

CHALLENGING COACHING

*Going beyond traditional
coaching to face
the FACTS*



JOHN BLAKEY ■ IAN DAY

Challenging Coaching: Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS

By John Blakey and Ian Day published by Nicholas Brealey Publishing. Order now on Amazon and other major book stores

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Challenging Coaching is a real-world, timely, and provocative coaching book which provides a wake-up call to move beyond the limitations of traditional coaching. The book challenges coaches and their clients to achieve courageous goals that sustainably transform bottom line performance.

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Foreword

by Sir John Whitmore

This is a book that questions the role and responsibility of coaches generally. Its title suggests that executive coaches could be more courageous and do more to warn about, help, or even avert the challenges faced by their clients. Through its contents, John and Ian aim to upgrade the skills and thereby the confidence of existing coaches—for all too often we shrink from challenging our clients when in fact a challenge would be both appreciated and beneficial.

Understanding that the roots of business coaching lie in the progressive psychology of Carl Rogers and Gerard Egan and are therapy based is important if one wants to fully understand the impact of workplace coaching and also to recognize the limitations of this heritage; that is, not all of the person-centered counseling approaches are appropriate or effective in a corporate environment. Similarly, the existing forms of sports coaching have a lot to contribute to effective coaching in the workplace, yet some of these are preoccupied with instruction on technique, which becomes less effective when placed into a political and dynamic business landscape. It is important to recognize that there are unique features of the business coaching challenge that require new and tailored approaches and it is on this specific agenda that this book focuses its attention.

Importantly, the book challenges coaches too by giving them permission to break some of the “golden rules” of coaching, for example the principle of staying on the coachee’s agenda exclusively. It actually encourages breaking this rule and I wholeheartedly agree with this. A coach’s task and responsibility are to benefit not only the coachee, but also the client company and all of society too.

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John and Ian briefly reference several models of coaching such as the GROW model, which is sometimes attributed to me, before focusing on their FACTS approach, the theme of this book. They give guidance about the more sophisticated aspects of coaching and the kinds of questions good coaches can usefully ask, providing illustrative examples. The FACTS model is clear, well laid out, and easy to grasp. Hopefully it will be a road map for coaches to use to venture into the less-charted territories of conventional executive coaching.

My personal reflections on the various components of the FACTS approach are as follows.

Feedback: Coaching has generally been perceived as a bit “soft,” with many people asking nice questions in a nice sort of way. Of course, this approach is often very appropriate, but sometimes it is not. An example from my own experience may help to illustrate this point. I asked a coachee of mine: “How committed on a scale of 0 to 10 are you to taking this action?” He instantly replied: “Oh, I would be 9 out of 10 for sure.” Yet, I heard something in the tone of his voice that led me to doubt his conviction. I paused for 30 seconds and then said: “That’s rubbish, I don’t believe you.” My coachee also then paused for 30 seconds and replied: “You’re absolutely right—I was just trying to get you off my back.” This example shows that sometimes challenging feedback is necessary for change to happen. When people say to me: “That isn’t coaching,” I reply: “Anything that is appropriate in the moment to help a person move from *A* to *B* is coaching.”

Accountability: I prefer the word responsibility to accountability, since I believe it is more human, yet these words are interchangeable in the context of this book. The key point here is that as coaches we are not responsible just to ourselves but to everyone

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else in the organizational system in which we are operating. To use an analogy from soccer, just because the goalkeeper's specialist function is to keep the ball out of the net, that does not mean he is not also responsible for the goals of the wider team (no pun intended). If he or she sees issues or risks that are affecting the wider team, then he or she has a responsibility to raise these and do something about them. The same is true for coaches and for leaders who have responsibility for the bigger picture in which they operate.

Courageous goals: I call this the dream. What is your dream? A dream serves as an incredibly valuable purpose, even if it is not achieved. Let me give you an example that is close to home. My son, Jason, was watching the men's Wimbledon final on television when he was a small boy. The commentator was bemoaning the fact that not since 1936 had an Englishman lifted the trophy. My son suddenly exclaimed: "Oh my God, what if I were the next Englishman to win at Wimbledon?" This became his dream—it motivated and inspired him as he pursued his tennis career over the coming years. As a 12 year old he played for his county and beat the then unknown Maria Sharapova; this would not have happened without the power of his dream. Unfortunately his career was cut short by illness and the dream was not achieved, but it had served him well every day it was kept alive. As John and Ian would say: "Dream, share, start..."

