

Leadership Development and Executive Coaching: Reflections from a Summit

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Leadership development was one of the three primary themes identified in preparation for the New Executive Coaching Summit (NECS) held during April of 2022 at a Bed and Breakfast Inn located in Harpswell Maine. Consideration was given throughout this 2 ½ day meeting to the nature of and promotion of leadership development, as well as its relationship to the field of executive coaching. Small group meetings were accompanied by extensive flip chart note taking. Following is a summary of the notes that were taken.

The Challenges of mid-21st Century Leadership

One of the convening concepts at the summit was the presence of a VUCA-Plus environment in the life of most leaders. This environment includes high levels of volatility (V), uncertainty (U), complexity (C) and ambiguity (A). These VUCA elements of our contemporary environment have been noted for many years. Closely associated with these four elements are turbulence and contradiction (hence the phrase VUCA-Plus). Leadership that is to be effective and sustainable during the middle decades of the 21st Century must meet the myriad challenges associated with VUCA-Plus.

The New Mid-21st Century Leader

One of the small groups reflected on the stress associated with this challenging environment. Participants in this group noted that leaders often have “no bandwidth” for the many ways in which these VUCA-Plus challenges enter their life and work. Change curves are abundant and often overlap one another. How does a leader maintain the stamina (both physical and psychological) to address these curves every day?

Another of the small groups took a somewhat different tack. They envisioned what a successful mid-21st Century leader might look like—someone who attacks these VUCA-Plus challenges rather than just survives them. They talked about a mid-21st Century leader being bold and courageous. This person is a Disruptor—someone who is breaking The Rules. They are breaking the Mold of what leadership is and of what can be accomplished in a VUCA-Plus environment. While breaking the mold, these leaders are also creating New Molds. This is quite an undertaking.

The mid-21st Century leader must break the old mold and try out new molds without apology—for they will often make mistakes and will have to re-learn, re-group and re-initiate. In breaking the old molds and trying out the new molds, these bold and courageous leaders are not Bound by Stereotypes nor Cultural Norms. These are absolute requirements in a globalized (flat”) world that is complex and filled with both ambiguity and uncertainty. Even more importantly, new molds are required in an environment that is volatile, turbulent and filled with contradictions.

Agility, Vulnerability and Systems-Perspective

The theme of Agility accompanied this emphasis on bold and courageous leadership. Leaders must be agile in addressing the multi-tiered and shifting challenges of VUCA-Plus. They become and remain agile

by testing out new ideas and new approaches to existing issues. They are willing to Take Risks and Look Foolish. As members of one small group put it: agile leaders are working *In It* and *On It* (It being the challenging environment in which they must leader). They are fully engaged and never standing on the side lines. They are the pilots of the plane flying through a storm. And often they also have to be the co-pilots and even the navigators. Speaking of broad bandwidth! This commitment to fully engaged agility means at a very deep and fundamental level that leaders embrace a willingness to be Vulnerable. This is a tall personal order.

Another of the small groups took a somewhat different approach—embracing a strong systems perspective. Members of this group noted that at any moment in time, anyone in an organization can assume a leadership role. A VUCA-Plus environment requires many different kinds of skills and types of knowledge, as well as diverse styles of leadership. This means that a mid-21st Century organization must provide structures and policies that enable and call for diverse, situation-appropriate modes of leadership. This also means that organizations must find Unassuming Leaders—those who can step into this role without great fanfare or abundant narcissism. This group seems to be embracing the findings of Jim Collins that effective leaders are often quite humble (as well as persistent). Given the many mistakes that will inevitably be made by leaders in a VUCA-Plus environment, this humility (and the accompanying openness to new learning and change) is warranted and welcomed in an Agile organization.

Leadership Development and Executive Coaching

Given these challenges confronting leaders in a mid-21st Century environment, what might a leadership development program look like—especially when accompanied by executive coaching. Two fundamental questions were addressed by participants in the NECS: (1) What’s now working and what’s not working, and (2) What is the “Industry” asking of us?

Best Practices: What Is Working?

How do we approach the first question regarding what is and is not working? It probably depends in large part on the perspectives being taken and the criteria we have engaged to determine success. In other words, as one of the NECS small groups concluded: it would help to figure out “what is the right” but this is hard to do.

We want to do the next thing to be successful—but we often don’t know what it is. Best practices can be identified, but one of the small groups warned that the outcome of any best practice review should be the identification of important perspectives, practices and “philosophies” of coaching—not a prescription nor set of dogmatic guidelines that discourage innovation.

Even with these reflective and cautionary comments, participants in NECS do have some good ideas about what has been shown to be effective. The first key to success seems to be the establishment of long-term relationships with organizations. The coach serves as a trusted advisor. The word TRUST seems to be particularly important.

Second, it seems important that the coach and client are clear about what constitutes both leadership and executive coaching. A clear distinction must be drawn between leadership and management, and between professional coaching and other helping professions.

