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Coaching in the Eye of the Storm

Arthur B. Gingold

The author, who has spent the last ten years coaching senior executives in the financial services area, shares insights on what it was like to observe firsthand how leaders reacted when most of what they thought was sacrosanct and within their control came crashing down around their ears. In what became a brighter and more expansive spotlight, their reactions and behaviors were watched not only by those inside the walls of the firms they managed, but even more extensively by an angry and critical world at large. Many of the behaviors that emerged are discussed and critiqued. In this time of turmoil and fear, the challenges and opportunities for a coach to step up and provide the kind of guidance and support were never more in evidence, and examples of how that was addressed are reviewed and analyzed. Now that the worst seems to be over, and a semblance of a recovery is beginning to materialize, what are some of the lessons that have been learned, and what are the potential hazards that leaders will still need to anticipate and deal with? It was a time for learning as well as hurting, and only time will tell us who has really been listening and learning.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity." - Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

How unknowingly prescient Charles Dickens turned out to be when he wrote those opening lines to his classic novel *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859. And how eerily accurate they appear when one looks at what has transpired in our financial markets over the past two years. The wild ride and major meltdown we have all witnessed has, among other things, resulted in a laser focus on the leaders in the financial services industry. Cries of mismanagement, greed, dishonesty, and stupidity are only a few of the many vilifications that have been leveled. As a result, the casualty list of those who only a few short years ago were riding high at the top of this industry keeps growing, and in many cases, includes people who were considered all-stars just a few years ago. What was the standard by which that assessment was made? Is the implication here that people who were viewed as talented have all of a sudden become less talented? Does it point more directly to the need for leaders to find ways to pick up the pieces and begin to understand what the way forward will look like? And what role can coaches play in this rebuilding exercise?

Based on what most economists tell us, it would appear that turbulence and unpredictability will be the uncomfortable realities of the next few years. These are uncharted waters and as far as most people can discern there are no good maps available. Add to that the findings of a recent February 2009 Gallup poll indicating that as things continue to improve the public will begin to move away from their reliance on government and look rather to our business leaders for long-term solutions. So what will they find when they look there? For the most part they will find a landscape where the sense of arrogance and certitude has been replaced by a sense of confusion and doubt, and where trust and confidence, two of the essential elements of leadership, have been shaken, and in many cases lost entirely. As any student of leadership will quickly affirm, without confidence, trust and leadership presence, there will likely be few followers. This conundrum was illustrated rather bluntly by Massachusetts Congressman Barney Frank when he told bankers back in February, "People really hate you, and they're starting to hate us because we're hanging out with you."

Is the implication here that people who were viewed as talented have all of a sudden become less talented?

Although all businesses are struggling to regain their footing, none have been the center of the public's ire more than the financial services industry, and nowhere is the challenge of courageous leadership more daunting. Having coached senior executives in the financial services industry over the past ten years, I have been there for "the best of times," was in the middle of "the worst of times," and am currently engaged observing how organizations are trying to find their way out of this turmoil. Here is what I have been seeing.

THE CHALLENGES FACING LEADERS

Awareness of the spotlight and the megaphone

One of the things I have always stressed when beginning a coaching assignment with top-level executives is to make them keenly aware of the brightness of the spotlight that follows them as they move through their day, and the size and resonance of the megaphone into which they speak. Many say they understand this, but few really do. This is the case even under normal conditions, but in a crisis everything gets magnified. The spotlight gets considerably brighter, and the megaphone significantly louder. Everyone, stakeholders included, is watching to see how the person in charge is coping, and if the message is not one of confidence and control, the results can be devastating. I have likened it to being on an airplane going through extreme turbulence. If the flight attendant walks through the plane looking confident and in control the passengers will be less alarmed. If, on the other hand, the demeanor portrays panic and disarray, that will be quickly reflected and replicated throughout the airplane. Leaders have to accept this responsibility as something that always "goes with the territory" and learn to act accordingly, even if in some cases it may require the skill of a thespian. The face and vibes leaders put forth are the ones that people will respond to, either positively or negatively.

