

HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS

helping

Coaching with Compassion for

people

Lifelong Learning and Growth

change

Richard Boyatzis | Melvin Smith | Ellen Van Oosten

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CHAPTER 1

the heart of helping

*how to really help others
learn and grow*

After tying off the final sutures, Greg Lakin thanked the operating room staff for another job well done. He removed his surgical mask and felt pleased that the procedure had gone well. Yet at the same time, he noticed that the joy he used to experience in his work as a plastic surgeon just wasn't there. He wondered: *When—and how—did I lose that excitement?*

He decided to get some help from a coach. An overachiever since childhood, Greg had attained one success after another on the road to becoming a surgeon. When he began working with a coach, he shared that this drive for success was partially fueled by the feeling that he needed to constantly prove himself. In the process, however, Greg had lost sight of his true passions and life aspirations. For instance, he wished to have a more balanced life with time for

travel and getting back to his running. He also expressed a desire to get back to South Florida, where he had grown up, so he could be closer to his family and childhood friends. Yet his current path had him working seventy to eighty hours a week, leaving little time for the other things he cared about.

Picking up on these things, Greg's coach asked him to spend time reflecting on and articulating the details of his personal vision—and to try to separate his heartfelt desires from the *shoulds* and *oughts* in his life. As he gave himself permission to do that, a light switched on. Greg discovered what he really wanted, and he experienced the positive energy and motivation that comes from such clarity. Working closely with his coach, Greg began to change his life in ways he couldn't have imagined just a few months before. We'll look at Greg's story in depth in chapter 2, but for now we will say that his life, both personally and professionally, has changed for the better in significantly meaningful ways.

how to really help others

Because Greg decided to fully explore his *personal vision* and then actively pursue it, he eventually achieved the work-life balance and closeness with family and friends he desired. And he rediscovered joy in his life. When it comes to coaching other people, our research shows that excavating and articulating an individual's personal vision is crucial. More than resolving immediate problems and more than trying to help someone achieve a set of prescribed goals or meet certain standards, uncovering a person's hopes and dreams is the key that unlocks positive emotions and intrinsic motivation—and propels that person to genuine, lasting change.

But guiding others to achieve their hearts' desires isn't just for coaches. Everywhere you look, you see examples of people helping other people to learn or change. In fact, when asked about the people who influenced us most in life, many of us think first about our parents, athletic coaches, or teachers—perhaps a teacher like Kyle Schwartz.

When Kyle began teaching third grade, she suspected there was more to know about her students than what their enrollment data forms or their standardized test scores revealed. To be a truly effective teacher, she decided, she'd somehow have to learn what her students were thinking about—what mattered to *them*.¹ She asked them to complete the following sentence: “I wish my teacher knew . . .”

Here's what Kyle learned:

“I wish my teacher knew my reading log is not signed because my mom is not around a lot.”

“I wish my teacher knew I love animals and I would do anything for animals. I would love to work at the MSPCA so I could help animals get adopted.”

“I wish my teacher knew that my family and I live in a shelter.”²

The list goes on, each answer more moving and revealing than the last. To say the least, the students' words triggered Kyle's compassion. Even more, they gave her the information she needed to help them as their teacher. Now she knew what mattered most to the kids—and it had little to do with the standard daily lesson plans found in third-grade classrooms.

Kyle's question to her students has gone viral on the Twitter-sphere, and it's making its way into primary-school classrooms around the world. Clearly, people are hungry to find effective ways to understand and help other people. Her question is simple, yet it isn't often asked by people who presumably want to help others. As teachers, managers, colleagues, parents, and coaches of all kinds, we become preoccupied with our tasks and agendas and forget to ask such basic, revealing questions—questions that will tell us something important about the people we want to help. Or perhaps we don't ask such questions because we're afraid of the answers and what issues and emotions might surface. It's sometimes easier to ignore or deny them, to stay closed off to our awareness

or sensitivity to another person. We simply proceed, undeterred by people's needs and wishes outside the scope of our schedule or lesson plan.

And yet, as Greg Lakin's story illustrated, those "distractions"—people's hurts and sorrows, their dreams and most heartfelt wishes—nevertheless remain. They still affect our students, clients, patients, subordinates, peers, and children on the deepest levels, the level on which true learning and change occurs. In response to her question, the students in Kyle Schwartz's classroom told her not only what was troubling them; they also told her their aspirations and visions for themselves.

