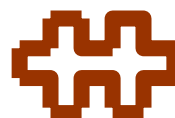


Praxis Note No. 27

# Executive Coaching for Leadership Development

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## Introduction

*'Earlier on no one would oppose me, and later on they would grumble... Now I don't do a lot of decision making on my own... it is all shared.'*

Coaching and mentoring are increasingly being used as tools for leadership development within civil society organisations. This Praxis Note illustrates how coaching can be used with leaders and staff in situations of internal tension and dispute to encourage greater communication and increased participation of staff. This approach

fosters a more harmonious organisational environment and creates space for strategic thinking and leadership direction. The experience is outlined in the form of two open letters between Bwana Mkubwa, the director of the head office of a Kenyan NGO, and an organisational development consultant (William Ogara) who provided coaching support to the organisation. Details of tools, methods and approaches used during the process are outlined between the introductory letter from the NGO and the letter in response from the consultant.

*Isbania*  
*15 January 2005*

*Dear Mr Ogara,*

*Greetings from us here in Isbania International Office (IO). We are in the midst of winter and a number of my colleagues are complaining of flu. As you have been briefed, we are the parent body of Ushindi National Development Programme, a programme which derives its financial and managerial support through us. As it is we are under obligation to ensure that Ushindi is well managed. What has happened*

*in the recent past makes us fear that some of our main external financial supporters who we have worked so hard with to nurture Ushindi may leave us.*

*We are delighted that you have agreed to accompany the Country Director (CD) of the Ushindi National Development Programme through a six month executive coaching programme. As you prepare for what we see as a very challenging task, we wish to provide you with a brief of what has transpired within Ushindi in the recent past. This situation is to us unhealthy and can not be allowed to continue for too long.*

*Over the last three years, Ushindi National Office has recorded significant growth in terms of operations. This growth has continued to occur in the midst of mounting uncertainty amongst staff and apparent communication gaps within the organisation. One of the consequences of this expansion has been a questioning of the present leadership style that is in place. In addition, unhealthy coalitions and alliances have become the order of the day. Power is seen to be concentrated in the hands of the CD. Conflicts of different nature and magnitude remain prevalent.*

*Our Organisational Learning Director recently paid a visit to Ushindi and held a staff consultation meeting at which a number of issues surfaced. We were aware that the CD was not very happy with the outcome of the meeting but we believe that the process is healthy for Ushindi. Issues that surfaced included:*

- Disrespectful treatment of staff by the CD, including shouting, threats, demeaning language, and spreading rumours about staff members.*
- Excessive micromanagement by the CD, and an adverse relationship with almost all staff reporting directly to her.*
- Perceived tribal favouritism and nepotism evident in hiring preferences towards one ethnic community, family members and friends.*
- An environment of distrust created by encouraging junior staff to spy and inform on senior staff.*
- Contravention of policies and procedures, including recruitment and financial procurement.*

*As you can see we are all concerned. Our understanding is that there*

are many issues that need to be dealt with in a meaningful way to allow staff to carry out their roles. Managers need to be given the autonomy and authority as well as information and resources to make decisions related to their programmes, and they need to be held accountable for their actions. The CD needs to acknowledge her own part in contributing to this situation. She needs to learn to control her temper when dealing with staff and to stop micromanaging them. She also needs to hold them accountable for their programmes. She needs to change her way of dealing with some staff, which is autocratic and condescending, and to make amends with high-performing employees who now feel alienated.

As management here at the IO in Isbania, we felt that perhaps it would be prudent to advise the CD to leave. But it is difficult to find such technically competent people! We think that part of the CD's problem is caused by guarding her position against people she sees as a threat. We have therefore made a decision to give the CD a chance to stay on and have the opportunity to be taken through a coaching process. Our vision of the coaching process is to see improved communication, managerial, and delegation skills; more effective and supportive relationships with staff; and a more harmonious culture within the organisation with respectful treatment of all. This includes:

- Increased ability by the management team to inspire and motivate staff to work together as a team, and to manage conflict and inter-group relationships.
- Open communication between the management team and staff.
- Employees being given adequate control over their own work and responsibilities.
- The management team effectively managing staff performance, encouraging constructive criticism and positive feedback.
- Increased ability of the CD to delegate responsibility and authority to individuals and teams and become more inclusive in decision making.
- Setting up and maintaining financial and programmatic systems and procedures.

