Coaching for Respectful Leadership
Jan C. Salisbury

Summary
Executive coaching and leadership development is in high gear these days as organizations understand that leaders at every level make the difference in accomplishing the mission. In addition, leadership experts tend to agree with the common wisdom that “most good leaders are made, not born.” Yet there is little in the coaching or leadership literature that addresses a frequent challenge in leadership development: How do you transform leaders who behave in ways that are perceived as disrespectful? Regardless of how technically competent and bright a leader may be, intimidating, emotionally negative, or biased behaviors seriously undermine a leader’s credibility and effectiveness. “Coaching for Respectful Leadership” is a model for addressing and improving these leadership behaviors. The goal of this approach is not only to extinguish disrespectful and inappropriate behaviors, but also to increase a leader’s capacity to lead. This article describes five stages, strategies, and themes coaches can apply when faced with leaders who misbehave.

At its heart, coaching for respectful leadership is about emotional intelligence and understanding diversity. Emotional intelligence or the ability to feel, understand, articulate and effectively apply the power of emotions in our work is essential to why leaders behave disrespectfully in the workplace (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002). EI competencies, such as conflict resolution, working on diverse teams, and coping with ambiguity, change, and stress, are rarely taught in traditional higher education. Leaders often advance because they are technically superior, not because of their emotional intelligence. However, EI accounts for an astounding 85 to 90 percent of the difference between outstanding leaders and their average peers (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002; Kellerman, 2004). Why does it matter so much? High-potential employees will not stay or excel in an atmosphere in which they feel mistreated or unfairly treated. Furthermore,
employees are diverse in their backgrounds and cultural influences. Unless leaders can create an atmosphere that brings out the best in each employee, organizations risk losing a critical competitive advantage (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). From an emotional intelligence perspective, the leadership coach who addresses disrespectful behavior should be prepared to explore: (1) the emotional reasons for behaving disrespectfully, (2) the impact of the behavior on the workplace, and (3) the role of diversity and bias.

I define disrespectful leadership as any leader behavior that violates professional, cultural, and/or organizational standards of treating others and has the impact of offending, intimidating, or fundamentally disrupting the emotional trust between a leader and follower. Degrees of disrespectful behavior range from episodic, subtle and unintentional behavior to harassing, bullying and intimidation (Vardi & Weitz, 2004). Intentional harassment or bullying that creates a risk to the health and safety of employees is not the focus of coaching for respectful leadership (Salisbury & Dominick, 2004). More often than not, these behaviors result in termination and are not likely to change through a coaching process. However, any type of disrespect or incivility can affect an employee’s satisfaction levels and commitment to work (Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langout, 2001). Unintentional disrespect is more difficult to precisely define because it is often highly contextual. Respect reflects on integrity and trust. Furthermore, while we tend to believe respect is universally understood, our ideas of respect are deeply felt, disparately formed, and rarely articulated or shared directly. The adage, “We know it when we feel or see it” often rings true when we speak of someone who is respectful or disrespectful.

A leader’s power exacerbates the impact of disrespect and challenges the organization to promptly correct the breach of trust. “Coaching for Respectful Leadership” is one method for doing so. By targeting disrespectful behavior, this coaching model can help motivated leaders transform a serious deficit into an opportunity for growth.

Coaching Prerequisites

There are three basic prerequisites for engaging in respectful leadership coaching: (1) the organization should deliver a clear message to the leader about what is and is not acceptable behavior, (2) the leader must be committed to engaging in coaching to change the problematic behavior, and (3) the leadership coach must have the background for understanding and addressing disrespectful behavior.

The Organization

It is unusual for a leader to proactively seek coaching for disrespectful behavior. Organizations usually confront a leader with feedback that his behavior offends
employees and will not be allowed to continue. Although the feedback is often given under an “anonymous” umbrella (because of the fear of retaliation), it should be as specific as possible, both in terms of the behaviors and of the impact on people. The organization must also feel and communicate that the leader is valued and worth the investment of individual coaching. These conversations are emotionally laden. The leader may not always “hear” all the information. The organization may need several meetings and a period of reflection to assess whether the leader is open to change.

