

A blue-tinted photograph of two men in a factory or office environment. They are both wearing safety glasses and are looking down at a document held by the man on the right. The man on the left is wearing a dark polo shirt and jeans, while the man on the right is wearing a light-colored polo shirt and a lanyard. In the background, there are computer monitors, desks, and a calendar on the wall.

# THE PERFORMANCE TALK

## Having a Productive Conversation about Performance

*By John Norcross, SVP and Ken Wiesinger, VP, Evolve Partners LLC*

*“To be honest, I just don’t know what to focus on when I meet with the operations teams in the plant.”*

Terry was overwhelmed by the number of metrics being reported by each of the shift teams.

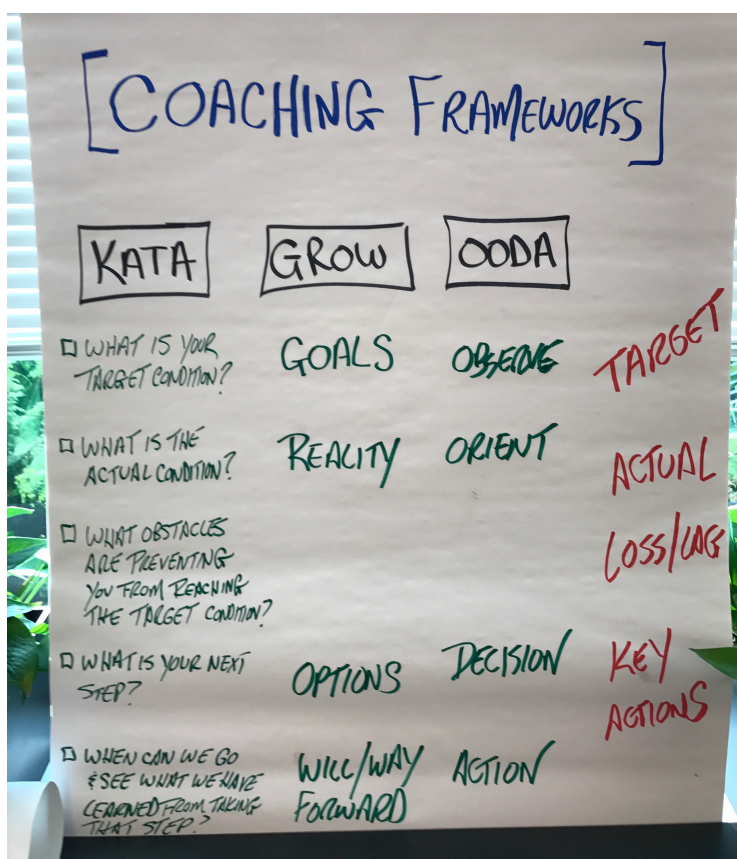
When she looked at performance across shifts and against the plan, there was a great deal of inconsistency. Few of the most important performance indicators were heading in the right direction. In an attempt to help front-line leaders like Terry, her company’s continuous improvement team had developed a long checklist of questions to ask operations teams when conducting a plant tour.

*“As soon as I get out to see the teams I find it difficult to know where to start and eventually lose focus. When I try to use the checklist, I feel as though I'm a robot working through a questionnaire. It doesn't feel real and I don't learn anything because I'm so focused on being compliant and asking 'the right questions'. In fact, all I think it does is disengage people.”*

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We were working with a client to find a better way of coaching the plant teams. For some reason none of the usual coaching frameworks<sup>1</sup> resonated with the client team. One of us started describing the basic structure of a coaching conversation on a flip chart and we suddenly noticed an acronym staring back at us.

The three of us laughed. It isn't like the world needs another acronym, and consultants, sadly, have a reputation for being amongst the top offenders in generating them. However, we could also see that it worked! Our client loved it and coined the phrase “Performance TALK”.



## **“TALK” is an acronym for *Target, Actual, Loss (or Lag) and Key Actions.***

### **Target**

- What is the target expectation for how this process is supposed to perform?
- What is the target condition for the process or operation in question?

### **Actual**

- What is the current, *actual* level of performance for this process?
- What is the condition of the process or operation at present?

### **Loss (or Lag)**

- What is the gap between Target and Actual? (Note: This can be expressed in terms of a “loss” in process performance, if you are looking at an output measure, or a “lag”, if you are looking at time-based performance, say, in the case of a project schedule)
- What is driving this loss? What are the root causes? What's getting in the way?

### **Key Actions**

- What are our options? Who needs to do what and by when?
- When shall we cycle back to look at the process again?

What resonated most was the fact that this was “just” a conversation and it didn't require a checklist (or any other collateral) that might get in the way of having a dialogue with team members about what they see. There wasn't anything to “get wrong” (in terms of not adhering to a procedure or some perceived “orthodoxy”) because the four topics were easy to remember.

## How do you use it?

The first step is preparation. What process are you interested in? Where can you go and see the process in action. Who can you speak with in order to understand more about the process in question? What is the motivation behind the Performance TALK (Hint: It should be orientated around *learning*, not judgement or evaluation).

The next step is to see the process in action and meet the people involved. These can be people working in the process itself, people accountable for the performance of the process, suppliers and/or customers.

The most important step is to actually speak with these stakeholders using a framework like TALK - in other words, *inquire and learn* through simple, open-ended questions, pausing to listen and knowing when to say “tell me more about that”.

Lastly, you need to live up to the commitment to return to the process and review the result of the intervention (i.e., the “key actions”).

## Summary

Regardless of what framework you use, the important thing is to help people develop a practical sense of **self-belief** (“we *can* do better”), **self-efficacy** (“I *can do* something in my sphere of influence”), **clarity** (“I *can see* the waste, variation and complexity in the business”), **choice** (“Here are the specific *options* I have”), **ownership** (“I see it ... and I own it”) and **action** (“Let’s get started!”).

View and download the **TALK model**. If using TALK as a model for structuring your conversations helps, **please let us know!**

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## Evolve Partners

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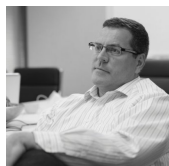
## About the Authors

### John Norcross, SVP, Evolve Partners



John joined Evolve in 2005 and has partnered with most of our clients' leadership teams on their biggest transformation efforts since then. In addition to his client facing role he led Evolve's Canadian operations in Calgary until 2015. Over his 20-year career in the improvement and innovation space he has worked with clients in the energy, chemicals, utility, healthcare and telecommunications sectors as well as co-founding a Strategy and Design firm in NYC. In April 2017 he took on the role of SVP, Accounts working with program teams across Evolve's global client base.

### Ken Wiesinger, VP, Evolve Partners



Ken has been part of Evolve since 2008 and is well known for leading complex implementations that bring about sustainable improvements in behaviors, systems and processes in order to maximize clients' production gains and profitability. Over the course of more than two decades, Ken has worked in a variety of corporate and consulting roles in the private equity, chemicals, refining, aerospace, manufacturing and oil & gas (oil sands, shale and conventional) industries.

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<sup>1</sup> The common frameworks we use to support coaching conversations include: GROW™ (Goals, Reality, Options, Will/Way Forward), DADA (Data-Analysis-Decision-Action), OODA (Observe-Orient-Decide-Act) and the five questions from the Coaching Kata (which is the model closest to the Performance TALK concept, in particular with respect to establishing target and actual process conditions). All of these are useful and recommended.

#### References:

John Braddock, *A Spy's Guide to Thinking*

Robert Coram, Boyd: *The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War*

Mike Rother, *Toyota Kata*

John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance*