and authority.

Given the right conditions, the wish list of my opening paragraph is far from fanciful; it's a description of some of the potential of all human beings. It's how you and I behave when we are given (or create) the conditions which support and challenge us to be in touch with the best in ourselves. Encountering ourselves in a relationship which brings out the best in us can catalyse real transformational change – a self-generating flourishing of the human being.

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## A vehicle for transformation

The purpose of coaching is to provide the optimal conditions in which already well-functioning individuals can truly flourish. It is designed to enable the client to think more clearly and be more emotionally intelligent and creative in response to challenge.

*“What coaching does is help you understand and appreciate your own value, because often when you are in a situation of such rapid change and evolution, there can be human casualties. Coaching can help you choose to remain part of the process. .... A coaching relationship gives you personal strength and it helps you keep a focus both on yourself and on the business. It basically keeps you charged and alive so that you not just cope with the change, but react with it and direct it. It means that you’ve got the power and the energy to keep contributing and moving forward but without burning out.”*

Coaching client<sup>1</sup>

Coaching offers an active, purposeful, adult-to-adult partnership of mutual trust and respect, which supports, challenges and empowers the client as they focus on achieving their goals and creating desired changes for themselves .

The work is always the clients’ work, not the coach’s. While the coach may have experience or expertise relevant to the client’s situation, their role is not to advise – the power of coaching lies in the fact that the client does their own work and finds their own answers. The coach’s job is to co-create with their client the active relationship within which the client does what they need to do: reflect, clarify, resolve, choose, decide, act. If the coach occupies the space of authority, of ‘knowing’, then the client will not own that space and won’t experience the power of self-development.

*“You get there yourself, and I think that is one of the best parts of the coaching thing because you get there – where you are going – under your own steam.”*

Ibid

So the coach listens deeply to what is said and unsaid, reflecting back their understanding of what they are hearing and sensing. They share their honest observations and ask the searching exploratory questions that naturally arise from the depth of their listening. The agenda is the client’s and the only authority on what’s true and authentic for them is the client. The crucial stance is adult-to-adult rather than parental (either nurturing or controlling). The attitude is one of acute attention, absolute respect and acceptance of the client and therefore an absence of judgement (positive or negative). What arises is a focussed partnership of supportive challenge which stimulates self-awareness, insight and forward movement and where responsibility and accountability for action lies with the client.

## Impact on the individual

For the client, the opportunity to explore and test their thinking and their emotions in a non-judgemental but stimulating environment leads to a liberation of both thought and feeling.

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There is a release of insight and clarity, the resolution of stuckness and a natural movement into productive action .

*“Situations that have seemed complex and difficult - intractable - feel clarified and within my control.”* Ibid

*“Having my nose put in my own learning; bringing the unconscious to the conscious. Learning from mistakes I have made so that that learning can contribute value in the future. Getting feedback I won’t get from any other source. Being more aware of your actions makes you more aware of the consequences of them. You don’t go blindly into decisions; you are more likely to make the right decisions. You become more reflective and more aware and so able to work through some of the barriers and become better at the job ... do better management.”* Ibid

Coaching clients typically achieve their goals and more – they may indeed get in touch with the very best in themselves. Clients become increasingly self-aware and think clearly, letting go of old impediments and releasing blocked energy. They resolve internal conflicts and integrate new understanding, tapping into their own inherent wisdom. New choices lead to more intelligent action. Clients report that they experience themselves as stronger, more alive, clearer, more confident, able, energised, whole, at ease. Objective reports from their organisations support their subjective experience. They meet their challenges and attain their goals. They thrive – and in thriving they contribute.

### Organisational impact

The impact of coaching in an organisation may partly depend upon whether the coaching is provided by external coaches or by a cadre of internal coaches – if only because clients may restrict the topics they choose to explore with a coach from the same organisation. In either case, while efficacy studies struggle to give consistent evidence in terms of ‘hard’ business measures of ROI, research consistently points to major organisational benefit.

