

The Empowerment Mindset – What Leaders Can Learn From Coaches

Systemic Coaching Program InKonstellation Cologne – Final paper

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1 Introduction

A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves. – Lao Tzu

This brief paper examines what leaders in today's world can learn from coaches. Following this introduction, chapter 2 introduces the idea of "Leaders as Coaches" as an alternative to traditional leadership styles. Afterwards, chapter 3 outlines key characteristics of a coach's role and stance. Building on these ideas, chapter 4 then examines in what ways a coaching mindset poses a powerful and valuable asset for modern leaders. The paper concludes with final thoughts on the realization of a leadership shift.

Two notes on the following chapters:

The systemic approach of coaching recommends a coach being someone from outside the coachee's direct environment ("system") in order to take an unbiased and unconcerned role. Following this idea, this paper does not discuss or recommend formal, regular coaching sessions between a leader and his employees. Instead, the focus of this paper is on the general mindset of a coach (his attitude, beliefs, and fundamental assumptions) and the applicability of this mindset in daily "coachable moments" (Boyatzis et al, 2019).

Although this paper focuses on business leaders, the ideas discussed are neither limited to the business context nor to the C-level. The underlying assumption is that leadership, like coaching, takes place across all areas of society and on all hierarchical levels. Or in Edgar Schein's (2016) words: "Leadership exists in all corners and levels of all organizations."

2 Leadership in today's world

The key to successful leadership today is influence, not authority. – Kenneth Blanchard

In a world of increasing complexity and information, leadership is more important than ever. Today, leaders in all areas of society find themselves in a constantly and rapidly changing environment. They steer complex, often globalized (sub-)organizations in times of high volatility and radical political, economic, social and technological shifts. They make far-reaching strategic decisions in times of great uncertainty and ambiguity. They cope with handling high levels of pressure to perform while at the same time creating the organizational culture that enables prosperity.

In this environment, leadership, as “the art of motivating a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal”¹ constitutes an extremely challenging task – and a tremendously important foundation for meaningful impact for our societies. Collective achievement, change and progress require collective movement. It requires aligning the unique capabilities of individuals towards a higher, common objective. That is, it requires leaders that provide purpose, guidance and motivation to activate the full collective potential that lies within the individuals of an organization: “If you’re a manager, your most important job is to help those around you reach their greatest potential” (Boyatzis et al, 2019).

In recent years, multiple authors have stressed that in a world of high volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) the traditional, directive leadership style is not accurate and effective anymore (Lawrence, 2013). Two examples of alternative leadership concepts are Edgar Schein’s “Humble Leadership” and Robert Greenleaf’s “Servant Leadership”. In his same-named book, Schein (2016), one of the key pioneers in the field of organizational culture and leadership and his son Peter Schein, call for a shift from static hierarchies and professional distance (leaders as “heroic superstars”) towards relationships, openness and trust (leaders as empathic, collaborative partners).

Greenleaf’s (1982) “Servant Leadership” goes even further and defines a leader as fully dedicated to identifying and serving his employees’ needs. Like in Schein’s framework, Greenleaf stresses the importance of suitable new competence profiles – emphasizing listening,

¹ <https://www.thebalancesmb.com/leadership-definition-2948275>

empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community as key capabilities of modern leaders (Spears, 1998).

Leadership is lifting a person's vision to high sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations. – Peter Drucker

What these and other modern leadership concepts have in common is the idea of an empowerment mindset that supersedes a governing mindset. The traditional, authoritative and transactional leadership style (teaching others what to do) might apply for situations in which the leader has the right answer – and hence all information, knowledge and experience needed to make a thorough decision. But the greater the situational complexity, the more the leader depends on the expertise, talent and judgment of its employees or colleagues. They need to “supplement their industry and functional expertise with a general capacity for learning – and they must develop that capacity in the people they supervise” (Ibarra & Scoular, 2019).

With each individual being the knowledge carrier, solution contributor and decision-maker, the ultimate task of the leader becomes to engage and enable others to unleash their full potential and to facilitate positive change. The role of the leader shifts from providing answers to providing support and encouragement. The leader adopts the mindset of a coach.

