
LEADERSHIP

VELOCITY

Coaching Approach, Best-Practices
and Tools to Accelerate the
Development of Leaders

PATRICK DOYON



LEADERSHIP VELOCITY

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Accelerate the Development of Leaders

Patrick Doyon

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Dedication

To Rita, my lovely and amazing wife, and to our two remarkable kids,
Lola and Luca.

Without your support and patience, this book would have never left
my laptop. Merci!

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NOTE: Throughout the book, the terms “developing leader”, “program participant”, “client” and “coachee” will be used interchangeably. All of them represent the person(s) being coached with the intent of improving their leadership competencies.

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Finally, I'd like to thank my family – my loving wife Rita, and my amazing kids Lola and Luca. Your patience (*and tolerance*) were essential, and immensely appreciated.

Introduction

I. WHAT'S THIS BOOK ABOUT?

You're probably wondering, "Why another book on coaching and leadership?" Any Google search on these topics will yield thousands of relevant results. Libraries, bookstores and Amazon have countless best sellers on coaching and leadership, and there are hundreds of authors, speakers and bloggers focusing on these subjects. But this book is different. It is not too long, theoretical, or abstract. Neither is it filled with convoluted concepts, lengthy diatribes, or touchy-feely statements. This book is meant to be a practical guide for whoever is interested in using coaching to develop the leadership competencies of employees. It is brief, to the point, and filled with concrete practices, tools and examples that will help you develop your leaders through coaching.

This book *does* talk about coaching and leadership. But don't expect to find information about leadership theories and models. It's also not about coaching as a leadership style. The focus here is on the use of coaching as an effective means for improving the critical skills needed by today's leaders.

Why (and why not) coaching?

Coaching is a professional activity whose applications and benefits are well known and increasingly used by organizations ^[REF. 1, REF. 2]. But why is coaching ideally suited for leadership development? And in which circumstances should it be avoided as a means of development? Two recent studies conducted by McKinsey & Company ^[REF. 3, REF. 4] concluded that leadership-development programs often fail due, in part, to the following three factors: lack of context regarding the development initiatives; not enough attention to the leader's self-awareness and mindset during the programs; and insufficient focus on experience, behavior transfer and reinforcing feedback. And coaching is especially useful for tackling these deficiencies.

First off, coaching is context specific by design. It naturally focuses on the leader's unique development goals, and emphasizes linkages between these goals and the leader's personal, professional and organizational settings. This is in stark contrast to more traditional one-size-fits-all leadership training programs. Also, by working with an individual leader, the coach is in an ideal position to monitor and address aspects pertaining to the coachee's attitude and outlook toward the leadership endeavor. The coach is also able to monitor closely the coachee's engagement regarding the required underlying behavioral changes. Finally, well-designed leadership coaching programs can effectively raise and leverage the leader's awareness of his/her strengths, weaknesses and priorities, and support him/her in implementing concrete experience-based activities that will help internalize the sought-after leadership practices and behaviors.

Alternatively, there are situations where a coaching approach would not be optimal for developing your leaders. For example, when there is a lack of clear commitment from the leader toward the development endeavor. A low level of engagement in coaching may be the result of work-related demotivation from the leader, his/her refusal to accept the need for change, or the work itself simply being too overwhelming. Regardless, proceeding with coaching in this case could be laborious and ineffective. Another situation where coaching might be ill advised is if the targeted skill gap is too important and/or too technical in nature. Coaching can indeed yield positive results, even with important change initiatives. However, when the sought-after change is too challenging and includes technical aspects pertaining to the management role of the leader, a more piecemeal approach of using or blending different development strategies might be more effective.

How did the ideas in this book come about?

Back in 2012, after spending a few years co-designing and delivering a large competency development program for an important Canadian manufacturer, I realized that training and e-learning had important limitations when it came to the development of interpersonal skills. At the time, my partner and mentor in the program introduced me to

coaching as a potent approach for developing leaders. Curious to learn something new, and determined to solve this “soft-skill development challenge,” I registered in the Graduate Certificate in Executive Coaching from Royal Roads University in Western Canada ^[REF. 5]. My objective was simple: learn about coaching and use it as a more effective method for developing my clients’ leadership skills.

So, the journey began. First, I plainly applied the techniques and best practices learned at Royal Roads University with my clients’ leaders. Although these principles – largely based on the ICF Core Coaching Competencies ^[REF. 6] – proved to be a sound and useful starting point, the outcomes were somewhat below my expectations. Could this have been the result of my own lack of coaching proficiency, or was there something else missing from the mix? As it turned out, both played a role in my subpar performance.

But I remained steadfast with my goal. I truly wanted to find a better, more effective and efficient approach to develop leaders. Particularly emerging leaders – the younger ones who had been recently promoted and were full of ambition, but still naïve in the art of “how things get done in the workplace.” Over the next eight years, I iteratively refined my approach through more than 1,500 hours of direct coaching and coaching supervision with more than 400 leaders from over 20 different client organizations. Much of what I learned on that coaching journey is distilled in this book.

What exactly can you expect from this book?

This manuscript will first introduce a **conceptual development framework** that will help you examine the following question in a broader, more holistic way: How can we efficiently accelerate the development of our employees’ leadership skills? This framework integrates, in a simple and logical fashion, the key concepts, stages and components relevant to any leadership development initiative, whether it is coaching-centric or not. This book will also provide you with a series of **coaching practices** deemed useful for developing leaders. Each of these seven practices addresses a specific set of

challenges that coaches typically face when working with developing leaders. Finally, you will be presented with several practical **coaching tools**. These tools, centered on the experiential acquisition and improvement of leadership competencies, have proven to be useful in enhancing our coaching programs.

