EXCLUSIVE VIP PREVIEW

CULTIVATING EXCELLENCE

The ART, SCIENCE, *and* GRIT *of* HIGH PERFORMANCE *in* BUSINESS

DARRYL CROSS

with WILLIAM CROSS

Why and how do world-class leaders and great performers consistently beat their competition?

They realize they cannot go it alone. They use teams and coaches to amplify their results. Many performers who have already surmounted exceptional tests and challenges and have succeeded in business, sports, the military, or the arts well beyond their peers think performance is only up to the individual. Many become frustrated when hours of hard work, years of experience, and expensive educations don't lead them to the top of their domain. They are already among the best, but they want to be *the* best.

The elite realize there is only so much they can do on their own to achieve that status. They understand they need coaches, colleagues, and competitors to provide the collaboration and competition that serve as a constant push to keep forward momentum going toward attaining that next level.

In *Cultivating Excellence*, Darryl Cross uses thirty years of experience to show top performers that the key to continued enhancement of performance and success is an exceptional coach and team. They guide the elite performers to see situations and challenges in new ways (art), to perfect their craft to the *n*th degree (science), and to commit to deliberate practice that eliminates performance gaps (grit) and puts the summit within reach.

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REFLECTIVE COACHING

"In my early professional years I was asking the question: How can I treat, or cure, or change this person? Now I would phrase the question in this way: How can I provide a relationship that this person may use for his own personal growth?"

—CARL ROGERS

"By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the bitterest."

—CONFUCIUS

"Without reflection, we go blindly on our way, creating more unintended consequences, and failing to achieve anything useful."

—MARGARET J. WHEATLEY

When you think back to all of the coaches in your life, you'll note wide variations in their styles and techniques. As we identified in the false coaching personas, some like pontificating, some like yelling, and others like to take you for a stroll down memory lane to reflect on their glory days. This may be somewhat effective for coaching children or people at their very first job, but it is the completely wrong way to coach adults and people with advanced proficiency. Imagine your favorite sports stars, talented neurosurgeons, or

lawyers who argue before the US Supreme Court on a regular basis. Now imagine their reaction to being "coached" by someone yelling and carrying on about a supposedly subpar performance and how this superstar needs to listen to them if they ever want to be the best they can be. You could sell tickets to that show because it would certainly be entertaining.

When it comes to adults, especially those who are already in the upper levels of their domain, coaches must use a different approach. The most common traits associated with ineffective coaching have a similar theme: they are focused on the opinions, experiences, and preferences of the coach. The next steps and answers to improvement for high performers come from within the performers themselves. The coach's job is to ask the right questions, identify gaps, and gain mutual agreement about next steps. This is the essence of reflective coaching, the key to gaining the last few percentage points of excellence that take high performers from *good* to *great* to *elite*.

BAD COACHING CAN BE WORSE THAN NO COACHING AT ALL

Let's imagine that we had just finished a simulation, and it did not go well. Everyone was taken through a scrimmage to determine their initial skill levels and performance gaps. Everyone was drilled incessantly on fundamentals. Every performer was taught situational plans (what to do and when to do it). However, everyone just fell to pieces during the simulated event. Now the coach has to talk to the performers about what happened.

Think back to the false coaching personas we discussed before. How would each of them most likely handle this serious discussion?

> **Drill Instructor:** "Well, it looks like no one is listening. I guess you slackers are going to sit here all night and practice until you get it right!"

Bean Counter: "I need to do some analysis on what happened and see the trend lines. Once I do, we will have a meeting about this."

Preacher: "You have got to want it more than they do! I know you are capable, and you have to dig deep into your heart and soul!"

Reminiscer: "Back in my day, we did it totally differently. You people have it easy compared to what we used to do."

Monday Morning Quarterback: "Oh my goodness! What were you thinking when you did that? What a horrible decision! Let me tell you what you should have done."

Backseat Driver: "I cannot believe this. That was terrible. I'm going to show you the right way to do this, so watch closely. Let's see if any of you can keep up with me."

I expect most readers were chuckling, shaking their heads, or reliving an unpleasant memory as they read these ineffective, yet common, attempts at coaching. As we mentioned before, there is a time and a place for each persona's unique characteristics, but each in isolation is not coaching.

