

# Experience

Advice and Inspiration



MANAGING YOURSELF

## COACHING FOR CHANGE

### How to help employees reach their potential

by Richard Boyatzis, Melvin Smith, and Ellen Van Oosten

**CHANGE IS HARD.** Ask anyone who has tried to switch careers, develop a new skill, improve a relationship, or break a bad habit. And yet for most people change will at some point be necessary—a critical step toward fulfilling their potential and achieving their goals, both at work and at home. They will need support with this process. They'll need a coach.

That's where you come in. Whether you're a boss or a colleague, a friend or a spouse, introverted or extroverted, emotional or analytic, or high or low on the totem pole, you can learn how to facilitate life-enhancing change in those around you.

All three of us work as professional coaches to executives in a variety of career stages, functions, industries, and countries. We've also spent the past two decades investigating how coaching works and training others to do it. We've conducted dozens of longitudinal studies and field experiments to identify evidence-based strategies, and we're sharing them here to ensure that more people are equipped to help others become their best selves.

In 1970 one of us (Richard) developed a theory of intentional change, which has become canon in psychology and management science. Intentional change involves envisioning the ideal self (who you wish to *be* and what you want to *do* in your work and life); exploring the real self (the gaps you need to fill and the strengths that will help you do so); developing a learning agenda (a road map for turning aspirations into reality); and then experimenting and practicing (with new behaviors and roles).

Good coaches help people through this process. Note that we used the word "help," not "guide," "lead," "push," or "pull." You're not there to tell anyone what to do. You're there to ask good questions and listen intently, to offer compassion, to explore a person's individual vision, and to build a caring relationship. Your job is to assist someone else with making a change, and how you go about it matters. You're there to help him or

her spot the learning opportunity, set the groundwork, and see things through. This framework will let you support people with challenges that range from very big (I'm unsatisfied in my career) to relatively small (I'd like to interact with others differently). Here's how it works.

## SPOT THE OPPORTUNITY

If you pay attention, you'll start finding what we call "coachable moments"—opportunities to help people with their development—everywhere. Sometimes people are aware they need to shift gears: The challenge is evident. They get a promotion, are tapped to lead a significant project, or receive some feedback that their approach needs to be retooled. In other cases they experience a wake-up call: They lose their job in the latest downsizing, get a scary health diagnosis, or hit a major birthday milestone. But often they may have only a vague sense or no idea at all that things aren't quite right in their lives.

Let's look at the experiences of two executives. The first, Karen Milley, was the head of R&D at a large consumer goods company and oversaw 60 engineers and scientists. As a leader, she was driven and direct. Her focus was on solving immediate problems, and she got results. But when her manager asked her to enroll in a corporate leadership-development program, she began to wonder if her transactional, no-nonsense style was really helping her get the best performance out of her team.

The second executive, Ray Lewis, was a corporate accounts manager at his family's business, an environmental emergency response service, and on

