Coaching for Results

John Lubans Jr.

Here is my second column on coaching. The first installment was about a student orchestra–the Chamber Sinfonia Orchestra of the Manhattan School of Music–performing without a conductor. Their coaches were musicians from the conductorless Orpheus Chamber Orchestra.[1]

On the way from the first coaching column to this one, I took a deliberate detour to encourage library managers toward a more proactive leadership. My point was that the seeming excess of reactive leadership serves libraries poorly, leads to imitation, and, progressively, to our marginalization. Of equal concern is the stifling affect this can have on leaders and followers in reactive libraries. That column's title, "Balaam's Ass," was derived from the biblical story of the good follower–the ass–who resists and overcomes the wrongdoing of his master.[2] While the Balaam piece does not mention coaching, it does illuminate the terrain in which a proactive leadership can thrive. That same sunny climate of trust and respect benefits genuine coaching.

I defined coaching in my first column as the interactive process by which a library manager helps–by giving sound advice, speaking the truth, and encouraging–colleagues get better in their work. We'll see how that definition holds up as I consider the complexities of individual coaching by managers.

While sports coaching analogies rarely apply to the library workplace (such as "When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" or "Win one for the Gipper!") the quotes below from two basketball players suggest a level of coaching rarely found on the playing field or in the office:

> Coach is always going to tell you the truth, no matter what it is. And just to know where you stand is good–whether it's good or bad.[3]

> . . . it's always good when he can tell you things that you're not seeing. . . .[4]

> It's always that he's real . . . , so after you leave you know where you stand, on and off the court.[5]

The players are talking about their private meetings with coach Mike Krzyzewski, a distinguished basketball coach, and, more importantly for this story, the founder of and participant in a center for the study of leadership and ethics.

The players' words capture what good coaching is about: a good coach is consistent, speaks the truth, is pragmatic, is clear about roles, and communicates to the player what he is seeing. Implicit in these comments is the players' respect for and trust in the coach and their *desire* to be coached. While not mentioned, the coach's highly developed observing–a form of listening–is implicit in the reference to *his* seeing what you're not seeing.

One day I got to observe the intensity with which Coach Krzyzewski watches practice. He listens with his eyes–sorting sense from the blurred images of ten players going full speed, and he excels in communicating what he sees to the player. Calmly spoken or tersely expressed, the truth, "no matter what it is," is shared fully and openly in ways that help the player. The truth is not bottled up or avoided. It helps that these players *want* their coach to tell them the truth. I recall in my study of coach Gail Goestenkors the players' acceptance of the coach's yelling at them in practice.[6] Her players told me they expect to be held accountable by the coaches: "If the coach is doing her job she has to yell at you."[7] Players, when vocally blasted with "Your defense sucks," forgive the vernacular *and* ratchet up their intensity in ferociously protecting the goal. They hear the coach because they know what good defense is, they want to hear her, and they know her yelling is a carefully used tool, not a personal assault.

Giving feedback is much of what a good coach does. When I lecture in library school about annual performance appraisals, I ask students to reflect on a time when someone gave them feedback that really made a difference, feedback that changed them for the better. I ask them to consider these questions, on paper, about what led to the feedback's effectiveness:

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- What were your thoughts and mindset?
- How did the feedback giver relate to you?
- How did you feel about him or her?
- What did you hear?

Then I ask them to complete this statement: "I really heard what that person was saying because . . ." In the go-around I usually hear these reasons for the feedback's making a difference:

- I saw the information could benefit me.
- The giver had my best interests at heart.
- I respected the person giving the feedback.
- I trusted the person giving me the feedback.
- It was important to me; I had a desire to change.
- We were one-on-one in private; the person had my full attention.

In other words, you hear feedback only when:

- The feedback comes from a credible source. The giver has expertise, is a valid source.
- The feedback giver is trustworthy. What he or she says is sincere.
- The feedback is well intended. The giver has the receiver's best interests at heart, or it's otherwise apparent that the feedback is to serve a worthy purpose.
- The feedback's timing and circumstances are conducive to learning. The receiver *wants* to hear what you have to say. I have italicized "wants" because the person may not always anticipate with pleasure what you have to say but is resolute in hearing the news, maybe good or maybe bad, just like Coach K's players.
- The feedback is given face to face, preferably in private. The receiver and giver can hear and observe facial expression and body language. There's opportunity to ask questions and to clarify meanings.
- The message is clear. It adds clarity to what the receiver has done, not done, or needs to do.
- The feedback is helpful to the receiver. The message contains good information or new insights that are useful or enlightening.

