

A COACH APPROACH TO MISSIONS PARTNERSHIPS

by Kelly McClelland

At the Interchange 2011 Conference, Kelly McClelland presented a training session on coaching. Here he summarizes some of the key concepts that make coaching skills appropriate to all aspects of missions partnerships.

What will it take to create and maintain strong, strategic, mutual partnerships in missions? Perhaps at the heart of things we need a new approach. I suggest that we consider a *coach approach* to our mission partnerships at all levels. What does that mean?

In her excellent book, *Christ-Centered Coaching: 7 Benefits for Ministry Leaders*, Jane Creswell lists seven good reasons to consider a *coach approach* in our interactions and partnerships. She notes them:

1. Leverages Your Strengths
2. Provides Clarity and Focus
3. Instills Confidence
4. Catapults Learning
5. Fosters Intentional Progress
6. Rubs Off on Others
7. Encourages God-Sized Goals

Can you imagine having those benefits in your missions partnerships? With that kind of a mutually beneficial relationship, what could the Lord accomplish through your efforts?

So What IS a Coach Approach?

There are many answers to that question. Formal coaching requires a good bit of training, re-learning, and discipline, and is not a fit for everyone. Several fine Christian organizations provide that level of training (see the list at the end of this *Postings*). But for most situations, I suggest the application of basic coaching skills that don't require extensive formal training. That is what is meant by using a *coach approach*. Although this article focuses on using a *coach approach* specifically in the context of missions partnerships (between mission agency, church, missionary, and/or national partners) the tools will be helpful in any and all sorts of relationships and collaborative efforts.



At its core, coaching revolves around a belief that the other person understands his/her own objectives—and possible solutions to achieve those objectives—better than we do. Thus, honoring the other's agenda is central to the coaching process. For us as believers, Christ-centered coaching is a natural way to esteem others over self and bring a solid biblical foundation to our relationships. It means being Christ-like and laying down our own agenda to support others' achievement of their God-given vision.

Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, But a man of understanding will draw it out.

Proverbs 20:5 (NKJV)

A *coach approach* is the method we can use to draw out the other person's understanding. Creating a safe environment and being a source of godly counsel allows for exploration and discovery. By laying down our personal/organizational agenda and focusing on our partner's agenda, we encourage partnership levels to increase built on a strong foundation of relationship.

Much like inductive Bible study helps people to discover the truth of God's Word and make powerful, transforming life changes, a partnership built on mutual respect and relation-

ship can bring forth God's best in our missions collaborations. This leads to faster and longer-lasting strategic results with the added benefit of God-inspired vision brought to realization.

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Discovery Listening and Powerful Questions

Two basic coaching skills can equip us for becoming *coach-approach* partners. Coaching requires the use of **discovery listening** and **powerful questions**.

Three Levels of Listening

Discovery listening is careful listening with an intentional effort to let go of our own thoughts and advice (i.e. **our** agenda) and really focus on our partner's agenda. Rather than listening on a surface or conversational level, we need to *lean in* and listen with our ears, hearts, and minds. In coaching lingo, normal conversational listening is referred to as level one listening—where we **listen to** someone.

Kimberly Dinsdale illustrates level one listening like this: *Three coaches are walking down the street. The first one says, "Windy, isn't it?" The second one says, "No, it's Thursday!" The third coach says, "So am I. Let's go to Starbucks."*

Conversational listening is the way we normally relate to others. When we ask, "How are you?" most of the time we don't pay much attention to what is actually said unless it is very unusual and manages to catch our attention. We hear people speak, but because we are thinking of what we want to say or do, we actually do not retain or process much of what we hear.

In Luke 8:4-8 Jesus was telling His followers something important in the parable of the sower. He asked them a question at the end of the parable to see if they were paying attention. "Are you listening to this? Really listening?" Luke 8:8b (MSG) Jesus made an important point, but He realized that the hearers were not focused on what He said. Jesus knew that they were not really hearing and understanding the point He wanted to make! If we tend to miss what Jesus is saying, how much more when we talk to our mission partners?

To begin to apply a *coach approach*, we need to use listening level two and **listen for** what our partners are saying. This is **active** listening where we fully engage and enter into the conversation as a participant and not merely as a casual listener. By choice, we make it important and focus on really hearing our partner's heart and vision.

