

Leader Coaches

Principles and Issues for In-House Development

More and more leaders are taking on coaching responsibilities in their organizations themselves rather than relying solely on external coaches. But leaders who are considering such coaching need to understand a number of things. Here's a primer for today's aspiring leader coaches.

In an increasingly complex and competitive world, it is imperative that organizations make sure they have a steady supply of leadership talent. Leaders today have to be concerned not only with their personal effectiveness and the performance of their direct reports but also with the development of people who will take the lead in meeting tomorrow's challenges.

Coaching is a well-known way to fill the leadership pipeline, but now, instead of relying solely on external executive coaches, more and more leaders are taking on coaching responsibilities themselves. The leader coach is becoming a fixture in today's organizations.

If you, as a leader, are considering taking on coaching either formally or informally, there are a number of things you should understand: the essential principles that guide the coaching process, the important elements that define the depth of coaching work, the sometimes too rigid distinction drawn between coaching for performance and coaching for development, and the basic responsibilities of the leader coach.

SIX PRINCIPLES

Six rules of engagement should guide the coaching activities of the leader coach. Coaches may have to adapt



by **Doug Riddle and Sharon Ting**

the mechanics of implementing these principles to their particular context, but the spirit of these principles remains foundational to any effective coaching process.

Create a safe but challenging environment. It is the leader coach's responsibility to create a safe environment in which the coachee can take risks and learn. Applying this principle requires the coach to be skilled at balancing challenging and supporting behaviors. Regardless of what the coach believes may be true or right for the coachee, the coach should take care to ensure that the coaching process does not damage the coachee's fundamental sense of self and worth. Creating a sense of safety is a challenge for leader coaches, who often wear an evaluator's as well as a coach's hat, which may cause the coachee to constantly wonder if and how information he or she shares will be used outside the coaching environment. At a minimum

the leader coach must aspire to an open and nonjudgmental attitude.

Work in tune with the coachee's agenda. The coaching experience is, first and foremost, for and about the individuals being coached. They are responsible for driving the process and directing their own learning. They decide which goals to work on and how to go about this work. The coach's role is to influence the agenda, not set it. This does not mean there cannot be alignment between the coachee's goals and the coach's or the organization's goals. To the contrary, it is ideal when there is alignment. Sometimes the leader coach has a clear agenda, such as performance expectations, a specific action that is needed from the coachee, or a message that the organization needs the coach to deliver. In these cases the leader coach would do well to evaluate whether this requires him or her to shift into a managerial role to avoid having the coachee feel manipulated or to prevent damage to the coaching relationship.

Facilitate and collaborate. Although leader coaches typically possess considerable knowledge and expertise, they should not act like experts, making recommendations and spouting out answers. They should focus on the coachee's needs and avoid disclosing personal reactions, telling their own stories, or advocating their preferred theories and techniques. They should be highly selective about taking directive actions and should do so only to the extent that it is clearly relevant to the coachee's needs and agreed-on agenda and only when more facilitative methods would not work just as well. The coach is not there to lecture, opine, or pontificate. And although the coach may suggest options, the ultimate decision about what action to take rests with the coachee. This can be a difficult principle for leader coaches to adopt because they usually have a big

investment in achieving the desired outcomes. A leader coach should take a more directive approach only as a last resort and should take some of the responsibility for the outcomes.

Advocate self-awareness. Knowing one's strengths and development needs is a prerequisite to growing as a leader. Coachees, by learning to better recognize their own behaviors and understand the impact these behaviors may have, will be better able to analyze or predict the outcomes of their interactions with others and to take steps to achieve desired results.

Promote sustainable learning from experience. Most individuals have the capacity to learn, grow, and change if they encounter the right set of experiences and are ready to learn. Reflecting on those experiences is a powerful method for identifying personal strengths and development needs as well as opportunities and obstacles. CCL encourages coaches to help their coachees think about events from the perspective of what worked well and what did not and to use their findings to chart a course toward enhanced leader capabilities. A key element of this principle is helping coachees learn how to move from awareness to action, how to sustain that learning, and how to create a developmental feedback loop to continually replicate the process.