Maybe we are too ambitious and we do agree that what we are getting into is a risk of some sort. What do you think? From what we have heard about your organisation, we have faith that you can steer this process successfully.

**Bwana Mkubwa**  
**Director**  
**Isbania International Office**

## The Process

It had become clear that what the organisation needed was a supportive working culture and that changing the CD was not the immediate solution (given the stage which Ushindi had reached). Therefore, it was agreed to provide her with a process of accompaniment through coaching. The process was revised and developed along the way, to adapt to the changing situation. The principal steps of the process were:

### Step 1: Relationship and confidence building

After we agreed in principle to undertake the work, the field process started with a meeting with the CD to gauge her understanding of the process. During this time, much of the initial discussion focused on the purpose of the coaching process and sharing of mutual expectations. I realized that the last thing that the CD wanted to happen was for her subordinates to know that she was being coached. She did not express this openly but I noted her pride and initial unwillingness to even engage in this process.

At this stage I asked myself a number of questions about the decision to initiate this coaching process:

- Was this process pushed on the CD against her will by the leadership from the IO? Could it be that she had little choice to say 'no'?
- Was this process driven by a genuine desire for the IO to protect the CD from being victimized by her own staff? Or was this more of a confidence-building exercise as the IO was not ready to lose the CD?

- Was the process part of a plan to appease the Country Office staff? Undoubtedly, they did not like the manner in which the CD was conducting herself.

The time and space for raising these questions was necessary for confidence building and for the process to have the integrity that it required.

### Step 2: Assessing the situation

Two meetings with the CD were spread over a period of two weeks. During this time, she opened up and shared a number of her frustrations. These included passing over to me a number of email correspondences in which she was being accused by her own staff. Some of the emails had been sent directly to the IO with no copy to her, and she was only able to get them by default. These had upset her well before our coaching process started, and at that stage she had felt like resigning. She felt that she had lost respect and that her own staff had undercut her.

I realized that my chief role here was one of probing and questioning what had gone on. This went well, since the CD had developed trust in me and would therefore open up to me. Her willingness to share why she had behaved the way she did with her staff helped to facilitate these investigations. She had felt threatened by some of her staff, who she believed were colluding with the IO to undermine and frustrate her, possibly to make her leave so they could take over.

### Step 3: Assessing who else to involve

It became clear to me that in order for the coaching process to succeed, there were other parties that needed to be involved, including the management team. The idea here was to explore their understanding of

the situation and establish how they could work better with the CD. The staff were initially very passive and closed. It took two meetings to convince them that it was in their interests to open up.

It was important to discover where the energy of the team was directed. I realized that questioning their vision and strategy helped to generate interesting discussions which were very useful, and provided a good entry point. Thereafter, we developed adequate trust to enable me to raise some of the issues that related to the CD.

#### **Step 4: The coaching process**

The coaching process took place over ten meetings spread over a period of ten months. A one-month interval would be left between meetings to provide space for the CD to continue with her normal responsibilities. The meetings can be seen to have developed through five stages:

The first series of meetings focused on **understanding** Mzima and the challenges that it was experiencing. The sessions primarily consisted of listening to the CD share her frustrations.

The second series of meetings explored the content of coaching. This involved **listening** to the CD discuss the frustrations that she was going through, and asking reflection questions, which were left for the CD to think through and discuss at the subsequent meetings.

The third series of meetings were held with the **management team** alone. This was to enable them to open up and share what they would have found difficult to share in the presence of the CD.

The fourth series of meetings involved **witnessing** the CD work with the

management team, as they explored options for continued funding, and how to address the uncertainty surrounding stability of staff.

The last series of meetings were held out of the office and focused on moving towards closure of the mentoring process and allowing space for a **joint review** to be conducted. Feedback from the management team on their view of the coaching process was also collected.

