

COACHING FOR LEADERS

Most of us know the experience of frustration and how it impairs our happiness. Here's a little known truth: much of our frustration comes from incompletions. "Incompletions" are things we *need* to do but haven't yet done, things we *want* to do but haven't yet done, things we have *started* but haven't finished, or things *others* want us to do and that we want to do for them but haven't yet done. For many people, the name of their greatest unhappiness is "my unfinished tasks list." Incompletions claim a piece of our heart, mind, and energy, all of which could be better used for living life.

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The nature of our society generates a large number of incompletions. Most people find that they simply can't keep up with all the things asked of them by the state, the church, the job, the family, the house, the yard, the car, the portfolio, and the bill file. Need I go on? All our access to information and technology makes us more susceptible to the plague of incompletions. Probably no other age of human history has created as many opportunities, demands, and therefore, incompletions. There is often a large gap between what we want to get done and what we have accomplished; also there is often a large gap between what we want to be and what we are. Whether it is exercise or weight loss or getting the house in order or writing that book or achieving professional goals, we are often frustrated with the gap between what we want—even what we have firmly decided—and what we do.

Information is not the solution. Most of us have the information we need to do change but still don't do it. For example, did you know that the New York Times Bestseller List has, for every week of the 44 years (that's 3,328 weeks) it has been in existence, held at least one diet book (and most experts agree that any one of them would work). Yet Americans are fatter than ever. Clearly it is not information that is needed.

Inspiration (motivation) is not the solution. Inspiration is great, but it evaporates too quickly. We all know how quickly we can go from motivated to unmotivated. The great inspiration of a

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seminar or conference or workshop barely survives the trip home. How many times have you come across the notes you took at a conference—notes about things you wanted to do when you got home—and found that you hadn't done them? It's the usual human experience. Inspiration is very volatile and evaporates quickly.

Something more than information or inspiration is needed. That something is coaching. Coaching is an ongoing relationship between two people in which one of those people is entirely dedicated to helping the other person to accomplish his/her agenda. Coaching helps a person to accomplish what he or she wants to accomplish. It helps people do what they want to do. Coaching closes the gap between their intentions and their completions. I like to tell my clients that they are always the pilots, and they can have me as their co-pilot if they want, but they will always remain the pilot. They decide where they want to go and the route they want to take to get there. I am there to help them get where they want to go.

Coaching adds to a person's life someone whose only interest in them is seeing that person do their best so they can be their best. Of course, the coach is also interested in making money, but the best coaches only get paid when their client has attained what he or she hired the coach to attain. Clearly it is in the coach's interest to make sure that the client is clear about what he or she wants to attain and what measures will be used to determine whether he or she has attained it.

Coaches are specialists in completions. Coaches know how to help other people accomplish their goals, fulfill their dreams, finish their incompletions, implement their decisions, and realize their plans. The chances of actually following through with decisions to change behaviors are slim, but coaching greatly improves the odds. Studies have shown, for example, that coaching is a highly effective and superior strategy in reducing total cholesterol and other coronary risk factors such as high blood pressure, compared to patients who were prescribed medication but not coached.

More and more people are hiring coaches: to help them lose weight, finish doctoral degrees, redesign their careers, start a new business, or sort out their lives.

Many leaders hire coaches. Leaders are usually high performance people who have a lot expected of them and who expect a lot of themselves. They passionately believe in the importance of what they are doing and very much want to accomplish a lot of good things with and for the people they lead. They want to do better and they want to be better. That's why they hire coaches.

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Leaders who have a lot of incompletions create a lot of suffering for a lot of people. (This is the same thing as saying that a leader who doesn't manage to accomplish what he decides to accomplish creates a lot of difficulties and problems for the people he is leading.) By definition, leaders affect others. (Of course, all people affect others and, in that sense, all people are leaders, but obviously some people affect a lot more people than others.) Those “large-scale” leaders have larger networks and greater influence. If a leader's incompletions are in the area of his/her responsibility for leadership in his/her organization, the leader's incompletions might not only cause a lot of pain for the people in the organization, but may actually cause the organization to fail (partially or completely) with dire consequences for society or even the world. We are not speaking here of leaders who have unethical values or immoral ambitions. Rather, we are speaking of leaders who want good things and who do their best, but their best isn't good enough to prevent the suffering of people close to them. These people will experience distress because the leader can't get it done, can't follow through, won't get better organized, loses sight of the big picture, can't delegate, can't or won't set goals, can't inspire a shared vision in his organization, or can't handle execution well. It is vitally important for leaders to close the gap between what they decide to do and what they actually do. If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, so is the road to frustration, pain, and failure for leaders and those who network with them (directly or indirectly) if the leaders' good intentions are not accomplished in actions.