Tension: While I agree with John and Ian about the constructive role of tension in the coaching relationship, I must add a word of caution. Tension is a very individual dynamic: some people thrive on high levels of tension, for others it can be damaging. The key is to know the person in front of you and to carry out the dynamic calibration that John and Ian propose in order to make sure that

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the level of tension is optimized. We have a duty of care to the people we work with and we must test our assumptions fully and carefully before jumping to conclusions about how much tension is introduced into any given situation. This said, I am sure there are many senior leaders who thrive on high levels of tension and it is often our job as coaches to provide this, since others around them may not have the skills or the motivation to do so.

Systems thinking: In a way, John and Ian save the best until last with their model, since I believe that systems thinking is the underlying catalyst within their overall FACTS approach. Unfortunately, there is a severe shortage of people in the corporate world who look at the world through a systems thinking “lens.” This leads to a focus on short-term, silo thinking, with a blindness to the wider context in which individuals are operating. While this mindset was not critical when the economic environment was stable and growing, it has suddenly become critical in a landscape where there is inherent instability, ambiguity, and contradiction. Systems thinking is not something any of us were taught at school, or indeed at business school, yet it is a discipline that will need to emerge from within each one of us as we face the unknowns of an increasingly interrelated world.

Models like GROW and FACTS are useful memory joggers or chronological sequences that coaches and others use or have handy; although models are just models, they are not the truth. There is no one way to coach any more than there is one way to walk. Each of us walks differently because our bodies are different. Each of us thinks differently because our brains are different. Were you taught to walk or did you just do it naturally over time? Being coached implies natural learning. It is only fair to say that the best coaching sessions you may have are often those that are

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intuitive and break all the rules. Each person needs to find their own natural and authentic way to coach that gets results over time, and we should never judge anyone else for not doing it our way.

In the later chapters of this book, John and Ian cast their net wider to consider the relevance of FACTS coaching to leaders and leadership. I have always held the view that “coaching is much bigger than coaching.” There are trends ongoing in the world that will require new skills of our leaders. Old-style, autocratic leaders are losing their clout because the people they lead are becoming more challenging. As someone commented to me recently, “I used to interview people to work in this company, but now it feels like they interview me.” In this environment, coaching skills become critical. How can you call yourself a leader in this new world if you do not have coaching skills? How can you lead by example? In Jim Collins’ seminal book *Good to Great*, he suggests that a quality of “Level 5” leadership is humility. This is a word that is often misunderstood. It does not mean being a wimp: real humility is ruthlessly strong because it has a genuine authority at its core. John and Ian show how the FACTS model can help leaders deploy tough coaching skills with the humility that will be necessary to engage and motivate the modern workforce.

Challenging Coaching is an excellent contribution to the advancement of the profession of executive coaching. There are many books on the techniques of coaching, but what strikes me as unique about this book is that it focuses on the context in which coaching is taking place. John and Ian are taking the context of coaching seriously, and I hope that others will wake up to this important challenge through reading and re-reading this timely book.

Sir John Whitmore PhD, author of Coaching for Performance

December 2011

Warning: This is a provocative message!

When we have presented the themes in this book to our peers in the coaching world via many seminars, articles, and conferences over the past two years, our message has stirred up the profession in ways that we have found both surprising and unsettling. Our message has always provoked a strong reaction. In public, there are many who have suggested that the coaching approach we are proposing verges on the heretical. Indeed, one conference delegate suggested that our FACTS coaching model was akin to proposing that “the Pope was a Methodist.” At another keynote speaker panel discussion, a stormy debate ended with a renowned coach launching into an expletive-ridden declaration: “Who do we think we are? We are not here to save the banking system. We’re not here to save the planet. We forget we’re a servant.”

It has been an intense time. However, in private we have had many people approach us with words of great encouragement. Experienced, worldly coaches have whispered to us quietly: “I am so glad you are bringing these topics into the open.” “It’s about time someone raised these questions.” “Keep up the good work.” “This might not be a popular message, but it’s an important one.” “I’m a great fan of your approach.”

