

If You Can't Coach, You Can't Lead!



John O. Burdett

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“To become special we need to tap into that which makes us special.”

Introduction

Coaching has always been an important leadership capability. As the world becomes faster, as organizations become flatter and as technology reinvents what's possible ... coaching becomes the very essence of what it means to be a successful leader. Change = coaching. Revolutionary change = masterful coaching.

Any conversation around coaching brings up the role of artificial intelligence (AI). Leaders are busy, time is at a premium, most leaders suggest that they don't even have time to read, “Why not let your AI alter ego run the show?” After all, AI is really good at providing content, supporting objective setting, tracking performance, analysing communication, delivering feedback and allowing the coachee to recognise ongoing patterns of behaviour. It can also provide ongoing peer feedback.

With the current level of technology there may be value in exposing mid-level employees to AI-based coaching. However, when we come to more complex roles, where thinking strategically and orchestrating cultural change is the norm, AI comes up short. The most limiting concern? An inability to interpret context. Consider the following:

- AI-based coaching support can't read the room. Posture, tone, hesitation, emphasis, pacing and eye movement are essential coaching cues. Interpreting anxiety, surfacing self-doubt and drawing out vulnerability will, as a result, go unrecognized. Your AI coach isn't going to suggest therapy!
- Managers benefiting from AI coaching often feel that the input is scripted, lacks strategic relevance and is unable to penetrate the fog of ambiguity.



- Trust and empathy are very personal human emotions. Can I trust that the AI conversation is secure? Meanwhile, although the right algorithm can recognise, mirror and respond to human emotion (artificial empathy), at best, it's simulating empathy. And collaboration – coaching is collaboration writ large – without authentic empathy is an empty promise.

AI coaching, in its current form, has distinct drawbacks. That doesn't mean we should throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. If you are dealing with multiple occupancy roles (for example, shop-floor supervisors) and the challenge is relatively straightforward (for example, improved decision-making around quality), AI coaching is an incredibly useful tool. Its value is enhanced by the practical reality that your AI coaching partner can: (1) incorporate both pre-programmed and challenge-related questions; (2) introduce videos, training aids and relevant reference material; (3) introduce new image-based metaphors and best-practice stories; and (4) monitor progress for very large constituencies. Arguably, the best results come when a live coach uses AI to augment their coaching effectiveness.





Don't confuse counselling, mentoring and coaching

- *Counselling*: addresses past trauma, emotional distress and/or behavioural issues that, although they may impact the workplace, have their root cause outside of the workplace. Its purpose is to heal. The central theme is “causation and remedy.” Counselling demands a deep dive into the client’s psychological state. This means extensive, specialist training.
- *Mentoring*: a seasoned performer (regardless of age and/or hierarchical level) who shares their “story” with a less seasoned performer. The outcome? The less seasoned performer is accelerated through the learning curve. [Read *Mentoring*. John O. Burdett >](#)

Storytelling shapes the rich visual language that a masterful coach weaves into the coaching conversation – especially stories that draw on relevant events.

- *Coaching*: a leadership intervention where the critical outcome is improved performance. Other benefits are often achieved – enhanced self-confidence, personal growth and a skill development agenda – but if there isn’t a clear and unambiguous performance improvement, the central goal is missing.

In the midst of the ongoing transformative change in the 21st-century organization, there is a second and critical dimension of coaching – instilling “readiness.” Readiness for a world being turned upside down by breakthrough technology. Readiness as a way to purge the organization of anxiety, fear and apprehension. An unprecedented level of emotional uncertainty dominated by one all-consuming question, Will AI take my job?

Fear is not a malaise limited to Gen Z or middle managers. Essential as it is, it’s not a problem solved by upskilling. The challenge is ultimately one of mindset. Mindset as it relates to: (1) the need (with innovation and flair) to manage the business from the outside-in – as opposed to a philosophy of “if we make it they will come”; (2) the absolutely essential move from simple learning to learning how to learn; and (3) an emphasis on true collaboration – rather than merely settling for cooperation. [Read *Mindset*. John O. Burdett >](#)

Coaching for readiness finds expression in each of the six coaching scenarios identified in **Figure one**.

