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Coaching great leaders

Being a manager who can influence, inspire and engage team members is not something that can be learned from a book, say Iain McCormick and Rolf Siggaard. They examine the role of coaching in developing authentic leaders.

Consider this scenario: Mark Phillips is the manager of a mid-size company. The business results are not where he wants them to be. Mark is very ambitious about what the company should achieve but feels that 'the troops don't get it'. He spends a lot of time telling people what he expects of them, but to little avail. "How many times do I really need to repeat myself," he often thinks.

New Zealand needs managers at all levels who can shape, influence, inspire, and engage team members. This ability cannot be learned on a course or in a textbook. It has to come from the heart and be authentic.

New Zealand leaders are not great, according to Hamish Deery from ISR Research. He suggests that many New Zealand leaders fail to demonstrate the critical leadership behaviours as effectively as their overseas counterparts (*Management*, March 2005). While our

leaders do well at clarifying company values, they do not make decisions that are consistent with these. Deery's conclusion is that many of our leaders do not create the high-engagement and high-performance workplaces which we so desperately need.

So, if our leaders are not great, how should they be developed? A useful set of steps is provided by Robert Fulmer, Philip Gibbs and Marshall Goldsmith in their *MIT Sloan Review* article 'Developing leaders: How winning companies keep on winning'. They suggest that there are five critical steps which have been adapted to fit with the leadership coaching perspective.

1. Awareness—understand current reality. Look both inside and outside the organisation for information and leadership coaching approaches that work. This may include reviewing customer and employee satisfaction data, market research, and researching best practices. Genuinely engage with people, having an open mind, and

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(for a while) putting aside own perceptions is the best approach to get ideas from people and better understand the organisation's issues, challenges and leadership requirements.

2. Anticipation—understand business drivers and how the company should benefit. The best leadership-development programmes focus on the future. Talk to people at all levels in the organisation on what they see as the most significant trends that are likely to affect the business. A useful technique is the Merlin Exercise which asks people to use the magic of Merlin to create an exciting and far-reaching future vision of the organisation.

3. Action—test ideas in 'real time'. People learn better from experience than discussion. Effective leadership coaching emphasises the actual application of leadership methods to real-world challenges between coaching sessions. It always involves developing real 'field-work' actions to undertake and report back in the next session.

4. Alignment—connect the dots. Leadership coaching should have a clear context. Best-practice organisations recognise the importance of aligning leadership development with other functions; activities such as formal performance appraisal and succession planning. Leadership coaching should clearly support the future strategic direction of the organisation, not be a loosely coupled, stand-alone activity.

5. Assessment—be honest and ask for support. Best-practice organisations always assess the effectiveness and value of their leadership-development processes. This often includes formal tools such as 360° feedback, team effectiveness surveys, and psychometrics. Good leaders will also keep their own 'scorecard' with a list of development actions. Most people will happily volunteer time to help other people grow. Good leaders make a habit of checking progress against development actions through informal conversations with peers and an external coach.

Graham Lee, in his 2003 book *Leadership coaching: from personal insight to organisational performance*, argues that effective leadership often contains a paradox—the two potentially conflicting demands—the personal needs of the leader and the demands and needs of the organisation (see diagram above).

A leader may want to establish sound work-life balance while the organisation wants highly committed people. The leader may want to make a difference to other people's lives while the need of the organisation may be to increase profitability. The leader may be concerned about environmental issues where the organisation may consider that profit improvement comes before any other issues.

The most effective leadership results from an ability to resolve the tension between personal goals and the demands of the organisation. This can be done when the leader finds a fit between his or her individual values and the organisation's needs. This fit is usually a creative solution which ensures that the needs of the organisation and



individual are achieved—this is the art of authentic leadership.

It can be very tough to 'battle' with this tension alone. Good leaders find someone neutral—a coach they can use as a sounding board and even practice with. Coaching is a powerful mechanism to help individuals understand themselves better and use all abilities to help achieve organisational goals.

The nature of authentic leadership

Lee contends that it is the development of authentic leadership ability that is the key to finding the links between individual values and organisational needs (see below).

