

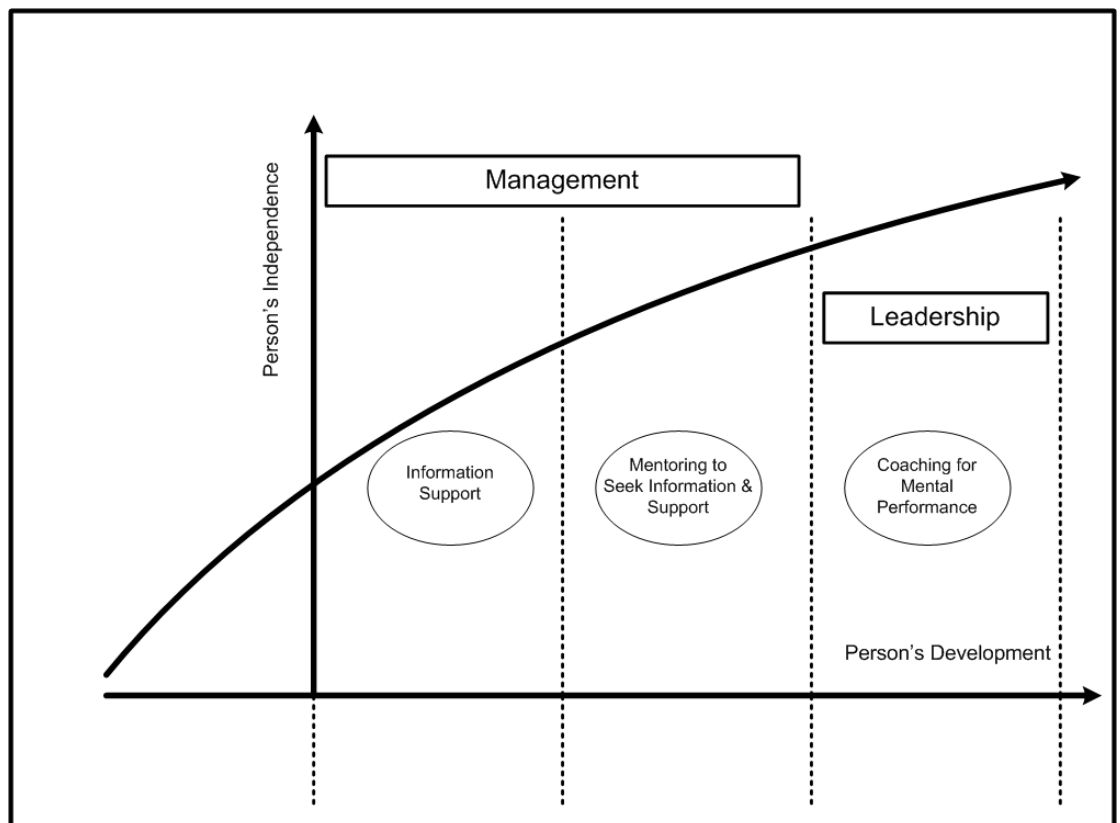
# Managing in a Coaching Style

By Dr Angus McLeod

The benefits of managing in a 'coaching style' for those who work for us are said to include increased pro-activity and a better sense of personal control. This is only likely to be true if you know when to use coaching interventions. This article explains a methodology for understanding when and with whom to use coaching interventions, with examples.

If you have ever been over-managed or under-managed you know how demoralizing that is. To what extent do you know whether you are always better at getting the balance right, compared to the people we know who got that balance wrong?

Have a look at the management model below. The vertical axis is based upon the level of working 'independence' of the person. The horizontal scale shows a developmental curve from the lower levels to the highest, right. For completeness, I include an off-chart level Zero (left of the y-axis) for which additional help and support is normally required - that is, a person who is not capable of effective work without specialist support.



