Enabling Fearless Coaching Conversations

Build Coaching Skills and Reduce Fear While Facilitating Employee Commitment to Great Performance

May 16, 2017
Session 3B: 2:45 to 4:00 p.m.
Jeffrey L. Russell

Jeff Russell, co-director of Russell Consulting, Inc. (RCI) with his wife Linda, specializes in helping leaders build productive, supportive, and motivating work environments. RCI helps companies develop their leadership and strengthen team performance to achieve their great performance goals and outcomes. By guiding the exploration of key values held in common by organizational members and developing strategies and actions to express these values-in-action, RCI helps organizations achieve their strategic vision.

Through processes that include “visioning” retreats, Future Search conferences, process redesigns, improving decision making processes, implementing quality improvement strategies, and providing a variety of skill-building seminars, RCI enhances long-term organizational effectiveness and performance.

Consulting Expertise

Jeff consults with companies in the areas of:

- Visioning and strategic planning
- Leadership development
- Leading and implementing change
- Performance management systems
- Employee engagement assessment
- Customer and employee focus groups
- Team assessment and intervention
- Training needs assessment
- Organizational design
- Self-managed teams
- Problem solving and decision making

Training Expertise

Jeff conducts an array of leadership and team development seminars on such topics as:

- Surviving difficult conversations
- Fearless performance reviews
- Leadership and strategic thinking/planning
- Leading fearless change
- Communication skills
- Dealing with difficult people
- DISC Behavioral Profiles
- 360 leadership assessment and development
- Effective meeting management

- Decision making and problem solving
- Managing conflict and win/win negotiations
- Performance management and coaching skills
- Team building fundamentals
- Team leadership and facilitation skills
- Customer service

Professional Background

Jeff serves as an adjunct faculty member at University of Wisconsin-Madison and UW-Milwaukee. He also teaches for the UW-Madison, UW-Eau Claire, and UW-La Crosse Small Business Development Centers.

Jeff has a bachelor’s in Humanism and Cultural Change and a Masters of Science degree in Industrial Relations from UW-Madison.

Before forming RCI, Jeff served as human resource coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Administration (DOA). At DOA, Jeff developed and coordinated their employee assistance, leadership and employee development, and equal employment opportunity/affirmative action programs.

Jeff is a past president of the Board of Directors for the Greater Madison Area Society for Human Resource Management serving over 800 HR professionals in the Greater Madison area.

Conference Presenter and Author

Jeff is a sought-after speaker at state, national and international conferences. Recent presentations include:

- ASTD International Conferences — 2001 through 2011
- 2005 Minnesota Quality Conference
- Leading Change, Shanghai, China
- Emotional Intelligence in Action, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 2012

Jeff and his wife Linda have co-authored nine management books including Leading Change Training, Strategic Planning Training, Change Basics, Strategic Planning 101, Ultimate Performance Management, and Fearless Performance Reviews (McGraw-Hill, 2014).

Helping Create and Sustain GREAT Organizations!

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Fearless Performance Coaching Conversations

**Performance Coaching Conversation Defined:** A performance coaching conversation involves a meaningful and collaborative dialogue between an employee and his or her supervisor centered upon the employee’s aspirations, goals, performance expectations, accomplishments, challenges, and performance outcomes.

**Desired Outcomes of the Coaching Conversation:** The desired outcomes of the coaching conversation include a deep understanding of the employee’s motivational drivers and aspirations, the development of professional and job-related goals, an accurate assessment of the employee’s success in achieving these goals, a mutual commitment by the employee and supervisor to the employee’s success in achieving these goals, and the identification of mutual actions that each will take to move the employee forward.

**What Undermines/Enables Fearless Coaching Conversations?**

Work with your small group to identify factors that undermine and enable effective coaching conversations as described above . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors and Behaviors that <strong>Undermine</strong> Fearless Coaching Conversations</th>
<th>Factors and Behaviors that <strong>Enable</strong> Fearless Coaching Conversations</th>
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Managing Emotional States: Appreciation or Fear – You Decide!

