

How Coaching Strengthens Your Leadership Effectiveness

Restless and unsettled, naval gazing had become my favorite indoor sport. It wasn't logical. On the staff of a vibrant, nationally recognized church, my career was on the upswing. I had speaking engagements around the country and had just finished work on my first book. Yet I was scattered and unfocused, feeling as though I was merely reacting to life as it came my way rather than proactively managing my choices. Every few years, I transitioned to a new ministry focus, and I couldn't figure out why. My life felt blurred, as though I was living through a fog. I was doing a lot of great stuff in ministry, yet I lacked direction. On the verge of depression, my moodiness was affecting my relationships. In a typically male response, I "knew" I could get myself back on track with a little soul searching...beginning with an internal look at what was working and what wasn't.

My spiritual life was on track, sort of. Journaling had long been part of my daily routine, and I had also established a personal habit of spending time alone in the woods with God, seeking His guidance on the churnings in my soul. These two staples were still part of my spiritual diet, but something was different. The journaling and solitude were still good, but they were not going as deep into my soul as they once did. It was almost as if there was a wall around my soul. The deeper I dug to find the root cause, the more blurred I became between healthy soul searching, actual communing with God, and morbid introspection. A few months into this process, I realized that I was merely going through the motions. It was almost like the beginning of a new year...I had staked out my goals, purchased the latest goal planning system and read the latest book about finding one's purpose. I would start the year off with a bang only to falter at the end. Nothing was changing. Stagnant...like water left sitting in a barrel for months. My growth was stagnant and it certainly did not measure up to the desire of my soul

I recalled reading a poster at my health club, which read, "If you keep doing what you've always done, you will get what you've always got." The pain of staying the same was greater than the pain of changing. If change was going to happen, I needed a fresh set of eyes and the raw willingness to have someone else journey with me to take a deep, hard look at my soul. Familiar with life coaching, I had recommended it to many but never considered it for myself. It was time for a change.

Coming to Terms with Terms

The term "life coach" is the current buzzword in the marketplace. It joins mentor as one of the routes to personal growth for professionals. For the sake of clarity, let me provide simple definitions that capture the essence of each of these key words.

Mentoring has been defined as a personal relationship in which an individual who is usually more experienced and older acts as a guide, role model, teacher and sponsor of a protégé who is less experienced and younger. Perhaps mentoring could be described as developing a relationship with someone who has been where you are going; a wise and trusted role model who has already embarked upon the road you are about to travel.

Coaching is discovery oriented. A professional life coach helps a client become the person they want to be, to support them in living out their purpose and calling. The word coach is derived from “carriage” – a means of carrying, a vehicle for conveyance.

Chip Bell, in his book Managers as Mentors, makes a subtle distinction between coaching and mentoring. Bell says, “Coaching is a part of the leadership role specifically aimed at nurturing and sustaining performance. Mentors are leaders who engage in deliberate actions aimed at promoting learning.”

There is overlap between mentoring and coaching. They both involve being intentional about developing a relationship with a guide and both have a forward outlook. However, a mentor has usually walked where you are walking, experienced your current place. A mentor comes alongside to encourage and affirm from the perspective of one who has been there. A spiritual life coach, while filling some of these roles, is different. He listens, asking probing questions that help his client see himself more clearly. Your conversation with a life coach will be just that...a conversation. Your coach will, in a sense, *listen* you into being. Proverbs 20:5 tells us, *Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out.* In essence, this is what a life coach does.

James Flaherty defined my experience with life coaching to a tee. *"To sum up and simplify what I'm saying, coaching is a way of working with people that leaves them more competent and more fulfilled so that they are more able to contribute to their organizations and find meaning in what they are doing."* (Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others.)

A Process of Coaching

“What does it look like?” That’s what I found myself wondering before actually committing to a life coaching process. In their book, Coaching and Mentoring: Practical Methods to Improve Learning, by Parsloe and Wray, the process of coaching is well outlined:

- Step One: Analyze for Awareness. Your coach is going to want to *hear* from you. You will need to be prepared to bare your soul. I remember thinking that I had already done this, but amazingly, there were things my coach heard me saying that I had no idea were inside of me.
- Step Two: Plan for Responsibility. This step is exactly what it sounds like. You need to be prepared to accept ownership for where your path will end. This is not about a load of guilt being unloaded at your doorstep. It is a heart step where you acknowledge that you, and only you, have to do the hard work to make progress.
- Step Three: Implement. Again, this step is what it sounds like. You will work with your coach to develop specific techniques for moving forward...and then you will put them into action.

- **Step Four: Evaluate.** A key part of the coaching experience is for you and your coach to take time at the end of your time together to discuss where you were and where you are. Did you achieve your goals in part or in whole? What part of the coaching really worked for you and why? A successful leader always evaluates!

Three Crucial Areas Where Every Leader Benefits from Coaching

While every leader does not need a coach in order to be successful, having a professional take a close-up look at your current situation to provide insight and guidance will reap you reward. The research conducted by Gordon B. Spence and Anthony M. Grant showed that clients of professional life coaches were more engaged than working with a peer coach and they experienced positive change and mastery in the area they were being coached. You will learn to reframe your challenges, leading to new ideas for problem solving. You will learn new insights about your leadership by sharing and receiving feedback. You will be a stronger leader and a more effective communicator.

Your life coach will help you tend to your soul, focus on the relevance of your tasks and build authentic relationships with the people on your team. Life coaching that is solution-focused and has a cognitive behavior slant is effective. It will help you achieve your goals and bring a positive outlook to your leadership. As you grow, so grows your organization because it reflects the values and behaviors of you, its' leader.

As more leaders seek the support of a life coach, the success stories are building. Jim was a pastor whose frenetic pace exceeded his soul. When his soul imploded, resulting in broken relationships and a church on the edge of crisis, he sought a life coach. Through coaching, Jim took a sabbatical after 23 years of ministry. He has learned to bring balance to his life through rest and a renewed focus on his spiritual growth through a commitment to solitude and journaling. The simultaneous calm and energy this change has brought to Jim and his church are inspiring.

Rick sought to bring about a new paradigm for teachers at the Christian school where he was the principal. This was met with some resistance and lack of support from the board, which frustrated and angered Rick, pushing him to shut down internally. Coaching helped Rick recognize that he was becoming a transactional leader. He became almost irrationally focused on getting tasks done while the praise and encouragement he was known for disappearing. This was inconsistent with Rick's heart, and he could not see it happening until his life coach helped him see into himself. The situation is not entirely changed, but Rick is in a much stronger place as a leader, his relationship with his board is growing and his staff has renewed energy.

The metaphor of the Iceberg

For me personally, seeking out a life coach was one of the most positive steps I've taken in my professional development. I compare it to an iceberg deep within the ocean. When 70% of the iceberg is underwater, the risk for calamity is unknown. When only 30% of

the iceberg is covered by water, with 70% exposed, rational decisions can be made as to how to navigate the iceberg. My life coach helped me understand the swirling emotions I had buried in my soul. My literal fear of God came as a shock to me and my insecurity of God's love for me was startling. In actually hearing my soul through the words of my life coach, I came to see how the disarray in my soul was leading me to be scattered, unfocused, depressed and constantly searching. Once the "iceberg" of my soul was uncovered, I could process the ice and begin to make a plan for forward progress. In the seven years since my coaching experience, I am still amazed at the calm I feel in my soul. It has transformed me and in so doing, increased my skill as a Godly leader of those around me.