



Coaching
Monograph Series
2008: No. 2

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Learning to Coach Leaders

By Robert J. Lee, Ph.D.

Abstract

Executive coaches often focus on their clients' leadership challenges yet coaches themselves may have no actual experience as leaders. This paper offers various perspectives on how coaches learn to coach leaders. It especially draws upon the author's experience training executive coaches, including the skills they learn explicitly and implicitly. Perspectives are also offered about the overall challenges of leadership and how coaches can begin to coach around these essential issues.

Note: This monograph is based on an address given by the author at the Leading Edge Consortium on Executive Coaching, sponsored by the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, in Cincinnati, October 2008.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgement is extended to my iCoachNewYork colleagues – Michael Frisch, Karen Metzger, Jeremy Robinson and Judy Rosemarin – for their comments and support.

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Learning to Coach Leaders

By Robert J. Lee, Ph.D.

We in the coaching world have traveled an enormous distance in the past 25 years. We have journals, conferences, training programs, certifications, trade associations, global reach, and hundreds of books and articles – all the manifestations of a mature profession. There are legitimate and powerful drivers behind this success.

- A primary one is that we've found ways to customize learning for busy, successful executives.
- We have learned how to help clients reach into the complex of behaviors we call "leadership" and face their leadership challenges in organizational settings.
- We know that doing coaching works in our professional lives – that we find personal and career satisfaction from doing coaching.
- And we also know coaching can be learned, not by copying what others do, but by intentionally building on the basics of coaching to fit each practitioner's unique hands and purposes.

This paper is about what people learn when they prepare to coach leaders, or at least my observations on that process, based on the coach training programs I've been involved with.

There is an apparent paradox that needs to be addressed up front: People who become coaches usually aren't organizational leaders. We're primarily in the helping or consulting professions. I know personally that experience in a formal leadership role is helpful, but it doesn't appear to be necessary and it definitely isn't sufficient to being an effective coach to leaders.

We must look elsewhere for insight, into the skills that coaches have and their ways of approaching their work. What do they need to bring to the task of coaching leaders to have a positive impact?

For the past 11 years, I have been an independent coach and a trainer of coaches. The training is done through *iCoachNewYork*, a group of five senior coaches who came together for this purpose. The *iCoachNewYork* faculty teaches an elective course on coaching in a Masters Degree program at New School University, and we deliver the Professional Coaching Program (PCP) which is an intensive three-month certificate course offered jointly with the Zicklin Business School at Baruch College, which is part of the City University of New York. We also have had the opportunity to teach in-house internal coach training programs for organizations that have such roles.

Our notion of coaching is that it is an employer-sponsored, more-or-less six-month relationship with an executive concerned with some combination of performance, development, transition or leadership issues. This is essentially the same definition that Anna Marie Valerio and I used in our book on executive coaching (2004).

In this definition, the primary relationship is with "an executive". This means the client is the individual, rather than the organization, even though the bill is sent to someone else. A good part of the foundation for coaching has come from

counseling and clinical psychology – helping professions that also focus on the individual as client.

What the participants in our courses initially want to learn are the processes, structures and techniques for doing executive coaching. This is valid. They need to be familiar with established practices and alternatives in the coaching field. Those are addressed in most books on coaching, and we do cover them in detail in our courses. This paper, however, focuses on what is learned beyond those fundamental skills.

We each have our favorite quotes. This is one of mine, and it is very relevant to the issues of coaching and leadership. It's about complexity and simplicity.

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.

Oliver Wendell Holmes

There's a lot of complexity in coaching. Yet simplicity is very much needed, especially by senior executives, if coaching is to be effective.

I would like to walk through some of the complexity of coaching and show how coaches can get to simplicity on the other side of it. Our challenge is to train coaches so they'll be able to achieve this simplicity in their work with clients.

What does a coach need to know and be able to do? Here's my view of the core components of a coaching engagement:

1. Coaching as a Process. Coaches must understand what happens between coach and client at multiple levels, including covert ones. The focus is on how the coach manages the client through the engagement so it is a productive partnership and feels owned by the client.
2. Coach Self-Management. An important part of being a coach is the ability to manage our anxieties about acceptance and performance, as well as our personal agendas and authenticity, so that our presence supports the engagement rather than just our own needs.
3. Client as a Whole Person. The client, of course, shows up with a complex personality, life history and personal life. We see the skills, styles and habits that impact work life, but there are other less visible aspects of the client's totality that we may or may not address.
4. Client's Leadership. A key part of coaching is the client's leadership behavior and style and his or her impact on others in the organization.
5. The Sponsoring Organization. The culture and dynamics of the surrounding organization provide the arena in which the effectiveness of the coaching is defined.
6. Organizational Stakeholders. In addition to being part of the client's operating context, the organization's representatives also serve as the coach's potential collaborators, evaluators and sources of future coaching business.

