

You First: Leadership for a New World

“Just Ask ‘What?’”

by Mark Light, MBA, PhD

“With practice,” asserts Mark Light, “you can become a pretty good coach.” While Light is not proposing that every nonprofit leader become a professional coach, he does suggest that adding some basic coaching tools to one’s toolkit is a sure-fire way to improving your management and leadership skills. But first, you must establish your coaching stand; get your coaching questions in order; and open your heart to curiosity.

HAD MY FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH LEADERSHIP coaching about twenty years ago, when my then-chair of the board suggested that I needed a coach, and should get one “soon.” The old saying about polishing the rough edges had come up in a conversation over breakfast. I recall joking, “Me? Rough edges?” or something along those lines. She didn’t smile. I got a coach and started polishing.

I have long been captivated by the whole idea of coaching. And why not, right? Everyone is on the lookout for ideas and tools that could be helpful to the causes we serve. And what could be better than a tool that executive coach William P. Ryan describes as a “short- or medium-term consultation aimed at helping a leader improve work performance by gaining more personal awareness and reflecting more deeply on decisions”?¹

Other definitions include Michelle Gislason and Judith Wilson’s, who describe coaching as a practice that “supports individuals to make more conscious decisions and to take new action.”² The

International Coach Federation (ICF) defines it as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.”³ Ana Polanco and Susan Misra write that coaching “supports people in exploring their identity, wholeness, and evolution to a way of being in the world that engages more of their whole self.”⁴

The last word here comes from the “Dean of Coaching,” Sir John Whitmore, who asserts that coaching is all about “unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance.” And just how is this done? Says Sir John, “It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.”⁵ Kinda gives you goosebumps, doesn’t it?

That first experience with coaching knocked my socks off; in fact, in 2008, I started my own coaching practice, and for a decade I have used coaching in my teaching practice with emerging nonprofit leaders. Like the coachees in Bill Ryan’s study of practices, coaching for my clients centered on, “How do I master this new role? What are my blind spots,

what are my gaps, what do I need to figure out to jump in and succeed here?”⁶ New or seasoned leaders—who doesn’t need this sort of support at whatever level they may be?

Let’s say that you agree and want to get started, but because three in four nonprofits have budgets of less than \$1 million and two in three have budgets of less than \$500,000, finding and paying for a coach is going to be a stretch.⁷ Well, consider doing it yourself by adding some basic skills to your repertoire as a leader and manager. With practice, you can become a pretty good coach. You’re probably already doing some variation of coaching anyway, even though you’re not calling it that.

Now, just to be clear, I’m not suggesting that you go out and become a professional coach. What I *am* suggesting is that you add some basic coaching tools to your practice of managing and leading others. As Kris Plachy (founder and CEO of Leadership Coach, LLC) observes, leaders must play five roles to be successful: leader, manager, mentor, trainer, and coach.⁸ So, when you’re

doing your next one-on-one with a direct report, discuss the big picture of where they're going within the organization's context, take a look at the progress they're making in getting there, perhaps share some of your own insights and experiences, maybe teach them a new skill, and then coach them to unlock their own power to learn.

Do keep in mind that unlocking the power to learn must be in balance with the needs of the organization. That's a delicate dance sometimes; symbiosis is desired, for sure, but the leader is ultimately the advocate for the good of the agency.

But first things first: you must clearly establish and articulate your coaching stand. A *stand*, according to Polanco and Misra, is "the intention with which an organization or individual approaches coaching . . . a higher purpose and commitment that a coach embodies in order to support the client's exploration of change, free from the coach's own experience."⁹ They identify three necessary commitments: "First, *coaches explicitly consider power and privilege* . . . Second, *coaches are mindful of multiple ways of knowing beyond the brain's problem-solving capabilities* . . . Third, and finally, *coaches are open-hearted*."¹⁰

So, how do you hold to your stand? Give it voice at the beginning of each session. I start each coaching session by discussing where I and my coachee come from in terms of privilege and power, and how this influences the way we communicate. We then talk about our own stories, and get clear on how we will work together. (You may have other elements that are important to your stand, such as confidentiality and other ethical issues like those in the ICF Code of Ethics.¹¹)

Now that you have your stand clear, you'll need to get your coaching questions in order. This is a snap, because most of

your questions will begin with the word "*What*." For example, 75 percent of the Coaches Training Institute's list of 116 powerful questions begin with "What," 17 percent with "How," 3 percent with "When," and 3 percent with "Where." No other words register, including "Who" and the dreaded "Why."¹² Nine of Sir John's ten powerful questions also begin with "What"; "Where" is the tenth.¹³

The great thing about beginning your coaching questions with "What" is that you want your coachee to be thinking and talking, and open-ended questions make that easier. This is very nearly impossible if you're leading with yes/no questions.

All you have to add now to the mix is your curiosity as your coachee's story develops. Curiosity is easy to engage—your coachee is telling a story, and you want to see where it's going. It's actually fun to do. For example: "What happened?" "Computer crashed." "What happened then? What's the impact? What will you do now? When will you do it?"

