



## Coaching your Leaders! A new trend in Leadership?

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### Leadership is about subtle messages of hidden reality

Some research indicates that the good performers are good also because they receive faith, trust and support from their bosses, while the bad performers are bad because of lack of faith, mistrust and lack of support from their bosses.

When the good and bad performer face the problem, the conversation with a boss in the case of good performer is typically focused on the problem and how the boss can help there, whereas in the case of bad performer the same type of conversation carries along also a subtle communication of "How can you let this happen?" and such inquisitions people normally try to avoid.

What sort of subtle messages leaders send to their employees in consequence impact the performance of his/her employees and also their own performance.

Therefore, grasping the hidden reality of leader's behavior on his/her people is important. And this is not an easy job, because:

- a) People can see and hear more or less only what they expect to see<sup>1</sup>.
- b) People like to filter out the information not matching their self-image, pre-composed opinions, and taken-for-granted assumptions.

Because of imperfect and flawed perception people are blocked with blind-spots.

The notion of the blind spot is nicely depicted by a very old model that is still very powerful because of its simplicity and relevance (Johari window- Figure 1). Our self is composed of open self, concealed self, blind self and unknown self<sup>2</sup>. We know our open and concealed self, but we are unaware of our blind self, though others can see and also feel it! It impacts them.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, in the "gorilla-on-the-basketball-field" experiment majority of the observers didn't see the gorilla, because they were focused on counting the number of ball passes, a task which was explicitly given to them (Manzoni, J.F., Barsoux, J.L., 2002). If human beings fail at such an easy perception task, we surely fail even more severely at more complex tasks.

<sup>2</sup> We are aware of open self, which we are willing to show with others. Concealed self represents feelings and responses we are aware of but consider them to be inconsistent with our self-image and/or to be impolite or hurtful to reveal it to others. Unconscious self is completely hidden to ourselves as well to others. There are deeply repressed feelings and impulses, hidden talents and skills, and untested potentials that might reveal themselves under the extreme circumstances.



Figure 1: Johari window

	Known to self	Not known to self
Know to others	Open self	Blind self
Not known to others	Concealed self	Unknown self

Source: 1. Luft, J.: The Johari Window. Hum. Rel. Tr. News 5, 1961, pp. 6-7.

Leaders constantly leak messages out of their blind self. To discover what signals they are sending and especially, which of them are damaging, leaders need to seek for the feedback from subordinates and subordinates should be willing to share it.

One of the key leanings from this research is that the meaning of what a leader does or says is not so much in what he or she says or does but...in other people's reactions! So leaders must learn how to read the impact that their communications have on people. It is not easy and yet it is a key condition for leadership effectiveness

### Coaching paradox

For the reason of subtle messages coming from blind self we do not believe in the standard way of practicing coaching. We advocate imposed coaching is both demeaning and in most cases manipulative. It implies "I'll tell you how to perform better for the sake of the organization if not for the benefit of my own career as your manager".

The only exception is when somebody asks for it. In other words it is fine and even good when it is voluntary.

If people say: "I need your advice, please help me. Then it is fine. But something is wrong if people have no choice and they must submit to a top down coaching process. It is alienating! The message sent to subordinate is you are not OK. The employee most likely feels under-trusted, which in consequence leads to the self-fulfilling prophecy of withdrawal and drift into a poor performance.

The reverse coaching communicates the opposite message "Can you please help improve me since you are OK." It establishes the trust and respect, which in consequence can make both parties grow and develop. Therefore, we strongly support "reverse coaching" that we can also call "Reverse empowerment".

### "Reverse" Coaching?

This is also called upward coaching and does require some very special people skills. It is a fact that for some obvious reasons most leaders do not want to be coached by their own team members. They accept advice from senior executives or consultants but not (in most cases) from their "subordinates". They are mostly afraid of being perceived as being weak, lost and incapable. And the more ego is around and the more the leader will reject the idea of getting help from the very people who work for (sorry "with") them



And yet, there is no question that in a highly complex, fast changing and deeply ambiguous world leaders cannot be on top of everything.

