

A LEADERPerfect Resource

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a dark blue pinstriped blazer over a white collared shirt, is smiling warmly while looking at a document held by another person. The background is a blurred office setting.

**DEVELOPING LEADERS
WHO COACH**

BY DR. MIKE ARMOUR

Developing Leaders Who Coach

A LEADERPerfect Resource

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About Dr. Mike Armour . . .

Dr. Mike is the founder and managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International in Dallas. He has proven himself in far-ranging leadership responsibilities, including service as a Navy captain, a college president, the CIO of a national intelligence community, and the CEO of an international humanitarian organization operating in 18 nations.



He has also managed political campaigns, chaired numerous multi-million dollar fund-raising drives, founded a private school, and led several faith-based institutions.

Today Dr. Mike brings this experience together in his work as a leadership coach, management trainer, and consultant for organizations of every size, including Fortune 100 companies. He is also a podcaster, keynote speaker, and an author. Having written or co-authored eleven books, six in the field of leadership, he has been published in over two-dozen languages.

Learn more about Dr. Mike and his services at

<https://www.leaderperfect.com>

The word “coach” appeared in the English language for the first time in 1556 as the name for a horse-drawn conveyance to move a person from a starting point to a desired destination. In the 19th century the term attached itself to sports to denote a person who took athletes to a desired destination, that is, from one level of performance to a higher one. “Coaching” retains this same basic meaning today in personal and executive coaching.

Developing Leaders Who Coach

An Interview with Dr. Mike Armour

This interview originally appeared as a chapter in No Winner Ever Got There without a Coach, an anthology of in-depth conversations with top leadership experts in 2010 and first published in 2013 by Insight Publishing.

Interviewer

Mike, you've taught Executive MBA courses on coaching and mentoring skills for managers. Is coaching and mentoring becoming more important as a leadership skill?

Armour

Yes, most definitely. Companies are increasingly explicit about their coaching and mentoring expectations for management. And I'm approached regularly by businesses wanting to develop internal mentoring programs, something which few thought about a decade ago.

This trend is also impacting business education. Enrollment for my EMBA classes on coaching and mentoring is usually at capacity, even though it's an elective course. This indicates the level of interest in the subject among mid-level managers who make up the class. Yet a few years ago this topic was virtually unknown in schools of management.

Interviewer

What brought this about?

Armour

There are several factors at play. One is the expanding emphasis on team-building. In today's hypercompetitive market place, perceptive leaders know that to be winners themselves, they must surround themselves with a winning team. And for the team to win, leaders must develop and utilize the full potential of every team member. As a result, leaders increasingly picture themselves as player-coaches on a winning team.

Then there's the fact that in most companies the single greatest asset today is the people. This is true wherever you have a knowledge-based economy.

Historically we have defined investment in infrastructure along physical lines – upgraded facilities, new communications systems, expanded data centers, etc. For companies which thrive in a knowledge-based economy, however, their most important infrastructure investment is in people. Coaching them to develop their expertise and enhance their performance is part of this investment.

But companies have always needed to develop their people. What accounts for this relatively new expectation that leaders should be directly involved in coaching and mentoring?

This development is simply another step in the natural evolution of coaching itself. In the first stage of the evolution companies used executive coaches in large measure to rescue managers with struggling careers. By its very nature, this kind of coaching was remedial.

Next came developmental coaching, where the company provided coaches for solid performers – the so-called high-potential players – who were ready to step up their game. Developmental coaching proved so successful that it became a widespread practice.

Then, as more and more executives benefited from coaching firsthand, they became intrigued with the idea of generalizing the benefit across the entire organization. But the potential cost

of giving every manager an external coach was problematic, if not prohibitive. Leaders therefore began to ask, "Why do we have to rely entirely on outside professionals to coach our people? Why can't we be coaches and mentors ourselves?"

