Leadership in coaching

Dr Jonathan Passmore

Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of leadership coaching. In the first section I will explore the benefits which models and concepts offer the coach in working with managers in organisations. In doing this, it is recognise that models are short-hand ways to view the world and they can be helpful in exploring the diverse ways of leading others. In addition they can be useful heuristics for managers in guiding their decision making.

In the second section I will discuss the growing evidence base in leadership coaching. While many coaches work in this domain, the evidence of coaching’s impact (at least in scientific terms) is still relatively weak when compared with other organisational interventions. However this is slowing changing with increasing numbers of coaching studies being published. This chapter includes a brief account of this growing evidence. In the final part of the chapter I will briefly discuss ways in which the coach can use models and frameworks in their work and review one model which I find useful in my own coaching practice.

The opportunities of concepts and frameworks

There is no shortage of leadership models. Walk into any book shop or library and there will be plenty of choice among the section on leadership and management. Most offer the reader a unique model, sometimes developed from research, but more often, the product of the thoughts and experiences. Examples include John Kotter and Charles Handy who have both offered multiple insights into leadership and how leaders can improve what they do. Many are personal accounts of well know leaders such as Louis Gerstner ex-CEx of IBM or Barbara Cassani from Go airlines, who offer their perspectives on what it takes to be a successful leader.

Sadly many readers, and some writers, interpret these models as universal truths: a model which can be applied in both sunshine and rain. However, it is misleading and unhelpful if leadership theories are expressed in this way. The context is important, as many of the writers in this book and others have emphasised (Grint, 2005; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). The best leaders select from a wide palette and make informed choices about their interventions and approaches which suit the individuals, the culture and the context.

I would argue that models are a useful heuristics for leaders, but they are not the answer. Conceptual models offer the leader (and their coach) a number of advantages when discussing leadership and leadership dilemmas. Firstly, they offer a lens through which to view the situation. Such a lens provides positioning points which can frame the problem, like longitude and latitude. The model does not exist by itself but these points help to measure, assess and explore the issue. Secondly, models offer both the coach and the manager a common language with which they can talk about the issue. Models use different words and phrases to describe leadership behaviours. They can be helpful and provide a common way to engage with and discuss the issue. In some instances the issue itself may have outside of the manager’s awareness and the coaching conversation can help deepen their reflection and self-awareness. Thirdly, models can help normalise events, helping managers to recognise that they are not alone in experiencing these events, and also challenge their perspective when wider issues have been left unconsidered. Finally, in some cases the model has been developed into a questionnaire. The questionnaire offers feedback for the manager on their personal situation or style and combined with the common language can help in building a plan of action. We have explored this concept in more detail in
Psychometrics in Coaching, but a few of the authors in this book have linked their models to accompanying questionnaires.

The coach needs to be able to draw useful on a range of models, which they should be able to describe and discuss with their coachee. However in doing this the coach needs to be confident the approach fits with the learning style of their coachee or whether the model’s language or insight would help cut through a longer discussion of the problem without such a short-hand aid.

Evidenced based coaching: The importance of research

There has been a growing body of research in coaching over the past decade (Grant et al., 2010; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007) and much of this has focused on the benefits of coaching within organisations. However the area of coaching’s contribution to leadership is still relatively under researched when compared with other areas of leadership development. Organisations are asking more questions about their development decisions: What are the benefits of this approach? What is the return on investment? Does it really work?

We would argue that coaching can contribute in a number of ways to leadership development. The first is in helping leaders and managers to transfer learning from the classroom to the workplace, personalising the material, and making links from theory to practice and from conceptual to previous knowledge. While limited in its scope Olivero, et al (1997) argued that such benefits could be achieved through combining training with coaching to enhance learning.

