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The easiest kind of relationship for me is with ten thousand people. The hardest is with one.

Joan Baez,
American singer
(1941–)

Personal coaching, one-on-ones, and pair working are three examples of people helping employees and colleagues learn how to do better work. By using inquisitive statements instead of traditional coaching questions, you can catalyze a person's performance using principles taken from Appreciative Inquiry, Powerful Questions, and Improvisational Theater.



For five years, Raoul had been going on and on (and on) about his desire to live healthier, to eat better food, and to start a personal fitness program. Nothing ever happened. My standard reply, from behind a computer or business book, was that simply saying something a thousand times would never make it a reality. However, two years have passed since the last time I offered my smart insight, and I am now looking at someone who primarily eats chicken, rice, and veggies, who runs and exercises almost every day, and whose arms and legs have been morphing slowly from twigs into trunks. What has changed?

Well, that's an easy one. He now has someone who gives him personal dietary instructions and training schedules, who follows up with feedback on the progress he makes, and who cares deeply about his crunches and calories. Not me, of course. Two years ago, Raoul started working with a personal trainer.



Autocatalysis

The complexity science book that has fascinated me most (and the only one I read twice) was *At Home in the Universe* by theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman. In this book, he describes the concept of **autocatalytic sets**.

Imagine a vast number of molecules happily bouncing around in a puddle. Molecules are very social and influential elements. They have a tendency to interact with each other: participating in reactions, creating bonds, sometimes transforming themselves, and sometimes merely catalyzing the transformation of their friends. Newly formed molecules can be just as interactive and productive as the ones that formed them, even contributing to the re-creation of their own predecessors. It is like a circle—old molecules create new molecules, which then create the old molecules, which then create new molecules, and so on. This is autocatalysis. We can imagine the puddle to be full of molecules catalyzing each other's production. When this is the case, the puddle of molecules is said to be **self-catalyzing**. It is a “self-contained cycle of chemical creation”. [MIT Technology Review, “The Single Theory That Could Explain Emergence”]

When connectivity and diversity are increased in a network of interacting parts that have a tendency to support each other's production, the formation of an autocatalytic set is almost inevitable. [Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe*] It leads to a self-sustaining network that has no need of anything but itself (and a little energy from outside). There is even empirical support for the idea that life itself is the outcome of very creative self-catalyzing molecules. [MIT Technology Review, “The Single Theory That Could Explain Emergence”] Yes, it seems the poodle emerged from a puddle.

Employees can play the role of a catalyst for others, helping them to do better work and enhance their performance.

It's not difficult to see how this insight applies to organizations. Employees can play the role of a catalyst for others, helping them to do better work and enhance their performance. [Appelo, *Management 3.0* loc:5399] With more diversity and better connectivity of people, heterogeneity increases, and an increased number of creative networkers can catalyze the work of others. This can go on until everyone's work in the organization is catalyzed by at least one other person. Autocatalytic sets are merely the mathematical description of groups in which all participants reinforce and accelerate each other's productivity.

Few things leaders can do are more important than encouraging helping behavior within their organizations. In the top-performing companies, it is a norm that colleagues support one another's efforts to do the best work possible.

Amabile, Fisher and Pillemer,
“IDEO's Culture of Helping”

Many people see Stuart Kauffman as one of the fathers of complexity science. But maybe someday he will also be seen as a thought leader of organizational transformation.



Personal Coaching

Now, let's get back to Raoul and his personal trainer. Many experts consider **personal coaching**  to be one of the most important organizational practices available. [Rother, *Toyota Kata* loc:2473] The purpose of a coach is to assist with someone's personal development and performance improvement and to help that person achieve her goals. [Pavlina, "Life Coaching"] When every person in your organization is coached by someone else, you have achieved the equivalent of an autocatalytic set. This explains why most experts consider it important to rely primarily on coaches *internal* to an organization, or at least coaches that have a strong and long-term relationship with the organization. [Rother, *Toyota Kata* loc:3447] A self-contained cycle of value creation needs to be built directly into the organization and its dependent ecosystem. Never delegate the responsibility of personal coaching to a short-term contractor!



Several aspects of coaching are important to consider. First of all, no coach can be the single authority on everything that is important for a person. Your fitness trainer is probably not the first person to turn to when you need help with public speaking. And I hope you won't confuse your team coach with a wellness coach. This means that over a long work life, you might benefit from engaging with multiple coaches for different areas of your life as well as using different coaches for the same areas at different times and under different circumstances.

Another thing to consider is that people rarely coach each other. Raoul has a language teacher who teaches him French every second week. The weeks in between, Raoul teaches her Dutch. Such a mutually beneficial coaching relationship is interesting for motivational and financial reasons, but it's not the norm. It is uncommon for two molecules to catalyze each other's chemical reactions. Likewise, it is uncommon for two people to act as each other's personal trainer. More commonly, the catalyzing chain only becomes truly circular, and auto-catalyzing, after there are four, five, or six steps in the network.

This doesn't mean there's nothing for a personal coach to learn when he is supporting an employee. On the contrary! Many say the best way to learn a craft is to teach it. (I'm learning a lot about this topic right now by writing about it.) But the learning for the coach is mainly autodidactic, which is great. Remember Isaac Asimov's statement that self-education is the only kind of education. Those who want to become a master in their craft are best advised to find themselves an eager student or two.

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Last, but not least, trust between a personal coach and a worker is often mentioned as the primary driver of self-development and performance improvement. People must be able to share their desires and fears, their goals and uncertainties, and of course, their dumbest mistakes with their coach in a way that improves rather than inhibits their progress and learning. Personal coaching can, indeed, be very *personal*. [Mantell, “Why and How to Trust Your Personal Trainer”]

Great coaching in an organization is internal, plural, maybe not mutual, but certainly educational, and definitely personal. If all goes well, it might even be recreational.

When and where do we talk?