The Leader

Leaders commonly respond to feedback regarding disrespectful behavior with a mixture of disbelief and defensiveness. How does the organization or the coach know, then, whether the leader is willing to use coaching to address his or her behavior? I explore several questions with the organization including: Is the leader ethical and generally competent? Do employees and the organization feel the leader adds value to the organization? Has the leader expressed an authentic desire to change and does he or she show signs of “owning” the feedback? Is the leader’s ego capable of absorbing the feedback and not inclined to retaliate against those who gave the feedback? Is he or she willing to spend the time and resources to change? The coach can also question the leader during the first few meetings. The answers to these questions before and during the coaching should help gauge a leader’s readiness and potential for success. At the very least, these questions can help all parties involved understand that the coaching process is a serious commitment.

The Coach

Coaches who undertake coaching for respectful leadership should be experienced in the following general areas: First, they should understand the psychological dynamics of disrespectful behavior in the workplace, including why individuals misbehave and the impact they have on employees and organizations. Second, they should have a background in leadership theory, communication, and interpersonal dynamics. If the behavior is perceived as biased, coaches should be able to explore the role diversity plays in the situations described. Third, they should be comfortable confronting as well as supporting leaders as they work through defensive, angry, and frustrating feelings. The ability to both help leaders see the truth in others’ perceptions and advocate strongly for their ability to change is essential.

When the organization, leader, and coach agree that the coaching is appropriate, the leader and coach can meet directly to discuss in greater detail the background of the concerns and the process of coaching. Experienced coaches understand the
importance of establishing a relationship of trust and support during these first meetings. The following stages describe the process and special concerns of coaching for respectful leadership.

**Stage 1: Holding Up the Mirror: Understanding the Basis of Disrespect**

Data describing disrespectful behavior comes from many sources: performance reviews, 360-degree feedback assessments, and complaints to human resources, etc. Usually, disrespectful behavior merits coaching when its impact is significant and/or there is a pattern of behavior. The leader and the coach must first understand what is wrong and why before defining the goals.

**Collecting Data**

The coach must begin with clear, behavioral data of what has felt disrespectful and understand the impact on those targeted. Sometimes the organizational feedback for the leader is insufficient. The examples are too broad and the leader does not clearly understand the extent of the problem. The leadership coach may recommend additional conversations with the organizational representative. The following example is representative of how a coach may proceed when the coach or leader decides additional feedback is warranted.

Joleen was an experienced IT director for a municipality. She had been lauded by her superiors for her quick wit, her innovative vision, and her drive. Yet, there was also a pattern of capable managers leaving her team, reports of angry outbursts, and sporadic micromanaging. Joleen’s annual review picked up a growing chorus of peers and superiors who felt Joleen’s career would be stifled unless these behaviors changed. Joleen was incredulous about her feedback. Although she acknowledged a few lapses in communication, she did not understand why these behaviors were career stoppers. She worried that a few malcontents had skewed the feedback. She requested that the coach collect additional data.

Joleen e-mailed fifteen members of her staff, management peers, and others with the news that she was working with a coach to further develop her leadership, and that she needed their help. She encouraged them to be honest with the coach and assured them that the feedback would be anonymous. Using phone interviews, the coach gathered the data by asking generic leadership development questions about style, strengths and weaknesses, accessibility, what they looked for in a leader, and what they would like the leader to do more of and less of. The coach also specifically asked whether the interviewees felt respected and treated fairly. The interview data was summarized in terms of themes and helped in two ways: It greatly clarified what others experienced.
as disrespectful and it supported Joleen’s strengths as a leader. Joleen’s resistance dissipated. She accepted the validity of the feedback and moved forward, toward defining the leader she wanted to become.

Leaders may feel challenged and even threatened when they initially hear critical feedback. However, most people don’t mind confrontation as long as they feel supported and there is a way to “fix” the problem. By holding up a mirror for the leader, coaches can teach leaders to see and accept how others perceive them. This is key emotional intelligence ability for leaders.

