



## **Challenging Coaching – Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS**

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Consider a continuum from 0 to 10, with 0 representing a coaching style that is supportive, attending to the clients agenda, with empathy, summarizing and active listening, and where 10 represents a challenging coaching style which positively confronts, holds the client accountable, provides honest feedback, challenges assumptions and the coach uses intuition and takes risks. Everyone has a natural coaching style and so if you were to assess your style or default starting position on this continuum where would you be? Maybe zero, three, eight, or maybe ten? When doing this exercise with coaches, there seems to be a typical range between 3 and 6. This is not surprising as most coaches want to help and support people, and when we started coaching we would have scored ourselves a four on this spectrum.

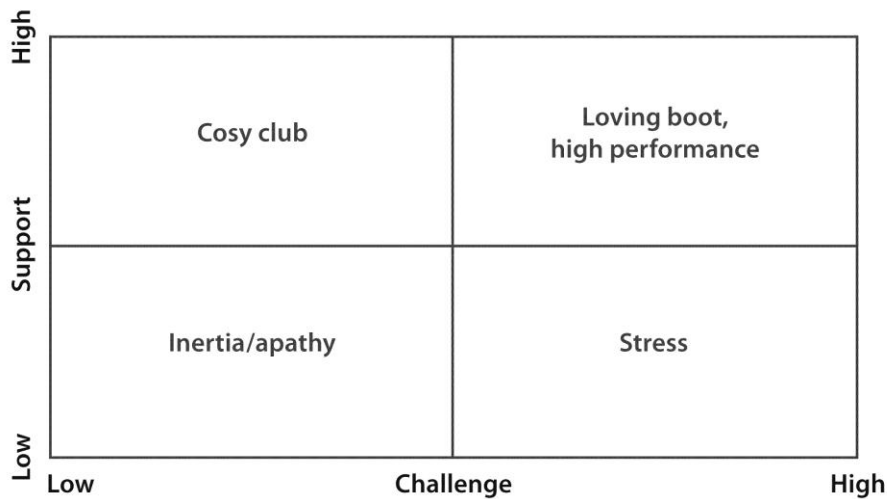
However, our style has changed as the world has changed and it is now time for coaching to become more challenging and for coaches to develop the skills so that they can stretch their coaching style up to a 10 on this continuum.

Coaching is a very young profession which accelerated its development by using many of the supportive skills and approaches of its sister profession of counseling. This has undoubtedly served coaching well and it is now a mainstream development intervention with competency frameworks and codes of ethics. However, we would argue that the legacy of counseling is now holding back coaching and preventing it from becoming a real transformational force within leadership development.

The traditional notions of being non-directive, holding the coachee's agenda and building rapport are foundations for effective coaching, but also come with limitations and risks. There is the risk that the coach colludes with the coachee, only asking questions in a very supportive fashion, while being non-judgmental. If a coach holds strictly to the coachee's agenda irrelevance occurs as the conversation is detached from the wider organisational context. How many coaches have ever asked themselves the following question in the midst of coaching session - "How did we get here and what on earth has this got to do with the people that are paying me to be in front of this person right now?" Also, there is the risk of self-obsession, focusing only on the individual's short term needs or rewards which fueled by the 'me, me, me' attitude that pervaded in the business culture of the boom years and which many commentators believed had a significant impact on the lead up to the subsequent financial crisis.

It is time to change and move away from a single focus on support. The diagram below demonstrates that there are two variables essential to maximize performance: support and challenge. It is when these two are out of balance that performance suffers. Too often in business (and in life in general) people actively avoid challenging interventions fearing that these will cause disruption and create ill-will. However, a high level of challenge is not inherently 'wrong' and in fact the absence of challenge in a business environment risks complacency, indulgence, apathy and disinterest. When the stakes are high, a lack of challenge causes people to 'play small' in an environment that is forever demanding that

they 'step up'. The key is that challenge is provided alongside equally high levels of support. The support skills of coaching are used to create the conditions in which a coachee feels secure enough to disclose private thoughts and feelings, and in turn develop awareness. There must also be challenge to push this self awareness further and to move to sustainable development.