It is the coach's responsibility to manage the interactions among these factors into a smooth, cohesive and not too complex process. As faculty of our coach training programs, it is our responsibility to give the students a way to do that. Our method is built around each student articulating a Personal Model of Coaching, their own version of simplicity on the other side of complexity. The next section describes this Personal Model approach to coach training.

The Personal Model of Coaching

Training programs deconstruct roles and then eventually put them back together. The Personal Model of Coaching that each of our students complete is a concrete manifestation of that learning process. It describes what that coach is trying to accomplish, how coaching works, and what he or she brings to it as a unique person and as a professional. The Personal Model contains the coach's focus in coaching, types of clients, contractual considerations and likely data sources. It also should include the coach's understanding of how adults change and grow, which may tie to that coach's preference for certain psychological traditions, techniques and instruments. For example, some lean toward cognitive or behavioral approaches, others to motivational or systems ones, and still others to emotional intelligence or appreciative inquiry models.

In addition, the Personal Model of Coaching asks each student to customize two frameworks. One is the coach's views about what he or she brings to the practice of coaching and what that practice will look like. It guides decisions about how to engage clients. The other framework has to do how the coach thinks about leaders and leadership and is useful in guiding the content of coaching discussions. The integration and articulation of these two frameworks begins early in our coach training programs, progresses during them and we

expect that it continues to be shaped by actual experience in the months and years afterwards.

Both coaching and leadership are artistic performances that defy universal or precise description. There is no one right way to do either of them. Both are “whole person” activities that require authenticity and responsiveness to immediate pressures in a situational context. I believe both require conscious, articulate self-awareness; simultaneously doing and reflecting on doing. A clear and focused Personal Model is the foundation for that, raising the likelihood that coaching engagements will lead to clear, focused outcomes.

Coaches help leaders reflect on their organizational lives, help them be more articulate about their situations, and help them make more conscious choices about how to lead. Similarly, our students need to consciously reflect on who they are as coaches and make their choices more articulate, and it is for these reasons that we require them to write up their Personal Models of Coaching.

In pursuing simplicity on the other side of complexity, we have noticed that four coach competencies often emerge in Personal Model papers. Interestingly, we did not set out to teach these overtly in our courses. Our students have discovered them as they set out to become effective coaches. These four coaching competencies also align with the challenges of leadership.

Four Special Coaching Competencies

1. Seeing

The first one is about seeing. This is about what do *I* see, and what can I help *you* see.

The core of seeing is recognizing the elusive nature of “reality”. Coaching seems to work better when the coach acknowledges that reality is relative, that we live in worlds that we largely construct in our minds. This is a bit unnerving for new coaches – their lives have been spent validating their grasp of reality. Graduate schools usually take this objectivist point of view. Success as a researcher, consultant, business person, HR manager or trainer further confirms the importance of knowing how to grasp, describe, dimensionalize, and predict reality in guiding others to cope with it.

A more productive approach for learning about and doing coaching is based on each of us seeing the world through the filters of our own histories, identities and agendas. Coaching begins with affirming the validity of individual perspectives – both the coach’s and the client’s. Coaching requires being aware of the way your particular filters create systematic tilts to your views, appreciating that clients are doing the same thing, and yet seeing productive paths amid the distortions.

There are some deceptively simple but dangerous phrases in our conversational language:

“*The question is*”

“*The fact is*”

“*The truth is ...*”

Such phrases imply a privileged access to reality. It's that little word *The* that signals a deceptively definitive insight into complex issues – the kind of insight that beginning coaches may think they should have, but is generally unproductive.

This is not to say that the coach shouldn't trust his or her perceptions. The coach must build that confidence, but use it to frame observations and hypotheses, rather than as true facts. I think of this stance as *constructive marginality* – standing close enough to see what is happening but always aware of being separate and lacking perspective about some relevant variables. Seeing from that posture, both acknowledging limited views but also using what is observed, provides a vision that empowers new coaches.

