

RYP Quarterly

Coaching and Counselling: How They Differ, and Why Great Leaders Need Both



An Article
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INTRODUCTION:

*In today's workplaces, leaders are expected to be motivators, strategists, problem-solvers, and mentors. Yet one of the most powerful capabilities modern leaders can master is the ability to support people through both growth and recovery. This is where two often-confused disciplines (**coaching** and **counselling**) play distinct yet complementary roles.*

Although they share some overlapping skills (empathy, great listening, and the ability to ask thoughtful questions), the purpose, intention, and methods of coaching and counselling differ significantly. Understanding these differences is not just a matter of vocabulary; it is essential for creating high-performing, healthy, and resilient teams.

This article breaks down the coaching and counselling dynamic, what each is, how each is applied in a workplace, and why leaders must understand both. It concludes with practical, safe guidelines for using counselling skills at work without stepping into territory that requires professional therapeutic training.

COACHING VS. COUNSELLING: THE CORE DISTINCTION

At its heart, the distinction between coaching and counselling can be captured in two simple statements:

- **Coaching is about growth and performance improvement.**
- **Counselling is about recovery and wellbeing.**

Both help people move forward, but they start from different places and serve different needs.

WHAT COACHING IS:

Coaching is future-focused, goal and performance orientated, and fundamentally optimistic about capability. The goal is performance improvement—helping someone unlock their potential, sharpen their skills, or move toward a goal.

Coaching questions sound like:

- What does success look like?
- What strengths can you build on?
- What options do you see?
- What's your next step?

It energises, stretches, and challenges. Coaching assumes the person is ready and able to move forward, but they may need clarity, support, or accountability, but they are not psychologically stuck.

WHAT COUNSELLING IS:

Counselling is present-focused and reflective. Its primary goal is recovery, emotional processing, and well-being. It helps people who are overwhelmed, distressed, fatigued, or carrying emotional burdens that block performance or decision-making.

Counselling draws out feelings, meaning, and personal insight by exploring:

- *What's really going on for you right now?*
- *How is this situation affecting you?*
- *What do you need to feel supported or safe?*
- *What would help you recover or regain balance?*

It is grounded in empathy, deep listening, and the ability to hold space. Counselling doesn't push for action until the person feels stable, heard, and supported.

COACHING & COUNSELLING IN SHORT:

- **Coaching** moves people forward.
- **Counselling** helps people get back on their feet so they can move forward.

WHY LEADERS NEED BOTH SKILLS:

Today's workplaces are fast-paced, uncertain, and often emotionally demanding. Staff can experience anxiety, overload, conflict, burnout, change fatigue, or personal challenges that spill into professional life. Leaders don't have to be psychologists, but they do need **counselling skills** to safely recognise distress, respond appropriately, support wellbeing, and create environments where people feel valued and understood.

Equally, leaders must use **coaching skills** to lift performance, develop capability, create a positive and safe team climate, and motivate people toward professional growth. The best leaders know when to use which and how to transition between them.

THE SKILLS OF COACHING, AND HOW THEY HELP LEADERS:

Leaders who coach well demonstrate:

1. **Strong Questioning:** Coaching questions are structured to open thinking—not feelings. They help staff gain clarity and focus on action.
2. **Future Orientation:** Coaches focus on goals, aspirations, and improvement—not dwelling on the past.
3. **Accountability and Challenge:** There is a level of productive tension: "What will you commit to?" and "How will we track progress?"
4. **Strengths-Based Approach:** Coaches assume people have capacity, talent, and solutions within them.
5. **Performance Mindset:** The aim is capability building, confidence, competence, skills, and execution. These are essential tools when improving results, setting goals, building high-performing teams, or developing staff.

