## LEADERSHIP COACHING ... Touching Hearts?

Gregg Thompson

he coaching wrap-up conversation over coffee quickly turned uncomfortable, at least for me. "You touched me," said my client, "you really touched me." With a quick "thank you" in return, I tried to quickly change the topic to something much more benign. (My mind is racing...Is he a football fan? Will a comment about last weekend's games provide a quick detour in the conversation?) He was not to be dissuaded. "You are not hearing me, Gregg. You touched me here." This time he pointed directly at the middle of his chest. "Right here!"

It seems that I have spent many years positioning leadership coaching as a practical and potent performance improvement process (and it clearly is that) while minimizing the more personal aspects of this work. After all, we are coaches, not counselors. And not just regular coaches for that matter. We are leadership coaches whose clients are primarily senior business managers. We use words like "partnership" and "challenges", not "intimacy" and "compassion." We ask our clients to step up to a bigger game, not get in touch with their feelings. And now, sitting right in front of me is the seasoned COO of a major manufacturing enterprise telling me that our coaching work has not only rekindled his passion for leadership, but for life itself. \*He continues, "I have made three commitments, and I am living these every day. First, I have committed to have a positive impact on the jobs, careers and lives of every single person in our organization, regardless of their position. Second, I have recommitted myself to be a genuine servant leader in my family. Third, I have committed to leave this planet a better place in some way when my time is done." And then he said the words to which I had no response: "My heart has opened up to a whole new world."

In this column I often provide a few insights or aphorisms for those readers who are interested in the leadership development field. This time I simply have some reminders for myself:

When I am coaching I need to remember that:

- 1. I cannot separate the leader from the person. The whole person is in the coaching relationship with me. I need to have the courage to bring my full humanity to the coaching relationship.
- 2. All leadership development is, in fact, personal development. The person being coached is the instrument of leadership, and the only way that development can occur is when the leader works on him or herself. I need to remember that I can serve others best by being a fellow learner rather than a teacher.
- 3. The most intense leadership development is a result of a deep personal commitment. I need to keep in mind that all real learning is self-directed and people will only change when they decide to do so.

Coaches give little advice. We mostly remind our clients of their talents, their passions, their aspirations and their potential. That day over coffee, my client reminded me so clearly of one of the most important tenets of this work – it is impossible to fully explore leadership potential without touching the heart along the way.

\*I rarely write about my coaching conversations much less quote my clients, however in this case, my client not only gave me his permission, he encouraged me to write the article. I thank him for his thoughtfulness and generosity.



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