Establishing a Learning Network of Leadership Coaches: A Patchwork Process

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Networks often have unclear starting points, rather influences to come together to form a focus of interest, energy and will to do something. The Ashridge Leadership Coaching Network was just like that. It started when the flagship Leadership Development Programme came to the end of its long life, and a new, six-month leadership development process was being designed and piloted. Coaching was conceived as an integral part of the new learning design. There were questions about who could and should do coaching? What sort of coaching? How could you establish and sustain the quality of coaching and therefore this leadership development process? Andrew Lambert points out that in recent years there has been a huge scaling up in demand for executive coaches and although ‘the desirability of a technique such as coaching to boost capability may be compelling, where are all those high quality coaches to be found?’ There are no specific qualifications nor commonly recognised standards. In fact there is an extensive and inconclusive discussion about the differences between mentoring and coaching, not to mention counselling and consulting.

In this environment establishing a learning network of leadership coaches we are discovering is a patchwork process. You start with a design, albeit sketchy and pieces get added, new forms and activities appear and it gains and loses energy as events and experiences shape thoughts and activities. We have defined three phases so far that contribute to the learning of this community:

Phase 1: Why leadership coaching?
Phase 2: How the network becomes established
Phase 3: Sustaining momentum and becoming a learning network.
Our intention is to reflect on our experiences over the last four years and to offer a
narrative around how we are developing. There are many things we could, and should
have done differently. There is certainly a lot we continue to learn about leadership
teaching and being part of self-managing professional learning network.

Coaching in the Context of a Leadership Development Process

How did we discover that there was such a thing as Leadership Coaching, that this
brand of coaching requires specification and a shared repertoire of approaches
amongst those doing coaching? The need to do this came to light and took form in
the first phase of the network’s development.

The Beginning – the first piece in the patchwork.

A noticeable beginning was one Saturday in August 1999, when a large number of
people gathered at Ashridge for the launch of the New Leadership Process. The
invitees were various: tutors, feedback givers, who were mainly associates who knew
Ashridge well, plus external folk who were interested in contributing particularly to
teaching. Coaching was billed as an integral part of the new design. This was
exciting and a departure from the previous programmes where a four hour, individual
feedback session based on psychometric instruments and behavioural observations
had played a major part. For those present on that Saturday there were in the air some
dilemmas and tensions. By far the largest group present was existing feedback givers.
They were noticeable as a group of twentish, middle-aged, white, female, English first
language, Brits. Many were psychologists. All were experienced with psychometric
instruments. Some were very experienced with years of practice in Ashridge and
outside. They considered themselves an elite and were proud of their competence.
Others brought experience from business, both as managers and through MBAs. Still,
others were counsellors or therapists who were very competent working with people
and their problems. As a group the feedback givers were proud of the expertise that
they brought to the previous programme.

The launch was unsettling in two ways. Did the presence of so many other new
external people mean that the were assumptions implying that feedback givers were
no longer required or seen as not capable coaches? For self-employed associates this threatened their livelihoods. Other unsettling questions were around, what is so special about coaching anyway? We are person centred, intuitive professionals and some already coach individual executives. This is nothing new was the verdict. Excitement and optimism were also present at the launch event. The new Ashridge Leadership Process did seem attractive and innovative. There was a lot of support for the work put into the new design and optimism about the potential development leaders might gain in this particular process. The approach appealed to many.

**Ashridge Leadership Process (ALP)**

The ALP aims to help individual leaders discover and build their own approach to leadership that works for them personally and in their organisational context, so that they become the best they can be in their context.

This development process provides leaders with an opportunity to acknowledge the most constructive aspects of their past, appreciate their present and anticipate their future within their specific context. Leadership is represented as a set of interlocking pieces of a puzzle that together give a complete picture. The self is at the centre, connected to past highlights, the current situation and future possibilities. Through an examination of the whole the leader discovers his/her own capacities and aspirations.

This puzzle forms the basis for the design of the content, structure and activities of a five-day workshop. Creating a connection between the workshop and the leaders’ context, means that the process lasts at least six months. Leadership coaching is integrated into the workshop to enhance the leader’s opportunity to make sense of his or her experience in relation to their particular working environment. Links are made during the workshop and afterwards back at work, with a focus on enhancing their leadership in practice. Coaching invests time and effort into thinking through what to do, why to do it and importantly how to make differences. There are five coaching contacts: one before the workshop, two during the workshop and two in the following six months.
Pilot Workshop – the next piece in the patchwork

Some six feedback givers found themselves plunged into coaching in practice on the first pilot workshop. Experiences from coaching on the pilot workshops highlighted the need to clarify the particular design or brand of coaching, so that participants, tutors and importantly coaches had a common mental model about what was expected. Kilberg points out in his model of coaching effectiveness that the clients and coaches need to have a commitment to a path of progressive development which needs to be aligned with the structure of coaching and both the clients and the coaches’ organisational settings.