Model what you coach. As Daniel Goleman points out in *Working with Emotional Intelligence* (Bantam, 1998), it is the responsibility of the leader coach to exhibit the leadership and emotional competencies (such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and social skills) that the coachee is trying to develop. It can be challenging for leader coaches to apply this principle because they themselves are likely to have both strengths and weaknesses in these areas. Ideally, the leader coach has sufficient self-awareness to know whether he or she has the

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capacity and skill to coach around a particular issue and if the coachee can be more effectively served by receiving coaching from another individual. Furthermore, in order to model effective, in-the-moment feedback, coaches may face the challenge of describing the negative impact that the coachee's behavior is having on them, an approach that often feels risky.

THREE LEVELS

A recurring challenge for coaches is their reluctance to fully engage with a coachee when the latter begins to disclose significant and sometimes personal information. When coaches pull back just as they are closest to facilitating movement in their coachees' thinking, underlying mental models, and self-perception, it is often because they are afraid—of going too far or too deep or of unlocking strong emotions they feel ill equipped to handle. In short, they fear a tumultuous and out-of-control experience. This reaction apparently results from their discomfort with emotions and an often mistaken image of coaching as therapy in the workplace.

There are two responses to these concerns. First, when things go badly, it is usually because of poor practice on the part of the coach, not the practice of coaching. Second, coaches can guard against this outcome by thinking in advance about the appropriate ways they should be working with their coachees. A coach who believes there should be no boundaries around topics and depth of discussion is flirting with trouble. And those boundaries should be set by the nature of the relationship and agreement, not simply by what the coach is skilled at. Coaches can usefully characterize their work and articulate their philosophical approach to coaching by thinking about different levels of coaching.

CCL has identified three levels of coaching: *behavioral*, *underlying drivers*, and *root causes*. The intent is to provide guidelines that coaches can use to manage what they discuss with their coachees and to determine how deep the coaching conversations might go. Coaches can find reassurance in the fact that the coaching waters deepen gradually; moving from the behavioral level to root causes is not like dropping suddenly from the platform to one hundred feet. Working at these different levels is like moving from dry land into water. The farther out the coach goes, the deeper and less clear the water is. The coach then requires higher levels of skills and confidence and also greater judgment in knowing when the coachee's needs may have surpassed the coach's capabilities. The highest power of coaching often lies in the second level (underlying drivers), a broad level that encompasses many rich perspectives.

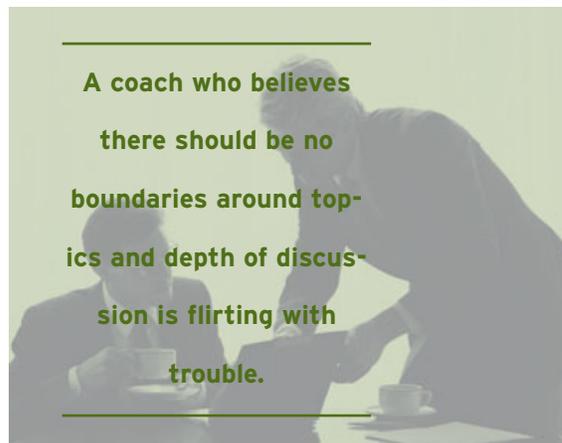
Behavioral

Coaching at the behavioral level is the most accessible and comfortable function for leader coaches. At this level, coaches address observable actions and behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, that have an impact on other people. They address what is visible and concrete. This level assumes that the coachee can understand, recognize, and have access to a range of desired behaviors and that the primary goals are to recognize the appropriate contexts in which to use these behaviors and to increase the frequency of their use. It also assumes that internal forces that may be preventing or limiting the coachee's use of these skills are not so strong or deeply entrenched that the coachee is unable to manage them.