The 200+ pages of this book include several concrete examples, practical tips and tricks, and suggested approaches for designing and delivering effective leadership coaching programs. These are supplemented by a number of critical questions to encourage reflection about leadership coaching and understanding about how to apply this approach with your leaders. In this book, you will NOT find: yet another theoretical treatise on coaching and leadership; a feel-good, heartwarming essay on the power of coaching and its unquantifiable benefits; a new model for coaching leaders; or a new method for developing leadership skills.

In the end, this book is about balance. Balance between a number of elements that affect the efficiency and effectiveness of any leadership-coaching journey. Some such elements include: coach involvement; the leader's autonomy with his/her learning; the structure, prescription and guidance of the development approach; the intensity, frequency and duration of the learning endeavor; the use of online/offline tools and resources; and individual vs. organizational flexibility. If this book achieves its purpose, you will be able to select and blend these elements in order to design and deliver flexible, engaging and effective leadership-coaching programs to your employees or clients.

2. WHO'S THIS BOOK FOR?

As an author, not necessarily searching for fame and fortune, but always looking for collective validation and support for my ideas, I could only hope that this book be read by many. In reality, however, it was written with a very specific target audience in mind, namely:

- Coaches (*leadership and executive focused*),
- HR and Learning & Development professionals, *and*
- Managers of leaders

Coaches

As a coach working with other coaches on a daily basis, I have a lot of admiration for these professional colleagues of mine. In addition to their trade-specific training, credentials and experience, coaches bring a wealth of personal and professional know-how to their client engagements. They generally care deeply about the improvement and well-being of their coachees, and they constitute a group of trusted and dedicated professionals overall. However, they can be a little on the “purist” side of their trade, and some tend to truly believe the client alone is responsible and able to reach his/her goals. In my experience, simply asking deep open-ended questions that trigger reflection and insight from your clients, does not necessarily translate into concrete and lasting behavioral changes.

Yes, client involvement is crucial for the success of the coaching process. Without betraying the essence of what coaching is, however, I found that getting “my hands a little dirty” as a coach often helped my clients reach their desired behavioral outcomes (*more on this later in the book*). Both the coachees and the client organization appreciated the extra involvement and added structure of my approach. So, for the coaches who place the practicality and usefulness of the coaching process slightly ahead of the purity of the methodology, and who

dedicate their practice to improving the leadership skills of their clients, this book should prove helpful.

HR and Learning & Development Professionals

The second target group of this book includes professionals working in human resources (HR). Admittedly, there can be important professional differences when comparing the more generalist HR executives with the specialist group of learning and development professionals (L&D). Nevertheless, anyone who is remotely involved in managing organizational talent in general, and is specifically engaged with the development of leaders, will likely appreciate the ideas presented in this book.

Managers of Leaders

Finally, I have come across managers (*mid-level to executives*) in organizations who truly cared about, and concerned themselves with, the development of their teams. These individuals would often lead their respective organizations in piloting novel competency development programs with their employees. Sometimes they directly hired development professionals – instructors, consultants or coaches – outside of the existing organizational programs. Some even took it upon themselves to lead by example, and actively drive their own professional development by participating in the same programs as their employees, and/or by working individually with a coach. As leadership development champions within their respective organizations, these individuals should also find value in the practices, tips and tools presented in this book.

Ultimately, if you are involved in developing the leadership skills of your employees, if you are looking for a more efficient and effective alternative to traditional training methods, and if you believe that coaching may play a role in this endeavor, then this book was written with you in mind.

PART I.

**Developing Leaders: *Why, What
and How?***

3. WHY: *DRIVERS AND CONSTRAINTS*

Before exploring the best practices and tools for leadership coaching, let's briefly underline the motivations and limitations behind any organization's decision to undertake the development of its leaders. These imperatives lay the foundation for a company's decision to adopt leadership coaching.

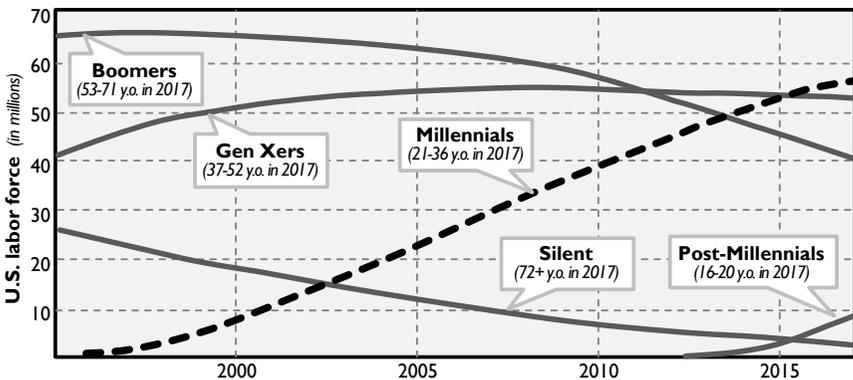
Business Drivers

There has been much research, writing and discussion about how the quality of leadership affects the performance of an organization ^[REF. 7]. Simply put, effective leaders – those who are proficient at leadership – drive performance at the employee, team and organizational level. Although leadership is not the only factor affecting business performance, it is an important one, and it pulls on many levers. For example, from a more holistic and cultural perspective, it is the presence of talented leaders at all levels that allows an organization to align, execute, and renew itself faster than the competition. Data shows that such healthy organizations generally produce shareholder returns three times higher than unhealthy ones ^[REF. 8]. At the team level, the leader's ability to adopt different context-specific leadership styles establishes an effective work climate. This ensures that people trust one another, are engaged, aligned and productive, and remain agile and resilient as they tackle business challenges and adapt to changes. Research has shown that team climate can account for more than 30% of a company's performance ^[REF. 9]. Effective leaders are also better at driving engagement within their teams ^[REF. 10] which, in turn, leads to more productive team members, higher employee retention rates, better customer-focused interactions, and improved business performance ^[REF. 11]. Effective leaders do not strictly focus on present business outcomes, but also try to sustain performance levels over time. As such, they concern themselves with building a healthy pipeline

of future leaders who, in turn, will positively affect the organization for years to come [REF. 12].

