

# What Is “Global Leadership Coaching”?

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*Things should be as simple as possible, but not simpler.*

— Albert Einstein

Global leadership coaching shows signs of becoming the business community’s Next Big Thing. Major corporations, intent on gaining a competitive advantage worldwide, are asking for it. “It” can be described as concurrent coaching, worldwide, for the firm’s top executives and, in some cases, its top executives-to-be. Services of this type are now being sought by many global companies. Another bandwagon...

The three of us urge that, before this bandwagon gathers too much speed, businesspeople pause for a few moments to consider the question, “What *is* global leadership coaching?” Or perhaps the more critical question we need to ask is, “What is global leadership coaching *at its best?*”

Why should decision-makers contemplating a global roll-out of leadership coaching pause to ask this question? Because if they don’t, they may purchase leadership coaching *as conceived and practiced in the U.S.*, making it “global” solely because of its geographical distribution.

We’re among those who think that a global effort to coach senior leaders cannot be effective if “global” means merely “used in many geographies.” Here at GROVEWELL, where coaching of global leaders is a core service, we’ve learned that global coaching should mean “*customized* for use in *each* of many geographies.” For such a program to deliver enduring value, attention must be paid, within each locale, to how it is described and positioned, to the nuances of the coach-coachee relationship, and to its overall approach, pacing, content, and process. If lasting impact is the goal, coaching must be tailored to fit the local culture.

The concept and practice of coaching is well established in the U.S. In some other nations, coaching as both word and concept may not be recognized outside of sports arenas and the enclaves where U.S. firms operate. Instead, terms such as “teacher” and “guru” are likely to exist, and to have embedded in them traditional assumptions and values that will shape local businesspeople’s expectations towards leadership coaching. When these expectations are carried by local businesspeople into their coaching sessions, the outcome is a subtle clash of cultures.

## The Intercultural Perspective

Over the past 30 years, corporate leaders have increasingly recognized that it is cost-effective to be fully informed as they expand abroad. We’re referring to their mastering not only new legal and financial rules but also discerning and leveraging underlying differences in assumptions, values, habits of thought, and patterns of behavior that affect the ability of people from a variety of national backgrounds to attain goals when working together. Many corporations now insure that their expatriate managers, if not others, benefit from intercultural training.

*This same awareness needs to be applied to leadership coaching when it is extended beyond U.S. borders. Why?* Because coaching is grounded in a powerful Western value: PROGRESS. Progress means things like indoor plumbing, followed by hot water 24/7, followed by Jacuzzis; it means Galileo’s telescope, followed by Mount Palomar’s observatory, followed by Hubble’s infinite grasp. The desirability of *unceasing development toward an improved condition* is so deeply ingrained in American businesspeople that we even apply it to ourselves: You and I, he and she, all of us *ought* to learn, grow, and enhance our skills and abilities throughout our lives.

Leadership coaching (also known as executive coaching) is an observable outcome of this value. Some people in the U.S. make a good living by helping others attain individual progress (albeit, often within the parameters of an organization's overall business goals), providing convincing testimony that this value is robust. We don't just claim to honor progress. We *pay* to make sure that we live by it.

Coaching, as a product of the value of progress and similar U.S. values, uses U.S. methods to achieve its objectives. Consider common corporate expectations about the relationship between coach and coachee. An open coach-coachee relationship is expected to get off to a rapid and productive start although, usually, the two begin as strangers. Personal information and feelings are to be freely divulged. The coachee should be self-expressive in setting goals, self-reliant in attaining them. The goals themselves often touch upon matters of efficiency in task-accomplishment. The coach is merely facilitative; she is not senior, not directive, not a "sage."

If all this seems Right and Good to you, most likely you're an American or deeply influenced by American values. What about your counterparts in nations and cultures unlike our own that are now essential to global business success – China and India, to name just two?

### Cultural Challenges to Effective Coaching

American objectives and methods of coaching don't necessarily align well with strongly held values abroad. To begin with, the goal of upgrading one's productivity through greater efficiency may seem, to businesspeople in some world regions, like just one more example of a materialistic "live to work" mentality that they're familiar with but don't embrace. To such people, richly textured and enduring human relationships are at least as important as getting more work done faster. Those relationships begin *slowly* and mature *gradually*. Only after they mature is trust finally established.

