



The **HUDSON** Institute  
of Santa Barbara

# The Art of Leading from Behind in Our Coaching

By Pamela McLean, Ph.D.

We emphasize the artful practice of 'Leading from Behind' as one of the hallmarks of a great coach – the ability to walk slightly behind the client supporting, challenging and coaching her to uncover the changes she articulates as important to make at this juncture in life. Whether the coaching concern is a shift in one's leadership style, a new way of managing tough conversations or a pivotal decision making process, the approach of *leading from behind* reminds the coach that the essence of the work is in empowering the client to come to terms with the issues and challenges that she needs to address in order to fully commit to taking a new step forward in life and work.

For most of us as leaders, managers, and professionals, this artful coaching practice of *leading from behind* may initially seem counterintuitive, inefficient and at times, impractical. We ask ourselves: Why not share our wisdom with the client? Why not impart our expertise in order to help the client avert a wrong choice?

Why not spare the client of needless meanderings and reinventing the wheel once more? And, most of us would probably agree that an efficient short term solution often emerges from an advisory or consulting approach, but long term shifts and longer lasting deep changes are thwarted when the coach moves ahead of the client and suggests her preferred approach or builds the client's solutions for the particular challenge at hand. This is the essence of the shift from leading the client to a solution to stepping back and *leading from behind*.

*Leading from behind* is not a simple formula for most of us. It is a masterful practice that requires emotional agility, personal awareness, and the ability to harness the shadow side that often urges us to move out ahead of our client. The approach requires skill, restraint, powerful listening and questioning, and a portfolio of coaching tools and techniques that can be easily accessed when the time is right and they 'fit' with the needs of a particular client.

Let's take a look at a coaching client and see how this artful approach of *leading from behind* is embodied in the coaching work. Jane, an experienced leader in her sector, has recently moved to a new organization which turns out to be much less authoritarian than her previous company of fifteen years. She quickly observes that her highly directive style will not work well in her new work environment. Jane engages a coach to help her shift her well-honed style to one of a more collaborative nature. She knows this shift is essential, and she's keenly aware of the challenge this will be after fifteen years of cultivating her approach to leadership.

The coach who endorses the art of *leading from behind* knows that there are plenty of tools, instruments and techniques that could prove useful to Jane as she makes this transition, yet, it is going to be essential that Jane begins the coaching process by exploring and articulating the depth of change, the consequences, and the challenges she will encounter along the way before the coaching work moves toward an action plan.

Jane makes it clear to her coach that she understands the dilemma at hand. She has spent many years inside an old-style organization and while she has worked her way up the ladder and gained plenty of skills and expertise along the way, she is acutely aware of how out-dated her company's approach to leadership has been. She has intentionally sought out a more progressive company in order to take her skills to a new level. She knows there will be a tough learning curve ahead and she is ready for work it involves. That's

precisely why she has hired a coach and now she's ready to get going.

Through the use of powerful questions, the coach frames the context for understanding Jane's current situation and the shifts she wants to make. Importantly, the coach also elicits information about the inherent challenges Jane will face in developing a new approach to her leadership style. No matter how committed Jane is to altering her approach to leadership, her old style of command and control is deeply ingrained, well honed, and a natural default methodology.

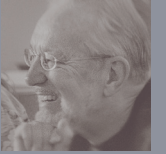
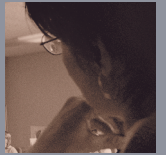
Telling is not as effective in situations requiring significant behavior change because it is based on a narrow, cognitive view of human systems. It fails to incorporate values, attitudes, and feelings. While people may understand why they should change, they are often not willing to make the painful changes that are necessary. When the target of change begins to resist, the change agent often becomes frustrated and turns to an even more directive strategy.

(Quinn, *Building the Bridge as you Walk on It* p. 70).

*Leading from behind* implicitly requires that the coach garner the client's commitment to the change before moving the client toward the actionable items. Jane needs to be certain she is desirous of making this shift. Clearly, there are many other companies in

which she could comfortably operate using her directive style. There are important up and down sides to considering the steep path of change she is contemplating and a coach who leads from behind wants to take the time to explore all perspectives before moving into the currents of change.

