

FEATURE

Why Leaders Need Coaches

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Introduction

It's 2011 and I'm at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, serving as that institution's senior scholar. During an Honor Code violation meeting I'm confused when I hear an officer say that a cadet should have gotten "on the balcony." I had no idea what the expression meant. That night, through the wisdom of Google, it quickly became clear to me why the officer used that expression.

Coined by Ron Heifetz, founder of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard, "on the balcony" refers to the capacity of a leader to observe and reflect while in the midst of a conversation, situation or complex activity (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Parks, 2005). Heifetz uses the example of a dancer who has developed the ability to work on particular steps and movements on the dance floor while simultaneously getting "on the balcony" (metaphorically) to observe the patterns of the choreography and the interactions between the dancers.

Heifetz uses the metaphor to challenge leaders to think about their own thinking (and actions). The challenge for any leader, he suggests, is to develop the cognitive agility to transition effortlessly from the action on the "dance floor" (everyday conversations, meetings, decisions) to getting "on the balcony" to observe, reflect and "see" larger patterns of behaviors, relationships, etc. Indeed, one of the benefits of getting "on the balcony" is that the leader begins to develop the capacity to identify his/her "blind spots" (see Shaw, 2014). This intentional process of reflecting harkens back to the owl of Athena in Greek mythology and the creature's ability to "see" things in the dark as the symbol of wisdom.

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Indeed, Russell (2009) reminds us that the Greek philosopher Aristotle frequently employed the “vision” metaphor in his writings on character and leadership. The *phronimoi* (wise persons), suggests Aristotle, know what to do in particular situations “because they have an eye, formed from experience....they see correctly” (NE VI.II, 1143b13-14).

In addition to “vision” metaphors, scholars and leader-practitioners frequently employ “spatial” metaphors to describe the ability of leaders to reflect on their behaviors even in the midst of action. For example, Russell (2009) asserts that virtuous people need “critical distance” (p. 388) in order to evaluate one’s character, aims and desires. Additionally, the language of “standing back” or “stepping back” is widely used to extol the virtue of testing our assumptions, behaviors and mental models (Dewan & Myatt, 2012).

Mental Models

One purpose of this article is to consider whether too many leaders are caught in a web of “mental models” that limit their capacity and effectiveness. Mental models have been defined as the extent to which “people’s view of the world, of themselves, of their own capabilities, and of the tasks that they are asked to perform, or topics they are asked to learn, depend heavily on the conceptualizations that they bring to the task” (Gentner & Stevens, 1983). Plato, in his parable of the cave, warns us that the capacity to “step back” from our mental models is not easy. We all have settled habits of mind, heart and hands (e.g., our behaviors and actions). In her book *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, Nancy Snow (2010) draws on the research of Walter Mischel & Shoda (1995) to explain how difficult it is to change our thoughts and behaviors. Mischel & Shoda posit that each of us have developed a “bundle” of distinctive motivations, cognitions and affective responses. These elements form our personality, or what they call our Cognitive-Affective Processing System (CAPS). For example, a “shy” person will typically react to a situation differently than an extremely outgoing person. This

“system” also includes our beliefs, goals, feelings, values, desires, self-regulatory plans, self-attributes, etc. The CAPS model suggests that our typical response to any situation depends on our personality, temperament and dispositions.

Moreover, we all have internal schemas, scripts, routines, habits and behavioral repertoires that are primed and activated by particular people, situations or contexts. Mischel & Shoda call these responses “behavioral signatures” – automatic “if-then” responses to different stimuli and events. For example, my CAPS explains why, all things being equal, I will respond to meeting people at a conference using behaviors, language and affect typical to how I’ve met people at conferences for the past 40 years. We all have “default” or automatic thoughts and behaviors (“if-then” responses). This article seeks to examine the ways in which our “behavioral signatures” limit and inhibit men and women in positions of leadership within their professions. More specifically, I aim to persuade the reader that most of us need support to grasp the ways in which our personality structure limits our cognitive, affective and behavioral agility.

Developing Wisdom

It has never been easy for me to get “on the balcony.” I prefer to stay on dance floor (metaphorically). Thus, I understand first-hand the resistance that leaders may have when it comes to asking for support (often referred to as coaching). Most leaders have demonstrated success in their field or profession. They’ve been promoted, often several times. Clearly, their “default” scripts, schemas, routines and behavioral repertoires have served them well. Why change?

