

Masterful Coaching: Extraordinary Results by Impacting People and the Way They Work Together

by **Robert Hargrove**

Book Review by Kate Kalin

Robert Hargrove's substantial book covers a wide range of coaching concepts and techniques. Although much of his focus is on coaching work teams, many of his teachings can also be applied to coaching individuals. Hargrove's notion of the "transformational coach"¹ aims to "unleash the creatively productive contribution of the individual"⁽⁶⁾. He believes a masterful coach is primarily "someone who is a vision builder and value shaper"⁽¹⁶⁾.

Hargrove has four coaching compass points. The first: coaching as stewardship; that is, becoming involved in creating the type of world we want to live in. The second point is coaching as transformation for individuals through assisting them to create a life based on what is deeply purposeful for them. Thirdly, in the team situation, the coach is builder of communities of commitment through empowering collaborative dialogue. Finally he regards coaching as an expander of a group's capacity to take effective action through the creation and implementation of 'stretch'² and 'breakthrough'³ goals (17-26).

These compass points are addressed through the following methodology: Triple loop learning transforms the personal context out of which the coachee makes self-defining choices. This results in dramatic changes in the coachee's point of view about themselves. Double loop learning reshapes patterns of thinking or practices, with the intent of breaking through impasses and learning new ways of doing things. In single loop learning individuals are coached to continually improve their current practices

1 'Transformational coaching' helps people transform or stretch their visions, values and abilities (1)

2 'Stretch goals' encourage coachees to aim for what they may have believed was impossible. In business coaching stretch goals force people to think outside their normal paradigms to develop new products and services and reinvent their current business processes. Stretch goals demand new knowledge and resources and new ways of being (37,85-104).

3 The 'Breakthrough Technique' developed by Robert Schaffer involves questioning how our ideal future would look if there were no constraints, then 'inventing' what is missing to get there. Urgent short term goals are set to necessitate experimental action, collaboration and problem solving. This practice leads to successful collaboration, success experiences and individuals feeling they have the power to make an immediate difference (261-274).

"A coach is something that you BE" (39).

Hargrove suggests that aspiring coaches need to develop a calm and centred spirit. He also marks the need to call forth our ability to inspire, set higher standards, bring honesty, integrity and disciplined intensity to help others learn, grow and perform (39-49). Out of these premises Hargrove promotes three coaching models for the business situation. In his opinion when there is an emergency or the coach needs to give advice, the coach must take on the mantle of the 'doctor' or 'expert' to move others quickly to take necessary action (35). This struck me to be more aligned with consultancy than coaching, however Hargrove promotes that we cross these lines.

His second model called the 'guru' or 'catalyst', uses what the Buddhists call 'crazy wisdom' to inspire and jolt others out of preconceived ideas and old habits. The 'guru' is someone who is "colourful, dramatic, humorous, shocking and wise" (16). The coachee is inspired by the guru to personally transform or reinvent themselves. Tools such as reframing perceptions and role play are used in the guru approach. The third model is the 'learning enzyme' coach (34-36). This model is usually used in the group setting, where the coach negotiates values and shares practice tools to enable collaborative conversations within groups. These conversations help the group or team to create a shared vision/purpose based on what they deeply care about. Individuals are helped to question and reframe their assumptions with the intent of impacting on their ability to perform. My response to Hargrove's coaching models is that each coach probably fits naturally into one of these roles more easily than the others. However, Hargrove suggests to me that within the business environment one needs to be able to move between all three models.

Hargrove provides a selection of valuable tools for transforming groups or teams. Firstly he suggests creating governing values and rules with the group to assist with building a shared vision and also to foster internal commitment to the goals or learning. A commitment is undertaken by the coach to provide valid information, illustrate assessments with examples, and providing free and informed choices. Next, Hargrove works to unearth what people care deeply about. He uses this information as the motivator to frame his invitation to them to participate in stretch goals (97). The next inquiry is around closing the gap between formal policy and the actual 'unwritten rules' that everyone works under (105). It is necessary for the coach to also find out who the enablers are (those who can give coachees what they need), and what the triggers are (the conditions that will trigger the enabler to either grant a reward or penalty) (105-116).

