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Leadership - Cambodia Needs Leaders “Being Coaches” Not “Doing Coaching”



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Coaching is now a familiar term in organizations worldwide and even in Cambodia. A large number of companies and NGOs train their managers in coaching methodologies, looking to build a “coaching culture”. The motivation behind this trend is clear - coaching is undoubtedly effective. In a survey by the International Coaching Federation (ICF), 80% of people who received coaching reported increased self-confidence, and over 70% improved work performance, relationships, and more effective communication skills¹.

This is a commendable effort to shift away from a traditional model of leadership to address new demands of the economy, the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment we find ourselves in, and also to meet the preferences of a new generation of the workforce. A survey at Google found that “being a good coach” was the top trait of a successful manager².

One potential trap that faces this welcome development is for people to misunderstand coaching as a formulaic process or technique to apply to their staff, what we will refer to as “doing coaching”. Coaching is a mindset shift away from looking at human beings and the workforce as parts of a machine, a view that we inherited from previous industrial phases and one which will not serve us as we enter the new one.

This shift towards seeing people as what they truly are (the “being” of a coach), human beings full of potential, actually mirrors the Kingdom’s longer-term plans to shift the economy away from garment manufacturing

into the digital economy. To prepare the workforce for this new age, we must not only train in technical skills but also start treating them as human beings full of potential if we want them to not act like machines.

What Is Coaching?

Coaching was coined and developed as a practice in various places around the world during the 90s, most notably in the UK as led by Sir John Whitmore - Author of Coaching for Performance - and in the US with the Co-Active Training Institute (CTI, then known as Coaches Training Institute) and the International Coaches Federation. The purpose of this nascent practice was to improve the performance and happiness of the coachee, using a process that raises the coachee’s awareness to evoke their growth.

It is worth taking a moment to define coaching, as it is often deeply misunderstood and misrepresented. Whilst it is not an issue limited to Cambodia, most “coaches” in the kingdom are neither trained nor accredited but rather spend much of their time giving motivational speeches.

The ICF, the world’s largest accrediting body for professional coaching, defines coaching simply as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.” They also provide a list of coaching competencies that set out the skills and approaches used by coaching professionals around the world. It is a process by which we help clients get better “results” by shifting their beliefs, thoughts and emotions, largely through changing and deepening perception and awareness³.

1. International Coaching Federation, ICF Global Coaching Client Study (Lexington: International Coaching Federation, 2009).

2. Melissa Harrell and Lauren Barbato, “Great managers still matter: the evolution of Google’s Project Oxygen,” rework, February 27, 2018, <https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/the-evolution-of-project-oxygen/>.

3. Barbara L Fredrickson, “What Good Are Positive Emotions?” *Rev Gen Psychol* 2, no. 3 (1998): 300-319.

“Doing Coaching” Vs Coaching Philosophy

When we train leaders in organizations in coaching, we find it helpful to distinguish between coaching as a profession, coaching as an act or a skill, and coaching as a way of being or culture. Monkhood is a profession or vocation. Prayerful chanting is an act or skill. Underlying the act, though, is a way of looking at the world and being in the world, e.g. non-attachment or compassion for all living things.

Likewise, the profession of coaching engages in contracted relationships whereby professional coaches journey with clients to transform themselves, generally facilitated in time-bound sessions of 45-60 minutes. The act or skill of coaching includes things like listening, asking powerful reflective questions, intuition and others, potentially used alongside conversation structures like GROW⁴ or CLEAR⁵. The way of being or culture of coaching is curiosity, acceptance, compassion, trust and courageous vulnerability.

Much of the ICF’s coaching competencies focus on the “being” aspect of coaching rather than the skillset. “Doing coaching” whilst not paying sufficient attention to the spirit, culture or philosophy that gave birth to the skills will make coaching as effective as Donald Trump’s chanting is holy and meaningful.

It is easy for us to fall into the trap of the “form” of something and miss the “spirit” behind the act, especially so in the corporate world. Learning to “do coaching”, ask questions and follow a GROW conversation is good and will meet little resistance, but

the real benefits for Cambodian companies and wider society will come from the philosophical stance that coaching takes and the cultural and mindset shift required for coaching to be effective.

