

RE-ORIENTING LEADERSHIP COACHING FOR SUSTAINABLE EFFECTIVENESS

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As a result of our respective doctoral studies in management and leadership, we have had the good fortune both to uncover research that is often overlooked as well as to engage with some extraordinary clients. This motivated a critical part of our own journey, namely the publication of our book *Coaching on the Go: How to lead your team effectively in 10 minutes a day*. Writing the book was heavily influenced by our own empirical research as well as personal experiences as senior leaders working with and in different types of organizations, as well as being professional coaches and delighting in the impact that this has both on our clients and on ourselves.

We would be the first to acknowledge that improving our own capabilities as professional coaches enabled us to see how we might have been so much more effective as business leaders using some of the same skills! However, we believed that teaching these same coaching skills to everyday business leaders was overcomplicated and misdirected. This is what inspired our book.

Our personal experience, client conversations, and research has led us to identify and highlight two critical issues where we see organizations consistently making serious errors that hold back the development of their leaders, waste money, and restrict the potential for longer term and sustainable effectiveness. The purpose of this article is to explain these and to offer solutions.

Coaching in Organizations today

In many organizations it is common for managers to work on their personal growth and development by engaging a leadership coach. Coaching is a powerful tool. Not unsurprisingly therefore, many companies even commit significant resources in training their own people to be internal coaches. But too often organizations use it incorrectly, creating ongoing long-term costs without solving the business' needs. Given the ever-increasing demand for professional coaches and the growing number of voices calling for the development of a coaching culture, you may find this viewpoint surprising.

Both of us have worked in industry at very senior levels and subsequently as executive coaches for more than 30 years combined. We have been requested to coach senior leaders to help them adjust or 'get up to speed.' However, what we have learned is that often the true issue is an organizational-level problem that coaching alone cannot resolve, for example, poor structures and processes or the toxicity of the whole organization.

We also train leaders to use coaching skills to address systemic organizational problems, from poor leadership to employee disengagement and burnout. Through this work we have identified that organizations have regularly sought this solution previously without success because their approach is fundamentally flawed. The use of coaches and training leaders in coaching skills are two seemingly different organizational challenges and yet they have a single related solution.

The ICF/International Coaching Federation predicts that over two-thirds of organizations will increase their use of external coaches, and according to Zhou (www.luisazhou.com) the 2024 coaching market will bloom to an estimated at \$20bn and one-third of all Fortune 500

companies utilizing executive coaching all the data shows that this issue is a big-ticket item and needs attention We've identified how.

The first step is to understand when "a coach" can and can't help. The second is to understand the difference between "a coach" (in other words a professional coach, or someone following such an approach) and **leaders-who-coach**. As a result, organizations can make the most of their coaching dollars, and their people.

Understanding when a coach can help

To determine when to use a professional coach, we use a simple question to address whether such coaching is a worthwhile endeavor: *Does the executive need to develop and challenge themselves or do they need tools to function within their organization?* The former is ripe for a coach to assist, the latter indicates a bigger systemic issue, which demands further exploration before assuming the provision of a coach is the answer. Here's an illustration.

A client we recently worked with at a major global management consultancy was at a career tipping-point, hoping to achieve partner status, with all the huge responsibilities and rewards that this brings. One of us was brought in to help with a range of issues including a perceived lack of confidence when working with colleagues. Yet this manager was already a huge revenue earner and new client generator, and highly regarded by others. They reported that they felt extremely confident when working with clients and external shareholders. And yet, when shifting to work with internal colleagues, especially existing partners, their confidence disappeared. Our coaching helped the client to understand, learn and adjust their own behaviors to succeed. Promotion to partner soon followed.

Now consider other typical coaching engagements we have experienced. In each case the set-up is similar: a talented employee is being offered a coach to develop their potential. Very quickly, however, during early coaching sessions the manager reveals the toxicity of the working environment: their function and the wider organization are riven with divisions and mistrust. Unreasonable demands are being consistently made on employees of all levels. Personal success is only achieved through careful maneuvering, political skill and pushing other people behind. There is no collaboration. Consequently burnout, stress and failure are widespread. A coach might help the client cope, but in our view coaching of this individual will not lead to long-term organizational success.

This problem is more common than you might think; in one of our surveys, 30% of people being coached felt they were being coached to navigate a broken system that was not being addressed. When we asked coaches how common they thought this problem was, the results were even more startling; 90% of them said that the issues they were asked to address with individual clients were often systemic and warranted a wider intervention beyond their coaching. Furthermore, even when these issues are flagged in advance, i.e. coaches are told that the individual is being supported simply to help them endure a toxic culture, 36% of the coaches said they would keep going.

In practice this means that a significant percentage of coaches are living in an arrangement in which their services are perpetually required. As they help one manager navigate the broken system, the manager is promoted, and so they must coach the next person. Potentially the promoted manager even exacerbates the toxic system as they have learned what it takes to succeed. The system continues to be broken.