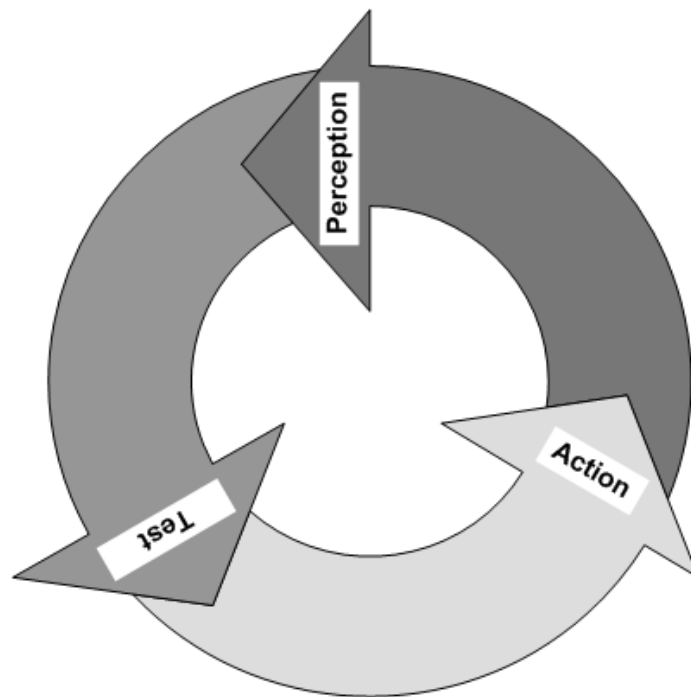
***Caption: McLeod Management Model***

Let's start by defining terms in this context – you could skip this if the terminology is familiar to you. All are designed to be motivating when done well.

### ***Independence***

A person is independent when their needs for information and support are minimal. They are capable of doing the work and self-resource themselves to satisfy their needs for information and support in most situations.

At every level, no decision is made about the way to manage, but rather they provides clues to the sort of conversation we will have to determine the best way forward, for that individual, in that context. Firstly we need to focus our attention on the individual to observe or perceive how we think they are doing (Perception). Then we need to test that by asking questions of them (Test) and only then, take appropriate action (Action). As a manger and leader therefore, we ought perhaps to be going through this process of Perception, Test, Action with all our people in the context of all their major tasks.



### ***Caption: the Perception, Test Action Cycle***

It is important to know that in levels One through Three, a single person may be at any level in one context at work and at another level in a different context at work – each requiring different things from us. For those readers familiar with the Situational Leadership model<sup>1</sup>, the important of context is similarly vital.

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<sup>1</sup> Ken Blanchard, copyrighted product

## **Information**

Information is the data, knowledge, people-networks, how-we-do-things, boundaries and experience that we need to achieve most perfectly at our jobs.

## **Support**

Support takes a number of forms. These can include recognition, personal-acknowledgement, offering to assist, offering to facilitate, providing resources, boosting confidence and commitment through success or failure.

## **Mentoring**

If someone knows nothing, then we simply need to tell them what to do, provide lists of actions and know-how. Mentoring adds to this since it can involve more or less direct information and widens the input of information to include examples and stories – to offer new ways of thinking, new choices. One can go further, where an individual is independent enough, questions can be used to encourage them to find new perceptions, new choices and motivated actions.

All of these can be linked:

*Tom, I can think of three options we might use here and these are <gives details, 1,2,3>. There may be at least one more I haven't thought of. Would you like to think of other options and then discuss the pros and cons of each?*

*Tom, I had a similar problem some years ago and at the time came up with an idea. This was <gives detail>. In addition, I can think of another two options <gives details A,B>. Do any of these give you ideas for what to do now or is there a better way?*

The process provides information for the relative novice in a culture to understand how things are done within the culture and it encourages independent thinking. The benefit of that is that they may need less of your management time in the months to come. Invest now for gain later.

There is a good reason for providing ideas and solutions in threes<sup>2</sup>. Where you offer one solution, the mentee will typically accept or reject it without further processing. The decision is a simple 'yes' or 'no' based upon their current thinking.

