The Coaching Paradigm

The Disciplines, Skills and Heart of a Coach

Asking vs. Telling

At its heart, leadership coaching is about helping people solve their own problems, not telling them what to do. One of the most difficult changes beginning coaches must make is learning to ask questions instead of giving advice. As they struggle to get used to this new approach, the following kinds of questions invariably come out:

- “Would it help if you’d keep track of how much time you’re spending on that project?”
- “Could you just come right out and say something to her about the problem?”
- “Do you think you should talk to your pastor about that?”

To see what’s really going on, simply cross out the first several words of each question, like this:

- “Would it help if you’d Keep track of how much time you’re spending on that project.”
- “Could you Just come right out and say something to her about the problem.”
- “Do you think You should talk to your pastor about that.”

Oops! What we thought were good coaching queries turn out to be statements instead. The coach is dutifully attempting to ask questions, but what actually comes out are pieces of advice with question marks stuck on the end.

The statements above are what I call solution-oriented questions: advice-giving masquerading as coaching. While the coach is working diligently at the technique of asking, the change is only skin-deep. The coach is still the one identifying and solving the problem, then trying to lead the client to a certain solution. On the surface it looks like coaching, but the underlying advice-giving paradigm hasn’t changed.

Solution-oriented questions are a great illustration of what it looks like to try to change what you do without changing who you are. Jesus discussed this age-old problem when He stated, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matt. 12:34). In other words, what you do and say comes out of who you are—your “being”. What you say won’t change until you change. According to Jesus, to fundamentally alter the way you function, you have to be transformed at the “being” level (values, identity, paradigms and worldview) and not just in your “doing” (skills and techniques).

If you approach leadership coaching as a set of tools and techniques to add on to your existing ministry paradigm, you’ll never be a coach. I can’t emphasize this enough: leadership coaching is a whole new discipline, with an underlying philosophy and value set that most likely is far different than what you are used to. Becoming a great coach is a major remodeling project...
that will alter your values, the way you look at people, and the conversational habits of a lifetime. Becoming a transformational coach starts with being transformed.

**Disciplines, Skills and Heart**

I’ve worked with hundreds of aspiring coaches around the world. In the process, I’ve developed a training philosophy based on the idea of *disciplines, skills and heart*. While all three are needed for maximum effectiveness, the heart of a coach is the foundation. When you begin to think like a coach, believe in the coaching values and see others through the eyes of a coach, the coaching skills come naturally to you. Simply put, coaching is a radical belief in people, practiced in a consistent, disciplined way in order to help others grow. Understanding and embracing the heart of the coaching paradigm is vital to coaching success.

When you start with the heart of a coach, the coaching skills take on a greater significance. They are not practiced as stand-alone techniques, but as *the disciplines of believing in people*. Coaches don’t listen because listening is a good technique, or because it is effective, or even because people like to be listened to. A coach listens because to listen is to believe in you. It’s a conscious imitation of the way Christ treats others. Listening is one of the most powerful, compelling ways to say, “You are a great person—I have confidence in you!”

When I practice a technique as a discipline, an important byproduct is that it changes me as well. For example, when I pray regularly, my ability to tune into God increases, I see more clearly how God is at work in my life, and I come to value prayer even more. In the same way, when I listen habitually, my ability to tune into others increases, I see more clearly how God is sovereignly at work in them, and I come to value what they have to say even more.

Practicing the coaching techniques (listening, asking, goal-setting, taking responsibility) in a disciplined, consistent way is living the lifestyle of a coach. It’s when you believe enough in the coaching paradigm to reorder your own life around it that you’ll truly be great at coaching others.

**Your Biggest Obstacle**

The biggest obstacle faced by the Christian coaching revolution is the get-skills-quick mentality we bring to leadership development. Everybody wants to go to a one-day workshop and then come out magically transformed into a coach. It doesn’t work that way. That approach treats coaching as a set of techniques, not a lifestyle. Practicing techniques on people just to get a certain result ultimately fails: technique without

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**Coaching from the Heart**

I once sat in on a coach training session where the trainee was floundering badly. She interrupted, gave unwanted advice, asked solution-oriented questions—it was painful to watch. In the debriefing time afterward it was a struggle to find anything positive in her performance to affirm.

Later that afternoon I came around to her table and watched her coach again. The difference between her first and second attempts was like night and day—she listened intently, asked excellent questions and helped the client develop his own great solution. Afterward I complimented her profusely, and then asked, “You did so well this time—what changed from the first session?” After thinking it over for a moment, she replied, “Well…I guess I was just so interested in what this person had to say that I really wanted to listen.” It was a great demonstration of the principle: *When you have the heart of a coach, the techniques come naturally.*
heart is manipulation. Sooner or later, people will realize that you are more interested in the results than you are in them.

Reading a book in a few hours won’t make you a coach either. Beyond what’s in this book, the things you’ll most need to coach well are:

1. To have your own heart genuinely and radically transformed by the coaching values;
2. Lots of practice;
3. Interaction with a professional coach trainer.

But, ultimately, everything comes back to your heart. If you have the heart of a coach, you can make every technique mistake in the book and you’ll still transform people’s lives.