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Becoming a Quiet (Actuarial) Leader

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I was invited to participate in an executive coaching group this year. By the way, if you are serious about your leadership growth, always take advantage of these opportunities. The curriculum involved reading, studying and practicing the concepts from the book *Quiet Leadership* by David Rock. This book is a deep dive into a frequently overlooked, but extremely important, leadership competency: improving others' performance.

Transforming performance is not a new topic. However, as Rock argues, traditional approaches are ineffective. Those include giving advice, solving the problem, and prescribing how to think about something. Quiet Leaders distinguish themselves by becoming "masters of helping others think for themselves."

Actuaries are high-powered thinkers and problems solvers. Actuarial leaders, however, have the additional responsibility of transforming the performance of other actuaries. Imagine the implications to your organization and profession of truly transforming their performance. In this article, I share five of my key learning points from the book. There are many other lessons, but my focus here is on the components that readers can quickly put into place and see immediate results.

1. TRANSFORMING PERFORMANCE ISN'T ROCKET SCIENCE; IT'S BRAIN SCIENCE.

Our leadership stands to make a huge improvement if we lead in a way consistent with people's brains. Consider a few facts about thinking and the brain:

- Brains operate by making connections and forming maps within the framework of their current wiring.
- Old wiring is nearly impossible to deconstruct, whereas new wiring is easy to construct.
- Every person's brain is very different.

Telling people how to think, directly or subtly, is ineffective. People must solve problems in

such a way that their brain processes information and forms connections. Then, the real value to transforming performance comes when the newly formed connections are used to solve future problems.

This leads to great results. Henry Cloud, in his book *Boundaries for Leaders*, gives additional support for the power of leading in ways that people's brains work. He states, "From making the coffee to making computers, people have what it takes to get it done, if the right ingredients are present and the wrong ones are not. The leader's job is to lead in ways such that people can do what they are best at doing: using their gifts and their brains to get great results."

2. START BY CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF THE DILEMMA.

One benefit of Quiet Leadership principles is to solve problems more efficiently (in addition to more effectively). What would otherwise take hours to solve, may take a matter of minutes. To do this, capture the essence of the dilemma by determining what the person really, really wants and what is getting in the way.

A dilemma may look something like this: "I really, really want to get my FSA, but I can't seem to find time to study." From there, you would ask thinking questions to get the person you are coaching to develop their own insights for how they can find more study time. If, instead, you jump straight into versions of what you did to pass exams, manuals they should read, and courses they should take, the coachee is likely to walk away and not do anything. Without capturing the essence of the dilemma, you also risk getting hung up in the details and drama of the situation—facets of the dilemma that may be very interesting, but not useful for developing insights and hardwiring habits.

Because of their problem-solving ability and penchant for details, actuarial leaders are at high risk for getting caught up in unnecessary details when coaching people. It is easy to get lost in such details, which can result in taking a very long time to get to a useful insight (if at all) and frustration

for the person with the dilemma. This is not to say that the details in such situations are unimportant. The leader just has to remember that the goal of a coaching conversation is for the coachees to develop their own insights and to hardwire new thinking.

3. END THE MADNESS OF THINKING FOR OTHERS.

Leaders must stop doing the thinking for people. While this may seem obvious, it is far too common in the organizations we all work in. Rock encourages leaders to get out of the advice and answers business and, instead, get into the “helping others think better” business. Rock states, “*Many of us believe we can think for people, yet when it comes to the way we process information, our brains are all dramatically different. What we think another person should be doing is just what our brain might want to do, which is very unlikely to be the right idea for them.*”

The key to improving others’ thinking is to ask thinking questions. Here is an illustration. Imagine you (John) have an actuarial student (Katie) who is struggling to find time to study at work for her upcoming exam. She has approached you for help.

A common set of questions coming from you might look something like this:

- Are the other students having this problem?
- Have you tried tracking your hours in the spreadsheet I sent out?
- Why don’t you get to the office earlier so you aren’t distracted by activity?
- How many weeks is it until the exam?

