

Growing leaders through coaching

Michael Cauley

What would happen if every leader had someone to talk to, who would challenge them to grow and help them identify resources to do so? What would happen if every leader had an unseen friend to ask them hard questions about self-care or their growth plan for the new year? What would happen if every leader had someone to speak with regularly, who, no matter what they discussed, would love them as a brother or sister in Christ and hold their confidences? And, what would it feel like to know that you are not alone in your journey through life? While this may sound inconceivable, it is something that I have experienced first hand in many ways. And it has blessed my life and my leadership.

About five years ago, while on a trip with my brother-in-law, we began to dialogue about a fundamental leadership issue: how to help leaders develop their skills and lead more effectively. He had served in health-care administration for several years and, as it turned out, he had recently completed extensive training to become a leadership development coach. He then told me something I hadn't heard before: he had never seen anything that equaled coaching in terms of its potential for developing people. Since I was looking for a Doctor of Ministry project on growing leaders, immediately my interest was piqued. We discussed the process of being trained to function as a coach, and I learned that the first step is to be coached by a skilled coach. I was put in touch with, Dr. Nick Howard, a Psychologist and Leadership Coach practicing about two hours from where I was living at the time. I decided to give coaching a shot and we had a few sessions before I received a call and moved to another state.

Because of the move, my doctoral work was delayed for a year. In the mean time, I had begun to experience great value in being coached. I was growing as a leader and a person. The initial idea of training my key leaders in coaching skills took on greater meaning as I was experiencing genuine growth through the coaching process. Consequently, in telephone coaching sessions with Dr. Howard, I began to lay out the academic project that would involve developing a system of coaching for pastors and school administrators. Over a period of seven months, most of the administrative team (including me), a pastor, and three staff from the ministerial department became trainee coaches. The eight of us received coaching from Dr. Howard and he, as the coach/trainer, conducted three two-day seminars over the six month period.

Moreover, we read about 1100 pages of material from various authors on coaching, systems theory, change theory, and human development. The capstone of the training process was that we each coached two people over the six-month period under the supervision of Dr. Howard. Below I highlight some of the key findings that emerged from that unique learning experience.

The impact on those who were coached

As a part of my doctoral project, I received permission after the training to interview the people who had been coached by the newly trained coaches on our staff. I also interviewed the trainee coaches who were coached by Dr. Howard throughout the time they were being trained to serve as coaches. Given that this training was different than most as it included a coaching component, I was really curious about how my peers and those who were receiving coaching from them ultimately viewed their experience. Interestingly, the responses from the people who were coached by the trainees were overwhelmingly positive and affirming. (I must

admit I was a bit surprised by this.) When I asked the coachees what the single greatest benefit of the coaching experience was, their responses fell in the following categories:

Providing a framework for growth and accountability. Coaching helped certain pastors and educational administrators by providing a framework for professional growth with accountability; something that is highly important to help a leader move forward on their most important priorities. One coachee's comment was typical in describing the way his coach provided a kind of supportive accountability: "Now, as I go about my work, I hear my coach's voice in my head saying, 'How are you going to do that? What is the first thing that you are going to do?'"

Giving support in the midst of challenges. Coaching gave support in a profession that is vulnerable to discouragement because of the real existence of isolation. I was struck by how coaching was striking a deep chord in those receiving coaching. Note these comments, "To come into a church and find opposition and resistance is discouraging. Before, I easily became discouraged and I felt that I wasn't succeeding. Coaching has led me to be more patient with myself and people in the church." Another person shared: "Coaching has rescued me from discouragement and doubt. . . . It has enriched my prayer life and increased my confidence in myself."

Growing as a leader. Some of the coachees began using coaching skills with their church leaders without receiving the formal coach training. They reported results I hadn't anticipated, but they were outcomes I certainly welcomed. People shared things like: "I use the coaching principles to ask more questions to see what others think. I coach my church leaders toward a common goal or vision." "Coaching has sped up the process of turning over responsibility to others. I spend time with the church members getting them to share responsibilities." "It has given me a model for

doing discipleship.” “It is making me more focused and more assertive and has helped me to lead the congregation better.”

