Coaching leadership style: a learning process

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to outline a coaching leadership style based on an optimistic view of individuals. It is a method based on optimism, self-efficacy, positive emotions and learning. Focus is on the employee who wants to develop his potential and become the best version of himself. The aim is to achieve both personal and organizational goals. The paper describes how a method consisting of two learning processes can help to implement a coaching leadership style in practice. Learning 1: Using mental models to understand one's own situation and how others think. Learning 2: Using tools to change one's own and others' behavior. The paper shows that to succeed with a coaching leadership style, leaders must have a large toolbox, which includes tools such as self-management and a give-culture.

1 Introduction

A coaching leadership style (CLS) implies that the leader uses coaching as the main method with which to achieve the desired results. As in sports, where a coach enables an athlete to transform physical and psychological strengths into performance prowess, the leader can coach the employee to empower self-regulation (Grant, 2013), self-leadership (Manz and Sims, 2001) and to build lasting personal strengths (Hunt and Weintraub, 2002). Indeed, coaching in the business world came from sports, but is by nature far more complex because the people and situations that a leader must deal with, are infinitely more varied than the match results or finish times that numerically measure athletic performance.

However, there are no clear and common definitions of what coaching entails (Berg and Karlsen, 2007). The notion of coaching varies from being systematized common sense to a complex jungle of many opinions (Mihiotis and Argirou, 2016). There is a growing expectation that leaders should coach their employees (McCarthy and Milner, 2013). We introduce coaching as an important tool in the leadership toolbox. Coaching is understood as a tool to develop self-confidence and contribute to actions that create results. Coaching is about opening people's potential to maximize their performance and to achieve desired goals. It is about helping them to learn rather than teaching them (Whitmore, 2011). Each employee has the potential to become the best version of her- or himself. To get there, one must work with learning processes. First, one has to learn how to use mental models to understand one's personal situation and the thoughts of others. Second, it is important to learn how to use tools to implement the desired behaviour and realize goals. In the article, we refer to this concept, respectively, as Learning 1 and Learning 2.

The purpose of this article is to outline a conceptual framework; a method for a coaching leadership style with its strengths and weaknesses. The method is based on optimism, self-efficacy, positive emotions and learning. There is a shortage of published scientific research on coaching as a leadership style (Berg and Karlsen, 2016), thus there is a need to understand and improve the body of knowledge about coaching.

2 Method

Many researchers have studied the concepts of leadership and coaching in organizations. The conceptual framework presented in this article has drawn on literature from fields such as leadership, management, coaching, positive psychology, organizational behaviour and learning. These fields of study were identified through a search of scholarly literature. The initial review began with an examination of literature that discussed the concept of leadership in organizations. The review process was then narrowed down to literature that specifically referred to different leadership styles with a focus on coaching. Some of the key leadership theories that were considered included servant leadership, situational leadership and full range leadership development. The initial broad review of relevant literature was followed by a process of analysis and synthesis. The literary analysis began with identifying literature relevant to this article and addressing issues related to a coaching leadership style in organizations. Specific attention was given to identifying how learning processes can help to implement a coaching leadership style. The key factors that emerged from the review were then synthesized to form the conceptual framework in this article. The process of synthesis focused on capturing the dominant questions that should be asked during the learning processes. The conceptual framework (i.e. the coaching leadership style model) presented in this article is an attempt to unify different ideas into a comprehensive understanding of how learning processes

