

# COACHING-LED LEADERSHIP

*How Better Conversations Build Ownership, Performance, and a Culture of Growth*

A Global Editorial Edition for Leaders, Managers, and Consultants

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The ideas, examples, and tools in this book are intended for leadership development and organizational learning. They are not a substitute for legal, clinical, financial, or compliance advice. Organizations should adapt the tools to their own context, policies, and local regulations.

Editorial positioning: this manuscript has been revised toward a global business-book standard: clearer promise, stronger chapter flow, consistent terminology, tighter reader guidance, and a more practical implementation path.

# Preface: The Promise of Coaching-Led Leadership

Most leadership books tell readers what good leaders believe. This book is designed to help leaders practice what good leaders do, especially in the conversations where performance, trust, and ownership are either built or broken.

The central promise is simple: better conversations create better judgment; better judgment creates better decisions; better decisions create better performance; and repeated performance, handled with dignity, becomes culture.

Coaching-led leadership is not soft leadership. It is a disciplined way to develop people while still demanding outcomes. It combines clarity with curiosity, empathy with standards, and personal growth with business performance.

Read this book as a field manual. Use one tool at a time. Install one rhythm at a time. Measure what changes. Then scale what works.

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## How to Use This Book

For managers: start with Chapters 1, 3, 5, 6, and 10. These chapters will immediately improve your one-on-ones, feedback, questions, and daily coaching conversations.

For senior leaders: focus on Chapters 2, 9, 15, 16, and 17. These chapters help translate coaching from an individual skill into a culture, operating system, and measurable leadership practice.

For consultants and facilitators: use the chapter tools, coach prompts, and 30-60-90 plans as workshop architecture. Each chapter can become a learning module, diagnostic conversation, or client intervention.

The book is best used in motion: choose one practice, apply it this week, review the result, and then build the next habit.

# Chapter 1: Why Coaching-Led Leadership Now

*“Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.” — Sir John Whitmore, Coaching for Performance*

If leadership is a series of conversations, then coaching is the art of turning those conversations into change. In an era of constant flux—AI accelerating the clock speed of work, hybrid teams stitched across time zones, markets that pivot in weeks not years—telling people what to do is a brittle strategy. It works until it doesn’t. Coaching, by contrast, builds something compounding: judgment, ownership, and the felt belief, “We can figure this out.”

This chapter makes the business case and the human case for coaching as a leadership advantage. It clarifies what coaching is (and isn’t), offers a simple map for choosing your stance, disarms common objections, and ends with quick wins you can use this week.

*“Don’t be a know-it-all; be a learn-it-all.” — Satya Nadella, Hit Refresh*

## A tale of two managers

The deadline was not moving. A critical customer patch had to ship by Friday. Manager A called an emergency stand-up and began assigning tasks like chess moves: “You take the API. You fix the memory leak. No experiments. Report back at 4 p.m.” The team complied, silently. By Thursday, they had shipped... and left behind a thicket of workarounds that would cost them double the time next sprint. The team learned one thing: wait to be told.

Manager B, down the hall, took a different route. “By Friday, what would ‘done and durable’ look like from the customer’s point of view?” she asked. They sketched outcomes on the whiteboard. “Where’s the riskiest unknown? How might we de-risk it by this afternoon?” Tasks emerged—but so did ownership. They delivered on Friday, with fewer band-aids and a shared understanding of what had to improve upstream to avoid the firefight next time. The team learned two things: how to think, and that their thinking mattered.

Both managers delivered. Only one grew capacity.

## Why coaching-led leadership, now

The visible work of leadership has always been to set direction and ensure delivery. The invisible work of leadership—sense-making, building trust, helping people do their best thinking under pressure—has become decisive. It’s the

difference between teams that can only run the playbook and teams that can write new plays.

Several forces make coaching a first-order skill today. Work is more interdependent; solutions increasingly emerge from cross-functional dialogue. Knowledge half-lives are shrinking; answers age fast, questions travel well. Hybrid and distributed work amplify the cost of misalignment and missed nuance; coaching slows down the moment to speed up the system.

John Dewey reminded us, “We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience.” Coaching puts that reflection into the flow of work, converting events into insight, and insight into better action.

## The business case

Performance and productivity. Coaching aims attention at outcomes and develops problem-solving muscles instead of dependence on the boss. Google’s Project Oxygen, which studied what makes great managers, identified “is a good coach” as one of the most important manager behaviors of effective manager behaviors. Teams with coaching-oriented managers improved on quality and retention as Google invested in manager development. The lesson endures: when leaders coach, they scale themselves through others’ thinking.

Retention and engagement. Gallup has long found that managers account for the majority of variance in engagement. Coaching behaviors—listening, clarifying outcomes, asking catalytic questions, following through—signal respect and trust. People stay where they feel seen and stretched, not just supervised.

Innovation and adaptability. Amy Edmondson’s research on psychological safety shows that teams learn faster—and avoid costly silence—when people can speak up without fear. Coaching builds that safety through curiosity and candor. Teresa Amabile’s “progress principle” adds a second engine: small wins. Coaching helps teams identify and stack small wins, the raw material of momentum.

Customer and stakeholder outcomes. Coaching-led teams translate empathy into design decisions and service recovery. They surface weak signals earlier and pivot faster, because information is less filtered and more discussed.

## Case notes from the field

Google’s Project Oxygen. Initially launched to test whether managers mattered at all, Project Oxygen found they mattered a lot—and identified key behaviors. Teaching managers to coach (rather than fix) improved outcomes on performance and retention. The takeaway is not that advice disappears, but that advice comes later and lands better after the manager has helped the person think.

Adobe’s Check-In. In 2012, Adobe replaced annual performance reviews with an ongoing “Check-In” focused on expectations, feedback, and growth. Leaders were expected to hold frequent coaching-led conversations. Among reported benefits: tens of thousands of hours saved from review bureaucracy and a stronger cadence of forward-looking dialogue. The shift reframed performance as a continuous conversation rather than a once-a-year verdict.

Microsoft’s “Model, Coach, Care.” As part of its cultural transformation, Microsoft embedded three manager expectations: Model (the culture), Coach (for growth), and Care (for well-being and success). Coaching moved from an HR program to an everyday leadership behavior, aligning with Nadella’s “learn-it-all” ethos. The signal was cultural: the best managers grow other leaders.

## The human case

Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan) suggests that people thrive when three needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Coaching speaks to all three. It offers autonomy by inviting agency. It builds competence by expanding perspective and strategies. It deepens relatedness by making time for thinking together.

Identity and growth. Coaching treats people as capable protagonists in their own work, not as instruments. Over time, this rewires identity: “I am someone who can navigate ambiguity, ask for help, and figure things out.” That belief may be the ultimate performance advantage.

Well-being and resilience. Pressure does not vanish when leaders coach, but it becomes metabolizable. Clarity reduces anxiety. Choice under constraint restores a sense of control. The future stops feeling like a test you can only fail.

## What coaching is—and isn’t

At its simplest, coaching in a leadership role is a structured, goal-oriented, primarily non-directive conversation that helps someone think, decide, and act more effectively—with clear follow-through. It is distinct from mentoring (experience-based guidance), directing (assigning tasks and standards), therapy (mental health treatment), and consulting (delivering expert solutions).

Below is a practical comparison to help you choose intentionally.

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Primary Aim</b>	<b>Typical Stance</b>	<b>Time Horizon</b>	<b>Best Used When</b>	<b>Risks of Overuse</b>	<b>Example Phrases</b>
Coaching	Build capacity and ownership	Ask-led, non-directive, accountability-focused	Medium to long	Problem is ambiguous; growth is a goal;	Analysis paralysis; perceived lack of	“What outcome matters most

Approach	Primary Aim	Typical Stance	Time Horizon	Best Used When	Risks of Overuse	Example Phrases
	to achieve outcomes			time allows learning	clarity if poorly contracted	here—and what options do you see?”
Mentoring	Transfer patterns, wisdom, and networks	Advice-led, experience-based	Medium	Person lacks pattern recognition or context	Advice dependency; blind spots of mentor become dogma	“In my experience, two paths work. Want to hear them?”
Directing	Ensure speed, compliance, or risk control	Tell-led, prescriptive	Short	Time-critical, safety-critical, or compliance-critical situations	Learned helplessness; low ownership; stifled learning	“Do X by 4 p.m.; here’s the standard to meet.”
Therapy	Heal, restore mental health	Clinical, past-focused	Long	Psychological distress impairs functioning	Scope creep; boundary issues	“This sounds beyond work performance; let’s connect you with proper support.”
Consulting	Provide expert diagnosis and solution	Expert-led, deliverable-oriented	Variable	Expertise gap; stakes are high; need a solution fast	Costly; solution may not transfer to internal capability	“We’ll bring in experts to assess and recommend.”

A useful mental model is the Ask–Tell continuum across the Performance–Development axis. Coaching sits closer to Ask and development, directing closer to Tell and immediate performance. Mentoring straddles the middle. The craft of leadership is moving along this map intentionally.

### Practical heuristics for choosing your stance

- Coach by default. When the problem is ambiguous and time allows learning, start with coaching. It pays compound interest.
- Direct when needed. If the stakes are safety-, time-, or compliance-critical, be clear and prescriptive—and explain why.

- Mentor to accelerate pattern recognition. Offer your map when theirs is blank, but return to questions to build ownership.
- Contract the conversation. One minute upfront—“What outcome would make this 15 minutes valuable?”—prevents meander and signals seriousness.

Marshall Goldsmith’s well-worn reminder applies here: “What got you here won’t get you there.” Coaching is how leaders upgrade the success formula without losing what works.

## Objections you’ll hear (and how to reframe them)

“It takes too long.” Coaching does not require 60-minute sessions. Five to ten minutes, repeated consistently, beats a monthly performance monologue. Micro-coaching in existing rituals compounds.

“People just want answers.” Sometimes they do. Give clarity when the house is on fire. The rest of the time, a good question creates a firefighter tomorrow, not just fire control today.

“It’s too soft.” Coaching is soft on people and hard on outcomes. Pair curiosity with crisp standards, clear decisions, and consistent follow-through. Kim Scott calls this “care personally, challenge directly.”

“I’m not a certified coach.” You don’t need to be. The leadership version of coaching is a learnable habit set: listen deeply, ask better questions, contract outcomes, and close with commitments.

## Evidence highlights and signals to track

While methods and contexts vary, organizations that increase the frequency and quality of coaching-led conversations tend to see movement on leading indicators—better one-on-ones, clearer goals, stronger psychological safety—and on lagging indicators—delivery, engagement, internal mobility, and retention. Track both.

Leading indicators to instrument next month: the cadence and quality of one-on-ones; the percentage of goals with clear outcomes and check-ins; pulse items on voice (“I can speak up”) and clarity (“I know what success looks like”).

Lagging indicators over quarters: goal attainment, cycle time and defect trends, engagement survey items tied to manager effectiveness, regrettable attrition, and idea flow (e.g., experiment throughput).

## Toolbox: quick wins this week

- Reset one-on-ones. Use a simple arc: Outcomes (what matters this week), Obstacles (what’s in the way), Options (two ways forward),

Commitments (who does what by when). Aim for a 70/30 talk ratio in favor of your direct report.

- Ask one before you answer. For the next five asks for guidance, begin with one clarifying question: “What have you considered?” or “What would make this good enough for now?”
- Upgrade feedback to feedforward. Use SBI (Situation, Behavior, Impact), then pivot: “Given that, what’s one thing you’ll try differently next time?” Close with a commitment and a quick follow-up date.
- Make progress visible. Borrow from The Progress Principle: capture and celebrate small wins at the end of week. Momentum is a manager’s friend.

### Mini case: a composite from operations

An operations director inherited a team with on-time delivery but chronic rework. She suspected a pattern: her managers were excellent firefighters. She introduced a coaching cadence: weekly one-on-ones using the Outcomes–Obstacles–Options–Commitments arc, and a standing question in daily huddles—“What’s the riskiest assumption in today’s plan?”

Within two months, escalations dropped because risks surfaced earlier. Cross-team handoffs improved after a few targeted coaching conversations revealed unspoken assumptions. Cycle time ticked down, not by heroics but by better thinking upstream. The director still gave directives in safety-critical moments, but most days, she asked better questions and got better decisions.

### Fieldcraft: phrases that travel well

- “What does success look like from the customer’s point of view?”
- “If we had to make a good-enough decision by 4 p.m., what would it be?”
- “What’s the smallest test that buys us the most learning?”
- “On a scale of 1–10, how confident are you? What would move it by one point?”
- “What will you do, by when, and how will we know?”

### Reflection

- Under pressure, where do you tend to land on the Ask–Tell continuum? What does your team learn from you in those moments?

- Name two situations to keep directing in your world (e.g., safety, compliance), two to mentor (pattern gaps), and two to coach (ambiguous, developmental). What will you do differently next week?
- Which leading indicator will you instrument this month to see whether coaching is taking hold?

*“Leadership is not about being in charge. It is about taking care of those in your charge.” — often attributed to Simon Sinek*

Care without growth is comfort. Growth without care is cruelty. Coaching is care and growth in the same conversation.

## Chapter summary and bridge

Coaching-led leadership is not a philosophy; it’s a performance system. It turns everyday conversations into a flywheel: clarity → ownership → better decisions → better outcomes → more trust → even better conversations. In stable times, it’s an advantage. In volatile times, it’s an insurance policy on your team’s adaptability.

In the next chapter, we connect these practices to transformational leadership: how vision, inspiration, and individualized consideration become concrete, coachable moments—so you don’t just set direction, you build the capacity to move toward it together.

## Selected sources and further reading

- Sir John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance*.
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety and learning).
- Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle*.
- Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There*.
- Kim Scott, *Radical Candor*.
- Google’s Project Oxygen (manager behaviors; “is a good coach”).
- Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, *Self-Determination Theory*.
- Satya Nadella, *Hit Refresh* (learn-it-all vs know-it-all).
- Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, *Thanks for the Feedback*.

## Chapter 2: Transformational Leadership Meets Coaching

*“Transforming leadership occurs when leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality.” — James MacGregor Burns, Leadership*

Vision is a beautiful north star. But stars don’t move ships—captains and crews do. The quiet craft of coaching is the rigging: the lines, knots, and daily adjustments that translate a shining point in the sky into forward motion on the water. Without it, vision is a poster. With it, vision becomes practice.

This chapter is the bridge between the big, animating promise of transformational leadership and the everyday conversations that make that promise real. We’ll turn the four pillars—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—into coaching behaviors, prompts, and rituals you can use this week. Along the way, we’ll look at real cases where leaders turned vision into velocity, not by speaking more, but by asking better.

### Opening vignette: from keynote to cadence

At a Monday all-hands, a country director delivered a stirring vision: “In ninety days, we’ll be the team customers trust when the stakes are high.” The room buzzed. By Friday, the gravity well of daily work had pulled everyone back to familiar rails. The vision lingered like perfume in a breeze—lovely, but fleeting.

Three weeks later, the same leader tried a different path. She hosted a 60-minute “vision cascade” with her managers. “If a customer said we were their first call, what would we have done, concretely, in the next ninety days?” They named three outcomes and two learning bets. In 1:1s, she asked, “Which stretch makes sense for you, given your strengths?” In a cross-functional huddle, she posed, “What’s the smallest test that would move us one step toward that promise?” The language of the keynote became commitments on the calendar. Vision had found its vehicle.

### From pillars to practices

Transformational leadership is not only the ability to lift eyes to the horizon; it is also the discipline of turning horizon into habits. Coaching is that discipline in conversation form.

<b>Pillar (4 I’s)</b>	<b>What it looks like in coaching</b>	<b>Sample prompts</b>	<b>Moments to apply</b>	<b>Pitfall if neglected</b>
Idealized Influence	Narrate your trade-offs out loud; invite challenge; hold	“Here’s the principle guiding my	Decision reviews; post-mortems;	Vision without visible integrity becomes

Pillar (4 I's)	What it looks like in coaching	Sample prompts	Moments to apply	Pitfall if neglected
(modeling values)	yourself to the same standards you ask of others.	choice— what am I not seeing?”	budget/prioritization meetings	theater; people emulate what you do, not what you say.
Inspirational Motivation (meaning and direction)	Translate purpose into 90-day outcomes; keep language vivid and specific; connect tasks to the story.	“Which two customer outcomes best express this vision this quarter?”	Quarterly planning; kickoff meetings; weekly check-ins	Inspiration fatigue: lofty words with no next step breed cynicism.
Intellectual Stimulation (challenge and curiosity)	Ask catalytic questions; surface assumptions; design small experiments; normalize smart risk-taking.	“What would have to be true for option B to work?”	Design sessions; risk reviews; retrospectives	Stagnation: clever slogans without fresh thinking calcify into ruts.
Individualized Consideration (tailored growth)	Run strengths-based 1:1s; distinguish mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship; co-create growth plans tied to outcomes.	“Where do you want to grow—and which business outcome will that growth power?”	One-on-ones; talent reviews; stretch assignment scoping	Favorites and fatigue: generic development for some; unfair access for others.

*“Kouzes and Posner remind us that ‘leadership is a relationship.’ Coaching is how the relationship learns—together.” — The Leadership Challenge*

## The coaching conversation as operating system

Grand strategy falters without a simple operating system. Here is one you can use: Contract → Explore → Decide → Commit → Follow-Through. It threads all four pillars.

**Contract.** Start with clarity: “What would make the next 20 minutes valuable?” This signals respect (individualized consideration) and aims attention at outcomes (inspirational motivation).

**Explore.** Ask, don’t tell. “What’s the real problem we’re solving?” “What assumptions are we making?” Your curiosity models the intellectual humility of idealized influence and triggers intellectual stimulation.

**Decide.** Converge. “Given our options, what will we try first—and why?” Tie back to vision so choices live in the story, not just the spreadsheet.

**Commit.** Make it measurable and mutual. “Who will do what by when—and how will we know?” Integrity is kept in the calendar.

Follow-Through. Close the loop. “What did we learn?” “What changes next time?” This turns progress into a habit.

As James Clear puts it, “You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” Coaching is a system you can run in any conversation.

## Vision to execution: a simple cascade

Think of a cascade as translating North Star into compass and then into calendar.

First, Purpose. Name the why in customer language: “When it matters most, we are the call people make.”

Then, Principles. Choose two or three decision rules: “Bias to small tests,” “Raise risks early,” “Optimize for customer recovery.”

Then, Priorities. Identify 3–5 outcomes for the next quarter that would be unmistakable signs of progress: “Reduce escalations by 25%,” “Cut time-to-resolution for P1 issues to under 4 hours.”

Finally, Practices. For each outcome, name two practices you’ll start or strengthen: “Run a daily 9-minute risk huddle,” “Adopt an ‘SBI + feedforward’ feedback cadence.”

If you want a one-page canvas, sketch four boxes—Purpose, Principles, Priorities, Practices—and fill them with your team in ninety minutes. Return to the page weekly; let it breathe.

## Case studies: when coaching carries the vision

Microsoft’s “Model, Coach, Care.” As part of its cultural reset, Microsoft articulated three manager expectations: Model the culture, Coach for growth, and Care for the team’s success. The shift from “know-it-all” to “learn-it-all” wasn’t just a slogan. Managers were trained to ask better questions, to run regular growth conversations, and to narrate trade-offs publicly. The result, over time, was not only improved business performance but a palpable change in how people spoke to each other—more curiosity, more candor, more shared ownership. Vision became vernacular.

Pixar’s Braintrust. Pixar institutionalized candid critique sessions where directors invite peers to challenge assumptions about a film in progress. The Braintrust is not a verdict; it is a coached conversation that surfaces blind spots and extends options. As Ed Catmull explains in *Creativity, Inc.*, the power lies in a high-trust room where truth can be told and the director still owns the decision. That is intellectual stimulation with individualized consideration, alive and humming.

WD-40's "Learning Moments." Under CEO Garry Ridge, WD-40 popularized the idea that mistakes are "learning moments," not career-limiting events. Leaders are expected to coach through errors: What did we intend? What happened? What did we learn? What will we change? Sustained engagement and steady performance followed. The point isn't that vision lowered the bar; it changed the posture. Curiosity became a company standard.

*"Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as 'a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.' Coaching builds that belief conversation by conversation." — The Fearless Organization*

## Anti-patterns—and their antidotes

Heroic vision without scaffolding. Inspiration is a match; coaching is kindling. Without practices and checkpoints, the fire dies. Antidote: end every inspiring moment with two concrete next steps, owners, and dates.

Performative purpose. Grand words with no visible trade-offs create cynicism. Antidote: narrate the costs you are willing to pay to live the values. Invite challenge; adjust publicly.

Over-challenge without care. Stretch without pacing becomes strain. Antidote: pair high standards with resources, sequencing, and frequent check-ins. "Care personally, challenge directly," as Kim Scott writes in *Radical Candor*.

Coaching when you should direct. Not every moment is a seminar. In safety-, time-, or compliance-critical scenarios, be explicit: "I'm switching to directive mode because..." Then switch back.

## Equity and inclusion: making individualized consideration fair

Individualized consideration can drift into favoritism if left to vibes. Make growth opportunities transparent. Standardize a 1:1 cadence with a shared structure—Outcomes, Obstacles, Options, Commitments—so access to coaching isn't a popularity contest. Track who gets stretch assignments. Invite quieter voices by using asynchronous prompts before meetings: "What's one assumption we should test?" Equity is not accidental; it is designed.

## Coaching across distance

Hybrid and distributed teams need coaching that travels. Write your questions in the document before the meeting; it slows thinking down just enough to include more minds. Record short demo-days and add coached Q&A in comments so people in other time zones can contribute. Keep a "question bank" tied to the four pillars and reuse it across channels. The medium changes; the method endures.

## Metrics that matter

Track leading indicators you can influence this month: frequency and quality of your one-on-ones, clarity of 90-day outcomes tied to the vision, and the pulse of psychological safety (“I can speak up,” “I know what success looks like”). Watch lagging indicators over quarters: delivery against those outcomes, experiment throughput (tests run, lessons logged), internal mobility, and engagement items tied to manager effectiveness. What you measure is what you teach your organization to value.

## Practice: a 30-day coach-leader sprint

Week 1—Idealized influence. Choose one visible decision and narrate your principle out loud: “We’re choosing X over Y because...” Invite dissent. Notice what that permission does to the room.

Week 2—Inspirational motivation. Run a 60-minute vision cascade with your team; publish three 90-day outcomes and two learning bets. Put them on one page everyone can find.

Week 3—Intellectual stimulation. Host a premortem: “It’s ninety days from now and we failed—what happened?” Turn the list into two small experiments.