Hargrove advocates setting 'stretch' goals. These very ambitious goals are proven to lead to higher levels of accomplishment. He even suggests setting (what can seem like) *impossible* short-term goals which, through urgency, force the team to break out from old habits and traditions of thinking. He provides examples of this technique used successfully within industry to create incredible breakthroughs and creations. By intentionally creating a major gap between the stretch goal and the current knowledge and resources available, a 'creative tension' is caused which has been proven to mobilise people to action (85-95).

By designing a theory of action with the group using mental maps (160,183), and questioning their assumptions and standard practices, openings for action are created. Questions such as: "What are the crazy things to do?" are used as an antidote to over-rationalization. If participants seem overwhelmed Hargrove asks "What is the most simple and logical thing to do?" The use of small, well placed actions can make big differences. Short term urgent goals which encourage immediate experimentation and reflection, using the PDAC cycle (Plan, Do, Act, Check) are regarded as the most motivating. In industry, during this process people have also found revolutionary new theories. It is important to stretch rather than fit the goals to current resources. As the group tries out its new actions, and practises what they have learnt, the coach observes breakdowns, provides feedback and teaches new skills and capabilities to overcome these breakdowns (117-128).

To transform leaders of teams, Hargrove suggests four useful exercises. First they are asked to reflect on any gaps between what they 'preach' and what they 'practice' which may impede the sharing of goals and visions with their team. Second they are asked to video themselves at a meeting and reflect on their behavior. Third, they focus on practicing one new skill each week. Finally, they are asked to keep a reflective journal to monitor progress (136-138).

Teams undergo community building whereby they are asked to observe their own thinking and behaviour during group sessions. The idea is to learn to reflect rather than to react. Team members are asked to write a short case study. These are used to develop missing skills and to teach team reflection and inquiry. Protocols are set up to contain the feedback. The book provides a list of questions for empathetic listening, for testing assumptions, and diagnostic probing. Hargrove gives team members a list of questions related to how open they are to being influenced by others. Another set of questions are included regarding patterns they fall into when advocating their own position and, when faced with a point of view with which they disagree, a self-assessment of how

effective their listening is. Hargrove uses 'hotseating'⁴ to practice giving constructive feedback and promote honesty between team members (140-145).

According to Hargrove it is the coach's job to make accurate assessments, by bringing insight and rigorous reasoning to the coachees' observations. The coach helps others to see the difference between their intentions and what they are thinking or their actions. The coach needs to challenge illusions and self-deception that are usually caused by defensive thinking or behaviour. The coach works to resolve relationship difficulties, by recognising and dispersing defensive routines (143-144,243-257). Hargrove advocates interviewing the group members to gain insight regarding what they want, what is working for them, and what is not. He suggests listening for frames of reference and determining where behaviour is inconsistent with stated values (184-189).

The following are exercises I have applied to date with individual clients. So far this year I have not been working with adult teams but will look forward to applying more of Hargrove's methods when I do.

Hargrove says it is important for coachees to be able to state the problem they are trying to solve in one sentence. If the problem can't be defined like this, they don't understand enough about their subject. I have found this valuable for myself personally, and have used it for an individual coaching situation where the coachee wanted to get into problem solving too soon. When asked to state the problem in this way, she realised she needed to inquire more before trying to solve a problem that was a) unclear, and b) may not even be the correct problem to solve!

Hargrove's recommendation to use metaphors and analogies (202) to link similar and dissimilar ideas resulted in an 'aha' experience for this same client who had great difficulty seeing a situation from a fresh perspective. I will try and use this technique more as it appears to speak to people on a different level when they are stuck.

The chapter on identifying and reframing 'rut stories' is very practical and easy to apply. 'Rut stories' (victim or negative psychological assessments based on illusions or defensive reasoning) are converted to 'river stories' which are born out of a commitment to learn and grow, empower and transform. Classic rut stories include: 'I need others approval' and 'I am afraid to lose what I have'.

4 Hotseating is when a team member sits facing the group. The group is asked to each say one thing they appreciate about the person, something they have difficulty with (or else "A next step for you could be..."), and finally "one thing I want to create with you is....."