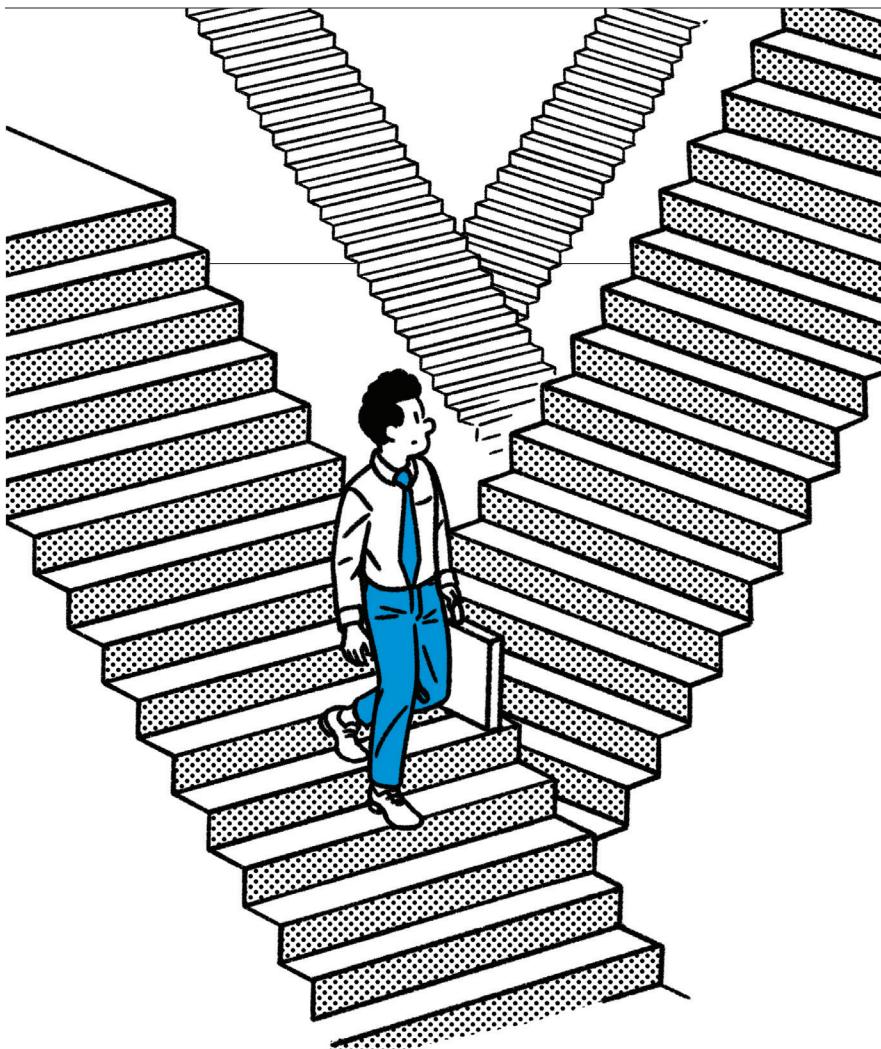
track to succeed his father as president. He'd even enrolled in an executive MBA course to hone his leadership skills. But he was feeling increasingly uneasy.

In both cases, the learning opportunity was clear. Milley was a standout manager who hoped to reach the C-suite, but she hadn't yet developed an inspiring leadership style. Lewis had never truly thought about or decided on his ideal career path. He'd just followed the one laid out for him, and if you asked him about taking over from his dad, his lack of genuine excitement came through. He needed to discover passion for his work.

Critically, Milley and Lewis were also ready to grow. Both were finally willing to look at an important aspect of their lives in new or different ways. When you're considering whether to invest in coaching someone, you need to ask yourself: Is this individual open to change? Is he or she willing to engage in the reflection and experimentation necessary to make it happen? Research by Bruce Avolio of the University of Washington's Foster School of Business and Sean Hannah of Wake Forest University shows that it's useful for companies to assess and sometimes enhance the readiness of employees they've chosen for leadership development; otherwise, it won't be as effective.

## SET THE GROUNDWORK

Numerous studies have shown that people tend to achieve more, in a more sustainable way, when they're in a positive state both psychologically and physically. How can you get someone into the right mindset? By coaching with compassion. You start by showing



genuine care and concern for the other person so that the two of you can build what we call a “resonant relationship.” You also need to display curiosity—asking exploratory, open-ended questions designed to help the person realize his or her personal vision, which becomes the context for your work together.

Unfortunately, when faced with a coachable moment, most of us tend to do the opposite. We drill down into the problem and then offer advice and solutions. As an engineer-turned-marketing-executive we know once said, “When people come to me with a problem, I see the problem, not the person. Actually, I see people as problem-bearing platforms!” This is coaching for compliance, and it can be effective

in helping someone achieve a specific predetermined goal, such as earning a promotion. But when it comes to broader behavioral goals, such as becoming a dynamic leader or a great listener or finding a better work/life balance, this strategy is less successful. Indeed, as our studies and other research have shown, it can trigger a stress response that hinders rather than helps progress.

In work with our Case Western Reserve University colleague Anthony Jack, for example, we found that students who were coached for compliance—with an emphasis on targets and on challenges they needed to overcome—were left feeling “guilty and self-conscious.” Coaching that instead focused on personal dreams and how people might achieve them,

in contrast, elicited positive emotions and was deemed by study subjects to be “inspiring and caring.” What’s more, our neuroimaging studies showed that it helped activate areas of their brains associated with openness to new ideas, change, and learning.