This point is made rather vividly in *House of Cards*, William D. Cohan's striking portrayal of the collapse of Bear Stearns. He talks about Alan Schwartz, Bear's CEO, conducting an interview on CNBC as the markets were roiling and rumors of Bear Stearns' liquidity crunch were growing direr by the minute. As Cohan (2009, p. 36) describes,

> Mr. Schwartz's delivery made some experts wince, *Wall Street Journal* columnist George Anders wrote. "He gazed upward before speaking. He pinched his lips tightly after several answers." According to a communications coach those grimaces made Mr. Schwartz look uncomfortable. Added a senior investment banker at the firm, "Alan is usually a very effective guy, but how bad was he on Wednesday morning? He was awful on TV. He looked like he was warmed over death on Wednesday morning and that didn't provide any comfort to anyone. He showed just terribly."

Those, of course, were unusual circumstances with the whole financial world watching, but it is what happens outside of the public view, and inside their own companies, where leaders have to be most aware of this. I have witnessed first-hand the result of a brash and confident hedge fund CEO who made his bones in the organization, not only through his investment acumen but by being visible, active and directive, totally lose his groove and retreat to his office. And when he did walk the halls he looked like he had been clobbered by a 2x4. Everyone was watching, and the results were predictable. It was only after being made aware of what he was doing and the effect it was having was he able to gather himself and get things back on track. The financial situation did not change but he did, which at least gave him a chance to begin the road to recovery. In these turbulent and unpredictable times, understanding the importance of what has been called the *shadow of the leader* and what it casts over the firm cannot be emphasized enough.

Decision making

One of the things which has always exemplified strong leaders is their ability to assess a situation and then make a decision, quickly and resolutely. As the recent financial meltdown gained momentum, and the grim implications became more obvious, two behaviors regarding decision making were in evidence. The first was an inclination to shut down and hide from the responsibility of making any decisions, particularly those that involved risk. The second was a tendency to make decisions too quickly, and make them based on fear rather than a measured analysis of the situation at hand. The dangers of doing that are clearly described in Jim Collins' new book, *How the Mighty Fall*: *A Primer on the Warning Signs*. He writes (2009, p. 96):

> When we find ourselves in trouble, when we find ourselves on the cusp of falling, our survival instinct and our fear can prompt lurching – reactive behavior absolutely contrary to survival. The very moment when we need to take calm, deliberate action, we run the risk of doing the exact opposite and bringing about the very outcomes we most fear.

And in a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, Snowden and Boone (2007) point out the need for leaders to understand the context in which they are working in order to make the proper decisions. In the chaotic context, one of the four they discuss, they suggest that a leader's immediate job is not to discover patterns but to stanch the bleeding. They must first act to establish order, and then work to identify emerging patterns which can both help to prevent future crises and discern new opportunities. In this instance, the authors say, communications of the most direct, top-down or broadcast kind is imperative. Often, there is not the luxury of asking for input, and "measured" and "thoughtful" need to trump "rushed" and "reactive."

For the most part they will find a landscape where the sense of arrogance and certitude has been replaced by a sense of confusion and doubt, and where trust and confidence have been shaken, and in many cases lost entirely.