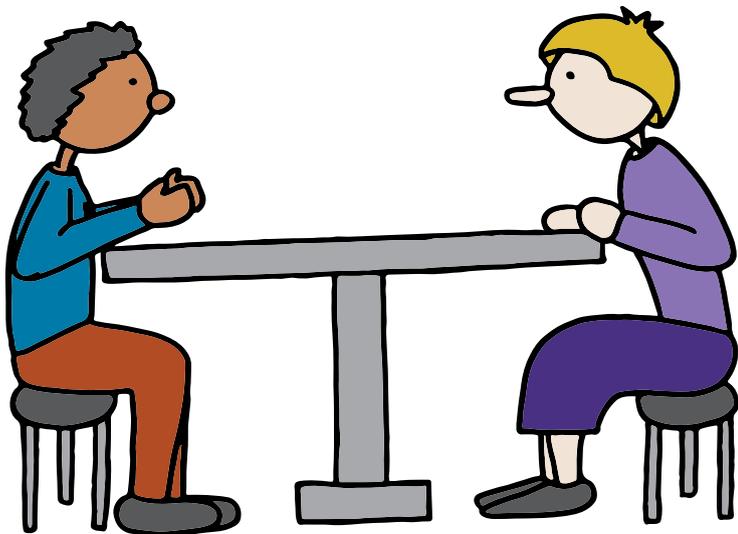
Imagine that your spouse says, “Sweetheart, I think our communication isn’t working out very well. Let’s schedule a regular meeting to talk about our relationship, what’s important to us, and how things are going. How about every Thursday evening at 9 o’clock in the meeting room?”

If something like this happened, chances are you’re not in the best phase of your relationship. Certainly, in a great relationship, people share quality time with each other. But, in my opinion, discussions about what’s important and how things are going can happen over breakfast, while traveling to work, during a walk in the park, over the telephone, or even with Facebook messages. And yes, occasionally, it can happen when sitting together at an office desk in a corporate meeting room. I did that once, just after breaking up with someone.

One-on-Ones

During my travels around the globe, I've noticed that the **one-on-one** , a regularly scheduled private dialogue between a manager and an employee, is possibly the most widely supported management practice in the world. It is usually promoted as a good way for managers to get to know their employees and to help employees perform better and develop themselves. [Haneberg, "How to Have Great One-on-Ones"; Rothman and Derby, *Behind Closed Doors*] Based on what can be gleaned from standard management literature, the purpose of the one-on-one is for a manager to discuss four things:

- Status and progress
- Obstacles and problems
- Career development
- Coaching and feedback



Interestingly enough, despite the fact that many managers agree on the *usefulness* of one-on-ones, few of them actually *organize* these regular private meetings because managers feel the meetings distract them from their “real” work. [McCarthy, “How to Have an Effective 1 on 1”] I’m sure there are some who keep saying that “if only they could find the time” they would certainly schedule one-on-ones with their employees. And they spend five years trying to find that time.

I found some useful requirements for good one-on-one meetings. [Derby, “One-on-Ones with Self-organizing Teams”] First of all, it is said that, one-on-ones should follow a clear schedule. Some authors say weekly, others say monthly, and the rest of the authors can be plotted anywhere in between. I’d say anything between one and four weeks would be fine, depending on the context. Second, the meetings should be adapted to the employee’s needs. There’s no fixed agenda for one-on-ones, and the specific topics depend on the people. [Artner, “One-on-ones”] Third, the meeting should have the two participants’ *full* attention. No phone calls, no checking of e-mails or Facebook, and no watering of the plants during the one-on-one. Fourth, an important requirement for one-on-ones is they shouldn’t give anyone the feeling that the one-on-ones are costing them too much time. In many organizations, *not* doing them would be much worse. [Rothman, “No More Meeting Mutinies”]

This could make you wonder about the difference between personal coaching and one-on-ones. Personal coaching is about a coach helping people do better work and develop themselves and one-on-ones are about a manager helping employees do better work and develop themselves. Does that mean the manager is the employee’s personal coach?

No.

Personal coaching is not a primary task in the manager's role.

Remember that *trust* needs to be at the core of a personal coaching relationship. A person must be able to share any fears, uncertainties, desires, and ambitions with her personal coach. For many people this will be very difficult to do when the other person is their direct manager. How would you tell your manager that you fear he might discover the freelance gig you have on the side? How would you tell your manager that your greatest desire is to have her job? Transparency is a noble goal, but in many organizational cultures, it's a bridge too far. Coaching might be necessary to precede and grow transparency.

I agree with those who say that managers are responsible for making personal coaches available to their employees, but they should not aim to fulfill this role themselves. I am against the idea of “managers as coaches”. My first argument is that managers should manage the *system*, not the *people*. Therefore, personal coaching is not a primary task in the manager's role. [Appelo, *Management 3.0* loc:4754] Management's responsibility is the coaching *capability* of the system, not the day-to-day *implementation* of it. My second argument is that, when the role of the manager is mixed up with the role of the coach, the other employees will also expect to be coached in their one-on-one meetings with their managers. This goes against the idea that *anyone* in an organization should be able to act as another person's coach. My third argument, closely related, is that it strengthens the hierarchy when managers in an organization act as people's coaches. [Appelo, “Managers Should Not Be Coaching Developers”] It reinforces the misguided idea that superiors are more experienced than their subordinates are. In the 21st century, we shouldn't reinforce hierarchies. We should aim for self-catalyzing networks.

It doesn't
scale!

Another reason many managers stop doing one-on-ones in a hierarchical organization is because the practice doesn't scale. When an organization flattens and has fewer people in middle management positions, it is quite difficult for managers to keep organizing one-on-ones with all their direct reports. Scalability is a key objective for many managers, and this is much easier to achieve when the coaching part of one-on-ones is delegated to the network.

This does not mean that managers have no business talking with their employees. Of course they do. But the focus of their conversations should be on the value offered by the person to the system, and the value offered by the system to the person. This value exchange can be boosted considerably by making sure that every person is offered personal coaching. When a manager also wants to play the role of a personal coach, it would be wise of him not to offer this service to his own direct reports, but to employees elsewhere in the organization. That's how you can grow a network, instead of a hierarchy.

Pairing

Besides assistance from coaches or managers, an employee's productivity can also be catalyzed by his peers. **Pair programming**  is the idea that two software developers work together on one piece of code. They have two keyboards, two mice, two monitors, and two brains, but only one computer. While one programmer acts as the "driver" (typing code on the keyboard), his buddy acts as the "navigator" (checking results and thinking of new ideas). These roles are not fixed because pairs regularly switch, passing control of the computer back and forth. Programmers are not unique in applying this practice. Two people collaborating while working toward one goal is an idea we also find among firefighters, rally racers, scuba divers, airplane pilots, Boy Scouts, and in plenty of other disciplines. [Jones, "High Cost and Negative Value of Pair Programming"; Thawar, "Pair Programming Considered Extremely Beneficial"]



Pairing is about “peering”

I admit that teaching, in the relationship between an employee and his coach, *can* go both ways. And, in a one-on-one meeting, it is possible that both the employee and the manager get feedback from the other. [Rothman, “No More Meeting Mutinies”] However, it is not the norm. I could teach my yoga master a thing or two about blogging, but that is not the aim of our working relationship. Likewise, I’m sure you can give your manager a few tips about managing people, but that doesn’t make you her coach.