We have been grateful for these sincere words against a backdrop of controversy, since they renewed our motivation and focus as we researched and wrote this book. At times when we have felt isolated among our own peers, we have consoled ourselves with the words of George Bernard Shaw: “All great truths begin as blasphemies.” For sure, there are a number of coaching blasphemies in this book and it is unlikely you will read it without being provoked into adopting a strong opinion on its contents—either for or against!

With this in mind, read on...

CHAPTER 1

Time to face the FACTS of coaching

What is overextended becomes diminished, what is too high is cut down. (Tao Te Ching, Verse 36)

One of the reasons we wrote this book is that we like a challenge. First, we want to stir up the young coaching profession by suggesting that it could be more than it currently is. Second, we want to help coaches learn new skills that can courageously challenge those they coach and so transform their potential and performance. In this sense, the coaching challenge starts with shining the spotlight on ourselves and then extends to explore the impact on those we work with and the results they deliver.

As experienced executive coaches we have worked with board-level executives around the globe and we've been struck by how these leaders thrive on challenge. And when we asked leaders for feedback on how our coaching could be made more impactful, repeatedly they replied: "I love it when you challenge me, so challenge me more!" These confident, ambitious individuals are surrounded by people who don't challenge them and, over time, this leads to an impoverished view of the world, impairs their decision making, and undermines business performance.

Yet, much of our own coach training was biased toward supporting others rather than challenging them. We noticed that this bias was also reflected in the many coaching books that exist and in the accrediting standards used by the different professional coaching bodies: an empathetic emphasis on listening and asking questions in a nondirective style, as opposed to a provocative emphasis on providing feedback and holding to account in an honest, direct style.

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Prior to being executive coaches, we were senior business leaders in large, multinational organizations. We worked with board-level leaders who were surrounded by people who saw it as their job to agree with them, anticipate their needs, and accommodate their prejudices. For these leaders this created an illusion of reality that felt cosy and comfortable. Unless they were challenged honestly and openly, we noticed that these cosy clubs contained the seeds of their own destruction. Specifically, when the truth was not spoken for fear of upsetting others and the facts were not faced for fear of creating bad news, then a state of denial crept into the leadership psyche, robbing the organization of both its effectiveness and its moral compass.

In contrast, a healthy challenge, when delivered from a relationship of trust and mutual respect, serves to stretch people's thinking and drives them to dig deeper into the reality of their situation and the true potential of the future. And what is true for the chief executives and managing directors we coach is also true for every executive, regardless of seniority. In this climate, we have noticed our coachees showing new levels of creativity, motivation, and self-belief, leaving the coaching session inspired to prove to the world that they can be and will be more than they currently are. Maybe we are all stronger than others think we are? Maybe we all like a challenge when delivered by the right person in the right way?

This book is a rallying call to coaches and to everyone who is responsible for developing other people. Be the missing voice of challenge in the coaching conversation. Swallow hard and break the collective trance of the cosy club to reconnect senior leaders with reality through specific, direct, and concrete interventions. Get up close with the organization's future leaders to inspire them to pursue courageous goals—not in the service of individual egos, but toward a broader, collective purpose.

Creating the coaching mold

What we propose in this book is a coaching approach that breaks the mold. First, we need to understand how this mold came about and what factors influenced its design. Not many years ago few people in business had heard of the word coaching, but today it is a mainstream leadership skill and an established profession. The speed and extent with which coaching skills have been adopted in business life have been dramatic, resulting in a plethora of coaching businesses around the world and the routine training of line managers in coaching skills.

Why did this explosion in coaching occur? One of the most significant driving factors in business has been the emergence of the “war for talent.” In a knowledge-based economy, attracting, developing, and retaining top talent are key determinants of organizational success. In the boom years, with talent in short supply, organizations seized on the idea of executive coaching as a way of recognizing and developing high-potential leaders. What had originally been regarded as a remedial activity quickly became a fashionable tool for the motivation and engagement of high performers. The argument was that if every top sports performer had a coach, why should the world of business be any different? Against this backdrop, there was a rapid growth in the use of executive coaching for senior leaders.