This approach to behavioral coaching assumes it is not necessary to understand causes or reasons for the extant behavior as long as the

coachee understands that a different behavior is desired or viewed as more effective. The focus is on the desired behavioral change. With this approach the coach and coachee focus on understanding what behaviors and skills are desired and relevant to organizational, business unit, or individual goals.

At this level the coach makes sure the coachee understands what those effective behaviors look like, identifies times and situations when the coachee can demonstrate them, and encourages repetition of these skills.



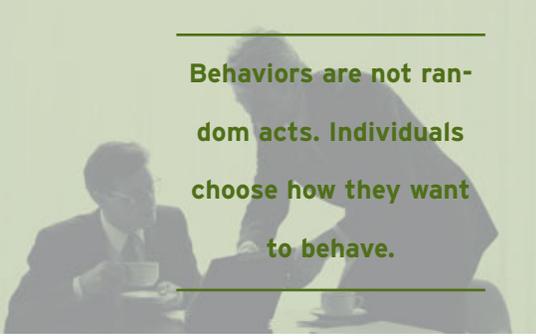
Although coaching at this level may feel more familiar to leader coaches than coaching at the other levels does, that doesn't lessen the potential results that can be achieved by working in this area. The challenge is staying in the behavioral mode and focusing on future actions rather than rehashing the past. The power lies in the coach's effective use of questioning and probing and his or her diligence in staying with the process.

Underlying Drivers

Underlying drivers lie at a deeper coaching level and comprise many elements that may be less visible than behaviors and may in fact contribute to behaviors' existence. Behaviors are

not random acts. Individuals choose how they want to behave. Sometimes those choices are conscious and deliberate; individuals likely understand what the impact will be.

Sometimes, however, behaviors are automatic. The individual is still making a choice, but it may not require conscious thought because it has become habitual or unconscious from years of learning and associating certain behaviors with certain results. Furthermore, individuals may act in ways they know are not likely to have the desired effect, but



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nonetheless they are at a loss to make another choice and act differently. In these cases the less visible (even unconscious) cognitive or emotional processes that drive the less desired behaviors are so strong that even when individuals are motivated to change they can't do so or their progress toward change is slow. Anyone who has tried to lose weight understands this dynamic.

Much of CCL's coaching practice has been built on examining and understanding underlying drivers as a way of appreciating how, in the coachee's understanding of and orientation to the world, the behavior makes logical sense. For that reason, CCL's coaching discipline includes administering personality and work-style inventories. Although CCL does not expect leader coaches to become trained in psychological instruments,

it does believe that through good questioning skills, relevant but less visible aspects of the coachee can surface and be factored into the change process. Examples of underlying drivers include talents, preferences, orientations, traits, values, mental models, beliefs, needs, and life experiences.

Coaches can easily work in these arenas by taking time to understand what motivates their coachees, what natural skills and orientations the coachees bring to the coaching process, and what experiences have shaped the coachees' view of themselves and the world and bear on their effectiveness. Coaches do not need to be licensed clinicians to have these conversations. Coachees are the experts on themselves. Effective coaches observe behaviors and are analytical and intuitive, asking thought-provoking questions to bring to the surface these underlying issues. Leader coaches typically have a wealth of opportunities for behavioral observations. Their challenge is to interpret these observations from the perspective of what they reveal about the mental models and orientations of the coachees as well as what they mean for the coachees' performance and leadership capabilities.

Root Causes

Sometimes a coachee's behaviors are deeply connected to root causes such as difficult life experiences, especially traumatic ones, or a family history of psychological disorders or substance abuse. Such deeply ingrained behaviors can be distinguished from those associated with underlying drivers by the coachee's degree of consciousness or sense of ease about revealing and discussing beliefs, mental models, and historical events.

Another differentiating factor is the extent to which the undesirable behaviors interfere with the coachee's productive functioning or to which

the coachee feels incapable of managing these behaviors.