**Personality Versus Behavioral Change**

Leaders also need to hear that coaching for respectful leadership is not focused on changing the leader’s personality, because that is not possible or appropriate. Communication styles and values, however, may be very relevant, particularly when factored into diversity issues. For example, a leader’s direct style of communicating may greatly conflict with cultural and individual norms that prefer indirect styles. While communicating the data, coaches should check carefully with the leader’s perceptions and emotions. How do they feel, and what do they think about the new information? What is surprising or confusing, what is not? These open-ended questions serve two purposes: They teach the leader tools for reflecting on feedback and they help the leaders understand how their emotions work.

Accurate data collecting is vital for initiating the next stage of coaching for respectful leadership, identifying what factors contribute to the leader’s behavior and understanding the impact of the behavior on others.

**Stage II: Understanding the Roots of Disrespectful Behavior**

Understanding the reasons why someone will choose to behave disrespectfully is central to a successful coaching process. From an emotional intelligence perspective, exploring the basis for any kind of behavior helps leaders become conscious of their behavior on a deeper level. Their awareness can then lead to addressing what is misunderstood or unresolved and to modifying their reactions. The goal is to enable leaders to employ respectful leadership practices. While the causes of a leader’s behavior are diverse, there are several common themes underlying most disrespectful behavior.

**Defining the Blind Spot**

The primary reason a leader has continued to behave in ways that are counter to organizational values is that he or she does not see the impact of his or her behavior on others and on the ability to lead. Leaders have failed to perceive others
and themselves as they truly are. Perhaps they are so focused on their own needs that others aren’t in the picture at all, or perhaps they don’t have the knowledge to complete the picture. Using the Johari Window (a psychological tool created by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955) as a model for effective communication, the coach can demonstrate the importance of increasing self-knowledge in the leader’s development plan. The larger the blind spot, the longer it may take to see what is. In the case of Joleen, her blind spot was in her valuing the outcome and not how she reached her goal.

Intent Versus Impact

Leaders’ initial defensive reaction to feedback is often focused on their intent. They argue that that their intentions were reasonable and that the recipients are equally or more responsible for their reactions. Coaches should help leaders clearly distinguish between their intent and the impact, each a product of an individual’s background and cultural filters. Detailing the emotional impact (intimidation, anger, fear, etc.) of specific behaviors underscores why impact is more important than intent. The key learning here is that successful and respectful leadership aligns intention with the impact on others. Once leaders accept and understand this concept, they are ready to look at alternative ways to behave.

Lack of Appreciation and Understanding of Power

Many leaders don’t acknowledge or understand the power that they wield. A leader’s need to be liked or to be perfect may undermine his or her ability to understand the power of disrespectful communication. By focusing on how others and the organization define their power, leaders are more likely to see why others have reacted so strongly to their actions. They can also better understand why others don’t confront them directly (a common frustration of leaders). Acknowledging one’s power can be daunting, but it can motivate leaders to reflect before they act!

Focusing on the Task and Not the Relationship

Many leaders are promoted because they “know how to get things done.” They are “experts” in the technical aspects of their jobs and consummate problem-solvers. They may believe in the adage, “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” However, their drive for performance is focused strictly on outcome, not process. As a result, they are prone to impatience, critical communication, micromanaging, shutting people off, and other hyper-task-focused leadership. Education about concepts such as Situational Leadership and factors that spur great performance in others can enable leaders to focus on building relationships and increasing their ability to engage in connective leadership (Lipman-Blumen, 1996).
The Psychology of Unmet Needs

Anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorders, workaholic tendencies, lack of work-life balance, and other, long-lasting psychological issues can also undermine respectful leadership. Leaders who are so afraid of failure that their anxiety triggers angry outbursts or who have little empathy for others because they received little support from others in their own development may not be able to change their behavior until they receive help from a mental health professional. The role of the coach is to help the leader identify these issues and then to encourage him or her to seek additional resources immediately. In some cases, failure to address these psychological issues will greatly impede or undermine the coaching process.