Demographic Drivers

When speaking of the talent pipeline and future leaders, organizations must also consider the generational shift that is happening in the demographic landscape of the workforce. In fact, millennials (*gen Y's; aged between 21 and 36 years in 2017*) have recently become the largest generational group in the US active population [REF. 17].



GENERATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF WORKFORCE IN THE U.S.
ADAPTED FROM PEW RESEARCH CENTER (PEWRESEARCH.ORG)

Looking a little deeper at the American labour statistics, we note that, from 2011 to 2017 [REF. 18, REF. 19], the group of workers younger than 35 years old increased by almost 12%, whereas the workforce of people 35-54 years old only increased by a little over 2%. In other words, over a mere 6-year period, the middle-aged worker segment (35-54 y.o.) has stayed relatively constant, whereas the group of younger workers (*less than 35 y.o.*) has grown considerably. The implication related to this relatively rapid labor segment differential might be that organizations will have to rely increasingly on younger workers to assume leadership roles. Hence their drive to find ways to accelerate the development of their leadership capabilities.

Instructional Drivers

In addition to business and demographic drivers, organizations that consider rolling out leadership improvement initiatives also look at the instructional effectiveness of the available development methods, and consider the preferences of the target audience for these various development means. First, it is useful to keep in mind the types of competencies we're trying to improve before examining the effectiveness of the development approach(es). Since the makeup of leadership competencies is strongly biased toward behaviors and attitudes, savvy organizations should lean toward more experiential development means rather than use traditional classroom training methods ^[REF. 20]. Secondly, although there is no clear consensus in the literature when it comes to preferences of development modalities in relation to generations and/or types of learning, some research reports provide us with insightful guidance to this question. For example, independent studies from DDI, the Conference Board, EY, PwC, McKinsey and the Center for Creative Leadership show that: 1. Emerging leaders (*millennials, first-level managers and high-potentials*) believe that coaching should play an important part in their professional development; 2. Millennials and Gen-Xers prefer coaching over classroom training when it comes to soft-skills development ^[REF. 21, REF. 22, REF. 23, REF. 24, REF. 25, REF. 26].

Organizational Constraints and Goals

Organizations and their leaders operate in an era of increased complexity, intense competitive change, and economic volatility and uncertainty. Although a competent workforce is required to face these internal and external challenges, development programs cannot hinder business imperatives. As such, leadership development initiatives need not only meet the goals of the companies deploying them, but also adhere to a number of constraints. Some of these important goals and constraints include:

- **Effectiveness:** *Leadership improvement programs need to be as effective as possible from a development perspective;*

LEADERSHIP VELOCITY: *Coaching Approach, Best Practices and Tools*

- **Flexibility:** *Leadership improvement programs need to be flexible for both the organization that deals with the logistics of deployment, and for the individual participants who need to squeeze these programs into their busy work schedule;*
- **Relevance:** *Leadership development initiatives should align with the organizational values, competencies and corporate imperatives, and be pertinent and useful for the individual participants;*
- **Engagement:** *As motivation is a key success factor of any learning and development initiative, leadership improvement programs should be engaging for the participants;*
- **Affordability:** *Finally, direct and indirect costs associated with the design/selection, deployment and management of any leadership improvement initiative should be streamlined as much as possible.*

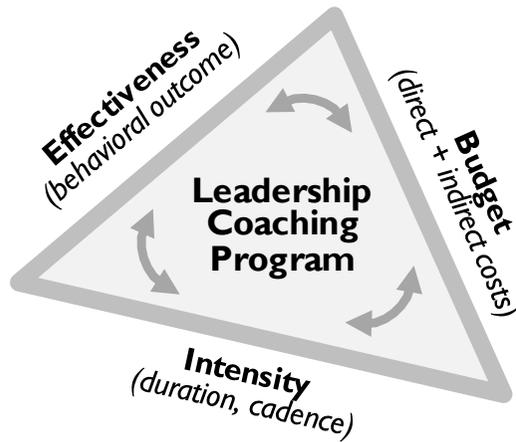
Project Management Analogy

A classic concept in project management is the time-costs-scope triangle (sometimes known as the Iron Triangle or the Triple Constraint Triangle). This concept simply states that the quality or outcome of any project depends on its duration (*time*), budget (*costs*) and detailed features and characteristics (*scope*), and that these parameters are interdependent. In other words, managing a successful project requires balancing these three constraints. There's a saying in the engineering community that goes as follows: "You can have it good, fast, or cheap. Pick two."

Similarly, a leadership-coaching program (*aka project*) is also characterized by three important dimensions that oppose each other. These dimensions are:

- **Effectiveness** – the program's ability to meet the targeted development and behavioral change goals;
- **Intensity** – the total duration of the program and the frequency of the coaching sessions, along with the other activities;
- **Budget** – the direct and indirect costs assumed by the organization.

This crucial balance between effectiveness, intensity and budget constitutes the central theme that underpins the creation and use of the leadership coaching practices and tools presented in this book. In the end, developing leaders should be looked at from a business point of view, whereby the organization tries to optimize the effectiveness of the development approach while balancing the program budget and intensity (*duration + frequency*). Let's see how this can be done...



