

Mentoring for Change

leadership, coaching, mentoring, storytelling

Welcome to the Mentoring for Change newsletter. In this issue:

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With best wishes

Keith the Mentor



Dangers of Executive Coaching?

I've always felt a little uneasy about Steven Berglas' influential article "Dangers of Executive Coaching" (HBR June 2002). When I first read it I put this down to a sense that it was rather self-promoting (the message seemed to be "you should always use a psychologically trained coach like me!"). I re-read it on the train up to London earlier this week. This time my first reaction was that Berglas was choosing examples where the coachees had significant pathologies to prove his thesis that "in an alarming number of situations, executive coaches who lack rigorous psychological training do more harm than good". But then when I looked at what each of the 'coaches' cited did, I realised that what he was describing was not coaching but actually (bad) training and consulting.

These are the four case studies he presents – in each case I have quoted his description of what the coach did (*italics mine*):

- Rob Bernstein, an EVP in charge of Sales at an automotive distributor. The problem was that Rob caused trouble within the company by mistreating support staff, though he was worth his weight in gold with clients. The coach "*taught him* techniques for managing the little people" – so teaching then, not coaching.
- Jim Mirabella, a Head of Marketing. His problem was that he was impossible to work with because he hoarded information about company strategy, market indicators, sales forecasts and the like. The coach, McNulty, "*analyzed Mirabella's behaviour and role-played* effective styles for mastering interpersonal situations." McNulty also "reacted to Mirabella's avowment of ineptitude and anxiety with

exhortations 'Quitters never win, and winners never quit' was a favourite comment of his, but at times McNulty would also chide Mirabella for being a 'weaking' who needed to 'act like a man' ". So here it sounds like a combination of teaching by modelling behaviours and bullying – again, not coaching.

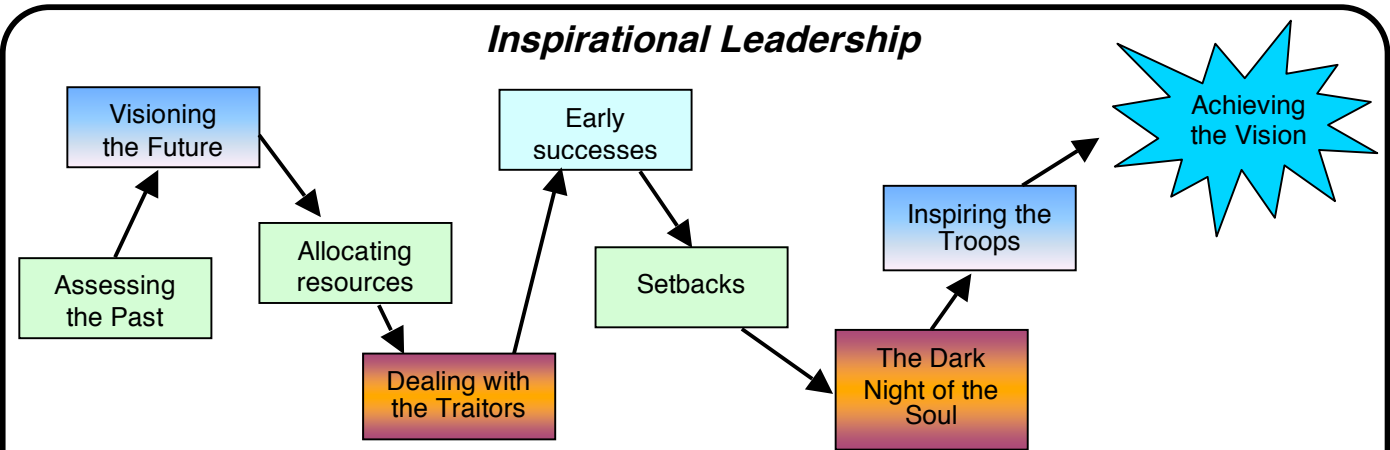
- Jennifer Mansfield VP of Training and Development. Her problem was a lack of confidence and a difficulty delegating. Berglas says that "the coach *assumed that* Mansfield needed to learn to set limits, to constructively criticize her subordinates, and to avoid the trap of doing other people's work for them. Within two months of what her coach deemed successful *training*, Mansfield began to lose weight, grow irritable and display signs of exhaustion." Training again.
- The COO of an athletic shoe manufacturer. He had snapped under the strain of failing to meet sales targets for three successive quarters and had begun venting his frustration on store managers, buyers and suppliers. The coach, a one-time colleague of the CEO, used an approach "based on a profiling system ... that would optimise individual managers' productivity". Six months later the coach claimed that the once raging COO was calm and capable of fulfilling his duties. When the coach suggested that he apply the profiling system to all the company's executives, the CEO readily agreed. During the next year, the coach suggested a number of personnel changes which were implemented. Many of these changes proved ill-conceived and damaged the company – but the coach had inadvertently set up a dependency relationship in which the CEO had formed a positive transference towards the coach. This meant that the CEO was unable to see that the

coach was creating the organisation's problems. It's not clear if coaching was used here with the COO or not. But the subsequent use of the profiling instrument with all the company's executives was a consultancy intervention, so again this example would seem to have little to say about coaching interventions.

There is a case that can be made for a coach needing to be psychologically trained – and certainly for being psychologically literate – but that that case isn't made here. Instead, the examples demonstrate what happens when organisations use incompetent 'coaches' - and the

dangers of a largely directive approach. Coaches who follow a non-directive approach can much more easily satisfy the injunction "first do no harm" (often attributed to Hippocrates but actually of 17th century origins). Of course, good coaches will use both non-directive and directive styles – but it takes much greater skill to make effective directive interventions than it does non-directive interventions – as Berglas' article does demonstrate.

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Earlier this summer, I had the pleasure of seeing my son Nick perform the "Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more" speech from Henry V. It reminded me of Richard Olivier's analysis of Henry's development as a leader in his book "Inspirational Leadership: Henry V and the Muse of Fire". Olivier provides a map of Henry's leadership journey (see above).

The journey starts with the young king having to gain commitment to his mission and assert his right to lead the army. He does so by demonstrating that he has left behind the riotous living of his Prince Hal days and that he has a compelling vision – to reunite England and France.

Henry then allocates his available resources and deals with those opposing him, including the three traitors who have been paid by the French to kill him. He tricks them into revealing themselves, vents his fury, and then dispassionately sentences them to death.

Landing in France, Henry achieves some early successes before setbacks lead to his 8,000 exhausted men being surrounded by 40,000 mounted French troops. The French offer Henry the choice of surrendering (and paying a huge fine but he and his troops being spared) or fighting the following day on the field of Agincourt and being killed.

Like so many leaders before and since, Henry faces his own dark night of the soul. He confronts the possibility of failure and the crushing loneliness of his responsibility as he faces a decision that could lead to

most of his men lying dead on the field of battle and his vision destroyed.

Finally resolving to fight the French, he reaches deep inside to find an inspirational vision for a future worth fighting for and then addresses the troops:

*And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now abed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day. (IV, iii)*

As they listen, Henry's troops follow his imagination into the future, seeing themselves as old men in a pub toasting their mates – and looking back on a glorious struggle. Now they have something to fight for. Survival and honour. Outrageous odds become inspiring challenge. Henry glories in the inequality of numbers and binds his troops to him in a bond of brotherhood. A few hours later 10,000 French lie dead on the battlefield and only 25 English.

Whilst there may be more than a little poetic licence in Shakespeare's version of history, the play provides a compelling account of the highs and lows of leadership – and of how a leader's moments of greatness often come out of touching their darkest depths.