

# ***The Genesis of ProStar Coach***

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An interview with the designer of ProStar Coach

**Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D.**

Conducted by Meredith Bell, President  
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March 2, 2010





## **TRANSCRIPT - PROSTAR INTERVIEW**

### **Meredith Bell and Dennis E. Coates, Ph.D. (Denny)**

**MEREDITH** – First, I'd like to extend a warm welcome to all our listeners. I'm Meredith Bell, President of Performance Support Systems, and today I'm interviewing Dr. Dennis Coates, my business partner and the mastermind behind ProStar Coach, a major breakthrough learning technology we've been working on for the past two years.

People have been asking lots of questions about ProStar, and Denny and I thought a recorded interview would be a great way to get some answers out there.

Let's start at the beginning. Denny, can you explain where the idea for ProStar Coach came from?

**DENNY** – Well, it goes back to the mid-90s when we were adding new features to 20/20 Insight, which is our feedback survey software. You know it's always been used extensively for 360-degree feedback. Most 360s are all about feedback, but even back then we knew that if you really wanted people to improve what they did in the workplace, in most cases it would take a lot more than feedback. You'd have to follow up with things like training, coaching, encouragement and accountability.

So what we did was to build developmental recommendations into the 20/20 Insight feedback reports. We also created a cool little software program to help people get started on changing their behavior. It was called IDP, which stood for Individual Development Planner.

IDP was actually the genesis of ProStar Coach. It was a great idea, but it was limited. It was a start. It got us thinking about what was possible. Later, when IDP showed signs of aging, we decided that rather than improve it, we'd create something new and with a lot more capability. So we asked our value-added resellers what the ultimate IDP ought to look like. They gave us lots of ideas.

**MEREDITH** – So ProStar is something that's been in the works for quite a while. How would you describe it, exactly?



**DENNY** – Well, Meredith, that’s the first question people ask. What is it? And the truth is, it’s so different from anything that exists now that people sometimes can’t immediately picture what I’m talking about. Since I have the time on this call, I’ll try to paint a clearer picture.

First, I think of ProStar Coach as a learning empowerment system. It helps people learn. Not just new knowledge. New skills. New work habits. New ways of interacting with people. It’s a web-based self-development toolkit with lots of resources to help a person change a behavior pattern and improve a skill.

And it’s focused on leaders. Managers at the operational level, where the rubber meets the road. Line managers, supervisors, foremen, crew chiefs, project managers, section chiefs, and candidates for management—high performers who are emerging and developing leaders.

It’s an integrated suite of resources like assessments, training videos, learning exercises and a private learning support network. I’ll describe some of these features in more detail.

For example, the program has 18 how-to leadership videos, each one focused on a specific leadership skill. These videos are quite a bit different from your typical training video, because we weren’t trying to teach knowledge, motivate or entertain. The ProStar videos do those things, but that isn’t the main point. The point is to show how to do a skill. The point is to give the developing leader a best practice model that’s based on a thorough review of the literature. So instead of fancy sets, scripts and actors, we used a real company with real managers working with real employees saying unscripted things in real situations. These are really different, reality-based videos. Most of them are only about 20 to 25 minutes long. I really like them, and I think managers will appreciate them, too.

So this is a great aspect of ProStar Coach, and it’s the first time all these basic interpersonal leadership skills have been addressed in a comprehensive suite of videos. And the cool thing is, the developing leader can access any video he wants, anytime, anywhere, and as often he wants for the length of the subscription. He can watch a video over and over if that’s what he wants to do. Dozens of managers can watch the video simultaneously from separate computers.

But I’d like to add something really important. Being an effective leader isn’t just about skills. It depends just as much on the intangibles, personal strengths like honesty, integrity, courage, composure, patience, perseverance and dozens of other behavior patterns.



So we built a special learning area into ProStar called Success Tools, which provides six or seven different kinds of content that support self-development in 40 different personal strength areas. New content is added daily and weekly. Nothing like this exists anywhere.

Also, ProStar functions as a virtual coach. Not only does it remind the learner of the best way of doing something, it provides several forms of encouragement and it connects them with real people who care about their development—such as bosses, team members, mentors, trainers and consultants. It does this through an innovative hybrid of social networking and forum technology that we call the Learning Network.

**MEREDITH** – From your description, ProStar does sound like something really different. Can you share why you felt this kind of service was needed?

**DENNY** – Well, getting managers to lead well has been a challenge since year one. Not just because new supervisors are hired from the rank and file all the time. It's a persistent problem because traditional training programs just aren't enough to change behavior.

You see, what organizations are paying for is results. Training is expensive. So when they invest in things like assessment and training, they want a return on this investment. They want managers to lead better. They want real behavior change. They want improved leadership.

The truth is, it isn't easy to change a work habit or a behavior pattern. The brain has to rewire itself. It's like taking golf lessons to improve your swing. The pro shows you how, but you don't immediately head for the first tee and start shooting par golf. It doesn't work that way. You have to put in an awful lot of practice on your own first. It takes awhile before it feels natural to do what the pro has told you to do.

It's the same process when you try to improve a leadership skill. It takes a lot of practice before the new behavior pattern feels comfortable. And you won't actually use it on the job until it does. It takes time. So even the best leadership development programs in the world can't improve the way a person leads without a lot of follow-up reinforcement.

**MEREDITH** – How much is needed?

**DENNY** – A lot. It depends on how often a manager puts the new skills into practice on the job. It could take a month or two. It could take a year. Maybe you remember a few years ago when



Tiger Woods tried to improve his swing? It took him that whole season to get comfortable with the changes before he started winning tournaments again.

And leadership skills are quite a bit more complex than golf skills.

So we wanted this new developmental tool, which we call ProStar Coach, to be the kind of technology that would support the developing leader, like a coach, long after training was over. In fact, we wanted it to be better than a coach. We wanted it to be there for the leader every day, any time of day, even if she's at home.

**MEREDITH** – I'd like to explore that first thing you mentioned in a little more detail. Why is it necessary for a learner to ingrain a skill? Why isn't it enough to just learn about it in a training course?

**DENNY** – The great thing about training is its ability to introduce a skill. Most participants love what they're being taught. They may even think it's the best training they've ever had. When they return to the workplace they may actually try to do what they've been told. But even if they're true believers, they won't keep on using what they learned if it doesn't feel comfortable.

The problem is, they lack experience and chances are their first attempts will be clumsy. Under the pressure of a typical busy workday, most people will revert to what's comfortable, their old way of doing things, even though it may create problems for everyone else. Yes, there are the happy exceptions, the highly-motivated people who stick with it and learn from their experience. But most of the time people fall back into their old habits.

Why is this? It's because it takes time to break an old habit and replace it with a better one. It takes consistent repetition and reinforcement over time to stimulate the brain to rewire itself. There's simply not enough time for that in a typical training course.

Consequently, the most important phase of skill development has to happen in the workplace. The most important phase of learning starts after instruction is over.

**MEREDITH** - All this suggests that if assessment and training programs aren't followed by lots of reinforcement in the workplace, the behavior of participants probably won't change in the long run. The investment could be wasted.

**DENNY** – I’ve known about this problem with training programs for a long time. I used to deliver a lot of training myself. I worked hard at it. I was proud of what I put out there, and the participants gave me rave reviews. But I’d come back a year later and little or nothing had changed. It seemed to me that the investment was wasted, and I felt terrible about it. My colleagues confirmed that it wasn’t just me. They had almost identical experiences. That’s the main reason we got out of the consulting and training business and started the software publishing business.

Coincidentally I had been a student of the brain for years. I was simply obsessed with the question, “What’s going on up there?” I wanted to know what causes personality and how learning happens in the brain. You never get to the end of answers to these questions, so for a while there I was reading something like a 100 books a year about neuroscience and cognitive psychology.

But in my mind I didn’t immediately connect the training problem with what I was learning from brain science. It wasn’t until around 2002 that some good books were published about what was called the “transfer of training” problem. People like Mary Broad, John Newstrom and Robert Brinkerhoff had done their homework and were citing evidence that in the U.S. alone, billions, no, TENS of billions of dollars were being spent every year for training that didn’t change behavior.

But they didn’t say why. That’s when it occurred to me that the brain doesn’t work that way. You don’t put someone in a three-day course or even a five-day course and expect the brain to rewire itself. It takes a lot longer. Months of consistent effort applying the skills at work and learning from experience.