The high support / high challenge area of this matrix is where growth and development can be maximised. This is the 'loving boot' which can stimulate and 'kick' a person to pursue a new direction or goal and to achieve high performance. This is the optimum balance of support and challenge where coaches can unlock the highest potential for both individual and organisation.

We propose a conscious, intelligent use of both support and challenge skills where the coach can dynamically shift depending upon the circumstances and environment. Take the metaphor of a train on a track; it can only go backwards and forwards and on a limited gradient and then compare this with an all terrain vehicle, which has the power and ability to go in any direction as the environment changes. If we switch back to coaching, with our preferred style and default position, without knowing it the coach is like a train on a track, only able to go one way. However, if a coach develops awareness of the value of challenge they will be more like the all terrain vehicle, being able to serve both individuals and the sponsoring organisation more effectively to create sustained business change. This is about the ability and choice of the coach - one default style is limiting whereas a choice of approaches is robust and effective.

So what are the skills which a coach needs to develop to avoid the risks highlighted above and ensure an optimum balanced of support and challenge? Through our coaching experience and observation of the economic, social and business trends we distilled the essence of our experience into the five cornerstones of a more challenging coaching stance known as FACTS coaching:



- **Feedback** - providing challenging feedback that informs and inspires, and ensures that praise and recognition for a job well done are balanced with honest feedback on mistakes, learning, and failures.
- **Accountability** - coaching clients are held accountable for commitments without blame or shame. Accountability is extended from personal commitments to alignment with the values, strategy, and ethos of the wider organisation. The coach anticipates the rising tide of accountability in the world at large and is a role model this behaviour in their daily work.
- **Courageous goals** - moving beyond rational, incremental goal-setting models such as SMART, to goal-setting that engages the right-brain attributes of courage, excitement, inspiration, and transformation.
- **Tension**—tension is constructive and is used to optimise performance without risking burnout. Tension in a conversation can be calibrated and dynamically adjusted to ensure peak performance.
- **Systems thinking**— coaching within the “big picture” issues such as sustainability, values, ethics, and the long term performance that reaches beyond the immediate individual and touches on deeper organisational change. The coach can learn from the world of systems thinking which enables the coach to be a positive agent of change for the wider organisation.

By using the acronym FACTS we grounded the approach in a word that sums up a theme of realism, honesty and challenge. Many coaches may say that they do many of these things already, however, we would encourage coaches to ‘turn up the volume’ and consistently do more and take risks to push further. FACTS coaching is not to be regarded as sequential series of steps like other models such as GROW but as an integrated suite of thinking with dynamic elements that interact and overlap. The behaviours and skills in FACTS are not used instead of the supportive skills and models of more traditional coaching approaches but rather to expand on these skills and leverage them to further improve performance and sustain the coaching impact. FACTS should be regarded as a further development of coaching skills once the core skills have been mastered and a firm foundation of a trust and respect has been established. From this starting point, a FACTS approach will provoke performance and change.

In summary, as coaches we need to walk the talk and find the challenging edge of our coaching. The edge that allows us to grow and so inspires our clients to grow with us amidst the shifting environment of business leadership. What is your edge? Are you willing to step up to it and accept the coaching challenge? Are you willing to face the FACTS?'

“Come to the edge.”  
“We can’t. We’re afraid.”  
“Come to the edge.”  
“We can’t. We will fall!”  
“Come to the edge.”  
And they came.  
And he pushed them.  
And they flew.

By Guillaume Apollinaire

Ian and John’s book “Challenging Coaching– Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS” published by Nicholas Brealey Publishing will be available from 5<sup>th</sup> April and is on Amazon for pre-order [http://www.amazon.co.uk/Challenging-Coaching-Traditional-foreword-W-hitmore/dp/1904838391/ref=sr\\_1\\_sc\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1328526587&sr=1-1-spell](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Challenging-Coaching-Traditional-foreword-W-hitmore/dp/1904838391/ref=sr_1_sc_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1328526587&sr=1-1-spell)

Ian and John will be delivering an Alumni Learning Forum event on Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> April at [Connections@trafalgarsquare](mailto:Connections@trafalgarsquare) and Ian will deliver a 2 day workshop on June 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> 2012.