The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching within Leadership

By Kim Gørtz

Editorial Preface by William Bergquist

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The following article by Kim Gørtz (“The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching Within Leadership”) is about power and coaching. It is not the usual article, however, that points to ways in which a coach can help his client become more powerful and more influential in her organization. This article, written by a gifted philosopher and coach, Kim Gørtz, is cautionary when it comes to the role of coach and client in the search for and use of power. As an article published in this issue of IJCO (that focuses on the philosophical roots and foundations of coaching), Gørtz’ “The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching within Leadership” is aligned in particular with the social critical philosophies of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze. Since some of our readers might not be familiar with the work of these philosophers, I thought, as co-editor of this issue, I would provide a very brief overview regarding these two exceptional philosophers.

Michel Foucault is a French philosopher who is known for his critical analysis of broad based historical trends, ranging from the role of discipline and punishment in prisons (Foucault, 1978) to the seemingly humane, but in fact quite manipulative, reform of mental institutions (Foucault, 1965). With regard to the present article, Foucault offers many insightful analyses regarding ways in which power is engages subtly and often destructively in various social forms (Foucault, 1970, 1980). His work has influenced many other social critics—including the American social critic, Richard Sennett (1993), who focuses on this subterranean use of power in his seminal book called Authority.

Like Foucault, Gilles Deleuze wrote about a wide range of phenomena—from the history of philosophy and the work of specific philosophers to the nature of contemporary literature and film. Central to his work is the proposition that the basis of identity resides within differences (Deleuze, 1995). If we take into account Foucault and Gørtz’s critical analysis of power, then one might suggest, with Deleuze, that power is itself based in difference (someone on top and someone beneath), and that all too often one’s identity derives from this difference (whether this identity be based in the sense of being powerful and entitled or in the sense of being powerless and subjugated). A second major theme in Deleuze’s work (especially in collaboration with Guattari; see Deleuze & Guattari, 2004) concerns the production of desire and, in turn, the production of power-relationships. This same theme has been powerfully articulated by an American author, Richard Lichtman (1986) in The Production of Desire. As with Foucault, Deleuze and Lichtman are concerned about the manipulative role of power and the founding of power in the creation of and alliance with primitive and societal-based desires. Certainly, such an analysis has implications for coaches as they challenge their clients regarding unacknowledged desires and the relationship between these desires and their quest for power.
Ironically – or perhaps poignantly – another aspect of Deleuze’s philosophy relates not just to this article, written by Gørtz, but also to another article in this issue of *IJCO* that is based on an interview with Julio Olalla. Both Deleuze and Olalla offer a radical empiricism and cite Spinoza as one of their heroes. For both Olalla and Deleuze, the lived experience is given precedence over the transcending of experience through abstraction and conceptualization (Deleuze, 2001). Deleuze writes about the “folding” of outside experiences into one’s self, as well as into political and social institutions. Immediate experiences are not transcended; rather they are folded inward (Deleuze, 1992). For Gørtz, as well as for Olalla and (one would suppose) Deleuze, the challenge of coaching is to assist clients in gaining access to and living with these raw experiences—experiences of “immanence” that are the source of creativity and discourse concerning the human condition.

**REFERENCES**


The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching within Leadership

KIM GORTZ

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POWER AS THE FOCAL POINT

It has for some time been debated whether and how leaders could and should coach their employees. On 2 February 2008 a leading article in the Danish newspaper Information described coaching as “an iron fist in a kid glove”, the TV station DR2 recently featured the same subject in the programme Deadline and the radio station P1 has also broadcast coaching programmes.

Despite a number of attempts in the Danish coaching literature to construct an integrated practice between being a leader and a coach – particularly the books “Ledelsesbaseret coaching” (leadership-based coaching), “Lederen som teamcoach” (the leader as team coach) and “Coachingbaseret ledelse” (coaching-based leadership) – there still seems to be a some uncertainty and real problems in this division between coaching, power and leadership.

Points of criticism

The problem is not so much the mentioned books, but rather understanding what power (and to some extent leadership) really is – and how and whether a leader-employee relationship should handle the golden fundamental coaching principle of “the power-free relationship”.

This is a subject that is rarely touched upon neither in both the Danish nor in international coaching literature and research – and at the same time a subject that many self-employed coaches have so far not really been willing to face, first and foremost in relation to their own practice. However, there seem to be several points of criticism – which are first and foremost raised by:
• The coaching business
• Critical academics
• Political intellectuals with a neo-Marxist grudge against any “newly invented” or “rediscovered” practice in private companies.