Pair working is different. Pairing is about learning between *peers*. The focus here is clearly on the progress of *both* participants. It’s about looking intently at what the other is doing, learning from it, contributing to it, and improving it. Pairing is about peering into each other’s work.

We can easily see a number of benefits of pairing. It is the fastest way to learn complex skills (working alongside someone with a bit more experience beats reading manuals). It is a more successful approach to focused work and getting into a “flow” (fewer distractions from emails and social networks). And the outcome is usually of higher quality, with fewer problems and better designs (two brains usually perform better than one). [Hastie, “How Pair Programming Really Works”; Shore, “Pair Programming”] We can also easily understand that an extra pair of eyes is extremely valuable when human lives are at stake.

The benefits of pair working don’t stop there. We have anecdotal evidence that people are better able to solve problems when they think out loud and pose challenging questions. They are also able to compensate for their buddy’s blind spots, exert peer pressure not to apply poor practices, and learn how to produce better estimates. [Hastie, “How Pair Programming Really Works”] Furthermore, people working in pairs are less likely to be interrupted by other colleagues, and they report that they’re having more fun. [Shore, “Pair Programming”]

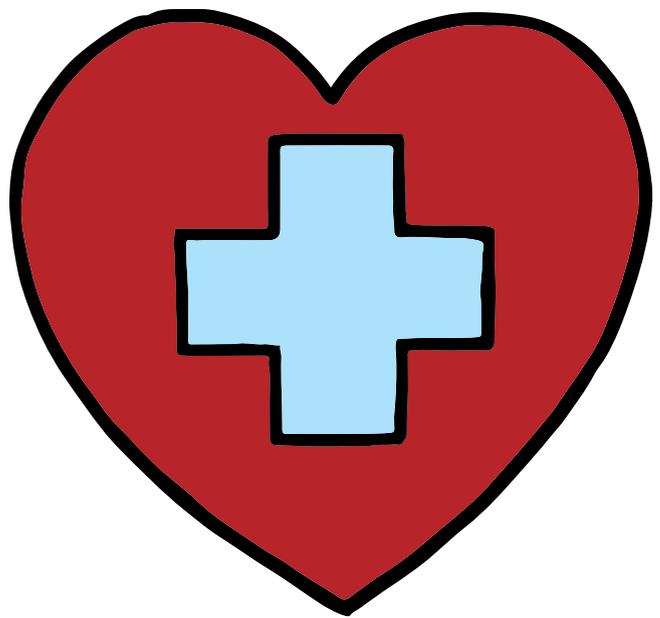
The experts found that pairing is most effective when the problem domain is complex, when the work is not yet fully understood by the workers, and when the tasks require creativity and experimentation by peers. When the problem and solution are well understood by one of the two workers, the pairing session can become a coaching session instead. The navigator/driver arrangement evolves into a master/apprentice relationship. However, when both workers understand the problem and solution well, many benefits of pairing can get lost, and it could be preferable to have the pairing partners work alone instead.

We wouldn’t call the world complex if other experts didn’t offer some contrarian opinions. Some claim that more work gets done when people work alone and that pairing often takes place in noisy open offices that distract people. [Evans, “Pair Programming Considered Harmful?”] Some say that pairing costs a lot more and that quality benefits are merely anecdotal in small areas but not confirmed empirically on a large scale. [Jones, “High Cost and Negative Value of Pair Programming”]

I am sure the experts are both right and wrong, depending on the context. Pair working (sometimes called the “buddy system”, the “two-man rule”, or the “four-eyes principle”) has emerged time and time again in environments where the problem domain is complex and the environment is dangerous. Two complex brains can absorb more complexity than one. Still, I admit that I wrote this text all by myself. I can’t write when there’s someone else looking over my shoulder all the time. The extra eyes and brains of buddies are quite welcome, but later, in the review stage.

Pair working has emerged time and time again in environments where the problem domain is complex and the environment is dangerous.

A **copilot program** (see sidebar) seems like a blend of the three popular practices already mentioned and could be a great way to combine all their benefits. Obviously, there can be a coaching relationship between the pilot and copilot because we can assume the pilot is the more experienced of the two. Their working relationship will certainly include private one-on-one conversations, and the two pilots are doing the same work together as a pair, with one sometimes handing over control of the work to the other, while the first keeps watching. In short, the copilot idea is coaching, managing, and pairing combined into one effective workout exercise program.



Copilots in the office

Ivar Conradi Østhus, a web developer in Norway, shared an interesting example of pair working with me over dinner after a Smidig conference in Oslo. He said he had been a copilot for the CTO of Itera Consulting. This program allowed any employee to be a copilot for a manager in the company for a period of six months. [Rangen, “We Don’t Really Have a Theory for That”]

As a copilot, Ivar was included in management workshops, strategy sessions, and discussions about goals and metrics. He told me the copilot program is a great way to short-circuit traditional hierarchies. Copilots are invited to important meetings, and they are able to influence important strategic decisions before they are made.

Appreciative Inquiry

Now that we've established the importance of catalyzing each other's performance in an organization, it is worth finding out what kind of approach we need as a coach, manager, pairing partner, or copilot. In my research, I was fortunate to find a method that offers great inspiration and is useful when focusing on positive organizational change.

The method of **Appreciative Inquiry** ❤️ states that inquiry is the engine of change, and that traditional problem-solving processes in human systems have a tendency to worsen the problems they are trying to solve. The method states that “objective” inquiries are impossible and that all social analysis is inherently biased by the perspective of the observer. [Bushe, “Foundations of Appreciative Inquiry”]

In Appreciative Inquiry, the idea is to stop focusing on “what is wrong” and instead wonder about “what is possible”. It tells us that people co-create their organizations through stories, and that to improve organizations we must therefore improve our conversations. Appreciative Inquiry states that an *inquiry* into a human system will automatically *change* that system, and it claims that organizations grow in the direction of the questions that people ask each other. (For example, asking a person about her happiness could cause her to feel either happier or unhappier.) Appreciative Inquiry also holds that sustainable change requires a positive attitude and positive relationships.

