

COACHING FOR LEADERSHIP: A THOUGHT PAPER

Leaders not only have to be good. They have to be outstanding, in a world which is changing at a faster pace than ever before, where surprises are commonplace, and where those who flourish have exceptional soft skills and self-knowledge.

My belief – based on my experience of coaching leaders, and borne out by the research - is that authenticity, built on a deep sense of self, underpins leadership effectiveness. Effective leaders consistently inspire with a vision – and coaching enables already effective leaders to become even better.

“I know what’s important to me and I’m not emotional about it: it just is. There are no more shoulds.”

SENIOR EXECUTIVE

In January 2010 The Work Foundation, in a piece of qualitative evidence-based research, proposed a set of principles and behaviours that combined to create outstanding leadership¹, focussing on sustainable performance, purpose and meaning. The research provides overwhelming evidence for the idea that truly people-centred leadership (i.e. leadership with a focus on relationships, placing people at the centre of performance) leads to more effective performance. Conditions for this are the leader’s depth of self-awareness, the discovery of what it means to be themselves, and self-acceptance.

Self-awareness, self-regulation, self-discovery and self-acceptance underpin authentic leadership, which – according to leadership coach Graham Lee² – is a paradoxical blend of being true to oneself with being true to the organisational strategy and needs. Authentic leaders critically reflect on their emotions, behaviours and thinking. They see, experience and evaluate situations and their personal responses as they are, without getting caught up in emotion. They build performance in themselves and others through productive relationships in which they connect emotionally with people, inspire them and engender trust. They nurture a sense of purpose and meaning, engagement and fulfilment. They empower others to deliver to their strengths and to take well-judged risks within a learning culture. They foster the development of authenticity in their followers. They encourage creativity. They build influence and impact. And they see the leadership task in the context of the whole organisation rather than simply their own part in it.

“When coached by you... my mind opens... I see my possibilities.” CHARITY CHIEF COMMISSIONER

I aim to facilitate coaching clients to uncover patterns in their emotions, behaviour, thinking, relationships, systems, and the stories they tell. On their coaching journeys they learn to listen to themselves and to discern meanings that were previously hidden to them. They learn how to respond rather than react, in a fuller awareness of the choices they make. They become able to access what Carl Rogers calls ‘a greater capacity in themselves to make judgments and draw conclusions’³ and to manage the paradox between personal and organisational imperatives. I take a psychological perspective, and I particularly like Gestalt, with its focus on awareness of ‘what is’ (rather than on particular processes, techniques or interpretation), and its flexibility and openness to drawing on all other approaches.

My experience of coaching leaders bears out the power of Gestalt to stimulate outstanding leadership through integrating the disparate parts that we all consist of⁴, based on key tenets: Focus on the coaching relationship as an enabler of

sustainable change. Dialogue in which the coach listens deeply. A holistic and systemic perspective. Focus on the here and now, and on what emerges as important through awareness. And creativity and experimentation.

The Academy of Executive Coaching's Certificates in 'The Psychology of Coaching' and 'Gestalt Coaching Skills'⁵ were the launchpad to the crafting of my approach. I am person-centred in the manner of Carl Rogers, system-focused (drawing on John Whittington's work on Constellations Coaching⁶) and oriented towards mindfulness. The coaching relationship is both platform and anchor: I am as authentic as I can be, I aim to accept the client and feel a warm regard for them, and to feel empathy for them. In my experience this creates a trust in which they feel safe enough to do risky thinking. The coaching client is able to use the relationship for growth, so that change, development and transformation occur.⁷

My coaching clients learn how to be leaders who enable autonomy in individuals and in teams, facilitate learning, stimulate independent thought and action, engage with the innovative creations that emerge, delegate, offer and receive feedback, and find reward in the others' development and achievement.⁸ They accept what is and inspire to what could be.

"I touched the heart and soul of me – I stood 'me and me'." NHS CHANGE CONSULTANT

My approach has proven to make a significant difference to the quality of coaching clients' leadership. It facilitates them to tap in more fully to their capabilities, to find personal fulfilment, resilience, focus and energy and to create (and continue to build) sustained growth in the organisation's return on investment in them as leaders and in those they lead.

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¹ 'Exceeding Expectations: the principles of outstanding leadership', Tamkin et al, 2010, The Work Foundation
<http://www.theworkfoundation.com/Reports/233/Exceeding-Expectation-The-principles-of-outstanding-leadership>

² 'Leadership coaching: from personal insight to organisational performance', Graham Lee 2003, CIPD

³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjTpEL8acfo

⁴ From 'Gestalt Counselling in Action', P Clarkson, 2004, Sage Publications

⁵ www.aoec.com

⁶ www.coachingconstellations.com

⁷ 'On Becoming a Person', Carl Rogers, 1967, Constable & Robinson Ltd

⁸ 'Carl Rogers on Personal Power', Carl Rogers, 1978, Constable & Robinson Ltd