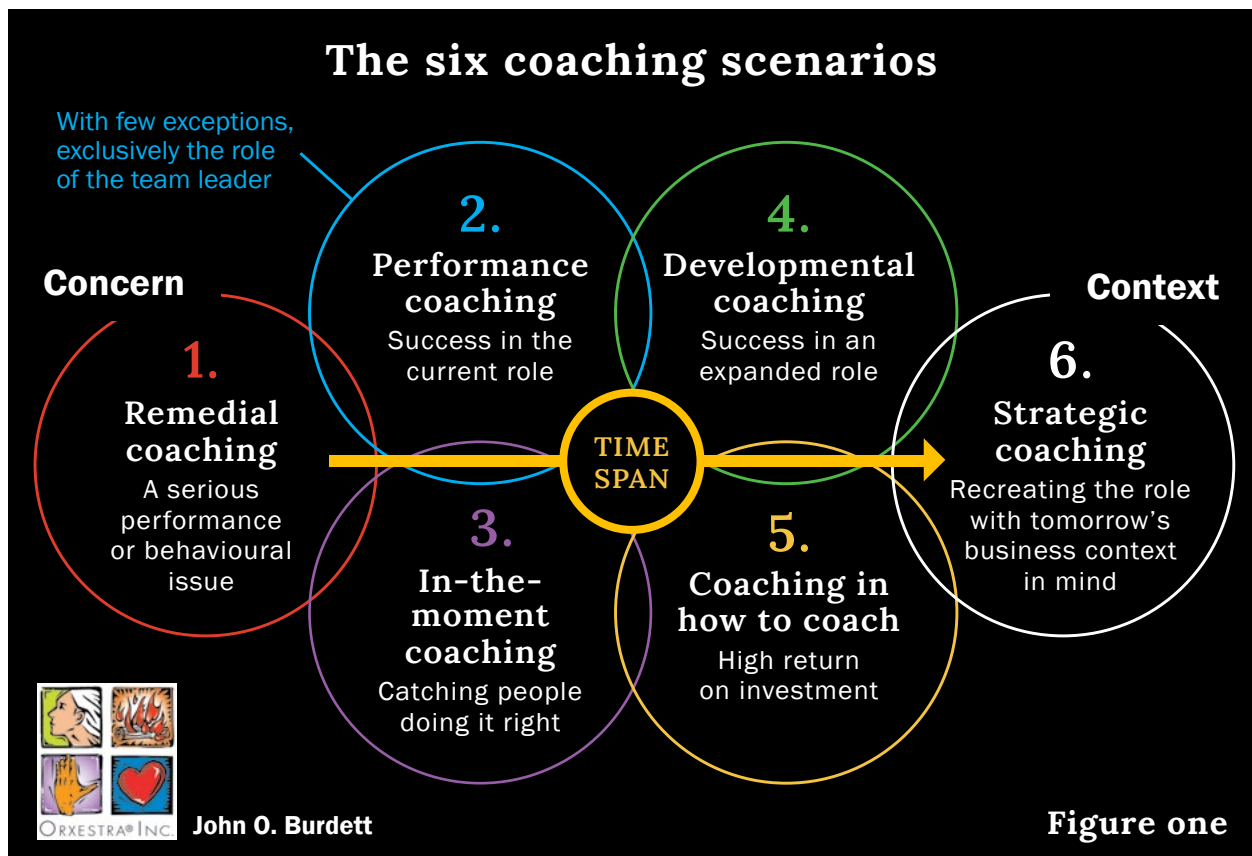


Coaching: It's not a case of one-size-fits-all

There are six dyadic (one-on-one) coaching scenarios. **See Figure one.** Coaching the team introduces a seventh scenario. Coaching the team is covered by the author elsewhere. [Read *Teamwork: Mandate it, Measure it, Manage it!* John O. Burdett >](#) Although there is a degree of overlap between the various coaching approaches, each has a different emphasis. Because it captures the basic coaching skills, the text delves into Performance Coaching in somewhat greater depth.

Who should undertake the coaching?

- *Remedial coaching.* Going outside the organization is a good idea when remedial coaching involves a senior executive. Revenge psychology is not a myth.
- *Performance coaching* is the prerogative of the team leader or manager-one-level-up. Indeed, if they are not coaching they are not leading. Hiding behind “busy work” is not that unusual.





- *In-the-moment coaching* has the most impact when delivered by the immediate team leader. For many leaders, this is best delivered in private, which is a practice common to many cultures.
- *Developmental coaching*, in that it may involve the coachee sharing concerns that they may not want aired within the organization, is best served by an external coach. Dissatisfaction with the organization's top leadership being one, not untypical, concern.
- *Coaching in how to coach* demands true mastery. Going outside is, invariably, the best option. Here a word of caution. The use of several external consultants who each introduce their own coaching approach is likely to be very confusing.
- *Strategic coaching* needs a coach who is comfortable at a high level of abstraction and whose business experience complements the challenges faced by the coachee. For example, if the coachee's role involves significant international work, a coach who has only operated domestically is not a good fit.
- Here we must address what is, arguably, the most impactful coaching of all – team members coaching each other. As we move into a period of flattening the organization, peer-to-peer coaching becomes both invaluable and necessary. The text contains all that is needed to support peer-to-peer coaching.

