"Marcia has done it again." —Michael Bungay Stanier, author of the WSJ bestseller *The Coaching Habit*

SECOND EDITION

COACH THE PERSON NOT THE PROBLEM

A Guide to Using Reflective Inquiry

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INTRODUCTION

What Makes Coaching So Powerful

I write my books because I am passionate about the importance of coaching especially in these chaotic, uncertain times. My purpose in writing this edition is not only to elevate your skills but also to boost your enthusiasm for the amazing work you do to uplift spirits, increase confidence, and expand possibilities for your clients..

Why Do People Need to Be Coached?

As we go about our daily lives, our brains create the beliefs and rules that define our self-concept and how we interpret our world. The brain then protects these concepts so we have a sense of certainty about how to live. Our brains don't like to have this sense of certainty disrupted, even when we know our mental habits are no longer serving our higher selves.

The brain's desire to protect our beliefs and identity blocks external attempts to challenge our thoughts unless we openly invite someone to help us think differently. Without invitation, when someone asks us why we did something, we immediately come up with a justification and then defend it even if we could easily find another reason given more time to think about it. Rationalizing is a well-honed skill we developed in our childhood. When we attempt to sort out a problem on our own, we don't recognize the impact of these protective mechanisms. Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga says

our deductions and decisions are subject to our "automatic thought-processing that leads us to fool ourselves into thinking we are right."[1] We instantly concoct a brilliant reason for procrastinating on a task, prioritizing reading email over working on a project deadline, or making life decisions based on how we will feel in the future when, in truth, we can never be sure how we will feel.

> For the same reason you can't tickle yourself, your brain resists self-imposed testing of thoughts and reactions.

We justify our choices instead of questioning them. The brain prefers self-preservation over self-actualization.

This natural resistance is why you can't just tell someone to think differently even if you have strong evidence that pokes holes in their beliefs. The more emotions attached to their perspective, the more they steadfastly hold on to their beliefs. Sometimes this resistance is simply tied to how much we dislike having someone tell us what to do or think, as if they know better than we do about our personal situations.

Professor Carin Eriksson Lindvall at Uppsala University said humans don't change habitual behaviors even when they experience undesirable results.[2] We might disturb a routine for a short time, but when our attempts to change feel awkward, we return to old, familiar behavioral patterns. We don't want others to see and judge our fumbles.

The fear of looking incompetent shakes our confidence. Our brains then conjure justifications for going back to the way we used to behave to save us from the discomfort of change.

To override our brains when we genuinely desire to alter our behaviors, we need a *thinking partner* to help us see our

rationalizations and what we are protecting. We need someone outside of ourselves to summarize our words and ask questions about what we mean and want in order to stop the brain's automatic manufacturing of protective reactions.

Skilled thought disruptors notice and ask how the reasons we give for acting and feeling the way we do contradict what we most desire to create. They share the statements we make to justify hesitations. They invite us to consider how likely the negative consequences we fear will happen and, even if they did, what we would do next. We can then *see* our thoughts with clarity, hear and recog-nize the holes in our justifications, admit to the fears limiting our choices, and identify the *shoulds* we have been dutifully obeying even when they don't align with our values and desires.

> Coaching the person is the art of disrupting thoughts with the purpose of fostering creative insights that change minds and behavior.

It's as if external thought disruptors lay our thoughts out on a table in front of us, beyond the shield of our overly protective brains. The insights that then emerge are disruptive because we have to face what we had previously avoided or never stopped to consider.

Using the skills of reflective inquiry in a conversation deflates the dependency on rationalizations. We coach to liberate people's minds from the past so they can more freely move toward their desired futures.

If you choose to give someone advice instead of coaching them to think differently, you get either compliance, which pacifies the creative, learning brain, or resistance because they don't feel like you really listened to them. If your suggestion is simple, they might feel embarrassed, or they resent that you think they are so ignorant that they hadn't considered the

obvious answers. Their shame or frustration may lead them to sabotaging your good idea.

