Base Metal...

February 2026

Introduction

An important consideration in contracting for coaching is clarity of roles and responsibilities. What part is played by the coach and what part by the client? This is often expressed as the coach having charge of the process and the client having charge of the content. In practice the relationship is likely to be more nuanced - particularly when the coach, in service of the client, brings their whole self to the task. What kind of learning partnership ensues? In this article, Paul explores how leadership is exercised - starting with the perspective of the follower.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

Lead or follow?

I was delivering some leadership development work a few weeks back to a very young group, where in their context it made a lot of sense to start from the point of view of 'followership' rather than leadership. To my way of thinking, this is a perspective which is too little explored or considered across the piece, however senior or otherwise one is. Just as one needs to understand both sides of an equation, how can one expect to grow in leadership if one does not consider what it is to be a follower, and most particularly an effective and fulfilled one?

To quote Aristotle: "He who cannot be a good follower cannot be a good leader."

If, however I build my awareness of what makes me a good follower, I cannot but improve my awareness of what also works for others, which may well be quite different from what works for me. Individual difference is rife in this environment, and one of the major leadership challenges for anyone in such a position is to work out how to get the best from each member of their team individually, and as a collective whole. You might fruitfully ask yourself the question "How do I like to be led?" before asking others for insight into their preferences. Am I the sort of person who, in order to produce their best work, needs a clear, regimented and structured process given to me or would I much rather be left to get on with it in my own way? Am I motivated by an externally imposed deadline or performance measure? Do I need the pressure of time in order to perform or is that a negative brake on my output? And, how does any of this affect my view of myself, my performance in my role, and any motivation I might have to develop?

With a coaching lens, these latter questions are frequently explored during interventions, but I have found that the perspective produced by looking at them from the point of view of followership can provide a rich 'way in' to exploring them in a more concrete fashion. They can then cease to be higher order, existential questions about the self, where the discussion can all get a bit too personal and "big". Rather, a discussion can effectively be started from direct experience of 'what works for me', and then extrapolated into some wider observations, with possible conclusions and next steps posited.

And this, for me, is where the leadership/followership paradox is interesting from a coaching

perspective. In a very important sense, our practice should be following – agendas, topics, outcomes, goals; these should all be set by the coachee, with the coach's job being a facilitative and developmental one. However, our experience tends to suggest that this 'empty vessel' approach is rarely the reality, also raising the question "if all we bring to coaching is that 'empty vessel' (leaving ourselves outside the door) are we actually serving our client most effectively"?

Similarly, if I introduce a model or a tool into a coaching intervention, I am, in an important sense, 'leading' what is going on, if only (or primarily) in process terms. How I manage the tension between following and leading, to the benefit of my client at any given time, is of course one of the key challenges that faces any coach in any intervention.

Q. Are you aware of these potentially competing elements in your coaching? How do you manage them, and are there ways you could improve your effectiveness in this regard?

Book review

By **Michael Bungay Stanier: "The Coaching Habit - Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever", Box of Crayons, 2016; "The Advice Trap - Be Humble, Stay Curious & Change the Way You Lead Forever", Page Two Books, 2020.**

Of the clear and practical "The Coaching Habit" Phil M. Jones writes "This is a book of advice about not giving advice. It shouldn't work. But it does." Michael Bungay Stanier makes the case in both of these books for the coach to stay curious and let the client do the work. The client leads.

By **Ian Day: "The Coaching Leader - Coaching Skills for Leading through Complexity", Routledge, 2026.**

Ian Day's book addresses 'the why, what, and how' of being a Coaching Leader in today's complex world - drawing on theory and practice, and matching the needs of the context whilst prioritising asking over telling.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"Great leadership requires being yourself - with skill." Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones.

"…the most successful leaders lead with questions…" Michael J. Marquardt.

"…a true leader stands behind the follower…accessible to and supportive of the followers". Mark Thornhill.

"Leaders must either invest a reasonable amount of time attending to fears and feelings, or squander an unreasonable amount of time trying to manage ineffective and unproductive behaviour." Brene Brown.

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