

Courage and Coaching

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Background and Context

For some time I have been curious about ‘courage’ and its relationship to leadership. I am specifically interested in the part that courage plays in a leader’s decision to work with a coach, but also in the courage it takes for a coach to help their clients become as effective as possible in their leadership roles.

Courage is not a new topic in serious conversations on leadership. It has been considered a significant attribute of the most effective leaders for many years. And it endures as revealed in many of the current discussions of leadership, including research and writing of such influential writers as Brene Brown, Kim Scott, Robert Kegan and Kim Lahey.

Today and for the past nearly two decades, I have been privileged to coach a range of individuals, in both private and public sectors and at various levels of the organization from senior to mid-level roles. As well, I have engaged two business coaches over the years, each of whom brought a personal style different from my own and each of whom supported and challenged me as I worked on specific developmental points, which would make me more valuable to clients.

From the experience of being ‘on both sides of the desk’, I have learned that being courageous almost always has some risk attached, some willingness to leave a more comfortable situation and some need to test ourselves and the values we espouse. And when we choose to take a courageous step or action, it almost always results in the learning and satisfaction that come from stretching ourselves and being willing to live our values and principles.

I now want to talk about courage from two perspectives: that of the person who decides to work with a coach and the coach who is engaged to support that individual in his or her growth, learning and development.

For purposes of clarity, the coaching work that I am referring to is with clients who want to accelerate their growth and impact as leaders; my comments are focused on those who choose to engage with a business or leadership coach, not those whose organizations have directed them to work with a coach for remedial purposes. In my experience (and it is my very good fortune to be able to say this) the leaders I have the privilege to work with are already accomplished in their roles; their interest is in furthering and deepening their development, expanding their action options and having even greater positive impact on those they lead and their organizations.

The Client Who Chooses to Engage a Coach

Choosing to work with a coach implies that no matter how successful the individual may already be, he or she acknowledges that their growth as a leader is a 'work in progress'. Self-regard and confidence are already in place and the individual is generally viewed as being quite accomplished. So where does courage present itself in such cases?

First, the willingness to become somewhat vulnerable, is a situation that would be seen as paradoxical or even a weak position just a few years ago. Leaders need to have the answers, leaders need to always move forward, leaders need to lead alone (or are they really leaders?). It was not so many years ago that comments such as "I don't have all the answers", or "I don't know with full certainty where we go next" would be met with surprise, at least, and more likely alarm, especially where the leader was at a senior level in an organization.

Today, such comments suggest that the leader recognizes the complexity of the environment, the pace at which change is occurring and the expectations of stakeholders.

Vulnerability risks 'losing face', disappointing colleagues and others and potentially creating concern in some situations as to whether the leader is the right leader for the times. So with the courage to display one's vulnerable side comes the companion feelings of being more uncomfortable than we might like. Ultimately, the choice to act in a courageous way puts us face-to-face with our values and the principles with which we inform our actions.

And more than that, fully-engaged coaching clients yearn for greater self-knowledge, deeper understanding of what matters most to them and how they can use themselves most effectively in support of their followers and the priorities of the organization. They are curious about their 'blind spots' and biases to an extent that can both surprise and engage colleagues as well as themselves!

Given the above, when I experience a client who is willing to set out on doing their active part in the coaching relationship – and then meets that commitment with deliberate actions – I am fairly confident that there will be value generated for the individual in terms of growth and abilities, as well as for the organization and what it expects from that leader.

By way of example, I have been working with a senior individual in a large health care system. A deep subject matter expert, she is seen as an accomplished professional, respected both in her organization as well as outside by others in her field as well as by regulators.

Curiosity is at the heart of her desire to engage in a coaching relationship. She wants to be seen as someone with potential to take on larger leadership roles and recognizes that her technical

and professional competence will not be the key criterion in being identified for other challenges. She recognized that learning more about her emotional intelligence and how it might impact her effectiveness led her to seek a coach.

The individual has been courageous in looking closely at how she impacts others and has reached out to the executive who is her boss as well as the senior HR leader to share her profile and to engage them as she develops a focused developmental plan with concrete measures of the growth to which she is committed.

A final observation is that the leader who takes the courageous steps I refer to above, is almost always met by a positive response from colleagues who see themselves in that 'mirror'; the leader is still the leader but now others have almost 'permission' or perhaps even an obligation to both join the leader where he or she is at, as well as examine their own motivations and begin to think about where courage might serve them in their respective roles.

The Coach Who Supports the Client's Development

The role of coach is neither a passive role nor one without its own set of responsibilities. When I was selected to work with several members of a senior team in a financial services organization, the CEO was clear that he needed his senior team to drive the changes required to shift the culture to one of growth and effectiveness. The organization had come through a difficult period and needed both stability and confidence if it was to thrive. Passive engagement by the coach was not what was needed; rather a balance of respect and challenge, toughmindedness and encouragement were what would best contribute to the growth of both the individuals as well as the organization.

What the CEO was really asking for and challenging me to consider was whether I would be able (and willing) to summon the necessary courage in those coaching conversations. Or would I choose to default to a more comfortable place. For me, his challenge spoke to the healthy, respectful and conscious tension which must exist between client and coach if the relationship is to lead to real change and sustainable growth.

