

Love for the planet:

our contract with the world and the crisis of leadership

What relevance does coaching have to the current crises on our planet? **Erik de Haan** argues that, as coaches, we have a unique role to play in providing space for reflection on these crises and what we can do about them

Coaches' concern for the planet

Over the past two years, we have all experienced what a truly global crisis looks and feels like and how such a crisis poses severe challenges. The 'corona crisis' reminded us of how connected we are, both in our biology and, increasingly, through global connectivity. It focused our minds on providing what is necessary in a short amount of time, even if humanity's collective response still left much to be desired.

During this corona crisis, the use of video platforms exploded, enabling us to keep in touch with one another during lockdown, continue holding meetings, and even engage in our consulting and coaching conversations, virtually. However, our rather discursive and fragmented screens, which often looked like a randomly arrayed series of rather bland postcards, also underlined the kind of crisis that we had to deal with: a crisis that drove us apart, stoked fear and blocked many a meaningful, intimate connection.

It is now dawning on most of us that we are tumbling from a grave health crisis into a graver financial crisis and into the gravest crisis of all, our self-made climate crisis – crises becoming ever more jarring, haunting and disruptive. It is understandable and ethical for us to want to do something about this and become an activist. Crisis invites us all to take a stance.

This pull is particularly strong on us coaches; we are, after all, professional helpers. We feel the urge to 'stand up and be counted', to try to use the considerable personal and professional power that we have, for what is clearly a good cause.

But is this actually helpful? As coaches, at some point in our lives we have chosen to put ourselves in the service of the fortunes and objectives of others. But this urge can overstep a boundary, where we run the risk of trying to do our clients' work for them or otherwise get overinvolved. Naturally there is a big pull in most of us to help others, and in some cases a real preference to attend to the needs of others over and above our own, sometimes called our 'helper's syndrome'.¹ The best coaches have learned how to step back from becoming too helpful and to address our visceral needs to help in other ways, eg by allowing ourselves to be helped as well as helping others, or by spending reflective time by ourselves, for ourselves.

Helper syndrome

Claudia is the eldest daughter of four. Her parents were still establishing their own careers when their children were born and, from an early age, Claudia learned to help take care of her younger siblings. After studying psychology, Claudia qualified as a clinical psychologist. Three years into her first job, she suffered a burnout, after which she took some time out to reorient herself. She recognised that she had taken on a lot of administration and managerial work, plus a considerable caseload. Following therapy, Claudia decided to become self-employed, and within a few years she became a successful coach, greatly in demand by her clients. Now, she had more control over her working hours, but again, she managed to overbook herself, and it was only through regular supervision that she managed not to succumb to the pressures once more. Gradually, Claudia became aware of her tendency to be generous with her time, while neglecting her own needs. Working with clients made her feel useful, whereas not being busy left her feeling helpless. By attending to this feeling and exploring it regularly, she was able to find a better balance and become more 'choiceful' in her practice.

There are clear boundaries to our effectiveness: if we become too much of an 'expert' – including advocacy – or too 'hands on', we risk becoming less effective as coaches.

It is also important to remember that these current crises are (mostly) man-made, that they are crises of our consciousness, including the hold of our own leadership shadows on us: our greed, our corruption, our narcissism. So, I would argue that if we coaches take a stance by turning to leadership and advocacy, we risk growing our leadership shadows at the same time, potentially aggravating the crises, however well-meaning our initial intentions.

We need to be doing what we do so well with our individual clients: taking a step back and not getting involved with their decisions or actions, simply coaching them through their choices. Can we lovingly observe and be available to those leading us



through the crises that we are ourselves part of? Can we nurture reflection where reflecting has become so difficult?

I think that to do so, we need to reflect on the roots of the crisis and think deeply, alongside the organisations we work with, about the mentality underpinning the problems, and see if we can hold this mentality in mind, lovingly, safely, so that healthier values may emerge from within. This is not so much activism and advocacy, but has more to do with observation and sense-making.

