



The autopilot is a collection of both positive and negative default behaviors that people display without awareness and without a concerted effort to act more appropriately. We all have an autopilot mode, and it consists of our typical reflexive reactions to given situations or people.

The benefit of autopilots is that they save time and mental effort, and they often work well. They come in handy by simplifying and speeding up our responses to familiar situations. Our autopilot is our brain understanding what has worked for us in the past and selecting what might work again, especially in an emergency.

Autopilot behaviors are hard to break because they are deeply wired into our brains by constant repetition. It is even more difficult to change our autopilot if the majority of those behaviors have worked or been accepted in the past.

## ■ The Intersection Between Coaching and the Autopilot

Identifying one's autopilot promotes critical self-awareness for employees [coachees], and self-awareness eventually yields to improvements in behaviors, skills, and performance. To get the most out of this powerful concept, coachees should follow a set process. First, they should strive to become aware of their default behaviors. Second, they should understand and accept how their behavior influences others. Third, they should become mindful so they can feel the autopilot about to surface. Fourth, they should decide whether the autopilot response is the most appropriate response for the situation, and if not, they subsequently should choose and

use the best possible response. This sequence begins with awareness and is followed by understanding and mindfulness to set the stage for self-management and growth. At Performex, we refer to this process as “Name it, Claim it, and then Tame it.”

The coach’s role is to guide the coachee through this process.

## ■ Strength, challenge, or both?

Performex’s internal data, collected from thousands of participants, suggests that close to 85% of people have a strength taken too far acting as their primary or secondary autopilot. This means that they overdo an automatic response to the point that it becomes detrimental to both their personal effectiveness and their interactions with others.

Other coachees have behavioral or skill challenges that are results of fear, unmet needs, and gaps in understanding.

## ■ Some Typical Autopilots

**The Expert:** An engineer who loves to do the work so much that he or she fails to delegate to direct reports.

**The Empath:** The kind and empathetic manager who cannot provide negative feedback or take disciplinary action out of fear of hurting an employee.

**The Debater:** The individual who is skilled at debating so feels compelled to “win” every discussion or argument.

**The Perfectionist:** The manager who insists on perfection to the point of wasting time and resources.

**The Bull-in-a-China-Shop:** The person who is known for getting tough assignments done but leaves a lot of collateral damage by behaving in a thoughtless manner in the process.

**The Control Freak:** An employee who crosses the fine line from being a detail-oriented manager to becoming a micro-manager.

**The List-Checker:** The individual whose desire to cross things off his or her list is so strong that he or she cannot eliminate or defer unimportant work.

**The Introvert:** The manager who so dislikes interacting with others that he or she does not build positive relationships or initiate needed discussions.

**The Showman:** Especially gifted orators who place a high value on excitement but may be short on substance, analysis, planning, and results.

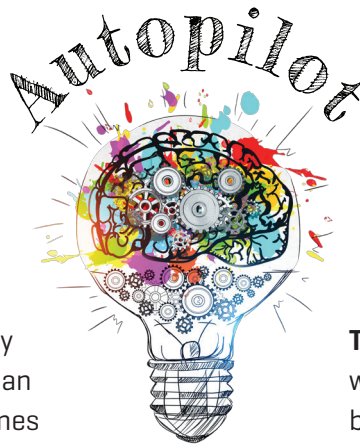
**Overly Cautious:** The individual who is so risk-adverse that he or she avoids making needed decisions in a timely manner.

**The Risk-Taker:** The employee who makes decisions that are reckless and are outside a reasonable risk-reward analysis.

**The Easily Distracted Employee:** The employee who tends to lose focus, procrastinate on important tasks, show up late for important meetings, or even ignore assignments he or she considers boring.

**The Seat-of-the-Pants Manager:** A manager that is successful at using intuition while avoiding planning. As he or she take on more complex tasks, the lack of formal approach causes missed deadlines and results below expectations.

**The Driver-Who-Gets-it-Done:** Bosses who are overbearing often are hyper-focused type “A” people that have weak interpersonal skills. They are proud of their ability to get results, but they lack awareness of how their behavior and lack of empathy are received by their direct reports.



Name it, Claim it,  
and then Tame it.



As a result, autonomy, engagement, and experimentation are stifled.

