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A Humble Mindset: A Coaching Differentiator

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Introduction

As a leadership coach, I regularly reflect on the approaches which support the essential relationship between the client and coach. Something that allows these approaches to work more effectively is an overarching mindset of humility, a mindset that applies to both the client as well as the coach.

I do want to be clear that ‘humility’ for me does not imply weakness, nor is it the opposite of a tough-minded approach to supporting a client in his or her developmental goals. Rather, it implies a respectful environment that recognizes that the most appropriate coaching relationship is one in which client and coach work on strategies, plans and actions that will result in positive impact. Further, a mindset that comes from a humble stance can strengthen the essential base of trust which the most successful coaching partnerships require.

My understanding of humility within coaching and organization work is anchored in the thinking of Edgar Schein (who has more recently been joined by his son, Peter), who have explored a humble approach in support of learning and behavioral change through a series of books.

In this article, I will share some examples of the application of a humble mindset in coaching work from two different perspectives:

1. The decision by a client to work with a coach and the coach’s decision to work with a client combined with honouring of the client’s expertise, experience and accomplishment throughout the coaching relationship; and
2. The commitment to working with the reality of where the organization is today, rather than where client and/or coach would like it to be.

Perspective One

As I have written before, I think that it is an act of courage to decide to work with a coach.¹ Senior leaders are by definition usually quite accomplished and deeply experienced; to decide to work with a coach is to say that there is an opportunity to become “even more effective” in their already-strong leadership role.

¹ For more on this, please see the articles related to leadership coaching that I wrote for Queen’s IRC in 2019: [Courage and Coaching](#) and [Active Curiosity in the Coaching Process](#).

The implication is that the client becomes a student in the service of expanded learning and there is a willingness to shift thinking in the service of personal growth. For some clients that is initially seen as a position of vulnerability, one of not ‘having all of the answers’. (This is the opposite of how senior leaders are generally viewed.)

Let’s turn to examples drawn from my recent coaching experience with a range of senior leaders. In a recent engagement, I was called on to work with a very-seasoned and knowledgeable executive, an aerospace engineer by background and one of the key leaders of a very successful and fast-growing international consultancy. The opportunity to work with a coach was not his idea so there was some significant and understandable hesitation to engaging with me and the coaching process. At one point we had a very frank conversation as to whether we should even continue the work given his reticence and my questioning of his openness to working together on his developmental options.

A humble mindset took time to evolve. The client assumed that the role of the coach was to tell him what his job was and this prompted a significant and strong ‘push back’ by the client early in the relationship. My approach was to be explicitly clear at various points in our early conversations that that was never part of the coaching relationship; in other words, this was not an ‘expert’ model but rather one of mutual learning and understanding. I emphasized my appreciation for his expertise and business acumen and indicated that I would never consider suggesting what his active role should be. Rather, I explained that we needed a singular focus on identifying behaviours that would be supportive of his continuing positive impact as a leader.

Moreover, echoing Schein’s thinking, I shared that I would be “dependent” on him from time-to-time in seeking a deeper understanding of what he did as an assist to me in coaching him in the clear context of his role. That dependency was part of my commitment to humility and respect that would characterize our relationship. As we worked further he mentioned that he had come to realize that he recognized that he had more to learn about his effectiveness from a behavioral perspective. I took that as an indication of an important shift in his mindset, one I choose to think of as a combination of curiosity, vulnerability and humility.

For his part, my client came to understand what coaching would focus on and gradually he opened up to learning more about his impact on others. In a revealing conversation – somewhat unexpected on my part given his earlier resistance – the client shared that he wanted to know what he could do to help his staff become more effective in their roles. And he became very eager for me to conduct a 360 interview process to identify where he was most effective and where he could become even more so.

We never spoke explicitly of humility but that was clearly a part of his new openness to learning. I supported him fully and together we created an interview guideline that focused on potential 'blind spots' that could be helpful to him in thinking about potential 'Start / Stop / Continue' options in his relationships and role.

As for my reference earlier to maintaining a 'tough-minded' approach within a framework of humility, I remained clear that my role was to push for clarity in the service of his further development. For example, his original draft of the 360 interview guideline was primarily a binary choice of 'yes' or 'no'. I pressed him, within the goal of learning how best to support his staff, that including open-ended inquiry would serve his objectives more fully in hearing from the team clear examples of behaviours that most helped his effectiveness and their performance.