If you instead choose to start the conversation with a coaching approach, summarizing what you hear, and then asking them to clarify what key words and ideas mean to them, they at least feel seen and heard. They are more willing to discuss their beliefs and perspectives with you. New ideas on how to solve their dilemmas will then likely emerge.

When you choose to coach, the experience is *transformational* because it transforms thinking. New thoughts are formed, which generate new actions.

But transformational conversations can be uncomfortable. The realizations often trigger an emotion. Their old reasoning is now discredited, producing a moment of uncomfortable uncertainty before a new reality appears. Nessa Victoria Bryce wrote in *Scientific American Mind*, "This pause in certainty as the brain rushes to reinterpret information is necessary for a clearer and broader understanding of the situation to emerge."[3] Profound learning often happens in these awkward moments of not knowing that create the opening for a new knowing to form.

This discomfort is why most people, from leaders to friends, would rather avoid the emotionally unpredictable path that is an important element of coaching. They prefer *transactional* processes that focus only on the possible actions that could be taken. These conversations feel easier but are less effective when looking to create sustainable change.

My question for you is, "Do you want to take the more comfortable approach of problem-solving or step into the unknown to coach your clients' thinking and possibly expand their ability to navigate their lives with more self-awareness and confidence?" Yes, this is a leading question, but even when you coach people into unchartered waters, if you give them a quiet moment to process their experience, their emotions will

subside. Then you can ask with curiosity and care, "Would you be willing to share what you are aware of now?" The aha experience then comes to life.

What Defines an Aha Moment?

A creative solution to a problem often includes one or more aha moments when people feel safe enough from judgment to dissect their thinking. As they hear their thinking reflected by some-one else and dig into what their thoughts mean to their choices and sense of self, the brain reconfigures information, triggering a realization.

The sudden shift in comprehension feels like the thought leaped out of their head. Their eyes might widen with a flash of a new insight, often referred to as a lightbulb moment. They might smirk or smile with a simple realization, or "duh" moment, when a person discovers that their circular and limited cogitating caused them to miss seeing an obvious solution.

Neuroscience reveals these creative insights emerge from the restructuring of past knowledge and experiences. When the brain is freed to rummage through its stockpile of memories, creativity flourishes.

An emotional reaction often accompanies the aha moment. In researching how coaching works in my book *The Discomfort Zone*, I found both the uncomfortable moments of uncertainty and the ensuing reactions are vital for learning to occur. The aha experience can show up in many different ways with varying levels of intensity, ranging from laughter to tears or deep embarrassment. The emotions are never bad; they indicate the person is seeing something new. The new perspective encourages new behaviors.

That is the gift and value we give with coaching.

Can AI Coach the Person, Not the Problem?

Since *Coach the Person, Not the Problem* was published in 2020, the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) prompted me to dive deeper into the research of the transformational change that coaching is capable of generating. Specifically, I wanted to convey how good coaching requires a human connection that would be difficult to replicate with AI.

Yes, there are times when discussing a problem and analyzing possible solutions can benefit from AI-assisted learning, but when emotions are attached to the problem or outcome, sorting through options is more difficult. If people are afraid to change or believe there is no solution that avoids a negative outcome, their anxiety and frustration decreases their ability to talk through possibilities. Ruminating on risks drains instead of stimulates creative insights. Even if they are open to talk about what good can come from changing, their stewpot of beliefs, assumptions, evaluations, and expectations limits their perspective.

Due to confusion and fear, clients have difficulties seeing beyond the negative aspects of their stories or what horrible events will occur if they risk going for what they want. They often come to coaching knowing only what they *do not want* to happen. Coaching them to sort through the jumble of thoughts and emotions that are holding their brains hostage until they feel safe enough to let go requires more than technical skills. The human connection is needed to support sustainable changes in thinking and behavior.

Yes, clients need to feel understood, which AI can do with summarizing, reflecting, and seeking confirmation. But the need to use our emotions to ease their fears and open their minds is a *human* energetic exchange.

