coaching conversations and change

Coaching conversations and change

Contents

Intelligent control appears as uncontrol or freedom
And for that reason it is genuinely intelligent control
Unintelligent control appears as external domination
And for that reason it is really unintelligent control
Intelligent control exerts influence without appearing to
do so
Unintelligent control tries to influence by making a show
of force

Lao Tzu

Learning

Learning from a personal perspective

Learning from an organisational perspective

Learning from a personal perspective

You can master the rules and moves of chess in just a few minutes. But, even after hundreds of years of intense study, new lines of play continue to be developed – no one has yet devised a strategy that guarantees a win. There are simply too many different responses you can get from the other player to establish a step-by-step recipe that guarantees success in advance of the first move. Someone has estimated that there are more than 10^{50} possible moves, which is, allegedly, more than the number of atoms that make up the earth. So, to all intents and purposes, the possibilities are infinite – which means there is no way of ever fully knowing the game.

Success in chess therefore requires an appetite for learning in real time - in the sense of accumulating knowledge and applying experience to events as they unfold. Chess players use various methods for increasing the effectiveness of learning in real time:

- They study theory: how to get pieces in play; the middle game – the trail and error search for opportunity and advantage; and the end game – bringing things to a finish.

- They keep up to date with current practice by taking a keen interest in the games undertaken by other players. They seek to create advantage by designing sequences of moves, experimenting with ruses and strategies.

- They reflect on their experience in matches – establishing connections between aspects of their performance and overall outcomes – and so reinforce strengths and modify weaknesses.

Becoming accomplished at coaching seems to present the same sort of challenges as becoming accomplished in chess. The basic moves are relatively straightforward but high levels of skill develop only with experience underpinned by theory, trial and error and reflection. This workbook covers the basics: some background theory to provoke your thinking, some ideas for putting the theory into practice and methods for managing feedback for yourself and others. The aim is to introduce you to these basics in a way that encourages you to continue learning and travel well beyond them.

There is another reason for connecting coaching with learning: coaching implies involvement with people who are themselves learning. So, the more effective you are as a coach, the greater the requirement for adaptability and responsiveness on your part to match the escalating demands of the people you work with!

Learning from an organisational perspective

There are three fundamental capabilities that any organisation must demonstrate - in varying degrees and over varying timescales, and on an ongoing basis - in order to remain commercially viable. The processes of acquiring, deploying and maintaining these capabilities can be considered a manifestation of organisational learning.

The three capabilities are:

`Identifying and seizing new opportunities.` This is the capability to look into the future and identify markets, products, services and business opportunities that do not currently exist. The level of investment in this activity, and its distribution throughout the hierarchy, will be determined partly by the prevailing commercial context and partly by habit and choice. Success here suggests: a willingness to experiment; the ability to spend time on conversations that focus outside current conventions of effectiveness; and the capacity to embrace uncertainty and ambiguity.

`Developing adaptability and flexibility.` Having identified future opportunities energy must be invested in ensuring that the managerial and technical capability exists to transform them into actions that deliver results. In other words, investment in new skills is needed. At the same time the organisation must also be capable of maintaining itself by responding to changes in its political, economic, social and technical environments. The change themes emphasised here are cutting, improving and copying – which translate into personal and organisational qualities such as awareness, nimbleness and the capacity for learning new skills.

`Converting opportunity into performance.` This requires the organisational capability to structure and organise the performance of others in ways that deliver results for customers and the business. The relevant change levels are efficiency and effectiveness, requiring the ability to focus energy and attention and engage committed action.

We maintain that every organisation establishes, either explicitly or implicitly, the overall blend of the three strategic themes deemed necessary to deliver the commitments made to stakeholders. However, the organisational blend needs translating into day-to-day reality – made to fit the demands of the everyday work environment if you will. And this, we believe, is the domain of coaching conversations and leadership.

Convert opportunity into performance

Create adaptability and flexibility

Identify and seize new opportunities

Organisational learning capabilities

Coaching

Coaching strategy

Coaching style options

SLOW coaching framework

Coaching strategy

Many things have the *potential* to influence the quality of coaching conversations but there is one thing that is absolutely guaranteed to impact upon the proceedings. Bizarrely, it rarely attracts much attention and it is our answer to the question: "As a coach and a leader, what are you working on?" Generally speaking, approaches for building coaching and facilitating skills emphasise an understanding of the motives and behaviours of others as the *recipients* of the skills. However, given that we are the persistent ingredient in every coaching conversation, perhaps there is a case for adjusting this position. We believe there is more opportunity and leverage in choosing to focus on our own behaviours, mental models and values – to assume that the things we bring to the party are the essential component of our effectiveness as coaches and leaders. To put it another way: one route to success in coaching is to act like a learner. William Hartston[1], offers the following on being a learner:

"All human skills may be divided into three categories: Putting Things in Boxes, Filleting Fish, and Thinking. Any task that demands the precise fulfilment of clear instructions, whether it is typing, house building or memorising all the answers to trivial pursuit is basically Putting Things in Boxes. Filleting Fish covers jobs that involve the application of a practised routine that still leaves some room for personal expression. Like brain surgery or playing the piano for example. Thinking, however, is something else entirely. When you have to decide both what to do and how to do it, and past experience provides no reliable guidelines, then and only then may actual Thinking be necessary."

This is like the old cliché we trot out about vision where a passer-by sees three people at work on a building site. The passer-by asks them what they are doing. The first says: "laying bricks", the second: "putting up a wall", the third: "building a cathedral". This is usually told as a tale about the vision we carry for our job – so, when the job is coaching, what is our vision of the capability of others (and ourselves for that matter)? Do we think of them as bricklayers, wall builders or as creators of cathedrals? You may not have a verbal answer to this question, but you will have the answer in some form – and it will make a difference to the way you work with others in coaching situations.

[1]*From an article in 'You' magazine (With the Mail on Sunday). April 1994*
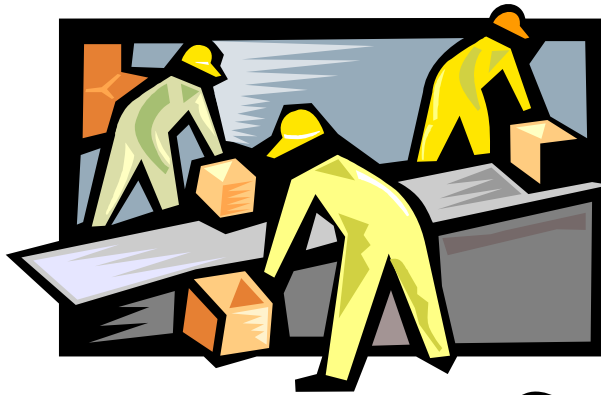
Coaching style options

If you consider that coaching should focus on making things happen, and that, as a coach you need to know about the subject under consideration, you may be attracted to the expert style. According to Angela Thomas[1]: *"The duty of the manager as coach is to promote the organisation's welfare by identifying and correcting performance shortfalls and problems…"* Coaches with this assumption may see people as bricklayers, adopt a "putting things in boxes" posture, and believe coaching is a way of getting people to do the right thing in the right way at the right time. Control is emphasised; you are working *on* the other participant.

The filleting fish, or putting up a wall, approach is not as tightly bound to specific behaviours. Here, style ranges from guide to developer. The focus for both is on building skills; enabling people to exercise choice and discretion in varied situations – as demanded by most management roles. So, people can respond to a scenario such as a goat entering a restaurant by applying rules of thumb rather than following a step-by-step procedure.

When you need to bring your experience to bear – as in mentoring – the style of guide is appropriate. The developer style is more suitable when your own experience has less relevance – as in choosing development goals in appraisals for example. With both guide and developer styles your influence is broader and less focused compared to the expert. The quality of your relationship has at least as much, if not more, impact than issues around the task. You are working *with* them rather than *on* them.

