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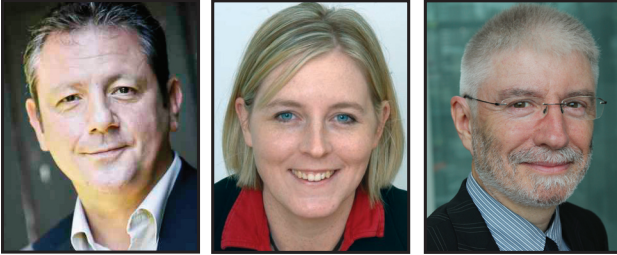
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A group coaching approach to authentic leadership development



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Abstract

This article overviews a group-coaching approach to Authentic Leadership development. A group of six senior managers took part in a three-day coaching workshop designed to help them explore their personal approach to leadership. The format of the sessions allowed each individual to reflect on how and why they lead in the way they do whilst being questioned, challenged and supported by other group members. The group met for one day a month over three months and after a three month break were asked to give feedback on their personal learning and report on how the experience had helped them in their role as a leader. Evaluation of this coaching intervention was based on the Kirkpatrick Evaluation Model assessing; Learning, Behaviour Change and

Performance Improvement. The final evaluation level of ROI was omitted due to the inherent difficulties in isolating the correlation between personal development and profit. However, self-reported performance improvement clearly suggests tangible benefits for the individual leaders, their teams and their businesses.

Keywords: authentic leadership, leadership development, leadership coaching, group coaching

There is growing interest in a new leadership concept called Authentic Leadership. The main developers of this construct, Avolio et al (2004), did so in response to the examples of poor ethical

leadership before 2007, witnessed in corporate failures such as Enron, WorldCom and Arthur Andersen, and continued failures since, such as Lehman Brothers. The idea has attracted both practitioners such as Bill George (2003), who defines Authentic Leadership as being the person you were born to be rather than developing the image or persona of a leader, and researchers such as Luthans, Gardener & Avolio (2003), who define Authentic Leadership as a process based on self-awareness and ethical self-regulation.

This article is an account of a group leadership coaching programme conducted to help a group of individual leaders achieve the increased levels of self-awareness and regulation noted above. Firstly though, let's consider what group-coaching is and why it may be an effective way in which to help develop authentic leaders.

In his book *Coach and Couch* (2007), Manfred Kets de Vries comments that whilst coaching is not therapy it can be therapeutic. He makes the following distinctions: Psychotherapy tends to be past-orientated, and coaching more future focused. Also, Psychotherapy is somewhat passive and reflective, and coaching more active and goal-orientated. And finally, he observes that while Psychotherapy typically targets symptom reduction, coaching addresses issues of personal growth and professional development.

So, using these points of comparison, a definition of coaching might be – a future-focused and goal-orientated process of personal and professional development.

This definition remains valid for the group-coaching approach, although it

takes place within a deeply facilitative matrix of inter- as well as intra-personal interaction.

In trying to understand the benefits of a group-coaching approach to Authentic Leadership development it is useful to consider the seminal work of Irvin Yalom (2005) in the area of group-psychotherapy. Yalom offers the following insights and reasons for the efficacy of group work.

Universality “In the group the disconfirmation of an individual's feelings of uniqueness is a powerful source of relief. After hearing other group members disclose concerns similar to their own, individuals report a ‘welcome to the human race’ experience”. Yalom (2005). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (p6).

Based on client feedback, some of which is included later in this paper, it would seem that this normalising experience is a key factor in a healthy coaching group as well. Perhaps not least because it can lead to:

Consensual Validation “Group clients are enormously helpful to one another in the group process. They offer support, reassurance, suggestions and insights. Often, group members accept observations from another member far more readily than from the group leader. For many clients, they remain the paid professional; but the other members represent the real world and can be counted on for spontaneous and truthful reactions and feedback”. Yalom (2005). *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (p22).

It seems that the group approach is unique in being able to offer this to a coaching client. The group coach offers

didactic instruction on related issues such as: management psychology, organisational behaviour and team dynamics, but it is often reported that the observations and feedback offered by other group members are what leads to the most profound self-insights for individual group members.

The Social Microcosm & Inter-Personal Learning “A fully interactive group will in time develop into a social microcosm of the participant members. Group members will begin to be themselves and will interact with the group members as they interact with others in their social sphere.” *Yalom (2005). The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy (p31).*

This brings into the group patterns of relatedness and attachment (absolutely fundamental to all forms of leadership) that if explored carefully can provide self-learning on the fundamental ways individuals interact with their wider interpersonal constellation colleagues, clients, staff and bosses.

In addition, it offers clients the opportunity to test and modify any interpersonal distortions they believe they may have through comparing their own interpersonal evaluation with that of others, ie, consensual validation.

This has tremendous potency for group-coaching members. For many, it is the first time they have participated in such a deep and open exploration of the reasons for their personal approach to leadership. It is worth noting that group-coaching is unique in the respect that it also offers coachees the opportunity to be of help and benefit to others trying to achieve the same goal.

Case Study

The group-coaching detailed below was conducted with six senior managers of a large UK-based energy company. The six participants were all engineers by trade and had progressed through the company to positions of senior management. Purposive sampling was used to select candidates for this process who were likely to be suitable for this form of leadership development. This means that they were selected on: their level of motivation to engage, their ability to accept and reflect on feedback and their ability to access and articulate their own inner-theatre – the scripts that determine a person’s behaviour and action (*Kets de Vries, 2010, p8*).

In summary, to give this intervention every chance of success, participants were chosen that would clearly be able to both get something from, as well as give something back to, the group-coaching approach.