The interesting aspects of these points of criticism are as follows:

The coaching business mainly takes a critical view on the issue of power in connection with internal coaching in organisations and the coaching-based leadership style. The coaches rarely focus on power in relation to their own businesses. It would be gratifying to see the coaches look nearer to home as regards their practised skill to steer the coaching process without using (subtle and invisible) power.

Critical academics seem to have somewhat abstract and general points of criticism that seldom target concrete coaching practices in companies. It would therefore be great if they took the time and opportunity to obtain the required knowledge about the actual conditions.

The neo-Marxist criticism of “the monstrous capital” always rears its head as soon as and as long as a profit-driven initiative concerns human affairs. This actually is no bad thing.

Unfortunately, this form of criticism is often crude and high-flying, based on a rigid picture of companies as places that brainwash, exploit and patronise employees. That is, as monsters craving maximum profits with the aid of leaders that use and benefit from authoritarian structures and almost psychopathic control.

VIEW ON THE COMPANY

The interesting thing – for all three types of critical input to the debate on coaching, power and leadership – is that companies are almost never seen as places where employees find identity, meaning, happiness, respect, recognition and self-worth; where the motivating factor is not a forced carrot (money)/stick mechanism but a combination of trust, social relations and participation in decision-making. And not least where internal coaching and the coaching-based leadership style both create and strengthen the foundation for this.

The question that needs to be asked is therefore: why is it that in this debate companies are not seen as places where, according to Peter Holdt Christensen from CBS, “employees - according to their own wish - are given more responsibility, more challenges and more flexibility in the performance of their work tasks”?

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Three processes
A far more balanced and instructive contribution to this debate comes from Michala Schnoor and Gitte Haslebo, who in their article (published in the Danish journal Erhvervspsykologi, 5(2), 2007) emphasise and explain three forms of coaching in relation to leadership and power:

- Coaching as a power-based process
- Coaching as a power-free process
- Coaching as a power-reflecting process.

Below follows a summary of the main points of this article:

Coaching as a power-based process
The writers ascertain (on the basis of the book Ledelsesbasert Coaching) that coaching in an organisational framework, i.e., where leaders coach their employees, can at most and definitely should support the fulfilment of the organisational goals. This form of coaching, the writers claim, is aimed at solving problems; the chief purpose of all forms of leadership-based coaching is thus to facilitate quality and productivity – also when a “detour” is taken via improved employee satisfaction, etc. The leader maintains his/her capacity as leader and the coaching is based on the leadership role. The writers find it difficult to see how employees can become “active co-creaters of their own conditions for improved opportunities” – mostly because reflections are not facilitated in the coaching process, according to the writers.

Coaching as a power-free process
Here the writers emphasise the golden principle of the power-free relationship – based on voluntary coaching whether or not the person being coached is an employee or a private individual (i.e., outside the workplace and the organisational framework). Moreover, it is emphasised that the pivotal issue is the employee’s learning and development. According to the article the leader must step outside his/her role as leader and assume a non-knowing, neutral and inquisitive position, thereby excluding knowledge and power from the coaching process – and underlining and supporting the reflection processes. The point is that coaching should preferably be seen in a special context alongside other organisational practices and that “the employee decides the topics for discussion and what the solutions should be”. The writers sum up the two views on the understanding of power as what I would call the exercise of power and the display of power, respectively, which corresponds to what the writers see as the traditional and modern perception of power – in line with the French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Coaching as a power-reflecting process
At this point it (finally) becomes clear that power neither can be nor should be excluded or included in coaching of employees.
According to the article, power is an unavoidable element in any human relationship. In continuation of this it is therefore suggested that the leader reflects on the power inherent in the coaching process itself. The leader also helps the employee to see which power relations that he or she is a part of. In this way, the writers point out, the purpose of the coaching process is not so much to solve specific tasks and fulfill defined targets, but rather to facilitate employees reflecting on their own opportunities in the context that they are a part of. Here the attention will often focus on the employee’s personal values. The coaching leader (stepping outside his role as leader) should therefore rather be seen as a source of inspiration and the process as being co-creative. In this way the employee can (and should) get the opportunity to take a critically reflecting view on the subjects that he or she brings to the table.

As noted earlier, this form of coaching-based leadership can lead to the employee’s personal values coming into play (initiated by the employee himself) and the writers find it important that the leader together with the employee draw up an initial psychological contract that should be adjusted regularly during the process. The contract should lay down limits so that the leader and employee do not get themselves into a situation where personal and on-the-job considerations are mixed up. The writers also mention that the leader “should put his formal power aside and let go of the idea of leadership and control”. The challenge for the leader will first and foremost be to avoid that the coaching process becomes suppressive and at the same time to create a space where the employee can “see and create himself as an employee and member of the organisation without being tied to a certain description of the person”.