The Context the Cambodian Workforce Finds Itself in

Cambodia is in an interesting stage of its development. The country aims to shift its workforce away from manufacturing into a digital economy, alongside its aspiration of becoming an upper-middle economy by 2030. The skills considered crucial for the digital economy include creativity, communication, critical thinking, ability to learn and agility. To address these, the government, companies and employees themselves are rightly investing resources in building up “hard skills” such as coding as well as soft skills. It is, however, even more important to understand how the culture is acting as a barrier to the kingdom’s goals. An analogy is installing the latest applications on your phone but the operating system is buggy and outdated.

Aspects of Cambodian Culture that Hinders Its strategy for Growth

There are specific cultural phenomena that we believe will continue to impede Cambodia’s plans for growth, though they are by no means unique to Cambodia. We will highlight some key ones, why we believe this will inhibit Cambodia’s desire for progress and propose that the spirit or culture behind coaching provides an antidote.

4. GROW = Goal, Reality, Options, Way.

5. CLEAR = Contracting, Listening, Exploring, Action, Review.

Fear-Based Motivation and Shame Culture

Fear of punishment is a common way used to motivate people. Fear of getting a bad review, being fired or just being told off in public. It's been a tactic used throughout history across the world, based on the principle that human beings will do what they can to avoid pain. Unfortunately, although we may want to avoid the pain of punishment, the fear of it may make us less equipped to perform the given task.

We now know that fear causes the fight or flight circuitry of the brain to be activated and that this, in turn, impairs our cognitive abilities, notably our ability to think creatively and critically as well as communication skills. These are the very skills that are key to succeeding in the digital economy and the fear-based culture we live in will only hinder our progress.

This fear of punishment also has other familiar consequences. How often have you experienced someone not speaking up or taking action whilst saying that they are "afraid of being blamed [*sic*]" (told off)? Many grow up in an environment lacking psychological safety. People are told from a young age to not speak up because if they are wrong, they will be shamed - within the family, in the education system, and at work. There is a common complaint that staff lack accountability and responsibility, but often there has been little investment in creating psychological safety that is crucial to nurturing these traits.

Saving Face

Similar to other Asian cultures, Cambodia is known for "saving face" - a sign of respect. There is an aspect of this that is linked to shame: we cannot accept any shortcomings because if we did have shortcomings then

we would be unworthy and shameful people. We do whatever we can to avoid "bringing shame" to individuals and groups, as to point out a shortcoming or failure would be to embarrass and cause shame for the person or group in question.

This has harmful consequences. Firstly, mistakes cannot be addressed and corrected, but are rather covered up. Secondly, what underlies this "saving face" culture is really the lack of psychological safety. We don't feel safe to not be perfect. Rather than being a culture of respect, it is in reality one of shame. We need to save face because deep down, if the mask isn't preserved, the person underneath will be ousted as the shameful creature he is, rather than a wonderful human being full of potential.

We recognize that saving face is partially driven by people putting a high value on relationships with the community and building harmony. People learn to maintain relationships by not making people around them feel uncomfortable and believe that trust is built by caring about other people's feelings and themselves. Whilst we commend the intention and the value of harmony, we must recognize the resulting negative impact of such an approach - a lack of transparency and trust, impeding progress and innovation.

Hierarchy, Deference to Authority and Strongman Leadership

Cambodia traditionally has a culture of not speaking out in disagreement against your superiors. One's rank determines who is right. This is "command and control" leadership that is not equipped for the rapidly changing VUCA world, in which leaders cannot know and control everything. Moreover, we come from a culture of seeking advice from our elders and superiors. 'Advice' is a recommendation regarding a decision or course of conduct. In short, we seek

their solutions to our problems. This is not bad per se, but it can propagate a culture of dependence and deference to authority, reducing accountability, self-authority, creativity and critical thinking.

Much of “traditional culture” also teaches that what means to be “strong” is to show no signs of “weakness”. To avoid showing weakness to many means not showing any signs of emotions, doubt or hesitation. Many leaders believe that to be considered a “strong leader” they have to appear larger than life. To appear superhuman or perhaps, more accurately, inhuman.

The above negatively affects everyone involved. The pressure to always be the one providing the answers and the suppression of displaying emotions takes a huge mental and emotional toll on leaders. The leaders themselves suffer from a lack of psychological safety, fearing that they will lose the respect of their team. Many leaders report feeling lonely, misunderstood and unsupported. Their team members, in turn, feel that they cannot show their true feelings either. Furthermore, future leaders will tend to imitate this behavior, perpetuating this negative cycle. The organization’s performance suffers due to burnt-out and emotionally fragmented leaders, and a dependent and fearful workforce.