*“People want quantitative data, but a big part of the change is at a personal level and you are not aware of what that is - but it is obvious behaviourally at work.”*

Exceptional Executive Coaching: Practices, Measurement, Selection & Accreditation<sup>2</sup>

*“I enjoy watching the executive uncover and develop an area which was a blind spot or something that was ‘unchangeable.’ I like to see a sizeable shift in behaviour - that they have taken the dialogue from the coach and put it into action.”* Ibid

*“Self-awareness is not part of normal executive development, and this is where executive coaching can be helpful. Most executives don’t have the opportunity otherwise.”* Executive Coaching: An HR View of What Works<sup>3</sup>

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Effects that seem to be consistent across many kinds of organisations, and apply to both individuals and wider populations, are movements in the direction of:

- a 'can do' culture of proactive high performance
- increased transparency, honesty and improved inter-personal communication
- heightened sense of trust in oneself and in colleagues; heightened sense of being trusted
- decrease in complaint and conflict
- increase in engagement, cooperation, commitment and contribution
- increase in job satisfaction and promotion
- sense of shared ownership and responsibility
- increased personal leadership and willingness to take appropriate risks
- increased ability to attract and retain the best

In today's world, these are the kind of qualities that will determine the ultimate success, and often the survival, of many organisations.

### Applying coaching effectively

For some purposes coaching is most definitely not the best tool. I believe that it's a serious mistake to use coaching for remedial purposes – to attempt to 'fix' someone through assigning them a coach. Coaching needs to be driven by a motivated client; it becomes something else if it's driven by the coach or the organisation. If it becomes one-to-one training, or counselling, it may be productive – but it won't be coaching. And there's a significant strategic downside of associating coaching with problem-fixing: people will naturally see it as a marker of poor performance and avoid it if possible. The most effective organisations use coaching explicitly as a positive investment in potential; having a coach becomes a marker of accelerated development and is therefore sought after and not wasted.

For a coaching approach to be really effective it needs to be seen to be adopted from the top. Where leaders don't appear to value or believe in coaching for themselves, then however great the impact on individual recipients may be, it has little chance of taking root down the line and affecting the organisation systemically. Where leaders walk their talk and clearly believe in the potency of coaching to accelerate their own personal, professional development, then a significant cultural shift is possible. A corporate entity that comes to see itself as an actively growing body, committed to the healthy development of all its constituents, is an incredibly attractive place to work.

### A coaching style of management

Coaching doesn't replace an organisation's need for clarity and directiveness in management; leaders and managers still need to decide, direct and tell when appropriate. So when we're thinking of using coaching as a management approach or skill, there are some important boundaries to keep in mind. In an effective coaching relationship the agenda and desired outcomes must be those of the client. Where the coach has their own separate agenda for

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the client this agenda will distort and limit the coaching relationship; the coach will find it difficult to avoid mentoring, leading or managing. So a line manager will almost certainly not be a suitable coach for their direct reports; coaching will be best provided by someone who is not in any position of authority over the client.

However, a manager can learn and employ the key behaviours, skills and attitudes of coaching to good effect in their role as a manager, without becoming the coach of those they manage – a shift of style, but not a change of role. Active listening, powerful questioning, contracting for the working relationship (how shall we best work together?), eliciting rather than telling – all such skills belong in the good manager’s repertoire and can transform a working environment and the performance of those engaged in it. For many organisations, a coaching style of management complements the provision of individual coaching as the chosen path of evolution.

### Summary

Coaching is an outstandingly effective vehicle for transformational change for both individuals and organisations. Engaging a coach can offer a pathway for accelerated personal and professional development. Adopting a coaching mind-set as an organisational approach to good leadership and management can have a profound effect on the working culture and productivity of an organisation.

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### References:

<sup>1</sup> Verbatim quotes from recipients of coaching, Philip Brew, 2000 – 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptional Executive Coaching: Practices, Measurement, Selection & Accreditation.  
Dr Gavin R Dagley, in association with the Australian Human Resources Institute. 2009

<sup>3</sup> Executive Coaching: An HR View of What Works. Summary of Research  
Dr Gavin R Dagley in association with the Australian Human Resources Institute. 2007

### Reading on impact of coaching:

International Coach Federation Research Portal: numerous case studies, reports and research articles  
<http://www.coachfederation.org/icf-research/icf-research-portal/>

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He is a past Co-President of the UK International Coach Federation (ICF) and for 4 years served as a Director on ICF's Global Board [2008 – 2011]. He is a co-founder of Coaching Development Ltd, one of Europe's leading coach training organisations, and provides training, supervision, mentoring and coaching to professional coaches.