

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Coaching Versus Therapy ▶ 08/28/08

Laurie appeared to have a golden life. She was heir to a family fortune going back three generations and was graced with an excess of brilliance and beauty. Her unassuming, down-to-earth air gave no clue to all the privileges she had or to the fact that she was running the family's philanthropic foundation.

My first exposure to Laurie had been on the phone when she called to inquire about coaching. I asked what she was looking for and she'd replied, "I know that people like me—and I like them!—but I just get the wobbles when I'm in front of folks. And I'm in front of folks all the time these days. It's not doing me or my foundation any good."

As the conversation went on, Laurie said the following things about herself: "A lot of times I worry I'm not up to the task of running the Foundation." "I'm pretty confident my Board of Directors is on my side. That's 'cause they don't know the real me!" "I won't ever be as smart as my dad." "I feel like I'm not good enough."

No wonder Laurie was feeling "the wobbles." If I diminished myself as much as she did, it'd be hard for me to get out of bed in the morning, let alone run a foundation.

At our first session, I asked Laurie what, to me, was an innocuous question: "When do you first remember getting these 'wobbles'?"

In reply, Laurie told me the details of a painful childhood. Her mom had been a rageful alcoholic who'd emotionally abused her and then had suffered a traumatic death before Laurie was ten. Laurie's dad, still alive and on Laurie's Board, had been alternately inattentive and absent or firm and exacting.

As she told me this story, Laurie displayed no signs of pain; she related the facts of her life as if they were an analyst's data. But it was impossible to hear her story without imagining the permanent psychological wounds Laurie must have suffered as a young child. Again, I felt Laurie had every right to her "wobbles."

When she finished her story, I said quietly, "That is really sad, Laurie. I'm sorry you had to live through that."



“Oh, that’s okay,” she said with a small smile. “There were lots of good things, too.”

“I’m sure there were. But even so, it’s a sad story. And it must have caused you a lot of pain.”

She stopped to consider that idea. “I don’t know,” she mused. “Maybe. I don’t really remember it as painful. It was just what was happening.”

“But do you see how all those incidents from your past might be contributing to your ‘wobbles?’ I mean, when I asked you when you first experienced them, you answered by talking about your mom and dad.”

She blinked as if she’d just woken up. “I did, didn’t I? This may seem stupid, Tom, but I never put that together before.” She broke into her radiant smile. “Maybe I should be lying down on a couch, telling you all my problems!”

I smiled back. “You could do that, but I’d still be a coach, not a therapist.” I went on to talk about how therapy and coaching—as I practice it—overlap and how they are different.

Both disciplines begin with the belief that we all carry wounds from our childhood. Even though the adults in our lives were caring and did their best, they unintentionally said and did things (often fairly small things) that shook our sense of self and opened a wound.

A detailed example of how wounds are created and what they predict can be heard on the podcast version of this Tip. This additional information begins at 3:20 of the podcast.

I explained to Laurie that the wounds from her past were real and were creating negative consequences in her present-day life. If she wanted to address these issues, she had a choice. She could work to eliminate the negative consequences through a therapeutic relationship with a trained psychologist, or she could try to eliminate the negative consequences by working with an experienced coach. The two experiences have some basic similarities and also some fundamental differences.

Therapy and coaching are alike in that they are both trust-based relationships that develop over time. They both are usually initiated by the client’s desire to achieve a goal—most often the elimination of some behaviors or feelings that are creating negative consequences. And, to succeed, both interventions require some degree of self-awareness and candor on the part of the client.



Therapy and coaching differ in the following ways. The goal in therapy, as the name suggests, is to heal the wound. This is done over a long period of time by exploring how the wound was created and teaching the client how to self-administer healing. Coaching, on the other hand, is a shorter-term intervention that may acknowledge the wound's existence but does not seek to heal it; rather the goal in coaching is to teach the client how to co-exist with the wound and successfully work around it.

As a senior leader, your development areas have most likely followed you throughout your professional and personal life. I am willing to bet they're linked to your past and have been with you a long, long time. When those areas become obstacles to achieving your career or personal goals, I hope you won't struggle too long trying to fix your problems by yourself; even the most self-aware individual can't be his or her own coach or therapist, just as the best surgeon in the world can't remove his or her own appendix.

Laurie worked with me for several months and then decided to also engage a therapist. I gave her several referrals and she found a person she liked a great deal. This two-pronged approach was very powerful for her and, over time, she developed a whole new sense of herself. Her only regret was that she'd suffered alone for so long before seeking help.

Whether you choose to eliminate the negative consequences in your life with a coach or a therapist is a personal decision. But choosing to address the issues that are impacting you is an act of personal courage. Only you can give yourself the gift of a commitment to uncover your best self.

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