Avoid abuse of power

Although the above article is very informative and instructive about the relationship of power in a coaching dialogue between employee and leader, some central aspects are strangely absent. Despite the writers’ systematic treatment of the subject – or maybe precisely because of this – there seems to be a strange absence of insight into the actual circumstances and real-life practices when leaders coach their employees.

First of all, it does not make much sense to maintain that power is present in any kind of human relations and then at the same time state that the leader should put aside his formal power (and role as leader) in coaching situations. Power is still present in the relationship. Nor does it make much sense to say that for this reason the coaching leader should reflect and touch on this in the “power-reflecting process”. There are many other things that are far more important to put on the agenda in the organi-
sational context – both for leaders and employees in the coaching dialogue.

However, as the article suggests, leaders should closely consider how and whether they can avoid that the coaching dialogue becomes a particularly sophisticated form of power abuse. But this requires that the leader can see a clear benefit of not abusing his power in the coaching situation. Put briefly, the benefits are stronger loyalty towards the company, stronger relations between the leader and the employee and stronger commitment, satisfaction and motivation on the part of the individual employee to think independently and take responsibility for solving own work tasks.

In a time where competition mainly focuses on attracting, retaining and developing employees it is quite simply not worthwhile to abuse your power as leader towards your employees. Research has repeatedly shown that the main reason why employees leave a company is poor leadership – and thus poor relations with the leader.

Coaching competencies are necessary
Among the factors that are absolutely decisive for ruling out abuse of power as a fundamental effect of a coaching-based leadership style, the most important one is coaching competencies.

The leader must be able (and willing) to be present, listen actively, take responsibility for the coaching process and, not least, create an atmosphere of trust where the employee feels at ease. In addition, it is equally important to be able to master some of the specific methods and techniques that are practised in the coaching industry. It is not enough to simply embark on a coaching-based leadership style. It requires practice, insight and willingness to learn the art of coaching. It will not do to simply start without having attended an internal or external coaching course of a relatively high professional standard.

There are several reasons why; although you might be able to learn the techniques fairly quickly, it is necessary to practice them in a special learning environment where you can get the required feedback on your performance. Moreover, many leaders unfortunately lack the required knowledge of human nature and insight into fundamental psychological processes. In my opinion, this is an important asset to learn as a leader in order to be able to understand the person on the other side of the table once you return to your workplace. Lastly, people that attend (high-quality) coaching courses usually undergo a personal development, because they are coached themselves and in this way learn a lot about themselves simultaneously with learning the art of coaching.
My main point is therefore that employees are too valuable to be “abused” through unsuccessful coaching by their leaders – whether it is intentional or not. For everything is about the employee’s experience of the process with his or her leader. And if employees feel manipulated, misled or in any way subjected to inappropriate exercise of power, the result may be just the opposite than the intended goal of the coaching dialogue – namely that employee’s performances deteriorate or they actually quit their jobs.

**TEN TIPS FOR LEADERS-CUM-COACHES**

In summary, we can conclude that switching to coaching-based leadership (either as style or tool) implies challenges for leaders in relation to their employees. These challenges can be clarified by highlighting a number of things that you (as leader) should be aware of when you start coaching your employees:

1. **Acknowledge the relationship of power**: Your employees will always see you as their superior – whether you want them to or not. You can fire them. You have the last say. The employees know this. So do not try to turn the situation into a friendly chat between equals. It is an illusion to think that you can ignore the organisational hierarchy.

2. **Invite to coaching**: Present coaching as an offer. Emphasise the benefits for the employees, the leader and the organisation. Play with an open hand. Explain why coaching would be relevant. Personal and on-the-job development could be key words. Create trust and faith in the process by openly showing your curiosity about and interest in how your employees are actually doing.

3. **Explain what coaching is about**: For example, it is not therapy. Further, you are not dissatisfied with their performances. Explain that it is a positive development tool that will give them the opportunity to be heard; to learn more about themselves and their work tasks etc. Be honest and tell them, for example, what you have yourself gained from being coached.

4. **Create ambassadors for coaching**: Offer, for example, some of your employees to attend coaching courses themselves, thus creating good-will ambassadors for coaching. Or allow yourself to be coached by your employees. You could also invite them to a sort of team coaching where you explain what you want to test – and then listen to their unreserved feedback.

5. **Confidentiality – strike a balance**: During the coaching process it is important that you find the right balance as
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