They need help because:

- Some of the team members know more and better about some specialized questions than they do
- They must learn how to improve their leadership behavior and must get some feedback from “their” people to grow and expand
- Nobody is perfect. There are times when a team member will see and understand things that the leader for some valid reasons has missed
- It is sometimes the best way for a leader to give a chance to other people to step into his (her) role, learn and grow from the experience
- This process can be one the best to shape up an environment in which people perform as equals and as partners in the creation of values

### **Upward leadership coaching**

There are many types of upward coaching. The most challenging one is the one that aims at helping the leader improve his leadership effectiveness. This is indeed very sensitive and it does require some pre-conditions for success i.e.

- A leader receptive to the idea of receiving feedback on his leadership behavior

*Leaders must accept the idea that they are not perfect and that they can learn from their own team members without losing face or jeopardizing their credibility as team leaders. They must be open minded and to a certain degree humble. They must accept that the people who work with them know something important that they are not aware of. They must understand that the impact of their actual behavior on the people is more important than their intents*

- A coach who is ready to take some risk and who is able to use some very simple (and yet powerful) upward coaching skills

*The prerequisite for success is the existence of a request from the leader for some kind of coaching. Imposed (or forced) coaching is always a disaster. So the leader must ask for it. Then the team member must use some very powerful skills that can be identified as:*

- *Empathy : The ability to show to the leader that one understands the challenges he is facing*
- *Sympathy: The ability to be in tune with the leader’s emotions*
- *Diplomacy: The ability to present a piece of advise in a subtle and yet effective way*
- An environment that support and even better value this kind of interface between the leaders and non-leaders

*One should not ignore and underestimate the pressure from the environment in this matter. A corporate culture that expects its leaders to be on top of everything, to lead (in all circumstances) by example and be a role model in almost everything is a major hurdle. Leaders in such an environment will be very*



*shy and even reluctant to seek advice on their leadership styles from others. It is also true that the so call "leadership feedback survey" that most organizations run on a regular basis can be extremely counter-productive because it is not basically asked for by the people (leaders and non-leaders) and therefore creates an unhealthy pressure on all the partners involved. At best the outcome is ignored. At worst it leads to conflicts and emotional turmoil. We should also notice that we do not know any organization that has a sound and effective performance review system...*

### **Cracking the leadership ambiguity**

Leadership is filled with ambiguities of what makes a leader strong, what gives a leader power and what means to take the responsibility and the reverse coaching successfully addresses them.

- Reverse coaching is about being strong by being weak!

*Asking for feedback from subordinates appears as an act of weakness, though the leader must be very strong and very self-confident to do that.*

- Reverse coaching is about gaining power by giving it up!

*The leader who asks for feedback share power and paradoxically assumes heavier responsibilities because he/she, being the leader, is still responsible, and ultimately his/her people know this and respect him/her for that, which in turn increases a leader's power.*

- Reverse coaching is about circumventing the blame by taking the blame!

*Leader who accepts the blame for things he/she did and even for he/she did not personally do it as a function of their larger role, his/her team members ventilate their high pressure out, in the future could act less hostile, respect the transparency and increase the loyalty to leaders. In short, the more responsibilities the leaders are able to take over, the less they will be blamed for the mistakes.*

### **A tip on leadership coaching**

Since this process can be highly sensitive and even dangerous, it has been shown that there is one very powerful way to achieve the objective (help a leader to grow and become more effective in a healthy way for everybody around) and that is: The ability to say something without say it! Here is a little illustration on how it works:



*One day in a company a team member had a major problem with his "boss". The leader was of the sadistic type. Inflicting pain and enjoying it. For some reasons the employee could not dare to say anything .He was scare to lose his job. But one day he got it: "To say something without saying it". So he went to his team leader's office, knocked at the door, went in and walked towards the manager who was sitting behind his desk. He got very close to him. He bent over the desk, looked straight at the leader's eyes and then said: "You will never guess what happened to me 15 minutes ago. I was walking in the street on my way to the office when a man came to me, look at me straight in my eyes and said: "You are stupid"! Having said that the employee left the office and the "boss" said "There are crazy people in the streets"!*

To say something without saying it!