As we see it, that is how Kyle tapped into the possibility of growth and transformation for those children. Rather than placing the focus on *herself* as the teacher and what she needed to teach her third-graders, she focused on the students, the *learners*. This enabled her to build better and more meaningful relationships with and among the students. She was able to build a community with a common or shared purpose of listening and caring for each other.

The two stories we've just shared emerged from very different contexts. But they are both about helping others to learn, grow, and change, and that is the focus of this book. The fact is that everyone needs help, not only third-grade children and not only surgeons at an impasse in their careers. We all need help to make important changes in our lives and work and to learn new things.

This book will show you how to help others more effectively. Note that, although our focus as authors, researchers, and educators happens to be on the coaching profession (executive, career, life, team and peer coaching), we intend this book for many different audiences. That is, anyone who wishes to help people—managers, mentors, counselors, therapists, clerics, teachers, parents, athletic coaches, colleagues, friends—will find an important guide here, including a number of practical exercises to develop your helping skills.

Specifically, we'll describe in this book what our research has shown helps people most profoundly and sustainably. That is, as Greg Lakin and Kyle Schwartz learned, the best way to help other

people to learn, grow, and change is by helping them move closer to their ideal self—their dreams and vision of their ideal future.

coaching with compassion

We've based this book on the premise that, when done effectively, coaching and helping of all kinds create three specific changes in people seeking help. First, they will find or reaffirm and articulate their personal vision, including dreams, passion, purpose, and values. Second, they will experience changes in behavior, thoughts, and/or feelings that will move them closer to realizing their personal vision. And third, they will build or maintain what we call a *resonant relationship* with the coach or helper and ideally with other supportive people in their lives.

But how do we get there? How do we go from having a good intention to help someone to actually fulfilling the promise of the three kinds of changes we've just named? It isn't always an intuitive or obvious process. Often, when we try to help people, we focus on correcting a problem. After all, we are often more experienced and can see what the person *should do* to lead a better life, be more productive, or learn more. We know what is good for them. Or we see ourselves in the person or situation, and we project what we once did, or would do, onto the other person. Sometimes people come to us seeking a solution to a problem. As helpers, we hear those people asking for symptom relief, so we work with them on something far short of their deeper desires and needs.

That is a mistake. In our attempt to coach a person seeking help, most of us naturally take a problem-centered approach, focusing on the gaps between where they are and where we think they should or could be. We are trying to *fix* them. This does not work well, if at all, to motivate sustained learning, change, or adaptation. It might, at times, lead to quick corrective action. But when people do respond, they often do so out of a sense of obligation and lack the inner motivation needed to manifest the change they desire. Or they feel the need to do something, even if it is not a sustainable

solution. *That* is the key: Is the effort sustainable? Will it last? Does the person have the deep commitment needed to continue the effort toward change or learning?

Of course, there are times when people have some serious problems they must resolve. But our research tells us that when the context is a gap or a shortfall that needs addressing, the energy and effort needed to sustain change is typically absent. Conversely, when the context is a long-term dream or vision, people draw energy from that vision and are able to sustain their effort to change, even through difficult times.

When a coach or other type of helper is able to craft such a context, we call this *coaching with compassion*—that is, coaching with a genuine sense of caring and concern, focusing on the other person, providing support and encouragement, and facilitating the discovery and pursuit of that person's dreams and passions. That is what Kyle Schwartz did when she reached out to her students and asked what they wanted to *tell her*. In this book, we contrast that approach with what we describe as *coaching for compliance*—where, rather than helping someone articulate and fulfill a desired future, the coach attempts to facilitate the person's movement toward some externally defined objective. Today, coaching for compliance is the default approach in many kinds of helping, from athletic coaching to teaching to parenting to the doctor-patient relationship. This is especially the case in business coaching and all too often for executive coaching, where a coach is hired explicitly to guide the executive or employee to meet specific criteria for success within the organization.

In certain situations, coaching for compliance can be effective in helping someone achieve a very specific and predetermined goal, such as earning a promotion to a certain role. But our research shows such coaching rarely leads to sustained change in individuals, nor does it help them strive toward their full potential, let alone achieve it. Coaching with compassion, on the other hand, does just that. It helps people discover the ways that they would most like to grow and change in their lives and provides them with a process and support to make and sustain those changes. One of our

students put it this way: “All those that were important figures in my life planted seeds of inspiration and ideas and then allowed me the freedom to take that in directions that worked best for me, all the while supporting and encouraging my choices.”