can help to implement a coaching leadership style. Based on the review, Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of this study.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework: CLS model
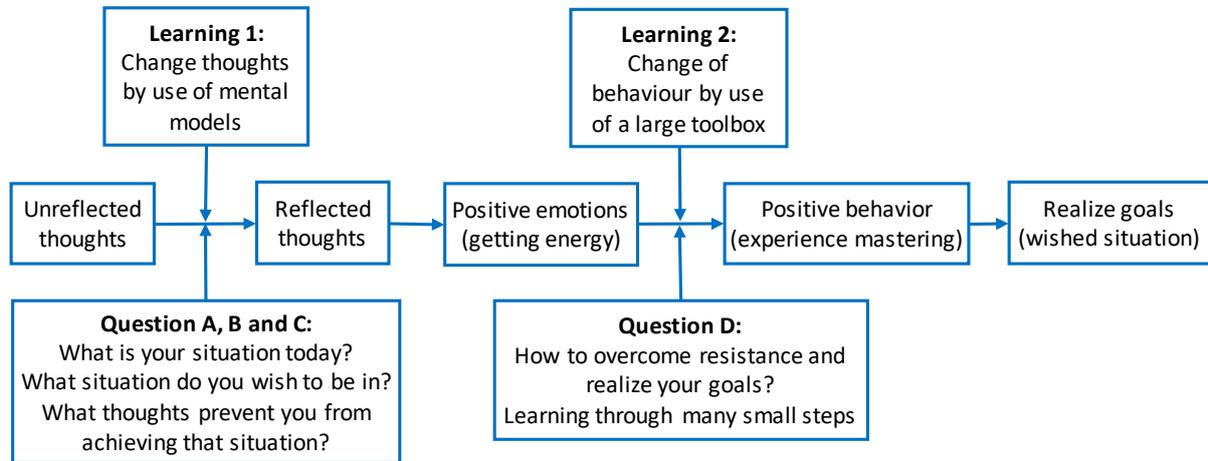
The process starts with what we will describe as unreflected thoughts: Both the current situation and the desired situation are unclear. To reach the goals, one must work with two types of learning: Learning 1 utilises mental models to understand one's own situation and the thoughts of others. It may be an interpretation of the current situation, but also wishes about the future. Learning 2 employs the right tools to implement the desired behaviour and realize goals. The model assumes that reflected thoughts can lead to positive emotions. This assumption infuses optimism, hope and energy into actions. The model further argues that the use of helpful tools can lead to self-efficacy, positive behaviours and the desired results.

3   Learning 1: Use of mental models

CLS is inspired by a positive view of human life. The method is based on two optimistic fields of research: Positive psychology and positive neuropsychology. Positive psychology strives to make individuals, teams and organizations "flourish" (Linley et al., 2010). The individual has the opportunity to develop a good and meaningful life. The strategy is strength-based and the individual must identify and use his strengths. The intention is that the individual should develop a feeling of greater social, emotional and cognitive well-being. This goal requires an interaction between thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

To some degree, several management theories and tools have integrated an element of coaching:

Servant leadership is a philosophy where leaders act as helpers and servants for their employees (Van Dierendonck, 2011; Gotsis and Grimani, 2016). Leaders use empathy and listen to their employees to understand their needs. This could lead to greater job satisfaction and efficiency.

Emotional intelligence is a key component in good leadership. Leaders who achieve the best results use elements from six different leadership styles, depending on the situation. The leadership styles are based on different aspects of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998; 2004; Batool, 2013).

Situational leadership II identifies four categories of employees (Blanchard, 2007). Based on this understanding, the leader chooses between the four different leadership styles. Coaching is one of the four styles and should be chosen when the employee does not have the necessary competence and skills, and is low on motivation and commitment.

Full Range Leadership Development, which was introduced by Burns (1978), provides an overview of five different styles of leadership, from laissez-faire, reactive, proactive, and transactional to transformational. According to Sosik and Jung (2010), the transformational leadership style includes four components of behaviour: (1) Idealized influence, where the leader serves as a role model; (2) inspirational motivation, in which the leader encourages, inspires and motivates; (3) intellectual stimulation, where the leader stimulates creativity and (4) individual consideration, in which the leader shows concern for the subordinates. Elements of coaching are included in transformational leadership (Cerni et al., 2010). The leader shows empathy and treats his employees as individuals with different needs, abilities and aspirations.

Except for servant leadership, all of the above-described theories assume that the leader has model power: By use of the theories, the leader decides how the situation should be interpreted. The models provide guidance on the leadership style to be practiced. CLS builds on these thoughts, but questions this kind of model power. CLS involves a mutual partnership in learning. Instead of the leader defining the situation and the leadership style, this happens in a partnership with the employees. Leaders and employees are encouraged to develop a good relationship, characterized by trust and involvement. This may mean reinterpreting the situation, reformulating goals, trying out tools and constantly learning from the process.

