



Four Great Coaching Conversations for School Leaders

Imagine a new teacher comes to you feeling really low. "My last lesson bombed," she says, referring to a special lesson she'd been preparing for ages. "I'll struggle to get that class back on board now."

How do you respond? How can you coach her?

This is a chance not only to help this teacher pick herself up after a difficult lesson but to help her learn from this experience and emerge with a new level of confidence in communicating her ideas. It is an opportunity to make a huge difference.

Most good leaders will naturally recognize the chance to be helpful here by listening or offering some time to reflect on what happened - but great coaching is about more than this. Great coaches can turn this kind of situation into an opportunity: to shift mindset, a sustainable way to create deep and lasting change in others. And that is because they know how to identify and use the four great coaching conversations.

Discovering the Four Great Coaching Conversations

We first started to identify these conversations on the back of some remarkable data. We are founders and key leaders of BTS Coach. BTS Coach was the pioneer of affordable coaching and manages around 300 coaches in more than forty countries, coaching nearly 10,000 individuals per year. Our education practice, BTS Spark, reaches 3,000 school leaders every year in England, Australia and the US.

To manage quality, our coaches have always been asked to keep anonymized notes on their conversations. By 2012 we realized that this data was a goldmine. Inadvertently, we had created a record of more than 100,000 conversations in which leaders were at their most open about the challenges they were really struggling with and the insights that unlocked change. And, of course, what truly unlocked the change was the mindset.

Something fascinating emerged from this data. At the root of vastly different situations and scenarios, particular mindset shifts and certain conversations kept occurring, again and again and again. We grouped our findings into four areas, each related to a mindset:

1. **"Be"**. These were conversations about the individual's resourcefulness, confidence, and their ability to stay calm, open, and empathetic in any situation. They are about authenticity and being yourself when you most need it.
2. **"Relate"**. These were conversations about relationships with other people. Influencing, building trust, giving a difficult message, collaborating, or dealing with conflict.
3. **"Inspire"**. These were conversations about direction, change, and purpose. Responding proactively to situations of uncertainty and knowing what you stand for and how to lead for it.
4. **"Think"**. These were conversations about solving problems in a new way. Identifying bias and seeking input from diverse sources. Creativity, strategy, innovation, and insight. Looking beyond the obvious.

When we analysed our coaching conversations with principals and assistant principals, for example, **Relate** typically represented 50% of conversations, **Be** 31%, **Inspire** 12% and **Think** 7%. Interestingly, these proportions appear to be relatively consistent with all levels of education leaders from heads of faculty in schools right up to school superintendents.

Sitting in our data lie these four very different mindset shifts. Each shift is fundamental and creates a step change in performance. But each shift is different and requires you to coach in a different way.

So what does this mean for you as leader and coach?

You need to be able to identify and listen for clues as to which of the Four Great Coaching Conversations your coachee is seeking. You can then be guided by the appropriate map for that conversation. If you do this, your chances of helping others make a sustained and significant change—a change in mindset—increase dramatically.

So what are they? Put simply, the heart of the Four Conversations are....

The **Be** conversation. When someone is feeling lousy, unconfident or unresourceful

The **Relate** conversation. When someone needs to build trust or connection with others

The **Inspire** conversation. When someone can't inspire themselves or others with a clear purpose or direction

The **Think** conversation. When someone needs to find new ideas or creative solutions

Critically, they don't just work in formal coaching sessions. In a busy school day, you don't generally have the luxury of having a series of conversations around a long-term goal. A colleague may come to you and say, "I've had enough with my colleague after our meeting. Help." The beauty of these four conversations is that the ideas can be used in the moment, over a five-minute focused coaching conversation, or over a longer-term planned conversation around an objective.

Let's take each in turn...

Conversation 1: The BE Shift

When someone is feeling lousy, unconfident, or unresourceful about something.

The example at the beginning of the chapter is typical of a Be conversation. The new teacher was feeling low after her lesson bombed. While the cause may be different, all human beings experience the need for this conversation every day. There are topics we are defensive, unsure, or anxious about. Situations or people that don't bring out the best in us. No matter who you are coaching, you will find there are times when they aren't at their best. When they feel lousy, unconfident, or unresourceful about something.

Helping people change the way they respond to situations like this can be transformational. It builds their ability to be at their best when they most need it, and therefore holds the key, for example, to being confident and authoritative with a senior audience or calm and authentic in a difficult work situation.

What you may find surprising is how often you may need to hold a Be coaching conversation. Our research with Singapore Management University analyzed over 900 coaching assignments (Sindhwani et al. 2017) and revealed that Be conversations were the second most common globally and the foremost need arising in our coaching conversations in North America.

Conversation 2: The RELATE Shift

When someone needs to build trust or connection with others.