A second benefit of leadership coaching is to enhance skills. As noted above, learning is part of this process, but applying the conceptual learning to a new behavioural skill is a specific part. In this part, the leader with their coach, can use coaching to develop the new skills identified from the learning engagement, through developing a personal plan about how they may apply the new learning, as well as considering the barriers and applies who may support their new behaviour change. What we know is that forming new habits is difficult, and that support from our wider network is a critical part in successful habit breaking or new habit forming

A third area is the development of greater self-awareness. This may come from training however the Socratic questions of coaching can also bring new insights and learning. This may be achieved through reflecting on feedback or through discussion about a model.

One model I frequently use in my own practice is the six leadership styles described by Fitzsimmons and Guise (Fitzsimmon, and Guise, 2010). Leaders often can relate well to the six styles, as these are simple to describe and are small enough in number to remember without reference to notes. From personal experience, many managers often note that they use two or three styles frequently and ignore the other styles. Discussing the styles with managers offers two useful paths for conversation depending on the coachee and the stage of the coaching contract and its goals. The first is to explore why these one or two styles have been ignored. Frequent examples are pace setting and commanding. These can be ignored by some managers as they like to be liked and they hold the view that a more authoritative style would be conflictual and negative. This opens the arena of self esteem, the nature of being a manager and what team members look for in a manager. The second area is to focus on the development of these absent aspects of behaviour, and explore in what situations and in what ways could the manager authentically use these styles.

A fourth potential benefit of leadership coaching is through enhancing the motivation of managers. The role of managing others can be difficult, challenging and in senior positions
can be an isolated one. It is not surprising that having someone to talk to, who is confidential and does not have a personal interest in the outcomes is viewed by leaders as intrinsically motivating. This may result from goal setting, which in itself has strong motivational properties, as well as the use of interventions which foster a desire for overcoming ambivalence such as motivational interviewing (Passmore, 2008; Passmore 2007).

The fifth area, where coaching can evidence a positive contribution in leaders is in helping leaders develop stronger personal confidence or self regard (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic 2006). This confidence may come through reflection on strengths and recognition that these strengths are adequate to achieve the tasks in hand. Alternatively, it may come from developing plans to address perceived weaknesses.

The final area where coaching can impact on leadership is through well being. A host of studies have been undertaken in this area. These include the positive effects of coaching on stress reduction (Taylor, 1997; Palmer & Gyllensten, 2008) and in building resilience and hope (Green, et al.2007).

Others have argued the impact of coaching on leaders is slightly different, preferring the headings; people management, relationships with managers, goal setting and prioritization, engagement and productivity, and dialogue and communication (Kombarakaran, et al., 2008). But what we can begin to conclude is that the evidence from coaching research demonstrates the value for coaching as a significant tool for leadership development.

We have drawn a selection of studies together in Table 1. They show a sample of the studies which have been undertaken by research in the area of leadership development coaching. There has been limited publications focusing on the topic but both Consulting Psychology Journal and the International Coaching Psychology Review have published special editions on leadership coaching. These contributions have drawn on the experiences of coaching practitioners and have offer case studies of the application (Goldsmith, 2009) and value of leadership coaching (Linley, et al 2009) as well as offering models for leadership development within coaching (Kemp, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Brief summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evers, Brouwers &amp; Tomic (2006)</td>
<td>A study involving 60 federal government managers. The study found the coached group scored significantly higher than the control group on two variables: outcome expectancies to act in a balanced way and self-efficacy beliefs to set one's own goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrett, P. T. (2007).</td>
<td>A study involving 84 managers in group coaching and a control group. The study found that group coaching reduced burnout but did not increase productivity when compared with the control group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowles, S., et al. (2007).</td>
<td>A study involving 59 middle and senior managers. The study found the coach group improved more than the uncoached group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feggetter, A. J. W. (2007).</td>
<td>A study involving 10 high potential UK military personnel. The study concluded that coaching had a positive ROI.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czigan, T. K. (2008).</td>
<td>A PhD study examining the development of leadership</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

competencies using multi-rater feedback. The study found coaching contributed towards the development of the competences.

Kombarakaran, et al 2008  
A study of 114 USA managers. The study found coaching had positive effect on people management, relationships with managers, goal setting and prioritization, engagement and productivity, and dialogue and communication.

