Coverdale



WHAT IF EVERY LEADER HAD A SPARRING PARTNER ON DEMAND?

How Ralph, the Coverdale AI Coach, helps leaders prepare for challenging situations, practice their approach and learn from the experience

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SPARRING PARTNER RALPH

Birgit Fischer-Sitzwohl · November 2026

Executive Summary

Many leaders, project managers, and employees initially use Ralph, the Coverdale AI Coach, as a thinking partner for specific leadership challenges. Another potential use quickly emerged: Ralph allows people not only to think through workplace situations but also to practice handling them.

This led to the development of Sparring Sessions. They help users prepare for difficult conversations, practice negotiations, critically examine decisions, and simulate realistic situations through a structured four-step process: Understand, Prepare, Practice, and Reflect.

This white paper explains how Ralph works as a sparring partner, which formats have proven effective, and what the limitations of simulation are.

WHY WE DEVELOPED SPARRING SESSIONS

During our first presentations and pilot projects with Ralph, we noticed something interesting. Many users began by asking very specific questions:

- "How can I handle this difficult conversation?"
- "How do I deal with this conflict?"
- "How should I prepare for this negotiation?"
- "What options do I have in this situation?"

They were primarily looking for answers and practical advice on how to proceed. People with little experience in coaching, in particular, tended to be somewhat tentative in how they phrased their requests.

That is why we regularly used our demonstrations to show what else Ralph could do. We set up scenarios together, explored possible approaches, and had Ralph take on the role of the other person. This allowed users to practice conversations, negotiations, and decision-making in realistic scenarios and then review their experience. Many were surprised by how realistic and helpful the experience was, yet very few had thought of using Ralph this way on their own.

That is why we offer Sparring as a dedicated feature within Ralph, alongside Coaching for immediate challenges and the Learning Journey for longer-term development.

HOW RALPH WORKS AS A SPARRING PARTNER

Every Sparring Session begins with a specific situation: a difficult conversation with an employee, a negotiation, a presentation to the executive board, or a decision with far-reaching consequences. Rather than immediately suggesting answers, Ralph guides users through the situation in four steps. The result is not a rigid conversation script, but a learning process tailored to the individual's goals and experience.

1. Understand – structure the situation

Ralph helps users systematically analyze the situation, including their goals, the people involved,

interests, expectations, risks, and success criteria. This step alone often brings greater clarity: connections become clearer, and assumptions are challenged before potential solutions are discussed.

2. Prepare – develop possible approaches

Depending on the situation, users develop strategies for the conversation, arguments to support their case, negotiating positions, or alternative approaches. The aim is not to find the single right solution but to develop several options and think through their potential impact.

3. Practice – simulate the situation

Ralph then takes on the role of the other person – for example, an employee, customer, negotiating counterpart, or critical stakeholder – and responds based on the briefing he and the user have developed together. Users can rehearse conversations multiple times, try different approaches, and immediately experience the impact of each approach.

4. Reflect – review the experience

After each simulation, Ralph guides users through a structured Review. His feedback is clear, respectful, and solution-focused: Ralph never judges the person but focuses on the impact of their behavior and what they could do even more effectively in the future. This allows users to reflect openly on even stressful situations. Effective phrases and insights are documented and remain available for future reference.

Simulation creates experience. Review turns experience into learning.

What a simulation cannot replace

Users can speak to Ralph instead of typing: he understands spoken language and responds out loud. This allows users to practice conversations in a way that closely resembles real-life interactions, including finding the right words under pressure. Body language, eye contact, and group dynamics, however, can only be experienced in actual conversations or in-person training. Ralph helps leaders prepare for these experiences; he does not replace them.

SPARRING FORMATS

No leader deals only with routine situations. Nevertheless, we encounter similar challenges repeatedly in our client projects, coaching engagements, and pilot projects. We have developed ready-to-use formats to make it easier to get started:

- **Difficult leadership conversations:** Prepare for, simulate, and reflect on conversations involving feedback, corrective feedback, conflict, and employee development.
- **Negotiations:** Practice negotiation strategies, building a case, and handling objections.
- **Stakeholder conversations:** Prepare for challenging alignment discussions with internal and external stakeholders.
- **Sales conversations:** Practice engaging with customers, presenting arguments, and handling objections.
- **Presentations:** Prepare for important presentations, including how to handle challenging questions.
- **High-pressure interviews:** Practice challenging interview and selection scenarios in a realistic setting.
- **Strategic decisions (Devil's Advocate):** Examine assumptions and options by deliberately taking a critical, opposing perspective.

These formats are intended to guide users, not limit them. With Ralph, users can prepare for, practice handling, and reflect on any situation they encounter in their day-to-day work.

THREE REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES

The following examples illustrate what sparring with Ralph looks like in day-to-day work. The aim is not to find the single right answer but to prepare for situations, try different approaches, and learn from the experience.

Difficult leadership conversations: When experience meets the responsibilities of leadership

A team leader has been leading a new team for several months. One of her most experienced employees is highly respected for his technical expertise. At the same time, he fails to communicate agreements clearly, makes decisions without consulting others, and treats her with increasing disrespect.

With Ralph, she first clarifies the aim of the conversation, identifies the issues she needs to

address, and considers how the employee might respond. Ralph then takes on the role of the employee. The team leader tries different approaches and rehearses the most challenging parts of the conversation. During the Review, she identifies phrases that work well and makes note of what she wants to do differently in the actual conversation.

Negotiations: When resources are scarce

A project manager needs additional resources for a strategically important project. The department head responsible for the resources has already indicated that very little capacity is available.

With Ralph, he analyzes the interests of those involved, identifies potential objections, and develops strategies for making his case. During the simulation, he discovers which arguments are persuasive and which encounter resistance. He then develops alternatives, building his confidence for both the actual negotiation and similar situations in the future.

Strategic decisions: When there is no clear-cut answer

A department head is facing a strategic decision. The technical arguments are compelling, but the risks, potential resistance, and long-term consequences are unclear.

In Devil's Advocate mode, Ralph deliberately takes an opposing position. He challenges assumptions, exposes weaknesses, and encourages the department head to examine her reasoning from different perspectives. The insights are documented so that she can revisit and reflect on them later.

FROM SPARRING TO COMPETENCE

The real strength of Sparring lies in the learning process behind each session. People bring their own real-life challenges – conversations, decisions, and negotiations – prepare for them, try different approaches, and review their experiences. In this way, an individual challenge becomes part of an ongoing development process.

Simulation creates experience. Review turns experience into learning. Application develops competence.

We would be happy to demonstrate how sparring with Ralph can support leadership and collaboration, using a specific situation from your day-to-day work.

Contact: office@coverdale.at · +43 1 533 44 27 · www.coverdale.at/en/ralph

Our white paper "What Makes a Good AI Coach" explains Ralph's underlying coaching methodology, data privacy, and licensing model. "The Learning Journey" describes how Ralph supports development goals over several weeks. Both are available at www.coverdale.at/en/publications.

Coverdale

www.coverdale.at office@coverdale.at

COVERDALE AUSTRIA
COVERDALE MANAGEMENTBERATUNGS- UND -TRAININGS GMBH
MOHSGASSE 1 / MEZZANINE
1030 VIENNA, AUSTRIA

TEL: +43 1 533 44 27
MAIL: OFFICE@COVERDALE.AT

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