#### **Step 5: Agreeing the way forward**

Both the CD and the management team were involved in discussing the best way forward. Four meetings were held with the management team, one of which introduced the use of a tool — The Moodometre — for assessing the organizational mood. This became very useful for the CD, as it enabled her to assess whether staff were in agreement with her or not. It was also agreed that periodic telephone conversations would continue with the CD to provide continued support, particularly for areas that may have been overlooked. This agreement included the formalized understanding that the Strategic Director would pay a follow-up visit to check on progress.

### **Methodology**

Within this coaching process, various methods and approaches were used. These included:

- Face-to-face meetings with the CD alone — occasionally allowing her time and space to share her personal frustrations. This became helpful as a counselling tool to enable her to open up once a certain level of trust had been reached.

- Meetings together with the CD and management team to ensure that the process was accepted by other staff besides the CD.
- Desk study of relevant information and documentation, including a record of previous discussions, to inform our enquiries.
- Discreet observation of the working environment from within the organisation premises to assess how staff relate to each other, and how to develop an atmosphere of mutual trust and openness.
- Sharing some literature with the CD on similar issues in other organisations as a way of building her confidence.
- Email exchange with the IO to clarify issues. This was very helpful in ensuring that we did not exclusively rely on information coming from the country office. It was also a way of keeping the IO on board with the process.
- Presentation to the CD of a summary report on the process to provide evidence of what had been done so far.
- Meeting with the staff of the IO to share outcomes. This became necessary to ensure accountability and provide clarity on certain assumptions and misconceptions that might have arisen.
- Agreement on an exit date and an exit discussion. This was necessary in order to give the CD the space to implement what had been learnt.

She seemed to feel that these issues were being caused entirely by the IO not being sensitive to and understanding her style of leadership. During our initial meeting, I recognized that she was experiencing personal difficulties, and questioned whether she needed counselling to provide the opportunity to release her frustrations. There were times when appointments were not honoured by the CD, as it took time for her to commit to the process.

This was a job that consumed considerable energy. I realized that in order to cope I had to adopt different approaches, such as the use of the accompanier model. This involved asking leading questions for the CD to open up and gain a sense of trust. In some cases, I found it very helpful to bring in specific case study examples of similar situations and reflect these to the CD. I realized that this would in many ways release considerable energy needed during the meetings. Through sharing and focusing on short-term wins, the CD was able to gain more confidence in her ability and to invest more commitment in the process. I also exchanged emails between meetings to help the CD feel valued and to provide ongoing support.

## Challenges and Constraints

The process was at times very frustrating and at some stages I felt that it would have been better to abandon it altogether. The initial reaction of the CD was one of resentment and a denial of any problems.

## One Year Later

*Mzima*  
20 February 2006

*Dear Bwana Mkubwa,*

*Excuse our belated response to your recent letter enquiring when we are finalizing the coaching process. It has indeed taken longer than we had anticipated and this as you are aware was largely due to the delays we experienced at the beginning of the process. There was a need to build trust. At some stages, we felt that the CD did not need us at all and that this process had been imposed unwillingly on her. The process has so far been a very challenging one as you rightly pointed out in your numerous correspondence with us. No wonder, a process that was initially intended to take six months has now taken close to one year.*

### *Outcomes and impact*

*One year has now passed and we have just concluded an exit strategy with a final report given to the CD. I feel that this has been a valuable process with evident positive outcomes.*

*Today, there is an effective management team in place which meets both formally and informally. New staff include a Director of Programmes and Director of Finance. The hiring of this new team has helped in many ways. The CD looks more relaxed. She now has time to think strategically, something that was rare in the past. She has learnt to let go and let the management team manage the staff. I had the opportunity to observe a programme staff meeting going on without the CD, something which in the past would be unheard of.*

*The CD has noticeable renewed vigour and commitment for leading the organisation. She described her vision for the Ushindi office which now includes a commitment to seeing an organisation with a diversified funding base, growing programmes, internal harmony and order, a happy staff and working environment. She expressed desire for an organisation where all staff have shared ownership and participation. A comment from an exit interview with the CD illustrates how her leadership style has clearly changed: 'Earlier on no one would oppose me, and later on they would grumble... Now I don't do a lot of decision making... it is all shared.'*