In their article “The Leader as Coach”, Herminia Ibarra and Anne Scoular (2019), two highly recognized researchers in the field of Executive Coaching, outline this phenomenon of leaders as coaches as effective framework in an increasingly disruptive business world: “To cope with this new reality, companies are moving away from traditional command-and-control practices and toward something very different: a model in which managers give support and guidance rather than instructions, and employees learn how to adapt to constantly changing environments in ways that unleash fresh energy, innovation, and commitment. The role of the manager, in short, is becoming that of a coach.”

3 Key characteristics of a coach's role and stance

In order to understand what leaders might be able to learn and adapt from coaches, we first need to shed light on the unique characteristics and qualities of a coach. What actually is the role of a coach? According to Frederic Hudson (1999), a pioneer in the field of Executive Coaching, “the ultimate function of coaches [...] is to help persons and organizations find their purpose, vision, and plans for the immediate future”.

Boyatzis et al. (2019) define the role of a coach as helping others in their intentional change process, to achieve their aspirations or change the way they think, feel and act. They describe four major process steps or “discoveries” the coachee performs with the support of the coach: The discovery of the (1) Ideal Self (Who do I want to be?), the (2) Real Self (Who am I?) including strengths and gaps (Ideal vs. Real Self), the (3) Learning Agenda (How can I build on my strengths while reducing the gaps?) as well as (4) Experimenting and Practicing new behavior, thoughts and feelings. They conclude: “So a big part of a coach’s job is to keep people progressing in the right direction – experimenting with new behaviors, testing different tactics, and then practicing and perfecting those that prove most effective.”

What these definitions and many others have in common is the focus on the process, not the outcome: the key responsibility of the coach is to constantly shape, control and adjust the coachee’s process towards a solution or answer, whereas the coachee is ultimately responsible for the outcome. The coach enables the discovery of new options, paths, and directions, but it is the coachee who ultimately defines where to go. Marshall Goldsmith, one of the most recognized executive coaches, emphasizes this idea by characterizing coaching as a “how to get there” process, rather than a “where to go” process. With this in mind, we can take a closer look at the core beliefs that determine a coaching mindset.

You cannot teach a man anything, you can only help him find it within himself. – Galileo Galilei

A fundamental coaching assumption is that the coachee already possesses all resources and competencies (e.g., knowledge, experience, talent, capabilities) required to solve his specific problem (that is: the subjectively perceived gap between the current and the defined target state). The assumption goes even further: since the coachee knows himself and his context best, he is the only one who actually can and should find the solution. By using coaching questions

and interventions, setting impulses and offering perspectives, the coach helps the coachee to make unavailable resources available, to gain access to conscious and unconscious capabilities. Jointly, coach and coachee uncover hidden emotional or intellectual treasures and make them usable for the coachee.

This resource orientated view on the coachee as fully equipped individual once more clarifies the role of the coach as enabler or catalyst rather than a creator. It also underlines the need for a humble mindset of the coach, knowing that he does not have the answer that fits the coachee's specific reality, as Milton Erickson points out: "Every person's map of the world is as unique as their thumbprint. [...] So in dealing with people, you try not to fit them to your concept of what they should be."

There are ways to see our biggest problems as our greatest opportunities – if only we can step out of our trained patterns of perception. – Anthony Robbins

Another fundamental assumption is that perception creates reality, or as Gunther Schmidt, founder of the hypnosystemic approach, puts it: "Our focus of attention defines our inner experience". The way we perceive and interpret our environment is determined by our cognitive patterns. Like a filter, our patterns define our focus, our experience and hence create our reality. The power and beauty of the constructivist perspective is that we don't need to change our surrounding (which we often have no influence on) to change the way we feel, act or think. Changing these inner patterns can create a completely new reality – even if the external context stays the same. Positive change means changing how we interpret and deal with our environment by adjusting our patterns and creating new ones.

What sounds easy can be a very tough task, especially since patterns are often unconscious and therefore beyond our direct spheres of action. The role of the coach as external observer and steward of alternative views is crucial here. By applying tools like reframing, duplicating & reflecting, positive connotation or balancing inner ambivalence (dealing with contrary parts), the coach helps the coachee to change perspective, to build new neuronal networks and to ultimately construct a new reality. The use of positive language is key in this process, as Steve de Shazer, founder of the Solution Focused Brief Therapy, highlights: "Problem talk creates problems, solution talk creates solutions."