This question launched the third stage in the evolution of corporate coaching. In this stage the coaching emphasis remains developmental. But now coaching is no longer the sole province of outside specialists. It's also the province of leadership across the entire organization. Today corporate initiatives are underway everywhere to equip leaders and managers with coaching skills.

Interviewer

With companies internalizing more coaching capability, is executive coaching, as a profession, at risk of disappearing?

Armour

Oh, not at all. If anything, the broader emphasis on coaching has helped companies attach even greater value to the contribution and special expertise of external coaches. Many coaching scenarios are far better served by an outside professional coach than by an in-house manager-coach.

Take the case of men and women in upper levels of management. Their position constantly requires them to look beyond the boundaries of their immediate organization. They need to understand the broader themes at work in their industry, in their competitive landscape, and in the world at large. Their ideal coach is someone conversant with these broader realities, someone who brings to the coaching moment a thorough knowledge of best practices in a variety of industries and institutions.

It's also advantageous to these executives to have an outside party with whom they can speak openly and confidentially. They frequently wrestle with pivotal decisions whose very sensitivity makes it unwise to seek counsel within their own organization. In this situation an external coach or mentor provides an informed outside perspective and serves as a perfect confidant.

Therefore, companies typically take a two-pronged approach to coaching. They structure formal coaching or mentoring programs around talent within the company, but continue to rely on external coaches, as well.

Interviewer

Should companies train specific people in their organization to be coaches? Or is the goal to create a coaching culture that permeates the organization?

Armour

That's not an either/or question. You ultimately want to do both. But the first step is to create a cadre of effective leader-coaches, especially at upper levels of the organization. A coaching culture will never take root unless top management supports it openly and demonstrates its support through active, personal involvement as coaches and mentors.

The goal is to keep growing this cadre until coaching and mentoring skills are broadly diffused in the organization. At this point a coaching culture begins to unfold. This culture will give rise to two types of coaching and mentoring conversations. Some will be formal, where a specific coach is paired with a specific employee for a structured, multi-week series of meetings. Others will be ad hoc, with managers and supervisors using coaching and mentoring techniques in their day-to-day interaction with direct reports.

Interviewer

For these formal, structured relationships, how do you determine which employees to coach or mentor?

Armour

Formal coaching and mentoring is normally reserved for those in management or supervisory positions and those preparing for such roles. For these people certain career transitions are natural "coachable moments." These include:

- initial promotion to management or supervision
- the transition from being a manager to being a manager of managers
- moving from a staff role to an operational role (or vice versa)
- horizontal transitions to a different functional or operational area

- implementation of a matrix management structure
- geographic relocations
- transfers to new divisions/companies within the larger organization
- promotion to senior management

Of these transitions, the two most critical “coachable moments” are 1) the initial promotion to management or supervision and 2) the transition from being a manager to being a manager of managers. More careers flounder at this point than anywhere else. These moments deserve special priority for training, coaching, or mentoring.

Interviewer

You keep using the term “coach” and “mentor” as though they are two different things. Yet many people use the terms interchangeably. Do you distinguish between the two?

Armour

Yes, I do. And I believe that it’s a worthwhile distinction. Although coaching and mentoring share many points of overlap, and while they both draw from the same reservoir of communication skills, they differ notably in their end purpose and their underlying methodology. They also differ from related functions such as consulting, advising, and one-on-one training.

Because we’ve not maintained these distinctions consistently, much of what passes for coaching today is in fact something else. It’s some type of indiscriminate mixture of mentoring, consulting, advising, and training, all lumped together and called “coaching.”

At the outset of my MBA courses I ask how many of the students already coach their employees. About twenty hands go up in a room of three dozen people. Then I give the class some reading assignments on coaching. Three weeks later I pose the question again. This time only two or three hands are raised. The reading has opened their eyes to what they are really doing, and it turns out not to be coaching. Usually it’s some type of one-on-one training with a little mentoring tossed in on the side.