From the pilots we learnt the question was not that coaching was not well accepted, or that coaches were unable to form good relationships with leaders. It was, from the leaders’ perspective, something of a confusion about what to expect. Coaching was presented as a benefit of the workshop, but you only saw them twice during the workshop. Some leaders’ expectations were based on sports coaching. They thought their coach would be walking or running beside them all the time giving on the spot behavioural feedback and planning tactics. This was not what we had intended.

Coaches from their perspective missed their psychometric instruments. At the first meeting there were no instruments. Then by the second meeting on Friday leaders were not interested in their 360 data, they were somewhere else altogether. So they questioned what they were supposed to be doing and were concerned about their effectiveness. Out of the pilots came the understanding that coaching in the context of leadership development process is distinctive and needs definition. In the context of a leadership development process coaching needed to be focused so that we could develop our practice, and offer a reasonably consistent experience to leaders.

What brand of coaching? – Getting a design

How does coaching blend with other learning processes to be effective? This was the next part of the patchwork process of developing leadership coaching. Clearly the coaching brand needed to be aligned with the workshop’s developmental philosophy. ‘Becoming the best leader you can be in your context’ is the claim which implies that leaders are resourceful, they are experts in themselves and their life and organisation.

Our philosophy resonated with David Cooperrider’s Appreciative Inquiry as an
approach to individual and organisational change. Magruder Watkins and Mohr propose that we know ‘from research (Cooperrider, 1990) human beings are strongly impacted by anticipating images of the future. In myriad ways ranging from physiological responses at the individual level to the creation of new strategies and organisational architectures, we collectively create the very futures we anticipate.’

We were persuaded that focusing coaching conversations on life giving forces with a future in mind would be aligned with the workshop’s philosophy. Rather than adopting a more usual problem centred approach that seeks to understand how the past occurred and what contributes to its being maintained in the present. At this time we were closet social constructionists but we realised that it matters what you talk about and how you talk. For coaching conversations in a leadership development context this is particularly important.

At the same time our attention was drawn to the increasing visibility of brief therapy championed by De Shazar, Weakland, Furman and more locally by George, Iveson and Ratner. One obvious aspect seemed relevant, our design planned for five coaching contacts over six months. Solution focused work is an alternative to years in therapy or counselling. Interestingly outcomes research on the effectiveness of solution focused work reports significant constructive progress. So we concluded it must have merits. We decided to make these two approaches the foundation of our coaching practice. George, Iveson & Ratner have a description of the therapist’s task, which we would endorse as a leadership coach’s task. They say ‘the consequence of the search for solutions that will make a difference.’ (Bateson, 1972) is that in a typical solution focused interview there is a minimal focus on problems: problem free and solution talk is encouraged wherever possible to enable clients to reach a position of belief in their ability to change their lives.’ The joint talk between the coach and leader co-evolves possibilities and a life giving future.

**Leadership Coaching – how do we describe it?**

We translated these approaches into a design for leadership coaching. Leadership Coaching conversations centre on generating viable, specific alternative solutions or possibilities that an individual leader constructs from his/her unique experiences and
capabilities. The leader gathers optimism and confidence likely to lead to enhancements in their practice as a leader. The essence of appreciative, solution focused talk can be summarised as:

- A search for what could be happening that would be worthwhile – a hoped for future
- Limited problem talk
- A search for exceptions, discovering what is being done, thought and felt when things are ‘right’. Even if exceptions are rare they demonstrate indigenous capability that can be built on.
- An assumption that there are always many ways of doing things – there are always other ways
- An emphasis on small constructive do-able steps for individuals and the people in their lives.

