Commentary on Jack Wood Interview: Leadership as a Collective Pursuit: Do We Ever Coach Just an Individual Leader?

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I was very intrigued by Jack Wood’s assertion that leadership is a collective endeavor. If that’s true, do we ever coach just an individual leader?

If we assume that it’s true that leadership is always a collective endeavor, a number of assumptions might follow:

1. Leadership does not exist outside of the group context, therefore coaching must always take group process, goals, and measures of success into account as well as the individual.

2. The leader is always a proxy for the collective leadership body, therefore coaches should encourage the individual to be conscious of what and who they represent (even when those others are absent) in their behaviors and actions.

3. Viewing the coachee through the lens of both individual and group unconscious can add perspective and value to an engagement. If we do opt for the idea that we are always working with a collective rather than individual context, we need to think about the idea of the group unconscious, and address issues of the group within our one-to-one efforts. In particular, issues of intersubjectivity.

I was also interested in the idea that many coaches with a psychoanalytic background feel that they can’t use it directly in their coaching. Although I’ll admit here that I defaulted from a PhD program in clinical psychology and got my masters degree instead (and have problems with my recall and may not always distinguish between Melanie Klein and Melanie Griffith), I feel...
that the principles of object relations and relational theory are completely relevant for leaders and their coaches, particularly in this age of interdependence. I am biased though in keeping our language simple and business-oriented rather than clinical. More on that later. First, some clinical language just for us chickens.

Since the late 1980s a relational theory of psychoanalysis has developed that builds on ideas popularized by a compatriot of Freud, Alfred Adler, who was the first in the psychoanalytic school to declare that the individual must always be viewed in context. The key assertion in relational theory is that there is, in Robert Stolorow’s (Stolorow and Atwood, 1994) words, a “myth of the isolated mind.” We need other people, not just to practice leadership but to exist at all.

Stolorow, Heinz Kohut, Jessica Benjamin, and other theorists who are focused on intersubjectivity theory assert that context is critical if we are to understand the complex psychology of an individual. We all carry a subjective view of the world. Intersubjectivity suggests that we also share subjective viewpoints with those around us, and this enables us to share meaning and to create common understanding. The application of intersubjectivity theory to organizations would point out that while we share subjective meaning and subjective consciousness, we also share a group unconscious or intersubjective unconscious.

We are not always aware of our subjectivity, and part of the task of the executive coach is to make conscious coachee beliefs, assumptions and biases that make up that subjective construction of reality.

Leaders who communicate well with their teams tend to be aware of this overlapping subjectivity, and create experiences, symbols, metaphors, stories, and emotional exchanges that create more of that shared experience. They are also able to tease out disagreement and lack of shared understanding in a way that assists the group members to function better together.

Intersubjectivity offers another useful lens for coaches viewing a leader in context – which is the lens of shared emotion or attunement, shared attention, and shared intention. Leading a group effectively requires awareness and conscious development of these shared arenas. Likewise, excellence in coaching requires shared emotion or attunement, shared attention, and shared intention between coach and coachee.

**THE REALITY FOR EXECUTIVE COACHING: THE PRACTITIONER’S DILEMMA**

After reading the interview with Jack Wood, my first response was to think that as a practitioner at a certain level of experience, each of us may become unconscious of our own operating models as we...
focus on meeting individual and organizational goals. In the words of my sage colleague Kevin Cuthbert, “practitioners may know what’s right, but choose what works.”

As the leader of a large consortium of executive coaches, I tend to look not at the theoretical models the coach has been working with, but on their specific results with coachees. One set of results is individual, and addresses the shift in behavior performance or specific, measurable accomplishment of a set goal. The second set of results concerns the achievement of an organizational outcome across a large pool of coachees. This outcome might be retention of key executives or development of new competencies or skills. In other words, in my own leadership context, pragmatism is key to my – and our – success. I also look carefully at language.

The practitioner’s dilemma is this. Theoretical models may be elegantly constructed, well thought out, and may make perfect sense – until we get in the room with a client and need to address their need for pragmatic solutions using the language of business. Whatever our theoretical orientation, a simple articulation of individual and organizational goals – why those goals are (or should be) important to the coachee, and the fact that we will work to get to those goals – is the most important part of launching an individual coaching engagement. “How” needs to be articulated after “what.” It is my assertion that what is more important than the training, models, or methodology used by the coach is the ability to effectively articulate the objectives of the coaching engagement and deliver results.

As much as I value my own background and context for formulating a coaching plan, it is certainly not important to me that the coaches in our practice study intersubjectivity theory. However, it is critical that they understand a fundamental principle: leadership and executive coaching are contextual. Likewise, I don’t care if the leaders we coach know the eclectic theories we are working under, but I certainly care that they see themselves as part of a whole system, and that they have awareness of others as well as themselves. I care that they develop skills, attitudes, and awareness that assist them in reaching their individual and organizational goals.

Do we ever coach just an individual leader? After posing this question, I believe the answer is no. And with that perspective, we can be much more valuable as coaches.

Within the Wood interview there were mentions of the work of Bion related to group dynamics. If as coaches we need to focus on group unconscious, this work can be very useful. Specific group defenses, according to Bion, are dependency, fight/flight, and pairing. Within groups that are under stress (and what work teams aren’t under stress in this particular era?), we may see unconscious patterns that distract from the pursuit of stated goals, and move into infighting, or becoming passive and waiting for someone to
give instruction. These patterns may not be part of the initial coaching intervention unless the coach gives voice to the possibility of unconscious group patterns.

The important reality here is the truth that all leadership is contextual. Addressing only individual thinking, behavior, and results does not truly develop or enhance organizational leadership, as much as it may develop individual skills and awareness. Hurrah for this perspective! To use an African phrase, this is a great time for us to share one word that may not be familiar in corporate life – Ubuntu. One restatement of Ubuntu is offered by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999), who suggests that ubuntu refers to a profound perspective regarding interconnectedness. Tutu proposes that each of us only exist because others exist. We can’t exist as human beings in isolation. We must move beyond thinking of ourselves as just individuals who are separated from the rest of humanity. What we do affects the whole world and we do well on behalf of the whole of humanity – not just ourselves.

REFERENCES


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Karlin Sloan has committed herself to finding out what makes great leaders tick, and to supporting leaders to be the change they wish to see in the world. As a corporate citizen she is an advocate for creating sustainable ways of working and living, and for creating positive organizational communities that work together for the greater good. She is the author of the acclaimed business book, Smarter, Faster, Better; Strategies for Effective, Enduring, and Fulfilled Leadership (Jossey-Bass, 2006), which has been translated into Thai and Russian.

Ms. Sloan is the CEO of Karlin Sloan & Company, a U.S.-based leadership development consultancy that serves multinational organizations that rely on collaboration and innovation. She is a frequent keynote speaker and media presence, and has been featured in the Los Angeles Times, the Christian Science Monitor, the Wall Street Journal, and Investors Business Daily, as well as on numerous radio and television outlets. She was recognized by Fortune Small Business magazine for her work with New York organizations in the weeks after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and is a featured speaker at Wharton Executive Education.
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