Previous research (e.g. Cox et al., 2010) has shown that leaders who succeed believed they had special skills to coach their employees. The leaders experienced self-efficacy and the ability to establish trust and build good relations with his employees. The reason was because the leaders really cared about their employees and truly wanted to help them to succeed. The leaders emphasized learning as the key element in the coaching process.
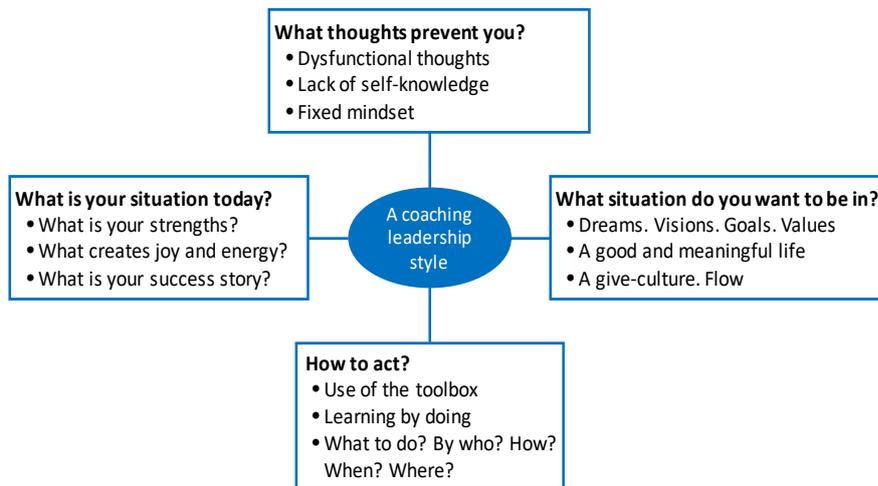
4   Use of CLS: Four questions

The Greek philosopher Socrates argued that he could not teach anything. He could only ask questions. The English poet and writer Rudyard Kipling claimed he had six honest servants. They had taught him everything he knew. Their names were What, Why, When, How, Where, and Who. By asking good questions, the employees may find the answers themselves. This approach provides self-efficacy and motivation (Baron and Morin, 2009).

The best-known method of coaching is based on the GROW model (Whitmore, 2011). The method emphasizes setting goals (**G**oal); examining the current situation of the individual (**R**eality); exploring options and choosing a strategy (**O**ptions) and establishing the will to act (**W**ill). The latter phase includes questions such as: What should be done? Of whom? Where? How? When? CLS should be based on a similar structure. The phases involve the following question (see Figure 2):

      A. What is your situation today?
      B. What situation do you wish to be in?
      C. What thoughts or barriers prevent you from getting there?
      D. How can you realize your wish? How to act?

Figure 2 Four key questions (Adapted from Berg and Karlsen, 2016)

What thoughts prevent you?
- Dysfunctional thoughts
- Lack of self-knowledge
- Fixed mindset

What is your situation today?
- What is your strengths?
- What creates joy and energy?
- What is your success story?

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What situation do you want to be in?
- Dreams. Visions. Goals. Values
- A good and meaningful life
- A give-culture. Flow

How to act?
- Use of the toolbox
- Learning by doing
- What to do? By who? How? When? Where?

Research on CLS indicates that this leadership style provides results (Hicks, 2014). It is most effective when leaders support their employees to build lasting personal strengths, which can help the employees to reach their goals. Both leaders and employees can be coached. This, in turn, can result in more efficient leadership (Theeboom et al., 2014).

A coaching leadership style builds trust, promotes individual competence, develops a high commitment to shared goals and fosters a more skilful and competent leader. Leaders also experience less stress (Henson, 2013).

4.1   Question A: What is your situation today?
The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed that if we seek to help another person to succeed, it is necessary to understand the person's situation. In order to help, we need to understand more than the person in need of help, but above all, we must try to understand what he himself understand.

When working with change issues, one can distinguish between a deficit approach and a strength approach (Cameron and Lavine, 2006). The deficit approach focuses on weaknesses, faults and shortcomings in individuals, teams and organizations. The purpose is to identify problems, analyse them, find alternatives, choose a solution and implement this option. However, the focus on errors and omissions may provide negative emotions. This strategy puts the employees in a defensive position. Creativity and self-efficacy are reduced and the room for posturing may be smaller (Fredrickson, 2001).

The strength approach begins with identifying the success stories when individuals, teams or the organization have performed best and understanding what makes it possible to achieve such results. This strategy also emphasizes ways in which these good results can be continued and repeated in the future, as well as how to implement strategies to realize a desired future, characterized by good results. The focus is on success and development of positive emotions. There is a correlation between positive emotions and creativity, learning, achievement and well-being. Mastery, self-esteem, optimism and gratitude increases (Linley et al., 2010).

