

Ten Dos and Don'ts of Coaching Conversations

As a manager you may have coaching conversations with your team members or other colleagues from time to time. These might be as part of a structured, relatively formal coaching process. But at other times this might be a one-off conversation that helps an employee to work through a particular issue or challenge. Use the following tips to ensure the coaching conversations you have are effective.

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Five Dos

1. Do... Be Clear What a Coaching Conversation Is

It's a common mistake in coaching (particularly if you're new to it) to think you're having a coaching conversation when, really, you're not. According to Gross et al. a coaching conversation is: [1]

- Very **intentional**, and often includes some pre-thought.
- Focused on the other person, their challenges, strengths and attributes.
- Designed to **stimulate reflection**, growth and change.

If you're largely focused on imparting lots of well-intentioned advice, you may barely even be having a conversation, far less a coaching one! So try to keep the above principles at front of mind.

2. Do... Prepare

If you know you're going to have a coaching conversation, take some time to get in the **right mindset** beforehand. Even just five minutes of quiet time in a room before your coachee arrives can help you:

- Quiet your mind.
- Create a **calming environment** for the conversation to flow.
- Be open to, and **curious** about, the other person's situation.

For coach Joanne Miles this approach helps her to be fully present and alert. "I need to be paying attention to what the coachee says, doesn't say, their energy, their language patterns etc. and this requires attention to details in both watching and listening." [2]

3. Do... Keep Things Focused

Coaching conversations should have a clear **purpose**. So, discuss with your team member what they want to cover, e.g. 'What feels like it would be most useful for us to talk about today?' It's OK to share your thoughts on this, but it's important to let your team member speak first, and to agree together what is to be discussed. Setting a clear objective for the session will help to **keep the conversation focused**. This can be as simple as asking 'What do you want to achieve?'

4. Do... Ask Open Questions



Open questions are a key part of coaching conversations. These are the ones that **encourage further reflection and exploration**, rather than closed questions where the coachee can simply answer yes or no. *Forbes* magazine asked a range of their coaching council members to share some of their most powerful coaching questions. These include: [3]

- **Can you tell me more?** This is a really useful question to delve deeper into the coachee's thinking and help them reflect about their situation.
- **What's standing in your way?** Often, we create barriers for ourselves, real or imagined, that can sabotage our success. This question helps your team member to consider their own particular blockers and explore how these can be minimized or overcome.
- **What's important about that to you?** This can be a great question to help a coachee to explore what they value, and how this impacts the decisions they make.

5. Do... Use Active Listening

Active listening is particularly useful in coaching conversations. Use open-ended, **probing questions** like those above to help your team member reflect on their issue or challenge. **Paraphrase** the coachee's key points every so often to check your understanding, and ask for clarification if anything is confusing or ambiguous. Finally, summarize what has been said, to make sure you have understood the main issues. This creates a firm foundation on which to help your team member to work towards their own solution. [4]

Five Don'ts

1. Don't... Go in With a Checklist of Questions



You want to help your team member to get the most out of any coaching conversations that you have. But it's important not to work through a set of fixed questions. This will guide the conversation down a particular route, and can also make it seem like you are not really tuned in to what the other person has to say. Have some sample questions you might call upon, by all means, but it's more about **being guided by**, and **following up** on, what your coachee is saying.

2. Don't... Be Tempted to Fill The Silence

Many of us find silences awkward and have a natural compulsion to fill them. However, in coaching conversations, silence can be a valuable tool. It can allow your team member to reflect more deeply. Silence also gives you **time** to observe and gauge reactions to the questions that you ask, which can help you to understand their perspective, and prepare follow-up questions.

If you find silence like this uncomfortable, why not **practice** it in social conversations first? Leave a longer pause than you normally would after asking a particularly thought-provoking question, and see what happens. Once the other person has answered, also try leaving a pause to give them space to add

any further thoughts. [5] You may be surprised how something as simple as silence can help improve the depth and quality of your coaching conversations.

3. Don't... Ask Leading Questions

These are really solutions dressed up as questions, e.g. 'Would it not just be easier to do that yourself?' They tend to **suggest a course of action** rather than to encourage real reflection from the person being coached. Even the most seasoned coach may stray down this path from time to time. But it's important to **check yourself periodically** to make sure you're not trying to put words into your team member's mouth.

4. Don't... Interrupt



While you might be eager to help the coaching conversation along, try not to interrupt your team member in the midst of speaking. This can seem that you're simply not listening, or that you think your views are more important than theirs. That being said, if the conversation is too unstructured, or starting to veer off track, you may need to **interject politely at times** to ensure the conversation is a productive one. One way to check if you interrupt too much, and the impact this can have on coaching conversations is to record yourself. This would, of course, need to be in agreement with the person you are coaching.

5. Don't... End the Conversation Without Agreed Actions

Coaching conversations are about helping others to grow, adapt and change. You and your team member should **discuss next steps** to help bring about that change. These actions should be agreed at the end of the conversation and include **timescales** for completion if possible. It's a good idea to also confirm these details, together with any other key points from the conversation, in a follow-up email soon after the meeting.

References

[1] 'What is a Coaching Conversation?' Available [here](#). [Accessed 25 July 2023].

[2] Joanne Miles, 'Preparing for a coaching conversation: hints and tips' (4 June 2014). Available [here](#). [Accessed 25 July 2023].

[3] Forbes Coaches Council, '16 Powerful Questions Coaches Ask Their Clients To Help Achieve Their Goals' (21 June 2018). Available [here](#). [Accessed 25 July 2023].

[4] 'Coaching Others: Use Active Listening Skills'. Available [here](#). [Accessed 25 July 2023].

[5] 'Use Of Silence – A Powerful Coaching Skill'. Available [here](#). [Accessed 25 July 2023].