A second example of the humble mindset from the first perspective i.e. the decision to work together with the accompanying respect for the considerable strengths and accomplishments of the client, again comes from an engagement with a professional services client. In that assignment, a senior partner with leadership responsibilities asked that I consider assuming the role of external coach. He had recently had some sobering feedback in his year-end review that shook his confidence, feedback that was derived from a number of partners and some of his team members.

(I had known this individual from an earlier coaching assignment when he was then in a senior employee role with an interest in moving to partnership. We had some coaching history in a different context but one in which he was aware of my style, approach and biases).

Let me turn to the question of humility as it evolved in this engagement. After the immediate anger, disappointment and hurt following his performance discussion, my client asked for an introductory meeting, one he would later describe as 'therapeutic'. He recognized in our conversation that he could indeed behave in an arrogant fashion with colleagues. What he then acknowledged was that indeed he needed to listen to feedback from some of those individuals who had provided input on their experience of him. (His earlier stance had been one that echoed a phrase from my earlier consulting career: he was a senior professional who was "always certain and often right"! That had been and would continue to be one of his great strengths and yet also a strength that when applied without thoughtfulness and care could alienate colleagues and work against essential collaboration).

To return to his recognition of a propensity to behave in what colleagues experienced as arrogance, it was clear that a more humble orientation would need to be a conscious choice. His colleagues clearly recognized his superb depth in relevant subject matter and a mind that was strategic, one of the few in the partner group most able to see and realize the potential for 'big deals'. And yet, his behaviour was limiting effectiveness in a serious way.

For my part, I thanked him for the opportunity to work together again. I felt that making it explicit that this was a privileged role for me was an important message. He was clearly in a vulnerable state when he reached out for assistance. An early supportive and appreciative message from his coach seemed an important step; further, I made it clear to him that my role was not to bring judgement but rather to work together to address the noted behaviours and find ways to rebuild the necessary trust between him and his partners and the wider team.

It struck me at the time, as it does now that we had both moved to a mindset that established an 'equal footing' and a position of mutual respect. From there, we moved quickly to develop a feedback process, build a guideline to gather thoughts and examples both positive and less helpful and identify a representative group of individuals for confidential input.

Perspective Two

Let me turn to the second perspective of where a humble mindset supports and enhances the results of a coaching relationship. That perspective as noted earlier is one in which both client and coach approach the work from a position *which recognizes the reality of the organization as it is, not from a stance of what one or both would wish it to be.*

Coaching is, of course, never done in the absence of other 'levels of system': individuals work within the context of organizational strategies, programs and such realities as the CEO's priorities, the culture and dynamics of a range of relationships. At times, those realities impact and influence the coaching relationship, and that too is natural and expected. What is important, however, is to be clear on two points: identify what the realities are and then determine which are immediately relevant in the coaching process and which are less so.

An example that points to the need to place the coaching within a current reality comes from work with a senior experienced leader and one of three members of the Executive Team. The CEO's style was abrupt and occasionally 'ham-fisted'; to put it differently, there was never any doubt as to who was 'Boss'!

My client had serious concerns with the style of the CEO. The concerns were twofold: first, the fact that he – the client – had managed complex engagements in much larger consultancies and that was apparently not appreciated; and second that he felt that there was a lack of adequate respect for his role in the Executive team. These concerns were of sufficient importance for the client that he initially was reluctant to engage in the coaching process unless all members of the Executive were also working with a coach.

I listened with care in order to understand his strong resistance and the larger issues that were impacting his engagement. *I needed to suspend my initial view that these were separate issues and the reality of the situation was not as important an issue in our work.* So I continued to listen, question, explore and better understand his perspective. That resulted in the adjustment of my views. Schein writes specifically on this point in his book *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*:

Humble Inquiry is the skill and art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person.²

The reality of the CEO's style, behaviours and related factors noted above did not change; what changed was my stepping back and using a humble mindset as my primary 'lens'. From there I was able to convey to the client my more complete understanding of how that reality was compromising his ability to work on his impact and less-helpful behaviours.

The client for his part began to think about the respect he held for the business that the CEO had built. Moreover, a humble mindset on the client's part opened the way to a key conversation among the client, the CEO and me to talk about priorities for the enterprise. Initially, the client was reluctant to have such a focused conversation and it was indicative of both his curiosity and to a degree his humble mindset that he joined actively in the meeting.

In another engagement in which both the client and coach needed to accept and work within the current reality, I was coaching a senior lawyer with deep tax expertise and considerable business experience. As a 'senior hire', her new organization had genuine difficulty in understanding how to integrate and encourage her particular skills and build them into the fabric of the organization.

