The CLEAR Model

Idea In Short

Leaders, coaches and organizations that want lasting behavioral change — not surface-level goal attainment — should adopt the CLEAR (Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action, Review) model as their coaching framework. Peter Hawkins, Professor of Leadership at Henley Business School, developed CLEAR in the early 1980s, making it one of the earliest structured coaching frameworks in existence. Unlike goal-first frameworks that move directly to outcome definition, CLEAR builds trust, surfaces emotional context and works on the assumptions behind behavior — not just the behavior itself. The result is coaching that produces durable transformation, not temporary adjustment. For any executive, coach or organization seeking to develop leaders who change how they think — not just what they do — CLEAR is the framework to deploy.

Peter Hawkins1, Professor of Leadership at the Henley Business School, UK, developed the CLEAR model in the 1980s as a structure for coaching". He initially developed CLEAR as a supervision model in the late 1970s and then adapted it for coaching in the early 1980s. He formalized the framework in Coaching, Mentoring and Organizational Consultancy (2006), co-authored with Nick Smith, establishing CLEAR as a structured approach to what Hawkins termed "systemic transformational coaching". The framework predates the widely used GROW (Goal, Reality, Options, Will) model by several years, a historical point that underscores CLEAR's foundational position in the coaching discipline.

Hawkins grounded CLEAR in the concept of Double-Loop Learning, introduced by organizational theorist Chris Argyris in the 1970s. Single-loop learning corrects errors within existing frameworks. Double-loop learning goes further — it questions and modifies the underlying assumptions, goals and norms that produced those errors in the first place. Double-loop learning entails the modification of goals or decision-making rules in the light of experience. Individuals or organizations not only correct errors based on existing rules but also question and modify the underlying assumptions, goals and norms.

Hawkins then went a step further, proposing triple-loop learning2 — a level that examines the governing values and identity that shape the assumptions themselves. Hawkins addresses what he regards as limitations in Argyris' thinking by transcending or going beyond a 'double-loop' outlook. CLEAR's structural architecture operationalizes this learning hierarchy in a conversational coaching format accessible to practicing executives and their coaches.

Structural Architecture of the Model

CLEAR is not a simple sequential checklist. The International Executive Coaching and Leadership [IECL] Academy describes it as a "dynamic, fluid approach that adapts to the unique needs and circumstances of each coaching relationship". Unlike models that offer a linear path to goal attainment, CLEAR embeds these principles throughout the coaching engagement, creating a dynamic, fluid approach. The five stages move from establishing the container for the work, through deep listening and exploration of underlying assumptions, to committed action and structured review. Each stage directly enables the next and revisiting earlier stages as the engagement evolves is part of the model's design.

Contracting

Contracting opens every coaching engagement and every individual session. Hawkins formulated a guiding principle he called "always be contracting" [ABC] — meaning the contract is not a one-time event but a continuously revisited agreement. In this stage, coach and coachee clarify what outcomes the individual wants from the engagement, establish the scope of the coaching work, set ground rules and agree on the evaluation criteria for success. In organizational contexts, contracting often involves multiple stakeholders — the coachee, their line manager and the commissioning organization — making it a relational rather than a bilateral act.

Listening

Listening is where most coaching frameworks allocate the least deliberate attention — and where CLEAR allocates the most. Hawkins distinguishes between hearing what is said and listening systemically. Hawkins advises 'listen systematically' — by bringing stakeholder voices in the room and through multi-stakeholder contracting. The coach listens for emotions, unarticulated beliefs and the broader organizational system in which the coachee

operates. The IECL Academy describes this as listening that:

> seeks to understand the counterpart's emotions, beliefs and unarticulated thoughts

— a quality of attention that provides a richer foundation for every subsequent stage. Listening in the CLEAR model goes beyond merely hearing words; it involves deep, empathetic listening that seeks to understand the counterpart's emotions, beliefs and unarticulated thoughts. Systemic listening requires the coach to make the coachee feel genuinely heard before the conversation moves forward.