The most important tool for developing skilled employees is to identify and develop their signature strengths (Seligman, 2002). These features constitute basic qualities of the individual and include self-discipline, courage, creativity, emotional intelligence and altruism. Positive psychology assumes that if people use their signature strengths in important parts of their life, they will develop joy and meaning. Key areas of life can be work, love, parenting and good relationships in general (Seligman, 2002).

To test whether you really have a specific signature strength (e.g. courage), you must answer yes to three questions: Am I really brave? Do I feel joy in showing courage? Does it give me energy and strength? However, a signature strength should be practiced with care and wisdom. You should be brave, but not cowardly and foolhardy.

Employees should get to know their own signature strengths. Identifying unrealized signature strengths entails a huge potential for growth and development (Linley et al., 2010). Use of strength-based coaching can lead to better goal achievement, improved self-confidence and positive emotions (Toogood, 2012).

4.2   Question B: What situation do you wish to be in?
A good life involves a balance between three values: (a) Hedonism: To provide pleasure and avoid pain. (b) Eudemonia: To develop oneself personally and professionally. (c) Altruism: To assist others and work for something greater than oneself (Seligman, 2002). Every person needs to locate one's own balance between these three values.

Many successful teams and organizations have developed a "give" culture (Grant, 2013). Employees are encouraged to give and seek help; reward those who provide help and sieve out those who just take without giving anything back. In a give culture, members help one another, share knowledge and use colleague coaching without expecting anything in return (Grant, 2013). There is a clear correlation between a give culture and productivity, efficiency, profits and employee satisfaction (Berg and Karlsen, 2012). In a "take" culture, colleagues can also help each other, but only when the personal benefits exceed the disadvantage of giving. In a give culture, members help each other without expecting anything in return. Giving has an intrinsic value. In such a culture, colleague coaching is vital (Berg and Karlsen, 2012).

Positive emotions, such as joy, hope and self-efficacy are important in a desired future. Csikszentmihalyi (2003) identifies different emotions such as anxiety, boredom and "flow", depending on the challenges the person faces and his or her skills. There may be a desire that employees experience flow frequently at work. Flow implies a balance between major challenges and competence. This can lead to improved creativity and higher achievements. Leaders should try to gain insight into what employees feel at work and how to help them to experience flow.

When do we perform best? Is it best to be oriented toward performance, learning or task? Elliot et al. (2011) believe that it is when we are task oriented that we perform best. The focus is on the job to be done. We are present in the moment, here and now.

Locke (1996) claims that we perform better when we have a specific goal to accomplish. Clear and demanding goals result in improved performance. The more demanding the goal, the greater joy one feels when it is achieved. The process is most effective when feedback is given

regarding the progress. The highest commitment to the goal is gained when the individual is convinced that (a) the target is important and (b) the goal is achievable (Locke, 1996). Use of coaching gives clear goals, clear expectations and a good description of the desired situation (Grant et al., 2009).

4.3   Question C: What thoughts prevent you?

The human being is a product of evolution over millions of years. The impetus was survival and reproduction. The Stone Age man had to identify hazards such as predatory animals and reptiles. The strategy was fight or flight. Surviving was far more important than identifying pleasure and positive emotions.

During the last 200 years, we have experienced tremendous technological development, but the brain has not evolved accordingly. One can claim that the brain operates at a Stone Age level, but in a digital age. Today's predators are being unloved, failing to perform as expected, lacking appreciation, missing deadlines and being unseen and unheard. This can lead to negative emotions such as low self-esteem, low self-efficacy, pessimism and a lack of hope for the future. This scenario creates stress and there are no simple solutions to overcoming stress (Berg, 2008).

A better strategy than to fight or flee is to collaborate and develop positive thoughts. This contributes to good feelings such as optimism, hope, joy and self-efficacy. There is a correlation between positive emotions on one hand and creativity, collaboration and efficiency on the other (Fredrickson, 2001). Dysfunctional thoughts can lead to negative emotions.

One obstacle is that the individual has a fixed, rather than a learning-oriented, mindset (Dweck, 2006). Such a fixed mindset can lead to dysfunctional thought-patterns (Burns, 1980). A person may also be convinced that he cannot change his thoughts. This could easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It takes three positive thoughts to offset a negative thought (Fredrickson and Losada, 2005).

Each individual's personality can be understood as a relatively fixed pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. These patterns are the individual's response to new situations. A CLS seeks to influence thoughts, feelings and behaviours. To varying degrees it is the individual who decides his or her own thoughts and feelings, as well as behaviour. This should imply that it is possible for an individual to achieve motivating results by working with personal development.