Why didn’t organizations support the needed follow-up? They didn’t appreciate why it was necessary. And there were no systems to support such a follow-up.

We built ProStar to be that system.

**MEREDITH** – Denny, I’d like to come back to something you mentioned earlier, that there’s more to being an effective leader than learning leadership skills. You used the term “the intangibles.”

**DENNY** –Most of us in the training business understand that knowing how to do something isn’t enough. There are other performance factors. You also have to want to. And you need support,

empowerment, stuff like authority, guidance, resources, systems, tools, etc. So often a performance problem isn't a training problem.

Keeping those 3 factors in mind—know-how, motivation and support— is a powerful perspective, because it causes you to ask the right questions before you invest in solutions.

But it leaves something out. There's a fourth factor.

I'll give you an example. If you're a sports nut like I am, you've probably heard a TV announcer or a coach talk about a superstar. "He's got the intangibles," they say. "You can't teach that." Another way they describe it is grit, heart, character strength, or inner strength. These are behavior patterns such as tolerance, optimism, patience, perseverance, self-confidence and dozens more. I prefer to call them personal strengths.

They aren't like leadership skills, which need to be done a certain way to be effective. Personal strengths can be manifested in behavior hundreds of different ways. There's no one way to exercise initiative, for example. No one way to exercise self-discipline. But they're absolutely essential to high levels of performance and effective leadership.

**MEREDITH** – It sounds like this is something that organizations haven't focused on in the past. Why do you suppose that is?

**DENNY** – The main reason is that it's a poorly defined area. Everybody wants their leaders to be strong as individuals. You get leaders with weak character and you have major problems, no matter how skilled they are. But what does personal strength consist of?

Also, it's a little involved. We're not talking about just one area. It's dozens of personal strengths.

And how would you train people to be stronger in this way? Classes in character strength? That doesn't sound like something that would work.

Organizations have their hands full with training, motivating and empowering people.

**MEREDITH** – So if decision-makers want their supervisors and managers to have these strengths, what should they be doing about it? How can they work on this?



**DENNY** – Well for starters, you can't teach it in the classroom. I mean, you can give instruction, but the best you can do is pass on some knowledge and some motivation. You can't change their behavior in that short span of time.

A good way to start is when they're selecting and hiring managers. They need to do a better job of checking for personal strength.

But even if you hire good people, you want them to get stronger.

The bottom line is that this is the kind of thing that has to be addressed through self-development. So the key is to have a culture that sets an example and expectations for these things. Bosses need to encourage these behaviors.

Beyond that, developing leaders can have content and learning resources that make self-development in this area easier—self-assessment, self-discovery, encouragement, coaching, affirmations, mental rehearsal, wisdom, and other resources.

That's why we incorporated so many strategies for personal strength development in ProStar Coach.

**MEREDITH** – So would you share with our listeners what ProStar does to address both these shortfalls in leadership development?—the failure to follow through with reinforcement, and the failure to reinforce leaders' personal strengths?

**DENNY** – Well, we made it an online subscription service so supervisors and managers could work on leadership skills and personal strengths anytime they wanted to.

We combined assessment, development and coaching programs into a single unified online program. ProStar provides continuous reinforcement so learners are able to ingrain skills over time. It's as if developing leaders have their own personal coach. We encourage them to work on one skill at a time, applying best practices with the people they supervise every day. They access learning resources anytime, anywhere and as often as needed to make real changes in their behavior that will make them better leaders.

The purpose of the self-assessment is to identify one top strength or one area for development.



The training videos introduce and reinforce critical leadership skills. Each of the 18 videos in the series focuses on one essential leadership skill. For every video, learners can download an audio file, PowerPoint® slides and a job aid that summarizes key steps and skill tips.

The Success Tools resources provide coaching on leadership-related personal strengths such as confidence, patience, perseverance, integrity and dozens more. Fresh content streams to the leader daily and weekly. Exercises relate this material to their work and facilitate follow-up action. All exercises can be saved in a private Learning Archive, reviewed later or edited by learners anytime.

