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Leadership Coaching: Are We Missing the Alchemy?

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ABSTRACT

In an era characterized by fear, uncertainty and doubt Leadership Coaches now find themselves operating on more difficult and unfamiliar terrain. Enabling their clients to cope, survive and thrive in such tenuous conditions offers a significant professional challenge. This paper offers an unusual supplemental approach to more conventional and traditional coaching methods. Utilizing principles derived from the ancient field of alchemy, as well as from modern neuroscience, this article provides both new ideas and guidance to the practitioner of leadership coaching. Beginning with a guided imagery, this piece will then cover the connection between alchemy and leadership, followed by alchemy's relationship to leadership coaching. The article will next review some relevant findings from contemporary brain science focusing, in particular, on the role of the unconscious mind. The ensuing section provides some ideas for what Leadership Coaches might consider doing differently to be more effective in working with their clients. The article concludes with a short summary and discussion of future implications.

Key Words: Alchemy, Brain Science, Neuroscience, Leadership, Leadership Coaching

INTRODUCTION

Clear your mind. Quiet your body. Calm your breathing. Picture in your imagination a small, dim, and obscure chamber. The space, at first glance, seems very old. It smells musty, the air dense with unfamiliar noxious odors. The walls are damp with moisture. In the semi-darkness your heightened senses detect the aura of a compact human presence. Brief indistinct movements cast wavering grotesque shadows on the surrounding stonework.

No weapons are visible. Placed strategically around the room are slender wax tapers. The spluttering candles afford only limited illumination. A small grouping of spectral figures appears to be seated on short benches hunched over a long wooden table. Plainly laid out upon the table are a variety of some kind of simple implements or tools.

Carelessly scattered across the tabletops are fragile hand-printed parchments penned in an obscure language. Several ancient-appearing leather-bound volumes are also in evidence. Particular selections of these fragile works are propped open to display specific portions of illuminated text. All of the revealed regions of the books overflow with enigmatic diagrams. Some even contain intricate, elaborate, drawings. Here and there, indecipherable coded notations show.

Clearly noticeable at the corners of the area are a few groupings of fairly large and complex constructions. These impressive fabrications seem to be composed mainly of dull metal and crystal components. They are intricately connected together by looping glassine tubes that appear to have some sort of fluid flowing through them. Altogether, they comprise an extremely puzzling assemblage of unknown purpose and origin.

When the ghostly figures move, they do so slowly and cautiously with infinite care. Their bodies are dressed from head-to-toe in long flowing robes. Sandals cover their feet. Hoods shroud their heads, making their faces appear vague and featureless. Several of the figures are awkwardly bent over bubbling-hot crucibles to which they occasionally add things. The steaming cauldrons frequently emit strange flashes of colored fire, smoke and exotic odors.

Seemingly engrossed in their labors, a few of the forms appear to be gingerly handling fragile-appearing glass beakers. Large flasks nearby are filled to the brim with curious unknown substances of various colors, densities and granularities. The workers infrequently speak. When they do, it is in muted tones using a tongue difficult to comprehend. Their movements seem agonizingly slow and calculated. In the dim candlelight their single-minded attention appears to be narrowly and feverishly watchful, even expectant.

Chancing a final look, you conclude that all of the physical arrangements and intense work efforts seem to be concentrated solely on accomplishing a single task. With that realization, the once vivid scene slowly dissolves and fades from your senses, returning you fully conscious to the present.

THE REVELATION

Aided by guided imagery, this fictional narrative was empowered by your mind's own creative unconscious processes. The storyline deliberately portrayed people in an unusual setting engaged in an ambiguous and unspecified task. The tale was intended to elicit a stylized version of the legendary quest for the "Philosophers Stone." This mythical rock was believed to have the transcendent power of transmuting lead into gold. As the primary symbol of Alchemy, the Philosophers Stone symbolized perfected enlightenment and heavenly bliss, not to mention the possibility of unlimited fabulous riches. Thus, the imaginary tale intentionally depicted fantasy figures who could well have been medieval alchemists.

For many of us, this hypothetical yesteryear scenario tends to elicit sinister images of mysterious fictitious characters like Professor Severus Snape. Snape was the erstwhile instructor of Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Snape springs from the fertile imagination of best-selling author J. K. Rowling. Rowling's immensely popular Harry Potter book series has captivated audiences world-wide.