The power of vulnerability

In this recent financial meltdown, you will find a veritable catalogue of mistakes and missteps made by those leading their companies directly as well as those peripherally involved. Errors of omission, errors of commission, errors of judgment, all made the cut here. It is in situations like this that one of the more powerful things leaders can do to strengthen their positions and increase followership is to have the confidence to admit when they were wrong. Too many times, in organizations with which I was involved, I saw leaders blaming circumstances rather than owning their mistakes. In addition to being the wrong thing to do, it was quickly seen through by the masses, and thus had a major adverse impact on a leader's credibility. On the other hand, those leaders who were able to stand up in front of their employees, acknowledge that this happened on their watch, and then take full responsibility for the outcome sent a powerful message. It says a lot about you as a leader when you're not afraid to admit when you were wrong. It shows a sense of confidence as well as a lack of blinding hubris. Rosabeth Moss Kanter (2009) writes, "The simple sentence 'I was wrong' is the hardest for leaders to utter and the most necessary for them to learn." This does not mean that we are looking for leaders who are forced to say "I was wrong" too often as we count on them to make decisions and exercise good judgment. Jim Kilts, former Gillette CEO, put it well when he characterized himself as "often wrong, never uncertain." There are, of course, two parts to this. After acknowledging their *mea culpa*s, it is also incumbent upon leaders to reclaim their *gravitas* by setting a clear direction for the future. Instead of blaming others or circumstances beyond their control, a willingness to admit that major mistakes were made and then regrouping and providing a road map for the future will begin to restore some of the confidence and trust that had been lost.

Connecting as opposed to withdrawing

One of the behaviors clearly evident in financial services companies at the height of the storm was the tendency for some leaders to "go underground" rather than being out in the forefront and visible and accessible to everyone. Many excused it by saying they really didn't have any answers to the problem, didn't know how long it was going to last, and weren't sure whether their company would survive. This was exactly the wrong thing to do because the need for leaders to connect with their employees is never greater than when things are at their nadir. Although the tendency has been for many people at the top to focus primarily on their own financial pain, this has blinded them to understanding the psychological and financial burdens of others. The time for active and generous listening is never more critical than in situations like the one we have just been through. The time for management by walking around, the time to get out from behind the desk and find out what people are doing and what they are thinking is never more critical than it is today. To be able to convince someone that their problem is your problem, and that you understand what they're dealing with, is one of the cornerstones of leadership credibility. Steven Covey (1989) talks about the greatest need of a human next to physical survival is psychological survival – to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated. Providing that avenue for the people who work for you will not solve the financial pain and sense of uncertainty about the future. It will, however, be a major step in shaping your perception as a leader who people feel genuinely cares about them and thus someone they will turn to and rely on through the most difficult times.

Lloyd Blankfein, CEO of Goldman Sachs, put it best in a recent interview (2009) with the *New York Times*. In answer to the question "What did you find yourself doing more of, or less of, in terms of day-to-day management, particularly when the company was under such intense scrutiny?" he said:

> What I did more of - and then I kept doing more and more of it as it got validated as a strategy - is that I talked to the firm very frequently. So in the last year and a half, and particularly in periods of peak stress, when people were wondering what was going on, when the press was as bad as it was, almost every day I would send a voice mail to the whole firm. I'd walk around the firm. I'd answer people's questions. And generally this firm has a walk-around culture. But I really emphasize that.

Don't lose your swagger

Most people who have been successful in the financial services industry have done so based on their ability to assess and manage risk. Being willing to take risk requires a number of special traits, but first among them is a sense of confidence, even boldness, in what you are doing. Time after time I witnessed executives who were so shaken by what was happening to their numbers that they started to question and doubt themselves to the point that they essentially froze in place. The tolerance for risk of any kind evaporated, leading to a 'hunker down and wait it out' mentality. Although it was clearly not a time to be as bold as they once might have been, there still were opportunities out there which many others in the organization recognized. People were "demanding to be led," as John Mack, CEO of Morgan Stanley, constantly admonished his people to do. But in many instances no leadership was in evidence. When facing this type of situation, leaders must once again trust their own instincts.

It says a lot about you as a leader when you're not afraid to admit when you were wrong. It shows a sense of confidence as well as a lack of blinding hubris.

A perfect example of this was illustrated on January 16, 2009 when a US Airways Flight had to make an emergency landing on the Hudson River. Its Captain, Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, had been well trained, as have all other pilots. The distinguishing feature in this heroic act, however, was that he trusted his instincts, didn't give up on them in as stressful a situation as one can imagine. In what was called a miracle by most observers, Sullenberger landed his plane safely with no loss of life. Certainly, saving scores of lives cannot and should not be compared to saving or redirecting a company, but the point goes beyond that. It is that when things get most difficult leaders have to remember not to give up on the instincts and honed habits that made them successful in the first place. Knowing what to do is only part of the equation. Embodying that knowing and having the confidence and trust to do it is quite another.

