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*Public respect for leaders has hit an all-time low as global recession strikes. But **Sir John Whitmore**, a key advocate of business coaching, believes the route to a new, more responsible future lies within us*

The global economy isn't the only thing that's in crisis. The turmoil of recent months has also exposed the inadequacy of those in leadership positions – certainly in banking and financial services, and arguably in many other sectors too. While some business leaders have shown a breathtaking lack of vision, wisdom, integrity, authenticity and humility, political leaders haven't done much better, reacting with fear and denial to events that caught them by surprise.

It's clear that many of our leaders urgently need to develop new inner qualities and rid themselves of the short-sightedness that got us into the mess we're in. I believe that coaching, which sets out to help people discover, develop, define and refine their own inner strengths, can rise to this challenge. Indeed, in my experience, that is just what it is doing.

Coaching emerged as a cottage industry 25 years ago in the form of life coaching or executive coaching for those who recognised that there was more to life and to themselves than a mortgaged mansion, a fast car and a high-powered job. They did not need therapy because they were not suffering from a mental health problem. They did, however, need to look deep within themselves to access the fine qualities that are latent in all of us but that we seldom use, so they turned to coaching.

This was a type of coaching far removed from the prescriptive, fault-based method that has long been used in sport. Life/executive coaching is based on more recent developments in psychology that place the

coachee, rather than the coach, at the centre of the process.

Coaching is now a profession, and in Britain alone there are 10,000 coaches working with individuals, teams, small businesses, corporations and institutions, such as the health service and education, the EU and the UN. In many cases, these organisations are attempting to transform themselves by “delayering” their structures and giving each layer a higher degree of autonomy and responsibility. Another aspect of this process involves adopting a management style based on the principles of the best coaching practice: namely, high awareness and high responsibility.

This is where coaches can play an important role, because the new leadership style calls for managers to develop themselves from within so they are then able to help their reports do the same. Yet despite the tireless efforts of a growing army of coaches, human resistance to change has proved a hard nut to crack. It takes a crisis to force people to accept the need for real change.

The best responses to crises of any kind are made by people with resilient inner strength, whole-system vision and compassion. These are the very qualities that at least some of our present or recently departed leaders seem to so conspicuously lack. Their absence may not be the main cause of the current crisis but it's certainly made matters worse.

So the coaching profession has a monumental task: to help leaders achieve the maturity they need. The crisis itself could make this task easier by provoking business leaders, and, I hope, a few politicians, to abandon some of their old assumptions, to

EXERCISE

Self-coaching

While we all wait for a new model of leadership to emerge, here is an exercise for you to try, regardless of your role, qualifications or circumstance.

◆ Take time to reflect on the big picture, the state of the world and of humanity and where you stand in it all. Try to identify the beliefs and assumptions, and the parental, social, cultural and religious conditioning that drive you, or make you feel guilty.

Imagine removing these burdens from your shoulders; and on your further journey through life, only take with you those that are still valid or that you value.

◆ Now take a piece of paper and list those things that you truly value. Recall a few times when you felt really passionate about what you were doing. Then ask yourself: “What am I good at?”, and list your skills.

◆ Next, write down the names of one or two people whom you really admire – anyone from your grandmother to a great historical figure. Now list the qualities of each of them that evoke your admiration.

◆ Lastly, review and reflect on these lists and search for the common ground between them. This will indicate what is truly, deeply important to you, and may in turn suggest a more meaningful, more purposeful direction for your life. It could cause you to change your job, but equally it may help you to bring these qualities into your work and so enable you to enjoy your current job more.

‘The best responses to crises of any kind are made by people with resilient inner strength, vision and compassion’

question whether their motives are driven by greed, to rethink their life purpose and to develop a desire to contribute to the whole. This is again where coaches come in because the answers lie within all of our hearts and minds. Coaching can help our leaders and former leaders to access this inner bank of riches, a bank that I believe is far richer than any on the high street.

I have no doubt that many companies, including even some of the bailed-out banks, will do their best to get back to business as usual, but they will be disappointed. Nothing will be the same. The credibility of business leaders will return only when they prove they deserve it. Many of our leaders were very talented and very clever, but they were also deluded. If they wake up, they can be leaders again in a new world, and find the authentic fulfilment that they never found in the material illusions that blinded them in the past. That shouldn't be too much to ask or expect. It is simply a matter of personal and, ultimately, psychosocial evolution.


Organisations need to revisit their roles, their social contributions and their ability to hold onto their people, not only by offering financial rewards but by providing them with work, an environment and relationships that are fulfilling. This, again, is an arena in which coaching can play a leading role. Respect for business leaders of all kinds has taken a big hit, not least because of the huge bonuses and other rewards that some have received. They have a lot of ground to claw back if they are to re-establish their authority. The way to do that is to show humility and a willingness to listen to what their staff and society want of them.

What I hope may emerge from this crisis is a realisation that endless quantitative growth is no longer the way forward and that qualitative contribution is a better option. This does not mean that businesses should not make a modest profit, but that people and planet should come first.

So what are the long-term prospects for coaching? Good to excellent, I would say, for at a time when business people may be feeling

tossed on waves that are beyond their control, there is a huge need for the variety of services that good coaches offer. I believe that coaches will play a more informed and consultative role in future, focusing not on the company's specific business, but on social justice and environmental issues, as well as personal, social, and, at times, spiritual development.

I should point out here that in most Asian cultures there is no boundary between psychological and spiritual development. It is only in the West that we place a false boundary between the two, which, in my view, stems from our silo-based approach to science. Coaches will need to expand their skills to include more whole-system approaches if they are to play on a global field that is looking ever more eastward.

It is sometimes helpful and even reassuring to see dramatic events as symptomatic signposts to a bigger change. The current crisis is just that, a symptom of a long-term, global social trend: the shift from hierarchy to self-responsibility. This is a highly significant stage in human evolution. We are experiencing the point at which hierarchy reveals its fragility and loses its influence, but we have some way to go before it is replaced by self-responsibility. We are entering a period of relative chaos, of liberation that can degenerate to licence while we define and assume our new responsibilities. I am convinced that in time we will emerge as better, more evolved, more responsible people. 

LINKS

About the author

◆ Former champion racing car driver **Sir John Whitmore** is chairman of Performance Consultants International.

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