

# The Three Questions

*A Framework for Coaching vs. Directing*

*"Before you decide how to help, figure out what's actually in the way."*

Managers often default to their most comfortable mode—directing when they should coach, or stepping back when someone needs structure. The difference between helpful and unhelpful support comes down to accurate diagnosis. These three questions help you figure out what someone actually needs.



1

## CAN THEY?

*The Capability Question*

Does this person have the knowledge, skills, experience, and resources to succeed?

### SIGNS THE ANSWER IS NO:

- They've never done this before
- They're missing key information
- They don't have access to what they need
- Errors suggest a gap in understanding



2

## DO THEY BELIEVE THEY CAN?

*The Confidence Question*

Does this person trust their own ability—even if they're objectively capable?

### SIGNS THE ANSWER IS NO:

- They ask for reassurance repeatedly
- They hesitate to start or decide
- They defer to you when they shouldn't
- They've done this but seem shaky



3

## WILL THEY?

*The Commitment Question*

Is this person motivated and bought-in? Do they actually want to do this?

### SIGNS THE ANSWER IS NO:

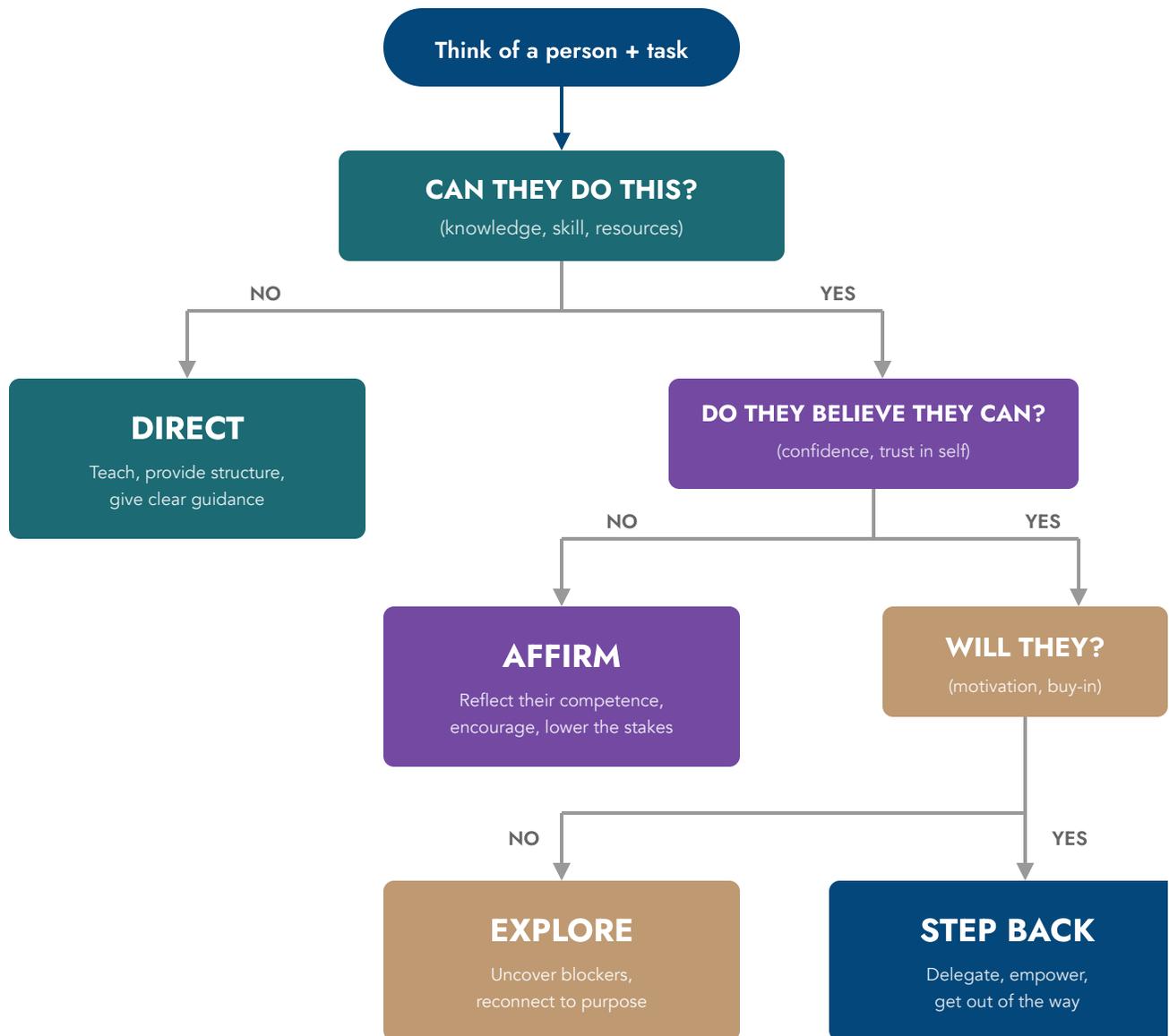
- The work keeps slipping
- They seem disengaged or checked out
- They do the minimum
- They doubt whether this matters