The Radical Counterculture of Coaching

Coaching, or rather the spirit behind coaching provides a radical counterculture to the one we are familiar with. It is in this spirit of coaching that we find the antidote to the systemic problems that Cambodia faces and will continue to face. Much more can be written on this subject, but we will highlight the key aspects with the greatest potential to impact Cambodian society.

Radical Acceptance - Safety and Honesty

Effective, transformational coaching can only happen in an environment of acceptance, trust and psychological safety. This is the first thing we set up in our coaching training - we design space of radical acceptance so that every trainee can experience what becomes possible in such a space.

So often in life only our strengths and achievements are celebrated and accepted, whilst weaknesses and “failures” are pointed out and shamed. In coaching, there is no such selectiveness. Everything is accepted, as it is, without judgment. Both the ugly and the beautiful. We allow room for the less than desirable traits and characteristics. It is ok to feel angry. It is ok to feel lazy. It is ok to feel disengaged or discouraged. This safe environment has the opposite effect to that of fear - it boosts creativity, critical thinking, and broadening perspectives, allowing the creative process of coaching to take place.

This culture of radical acceptance also acts as an antidote to the toxic culture of “saving face”. Saving face avoids looking at painful things, which are often judged as being “not good” or “shameful”. But these things fester away hidden under the surface and infect the body. It is not courageous to pretend these things do not exist and carry on (though we commend the will to carry on). What is truly courageous is to look at the hard things, accept them and move forward.

Foundational to coaching is radical honesty, which is made possible through a culture of permission, trust, and safety. The purpose of radical honesty is one of service and genuine love for the other, which is a stark contrast to the toxic cultures of saving face and shaming. Radical honesty allows neutral, nonpersonal observations, in service of the other person.

Frankness is something that's not uncommon to Cambodian culture - we experience it in daily life and also in historical stories. If psychological safety exists, creative ways can be found to improve the status quo. Without it, "honest" observations will simply result in the continuation of the cycle of shame.

Imagine a workplace where every employee feels accepted and safe. Not only will this directly improve their creativity and critical thinking, but they will also be better equipped to address any desired areas for change, identified through radical honesty.

The Coachee is the Expert

In coaching, unlike in other disciplines such as consulting or mentoring, we hold the coachee as the expert of their lives. Coaching requires deep and genuine curiosity into the mind and heart of the coachee. If carried out in an environment of psychological safety, this invites the coachee to be creative, become curious in turn about their thoughts, emotions, beliefs and actions, and take responsibility for their lives. Rather than turning to the leaders for the answers and just doing what they're told, people can take responsibility, learn to reflect, change their thoughts and solve their problems.

In addition, being genuinely curious about what really motivates the coachee, and helping them connect the dots as to what this looks like applied to their work roles can greatly increase their intrinsic motivation of the employee (in turn improves job performance). Imagine if you no longer had to pretend to care about the company's bottom line or your team's KPIs. No one cares about those things deep down. However, every good employee has specific reasons why he or she comes to work and performs well - whether they are aware of it or not. Those that are aware will have even greater

satisfaction and performance. Those that are not having their intrinsic motivations met will leave for a better paycheck or another extrinsic motivator.

To be coach-like as a leader is to get curious about what that unique person wants, is really motivated by, and how you can work together to help them use their unique strengths to achieve it. The leader's job is to find ways to align the employee's desires with that of the company's, not the other way around. This is what will generate the greatest mutual success.

Modeling Vulnerability as Strength

We know through extensive research (Dr. Brene Brown being a recent leading proponent⁶) that a culture of vulnerability is the antidote to the culture of shame and fear, which inhibits development. Vulnerability builds trust if reciprocated, the foundation to a thriving organization and society.

The avoidance of vulnerability is not something that is limited to Cambodia but there is a shocking lack of leaders exhibiting vulnerability and admitting fault. This is understandable, as there is a lack of psychological safety and society is still in fight or flight mode and living in a culture of fear and shame, arguably made worse by the recent genocide of the Khmer Rouge. However, this is a crucial switch that we need to make to thrive in the next age.