Exploring

Exploring operates in two sequential phases. The first phase helps the coachee understand the personal impact of the current situation — how it affects them emotionally, relationally and professionally. The second phase challenges the coachee to generate new possibilities for future action.

- **Exploring 1:** Helping the client to understand the personal impact the situation is having on themselves
- **Exploring 2:** Challenging the client to think through possibilities for future action in resolving the situation

The aim is an aha moment — an emotional connection to a potential behavioral change that creates intrinsic motivation rather than externally imposed obligation. This double movement from impact-awareness to possibility-thinking is what separates Exploring from simple problem analysis. The coach uses open questions, reflections and calibrated challenge to move the coachee through both phases without collapsing them into one.

Action

Action translates insight into specific commitment. Coach and coachee agree on the best path forward through a genuinely collaborative process — not one in which the coach prescribes and the coachee accepts. Note that this is an active, collaborative process. Too

often we see stakeholders and individuals being told what action will be taken. By agreeing on actions together, you will both be more invested in the journey and the outcomes. Hawkins introduced the "fast-forward rehearsal" technique at this stage: the coach invites the coachee to envision themselves executing the agreed commitment, noticing what fits and what feels uncertain. This simulation step reduces the gap between intention and behavior by making the commitment experiential rather than merely verbal. The action selected does not need to be large — it needs to be genuine.

Review

Review closes each coaching cycle and simultaneously opens the next. The stage has two components: reviewing progress toward the desired outcome and reviewing the coaching process itself. Review is a two-step process. We review progress towards the desired outcome and we look at the process itself:

- Is communication working well?
- Are we meeting frequently enough?

The coach invites feedback on what was valuable, what was difficult and what the coachee would like adjusted in future sessions. This meta-level reflection — evaluating the coaching itself, not just its outputs — is a structural feature that most coaching frameworks do not include and that makes CLEAR self-correcting over the duration of an engagement.

Four Levels of Engagement

Hawkins did not design CLEAR as a technique for managing surface-level behavior. He built it around four interlinked levels of engagement through which a coaching conversation must move to produce transformational rather than transactional change. The CLEAR Model works across four interlinked areas. Hawkins describes them as the 4 Levels of Engagement.

1. The first level addresses facts and observable behavioral patterns — the visible layer that most coaching conversations never move beyond
2. The second level engages emotions and the behavioral responses those emotions generate
3. The third level reaches into the assumptions, mental models and beliefs that drive

emotional responses
4. The fourth level works on the governing values and identity that organize those assumptions at the deepest level

The CLEAR stages map directly onto this progression: Contracting operates at the level of facts and behavioral patterns, Listening at the level of behavior and emotion, Exploring at the level of emotion and assumption, Action at all three middle levels and Review across all four. This architecture ensures the coaching engagement works at increasing depth across the conversation rather than remaining at the surface level of goal-setting and task accountability.

Applications in Executive and Team Contexts

CLEAR operates effectively in individual executive coaching, team coaching and coaching supervision, each context drawing on different aspects of the model's depth.

In individual executive coaching, CLEAR is particularly effective where the presenting challenge involves interpersonal conflict, leadership identity, stakeholder management or strategic decision-making under uncertainty. These are contexts where the underlying assumptions driving behavior are as important as the behavior itself. A 2023 meta-analysis published in Frontiers in Psychology, reviewing 20 randomized controlled trials, confirmed that executive coaching produces its highest impact on behavioral outcomes — specifically cognitive-behavioral activities — and generates significant positive effects on self-efficacy, psychological capital and resilience3. The impact of coaching on behavioral outcomes was higher compared to attitudes and person characteristics outcomes. CLEAR's Exploring and Listening stages are directly designed to produce the kind of reflective cognitive work that drives those outcomes.