In addition, or as an alternative to providing a coach, many organizations seek to address these systemic issues by training their staff to use coaching skills. This offers an excellent solution in theory, and we'll explain how, but mostly this is failing too. It fails because of the underlying

flawed and often hidden assumption, that a leader-who-coaches behaves in the same way as a professional coach.

Understanding a manager can coach, but isn't a coach

It's increasingly common for Human Resources (HR) and Talent departments to teach their managers to be coaches, often described as a desire to create a "coaching culture." The commendable idea here is that these managers can use their coaching skills in situ as they lead their teams/functions/businesses. The rationale is sound - if managers gain the appropriate coaching skills, the potential to resolve underlying organizational problems increases substantially. Awareness expands, influencing capabilities grow, positive outcomes increase, and the organization becomes less dependent on external coaches.

Here's the problem. Individuals are being taught **to be** coaches, rather than to be able to coach within their organizational role. There is a very distinct difference between a coach who coaches professionally and a manager or leader-who-coaches; they are just not the same. For example, in our research, sixty leaders told us the same thing repeatedly: the *process of coaching* gets in the way of them ever coaching. They are being taught the wrong skills.

Our research highlights the differences. For example, professional coaches have no leadership responsibilities with their clients in a traditional sense. They are rarely held accountable if their client fails to meet their numbers or achieve their goals. Professional coaches can challenge and help their clients to grow, but when a line-manager coaches their team members they are also responsible for that team member meeting their objectives.

Additionally, when working with a professional coach, everything a client discusses is usually subject to full confidentiality. Indeed, many coaches argue that this enables them to deliver what their client wants even if that contradicts what the line-manager wants. This approach to confidentiality is unworkable when a line-manager uses coaching skills with a team member because they are often having to share relevant and privileged information so that work can be progressed

As a final example, a professional coach would not give direct instructions such as 'you must do this task by next week,' but leaders sometimes feel the need to do so.

What to do instead – develop leaders-who-coach

An appropriate focus on training managers to become leaders-who-coach can address both the challenges we've identified – the right type of training enables managers to resolve systemic issues and saves money perpetually spent on external coaches. Equally importantly, this keeps professional coaches focused on where they have true long-lasting effects.

Training managers to be leaders-who-coach is relatively straightforward, but it may require a mindset change from HR and business leaders who have become comfortable overly relying on external suppliers of coaching. To begin, consider these questions drawn from our experience, which indicate you may have the problems we've identified:

1. How often do you find your managers reporting that their staff are consistently failing to use coaching behaviors despite having been sent on coaching skills training courses?
2. Do you have managers saying that they do not have time to coach?
3. Have you sent managers on coaching skills courses only for them to leave to become professional independent coaches? As one of our clients said recently, this can be especially true of people in HR – how ironic and frustrating!

4. Have you noticed that your procurement department insists that coaching skills training is accredited by professional coaching bodies, and yet you are not training people to be professional coaches?
5. How often when terminating a person's contract, do you hear that they have never been on a Performance Improvement Plan (PiP), or never had corrective feedback?
6. What is the trend in burnout within your organization?

Leaders-who-coach do not need professional coaching accreditation. They draw on their coaching skills in the midst of everyday meetings, in the messiness of business life, and often in front of others. This means that any coaching-capability assessment that is designed for professional coaches, but then used in training for managers, is inappropriate. Similarly, a fixed focus on coaching models restricts success.

Let us illustrate the difference further by taking a real-life example. The act of contracting is taught as a critical skill for professional coaches. For leaders-who-coach, we define it as the ability to establish how you work with others. It includes, amongst other things, practical elements (how much time do we have), goal-setting elements (what do we want to achieve from this conversation) and psychological elements (how challenging or direct may I be with my feedback). However, all of these elements are equally powerful when managers have no direct intention of 'coaching someone.'

For example, we suggest that one way to resolve the constant complaints about there being too many meetings today, would be to apply effective contracting. This might include checking how long everyone has for the meeting, confirming the priorities of the meeting and checking that the most appropriate people are in the room, with no spares. In our experience, clients who put their attention into practicing this dimension of a leader-who-coaches quickly report hugely positive impacts.

These people are not coaching in the way professional coaches might, because a professional coach would not set the agenda nor decide the desired outcome of the meeting – yet a leader-who-coaches can and will do these things. In this way, the skill of contracting when used by a professional coach usually focuses on confidentiality, timing of sessions, what's in scope and what's not. The verbal contract may be written down, and it usually prevails for the duration of the assignment.

However, as we have demonstrated for leaders-who-coach, contracting is a more dynamic, more informal and ongoing discussion. The method of contracting, the subject matter of contracting and the parties involved in the contract are way beyond the bounds that a professional coach would recognize.

Similarly, the skill of feedback. Professional coaches are rigorously schooled to leave their opinions at the door and to enter an engagement with unconditional positive regard. These touchstones of coaching cleave to the foundational practice of psychotherapy. But leaders-who-coach are interested in progressing the organization, albeit in a humane and respectful manner. Feedback on performance is a necessary part of being an effective leader-who-coaches: without feedback people find it hard to improve; teams sense that some individuals are allowed a free pass; individualism reigns. This means that feedback needs to be embedded into everyday conversations so that small adjustments can be made easily without shame or blame. A leader-who-coaches is skillful in giving and receiving feedback in a way that professional coaches eschew.