Listening for means that we become curious and ask for more information and draw out and clarify what our partner is saying. When we *listen for*, we attempt to hear things at a deeper level and begin to understand the situation from our partner's perspective rather than attempt to persuade them to our view of things. This takes practice and control, but better understanding of our partner's situation, needs, resources, challenges, and desires can propel our partnership to new heights.

You'll know you are involved in an active listening conversation when you are noting what is being said, asking for clarification, and helping *draw out* information rather than *providing* information. Consultants, teachers, preachers, and yes, even missionaries and mission pastors tend to be providers of information and counsel. Active listening means laying

those skills aside to make sure that we are *hearing* what our partners are saying and not merely giving answers that may not fit the situation at all. It helps to begin to be more curious about what our partners really envision in our mutual efforts. Often we'll be very pleasantly surprised to see how the Lord has prepared the way for a strategic effort that would have been missed if we had not actively listened to our partner.

With a firm foundation and the help of the Holy Spirit, we may even reach **level three listening**. This is when we really begin to see through our partner's eyes, and we start **listening with** them. Although this is not an everyday experience, it is possible when we intentionally try to relate at a



deep level. Much like experienced basketball players seem to know where their teammates are and pass the ball to them without looking, we can begin to anticipate and act in sync with our partners.

Sometimes husbands and wives or

very close siblings or friends experience this level of intuitive relationship when they know where/what their partner is doing or thinking and they both act in unison without using words or signals. With the Holy Spirit's help, some truly amazing things can happen when we reach this level of understanding and collaboration in our Kingdom work.

Powerful Questions

To help draw out our partner's agenda using a *coach approach*, we need to use **powerful questions**—those that require us to relate, reflect, refocus, resource, and review, and then lead to awareness and clarity of purpose and methods. Coaches refer to these "5 Rs Results" as an outline guiding the discovery process.

No one has ever modeled powerful questions better than Jesus, and many books have been written on that subject. By using simple yet powerful open-ended questions, we can help our partners discover and express their own agendas like never before. In doing so, we find the common ground and resources we need to get the work of missions done in divine partnership.

A word of caution is necessary when we use questions. It is very easy to tack a question mark on the end of a sentence that is merely telling someone what to do. "Don't you think you should pray before you make that decision?" is an example of a closed question that is a thinly veiled attempt to shame another into praying. Remember to honor your partner and not drive the conversation with your own agenda



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through a pounding with multiple questions. Rather, ask open-ended questions that draw out the answers and help your partners become aware of their own ability to choose a course of action. Doing so edifies, builds, and encourages action based on the visions God gives. Empowering others is what Jesus is all about, and as His disciples we are called to equip and help launch one another in fulfilling our callings.



Coaching is not for everyone, but using a *coach approach* can benefit all. Agency representatives can connect in partnership with churches and national partners. Missionaries using a *coach approach* can build support partners faster by improving their communication and relationship skills. Church leaders can proactively recruit and prepare workers by simply listening well using powerful questions and coming alongside others.

If you'll move into using a *coach approach* in your life and ministry, the Holy Spirit is sure to help you find many ways to use it for God's glory.

It is beyond the scope of a short article to go into the details of honing your listening and questioning skills, but here are a few references that may help you connect with the training and resources you need.

Books:

- ***Christ-Centered Coaching: 7 Benefits for Ministry Leaders*** / Jane Creswell. Chalice Press 2006
- ***Christian Coaching: 2nd Edition***. Gary Collins. Nav-Press 2009.
- ***Coaching Questions: A Coach's Guide to Powerful Asking Skills*** and ***Leadership Coaching: The Disciplines, Skill and Heart of a Christian Coach*** / Tony Stoltzfus, www.Coach22.com
- ***Jesus Life Coach*** / Laurie Beth Jones. Nelson Publishers 2004

Other Organizations and Training Resources

- [Advance Global Coaching](#)

- [Christian Coaches Network](#)
- [Christian Coaching Center](#)
- [Church Resource Ministries](#)
- [Church Smart](#)
- [Coaching Mission International](#)
- [CoachNet](#)
- [Professional Christian Coaching Institute](#)



Kelly McClelland and his wife Connie became second-career missionaries after God called Kelly out of the headhunting business and into missions. They served in Indonesia for 10 years and then joined Pioneers, where Kelly was vice president of church resources. Recently Kelly launched *Transition Time Coach* to help people successfully navigate major life changes. For further info or to explore more options, contact [Kelly](#) or visit his [website](#).

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