One behavioral indicator that work is needed at this level is that the coachee appears to be stuck. This doesn't refer to the common experience when making a change of overcoming the initial inertia or the natural tendency to revert or regress periodically to the old behavior during the process of shifting to a new behavior. This type of being stuck tends to paralyze the coachee in a set of behaviors clearly having an adverse impact on his or her work and possibly personal life or even propelling him or her toward derailment.

Coaches have conversations with their coachees about early life experiences that affect their current leadership style and skills. In fact a biographical inventory is a useful assessment tool in coaching. Coaches can informally or formally introduce and use such an assessment to better understand the coachee's personal context.

The difference between using such biographical assessment and delving into past life experiences is the coachee's ability to frame and make sense of those experiences. If coachees have such ability, then the experience falls within the realm of underlying drivers.

When working at the behavioral and underlying drivers levels proves to be insufficient and the coachee feels the need to delve into past life experiences to relive and heal past wounds, the leader coach should consider referring the coachee to a clinical professional with whom the coachee can establish a therapeutic relationship. The structure, goals, and boundaries of such a relationship are different from those of leadership coaching. Even if the leader coach has training in counseling or therapeutic practice, it is not recommended that he or she engage in this type of work.

Most leader coaches are familiar with their organizations' processes for referral. Alternatively, if the coachee chooses not to use internally offered services, a leader coach might encourage the coachee to seek professional services using his or her own resources and referral sources.

DEVELOP AND PERFORM

One issue that continues to engage practitioners and leaders in lively discussion is how coaching is applied in leadership development; in particular, what is the relationship between coaching for performance and coaching for development? Sometimes these terms are used interchangeably, but more often they are used to differentiate the focus of the coaching.

CCL sees the two forms as sitting in different places on a continuum of coaching rather than as polarities, and although CCL's work is best understood as having a development focus, the Center also believes the learning that occurs through coaching can benefit both the performance and the development of the coachee. Calling out some of the differences adds to the perspectives of leader coaches who are more routinely engaged in performance coaching.

In *Four Essential Ways That Coaching Can Help Executives: A Practical Guide to the Ways That Outside Consultants Can Help Managers* (CCL Press, 1997), Robert Witherspoon and Randall P. White differentiate coaching for development and coaching for performance by emphasizing that coaching for performance generally relates to learning that focuses on a person's current job. It's geared toward helping people improve their effectiveness on the job, often over a span of time ranging from several months to a year or more. Coaching for development, however, focuses on the individual's future. That can mean preparing for a career move, for

example, or for advancement to higher levels in the organization.

A key distinction between coaching for development and coaching for performance is that developmental coaching focuses on learning. That distinction helps to bridge the seeming gap between performance and development. When there is a conscious focus on learning, an intention to reflect and to identify lessons for the purpose of being more effective in the future (whether that future is tomorrow or two years away), then development is occurring. So coaching for performance can be developmental when the learning that improves a coachee's ability to meet the current demands and goals of his or her current role is understood by the coachee as a step in a longer process of leadership development.

CCL encourages leader coaches to hold both a developmental and performance mind-set and offers a supporting business analogy:

Organizations pursue both a long-term strategy and short-term goals. The long-term strategy is aspirational and usually involves developing new organizational capacities and perspectives. The short-term goals are practical and immediate, relying on applying an established set of skills and behaviors to ensure the company's financial strength in order to pursue its long-term strategy. Both are needed for organizations to be successful. Leaders need to tend to both aspects in themselves as well. They need to be equipped with the skills and attributes that ensure achievement of current expectations as well as to anticipate the capabilities and attitudes needed for the next level of leadership demands.

When an executive is unsuccessful at a particular job or derails completely, the warning signs often were present but were missed, overlooked, or rationalized for various reasons. If a more holistic coaching approach that encompassed performance and

development had been taken with such individuals, preventive measures might have avoided such visible and costly failures. Such an approach might mean not using the individual's strengths to optimize short-term results but instead moving that individual into a role that offered him or her the opportunity to employ and develop new skills that would benefit



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the organization's long-term objectives.

