Real Time Coaching
by George Binney and Isabelle Read

A simple but powerful new form of leadership development is being practised by Ashridge. ‘Real Time Coaching’ involves an Ashridge coach observing a leader as they go about their work and then sitting down with them to reflect on their practice as a leader. How does the leader actually lead? Are they having the impact they want to have? What works well for them? What would help get better results? The attention is on the real work of leadership, in real time.

The approach is being used in the leadership programme that Ashridge is providing for the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). Over three years, this programme will involve 120 leaders of health research across England. Each is being offered Real Time Coaching. So far, results are encouraging.

How does Real Time Coaching work?
The process starts with a phone conversation in which the coach outlines the approach and invites the leader to participate. Intrigued by the idea of a coach turning up in their world to observe them and discuss how they lead, most leaders have said ‘Yes’. “For many, it’s the first time anyone has offered to focus on them and their leadership style. They may be a bit apprehensive but they are interested to have a go,” says George Binney, leader of the NIHR programme.
Participants think carefully about which day or half day, initially, to offer for observation. The best days have been when a leader is involved in a variety of events. For example, one leader chose to be observed during three hour-long meetings in quick succession: the last hour of an ‘Awayday’ with the organisation’s executive team, a project group meeting and, finally, a performance review with a medical colleague. This presented a valuable opportunity to observe the leader in different roles in three very different meetings: more useful than when leaders offer big, set-piece, occasions like board meetings which are too long and offer too little variety.

The coach who is observing should be as invisible as possible. “We want to interfere as little as possible with the normal dynamics of the leader’s interactions,” says George. “Obviously our presence does have an impact, but usually people seem to forget about us after a while. When we ask people, they say that the essential dynamics of their exchanges don’t change.”

Before and after the observation, the coach spends time with the leader to help review the leader’s intentions, behaviours and actions. What did you want to achieve? Did you get what you wanted? What could you have done differently? What might be points to think about for the future?

“We go from specific incidents to possible conclusions about the strengths of the leader’s approach and areas they may want to develop. Asking a few open questions frequently leads into a powerful discussion about how a person leads. By focusing on specific actions and responses, we prompt the leader to think carefully how they lead and what impact they’re having.”

The leader is then sent reflective notes that play-back the key themes of the observation and discussion, to give both leader and coach a reminder of important points that they can both return to in later discussions. The process of observation and reflection takes place over several half or full day visits, spread over 6 to 12 months. The repeated visits enable trust to build up and an increasingly intimate and focused conversation to develop.

How does Real Time Coaching compare with traditional executive coaching?

Ashridge coaches are excited by the difference Real Time Coaching brings, in three ways:

1. The observation quickly provides the coach with a wealth of data about the environment, organisational culture and the key people and relationships that the leader works with. Issues that might take months to surface or might not be visible at all in conventional coaching are immediately apparent.

2. Following observation, the review conversation is direct and personal. Sometimes it takes only a few simple, open questions to bring key issues into discussion; at other times it takes attention to incidents and moments and some feedback on the impact of a leader’s behaviours and actions.

3. Because the review conversation draws on recent experience, there is a ready link back to developing practice. Reflection leads naturally into questions about a leader’s practice in the future and possible experimentation and development.

Whereas traditional coaching often happens away from the place of work and away from the people and relationships that surround a leader, real-time coaching happens ‘in the thick of’ the people and situations that leaders work with. “We are struck by how often a few open questions and some time together to reflect after observation can provoke a leader into re-thinking – of the strengths they have and how to make more of them and of possible shifts in practice,” says George. The approach has led to feedback like: “My coach made me re-think how I handle a deferential middle manager. I used just to tell him what to do. We looked at this pattern. Now I ask him ‘What do you suggest we do?’”

“At the monthly meeting I used to find myself just presiding – with no sense of intention – there because it’s the monthly meeting. I started to ask myself: what am I trying to do?”

“I felt I was doing all the work. My coach asked: who is going to share leadership with you? I hadn’t focused on how to get people to step up….we discussed ways of doing this”

What does Real Time Coaching require of participants?

