

Leadership Coaching: What Is It Worth?

by Chris Coffey and Marilyn McLeod

When every dollar in your organization's overall budget counts, each line item must contribute to the bottom line. Leadership coaching, which focuses on how human beings think and behave, can not be measured on a financial balance sheet with any logical certainty. So, how do you know that the money you're spending on leadership coaching is worth your investment? If the leader sustains the change long after the coach has moved on, the coaching was worth the investment.

As coaches, one of the best compliments we can receive is that we helped someone think and behave differently and that they sustained these changes after the coaching process was completed. This is the goal, and it's challenging, because as human beings, we are all creatures of habit. We quickly go back to our old ways of thinking and behaving once the coaching experience has ended, unless we are compelled to change. Have you ever met a smoker who has quit 30 or 40 times? Quitting is easy; the difficulty is sustaining it.

A coach's job is to compel others to change. Mark Goulston talks about the difference between a convincing and compelling approach to influencing change. Smart, intelligent, knowledgeable people put together a good logical argument hoping to convince others to see things as they see them. The targets of these attempts to convince often hear "I'm right and you're wrong." This is generally not an effective way to pull people toward you and your point of view.

In contrast, a compelling approach asks questions to help others examine their own claims (what they want someone to agree with), the evidence they are using to support their claims, and the inferences they are using to link the evidence to their claim. This can be much more compelling and pull people toward you if they see you open and willing to listen. This is truly an art when done well. The following story reveals the extraordinary change that happens when a leader makes simple changes in his or her thinking and behavior.

Al works for an international media giant and is an avid amateur hockey player. He engaged Chris Coffey in this stakeholder-centered coaching process, because he was newly promoted to lead tax advisor on a business transformation project that required him to deal directly with the organization's senior executives. There was concern as to whether Al would be able to fulfill his new role due to flaws in his communication abilities. Would Al be able to influence without authority with sub-optimal communication skills? Through an iterative process with Chris and key stakeholders, Al decided to improve two leadership skills.

As a result of understanding this convincing vs. compelling concept, Al began to actively observe and evaluate his conversations with others in both one-on-one conversations and in meetings. In addition, he and Chris consciously practiced this dialectic skill. As a result, formerly unrecognized habits started to become clear. Awareness and recognition is only the beginning and it is the easier part. The next part, correct practice that is repeated, has a clearly articulated purpose, and is focused on the desired articulated outcome, is very powerful and can be quite difficult to maintain.

Al uses the following analogy to describe this: "In conversations I feel more like Wayne Gretsky coming down the ice. I see more options and more choices I now have the skills to execute. I have much less need to 'tell' people what to do. I ask questions and consciously look for points I agree with and also identify what I see differently."

Al goes on to say, “At the beginning of this coaching process I told key stakeholders that I committed to be more collaborative and to listen to different points of view with an open mind. At the start of the coaching, I don't think they really thought I would change. I had been here for 15 years and they all knew me quite well. Quite frankly, at the beginning I was not totally convinced change was needed or even desirable.”

At this point Al remembered that when he was first told to ‘get a coach,’ he felt less than enthusiastic. He wondered what was wrong with him that he should need a coach. “After selecting Chris I got an email from him signed ‘Be Happy Now’ and I thought, ‘Oh, no ... some touch-y feel-y, let’s-all-get-along wimp. Boy, was I wrong! Chris helped me think differently and learn other skills to influence effectively. I began to look forward to our conversations. Chris kept telling me this process takes courage and discipline, and that it is simple but not easy. That was becoming clear. However, now I was committed. I clearly saw the benefit. I became disciplined to process these after-action review questions:

1. What did I set out to do?
2. What actually happened and why?
3. What insights did I have?
4. What would I do moving forward?

A few months into the coaching process my stakeholders positively acknowledged my effort and new skills of collaborating and listening with an open mind before giving my opinion. In fact, they knew they could convince me with a good argument. I was consciously looking to defer to their point of view. It was no longer about winning €it was about coming up with the best decision. This is truly an art that I continue working to improve. Boy, has this worked wonders for me and our team! What I initially thought was a silly sign off “Be Happy Now” was happening to me before my eyes.”

Al relays the following story of what it is to lead by example: “Chris would say that a powerful way to encourage creativity in yourself or others is to ask the question ‘Could the opposite of that be true?’ or ‘What is different this time economically, politically, socially, etc. that changes the context and as a result the needed solution?’ I got used to asking these questions. They became part of my conversational DNA.

After doing this a while with my team, I found myself on a phone conference with a direct report who was historically unable to see things others’ points of view. During the conversation I heard him encourage one of his own direct reports to listen with more of an open mind by using the question, ‘Could the opposite of that be true?’ He had followed my lead! That was a real ‘wow’ moment for me. My coaching experience had become the gift that keeps on giving. This stakeholder-centered coaching process was truly a system approach that benefited not just me. It benefited the entire team.”

In addition to these great behavioral change benefits to Al and his team, during the coaching process Al was promoted to the Head of the US Tax group with 45 people directly or indirectly under his charge.

Leadership coaching, what is it worth? It depends on the person being coached, the goal they pick, the culture of the organization, the measurable coaching process, and the coach. With these five parts in alignment, coaching is priceless.

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