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT TRIANGLE

4. WHAT: LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

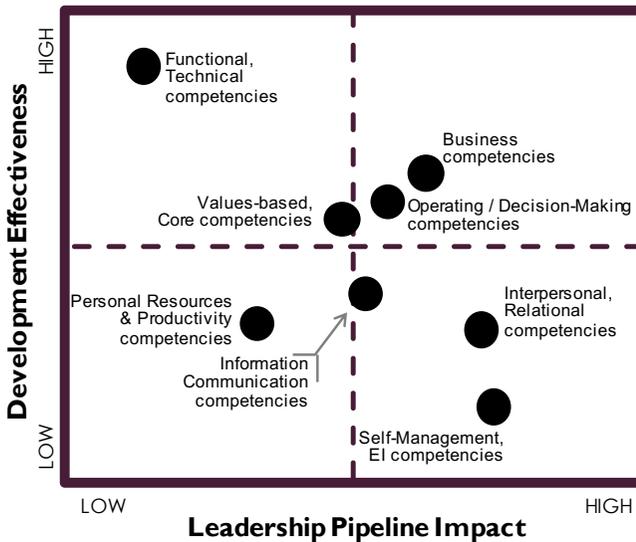
Competencies have been around the organizational landscape for over two decades... but they didn't always have good press ^[REF. 27]. Some development practitioners have advocated moving beyond competencies while others have simply given up using them altogether. In the end, competencies play a useful role in bridging the gap between generic concepts like roles and responsibilities, and organizational processes like employee evaluation, selection, succession and development. What are competencies, though, and what do we mean when we say "leadership competencies"?

A practical way to define competencies is to view them as the knowledge and know-how, attitudes and behaviors that allow someone to perform in a particular area of his/her work. These three components – cognitive (*I know*), attitudinal (*I am*) and behavioral (*I do, I act, I interact*) – apply to all competencies, including both technical and non-technical ones. However, in the case of leadership competencies, it's obvious that they are predominantly biased toward the behavior and attitude dimensions. In other words, you don't need to know a whole lot of concepts to be a good leader. However, you usually need to be proficient in self-management, interpersonal interaction, communication, and social intelligence.

Back in 2013, a colleague and I conducted a national survey with over 100 HR and management executives on the topic of *Trends and Best Practices for Emerging Leaders Development* ^[REF. 28]. As part of this research, we were trying to determine what were the competencies the organizations deemed critical when developing their emerging leaders and strengthening their talent pipeline. For the survey, we had classified competencies into the following eight larger categories: **1. Values-based & Core** competencies (e.g.: *ethics & integrity, trust,*

LEADERSHIP VELOCITY: Coaching Approach, Best Practices and Tools

teamwork, courage, passion, etc.); 2. **Personal Resources** competencies (e.g.: energy, drive, enthusiasm, perseverance, action-oriented behavior, learning agility, creativity, etc.); 3. **Self-Management & EI** competencies (e.g.: self-awareness, emotional self-control, optimism, stress management, time management, etc.); 4. **Interpersonal & Relational** competencies (e.g.: empathy, influence, inspiration and motivation of others, negotiation skills, resolution of conflict, etc.); 5. **Information & Communication** competencies (e.g.: analytical skills, ability to process and understand information, presentation skills, etc.); 6. **Operating & Decision-Making** competencies (e.g.: decision-making skills, ability to set priorities, organization & planning skills, delegation, etc.); 7. **Business** competencies (e.g.: business acumen, customer orientation, change management, project management, facilitation, etc.); and 8. **Functional & Technical** competencies (e.g.: job-specific knowledge and skills such as financial analysis, system administration, data analytics...).



CRITICAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES:

YOUR COMPANY'S ABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY DEVELOP THESE CRITICAL CAPABILITIES, AND THEIR RELATIVE IMPACT IN STRENGTHENING YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP BENCH. FROM DOYON, P. & TREMBLAY, V. (2013)

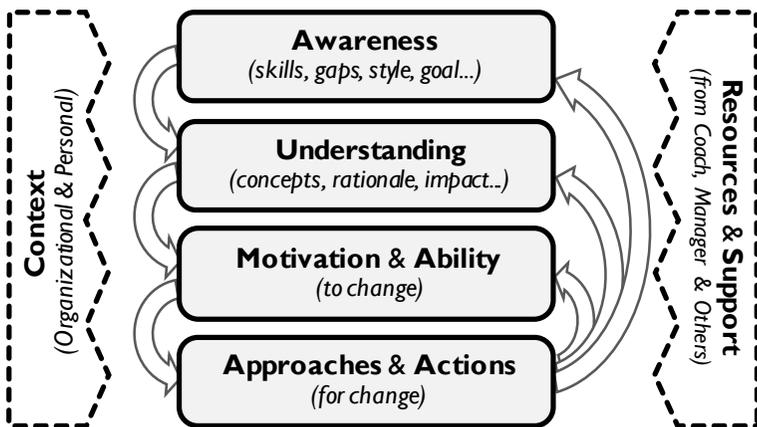
Survey respondents were asked to assess two things: **1.** The relative **importance** born by each category of competencies in relation to the state of their organization's leadership pipeline; **2.** The **effectiveness** of their company in developing these competencies.

As depicted in the scatter diagram, the survey results showed that companies were relatively effective at developing the functional competencies of their emerging leaders. However, these targeted development efforts typically resulted in minimal strengthening of their leadership bench. In contrast, although respondents admitted that their companies were relatively ineffective at developing the self-management and the interpersonal competencies of their emerging leaders, they felt that improving these would have the greatest impact on the strengthening of their leadership bench. From a development perspective, the answer is clear: organizations should concentrate their effort toward developing the Self-Management and the Interpersonal competencies of their leaders... and perhaps scale down their training efforts on functional and technical capabilities.

Obviously, the competencies that “matter” can vary greatly based on many factors: organizational, cultural and socioeconomic context, personal and professional characteristics of the developing leader, available resources and support, awareness level of the current competency profile, etc. But the conclusion is fairly obvious: companies need to emphasize the improvement of their leaders' attitudes and behaviors pertaining to self-awareness, emotional self-control, optimism, stress management, agility and resiliency, empathy, influencing skills, inspiring others, motivation and empowerment, negotiation skills, and conflict resolution. These observations are in line with the findings of several other studies ^[REF. 7, REF. 9, REF. 20, REF. 22].

