

Are you a talented coach on the rise? Do you want to be an “A-Level” coach? Are you interested in becoming an elite leader? Think deeply about these three questions before moving on.

Instead of assuming leaders are born with the “right stuff” to lead, I start with the assertion that leadership is a talent. If that talent is to be advanced the coach needs a context that supports the development, get the experiences they need to cultivate their leadership ability and possess the drive to master learning to lead.

Let me make another claim: talented people want to be challenged, not coddled. As a coach to coaches I know this to be true. And as a coach I’m sure you will agree success isn’t something you simply hope happens. It is high achievement accomplished by consistent, deliberate, and intense preparation and commitment to a goal with a daily plan of action based on choices you make.

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In your version of reality you may have “high potential” stamped on your forehead and be successful in your own mind. All this may be true, but don’t be deluded. Odds are you’re nowhere near where you want to go and who you want to be. If you really want to stand out, lift your performance to its peak, break into the small circle of elite performers, then accept that life is not a do-it-yourself project. If you surround yourself with winners—or are fortunate enough to have a skilled and caring mentor in your corner—you are likely on a winning path toward the success you covet. We all need people who help us look at situations from a different perspective.

Today, top athletes, actors, musicians and corporate leaders have begun to use performance coaches to help them reach their potential. They’ve chosen coaching as a way to shorten their path to sustained success. What they know is that good coaching will get them where they want to go, help them achieve what they want to achieve, and transform them into who they want to be.

REALITY BITES

Here’s your first bite of reality. As determined as you are, you might never get to where you want to go. You ask; why is this?

The answer: blind spots. All coaches have blind spots. Yes, we all have blind spots, but this is about you.

I know how badly you want to be good—no great! So it’s important for me to let you know that blind spots are real and really capable of derailing your efforts to reach your potential.

You’ve spent most of your life committed to particular ways of thinking, doing, and being, and that’s a good thing; and a bad thing. It guarantees blind spots. Don’t checkout yet. Let me be clear about this: it is never easy to bring about a mindset change. But that’s not enough. Another bite of reality is that

it's more difficult to replace a simple way of thinking with a more complex way; which of course, is likely necessary to become an elite coach.

So, what is a blind spot? A blind spot is a weakness that other people see but we don't. The crazy thing is, because a blind spot is not known to us, we simply don't know what we're doing wrong and what we can do to get better outcomes. We have no idea how a certain coaching behavior of ours is coming across to our stakeholders—players, parents, coaches, and administrators—but it is. A blind spot is an outer reality. That is, it exists outside of us, yet inside of others.

A behavioral blind spot is the unproductive or destructive behavior that undermines or erodes interpersonal influence and the building of durable and enduring relationships.

There are various sorts of blind spots that can lead to ineffective coaching to some degree or another, but one particular form holds many coaches back from great success. That is, a behavioral blind spot. A behavioral blind spot is the unproductive or destructive behavior that undermines or erodes interpersonal influence and the building of durable and enduring relationships.

To ease into the idea of blind spots think of it as something similar to the blind spots we encounter when driving a vehicle. Several years ago while driving a large truck I bumped up against a car in the other lane, hidden in my blind spot, without knowing it. The car sped up to get alongside me. I spotted a crazy man pumping his arms and screaming at me. I pulled over and, sure enough, unbeknownst to me I had sideswiped the driver-side door of the crazy guy's car. Yes, I failed to use the tool built for reducing blind spots—the mirror.

Getting a grip on reality requires a heavy dose of reality. Here's a start: Deep changes in how people think, what they believe, and how they see the world are difficult to achieve. Experts will tell you such change is downright impossible to bring about through compliance. You've got to want to change.