Both the leader and the coach are experts in the coaching relationship. The participant knows him or herself their personal context and organisation, plus the image of the future they want to bring about. The coach is respectful and curious about how the leaders’ unique resources can be engaged to become even more life giving. In addition to this fundamental developmental philosophy here we added three aspects that for leaders, in today’s world leadership. These are briefly outlined below as the landscape that we expect leadership coaches be working in.
Psychometrics

Given our coaches’ heritage the use and positioning of 360 feedback, personality preference indicators such as MBTI are important. As part of appreciating the present, a selection of psychometric instruments plus a 360 instrument are used in the workshop. Research on the effectiveness of the leadership process suggests that this feedback is highly valued by leaders. It provides them with insights into their relationships, how they are experienced as leaders. However these insights are gained by working for 5 days in small groups of peers who are fellow travellers. Having a chance to work together with peers on their leadership approach and to gain personal feedback is a part of the whole process that leaders find most valuable.

Coaches are no longer needed as the experts in the instruments. Leaders become aware of how their leadership is experienced by others, from their peers, or from those in their everyday relational networks. Coaching discussions tend not focus on awareness raising of current behaviour. Bridging the insights, experiences, emotions from the workshop into the leader’s future working and personal world is the focus of coaching.

Organisational Development and Strategic Development Processes

Leadership is said to be much about making a future, rather than only focusing on the problems and incidents that overwhelm today and need to be managed. We continue to incorporate into our thinking systemic ideas about how organisations create strategic processes and change. These are based on Ralph Stacey’s complexity perspectives and Peter Senge’s ‘The Fifth Dimension’. We are concerned with emergent patterns and processes that are often full of dilemmas often characteristic of the world leaders are working within.

Diversity and multi-cultural working

Perhaps today we would change the word diversity for inclusivity. Making the shift from diversity towards inclusion emphasises the benefits and richness to be gained through working together in new ways for all.
The need to include diversity into leadership coaching occurred because more than 35% of ALP participants are not UK, male, white Brits and even those who are, find themselves working with partners or customers that are not the same as they are. The global village is here and living in a multi-cultural world is a reality for most leaders, and one where we all have a lot to learn.

Working out how as coaches to have inclusive conversations with leaders that enabling them to be inclusive is a continuing search. Not reinforcing our own well intentioned stereotypes and prejudices requires new awareness, skills and ways of talking.

**A Learning Network for Leadership Coaches – Next piece of patchwork design**

Pulling these ideas together to clarify what sort of leadership coaching would integrate with the workshop with a continuing leadership development process took some months. One of the coach/feedback givers was invited to take this forward. She was asked to orchestrate a process that would build this brand of leadership coaching amongst former feedback givers. The design needed to get into praxis, to extend a more consistent coaching brand.

Again aligning the leadership coach development with the ALP process was necessary. In short, treating coaches as competent people who want to change and through experience and working with peers would build new ways of working. We borrowed from Etienne Wenger’s ‘Communities of Practice’. He recommends for Communities of Practice to thrive they need to combine three kinds of attractive activities:
• **Joint enterprise.** Wenger suggests *joint enterprise* is a complex activity that involves all where, what happens and the effects are negotiated. We had the continued leadership coaching as our joint enterprise.

• **Shared Repertoire** Wenger talks of opportunities for practice, or experience to be shared, discussed in the reality of life and its ambiguities. Personal perspectives and practices were to be aired and incorporated. A fundamental to continuous professional learning is a willingness to discuss your own work. The feedback giver group had mixed views about sharing their practice. Some counsellors and therapists were used to continuing professional development and regular supervision of client work. Chartered psychologists typically had the view that once trained you had a licence for life, any review was a critical assessment done by a superior outsider. Those from industry heard ‘supervision’ as control and direction, in fact line management. The challenge was how to establish a climate of learning and development amongst the wide range of coaches to enable a similar approach with appropriate coaching standards and quality.

• **Mutual engagement** Wenger says, means that those involved define and negotiate what and how they do what they do. Bring the people together to share, negotiate, and continue to elaborate what they do. Taking care of not only individual competence, but being accountable for the communities’ competence. We certainly had a group of interested and engaged people. How could we build an attractive network that could learn and become self managing rather than conformative?

Again, these were sketchy designs suggesting that a learning network would be a way forward and the nature of what we needed to do, but little was on the ground.

**Phase 2: Building a Learning Network**

**Leadership Coach Training – Next patchwork piece – common mental model**

The first move was to offer a two-day training in leadership coaching, based on the four leafed clover, making links with the workshop’s learning design. All existing feedback givers were invited and encouraged to attend but the event was voluntary. A small selected group of interested external people were invited. Including external...
people indicated that this coaching group could and would change, but was unlikely to be flooded. Clearly including more men would balance the group, also with coaches from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds would be an additional asset. Selecting potential coaches created the need for some published criteria and a proposal of how to bring new people into this coaching community.

