

COACHING KALEIDOSCOPE

PERSPECTIVES FOR MEANINGFUL LEADERSHIP



Makarand Khatavkar

myTsugi
designing transformations

What Really Changes Through Coaching?



Leadership development is often discussed in terms of skills and behaviours: delegate better, become more strategic, listen more, improve executive presence or handle difficult stakeholders. All of these matter. But after working with leaders for many years, I have come to believe that coaching needs to go deeper.

Better judgement changes how leaders read situations, question assumptions, respond under pressure and make choices when there is no obvious right answer. It also prepares them for challenges that have not yet arrived.

Behaviour still matters because that is where change eventually becomes visible, but judgement is often where the deeper change begins.

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The goal of coaching is not simply better behaviour. It is better judgement. Better behaviour is often the outcome.

Leaders come to coaching with real issues: a difficult boss, a new role, a team that is not performing, delegation, executive presence, conflict with a colleague or an important decision they are struggling with. We need to work on the issue in front of us, but stopping there can mean missing something more useful.

A delegation problem may reveal difficulty in trusting others. A stakeholder problem may expose an assumption about power or influence. Someone struggling with executive presence may actually be trying too hard to become somebody else's idea of a senior leader. Once those patterns become visible, the leader starts recognizing them in situations that initially appeared unrelated. That is when coaching becomes developmental rather than simply problem-solving.

*The Topic Is Rarely the Point .
The Patterns Behind It Are*

Three Levels of Leadership

Every leader operates with assumptions, interpretations, emotions and self-beliefs that influence decisions. Most of the time these do not feel like choices. They feel like instinct. They have usually developed for good reasons through experience, past successes and sometimes difficult periods. The problem begins when an old response appears automatically even though the situation has changed.

I find it useful to look at leadership at three connected levels.

What You Tell Yourself is largely invisible to everyone else. It includes the assumptions you make, the meaning you give to events and the inner conversations that shape how you see a situation. **How You Show Up** is what other people experience through the way you listen, decide, delegate, disagree, deal with setbacks, respond under pressure and exercise authority. **What Endures** goes beyond the individual leader to the capability, culture, relationships, standards and ways of working that remain behind.



What You Tell Yourself

Assumptions, interpretations, emotions, self beliefs & the meaning you give to events



How You Show Up

How people experience you through your decisions, conversations & behaviour



What Endures

Capability, culture, relationships and ways of working that remain beyond you



What Am I Building That Can Succeed Without Depending Entirely On Me?

The Visible & the Hidden

What we see is only part of the story.

● ——— Actions | Decisions |
Behaviour | Outcomes

- Assumptions
- Emotions
- Beliefs
- Identity
- Past Experiences
- Organizational Forces

Rational Understanding of the need to change is rarely sufficient

Every coaching conversation also operates at two levels. The visible consists of actions, decisions, behaviour and outcomes. The hidden includes beliefs, emotions, assumptions, identity, past experiences and the interpersonal and organisational forces influencing what we do. Working only on what is visible can certainly improve behaviour, but when a problem keeps returning in different forms, something underneath may need attention.

Most experienced leaders already know they should listen more, delegate better or remain calm under pressure. Telling them again adds little. A more interesting question is why an intelligent person continues doing something they already know is not helping them. That question can take a coaching conversation somewhere quite different.

Success has Its Own Blind Spots

We tend to associate development needs with weaknesses. Yet some of the most interesting coaching conversations begin with strengths. Decisiveness can become impatience, confidence can become certainty, attention to detail can turn into control, and high standards can become intolerance. Independence, which may have contributed greatly to someone's success, can eventually make collaboration difficult.

Some of the most capable leaders who seek coaching are not in trouble. They are succeeding and beginning to sense that what got them here may not be enough for what comes next.



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Success can create blind spots precisely because so much appears to be working

These strengths do not need to disappear. The challenge is recognizing when something that contributed to success begins to create a new risk. This becomes particularly difficult because much of the evidence appears to support the leader. Results are good, promotions continue, important people seek their opinion and, as seniority increases, fewer people may openly disagree.

