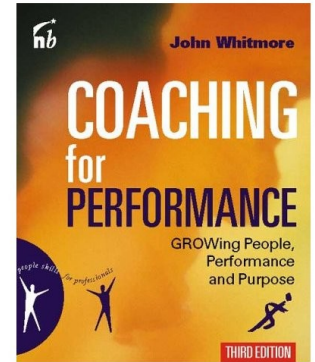


coaching for performance: GROWing human potential and performance

John Whitmore (Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 4th ed 2009)

When a book first published in 1992 comes out in a 4th edition, it must be worth reading. What most struck me about this book was how simple and straightforward it is, but yet how wide-ranging, extensive and deep.

For some, the first question about this book might be: 'Why would I want to read a book about coaching?' Not just any book about coaching, perhaps, but I would commend this one because it is basically about people. And so it would speak to managers who want their staff to perform at their best, sports coaches (where 'coaching' originated) who want players to perform at their best, and church leaders who want to bring out the best in everyone they work with.



One question I brought to this book was about the difference between coaching and mentoring, and this is addressed early on. Whitmore notes that some people use the term 'coaching' interchangeably with mentoring. But he argues that whereas mentoring has its origin in apprenticeship, and 'an older, more experienced individual passing down his knowledge', coaching requires expertise in coaching but not the subject in hand. Given the significance of asking questions in mentoring as I understand it, I'm not sure I agree that mentoring is so different from coaching, but it matters not in this book.

Coaching has come to be understood as a way of working with people which is about asking good questions in order to help those people to rise to higher levels of 'performance' in a variety of spheres. According to Whitmore, the essence of good coaching is building awareness and responsibility, in other words, helping people to be aware of their own abilities and skills and to take responsibility to improve their performance by removing barriers. Thus for 'coaches' – or anyone who wants to help others in this way, one key technique is that of asking open questions – and being fully attentive to the answers.

Thus a substantial section of the book introduces the 'GROW' sequence of questions: Goal setting; Reality checking; Options/alternative strategies; and What, when, by whom and the will to do it. It also gives examples on how this technique can be used in a variety of contexts, and the benefits of using it.

The subtitle of the book, *GROWing human potential and purpose*, reveals something of the author's beliefs. At points he seems optimistic about human nature, but he is also realistic. I could not help smiling at the sentence 'I believe that humanity is still destined to travel a positive evolutionary journey' – but the rest of the sentence, arguing that we have veered off track, 'seduced by materialism and consumerism', could have been written by a Christian. A few sentences on, he writes, 'While we wait in vain for a saviour...' – and it almost seems that coaching *is* salvation; nevertheless, there is a vast amount of practical wisdom in this book. We under-estimate people, and could do so much better.

Each chapter is short, focusing on one area, making the book very accessible and readable. There are chapters on motivation, feedback and assessment, developing teams, emotional intelligence. And there are several chapters on leadership, which explore, among other things, the importance of values, and changing styles of leadership.

In his introduction Whitmore explains his use of the masculine gender with the comment that 'it is men who need to heed its message most', because 'women have consistently shown more natural ability to adopt a coaching philosophy.' That may be a stereotype; some of what is spelled out in the book may come more intuitively to some women, but there is plenty here for men *and* women.

I can see why this book has become the definitive book on coaching methodology in HR and schools of coaching. Because it is so well written and it's basically about what makes people tick, what motivates people and how to work with them, it would be of value to all church leaders.

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