5. HOW: LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

How should we go about developing the leadership capabilities of our employees, our clients? Before attempting to answer this central question, let's consider a more general framework that highlights the different components relevant to the process of leadership development. The model, as illustrated in the following 6-part diagram, consists of four (4) stages that interact with one another in a mainly sequential and cyclical fashion. These are: 1. the **Awareness** stage; 2. the **Understanding** stage; 3. the **Motivation and Ability** stage; and 4. the **Approaches and Actions** stage. These four central development phases are also impacted by two lateral dimensions: 1. the **Context** – both organizational and personal; and 2. the available **Support and Resources**. Together, these six interconnected elements form the basis of our leadership development framework.



LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

The Awareness Phase

Awareness is a pivotal stage in the development of leadership abilities. Although not strictly essential, since some learning does happen unconsciously, it is quite difficult to efficiently acquire new skills or improve existing competencies without a certain level of consciousness about the very things that need to be acquired or improved upon. Self-awareness of the following critical aspects is strongly desirable: **1. Current Situation:** First, developing leaders should have a good grasp of their current situation in terms of strengths and areas of improvement. Since competency requirements vary based on the roles and responsibilities assumed by leaders, it is useful to frame these proficiencies and deficiencies in terms of their actual professional roles and responsibilities. **2. Ideal/Target Situation:** Next, developing leaders should have a clear picture of what is required from their desired situation (*regardless of whether it is within the same role or for a different professional function or assignment*). Although one would expect this start-to-end gap analysis to be simple HR arithmetic, my experience has proven that figuring out skill gaps and future requirements is often more an art than a predictive science. In other words, for two similar target situations, the skills needed might differ substantially. That's why it's essential to pause and reflect on the competency requirements of a target situation in light of the state that the developing leaders are starting from. **3. Blind Spots:** Another important aspect pertaining to the Awareness stage are blindspots – weaknesses and/or strengths that the developing leaders don't know they have. **4. Assessments:** Finally, evaluations and assessments may complement the bulk of personal information that the developing leaders should digest during the Awareness stage. These include psychometric self-evaluations, multi-rater/360 competency assessments, past performance appraisals, and others.

The Understanding Phase

The second step of our development framework is essentially focused on the why. The goal here is for the developing leaders to understand the significance of what was uncovered during the Awareness stage

and to interpret what their current and anticipated strengths or weaknesses mean and what implications these might have on them and their workplace. This also relates to knowing how current or target skills and behaviors will manifest themselves, and how to determine actual proficiency levels of such skills. The Understanding stage is very much akin to double- and triple-loop learning ^[REF. 13]. This is where the developing leaders not only need to grasp their current and desired actions and behaviors, but also need to understand the reasoning that led to these behaviors, and the premises, assumptions and beliefs that induced that reasoning.

The Motivation and Ability Phase

The first two stages of our framework are more concerned with providing the developing leaders with the information and insight required to derive their development priorities. This third stage, however, is focused on validating the leaders' readiness – their motivation and ability to commit to the plan and to execute its various learning actions. This sounds like common sense, but my experience indicates that this crucial dimension is often overlooked. In terms of motivation, research has demonstrated that, for behavioral changes to truly last, they should be intentional rather than imposed ^[REF. 14]. In other words, adults learn much better when they are learning things they want to learn, rather than things they're told to learn. Intentional learning is synonymous with self-directed change, where developing leaders are aware of the changes, understand the transformation course, and are truly self-motivated by the process and the goal.

Aside from being motivated to improve certain leadership dimensions, the developing leaders will often need to possess some pre-requisite abilities in order to achieve the desired leadership skills. For example, negotiating complex corporate mergers, leading senior sales teams as they respond to multifaceted proposals, or managing diverse cross-functional initiatives to resolve challenging engineering production issues will require that a developing leader be proficient in a number of baseline capabilities such as corporate law, negotiation techniques, solution selling, c-suite selling, manufacturing processes, and more.

Obviously, this depends on both the leaders' starting point (*their actual knowledge, skills and behaviors*) and on the leadership dimensions to be acquired or enhanced. This highlights the need for both motivation and ability conditions to be present prior to guiding the leaders through their leadership development effort. Provided that both motivation and baseline abilities are present, it's my belief that, with the proper plan, approach and support, developing leaders can leverage existing strengths and talents to grow in the targeted areas and, in the process, significantly enhance their overall effectiveness in the workplace.

The Approaches and Actions Phase

To quote the proverbial expression, the Approaches and Actions stage is where the rubber meets the road. The types of instructional approaches and development activities will obviously depend on several factors such as the competency to be acquired, the strengths to be leveraged, the proficiency gap to overcome, the leaders' preferred learning style, the context in which the learning actions will take place, and the support and resources available during the learning experience. In other words, the Approaches and Actions stage essentially embodies everything that we know about leadership development, experiential training, and adult learning. This is where developing leaders – alone or supported by their coach and/or manager – will artfully craft their unique development blends based on insight obtained from the other five (5) framework stages and dimensions (*Awareness, Understanding, Motivation and Ability, Context and Support and Resources*).

For example, a developing leader may decide to observe while a work colleague handles a difficult business situation, then experiment later on using similar techniques and behaviors in his/her day-to-day job. Another leader may choose to improve certain management competencies by interacting with his/her manager or mentor, by seeking advice from staff and/or by discussing issues with peers in a group setting. A third leader may go about enhancing his/her influencing skills by watching an online video and/or reading an article,

and by reflecting on ways to effectively integrate these best practices into his/her thinking and future behavior.

The number of possible development approaches and actions is nearly infinite. However, how developing leaders grasp and transform experience seems to be a common denominator in most leadership developmental activities ^[REF. 15]. For these experiential approaches and actions to be effective, they need to challenge the leaders – take them out of their comfort zone – and provide them with feedback and support post situation. “Comfort is the enemy of growth,” ^[REF. 16] and novelty, difficult goals, conflict, and dealing with adversity are important elements of experiential learning situations that can stretch developing leaders.

