

John J. Scherer
Amy Barnes

COACHING REVIEW 1/2012 (4) s. 72-79
ISSN: 2081-7029

COACHING LEADERS IS *DIFFERENT*

ABSTRACT

The world of a leader in today's business environment requires much more than insights regarding intra-personal and/or inter-personal issues. If you want to coach someone who is a leader, *you* need a larger worldview and a very different way of thinking about your task.

Keywords

coaching leaders, client-leaders

ABSTRAKT

Świat liderów w dzisiejszym środowisku biznesowym wymaga czegoś więcej niż tylko przemyśleń dotyczących osobistych kwestii związanych z wewnętrznym lub zewnętrznym światem klienta. Jeśli chcesz coachować kogoś, kto jest liderem, potrzebujesz szerszego spojrzenia na świat.

Słowa kluczowe

coaching liderów, klienci-liderzy

CHALLENGES OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

As Gestaltists, we regard ourselves as ‘of the field’, which means we are continually shaping *and being shaped* by what is happening in and around us. All of us, but especially leaders who are attempting to navigate themselves, their people, and their businesses through the ‘rapids of change’ – thank you, Peter Vaill for this wonderful image – face unprecedented challenges:

- Being Overwhelmed and Complexity
- Consumption and Commoditization
- Virtual Reality and Relativism
- Polarization and Extremism
- Perfection and Self-Acceptance

CHALLENGES FOR LEADERS IN POLAND (AND CENTRAL EUROPE)

Since we have been living and working in Poland for a few years, we have come to know some of the specific challenges for leaders in this part of the world:

1. Honoring the Past while Presencing the Future

From our observation, Polish history has resulted in a workforce – including its leaders – manifesting distinctive paradoxes. Polish managers and many leaders are courageous, yet rule-bound; consequent and determined, yet hesitant to take independent action; conservative and bureaucratic, yet yearning for freedom from rules; respectful of hierarchy, yet rebellious underneath; resilient, yet hesitant. One personal challenge for a Polish leader is how to build on the past and yet free themselves – and their organization – for a future that is ‘right’ for them.

2. Uncertainty and complexity

How does your leader/client navigate through unpredictable local and global waters – without a map?! How do they provide leadership when they don’t have certainty? How do they engage people when they *themselves* are struggling to understand the variables? How do they present the future with optimism and confidence when the risk of failure is equally possible?

3. Cost and Value at the Same Time

Leaders need to understand what efficiency looks like *and* what is the value-creation core of their business, now and in the future. How do they cut costs while at the same time investing in value-creation? And how do they work with a Supervisory Board that holds very different views, priorities, and values?

4. Building Capabilities

‘*Who do we have, and what are they capable of doing?*’ is as important as ‘*What are we doing?*’ Your leader-client needs to know how to build competitive advantages via cross-functional teams and create interesting combinations of people. How do

they develop the safety required for ‘breakthrough thinking’ (innovation), and build the capacity of their workforce to create change, in themselves and even in their organization as a whole?

5. **The Human Spirit**

How do they build workplaces that are worthy of the human spirit. Beneath the suffering of generations in Poland is a bone-deep understanding of the human spirit. Yet up ‘till now, workplaces that nurture the human spirit are not yet widespread in Central Europe. (Our translators have told us that there is not actually a word in Polish for ‘human spirit’.)

6. **Complex Relationships**

Globalization means that all organizations everywhere are inter-related and inter-dependent. People are connected via multiple invisible relationships where everyone is potentially a client, a connector, and a provider of goods and services. How does your leader-client handle complex relationships in ways that encourage entrepreneurship, innovation, excellence, and a degree of mutuality?

7. **Generational Differences**

There are three different generations in the Polish workplace: those who lived most of their lives in Communist times; those who were born in Communist times but have spent the majority of their years in a post-Communist world, and those who were born – and grew up – ‘after the wall came down’. These generations carry very different cultural DNA. How can your leader engage these radically different world-views in achieving a single goal or mission?

8. **Confidence**

There is nothing to stop Polish leaders from exporting their experiences, ideas, and insights to the rest of the world, yet they don’t typically tend to do this. How can your Polish leader-client stand with their power and present themselves to their people – and to the world – with authentic confidence? Could they take up the challenge of creating great Polish enterprises that are capable of exporting their expertise and becoming regional, even *global*, leaders?

