

LEADERSHIP INSIGHT

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Unleashing the Coaching Leadership Style

By Capt Simon Lash AGC(SPS)

The Future Soldier programme will require our people to be more agile and adaptable to be able to meet future challenges, but how can our hierarchical organisation achieve this? The answer is through leadership and – as I suggest in this Insight – by applying the coaching leadership style.

The coaching leadership style is one of the six leadership styles adopted by the British Army with the introduction of the Leadership Code (2015). The latest iteration of the Leadership Doctrine (2021) explains the coaching leadership style by saying that, 'The leader encourages dialogue and focuses on the future. It develops others by helping them identify their own strengths and weaknesses and building long-term capabilities' (ALD, 5-14.d).

How do leaders achieve this and how can they apply a more coaching leadership style? This Insight will provide four steps to become a better coach-leader.

Context

In 2000, Daniel Goleman published one of the largest surveys on leadership ever conducted with business executives from around the globe. The result shaped organisational leadership thinking, including our own. The research found that coaching was one of the more positive leadership styles and it was a key style in developing self-awareness, one of the components of Emotional Intelligence. Coaching therefore plays a key role in the development of our people and them unlocking their own potential. Goleman concluded that 'Leaders who ignore this style are passing up a powerful tool'. Yet, out of all the styles, coaching was found to be the least utilised. Leaders often explained that they did not have time to coach people. Further studies – including the Bangor University Model of Transformation Leadership (1999-2010), which examined recruitment wastages in the Royal Marines, emphasised the benefits of a coaching leadership style.

Four Steps to Coaching as a Leader

The four steps below are based on research and official guidance. They complement the Army Leadership Development Programme. Therefore, they should not come as too much of a surprise but rather as a refresher along with practical tips on how to apply them. Firstly, a leader can step

in at any point within the four steps but ideally, for full effect and better outcomes, the steps should be taken in order as shown below in diagram 1.



Diagram 1 – Four practical steps to develop a coaching leadership style

Step 1 – Say Less and Ask More

Be inquisitive. How can we truly develop our people if we do not know them? As leaders we need to know those we lead in both personal and professional respects. This helps to build trust, foster a sense of belonging, and build empathy. A coach leader uses this strategy to better effect by asking more questions rather than by providing solutions.

According to Stephen Karpman's drama triangle, most people have a natural reaction to want to help others and provide them with solutions. Karpman referred to these individuals as 'rescuers'. Providing solutions does not help those we lead in the long term and affects the way in which we develop them. This approach makes individuals more reliant on leaders and takes away personal accountability. It is the opposite of the empowerment action that is needed.

David Emerald has proposed that the role of rescuer can be flipped to that of coach to allow individuals to find solutions for themselves and make their own choices. By saying less and asking more, we as leaders change the way we open our dialogue with the individuals we lead. For example, how often do you open with questions such as 'What can I do for you?' or 'How can I help you?'. With these opening questions, part of the ownership of the issue is already removed from the individual knocking. By making yourself available, you have taken on the role of rescuer without any intention of doing so.

One quick and easy way to address this is by changing your opening question. Michael Bungay Stanier says, 'Call them forward to learn, improve and grow, rather than to just get something sorted out'. Bungay Stanier suggests that one of the best 'kickstart' questions is 'What's on your mind?'. This question invites the individual to talk about the thing that matters to them most, it is giving them the autonomy to open-up about anything. Now, it can elicit the same response as 'What can I do for you' but you have not taken ownership, you have asked the individual to think what matters most to them at that point.

Inquisitive questions are one of the most powerful tools a coach leader can use, and the great thing is they do not need to be overthought; they just need to be open-ended. Open-ended questions are simply a question that cannot be answered in one word, like "yes", "no", "good" etc. The first step though is to just say less and ask more, it is important that you come across as authentic and genuinely interested in what they have to say. As you become more comfortable with the coach leadership style, you can develop other skills such as effective listening and effective questioning. These techniques will help you grow in confidence and be a more effective coach leader.

Top tip: explore the power of silence. By staying silent and giving time for reflection after you have asked a question, you create space for the individual to think. You allow them to engage with their own mental process.

Step 2 – Set Objectives

Now that we have said less and asked more, we are starting to know our people. Once we know them, we can start to develop them more effectively. One of the most proven methods of providing direction and focus is setting goals. To achieve goals, we need to set short term measurable objectives. Objectives Based Reporting (OBR) is an integral part of our appraisal process, as leaders we need to ensure we set clear personal and professional objectives. Whilst personal objectives are key to personal development, which can benefit the organisation, they need to be balanced with professional objectives that align with organisational outputs/desirables. The best objectives are those that benefit the individual, the team, and the organisation.

My personal experience of objective setting is based on the six to nine month point when I am prompted to update objectives and then look back at what I have accomplished over the year. This is easy and convenient, but it is also lazy.

Top Tip: Use the GROW model for the overarching goal and the SMART model for the small, bite-sized objectives.