Working with senior leaders: Servant Leadership

In this final section of this chapter I will explore one leadership model that may be returning to popularity, Servant leadership, and how coaches may use this model and others in their coaching practice (Greenleaf, 1977) as an illustration of what is to follow in the remaining chapters of this book.

Greenleaf offered a different approach to many models of leadership. One which is emphasises the service to others, a sense of community and the sharing of power and decision making.

While the ten labels offered in Diagram 1 do not directly accord with the model or language used by Greenleaf (1977), the approach and the themes are consistent with the overall approach of servant leadership. Its focus is on changing from traditional leadership of controlling to empowering, for the more traditional directing to coaching.

The Servant leadership model

The first three themes of team building, stewardship and community building reflect the outward facing approach of the leader, towards stakeholders and employees. The servant manager recognises the value of developing others, not only for their future contribution to profits on in their current role, but in the wider belief that human development is a virtue which will bring both tangible and intangible benefits to the individual, the organisation and the community. The second theme in the three building blocks of the model is a focus towards building the community. In the past fifty years institutions have become increasing removed from a single local community, from which they draw their employees and which they serve. As a result organisations can become disconnected from these communities. This is equally true for public sector bodies, local councils and health trusts, as it is for multi nationals. Most organisations now need to find ways to reconnect. This may be through charity giving to local projects, to positively encouraging senior staff to live locally and contribute to the community with time off for service on local bodies. The final one of these building blocks; stewardship, is the recognition that as CEx or senior manager, they are not the organisation, but simply hold the organisation in trust for future generations.

The next set of four themes, persuasion, listening, awareness and empathy are the core skills of effective interpersonal behaviour. Listening is often an under used skill. Leaders in western culture, as contrasted with Japan for example, are more used to expressing their opinions in the hope if influencing the debate. When leaders, like many of us, listen this can be more like just waiting for their turn to talk. Real listening involves hearing not just the words but paying attention to the body language, including changes in breathing, skin colouration and body animation. It also involves aiming to listen beyond the word into the
context of what the speaker really means and checking this out with them through summaries and paraphrasing. The leader also benefits from awareness of others and awareness of themselves. This may draw on awareness of their personality, their preferences, their changing emotions and a recognition that others are different. Managers are then conscious of days when they feel sad or happy and this, along with other factors, can be managed as part of their interactions with others. The two elements above lead towards the third element in this set; empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand the world

of other, ‘as if it were our own’. Empathy can be easy for those we are close to or relate to but can take effort when we do not know someone or when we recognise wide differences between them and us. The last element is the skill to be able to persuade. Servant leaders need to be able to listen, empathise and maintain personal awareness and these can be used to effect to influence others. Empathy contrasts with a more directive or commanding style, which instructs and gives out orders. In this element the servant leader is seeking to gain the commitment of others, through reflecting back their values, concerns and views in the communication to produce a win-win outcome. For example by consulting staff and including these views as factors in the decision, and when communicating the decision linking this back to the feedback from staff.

The final set of three foresight, vision and transformation are about the longer term relationships. Leaders need to be able to scan the environment, make sense of the multiple information and translate this into useful information for their teams. The need to hold to a clear vision about where they and the organisation is going, and most importantly communicate this in a language that staff can understand. Finally they need to be able to bring about transformational change, responding to the environment and taking forward their vision. Such transformations, should affect both the organisation and the individuals in a positive way.

**Using the model with coachee**

The set of ten elements is a useful set of themes which leaders can consider. In coaching where I have a coach who is reflective, and interested in ideas, and the focus is on leadership development, I would ask what makes a good leader. In most instances I find the coach talks about their personal experiences or their views of a leader who they admire. One frequently quoted example is Richard Branson, another is Nelson Mandela. In these instances I would encourage the coachee to talk about their perceptions of the individual and what they do which makes them a great leader. This leads us into building a set of competences and at this point a leadership model can be a useful.

