“Don’t worry. You’ll get the hang of what I’m looking for—you know, what works with our customers.”

Many of us remember a time early in our careers when a manager coached us on an assignment. Although the details of the conversation varied, our boss inevitably gave us “words of wisdom” or “constructive criticism.” He or she expected us to learn in the time-honored tradition of apprenticeship, in which an expert instructs, monitors, and corrects the learner on how to do a task a certain way.

This traditional model contains a powerful implicit assumption by managers: “I’m the expert. I’ll tell you what you need to know. You’re here to learn from my experience. If you question me, you question my expertise and authority.” Unfortunately, this perspective locks both the manager and the employee into roles that don’t always serve the employee’s learning or the manager’s efforts to teach and guide. The teacher’s “performance” and expertise may take on greater importance than the learner’s improvement.

Timothy Gallwey, whose “Inner Game” philosophy has challenged most traditional coaching methodologies, often cites a valuable insight he gained about the roles of teacher and learner early in his career as a tennis pro. During a lesson, he was astonished when the student learned something before Gallwey had a chance to teach it to him. Gallwey remembers his exasperation as he thought, “How dare he . . . I haven’t shown him that yet!” Reflecting on it later, he realized that he had been more concerned with his own teaching than with the student’s learning.

What Gallwey discovered was simple—but not easy—for coaches, managers, and leaders to accept: When a coach concentrates on facilitating a person’s learning instead of on teaching, the coachee’s performance can undergo an almost magical change.

Continued on next page
transformation. Natural learning, based on the coachee’s learning style, happens quickly and easily—much the way we learned to walk or ride a bike. Because this kind of learning experience promotes relaxed concentration and enables us to create our own high-quality feedback, we stop trying so hard and perform almost unconsciously at increasingly effective levels. Over the years, Gallwey and others have shown that this change in focus can be effective in enhancing individual and team performance and learning in business, sports, and even music.

**Partnership Coaching Defined**

Effective coaching is a partnership between coach and coachee, expert and novice—a partnership whose purpose is to facilitate learning, improve performance, and enable learners to create desired results (see “Traditional Versus Partnership Coaching”). In **partnership coaching**, one individual works to support the learning and actions of another person or a team. Following this model, managers help people achieve what they **want**—through careful listening and gentle guidance—rather than tell them what they **need** to accomplish or to know. Shifting from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning requires a manager or coach to:

- **Ask** open-ended questions that focus the person’s attention on critical, relevant details rather than **tell** her what the coach knows.
- Create an environment that reduces **interference**—or negative self-talk by the learner—which can reduce the quality of the learner’s thinking and actions.
- Understand the difference between constructive criticism and **editable**—or usable—feedback and to make feedback learner-focused rather than teacher-focused.

**The Limitations of “Telling”**

As shown in the opening example, the traditional structure used for conveying expertise and advice emphasizes **telling**. Although good, clear instructions are vital to the successful completion of a task, most managers find it difficult to convey information in a way that enhances a learner’s performance. In the telling mode, a coach usually assumes the employee understands what he is saying, but often the employee goes away feeling confused at best, mistrusted and disrespected at worst.

Our informal polling of approximately 1,000 middle- to senior-level managers indicates that executives use telling as a means of communication an average of 85–90 percent of the time. And yet, at least five conditions must be met for the telling approach to be effective. 1. The coach has to know **exactly** how to do the task. 2. The coach has to be able to articulate clearly what she **does** know. 3. The other person has to understand what the coach is saying. 4. The other person has to be able to translate those instructions into action. 5. The other person has to **want** to do the task. If one or more of these conditions is missing—which is often the case—the odds of a coach’s successfully transferring know-how to a learner are low. Moreover, the coach has likely wasted her own time, the other person’s time, and the company’s money.

According to the British author and business coaching expert Sir John Whitmore, “To tell denies or negates another’s intelligence; to ask honors it.” Yet shifting from telling to asking isn’t the only change coaches need to make in order to improve their skills; they also need to learn to ask effective questions.