The Context Dimension

The Context dimension pertains to the personal background of the developing leaders and to the setting where the learning will take place. On the personal front, values, aspirations, personality traits, talents, capabilities and the role and responsibilities of the developing leaders constitute the important aspects that will affect the learning and development process. At the organizational level, company values, workplace climate, social environment (*managers, colleagues, employees, external partners*), and economic (*external*) and business (*internal*) conditions are the other dimensions that will influence a leader’s development.

Although difficult to alter, these personal and organizational elements may have significant impact on the effectiveness of the leadership development process. For example, a company culture where trust is deficient and where mistakes are not tolerated won’t naturally lend itself to a “trial and error” experiential learning approach. Similarly, a leader whose personality traits include shyness, introversion and prudence along with lower levels of curiosity and teamwork may learn better through reading, observation and reflection rather than via group workshops and team coaching. Since development is context sensitive ^[REF. 3, REF. 4], it’s imperative to take into consideration the

personal dimensions that developing leaders bring along and the organizational context in which they will carry out their development program.

The *Support and Resources* Dimension

The final dimension of our framework pertains to the various sources of support and resources available to the developing leaders. Resources may include existing training programs, access to a corporate library, perusal of e-learning material, wikis, electronic performance support systems (EPSS), and subscriptions to trade magazines, thematic newsletters, etc. In terms of support, developing leaders could rely on one or more of the following development stakeholders: employees, managers, superiors, mentors, internal peer network, external community of practice, internal or external coaches.

Once again, the presence of a variety of these supporting actors may affect, to various degrees, the learning effectiveness as the leaders navigate through the 4-stage development process: 1. Awareness → 2. Understanding → 3. Motivation & Ability → 4. Approaches & Actions. Hence the need to consider – and leverage as much as possible – the existing sources of support and resources available.

Interconnectedness and Cyclical Nature of the Framework

Even though the core portion of the framework depicts a relatively natural sequence of stages (*from Awareness to Approaches and Actions*), the leadership development process should not be viewed as strictly linear and unidirectional. Instead, it should be considered flexible, recurring and interconnected in nature. Simply put, this means that for learning to be effective, developing leaders must: 1. Be self-aware (*of their strengths and gaps, their current and desired states*); 2. Understand (*the rationale and impact of the development*); and 3. Be motivated (*and able to execute their development plan*). This makes room for the fourth stage of the process – the development approaches and actions. However, stages 1, 2 and 3 need not occur in sequence: a leader may

first be motivated and able, then understand the rationale and impact of the learning, and lastly assess his/her strengths and gaps. More importantly, the sought-after learning may not necessarily happen all at once during stage 4.

In fact, the behavioral transformation may very well be achieved in smaller increments – through shorter activities, experiences, observations and/or reflections. And once one of these bite-sized development activities is completed, it will likely impact the levels of Awareness (*stage 1*), Understanding (*stage 2*) and/or Motivation and Ability (*stage 3*) that the developing leader started the process with. Moreover, regular support from an external coach and/or changes in the organizational context may also modulate the process by affecting the pace and/or focus. The cycle will then repeat itself a number of times until the developing leader reaches the sought-after proficiency level. Hence the Interconnectedness and Cyclical nature of the proposed development framework.

Enter Coaching

It's worth noting that this leadership development framework is general and may be applied to design and/or review any type of learning initiatives and modalities. However, when considering its 4+2 stages and dimensions, it becomes obvious that coaching can be a naturally potent leadership development method as it has the inherent ability to: **1.** Raise the leader's awareness and understanding toward the change effort; **2.** Monitor his/her motivation and re-ignite it if the development suddenly becomes more laborious; **3.** Shed light on the leader's personal and organizational context, and adapt the learning approaches and actions accordingly; and **4.** Leverage existing resources in order to facilitate the sought-after behavioral changes. Finally, coaching is inherently a feedback-rich conversation style. And feedback is essential to ensure that developing leaders loop through the various stages of the framework.

competencies? As we'll see later in the book, Phase 1 typically lasts between one to three months. The second phase focuses on the **Transformation** of the developing leader. The underlying questions being addressed here are: *What competencies are we working on? When and how are we going to improve them? What resulted from our development trials? What do we need to do differently in order to reach our improvement goals?* In Phase 2, the coach supports and guides the developing leader through the iterative experiential acquisition and improvement of the prioritized leadership competencies. The third and last phase, **Sustainment**, is much shorter and helps the developing leader focus on what should happen next, once the leadership coaching is over.

Micro-structure

The high-level macro-structure presented above seems straightforward. However, the details show up when we look more closely at the micro-structure of every phase. For example, Phase 1 walks the developing leader through a series of reflection and self-assessment exercises. By using guidelines and information about the coaching program and a questionnaire about the developing leader, along with psychometric self-evaluation(s) of some sort, the leader is asked to reflect on who he/she is in terms of strengths, values, traits and styles, past successes and challenges, and professional aspirations. I found that this mindset shift – from a working leader to a developing one – is intimately linked with the fluidity and effectiveness of the coaching approach. Not only does this clarify the leader's development focus and enhance his/her motivation toward the process, but it also helps the coach become more familiar with his/her coachee. Phase 1 is also where the developing leader often conducts – along with his/her coach – a multi-rater assessment (aka 360), and synthesizes the results into a development plan. As we'll see later in the book, this 360 feedback is essential to prevent blindspots from creeping in and inhibiting the effectiveness of the program.

In Phase 2, the leader cycles through a number of experiential development activities blended with the coaching sessions.

Concretely, the coach pursues two goals throughout this phase. First, the coach helps his/her developing leader progress as much as possible within the coaching sessions. This usually takes the form of the coachee's reflection, insight, understanding, motivation and planning. Secondly, the coach ensures that his/her coachee will have the necessary understanding, support and motivation to carry out the planned experiential learning activities between coaching sessions. As in some sports where the athletes periodically consult and plan with their coach and make concrete progress on the field, the developing leader leverages what happens during the coaching sessions in order to concretely experiment, understand and acquire the sought-after leadership behaviors and attitudes outside of the coaching.

