The Role of the Mindful Mentor in Transforming Leadership

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Why ‘Mentor’?

Organisations looking to change their culture through transformational leadership often have a blind-spot regarding the potential of mentoring to affect this level of change. Mentoring is usually synonymous with advice and support at early stages of professional development for example to graduate recruits in their first year or to new managers. Regrettably however there are also a number of reasons why it’s easy to overlook its potential to support change at later stages of development as well. Hopefully this article will help to shift that mindset by re-appraising the value that true mentorship can bring.

But before we jump into the main arguments, it’s important to recognise why mentoring has taken a back seat in our awareness. Language and professional ‘labels’ have significant influence on our thinking. We speak about Executive Coaches but rarely Executive Mentors, more about coaching culture and less about mentoring culture.

At The OCM, we use the term ‘Coach-Mentor’ as a reflection of our pragmatic and situational approach where we recognise that coaching and mentoring are frequently complimentary and overlapping activities. Yet if we’re honest, we still talk a lot more about coaching and that’s not just unique to us; the European Mentoring and Coaching Council also recognises the same issue in their communications and conferences.

Further to the linguistic and professional bias is the challenge that coaching and mentoring can be quite hard to tell apart. At the most recent review for National Occupational Standards on Coaching and Mentoring, there was consensus that trying to gain unilateral agreement about how the two differ would be nigh on impossible.

Yet when mentoring is understood through a historical lens, the distinguishing characteristics become clearer; the difference lies not in the competences per se but in the mentor’s skill in leveraging their life experience to support change in another. For the purposes of this article, we will therefore be focussing on how mentors, regardless of whether those individuals are called coaches, mentors or neither, can bring about transformational change within an organisation’s leadership.

The true spirit of mentoring is seen as being qualitatively different from ‘conventional mentoring’ (with its reliance on sharing advice or best practice) and is instead a relationship of support and challenge where the wisdom, self-awareness and mindful attitude of the mentor qualifies them to hold a safe space for a leader’s next stage of development in ambiguous or conflicted contexts.

Towards authentic leadership

Whilst we’re defining our terms, we should state that leadership, in our view, is the part of every leader, manager or individual contributor’s role that requires or allows them to come into relationship with others in a way that creates, releases and focusses energy. ‘Good’ leadership creates a positive energy that engages individuals in delivering outcomes that the organisation values. By definition then, leadership is about our identity, it is about ‘who and how’ we are rather than about what we do. Therefore changes in our leadership capacity are related to changes at a transformational as opposed to a transactional level.

Recent discussion of authenticity in leadership has focussed on the importance of leaders ‘being themselves with skill’, bringing themselves authentically and flexibly into relation with others as the situation requires. This argues then that the most skilful leaders will have a deep level of self-knowledge, accurate empathy to others and a capacity to manage themselves. At the core of developing these capabilities is the capacity to ‘see what is’ and choose how we respond in a way that is free of the biases and limits that our own mental and emotional responses might impose – essentially the quality of mindfulness.

However, authenticity is not a static concept, for if it was, it would prevent further growth in the leader. In Rooke and Torbert’s ‘Transformations of Leadership’ (Reference 1) they argue a stage development theory in which ‘leaders who do undertake a voyage of personal understanding and development can transform not only their own capabilities but also those of their companies.’

There are inherent challenges in that voyage, with critical periods which may be uncomfortable both for individuals and their organisation. Most organisations are largely driven by ‘conventional’ beliefs and assumptions, reaching for certainty, stability and a focus on getting results efficiently. The leader who starts to work at a post-conventional phase may seem to work in direct opposition to these needs, which in turn creates resistance and mistrust towards them and yet we desperately need leaders who can think in ‘post conventional’ ways.

So how can individuals access support in transitioning through these difficult stages?

Mindful mentoring and the liminal space

Answering that question brings us back to the initial point regarding transformational mentoring. When it comes to supporting a leader’s transition from conventional to post-conventional, normal coaching
assumptions about goal achievement (which would by definition be framed conventionally) will be counterproductive or even damaging to the process, as would passing on advice and best practice via conventional mentoring.

What’s needed instead is a person who is equipped to support a journey into the unknown, in which the leader is literally evolving into their next stage of existence. The mentor, in this sense, is someone who has personal experience of this order of change from which they can support the individual in traversing a liminal space where many previously held certainties or assumptions no longer hold true.

