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## On Becoming a Master Coach

*The time that leads to mastery is dependent on  
the intensity of our focus.*

—ROBERT GREENE, *Mastery*

**F**or some, being a leader today is a wonderful, rewarding adventure. For others, it is a thankless, underappreciated chore. This has probably always been the case. But the world is changing, and the very notion of what a leader is, and what a leader does, is changing with it. First, the idea of having a hero-leader perched at the top of the organization is rapidly fading. Effective leadership is now needed and expected at all levels of the organization. Second, positional power is waning. It matters less that you have the title of Manager, Director, or Vice-President and more that others see you as a person of purpose, influence, and inspiration. And third, organizations are becoming much more nebulous and disorderly. They are often spread over vast geographical distances and interconnected with multiple other companies. Technology continues to disrupt every industry at shorter and shorter intervals. And while leaders struggle to compete in this fast-paced global marketplace, they also face increasing expectations for their businesses to have a positive social and environmental impact, moving into territory once reserved for NGOs and governments. Demands for transparency and integrity are higher than ever, and a single social-media-empowered customer can do damage that would have been unimaginable in any other era.

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In response to this daunting set of challenges, much creative thinking has been done about how we might re-envision the workplace, restructure organizations, and reinvent traditional management hierarchies. Some even go so far as to reimagine capitalism itself. But as management expert Gary Hamel astutely observes, “the pay-off from reforming capitalism, while substantial, pales in comparison to the gains that could be reaped from creating organizations that are as fully capable as the people who work within them.”<sup>1</sup>

Organizations are populated by individuals—unique men and women with all their talents, capacities, and strengths as well as their idiosyncrasies, moods, and flaws. These are the things that add vitality and richness to organizational life. New generations of employees, or associates, as they are now often called, are less content than ever to be treated like cogs in a machine or even “human resources.” They want to be respected and valued as people. They want to learn and develop. They want to contribute and be part of something special.

As traditional command-and-control pyramids give way to distributed-authority networks, organizations are flattening out. And millennials, who will make up more than 75 percent of the workforce by 2025, care about doing meaningful work—so much so that more than 50 percent say they would take a pay cut to find a job that matches their values.<sup>2</sup> Organizations that are moving into the future will bear more resemblance to purpose-driven communities than profit-driven hierarchies. Business is becoming more collaborative, more complex, and more chaotic.

In the midst of this turmoil, doubling down on a highly directive style of management simply doesn’t work. But what should leaders and managers do instead? Often these are people who have been hired for their industry expertise, their innovative thinking, their business acumen, their technical know-how, their strategic vision, or their role-specific skill set. They likely have solid interpersonal skills and are confident managing teams—keeping

them productive, focused, and organized. But this authority-centered management is an approach that works for processes, systems, numbers, or logistics. It's just not particularly effective for getting the best out of people. As Hamel puts it, "Initiative, imagination and passion can't be commanded—they're gifts. Every day, employees choose whether to bring those gifts to work or not, and the evidence suggests they usually leave them at home."<sup>3</sup>

One such piece of evidence is the depressing data on "employee engagement." Gallup's latest global survey showed that as few as 13 percent of employees described themselves as truly engaged in their work.<sup>4</sup> That means that an incalculable amount of human talent, energy, intelligence, and innovation is being lost every day in almost every workplace. And it points to what I see as the core challenge and opportunity facing today's leaders: fully engaging their teams and unleashing the creative potential of the men and women who show up to work every day.

Look around your workplace right now—at its cubicles and its hallways, its meeting rooms or labs, its factory floor or its showroom. Any place where people come to work, you will find enormous, untapped potential waiting to be developed and deployed. If companies can find a way to truly unleash the full capacities of the human beings within them, they won't have to worry so much about reinventing their workplaces. Their people will do that for them. And when it comes to unleashing human potential, there is one process that has consistently proven to be more effective than any other: coaching.

## **THE LEADER AS COACH**

When I was growing up, coaches were the guys with the loud voices and even louder whistles out on the sports field. But these days, coaching is everywhere. From the basketball court to the boardroom, it is recognized as a critical element in the pursuit of excellence. We have life coaches, parenting coaches, relationship

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coaches, wealth coaches, health coaches—the list goes on. And within the business world, coaching has soared in popularity, becoming the fastest growing human resource development process today.