Compassionate coaching continues with the discovery of the ideal self—getting the person you’re helping to tell you about his or her values, passions, identity, and hopes for the future. This requires you to set aside your own biases, assumptions, and experience, and engage in what MIT professor Ed Schein called “humble inquiry.” You must demonstrate sincere interest in the person, convey empathy for his or her situation, communicate your deep desire to help, and then let him or her do at least 80% of the talking.

For example, you might ask Milley: Who are you at your very best? What kind of leader do you want to be? How do you want others in the organization to see you? What does success look like to you? What position do you ultimately want to attain? You might ask Lewis: What kind of work do you feel drawn to do? What gives you the greatest energy and excitement as you think about your future? What do you really want to do, and how does that differ from what you feel you should do? Twenty years from now, what would you like to say you’ve accomplished? (And the best last question is always: What other ideas come to mind as you think about this?)

Angela Passarelli, a professor at the College of Charleston, has compared the outcomes of a coaching experience centered on this vision of a positive future with those of coaching that instead

## Experience

focused on career advancement and encouraged people to work through their current problems. She discovered that participants who experienced the first kind of coaching felt happier, expressed higher aspirations, were willing to exert significantly more effort in pursuing their goals, and found more joy in doing so.

We advise everyone we coach to cap off the ideal-self discussions we've had—typically they involve multiple conversations—by crafting a personal vision statement. (Dewitt Jones, a prominent corporate trainer, goes so far as to ask that it be boiled down into a short phrase of six or so words and then memorized and repeated as a daily mantra.) This practice keeps people focused on their desire to change, rather than their obligation to. Milley's personal vision statement was "Live freely, in good health, with integrity, in a future filled with love and hope." Lewis's was "Enjoy the freedom to travel the world, meet interesting people, and pursue an exciting, passion-filled life of learning."

Next, you want to guide the person you're coaching toward an accurate assessment of his or her real self. This is not just about listing strengths and weaknesses. And it certainly doesn't involve highlighting places where the person needs improvement. Babson professor Scott Taylor, who has studied self-awareness for decades, suggests that it has two components: what people know about themselves, and their understanding of how others experience and think of them. The point here is to identify the areas where your coachee's perceptions differ from those of others and, even more critically, where his or her ideal self and real self are aligned or not.



Formal or informal 360-degree feedback can be useful here. So can additional nonleading, nonjudgmental questions, especially ones that focus on the person's best qualities and how they can be leveraged. Even when discussing areas for development, it's important to keep those being coached in that positive emotional state. As Andrew Carnegie reportedly once said, "Men are developed the same way that gold is mined. When gold is mined, several tons of dirt must be moved to get an ounce of gold, but one doesn't go into the mine looking for dirt—one goes in looking for gold."

We recommend capturing this work in a "personal balance sheet." In devising it people should consider not only their current strengths and weaknesses but also their most distinctive qualities and enduring characteristics—their traits, habits, and competencies that have held steady over time. This enables them to clarify both what is going well and what might need to change relative to their long-term vision. Milley recognized

that while she excelled at maintaining her composure in difficult times and reading power dynamics throughout the organization, she wasn't adequately demonstrating the care and empathy for others that she genuinely felt. Lewis realized that his strong suit was being a visionary and adapting easily to diverse environments—and that he didn't want to continue subordinating his own dreams to perceived obligations and the expectations of others.

Next comes the learning agenda. How, exactly, will the individual you're coaching move from point A to point B? Again, we advocate for a focus on existing strengths, passions, and values. Ask how the knowledge, skills, and traits the person already possesses can be used to close any relevant gaps, and what behavioral change he or she is most excited to try.