A CLS can contribute to more self-awareness and a greater understanding of the challenges that leaders and employees face so that they are able to master them (Grant et al., 2009).

4.4   Question D: How can you realize your goals? How to act?

Mahatma Gandhi believed that even the longest march begins with a small step. However, often there is a "knowing-doing" gap (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000). It is easy to have good intentions, but it is difficult to carry them out in actions. Negative thoughts and performance pressure can dominate. There is a fear of failure. In such a process, some may have a strong desire to receive confirmation that they are proficient. Others have negative thoughts on how one will be considered. In such cases, feedback can be uncomfortable.

Instead of thinking about performance and consequences, action can be seen as a learning process with many small steps. We focus on the tasks to be done; for example, listen actively, set goals and inspire. Developing psychological capital such as optimism, hope, self-efficacy and resilience (being emotionally robust) can contribute to action.

Several studies show that learning from experience separates successful leaders from leaders who do not succeed (Charan et al., 2001). This requires the individual to have personal qualities such as self-efficacy and self-knowledge (Steward et al., 2011). Learning is most effective when learning is integrated as a part of work; the employees receive feedback and are encouraged to learn by themselves. This requires the employees to have the ability and willingness to learn; they must receive relevant information and they must understand why it is important to learn (Cox et al., 2010).

CLS can build psychological capital and help to overcome the "knowing-doing" gap. Employees' thoughts and actions are supported and challenged (Hicks, 2014). This can be done in four steps (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 To achieve action through support and challenge (Adapted from Hicks, 2014)

	Thoughts	**Actions**
Support	(a) • Active listening. Understand thoughts • Verify and value thoughts • Self-efficacy. Trust. Positive emotions	(d) • Confirm the need for change • Overcome barriers • Self-efficacy. Trust. Positive emotions
Challenge	(b) • The correct thoughts? • Consequences of thoughts? • Re-formulate thoughts?	(c) • What to do? By who? • How to do it? When? Where? • Re-formulating the plans?

(a) The leader supports the employee's thoughts about action. This can provide self-efficacy, good feelings and confidence. (b) The thoughts are challenged as the employee must try to identify the consequences of their suggestions. How can the thoughts contribute to a desired future? Maybe the employee must reformulate his thoughts. (c) The employee is challenged to specify what should be done, how it should be done and when to do it. The employee is encouraged to use a strength-based approach and focus on current and past successes. He is also challenged to use "several small steps" and experiment with new forms of behaviour. (d) The leader supports the actions and confirms the need for change. This can provide self-efficacy, good feelings and confidence.

These four steps can have an impact on the likelihood of the success of a change. The leader starts to develop positive thoughts that can lead to positive feelings, which may lead to positive behaviour. This can yield positive results and reinforce positive thoughts (Berg and Karlsen, 2007). Individuals with strong self-efficacy are more successful in handling new tasks than individuals with low self-efficacy (Malone, 2001). Success depends on two conditions: The employee has the necessary skills and a strong belief in personal abilities to reach the desired results (Bandura, 1997; Caldwell and Hayes, 2016).

5 Learning 2: Using the toolkit

The final test of a CLS is whether the desired behaviour and goals are achieved. Changes can be evaluated at several levels (Kirkpatrick, 1998). At a behavioural level, the employees have changed their way of acting. They have improved their collaboration skills, but they are also capable of working more independently (Berg and Karlsen, 2016). They are more creative and have developed a give-culture where they support and challenge each other. In this give- culture, members help one another, share knowledge and learn from each other without expecting anything in return (Grant, 2013). According to Curran (2008) the chances of learning and changing behaviour increase where there is a good emotional relationship between the coach and the coachee. This is also underlined by Crichley (2010), who claims that a coach can have a major impact on the well-being of the coachee. At result level, an evaluation of the employees' change of behaviour takes place. This is an evaluation to find out whether the coaching actually has created a difference on the individual and organizational level (De Meuse et al., 2009). For example: Are the employees more satisfied, more productive? Has your organization obtained new customers? Has the production increased? Have profits (or ROI) improved? The control question is whether this can be explained by changes in behaviour and organizational culture or is it a result of other circumstances.