### Traditional Versus Partnership Coaching

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**THE SYSTEMS THINKER™**

Managing Editor: Janice Molloy
janice@pegasuscom.com

Publisher: Daniel H. Kim

Editors: Laurie Johnson, Kellie Wardman O’Reilly

Production: Nancy Daugherty, Kellie Wardman O’Reilly

Circulation: Louise Corcoran

Advisory Editorial Council: Richard Austin, EDS; Bob Eberlein, Ventana Systems, Inc.; Pål Davidsen, University of Bergen; Janet Gould Wilkinson, MIT Sloan School of Management; Gregory Hennessy, Dynamic Strategies; Jenny Kemeny, Innovation Associates; Victor Leo, Ford Motor Company; Dennis Meadows, University of New Hampshire; John Morecroft, London Business School; David W. Packer, The Systems Thinking Collaborative; James Pennell, MIT Sloan School of Management; Pat Walls, General Motors Corporation; Michael J. Radzicki, Worcester Polytechnic Institute; Thomas J. Ryan, Shell Oil Company; Peter Senge, MIT Sloan School of Management; Dan Simpson, The Citrox Company; John Steeman, MIT Sloan School of Management; Pat Walls, FedEx

THE SYSTEMS THINKER™ explores both the theory and practice of the learning organization, with particular emphasis on systems thinking as the cornerstone of the five disciplines (as outlined by Peter Senge in The Fifth Discipline). Articles by leading thinkers and practitioners articulate the challenges and issues involved in creating learning organizations. We encourage dialogue about systemic issues and strive to provide a forum for debating such issues. Unsolicited articles and stories are welcome.

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**Editorial and Business Address:**

Pegasus Communications, Inc.
One Moody Street, Waltham, MA 02154-5339
Phone (781) 398-9700 • Fax (781) 894-7026

www.pegasuscom.com
The Anatomy of an Effective Question

Effective questioning uses the principle of creative tension to set up conversational structures that promote learning. According to Robert Fritz, a structure seeks to resolve the inherent tension within it, much like a stretched rubber band seeks to return to its original state. Asking a question sets up a tension that is resolved by an answer; for example, when asked “How are you?” we feel compelled to resolve the tension in the linguistic structure by responding.

A good question helps individuals put aside their assumptions regarding the correct or right answer and lets more reflective and flexible responses fill the void. The word question itself suggests a “quest” for something, inviting the respondent to create or find an answer. Thus, an effective or powerful question creates a structure in which an individual or group feels compelled to seek a resolution. In addition to providing creative tension, effective questions:

• Are nonjudgmental.
• Are open-ended (who, what, when, where, why, and how) instead of closed (requiring a yes or no answer).
• Raise awareness of the learner’s goals and current reality by broadening his perceptions.
• Reduce interference by focusing the learner’s attention.
• Make feedback “edible”—or easier for a learner to hear and use.
• Lead to deeper questions and more reflective and expansive thinking by the learner.

A powerful question asked with the wrong intention (such as getting the person to agree to something) isn’t as effective as a question posed from a place of genuine reflection and interest. When people feel cornered and manipulated, they are likely to be less forthcoming and thoughtful with their responses. “Yes/no” questions such as “Well, did you ever think about . . . ?” or “Wouldn’t you agree that . . . ?” can come across as accusatory because these queries often contain hidden assumptions about the speaker’s mental models regarding the best decision or the right answer. Such closed-ended questions can make people feel defensive and undermine a partnering relationship.

Surprisingly, tone of voice and body language carry approximately 92 percent of the meaning in conversations; the words themselves convey only 8 percent. The power of a good question can thus be lost if a manager comes across as condescending, negative, arrogant, or even overly solicitous. A leader who is well intended can still create crippling self-doubt within an employee by asking a good question with the wrong tone or inflection.