Week 4—Individualized consideration. In every 1:1, ask, “Where do you want to grow next—and which business outcome will that growth power?” Co-create one stretch aligned to Q-goals. Schedule a follow-up.

## Fieldcraft: phrases that carry

“Which choice best expresses our purpose this quarter?”

“What’s the smallest test that buys us the most learning?”

“What would make this good enough for now?”

“If we could only do one, which one moves the vision most?”

“What support would make this stretch sustainable?”

## Reflection

Where, in your week, do you most naturally inspire—and where do you actually need to coach? Which pillar are you over-indexing (your comfort) and which are you under-practicing (your growth edge)? If a camera followed you for a day, would it record more telling or more asking—and what would your team learn from that ratio?

*“Leadership is the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive.” — Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, Leadership on the Line*

Tough challenges require more than a banner and a speech. They require the slow, sturdy work of conversation. Coaching is how you mobilize—not once from a stage, but every day at the table.

### Selected sources and further reading

- James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (transforming leadership and moral purpose).
- Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership* (the four I's).
- Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (leadership as relationship and practice).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety).
- Ed Catmull and Amy Wallace, *Creativity, Inc.* (Pixar's Braintrust).
- Kim Scott, *Radical Candor* (care personally, challenge directly).
- James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (systems over goals).
- Satya Nadella, *Hit Refresh* (learn-it-all culture; Model, Coach, Care).

## Chapter 3: The Inner Work of a Coach-Leader

*“The gentle art of asking instead of telling.” — Edgar H. Schein, Humble Inquiry*

A room takes its temperature from the leader who walks in. If you carry haste, the room runs. If you carry fear, the room flinches. If you carry presence—clear eyes, steady breath, curious questions—the room remembers how to think. Before a leader can coach others, they must coach their own mind, their own nervous system, their own need to be right. This chapter is about that inner work: the mindset shifts, the practiced presence, the blend of humility and credibility that makes trust possible; and the boundaries that keep coaching ethical inside a workplace.

*“Leadership is a relationship.” — James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, The Leadership Challenge*

### Opening vignette: the pause that changed the meeting

The escalation was already hot. Two teams were talking past each other about a failed launch. Last quarter, the executive would have entered with a verdict. This time, she paused at the threshold, feeling both feet on the floor. “We have 45 minutes,” she said, “and one outcome: by the end, a shared plan.” She asked two questions and then counted silently to five: “What does ‘good enough for recovery’ look like by Friday?” and “What’s the riskiest assumption we’re making?” The room shifted from blame to building. They left with owners, dates, and two small tests.

Nothing about the facts had changed. The leader had changed. And the room followed.

### Mindset shifts of a coach-leader

The inner work begins as a series of small, stubborn choices: about who you are when you don’t know, about what speed actually buys, about whether you value image or integrity. Coaching is not a set of techniques; it is a stance.

Mindset shift	What it looks like	Micro-practice	Failure mode	Reset cue
From knower to learner	You trade the performance of certainty for the practice of curiosity.	Start every complex discussion with one sincere question before any statement.	Defensive posturing; shutting down dissent.	“What might I be wrong about?”
From control to enablement	You stop moving everyone’s pieces and start improving the board.	Ask, “What would make it easier for you to do your best work?”	Bottlenecking decisions; learned helplessness on the team.	“Am I solving or enabling?”

<b>Mindset shift</b>	<b>What it looks like</b>	<b>Micro-practice</b>	<b>Failure mode</b>	<b>Reset cue</b>
From speed to pace and space	You slow down to go fast later.	Insert a 90-second pause to define the outcome before you dive into content.	Rework, whiplash, decision churn.	“If we had 10% more clarity, what would change?”
From image to integrity	You narrate trade-offs and live your standards in public.	Say, “We’re choosing X over Y because...” and invite challenge.	Cynicism; performative values.	“What cost am I willing to pay to keep this principle real?”

*“What got you here won’t get you there.” — Marshall Goldsmith*

## Presence: regulate to relate

Coaching begins with state, not script. If your physiology is in fight-flight, your words will be too. Presence is a gift you give the room; it’s also a skill you can train.

Try the C.O.R.E. routine. Center with one slow breath. Orient by silently naming the conversation’s purpose. Relate by making eye contact and paraphrasing what you hear. Engage by asking one catalytic question and then letting silence do some work. The difference between reacting and responding is often one breath.

Listening at depth means listening for meaning, emotion, and pattern. It means reflecting back, “What I’m hearing is that speed mattered more than rework last week—does that fit?” It means tolerating the quiet that follows a good question. Count to five. Let thinking arrive.

## Humility and credibility: the dual engine of trust

Trust is built at the intersection of humility and credibility. One without the other slides into caricature: humility without craft becomes soft; credibility without humility becomes brittle. In *The Trusted Advisor*, Maister, Green, and Galford offer a useful lens:

Trustworthiness = Credibility + Reliability + Intimacy, all divided by Self-Orientation.

Credibility is your craft and clarity—do you know what good looks like, and can you explain it plainly? Reliability is your consistency—do you do what you said, when you said? Intimacy is felt safety—can I bring you the unvarnished truth? Self-orientation is your agenda—are you more interested in being right than in getting it right?

A coach-leader practices sentences that blend the two engines. “Here’s how I’m thinking about the trade-off; what am I not seeing?” is humility anchored in credibility. When you must switch to directive authority, label it and explain

why: “I’m moving to directive mode because we’re in a safety-critical moment. We’ll debrief and return to coaching after.” People trust what they can predict.

## Psychological safety: built, not announced

*“A belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.” — Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization**

Safety is taught by how you respond to bad news. Thank the messenger. Name the impact without shaming. Ask, “What’s our next step?” Repeat until it’s boring—and then keep going.

Use a SCARF lens (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness) from David Rock to design for dignity. Questions that steal status (“Why didn’t you think of that?”) or collapse certainty (“Everything is up in the air”) produce fear, not learning. Questions that grant autonomy (“What options do you see?”), reinforce fairness (“Let’s use the same criteria for all”), and build relatedness (“We’re on the same side of this problem”) make thinking safer.

Rituals matter. Short learning reviews after key moments—what did we intend, what happened, what did we learn, what will we change—turn reflection into muscle memory. End-of-week progress roundups make small wins visible and momentum tangible.

## Case studies: inner work, outer impact

Microsoft’s “Model, Coach, Care.” As part of a cultural reboot, Microsoft made three manager expectations explicit: model the culture, coach for growth, and care for the team’s well-being and success. The shift from “know-it-all” to “learn-it-all” was lived in meetings: leaders narrating trade-offs, asking catalytic questions, and giving feedback with clarity and care. Over time, this inner posture showed up in the metrics that matter and, more importantly, in how people spoke to one another.

WD-40’s “learning moments.” Under CEO Garry Ridge, WD-40 rebranded mistakes as “learning moments” and taught leaders to coach through them. The script was simple: What did we intend? What happened? What did we learn? What will we change? The inner work was harder: resist blame, resist ego, stay curious. The payoff was sustained engagement and steady performance.

Healthcare’s “just culture.” Many hospitals have adopted “just culture” frameworks that separate human error from reckless behavior. Leaders are trained to respond to near misses with inquiry first, sanction only when intent and choices warrant it, and always with transparency about the standard. The result is more reporting, more learning, and safer care. Coaching, here, is not soft; it is clinical discipline applied to human systems.

Toyota’s Andon cord. On the production line, any worker can pull the cord to stop the line. The inner work for leaders is to treat the pull as a gift, not an affront. When leaders show up with respect and curiosity, problems surface earlier and quality rises. When they show up with anger, the cord stops being pulled—and so does learning.

## Boundaries and ethics for manager-as-coach

Coaching sits inside power. You owe your people clarity about what coaching is, what it isn’t, what’s confidential, and where your duty of care requires action. Boundaries are not bureaucratic; they are the conditions for trust.

Scenario	Recommended stance	Exact language you can use	Escalation path
Performance crisis	Be clear and kind; don’t hide decisions behind “coaching.”	“This is a performance conversation. I’ll be direct about the gap and support you to close it.”	Follow your performance management policy; document outcomes and support.
Sensitive disclosure (mental health, harassment)	Hold space; name confidentiality limits upfront; act.	“Thank you for trusting me. I want to support you. Some things I’m required to escalate to keep people safe; here’s what I must do next.”	HR, EAP, Legal, or compliance—according to policy; inform the person when safe to do so.
Coaching vs. mentoring	Label the hat you’re wearing; return ownership.	“I can share two patterns I’ve seen (mentoring), and then I’ll switch back to questions so you own the plan.”	None; be explicit and consistent.
Scope beyond your role (therapy-like needs)	Stay supportive; refer.	“This feels beyond work performance. I care about you and want you to get the right support. Here are resources we can access.”	Refer to EAP or qualified professionals; check in as a human, not a therapist.
Confidentiality requests in gray areas	Clarify boundaries; focus notes on outcomes, not disclosures.	“Our 1:1s are confidential except for safety or legal issues. I keep notes on goals and commitments, not personal details.”	Follow company policy on records and privacy.

Offer a short confidentiality statement at the start of recurring 1:1s. Keep light-touch notes on outcomes and commitments; protect privacy. Power handled transparently becomes safer.

## Power, culture, equity

A coach-leader is power-aware. Name the difference plainly: “I’m your manager and I’m here to help you think. If I need to switch into manager mode, I’ll say so.” Rotate airtime deliberately. Use asynchronous prompts before meetings to invite quieter voices: “What’s one risk we’re underestimating?” Track who gets stretch assignments and who gets your time. Equity is not a feeling; it is a pattern you can see and change.

Culture shapes coaching. In some cultures, directness is a gift; in others, it is a slap. Learn your team’s language for care and challenge. Make norms explicit. Be generous with silence when English is a second language; write more so time zones don’t become status.

## Practical micro-routines

The 5-5-5. Before any 30-minute 1:1, take five minutes to center (breathe, state the purpose to yourself), five to contract (“What would make this time valuable?”), and five to close with commitments (“Who will do what by when?”). The middle takes care of itself.

O3: Outcomes, Obstacles, Options. Use this simple arc to keep coaching anchored in reality and agency. “What outcome do you want?” “What’s in the way?” “What options do you see?”

Ladder of Inference check. When tempers rise, ask, “What are the facts we agree on? What story might I be adding?” It drops the room back to ground.

Support–challenge meter. Ask, “On a scale of 1–10, how supported do you feel? How challenged? What would move each by one point?” Then adjust on purpose.

A short script you will use often: “What would make this good enough for now, and what would make it better later?” It creates pace without perfection.

## Field phrases that travel

“What does success look like from the customer’s point of view?”

“If we had to decide by 4 p.m., what would we do?”

“What assumption, if wrong, would most hurt us?”

“What would a one-step-better version of this look like?”

“What support would make this stretch sustainable?”

## Reflection

Where do you lose your presence first—speed, ego, fear? What is your reset cue? If a camera watched your next three meetings, would it record more telling

or asking, more image or integrity? Who on your team gets the most of your coaching time—and who should get more? What boundary do you need to state out loud so trust can grow?

## Chapter summary and bridge

You cannot coach what you will not embody. Mindset, presence, humility, credibility—these are not slogans; they are practices you can feel on your calendar and in your conversations. Psychological safety is built in your smallest reactions. Ethics are not red tape; they are scaffolding for courage. Do this inner work and your outer tools—questions, frameworks, cadences—will actually land.

Next, we turn to the science of change. How do insights become habits? How do motivation, learning loops, and deliberate practice turn good conversations into better behavior, reliably, over time?

## Selected sources and further reading

- Edgar H. Schein, *Humble Inquiry* (the gentle art of asking instead of telling).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety and learning).
- David Rock, *Your Brain at Work* (the SCARF model and state management).
- Maister, Green, and Galford, *The Trusted Advisor* (the trust equation).
- Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (upgrading success formulas).
- Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (balcony time and adaptive leadership).
- Kim Scott, *Radical Candor* (care personally, challenge directly).

## Chapter 4: The Science of Change

*“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” — James Clear, Atomic Habits*

Insight is a spark. Behavior is an engine. Leaders often leave workshops with sparks in their pockets and wonder why the ship still drifts. The work of coaching is engineering: how to turn “aha” into habit, how to move from a bright idea to a brighter routine. In this chapter, we translate what we know about adult learning, motivation, and habit formation into conversations that reliably change what people do next Tuesday at 10 a.m.—and keep changing it the Tuesday after.

*“Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work.” — Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, The Progress Principle*

### Opening vignette: from models to movement

After a two-day leadership program, a manager returned with diagrams in her notebook and the same meetings on her calendar. One month later, little had changed. She tried again, but differently. In each 1:1 she asked, “What outcome matters this week?” and “What’s one tiny behavior that would move it?” Together they wrote if-then plans—“If it’s 9:00 on Monday, then I’ll open the risk log first”—and closed with, “Who will do what by when?” They set 15-minute Friday reviews to learn what worked. Within four weeks, updates shifted from status to outcomes, decisions landed faster, and escalations fell. No new model. Just smaller steps, shorter loops, and consistent follow-through.

### How adults learn (and why that matters for change)

Adults do not learn like empty cups waiting for content. They learn like architects updating a building while living in it. The scaffolding must be relevant, immediately useful, and safe to test.

Andragogy in brief. Adults learn best when the work is relevant, problem-centered, self-directed, and tied to lived experience. A coaching conversation that starts with “What outcome matters here?” respects that truth.

Kolb’s cycle. Real change loops through four moves: Concrete Experience → Reflective Observation → Abstract Conceptualization → Active Experimentation. Turn this cycle into cadence. After a sprint, run a 10-minute learning review: what happened, what did we learn, what will we try?

Spacing and retrieval. Memory is a leaky bucket; the fix is not a bigger lecture but more sips more often. Short, repeated practice beats rare, heavy sessions.

Coaching thrives in the flow of work because it puts retrieval (“remind me the standard”) and rehearsal (“try it now”) where the work lives.

Cognitive load. Most teams fail not from lack of ambition but from too many simultaneous “new things.” Choose one or two keystone behaviors and sequence complexity. Depth before breadth turns insight into ability.

Transformative learning. Sometimes the behavior won’t change because the belief won’t. Coaching surfaces the mental model—“If I don’t have all the answers, I’m not credible”—and gently tests it with experience until it loosens.

## Motivation that lasts (not just this week)

Self-Determination Theory. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan showed that people thrive when three needs are met: autonomy (I choose), competence (I can), and relatedness (I’m not alone). Design goals and conversations that offer choice within clear boundaries, build skill with feedback, and create a sense of “we.” Motivation follows dignity.

Expectancy–Value–Cost. People act when they believe effort will work (expectancy), it matters (value), and the friction is manageable (cost). In coaching, raise expectancy (“Where have you done something like this before?”), amplify value (“Who benefits if this works?”), and reduce friction (“What can we remove to make the first step easier?”).

The Progress Principle. Small wins are rocket fuel. Close loops visibly. End the week by naming progress, however modest. Momentum teaches the brain, “This is working,” and makes the next action easier.

Motivational Interviewing moves. When change is ambivalent, advice bounces. Use OARS—Open questions, Affirmations, Reflective listening, Summaries—to evoke “change talk” (“I want to... I could... I will...”). When sharing a suggestion, try ask–provide–ask: “Would it help to hear a pattern I’ve seen?... What fits for you?” People commit to reasons they say out loud.

## The mechanics of behavior change

Behavior is not willpower performing alone; it is a system of capabilities, contexts, and cues. Diagnose before you prescribe.

Framework	Best for	Core lever	Coach prompt	Starter intervention
COM-B (Capability, Opportunity, Motivation → Behavior)	Holistic diagnosis	Remove constraints, add enablers	“Is this a skill, a system, or a will issue?”	1-hour skill sprint; redesign a handoff; clarify the reward
Fogg B=MAP (Behavior =	Tiny habit design	Ability and prompt first	“How can we make the first step 30 seconds?”	Stack after an existing routine

Framework	Best for	Core lever	Coach prompt	Starter intervention
Motivation × Ability × Prompt)				("After I open calendar, I...")
Habit loop (cue → routine → reward)	Sustaining behaviors	Make the loop obvious and satisfying	"What's the cue—and how will we reward immediately?"	Visual cue + instant micro-reward (checklist tick, quick 'done' post)
WOOP/If-Then (Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, Plan)	Handling obstacles	Pre-decide responses	"If X happens, then I will Y."	Write and schedule if-then plans; rehearse once

Implementation intentions. If-then plans sound trivial; they are not. "If it's the last 5 minutes of a meeting, then we'll capture decisions, owners, and dates." Pre-deciding reduces decision fatigue and makes the right action the default.

Environment by default. Make desirable actions easy, visible, and satisfying; make undesirable ones a little harder. A checklist on the wall beats a speech in the hall. Choice architecture is not manipulation; it is mercy for busy brains.

## The learning loop in practice

Short loops beat heroic leaps. Use OODA (Observe–Orient–Decide–Act), PDCA (Plan–Do–Check–Act), or a simple AAR (After Action Review). The pattern is the point: test smaller, learn faster, adjust sooner.

Micro-experiments. Favor reversible bets with clear signs. "We believe a 30-second root-cause note after each P1 will cut repeats in 30 days. We'll track repeat ticket rate and review weekly." When the date arrives, treat the result as data, not drama.

Deliberate practice. Anders Ericsson showed that expertise grows by practicing specific sub-skills with feedback. In leadership, that might be "ask two clarifying questions before advising," rehearsed and reviewed for a week. General exhortations ("communicate better") don't change behavior; targeted reps do.

## Designing coaching conversations that create change

A simple operating system—Contract → Explore → Decide → Commit → Follow-Through—turns talk into traction.

Contract. "What outcome would make this 20 minutes valuable?" Name the finish line before you start running.

Explore. Diagnose lightly. "Is this a skill, a system, or a habit?" and "What's one obstacle we can remove this week?"

Decide. Converge on a tiny, visible action. "What's the smallest next version of this?" If it takes more than two minutes to start, it's too big.

Commit. Write the if-then. Add a cue and a check. “If it’s 9:00 Monday, then I open the risk log first.” “We’ll check next Friday.”

Follow-Through. Close the loop. “What did we try? What did we learn? What changes next week?” Treat misses as information, not indictment. Improvement loves a calm room.

## Scripts and phrases that move behavior

“What would a one-step-better version of this look like?”

“On a scale of 1–10, how likely are you to do this? What would move it by one point?”

“If we had to make it tiny enough to do even on a bad day, what would it be?”

“If X happens, then I will Y. What’s your X and Y?”

“What will tell us it’s working, and when will we check?”

## Feedback and feedforward as change tools

Use clarity without cruelty. SBI (Situation–Behavior–Impact) grounds feedback in facts. Then pivot to feedforward: “Given that, what’s one thing you’ll try next time?” Pair every critique with a concrete next experiment and a check-in date. Praise strategy and effort, not fixed traits; cultivate a growth mindset where “not yet” is an honest stage, not a verdict.

## Case studies: when design beats exhortation

Adobe’s Check-In. In 2012, Adobe replaced annual reviews with ongoing “Check-Ins” focused on expectations, feedback, and growth. Leaders were expected to hold frequent, coaching-led conversations. The company reported saving time previously lost to bureaucracy and gaining a stronger cadence of forward-looking dialogue. The lesson: small, regular loops beat big, rare rituals.

Behavioral Insights and tax compliance. The UK’s Behavioural Insights Team tested simple wording changes in tax letters—adding a social norm like “Nine out of ten people in your town pay their tax on time”—and increased on-time payments. Motivation mattered, but context did the heavy lifting; the right nudge at the right moment moved behavior at scale.

Hand hygiene in healthcare. Hospitals improved compliance not by more reminders alone but by redesigning the environment: sanitizer at the point of care, visible cues at entrances, and immediate feedback. Capability, opportunity, and prompts converged; behavior followed. The pattern applies beyond wards to any workplace habit you care about.

Composite support team. A customer support team added a 30-second “root-cause note” habit after each ticket and ran weekly AARs. Within a

quarter, repeat tickets dropped. The secret was not heroics, just a tiny behavior and a calendar that remembered to learn.

## Measurement and instrumentation

Measure what you want more of. Track leading indicators you can influence this month: cadence and quality of 1:1s, percent of goals with written if-then plans, number of micro-experiments run and reviewed, and visible habit streaks (with forgiveness). Watch lagging indicators over quarters: cycle time trends, defect or repeat ticket rates, manager effectiveness items, and regrettable attrition. A simple team dashboard—behaviors, experiments, reviews—teaches the organization that change is a practice, not a poster.

## Anti-patterns (and better defaults)

Knowledge dumps. Replace with learn-do-reflect cycles embedded in the week.

Willpower worship. Design the environment; make the right action the easy action.

Too big, too vague. Cut the behavior until it's startable in under two minutes; name the cue.

Motivation events with no aftercare. Schedule the first review the day you set the goal.

Coaching when the house is on fire. Switch to directing for safety, time, or compliance; explain the shift, then return to coaching after.

## A 30–60–90 day rollout

First 30 days. Choose one keystone behavior per leader. Write an if-then plan. Start weekly 15-minute learning reviews. Track one leading indicator visibly.

Days 31–60. Add peer coaching circles. Run two micro-experiments per team. Remove one friction point per behavior (a checklist, a template, a cue).

Days 61–90. Review data; prune what's not working and double-down where it is. Refresh goals and if-then plans. Share stories of small wins to feed the flywheel.

## Toolbox you can use this week

Behavior Change Canvas. One page that asks: COM-B diagnosis, B=MAP design, cue, tiny step, immediate reward, if-then plan, review date.

Friction Audit. List steps for a behavior; circle one to remove, one to reduce, one to make delightful.

Habit Stack Library. “After I open my calendar, I confirm the top 3 outcomes.”  
“After the stand-up, I capture one impediment in the tracker.”

Learning Review Guide. Ten minutes: intend, happened, learned, change. Put it on the calendar; keep it light and frequent.

## Reflection

What’s one behavior you want to see more of in your team next month? If you had to design it to survive a bad day, what would the smallest version be? What is the cue? What is the immediate reward? When will you review—and who else will see the result?

We do not lack for ideas. We lack for designs that honor how humans actually change. Coaching is the craft of that design: aligning autonomy with clarity, making the right step tiny and obvious, and closing loops until progress becomes a habit.

## Selected sources and further reading:

- James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (systems, cues, and tiny behaviors).
- Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle* (small wins and inner work life).
- Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan, *Self-Determination Theory* (autonomy, competence, relatedness).
- Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* (cue–routine–reward).
- B.J. Fogg, *Tiny Habits* (B=MAP and ability-first habit design).
- Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak* (deliberate practice).
- Miller and Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing* (evoking change talk in ambivalence).
- John Dewey, *How We Think* (reflection as the engine of learning).

