



# 3 Myths About a Coaching Leadership Style

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### 3 Myths About a Coaching Leadership Style

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The more authority you gain in an organization, the more you realize that your greatest impact results from growing other leaders rather than simply making decisions and doing things yourself. This basic dynamic of leadership isn't always obvious to those with less authority. When you don't have it, authority looks like power. When you have it, you know you'll never have enough authority *or* power to solve all the problems that have landed on your shoulders. When leaders come to this realization, I usually gear up my [executive coaching services](#) to help them develop their own Coaching Leadership Style. Generally we begin by getting clear on what is (and isn't) Coaching Leadership, and debunk some common myths about leadership along the way.

## **What is a Coaching Leadership Style?**

Your leadership style essentially refers to patterns in the way you typically deal with things. If people who are late with assignments regularly receive an angry blast from you, you have an angry leadership style and “don’t suffer fools.” If you take on disagreements and work to develop consensus, you have a mediation leadership style and “don’t shy away from conflict.” If you give out assignments with more vision than instruction and provide input while they achieve success, you have a coaching leadership style. Coaching employees is like coaching a baseball team, you stand on the sidelines, lead in the creation of strategies and pray a lot on the sidelines when the team is on the field executing the strategies.

The sports analogy does break down at certain points, of course, but it is essentially valid. When you’re coaching others, even if you *could* do their job, you choose not to. You choose to give them the experience of working through problems, gathering information, deciding what to do and (as much as possible) living with the results. You don’t do this because you’re lazy. You do it to help them become more capable leaders. You do it to learn what their capabilities are, so you know how and when to rely on them in the future. You do it so you can trust them to manage the details of their areas so you can focus on other areas where less capable leaders are in charge.

Coaching leadership can be either formal or informal, depending on the person and the organization. Personally I encourage all my

clients to develop a comfort level with this style of leadership so they can decide when and where to use it most effectively.

### Myth #1: Good leaders always know the answer

I have one client who has to stave off a panic attack whenever her team comes to her expecting her to solve their problems, especially if she doesn't know the answer. She intellectually knows she shouldn't do their jobs for them, but she's emotionally petrified that if she doesn't answer their questions, they'll think she's full of hot air. She fears they'll lose respect for her. Their requests for her to solve their problems trigger her imposter syndrome and the mere fact that she's not all-knowing is enough to upset her to the point of anxiety.

Part of her challenge is an irrational fear of being disliked. She's worried that if she sends them away to resolve their own issues, they won't like her and her natural desire to please becomes triggered also. With this mass of triggers, it's hard for her to take the necessary steps back to see the best solution in the moment. Coaching isn't always the best option for every problem — especially when the stakes are high — so you need to have the ability to get perspective before stepping into coach.

Over our time working together, my client has become better at [detriggering](#) her anxieties so she can see her choices more clearly. But even when she's emotionally focused, she fights the urge to be the hero and solve the problems. Most good leaders are good problem-solvers, which is how they got where they are, so it can seem counterintuitive to let others solve challenging business

puzzles, especially if it means letting them fail occasionally in order to develop. With less triggered emotions and more experience coaching others to success, my client is learning how to step back and decide in each situation whether to coach or solve. When she chooses to coach, she's better now at letting others succeed (and sometimes fail) in order to learn important lessons of their own.

This tension between solving the problem and letting others solve it isn't only relevant in a coaching leadership situation, but to be effective in deploying a coaching leadership style it's a challenge you must become adept at managing. You'll be a better coach leader if you're comfortable with allowing others to be uncomfortable. In discomfort is where the biggest growth can occur. So letting others struggle with a problem you could easily solve yourself can take some getting used to. I'll tell you this, however, the first time they come out of their discomfort with a better solution than you would have come up with, it might be even more disconcerting! So get ready to learn a few things yourself!

Save them from taking the hard road and you may miss out on a new path to success.

### **Myth #2: Good leaders have "a style"**

Consistency in leadership style, just like parenting and being a good friend, is valuable. It's important that people be able to predict (within reason) how you'll respond when they reach out for help. That said, too much consistency can be a liability for leaders, because different situations require different kinds of responses.