If you go for cathedral builders and thinkers you are in the coach as catalyst region and you will doubtless agree with Tim Gallwey[2]: *"Coaching is unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them."* This mode of coaching is quite remote from specific action, so there is the potential for having an impact across a very wide range of situations. But, because of this remoteness, control and certainty for the coach are much lower; you can't predict the way the exploration will go. Consequently both your risk and your emotional investment are higher. Here, you could say you are working *for* them.

[1] *Coaching for staff development. Angela Thomas. BPS Books. 1995*

[2] *The inner game of tennis. New York. Random House. 1975*

A range of coaching styles:

Skill level	Focus of attention	Style & applications
"Putting things in boxes"	**Delivering performance:** Reinforce or modify specific actions applied within particular contexts, e.g. a step by step procedure for handling complaints	**Expert:** Induction, on the job training, performance management conversations, discipline
"Filleting fish"	**Increasing flexibility and adaptability:** Develop a flexible performance repertoire that can be applied over a range of contexts, e.g. presentation skills, handling meetings, juggling, project management, coaching, working in teams	**Guide:** Mentoring, reviewing experience, offering comments **Developer:** Creating practice opportunities, performance appraisals, feedback conversations, facilitating teams
"Thinking"	**Identifying and creating new opportunities:** Build capacity for learning and potential to initiate and respond to change, e.g. how to organise personal experience in order to provide a basis for action in unfamiliar situations	**Catalyst:** Career conversations, seeking new directions and opportunities, strategic decision making, life goals, counselling

Which style is best?

Is there any point in making these distinctions in style? We think there is; how people are coached influences the way they learn and develop – and individual learning and development is at the heart of organisational change and sustainability. But 'one size fits all' does not apply – each style has benefits and limitations; each style poses different questions and challenges for the people involved. The table opposite summarises the benefits and limitations for each style.

So, is there such a thing as a preferred approach? From one perspective the answer is no; each style occupies its own niche and the flexibility to work fluently across a range of styles is an indicator of your capacity to lead and influence change. You could also argue that the willingness to adjust your behaviour to fit the needs of the people you are working with is a basic ingredient in establishing effective relationships.

So there it is then – the answer is to adapt our style to suit the situation. Or is it? While it is tempting to accept that we adjust our behaviour to match the demands of different situations, experience suggests that our untested beliefs and assumptions exert more control over style than our ability to produce behaviours. In the muck and bullets of the work situation the fact that people *can* ask an open question is no guarantee that they *will*. Given that the basic agenda for coaching is to stimulate learning and change, perhaps there is a case for preferring assumptions that offer the greatest scope for creating new possibilities – suggesting catalyst as the preferred style. However, this could be more about strategy than style: beginning with catalyst and moving towards expert when required builds in more scope for learning. Perhaps it comes down to sensing and responding: the ability to discern the appropriate style to use and the capability to put the chosen style into action.

Another thought on strategy: coaching and facilitating are best seen as a series of connected conversations. The accumulated impact of these conversations is increased capability for the participants – they learn. As learning grows, ambition and goals enlarge. So someone who initially flourishes on the receiving end of an expert style may find themselves stifled if the coach fails notice the cues that suggest a less controlling approach would fit. So perhaps coaches and facilitators who act as if others are capable of learning - and act like learners themselves - offer the greatest potential for engaging and sustaining change.

Coaching styles compared:

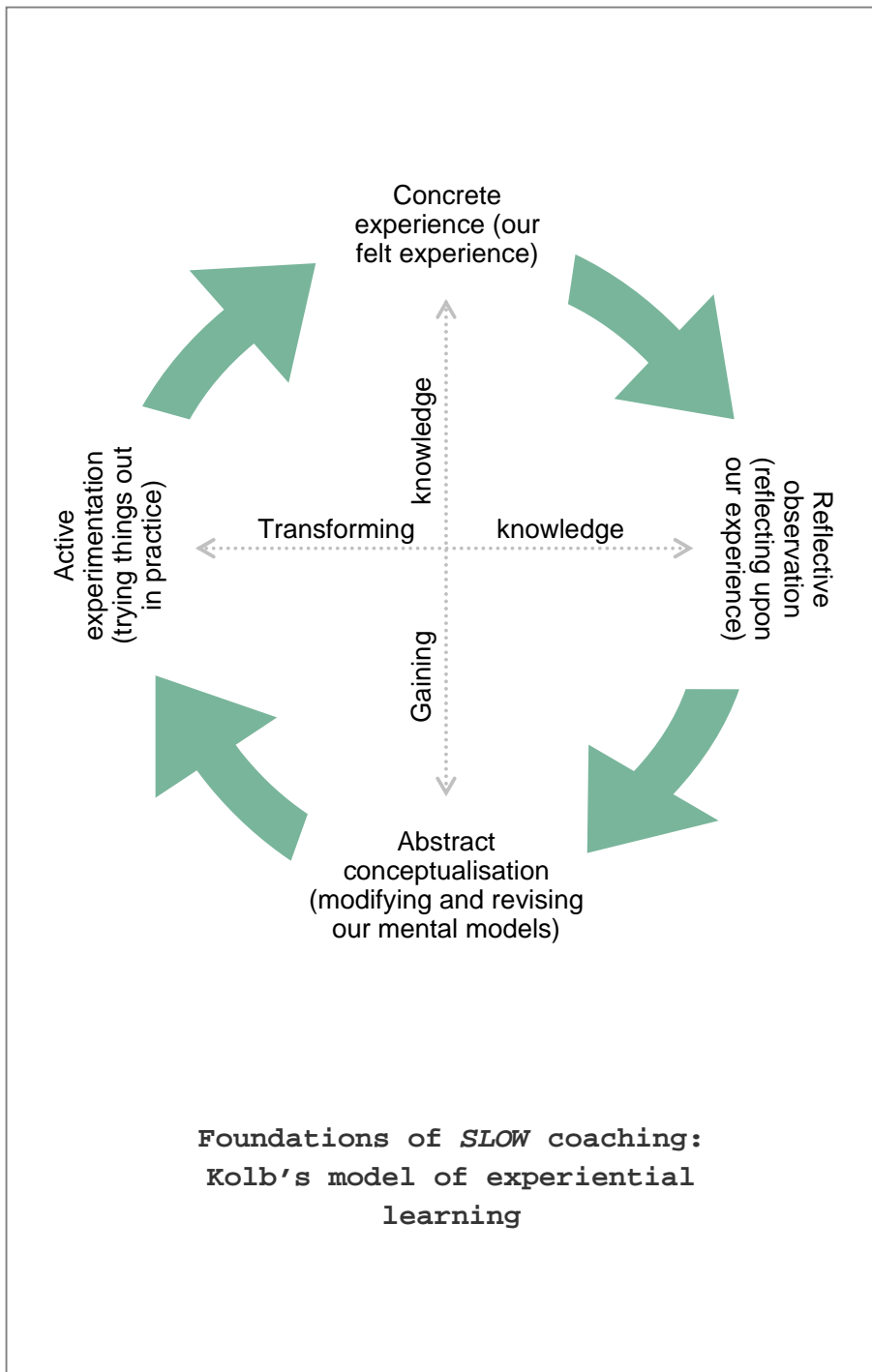|	Focus	Impact	Risk/control
Expert	**Getting the job done – achieving tasks efficiently and effectively:** performance, technique, methods and tactics.	Physical, intellectual, interpersonal: acquiring and applying knowledge	Risk is low, control is high – agenda is determined by the coach
Guide	**Skill building – increasing capacity in the role:** reaching development goals and objectives	Intellectual and interpersonal: refining knowledge, solving problems	Risk is still low, control still high; coach is mostly on comfortable ground, but needs to create a working relationship
Developer	**Enlarging capability:** setting goals for development, outlining future paths and objectives	Interpersonal and emotional: influencing self and others, creating new opportunities	Risk is medium to high – personal involvement is integral to the coaching relationship
Catalyst	**Values and perspectives:** creating change via enlarging potential, personal awareness, vision and purpose	Emotional and interpersonal: integrating relationships with personal values	Risk is high, control is low – limits are tested and new territory is explored by both participants

SLOW coaching framework

SLOW coaching is a four-step, thought to action, process. It begins with building a picture of the situation at hand – seeking and providing information and raising awareness. Second is finding leverage – recasting the information in ways that allow the situation to be analysed and goals and targets to be chosen. Next opportunities and options can be formulated – a choice of paths to reach the chosen goals and targets. Finally the focus moves towards taking action: who, what and when – determining who will be doing what and when will it happen.