The best leadership coaching takes advantage of the large network of relationships that most leaders have. Research shows that leaders who want to improve their leadership skills are more successful when they involve the people they live and work with in helping them to do it (*The Drucker Foundation: The Leader of the Future*, Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Beckhard, 1997, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 227-237, ISBN: 0787909351). Not only is it very difficult to make a behavioral change without support and assistance, but studies in cognitive dissonance show that observers tend to discount real behavioral changes that they observe in others, believing the person to be the same even though the person has actually accomplished a significant alteration in behavior. What seems to happen is that people label others (“He doesn't listen well.” “She is arrogant.” “He never consults others.”) and fail to re-label them even when the other person changes. So it is necessary, not only that the leader accomplish the change he/she intends to accomplish, but it is also necessary that the people the leader lives and works with

recognize that the change has taken place. The best way to do this is to involve the people who are in the leader's network in the change effort.

We have used a method used and described by Marshall Goldsmith in his executive coaching that combines multi-rater feedback, a personalized action plan focused on observable behaviors, consistent "coaching" in the form of feedback and (what Goldsmith calls) "feed-forward" by persons in the leader's network of daily relationships, and periodic assessment of the leader's utilization of that network, with low levels of traditional coaching. By "low levels," we mean that the coach spends as little time as possible in coaching the leader, and what time he does spend is spent mostly in teaching the leader to better utilize his/her network of relationships and the suggestions he/she is receiving from them. (Goldsmith calls these individuals "stakeholders" because they have a large stake in the leader's success since they are relationally bound together in the effort to achieve success in some joint endeavor.) Let me describe the process in some detail.

The leader wants to get better at leading. He hires a coach. The coach suggests that the leader ask the people he works with what they think about his performance. We usually suggest that the leader ask for feedback through some form of 360° assessment instrument (multi-rater information). [We have been using the "Leadership Practices Inventory" (LPI) developed by James Kouzes and Barry Posner from their research that resulted in their book *The Leadership Challenge* (3rd Edition, 2002, Jossey-Bass, ISBN: 0787956783).] We have also conducted interviews with people the leader interacts with (with the leader's permission, of course), explaining that every leader is successful *because of* some things and *in spite of* some other things, and we would like to know what they would put on those two lists. With the data from the 360° and the interviews in hand, we sit down with the leader and analyze the feedback. We invite the leader to choose one or two specific behaviors that he would like to change that he believes would give him "the most bang for his buck" (ie, the greatest return on the investment of energy he is going to make in changing). Then we assist the leader in creating an action plan for change. The timeline here is about a year. It takes that long for new behaviors to "stick." (Sometimes we do a shorter timeframe, but with smaller and less ambitious goals for change.) The next step is to explain to the leader that the best and easiest way for him to achieve his action plan and attain his goal is to ask his co-workers to help him. Many leaders resist this. They think they will lose influence if they do this. They think they will look weak. We

explain to them that they will powerfully create a culture of learning and performance improvement, that their co-workers will see them as strong, not weak, secure enough to ask for help, human enough to trust. Even so, there is often much resistance. (Coaching pastors seems to be the worst. Not only are pastors reluctant to admit to being human, but congregants are often reluctant to “touch the Lord’s anointed” by participating in the process.) We explain to the leader that his task is not only to change, but to convince others that he has changed, and that the best way to do this is to involve them in the process all along. Usually we get the client to agree to participate in the process, but we know that there may well be sabotage (conscious and unconscious) along the way. At this point, we ask the leader to identify his “stakeholders.” The next step is to ask the stakeholders to participate. We do this in two ways: First, I meet with the chosen group of stakeholders either as a group or individually—with the leader present—and explain to them what it means to be a stakeholder, after the leader has told them that he wants to become a better leader and needs their help. Second, I coach the leader in how to ask stakeholders to participate (with role plays and multiple rehearsals, if necessary) and he enrolls them himself. We ask the stakeholders to commit to four things (and here again we follow Marshall Goldsmith’s practice):

1. To not hold the leader hostage to the past but rather to give him a new blank page for the future;
2. To commit to being a supportive coach, helper, and “cheerleader” for the leader as he works at becoming better;
3. To agree to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth;
4. To identify something in their own lives that needs to change and commit to working on that while the leader is working on his stuff.

In my experience, most people are willing, even eager, to commit to this work (with the reluctance noted above concerning church members committing to their pastors). Perhaps there are leaders out there who are so punitive that their co-workers would never agree to give them honest feedback, but those kinds of leaders appear not to ask for this kind of help. Once the stakeholders are enrolled in the process, I spend some time teaching the leader how to let them help him. What we want the leader to do is to frequently contact each stakeholder and say three things:

1. Thank you for agreeing to help me to accomplish my goals for becoming a better leader.
2. How have I been doing?
3. Do you have any suggestions for me for how I might do better in the future?

