

A COACH APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

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“...HUMANITY IS BOTH MORE CONNECTED AND MORE DISCONNECTED THAN EVER BEFORE.”

Growing up on the Canadian prairies I didn't play team sports, and my athletic pursuits were usually independent affairs involving the outdoors and adventure. Until I owned a veterinary practice, I never felt the camaraderie of a team and never experienced great coaching. Yet here I am, completing a Certificate in Executive Coaching, stepping into this new persona of coach, and somehow it feels right. Perhaps, if you pay attention, the universe delivers you exactly where you need to be.

In 2020, change was a constant and nagging companion as leaders in all industries navigated the uncertainty and fear associated with COVID-19. As the pandemic unfolded, it became clear that a hierarchical or command-and-control model of leadership was not the most effective in the evolving, complex, ambiguous environment of COVID-19. In this new digital age, humanity is both more connected and more disconnected than ever before. When information is available with the click of a mouse, and rapid, disruptive change is unrelenting, a different type of leadership is required. We need leaders who are willing to move from telling people what to do and demanding compliance to instead believing in the capacity and creativity of their team and leveraging their collective strengths. This shift to focusing on unlocking people's potential to maximize their performance is the essence of a coach approach to leadership. Organizations needed agile leaders able to:

- **Optimize trust** to decentralize control and create agility and speed in decision-making
- **Engage people** to amplify communication and improve problem-solving and collaboration at all levels of the organization
- Step back from having the right answers and instead **ask the right questions** to empower the entire team in finding solutions

As a leader with a coach approach, your job is to draw creativity and insight out of your team, empowering them to embrace challenges, find solutions, and make sound decisions on their own. This requires skills that don't come naturally for many leaders. Bringing the benefits of coaching to your hospital starts by adopting five key coaching principles into your leadership practice.

1. COMMITTED LISTENING

Learn to listen at a deeper level. Most of us listen with the intent to reply. Some of us listen to understand. Few of us listen to find the deeper meaning behind the words being spoken. With practice, we can train ourselves to hear the context, values, and belief systems behind what is being said and use this understanding to bring awareness to our team. In this way, a leader can safely challenge existing mind-sets and create new thinking and behaviour patterns. This expands a team's sense of what is possible and enlists them in finding ways to bridge the gap. Developing this skill requires courage, humility, and willingness to let go of judgment and admit you don't have all the answers. As you build your listening skills, ask yourself these questions:

- “Am I about to give advice before attempting to understand this person?”
- “What might I learn if I let myself get curious?”

- “What don't I know that might change my thinking about this person or situation?”
- “Who can provide a new perspective?”

2. POWERFUL QUESTIONING

In turbulent times, organizations need to create new knowledge and innovate to meet the demands of rapid change and ambiguity. The way we have always done things is no longer a guarantee of success. A different kind of thinking is needed to meet the challenges of a world in flux—creative thinking.

As veterinarians, we are trained to follow a logical set of steps to diagnose disease (the problem). We then set about treating disease (or fixing the problem) using well-researched and scientifically sound methods. While this logical approach reduces risk (mistakes) and increases the likelihood of a successful outcome when dealing with medical cases, it may not be as effective in exploring the complexity of decision-making in the information age. Creative thinking leverages the collective capacity of an entire team to discover fresh perspectives and innovative solutions. It requires a shift from a problem-solution orientation where we focus on finding the right answers to admitting we don't have all the answers and asking the right questions instead.

In formulating powerful questions, it is important to challenge assumptions, let go of judgment, and engage curiosity. Instead of “What did we do wrong and who is responsible?” leaders need to ask “What did we learn from this and what possibilities do we now see?” Consider posing questions that do the following:

- Provoke thought
- Engage curiosity in the listener
- Stimulate reflective conversation
- Surface underlying assumptions
- Invite creativity and new possibilities
- Touch deep meaning
- Evoke more questions

3. CREATING IMAGES OF POSSIBILITY

While the past can teach us many lessons, human systems grow toward what they persistently focus on and ask questions about. Leaders who can paint a picture of what is possible and inspire their team to co-create this future have the opportunity to grow in new directions and tap into innovative sources of knowledge and energy to move forward.

As you adopt a coach approach, instead of focusing on solving problems and controlling situations, try to paint a mental image for your team of what is possible and what the future could look like. This moves the team from a focus on short-term solutions (reacting to the situation) to building sustainable, satisfying long-term results (responding intentionally to the current reality). When creating a powerful, shared vision and purpose for your organization, take time to explore the following:

- What do we value about our work? Our team?
- What is special and unique about our organization?
- What strengths are represented on our team? How do we leverage these strengths to meet our vision?
- When are we at our best?
- What achievements are your team most proud of?
- Apart from money, what makes it worth coming to work?
- If you had three wishes for our organization, what would they be?

4. FEEDFORWARD INSTEAD OF FEEDBACK

People want to know how they are doing and whether their performance is in line with what leadership expects. Great coaches have mastered the skill of creating awareness with respect and compassion while empowering individuals to take ownership of their growth. One way to do this is to move beyond the traditional employee evaluations with a focus on past performance to feedforward sessions that invite employee participation and focus on building skills to prepare for future opportunities. Consider trying this introduction to the benefits of feedforward with your team:

1. Have each participant pick one behaviour they would like to change. Changing this behaviour should make a significant, positive difference in their life. For example, “I would like to learn how to control my temper when stressed at work.”
2. Break the group into random two-person teams. Have one person start by describing the behaviour they want to change and ask for feedforward.
3. The second person responds with two suggestions for the future that might help their teammate achieve a positive change in their selected behaviour. There is one rule—they are not allowed to give any feedback or examples from the past. Only ideas about the future.
4. The first person should listen attentively and take notes

if desired. They are NOT allowed to comment on or critique the suggestions in any way, even to make positive statements like “That's a great idea!” Teammates are only allowed to say “Thank you for your suggestions” and “You are welcome.”

5. Participants change roles and repeat the process. When they have finished, they change partners with another group and repeat the process until the exercise is stopped.

When the exercise is finished, ask participants to provide one word that describes their reaction to this experience. You might be surprised to learn that the response is almost always positive. This game is a great way to start creating self-awareness and teaching your team valuable skills in interpersonal communication while learning to give and receive feedforward directly with a high level of care.

5. CELEBRATING TOGETHER

The final principle requires moving from the rescuer mind-set that says “Let me fix it for you” or worse, “Let me fix you” to a coaching mind-set that says “I will stand by you, challenge you, and inspire you because I believe in you.” This helps team members take ownership of their role on the team and become accountable for their success. Pay close attention to your team's progress. Acknowledge behaviours that align your values and support your shared vision and watch for opportunities to celebrate as you teach your team that the best wins are team wins.

A coach approach to leadership will move your team from a problem-solving mind-set to a creative one, stimulating the innovation and collaboration needed to thrive in a climate of rapid change and uncertainty. Like any new skill, shifting from telling people what to do and demanding compliance to listening, asking questions, and growing capacity takes time. It requires a dedication to the long game, ongoing practice, and an unflinching belief that the people in your organization are your biggest asset. This leap of faith has the power to reap big rewards for your team and your organization.

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