THE SKILLS OF COUNSELLING, AND WHY THEY MATTER IN LEADERSHIP

Counselling skills allow leaders to support wellbeing without overstepping professional boundaries. These are not clinical therapy techniques. They are fundamental human skills that allow leaders to navigate emotional conversations safely and respectfully. The most important counselling skills for leaders include:

1. **Deep, Non-Judgmental Listening:** This means listening without solving, fixing, or interrupting. It conveys safety, presence, and respect.
2. **Emotional Validation:** People in distress often need to feel seen. Leaders who say, “That sounds really tough; I can understand why you’d feel like that,” build trust and psychological safety.
3. **Empathy Without Rescue:** Good leaders don’t jump in to take away pain; they acknowledge it and help the person navigate through it.
4. **Awareness of Boundaries:** Counselling in a workplace is about support, not diagnosis, therapy, or analysing childhood experiences. Leaders must know where the line is and refer to professionals when needed.
5. **Recognising Signs of Distress:** Leaders should pay attention to:
 - withdrawal
 - irritability
 - sudden drops in performance
 - feelings of being overwhelmed or confused
 - emotional outbursts
 - fatigue or burnout indicators
 - The aim is early intervention, checking in before things escalate.
6. **Creating a Safe Space for Disclosure:** This involves privacy, respect, and clarity about confidentiality (and its limits).
7. **Reflective Questioning:** Rather than pushing toward goals, counselling-style questions help someone articulate feelings and needs:
 - “What part of this is weighing on you most?”
 - “What would help you feel more supported right now?”
8. **Supporting Recovery:** This might include helping someone:
 - rebalance workload
 - take leave
 - access an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
 - negotiate flexibility
 - have difficult conversations
 - reduce stressors or conflicts

These Skills Allow Leaders To Support The Human Side Of Performance—Something Coaching Alone Cannot Address.

WHEN COACHING IS APPROPRIATE, AND WHEN COUNSELLING IS NOT

<p>Use Coaching when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone is performing well but wants to improve • The person is motivated and stable • The situation is about skills, direction, or decisions • The person is ready to set goals • The conversation requires accountability 	<p>Use Counselling when:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone is overwhelmed, emotional, or distressed • There is conflict, burnout, or strong personal impact • The person is stuck due to wellbeing issues • Emotions need to be processed before solutions appear • The person needs support more than they need stretch
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A Helpful Rule of Thumb

If emotions are high, start with counselling skills. If clarity returns, transition to coaching.

WHERE COUNSELLING SHOWS UP IN THE WORKPLACE

Leaders use counselling skills regularly, often without naming them.

- **Managing Change and Uncertainty** People experience anxiety or grief when structures shift. Counselling skills provide space for reaction and adjustment.
- **Supporting Burnout or Overload** Sometimes the person doesn't need new goals—they need recovery strategies, empathy, and support.
- **Conflict Resolution** Before addressing behaviour or outcomes, people may need to express hurt, frustration, or fear.
- **Difficult Feedback Conversations** Employees often react emotionally before they become solution-focused.
- **Personal Issues Affecting Work** Illness, family challenges, financial strain, and life transitions often show up in performance. Leaders need sensitivity and care.
- **Returning from Leave (stress, health, parental, or trauma)** Re-entry requires emotional support before productivity considerations.
- **Mental Health First Response** Leaders are not clinicians—but they are often the first person to notice when someone is struggling

HOW LEADERS CAN USE COUNSELLING SKILLS AT WORK, WITHOUT BECOMING COUNSELLORS

Leaders don't provide therapy, but they do provide support. Here's a simple, safe, and effective framework.

A Practical 5-Step Counselling Approach for Leaders

1. **Create Safety and Permission:** Use a private, calm space and ask: “Is it okay if we talk about how things are going for you?” People open up when they feel secure.
2. **Listen Fully Before Moving to Solutions:** Let the person speak. Don’t jump in with fixes. Silence is powerful. Use helpful phrases: “I’m listening.” Or “Take your time.”
3. **Validate Emotion and Experience:** Showing understanding reduces defensiveness and increases trust. Some Examples: “It sounds like this has been really challenging.” Or “I can hear how much this is affecting you.”
4. **Explore Needs, not Goals:** Ask questions that uncover what would help them feel supported. Some examples: “What would help make things feel more manageable?” or “What do you need most right now?”
5. **Support a Recovery Plan:** Co-design a simple support plan, which might include rebalancing workload, reordering prioritisation, providing temporary adjustments, arranging EAP support, or just checking in regularly. Coordinate this with HR if necessary. Remember, this is not goal-setting; it’s stabilisation.

When the person regains emotional footing, the leader can gradually, and respectfully, transition back to coaching.