For example, when time is short effective leaders don't start broad, consensus-generating decision processes if they want to make a timely decision. Conversely, when they have the luxury of time, good leaders engage a broad range of employees to contribute to a collaborative decision-making process. Excellent leaders learn to develop consensus in short periods of time.

The point is that capable leaders develop multiple styles that they can deploy easily in different circumstances and with different groups of people. [Research](#) has shown that developing a good sense of when to lead in what way can actually contribute to your positional and financial success. This makes sense. Like a like an offensive squad in a football game, if you only have one play you'll lose when you have to face a defense who's figured it out. You need a full book of plays and a team trained to use them all.

A Coaching Leadership style is one tool in your playbook. It's not always the best approach. Particularly when the risk is high and you're not willing (or able) to pay the cost of failure, consider putting your coaching hat on the bench. At times like these it's appropriate to jump into the game yourself.

However, I do advise you to stop and think twice before getting on the field. As I said above, if you're a good leader you're probably also a good problem-solver. You like to get your hands dirty and this can lead you to create situations where you believe it's always appropriate for you to jump in and do the work. Be strategic and, where you can, create at least as many situations where your presence on the field isn't necessary.

### Myth #3: Coaching someone means giving up control

Some clients have told me they struggle to get off the field and be content coaching others because it makes them feel vulnerable. They believe it's their job to produce results and when they hand over control to others so they can play the role of coach, they're anxious and uncomfortable. Even those skilled in delegating can fall prey to this fear because unlike delegating specific tasks, coaching requires that you give people more room to decide *how* the work gets done. Coaching a team member means you give them a clear sense of the end goal, the *what*, and let them explore multiple ways to get there.

If you hand over complete control to others over things that are (a) important and (b) in your area of responsibility, you should feel anxious! That's not how leadership works. Having a coaching leadership style means that you mete out responsibility to others within limits and use these boundaries to retain an appropriate amount of control. As they do the work within the boundaries you establish, you're there with advice and guidance. These coaching leadership boundaries look like:

- Deadlines
- Budgets
- Resources

You establish deadlines and then you hold them accountable. You give and take projects away as rewards for work well done. You give advice instead of making decisions, but you do it in the

context of project boundaries that establish the limits on their control, which are sub-limits of your own span of control.

Some coaching leaders get into trouble with this approach by not allowing enough time for mistakes and learning. Even if you're good at predicting how much time a particular project might take, you may not be as good at predicting how many mistakes will have to be made (and made up for) along the way when someone else is in charge of the day-to-day process of doing the work. A good rule of thumb here, stolen from the project manager's handbook, is to double your estimate. If you think you could do the work in a week, plan two weeks when someone else is doing it to give you time to coach them along the way. If you don't have the luxury of two weeks, and aren't sure of your coachee's abilities, maybe that project isn't the best one to coach them through. Use your judgement; that's what you're getting paid to do.

Coach others through the work and you'll gain a more strategic perspective yourself.

The bottom line is that by developing a coaching leadership style you'll be able to develop your team to take on greater challenges, expand your own impact (through them) and step back more often from the day-to-day. A great byproduct of this leadership style is that doing it regularly helps train you to see the larger perspective. By stepping out of the weeds, you become practiced at the treetop view. You learn to see new patterns and gain strategic insights you don't really have the opportunity to experience when you're in the scrum. Best of all, unlike a sports coach, you can choose to jump back into the fray from time to time when the situation calls for it.

It does take intention and guidance to accomplish, of course, so make sure you have mentors and [coaches](#) to back you up, too!

*Dana Theus is an [executive](#) and [career coach](#) specializing in helping you activate your highest potential to succeed and to shine. With her support emerging and established leaders take powerful, high-road shortcuts to developing their authentic leadership style and discovering new levels of confidence and impact. Dana has worked for Fortune 50 companies, entrepreneurial tech startups, government and military agencies and non-profits and she has taught graduate-level courses for several Universities. [Learn more](#) about Dana and schedule an introductory call!*

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