Coaching leaders:

A study in practice-oriented phronesis

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Widener University

How many times can a man turn his head and pretend that he just doesn't see.

- Bob Dylan

Introduction

I am fascinated with the science of self-talk (Kross, et. al., 2014). My interest in the field

began in 1995 when Sir John Templeton invited me to join his foundation. Sir John loved

maxims and wise sayings and he was always peppering his conversations with inspirational and

motivational sayings, or what he affectionately called "laws of life" (e.g., *"an attitude of*

gratitude creates blessings"). I had the honor to work with Sir John for fourteen years and I

quickly learned and appreciated how he repeated to himself on a daily basis his favorite maxims

and proverbs, especially while praying.

Fast forward several years. I'm in Colorado Springs at the United States Air Force

Academy, serving as that institution's senior scholar. During an Honors Code violation meeting

I'm confused when I hear an officer say that a cadet should have gotten "on the balcony." I had

no idea what that expression meant. That night, through the wisdom of Google, it quickly

became clear to me why the officer used that expression. Today, I say to myself "on the balcony" almost every day. It's become one of my favorite "self-talk" expressions.

"On the balcony" was coined by Ron Heifetz. It refers to the capacity of a leader to observe and reflect while in the midst of a conversation, situation or complex activity (Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Parks, 2005). Heifetz uses the example of a dancer who has developed the ability to work on particular steps and movements on the dance floor while simultaneously getting "on the balcony" (metaphorically) to observe the patterns of the choreography and the interactions between the dancers.

Heifetz uses the metaphor to challenge leaders to think about their own thinking (and actions). The challenge for any leader, he suggests, is to develop the cognitive agility to transition effortlessly from the action on the "dance floor" (everyday conversations, meetings, decisions) to getting "on the balcony" to observe, reflect and "see" larger patterns of behaviors, relationships, etc. Indeed, one of the benefits of getting "on the balcony" is that the leader begins to develop the capacity to identify her "blind spots" (see Shaw, 2014). This intentional process of reflecting harkens back to the owl of Athena and the creature's ability to "see" things in the dark.

Indeed, Russell (2009) reminds us that Aristotle frequently employed the "vision" metaphor in his writings. The *phronimoi* (wise persons), suggests Aristotle, know what to do in particular situations "because they have an eye, formed from experience….they see correctly" (NE VI.II, 1143b13-14).

In addition to "vision" metaphors, philosophers and scholar-practitioners frequently employ "spatial" metaphors to describe the reflexive capacities of the *phronimos*. For example,

Russell (2009) asserts that virtuous people need "critical distance" (p. 388) in order to evaluate one's character, aims and desires. Additionally, the language of "standing back" or "stepping back" is widely used to extol the virtue of testing our assumptions, behaviors and mental models (Dewan & Myatt, 2012).

Mental models

Plato, in his parable of the cave, warns us that the capacity to "step back" from our mental models is not easy. We all have settled habits of mind, heart and hands (e.g., our behaviors and actions). In her book *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, Nancy Snow (2010) draws on the research of Walter Mischel (1995) to explain how difficult it is to change our thoughts and behaviors. Mischel posits that each of us have developed a "bundle" of distinctive motivations, cognitions and affective responses. These elements form our personality, or what Mischel calls our Cognitive-Affective Processing System (CAPS). For example, a "shy" person will typically react to a situation differently than an extremely outgoing person. This "system" also includes our beliefs, goals, feelings, values, desires, self-regulatory plans, self-attributes, etc. The CAPS model suggests that our typical response to any situation depends on our personality, temperament and dispositions.

Moreover, we all have internal schemas, scripts, routines, habits and behavioral repertoires that are primed by particular people, situations or contexts. Mischel call these responses "behavioral signatures" – automatic "if-then" responses to different stimuli and events. For example, my Cognitive-Affective Processing System (CAPS) explains why, all things being equal, I will respond to meeting people at this conference using behaviors, language and

affect typical to how I've met people at conferences for the past 40 years. We all have "default" or automatic thoughts and behaviors ("if-then" responses). This paper seeks to examine the ways in which our "behavioral signatures" limit and inhibit our phronesis, especially among those who are in positions of leadership within the professions. More specifically, I aim to persuade the reader that most of us need support to fully grasp the ways in which our personality structure limits our cognitive, affective and behavioral agility.