The Role of Bias, Prejudice, and Culture

Leaders who have made remarks or comments that show bias toward ethnic groups, women, or other groups protected under law are under the greatest pressure to change. The organization must show that, in addition to sanctioning the leader in some way, it has done something that deters that sort of behavior from happening again (Salisbury & Dominic, 2004). While rarely intended to do harm, low-level “harassing” behavior by a leader can be destructive to individuals and workplaces (Salisbury & Dominick, 2004). Unfortunately, most harassment training does little to help leaders understand their own cultural biases. Coaches who choose to address these behaviors should be well versed in the dynamics of stereotyping, sexism, racism, and other systems of bias. In addition, they may have to be prepared to help the leader recognize and adapt to cultural differences. For specific guidelines, consult Individual Training for Harassers (Salisbury & Jaffey, 1995).

The Dynamics of the Organizational Climate

Organizational cultures sometimes play an important role in eliciting disrespectful behavior. Too often, other leaders are engaging in similar behavior, or else the stress level is overwhelming. The leader may be frustrated and thwarted from meeting unreasonable expectations and aggressive, even hostile behavior may result (Vardi & Weitz, 2004). The leader may not have direct control over these factors. However, recognizing how their environment affects them can help leaders detach themselves and cope more effectively with the pressures of the environment.

Leadership Development and Role Models

Unfortunately, many leaders have never experienced formal leadership education. They model their styles after a parent or other leaders in and outside the workplace. Traditional supervision training may expose them to supervising tasks but not to
the added role of a leader whose role is to encourage, inspire, and motivate (among other things). Furthermore, they do not have the advantage of formal training that can provide a template for effective leadership. Depending on the learning style of the leader and the resources available, coaches should help the leader explore outside training and mentoring resources for increasing their leadership knowledge. They should also be ready to help leaders understand the sources of their passion and values about leadership and provide articles, videos, and other resources (George, 2007).

Leaders who understand their disrespectful behavior from both their own and others’ perspectives are then ready to identify their goals for the coaching process.

Stage III: Defining the Goals and a Plan for Change

As the themes from the feedback emerge, the coaching sessions should focus on definable goals and strategies. Goals create accountability for the coach and the leader. Generally, the goals focus primarily on respectful and effective leadership behavior. However, it’s important once again not to avoid articulating the types of behavior that must stop or decrease. From a staff perspective, any reoccurrence of the “disrespectful” behaviors will wipe away gains made by appropriate behavior.

The coach and leader can work together on the goals; each summarizing what the leader believes will make the most difference. The leader can decide to share his goals with his boss or direct reports. Sharing goals communicates transparency and enlists the support of others. As goals are achieved, new goals can emerge until the leader and the organization see that the original behavior has been corrected and new practices are in place.

The goals below are for Joleen, the IT manager.

**Goal I: Learn to Listen and Coach**

- Refrain from giving advice and being critical.
- Practice active listening skills.
- Enroll in a leader coaching course.

**Goal II: Communicate Respectfully at All Times**

- Decrease the use of email and impersonal communications, especially about emotional issues.
- When aware of frustration or anger, choose to delay responding to situations until decided on the best response for the situation.
• Do not act on the urge to micromanage. Plan how to approach the solution by enabling and coaching others.

• Take a communication style assessment and become aware of different communication styles.

Goal III: Create a Collaborative, Inclusive Atmosphere for the Team

• Explore opportunities for building relationships and understanding differences between members of the team.

• Facilitate a team-wide process of developing behavioral norms that will increase our productivity, trust, and creativity.

• Observe and meet with a leader/mentor who can model the behaviors targeted in the goals.

The coach should also discuss how the leader will measure his or her success in reaching these goals, including periodic feedback with a significant boss, human resources manager, or other objective sources. As the coaching moves into the fourth stage, the coach can also elicit specific examples that illustrate what is going well and what continues to be a challenge for the leader.

Stage IV: Exploring and Experimenting

The fourth stage of coaching expands on the insights and feedback that began in the first three stages. In this stage, the coach uses an array of leadership development tools and resources to help the leader learn new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving. A leader’s learning style, whether experiential, conceptual, or observational, will help determine what methods will be most helpful.

