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Leadership Coaching Tip

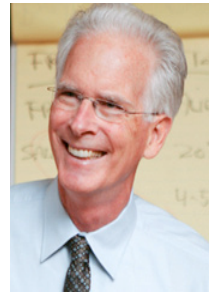
Enhancing Collaborative Leadership Capacity with Dyadic Coaching

Allison Conte and Tom Curren



Mounting evidence in the leadership literature suggests that today's organizations can no longer be effectively led by a single person operating "heroically" at the top of a hierarchy, because the problems leaders face are so complex that they cannot be solved by any one person alone.

In solving problems and making decisions, senior leaders must coordinate the interests of the company with the external realities of the external marketplace, of society and of the planet, as well as with the interests of self, board members, peers, senior and upper-level managers, and employees.



This demands the very highest level of reasoning and decision-making skills – level 13 as measured by the Lectical Assessment System, developed by Theo Dawson¹.

And, of course, reasoning ability is not all that matters. As Joiner and Josephs point out, even leaders who have reached advanced stages of interior development may lack the experience to translate those capacities into the exterior skills and behaviors that their jobs demand².

This would be a dire set of circumstances, if it were not for some good news offered by Dawson: While level 13 leaders are extremely rare, her research indicates that level 13 leadership goals can be achieved through collaborative discourse involving level 12 thinkers³.

This leads us to conclude that organizations would be well served to not only install or develop level 12 ("Catalyst" level and above in Joiner and Joseph's model) leaders, but also to *promote collaborative discourse and expand collaborative capacity*.

Since much has been written about individual leadership development, we'll focus this article on developing collaborative leadership. We believe that coaching – specifically, dyadic coaching integrated with individual coaching in an action-learning context – can be a powerful way to support leaders to develop the interpersonal and perspective-taking abilities they need to move to a more collaborative style of leadership.

Case example

In a whole-system change⁴ consulting engagement with a nonprofit think-tank client, it became clear that shared leadership at the top would be critical for success. To that end, we launched a long-term dyadic coaching engagement with the CEO and the founder. After six months of intensive work, the pair has moved from a relationship characterized by back-talking and destructive power plays to one that is built on trust, deep listening, mutual respect, synergistic strengths and collaborative problem-solving.

The ripple effects can be felt throughout the organization. Both leaders note that their collaboration has resulted in improved morale; increased staff engagement; dramatically reduced turnover; and a plethora of interested recruiting candidates – all of which seemed nearly impossible six months ago.

Upon looking back at the ideal future vision they wrote in the first session, both men smiled in disbelief at the transformation they'd accomplished. "When we wrote the vision, it felt like a real stretch," the founder said. "It seemed like it would be great if we could pull this off. Now it's what we're doing. That's extraordinary! In six months, our vision has moved from aspirational to pretty much actual."

The lead trustee, who oversaw the process, said she was "astonished" at the results. "Most consultants who promise organizational change break their picks," she said, "but you've created genuine and lasting improvement."

Following are what we see as the key success factors that helped to create that shift:

Do not compromise on time and budget.

We insisted that our clients commit to doing what we believed it would take we are convinced it takes to generate significant personal and interpersonal change, and make it stick. We fought resisted the understandable push-back that consultants often get push-back understandable from overly busy executives. We told them that we would not do the work unless they agreed to devote required significant chunks of time to for assessments; monthly full-day, face-to-face, six hour partnership working sessions; twice-monthly individual coaching sessions; and significant assignments between sessions --, for a minimum of four months, preferably four to six months.

Engage yourself as an instrument of change

We used our own working relationship as a living laboratory in which to learn about collaborative leadership and to facilitate the development of our clients. We examined our own relational patterns, challenged ourselves to step up to a higher level of partnership, and shared our learning process with our clients. We also modeled our own high-level reasoning, perspective-taking and interpersonal abilities, setting an example for respect, transparency, deep listening and experimentation.

We often took "time-outs" in front of the clients to discuss with each other what we were seeing and what we should do next. These "fish bowl" sessions interventions were remarkable in that they put the clients in the role as alert observers of our process.

Establish a safe container for dialogue

All this allowed us to create a safe, dialogical container in which our clients learned to stay with their tension rather than defend against it. As a result, they were able to transmute deep conflicts into powerful insights and positive change.

Co-create a shared vision, current reality and path forward

According to Intentional Change Theory, sustainable transformative change becomes possible when we are inspired by a compelling, positive vision of the future. Thus, the we devoted the first session was devoted to co-creating a list of guiding principles and an aspirational vision for our client's ideal partnership. We used a modified Appreciative Inquiry approach to draw out and amplify our client's highest and best intentions.

