

Coaching: Smooth operator

If leadership coaching is to offer real value, it needs to focus on mastering a seamless gear change between a range of opposing behaviours. Judith Nicol and Paul Sparrow explain why

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Coaching and reflection have become common development tools embraced by senior leaders. The word “reflection” would have been difficult for CEOs and HR directors to embrace a decade ago. But now there are few who would not talk about the need to reflect. Why? Do we have a new generation of leaders who think and behave differently? Or is it that CEOs now face such uncertainty that they must acknowledge the need to reflect? Sadly, the reasons are not so positive – there is a risk that reflection is only surface deep and does not lead to a more evolved leadership style or higher performance.

Similarly, coaching may not be having the effect it should. Consider the type of coaching available for CEOs. Why might it reinforce “more of the same” in our leaders? At middle management level, coaching interventions tend to be structured and monitored by HR. But at senior levels the HR director is often kept away from coaching relationships, ostensibly for reasons of confidentiality. Leaders often rely on a type of coaching more akin to a consigliere role and this is only partially successful in developing high performance. Coaching at this level can amount to little more than leaders merely talking to people with similar experiences. Instead of broadening leadership range, they merely improve tactics.

In order for reflection and coaching interventions to be effective long term and counteract risks, there has to be some kind of underlying transformation that moves leaders towards higher performance, otherwise it will only produce “more of the same”. Leaders need to learn how to move smoothly between a range of opposing styles.

First, though, what is it about leadership styles that could pose a danger to organisations? Few CEOs will say that they are not good at taking on board others’ views – but, in reality, many are poor at “unattached” listening. This will lead to poor-quality strategy talk (defined as the free-ranging analysis of the business model needed to ensure sound strategic execution).

This is made worse by leaders’ manipulation of emotional intelligence (EI). Although there is a greater awareness now of the desirability of EI in a leader’s repertoire, many pay superficial attention to it, using it as a transactional charm tactic rather than allowing it to enable powerful listening. For example, it is used (often unknowingly) to satisfy other executives when, in reality, it is simply providing a veneer of interest and acknowledgement. And there can be a price to pay. This kind of leadership dynamic can lead top teams and leaders to develop an “illusion of control” over this business model. This tends to manifest itself in three ways:

- **miscalibrations**, where leaders assess outcomes as better than average when they are not;
- **illusions of control**, a judgment bias where leaders overestimate the precision of the information available to them, so misjudge their level of control, contingency options and their ability to predict;
- **an unrealistic optimism**.

Another problem is that many CEOs go into strategic discussions with a firm view of what the outcomes will be. Important issues are discussed in advance to line up the necessary allegiances, leaving little genuine discussion for the boardroom.

Recent controversy about the depth of discussion conducted by the former government surrounding decisions about the Iraq war reminds of us this danger. Often such behaviours are a by-product of egos – senior leaders needing to manage the process. In essence, few leaders exhibit real flexibility and free choice in their selection of leadership approach. The decision tends to result from a reflex response or behavioural patterns established over a long period of time. Most leaders will have a natural propensity for either a hard power or soft power approach (see chart, below). Although, intellectually, some leaders may recognise the difference between these approaches, few have the self-awareness to be in the best position – able to choose between the two or combine both in some appropriate way.



Worse still, as long as overall personal and business performance is good, there can remain a culture amongst senior leaders that their leadership styles are “fit for purpose”, which discourages change and promotes a “one-gear” approach. Traditional psychometric assessment and behavioural models contribute to this: they may be true and valid but are linear.

Looking at the typical behavioural patterns of senior leaders, it is evident that their reflex responses are typically associated with hard power rather than soft. And this pattern is repeated generation after generation as high-potential individuals observe and emulate what seems to be working. Although some of the soft power characteristics, such as humility or putting others before self, are regarded as nice to have, rarely are they seen to be as essential as self-confidence and looking after oneself. This limits leadership range and performance.

Male leaders may try to adopt what they perceive to be EI behaviours, but the two aspects are often not integrated and this can cause them to appear unauthentic. Sometimes they revert to soft power responses more as a result of recognising their own dysfunctionality and wanting to escape it. For example, their decisiveness may have taken them into a cul de sac of exhaustion and complexity where reflection seems the only way out.

For women in senior roles, there is a tendency for them to become more limited in their leadership range after observing what makes their senior (typically male) counterparts successful. They frequently abandon skills in a nurturing, collaborative, soft power style for a more action-orientated, hard power approach. While there are clear benefits for any leader with soft power reflexes to broaden their range to incorporate hard power responses, frequently they over-compensate and just exchange one set of reflexes for another. The risk is that functional stereotypes rather than innate ability start to drive the career choices made. There are few senior women in substantial line roles - the majority are to be found in functional roles: HR, marketing or PR.

What, then, can be done to produce high-performance leadership and better all-round leaders? A key capability often talked about is "dual gearing". This involves the capacity to shift between two modes of thinking – from an automatic and intuitive type of processing to a more analytical and conscious type of engagement. Leaders need to be able to sense when a switch is appropriate - when to process in one or another mode.

The key here for most leaders is deciding which side they want to be on but understanding how to keep the opposite style in operation. It's like being able to use the left hand in a right-handed situation – and knowing that this is different to how you would use your left hand by itself. Combining opposites in this way produces more rounded leaders capable of getting the best out of everyone, thus improving their effectiveness.

Let's return to the problem of strategy talk and the dangers of senior leaders having an "illusion of control" over the business model. Instead of entering a discussion only to persuade the other person round to their perspective, combining their styles and empowering others, showing vulnerability and considering alternative options will build trust among teams. It will feel balanced and considered, yet with a strong sense of momentum. It will also make people feel safe to follow and give their commitment.

For women pre-disposed to soft power behaviours who want to progress to the most senior levels, it is essential that they "dual gear" around aspects such as focusing attention on themselves (in addition to the needs of others). They also need to express self-confidence and keep humility in check (or, at least, not overplay it).

However, there is a substantial obstacle to unlocking leaders' ability to dual gear. If they are producing the results that keep the board and business world satisfied, where is the motivation for them to change?

Most leaders, however successful, have an "imposter syndrome" – a fear of being "found out". This vulnerability will make them curious as to how they can maximise the chances of continuing to be successful. Most leaders are besieged with inner questions that they will share only with their closest confidant or coach: "Can I reproduce this success year on year? What if the market fundamentally changes? What if my current formula stops working?"

The skill is pulling this data together and getting them to ask themselves: "Is this limiting me? And if it limits me, will it limit people around me? And if it limits them, what intelligence am I missing out on?"

The key, then, is for leaders and coaches to spot the need for when they need to change gears. This might be triggered by external factors, such as a shift in current politics, or an assessment of organisational capability. Or it could be an internal awareness, often a bodily reaction to uncompromising behaviour. This underlying EI might give points of entry to discussions around leadership style.

Robust 360-degree feedback and other interventions of a non-linear nature, including coaching, can also start to open leaders' eyes to the limitations of a one-gear approach and the fact that it may pose a risk to their continued success.

To conclude, having the self-awareness to be able to choose between opposite responses or combine them appropriately is a discipline that requires practice - leaders have to be prepared to take risks as they learn to broaden their range. Where leaders achieve this, they will be powerful and also have great followership in their organisations. In turn, their organisations will develop a culture that mirrors the best of a hard and soft power approach