If the conversation needs to go beyond considering options to choose a reasonable solution, it is more effective to work with a coach trained to create a connection that generates the psychological safety necessary for the client to bypass their protective brain and then willingly explore their thinking. Therefore I have shifted the focus of the first part of the second edition of this book to how we use our emotions with and without words to make the human connections that generate the significant insights and transformation. The more adept we are at generating an energetic field with courage and compassion, the more our coaching skills rise above the capacity of AI to mimic our impact.

What's New in This Edition

My intention for this edition is to take you even further on your path of mastery than the first edition. I hope the book will be your new go-to guide to easily and effectively use your coaching skills with a clear understanding of what you are trying to achieve with your skills.

The essential skills for coaching a person's thinking have been updated from my experiences and research since the first edition was published. With the recognition of the importance of the human connection, I switched part 2 and 3 from the original text so the updated version teaching the mental habits comes before clarifying the specific skills. This gives the human relational skills priority because these practices make exercising the practical skills more effective.

After exploring the value of coaching and the revised five Misleading Coaching Beliefs, part 2 delves into the three essential mental practices, accompanied by helpful exercises so you can apply the mental habits needed to make coaching a co-creative process:

1. Align your nervous system
2. Receive (don't just listen)
3. Catch and release judgment

Part 3 is your guidebook to five active coaching skills. This new edition includes updates with what I have discovered from teaching coaching skills around the world. You will be given explanations of the intent of each skills, important actions to include to meet the objectives of the skills, and examples and case studies to see the skills in action. The skills include the following:

1. Focus—Shifting to coaching the person, not the problem
2. Active replay—Playing back the pivotal pieces for review
3. Navigating desire—Clearing the fog to see the road
4. Brain hacking—What are you listening for?
5. New and next—Coaching insights and commitments

You will also find new coaching approaches, such as how to listen for and reflect key components in the context of clients' narratives and how to effectively include *who* clients are being when they envision what they want to create. Coaching the identity of clients, including exploring fears around releasing their self-image and courageously taking steps to live more in alignment with their values, boosts their commitment to change. Identity shifts lead to sustainable change.

Whether you are a coach or you are in another role and know the value of using a coaching approach in your conversations, these chapters provide the mental habits and essential skills for developing your ability to quickly prompt others to transform their perspectives and motivate actions.

With the big shifts we are experiencing not just in technology but also in leadership, personal relationships, and geopolitical uncertainty, coaching is vital to support a confident outlook and adaptability. We make a meaningful difference with every person we touch with our efforts. I hope you find gems in this book to help you do your important work as a coach.

PART I

What Is a Coaching Conversation?

The human soul doesn't want to be advised or fixed or saved. It simply wants to be witnessed—to be seen, heard, and companioned exactly as it is.
—Parker Palmer

The founding members of the International Coaching Federation (ICF) asked the question, "What makes coaching different from therapy and consulting?" The first ICF definition of coaching emerged from their discussions: coaching is "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential."[1]

The key word in the definition is *partnering*. Coaches do not act as experts or analysts even when they have relevant experience and education. Coaches are thinking partners focused on helping clients use their creativity and resourcefulness to see beyond their blocks to solve their problems on their own.

The passion and commitment that fuels the continual growth of coaching is grounded in the coaching experience for both coach and client. For me—when I give up the urge to advise—nothing is more fulfilling than seeing my clients laugh at themselves when they realize they've been clinging to an outdated belief. I love the

spark in their eyes when they discover the answer to their dilemmas.

It's a gift to witness their faces relax and their postures rise up when they recognize they won't be hurting anyone, or themselves, when they decide they can and are worthy of reaching for their dreams. When I feel the courage in my clients bubble up, it is my pleasure to help them put their desires into motion.

When we partner with our clients so they feel seen, heard, and valued, their creative brains are activated. They feel safe enough to explore their thinking and actions. Surfacing their judgments and fears may be uncomfortable for them—and you—but when clients see how to move beyond their blocks they feel empowered.