We have talked about how coaching is defined as applying the art, science, and grit of repetitively helping others become better than they were yesterday.

Keep in mind that performance gaps get smaller and smaller as people improve, and it becomes harder and harder for performers to squeeze out those last percentages of excellence.

Now that you have thought about how the false coaches would handle a bad simulation, let's imagine how performers who are already pretty damn good at what they do would react to those comments.

Reaction to the Drill Instructor: "Who does he think we are? A bunch of kids? I work my butt off every day."

Reaction to the Bean Counter: "You have got to be kidding me. She is going to stick her nose in a spreadsheet to try and figure this out? You do that. I will be out here in the real world."

Reaction to the Preacher: "Hey, guess what? I don't need a lecture on commitment from you. When was the last time you tried this?"

Reaction to the Reminiscer: "That's great, but unless you have a time machine, that does me no good whatsoever."

Reaction to the Monday Morning Quarterback: "Oh, *now* he tells me. Thanks, but that's not real helpful. What do we do now?"

Reaction to the Backseat Driver: "Oh, here we go. Let's watch her try to impress us. I hope she doesn't pull anything."

When working with high performers, bad coaching can be worse than no coaching at all because of negative effects on their attitude, demeanor, and commitment. Coaches who are regarded as peers can quickly become seen as rivals. If a superior, coaches can be looked upon as patronizing or authoritative, and the coach might well get them fired. Critiquing someone's current level of performance is always a challenge. Critiquing someone who already has more ability and potential than most people could ever dream to possess is much harder and must be handled delicately. Defensiveness, making excuses, and deflecting blame are all natural reactions. That's why it's incredibly important to establish high levels of trust and respect between the coach

and the performer. High-performing adults cannot be treated like children, or they will start acting like them.

When it comes right down to it, coaching is a form of learning education that is designed to improve results in a specific domain. However, most coaches' learning theories and styles date from their youth. Coaches who have not been formally trained look back to the people who coached or taught them when they were developing a reference point on best practices. This is a rational and completely normal behavior.

However, there is a major problem with this reality. Teaching adults, especially high-performing ones, is not the same as teaching children or novices.

The word *pedagogy* refers to the principles and practices associated with the teaching and instruction of children. Some of its roots actually come from theories of animal-based learning, where tasks are regimented, specific, and reinforced through simple positive and negative rewards. This is absolutely not how to train adults, and certainly not how to work with high performers! Can you imagine a coach telling their high performers they would be treated like an insolent child or a stubborn ox to improve performance? Good luck with that.

In contrast, *androgyny* refers to methods and theories related to adult learning and instruction. It emphasizes why and how things are taught (process and outcomes) instead of what (content and subject matter) is taught. Malcolm S. Knowles developed the theory about differences between teaching adults and children in the late 1960s. He wrote extensively about the main concepts that distinguish adult learning:

- Adults learn through experience, and mistakes are expected.
- Adults need to know *why* they are learning something.
- Adults learn best when there is a sense of urgency and applicability of the knowledge to solve short-term issues.

- Adults need to be involved with the planning and conducting of their own training as well as their own evaluation.
- Adults prefer problem solving and task solving versus content awareness and memorization.
- Teachers and coaches of adults should be collaborative, not authoritative.
- Learning should be self-directed and conducted in an emotionally safe environment.
- Adults want the freedom and autonomy to experiment and be creative.[1]

The concepts involved in teaching adults are quite different from what many people normally associate with how we "get people to perform" or learn new things. We may have been willing to get yelled at on our high school swimming team or as a student in law school, but accomplished adults will not put up with that. Coaches who do not grasp this concept will fail almost all of the time because the coaching relationship *must* be one of partnership and collaboration.

While the coach must maintain control of the learning structure, pacing, environment, and progress expectations, it is the performer who actually owns the most important factor: the results. Coach and performer are *equals* with different roles to play. How they communicate in a partnership of equals is known as *reflective coaching* and it is a critical component of the coaching process when we want to facilitate continuous improvement.

Coaching should be a dialogue between partners of equal status. The performer does not sit and listen as the coach critiques, tells them what they should have done, and gives tips and tricks for next time. The coach should

not feel less worthy due to not achieving what the performer can do. Both have their own expertise, so they meet as peers with different talents and a common purpose. If anything, the coach should do most of the listening, probing for details, and encouraging the performer, who should do most of the talking.

