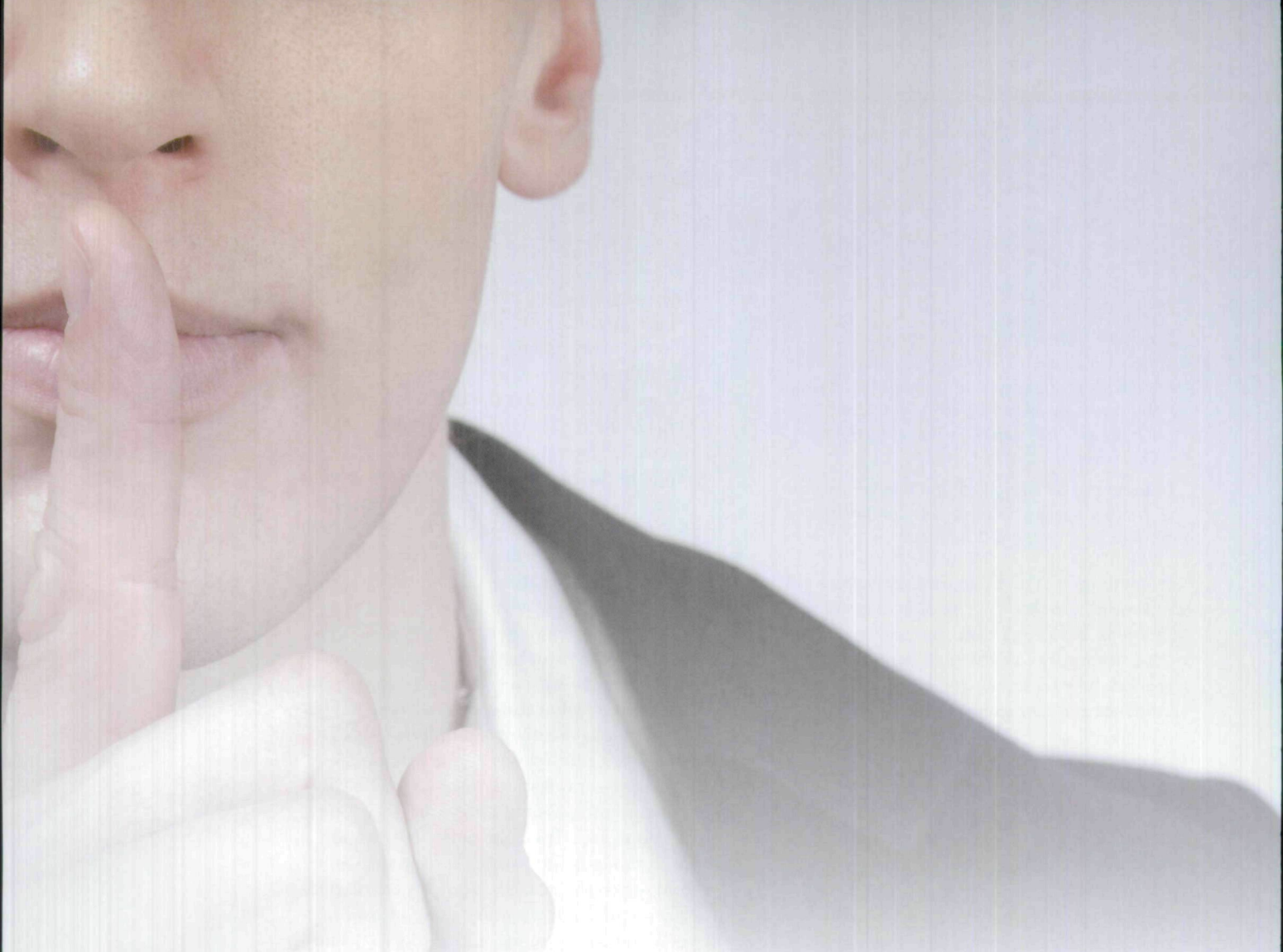




Questions not advice

Line managers have to learn to bite their tongue if they are going to be able to coach their teams, says **Alison Hartley**

Please don't read any further.
I see you've chosen to ignore me. That's because, in general, we don't like being told what to do. And as we gather knowledge and experience, promotions and responsibility, we like being told what to do even less.
However, many of us can't resist the urge to tell others how to run their lives. And as we rise through the tiers of management, we find

ourselves increasingly in the position where we can impose our way of doing things. This may be in an SME, where line managers have worked hard to build success with a small team and therefore believe they know the only way to run their business, or it can be in a large, blue-chip organisation, where there are pressures from matrix management structures and ever-changing priorities.