As a prototypical character, Snape might be considered a model for a present-day alchemist. Alchemy has historically amassed a bad reputation as an occult science. Through the ages Alchemy has earned a dubious reputation as a pseudo-science. It has been long considered a kind of false knowledge rooted in the confusion and mysticism of the Dark Ages following the fall of the Holy Roman Empire. Traditionally, Alchemy has been identified as the medieval forerunner of modern chemistry.

A more contemporary perspective, espoused by some modern-day theorists, considers Alchemy to be a centuries-old part of the field of natural philosophy. Natural philosophy being the philosophical study of physics or nature and the physical universe. Alchemy, as such, is often seen as a pre-science tradition concerned with purifying and perfecting specific substances and the finding of a universal elixir. Even that paragon of early objective scientific thought, the acknowledged founder of the field of modern Physics, Sir Isaac Newton, was a practicing alchemist (Newman, 2018). With all the historical controversy and negative views about Alchemy, what could it possibly offer a modern Leadership Coaching practitioner?

ALCHEMY AND LEADERSHIP

A number of these ancient alchemic ideas, rooted in longstanding customs, have been linked to the leadership field. They have also stimulated several recent subject-related books. These works include: *The Alchemy of Power: Mastering the Immutable Facts of Leadership* (Corley, 2019), *The Alchemy of Authentic Leadership* (Massouth & Mondale, 2013), *Leadership Alchemy* (Pi, 2020), *Corporate Alchemy* (Shields, 2018), and *The Alchemy of Truly Remarkable Leadership* (Watson, 2020).

The topic of Alchemy has also garnered the notice of practitioners from other, more traditional, business disciplines. Of particular note, for Leadership Coaches, is the professional interest of controversial marketing guru Rory Sutherland. Sutherland is a noted author and vice chairman and creative director of advertising powerhouse Ogilvy & Mather. In his recent book, *Alchemy*, Sutherland defines Alchemy as “the Dark Art and curious science of creating magic in brands, business and life.” (Sutherland, 2019), He further suggests that our brains, consistent with evolving neuroscience research, offer us a deliberately biased viewpoint designed less for accuracy and more to advance our evolutionary fitness. In other words, our brains appear to be constructed to prefer thoughts and actions that support passing on our DNA and enabling survival of the human species.

Sutherland, something of an iconoclast among contemporary marketing experts, further proposes that the human mind is not primarily driven by logic but by emotion. Additionally, he suggests the conscious mind tries mightily to continue the fiction that it alone chooses every action that we take. Sunderland, ever the experiential teacher, also advises practitioners that not everything that makes sense works, and not everything that works makes sense.

This pragmatic notion of sense-making seems very consistent with what Leadership Coaches attempt to accomplish with their clients. Sutherland’s idea that individuals are not principally driven by logic and rationality is finding support in the work of contemporary neuroscientists. Much of our behavior, according to their brain research results, appears to be driven by unconscious processes, only some of which make it into conscious awareness. This emerging realization of the impact of unconscious processes on behavior may hold real implications for the work of Leadership Coaches.

ALCHEMY AND LEADERSHIP COACHING

So, what does alchemy actually have to do with leadership coaching? White & McKinnon (2003) showed that the essence of Leadership Coaching is about establishing, influencing and maintaining human relationships. The alchemy lies in the extent to which individual talents, competencies and interests artfully meld with imagination and creativity via people

relationships to collectively accomplish great things; or the successful transmutation of the implicit into the explicit. Today's well-established Leadership Coaching approaches appear to focus primarily on helping clients to better understand and make enhanced use of their singular capacities and less on enhancing cooperative relationships.

Coaches may also encourage their clients to set achievable goals and to become more involved in the professional and personal development of others with whom they engage. In order to more adeptly assist their clients, Leadership Coaches may involve them in a process of sense-making at both the conscious and unconscious levels. This may be accomplished through the use of provocative questions, pointing out behavioral patterns and contradictory actions, guided exercises, mutual exploration of options, role playing, and homework assignments.

Certainly, assisting clients in sense-making appears to be a significant part of what many Leadership Coaches do, although they may not specifically call it that. Coaches seek to assist their clients in making better sense out of their professional and personal lives and putting their insights into action. In doing so coaches attempt to present themselves as credentialed, knowledgeable, rational helpers. Coaches attempt to act in the best interests of their clients as skilled helpers, professionals well-schooled intellectually, academically and experientially. Really effective coaches can do more.

