Constructing a Coaching Model to Promote Well-being Based on Attributes of Spiritual Leadership: Keeping Leaders Healthy

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The academy can be obsessed with long titles. This paper borrows from the title given to five years of doctoral research. But for the sake of memory, let’s just call it “Keeping Leaders Healthy.” This essay briefly touches six aspects of the topic. The first three points offer common understanding to clarify what is being discussed in this area that called “leadership” and by this discipline that we call “coaching.”

Armed with some common understanding of those concepts, I will venture into how 5 years of academic research shaped the unique model that I labeled as Christian Leader Coaching. The final 3 points will describe that model and consider elementary evidence of the value of employing the coaching tools of Christian Leader Coaching.

Leadership Dissected

Everything rises and falls on leadership” (Maxwell, 1999). John Maxwell introduces his book The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader with this 6-word declaration. Whether you completely accept Maxwell’s premise or not, I am convinced by your attendance at this Leadership Roundtable that you agree that leadership is very important. However, there is evidence of a severe drought in the emergence of effective leaders. While the world becomes smaller through social media, there is an outcry for vision-setting, positive growth-motivating, personal example-setting leaders. We witness fewer people who are willing to step into the scrutinizing (often cynical) public light and declare, “Here I am, follow me.” Fewer still people desire to assume the role of servant-leader – one who promotes the well-being of the tribal good as the expense of personal benefit and prosperity. It isn’t happening in government. It isn’t happening in business. And sadly, it isn’t happening in the church.

One of George Barna’s surveys revealed approximately 75 percent of serving pastors experience major stress associated with their ministries. One in three pastors seriously considers leaving the ministry. Forty percent of pastors exhibit advance signs of burnout (Barna, 1999). These
statistics suggest that church leaders, as a group, are not healthy. Studies would likely show that other leader groups fare no better. This survey research only reinforced my personal experience with fellow pastors and church leaders who exhibited the danger signs of burn-out, as well as national examples of pastors who failed themselves, their families, their congregations, and society at large. Their moral failures often appeared as the result of emotional and spiritual burn-out.

This research did not address the crisis of positive leadership that currently exists. It is intended to consider the health of those who are leading well. Dr. Imogene King (1971) defines health as “ability to continually adjust to the stresses of the environment by optimally employing one’s resources to achieve maximum potential for living” (p. 24). My desire was to identify potential preventive methods of promoting well-being, rather than therapies designed to heal brokenness and restore leaders to some level of effectiveness. A friend suggested “Coaching” as a means of maintaining the emotional health of spiritual leaders. Frankly, I was clueless about the discipline of ‘Life Coaching’ and was very suspicious about its effectiveness.

Coaching Formularies

To be perfectly honest, I was suspicious of my friend after his suggestion. As I began to study the subject, three aspects of coaching intrigued me and grew my appreciation of this emerging profession. Coaching is very relational. Coach and client walk together through the process of reflection, interpretation, and future focus.

Clients are propelled forward to adjust to life stresses with internal resources and compelled to achieve goals that fulfill their maximum potential. Dr. Robert Emmons, in The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns (2003), writes that striving for goals is a human imperative (p. 16). Viktor Frankl (1949) observed this principle play out in the lives of his fellow prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps, “The prisoner who had lost faith in the future was doomed…became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happened quite suddenly” (p. 74).

Finally, the answers are drawn from the client rather than the expertise of a well-intended care-giver with limited insight. The Proverbs writer observes, “The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out” (Proverbs 20:5). The curriculum of the Center for Coaching Excellence promotes a coaching conversation adopted from Sir John Whitmore, who is an early coaching pioneer. Whitmore suggested following a ‘GROW’ model (2009) to focus client of specific goal setting, considering the relevance and the realistic virtues of the prospective goal, identifying optional paths to achieve the goal, and walking with the client to provide accountability and share in the celebration of goal achievement. However, CCE added to introductory steps to help focus the discussion making their model distinctive as ‘toGROW.’ The initial points of talk and objective gave focus to the discussion at hand. However, they continued in the vein of Whitmore to give the client maximum latitude to drive the discussion according to their agenda.
Traditionally, common coaching techniques offer great latitude and difference to the client for setting the agenda of the coaching conversation. However, the model of Christian Leadership Coaching developed and honed in this research was more directive and prescriptive than many other coaching niches. This model was specifically designed and examined to address the challenges of leadership. However, to develop a coaching model intended to promote leader well-being, the necessity to dissect leadership became clear. What is distinctly attributable to leadership? The body of leadership literature was reviewed and lists of attributes ultimately boiled down to those characteristics compared in this table.

**Leadership’s Core Attributes**

The lists compared on the preceding table represent those leadership elements that were commonly agreed upon by academics, popular subject matter experts, theologians, and secular business leaders. When compared and contrasted, these various perspectives are refined to Character, Knowledge, and Influence – or the Be, Know, Do of Leadership.