Obviously, you don't want to wander aimlessly in the land of "What"; you're coaching for a purpose, and that purpose is often about what the individual wants to do. Supporting "individuals to make more conscious decisions and to take new action" is about forward movement.¹⁴ Your first questions should help them get clear on what they want, and your last questions should address what they'll do to get it. We're not talking therapy here—we're talking about the future, and you can get a lot done in a handful of conversations.

Now that you have your stand and questions, get used to checking in once in a while to reflect back what you've heard. That helps you to both stay on track and correct any misimpressions. I usually say something like, "Let me see if I've got this right—the computer crashed

and everything shut down, yes?" This is reflective listening, which involves "two steps: seeking to understand a speaker's idea, then offering the idea back to the speaker, to confirm the idea has been understood correctly."¹⁵ In the process, you're actually helping coachees hear what they've just said, helping them to slow down a bit and engage their thinking brain. You don't need to make any interpretations or search for the underlying feelings; you simply pay attention to what you're hearing.

Successful coaching ultimately rests on your belief that people can make their own decisions. I remember all too well learning this as a volunteer mediator in small claims and juvenile court. When I was in training to become a mediator, I was often frustrated by what I thought were unfair agreements that appeared to benefit one party over another. But the mediation center was committed to the transformative approach, in which "[outcomes] that are reached as a result of party shifts toward greater clarity, confidence, openness, and understanding are likely to have more meaning and significance for parties than outcomes generated by mediator directiveness, however well-meant."¹⁶

This is all well and good—but again, you're the leader who is in the role of a coach when appropriate. Sometimes people can make their own decisions about what they want to do, and it lines up with where the agency is going, but sometimes those decisions will be antithetical to what the agency needs. At that point, you must step out of the coach role and into that of the leader, manager, mentor, and/or trainer roles.

In sum, first, make your stand loud and clear. Second, take the conversation to the coaching ER: open-ended **E**mpowering questions ("What?") to unlock potential, and **R**eflective listening ("Am I hearing you right?") to stay on track.

Practice makes perfect.

There's a significant bonus to adding coaching skills to your life: you can use these skills with whomever and wherever you are to become a great and respected communicator. That's especially useful when you're raising money, building relationships, and relating to your children, partners, sibs, and pretty much everyone else. And why not, right? Don't we all want others to stop fixing us and listen to what we're saying instead?

Almost forgot—six of seven questions from executive coach and author Michael Bungay Stanier's best seller about coaching are . . . well, if you don't know the answer by now, just ask "What?"¹⁷

NOTES

1. William P. Ryan, *Coaching Practices and Prospects: The Flexible Leadership Awards Program in Context* (San Francisco: Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, May 12, 2009), 3.
2. Judith Wilson, Michelle Gislason, and CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, *Coaching Skills for Nonprofit Managers and Leaders: Developing People to Achieve Your Mission* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 1.
3. International Coach Federation, *Become a Coach: Create positive change and achieve extraordinary results*, accessed February 9, 2019, coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2017/12/BecomeACoach.pdf, 2.
4. Ana Polanco and Susan Misra, "Emergent Coaching: Becoming Nimble in Complex Times," *Nonprofit Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 33.
5. John Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance: GROWing human potential and purpose: The principles and practice of coaching and leadership*, 4th ed. (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2009), 212–13.
6. Ruth McCambridge and William P. Ryan, "Coaching as a Capacity-Building Tool: An Interview with Bill Ryan," *Nonprofit Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 29.
7. Brice S. McKeever, *The Nonprofit Sector in Brief 2018: Public Charities, Giving,*

and Volunteering (Washington, DC: National Center for Charitable Statistics, Urban Institute, 2018).

8. UC Davis, *Managing as a Coach*, www.coursera.org/learn/managing-as-a-coach, accessed February 9, 2019.
9. Polanco and Misra, "Emergent Coaching": 38.
10. Ibid.
11. "Code of Ethics," International Coach Federation, coachfederation.org/code-of-ethics, accessed February 9, 2019.
12. Henry Kimsey-House, Karen Kimsey-House, and Phillip Sandahl, *Co-Active Coaching: Changing Business, Transforming Lives*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Nicholas Brealey, 2011).
13. Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance*, 256.
14. Wilson, Gislason, and CompassPoint Nonprofit Services, *Coaching Skills for Nonprofit Managers and Leaders*, 1.
15. "Reflective Listening," Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reflective_listening, accessed February 9, 2019.
16. Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 71–72.
17. Michael Bungay Stanier, *The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever* (Toronto: Box of Crayons Press, 2016).

MARK LIGHT, MBA, PhD, is founder and president of First Light Group (www.firstlightgroup.com), with a mission to bring your future within reach through leadership coaching, teaching, and writing. He has also written for *NPQ* under the pen name "Dr. Conflict." Follow Light on Twitter @DoGoodGreat.

To comment on this article, write to us at feedback@npqmag.org. Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 260108.

THE Nonprofit QUARTERLY

The latest news and analysis about the nonprofit sector from the *Nonprofit Newswire*

Regular feature articles

Subscription information for the print magazine

For more information from the *Nonprofit Quarterly* go to www.nonprofitquarterly.org