Here is a typical Relate situation....

A very able teacher in your school is leading a whole school literacy initiative. He has done remarkably well at getting colleagues on board but has got nowhere with one long-standing teacher. "I've tried everything," he fumes, "but he's so small minded. All he thinks about is how it will impact his workload. What can I do?"

How do you respond? How can you coach your project leader to learn from this experience and emerge with a new reconceived approach to influencing their colleague? How can they recognize their judgments and reactions, and shift the mindset toward others to greater understanding, empathy, and response?

We find that most of our coaching conversations with school leaders globally are essentially about Relate challenges. Teachers may need to collaborate with their peers, heads of faculty need to build others' capability and principals need to delegate more to their teams and hold others to account. Success for most people depends on their ability to engage with, influence, and coach others. It sits at the core of leadership. And it is often the one element that most defines effectiveness.

Conversation 3: The INSPIRE Shift

When someone can't inspire themselves or others with a clear purpose or direction .

Here is a typical Inspire situation...

Imagine you are coaching a high performer. She has been working flat out over the past year and has exceeded all her targets. But she is exhausted and starting to get feedback from others that she is overly driven. She opens up to you, sharing that she's starting to wonder whether it's all worth it.

How do you respond? How would you coach her? How can you help her discover what is really important to her and how to lead in a way that is inspiring to her and those around her?

This kind of conversation is critical in education. Many teachers join the profession wanting to make a difference and positively impact children's life chances. And many teachers also become disillusioned. The high levels of burnout of teachers testify to the need to help teaching colleagues reconnect with their personal purpose and find ways of bringing that 'spark' into their everyday work.

Conversation 4: The THINK Shift

When someone needs to find new ideas or creative solutions.

A typical Think situation might be...

Your school has had persistent problems with student attendance rates. Over the years, you have tried a few different interventions but they have all met with limited success. Your deputy principal is responsible for student attendance. She comes to you in despair, declaring that this problem is intractable and is fundamentally caused by the low expectations of the local community.

How do you respond? How can you coach her to learn to think differently and hence to create genuinely breakthrough ideas? The Think conversation addresses this, as well as how we create and innovate new solutions.

This conversation is NOT about giving people new ideas or creative solutions. That wouldn't be coaching. It IS about challenging thinking. It is about coaching to view a situation through new and different lenses, unleashing new levels of creativity and innovation in the other person. This shift enables some people to step back from a situation and pick out the root cause, to create strategic insight and develop radically new ideas.

It is about recognizing habitual thinking, such as, "how I or we normally think about this," and consciously moving beyond these assumptions to create new ways of looking at it. It's about getting curious again.

In Summary – the Four Great Coaching Conversations

The Four Great Conversations	When do you use this conversation?	How might it help those you coach?
The Be Conversation	When someone is feeling lousy, unconfident or unresourceful	Being at their best when they most need it, confidence, resilience, emotional control, resourcefulness, having a growth mindset
The Relate Conversation	When someone needs to build trust or connection with others	Influencing others, giving difficult messages, listening, building relationships with those they find challenging, overcoming conflict
The Inspire Conversation	When someone can't inspire themselves or others with a clear purpose or direction.	Leading in uncertainty, setting direction, clarity, knowing what they stand for, meaning and values
The Think Conversation	When someone needs to find new ideas or creative solutions	Creativity, problem solving, strategic insight, challenging the way things are done, coming up with breakthrough ideas, innovation

The Secret Behind the Four Great Coaching Conversations

So why are these conversations so important? What is the secret behind them? Why did they stand out so strongly in our data? What we have found is that these Four Conversations are so critical because they work at the level of mindset. This means the change they can unlock is deeper, longer lasting and more significant. This is because mindset is at the heart of behavior change.

To bring it to life, consider this scenario, which may well sound familiar to you...

You receive yet more feedback that a member of your team is frustrating his colleagues with his poor communication and lack of sensitivity. You are unsure what to do. You have given him this feedback on several previous occasions, and he's committed to changing. You've sat down and shaped a development goal to this effect. You had some great coaching conversations, but he still isn't changing.

Why not? And how come all those carefully crafted coaching skills aren't working?

It's because these conversations do not strike at the heart of the turning point for change. A good conversation is not enough. We know this ourselves—think about the New Year's resolutions that fail or the commitments to better ourselves that never end up coming to fruition. Behavior change takes more than good intention. It requires a change in mindset.

What do we mean by Changing Mindset?

Mindsets are the beliefs, assumptions, and mental frames—often unconscious—that shape people's actions. If the person you are coaching is unaware of them, they may find that their good intentions to change lapse in the face of stress, and then old habits kick in. Mindsets have corresponding physiological and emotional components.