What is it going to be: **Fight or flight?** or **Approach and appreciate?**

For every conversation that we have with every person in our life our emotional brain subtly and often unconsciously steers us in one of two emotional directions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fight or Flight</th>
<th>Approach and Appreciate</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fear response when . . .</strong></td>
<td><strong>Appreciation response when . . .</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• My mistakes are highlighted</td>
<td>• You are coming from a good place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• My errors are exposed</td>
<td>• I trust your heart/good intentions</td>
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<tr>
<td>• My vulnerabilities are exposed</td>
<td>• I know what will happen next</td>
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<tr>
<td>• I fear the loss of something that I value</td>
<td>• You have earned my trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• You pose a possible threat to me</td>
<td>• You have my back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I don’ know what will happen next</td>
<td>• You want me to succeed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I’m unsure of your motive or intention (don’t know your heart)</td>
<td>• I feel safe and secure around you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• My confidence and self-esteem is at risk</td>
<td>• We have a history of good interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Our relationship isn’t strong or healthy</td>
<td>• Past injuries have been healed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I’ve been injured by you in the past</td>
<td>• You listen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I’m unsure of myself</td>
<td>• I feel heard and understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I feel invisible</td>
<td>• You tell the truth in ways that respect me</td>
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<td>• ??</td>
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Fearless Coaching Conversations

Fearless coaching conversations that activate the “approach and appreciation” response are . . .

1. **Based upon a strong performance** — where both parties know the others’ “heart” (their good intentions) and where trust runs deep. Both invest in this partnership to make it even stronger.

2. **Focused on helping the** become successful. Absolutely every word said and action taken must center on one simple goal: enabling the employee to be successful in the current job, in his/her career, in his/her professional life (even if that involves moving the employee into a new job with a better fit).

3. ** looking.** The focus of the conversation is on the future: including such discussions as what happens next? How insights and lessons learned inform future work. What new goals emerge that should define the employee’s future efforts? What support is needed from the supervisor and others to enable great results? Etc.

4. More than evaluative. The conversation seeks to enable the employee to learn from successes and mistakes, build his/her confidence, and grow as an individual and as a professional.

5. **Anchored to “Great Performance”** and goals that are defined annually, reviewed frequently, and revised as needed based upon a changing environment and the employee’s performance outcome successes and setbacks.

6. — conducted as often as necessary to ensure a shared understanding of where the employee is on his/her journey to great performance and outcomes and to keep the employee on track or get him/her back on track if and when problems occur.

7. **Conversational** and with a focus on curiosity and exploration leading to a shared understanding vs. highly structured and formal.

8. Based upon a Mindset that leads to insight and learning (approach and appreciation) vs. a My-Way Mindset which can lead to defensiveness and fear (fight or flight).

9. **Objective and -based** — using observable and countable behaviors and results as its foundation.

10. . . both the employee and the coach have learned something about themselves and each other that they otherwise wouldn’t have known and which enables each to perform at a higher level in respect to each other following the conversation.
Developing the Right Mindset for Coaching Conversations

Conducting a truly fearless performance coaching conversation comes down to both the supervisor and the employee adopting a healthy and productive “mindset” – one that opens up the dialogue between them.

What is a Mindset? A mindset is a mental model or way of thinking and seeing that people often unconsciously adopt that influences how they interpret and respond to others and the world. It is a fixed mental attitude or disposition that predetermines a person’s interpretations of and responses to different situations.

A Mindset Continuum

My-Way Mindset

I am right, you are wrong.

I’m in charge, you’re not.

My version of the truth is the right one.

I need to win, you need to lose.

When approaching a performance partnership and the coaching conversation, both the supervisor and employee consciously or unconsciously choose a position on this Mindset Continuum.

Where are your managers along this scale?

Where do your employees fall on this continuum?

Collaborative Mindset

I have something to learn.

People are doing their best.

I only know part of the story.

We both can win.

Collaborative Mindset Values and Behaviors

Governing Values

- **Authenticity** — Being honest with oneself and others, acting with integrity, demonstrating congruence between one’s inner thoughts and external expressions.

- **Valid Information** — All relevant information is shared so that everyone understands what they need to know in order to make decisions and take actions based upon a . . .

- **Free and Informed Choice** — People make their independent decisions based upon good information, not due to coercion . . . which enables them to have . . .

- **Personal Commitment to the Choices Made** — Individuals have greater ownership and take greater responsibility for the choices that they participate in based upon . . .

- **Transparency** — Everyone feels comfortable with open, honest, and direct communication with no “hidden agendas” or undiscussables . . . which is best done with . . .

- **Humility** — A deep belief that we are no better than others. Rather, we are grounded in an understanding that we are not above others in value which, in turn, enables us to have . . .

- **Empathy** — Individuals have compassion for others and differing viewpoints and a genuine interest in understanding another’s perspective . . . which is made possible because . . .

- **No One Person’s Truth is Absolute** — Each person’s truth is a reflection of his or her own reality, how he or she perceives and interprets the world. Discovering a holistic truth emerges from respecting and integrating others’ truths.

Enacting Behaviors

1. **Mindfulness** — Being present, self-aware, and fully attentive to the moment helps us better understand and manage our emotional responses to difficult situations – and to be tuned into others emotional states and responses. This, in turn, enables us to navigate relationships with others with greater authenticity, transparency, and empathy. Being mindful reminds us to slow down, engage in critical reflection, and then make intentional, thoughtful choices.

