

# ***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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November 1, 2010





## **TRANSCRIPT - PROSTAR INTERVIEW**

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

**MEREDITH** – First, I'd like to extend a warm welcome to 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 several 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, would 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, our feedback survey software. 20/20 is used a lot for 360-degree feedback. But if you really want people to improve, it takes a lot more than feedback. You have to follow up with things like training, coaching, and accountability.

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

IDP was actually the genesis of ProStar Coach. IDP 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, let's create something new and with a lot more capability. So we asked our 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 have trouble picturing what I’m talking about.

ProStar Coach is an online self-development empowerment system. It helps people learn. Not just new knowledge. New skills. New work habits. New ways of interacting with people. It’s an integrated suite of online resources to help a person change a behavior pattern or improve a skill.

You can link it to any content, but it comes pre-loaded with content focused on people skills and personal strengths. These are core skills and strengths that you’d want anyone in the workplace to have—especially managers.

It has a suite of integrated learning technologies. One of these is a new kind of self-initiated feedback system. It’s a simple hybrid of micro-feedback and feedforward to help the learner figure out what to focus on.

Another innovative resource is the people skill training videos. These are reality based – no actors, no fancy sets, no scripts. Just real people in real situations. All focused strictly on how-to.

**MEREDITH** –These don’t sound like your typical training videos.

**DENNY** – No, they’re not. Each video is focused on a specific people skill, such as how to listen, how to give feedback, how to receive feedback, how to resolve conflict, etc. Unlike your typical slick corporate video, these don’t try to motivate or entertain. The ProStar videos do some of this, but that’s not their main purpose. The point is to show a behavior model of the best practice. Most of them are only about 20 minutes long.

It’s a great resource. All the basic interpersonal skills are addressed. A person can access any video he wants, over and over if that’s what he needs to do, anytime, anywhere. Dozens of people can watch the same video simultaneously from separate computers.

**MEREDITH** – What are some of the other resources?

**DENNY** – I like to use the analogy of a gym. When you’re working in ProStar Coach, it feels like you’re in a fitness center. But instead of getting stronger physically, you’re getting stronger as a person. You’re working on people skills and personal strengths.



There are lots of fitness areas and many different exercise resources. Just like a gym, you're free to work on any area you want, in any sequence you want. And you get lots of coaching. The videos and exercises give you tips, direction and encouragement. Then there's the FAR Workout area, which is a virtual personal trainer. It gives you structure and keeps you focused and on track. FAR stands for Focus, Action and Reflection, a cyclic process we use to ingrain new behavior patterns. The FAR personal trainer is always there for you, but you don't have to use it.

**MEREDITH** – Just like a gym.

**DENNY** – Right. But it's better than a gym because it's always open and totally private. You're always the only person there.

And it has a third kind of coaching. This is the Coaching Network, which isn't virtual. It's real. It connects you with real people, the people who care about your success.

**MEREDITH** – Tell us how that works.

**DENNY** – It's a computer interface like social networking that connects you with people who can give you feedback, input, coaching and encouragement. It works somewhat like a forum, but it's not public. It's private. It's set up for you and you alone. It's not really social networking, because it's optimized for learning, not networking.

**MEREDITH** – Great. So ProStar has a way to get feedback, it's got training videos, the FAR workout area for focus, action and reflection, and a private coaching network. Anything else?

**DENNY** – Yes. It also has an exercise workout area where people can work on building personal strengths.

**MEREDITH** – Personal strengths. I bet a lot of people don't know what those are.

**DENNY** - Well, being effective in life or work requires skills, but of course success isn't just about skills. It's also about who you are as a person. Doing your best work depends just as much on the intangibles, personal strengths such as patience, composure, self-confidence, focus, initiative and dozens more.

**MEREDITH** – These sound a lot like character strengths.

**DENNY** – Many of them are. Honesty and integrity, for example. But we think of personal strengths as behavior patterns. These are the hard things people need to do to deal with the challenges of life and work.

So we built a special workout area into ProStar called Personal Strength Exercises, which provides seven different kinds of content that support self-development in 40 different personal strength areas. Nothing like this exists anywhere.