How did this training go? Overall it was well attended and well received. Many feedback givers welcomed the opportunity to extend their ways of working and were attracted by Appreciative Inquiry and Solution Focused approaches.

The new people mixed in well and seemed to provide interesting potential colleagues. There were various voices in the background, some who did not attend and didn’t notice that they had missed something. Some who did attend and found opportunities during participative exercises to gather in small groups to review their coaching experiences on the pilots and reinforce their unease. Some felt that their competence was being stretched and challenged so they were uneasy and felt pushed and constrained by a new and unconvincing approach. The four leafed clover was aspirational but there was a growing acceptance that leadership coaching needed developing and this might be a good way forward.

**Co-coaching days – next step in the patchwork – continuing learning**

Continued learning spaces, Wenger tells us, are a main feature of communities of practice. Offering training was not a new departure, proposing continued development opportunities was different.

We proposed quarterly co-coaching days that would help us to share our practice build our repertoire leadership coaching skills. These days were intended to have the following developmental aims – formative - that is developing practice; normative - encouraging the group of 27 coaches into a brand of leadership coaching; and restorative - in terms of supporting coaches in the ups and downs of working with people.

We decided to use solution focused and appreciative approaches in our own co-coaching sessions reflecting on our own practice. Co-coaching sessions when we are reflexive about our practise take half a day and the other half is for further training or
one leaf of the four leafed clover. External contributors are invited including Ashridge colleagues whose research and consulting practice is relevant. For coaches, these sessions are unpaid except for expenses. We expected mutual interest and engagement to attract attendance. We suggested that coaches should attend once a year given the number of leaders they were coaching, which is typically 9-12 in a year. Naturally if they wanted to attend more and invest more time in their development they are very welcome.

Initially this was met with confusion. Having had the training, many now assumed that they knew what to do and were already putting it into practice. Nothing more was necessary. Or did this mean, they wondered, that they were considered to be less than competent? These were the comments on the street. Anyway the commentary continued. This was not paid, so why should valuable fee earning time be invested. It was not required. Others thought review meetings might be useful but why did they need facilitating – or structuring we could do this ourselves? Still others were unused to the prospect of being reflexive about their own practice and sought advice what else their leaders could do differently.

Despite the newness we started as several people were interested in having the opportunity to share their repertoire, especially in an appreciative environment. The workshops aspect was felt useful as we learnt together new ways of extending leadership coaching.

Now, four years on, most coaches find this is an exciting and attractive part of their portfolio of work and the sense of working together with colleagues in a mutually supportive way has become established and looked forward to.

**Lead Coaches – another part in the patchwork – extending self management**

Having one person orchestrating coaching across some 12 or more ALPs running in one year was insufficient. Also, from a networking perspective it was important that more people, through interest and mutual engagement could became part of the self managing nature of community of practice.

The idea came about to have a lead coach for each ALP cohort who would make sure the coaches were briefed, supported, integrated into the workshop and tracking the
further coaching sessions that happened away from Ashridge over six months. Maintaining quality and feedback post-workshop was important for coaches, Ashridge and corporate clients.

We also had a number of new coaches under development. Some were outsiders, some were relatively new feedback givers whose experience fell short of the entry requirements for coaching. Casually the idea of lead coaches was floated to the network to test the reaction and interest. Who would volunteer to step into this role? At the same time volunteers were touted for taking in part in an Action Research Programme.

Three people stepped forward – two were interested in Lead Coaching, one in research. The idea of lead coaches was received with a quiet hush. The idea hit the professional competence button. The comments running about were, ‘we do a good job, why should we need managing? Are they assessing us or constraining us?’ ‘Will the lead coach be seen as a better coach, this making a hierarchy that leaders will pick up, we are all equally good’ ‘What gives other coaches the right to assess or criticise us?’

Despite the hesitations six lead coaches came into the network’s hub. They are a diverse group and demonstrate the communities’ breadth of experience. Also despite initial hesitance they have fashioned a role that links themselves as ordinary working leadership coaches with the collective network. They are keen on learning as we go and working with their colleagues to co-create what we do and how we do it. They run co-coaching sessions. They review in ‘live’ supervision initially coaches under development and they co-ordinate a small sub-group of coaches to track feedback from participants and feedback from coaches about their experiences.