Knowledge includes both the cognitive and relational acumen of the leader. The knowledge of the subject matter that most directly drives a team to its goal is critical to enable the leader to use the resources at hand to achieve the vision set by the group. However, the leader must also know how to inspire, nurture, and promote team unity and effectiveness. Sun Tzu observed, “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles” (as quoted in Sun & Giles, 1990).

Character is key to leadership. It provides the foundation of who we are on which we can build life. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman completed a major treatise on Character Strengths and Virtues. The 5 virtues listed on this slide represent fundamental values they discovered to mature in the life of people regardless of cultural environment.

Another oft-quoted Maxwell maxim (1988) is that “Leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less” (p. 17). Again, one may argue the simplicity of his position. However, influence is the ultimate product of leadership. Leaders do not lead unless they inherit followers.

So, literature review established character, knowledge, and influence as the core attributes for consideration in
the model of Christian Leadership Coaching. The positive interplay between the core leadership attributes is key to the maturity and emotional well-being of the leader. Conflict, incongruities, and dissonance among core attributes, however, are sources of distress. Karen Horney (1945) submits that such incompatibilities are the basis for emotional dysfunctions that may lead to burnout (p. 46-47). For good or ill, the maturation of knowledge, character, and influence comes about through the interplay between themselves. However, there are other internal and external co-relational factors involved in shaping and developing these core attributes.

**Correlated Factors**

Some psychologists suggest the maturation of the core leadership attributes may be shaped by external factors, such as social norms and environmental conditioning (Skinner, 1968). Some argue that humans are remarkably adaptable and capable of change. Horney concludes her work *Our Inner Conflicts* by suggesting that, though we are shaped by our early environment, we continue to possess the capacity to achieve fundamental change throughout our lives (Horney, 1945). Bischof (1964) concurs with Horney’s assertion and summarizes her ideas by acknowledging the human capacity to change rather than adhere to rigid formations developed in early childhood (p. 350).

On the other hand, other schools of psychology suggest that certain traits and propensities are more innately hard-wired into individuals and are less susceptible to the effects of external influences. Miller is a major proponent of the idea of innateness. As evidence of his theory, Miller offers findings (2006) based on forty-five years of research that studied more than fifty thousand individual cases (p. xxxv). He rejects theories that, as he sees it, suggest humans are malleable subjects who are victim to the controlling forces of society (p. 12). Instead, he suggests that each person is endowed with unique patterns of competencies that lend themselves toward specific propensities (p. 122). In fact, analysts at People Management International conclude that achievements of satisfied employees reveal consistently recurring patterns (Hanson, 2007).

A person’s natural inclination to problem-solving may encourage studies in the areas of mathematics and science and realize the greatest satisfaction in these areas. One’s innate compassion toward others may be realized in health services or ministry. Max Lucado (2005), pastor and author, wrote, “God gave you a zone, a region, a life precinct in which you were made to dwell. He tailored the curves of your life to fit an empty space in his jigsaw puzzle. And life makes sense when you find your sweet spot” (p. 1).

In all schools, researchers agree that numerous factors influence health. As noted above, I focused on six correlates associated with leadership maturity to determine overall affects on the well-being of core leadership attributes. The factors selected for further study in this research were values, relationships, education, experience, goals/obstacles, and environment. The literature and empirical study of these associated factors suggests all factors correlate to all attributes, but specific factors are more directly reflected in certain attributes. For example, values and relationships are closely associated with character. Education and experience are closely associated with knowledge. Goals and environments are closely associated with influence. This study does not suggest that relationships therefore have no impact on knowledge development or influence, or that environment has no role in learning. However, to provide fidelity of research, each correlate was examined according to the primacy of its impact on a specific leadership attribute.
The fidelity of these areas and levels of satisfaction are acquired through empirical survey research that developed an instrument called the Leadership Resiliency Survey (LRS). The LRS acts like an astronomer’s finder scope – a device that aims the powerful telescope toward a specific target (e.g. moon, planet, star, etc.) – to hone in and focus on the relationships between core attributes and associated correlated factors.

The model of coaching being presented offers a leadership coach the means of targeting efforts on a specific target area in the leader’s life to develop goals for greater emotional health through harmony among leadership attributes and higher levels of overall satisfaction. This is an academically developed and proven model of coaching.

The relationship between attributes and associated correlates can be graphically displayed as a phenotype, to reveal the characteristics of their interplay and identify potential stress points created by dissonance between attributes. This creates a topographical depiction of these relationships as a useful tool in the attempt to understand the dynamics involved in leader development.

Two aspects are important to this model. First, recognize that the influence of correlated factors is not isolated to one core attribute, but impact all attributes (although perhaps not equally). Second, satisfaction is used as the metric, or gauge, to assess the health for each association between attribute and correlate. Dissonance between talent and objectives produces stress that can be measured in the personal dissatisfaction with progress toward achieving established goals (Emmons, 1999). Harmony in these areas promotes emotional and even physical health. Dr. Charles Rapp (1998) suggests that satisfaction and fulfillment of goals are the most influential aspects of well-being (p. 25).