The six dyadic coaching scenarios are as follows:

1. Remedial Coaching

Remedial coaching describes a situation where, unless the performance improves, separation is the likely outcome. It's an intervention of last resort. For an executive, separation from a prestigious position is a traumatic experience. Although there are profound lessons to be learned, some executives never really recover.

My own experience is that even well-meant, tough-minded, remedial feedback, typically, provokes three kinds of response: (1) "it's not my fault"; (2) "people don't really understand the situation here"; and (3) "we are well on the way to solving those issues." In that it involves the leadership of self, it's far



easier to rationalise the situation away than to face the emotional challenge of reinventing oneself.

No matter who is charged with delivering remedial coaching, there is one hard and fast rule. “Leverage the consequences; don’t try to force-fit new behaviour.” The most likely outcome of the latter is lasting resentment. People will embrace change. What they rail against is being changed. The theme “let’s work together to save your job” will have a far more positive outcome.

2. Performance Coaching

Performance coaching focuses on moving the coachee to the next level of performance (results and/or behaviour) within the current role. There is an important rider here. In today’s turbulent world, the team leader who can’t coach (or doesn’t coach), can’t lead!

Here we need to emphasise the value of a coaching model. **See Figure two.**

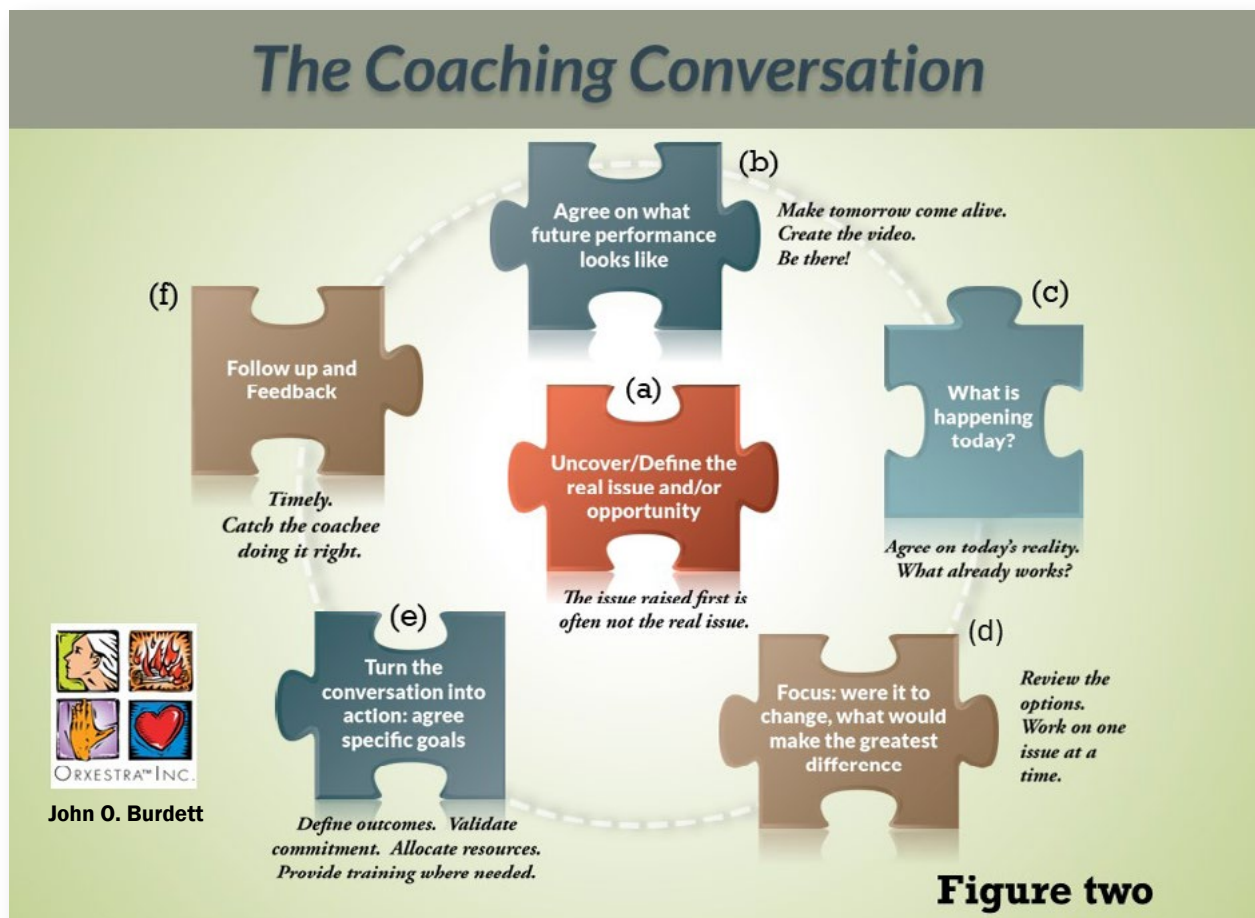


Figure two



A successful coaching model must be adaptable enough to meet the needs of the moment. A purely linear approach – a process that follows a preordained series of steps – can easily become a straightjacket. Think of **Figure two** as if it were a jigsaw puzzle. You need all the pieces to complete the picture but it doesn't matter in which order you put the pieces down.

With the jigsaw metaphor in mind, **Figure two** comprises six (a to f) synergistic “pieces”:

- (a) Uncover/define what the real issue and/or opportunity is. The first issue that comes up is often not the real issue. In the first instance, consider it a place holder. Cycling back to better understand the real issue is both expected and desirable.
- (b) Agree on what future performance success looks like. With readiness in mind, explore the potential impact of AI. Make tomorrow come alive. “Imagine.” Ask the coachee to play the mental video. Help them to be there. The more detail that can be captured in the future mental video, the more likely it is that the coaching will be successful. Know also that the mind can't distinguish between mental rehearsal and the real thing. If the coachee can “imagine it,” they are already starting to be it.
- (c) What's happening today? Unbundle today's reality. What works? Even if it's in some places some of the time, building on success is the path of least resistance. What works less well? What elements of performance are falling between the cracks. Identify issues that are potentially career limiting. Lack of fit with the present and/or needed culture ... or being slow to adapt to AI are classical examples.
- (d) Where does the current situation need to change. Review the options. What action(s) would make the greatest difference? Where possible, focus on one issue at a time. Fast and focus walk hand in hand.
- (e) Turn the conversation into action. Agree on specific goals. Add a qualitative dimension wherever possible. Validate commitment. Allocate resources. Provide training where needed. There is no such thing as 99% commitment.
