

Coaching within the context

Anton Franckeiss examines why the “circumstantial framework” of a coaching assignment is crucial to its success

The role of coach should, by now, be understood. Although complex, it needs to embrace a range of activities: encouraging not just self-awareness but awareness of impact on others and on relationships; providing feedback; posing questions and setting challenges that encourage and that raise the coachee’s sights to perform better and achieve more; identifying barriers and hurdles, and helping the coachee overcome them.

At a general day-to-day level, many of these are tasks that we might hope would be performed free of charge by our proverbial best friend or even, perhaps, our parents. Where our lives are out of kilter to a greater degree – and our friends can’t or won’t help – we may turn to the ever-expanded canon of self-help books. (Though it is popular to be a little sneering at them, it is equally true to say that most are at worst harmless, and that their continuing existence and popularity means that their audience finds a purpose – although sometimes this may be mere comfort – in them.) Where the ‘problem’ proves more intractable, we can turn to general or ‘life’ coaches. Like most things, they have their place. But like most places, they have boundaries.

Hermits and psychopaths aside, we all live in worlds in which our interactions with others – and the way in which we perform them – have an impact not just on their lives, but on our own. But while these roles are ‘generic’ (in the sense that they apply in *any* coaching situation), they cease to be generic when we consider the circumstantial framework within which the coaching is taking place. While both are relationship issues, the needs of someone struggling to make new friends in a new town are not the same as those of a newly-



appointed senior executive facing the challenge of building productive and effective relationships with those already operating at this level. The size, status, geographic spread, culture and structure of the organisation all shade and colour the situation in individual ways: the circumstances would be different even in two outwardly comparable organisations.

When the needs of the coachee are specialised, the coaching offer needs to match the specialism if the need is to be truly met. Generalist coaching may provide a general tonic but a specific difficulty requires a specific, targeted, well-matched response. In much the same way that a daily vitamin pill will help to maintain a healthy working body but will do little to address an infection (which may require a specific topical treatment or course of antibiotics), generalist coaching can only ultimately help in the face of generalist problems.

Tweedledee, Tweedledum and Tweedledave

To illustrate the point, let's take the case of a few household names. Much has been made, for example, of Ed Miliband's family background. Given their long, intense involvement in political affairs, its various members are better qualified – whether or not we have truck with any of the rumours that circulated about antipathy between two rival brothers after the leadership election – than most to advise him in preparing for and stepping up to the role of Labour Party leader.

The demands of the role and the personal transition it represents, however, are both great and specific. No doubt his mum and his brother have plenty of advice to offer (his father, once described by *The Guardian* as “arguably Britain's most charismatic and influential leftwing intellectual”, having passed away in 1994) but we'd also hope that they are not his only source. (Ed is, however, privileged in that his immediate family have experience of holding cabinet-level political office, deep involvement in formulating a political party's policy direction and decades of academic study of the politics of the left.)

Indeed, each of our political leaders provide an interesting viewpoint if you consider yourself in their shoes. All of them find themselves relatively newly in fresh roles that are rapidly evolving. David Cameron has experienced a year as PM rather than leader of the opposition, having to implement rather than merely contest and criticise, and having to live with the consequences of decisions. Those decisions are not as clear-cut as those he might have hoped to have been





making either: not only must he bear at least some responsibility for the work of his cabinet colleagues (forests, the health service, university entrance policy, school sports partnerships, Booktrust funding...), he must also work with members of a party he does not lead.

Nick Clegg has to lead a party not just in power but in coalition with those fought against before the result was declared, and faces a situation fraught with complexity: wishing to radically change many aspects of British politics (voting and the composition of the House of Lords are just two), he has the – significantly – junior position in the coalition, and must keep his party together and onside if he is to maximise any chance of having an impact. Simultaneously, he symbolises – more powerfully than hoodies, huskies or Europe – things that one wing of his coalition partner's party least wishes to embrace.

Meanwhile Miliband the Younger has not just to lead, but to lead a party out of power after a long period in office. The party needs to renew itself and re-earn the admiration and respect of the electorate; it must also address the legacy of the financial crisis. However much blame anyone may or may not attach to the party for causing it, it happened on its watch and the legacy cannot be brushed aside.

Horses, courses and no time for novices

Even without the economic situation, these are demanding personal challenges. They must also be played out in the public eye, while – largely unseen to public and press alike – politicians must work with the machinery of both parliament and government (and a vast backdrop of local, national and international agencies).

These are not really the circumstances in which to deploy someone who prides themselves on a holistic approach, wants people to find themselves and was once a regional sales manager for something, even if they have acquired reputable coaching qualifications in the meantime. It's not necessarily that their advice would be poor: we can each offer insights into our political leaders' performance and approach – indeed, part of their difficulty is that quite so many of us are so keen to do so.

The issue is credibility: in their shoes, faced with a choice of 'elder statesmen' from your own party or abroad and a confident, qualified coach with no experience in senior public office, whose advice might you take more seriously? Whose questions would you feel were most likely to deserve investing the extremely scarce commodity of time?



Someone who can offer only a general model of 'leading' isn't the answer to any of these three men's situations: 'leading better' is what all three of them need to do, but that doesn't mean that all three need to take the same actions and model the same behaviours to improve their performance. However each of them decides to lead, they must all do so in very different circumstances and within their own sets of relationships – with their parties, with the public, and with our perceptions of their values.