TEN PRACTICAL TIPS FOR LEADERS USING COUNSELLING APPROACHES AT WORK

Here are actionable techniques leaders can apply immediately:

1. **Slow down. Emotions need space.** Rushing to solutions is a coaching instinct—but the distressed person needs the opposite.
2. **Ask feeling questions—not just thinking questions.** Try: “How are you coping?” or “What’s the toughest part for you?”
3. **Avoid minimising or silver-lining.** Phrases like “You’ll be fine” or “Others have it worse” shut people down.
4. **Keep confidentiality, within professional limits.** Explain clearly if something must be escalated (e.g., safety risk).
5. **Don’t diagnose, describe behaviour.** Replace: “You seem depressed.” With “I’ve noticed you seem quieter and more tired than usual.”
6. **Offer support options, ask questions, not prescriptions.** Eg: “Would it help if we prioritised your workload?” or “Would you like me to connect you with our EAP?”
7. **Follow up.** A single conversation isn’t enough. Check in gently and regularly: Ask “How are things going since we last spoke?”
8. **Know your boundaries.** If conversations become deep, complex, or personal, refer the person to professionals. Leaders support; they don’t counsel clinically.
9. **Model vulnerability.** A leader willing to share their own challenges (appropriately) normalises honesty.
10. **Shift back to coaching when the time is right.** Once the person is emotionally steady, coaching regains its value.

GREAT LEADERS COACH FOR GROWTH AND COUNSEL FOR WELLBEING:

Coaching and counselling are both essential leadership capabilities—but they serve different purposes.

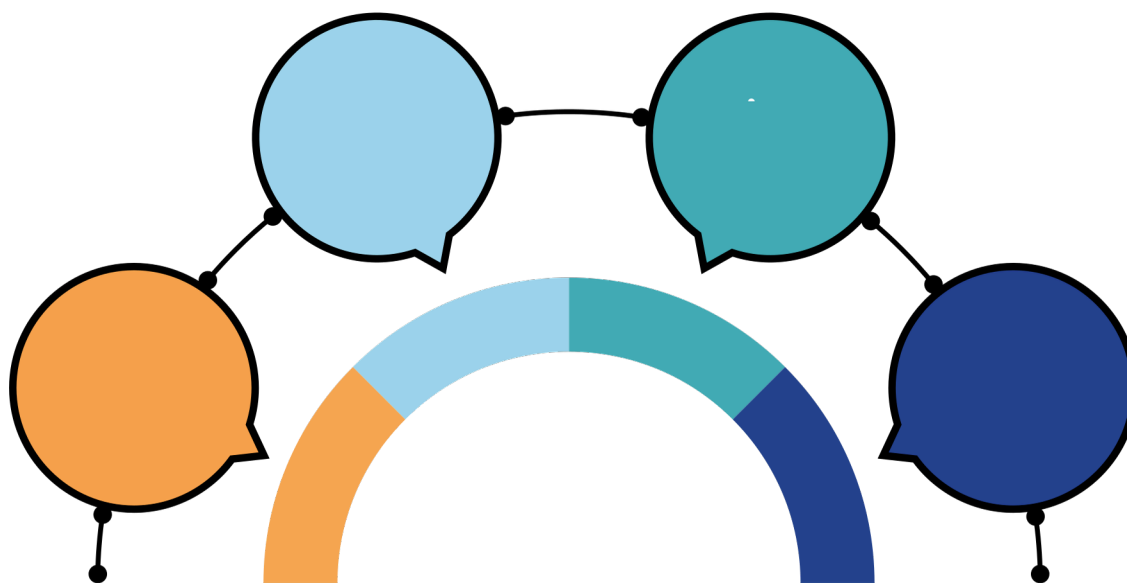
- **Coaching builds performance.**
- **Counselling supports recovery.**
- **Both together build trust, resilience, and a thriving workforce.**

When leaders understand the difference, apply the right approach at the right time, and know their boundaries, they create workplaces where people feel supported and empowered.

Leadership Lesson:

In a world where pressures are rising, and human connection matters more than ever, leaders who master both coaching and counselling skills become the leaders people want to follow

FACTA NON VERBA – DEEDS NOT WORDS



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