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The core traits of truly effective coaches, mentors and leaders

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A vast amount has been written about the competencies of coaches and mentors, and even more about the qualities of great leaders. Much of this is contradictory and dependent on circumstance or context. Research into the desirable traits of both coaches and leaders, for example, shows significant differences of expectations and perspective arising from cultural factors. There seems to be a whole industry devoted to creating new descriptors of these traits: authenticity, connectedness, learning agility And so on.

Some time ago, I set myself the task of cutting through the fog. My question for research and reflection was *What lies at the core of an optimally functional human being, who is tasked with (or takes upon themselves the task of) influencing others to achieve a greater good?* There are, of course, potentially limiting assumptions in this question. Not all leaders have a greater good in mind – many on the sociopathic spectrum seek only personal advantage. Moreover, the greater good is in itself a slippery concept. Optimal functioning is also a concept, which may have different interpretations. I have taken for granted, for example, the inclusion within this term of a reasonable level of intelligence, as well as a lack of any serious mental disease, but ignored any aspects of physical disability.

These constraints accepted, in my reading and conversations, especially with coaches, who I supervise in their professional practice, I have sought a consistent pattern that integrates multiple perspectives (philosophy, religion, the science of adult development, well-being and the literature of coaching, mentoring and leadership). What emerged is a triad of core virtuous traits or qualities, which seem to underpin optimally functioning coaches, mentors and leaders. These are:

- **Compassion.** Compassion is a much more positive and useful trait than empathy. Empathy is about feeling *with* someone, and can easily lead to emotional overload, distancing and in extreme, desensitization. Compassion is feeling *for* another person and brings with it the desire to alleviate their pain. Key components of compassion are self-awareness, kindness, self-compassion, acceptance and equanimity. In a current study of high performing teams, one of the key observations is that the leaders of these teams tend to have a much greater sense of personal security than their counterparts in less successful teams. They have confidence both in themselves and in others, are forgiving of mistakes (their own or other people's) and, because they have trust in themselves, are able to extend trust to others, empowering them to take decisions and self-manage.
- **Curiosity.** Curiosity incorporates creativity, for an incurious mind does not easily put concepts together to generate new ideas. Curiosity causes us to explore our inner worlds (why and how do I think, feel, behave and function?), how we interface with the world outside of us, and how that world itself functions. Key components of curiosity include mindfulness, higher order reasoning, and learning orientation.
- **Courage.** Courage is the capacity to do the right thing, while being aware of the personal and wider risks. Key components of courage include clarity of

one's own values, a deep sense of ethicality, being positively self-critical, being able to let go and move on, resilience to setbacks. Courage also encompasses the will to work with dreams (generated or espoused through Curiosity) until they become reality. It allows us to take tough decisions, to have conversations and to avoid dealing with issues we would rather avoid, and to behave in ways closer to the person we aspire to be.

Whether we are acting as coach, mentor or leader, our primary role is to help people make better sense of their internal and external worlds, so that they have more constructive choices for decisions they make about themselves and on behalf of others. In effect, we use our compassion, curiosity and courage to stimulate and support theirs. When we see failures of leadership, while the attributed cause may be related to lack of knowledge or skill, the root cause in every case I have examined can be attributed to a lack of one or more of these three core qualities. Poor decisions, for example, typically come from not wanting to acknowledge alternative perspectives or information (lack of Curiosity) and / or inability to challenge myopic thinking (lack of Courage) and/or ignoring or underestimating the impact upon stakeholders (lack of Compassion).

Much the same appears to hold true in coaching and mentoring. In observing hundreds of coaches, we observe a broad correlation between evidence of self-awareness and self-compassion and the depth and quality of the coaching/mentoring conversation. The most effective coaches and mentors are deeply interested in the other person and how they see their circumstances – the client is not a problem to be solved, but a world to explore together. And they have the courage both to release control of the conversation and to ask those difficult and penetrating questions that access the “beneficially painful” aspects of the client's world.

Becoming Compassionate, Curious and Courageous doesn't happen overnight. It takes time, reflection and practice. I have started to ask myself regularly *What did I do (today or this week) that made me more compassionate, more curious and more courageous?* I conclude that I am still a “work in progress”!