We train our coaches to model courageous, vulnerable leadership for our clients through our behaviors. As coaches we know that problems are not solved on the level it presents itself, and to go deeper requires vulnerability. A coach cannot ask their coachee to be vulnerable when the coach

6. Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (Avery: Reprint edition, 2015),

first does not show vulnerability. This is a radical shift from most professions where the professional is expected to be “the expert” and cannot show uncertainty or admit mistakes.

When vulnerabilities are embraced within organizations and demonstrated by its leaders, it unlocks trust - highlighted by many (including Patrick Lencioni in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*⁷) as the foundational trait required for successful teams. Moreover, by allowing space for the more vulnerable sides of everyone to be present, leaders and employees alike can show up in an integrated and authentic way. Less energy is wasted on suppressing emotions and thoughts, and more resources are instead made available to help each other thrive through challenges.

Coach the “Chet” not the Mind

In our coaching training sessions, we spend a lot of time helping leaders fundamentally shift how they think of coaching. They come wanting to learn a technique or methodology that will allow them to have an intellectual conversation with their employees to help solve their problems. We spend the entire course teaching them that coaching is not a conversation of the head, but rather a conversation of the heart. It is an intensely human conversation.

This is not an issue that we see as being particularly specific to Cambodian culture, but a trend that has been growing worldwide since the Enlightenment. As coaches, we take a stand against pretending humans are rational versus emotional ones. The Singaporean government, leading a country that takes pride in logic and reason, invests heavily in training their leaders in coaching, through a school that focuses very much on

this “being” of coaching. That, as a core part of their coaching curriculum, reconnects students with “human skills” (often miscalled “soft skills”). Of course, they would not do this merely as a philosophical stance if it was not effective. To be compassionate, vulnerable, curious and open is not “soft”. It is fiercely difficult. And very few master it. And when it is mastered, the results are transformational.

As we strive to build a thriving Cambodia of the future, we must not forget the fact that human beings are not cold, logical and rational beings. We believe that Cambodians especially know this to be true. In our training, we ask participants to point to where the “chet” (often translated as “mind”) lives in their bodies. The vast majority point towards their hearts and not their heads. This encourages us and we hope this truth is not forgotten as we enter the Fourth Industrial Age and build on the foundations laid by those who came before us.



7. Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (Wiley, 2002).

Concluding Remarks

We celebrate the increasing number of organizations that train their staff with various “models” of coaching (popular ones being variations of CLEAR and GROW) and coaching skills to be used in the workplace. What Cambodia and its organization need though is the “being” of a coach, rather than people “doing coaching” (skills, methodologies, etc).

The “being” of a coach and coaching culture entails mindsets, beliefs and ways of looking at a person: trust, loving, safe, curiosity, open, vulnerability. It is a shift away from looking at human beings and the workforce as parts of a machine (a view that we inherited from the previous industrial age). This shift in how we see people mirrors the Kingdom’s longer-term plans to shift the economy away from garment manufacturing into the digital economy.

This is the real change required to serve the needs of the growing country and its workforce. The real benefits for Cambodian society will only be realized when the cultural and mindset shift (which is the foundation of coaching) is put at the center. By adopting this new way of “being”, Cambodia and its organizations will reap countless benefits both on a macro (national and organizational) and micro (e.g. teams, families and individuals) level. These things should not be limited to “coaching conversations” but should permeate the corporate culture.

This cultural shift cannot just be limited to forward-thinking organizations. The country is going through a massive transformation plan. To be equipped to meet the plan’s demands, all aspects of society need to change. Culture is built from families, friendships, social media chats, schools, governments. This is the goal. We start with companies and their leaders.





ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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RA Joey is Cambodia's only Certified Professional Co-Active Coach and the Founder of Cambodia Coaching Institute, the country's first professional coaching training program. Joey also holds the role of Chief Happiness Officer for Spark18, a Leadership Coaching Company in Singapore.

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He partners with leaders around the globe, aiming for deep inner transformation that leads to lasting improvements in happiness and performance. Combining rigorous scientific research with ancient wisdom, he specialises in helping clients integrate parts of themselves previously ignored (emotions, heart, characteristics) so that they can lead from a more resourceful place. He read Biochemistry at Imperial College London and his understanding of neuroscience informs his coaching.

Prior to coaching, Joey worked in Human Performance and Reward for Deloitte, Prudential and Nomura. He continues to run a small consultancy practice.

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