The relationship is the background for all coaching efforts. The relationship must be one in which there is mutual respect, trust, and mutual freedom of expression. – James Flaherty

The importance of the relationship between the coach and the coachee cannot be overestimated. Mutual contact, trust and respect are crucial preconditions for a flourishing coaching process. A strong connection allows the coachee to relax, to open, to explore and to engage in interventions offered by the coach. A stellar coach is constantly in contact with the coachee, in a highly focused state of mind, present and in the moment. He thereby gives the coachee the feeling of being heard, seen and understood at any time during the coaching process.

I believe the greatest gift I can conceive of having from anyone is to be seen by them, heard by them, to be understood and touched by them. – Virginia Satir

Freedom of judgement or multipartiality, as the absence of positive or negative assessment of the coachings inner perception, also play a major role in building this safe space. Referring to the OK-OK-model, the equivalent mindset of the coach is: I am OK, you are OK. It requires acceptance of both conceptions without morally or rationally categorizing the one or the other as superior or inferior. Closely related is a curiosity for new perspectives, value systems, and reality constructions.

Empathy, as part of emotional intelligence, is another crucial capability in the context of coaching. It refers to explicitly showing understanding for the coachee's feelings (desired and also undesired ones) or even anticipating them. Equally important, openness and transparency are directly related to respect: coaches who share their own feelings, ambivalences, and vulnerability and who explain their proceeding (applied questions, techniques, interventions) meet their coachees at eye level. Last but not least, humbleness (knowing the limits of the own wisdom, not having the answer to the coachee's problem) and appreciation (for all elements of the coachee's system and perception) pose fundamental elements of the coaching mindset.

4 The coaching mindset as valuable asset for leaders

An effective manager-as-coach asks questions instead of providing answers, supports employees instead of judging them, and facilitates their development instead of dictating what has to be done. – Ibarra & Scoular, 2019

Should leaders adopt a coaching mindset as suggested by Ibarra and Scoular (2019)? Should they complement their leadership repertoire by coaching elements? What is in for them? The following section provides some initial hypothesis on resulting positive effects on employees and organizations.

In their book „Coaching – Evoking Excellence In Others“ Flaherty et al. (2005) describe competence and fulfillment as the two primary outcomes targeted by a coach. Different from a goal as something you achieve, competence is an enduring capacity that stays with us even after the coaching process. Fulfilment, as defined by them, is closely related to finding meaning and purpose in what we do and who we are becoming. Applied to the business context, these two concepts are not just of great value for the individual itself, but also on the organizational level: greater competence, meaning and motivation allows for greater performance, while fulfillment might influence the employee's dedication and loyalty.

Outstanding leaders go out of their way to boost the self-esteem of their personnel. If people believe in themselves, it's amazing what they can accomplish. – Sam Walton

As they embrace a coaching mindset, leaders can significantly contribute to a learning and exploration environment that encourages employees to create ideas and solutions. Besides amplifying the employees' self-efficacy, creativity, motivation and satisfaction, it also fosters new perspectives as employees are inspired to follow their paths and explore new directions.

Inviting others to find their own, unique answers rather than giving instructions comes with another great side effect: It creates the need to actively and creatively search for solutions rather than just executing. An intellectual challenge that requires commitment, effort and responsibility. Although it may firstly be perceived as uncommon or even inconvenient to activate own resources, strategies and ideas, practiced over time, it can become a powerful, lasting capability. Like a muscle, independent thinking and autonomous decision-making are

trained and established, and with it comes self-awareness, self-reliance and the capability of self-help. Or as Flaherty et al. (2005) conclude: “Coaches drive towards enabling two specific outcomes for the people they work with: self-correction and self-generation.”