- (f) Monitor performance. For the most part, get out of the way. Assume, given the chance, the coachee will get it right. Take the time to catch



the coachee doing it right. Timely follow up and feedback. Who should initiate the follow up? The coachee. The coachee owns what has been committed to.

The value of a robust (but flexible) model is that it creates a mental picture for the coach to know exactly where they are in the coaching conversation. A coaching model also helps the coach to better evaluate (and improve) their own coaching performance. In that they are often gestalt learners (seeking to visualise the organised whole), top leaders find a meaningful coaching model especially helpful.

Here we need to challenge a dysfunctional myth. Performance coaching should not be limited to those whose performance has dropped or whose contribution is deemed to be marginal. If you only have one hour a week to invest in coaching, spend that time with your highest performer. The return on investment will be far greater than with a middle-of-the-road contributor. Indeed, because they are often pushing to the edge and/or reinventing possibility, failing to coach a high performer is a problem in the making. Ignored and/or frustrated top talent vote with their feet!





Like any leadership approach rooted in excellence, performance coaching draws on a number of underlying disciplines:

- (a) Cheering works! Where affirmation is an established norm, the organization has created a positive platform for performance coaching to gain real traction. By comparison, leaders oriented to “management by exception” – feedback limited to when things go off track – will find that the coachee views the coaching conversation with trepidation. “What did I do wrong now?”
- (b) What the coach believes is what the coachee perceives. No matter how well they think that they mask it, if the coach doesn’t believe the coachee is capable and ready to move to the next level of performance, the coach becomes part of the problem. What if you don’t believe? As a coach, you have to believe. If not, then pass the coaching baton to someone else.
- (c) Develop a beginner’s mind. Have an attitude of openness. Learn to see with new eyes. Let go of assuming you already know the best way forward. Listen to every suggestion and/or idea as if it is the first time you have heard it. If you are open to be surprised – don’t be surprised if you are surprised. The concept of a beginner’s mind is a core principle in Zen Buddhism. The Japanese term is *Shoshin*.
- (d) Don’t confuse coaching with problem solving. In the manager-employee relationship there are five nexuses of power:
 - Tell and listen – *power over*. “This is what I need you to do.”
 - Tell and sell – *soft power over*. “This is what I would like you to do, because ...” Explaining “why” makes it far more likely that the request will be enacted.
 - Problem solving – *power with*. “Let’s get together and between us figure out the best way forward.”
 - Coaching – *power to*. “What are you going to do?” Confusing coaching with problem solving is where inexperienced coaches tend to stumble. You know you have moved off the coaching track and into problem solving when, as a coach, you ask, “Have you thought of ... ?” “My suggestion would be ...” “Here is what worked



for me when I faced that issue.” To coach is to reveal the coachee to themselves. It is to reframe the coachee’s inner dialogue.