There is nothing novel about these steps, they form a conventional problem solving/opportunity creating process that begins with ideas and possibilities and gradually funnels down to focused action. While there may be differences in the labels, or the number of steps, most coaching models exhibit a similar progression. You could argue that the main benefit of coaching processes is that they provide scaffolding – a structure to manage the beginning, middle and end of conversations. Scaffolding provides a method for handling a range of situations without having to know the particulars of the issue in advance.

Underlying *SLOW* coaching is a basic assumption: irrespective of the style in use – expert, guide, developer or catalyst – the goal is to create difference. Creating difference means that somewhere along the way learning takes place. For insight into the process of learning we turn to David Kolb and his cycle of experiential learning. For Kolb, learning is the process by which we:

a) Use our experience to derive the concepts, principles and rules of thumb that guide our behaviour in new situations; and

b) How we test out and modify these concepts and rules to improve their effectiveness.

You can view this process as a cycle shown in the diagram opposite – concrete experience is followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation: we reflect on our experience to create concepts and we test out these concepts by taking action. In addition to taking trips around the circle however, there are other things occurring - such as the dynamic created by the tensions between two ways of gaining knowledge (via experience or theory) and two ways of transforming knowledge (actively or reflectively). The interactions between the parts of the learning cycle create the four steps in the coaching process. We show an overview of the coaching process on the next page and then explore opportunities and issues for each step in turn.

Concrete experience (our felt experience)

Reflective observation (reflecting upon our experience)

Abstract conceptualisation (modifying and revising our mental models)

Active experimentation (trying things out in practice)

knowledge

Transforming   knowledge

Gaining

Foundations of *SLOW* coaching: Kolb's model of experiential learning

SLOW coaching - an overview

Here is an overview of the steps in the *SLOW* coaching approach; each step is then described in more detail.

Situation building.

Essentially finding out what is going on, with the aim of creating shared understanding of the current state of play. Establishing the context, purpose and scope of the encounter. Exploring the current situation, aiming to expand mutual awareness of the situation at hand. Balancing the use of questions – to encourage input from the other participants – with offering your own perceptions and data. But mostly – paying attention to what is happening!

Leverage and goals.

The aim here is to create a definition of the situation in a way that builds creative tension – a springboard for committed action. The information generated in step one is the raw material in the process of identifying issues worth dealing with, either as problems to be solved or opportunities to pursue.
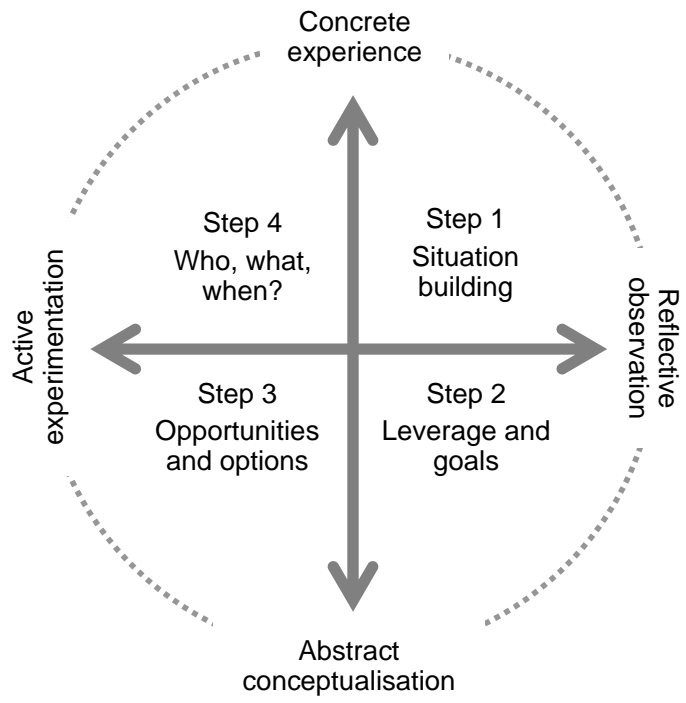
Goals are an integral part of this step; they create a context for the current situation and help form the gap between now and a preferred future. Identifying and crossing this gap is one way of framing the purpose and range of the coaching assignment.

Opportunities and options.

A well executed step two focuses attention on the future. Step three is about creating and testing predictions about actions and the responses they could generate. When new territory is being explored opportunities for practice can be identified. Options for action lead to flexibility and resilience; so there is advantage in designing optional routes for reaching goals, targets and milestones. Once options are designed the advantages and disadvantages of each can be evaluated and the preferred course of action can be chosen.

Who, what, when?

This entails a focus on what is to happen differently. Planning and scheduling tools that fit the scope of the intended outcomes are required – from back of a fag packet to a full-blown project plan. Specify: what will happen, who will do it; when it will occur; and who else needs to be involved. Ideally action is taken in the spirit of practice and experimentation. Results are delivered. Arrangements for review and follow up are made.

Concrete experience

Active experimentation

Reflective observation

Step 4
Who, what, when?

Step 1
Situation building

Step 3
Opportunities and options

Step 2
Leverage and goals
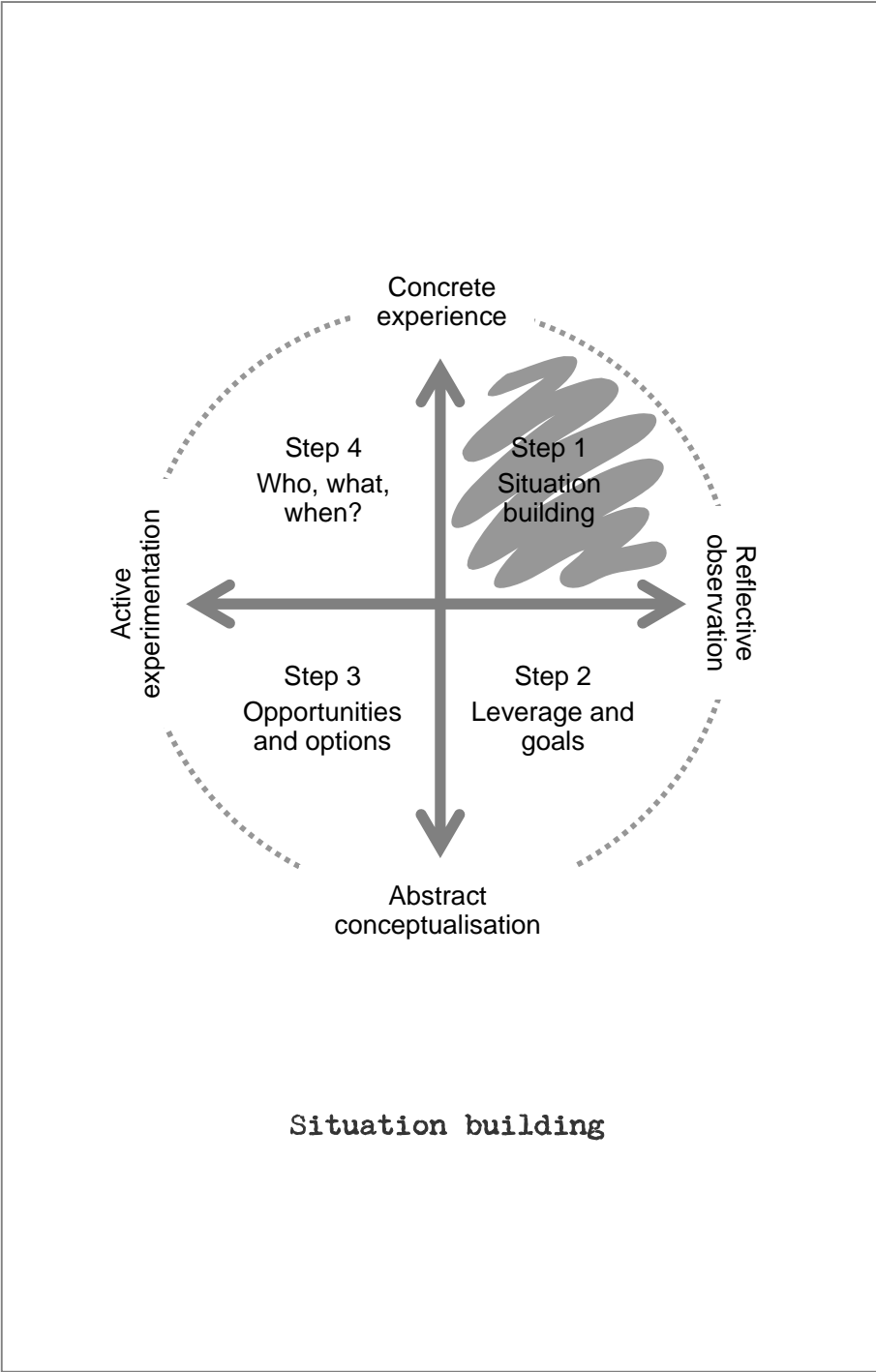
Abstract conceptualisation

