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# Three Keys to Mindful Leadership Coaching

**By Douglas Riddle**

There are countless executive coaches I would never hire for myself, no matter how wise, insightful, dynamic or experienced.

Admittedly, I'm a hard guy to please, so what I require might not be a good guide for others.

However, if a coach can't create an environment that dissolves the limitations of history, expectation, and assumption, I'm not interested.

How does a coach do that? By creating in the conversation with the coachee a sense of open, reflective exploration. The coaches who expand my mind, emotions and performance come to the coaching relationship from a place of inner calm. They have quiet minds. They are not beguiled by fancy techniques or elegant coaching models. They are midwives for the narrow, messy emergence into a larger world – and they rely on habits of mindfulness to accomplish that.

As you may have noticed, there's been an explosion of information in recent years on neuroscience and how the brain handles change – and it's fueling an interest in mindfulness. If you are a coach or are

searching for one to boost your performance, remember this rule: mindful coaching is better coaching. And mindfulness practices have shown benefits for clients in health, decision-making and leadership.

Mindful coaches perfect a form of conscious and comfortable simultaneous attention to themselves, their coachee, the relationship between them, and the mental, emotional, and relational dynamics occurring in the moment. There are three aspects of mindfulness that have particular pertinence to leadership coaching:

- 1) an empty mind
- 2) non-reactivity
- 3) permissive attention

**An empty mind.** For the coach, mindfulness is characterized by an empty mind, a stilling of the persistent chatter and the cognitive ticker-tape of commentary. This is a challenge for most Westerners because of our devotion to activity and terror of being alone with ourselves. An empty mind is key to letting something happen in someone else. It is the essence of coaching. Like falling in love or falling asleep, it can't be achieved through greater effort or more action.

As coaches, a busy mind sabotages our efforts to let others express themselves. Think about your conversations with co-workers or with family. How often have you had the feeling that someone was not really hearing you, not really attending to you? You may have told someone about the challenge you were facing, only to find that they couldn't keep themselves from telling you how you *should* think about it, or that it shouldn't bother you so much, or how they have had similar experiences.

Alternatively, when someone hears us with an open, empty mind, we sense our own substance and value. No matter how 'helpful' someone wants to be, advice or correction always implies that we lack something. We have to persuade ourselves that someone cares when they give us the impression that they think we can't figure it out for ourselves. Unfortunately, more than a few coaches enter the profession because they've never been heard themselves. They picture themselves giving important advice to powerful people and receiving their gratitude. That guiding image will never benefit the coachee.

**Non-reactivity.** Meditation and quiet thoughtfulness help coaches sense that, as they work, they are operating in a vast mental and emotional space with clients. No reaction is required, no matter what the provocation. Instead, coaches are free to perceive the needs of their clients and respond – without escalating the emotional content or misinterpreting any intent. Still, fostering a non-judgmental attitude as a coach does not mean surrendering judgment. Mindfulness in fact leads to wiser judgment about what's important and what is not. A coach who practices mindfulness doesn't make things worse. Non-reactivity on the part of the coach gives the person being coached room to roam from perspective to perspective, from one incomplete thought to another until they begin to become whole thoughts and the basis for growth.

Oddly, non-reactivity is often experienced quite positively by people who are being coached. I say, "oddly" because so much energy is expended in our culture in empty encouragement that does not actually encourage. Coachees often find that space to think and feel and explore while staying in relationship is invigorating. In addition, this dynamic makes true collaboration possible. The mindful coach creates an emotional space

without land mines, where the coachee isn't worried about being manipulated or controlled.

**Permissive attention.** A brilliant – and almost pathologically internally-focused – engineer was sent to me for coaching. In the first session, he assured me that he could never benefit from coaching because he couldn't tolerate a conversation with someone longer than a couple minutes. When he predicted the demise of our session, I let on that I was quite curious to see that, and that we could both be watching for it. “Do you suppose you will see this change as it is coming along, or do think you are likely to be surprised by its sudden dramatic entrance?” I asked. He was made curious by my curiosity and new possibilities were suddenly available to him. I call it permissive attention because I chose to draw our attention to his certainty of this coming disaster as a matter for discovery rather than trauma. He went on to a productive and long-lasting coaching engagement because the spotlight was never on him, but on his growth.

A mindful coach can draw a person into a moment of connection in which all distractions disappear. It doesn't matter whether the distractions are in the room or in the street outside or in unbidden thoughts or feelings from within the coachee. The ultimate challenge for most leaders is staying focused for more than a moment on any serious line of thinking, perceiving, judging or acting. The coach is repeatedly able to draw the attention of the coachee to those things of importance to him and return the attention to it without coercion.

Modern brain research has shown that we move in and out of various states of focused or unfocused attention throughout our day. Coaching allows someone to stay on a line of thought until it yields new perspectives and answers. It proves especially powerful when

these are questions that might have stymied us for a long time. The coach wants to create an encounter in which the two people are in synchronized attention and vast amounts of mental and emotional energy can be directed at the development of the person being coached. This is a kind of mutual trance state, along the lines of being “in the zone” in sports, and most people have experienced it only briefly. The mindful coach can elicit this state and maintain it for the growth of the coachee.

As coaches, we are privileged to serve as midwives to human change – and can impact the performance of entire organizations. How do we contribute to the possibility of change? How do we serve as catalysts for turning experience and reflection into more effective, meaningful lives? Mindfulness offers a powerful alternative to the coercive and linear assumptions that have dominated our thinking. It might be that individual change is not so much *driven* as *permitted*. The question for the coach is this: how can I prepare myself to create a mental, emotional, and relational space in which someone may grow and develop? Mindfulness practices prepare coaches to really help instead of just trying to be helpful.

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