



## Does every good leader have a coach?

**Coaching has long** been established as an essential tool in creating more effective business leadership and as a behavioural or performance enhancer. Véronique Girma, general manager and senior coach at Turningpoint Hong Kong, illustrates how leadership coaching can facilitate productive changes in people, teams and systems.

If I talk to you about “coaching”, what images first come to mind? A stern-faced guru who listens to you and remains silent after you finish speaking, his large, round eyes gazing at you intensely? An ex-senior CEO delighted to find a keen ear to which he can recount his many tales of success? A poisoned chalice you cannot refuse offered to you by your boss, leaving you somewhat perplexed? The dazzling grin of an expatriate woman thrilled by her new job? Or maybe you yourself, at one point in your career, have undertaken the journey of coaching? No matter what it is associated with, coaching seems to be in vogue – a rising profession in terms of number of coaches and activities.

Many organisations know that talent is the single most important factor in driving

competitive advantage, and that the skills and capabilities needed tomorrow may not exist today. A survey conducted in 2012 by the Conference Board (“Strategic Leadership Development: Global Trends and Approaches”, with 654 respondents participating from 14 industries) revealed that 40 percent of company leaders are perceived to be either marginally prepared or not prepared to meet the business challenges that lie ahead. In a world marked by high talent and capital mobility, underperforming is not easily forgiven. So is coaching the magic remedy, the key success factor in a world where performance is the queen of the business virtues? Does a successful leader need a good coach?

Firstly, what makes a good leader? According to a classical definition, a leader is visionary, audacious and inspiring to those under his responsibility, and the more charismatic he or she is, the better. But is the image we have of a good leader in the West the same in Asia? Leadership “Chinese style” is based on harmony, balance, energy and keeping face. This means that Chinese leaders are not always under the limelight. The Chinese philosopher Laozi’s comment on leadership (in his *Dao De Jing* – 6th-5th century BC) is quite unusual to the Western ear: “A leader is best when people barely know that he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worst when they despise him... But of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aims fulfilled, they will all say, ‘We did this ourselves’.”

Beyond the juxtaposition of cultural frameworks, the times we live in are full of volatility and uncertainty. Compared with the dominant context of the 20th century, this has changed considerably. It is now necessary to take into account the fluidity of resources that we employ: investors, capital, talent, allies, hierarchical support...the wheel of luck can

quickly turn. Within such a context, it is not easy to project oneself into the future and to promote a vision that is likely to become obsolete in a short amount of time.

Being a good leader requires accepting the need to navigate within ambiguities and paradoxes, and to constantly deal with them in order to stay on course. There is no ideal model or recipe for leadership. This is why it is difficult to lead alone, without the presence and the opinion of another. In this case then, can a friend, a partner or an advisor do the job?

What can a coach do differently? Thanks to his expertise encompassing a certain attitude, questioning and exploring techniques, the coach enhances and speeds up a twofold process: the first concerning relationships (to oneself and to others); the second concerning the relationship of the person within the context in which he/she operates (the ecosystem).

## Working on oneself and one's relationship with others

While there is no recipe for being a "good leader", it is often necessary to undergo a certain amount of work on oneself: to look for one's own style, instead of trying to adopt the style of another.

I was recently listening to an interview on the radio from Stephane Lissner, who was appointed a few months ago as director of the Opéra de Paris. He was talking about what made a "Diva". According to him, a Diva "is the meeting point between the colour of a voice, a particular timbre and a persona. Some great singers have an excellent tonality and musicality, but they have not yet met their persona." This thought brought me back to the definition of a good leader, whose quality is not limited to his or her expertise, but expresses itself at the crossroads between a unique personality and the role he or she has to hold in a specific context.

This is where coaching can provide precious space and time to take a step back and reflect upon a situation. Isn't one of our greatest challenges to resist rushing in the face of the tyranny of time? Coaching helps to formulate

and articulate one's own convictions, and build a vision that is flexible and solid, sensitive to the fluctuations of the environment.

Coaching also creates a framework within which the leader can face his or her vulnerabilities without fear: what often isolates the manager is his fear of admitting his vulnerabilities when he is expected to remain strong in the face of growing pressure. In this respect, confidentiality is crucial.

Coaching opens a space for constructing a leader's identity and acknowledging each leader's unique background: leading others begins with a "leadership of self". What are the foundations that will allow me to go forward? What is my contribution today and what will it be tomorrow? What have I learnt from my past failures? Am I aware of my own traps? What are the behaviours, habits, perceptions and mistrust I must learn to let go of?

Throughout this process, the coach also encourages us to celebrate our successes. He or she has the ability to draw out the best in us, even positive attributes that we may not be aware of, which is very empowering.

The coach helps a leader to approach reality from the perspective of those upon whom he exerts his leadership. If we ask ourselves which leaders had an impact on us, we do not remember them based on their hierarchical status, but based on what they had that was unique and different. The leaders we remember are those who led from the heart. They decided to trust by choice, because they understood that trust is the key to all constructive relationships. They did not give us all the answers or solve all our problems. Rather, they faced our challenges with us.

## The coach, a camera on the leader's ecosystem

Coaches challenge us. They help us to identify and confront critical issues in our environment that require addressing instead of being swept under the carpet. They act like a camera, offering different and often new angles. Our unconscious biases are revealed and we become less conditioned by them.

In a world of constant evolution, it is difficult to take anything for granted. Instead of using all our energy attempting in vain to predict the future, it is better to choose a few essential commitments that we will be keen to keep. In your current environment, who is relying on you? What room for manoeuvre do you have? Whose support do you crucially need?

What key commitments will you choose to make? By implicitly or explicitly helping you to formulate which engagements you will make and towards whom, the coach also helps you to clarify the support you need to achieve your ambitions.

## The coach facilitates adaptability

It is crucial now more than ever to be realistic about the evolutions within the context in which we operate. The role of the leader consists of constantly questioning change. In some cases, regardless of how demanding it seems, the best move is to be transparent and show some humility.

One of the conclusions from the McKinsey Quarterly article titled "Leading in the 21st century" is that leaders must act as "Chief Reality Testers" – in other words, ensure that their team grasps reality:

"Leaders need to develop a facility for viewing the world through two lenses: a telescope, to consider opportunities far into the future, and a microscope, to scrutinise challenges of the moment at intense magnification. Most of us are naturally more comfortable with one lens or the other; we are 'farsighted' or 'nearsighted', but rarely both. In times of complexity, leaders must be able to see clearly through either lens and to manage the shift between the two."

To sum up, resilience, agility and the ability to question things and moving forward in a transparent way have become the key leadership skills of the 21st century. Addressing such challenges is a deep commitment, which is why the support and expertise of an executive coach are bound to enhance efficiency in tackling them through the co-creative process of coaching. **E**