The psychologist Alfred Adler explored the concept that people don't need to be fixed or saved because they are naturally creative, resourceful, and whole. He said, "Man knows much more than he understands."[2] In breaking away from the ideas of his teacher Sigmund Freud, Adler said we do not have to plumb the depths of one's psychological history to help normal people progress. If we determine ourselves by the meanings we give to situations, then changing or expanding the meanings opens new possibilities to redefine ourselves and our actions.[3]

The regard Adler held for humans is a foundational concept for coaching. We are respectful partners, not expert advisors, who believe in our clients' abilities to think differently. We use our skills to enable them to more broadly and courageously think about their thinking.

Where Does the Term Reflective Inquiry Come From?

Even though coaching may be similar to cognitive behavioral therapies and question-based relationship consulting, the actual practice of coaching can be dated back to John Dewey's learning theory.

In 1910, Dewey defined the practice of *reflective inquiry* in his classic book, *How We Think*.[4] As an educational reformer, Dewey wanted to change the practice of dumping information in students' brains and then testing their memorization skills. He wasn't just advocating for teachers to ask more questions. He defined methods of inquiry that prompted students to doubt what they thought they knew so they would open up to learning.

Dewey said combining tools that provoke critical thinking with Socratic questioning would prompt students to go inward to give their thoughts serious consideration. They would then be better able to discern what they know from what they don't know, confirm or negate a stated belief, and verify whether a fear or doubt held any value.

He said, that metaphorically, reflective inquiry enables us to climb a tree in our minds.[5] We gain a wider view to see the connections and faults in our thinking to better assess what to do next.

The Power of Active Replay

Reflective inquiry includes statements that hold up a mirror to our thoughts and beliefs to provoke evaluation. The practice of mirroring, or what I call *active replay*, includes when the coach summarizes, paraphrases, acknowledges key phrases, and shares the emotions and gestures clients express. Clients expand

on the meaning of their words with explanations or corrections. They may drop into silence, shifting their eyes up, down, or sideways as they look into their thoughts. Coaches pause to let their clients think. If the pause is unbearably long, the coach might offer a reflection and question, such as "It looks like you are considering something. Would you share what is coming up for you?"

When coaches use reflective statements, people hear their words, see how their beliefs shape their perspectives, and consider the emotions they are expressing. Then, when coaches follow up with a question to confirm their observation (such as "Is this the belief you are holding?") or to explore what they expressed (such as "How does that belief relate to the uncertainty you said you feel?"), clients are prompted to examine their thinking.

We use reflective statements plus questions to prompt people to reflect on and assess how they think.

Coaching includes *noticing* and *asking about* energy shifts, tone of voice, pace of speech, and changes in body movements and facial gestures. Coaches *play back* the stated beliefs and assumptions to consider what is true now or limiting. They *concisely summarize* key words and phrases, expressed desires, and the doubts impinging on their clients' possibilities, offering these reflections for clients to accept or alter. They *present observations* when clients show resistance. They *reflect progress* to reinforce the insights discovered and subsequent decisions and commitments to actions. The goal of offering reflective statements is not to lead clients to a specific way of thinking but to clarify their thoughts so they discover new ways of thinking on their own.

By using reflective practices, coaches encourage clients to think about what they express when talking about their situations. The coach accepts the clients' responses, even if they respond

defensively or doubtfully. Giving clients a judgment-free space to process the reflected observations is critical to their progress.

John Dewey may not have been successful at transforming our educational systems, but his gift of defining how to expand people's minds can be seen today in the actions of trained coaches.

Coaching Isn't Rah-Rah

Most people I know like the idea of having someone act as a sounding board who offers a few questions when thinking through a dilemma. Talking about a problem can help analyze what could help or hinder their goal achievement. They don't want the listener to only give simple suggestions they have already considered or shallow encouragement. "You can do this" statements can feel patronizing, especially to the high achiever.

