

From Relationships to Results: Coaching using the GROWTH model

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Previously in *e-Leading* (Munro, 2016) we considered some frequently asked questions about coaching in education contexts. Coaching conversations were described as intentionally *managed* conversations that employ active listening, skilful questioning and other coaching skills tempered with high levels of emotional intelligence, in order to raise *awareness* and encourage *responsibility* in the coachee (Munro, 2016). This article will focus on the use of the GROWTH model as one way to 'manage' a coaching conversation.

The GROWTH model

The GROWTH model as presented here (Campbell, 2016a) is an extension of the popular GROW model proposed by Sir John Whitmore (2009) in 1992. Aside from achieving a higher *Scrabble* score and forming another very apt word in a coaching context, the addition of the 'T' and 'H' serve to ensure that the conversation leads to clearly defined actions and that consideration is given to factors influencing the sustainability of new practices.

Before outlining each stage of the model in turn, it should be noted that coaching conversations are rarely as linear as the model might suggest. The GROWTH model is certainly *not* intended to be interpreted as a six-question script or formula. Moreover, it is a *conversational* framework designed to enable productive coaching conversations – it was never intended to be reproduced as a *form* to be completed by passive recipients!

Goal

In short, the goal stage is about gaining clarity (for the coachee) around *what's wanted*. The aim here is

The GROWTH model



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to establish a clear and compelling end point in relation to the topic that the coachee wishes to address. Regardless of how goals are defined, it is paramount that the coachee is encouraged to articulate their *commitment* and the potential *benefits* of following these through in their context. Maintaining a solution-focussed, rather than problem-focussed, stance is helpful here in order to help the coachee envision

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their desired future rather than concentrating on analysing the past.

Some useful questions:

- Tell me about what you'd like to achieve by the end of this month/term/year?
- What would be the benefits of this? What would you notice? What would others notice?
- If this was working well, what would be happening?
- What else?

Reality

Where the goal phase seeks clarity about the *desired* state, the reality phase looks at the *current* state in order to establish a starting point for positive movement. The natural tendency for the coachee is to dwell on everything that's *not* working. This is a time for active listening and empathising before bringing the focus back to what's wanted instead. Again, a solution-focussed stance that looks to leverage strengths and existing resources can begin to build an increased sense of self-efficacy at this stage. From this perspective, the 'R' of the model can also be read as **resources**. Alongside this, the coachee might be encouraged to consider how to gain a clearer picture of the current reality. Data and sources of feedback could play a role here.

Some useful questions:

- What's working now?
- What skills/knowledge/strengths/experience/resources could you tap into to help move towards your goal?
- Tell me about times when this is not a challenge for you. What were you doing then?
- What else?

Options

This phase is a time for divergent thinking and generating as many options as possible. The aim here is to move the coachee beyond a sense of being 'stuck' and generate an increased sense of control by realising that they have some options within their sphere of influence that could take them a step or two closer to achieving their goal. This stage represents a key turning point where the coachee begins to take responsibility to act on their challenge. Provocative questioning and strategies to help the coachee to think 'outside the box' are essential at this stage. Some useful 'ports of call' in the search for options can be:

- Times in the *past* when *they* have successfully tackled this challenge, or a *similar* one
- *Other people* who they know have expertise in this area or have tackled the same or similar challenges successfully
- And, *finally*, suggestions from the *coach*.

The coach will almost certainly have ideas of their own. However, that's just what they are – the coach's ideas, based on their experience and

contextual lens - who's to say that they are the best ideas? Caution and restraint are required on the part of the coach at this stage. The aim is to keep responsibility and ownership with the coachee. The coach might ask, "Would you like some suggestions from me?" and then introduce several suggestions with something like, "What I've seen work in the past is..." To some degree, this puts the ideas out there in neutral territory. A supplementary question that serves to make these suggestions even more provisional is, "How might those ideas work in your context?" This is very different from, "Well, what I think you should do is..." Whitmore (2009), sums this up nicely:

"If I give you advice and it fails, you will blame me. I have traded my advice for your responsibility and that is seldom a good deal."