Our minds are adapted to comparing. The yes/no tends to stimulate that simple process. However, we hope to stimulate them into

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<sup>2</sup> McLeod, 2004. Performance Coaching & Mentoring in Organisations, **Resource**, 1,1, 28-31

deeper processing. When the mentee is given three solutions, their processing becomes more complicated. With three solutions, several, concurrent comparing-steps are needed:

A or B  
B or C  
A or C

As the comparing begins, the mentee will typically give up the comparing process and start to do higher-level processing. Once this happens, it is more likely that they will introduce ideas of their own based upon their own experiences. The result is likely to be a new idea, previously inaccessible to the mentee.

### ***Facilitation***

This term is applied to methods of drawing out the latent potential and knowledge in people whether in 1-2-1 or in groups. In this case information is not normally provided, the premise is that the solution needed can be developed by enquiring and by their self-reflection. This can be neatly illustrated by considering the process of coaching which is typically facilitation on a 1-2-1 basis.

### ***Coaching***

Coaching is a facilitation process dominated by three 'Principle Instruments', these are Questions, Challenge and Silence<sup>3</sup>.

#### **Questions**

Questions have many purposes. Typically at the early stages of an issue or goal-development, we use questions to develop perception and choice. Questions include:

*What other options are there?  
And if there was another option, what is that option now?  
And if I had this same challenge, how would you advise me now?  
Imagine you are an observer in that situation, what is happening?*

These are all open questions<sup>4</sup> in that the answers require detail. Later, we may ask questions to get to a single plan of action:

*Which of your ideas will work best for you and the department?*

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<sup>3</sup> McLeod, A (2003)

<sup>4</sup> All these questions also fall into other categories as well as 'open'. The opposite type, closed questions, are ones that can be answered by the words yes or no or a numeral

After that we will want to test their motivation and be sure that the plan of action is holistically sound and realistic. Again, questions are used:

*What are the pros and cons of those options?*

*How would that be for you if you did not succeed?*

*What other resources are needed to achieve that?*

*If there is another implication we missed, what is that?*

*And if that does mean more work, what about your private life?*

When they are fairly certain and committed to a course of action, it is then useful to use questions again in order to invite them to take a Sensory Journey<sup>5</sup>:

*Imagine it's all done, you have the award, what is that like now?*

Notice the change of tense from future-conditional to present, in effect tempting their conscious mind to imagine 'as if' the experience is really happening in the present.

### **Challenge**

Whereas questions may invite a new perspective or action, challenges are more pushing than pulling in nature.

Challenges can be statements or questions and are designed to shift perception another level. Challenge can only be made where there is already a very good, working level of rapport and a willingness to be pushed further into the Stretch Zone. Remember that the Stretch Zone is also called the learning zone. It is from this zone that new perceptions and ideas will spring.

*Who says you are hopeless?*

*Is that slightly hopeless or completely hopeless?*

*What would someone else need to think and do in order to be that scared?*

*Not very good at presentation? I have never seen you present but let's agree that you are really terrible at presenting and move on to the next item.*

The more challenging statements only work if the rapport is excellent. Of course you risk rapport every time you push a person into the Stretch Zone<sup>6</sup> but that must not deter you.

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<sup>5</sup> In neuro-linguistic programming terms, sometimes called 'future-pacing'

<sup>6</sup> Sometimes called the 'Learning Zone' and relating to the stretch needed to get out of the 'Comfort Zone' and into a psychologically more demanding state, one which is more optimal for learning and development

## Silence

*'Learn to be quiet enough to hear the sound of the genuine within yourself so that you can hear it in others'*

## Mariam Wright Edelman

*'Let us honor silence, the perennial flow of language interrupted by words'*

## M. Ryan

In coaching, the most profound perceptions and motivations arise because the coachee has been able to self-reflect (without an interruption from their coach/leader). These silences can run for several minutes and the coachee is never (in my experience) aware of that time span because their focus is wholly internal. The self-reflective silence may create a novel solution, great certainty, massive motivation, a great feeling of stupidity for not having thought of the solution before and/or an overwhelming desire to start on their plan instantly. In other words, the most extraordinary convictions and energy arise directly from careful questioning and a silent space in which the coachee is self-reflecting.