Organizations grow in the direction of the questions that people ask each other.

Organizations, says AI theory, are centers of human relatedness, first and foremost, and relationships thrive where there is an appreciative eye—when people see the best in one another, when they share their dreams and ultimate concerns in affirming ways.

Cooperrider and Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry* pag:20

The benefits of a positive coaching style, as opposed to a more traditional find-problems-and-fix-them style, are backed up by neuroscience. [Stillman, “How to Be a Better Coach”] Instead of negation, criticism, and dissent, Appreciative Inquiry tries to foster positive change by bringing out the best in people, strengthening the affirmative capability of the organization and building momentum around a shared purpose. [Cooperrider and Whitney, *Appreciative Inquiry*]

For some readers, this should sound familiar. I dedicated a significant part of my first book, *Management 3.0*, to complexity topics, including the observer influencing the system, the problem of vicious feedback cycles, enabling change through storytelling, and seeing organizations as networks of relationships. Though explicit references to complexity science are missing, the articles about Appreciative Inquiry certainly seem to breathe complexity thinking all over. We would do well to consider some of its principles in our efforts to improve our personal coaching, one-on-ones, pair working, and copilot sessions. This means focusing on positive dialogues and tapping into the potential of participants while being aware of the influence of the observer.

Powerful Questions

Given that we should inquire into an organization in a positive way, it would be helpful to know what kind of questions we should ask. To learn more about this, we can turn our attention to the concept of **Powerful Questions**.  [Kimsey-House, House and Sandahl, *Co-Active Coaching*] A powerful question stimulates curiosity and reflection in a conversation: it leads the participants toward creativity, energy, and forward movement; it helps to channel attention and focus; and it has a tendency to invite further questions. My own very first powerful question, satisfying all these criteria, would be, “How can we make our questions more powerful?”

A powerful question stimulates curiosity and reflection in a conversation.

We can make our questions more powerful by using *why*, *how*, and *what* instead of *who*, *when*, *where*, and *which*. The first set of question words invites deeper discussions than the second set. We can keep the scope of our questions realistic and our insights actionable by covering a part of the system that is still within the participants’ circle of influence. And we can modify our questions so that they challenge rather than hide our underlying assumptions.

The effectiveness of the actions we take depends on the quality of the questions we ask.

Vogt, Brown and Isaacs, *The Art of Powerful Questions*

For example, the following question is *not* powerful:

- **Who is responsible for the failures of this organization?**

The question starts with the narrow interrogative *who*, it has a scope that is far too wide (all failures in the whole organization), and it assumes that someone is to blame. Instead, with a few small changes we can make the question more powerful:

- **Why does our team feel that the organization is failing?**

This new question starts with the more powerful *why*; it narrows the scope to what the team is able to deal with (its own attitude); and it challenges the assumption that the organization is failing at all.

By asking questions that are more powerful, an organization is able to engage people’s thinking about complex issues and shift away from lamenting about past problems to inquiring about ideas for a possible future. As creative networkers we have to develop the organization’s capacity to be inquisitive, to learn, to adapt, and to seize opportunities for change. We can do that by creating a climate of discovery, suspending judgment, exploring beliefs, connecting ideas, widening perspectives, honoring contributions, articulating understanding, and sharing collective insights and actions. [Vogt, Brown and Isaacs, *The Art of Powerful Questions*] And by shortening our sentences. :-)



Improvisational Theater

Now that we know our positive inquiry into an organization is best initiated with powerful questions, it is useful to learn a bit more about developing and catalyzing our dialogues. A great analogy for storytelling in working environments is **Improvisational Theater** 🎭 (or **Improv** for short). Improve is a form of theater where little or nothing is planned ahead, and every performer on stage works with whatever is created at the moment.

When actors improvise on stage, the rules of Improv say they should respect whatever the other actors have created, add their own contributions to make things look even better, and adapt in a positive way to any unanticipated developments. In other words, **respect, create, contribute, adapt**. [Christiansen, “Rules for Improv”] There is also a strong focus on offering statements rather than asking questions, because by making your own statements you bring the conversation forward. When you merely ask questions, you’re just being lazy, expecting the other person to do all the work.

It is obvious that improvisation is a primary tool that has helped the human race to survive in changing environments, We’ve been improvising ever since saber-toothed cats developed fangs for possible use as human satay skewers. Improvisation is also exactly what we need in organizations in the 21st century [Fortier, “Improvisation”] and it’s a great analogy for people who want to change their lives. [Madson, *Improv Wisdom*] Furthermore, the rule that every improviser must make the *other actors* look better seems to me yet another example of autocatalysis. We find the same principle within top-performing organizations, such as IDEO, which has concepts such as “make others successful” and “be helpful” among their core values. [Amabile, Fisher and Pillemer, “IDEO’s Culture of Helping”] The mechanism that makes improvisation successful and that allows organizations to be top performers is also the enabler of life itself.

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It is important for us to understand how to improvise in our dialogues and how to catalyze the performance of *other* people in the organization. We can do that by turning powerful questions into powerful statements, by respecting what others have said before, and by contributing with new statements in an affirmative way.

Let us now turn to a practical implementation of what we’ve learned so far from Appreciative Inquiry, Powerful Questions, and Improvisational Theater, and thereby lend a helping hand to coaches, managers, pairing partners, and copilots.

We’ve found some very compelling evidence to suggest that the ethos of support and generosity that is native to improvisation is at the core of our beings. Improvisers are trained specifically to look out for and support their partners and group in order to find success as a whole.