In parallel, the idea of a coaching culture emerged as an antidote to command and control. A younger, better-educated, and tech-savvy generation rebelled against authoritarian management styles and demanded greater empowerment. Many managers were trained in coaching skills as a response to this need. Armed with this new technique, they sought to build stronger relationships with managers that engaged and motivated rather than cajoled and bullied.

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Hence, what shaped business coaching as it developed was a focus on individual wants, not organizational needs. Many return on investment (ROI) measures from coaching initiatives in this period reflected this bias, targeting the retention of high performers, improvement in staff survey engagement scores, and subjective feedback from participants rather than progress in specific, bottom-line measures.

Let us give you a typical example from this era. We designed and implemented a coaching program for a global property management company that was part of a Europe-wide leadership development program. The declared objectives of this program were as follows:

- ❑ Bring more rigor and objectivity to the succession planning process for the European board.
- ❑ Facilitate a greater number of cross-country and cross-business appointments in key roles.
- ❑ Motivate and retain key individuals by defining a clearer path to future career opportunities.
- ❑ Promote and embed the critical leadership competencies to deliver the three-year business vision.

Only the last of these objectives hinted at business performance measures; in practice, even the activity of developing leadership competencies was focused primarily on the development of personal skills rather than the delivery of collective business outcomes.

Participants in this program were allocated an external coach and an internal mentor for a series of individual coaching sessions focusing on the review of 360° feedback, the development of a career vision, and the practising of new skills. The participants in the program loved it. Engagement levels shot up, attrition

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levels shot down, new appointments were secured, and succession plans were put in place. When the program was formally evaluated, these were the headline benefits that were presented to the European board:

- Participants feel more motivated.
- Participants feel more valued.
- Participants have developed new insights into leadership behavior.
- Participants understand their career path better.
- Participants have expanded their networks.

From our perspective at that time, we were delighted with these outcomes. We did not realize then that we were focusing on a very narrow range of measures in an exceptionally strong business climate that had been booming for many years. These were “me, me, me” programs for a “me, me, me” business culture. As long as the good times rolled, everyone was happy. HR directors were doing what they wanted to do, coaches were doing what they wanted, CEOs were keeping their top people happy, and the formula worked well.

And then the world changed and the party was over. After 15 years of consecutive growth in the world’s developed economies the “credit crunch” struck, heralding a wholesale recession. A temporary truce was established in the talent war as many thousands of companies froze recruitment and cut jobs. The property management company for which we’d developed a program suspended all training for two years, stopped bonuses, and introduced across-the-board pay cuts. This progressive modern company took these steps not because it suddenly didn’t care about employee engagement and motivation, but because such measures were necessary to ensure business survival.

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If you don't first secure the viability of the overall organization, what is the point of a succession plan or a motivated individual or high levels of employee engagement? For many in our generation of business leaders, this jolt represented a serious wake-up call.

Breaking the mold

We first noticed this shift while working with the sales management team of a well-known media company. This company had previously engaged a consultancy to train its area sales managers in coaching skills. All the managers attended a three-day coach skills training course and received follow-up support to apply their new skills. The courses focused on developing self-awareness through listening and asking open questions, as well as using the well-known GROW model.

The company experienced a dramatic fall in attrition levels among front-line salespeople due to improved relationships between the sales managers and those they managed. The new coaching skills helped motivate and engage staff and the program was considered a great success. However, the company then hit the early edge of the coming recession and launched an initiative to drive bottom-line performance in a more difficult marketplace. The area sales managers expressed concern that though their coaching skills had proved effective at building relationships, they were struggling to convert these relationships into bottom-line results in a tougher market environment. In response to this, some were clinging faithfully to their existing coaching style and others were reverting to a command-and-control approach. Neither response felt appropriate to the national sales director responsible for the team.

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It was at this stage that we were commissioned to work with the sales managers as executive coaches. Given the history and the business need, we realized we would need to break the mold of the coaching style that had built up in this organization. We contracted with the group that we would introduce a new style of coaching that would build on and expand their existing skills. We advised them that they were going to learn “edgier” and more challenging behaviors that would introduce a level of tension into relationships with their teams. We asked them to trust that their relationships with the sales staff were now strong enough to withstand this tension and that the impact of a greater level of challenge in their coaching would be the improved bottom-line performance that was critical to collective success.