2. Listening

Yogi Berra is reported to have said, "You can hear a lot just by listening." Everyone seems to know this, but why is doing it so difficult to do?

For starters, people are uncomfortable with silence, yet this is often what is needed. Successful novice coaches learn to be OK with being quiet. Quiet makes it safe for people to talk. Quiet allows clients to think, organize, and say difficult things. It gives the coach permission put aside a list of prepared questions and stop rehearsing the next one. It also gets the coach out of the expert role in responding to the client, and allows the client to feel really heard.

New coaches learn to modify their *interviewing* habits in favor of questions that promote self-reflection. Such questions require silence to answer.

Also, a focus on listening reduces the temptation to jump to premature conclusions based on false assumptions of similarity. As the existentialists say, in

some ways each of us is like *all* others, in some ways each of us is like *some* others, and in some ways each of us is like *no other*. The new coach learns to use the power of true listening as a way to explore both the similarities and the uniqueness of the client.

3. Goal Shaping

The coaching process often crystallizes around the question of goals, since these define the desired results. But whose goals should prevail? Do we stay with the goals set forth by the sponsor and boss on Day 1? What if there are multiple perspectives on what should be accomplished, and what if they shift over time? What if the initial goal is more of a *felt need* or problem statement than a clear and useful coaching goal?

Our students learn that goal setting in coaching is a continuous activity, not an up-front, one-time event. Coaches learn to help clients evolve their initial, felt needs into resonant goals that drive new choices and behavior. In fact, a coaching engagement may pivot around an *Aha* experience when the client figures out what goals to actually work on. New coaches learn that this does not happen on day one of coaching and that they can foster that insight as coaching progresses.

4. Taking Action

Coaching is anchored in helping something good happen in the client's work performance. All of us, not just corporate sponsors, are looking for tangible results. How ever much the coach may feel responsible for results, or be held responsible by stakeholders, only the client can produce action leading to desired outcomes. There are two key insights for new coaches regarding this topic: they must be able to flex along a continuum that runs from support to confrontation and they need to use the client's resistance to change productively.

New coaches usually discover that there is a continuum that they can range along going from being direct and confrontational to being accepting and supportive of the client. All locations along this continuum are valid at different times for different reasons but new coaches may favor one side or the other. Instead, they need the skill to leverage either side and the flexibility to choose the location on the continuum that best suits the client's constructive action.

The student coach learns about navigating along this continuum by making choices and seeing what happens. It's a kind of action learning for the coach since there are no right answers. An important task for the faculty supervisor in coach training is to help the new coach become aware of his or her choices, how those did or didn't help the client to change, and point out how those choices accumulate to define the coach's own style.

Resistance tends to have a negative connotation. However, there is a coaching skill that has to do with embracing resistance – recognizing it as information about where the client is stuck and where issues of importance are being protected. An important skill for new coaches is to be able to label, clarify and use the resistance to move forward without taking it personally and without avoiding key topics. All clients can be expected to show some resistance as

progress is made. The new coach learns to be patient with and explore resistance so that the insight from coaching conversations can yield action in the client's world.

In addition to these four special coaching competencies, I also hear about students' views on leadership in their Personal Model papers. How they react to and understand this important topic determines much of how they approach coaching clients. The most successful students do get to a simplicity on the other side of the complexity of leadership. Below is a description of how we help them get there.

Leaders and Leadership

We discuss leaders and leadership with the students both in class and in individual supervision to encourage both insight into leadership issues and more importantly their own views on them. My approach to discussing leadership with coaches-in-training is to offer *my* way of understanding this complex process while referencing some other conceptualizations. For convenience, I sort points about leadership and coaching into two categories: coaching the leader as an individual and leadership processes that benefit from scrutiny.

The Leader's Coachable Issues

Not everything about a leader is subject to coaching – that is why selection is so important. Selection criteria not amenable to coaching include cognitive skills, drive, ambition, integrity, conscientiousness, tolerance of ambiguity, and others. We don't find these to be coachable within the scope of our skills.

However there are many skill areas which are coachable. Here are two that are part of the leader as a person but are often overlooked as coachable topics. New coaches often find traction in exploring these areas with clients.