Leader coaches who are most often engaged in performance coaching can leverage their coaching by making the learning focus intentional and by making explicit the relationship of the current skills improvements to expanding the coachee's overall leadership capacity. The coach is readying the coachee for future leadership challenges. If the coach thinks strategically about the coachee's development, the coach will also seek to identify skills that may not be currently needed but will be needed in the future.

BASIC RESPONSIBILITIES

General coaching considerations of importance are confidentiality, resistance, power and authority, and role

conflict, but not all leader coaches are experienced in these areas.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a complex issue for leader coaches because they don't have the luxury of defining their relationship with coachees as solely developmental. Leader coaches occupy a unique position from which they gain a view of the coachee that is more comprehensive than the one afforded an external coach. When it comes to confidentiality, it's important that leader coaches and their



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coachees explicitly discuss such issues as these:

- What types of information and discussions can and will remain absolutely confidential?
- What types of information cannot remain confidential because of organizational ethics, codes of conduct, and reporting requirements?
- What types of information may enjoy only limited confidentiality because of the leader coach's broader role in the organization?

Leader coaches have to monitor constantly how confidential information affects their coaching. They must maintain their awareness about what

information they have, how they obtained it, and whose confidence they are obligated to ensure.

Resistance

When coachees don't accept feedback, don't agree to make changes, or agree to change but don't follow through, coaches can feel frustrated, impatient, annoyed, or disappointed. A leader coach may conclude that the coachee is not really committed to change or accepting of development needs. As a result the leader coach might push harder, become more directive, withdraw energy, or give up. These are all reasonable feelings, thoughts, and reactions, especially if the leader coach regards resistance as unwillingness and defiance.

CCL, however, encourages leader coaches to see resistance in a more positive light. It can be a natural self-protection mechanism that some coachees use. After all, their way of reacting to leadership situations has evolved over time, and they have been rewarded for those practices. These tried-and-true behaviors form a natural protective covering that wards off not only negative external influences but also positive opportunities to change.

When leader coaches encounter what they perceive to be resistance, they can benefit from stepping back and trying to better understand how the coachees' behaviors have enabled and supported their careers thus far. With this perspective, the coach can then look for alternative approaches and tactics to engage the coachee.

Power and Authority

Good coaching relationships include openness, candor, trust, and dialogue. Leader coaches should be aware of how their coachees respond to power and authority and what impact those reactions may have on the coachee's ability and willingness to engage openly in coaching. At the same time, leader coaches should examine their

own views on and responses to power and authority and how those reactions might be affecting their expectations about the coaching relationship and the ways coachees should respond.

By talking openly about this issue, a coach and coachee may be able to avoid negative power dynamics, such as overly compliant coachees who invest in their development goals primarily because the leader coach sees those goals as valuable. In such cases the coachee is often responding to the implicit power and authority that resides in the leader coach's organizational role.

Role Conflict

Leader coaches encounter role conflict because of the multiple roles they assume in organizations. At any one time a leader coach might also be a business manager; a leader responsible for getting results; a manager responsible for enabling, evaluating, and developing; or an organizational citizen responsible for participating in and supporting broader organizational agendas. In each of these roles, the leader coach's relationship to the coachee shifts. These different roles can't be totally separated. Leader coaches need to understand these various roles, to assess their ability to juggle their coaching role among them, and to judge whether the circumstances have changed in such a way that it is advisable to alter the coaching relationship or its developmental content.

GAINING CLARITY

The goal of the leader coach is to help the people being coached to understand themselves more fully so they can draw on their strengths and use them more effectively and intentionally as a means to improve and develop their potential. Much of the work of the leader coach involves helping people gain clarity about their own motivations, aspirations, and commitment to change. ✍