How many times have you heard yourself say: "If I were you..."? Well you're not, are you? Therein lies the problem with giving orders, advice and instruction. Despite good intentions, the recipient has to find *his own* way to do things. And that's where coaching comes in.

I've found that some line managers just don't get what coaching is all about. This is true in large and small organisations, and even when meeting pals in the pub on a Friday night. They are guilty

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– standard ways of
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of seeing it as a time-consuming and somewhat vague process. In fact, done well, it leads to:

- Employees becoming more competent and willing to take ownership of issues
- Managers' time being freed up
- People who can be trusted to do well, even when the manager isn't there.

Coaching, in its purest form, is simply asking insightful questions and listening carefully to the answers. It is respectfully allowing the 'coachee' to say whatever he wants to say, to explore whatever he wants to explore and to get to his own conclusions.

One of the most concise explanations I ever heard is that one should "listen with an empty mind, then ask another question". This is incredibly difficult to do! We want to help – offer advice.

We think of our next question while we are 'listening'. We are composing our thoughts on the matter as the other person speaks. This is all perfectly normal, and so good coaching takes practice. It is a skill as well as an intent.

In the working world, we are all busy. I've heard many line managers say it's easier to tell, or to do things themselves rather than delegate or coach someone else. And it may be in the short term. However, individuals will never learn to do it themselves if this approach is continued. We also often have high standards that we worry might be compromised if we allow someone else to do it their way. Standards are good – standard ways of achieving them are not.

In fact, in the business world, a more common-sense approach to coaching is often needed. It's okay for managers to set goals and monitor performance – that's their job. In certain situations, direction, teaching and prescription are appropriate. The point is, these are far more limited than some managers seem to believe.

In fact, a blend of styles is required depending on the situation and the individual involved. Sometimes use of a simple model, like the Conscious Competence Learning Framework (right), helps managers get to grips with what is required when. After all, there would be no point in a manager asking a new starter: "What do you think you should do today?" Direction and teaching is required at this point.

In large, blue-chip organisations, managers have often had extensive management training in which coaching is mentioned frequently as a vital part of the management toolkit. They may even have been on a bespoke coaching course. In one of my previous jobs, we had 'super coaches' – line managers throughout the organisation who had