WHAT IS REFLECTIVE COACHING?

One of the benefits of conducting an opening scrimmage followed by subsequent training and drills on fundamentals, situational planning, and simulations is that performance gaps become readily apparent to everyone involved. If you have rational performers who genuinely want to improve and talented coaches who want to help them do so, there is a clear, smooth path to continuous improvement. That path is paved with the practice of *reflective coaching*.

Reflective coaching is a collaborative, purposeful, and results-oriented discussion. It is characterized by the coach asking the performer questions so that the performer and the coach can agree on desired results, confirm the actual results, identify reasons for deficiencies, and agree on next steps to enable continuous improvement.

Let's break the definition down into its components.

- First, the coach and performer are working together with a common process and end goal in mind. No matter whether this is coaching related to a particular drill, competition, event, or overall development, a specific objective is addressed.
- Second, the coach asks questions to lead the performer down a personal road to resolution. By asking questions instead of giving advice, the coach transfers ownership of the gaps and solutions to the performer.
- Third, four key points of reference are established:

Continued on next page . . .

- what was supposed to occur
- what actually occurred
- the reasons for the differences
- what should be done to do better next time

These components identify the performance gap, and the performer must concur on these points, or they will derive no benefit from the coach's directions for improvement.

We can find many examples of this method of coaching, instruction, and assistance in various disciplines and fields. The defining characteristic that makes them all comparable is the coach's use of questioning to lead performers to find the solution for themselves.

PROVEN EXAMPLES OF REFLECTIVE COACHING

Socratic questioning is used in many areas as a technique to analyze, probe, and explore problems and test perceptions as well as assumptions. It is most commonly associated with the study of the law, where professors challenge students' knowledge by continually asking questions that challenge students to clarify their positions. It is meant to be an exhaustive process of eliminating unfounded suppositions and exposing deficiencies in reasoning or knowledge. While movies and TV have characterized this method as the dramatic, gut-wrenching humiliation of students in front of their peers, this is not the true spirit of the method.

Some academics argue that Socrates himself developed the technique to reinforce his own belief that "I know that I know nothing." But the purpose of Socratic questioning in coaching is to identify gaps in performance and identify how to address them. The object is improvement—not just generating

insight. The coach as the questioner must resist the urge to lecture, be systematic in approach, direct the coaching through their questions, and attempt to have the performer generate the solution through their answers.[2]

Client-centered (Rogerian) therapy was developed in the late 1940s by renowned psychologist Carl Rogers and continuously revised as it gained prominence in the field of psychology and counseling. It is still one of the most popular theories of counseling and therapy in use today. Initially, it was called *non-directive therapy* due to its belief that the answers to solving an issue lay within the client, not the therapist. The therapist directs the discovery through questioning.

Rogers stated, "A person cannot teach another person directly; a person can only facilitate another's learning," and "A person learns significantly only those things that are perceived as being involved in the maintenance of or enhancement of the structure of self."[3] This belief that the therapist (or, for our purposes, the coach) is a guide and partner in the process of improvement is a key feature of the theory. The safety, openness, and trust established in the relationship between coach and performer are critical to progress.

Rogers identified three core conditions that must be in place for positive change to occur. First, there must be *congruence* between coach and performer. Being genuine and transparent is critical if the performer is to open up and talk about experiences. Second, the coach must display *unconditional positive regard* for the performer. This shows that the coach is not being judgmental and values the performer's judgment and validity of perceptions regarding experiences. Third, the coach must demonstrate *empathy*. Performers must feel that the coach understands where they are coming from, their individual challenges, and the unique set of circumstances they face.[4] When performers feel they can safely share their views and feelings without judgment or penalty, they will own their problem as well as the solution to it.

US Army After Action Reports (AARs) are tactical tools used by the military to debrief participants after a project, training session, or event. Any

leader or observer of performance can conduct an AAR. In fact, informal AARs are frequently conducted by junior officers and non-commissioned officers (most of whom are in their early twenties) due to their simplicity, structure, and near universal applicability.

