The Role of Coaching in Leadership Development: Integrating Elements for Improved Performance

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The Role of Coaching in Leadership Development: Integrating Elements for Improved Performance

BARRY BALES AND JOYCE SPARKS

Effective leadership development programs involve more than classroom lectures and discussion. This article describes the elements within an executive leadership development program that contribute to enhanced performance improvement, and the various ways coaching is used to integrate the different elements within this program.

INTRODUCTION
The concept of “coaching” in governmental organizations is sometimes a hard sell. An attitude of “if you need it, maybe you should not have been hired in the first place” is still alive and well in some governmental agency cultures. It hearkens back to a time not that long ago when many had that same belief about leadership development. As long as coaching – or leadership development, for that matter – was seen as a solution to “fix” people who were perceived to be “broken” in some way, it is not likely that such interventions would be highly valued or welcomed within an organization.

In some state government agencies, the attitude toward management and leadership development began to change in the early 1980s with the introduction of business principles to the management of government organizations. Management and leadership development began to be seen as valuable processes for improving organizational leadership. Many corporate-sector organizations have long recognized the value of leadership development to future success, but this was new thinking for many in state government organizations. Having finally cracked the barrier of recognizing the value of leadership development, how then should government agencies develop their leaders? Send them to training of course! And many states began conducting leadership training courses for state government managers.

The pioneer work of those in the performance improvement field in the 1980’s has had a fundamental impact on the thinking
about leadership development. Geary Rummler’s and Alan Brache’s (1995) assertion “If you pit a good performer against a bad system, the system will win almost every time...We spend too much of our time ‘fixing’ people who are not broken, and not enough time fixing organization systems that are broken” (p. 13), suggests that leadership performance is due to more than just having a well-intentioned leader. The question many in the leadership development field began asking themselves was, “If performance improvement is the goal, then is classroom-based training the best or only method for achieving that goal?” This evolution in thinking has had a major impact on the design of leadership development efforts in some government agencies and bodes well for the growing credibility of coaching as a valuable method for performance improvement.

This article describes how coaching has been integrated into a systemic approach to leadership development in government and the role that coaching plays in improving leadership performance.

**DESIGNING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FROM A COACHING MINDSET**

Traditional classroom-based leadership development programs typically involve one or more instructors presenting material on a variety of topics to enhance the management and leadership knowledge of the audience. At the very least, most good programs incorporate what we know about adult learning theory to make these presentations meaningful and useful – e.g., course material and learning outcomes that are linked to the actual work environment, learning activities and exercises that both involve participants and are relevant to their work (Knowles, 1990; Van Wart, Cayer & Cook, 1993). The use of effective teaching methods such as case studies, small group work, and application exercises involving real-world issues can all greatly enhance the classroom experience.

Will classroom presentations -- even those incorporating the most effective teaching methods -- result in improved leadership performance on the job? Maybe they will for some people, but some experts suggest that typical training courses often fail to produce significant performance improvement gains (Broad, 2005; Rummler & Brache, 1995). Literature on transfer of training, systems thinking, and human performance technology (Broad, 2005; Rummler & Brache, 1995; Senge, 1990) indicate that in complex organizational systems there are multiple elements that interact to affect performance. The “Eight-Elements Model” (Bales & Sparks, 2006) shown in Figure 1 describes at least some of those additional elements/processes that can be included in a development process to have an impact on performance.
Coaching is shown as one of those distinct elements in Figure 1. Coaching can be a valuable addition to a leadership development program at a specific point in time. Many of the other elements shown in this model, however, are enhanced when coupled with a coaching mindset or approach. The use of assessment data/feedback on one’s skills is a critical element of many leadership programs. Indeed, “feedback-intensive” programs, a cornerstone of leadership courses sponsored by the Center for Creative Leadership (Guthrie & King, 2004) can help a participant “…reassess what makes the person more or less effective relative to the goals he or she wants to attain” (p. 25). However, the usefulness of that data/feedback to the participant is almost always enhanced when coaching is involved. Planning for ongoing leadership development helps one identify a process for the continued development of leadership skills. Such leadership development planning is more likely to happen, however, if a coach is encouraging the process. An applied learning project enhances the transfer of learning from the classroom to a real, work-related issue, but coaching around that project can help insure a better integration of key concepts from the classroom part of the program.

The Governor’s Executive Development Program (GEDP) is a three-week, intensive leadership course for senior-level managers in Texas state agencies and universities. It exemplifies a leadership course that has evolved over time to incorporate the elements identified above. The GEDP uses a coaching mindset to integrate the various elements in the program for the purpose of enhancing performance back on the job. One follow-up research study, cited below, suggests that, for at least some GEDP participants, this process does lead to improved performance (Middelberg, 2006).
**The Role of Coaching in Leadership Development**

Government executives are sometimes hesitant to seek out coaching (at least in our experience) for some of the reasons mentioned above. Despite the growing credibility and success of executive coaching (Goldsmith, 2007), there is still some reluctance to spend limited agency funds on coaching as a leadership development strategy. Our experience shows coaching to be a valuable part of the larger development process. Participation in an executive coaching session is an expectation of participants in many of our leadership courses, and the cost of providing this session has been built into the overall program fee for the GEDP. Participants don't have to seek out or make a decision to “buy” coaching – it is interwoven into the leadership development process.

Ultimately, the goal of GEDP is to improve leadership performance. We use coaching processes in several different ways to integrate the elements shown in Figure 1 and to help enhance this improved performance. Individual coaching sessions are conducted with each participant. These sessions are focused on helping the participant interpret assessment data and develop a personal, on-going leadership development plan. Additionally, coaching is used to help the participant craft an Applied Learning Project for transferring what is learned in the course to the workplace. These three uses of coaching processes are described below.