We contend that this is what great coaches do. Great coaches and the best teachers, managers, colleagues, and friends engage us in conversations that inspire us. They make us want to grow, develop, and change in meaningful ways, and they help us to do so. They help us pursue a personal vision rather than merely to dutifully fulfill a life of *shoulds* and *oughts*.

the research: why coaching with compassion works

To make changes stick, our research shows that it has to be intentional and internally motivated rather than imposed from the outside. That’s why coaching with compassion starts with a person articulating his *ideal self* or vision for himself—as Greg Lakin did when he realized he wanted a more balanced life, connected with his family and old friends. This anchored Greg, both psychologically and emotionally, in what we call a *positive emotional attractor* (PEA) that opened him up to possibilities and the excitement that can come with change. In the chapters to come, we will contrast the PEA with the negative emotional attractor (NEA)—usually triggered by *shoulds* or outside mandates—and show how the one helps and the other inhibits the process of lasting change.

Nevertheless, both the PEA and NEA are needed for growth—it’s just a matter of getting the “dosage” and sequence right in order to be effective rather than inhibiting. In this book, we also will explain how the PEA acts as a tipping point that helps a person move from one step to another in an important developmental process guided by *Intentional Change Theory* (ICT), which we will explain in chapter 3. We will also share here many other findings from our research. We’ll talk about how the coaching process should always begin with an individual’s personal vision, and how

the coaching process itself needs to be holistic, encompassing the individual's life as a whole—not just a few discrete aspects.

An important note: We believe that in order for coaches or anyone to help another person, they must first feel inspired. Without recognizing our own motivations and feelings, we can do little to truly connect with another person in a helpful way. That is, coaches—be they teachers, parents, doctors, nurses, clerics, or professional executive coaches—should understand their own emotions and develop a personal vision. That is the basis for an authentic relationship between the helper and person being helped or coached. Therefore, we intend the exercises included throughout this book not only for the coachee but also for the coach.

Everything we are writing about is based on in-depth research that we have conducted personally—individually and as a team—over the past fifty years. That is part of what sets this book apart from many other books on helping, management, leadership or coaching: it is based on evidence. The research began in 1967, with studies on how adults helped each other develop or didn't. Longitudinal research (i.e., tracking people over time) about behavior change in arenas from management to addiction was completed in companies, government agencies, nonprofits, graduate school programs, and hospitals around the world. This research was followed by almost twenty years of hormonal and neuroimaging studies. We cite our own research as well as studies completed by our doctoral students and those of colleagues. In addition, we are each coaches and educators, so our stories draw on our own personal and professional coaching experiences.

As researchers and authors, the three of us work closely together at Case Western University, and we teach together in our Coach Certificate Program at the Weatherhead School of Management. Moreover, together we have launched several coaching initiatives. The Coaching Research Lab (CRL) was formed in 2014. The CRL brings together scholars and practitioners to advance coaching research. Our massive, open, online course (MOOC), “Conversations That Inspire: Coaching Learning, Leadership, and Change,” was started in 2015. The course focuses on a compassion-based

approach to coaching and has attracted more than 140,000 participants. An earlier MOOC on inspiring leadership through emotional intelligence that introduced many of these ideas has attracted more than 800,000 participants from more than 215 countries.

Our studies make the case clearly—specifically, the behavioral, hormonal, and neuroimaging studies show the differential impact of coaching others around their dreams and vision (coaching with compassion) versus coaching them around some externally defined objective (coaching for compliance). Further, we've seen in our own students how effective coaching with compassion can be. Such coaching, in conjunction with a four-month-long leadership development course, has resulted in significant improvements, as observed by others, in the emotional and social intelligence competencies the students chose to develop to support their personal visions. Together, these provide a sound, scientific foundation for the development of *how* to effectively coach and help others manifest sustained, desired change.

a guide to this book

As you read this book, you'll delve further into each of the topics explored in this introductory chapter, gleaning insight and practical skills along the way to help you most effectively coach or help others in most contexts. Throughout the book, we highlight specific takeaways (*key learning points*), relevant research studies (*research spotlights*), and provide references and more detail in the endnotes. For the practical reader, we offer specific, time-tested exercises at the end of most chapters (*reflection and application exercises*). We want to promote reflection as active and emotional learning, not just knowledge. We also provide conversation guides at the end of most chapters, which include questions about these topics to mull over with friends and colleagues. The benefits of the book come in part from personally reflecting on the ideas and techniques and, as our neuroimaging studies have shown, talking about these reflections and experiences with others. Discussing ideas with others is what makes them come alive in a more

accessible way. The conversation guides are a useful way to make that happen. Although we hope we've written this book in such a way that you'll enjoy reading it from cover to cover, you can also use it as a reference guide by going straight to certain chapters or to the key learning points, exercises, and the other items highlighted throughout.

