

# Coaching in Leadership Development

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

The search for new insights on leadership and leadership development appears to be insatiable. Indian scholar and spiritual leader Sri Sathya Sai Baba in his Mahavakya\* on Leadership remarks:

*“There are more than 350 definitions for the word Leadership in academic literature in the English language alone. It indicates the general confusion that prevails about the subject and also its complexity”.* (Chibber 1995)

Some scholars ((Arthur et al. 1999-2000; Day 2000) postulate that the intense focus on leadership development has arisen through the urgent need for organisations to find ways of building capacity to deal with the unforeseen challenges brought by our ever-changing global reality. We use this article as a means of showing that by adopting an ‘integral’ stance - one which integrates different theories in the field, we are able to crystallise key insights and to add an extra dimension to the topic. We do this by exploring leadership through the lens of a process designed to aid in its development, namely *coaching*. Coaching here refers to the one-on-one process of business or executive coaching, through which leaders confront their competency to lead and develop an awareness of the road they need to walk to mastery of this capability.

This article has been structured to:

- Explore the concept of leadership and its emerging definition
- Define Coaching in a robust way and to investigate it’s growing relevance in the development of leaders and leadership development
- Look to future trends suggested by current activities

## 2. The concept of leadership

### 1.1 The emerging backdrop

It is interesting to note that traditional leadership theory - such as transformational or charismatic leadership theory, has conceptualized leadership as an individual-level skill (Day 2000). Somehow 50 years of research showing the complexity of the interrelationships between leadership and the social and organisational environment (Fiedler 1996) are ignored when approaching leadership from this view. How to create a lens through which to view both individual and relational aspects of leadership development provides a challenge that needs to be addressed if it is indeed “...the task of a leader to sense and recognise emerging patterns and to position him- or herself,

personally and organizationally, as part of a larger generative force that will reshape the world.” (Arthur et al. 1999-2000 p3)

## 2.1 The boundaries of leadership

The complexities and bounded chaos of the world in which we now live has highlighted the inadequacies inherent in the current definitions of leadership and ways of developing leaders. Indeed, often the underlying assumption of leader development is that more effective leadership occurs through the development of individual leaders and that this will in turn lead to improved social and operational effectiveness (Day 2000).

There is nevertheless an awareness growing that leaders are seeking a process to create shared meaning both in terms of value-add to the organisation and in terms of sense-making within a relational structure. Leaders somehow, in some way, need to develop a new cognitive capacity that will enable them to notice and to pay attention to intangible sources of knowledge and knowing - the ‘knowledge for action’ espoused by Chris Argyris (1993). The relevance of mapping the invisible territory of leadership - the tacit territory - is to develop a deeper level of knowing, a deeper level of awareness (Arthur et al. 1999-2000). We will argue that coaching is the ideal vehicle through which to achieve this seemingly disparate set of objectives.

## 2.2 The emerging competencies of leadership

With these perspectives on Leadership as filters, the requirement for a more essential definition of the competencies that need to be mastered becomes apparent. Divine and Flaherty (2002) present a powerful case for leadership competencies being evidenced across a range of categories which they call ‘domains of competence’.

Using a framework rooted in the work of Habermas (Braaten 1991) they explore leadership in a holistic way. Table 1 below sets out the three domains in which a leader needs to show up and be competent.

**Table 1: Domains of Competence Model**

Domains	Basis of Reality	Illustrative Characteristics	Competencies in Domain
“My” World of Internal Nature (I)	Interpretive	Consciousness, subjectivity, self, self-expression, truthfulness, sincerity	Purpose Self-knowledge Self-correction Persistence
“Our” World of Society (WE)	Interpretive	Ethics and morals, common context, culture, worldviews; mutual understanding, appropriateness, justness	Relationship Communication Leadership Inspiration
“The” World of External Nature (IT)	Objective	Science and technology, objective nature, empirical forms	Processes Technology Measurement Statistics

Source: (Divine and Flaherty 2002)

The thesis of the above framework is that leaders need to master three key realms in order to be effective:

- **I**, constitutes the area of personal mastery, an arena in which the executive seeks to achieve competency in terms of knowing and managing themselves from the inside out.
- **We**, describes the domain of mastering the conversations and relationships with key people through whom the leadership influence is exercised, including the organisation itself
- **It**, outlines the sphere of tasks, processes and things - the tools which a leader needs also to master to make things happen

Divine and Flaherty (2002) have extrapolated this model to explore leadership competencies more fully by asking what qualities and skills a leader would have to master in order to embody the characteristics and competencies outlined in Figure 1. These are contained in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Essential Qualities and Skills**