**Assessment Data**

Many leadership development programs recognize the value of feedback to a person’s development. A feedback-intensive program, as referenced above at the Center for Creative Leadership (Guthrie & King, 2004), can provide “…self awareness, transformational perspective change, goal attainment and reframing, and behavior change” (p. 51). Like many leadership development programs, the GEDP incorporates a number of assessment feedback instruments. Personality preference profiles, multi-rater feedback instruments, and organizational culture/change readiness instruments are all sources of valuable data that can help participants better understand their own styles and preferences and how they are seen by others with whom they interact. The results of these various assessment instruments can sometimes be effectively debriefed in a classroom setting via group coaching.

For some types of assessments – particularly those involving multi-rater feedback -- more personal coaching is necessary. Multi-rater feedback processes, sometimes called “360°” assessments, typically involve gathering confidential feedback on management and leadership behaviors from one’s boss, peers and direct reports. This feedback, coupled with coaching, is often extremely valuable in helping participants understand their own
strengths and development areas as seen by others, which can then be used for development planning purposes.

This confidential feedback, though, can sometimes be more candid than the participant is ready to hear, and the coach’s role in these cases is even more critical. Our experience shows that participants react to multi-rater feedback in one of several ways: (a) they are possibly surprised about some of the feedback but overall are reassured by the data being fairly consistent with their own self-assessment, (b) they are shocked or even devastated by some or most of the data, revealing a situation of “they don’t know what they don’t know and they don’t like it,” or (c) they deny or dismiss the feedback given by other people that doesn’t track with their own self-assessment. Often, a coach is invaluable in helping people in the latter two categories see themselves from a different perspective (evidence of an effective coaching technique). This perspective allows them to identify and recognize current behaviors that may be barriers to high performance and career success.

We rarely find that this feedback and follow-up coaching results in an identified need for the more serious intervention of professional counseling. Experienced coaches know when the issue warrants such a referral. Conducting such multi-rater processes without follow-up coaching provided by experienced coaches, especially for those in the latter two examples, is a disservice to participants and, in our view, is an abrogation of professional standards. Indeed, many publishers of such multi-rater instruments require those who will debrief their instruments to complete a certification program to prepare them for dealing with such cases.

**Development Planning**
Recognizing that attendance at GEDP is only one part of an on-going leadership development process, coaching is also used within the program to encourage and support participants in the drafting of personal leadership development plans. These plans identify specific strategies and timelines for acquiring new and enhancing existing leadership behaviors, skills and mindsets. As indicated earlier, the coaching around this process heavily incorporates the participant’s feedback data on strength and development areas as well as the participant’s career goals and aspirations. The development – and succeeding implementation -- of this plan will hopefully enhance performance improvement over time.

**Applied Learning**
To enhance the likelihood that participants will transfer their learning to the workplace, one of the elements of the GEDP requires participants to develop a plan for addressing a strategic
real-work challenge with which they are currently faced, incorporating what they have learned in the program. Coaching is valuable to this process as well. Using the participant’s assessment data and knowledge of the program topics in GEDP, the coach can ask the powerful questions that help the participant more clearly define the problem, identify factors and strategies to be considered in the implementation of his project, and challenge thinking or perceptions related to the person’s role in the situation.

**COACHING AS A FOLLOW-UP: LESSONS LEARNED**

The systemic design approach to GEDP continues to evolve, and we continue to experiment with various elements and integrative practices that can help us achieve our primary goal of enhanced leadership performance. “Lessons learned” may be a bit presumptuous, especially in regards to a more generalized application of these findings to other settings, but we offer these as the fruits of our experience.

- Coaching is a critical and effective method for helping participants make sense of the assessment data they receive and for better integrating what is learned in the program.
- Follow-up coaching after the program is often requested by participants, especially in cases where they have little or no organizational support network and limited feedback systems that challenge their assumptions and help them identify alternative perspectives.
- Executive coaching in government leadership development programs seems to require a unique blend of skills and knowledge. To have the credibility necessary to coach executives in government, one should have a good understanding of both the government environment and the challenges faced by executives in government organizations. However, if that understanding were all that were required, retired government agency executives, absent any other coaching experience, would be effective coaches. While undoubtedly there are some retired executives who can play that executive coach role effectively, this role is significantly enhanced by the knowledge and application of professional coaching principles.

**DOES IT WORK?**

We commissioned an independent evaluation research project to address the question “Does the leadership development process used in GEDP result in improved performance?” Using Robert Brinkerhoff’s “Success Case Method” (2003) as the design for this research, our contractor identified the past five years of graduates of the GEDP as the sample for investigation. Brinkerhoff’s assertion is that all well-designed training programs have a distribution of participants’ results that fall in three categories:

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those who don’t attempt to implement what they learned in the program, those who at least try to implement what was learned with some marginal success, and those who produce substantial results from implementing what was learned in the program (2003).

Using an adaptation of Brinkerhoff’s method, we designed with our contractor a two-step data collection process. The first step involved inviting all GEDP graduates within the sample to take part in an on-line survey that assessed the extent to which they had implemented what they had learned in the GEDP. Through coding, these responses were grouped in four categories, a slight adaptation of the three categories initially suggested by Brinkerhoff. Follow-up individual interviews with those who fell in the highest-use category sought to identify specific, measurable results. This research initiative provided evidence suggesting that the integrated, systemic leadership development process used in the GEDP does improve performance, and quite substantially for some of those in the highest-use category (Middelberg, 2006).

We did not attempt to identify which of the elements used in GEDP most accounted for improved performance, and further research efforts might determine the extent to which coaching contributes to these results. Even without this additional data, we are confident that a multiple-element approach to leadership development is an effective way in which to enhance performance improvement in government leaders and that coaching is a valuable and effective process for integrating these elements.

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