- Being stuck – *a power vacuum*. “It’s clear that for now you have exhausted your thinking and/or ideas about the next steps. Let’s adjourn and pick up in a few days where we left off.” Reflection facilitates learning. Alternatively, where the issue is urgent and/or others are held back by the coachee’s inability to move forward, the “coach” can move to problem solving – or as a last resort, tell and sell.
- (e) All meaningful learning starts with a great question. As the late Peter Drucker pointed out, “Fifty years ago a leader knew the answer ... today they ask great questions.” A great question asks for what you want, not what you don’t want. Silence is invariably the best question of all. [Read *What Is A Great Question?* John O. Burdett >](#)
- (f) It’s the one who listens that shapes the conversation! At no time in our history has listening been as important; at no time have leaders been faced with today’s volume of unceasing background noise. How





do we make listening an intentional part of the coaching conversation? Getting rid of distractions is the start of it; using our whole body as an antenna is part of it; but being there, really being there, is the heart of it. [Read *If Ever There Was A Time To Listen – It's Now!* John O. Burdett >](#)

- (g) Coaching without follow-up is a false promise. If it's not written down, it won't happen. Guaranteed! The specific what, when, the outcome criteria and any resources/training agreed to during the coaching conversation should be captured as soon after the conversation as possible. Who should capture what was agreed on? The coachee! Commitment without involvement is a bridge to nowhere. Timely follow-up should also be initiated by the coachee.

3. In-the-moment Coaching

In-the-moment coaching is the time spent to pull someone aside after a meeting. It's a quiet word to a member of the team when you are alone in the elevator. It's the heartfelt feedback you give or transformative question you ask when, by accident, you meet a colleague at the drinks machine. It's a simple, often non-verbal, affirmation in the middle of a meeting.

In-the-moment coaching draws on two fundamental assumptions. One: a spontaneous and authentic coaching moment can deliver deep and lasting emotional impact. The power of authenticity is that it gives permission for the coachee to shed their own mask. Two: the most impactful in-the-moment coaching is "Catching people doing it right." [Read *Cheering Works!* John O. Burdett >](#)

4. Developmental Coaching

Developmental coaching describes a coaching conversation with an outstanding performer where the outcome is either (1) charting a path for significant growth within the current role; or (2) orchestrating learning/development such that the coachee is a fit for a more impactful role in the organization.

Substantial growth exclusively within the current role builds on the disciplines described within performance coaching with one key exception: the time span (future thinking and action) needs to be somewhat longer. This implies a greater emphasis on the future culture, focusing the longer-term leadership