Interviewer

So how do you delineate between coaching and mentoring?

Armour

Let's start by looking at mentoring. Whereas coaching is a very modern concept, mentoring is quite ancient. In fact, medicine and mentoring are probably the world's oldest helping professions. The word itself derives from the name Mentor in Homer's *Odyssey*, written three thousand years ago. Mentor was the close friend to whom Odysseus entrusted the rearing of his son Telemachus as Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War.

In 1669 François Fenelon wrote a book entitled *Les Aventures de Telemaque*. As the title suggests, Telemachus figured prominently in this work. Here, for the first time, the word "mentor" was used to describe someone who guides the development of another, just as Mentor did with Telemachus.

Such people had long been admired in history and literature. Perhaps the most renowned mentor-mentee pairing in the ancient world was Aristotle and Alexander the Great. Later the lore of the Middle Ages gave us another mentor-mentee duo in the mythical persons of Merlin and King Arthur.

If you've seen the film or stage version of *Camelot*, you will recall scenes in which Arthur pines for Merlin's counsel. Through Arthur's words we glimpse the essence of mentoring. In one scene he describes Merlin's techniques for helping him think things through more clearly. And he fondly recalls gems of wisdom which Merlin gave him along the way.

This then suggests the following definition for mentoring:

Mentoring is a paired relationship whose aim is to transfer wisdom and insight from someone with veteran experience (the mentor) to another person with more limited experience (the mentee) in a setting of collegial dialogue.

In short, a mentor is someone who "shows you the ropes." Where this phrase originated, we're uncertain. Some believe that it came from the era of massive sailing ships, where the set of the sails was controlled by dozens of ropes. Others trace its origin to the theater and the ropes to raise and lower scenery.

In either event, the person who “shows you the ropes” is the one who taught you to deploy the ropes to maximum advantage. That’s a pretty good metaphor for what mentors do.

Interviewer

Then let’s turn to coaching. How does it differ from mentoring?

Armour

Whereas mentoring is largely about imparting wisdom, perspective, and counsel, it does not necessarily tie itself to achieving a specific, targeted outcome. For example, the mentoring which we received from our parents was meant to make us better persons. But it generally was not aimed at helping us attain a specific, tangible goal.

Coaching, by contrast, is always outcome oriented. The word “coach” appeared in the English language for the first time in 1556 as the name for a horse-drawn conveyance to move a person from a starting point to a desired destination. In the 19th century the term attached itself to sports to denote a person who took athletes to a desired destination, that is, from one level of performance to a higher one.

“Coaching” retains this same basic meaning in personal and executive coaching. Thus, when asked to define coaching, I offer this description:

Coaching is a paired dialogue in which a facilitator (the coach) uses questions, feedback, and encouragement to help the other party reach a desired goal through mastery of new skills, deeper self-understanding, improved effectiveness, and accelerated achievement.

Notice how this definition is more action-oriented than the one for mentoring. Coaching aims at improved performance, mentoring at increased wisdom and deeper understanding. Both may lead to new skills and capability. But mentoring generally addresses longer-term issues and looks at a relatively broad landscape. Coaching, by contrast, tends to be narrower in its scope and near-term in its focus, zeroing in on immediate challenges.

To illustrate the difference with still another example from sports, professional athletes have coaches to help them maintain peak performance. But they also have mentors who offer counsel on how to manage the pressure of being in the public spotlight, how to make sound investments, and how to prepare for a career after sports.

Interviewer

You've described a coach as a facilitator. But when I think of coaches, what comes to mind is someone who is in charge and is calling the shots. That doesn't sound like a facilitator to me.

Armour

You've made a good observation. The most common image of a coach is someone who stalks the sidelines, barking out commands and signaling the next play. In sports like football, soccer, basketball, and hockey, this is the prevalent style of coaching.