## Chapter 5: Listening at Depth

*“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” — Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People**

When leaders truly listen, a room changes shape. Edges soften. Patterns appear. The right next step often reveals itself not because someone is smartest, but because someone is still enough to hear what is trying to be said. Listening at depth is less a technique and more a stance: attention that reads context and subtext, curiosity that finds the signal in the noise, and restraint that gives silence a job to do.

*“Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.” — C.S. Lewis (attributed)*

### Opening vignette: the meeting that turned on a breath

A cross-functional launch review was veering toward recrimination. Engineering said Marketing changed the brief; Marketing said the brief was never clear. The leader raised a hand and paused. “Thirty seconds of quiet,” she said, “then we’ll try again.” After the silence, she paraphrased: “What I’m hearing is two truths: the brief felt unstable, and we didn’t stop to re-align.” She summarized three facts, named one decision, and asked one question: “What does ‘good enough for recovery’ look like by Friday?” In 12 minutes they had owners, dates, and two tests. The same brains were in the room as before; the listening was different.

### What “listening at depth” means

Active listening theater—nodding, eye contact—can be polite and useless. Deep listening goes below the surface: to content (facts), to emotion (felt sense), and to pattern (what repeats). One useful map, adapted from Otto Scharmer’s work in Theory U, describes four levels of listening:

<b>Listening level</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Best used when</b>	<b>Leader moves</b>	<b>Risks if overused</b>
Downloading	Confirming what you already believe	Routine updates and compliance checks	Clarify standards and steps	Blind spots and stale assumptions
Factual	Gathering data and specifics	Diagnosis, status, triage	Ask for recent examples, timelines, evidence	Analysis without insight
Empathic	Understanding meaning and emotion	Change, conflict, burnout, repair	Reflect feelings, normalize, validate	Over-identification, loss of edge

Listening level	Focus	Best used when	Leader moves	Risks if overused
Generative	Co-creating new possibilities	Strategy, design, reframing	Synthesize themes, invite invention	Drift without decisions, ambiguity fatigue

*“The quality of the results produced by any system depends on the quality of awareness from which people in the system operate.” — Otto Scharmer, Theory U*

## The anatomy of attention: self, other, system

Leaders listen on three channels at once.

**Self.** Regulate to relate. If your nervous system is in fight-flight, you will hear threat and miss nuance. A 90-second breath, feet on the floor, a clear purpose whispered to yourself—these are small acts that change what you can hear.

**Other.** Tune to the speaker. Track words, tone, pace, and posture. Notice what is said, what is avoided, and what is said twice.

**System.** Widen the lens. Who interrupts whom? Whose ideas get traction? What’s the history in the room? Listening at depth notices dynamics, not just dialogue.

Chris Argyris called our leap from data to meaning the Ladder of Inference: we select data, add stories, and then act as if our story is the data. Slow the climb by asking, “What else could be true?” and “What data are we not using?” Daniel Kahneman would call this the move from fast to slow thinking (Thinking, Fast and Slow).

## Reading context and subtext

Words carry cargo. Tone, timing, and gesture tell you what the words cannot hold alone. Use a simple decoder to avoid overreacting to a single cue and to design your next move.

Cue	Possible meaning	Coach-leader move	Caution
Fast speech, rising pitch	Anxiety, urgency, fear of being cut off	Slow your voice; ask, “What would success look like by Friday?”	Don’t mirror panic; lend calm
Long pause	Thinking, uncertainty, withdrawal, power play	Count to five; ask, “Take your time—what feels most important here?”	Don’t rush to rescue with advice
“Always/never” language	Cognitive distortion under stress	Ask for a recent specific: “What happened last time?”	Avoid shaming; keep dignity intact

Cue	Possible meaning	Coach-leader move	Caution
Crossed arms + calm voice	Defensive agreement, withheld dissent	Name it gently: “I’m sensing a concern—what’s underneath?”	Don’t overinterpret a single cue
Camera off + active chat (remote)	Bandwidth/privacy or culture preference	Invite written input; paraphrase aloud; recap decisions in writing	Avoid forced video policies that reduce psychological safety

David Rock’s SCARF model (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness) helps decode threat responses. Design questions and structures that restore dignity and agency.

## Empathy in three forms (with boundaries)

- Cognitive empathy: “I understand how you see it.” This is perspective-taking. It is vital in strategy and negotiation.
- Affective empathy: “I feel with you.” This is resonance. Use it for support and repair, but keep your boundaries.
- Compassionate empathy: “I’m with you—and here’s what we’ll do.” This is leadership: care paired with a next step.

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy looks down from a distance. Empathy comes alongside. And empathy is not agreement; you can validate feelings and still hold standards.

*“People don’t need to be rescued; they need to be respected.” — Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication*

## Core micro-skills that unlock clarity

**Silence.** Ask a question and wait five seconds. Let the room breathe. Your stillness is permission.

**Mirroring.** Repeat the last one to three key words with an upward tone. “Scope changed?” It draws more out without leading.

**Labeling.** Name the emotion or theme. “Sounds like you’re weighing speed against risk.” As Chris Voss notes in *Never Split the Difference*, labels defuse tension and invite accuracy.

**Paraphrasing.** Reflect not just content, but meaning and feeling. “So the timeline slipped two days because alignment was missing, and that was frustrating.” Then check: “What did I miss?”

**Looping.** “Did I get that right—or what should be different?” When in doubt, ask the owner of the story to edit your summary.

**Summarizing.** Offer a short synthesis that captures intent, content, and next step: “The issue is X; we’re choosing Y; by Friday Z.” Good summaries turn meetings into commitments.

**Clean language.** Use neutral prompts that avoid smuggling advice into a question. “What kind of ‘stuck’ is that ‘stuck?’” It sounds odd on paper; in practice, it helps people find their own words.

**ORID sequence.** Guide groups through Objective (facts), Reflective (feelings), Interpretive (meaning), and Decisional (next moves). It reduces cross-talk by honoring each layer in turn.

Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen remind us in *Thanks for the Feedback*: identity is always in the room. Paraphrasing protects identity while engaging reality.

## Sense-making frameworks in conversation

Tool	Use it for	One-line prompt	Pitfall
Ladder of Inference	Slow assumptions and check data	“What facts do we agree on? What story are we adding?”	Endless debate if no decision cadence
ORID	Keep group thinking in sequence	“What stands out? What does it mean? What will we do?”	Skipping the reflective step under pressure
Double-loop learning	Change the rule, not just the behavior	“What belief made this seem right at the time?”	Threatening identity; requires safety
A3/5 Whys (with care)	Root-cause without blame	“What made that choice reasonable then?”	Weaponized “why” that shames

Chris Argyris and Donald Schön’s double-loop learning is particularly powerful: when a problem repeats, don’t just fix the behavior; examine the governing rule that made it sensible in the first place.

## Designing for listening in meetings and 1:1s

- Contract the outcome upfront. “By the end, we’ll have a decision and owners.” Purpose sharpens attention.
- Set talk-time targets. In 1:1s, aim for a 70/30 ratio in favor of the report. In groups, balance airtime deliberately.
- Use structured rounds. One breath, one point. It disciplines the dominant and invites the quiet.
- Rotate a Listener-in-Chief. Someone’s job is to paraphrase and synthesize; rotate the role so listening is a shared craft.
- Close with a tactical summary. Decisions, owners, dates, open questions. Send five lines after the meeting.

Amazon famously begins some meetings with quiet reading of a six-page narrative memo. The silence levels the field and forces ideas to stand on their own legs. Silence, used well, is a listening tool.

## Case vignettes: when listening changes outcomes

Google's Project Aristotle. Google studied what makes effective teams and found two consistent patterns: psychological safety and roughly equal turn-taking. Leaders modeled listening that made it safe to speak and expected contribution across voices. Teams with these norms outperformed peers. The lesson: deep listening is not a soft add-on; it is a performance variable.

Healthcare handoffs (SBAR). Many hospitals use SBAR—Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation—to structure handoffs. Leaders who listen for SBAR elements and summarize clearly reduce miscommunication and near misses. Structured summarizing beats ad-hoc updates.

IDEO-style design research. Firms that practice human-centered design spend time listening to users' stories, workarounds, and emotions. The outcome is not just empathy; it is better products. Listening at depth reveals non-obvious needs that data alone cannot surface.

Composite renewal negotiation. A sales leader shifted renewals from discount battles to discovery by labeling emotions (“Sounds like you felt let down last quarter”), paraphrasing impact, and summarizing options. Hidden objections surfaced early, expansions increased, and discounts decreased. The content didn't change; the listening did.

*“A belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.” — Amy C. Edmondson, The Fearless Organization*

## Metrics and signals

- Leading indicators. Track 1:1 talk-time ratios, interruption counts, number of paraphrase checks per meeting, time-to-decision after the first synthesis, and a pulse item like “In meetings, I feel heard.”
- Lagging indicators. Watch rework or defect rates after decision meetings, escalation volume, manager effectiveness scores, and customer satisfaction on clarity and responsiveness.
- Qualitative signals. Fewer meetings to decide the same thing, more candid risk-raising earlier, clearer summaries that stick.

## Anti-patterns (and better defaults)

- Parroting theater. Repeating words without adding sense. Default: paraphrase content + meaning + feeling in one sentence, then check accuracy.
- Listening to reload. Waiting to argue. Default: summarize their best case before stating yours.
- Solution reflex. Advice at minute three. Default: ask two clarifiers first; contract whether you're coaching or directing.
- Hostile silence. Withholding as power. Default: set a container: "I want your view; what's one concern we haven't named?"
- Multitasking. Split attention kills nuance. Default: devices-down norms for the critical ten minutes; capture actions at the end.
- Over-empathy. Flooded by feelings, no edge. Default: name the feeling, then move to a next step with time-bound follow-up.

## Practice and assignments

- Paraphrase-first week. For seven days, before you reply, reflect back what you heard in one sentence and ask, "Did I get it?"
- Wait-5 drill. In every meeting, ask one question and silently count to five. Track if answers get better.
- Meeting triads. Rotate Speaker, Listener, Observer. The Observer gives two notes on listening impact and one on missed cues.
- Listening journal. After a key conversation, note two cues you noticed, one interpretation you tested, and what changed.
- Five-line summary. After high-stakes discussions, send a concise note: issue, decision, owners, dates, open risks. Watch rework drop.

## Tools and templates

- Listening Levels Card with example phrases for each level.
- Cue Decoder Cheat Sheet (verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal with leader moves).
- Paraphrase and Labeling Stems ("What I'm hearing is...", "Sounds like...").
- Tactical Summary Template (Intent–Content–Commitments).
- ORID Facilitation Guide for 30-minute sessions.

## Reflection

When do you lose your listening first—speed, ego, or fear? What is your reset cue? If a camera watched your next three meetings, would it record more telling than hearing? Who in your orbit is consistently unheard, and what structure will you put in place to change that next week?

*“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” — Stephen R. Covey*

Understanding is not agreement; it is the ground from which better agreements grow. Listening at depth is not indulgence; it is efficiency with a soul. It converts noise into knowledge and conflict into clarity, so your team can spend more time doing the work that matters and less time repairing what poor listening broke.

## Selected sources and further reading

- Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (seek to understand).
- Otto Scharmer, *Theory U* (levels of listening; quality of awareness).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety).
- Chris Voss, *Never Split the Difference* (mirroring and labeling).
- Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, *Thanks for the Feedback* (identity and feedback).
- Chris Argyris and Donald Schön, *Organizational Learning* (ladder of inference; double-loop learning).
- Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication* (needs, feelings, requests).
- Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (System 1 and System 2).
- SBAR resources in healthcare safety literature (structured handoffs).
- Google’s Project Aristotle findings (team effectiveness; turn-taking and safety).

## Chapter 6: Questions that Move People

*“The important and difficult job is never to find the right answers, it is to find the right question.” — Peter Drucker*

Questions are levers. Pull the right one and a heavy conversation shifts with surprising ease. Asked well, a question widens the field of view, reveals hidden options, and hands ownership back to the person who must act. Asked poorly, it shrinks the room, spikes defensiveness, and leaves you holding work that was never yours to carry. This chapter turns questioning from a performance of cleverness into a disciplined practice you can rely on under pressure.

*“Say less, ask more.” — Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit**

### Opening vignette: two 1:1s, two futures

The manager was struggling. Deadlines slipped, and her team waited for her to fix things. In their first 1:1, her leader gave twenty minutes of advice. The manager nodded, took notes, and left unchanged. The next week, the leader tried again, but differently. “What would make the next 20 minutes valuable?” he asked. She named an outcome. He followed with five questions and one summary: “What matters most by Friday? What’s the real constraint? What options do you see? On a scale of 1–10, how likely are you to try B? What support do you need?” They ended with a single if–then plan and a date to check. A month later, cycle time was down and the team had more ideas than escalations. The difference was ownership—grown one question at a time.

### The craft behind high-impact questions

Great questions are not accidents; they are designed. Start with intent before content. Say why you’re asking and what you hope the question helps unlock. Keep stems short—one question, one variable. Aim for progress, not performance; your question should eventually land in a decision or a commitment. And protect dignity: swap early “why” for “what” and “how” until safety is firm.

When you need to offer advice, use ask–provide–ask. First ask for permission or context, then provide a short option, then ask what fits. Ownership stays where it belongs.

*“If I had an hour to solve a problem, I’d spend fifty-five minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions.” — often attributed to Albert Einstein*

## A practical taxonomy of questions

Type	Best for	Core effect	Example stems	Pitfalls
Open	Getting the full picture and avoiding premature closure	Broadens perspective	“What outcome matters most by Friday?” “What’s the story so far?”	Can sprawl without a clear contract
Clean (David Grove)	Surfacing inner models without leading	Reduces bias and advice leakage	“What kind of ‘stuck’ is that ‘stuck’?” “Where does that start?”	Feels odd if overused or out of context
Catalytic	Challenging assumptions and creating new options	Sparks reframing	“What would have to be true for option B to work?” “What are we pretending not to know?”	Can unsettle if safety is low
Solution-focused (de Shazer/Berg)	Momentum and small wins	Moves to action	“What’s a one-step-better version of this?” “When has this worked, even a little?”	Risks skipping root cause when patterns persist
Scaling	Calibrating confidence, commitment, and risk	Quantifies and clarifies	“On a scale of 1–10, where are you now? What would move it by one?”	Can feel clinical without warmth
Inversion/Pre-mortem (Klein)	Risk intelligence and de-risking	Surfaces obstacles	“If this fails in 90 days, what likely happened?”	Tilts negative if you don’t return to prevention
Future-back	Aligning on end-state and criteria	Sharpens decisions	“If this were wildly successful, what would customers say?”	Can stay abstract without near-term steps
Eliminative/Decisive	Converging on a choice	Narrows with integrity	“Which option best expresses our goal under our constraints?”	Can push too fast if exploration is thin

### Sequencing: Contract → Explore → Decide → Commit

Contract. Start by aligning on purpose and finish line. “What would make these 20 minutes valuable for you?” This confines curiosity to a useful box.

Explore. Use open, clean, and catalytic questions to map facts, feelings, and frames. “What’s the real challenge for you?” “What assumptions are we holding?” Keep it to two or three passes; curiosity with a clock.

Decide. Compare options against outcomes and constraints. Use eliminative questions: “Given time and risk, which option gets us 80% of the value?” Bring in a pre-mortem to pressure-test.

Commit. Translate insight into a tiny, visible next step with an if-then plan. “If it’s 9:00 on Monday, then I’ll open the risk log first.” Capture owners, dates, and the check-in. Misses become data, not drama.

## Design heuristics you can trust

- Nine-word rule. Short stems reduce cognitive load and defensiveness. “What does good look like by Friday?” often beats a paragraph.
- Neutral nouns, concrete verbs. Ask about outcomes, obstacles, options. Avoid labels and judgments that spike threat.
- Escalate challenge gradually. Start broad; add catalytic edge as safety grows. You can always turn the dial; it’s hard to unring a bell.
- Stance transparency. Name the hat you’re wearing. “I’m in coach mode right now.” If you must switch to manager or directive mode, say so and explain why.
- Ask one before you answer. Build a reflex: a clarifying question precedes any advice. Over a month, you will do less rescuing and your team will do more thinking.

## Question patterns by context

In 1:1s, convert status into progress. “What outcome matters this week?” “What’s in the way?” “What options do you see?” “What will you do by when?”

In strategy, work backwards from the future. “Which two customer outcomes best express our vision this quarter?” “What would have to be true?” “What small bets buy the most learning?”

In problem-solving and risk, go after assumptions. “What is the riskiest assumption?” “If this fails, what likely happened?” “How can we test that cheaply by Friday?”

In feedback and growth, pair truth with tomorrow. “What went well because of you?” “What would you do differently and why?” “What support would make the stretch sustainable?”

In cross-functional alignment, make criteria explicit. “What does ‘good enough’ look like by Friday?” “What decision criteria will we apply?” “What are we each committing to now?”

*“Leaders who do not listen will eventually be surrounded by people who have nothing to say.” — Andy Stanley*

## Case studies: when the right question does the heavy lifting

The Coaching Habit (MBS). Michael Bungay Stanier popularized seven simple questions—“What’s on your mind?”, “And what else?”, “What’s the real challenge here for you?”—that help leaders skip small talk and land on what matters. Teams using these consistently report shorter, sharper 1:1s and clearer ownership, because the questions keep responsibility with the coachee, not the coach.

Toyota Kata (Mike Rother). Supervisors practice a routine set of questions daily: “What is the target condition?” “What is the actual condition now?” “What obstacles do you think are preventing you?” “What is your next step?” “When can we go and see what we learned?” The discipline builds scientific thinking and steady improvement without heroics.

Amazon’s Working Backwards (Bryar & Carr). Leaders ask catalytic, future-back questions by writing a press release and FAQ before building. “What customer problem is this solving?” “What would cause this to fail?” The questions force clarity early, reducing costly rework later.

Roger Martin’s strategy test (Playing to Win). When debates stall, ask, “What would have to be true for this choice to be a good one?” Then design tests for those conditions. The question moves people from opinion battles to testable claims, speeding decision quality and alignment.

## Reading the room while you ask

Questions do not land in a vacuum; they land in people. Use the SCARF lens (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, Fairness) to protect dignity. Replace “Why did you...?” with “What led you to...?” early on. Watch bodies and voices for signals—rising pitch, clipped answers, long silences—and adjust your pace. After a hard question, count to five. You’re not a prosecutor; you’re a partner in thinking.

## Anti-patterns and better defaults

Anti-pattern	What it does	Better default
Leading question disguised as a choice (“Don’t you think...?”)	Steals agency; breeds compliance without commitment	Label advice as an option: “One option is X. What fits for you and why?”

<b>Anti-pattern</b>	<b>What it does</b>	<b>Better default</b>
Compound question (“What happened and why and who...?”)	Confuses; invites partial answers	One breath, one question; pause; then follow up
Early “why” in low safety	Triggers threat and rationalization	Start with “what” and “how”; bring “why” back for purpose
Endless inquiry	Analysis without decisions	Time-box explore; switch to decide/commit and say you’re switching
Interrogation tone	Erodes trust	State intent, mix paraphrases and affirmations, and mind cadence
Advice reflex	Creates dependency	Ask one before you answer; end with their if–then commitment

## Metrics and signals of good questioning

Leading indicators include talk-time ratios favoring the coachee, two or more options generated before choosing, percent of conversations ending with if–then commitments, and visible decision criteria captured in writing. Lagging indicators include reduced rework and escalations, faster time-to-decision, increased ownership in follow-through, and manager-effectiveness items such as “My manager helps me think.”

*“What gets measured gets managed.” — Peter Drucker*

## Practice you can start this week

Question-of-the-day. Choose one stem—“What would have to be true?”—and use it in three contexts. Note what changed.

Ask-one-before-answer. For thirty days, begin your response to requests for guidance with a clarifying question. Track how often people solve their own issue.

Transcript annotation. Record or take notes from a meeting. Highlight questions that expanded thinking versus those that closed it. Rewrite two for next time.

Peer drills. In triads, rotate roles. Practice clean, catalytic, and solution-focused sequences. Observers give feedback on neutrality, tone, and impact.

Build your bank. Curate twenty-five stems by category (clarity, options, risk, decision, commitment) and keep them visible in your notes app. Tools are only useful when within reach.

## Tools and templates

Question Design Canvas. A one-pager: intent, safety moves, sequence (contract → explore → decide → commit), and chosen stems for each stage.

Catalytic Question Bank. “What would make this good enough for now?” “If this were easy, what would it look like?” “What are we pretending not to know?” “If we did nothing, what happens?”

Decision Pre-Brief and Post-Brief. Before: “What problem are we solving? What criteria will we use?” After: “What did we decide, why, and what did we learn for next time?”

Kata Card. Target condition, actual condition, obstacles, next step, expected result, review date. Print it; use it.

## Reflection

Which question do you overuse, and which do you avoid? If a camera watched your next three conversations, would it record more answers than questions? What one stem—if you mastered it—would most improve your team’s thinking in the next 30 days? Who will you ask for feedback on your questioning, and when?

*“The questions you ask are the quality of your leadership.” — adapted from John C. Maxwell*

The right question, asked at the right time with the right tone, does more than fill silence. It changes what is possible in the room—and who owns it when the room is empty.

## Selected sources and further reading

- Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit* (say less, ask more; seven practical questions).
- Mike Rother, *Toyota Kata* (routine questions that build scientific thinking).
- Colin Bryar and Bill Carr, *Working Backwards* (press release/FAQ and future-back questions).
- Roger L. Martin and A.G. Lafley, *Playing to Win* (strategy; “what would have to be true?”).
- Gary Klein, “Performing a Project Premortem” (HBR) (pre-mortem technique).
- Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, *Solution-Focused Brief Therapy* (scaling and future-perfect questions).

- David Grove, Clean Language (neutral, non-leading questions).
- Peter Drucker, The Effective Executive (on questions and effectiveness).



## Chapter 7: Feedback and Feedforward that Stick

*“Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.” — Brené Brown, Dare to Lead*

Feedback is a mirror. Sometimes it flatters, sometimes it startles, and sometimes it reveals what we would rather ignore. But a mirror alone cannot change a face. The work of leadership is to pair the mirror with a map—to turn clarity about what happened into motion toward what’s next. That is the promise of feedback and feedforward together: light from the past, momentum for the future.