Overcoming Interference

In his article, “The Inner Game of Work: Building Capacity in the Workplace” (V8N6), Gallwey discusses the concept of internal interference and how it creates obstacles to learning (see “Interference Model” on p. 1). Gallwey defines interference as “the ways that we undermine the fulfillment or expression of our own capacities.” Interference can be internal or external; it impedes our performance by preventing us from concentrating and from receiving ongoing feedback. Gallwey has found that reducing interference can dramatically improve a person’s performance. Learning happens naturally when a person isn’t distracted by negative thoughts and can focus on what he is doing.

The key to reducing interference lies not in diagnosing it, but in asking questions that move learners’ attention away from judging their own performance to concentrating on the relevant details of the activity they are attempting to perform. For example, when an employee appears flustered because she doesn’t know how to resolve a problem, asking her what she is noticing about the situation or the problem, and what is and isn’t working toward resolving it, can increase her self-awareness and reduce her self-doubt, enabling her to focus calmly on the issue at hand. This self-awareness gives coachees pure, nonjudgmental, and noncritical feedback about what is actually happening. At the same time, coaches need to ask themselves, “Am I increasing or decreasing interference in this conversation?”

What, then, might the session in the opening example have sounded like if the coach had used questions to reduce the coachee’s internal interference and increase her focus?

“I want you to create the new print ad campaign. Here are copies of what we’ve done in the past. What do you think about the strategy and format we used? Here’s data from focus groups and information on how well the ads pulled. What do you think we could have done to increase those numbers? Our deadline is in eight weeks. How long do you think you will need? When can you tell me if this deadline is realistic?”

First coaching meeting: “I’ve had a chance to look at the first version of the new print ad campaign. First, I’m curious about your thinking behind this strategy. What about this style and format appeals to you? What about this approach do you think will appeal to our customers? What about these ads works better than our previous campaign?”

“What concerns do you have, if any, about this strategy? Where do you think the trends for print ads are headed? Is there anything you’d like to do differently, given more time or money?”

“I’m a little concerned about the size of the ads and the lack of color, but maybe I’m underestimating the impact. I guess I need to know more before I’ll feel comfortably with changes that feel this drastic. How will our customers respond to such changes? Will the ads cost more or less to produce? What is the impact on our overall budget?”

In the example above, the manager expresses little judgment regarding what is right or wrong, good or bad, about the proposed ad campaign. She asks open-ended, not yes or no, questions. Her intention,
Meanwhile, they generally don’t hear or
consider the coach’s observations simply
because they are not edible.

An edible suggestion is one that the
coachee can actually take in and digest
because it doesn’t overload her with too
much negative information, too much
advice, or too many suggestions to remem-
ber or internalize. This feedback model
shifts the focus away from the traditional
mode of the manager telling the employee
what went right and wrong to one in which
the employee discovers for herself what she
learned. By helping the performer “debrief”
her own perceptions of what did and didn’t
work, the coach leverages our tendency to
believe our own data and observations,
rather than those provided by others.

Feedback should do exactly what the
word says: Feed back information that
nourishes the performer, increases self-
awareness and focus, and allows him to
internalize useful data for learning.
Providing feedback in this manner fosters
learning and improvement that are intrinsi-
cally, rather than extrinsically, motivated
(see “How to Give Edible Feedback”).
Performer-based feedback also creates
trust and better, more reflective working
relationships, because the data is more
easily digested. This focus enables the
coach to function as a mirror, reflecting
back the appropriate, relevant information
in a nonjudgmental way.

The “GROW” Model of
Coaching
Partnership coaching involves shifting one’s
mind-set from teaching, training, and con-
trolling to asking coachees for their
desired outcomes and ideas for achieving
them; reducing coachees’ internal interfer-
ence; and learning to give useful, edible
feedback. All these elements are woven into
a process for conducting a successful
coaching session described by Sir John
Whitmore in his book, Coaching for
Performance. His “GROW” model can help
guide coaching conversations to more
meaningful and realistic resolutions (see
“The GROW Model” on p. 5). Although
there are many effective ways to coach in a
partnership style, the GROW model pro-
vides a useful framework in which the
coach guides the coachee toward articulat-
ing her goals and achieving desired results.
By using effective questions in a nonjudg-
mental tone, the coach shows respect for
the coachee and helps her to take own-
ship for determining the path to reach her
goal.

