

# The GROW model

**T**GROW

**Topic**  
What is  
the subject?

**Goal**  
What do you  
want to achieve?

**Reality**  
Where are  
you now?

**Options**  
What could  
you do?

**Way forward**  
What will  
you do?

*"The carrot and the stick are pervasive and persuasive motivators. But if you treat people like donkeys, they will perform like donkeys"*

The above quote comes from the late Sir John Whitmore, who was one of the pioneers of the performance coaching movement (as well as a legendary racing driver) and a passionate believer in leadership as a quality that should exist throughout an organisation, rather than being concentrated at its peak. Together with his colleague, Graham Alexander, he created the GROW model in the 1980s as a way to make coaching conversations 'fluid, natural and artistic'.

I first encountered GROW in a coaching context; I was part of a fairly dysfunctional management board and an external coach had been drafted in to help us find a way to overcome this dysfunctionality and hold positive, productive board meetings. I should state for the record that (a) it turns out that I was a large part of the dysfunctionality, and (b) EVERY management board or team I've witnessed or been a part of has been a little dysfunctional, which I'd say is more an inevitable consequence of the human condition than a deficiency of leadership. In any case, the coach introduced the GROW model as a way for us to interact positively and to re-establish a sense of common purpose. And it worked.

# G R O W

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What will you do?

Like all good frameworks for structuring thought, the GROW Model follows a simple logic, although if we're being strict about this logic, then the model should include a (silent) 'T':

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## Topic

The first stage in a (T)GROW coaching conversation involves agreeing a topic. It's often the case that vague topics can be unravelled and the conversation focused on areas that are more important to focus on. In some cases, this can get you halfway towards a solution.

## Goal

Once the topic is clear, the next step is to agree on the most desirable and achievable outcome. Obviously, this needs to be as clearly stated as possible, but there's no need for the goal to satisfy the SMART criteria favoured by many consultants (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound). I actually have an issue with SMART metrics, as they force people to focus on a relatively narrow set of goals that happen to be quantifiable, whilst diverting attention from unmeasurable qualities that can make a bigger difference to how an organisation performs. I'm talking about stuff like culture, creativity and integrity. This is why it's more important for the stated goal to be stimulating than SMART.

## Reality

Once the goal is stated, we can move on to an assessment of the current situation: how is the organisation performing today? What are the internal and external obstacles to achieving our stated goal? And what resources do we have at our disposal to overcome those challenges? It's important that the goal is clearly stated before discussing current reality; otherwise it's really easy to descend into a pointless and unproductive blamestorm about the organisation's shortcomings and who's most at fault. With the benefit of hindsight, the worst board discussions I've been involved in failed because we started discussing 'Reality' with no 'Goal' in mind to keep us focused on the positive outcome we wanted to achieve. It's just too easy to become overwhelmed by everything that seems broken in a business if you don't also hold in your mind a vivid picture of how much better things will be if you can fix them.

## Options

Armed with a firm point of view on the current reality, challenges and resources, it's possible to move on to a conversation about options for

moving forward. This is the point at which we move past the issues and discuss how we can better marshal our resources to overcome the obstacles we've identified and achieve our goal. The aim is to develop a comprehensive list of potential options by appealing to the group's imagination and experience. The idea at this stage is to create and not to critique.

### **Way forward**

This is the action planning stage of the conversation. It begins with cycling through the available options and working through their relative strengths and weaknesses until a way forward is agreed. The crucial point is to (systematically) narrow the options down to a single agreed way forward through a rigorous process of evaluation and then to agree an action plan: what steps will be taken and when, who will be involved, and when will progress be reviewed.

Applying the GROW Model helped the management board overcome our dysfunctions and introduce a high feedback, high performance working culture. Beyond the boardroom, I've often found it an immensely helpful way to structure brand strategy. At the most basic level, it can provide a useful guide for planning management interviews, meetings and workshops. It also provides a sensible way to develop strategy presentations and reports. It's even possible to design the entire strategy development process using the GROW Model: beginning with visioning workshops; working with department heads to identify barriers and resources; exploring and refining different strategic alternatives; and then action planning based on an agreed way forward. Although its potential applications are extremely broad, I've found the GROW Model most useful in organising my own thoughts.

Like most (honest) brand strategists I know, I occasionally find myself wrestling with a problem that I worry I can't solve. The GROW Model is one of the tools I use to force myself to break problems down into simple, logical steps and to start making progress towards a solution. Actually, this is where the silent 'T' can be really helpful; sometimes the act of restating the challenge in my own words is enough to jog my brain into thinking more positively about the answer. (T)GROW helps me not to panic or freeze or be distracted by the prospect of failure. And as the late, great Sir John Whitmore once said:

*"We tend to get what we focus on. If we fear failure, we are focused on failure and that is what we get."*