



COACHING IN LEADERSHIP

This article explores how the principles of coaching are applied in leadership, a process which extends back some thirty years to a time before the term 'coaching' had acquired the meaning it has in the workplace today.

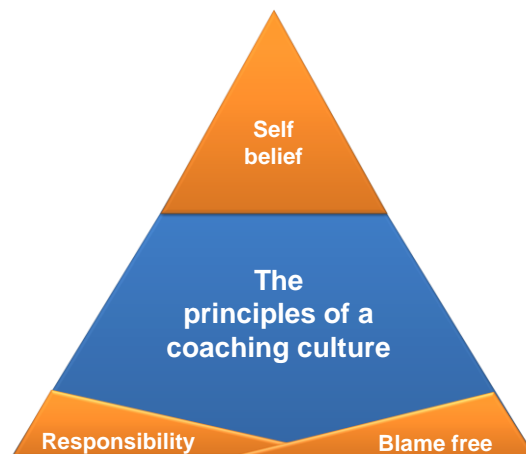
One of the best ways to understand coaching in leadership is through an exercise which I learned from Sir John Whitmore. Think back to someone in your life who inspired you as a leader; someone you had a personal relationship with, not a leader you viewed from afar. It might be a relative, a teacher, perhaps a leader in the scouts or guides, or, later, a business manager. It will be someone you were always pleased to see, and who helped you develop as a person.

Now ask yourself:

- What did that leader do that worked for you? What skills did your leader use, how did he or she behave?
- How did you feel when you were with your leader?

Write down a list in each category. Take five or ten minutes to do this before reading on. When you have finished your list, continue reading and we will come back to review the list later.

Meanwhile, let us turn to the elements that constitute the 'coaching culture' which so many organisations aspire to today. Through my years of experience as a manager and at training managers in coaching, it seems to me that there are three key elements which hold up the sky in a coaching culture:



Responsibility: the more you control and check on what your employees are doing, the less effort they will put in themselves. Why bother to exert yourself when you know there is a safety net, and someone is going to correct your mistakes or (even less motivating) change your suggestions and ideas?

Self belief: the more you believe in people, the more they will believe in themselves. It is tried and tested that the more people believe they can achieve something, the more likely they are to achieve it. You have to let people take risks and believe they will succeed. This is half the battle in building confidence.

Blame free: of course, the very nature of risk lies in the danger of failure. Children learn to walk by falling over, and if workers are not allowed to fail, then they will not be able to take any actions except the ones that have been taken before. How then can a company keep up in our fast changing times? Viewing mistakes as part of the learning curve – i.e. one step closer to success – constitutes the other fifty per cent of building the confidence of your workers. Learning through experience – both of success and failure – is how they will build their own self belief.

Some examples of natural coaching managers who have never been on a course are:

- **Warren Buffet:** From time to time the world's richest man, Buffet built his empire by buying chunks of other people's organisations. According to interviews I have read with owners of the organisations he acquired, he leaves the managers alone to run their businesses but is always available at the end of the phone. In a coaching culture, there is no need to check up on staff because they will come to you when the need presents itself. Imagine how much time that saves!
- **Ricardo Semler:** thirty years ago Semler inherited the global industry of Semco from his father. He felt there had to be a better way of managing the business than telling his workers what to do. Respecting their talent and innate intelligence, he handed over control of the organisation to them, eventually even down to having people set their own salaries. There were no coaching books or courses for Ricardo to follow – he had to make it up as he went along, and although he faced few pitfalls on the way, the new system thrived.
- **Andy Law,** the owner of St Luke's Advertising, turned the entire organisation over to its employees, right down to the shareholding.
- **Ralph Stayer** who in 1980 commenced a tortuous but rewarding experimental process of enabling his workers to lead his organisation, Johnsonville Sausage.
- **Sir Richard Branson:** I worked at board level with Branson for a decade at the start of Virgin. The organisation seemed like a wonderful anarchy at the time, but looking back I can see that Branson showed all the elements of a coaching leader – before the term as we know it today had been invented.

Returning to the list you wrote earlier, how do these elements compare with what you have written?

My leader...

- Listened to me
- Believed in me
- Challenged me
- Trusted and respected me
- Gave me time and attention
- Treated me as an equal

I felt ...

- Special
- Valued
- Confident
- Safe, cared for, supported
- Fun, enthusiasm
- Self belief

I have delivered this exercise with groups as diverse as Americans, Asians, Malaysians, Australians, Emiratis and managers from all over Europe. Extraordinarily, the answers are always virtually the same. The group of Emirati women pictured below gave the answers so exactly that I stopped the session and asked if they had been given the slide printouts in advance. But they had not!



The items on this list represent common values which underlie inspiring leadership across all cultures, age groups and sexes. Yet are they the qualities which come to mind when we think of good leadership in the abstract sense? They tend not to be – we might say that leadership is about being a great orator, having talent, knowledge and t, having the courage to stride ahead, flag-waving and flamboyant. Yet these aspects are rarely mentioned when people talk about the leader who was most effective for them personally.

Take another look at the list. Who can do these skills of listening, showing belief, giving time and attention etc? Anyone can! Therefore who can be a great leader? Anyone can! Of course the skills require authenticity, and that is possibly the only hard part.

There is a misconception that coaching is about learning particular techniques, like active listening, open questioning and clarifying. These are indeed coaching skills, but for me what turns someone into a coaching manager is the underlying intention behind the words: treating people with respect, focusing on their development, believing in them and raising their awareness and self belief:



If you attend a coaching course and learn the skills marked in blue on the left, but do not pay any attention to the red list on the right, you may well find yourself saying 'I am using Open Questions and my staff still hate me!' However, if you are a person who usually incorporates the skills on the right, it is quite likely that you will find yourself naturally projecting the skills on the left, and a coaching course will enhance this.

It is my belief that even directive management can be delivered in a coaching style. I once trained a manager who returned to the second phase of the course after a month's practice in the field, and related to the group how he had fired someone. He said that instead of telling, he coached the man. 'And he fired himself!' exclaimed the trainee. 'And then he thanked me for it!' I hear stories like this all the time and have known managers who making being fired a revelatory and inspiring experience, whether they are trained coaches or not.

I have found that the most effective way of becoming a coaching manager – if you are not one of the lucky ones who, due to culture and upbringing, are natural coaches – is to learn and copy the skills as taught on courses, integrate them through practice, and then throw the rule book away. In this way, it is possible to manage in a coaching style but with authenticity in terms of your own personality and values. Coaching skills should always be the tool, not the master.

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About the author:

International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the ILM, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations all over the world and has won several awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of 'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training' and 'The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'. She has contributed to several other books and published over 50 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.

www.coachingcultureatwork.com
www.cleancoaching.com
+44(0)207 022 4923
info@coachingcultureatwork.com