Her initial stance was to expect that the organization would do most of the 'work' in arriving at that understanding. To paraphrase: 'They invited me to join them and should have known what they were getting'. Our work centred on the unhelpful nature of the verb 'should'. Through our conversations two things became clear: first, she very much wanted to move into more senior roles and was acknowledged as a significant talent; second, she recognized that the work of adapting to the organization culture was largely hers to do and she would need to set aside an 'I know better' mindset for one that had a more humble approach, given her overall goal of moving into larger roles.

² Schein, E.H. (2013). *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

From my perspective, again there was a need to set aside what I thought I knew of organization reality in order to hear fully where her resistance lay and why she held so strongly to her views. Again, Edgar Schein says it so well in *Humble Inquiry* when he writes that “the other person knows something that I need or want to know”.³ Initially I may have ‘wanted to know’ but only when I recognized that I ‘needed to know’ could I be as helpful as she needed me to be.

A third example of the value of adopting a humble mindset which accepts that the current reality is what we have to work with (versus a preferred or different state) comes from work with a high-potential manager who was respected for his keen mind and his ability to work effectively with a range of clients.

In this example, the individual was very impatient with what he perceived – quite accurately as it turned out – as administrative and managerial systems which were imperfect and at times unhelpful. It was acknowledged by others that his assessment was accurate. That said, it was neither helpful nor well received by senior leadership to engage in criticism and figurative ‘hand-wringing’ at the same time as he was being considered for potentially moving into a larger leadership role.

The client adjusted his views when he recognized that only when he became part of the senior leadership would he be able to have greater influence on improving the systems that were less-helpful. Adopting a more humble mindset and with an appropriate regard for the reality, the client engaged with senior leaders to have a more constructive conversation which was anchored in how to make the current systems work more effectively. That shift in mindset by the client was well-received and signalled his increasing maturity to firm leaders.

Again, my role as a coach (based on my close understanding of the firm given that I had been employed there for many years) could have been a “just get over it” response which would have been singularly unhelpful. Rather than staying with my original reaction, I deliberately slowed myself down and stayed ‘in step’ with the client. I consciously demonstrated my respect for him and acknowledged his commitment to the organization. He saw that I was serious about wanting to better understand his vehement disagreement with some of the approaches and systems. That willingness built credibility with the client as he knew that I actually understood his frustration.

³ Schein, E.H. (2013). *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Concluding Thoughts

Obviously my perspective is that of a coach entrusted with supporting the developmental priorities of clients as fully as possible. In all of the examples cited, there was a need for both the client and the coach to be willing to both learn from and understand the position of the other more clearly.

I also recognize that I am probably able to recognize my own moments of humility more quickly and more fully than I might be able to do in the client. So it would be interesting in a subsequent inquiry to have clients examine their coaching experience and identify even more and different instances of where a humble mindset was of greatest value for them in their growth and effectiveness.

That said, the following are my summary thoughts around the humble mindset:

- Bringing a humble stance to a coaching engagement is always linked to a genuine respect for the experience, expertise, understanding and goodwill of the other; moreover, it implies a will to make and take the necessary time to build that understanding and deepen the mutual respect;
- The conscious application of a humble mindset heightens the potential for serious dialogue and genuine exchange around the most important topics and issues;
- Where a humble approach informs coaching, opportunities to challenge the client (and for the client to challenge the coach) in a clear and direct manner is much more possible; in other words, it contributes to creation of both a 'safe' and necessary space for serious exchange and deeper understanding; and
- Ultimately, a mindset informed by humility does much to foster a relationship of trust between the client and the coach. David Johnston, our former Governor General says it most succinctly in his recent book:

“Trust grows when you take time to understand the thoughts and feelings of others before you act”.⁴

⁴ Johnston, D. (2017). *Trust: Twenty Ways to Build a Better Country*. Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada Limited.

About the Author



Ross Roxburgh, CMC, MCEC, is a senior consultant, with a strong record of accomplishment in executive coaching, and leadership development. His focus on coaching leaders is complemented by his continuing work in the design, development and facilitation of a variety of practical learning programs, across many client groups. He is strong proponent of action learning as he supports clients in “turning strategy into results”. Ross was a member of the Deloitte practice for nearly twenty-one years. He worked in both the Ottawa and Toronto offices and was a Consulting Partner for fourteen years. During that time, his clients included major organizations in the para-public, public and private sectors. In 2000, he left the Firm to establish his own practice with a primary focus on Executive Coaching, Leadership, Culture Shift and Organization Development. Ross has co-facilitated custom programs for Queen’s IRC on Board Governance and Leadership and has been a guest speaker at the IRC’s [Performance Management](#) program.

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