



AWARENESS OF THEIR OWN MENTAL MODELS CAN HELP COACHES STRETCH AND GROW

BY JOELLEN KILLION

Coaches make hundreds, if not thousands, of decisions that affect the daily work of teaching and learning. These decisions are not arbitrary; they are guided by the mental models coaches hold.

Mental models comprise our assumptions, beliefs, and generalizations, and they shape how we see the world and act in it. The concept of mental models, popularized by Donald Schon in his study of how professionals learn (Schon, 1987) and Peter Senge in his work on

organizational learning (Senge, 1990), has been described in multiple academic fields since the late 19th century.

Coaches' mental models are powerful factors in determining how they see and understand their clients' classrooms, the school context and culture, and the work that needs to be done. This is one reason that different coaches often respond differently to the same situation.

It is important for coaches to analyze their mental model, understand how it influences their work, and ultimately learn to expand it to best

meet clients' diverse needs and contexts. By becoming increasingly cognizant about the influence of their mental models, coaches can stretch and grow.

They can engage in an essential and ongoing process of "becoming" rather than getting stuck in the act of "being" who they are today. Too often, though, coaches with frenzied daily schedules lack the time and sometimes even awareness to examine their mental models.

This article explores three predominant mental models of coaches and proposes how coaches can overcome



SUMMARY OF PREDOMINANT COACH MENTAL MODELS

Mental model	HEART	HEAD	HAND
PRIMARY DRIVERS OF COACHING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feelings • Relationships • Positive emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rational and analytic cognition • Clarity of vision, purpose, and goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity-building • Removing barriers to action
CORE BELIEFS	Minimizing resistance and frustration increases teachers' appreciation of coaching and facilitates change.	Understanding "why" and engaging in deliberate, step-by-step planning facilitate change.	Jumping in and getting things done facilitates change, when coupled with developing skills and capacity.
MAIN CHALLENGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusing on practice • Having difficult conversations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow pace of change • Letting go of being the "expert" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saying no • Focusing work for impact

their limitations. As a business school professor and consultant who specializes in personal mastery, Srikumar Rao writes, "All transformation begins and ends with mental models ... when you change the model, you change your life" (Rao, 2006).

THREE MENTAL MODELS: HEART, HEAD, AND HAND

From interactions with and observations of thousands of coaches around the world, I have developed a theory that coaches operate from three predominant mental models. Each mental model has unique strengths and challenges, and each results in different ways of working.

To describe the three models, let me take you on a journey with three coaches preparing for a challenging

hike to the top of a mountain summit at the end of a school day. Before they begin the climb toward the summit, they examine what they packed in their backpacks that morning.

JAMES
MIDDLE SCHOOL
INSTRUCTIONAL COACH

James coaches through a mental model of the heart. He believes that relationships are the bedrock of coaching, and, in interactions with teachers, he focuses on relationships, motivation, and emotional support. He maintains laser-like effort on building and maintaining a culture of safety in coaching. He prefers to wait patiently for teachers to exhibit willingness for coaching rather than initiating interactions directly.

In a journal, he records notes about his work with teams of teachers so he can ensure all voices are heard. He has a manual of processes for building a sense of team within professional learning communities.

In his pack are a book of humor and snacks as antidotes to conflict, frustration, and stress. He also carries a plaque that says, "When teachers feel good about themselves, they are doing what is best for students." Near the top of his pack is a treasured thank-you note from a team of teachers expressing their appreciation for listening to their frustration.

James' own frustration is piqued by the strict accountability placed on students, teachers, coaches, and principals. He complains that there isn't a culture of continuous

improvement in the district and records notes of the many times he has talked with administrators, encouraging them to be more proactive in creating a coaching culture.

His greatest challenges are the lack of substance in coaching conversations and an unwillingness to have the difficult conversations to create dissonance essential for change.

JUSTINE

HIGH-SCHOOL TECH COACH

Justine holds a mental model of the head — one driven by cognition and vision and by logical, rational approaches to change. To her, telling is coaching. Advising, guiding, and problem-solving, she believes, are necessary to motivate teachers to act.

She packs her tablet and details of SAMR, a model of technology integration. She carries electronic files of research on the effects of technology integration on personalization of student learning, achievement, and teacher efficiency because she believes that data are crucial for convincing people to change.

She has a collection of the best apps for students and a curated collection of online resources for teachers. She has a digital archive of emails and tweets from colleagues who acknowledge how resourceful she is. They mention how she plans lessons for them that integrate technology and how quick she is to fix pesky technology glitches.

Justine has a healthy dose of impatience with teachers who avoid working with her. She continually seeks strategies to work with resistant teachers, and she worries that the same small group of teachers are the only ones who work with her.

Her biggest complaint is that the principal fails to advocate technology integration or her coaching services to teachers more actively. If the principal would require teachers to integrate technology and work with her, she believes, she would have entrée to more classrooms.

She is frustrated that data show

little change across the school in technology use. Her biggest challenges are being patient with the pace of change and letting go of the desire to be perceived as the expert to engage teachers in discovery.

JASMINE

ELEMENTARY MATH COACH

Jasmine coaches from a mental model of the hand. She believes that the more she does for teachers and the school, the more staff will value coaching and the higher results will be. By filling her day, she feels fulfilled. She is always busy, never a moment in a day to take a breath, eat lunch, or plan for upcoming coaching conversations.

