



2017 APECS Symposium: Session 1.3

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The Leadership Gap (edited from original post on [Linked-in](#))

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What are the emergent challenges that leaders need most help with from their coaches? I'm going to highlight two big themes here, which increasingly arise in my own coaching practice – and which have resonance in the broader societal context of leadership to which we are all exposed if we follow the news.

I'm skipping over perennial themes, such as delivering *performance*, leading *change* and developing new skills or *behaviours*. These bread and butter agendas of leadership are most likely familiar to any experienced executive or leadership coach. Plenty of coaching blogs deal with these, so my aim here is look beyond to some of the more challenging aspects of leadership and what this means for coaching.

Coaching for complexity

The first of my two meta-themes, is **complexity**. Leaders face increasing complexity in their organisational environments as well as inner lives, sometimes combining with pressure and stress to the point of overwhelm, shutout or breakdown. Dealing with complexity is a prime imperative for all of us and involves developing new levels of awareness, capacities for understanding and strategies for action. Specifically, we need to develop our capacity for taking systemic perspectives (e.g. [Seeing Systems, Barry Oshry, 2007](#)), and engaging with systems forces (e.g. 'Five Dimensions of Leadership', Roger Evans, 2017). I emphasise the need for a systemic perspective here, because without it we are simply overwhelmed by content and detail, or worse, we deny and reduce complexity to fit our comfort zone of over-simplification, with potentially disastrous consequences.

To illustrate how this is playing out on the broader stage:

“...too many of the problems in societies today stem from leadership that is ill prepared to deal with present complexity. ...too many leaders have been educated for a different time, a different world. Few are prepared for the task of dealing with the complexity and chaos of today when the usual formulas and stopgap solutions of an earlier era will not help”. (Jean Houston, <http://jeanhoustonfoundation.org/social-artistry/the-leadership-dilemma/>)

Adam Curtis’ latest documentary film of our times, HyperNormalisation (2016), echoes this state of affairs and tells the story of *“How we got to this strange time of great uncertainty and confusion where those who are supposed to be in power are paralysed and have no idea what to do”.*

Robb Smith (<https://www.integrallife.com/integral-post/morning-after>) expands upon this analysis of what is often now referred to as VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity): *“...a rapidly-changing world that is in many ways moving too fast for all of us really is scary, uncomfortable and unsettling. We’re connected in ways we haven’t yet mastered, we’re learning at rates we can’t yet process and we are subject to forces we can’t hope to understand (even experts don’t really understand the complex dynamical systems at the core of their disciplines). We’re all in this messy, chaotic process together”.*

One word of warning – taking a systemic perspective isn’t just about clever objective systemic thinking (e.g. Senge’s *Fifth Discipline*). We need to include ourselves in the picture and combine big picture views with inner world (e.g. feelings, intuition, instincts) and psychological perspectives, in order to develop effective systemic practice.

Coaching the being

My second meta-theme is **being**. As in the *being* of leadership versus the *doing* of leadership, as in how to *be* a leader, as in creating the space for the human *being* in the workplace, as in *being* in right-relationship. The *being* dimension of leadership is also

sometimes approached in terms of self-and-other awareness, or presence, or charisma. A door has also been opened to bringing or allowing the *being* to be more present in organisations through the growing popularity and acceptance of mindfulness practices (although ironically this often happens in very much a doing kind of way).

Successful leadership is as much about *who* you are and *how* you are, as about *what* you do (and the same is true for coaching). Most leadership development focuses almost entirely on the doing aspect of leadership, the competencies, skills and behaviours, on strategies, tactics and execution. Although the importance of leadership *being* is increasingly acknowledged, very little practical support or development of this dimension is offered. Many good coaches might naturally bring their being to their coaching and nurture the being of their clients. However, this can be pretty hit-and-miss so on our courses we explicitly help develop coaches' awareness, capacity and subtle skills for working at the level of being, which we now refer to as ***coaching the being***. This extends to helping leaders to do the same with the people they lead and create the context for what Frederic Laloux refers to as the principles of *wholeness* and *purpose* in evolutionary organisations. Although, at an essential level, *coaching the being* is simply about being present, available and responsive to the other (e.g. Martin Buber's I and Thou) and allowing the space between you (like in [Patsy Rodenburg's 'Second Circle' 2008](#)), we very rarely find this easy given the busy-ness and clutter of both our inner lives and outer organisational worlds. As we grow and develop, our inner lives can actually become more complex and the impact of our unexplored history and unconscious drives more important. Hence the need to explore our different levels (pre-personal, personal and transpersonal) of consciousness and unconsciousness and the psychological processes that work away in our psyche.

I would like to suggest that *coaching the being*, also support leaders in their capacity to deal with complexity – that these two meta-themes are connected. The proposition here is that we (and the leaders we are coaching) need to expand our inner awareness and capacities in order to be able to meet the outer challenges we are facing in the world.

Context for discussion at APECS Symposium

I suggest we can discuss the leadership gap at both the individual and the collective level:

At an **individual level**, leaders face increasing complexity in their organisational environments as well as inner lives, sometimes combining with pressure and stress to the point of overwhelm, shutout, breakdown or crisis. Dealing with complexity is a prime imperative for all of us and involves developing new levels of awareness, capacities for understanding and strategies for action...

1. In what ways does this post resonate with your experience of working with the challenge of complexity? Or with the being of leadership? What would you add or say differently?
2. What are you learning about engaging with and closing the leadership gap in your own practice with leaders?
3. How do you see the leadership gap in relationship to 'vertical development' (in terms of any of the developmental models, (e.g. LDF, Keegan, Laloux, Spiral Dynamics). Is this about helping leaders shift or transform in their mix of action logics, worldviews or paradigms? Or more about responding to what is emergent in the leader? Or helping them develop a capacity of inner complexity that matches the outer complexity?

At the **collective level**, the gap between the leadership that is needed and the leadership capability that is available seems to be widening, with potentially serious consequences for both organisations and society.

1. How does this shape the agenda for leadership education, development and coaching?
2. How might we think differently about addressing this gap?
3. How might leadership development in organisations help, inform or cross-over to leadership development in society (e.g. politicians, communities) more widely?