

THE EVOLUTION OF EXECUTIVE COACHING BY BARBARA WILBY

Coaching of leaders has been around since the beginning of time. It just hasn't been called that. It's been called confidential advisor, consultant, aide, counsellor, and many other terms. In the last decade, usage of coaching has grown sufficiently that what was done in more ad-hoc ways is now being formalised, systematised, and generally made to be best practice. The growth of coaching has created many new entrants to the industry. Books, seminars, training courses, institutes, associations and conferences have emerged to cater for those seeking to upgrade their skills and those wanting to be introduced to this new world. HR departments now have people who manage coaching programmes.

Can We Bottle Great Coaching?

Like the study of leadership, the study of coaching has gone through through a number of phases. First, the quest to understand what makes a good (and potentially great) coach. Can we bottle it, capture it and replicate it? This is similar to the mission that behavioural scientists embarked on when they began their quest to understand leadership by examining the characteristics of great leaders.

Just as leadership theorists have failed in their efforts to define and bottle the defining leadership characteristics, we suspect that there will be a failure to identify a comprehensive, stable and predictive coaching profile (set of skills, attributes). This failure is starting to be perceived by some and is leading investigators to pursue new directions. One of these is the area of behaviours. Attention has been directed in recent time to how great coaches behave, with the implication that people could be trained to become more effective, both as professional coaches and in the leader's role as coach.

Is Great Coaching Situational?

The emphasis in leadership theory and study on situational leadership has also been evident in the development of coaching theory and practice. The ability to read and adapt to different situations in session as a coach, and how value is added as a result, has been theorised and talked about extensively. The ability of coaches to develop an approach that integrates both task and relationship has been a key differentiating factor.

As a next evolution of leadership theory and practice, there is a distinction being drawn between managers who manage output and control inputs and leaders who think and act in terms of quantum leaps (what is needed to make a major shift in an organisation and an industry, creating new contexts). Managers join the dots on the same page, leaders create a different page. Some in leadership roles are capable of being distinctive in both types of roles. This is very interesting for coaching since it forces coaching to go beyond training in skills and techniques to being able to be with a client and facilitate them in creating quantum leaps. The coach as leader, not coach as manager.

The Next Phase

Wise executives create organisational growth by allowing others to contribute at their fullest. One of the ways that they do this is by encouraging through their own example, the concept of self-leadership. Evolution in leadership will continue to occur as and when we resist the search for one-dimensional or model-based approaches to the development of business leaders.

Likewise, evolution in coaching will continue as we resist the search for “the model” or “the great coach” and recognise that what is needed in coaching is self-leadership and the growth in personal awareness that is part of that. Quite simply, the more the coach grows and evolves personally, the more they offer as a coach. This is because the more coach is able to see beyond their own dynamic and work with clarity and strong intention, the bigger their impact.

To do this, one must practise the AND; techniques and models, and awareness/self-mastery of one's own personal dynamics and limitations. For the coach it is as I am, so I coach. Coaches are being asked to contribute at a level that affects not only individuals, but communities and our global society. And so it is with leaders.

If coaches can play a true role in the above landscape, they will live beyond the current fad of executive coaching and remain as a resource that adds enduring value over time.