My purpose in using this exercise in a discussion about annual job evaluations is to make clear that if the *conditions* for meaningful feedback are absent, performance appraisal becomes a futile exercise. And our coaching during the evaluation, however well intended, will make little difference to the person we are evaluating.[8]

"You Can't Coach a Pumpkin!"

That's the phrase that pretty much sums up my experience with coaching the unwilling and the uncertain. Most readers have been exhorted, as supervisors, managers, team lead-

ers, and bosses, to coach more, supervise less. That sounds appealing, something to aspire to in a humane and participatory organization with trust and respect abounding.

Well, what happens when we try to coach staff who think they are doing fine and that their current level of performance is good enough? Our suggestion that they need coaching might lead them to ask us about when to find the time, in an already impossible schedule. Writers who blithely advocate coaching more—I was using the term in my management articles as early as 1992—rarely tell us the *how* or the *when*.

Nor do the experts talk about the changed expectations for those to be coached—what does it mean to be coached?

In my experience, unlike those admirable athletes under coaches K and Gail and the student musicians coached by Orpheus, few library staff *want* to be coached, many are uncertain, and some *won't* be coached. The last are as unyielding as a November pumpkin. I think the prevalent talk about an inclusive coaching role for managers fails to address the special relationship demanded for genuine coaching.

A personal learning experience: I once led a large library's experiment with self-managing teams. My administrative job description changed—largely to reflect my desire (and assignment) to implement team and self-management concepts in our reinvented organization. I boiled down my two-page-long, single-spaced job description into one sparsely populated piece of paper with three headers: coaching, consulting, and leading, with each followed by a few qualifying words.

Naturally, as part of my coaching I wanted to see how the self-managing teams and their team leaders were doing and how I could *help, challenge, and encourage*—the modifiers in my job description. So, I invited myself to sit in on team meetings and promised to be little more than a fly on the wall, to observe unobtrusively. And, after observing, I'd give feedback to the team leader about what I saw.

Most of the meetings were conducted in a formal way, seemingly rehearsed, with participants on their best behavior and no controversial items on any agenda. My fly-on-the-wall role felt like that of the jumbo fly in the classic sci-fi horror flick. Still, I did learn. These team meetings were little different from the department meetings I had sat through in previous years. During project reports, there were few offers of help or ideas for improvement coming from the team members. Complaints still abounded—mostly about issues external to their team, including the administration. Nor had the team leaders adopted new ways of engaging team members, of evoking ideas and opinions.

Another learning: the hierarchy was clearly still in control, and we were far from achieving the highly effective teams we wanted. Our team development was stuck in phase one: immature. To put it euphemistically, most of our teams were developmentally delayed.

However disappointed I felt personally, the meetings were not a total waste. What I saw underscored the

difficulties of changing an organization—most team leaders, while saluting the team flag, were rooted in the familiar world of the department head. Another inhibitor was the organization not being clear about what was expected of team leaders and team members. Nor had the library done enough in the way of training teams.

I think many of us—team leaders and administrators—meant well. We acted in good, if naïve, faith in moving toward a team-based organization. But, hoping for an intuitive, spontaneous positive response to the new way—however much endorsed and practiced by the director of the library—was unrealistic.

Reflecting on that time dredges up mixed feelings: an amused embarrassment at my coaching naiveté, irritated bemusement at a few of the team leaders' intractability, and, ultimately, puzzlement over why few wanted to do anything different, why there was so little receptivity to trying out new roles. I like to think a few could have humored me, borne with me, and given the situation the benefit of the doubt if only for learning's sake. I did persist in giving each team leader some feedback about what I had observed. That superficial feedback was expressed and accepted with a mutual sigh of relief—or so it seemed.

What Is Genuine Coaching?

A philosophically profound book, James Flaherty's *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others,* offers insights into genuine coaching.[9] For Mr. Flaherty the ends of coaching are self-correction, self-generation, and long-term excellent performance.

Flaherty's five principals of coaching relate to my team observation experience:

