

Anticipatory Literacy Coaching: Reframing Leadership Coaching as Futures-Literate Practice

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The future no longer arrives as a distant planning horizon. For many leaders it enters the coaching room as overload, compression, reactivity, and the nagging sense that today's decisions are being made with yesterday's frames. They are asked to stabilise teams, respond to AI-mediated change, navigate institutional fatigue, and still offer direction. The problem is not simply pressure. It is the way imagined futures already organise the present.

During the pandemic and after, leaders I coached often described feeling “chased by change.” One senior executive, after mapping the pushes of the present and the weight of inherited assumptions, paused and said: “I’ve been running from the tide instead of learning its rhythm.” That sentence stayed with me. It suggests that anticipatory capacity is not only a matter of better forecasting. It is also a matter of how people narrate what is coming, what they fear, what they hope, and what they think remains possible.

Coaching is often introduced at this point as support for performance, resilience, or behavioural change. Yet the field is more plural than that. Ives (2008) describes coaching as containing multiple paradigms, from goal-oriented and developmental to more non-directive or therapeutic traditions. Contemporary coaching scholarship has likewise shifted toward co-constructed meaning rather than technique alone (Passmore & Evans-Krimme, 2021). That matters here. If coaching is understood only as goal pursuit, futures work appears as an add-on. If it is understood as a developmental conversation, then the client's relationship to the future can become part of the work itself.

Futures studies already contains several pathways that point in this direction. Wheelwright (2009) brought futures work down to the level of individual lives. Markley (2008) used mental time travel as a practical way of exploring possible futures experientially. Inayatullah and Milojević (2015) showed, through CLA and related inner work, how narrative and metaphor shape what can be thought and enacted. Ramos (2020), in *Mutant Futures*, pushed futures practice toward embodiment, grace, and transformation. What has remained less explicit is how these sensibilities can be translated into the structure of leadership coaching conversations.

Anticipatory literacy coaching sits in this space. It is neither a new foresight method nor, in this form, a validated intervention model. The claim is simpler: anticipatory sense-making can be woven into the structure and rhythm of coaching itself. In this sense, anticipatory literacy coaching extends developmental coaching by making the client's relationship to the future an explicit object of inquiry.

Coaching, futures, and anticipation

At its simplest, anticipatory literacy coaching starts from one observation: leaders do not enter coaching as blank decision-makers responding to neutral facts. They bring preferred futures, feared futures, used futures, and half-formed intuitions about what is ending or emerging. Those anticipations already shape what they notice and what they dismiss.

Anticipation studies help name this. Poli (2017) argues that people act not only on present conditions but also on the futures they imagine. Futures literacy, in turn, asks not simply what will happen, but how imagined futures alter present understanding (Miller & Sandford, 2018). That sits naturally alongside developmental coaching, where the work is not only to execute more effectively but also to examine how reality is being constructed (Bachkirova, 2016).

The gap, in practice, is often one of translation. Futures tools can open strong insight but remain abstract when separated from lived decisions. Coaching can support reflection and behavioural change but leave temporal assumptions untouched. Anticipatory literacy coaching tries to bridge that gap by keeping both in view: the interpretive depth of futures work and the relational discipline of coaching.

From conversations to practice

The framework emerged less from a single theory than from a recurring mismatch in practice. Conventional executive coaching often helped clients clarify goals and behaviours, but not always the future images already organising those goals. Futures methods, by contrast, often opened rich strategic reflection, yet when used outside a coaching relationship they could remain detached from identity, habit, and action.

Across many conversations, three moves kept recurring.

Temporal noticing helped clients name the pushes of change, the pull of preferred futures, the weight of inherited assumptions, and the weak signals they routinely ignored.

Narrative work began once the immediate problem had been named. Attention shifted to the stories, metaphors, and worldviews through which the client was reading the situation.

Anticipatory experimentation made insight useful by translating it into small shifts in practice: a different question, a different meeting rhythm, a different way of reading a difficult decision.

These three moves sit within a larger ecology of futures work, including the Six Pillars (Inayatullah, 2008), Three Horizons (Curry & Hodgson, 2008), and anticipatory action learning. For a short Perspective, however, they are enough. They show how futures methods can become coaching practice without turning the article into a toolbox.