But in other sports, such as golf or tennis, the coach is nowhere to be seen during the game itself. In fact, some sports prohibit the coach from being anywhere near the competition. Tactical decisions during the game must come from the athlete alone. And when something goes wrong, the athlete must take corrective action without input from the coach.

Executive coaching functions in basically the same way. Executive coaches facilitate rather than direct, because their goal is a client fully capable of self-direction once the game is underway and the coach is no longer around.

To enhance this self-reliance, coaches facilitate a specific type of dialogue. The dialogue is structured to force frequent reflection and introspection on the part of the person being coached. This introspection serves to strengthen inner resources and make these resources accessible at will.

It also engenders deeper self-understanding and clearer set of perspectives. Most of all, it enlarges the ability to autonomously generate appropriate insights, options, goals, strategies, and outlooks essential to sustained success.

Interviewer

Given these distinctions, is it best for leaders to focus on mentoring? Or on coaching?

Armour

Neither mentoring nor coaching is necessarily the “best” focus. Each one has its own unique contribution to make to the development of others. But the skill set in mentoring is easier to master.

Because mentoring deals with topics which are more general in nature and because it entails more narration and counsel than artful questioning on the part of mentor, the ability to mentor can be learned rather quickly.

After all, at one time or another most of us have had someone who mentored us about our life or career. They probably had no specialized training to be a mentor. They merely had a heart to help others by sharing what they had learned.

Leaders can therefore start to mentor with relative ease. Moreover, the skills which they hone as mentors are directly transferable to coaching. Coaching merely layers other skills on top of the mentoring skill set. These added skills make coaching more challenging to learn.

But the advantage of coaching is that it has far more leverage to effect quick and lasting change than is true of training, consulting, or even mentoring.

Fortunately, you don’t have to wait until you are an accomplished coach before you begin helping people enhance their skills or realize their goals. You can facilitate skill development by combining mentoring with one-on-one training, in a paired relationship which looks very much like coaching.

In fact, this very combination is the primary way that we’ve learned much of what we know. So my counsel to leaders is to become mentors first. Then, as you mentor, add occasional techniques of coaching until you are as comfortable with coaching as you are with mentoring.

Interviewer

If it takes time for leaders to develop coaching skills, how do companies provide for coaching in the meanwhile?

Armour

Companies meet this challenge in a variety of ways. Because mentoring is an easier skill to master, some companies make little effort to train managers and executives as coaches. Instead, the company sets its priority on training leaders to be good mentors. For coaching, the company then relies on external specialists.

A variant on this approach is to add professionally trained coaches to the HR staff. In this arrangement the company's leaders serve as mentors and these HR personnel provide in-house coaching. A variation on this strategy is to use in-house coaches for some assignments, external coaches for others.

Interviewer

Okay, but the more you talk about this, the more I wonder if busy executives and managers really have time to coach and mentor.

Armour

Well, let me ask this. Do they have time for conversations with people in their organization? After all, as leaders they're responsible for developing their people, aren't they? And don't they pursue this development in large part through conversation? Now, what if they were skilled at turning these developmental conversations into brief coaching or mentoring encounters?

You see, coaching and mentoring are not so much about how much time you spend with people, but about the way you structure conversations with them. Coaching conversations – and mentoring conversations, too, for that matter – don't need to be time-consuming. I've had coaching conversations which ran for hours and others which lasted only a few minutes.

Of course, formal coaching or mentoring relationships – those that fall under a structured company program – call for more extensive commitments of time. But these programs normally match executives to only one coaching or mentoring partner

at a time. And without exception, executives who serve in this capacity find it rewarding, fulfilling, and well worth the sacrifice which they make to participate.

Interviewer

In other words, coaching and mentoring are both time well-spent for leaders.

Armour

Without question. Above everything else, leadership is a “people process.” It’s about rallying people around a common purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it. And the key phrase here is “achieve it.” Leadership is ultimately about results. Only by achieving desired results does leadership fulfill its calling.