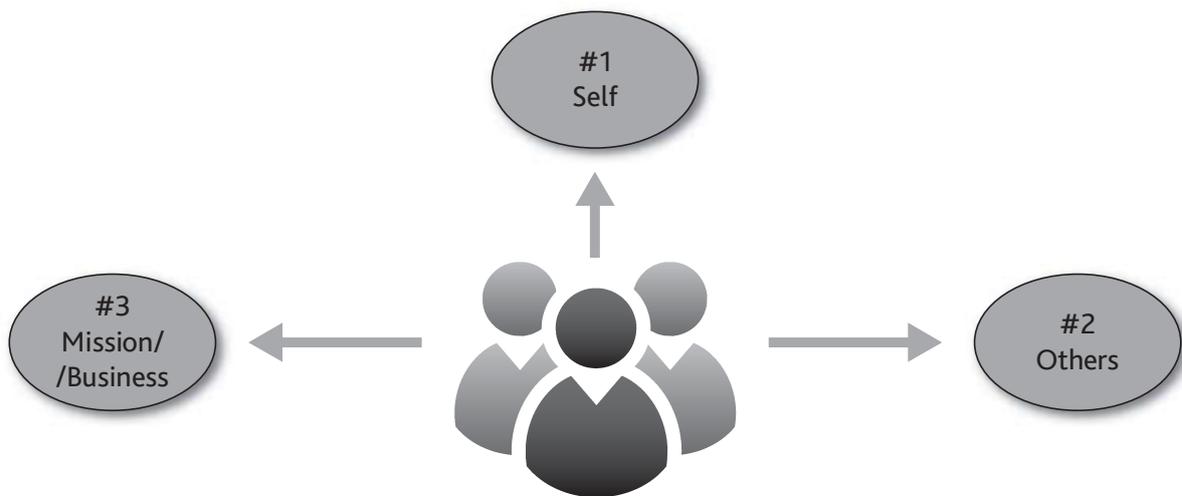
Given all this, how do we make it real? How do we, as Leadership Coaches, help realize the conference theme – ‘Leadership Coaching as an Answer to Challenges of the Contemporary World’ – in our practice with the men and women sitting in front of us?

WHAT LEADERSHIP COACHES NEED: WORKING IN THE SWEET SPOT

In our work with leaders we use a conceptual model of John’s called ‘The Sweet Spot’ to help them see how they currently instinctively ‘navigate’ through the tough situations listed above, what they are missing or avoiding, and what they need to do to

reduce the strain and increase their effectiveness. Like everyone else, leaders are being ‘pulled’ by three sets of needs all the time:

- What I need (as a human being engaged with others – ‘The First Circle’)
- What OTHERS need (as human beings engaged with me – ‘The Second Circle’)
- What our MISSION or THE BUSINESS needs (regardless of the human beings involved – ‘The Third Circle’)