Again, there has been a gradual acceptance, and as lead coaches have got used to being orchestrators in the network in a constructive way. A few coaches are still reluctant. Live supervision is an area of reluctance. This sort of supervision is very relevant. We use through observation behind a one-way screen or video or audio tape. From a social constructionist basis it does matter what you talk about and how you talk. As a coach this can be a very formative experience reflexively reviewing, with a respectful colleague, the patterns you use and how they work and what alternatives
you might employ. We started live supervision with coaches under development and lead coaches discovered that they learnt a lot about coaching so they proposed that live supervision could be offered to everybody. They started by volunteering themselves and slowly others have been encouraged to put themselves forward for this experience that is seen as risky. Post ‘live supervision’ most coaches say they have gained a lot and it was not what they feared - an undercover assessment. It is becoming about their development and part of good practice.

**Phase 3: Sustaining Momentum and Becoming a Learning Network**

Bringing a network into being involves developing structures, routines and rituals that create mutual engagement and keeps the joint enterprise in view. Colin Hastings, in New Organisation points out that networks need maintaining and energising to continue to be useful. Sustaining momentum and continuing to be a learning network is where we are now. There are, at the moment, three life giving activities: action research, the code of ethics and accreditation. These are the next pieces in the patchwork.

**Action Research – another patchwork piece – what difference does the ALP make to leaders?**

We wanted to discover what difference the Ashridge Leadership process makes to leaders in their context. We were interested in their stories of what they were able to do 6-12 months after the ALP in their own world. We were also interested in what made the difference for them, how did they learn to do or be what they were becoming. Using an Appreciative Inquiry method we interviewed 50 leaders who had taken part in the first 18 months of the new leadership process. Coaches were invited to be interviewers as interested members of the learning system. Hearing leaders’ stories, encouraged coaches and gave them confidence in this leadership development process and coaching in particular.

Coaching was discovered to be very useful. 70% said that they had found coaching very helpful rating it as 7 or more - a scale 1 not helpful to 10 extremely helpful. This action research also gives a collective story about the value and effects that coaching has as an integral part in the whole development process. There is close interaction and co-existence of learning methods in this development process that are
constructively complementary. The continuing research programme continues to be undertaken by leadership coaches who choose to do so.

**Code of Ethics – a further piece – codifying coaching practice**

In the summer of 2001 a colleague from Australia joined us for a leadership conference. The ALP had been launched in Mount Eliza Business School in Melbourne. Leadership coaches had been selected, trained and were well under way with leadership coaching. The question in this colleague’s mind, was ‘Where’s your Code of Ethics then?’ We reflected, this seems to be good practice but if we had one what would we do with it and more importantly what should be in it? We agreed he was right, but how should this come into being. We did not want to impose something from outside that we would uncomfortably conform to. We asked him to use his enthusiasm to make a draft, if we could use it as a means of discussion that would be fine. We could share our thoughts with him. This started months of running conversations, amongst coaches, in breaks and at co-coaching sessions, causing us to reflect on what we wanted to have codified, what it was important to say, what we wanted leaders and their organisations to know. Finally, in 2002, a new ALP director who is keen on establishing and publishing standards pulled it together. It does get referred to from time to time and now we need to keep it alive. This indicates in Wenger’s terms that the community is concerned about its collective standards and wants to own them.

**Raising the Game – the last patchwork piece so far …..**

Raising the game was the name given to our own Appreciative Inquiry process used to imagine our future. It happened quite by chance as a contributor to a co-coaching day was ill at the last moment. So what to do? We had a new director, so there was another impetus to look forward. We started discovering what we and our clients valued most in leadership coaching and began to imagine how it would be if we raised our game. Much energy was liberated, designs were put forward to raise the profile of coaching in other parts of Ashridge, where continued coaching is not typically incorporated into the learning design. We agreed to sign in as Leadership Coaches, not as associates a rather undefined title. There was a call for us to find a way of accrediting coaching internally within Ashridge and with reference to the outside
coaching world. Groups of interested people clustered together to work on this. This demand for accreditation clearly came from within indicating a mutual engagement with self regulated, and shared practice development. We seem to be continuing to learn and this is our current venture. We are also beginning to create other networks of coaches in response to particular clients or new development processes for top leaders.

The patchwork continues. There is an increasing number of 27 coaches who would describe themselves as attracted to and actively participating in a learning network. A few are on the edge, moving away as they find that they are not engaged to this kind of coaching practice. On the whole coaches are proud of and talk about the good quality work they know they do well and they want to continue to expand their leadership coaching practice.

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