This makes for a natural marriage between leadership and coaching, since coaching also has this same passion for results. It seeks to improve effectiveness, accelerate achievement, and attain vital outcomes, all primary concerns for leadership.

Leaders who coach and mentor are fulfilling the third of three imperatives incumbent on leadership. The first is to know who your people are. The second is to know where you are taking them. And the third is to equip them for the journey. Coaching and mentoring equip people for the journey. Unlike counseling and therapy, which are called “people-helping” professions, coaching and mentoring are best described as “people-equipping.”

Interviewer

So coaching is not an adjunct to leadership. It aligns directly with leadership’s essential functions.

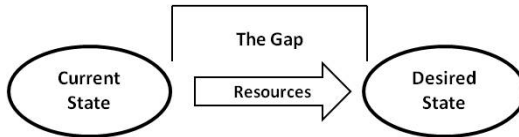
Armour

Precisely. Leadership and coaching are both future oriented. They set their vision on some desired future state.

- They begin by identifying this desired state.
- Next they analyze the gap between the current state and the desired one.

- Then they work to fill this gap with the resources required to reach the desired state.

Building resources is both the equipping function of leadership and the primary domain of coaching. The following illustration demonstrates the relationship between the current state, the future state, and the resources to fill the gap in leadership and coaching alike:



Thus, in terms of their underlying structure, coaching and leadership are highly compatible. Because of this, good leaders immediately recognize the value of the current state/desired state model of coaching.

Interviewer

But can't mentoring, as you've defined it, function in this same current state/desired state structure?

Armour

In one sense it can. In fact, most mentoring which I've seen in the business world is less of the Merlin-Arthur type of activity, where someone is being readied for life, and more of an equipping effort to further a desired outcome for the company.

Yet, even when mentoring is conducted within the current state/desired state model, it still differs from coaching in one vital regard. This difference revolves around the "locus of expertise." In mentoring, the primary expertise is resident in the mentor. The same principle is found in training, consulting, and advising. In all of these disciplines the locus of expertise is in the service provider.

Coaching, by contrast, posits the locus of expertise in the one being coached. This parallels the relationship between coach and athlete in professional sports. Once an athlete is a professional, it's rare for the coach to have more athletic ability than the

athlete. As a result, the role of the coach is less about imparting expertise and more about enhancing the inherent expertise of the athlete.

Executive and leadership coaching follows a similar pattern. The coach simply facilitates a conversation that surfaces latent ability within the person being coached and sharpens the abilities already evident. The ancient Greeks would have called this "education," which literally means to draw out what lies hidden inside.

When it comes to coaching, I think that we intuitively sense this unique locus of expertise, even if we have never articulated it. This accounts for our collective resistance to the term "coachee" as a name for the person being coached. Although you hear the word used occasionally, it has never caught on. Why not?

Perhaps it's because of what English words ending in "ee" typically denote. They usually identify the party in a relationship who is less knowledgeable or less in control. So we have words like "employee," "appointee," "inductee," "trainee," and even "mentee." But somehow "coachee" just doesn't sound right to the ear of most native English speakers. And I attribute this dissonance to our unconscious recognition that in coaching (in contrast to other people-equipping endeavors), the locus of expertise is found within the person being coached, not in the one doing the coaching.

Interviewer

When a leader coaches, however – especially in a business context – doesn't the leader usually have more subject matter expertise than the one being coached?

Armour

In general that's true. But in terms of how the leader structures the coaching conversation, the leader assumes the place and function of a facilitator, not the subject matter expert. Acting as a facilitator, the leader draws out the expertise and abilities of the other person, whereas the job of a trainer or consultant is to impart expertise and skill.

This is why effective executive coaches can provide their services across a broad spectrum of industries, even though they

may know little about the inner workings of these individual industries. It's rare, indeed, for an external coach to have the industry expertise of the one being coached. But unlike consultants and trainers, coaches are not required to bring subject-matter expertise to the coaching relationship. Instead, the coach is facilitating the other party's learning process.

