

EXECUTIVE
COACHING

Leading With a Healthy *Sense of Self*

Leaders with a healthy sense of self are an important asset for business success. These talents can be nurtured through executive coaching.

Lisa Rabasca Roepe



In today's culture of doing, your sense of self is grounded in the work you do, the skills you have and accomplishments you have attained, rather than your values and character traits. In a culture of doing, tasks take precedence over personal relationships and deadlines and profits are more important than personal values. As a result, it's become much harder to have a healthy sense of self. For many, a sense of self is misguidedly tied to their accomplishments, not character traits such as integrity, trustworthiness, self-awareness, responsibility, accountability and openness.

So what's so bad about lacking a healthy sense of self? For one thing, leaders without this critical parameter are more likely to focus on what's urgent, rather than what's important to their values, says executive coach Jody Fosnough.

"The culture of doing allows us to disguise ourselves behind how productive we are," says Melissa Hook Shahbazian, an innovation coach and graphic facilitator at LIME. Yet, a leader with a healthy sense of self typically will define himself or herself by values, not accomplishments and skills, she says.

A healthy sense of self—knowing who we are and how others perceive us—can empower leaders to tackle challenges with more confidence, says career coach Andrea Raggambi. "We all waver and question ourselves at times but being able to come back to our truths and live authentically, based on who we believe we are, will help us make decisions and move forward during difficult times," she says.



Staff and business thrive with self-aware leaders

Leaders who aren't focused on their values as their true north can easily cause chaos. For instance, says Raggambi, they are more inclined to deflect and place blame when difficult circumstances arise. They often react outwardly rather than first reflecting inward when faced with a difficult situation. "They might even keep important information to themselves because they don't want to put trust in others around them, fearing they will bring them down or steal their spotlight," she says.

In fact, says Shahbazian, a leader without a healthy sense of self can create a culture of fear among employees. "People tend to stick to rank when they feel threatened," she says. "They start to panic and become sticklers for titles, start playing out power trips and focus on what's unfair." As a result, employees will become disengaged and the best talent in the company will often leave.

"Leaders that lack a sense of self tend to rattle cages and react frequently so you might see employees who fear these leaders and who aren't being motivated in healthy ways to perform," says Raggambi. "In this type of environment, conflict arises easily and frequently, and a leader who lacks a healthy sense of self may not be able to see how others really see them to understand the best ways to resolve conflict and lead effectively."

In contrast, a leader with a healthy sense of self will be more responsive than reactionary. "They are more humble and accepting of failures, and forgiving of themselves and others when mistakes are made," Raggambi says. "They also have integrity, speak from their own truths and embrace openness rather than control."

When a leader has a consistent message, their actions will be reflected in the company's values and brand, says Fosnough. And, because employees and shareholders are confident that the leader's actions will be consistent, they have the confidence and courage to create and innovate.



Companies that have benefited from self-aware leaders

A number of successful companies, including Zappos and Lockheed Martin, have excelled because their CEOs have a healthy sense of self. Last year, Zappos CEO, Tony Hsieh, eliminated managers and job titles, and told employees to create their roles based on their strengths.

Rather than fill roles, teams and a mission that forces its employees into a box, says Shahbazian, employees are creating their own projects and incentives. Hsieh is providing a consistent message that gives the staff the confidence they need to create and innovate as opposed to relying on an antiquated mission statement or ideas that no longer make sense for its business, Shahbazian says. “You can repeat a mission statement until you’re blue in the face, and you can get your employees to say it until they’re blue in the face, too, but,” she says, “if it doesn’t make sense for your company, it won’t work.”

Take the example of Marillyn Hewson, Lockheed Martin’s chairman, president and CEO. Hewson demonstrated a strong sense of self when she was able to maintain a vital sense of community with her employees and a shared purpose with her shareholders when economic pressures forced her to cut 4,000 jobs in 2013. Yet, says Raggambi, she is fully invested in and committed to the organization. During this time of crisis, Hewson created a shared vision with her staff that focused on sustaining strong profits and shareholder returns while funding research efforts in each business unit. These strategies enabled staff to innovate by encouraging them to look beyond the present to find solutions to problems customers might not even know they have yet. “Someone who is not self-aware or doesn’t have a healthy sense of self couldn’t lead effectively in this situation,” Shahbazian says.



Ways to increase self-awareness

Executive coaching to institute a healthy sense of self can be difficult. “Those with an inflated sense of self could be less willing to see or acknowledge that they would benefit from finding increased balance,” Raggambi says.

Shahbazian agrees. “A leader being coached must have a willingness to shift the level of acceptance and the attitude he or she has and challenge [the] inner critic,” she says. “Self-awareness is understanding how your own emotions, perceptions and even physiology factor into decision-making, and how well you handle yourself and others.”

An executive coach can help leaders develop a healthy sense of self by:

- Ridding the executives of unrealistic opinions they have about themselves
- Becoming an intuitive listener
- Practicing mindfulness

We often have unrealistic opinions about ourselves because of situations or experiences in our past, Raggambi says. These beliefs can prevent us from being and acting authentically. “A strategy to help us let go of some of those limiting beliefs is to write down some rules that we have carried with us from childhood and decide if and how those still serve us today,” she says. They may have helped some purpose in the past but may no longer apply. For instance, she says, many people believe they can’t take a break until they finish all their work but, in reality, taking a short walk or eating lunch away from our desks, can make us more productive. “Once we let go of behaviors around limiting beliefs that no longer serve us, we free up our energy to engage in experiences and feelings about our behavior that better match our reality,” she says.



Becoming a more intuitive listener, says Raggambi, means paying attention to what is not being said. “So much of what we need to know about who we are is reflected in how we interpret what others say to us,” Raggambi says. “If we are able to remove judgment and really understand, not just hear or listen, to what others are saying about how and why they are saying it to us, we can learn so much about ourselves.”

Strategies for achieving this include not thinking about how you might respond while someone is speaking and not allowing your mind to wander to something else during the conversation. “This kind of listening will build rapport, establish buy-in and help us acknowledge how people feel about us based on their tone and intensity of the conversation and what they are asking of us,” she says.

Mindfulness allows leaders to just “be” at times of stress. A mindfulness practice will help

leaders relax and respond thoughtfully when there is a problem instead of just reacting, Raggambi says. “Whether it is through formal meditation or just moments we take to clear our minds and really experience just being, feeling our bodies and clearing our minds, this practice allows us to eventually see that events in our day or circumstances in our life are taking a lot of power and energy from us unnecessarily,” she says.

Leaders who understand who they are and how others perceive them are more confident and more focused on what they value rather than what’s urgent at the moment. This type of leadership often creates a winning playing field for employees and shareholders and empowers them with the confidence and courage to innovate and mold an even more vital and thriving business.

Lisa Rabasca Roepe is a journalist who writes about the culture of work, personal finance, and the media. Her work has appeared in Fast Company, Quartz, The Week, Men’s Journal and Eater.

