

## **Manager? Mentor? Coach?! Pull it all together with the Infinity Loop.**



The mandate for leaders has become bigger and harder. The world is a spinning swirl of complexity, it's no longer linear or predictable and always leading from the front is no longer possible. Companies require you to play all three roles. As a manager you need to meet short term earnings expectations with a relentless focus on immediate results (numbers are linear). You also need to pass along what you have learned so your people can be even more effective. And then, to be a great coach, taking the time to pull the best from your people and to create high performing teams. You will be measured on your numbers, your bench strength and how well you develop your people. The polarizing forces on leaders can seem crushing.

Let's be clear, what you are being asked to do may well be impossible, it can certainly feel that way.

Karl, one CEO of a publicly traded company put it rather bluntly.

“Carol, it’s like there are two guns are pointed at my head. I do one thing; one gun goes off. Do something else and the other one goes off.”

“That’s true,” I said, “But remember, they’re blanks. When one of the guns goes off it will hurt like hell, but remember, it won’t kill you.”

He laughed and groaned. “How comforting. You always say there is a third way, I think this is the time to find it.”

Take a moment to think of your own leadership. How do you pull it all together, being a manager and mentor and a coach?

What is coaching anyway, is it a skill, or a set of behaviors or a mindset? At its simplest we can think of a coaching headset as shifting from expert (telling) to explorer (asking). In many ways from engaging in instruction to inquiry.

The first step of the shift is to think of a highly successful outcome, near or long-term depending on the challenge facing you. Second step is to assess where you are. The third is to build on your past experience and accomplishments and harness existing strengths The fourth step in coach mode is to ask questions that will move you toward your goal.

### **Coach by numbers.**

If you want to develop the coaching skills/headset path, I’ve created the simplest coaching model – it takes two minutes to learn, you can apply it right away. Going from good to great at it, of course, takes time.

Let’s back up to set the stage. I’ll use the perspective of the coach who is asking the questions:

**What would you like to work on and Why does that matter to you?**

The foundation is picking something to work on that matters and isn’t just being compliant.

Question one: 10 of 10.

**If you were able to achieve this at a 10 out of 10, what would it look like?**

Paint a picture, and what would you be doing?

Question two: Rate yourself.

**On your scale of 1 – 10, where are you now?**

This is **their** scale, the accuracy isn't the point. If they say 5 and you think they are a 7, don't reassure. If you think they are a 2, don't roll your eyes.

Question three: THE question that counts

**What are you doing right that you aren't a ½ point lower (eg why not a 4 or 4.5)?**

This is harder than it seems, capturing the negative is neurologically easier than finding the positive. Keep asking "what else are you doing right" until the well is dry.

Question four: next ½ point


**What could you do over the next 8 weeks to raise yourself ½ a point?**

Change happens in increments. When someone "transforms" they typically transform right back a few weeks later. This makes it real and it they best way to build on question three.



## Coach by Numbers

What do you want to work on? Why does it matter?

1. If you were a 10 of 10 on this, what would it look like?
  2. On that scale, where are you now?
  3. What are you doing RIGHT that you aren't a ½ point lower?
  4. What could you do over the next 8 weeks to be a ½ point higher?
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In Explorer/Inquiry/Coach mode the skill you develop is asking great questions. This is probably the opposite of what has made you successful, which is likely having all the right answers. As Marshall Goldsmith famously wrote – What got you here won't get you there.

## Why do we need to ask questions?

Having to ask questions has always irritated me. Even with 40,000 hours of coaching experience I still WANT to teach people what to do. I love knowing stuff and sharing it. Especially when the answer to the other person's challenge seems obvious.

Is the coach approach of asking questions just coaching dogma? Has anyone actually challenged this assumption? Just giving the answer is quicker!

True, for the teacher. But possibly not quicker in the long run because the challenge will just come up again. Third time round we're annoyed. Possibly the same issue will surface again and again. (That said, we'll see below that there is a limit to the benefit of just asking questions.)

### Reason 1:

**It can save you from embarrassment when you give tips they already know, save you the energy of having to produce ideas. Here's an example of how it can work.**

Paul is a Chief Operating Officer of a Fortune 30 company and mandated coaching was part of a largescale leadership development program. "Good luck with me," Paul announced, "I've been working on delegating for 20 years had three coaches and have gotten nowhere."