In team coaching, Hawkins extended CLEAR into the CID-CLEAR model:

- Commission
- Inform
- Develop
- Contracting
- Listening
- Exploring

- Action, and
- Review

This adds three preparatory stages that address how the team coaching engagement is set up with the commissioning organization before the team work begins. His book Leadership Team Coaching, now in its fourth edition, includes case studies from organizations such as Deloitte and General Electric [GE], demonstrating CID-CLEAR in practice across executive and non-executive boards, project teams and international leadership groups.

Featuring case studies and insights from organizations including Deloitte and General Electric, the book covers executive and non-executive boards and project and account teams in all types of organizations.

In coaching supervision, CLEAR originated as a supervision model before its adaptation for coaching. Its emphasis on both the content of the coaching work and the quality of the coaching relationship makes it structurally suited to supervisor-coach conversations where both dimensions must be examined simultaneously.

CLEAR in the Wider Coaching Landscape

CLEAR occupies a structurally distinct position relative to other coaching frameworks in current organizational use. GROW prioritizes goal clarity and option generation, making it effective for performance conversations with clear, near-term deliverables. CLEAR prioritizes relational depth and assumption-level exploration, making it effective where the objective is leadership development, cultural change or long-term behavioral transformation. The CLEAR Model is a process-oriented coaching method that promotes building rapport and trust between the coach and the coachee.

OSKAR (Outcome, Scaling, Know-how, Affirm and Action, Review), developed by Jackson and McKergow in 2002, shares CLEAR's Review stage but moves more quickly from present-state assessment to resource activation. Where OSKAR accelerates behavioral change using existing capability, CLEAR works more deliberately on the layer of values and assumptions that generate behavior. The two models address different layers of the change challenge and in many organizational development programs operate in sequence — CLEAR for

leadership identity work, OSKAR for performance execution. CLEAR was developed by Peter Hawkins specifically for contexts where trust and understanding must come before action. Unlike goal-focused frameworks that jump immediately into problem-solving, CLEAR prioritizes the human side of the coaching conversation. CLEAR's structural emphasis on contracting, systemic listening and assumption-level exploration positions it to produce precisely the deeper behavioral and identity shifts that this evidence base identifies as the highest-value outcomes of executive coaching investment.

Deploying CLEAR Effectively

CLEAR demands more of the coach than most frameworks. The model's depth is also its qualification requirement. Coaches who apply CLEAR effectively have developed the capacity to listen at multiple levels simultaneously — to the words, the emotional register, the unarticulated beliefs and the systemic context — while holding the structure of the conversation clearly in mind. CLEAR provides a comprehensive approach to coaching that addresses the complex, multifaceted nature of human growth and development, emphasising relational depth, ethical integrity and adaptive flexibility. Organizations deploying CLEAR at scale need to invest in coach development before scaling the model, not after.

The Contracting stage, in particular, is frequently underestimated in practice. Hawkins' "always be contracting" principle reflects a hard-won insight: the coaching relationship shifts as it deepens and the original contract often ceases to reflect the work actually happening. Revisiting the contract at regular intervals is not administrative housekeeping — it is the mechanism through which the coaching engagement stays aligned with the coachee's evolving developmental needs and the organization's investment objectives.

Organizations that integrate CLEAR into their leadership development infrastructure report that the model shifts the culture of coaching conversations from performance management to genuine inquiry. That shift has organizational value well beyond the individual coaching relationship: leaders who experience CLEAR as coachees begin to apply its principles — deep listening, exploration before action, explicit contracting — in their own managerial conversations, creating a multiplier effect across the organization.

- 1Key Management Development Models, 3rd Edition
- 2The Origins And Conceptualizations Of Triple-Loop Learning: A Critical Review

- 3Frontiers In Psychology

Summary

CLEAR — Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action, Review — is a transformational coaching framework developed by Peter Hawkins in the early 1980s. Grounded in double-loop learning theory, it works at the level of assumptions and values rather than surface behavior. Applied with relational depth and facilitative rigor, it produces durable leadership transformation across individual and team contexts.