Next, we examined current reality through individual and collective perspectives:

- “I” (individual)—Each leader shared his assessment results and individual development plan with his partner. We measured reasoning and decision-making capacity using the LAS and evaluated behavioral effectiveness using a 360-feedback instrument), and they promised to support each other in their efforts to grow.
- “We” (collective)—We observed how the pair's interaction patterns were affecting the organization, and how their individual strengths and development goals overlapped. For example, one partner orients primarily from a scientific/systems perspective and needed to develop his social/interpersonal skills, while the other orients primarily from a socio-political perspective and needed to develop his facility with scientific/systems thinking; additionally, one was working on delivering feedback without placing blame and the other was working on receiving feedback without getting defensive.

From here, we helped the pair to determine potential leverage points and roadblocks to improving their relationship; make requests and promises to support each other's growth; and design a path forward.

Integrate “real” work with developmental work in an action-learning context

At each partnership session, the pair worked to discuss contentious issues, solve problems and make decisions. We used this “real” work as a laboratory in which the leaders could examine their underlying motivations and assumptions; practice and experiment with new behaviors; and get feedback. We also devoted significant time in each session to learn new tools and conceptual frameworks linked to our clients' developmental priorities. During these working sessions, the CEO and founder made important decisions about previously thorny issues such as hiring new senior staff; addressing performance issues on the senior team; moving the founder's office to a new location; and improving the effectiveness of a new project review process.

Introduce powerful practice tools

Following are some of the tools, frameworks and methods that we've found to be effective for dyad coaching:

- **Polarity Management** – Barry Johnson's elegant framework helps clients to de-polarize their positions around hot topics and see the value in each other's perspective.
- **The Empowerment Dynamic (TED)** – David Emerald's simple concept shows clients how to escape the trap of drama roles and make conscious behavioral choices
- **Difficult Conversations** – This tiny book by Douglas Stone offers a wealth of wise and practical ways to navigate treacherous interpersonal waters.
- **Integrative Decision-Making** – Borrowed from Holacracy, this practice creates a structure which removes ego drama from the decision-making process and helps teams to integrate multiple perspectives into a workable decision. Another practice called PMI (based on the work of Edward DeBono and referring to the "Plus, Minus and Interesting" aspects of a decision) works well, too, as it allows for weighted decisions (people vote based on how strongly they feel about a decision) and puts as much value on the rationale as on the decision itself.

Continuous Improvement

We are continually working to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our approach to developing collaborative leadership. In our next client situation, we intend to:

- Refine the mix of assessment instruments
- Expand the range of tools we use; for example, more explicit use of Holacracy practices.
- Broaden the domains which we incorporate into the work (e.g. poetry, neuroscience, movement, meditation, etc.)
- More clearly integrate the inter-session reading and exercises with the live work sessions
- Evolve the range of tools we use to address leadership agility; for example, more explicit use of Holacracy practices.
- Work even more explicitly on a range of modalities e.g. both these client appreciated poetry, which we could have done more with
- Etc.

To support our continued learning, we invite your comments and questions on this topic. Please address correspondence to allison@hawthorneconsultants.com.

Endnotes

1 According to Dawson's original research, CEO-level task complexity in large organizations requires reasoning at level 13, or the very top of the measurement chart; a summary of this research can be found on <http://www.devtestingservice.org>. Her recent thinking on task demands and capabilities can be found on her blog at <http://theodawson.net>.

2 Joiner, Bill and Josephs, Stephen (2007). *Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p x.

3 Dawson's research leads us to see the logic in Robert Greenleaf's perspective when he advocated, more than 30 years ago in his book, *Servant Leadership*, that organizations would be more effectively managed by a collaborative team of senior executives – a team led by someone who is “first among equals” rather than chief executive. This is a subtle distinction, but in light of current data pointing to the gap between CEO-level task demands and leadership capacities, we believe that it is an important idea for trustees, executives and leadership advisors to consider.

4 In our consulting practice, Hawthorne Consultants, we see whole-system change as comprising **three** primary tasks: 1) setting a shared direction/strategy; 2) engaging people around real work; and 3) developing organizational capacities, including leadership capacities.

About the Authors

Tom Curran lives with the question, “How can wisdom best inform organizational action?” After completing an MBA at Wharton and a tour as a US Naval Officer, Tom has spent 40 years as an executive in, or consultant to, premier organizations such as Procter & Gamble, McKinsey & Company and Marriott International. As the founder of Hawthorne Consultants, Tom works exclusively at the CEO or Division President level to align top teams, develop breakthrough strategies and shift organizational cultures. He integrates strategy and organization development from a whole-system perspective to help create “good things” in organizations.

Allison Conte helps clients to solve complex problems, generate adaptive change and increase agility in individuals, teams and organizations. For 20 years, she has consulted with large organizations across a variety of industries, including energy, manufacturing health care and publishing. Her expertise includes Gestalt, Appreciative Inquiry, Polarity Management, Emotional, Social and Spiritual Intelligence, developmental psychology and Holacracy. In addition to her role as senior consultant at Hawthorne Consultants, Allison is a master executive coach in Weatherhead School of Management's Executive Education program, and a lecturer at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. She holds a masters degree in organization development from the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University.

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