



By David Lang

Although coaches are commonly seen as leaders, not all leaders feel the need to be coaches. However, as we face the leadership challenges of the 21st Century, that perception is changing. In fact, on the international stage, acclaimed leadership coach Christian Simpson flatly declares “you cannot lead if you cannot coach!”

But wait, you say, the folks I lead have expertise that I lack so how can I coach them? Relax. Contrary to popular belief, coaches don’t have to be subject matter experts. In fact, coaches with no background in the topic at hand are often the most effective!

Mainly due to the sports coach stereotype, many people think that a coach needs to be an expert. However, according to the International Coach Federation and experts like Christian Simpson, the activity commonly called coaching in sports and other physical activities is more accurately described as teaching or mentoring, not coaching. Upon examination, the differences between teaching, mentoring, and coaching are actually quite clear.

Teaching and mentoring are based upon providing knowledge or skills to an individual or, to put it another way, pouring into an individual. Conversely, coaching assumes the individual is resource-full and needs no coach-provided knowledge or skills. The well trained coach knows the client already has the answers within and the coach’s job is to ask insightful

questions to bring those answers to the conscious realization of the client. A coach with no subject matter expertise is often better than a coach who is an expert because often, they can access more insightful questions since they are not burdened with preconceived “expert” solutions.

So how does this coaching paradigm relate to leadership and why do experts like Simpson say that if you cannot coach you cannot lead? The foundational definition of leadership holds the answer. Leadership guru John Maxwell, who has written 74 books on leadership and personal development, sums up leadership quite succinctly, “leadership is influence.” This simple definition reveals those who are able to ask insightful questions that empower others to solve problems (coach), without assuming a solution or trying to solve it themselves, exert influence which equates to leadership.

Moreover, the skilled coach can lead from any position in an organization or group using coaching. On the other hand, one who is unable to coach will quickly find themselves limited to positional (level one), permission (level two), and production (level three) leadership roles. Without the ability to coach, these nascent leaders will never become fully functional and will struggle to develop their people (level four) or develop and lead other leaders (level five).

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