



Taking more of a Coaching Approach: why do it and what does it take?

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Based on materials and experiences drawn from our Coaching Leaders Clinic Tool-kit and Master Class

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A self-proclaimed company-man, Ivan put results before his people. He drove them hard, and himself harder. Diligent, conscientious, indefatigable, his intense focus on deliverables made him intolerant of failures or frailties. He expected everyone else to perform to the same demanding standards he did. Ivan's sole interest, so he said, was getting people to meet targets. Sparing no time to tender to people's needs, Ivan proudly pronounced himself lacking in emotional intelligence, and believed his bellicose, no-nonsense manner earned him respect because "it got things done". He paid little heed to high turn-over rates amongst his project managers, the fearful responses he got, or that his staff nick-name was "Ivan the Terrible".

Why take a Coaching Approach?

I still encounter plenty of Ivans out there in work-world. They're one big reason for taking more of a coaching approach to leadership. It's a more effective, emotionally intelligent style – a very powerful, personalised way to motivate and build people-capacity at the same time as boosting those bottom-line business results. Taking a coaching approach can give you a whole new way to relate, and make the most of the resource you rely on most – your people. It can significantly improve productivity, relationships and the way people 'warm-up' to their jobs.

Hersey and Blanchard first described what they called the *coaching style of leadership* way back in the late 1960s. In 2002, Daniel Goleman gave us a new-millennium reboot in his book on *Primal Leadership*, where he included the coaching leader as one of his six leadership styles. As he said: "Coaching boosts not just employees' capabilities but also their self-confidence, helping them function both more autonomously and at a higher performance level." (*Working with Emotional Intelligence* p. 147)

More than ever these days, people are pretty dictator-and-directive resistant. They want to be coached not 'Ivanised' – to be encouraged, not coerced, bossed around and told what to do. This applies especially to 'twenty-something' workers who on the whole reject any kind of autocratic, "shut-up, do what you're told" approach. It just doesn't work.

Belligerent and over-controlling bosses like Ivan create toxic work cultures that sap morale, motivation and personal productivity. They can end-up brutalising a workforce and perpetuating this kind of behaviour. Overly directive, pace-setting leaders, with driving styles and a relentlessly exclusive focus on results can push people too hard, creating stress and malnourished work relationships.

Curiously, pace-setting leadership (another of Goleman's six styles) is what many public and private enterprises push for. The high standards such leaders insist on may initially impress, but the pacesetting approach can back-fire if staff feel they're being pressured and pushed too hard by a leader's unceasing demands for more quantity, better quality, quicker results that can actually provoke anxiety and lead to loss of focus.

To put it simply, command-and-control is out, coaching is in. Nowadays, staff seek self-responsibility, autonomy and challenge. A coaching approach taps into the deep-seated need we all have to challenge ourselves, achieve the things that really matter to us and accomplish results that come from our own initiative. Forward-thinking leaders see the futility of trying to control others, and the importance of adopting a coaching style. Here's some other reasons why:



- **A coaching style is more resonant and emotionally intelligent.** It significantly improves relationships. Staff want their leaders to be approachable; to relate to them with empathy, understanding, positive encouragement – and coaching provides that kind of platform.
- **Organisations want people who can think independently,** take initiative, and assume responsibility without waiting to be told. They're keen to develop themselves, so they can perform better. The concept of a good employee has shifted from one who does what they're told, to one who's self-directed, resilient and continuously learning.
- **Coaching is a much more constructive and engaging leadership style.** It taps into the deep-seated need we all have to challenge ourselves, achieve things that really matter to us, and accomplish results that spring from our own initiative. It helps to bring out people's creativity and talent, which generates motivation, interest and commitment.
- **A coaching style also promotes collaboration and self-responsibility.** Leaders shoulder less of the burden alone. People are less reliant on the leader for direction, which increases self-sufficiency and frees you up from time-consuming and frustrating 'micro-managing'.

Workplaces that successfully establish coaching cultures also say they see significant improvements in terms of retaining staff, reduced conflict, open communication, more job satisfaction and an increased overall level of happiness and productivity.

Most staff I've come across not only want to better themselves but also get along better with others. A coaching style of leadership does both. It has a successful track-record in getting improved performance results, and, it gives leaders a new way of relating to people – of facilitating individuals and teams to direct themselves, rather than have to lead from the top all the time.

In fact, as Peter Senge, founding father of the Learning Organisation movement once pointed out, there's a direct connection between a relationship-based coaching approach, and the ability to create dynamic, learning environments where individuals and teams continually improve. This is the essence of what Senge called Team Learning – one of his famous [5 Learning Disciplines](#).