Aristotle is not especially helpful here. While Aristotle’s theory of the virtues is surely a “theory of getting better,” Russell (2015) aptly points out that Aristotle does not articulate any special theory or set of interventions on how we can most optimally enhance our practice of the virtues -- except to insist

that acquiring a virtue is like acquiring a skill. In fact, a close reading of Aristotle seems to suggest that all it takes to develop a virtue is the right amount of focus, effort and practice.

While we may be able to develop such virtues as generosity or gratitude using this focus-effort-practice formula, I doubt whether we can fully develop wisdom in this manner. This is especially true for leaders who

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need to access complex cognitive skills (Hannah, Lord & Pearce, 2011), whether it’s to make a “hard decision” in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity or to know when to demonstrate the “soft skills” of caring, listening or compassion.

Aristotle, however, does explain the different functions and abilities of wise persons. In his book *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Daniel Russell (2009) offers us a chain of factors that form the virtue of wisdom (*phronesis*). First, the wise person has the ability to look at any situation from multiple perspectives. Second, after weighing and discerning these multiple perspectives, the wise person is able to discriminate between the most likely right and wrong response. In other words, the wise person can ultimately grasp (“see”) what is actually going on. Next, the wise person exhibits the ability to bring this deliberative process to a conclusion and determine what needs

to be done. Finally, based on the steps described above, the wise person actually responds to the situation, avoiding the dreaded “decision-action gap” (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2013).

In many ways, wisdom is the ability of a person to extract relevant information that might be lost on others. Indeed, Aristotle seems to suggest that experience is the great equalizer. My argument is that self-scrutiny – the capacity to reflect consistently on the range of your leadership behaviors, from strategic decisions to what “pushes your buttons” – becomes for many leaders more critical than mere experience, especially for leaders who have taken on significant responsibilities and enormous pressures. Once again, I want to emphasize how unlikely it is for anyone to develop the virtue of wisdom without taking intentional steps to learn how his or her personality structures (our cognitive-affective processing system) limits and restrains them. A growing number of leaders are beginning to recognize this limitation (often after talking to their mentors) and increasingly they are working with a leadership coach who helps them “see” their blind spots (Berglas, 2013; Coutu & Kauffman, 2009).

Coaching Leaders

The coaching profession is exploding across a number of dimensions and domains (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014; Palmer & Whybrow, 2014). According to Connie Whittaker Dunlop, a member of Forbes Magazine Coaches Council, coaching is a \$2 billion global industry with 36 active professional coaching associations worldwide (Dunlop, 2017). Of course, such dynamic growth has produced significant challenges for the industry, including the standards used to accredit training programs for leadership coaches. Yet the proliferation

of these programs and associations all cohere around the belief that “coaching is a powerful vehicle for change” (excerpted from the mission statement of The Institute of Coaching, affiliated with the Harvard Medical School).

Broadly defined, leadership coaching (often referred to as executive coaching) is a relationship between a coach and a person in a leadership position. The purpose of the relationship is for the coach to help the coachee become a more effective leader. There are three components to this one-on-one relationship: (1) the strict confidentiality of what’s discussed during the coaching session; (2) the willingness of the leader to learn and grow from the coaching experience; and (3) the ability of the coach to use the right coaching model with the right person at the right time to create the ideal environment for the leader to solve or understand the right problem (Kauffman & Hodgetts, 2016).

While approaches to coaching leaders may differ, most coaches aim to support the efforts of leaders to examine their assumptions, attitudes and default mindsets across a wide range of leader behaviors, cognitions and emotions. After conducting a comprehensive review of the literature, compiled below is a list behaviors and cognitions that coaches report are common to their coaching experience. What is startling to me is how this list incorporates the different functions and abilities Aristotle ascribed to the wise person:

1. Self-knowledge (from awareness to deeper meaning and insight)
2. Mental attention and mindfulness
3. Learning from past mistakes
4. Ability to recognize patterns of behavior
5. Ability to find creative or novel solutions to problems
6. The capacity to think dialectically (to grasp opposite values or perspectives)