2. **Speak honestly** — This behavior involves speaking with integrity, telling the truth in a respectful way, and using the power of our voice/words to build up vs. tear down. When we speak honestly, we speak from the heart in ways that work to inform and strengthen others and our relationships. Our authenticity and genuineness can enlighten, refresh, and disarm.

3. **Share all information that’s pertinent to the situation** — People can only make informed choices or decisions when they have all of the useful and relevant information in front of them. This requires us to actively participate in dialogue with each other to say what we’re thinking and what we know. Sharing all useful information includes saying “I don’t have an opinion” or “I don’t have anything to add to the discussion” rather than remaining silent (and causing people to wonder what we are really thinking!).

4. **Identify and test assumptions** — When you observe others making statements, taking actions, and making decisions, it’s natural/inevitable to make assumptions about their intentions/motivations. This enacting behavior first involves you identifying when you are making an assumption or inference about another person and then testing the assumption or inference directly by asking the other person for more information. Verify your “story” before you run with it!

5. **Suspend judgment** — In our normal conversations we tend to make quick judgments about what others have said or done. We view others’ statements or actions as good, bad, right, wrong, foolish, bold, brutish, bullying, caring, and so forth often without hard data behind our conclusions. With the Collaborative Mindset, we test out our assumptions and suspend our judgments about others. By suspending judgments we put our judgments on hold—creating enough distance between our judgments and ourselves to free us from having to act upon or be influenced by them and perhaps form new judgments, but this time informed by new information.
6. **Share your reasoning and intent and inquire into others’ reasoning, intentions, perspective, knowledge, and experience** — This enacting behavior enables others to see how you reached the conclusions and judgments you did and to then explore areas of your reasoning where they reasoned differently. When you explain to others why you think the way you do about something or why you made the statement you did, it enables them to better understand the basis for your words and actions and your purpose or reasons for doing something. The second half of this behavior involves actively inquiring into others’ reasoning, intent, perspective, etc. When you genuinely inquire into others’ reasoning, intentions, etc., you are able to better understand and appreciate what lies behind others’ words and actions. Collaboration naturally evolves from the rich dialogue that emerges from this sharing of reasoning and intentions and an appreciation of divergent experience and backgrounds.

7. **Listen for understanding** — The Collaborative Mindset depends upon the skill of reflective listening with a focus on understanding and appreciating another’s perspective. Reflective listening involves listening to what lies behind the words of others and then “mirroring” and paraphrasing what is learned back to the speaker in such a way that demonstrates your understanding. Reflective listening enables the speaker to confirm or disconfirm what you heard . . . leading to a deeper understanding of what the other was saying/thinking.

8. **Focus on exploring mutual interests, not defending positions** — Rather than focusing on positions (which, by definition, never intersect and which we tend to defend and hold), focus on better understanding and sharing your interests and exploring the interests of others. Our interests reflect the underlying needs and desires we have in a given situation. When we focus on interests it is far easier to find a solution. When, however, we focus on positions, we tend to defend and protect these positions — which profoundly limits understanding, agreement, and learning. [Note: adapted from Getting to Yes, by Roger Fisher and William Ury, 1991]

9. **Develop shared meaning of key words, concepts, ideas, events, decisions, and actions** — Creating a shared meaning and understanding around specific dates, times, places, and key words ensures that relevant information is available to all and enables people to make free and informed decisions and choices. When we have a shared understanding of key events and decisions we are more able to have an informed discussion on the issues before us. When we agree on the meaning of key terms (e.g., quality, learning, consensus, conflict, opportunity, etc.) we work from a shared understanding of the word/idea vs. drawing different meanings of these words and going off in different directions.

10. **Share decision making and action planning** — When we act unilaterally from a My-Way Mindset we attempt to impose our will onto others. The Collaborative Mindset involves working with others to jointly decide on what will happen and how to implement the decision. So, rather than imposing our way of thinking, we share our own ideas about next steps (and our reasoning behind them) and then invite others to share their thoughts (and the supporting reasoning). Based upon this valid information, we can then make informed choices on what to do next.

11. **See the parts, understand the whole** — By gathering all valid information in a given situation we can appreciate the pieces to the puzzle and make an informed choice about what to do next. The Collaborative Mindset, however, moves beyond just the parts to see the larger context and the fabric of the whole. People are moved to make decisions and take actions in their lives based upon the pieces and the whole. By understanding the whole vs. just looking at the parts, we can begin to appreciate why people do what they do. The larger context of their lives is as much responsible for their decisions and actions as a specific event or circumstance. When we see things holistically we tend to be more empathetic and understanding toward others and, therefore, more open to their experience, perspective, insights, and so forth.

