

# Leadership Development at the Top: A Teaching Case on Coaching in a Public Human Service Organization

ALEXIS FERNÁNDEZ, MICHAEL J. AUSTIN, AND STAN WEISNER

## Introduction

This case study examines the use of executive coaching as a leadership development tool at the top management levels of a rural public human service agency in a large metropolitan area of the U.S. It considers the organizational factors that led to the use of executive coaching and a leadership development program that focused on the development of shared expectations and desired results (individual and team) and required a considerable investment of agency resources.

This case on coaching takes place in a public agency setting and describes in some detail a successful strategy for expanding organizational leadership within a framework of collaborative management. Much of its success is due to the vision and leadership of a committed agency director who chose to make this kind of investment in his top leadership under the assumption that, in his own words, *“the public should expect the agencies it funds to be as productive, effective, and efficient as possible. These are basic organizational attributes that apply equally in the public and private sectors. The surest way to promote these attributes is to adopt evidence based practices in the management of an organization.”*

## Setting the Stage

In mid-2007 Suzanne Smith, the department director of 85 to 90 staff, began working with an executive coach with the goal of further developing her skills as an effective agency leader.\* With more than twenty years of county experience, and having been a manager since 1993, Suzanne was leading the largest of ten divisions in a mid-sized human service agency and had the full support of the director to continue to do so. Her partnership with an executive coach was the result of a larger agency-wide initiative to move toward a model of collaborative management. The initiative's success required an emphasis on supporting agency leaders in order to maximize their effectiveness as administrators. Prior to

her experience with the executive coach, Suzanne's management style was regimented and overly structured. She often felt she used the right management ideas and tools but was not always able to translate them into an effective leadership style. Her ability to manage the program and meet a range of the outcome goals was strong, but she felt she was missing certain components that would enable her to become a more effective leader of her organization.

The agency she worked for was entering a period of transition that included increased attention to collaborative management strategies. Donald Davis, the agency director, was relatively new to his position, but his prior experiences and keen awareness of the changing state of public sector human services led him to reconsider the agency's traditional structure of service delivery. Regardless of the difficult economic challenges facing the agency, Donald and his staff could no longer focus solely on survival. Donald believed that in order to thrive in the current environment, the agency culture needed to change. One approach was to invest in the development of a collaborative style of management that would require the use of newly acquired leadership skills.

For Donald, the greatest distinction between the current state of the agency and the future he envisioned was a shift toward an organizational structure that supported managers who were given the opportunity to lead proactively, rather than focus reactively to task-based assignments. A collaborative management environment involved the development of skills that would enable managers

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**Alexis Fernández, MSW**, BASSC Research Assistant.

**Michael J. Austin, PhD**, Mack Professor of Nonprofit and Public Sector Management; School of Social Welfare, UC Berkeley;

**Stan Weisner, PhD, MSW**, Director, Department of Behavioral and Health Sciences, UC Berkeley Extension;

Partially subsidized by Title IVE training funds through the Bay Area Academy.

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\*All names used in this teaching case are disguised to maintain confidentiality.

to: (1) use honesty and transparency to empower staff, (2) strengthen relationships with co-workers at all levels, and (3) actively engage people in the process of reinforcing these skills. Donald knew that Suzanne possessed the capabilities that he saw as essential for collaborative management. His next step was to develop a process that would help bring these capabilities to the forefront of her leadership style.

Donald acknowledged that the agency did not necessarily possess the internal expertise that was needed to efficiently and effectively implement this shift. In Suzanne's case, a professional executive coach was hired to provide her with the additional resources and guidance that she would need to realize the change. Though not common in the public sector, Donald recognized that acquiring new and different techniques needed special supports to provide managers with the tools that would foster success. Having past experience with organizational consultants and coaches, Donald could appreciate their ability to provide a "reality check", expertise beyond the agency's capacity, and make suggestions and present resources based on a wide array of past experiences.

Before committing to employ an executive coach, Donald and Suzanne discussed the reasoning behind the decision, the potential outcomes, goals, and the likelihood of success based on Suzanne's own understanding of the roles that Evonne, her future executive coach, and Suzanne would play during the process. All those involved would need to share a common understanding of collaborative management within the context of the agency.

In addition, Suzanne had time to think through the personal investment she would have to make in the process. She analyzed her own ability to not only move ahead with an executive coach but also to gain something from the experience. This recognition step was a moment of growth and one that is often difficult for any manager to accept that their leadership style developed over many years might need revision. Moreover, Suzanne needed to become comfortable with the possibility of feeling vulnerable and confronting areas for improvement, as opposed to her need to exert power and control in multiple situations. After a period of self-reflection, Suzanne not only was ready to commit to the executive coaching process but had opened herself to the experience in a way that would allow her to find true success.

