

Coaching Leaders ...Make Coaching Work For You

All great athletes in the world need and have good coaches. So do effective leaders. Ever wondered why?

First, effective leaders never stop learning. Great athletes always believe that they need continual improvement. They realize that there is always something new or different to learn, perhaps even to unlearn or relearn. Tiger Woods, the world's greatest golfer has a coach because he realizes there are blind spots in his golf swings and he recognizes that there are always new terrains to be conquered.

As leaders, we have to recognize that we need help. There is always room for improvement. As one premier school motto rightly puts it, "The best is yet to be." Learning must be part of a leader's lifestyle.

Second, all leaders need to be held accountable. Good coaches are relentless in their observations, always probing for new ways to help leaders improve, become more competent, and correct their blind spots.

Effective leaders recognize our own fallibility. When we refuse to be held accountable and our egos become larger than our position, our blind spots will grow and unchecked failures will dominate our lives. That's the beginning of self-deception.

We need a coach to tell us where we might have faltered. Of course, it is hard for subordinates to tell leaders that they are wrong. Even if they did, would their leaders listen? An impartial third party is often needed to sound the alert.

As Walter Wrightⁱ rightly proposes, "Leaders need wisdom. They need perspective. They need accountability." Usually, board members discover leaders' weaknesses too late to do anything about it. A coach can help prevent leaders from falling into the precipice of self-deception.

Ronald Heifetzⁱⁱ, in writing about leadership, suggests, "Because we get so swept up in our professional roles, it's hard to distinguish our role from ourselves on our own. That's why we need partners who can help us stay analytical. And we need two different kinds of partners. We need allies inside the organization – people who share our agenda. And we need confidants inside or outside the organization – people who can keep us from getting lost in our role." Find a coach/mentor if you don't have one yet. When you do, keep the relationship honest.

Third, leaders need to be sharpened. Even when leaders are doing well, coaching can help broaden their perspectives, affirm their directions, sharpen their skills and improve their strategies. Humility is one of the qualities of a great leader. Jim Collins calls humble leaders "Level Five Leaders - those who build enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will."ⁱⁱⁱ They always seek to be better leaders.

Fourth, leaders are loners. One banker shared, "Leaders have very few close friends. Clients are seen as targets to be exploited. Competitors are seen as enemies to be destroyed. It's really lonely at the top!" Hence, leaders need confidante whom they can share their struggles with and confide in. The coach can then become a safe haven for these leaders.

How do you make coaching work?

1. Be clear what you want to improve

Knowing what you want is important. Look for a coach who has the experience in that area. Be clear of your goal in the coaching. Find a coach who can help you achieve your goal. The goal is development not performance appraisal. Unclear or mismatched expectations can sour the relationship with your coach.

2. Find a coach you can trust

Finding the right coach is important. Find someone who is not afraid to say “No” to you. A trust relationship is important. It allows you to ask candidly, clarify doubts, and receive honest feedback. This will only happen when there is a climate of trust.

3. Be willing to change

A coach cannot change what you don't want to change. And a good coach will never try to change what you refuse to change but s/he can help you understand what needs to be changed.

Getting good feedback is an important part of coaching. This can be done through a 360 degree feedback mechanism, be it a quantitative instrument or a qualitative interview. Get feedback from your board members, your industry peers and better still, your subordinates.

Get feedback from people who know you well, whom you respect highly and whom you trust. Explain to them why you need their feedback and ask them to tell it like it is. For your subordinates, you might have to assure them that the feedback will not be used against them. Use the feedback to find out where your blind spots are and how you can do better.

4. Make small steps to change

The worst thing that can happen to you is when people don't see any change in you after the coaching. It will breed skepticism and cynicism. However, it is important to moderate your and other's expectations.

Make effort to change. Take baby steps that others can see the change. For example, if you have not been a good listener, make special effort to paraphrase and understand their perspectives.

We call them “quick wins” in coaching. This will demonstrate that we are sincere and earnest about the coaching.

When people see the change in you, not only will they be more open in giving you feedback, they themselves will also be more open to change. Then you will be on your way to becoming a great leader who will be building a great organization. You would have modeled a cultural change in your leadership team to be “Coaching Leaders”!

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ⁱ [Wright Jnr, W.C. The Gift of Mentors. De Pree Leadership Center. 2001.](#)

ⁱⁱ [Taylor, W.C. The Leader of the Future. Fast Company. 2001.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Collins, Jim. Good To Great. Harper Collins Publishers. New York. 2002.