



Developmental coaching – growing leaders for a complex world

Leaders of modern organisations are challenged with making sense of a VUCA world – a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous landscape. In these conditions, we need time to think about our challenges, to give ourselves the opportunity to understand them properly, and perhaps to see them differently. But busy-ness is the norm, and the pace of change can be relentless: time and space to think can be in short supply. In these hectic, sometimes chaotic, conditions, developmental coaching carves out much needed space, providing a rare opportunity for calm reflection. With a supportive coach, leaders can take the time to make sense of their challenges, identify new perspectives and options, and develop new skills of thinking which they can take forward into the future.

"If I had an hour to solve a problem, I'd spend 55 minutes thinking about the problem and five minutes thinking about solutions."

Albert Einstein

The days of the predictable five-year strategy are long gone. Global markets and disruptive innovation call for strategies which are flexible and emergent, not fixed. And leaders need new capabilities - VUCA capabilities - to make the most of these new conditions. At MDV, we develop leaders to promote inquiry, developing a culture of safe-to-fail experimentation and the skills of framing for themselves and others. We encourage them to surface dilemmas, working positively with ambiguity and conflict, and to nudge change across the whole system, not just dealing with presenting issues. We support them to connect creatively across diverse perspectives and interests, and above all to deal with the anxiety, frustration and overload of the VUCA world by cultivating resilience in themselves and others. Developmental coaching can help to unlock these critical capabilities and build the self-awareness, empathy and confidence which are essential for healthy leadership.

New leaders, or those transitioning to new levels of responsibility, face particular challenges. New skills are not enough. As we take on new roles it can be hard to fully see what's expected of us and our response to new

complexities can be to revert to the apparent safety of out-dated ways of thinking and doing. Leaders going through a transition into more complex areas of operation, or into new areas of business, can benefit enormously from the sense-making opportunity provided by coaching. Coaches will help the new or transitioning leader to seek feedback, for example, or take a wider view of stakeholders, to explore the implications of new responsibilities or to look for role models and mentors at the new level.

And it's not only leaders' role expectations which change. As we mature as adults, increasing our ability to handle complexity, we naturally begin to see old problems in new ways. These important, frame-breaking developmental shifts can be optimised and supported - perhaps even sometimes accelerated - with the reflection involved in coaching. Coaching helps us to align our new / emerging sense of self with our evolving style of leadership.

Developmental coaching is perhaps uniquely placed to support leaders in sense-making. Most importantly, a good coach creates a confidential space where truth can be spoken. Unlike performance coaching, where coaches are often promoting a predetermined formula for what makes a successful leader, the developmental coach has no skin in the game except for a desire for their client to thrive. There is no agenda but that of providing the space and challenge for clients to make sense of their circumstances, to have a more expansive range of choices and opportunities and to have the support they need to try out new strategies. That's not to say that there is no challenge. On the contrary, often the most helpful tactic the coach can use is to hold a mirror up to the client, giving feedback and encouraging them to think about how they themselves are contributing to their own problems.

Developmental coaches and clients typically start their work with real-life dilemmas: how do I forge a better relationship with my boss, for example, or how do I get the best out of my team? The coach will encourage the client to recollect incidents, conversations, actions and reactions which seem significant. Together, coach and coachee explore these "critical moments" with curiosity –

from different angles, considering multiple factors, musing about possible meanings, connecting the dots in new ways, surfacing inherent dilemmas, challenging fixed thinking and noticing how issues change as the process of reflection unfolds. In light of new insights, coaches work with clients to devise safe-to-fail thought and action experiments to respond to new conditions and, over time, reflect on their impact.

So developmental coaching can help clients to tackle pressing, immediate problems, to make sense of new expectations or conditions and to understand and respond in a positive way to the challenges of their role. But successful coaching leaves a sustainable legacy with the client which is far more than just new ways of tackling current issues. In coaching, clients acquire an experience of curious reflection which they can replicate elsewhere, and develop an ability to consider their own thinking, which they can use in future to broaden their perspectives and recognise their choices. By experimenting safely with changing the ways they think and behave, clients develop resilience and the confidence to experiment again in future. Over time, the skills the coach and client work on together become second nature. The client learns to be their own best coach.

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