

Book Review

The Four Greatest Coaching Conversations

Edited by Jerry Connor & Karim Hirani

Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2020
ISBN 978-1529391060

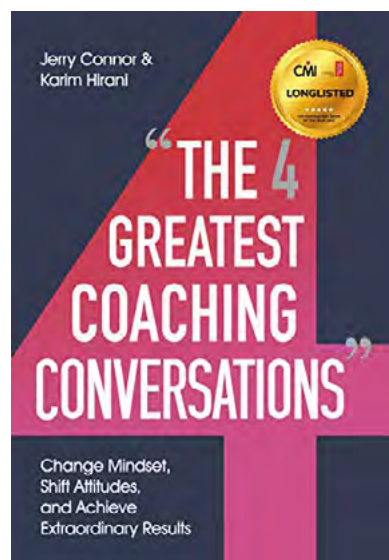
Reviewed by Paul Laughlin

WHO NEEDS to know the four greatest coaching conversations? This is a book that could really help leaders have more intentional coaching conversations with their reports or themselves. However, I fear it could fall between the stools of different communities in the coaching world. Let me explain why as I outline what you can expect from this book.

The book seeks to share the systemic insights and best practice gained from over 100,000 coaching sessions by the team at the company Jerry Connor and Karim Hirani co-founded.

A quick flick through the book will reveal that it is presented very much in the style of a 1990s leadership book. I was reminded of the writing style and clip art usage of stalwarts like Tom Peters. However, I wonder whether the apparent aims of the book will attract a suboptimal audience. From my experience, there are at least three clear communities attracted by coaching books. First, leaders in the business community seeing it a sub-genre of leadership development. Second, lifestyle coaches, especially from the life coaching, Gestalt and NLP tribes. Thirdly, coaches in professional bodies who work with academia to establish a solid research basis for their profession.

My fear with this book is that at several



points it seeks to assert that it can provide a research basis for best practice or is based on an established coaching theory. However, I find it to have insufficient research data to back up the first claim and to simplify coaching theories too much for the second claim.

However, I'm getting ahead of myself, let me first explain what you can find in this book that is still well worth leaders reading.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first, the 'four greatest coaching questions' are introduced and explained. In the second, the models underpinning those four questions are applied to teams or organisational transformation. In the final part, the thinking and theory behind the four questions is explained through the use of mindsets.

Those four brilliant coaching questions have short memorable titles. Be, Relate, Inspire and Think. They are introduced in Part One as having emerged out of analysis of what had worked during all the hours of coaching practice conducted by Connor and Hirani's business. It is readily apparent that these are indeed widely applicable and timely challenges faced by today's leaders. What is effective in this part of the book is the use of real-world examples to bring to life when and how to use the recommended questions in practice.

In brief (and these explanations do not do the book justice), the four questions can be understood as addressing the following challenges:

1. **Be:** When a client is 'stuck in their box' struggling to change behaviour or adapt to change. This is addressed through a simplified version of cognitive behavioural coaching, using the ETC model (emotions, truth, choice). To help people understand how to help clients through this process, readers are also introduced to a version of the 'drama triangle' from Transactional Analysis. This time it is represented by the imposed personas of Judge, Pessimist and Realist.
2. **Relate:** When a client is struggling with a stakeholder relationship or dealing with difference. This is addressed through a combination of work familiar to systemic coaching or empty chair technique and the 'presence triangle' (Self, Other, Environment). In both, an approach akin to the role of the observer from mindfulness practice is used, to help clients better consider other perspectives. There is also advice for framing your 'elevator speech'.
3. **Inspire:** When a client is struggling to inspire their team or set a motivational purpose/vision. This is addressed by the three steps of identifying values, visualising change and identifying experiments. The action learning cycle and other models from the world of leadership development help guide coach and client through vision scripting work.
4. **Think:** When a client is struggling to deliver the strategic or creative thinking needed by the organisation. Here

a model of five directions of looking is used (Up, Out, Down, Forward and In). This reminded me most of the work by Senge and others on systems thinking, together with some of the current best practice in facilitating innovation (design thinking).

The second part of the book left me less convinced. It felt like stretching the questions to fit the popular focus on team coaching. Not sure the models read across to work with teams, it felt more forced as you work through this part.

The last part of the book reveals an apparent basis in psychosynthesis. Here I come back to my opening concerns. Although this basis for the questions will help leaders understand better, the simplification of psychosynthesis was too much for me. Both Assagioli's famous 'egg model' and the approach of defining sub-personalities were present in ways that lacked key elements of this school of psychology.

So, in summary, would I recommend that people read this book? Yes, if you are a leader who has enjoyed books by popular authors such as Michael Bungay Stanier. It will expand your repertoire of questions to use. No, if you are a qualified coach. This lacks both a basis in proven research and key elements of presence, listening skills and the art of client-led conversations that are responsive to the emerging narrative.

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