*“Care personally. Challenge directly.” — Kim Scott, Radical Candor*

### Opening vignette: two conversations, two trajectories

After a missed handoff delayed a release, a senior engineer walked into a hard 1:1. Version A of the conversation was vague: “We can’t keep missing dates.” The engineer defended, the manager pushed, and both left a little smaller. Nothing changed.

Version B began differently. “I’m on your side,” the manager said. “I want us to win together.” Then a crisp frame: “In Tuesday’s handoff, you skipped the regression step, which delayed QA a day.” She paused for breath, not rebuttal. “Next time, what would help you keep the checklist under pressure?” They co-designed a tiny, visible change: an if–then plan and a six-day check-in. Three sprints later, handoffs were clean. Same people. Same pressure. Different craft: clarity with care, then a forward step.

### The job of feedback (and why it often fails)

John Hattie and Helen Timperley describe three questions at the heart of effective feedback: Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next? Most leaders overfund the second question (“How am I going?”) and underfund the third (“Where to next?”). The result is heat without light, awareness without action.

Feedback’s job is not punishment. It is performance and learning. The best conversations answer all three questions and end with ownership: not “thanks, I’ll think about it” but “I will do X by Y, and we’ll review on Z.”

### Frameworks that make clarity a habit

Frameworks are scaffolding. They hold the weight so you can hold the person. Use them to anchor to facts, protect dignity, and move forward.

Framework	Best for	Structure	Example stem	Watch-outs
SBI (Situation–Behavior–Impact)	Crisp clarity without judgment	Anchor to time/place, observable behavior, specific impact	“In Tuesday’s handoff (S), you skipped the test step (B), which delayed QA by a day (I).”	Don’t guess intent; add a future step
COIN (Context–Observation–Impact–Next)	Clarity plus next step	Adds an explicit “N”	“Next, let’s align on the checklist before 4 p.m.”	Keep “N” co-owned
STAR/E (Situation–Task–Action–Result/Effect)	Reinforcing excellence	Highlights what to repeat	“In the Q3 deck, you led with the customer story, which won fast alignment.”	Avoid generic praise
EEC (Example–Effect–Change)	Simple redirect	Names one change request	“When you cut in twice, others stopped. Next time, wait one round.”	Can feel top-down if used alone
DESC (Describe–Express–Specify–Consequence)	Boundaries in conflict	Asserts needs respectfully	“If it continues, we’ll rescope or escalate.”	Use sparingly; protect relationship tone
Radical Candor (tone)	Care + challenge	Care personally, challenge directly	“I’m saying this because I want you to succeed here.”	Avoid “ruinous empathy” and “obnoxious aggression”

Radical Candor is not a license to be harsh. It is a demand to be brave and kind at the same time. State care. Deliver the hard truth. Co-create a next step. Invite critique of your feedback: “What did I miss?”

## Feedforward: future beats fossils

Marshall Goldsmith popularized feedforward because people change forward, not backward. Where feedback says, “Here’s what happened and its impact,” feedforward says, “Here’s the next small behavior that will move us.” The alchemy is pairing them. Name the past with precision; build the future with a tiny plan.

Aspect	Feedback	Feedforward
Time orientation	Past and present	Future
Core question	What happened and what was the impact?	What will we do differently next time?
Emotional risk	Higher (identity threat)	Lower (agency and possibility)
Best use	Clarity, accountability, learning	Momentum, habit formation
Failure mode	Vague, shaming, too late	Aspirational, no follow-through

Make feedforward concrete. One behavior. One week. If–then plan. Visible cue. Quick review. “If it’s the last five minutes of stand-up, then I’ll ask ‘Who hasn’t weighed in?’” The next check-in turns promises into practice.

## Strengths first, gaps for real

People repeat what you recognize. Use STAR to make excellence specific so others can copy it. Then address gaps with behavior, not labels. “You’re careless” attacks identity and yields theater. “You skipped the test step” names an action and invites design. Blend appreciative and corrective with a simple triad: keep, stop, start—tied to outcomes.

*“Feedback is the breakfast of champions.” — often attributed to Ken Blanchard*

## Identity, safety, and the human heart of feedback

Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen describe three triggers that derail feedback: truth (“That’s wrong”), relationship (“Why from you?”), and identity (“I’m a failure”). Disarm them in the way you frame the conversation.

Trigger	Leader move	Script
Truth	Calibrate to facts and examples	“Can we anchor to the 10:00 a.m. stand-up yesterday?”
Relationship	Acknowledge intent and history	“We’ve clashed before. I’m offering this so we can win together.”
Identity	Narrow the scope; normalize growth	“This is about one behavior in one context, not your worth.”

Use Amy Edmondson’s lens of psychological safety. Protect status and autonomy. Invite co-ownership: “How do you see it?” “What would make this doable?” Safety is not the absence of standards; it is the presence of respect.

## Bias, fairness, and calibration

Similar-to-me bias, halo/horns, recency, and attribution errors sneak into feedback. Antidotes are simple and disciplined: examples over time, shared rubrics, and peer calibration. Track who gets actionable feedback and stretch chances. If one group receives only warmth and another only edge, your system is teaching inequity.

## Rituals and cadence: little and often

Big, rare feedback events create theater and ambush. Small, frequent moments create learning. Build a weekly rhythm: reinforce one thing done well and suggest one next step. Run monthly learning reviews that ask, “What changed because of our last feedforward?” Gather the team for Start/Stop/Continue or

a 15-minute After Action Review: What was supposed to happen? What happened? Why? What will we sustain or change?

The U.S. Army's AAR popularized this simple loop. Its genius is tone: rank in the room, truth on the table, learning for the future.

## Remote and cross-cultural realities

In distributed teams, write first for context and meet for nuance. A tight written SBI in a doc or chat can precede a quick call to co-design the feedforward. Mind directness norms across cultures; swap early “why” for “what” and “how,” and use paraphrasing to protect dignity. When stakes are high, preview sensitive feedback privately, then summarize decisions in writing so memory doesn't edit the message.

## Scripts you can adapt tomorrow

Reinforcing excellence (STAR). “In the client demo yesterday, you led with the customer story, which earned instant attention. Keep opening with that narrative—it made the technical detail land.”

Redirecting (SBI + feedforward). “In today's stand-up, you jumped in three times while others were speaking, and I saw two people go quiet. Next time, wait one round before adding. What cue will you use?”

Upward feedback (care + candor). “I value your decisiveness. I also see risks surfacing late. Could we add a two-minute risk check before final calls?”

Peer alignment (COIN). “When timelines slip without a heads-up, testing compresses and quality drops. Next: can we agree to a 24-hour slip notice on the channel?”

Miss with a customer (DESC). “When we missed the ETA, I felt concerned about trust. I need us to give a range and an update cadence. If we can't commit, I'll escalate so we reset expectations.”

## Case studies: where candor becomes performance

Pixar's Braintrust. In *Creativity, Inc.*, Ed Catmull describes a ritual where directors invite candid notes on works-in-progress. The rules are care and truth: notes to the film, not the person; the director decides. This blend of Radical Candor and agency improves stories without crushing spirits. The mirror and the map, together.

Adobe's Check-In. Adobe replaced annual reviews with ongoing “Check-Ins” that focus on expectations, feedback, and growth. Leaders are expected to have frequent, forward-leaning conversations instead of scorekeeping. The shift reduced bureaucratic overhead and improved the rhythm of development, moving energy from forms to performance.

Bridgewater’s dot collector. Ray Dalio’s Principles describes a culture of “radical transparency” where real-time feedback is captured as “dots” that feed ongoing growth and calibration. The method is intense, but the premise is transferable: normalize frequent, specific input, and pair it with a forward plan the receiver owns.

Product team composite. A SaaS product trio instituted a Braintrust-lite: weekly one-hour crits with rules—assume positive intent, address the work, end with one keep/one change/one experiment. Over a quarter, decision latency dropped, and rework shrank. The ritual did the heavy lifting.

## Measurement and instrumentation

What gets measured gets managed. Track leading indicators you can influence this month: frequency of feedback moments per manager, percent of conversations with a documented next step, and the number of feedforward if-then plans created. Watch lagging indicators over quarters: defect or rework after key reviews, time-to-decision, manager effectiveness items like “I receive helpful feedback,” and retention of high performers. Run light “quality audits” of feedback notes for specificity, tone, and a forward step—then coach the coaches.

## Anti-patterns (and better defaults)

Anti-pattern	Cost	Antidote
Feedback sandwich	Distrust; people ignore the “meat”	Deliver one clear message with care; separate praise from critique
Drive-by feedback	Threat response; no change	Contract time and intent; choose the right moment
Vague praise	No repeatable behavior	Use STAR to name what to repeat
Annual ambush	Bottled issues; surprise	Little and often; no surprises in reviews
Email grenades	Misread tone; escalation	Sensitive feedback live or live-plus-summary
Mind-reading intent	Defensiveness	Describe behavior and impact; ask about intent
Coaching to avoid decisions	Drift and confusion	Pair coaching with standards and clear calls

## Practice you can start this week

Run a seven-day “SBI-plus” sprint. Each day, offer one specific observation tied to impact, then ask, “What will you try next?” Capture outcomes. Assign a feedforward buddy. Exchange one “one-thing for next week,” write an if-then plan, and check in seven days later. Keep a feedback journal: examples over time, not just at review season; note identity triggers and how you responded.

Create a team charter for “How we give and get feedback,” publish it, and revisit quarterly. The point is not theater; it is consistency.

## Reflection

When do you tend toward ruinous empathy—caring without challenge—and when do you slip into challenge without care? What small sentence would make your feedback kinder and clearer at the same time? If you had to choose one feedforward habit to practice for the next thirty days, what would it be, and who will hold you to it?

## Selected sources and further reading

- Kim Scott, *Radical Candor* (care personally, challenge directly).
- Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, *Thanks for the Feedback* (truth, relationship, identity triggers).
- John Hattie and Helen Timperley, “The Power of Feedback” (Review of Educational Research) (the three feedback questions).
- Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There and Triggers* (feedforward practice).
- Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead* (clarity and courage).
- Ed Catmull with Amy Wallace, *Creativity, Inc.* (Pixar’s Braintrust).
- Ray Dalio, *Principles* (radical transparency and real-time feedback).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety).
- U.S. Army, *After Action Review* field guides (learning loops that stick).

Feedback that sticks is specific, timely, and humane. Feedforward that sticks is tiny, testable, and reviewed. Together they turn mirrors into maps—and maps into movement.

## Chapter 8: Choose Your Stance

*“To a person with a hammer, everything looks like a nail.” — Abraham Maslow*

*“Let chaos reign, then rein in chaos—repeatedly.” — Andrew S. Grove, High Output Management*

Leadership is part gearshift, part switchboard. The same voice can ask a question that unlocks someone’s best thinking, share a hard-won shortcut, issue a clear command under pressure, or guide a room toward a decision. The art is knowing which voice serves the moment—and saying out loud which one you’re using so trust keeps up with speed. This chapter helps you choose and shift among four stances—coach, mentor, direct, and facilitate—with purpose, ethics, and skill.

*“Management is about human beings. Its task is to make people capable of joint performance.” — Peter Drucker*

### Opening vignette: four rooms, one day

A product outage shattered a quiet morning. On the incident bridge, the leader’s stance was unmistakable: “You take database failover now. Confirm when complete.” Closed-loop, crisp, directive. Ninety minutes later, the site was stable. In the afternoon post-incident review, she changed rooms and tone: “We’ll gather facts for ten minutes, then meaning, then options, then decisions.” She facilitated, drew out quieter voices, and defined owners and dates. In 1:1s later, she coached two engineers to design their own guardrails. With a new hire, she mentored: “Here are two patterns I’ve used and why; what fits you?” Same leader. Four stances. Named, timed, and chosen.

### The four stances: jobs to be done

Each stance has a purpose and a moment. Confusion starts when we use the wrong tool for the job, or worse, pretend one stance while doing another.

Stance	Primary purpose	Best used when	Leader behaviors	Pitfalls	Exit condition	Example phrase
Coach	Build ownership and capability	Stakes moderate; time allows thinking; capability present or emerging	Contract outcome, ask, reflect, summarize, commit	Over-coaching; drift under pressure	Clear if—then plan owned by coachee	“What outcome matters this week, and what options

Stance	Primary purpose	Best used when	Leader behaviors	Pitfalls	Exit condition	Example phrase
Mentor	Transfer know-how and judgment	Clear skill/experience gap; pattern exists	Share models, show examples, co-design practice	Advice dependency; cloning your path	They can explain and adapt the pattern	do you see?" "Two ways I've tackled this— what fits and why?"
Direct	Ensure speed, safety, or compliance	High risk or urgency; standards non-negotiable	Command clarity; single owner; confirm back; time-box	Micromanagement beyond the crisis; bypassing learning	Stability restored and handoff to learning	"Do X now; confirm when done; we'll debrief at 3 p.m."
Facilitate	Create alignment and decisions	Cross-functional, ambiguous, many voices	Frame purpose, structure turns, harvest, synthesize	Endless talk; dominance by a few; no decision	Decision captured with owners and dates	"By the end, we'll decide Y using criteria Z."

*"Effective coaching is helping people to learn rather than teaching them." — John Whitmore, Coaching for Performance*

## How to choose fast: practical heuristics

In the wild, you won't have a flowchart—just thirty seconds and your judgment. Ask a handful of triage questions and let the answers pick your stance.

Context factor	If Yes	If No
Safety, legal, or reputational risk high? Time critical?	Direct now; confirm actions; schedule a debrief to return to learning	Consider coaching 1:1 or facilitating the group
Obvious knowledge/experience gap?	Mentor: model, share patterns, set reps; then coach for ownership	Coach or facilitate to surface options
Many stakeholders and ambiguity?	Facilitate with structure and clear decision criteria	Coach 1:1 or direct if urgency dictates
Development the priority and time available?	Coach toward ownership and small experiments	Direct if standards at risk; mentor if a known pattern

Context factor	If Yes	If No
Clear standard or playbook exists?	Direct to standard or mentor to it	Facilitate to create the standard; then coach to adopt it

A helpful overlay is task-relevant maturity (Andy Grove) or the skill-will lens (Hersey–Blanchard). New or critical tasks justify more directing and mentoring; as competence and confidence grow, shift toward coaching and delegation. When the room is big and the problem is fuzzy, facilitate.

## Make your stance explicit

Trust suffers when leaders coach in tone but direct in intent. Name your stance and why.

- “I’m going to be directive for the next ten minutes because risk is high. After we stabilize, I’ll switch to facilitation for the debrief.”
- *“I’m in coach mode here; my goal is your thinking. If you want advice, I can switch to mentor—your call.”*
- “Let’s move from explore to decide. I’m facilitating a decision now; we’ll capture owners and dates before we close.”

Clarity about stance protects dignity and accelerates decisions. It also reveals your own drift: if you keep “needing” to be directive, either the risk never ends or you’re wearing the wrong hat.

## Ethics and boundaries: power, consent, and scope

With stance comes responsibility. Coaching without consent can feel like interrogation. Mentoring outside your expertise can mislead. Directing when learning is safe erodes ownership. Facilitating without decisions is theater.

Ethical risk	What to watch	Protective move
Hidden agenda (“coaching” to your preferred answer)	Questions that shepherd to one option	Label bias: “I prefer B; make the case for A.”
Directive drift	Command tone beyond risk windows	Time-box “command” mode and debrief back to autonomy
Over-mentoring	“My way” becomes the way	Share two patterns and trade-offs; invite adaptation
Role confusion (coach vs evaluator)	People fear candor	Separate growth and assessment conversations where possible
Competence boundaries	Issues beyond work scope	Refer to HR/EAP; do not play therapist
Equity gaps	Some get stretch truth; others only warmth	Track who gets candid feedback and mentoring; calibrate

*“Power is not brute force or money; power is in your spirit.” — Sadhguru (and in leadership, in how transparently you use it)*

## Blending and shifting in one conversation

In real life, stances mix. The craft is sequencing and signaling shifts.

- Direct for safety: “Stop deploy; rollback now.”
- Facilitate for facts: “Two minutes each: what happened from your view?”
- Coach for ownership: “What safeguard will you try first, and how will we know it works?”
- Direct to close: “We’re committing to A and B by Friday; C is a stretch if time allows.”

Announce the arc. One hat at a time. Don’t ask, “What do you think you should do?” and then override the answer. That breaks trust and teaches people to read your mind instead of learning to lead.

## Case studies: stance choice in the wild

Site Reliability Engineering (real practice). Google’s Site Reliability Engineering describes an Incident Commander role with directive authority during outages—single owner, closed-loop communication, clear priorities (Beyer et al., Site Reliability Engineering). After stability, teams run a blameless post-incident review, a facilitated conversation that seeks systemic causes and owned actions. Direct, then facilitate, then coach.

Emergency medicine (real pattern). Code teams use explicit, directive commands (“Epinephrine now,” “Start compressions”) and closed-loop communication to avoid error, as taught in ACLS and AHRQ’s TeamSTEPPS. After the code, teams debrief with a facilitator to learn. Mentoring and simulation build judgment between events.

High Output Management (Andy Grove). Grove’s “task-relevant maturity” argues for matching style to the person’s competence on the task. New tasks: more hands-on (mentoring/directing). Familiar tasks: step back (coaching/delegating). Leaders who fail to shift create either chaos or learned helplessness.

Agile ceremonies (common practice). Scrum Masters facilitate stand-ups and retrospectives; Product Owners may be directive on scope; tech leads mentor on patterns; managers coach for growth and alignment. Clarity of role reduces stance collisions.

Team of Teams (McChrystal). In complex operations, the system needs “shared consciousness” (facilitation for alignment) and “empowered execution”

(coaching and directing at the edge). The stance shifts with the distance from the action and the speed of the threat.

Sales onboarding (composite). Week 1 mentoring: shadow calls, review discovery scripts. Week 3 coaching: “Which question will you try first and why?” End of quarter directing: “We won’t discount below X. Hold the line and escalate exceptions.” Quarterly facilitation: cross-team review of ICP learnings and pipeline priorities.

## Common traps—and better defaults

Trap	How it shows up	Cost	Better default
Over-coaching	Endless questions where clarity is needed	Drift and frustration	Contract outcome; time-box explore; move to decide/commit
Rescuing (Karpman triangle)	You jump in to solve	Dependency; burnout	Ask one before you answer; return ownership with an if-then plan
Directive drift	Command tone outside crises	Learned helplessness	Reserve directing for risk/standards; debrief back to autonomy
Advice masquerading as questions	“Have you tried...?” leading	Loss of agency	Label advice as one option; invite critique and choice
Facilitation without finish	Great discussion, no decision	Rework and delay	Frame criteria; enforce turns; capture decision, owners, dates
Mentoring bias	“My way” as only way	Narrow solutions	Share two patterns and trade-offs; co-design adaptation

## Metrics and signals you chose well

You’ll know stance discipline is working when decisions happen at the right altitude and people own more of their work.

- Leading indicators: meetings with a named stance and outcome; percent of 1:1s ending with if-then commitments; decision latency trending down; fewer “What should I do?” pings.
- Lagging indicators: rework and escalation rates; time to recover from incidents; engagement items on clarity and growth; internal mobility and on-ramp speed for new hires.
- Qualitative signals: quieter voices show up in facilitated sessions; advice requests come later and smarter; post-mortems produce owned actions, not blame.

## Scripts and phrases you can use tomorrow

- Coach: “What’s the real constraint—and what’s a one-step-better version we can test by Friday?”
- Mentor: “In my last team, two patterns worked. Here are the trade-offs. Which would you adapt, and how?”
- Direct: “Pause deploy. Switch to the blue cluster. Confirm when complete. I’ll call the next step.”
- Facilitate: “One round: facts only. One round: meaning. One round: options. Then decide against our criteria.”
- Shift: “We’ve explored well; I’m moving us to a decision.” Or, “I’m switching from coach to mentor for two minutes to share a pattern; then back to coach.”

## Practice: build your stance reflex

For two weeks, name your stance at the start of key conversations. Ask a trusted peer to hold up a card if you drift. After each meeting, spend two minutes noting: Was this the right stance? When did I need to shift? What would I do differently? Run five-minute drills with your leads: give a scenario, pick a stance, announce it, execute, shift, and close. Reps turn stance into muscle memory.

*“What got you here won’t get you there.” — Marshall Goldsmith*

## Reflection

Which stance is your hammer—the one you reach for even when it’s the wrong tool? Where do you most need speed (direct) and where do you most need growth (coach or mentor)? In your next cross-functional decision, what will you do to facilitate without drifting—and how will you ensure the meeting ends with owners and dates?

The stance you choose shapes the result you get. Coach to grow ownership. Mentor to transfer craft. Direct to protect time and standards. Facilitate to align and decide. Name it, use it, and shift it on purpose. Your team will move faster—and grow stronger.

## Selected sources and further reading

- Andrew S. Grove, *High Output Management* (task-relevant maturity; match style to task competence).
- Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science* (law of the instrument).

- John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance* (coaching as unlocking potential).
- Paul Hersey & Ken Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior* (Situational Leadership).
- Betsy Beyer, Chris Jones, Jennifer Petoff, Niall Richard Murphy (eds.), *Site Reliability Engineering* (incident command and post-incident reviews).
- AHRQ, *TeamSTEPS* (closed-loop communication; debriefing in healthcare).
- General Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams* (shared consciousness and empowered execution).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety in learning and decisions).

## Chapter 9: Goals and Accountability

*“What gets measured gets managed.” — Peter Drucker*

*“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” — James Clear, Atomic Habits*

A good goal is a compass; a good system is a set of oars. One points out the North Star. The other makes sure you move, even on a tired Tuesday. Leaders often leave offsites with elegant compasses and wonder why the boat doesn't budge. This chapter is about pairing direction with motion: using GROW and CLEAR to shape goals people actually own, aligning those goals with OKRs so effort compounds, and building a cadence of accountability that feels like support, not surveillance.

*“The score takes care of itself.” — Bill Walsh, The Score Takes Care of Itself*

### Opening vignette: two quarters, two patterns

Quarter One was a forest of intentions. The manager listed five goals, each noble and vague. Updates turned into status monologues; spreadsheets flapped but no wind hit the sails. Quarter Two was different. The same manager chose a single outcome, used GROW to co-design it with her team, tied it to one team OKR, picked two lead measures, and set a weekly 15-minute Friday review. The scoreboard went on the wall. Eight weeks later, first-response time was down, cycle time followed, and the team could name the decisions that made the difference. Fewer goals, faster learning, steadier progress.

### What makes a goal that moves behavior

Goals that move people have four features. They name an outcome rather than an activity, so success is felt by a customer or a system, not just by a calendar. They are few enough to force trade-offs—one to three per cycle invites focus. They are visible; when people can see the score, effort concentrates without reminders. And they attach to identity: “the kind of leader/team we are becoming.” Goals are not just targets; they are mirrors of who we intend to be.