The word "facilitate" comes from a Latin word meaning "easy." The function of a facilitator is to make something easier to accomplish. As a facilitator, the coach helps people tap into every resource at their disposal and to do so more effortlessly, thus making it easier (and therefore quicker) for them to achieve desired outcomes.

Interviewer

Then coaches never share their own expertise with the person being coached?

Armour

Quite the contrary. The time constraints of a coaching conversation or the urgency of matters at hand can require the coach to set aside the coaching function and briefly put on another hat.

In such instances the coach momentarily becomes a trainer, an advisor, or a consultant in order to convey something essential – a piece of vital information, an element of knowledge, or even a new skill. But as quickly as this essential information is conveyed, the coach immediately shifts back into the coaching role.

Let me give you a common example from my coaching experience. In the course of a coaching conversation, the person whom I'm coaching hits a roadblock. He or she will say something like, "I just don't know how to analyze this situation." My thought goes immediately to a helpful analytical model found in a certain book. So I ask, "Have you read such-and-such a book?"

If the client has read the book and grasps the model, I ask, "In what ways could this model be helpful in your analysis?" Notice that I don't make any application myself. That's the client's job. My function is to keep asking questions to help the client uncover new insights from the model.

But what if this person says, “No, I don’t know that book”? At this point I’m likely to take off my coaching hat and put on my training hat. I quickly provide a short overview of the book and its primary theme. Then I sketch out the model on a sheet of paper and explain it. With this training task complete, I take off the training hat, don the coaching hat once more, and ask the coaching question: “In what ways could this model be helpful in your analysis?”

The key for you as a coach is to be purposeful when you change hats and to be aware of the change when you make it. With my students I sometimes describe a coaching conversation as a dance in which you move repeatedly away from the coaching position, then back to it again. At times the move takes us to consulting, at other times to mentoring. The next time the move may be to training or advising. But the goal is always to return to the coaching function as swiftly as possible, because that’s where the client’s learning is most effectively facilitated.

Interviewer

Is there a simple way to know when you’ve begun to function in one of these other arenas?

Armour

Perhaps the simplest way is to ask yourself, “Given the way that this conversation is presently structured, would an observer believe that the locus of expertise is within me or inside the other party?” If the answer is “within me,” then you’ve stepped out of the coaching position, at least for the moment.

A second way to determine whether you are coaching or not is to compare the amount of time that you and the other party are talking. If you are talking more than 20% of the time, there’s a high likelihood that you have set aside coaching to play the role of consultant, trainer, mentor, or advisor.

Remember, coaching conversations are intended to help the other party self-discover. And people self-discover only through reflection and talking things out. If you are dominating the conversation, you are not providing an opportunity for reflection to occur. And you certainly are not allowing time for the reflection to clarify itself through verbal expression.

Interviewer

A moment ago you emphasized the importance of coming back to what you called the “coaching question.” What I’m hearing you say is that unlike trainers or consultants, coaches are less concerned with imparting information and more concerned with asking good questions. Is my perception correct?

Armour

It’s exactly the case. I tell my students that coaching is more about asking profound questions than about offering profound recommendations.

Profound questions may also figure prominently in mentoring conversations. In *Camelot*, Arthur recounts questions which Merlin posed in helping him gain a clearer perspective on life. Yet, the very nature of mentoring means that it devotes more time to “telling” than to questioning. The thrust of mentoring, after all, is a veteran sharing insights and experiences with a receptive protégé. Thus, creative questions are not nearly so critical in mentoring as they are in coaching.

This is one place where the analogy between personal coaching and athletic coaching breaks down. When athletic coaches run a practice session, they give frequent instruction. Their language is clearly directive.

Our definition of coaching, on the other hand, stresses questions, feedback, and facilitated self-discovery. None of this sounds particularly directive. There are certain books, to be sure, which talk about directive coaching. But in my judgment, what they call directive coaching is more appropriately thought of as one-on-one training. It clearly is not coaching in the purest sense of the word.