Although the overall process is linear – moving from Phase 1 to Phase 3 – what happens within Phase 2 is fairly iterative. The developing leader determines what leadership dimension to tackle first, and then cycles through various learning activities like observing, reflecting, planning, experimenting, discussing, adapting, understanding and internalizing, plus regular interactions with his/her leadership coach. And the process continues up to a point where the coach and the coachee determine that the target proficiency is reached (*or soon to be*), and that the coachee has enough autonomy (*i.e.: understanding, determination, self-reflection*) to carry on without the support of the coach. At that point, Phase 2 either shifts its focus to the next leadership priority (*as determined in Phase 1*), or comes to an end, which triggers Phase 3 of the process. There, the coach and the coachee briefly look back and review what happened during the first two phases of the program in terms of goals, accomplishments, challenges and outcomes. They also look forward in order to determine what is important for the developing leader, and to identify potential self-improvement strategies and tactics.

Potential Challenges

Although the proposed process is fairly logical and straightforward, it's not devoid of difficulties or pitfalls. Some potential challenges result from over-relying on a purely non-directive coaching approach where

the developing leader has complete ownership of the design of his/her plan and the execution of its activities. Obviously, the more committed and autonomous a developing leader is, the greater the likelihood of success the program has. But life never is that simple or perfect. In my experience, even with lots of motivation and goodwill, leaders often stumble across obstacles and difficulties that inhibit the effectiveness of their plan, even if it's well-crafted. For example, leaders will often come to coaching sessions ill-prepared, without a development-focused mindset, or simply not remember what was discussed and planned. Sometimes, they won't have completed the post/pre-coaching activities because of a lack of clarity on the required steps and sequence, their inability or unwillingness to step out of their comfort zone, and/or simply because life (*i.e.: the job*) got in the way. Ideally, leadership coaching should be like a beating heart. It consistently contracts and releases, but even in between heartbeats, the oxygen is taken in, the blood keeps flowing, and the cellular processes are activated. Unlike the activity of the cardiovascular system, I've often witnessed great coaching sessions (*akin to heartbeats*) filled with insight, planning and motivation, be followed by disappointing episodes of inactivity. It doesn't mean that such coaching program won't have any value. On the contrary. It simply means that, due to the unproductive inter-coaching periods, more coaching will be required to reach the targeted goals.

Project Management Analogy, Take 2

Reflecting on these challenges, I can't help but to think about some of the principles and best practices of project management. Concretely, a project is successful if all its tasks are completed effectively and in a timely fashion. To ensure this, the project manager periodically conducts status meetings. But for these meetings to be productive, the project manager needs to do two things: **1.** Prepare and share an agenda prior to the meetings, so that the participants come prepared; and **2.** Send a brief summary along with a set of action items right after the meetings, so that the participants remember what they discussed and committed to complete.

This doesn't mean that the project manager will do the work discussed and planned, the team members will. But it clearly facilitates the planning, tracking and execution of such activities. Anyone who has ever been involved in projects where meetings had no agenda and no summary or action items will certainly agree to the unproductive nature of such initiatives. It is the role of the project manager – not the project team members – to draft the agenda, capture the minutes, and track the action items. Since a coach also plays the role of the project manager for the leadership development program, and the coaching sessions are akin to the periodic project meetings, why wouldn't the coach be accountable to remind the developing leader of the agenda for the coaching sessions, and the learning actions to be completed in between such sessions? The best practices and tools of sections 2 and 3 have, in part, been developed to overcome some of these project management challenges.

7. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LEADERSHIP COACH

Based on everything presented so far, the next question that comes to mind is: *What makes a good leadership coach?* Over the years, having personally tried and tweaked this process – along with its practices and tools – and having used it with other colleagues as part of larger coaching programs, I've come to realize that a handful of characteristics are required from the leadership coach. These are:

- Proficient in coaching,
- Experienced in leadership,
- Familiar with learning and development, *and*
- Pragmatic, engaged and organized

Proficient in Coaching

Since coaching is at the center of the proposed leadership development approach, having a solid mastery of the main coaching skills is essential. A few techniques are particularly useful for helping the developing leaders loop through the various phases and steps of the experiential learning cycle. For instance, I often apply the following sequence when working with my coaching clients: **1.** Have them reflect on the targeted leadership skills, the significance of those skills and the potential impact that improving them will have on their performance at work; **2.** Help them break down these skills into specific behaviors and attitudes, and recognize the potential obstacles that could hinder their development effort; **3.** Support them in planning concrete trials using these behaviors and attitudes, and facilitate the review and understanding of the outcomes post-practice; and **4.** Encourage them to iteratively practice and fine-tune these new leadership behaviors until a certain proficiency and comfort level is reached.

In doing so, the following typical coaching skills are used repeatedly:

1. Open-ended questioning to trigger reflection and generate awareness and insight specific to the competency(ies) being addressed;
2. Providing support for the developing leader in identifying the internal and external development barriers as well as the triggers to these barriers and how to apply mitigation tactics to overcome or prevent them;
3. Active listening and paraphrasing to help the leader see the bigger picture regarding his/her development effort, revisit his/her expectations and establish a new perspective pertaining to the leadership skills being developed; and
4. Plenty of encouraging feedback combined with stories, metaphors, and humor to entice active experimentation of the novel practices.

Over the years, I found this coaching practice to be ideally suited for the development of leadership behaviors and attitudes. But for this to be effective, the approach must be a little more prescriptive and interventionist than classical non-directive coaching. Since the coach and the developing leader are following a micro-process (*experiential learning*) blended within a macro-process (*three program phases*), the agenda for each coaching session is fairly deterministic, and the coaching follows a somewhat structured path. The coach's role is to act as a Sherpa in this journey, encouraging the leader to progress as far and as fast as possible, while making sure that he/she doesn't stray away from the route forward.

