

Why Leaders Need Coaches

- Barbara Walsh

Last week I had a breakfast meeting with someone I've known for a long time. Lesley is the MD of a marketing company, based in Johannesburg with many offices around the country.

Lesley was curious. She knew I had recently sold my award-winning tourism business and, although I have been coaching for many years on a part-time basis, thought it seemed crazy to sell out now, just because I wanted to do more meaningful work. Especially considering that coaching is an industry which is still finding its feet in this country - and doing so right in the middle of the economic downturn!

She wasn't even sure she understood what Coaching is all about. She'd heard about Life Coaching and Business Coaching, and initially she thought it had something to do with therapy - people go to coaches if they need fixing on some level. I explained to her that coaching was very different to therapy. Typically people seek therapy when they have deep issues from the past which need healing before they are able to take on the future in a resourceful way.

I explained that coaching is not about fixing the individual or the past. Instead coaching is a process which empowers and enables the client in the context of the present and the future. The coach takes the perspective that their client is already a resourceful human being, who knows they have a great deal of potential, but is not always sure how to access it and reach their goals.

I work specifically in the field of Executive and Leadership Coaching, and this led to Lesley's next question. "Well, she reasoned "if people you work with are already so successful, if they have made it to the top or are well on their way to reaching the top, why would they need a coach? Surely they've proven they have what it takes to reach their potential already? Doesn't having a coach insinuate that you're not up to scratch?"

I started with Leadership Coaching. "People who have been excellent managers are often promoted into senior positions on the basis of their strong technical skills and knowledge. At a middle management level, this has served them well. Middle management is largely operationally focused, and managers, with their teams are required to deliver in the context of set criteria, such as achieving budgets, maintaining customer satisfaction etc. However the next level up, the step from Manager to Leader, requires a whole different set of skills and knowledge."

"Now they need to trust others to deliver the operational results, while they are able to focus on the visionary, strategic and tactical requirements of their roles. They need to be able to lead and inspire people, to challenge the status quo, and to be innovators. Usually they find that the strong technical ability that has carried them this far, does not offer much to which they can refer for the different requirements of their new positions. This is the much-referred to "Leadership Gap". Coaching is one of the fastest possible ways of empowering new and upcoming leaders to develop the necessary attitudes and skills to be effective in their new positions."

"OK", Lesley nodded. "I understand how coaching can be useful for new leaders. But why would the CEO of a multi-national organisation need coaching? After all, at this level they have usually proven they have the necessary attitudes and skills to produce results."

Good question.

As Dr L. Michael Hall of the International Society for Neuro-Semantics puts it:

"Because we all have blind spots, that's why. Even the most psychologically healthy person, the most self-actualizing person, has blind spots and needs someone who will challenge them, confront them and not let them sell themselves short. This is especially true of the most successful and effective people, because often our greatest blind spots are hidden in our greatest strengths."

"I don't get it" Lesley said. "How could that be?"

"It's because when the pressure is really on, we all tend to play to our strengths. Especially if we've been highly successful in our strengths, it is so easy to over-play these when the heat is on, trusting that they will see us through any crisis."

A good example is someone recently in the news, the former CEO of BP, Tony Hayworth. "Can you imagine him in the board room, negotiating with top level executives? His ability to get to the point quickly, to calculate risks and to think in terms of his shareholders would be real strengths in his position."

Lesley nodded.

"And that very strength was his weakness when it came to handling the public and the media. When people wanted to hear his 'heart' about the death of 11 people on the oil rig, and the loss of thousands of jobs due to the oil spill and the impending ecological devastation, Tony was quite dismissive in saying he'd like to get it all over with and get his life back! His strength of operating from the first-person and fighting for himself and his company was his very weakness in the context of managing public relations! We are most tempted at our strengths.

An Executive Coach would have been really useful for Tony at this time. Someone who, in a non-judgmental, private and confidential space would have asked him the questions he doesn't ask himself, been a sounding board and reflected back to him what he says. I bet he didn't have one when he most needed one!

The table had been cleared, and Lesley and I were heading off for our next meetings. As she was leaving, Lesley looked back. "So if I wanted to be coached, how would I find the right coach for me?" she asked. "Well that's another conversation altogether" I smiled. "There are many important factors to be aware of when selecting a coach."

We agreed to schedule some time to talk about it. And that will be the subject of our next article in this series.



Barbara Walsh holds the internationally-recognised Associate Certified Meta-Coach qualification, and is also a NLP/Neuro-Semantics Master Practitioner (Business Leadership). She has a solid understanding and appreciation of the challenges with which businesses today are faced, and thoroughly enjoys facilitating successful, measurable and sustainable solutions through various individual and team coaching interventions.

She is a Board Member of the International Federation of Business & Professional Women - South Africa, and writes regular features on the subjects of coaching and leadership for print and online publications.