Using a Leadership Log

New choices cannot occur without expanding awareness. The ability to hold a mirror to see oneself is a fundamental competency of developing respectful, effective leaders. One primary tool for learning to reflect and be proactive is a leadership log. The leaders are encouraged to keep a log of situations that feel both successful and challenging. They are encouraged to identify the following in their logs.

Leadership Log

• Describe the situation.

• Describe how you felt about the situation and why.
• Describe how you behaved.
• What were the consequences of the behavior?
• What other choices did you have?

The log provides rich examples for the coaching process. Leaders learn how to manage their emotions and what behaviors are effective. Coaches can offer support and resources that are directly applicable to the leader’s everyday world.

In one example, a leader was astounded that an email sent back to a subordinate asking pointed questions about a project shut down the conversation between them. The leader felt the email was expressing interest, and that it was not a rejection of the project. The awareness log showed that he was excited about the project but also anxious to move it forward. The coaching opportunity here was to explore how emails are poor vehicles for capturing excitement and motivating others, because the nonverbal and emotional messages are missing. In addition, asking questions without directly communicating support and interest can create defensiveness in others. The leader then chose to meet with the project leader and has greatly reduced the role of email in crucial conversations.

Proactive Planning

Helping leaders be proactive in changing their behavior is another core strategy for coaching respectful leadership. In what situations can leaders anticipate using new behavior patterns and create different histories with those with whom they work? The list might include one-on-one meetings, plans for change, and presentations. What can leaders do to prepare for these contexts? What situations are most challenging to them? and What approaches may be more effective than those in the past? Being prepared can reduce the anxiety or tensions that may lead to disrespectful behavior. For example:

When George met with his accounting staff, he often felt and reacted impatiently—the staff’s focus on detail and their inability to give him a bigger picture of the budget was frustrating. As a result, he interrupted them and made sarcastic remarks about their profession. In addition, his accounting staff was female and perceived his behavior, when compared with male staff in other departments, as demeaning and sexist.

The coaching focused on George’s feelings, needs, and behavior in this situation. George realized his own culpability for the outcome of these meetings. He developed a clear strategy for the next meeting. First, he apologized for his behavior and clearly communicated what financial information he needed and why. He actively listened to questions and concerns and discovered that he had not comprehended the challenges of the software being used. He also expressed appreciation for his accounting staff’s specific contributions to the
business. George and the accounting department manager planned to support the staff's need for new tools and helped establish mutual trust. In the meantime, the staff worked diligently to deliver the information George needed.

By encouraging them to reflect and experiment in tough situations, coaches help leaders see the array of possibilities for leadership. Leaders also begin to see how diversity, whether professional background, ethnicity, gender, or personality, can make a difference in how they and others react and in how to adapt to those differences. It is a shifting perspective that calls for the ability to know what is appropriate, when, and why. For example, global teams confront the impact of cultural norms on respectful behavior daily. Virtual teams working across global boundaries struggle with the inadequacy of electronic communication and the paucity of face time to work through conflict and decisions highly affected by cultural differences. By acknowledging the challenge of cultural differences, leaders can minimize the barriers and help teams adapt to disparate values and styles.

**Developing Empathy and Sensitivity**

Leaders who become attuned to themselves and empathetic toward others become increasingly sensitive to disrespectful behavior in others. Previously oblivious to common disrespectful behavior, they now find themselves reacting strongly. These "teachable moments" are wonderful opportunities for leaders to coach others, and when appropriate, share their own journeys. They also reveal the depth of the leaders' commitment to respect.

The experimenting stage of respectful leadership coaching helps the leader establish new awareness, attitudes, and practices. Generally, the focus is significantly less on decreasing disrespect and more on increasing effective, respectful leadership behavior.

**Stage V: Sustaining the Transformation**

As with most coaching processes, the success of coaching for respectful leadership depends on the leader's ability to sustain both the internal and external changes. The "unconscious" has become "conscious" both in terms of eliminating the targeted behavior patterns and of integrating new practices. As they reach the end of the coaching period, the coach and leader should ask the following questions: Has the leader learned to reflect on his or her behavior as well as to understand and connect with others in critical situations? Can he or she identify the emotional trigger points and biases that lead to dysfunctional behavior? Is he or she clear about the connection between leading respectfully and the success of the team or organization? Does he or she understand the concept so aptly articulated by Aristotle that
being angry is easy, but to be angry at the right time, for the right reason, in the right way, is not easy? (Goleman, 1995).