Spotting a Coaching Leader

You come across coaching leaders in most organisations, though it's far from the dominant style in many, and they're sometimes hard to spot. Like the rare-birds they often are, you probably won't find them parading around giving grandiose speeches about visions or taking credit for achievements and breakthroughs.



Coaching leaders can be all types. Not strictly personality-based, though one Harvard study suggests introverts make better leaders because they listen more, empower others to take action, and don't look to be in the leadership limelight. Rather than centre-stage, they usually stay in the wings, prompting and supporting. They lead with quiet confidence from the midst of their teams, not from the front.

So how do you spot a coaching leader? Here's a few ideas on what this style looks like in action. Why not reflect on how many apply to you?

- **You're always alert to coaching moments and learning opportunities.** Most learning happens in the workplace, not away from it. Coaching leaders work hard at embedding learning into all their everyday work processes and are always on the look-out for how they can help someone improve.
- **You carry on a continual series of conversations** with staff. Listening and questioning are your major tools. You're always willing to engage in such conversations to help staff reach goals and solve problems that matter to them.
- **You use action-learning** to help people plan try-out actions to reach their goals and reflect on what worked and what didn't. You assist them analyse what's going on with a situation, and develop options and solutions to implement.
- **You put your people first, organisation second - ahead of results**, knowing that good performance will follow if you stick with it and do your coaching job well. You keep one eye on what's good for the organisation, the other on helping people develop skills that link to their long-term career goals.
- **You guide people to find their own answers and solutions**, not succumb to the temptation to work it out for them. You help them tap into what they know and find strengths within themselves. You're about cultivating self-sufficiency and self-responsibility, not learned helplessness or dependency.
- **You challenge and confront.** You help people rethink situations, reframe limiting beliefs, reflect on their approach to situations, events, themselves and their behaviour – old habits and patterns that hold us back, limit us and impact our performance.
- **You build open and trusting relationships.** Your effectiveness depends on them. You have a genuine personal interest in your people. You empathise with them. Often, much of the context for your coaching work with staff is on the relationships they have with others around them.
- **You deal in feelings, genuinely.** Emotions are the essence of many coaching challenges. They drive what people think and how they act. Emotional Intelligence is a critical capability of coaching leaders.
- **You work on the positive, appreciative side with people.** You give ongoing, constructive feedback that builds motivation and constantly encourages them to take on challenging assignments that stretch them, purposely extending their skills and talents.
- **You design and assign challenging tasks to people** that achieve not only organisational results but also their personal and career goals. While your coaching actions support the work goals, you're dedicated to building long-term capability – getting the best out of your people to get the job done but helping them learn, adapt and develop new skills to face new challenges. Coaching leaders are first and foremost capacity-builders. You know that great performance will follow.

What's it take to be a Coaching Leader?

Periodic surveys of Australian staff seem to point to them favouring a coaching style of leadership above all other leadership styles. The challenge for organisations is to train their leaders to transit to a coaching style – and develop a work culture that fosters a coaching approach. Over the last decade or so, lots of

businesses have invested heavily in trying to turn their managers into coaching leaders. Some have been remarkably successful. The majority have mostly had less success in terms of changing around the basic behaviours of their leaders, or their dominant workplace cultures.

In fact, one prominent obstacle to coaching leadership is an 'Ivanised' mainstream management culture – where senior managers extol or reward autocratic, directive, or pace-setting leadership. A coaching style is difficult to keep up in this kind of leadership culture. It's not just that a coaching-style leader might feel isolated or unsupported. The mainstream, feeling threatened by a style different from their own, can insist leaders conform to the dominant model.

In the last few months, I've come across two stark instances of this with my leadership coaching. In one, the leader's boss insisted he must be *"hard and harsh"* with staff and *"drive"* them, because *"that's the only way you get results."* In the other, a leader was told he had to be more *"aggressive and head-kicking"* to get on in this organisation! In both instances, when this advice was resisted, it resulted in one case, in a formal reprimand for not keeping his staff in line; in the other, a 'move-aside' from the position.

Let's look at some other, more personal, 'hold-backs' to taking on more of a coaching style. One thing coaches do is help people identify obstacles to achieving personal goals. Let's apply this to becoming a coaching leader. What ones get in the way for you?