Facing issues of self-care and family needs. Learning how to appropriately take care of ourselves as church leaders is one of the tougher challenges we face. I’m beginning to think that healthy self-care is fundamental to creating a truly effective ministry over the long term. As a result, I was pleased by how self-care emerged as a theme in the responses. One coachee responded, “I have established boundaries regarding my health. . . . The tyranny of the urgent had pushed my personal life to depletion. Coaching forced me to do an inventory on how I was living my life. Taking the time for contemplation and reflection has caused me to look at what is really important.” “One of the things that I do differently is that I enjoy life more. I am happier. I spend time with my family and enjoy it and feel good about it instead of always feeling that I have to be working.” “In my relationship with my wife, our communication has definitely improved as a result of the coaching experience. . . . I am now freer and have peace of mind when I set aside time to be with my family.”

The impact on those who were trained as coaches

And what about those of us trained as coaches? Since I was a part of the learning group, I was able to experience first-hand the transformation in the lives of several of the trainee-coaches. They received expert coaching by Dr. Howard while acquiring a vital skill. Here are some of the benefits noted:

Obtaining new skills in communication. Communication skills are obviously highly important in effective ministry and leadership. The trainees reported improved skills that are essential to solid coaching, such as active listening, asking open-ended questions, naming, and affirmation. One staff member shared: “I learned new

listening skills, questioning skills, and naming skills which have made me a better husband, father and leader. I have become an advocate with my subordinates and have gained the skill of affirmation.” Another stated: “Coaching has changed my perspective on every conversation I have with the pastors with whom I work.”

Developing effective teamwork. A well-functioning leadership team is central to effective leadership. One coach reported that his subordinates had picked up coaching skills through the process of being coached by him. This resulted in them working more effectively to resolve problems as a team. “. . . soon (my subordinates) were reporting to me not only the answers to their problems which they had discovered, but on their success in cooperating with their peers to discover solutions.”

Living more consistently with their vision and values. Lastly, those participating in the training reported increased focus and confidence. Many made progress on long-term goals and short-term plans. Several addressed areas of their lives that had held them back from reaching their potential. For many, it included wrestling with the issue of balance; especially relative to family and health.

Conclusion

As leaders, we are often faced with substantial questions, which can certainly be overwhelming at times. Questions like: How do you meaningfully impact the culture of a church, institution, or conference? Or, how do you develop leaders in your place of ministry? Further, how do you address the desire and need of people to grow? And, lastly, what can we do to tackle issues of isolation in ministry? As leaders we are charged with addressing these real needs but of course it is much easier said than done. Through this training process, I’m realizing on deeper levels that it does not happen overnight or without a real investment of time and resources

in the right kind of training. And, while I did not dare to hope that a tool existed to address those issues I was happily surprised by the impact of the training program. I was amazed that the experience of having a coach over a period of approximately six months impacted people to the extent that it did. I felt so rewarded to see people grow to a healthier place and become more effective in their leadership and service.

I'm now beginning to see that coaching is in reality a kind of discipleship for vocation. It is fundamentally about coming alongside people, creating a safe environment, and helping them achieve their potential. In the Book of Acts, the church seems to have lived in a role of supporting, strengthening, and encouraging one another. It was fundamental to New Testament religion. Perhaps it was more natural for people living in simpler times. Could it be that in our complex world we need an intentional structure to help us have meaningful conversations that facilitate growth? It seems clearer to me that we don't naturally take time to reflect and process and hold each other accountable for our growth.

Ultimately this project has confirmed my thinking that it is simply not possible to live up to your full potential as a church leader if you are going through life solo. It appears to be God's ideal that people have someone to come alongside them to be an unseen, trusted friend on their journey through life. It is likely the only way for individuals to fully mature to God's ideal for them.

Aligning a person's life with his/her vision and values is critical to living empowered lives and becoming agents of transformation. And the experience of personal transformation is perhaps more powerful than all the leadership lessons that we can study otherwise. I am more and more convinced that who we are and how we live communicates so much more than what we say. The coach training program brought these truths to light in a deeper way, and I am grateful for the impact it has had.

Through this doctoral project “experiment” we are now incorporating coach training for more of our pastors and administrators, and the ripple effect of this vital work is spreading throughout our field. It is an investment in time and energy but I believe it will pay significant dividends when we invest in our people.

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