Everyone may be using the term, but we don't necessarily all mean the same thing. In business, coaching can refer to anything from tracking performance to advising on career development. Unfortunately, most contemporary approaches to coaching are essentially some combination of problem-solving and action-planning processes. True coaching, is something much more rare. It is a co-creative, co-learning process that demands more than the basic communication and interpersonal practices that most leaders have mastered. Here's the definition I like: *Coaching is a powerful interpersonal process that stimulates and equips a person to perform at a higher level while accelerating their development.*

Two words are key here: performance and development. Ultimately, the test of any coach's success is whether there are visibly higher performance and accelerated development in those being coached. But there is a profound twist. As discussed throughout this book, when you are at your best as a coach, the person being coached receives all the credit for this progress. If you are seeking immediate recognition, honors, and adulation, coaching is likely not for you. If, on the other hand, you simply want to be of significant service to others, it likely is. Coaching is a process that has the sole purpose of unleashing the potential of the individual being coached. As you become a good coach, a great coach, a *master coach*, you will make an indelible mark on the work, careers, and lives of those you coach. A master coach is a catalyst for sustained personal change in individuals that in turn will tangibly impact the organizations in which they work and communities in which they live.

Nothing compares to coaching when it comes to helping people perform at their best and accelerate their careers. Not

re-engineering, not team building, not quality improvement programs. Coaching works because it is focused on the individual rather than on the organization and its processes. Even mediocre coaching can produce remarkable results. Individuals become energized (or re-energized) about their work, take full ownership of their performance and their careers, find and rejuvenate long-lost talents, and make major shifts in their contribution levels. Go and speak to anyone in your organization who has significantly increased their performance and you will find a coach involved somewhere, even if that is not their official title.

While we're defining terms, there's another that needs to be mentioned. A coach has no purpose without someone to coach. I use the term "Talent" to describe the person receiving coaching, in recognition of the natural abilities and potential that he or she possesses. I'll say more about the thinking behind this term in chapter three, but for now, the Talent refers to the individual who is receiving coaching. It is important to note that the Talent can be anyone with whom you are interacting: your team members, your colleagues, your manager, even your customer.

As a leader, manager, or team member, you are perfectly positioned to become a master coach. This is not a role reserved for psychologists or professional executive coaches. In fact, I believe it is increasingly recognized as an essential competency at every organizational level, as the traditional functions of leadership are being distributed more and more broadly. There's no way that a single heroic leader can drive all the complexity of decision-making and execution from the top down. If a company is to be agile, responsive, and able to keep pace with its fast-changing environment, people at every level need to have the tools, the confidence, and the will to be leaders in their own teams and throughout the organization.

Leadership becomes everyone's business. And the type of leadership required is the ability to influence the people you directly touch and interact with every day. Training managers

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to coach is the most effective means of making them into good line-of-sight leaders. Coaching needs to happen throughout an organization and become an integrated part of how managers work with their teams and their colleagues.

Everywhere I go, from Boston to Bangkok, senior leaders are recognizing that creating a coaching culture is the key to unlocking the talent that's hiding in plain sight in their workplaces. In fact, a 2015 study by the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the Human Capital Institute (HCI) found that 81 percent of organizations surveyed planned to expand their scope of managers/leaders using coaching skills.<sup>5</sup> I'm encouraged by these statistics, but I also know that despite its growing popularity, certain misconceptions about coaching are pervasive. If the promise of a coaching culture is to be truly fulfilled, greater clarity needs to be brought to the critical difference between picking up a few coaching skills and becoming a master coach.

### **COACHING IS A WAY OF BEING**

If there is one message you take away from this book, let it be this: *Coaching is a way of being, not doing*. Despite what many authors will have you believe, there is no universal formula for coaching—it's far too big an endeavor to be compressed into a finite number of steps. It is not a nice, neat cognitive process involving the exchange of feedback, insights, and action plans. To be honest, it might better be described as a muddled, awkward expedition full of chaos, experimentation, self-learning, disappointment, and elation. It is a complex human-to-human relationship whose ultimate success depends much more on the character and intention of the coach than on any particular method he or she uses.

That said, coaching can be learned. But you must be prepared to learn by changing, to *become* a coach rather than adopt a set of skills. This book will guide you in that developmental journey. It will also provide you with proven tools, techniques,

and approaches, but these will always be secondary to the transformation of the person who is using them. My purpose is not to introduce you to one specific coaching technique but rather to introduce you to the coach inside of you, and to help that coach become a master. My hope is that if I am successful, while you may not always be engaging in a conversation, you will always be a coach. Coaching is an attitude and a commitment to having a positive influence on the lives of others. When we master this art, it is not something we turn off and on at will; it is a way of being.