GROW	Action
Goal	To qualify for CIPID Level 5
Reality	I am a SNCO in the SPS and have been developing my leadership and management skills. I now have the capacity and motivation to take my learning further.
Options	There are many universities I can undertake this study with; however, I have chosen Leicester due to its close ties to the military. I have also considered a Leadership & Management Degree, but I believe that Level 5 is more relevant to my current work and what I am capable of now.
Way Forward	I need to register with Leicester university and secure ELC funding. I will need to make time in my schedule for the studying that will be required. Additionally, I may seek a mentor who has already achieved the qualification.

SMART	Action
Specific	Register with the university of Leicester and apply for ELC's. If I do not do both of these, I will not be able to enrol or afford the course.
Measurable	I know this will be achieved when I have successfully enrolled on the course. I will need to be enrolled by Jul 21 in order to start the course in Sep 21
Achievable	I currently have the time and capacity to conduct the studies and have chain of command support. I must however secure the ELC funding to make it affordable
Relevant	As a SNCO I am looking to develop myself in Human Resources and Administration. This qualification will provide me a deeper level of knowledge of how these functions work which will allow me to utilise new skills within the workplace. This should benefit me, the team and the organisation.
Time Bound	All actions need to be completed by Jul 21 so that I can be enrolled on Sep 21 course. My first step will be to apply to the university of Leicester by Feb 21 and to have applied for ELC funding my Apr 21. These timelines are realistic.

Step 3 – Deliver Feedback

According to Julie Starr there are five fundamental skills of coaching, with skill five being constructive feedback. Delivery of feedback can be immediate and, in the moment, or it can be a more considered challenging view of someone's attitudes and/or behaviours. There are a few basic principles of delivering quality feedback, feedback should be: Given with a positive intention; Based on facts and behaviour; Constructive and beneficial.

My experience with feedback is that we tend to provide immediate feedback when we do well at something and more detailed and constructive feedback twice a year, the first being during the mid-period appraisal and the second on delivery of the annual appraisal. This level of feedback is the minimum level that is required to truly develop our people. Yet, constructive feedback should be delivered more frequently, I suggest monthly as the minimum. It may sound time-consuming but one-to-one meetings only need to last 10 minutes and can reap long term development success. Even if the feedback loop goes back to the stated objectives and provides only short feedback on progression and attainment, you as a leader have demonstrated interest in an individual's development. This creates an environment of trust, which is one of the building blocks for creating high-performing teams and developing the leader-follower relationship.

Top tip: When providing quality feedback, you will need to balance objective (what you have observed) and subjective (your opinion) statements. If you are too objective, you can come across as transactional and have no influence whereas. If you are too subjective, you are basing everything in opinion and not fact, thus losing credibility.

Step 4 – Develop Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is one of the key tenets of Emotional Intelligence and is considered one of the 'arts of leadership'. As leaders, we not only need to develop our own self-awareness but we also need to support those we lead in developing their own. Individuals who develop self-awareness recognise how their feelings affect them, other people, and their overall workplace performance. Conducted correctly, the 3 previous steps will feed into self-awareness, however there are several other ways we- as leaders – can improve self-awareness in ourselves as well as others, they are:

- 180 Reporting. It allows leaders to seek constructive feedback from peers and from those they lead and not only from their superiors. The MOD has developed the [180 Leadership Tool](#) as a template.
- Complete a personality profile exercise such as Myers-Briggs or a free personality profile such as the 16 Personalities Test to see where you fit within a team and to understand more about yourself. Research shows that teams with the same personality type are likely to have more blind spots. It is therefore essential to identify these traits so we can recognise the teams' strengths and weaknesses.
- Use reflective tools like Gibbs Reflective Cycle to self-reflect. Over time you will be able to see traits and recognise how you deal with different situations.

Self-awareness allows individuals to keep improving and to identify blind spots. Once individuals have identified areas where they can improve or develop, they can move to stage 1 and discuss a way forward or move straight to stage 2 and set objectives to develop.

Time

Time plays a big factor when using the coaching leadership style. At first, you may find that you spend more time than usual when applying these coaching techniques as they require time to think and self-reflect. However, as you learn and become more comfortable with this new way of thinking and leading, your time spent coaching decreases rapidly. For example, what would have taken me 30 minutes at the beginning, now takes me 10 minutes. Step 1 is now routine, and it is part of my everyday language. Not everything has to be structured. 'Curb side' coaching can be just as powerful as it is immediate and engaging. It can be as simple as a conversation whilst you are waiting for the kettle to boil.

Golden Rules

There are two golden rules.

First: do not push it. Using coaching techniques requires the receiver to be open to the process. Being asked open-ended, reflective questions can be a new experience for some. Find the right moment, look out for non-verbal responses, and respond appropriately. As cultures change and awareness of the benefits of leadership coaching spread, more people will become receptive, in fact they will be expecting it.

Second: this is not just a 1RO's responsibility. Leaders at all levels can adopt a coaching leadership style to ensure those they lead reach their full potential. This is what we – as an organisation – should always strive to achieve.

Questions

1. When did I set my Objectives on JPA? Who holds me to account for them?
2. When was the last time I conducted self-reflection? What did I do after?
3. Looking back at a recent conversation with one member of my team, did I just provide the solution? Could I have approached the situation differently?

Resources

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