INSIGHT PAPER / LEADERSHIP COACHING

From Reporting to Thinking

Coaching for ownership, insight and action



Strong performance conversations do more than establish what happened. They help people surface evidence, understand the system, take ownership of the next decision and act with greater confidence.

THE CENTRAL SHIFT

Move from requesting updates to developing the thinking behind them.

In a pressured workplace, leaders need reliable facts and visible standards. Yet when conversations end at the status update, the leader can remain responsible for all the real thinking. This paper sets out practical coaching questions that strengthen judgement, more credible forecasting and ownership of action.

AT A GLANCE

1. Hold the standard
Make the expected outcome, timing, quality and safety requirements visible.

2. Ask for evidence
Explore assumptions, systems and signals—not only the visible performance gap.

3. Return ownership
Close with a clear next action, measure of success and review point.

In a pressured workplace, it is easy for leadership conversations to become a rapid exchange of targets, facts and instructions:

- "What was committed?"
- "What has been delivered?"
- "What went wrong?"
- "What are you going to do now?"

These questions matter. They create clarity, expose gaps and keep work moving. Yet, used on their own, they can leave leaders with a familiar frustration: people become very good at reporting information, while the leader remains responsible for doing the real thinking.

Coaching changes that pattern. Its purpose is not to make performance conversations softer or slower. It is to help people examine their assumptions, understand the systems they lead and take fuller ownership of the next decision. Done well, coaching creates more capable people, more reliable forecasts and faster recovery when something goes off track.

The shift is from asking for data to developing the thinking behind the data.

Management as service

At its best, management is a form of service. It creates the conditions in which people can think well, act responsibly and deliver work that matters.

This does not mean that a manager must have every answer, nor does it mean avoiding difficult conversations. It means being clear about the required outcome, helping people understand what is producing the current result, and returning responsibility for action to the appropriate owner.

A coaching leader therefore does three things consistently:

1. Makes standards visible. People know the outcome, timing, quality and safety requirements.

2. Invites sound thinking. People are expected to explain their reasoning, not merely provide a status update.
3. Builds ownership. People leave the conversation knowing what they will do, how progress will be measured and when they will report back.

This is especially important when leaders feel pressure to step in and solve the problem themselves. Stepping in can be necessary. However, if it becomes the default response, the team learns to wait for rescue instead of strengthening its own judgement.

The three levels of a productive leadership conversation

A useful framework is to organise questions across three connected levels: administration, system and ethics.

Administration

This level examines commitments, targets, timing, priorities and the visible performance gap. Ask: "What was agreed?" "What has actually happened?" "What is the gap?" The aim is a shared, fact-based view of performance.

System

This level examines process flow, assumptions, controls, capability, constraints, handovers and evidence. Ask: "Why did the system behave this way?" "What did we fail to understand, control or anticipate?" The aim is insight into the drivers of the outcome, not just its symptoms.

Ethics

This level examines ownership, judgement, candour, follow-through and care for people. Ask: "What is your part in this?" "What did you do when you first saw the risk?" The aim is responsible action, learning and trust. The administration level is the most visible. It tells us whether the target was achieved. The ethics level establishes the quality of leadership: whether people are candid, accountable and willing to act. The middle level—the system—is often where the greatest leverage lies.

A missed commitment may be obvious. The more valuable question is: what in the system, reasoning or decision-making caused the commitment to become unreliable? Until that question is explored, the same pattern may repeat under a different label.

Why "why" matters

A calm, purposeful "why" question can be one of the most powerful tools available to a leader. It invites people to make their thinking visible.

Compare these two exchanges:

Reporting

"The result will be late because the process is running behind."

Coaching

"What led you to believe the original timing was achievable? Where did the plan first stop matching reality?"

The first response provides a fact. The second asks for the assumptions, evidence and decision points behind the fact.

This matters because people can sometimes present plausible information without having examined whether it is enough. A coach does not simply accept the first answer and move on. They help the person ask better questions of their own thinking:

- What did you know at the time?
- What did you assume?
- What evidence supported that assumption?
- What signal did you overlook or discount?
- What would you do differently if you faced the same conditions tomorrow?

The intention is not to interrogate, embarrass or conduct a ritualised "five whys" exercise. The intention is to uncover the judgement that sits beneath the action. Productive discomfort can be part of that process, but it should always be paired with respect, curiosity and a clear path forward.

A six-step coaching sequence for performance conversations

When delivery, quality, safety or a forecast is at risk, use this short sequence to structure the conversation.

1. Name the expected outcome

State the commitment precisely and explain why it matters.

- "We agreed this outcome by this time. Why was that commitment important?"
- "What standard are we trying to protect here?"

This anchors the conversation in a shared purpose rather than a personal disagreement.

