

ADAPTATION 4 OF 4 — EBOOK CHAPTER

Where GROW Goes Wrong

For the material that's ready to become a book.

Excerpt drawn from approx. 10:59–14:43 of the full recording.

Ask a room full of managers if they know the GROW model, and most hands go up. Ask them to run a real coaching conversation through it, out loud, and the model tends to fall apart in the same four places every time. Not because it's a bad framework. Because each of its four steps has an easy way to fake it.

Start with Goal, the step everyone gets right on paper and wrong in practice. The failure here rarely looks like skipping the question. It looks like asking it and accepting the first answer that comes back, usually something vague enough to mean nothing: "get better at this," "improve the situation," "do more." A goal that vague isn't a starting point. It's a placeholder dressed up as one, and the coach who lets it stand has already let the whole conversation off the hook before it began.

Reality is where the model breaks down most often, and for a reason nobody likes to admit: honest reality checks are uncomfortable, and discomfort is the first thing most conversations quietly optimize away. The tell is a particular kind of politeness. Someone names a problem, softens it immediately, and the coach, wanting to keep things pleasant, lets the softened version stand. Revenue is "a bit behind," rather than down twenty percent. A key skill is "still developing," rather than absent. None of this is dishonesty exactly. It's the ordinary human preference for a version of the truth that's easier to sit with, and a coach who doesn't push past it is coaching against a fiction.

Options fails in the opposite direction: not through avoidance, but through speed. Someone names a problem, the coach already has an answer in mind, and the "options" step becomes a formality on the way to the coach's preferred solution, dressed up as a question so it feels collaborative. Real option-generating is slower and, frankly, more annoying than that. It means sitting with the discomfort of a few genuinely bad ideas on the table before a good one shows up, because the good ones rarely arrive first. Skip that discomfort and you get options in name only, a single idea wearing a plural.

Then there's Will, which fails in the most familiar way of all: the coach, sure they already know the right move, nudges the conversation toward it instead of letting the other person land on their own answer. It rarely looks like an order. It looks like a leading question, a raised eyebrow, a "have you considered," repeated until the person being coached arrives, gratefully, at the exact conclusion the coach had in mind the whole time. This isn't coaching. It's steering with extra steps, and the person on the receiving end usually knows it, even when they can't quite say why the conversation felt hollow.

What connects all four failures isn't laziness. It's that each shortcut feels, in the moment, like the reasonable thing to do. Accepting a vague goal feels efficient. Softening a hard truth feels kind. Moving fast past options feels decisive. Nudging someone toward the right answer feels helpful. None of these instincts are malicious. They're just the path of least resistance, and the model exists precisely because that path leads somewhere worse than the discomfort it avoids.

Used honestly, GROW isn't difficult to understand. It's difficult to sit through, which is a different problem entirely, and the only real fix for it is noticing, step by step, exactly where the temptation to shortcut shows up, and choosing the slower version anyway.