The coaching-leader therefore needs a number of key skills to work at this level of performance. These skills include questioning skills, rapport-building skills and knowing when to stay silent.

The ability to hold that silent space is one that needs practice and confidence to achieve. We run courses to do just that<sup>7</sup> – these explore the power of silence specifically but also, naturally, develop all the skills of coaching-leaders.

To begin with, notice these two things:

1. Where there is a silence and you have an urge to break that
2. When you ask a question and a silence follows

If you have discomfort with silence then it is worthwhile giving yourself permission to stay with silence and practice by leaving longer silent spaces in conversations. If a person is busy thinking through an answer to your question, then force yourself to be quiet and observe the effect of that.

Silence is enormously powerful. It can be used to help people talk themselves into uncomfortable reality, for example, that it is **they**

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<sup>7</sup> The Power of Silence, first designed and delivered with Steve Breibart and available via Angus McLeod & Associates

and not their people who is responsible for some event that went badly. Silence is also powerful when used just prior to speaking at meetings – the more confident and impressive you are, the longer that you can hold that silence. This increases your status in the perception of others<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Working with the McLeod Management Model***

When we manage, it is more important to understand the best way we might manage rather than be able to label someone. For that reason, I concentrate on the differences between the levels. Noticing those differences then help you to have productive conversations with the individual so that your response is optimal for their performance. This is flexible managing at its best and will avoid under-managing and over-managing.

#### **Level 1: Information & Support or Level 2: Mentoring**

The boundary between these two 'management' levels is demarked by a general change in the level of independent working. At level One these are largely below professional standards, at level Two independent work has reached generally acceptable levels. There may still be issues about speed, quality or the understanding of the consequences of actions but the base level of work is adequate and advancing. At level Two we can begin to test the person to think solutions through in the areas where they are most experienced. One way to do that is to ask mentoring-type questions.

*Tom, the Financial Report for Category D purchasing is fine. I want you to look at the circulation list and tell me if you notice anyone that is there that ought not to be listed or whether anyone is not listed that ought to be – any thoughts?*

Possibly followed by:

*Excellent. Now, what do we normally do in a situation like this?*

If Tom does not know the system, you can intervene:

*Tom, there are at least three ways that might work. The others went yesterday by internal mail right?... okay, we could mail the others with a note from me or you; we could email the report similarly so it catches up, or since all the people we missed have offices that are on site, we could get Jonathon to walk them around by hand with a note. Which do you think would be most appropriate and why?*

The questions are only asked if an assumption can reasonably be made that the individual has some level of understanding in that

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<sup>8</sup> This is an area of expertise of John Abulafia the operatic director and trainer

context, if not, we should consider them as level One and ask what information and/or support needs they may have. The answer to that should be sufficient to enable them to complete the job. Remember, Perception, Test, Action.

### **Level Two: Mentoring to Level Three: Coaching**

Level Two to Three is demarked by a higher level of independence and also marks the change in managing style from management to leadership.

At level Three the person is self-starting and more resourceful. Level Three people are taking new initiatives and finding, from experience, better ways of doing things. The real development that awaits them is mental aptitude. By that, I mean the development of higher reasoning, wider and more holistic understanding of the consequences of actions, broader ability in initiating and developing relationships (to improve performance) and careful and sensitive handling of both communication and management issues. All of these are stimulated most excellently by facilitating their development using coaching interventions to make the difference.

Coaching assumes that they have the mental resources to find motivated solutions for themselves and enough information about the detail of their specialty, the role of their product or service and their impact within the whole business. Using a combination of questions, challenges and silence, the coaching-leader aims to encourage the person to achieve their goal, gain a wider set of options for moving forward and select one that is effective (and for which the person is suited and motivated).

