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A large, central image of a globe made of shattered glass, with many sharp fragments floating around it, symbolizing chaos and a rapidly changing world. The globe is set against a background of a blue sky with some green foliage at the bottom.

## COACHING IN CHAOS

Navigating a rapidly changing world

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# Courage, Compassion & Curiosity

Using a coaching approach to activate resilience  
in uncertain times

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In an era defined by big shifts in technological advancements as well as economic and geopolitical disruptions, many people are seeing the world through a fog of uncertainty, leading to anxiety, frustration and confusion. You don't have to be a certified coach or be in formal sessions to use coaching skills to help people embody the curiosity and courage they need to feel resilient.

Whether you're in the position of a leader, coach or friend, the habitual response when talking with people experiencing intense emotions is to lean on what has worked in the past instead of leaning into the murky unknown. But while experience is a valuable teacher, old solutions are often harmful when applied to new problems. Whenever we think we have a suggestion for someone because we have experienced the same situation they are facing, we are ignoring the fact that the life they have led up to this moment is different than ours,

so their experience of any situation is different as well.

When a client or colleague is grappling with uncertainty, the alternative to focusing on easing their stress or fixing their problems is to activate their resilience by trusting in the power of coaching. Using a coaching approach — even in informal conversations where you become someone's "thinking partner" — can help them override entrenched but constraining thought patterns to discover what is in their control to move forward.

Using a coaching approach in either formal or informal conversations helps others to broaden people's perspectives and open their minds to new possibilities.<sup>1</sup>

## STARTING THE CONVERSATION

The aim of using a coaching approach is to help someone who feels frustrated or afraid to metaphorically take their thoughts out of their head and lay them out on the table to *see what they are thinking* with detached clarity. They are then

better able to recognize their senseless justifications, admit to the fears limiting their choices, and identify the assumptions they are making with limited knowledge of how the future will unfold.

Simply summarizing explanations, asking questions about what key phrases mean, and discerning what is critical but risky from what is "playing it safe" can alter perspective enough to find a new path forward.

The intention of using a coaching approach is to spark creative insights that alter perspective and confidently motivate someone to try out new behaviors. Over time, people are better equipped to navigate more challenges independently.

To start a conversation with a coaching approach to generate new ways of seeing and feeling, consider how to use these three steps.

STEP  
1

**Agree on the specific challenge you will be exploring together.**

Ask how they see the situation and what is making it a challenge to address. Genuinely

seek to understand the person's perspective, appreciating without judgement that this is the perception they are holding right now. As they describe how they see the situation and what is making it a challenge, other questions you can ask include:

- Even if you doubt it can happen, what resolution or outcome can you imagine could be created that would be fruitful and fulfilling?
- What else is possible to change or create that you haven't considered?
- If what you are fearing comes true, what is in your control to do next?
- When you see yourself boldly moving forward with your uncertainty, how are you showing up? What would you be doing?

## STEP 2

### Summarize key ideas they share so they feel heard and understood.

Ask them to further explain what key words or phrases mean to them, so you can fully understand what they see and want to happen.

## STEP 3

### Name the challenges.

Once they agree with your summaries, signaling that you fully understand their perception, ask them to identify the challenges they think must be addressed in order to move forward. Often just exploring what is making a situation challenging reveals what must happen next.

## THE MOST IMPORTANT SKILL

Because a coaching approach looks inside at how someone thinks, instead of staying on the outside to analyze possible actions and threats, the emotional connection you initiate in the conversation is critical to your effectiveness. The connection must generate both a *sense of safety* that they won't feel judged and the trust to explore their thoughts deeply with you, even when it feels uncomfortable.

Research in therapeutic presence has found that you can stimulate feelings of safety, trust and willingness by preparing for the conversation by opening the three major receptors of your nervous system — the head, heart and gut.<sup>2</sup> Open your mind with curiosity to receive what they share,

resisting the urge to make them think differently. Feel acceptance and respect to open your heart so they believe you care about them. Breathe in courage to open your gut to stay attentive and have faith in their ability to discover a way forward without you telling them what to do.

This curious, compassionate and courageous presence quiets their stress response with the release of neurotransmitters and hormones that stimulate their feelings of acceptance, psychological safety and the willingness to explore with you what is possible for them. The conversation can then more easily flow with ideas — ending with a firm commitment to take a step forward within days, if not hours.<sup>3</sup>

## RECEIVE, DON'T JUST LISTEN

I first heard the word “receive” used as a form of listening from Julian Treasure in his TED Talk “Five Ways to Listen Better.”<sup>4</sup> He presented a formula for listening called RASA, which stands for Receive, Appreciate, Summarize and Ask. He said receiving goes beyond just gathering what is said so you can prepare your response.

Receiving means fully taking in what you are hearing and seeing. It means being curious about how the other person sees the situation and challenges — without analyzing or judging what is shared, or quickly assuming you know what they are experiencing. It means listening without thinking — keeping your mind open and able to be changed.

Resist the feeling of knowing what is going on or what needs to be done. As the CEO of Microsoft, Satya Nadella, told his leaders in 2014, “Don't be a know-it-all. Be a learn-it-all.”

Using Treasure's formula in applying a coaching approach allows you to maintain your open head, heart and gut — so you can accept and appreciate what people are saying, knowing they are interpreting what they see through the lens of their life experiences. When you Receive and Accept before you Summarize and Ask, you engage them in the conversation

because they feel seen and heard without judgment, understood from their perspective, and valued for what they know.

Philosopher Simone Weil said, “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated... waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive.”<sup>5</sup> When you accept people for who they are and what they share from their perspective, they are likely to trust you enough to open up and explore their thinking with you.

We need to help each other walk through the darkness of uncertainty. No matter the relationship you have — as a coach, leader, parent or friend — the listening we use and the questions we ask with our curious, caring presence are critical to relieving stress and seeing what is possible when the fear of not knowing takes over. ●

## NOTES

- 1 Carin Eriksson Lindvall, “Renewal by Subtraction,” *Psychology Today*, November/December 2021.
- 2 Deb Dana, *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation* (W. W. Norton, 2018).
- 3 Marcia Reynolds, *Coach the Person, Not the Problem*, 2nd Edition (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2026).
- 4 Julian Treasure, “5 Ways to Listen Better,” TEDGlobal, July 2011 [ted.com/talks/julian\\_treasure\\_5\\_ways\\_to\\_listen\\_better](http://ted.com/talks/julian_treasure_5_ways_to_listen_better)
- 5 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1983).