*Now, think of your own experiences developing delegation skills and your own hard won top delegation tips. Wouldn't it be a good idea to share them, wouldn't it be quicker? That's my bias. But what happens if you ask instead? I'll do this using the 10/10 model, but you can find your own version of what works.*

"So, we'll lower our expectations," I laughed. **"But if you were good at delegation, what would it look like? 10 of 10??"**

Paul answered: "I'd communicate well by setting clear expectations and get the RACI right. I'd make sure they understood the nature of the task, who is responsible and accountable, who needs to be consulted and informed and be crystal clear on the deliverables. I'd be able to keep myself from micro-managing or stepping in to take things back. I would rise above my individual contributor and action bias and lean into leading through others rather than leading myself."

*So, he knows this already. How many times have you shared your top tips only to hear, "I've tried that... I've tried that too." This is never a pleasant experience, and it can feel like they are making excuses. But also, see how it would have been fruitless or even embarrassing to offer the basic tips only to see how well he knew them already?*

## Reason 2:

### It can point you in the right direction.

“Paul, that description is great and on target. **On your scale, what are you now?”**

“Five, maybe more on a good day, but in general a 5,” he answered.

*Notice I said, “On your scale.” Now is not the time to give in to their scale and not to reassure them that they are better than that, or judge them because they wouldn’t see 5 on a good day. Go with their version of the truth.*

### What are you doing right that you’re not a 4 or a 4.5?

Paul looked up a moment, “What am I doing right... I’m able to decide what to delegate. I think I am good at the RACI, but I do micromanage and step in or take things back nearly half the time.”

“Fine,” I said, “but let’s stay on track of why you’re a 5 and not a 4. Where do you delegate well?”

“Where do I do it well? I can think of 5 people on my team where I’m probably an 8 or better and...Paul trailed off, was silent and stared a hole in the wall. I stayed silent, what was going on?”

And then.

“Crap! I *don’t* have a problem with delegation. I am great with over half my team. It’s the other four. It’s not delegating at all, it’s having the tough conversations with that four... I can’t believe it. I’ve been working on the wrong thing for twenty years!”

My next question would have been, what could you do over the next 8 weeks to get to a 5.5 but raising a ½ point on delegation was moot. We uncovered the real issue, having the tough conversations and Paul is very energized to take this new challenge on.

When Paul described his delegation challenge How easy it would have been to give him tips or guidance? But we saved ourselves the embarrassment of tips, as he knew them as well as we did and that information hadn’t helped for 20 years. Instead, by asking what he’d done well, it flipped his thinking and pointed him in an unexpected direction. “What have you done right?” is a question to ask, every day.

### **Reason three.**

#### **They retain it.**

This one took me forever to figure out. It's obvious once you see it. Imagine a pyramid and you want to fill it up with water. When it's filled the other person has fully retained the information.

This is called the Learning Pyramid and as The National Training Laboratory describes it: you're teaching someone and supporting it with some reading, this will lead to their remembering about 10% of the information. But, if the person must teach it to someone, the pyramid is 90% full! They remember it.

In this case, they are "teaching" it to you. When you ask someone a question, you are in essence asking them to teach you what they know or think. Often, the question jogs something loose in their brain, and they are "learning" what they didn't know they knew, as they are teaching it to you in real time. By pulling, you pull what they think and they are active. By pushing, you push what you think, and they are passive.

When possible, go for the other person being active.

#### **Taking the question thing too far. Using the infinity loop.**

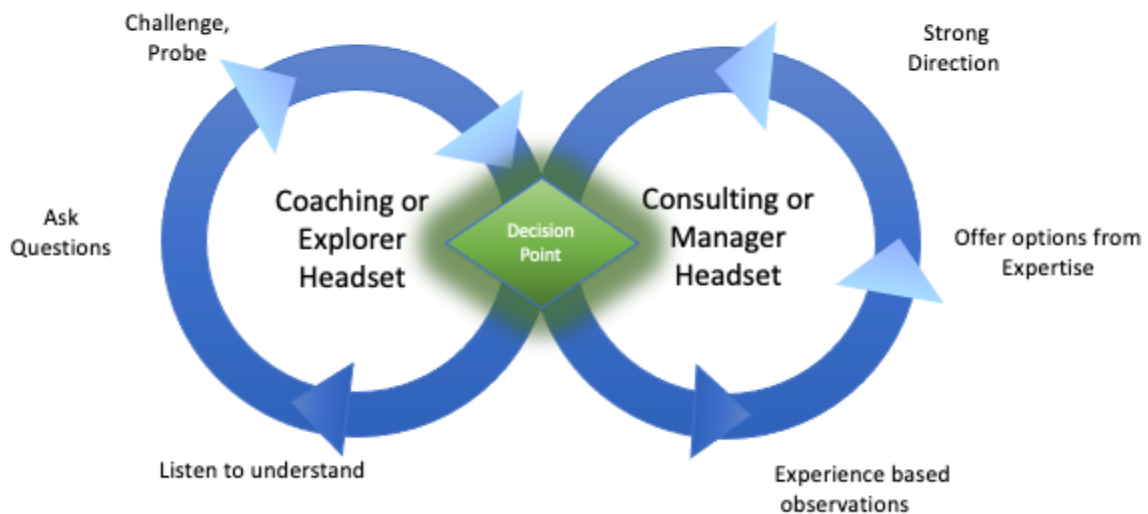
What coaching articles typically don't mention is that the true art of Leader as Coach is seamlessly shifting from expert to explorer, or instructor to inquirer, and back again. Ironically, if you always pick a coach approach and keep "pulling" you are as rigid as someone stuck in command and control.