1. Relationship. For the most part, I enjoyed good relationships with the team leaders. Not surprisingly, those most beholden to the boss-worker paradigm were the least willing to be observed. For Flaherty, the relationship has to be "mutually satisfying" and based on "mutual respect, mutual trust, and freedom of expression."[10] This level of relationship may be difficult to achieve in the workplace. Supervising has an explicit power imbalance (superior/subordinate) that may impede coaching. Still, if strong trust exists, I think it is possible for a supervisor to coach a subordinate, certainly in the Venn diagram–like zone where their job interests and responsibilities overlap.
2. Pragmatic. According to Flaherty, coaching is outcome-based, with relentless correction based on feedback loops. My attempts to observe group dynamics were superficial, more information-seeking than outcome-based, nor was there "relentless correction." One observation of a team was hardly enough to get my foot in the door. To begin a relationship or to create a series of feedback loops would need a greater time investment. Had I dedicated my limited time to those few teams that were open to improvement, I probably would have had more success.
3. Two tracks. Flaherty contends that coaching happens only when "both client and coach are engaged in learning."[11] Good coaches question their own assumptions, vigilantly correct from outcomes, and abandon prescriptive techniques. My observing team meetings was a sort of learning. However, that learning was barely reciprocated by a majority of team leaders. At the risk of overstating the obvious, Flaherty's two-tracks type of coaching is like helping someone become a better writer. The writing coach considers and reflects on written drafts and offers expert advice, encouragement, and the best feedback he or she can muster. For example, if the writer is doing more telling than showing—interpreting for the reader rather than trusting the reader to interpret—the coach has to make clear what she is observing and how she thinks it can get better; hardly a spur-of-the-moment observation. The writer, of course, carries the burden of actually writing, reflecting, considering, and struggling to work it out for himself.
4. Always/already. Flaherty observes that "human beings are always already in the middle of something."[12] I was aware that the team leaders had their own way of doing things, their own ideas on what worked best in the running of their teams. I understood that to some extent, but also was prone to interpret "where they were" as resistance to team concepts. A more effective coach would have adjusted to this scenario rather than concluding recalcitrance.
5. Techniques don't work for Flaherty. I suppose my observations were a simplistic technique. Other coaching techniques, perhaps such as those in the Inner Game series of books by W. Timothy Gallwey, are too limiting and easily figured out by the coach's client.[13] Flaherty is not completely negative about techniques—we all use them, he says—but we need to be selective and aware of when the situation and timing are right. In my case, observing one meeting and hoping for revelations to come tumbling forth was asking for too much. Likely, had I observed several meetings with one team, gaining trust, listening well, and working hard at giving the most well-considered feedback I could, the outcomes would have been far more productive.

So how did my coaching definition hold up? I defined coaching as the interactive process by which a library manager helps colleagues get better in their work. That definition could be strengthened by recognizing the role and investment of the persons coached. Clearly, coaching well is more than just supervising less. It is possible for a willing manager to coach willing staff when the manager or coach and the employees being coached understand what they are getting into.

References and Notes

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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. John Lubans Jr., "A Reason for Rain: Hoop Lessons for Library Leaders," (On Managing column) *Library Adminis-tration & Management* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 39–43.
7. Ibid., 41.
8. I adapted this classroom activity from the book by Tom Coens, Mary Jenkins, Peter Block, *Abolishing Performance Appraisals: Why They Backfire and What to Do Instead* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publ., 2000).
9. James Flaherty, *Coaching—Evoking Excellence in Others* (Boston: Butterworth/Heinemann, 1999).
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. W. Timothy Gallwey, Inner Game series. For example, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1997).

Many large university libraries have been and are currently facing reductions in staff; therefore, cross-training will be increasingly necessary to ensure patrons are not inconvenienced by these reductions. Even if staffing remains level, libraries are being called upon to provide more diverse services. As a consequence, staffing resources shrink (either absolutely or in relation to demands for services), and larger libraries may find themselves pushed into the cross-training of employees.

In addition, electronic resources seem to make the distinction between public services and technical services somewhat murky. Public services librarians increasingly have to learn more about access provision, licensing restrictions, and server problems. These are matters that, in the past, would have largely been the concern of technical services personnel. At the same time, catalogers are witnessing some fundamental changes in the nature of the catalog. In addition to its more traditional function of serving as a surrogate for the collection, the catalog is now assuming, at least in part, the role of portal to resources in the collection. As the discussions connected with the revision of AACR2 show, catalogers are becoming increasingly sensitive to the varied needs of users. There is no better way to gain an understanding of the user needs than by working directly with them. Of course, the reference librarians themselves may be the heaviest users of the catalog, so working closely with them at the reference desk is the ideal solution. This is not to say that we will all become holistic librarians. But it does seem likely that, for one reason or another, our jobs may require more crossing of traditional division lines and more collaboration across the divisions.

Conclusion

Is working across divisional lines the answer to all communication problems in a large research library? No, but sharing responsibilities and learning to work together to solve problems is a great way to start. AUL is among the pioneers of larger research institutions breaking barriers of specialized divisions by encouraging cross-training opportunities for its employees and supporting formal and informal communication endeavors among departments. With proper training and the support of departments and unit heads, the library has found that breaking down the walls to successfully integrate departments is a great way for library employees to experience the library world through their peers' eyes and change attitudes toward the work environment in a positive way. As a result, patrons are the ones who benefit from our working across divisional lines.

References

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