

Classic Coaching

Create 3 experiences for the employee

1. I feel understood.
2. I feel challenged to think.
3. I feel supported to act.

Step 1



Understand Before Solving

Many leaders move too quickly into problem-solving. Coaching starts with understanding.

What to say

- "Walk me through what's happening."
- "What's most challenging about this for you?"
- "How are you experiencing the situation?"

Show active listening

- "Tell me more about that."
- "What else?"
- "Can you give me an example?"

Reflect back

Before asking another question, summarize.

- "So what I'm hearing is..."
- "It sounds like you're feeling..."
- "The part that's most frustrating is..."

Employee: "My team isn't responding to my emails."

Coach: "It sounds like you're putting effort into communicating, but you're not getting the engagement you expected, and that's creating frustration."

This is the moment people feel empathy.

Step 2



Validate Without Agreeing

Many leaders think empathy means agreement, but it doesn't.

What to say

- "I can understand why that would be frustrating."
- "That sounds difficult."
- "Given the situation, it makes sense you'd feel that way."
- "I can see why you're concerned."

Empathy says: "Your reaction makes sense."

Not: "You're right."

This lowers defensiveness and increases trust.

Step 3

Help Them Clarify the Real Issue

People often present symptoms, not problems.

What to say

- "What's the core issue underneath this?"
- "What do you think is really driving this?"
- "If we stripped everything away, what's the biggest challenge here?"
- "What's in your control versus outside your control?"

Employee:

"Nobody reads my emails."

Coach: "Is the real issue the emails, or is it gaining commitment from the team?"

Now you're coaching.



Step 4

Create Insight Through Questions

Powerful coaching questions

Awareness

- "What assumptions could you be making?"
- "What perspective might you be missing?"
- "How might they see this differently?"

Possibilities

- "What options have you considered?"
- "What else could work?"
- "If there were no constraints, what would you try?"

Ownership

- "What's your role in this situation?"
- "What influence do you have in this situation?"
- "What could you do differently?"

Learning

- "What are you learning from this?"
- "What would success look like?"
- "What would you do again?"

The person should be talking 70-80% of the time.

Step 5

Challenge With Care

Many leaders are empathetic but avoid challenge. Coaching requires both support and accountability.

What to say

- "Can I offer an observation?"
- "May I challenge your thinking for a moment?"
- "I wonder if..."
- "What evidence supports that conclusion?"

Employee:

"My team just isn't motivated."

Coach: "Can I challenge that a little? How do you know it's motivation versus a lack of clarity or priorities?"

Notice the challenge isn't an attack.



Step 6

Move to Action

Coaching without action feels like therapy: coaching should create movement.

What to say

- "Given our discussion, what's the next step?"
- "What are you committing to?"
- "What's the first action you'll take?"
- "When will you do it?"

The employee should identify the action when possible.

(You are not telling them what to do next, or what to commit it. They identify the action.)

Step 7

Reinforce Confidence

People leave coaching sessions remembering how they felt, how they were heard, how they participated, what they committed to.

What to say

- "I have confidence you can handle this."
- "You already have some good ideas."
- "You've thought this through carefully."
- "I appreciate how honestly you looked at the situation."

This creates self-efficacy instead of dependence.



The Formula:

Listen → Reflect → Validate →
Explore → Challenge → Commit

A Complete Coaching Conversation Example

Employee: "I'm struggling with a difficult stakeholder."

Coach: "Tell me more about what's happening."

Employee explains.

Coach: "So you're feeling stuck because every conversation seems to become a disagreement, and you're not seeing progress. Is that right?"

Employee: "Exactly."

Coach: "I can understand why that's frustrating."

Employee: "Yes."

Coach: "What do you think is the real challenge underneath the conflict?"

Employee: "I think we have different expectations."

Coach: "Interesting. What expectations could be unclear?"

Employee reflects.

Coach: "What part of this is within your influence?"

Employee answers.

Coach: "Can I offer an observation? I notice you've focused a lot on changing their behaviour. What might change if you focused on changing the conversation instead?"

Employee gains insight.

Coach: "Given that realization, what's your next step?"

Employee identifies action.

Coach: "Great. When will you do that? And what support do you need from me?"