



White Paper
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To GROW or not to GROW? Is the choice CLEAR?

It is important for managers to have simple models for structuring coaching conversations.

Peter Hawkins

The GROW model is the best-known coaching model and the one most often taught to leaders. But is it the best? Or does a different model have a CLEAR advantage?

GROW

The GROW model is widely used by facilitators and teachers in the coaching skills space. Various derivations of the model have emerged, such as T-GROW, I-GROW, REGROW etc ... I like GROW-F when talking to leader/coaches because it i) includes a call to Follow-Up, and ii) it reminds me of when I used to live in East London. GROW gets its fair share of criticism, first from those who fear people will use it linearly. My favourite quote in this space is from David Clutterbuck:

One of my favourite ghastly examples is the coach, who corralled the client into articulating a goal, then ploughed relentlessly on into the R of GROW until the client stopped the conversation:

"Actually, my real issue is that I don't feel I have a purpose in my life any more."

The coach nodded sympathetically.

"That's really interesting. I wish we had time to explore that. But let's park it and focus on the issue we started with ..."

In his reflection notes, the coach was blissfully unaware that this might not have been the appropriate response – he had followed the model!

I don't hear this as a criticism of the model however. It feels like more of a warning as to how to not use this model – or any other model for structuring a coaching conversation. As Antony Grant points out, effective conversations often

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GROW also gets critiqued on the basis it places too much emphasis on the early formation of a goal. Don't goals sometimes take a long time to crystallise? David Drake suggests that a focus on goals is often counterproductive, because:

1. It can place too much emphasis on the end-state, such that other considerations get forgotten – such as ethical issues.
2. It can lead to an over-emphasis on short-term outcomes and deliverables.
3. Many people in organisations are already goal-fatigued, working in an environment chock-full of ever-shifting KPIS.

Sir John Whitmore, who co-created the GROW model in the first place, effectively counters this perspective by pointing out that goals don't have to be short-term. He wrote:

"Goals are broader than the old meaning of the word, and I think more and more people are beginning to look at things that way."

Anthony Grant, on the other hand, suggests that beginning with a goal is always appropriate, even if it is only to agree what the coachee would like to have achieved by the end of a conversation.

The two main criticisms of GROW then, are that it may be used too linearly and that it places too much emphasis on the initial formation of a goal. If we agree with Peter Hawkins, that it is important for managers to have simple models for structuring coaching conversations, then whatever model we use, we must be careful to warn against using a model linearly. In our programs we cover models toward the end of the program, so that people don't confuse coaching with following a formula. We teach coaching *skills* first, and position GROW explicitly as a potentially useful *structure* for having a coaching conversation.

The second criticism remains however, and when we get into role plays we do often find new coaches, working inside organisation, move from G to W, barely acknowledging the value of R or O. The temptation to move through a 'coaching' conversation so quickly is always likely to be there, given how busy people always seem to be. So is there a better model, at least to use with leader/coaches?

CLEAR

There are lots of other models to choose from. Other models include ACHIEVE, PRACTICE, OUTCOMES, FUEL ... One we have found increasingly drawn to, when working with leader/coaches, is CLEAR. This Peter Hawkins model stands for

The leader/coach has to work out, moment to moment, what kind of conversation to have.

Contract
Listen
Explore
Action
Review

CLEAR is similar to GROW in that it has an explicit call to **Action**. In other ways it is different.

Contracting

CLEAR starts with contracting. In a leader/coach scenario this is a really useful practical way to begin. As an external coach I will have some contracting to do too, but I don't generally need to agree to have a coaching conversation – that's what I've been hired for in the first place. Life as a leader/coach is very different. Leader/coaches are obliged to have lots of different kinds of conversation with the people they work with. Sometimes a direct report might want a quick piece of advice. Other times I may recognise the need to set clear expectations. Other times they may appreciate being coached. The leader/coach has to work out, moment to moment, what kind of conversation to have. A lot of leaders ask - how can I tell what my direct report wants from me? In many scenarios the simplest solution is simply to ask – to contract. This is such a useful insight for many leader/coaches. They are reluctant to try coaching, in case their direct reports think they're being weird, or in case they resent being asked a load of questions. So don't just start coaching people – start by talking about coaching, and flag the possibility that this might be a useful kind of conversation to have sometimes.

Listening

The hardest things about coaching, for many leader/coaches, is the need to stop, slow down, tune-in, and just listen to what the other person has to say, parking all the inner voices saying things like '*I know the answer to this already*', and '*I've only got five minutes*', and '*let me work the answer out for you.*' We spend a full half day in our programs, just considering how to listen. Listening isn't necessarily a skill. It's as much a mindset, a mindset that can get lost amidst the hurly-burly of demanding modern life in an organisation, in a world in which many leaders feel it is their job to know the answers. CLEAR is quite explicit about the need to adopt a listening mindset, in a way that GROW is not. If the leader/coach can shift into that listening mindset early in the conversation, much of the hard work is done.

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Exploring

Listening leads neatly to exploring. As pointed out before, many leader/coaches are inclined to transition quickly from Goal to Action. Explore encourages the leader/coach to s-l-o-w d-o-w-n, and to stay curious.

Choosing

At the end of day, a model is a model is a model, and there are lots of good coaching models that can do the job, if taught well. In our experience, recognizing the particular demands facing the leader/coach, and recognizing that most leaders don't spend as much time as externals reflecting on their coaching practice, we have found that CLEAR resonates more often with the leader/coach. When we have time we like to share GROW and CLEAR and create the space for leaders to choose for themselves.

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For more information, ask Paul for a copy of:

'Managerial Coaching - a Literature Review' in: *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* 15(2), 43-69.