A leadership conversation under pressure

Consider a senior operations executive in a public-service organisation. The scene draws on recurring patterns from coaching practice rather than on a single documented case.

“Mara,” a senior operations executive in a public-service organisation, entered coaching saying: “Every week I solve for yesterday. By the time we make a decision, the environment has already moved.” Her calendar was saturated with crisis meetings. Staff wanted clarity. Senior management wanted measurable results. Any invitation to think long term felt, to her, almost irresponsible.

The first shift came through a Futures Triangle conversation (Inayatullah, 2008). Together we mapped the pushes of the present: budget pressure, AI-related workflow changes, public scrutiny, and staff exhaustion. We then named the pull of a preferred future: an organisation trusted for steadiness, adaptability, and judgement. Finally came the weights of the past: the heroic leader story, the belief that competence means having answers, and a performance culture that rewarded immediate containment more than strategic learning. Mara paused when the map was complete. “I’m not being pulled by the future I want,” she said. “I’m being governed by the weight.” In Inayatullah’s terms, she was caught in a used future of leadership.

The second shift came through CLA-informed questioning. At the litany level, her problem was overload. At the systemic level, reporting rhythms and KPI cycles rewarded reaction over reflection. At the worldview level sat a familiar assumption: control equals competence. At the metaphor level, she described herself as “standing on the shoreline waiting for the next wave to hit.” The task was not to move downward in search of a superior truth. It was to see how these layers held one another in place. When

asked to try another metaphor, Mara moved from “being hit by waves” to “learning the tide.” The issue had not disappeared, but her stance had changed.

The third shift was practical. Using Three Horizons language (Curry & Hodgson, 2008), Mara separated Horizon 1 obligations that genuinely required immediate stabilisation from Horizon 2 experiments that could open different habits. She began two small practices: a weekly ninety-minute horizon review with no operational firefighting allowed, and a monthly weak-signal conversation with her direct reports. She also developed a future-self prompt for difficult decisions: “What would the version of me leading well three years from now notice here that I am missing today?” The example shows how anticipatory literacy becomes tangible in coaching: not as prediction, but as a shift in stance, language, and experiment.

What CLA offers here, and what it does not

That distinction matters. Anticipatory literacy coaching does not present coaching as a full conventional CLA process, nor does it assume that movement toward worldview or metaphor is inherently superior. In CLA, litany is not “worse” than myth. Different layers illuminate different aspects of a situation (Inayatullah, 1998; Inayatullah & Milojević, 2015).

What coaching can borrow from CLA is disciplined movement across layers when one layer has taken over the client’s reading of reality. Surface concerns matter because they are lived. System matters because incentives, routines, and structures shape behaviour. Worldview matters because it defines what counts as sensible, responsible, or even imaginable. Metaphor matters because it organises feeling and possibility.

Used this way, CLA becomes a way of loosening a stuck reading of the present rather than a search for ever deeper truth. In coaching terms, the practical question is not “How do we go deeper?” but “Which layer is currently dominating this client’s reality, and what shift in narrative might widen agency?”

What this makes possible

Anticipatory literacy coaching suggests that leaders need more than coaching technique and more than strategic foresight. They need a way of connecting weak signals, multiple horizons, inner narratives, and practical action. Without coaching depth, futures methods risk becoming workshop exercises or consultant add-ons. Without futures depth, coaching risks helping people adapt more elegantly to assumptions that may themselves need to be questioned.

This is also why the work must remain ethically careful. Coaches bring their own anticipatory assumptions. Preferred futures can easily be smuggled in as if they were neutral. Temporal metaphors are culturally patterned, and not all clients relate to uncertainty through the same language, pace, or emotional register. The point is not to impose a future. It is to create a conversation in which futures can be surfaced, examined, and worked with more consciously.

The strongest claim for anticipatory literacy coaching is therefore also the most modest one. It does not invent personal futures work, imaginal futures work, or the CLA of the self tradition. What it offers is a clearer articulation of how these lineages can be translated into leadership coaching. Its value lies in recasting coaching as a place where futures literacy becomes lived: where leaders map the pressures acting on them, question the stories through which they read change, and rehearse more generative ways of acting.

In that sense, anticipatory literacy is not a technique added onto coaching. It is the capacity to notice the futures already at work in the present and to respond with greater agency, humility, and imagination.

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