Developing wisdom

It has never been easy for me to get "on the balcony." I prefer to stay on dance floor (metaphorically). Thus, I understand first-hand the resistance that leaders have when it comes to asking for support or coaching. Most leaders have demonstrated success in their field or profession. They've been promoted, probably several times. Clearly, their "default" scripts, schemas, routines and behavioral repertoires have served them well. Why change?

Aristotle is not especially helpful here. While Aristotle's theory of the virtues is surely a "theory of getting better" Russell (2015) aptly points out that Aristotle does not articulate any special theory or set of interventions on how we can most optimally enhance our practice of the virtues -- except to insist that acquiring a virtue is like acquiring a skill. In fact, a close reading of Aristotle seems to suggest that all it takes to develop a virtue is the right amount of focus, effort and practice.

While we may be able to develop generosity or gratitude using this focus-effort-practice formula, I don't think we can develop fully develop *phronesis* in this manner. This is especially true for leaders who need to develop complex cognitive skills (Hannah, Lord & Pearce, 2011),

whether it's to make a "hard decision" in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity or to know when to demonstrate the "soft skills" of caring, listening or compassion.

Aristotle, however, does explain the different functions and abilities of the *phronimos*. In his book *Practical Intelligence and the Virtues*, Daniel Russell (2009) offers us a chain of factors that form the virtue of *phronesis*. First, the wise person has the ability to look at any situation from multiple perspectives (*gnome*). Second, after weighing and discerning these multiple explanations, the wise person is able to discriminate between the most likely right and wrong explanations (*kritike*). Third, the wise person can ultimately grasp and comprehend ("see") what is actually going on (*eusunesis*). Next, the wise person exhibits *nous*, the ability to bring this deliberative process to a conclusion and decide what needs to be done. Finally, based on the steps described above, what occurs next is the wise person's considered response or action (*hexeis*).

In many ways, *phronesis* can be understood as the ability of a person to extract relevant information that might be lost on others. Indeed, Aristotle seems to suggest that experience is the great equalizer. My argument is that *self-scrutiny* becomes more critical than mere experience, especially for leaders who have taken on significant responsibilities and enormous pressures. Once again I want to emphasize how unlikely it is for anyone to fully develop the virtue of *phronesis* without taking intentional steps to learn how his or her personality structures (our cognitive-affective processing system) limits and restrains them. A growing number of leaders are beginning to recognize this limitation (often after talking to their mentors) and increasingly they are finding a leadership coach to help them "see" their blind spots.

Coaching leaders

The coaching profession is exploding across a number of dimensions and domains (Cox, E. Bachkirova, T. & Clutterbuck, D., 2014; Palmer, S. & Whybrow, A., 2014). For example, the International Coach Federation is leading the effort to accredit training programs for leadership coaches. UC-Berkeley recently launched The Executive Coaching Institute for individuals interested in entering the field of executive coaching. Most significantly, the proliferation of these programs and associations all believe that "coaching is a powerful vehicle for change" (excerpted from the mission statement of The Institute of Coaching, affiliated with the Harvard Medical School).

Broadly defined, leadership coaching is a relationship between a coach and a person in a leadership position. The purpose of the relationship is for the coach to help the coachee become a more effective leader. There are three keys to this one-on-one relationship: (1) the strict confidentiality of what's discussed during the coaching session; (2) the willingness of the leader to learn and grow from the coaching experience; and (3) the ability of the coach to use the right coaching model with the right person at the right time to create the ideal environment for the leader to solve or understand the right problem (Kauffman & Hodgetts, 2016).