In fact, as I explained what makes coaching so powerful in the introduction, good coaching often spurs moments of discomfort. Learning often happens in a moment of awkward uncertainty when we come to doubt the beliefs and assumptions that underlie our choices or inaction. A disruptive reflection or incisive question is needed to break down what we think we know. The experience may be unsettling, but then we become open to learning. Over time, we are grateful for the insights we gained.

For example, I had a boss who had developed his ability to read people. When we talked, he seemed to know what barriers in my brain got in my way of my getting what I really wanted. His questions instantly opened my eyes to my blind spots. My realizations were often painful, but I knew what I had to do differently even after a brief interaction.

Once, when I was raging about the incompetency of my peers and the overload of work I then had to do, he said, "It seems that everyone disappoints you." Taken back, I paused to consider

his observation. Before I responded, he asked, “Will anyone ever be good enough for you?” Defenseless, I couldn’t think of anything else to say other than “Let me think about that.”

Back at my desk, I wondered if I had always focused on other people’s flaws. I saw how this pattern had hurt both my personal and work relationships for years. With one reflection and question, I faced how I was playing out this pattern in my current work situation. I then knew I would never see my work relationships the same again.

My boss’s observation and question made me stop and examine my thinking, which was terribly uncomfortable. In the midst of this discomfort I became more conscious of how I distanced myself from others by my need to prove I was better than them. I wanted to be a leader. Instead, I was a judgy complainer.

The painful truth led me to learn how I could better work with others—and someday lead them.

The best coaches help us recognize that we have gaps in our reasoning. The moment we become unsure of what we know, learning happens.

Drifting Away from the Intention of Coaching

My second master’s degree is in adult learning and instructional design. I’ll never forget a professor saying we should always tell students what they will be tested on so they could focus their learning. As a student, I loved this advice. My hope was to get an A in the class. I wasn’t considering how I would apply what I learned when I graduated; I just wanted to learn enough to be an A student.

I still believe you should test on what you teach, but I have noticed a growing number of students in coach training programs

worldwide are demanding to learn precise coaching steps to earn their credentials. The focus of teaching has shifted to the test of specific coaching behaviors with less on the importance of the energetic relationship.

Efforts by certifying organizations to legitimize coaching by making sure demonstrated behaviors are specific and replicable often overshadow the purpose of the conversation. Taking an evidence-based approach to limit assessor subjectivity is important, and behavioral descriptions are useful for trainers and mentors, but the attempts to reduce ambiguity when defining coaching behaviors has contributed to coaches believing they must follow a formulaic process. The focus on remembering what must be asked obscures people's ability to allow their conversations to spontaneously flow toward to revelation and perceived possibilities.

The original ICF coaching competencies were never intended to be a checklist of behaviors. I was a part of the ICF leadership when the competencies were written. The focus was on the transformational experience, where people learn from the inside out. The competencies were not meant to be taken in any order other than to spend time at the beginning to see and agree on what the client wanted to change or create as a result of the conversation, and then to determine what is getting in the way of achieving this desire. To close out the conversation, the coach asks for a commitment to what the client will do next to ensure progress. The remaining competencies are guidelines for holding a conversation that could spawn a new awareness based on the quality of the coach's presence and listening. There isn't one right way to coach.

Coaching involves so much more than mechanically reviewing what was said, asking overused questions, and following specific models. Coaches must first create an energetic bond of trust and safety that encourages a willingness to learn and change. The relationship is essential for the coach to be an effective thinking partner. The courage, care, and curiosity coaches feel, and their unwavering belief in their client's potential to learn and grow, make the competencies work.

During my first class at my coaching school, the founder, Thomas Leonard, said to learn how to coach, we had to get out there and coach people. We resisted, saying we didn't know what to do. He said we would acquire our skills with experience. For now, he said, "Just go love them."

I have used this advice for over thirty years. Most times, I feel my clients love me back.

The intention of this book is to bring back the heart as well as the art of coaching into all our conversations. The book is a guide for all who use coaching, regardless of the school you attend, the credential you seek, or the role you play where having good conversations is essential.

Notes

Introduction

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Part I

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