Liminality is defined as the intermediate space which must be transitioned in a rite of passage (limen from the Latin means threshold), which is accompanied by a temporary experience of becoming invisible or an outsider – “betwixt and between”, neither one thing nor the other. It may be a time of grieving the death of the previously held identity in order to embrace the new. In traditional societies there are specific rituals which support the transition between, for example, boyhood to manhood, or from adulthood to eldership; in the modern world we’ve largely lost the awareness of how to support these transitions and we lack the words to describe them.

One framework which does provide some helpful terms to describe the phases of liminality is Scharmer’s Theory U (Reference 2). In it he identifies a process of ever-increasing awareness of what is emergent via stages of:

• ‘Open Mind’ – choosing to adopt a mindful posture of not knowing, to see with fresh eyes, to identify and challenge previously held beliefs and assumptions, to see new realities – and overcoming the ‘voice of judgement’ (that can’t be right, it doesn’t happen that way, it won’t work)

• ‘Open Heart’ – engaging both emotionally and at a somatic level, a deeper felt sense in opening up to what is emerging – and overcoming the ‘voice of cynicism’ (well that might be fine in an ideal world, but in reality no-one cares about really changing things and making a difference)

• ‘Open Will’ – embracing the commitment to become what is needed, and go beyond the point of no return – and overcoming the ‘voice of fear’ (if I take those steps my life will change forever)

Engaging in this process is by definition a mindful activity, where both the leader and their mentor agree to notice without judgement what comes into awareness, rather than place constraints and expectations on what ‘should’ be achieved or focussed on. By engaging deeply with this process, the individual makes contact with profound questions of identity – “Who is myself?” “What is my work?”.
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From this place they can observe what is crystallising and forming within the new spaces opening up – the work the future is calling forth. Supporting this order of change requires a high level of tolerance for ambiguity and non-attachment to outcomes; the ability to support both the individual and the organisation in the challenges which will accompany the next level of growth.

**Practical application**

So, how to apply these approaches in reality?

From an organisational perspective, there needs to be a better understanding of how this quality of support will be nurtured and recognised. This includes potentially identifying levels of transformation which mentors have themselves experienced. There are signs of awakening to this kind of mentorship; a recent coach selection process for a global organisation included in their criteria the level of grounded-ness, spiritual maturity and self-knowledge of the potential candidates as much as their professional credentials.

If leaders are to be supported in transitioning to post-conventional stages of development, then in reality it is a journey which the whole organisation must eventually go on or they will lose leaders who no longer see that they have a place or role. So clearly there are risks which must be taken if an organisation is to evolve. Building a culture and practice of mindfulness which supports organisations to see what is, rather than be blinded by what should be, may be one of the strategies they take to develop the ‘inner freedom’ to move forward.

There are also implications for the mentors working in this space, who need to primarily contract and agree around a process for working with a leader, rather than outputs. This is likely to fly in the face of the way most coaching is typically set up and evaluated. As such there may also need to be an educative input to main sponsors and stakeholders about the value of this approach. To this end, using models such as Theory U or Rooke and Torbert’s Leadership theory can be useful contracting tools, although needless to say it’s important that they are applied with a light touch and don’t in themselves become straight-jackets to the process.

The overarching aims for the mentoring will involve the re-positioning of the leader’s self in relation to their system in order to re-integrate and contribute to it from their next level of development, whatever form that may take. The mentor therefore needs to create safety for the leader to move away from previous narratives, explore new identities, and embrace ‘wrong turns’ as useful teachers, just as much as the true way(s) forward.

Final thoughts

Edward de Bono is quoted as saying ‘You can’t dig a different hole by digging the same one deeper.’

Edward de Bono is quoted as saying ‘You can’t dig a different hole by digging the same one deeper’; recognising the limitations of conventional coaching and mentoring is a starting point to better understanding the keys to transformational change for leaders and their organisations. Jarvis and Macinnes (2008) (Reference 3) identify a spectrum of coaching and mentoring support, where on one end the purpose is to maintain or strengthen the status quo and on the other, to challenge it; supporting post-conventional leadership transformations typically requires courage to shake up the system.

As members of the coaching and mentoring profession, it’s time we had a wider debate regarding the potential of the mentor to understand and use their own leadership and life stages in order to ‘be themselves with skill’ in a transformational developmental relationship.

References:


If you would like to discuss how mentorship can bring about transformation change in your organisation, please contact me to discuss.

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