

**LINKING COACHING TO ORGANISATIONAL SAFETY PERFORMANCE**

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## **PREFACE**

*I am an executive manager within Transnet Freight Rail, South Africa; responsible for railway operations in the Western Region. The region is comprised of four production units, which are Bellville (Cape Town), Saldanha (Iron ore export line), Port Elizabeth and Kimberley.*

*With safety as one of the key objectives for Transnet Freight Rail and an integral part of my output as a Regional Operating Executive, I am aware that I cannot reach targets in a silo. This is why Coaching is a subject very close to my heart; hence I have linked coaching as a tool to improve organisational safety performance.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how coaching can be used as an approach to improve organisational safety performance. Assets, technology, systems, processes and people are key ingredients in the safety fraternity. However, for the purpose of this paper, I would like to focus more on leadership involvement and employee accountability playing pivotal roles in organisational safety performance. In any case, it is leaders that make decisions on what assets to be procured, what technology to be used and what processes to be followed. The employees are the process owners and users of assets and technology.

Particular focus will be given to the Beaconsfield marshalling yard safety improvement success story. Beaconsfield marshalling yard is based in Kimberley in the Northern Cape, South Africa. This marshalling yard team call themselves “The Green Team”.

## **2. COACHING**

### **WHAT IS COACHING?**

#### ***Definition***

“Coaching is a way of working with people that leaves them more competent and more fulfilled so that they are more able to contribute to their organisations and find meaning in what they are doing” **James Flaherty**

“Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organisations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.

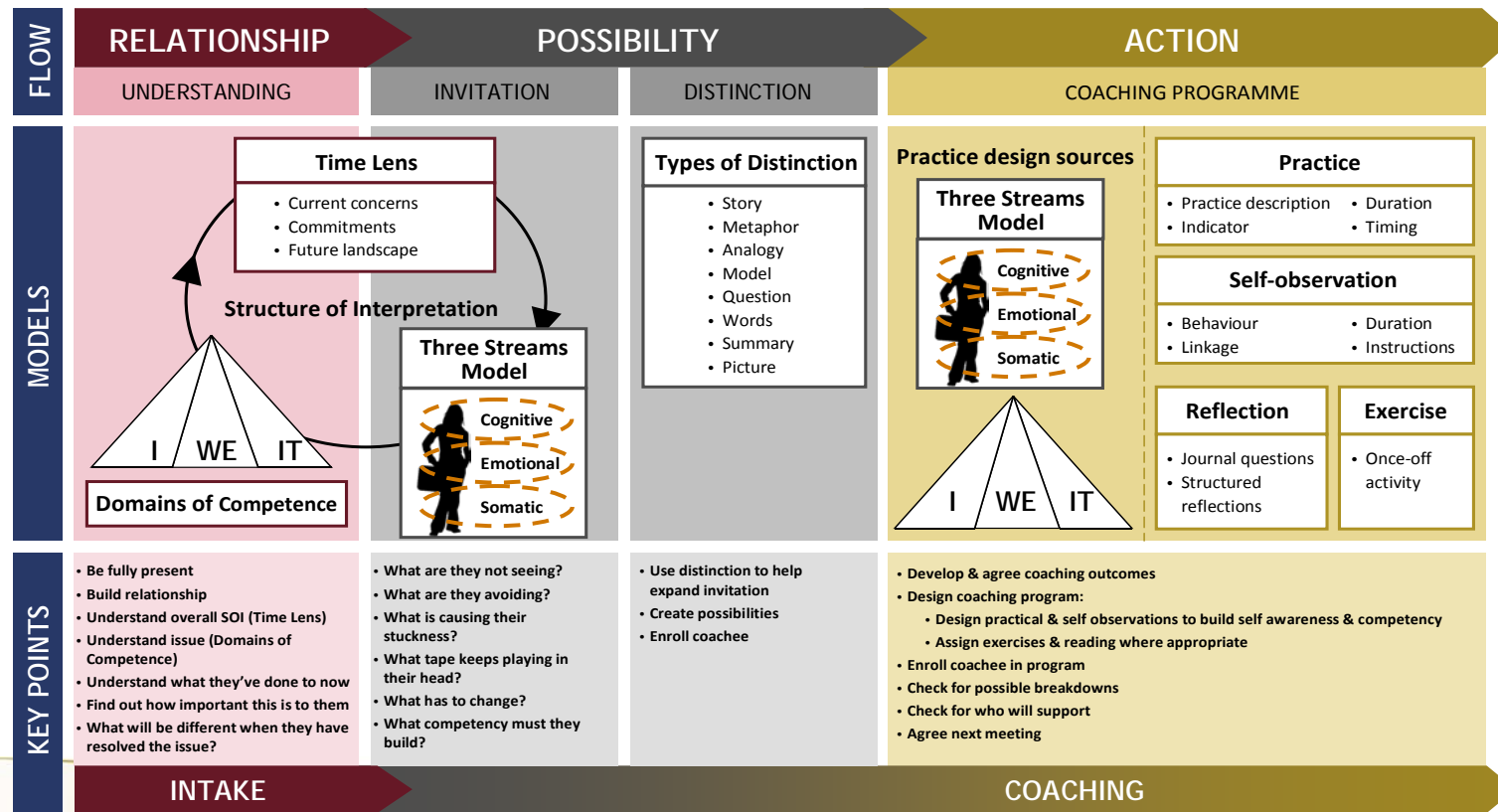
In each meeting, the client chooses the focus of conversation, while the coach listens and contributes observations and questions. This interaction creates clarity and moves the client into action. Coaching accelerates the client's progress by providing greater focus and awareness of choice. Coaching concentrates on where clients are now and what they are willing to do to get where they want to be in the future. International Coach Federation (ICF) member coaches and ICF credentialed coaches recognise that results are a matter of the clients intentions, choices and actions, supported by the coach's efforts and application of the coaching process ” **International Coach Federation.**