Experience in Leadership

Another useful characteristic of the leadership coach is to have a certain level of experience in management and leadership. The reasoning is that, since leadership – and leadership development – are context sensitive ^[REF. 3, REF. 4], and since the proposed approach is a little more prescriptive and interventionist than classical non-directive coaching, then it's difficult to be an effective coach without having any familiarity with the types of situations the developing leaders are facing. The goal here is not to tell them what to do or how to act in various situations. But drawing from your own leadership experience is useful for multiple reasons: 1. It helps you understand what the developing

leader is going through; **2**. It also helps you inspire trust and exhibit presence throughout the coaching sessions; and **3**. Sharing experience and stories is useful to catalyze reflection and induce insight. Sometimes, rather than waiting for self-discovery to kick in, it's worth briefly adopting a teaching mode to introduce a few important leadership concepts, and then moving back into a coaching mode to help the developing leader contextualize the learning.

For example, consider this situation where a developing leader has inherited management of an underperforming IT consulting team providing cybersecurity audits and malware threat assessments to the financial planning market. The team's commercial results have been declining over the last six quarters, mainly due to clients not renewing their service contracts. To tackle client turnover, the inexperienced leader decides – through self-discovery – to perform an internal audit on the team's service performance. Having completed his analysis, the new leader notices that the customer service level agreements (*SLA*) call for a mean time to respond (*MTTR*) of 90 minutes. However, his audit revealed that his team emails back its clients with a *MTTR* of 120 minutes. Upon this realization, he may be tempted to simply allocate additional resources from the company's call center in order to reach the 90-minute *MTTR* service level. This should be sufficient to satisfy customers and prevent further turnover. However, an experienced leadership coach would probably highlight to the developing leader the basic concepts and principles behind customer engagement (*emotional engagement vs. rational satisfaction*) and their relationship with customer loyalty ^[REF. 30]. In this case, perhaps the problem didn't lie with *how fast* the team responded to the customers, but *how* they responded altogether. And the solution would probably be found by surveying the customers rather than by simply performing an internal audit.

In other words, a bit of theory and some concepts coupled with context-specific leadership coaching is likely to be more effective in the long run than coaching the developing leader through a non-directive self-discovery approach. And to do so, the coach needs to have a basic understanding of and experience with such leadership concepts.

Familiar with Learning and Development

Developing leaders often come to coaching with naïve or misinformed expectations. This is probably related to the fact that coaching is less prevalent amongst younger, emerging leaders (*in comparison with executive coaching offered to more senior leaders*). Combine this partially unclear view of coaching with various experiential learning activities like assessments, experimentation, feedback, observation, and reflection, and we run the risk of confusing the developing leader, which often leads to disengagement. To offset this, I found it useful and worthwhile to explain, as the need arose, the mechanics, rationale and benefits of the learning approach: How do we change or acquire behaviors? What are good habit making/breaking strategies? Why do we do certain activities? Etc. And to do this in a convincing and effective fashion, the leadership coach needs to be familiar with the key experiential learning concepts, tools and strategies utilized throughout the proposed approach. This requirement is also in line with basic andragogical principles ^[REF. 29], which state that adults learn best when they are familiar with the learning process and understand the reasoning behind its activities.

Pragmatic, Engaged and Organized

A final set of qualities that I've found helpful when coaching developing leaders relates to our own engagement in the learning journey. One might think this goes without saying, but it's easy to become disengaged, especially if, as a professional coach, you're busy working with several leaders in parallel, or if you are focused on carrying your main work-related responsibilities as a leader-coach (*aside from developing your leaders through coaching*). Over the years, I've noticed that developing leaders were not always fully motivated by their learning through the coaching program. They understood the value of professional development, but were not necessarily ready or prepared to embark on a multi-month coaching endeavor. In fact, many were "voluntold" rather than having volunteered! Moreover, the transition from an individual contributor to seasoned leader is often characterized with unforeseen challenges, ambivalence and doubt,

making the job of an emerging leader even more difficult. A natural reflex is to focus on the immediate workload and, in the process, lose the longer-term view of the role.

Keeping in mind your role as a Sherpa for leaders on their development journey, and remembering what it felt like to be in their shoes, are certainly steps in the right direction. As a leadership coach involved in the learning success of your client, one of your goals is to be as engaging and supportive as possible, thus helping the developing leaders to move away from the daily grind, see the bigger picture, and understand that, sometimes, one needs to take a step back in order to move forward. Becoming a better leader is exactly this: taking the time for – and being open to – trials and failures, knowing this seemingly unproductive detour is necessary for future success. This is akin to the paradox of delegation: you need to spend a bit of time delegating in order to gain more time later on through increased autonomy of your employees. Similarly, a developing leader should understand the need to spend a bit of time trying and learning in order to gain more time later on through improved leadership.

An effective coach will also be able to listen and empathize with the challenges experienced by his/her developing leaders, and help them see these difficulties as positive learning opportunities rather than drama-filled, overwhelming situations. Being down-to-earth – and sometimes using humour as a perspective-inducing means – is also a helpful quality that the leadership coach should leverage.

Finally, although the 3-phase leadership coaching process is simple, it is composed of several moving parts to manage such as: onboarding questionnaire, psychometric self-evaluations, 360 competency assessment, prioritized leadership competencies and development plan, experiential learning strategy, selection of leadership behaviors and attitudes, identification of internal and external barriers and relevant mitigation strategies, planning and execution of context-specific trials, reflection and adaptation from past experimentations, review of best practices, observation of peers and feedback from colleagues, transformation of novel behaviors into habits, 3-way

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discussion with management/HR, etc. As such, the effectiveness of a leadership coach will also be affected by his/her organization skills. Not only is this helpful in keeping the developing leader aware of his/her progression within the coaching journey, but it is even more important if the leadership coach is following several leaders in parallel.

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