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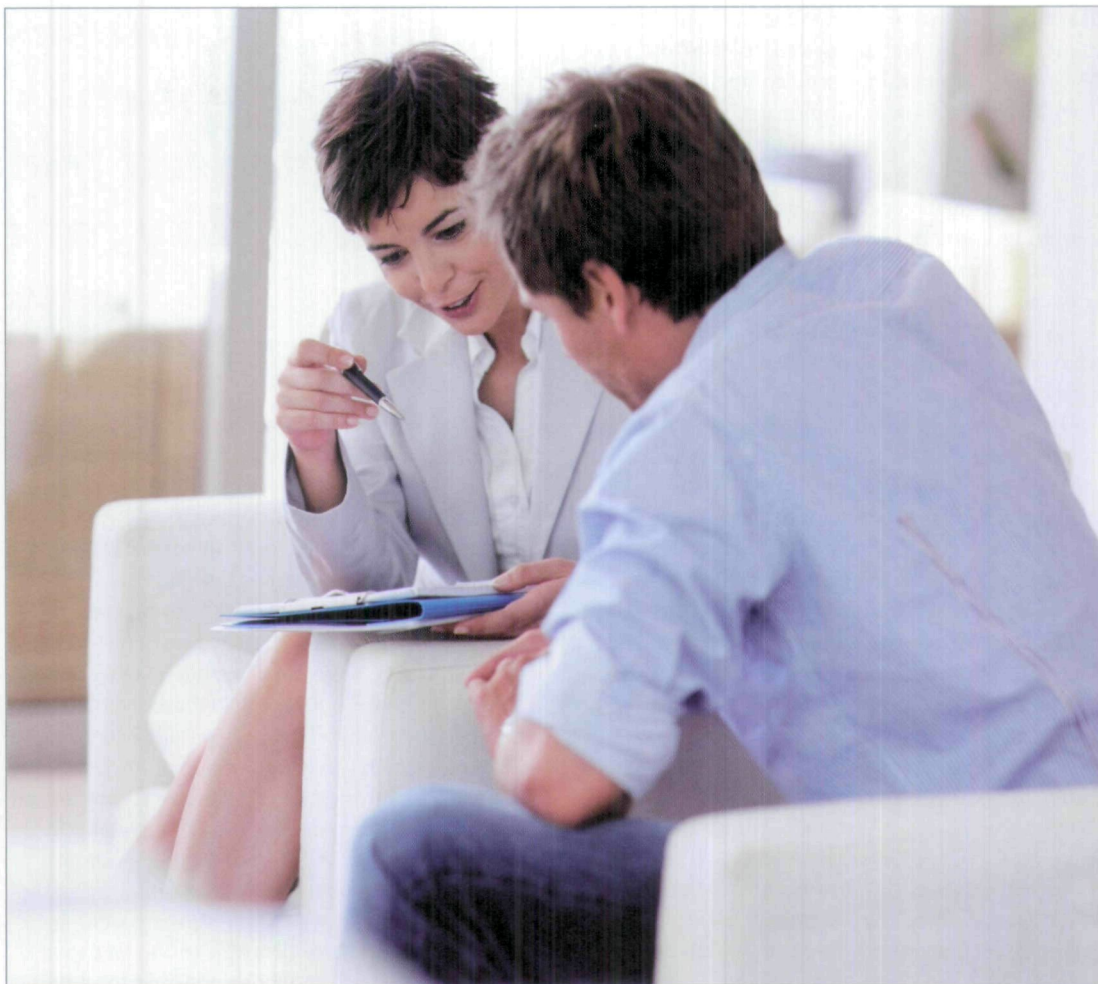
been chosen to champion the case for coaching and to train others. This led to coaching having a credibility that might have been lacking if it were just another HR-driven initiative.

These super coaches had also been through a selection process, to ensure they had the right set of personality traits and skills to be great champions. Finally, coachees were often matched to coaches who were not their line managers, because there were sufficient resources and numbers to do this. This perhaps allowed a purer form of coaching to happen, because there was not the awkwardness of the coachee feeling scared about exposing a weakness to his line manager.

In SMEs, there is likely to be less scope for specialised roles or training. It is probably going to be the manager who is doing the coaching. Recognition needs to be given to the fact that the manager is ultimately responsible for judging performance and controlling pay rises. However, skilful use of coaching techniques, despite that, will lead to more motivated and competent employees, especially in these straitened times, when everyone needs to be delivering maximum effort.



	Competence	Incompetence
Conscious	3 Conscious Competence <i>Coaching with low direction</i>	2 Conscious Incompetence <i>Mixture of direction, encouragement and coaching</i>
Unconscious	4 Unconscious Competence <i>Agreement on goals and coaching if asked for</i>	1 Unconscious Incompetence <i>Mainly direction needed</i>



So how is it done well?

One of the bonuses of being a coach, in my view, is being released from responsibility for the outcome. You are simply the catalyst for someone else's achievement. This is more difficult if you are someone's manager but, if managers can keep in mind these principles, coaching can be powerful:

- Release yourself from the responsibility for the outcome
- Practise great questions – open and short
- Listen like you've never listened before – this is an active process!
- Encourage progress towards goals but don't offer to do it for them.

Another part of coaching, especially in the business world, is management of the coaching meeting, and this may help managers see it more as a business process. There will be a time frame to any coaching process and there will need to be a result. There are various coaching models in the business world, which help define a process,

and with research and practise each organisation finds the right one. Whichever one is chosen, the coach's responsibility extends to managing the process so that the coachee achieves progress.

Think of it as a burger in a roll. The meat of the sandwich is the coachee's responsibility – he owns the content. The coach is the bread – the bottom is the process, the top is questioning and listening.

Great coaching is an excellent way to help others to grow – to find their own solutions and to be able to do whatever it is again, even better. While perhaps more time consuming in the short term for the coach, in the long term it leads to more competent, more autonomous coachees who are likely to feel listened to, trusted and developed. So encourage your managers to bite their tongues when asked for advice, and ask a question instead.

If you're still reading this article, you obviously came to your own decision that it was the right thing to do. And that is exactly what coaching is all about. **TJ**

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