### *Coaching Process*

“Coaching uses a process of **inquiry and personal discovery** to build the client's level of **awareness and responsibility** and provides the client with **structure, support and feedback**” International Coach Federation.

It must be noted that the word “client” is used to denote the person who is being coached, regarding of who is paying for the service.

# Detailed flow of coaching conversation



**Relationship building** in coaching is the foundation for ensuring desired results or outcome. Relationship fosters mutual trust, mutual respect and freedom of expression between client and coach.

The coach aims at evoking excellence in his client by asking questions that will make the client to see a world of **possibilities**.

Human beings do not exist in a vacuum; they must be in touch with their **body and emotions**.

**Coaching conversations** occur when a coach speaks to their client in such a way that the client is able to see or understand something or appreciate something he could not before. Effective coaching conversation is measured by the action that the client takes. The coach must speak to a client in a way that frees the client to take **action**. The conversation could be intended to bring about a fundamental change or sharpening a competence.

**Self-Correcting** – A competent client will be able to on their own observe good or bad performance. In case of bad performance, the client will tend to self correct or adjust the behaviour to an acceptable one. A gesture that is pivotal in eradicating unsafe acts. The employee does not have to rely on the safety manager or their supervisor to constantly look over their shoulder in order to ensure that proper safety processes and procedures are followed.

**Self-Generating** – A competent client always strives to improve or operate at the next level. This can be done by undergoing training in order to improve their competency levels, by practicing more as practice makes perfect or by observing someone more competent performing the work. Highest safety standards can be achieved by exposing employees to technical and safety training. Employees need to be encouraged by their leaders to be innovative and to continuously improve their environment with the aim to reduce high safety incidents.

## **2.1 LEADERSHIP COACHING**

Most accidents in the railway environment take place due to poor leadership and employees taking short cuts. The hierarchical tendencies and bureaucracy of railroad leaders may be a hindrance to world class safety performance.

There are practical examples where it has been evident that an accident could have been avoided had it not been due to managers pushing production over safety.

In some cases there is a perception or fear by junior employees that their position will be compromised for speaking out about unsafe acts committed by senior employees. By leadership, I am not only referring to top management, but also including middle management and supervisors.

Autocratic leadership prohibits peak performance. Whereas a cooperative approach can:

- Help your employees to discover their hidden potential.
- Unleash the power within them
- Awaken a giant in them

## 2.2 BEHAVIOURAL COACHING

Sometimes the abundance of technical experience can be the downfall of some leaders! The challenge is combining the technical knowledge with interpersonal skills. They tend to be self sufficient; they want to come up with their own solutions and in the end fail to take their subordinates along. It is commonly known as the “Who to do it better than myself approach”?

Due to this egocentric and impatient behaviour, they miss the opportunity of achieving the best results, tantamount to their intelligence and impressive practice.