Moving to a more performance-based culture

Because of the magnitude of failures in evidence and the public's perception that the financial services industry has been a place of greed and undeserved wealth accumulation, the need for leaders to move their companies to a more performance-based culture has never been greater. This will not eliminate the skepticism and anger of those harshest critics, but it will set the ground work for a more balanced, accountable organization. Leaders must accept the fact for themselves that they will be at the forefront of this accountability, and drive the message home that results is what will matter and everyone should expect their feet to be held to the fire.

Getting back on your feet and setting the direction

There's hardly a leadership book written which doesn't state the need for those in charge to articulate the way forward, and inspire a shared vision. This has never been truer than for those companies who have been shaken to their core by the events of the last two years. It is an opportunity for strong leaders to step up and welcome the task that confronts them. People need to sense that you have a solid conviction about where you want to go, and that you have the confidence in yourself and those who work for you that you will get there. In addition, they should have a clear understanding of what they need to do to help you get there. In *How the Mighty Fall*, Jim Collins (2009, p. 120) writes,

> The signature of the truly great vs. the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty. It's the ability to come back from the setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before. Great nations can decline and recover. Great companies can fail and recover. Great social institutions

> can fall and recover. And great individuals can fail and recover. As long as you never get entirely knocked out of the game, there remains hope.

What kind of leaders do we need?

In his well-acclaimed book *Good to Great,* Jim Collins (2001) talks about what he calls the *level 5 leader*. He describes that leader as embodying a paradoxical mix of personal humility and professional will. These Level Five leaders certainly are ambitious—but ambitious first and foremost for the company, not for themselves. These traits in a leader have never been more in evidence than during this recent financial crisis. This is not a time for heroes, "Sully" Sullenberger notwithstanding, and many who thought they were heroes (or needed to be heroes) learned painfully that they were sadly mistaken. The kind of leaders who are needed to help guide their companies beyond the carnage have to be fanatically driven, infected with an incurable need to produce sustainable results. They have to be willing to do whatever it takes to move their organizations forward, no matter how big or how difficult the decisions required to get there. And they have to have the courage and wherewithal to make those decisions.

THE CHALLENGES FOR THE COACH

As leaders began to face and deal with the upheaval that the meltdown brought, their need for a supporting and objective voice outside the day-to-day turmoil became even more important. Being aware of what challenges that brings and how to make that voice resonant and helpful is something the coach needs to constantly assess.

A sanctuary and a lighthouse

The waves are swirling about; the pressure to do something can be overwhelming, and the din of well-meaning advice is so loud and constant that it is hard to hear yourself think. It is not surprising, therefore, that someone caught in that kind of situation can feel trapped and confused. It is here that the coach must step into the breach and fill this void. The coach can provide a safe place for the client to go, become a port in a storm, and give the client a quiet place to reflect on events and possible actions. The fact that you are not an actual employee, but at the same time fully understand the culture, gives you the neutrality, objectivity, credibility and perspective that can be invaluable in times of chaos and uncertainty. Some may look for pity, but it is a sense of resolve and confidence building that they really need. Helping them to regain their balance and urging them to get out of the weeds, and move up to the 5,000 foot view is one of the best ways to do that.

Maintaining your independence and neutrality

One of the constant hazards in coaching is the propensity for the coach to take on the client's problems. This is particularly true in times of turmoil, especially when you begin to feel the problems were not totally the client's fault. Many instances like this surfaced during the financial meltdown of the past few years. Your client may not have been directly part of the greed and mismanagement that led to the problem, yet their company was suffering because they were part of the industry. The minute a coach becomes *carelessly sympathetic*, and takes on these problems as his own is the minute his value gets diminished and ultimately eliminated. Commiserating is not what an effective coach gets paid to do, although clients will subtly and sometimes forcefully want you to do just that. Compassion is different from pity, and it is guidance, not hand holding, that will ultimately prove your worth. While being careful not to assume the burden of the client's issues an effective coach does have to bring an appreciation for the problems their client is facing. You can do this by looking for and finding openings for coaching conversations which will allow for learning, healing, and growth.