SLOW coaching framework

SLOW coaching - step-by-step

Situation building

This is the beginning of a conversation, so typically this consists of some input from the coach to set the context, closely followed by an opportunity for the other participant to present their perspective. Open questions provide the room for the other participant to express and organise their thoughts about the situation at hand. Your aim as a coach is to expand awareness – in terms of attending to current reality and determining what aspects of it should be explored. While this sounds nice in theory it is not as straightforward as it sounds – a key skill is the ability to adjust your use of open and closed questions, combined with listening and responding, in order to balance the input from all involved. The balance of input will vary according to context and intentions:

- `Expert` – you will typically bring the majority of the information to the party: offering feedback about performance; outlining the issues you want to explore; giving your opinions and reactions

- `Guide` – your own experience and opinions will be a valued part of the equation so it is appropriate for you to have a fair bit of input but this is likely to be in response to the context of the other party instead of you setting the agenda from the outset

- `Developer` – more of a balance: both parties will have relevant information so each person's input shapes the other

- `Catalyst` – the participant's agenda shapes the encounter – so you might be undertaking this step in response to goals that they have already set. Your aim here is to assist them in a journey of discovery, which leaves even less scope for your views on how the world turns

Whatever the context it is useful to recognise the influence that discretion and habit bring to this party. There is always too much going on for us to notice everything about our surroundings, we are therefore selective in our attention; our awareness involves choice. The way I experience the world combines with my perspective to shape the information I discover. We find what we look for! Is it the world that changes when I start seeing lots of Ford Fiestas or is it that I've decided to buy one?

Concrete
experience

Step 4
Who, what,
when?

Step 1
Situation
building

Active
experimentation

Reflective
observation

Step 3
Opportunities
and options

Step 2
Leverage and
goals

Abstract
conceptualisation

Situation building

Leverage and goals

There are two elements in this step. The first is to interpret the data unearthed in step one to create an interpretation of current reality. Interpretation and meaning emerge when reflection interacts with mental models; patterns are detected, problems are formulated and opportunities are discovered. Leverage comes from interpretations that lead to the identification of worthwhile (i.e. the outcome is more valuable than the resources invested) issues.
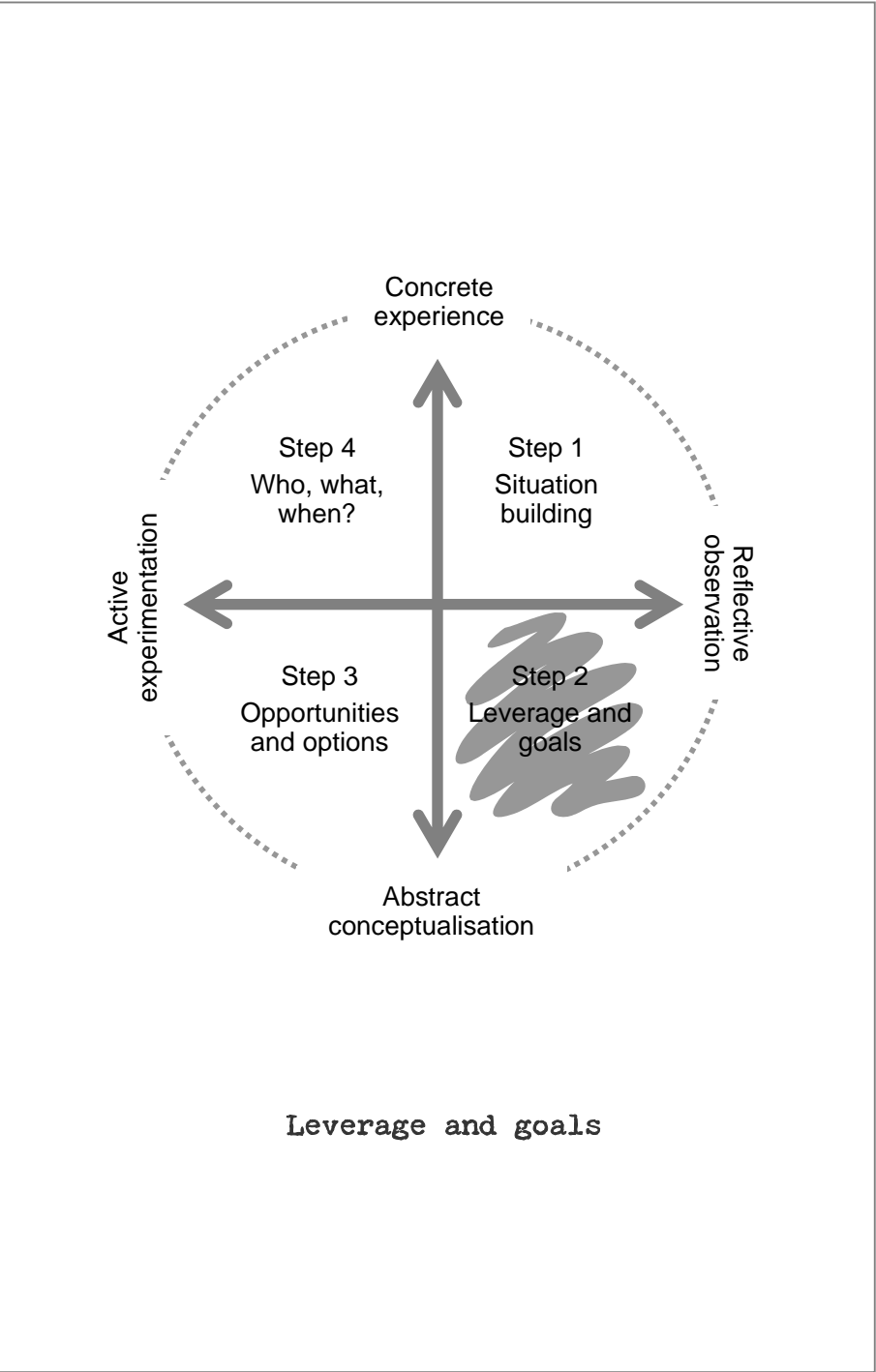
We are convinced that one of the major benefits of coaching conversations is the contribution created simply by bringing another perspective to bear. Not a better perspective; another perspective!

The second element, having made sense of the situation, is to design goals. We use design here to emphasise the role of choice, power and discretion. In problem based scenarios goals may be given: a remedy is needed to correct an error or lack of technique. When you seek new opportunity however, things are less clear-cut, opportunities don't announce their arrival, they have to be discovered by assimilating and connecting information. You may have to keep cycling back to step one for more data. In either case goals form gaps: the spaces between perceptions of current reality and a more desirable future. The consequence of these gaps is creative tension – the emotional springboard for action.