## ■ How Do Coaches Help Coachees Discover Their Autopilot?

If you are a coach, introduce the autopilot concept to your coachee by sharing this video [link to autopilot video]. After the viewing, ask the following questions to verify and reinforce understanding.

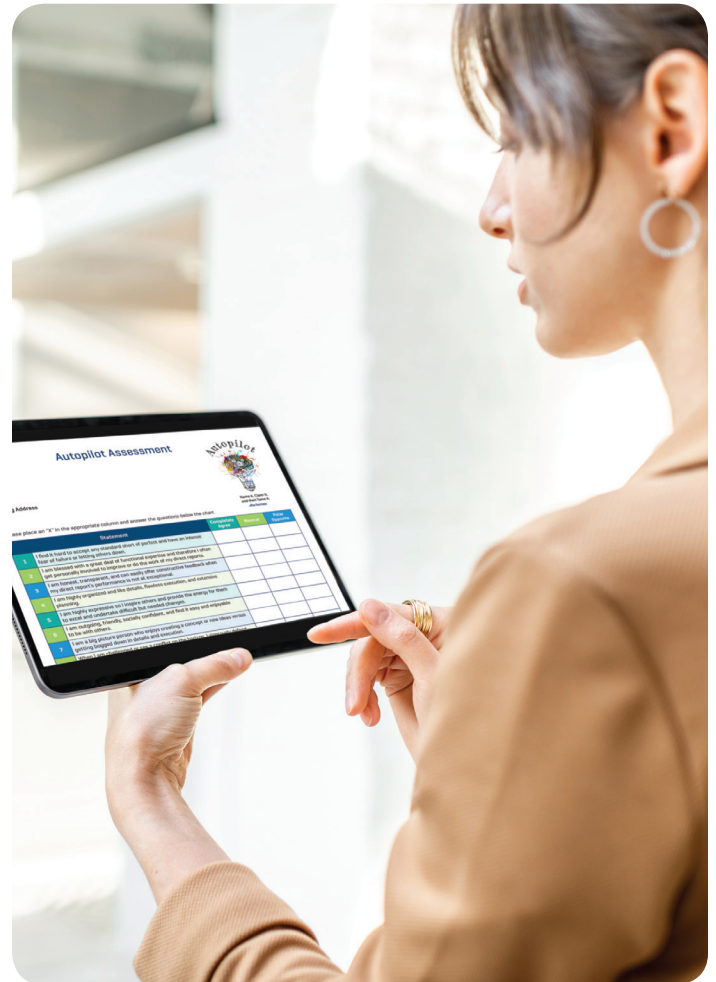
- ❑ What is the autopilot? What role does it play in leadership development?
- ❑ The video says sometimes people take their strengths too far. What does this mean?
- ❑ What was the process the video describes for managing the autopilot?

Once they understand and buy into the concept, coachees can discover their autopilot through behavioral assessments, introspection, and assistance from a manager/coach.

Performex uses more than seven behavioral assessments for autopilot identification. However, we have found that the most helpful and easy-to-interpret assessments for autopilot identification are the Firo-B assessment [[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental\\_interpersonal\\_relations\\_orientation](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_interpersonal_relations_orientation)], our proprietary 360 multi-rater [[insert credit card access to Summit 360]], and the Performex autopilot assessment [Insert Link].

Firo-B helps identify autopilots that stem from a person's reaction to and need for control, one-on-one relationships, and group participation. In addition, the algorithms for various clusters of questions ferret out other potential autopilot behaviors such as rebellion, masking one's feelings, and more.

The propriety 360 Multi-Rater evaluates behaviors associated with competencies such as empathy, delegation, accountability, planning, leadership, organizational skills, and communication.



The Performex Autopilot Self-Assessment is a straightforward assessment of more than 15 different autopilot behaviors. The resulting report helps the employee find characteristics that are most likely related to their autopilot.

The coach, with assistance from Performex, should select one or more of the assessments to help the coachee identify their behavioral tendency and subsequently their autopilot. For access to these assessments contact Performex LLC at 855.PFX.LEAD [855.739.5323] or by Email at: [info@performex.com](mailto:info@performex.com).

Here are our recommended techniques for you to help your coachee Name, Claim, and then Tame their autopilot.





## GROW Coaching for the Autopilot

### ■ GOAL Questions

Like in the general GROW coaching model, the GOAL step when coaching for autopilots is to set measurable endpoints that are motivational, inspirational, and challenging. Behavioral change and inspection are not easy, and without motivation and perseverance, your coachee will either fail altogether or stop short of mastery.