The Quiet Leadership approach is very different. Consider asking alternative questions meant to help Katie think about her dilemma and how she might solve it:

- How long has this been bothering you?
- On a scale from 1 to 10, how much of a priority is resolving this?
- How can I best help you think this through?
- What can we do together to make this work?

See the difference? John (a Quiet Leader) doesn’t jump straight into making assumptions, giving advice, making suggestions, or doing any thinking for Katie. Through disciplined dialogue, he is committed to helping Katie solve the problem in a way that her brain works—and helping and supporting her along the way.

Actuaries, like other problem-solving professionals, are particularly susceptible to thinking for others. Rock states, “*People with MBA’s, engineering, or accounting degrees are often (though not always!) logical and analytical thinkers who enjoy delving into problems. When analyzing and trying to change processes, an analytical and problem-focused approach is very useful. But when trying to change people, something else is needed.*” And this “something else” is improved thinking.

I’m only scratching the surface here. More details and practices can be found in the book. But, by changing the questions you ask and appropriately structuring the conversation when approached with dilemmas, leaders can have an instant impact. And this is a major step toward positively and efficiently transforming performance.

4. BE SSG—SPECIFIC, SUCCINCT AND GENEROUS.

For actuarial leaders, right up there with becoming an ASA or an FSA is becoming SSG.

- **Succinct** because conversations that stay focused allow mental energy to be spent helping people develop their own insights.
- **Specific** so people understand exactly what you mean.
- **Generous** because people think better when they are excited and motivated.

Let’s revisit Katie’s study time dilemma and consider two alternative responses from John.

A Non-SSG Approach:

“Oh, been there done that! When I was an actuarial student, I didn’t get much study time either. I was working on annual statements,

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rate filings and valuation work. In fact, those were also the days when the exams were harder, and we had to pass more of them [ouch!]. So what's going on here? Are you not focused enough? Are you not making studying a priority? Have you talked to the student program manager about this?"

The SSG Approach:

"I appreciate you taking the time to let me know you are struggling with getting your study time at work. Passing actuarial exams is important to our work, and I'd like the opportunity to help you explore some insights to help you solve this. Are you open to that?"

See the difference? Being SSG is something that is very useful both inside and outside of coaching conversations. Practice this in your interactions with others, and I believe you will immediately see people respond positively.

When you engage with others, using permission is useful no matter the circumstance. It is easy to implement and takes very little effort.

5. ESTABLISH PERMISSION IN YOUR CONVERSATIONS.

In the prior example, an important concept was illustrated: establishing permission. Permission is very useful in several types of frequently encountered situations: someone is (or may be) busy, the conversation is personal, or a conversation shifts gears.

In the regular flow of business, leaders are quick to assume that others have the same boundaries as they do (i.e., that their brains operate the same as theirs!). By establishing permission, we set this aside and open the door for welcomed and effective dialogue.

Our study time example is useful for further illustrating this.

John: "*Katie, I'm really concerned about your study time. What's going on?*"

Katie: "*I'm really busy trying to work on the project you gave me. I wish this conversation could wait, but since you are so concerned, I don't want it hanging over my head so let's get it over with.*"

John's approach doesn't respect Katie's boundaries and puts her on the defensive. Establishing permission can change the game as the following alternative scenario shows.

John: "*Katie, I know you are busy with that project right now. But, I was reviewing your study hours, and I have some concerns I would like to discuss for a few minutes. Is now a good time?*"

Katie: "*I'm busy right now, but since it will only take a few minutes, sure, why not.*"

In the second exchange, John is effective at establishing permission. He respects Katie's boundaries, gives her the *option* to talk to him now, and sets the conversation up to transpire positively and effectively. When you engage with others, using permission is useful no matter the circumstance. It is easy to implement and takes very little effort.

By putting Quiet Leadership principles into practice, I believe you will improve your effectiveness as a leader. The five lessons detailed in this article can be put into place immediately, allowing you to take important steps to becoming a leader who transforms performance. Drop me an email letting me know about your progress on your journey to become a Quiet (actuarial) Leader. ●