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The Paradox of Success:

The Case for Leadership Coaching for Technical Professionals

As an executive and personal coach over the past 16 years, I've enjoyed the opportunity to help many executives and highly trained professionals examine and revise the patterns of thinking and behavior that have threatened their career success. I have seen leaders in many industries convert their unconscious, ineffective and unintended impact on others into positive influence and outcomes, radically improving their work performance and their personal satisfaction. In today's parlance we understand they have raised their emotional intelligence (EQ) for the benefit of themselves and those with whom they work.¹

Not all professions embrace the concepts of leadership EQ.

The imperative for organizational leaders to elevate and apply their EQ has penetrated the world of big business and private industry at an explosive rate in the last decade, and executive coaching is recognized as the most successful approach to develop those skills. It is considered a mainstream benefit and common intervention in many Fortune 500 companies. Yet other professions, notably medicine, law, engineering and academia, have not been so quick to embrace the practice. It appears that physicians, attorneys, professors and engineers are more inclined to dismiss or devalue the concept of emotional intelligence. They regard it as unnecessary, irrelevant, even insulting.

But why? Cultural myths about what constitutes leadership success in these professions remain rooted and reinforced in long-held traditions such as tenure, peer review, partnership status and billable hours. These traditions are governed by a set of beliefs that run along these lines:

- . Performance measures are best determined and assessed **only** by one's professional peers.

¹ The collection of skills that make up EQ fall into four categories: 1.self-awareness - the ability to accurately and intentionally assess one's impact on others; 2. self-management – the ability to understand and manage one's own emotional responses to situations and people; 3. social awareness- the ability to “read” the needs of others, and demonstrate respect for others' feelings; and 4.relationship management – the ability to sensitively and patiently manage complex people and problems.



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- Tenure, volume and outcomes (e.g., years teaching, books published, procedures performed, trials won, etc.) are the sole determinants of leadership eligibility. (Quantity outweighs quality.)
- Leaders are born, not made. You either have a kind of people-focused personality or you don't, and it's up to others to adapt.
- Experienced and successful adults cannot (or will not, or should not have to) change if they've produced excellent results doing what they've always done.

Is success the “problem”?

For technical stars, interpersonal communication problems and leadership snafus are often, unwittingly, **the direct result of their success**. While conventional wisdom points to inherently poor people skills (less kindly described as arrogance, insensitivity, narcissism, manipulation, rudeness, bull-headedness, etc.) as the source of many leaders' shortcomings, I don't agree. They are simply continuing to do what they have been trained to do, then recognized and rewarded for doing it by being appointed into leadership positions.²

Medical school emphasizes self-reliance, competitive intellect, aggressive treatment; the ability to 'rule out', to cut out, to take charge, give orders, act quickly. In law school, it's critical thinking, reliance on facts and evidence, conviction in the face of opposition, oratory skills and the emphasis on winning that's essential to the successful litigator. Autonomy, decisiveness, and detachment are heralded.

These qualities are in direct contrast to the current paradigm of leadership, which stresses the importance of relationships and self-awareness: the capacity to connect, be a team player, to influence, to listen, to empathize, support, negotiate, adapt and reflect – skills and qualities not typically listed in job descriptions or taught in med or law school, but nonetheless expected. Many physicians are now being compensated in direct proportion to patient satisfaction ratings; asking how patients **feel** about their care was unheard of a decade ago, and certainly not a condition of employment. Hiring criteria and pay-for-performance models are expanding to include these intangible people skills that comprise emotional and relationship

² Commonly referred to as the Peter Principle: people in a hierarchy rising to the highest level of incompetence.



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intelligence. Participatory decision-making is becoming the norm, not the exception. These are encouraging and challenging trends.

Meanwhile, surgeons know how to save lives but receive no preparation for running a hospital. A prolific university professor can write a Nobel treatise on global economics but not be able to govern his own department of 6. The litigator can win murder trials but be a serial loser in interpersonal relationships with his support staff. Engineers can design behemoth bridges that span the seas, but be unable to bridge small interpersonal differences in the office. And it might not be their fault!

But how can an old doc learn new tricks?

While it is absolutely true that our personality types and preferences influence our ability to develop a deep emotional intelligence, it is also true that long installed habits and patterns CAN be changed or augmented when there is sufficient motivation, incentive, and optimal conditions for learning. Leadership Coaching for technical professionals is specifically designed to help close the gap between technical skill and leadership proficiency.

In my experience, highly intelligent and motivated people are resilient and eager learners; they *want* to succeed, contribute, and earn recognition in what is essentially new territory – leading and managing others. Coaching is an exceptionally efficient, confidential and non-competitive forum for learning these new skills.

Coaching focuses on the real-world experiences and challenges of the leader's actual work. It is credible because it is based on the events of the practitioner's daily encounters. The coach presents personalized feedback (data and observations) in a thoughtful way that is authentic, constructive, and confidential -- and in no way punitive. Assumptions, habits, and patterns of behavior are explored non-judgmentally. Specific skills, e.g., reflective listening, giving performance feedback, conducting an effective interview, leading a meeting, managing staff conflict, strategic planning ... all are modeled and practiced in a confidential and highly personalized manner.

What's in it for the organization?



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Coaching offered to a newly appointed leader with excellent technical expertise but limited prior leadership experience is the best preventive medicine a business can offer. When personnel problems between colleagues emerge and are squarely faced, and coaching is offered, enormous expense and anxiety can be spared. Complaints from staff, colleagues, patients, clients decline when a “disruptive” physician or other professional is offered support through coaching. Inter-departmental relations improve. The costs of lawsuits, severance packages, turnover, recruitment, and even traditional leadership training programs are a high price to pay when an early, relatively short-term intervention can prevent problems from occurring or continuing.

Reputation management (the task of all who have acquired a negative people-skills label) becomes increasingly difficult when problems escalate or are simply not addressed. This is particularly vexing when doctors supervise fellow doctors and lawyers manage junior partners. It is not uncommon for even the most seasoned leaders to avoid confronting their professional colleagues in fear that they will violate the old-standing unwritten rule about how professionals should treat each other: autonomously. Coaching can help rewrite that rule, kindly.

There are 5 basic criteria for a successful coaching engagement: 1. an individual’s desire to change, learn or improve; 2. coaching is offered as a supportive benefit (vs. mandated); 3. the coach is a credible, experienced accountability partner with industry knowledge; 4. confidentiality is offered and upheld; 5. there is a good personal ‘fit’ between coach and coachee. When leaders become skilled at leading with EQ, the confidence of everyone with whom they work is bolstered. The measures of productivity and profit are met, as are the standards for quality of work and life. Coaching is generally a win-win-win for leaders, the people with whom they work and the organization.