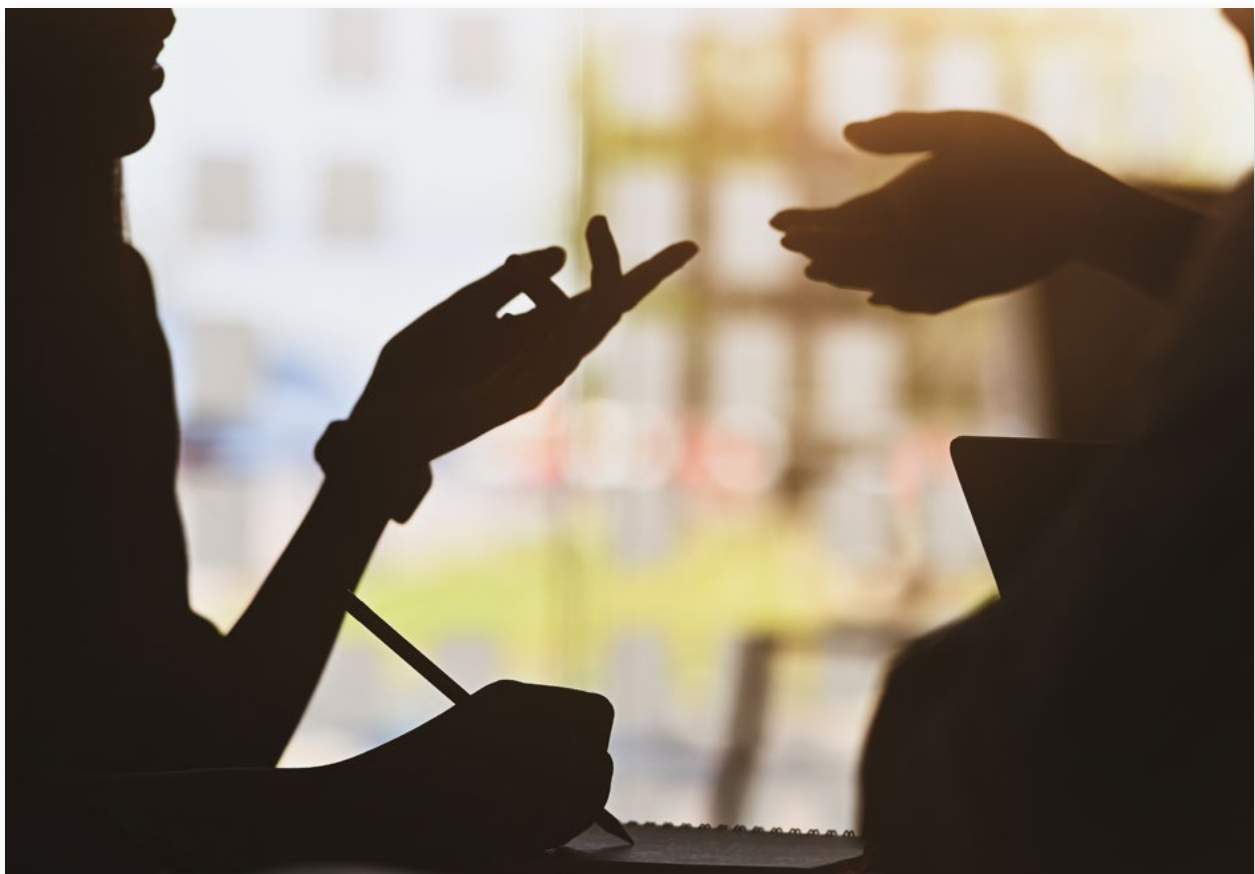


competencies needed, and truly understanding what it will mean to be part of a great team.

Developmental coaching for a high-potential employee still at an early stage of their career emphasises the organization's future culture and the future team ethos. However, instead of focusing on role-specific leadership competencies, the organization-wide, generic leadership competencies come into play.

A third development coaching approach focuses on the seasoned performer who has been identified as a fit (successor) for a mission critical role in the organization. As before, the future culture and the future team shape possibility but the role-specific competencies for the mission critical role now emerge as a critical element. [Read *It's Time to Rethink Succession*. John O. Burdett >](#)

Caring is always a central feature in successful coaching. Because we are pushing the coachee to the very edge of their capability, in developmental coaching, caring is especially impactful. [Read *To Lead Is to Care*. John O. Burdett >](#)





5. Coaching in How to Coach

If you have leaders in your organization who are great coaches, protect them, reward them and if the opportunity arises, promote them. *Do* equip them to coach others in how to coach. *Don't* let them join the competition!

Coaching in how to coach draws on everything laid out in the text. Build on the different coaching scenarios – especially performance and strategic coaching – lean into the coaching model, and you have the basic ingredients. To coach others in how to coach at a level of excellence, however, we need to throw a wider net.

In a sense, every coaching session is an opportunity in *coaching in how to coach*. If the situation is right, the coach can let the coachee see behind the curtain, share the model, emphasise the power of a great question and stress the importance of listening.

If you are coaching others in how to coach in a group setting then move beyond presentation and actually coach. Have participants coach each other. Be a role model but encourage each participant to find their own style. Emphasise the power of language. We explore the world through metaphors and learn through story.

Culture is everything. And no matter how often consultants present it that way; culture isn't simply a series of insulated actions, habits and processes that you can work on one at a time. Culture is a dynamic and integrated system. Change one element and you impact the whole. At the heart of that system, the linchpin that holds everything together? The organization's values. No matter how successful they are in delivering results, the leader who does so whilst ignoring, trampling on or displaying behaviour that isn't aligned with the organization's values is not going to be a successful coach. Quite the opposite!

In no small measure, success as a coach is how the coach turns up. It's the coach parking their judgment gene at the door. It's the assumption that seeking to know is always a precursor to the presumption of knowing. No less important, tardiness around time communicates that the coach's needs and schedule are more important than the coachee's.

The coach who fails to establish trust, ain't got much! The dictionary describes trust as "the assured reliance on the character, ability, strength or truth of



someone.” A seasoned coach builds trust through: **T**he ability to build rapport ... **R**espect ... **U**nderstanding the coachee’s point of view ... **S**hared values ... **T**he commitment to always deliver on what has been promised.

In building trust, small things make a difference. Nothing is more important than how the coach begins. From her research, Harvard psychologist Amy Cuddy discovered that the early steps of trust are set in motion within the first 20 seconds. Cuddy emphasises that competency counts for little unless trust has first been established. Qualifications, reputation and experience, similarly, take a back seat until the basic building blocks of trust are in place. For the coach, those first precious seconds open (or not) the door to opportunity.