The waves are swirling about; the pressure to do something can be overwhelming, and the din of well-meaning advice is so loud and constant that it is hard to hear yourself think.

Earn your place at the table

No one would expect a coach in the financial services industry to *teach* their clients how to be better bond or stock traders, or better advisors for mergers and acquisitions. What they would expect, however, is for them to understand enough about the business, be able to speak the language, know what happened and why, and, as a trusted advisor, earn a seat at the table. The valuable role played by this element of credibility was validated in an experience I had with a major hedge fund client. This was at the very worst time of the meltdown when things seemed to be spiraling downward with no visible light at the end of the tunnel. One could go through an entire issue of *The Wall Street Journal* or *Financial Times*, and find nothing but negative perspectives as if they had been written by The Grim Reaper. Sitting in a meeting with the firm's senior partners the sense of darkness and doom was palpable. Everyone was convinced we were headed for the next great depression, and each person who spoke only seemed to validate and pile on to what was said by the previous speaker.

It was at this point that I decided to step in. I admitted that I was nowhere near as financially astute as they were, but what I did know was that if the conversation continued along these lines it would serve absolutely no purpose. I said that I was well aware of the fact that we were in for very difficult times, but the next great depression was not the inevitable outcome. Ruminating about how bad things were going to get was not a solution, it was rather a way to avoid their responsibility as the firm's leaders. What they needed to focus on, I offered, was not how bad things would continue to get, but what kind of a game plan they could put together to help them get through this. That was what they should spend their time talking about. If nothing else, this pronouncement broke the sense of mesmerism in the room and did move the conversation to more productive topics. The lesson for me as a coach was that instead of being dismissed as a naïve Pollyanna, I had earned enough credibility and trust that my opinions were respected and not dismissed out of hand.

Reflecting on this particular situation, I am reminded that when things seem their bleakest, it has proven to be helpful advice to remind clients that they are never stuck *in* a problem, but rather are moving *through* a problem. There are few bright spots or answers in the problem itself, so that's not where you focus your attention. Good leaders must be able to see beyond the problem, envision some possible solutions, and then work to move everyone in that direction.

Be aware of absolutes and hyperbole

In difficult times my experience has shown me that clients have a greater tendency to speak in absolutes and hyperbole with few suggested solutions: "This is the worst situation we've ever been in." "We're never going to work our way out of this." "The company morale is past the point of no return." "Liquidation is our only option." In these instances it is imperative for the coach not to accept these kinds of statements out of hand. Just reciting the problem and whining about it is often a sure formula for ultimate failure. As coaches we have to move our clients beyond this doomsday mind-set and keep pushing for fresh reflection and new action. Talking about what they plan to do about this is productive. Wallowing around in the wreckage is not. There will almost always be some resistance to this, but it is where perseverance and objectivity usually win the day

Complex problems don't always call for complex solutions

When problems got as complex and far reaching as they did during the worst days of the financial crisis there was a temptation to think that the kind of solutions called for transcended the normal coaching basics. In *Coaching*: *Evoking Excellence in Others*, James Flaherty (2005) emphasizes the fact that to be successful any coaching relationship requires mutual trust, mutual respect, and mutual freedom of expression. This is never truer than in times of crisis and there needs to be nothing complex or arcane about the advice or perspective clients need. To the contrary, I have found that in the middle of the worst times, the return to the time-tested "blocking and tackling" of coaching proved to be the most effective. Raising the client's awareness level, having them understand the consequences (good or bad) of their behaviors, showing them the importance of staying in role, putting the building blocks in place to regain trust are not complex but necessary, particularly under the most challenging and difficult circumstances. A simple question like "Why don't you take the time to walk down to X's office and see what they're thinking?" has in my coaching practice, produced some remarkable results.