Then we want the leader to listen carefully to what the stakeholder says, write it down without modification or comment, and simply say, “Thank you. I really appreciate this. Do you have any other suggestions for me?” (For some leaders, it requires a lot of coaching to get to this place!) The leader then utilizes the feedback and suggestions he has received and checks back with the stakeholders again in a week or a month. After about three months, we ask all the stakeholders to complete a very short, very simple (usually) on-line survey that asks them whether the leader utilized them, with what frequency, and whether they perceive the leader as “better, worse, or about the same” compared to the starting point. If the stakeholders say that the leader is not working the process, then the coach wants to know why not. This is often the place for some serious accountability. The “mini-surveys” are repeated at six and nine months. There is a somewhat more comprehensive survey at the completion of the year-long contract.

Goldsmith and his partners don't get paid until the end of the contracted year, and then only if the client and the stakeholders agree that he got what he contracted for—improved performance according to the agreed-on action plan. In my coaching of pastors and teachers and most church administrators, I don't get paid anyway, so we don't usually write the contract that way.

This coaching process has several benefits:

1. The leader is more likely to improve. Adding stakeholders into the coaching mix improves the result enormously. Systems theorists will readily understand how difficult it is for any one person in a system to change since that change affects the whole system, which will resist the change and attempt to preserve homeostasis. This method of coaching enlists the system in the change process and makes it an agent for change instead of against change.
2. Others recognize when the leader changes. Imagine two scenarios: In the first, Bob sets out all on his own to become a better listener because his last 360° assessment showed that his co-workers, his direct reports, and his manager all agreed that

he didn't listen well. And let's say he really works at it and he really does get better at listening well. But nobody notices. They have all labeled Bob as "not a good listener" and they aren't watching for any signs that he is changing. If and when Bob slips and doesn't listen well just one time, everyone says, "Yep. That's Bob. He doesn't listen." At the end of the year, Bob is doing a much better job of listening, but he's still wearing the same old label.

Here's the other scenario: Bob looks at his feedback and decides he has got to do better at listening, so he tells a number of his co-workers that he is committed to getting better at this and asks them for their help. They agree, but they are frankly skeptical that Bob can or will change. A few days later, they are amazed when Bob comes to them and says, "Hey, thanks so much for helping me with this. I've really been working on it. Have you noticed any change?" They're surprised! Bob seems to be in earnest. But, no, they haven't noticed any change. They weren't looking for any change because they didn't expect Bob to follow through. They would have been surprised to see a change. So they say to Bob, "Well, maybe a little." Bob says, "Great! Do you have any suggestions for me? How can I do this better?" They say, "Well, I don't know. Just keep doing whatever you're doing, I guess." Bob says, "Okay. If you think of anything, let me know, and I'll check back with you." A week or two later, Bob's back. "How am I doing? Do you have any suggestions for me?" By this time, they're getting the message that Bob is serious about this, so they actually start looking. And they begin to offer Bob some suggestions. And every time they do, Bob says, "Great! Thanks so much." And he writes it down. And they really do see Bob doing better at this. One day Bob slips and cuts in on somebody and runs over what they saying. The next time he talks to his stakeholders, they mention that incident and Bob says, "You're right. Thank you. I did do that. I'm sorry. Do you have any suggestions for me on how I can keep from doing that again?" At the end of the year, Bob's co-workers are impressed. Bob has become a better listener—and they noticed!

3. The entire culture is affected by the process, and the value of learning, personal improvement, and cooperation are enhanced. The organization becomes a learning organization. People see their leaders engaging in continuous quality improvement and begin to do it themselves. Leaders not only

model the way in this regard, they also model humility, trust, vulnerability, teachability, equality, servant-leadership—and Christlikeness.

The “Level Five Leadership” that Jim Collins describes as characteristic of organizations that successfully make the jump from good to great is facilitated by such a process (*Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... And Others Don't*, James Collins, 2001, Collins, ISBN: 0066620996). Leaders who are willing to engage in this process are the leaders who grow into the kind of leadership Collins describes, and are unlikely to become the self-centered, coercive, abusive leaders that distort the image of Christ, handicap their organizations, diminish their people, and impede the work of the Kingdom of God in the world.

One final word: A Christian coach would never continue to work with someone who was immoral or unethical. Such leaders don't need coaching. They need firing. Character issues are not compatible with Christian coaching.

Everybody influences somebody. People who want to be the best they can be need others to help them get there. By becoming the best they can be, they materially enhance the lives of others, increasing their happiness and advancing the quest of others to become the best they can be. Coaching helps people to complete their incompletions, becoming the people they want to become, accomplishing the goals they choose to accomplish. A coaching process that utilizes the powerful relationships that surround the person being coached is not only more effective, it is a living witness to the reality of the gospel and the kingdom of God.