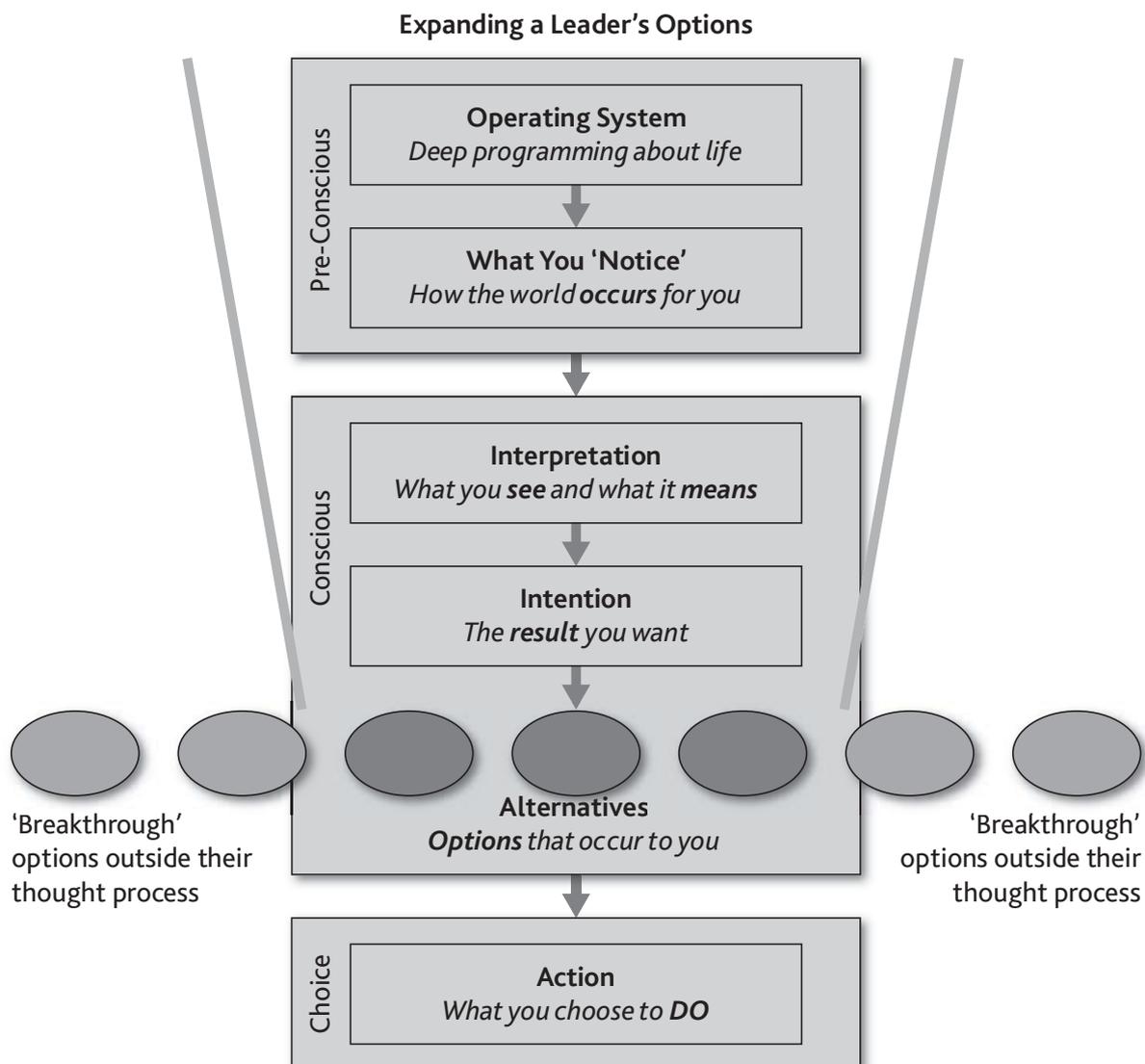


Some coaching focuses on the first two circles and leaves it up to the leader to make the application to The Third Circle, their business and the environment in which their business operates, which in many cases is why they are coming for coaching in the first place. For us, the most *useful* leadership coaching results in the client creating insights and breakthroughs in all three, but especially in that Third Circle. From time to time we are asked to provide coaching with a leader who tell us, *‘I had a coach and I liked them. I got a lot out of my time with them, plus it helped me with my relationships at home and at work. . .’* And we wait for the ‘but’. Then they say, *‘But it didn’t actually transfer to me as a leader in my business. I’m not sure they actually knew what my world was really like. . .’*

Effective coaching requires a coach’s connectedness to the wider context in which the leader is operating, an ability to relate to the leader’s organizational context, and an ability to sense how these contexts shape and are shaped by the leader. For example, coaching an ex-pat leader in Poland who works in a large, multi-matrixed organization in an industry that is declining is a different proposition than working with a local leader of a small, family-owned organization that serves a domestic market. In contrast, coaching government leaders or people involved in legal and regulatory issues require a higher level of awareness, understanding, and acceptance of their political realities than when coaching ‘regular’ clients with different demands on them.

HOW YOU 'SEE' AS A LEADERSHIP COACH: YOUR OPERATING SYSTEM

What you do with a client will be shaped by the interaction of your own value system with theirs. Our first step involves helping the client look at what we call their Operating System, or 'Black Box', which reveals how all of us are 'living on automatic' and, mostly, don't realize it. But, using our approach means that *you*, as their coach, have to deeply understand *your own* Operating System first. *'You can't go with someone where you have not been yourself.'* This process, taken from John's recent book, *Wiser at Work: Five Questions that Change Everything*, reveals our 'default worldview' that shapes everything. It is, in fact, not just something for your client; it also helps you see what is shaping the way you work with your client! What are you noticing and attending to – and what are you missing?



(As you read this next section, insert both yourself *and* your client as the subject.)

At the beginning is the **Operating System**, that Pre-Conscious early and deep ‘programming’ that *represents reality* to you (or the client). Think of it as the source of the ‘colors’ embedded in your eyeglasses through which you ‘see’ the world. Everything that follows flows from that. Your Operating System determines what you **Notice**. You see things in terms of the programming in your Operating System. In fact, it’s worse than that! You can’t see anything that is not already in your Operating System. Next in your virtually instantaneous process of ‘seeing’ is your **Interpretation**. You ‘name’ what you are seeing and along with that name usually comes an almost automatic meaning. Based on that interpretation/meaning you form an **Intention**, a strategy, what you want to happen as a result of whatever you do. As soon as that Intention forms, **Alternatives** start to occur for you. ‘OK. . . I could do X, or Y, or even Z. . .’ Then you select an option and take **Action**, choosing one from the ‘approved’ list.