It was in this program that we first focused with a new level of intensity on the challenging coaching skills that form the basis of the approach in this book. While these skills had always been part of our repertoire, we “turned up the volume” on these behaviors—and we noticed a dramatic positive impact on the performance of our coachees and their teams. We started to break the mold of our own coaching styles in response to a changing business environment and gathered client feedback on the impact of these behaviors.

With these challenging skills came a changed ROI perspective for coaching. Whereas in the boom years coaching had been driven by a desire for a greater people focus, the same skills could generate wider performance outcomes by adjusting the balance between support and challenge in the coaching relationship. In parallel with a greater degree of challenge, the needs of other stakeholders in the organization were given equal and, in some cases, greater emphasis than the needs of the individual coachee. More rigorous contracting with these stakeholders throughout the coaching assignment brought a discipline and a reality check

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to the work by rooting coaching in organizational reality rather than leaving it to the whim of a single individual.

Initially, we thought that this approach was a unique response to one company's specific needs. However, in the years following we realized it was a more widespread response to the economic downturn, as more and more of our clients encouraged us to challenge them more strongly to achieve courageous goals and resolve tough issues. We concluded that the coaching mold must well and truly be broken and reformed if coaching is to mature and adapt to the new circumstances of twenty-first-century business.

Facing the FACTS

It was out of these experiences and front-line observations that the thinking and the models in this book were created. We distilled the essence of our experience into the five cornerstones of a more challenging coaching stance:



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- ❑ **Feedback**—How does a coach provide challenging feedback that informs and inspires? How can we ensure that praise and recognition for a job well done are balanced with honest feedback on mistakes, learning, and failures? How can team collusion and compromise be avoided by skillful yet direct interventions?
- ❑ **Accountability**—How does a coach hold people accountable for commitments without blame or shame? How can accountability be extended from personal commitments to alignment with the values, strategy, and ethos of the wider organization? How can coaches anticipate the rising tide of accountability in the world at large and role model this behavior in their daily work?
- ❑ **Courageous goals**—How does a coach move beyond rational, incremental goal-setting models such as SMART to goal-setting models that engage the right-brain attributes of courage, excitement, inspiration, and transformation? What models and concepts help structure these conversations and provide a practical road map? What blocks this approach in the world of business?
- ❑ **Tension**—When is tension constructive? How can coaches practice creating and holding tension without risking burn-out in key performers? How can the tension in a conversation be calibrated and dynamically adjusted to ensure peak performance? When does tension go too far and damage the underlying relationships?
- ❑ **Systems thinking**—How can a coach stay sensitive to “big-picture” issues such as ethics, diversity, and the environment without losing focus on bottom-line results? What can be learned from the world of systems thinking that enables the coach to be a positive agent of change for the wider organization? What is the role of intuition in guiding interventions

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that reach beyond the immediate coachee and touch on deeper organizational change?

By using the acronym FACTS we grounded the approach in a word that sums up a combination of realism, honesty, and challenge. FACTS is not to be regarded as a sequential series of steps like other models such as GROW, but as an integrated suite of thinking with dynamic elements that interact and overlap. The behaviors and skills in FACTS are not used *instead of* the supportive skills and models of more traditional coaching approaches, but rather to *expand* on these skills and leverage them to further improve performance and sustain the coaching impact. FACTS should be regarded as a development of coaching skills once the core skills have been mastered and a firm foundation of trust and respect has been established. From this starting point, a FACTS approach will provoke performance and change.

Who is this book for?

This book is intended for experienced coaches, business leaders who are keen to adopt a coaching style, and HR professionals who are promoting a coaching culture in their organizations. For coaches themselves, we hope that the book is a wake-up call regarding the need to adopt a more challenging style of coaching as opposed to the person-centered, supportive mindset in which the profession has been steeped to date. For business leaders, the book will provide practical tools and techniques that can be deployed in fifteen-minute business discussions as readily as they can in a two-hour coaching session. For HR professionals and other buyers of coaching, the book will provide a benchmark from which to assess coaching needs and a new language with which

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to assess coaches and their services. While we will refer to the “coach” throughout the book as our focus of attention, the reader should interpret this as applying not just to full-time, professional coaches, but to all those whose role and responsibility include the development of others to achieve a specific business outcome.

