

LEADERSHIP *Warren Bennis* Excellence



THE MAGAZINE OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, MANAGERIAL EFFECTIVENESS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY

DECEMBER 2009

Lead Yourself

Leadership Insights

Revolutionary Thinking

New Breed of Leader

Sheila Murray Bethel
Leadership Consultant



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—WARREN BENNIS, AUTHOR AND USC PROFESSOR OF MANAGEMENT

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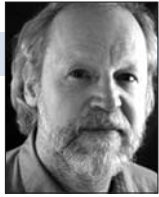
Fox Guarding the Henhouse

Alas, in the legend and lore of so-called leadership we commonly hear of foxes (folks in positions of responsibility) allegedly guarding the henhouses they intend to bilk, raid, pillage and plunder. Hence, we again plea for authentic leaders.

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Leaders Coaching Leaders

Bringing out authenticity in your people.



by Carter McNamara

EFFECTIVE LEADERS have “learned how to learn.” It’s a simple concept that belies the billions of dollars spent on external sources, books, trainings, and the rope-climbing-variations-of-the-month to develop leaders. While LD expertise is often sought outside, real leadership strength frequently lies inside the walls of organizations and within those who would lead.

What makes a good leader? asks Jon Renesch in *Debunking the Leadership Development Myth*. “Are they born or made? This has been debated ever since leadership became a serious academic pursuit. The field has occupied thousands of academics, consultants, trainers, and HR professionals, trying to make leaders out of non-leaders, to make managers better leaders and, supposedly, to improve performance.”

In the past 10 years, the companies most prudent about investment in LD have leveraged people’s ability to lead through the platforms of *Action Learning* and *Peer Coaching Groups* (PCG).

Most Fortune 1000 companies use *Action Learning*—educating participants about their actions and experience to improve performance through learning-by-doing and teaching others—to cultivate leadership skills, including reflection and inquiry. However, the *Action Learning* process can be expensive and time-consuming, requiring participants to be away from work for days at a time. For most, such leadership training is not realistic: day-to-day leadership challenges are seldom addressed by carefully chosen, well-structured and highly rational approaches to solve myriad business problems through careful planning. Instead, leaders often resort to highly intuitive, real-time approaches that are based on the leaders’ learning from their past experiences and with help from others in the organization.

The model/method that best accommodates the good intentions of *Action Learning* with the much needed leadership problem-solving method on the job is *Peer Coaching Groups* (PCG)—and the rewards are numerous:

Microsoft was so confident in the peer coaching process when it started three years ago that it decided to develop 50 groups of six-to-seven people across the Americas region and customized the peer process and materials to suit *Microsoft* cultures in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia Pacific, Japan, China, and India. “There are few opportunities when top talent inside *Microsoft* can meet each other in meaningful ways and get their thinking structured in a way that makes them more self-aware and able to more easily share the issues they face in their departments,” noted Karan Rhodes, *Microsoft*’s Global Program Manager of LD.

“The Peer Coaching experience has huge value for the participants and our company; in the first year the program’s evaluation score was 98 percent. This could become a legacy training platform for *Microsoft*.”

At *BP*, where similar programs have been in place for two years, LD personnel were surprised at how fast peer coaching built trust within groups.

Regardless of industry, the PCG model is finding its place—even in the change-resistant hallways of healthcare management. *Blue Cross/Blue Shield* adopted PCG as a way to bring *Action Learning* to the organization by developing a leadership course for manager training. According to Pat Brinton, Senior LD Consultant, “Our managers were looking to develop leadership skills and had many courses to take. But there was no *experiential* component. We wanted them to have an environment where real time-learning could take place because it would be more relevant and have more staying power.”

PCGs generate positive comments from participants; inspire deep understanding of their roles; help them see how they can improve their skills; create a stronger network among peers; facilitate approaching one other with challenges and feedback; enable peers to learn how to coach others; reduce costly one-on-one coaching; teach participants to coach their peers in leadership attributes by working on real issues together; and create authenticity.

Experts and practitioners in leadership assert that authenticity is a critical trait of effective leaders. PCGs help leaders to be more authentic, as they increase productivity by leveraging the experience, knowledge, wisdom, and potential of all employees,

Learning in Circles

Leaders in the PCG model are neither born nor made—they are actualized by participating in the leadership training or development process. PCGs are most effective in groups of five-to-seven that meet once a month, using *circles* as the preferred forum. In PCGs, each person gets time to work on an important problem or goal. They may benefit from the coaching, support and feedback shared among group members. But mostly they benefit from

being honest, direct and in-the-moment about what’s truly going on. Members can’t just vent about their situation—each member has to take the leadership to do something about it.

People show up in their groups the same way they show up at work. If they wait for others to take initiative, they’ll do that in their groups. If they gripe about what’s wrong, they’ll do that in their groups. But they’ll only do it for a short time before other members start asserting that it’s time to take responsibility and move forward.

Is it effective? Contrast traditional leadership training with PCGs to assess which is more effective: In the traditional setting, students are taught by expert instructors or consultants. With PCG, learning is developed from the inside out. In the traditional setting, students are expected to master subject matter. With PCG, learners focus on actions and learning from those actions. In the traditional setting, experts ask questions to students for a correct answer in a passive setting. With PCG, participants share questions and issues to increase understanding and develop proactive plans. In the traditional setting, simulated exercises are used to help students understand information. With PCG, real-life challenges are looked at to be solved. In a traditional setting, a facilitator reinforces right answers. With PCG, participants encourage each other to explore thinking and actions.

Learning for a circle member occurs during the entire meeting; when thinking about other member’s goals and actions, when realizing the interests and challenges of others at work, and



between circle meetings when taking actions and reflecting on the results.

In short, PCG circles are doing problem-solving on the job and developing leadership *from* the job with many important residual effects.

People learn best when they apply new information to current challenges.

The *urgency* of current challenges often causes people to be far more interested in using new learning to address those challenges and, thus, to be far more involved in understanding and benefiting from that learning, as well.

People often learn best when they share ongoing feedback with peers. People often place more value in the help that they get from others in similar situations than from “outside” experts. Reliance on outside experts can cultivate passivity and dependency in people and minimize their capabilities.

The person with the problem is the expert on the problem. That person is the most closely involved in the problem and can best understand the problem—and what can be done to solve it. Often, the solution to the problem even has to start with that person.

Finding the right problem is as important as solving it. People often see only the *symptoms* of recurring problems, rather than *real causes*. That’s why problems recur. They’re often caused more by how people perceive them than by people missing some new information. They often need to understand more about their own perceptions and conclusions instead of taking more courses and reading more books.

Learning involves the whole person.

The PCG Circles process closely conforms to state-of-the-art principles of adult learning. People can’t learn unless they’re ready to learn. Learning environments must enable learners to be involved in the learning, question new information and materials, try them out, and reflect on how the learning suits how they learn.

PCGs represent an effective, low-cost way to do LD, problem solving, networking, and accountability for trainings, programs, and plans. PCGs give people practical tips and tools. They are owned and operated by the members. They facilitate *getting things done* and *learning* at the same time. As long as people are being honest and engaged with themselves and others, their organizations will survive—and thrive. LE

Carter McNamara is an expert in OD and known as the Father of Peer Coaching Groups. He is a partner at Authenticity Consulting. Visit www.authenticityconsulting.com.

ACTION: Start using peer coaching groups.

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