As a result of the coaching process, leaders should experience success from their changed behavior. A leader's ability to notice the positive outcomes of his or her new behaviors is important for sustaining the transformation. These outcomes should become self-reinforcing and augmented by formal and informal assessments from others in the work environment. The coach can help the leader celebrate both the profound insights and the small, incremental changes that occur during the coaching process. Examples of success for individual leaders include the following:

- Helped the person identify the underlying issues and supported the ability to solve the problem;
- Facilitated more open discussion and trust by spending more time walking around and learning about employee concerns;
- Apologized for an action that had unintended consequences for someone's job;
- Facilitated a difficult change by acknowledging the team reactions and emotions before engaging them on how they could move forward;
- Facilitated open feedback on initiatives at a staff meeting;
- Stopped responding to emotional issues via email and picked up the phone;
- Found humor in themselves, rather than telling jokes that offended people;
- Greeted people every day and found authentic ways to regularly express appreciation for people's work;
- Balanced appreciation with challenging feedback; and
- Sponsored and participated in a major diversity initiative focused on global business partners.

**How Long Does It Take?**

How long it will take depends on the behavior patterns, the person, and the organizational climate. Most organizations want to begin to see some change in "disrespectful" behavior immediately because the cost for them is so high. Some leaders
are able to quickly perceive why their behavior is inappropriate and apply their leadership acumen to making a change. For others, the “blind spot” is so difficult to see that regular coaching sessions over several months may be required to help long-lasting change take place. Organizations may want to know at the beginning how long and how much coaching is needed, but coaches should be honest that, until the data is shared and the coach can assess the leader’s background and reaction, it is not possible to know.

**When Does Coaching Fail?**

Many factors contribute to why coaching may not help improve a leader’s behavior besides the leader’s denial of the feedback or his or her unwillingness to authentically engage in the process. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The leader has significant mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, or other emotionally relevant problems. These concerns may warrant referrals to other resources.
- The coaching reveals other significant leadership deficiencies that undermine the leader’s credibility and effectiveness.
- The leader’s best efforts are not enough to re-establish trust and credibility with direct reports.
- The leader discovers that the job or organization is not a good fit for his or her professional or personal development.

The feedback that the coaching has not fulfilled the goals of the leader or organization can come from the organization, the leader, or the coach. If the coach believes that these dynamics are at play, he or she should consider sharing these hypotheses in a coaching session. Such observations usually take time to form and are most effectively explored when the coaching relationship is established and mutual trust has been established.

**Evaluating Success**

As at the beginning of the coaching process, the organization, leader, and coach all have a role in deciding when the coaching has been effective. Not every organization will make the commitment for all five stages of coaching. For some leaders and behaviors, the first two stages are sufficient education and development to initiate change. If a coach strongly believes that more coaching and support are indicated,
it's important to communicate that reasoning to both the leader and the organization. The leader and organization can then decide whether to proceed.

**Conclusion**

Coaching for respectful leadership is an important focus for organizations and coaches. When leaders behave disrespectfully, they seriously undermine not only their own efficacy as leaders, but also the culture and values of the organizations they represent. This crisis of leadership can motivate leaders to stop their dysfunctional behavior and learn new ways to lead.

Coaches who engage leaders in addressing disrespectful behavior should be well-prepared. By facilitating helpful feedback, exploring emotional intelligence skills, and integrating leadership theory and knowledge, coaches can provide a safe, authentic climate for leaders to change.

**References**


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**Jan C. Salisbury**, owner of Salisbury Consulting, is a consultant and trainer who specializes in organization development, leadership coaching, diversity issues, and emotional intelligence in the workplace. Serving public and private employers for over twenty-five years, she is the author of several professional articles and co-authored the book *Investigating Harassment and Discrimination: A Practical Guide* and is working on a new book, Leading the Culture of Respect.