GROW Model

The GROW Model is one of the most widely used frameworks in executive and performance coaching. Developed in the 1980s by Sir John Whitmore, Graham Alexander, and Alan Fine, the model provides a structured, goal-oriented approach to coaching conversations. It is designed to help individuals and teams clarify objectives, assess current realities, explore options, and commit to action.

The model was inspired by Timothy Gallwey's "Inner Game" theory, which posits that performance is often hindered not by external obstacles but by internal interference, such as fear, doubt, or limiting beliefs. Whitmore and his colleagues adapted these insights into a practical coaching tool for business leaders, managers, and coaches.

The Four Stages of the GROW Model

GROW is an acronym that stands for:

1. Goal

2. Reality

3. Options

4. Will (or Way Forward)

Each stage represents a phase in a coaching conversation, designed to guide the coachee from aspiration to action.

1. Goal: Defining the Desired Outcome

This stage focuses on clarifying what the coachee wants to achieve. Goals should be specific, measurable, and meaningful, and may be short-term (session goals) or long-term (developmental or strategic goals).

- Theoretical linkage: Aligns with Locke and Latham's Goal-Setting Theory, which emphasises the motivational power of clear, challenging goals.

- Coaching questions: "What do you want to achieve?" "What would success look like?"

2. Reality: Understanding the Current Situation

Here, the coach helps the coachee explore their current context, including internal and external factors that may support or hinder progress.

- Theoretical linkage: Reflects systems thinking and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön), encouraging critical reflection on assumptions and behaviours.

- Coaching questions: "What is happening now?" "What have you tried so far?" "What's working or not working?"

3. Options: Exploring Possibilities

This phase involves brainstorming potential strategies, resources, and pathways forward. The aim is to expand the coachee's thinking and generate creative solutions.

- Theoretical linkage: Draws on solution-focused coaching and design thinking, encouraging divergent thinking before converging on a plan.

- Coaching questions: "What could you do?" "What are the pros and cons of each option?" "What would you do if there were no constraints?"

4. Will: Committing to Action

The final stage is about converting insight into action. The coachee selects a course of action, defines next steps, and commits to follow-through.

- Theoretical linkage: Tied to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan), which highlights the importance of autonomy and commitment in motivation.

- Coaching questions: "What will you do?" "When will you do it?" "How committed are you on a scale of 1–10?"

Flexibility and Variations

While the model is often presented linearly, experienced coaches use it iteratively and flexibly, revisiting earlier stages as new insights emerge. Notably, the "W" has been interpreted differently by its co-creators:

- Whitmore: "Will" – the commitment to act

- Alexander: "Wrap-up" or "Way Forward"

- Fine: "Way Forward" – the plan for implementation

This flexibility makes GROW adaptable across coaching styles and organisational contexts.

Integration with Broader Coaching and Leadership Theories

Theory	Connection to GROW
Transformational Leadership	GROW supports leaders in developing others through empowerment and vision alignment.
Adult Learning Theory (Knowles)	Emphasises self-directed learning and reflection, both central to GROW.
Positive Psychology (Seligman)	Encourages strengths-based, future-focused coaching conversations.
Wilber's Integral Theory	GROW can be mapped across the "I–We–It–Its" quadrants: personal goals, relational dynamics, behavioural actions, and systemic context.

Business Application: Case Example – Nedbank Group

Context: Nedbank, one of South Africa's "Big Four" banks, has invested in leadership development and coaching to support its digital transformation and sustainability agenda.

Application of GROW:

- Goal: A senior leader sets a goal to improve cross-functional collaboration in a hybrid work environment.

- Reality: Through coaching, they realise that siloed communication and unclear role expectations are key barriers.

- Options: They explore strategies such as stakeholder mapping, team charters, and agile rituals.

- Will: The leader commits to piloting a new team onboarding process and schedules a follow-up coaching session to review progress.

Outcome: The GROW model facilitated a structured, reflective, and action-oriented coaching process that aligned personal leadership development with organisational priorities.

Conclusion

The GROW Model remains a cornerstone of coaching practice because of its simplicity, adaptability, and effectiveness. It offers a practical framework for structured conversations that unlock potential, drive accountability, and align individual development with strategic outcomes.