The GOAL can be related to a specific assignment, skill, or behavior, or to big picture items (such as career and life goals).

- ❑ What are your immediate, short-term, and long-term career goals?
- ❑ Do these overall career objectives fit with your team's objectives?
- ❑ How will you know that you have achieved these goals? What non-work-related benefits will you receive by improving this skill, behavior, or your performance?
- ❑ How will you know that the obstacle has been addressed and/or the problem or issue has been solved?
- ❑ How will you measure your success against this particular goal?

- ❑ What would happen if you eliminated the negative behavior or mastered the new skill?
- ❑ How will these changes impact your relationships with your family, friends, and boss?

### ■ REALITY Questions

Reality questions are the “now,” or the starting point, for the coaching interaction. They are called reality questions because they are a measure of actual, “on-the-ground” situations. Some examples of REALITY questions that can help your coachee name and claim their autopilot are:

- ❑ What is your current reality?
- ❑ What has happened in the near past (what, who, when, and how often)?
- ❑ What is the effect or result of this on your performance reviews, discussions with your boss, and on your reputation and personal brand?
- ❑ What predominant behaviors are holding you back from your GOAL?
- ❑ What are your two greatest strengths as a leader? Are these strengths over-used? If so, what is the impact of this overuse?

- ❑ For your high and low scores, what did the Firo-B assessment, 360, or autopilot assessment tell you about your leadership style and autopilot?
- ❑ How do you feel under stress and in challenging interpersonal situations? Are there unproductive behaviors that surface?
- ❑ Under stress, how do your body language, words, and actions shift into your autopilot mode?
- ❑ What causes you to interrupt, fail to delegate, become aggressive or passive, blame others, micromanage, or fail to listen actively?
- ❑ What is the predominant autopilot behavior you need to control?
- ❑ If you asked a colleague, peer, or manager, what would he or she say about you?
- ❑ On a scale of one to ten, how severe/serious is your autopilot?

At the end of the session, give your coachee these instructions:

1. Create a list of challenging situations that routinely arise and identify your typical responses.
2. Try to examine these responses from an inquisitive and objective third-person point of view. Consider your skills, challenges, behaviors, and motivations. These interpersonal situations will typically manifest

during meetings, conversations, negotiations, conflicts, and other conditions when you should respond strategically.

3. Create a name for your autopilot.

## ■ Naming the Autopilot

The first step for coachees to effectively manage their autopilot is to create a catchy name for it so they can easily recall its features and examine the impact it has on others. When they tie the name to their dominant automatic processes, the autopilot no longer sits in the back of their minds and out of reach. Labeling the autopilot allows their coaches to push the concept into their consciousness. Almost immediately after the coachee begins making an unconscious habitual response conscious, it becomes less automatic, and they can begin to control it.

- ❑ What is your autopilot name?
- ❑ Why did you select that name?
- ❑ What are the pluses and minuses of this particular autopilot behavior?
- ❑ Is there a secondary autopilot behavior you have identified? Does your autopilot name capture this autopilot? Would another name that incorporates both the primary and secondary autopilot behavior help or hurt your development GOAL?



## ■ OBSTACLE Questions

OPTIONS are behaviors, actions, or decisions that lead the coachee towards his or her GOAL. Your objective as a coach is to let your coachee brainstorm a long list actions they can take to overcome obstacles that would prevent them from taming their autopilot.

Typical general questions that you can use to explore OPTIONS are:

- ❑ What resources/time do you need to tame or manage your autopilot?
- ❑ What is one small baby step you can take now to tame your autopilot? What else could you do?
- ❑ What if these constraints were removed? Would that change things? How?

Because the autopilot is a collection of reflexive responses (and reflexive responses are challenging to tame), the OPTIONS, and eventually the WAY FORWARD, need to be practical and effective. First, an action plan must include items to keep the issue front and center. Second, there should be methods the coachee will employ to deal with the discomfort and awkwardness associated with change. Third, a good WAY FORWARD will include mindfulness and stress reduction techniques. Finally, the coachee needs to know and articulate what excellence or skill mastery looks like.

