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Bottleneck to Breakthrough: Why Trying Harder Isn't Always the Answer

The business trends reshaping **Coaching and Facilitation** and why understanding the human drivers of performance matters deeply.

Question: What do you do when a capable employee repeatedly misses targets, a talented entrepreneur keeps postponing their next move, or a team receives training but little changes?

Familiar responses: set tougher goals, provide more training, improve accountability or push people to try harder. But what if we're treating the symptom rather than the cause?

The changing business of people development

As AI transforms work, the ability to adapt, think critically and exercise sound judgement is becoming increasingly important. Deloitte's 2026 research found that 85% of surveyed leaders consider **workforce adaptability** critical, yet only 7% say their organisations are leading in continuously developing it.

Meanwhile, the coaching profession continues to grow. The ICF's 2025 Global Coaching Study estimated annual industry revenue at US$5.34 billion, with 122,974 coach practitioners worldwide.

These developments point towards a broader shift: people development must go beyond delivering information and building skills. It must also **help people translate what they know into meaningful action.** The question is no longer simply, “What does this person need to learn?” It's also, “What's getting in the way of applying what they already know?”

Diagnose before prescribing: Identity Ignite’s 4C Progress Diagnostic™

My Bottleneck to Breakthrough approach uses four areas to help identify where progress is stalling:

- Clarity: Is the goal meaningful, specific and genuinely desired?
- Capability: Are the necessary skills, knowledge, resources and support available?
- Consistency: Are effective routines, systems and accountability in place?
- Core Identity: Are beliefs and assumptions influencing what the person believes is possible, safe or acceptable and thus keeping them stuck?

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Consider an entrepreneur who repeatedly postpones marketing their business. They may lack a clear strategy (**Clarity**), need marketing skills (**Capability**), struggle to maintain a routine (**Consistency**), or fear that being visible will expose them to criticism (**Core Identity**).

The behaviour looks the same: no marketing. The solutions, however, are very different.

Effective development begins by identifying the actual bottleneck, not assuming everyone needs the same remedy.

How limiting beliefs keep us stuck

Sometimes, our interpretation of an experience becomes a rule we unconsciously live by.
Imagine an employee who once shares an idea and receives a dismissive response. They interpret this as evidence that their contributions aren't valued. Next time, they stay silent. They receive less visibility and fewer opportunities, which may appear to confirm their original belief.

A possible **cycle** emerges:
Experience → interpretation → belief → behaviour → consequence → apparent confirmation.
This is not inevitable, nor is every performance problem psychological. But it illustrates how an assumption can influence behaviour and become self-reinforcing.

The opportunity is to separate what happened from what we concluded it means about us.
A leader might ask: “What are you telling yourself about this situation? What evidence supports that conclusion? What else might be true?”

These **questions invite discovery** rather than judgement.

From limiting beliefs to new paradigms

Changing a belief isn't simply a matter of repeating a positive affirmation. A more useful process involves noticing the pattern, questioning the assumption, developing a credible alternative and testing it through action.

For example, a manager who believes, “If I delegate, the work won't be good enough,” might explore a different perspective: “I can establish clear standards, delegate progressively and help others develop their capability.”

The new belief becomes meaningful when the manager tests it, observes the results and adjusts their approach. Reflection, feedback and repetition help reinforce new ways of responding.

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This is where **skilled coaching and facilitation** can make a difference: **creating the space for people to think** more deeply, **challenge** assumptions and take **ownership** of their next steps.

A question for every leader: Is the person unclear, unequipped, inconsistent or constrained by an assumption? Are there organisational barriers that need addressing? What would genuinely enable progress?

Whether you work in corporate, public sector, an SME or a community organisation, the principle is relevant: Before prescribing another course, tightening controls or demanding greater effort, pause to investigate below the surface...

The most valuable coaches, facilitators and leaders will not simply be those who know the right answers. They will be those who can ask the **questions** that **reveal the right problem** and help people turn insight into sustainable action.

Before asking someone to try harder, let's ask: Have we truly understood what's really getting in their way?

Sources for publication: Deloitte, 2026 Global Human Capital Trends; International Coaching Federation, 2025 Global Coaching Study. Additional background: World Economic Forum, Future of Jobs Report 2025, which identifies analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility and agility among important workforce skills.

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