- **Adopting a coaching style will add up to a loss of power, position and control.** Quite a lot of leaders fear this. Management can't control everything from the top but this doesn't stop them trying. The old command-and-control style may be past-it but it's still alive and kicking.
- **Being a coaching leader is hard because of a lack of confidence, know-how, tools or coaching skills.**
- **Lack of relationship-building skills to be a good coach.** Some fear a coaching approach may expose personal deficits in terms of emotional awareness or people skills, or that coaching might entail building closer relationships and some don't want to get that close.
- **A coaching approach will take up too much time** and is a low priority in terms of achieving practical, no-nonsense results with tight time constraints. Sometimes this extends into attitudes like *"I haven't got time to hand-hold or develop people. I'm too busy already. They just need get on with the job!"*
- **Coaching is not hard-edged and results-oriented enough to convince some to do it.** They don't believe coaching is real management work: that a manager's job is dealing with hard business or technical priorities, and should not be concerned so much with personal development.
- **Coaching won't get us the business results we need – it's too soft or too slow.** Becoming a coaching leader isn't for those who like quick-fixes. There's an element of faith with a coaching approach that it will pay long term dividends on results – but it takes patience and usually won't deliver short-term.
- **People should develop themselves in their own time, not in work-time.** This is the belief people should already have the skills to do their work. If they don't have what it takes, why hire them in the first place? There's also those who feel people shouldn't need this level of personal maintenance and pandering. Yes, it's an anti-development ethos but it's still widely, if secretly, held.

So far we've looked at the barriers. But what does it take to be a coaching leader? For a start, we believe you don't need to spend thousands of dollars becoming a *certified* coach in order to be a coaching leader. You're not going to be a full-time coach, and your relationship as a leader with your staff is different to that of a professional coach, whose services you might use from time to time. Here are some **capabilities and characteristics we think a coaching leader need to be effective:**





- **Self-awareness:** not just being mindful of values, emotions, thinking and behaviour patterns with people you coach but also constantly work on your own levels of personal mastery and mindfulness.
- **Encourage more – direct less:** the shift from controlling to collaborating; from “*how do I make them achieve my goals?*” to “*how can I help my people reach their goals?*” Sense the difference? You become more of a coach and less of a controller who assigns tasks.
- **Empathy and understanding:** being able to identify with other’s emotions, understand different world views, emotional patterns, fears and aspirations without judging builds the trust needed for any good coaching relationship.
- **Relationship & rapport-building:** the coaching relationship won’t work unless you’re seen as friendly, open, honest, authentic, and approachable – someone to confide in and open-up to.
- **Energising & inspirational:** a capacity to inspire others helps them focus and stick to working through often difficult issues, limits or constraints. Coaching leaders operate from positive appreciation. You encourage and build on strengths rather than focus on deficits, diminishing people or their abilities.
- **Mental agility:** able to adapt coaching strategies and tools in the moment to fit the emerging needs of people and help them analyse a situation and come up with actions, rather than provide answers.
- **Conversational capability:** connecting with the people you coach through conversations helps you understand others, dig down into issues, challenge respectfully and maintain open relationships
- **Perspective-takers:** helping people sort out the range of issues in any given situation, to see how they relate to each other and the big picture. You provide clarity and context for meaningful discussions to occur; help others understand their own and other’s perspectives and see alternatives.

There are a few other things it takes to be a coaching style of leader. First, you have to genuinely like people – be interested and curious in them. Second, you have to believe they can grow, change, be different and that you can tap the unrealised potential in them. If you want to build more coaching into your leadership, you also need to be prepared to ask yourself a few incisive questions. For example:

- Is there a sufficient basis of trust and relationship for me to coach? Will my staff accept the idea me coaching them?
- Am I prepared to persevere with a coaching approach? Do I have the patience and tolerance? Am I able to make the transition from controlling and directing to encouraging and coaching?

Leaders who ignore the coaching style, claiming they haven’t got the time, the patience, the tolerance or the relational talents to do it, are really missing out on a powerful and persuasive tool to achieve their own, and the organisation’s goals, and give their staff the often much-needed lift they need to perform and succeed in both their work and their private lives too.



As we suggested above, you don’t have to spend thousands to become a certified coach to be a coaching leader. More leaders would probably take on a coaching role if they had some help with the how-to’s. That’s what The Change Forum’s *Coaching Leaders’ Clinic* comes in. It provides tools and practice opportunities to assist you to learn how to become a coaching-style of leader. If you want to turn your leaders into coaches, *The Coaching Leaders’ Clinic* can be delivered in-house as a useful adjunct to your leadership learning or coaching culture strategy...

Top of the list of other programs we highly recommend to help adopt a more coaching style, our *Personal Mastery: 7 Practices of Emotionally Intelligent Leaders* masterclass helping you to develop and apply emotional intelligence capabilities that all levels of leader need.

More on *The Coaching Leaders Clinic* & *Leading with Emotional Intelligence* programs on-line at www.thechangeforum.com.

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