## ■ Staying on Track: Keeping the Autopilot Front and Center

Mnemonic and other memory devices can play an essential role in learning to manage one's autopilot. These techniques can help your coachee remember to act more appropriately than his or her autopilot response would dictate.

Our coachees have given us some of the best ideas for mnemonic devices. One participant changed his phone screen to a picture of himself with his autopilot name as a caption. Another participant framed a caricature she drew of herself in autopilot mode. This image sits on her desk as a reminder not to operate in her autopilot each day. Use the following questions to help your coachee flush out



OPTIONS:

- ❑ What reminders can you use to keep you on track to tame your autopilot on a daily basis?
- ❑ How will you sustain the effort and dedicate time to taming the autopilot for a positive change?

Visualization is another powerful tool for taming your coachee's autopilot and keeping that GOAL front and center. Visualization activates the subconscious brain to generate creative ideas to achieve goals. It engages the whole brain to solve problems. Furthermore, it enables the law of attraction, thereby subconsciously drawing into your life the people, resources, and circumstances you will need to reach your goal. By practicing visualization daily, or even weekly, your coachee will make significant progress in reaching his or her goal.

Instruct the coachee to follow this process:

- ❑ Close your eyes. Take three deep breaths.
- ❑ Visualize yourself performing at a whole new level of performance.
- ❑ Imagine the joy you will have once you are successful.
- ❑ Picture yourself in this new state.
- ❑ What is the situation? What are you doing differently? What does your tamed autopilot feel like?





- Tell the coachee to create and then recite an empowering phrase to build focus and reprogram their brain to think differently.

Ask the coachee:

- Please complete this statement: "I'm confident and competent, and I will overcome my autopilot by \_\_\_\_\_."
- How did reciting this statement make you feel?
- What are the words that describe your tamed autopilot?

An accountability partner, often a peer or colleague, helps a coachee stay on track and adhere to the commitment to manage his or her autopilot. Find someone that does not have similar development needs. In fact, a peer who is more highly skilled is preferable.

Ask the coachee:

- Are you familiar with the concept of an accountability partner? If so, what does this mean to you?
- How could an accountability partner help you tame your autopilot?
- What specific traits would an accountability partner need to have to help you the most?
- Who could be your best accountability partner to observe you and provide objective feedback and encouragement?

- Would this prospective partner be someone you would hate to disappoint?
- Will you let your partner know that you are depending on them to tell you the unvarnished truth and counting on them to keep you on track?

## ■ Dealing with the Discomfort and Awkwardness Associated with Change

Coachees often need to endure a period of discomfort as they master complex new skills and change behaviors. Some coachees will seek to eliminate this source of discomfort as soon as possible. To them, the new behaviors will feel almost like physical pain. Paradoxically, the desire to eliminate this discomfort causes many people to slip immediately back into their autopilot mode, where they then regain peace and control.

Ask the coachee:

- What scares you the most about making these changes?
- How will you reward yourself for leaning into discomfort?
- How will you prevent the stress or discomfort you might feel when trying a new behavior from derailing your efforts to improve?
- How will you know you are successfully taming your autopilot?
- How will you avoid quitting or declaring premature victory or success?

## ■ Taking Baby Steps with the Spacing Technique to Lessen the Awkwardness

The spacing learning technique does the opposite of cramming a lot of change into a short period of time. We have seen that making a little progress every day over an extended period ensures positive change.

Coachees often have a great deal invested in their habits and the way they do things. These investments include the sense of self-worth, the time they spent developing the skill, overcoming past trauma, or emotions, and friends who like them the way they are. This investment makes effecting a dramatic change for coachees rather daunting. If they aim for immediate perfection, coachees will likely get frustrated and give up. Encourage them to take baby steps to get the ball rolling and then repeat the new behavior.

Ask the coachee:

- ❑ What is the first small step you can take to get the ball rolling and begin to manage your autopilot?
- ❑ Who will resist or resent the change you're trying to make? How will you manage them?
- ❑ How can you set aside a little time every day to practice, read, and reflect on the substitute behaviors?

## ■ Mindfulness and Stress Reduction Techniques

Our autopilots manifest themselves more when we are under pressure. Once your coachee acknowledges his or her autopilot is sometimes detrimental to the situations they face on the job, the need to manage their anxiety level will be obvious. Your coachee cannot implement a plan to eliminate stress, but he or she can implement a strategy to manage it.

