



The Tell-Ask Continuum User Guide

The model

The Tell-Ask Continuum shows us a range of options we have when choosing how to interact with other people.



How we use the Model

Direct (Tell)	Mentor	Coach (Ask)
This is about execution and outcomes, telling others exactly what to do or providing answers to their questions or challenges.	This relates to knowledge transfer and sharing experience between the mentor and the mentee.	This is non-directive with a focus on eliciting ideas and thoughts from the participant, hence the focus is on asking questions.

There is also the option of providing no feedback - 'meddle' less and observe more, perhaps using some nuanced body language (a smile, thumbs up etc) and not talking at all!

One of the core roles in mentoring and developing others is to train a way of thinking or training the problem-solving capacity and independence of the mentee. With this approach, you're not so much mentoring a task as you are mentoring a person.

Why the model is useful

When we shift from telling to asking, we help to facilitate others' learning and empower individuals to search for their own solutions.

When working at the Tell end of the continuum, we are operating on our own agenda – communication is one way and there is minimal involvement by the mentee. Operating at the Tell end, where we give our mentee the answers to their problems, also trains a mindset that when they have a problem, they come to us for the solution.



Instead, when working at the Ask end of the continuum, we are operating on the agenda of the mentee, and communication is two-way. We are still helping our mentee find the answer, but we're also training them in how to think through solving their own problems which they can take with them and apply in different environments.

Why the model might be challenging

Adopting a more questioning style can be challenging if you are used to being seen – and, perhaps, treated – as an expert with the answers; it might even feel as though you are not doing your job properly to be asking questions instead of giving answers. However, a significant benefit of operating at the right-hand end can be developing in others the self-reliance and individual capability necessary to solve problems, rather than always coming to you for the answers.

Moving from telling to asking involves asking questions that:

- Stimulate people to think in new ways.
- Help people to reframe problems as challenges or opportunities.
- Help people to develop greater awareness and broader perspective on issues they are facing.
- Help people generate more creative options for addressing challenges.

What it looks like in practice

The following provides explanations and examples of when you might choose to interact with another person from each of the three sections of the Tell-Ask Continuum.

Direct (Tell) When to use it	Mentor When to use it	Coach (Ask) When to use it
Good for short term outcomes (e.g. when sharing information or facts, providing instructions on how to do something).	When the mentee is seeking the expertise of a mentor for advice and guidance.	Ask questions when you want to empower someone. Help them solve their own issue or build on their capability by driving independent thought.
Examples	Examples	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching a new skill • Guiding someone new to their role • Giving a presentation or update in a staff meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giving tips for critical feedback to an athlete • Managing parent expectations • Handling a participant questioning an official's decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting a coach with how to progress or regress an activity • Creating a safe environment to fail and learn • Building connection and trust with a new team



Contextual Scenario

Below represents a fictional exchange between a Netball Umpire Coach, Carol, who was supervising a Junior Umpire, Maddie, learning to officiate on her own. Notice the difference between the two conversations and how Maddie interacts with Carol as her Umpire Coach when Carol operates at either the Tell and Ask ends of the continuum.

Operating in the 'Tell' end of the continuum

Umpire coach - tells	Tell – Ask Continuum	Junior umpire - responds
Hi Maddie! Let's talk about what happened in the last quarter when you got into a bit of trouble.	Tell Direct	Yeah, I messed up the offside call - but I want to know how I can react better to make a more informed call.
You weren't in the best position to make the call and you missed seeing the WD contact the WA.	Tell Direct	Right – I sort of know that.
You need to run faster after the intercept to get around to the base line so you can see the play and all players.	Tell Direct	Yeah okay.
So, what will you do next time?	Ask Coach	Run faster

The above example depicts the Umpire Coach giving an answer to a problem.

The below example demonstrates the Umpire Coach providing the Umpire with the tools to operate differently to improve her officiating by asking relevant questions to help her understand the factors that influenced her decision making.

Operating at the 'Ask' end of the continuum

Umpire coach – asks and supports	Tell – Ask Continuum	Junior umpire - responds
Good work today, Maddie! Tell me about some of the things you did well in the game?	Ask Coach	I used my whistle well and was clear with my decisions and hand signals.
I agree - your whistle use was short, sharp and hand signals clear and decisive. Well done!	Mentor	Thanks.
What aspects of your umpiring didn't go to plan?	Ask Coach	I messed up the offside call in the last quarter - but I want to know how I can react better to make a more informed call.
Okay, tell me more about what happened there?	Ask Coach	I thought the WA went offside into the goal circle, so I gave a free pass to the other team. But I think it was the wrong decision.



Umpire coach – asks and supports	Tell – Ask Continuum	Junior umpire - responds
What makes you think it was the ‘wrong decision’?	Ask Coach	I thought at the time she might have been pushed but I had already made my decision. Then I saw the reaction of the players, so I thought she may have been pushed offside.
How would you know if she was in fact pushed?	Ask Coach	I'm not really sure – because I couldn't see it completely – I just saw the aftermath and realised I may have missed it.
Would you like me to give you my thoughts?	Ask	Yes please.
You did sprint down to the goal circle which was great, but then you stopped.	Ask Coach	Yes, I stopped because I was distracted by the ball which rolled onto the court.
Oh, I see. As it was in the other Umpire's area of control, you didn't need to worry about that. So, what could you have done instead?	Mentor Ask	I should have kept going around to the base line so that I could see the WA & WD.
Yes, coming right around means you can see more players, not just those in the goal circle.	Mentor	Yeah, I could have seen if the WD did make contact to cause the WA to go offside.
So how might you avoid this happening again?	Ask Coach	I will sprint down after the intercept and make sure I'm around on the base line to see all players if the ball moves quickly to the circle.
Excellent – I look forward to your next game.	Mentor	Great – thanks for your support and feedback.

How to know if it's working

As you improve your skill at making interaction appropriate choices and moving from telling to asking, you will notice that the people you work with developing their ability to respond to situations without you needing to give them solutions. In time, a lot of your conversations will feature many more questions from you than directions.

Self-reflection and action learning

Use the [Action Learning Guide](#) to practice applying the models and techniques in your specific context and situation.