What constitutes a goal varies – with varying demands on you as a coach. In expert coaching they tend to be about what to do and when and where to do it: close the sale more quickly, hit the ball further, answer more calls. For guides it is likely that goals are less obvious and longer range: developing strategies for managing meetings, making inspiring presentations for instance. In the case of developers the agenda is building capability, finding direction and widening choice, so the selection of goals is the essence of the encounter. This is even more the case for catalysts; you are among questions that have no cookbook answers: What do I want from work? What should I be working towards? What are my beliefs? What is important to me? This is vague, uncertain and potent territory – especially for the coach.

How work on these elements is shared, and therefore whose mental models and perspectives are utilised, depends on your self-awareness and your ability to adjust your behaviour in real time. As you might predict, this develops mainly via experience, reflection and practice.

Concrete experience

Step 4
Who, what, when?

Step 1
Situation building

Active experimentation

Reflective observation

Step 3
Opportunities and options

Step 2
Leverage and goals

Abstract conceptualisation

Leverage and goals

Opportunities and options

Having defined the situation and set goals, there are now boundaries to work with – in some contrast to the potential for vagueness and lack of direction in the previous step. Here the task is to invent ways of bringing the desired future into being.

There is plenty that coaching can contribute here. For a start, anticipating the future is riddled with opportunities to examine beliefs and challenge the mental models we carry – about ourselves and others in general – and, more specifically, about our ability to take action. What sort of predictions do we make? Do they assume success or failure as the default outcome?
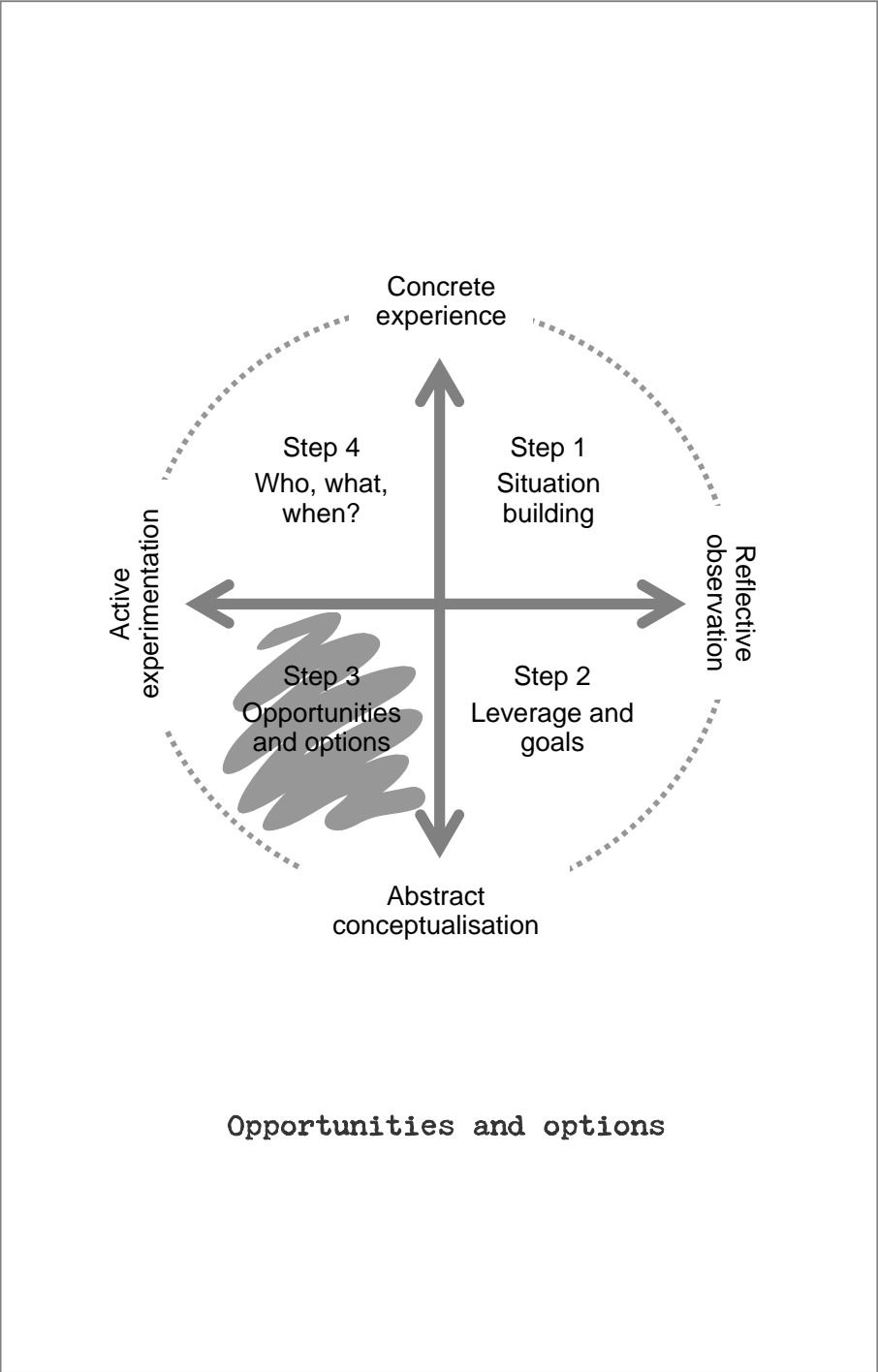
An implicit and integral component of designing action are the predictions we make about others in terms of what they will need and how they will respond – so this stage tends to be more like building strategies than planning single step actions – charting a path to checkmate rather than moving a pawn forward.

In formulating strategies, the law of requisite variety can be applied. This says that the person with the most flexibility of behaviour in a situation will be the one with the most influence. To put it another way, if you have only one response to a particular situation then you are basically a robot whenever you are in that situation: make a proposal and I'll always challenge it. If you have two options you are in a dilemma – like the donkey that starves to death because it can't choose between two piles of hay. Flexibility, and hence influence, comes from having at least three action strategies, all of which can be executed successfully. You can also apply this law to the person you are coaching.

Summary of tasks at this step: generate a number of possible courses of action that all have the potential to achieve the chosen goals; then evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each one; then choose the most favourable.

As before, you have choice about who does the work here. One source of information about your coaching style is the level of commitment for action exhibited by the parties to the discussion. This is direct feedback about the ownership of the goals that were set at step two. There is more detail on this in the section on feedback.

The further you wander from the expert role the greater the likelihood becomes that action is being taken as an experiment – a practice session is being designed. Limits can be reset and boundaries tested and adjusted. This too, applies to the person you are coaching.

Concrete experience

Step 4
Who, what, when?

Step 1
Situation building

Active experimentation

Reflective observation

Step 3
Opportunities and options

Step 2
Leverage and goals

Abstract conceptualisation

Opportunities and options

Who, what, when?

This is delivery – the stage of planning and executing the chosen strategy. Action is being taken in order to move towards desired goals.

In expert type coaching this is often a one trip round the loop scenario – the new action is in place because it is being done: the phone is answered with the appropriate level of smile in the voice; the ball is hit with the correct part of the bat. The task gets done in the right way in the right time.

In guide and developer modes there is more emphasis on ongoing application – learning to play a musical instrument, managing performance, or leading a complex project is rarely a one shot affair.

When in the catalyst style exploration and discovery are the key themes – blind alleys and multiple laps of the coaching cycle may be travelled along just to become clear on what to work on.

There are two parts to this step and it's tempting to assume that both have been covered as a by-product of considering a range of possibilities for action.

The first part is planning – required in varying degrees according to the complexity of the action being taken. This may mean setting objectives, choosing priorities, allocating resources, determining time and timing, involving others etc. Your contribution here is not so much planning directly (unless you are in full expert mode) but supporting the participant in indulging in a level of planning and preparation appropriate for the chosen action. They nail down what needs nailing down. Investing in high levels of participation in the earlier parts of the coaching process pays dividends here – if you have assessed this accurately planning for implementation will effectively be a foregone conclusion.

The other part of this step is making room for practice. There are many forms of practice – but the willingness to support and encourage it is a fundamental coaching discipline.