While approaches to coaching leaders may differ, most coaches aim to support the efforts of leaders to examine their assumptions, attitudes and default mindsets across a wide range of leader behaviors, cognitions and emotions. Below is a partial list behaviors and cognitions that coaches report are common to their coaching experience. I ask the reader to consider whether

this list might also include a catalogue of the different functions and abilities of a *phronimos* in

Aristotle's writings*:*

- Self-knowledge (from awareness to deeper meaning and insight)

- Mental attention and mindfulness

- Learning from past mistakes

- Ability to recognize patterns of behavior

- Ability to find creative or novel solutions to problems

- The capacity to think dialectically (to grasp opposite values or perspectives)

- Developing a questioning spirit (leaders ask questions)

- Adaptability (across situations and domains)

- Improving interpersonal relationships

- Thinking strategically

- Understanding emotions (in both self and others)

- Ability to self-regulate (anger, choice of words)

- Ability to actively listen

- Ability to give feedback

- Ability to question assumptions

- Admitting when (and what) one does not know

- Develop new skills and behaviors (growth mindset)

- The courage to stand up for one's values and convictions

Assess-Challenge-Support

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has developed the Assess, Challenge, Support (ACS) model of coaching that many leadership coaches use (Ting & Scisco, 2006). During the *assessment* phrase, the coach and leader work together to identify precisely what the leader wants to work on. For example, the leader may have participated in a 360-degree review and the coach will spend time with the leader to help him or her identify significant themes and questions that emerged from the 360-review. Significantly, we know from the literature that a 360-degree assessment often reveals a gnawing gap between how leaders see themselves and how others in the organization see them (Lepsinger, R. & Lucia, A. 1997). In other coaching situations, the leader has taken a battery of inventories (personality tests, emotional intelligence scales, a transformational leadership questionnaire, etc.) that reveal certain themes the leader will likely want to explore with his or her coach (e.g., *"I was surprised to see that I scored so low in the "individualized consideration" area of transformational leadership"*). Other times, the leader has already determined a specific skill or organizational challenge he or she wants to examine and focus on (e.g., team dynamics or a relationship with a specific colleague).

The *challenge* component focuses on the opportunity for the coach and leader to identify a particular context or situation in which the leader can practice the new behavior or approach. For example, perhaps the coach has been working with the leader on how to observe patterns of behavior or communication during a particular meeting or situation (e.g., getting up "on the balcony"). What's essential during this challenge phase of coaching is the ability of the coach to create a disequilibrium or imbalance so the leader can stretch beyond his or her comfort zone.

The third component, *support*, is the ability of the coach to maintain the leader's motivation, whether it's by continuing to offer new resources and strategies, managing setbacks, and perhaps most critically, affirming small wins (e.g., celebrating the first time the leader effectively delegates responsibility rather than hording control).

The success of the coaching experience can be measured along two dimensions: (1) the extent to which the leader has attained or reached his or her stated goal (e.g., to listen better); and, (2) the extent to which the leader has made a commitment to create a sustained "learning agenda" whether the coaching experience continues or not.

Five reasons that prevent leaders from growing via coaching

I have gleaned from the literature five reasons why the coaching experience does not cultivate new insight or skill, even when the leader works with a skilled and effective coach. These are:

- *Leaders are driven by performance goals, not learning goals*

Most leaders are achievement-oriented. They like excelling, whether it's taking a test in high school or accepting a professional stretch assignment. Learning goals are not so simple or easy (Dweck, 2007). Too many leaders just don't like being a beginner, especially when "mastery" seems so distant and unattainable. Moreover, leaders catch on fast that organizations (whether it's schools or companies) are far more likely to reward the attainment of a performance goal than recognizing a leader who has learned something about herself that has previously limited her behavioral repertoire.

- *Leaders spend too much time preserving their reputations and hiding their inadequacies*

In their book *Immunity to Change* (2009), Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey write that "if you are leading anything at any level, you are driving some kind of plan or agenda, *but some kind of plan or agenda is always driving you* (p. 6, emphasis in original). For many leaders, the agenda driving them is finding ways and taking steps to preserve their reputations and hide their inadequacies (from themselves and others). For most leaders, vulnerability is a recipe for disaster (Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Fleming, A., & Miller, M., 2014). When I started working with my coach this was the one area that I desperately wanted to avoid. Looking back, I'm thankful my coach encouraged me to examine this aspect of my leadership practice.

