

# The CEO Coach

04 Sept. 2004 by: **Anand David**

The best are coached.

Always Period.

Ask the best surgeon, the best actor, the best entrepreneur, the best lawyer, the best football player, the best mountaineer, the best designer or the best CEO.

Yes, in some form or other, they were role modeled, trained or coached.

In any field of human endeavor where the demand for performance far out strips the present level of competence, the need for coaching manifests itself. But what gives some of us the ability to understand this need? Are we saying that (corporate) coaching is not for all? A good question, and in all probability, the answer to this question is a resounding 'yes'. It can also be answered by asking ourselves - are we under exceptional pressure to deliver? Are we required to be movers and shakers in the arena of organisational excellence? Do you belong to chosen few that matter? Are you the one whom Ayn Rand had in mind, when she penned those immortal lines..., '...only a few in each generation will grasp and achieve the full reality of man's proper stature - and that the rest will betray it. It is those few that move the world and give life its meaning... and it is those few that I have always sought to address. The rest are no concern of mine...'

Concepts like disciple and discipleship may be dated, but surely not coaching rigours and discipline. The best examples are the billion-dollar sports organisations, the likes of Manchester United, the Australian Cricket Board, Chicago Bull and Real Madrid, who have withstood both, the test of time and the whims and fancies of sports personalities. These concerns seem to have translated unalloyed success into a core competency. A strategic principle must be at work here. There must be a success-process, a development mechanism, that keeps these organisations in 'form'.

Geoff Marsh writes about Sir Donald Bradman attending a seminar in 1997. One question he (Geoff) asked him was, "What sort of things did you do when you were out of form?"

And he looked at me, and said, "I can't answer that." And I asked him why.

He said, "Well, when I played, I was never out of form."

Is coaching then, essentially the development of core competence that is also a success-process?

To a corporate leader, more than physical stamina and skills, the coaching aspects that intrigue are psychological energy, exceptional commitment, discipline, data collection and interpretation methods, processing and analysing, risk and decision making, synergising, strategising, implementating and seeing success through. These are the resources used by those sports organisations mentioned here. And they succeed year after year. Handsomely. Can a corporate leader also apply those nuts and bolts, that process to everyday management?

Maybe we can learn.

For learning is the first step in coaching. To address this, here is the first article in the The CEO Coach series.

There are of course, questions to be asked.

Who is being coached?

How does he/she learn?

Do we have unique learning styles?

Research say we do. Kolb's work on the Learning Cycle shows clear preferences we adults have as we walk through the stages of

- Concrete Experience
- Reflective Observation
- Abstract Conceptualisation, and
- Active Experimentation.

Not all these stages are as well developed as each other, as we discover with dismay later in life. While we say these are adult styles, strangely enough, androgogy - the principles of adult learning - has all of its roots in the state of 'free' childhood learning.

Born on the first of September, as is this article, a child for want of a better method is spanked. She cries, upon which she is washed, cleaned and fed. Among the earliest of feelings she experiences is hunger and a need for touch. When she cries, she is held close and fed to satisfaction. She learns through *concrete experience* and *reflective observation*, that a process which leads to her satisfaction begins with her crying to draw attention.

After a few turns of *concrete experience* followed by reflective observation, an abstract concept or formula is born to her - when she is hungry, she cries, when she cries she is fed, when she is fed, she is satisfied.

Only then does she dare upon the path of active experimentation. She cries for no good reason, and she is fed. Not needing to be fed, she now bowls in pain and discomfort, her mother eases her, gives a dose of cough syrup and puts her off to sleep.

In all this he still learns.

As we grow in life, we all develop styles of learning. It is therefore pertinent that these styles be understood by both (or more) of those undergoing the rigours of coaching. Before taking a harder look at each of the four stages of learning, it would be wise not to forget that the one being coached is an adult, accustomed to exercising choices, sharp enough to discern, understands the need of a structure to anchor, is sufficiently aware of strengths and soft spots, is conscious of that self-esteem at stake, and needs reassurance and non-judgmental support. It is important to understand the absolute in the relationship that there is a pre-determined objective of bringing about a substantial shift in output.

### **Concrete Experience**

This adult learner relies heavily on specific engagements where personal, here and now experiences matter most. They swear by, I saw it happen, I experienced it, so it is true. Usually a twin of active experimenters, they hunger to engage in activities that result in learning. Looking good is rarely a big issue and are comfortable sharing their experiences to others.

### **Reflective Observation**

Quite a few adults learn through reflection. Contemporary education is oriented towards enabling quiet introspection, running through data and making sense of it. They tend to use their eyes and ears more, while using less of other senses. A sharpened sensitivity to gather information in a measured manner, enables an unbiased observation of whatever is in focus. They reflect on the data, mull over it at length and learn by association to similar situations. Their learning is in their head.

### **Abstract Conceptualisation**

Those who have a natural preference for this style of learning are fortunate, for most of school and university is largely conceptualisation, be it abstract or otherwise. Adult learners who are highly developed in this sector of learning gather data, analyse quietly in the silence of their minds, generate a hypothesis, propose a formula for application or develop a strategy for action. They surely appear intelligent.

### **Active Experimentation**

These learners are out there playing. So visible that it is difficult to miss them out, even in a crowd. They thrive on confirmatory feedback and check a dozen times whether their formula still works or not. When it does not, they are graceful in accepting the outcome, making swift changes and are out there in the game of corporate life again. They belong to the tribe that believes 'that winning is no more than this, to

rise up each time you fall.' Sometimes one wonders if they never ever give up. All of us, those being coached as well as the coaches themselves, exercise these learning styles all the time. Yet, based on past experiences, we prefer one over the other. Most often than not, circumstances and our own preferences steer us towards a couple of styles while the others, at a very big cost, remain unharnessed. A skewed perception of learning thus emerges. The older we get, the more we turn towards reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation. While the pay-off may be an apparent sense of safety with failure not being evident, the bigger cost is paid in the absence of active experimentation and personal concrete experiences. As is the consequence, almost every coaching challenge for the best of seniors hovers around and aspect of security or 'looking good'. But then, as Helen Keller puts it 'Security is mostly a superstition, it does not exist in nature, nor do children of men experience it as a whole. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing'.

There is no such thing as the better learning style, but a balanced one is most needed for the best to emerge and possess a leading edge.

Each style has its rewards.

Each style has a cost.

The effectiveness and the credibility of a coach rises, when having closely studied learning preferences, the coach can design an experience to bear fruit.

It is therefore axiomatic that coaching the best is no easy task. It is tough.

That is where the joy of coaching lies.

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