Ironically, there is a further mismatch between leadership and professional coaching. In many organizations, the price of entry to leadership is to be technically excellent with little or no regard for relational excellence. Yet in the coaching profession the requirements might be

much higher thresholds for certification in the coaching competencies. Both are wide of the mark: organizations need to recognize how important relationship management is within leadership, and, the professional coaching bodies need to understand their competency models might be limiting and inappropriate when imported within an organization.

Coaching your organization for the long-run

We need to position managers to understand the nature of a leader-who-coaches and to consider what they can do differently in their everyday activities – as part of those activities rather than an additional or different process. Using their skills ‘On-the-Go.’ As one of our clients who already held a coaching qualification said recently after our training, “Oh my. This means I can even coach in the elevator!” The key differentiator in our view is to identify the component skills that together create the act generally called coaching, and to develop each of these as appropriate to the individual manager. These skills are developed through small, incremental changes in daily routines, not in external classroom environments.

The model that arises from our research includes 15 dimensions (as listed in Table 1 below). However, recognizing that it is impossible to have a development plan for all 15, our coaching of would-be leaders-who-coach is to focus on the skills most likely to have most impact within their context and culture.

Table 1: The 15 dimensions of leaders-who-coach

<i>Being present</i>	Maintain attention and awareness on what is important in the moment to you and others
<i>Building trust and rapport</i>	Build others’ confidence in you so that they are willing to be open and honest about the challenges they face
<i>Changing perspectives</i>	Help others to learn and grow by inviting a change of perspective on the issues and questions they face
<i>Confidentiality</i>	Recognise and manage the importance of confidentiality
<i>Contracting</i>	Establish how you work with others
<i>Creating actions</i>	Help others identify their own actions to move them forward
<i>Creating awareness</i>	Help others identify what they are already thinking, including their skills and capabilities
<i>Creative questions</i>	Question people to maximise their learning, growth and awareness
<i>Delegation</i>	Give work to others in a way that they can be successful and deliver the work required
<i>Generative listening</i>	Listen in a way that enables the speaker to generate new awareness
<i>Giving feedback</i>	Give feedback to others which positively affects their understanding of their own behavior so that they can make different choices
<i>Pause-Points – other</i>	Help others to sit back and reflect on what is important in the current moment
<i>Pause-Points – self</i>	Use silence and stillness as a skill to improve your awareness of what is important in the moment

Reflection	Reflect on your work, your habits of mind, the actions of others and the broader environment in order to develop learning and growth
Self-Awareness	Be aware of your own skills, capabilities and weaknesses in order to change and develop

For more on the background to the methods used to develop this list, see Chapter 4 in the recently published *Critical Perspectives on Coaching and Leadership*, edited by Andrew J. Wefald; and on our website (www.coachingontheego.co.uk). By focusing on the component skills of a leader-who-coaches and seeking to use them more and more effectively the organizational outcomes can improve. This means also that coach training needs to work in this way too – small steps, gradual change, long term sustainable outcomes.

Numerous models, researchers and advisers recommend that the skill of coaching is fundamental (not optional) to effective management/leadership. We believe that when managers have the skills of a leader-who-coaches, their proficiency at growing and developing their own staff increases. Instead of bringing in professional coaches, development issues are addressed directly and naturally. In the long run these changes also serve to limit the systemic problems that are often inappropriately addressed through offering individuals a coach. We need to reassess the role that coaching plays in our organizations and shift the investment directly into the development of our managers as leaders-who-coach.

Conclusion

In summary, firstly organizations spend too much money on providing coaches to employees in the wrong circumstances where those interventions cannot address the underlying systemic issues that the organization faces. And we sense too many coaches are willing to accept these assignments despite the fact that they only address the symptoms and not the cause of the underlying organizational issue. Secondly, organizations seek to train their employees to become coaches when they do not need coaches, what they need are leaders or managers who are able to use coaching skills mixed in with their everyday leadership practices. The solution to both issues is to change the way the training takes place and to enable the desired end-result: creating leaders-who-coach who, as a result, will gradually enable a change in the underlying systemic issues.

As Marshall Goldsmith says, “Great leaders coach.” He doesn’t say that they **are** coaches, he says that they coach! They are **leaders-who-coach**. And this is where organizations should be focusing their attention.

About the Authors

Dr. Phil Renshaw and Dr. Jenny Robinson are co-authors of *Coaching on the Go: How to lead your team effectively in 10 minutes a day*, published in 2019 by Pearson/FT. Jenny and Phil met in a lecture theatre at Cranfield School of Management in the UK. It was Phil’s idea to write a book and as Cranfield is the only university that has its own airfield for Pilot training, it was a small step to include a story about a global airline. In 2018, they went on to develop an online GIZMO, which is now used around the world to profile leaders-who-coach. Coaching On the Go has an emancipatory objective to make coaching skills available to any leader who has ten minutes a day to invest in themselves and the people they work with.