G=GOALS
The coach and coachee agree on session
goals and long-term goals. To set session
goals, the coach asks questions such as:
• What would you like to accomplish in the
time we have available?
• What would make this time well spent?
• What would you like to achieve today?
To set long-term goals, she asks:
• What would ultimate success look like to
you?
• If you could create anything you want,
what might that be?

R=CURRENT REALITY
Centering on current reality means describ-
ing the situation as accurately as possible,
challenging assumptions that might be
blocking more effective thinking and
action, and raising awareness of the rele-
vant details of what is currently happening.
Good coaching involves following the
coachee’s interests and thoughts and
exploring what he has tried so far, without
judging. Questions about current reality
might include:
• How do you know your perception
of X is accurate? How can you be sure?
• Whom else might you check with to get
more data about the larger perspective?
• What have you tried so far?
• What are your beliefs about this particu-
lar situation? This person? The other
department?

O=OPTIONS
The first challenge here is to help the
coachee create as many options for poten-
tial actions toward the goal as possible
The GROW Model illustrates the process of helping others clarify what they want, what they have now, priorities by asking questions such as:

- Which options would you like to explore further or take action on right away?
- Which would you be willing to implement?
- How would you rate these options from high to low?
- Where would you like to begin?

**W=WHAT’S NEXT?**

This is the stage for committing to action—stating an intention that is time-phased and observable, identifying potential obstacles, and aligning support from collaborators. Possible questions might include:

- What are you going to do and by when?
- What’s next? What steps are involved?
- How might you minimize the obstacles?
- What might be some unintended consequences of taking these actions?
- How will you collect data for feedback over time as you progress?
- On a scale of one to ten, how certain are you that you will do this?

### Self-Coaching

One of the remarkable things about partnership coaching is that managers don’t have to be subject matter experts in order to coach others who are—they just have to be expert coaches. Sometimes, having less expertise on the subject than the coachee frees an instructor from needing to share his knowledge; this “knowing” can get in the way of asking good questions.

Coaches who want to improve their skills can solicit feedback as part of every learning session by asking learners:

- What about the session worked well?
- What didn’t work as well?
- What might I do differently next time to support you more effectively?

Coaches can also guide themselves during a coaching conversation and gain additional learning afterwards by asking:

- What’s happening right now?
- Where is my coachee’s focus?
- How much interference is she experiencing? Where is it coming from?
- When I made that statement, what happened with her body language?
- What judgments appeared in my thinking?
- On a scale of one to ten, how would I rate our level of partnership?
- What worked and didn’t work for us in that coaching session?

These questions give managers the opportunity to make adjustments, test assumptions, and experiment with new possibilities.

### Leveraging Partnership Coaching

At its most effective, partnership coaching is simply a generative conversation in which the coach asks nonjudgmental, open-ended questions that sharpen the coachee’s focus and increase her awareness of goals, current reality, and possible options for action. In a natural and easy way, it reduces interference and structures feedback for intrinsically motivated learning. This coaching model can leverage learning for individuals, teams, and organizations by helping them improve performance more quickly than in traditional forms of coaching.

As partnership coaching becomes part of an organization’s culture, every leader becomes a steward of learning and a facilitator of performance. Learners come to trust that managers are truly on their side, supporting their learning and development as a partner and not as a disciplinarian. Partnership coaching can be a powerful tool for implementing the principles of organizational learning by facilitating personal mastery, team learning, and shared vision.

Diane Cory is a facilitator, coach, and consultant whose areas of expertise include organizational learning, servant leadership, storytelling, creativity, and coaching. Rebecca Bradley (beck-coach@aol.com), president of Atlanta-based Partnership Coaching, Inc., is an executive coach and consultant whose focus is helping individuals and teams improve performance.