With this in mind, put yourself in the shoes of a new coachee in an unfamiliar place who realizes that his or her personal feelings and challenges are supposed to be shared with a near stranger – the coach. In this situation, *something* will be shared, but it may not be what the coach assumes it is. For example, the Japanese distinguish between "tatemae," discussing external appearances with most people, and "honne," discussing inner realities with the deeply trusted few. (What might this mean for coaching programs based on 360° feedback?)

We live on a globe that from a distance looks pretty uniform. "Globalization" sees the world from a distance, assuming and encouraging a certain homogeneity of behavior. Is that what we want from our managers?

A closer look reveals something rather different. Far from being uniform, this world is made up of all kinds of worlds. Should we not, then, be encouraging our managers to be more worldly, more experienced in life, in both sophisticated *and* practical ways? In other words, should we not be getting into worlds beyond our own – into other people's circumstances, habits, cultures...?

Jonathan Gosling and Henry Mintzberg,  
"The Five Minds of a Manager," *Harvard Business Review*, November 2003, p. 58.

Consider now the notion that the coachee should be self-expressive and self-reliant, while the coach should be facilitative. This view tends to be characteristic of Americans, who apply it to a wide range of learning situations. In the U.S., it's best when students and trainees "discover" things for themselves; instructors are helpful advanced fellow-learners. In other cultures, those being taught, trained, or coached often have a contrary expectation – that they'll be told what to learn, and what to do to learn it, by an all-knowing senior. This type of directive behavior by an authority is experienced as supportive. Mere facilitation may be experienced as negligent.

There are coaches and trainers who travel abroad, do their customary thing, and return home saying, "Everything went fine!" We're not surprised. In many nations, generous treatment of foreigners, the maintenance of "face," and interpersonal harmony are deeply honored values. *That things should appear to go well is paramount*. Thus, disasters are rare, overt criticism still rarer. Compliments abound. Nevertheless, Made-in-America coaching programs that do not systematically incorporate intercultural knowledge and skills often unravel over the long term.

## Answering the Critical Question

Let's return now to that critical question: "What is global leadership coaching *at its best?*"

Here's our answer: *When the practice of coaching is shared across national boundaries, it will be at its best only to the extent that it is informed by wisdom from the field of intercultural consulting.* As researchers, theorists, and practitioners since 1960, interculturalists have attained in-depth awareness of the differences and similarities among the value systems of various human groups. They have learned how to transmit to others skills that enable people to interact effectively when they travel abroad to immerse themselves in a different value-system.

Finding synergies between the practice of coaching and intercultural wisdom isn't difficult. For the missions of coaches and interculturalists are nearly identical. Consider the definition of coaching offered by Philippe Rosinski in *Coaching Across Cultures* (2003, p. 4):

**Coaching is the art of facilitating the unleashing of people's potential to reach meaningful, important objectives.**

With minor alterations, this view of coaching transforms into a fine definition of intercultural consulting: the art of facilitating the enhancement of people's potential to attain important objectives *while working with others from unfamiliar cultures.*

The three of us believe that *both* professions have indispensable contributions to make to an innovative area of professional practice that we call **Coaching for Global Advantage**<sup>SM</sup>. Through our collaboration with the corporate leaders from Europe, Asia, and the Americas whom we've been coaching, we have continuously improved our approach to coaching global leaders for enduring impact. Our coachees report significant increases in their ability and desire to contribute to their company's bottom line...and beyond.



## A BREAKTHROUGH FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COACHING

In this essay, we asked "What is *global leadership coaching?*," then offered alternative answers.

On the one hand we observed that global leadership coaching currently is giving every appearance of being "Made-in-America" coaching that is exported more or less intact.

On the other hand, we envisioned a breakthrough in which the wisdom of intercultural consulting is used to contextualize and enhance current approaches to leadership coaching. The outcome is that *the values and expectations* of executives from all around the world (including those on assignment abroad) are anticipated and welcomed as legitimate contributions to their own coaching process. Only then can we speak of a genuinely GLOBAL coaching program. Only then will such programs generate lasting beneficial impact for *all* coachees and their companies.

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