Read the definition of the AAR from the US Army's "A Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews":

> "An after-action review (AAR) is a professional discussion of an event, focused on performance standards, that enables soldiers to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened, and how to sustain strengths and improve on weaknesses. It is a tool leaders and units can use to get maximum benefit from every mission or task. It provides:
>
> **Candid insights** into specific soldier, leader, and unit strengths and weaknesses from various perspectives.
>
> **Feedback and insight** critical to battle-focused training.
>
> **Details often lacking** in evaluation reports alone.
>
> **Evaluation** is the basis for the commander's unit-training assessment. No commander, no matter how skilled, will see as much as the individual soldiers and leaders who actually conduct the training. Leaders can then better correct deficiencies and sustain strengths by carefully evaluating and comparing soldier, leader, and unit performance against the standard. The AAR is the keystone of the evaluation process."[5]

The AAR is a shared learning event, where emphasis is placed on what was supposed to happen and what actually happened. Through discussion and asking questions, all participants see issues from different points of view and take ownership of the solution. Disagreement is encouraged, because no two people will share the same experience. The objective is to learn and retain information that can be applied in the future to facilitate continuous improvement.

Any AAR has a very basic structure and utilizes open-ended questions to get at the core issues related to improving performance:

- What was supposed to happen?
- What actually happened?
- Why did that happen?
- How do we improve the results in the future?

COMMON PRINCIPLES OF REFLECTIVE COACHING

The previous examples have five common principles, which are listed here:

- Answers for high performance reside within the performer.
- The coach/therapist/mentor/instructor's job is to direct the performer through structured questions to find those answers.
- Coach and performer are collaborative partners with different roles to play.
- Identifying gaps between what is desired and what has been achieved is critical.
- Goal: Put in place tactics and strategies to continuously improve performance.

Creating tactics and strategies to continuously improve performance is the purpose of coaching, and reflective coaching is the method to get high performers to move from being very good to becoming great.

Socratic questioning is an example of how extensive examination can drill down to core issues and challenge comfort zones. Client-centered therapy

teaches that the answers lie within the subject and a coach's job is to get them out in the open and agreed upon by both parties. AARs are an illustration of how a simple structure can be used to organize coaching into a systematic process that ties back to corrective measures.

THE WHYS AND HOWS OF REFLECTIVE COACHING

All of these approaches can be combined to create reflective coaching methodology that works well within any industry, domain, or field. The questions might vary greatly based on what the performer's role or activity might be, but the method remains the same. At the end of this book, you will find links to resources that will help you build your own reflective coaching tools. However, coaches know their performers, and they know what must be achieved for those performers to become great. They should start with a conversation, be genuinely curious, and let the performer talk. You will see some example conversations below.

The tools, methods, and philosophies of reflective coaching hold the keys to improving performance in adults—especially those who want to be in the top tier of their domain.

These keys can be used in any industry, field, or discipline after a simulated or actual event. Upon reflection and agreement, the coach can then identify fundamentals that need to be worked on, adjust situational plans that need to be revised, and prepare a simulation to retest and validate any corrections at an individual, team, and organizational level. Once the reflection is complete, it is up to the coach to make sure that the performance enhancement plan is developed, followed, and reexamined—again, again, and again.

Applying Reflective Coaching in the Real World

Reflective coaching can happen in any performance-related field. I've included the following conversations that utilize its five principles to bring home reflective coaching's power.

Example 1: Business Post-Sales Call Setting

Coach: Let's take a few moments and debrief on your visit to that prospective client. I want to hear how you think it went and talk about next steps. Hopefully, this will make it easier the next time we meet with them.

Performer: OK, as long as it won't take too much time.

Coach: It won't take long at all. Tell me about the client visit. What did we hope to achieve?

Performer: We went in there to talk to them about our corporate services and retain them as a new client.

Coach: Was that the goal? Who established that?

Performer: Well, I assumed that was the goal.

Coach: Do you usually go into a first meeting and expect to come away with new business? How often does that happen?

Performer: Not often. Well, actually never.

Coach: Why do you think you took that attitude going into the meeting?

Performer: I guess this was a really big opportunity, and I really needed it.

Coach: What actually happened?

Performer: We did a great presentation, but their head of the department wasn't there. They were also really taken aback by our high costs.

Coach: Was she supposed to be there?

Performer: Well, this was a big meeting, so I assumed she would be.

Coach: Why was it a "big meeting"? Did they have anything at stake?