This figure depicts the disparities between satisfaction levels associated with the interplay of core attributes and correlated factors associates with leadership development. The satisfaction levels were obtained through a survey instrument created by this research and known as a Leadership Resiliency Survey (LRS). The survey was developed during several iterations of testing with pilot groups of pastors, as well as math and psychology professionals. It was successfully evaluated and found to be both valid and reliable.

A common question that often arises in these discussions is: Are leaders born or made? The related debate is addressed in an article by Paul Griffiths (2009), who considers the distinction between innate and acquired characteristics in human beings. Griffiths compares and contrasts heritability, genetics, and innateness with acquired, cognitive development (p. 6-9). It is important to note that Griffiths rejects any idea that innateness can be measured solely on the basis of heritability (p. 1). However, he refers to biologist Conrad Waddington’s phenotypes, which graphically depict the dynamic properties of an epigenetic landscape. Griffiths concludes that innate underpinnings create a topographical landscape that tends to channel development of
some characteristics. When exposed to such channeling, people respond affectively and behaviorally to both innate and environmental influences (p. 21-24).\(^1\)

Great care was given to develop a survey instrument that was tested to be both valid and reliable. After the instrument was developed, it was distributed to pastors throughout Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and High Point, NC (a region known as The Triad). Of the surveyed population, ~35% indicated significant dissatisfaction with at least 2 of the 3 attributable areas of their personal ministry leadership. This is near the level of 40% of pastors who are burning out, according to Barna’s research (1999). The phenotype shown in the previous slide is actually a composite of the responses provided in this initial survey.

A small control group was selected from the surveyed population to participate in a one-year coaching relationship that would target each participant’s stress areas and assess the health benefit potential of this coaching model. The Center for Coaching Excellence ‘toGROW’ format was further modified and made more directive in nature. Clients were offered less freedom to choose their topics for discussion. Instead, client attention was focused on areas of dissatisfaction to confirm the results of their individual survey. Coaching conversations were directed toward goal setting in ways to reduce dissonance and raise personal satisfaction.

**Case Studies**

The following charts depict each case’s results of surveys as they were tested and retested each quarter over the period of one year. It is useful to note the variants in each quarter.

*Case A* initially indicates the greatest in areas of values driving all 3 attributes. However, satisfaction with knowledge—in this case the pastor did not have seminary or graduate-level theological training—declined with the consideration of education and experience. He was particularly dissatisfied that he had established no specific personal goals that he was pursuing. However, he was satisfied that he was making a positive impact on his parish. Each quarter, greater harmony was reached between attributes and greater satisfaction was expressed.

\(^1\) I considered the interplay of select correlated factors that act upon leadership attributes during the life of the leader.
in all areas of the client’s personal life. These improvements were confirmed both in coaching sessions, as well as surveys.

Case B indicates major dissatisfaction with most areas of personal ministry leadership. This client was depressed and indicated his interest in leaving ministry and seek coaching to set goals for new career direction. The initial goal established was to character identification. He had been raised in an atmosphere that discouraged questions of authority figures and emphasized the importance of strict obedience. He had never wrestled with personal identity. Personal inventory of recurring strengths and interests (System for Identifying Motivated Abilities) was key to raising this client’s personal satisfaction. He continues to experience adverse self-esteem, but is improving.

Case C is an example of initial euphoria that some clients experience when they are permitted to dream of goals. As reality settles there may be slight declines in satisfaction levels, but these are very manageable and generate little distress.

Case D was remarkable. The client was totally frustrated, feeling inadequate to influence others. However, as he established personal goals, his vision became contagious within his congregation. The result was mutually rewarding to all.

Case E suggests that health was maintained by the coaching relationship. However, these graphs do not reflect that this client had inflated his responses in the initial survey. During coaching sessions, the client grew more comfortable in his ability to be authentic to himself and others. The end result was health that was acknowledged by the client and affirmed by others associated with him.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Coaching continues to grow as an acceptable discipline among emotional health providers. This research built many on existing principles, while adjusting others to develop a model that may be a little more directive and prescriptive in nature. Its focus is to promote the well-being of these servant-leaders rather than restore damaged relationships. Its initial conclusions are promising. However, much more work is needed to prove the long-term benefits to individuals, churches, and society at large.
About the Author

Dr. Danny G. Nobles, Ph. D., obtained his B.S. from Excelsior College, his MSSc in International Relations via Syracuse University, his MS in National Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College, and his doctorate from Trinity Theological Seminary. He is currently licensed as an Essential Coach through the Center for the Advancement of Christian Coaching, and he is also an ordained Anglican priest in the Province of the Anglican Church of Rwanda. He currently serves as the National Director of Coaching for the Anglican Church of North America, and as the president of NoblePurpose Ministries. He also served in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, honorably discharged in 2007 at the rank of Colonel. He is active in his local church, and continues to be involved with different Army organizations as a civilian. He has been published previously in both Christian and military media. Questions or comments regarding this article may be directed to the author at: danny.nobles@noblepurposeministries.org.

References