Fortier, “Improvisation: The Original Survivor Tool”

Focus Areas

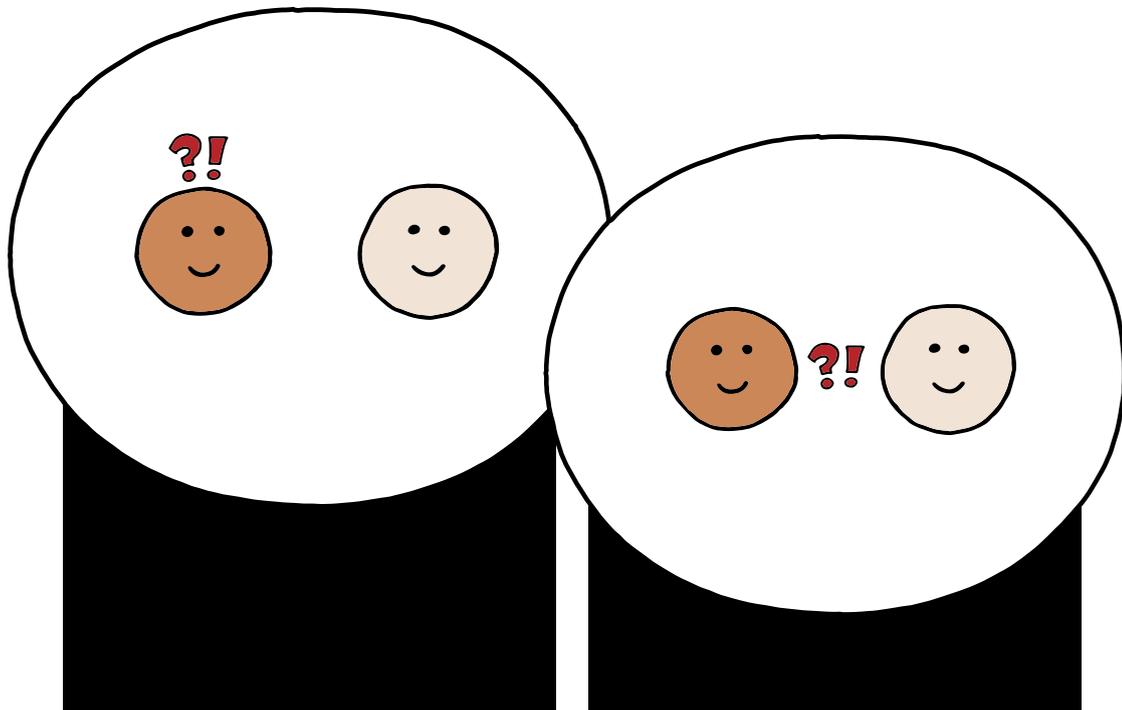
When we are engaged in personal coaching, one-on-ones, pair working, or copilot sessions, we can discuss four areas in order to improve each other's performance: personal topics, relational topics, organizational topics, and environmental topics.

Personal Topics 

One of the goals of one-on-one coaching sessions is to align work and outcomes with a person's motivation. You can use your quality time to discuss intrinsic desires, personality traits, personal history, and personal ambitions. It might sometimes be necessary to address health issues (of body and mind) and any other impediments that could prevent a person from performing to the fullest of her potential.

Relational Topics 

A second area to cover in one-on-one coaching is the relationship between the two participants. It doesn't really matter if the discussion is between a coach and an employee, between a "superior" and a "subordinate", or between two peers on a team. In every case, you're trying to achieve a good working relationship. Therefore, any issues that are impeding a healthy and productive collaboration (dare I say catalyzation?) need to be resolved.



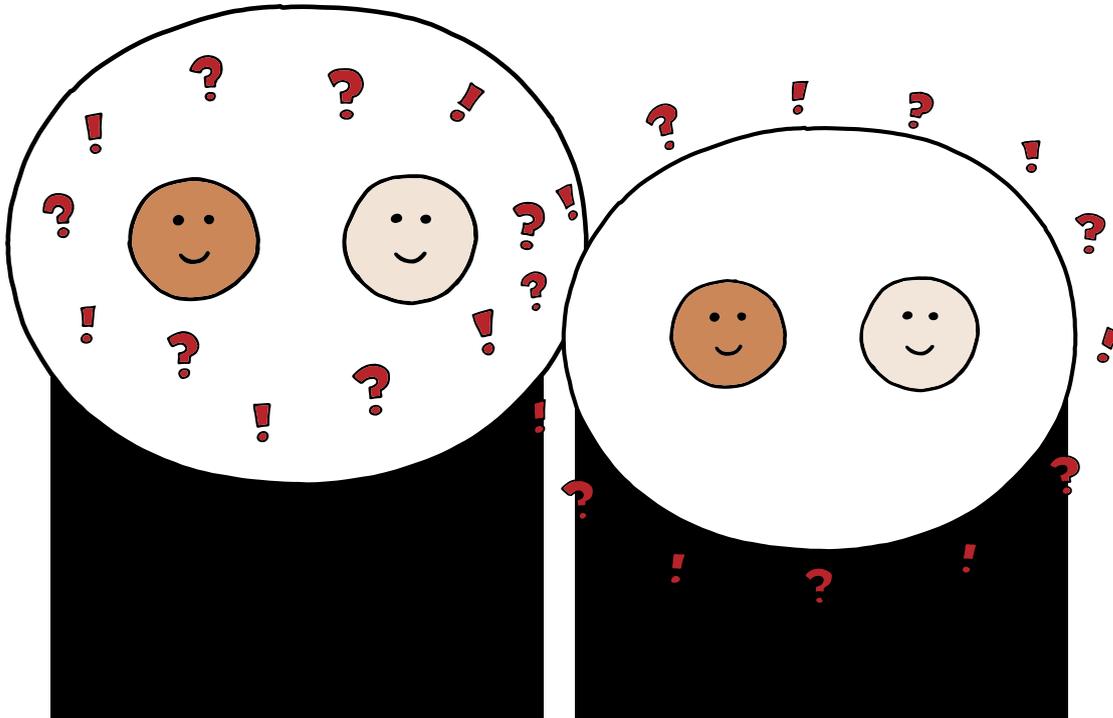
Organizational Topics

You should also talk about organizational changes and news, team performance, organizational structure, upcoming opportunities, innovative capability, and how to help other team members succeed. Everything is allowed as long as you try to focus on the systemic aspects of the organization. Your aim is not to gossip about other people. You're there to discuss how to get the whole system to improve and generate more value.

Environmental Topics

Finally, the last area in one-on-one coaching is a conversation about the environment. What is happening in the world at large? What have competitors and partners done lately? Are there important things going on with customers or communities? And how do these developments influence the way we do our work? You can talk about politics, technology, economy, and anything else that has an impact on the person's performance and productivity.

