CHARACTER · STYLE

Beyond Performance: Coaching the Whole Leader

Jim Petersen, PhD · November 22, 2026

PETERSEN LEADERSHIP | PERSPECTIVES

Why skills, execution, and personal development must work together

A business owner knows that delegation is necessary, yet continues to make every decision. A sales leader understands accountability, yet avoids difficult conversations. A technically accomplished executive delivers results, yet struggles to earn the trust of the team. In each case, a coach could prescribe another skill, a stronger goal, or a more disciplined action plan. But would that address the problem?

Effective coaching requires more than helping people do things better. It requires understanding what is preventing progress and responding to the underlying need. Sometimes that need is knowledge. Sometimes it is execution. Sometimes it is a deeply held assumption about leadership, control, or personal responsibility. And sometimes the barrier lies not in the individual at all, but in the culture or systems surrounding that individual.

A useful graphic by Timothy Tiryaki distinguishes skills, performance, and developmental coaching. These distinctions provide a helpful starting point. I would go one step further: they should not be treated as three separate services or stages through which every client must pass. They are interconnected dimensions of coaching, and the professional judgment to know which dimension matters most is what makes coaching effective.

Three dimensions, one coaching relationship

Skills coaching: Building capability

Skills coaching addresses what a leader needs to know or learn to perform effectively. It may involve strategic planning, financial literacy, delegation, communication, meeting management, or the mechanics of developing a team. The central diagnostic question is: Does this person possess the knowledge and capability required by the challenge?

When the answer is no, a coach may help the client identify a learning goal, practice a new behavior, or locate appropriate training and expertise. Coaching, however, is not identical to teaching or consulting. The professional coach helps the client take ownership of the learning while recognizing when subject-matter instruction would be more useful than additional questions.

Performance coaching: Turning capability into results

Performance coaching addresses the gap between what a person can do and what actually happens. It focuses on priorities, execution, habits, feedback, follow-through, and accountability. Its central question is: What must change so that capability produces meaningful, repeatable results?

This dimension is not limited to sustaining performance. It can also involve recovering from setbacks, improving performance, removing obstacles, and making deliberate tradeoffs. A leader may have sufficient skill but face competing priorities, unclear expectations, weak processes, or insufficient resources. More pressure to perform is rarely a substitute for identifying the real constraint.

Developmental coaching: Expanding the leader's capacity

Developmental coaching examines the assumptions, perspectives, values, emotional responses, and sense of identity that shape leadership behavior. Its question is: How does this person need to think, interpret, or respond differently to meet the demands of leadership?

A business owner may know how to delegate but believe that asking others to take responsibility means surrendering control. Another leader may understand how to give feedback but equate disagreement with disloyalty. The obstacle is neither ignorance nor a missing action plan. It is the way the leader makes sense of the situation.

Chris Argyris's distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning is relevant here. Single-loop learning changes actions to improve an outcome; double-loop learning also questions the assumptions and governing beliefs behind those actions (Argyris, 1976). Developmental coaching can help a leader do both without losing sight of practical results.

Diagnosis must come before intervention

A coach who favors one method may find evidence for that method in every problem. The skills specialist recommends training. The accountability specialist recommends tighter goals. The developmental specialist explores beliefs. Each response may be useful, but none should be automatic. The client deserves a diagnosis before an intervention.

I suggest that coaches examine four possibilities together. First, is there a capability gap? Second, is there an execution or accountability gap? Third, are beliefs, emotions, or perspectives limiting the client's choices? Fourth, are organizational conditions helping or hindering success? These are working hypotheses, not labels to be assigned to the client. More than one may be true.

Consider a company that repeatedly misses its sales targets. The surface problem is performance. Yet a thoughtful coach might discover that the sales manager lacks the skills to develop others, that the team has no consistent follow-up discipline, that the owner avoids confronting poor performance, and that incentives reward activity rather than profitable

customer relationships. The answer may require skills development, accountability, a shift in the owner's thinking, and changes to the company's systems. A single coaching lens would miss much of the picture.

This is why asking the right question matters more than simply asking more questions. The next question should arise from what the coach has learned, what remains uncertain, and what would most help the client examine the situation. Professional judgment determines whether to explore capability, action, underlying beliefs, or context.

Culture is not a footnote

Business coaching does not occur in a vacuum. Leaders operate within expectations, relationships, incentives, formal processes, and unwritten rules. A person may have the right skills and intentions but struggle in a system that punishes initiative, withholds information, or discourages honest discussion. Calling every failure a personal performance problem can hide an organizational problem.

Amy Edmondson's research on work teams found that psychological safety was associated with learning behavior, which in turn was connected with team performance (Edmondson, 1999). Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory likewise emphasizes the importance of competence, autonomy, and relatedness to human motivation and healthy functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These findings do not mean that culture excuses poor performance. They mean that culture can enable or constrain the behaviors coaching is intended to improve.

The coach should therefore ask not only, "What must this leader change?" but also, "What in this environment makes the desired change easier or harder?" In some situations, developing the leader and improving the culture must proceed together. This connection is central to the Petersen Leadership Model, in which Culture is what a leader creates.

