

Coaching: The Central Thread of Leadership Development

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You want to develop leaders who will do what Jesus called us to do, leaders who can take the church forward into the 21st century. You look to the fields and see them, as Jesus does, ready for harvest-- and you know that's where your ministry needs to concentrate. What's needed is rapid leadership development -- the kind of leadership development that comes from the harvest and leads people back into the harvest, resulting in subsequent generations of new believers and new leaders living as Jesus called us to live.

That's why you went into ministry in the first place. But experience has not delivered. You've longed for this vision, yet it's simply not happening. You've tried all kinds of things, too many things -- new programs, new initiatives, undertaken in good faith. And yet they've all fallen short. Why?

If you are one of those who long for the real expression of Jesus in the world today, if you are one of those who feel stuck sometimes and caught in the middle, if you are open to new ideas about how to move forward, journey with us these next few pages as we think through how things got off track, how we can get them back on track, and where to go from here. We believe there is the hope for real, missional, incarnational presence of Jesus to be seen in the here and now of your ministry.

How things came unraveled

In knitting, the central thread is the one that runs through everything else, holding all the rest together. When that thread is pulled, the whole fabric starts coming unraveled. In leadership development, coaching is that central thread: without coaching all the rest of our efforts will continue to unravel: the classes, the books, the meetings. No matter how well we do them, they don't work.

Like the sweater that comes unraveled, our leadership development attempts have failed and we're left trying to figure out why. The lack of coaching is the why. Without coaching, you're not going to develop the kind of leaders you want or get the results you want.

- If you want to develop the person as well as accomplish the task, you need coaching.
- If you want to develop leaders from the ground up rather than just importing them, you need coaching.
- If you want to create not just a few more leaders by addition, but a multiplying movement of leaders, you need coaching.

- If you want to develop leaders who can think in terms of principles, you need coaching.
- If you want consistent results, you need coaching.

Coaching is the lacking ingredient in most attempts at leadership development—it’s what’s missing. Coaching is the intentional process of coming alongside a person to give them focused attention. Coaching helps them discern where they are, where God wants them to go, and what the next steps are toward getting there. This focused attention helps people in the accomplishment of their ministry and also helps them grow in their personal development.



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We can try to develop leaders without coaching, but we end up short-circuiting the process and don’t accomplish what we want accomplish. What happens when we try to do leadership development without coaching? Let’s take a look at some of the most common scenarios.

Recruiting instead of developing

The most extreme response is giving up trying to develop leaders at all. Since it doesn’t work anyway, why try? Instead, we look for ready-made leaders who are fully trained, self-motivating, self-correcting, self-sustaining. We try to recruit those who don’t need any investment. Not only is there an extreme shortage of such people, but we contribute nothing to the kingdom with this approach. Our energy is focused internally, trying to get enough leaders to meet our own organization’s needs.

Training and releasing

If we do try to engage in leadership development, another common problem we face when coaching is left out of the picture is the “train and release” phenomenon. After we have trained leaders (usually in groups and in a classroom), we consider the job done. We send them out with “be warm and be filled,” and never check up on them unless something goes wrong. Sometimes we’re so relationally disconnected from those we’ve “developed” that we don’t even know something has gone wrong until long afterwards. With no connection to resources, to other leaders, or to us, is it any wonder that we have far few leaders leading than have attended our leadership classes?

Processing leaders in groups rather than one-on-one

Let’s say we don’t fall prey to “train and release.” We understand that some kind of follow up is needed after we train leaders. Without coaching in the picture, most of us decide to provide ongoing support in group settings, rather than one-on-one. We hold leader meetings and process

them in groups. On the surface, developing leaders in groups seems like it would save time. However, anything that doesn't accomplish the ultimate purpose wastes time over the long haul.

While leadership groups can certainly be valuable, working with leaders only in group settings seldom provides enough input that applies directly to the new leaders' context. Often the most negative person dominates, discouraging the others, and new leaders walk away without any clear sense of guidance specifically for them. Processing people in groups simply lacks the focus and quality that one-on-one coaching provides. Save the groups for the purpose of encouragement and idea-sharing rather than trying to use them as a primary vehicle for leadership development.

Trying to train leaders classroom-style

Due in part to our culture and the modernist influence in our recent history, our default means of equipping leaders is cognitive rather than relational. We focus on information—all that they might need to know—and then try to download it using an academic classroom approach. Yet for ministry skills, the way people learn best is not in the classroom, but on-the-job. Imagine trying to learn how to swim in a classroom. Someone can explain the principles and show a movie, but until people try it and have someone coach them along depending on their skill level and what they need to work on, they're not going to learn how to swim.



