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## WHY A LEADERSHIP COACH?\*

*Posted on December 19, 2015*

In this edition of our Newsletter, we welcome as our Guest Contributor, Mark E. Ulfers, Head of School, American School of Paris. He is the author of the following article.

Hopefully I still have an eye-on-the-object look. It is the rapt expression when a person is deeply engrossed in what they are doing and, in my case, about love for a chosen profession and the ebb and flow of a life in schools.

Yet, I also cheerfully and all too confidently plunge and somersault into leadership circumstances where I have no business or overwhelmingly misjudge the best way to help our learning community or school. My blind spots are many. After 29 years of leading schools, I still miss on pulling out the best leadership tool and much more. So my idea is to never stop trying to become qualified for my job!

I found a leadership coach to learn in a different way about leading a school. My goal was to be better today than yesterday.

Plato's theory about human perception in his "Allegory of the Cave" claims that knowledge gathered from our senses is opinion, not truth— even if clearly observed. Philosophy, debate and even practical experience must challenge and inform deeper understanding— to shed metaphoric sunlight. In my work, I was worried about seeing only what I wanted to see. I was certain my field of vision on leadership and innovation had narrowed. And as has been said, it is best to keep in mind that memory and experience are tools of a novelist. I wanted a new point of view with a chance for objective and challenging debates, from the outside looking in. Leadership coaching helped me move beyond the shadows.

I learned much from my initiation into having a leadership coach and there are a few themes and ideas that can be teased out from the experience.

### **Success Blinds You to the System**

The time to begin with a leadership coach is when things are going well and also when you have a healthy fear about taking the complexities of your work for granted. After years of experience, maybe I caught myself being too quick with answers, realizing that what I was seeing or doing did



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not always translate to a lasting solution or an optimal climate where harmony finds a way. I needed poking with a sharp stick.

A group of 200 CEO's (Gavett, August 15, 2013) were surveyed about their learning needs and unanimously indicated they were receptive to making leadership style changes through coaching and feedback. Of this group, 80% of CEO's who sought outside leadership coaching did so on their own. I did the same. I went to my board and asked for their support.

### **The Devil of Insecurity Can Be an Angel in Disguise**

Back to the survey— The majority of CEO's had not sought leadership coaching. The idea that others in leadership or members of their board might see coaching as "remedial", was a stopper for many. Yet consider that the world's greatest tennis players want coaching when at the top of their game.

My insecurity of not seeking a coach earlier in my career was really a function of using an old internal operating system, rather than the equivalent of upgraded self-reflection 2.0 mental software. I understood that it was time to sharpen my craft, to get unstuck, and to find someone who would openly challenge both my thinking and doing for leading a school. Quite the opposite of signaling any professional weakness to my board or others, initiating leadership coaching enhanced my professional standing.

### **Speaking Truth Over Power**

"Power" is not a word normally associated with schools— nor should it be— yet human nature has much to say about such matters. People across differing roles and responsibilities within a school will not naturally tell you what's on their mind nor will they cross the very communication barriers you are trying to lower. Some will, many won't. The same is true of inner-circle administrative team members. I figured a leadership coach could help with organizational translation— another set of eyes and ears on our professional home.

I've learned that a leadership coach is at his or her best when speaking frankly and when applying attitude adjustments. I needed a leadership coach hardwired to speak with candor. Our ongoing debates, conversations and real-time problem solving (each session for one hour, sometimes longer) did help me get beyond the "cave" of my perceptions. Exchanges were at times blunt, yet never disrespectful. My coach helped challenge my thinking to deal with new realities in teaching, supervision of instruction, board governance and the impact of my leadership behaviors on the school. To borrow from Jim Collins and "Good to Great", my coaching sessions afforded a bi-monthly "autopsy without blame". We unpacked school events together. The climate for doing so had nothing to do with fault finding, but rather how best to deal with a difficult situation and then



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to come back stronger. And because my mentor has years of experience in schools, problem-solving discussions were laced with stories and vignettes that invited creative thinking and learning from one context to another.

### **Strip Away the Noise and Clutter**

Leadership coaching has offered me a renaissance of self-discipline. How I work with people, thought processes for setting vision and marshalling people and resources around imperatives for change and then launching into action have dominated our process debates. Most recently we discussed how human motivation, talent development, mentoring skills and our incurable need to continually improve can drive implementing leadership standards and performance reviews. My coach and I came with our agendas for each meeting. In the very beginning, we agreed on key leadership topics, about which I rated my ability— or lack of— so we had a baseline agenda. We determined to build discussions from research and practice. But then there were always the circling urgencies of school life, whether about personnel, board decisions, team building or a tough interpersonal issue we were facing.

We thoroughly dissected conflict resolution process in the midst of intellectual "doodling", where we applied ideas to novel situations. And not for a minute was I let off the hook for faulty thinking or sloppy doing as we've debriefed day-to-day leadership.

During coaching sessions, all the background noise from the busy life of school did drop away for one hour, every two weeks as we settled on an issue and talked it out, never leaving the discussion without a next step to be reported back when we met again. We focused on the things with greatest impact.

### **Windows and Mirrors**

The leadership coach experience has reminded me of the sentiment that we see the world, not as it is, but as we are— or as we are conditioned to see. I work with smart, clear-headed, and sincere people who embrace our school mission, but they see many differing ways of achieving our strategic goals. To support balancing so many perspectives and finding the inner strength to do so, leadership coaching has provided both a window and a mirror. The window for sharpening my vision and opening new scenery on leadership perspectives and opportunities— and the mirror to look inside myself for vulnerabilities, areas for growth and how I can best lead the development and success of others and our school. And also keep that eye-on-the-object look too!

\* I found John Littleford of Littleford & Associates as my leadership coach. Or maybe he found me. Either way, it worked. His depth of professional knowledge, flat-out common sense, personal chemistry with me, and his candid style continue to be key to the success of my leadership



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coaching experience.