The learning agenda is not a performance improvement plan designed to address shortcomings; those feel like work and inhibit the development



## A big part of a coach's job is to help people experiment with new behaviors, test different tactics, and then practice and perfect those that prove most effective.

process. The idea is to leave people feeling energized and empowered to improve. Milley decided that she wanted to be more of a coach and less of a commander and become more emotionally aware and mindful of others. Lewis's priorities included more fully integrating his personal passions with his professional goals, developing stronger relationships with key people within and outside the business, and making time to reflect on what was most important to him in life. That included activities like hiking, martial arts, and other sports; work with youth groups; meals and get-togethers with friends, family, and coworkers; and occasional extended breaks away from home and the office.

### SEE THINGS THROUGH

Change efforts of any kind require time and energy. Even the best-laid plans sometimes fail or take a while to pan out. Research by Philippa Lally and her colleagues at University College London found that it takes 18 to 254 days to form a new habit. Skill building, relationship management, and career change require even greater commitments, with many stops and starts.

So a big part of a coach's job is to keep people progressing in the right direction—experimenting with new behaviors, testing different tactics, and then practicing and perfecting those that prove most effective.

Focused on her learning goals, Milley met regularly with her coach to review progress. She worked to shift out of her always-busy problem-solver mode and into being more approachable, kind, and playful with her team. She committed

to spending more time with her direct reports in an effort to better understand their experiences and soon established more-authentic relationships.

Lewis and his coach also continued to check in periodically to review his progress and discuss certain unreconciled issues. But it took an extended vacation abroad—that is, the time for deep reflection Lewis had deeply desired—for things to finally click. Not long after it, he left the family business and started his own successful company.

The business of learning, growth, and changing one's identity and habits is not a solo act. It's so challenging that the people you coach will need continued support not only from you but also from an extended circle of others. Kathy Kram, a professor emeritus at Boston University's Questrom School of Business, and Monica Higgins of Harvard University's Graduate School of Education call this circle "a developmental network." We recommend that coachees create a personal board of advisers made up of role models for the types of behaviors they aspire to. The idea is to identify a group of people who have a stake in an individual's ultimate success and can serve as sources of inspiration and sometimes even accountability.

If you're a team leader, peer coaching is another powerful option. If you train others in the intentional change framework, they can serve as compassionate catalysts, seeing their colleagues through the transformation they've started and perhaps even helping them identify and embark on the next one. We've found that one-on-one peer relationships work well, but so do small groups of five to 12 peers.

When Carlos De Barnola, then the director of HR for the Iberian division of Covidien, brought peer coaching to his company, he asked each person to pair up with one teammate and talk, with one of the three of us in the room to help facilitate the conversation. Very quickly, people began to show more concern, ask good questions, and build real, trusting relationships. After a while, Barnola told these pairs to find another pair. They formed quartets, and soon we, the professionals, were able to withdraw entirely while the coaching continued.

**IF YOU'RE A** manager, your most important job is to help those around you reach their greatest potential. Having been coached themselves, Karen Milley and Ray Lewis now bring what they've learned to their teams. "Today I give people permission to have two or three scenarios of a possible future, and I assure them that we'll figure out the path that's best for them," Milley says. "I'm seeing that compassion with each other leads to compassion with customers, constituents, and all others, which creates performance."

We agree: When you coach with compassion, it becomes contagious.

**HBR Reprint** R1905L



**RICHARD BOYATZIS** is a Distinguished University Professor at Case Western Reserve University. **MELVIN SMITH** is a professor of organizational behavior at Case Western. **ELLEN VAN OOSTEN** is an associate professor of organizational behavior at Case Western. They are the cofounders of the Coaching Research Lab and the authors of *Helping People Change* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2019).

Copyright © Harvard Business Publishing. All Rights Reserved. This content is intended for individual research use only, subject to the following:

Unless permission is expressly granted in a separate license, this content may NOT be used for classroom or teaching use, which includes teaching materials, electronic reserves, course packs or persistent linking from syllabi. Please consult your institution's librarian about the nature of relevant licenses held by your institution and the restrictions that may or may not apply.

Unless permission is expressly granted in a separate license, this content may NOT be used in corporate training and/or as corporate learning materials. For corporate users, please consult the specific terms of your company's license(s) for complete information and restrictions.

For more information and teaching resources from Harvard Business Publishing including Harvard Business School Cases, eLearning products, and business simulations please visit [hbsp.harvard.edu](http://hbsp.harvard.edu).