Coaches can help clients foster real feelings of delight and confidence in the discovery of their own, as of yet, unrecognized and unrealized potential. In the coach's eagerness to build rapport, actively listen, provide challenge and support, he or she may sometimes lose track of the fact that they are dealing with vital but imperfect human beings. Coaches can more fully recognize that their clients are whole individuals and groups arriving at coaching sessions complete with their own sets often much of unconscious beliefs and motivations. Really effective coaches can appreciate that much of the presenting behavior of their clients may actually be the product of hidden unconscious drives.

Painfully perhaps, and sometimes to their chagrin, coaches relearn that their clients are distinctive and complex personalities. Clients come built-in with their own quirks and idiosyncrasies, often without recognizing that they have them. Sometimes they acquiesce, sometimes they go silent and other times they pushback. Clients can and do act impetuously and irrationally. Although, they may not overtly choose to admit it, coaches do all these things too without fully understanding why. The unconscious mind can manifest itself in strange and unpredictable ways.

WHAT BRAIN SCIENCE HAS TO OFFER LEADERSHIP COACHING

Early in the first decade of the 21 century, Leadership Coach and author Daniel White began articulating the possible role of neuroscience in leadership coaching (White, 2006). Additionally, during the early 2020s, neuroscientists (Dimitriadis & Psychogios, 2021) and (Braun, 2022) began to take special note of how brain science could offer practical insights to leaders.

A small cadre of neuroscientists believed they might actually enable those in frontrunner individual and team roles to more effectively influence and guide their organizations. The new brain research also began to make exciting discoveries about the role and function of the

unconscious mind, emotion, and their influence on behavior (Fuller, Murphy & Chow, 2020). The subterranean mind, without the knowledge and approval of the conscious mind, was found to control many mental and bodily functions and processes.

The unconscious has been the subject of speculation since at least the middle seventeenth-hundreds. Charles Darwin mentioned it repeatedly in his masterwork *On the Origin of the Species*. Other researches exploring the recesses of the unconscious mind notably included German Philosopher Edward von Hartmann and American Psychologist William James. (Barch, 2017). More recent works on the role of the unconscious mind include *Incognito* (Eagleman, 2011), *Consciousness and the Brain* (Dehaene, 2014) and *Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior* (Mlodinow, 2012). For coaches, knowing that behavior of their clients is partially determined by their unconscious mind can be of value in interpreting why they sometimes do what appears to be the illogical, the surprising and the unexpected.

WORKING WITH THE UNCONSCIOUS MIND

Social Psychologist Timothy Wilson has been investigating the role of the unconscious mind for forty-six years. His book *Strangers to Ourselves* (Wilson, 2002) outlines his view about the role of the unconscious mind in every-day life. As a direct result of his ongoing research, Wilson has developed a firm belief in the positive functions of the unconscious mind. In contra-distinction to Sigmund Freud's notion that the unconscious mind is a seething cauldron of conflicting basic desires, Wilson conceives the unconscious as highly adaptive. Certainly, this is a hopeful sign for the work of the Leadership Coach.

Wilson's belief is that the unconscious may even be the essential foundation of our personalities and the primary seat of our decision-making, problem-solving, and motivational processes. In support of Wilson's work London Business School Professor Daniel Cable states that it is a part of our human biology for our adaptive unconscious to know that our human potential is being wasted and that we are wasting away (Cable, 2019). If such is actually the case, then a significant part of the coaching relationship should be to help clients better understand and actualize their unrealized potential.

Gerd Gigerenzer is another researcher who has taken a contrary approach to the traditional study of unconscious functioning. Gigerenzer is the Director of the prestigious Max Planck Institute of Human Development in Berlin, Germany. He has focused his cutting-edge research efforts on the intelligence of unconscious functioning via the role of intuition or "gut feelings." His work (Gigerenzer, 2002) provides a basic underpinning for how modern humans use instinct and rules of thumb that have evolved over thousands of years as a means of coping with our every-day experiences. Effective coaches seem to intuitively grasp that their clients employ instincts and rules of thumb as a means of coping and aid in making them conscious.

Highly respected Neurologist Anthony Demasio studies brain-damaged people. One of his theoretical conclusions, derived from his own extensive research, is that our experiences are immediately processed unconsciously. The processing, in turn, triggers a whole set of bodily changes. Our brains then sense and interpret these changes. Demasio (2010) terms the alterations "somatic markers." The changes are then further evaluated in the context of the immediate situation and the brain's knowledge of current emotional states. Demasio further believes that these somatic markers are the direct product of rapid non-conscious processes

that create distinctive bodily changes before our conscious reasoning catches up. Gut instincts become the innate sensation that arises from our interpretation of the bodily changes.