It’s fair to say that all of these participants had spent most of their careers involved in typical push types of learning and development, where knowledge is gained from without, such as: training, lectures, classroom learning. It’s also fair to say that most of the group were relatively new to the pull method of coaching, where the learning comes from within. However, these individuals had some experience as they had been coached by the author for a year prior to this coaching group convening.

At first, attending a group-based session made some of the participants feel somewhat uneasy, particularly in the absence of formal agendas and objectives. One particular evaluation comment offers

some insight into how one individual participant experienced this:

‘I wasn’t sure what I was going to get out of this, but it became clear it wasn’t a training session really but a self-realisation session!’

Group-Coaching format

As this group was focusing on Authenticity in leadership, it was a fundamental part of the process to guide participants in a 360° exploration of their lives and careers to date, their current situation and their plans for the future, and so the format of the three days was – Past-Present-Future.

Bill George (2003), talks about crucibles of leadership as the defining moments that can shape an individual and drive them on to leadership success, and with this in mind the process commenced with participants reflecting on the defining moments of their lives and the impact this had had on their leadership style and philosophy.

Day One focused on Values, and required participants to complete a detailed lifeline with particular emphasis on where important life lessons had been learnt and personal values formed. In *The Leader on the Couch*, Kets de Vries suggests that this life-story approach to exploring the self can lead to bigger, existential questions.

He says: “It creates a readiness for interpersonal learning and insight...and helps people arrive at meaningful personal life integration” (Ket de Vries, 2006, p298).

This is evidenced in some part by evaluation feedback such as:

‘The time to reflect has been hugely helpful and has helped me come to some major, major conclusions and outcomes about myself!’

Day Two encourages participants to explore their current leadership style and how they think, feel and behave at work. How they approach decision-making and problem-solving. How they manage their teams and how they manage themselves.

By this time in the process, individuals have usually warmed up and the group are feeling engaged and secure enough to challenge each other when they see discrepancies or contradictions in what other participants are saying and presenting. Therefore we now have a live 360° feedback process beginning to take place in the room.

This live 360° encourages active participation of all group members to be sources of data and learning for each other. They not only share observations of each other, but also share their own personal reactions to each other’s stories. The skill of the group coach here is vital. Candid, and even challenging, exchanges are encouraged, but must all be framed in a constructive manner that allows the recipient to positively experience that feedback, ie, consider it to be relevant, insightful and useful.

The following comments give us an insight into this experience from the participant’s viewpoint:

1. *‘I found that by coaching others in the group with their irrational thinking, you were also helping yourself with your own irrational concerns.’*
2. *‘I learnt really interesting and useful new things from the group about my own personal drivers and motivations. It’s interesting to reflect on how long it’s taken me to do that.’*
3. *‘Confidence was a big thing, particularly from discussions with the rest of the group.’*

4. *'Taking time out to really understand yourself and what you were able to learn from the others in the group was just massive.'*

Day Three The final day concludes with the logical and intrinsically motivating look towards the future. Participants are invited to consider what they would like the long-term legacy of their leadership to be. Many within this particular group also found it to have an extremely positive effect on their readiness for pending role changes and promotions within their own organisation:

1. *'Where this program has brought me is ready to step up to the next stage in my career.'*
2. *'It fundamentally made me take a good look at myself and my career path and made me think that, yes, I can do this.'*
3. *'If you'd asked me a few months ago if I'd have been up for this new role, I'd probably have said no, but I am now and I may not have been before this programme, I don't think.'*
4. *'I'm not sure I would have had the courage to take on this new role and I don't think I'd have made the decision without being on this programme.'*

Conclusion

The difficulties of measuring the effectiveness of leadership programmes are generally well accepted within the field of Learning & Development. Key methodological issues include: control groups, test & re-test procedures and the need for near vacuum-like conditions to isolate and control compounding variables. Although part of a larger piece of research investigating group-coaching and Authentic Leadership, the intervention summarised above did not set out to test a

hypothesis, but rather begin to generate one by collecting initial phenomenological data from those involved.

The interview data was collected three months after the last group session, to try and establish what learning had actually remained with the participants and what tangible difference it had made to their performance in their leadership role.

This final selection of feedback quotes illustrates some of these changes and the perceived business benefits of this particular group-coaching intervention.

1. *'I've come to understand the power in empowerment and my team are starting to come up with their own solutions more, which has definitely improved their confidence and their belief that they, in turn, can step up to the next level.'*
2. *'I am being clearer on how I ask for what I want from people and related expectations and outputs.'*
3. *'I used to really struggle with delegating, but now it's become a regular part of how I do my job.'*
4. *'I now see blocks as just hurdles that have to be got over via my own behaviour and performance and also by doing more strategic work.'*
5. *'I don't do strategy and I never did strategy before, but I have now done a visible and structured strategy plan.'*
6. *'My performance has improved, even as the scope of work has grown and grown, and I'm prepared to take on an awful lot more.'*
7. *'More structure and clearer roles for my team now makes delegation easier, and the one-to-ones have come on a lot. This frees me up to do more strategy, looking up rather than organising down, which is a definite improvement.'*

8. *I am now better able to deal with challenge, better able to work with others, have improved quality of thinking and doing better quality work.'*

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Tony Fusco is a Chartered Psychologist specialising in Management & Leadership Development. He is an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society and is currently conducting Doctoral research into the emerging field of Authentic Leadership. This involves working with Senior Managers and Leaders in a group-coaching approach to leadership development where individuals explore their personal leadership identity and philosophy and how they can use that knowledge to achieve greater results in their careers.

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