1. The first coachable issue for leaders is the actual decision to aspire to become a leader. Many people in leadership roles just end up there perhaps, due to the desire to advance and make more money but without actually having a passion to lead. Coaches need to ask key questions on this topic: How does being a leader here and now make sense in your career? Where does leadership fit into your life? How does being a leader help you become the person you want to be? There should be a compelling narrative that answers these questions. This is what provides the energy needed to lead, and a basis for the leader's sense of purpose.

If there has been no conscious decision to be a leader – if the client is in a leadership role by default – the coach needs to explore that early in the coaching engagement. It may not be too late for the client to make an active choice to lead, but it is difficult if not impossible to help someone be better at something they haven't decided to do. [For more on this subject, see *Discovering the Leader in You* (2001) by Robert Lee and Sara King.]

2. For me, and often for our students, the *client's stories* are a key factor (this is a wide-open secret) to success in leadership coaching. The coach's conversations with the client are not just streams of information, they are the story of his or her life, full of plot, heroics, characters and a sense of direction. New coaches often find that it is exciting and useful to facilitate the emergence of the leader's story.

Here are some quotes from well-known leadership experts that underscore this point:

It is stories of identity – narratives that help individuals think about who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed – that constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader’s literary arsenal.

Howard Gardner

The hallmark of world-class champion leaders is the ability to weave all the other elements together into vibrant stories that lead their organizations into the future.

Noel Tichy

People believe stories more than they believe numbers. Stories teach, mobilize and motivate. What is necessary in sense making is a good story.

Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner

What should a coach listen for as the client tells his or her story?

- The degree of authorship – is this person writing the story, or is simply in it?
- What sense of purpose or vision comes through?
- Is he or she the hero of the story, or just another character in it?
- How does the story mend wounds, celebrate victories, and help the client successfully navigate transitions?

Coaches can have these kinds of questions in mind as they elicit more of the story, help the client think differently about the story, focus attention on specific

story elements, test assumptions that underlie the story, reframe issues in a useful way, and identify patterns in the story that may suggest new leadership options in the current circumstances.

A successful leader needs a strong story and a coach can help shape the story and the leader who lives it.

Leadership Processes

Moving beyond coaching the leader as a person, we get to leadership processes that can be explored. Some of these processes operate at the supervisory or managerial level. The supervisory category includes setting expectations, effective delegation, giving useful feedback, and developing people for future opportunities. The managerial category includes planning, decision making, monitoring and control systems, resolving conflict, and team building.

While these processes and the skills that they require should be mastered by supervisors and managers, in fact they often are problematic for leaders even at higher levels. As such, they often become part of the agenda of executive coaching. While they may not have the appeal of coaching on leadership per se, they are important competencies and legitimate for coaching. Newer coaches are often surprised when executives need to build skills in these more basic people-management processes but they learn that organizational level is not always aligned with effectiveness. Questioning assumptions and keeping an open mind to all possibilities are important coach perspectives.

Finally, there are leadership processes that have to do with being an effective *player* in the dynamics of the organization. In both formal and informal ways, leaders need to have a high profile within organizations. Processes included here are all the things under the *organizational politics* heading: managing within

the organizational power matrix, forming alliances, being influential with peers, taking a stand when appropriate, managing up, and leveraging both the performance and informational aspects of presentations. Many clients have concerns about their effectiveness in these areas and they can be among the most challenging domains for new coaches.

Ten Leadership Challenges and Paradoxes

As new coaches become students of leadership they begin to appreciate the complexity of being a leader. One way of working with this complexity is to distill leadership into paradoxes. Together with the coach the leader discovers which paradoxes strike a resonant chord, and then use these constructs to shape the goals of the coaching.

Here is a sampling of leadership challenges and paradoxes that clients, and coaches, wrestle with:

- Messiness and Ambiguity vs. Structure and Control
- Shared Power vs. Retained Power
- Personal Visibility vs. Bounded/Private Persona
- Interpersonal Distance vs. Personal Closeness
- Narcissism and Pride vs. Humility and Humbleness
- Nice and Approachable vs. Tough and Demanding
- Passionate and Emotional vs. Balanced and Stable
- In the Fray vs. On the Balcony [Ron Heifetz]
- Empowering and Enabling vs. Directive and Forceful [Bob Kaplan]
- Provocative and Controversial vs. Harmonizing and Conflict-Avoiding [Patrick Lencioni]

These kinds of paradoxes in leadership are not new. In fact, they come with the leader's job, so to speak. Identifying one or another of these challenges, tensions and paradoxes, when they are relevant, may help a coach and a client see important distinctions in a confusing context. Such headlines may serve as starting points in answering, "What's going on here?" as a coach struggles to understand a client's world. They may help a coach connect and resonate with that client's leadership challenges by suggesting patterns and follow-up questions. Even simply labeling a paradox can help a client reframe their context and suggest choices that he or she may not have considered.

