Coaching at Work

Viewpoint – my humble opinion

Tim Casserley

Come the next financial crisis coaches must help leaders – as well as themselves – redefine the scope of their influence

While the recklessness of the financial services industry was pivotal in bringing about the world financial crisis, it may well have been the culmination of a far wider malaise. It is one that permeates current notions of how organisations operate, what leaders do and how they are developed.

By and large most leaders – and most coaches – see leadership as being in control of an organisation in singular pursuit of maximum profit. This paradigm is based on the twin assumptions that organisations are like machines which leaders can 'drive' and 're-engineer', and that the main purpose of business is to maximise shareholder value. Viewed from this perspective, leadership is little more than a set of competencies, and leadership development an exercise in behaviour modification.

Recent experience has shown that the fantasy of being able to control organisations leads to illusions of grandeur and omnipotence in which leaders lose sight of their duty of service to the long-term interests of clients and markets.

While the illusion of control can be traced back to Western cultural beliefs about man dominating nature, the supremacy of shareholder value emerged in the 1980s from the neo-liberal ideas of economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, and was enthusiastically adopted by Prime Minister Thatcher and then New Labour. As these ideas steadily gained credibility so did Social Darwinist notions that only money really motivates, that some people are naturally superior, and that we should be 'intensely relaxed' about creating elites of the 'filthy rich' and excluding others from society's norms because they could no longer afford to be included.

This toxic mixture resulted in many people pursuing success, celebrity, money and fame for its own sake, to the exclusion of all other considerations, as a way to give meaning to their lives. In the words of Wilkinson and Pickett*, this often manifested itself as "a kind of self-promoting, insecure egotism which is easily mistaken for high self-esteem".

All this continues to have profound implications for coaches. Most do not question the limits of the prevailing paradigm concerning the purpose of companies nor the implications for what leaders do and how they develop.

Moreover, the coaching profession appears to have developed an exaggerated belief in its own importance. The idea that coaches could have helped to avert the credit crunch reeks of grandiosity. And yet we have seen articles in some books, and in this very magazine, which have made just such a claim. The absurd fee rates claimed pre-recession by some coaches are also testament to a profession that is beginning to believe its own press, as is the cult of the celebrity coach (look at this magazine's own front covers), and the prestige of working with very senior, well-paid clients.

When the next crisis comes – as it surely will – we coaches need to address the more humble and important task of how we can avoid contributing to it. This involves asking our clients uncomfortable questions about the limitations of the existing paradigm, and helping them focus on what they and their organisation are there to serve. It includes the health of the social and ecological environment to which long-term business success is inextricably linked.

It also means encouraging our clients to expand their idea of value to one in which profit is seen as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Where shareholder value becomes stakeholder value.

* R Wilkinson and K Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London: Allen Lane, 2009.

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