I know we need to 'fight' the crises, and some might argue we are already far too late to begin our fight. My question is, nevertheless, even at this late stage: how do we fight? And what happens to us when we fight in advocacy mode? Might we risk putting off a lot of good people by lecturing to them? Might we risk switching parts of ourselves off, by suppressing them? If we fight against other nations, institutions or individuals, we won't achieve our ends, as this is a global crisis that encompasses all of mankind.

In Greek mythology, there were two gods of warfare – masculine, violent Ares and the protectress Athena, who held a secondary interest as the goddess of wisdom. I would argue that in this fight, wisdom is to take Athena's stance and to strive for protection and reflection in the interest of defence, not attack. And I firmly believe our feminine, protective coaching profession can play a role under the banner of Athena, rather than Ares.

Coaches are familiar with crises of leadership

Let us think about the kind of crises that we are having to deal with. First and foremost, they are crises of leadership, in manifold forms. We know that, on the whole, mankind has the resources to feed – and vaccinate – the world, to increase diversity and to reverse climate change for as far as this change is reversible over the short term – but this requires joint strategies, joint implementation and joint action, and they are conspicuously hard to achieve, in particular with the many forces that can drive us apart and make us compete with each other for ever more scarce resources.

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This is where coaches can play a unique and important role: witnessing the mindset that underpins the crisis, being sensitive to the greed and hubris that are at stake – and calling them out

We have never been able to establish full global leadership, even though clearly global leadership was called for in the corona crisis and was to an extent provided by the World Health Organisation (WHO), global pharma companies and careful communication between governments and institutions.

Leadership is a very basic process, to do with the effectiveness of a team or organisation, that we all partake in, all of the time and even from a very early age, which makes it so often hard to define. In recent years, technological advances have grown the span and influence of leaders – with impact on many people's daily lives, with a need to respond to frequent change, and increasingly so, as the world is becoming increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous ('VUCA').²

Psychopathology and leadership are highly correlated: leadership corrupts and therefore creates pathology over time, and conversely, psychopathology also produces leadership.³ In other words, free-flowing leadership processes do not automatically converge on the best possible solution for all or for resolving crises – and conversely, many individuals who are not the best leaders, end up in leadership roles.

I think the crises in our leadership, most of which predate the current health, financial and ecological crises, lie at the root of the issues in those other domains. This means addressing the manifestations of selfishness, greed, fear and stubbornness or prejudice in our leaders, so that they can begin to make better decisions for all.

In *The Mask of Sanity*, US psychiatrist Hervey M Cleckley was the first to describe the specific configuration of traits that capture the essence of the psychopathic personality.⁴ Psychopaths were described as superficially charming, self-centred, fearless, impulsive, articulate, callous and guiltless. Out of this thinking triarchic models of psychopathy evolved, where the most common psychopathic traits are clustered around boldness (eg grandiosity, interpersonal dominance), meanness (eg lack of empathy, callousness) and disinhibition (eg impulsivity, irresponsibility).⁵

Although boldness may contribute to positive task performance and charismatic leadership, and disinhibition may contribute to positive adaptive leadership, an overall negative contribution of meanness and a partially negative contribution of disinhibition to leadership has been found.⁶ In Vergauwe et al's research, the leadership effectiveness was rated by subordinates, which we argue in *The Leadership Shadow* is a helpful perspective for measuring leadership effectiveness.³ However, if one would measure the impact of psychopathy from the perspective of quality of life on our planet or for future generations, these negative, demonstrated links between psychopathy and leadership effectiveness are expected to be even stronger and to also include boldness.

Unfortunately, leadership appears to be a key example of 'successful psychopathy': it attracts individuals who are interested in power and self-promotion, and/or the pressures and projections on top leadership have a pathology-enhancing effect, especially over time.⁷ This means that either through self-selection or through experiences on the job, the number of triarchic traits according to the Patrick et al model is expected to be larger than in the general population.⁵

I argue that these crises of leadership, and the dark leadership shadows that they have occasioned, lie at the root of the current major challenges, those to do with exploitation, inequality, threats to biodiversity and to the climate globally.³ Greed, narcissism and fear lie at the root of these issues. So, we need to find better ways to counter greed, selfishness and fear.