Having a leadership vocabulary and discussing topics such as these are important skills for new coaches. Drawing on their coach trainers and supervisors, and coaching peers, new coaches need to be students of leadership, even if their personal experience of leadership is limited. Increasing sensitivity to the permanent tensions of leadership gives coaches a perspective that informs questions, suggests hypotheses, and helps bring greater simplicity to what is inherently a complex subject.

Bringing it Together

So, how can new coaches bring it all together to help leaders?

1. Accessing Our Own Experience

Coaches leverage strengths as observers and helpers, and maintain a professional identity and independence. However, coaching also has many things in common with leadership. These can be combined with what coaches learn through observation and study to be effective helpers for people wrestling with leadership issues, even if the coach has never been a C-suite officer.

What do we as coaches have in common with leaders? Here's a quick inventory:

- We have our wider mission and goals that we strive to achieve in our professional associations, consulting firms, corporate departments and our community involvements
- We build and manage the staff in our departments, agencies or consulting firms; hiring, delegating, supervising, and developing
- We change, reorganize, and adjust the structure and activities in those organizations
- We struggle with our own choices about balance, aspirations, energy, support and families
- We strive to balance our drive for results with our concern for people and process.

In addition, we are students of leaders and leadership. We observe leaders in many contexts. We read, discuss and try to understand the quandaries of leadership. We see what helps leaders, under what circumstances, and why. We become clearer at abstracting from experience to capture lessons learned. We see both the bright and the darker aspects of leadership and appreciate that sometimes only subtle differences separate them. These are experiences and observations that we accumulate to become more helpful coaches to leaders.

2. Simplicity on the Other Side of Complexity

Going back to Oliver Wendell Holmes, coaches engage leaders initially at a simple level: the *felt need* as defined by the client. We try to capture the nature of the problem, opportunity, dilemma, or conflict. Then things become more complex. The coach engages the whole person within a multi-faceted context

and teases out the particular struggles and tensions that engage the leader. The coach facilitates the leader's story and interprets meaning and direction. More information is accumulated from others in the client's organization so that perceptions of the leader can be described. Experienced coaches add to all this with their own internal responses to the leader: *use of self* data. Coaching goals shift and evolve from vague felt needs to something clearer and more designed by the client. There is a lot happening as coaching unfolds

But then coaching moves toward simplicity. The coach helps the leader get to core issues that pull the threads together: One or two compelling priorities that seem to address multiple issues and frustrations. The coach helps to translate these into viable experiments in behavior change. Those experiments that yield results become the leader's action plan for his or her development. The coach fosters the involvement of others, such as the boss, HR or colleagues, in the ongoing development of the leader. The path that was not visible to the leader in the early stages of coaching is taken with journey partners supporting progress and the coach begins to disengage. When done well, solutions in coaching can appear simple even though getting there is not.

3. Believing in Yourself as a Coach

One of the striking lessons for me has been to see how new coaches transition from anxiety and confusion to believing in themselves as coaches to leaders. The complexity of coaching that can be overwhelming at first gives way to a simpler confidence that they can bring value to a leader's perspective and choices. And going further, that they can grow and develop as coaches at the same time that they add coaching to their professional activities and practices.

What they discover is how to judge what's possible in coaching:

- With themselves as coaches
- With a specific client, based on that person's motives, energy and skills
- Within the organizational systems that exist, which means the opportunities, support, politics and pressures that operate in a leader's world

They start to believe that planful, guided adult development and performance improvements are possible and this belief is conveyed to clients as well. This perspective requires optimism about a client's willingness to change and grow and the coach's ability to engage the client in that journey. They start to believe that that optimism is well founded and is usually rewarded. This is not about getting clients to believe in the coach as hero or magician. This is about new coaches believing in their ability to do this work and in so doing, helping clients believe in change even at mature ages in complex situations. That's a simplicity that both coach and client can rely on.

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