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# Transparency

Transparent leaders require transparent coaches

After the business world reeled from the debacles of corrupt leaders who splattered the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, the rebound cry was for transparency in leadership. In response to the government secrecy of the last eight years, the U.S. elected Barack Obama, who ran a campaign heralding the need for and benefits of transparent leadership. If you are coaching in business these

substance in a meaningful and authentic way. Authenticity is key to effective leadership, and real transparency hinges on authenticity.

Transparent leadership is especially important in difficult economic times when the stakes in decision-making run high. People can detect inauthentic behavior by an opaque

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days, you cannot avoid the latest buzzwords of transparent leadership. Authors Bennis, Goleman, and Biederman caution us that “claiming to be transparent is not the same as actually being transparent” and the containment of truth by leaders of business and government today remains a common practice (“Creating a Transparent Culture,” *Leader to Leader*, no.50, fall 2008).

This gives coaches a tremendous and timely opportunity to coach for transparency. We must model transparency so that our leader clients can step fully into their own style and

leader who masks his authentic expression or hides information.

## 5 Keys of Coaching for Transparency

### 1. ETHICS & INTEGRITY

You cannot coach for transparency unless you are yourself a transparent leader. It ought to be a truism that ethical behavior is preferred over unethical behavior. In leadership and in coaching, we believe that “what goes around comes around.” Headlines abound, however, of those who have chosen to take a different path. If a client chooses



a course that is beyond legal or ethical boundaries, there is a fear of very real legal consequences. In the coaching domain, if a coach is credentialed through the International Coach Federation (ICF), there are sanctions for unethical actions including, but not limited to, the loss of one’s credential. Even though the ICF Code of Ethics is relatively new and still evolving when compared with professional fields with greater longevity, the precepts set forth in the ICF code provide useful guidance. We expect more comprehensive guidance and specific interpretations of the code to emerge over time.

Whatever professional code of conduct is in force, however, there will always be tensions and competing interests in play. For example, as business coaches we are often hired to combine our coaching methodology with subject matter expertise or other competencies. The ICF would consider that to be consulting and therefore not aligned with their definition of coaching. It is

vitaly important, therefore, that a coach has an independent set of ethics to serve as a moral compass when interpreting a set of professional guidelines. In an increasingly fast-paced, high stakes world this is as true now as it has ever been. Common sense guidance in the past suggested you ought not do any-

*ture of Candor* speak about “the free flow of information within an organization and between the organization and its many stakeholders, including the public. For any institution, the flow of information is akin to the activity of a central nervous system: the organization’s effectiveness depends on it. For

specific contract in place, a competent coach will stimulate awareness of the potential consequences if one of these elements is missing.

### 3. ALIGNMENT WITH OUR CLIENT

A transparent leader will typically express a commitment to transparency. Thus, we must express our

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thing that you wouldn’t want to read about on the front page of the *New York Times*, which numerous business executives and public figures may wish in retrospect that they had heeded. Today it is not so much the *Times* we need to worry about as the Internet and blogosphere. Transparency as a leader informs and contributes to media exposure, online reputation and branding both internally and externally. Coaches must lead our clients towards behaviors that align with each leader’s own standards of ethics and integrity.

### 2. LEADERSHIP TRANSPARENCY

Coaches must have a working understanding of leadership transparency, which we define as openly sharing information, commitments, goals, objectives, and the journey to excellence (both successes and challenges). Transparent leaders seek and include the input of those who serve them, those who follow them, those who are peers, as well as those they follow and those they serve.

Authors Warren Bennis, Daniel Goleman and Patricia Ward Biederman in *Transparency: Creating a Cul-*

information to flow freely within an institution, followers must feel free to speak openly, and leaders must welcome such openness.” In *The Leadership Challenge*, authors James Kouzes and Barry Posner suggest that a paramount practice of leadership is to “model the way” by clarifying values, finding your voice, affirming shared ideals, and setting the example by aligning actions with shared values (4th Ed. Page 26). The most prominent attributes of credible leaders are honesty, forward-looking orientation, inspiration and competence – attributes that are consistent across cultures and continents and congruent with what we describe as transparency.

Another prominent commentator on leadership, Peter Koestenbaum, asserts that if any aspects of the “Leadership Diamond” (courage, vision, ethics or reality) are missing, it is difficult to sustain leadership. (*Leadership: The Inner Side of Greatness, A Philosophy for Leaders*, Jossey-Bass, 2002). Effective coaching requires helping a leader embody behaviors that support the achievement of these qualities. Depending on the nature of the coaching engagement and the

commitment to transparent coaching. Clients who aspire to do the right thing and chart an ethical path typically seek support from a coach with a similar commitment. In fact, leaders today value the perspective of a coach who is “outside the system.” Of course, internal coaches provide valuable coaching and perspective, but on occasion they may be susceptible to forces within the organization or system. External coaches may, in turn, be unaware of norms or political or cultural forces within an organization. Because of these dynamics, it becomes all the more important for transparency and candor in the relationship between coach, client and sponsor.

### 4. ARTICULATING PURPOSE AND RATIONALE

Transparent coaching can be defined as openly expressing the purpose and rationale behind a particular coaching thread of questions, or a particular set of coaching practices.

Whatever issues prompt a leader to seek out a coach, trust is a critical ingredient in the relationship. Trust is in no way an automatic element of a coaching relationship; it must be