As a coach you want a nest of choices here – the law of requisite variety applies. There is a continuum of practice modes, ranging from one step removed – as in taking part in a role play for instance; to real world – as with adopting a practice mindset when undertaking the actual conversation. Activities on this continuum, in one step removed to real world order, include: reading, videos, demonstration, case study, exercises, simulations, role plays, rehearsals, having a real go.

The natural outcome of practice is experience and feedback, which leads us back to another step one, a new situation to be built…

Who, what, when?
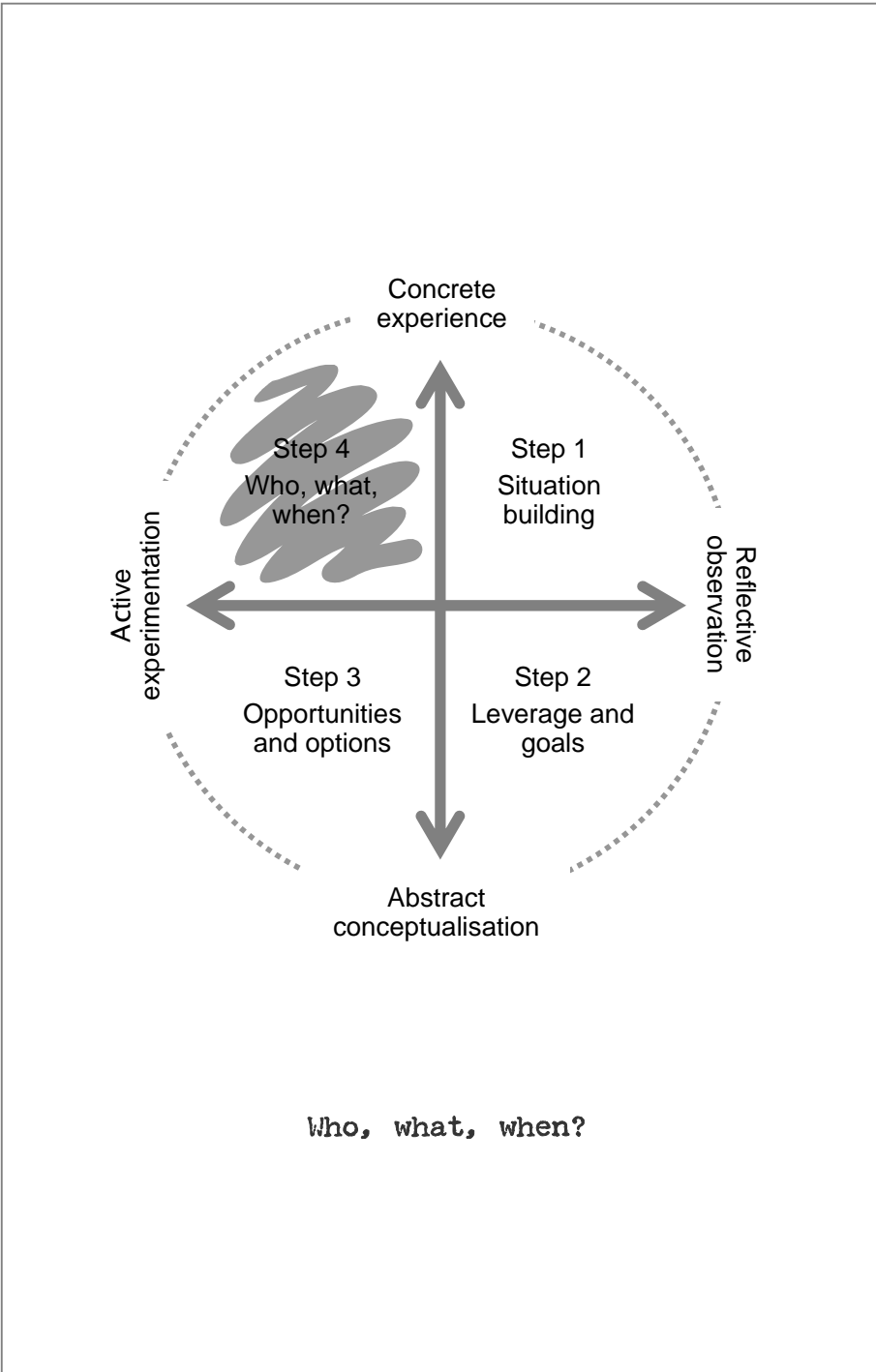
Feedback and review

What do we mean by feedback?

SLOW feedback conversations

Observation and data gathering

Behaviour analysis

SLOW review – learning in groups and teams

What do we mean by feedback?

If you look around for information about feedback (on Google a search for: "feedback skills" delivers about 74600 results) you will quickly discover that there is no shortage of guidance - recipes if you like. Having studied a good number of these recipes, our contention is they can all be resolved into three categories: ritual, elaborated ritual and real work.

Ritual, as the name suggests, involves taking part in activities designed to maintain the status quo. The thinking that underlies ritual feedback is essentially: 'I'll watch you in action, then I'll tell you what you need to do differently.' Just as the socially acceptable answer to 'How are you?' is 'Fine thanks' whatever your actual experience; the routine for ritual feedback boils down to 'You did this, this and this but if you had done this instead it would've been better'. Your response to this meaningless drivel is to nod enthusiastically, smile and say 'Thanks a lot. That was really useful' which is the signal for everyone to move on and forget the conversation. If your purpose is to make some sort of difference then ritual isn't really the best man for the job.

Others have also noticed ritual's lack of impact; hence the emergence of various forms of elaborated ritual. The elaboration can be in terms of more detailed guidelines for handling the interaction, for example:

- *Give positive feedback when it's due; don't just point out mistakes.*

- *Focus on the task or behaviour, not on the person, e.g. 'This page of the leaflet is not as clear as it could be' rather than 'you've made a real mess of this page.'*

- *Avoid personal, judgemental comments, e.g. 'It makes it difficult for us all if you are late for meetings' rather than 'You're hopeless – you're always late for meetings.'*

- *Make the comment as soon as it is needed, rather than days later, e.g. 'I'm not sure this is going to work' rather than 'I thought at the time that that wasn't going to work.'*

- *Be specific: identify precisely what has gone well and make specific suggestions for improvement, e.g. 'The introduction and conclusion of the report were good and you covered all the main points. It would be helpful to give each section a heading', rather than 'Can't you set out your reports more clearly?'*

- *Avoid commenting on areas the other person can do nothing about, e.g. their physical appearance.*

More flamboyant variations involve dealing with the issue that people don't often respond well to being told to amend their behaviour. This is usually done by

larding the bad news with a few dollops of praise. Here is the shit – sorry, feedback - sandwich manoeuvre (faithfully reproduced):

A feedback sandwich is a linguistic construction designed to cause the person being given feedback to accept the feedback. If you tell a person only what they do wrong, they will become demoralised and switch off. Likewise, if you personalise the feedback to <u>who</u> they are (their identity) rather than <u>what</u> they are doing that needs changing (their behaviour) then they will not be motivated to change. How do you do it? Think of three things the person does well, in the context of the task, behaviour or situation you are wanting them to change, and the one behaviour that you want them to change. Finish by praising them at the identity level.

Example: "I like the creative approach, energy and determination you have as a consultant Charlotte, the one thing you could change would be the attention to detail which currently is not sufficient to produce the overall quality on this project that I know you are capable of achieving."

In both examples the underlying thinking remains the same as for the basic feedback ritual – I'm still aiming to get you to do something in order to remedy some flaw I'm able to point out to you. In coaching style terms these are both examples of the expert mindset – the focus is directly on action and the area for exploration is determined by me.

The final category of feedback recipes is real work – which can be characterised as a conversation with learning. The significant difference with real work recipes is the change in the underlying thinking; by moving away from the need to have the answer before the conversation starts I can free myself up to enter into a conversation with you that rests on joint exploration and discovery rather than some bizarre shuffle to a pre-determined goal. The advantage of this approach is that it taps into people's potential for creating change for themselves, and as Don Tapscott notes *"In the innovation economy human imagination is the main source of value".* The disadvantage is the loss of certainty and control – there is no way of knowing the destination of this type of conversation. What you can do however is manage the process of the exploration and we show one way of doing this on the following pages.