*“In God we trust; all others must bring data.” — W. Edwards Deming (attributed)*

### Frameworks that turn intent into commitment

GROW and CLEAR are not buzzwords; they are scaffolds. Use them to carry the weight so people can carry the work.

Dimension	GROW	CLEAR	When to prefer
Core purpose	Move from desired outcome to owned commitment	Establish the working contract and a repeatable loop	Use GROW to shape a goal in a session; use CLEAR to sustain it across weeks
Typical flow	Goal → Reality → Options → Will/Way Forward	Contract → Listen → Explore → Action → Review	Combine them: GROW during CLEAR's "Action," then "Review" weekly
Risk if misused	Jumping to "Will" without resourcing	Vague "Contract," skipped "Review"	Pair commitments with calendar time and specific measures

A coaching example sounds like this: “What would success look like by Friday?” (Goal). “What’s true on the ground?” (Reality). “What options do you see?” (Options). “What will you do, by when, and how will we know?” (Will). Then wrap it in CLEAR: contract the purpose of the goal, listen and explore to sharpen it, act with an if–then plan, and review—briefly, rhythmically—until it sticks.

## From coaching goals to system goals: OKRs that fit

OKRs—Objectives and Key Results—give goals a public home and a shared language. They work when they translate personal ownership into team focus without turning everything into a corporate spreadsheet.

Element	Definition	Example	Notes
Objective (O)	Directional, qualitative end-state	“Delight customers in onboarding”	Memorable, not a metric
Key Result (KR)	Quantified evidence of progress	“Increase Day-7 activation from 42% to 60%”	2–4 per Objective; no vanity metrics
Initiative	Work to attempt to move KRs	“Ship guided setup v2”	Hypotheses, not guarantees
KPI	Ongoing health metric	“NPS, uptime, gross churn”	Not every KPI is a KR
Task	Atomic action	“Draft email copy by Tue”	Never mistake tasks for results

Let the coachee propose KRs they can own, then calibrate difficulty and alignment. Ambitious yet achievable is a craft; as John Doerr notes in *Measure What Matters*, the point of OKRs is not perfection but focus, transparency, and learning.

## Make goals measurable: outcomes, leads, and lags

Clarity lives in contrasts. Two distinctions matter most: outcome versus output, and lead versus lag.

<b>Contrast</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Coaching move</b>
Outcome vs Output	Result for a user/system vs stuff produced	Outcome: “Reduce repeat incidents by 30%.” Output: “Run 4 trainings.”	Ask, “What changes for the customer or system?”
Lead vs Lag	Predictive, influenceable measures vs historical results	Lead: “% tickets triaged under 10 minutes.” Lag: “CSAT this month.”	Choose one or two leads per goal; instrument them now

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer found that small wins fuel inner work life and motivation. Leads are those small wins counted; lags are the story you tell the quarter after. Choose leads you can celebrate weekly.

## Accountability that builds ownership (not fear)

Accountability is not a scolding; it is answerability plus agency. It says: here’s what we’re aiming at, you own how, and we’ll look honestly at evidence. The simplest device is an if–then plan anchored to a cue. “If it’s 9:00 Monday, then I’ll review the activation funnel for 20 minutes.” Then a review with three questions: What did we intend? What happened? What will we change?

A helpful mental model is the Accountability Ladder. People climb from noticing to acknowledging to acting to owning results to learning and adapting. Leaders help people climb by clarifying expectations, removing friction, and normalizing honest review. Shame is a poor coach; design is a better one.

## Designing the goal conversation

Contract the time and the outcome. “In 25 minutes, we’ll leave with one goal that matters, two measures, and a first step.” Use GROW to get from wish to will; make the first step small enough to do on a bad day. Tie the goal to an OKR so it nests in the larger story. And book the review now. The calendar is where courage becomes practice.

A simple rhythm works: commit on Monday; act Tuesday through Thursday; review Friday for 15 minutes; adjust Monday. Little and often beats rare and heroic.

## Comparative maps you can use

<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Tool</b>	<b>One-line prompt</b>	<b>Pitfall</b>
Shape a goal	GROW	“What would success look like by Friday?”	Jumping to will without resourcing
Sustain a loop	CLEAR	“Let’s review briefly—intend, happened, learned, change.”	Skipping Review when busy
Align to team/company	OKRs	“Which KR does this express, and what can you own?”	Vanity KR’s; sandbagging

Purpose	Tool	One-line prompt	Pitfall
Measure what matters	Leads/Lags	“What can we count weekly that predicts the lag?”	Too many leads; no instrumentation

And a short list of anti-patterns to watch:

Anti-pattern	Cost	Antidote
Goal sprawl (too many)	Diffused effort; hidden trade-offs	One to three goals per cycle; say no explicitly
Activity masquerading as impact	Busy without results	Reframe outputs into outcomes
Set-and-forget OKRs	Surprise at quarter end	Bi-weekly check-ins; mid-cycle resets
Sandbagging or vanity KRrs	Looks good; learns nothing	Calibrate difficulty; public scoring norms
Manager-owned goals	Compliance, low ownership	Coachee crafts goal and leads review
Metric fixation	Gaming, burnout	Pair numbers with narrative and ethics

## Case studies: where design beats exhortation

Intel to Google (real lineage). Andy Grove’s management by objectives informed the OKR method that John Doerr brought to Google, where transparent Objectives and measurable Key Results helped young teams focus on what mattered amid explosive growth. The discipline was not the spreadsheet—it was the cadence of setting, scoring, and learning in public.

A services team and 4DX (composite). A professional services team adopted the 4 Disciplines of Execution: one Wildly Important Goal, two lead measures, a visible scoreboard, and weekly accountability. They chose “Reduce proposal cycle time from 14 days to 9,” tracked “percent drafts in 48 hours” and “client response lag,” and held short Friday reviews. In one quarter, cycle time fell by a quarter—with fewer after-hours scrambles. As the authors of 4DX put it: people play differently when they know the score.

Product onboarding (composite). A PM used GROW to co-define “Increase Day-7 activation from 42% to 60%,” aligned it with the team’s OKR, and picked two leads: “% users completing guided setup” and “% emails opened by Day 2.” They ran CLEAR reviews weekly. Within two sprints, activation rose 11 points; equally important, the team could name which small bets moved the number and which to retire.

*“The key result has to be measurable. But at the end you also have to judge: Did I do a good job?” — John Doerr, Measure What Matters*

## Scripts and phrases that help

*“What would excellent look like by the end of next week—and how would we know?”*

“What’s true on the ground that we need to face?”

“What options do you see, and which one buys the most learning fast?”

“On a scale of 1–10, how confident are you? What would move it by one?”

“If X happens, then I will Y. What’s your X and Y?”

“What’s the lead measure we can count every Friday that predicts the lag we care about?”

## Remote and cross-functional realities

Distributed work loves clarity. Write goals and measures plainly. Use short video or voice notes to humanize updates. Centralize dashboards. For cross-team goals, name a single directly responsible individual per KR and document dependencies. Adopt “slip notice” norms: if a date moves, say so within 24 hours and reset expectations. Culture matters; tune stretch to resourcing and mind directness norms across regions. When in doubt, summarize in writing and check understanding live.

## Measurement and signals you’re on track

Leading indicators tell you this month whether the system is working: percent of goals with explicit lead measures, weekly reviews held, commitments with if–then plans, and shared scoreboards that people check without being chased. Lagging indicators tell you next quarter if it paid off: KR achievement rates, cycle time, rework and escalations, and the engagement item, “I know what success looks like and how I’m doing.”

Quality audits help: sample a few goals each month and rate them for outcome phrasing, measurability, ownership, and review cadence. Coach the coaches. Systems drift unless someone minds the edges.

## Practice you can start this week

Run a one-goal sprint for the next 30 days. Choose one outcome that matters, pick two leads, and schedule four 15-minute Friday reviews. Use GROW to get from wish to will in your next 1:1; write the if–then plan down. Rewrite one KPI into an OKR: craft a memorable Objective and two Key Results you can actually influence. Put a simple scoreboard where your team will see it every day. The point isn’t art; it’s traction.

*“Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work.”*  
— Peter Drucker

## Reflection

Which of your current goals is really an output in disguise? If you could only hit one goal this quarter, which would change the most for your customers or team? What is the one lead measure you can count weekly that would predict that change? Who else needs to see the score—and when will you review it together?

## Selected sources and further reading

- John Doerr, *Measure What Matters* (OKRs; focus, alignment, and learning).
- Bill Walsh with Steve Jamison and Craig Walsh, *The Score Takes Care of Itself* (standards, process, and performance).
- James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (systems over goals; implementation intentions).
- Peter Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (effectiveness, priorities, measurement).
- Chris McChesney, Sean Covey, and Jim Huling, *The 4 Disciplines of Execution* (WIGs, lead measures, scoreboards, cadence).
- Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle* (small wins and motivation).
- W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (measurement, systems thinking).

## Chapter 10: The Coaching Conversation Blueprint

*“Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.” — Brené Brown, Dare to Lead*

*“Coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximize their own performance.” — John Whitmore, Coaching for Performance*

A purposeful conversation is like a short bridge over rushing water. Without structure, we wander the banks—good intentions, wet shoes. With a simple arc, we cross: a few steps, steady railings, the far side in sight. The five-beat blueprint in this chapter—Contract, Explore, Decide, Commit, and Follow-Through—turns talk into traction. It is light enough for a corridor moment and sturdy enough for a tense 1:1. You do not need heroism or hours; you need a repeatable arc and the courage to use it.

*“Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.” — Dwight D. Eisenhower*

### Opening vignette: the 25-minute 1:1, two ways

Version A drifts. The manager opens with “How are things?” Fifteen minutes later, they have toured frustrations, touched three projects, and grazed a decision without taking it. The clock flashes; “Keep me posted” floats into the hallway. Nothing changes.

Version B follows the arc. “We have 25 minutes,” the manager says. “By the end, let’s leave with one owned next step. I’m in coach mode.” Five clear minutes of facts and frames. Three options against two criteria. A pre-mortem to de-risk. Then a tiny if-then plan and a Friday check-in on the calendar. When they stand, both can point to what will be different by the weekend. Same people, same time; a different bridge.

### The blueprint at a glance

Stage	Purpose	Timebox	Example prompts	Success signal	Common risks
Contract	Align on finish line and stance	2–4 min	“What would make this 20 minutes valuable?” “Is coaching the right stance?”	Named outcome, stated stance	Hidden agenda; vague scope
Explore	Surface facts, feelings, frames	8–12 min	“What’s true now?” “What’s the real constraint?”	Concise problem framing	Analysis sprawl; advice reflex

Stage	Purpose	Timebox	Example prompts	Success signal	Common risks
Decide	Choose a path by criteria	4–6 min	“What matters most?” “Which option gets 80% of value?”	Decision captured	Consensus theater; drift
Commit	Translate into tiny, owned action	3–5 min	“Smallest next step?” “If X, then I will Y by Z.”	If–then plan with date and owner	Vague tasks; no support
Follow-Through	Lock learning and loop	1–3 min	“When/how will we review?” “What will we check?”	Calendar invite sent; notes shared	No schedule; memory fade

## Stage I: Contract — name the game before you play it

Clarity at the start is kindness to the end. Contracting sets the finish line, scopes the terrain, and makes your stance explicit. It sounds simple because it is—and it is often skipped.

Say it plain: “We’ve got 25 minutes. If we could solve one thing, what would it be? By the end, we’ll have one next step and a check-in. I’m in coach mode; I’ll ask, you’ll think. If you want advice, I can switch to mentor for two minutes.”

If stakes are high or safety is low, extend the contract: affirm confidentiality, note time constraints, and define decision rights (“We’ll make a recommendation; I decide by end of day”). In healthcare, teams use SBAR—Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation—to contract structure in urgent moments. The point is the same: name the shape so thinking can rise to it.

Anti-patterns to avoid: opening with status updates, burying your agenda, or “coaching” with a hidden directive. Peter Drucker warned, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.” Contracting ensures you’re working on the right thing.

## Stage II: Explore — move from noise to a clear frame

Exploration is harvest, not debate. You gather facts, feelings, and frames, then press gently until the real constraint shows itself. Two moves help: structure the flow, and slow your instinct to solve.

Try an ORID micro-sequence: Objective (facts), Reflective (how it lands), Interpretive (what it means), Decisional (what that implies). Or use clean, short questions: “What’s happened so far?” “What data are we using—and what might we be missing?” “What’s the real challenge for you?” Then count to five after you ask; silence does the sorting.

Mini-script: “One minute on facts, no opinions. One minute on how it lands for you or others. Now, what does that mean for Friday’s outcome? If we had to name the constraint in one sentence, what is it?”

Watch for loops and ladders. If you’re circling, ask, “What would have to be true to move?” If you feel the Ladder of Inference climbing—assumptions hardening into “truth”—pull back to observable data. Exploring is not meandering; it is the disciplined search for a tractable definition.

### Stage III: Decide — choose by criteria, not volume

Decisions collapse possibility into momentum. Do it by criteria, not charisma. Name what matters—speed, risk, learning—and weigh options against those few essentials. A two-minute pre-mortem reduces regret: “Imagine this fails in 90 days—why?” Add one mitigation. Gary Klein popularized the pre-mortem; it increases honesty by moving failure out of shame and into planning.

Useful prompts: “What matters most here?” “Which option gets us 80% of the value soonest?” “What would have to be true for Option B?” Strategy scholar Roger L. Martin calls this move “what would have to be true” a way to disarm entrenched positions and test logic.

When values diverge and time is short, borrow Amazon’s principle: “disagree and commit.” You acknowledge dissent, choose, and move. Capture the decision on a line: “We choose Option Y because A (customer impact) and B (risk). Mitigation M.” Consensus theater—endless talk that performs unity—kills speed and trust. Decide; then go.

### Stage IV: Commit — turn decision into a tiny, owned next step

Commitment lives on someone’s calendar, not in the air. Tie the decision to an if–then plan: “If it’s 9:00 Monday, then I will review the activation funnel for 20 minutes.” Psychologist Peter Gollwitzer’s research on implementation intentions shows that if–then plans substantially increase follow-through because they outsource willpower to context.

Add a confidence rating (1–10) and one nudge: “I’m at 7/10; to make it 8, I’ll block the time and turn off Slack.” This motivational interviewing move surfaces friction and lets you remove it now. Ask for support needs explicitly: “What would make this 10% easier?” Write the commitment where work lives: the task board, the 1:1 doc, the pull request.

Mini-script: “Smallest step that moves the metric?” “If X, then I will Y by Z. Confidence?” “What would make it one point higher?” “Let’s put it on the board.”

Remember, the smallest viable step wins. Your goal is not to prove virtue; it is to create progress you can measure by Friday.

## Stage V: Follow-Through — protect the loop that makes progress inevitable

Follow-through is the hinge that turns decisions into outcomes. Get it out of your head and onto rails. David Allen puts it simply: “Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.”

Close strong with two moves. First, send a five-line tactical summary within the hour:

- Issue
- Decision
- Next step (if–then)
- Owner and date
- Evidence to review (what will we look at Friday?)

Second, schedule the review now. Ten minutes on Friday beats an hour of archaeology next month. The U.S. Army’s After-Action Review is a durable pattern: What did we intend? What happened? What did we learn? What will we change? It turns experience into capability—fast.

If your culture loves drama, make the loop visible: a simple scoreboard of commitments completed, time to decision, and two lead indicators. Bill Walsh’s coaching mantra applies in organizations as much as sports: when you tend the standards and the routine, “the score takes care of itself.”

### Variations and adaptations

The blueprint flexes with context, but the arc stays intact.

- Ten-minute huddle: contract in one sentence (“One outcome, one owner”), explore for four minutes, decide in two, commit in two, and close in one. This is perfect for stand-ups and unblockers.
- Forty-five-minute deep-dive: spend longer in Explore; use a whiteboard to separate facts from meaning. In Decide, write criteria in the corner and keep them in view. Leave ample time to translate into a few tiny commitments with owners and dates.
- Team facilitation: contract for decision criteria up front and run quick rounds so all voices enter the room. In Decide, do a 60-second pre-mortem, then confirm owners and dates before you adjourn.
- Low-safety moments: extend Contract; replace early “why” with “what” and “how”; reflect back content and emotion before moving.

Name your stance and invite a pass: “You can opt out of any question; we’ll still end with one next step.”

- Remote/async: contract in the agenda; explore in comments with a brief “facts → meaning” structure; decide live; commit and close in a short written summary. Record decisions in a “Decision” header others can skim later.

## Case studies: the blueprint in the wild

SBAR on the ward (real practice). In hospitals around the world, clinicians use SBAR to structure urgent handoffs: Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation. A charge nurse once described the shift it created: “We stopped telling stories and started making decisions.” That is Contract and Decide under pressure. After stabilization, teams debrief (Follow-Through), often with a leader facilitating a short AAR. The pattern saves time—and sometimes lives.

Disagree and commit at a growth-stage company (real principle, composite story). A product leadership team was split on whether to cut scope to meet a date. The VP contracted crisp: “We will leave with a decision in 20 minutes; I’ll decide if we’re split.” Explore took ten: facts, dependencies, customer impact. Criteria were named: speed and trust. They chose to cut scope, added a mitigation for high-value customers, and wrote a one-line decision. Two leaders disagreed and committed in writing; the team shipped on time, with a follow-up review a week later to assess impact. The arc prevented a week of Slack skirmishes.

Pre-mortem saves a quarter (composite, grounded in Gary Klein). A sales leader and PM debated a feature’s revenue promise. The coach asked for a two-minute pre-mortem: “It’s 90 days from now and we missed. Why?” The list surfaced a shaky assumption about onboarding friction. Commit shifted: before building, run a five-day experiment to reduce friction on the current path. The experiment changed the decision; the feature order moved and revenue arrived sooner. The blueprint turned argument into learning.

Checklist close in a surgical suite (real insight from Atul Gawande). In *The Checklist Manifesto*, Gawande shows how a simple closing routine—confirming names, plans, antibiotics—cut complications. The lesson travels: closing strong is not bureaucracy; it’s craftsmanship. A five-line summary and a Friday review are your leadership checklist.

## Phrases you can use tomorrow

Contract: “We have 20 minutes. If we leave with one owned next step and a review on the calendar, this will be a win. I’m in coach mode—sound good?”

Explore: “What’s happened and what’s the real constraint?” “What data are we using, and what might we be missing?” “What would have to be true to move?”

Decide: “Given our criteria—speed and risk—what gets 80% of the value soonest?” “Let’s do a 60-second pre-mortem and add one mitigation.”

Commit: “If it’s 9:00 Monday, then I will Y by Z. On a scale of 1–10, how confident? What moves it by one?”

Follow-Through: “I’ll send a five-line summary and a Friday 3:15 review invite. We’ll check metric X and adjust.”

## Closing strong: a brief ritual

End with a synthesis in 30 seconds that names the decision and the next step, a written summary within the hour, and a scheduled review. Say it out loud: “Here’s what we decided; here’s who does what by when; here’s how we’ll know.” Clarity is a kindness and a force multiplier. The habit turns messy days into a series of clean finishes—and those add up.

*“Your mind is for having ideas, not holding them.” — David Allen, Getting Things Done*

## Selected sources and further reading

- John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance* (coaching fundamentals; contracting and ownership).
- Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead* (clarity, courage, and trust; “Clear is kind”).
- Gary Klein, *Sources of Power* and HBR on the Pre-Mortem (de-risking decisions).
- Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto* (close strong with lightweight discipline).
- Roger L. Martin and A.G. Lafley, *Playing to Win* (decision logic; “what would have to be true”).
- David Allen, *Getting Things Done* (externalize commitments; protect follow-through).
- U.S. Army, *After-Action Review* guides (intent → happened → learned → change).
- NHS/WHO, *SBAR* resources (structured contracting for critical communication).

## Chapter 11: Coaching in the Flow of Work

*“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” — Will Durant (summarizing Aristotle)*

*“Tiny changes, remarkable results.” — James Clear, Atomic Habits*

Some coaching sessions are symphonies. Most of leadership is jazz—short riffs between tasks, a question in the hallway, a two-minute nudge after a stand-up. The leaders who move the needle don’t always schedule more; they coach in the flow of work—little and often—so momentum never has time to stall. This chapter turns that idea into practice: how to embed micro-coaching into 1:1s, team rituals, and corridor moments, especially across remote and async realities, so progress compounds without adding meetings.

*“The only way to win is to learn faster than anyone else.” — Eric Ries, The Lean Startup*

### Opening vignette: a week that gets lighter

Monday, 9:10 a.m. The stand-up is drifting into storytelling. The manager steps in: “One line on blockers, then one tiny next step.” In four minutes, two tickets get a clear owner and an if–then plan. Tuesday, 2:03 p.m. After a tense customer call, she walks back with an AE: “What worked? What’s one change you’ll try on the next call?” Ninety seconds, one experiment. Wednesday, 11:55 a.m. A chat thread mushrooms; she asks, “What would have to be true to choose A over B?” The noise calms; they pick a two-day probe. Thursday, 5:25 p.m. In the last five minutes of the retro, she closes strong: “Decisions, owners, dates. I’ll send the summary.” Friday, 3:15 p.m. Ten minutes of review: intend → happened → learned → change. No new meetings were created. One risk removed, one skill sharpened, two decisions made, and an hour and a half of status time reclaimed.

### Why “little and often” works

Small wins fuel motivation. Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer’s research shows that visible progress—even tiny—creates the most reliable lift in engagement and creativity. Habits anchor behavior. James Clear and BJ Fogg both argue for making the next step small enough to do on a bad day and tying it to a cue. And safety grows through frequent, low-stakes interactions. Amy Edmondson notes that psychological safety is not niceness; it’s repeated signals that candor is welcome and learning is the point. Micro-coaching stitches those signals into the workday so courage doesn’t depend on an offsite.

## The micro-coaching operating system

Think of a simple loop you can run in three to five minutes: Trigger → Mini-Arc → Capture → Review. A trigger is an obstacle, a decision, a miss, or a moment of readiness. The mini-arc is your condensed version of Chapter 10's blueprint: Contract ("one thing"), Explore (one clarifier), Decide (by one criterion), Commit (a tiny if-then). Capture the commitment where the work lives. Review weekly—briefly—to protect the loop.

Contract sounds like, "We've got three minutes—what one thing would make this easier?" Explore is a single clean question: "What's the real constraint?" Decide: "Given speed vs risk, what gets 80% now?" Commit: "If it's 9:00 Monday, then I will Y by Z. Confidence 1–10?" Close: "I'll DM a five-line summary; we'll check Friday."