Domain	Quality	Skill
"I"	Vision Passion Integrity Trust Curiosity	Self-Observation Self-Knowledge Self-Management Self-Remembering Self-Consistency Daring
"We"	Empathy Reliability  Openness  Faith	Listening (to team/concerns) Speaking (possibilities / inspiration) Setting Standards (developing others) Learning Innovating
"It"	Rigor  Objectivity  Persistence Creativity Focused	Analysing (inhibiting factors/sources) Predicting (long & short term effects) Simplifying Building Models Organise/Prioritize/Release

The significance of the above tables lies less in trying to add even more required competencies to the already crowded lexicon of what being a leader entails. Rather they are intended to signpost the fact that such competencies are not going to be developed by training and development courses alone, but require a much more sophisticated approach if any meaningful impact on their development is to be made.

The tables also serve to emphasise how deeply internal the origins of leadership are. Sadler (2003) underlines this in his work on leadership:

*“According to Badaracco and Ellsworth (1989), leaders resolve dilemmas in the light of their own personal philosophies. These philosophies are usually tacit rather than explicit; they involve fundamental assumptions about human nature, about the roles of people in organisations, the nature of managerial work and the kinds of actions they contribute to organisational effectiveness. Like a geological deposit, these tacit philosophies build up over many years, through the experiences and influences that shape a person's life”.* This frames the challenge implied in developing leaders in a persuasive way. Working to develop leaders effectively means engaging with and addressing the deeply internal competencies outlined above. These are competencies that may be beyond the reach of generic interventions which address group learning.

### 3. Coaching - a unique window

#### 3.1 Defining Coaching

Before exploring the unique role that coaching can play in leadership development, it would be valuable to spend some time exploring its dimensions. Coaching has become a clichéd word in social and management practice. It functions as an umbrella phrase which is used to describe processes as dissimilar as managing the strategy and implementation of the Saturday game-plan of sporting teams, to the casual words of advice offered in the corridor to a colleague struggling with some dilemma. In reality, coaching has become a strongly applied and researched process in the corporate context, with a track-record of twenty years in more developed economies. It has also developed a range of exponents, theories and schools which say and mean very different things when they use the term. Some exploration here is necessary to frame which stance this article departs from.

#### 3.2 What coaching is not

Perhaps to start with what coaching is categorically not. All too often the term is used as a bucket to embrace any kind of advice given in a friendly and constructive manner. This is damaging to coaching and leaves people with the illusion that simply by changing their tone of voice and their manner that things once seen as giving suggestions, answers, input and perspective and even manipulation, are now coaching. A coach is absolutely not:

- Simply an accountability partner who supports someone to reach their goals
- A disciplinarian who changes someone's unwanted actions
- A cheerleader who supports from the side
- A devil's advocate who asks different questions or takes an alternative point of view, simply for the point of debate

There are terms already for these roles - inspector, teacher, supporter and sounding board. Why bother using the obsolete term of coach to rename existing roles played very necessarily and successfully in organisations and life? To be crass, if you want

solutions call a consultant, if you want answers seek out a sage and if you are desperate for advice speak to a minister. So, if that's what coaching is not, then what is it?

### 3.3 What coaching is

Coaching for the purposes of this discussion has been framed within the philosophy of coaching which has been variously called 'generative', 'ontological' or 'integral' coaching. These words are used to describe a perspective on coaching which has deep and impressive academic and philosophical sources.

Fernando Flores (1999) is a key figure in the formation of the discipline. Flores, a Chilean academic and modern management philosopher, was greatly influenced by the novel, yet biologically grounded ideas of philosopher Humberto Maturana (1998) on perception, cognition, language and communication. These ideas were a key inspiration for research in which he particularly focussed on the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger (1999) and the work in Speech Acts of John Searle (1969). James Flaherty, a student and collaborator with Flores has expanded these roots over the last ten years, into the branch of Integral Coaching which powerfully blends the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (2002) and the work of modern philosopher Ken Wilber (2000). It is this stance that we humbly and respectfully defer to in our journey forward in this article.