Comprehensive examples about the use of coaching interventions in management are available in 'Performance Coaching'<sup>9</sup>. Here though are some typical coaching interventions:

*Tom, you say that that we cannot produce the order in time, but what if we could? What would we have to do in order to do that?*

*Tom, if I heard you right you said that Peters dislikes you because he has twice left you off the monthly meeting list. If there was another reason for that, what might that reason be?*

*Tom, you have suggested three different approaches. Which one is the best and why?*

*Tom, should we concentrate on what we know we can't do or what we can?*

*Tom, imagine if you will that John had this same issue going on with him at the moment. What could you advise him to do?*

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<sup>9</sup> McLeod, A., (2003) 'Performance Coaching – the Handbook for Managers, HR Professionals and Coaches' Crown House, Bancyfelin, UK & NY



*Tom, What if we had just won the Annual Award, how good would we be feeling right now? What do you think we would have learned that would be useful to us in order to achieve this award again?*

Each question is designed to test Tom's present perception and move him to a more useful, performance mindset. More than that, professional coaching develops mental agility and expert use of tools that Tom will apply long after Tom or the coach (or coaching-leader) has moved jobs.

### **Level Zero to Level 1**

The off-chart parts of the model include Level Zero. What do we do when we have people who are regularly distressed and have variable efficacy at work? Typically, we need help too! Most managers are not qualified to deal with such issues, even if they have the time to grapple with these situations. But you still need to understand and manage those contexts at work where the Level Zero is performing at level One.

The differential between level Zero and level One is determined by the emotional resource of the person to do their job rather than by their competences. Competence will help people in both levels to gain self-esteem and self-confidence. However, at level Zero the individual is too distracted, too panicky and/or too preoccupied to learn quickly enough and to achieve a consistent level of quality in their work.

Level Zero people have a lack of emotional resource. In its extreme manifestations, this lack of emotional resource can manifest as crying, absenteeism and self-harming. In these cases, it is worth considering having a conversation about further help and involving a professional from the HR department, possibly of the same gender as the person exhibiting those symptoms.

A conversation will be measured in time and the manager must always be prepared to go over the same ground several times if necessary. In stress, people may hear but not understand what is being said due to inner-dialogue, self-judgment, interpretation and so forth. When repeating information, keep the messages simple and clear.

The conversation will best be conducted in a neutral and familiar space. Ideally they will have options where they can sit without any desk or table between them and you. Make sure there can be no interruptions and that phones are turned off.

*Tom, I am concerned about you because you seem to be struggling. Because we care about you and not just your work, I have asked you to meet with me so we can talk confidentially about any pressing concerns and issues that you may have.*

*Where we can, I would like us to agree a way forward that will help you to feel confident and competent in your work. To start, would you like to tell me what you believe I have said so far so that we are starting on the same page?*

Asking for clarity is essential. If Tom has gone internal, he will have missed most of what has been said, critically, the part about working together to help him.

Where the emotional situation seems less debilitating it may be possible to have a conversation about some training or 1-2-1 mentoring (from an encouraging colleague) to get their confidence back. Find a private, egalitarian space, a choice of identical chairs, remove physical blockages (table or desk) or work together from one side only. The pace of delivery should be measured and your attention should be good so you can observe reactions and gain insight into whether or not they really understand what you are saying.

*Tom, you seem to be struggling sometimes and I realize that I may have expected too much of you too soon. I want us to talk together so we can both agree a way forward that will get you moving forward and feeling more confident in your work. To start, would you like to tell me what you understand I have said so we are starting on the same page.*

And later:

*Tom, there may be some options for assisting you to get up to speed faster and I hope that one of them may appeal to you. I am wondering if Joanne or Peter might spend an hour with you for a couple of mornings to offer advice and show you how they do things. Alternatively, you could shadow one of them for a half-day. There is a training course on quality management coming up in two months and I want to put your name down for that as well - how do you feel about these three options?*

In contrast, level One people do have the emotional resource to improve but need support and information to do that. Not all people at this level will realize they need help however – a conversation in all cases makes that explicit. Three things count:

1. asking them for their understanding of what you have said
2. asking whether they agree they are in need and thirdly, if helpful,
3. using silence to get that agreement.