The Learning Network is a private, confidential virtual coaching resource that's a hybrid of social networking and forum technology, optimized for learning. This tool makes it easy for developing leaders to get input from the people who have a vested interest in their development, such as managers, colleagues, coworkers, coaches and mentors. These people can give information, feedback, coaching, advice and encouragement.

**MEREDITH** – The Learning Network sounds like a way to get coaching from real people.

**DENNY** – That's right. The Learning Network facilitates coaching from real people, in addition to virtual coaching.

**MEREDITH** – Virtual coaching. Now that sounds like a powerful concept. How does ProStar provide virtual coaching?

**DENNY** – A good coach would remind you to do it this way, not that way. The videos do that. Users of the program can watch any video again and again, anytime they want.

A good coach would encourage you. ProStar has dozens of powerful three-minute encouragement videos, with a new one appearing each week. The Strength Journey meditations are amazingly encouraging. The Energizer articles all have encouragement built into them. The affirmations are presented in an encouraging format.

A good coach would guide you to learn from real-world experience. The content of all the success tools is followed by a question-and-answer exercise that helps the learner relate the content to personal experience.

That's why we call it ProStar Coach.



**MEREDITH** – It seems like ProStar really does address the two main problems that have plagued leadership development programs all these years. But in the past there has always been a reluctance to invest in follow-up programs.

**DENNY** – Most executives aren't familiar with how the brain learns. So it's not surprising that they haven't appreciated why long-term follow-up is absolutely essential, if what they want is changed behavior and improved performance. As a result, they've been reluctant to make this kind of investment.

Also, learning and development programs are expensive. With limited training budgets, they probably cringe when you suggest that they should be doing more. They may be imagining that they have to hire executive coaches for everybody. And yes, that WOULD be expensive.

That's why we structured ProStar to be an online system for leadership development and virtual coaching. It keeps the costs way down. You can make ProStar available to a developing leader 24/7 for an entire year for about the same cost as sending him to a one-day seminar at a hotel somewhere. Literally pennies a day.

**MEREDITH** – It seems to me then, running through everything thing you've said, that you can buy the best training programs in the world, but you won't get what you want from them if you don't have a system for following up.

**DENNY** – I'm afraid that's true. If you want better leaders, follow-up is absolutely essential. Months and months of it. Better yet, years of it. When a manager gets stronger in one of the areas, you know what he should do next? Work on another area. Work on them one at a time. Many skills and strengths are involved in effective leadership. It's not the kind of thing where you can say, "Wow that was great. I'm done now." It's like playing chess, only times ten or times 100. You never get to the end of how good you can be.

So in the best case, the leader is also a life-long learner. Self-development is a journey. It's how you set yourself up for success. But it isn't easy. ProStar Coach makes it a whole lot easier.

The reward to the organization is that when managers get stronger, people respond to their leadership better. When employees are unhappy with their bosses and leave, it's expensive to find, hire and train new people. When your managers lead well, you avoid these costs. You get more enthusiasm and a higher level of effort. More engagement. More productivity. Less conflict. Less turnover.



MEREDITH – Well, thank you, Denny. This has been a great conversation and an excellent introduction to ProStar Coach. If anyone listening wants more information, they can check the website, [www.prostarcoach.com](http://www.prostarcoach.com).

**DENNIS E. COATES, PH.D.**

Co-founder of Performance Support Systems, Denny coordinates research and development and provides strategic direction for the company. He is the author of ProStar, an online leadership learning, coaching and reinforcement system, and 20/20 Insight GOLD, an award-winning 360-degree feedback system.

A graduate of West Point, Denny retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel in 1987. He has over 35 years' experience as a manager and leader. His military assignments focused on training development and personnel management and included service in Vietnam and Germany.



He earned his Ph.D. at Duke University and has served on the faculties of the United States Military Academy, the Armed Forces Staff College, the College of William and Mary, and Thomas Nelson Community College. In addition, he was an adjunct lecturer at the Center for Creative Leadership for ten years.

Hundreds of Fortune 1000 companies and over a million participants – including managers from more than a dozen federal agencies – have benefited from his programs in assessment, self-awareness, leadership and team development. He is the author of numerous articles, booklets, and manuals in the areas of cognitive style, leadership, management, training, and personal strength.