A coach, from this perspective:

*"Observes and works with key aspects of how the coachee (in our context, a leader) has structured their reality and the nature of their existence i.e. their perceptions and ways of participating in life"* (Sieler 2003). In Flaherty's view coaching is thus:

*"A professional relationship grounded in mutual trust and respect and directed towards a set of clear outcomes, guided by presence and informed by broad models of what it means to be a human being"* (Flaherty 1999). The primary outcomes targeted by a coach working from this standpoint are competence and fulfilment. Flaherty is eloquent in distinguishing these two concepts:

- *"Competence is distinct from a goal. A goal is something you achieve. Competence is a capacity that endures. It helps us achieve particular goals and stays with us afterwards."*
- *Fulfilment is a deeply felt experience that what we are doing and how we are living and who we are becoming is meaningful and worthwhile. For an individual the value of fulfilment is self-evident. For organisations it makes a difference when people are fulfilled because they stay longer and generate better results."*

The essential role of a coach is thus to provide a powerful learning context in which coachees explore new distinctions that expand how they observe the world, enabling them to become more effective and powerful. Coaches drive towards enabling two specific outcomes for the people they work with; self-correction and self-generation. Flaherty (1999) provides compelling distinctions for both:

- *"When we are self-correcting we have the capacity to observe discrepancies between what we intend and the actual outcomes, between the espoused values and our actual actions, and then bridge the gap. When clients are self-correcting, they are not dependant on the coach"*

- *“When self-generating, we have the ability to continuously renew ourselves by drawing upon resources from without and within. When clients are self-generating, the development of competence becomes not a final end-state but a continuous process.*

## 4. Coaching - a lens on leadership development

### 4.1 Relevance of coaching in leadership development

Having profiled leadership as requiring a more subtle and sophisticated scrutiny and having trawled the true nature of coaching, what contributions can coaching make therefore, in the development of leaders?

Perhaps the starting point is how leadership development has evolved from the somewhat narrow and mechanical focus of the past. Sadler (2003) underlines this when he writes:

*“It is important to distinguish between leadership development programmes and leadership training courses. A course as the term implies is a single event that may last everything from a day to several weeks, the purpose of which is to improve the effectiveness in the leadership of those attending. A leadership development programme, however, is a series of related events, including courses, but also such things as coaching, job assignments, attendance at an assessment/development centre, learning sets and/or various forms of feedback”.*

The shift towards coaching in leadership development has been driven by the shift from traditional pedagogic (child-based) models of learning to more adult-centred andragogic models. The key distinctions between these models of learning were first comprehensively explored by Malcolm Knowles. Knowles’ (1984) research and insights are captured in Table 3 below

**Table 3: Different Learning Modes**

Aspect	Pedagogic	Andragogic
LEARNER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dependant on teacher</li> <li>• Teacher has full responsibility</li> <li>• Decisions as to what is learned and how, are the teachers</li> <li>• Only role for learner to be submissive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learner is self-directing</li> <li>• Drive is towards taking responsibility for self-concept</li> <li>• Feel resentment and resistance when we feel others making decisions affecting our learning experience</li> <li>• Energy gets diverted from learning when ability to be self-directing is absent</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learner has little experience of much value as resource for learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners enter with great volume of relevant experience</li> <li>• Learning seen as their richest resource for self</li> </ul>

<p><b>LEARNERS EXPERIENCE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experience of the teacher or learning aids that count</li> <li>• Backbone of learning resides in the transmission techniques e.g. notes etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Techniques need to make use of this experience</li> <li>• Individualised learning plans are key</li> <li>• Experience can also be source of bad habits and prejudices which learning must be designed to overcome</li> <li>• Rejecting their experience is akin to rejecting the person</li> </ul>
<p><b>READINESS TO LEARN</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students ready to learn what they are told</li> <li>• Readiness largely a function of age</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readiness to learn based on need to know something to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives</li> <li>• Many triggers to learning exist</li> </ul>

Source: (Knowles 1984)

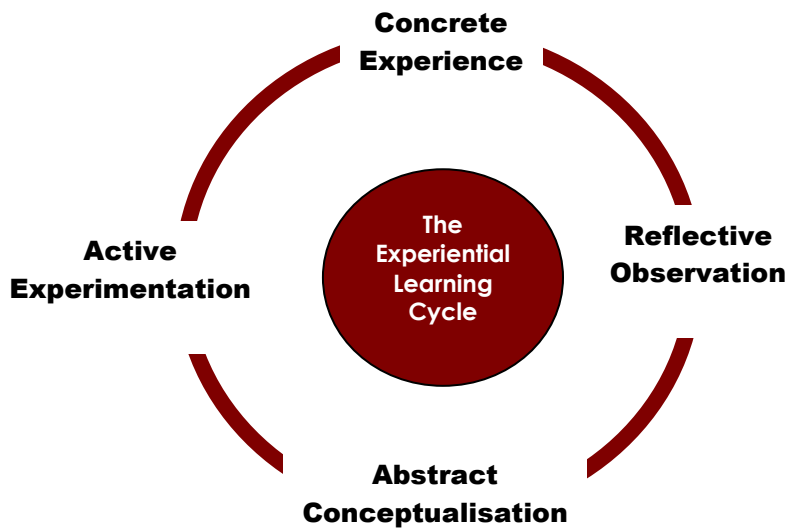
Knowles’ research provides strong insights for why coaching works well in the context of leadership development:

