The Coaching Mindset: A Practical Leadership Tool, Not Just a Coach's Job

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A mindset, not a job title

Coaching is often thought of as something that happens in a formal, dedicated session with a qualified coach. But the underlying mindset, curiosity about another person's thinking rather than an urge to immediately fix it, is a practical leadership tool that any manager or executive can use, in ordinary daily conversations, without any formal coaching training.

This distinction matters because many leaders assume coaching-style conversations require more time than they can spare. In practice, the shift is less about adding new meetings and more about changing how existing conversations, a two-minute check-in, a project update, a quick problem someone brings to you, are handled.

The default leaders fall into without noticing

When a team member brings a problem, the fastest, most natural response for many experienced leaders is to offer a solution immediately. It feels efficient, and it usually is, in the short term. The cost is cumulative: the team member's own problem-solving muscle is used less often, they bring problems to the leader rather than working through them first, and over time the leader becomes a bottleneck for decisions the team could increasingly make on their own.

Three habits worth building

Ask before you advise. Before offering a solution, ask what the person has already considered, or what they think the right next step might be. Often they already have a reasonable idea and simply want it validated; sometimes the act of articulating it out loud clarifies their own thinking without any input needed at all.

Resist the first solution that comes to mind. The first idea a leader has is not always the best one, it is simply the most available, often shaped by how the leader themselves would approach the problem rather than what actually fits the situation or the person in front of them. Holding it back for a moment, and asking one more question first, often surfaces a better option.

Reflect back before responding. A brief, genuine paraphrase, "so it sounds like the real issue is X, not Y", does two things: it confirms you have actually understood the problem correctly, and it often helps the other person see their own situation more clearly, sometimes enough that they arrive at their own next step without further input.

Where this mindset is most valuable

It matters most in exactly the situations where leaders are tempted to skip it: when time feels short, when the leader clearly knows the answer, and when the stakes feel too high to "waste time" asking questions. These are precisely the moments where jumping straight to a solution most

reliably produces disengaged compliance rather than genuine ownership, and where a small investment of curiosity tends to pay off the most.

Not a replacement for direction

A coaching mindset does not mean a leader should never give direct guidance. There are moments, urgent decisions, safety issues, situations where the team member genuinely lacks the necessary information, where clear direction is exactly what is needed. The skill is knowing which mode a given moment calls for, rather than defaulting to advice-giving as the only available response. Leaders who develop that judgement tend to build teams that are both more capable and more willing to bring them the problems that actually matter.