M, 40s, GSOH, WLTM ...

Then there is the issue of personality. Cameron has flirted – although the verb implies an element of conscious choice that may be unfair – with behaviour that has variously been called smug, patronising, condescending and... well, worse. Clegg, meanwhile, appears a candid, emotional individual: his 'confession' in a *New Statesman* interview that he often cries listening to music attracted much publicity, but, as one post on the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music's online forum puts it: "I pity anyone who is unable to be moved by music."

While an executive coach may not be a permanent position, let alone a permanent working relationship – coaches to political leaders and major sporting or entertainment celebrities are an exception to the rule in that regard – there is a further dimension that explains why the best providers of them tend to offer a broad stable of coaches. It is not simply that the coach must offer excellence in the tools, techniques and practices or coaching, or that a broad stable enables a provider to offer more than one coach with relevant personal operational experience, the coaching relationship and its success depend on personality too.

Although dredging up any politician's words from more than a year ago is usually done for malice, I'm going to do so purely to illustrate a point. In April 2010, Clegg said: "As for who I'd work with, I've been very clear – much clearer than David Cameron and Gordon Brown – that I will work with anyone, I will work with a man from the Moon, I don't care, with anyone who can deliver the greater fairness that I think people want."

He did, however, go on to make one exception: Gordon Brown. Some personalities will never truly gel, no matter how much we are committed to evolving our working relationships and personal interactions. Clegg had other reasons for ruling out working with Brown – including not wanting to give legitimacy to someone he felt did not deserve it – but a highly pressured position is not



one in which adding difficult relationships is going to be helpful.

In normal working life, there is often time for 'personality clashes' to be addressed – provided there is willingness to do so – and preferably on both sides. The shorter duration and periodic nature of an executive's relationship with his coach is different: if the coaching relationship is to bear fruit within its timeframe, there isn't the luxury of undue time spent overcoming difficulties of interaction.

Accordingly, a breadth of coaching talent affords a coaching provider the opportunity to identify the 'best match'.

Beyond the Westminster Village

Your own shoes possibly walk less demanding corridors, but your concerns are not simply those of the lady of the manor whose mid-life angst has not been salved by the self-help publishing industry or the golfer who can't quite get into the swing of things. They are specific: they require not just well-proven skills in the different aspects of coaching (if you employ a generalist/life coach, have you actually checked their credentials, their professional memberships, the extent to which they abide by their coaching bodies' codes of ethics?) but in-depth experience and understanding of the situation.

No matter how well-qualified in coaching a former equestrian might be, for example, a former football player will have more to offer – and more credibility with – the national First IX. That ability to provide is not just in technical mastery, but in context: business is business (a sweeping generalisation that is heard far too often) and sport is sport, but a rider and horse is not the same as a team. Especially if the team in question wears shorts and kicks a ball.

Take, for example, a divisional executive newly appointed to his role and working for a multi-national corporation. He must manage a local team (and its performance and expectations) while reporting to a board based 2,000 miles away on another continent. There are difficulties, not just of newness in the role but of time, language, communication and culture with the geographically-remote board.

He is undoubtedly in what is sometimes called 'the marzipan layer' – the level of senior staff just below the topmost level of directors or partners. The implication that the layer lacks the glamour of the icing and the solidity of the cake is, let us assume, not a purely coincidental part of the metaphor.

The specific challenges that they face – and

the coaching support that they require – demand not just a skilled and experienced coach. For the coach's input, challenges and questions to have credibility – and therefore impact – it will be significantly helpful if he has had first-hand experience of a) working in 'the marzipan layer', b) operating in a multi-national organisation and c) managing upwards in a remote working context where cultural issues are at play.

These factors may be the context of the issues that the executive faces, but the degree to which they colour his situation is highly significant – the issues cannot be addressed without addressing the contextual factors, and a coach with little or no experience of them will find the challenge significantly harder.

An executive faced with a coach with a lack of experience will, understandably, question the coach's value and his ability to fully understand the challenge that he has been engaged to help him address. (Referring back to our earlier examples, it probably goes without saying that a difficult combination of personalities between coach and coachee can only add further to these difficulties.)

Like any chemical activity, there are a number of key ingredients. The right coach/coachee combination needs some of those ingredients 'up front' to act as catalysts during the rest of the coaching process: initial respect on the coachee's part for the track record of success that the coach brings to the discussion; the comfort that coachees can derive from the coach's ability to demonstrate that he has 'walked in their shoes'; the coach's ability, from a very early stage in the process and relationship, to engage in the right way.

The sporting analogy may be a little stretched but, in one sense, every assignment that a coach accepts is an away game. The personal and business context of the coachee are the pitch on which the process is played out, and the coach must be able to 'play in the space' in which the coachee currently best operates. While the coach's role is to serve the coachee – the football analogy is stretched mainly in that both are playing for the same team – this is easier to accomplish when the coach can operate effectively and plausibly in the coachee's context and circumstances.

Coaching is not about offering whatever the coach can provide and presenting it (whatever it might be) as a solution: it is about identifying the needs of the coachee (and his business and immediate situation) and identifying not just the right approach but the right coach to meet them. **TJ**

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