Illustrating this with the example of a leader who wants better work-life balance while the organisation wants a highly committed workplace, the solution may be to recruit a group of part-time workers who can provide greater flexibility and resource savings for the organisation. In the case of a leader who is passionate about environmental issues while the organisation may only want economic profit, the solution may be to implement environmentally friendly cost savings.

Awareness is the basis of a conscious thoughtful approach to leadership. Authentic leadership requires three levels of awareness: self



awareness, awareness of others, and organisational awareness. Self awareness enables leaders to identify unhelpful defences or reactions they may have—such as a tendency to dominate and control, to fear failure, and so on. Self awareness enables the leader to understand his or her own motives without the distortion of unconscious bias. The awareness of others enables the leader to be more sensitive, more understanding of others' motives and so better able to align these with organisational needs.

Leadership coaching often involves helping the leader move from a defiant or compliant leadership style to a more authentic style (see diagram below). Defiant and compliant leadership is typically the result of a lack of awareness of self and others.

Developing authentic leadership is one of the key challenges facing many New Zealand businesses and organisations. We need leaders who will use the wisdom of conscious contemplation. It is the responsibility of the leadership coach to help individuals achieve this conscious authentic style.

Lee provides a useful model with four distinctly different targets for coaching (see diagram on page 34). The individual development-people quadrant involves the development of self awareness. The individual development-task quadrant involves the development of the relevant skills and capabilities. By contrast, the people focus-organisational development quadrant involves the understanding of others and the development of motivational leadership. The final organisational development-task focus quadrant involves business leadership with a focus on strategy and managing complexity.

The traditional approach to leadership development often has a bias toward organisational development/business leadership tasks. A more complete development programme can be provided by a coach who can help the individual to understand the people and self awareness focus required by an authentic leader.

At a practical level, how this can be done? Self awareness can be developed through the individual understanding his or her own

personal influences and motives. Using a biographical essay exercise is useful and involves literally, writing one's life story: where I was born, grew up, what work my parents did, memorable moments in school, university, successes, setbacks along the way, why I chose this career, how I got to where I am, and where I want to go. This writing is very important because it gets the person thinking in an organised manner.

- It refreshes the memory of where the person has been and what the person has done;
- The person ends up with more complete information for their leadership coaching;
- The person discovers patterns and tendencies;
- The person uncovers gaps between desires and reality;
- Overall the person develops greater self-awareness.

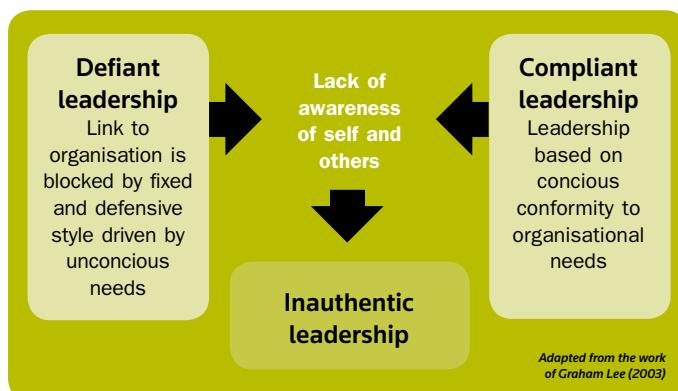


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Skills and capabilities can be developed through the use of systematic ability coaching programmes that may include: time management, communication and conflict management skills, team development and problem solving.

Motivational leadership, and finding the right roles for the right people in the team, can be developed by using career-anchor exercises considering individual employees and identifying what motivates each person, eg, a desire to produce new ideas, objects or experiences; take charge of things; a desire for physical assets and money; to be a specialist in a chosen field; a desire for responsibility, risk and profit of one's 'own' operation; to work with others; or a desire to have a predictable future and to avoid unnecessary risks.

Finally, business leadership can be developed through the use of skills coaching around strategic thinking, managing complexity, organisational astuteness and change management.

Having worked in the leadership coaching area for many years, we have found that this coaching approach highly effective. Leadership coaching is a very powerful tool to develop authentic leaders who, in turn, can create the high engagement and high performance we need to develop great businesses and great workplaces in New Zealand. **et**

Iain McCormick and Rolf Siggaard run the Executive Coaching Centre www.executivecoachingcentre.com

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