Because of the personal nature of the journey, becoming a master coach is not easy. And it is not a path that comes to an end, with a certification to mark your achievement. Master coaches are always learning and growing because they know their ability to coach is inseparable from their own development. But it is one of the best investments of time and energy you could possibly make if you want to have a real impact on others and become a better person with a richer life in the process.

## **YOU ARE SUFFICIENT**

A coach is something you become, but it is also simply something you are. The path to mastery in the arena of coaching is sometimes counterintuitive, because this is one of the few areas of life in which accumulating greater knowledge won't necessarily make you more proficient. Rather, it is a journey of going deeper into yourself, stripping away obstacles and limiting beliefs, and becoming more confident in who you truly are.

Have you ever come across a great book, a website, or an inspiring video and immediately said to yourself, "My sister/brother/friend/boss/child needs to read/see this"? We dutifully pass along references and links in hopes that the pearls of wisdom contained within will change the recipient's life. Look at the seemingly endless quotations, sayings, and poems that one can find on almost any Facebook page. Sadly, too many coaches, even professional coaches, do the same thing, hoping

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it will enhance their coaching. It doesn't. Don't do it. This well-intentioned but counterproductive practice is the antithesis of great coaching because it sends out the erroneous message that the answer is out there, somewhere, in something someone else has written or said. It isn't—no matter how brilliant, insightful, or relevant their words may be. The answer is in the coaching process. It just needs to be found.

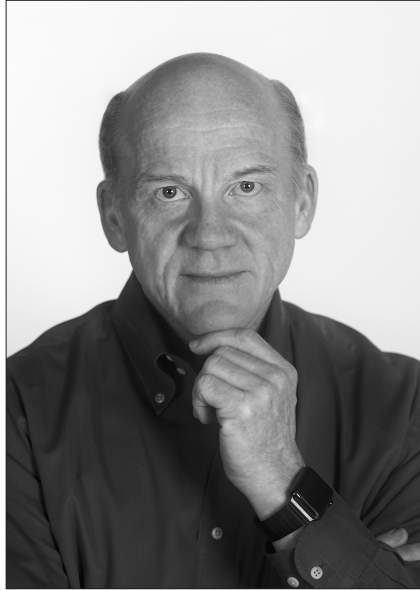
As a coach, remember these three powerful words: *You are sufficient*. You do not need books and videos or anything else to back you up. Trust the process. Trust yourself. And most of all, trust the Talent. *You are sufficient*. Those three words sum up the essence of what every master coach knows. All you need to bring into the coaching process is you. The answers will be found right there, in the moment, not in any external resources you may bring to the table during or after the session.

I know this is a challenging message to hear. In a world that teaches us to revere experts, it is scary to put them aside. When we have built our careers on knowledge, credentials, and tools, it is an act of courage to put these on hold and simply be ourselves. And it is even more courageous to do so while acknowledging that we don't have the answers—the Talent does. To trust the process that much can be profoundly disconcerting, but it's the essence of great coaching.

The core thesis of this approach is that the pathway forward is always best discovered within the conversation between the coach and the Talent. That's not to say books, resources, knowledge, and expertise aren't helpful, but they are secondary. They especially should never be used to dampen the uncomfortable ambiguity and uncertainty that opens up when you start to explore the uncharted waters of human performance and potential.



# About the Author



Photograph by Brian Gottmers

**Gregg Thompson** is President of Bluepoint Leadership Development, recognized as one of the finest providers of coach-training programs in the world. Having coached many of the most senior leaders in Fortune 100 companies and trained thousands of coaches worldwide, Gregg is uniquely qualified to write the definitive book on what it takes to be a Master Coach. An in-demand speaker and facilitator, he has a broad-reaching background in leadership development, specifically in helping leaders develop their coaching skills. He has designed several award-winning leadership development workshops including *The Coaching Essentials*, *Leader as Coach*, *Advanced Coaching Skills*, and *Powerful Coaching Conversations*.

Gregg is the author of the popular book, *Unleashed!* (Select-Books, 2006). His deep corporate and consulting experience includes having held several senior executive roles in large commercial

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