Briefly, the book unfolds as follows: Chapter 2 explores the uses and definitions of coaching and other ways that people help one another. As the examples we offer from real coaching cases illustrate, at the heart of any such helping process is a set of experiences within the relationship between the person being helped and the helper. Chapter 3 delves more deeply into how to coach with compassion versus coaching for compliance. Our approach begins with the realization that people can change when they want to change. We then describe the five discoveries in Intentional Change Theory as the model of sustained, desired change.

In chapter 4, we discuss what we've learned from recent brain science studies that can enable us to help others more sustainably. Specifically, we focus on how to arouse positive versus negative emotional attractors (PEA and NEA, respectively) in our brains to create a more receptive and motivated emotional state. Chapter 5 takes a deeper dive into the science of PEA and NEA, illustrating that while we need the negative emotional attractor to survive, it is the positive emotional attractor that allows people to thrive and flourish. We discuss how to effectively invoke the positive and create the proper balance between it and the negative, thereby initiating growth and change that lasts.

In chapter 6, we explore the personal vision in depth. Our research shows that discovery and development of such a vision is the neurologically and emotionally most powerful way to engage the positive emotional attractor. A person's vision is her image of a possible future. It is neither goals nor strategy. It is not a forecast of what is likely. It is a dream!

With chapter 7, we begin to focus on how to build resonant relationships and learn to ask the right questions of one another—while listening to the answers—to evoke learning and change.

Both style and timing of questions can inspire the PEA and change, or the opposite. Missing key moments and getting questions out of sequence can turn a possibly motivating conversation into a guilt-inducing grilling. Chapter 8 explores how organizations can foster a culture of coaching by changing company norms, for example: (1) encouraging peer coaching; (2) using external and internal professional coaches; and (3) developing managers to be coaches for their units as well as other areas.

In chapter 9, we illustrate how to take advantage of moments in which a person is ready to be helped, what we call *coachable moments*, and we provide a practical guide for creating a safe space for reflection and openness. The chapter also examines some typical “tough” cases in coaching and demonstrates how the techniques of coaching with compassion can help. Finally, with chapter 10, we end the book with an inspirational appeal, returning you to an exercise first offered in chapter 2, in which we asked you to reflect on who helped you become who you are. After reading the book and learning ways to help others develop, we ask, “Whose list will *you* be on?” After all, connecting with others as they pursue their dreams can be the greatest and most enduring gift in life. It is our legacy!

a message of hope

With this book, then, we present a message of hope. The way to engage and inspire people to learn and change in sustained ways is not difficult, although it may seem counterintuitive at times. We discuss how to stimulate a person to explore new ideas in the context of his dreams and personal vision while on the way to solving specific problems. We will explore what effective coaches and helpers do to help individuals make sustained, desired change in their lives. We will examine not only an approach for effective helping and coaching, but also what it looks like and, perhaps more importantly, what it *feels* like to be engaged in a meaningful coaching relationship from the perspective of both the coach and the person

being coached. That's why we use the word *coach* in this book as an approach and a way of *being* more than a title one holds or role that one fulfills.

We believe the ideas and practices in this book will help change the way coaches, leaders, managers, counselors, therapists, teachers, parents, clerics, doctors, nurses, dentists, social workers, and others approach conversations with their clients or patients or students. What's more, we want to inspire more research about coaching and helping. We want to encourage tweaking or modification of the hundreds of coach and manager training programs, medical and nursing education, and any other program aimed at developing individuals in the helping professions to teach a different way to inspire learning and change.

Perhaps most of all, in these recent times of polarized conversation in so many areas of our lives, we want to help people develop the skills to listen with empathy to one another. We want people to be open to learn from one another. We hope we can help people expand their focus outside of themselves and be open to new ideas. By focusing on others and truly helping them, we can build toward a better future in our families, teams, organizations, and communities. With this book, we offer a way to tap into people's desires to learn and change, to motivate themselves and others, and to lead in more compassionate ways.

So let us begin.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Smith is a Board Certified Coach (BCC) and a highly sought-after speaker. He regularly provides training and education services to numerous US organizations in addition to working with executives in Canada, Dubai, India, New Zealand, Scotland, Spain, and Trinidad.

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Oosten has published scholarly and practitioner articles that cover topics such as coaching for change, coaching outcomes, leadership vision, and leadership development in organizations. Her work has been published in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, *Frontiers in Psychology*, the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, *Journal of Management Development*, *Leadership Excellence*, and *Organizational Dynamics*.

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