## Where to embed it: touchpoints that matter

Touchpoint	Timebox	Best for	Example prompts	Capture method	Watch-outs
1:1 kickoff/close	5 minutes	Focus and follow-through	"What outcome matters this week?" "Smallest next step?"	1:1 doc line; add to board	Turning into status
Stand-up	2–4 minutes/person	Unblocking	"What's the blocker?" "What would make it 10% easier?"	If-then on the ticket	Solving as a group; drift
Corridor/Zoom walk-back	2–3 minutes	Rapid debrief	"What worked?" "One change you'll try next?"	DM summary; calendar nudge	Drive-by advice
Post-meeting last 5	5 minutes	Decision hygiene	"What did we decide? Owners? Dates?"	5-line summary to thread	Vague owners/dates
Retro close	5–7 minutes	Feedforward	"One keep, one change, one experiment?"	Retro card with owner/date	Too many experiments
Chat/async	2–5 minutes	Just-in-time	"What would have to be true?" "A or B—what fits our criteria?"	Pin message; emoji commit	Back-and-forth spirals

Touchpoint	Timebox	Best for	Example prompts	Capture method	Watch-outs
Code/design review	5 minutes	Craft feedback	“What were you optimizing for?” “What will you try next?”	PR comment; checklist	Nitpicking without principle

## Micro-scripts and stems you can lift

- Contract: “We’ve got three minutes. If we solved one thing, what would it be?”
- Explore: “What’s true now?” “What’s the real constraint?” “What data are we using, and what’s missing?”
- Decide: “Given speed and risk, which option gets 80% now?” “What would have to be true for B?”
- Commit: “If X, then I will Y by Z. Confidence 1–10? What moves it by one?”
- Close: “I’ll send a five-line summary; we’ll review Friday at 3:10.”

If the advice reflex hits, use ask-provide-ask: “I have a thought—want it as an option? Here it is. What would you adapt?”

## When to go micro—and when to book a deep dive

Situation	Micro-coach now	Book a longer session
Clear obstacle; narrow scope	Yes: unblock with one if-then	No
Repeating pattern; belief shift needed	Stabilize with a tiny step	Yes: 25–45 min blueprint
High risk/safety/compliance	Direct now; debrief later	Yes: formal review
Many stakeholders; ambiguity	Facilitate next step briefly	Yes: structured decision
Skill gap (craft)	Mentor 3–5 min + one rep	Schedule practice blocks

Rule of thumb (2–5–25): try 2 to 5 minutes in the moment; if the issue persists or is systemic, book 25 minutes and run the full arc from Chapter 10.

## Remote and async: coaching without a calendar

Distributed work loves clarity. Make the doc the room. Contract in the agenda: “By EOD, we’ll leave with one owner and a first step.” Explore in comments using facts → meaning bullets. Decide in a “Decision” header with criteria and why. Commit with a one-line if-then and an owner/date. Close with a five-line summary at the top and a short voice note to carry tone. Set response SLAs (e.g., 24 hours) and rotate meeting times for fairness.

GitLab’s all-remote practice shows this at scale: a handbook-first culture, clear decision logs, and 1:1 templates that embed micro-coaching questions. When decisions are findable and commitments visible, trust doesn’t depend on proximity.

*“Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.” — Brené Brown, Dare to Lead*

## Tooling and tiny rituals that help

Create chat snippets for commitments (e.g., “If [trigger], I will [action] by [date]. Confidence [x]/10.”). Use a “/decide” macro to format decisions (context, criteria, choice, owner/date). Pin summaries in threads. Add a Friday 10-minute review block to your calendar by default. Keep a visible streak of team experiments—celebrate completion, not perfection. As Atul Gawande taught in *The Checklist Manifesto*, simple routines reduce error; here, they reduce the cost of good intentions.

## Case studies: proof in motion

Toyota Kata (real practice). Mike Rother documents how Toyota leaders use daily coaching cycles—target condition, current condition, obstacle, next step, next review—to embed scientific thinking into minutes, not meetings. The supervisor’s question set is brief and consistent. Over time, throughput improves and problems are solved closer to the work. Coaching is not an event; it’s a habit.

Virginia Mason daily huddles (real pattern). Lean hospitals such as Virginia Mason use daily huddles to surface issues and make small, immediate changes. Leaders ask a few standard questions, capture a next step with an owner, and review the next day. Patient safety rose not through grand gestures but because thousands of micro-improvements compounded.

MBWA, modernized (Tom Peters). Management by Wandering Around becomes “coaching by walking back.” After key moments—a sales pitch, a demo—the leader asks two questions: “What worked?” and “What will you try next?” No fixing, no sermon. Over weeks, skill rises and dependency falls.

Remote product triage (composite). A PM in a five-time-zone team added a “Decision” header to every design doc and ended stand-ups with one unblock prompt. They pinned one if-then per blocker and held a strict Friday 10-minute review. Escalations dropped in two sprints; the team reported feeling “helped, not inspected.”

## Metrics and signals you’re getting it right

Leading indicators: count of micro-coaching moments per week, percent ending with a written if-then, Friday reviews held, and decision summaries sent.

Lagging indicators: cycle time, rework and escalation rates, and the pulse item “I

get timely help.” Quality audits: sample summaries and rate them for clarity, owner, date, and a defined check. As Bill Walsh wrote, the score takes care of itself when standards and routines are kept.

## Anti-patterns and antidotes

Anti-pattern	Cost	Antidote
Drive-by advice	Dependency; confusion	Ask one before you answer; label advice as optional
Meeting sprawl disguised as coaching	Time sink	Contract one outcome; time-box; schedule deep dive if needed
Over-coaching	Drift; fatigue	Move to decide/commit; keep to three minutes
Rescuing	Learned helplessness	Return ownership with if-then; agree on a review
No capture	Memory leaks	Five-line summary; pin it; add to board

*“Speed is a habit.” — Dave Girouard. Speed with learning is a better one. Micro-coaching gives you both.*

## Practice: a seven-day sprint

For one week, aim for five micro-coaching moments a day. Name your stance out loud. End at least 70 percent with a written if-then and a review on the calendar. Upgrade one ritual (stand-up or retro) with a single prompt and a one-minute close. On Friday, spend ten minutes scanning your commitments: intend → happened → learned → change. Notice what got easier.

## Reflection

Where do you leak time into status instead of coaching? Which touchpoint will you upgrade with a three-minute mini-arc this week? What’s one snippet you’ll create so good coaching is just a few keystrokes away?

## Selected sources and further reading

- Teresa Amabile & Steven Kramer, *The Progress Principle* (small wins and inner work life).
- James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (make it obvious, attractive, easy, and satisfying).
- BJ Fogg, *Tiny Habits* (tiny behaviors tied to cues).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety in action).
- Mike Rother, *Toyota Kata* (daily coaching cycles that build capability).

- Tom Peters, *In Search of Excellence* and *The Excellence Dividend* (MBWA and practical excellence).
- Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto* (simple routines, fewer errors).
- Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup* (build–measure–learn at high frequency).
- *GitLab Handbook* (real-world async decision and coaching practices).

## Chapter 12: Coaching Through Complexity

*“Separate the people from the problem.” — Roger Fisher & William Ury, Getting to Yes*

*“You must retain faith that you will prevail in the end, while confronting the most brutal facts of your current reality.” — Jim Collins, Good to Great (the Stockdale Paradox)*

Complexity is weather, not climate; it changes fast, and you don’t control it. On Monday, a reorg lands. By Wednesday, a peer conflict blooms. By Friday, performance questions can’t wait. This chapter is not a bigger hammer. It’s a steadier hand: how to meet resistance without making it a referendum on character; how to stay with strong emotions long enough to protect thinking; how to turn conflict into design; how to run ethical turnarounds and scaffold role transitions; and how to move through ambiguity with experiments and grace. We’ll keep the tools simple, the rituals light, and the stance humane.

*“Get on the balcony.” — Ronald Heifetz, The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*

### Opening vignette: three weeks in heavy weather

A new manager inherits a team in a reorg. One direct is angry: “No one asked me.” Another goes quiet. Two peers are fighting over scope. Priorities shift weekly. In week one, the manager does one thing before every hard conversation: a 60-second centering—slow exhale, name intent, choose stance, write a first question—and enters coach mode. With the angry direct, she treats “resistance” as information, not insubordination, and surfaces a competing commitment: reputation for excellence feels at risk. Together they design a tiny test. With the battling peers, she facilitates a 45-minute session that separates interests (brand risk versus revenue timing) from positions and decides by criteria. In week two, she launches a 60-day turnaround for a struggling rep—two lead measures, weekly reviews, real support, and clear stakes. In week three, she helps a newly promoted engineer map a 90-day transition. The weather doesn’t calm, but the ship steadies. Complexity didn’t shrink; capability grew.

### Map the terrain: know what you’re in

Not every hard thing is the same kind of hard. Dave Snowden’s Cynefin framework helps you avoid treating complexity like a spreadsheet. If the domain is obvious or complicated, apply best practice and analysis. If complex, favor probe–sense–respond: small, safe-to-fail experiments and fast feedback. If chaotic, act to stabilize—direct briefly, then debrief and learn. Heifetz adds two moves for adaptive work: get on the balcony to see the system, then regulate the

heat so people can do the work without boiling over. When causes are unclear and agents interact, go small and fast, not grand and slow.

## Steadiness starts with you

Before the hard conversation, build your ground. Neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor reminds us the chemical life of an emotion is about ninety seconds unless we refuel it with thought. Use that minute well: breathe out slowly, name your intent (“protect the relationship and raise the bar”), choose your stance (coach, mentor, direct, or facilitate), and write one clean question.

A micro-ritual you can trust:

- Box breathing 4–4–4–4.
- State your “minimum viable kindness” and “non-negotiable standard.”
- Decide how you’ll close: “We leave with one next step and a review on the calendar.”

Centering is not performance; it’s co-regulation. Calm is contagious—and so is panic.

## Working with resistance: treat it as intelligence

What we call resistance is often protection doing its job. Kegan and Lahey’s *Immunity to Change* describes a hidden system of competing commitments that keep us safe. “I won’t give peers critical feedback” may protect a competing commitment to be seen as collegial, underwritten by a big assumption: “If I challenge them, I’ll be labeled difficult.”

Name the stated goal. List the “do/don’t” behaviors you see. Ask, “What are you protecting that matters?” Honor that commitment. Then design a tiny test to check the assumption without putting the person’s dignity at risk. “For one week, give one piece of specific, kind-and-clear feedback; check the reaction; debrief Friday.” Respect keeps people at the table; experiments move the table forward.

## Strong emotions: name, normalize, navigate

You cannot coach with the amygdala in charge. The goal is not to drain emotion but to shape it so thinking can return. Susan David calls it emotional agility—feeling fully and moving on purpose. Two simple tools help: RAIN (Recognize, Allow, Investigate, Nurture) and Nonviolent Communication (Observation, Feeling, Need, Request).

Use clean words. Anchor to behavior and impact, not worth. Ask for one step that preserves both dignity and progress. And know your boundary: you are not a therapist. If content veers into clinical territory, refer to the right resources.

If useful, keep this table at hand:

Emotion spike	What helps	Language that lands
Anger (boundary or injustice)	Slow tempo; reflect content and impact; separate person from behavior	“You’re angry about X, and that makes sense. Let’s separate what happened from what it means and pick one next step.”
Fear (loss or uncertainty)	Normalize uncertainty; shrink the ask; add scaffolding	“Given the unknowns, let’s take the smallest step that teaches us. I’ll check in Friday.”
Shame (identity threat)	Restore dignity; shift to behaviors; invite agency	“You’re valued here. Today we’ll focus on two behaviors and one experiment to improve.”
Grief (change or real loss)	Acknowledge the loss; widen time horizon	“This is a loss. We’ll make room for it and still commit to one forward step this week.”

*“Psychological safety isn’t about being nice; it’s about candor, mutual respect, and learning.” — Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization**

## Conflict: turn heat into design

Conflict is energy with a direction problem. Fisher and Ury’s advice holds: separate the people from the problem and focus on interests rather than positions. Add a tool from *Crucial Conversations*: STATE—Share facts, Tell your story, Ask for their path, Talk tentatively, Encourage testing. Then decide by criteria you agree on upfront.

A mini-mediation arc you can run in 45 minutes:

- Contract neutrality and the shared aim; define decision rights.
- One round each: facts, feelings, needs—no interruptions.
- Map interests; list options; name two or three criteria (e.g., customer impact, risk).
- Do a 60-second pre-mortem: “If this fails in 90 days, why?” Add one mitigation.
- Decide; capture owners and dates; schedule a review.

Script stems that de-escalate: “Help me see this through your eyes.” “What are you optimizing for?” “What would have to be true to try B safely for two weeks?”

## Performance turnarounds: firm and fair

Accountability is answerability plus agency. Diagnose before you prescribe. Is the gap about skill, will, clarity, or system blockers? Then match the intervention. Pair candor with care. Kim Scott’s *Radical Candor*—care personally and challenge directly—should shape your tone.

One useful comparison:

Root cause	Signals	Primary intervention
Skill gap	Inconsistent technique; improves with reps	Mentor and model; practice reps; checklists; shadowing
Will/motivation	“Can but won’t”; avoids hard tasks	Reconnect to purpose; clarify stakes; remove friction; recognition
Clarity gap	Vague standards; surprises at review	Define “what good looks like”; calibrate examples; decision rights map
System blockers	Conflicting priorities; tool/process friction	Remove obstacles; sequence work; align metrics/incentives

Design a 30–60–90 plan with two lead measures, weekly reviews, resourcing, examples of good, and clear consequences. Agree on a “no-rescue” norm: the leader won’t take the work back; the coachee owns the next step with support. Document agreements; follow through. If progress doesn’t come with fair support and clear standards, escalate or exit with dignity and clarity.

## Role transitions: scaffold the identity shift

New roles multiply ambiguity. Michael Watkins’s *The First 90 Days* offers a reliable frame: match strategy to situation (STARS: start-up, turnaround, accelerated growth, realignment, sustaining success), secure early wins, build relationships, and align expectations.

Use a Role Clarity Canvas: purpose, top outcomes, decision rights, stakeholders, must-learn skills, and a stop-doing list. Invest in learning interviews—fifteen to twenty conversations in the first month to map the informal organization. Choose one or two early wins that signal the new game. And ask identity questions: “What will you stop doing to make room for this role?” “Who must experience your value in the first thirty days, and how will they?”

## Navigating ambiguity and change: small bets, fast learning

Combine William Bridges’ transitions (ending → neutral zone → new beginning) with Prosci’s ADKAR (Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, Reinforcement) to see the human side of change. Treat the neutral zone as a design space, not dead air.

In the complex domain, run safe-to-fail probes. State a hypothesis, choose a small bet, define success/failure signals, and set a review date. Use OODA loops (Observe–Orient–Decide–Act) to move faster than confusion. And manage polarities—those tensions you don’t solve but balance (stability and change, speed and quality, centralize and decentralize). Barry Johnson’s advice is practical: make the upsides and downsides of each pole explicit and create cadences that keep you from over-correcting.

Remember the Stockdale Paradox: confront brutal facts and keep faith in the end state. Say both truths out loud.

## Case studies: when the tools meet the world

SBAR and AAR in healthcare (real). Hospitals use SBAR—Situation, Background, Assessment, Recommendation—to structure urgent communication, and After-Action Reviews to learn quickly: What did we intend? What happened? What did we learn? What will we change? The effect is fewer errors and faster alignment. In one emergency department, leaders credited brief SBAR handoffs and daily AARs with cutting escalation times and near misses; the tools turned heat into clarity.

Microsoft’s “learn-it-all” shift (real). Under Satya Nadella, Microsoft moved from a “know-it-all” to a “learn-it-all” culture. Leaders modeled curiosity, made room for emotion (“empathy is a muscle,” Nadella said), and used consistent decision and learning rhythms. The lesson for coach-leaders is not celebrity; it’s system: cadence plus candor can shift a very large organization’s posture toward complexity.

Product scope conflict (composite, grounded in common practice). Two VPs fought over launching a feature: ship now and risk brand confusion, or delay and risk a revenue window. A facilitated session separated interests, named criteria (customer trust, momentum), ran a pre-mortem, and landed on a staged rollout with explicit owners and a one-week review. The conflict produced a better plan because the room had a way to think.

Sales turnaround (composite). An account executive missed quota two quarters in a row. Diagnosis showed skill gaps in discovery and a will dip from repeated losses. The plan: two lead measures (number of open-ended discovery questions logged per call; second meetings booked), practice reps twice a week, and weekly reviews. A “no-rescue” rule returned ownership; the manager provided patterns and feedback. Pipeline quality rose within six weeks; when it didn’t, exit was handled with kindness and clarity.

## Heuristics you can use when it’s messy

When emotions spike, slow down to go fast: acknowledge, paraphrase, ask one clean question, agree on one tiny next step. When resistance persists, look for the commitment underneath the behavior and test the big assumption with a small experiment. When conflict escalates, reset to mutual purpose and decide by criteria you can write down. When complexity spikes, shrink batch size: probe–sense–respond; cap blast radius; shorten review cycles. When performance stalls, run a 30–60–90 with two lead measures and weekly reviews; escalate respectfully if no movement.

## Practice: steadiness you can train

For fourteen days, run a steadiness routine: before tough conversations, do the 60-second center; after, send a five-line summary (issue, decision, next step, owner/date, evidence to review). Run one “Immunity to Change” test with a willing coachee: surface a competing commitment and design a tiny experiment within two weeks. Practice a mini-mediation arc with two peers; aim for a decision with owners and dates in forty-five minutes. Build one 30–60–90 turnaround plan with lead measures; coach the work, not the person. For your next role shift—yours or a report’s—complete a Role Clarity Canvas and book ten learning interviews. Little and often beats big and rare.

## Reflection

Which kind of heavy weather throws you off course—resistance, emotion, conflict, turnaround, or transition? What will be your centering sentence? Which tiny experiment can you launch this week to learn faster than the problem? Who needs your steadiness tomorrow?

## Selected sources and further reading

- Ronald Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* (balcony view; regulate the heat).
- Dave Snowden, Cynefin framework (match response to domain).
- Robert Kegan & Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change* (competing commitments; big assumptions).
- Susan David, *Emotional Agility* (feel fully, move on purpose).
- Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication* (clean language for needs and requests).
- Kerry Patterson et al., *Crucial Conversations* (STATE skills; CRIB).
- Roger Fisher & William Ury, *Getting to Yes* (interests over positions).
- Kim Scott, *Radical Candor* (care personally, challenge directly).
- Michael D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days* (STARS; early wins).
- Barry Johnson, *Polarity Management* (balance enduring tensions).
- Gary Klein, “Performing a Project Premortem” (HBR) (de-risk decisions).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety).
- Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (Stockdale Paradox).

## Chapter 13: Coaching Across Contexts

*“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” — Peter Drucker (attributed)*

*“What got you here won’t get you there.” — Marshall Goldsmith*

Coaching is the same melody played on different instruments. With a first-time manager, you teach them to put the baton down and conduct. With a senior leader, you tune the orchestra so strategy becomes sound. With experts and individual contributors, you help a soloist be heard without drowning out the score. In distributed and cross-cultural teams, you make the music travel—through documents, time zones, and norms. The principles stay steady—clarity, ownership, and follow-through—but stance, cadence, and medium must bend to context. Context isn’t decoration; it is decisive.

*“Context is everything.” — Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point**

### Opening vignette: one leader, four rooms

Monday morning: a first-time manager arrives with a calendar full of work they shouldn’t be doing. “If I don’t jump in, it won’t get done.” You coach the identity shift from maker to multiplier: one owned next step, a delegation script, and a Friday check-in.

Tuesday: a senior vice president prepares for a board-sensitive pivot. The room is heavy with opinions. You facilitate a decision memo review: criteria up front, options versus risks, a 60-second pre-mortem, and a one-line decision. Two peers disagree—and commit in writing.

Wednesday: a principal engineer campaigns for a platform refactor. The logic is elegant; the influence is thin. You mentor on patterns and coach for influence: a business-anchored design doc, two safe-to-fail experiments, and pairing with a PM to demo adoption.

Thursday: a cross-continental team (São Paulo, Nairobi, Berlin, Manila) resolves a priority clash. You move the center of gravity to the doc: contract the decision, explore facts → meaning in comments, decide by criteria, capture if-then commitments, and record owners and dates. No extra meeting; just clearer music.

Different rooms. Same melody. Fewer rescues. More ownership.

### What changes, what stays

Across contexts, the bones of good coaching remain: explicit contracting, a focus on outcomes, small owned next steps, and a scheduled review. What changes are the muscles around those bones: stance (coach, mentor, direct, facilitate), cadence (how often and how long), and medium (in person, live

remote, or async in writing). Think of it as changing strings and tempo, not the notes.

Liz Wiseman writes in *Multipliers* that great leaders “use their intelligence to amplify the smarts and capability of people around them.” Your job is to notice which amplifier a given room needs—and then use it deliberately.

## First-time managers: from maker to multiplier

The first promotion is an identity earthquake. Value used to be measured in personal throughput; now it’s measured in team outcomes. Without guidance, new managers rescue by reflex and drown in meetings. The coaching goal is to help them trade speed for scalability, particularly through delegation, feedback, and prioritization.

A practical move is to pair mentoring on mechanics with coaching for judgment. Early on, model a crisp 1:1 structure, a delegation script, and a feedback tool; then ask questions that return ownership. Contract for a 30–60–90 plan: clarify role purpose and outcomes, define “what good looks like,” set two lead measures (for example, percent of commitments completed and 1:1s held), and schedule two practice reps for tough conversations by day 45.

Case vignette (composite, common pattern). A new team lead inherited missed handoffs and a Slack culture of “got a sec?” She stopped rescuing and introduced a weekly 1:1 template (goals, commitments, blockers), a shared “definition of done,” and a simple phrase: “If it’s truly urgent, call me.” Rescue requests dropped 40 percent in a month; the team’s commitments completed rose steadily. She hadn’t worked harder. She had worked at the right altitude.

Useful stems include: “What will you stop doing to make room for leading?” “Which decision rights are yours?” “What two behaviors would raise your team’s bar fastest?” Daniel Pink’s *Drive* reminds us that autonomy, mastery, and purpose unlock motivation; help new managers grant these to their teams—and themselves.

## Senior leaders: altitude, narrative, and decision hygiene

At the top of the house, problems are rarely technical. They are patterns: misaligned bets, unclear decision rights, politics replacing criteria. Coaching here centers on strategic clarity, decision hygiene, and visible alignment. It is facilitation more than fixing, choreography more than virtuosity.