The same is true of ministry; people don't really learn until they start doing it. Providing some type of orientation beforehand is important, yet we need to recognize that where people really will learn is on the job with coaching. There's nothing wrong with *orienting* people in a classroom setting; we just can't assume that that is the same as *training* them.

Taking an either/or approach: people vs. tasks

When coaching isn't present, we can get so focused on getting the job done that we forget about developing people. An either/or approach results: either we develop people or we get things done. For good ministry leaders, it's not either/or, but both/and. Do we need to accomplish the task? Yes. Do we need to develop people? Yes. With coaching we don't have to choose but can do them both in tandem.

Not allowing people to reach their fullest potential

When leaders are not engaged in an intentional coaching relationship, we run the risk of not allowing them to reach their fullest potential. They may not be sufficiently challenged. They may not be spending enough time in reflection to hear God's voice. If we are focused on perpetuating our organization and don't have a strong personal development plan, it's easy to miss what God may be calling people toward next.

Sometimes people's development means they need to move on. That means we can't hang onto people—they need to be free to leave our ministry and go somewhere else that God maybe be calling them. Ultimately, leadership development is not done for the sake of our own organization, but for the sake of the kingdom. Jesus said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mark 8:35). If we truly want to develop leaders, we must be willing to lose them, we must be willing to give them away. We may lose them, but what a contribution for the kingdom.

Leadership development that *doesn't* work:

- **One-size-fits-all:** we cannot approach leadership development with an assembly line mentality
- **Aiming too low:** our passion for leadership development can't be institutional survival
- **Trying to teach people to swim in a classroom:** people need hands-on ministry experience in order to learn
- **Quick fix mentality:** a lack of willingness to commit to ongoing development rather than a one-time fix
- **Impersonal resourcing:** we give people and orientation, a few books, and say "go, be warmed and filled"

Leadership development that *does* work: People learn best when they....

- have someone to come alongside them
- engage experientially through on-the-job training
- can focus on both life and ministry skills
- take time to reflect on their experiences
- receive a consistent investment of time and energy over the long haul

Coaching is the central thread of leadership development—the piece that holds all the rest together. If you want to get all that God wants out of your leadership development plan, include coaching. Without it, leadership development simply doesn't work. It keeps breaking down over and over again at predictable places along the way.

We know what doesn't work. How about trying something different? Are you willing and ready to try something new and stay with it over the long term?

Moving toward a different plan

If coaching is what's needed, how does that impact what we're doing? We'll need to begin thinking about leadership development in new ways: relational ways, with coaching at the center.

- We need to invest time in developing people.
- We need to develop people both personally and in their ministry.
- We need to develop enough coaches so all leaders have coaches.
- We'll need to shift the focus from maintaining existing programs to proactively developing new leaders.
- We'll need to make a personal investment.

This last point means we'll need to model coaching behavior. Effective pastors and denominational leaders invest at least 20% of their time in coaching leaders. If that's not the case for us, it likely means we're either spending too much time pushing papers or too much time doing all the work of the ministry ourselves. So the question becomes, "Who am I coaching? Who am I intentionally developing?" In many cases, we're not getting what we want because we're not putting in the necessary investment ourselves.

If coaching is truly the central thread of leadership development—the one piece without which nothing else holds together—you'll need a lot of coaches. You'll need more than just you; you can't do it alone. You'll need to be intentional about raising and multiplying quality coaches within your ministry. The more people we empower to coach, the more people can be empowered to bring in the harvest. The growth is exponential. Therefore it is not only coaching, but number of people coaching, that holds the key to unlocking the church's harvesting potential.

Looking forward

When you think leadership development, think coaching. And think about the kind of leaders Jesus wanted to produce--leaders from the harvest, for the harvest.

Whatever you do, put coaching at the core. Make it primary, and you'll see the long-term fruit in all areas of your ministry. If you are willing to provide the consistent investment of time and energy required to come alongside leaders to help them grow, the return on that investment will be phenomenal. Like compounding interest, your efforts will have a multiplying effect that makes a difference well beyond the walls of the church.

Let's get serious about leadership development through coaching so that the church can do what Jesus intended it to do. If you're serious about change, we're here to help.

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