7. Developing a questioning spirit (leaders ask questions)
8. Adaptability (across situations and domains)
9. Improving interpersonal relationships
10. Thinking strategically
11. Understanding emotions (in both self and others)
12. Ability to self-regulate (anger, choice of words)
13. Ability to actively listen
14. Ability to give feedback
15. Ability to question assumptions
16. Admitting when (and what) one does not know
17. Develop new skills and behaviors (growth mindset)
18. The courage to stand up for one’s values and convictions

Assess-Challenge-Support

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has developed the Assess, Challenge, Support (ACS) model of coaching that many leadership coaches use (Ting & Scisco, 2006). During the assessment phase, the coach and leader work together to identify precisely what the leader wants to work on. For example, the leader may have participated in a 360-degree review and the coach will spend time with the leader to help him or her identify significant themes and questions that emerged from the 360-review. Significantly, we know from the literature that a 360-degree assessment often reveals a gnawing gap between how leaders see themselves and how others in the organization perceive them (Lepsinger & Lucia, 1997). In other coaching situations, the leader has taken a battery of inventories (personality tests, emotional intelligence scales, transformational leadership questionnaire, etc.) that reveal certain themes the leader will likely want to explore with his or her coach (e.g., “I was surprised to see that I scored so low in the “individualized consideration” area of transformational leadership”). Other times, the leader has already determined a specific skill or organizational challenge he or she

wants to focus on (e.g., team dynamics or a relationship with a specific colleague).

The challenge component focuses on the opportunity for the coach and leader to identify a particular context or situation in which the leader can practice the new behavior or approach. For example, perhaps the coach has been working with the leader on how to observe patterns of behavior or communication during a particular meeting or situation (e.g., the ability to get “on the balcony”). During this challenge phase of coaching it’s essential that the coach create a disequilibrium or imbalance so the leader can stretch beyond his or her comfort zone.

The third component, support, is the ability of the coach to maintain the leader’s motivation, whether it’s by continuing to offer new resources and strategies, managing setbacks, and perhaps most critically, affirming small wins (e.g., celebrating the first time the leader effectively delegates responsibility rather than hoarding control).

The effectiveness of the coaching experience is usually measured along two distinct dimensions: (1) the extent to which the leader has attained or reached his or her stated goal (e.g., to listen better); and, (2) the extent to which the leader has made a commitment to create a sustained “learning agenda” whether the coaching experience continues or not.

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extent to which the leader has made a commitment to create a sustained “learning agenda” whether the coaching experience continues or not. While several modest studies have shown the benefits of the coaching experience, ranging from increased leader-efficacy to a leader’s trust in subordinates, the field has yet to produce a definitive outcomes study to determine the efficacy of the coaching experience across the professions (Page & De Haan, 2014; Tamir & Finfer, 2017).

Five Reasons That Prevent Leaders From Growing Via Coaching

While there is empirical and anecdotal evidence that coaching can significantly increase leader effectiveness, there are five reasons why the coaching experience does not result in new insight or skill, even when the leader works with a skilled and effective coach. These are:

1. Leaders are driven by performance goals, not learning goals

Most leaders are achievement-oriented. They like excelling, whether it’s acing a test in high school or accepting a professional stretch assignment. Learning goals are not so simple or easy (Dweck, 2007). Too many leaders just don’t like being a beginner, especially when “mastery” seems so distant and unattainable. Moreover, leaders catch on fast that organizations (whether the military or companies) are far more likely to reward the attainment of a performance goal than recognizing and rewarding a leader who has learned something about herself that has previously

limited her behavioral repertoire. To guard against this constraint, organizations should braid into their performance evaluations annual learning goals; moreover, leaders should take the proactive step to

work with a colleague to hold each other accountable to demonstrate progress toward a learning goal.

2. Leaders spend too much time preserving their reputations and hiding their inadequacies

In their book *Immunity to Change* (2009), Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey write “if you are leading anything at any level, you are driving some kind of plan or agenda, but some kind of plan or agenda is always driving you (p. 6, emphasis in original).” For many leaders, the agenda driving them is finding ways and taking steps to preserve their reputations and hide their inadequacies (from themselves and others). For most leaders, vulnerability is a recipe for disaster (Kegan, Lahey, Fleming, & Miller, 2014). Years ago, when I started working with my coach, vulnerability was one area I desperately wanted to avoid. Looking back, I’m thankful he encouraged me to examine this critical aspect of my leadership practice. To guard against this constraint, emerging leaders should observe how being vulnerable benefits leaders they respect and admire. Second, they should fiercely reflect and consider the possibility that being vulnerable is an act of personal courage.