All this happens in a nano-second, and is usually below the threshold of awareness for most people. The good thing is that we don’t have to stand around all day waiting for a ‘solution’ to occur to us. We are leaders! We are coaches! We see something – we take action. What is less well known, however, which can be disturbing when discovered, is what is being *missed* in the process. When a carpet salesman walks into a room, what do they notice, probably without even thinking about it? Things like room size, quality and cost of the carpet, thread count, age, etc. If an electrician walked into that same room, what would they notice? How many and the location of electrical outlets, lighting, etc. What would the electrician probably miss completely?

The carpet! You and your client are noticing what you are noticing – and missing what you are missing. Which could make all the difference in the world. In a coaching session, both you and your leader-client are constantly moving up and down this funnel, considering what to do from moment to moment. *You*, as their coach, are constantly listening, watching, sensing, reaching inside for what to say and/or do next in the coaching session. Your client is likely reporting a situation from their work or life in which *they* are listening, watching, sensing, reaching inside for what to say and/or do next. Here is the point: both of you are choosing what to do from a set of alternatives that is *incomplete*. The process of seeing, choosing and acting happens inside a kind of ‘diagnostic funnel’ that narrows your options, based on what is familiar, or at least within what are considered survivable limits.

How can you expand the diagnostic funnel that is limiting options for you and your client? When confronting a situation where what comes naturally isn’t working, the breakthrough probably lies *outside* those familiar options, in a path of action that has *risk* or at least *discomfort* connected with it. So how do you and your client get outside that narrowing funnel to discover options outside your Operating Systems’ approved list of alternatives?

POLARITIES

One of the secrets is to understand and embrace the polarities that are present, using the powerful ‘Polarity Management’ model from Barry Johnson, who explains a polarity as a set of alternatives that are inter-dependent opposites. Some examples:

- Being Tough AND being Understanding
- Taking care of Myself AND Taking care of Others
- Wielding Power AND Yielding Power

As you can see, both options are actually valid, depending on the situation, but, because of your Operating System and its internal patterns and structures, you – and your client – tend to ‘lean’ *toward* one pole and *away* from the other. You become ‘positional’, and thereby begin to experience the inevitable downside of your preferred pole, and lose the much-needed, probable breakthrough benefit of the pole you are either avoiding or not able to see. Not only are your options diminished, they can become increasingly dysfunctional as you try to do more of what you have always done, only harder. Executive burnout is but one example.

Healthy leadership – just like great coaching – means an ability to flow between sets of polarities, just like our natural oscillations between inhaling and exhaling. Exploring and understanding your clients’ polarities is particularly useful in helping your clients increase their awareness and bring disparate and resisted parts into an integrated whole. Enter The Shadow.

SHADOW WORK

This is worth an entire article, but in short, by the time someone gets to be a teenager, they have developed both a ‘Persona’ (the way they would *like* to be seen) and a ‘Shadow’ (the way they would *never* want to be seen). What you or your coaching client needs in a difficult situation is not more Persona. In fact, we like to suggest they have ‘maxed out’ relying on their Persona. Rather, we suggest what they need is just a touch of one of the ‘gifts’ embedded in their Shadow.

When we work with leaders who say they would never want to be seen as ‘weak’ or ‘needy’, we ask them: ‘What ‘gift’ is actually buried inside someone’s ability to risk being seen as weak or needy?’ Sooner or later they might get around to, ‘Well. . . They would be able to let other people help them. . . Or allow other people to be strong in a situation. . .’ Then BOOM! The lights go on for them.

On the other hand, a client who would never want to be seen as ‘cruel’ or ‘dictatorial’ needs to experiment with being *decisive* or *clear about what they want*. This Shadow Work is at the heart of our workshops and seminars as well as our coaching, and is something we rely on virtually every time we are in the field.

TO CONCLUDE

In conclusion, we believe that leadership coaching *can* be an answer to someone facing the business pressures of the contemporary world. But it takes more than good listening skills and a proven coaching model or paradigm. Effective coaching of leaders that results in help with the Third Circle requires you to be doing your own inner Shadow and Polarity work. This increases the ‘width’ of your ‘funnel’, and develops the courage to operate with new and even uncomfortable intervention with unknown outcomes – just like your leader-client has to do all day every day.

Dr John J. Scherer
Amy Barnes, MBA

They are co-directors of Scherer Leadership International (SLI), a Poland-based consortium of experienced consultants, coaches, change facilitators and leadership development specialists from 12 countries, committed to transforming the world at work™. The Polish version of John’s best-seller, *Five Questions that Change Everything (Pieć pytań, które zmieniają wszystko)*, was published in October 2012.

e-mail: amy@scherercenter.com; john@scherercenter.com