The best practitioners have mastered both parts of the process – imparting knowledge and helping others discover it themselves – and they can artfully do both in different situations. – Ibarra and Scoular (2019)

The fundamental differentiation between instruction (presenting one final solution), consulting (offering solutions) and coaching (providing support on the way towards another person’s solutions) is crucial for effective leadership. Why? Because as contexts and challenges vary, so do appropriate solution strategies. Depending on the nature of a task or decision, a leader should be able to actively move on the continuum between giving the right answers (direction) and asking the right questions (support and enquiry).

In highly innovative, agile contexts, as we find them in start-ups or R&D functions, or highly emotional settings, for example in case of an ongoing conflict between team members, the leader might not have the required proximity and information to provide an answer, or even not the natural authority to do so. However, in other contexts, for example serious financial crises, it can be a leader’s key task to provide stability and clarity – which often interferes with a more directive leadership style. The ability to adjust the leadership mindset to certain challenges and stakeholders and to switch between the role of a consultant and a coach, allows for a more agile and differentiated leadership.

In alignment with this idea, Ibarra and Scoular (2019) describe four options for leaders to utilize coaching in a simple 2x2 matrix:

Styles of Coaching

More info put in	1. Directive	4. Situational
Less info put in	2. Laissez-faire	3. Nondirective
	Less energy pulled out	More energy pulled out

Along the vertical axis, they differentiate the degree of information, advice or expertise that a coach puts in to a relationship with a coachee (offering solutions). Along the horizontal axis, they show the level of motivational energy a coach pulls out by unlocking the coachee's potential and solutions (providing support on the way towards another person's solutions).

The first quadrant (directive) fits the common leadership style: it equals telling someone what to do and how to do it. This might be appropriate in cases where the leader has the required expertise or acts as a mentor for less tenured or experienced colleagues. The second quadrant (*laissez-faire*), describes the absence of a coaching need and therefore low levels of intervention. This behavior might for example be appropriate for highly autonomous, productive teamwork. The nondirective coaching (third quadrant) corresponds with the classic role of a coach: the leader provides few information and instead leaves space for the other person to develop and present a solution. Finally, the situational coaching (fourth quadrant), which Ibarra and Scoular (2019) categorize as “sweet spot” of their framework, describes a highly contextual, dynamic interplay of the directive and nondirective style.

5 Final thoughts

The Learn-It-All does better than the Know-It-All. – Satya Nadella

In a rapidly changing business world that demands for constant innovation, out-of-the box-thinking and genuine solutions, it might be worse challenging whether common leadership styles represent the best fit to fully utilize the unique resources of employees and contribute to their growth and fulfilment. To address this challenge, this paper suggests recognizing coaching as “individual managerial capacity” (Ibarra & Scoular, 2019) and incorporating a coaching mindset as we lead teams and organizations.

Leadership is not an affair of the head. Leadership is an affair of the heart. – Kouzes & Posner (2012)

Given the discussed benefits of this idea, one might ask: Where is the flaw? Why do we see so few leaders incorporating it? One reason might be a common misconception that empowerment of others comes with a loss in power. Power is a multilayered concept, yet we tend to dismiss

most of its layers. Can dominance, ignorance, enforcement, suppression and overinflated confidence lead to greater power? It certainly can in many of today's corporate cultures. Is it sustainable? It may be or may not be, but it certainly consumes part of the leader's energy as he preserves the accumulated power.

What instead creates energy then? It is the selfless, sincere will of leaders to lift others, and to help them grow, even beyond themselves. It is the ability to create trust-based relationships and the intellectual and emotional capacity to engage and empower others. It is the humble recognition of our own limitations and the appreciation of the unique capabilities of those around us. It is a resulting natural cultural change towards mutual endorsement. It is the lifelong journey towards being a genuine coach. It is a new kind of leadership.

Changing an organization, a company, a country – or a world – begins with the simple step of changing yourself. – Anthony Robbins

What can we do about it? We can jointly leverage the potential of the coaching mindset to initiate positive change in our direct environments. Coaching is not just a toolkit or set of techniques, with it comes a mindset of appreciation, encouragement and positivity that has the power to shape the way we interact, communicate, perceive the world and thereby create reality. Leadership is not an inherent talent, but a learnable capability. Whether we lead ourselves, our families, our communities, or a Fortune 500 company doesn't matter: in any context, we can enter the next level of leadership by adopting a coaching mindset.

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