*These aren't mutually exclusive. Someone can lack all three, or just one.*

Your job is to figure out which gap is primary—because each requires a different response.

# Start Here: What Does This Person Need?

Think of a specific person and task. Then follow the flow.



**Note:** This is a starting point, not a rigid rule. You may need to address multiple gaps. But identifying the *primary* gap helps you lead with the right approach.

# Four Modes of Support

What each response looks like in practice

## DIRECT

When they lack capability

What it is	What it sounds like
Provide clear instruction, structure, and information. Explain the "what" and "how." Check for understanding.	<i>"Let me walk you through how I'd approach this." "Here's what good looks like for this." "Let's go step by step."</i>

**Risk if you skip this:** They flounder, lose confidence, make avoidable mistakes.

## AFFIRM

When they lack confidence

What it is	What it sounds like
Reflect their capability back to them. Reference past success. Lower the perceived stakes. Stay close without taking over.	<i>"You've handled things like this before—remember when you..." "What's making this one feel different?" "I trust your judgment here."</i>

**Risk if you skip this:** They stay dependent on you, or avoid stretching into new challenges.

## EXPLORE

When they lack commitment

What it is	What it sounds like
Get curious about what's blocking them. Reconnect the work to purpose or consequences. Surface unspoken concerns.	<i>"Help me understand what's getting in the way." "How does this connect to what matters to you?" "What would need to change for this to feel worth doing?"</i>

**Risk if you skip this:** You push harder on a symptom while the real issue festers.

## STEP BACK

When they're ready

What it is	What it sounds like
Delegate fully. Express confidence. Make yourself available without hovering. Focus your energy elsewhere.	<i>"You've got this—let me know how it goes." "I don't need to be involved unless you want me to be." "What support, if any, would be helpful?"</i>

# When You're Coaching: A Quick Primer

*The art of helping someone find their own answer*

When someone has capability and confidence but needs help thinking something through, your job shifts from teaching to facilitating. Coaching is about asking questions that help them discover their own path forward—not giving advice disguised as questions.

## The Mindset Shift

### INSTEAD OF

"Here's what I would do..."

### TRY

"What options are you considering?"

### INSTEAD OF

"Have you thought about...?"

### TRY

"What's getting in the way?"

### INSTEAD OF

Solving it for them

### TRY

Staying curious longer

## Five Questions That Do the Work

### 1. "What's on your mind?"

Opens the conversation without leading it.

### 2. "And what else?"

The first answer is rarely the whole story.

### 3. "What's the real challenge here for you?"

Gets past the presenting problem.

### 4. "What do you want?"

Clarifies the actual goal.

### 5. "What was most useful for you?"

Locks in the learning.

## Go Deeper: Resources for Building Your Coaching Muscle

### The Coaching Habit

Michael Bungay Stanier — The source for the five questions above. Practical, funny, and immediately applicable.

### The Advice Trap

Michael Bungay Stanier — The follow-up that goes deeper on why we default to advice-giving.

### The Tao of Coaching

Max Landsberg — The classic that introduced the Skill/Will matrix and practical coaching techniques.

## REFERENCES & ATTRIBUTION

The Three Questions framework is developed by Bevel Talent, drawing on the literature on management, leadership, and coaching. It builds on foundational work including: Landsberg, M. (2003). *The Tao of Coaching*. Profile Books. Dweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Random House. Coaching questions adapted from Bungay Stanier, M. (2016). *The Coaching Habit*. Box of Crayons Press.