The first requirement is courage – the courage to disclose publicly that they are getting support with their leading and the courage to be part of a process when they don’t know at the outset exactly where it will take them.

“We have been helped in the NIHR project,” says co-leader Isabelle, “by the fact that doctors are used to being ‘shadowed’ by students, colleagues and others. Those who have developed in the university system usually have mentors.”

Also important is a leader deciding how they want to use the process. “I found I needed to change from being a passive recipient to structuring the coaching and using the consultant in the way that was most useful to me,” says Professor Sallie Lamb.

What does it require of the coaches?

• There is a peculiar balance needed: being physically present in the room without intruding into or detracting from what happens. This means not intervening during meetings.

• “Noticing, noticing, noticing – your antenna has to be finely tuned,” says Isabelle. Real Time Coaching requires sustained curiosity and alertness. It is very intense and absorbing and requires some stamina for the long periods of attention, and being tuned in to what is significant, while letting go of enormous amounts of facts, figures and feelings that flow around.

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Improvisation: “You never know what is going to happen as you accompany a leader; what issues will emerge and what relationship you can develop with the leader,” says George.

“Courage is required to be a ‘critical friend’ telling ‘your truth’ and feeding back the tough stuff. Offering hunches and intuition to individuals who want evidence and facts is not for the faint-hearted!” says Isabelle. “You need to be willing to say the things no-one else is saying.”

Establishing an assertive, adult and trusting relationship, as a professional in your own right is important early on.

Introducing new concepts or ways of seeing things – good teaching is useful and introducing some theories in the longer reflective sessions.

Preparing others is important: leaders are given notes to adapt and send to those whose meetings will be observed, to outline the programme that the Senior Leader is participating in.

Balancing challenge with unconditional positive regard and affirming people in a way they often don’t get elsewhere. The leaders must know that the coach is on their side and not assessing them or reporting back.

Taking time to realise when you have made a difference and contributed something of value.

Ensuring that the coaches have a strong process of supervision to consider the issues that arise from the work. The NIHR team has formed itself into trios who give each other regular supervision as well as receiving support occasionally from individuals outside the team.

Does it work with other groups?

Health research leaders are a demanding group. They are very bright, driven and competitive. They have very little time, they are impatient of anything that is not well thought-out and they face tough challenges. They often are responsible for large organisations and budgets and work across many organisational and political boundaries but have had little or no management or leadership development. But the programme leaders believe the approach has something to offer other leaders facing tough challenges, whatever their previous leadership development experiences.

Case example – Shifting patterns of leading

I spent the day real time coaching Tim. It was a day full of scheduled meetings all of which took place in his big office. When I arrived, he briefed me that was coming up was a series of catch up meeting with colleagues in the department. His PA came in and out between meetings adjusting the timetable. What I noticed at the beginning of each meeting was the genuine interest in the individual’s Tim showed – he remembered to ask after family members and holidays. His style was relaxed, gentle and considered – he asked open questions: “How is it going? What was your interpretation of that?” and did lots of listening and nodding. There were moments of humour which others seemed to appreciate.

As the day progressed, I began to notice a pattern emerging. Several of the people who came to see Tim had almost finished ‘their allotted time’ and were being ushered out of the door, before they asked for what they really wanted. In one case this was about “Will you be my sponsor?” In another it was “I’m having a life re-evaluation (I need to talk about it).” At the end of the day, I gave Tim feedback on this pattern I had noticed. We discussed how he might help people (who see him as a senior, authority figure) ask for what they want and need. We did some work on the ‘process’ of effective meetings and how it could be helpful to find out up-front what all the agenda items are and what would constitute a good outcome from the meeting for each person involved.

What is the future of Real Time Coaching?

Real Time Coaching in the NIHR project is linked to organisational change. The leadership programme is part of a wider process of change the Government has set about since 2006 to secure the UK’s place as a world class centre of clinical research that benefits patients and improves health.

So far, Real Time Coaching is proving itself as an integral part of the process of change. It has been a way in for the leadership programme – a way to engage with a very busy and sceptical population of leaders.

The process is so obvious and simple that once you are doing it you wonder why you haven’t always done it that way