Interviewer

This means that to coach well, you must master the art of questioning.

Armour

Absolutely. Effective coaching hinges on asking powerful, artful questions which compel the other person to self-reflect. Of course, we all think that we are good at asking questions. But

coaching carries the art of asking questions to an entirely new level.

In day-to-day conversation we usually ask questions to elicit information. Coaches do the same. But they interweave into these routine questions another set of questions which are of an altogether different order. These are the “coaching questions” to which I referred earlier. The purpose of coaching questions is not to elicit information, but to effect change in the way that those who are coached see the world, themselves, and their options.

Because they generate such new perspectives, questions of this nature are called “generative questions.” They are the coach’s craft and trade. Generative questions are designed and framed in such a way that the very process of answering them generates new insights, new linkage between ideas, new levels of understanding, or an expanded sense of possibilities.

In a word, they generate change. And change is at the heart of the coaching endeavor, since change is the means by which we move from the current state to the desired state.

Moments ago I described a conversation with a client about a model in a certain book. This conversation combined routine questions with a generative one. I began with routine questions. For instance, I inquired about whether the client had read the book. Here I was simply looking for information. The coaching question – the generative question – came after we were focused on the model itself. That’s when I asked, “In what ways could this model be helpful in your analysis?”

On the surface this sounds like just another informational question. But it’s not. The client can only answer after evaluating the issue under discussion through the lens of the model. For the client, this is a moment of forced introspection and an opportunity for self-guided discovery, which is the object of both coaching and mentoring.

Key though they are, not all generative questions are created equal. Some have greater leverage than others in effecting change. The most powerful generative questions, in fact, evoke such wholesale change which they can only be described as transformational.

Interviewer

Can you give me an example of a transformational question?

Armour

Gladly. But let me first say that transformational questions must be properly timed and properly set up. Otherwise they can lose much of their clout or become ineffective altogether. So let me show you how such a question, properly timed and set up, generated radical change in a client's self-perception – so radical, indeed, that it salvaged her career.

This woman was highly accomplished, with an illustrious twenty-year track record in demanding positions. Only weeks before I met her, she moved halfway across the country to become a senior executive in a huge corporation. She not only relocated geographically, she also stepped into an industry which was entirely new to her. Then, as a member of the executive committee, she quickly discovered that she was surrounded by peers of exceptional brilliance and skill.

Still struggling to learn the industry, and answering questions daily from these super-achieving peers, she slipped into a crisis of self-confidence. By the time that we linked up, she had nearly convinced herself that her move had been a terrible blunder. Her self-doubt was deep and persistent. No matter what topic we pursued, she always came back to her mistake in taking the job.

For coaching to succeed, this crisis of self-confidence simply had to be overcome. So I asked her to tell me more about the executive team. "From your experience," I said, "how would you rate their decision-making? Are they really good at it? Or do make a lot of decisions which they later regret?"

"Oh, they make really good decisions," she answered. "The reason they intimidate me so much is that they are all so smart."

At this point I leaned forward, looked her in the eye, and with a tone of curiosity in my voice asked, "So, since they are so brilliant and always make such good decisions, what led them to hire you?"

The question caught her completely off guard. For a full 30 seconds she sat in stunned silence, absorbed in thought. I let the

silence run uninterrupted while she went inside and processed the implications of my question. Finally she looked up, tossed her shoulders back, and with a radiant smile declared, "I guess it's because they believe I'm up to the job!" In that instant her self-confidence rebounded and her self-doubt fled. Within days her performance zoomed upward.

Interviewer

I see why you called this a transformational question. Can you comment further on what made it so powerful?

Armour

The first thing to note is that I began the setup with what sounded like a simple, informational question. I inquired about the team's decision-making ability: Was the team good at making decisions? Or was it prone to decisions which proved to be mistakes? Innocuous as these questions sound, I intentionally framed them to put her in a double bind.

