

1 The Business Case for Coaching



Einstein is often quoted as saying **“if you can’t explain it simply, you don’t understand it well enough.”**

What if we were to apply these principles to leadership? How would we explain what great leaders do and don’t do in the simplest terms possible? And how would we translate that into where we spend our money when it comes to investing in leadership development?

Here’s our take. If you do an internet search using the words “Google”, “Engineers” and “Management” you will come across a HBR article.

It describes a radical experiment that Google did to find out what great leaders do and don’t do. They removed all their managers to see whether - with a highly motivated, skilled workforce and a queue of people waiting to join them - people needed a “boss” at all? Luckily for those of us who manage people or develop leaders, some things that managers did every day to support their people were absolutely missed because they impacted both individuals and the performance of the business.

However, having undertaken this experiment hand in hand with PhD researchers (and a head for business analytics) it gave Google a fascinating opportunity. They started their managerial competencies with a blank piece of paper.

We describe it to clients as zero-based budgeting for leadership - Google only added the managerial competencies back in that people had actually missed and that could be evidenced to have made a discernible difference to business metrics.

Google then based their leadership development training on these “Top 8” behaviours. Their number one was “Be a Good Coach”.

Whilst the study was reported in 2013 and a lot has changed in the world since then, reading widely around leadership will probably bring you to a similar conclusion as us. Being a good coach and being a good leader into today’s VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world requires the baseline skills set that Google identified – only more so.

The ability to listen, the emotional intelligence to create trust by managing yourself and your emotions, a growth mindset, innate and impartial curiosity, the ability to ask questions people hadn’t thought to ask themselves, holding tough conversations that encourage thinking (as opposed to triggering the human threat response), generating empowerment rather than telling people what to do – these are all trainable, coaching skills. They are also the most proven fundamental foundations for modern leadership development.

In a knowledge economy, growing people’s ability to think autonomously is the core job of a leader. In a virtual and mobile working world, ensuring team members can think and perform when you are not in the room is crucial. Google’s Number 2 behaviour is to empower and not micromanage. The key purpose of coaching is to empower people to create their own solutions and for the thinker (not the coach or leader) to take responsibility for what happens next. Telling people what to do and giving advice have their place, but choosing to coach where you can physically strengthens someone’s neural pathways – increasing their ability to think well. That’s why coaching works!

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