In summary, your feedback choices come down to comfort and predictability with a guarantee of no real impact, or a bit of uncertainty with the chance to create a significant difference.

SLOW feedback conversations

This framework for feedback sits on the same beliefs that underpin *SLOW* coaching: the whole point of feedback is learning. So we are back to conversations, as opposed to simply offering comments and judgments. Here are some general-purpose guidelines – they follow the same sort of progression as the *SLOW* coaching model.

1. Situation building - get them talking about their experience

Use open questions to get them talking about their experience. "How was that?" offers more scope than "What do you think went well?" How you open influences the rest of the interaction. As they describe their experience you can compare and contrast this with your own data, opinions and impressions. A key part of your contribution at this stage of the conversation is the ability to provide fairly objective data – the next section of the handbook outlines a data gathering technique using behaviour analysis. You will need to judge if, how and when to offer your own observations. As they reply to your short open questions you should have the luxury of plenty of time to think! Use closed questions to focus, for instance in response to "I think it went really well" you could try "What did you do to make it go well?"

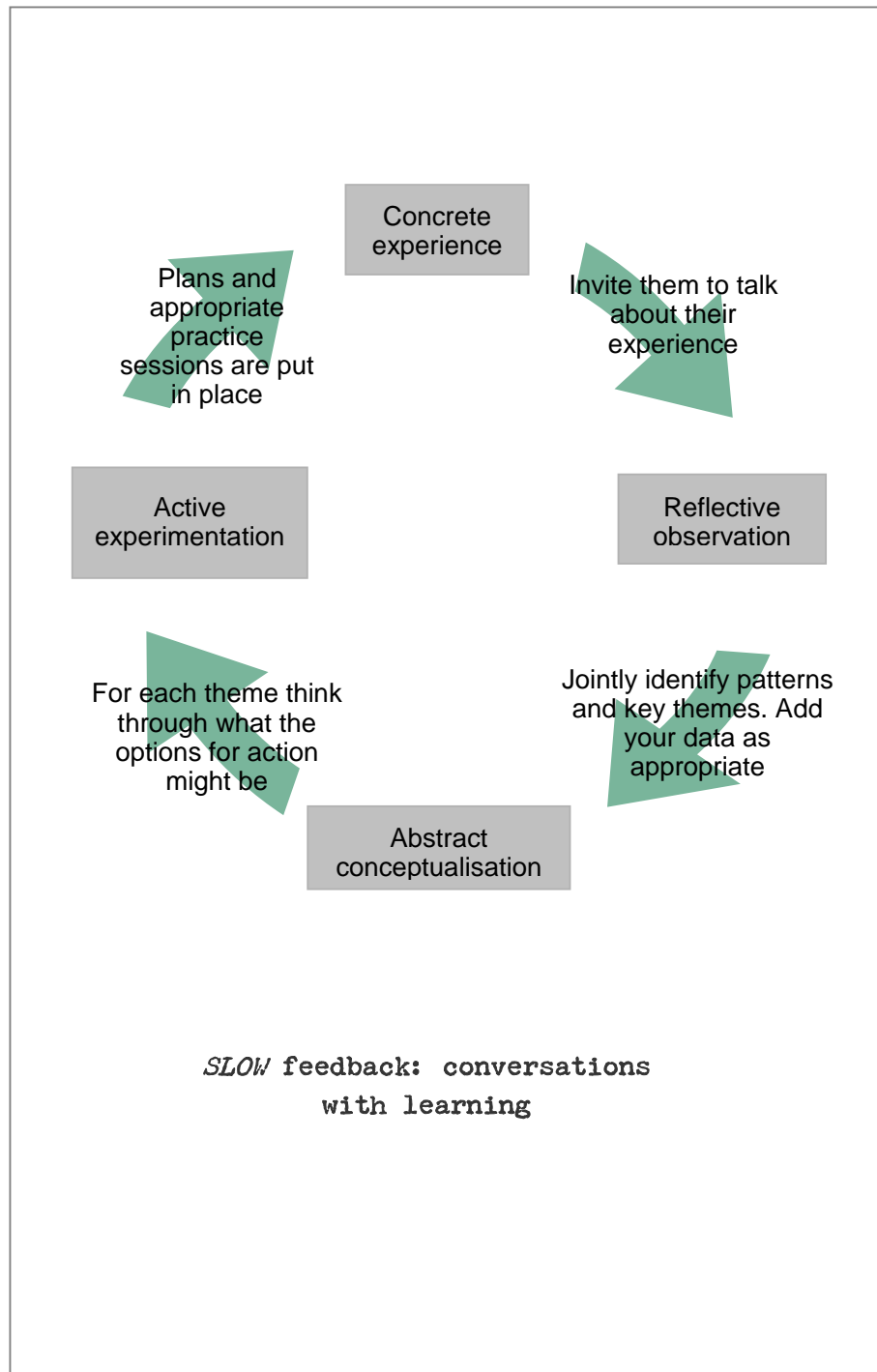### 2. Leverage and goals – jointly identify patterns and key themes

What are the two to three themes in the discussion? Use a summary to check the themes to work on. Keep it to two or three opportunities or problems as it is hard to work on 19 things at once. For each agreed issue work through steps 3 and 4 below - remembering to include a brief summary each time you move to a new theme…

3. Opportunities and options – think through what could be done

Get them to think through several ways of responding to the issues defined in step 2. If they are short of ideas then offer possibilities of your own. Ask them to rate the advantages and disadvantages of each option and to select the options they consider the most viable. Resist the urge to select on their behalf.

4. Who, what, when – practice and planning for the option chosen

What is to be done? When will it be done? What preparation or practice needed? Who will be involved? What follow up is required? As with this stage in coaching conversations your task here is to encourage them to really think through their plans in order that something happens to make a difference. If possible, find a way of organising a practice session for the action proposed. The learning continues...

Concrete
experience

Invite them to talk
about their
experience

Plans and
appropriate
practice
sessions are put
in place

Active
experimentation

Reflective
observation

For each theme think
through what the
options for action
might be

Jointly identify patterns
and key themes. Add
your data as
appropriate

Abstract
conceptualisation

SLOW feedback: conversations
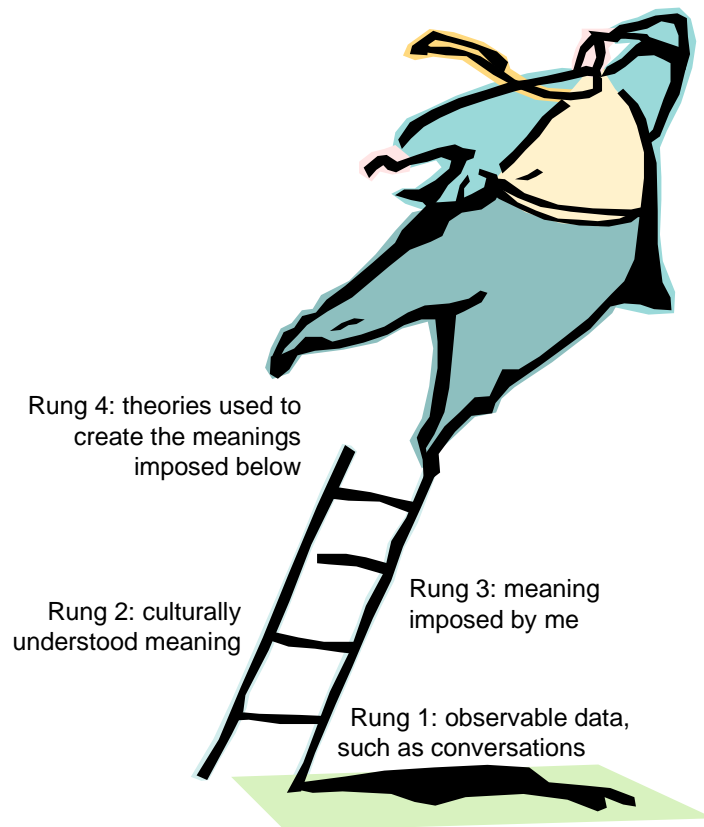with learning

Observation and data gathering

A basic requirement of real work feedback conversations is the ability to bring fairly objective data to the party. Offering appropriate data and information at relevant parts in the exploration is a key tactic in encouraging the participant to assess their experience and performance for themselves instead of relying on 'the expert'. Equally, one of the ways to place obstacles in the path of learning is to communicate at high levels of inference. What is meant by high levels of inference? The diagram illustrates a process we probably go through, according to Chris Argyris, in order to make sense of our surroundings and determine the appropriate action to take.