Her self-doubt, you see, rested on two presuppositions. First, that hiring her was a mistake. And second, that she was inferior to her peers, because they were so brilliant. So I created a dilemma for her with my questions.

If she answered that the team always made good decisions, then hiring her was another of those good decisions. On the other hand, if she responded that the team was susceptible to making mistakes, then the team was not so brilliant as she had believed. Either way, she had just devastated one of the presuppositions underpinning her self-doubt.

But I had to be sure that she recognized the full implication of what she had just said. That's why I followed instantly and intently with the question, "Since they always make such good decisions, what led them to hire you?"

To answer this question, she had to confront the fact that her very words had invalidated one of her presuppositions. That's why she went silent in response to my question. She was internally absorbing the full import of what her own words implied.

Let me underscore that the challenge to her presuppositions took the form of a question, not a statement or commentary.

I avoided being explicit about the inconsistency between her presuppositions and her answer to my setup questions. Rather, I framed my questions in such a way that to answer them, she had to challenge the presuppositions herself.

Interviewer

I gather then that coaches prefer questions to statements whenever a question can be equally or even more effective.

Armour

Yes, at least that's my personal guideline. I might also say that this is one of most daunting challenges for leaders who want to coach. Most leaders are accustomed to telling, not asking. They are more attuned to offering solutions, than to helping people find their own solutions.

Thus, when leaders begin coaching, they can easily forget that we grow and change primarily through what we discover for ourselves. Like all personal coaches, the leader-coach should never short-circuit the process of growth and change by injecting needless commentary.

Interviewer

Can you say more about the kind of change that generative questions are intended to create?

Armour

Executive coaching and mentoring basically aim at three types of change: performance, developmental, and transformational. Leaders who coach or mentor are usually focused on these first two types of change. Transformational coaching is less common in business contexts, though quite common in life coaching.

Yet, even in the business setting, there are occasional situations, like the one I cited, where transformational coaching is necessary before performance and developmental coaching can achieve their full promise.

Interviewer

But I'm putting myself in the position of motivated leaders who are reading this book and are reflecting on the transformational question that you posed. I can almost hear them saying, "I would never be astute enough as a coach to create that kind of double-bind on the fly." How would you respond to this reaction?

Armour

I would first state that transformational questions, in and of themselves, do not require double-binds. Most, indeed, don't have one. In this instance the double-bind merely gave the question more voltage. But the question itself had transformational potential, without the double bind.

Second, I would reiterate what I said just moments ago, namely, that transformational change is not typically the goal of business or leadership coaching. You could coach in your organization for years and never need high-voltage transformational questions.

But I chose this example because I wanted to show the tremendous power of the right question at the right time. In training coaches, I've discovered that people don't always recognize the power inherent in well-formed questions. Thus they try to coach and mentor without taking the time to master the artistry of framing good questions.

Professional coaches develop a catalogue of thought-provoking questions which they use time and again, to the point that the questions become a habitual response. For example, when talking to clients about their desired outcome, I routinely ask one of these questions:

- Once you achieve your desired outcome, how will the world be different for you?
- To get where you want to go, what tradeoffs will be required? Are you at peace with them?
- Since this outcome is so important to you, how is it possible that you've not achieved it already?

Notice how none of these questions permits a simple, rote response. The very act of answering them requires reflection and a new level of self-awareness. Each one of them nudges the process of change forward, ever closer to the desired future state.

Interviewer

Do you have a final word to leaders who want to coach?

Armour

Yes, in the words of Nike, "Just do it!" You did not learn to lead by reading a book or going to seminars. You learned to lead by doing it. The same is true of mentoring and coaching. Read books on the subject, for sure. Go to workshops on coaching and mentoring whenever possible. But the only way that you will ever become a coaching or mentoring leader is to do it.