Learning Beneath the Problem

Each of us carries a cognitive map built from experience. When we encounter a problem, we naturally draw on that map. Usually this is useful. It becomes limiting when yesterday's map becomes the automatic answer to today's problem.



*What should
I do
differently?*



*What assumption
led me to
respond that
way?*



*Why do I
keep seeing
situations in
the same
way?*

Not every problem needs deep introspection. Sometimes a practical change is exactly what is required. But when the same difficulty keeps appearing in different forms, fixing its latest occurrence may not be enough.

Carl Rogers made a related point decades ago about the power of self-discovered learning. Being told why we behave in a particular way is not the same as seeing it for ourselves.

*Being told why we behave in a particular way is not
the same as seeing it for ourselves.*

From Insight to Change



*Coaching works only
when the leader does.*

This is also where coachability becomes important. Being coachable requires honesty with yourself, enough humility to recognize your contribution to a problem, openness to learning and willingness to experiment with something different. Most of us would readily describe ourselves this way.

The real test comes when feedback contradicts our self-image or when the conversation reaches an explanation we would rather avoid.

There is something satisfying about insight. We suddenly understand why we react in a particular way, where a behaviour comes from or why certain situations consistently trouble us. That can feel like progress, and sometimes it is. At other times it is simply an interesting explanation.

Self-discovery becomes useful when it is accompanied by responsibility. Once I recognise my contribution to a recurring problem, what am I prepared to do differently? Taking responsibility does not mean blaming ourselves for everything that happens. Leaders operate within complicated organisations and other people have their own motives, pressures and behaviours.

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*You don't have to
own the whole
problem. You do
have to own your
part in it.*

Does Executive Coaching Work?

The research base for workplace coaching has become considerably stronger. Meta-analytic research points to positive effects across a range of outcomes, including behaviour, goal attainment, self-efficacy, resilience and other aspects of individual and workplace effectiveness. That is encouraging, but coaching should not be presented as a tablet with a predictable dosage-response relationship.

The quality of the coach matters, the willingness of the leader to engage matters, organisational context matters, and what the leader does between coaching conversations matters enormously.

Spectacular ROI numbers can create an impression of scientific precision that the evidence does not necessarily support. Research tells us that coaching can work. The leader remains an active ingredient in whether it does.

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Choosing a Coach

Two questions matter to me.

Has the coach walked enough of the leadership path to understand the challenges you are dealing with in real life?

Experience is not a substitute for coaching capability, but it brings an understanding of organizational realities that is difficult to acquire from the outside.

The second test is more personal. Can you have a conversation with this person that you cannot easily have anywhere else?

If the answer to both is yes, you probably have the basis for a meaningful coaching relationship.

Where the Advice Stops

No leader operates independently of the organization around them. A coaching conversation may begin with the individual and gradually reveal questions about the team, organization structure, talent, culture, incentives or management processes. That is not surprising. A highly capable leader cannot compensate indefinitely for weak systems, unclear accountability or an organization that has outgrown the way it works. The reverse is equally true. Sophisticated systems cannot compensate indefinitely for poor leadership. The individual and the organization constantly influence each other, which is why coaching conversations sometimes move naturally towards broader organizational questions. Leadership doesn't exist in isolation. It succeeds or struggles within the organization around it.

My Work Begins Where Advice Stops

Makarand Khatavkar

Senior leaders receive plenty of advice from boards, colleagues, consultants, books, podcasts and leadership programs.

Advice has its place, and sometimes an answer from someone who has encountered the problem before can save enormous time. But there are questions for which another person's answer is not enough. What am I not seeing? Why does this situation keep repeating? What assumptions am I bringing into the room? What part of this problem belongs to me? What am I prepared to change? Nobody can answer these questions on behalf of a leader.

A coach can challenge, inquire, offer perspective and hold up the mirror, but eventually the leader has to look into it.

