



Coaching Conversations: Teaching People to Think

One cannot teach a man anything. One can only enable him to learn from within himself.
~ Galileo Galilei

With so many employees being paid to think, leaders and managers should find ways to cultivate their staffs' cerebral capabilities to boost workplace performance.

But most leaders wouldn't know where to start.

The process begins by improving the way knowledge workers process information – not telling them what to do or jumping in to solve their problems.

Leadership practices need to keep up with the realities of organizational life. There's an increasing gap between the way employees are managed and how they *want* to be managed. Countless surveys and headlines reinforce this revelation:

- 60 percent of workers are miserable.
- 74 percent aren't engaged at work.

It's easy to see how we arrived at this sorry situation. A century ago, most people were paid for physical labor. The dominant management model was master/apprentice, with the master showing his employees how to perform their jobs.

The Industrial Age introduced systems. Process management became the dominant paradigm, with scientific analysis of linear systems for greater efficiency. Employees were trained to follow, unquestioningly, their bosses' best-laid plans.

Hired to Think

To learn is to change how you think. ~ Michael Merzenich, Professor of Neurosciences

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



Proffitt Management Solutions can help...

In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*" Patients, clients, and employees expect nothing less than 100% satisfaction.

At **Proffitt Management Solutions** we are fully committed to help you and your company become more focused, motivated and successful in reaching your full potential.

Find out how services such as individual or team coaching and development, motivational workshops, seminars and keynote speaking may benefit you...

www.ProffittManagement.com

You can share this article on Facebook or LinkedIn or forward to people who want to make a positive impact.

Proffitt Management Solutions
326 Maddock St.
West Palm Beach, FL
www.ProffittManagement.com
561-582-6060
info@proffittmanagement.com

Over the last two decades, the most routine business tasks have been computerized or outsourced. As a result, today's employees are increasingly hired to think. In 2005, 40 percent of employees were considered knowledge workers; for mid-level management and higher, the number is closer to 100 percent.

Modern leaders must increasingly shift management styles to reflect the needs of a more educated labor force. Unfortunately, business schools have neglected to teach leaders and managers how to improve their knowledge workers' thinking and decision-making skills.

Strengthening these abilities is critical, according to NeuroLeadership CEO David Rock, author of *Quiet Leadership: Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work*.

"Yet we have not significantly reinvented our management models since the time Henry Ford hired a pair of hands and wished they'd left their brains behind," he writes.

Generations X and Y have been making major organizational contributions, albeit with different expectations. They embrace personal development, while valuing freedom and independence. They want to work for leaders who will help them fulfill their career potential – mentors who can help them improve their thinking.

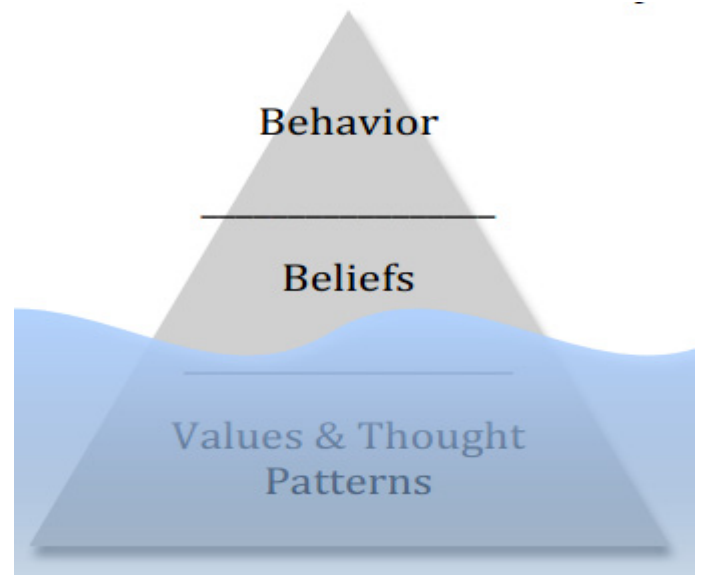
As these future leaders develop, they will move from managing themselves to managing others. Their leadership potential depends on their ability to change the way they think. Regrettably, the organizations that employ them usually allocate few internal resources to help them through this shift. It's time for leaders to learn how to train the next generation in higher-level decision-making.

The Iceberg Model

What we think, we become. – Gautama Buddha

Some leadership experts have adopted the "iceberg" model to describe human performance. This metaphor suggests that some of our behaviors are visible, while most other behaviors, thoughts and feelings lurk below water.

Our work achievements are driven by how we think. Why, then, do leaders focus on what's superficially visible when addressing employee performance? Evaluations rarely consider the factors that drive habits, nor do managers reflect on employees' feelings or thoughts.



Many employees are highly capable individuals who want to work – and *be* – smarter. They're crying out for help. It's up to their leaders to learn how to ask the right questions and conduct truly engaging coaching conversations.