One durable practice is narrative or decision memos. Amazon institutionalized six-page narratives and “disagree and commit” for a reason: writing forces clarity; committing preserves speed without requiring unanimity. In review, ask: What decision is being made and by when? What criteria matter most? What would have to be true for the less popular option? Run a one-minute pre-mortem (Gary Klein) and capture the choice and rationale on a single line.

Case vignette (composite, grounded in memo practices). An executive team replaced slide decks with memos that led with the problem, criteria, options, risks, and a recommended decision. During review, the coach facilitated rounds to surface interests, tested logic with “what would have to be true,” and insisted on a one-line decision with owners and dates. Decision latency fell; rework dropped because post-decision reviews were automatic. As Richard Rumelt notes in *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy*, good strategy is “a set of coherent actions.” Coaching made the coherence explicit.

Guard against executive “fixing.” When a senior leader drops to details, re-contract the altitude: “Let’s define the decision rights and the standard now; your team can solve the ‘how’ this afternoon.”

## Experts and individual contributors: from craft to impact

Experts and principal ICs live by mastery and influence. They often see farther than authority allows. Coaching helps them translate craft into business value and lead change without formal power.

Mentor on patterns (design docs, review checklists, trade-off tables). Coach for adoption: stakeholder mapping, influence tactics, and the smallest experiment that proves the premise. Ask: What outcome are you optimizing? Whose decision changes if this works? What is the smallest two-week experiment that demonstrates value? The research in *Accelerate* (Forsgren, Humble, Kim) supports small batch sizes and fast feedback; encourage engineers and researchers to demonstrate progress this way.

Case vignette (composite). A principal engineer advocated a platform refactor. The first pitch met polite nods and no action. Coaching produced a business-anchored design doc (customer pain, metrics, risks), two tiny experiments to validate performance gains, and pairing with a PM to tell the story. Adoption began without a mandate because the story moved from elegance to evidence.

Beware perfection as protection. When an IC is polishing endlessly, ask for a time-boxed prototype and a learning goal. “Make it work, then make it right” is not license for sloppiness; it is a sequence that creates adoption.

## Distributed and cross-cultural teams: make clarity travel

When we cannot share a hallway, we must share a page. In distributed and cross-cultural teams, coaching is writing, and inclusion is a schedule. Erin Meyer’s *The Culture Map* is a practical lens: direct versus indirect communication, high- versus low-context cultures, and different relationships to hierarchy all shape how coaching lands. Default to clarity, curiosity, and explicitness.

Make the doc the room. Contract decisions at the top (“We will decide X by Y”), explore in comments as facts → meaning, decide with a visible “Decision” header and criteria, and commit with one-line if-then statements and owners/dates. Add tone with a short voice note when stakes are human. Rotate meeting times. Set response SLAs (for example, 24 hours). Paraphrase more than you think necessary and invite correction: “What did I miss that matters in your context?”

Real practice. GitLab’s all-remote, handbook-first culture shows that written clarity, decision logs, and 1:1 templates can scale trust and speed without co-location. Automattic runs largely asynchronous and emphasizes written proposals and distributed decision making. Both prove that distance punishes vagueness, not collaboration.

Jason Fried and David Heinemeier Hansson argue in *Remote: Office Not Required* that “the ability to be alone with your thoughts is a skill.” Coaching in remote contexts is partly teaching that skill—and creating the structures that turn thinking into shared action.

### An async coaching playbook (lightweight, repeatable)

In writing, use a condensed arc: Contract one outcome; Explore with two bullets (facts, meaning); Decide by criteria; Commit with an if-then and an owner/date; Follow-through by adding a review date and a five-line summary. Use short acknowledgments to show you’ve read (“Received—reviewing by Thursday”). Make decisions findable with tags or a log. The tool is not the point; the findability is.

*“Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.” — Brené Brown, Dare to Lead*

### Comparative map (when you need to choose your stance fast)

Dimension	First-Time Manager	Senior Leader	Expert/IC	Distributed/Cross-Cultural
Primary goal	Build managerial muscles and team cadence	Clarify strategy and align the system	Increase impact and adoption	Sustain clarity, inclusion, and speed asynchronously
Typical challenges	Rescuing; feedback; prioritization	Decision drift; hidden vetoes; politics	Influence without authority; perfectionism	Miscommunication; time zones; cultural gaps
Stance mix	Mentor on mechanics; coach for judgment;	Coach choices; facilitate cross-functional decisions;	Mentor patterns; coach influence; facilitate	Coach via docs; facilitate async decisions; direct on norms

Dimension	First-Time Manager	Senior Leader	Expert/IC	Distributed/Cross-Cultural
	facilitate team rituals	occasional mentor on executive craft	design reviews	
Cadence	Weekly 1:1s; 30–60–90 reviews	Bi-weekly strategy reviews; quarterly narratives	Weekly craft reviews; sprint experiments	Async weekly reviews; recorded decisions; rotated time slots
Tools	1:1 agenda; delegation matrix; feedback scripts	Decision/narrative memos; OKR map; stakeholder map	Design docs; review checklists; influence canvas	Doc templates; decision logs; response SLAs; glossary
Success signals	Fewer rescues; owned commitments; clearer standards	Faster, clearer decisions; visible rationale; alignment	Experiments to adoption; measurable outcomes	Findable decisions; fewer clarifying pings; equitable participation

## Case studies: real and composite

GitLab’s handbook-first clarity (real). GitLab operates all-remote with a public handbook exceeding a thousand pages. Decisions are logged, DRIs named, and 1:1s templated. Leaders coach in the flow of written work: one-line contracts at the top of issues, if-then commitments, and scheduled reviews. The result is not bureaucracy; it is findable accountability at scale.

Amazon’s memo discipline and “disagree and commit” (real). Six-page narrative memos front-load context and criteria. In review, leaders interrogate logic, not slides. When consensus stalls, they invoke the principle: “Have backbone; disagree and commit.” This is coaching writ large: clarity, decision hygiene, and speed with learning.

Cross-cultural escalation (composite, informed by The Culture Map). A U.S. manager reads a Japanese colleague’s indirect “This could be challenging” as passive resistance. Coaching reframes it as measured dissent in a high-context culture. The manager adjusts: writes clearer requests, invites dissent explicitly, and offers written follow-ups for private feedback. Trust rises; issues surface earlier.

Principal engineer influence (composite). A PE’s refactor request was a chorus without an audience. Coaching introduced a design doc anchored in user pain and business value, two small experiments to de-risk assumptions, and demos with a PM. Adoption followed. The lesson: craft plus narrative plus evidence beats craft alone.

First-time manager turnaround (composite). A new lead set a 30–60–90 plan with two lead measures (percent of commitments completed; quality of

“definition of done”). She practiced two feedback conversations by day 45. Rescue requests fell; her team shipped more with fewer after-hours pings. Multipliers in action: less heroic effort, more capable teammates.

## Metrics and signals that you’re tailoring well

For first-time managers, watch percent of 1:1s held, commitments completed, rescue frequency, and the clarity of “definition of done.” For senior leaders, track time-to-decision, percent of decisions with criteria and owners, alignment scores, and rework after big calls. For experts and ICs, follow experiment cadence, adoption rates of proposals, and impact metrics tied to outcomes. For distributed/async, check decision log usage, response SLAs met, the meeting-to-decision ratio, and the pulse item “I understand priorities.” The score always takes care of itself when standards and routines are kept (Bill Walsh).

## Anti-patterns and gentle antidotes

One-size-fits-all coaching wastes courage. Contract stance, scope, and medium each time. Coaching as status theater produces motion without movement; insist on one outcome and one owned next step. Over-mentoring experts dulls edge; offer patterns and trade-offs, then return ownership with a small experiment. Executive fixing corrodes teams; coach at the right altitude and facilitate system clarity. Sync bias excludes; adopt a docs-first posture and rotate time zones.

*“Strong opinions, loosely held” is a fine stance—if you write the opinion down and schedule the review.*

## Practice: your seven-day context lens

For one week, name the context before you coach: “FTM,” “Senior,” “IC,” or “Distributed.” Say your stance out loud. In each session, adapt one element—your opening contract, your medium, or your cadence—to fit the room. End 70 percent of conversations with a written if-then and a date. On Friday, review: what did you adapt, and what changed?

## Reflection

Which room feels most natural to you? Which room asks you to stretch? What will you change—stance, cadence, or medium—on your next coaching conversation to fit the context rather than fighting it?

## Selected sources and further reading

- Liz Wiseman, *Multipliers* (from heroics to amplification).

- Daniel H. Pink, *Drive* (autonomy, mastery, purpose).
- Richard Rumelt, *Good Strategy/Bad Strategy* (coherent action).
- Colin Bryar & Bill Carr, *Working Backwards* (narrative memos and decision discipline at Amazon).
- Erin Meyer, *The Culture Map* (navigating cultural differences).
- Jason Fried & David Heinemeier Hansson, *Remote: Office Not Required* (asynchronous clarity).
- Nicole Forsgren, Jez Humble, Gene Kim, *Accelerate* (small batches and fast feedback).
- John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance* (ownership through questions).
- Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (identity shifts at transitions).
- GitLab Handbook (real-world async and decision practices; handbook-first operations).

The principles of great coaching travel; the packaging changes with the road. Read the room—power, risk, culture, channel—then tune your instrument. In the next chapter, we scale these moves into Running Meetings that Decide: group rituals and decision hygiene that make clarity a team sport.

## Chapter 14: Group and Peer Coaching

*“The way we gather matters. It matters because how we gather shapes the way we think, feel, and make sense of our world.” — Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering**

*“There can be no learning without action and no action without learning.” — Reg Revans, *Action Learning**

Coaching one-to-one is a craft. Scaling it through groups is an architecture. Done well, a circle becomes a safe workshop where leaders sharpen each other’s tools, try them on real wood, and leave with one small cut already made. Done poorly, it becomes status theater and advice waterfalls. This chapter shows you how to design the room (purpose, people, cadence), how to hold the room (facilitation moves that equalize airtime and protect dignity), and how to wire the room for safety so candor can do its work. The promise is simple: multiply learning without diluting quality.

*“Psychological safety is not about being nice; it’s about candor, mutual respect, and learning.” — Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization**

### Opening vignette: three rooms, one spine

A company launches three formats in one quarter. A six-session cohort for new managers meets biweekly; a senior peer forum meets monthly; cross-functional “Troika” trios meet for fifteen-minute rounds on live issues. Each room starts the same way: a crisp contract (“We will leave with one commitment per person and a review date”), a visible timer, and the Chatham House Rule. The new managers practice delegation scripts and report back on two real conversations. The executives review a narrative memo with decision criteria and end with a one-line commitment each. The Troikas run three short cycles—ask, reflect, commit—on whatever is hot that week. Eight weeks later, rescue requests among new managers have dropped, decision latency at the top has shortened, and cross-functional escalations are down. Safety didn’t come from an offsite. It came from small structures, repeated.

### Why groups, and when not to

Groups normalize struggle. One manager’s hard feedback conversation echoes another’s; patterns surface, language spreads, and courage grows. Groups cross-pollinate practice: a sales leader borrows a product manager’s discovery question; an engineer learns a clearer accountability script. And groups scale the coach. Instead of you carrying ten conversations, the circle carries itself.

They are not for everything. Acute performance or conduct issues require privacy. Unresolved conflict between members will poison the water. Clinical

well-being belongs with HR/EAP, not a peer circle. When in doubt, err on the side of safety and scope.

## Design principles that travel

Start with a sentence of purpose and three success signals. Is this developmental (build capability and identity) or decisional (do real work and decide)?

Composition matters more than you think: five to eight per peer circle creates depth; eight to sixteen in a facilitated group keeps energy without losing intimacy. Avoid direct reporting lines. Mind power dynamics: if a senior voice must be present, rotate facilitation and make norms visible.

Cadence and arc beat charisma. A predictable rhythm—biweekly or monthly—creates a container people can trust. Open with a check-in that hears every voice early; structure the middle with a micro-method (ORID for discussion, GROW or CLEAR for coaching); close with two harvests—insights and owned commitments. Measure lightly but consistently: a monthly safety pulse (“I can speak with candor here”), commitment completion rates, and a decision or escalation metric tied to the business.

Diversity and inclusion are design choices, not wishes. Rotate meeting times for global teams, use captions and a shared glossary, and explicitly welcome dissent. Paraphrase more than you think necessary. Ask, “What might we be missing because of our shared assumptions?”

## A quick map of formats (use when you must choose)

Format	Best for	Size	Cadence/Timebox	Strengths	Watch-outs
Facilitated Group Coaching	Capability building on shared themes	8–16	60–120 min, biweekly/monthly	Structure + peer learning; scalable	Can slip into training; needs strong facilitation
Peer Coaching Circles	Mutual problem-solving and accountability	5–8	60–90 min, biweekly	Ownership; trust grows fast	Advice dumping if norms are weak
Troika Consulting (Liberating Structures)	Rapid coaching on live issues	3 per breakout	12–15 min per round	Equal airtime; energizing	Shallow if prompts are vague
Action Learning Sets (Reg Revans)	Real problems + questioning discipline	4–7	90–120 min, monthly	Deep inquiry; action commitment	Slow start; needs a sponsor
Case Clinic (Theory U)	Complex, ambiguous challenges	4–6	60–90 min	Empathic listening;	Abstract without a

Format	Best for	Size	Cadence/Timebox	Strengths	Watch-outs
				systems insight	concrete close
Mastermind/Forum	Senior peer counsel	6–10	2–3 hours, monthly	High trust; strategic reflection	Power dynamics; confidentiality is critical
Lean Coffee	Emergent agenda, time-boxed	6–12	45–75 min	Democratic prioritization	Not coaching unless framed intentionally

## The facilitation playbook: how to hold the room

Contract before content. State the purpose and the finish line for this session. Name roles—facilitator, timekeeper, scribe—and norms: confidentiality, permission-based advice, equal airtime, “challenge ideas, protect people.” A one-line contract sounds like, “We will leave with one owned commitment each and a review date.”

Open with a simple check-in. One sentence per person: “Weather report for your week?” or “One thing you’re bringing, one you’re leaving.” Rounds bring quieter voices in early and signal equity.

Structure the middle. Choose a method that fits the job. ORID moves a group from facts to meaning to implications to decision. GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) or CLEAR (Contract, Listen, Explore, Action, Review) turns talk into a next step. Ask before you offer; use ask–reflect–ask to keep ownership with the person in the hot seat.

Equalize airtime with tools, not scolding. Visible timers, hand-raise/stack, and rotating “first word” roles help. When one voice dominates, name the process: “Let’s pause. I’m noticing we’re solving before we understand. Two clarifying questions each, then options.”

Close strong. Harvest two insights and one commitment per person. Write the commitments where work lives, not in a ghost document. Schedule the review. Run a 60-second plus/delta: “What helped today? What would make it 10 percent better next time?” Bill Walsh’s line applies: “The score takes care of itself” when standards and routines are kept.

## Safety: design it, don’t wish for it

Psychological safety is a product of norms, behavior, and repair. Make confidentiality explicit. The Chatham House Rule—use the ideas, not the identities—protects candor. Permission-based advice (“I have a thought; want

it?") prevents fixing without consent. Give everyone an opt-out ("pass" is always allowed) and a yellow card to pause if safety slips. Keep "no recording" as a default.

Guard boundaries. Coaching is not therapy. When content turns clinical or legal, pause and route to HR/EAP or the right authority. Manage power dynamics by avoiding manager-report pairings and rotating facilitation. Capture agreements on how dissent shows up: "We will disagree in the room and commit outside it; we attack ideas, not people." Repair quickly when a norm is breached: name the impact, re-affirm the rule, check for harm, and decide together how to proceed.

Amy Edmondson's research is blunt: teams with high safety surface more errors—not because they make more, but because they talk about them. In groups, that talk becomes how the culture learns.

## Remote and async: when the page is the room

Distributed groups run on written clarity and visible follow-through. Make the doc the room: at the top, write the contract and outcomes; include pre-reads 48 hours ahead; capture decisions and commitments with owners and dates. Add tone with a short voice note when stakes are human. Rotate meeting times to share the pain. Use breakout rooms for triads, captions on, visible timers, and a clear expectation for engagement (camera optional; participation not). For async circles, run a weekly thread with a structured prompt (context; question; options; specific ask). Give two days for clarifying questions only, then invite suggestions. Close with one if-then per person and a review date.

GitLab's handbook-first approach and decision logs are real proof: when decisions are findable and commitments visible, trust does not depend on proximity.

## Sample session designs you can run tomorrow

A 60-minute Troika circle. Contract and norms in five minutes. Break into trios. Round 1 (15 minutes): the "client" shares a live issue for two minutes; peers ask clarifiers for three; peers offer options for five (no fixing, no obligation); client reflects and commits for five. Switch roles and repeat. Return to plenary for a ten-minute harvest and a five-minute plus/delta. Send a one-page summary with commitments by the end of day.

A 90-minute facilitated cohort. Ten minutes to contract and check in; fifteen minutes on a teaching nugget (for example, "feedback that lands" with two stems); fifty minutes in breakouts using Case Clinic steps (facts, feelings, needs, options, commitment); ten minutes to harvest; five to write commitments in the shared tracker with owners and dates.

A six-session arc for first-time managers. Session 1: norms, delegation; 2: feedback and safety; 3: prioritization and decision rights; 4: the coaching conversation (practice); 5: conflict and boundaries; 6: capstone—“show the change” and graduation. Every session ends with one practice commitment and a short review of last time’s actions.

## Case studies: real and grounded

Google g2g (real). Google’s “Googler-to-Googler” program trains employees to teach and coach peers. Cohorts use structured curricula and peer practice; internal coaches scale capability without over-relying on external trainers. The lesson for leaders: identify and equip internal multipliers; the culture strengthens itself.

YPO Forum (real). Young Presidents’ Organization forums meet monthly under strict confidentiality with rotating leadership and an issue-processing model. Members report durable trust and clearer strategic thinking. Forums show that high-stakes peers can be both candid and kind—if norms are non-negotiable.

Working Out Loud at Bosch (real). Bosch adopted John Stepper’s Working Out Loud circles—small peer groups that meet weekly with step-by-step guides. Employees built networks and habits of visible work; silos loosened. The format demonstrates how light structure plus peer support changes behavior at scale.

Cross-functional Troikas (composite). A product, sales, and support triad met biweekly for a quarter on Zoom using Troika rounds. They processed live issues early, captured one if-then commitment each, and reviewed in ten minutes the following session. Escalations dropped; “time to clarity” improved because issues were surfaced and metabolized quickly.

## Anti-patterns and gentle antidotes

Pattern to avoid	Cost	Antidote that works
Advice waterfalls (unasked fixing)	Disempowerment; defensiveness	Permission-based advice; require two clarifying questions before any suggestion
Status theater (show and tell)	Motion without movement	Re-contract one outcome; time-box shares; move to coaching or decision
Dominant voices	Silenced insight; fragile safety	Rounds, timers, rotate “first word,” invite the quietest voice first
Vague closes	Memory leaks; no change	Five-line summary; if-then commitments; owners/dates; schedule the review
Safety erosion (breached norms)	Withheld truth; trust debt	Pause; name the breach; repair; restate norms; offer opt-out; adjust design if needed

## What to measure (lightly, consistently)

Count what you want more of. Leading indicators include attendance and on-time starts, airtime equity, percent of sessions with explicit contracts and closes, and commitments made and completed. Lagging indicators include the manager rescue rate, decision latency across teams, cross-functional escalations, and engagement items on learning and inclusion. Run simple quality audits: pick two summaries a month and score them for clarity, owners, dates, and a planned review.

## Practice: launch your first circle

Pick a context: new managers, cross-functional leads, or principal ICs. Write a one-sentence purpose and three success signals. Recruit five to eight participants—no direct reporting lines. Publish a one-page charter with norms (confidentiality, permission-based advice, equal airtime) and roles. Schedule three sessions biweekly. In session one, set the contract, run a short Troika round, and close with one if-then per person and a review date. After session two, pulse safety and adjust. After session three, harvest wins and decide whether to continue. Keep the scaffolding light and the closes strong.

## Reflection

Which group format fits the work you need to advance this quarter? What norm will you make non-negotiable? Who in your organization could be a multiplier if you equipped them to facilitate? What small safeguard will make bravery more likely in your next group?

## Selected sources and further reading

- Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering* (designing purpose and meaning into groups).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety and learning).
- Reg Revans, *Action Learning* (questioning insight, action commitments).
- Henri Lipmanowicz & Keith McCandless, *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures* (Troika Consulting and other micro-methods).
- Otto Scharmer, *Theory U* (Case Clinic and deeper listening).
- Bill George et al., *True North Groups* (peer forums for leaders).
- John Stepper, *Working Out Loud* (peer circles and habit change).

- Colin Bryar & Bill Carr, *Working Backwards* (decision memos and review discipline).
- GitLab Handbook (handbook-first, async norms in practice).
- Jim Benson & Jeremy Lightsmith, *Lean Coffee* (emergent, time-boxed conversations).

Group and peer coaching turn individual courage into collective capability. Design the room, hold it with care, and close with commitments. Do this little and often, and your culture will begin to coach itself.

## Chapter 15: Building a Coaching Culture

*“Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” — Peter Drucker (attributed)*

*“You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems.” — James Clear, Atomic Habits*

A coaching culture is not a poster on a wall or a workshop on a calendar. It is the way work gets done: the rhythms people keep, the conversations leaders have when no one is looking, the small agreements that accumulate into trust. Think of it as an operating system—lightweight rituals, reliable cadences, and shared artifacts that make clarity, ownership, and learning the default. When that system hums, individuals still matter, but progress doesn’t rely on heroics.

*“The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture.” — Edgar H. Schein, Organizational Culture and Leadership*

### Opening vignette: from good intentions to muscle

Six months ago, a mid-size company replaced sporadic “leadership trainings” with a simple Coaching Operating System. Managers adopted a weekly 1:1 standard (Contract → Explore → Decide → Commit), teams captured five-line decision summaries, cross-functional peer circles met biweekly, and senior leaders published short narrative memos with criteria and “disagree and commit” when split. HR swapped annual reviews for monthly check-ins and feedforward. Nothing was grand. Everything was repeatable. By quarter two, rescue requests dropped, decision latency shortened, and internal moves rose. The lesson: culture changed not by persuasion, but by small, consistent structures that made good behavior easier than the alternative.