It may not come as a surprise that the different focus areas for improvement dialogues have a strong correlation to the three principles of Management 3.0 practices mentioned in the introductory chapter. The personal and relational topics will help you engage with people, the organizational topics will help you improve the work, and the environmental topics will help you delight the clients.



Inquisitive Statements

Based on the insights from Appreciative Inquiry, Powerful Questions, and Improvisational Theater, I made a list of *inquisitive statements* for use by coaches, managers, peers, and copilots. The statements I give here were inspired by various useful sources offering questions for coaches and managers. [Bavani, “The Power of Inquiry”; Doddi, “Great Questions to Ask”; Kimsey-House, House and Sandahl, “Powerful Questions”]

I turned questions into statements because this may help us to reduce the influence of the observer. The questions that we ask determine the direction of the change and thus, I believe it is sometimes best *not* to ask questions. Instead, we can pick reflective statements randomly from the list, enabling us to broaden our inquiry and cover a wide area of interesting topics. We should have faith in the uncertainty of the session’s conversational flow and trust that the most inspiring insights will emerge from improvisation rather than interrogation.

There are four areas of inquisitive statements in this list: *personal*, *relational*, *organizational*, and *environmental*. This makes it easy for you to skip an area that is not applicable to your situation and to adjust the scope of the inquiry to what is realistic and actionable. For example, for someone who is privately paying a personal trainer, it makes little sense to discuss organizational and environmental topics.

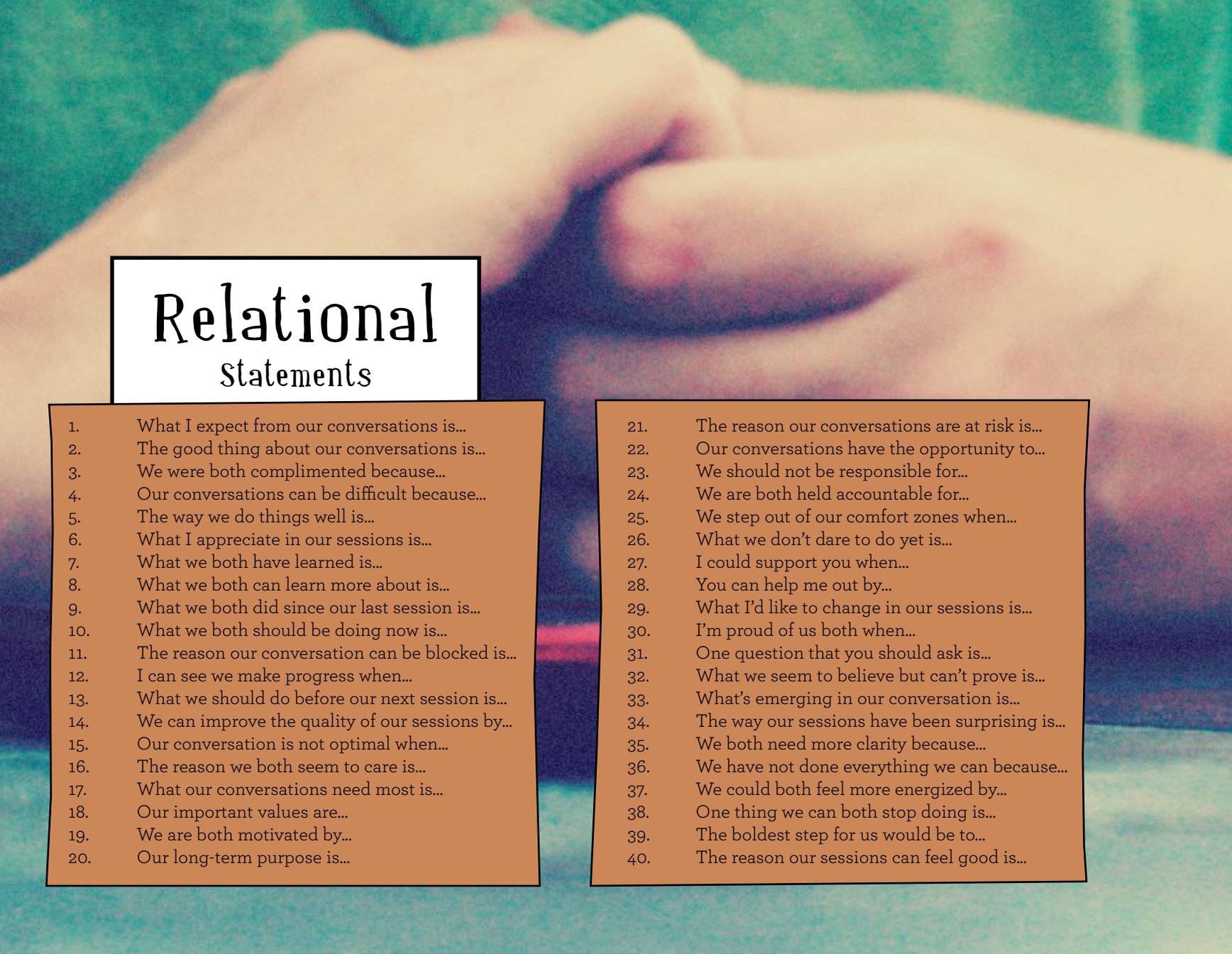
All statements are designed to be powerful by the implicit use of *why*, *how*, *what*, and *when* (hidden within the statements). These question words invite deeper discussions and many of them help people to bring their underlying assumptions to the surface.



Personal Statements

1. What I'm expected to do is...
2. I believe I'm quite good at...
3. I was complimented because...
4. My work can be difficult because...
5. The way my work goes well for me is...
6. What I like about this job is...
7. I learned a lot when...
8. I want to learn more about...
9. What I did since the last time we met is...
10. What I'm working on right now is...
11. The reason I can be blocked is...
12. I can see my progress when...
13. What I will do before the next time we meet is...
14. I can improve the quality of my work by...
15. I cannot be myself when...
16. The reason I care is...
17. What I need most is...
18. My important values are...
19. I am motivated by...
20. My long-term purpose is...

21. The reason I am at risk is...
22. I see the opportunity to...
23. I don't want to feel responsible for...
24. I want to be held accountable for...
25. I step out of my comfort zone when...
26. What I don't dare to do yet is...
27. I'm helping myself when...
28. I can delight others by...
29. What I'd like to change in myself is...
30. I'm proud of myself when...
31. One question that I should ask is...
32. What I believe but cannot prove is...
33. What seems to be happening is...
34. The way I have been surprised is...
35. I need more clarity because...
36. I haven't done everything I can because...
37. I could feel more energized by...
38. One thing I should stop doing is...
39. The boldest step for me would be to...
40. The reason I feel happy sometimes is...