A third success factor appears to be the readiness of a person being coached for this kind of support. Is the client being somehow “forced” to engage a coach? Do they understand how the executive coach might actually be of benefit to them? Is it all back to the matter of TRUST Does the client trust the intentions and competencies of the person doing the coaching?

Closely related to this factor is the setting in which the coaching is taking place. What is the “mindset” of those leaders and other stakeholders in the organization who are sponsoring, supporting and encouraging the use of executive coaching? Is their mindset aligned with that of the coach(es) being engaged? Organizations are often saturated with internal politics. Do executive coaches try to remain outside the “fray” or do they somehow play a role? Where do coaches turn for wisdom regarding these political matters?

Most importantly, it seems that successful leadership development—and executive coaching as an important complement to this development—requires a comprehensive framework. The practices, beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and values associated with a leadership development and executive coaching program must be clearly articulated by both the organization and the executive coach(es). Several important matters must be addressed.

Are leaders to refine their existing skills and enrich their own current knowledge of the way in which to lead in this organization? Or are new skills and new knowledge to be acquired in a development program and in the executive coaching sessions themselves? One of the small groups identified the steps that should be taken in the identification of new ideas and practices:

Phases of leadership “teaching”

1. Starts with a “drip” (coach to coachee)
2. Then a “leak” (coachee) (those whom coachee influences)
3. Spreads (culture)
4. Flood: expectation

Perhaps, executive coaches should themselves be open to new learning—as they begin to encounter the unique issues and dynamics that are taking place in the specific organization that has engaged them. Executive coaches might themselves embrace a “drip” and then a “leak” and eventually a flood. As a life-long learner, the executive coach is modeling effective leadership in their own practice.

They can provide additional modeling in their own mentoring of younger coaches. They can model legacy leadership, creating what one small group identified as “a generational thumbprint of leadership for future coaches.” This group went even further in envisioning the “transcendent potential that models ‘real leadership’ for others in coaching”

There is one final point regarding leadership development and executive coaching that relates to what the small group identified as “transcendent potential.” Spirituality was one of the themes that emerged from the ‘open space’ format of the NECS. Some people working in organizations (and providing executive coaching services) hold their version of leadership as “sacred”.

They believe that there is a deep foundation of the “sacred” in every organization. Leaders are effective when they hold true to the values (and covenant-based TRUST) inherent in the life of any organization. Participants in NECS spoke of exploring this dimension of leadership and organizational life. They wish to enhance their definition of “spirituality” as it relates to the seemingly “secular” matters of running an organization and making a “profit.”

Industrial Requests: What Do They Want?

Small group NECS participants identified a wide variety of requests regarding what mid-21st Century organizations are asking of those teaching in leadership programs and those doing executive coaching. First, leadership training and coaching need to be made more accessible. This might mean providing more modularized, packaged leadership development programs which members of an organization can engage at a convenient time for them and in portions that fit with their own learning style. This might also mean more group coaching and/or the engagement of peers in coaching and mentoring services.

A second request concerns helping “pods” in organizations stay abreast of the volatile environment in which they are all working. A third request concerns the provision of support for and the “seeding” of programs for more members of the organization who could at some point provide situation-appropriate leadership. A fourth request is that more members of the organization should learn how to coach. This is meant not just a way to provide more coaching services to more employees, but also a way to make all engagements of leadership more “coach-like” (regardless of the situation in which the leadership is being requested.)

Benefits of Leadership Development and Executive Coaching

One of the NECS groups identified Return-On-Investment (ROI) as an important adjunct to any leadership development program or executive coaching initiative. It is important for those in the field of executive coaching to not only determine what works best and what is requested by their potential clients, but also demonstrate in tangible terms that the “investment” to be made by their clients offers a reasonable “return.”

I would note that I personally have always supported the engagement of ROI in the field of executive coaching (and other modes of coaching in an organizational setting). I co-edited the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations that offered many articles (and devoted an entire issue) to the critical role played by ROI in this field. As co-curator of the Library of Professional Coaching, I have often published essays on ROI and supported an entire issue of the Future of Coaching that was devoted to this matter.

I indicate my support for ROI in the field of executive coaching because I want to complement this support with my own concerns about the way in which ROI is currently being engaged. I offer several cautionary notes. First, the terms “return” and “investment” can be quite elusive. Do we consider only financial investments, or do we include time spent on a specific coaching initiative?

What about the much less tangible (but important) investments made by members of an organization in the attention they devote to executive coaching and hopes that are garnered regarding the anticipated results of the coaching initiative? How are the results to be measured? Do we look just at short-term

results, or do we take a long-term perspective? One of the reasons for establishing a long-term relationship with a client is that “return” can be measured over a period of years rather than months.

Furthermore, is the scope of assessment narrow or broad? Executive coaching (and leadership development) initiatives often not only yield discernable results over a long (rather than short) period of time, but also impact broadly rather than narrowly. The improved performance of a leader might not show up right away and might be seen not in the success of the leader’s own division but in the way in which the leader’s division has helped to improve the performance of other divisions in the organization.