The 'artful victim' story is where all responsibility is placed on others and the 'tranquilizing story' is full of excuses so as to avoid seeing one's own incompetence. The 'why bother' story speaks for itself! (63-72). I have used this process with an individual client who had an 'artful victim' story, to help her turn her story around. After converting her rut story to a river story, we used another of Hargrove's techniques for transforming results through getting the coachee to identify where they were stuck or ineffective. By asking for the coachee's assessment and considering the strategy behind the action, the coachee was encouraged to reveal the error in her strategy and consider how she needed to be, act and think differently (75-81). This successfully moved the coachee into a problem solving mode.

Hargrove's work on eliminating defensive routines is a very detailed and useful set of tools. I used his 'Ladder of Inference'⁵ (78,250-252) with a current coaching client, a woman who is having difficulties with colleagues at work. Through using this tool she found she may have misinterpreted others and at our last meeting was going to test her assumptions. This tool can also be used very effectively for advocating views by selecting and explaining steps in the reasoning process. In a team situation it can also be used to discover how others move up and down their own ladder of inference. Hargrove's chapter on 'Advocacy and Inquiry' (251-253) shows how 'The Ladder of Inference' can also be used to help people examine defensive behaviour and thinking, as well as to surface and test assumptions.

I also found 'The Left Hand Column' developed by Chris Argyris (249-250), very useful. In the right hand column the coachee writes what was actually said in a given situation. In the left hand column they write what they were thinking and feeling but didn't actually say. I used this for my client to observe the gap between what she says and how she feels. The left hand column displays the reasoning process that people use to lead to actions. We are now looking at techniques for this client to allow dialogue which she feels is both appropriate and honest. 'Discussing the Undiscussable' (256-257) showed a way for my client to address a challenging topic with her boss. Hargrove advocates being honest about difficult feelings e.g: "You are my boss and it is difficult for me to bring this up," followed by making a statement and inviting questions or disagreements to keep the approach balanced and reasonable. By being specific in the use of examples of behaviour the undiscussable can be discussed rationally, professionally and calmly.

5 'The Ladder of Inference' is a tool which helps people with differing views to build common understanding by both reversing and externalising their thinking processes. It can also be used to diagnose and question an individual's journey from observable data to assumptions, conclusions, beliefs and action.

Hargrove's tools and methods for building collaborative conversations (209-227) are detailed and useful and he gives many examples of questions to be used for different challenges. Some of Hargrove's question lists could be handed out e.g. his ground rules for conversations (221) I believe should be given to all team members to discuss as a starting point before engaging in group work. Due to the nature of my current groups (one day workshops with 12-14 year olds in 22 schools), the given objectives and time limits, it has been impractical to apply many of Hargrove's methods. However in setting up the workshops I use some of his collaborative work, particularly when getting the children to create their own governing rules and values for the day. I have also used some of Bob Putnam's method for dispursing defensiveness, i.e. bypassing, naming or engaging the defensive routine (245-247).

Hargrove's discussion of the different styles of coach (35-49) has led me to be much more accepting and relaxed about my own style which tends to fall into the guru category. Whereas I would previously tone myself down I now accept my natural style of coaching and enjoy allowing myself the freedom of my unique approach and personality. As a drama practitioner it is interesting to me that Robert Hargrove advocates many tools that are used regularly within acting/drama workshops e.g. role plays (38), hotseating (144) and physical balancing exercises for dealing with dilemmas (138). Inquiry into the 'subtext' of what people say and unearthing the 'Master Program' (124,238) is a similar process actors use to unearth objectives and superobjectives of a character.

I think the knowledge in this book is very valuable. I have found the tools of identifying and transforming 'rut' stories, the 'Ladder of Inference' and the 'Left Hand Column' exercises particularly useful and powerful for individual coaching. The three exercises work well together to untangle defensive thinking and I look forward to applying them when coaching teams. I have not covered or used all of Hargrove's ideas by any means. Other chapters not mentioned such as The 'Controlled Burn', 'Zest Factors', and 'Questioning the Sacred Cow' are all techniques I hope to apply to groups in the near future. I look forward to using his exercises particularly for breaking down defensive communication and creating collaborative dialogue in groups.

Hargrove, Robert. Masterful Coaching: Extraordinary Results by Impacting People and the Way They Think and Work Together. California: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 1995.