Performer: No, but we did.

Coach: OK. Tell me about the high costs issue. Why do you say they were taken aback?

Performer: They looked shocked when we showed our rates during the presentation. However, you would think they would understand why the rates are what they are after seeing the information we showed them in the presentation. All of our offices, experience, recruiting from the top schools—those cost money!

Coach: What did they say during your discovery and development phases that led you to believe they wanted to see about all of our offices and expenses?

Performer: Well, it's a standard presentation deck.

Coach: You said you wanted to close a deal. Why did we not achieve what we wanted?

Performer: I don't think we did a good job confirming attendees or finding out who the decision makers actually are. Also, we can get very defensive when discussing our fees, and I think it makes us look arrogant.

Coach: Let's back up a minute. Why were you going into a first meeting and expecting a quick decision that would have required all of their top people there?

Performer: We were told to get out there and generate new business. We worked hard on this one. It was our big shot.

Coach: You still haven't told me why the ***client*** would have thought it was an important meeting that would have required all their decision makers in the room. What would have changed that?

Performer: We didn't know much about what they were working on and what they sought in an outside partner such as us.

Coach: Why didn't we know that?

Performer: Frankly, we didn't ask. We were too worried about the presentation deck looking impressive.

Coach: Why do you care so much about the deck?

Performer: I don't like how cutthroat competition has become in this industry. I hate it. I just want to show what we do to them, have them be impressed at what we can offer, and get back to work.

Coach: Do you think the client can sense that you are just trying to get through this as fast as possible and get back to work?

Performer: Maybe.

Coach: How do we improve this type of visit in the future?

Performer: We need some additional training on how to handle price negotiations. I also think we need to practice more before we go into a meeting. Whenever price comes up, we freeze or immediately offer a discount.

Coach: Is that it? When is the next time you think we will have a meeting like this?

Performer: We don't get these too often. So, we may need to do something to keep sharp in between the big meetings.

Coach: Would you be willing to dedicate some time to simulating meetings like this on a regular basis? If so, I will set it up.

Performer: Sure. Let's do it.

Coach: Excellent. I will provide you with some fundamental exercises to work on. I also need you to study some of the plans we have with how we have dealt with price sensitive clients in the past. In two weeks, I will schedule a mock client visit to practice. I will be playing the client, so be ready!

Performer: Deal.

Example 2: Post-Training Simulation (War Game) Setting

Coach: Now that the war game is over, let's take some time to talk about what happened and get your feedback on how you think you did. I want to ask you a series of questions, identify any gaps in performance, and come to some common ground on areas for improvement. Hopefully, this will show us what we can work on together to improve our chances of winning when it's not an exercise. Sound good?

Performer: Sounds great.

Coach: Tell me about that war game and your team. What did your team hope to achieve?

Performer: We were going head-to-head against two other teams playing our competitors trying to win the business of a simulated client.

Coach: Was the defined goal of the exercise to win business?

Performer: I thought so.

Coach: Do most of your calls work that way? Do you often close new business with just one visit?

Performer: Not usually. Getting commitment to move forward with us exclusively is probably just as good.

Coach: What actually happened?

Performer: We lost badly. The judges rated us at the bottom, which I don't agree with at all. We were definitely the more prepared team and had a much better flow to our presentation.

Coach: What did the judges say about why they marked you so low?

Performer: We relied too heavily on information about our organization and telling them what we do. The other teams focused on client needs.

Coach: Why do you think the other teams decided to focus on the client needs and we didn't?

Performer: Probably because they didn't *have* very much information about the competitors they were pretending to be. They don't actually work there, so all they had was what was available on their website!

Coach: So, do you see that as an advantage or a disadvantage? Would you have done the same thing?

Performer: Probably. Also, it seemed to work.

Coach: That makes sense, and I understand where you are coming from. It is a challenging exercise! How would you and your team improve on your performance in the future?

Performer: We need to get better at researching the business issues of our clients, practice our public speaking, and have multiple options to present when we are in competitive situations. We also need to do more of this type of practice before we lose a client opportunity like this for real.

Coach: That can't be a new idea for you. Why didn't you do it that way the first time?

Performer: I think it's just easier talking about our own organization. I don't want to look silly in front of a client. I worry about them asking me a question about one of their business issues that I am not an expert on.