Relational Statements

1. What I expect from our conversations is...
2. The good thing about our conversations is...
3. We were both complimented because...
4. Our conversations can be difficult because...
5. The way we do things well is...
6. What I appreciate in our sessions is...
7. What we both have learned is...
8. What we both can learn more about is...
9. What we both did since our last session is...
10. What we both should be doing now is...
11. The reason our conversation can be blocked is...
12. I can see we make progress when...
13. What we should do before our next session is...
14. We can improve the quality of our sessions by...
15. Our conversation is not optimal when...
16. The reason we both seem to care is...
17. What our conversations need most is...
18. Our important values are...
19. We are both motivated by...
20. Our long-term purpose is...

21. The reason our conversations are at risk is...
22. Our conversations have the opportunity to...
23. We should not be responsible for...
24. We are both held accountable for...
25. We step out of our comfort zones when...
26. What we don't dare to do yet is...
27. I could support you when...
28. You can help me out by...
29. What I'd like to change in our sessions is...
30. I'm proud of us both when...
31. One question that you should ask is...
32. What we seem to believe but can't prove is...
33. What's emerging in our conversation is...
34. The way our sessions have been surprising is...
35. We both need more clarity because...
36. We have not done everything we can because...
37. We could both feel more energized by...
38. One thing we can both stop doing is...
39. The boldest step for us would be to...
40. The reason our sessions can feel good is...

Organizational Statements

1. What I expect from the *organization* is...
2. The *organization* is very good at...
3. The *organization* was complimented because...
4. Our *organization* can be difficult because...
5. The way the work in the *organization* goes well is...
6. What I appreciate about the *organization* is...
7. The *organization* has learned to...
8. What the *organization* should learn is...
9. Since our previous session, the *organization* has...
10. What the *organization* should be doing now is...
11. The reason our *organization* can be blocked...
12. I can see the *organization* make progress when...
13. Before our next session, the *organization* should...
14. The *organization* should improve quality by...
15. The *organization* does not perform well when...
16. The reason the *organization* cares is...
17. What the *organization* needs most is...
18. The important values in the *organization* are...
19. The *organization* seems to be motivated by...
20. The long-term purpose of the *organization* is...

21. The reason the *organization* is at risk is...
22. The *organization* has the opportunity to...
23. The *organization* is not responsible for...
24. The *organization* is held accountable for...
25. The *organization* is out of its comfort zone when...
26. What the *organization* doesn't dare do is...
27. I'm delighting others in the *organization* when...
28. The *organization* should support me when...
29. What I would change in the *organization* is...
30. I'm proud of our *organization* when...
31. One question the *organization* should ask is...
32. What the *organization* believes but can't prove is...
33. What's emerging in the *organization* is...
34. The way the *organization* has been surprised is...
35. The *organization* needs more clarity because...
36. The *organization* hasn't done all it can because...
37. The *organization* could be more energized by...
38. One thing the *organization* could stop doing is...
39. The boldest step for the *organization* would be to...
40. The reason the *organization* can feel happy is...



Environmental Statements

1. What *customers* can expect from us is...
2. A good change among *customers* is...
3. Our *customers* should be complimented because...
4. Our *customers* can be difficult because...
5. What our *customers* do well is...
6. What I appreciate about *customers* is...
7. Our *customers* have learned to...
8. What our *customers* should learn is...
9. After our previous session, our *customers* have...
10. What our *customers* should be doing now is...
11. The reason our *customers* can be blocked is...
12. I can see *customers* making progress when...
13. Before our next session, our *customers* should...
14. Our *customers* expect quality when...
15. Our *customers* cannot perform well when...
16. The reason our *customers* care is...
17. What our *customers* need most is...
18. The important values for *customers* are...
19. Our *customers* seem to be motivated by...
20. The long-term purpose of our *customers* is...

21. The reason our *customers* are at risk is...
22. There is an opportunity for our *customers* when...
23. Our *customers* are not responsible for...
24. Our *customers* can be held accountable for...
25. Our *customers* are out of their comfort zone when...
26. What *customers* don't dare to do is...
27. We're delighting our *customers* when...
28. Our *customers* could support us when...
29. What I would change about *customers* is...
30. I'm proud of our *customers* when...
31. One question our *customers* should ask is...
32. What *customers* believe but cannot prove is...
33. What's emerging among *customers* is...
34. The way our *customers* have been surprised is...
35. Our *customers* need more clarity because...
36. Our *customers* haven't done all they can because...
37. Our *customers* could be more energized by...
38. One thing our *customers* should stop doing is...
39. The boldest step for our *customers* would be to...
40. The reason our *customers* can feel good is...

The idea of an improvement dialogue is that a person picks a random statement from the list (or draws it from a pile of cards) and completes the sentence in any way she likes. Here is an example, with the statement “*What I need most is...*”

- “*What I need most is... a bit more time to learn new tools and technologies.*”

The coach, manager, pairing partner, or copilot now has the obligation to respond to that statement in the *affirmative* and offer a suggestion to bring the dialogue forward.

- “OK, perhaps we can find out what busy work is keeping you from learning new things.”

It is then up to both participants to keep the conversation flowing by always staying positive and trying to contribute to the previous statement.

- “Yes, I have a hunch that management’s daily interruptions are costing me too much time.”
- “I see. Well, it should not be too difficult to measure this and validate that assumption.”
- “You’re right, I’ll see if I can find a time tracker app on my smartphone to do this.”
- “Good, and I will check if someone else has done something like that before.”

When you’ve arrived at a useful insight or action item for either of you, the employee can pick another random statement from the list. It is important to note that, in the area of organizational topics, the word *organization* can easily be swapped with *team*, *business unit*, or *department*. Among the environmental topics, the word *customer* could be replaced by *supplier*, *shareholder*, *employees*, or *community*. This should be left to the creativity and improvisation of the two participants. For example, participants could make a change to the statement “What *customers* can expect from us is...”