She moves through the school like a whirlwind sharing resources, conducting demonstration lessons, answering questions, generating assessments for teachers, facilitating unit and lesson planning meetings, and filling in wherever needed.

“I can’t get into classrooms,” she tells her coach champion, “because I am so busy with teacher and principal requests,” and she missed the last district coach meeting because she was stepping in for her principal at the kindergarten parent meeting.

Her pack is filled with tools, skills, strategies, protocols, and maps. Her planning book and calendar are heavy and full. She also carries teachers’ notes that express appreciation for helping them with time-consuming tasks and for always saying yes to their requests.

Her greatest challenges are saying no to the insignificant requests that have little impact and reconstituting her current work to focus on what will have the deepest impact on teaching quality and student learning. The chief complaint she has about her work is that if she doesn’t do it — whatever that “it” is at the moment — it won’t get done or won’t be done well.

All of these mental models and approaches have benefits. Yet, no one of them alone is the best fit for every situation. Transformative learning, the kind that coaching seeks to achieve,

requires coaches to move away from a single mental model toward a broader one that supports fluidity and flexibility across multiple mental models.

Decades of research reveal that transformative learning, the kind that changes how people think and act, weaves together the heart, head, and hand, or as researchers would call them, relational knowing, metacognitive analysis of practice, and deep engagement. James’ relational mental model, Justine’s growth-oriented head model, and Jasmine’s action-oriented model can coexist. For this to happen, these coaches must first examine and understand the models they currently hold.

GROWING COACHES BY ‘BECOMING’

When coaches experience coaching or self-coach, they can pair a growing awareness and deepening understanding of their current mental model with a commitment to expand and extend their mental model to increase the effectiveness and impact of their coaching practice and better meet client needs. They are open to who they can become — and who the teachers they coach have the potential to become.

It takes courage, confidence, and capacity for coaches to examine their own mental models. Coaches grow by embracing the challenge and dissonance of the journey to undergo their own transformative learning. They acknowledge and discover blind spots, seek deeper understanding of their current mental models, and upgrade practices.

James, Justine, and Jasmine, the coaches ready to start the climb to the summit, have filled their packs with artifacts of their best current selves. Yet, to face and overcome the challenges the journey presents, they ensure they leave space in their packs for what they inevitably will learn along the way. Their packs will shift as they travel upwards — if they are open to becoming more than they are now.

Writer Maria Popova notes that

“becoming” is a conundrum most people grapple with —awareness that growth, either personal or professional, means transcending one’s current mental model to discover a more dimensional, intelligent, and enlightened one (Popova, 2014a). She describes “the excruciating growing pains of evolving or completely abandoning our former, more inferior beliefs as we integrate new knowledge and insight into our comprehension of how life works.

“That discomfort, in fact, can be so intolerable,” she emphasizes, “that we often go to great lengths to disguise or deny our changing beliefs by paying less attention to information that contradicts our present convictions and more to that which confirms them.”

Describing the origins of this behavior, she explains, “Once forced to figure out who we want to be in life, most of us are so anxious about planting that stake of being that we bury the alive, active process of our becoming” (Popova, 2014b).

Or, as Daniel Gilbert, a Harvard psychologist, in his 2014 TEDTalk *The Future of Your Current Self* says, “Human beings are works in progress that mistakenly think they’re finished.” At this very moment, he proposes, no one is what he has the potential to become.

Many teachers who step into coaching cease to become. This makes sense temporarily. They may experience dissonance when they move into the role of coach and grieve the loss of their own classroom, students, and identity as a teacher. To cope with dissonance, they double down on their comfortable mental models.

Alternatively, coaches may struggle with becoming because they are so enthusiastic about having “arrived” at their new role. Causing further entrenchment of mental models, coach preparation programs often inadequately address the necessary transition in mental models, preferring skill development over cultivation of a coaching mental model.

REACHING THE SUMMIT

James, Justine, and Jasmine have reached a turning point in their careers. They have decided to journey to the summit, to embrace a transformative approach to coaching, one that embodies the heart, head, and hand. What’s in their packs — and what will be in their packs — will determine how challenging the trek toward the summit will be and whether they make it to the top.

Often coaches’ packs are so full of their existing mental models, they have little room to adjust the contents. Along the way, though, the successful ones will offload unnecessary or outdated mental models and expand and add newly adapted or acquired mental models.

To do this, they answer these questions:

- Who am I as a coach?
- What is implicit and explicit in my decisions, actions, and words?
- What am I learning about myself, my practice, and my impact on my clients and the environment in which I work?
- How much available space is in my pack to add what I learn as I climb?
- How can I move beyond being once I reach the summit and keep searching for my next becoming?

To become and transform, coaches commit to the heart work of being vulnerable, appreciating dissonance that occurs with the change, and providing emotional support for one another. They engage in the head work of critical analysis and reflection to make sense of each experience. And they welcome the hand work, the labor of moving learning into practice in multiple short experiments that lead to more sustained practices.

To climb onward, coaches acknowledge the internal or external dangers that lie along the way — for example, when a school board asks if results realized from coaching are worth the investment or when teacher or

student performance slips in the process of change — and muster the courage to journey onward by seeking to clarify, learn from, and adapt their current mental model.

What lies at the summit of their successful climb is the joy of becoming more than they were at the start of the journey and shedding or adapting the mental models that limit their growth and impact.

Reaching the summit empowers coaches not only to experience their own transformative learning, but also to facilitate for others transformative learning that prompts and sustains permanent change in how they think, act, and speak.

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