- *Leaders like being the "hub" rather than the "bridge"*

These metaphors are used by Herminia Ibarra in her most recent book *Act Like A Leader, Think Like a Leader* (2015). Most leaders are comfortable being at the "hub" of activity, such as controlling the flow of information, establishing goals and objectives, overseeing critical tasks. Ibarra suggests, however, that the most effective leaders become "bridges." These leaders spend much of their time serving as a bridge between their team and the "higher ups." They are constantly connecting members of their team to key outside people; they strive to provide new and timely information to members of their team. Regrettably, too many leaders cannot let go of their "hub" role, even with the support of a leadership coach. There is this persistent, gnawing reality in the coaching literature that too many leaders simply want to keep doing what they already do well (Goldsmith, 2007).

- *Leaders avoid confronting the "undiscussable issues"*

Robert Quinn used this phrase in his book *Deep change: Discovering the leader within* (1996).
Every family and group has a cluster of issues that people are afraid to discuss. These issues are
the "sacred cows" that even the most authentic leaders are reluctant to discuss. Sometimes we
we avoid bringing up "undiscussable issues" because there is simply too much history involved.
Or past efforts failed miserably. There is also the perception that raising the issue will likely hurt
one or more individuals. Sometimes, focusing on the issue will be viewed as an act of disloyalty.
In sum, we often avoid these "undiscussable issues" because who wants to risk feelings of fear
or embarrassment?

- *Leaders focus too much on skills, rather than on developing virtue*

Too many leaders come to coaching for answers to a simple question: "What ought I to do?"
Yet Hursthouse (1999) argues that the *phronimos* ask a radically different question: "What sort
of person ought I to be?" Recent research on leader identity (Hannah, Woolfork & Lord, 2009)
reveals that the most effective leaders have the right sort of life goals, motives and purposes
(*telos*). These leaders strive to find harmony and consonance between their different values
and commitments (Kristjansson, 2016). Aristotle hit the mark when he wrote that "virtue makes
one's end the right end and phronesis makes right the things toward that end" (NE, VI, 12,
1144a7-9). Regrettably, anecdotal evidence suggests that leaders across all professions focus
significantly more attention on developing the requisite skills of their chosen profession rather
than cultivating the virtues aimed at a good life (Kilburg, 2012).

Conclusion

Rare is the professional who has not uttered the words: *"What was I thinking?"* While Socrates urges us to examine our beliefs, behaviors and emotions most of us adapt to the status quo. It's safe. Predictable. But a growing number of scholars are calling for leaders to challenge the status quo and long-held assumptions (Bennis, 2009; Sharmer, 2016). This shift is nothing less than developing the radical mindset of a life-long learner. In other words, as we learn in the Talmud, there is much wisdom to recognizing that we do not see things as they are, we see things as we are. This intersection between the virtue of wisdom and leader identity is generating new scholarship and research across the disciplines (Hess & Cameron, 2006; Mckenna, Rooney & Boal, 2009; Yang, 2011).

Postscript (a short story with a happy ending)

The International Leadership Association held its 2016 conference recently in Atlanta (USA). I sit on the board of this non-profit organization so I consider it my responsibility to meet as many of the 2,500 men and women who attend the conference. Standing in the hotel lobby on the first day, I saw a person whom I know well (from past conferences) and asked how she was doing. Her response was anything but perfunctory. She shared with me that during the summer the school superintendent in the city where she lives asked her to serve as a leadership coach for him and his cabinet (eight men and women who report directly to him). My friend now meets with these eight individuals (most of them associate superintendents) on a

consistent basis, employing the CCL model described above. It's important to note that she's

not a consultant but a full-time employee of the school district.

I share this story with you because I believe my friend is at the forefront of new

organizational movement. Across the world leaders are beginning to recognize that leader

humility (Owens & Hekman, 2016) is strongly associated with group cohesion, innovation, and a

promotion-focus orientation. Coaching can help leaders develop and cultivate the virtue of

humility. Coaching surely helped me cultivate my own practice of humility. It also deepened my

appreciation for one of Sir John's Templeton's favorite expressions: "how little we know, how

eager to learn."

Please contact me at aschwartz@widener.edu if you would like to contact my friend

and learn more about her role as a leadership coach in a public school system.

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