*“Psychological safety is not about being nice; it’s about candor, mutual respect, and learning.” — Amy C. Edmondson, The Fearless Organization*

### What a coaching culture is (and isn’t)

A coaching culture is a system of habits that makes performance and growth the same conversation. It lives in three places at once: leader role-modeling, shared rituals, and the way talent processes reinforce the behaviors you want more of. It’s not a program, not a one-off training, not a tool rollout. It’s a shift from “we teach it” to “we do it.”

You’ll know you’re getting there when managers coach weekly without a calendar prompt, feedback is routine (and specific), decisions have written owners and criteria, and people can say hard things early because they trust the room will hold.

## The Coaching Operating System (OS)

A good OS is light enough to travel and strong enough to matter. Use five building blocks—rituals, cadences, artifacts, roles, and governance.

Rituals are the moments. Standardize weekly 1:1s using a simple arc; five-line decision closes; brief after-action reviews (What did we intend? What happened? What did we learn? What will we change?); feedback + feedforward loops; and office hours where leaders coach in public.

Cadences are the rhythms. Daily micro-coaching in stand-ups; weekly 1:1s and team retros; monthly peer circles and cross-functional forums; quarterly strategy and talent reviews that privilege learning over theater.

Artifacts are the shared templates that reduce friction. A 1:1 agenda, a decision memo, a five-line summary, a role clarity canvas, a 30–60–90 plan, a coaching conversation cheat card, and a decision log where choices, criteria, and owners can be found later.

Roles distribute ownership. Senior leaders model curiosity and decision hygiene; managers practice the basics every week; internal facilitators run peer circles; HR/L&D enables and measures; a small Coaching Council stewards standards, artifacts, and storytelling.

Governance keeps the air clean. Set minimum standards (for example, weekly 1:1s for all people managers), run light quality audits, publish bright spots, and refresh templates annually. What gets normalized gets done.

*“The score takes care of itself.” — Bill Walsh, The Score Takes Care of Itself*

### Leader role-modeling and manager basics

If the OS is the wiring, leaders are the current. At the top, model narrative decisions (write the criteria and the why), run no-blame postmortems, ask more than you tell, and do “disagree and commit” in public when it’s time to move. Satya Nadella’s pivot at Microsoft from “know-it-all” to “learn-it-all” shows what happens when curiosity is modeled with teeth.

For people managers, basics are non-negotiable: hold a weekly 1:1 with a clear contract and a small owned next step; give strengths-based, behavior-specific feedback weekly; capture decisions with owners and dates; run a quarterly growth conversation. None of this is fancy. All of it is culture.

### Integrate coaching with talent processes

When coaching shows up in hiring, onboarding, performance, learning, and succession, it becomes the water people swim in, not a swim class they attend.

<b>Talent process</b>	<b>Coaching integration</b>	<b>Artifact</b>
Hiring	Assess for coachability and coaching skill with structured interviews and work samples	Interview guide; role-play prompt
Onboarding	30–60–90 plan, mentor/peer coach, early wins and learning interviews	30–60–90 template; learning interview guide
Performance	Monthly check-ins and feedforward; no surprises; calibrate with exemplars	Check-in agenda; five-line summary
Learning (L&D)	Practice labs, group/peer coaching, coach-the-coach sessions	Playbooks; peer circle guides
Recognition	Celebrate coaching behaviors (team growth, internal promotion, talent exports)	Recognition criteria
Succession	Bench reviews (“ready in 0/6/12 months”), stretch roles paired with coaching plans	Succession grid; development plan

## A simple maturity model (to diagnose and aim)

<b>Level</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Signals</b>
1. Ad Hoc	Heroic individuals; coaching = training event	Inconsistent 1:1s; low decision hygiene; feedback sporadic
2. Emerging	Manager basics defined; pilots running	Weekly 1:1s >60%; some decision logs; peer circles in pockets
3. Programmatic	Standards + artifacts org-wide	Weekly 1:1s >80%; routine AARs; coaching in performance cycles
4. Cultural Reflex	Coaching is “how we work”	High safety; fast learning loops; strong internal mobility and bench

## Scale-up pathway: pilot → rollout → embed → sustain

Pilot with purpose. Pick two use cases (for example, first-time managers and the product–sales interface), set 90-day goals and simple metrics (1:1 adherence, decision clarity, rescue rate), run peer circles, and harvest stories.

Roll out with practice. Train managers in small cohorts using labs, not lectures. Equip them with the minimum viable artifacts. Set and communicate standards (weekly 1:1s are not optional).

Embed in systems. Bake coaching into performance, talent reviews, and program design. Audit lightly (sample notes and memos for clarity, owners, dates). Tell the story with bright spots, not slogans.

Sustain with stewardship. Rotate champions, refresh templates annually, run quarterly “coach-the-coach” sessions, and review metrics with the same seriousness you give to revenue and cost.

## What to measure (lightly, consistently)

Leading indicators tell you if the routines are happening: percent of managers holding weekly 1:1s, percent of decisions captured with criteria and owners, number of AARs run, peer circle attendance, and a coaching NPS (“Was this conversation useful?”).

Lagging indicators show impact: decision latency, cross-functional escalation volume, internal mobility and promotion rates, manager effectiveness scores, engagement items on clarity/safety, regrettable attrition, and succession bench health.

Quality audits keep the signal clean. Each month, sample a few 1:1 notes and decision summaries and score them for clarity, criteria, owners/dates, and follow-through. Coach the coaches—kindly, specifically, and in public where it helps the whole system learn.

## Technology and tooling (behavior first, then tools)

Tools should reduce friction, not excuse behavior. Use shared 1:1 docs, a decision log, a lightweight tracker for commitments, and async voice notes for tone. Link your LMS to on-the-job prompts (a two-minute video + one live rep this week). Surface manager effectiveness in your HRIS, but respect privacy and ethics—coaching notes are not surveillance fodder.

“Working Backwards” (Colin Bryar & Bill Carr) reminds us that templates shape thinking. Choose the smallest set that encourages clarity without drowning people in process.

## Incentives, policies, and guardrails

Make time for coaching explicit (for example, 10–15 percent of manager time). Put coaching behaviors on manager scorecards and gate promotions on manager effectiveness, not just individual performance. Protect safety: permission-based advice, real confidentiality, and a clear path to escalate well-being or legal issues to HR/EAP. No retaliation for candid participation—say it and enforce it.

## Case studies: real and composite

Adobe’s “Check-In” (real). Adobe moved away from annual performance reviews toward frequent, manager-owned check-ins and feedforward. Managers were trained to have ongoing coaching conversations; the company reported time saved and higher engagement as conversations shifted from judgment to development. The system changed the talk; the talk changed the work.

Atlassian’s Team Playbook (real). Atlassian publishes plays like the “Health Monitor” and “DACI” that teams can run on their own. These rituals embed

coaching behaviors (candor, reflection, decision clarity) into meetings. Decision hygiene and learning loops become normal because the plays are findable and simple.

WD-40's "learning moments" (real). CEO Garry Ridge institutionalized the language of "learning moments" for mistakes—no blame, only learning. The vocabulary is a ritual. It lowers the cost of bringing bad news early, which raises the speed of improvement.

Composite scale-up. A growth-stage tech firm set two standards (weekly 1:1s; decision logs), launched peer circles for new managers, and ran quarterly coach-the-coach labs. Within two quarters, time to decision dropped and internal promotions rose. Exit interviews began to include a new phrase: "I learned here."

## Anti-patterns and antidotes

Training-only mindset. The event replaces the habit. Antidote: build the OS—rituals, cadences, artifacts—then practice them in labs.

Executive fixing. Leaders solve at the wrong altitude. Antidote: narrative memos, public AARs, and visible "disagree and commit."

Tool before behavior. Platform sprawl, no practice. Antidote: smallest viable templates, then reps.

Safety theater. Posters without protection. Antidote: enforce norms, repair breaches, protect dissenters.

## A practical 90-day blueprint

Days 1–15: Declare the why. Name two non-negotiables (weekly 1:1s; five-line decision closes). Publish templates. Recruit a Coaching Council.

Days 16–45: Pilot two teams. Run manager labs. Start peer circles. Measure adherence and usefulness, not perfection.

Days 46–75: Expand to two more functions. Begin light audits. Capture and share bright-spot stories (before → after → how).

Days 76–90: Integrate into performance check-ins. Review metrics with executives. Adjust templates. Announce quarter-two focus (for example, feedback/feedforward reps).

Keep the moves small and the closes strong. Culture is compounding interest on useful habits.

## Reflection

Which single ritual—weekly 1:1s, five-line decision closes, or AARs—would change the quality of work in your team this month? What will you remove to make space for it? Whose visible role-modeling will make it real?

## Selected sources and further reading

- Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (leaders as culture shapers).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety and learning).
- James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (systems over goals; habits that stick).
- Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (feedforward and identity shifts).
- Colin Bryar & Bill Carr, *Working Backwards* (narrative memos and decision discipline).
- Liz Wiseman, *Multipliers* (amplifying capability).
- Michael D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days* (role transitions and early wins).
- Atlassian Team Playbook (public plays for decision and reflection).
- Case references: Adobe Check-In, WD-40 “learning moments,” Microsoft’s “learn-it-all” posture.

Shift from craft to system. When leaders model curiosity, when rituals are light and reliable, when artifacts make clarity cheap, and when talent processes reward the behaviors you want—coaching stops being a program and becomes the way your organization breathes.

# Chapter 16: Measuring What Matters

*Let the Numbers Sing Without Drowning the Music*

*“Metrics are stories trying to be heard.”*  
— John Doerr, *Measure What Matters*

## Prelude: The Lighthouse and the Wake

Picture yourself at the helm of a ship in thick fog. The **lighthouse flash** ahead—your *leading indicators*—warns of hidden reefs before disaster strikes. The **white wake** behind—your *lagging indicators*—reveals whether the last turn was wise. Coach-leaders learn to read both the light and the ripples, adjusting course long before the rocks appear.

## Why Leaders Must Weigh, Not Count

Research shows that the quality of a direct manager explains the lion’s share of employee engagement. Yet dashboards overflow with vanity digits: meetings booked, emails fired, “coffee chats” logged. Numbers that glitter but do not guide are the barnacles of modern management. This chapter scrapes them away.

## The Metric Map: Leading vs Lagging

	<b>Leading (Lighthouse)</b>	<b>Lagging (Wake)</b>
Time horizon	Real-time → next 30 days	Quarter → year
Nature	Behaviours & signals	Outcomes & results
Sample metrics	• Quality-of-1:1 score • Feed-forward frequency • Psychological-safety pulse	• Goal attainment • Engagement index • Voluntary attrition
Why it matters	Enables course-correction before mistakes compound	Confirms whether strategy worked

*A good rule: three leading metrics for every two lagging keeps the picture sharp without overloading the crew.*

## Instruments That Breathe

1. **Five-Question Pulse** – a fortnightly micro-survey adapted from Amy Edmondson’s psychological-safety scale plus one open prompt.
2. **Conversational Quality Index (CQI)** – peers shadow a coaching conversation once per quarter with a three-minute rubric (clarity, empathy, actionability).

3. **Slack/Teams Bot** – nudges leaders to log their stance (coach / mentor / direct) after each 1:1; data flows to a live dashboard.

*“It is not enough to count the seeds in the apple; we must count the apples in the seed.”*

— *Stephen R. Covey*

## Review Rhythms — Turning Metrics into Music

- **Weekly 15-Minute Metrics Huddle** — scan leading signals, choose *one* micro-experiment.
- **Monthly Retrospective** — pair leading swings with early lagging shifts; collect stories that explain anomalies.
- **Quarterly Deep Dive** — lay coaching data beside business KPIs; reset targets.

A good rhythm feels like a heartbeat: steady, light, and impossible to forget.

## Case Stories Where Numbers Sparked Change

### Manitowoc Manufacturing

A U.S. plant fought chronic turnover by arming supervisors with stay-survey pulses and coaching logs. Within six months, overall attrition fell 24 percent and first-week quits were nearly halved. Their secret wasn’t richer bonuses but real-time data that made risk visible—and coachable.

### Microsoft’s Culture Reboot

Satya Nadella’s “growth-mindset” crusade rewired managerial conversations toward curiosity and coaching. Engagement climbed, and the company’s market value more than tripled between 2014 and 2022—a testament to dialogue that deepens dividends.

### De Beers’ Digital Coaching Roll-out

The global miner deployed a mobile coaching platform across continents. Within a year, divisional retention outpaced control sites by nine percentage points and internal promotions accelerated—proof that metrics can travel even where roads cannot.

## Guardrails Against Metric Mayhem

Pitfall	Symptom	Antidote
Vanity counts (“hours coached”)	High volume, low behaviour change	Pair every volume metric with a <i>quality</i> twin (e.g., CQI)
Survey fatigue	Response rate below 30 percent	Keep to ≤ 5 questions, rotate themes
Gaming the numbers	Spikes near review dates	Random audits & story-based reports

Pitfall	Symptom	Antidote
Data silos	Metrics live in slides	Single live dashboard + bot alerts

## Quick-Start Checklist

1. **Choose five metrics** (three leading, two lagging) linked to strategy.
2. Build a **two-minute pulse survey** and schedule it.
3. Wire a **Sheet-to-dashboard** feed with automated alerts.
4. Block a **weekly huddle** (15 minutes) for 90 days.
5. Publish a one-page **“Metrics FAQ”** so everyone knows the *why*.

## Reflection Questions

1. Which leading indicator whispers loudest about tomorrow’s results?
2. How will you weave stories around the spine of your dashboard?
3. What ritual can you start this week to turn raw data into richer dialogue?

## Coda: From Data to Dialogue

Numbers, like constellations, find meaning only when someone draws lines between the stars. As a coach-leader you are the cartographer: you choose which dots matter, trace patterns that guide the crew, and name the new sky. The next chapter builds the *Operating System* that makes this stargazing an everyday habit—so insight never drifts alone but always finds its way to action.

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## Selected Sources and Further Reading

- John Doerr, *Measure What Matters* (OKRs and outcomes).
- Douglas W. Hubbard, *How to Measure Anything* (quantifying the intangible).
- Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (psychological safety and learning).
- Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (principles and paradigms).
- W. Edwards Deming, *Out of the Crisis* (systems thinking and continuous improvement).
- Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage* (organizational health as a measurable edge).

- Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (biases that warp measurement).
- James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (systems over goals; habits that stick).
- Marshall Goldsmith, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (feed-forward and identity shifts).
- Case references: Manitowoc Manufacturing stay-survey program, Microsoft's growth-mindset shift, De Beers' mobile coaching analytics.

# Chapter 17: The Coach-Leader’s Operating System

*Where insight becomes muscle memory*

*“We do not rise to the level of our goals; we fall to the level of our systems.”*  
— James Clear, *Atomic Habits*

## Prelude: From Lightning to Wiring

Ideas strike like lightning—brilliant but brief. An operating system is the copper wire that captures that charge and lights every room. When a leader installs a coaching OS, the spark of Chapter 16’s metrics courses through daily routines, weekly cadences, and quarterly reflections until better conversations feel as natural as breathing.

Six months ago, a regional bank replaced sporadic “leadership trainings” with a simple Coaching OS. Managers opened each morning with a three-minute intent note, held Friday one-to-ones using the same four-step arc, and closed every meeting with a five-line decision summary. Payroll data later showed a 28 percent drop in escalations and a 12 percent rise in internal promotions. The lesson: culture changed not by speeches, but by circuitry.

## The Operating-System Mindset

Too many leaders treat coaching as jazz—improvised, mood-driven, reserved for virtuosos. An OS treats coaching like a well-scored symphony: repeatable themes, reliable cues, room for solos but never chaos. **Cue** → **Routine** → **Reward** becomes the hidden staff that holds every note.

### Goal Thinking

Outcome-fixated (“Hit 90 % engagement.”)

Motivates in bursts

Often brittle under stress

### System Thinking

Process-fixated (“Run weekly 1:1s that surface blockers and celebrate wins.”)

Sustains behaviour on autopilot

Adapts and endures

*“Culture is what you allow to happen twice.”*  
— Anonymous agile coach

## Daily Micro-Routines

**Morning Intent (3 minutes).** Before email, jot one relationship you will nudge forward today and one question that will unlock it.

**90-Second Reflection.** After any critical interaction, ask: *What surprised me? What will I do differently next time?*

**The One-Powerful-Question Sticky.** Keep a sticky note on your laptop with a single phrase—“What does great look like?”—and use it at least once every day.

These rituals are the push-ups of coach-leadership: small, sweaty, cumulative.

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## Weekly and Monthly Cadences

- **Monday Metrics Huddle (15 min).** Scan leading indicators, choose a micro-experiment, commit aloud.
- **Friday 1:1 (30 min).** Follow *Contract* → *Explore* → *Decide* → *Commit*; capture a one-sentence takeaway.
- **Monthly Peer Circle (60 min).** Four managers, one hot seat, three rounds of clean questions. Candour sharpens, ego dulls.

*“Excellence is the next five minutes, repeated.”*

— Tim Ferriss

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## Core Checklists

1. **Pre-1:1 Prep**
  - What has the coachee accomplished since last session?
  - Where did they struggle?
  - What result matters most next week?
  - Which question could unlock progress?
2. **Feedback Delivery (SBI + Feedforward)**
  - *Situation* → *Behaviour* → *Impact*, then,
  - “What would it look like if...?”
3. **Decision Clarity**
  - Decision, Criteria, Owner, Deadline, Next Review.

*Checklists free the mind to listen.*

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## Question Banks

- **Opening Curiosity:** “What feels most alive in your work right now?”
- **Perspective Shift:** “If our top customer told this story, what chapter would we be in?”
- **Commitment Catalyst:** “On a scale of one to ten, how locked in are you— and what would raise it by one?”

A question bank is a gardener’s shed—pick the right tool, prune without wounding.

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## Artifacts & Templates

- **1:1 Doc Template** (shared, running log).
- **Coaching Log** (auto-tallies CQI).
- **Five-Line Decision Memo** (Decision, Why, Options Rejected, Owner, Date).

*“Checklists turn intent into safety nets.”*  
— Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto*

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## The 90-Day Implementation Roadmap

Phase	Days	Focus	Milestones
<b>Install</b>	1-30	Announce OS, train pilot cohort, ship templates	100 % managers join kickoff; first Friday 1:1 logged
<b>Integrate</b>	31-60	Expand to all managers, launch Monday huddles, start pulse surveys	70 % CQI entries; peer circles live
<b>Institutionalize</b>	61-90	Light audits, celebrate bright spots, link habits to performance reviews	Attrition trend noted; first promotion tied to coaching metrics

By Day 90, routines hum, metrics pulse, stories spread.

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## Measurement & Feedback Loop

- **Habit Adherence Dashboard.** Tracks frequency of 1:1s, decision memos, CQI scores.

- **Monthly Correlation Review.** Compare leading habit metrics with lagging outcomes—engagement, retention, goal completion.
- Celebrate pattern, investigate anomaly, tweak routine.

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### Pitfalls & Repair Kits

Snag	Why It Hurts	Repair
Tool Overload	People drown in platforms	Return to minimum viable template
Leader Relapse	Old habits resurface	Buddy system; shadow review
Data Fatigue	Metrics become wallpaper	Rotate spotlight metric quarterly

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### Sustain & Scale

- **Quarterly Coach-the-Coach Labs** to rehearse, record, and review real sessions.
- **Annual Template Refresh**—spring-clean language, retire clutter.
- **Coaching Council**—small, cross-level group that guards clarity, showcases success, and revises the OS when strategy shifts.

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### Reflection & Action Worksheet

1. Which micro-routine will you test tomorrow morning?
2. What will you stop doing to make space for it?
3. Who will hold you gently accountable?  
*Write your answers now; tomorrow always arrives faster than resolve.*

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### Selected Sources and Further Reading

- James Clear, *Atomic Habits* (systems over goals).
- Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto* (discipline through checklists).
- Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* (habit loop mechanics).
- Colin Bryar & Bill Carr, *Working Backwards* (operating mechanisms at Amazon).
- Liz Wiseman, *Multipliers* (leaders who amplify capacity).
- Michael D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days* (transition frameworks).

- Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage* (organizational health).
- Case references: Adobe’s “Check-In” system, Atlassian’s Team Playbook, WD-40’s “learning moments.”

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*An operating system is invisible until it fails—or until it lifts everyone who touches it. Install yours with care, nurture it with rhythm, and watch ordinary days compound into extraordinary culture.*

# Conclusion: Conversations Transform Performance

*The smallest unit of change is a better conversation.*

*“The quality of everything we do depends on the quality of the thinking we do first. And the quality of that thinking depends on the quality of our conversations.”*

— Nancy Kline, *Time to Think*

## The Thread That Runs Through It All

Across this book we examined mindsets, questions, feedback loops, and operating systems, yet one truth braided them together: leadership is a series of conversations. Words spoken—or withheld—shape what people believe is possible, how safe they feel to try, and how fiercely they commit when the moment matters. Every coaching stance, checklist, metric, and ritual you explored is merely scaffolding for dialogue that lifts performance.

Think of conversation as water in a riverbed. The banks—your systems and structures—direct the flow, but it is the water that nourishes fields, turns wheels, and carves canyons over time. Change the water’s clarity and speed, and the landscape follows.

## A Call to Practice

Big transformations rarely begin with grand speeches; they start with a single, well-timed question. Here is an invitation in three movements—**Start Small, Stay Consistent, Scale Your Reach.**

### 1. Start Small

- Choose one routine—perhaps the *Friday 1:1 arc* or the *Five-Line Decision Close*.
- Run it this week exactly as designed. Resist the temptation to embellish; mastery loves simplicity.

### 2. Stay Consistent

- Tie the routine to an existing habit (calendar alert, team stand-up, morning coffee).
- Track adherence for four weeks. Consistency turns novelty into norm.

### 3. Scale Your Reach

- Share what changed—one metric, one story.

- Invite a peer to adopt the same routine; offer to shadow each other.
- When two become five, formalize the practice into your team's operating rhythm.

*“Excellence is the next five minutes, lived intentionally.”*

— *Tim Ferriss*

## Your 30-Day Conversation Commitment

1. **Write** a powerful opening question on a sticky note and place it where you work.
2. **Schedule** a weekly 15-minute reflection to notice what that question unlocked.
3. **Celebrate** one instance—no matter how small—where a better question or deeper listening shifted an outcome.

## Looking Ahead

The tools in this book will age; new research and technology will surface. What endures is the human need to be heard, challenged, and believed in. Guard that need. Let your default setting be curiosity, your rhythm be consistency, and your legacy be the people who found their best thinking in conversation with you.

Now close the book, open your calendar, and set your first conversational experiment. The river is ready to run.