Coach: Would learning more about their industry and how to deflect direct challenges be helpful? What if we came up with a list of drills we could work on together as well as likely scenarios some of your peers have encountered? Would that help?

Performer: Maybe, if we practice them and see if they are realistic.

Coach: Understood. We want to make sure it feels natural for you. I will put together a plan, and we can get the team together for another go at this in a less public arena. Sound reasonable?

Performer: It does. Thanks!

Example 3: Sports Setting

Coach: OK, take a knee and relax for a bit. With the game still fresh in our heads, I wanted to walk through how it went compared to how we prepared. I want to ask some questions to get your point of view of how you felt out there and what you saw. Afterward, we can start thinking about practice structure for next week. OK?

Performer: OK, coach.

Coach: I think we can both agree that was an interesting game. What was supposed to happen?

Performer: We were supposed to win the game. We were supposed to crush them here at home.

Coach: Any reason you were so confident?

Performer: The team has really started coming together. We had a great week of practice, and I felt really good.

Coach: What actually happened?

Performer: We lost in the last two minutes of the game. It is very frustrating. I'm really angry with myself and some of my teammates.

Coach: Angry at the result or how we played?

Performer: Both, of course. But how we played really aggravates me. We are better than that. I am better than that.

Coach: Let's just talk about your point of view for now. You can open up and tell me what affected you personally. You said you felt good. What changed?

Performer: When things started going badly in the last part of the game, I started trying to take it all on myself. I was pushing hard since no one else seemed to be doing so.

Coach: I noticed that. Why did that happen?

Performer: We were not prepared for losing one of our key players, dealing with their defensive scheme, or running out of steam in the last few minutes. I kept trying to push my teammates, but they kept missing key plays, dropping balls, and committing penalties.

Coach: You mentioned that you were really tired. Were they?

Performer: I am in pretty damn good shape, so they had to be, right?

Coach: Do you tend to make more mistakes when you are tired? Does rushing when you are already tired make it harder for you personally?

Performer: It does, and I see where you are going with this . . .

Coach: You tell me. What do you think happened?

Performer: I started rushing the plays, everyone was gasping for air, and our play deteriorated. That is on me.

Coach: Hey, I get it. You are a leader. I can see myself doing the same thing. So, how do we improve on our performance in the future?

Performer: We need to be in better shape so we don't let fatigue beat us. We also need to spend more time watching film and preparing for how we deal with having to change our game plan when the situation changes. I also need to work on my own coolness under pressure.

Coach: We all have those days. Let me get with our conditioning coach for some things to work on that will help. We will also work on more situations at practice where we are pressed for time, but we will insist on no mistakes. On Wednesday, we will run against our scout defense squad to practice it in a realistic way. Sound good?

Performer: It does. Thanks Coach. Sorry about today.

Coach: Don't give it a second thought. You will get better. You always do.

You will notice that the conversations seem very natural and may vary based on the situation or activity. There isn't a script. However, all utilize the five principles of reflective coaching. The answers reside within the performer, and it is the coach's job to use questions to find those answers. The

performer will only open up to the coach when there's established trust and respect between partners. Once performance gaps between what is desired and what is achieved are identified, the coach and performer mutually agree to an improvement plan.

REFLECTIVE COACHING STRUCTURE

Reflective coaching uses a combination of questions, collaborative discovery, and systematic approaches to formulate action plans. Keep in mind that reflective coaching, discussed in this Chapter, should follow a general structure meant to generate dialogue between partners. Let's revisit those important steps:

- Reach agreement on reason, approach, and payoff (why the coach and the performer are having this discussion)
- Discuss what was supposed to have happened (goal)
- Discuss what actually happened (actual result)
- Reach agreement upon performance gaps (the difference between goal and actual)
- Reach agreement on why the performance gap occurred
- Agree on how improved performance can be achieved next time (corrective action)
- Determine action items for coach and performer (program for improvement)
- Plan for reassessment (measurement of performance gap after corrective action)

This structure is not meant to be a script or rigid in its application. It is meant to guide a conversation that will feel natural and genuine. If a conversation sounds canned, the performer may perceive a lack of empathy or authentic concern. However, with a familiar structure and approach each time there is a coaching conversation, performers become used to the process. They anticipate the coaching discussion and become better at sharing and receiving feedback.

