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Dear Reader:

Leadership is one of the most-written about topics in management literature. It seems to continually pose new challenges, as the working environment and our whole world changes. We are introducing here a new management profile, that of the Leader Coach, as a leadership response to those changes.

Enjoy the reading!

Isabel Rimanoczy
Editor

Quote of the Month

"The great end of life is not knowledge but action."

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895)



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THE NEW MANAGEMENT PROFILE: THE LEADER COACH

by Ernie Turner and Isabel Rimanoczy

About 30 years ago, Professor Abraham Zaleznik introduced a distinction in the understanding of management versus leadership in a famous article published in the Harvard Business Review (1977)^[1]. Managers, he said, are focused on planning, coordinating, supervising, giving clear instructions and

monitoring results. Leaders, he continued, are visionary individuals, able to see beyond the horizon, to dream what is possible.

In the '80s, a new role entered the corporate offices: the Executive Coach. Combining the personalized support of a sports coach with the psychological perspective traditionally provided through counseling and therapy; this new profile grew in popularity, offering managers and executives an external support to better reach their goals, to better solve conflicts or ride the stormy waves of human relationships. The growing interest fostered the development of a variety of approaches: from a more challenging sports-like and expert-directive style to a more reflective, question-centered process.

Individual coaching soon proved to be the most efficient way to tackle behavior challenges, to help foster change and personal transformation as well as to improve performance and interactions. The foundation can be established through training and development programs but the application is best monitored and supported through the personalized support of a one-on-one coach.

This practice of assigning coaches to managers soon collided with budgetary constraints. Executive coaches are expensive and cannot be offered to all the managers of an organization. So organizations started to look at developing their own internal coaches among HR, OD, T & D and internal consultants. In some cases even managers who were interested in adopting mentoring roles were invited to develop coaching skills.

A new combination: The Leader Coach

In the mid '90s, LIM started developing a new profile: The Leader Coach. Combining the leadership role with the role of a coach, the Leader Coach profile is based upon the premise that a team leader has the opportunity and responsibility to manage, inspire and support his/her team members in helping them identify and achieve their individual and collective potentials.

What is a Leader Coach?

A Leader Coach is a leader who uses multiple means to lead his/her team.

a) A focus on priorities. She is able to mobilize the team around the right tasks at the right time. She is well aware of the task at hand although she may not be the expert in solving the problem. She knows who in the team has the required talents, is aware of the task demands, resources available and time commitments.

b) A focus on team processes. She is aware of the many processes, practices, concepts and techniques that differentiate a good team from a high performing team. She constantly coaches the team, collectively and individually on these practices so that they start using them on their own, and thus alternates the role of meeting facilitator and "Chief Learning Officer."

c) A focus on team dynamics. The Leader Coach is aware how the team is doing both personally and interpersonally; she knows each team member's aspirations, strengths, weaknesses, concerns, career ambitions and learning goals. She is also aware how they interact with one another and where they need to support and challenge one another.

In order to act effectively and efficiently in the Leader Coach role -- leading the team, reaching the business goals and supporting the individuals in identifying and achieving their potentials -- there are a number of skills that the Leader Coach needs to develop:

1) those that relate to coaching support:

- active listening,

- asking good questions,
- setting the right context (ensuring a safe environment, contracting expectations, right timing)

2) *those that relate to developing a high performing team*

- effective meeting management
- planning
- decision making
- clarifying mission, vision, values, goals and norms
- prioritizing
- effective communication
- managing the follow up
- empowering and delegating
- contracting roles and responsibilities
- giving and receiving feedback
- sharing leadership
- knowledge management through extracting learnings
- bonding
- evaluating
- celebrating achievements

While this list may seem ambitious, the essence of this role is the mindset and the attitude a Leader Coach has to develop. An effective Leader Coach needs the skills and experience of a black belt but the curiosity and humility of a white belt. She has the "Tao" mentality, knowing that less is more and understanding how things get done. She is able to empower others because she knows that this will not threaten her own power. It is clear that authority comes from respect and not from functional power. She is aware that those who have a stake in a decision should have a voice, and therefore is able to create an environment where those voices can be heard, promoting involvement and participation. Another key characteristic is having an appreciative approach, valuing the strengths of others as a way to increase self esteem and foster positive performance. Trust is also a necessary condition: it permeates through words, actions and body language. Creation of a trusting environment helps people bring out the best of themselves.

The obstacles

There are a number of obstacles that a Leader Coach has to address. The first one is the pressure of time and getting things done. Time pressure frequently leads managers to rely on their own expertise and knowledge, to make decisions and take actions without consulting the team, and without giving themselves the opportunity to learn with and from the team simply because it would take longer and slow down the action. It takes self restraint and a view of the larger picture and the future state to hold one's self back and encourage others to learn by doing. One way to look at this challenge is to consider that if we never train others to do what we are doing, we would continue doing the same things, as opposed to exploring new areas, taking on new challenges and growing professionally.

Another obstacle is the satisfaction we derive by doing things our own way. We are comfortable with our own patterns of thinking and doing, and therefore it is easier and more pleasant to do something without engaging others who may have different opinions or are on a different part of the learning curve. This goes in hand with the assumption that others don't know as much as we do, and in consequence their input will be less valuable. This is an assumption everyone should check, as the most creative ideas come from those who know less, have less expertise and therefore have fewer constraints in their thinking.

An organization needs to support the Leader Coach role, encouraging leaders to develop others, even if this

means that things don't get done as fast in the beginning. Of course a reward system needs to support these new behaviors.

The obstacles however seem to be more internal than external. If we are able to address our internal fears, uncover our assumptions about sharing leadership and developing others, we may find it easier to adopt the Leader Coach role. We need to believe that everyone can grow and add value.

The gain

Companies depend more and more on teamwork for business success. Winning companies encourage team leaders to transfer their know-how to members of their teams, who, in turn, should do the same. The companies that develop, encourage and reward Leader Coaches will be the ones best equipped to survive and succeed in today's quickly changing market.

Most effective team leaders already know deep inside the value of working as a coach as well as a leader. They just need to take the extra step of testing these new waters. As they discover the power of letting others grow, learning and sharing effective practices, teamwork improves; this, in turn, brings better results. And as teams become more productive, they also create more enjoyable places to work.

Isn't this a valid goal? 

[¹] Zaleznik, A. (1977) Managers and leaders: Are they different? Harvard Business Review, 55 (3), pp. 67-78.



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