3. Leaders like being the “hub” rather than the “bridge”

These metaphors are used by Herminia Ibarra in her book *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader* (2015). Most leaders are comfortable being at the “hub” of activity, such as controlling the flow of information, overseeing critical tasks, establishing goals and objectives. Ibarra suggests, however, that the most effective leaders become “bridges.” These leaders spend much of their time serving as a bridge between their team and the “higher ups.” They are

constantly connecting members of their team to key outside people; they strive to provide new and timely information to members of their team. Regrettably, too many leaders cannot let go of their “hub” role, even with the support of a leadership coach. There is this persistent, gnawing reality in the coaching literature that some leaders simply want to keep

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doing what they already do well (Goldsmith, 2007). To guard against this constraint, organizations could braid into their performance evaluations, including the leader’s 360-degree review, the extent to which an emerging leader is able to demonstrate “bridge” behaviors. In addition, a leader could simply ask a trusted peer to offer honest feedback on his or her ability to exhibit “bridge” behaviors.

4. Leaders avoid confronting the “undiscussable issues”

Robert Quinn used this phrase in his book *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within* (1996). Every family and group has a cluster of undiscussable issues. These issues are the “sacred cows” that even the most authentic leaders are reluctant to discuss. Sometimes we avoid bringing up “undiscussable issues” because there is simply too much history involved. Or past efforts failed miserably. There is also the perception that raising the issue will likely hurt one or more individuals and sometimes focusing on the issue is perceived as an act of disloyalty. In short, leaders too often avoid these

“undiscussable issues” because who wants to risk experiencing fear or embarrassment? This is a hard constraint to overcome, but the most effective leaders have learned that it’s best to name the elephant in the room. They know from past experiences that too much energy can be spent on finding ways to avoid the “undiscussable issues” rather than harnessing that energy to find a solution. Sometimes all it takes is for a leader to set the example; to communicate to his or her subordinates that it’s okay to talk about an issue that others sought to dismiss or sweep under the table.

5. Leaders focus too much on skills, rather than on developing virtue

Too many leaders come to coaching for answers to a simple question: “What should I do?” Yet Hursthouse (1999) argues that the wise person asks

on developing the requisite skills of their chosen profession rather than cultivating the virtues aimed at a good life (Kilburg, 2012). To overcome this constraint, an emerging leader could identify a virtue that he/she wants to strengthen or enhance, such as patience, and during the next three months challenge himself/herself to intentionally practice this virtue.

Conclusion

Rare is the leader who has not uttered the words: “What was I thinking?” While every mentor and coach since Socrates has urged us to examine our beliefs, behaviors and emotions too many leaders revert back to what they’re comfortable saying and doing. It’s safe. Predictable. But a growing chorus of scholars and leader-practitioners are calling for leaders to resist the status quo and their long-held assumptions (Bennis, 2009; Sharmer, 2016). They are challenging each of us to develop the radical mindset of a life-long learner. In addition, leaders are beginning to recognize that leader humility (Owens & Hekman, 2016) is strongly associated with group cohesion, innovation, and a promotion-focus orientation. Coaching can help leaders develop and cultivate the virtue of humility.

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a radically different question: “What sort of person ought I be?” Recent research on leader identity reveals that the most effective leaders have the right sort of life goals, motives and purposes (Hannah, Woolfork & Lord, 2009; Hess & Cameron, 2006; McKenna, Rooney & Boal, 2009; Yang, 2011). These leaders strive to find harmony and consonance between their different values and commitments (Kristjansson, 2016). Aristotle hit the mark when he wrote “virtue makes one’s end the right end and phronesis (practical wisdom) makes right the things toward that end” (NE, VI, 12, 1144a7-9). Anecdotal evidence suggests, regrettably, that leaders across all professions focus significantly more attention

There is much wisdom in the Talmudic expression “we do not see things as they are...we see things as we are.” At the core of this wisdom is the call for leaders to recognize and accept that everyone has weaknesses and blind spots. Looking into the mirror may not be easy, but it’s what the most effective leaders consistently do. They have learned that the most effective way to motivate and inspire their subordinates to improve is to model and communicate the ways they are striving to improve themselves.

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