- “*What customers employees can expect from us is... that we share our good experiences with these improvement dialogues with everyone.*”
- “Good idea; maybe we could do a presentation about it.”
- “Yes, and we could let people watch while we give a demo on stage.”
- “That could work, but we should remove a few questions first that might be too personal to discuss in public.”
- “Certainly, I will review the questions if you schedule a time and place for the demo.”
- “Agreed; I’m making a note of it right now.”

You can see that improvement dialogues, initiated by inquisitive statements, are a simple way to bring a conversation forward rapidly and catalyze action. There's no way of predicting what exactly will be discussed (minimizing the influence of the observer) or how the dialogue will develop (no questions are asked). It is also important that whatever the other person says is accepted as a fact (no denial is permitted). This brings the practice very close to both improvisational theater and appreciative inquiry. You can even consider turning this practice into a little game: Every time one of the two participants denies something, or asks the other a question, there is a penalty of a dime, a dollar, or a drink.

By building on top of each other's contributions, respecting what others have said before, and by contributing with new statements in an affirmative way, the participants in these dialogues are most likely to bring out the best in everyone.





Internal coaching

After I became a manager in a big telecommunications company, I went through frequent reorganizations that continuously changed my responsibilities. In one challenging situation, I was lucky that one of my managers funded an external coach who helped me to clarify and strengthen my position and to develop my personal way of leading teams. This experience made me realize that coaching could be an extremely helpful tool for everyone and I wanted to learn more.

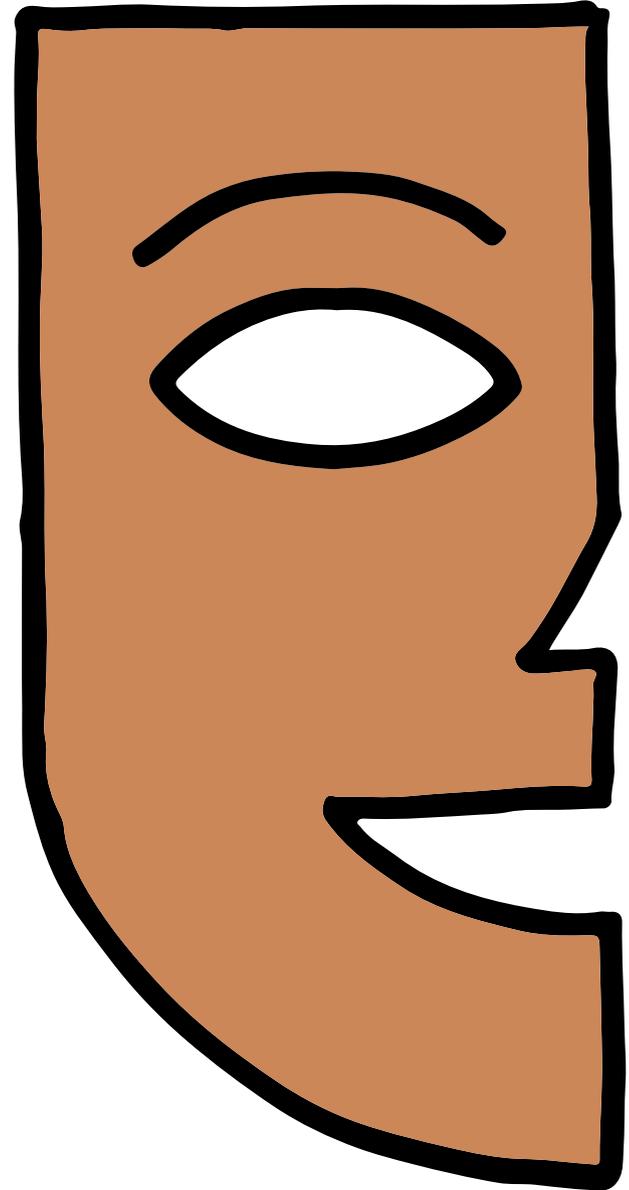
I convinced my next manager that a qualification as a systemic coach would be the best personal development measure for me. To support the business case for the company, I offered my future support as an internal coach for other members of the organization. I also got in contact with the HR department to get their support and to discuss the development of an internal coach pool. I then became a systemic coach and was not only able to help in quite a few internal coaching relationships, I also adopted tools and a mindset which still support me as a manager and consultant today.

Jürgen Dittmar, *Germany*

What Now?

This is what you can do to get started with improvement dialogues:

1. Initiate a coaching, pairing, one-on-one, or copilot session.
2. Invite your colleague, friend, coach, or copilot for a private talk in a comfortable environment (preferably not in a boring office room).
3. Print the statements in a way that makes it easy to pick them at random. Leave out the areas that are not applicable to your situation.
4. Explain the rules: no questions allowed, only reply in the affirmative, and contribute to the dialogue.
5. Pick questions, develop your conversations, and catalyze each other's contributions.
6. Make notes of any insights and action items.
7. Evaluate. Yes, you are now allowed to disagree and ask questions.



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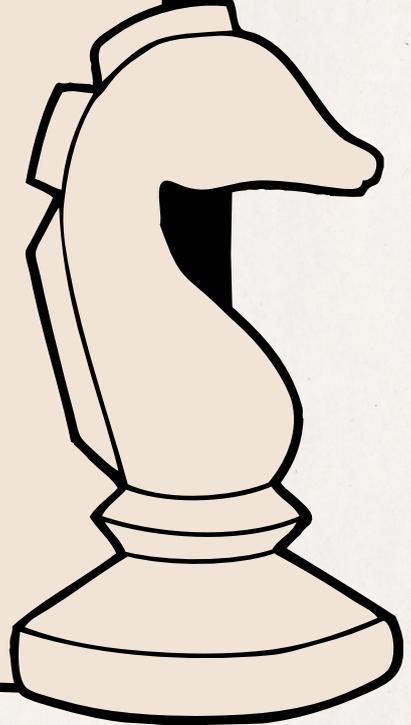
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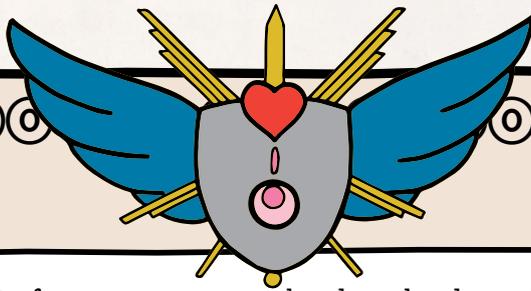
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