These instincts can allow us an intuitive sense of the correct choice even before our consciousness can even explain why. This instinctual sense can also be a source of implicit biases that unconsciously influence actions. Innovative psychiatrist Milton Erickson was known as something of a therapeutic magician. He employed a wide range of persuasive rhetorical forms to encourage behavioral change. Along with anthropologist Gregory Bateson, Erickson (Rosen, 1991) pioneered a number of techniques potentially useful to the Leadership Coach. These powerful methods for reaching the unconscious mind include: the use of metaphor, storytelling and indirect suggestions. A list to which we might add the detecting and utilizing Demasio's somatic markers. The coach will need to use caution in using these methods so as to preclude being seen as manipulative rather than facilitative.

In brief, what all this brain research is showing Leadership Coaches is that, contrary to popular thinking, it is emotions that principally drive human behavior. Emotions that are the result of unconscious interpretations of information coming in through all the human external and internal senses. It may well be that the particular "in-tune" or "in-synchronization feeling" that coaches sometimes experience in coaching relationships might be a type of structural resonance between the unconscious brains of client and coach.

WHAT CAN LEADERSHIP COACHES DO DIFFERENTLY

One of the ongoing concerns of Leadership Coaches, as they work with internal and external clients, is with developing more effective organizational leadership. Perhaps one of the coach's new and distinguishing competencies should be the ability to work with and utilize "Unconscious Leadership" processes. Numerous advantages may accrue to the coach for gaining a greater knowledge about the unconscious mind. For example, when to use quick and intuitive decision-making and when to operate in a slower, more calculated decision-making mode (Kahneman, 2013). Or, when to trust gut feelings and when to disregard them. And, what questions to use to stimulate unconscious research processes.

Some of the potential benefits of employing these alchemist-like unconscious techniques include: more attention paid to less obvious but important behavioral cues, a broader knowledge of the role of implicit biases, an enhanced ability to learn how to learn, greater insight into how to best sustain and retain productive relationships with key workforce members, and a better knowledge of self.

So, in practical terms, what can leadership coaching practitioners do capitalize on the immense processing capabilities of the unconscious mind? First, Leadership Coaches should be open to the real possibility that conscious minds do not always have the best answers. Particularly so in ambiguous, uncertain and highly complex situations.

Second, a greater willingness to listen to their wee inside-the-head voice as it quietly whispers in their inner ear. As its body is physically acting, Thirdly, deliberately assigning to the client's unconscious mind via suggestion the requirement to come up with creative possibilities after all conscious options have been exhausted. Finally, to risk some delays in decision-making and problem solving by giving unconscious processes time to work their magic.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

It is the opinion of the author that for the successful Leadership Coach of the future it will be insufficient to only be skilled in the conscious speech and actions that, heretofore, have made coaches particularly successful. For example, some of these overt coaching capacities might include: the expression of empathy, maintenance of an open-mind, offering fairness and honesty in role modeling, and providing useful options when requested. These expressed skills also encompass being supportive and even challenging when called for in the client's interest. In the future it seems likely that the most effective Leadership coaches will also be able to continue to use these skills but also to appeal to and positively influence the unconscious minds of their clients.

Perhaps, most of all, the very best coaches will constantly keep in mind that the primary work of coaching is about effectiveness in the present and meeting their client's ongoing needs for further development as a leader. Underneath it all is the idea that Leadership Coaching is a values-oriented helping profession. In the throes of a coaching session it can be sometimes easy to forget that the coaching relationship is about serving clients and not about looking good as a coach.

Critically, Leadership Coaching is about establishing and utilizing trust as a vehicle for the further growth of both the client and the coach. The alchemist-oriented coach should be willing to assist clients in reaching their goals utilizing both conscious and unconscious processes. It has been suggested (Naimen, 2022) that the major opportunity that Leadership Alchemy offers is actually the process of transmuting leaden thinking into the gold of wisdom.

So, here's to the wisdom of Sutherland's modern alchemy, curious science, and mental magic. May these elements act together to provide coaches ever more possible arrows for their quivers of professional capabilities. For in today's fast-paced and chaotic world, Leadership Coaches can use all the help available so as to be of even better service to their clients.

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