In order to influence the behaviour and achieve results, leaders should have knowledge about a rich toolbox (Berg, 2008). One of the most important tools are emotional intelligence (EQ) because it can also serve as a mental model to influence the mindset (Goleman, 2004). EQ can promote reflected thoughts and behavioural change to achieve goals (Batool, 2013). EQ is a framework of four key skills, self-knowledge, empathy, self-management and relationship management, for understanding oneself and others as well as changing oneself and others (Goleman, 2000). Each of the four skills can be nuanced. For example, looking at self-management, the focus is on courage and self-discipline. Other tools in the leadership toolbox include resilience (Cooper et al., 2013), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Caldwell and Hayes, 2016), locus of control (Rotter, 1990), signature strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), psychological capital (Avolio et al., 2010; Berg and Karlsen, 2014), positive feelings (Johnson and Fredrickson, 2005) and mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2005).

Leaders who succeed often have the following characteristics: They show empathy and trust in others (Ely et al., 2010); they have less need for control; they have a desire to help others to evolve and flourish; they give and receive feedback to learn themselves; they believe that most people want to learn and they assume that this will be achieved through incremental learning and not through a "sink-or-swim" strategy (Hunt and Weintraub, 2002).

6 Precautions and limitations using CLS

Much has been written about the effects of coaching, including several concerns. According to Ørsted (2015), there are primarily four challenging conditions when using CLS:

(1) *Imbalance in the power structure*. An imbalance between the coach and the coachee is probably the biggest challenge using CLS (Theeboom et al., 2014). The leader's authority and power may affect the employee in a negative direction. This authority may be far stronger than the leader himself is aware of. For example, there may be situations where the employee wants to match the leader's expectations and answer questions, although these questions exceed personal limits (Berg and Karlsen, 2016).

(2) *Invasion of privacy*. The leader may place too much emphasis on personal aspects. There should be a clear distinction between what is private and personal and work-related coaching.

Because of the leader's position and power, it can be difficult for the employee to defend himself against an invasion of privacy, even if it feels uncomfortable or even offensive.

(3) *The dark side of coaching*. While the intention behind coaching is to reduce stress, the result may be more stress. This can happen if the employee does not reach his goals and the leader starts to coach on how he still can achieve the goals. From a leader's view, the solution is often a more skilled and proficient employee. On the other hand, the employee has tried as best he could without succeeding. Given the imbalance in power, it may be difficult for the employee to defend himself. This can lead to more stress and discomfort.

(4) *Lack of psychological insight*. Coaching is about relationships and how people relate to each other. The leader may lack the necessary psychological preconditions for initiating learning processes that can influence thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This means both to understand her- or himself and to understand others.

7   Conclusion and contribution

This conceptual paper contributes to the body of knowledge by exploring how leaders can practice a CLS to achieve desired results in two important ways. First, we propose a conceptual framework – a coaching leadership style model. It provides a framework to rethink traditional leadership theories, such as servant leadership, situational leadership and full range leadership. Together the leader and the employees should support and challenge each other to realize the desired result. Second, we contribute by introducing a CLS as a partnership in learning. We have identified two learning processes. The first learning process is called Learning 1 and focuses on choosing positive mental models that can turn unreflective thoughts into reflective thoughts. This learning process can produce positive emotions in the form of self-efficacy, optimism, energy and motivation. The second learning process, Learning 2, empowers those who use it to look in the toolbox and choose the right tools to implement desired behaviour.

On the other hand, there are also situations where CLS is not a useful leadership style, such as when a decision must be made quickly or employees are highly skilled and autonomous. In such situations, a governing or delegating leadership style may be more effective.

If leaders are to succeed with a CLS, they must show necessary empathy and believe that they can act in the role of a coach. They must also have the skills to carry out this role. A coaching leadership style is most effective when the leader wants to help his employees to build lasting personal strengths, which makes employees more successful in the long run (Hunt and Weintraub, 2002).

It is a goal for everyone to live a good life, both privately and at work. But people are very different. Everyone must make their own journey. Each individual must re-interpret their own situation, re-formulate goals, identify and overcome resistance, try out new ideas and constantly learn from the process. Thus, coaching can help to solve everyday problems (Styhre, 2008). Coaching can contribute to the development of self-knowledge, self-efficacy, confidence, advantageous relationships between coach and coachee and positive changes (Toogood, 2012; Grant et al., 2009).

Future work can empirically test the proposed conceptual framework, the CLS model, by using a questionnaire. The model can be adjusted to suit the country or the organization in which the future researchers wish to test this model.

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