

## The coach as positive disruptor

Ask a conundrum of coaches (this seems to be the appropriate collective noun) how they see their role and most of them will talk about making a difference. Some will also talk about being a professional.

But what kind of difference and who for? When I probe these questions, I often find that coaches' ambitions are surprisingly limited. They talk mostly about helping clients achieve performance goals or career goals, with little or no connection to wider impact. It seems to be a matter of faith that helping an individual to become a more successful leader is necessarily a good thing. But is that always the case?

Think of a disastrous corporate leader. They probably have a current coach, who is working to try to shore up their dysfunctions. On the way to the top, they have had a succession of previous coaches, who have helped them manage their reputation and become an effective corporate manipulator. This individual might well have reached the top of the pile on their own, without coaching – they may even be gracious enough to credit their coaches with some of their success.

This is where coaching and mentoring coincide. If coaching is largely about growing in managerial competence and mentoring is largely about growing as a human being, then leaders need to evolve constantly in both. When we see toxic leaders, the factor that stands out to an observant eye is their lack of socio-emotional and cognitive maturity. They may be highly intelligent, but that does not necessarily mean that they are highly self-aware. They are unevenly developed. The role of coaching and mentoring is to help them achieve a more beneficial balance.

The other observation we can make is that they are unevenly connected. Divisive leaders become increasingly connected to people, who share their ideologies and increasingly disconnected from those that don't. This disconnectedness has many facets, including in many cases a disconnect between their public and authentic selves. One of the results of this, from a coaching perspective, is that much of coaching is helping clients and their organizations get better at doing the wrong things.

Of course, what constitutes "the wrong things" is a matter of judgement and perspective. It's not the coach's role to impose his nor her moral imperatives on clients. But a growing topic in coach supervision is the guilt coaches sometimes feel at being accessories to behaviours and outcomes by their clients, which they see as both undesirable and facilitated by coaching. Said one coach: "I feel like a gun dealer, who says 'It's not the gun that's the problem; it's the person using it.'" Replace coaching for gun and I feel distinctly uncomfortable..."

I'm not offering any answers here. But I do want to raise issues for reflection:

- It is standard dogma that the coach's first responsibility is to the client. Is this still tenable? Where does the coach's responsibility to the client's stakeholders come in?

Or the responsibility towards the great social and environmental issues? For example, if we stay silent about a client's plans to develop products that cause global warming, are we colluding in doing harm?

- To what extent is it the role of a coach or mentor to help someone become a more complete human being? What kind of recontracting would this require for the coaching relationship? Is there a case for coaching becoming a long-term developmental relationship (as with mentoring) rather than the typical relatively short-term six-sessions-and-you're-done assignments that characterise today's executive coaching?
- Coaching works by creating greater clarity in the client's mind about issues he or she faces. Should we expect in future to place equal emphasis on breadth of thinking – especially with regard to wider systems. How should the legacy of the leader and the legacy of the coaching interact?

Tackling these issues in my own coaching and mentoring practice has led me over the years to make substantial changes in how I contract with clients and what clients I will work with. The principle I try to apply is what I call *transformative compassion*. This means withholding blame or judgement for the limitations of their perspective and contracting to challenge them in ways that will enable them to become better connected with themselves, with more diverse people and perspectives and with the wider world, that they have the power to influence. Much of the time – more than I have the right to expect -- this compassion rubs off.

As we start a New Year, it's an appropriate time for coaches to re-assess *What am I doing here and why?* I hope the issues I raise here will stimulate some lively debate!

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