The most effective Leadership Coaches are almost always linked by some common values and guiding principles. In my nearly two decades of coaching experience, we are:

- Not in the business of being smarter or being right;
- Respectful of the commitment our client is making in agreeing to do the work that leads to enlarged possibility and greater effectiveness of leadership;
- Very clear that when a coach starts to become a 'crutch', the relationship is doomed and necessary integrity is lost;

- Always aware that the client makes the ultimate choices as to actions and direction; it is the client's career after all, not ours;
- Committed to doing all that we can to support the clarity of the client; often this requires a combination of caring and tough-minded challenge in approximately equal portions; and
- Explicit and clear that we work with the client (and the organization for that matter) where each 'is'. (Wanting a different reality at times might be nice but as the song says "Wishin' don't make it so!").

With that as backdrop, let's look at where the coach most needs to be mindful of where and when courage is most helpful to the coaching relationship. In my experience, in at least three specific aspects, the coach has the opportunity to have positive impact on the client through acting in a consciously courageous manner.

Establish a 'Baseline' Understanding

First, at the outset of a coaching relationship, one makes a choice as to how to most effectively determine the true nature of the current situation and the point from which the relationship can proceed. Pointed and respectful questions are among the most important 'tools' available to the coach in discerning what is 'true' for the client and how does she or he know that? How does the client 'get in her or his own way?' What do they believe to be true from earlier awareness building (i.e. 360s and related insights) and feedback from bosses, peers and subordinates?

To be able to establish this 'baseline' understanding, the coach has a duty to probe, to question more deeply, to ask questions such as 'why' or 'how do you know that?' as many times as necessary to ensure clarity for the client and then begin to consider where a few key aspects of developmental and behavioural focus will be of most value.

Deepening Self-Awareness

A second opportunity to access and apply courage is in the data gathering work associated with enhancing the client's awareness. Typically, one looks for behaviours in which there is a mismatch – or in some cases, a complete 'miss' – between intended outcomes and actual results or impact.

In the past few years, client organizations are including formal current and focused feedback as part of the information to support the coaching work. In many instances, qualitative 360 assessments are becoming more common given the ability to explore specific areas of growth with examples of current behaviours. By providing richer feedback beyond that available from simple rating scales, focused qualitative feedback allows for considered examination of

comments and enables the client to commit to specific actions which support progress against development plans.

Where the coach is charged with gathering accurate and explicit information, much of the value rests on the coach's willingness to probe beyond the superficial, to have informants provide concrete examples of behaviours, to sort hearsay and second-hand perceptions from more valuable (and actionable) information. The questions in the interview guideline can be little more than a 'blunt instrument' that sets out the terrain; the coach's commitment to working with it in the service of the client rests on the active courage to learn in the conversation and to test understanding rather than surmise intent.

As an example, I recently worked with a client who was being considered for partnership in a global professional service firm. As I consolidated the confidential feedback, I interpreted the many inputs as leading to a conclusion that the individual was not particularly interested in investing in team approaches.

Rather than sitting with my conclusion, I decided to share my hypothesis with a senior partner who knew the candidate well. I drew a picture on his whiteboard by way of summarizing what I thought to be the 'picture' with my synthesis of where her key development opportunities were. (It would have been more comfortable to not share the perspective that was emerging from my inquiries but it was important that I be helpful and not necessarily 'right').

When I pointed to the teamwork dimension, he challenged me directly and said that he disagreed that it was teamwork where her growth opportunity lay, but rather more focused work on developing 'followership'. She worked well in a team on engagements but was less focused on developing team members pre, during and after client engagements.

Challenging and Risking in Support of the Client

Finally, the ongoing coaching work as the client executes his or her Developmental Plan has rich opportunity for the coach to bring elements of courage to the work. Encouraging the client to move beyond the comfortable known into conversations with others whose input is key is one example.

In the complex world of organizations, influencers are often as important as decision makers. Clients often require a 'nudge' to expand their sources of candid feedback and to enlist commitments to support their learning and growth. The coach needs to challenge the client's thinking and be prepared to be wrong. Sometimes the greatest value I can deliver is to challenge the thinking of the client and understand why there is resistance to an approach option. In one recent instance, by asking what turned out to be the 'wrong' question, an insight came to the

client and he was able to convert my question into the right question. This is an obvious example of being helpful, not in being right.

Increasingly, I am aware that my natural curiosity must be linked to my courage. As an example, the discussion of Emotional Intelligence has moved into the mainstream conversation about leadership. Today one can find more than a single instrument that satisfies necessary criteria of both validity and reliability. It can be useful in understanding our actions which seem illogical and which can also generate focused developmental action plans.

To suggest to senior leaders, especially those with a strong track record and a reputation for tough-minded and decisive behaviour, that what were once was considered 'soft skills' might in fact be the very things that impede or compromise their effectiveness can often require a courageous conversation. Again, the coach has a 'choice point': to venture into potentially very uncomfortable territory by engaging the client in an unwanted conversation or to simply stay with the comfortable and run the potential of having fallen short of supporting the client's opportunity for real insight and possibly breakthrough growth as a leader.

Final Thoughts

There is something of a professional intimacy that exists in the best client / coach relationships. A curious way to describe a business conversation perhaps but still apt.

Like any personal relationship, vulnerability, openness and courageous engagement enables the really important discussions. While organizational life and leadership is not of the same importance as our primary human relationships, both share some common characteristics.

Chief among these in my experience to date as a coach, is the requisite need for trust. Put simply, client and coach must each know and believe that the best interests of the other are best demonstrated when there is a shared commitment to learning and to the co-creation of options. That said, the client has the responsibility to determine what is in his or her best interests as they grow in their leadership and the coach must always respect and honour those choices.

About the Author



Ross Roxburgh, CMC, 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.

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