2. Establish the actual position

Separate verified facts from assumptions, hopes and inherited views.

- "What do we know for certain?"
- "What is a forecast, rather than a fact?"
- "What information do we still need before we can make a reliable decision?"

A leader who distinguishes evidence from optimism improves both credibility and decision quality.

3. Explore the system-level why

Move from the symptom to the underlying operating reality.

- "Where did the plan first diverge from reality?"
- "What changed in the process, conditions, capability or handover?"
- "What did we not understand, control or anticipate?"
- "Which constraint is now setting the pace?"
- "What evidence would confirm or challenge this explanation?"

The leader does not need to be the deepest technical expert in the room to ask these questions. Their role is to ensure that the relevant expertise is brought to bear and that the explanation is grounded in evidence.

4. Test the reasoning behind the forecast

A forecast is a statement about the future. Ask what makes it credible.

- "What led you to be confident in that timing?"
- "Which assumptions must hold for this plan to work?"
- "What is the next point at which you will update the forecast?"
- "If your explanation is correct, what should we expect to see next?"

This turns forecasting from a hopeful declaration into a disciplined leadership practice.

5. Move decisively to recovery

Once the problem is understood well enough, shift into action.

- "What is your recovery plan?"
- "Who owns each action?"
- "What support is genuinely needed?"
- "What can be stabilised, accelerated or escalated safely today?"
- "When will we know whether the recovery is working?"

The question "why?" should not delay urgent action. In fact, it often accelerates action by clarifying responsibility and ruling out superficial responses.

6. Close the learning loop

Do not let the team treat recovery as the end of the matter.

- "What will change in the next plan, handover or forecast?"
- "What early signal will we watch next time?"
- "How will we prevent this becoming a recurring pattern?"

This is where coaching becomes capability-building rather than incident management.

Holding people accountable without making it personal

Accountability is often misunderstood as pressure, blame or a search for fault. In coaching, it is the willingness to own one's judgement, choices and follow-through.

A respectful accountability conversation might sound like this:

"I value your experience. Help me understand the thinking and evidence behind this recommendation."

This statement does two things at once. It recognises expertise and sets the expectation that conclusions must be accompanied by reasoning. That is particularly useful with experienced colleagues who may be accustomed to being trusted on the strength of their track record alone.

When someone reacts defensively, resist the temptation to argue about motives. Return to the practical purpose of the conversation:

- "I am not questioning your intent. I am trying to understand the thinking behind the decision."

- "What would help us make the next forecast more reliable?"
- "What is your own assessment, based on the available evidence?"
- "What is the leadership action required from you now?"

The standard should be consistent: coordination and delegation matter, but senior leadership also requires visible engagement, sound judgement and a willingness to step into the work when it needs leadership attention.

Coaching in urgent conditions

Some leaders worry that a coaching approach is too slow for a fast-moving environment. The opposite is usually true when the questions are focused.

A ten-minute operational conversation can follow this pattern:

1. Outcome: What did we need to achieve?
2. Reality: What has actually happened?
3. Cause: Why did the plan stop matching reality?
4. Risk: What could make the situation worse?
5. Recovery: What will happen next, by whom and by when?
6. Learning: What must change in the next decision cycle?

This is not an invitation to analyse endlessly. Stabilise any immediate risk first, then ask only the questions needed to create clear ownership and an effective response.

Three practical habits to build this week

1. Ask one more question before offering the answer

When you feel ready to explain what should happen, pause and ask:

"What do you think is driving this?"

That short pause often reveals whether the person has already understood the issue—or whether they need help to think it through.

2. Make the evidence behind every forecast explicit

When someone makes a commitment, ask:

"What evidence makes that forecast credible, and what would cause you to revise it?"

This produces earlier escalation, fewer surprises and better planning.

3. End every difficult conversation with ownership

Before leaving the conversation, make sure the person—not the leader—states the next step:

"Tell me what you will do next, what success will look like and when we will review it."

If they cannot answer clearly, the conversation is not yet complete.

The real purpose of coaching questions

The purpose of coaching is not to make leaders less direct. It is to make directness more useful.

Good questions help people connect an immediate decision to a wider purpose: safer work, more dependable delivery, stronger relationships and a more capable team. They show that

accountability is not a punishment. It is how people learn to use their judgement well and earn trust through consistent action.

The next time a commitment is missed, resist the urge to move straight from "what happened?" to "here is what you should do." Hold the standard, ask what is true, explore why the system and thinking produced the result, and return ownership of the response to the person who must lead it.

That is how reporting becomes thinking—and how thinking becomes better action.

PUT THE THINKING INTO PRACTICE

What would change if every difficult performance conversation built better judgement—not just a faster update?

Elephants in Main Street helps organisations connect culture, leadership and learning to the strategic intent that matters now.

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