These leaders have a high employee turnover rate and their results suffer, positioning the organisation in a bad light, leaving customers impacted negatively. Their technical skills, capabilities and intelligence cease to gain the desired competitive edge and world-class business performance. This is what “railroaders” may understand as “**leadership derailment**”.

*Coaching will assist the above leaders to:*

- Do more of self-introspection and work towards changing their current behaviour to a more desired one.
- Willingness to change their behaviour by aligning their actions with shared values.
- Have courage to deal with their weaknesses head on
- Strengthen their subordinates by unleashing power within them. Empowering them will allow them to make own intelligent decisions
- Seek input from others in expanding and improving their awareness and insights into the issues affecting their team.

The leaders’ success will be measured by a positive impact on their teams, how they bring out the best in their teams, and the effectiveness and positive results of their teams.

### **3. IMPLEMENTING A COACHING APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP: WESTERN REGION**

We began to implement a coaching approach in the Western Region in August 2008 when I convened a three-day senior management team breakaway session. Day one was assigned for brainstorming on ways and means to improve safety and operational efficiencies. One of the challenges deliberated on was the disturbing marshalling yard derailment incidents and high Disabling Injury Frequency Rate (DIFR). Labour Union Representatives and process owners together with yard managers were invited to be part of the solution.

We had a successful workshop with process owners highly motivated and committed to significantly reducing the number of incidents. Exactly a year later, the Beaconsfield team came back to share their success story out of the four production units.

Someone once said, if you want anything to run smoothly, fix the top.

#### **4. SUCCESS STORY: BEACONSFIELD MARSHALLING YARD “THE GREEN TEAM”**

Beaconsfield Marshalling yard is one of the biggest yards in Transnet Freight Rail, nestled in Kimberley in the Northern Cape part of South Africa. It is subdivided into 3 smaller interactive sub yards, called Alex Up Yard (22 lines), Alex Down Yard (21 lines) and Beaconsfield North Yard (14 lines). 40 trains are shunted in these 3 yards on a daily basis by a personnel compliment of a Yard Manager, 6 Yard Masters, graded as First Line Managers, 16 Yard Foremen and 100 Yard Officials.

Rail lines from the four wind directions feed this important shunting HUB and after shunting operations are completed, traffic flows out in the four wind directions according to our shunting strategy.

This depot was one of the worst performing depots in terms of safety, for example yard collisions, yard derailments, Injury On Duty (IOD) and so on. The productivity levels and the morale of the employees exactly mirrored their bad safety records. At some stage one pondered as to whether the yard manager, Mr Rassie Erasmus was the right person for the job or not.

Something drastic happened and a brand new team was born!!!

#### **4.1. COACHING FOR SAFETY RESULTS**

How does a bad coach convince a losing team that things can be turned around and that they can be a winning team?

Rassie Erasmus did it by doing the following:



- He first chose to **change his leadership style**. He moved away from an autocratic leadership style to a participative style. He realised that in order for him to attain excellent results, he could not do it alone, he had to involve his team.
- He ensured that he **established a good relationship with his team**, this being a foundation in coaching. This, he did by first enquiring what the concerns of his team were. Most of the issues he had to deal with were basic hygiene factors like personal protective equipment (PPE), condition of ablution facilities, lockers, information sharing, how employees are treated at work, provision of tools and so on. All these issues were within his control and he made sure that whatever they requested, he gave feedback timeously and satisfied their requirement expediently. The aim here was also to pause and listen to the employees as opposed to the manager giving orders all the time. The fact that he established a good relationship, meant that **mutual trust, mutual respect, cooperation and commitment** by all prevailed.
- The way he **communicated** with his team during green areas/pre-shift talks changed. He moved away from telling to engaging and allowing dialogue through coaching conversations. It was during these **coaching conversations** that employees **Self generated** the brightest improvement ideas. Yes, they are process owners and they know their work processes better than anybody else.
- **Visible Felt Leadership** was demonstrated by constant yard visits. Rassie took a video of employees whilst busy with shunting activities. Later he showed it to them for their comments. Comments like the following came forth, “I did not set the points correctly”, “I did not secure the wagon with a scotch block”, “I did not stand at the rear end of the movement”, “My communication was not clear. Employees started **self observing** their actions and then **self corrected** their unsafe acts instead of the manager being the one always pointing out the unsafe acts. He used the video clips to also learn about safe behaviours that were displayed during shunting activities. The video clips were not seen as a threat for punishment because the relationship was solid and there was a trust element, something that could have sparked a strike or grievance from employees before this significant change.
- He beefed up his **safety structure** without bringing in more people. According to the safety governance structure, for every 50 employees one must appoint a Safety, Health and Environment (SHE) Representative. He currently has 8 SHE Reps. He appointed 24 more employees as SHE Assistants. The SHE Assistants report to the SHE representatives. The aim was to increase employee involvement and accountability in the yards.