The messages in this book will be particularly relevant to any coach, line manager, or HR professional who is interested in answering the following questions:

- ❑ How should coaching skills evolve to suit a more challenging economic environment?
- ❑ How can coaching deliver outstanding bottom-line business results as well as build great personal relationships?
- ❑ How and when should a coach risk breaking rapport with a coachee in order to drive for a specific business result?
- ❑ How can coaching help move forward the wider leadership consciousness in business without compromising on its traditional ethics and values?
- ❑ What are the limits of the nondirective, person-centered coaching approach?
- ❑ Where does coaching go beyond the GROW model?

Challenging Coaching assumes that the reader has some knowledge and experience of basic coaching skills and models. For example, readers are likely to be familiar with common coaching models such as GROW and may have attended “Introduction to Coaching” courses where there is an emphasis on the skills of active listening and powerful questions applied in a nondirective coaching conversation. The book also assumes that the reader is familiar with the world of business, either from first-hand experience in a senior leadership role or through coaching leaders operating at this level in large, multinational organizations.

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In a nutshell

The book is organized into three broad sections. First, Chapters 2 and 3 explore the theoretical background to our approach in detail. In Chapter 2 we introduce the support/challenge matrix, an empirical validation of our own coaching experience. The support/challenge matrix is a central premise of FACTS and is used throughout the book as a uniting theme. We will outline the concept of the ZOUD or Zone of Uncomfortable Debate, a concept that explores how to get to the “heart of the matter” in a coaching conversation by breaking rapport with the coachee and holding the tension of a difficult conversation. All of the skills in FACTS involve being able to enter and sustain the ZOUD in order to provoke performance and trigger change.

In Chapter 3 we explore the history of coaching in the business world in order to understand how the bias toward a supportive, person-centered mindset originated. In particular, we will look at how the world of therapy has influenced coaching and the advantages and disadvantages of this legacy. Finally, we will describe the core principles of FACTS and explore how these differ from the principles of traditional person-centered coaching. As part of this, various “sacred cows” of the coaching world will be put under the spotlight and challenged, including the non-directive principle, holding to the client’s agenda, and the role of rapport.

In the second section of the book, Chapters 4 to 8, the practical skills in our coaching model are introduced and put to the test. Our intention is to provide simple, “real-world” tools and techniques that help the reader develop and practice new skills in a dynamic business context. Example dialogues, case studies, exercises, models, and metaphors are used to cater for different learning styles and provide fresh inspiration. The case studies we

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feature are not imaginary role plays but accurate accounts of real coaching sessions we have conducted. Where appropriate, we reference psychological models and business best practice to expand on themes and provide a strong empirical context. Throughout, our focus remains on the application of these skills in a business environment where multiple stakeholders, dynamic organizational structures, and shifting goals are the norm. We also assume a coachee who is routinely confident, ambitious, and resourceful in the pursuit of their goals—someone who has already mastered the basics of leadership and business, but who wishes to stretch to the next level in their development.

In the final section, Chapters 9 to 10, we look at the broader application of FACTS both now and into the future. Chapter 9 focuses on the specific role of a leader as coach to their own team and how FACTS can be applied on a day-to-day basis as part of a busy and demanding schedule. We introduce the idea of the player-coach, a leader who combines both “doing” and “coaching” to maximize the performance of others while still carrying out their own technical tasks and responsibilities. We explore this in practice by reviewing example FACTS dialogues for everyday management challenges such as delegation, managing performance, objective setting, managing upward, and client interaction.

Finally, Chapter 10 takes a philosophical turn to look at the wider implications of our coaching approach for the evolution of leadership in the twenty-first century. This is an ambitious chapter that shifts the agenda from discussing issues of support and challenge to the related and emotive issues of freedom and responsibility. It charts the evolution of dependent, independent, and interdependent mindsets and how a successful transition through each of these is facilitated by traditional coaching approaches and by FACTS.

CHALLENGING COACHING

This book is intended to challenge your view of coaching, to provoke you to think more deeply, and to help you learn valuable tools and techniques. Together we will step up to the coaching challenge—it is time to face the FACTS!

Challenging Coaching: Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS

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