Start a Coaching Conversation

The greatest challenge to any thinker is stating the problem in a way that will allow a solution. – Bertrand Russell

If we want people to think better, we must essentially let them do all the thinking. Dr. Rock suggests the following five-step process for establishing a coaching conversation that enables self-directed learning:

1. Let the employee think through his specific issue. Avoid telling him what to do or giving advice. Ask questions about his thought process.
2. Keep him focused on solutions, not problems.
3. Challenge him to expand his thinking and stretch himself, instead of clinging to his comfort zone.
4. Focus on what he's doing well so he can play to his strengths.
5. Make sure there are clear processes behind every conversation. To be truly helpful, a coaching conversation requires permission to ask questions and explore possibilities.

Posing questions allows you to focus on your employees' mental processes. Asking them to share thoughts:

- Helps them find connections in their minds

- Makes them more self-aware
- Encourages them to take greater responsibility for solutions

As they process their thoughts, they'll begin to search their mental maps for insights and potential solutions.

Useful Questions

The following questions can facilitate a constructive coaching conversation:

- How long have you been thinking about this?
- How often do you think about it?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is this?
- How clear are you about the issue?
- How high a priority does this issue have?
- How committed are you to resolving this?
- Can you see any gaps in your thinking?
- What impact is thinking about this issue having on you?
- How do you react when you think of this?
- How do you feel about the resources you've invested thus far?
- Do you have a plan for shifting this issue?
- How can you deepen your insight on this?
- How clear are you on what to do next?
- How can I best help you further?

None of these questions focuses on the problem's specific details. Notice how the questions avoid suggesting what employees should think or do. They're designed to help your people take notice of their own thinking. At this point, your employees will begin to contemplate key issues on a much deeper level, which allows them to see things more clearly. This often leads to new connections in their brains that create fresh insights.

We need to abandon our need to find behaviors to fix and problems to solve. Concentrate on identifying and growing people's strengths and abilities to think things through.

Asking Permission

An effective coaching conversation requires an environment where people feel safe enough to

explore their thoughts and reach new insights. Four elements should be in place:

1. **Permission:** "Is this a good time to talk and explore your thinking?"
2. **Placement:** "Let's see if you can come up with some ideas in the next few minutes."
3. **Questioning:** "Is it OK if I ask you to share your thoughts with me?"
4. **Clarifying:** "Tell me more about this. What do you mean?"

There's almost nothing more personal than trying to change people's thinking. Given that our perceptions become our reality, asking people to think differently means we're invading personal territory. It's therefore crucial to establish permission anytime you want to hold a coaching conversation.

As you approach the most personal questions, ask once again for permission. People can quickly become defensive and stop listening to you. Asking permission frequently helps people feel safe, acknowledged and respected. Here are some sample approaches:

1. I get the sense you have more to say about this. Could I probe a little further?
2. I'd like to have a more open conversation than we've had before. Would it be OK to ask you some more specific questions right now?
3. Can we spend a few minutes brainstorming ideas around this?
4. I'd like to understand more about your thinking. Would you be OK with talking more about this?
5. I'd like to discuss some more personal matters. Would this be OK with you?

Advice Doesn't Work

Ideas are like children; we love our own the most.
~ Chinese proverb

Advice is rarely helpful. People are far more likely to act on ideas they've come up with themselves.

Adult learning studies prove this is the way we acquire new habits.

We find a connection for other people's ideas in our own mental maps and decide to act. It then becomes our own idea—our own decision.

Giving Back the Monkey

People don't need to be managed; they need to be unleashed. ~ Richard Florida, Professor of Urban Theory

In 1974, William Oncken wrote one of the two bestselling articles in *Harvard Business Review*: “Management Time: Who’s Got the Monkey?” The piece compares an employee’s dilemma to a monkey. When the manager takes on the problem-solving job, he’s got the monkey.

The article focused on improving time management through better delegation (i.e., giving back the monkey). It didn’t, however, cover how to get people to come up with their own insights.

“Command and control” management practices were common back then. In a 1999 commentary about the article, leadership guru Steven R. Covey wrote:

“...much has changed since Oncken’s radical recommendation. Command and control as a management philosophy is all but dead, and ‘empowerment’ is the word of the day in most organizations trying to thrive in global, intensely competitive markets. But command and control stubbornly remains a common practice.”

Empowering subordinates is hard and complicated work. You have to be willing to give up control and let people work through their own thinking. Empowerment means you must develop people – a strategy whose success depends on dialogue and trust.

The best way to develop people is through coaching conversations – by letting people do their own thinking. This is also the best use of a leader’s time and talents. A good leader acts as a guide rather than the all-knowing expert.



326 Maddock St.
West Palm Beach, FL 33405
561-582-6060
info@proffittmanagement.com
www.ProffittManagement.com