As noted above, the way in which executive coaching and leadership development initiatives are most likely to be successful is when they are conceived and enacted in a systemic manner. Should this also be the case when evaluating the effectiveness of these initiatives? Is not a systemic (as well as long-term) perspective required in providing an ROI analysis?

A somewhat different perspective has sometimes been taken regarding ROI. We can consider Return on Expectations (ROE) rather than return on investment. We ask our client what they expect from their investment of money, time, attention and hope in a specific initiative. These expectations might be quantitative: financial, production levels, measured quality of service. However, they might also be qualitative: improved employee morale, increased “coach-like” behavior on the part of leaders, increased “appreciative” behavior on the part of all employees. This broader list of expectations might be harder to assess. However, it is more likely to be fully in line with what our client wants and more directly applicable to the planning and engagement of an initiative that is aligned with our client’s wants and needs.

There is the old, often-told tale about the person discovered searching around a streetlight for “something.” When asked about what had been lost, the searcher indicates that they lost their keys. When asked where the keys were lost, the searcher points to a spot several yards away from the streetlight. The next question is obvious: “why are you looking here under the streetlight?” The answer: “because the light is better here!” Similarly, we might be inclined to measure something (in terms of both “investment” and “return”) that is easily measurable (in the light), but not directly relevant to the expectations of our clients (the location of the keys). We must not only listen to what our clients want but also to what they expect. ROE might make more sense than ROI.

Future of Leadership Development and Executive Coaching

The NECS group discussions about leadership development often turned to the future and directions in which leadership development and executive coaching should move in the near future. One theme emerged that was particularly compelling for NECS participants. This theme concerned the shaping of a next generation of executive coaches and the next generation of coaching perspectives and practices. The field cannot remain stagnant. A strong but flexible bridge must be built between the current generation of coaching leaders (represented by those attending NECS) and the next generation of coaches and coaching leaders – those who are younger and those who have recently entered the field (at any age).

What is the role to be played by “senior” coaching leaders as mentors to the next generation? Should experienced coaches be coaching their younger colleague? What are the pieces of wisdom that should be passed on because they have “stood the Test of Time and as one group put it: “are relevant or more relevant now than then.” If nothing else, should the senior coaches serve as role models in being “in service” to not only their clients but also the field of executive coaching?

One other question was raised by NECS participants regarding the next generation. Should the learning that occurs be two-way in nature? Should the “newcomers” offer their own fresh perspectives and suggestions regarding how to engage the VUCA-Plus world—with which they, in particular, are fully acquainted? What about senior coaches learning from one another as well as from the newcomers? Can’t senior coaches serve as role models for those entering the field by not only being servants to the field, but also by being life-long learners themselves?

Several other themes emerged regarding the future. First, challenges and opportunities associated with the globalization of professional coaching were identified. Not only are there emerging opportunities for North American coaches to work with clients from other continents (either in person or virtually) there is also the opportunity to gain greater understanding of and appreciation for the perspective and practices of leaders living and working in quite different societies. One group labeled these as “multi-cultural moments.”

A third theme focused on the ways executive coaching can help facilitate the “on-boarding” of leaders who are entering a new organization or moving into a quite different role in their current organization. Much more should be learned about the “on-boarding” process and related issues of “transition management” and “adaptation” to the culture of an organization one is newly entering.

The final theme reiterates the emerging interest (and concern) of many NECS participants about the role played by spirituality in the profession of executive coaching. Should members of faith communities share their own insights regarding the building of a coaching culture that has a strong values-based and spiritual foundation.

Do members of faith communities share some of their own “truths”. They should not do this to proselytize for their own faith-based perspectives. Rather, they would share their “truths” to further enrich diverse and multi-tiered perspectives on the nature of belief that any executive coach should acquire. This fuller appreciation regarding the nature of “truth” can enhance the coach’s appreciation for the internal and external worlds in which the leaders they coach now live and work--and the globalized, multi-cultural, VUCA-Plus environment in which they are likely to live and work in the near future.

Conclusions

Where do we go from here? How might we serve most effectively as stewards to the fields of leadership development and executive coaching? Do we offer another executive coaching summit? If so, should this be an annual event? If this gathering is ongoing, then what should be its mission? What should be the outcomes of either one more summit or of annual summits? These questions were posed by one of the NECS small groups.

More generally, what commitments should each of us make as stewards of these fields of leadership development and executive coaching? What are the best ways in which to foster new leadership in

these closely related and deeply interwoven fields? NECS participants spoke of expanding the existing constituency of leaders in these fields. They suggested that we extend an invitation to young and new leaders in the field of professional coaching to become leaders of the field.

In essence, our commitment to stewardship might best be engaged by “activating leadership in the industry [of professional coaching].” What might this invitation look like? What would be the source of this invitation? Who should receive it?

The fields of leadership development and executive coaching are here to stay and are very much needed in a mid-21st Century world that is filled with VUCA-Plus challenges. Now is the time for establishing legacy. NECS participants have suggested that this might best be done by inviting new leaders to join our stewardship of these important fields of human service.