6. **Strategic Coaching**

Strategic coaching describes coaching support for those at the top of the organization. For example, a member of the C-suite or a senior executive who makes long-term decisions that impact the whole organization.





The C-suite difference – and it is a significant difference – is the time span of discretion in the role. Middle managers, in all probability, make decisions three or so months out. The next-level-up manager may well have a decision timeline that necessitates looking out over the next 12 months. At the top of the house – dependent upon the clock speed of the organization – the time span of discretion may amount to three or five months or an even longer time frame.

Strategic coaching thus draws heavily on understanding the emerging context. For understanding read “measurement.” If you can measure it, you are far better equipped to manage it.

Although the coaching suggestions woven through the text (for example, the value of a coaching model) are invaluable, there are aspects of context that significantly frame and support coaching at the top of the organization. A number of the more impactful aspects are outlined below:

- (a) What is happening as it relates to the social, political and economic environment? Now and in the future. What do tomorrow’s customer want to buy and *how* do they want to buy it? What emerging technology will change how we do business?
- (b) Why does the coachee stay? What makes the coachee tick? What is their motivation? If they are unhappy in the role (or in the wrong role), coaching amounts to little more than trying to put a temporary patch on a boat with a hole in it. What is the nature of and source of the coachee’s personal satisfaction in the role? What are the factors that come together to build a feeling of well-being? What are the motivational factors in the role (if any) that the coachee would like to change?
[Read *Why Does Your Top Talent Stay?* John O. Burdett >](#)
- (c) The present and future culture. Tomorrow will be different. It’s no longer the case that strategy drives culture – develop the strategy and then build the “right culture” to support the strategy. In an uncertain world, it’s culture that enables the strategy. We need both strategy and culture, but culture has primacy. If they collide, there is only one winner ... and it’s not the strategy. There are also two cultures: formal and informal. There is only one day in the year that the formal culture wins out.



The 29th of February. [Read *The Culture Conversation Guide*. John O. Burdett >](#)

- (d) Building the performance scorecard. At its best, coaching strives to achieve extraordinary performance. And yet, climbing even the highest mountain starts at base camp. The organization's strategy and enabling business plan roll up into the scorecard for the role. The scorecard should focus on the next 12 months but also capture critical longer-term performance targets aligned with the decision-making time span for the role.
- (e) Leadership competencies. A leader who only gets better at what they have always done is ultimately sowing the seeds of their own failure. What will success in the role look like three to five years from now? What **role-specific** competencies define **future** performance? A simple list of competencies is useful. Far more impactful is when the role-specific competencies are anchored in a meaningful leadership model: a framework for action that has currency across the organization. [Read *Completing the Weave*. John O. Burdett >](#)





As for tomorrow's competencies, in a large enterprise, strategic flair/empathy, AI literacy, laser-like focus in the midst of complexity, operational discipline, failing fast, resilience, comfort with ambiguity, working in a flat organization, building a great team, innovation, collaboration, coaching, building readiness, culture change, learning how to learn, authenticity and caring ... should probably figure prominently in the initial thinking.

- (f) Tomorrow's team success. No one makes it on their own. No one! Michelangelo had a dozen or more assistants when he painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling. Tomorrow's organization will be flat, focused, fast, flexible and fertile to new ideas. It will also be a team of teams. Teams supported by a comprehensive, fast moving, organization-specific, AI hub. It follows that as we continue to flatten the organization we will strip out many of the "connector and support" roles. The result? A leader found wanting in their ability to work within and grow the team is destined to fail. Not might fail. Will fail.