Ask the coachee:

- ❑ What are some realistic OPTIONS to manage your stress level? [Expect to hear are yoga, prayer, meditation, exercise, mindfulness, 4-7-8 breathing, or other relaxation techniques.]
- ❑ What is the most stressful situation you have faced at work thus far? How will you respond to similar situations in the future?
- ❑ What is an appropriate way for you to deal with stress?
- ❑ How can you ensure you have a healthy balance between good stress and bad stress?

Coachees that practice the new behavior in safe spaces for a certain period of time gain useful insights into the







nuances needed to make the change. Furthermore, practicing a new behavior or skill regularly is among the best ways for coachees to become proficient. Behavior change requires repetition. Role-playing exercises done in safe surroundings eventually build confidence and ability.

Ask the coachee:

- How can you find a partner with whom you can practice substitute skills?
- When will you commit to taking a short vacation from your autopilot, perhaps twenty-four hours, and substitute an exaggerated and radically improved new behavior?
- Have you considered using a journal to record the situation, the new behavior, the impact, and the results?

### ■ Be Mindful, and Recognize Your Triggers

When coachees are mindful, pay attention, and focus on what is happening in the present moment, it is easier to make a choice to do or say something more appropriate. This requires them to be in nonjudgmental states of heightened or complete awareness of their emotions. By doing so, they can detect their autopilots and formulate and use better responses.

Ask the coachee:

- What things can you do to pause before reacting to a situation and choose the most appropriate response?
- Think back to a time when your autopilot kicked in. What did it feel like? What do you need to watch for in the future?
- What are your triggers (the things, people, or events that cause your autopilot to kick in)?
- How can you reduce your exposure to your triggers?
- How can you lessen the impact or neutralize your triggers?
- As you've paid more attention to the people with whom you are interacting, do you feel your autopilot trying to express itself?

Many coachees do not actually know what excellence or skill mastery looks like compared to their autopilot behavior. Getting a clear mental image or written description of excellence creates a better target.

Assign the coachee to become a student of the behavior opposite of their autopilot behavior or skill. Ask him or her to do an internet search about the behaviors he or she hopes to have or change. Ask the coachee to find out what the top thought leaders have to say about acquiring the new skill or behavior. Research yields knowledge and applied knowledge breeds competence.

Then, ask your coachee to report back his or her findings and the subsequent action he or she hopes to develop, either in an email or during your next meeting.

Work with the coachee to use the output from his or her research to create a plan to substitute a new and better behavior for the old behavior. The plan should have provisions for how he or she will respond when he or she faces the triggers that prompt his or her autopilot to kick in.

Many people have used this same technique to kick a bad habit. We need safe mental places to go or actions to substitute instead of simply eliminating the less effective habit.



## ■ WAY FORWARD Questions

By examining the REALITY, OBSTACLES, and exploring OPTIONS, your coachee will know some reasonable and effective actions for managing his or her autopilot.

The final step of GROW coaching is to get your coachee to commit to specific actions in order to move forward towards his or her goal. In doing this, you will help establish his or her will and boost his or her motivation.

Ask the coachee:

- ❑ What are the 3 or 4 best OPTIONS for taming your autopilot? What will you do from now on to apply these strategies?
- ❑ What else will you do?
- ❑ What could stop you from moving forward? How will you overcome this?
- ❑ How can you keep yourself motivated?
- ❑ Who should be most motivated to improve, me [your coach], or you?
- ❑ If I have to bug you about working your plan and staying on track, what will that say about your commitment?
- ❑ When will we review progress? Weekly or monthly?

## ■ Summary

The autopilot concept goes to the heart of any coaching engagement. Lasting behavioral change is difficult, and many people stop short of truly taming their default behaviors. This lack of success happens even when the rewards are plenty and the potential consequences of failure are clear cut.

Real change requires sustained effort and dedication. Your coachees need a strategy for managing their autopilot in real time to lead others more productively.

## ■ Resources

Lee Newman, “How to Override Your Default Reactions in Tough Moments,” Harvard Business Review, April 15, 2014, <https://hbr.org/2014/04/how-to-override-your-default-reactions-in-tough-moments>.

“Overcoming Fear: 10 Ways to Step Outside Your Comfort Zone,” Forbes Coaches Council, April 26, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2017/04/26/overcoming-fear-10-ways-to-step-outside-your-comfort-zone/#5a76e415882d>.