A vision for a loving way to confront this unprecedented global crisis

Science and technology can help with the complex crises that we are facing, as we have seen with the corona crisis. However, without a different form of leadership, and an understanding that we have to change our priorities collectively and make them more sustainable collectively, rapid, technological change will not be enough and will itself not be sustainable. We will have to engage in many more conversations about ecotaxes, rewarding lower

Filling the 'leadership void'

Kevin is a leadership coach, who works mainly with start-up organisations, helping redesign their organisational structures and working through what the new structures mean for their work together and their relationships.

Kevin has found his participation in rapidly growing businesses to be meaningful and rewarding. However, he has also noticed that, despite his experience as an executive coach, his clients have a particular way of making him feel responsible for their leadership struggles. He notices that he often finds himself filling a void of leadership. This usually has adverse results: as soon as Kevin starts explaining or organising the way forward, the leaders in the team lean back and give him space, without successively implementing any of the great ideas that Kevin pressed for during the meeting. He is noticing that his high levels of engagement and involvement with these clients do not always yield the objectives his clients are aiming for. This leads to assignments being abandoned, Kevin being retained much longer term and him questioning his own value to the team and the company.

climate footprints, accepting changes to our diet etc. These will be very tough conversations that need to have real consequences, both in politics and in large organisations. Difficult choices will not be made without strong, collective leadership.

The new United Nations report on climate change by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), has shown that this is an exponentially growing crisis and can only be answered by similarly exponential changes in our approach to the planet.⁸ This means, we are dealing with a second-order challenge, both in terms of the need to change the mindset that has created the problem and in terms of the observer and change agent also being also part of the problem.⁹ Fortunately, this is something that organisational development professionals and coaches know about and can facilitate, however difficult it is in practice. This is another reason for us to be involved in addressing the leadership challenges as well as the mindset that has created the crisis.

Bad leadership is not something that can be 'fixed' in the way that processes and machines can be fixed. It cannot be 'located' in a single person or group of people; moreover, it is co-created or enabled by determining factors such as power, discretion, time of service, industry norms etc. Nevertheless, as coaches, we can work with leaders in transformative ways. I believe we can provide a relationship where bad leadership can be observed and given space to shift to healthier, more sustainable contributions.

If a leader is challenged head-on and without offering support, the only response will be defence and counter-attack, as we have seen with those - for example, whistleblowers - who try to address issues in global leadership.

In my experience, there are two prongs of attack (or rather, protection) that have made a difference in coaching conversations, with regard to leadership and the leadership shadow:

- Understanding more about leadership and links between power, hubris and psychopathology. From the study of leadership, we may formulate better checks and balances

on leadership, such as are in place with political power (two independent chambers, voting rules, democratic control).

- Challenge and support provided in a safe setting, so that leaders can truly reflect on what they are doing and reappraise their priorities and values. With appropriate challenge, leaders can step back from their shadow, put their contribution on a more positive and balanced footing, and integrate their more primitive urges as expressed by their shadow sides.^{3,10}

But we can only do this by remaining independent, by observing and reflecting on the leader mindset, not by taking a stance and advocating for particular ways forward.

This is where coaches can play a unique and, in my view, important role: witnessing the mindset that underpins the crisis, being sensitive to the greed and hubris that are at stake - and calling them out. Naming the unwholesome (greedy, lazy, selfish etc) processes that are compounding the issues, but not taking a side against them - just lovingly opening them up to reflection. I hope we will all take up the challenge.

For this, it is important that we learn to reflect on our own minds first. Our minds can be seen as pollutants emitting toxic substances, when they are fuelled by irrational fears, usually in response to feeling unsafe or unloved.¹¹ When in such a state, we feel we need to consume more or lead more, in order to feel safer, and our irrational greed remains unrecognised. This irrational fear can just as easily be expressed by coaching, by advocacy or by altruism, ie by aligning ourselves to a 'worthy' cause and a 'worthy' profession. We therefore need a lot of self-reflection to determine whether a piece of work (eg helping others) is truly worthy or only an expression of fear. The value of our coaching - or advocacy - is not an empty question with an obvious answer, but rather something that we will have to study regularly and at length to become gradually more sure of ourselves. ■

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