

# The Leader as Coach: Creating High Performance in Change

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Marcus Buckingham reflects on his Gallup research, "The corporate world is appallingly bad at capitalizing on the strengths of its people."<sup>1</sup> This condemnation is directed at leaders who are unable to evoke the full and willing commitment of employee teams to apply their energies to achieving our corporate goals. The need is clear: A strong, vibrant workplace where managers engage both the hearts and the minds of individuals and teams in using all of their talents to contribute to high performance results.

This article suggests that coaching fulfills this need. Leading as a coach means letting go of the traditional notion of leadership as strategy and control from a distance according to a pre-determined plan of action – the proverbial leader commanding the troops from a position on the hill overlooking the field of battle. In times of rapid change when high levels of complexity and uncertainty are the order of the day, leaders can no longer assume they can know or control what goes on. Information and decision making are dispersed. Plans must be adapted constantly to changing conditions. Individuals and teams must understand the organization's direction and be empowered to work toward it using their best capabilities and judgments in the moment.

In these circumstances, the role of leadership shifts to one of shaping the understanding, development, and learning of team members so they can act both independently and in concert with the goals of the whole organization. The leader becomes a coach. If this sounds a bit far-fetched, consider a recent study conducted in a large, progressive global pharmaceutical company where the set of competencies for leadership were compared with the competencies of a coach. The result? Seventy-five per cent of the competencies were the same. To be an effective leader, you must be an effective coach.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, most corporate leaders are not good coaches. Coaching requires a level of emotional intelligence that makes most of us uncomfortable. We tend to start our careers in technical and/or professional roles where we get work done ourselves through our own expertise. As we grow and expand our leadership roles, more and more of what we achieve is done with and through others. We must rely more and more on our personal and interpersonal skills to get the

results we want. That means managing performance, giving feedback, confronting issues, dealing with conflict, and a lot of other skills that fall at the bottom of the list of leadership competencies that most of us excel at.<sup>3</sup> We have to learn to balance our understanding of external factors – strategies, priorities, results – with an equal understanding of internal factors – values, purpose, self-awareness.

So how do you increase your skills as a leader coach? First, you look at who you are as a leader. Coaching happens from the inside out. You have to be aware of who you are, how you are perceived, what your own strengths and weaknesses are, and learn and develop yourself before you can begin to help others do the same. You must be a model of what you want to see in others. If you haven't had feedback on your own leadership within the last two years, that's the place to begin. Focus particularly on your emotional intelligence competencies, the skills central to good coaching. Are you a good listener? Do you ask more questions than you give answers? Are you patient with individuals' problems or do you jump in to solve them before you have even heard the whole story? Do you give regular feedback to your team members to support their ongoing development? Do you address conflicts or do you prefer to keep them under the table? Create your own development plan to take advantage of your strengths and work on any weaknesses.

Once you have a personal development plan, you are in a position to begin working with your team members to develop similar plans with them. Coaching is very much like strategic planning – you can think of it as preparing a personal strategic plan for each individual that is nested within the strategic plan for your unit or organization. It should cover where you are, where you're headed, and how you are going to get there. Once the plan is created, the coaching supports, challenges, and motivates reaching the specified goals. This sounds rather simple and it is – the trick is to actually follow through in the midst of the day to day chaos that characterizes most leaders' work lives. It's easy in theory but requires discipline, accountability, focus, and persistence to get results. It must become who you are as a leader, how you behave as a leader, or it will be another "to do" on your long list that never quite gets the attention it deserves.

Here are three things you can begin today to be a better coach. Try them and monitor the reactions to see if there is a difference in others as a result of a difference in you.

#### 1. Listen

In your next one-on-one conversations, try really listening with your whole concentration on what is being said. What is the story being told? What is the underlying message? Mirror back what is being said to be sure you understand.

Remove distractions. Don't jump in to solve the problem. Make eye contact and notice body language.

## 2. Silence

We are usually in such a hurry that we see silence as a waste of valuable time. As a result, we often move too quickly to a conclusion. We are impatient for a solution. Rather than filling the silence, let it be. Try leaving pauses before responding. Use this silent time to really think about what you want to say, rather than formulating your answers and questions while the person is still speaking.

## 3. Unconditional Positive Regard

This term was coined by Carl Rogers.<sup>4</sup> It means approaching each interaction from an appreciative point of view. We have often made up our minds about a person or an issue before the conversation starts. Try letting go of assumptions and just holding the person in positive regard. This doesn't mean you have to agree with everything they say, but it does mean that you value them as a human being and value their opinions even though they differ from yours.

These coaching techniques are more challenging than they sound. If you master them, you will find the results are well worth the effort. So I encourage you to give it a try, to act, to experiment, to just do it!

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<sup>1</sup> Buckingham, M. and C. Coffman. *First Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, S. and MacKinnon, C. *Leadership Alchemy: The Magic of the Leader Coach*. Toronto: TCP Publications, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Lombardo, M. and R. Eichinger. *The Leadership Machine*. Minneapolis: Lominger Ltd., 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Rogers, C. *On Becoming a Person*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1961.