Having gained agreement to talk about a model, I tend to briefly describe the model, and if like Greenleaf’s ideas, it contains a number of elements or have important relationships, I would write this down for the coachee to help them visualise the model. The 10 categories are easy to remember, so it’s the type of model which as a coach you can keep in your head and the use of modern language gives it resonance for the modern manager.

One way to move forward would be to ask the coachee to rate themselves from 1-10 for each of the elements with 10 being an exceptional personal strength and 1 being I need to do significantly better in this area. As self perceptions are only one lens, I would then invite the coachee to repeat the rating and imagine it was their boss who was rating them.

The rating provides a great starting point for discussion. One direction is to explore the differences between self and ‘imaged boss’ rating. It can be useful to get the coachee to think about the evidence in each element and having reflected on this make amendments to both their and their imagined boss rating so these reflect a stronger evidenced based view rather than an the initial reaction.

With the ratings available, the coach can explore with the coachee their views on what matters most in their role. In general I would argue that, with a model such as this, all aspects are important but I recognise some are more important than others and this varies between roles. Having identified the important aspects and the areas of lower rating, I would invite the coachee to select areas to focus on for a discussion selecting two or three for a coaching session.
The discussion would encourage the coachee to talk about what they do, and what an exceptional performer might do in this element. Take listening as an example. The coachee may reflect back that they do listen but that it takes time they don't have, so often they find they stop staff or talk over them. We might then explore techniques for the coachee to encourage their staff to stay focused and use a lift speech approach - delivering their message in a limited time. Alongside this we might also explore the perceptions of staff when their managers talk over them and also how the coachee might develop patience to be able to stay focused and fully attentive for the whole conversation. These two of three elements, might in turn lead the coachee to developing an action plan of 6-10 objectives they will go away and try out. In closing I tend to encourage the coachee to think about how they will stay in track towards these goals over the next 3-4 weeks. In particular I encourage them to think about who will hold them to account and who will support and encourage them when they are doing well. Ensuring support mechanisms are in place increases the likelihood of the manager returning having found they have successful maintained these new behaviours throughout the period.

A second way of exploring these elements would be to invite the coachee to tell a story about their experience of each. This approach works better with coachees who are more extraverted and who enjoy the narrative as opposed to a more numerical rating approach. The end process however is similar in encouraging the coachee to think about what they are doing well and what aspects from the model they could choose to strengthen.

The model also provides a useful aid in two further ways. Firstly, I have found many managers enjoy reading about business and leadership, and thus being able to recommend a book or magazine article from Harvard Business Review, People Management or the Director for example, is helpful. The recommendation often follows a conversation, in short hand about the model and through getting the manager to read the long version, it encourages them to re-engage with the material. To support this process, I tend to ask the manager to consider a series of questions which I suggest will be the basis for our conversation next time. These questions might relate to: What aspects of the model are critical for the organisation / manager now? What would the manager add to the model to make it a more appropriate fit? What does the manager need to change about their style? How are they going to do this?

Models lastly can be used as an evaluation device. The coach might useful return with the coachee to consider the leader progress again the model, after six months. This can be particularly effective when the manager is asked to rate themselves and the original scores are then compared with the self rating. The contrast again provides data about what changes have taken place and why have these occurred. With the manager’s agreement it would be possible to use the model in a self and boss rating exercise in the tri-partite closure meeting, when the coach, coachee and coachee’s manager meet to review the progress made.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have offered a brief review of the emerging literature on coaching’s contribution to leadership development. The conclusion is that coaching is a useful tool in this process and the research evidence from studies is beginning to demonstrate this value in scientific research terms beyond case study and personal experience. The chapter secondly offered a model of leadership and set out how leadership models can be a useful aid in the coaching relationship to enhance leadership development.
As with psychometrics or coaching models, the application of a leadership model by the coach is a judgement by the coach about what will be of most use and value for the coachee. Models can be a short hand guide to helping leaders understand themselves, provide them with a language for developmental conversations and offer them a heuristic to take into the office for their future development and decision making.

References


Czigan, T. K. (2008). Combining coaching and temperament: Implications for middle management leadership development: PhD study, Capella University, USA.