The first rung of the ladder is relatively directly observable data, for example: a conversation between two managers. The second rung is the meaning imposed on the interaction that would be culturally understood. If the conversation was a performance appraisal you would expect that we could easily recognise and agree on the nature of the discussion.

The next step of the ladder is the meaning that I impose on the discussion - I may conclude that the manager is not making a very good job of the appraisal. Finally, for me to do this I compare the interaction against my theories of how appraisals should be done.

So what? Unless we treat every piece of data as completely original (which would make our responses incredibly slow) we must make real time inferences and evaluations about our surroundings and act upon them. Our mental models and assumptions are therefore continually in action - but how often do we test out their accuracy or usefulness?

Whenever you see people drawing different conclusions from the same information you can be sure the ladder of inference is in action. What opportunities for learning would be created if the reasoning processes that led to the conclusions could be explored as readily as the conclusions themselves? Frameworks that enable events to be recorded relatively objectively, so that facts can be separated from opinions, are one route into these opportunities.

Rung 4: theories used to
create the meanings
imposed below

Rung 3: meaning
imposed by me

Rung 2: culturally
understood meaning

Rung 1: observable data,
such as conversations

The ladder of inference

Behaviour analysis

Behaviour analysis (BA) is a data gathering technique. You can use it to observe behaviour using straightforward categories and record the frequency of their occurrence. The technique is reasonably objective: categorisations are based on direct observations of behaviour, using fairly explicit rules, and require minimal interpretation of the part of the observer. As such BA offers a practical way of staying at the lower rungs of the ladder of inference. There are many varieties of BA, but the only significant difference between them is in the type and number of behaviour categories used.

The basic process: after being seen in action a person (or a team) is given a quantitative statement of the types of behaviour they have exhibited during an activity - see the example opposite. Armed with this information - and an appropriate context where it can be used as an aid to reflection - they will be better able to regulate both the type and frequency of the behaviour they use when next engaged in similar activity. When used effectively BA contributes to both individual and team capacity for learning from experience – just the job for a real work feedback process.

Since the data gathered is semi-objective it increases the opportunity for people to connect the things they do to the outcomes they achieve and to modify their behaviour accordingly.

In terms of categories of behaviours there is no ultimate, all singing and dancing, set that can be used to analyse all behaviour in all circumstances. It is down to us as leaders, facilitators and coaches to identify the most appropriate set of behaviours to observe and record in the context of:

- the task at hand

- the people involved

- the level of trust you have established

- your role and intentions in relation to the task

The list opposite shows some of the most widely used categories. In practice it is difficult to analyse and record behaviour into more than 12-14 categories so there is some trading off to be done between comprehensiveness, objectivity, ease of recording and, of course, ease of interpretation on the part of the people being observed.

Typical behaviour categories

- defending/attacking
- shows tension release/shows tension
- agrees/disagrees
- offers suggestions
- asks for suggestions
- offers opinion
- asks for opinions
- gives information
- asks for information
- bringing in
- shutting out
- stating difficulties
- identifying problems
- seeking clarification
- giving clarification
- seeking understanding
- summarising
- offers opinion
- seeking support
- giving support
- seeking agreement
- building
- asking open questions
- asking closed questions
- asking leading questions
- criticising
- interrupting/talking over

Team observation behaviour analysis categories

Seeking ideas	Asking other people for their ideas, suggestions or proposals, "Jenson, do you have any suggestions here?"
Proposing	Putting forward possible courses of action as statements, announcements or instructions, "Let's introduce ourselves."
Suggesting	Still putting forward possible courses of action but this time expressed as a question, "What if we introduce ourselves?"
Building	Still a contribution that contains a possible course of action but this time adding to, or developing, an earlier idea, suggestion or proposal.
Supporting	Covers all the ways of agreeing or backing other people's contributions, ranging from the obvious, "I agree" to the prolonged exploration of the merits of an idea but without adding to it.
Disagreeing	Covers the various ways in which people explicitly disagree, ranging from flat disagreement to the offering of reasons, explanations and rationales.
Difficulty stating	Pointing out the snags or difficulties with something someone else has said, "That is a good idea but it won't work in this company." Also covers the context of the interaction as in: "We are running out of time."
Seeking clarification or information	People asking for a recap, checking whether they understand something or simply asking for new or additional information
Giving clarification or information	Offering opinions and views and responding to requests for information, opinion and clarification.
Other behaviour	None of the above - usually things like summarising or gatekeeping.

Behaviour categories for observing coaching conversations

	Coach	Participant
Asks open questions		
Asks closed questions		
Reflects back		
Gives information		
Makes suggestions		
Gives opinion		
Tests understanding		
Summarises		
Totals		
Comments		

Asks open questions	Open questions don't have one right answer, but give the space for several possible answers. In general open questions give more scope for exploration and discovery.
Asks closed questions	Closed questions typically have a right answer, so they can be used to focus attention: "You've covered several factors, which should we deal with first?"
Reflects back	Echoing back the last few words that have been said, either as stated, or slightly rephrased. Conveys attention and interest without judgment.
Gives information	Contributes relatively objective data to the exploration. "In that session you asked 23 closed questions"
Makes suggestions	Offers options for action, "Shall we move on to an action plan?"
Gives opinion	Contributes more subjective data to the encounter, "I think you handled that situation well"
Tests understanding	Organising what has been said and offering it back, "So, let me just check, are you saying that the main block to progress is your manager?"
Summarises	Similar to testing understanding but ranging over several contributions or even sessions. Often a convenient springboard for launching into a more focused exploration.

SLOW review - feedback for groups and teams

Here is a framework that may help in terms of facilitating in group situations. You can use this to structure review and feedback conversations – once tasks have been completed - and also planning, design and decision making sessions – where courses of action are determined. The same thinking can also be applied in the individual context.

The diagram shows the SLOW progression from thought to action. The review process assumes that teams work relatively systematically along the spectrum - possibilities are many at the situation building end of the continuum and funnel down to focused action. The nature of the task, the context the team are operating within, and the mindsets of team members determine the span of the continuum available for influence.

The diagram also shows the choices available in review and feedback situations, in order of ease and control on the part of the facilitator (and therefore reverse order in terms of risk) these are:

React: The focus of the conversation is the action taken and the outcomes resulting from the action: reinforcing what went well, modifying things that didn't go so well. This is 'What would you do differently?' territory. The strategies that lead to the action are left unscathed.

Redesign: Here the focus is on the strategy that informed the action: were the predictions made about the participants in the situation accurate? To what extent did we take relevant factors into account? What parts of the plan worked? What parts didn't? Did we select the best option? Did we generate any options? At this level of review the chosen goals are assumed to be valid and left unexamined.

Reframe: This entails paying attention to our understanding of the context we are in, the issue agenda created and the goals we are seeking to achieve. Opens the possibility of seeing goals, the task and ourselves in relation to others differently.

Revalue: Giving attention our interpretations of the environment - what do we consider important? What factors get our attention? What is deemed relevant or irrelevant? Provides the potential for reassessing personal values.

As already mentioned, there is no need to limit this framework to looking back; in planning and design contexts the framework can be used to shape the focus of exploration and decision making as the team undertake their tasks. A method of real time team management maybe?

SLOW review process