## **Two Coaching Assessments**

*How good are you at being coached?*

Please look, at each item and assess yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 (0 being "Not at all – 5 being "Yes from time to time" and 10 being Absolutely right on")

How good are you at:

1. Paying attention to other people's views
2. Listening carefully to what others say
3. Accepting others' views
4. Avoiding being on the defensive
5. Looking for ways to improve yourself
6. Being unsatisfied with yourself
7. Coping with disagreements
8. Taking criticisms from others
9. Searching new ways of being
10. Controlling your emotions
11. Respecting what others think of yourself
12. Behaving in an open-minded way
13. Exploring alternatives to your usual way to behave
14. Experimenting and trying out new behaviors
15. Acknowledging your personal limitations
16. Managing your ego
17. Valuing feedback from others
18. Being curious about yourself
19. Knowing that you do not have all the answers (or questions)
20. Learning from others

De-Briefing of the self-assessment exercise

If your total score is between 0 and 80: There is a good chance that you do not even understand what we are talking about. It is maybe time for you to have a good look at what people think of you and your ways to lead





If your total score is between 80 and 150: It seems that you already know where you stand and yet you smart enough to understand that there is always room for improvement. It could be quite useful to go back to those items that you rated low and see where you can invest some time and energy to still improve

If your total score is between 150 and 200: Are you sure or are you kidding yourself. If it is true then do not change anything. We just hope that your team members are up to the challenge (of coaching you) and ready to meet your high expectations

*How good are you at coaching a leader?*

Use the same scale as above and answer the following questions. How good are you at

1. Understanding your manager's way of thinking
2. Reading his (her) moods or feelings
3. Controlling your impatience to say or do something
4. Putting yourself in the leader's shoes
5. Being supportive and positive in your statements
6. Advising others in such way that they buy in
7. Having a good grasp of the power game
8. Knowing when to stop talking
9. Formulating your advice in a diplomatic way
10. Selling your ideas to others
11. Choosing your words so that nobody gets upset
12. Being silent
13. Waiting for being asked to contribute
14. Knowing what makes your leader clicks
15. Being at the right place and at the right time (positioning yourself)
16. Saying things without saying them
17. Measuring the impact hat you have on your leader
18. Giving credit to the leaders without being obsequious (no flattery)
19. Using facts when giving feedback
20. Being provocative with a good purpose

De-Briefing of the self-assessment exercise

If your total score is between 0 and 80: Forget it! Do not even think about coaching your manager. If the result is right (your final score), it could mean that helping others is not your cup of tea. Up to you to decide

If your total score is between 89 and 150: You do have some of the basic skills required to practice reverse-coaching. It could be useful to have a look at the items that you scored highly (your strengths) and poorly (your weaknesses) and to set up an "Agenda for change"

If your score is between 150 and 200: This is so good that we suppose you have a consulting job and if not we strongly recommend you to think about that option. Why



not? It seems that you have the basic skills to advise people with power. Isn't it what consultants do?

## Conclusion

Reverse coaching seems to be in line with the new leadership trends i.e. that leadership is less and less a role to be played by one person and one person only but to move around according to the requirements of the situation a team is into as well as the respective talents of the team members. Does it mean that institutional or structural leadership is dead? Not quite! We believe that formal leadership is becoming more and more a process role where the appointed leader is responsible for making sure that everything within the team is going in the right direction and as smoothly as possible. If this is the new way than everybody should coach everybody!

## References

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