

Five Questions for Church Coaching

By Rick James

Coaches are increasingly common in business management. And just about every single sports team anywhere in the world has a coach. Yet coaching in the church is rare. When I told a church leader friend what I was going to write about today, they laughed and said, 'It is certainly needed, but does it ever happen?' Jesus' model of developing the thinking and behaviour of his disciples over a three years could easily be described as 'coaching'.¹ We need to rediscover coaching in the church.

We know full well how important it is for leaders to change if churches are to change. In last month's story about 'Creating Space for Greed' we saw how the Bishop, anxious to please an influential pastor and seize the assets, dissolved the whole development department of the church. Such actions by church leaders are not unique. We know leaders can block and drive change. We cannot hope therefore to influence change in churches, without simultaneously catalysing change in church leaders. In fact leaders' professed commitment to change in the church is synonymous with their openness to their own personal change. This personal change is extremely challenging, which is why it often best takes place through one-to-one conversations – through coaching interactions.

We see from the Bible that God used such interactions to bring change in leaders. We know that when Moses was overwhelmed with leadership responsibility, God sent his father-in-law Jethro to advise him to delegate. Again, when David had gone astray with Bathsheba and sent Uriah to his death, God sent Nathan the prophet to tell David a story and ask him a life-changing question. God sends 'coaches' to help his leaders.

In seeking to coach church leaders I have come across five major questions. The answers to these have had a profound influence on the success or otherwise of the coaching:

Are they desperate enough for change?

Many church leaders would like their churches to be better, but they are not desperate enough to go through the personal change that this will involve. They do not really see themselves as part of any problem. Where coaching has worked best for me is when church leaders have come to me with a yearning for change and an acceptance that this will also involve them.

How much do they trust us?

Coaching is based on trust. You have to earn the right to ask personal questions. You have to earn the right to be listened to. With one church leader in Malawi, it took me years to build up this level of trust. But in recent trip to Zimbabwe, church leaders gave me a remarkable degree of trust almost immediately (in what seemed to me a miraculous way). In coaching situations, I find it really hard to hold myself back from giving advice before I have earned this level of trust. There always seems to be an urgent need and I want to leap in with my ideas for how they could do things differently. But how they interpret my words depends on how much they have grown to trust me.

How much space do we create and hold for the leader?

¹ But even if we used the term 'discipling', I wonder how much authentic discipling goes on in churches today (as opposed to discipleship training courses)

Church leaders are notoriously busy. Everyone wants to see them. So I always feel embarrassed by encroaching on their limited time. In some cases this has meant that I have not pushed to meet up, using the excuse that leaders have to show commitment to change by always taking the initiative. At other times it has meant I have just seen leaders in their office, squeezed into a short gap between meetings with a long line of others waiting patiently outside. But where my coaching with church leaders has worked best, I have insisted on them getting out of their office, even if only for a quiet lunch. One time my church leader in Malawi was wrestling with issues of developing second-line leadership and potential succession. I strongly suggested we went off for half-a-day to a waterfall by a mountain to give God the space to speak to each of us and then discuss what we heard. My main coaching input was simply to create and hold that space.

Can we withhold answers and ask questions?

I find it so hard, when I finally get to sit down with a church leader, not to tell them what I think (especially if I think I know what they should do). Time appears so short that I have a tremendous urge to rush in with answers. But questions are usually more powerful than answers in provoking change. Change comes from within, when we realise ourselves we need to do things differently. So as coaches, we need to have a series of good questions at the front of our minds to avoid the temptation to give advice.

Good coaching questions

1. What would 'x' the ideal situation look like?
2. Why do we need to change 'y' the current situation?
3. What might you do in the short-term, medium-term, long-term to make 'x' happen?
4. What are the main obstacles in moving from 'x' to 'y'?
5. How will you know when 'x' is reached?

Adapted from 'Coaching in the church', Snow and Thomas 2008, Gove Books

Are we prepared to walk alongside?

Coaching, like discipleship, is not a one-off meeting. It is a relationship, a journey, that happens over time. This journey has a time cost for those involved. I know there are instances with church leaders that I simply have not had the commitment to see it through. Again if they ask to see me I'll respond, but I have not been bothered to be more proactive. We can only be effective as coaches if we are prepared to go the extra mile, to walk alongside in the mundane times, not just the high moments.

You as a the coach

I certainly need to learn more techniques and skills for coaching. I would love to do a coaching diploma. But I wonder whether this is not more about my confidence as a coach, rather than my ability. Many of us have developed coaching skills through our work in client-centred consulting or with even Christian counselling. Most important is having the courage and commitment to try and make it happen. I know when coaching has worked well or badly, it has been less about my skills and more about my attitudes. Our effectiveness as coaches to church leaders will correlate with how much we live out spiritual virtues of humility, compassion, patience, diligence, generosity and honesty.