Just to mention a few functions, the SHE Assistants together with SHE Representatives conduct safety audits, environmental assessments; risk assessments. The team embraced the introduction of the SHE assistants without any qualms. Before the change, without a shadow of doubts, Rassie would have been reminded of how some of these functions were not in their job descriptions

and Labour Union Representative would have escalated their concerns to senior managers.

- High standards of **housekeeping** became a sense of pride for the yard personnel. They started cleaning the yard and ablution facilities to Lean Production 5S standards.
- It is evident that the “Green Team” has matured so much that **safety is their personal responsibility**. They take **pride** in what they do, because they are striving for the best. The productivity levels soar and the morale is high.
- Introduced a measuring system whereby performance of all personnel is measured daily on a cumulative basis by each team / sub team. Performance measurement is used as a focus for the weekly Safety Symposium where 25% of the personnel engage.

#### 4.2. POSITIVE RESULTS

Measurements as on 31st May 2009

INCIDENT OCCURRENCE /	2007	2008	2009 (5 months)	
Absent Without Leave (AWOL)	103	28	4	
Absenteeism/Sick days (X99)	122	44	2	
Substance abuse	4	1	0	(496 days since last positive result)
DIFR	3.5	2.3	0	

Other achievements as on 31st May 2009

- Last derailment due to human error (27 November 2008) - 184 days
- Last collision with a stop block (26 May 2008) - 370 days
- Last IOD (18 June 2008) - 347 days

- The morale of the employees is the highest ever
- The safety statistics have significantly improved.
- Productivity levels have improved and customers are sending letters of appreciation.
- Harmony between Management and Labour.