IQ, EQ, and AQ: A complementary leadership lens

My leadership framework considers three interacting forms of intelligence: intellectual intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and adaptability intelligence (AQ). They offer another way to examine a coaching challenge. IQ contributes analytical capacity and technical understanding. EQ helps a leader understand personal reactions and relationships. AQ supports adjustment when circumstances change or established approaches no longer work.

These are not one-to-one equivalents of skills, performance, and developmental coaching. Each intelligence contributes to all three dimensions. A strategic decision may require accurate analysis, empathy for those affected, and a willingness to revise the plan when new information appears. Coaching that focuses exclusively on technical competence may leave EQ and AQ unexamined.

My Navy service laid the foundation for this view. Technical competence mattered enormously in the nuclear community, but I observed that a leader's ability to work with people could

profoundly affect the experience and effectiveness of a crew. Expertise may earn responsibility; it does not, by itself, build trust. My business career confirmed it.

What the evidence tells us

Research supports coaching as a useful developmental intervention, while also reminding us to avoid extravagant claims. Theeboom, Beersma, and van Vianen (2014), in a meta-analysis of organizational coaching studies, found positive effects across several individual outcomes, including performance and skills, well-being, coping, work attitudes, and goal-directed self-regulation. Jones, Woods, and Guillaume (2016) likewise found positive overall effects of workplace coaching on learning and performance-related outcomes. Their review focused on coaching delivered by internal or external coaches rather than routine manager-to-employee coaching.

These studies support the value of coaching, not the assertion that a particular three-part classification has been scientifically validated or that every coaching engagement will succeed. Outcomes vary by situation, evidence quality, intervention, and the measures selected. Our responsibility is to use research responsibly while remaining attentive to the individual client and the realities of the business.

A practical standard for professional business coaches

An effective coaching engagement begins with a clear description of the desired outcome and the evidence of the current gap. The coach and client then test competing explanations before deciding what to address. They choose an appropriate response, agree on action and accountability, and return to the evidence to determine what has changed. If progress stalls, they revisit the diagnosis rather than merely increasing the pressure.

Several questions can improve this process: “What does the leader already know how to do?” “What is actually happening, and how do we know?” “What assumption might be restricting the choices available?” “What would change the leader’s mind?” and “What conditions inside the organization reinforce the current behavior?” These questions are not a script. They are examples of the disciplined curiosity that effective coaching requires.

The distinction between coaching and other professional services also matters. A client may need formal instruction, specialized consulting, process redesign, or clinical support beyond the coach’s competence. The International Coaching Federation’s 2025 Core Competencies explicitly address maintaining the distinctions between coaching, consulting, psychotherapy, and other support professions, understanding client context, supporting client autonomy, and turning insight into action. A strong coach does not insist that every problem be solved through coaching alone (ICF, 2025).

For PBCA coaches, this integrated perspective offers a practical standard: diagnose before prescribing; coach the person while examining the system; build capability, translate it into

action, and challenge the thinking that limits growth. Business tools and accountability systems can help organize the work. They cannot substitute for the coach's judgment.

Coaching the whole leader

The goal is not to choose between skills, performance, and development. It is to understand their relationship. A leader can know what to do and fail to act. A leader can achieve results without developing the capacity to sustain them. And a leader can grow personally without creating the organizational conditions necessary for others to succeed. The coach must keep all three possibilities in view.

I learned this early in my financial services career. In my first assignment as a District Advisor, I took over the lowest-performing district in my region. Rebuilding it required more than a call for higher production. We recruited and trained advisors, then gave them opportunities to teach what they had learned to one another. Teaching strengthened their understanding, encouraged ownership of their development, and helped grow leadership capacity within the district. Our district ultimately rose to second in the region. This was a leadership and training experience rather than a formal coaching engagement, but it helped shape a principle I later applied to business coaching: capability, execution, and development reinforce one another.

Training can teach someone what to do. Performance coaching can help someone do it consistently. Developmental coaching can change how someone thinks about what needs to be done. Exceptional business coaching brings these dimensions together, within the realities of the culture in which the leader works.

The most important question is not, "Which type of coaching do I provide?" It is, "What does this leader need from me now, and what evidence would tell us that we are addressing the right problem?"

References

Argyris, C. (1976). Single-loop and double-loop models in research on decision making. Administrative Science Quarterly, 21(3), 363–375. https://doi.org/10.2307/2391848

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). The "what" and "why" of goal pursuits: Human needs and the self-determination of behavior. Psychological Inquiry, 11(4), 227–268. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327965PLI1104_01

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), 350–383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999

International Coaching Federation. (2025). 2025 ICF core competencies. https://coachingfederation.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/icf-cs-core-competencies-2025.pdf

Jones, R. J., Woods, S. A., & Guillaume, Y. R. F. (2016). The effectiveness of workplace coaching: A meta-analysis of learning and performance outcomes from coaching. Journal of

Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 89(2), 249–277. https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12119

Theeboom, T., Beersma, B., & van Vianen, A. E. M. (2014). Does coaching work? A meta-analysis on the effects of coaching on individual level outcomes in an organizational context. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 9(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2013.837499

Conceptual starting point: Timothy Tiryaki, “The Three Types of Coaching” (graphic shared for discussion). The integrated framework and analysis in this paper are the author’s interpretation.