Sometimes the other person just doesn't know. Continuing to ask questions in this situation is just painful. Now if you're stuck in the "coaches only ask questions" model, this is when you give up on the coach approach, flip into telling mode and leave attempts at exploration in the dust. But by using the model of the infinity loop we can learn to tilt one way (toward questioning) till it doesn't work, then the other (to solving or directing) and then back to questioning again.

Imagine 2 letter C's facing one another. The C on the left is for "Coach" and represents pulling knowledge from the other person by asking questions. The backward C represents "Consult" or pushing/installing knowledge by giving answers. It includes mentoring, managing, advising or being directive. It forms a sideways Figure 8, the symbol for Infinity. We need to smoothly slide from one side to the other, pulling in or pushing out at ease depending on what is needed in the moment.

I call this the Infinity Loop. Typically coach training talks about knowing what hat you are wearing, Manager hat, Mentor hat, Coaching hat, and sharing you are changing hats. I've always found this a bit misleading. It's shifting headsets, not hats. Here's what it looks like:

# Infinity Loop



A guideline is this:

You need to address an issue. Start out on the left side of the loop, with a question, see if this leads you anywhere. If not, try another (I usually suggest two or three). Then you hit the decision point and start to lean into the right side, where you make an “offer,” either an observation, teaching moment or at times a directive. But keep it short and then loop back with a short question. That can be 3 Questions then 1 Solve, ending with a quick question.

Josefa was the Chief Marketing Officer of an FMCG company. She was great as a creative marketer but the exco branded her as poor at delivery, despite 360 feedback that didn't confirm this belief. As a result her impact was blunted as she wasn't taken seriously.

“This is so frustrating!” she complained to the CEO. “I am good at delivery, and I love getting things done on time. I can't seem to get the exco to see it.”

Josefa's CEO had one day of Leader as Coach training.

He started by asking Josefa, “If you were successful at showing them you're good at delivery, what would you be doing??”

“I don't know,” she said.

The CEO asked a couple more questions and kept hitting a blank wall. After three tries he made an “offer,” ending with a question.

“You are brilliant marketer, if we thought of this as marketing yourself what would that look like?” To the CEOs surprise this also didn’t lead to any movement.

This is the tough moment as a leader. It’s a nearly irresistible invitation to jump into solve mode. It’s like the pain of watching a chicken trying to push its way out of the eggshell – you think, certainly helping crack it is the solution? (With a chick, by the way, if you do help it by cracking the shell, it dies. It needs the struggle to build up its little legs, so it can walk to food.)

Once more he chose to tilt to expert mode with an observation, again, followed with a quick question.

“Someone once told me, if you want people to think something of you, tell them what to think of you – how does that sound?”

“You mean just tell them I’m good at delivery?” Josepha asked, “Sounds so obvious once you say it.”

The CEO continued, “Well, where does that take you?”

Josepha now had a lot to say. And she did. Not only to the CEO but to the EXCO who started taking her more seriously

What the CEO did was to shift back and forth between asking questions, offering possible solutions and ending each with a quick question. Tilting from one side to the other, to explorer to expert and back can be done in an instant.

Why the quick question at the end? I think of it as “popping the bubble.” This is the image that comes to my mind: I visualize my “offer” as text in a speech bubble, like in a cartoon. I then lob it over to the other person, but the speech bubble stays over their head, stuck in the bubble. How can it drop into their head? That quick question of, does that seem right? what do you think? what else do you think? does that land? These are ways to pop the bubble so what’s inside falls into their head. In essence, it takes them from passive, to active. Then if it does land, they can start teaching me what they think. And then there is a 90% chance they’ll remember it and be able to use it in the future.

Manage? Mentor? Coach? Yes. Learn that simple coaching model. Practice asking questions and seeing how well it can work. Tilt back and forth from expert to explorer and see how your people can help themselves move forward. Even when you have no time, and give a quick directive, you can learn a lot if you follow it with a quick question. In fact, you may hear things that are crucial to success.

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Learn more about the Coach by Numbers and the Infinity Loop at  
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