

Management Summaries

Occasional synopses of modern management writings

Why Leaders Need Coaching

Graham Wilson

“Change is the only constant.” Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (1970)

If there's one cliché that resonates with almost every manager around the world it is this one. The world in which leaders operate is constantly changing.

The big problem with this is that the way we behave in almost every circumstance is based on our experience of similar situations in the past. Inevitably then, new situations come up that we have never experienced before and we need a way to consider them and decide how we will respond. This would be the case even if we were never promoted, but most leaders are constantly rising in their organisation, industry or in a wider sphere of influence, so past experience is very rarely a good guide. I am not suggesting, of course, that with each new setting the slate of experience is wiped clean, but these days it's a very dangerous game to assume that things are even vaguely similar.

'Experience' involves three components:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Attitudes

Through their rise to a leadership role, most people acquire all the knowledge that they need. More importantly they can recognise the kind of information that they want and know how to get it. Similarly, most skills are acquired early in our careers - the application or scale may change but the skill is the same. For example, you may be used to making deals of £1M and a new role might call for deal making ten times that, but it won't be your skills that let you down or guarantee success.

At the leadership level, what makes all the difference are your attitudes. It may be your attitude to other people or to yourself, but fundamentally in everything that you do as a leader it will be your attitudes that determine the outcome.

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So how do we go about exploring, understanding and, critically, changing our attitudes?

While we may have our attitudes brought into focus by contact with an outside event, such as an inspirational speaker, or a 'seminal' moment, most of us are not generally very good at observing ourselves, let alone our attitudes, and certainly not very good at reality testing them, imagining alternatives and then integrating them into our repertoire. And this is where a coach comes in.

A good coach is someone who helps us explore a situation, unwrap our preconceptions, interpretations, and other distortions and then helps us to see the attitudes underlying them.

The better we get at this, the more sophisticated our analysis can become. Just as a child progresses from draughts to chess and may then go on to 3D chess, so the sophisticated leader uses a 3-dimensional perception of their attitudes to shape their actions.

Why is it so difficult to explore and change our attitudes, that we need a coach?

There's at least two reasons:

1. Have you ever heard of a management course in attitudes?

No. Because establishing our attitudes is a very difficult thing to teach other than one-to-one. Sure, groups can have a go, but they call for a lot of self-processing and need a well-refined set of radar to begin with.

2. Attitudes, by their nature, are predominantly unconscious.

The events and experiences that shaped them are a long way back in our past, and some well-respected experts even talk about cultural attitudes shaped by our pre-history. The skills to achieve a change in these are not learned on a five day course in speed coaching, they are the result of the several years of training that a good, professional coach will have had.

If attitudes are so entrenched, where do they come from?

We may retrospectively rationalise them, but our attitudes are generally formed early in our lives and certainly by early adulthood. There may be a few things that our experience in adulthood appears to completely change but often there was a pre-orientation to experience something that way.

A simple example: two friends independently visited South Africa. They took the same package with the same travel company. One returned with tales of the excitement of a safari, and awe at the whales he had seen. The other was equally moved, though his emotions were a response to the hardship and squalor that the average South African experiences.

Different coaches will have different ways of exploring early life experience and how it dramatically affects the decision making and other ways in which leaders experience their lives.

A client of mine (who has agreed to me referring to him in this article) is CEO of a City-based service company. His firm recently had the opportunity to acquire a competitor to one of their

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divisions. His mindset led to a plan to acquire, strip the assets - in the form of a few lucrative contracts - and close the company.

My own reaction was of concern for the people in the company they were acquiring. This is my “stuff” - I’m comfortable I know where it comes from and that I can spot it influencing me when it does.

(Good coaches will have spent a lot of time getting to understand their own past and its influence on them. They will also always have a supervisor who will explore their coaching with them to make sure that the coach is not directing things according to their own agenda. And, both coach and supervisor will be bound by a code of ethics that honours the confidentiality of the client.)

In this case, I was able to share the difference in our responses and use the difference as the basis of a discussion around his decision making. We contrasted our experience of early childhood, where he had grown up in a family that was struggling to lose its working class origins and to adopt a middle class set of attitudes. As a boy he remembered an incident where his father and mother had been openly critical of a simple act of altruism that he had performed. Looking back, he could see that much of his acquisitive nature stems from his parents. As a coach, I was bound to ask how happy he was continuing to live his parents’ lives for them.

The upshot was a turning point for him. The competitor was acquired, but instead of stripping and dismissing, he decided to use the same charismatic style that he has in his own company and to take a significant leadership role in the acquired one. Eight months on, the two firms have each nearly doubled in size and are attracting lots of positive media comment.

So why do leaders need coaching?

Because the degree of sophistication, and the subtlety of the changes they need to make in order to continue to be so successful simply can’t be achieved through any other form of personal development.

It is a partnership, and pound-for-pound you simply can’t better the value that coaching produces, but no amount of evidence will satisfy a leader as much as the experience of being coached. (If you are interested, see my website, www.businesscoaching.org.uk, for a no lose offer.)