12. **Use critical reflection to examine deeply held beliefs and behavioral patterns** — Critical reflection is the capacity to think deliberately about something in such a way that our underlying beliefs are open to challenge and change. Socrates once said that “an unexamined life is not worth living.” He challenges us to critically examine our deeply held beliefs and behavioral patterns in such a way that we (1) are aware of their power and role in our life and (2) are then able to entertain and explore alternative beliefs and behaviors that may be more facilitative of understanding and learning.

Adapted from *Fearless Performance Reviews* by Jeff and Linda Russell, McGraw-Hill, 2014, and based upon the work of Chris Argyris, Donald Schön, William Isaacs, Susan Scott, and Roger Schwarz

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Exploring the Collaborative Mindset

Values/Behaviors that Activate Approach and Appreciation

Reflect upon the values and behaviors of the Collaborative Mindset. Share your thoughts on the values and behaviors that are the most important to activate the “approach and appreciation” response and enable truly fearless coaching conversations.

________________________________________________________________________
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Strengthening the Collaborative Mindset Values and Behaviors

What actions can we take to strengthen the use of the Collaborative Mindset values and behaviors to help activate the “approach and appreciation” response within performance coaching conversations in supervisors and employees?

Developing/Strengthening Collaborative Mindset in Supervisors

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Developing/Strengthening Collaborative Mindset in Employees

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Performance Coaching Conversations

There are two types of Performance Coaching Conversations:

- **Event-Driven/Everyday Performance Coaching Conversations** – These performance coaching conversations often occur “on the spot” in response to specific questions, issues, challenges, performance setbacks, performance successes, and so forth.
  - Either the employee or supervisor can initiate these whenever necessary to “fine-tune” expectations, problem solve, explore solutions, sort through work priorities, build on/sustain the successes, celebrate a success, or guide employee decision making.
  - The employee may want some help sorting through options and possibilities or the supervisor may want to discuss something that happened the day before.
  - Since these coaching conversations are event-driven, they typically aren’t focused on the employee’s entire performance but rather on a specific dimension, behavior, or outcome.

- **Periodic “Check-In” Performance Coaching Conversations** – These performance coaching conversations are typically scheduled in advance according to what the employee and supervisor deem an appropriate time interval.
  - These more formal “check-ins” might be held monthly or quarterly depending upon where the employee is in relation to his or her performance and the level of guidance and support required of the supervisor.
  - The focus is on strengthening the partnership.
  - During these check-ins, both the employee and supervisor explore a more holistic view of the employee’s performance. The employee and supervisor discuss the employee’s performance in each of the employee’s core responsibility areas.
  - The employee’s inner drives and aspirations are explored as well as the health of the employee/supervisor partnership.
  - The employee and supervisor collaboratively develop forward-looking goals that guide the employee toward maintaining or improving performance, accepting new responsibilities, or growing performance to a new level.
  - Typically, one of these “check-in” Performance Coaching Conversations is the formal “Annual Performance Review” – at which time the appropriate forms are completed as part of the process.
The Five Magical Questions that Frame the Performance Coaching Conversation

The performance coaching conversation is an informal back-and-forth dialogue where the employee and supervisor discuss an array of issues that examine the current state of the employee’s performance and explore “what’s next” for the employee’s performance and development.

The five “magical” questions are simple and focused and provide a framework for this informal dialogue.

The entire process is employee-centered in that the employee leads the way by sharing his/her thoughts about each of these questions . . . with the supervisor/coach affirming, clarifying, and adding to what the employee has offered.

Here are the five questions that the employee and supervisor explore together:

1. **What is going _______ with the job?** What about the overall job is working? What are some of the good things that are happening in each of your job responsibility areas? What recent accomplishments are you especially proud of? What parts of your job do you feel especially good about? **Why is the job or this aspect of the job going well?** What are the likely causes of your performance successes?

2. **What _________ going well in the job?** What aspects of your job aren’t working as well as you’d like? What job problems or difficulties in any of your responsibility areas have you experienced lately? **Why isn’t this going well?** What are the likely causes of performance challenges? If you are experiencing performance challenges, what might be the causes of these things not going well?

3. **What __________ or improvements could you make in how you do your job to help improve things that are not going as well?** What could you do to address the causes of things not going well and which would improve your future performance outcomes and goals?

4. **How might I (your supervisor) help you to be more _______________ in your job?** Your career? How can I help you achieve your professional goals? What can I do to enable you to achieve your performance goals? What is the health of our working relationship?

5. **What are your inner drivers and ______________?** What do you see as areas where you might want to explore new responsibilities and grow in your position/job role? How do you see your position/role evolving into the future? What are your aspirations for this position?