Will

We are now getting closer to the 'sharp end' of the conversation – homing-in on the coachee's preferred options and seeking commitment to taking them forward. Through choice, the sense of ownership and responsibility ramps up here. This is a significant shift in the conversation and can be quite confronting for the coachee.

Typical leadership conversations often stop here. A potential issue with this is that the conversation is concluded at an insufficient level of clarity and precision about what the coachee will do next. In this case, the 'W' could stand for *wishful thinking*!

Some useful questions:

- What options could you take forward in the next week?
- So, what are your first small steps?

Tactics

Having prioritised and selected from a range of options, and committed to actioning these, the tactics stage seeks *precision* about what the coachee will do, how, and when. Again, pursuing this level of precision can feel uncomfortable or challenging for the coach *and* the coachee. However, in the context of a trusting relationship and an expectation of challenge *in the service of the coachee's thinking and progress*, this need not be viewed as 'pushy', as it might be seen in normal social conversation.

Some useful questions:

- How and when, specifically, will you do that?
- Is that realistic?
- What do you need to put in place first?

Habits

The habits stage could be considered more holistic in nature, seeking to build support for sustained success. This stage needn't take long but it is important for the coachee to consider the resources, attitudes and support that may be required to see their actions through, both in the short and longer term.

Some useful questions:

- What strengths of yours will help you achieve your goal?
- What needs to be different about your attitude, behaviour or environment to see this through?
- Knowing yourself as you do, what advice would you give yourself going forward?
- What support/structures are needed to maintain this?

Loops, cycles and flexibility

Far from being a rather pedestrian and convenient acronym to be followed lock-step, the GROWTH model can be very flexible and responsive to the coachee's needs. In reality, the process consists of several mini-loops and the coachee will range across a number of stages as their thinking develops. Typically, much more time is spent cycling around G-R-O than on the more convergent phase of W-T-H. Options can pop up at *any* stage in the conversation and a skilled coach will hold the model loosely in order to shape the conversation.

A conversation built on trust

By now it should be clear that the use of a snappy acronym does not, in itself, automatically result in an effective coaching conversation, but it can provide a very helpful *scaffold* for both the coach and coachee. Taking the 'scaffolding' metaphor further, it could be said that the use of a conversational framework such as GROWTH helps to maintain the *structural integrity* of the conversation as it builds with *increasing clarity* and *momentum* towards change. Taking this image one step further, the *foundation* on which

this framework stands (or wobbles!) is a relationship based on mutual *trust*. Without trust, rooted in authentic engagement and investment in the process, the conversation runs the risk of becoming an interview or worse, an interrogation!

Not 'just' a conversation

'Doing' coaching can appear deceptively simple and we should not lose sight of the importance of strategically deployed coaching skills coupled with how the coach 'shows up' in the conversation.

"In defining coaching as a form of 'conversation' it can be easy to trivialise and underplay the critical importance of effective coaching skill development training. Coaching is a specific kind of conversation, full of intention; subtle and not so subtle shifts in perspective; carefully nuanced language; and acutely refined listening among other things" Campbell (2016b).

References

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Each person holds so much power within themselves that needs to be let out. Sometimes they just need a little nudge, a little direction, a little support, a little coaching, and the greatest things can happen.

Pete Carroll

Passion is what gives meaning to our lives. It's what allows us to achieve success beyond our wildest imagination. Try to find a career path that you have a passion for.

Henry Samueli

People live in the worlds our questions create.

David Cooperrider

Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best in people.

Stephen M. R. Covey

People who do not see their choices do not believe they have choices.

Gil Fronsdal

A machine can be controlled. A living system can only be disturbed.

Dr Fritjof Capra

Change is happening all the time. Our role is to identify useful change and amplify it.

Gregory Bateson