THE EDGE OF REALITY

Self-awareness has limits. Taken in isolation, the problem with self-awareness is that what others think of our behavior takes place outside of our awareness. The built in constraint is that self-awareness only reveals what we can see as what we can know, not what we can't see and not know. We are essentially disconnected from the effects of our behavior; we are blind to the internal reality of the other. All this makes it difficult to know there's a need to change our behavior. I think this is what author and psychologist R.D. Laing meant when he said, "The range of what we think and do is limited by what we fail to notice. And because we fail to notice that we fail to notice, there is little we can do to change; until we notice how failing to notice shapes our thoughts and deeds."

Because people don't know blinds spots exist, they aren't searching to understand how others' experience them. Consequently, if someone tries to bring a blind spot to one's attention, it's likely to be brushed off. The message will be disregarded and discarded. Let's be clear, if someone told you that you are behaving in a way that is having a negative impact on others, your initial reaction will be to take a defensive posture.

Our ability to confront ourselves is crucial to building insight and understanding and tackling the truth of our blind spots. Our willingness to venture out of our comfort zone and see things from others' perspectives is vital to achieving peak performance. This takes courage but offers great rewards.

Reality demands change. The biggest threat, the most resistant barrier, to personal change is you. Please do not take this to mean that you're not motivated or talented. You wouldn't be where you are, in position to get to the peak of your mountain, if that were the case. It's just that desire and motivation aren't enough. The reality is that the ability to initiate and persist with deep change is often exasperatingly elusive for most of us. Grasp that reality!

Yet, as the world maddeningly changes, so must we. The greatest power we have is the ability to envision our own fate and to action to change ourselves. However, the unavoidable question is can you do it by yourself?

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REALITY CHECK

Like the rest of the world—government, medicine, education, and business— sports has relied on the doctrine of scientific management: the theory that any task process can be broken down to its component parts and then reassembled in an efficient “scientific” manner. That sort of thinking, a mechanistic view of management, fostered assembly lines and military hierarchies. And it's fostered a social preference in which building relationships is not as important as task accomplishment—winning trumps all.

Today, we still have many assembly lines (such as schools) and hierarchies are still a favored organizational structure. However, more frequently these industrial age artifacts are adapting to and changing how the individual, the organization, and society interrelate. Change invariably reveals blind spots, and blind spots are deep and difficult impediments to growth.

Let me step onto thin ice. Every coach utilizes “constructive yelling” (my quotes) under the theory that if a player can't survive a spirited “talking to,” the opponent will kill her. This idea may work, sometimes. And other times it might not. Rather, it's simply a taken-for-granted coaching behavior, a “coaching style,” a way of “motivating” athletes. But until we have the courage to explore such coaching behaviors from a variety of frameworks—certainly to include the athlete's perspective—we might just be feeding a blind spot.

Here's how it happens. A team is a human community. It is a living system, like a plant. So, all teams are made up of people. And people are emotional. When engaged emotionally people easily lose perspective. Because people are emotional and lose perspective things are not always as they seem. In a nut shell, to lead effectively involves the need to recognize and acknowledge the importance of dealing with both one's own feelings and emotions and those of the others in an interaction.

Blind Spots

Now, stay with me. Every relationship involves reciprocal relational dynamics such as trust or distrust, respect or disrespect, liking or disliking, and dominance or autonomy. Consequently, these dynamics either reinforce relational growth processes or introduce limiting forces that impede the development of a durable relationship.

Here's a reality check. Without recognizing how certain behaviors negatively impact others, you won't be able to change your unproductive and destructive behaviors. Most of us fall into this trap, thinking we are always acting in the best interests of the student-athletes. That's just not true. Unfortunately, we continue unaware of the negative impact our behaviors create. The causal chain is clear: the fastest way to cause cohesion and morale to erode is to deny that a behavioral blind spot exists or to ignore it.

Discipline and determination are necessary, but it is the discovery of behavioral blind spots that is essential to unlocking your coaching potential. The better you know your strengths and weaknesses, your likes and dislikes—the better you know where you've been, where you want to go and what it will take to get you there—the better you can set your goals and craft a plan to get there. However, if you have a faulty behavioral blind spot you are destined to limit your growth and development into the great coach you want to become.