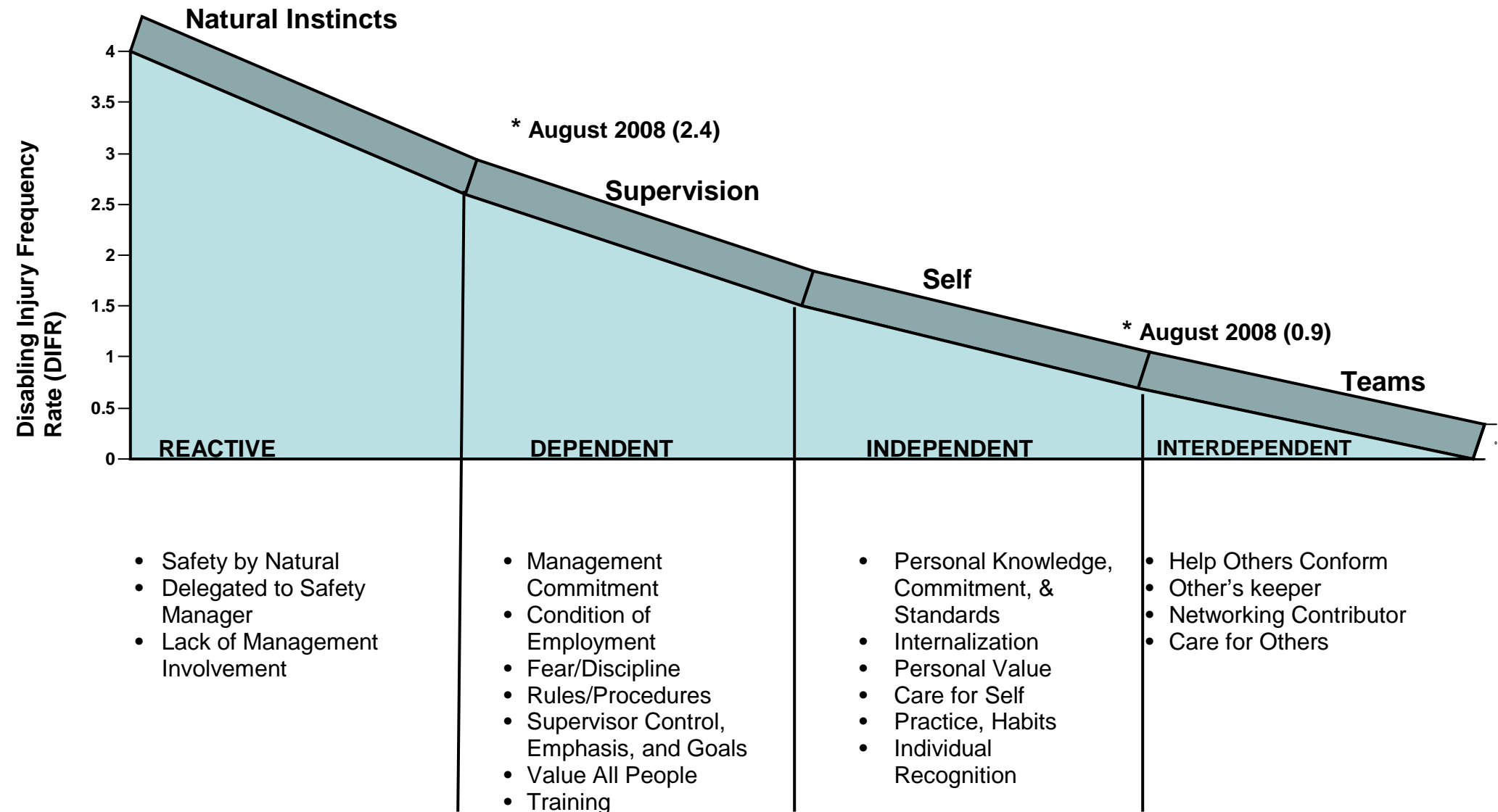
### 4.3. RECOGNITION

Recognition to the “Green Team” was not in monetary form, yet it still improved the morale of the team and instilled a sense of pride.

The following were the forms of recognition:

- The leader and two subordinates were flown to Johannesburg to present their best practice at the Senior Leadership Forum of Transnet Freight Rail (TFR), a forum chaired by the Chief Executive Officer of TFR. Their presentation was excellent and they were given a standing ovation. The opportunity to be personally recognised by the Chief Executive Officer in a large organisation such as TFR might only remain a distant dream for many. This was also the first flying experience for Rassie’s team members.
- Furthermore, they made their presentation to the members of the other three production units at the Regional Operating Executive’s (ROE), no fancy PowerPoint presentations, but a mere “How we did and it and plan to maintain it”.
- If that was not enough, they consulted and made a presentation with the Central Region in line with the organisation’s holistic growth. Now, the “Green Team” was on a roll, they tendered a “consultancy service” to the rest of the organisation, people in the organisation all over acknowledged this particular team’s success. It got other teams interested to learn from this team; Yard Managers throughout the Western Region and some operational areas within TFR spent time in Kimberley gathering all the information that they would take back and implement in their own environment.
- The ROE made a special visit to this team; they shared a braai/ barbeque and further conversed on the way forward. This might not be significant to others, but given the historic background of our organisation where Senior Manager and General Worker were worlds apart, you might understand how sharing a “space” with the ROE gave recognition and further motivation.

## 5. THE DU PONT'S BRADLEY CURVE KIMBERLEY YARD SAFETY IMPROVEMENT CURVE: THE GREEN TEAM



As can be seen on the Du Pont's Bradley Curve, there was a marked improvement of the DIFR from 2.4 in August 2008 to 0.9 in August 2009. Actually the DIFR was zero (0) in May 2009 but unfortunately one of the employees hurt himself at the locker room, this however did not deter the team's efforts to strive for safety excellence. The Beaconsfield Marshalling yard has matured to a point where they perform their work as a team to improve safety and to increase effectiveness and productivity. They have moved away from being reactive; performing their work because they want to comply to safety regulations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As a leader, I knew that I cannot do it on my own; I needed the assistance of my team to produce the best results. If I use the illustration of sticks; you can easily break one stick, but it is difficult to breakthrough many sticks. **I and U became Us!**  
I created a coaching culture in the Western Region by adopting coaching practices. According to Ken Siegel's Behavioural Coaching Approach, the team became **REAL**; **R**esponsible, **E**mpowering, **A**ccountable and **l**oving towards themselves and others.

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1. The art and practice of Leadership coaching: (Howard Morgan, Phil Harkins and Marshall Goldsmith)
2. Coaching – Evoking Excellence in others: (James Flaherty)