HAZARDS ALONG THE WAY

Although things are improving, there are a few road signs of which we need to be aware. Both coaches and leaders need to pay attention to this, and not take their eye off the ball.

As coaches we have to move our clients beyond this doomsday mind-set and keep pushing for fresh reflection and new action.

Potential for talent drain

The need to be able to attract and retain quality people has always been one of the most important things a leader can do. It may never be more important than it is today. The landscape and environment seem to be changing daily. As things begin to improve, albeit slowly, a number of newly formed, boutique shops may look attractive to some key people who may be concerned about pay regulations and increased scrutiny. Finding ways to retain this talent and giving them a reason to stay will be a major challenge. Leaders must identify where the most likely flight risks are, and if valued enough, convince these key people that there is a plan for the future and it includes and needs them to be major players.

Things will more than likely never be the same

Impatience for the good old days or some semblance thereof will begin to kick in as people sense the crisis mood is abating. When the economy does recover, however, waiting for things to return to normal could be a long and frustrating exercise. As Heifitz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) point out, things won't return to normal and a different mode of leadership will be required. The organizational adaptability required to meet this relentless succession of new challenges, they write, is beyond anyone's current expertise since no one has ever been here before. The authors suggest (p. 64) that instead of hunkering down, leaders can seize this opportunity to hit the organization's reset button. They use the turbulence of the present to build on and bring closure to the past. In the process they change the rules of the game, reshape parts of the organization, and redefine the work people do.

In times like this leaders, must create a culture of courageous conversations, listen to unfamiliar voices, and set the tone for candor and risk taking.

It is clear that everyone will be operating in a new paradigm. What used to be a sure thing is no longer a sure thing. To borrow a phrase from Marshall Goldsmith (2007), "What got you here won't get you there."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

During the halcyon days of economic growth, stock market surges, and unprecedented wealth accumulation, especially in the financial services industry, many observers may have wondered how long the good times would last, but few saw the carnage and upheaval that lay ahead: Bear Stearns collapsed, Lehman Brothers, General Motors and Chrysler filed for bankruptcy, and bank stocks fell to unprecedented lows. These were just a few of the thing that sent our financial well-being to the edge of a cliff, sent the government off on a mission to skewer and expose those responsible, and sent the public off on a tirade against those who caused this and unfairly benefited from the excesses. As a result, leaders in the financial services industry found themselves in the crosshairs of both the public's and the government's ire. Now that the damage seems to be slowly abating, these same leaders must take a hard look at the challenges that face them and understand what they need to do to address them.

I have found that in the middle of the worst times, the return to the time-tested "blocking and tackling" of coaching proved to be the most effective.

It is not, and will probably never be, business as usual, but those who can recognize what the new paradigm will look like, and adapt their style and focus to deal with it will be the ones who can succeed. And now, perhaps more than ever, coaches will play a key role in this rebuilding process. By maintaining their objectivity, being supportive but firm, and providing a safe place for candid but realistic conversations they will be one of the most important contributors to ultimate success. What is true of any crisis is the fact that as painful and wrenching as it may have been there are always valuable lessons to be learned. That has certainly been the case during these past eighteen months for both leaders and coaches. As Dickens said, it has been "the worst of times," and we can only hope it becomes "the best of times." After all the smoke clears, and this becomes an indelible entry into our economic and national history, it will be interesting to find out who has been really listening and learning.

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Art Gingold's career in organizational development and executive coaching spans more than a twenty year period. In 1984 he co-founded Barton & Gingold, a management consulting firm in Portland, Maine, and served as its President and Managing Partner until 2004. Since 1990, his practice has focused exclusively on executive coaching, and in that capacity he has coached senior executives in a broad range of organizations. For the past ten years his concentration has been in the financial services industry and his client list includes some of the industry's most respected names. Art holds a BA from The College of William and Mary where he now serves as one of the school's Executive Partners. He also is a guest lecturer and advisor at its graduate school, The Mason School of Business.

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