



# LEADERSHIP COACHING... TOUCHING HEARTS?

By GREGG THOMPSON

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Our final coaching conversation over coffee quickly turned uncomfortable, at least for me. "I was touched," said my client. "I was touched in a very special way." With a quick "thank you" in return, I tried to quickly change the topic to something not so emotionally charged. (My mind raced.... Is he a soccer fan? Will a comment about this week's games provide a detour in the conversation?) He was not going to be put off. "You are not hearing me, Gregg. I was touched right here." This time, he pointed directly at the middle of his chest. "Right here!"

I learned something very important that day. I have spent many years positioning the craft of leadership coaching as a practical and potent performance improvement process while minimizing the more personal aspects of this work. After all, we are coaches, not counselors—and not just regular coaches for that matter.

We are leadership coaches whose clients are primarily senior business managers. We use words like "partnership" and "challenges," not "intimacy" and "compassion." We ask our clients to step up to bigger roles, not to get in touch with their feelings and emotions. And now, sitting directly in front of me is this seasoned COO of a major manufacturing enterprise telling me that our coaching work has rekindled his passion not only for leadership but also for life itself.

\*He continued, "I have made three commitments, and I am living these every day. First, I have committed to have a positive impact on the jobs, careers and lives of every single person in our organization, regardless of their position. Second, I have committed myself to be a genuine servant leader in my family. Third, I have committed to leave this planet a better place in some way when my time is done." And then he said the words to which I had no response: "My heart has opened up to a whole new world."

In this column, I try to provide fresh insights to readers who are interested in the leadership development field. This is a bit of a different column. Today, I would like to share three important lessons that I have learned.

When I am coaching I need to remember that:

1. **I cannot separate the leader from the person.** The whole person is in the coaching relationship with me. I need to have the courage to bring my full humanity to the coaching relationship.
2. **All leadership development is, in fact, personal development.** The person being coached is the instrument of leadership, and the only way that development can occur is when the leader works on himself or herself. I need to remember that I can serve others best by being a fellow learner rather than a teacher.
3. **The most intense leadership development is a result of a deep personal commitment.** I need to keep in mind that all real learning is self-directed, and people will only change when they decide to do so.

Coaches give little advice. We mostly remind our clients of their talents, their passions, their aspirations, and their potential. That day over coffee, my client reminded me so clearly of one of the most important tenets of this work: It is impossible to fully explore leadership potential without touching hearts along the way.

*\*I rarely write about my coaching conversations, much less quote my clients; however, in this case, my client not only gave me his permission but also encouraged me to write the article. I thank him for his thoughtfulness and generosity.*



**Gregg Thompson is President of Bluepoint Leadership Development and author of several books, including *The Master Coach*. He welcomes your comments by e-mail.**

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