Remember that you may have misdiagnosed level Zero and level One. The person that you thought was level One may get upset and their fears, lack of self-confidence etcetera may come spilling out. For that reason, it is still best to make sure that the space is not-overlooked, that you have privacy and that interruptions are not possible.

*Tom, thank you for coming in. I would like you to feel positive about this meeting because its purpose is simply to do our best to advance your working effectiveness and help you feel more confidence as harder projects and more work-load come your way. To begin with I would like to be sure we are both on the same page so could you tell me what you understand I have asked you here for please?*

If any correction is needed to Tom's interpretation, you can give it – use the same phrases as before to make it easier and again ask for his interpretation of what you have said.

*Tom, I want to tell you that I am pleased with your time-keeping and enthusiasm. I also want to talk with you about some working practices that fall short of our requirements in the department – I mean specifically the accuracy of filing and the speed at which files are returned so others can access them quickly. Do you want to tell me what is working and not working for both those issues, I mean the accuracy and the speed of filing?*

The speech contains positives and inclusive language ('I also want to talk with you'), is clear and specific but inviting rather than ordering. If Tom does not agree that there is performance issue then resort to specifics and use silence to ensure you get an answer:

*Tom, if I heard you right, you disagree that files are being put back incorrectly by you. Here I have five records from three of your colleagues, both the time of your call and your notes in the files are prior to theirs in each case. What do you have to say about that?*

Keep the silence unless Tom starts to fidget or to look around the room. We are so used to speech that the silence may be difficult to manage but you must. A minute, even three or four or more may be required to get Tom to do the self-awareness work internally to be able to admit his errors. If you butt in or argue, all you will achieve is argument. The problem is internal to him and he will not sort that out by arguing his case, only by self-reflection. If he starts to look bored or begins to fidget, ask the question, just exactly as you did before. The sentence will hit exactly the same processing area in his brain if it is identical and no re-interpretation will be required<sup>10</sup>.

Typically a question like this only needs to be asked once, occasionally twice to get a sensible answer where any amount of argument and denial would have failed.

*Angus, I am sorry. I've always struggled with words. I mean, does The Ford Group go under 'T' for The or 'F' for Ford. And*

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<sup>10</sup> This comes from understanding about brain function and specifically neural pathways supported by what we know from the use of Clean Language and Symbolic Modeling. See for example, Lawley, J & Tompkins, P (2000), 'Metaphors in Mind', Developing Company Press, London

*what about the Robert Thomas Company? Is that R or T? I thought I put it under Thomas – is that wrong?*

Again, the manager will want to gain a mutual agreement about the way forward.

*Okay Tom, I could get a print off of all the names in file-order and yes you are right about the difficulties. In the telephone book I have seen the Robert Thomas Company listed under the surname but we list by the first letter of the company name, that's 'R' for Robert'. The list will be useful though as some companies are better known by a brand and that may be at the top of their correspondence, even though we list by company name. An example is 'Whizzo' which is manufactured by the Reading Chemical Company and hence listed under 'R' for Reading. Will that be enough to get you back on track or do you need any other help with this?*

At level One we need to be specific about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done and not offer choices. Choices are only likely to confuse at this time as the consequences of each choice is unlikely to be understood.

## **Conclusion**

Managing in a coaching style required flexibility and a commitment to taking the time to test how people are doing by having conversations. It does take an investment of time and hence fire-fighters will tend to continue to manage poorly. Investing time in coaching conversations creates more independent working in our people and makes sure that they rarely, if ever, feel over-managed or under-managed again. To have proactive, motivated people we must make that investment.

***This article is an adaptation from Dr McLeod's latest book 'Self-coaching Leadership – Fast Strategies from Manager to Leader' published by John Wiley & Sons, Chichester, in May 2007. ISBN: 0-470-512806. He is also author of 'Me, Mydlef, My Team' and 'Performance Coaching – The Handbook for Managers, HR Professionals and Coaches' both published by Crown House, Carmathen & NY. He can be contacted via the website [www.angusmcleod.com](http://www.angusmcleod.com) or by sending an email to [ourinfo@angusmcleod.com](mailto:ourinfo@angusmcleod.com)***