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 posthumate with the rest of us.

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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.
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