

REMEMBERING TO DO WHAT MATTERS

A Buddhist saying describes a teacher as one who helps you “find what you already have.” During an intensive leadership development program that a colleague and I recently led, people told us that a highlight was taking time for reflection, guided by a coach. A coach asks questions that give you the focus to articulate and clarify challenges, sharpen direction and priorities and reckon with what interferes with working well. Through the coaching process, you gain the perspective to discover desires and capabilities you already have.

Coaching begins with careful questions and active listening. In a first coaching meeting with one manager, I encouraged her to describe her challenges and asked probing questions to explore hidden areas of concern and half-formed ideas. By taking notes on patterns and arranging them on the table like you would a deck of cards, we were able to identify groups of issues she wanted to work on. Then we brainstormed strategies to address these issues. Most she would do herself, like interviewing other regional directors. A few, like sitting in on staff meetings to observe staff dynamics, were ones with which I could assist. We agreed on action steps and a timeline, with regular opportunities to reflect on progress.

Another executive came with several challenges: dealing with staff, setting clearer goals, developing his board and working with a parent organization. We have been meeting for a couple of hours about once a month. By asking questions, I encourage him to articulate what he wants to accomplish. Before we started meeting, he said he was getting ensnared in a pattern of reacting to situations. I encouraged him to make a vision of the organization, of his ideal role as executive and of his desires for professional growth. In three months he has made substantial progress toward organizing and promoting an active board, sharpening the priorities of the organization and changing staff dynamics. And he’s carving out regular time for reflection during the work week.

Another executive director brought several goals she wanted to advance in six months’ time. Just how they interacted, what steps to take and how to bring these goals to the board remained unclear. As she clarified—for herself and me—what needed to be done, I began to see how we could create a visual way to represent goals and tasks. Once we had the visual guide, we worked together to plan a six month calendar, with intermediary steps and check points that related to building plans, development goals, staffing needs and board meetings.

By practicing focused reflection, you model a central activity in organizations that know how to learn. What’s ahead for your organization? Does your daily work carry the organization’s mission? What actions will meet your challenges? Coaching helps you return to “first things first,” the discipline of asking what matters so that in the daily practice of leadership you do what matters.

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A client writes...

“Merryn has...helped me explore and enhance my leadership skills and style relative to the broad-based systems issues I regularly face in my work...She has helped me reframe some of my mental models while offering ...solutions that are immediately effective and provide sustaining organizational and personal value.”

Executive Director
Regional Health Organization