Recent advances in neuroscience help explain this. We learn that the frequent firing of neurons in the brain create deep pathways, or "rivers of thinking." The good news is that brains are "plastic," and these pathways can be changed. The bad news is that new connections will have to be built to do this.

But without creating new connections, natural reactions will be defined by these deep established neural pathways. So, our coachee's mindset—either their new one, or their old one—will play a key role in driving their behavior, which in turn drives their impact and results.

Take this example. According to research, 65 percent of employees in North America want more feedback (Fermin 2014)ⁱ So, it should be easy to persuade leaders to give feedback, right? Far from it. Time and time again we find that giving feedback is one of the behaviors that school leaders find most difficult and generally avoid. But why, especially when people clearly want it?

Telling people to change what they do – to start giving more feedback in this instance – isn't enough. Nor is it enough for them to simply come up with good intentions. There is something else at stake. And that something is mindset.

In this example, unlocking the mindset that drives the current behaviour – shying away from giving feedback – is absolutely key to getting leaders to give more feedback to their teachers.

If a school principal believes that negative feedback will upset a teacher and leave them demotivated, then they will probably hold back on giving the feedback. But even if the principal does try to give feedback in spite of their belief, it may not work. Say for example the principal attends a feedback skills workshop and returns with a new feedback model. They try it on the teacher. But because they believe that giving negative feedback will upset the other person, they are anxious when they give it. In their anxiety the message comes across more bluntly and more aggressively than they intended, skewing the truth of

the message. The teacher picks up the anxiety together with the clumsy message and does in fact become upset.

The principal's mindset (that "negative feedback will upset the teacher") has meant that trying to adopt a new behavior on its own didn't work—and in fact backfired, reinforcing the original mindset.

Mindset drives behavior, behavior drives results

"Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values, your values become your destiny." (A quotation attributed to Mahatma Ghandi.)

By contrast, suppose the principal recognized they held this belief or assumption that feedback will upset their teacher and was able to change their own mindset with a Be conversation. Perhaps, they replaced the belief that "feedback will upset the teacher" with a belief that "the teacher would love to know how they are doing." In this scenario, the results would be different. The principal can now try to give the feedback with confidence. They will therefore be free of anxiety and hence able to deliver the message clearly and with care. And of course, the result will be different. Mindset drives behavior, and behavior drives results. This is expressed well by A. J. Crum et al. (2013), where a mindset is defined as "a mental frame or lens that selectively organizes and encodes information, thereby orienting an individual toward a unique way of understanding an experience and guiding one toward corresponding actions and responses." It has been repeatedly confirmed by authors such as A. B. Frymier and N. K. Nadler (2017).

So, if you want to have great coaching conversations, you need to have an awareness of mindset.

In fact, coaching in schools is rarely simply about transmitting information or imparting new skills. Usually we are coaching others to learn to expand perspective, change the way they look or respond. In other words, to change mindset.

We often hear, "Well, if they had a better attitude they would succeed," or, "They just need to change their outlook if they would do it differently." But no one provides the answer to actually do that—change the attitude, outlook, or mindset.

Well, this is the secret behind the power of the Four Conversations. They go beyond foundational coaching models you may have come across, like GROW, listening techniques, or open questioning. They offer researched and tested ways of working to change mindset in four very different contexts – enabling you to have a genuinely transformative impact on others when they most need it.

Are the impacts of these conversations proven?

Because we coach at volume, we are arguably the first coaching organisation to be able to use "big data" and to test and refine its approach. We have always believed in transparency and openly share our methodology with coachees before their coaching sessions. We believe this means we can go deeper, faster. And the results support this. 98 percent of our coachees would recommend us to their colleagues and 97 percent of our coachees claim to have made changes as a result of the coaching. Most significantly, the number of coachees who claim that the change is significant and lasting (an indicator of

mindset change) is correlated to the coach picking and using the relevant conversation for each individual.

Why is this important? Because every tool and model used in the Four Great Coaching Conversations has been tested and refined with thousands of people. You can 'stand on the shoulders of giants' and tap into the insight from thousands and thousands of coaching hours and hundreds of coaches.

Coaching is not a 'one size fits all'

At the heart of our insights is the realisation that there is no 'one size fits all' perfect coaching conversation (just as there is no single formula for a successful lesson). And there is no one set of killer coaching questions. If you want to achieve impact with your coaching in your school, you need to be more agile – to learn to recognise the underlying need of the individual and support them with relevant tools from one of the Four Great Coaching Conversations.



Want to put these ideas into action? Order your copy of **The Four Greatest Coaching Conversations: Change Mindset, Shift Attitude and Achieve Extraordinary Results**, by Jerry Connor & Karim Hirani on this [link](#).

References

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Jerry and Karim's new book, *The Four Greatest Coaching Conversations* is due to be published this November by Random House.