**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. They want their employees to be strong for the challenges of the workplace. You get people with weak character and you have major problems, no matter how skilled they are. But what does personal strength consist of? It's not well understood.

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

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

**MEREDITH** – So if people want to get stronger in this way, 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 knowing isn't the same as doing. The best you can do is pass on some knowledge and some motivation. You can't change behavior patterns in the classroom.

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

The bottom line is that this kind of thing has to be addressed through self-development. That's why we incorporated so many strategies for personal strength development in ProStar Coach.

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

**DENNY** – A service like this is needed because assessment and training, by themselves, can't possibly change behavior. Skills don't improve and behavior patterns don't change until new habits are formed.

You see, training is expensive. So when organizations invest in learning and development, they expect a return on this investment. If it's a leadership development program, they actually expect managers to lead better. They want real behavior change. They want improved leadership.

But it isn't easy to change a work habit or a behavior pattern. The brain has to rewire itself. The brain is very good at doing this, but it takes a lot of repetitions of the desired behavior, a lot more than you can do in classroom instruction. It's like taking golf lessons to improve your swing. The pro shows you how, but you can'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 for the brain cells to connect in a new neural pathway, so the stroke feels natural.

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 use it habitually on the job until it does. It takes time. So even the best development programs in the world can't improve the way a person leads without a whole lot of follow-up reinforcement.

**MEREDITH** – How much reinforcement would you say is needed?

**DENNY** – A lot. It depends on how often a manager puts the new skills into practice on the job. If a manager applies the skill consistently on a daily basis, it could take a month. Or if that same manager applies it only occasionally, it could take a year or more to ingrain the skill. Maybe you've seen what happens when top pro golfers try to improve their game. It can take them an entire season to get comfortable with all the changes and started winning tournaments again.

So we wanted this new developmental tool, which we call ProStar Coach, to be the kind of technology that would support the development of new skills over time, long after classroom instruction was over.

**MEREDITH** – I'd like you to explain something you mentioned early. Why is it necessary for a learner to ingrain a skill? Why isn't it enough to just learn about it in a 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 taught. But even if they’re true believers, they won’t continue to use what they learned if it doesn’t feel natural and comfortable.

When you’re first introduced to a new way of doing something, your first attempts will feel awkward. The new way won’t work well for you at first. Under the pressure of a typical busy workday, you’ll be tempted to go with what feels natural and revert to your old way of doing things. Even if this causes 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.

So the most important phase of skill development is NOT what happens in the classroom. It’s what happens after instruction is over.

**MEREDITH** – So you’re saying that if programs aren’t followed by lots of practice, behavior probably won’t change in the long run. The investment could be wasted.

**DENNY** – Yes. And by practice, we mean applying on the job what you learned in the classroom. Until it becomes second nature.

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

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

We combined feedback, development and coaching programs into a single unified online program. ProStar provides continuous, long-term reinforcement so learners can ingrain skills over time. We encourage them to work on one skill at a time, applying desired behaviors every day. They access the learning resources anytime, anywhere and as often as they need to make real changes in their behavior.

**MEREDITH** – But in the past haven’t organizations been reluctant to invest in follow-up programs?



**DENNY** – That’s because 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. 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. Maybe they imagine 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 with virtual coaching. It keeps the costs way down. You can make ProStar available to someone 24/7 for an entire year for less than the cost of buying a small cup of coffee every day.

**MEREDITH** – From what you’ve said, you can buy the best training programs in the world, but you won’t get what you want if you don’t have a system for following up.

**DENNY** – I’m afraid that’s true. If you want real changes in behavior, follow-up is absolutely essential. Months and months of it. Better yet, years of it. When an employee gets stronger in one area, you know what he should do next? Work on another area. Work on them one at a time. These skills and strengths aren’t the kind of thing where you can say, “Wow, that was great. I’m done now.” It’s like playing chess. You never get to the end of how good you can be.

So in the best case, you’re a life-long learner. Self-development is a journey. It’s how you set yourself up for success. Improving work habits isn’t easy. ProStar Coach makes it a whole lot easier.

The reward to the organization is that when managers and other employees get stronger, they become more effective working with people. 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 revealing conversation and a good 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.