



Maree Foley COACHING AND THE LEAP

The role of coaching within the Leadership Exploration Action Program

While many courses can be attended and enthusiastically responded to, making connections between external information and our own internal personal world of decision making, can be more challenging than many of us anticipate. While on a course, free from the day to day stressors of work, the world of application seems simple and exciting. Once back at work, in the thick of multiple interactions and tasks, what seemed so simple, now seems more difficult. If we have been taught something and or can verbalise what we know in theory, does this mean we can put this knowledge into use across different settings/ contexts?

The Leadership Exploration Action Programme (LEAP) has been developed to function as a tool to be used within a coaching relationship to support a process of personally applying leadership principles. The goal is not to introduce personal therapy into coaching, but to introduce a process of developing personal knowledge of one's capacity to make use of knowledge when in the thick of day to day work and its stressors. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) asserts that the greater the felt stress, the greater the likelihood that we will begin to need to attend to our own needs for care and support. How effective we are in getting to feel steady and secure within ourselves, in turn influences how actively available we can remain to the exploring and problem solving amidst challenging work decisions and relationships (Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991).

Attachment theory hypothesises that when experiencing challenging stress we feel vulnerable, and as a way to relieve pressure, we can often begin to subtly or not so subtly exclude aspects of information. This process has been identified as a cognitive and emotional process of "defensive exclusion" and/or "selective exclusion" (Bowlby, 1980, p 52). While Bowlby was initially referring to young children in relationship with their caregivers, attachment theory has been widely recognised as a lifespan theory with relevance across the life span. Self protective processing strategies of "defensive exclusion and selective exclusion" operate also in the adult life e.g. the business work setting. The impact of excluding aspects of experience, is similar to that of the child. When under stress, we repeatedly exclude aspects of knowledge/experience from our awareness we end up with less of ourselves available for exploration/processing/decision making.

Attachment theory asserts that over time we develop internal working models (i.e. a set of expectations, and behaviours when in a position of needing to provide or receive support). At work, based on our experiences of ourselves in our roles and those of our colleagues, we confirm those "working models" that function to guide, the quality of information that we receive, how we process it and what kind of availability we have for decision making and organisational learning. In addition, the recent attachment theory informed work of Hazen and Shaver (1990) and Mikulincer and Shaver (2007) indicates the possibility of the use of attachment theory for further understanding and "conceptualizing leader-follower relations" (p.440). The LEAP is at the practice edge of these theoretical developments.

The LEAP is an intensive brief intervention to assist in gathering a clear view of the leader's capacity to take in the full depth of information and relationship available in our organisations. The LEAP offers a way to view our capacity to work with the inherent stresses of our work while remaining as open as possible to as much available knowledge, while remaining in connection with our emotions and the emotions of others.



Thus attachment theory expands more traditional ways of looking at stress. It helps us to get more specific about how stress can influence our capacity to learn and make decisions. While it is common knowledge that 'what might be considered stressful to one person may not be to another etc', attachment theory has a way of exploring this through developing personal knowledge of our own very specific stressors, and our internal working models in relation to those stressors. We may find for example that when very highly stressed we may not recognise this in ourselves, we may have become so adaptive that others might not notice either, we may find that when stressed, we have ways that distance ourselves from support rather than receive it. Once we know more about our working models and how we action them in the world we can make wiser choices about what we can make use of to support us in our tasks of knowledge consideration and application in our work.

The LEAP assists this process by providing a respectful and focused reflection process that seeks personalised stressors and makes meaningful links to both the source of these and the current day-to-day expressions of these. Often times these personalised stressors have never before been recognised as such and have never been connected as influencing and at times directing our current day work decision making and working relationships.

Within the LEAP, there is an understanding that often connections have not yet been made as the raw material is often implicit, has become part of the fabric of our beings, and as such is not attended to (Stern, 2004). There is also an understanding based on the work of Wilfred Bion (1962), that sometimes the link (between the internal coping model was learned and where it is now being applied) is not made as there have been prohibitions (implicit and explicit) on knowing what the true source of the model is. In other words, not only is the link not known, but there have been expressly attacks on knowing about the linking. We have been encouraged or even trained not to make the connection!

At work, as in other contexts, the greater the stress and the greater the responsibility we hold for ourselves and others while stressed, the more likely that our capacity to appreciate the multiple sources of knowledge coming our way might be compromised and as such compromise our full potential to take in, consider and use learning within our organisations. The LEAP, in the form of a personally tailored and deeply reflective discussion, facilitates the achievement of full potential under stress, and supports a greater sense of self in connection with work. Leaders are assisted to access these challenges to knowledge appreciation through considering day to day work examples, within a very respectful yet intensive journey. The LEAP in a relatively short space of time will take the leader on a journey which will shine a light on their current work life in a way which provides meaningful, personalised and useful knowledge at future times of stress.

Maree Foley (BSW, PG Dip Ch Psych, MPhil (Dist))

References

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