HIGH-PERFORMANCE COACHING NEVER STOPS

Coaching should occur in the moment and as close to the time of the performance (real time) as possible to ensure that the event, project, or competition is still fresh in the coaches' and performers' minds. Some "coaches" schedule discussion sessions on their calendar for a certain time every week—especially if coaching is not their full-time job. For example, ineffective sales managers would "coach" their account executives every Friday from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. instead of right before or right after a key sales call. Ineffective flight instructors would have monthly reviews instead of immediate post–flight simulator briefings. Ineffective litigation partners coaching young associates on their trial performance would coach at their regular, biweekly catch-up meeting instead of having that meeting standing right outside on the courthouse steps.

Many coaches will ask, "When is the best time to coach, and how much time should I spend doing it?" The answer is pretty straightforward. **If you are in charge of other's development—making them better at what they do—then the majority of your time should be spent actually coaching.** It may be five minutes here and twenty minutes there, but coaching should be under way constantly. Every moment can be a coaching moment.

In an actual event or competition, time cannot stop for coaching. But if there's a break in the action, coaching should occur immediately. If it is a

training or practice activity, coaches should stop performers periodically to ask what they are trying to accomplish, what they are actually doing, and so on.

Remember that coaching is not just pointing out deficiencies and giving advice. It is about agreeing upon deficiencies identified by the performer and having them come up with the solution. The coach owns the structure, style, and ensuing performance enhancement plan. The performer owns the execution of the plan and the expected improvement if they follow it.

It would be very logical to think of a coach who uses reflective coaching as an advisor, mentor, or even therapist. All of those people make use of questioning, mutual respect, collaboration, and a results-based structure to identify gaps in performance. The difference is that, as long as continued high performance is expected, coaching can never stop. You may eventually stop seeing a therapist or learn all you can from a mentor.

It does not matter whether you are an individual performer, leader, or CEO. If you are competing at a high level and your environment and challengers are keeping you from realizing continuous improvement, you will always need coaching. Coaching never, ever stops.

A.J. Hawk is an exceptionally gifted and intelligent athlete who served as the captain of the defense for a Super Bowl champion team. However, he is very coachable. He knows that he always has room for improvement, situations are always changing, and he needs coaches who will treat him with respect while being very candid. Here's what the NFL football great had to say in our interview.

Q: What about coaches at this level? Top performers in all disciplines could say, "I don't need a coach. They're not as good as I am and never were." So, why use coaches when you are all in the top 0.1 percent already?

A: I think everybody can get coached, no matter what your job is. I love how, as you get older in the NFL, your relationship with the coaches can change and grow. It's more of a back and forth relationship and good positive conversations than there are negative ones.

You always know though who your coach is. You know that he's the boss. You have to respect that. Now, the coach who loses that is screwed. They're going to lose the team. If you have someone that you just feel is not a great coach, you don't have a lot of respect. You feel almost like it's us against them, players against that coach, and that's just not a good thing.

When a coach feels like he wants to do whatever it takes to make you the best player possible and to make the team the best team possible, you have something mighty special. When that happens, you'll bounce all kind of ideas off of each other.

But, when you mess up, you have to admit to it. The coach is going to let you know in front of everybody that you messed up, and you can respect that as a player when a coach does coach you.

I think everybody, whether they admit it or not, wants to be coached. You want to have somebody there that's going to be able to either affirm that what you're doing is right or let you know when something is wrong. It may be tough to handle at the moment, but we all know when we do something wrong, whether you want to admit it or not. You have to have that coach there to kind of guide you in the right way and let you know when you get off track.

If someone is just surrounded by yes men, it's terrible. It's the worst thing that could ever happen. You have to have people that can check you and get you back on track when you do or say something wrong, whatever it may be.

Some people may wonder why someone in the top 1 percent of performers in an elite organization such as the NFL needs continual coaching. Shouldn't

he know all he needs to know? Hawk understands that he never will. He continues challenging himself, but he needs others to challenge him as well. His teammates will push him, competitors will push him, and coaches will push him. This is why he will be a champion in anything he does, even after his football career is over.

If a Super Bowl champion linebacker for one of the most storied franchises in sports appreciates the value of continuous, reflective coaching, shouldn't you?