

CASE STUDY

# Coach out your inner leader

By Melanie Blythe

Being a good leader is about much more than management. It is about uniting people behind a cause or common purpose; it is about providing direction and inspiration so that others can perform at their best.

Leadership development, however, has proved a rather tricky area. The 'soft skills' needed to be a good leader can't be honed as successfully in a classroom setting as can the functional skills of management.

Given this scenario, could executive coaching now offer the key to producing great leaders?

Grant Rothman, Head of Finance at Nedbank's Corporate Property Finance division, believes it can. He is nearing the end of a one-and-a-half-year personal coaching journey with executive coach Janine Everson, and says the experience has transformed him as a leader.

"Coaching has given me a better appreciation of my position and the influence I hold over others," shares Rothman. "I am far more focused on the people aspects of my role and how this is as important, possibly more critical, than the technical aspects of what we do, thanks to my coaching experience."



Nedbank is just one of several companies in South Africa harnessing the benefits of leadership coaching – Toyota Tsusho Africa, British American Tobacco, Metropolitan, Anglo American and ABSA are just a few of the others that have worked with the Centre for Coaching, based at UCT's Graduate School of Business, in recent years.

Craig O'Flaherty, Director of the Centre, says the trend is confirmation that coaching delivers results when it comes to leadership development.

"Coaching is not at all the same as mentoring or counselling," says O'Flaherty. "The coaching process is designed to help each individual become more focused, more driven, more balanced and better able to deal with life's challenges.

"It is not about digging up the past but rather about focusing on the present and the future so that people can replace negative behaviours with positive ones and perform better at work and be happier at home. The people-orientated nature of coaching makes it the ideal tool for leadership development," he explains.

Rothman agrees, but cautions that coaching is not about being instructed on how to behave differently – it is about looking deep within to find the answers yourself.

"Coaching is about self-exploration, not about being mentored or instructed. This is very important to understand upfront. The coach is there to guide you along your journey, which can be challenging given the amount of introspection it requires – people find it quite difficult to look at themselves honestly," he says.

Frank Berkeley, Managing Executive at Nedbank Corporate Property Finance and Rothman's superior, sees it the same way. He was coached by O'Flaherty prior to Rothman's own coaching experience and describes it as "possibly the single most important thing I've ever done".

Such a resounding endorsement asks the question, Why?

"Craig held up the mirror for me so that I could really look at myself," he explains. "While I liked the person I saw, I didn't like some of my behaviours."

Berkeley shares how, some four years ago, he became stuck in a negative headspace. "I found that everybody was irritating me all the time. I decided to take a three-month sabbatical and after a lot of thinking I reached the scary conclusion that I was the common denominator."

That realisation prompted him to take on a coach and the difference it has made, according to him, has been incredible.

"My coaching experience fundamentally changed my life – with my family, my colleagues and my boss," he enthuses.

Berkeley and Rothman are among a growing group of leaders at Nedbank Corporate Property Finance who have now undergone some level of personal coaching, and the division is weaving coaching interventions into its leadership development programmes.

Rothman, for example, was initially introduced to the practice when he and his colleagues were sent on a three-day programme at the Centre for Coaching in 2009. The experience, he says, "immediately struck a chord".

He describes his time with coach Janine Everson, who is also the Academic Director of the Centre for Coaching, as "challenging and fulfilling" and says he is seeing notable differences in his behaviours and outlook – as are his co-workers and family.

"Before coaching I was a very rules-orientated person. I had very strict rules for the way I lived my life and could be quite

uncompromising about them. Coaching helped me to realise this more fully and recognise the effects of my behaviour on colleagues and family."

To counter this, Rothman was given a number of practices and self-observations – one of which was to "break one rule every day" – even if it was something as simple as climbing out of bed on the 'wrong' side.

"This technique helped to break entrenched patterns of behaviour and allowed Grant to realise that breaking rules and doing things differently wasn't going to bring the world crashing down around him," explains Everson.

Berkeley confirms that Rothman is now far more flexible and confident.

"Grant was not someone who I thought needed to be coached but I can definitely see the differences in him for it. He was very rules bound and now he is more flexible. There is no doubt that he has grown as a leader. I think that proves my view that coaching can benefit anyone."

In terms of the actual coaching process, Rothman had a once-a-month session with Everson and was given reading material to assist the process. He was encouraged to do deep thinking and exploring both with Everson and on his own. A 360° observation was conducted to give an honest appraisal of his strengths and weaknesses as a leader from the perspective of his colleagues, superiors and subordinates.

"The 360° observation often forms the foundation for the coaching we do," explains Everson. "It gives the coachee an opportunity to see exactly how others perceive them. It can prove to be quite shocking for some."

Reflecting on his journey with Everson, Rothman says he now feels more at ease with himself and his role as a leader.

"I truly believe that I did change through coaching," he affirms. "I am more in tune with what's important to me at work and at home; I am less stressed about life and I'm generally more open minded. This is hugely important because as a leader you need to be able to spot opportunities and deal with challenges effectively when they arise."

Feedback from his team reinforces that the transformation has not just taken place in his mind, but in practice.

"Previously you used to avoid conflict like the plague, now you handle conflict situations very calmly and well," one colleague has commented. Others point to improvements in delegation, decision-making and public speaking, as well as a less stressed out demeanour in tense situations.

His team's performance has also been enhanced. Berkeley reveals how the modest Rothman has improved his leadership scorecard to such an extent that it couldn't possibly get any better.

Says Rothman: "The output of my team has improved as I have taken my head out of the operational detail and am focusing more on people. I have learnt that when you focus on people and how you engage with them, the output actually takes care of itself."

The comment demonstrates clearly how coaching has enabled Rothman to make the jump from management to leadership.

However, "There is no silver bullet to becoming a great leader," he advises. "Experience and good role models count for a lot, but looking within counts for more. Coaching has put me on a journey of continuous self-improvement, and for a leader that is crucial."