*There is evidence of delegated responsibility and increased effectiveness of the management team. One member of staff noted, 'the overall process seems to have led the CD to adopt a style of greater delegation of powers that allows empowerment of managers to direct and implement activities. More can be done to develop an even more effective management team, however, by ensuring regular leadership team meetings as well as regular staff meetings, and just as importantly, by ensuring significant substance and open discussion in such meetings.'*

*During an exit interview, a member of the management team discussed how staff salary procedures were now formalised and based on performance and not on the feelings of the CD. The staff seem to have valued the coaching process and the opportunity it provided for strategic discussion, and are keen to pursue this further in the future with an organisational performance evaluation.*

*There is increased loyalty of staff to the organisation and a greater sense of shared ownership. This staff participation needs to be maintained to ensure this continues. As one staff member commented, 'The general attitude of employees has changed considerably with evidence of staff loyalties shifting from individuals to the organisation. It is observable that coalitions and loyalties have more or less dissolved, although this will take time as staff need to be assured that they will be listened to.'*

*The close supervision by the IO and insistence on clear structures for reporting and delegation of authority have brought considerable benefit to the country office. Strict financial disciplines being instituted by the management team are bearing fruit. With three staff having been dismissed due to dishonesty there is a clear signal to all staff that attitudes of waste and dishonesty will no longer be permitted.*

### ***Learning from the experience***

*Before we conclude this letter we wish to point out issues that need to be addressed by the CD and your office as well, to ensure that the positive changes arising from the process continue.*

***The role of the CD:*** The success of the CD depends very much on the part that she chooses to play. With the recent changes in structure resulting in passing over core programme and management matters to senior staff, the CD is now in a better position to give priority to providing a clear vision and strategic direction to the organisation. These include decisions on how to reposition the Ushindi office to take advantage of future coalition and funding diversifications. It is important that the CD takes this challenge seriously if the work of the Ushindi national office is to make a positive difference.

***Coaching opens the door for enhanced team work:*** The terms of reference for the work were confined to working with and accompanying the CD. However, during the process it became necessary for the management team to be brought on board, as how the CD relates to other staff is central to her effectiveness as a leader.

***Coaching can involve deep personal changes:*** A key challenge of this process is that whilst it was partially about character review, there is the more challenging task of personality review. Essentially, one can work towards changing character but not personality. It is important that this limitation is born in mind in studying the outcomes of this process. As evident from the staff feedback: 'modifying interpersonal skills and leadership requires more than just the full commitment of the person involved; it implies changes of a very personal nature, and these are more difficult to address'.

***Role of the International Office:*** Issues have been raised which need reflection and further input by the IO. They touch on the existing working culture, which is a reflection of what goes on at the IO. An open and honest engagement with the issues is important for the future of the organisation. This includes questions such as how does the IO keep in strategic touch with the country office? How does the IO use informal channels of communication in such a way that they do not undermine the leadership? These are essentially questions for you at the IO to address if the coaching process is to yield tangible benefits.

***Allow space for learning and adjustments:*** The coaching process had to be staggered over a period of one year in order to provide space for reflection. But the process is far from over. Much more is still needed in the form of engaging staff who have not been involved. It is appreciated that the country office staff recognized the need to attend to the change management issues, but on several occasions meetings were postponed for other urgent priorities. Creating space for

*organisational learning has to be made intentional. It has to be an objective that an organisation goes out of its way to pursue. Otherwise it just won't happen.*

*In my opinion, the conclusion of the coaching process should open the door for an organisation review of their change experience. There are questions such as how do you promote and nurture a culture of open and honest critique? How do you provide space for some of the deeper cultural issues that may not be documented and yet could stand in the way of real progress?*

***Address issues of staff stability:** The success of the CD work will also depend on how staff are treated. At the moment, staff are employed on one-year contracts due to funding uncertainties. The cyclical nature of funding raises significant human resource issues like high mobility of staff. This situation needs review, as staff remain uncertain. The possibility of extending contracts to three years may be an option for the IO to consider.*

*We welcome an opportunity to discuss the above issues with you together with the management team at the IO.*

*With best wishes  
William Ogara  
CORAT AFRICA*