- Firstly, coaching is an andragogic modality. It represents a strongly tailored context for development, in which the coachee (leader) retains captaincy of the learning process and maintains responsibility for the outcomes of the process. However, the coach plays a strong role helping the leader to find out what causes their behaviour and helps to catalyse optimal or desired change.
- Secondly, leaders use their own experience in coaching as a basis for action, reflection and growth. The coach uses language and questions to help the leader to observe their actions in ways which can help to unlock new possibilities.
- Thirdly, during coaching, leaders find their own solutions, rather than being told what to do, and in doing so they develop and sharpen the competencies talked about in the I, We, It model described in Table 1 above. A model such as this is compelling in coaching because it can be used by the coach as a way of assessing a leader’s competencies and ascertaining the focus of the coaching. It can also be used as a way of the coach providing key insights and designing new practices that can enhance the leader’s power in a specific area. As each of these domains is present in organisations, the better leaders are able to perform optimally in each domain the better able they are to lead their organisations.
- Finally, the leaders hold no one but themselves accountable for their learning and actions. The coach at no stage takes responsibility for the learning and growth process. Any dilution of this principle is likely to lead to the coachee not being able to push through at key stages when the coaching is tackling difficult issues.

A second perspective as to why coaching works in the context of leadership development flows from the work of Kolb (1976). Kolb defines learning as a process by which knowledge is created by ‘transforming learning into meaning’. The process is labelled as *experiential learning*, and occurs over the four phases pictured in Figure 1 below.



**Figure1. Experiential Learning Cycle**



The coaching process outlined above mirrors Kolb’s description of learning closely and is described in Table 4 below

**Table 4. The Experiential Learning Cycle**

Cycle	Experiential Learning
Concrete Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Something happens or is happening that causes us to pay attention</li> </ul>
Reflective Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We consciously stop to think about (reflect on) what occurred in the actual experience</li> </ul>
Abstract Conceptualisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involves developing hypotheses and conclusions from the experience which need to be tested</li> </ul>

<b>Active Experimentation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The learner tests their newly developed principles or hypotheses by taking action which results in new experience. The cycle repeats itself</li></ul>
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Coaching strongly mirrors the process of experiential learning:

- **Concrete Experience** - The coachee (leader) experiences a process which forces them to become aware of the need to change what they are doing and how. This may come through the leader reflecting on past actions, or from feedback (360-degree type input from subordinates and peers) which causes the leader to see their behaviour in a new way.
- **Reflective Observation** - The coach suggests some observations that the coachee (leader) should do to become aware of what has caused them to get to where they are and the triggers that cause them to become stuck.
- **Abstract Conceptualisation** - The coach works with the coachee (leader) to consider alternative possible solutions that may assist the leader to make a breakthrough with regard to the challenge facing them.
- **Active Experimentation** - The coachee (leader) tries new practices developed in partnership with the coach and assesses the impact on the desired results.

## 5. Trends and likely future scenarios

### 5.1 Propositions

We would like to put forward some propositions regarding coaching in the context of leadership development. These represent our views of the likely future trends that will emerge. The statements are stated as propositions because they will require monitoring through research and evaluation.

**Proposition 1.** *Coaching will become a significant component of leadership development into the future and an increasing proportion of leadership development budgets.*

The impact of coaching on competency development and its ability to be tailored to the unique situation and characteristics of a leader will make it a sought after development modality into the future. It will begin to complement and even replace more generic leadership development forms such as off-the-shelf training courses, popular readings and generic education.

**Proposition 2.** *Organisations will increasingly seek to develop ‘coaching cultures’ as a way of differentiating themselves.*

Coaching skills and their wider application will begin to proliferate across organisational levels and functions. Organisations will increasingly look to investing in developing and acquiring coaching skills as a way of developing leadership talent and as a way of achieving competitive advantage.

**Proposition 3.** *Coaching will become increasingly used to integrate the learning and development outcomes aimed for in other learning modalities.*

Organisations will begin to view coaching as a development modality that can integrate and complement the learning outcomes that are targeted in initiatives such as training and development, assessment centres, mentoring programs and learner-directed development programs.

## **5.2 Conclusion**

Coaching can play a significant role in leadership development because it echoes strongly the process of how adults learn. It seeks to help leaders understand the meaning they bring to their surroundings and the actions they take. Working within the domain of how leaders see the world it strives to build competency development and to leave the leaders self-correcting and self-generating. As such it provides a highly tailored way of allowing leaders to explore the habits which get them stuck and the paths they need to build towards outstanding performance. Coaching will become an increasing part of the leadership-development landscape into the future.

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