



## **Extract from “The Inconvenient Truth about Learning”**

### **Solution 3: The Management Consultant Process**

The last common problem that arises in coaching conversations is when the individual has either done everything they think they can on their action plan, they can't see what they can improve or haven't been able to identify what to work on in the follow up TLA coaching conversations. In short they play the “I don't know” card.

This can be really frustrating for the coach and the individual. Sometimes the individual will say they don't know because they are disengaged and as we've covered earlier the best way to handle that situation is to call them on it and try to work past it. There is no point pretending that they are engaged or that there is no hostility when there is – Call them on it.

Sometimes the individual will resort to, “I don't know what to work on” because they genuinely don't know how they can improve and this can be extremely difficult for people to deal with, especially seasoned, and experienced individuals who are paid to “know”. It can be extremely confronting to realize that they don't know how to improve further or what is expected of them. They could be a top performer that receives little feedback on how they can go to the next level or they could be very self assured and not see any opportunity or way they *could* be better. Often I hear, “Well obviously I'm not perfect but I don't know what I could do differently to get an even better job.” As the TLA coach it's your job to help them find out.

Always let them know that it's OK not to know, reassure them that confusion is the pre-cursor for breakthrough and in any learning journey there is always a period of confusion just prior to comprehension. This is a normal part of the learning and change process.

What you need to do is take them to a position where they can bypass the rational mind and see things from a different perspective and the best way to do that is through what I call the management consultant process.

### **How to Use the Management Consultant Process**

1. Repeat back to the individual what you have heard so far. Summarize the conversation. You might say, “I'm hearing that you really feel that you've got everything covered or that you are unsure what else you could discuss in this conversation. Is that right?”
1. Get their permission to work through a process that could help unearth something that might be useful to work on. It can be helpful in this situation to play to the person's ego a little by suggesting you deviate from a Turning Learning into Action conversation into an Executive

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Coaching conversation. If appropriate, remind the individual that highly paid executives using coaching or that athletes who have won 2 or 3 gold medals still work with a coach. You might say, “If it’s OK with you I’d really like to shift away from TLA for a moment to Executive coaching and use a little technique to see how we can add value and perhaps help us to get a different perspective on the situation. Is that OK with you?”

2. Assuming you get their permission ask them to imagine the trainer from the program they have just attended has been work shadowing them for the last 3 weeks. You might say, “Just imagine that Alan from the training has been shadowing you at work, because he really wants to help you get the best results possible so he’s been watching your interactions, meetings, conversations and day to day business for 3 weeks. At the end of those three weeks, what insights do you think Alan might have about what he saw during that time – strengths and weaknesses?”
3. Sometimes the individual will start to provide ideas and you can use them to move forward. If they don’t then you might say, “What three things would the trainer identify as your real strengths in the role? “What three things do you think the trainer would identify as helping to make you successful in your role? Once they have created the list I play it back to them.
4. Once you have repeated the strengths and the individual has acknowledged them you might say, “Now obviously Alan wants you to get the best possible results so what three things might he have observed that could possibly be done differently to get an even better result. I stress here it could be things that are done well but could be done even better or it could be the smallest tweak that if changed a fraction would help them get an even better result. What are the three things the trainer would suggest?”
5. Buoyed by the previous strengths the individual is much more likely to find a few things and move past, “I don’t know”. So once you have the three things provided by the individual you play them back to the person and then get them to pick one item from the list of things that could be done different and add the most value and progress that point in the conversation.
6. If they are undecided get them to rank the three items they identified in terms of easiest to hardest or what will add the most value and least value. Always encourage the individual to work on the hardest issue or the one that will deliver most value. That way they are supported through those issues during the TLA process, gain the win and are then much more confident about handling the other less difficult issues themselves.

If you get the sense that the participant didn’t gel with the trainer in the program or doesn’t really respect that individual then you will need to change the perspective to someone they do respect otherwise the process will not be effective. If the training was in leadership or sales then instead of asking the participant to imagine what the trainer would identify through work shadowing then first ask that person to name a leader or salesperson they really admire.

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These can be famous people or people from their own experience past or present. Once they have chosen someone then simply go through the same process but have them imagine that person is work shadowing them instead of the trainer.

The final alternative is to ask the individual to imagine that they no longer work for their current company and that they have left the business and set up a very successful and highly respected management consultancy specializing in their industry. Have the person imagine that in a twist of fate his or her old company hire that person back to review the new person in their old role. Remind the individual that he or she trained that person before they left and they are effectively doing the job exactly the way they had done it before leaving. You might say, "From the perspective of an accomplished and insightful management consultant what three things is that person doing well and what three things could that person do slightly differently to get an even better result."

This approach, which is the namesake of this technique, can be particularly useful for de-personalizing the feedback. If the individual is defensive or reluctant to identify possible issues and move past "I don't know" then this approach massages their ego a little while providing them a less confronting way to get the issues on the table so you can move forward.

### **Example of the Management Consultant process in Action**

If the participant is unable to find the gap that they want to work on then any version of the management consultant process can help to create a new perspective and highlight a potential gap.

I remember one conversation where the individual was very resistance to coaching and was playing the "I don't know card" over and over again. So I quietly moved in the management consultant process to see if I could move him forward.

I asked the participant who they respected in the industry, someone they had worked with or knew of, or maybe someone from elsewhere in another industry. Every time I asked for a name the individual told me they didn't know anyone they respected.

Eventually after a little probing he admitted that he respected Nelson Mandela. So I used the technique above and said, "So if Nelson Mandela had been work shadowing you in your work place for the last three weeks what would be the three things he would say you've done really well and what would he suggest you could have done differently to get a better result?"

Just by shifting his perspective and standing in the imaginary shoes of Nelson Mandela this person was able to rattle off suggestions which then led to the identification of a gap and we were able to move forward with the TLA conversations.

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Although this might seem a little odd, encouraging people to stand in someone else's shoes and look at their own situation from a different perspective can be incredibly powerful. No one really understands why this type of guided imagery works but it is a recognised way to help people to connect with their innate wisdom and cognitive resources.

Science has already demonstrated that the brain processes about 400 billion bits of information per second and yet you are aware of about 2,000 of those bits. The vast majority of the information is therefore shunted to the subconscious mind. What's fascinating about the subconscious mind is that not only does it know things your conscious mind has forgotten but it knows things your conscious mind never even knew. It may be therefore that shifting someone's perspective or view point through guided imagery allows that individual to access different information that can provide innovative solutions. This type of process is a recognized and simple way to increase creativity and imagination which in turn helps to solve problems more effectively through visualizing situations from different angles and sourcing possible outcomes to different alternatives.

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