

ADAPTATION 2 OF 4 — LONG-FORM ESSAY

What Good Coaching Leaves Out

For the argument that needs the full page.

Excerpt drawn from approx. 4:01–14:43 (full segment) of the full recording.

There's a version of leadership that mistakes presence for value: the manager who has an answer for everything, who steps in before the silence gets uncomfortable, who corrects the plan before the team has finished proposing it, who explains the lesson before anyone has had the chance to miss it on their own. All of this can look like help, and sometimes it is, but more often it's intervention dressed up as guidance, leaving the other person with less room to think than they had before the manager arrived.

The four coaching behaviors worth paying attention to, care, focus on strengths, restraint after failure, and the habit of celebrating what worked, share something underneath the surface. Each one asks the leader to do less, not by putting in less effort, but by interfering less: trading the reflex to jump in, correct, or perform competence for something quieter, and in the long run more useful, room for someone else's competence to develop.

Take care first. It sounds like the softest of the four, almost incidental, but the pattern is specific: people can tell when a manager's concern is real, and they respond to it not with gratitude but with trust, which is the actual currency that makes coaching possible at all. Care isn't a behavior you perform for effect. It shows up, or it doesn't, in what you choose to notice about someone's development and what you choose to overlook, in whether you remember what they told you weeks ago about what they wanted to improve, and in whether that memory shapes how you talk to them today.

Most performance reviews spend their word count on what's broken. Fixing what's broken feels like leadership. It isn't, always. People improve faster in areas where they already have some traction, and a coach who spends the bulk of their limited time chasing deficits is fighting the direction learning naturally wants to go. Strength, not deficiency, is where growth compounds fastest. Play to it, whatever that costs in the appearance of thoroughness.

Punish a mistake and watch what happens next: the next mistake gets hidden, not fixed. That's the cost most managers don't count. The reflex to punish, or just to visibly disapprove, comes from a reasonable place, since mistakes are costly and costly things seem to deserve consequences. But a team that hides its mistakes from you is a team you can no longer actually coach. Better to walk the person through what went wrong: choose curiosity over a verdict, and stay interested a beat longer than instinct wants to allow.

And then, the smallest gesture, easy enough to skip that it usually gets skipped: taking the time to celebrate what went right. Not a speech, not a performance of enthusiasm, just the plain acknowledgment that something worked, said directly to the person who made it work. Positive reinforcement works. It always has, whatever the latest management book claims to have discovered about it. Underneath all four behaviors is the same move: get out of the way of the person's own competence, instead of standing in front of it.

Nowhere is that clearer than in the way a leader asks questions, which can be either the most useful tool in coaching or its most disguised form of control. A closed question invites a yes or no and teaches almost nothing to either party. A leading question, dressed up as curiosity, is really just an opinion with a question mark attached to it. Even the word "why" sounds like genuine inquiry, but it tends to put people on the defensive, because it asks them to justify themselves rather than think out loud. The alternative, asking what makes someone think what they think, hands the thinking back to the person who has to live with the answer, instead of asking them to defend a decision that's already been made.

This is where restraint becomes technique rather than personality. A good question doesn't just gather information the leader happens to be missing. It forces the other person to construct an answer out loud, a different and more demanding cognitive act than simply agreeing with someone else's plan. The leader who resists the urge to supply the answer is doing the harder, less visible work of making someone else's thinking sharper, question by question.

Listening carries the same discipline, though it rarely gets treated as a skill on its own. Real listening isn't nodding while composing your next sentence, or holding still while running through your own list of problems for the day, or hearing what's said and then finishing the other person's sentences for them. The bar is being able to summarize, accurately, what the other person just said, a surprisingly high bar most people don't clear even when they believe they have.

Most people, in a given day, are not truly listened to by anyone. The leader who manages it, consistently, gives something rare enough that it changes how a team behaves around them: more forthcoming, more willing to say the difficult thing out loud, simply because someone finally noticed the difference between hearing and understanding.

The GROW model brings this same logic to its most structured form, and its four steps ask as much of the coach as of the person being coached. Setting the goal belongs to the person being coached, not the leader, however tempting it is to suggest a better one. Assessing reality means setting aside your own assumptions long enough to see what's actually true, not what's convenient to believe about the situation. Generating options means resisting the pull to hand over your own answer, even when you're fairly certain you already know it. And deciding on the action, the final and most consequential step, has to belong entirely to the person who will carry it out, since a decision made for someone rarely survives contact with the work of actually doing it.

A coach who makes that decision for someone hasn't coached them. They've simply told them what to do.

What ties all of this together is less a technique than a posture: the coach's job is not to be indispensable, but to make their own presence, gradually and deliberately, less necessary. The care, the patience with failure, the discipline of asking instead of telling, the willingness to actually listen, the structure that keeps decisions where they belong: each one is a version of the same idea. Getting out of the way, so that someone else's thinking finally has room to arrive.