

Why Would a Leader Need a Coach?

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I'm a member of several coach associations. Three weeks ago, the leader of one asked me to address this question on our monthly teleconference. He receives my weekly articles by e-mail, and he felt certain I could provide valuable insight to other members of this particular coach network.

I've condensed an hour's worth of dialogue into two articles. I'll cover four ideas about why a leader would welcome having a coach this week. I'll cover four more perspectives next week.

Lack of feedback. Daniel Goleman in *Primal Leadership* calls this the "CEO Disease." The symptoms apply to leaders at every level, not just CEOs. Employees seem to have a natural instinct to please the boss, and that means not rocking the boat. Maybe it's fear of job loss or just fear of losing some future opportunity, but folks seem reluctant to deliver any kind of bad news to the boss. So the boss doesn't have the benefit of a more complete picture of current reality.

Even if the information might lead to significant positive outcomes in the long run, most individuals are reluctant to take the short-term risk. A coach, however, is willing to do whatever it takes to help you as the leader improve your long-term effectiveness. The coach will describe what everybody else is seeing, even when you are blind to the impact your behavior is having on the rest of the team.

"Safe harbor" dialogue. To do its job, a ship has to venture out into seas that sometimes are rough. Unless it leaves the safety of the harbor, the ship can't deliver its goods to its destination. So it is with you as leader. You need to be out there interacting with employees, customers, and suppliers.

But you're human, too. Your frustrations can be huge. Typically, blowing off a little steam with your team members can be risky. Every person is wondering, "Does the boss think I'm at fault? I wonder what I can do to set things straight." Not only is your complaining not good for morale, some individual may, with all good intention, take action that inadvertently makes things even worse!

It's not much different if you do some creative thinking with your team. One member may decide to take action independently, believing that you would appreciate someone executing the idea. Of course, if steps are taken before the entire scenario is analyzed, potential negative repercussions may occur.

So how do you creatively brainstorm or blow off steam without creating problems? Again, the coach is prepared to serve as a collaborator in acknowledging your anxiety or in providing an environment of imagination. Anything examined with the coach will remain confidential unless you explicitly direct the coach to share the information. No employees' feelings are hurt, and no individual hoping to stand out from the others will take initiative that could create new problems.

Practice vs. performance. For every hour that a professional musician or athlete actually performs, how many hours are spent in practice? In the teleconference last week, a part-time professional musician estimated that she practices about 50 hours for every hour of performance.

In contrast, what is your ratio of practice time to performance as a leader in your organization? Maybe you've never thought about taking time for practice! Who would you practice with anyway, your colleagues? Probably not, for the same reasons cited above.

Think about why you seem to cycle through the same problems over and over. Is it because you never take time to step back, analyze alternatives, and consider a different approach?

A coach, however, can help you be more aware of what's happening and generate some innovative options. Through role-plays and other experimental approaches, you can then practice an alternative behavior that you may never have previously considered executing.

Personal agendas. Everyone around you has a personal agenda. Each is different, of course, but each is associated with looking good and avoiding looking bad. Every person is thinking about upcoming pay raises, potential future promotions, the possibility of project opportunities, etc.

Your coach's only agenda is to help you move from where you are to where you want to be. Sure, it takes some time for you to trust your coach, but once that bridge has been crossed, you and your coach can do some terrific collaboration.

Your coach offers understanding, compassion, and alternative perspectives without you ever having to doubt about how he or she may be manipulating the situation. Your agenda is your coach's agenda!

Come back next week, and I'll share four additional reasons why a leader might appreciate a coach.