

# Coaching for Performance with SAFETY



*Sir John Whitmore dispels the myth that a coaching style of management exposes organizations to more risk than would an instructional approach, and he offers evidence of the huge safety benefits derived from coaching in any field*

**Not unexpectedly, some people hold the view that the modern person-centred coaching now being used in sport, the work place and other activities will expose the recipients to more risk than would clear instructions about acceptable actions and safe practice. In reality the opposite is true.**

The prescriptive militaristic approach to teaching and safety has been the norm for so long and is so widespread that it is seldom questioned, however that view ignores the fact that our understanding of learning psychology is progressing all the time. That which was best is surpassed and becomes obsolete in time.

So how does the apparently gentle coaching method produce better and safer results in potentially risky situations? The primary objective of coaching is to raise the **awareness** (of self and others) and the **responsibility** (for self and others) of the recipient. Awareness increases the quality and the quantity of the immediate input received in any activity and thereby delivers greater clarity about the action and the emotional reaction to the

situation. These two sources of information enable the person to manage his or her responses more appropriately and effectively.

Responsibility is derived from the capacity to make the most inclusive and appropriate choices based upon the consequences of actions, as opposed to the more common indiscriminate fear reaction. Responsibility is developed because coaches ask questions that provoke thoughts and perceptions which inform decision making, but they seldom prescribe actions. People who are unaccustomed to making decisions, and who seek instructions or affirmation, need to practise decision-making, starting, of course, with inconsequential ones and building to life-saving ones in the extreme.

This is now widely accepted among thinking people; for example the European Commission is promoting the adoption of coaching as the primary method of driver education throughout Europe. This is because a disproportionate percentage of young inexperienced male drivers cause road fatalities, not because they cannot control a car, but because they become competitive, aggressive, distracted or they show off. This is subconscious reaction much of the time, but through being coached they learn to make considered choices suitable for the prevailing circumstances. In youthful driving this is exemplified by the driver

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considering whether he has drunk too much, whether he is fatigued late at night, or whether he is tempted to show off to his young passengers.

I refer here to a number of specific examples as evidence of the safety effectiveness of the use of coaching. In the 1980s some 10% of first-time skiers came home from their winter holiday in plaster or otherwise injured. I ran a ski school at that time based on modern coaching and our injury rate was negligible due in part to the fact that our skiers were more physically relaxed and flexible, and in part due to the fact that they took responsibility for their own safety and that of the others they “met” on the slopes.

Two other examples are worth mentioning. The first is that many years ago the huge but now defunct company ICI ran a particularly toxic chemical plant in Runcorn near Liverpool where they employed many maintenance and emergency crews. It was a tough job and they had many accidents. ICI brought us in to train the supervisors and managers of these small teams because of their safety concerns. The fact that we worked with them for several years is evidence enough that for them it paid off.

The most striking one, however, was when the trainer for the Fleet Air Arm competition team attended a 2-day coaching course that Performance Consultants ran for sports coaches. The Field Gun race was the principle feature of prestigious military tournament held annually at Earls Court in London. It involved 16 men swinging very heavy military equipment over a chasm and dragging it through an obstacle course for some 5 minutes. It has been described as the toughest team competition in the world, because it requires immense strength and fitness, and usually results in many injuries in the 9 week training period – a very short time to learn a complex and dangerous skill.

On the coaching course, Joe Gough, the trainer, was sceptical but saw the potential benefits of using coaching in place of the usual military command and control method. The result was that for the first time in the 100 years of the competition, his team not only won all five cups, but they did so with almost no injuries in training and the race, something that had been unheard of before.

There is no doubt that coaching offers huge safety benefits in any field, though the take-up has been slow since the process defies the expectations of traditionalists who struggle to let go of old thinking and adopt new methods that defy their logic, but are actually rather straightforward and obvious when understood. Not long afterwards a retired senior army officer, a training consultant, asked me why all the military had not explored coaching for greater safety. That was in 1990, but now they are doing so. I have just accepted an invitation to join the Army Training Advisory Board.

*Sir John Whitmore PhD is Chairman of Performance Consultants International, the foremost provider of coaching, leadership development and performance improvement in the workplace globally. A pre-eminent thinker in leadership development and organizational change, he works with leading multinational corporations to establish coaching management cultures and leadership development programmes. He has written five books on leadership, coaching and sports, of which Coaching for Performance is the best known having sold 500,000 copies in 17 languages.*

You might enjoy this 1-minute video as an example of **How Not To Do Safety Training**:  
[http://youtu.be/u2TkmxcC\\_J0](http://youtu.be/u2TkmxcC_J0)