Conclusion

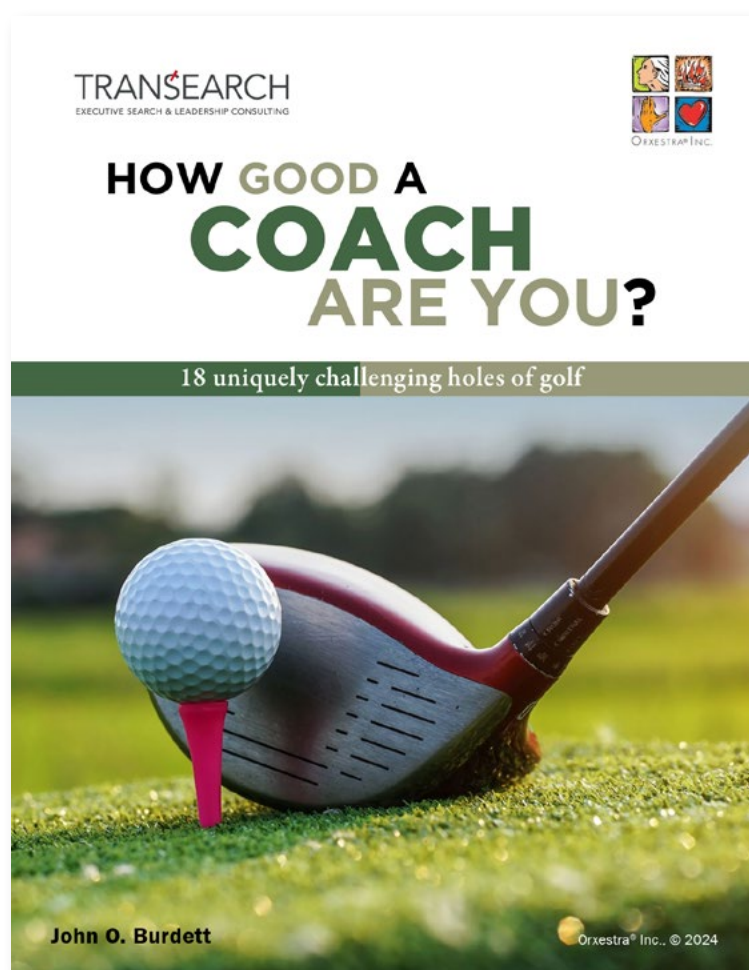
Artificial intelligence won't replace strategy ... but it will help uncover what you need to do to develop a better strategy. With ever-increasing complexity generally and the need to continuously reinvent possibility, artificial intelligence isn't going to replace coaching for those in leadership roles ... but it will help support the coaching agenda agreed on.

Neural networks and deep learning seek to replicate 40,000 years of social engineering. The technology is getting closer – AI can already analyse, digitalise, replicate and teleport complex smells – but coaching is still, essentially, a very human process. Data is not direction. Access is not action. Technology is not trust. Engineering is not empathy. Asking a great question is important. How you listen and the very subtle signals that support that you are listening are even more important.

To become special we need to tap into that which makes us special. Simply put: as we move into a very uncertain future, if you can't coach, you can't lead!



To assess your coaching capability we invite you to go through our highly lauded coaching assessment



How Good a Coach Are You?

Coaching is essential for leadership and team performance. Using a golf metaphor, leaders can assess their coaching skills and identify areas for improvement through self-evaluation.

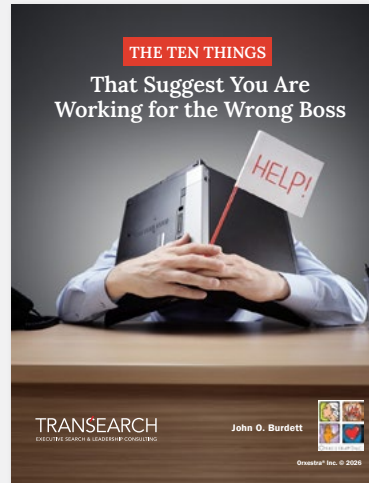
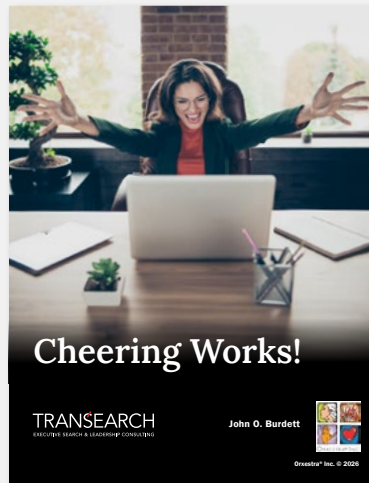
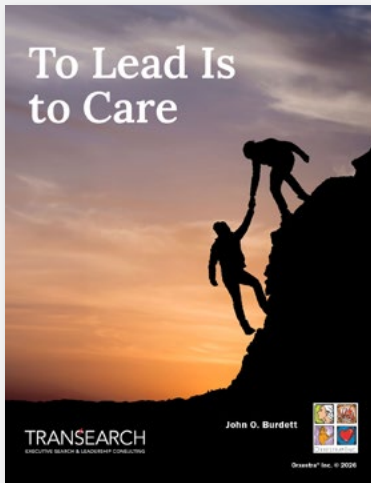
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*"To coach
is to change
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- John O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world's largest corporations.

In 2019, his work with ABB's top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams

around the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs.

Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, John has published 16 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His most recent book is a fully revised version of his international bestselling book on executive integration: *Without Breaking Stride*. To download his current business articles go to www.transearch.com/orxestra/downloads