While Jane is ready to move forward she is also painfully aware of the temptation to simply 'get things done' and move into her directive mode. She is keenly aware of the frustration she is already experiencing with a more collaborative approach and she admits to wondering at times if it is a practical and tactical way to lead her team.



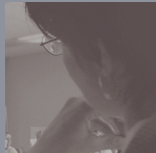
Why is it so important to labor over these nuances – because it is at this juncture that the client; in this case, Jane, makes a decision about the level of change and the depth of commitment she has for the challenge at hand. Once Jane’s commitment is clear, she is in the driver’s seat of the change process and her openness to trying new approaches, seeking collegial feedback and examining what’s working for other’s in the organization is at a much higher level than would be possible if the coach were simply supplying solutions and creating a series of actionable, measurable steps for developing Jane’s shift in leadership style.

Now Jane and her coach embark on the process of shifting her style. They engage in a number of coaching practices including some careful self observation and monitoring over a period time wherein one of Jane’s foci is on noticing her inclination to direct – and experimenting with some

new, more collaborative and participatory behaviors instead. This provides an important heightened awareness of her old style as well as some new insights about changes she could begin to embark upon. Jane also agrees that an assessment process could uncover some information that would be helpful in building her new skill set.

## Leading from Behind

Our approach to coaching creates the conditions for deeper change to occur, change that can be sustained by the client over time and change that results in a transformative experience embedded in the individual and organization rather than a more superficial behavioral shift that may serve a short-term need by eluding deeper and sustainable change.



## Leading from Behind

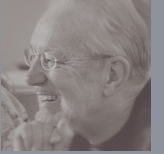
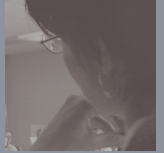
## Leading from Ahead of the Client

Asking .....	Telling
Change Agent Approach .....	Consult Approach
Holding Curious Mind. ....	Sitting in Knowing Place
Reduced Control. ....	Increased Control
Wondering. ....	Knowing
Wondering what client wants. ....	Driving toward a solution
Exploring Together .....	Fixing the Problem
Seeing an Opportunity .....	Seeing a Problem to be fixed
Practicing Transparency. ....	Imparting Knowledge/Wisdom
Participatory .....	Hierarchical
Inquiring. ....	Prescriptive
How do you see it? .....	How would you like to fix this?
What are the opportunities? .....	What are the solutions?
What will the obstacles look like? .....	Problem to Solution

# Practices to Cultivate a Leading from Behind Approach:

## Questions to Consider for Yourself:

- o Building Awareness of Your Style
  - o What's your strong tendency when a client voices a familiar issue?
  - o How much of your time is currently spent in the telling/consulting/advising roles?
- o Building Some Change Practices
  - o Notice and record how often you are tempted/prompted to give a advice to a client
  - o Notice and note and record how often you want to move to a solution when a client presents an issue or a challenge in her life
  - o Notice and record the level of your desire to 'fix' things and make things better for your client
  - o Begin to notice the slight shift in mood, posture, breathing, work load, and more as you move from leading your client from in front to slightly behind the client
  - o Do you hold yourself differently?
  - o Do you work harder or less during the coaching session?
  - o Do you sit more or less comfortably with some silence?
  - o Do you allow the client to face their situation no matter how uncomfortable it might be for the client? – without you, as coach, rushing to fix the discomfort, the anxiety the client might have



## About the Author



Pamela McLean, Ph.D. is CEO of The Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara, a leading organization in the field of adult development and a

pioneer in the emerging field of coaching. The Hudson Institute specializes in providing high quality coach training to seasoned professionals and leaders around the globe. In addition, The Hudson Institute provides transition and renewal programs that sustain resilience, create future visions, and renewal within professionals and the environments in which they live and work. Dr. McLean brings 30 years of experience as a clinical and organizational

psychologist, an executive coach and leader in the field of coaching.

Dr. McLean is on the board of The Association of Coach Training Organizations, The Harvard Women's Leadership Board, JFK School of Public Policy, a Master Certified Coach through the International Coach Federation, Fellow of The American Group Psychotherapy Association and Member of APA's Division 13, Consulting Psychologists. She is the co-author of the well-known book on transition and change, *LifeLaunch, A Passionate Guide to the Rest of Your Life* as well as a speaker on topics of Transitions, Coaching, and Women in Leadership.