The next step was to bring Evonne in as Suzanne's executive coach. Evonne holds a Psy.D in organizational psychology and a Master's in Human Services Administration. Her past experiences include administrative roles in government and the judicial branch. After spending more than 15 years in the field, she realized that effective leadership was

much more complicated than she had ever imagined. She returned to school to become an executive coach in order to help executives and professional managers find a safe place to talk about their thinking patterns, their behaviors, and alternative ways to strengthen their management style and leadership capacities. A coach had the ability to present managers with alternative scenarios and challenge a leader's thinking in order to help them explore and improve their management style.

An executive coach is not a counselor or a traditional consultant that might search for the psychological origins of a client's leadership technique. A coach is often an organizational development specialist who assists clients by helping them interpret their behaviors in order to identify techniques to deal with the pressures they face as leaders. The basic framework of executive coaching is to focus on generating new learning or behaviors that need to be reinforced through the use of feedback. A skilled executive coach helps people build these new connections, particularly through the use of alternative thinking. Most executives have already achieved a high level of success which explains how they ended up in executive positions. An executive coach simply helps them become even better at what they do. Evonne describes a successful coach as one who listens carefully to a client's needs and helps them to attain the goals they and their employers have set for them.

## The Process

As Suzanne entered into the coaching relationship with Evonne, she began to identify several challenges facing her as a manager. She had a difficult time encouraging staff to improve performance and would make accommodations when the going got tough. Because she was accommodating in these difficult situations, she often found it difficult to give constructive feedback. Instead she would simply assume staff would work harder and eventually get through it. In addition, she had difficulty articulating her vision in a way that was tangible for others. While she felt that she had the right ideas, she seemed to frequently use the wrong approach to communicating her vision of how to proceed. Staff could see her frustration as she got bogged down by the day-to-day tasks that disabled her from projecting the "bigger picture" that she felt should be a larger part of her responsibility as a leader.

Suzanne needed to shift directions. Unsatisfied at many levels, she was not able to effect the change she wanted to see in her department. After initial conversations with Donald and time spent seriously considering whether this was the right step, Suzanne committed to the executive

coaching process. She was ready to try something new, something beyond the traditional management training programs and management approaches that she had used in the past. In particular, she was intrigued by the individualized coaching that would be tailored to her specific needs and past experiences.

Donald considered Suzanne's openness about the process as a pivotal component in her initial success and a significant factor of her transformation into a successful leader. Once she made a commitment, Suzanne talked with her colleagues about the process. She engaged people at all levels, both within the department and across the agency management team. She was open about her goals and let staff know that she "wanted to expand her leadership skills" and quickly gain their trust and support. Suzanne's colleagues describe this as the beginning of a long process of staff engagement which still remains today. The level of openness that Suzanne used to initiate the process strengthened her relationship with other managers as their interest and cooperation became an important component of her success. In addition, Evonne engaged staff and colleagues through conversations that focused on Suzanne's leadership style, techniques and strengths. This process emphasized the importance of the total work environment and those relationships that would enable a process of continuous learning.

While the personal relationship with a coach is a key aspect of the process, every executive coaching experience is unique. Goal-setting, outcome specification and frequency of contact are different for each coaching relationship. This is especially true if an employer is clear about his/her expectation, strongly supports the process, and there is a good fit between the executive coach and all of those involved.

Though meetings are confidential, information about the progress that the manager is making needs to be communicated to other leaders in the organization. In this case, Donald was supportive of the process but also wanted to be kept informed. He clearly wanted to see Suzanne succeed because the investment in her success was also an investment in the success of the agency. The total cost of the coaching experience was about \$12,000 and extended over nine months. Donald felt strongly, however, that expending a percentage of the "annual cost of a manager to develop an essential skill is a small investment compared to the alternatives, such as searching for a new manager or abandoning collaborative management and resigning the organization to lower productivity and effectiveness."

Donald's support of the coaching sessions helped Suzanne transfer her new learning into various aspects of her

everyday work. She was given the time to meet with Evonne and also the time to engage in self-reflection by writing in a journal on a regular basis. Suzanne practiced and applied the strategies that were discussed during these meetings and was expected by the coach to share a self-assessment of the process and outcomes.

Executive coaching is a one-on-one program that often begins with an initial "getting to know you" stage where the coach and the client assess the nature of the relationship "fit" in order to see if their working relationship can lead to success. The first meetings between Suzanne and Evonne were held in a casual setting where Suzanne quickly identified the process of inquiry and discovery that Evonne would employ throughout their time together. They also were able to identify their shared understandings and expectations. Suzanne entered a phase of intense individual self-reflection. In this way, her executive coaching experience was significantly different from management and leadership training programs that she had attended in the past. Never before had she invested so much time in such a thorough self-assessment. The focus was on identifying Suzanne's strategies to improve her leadership skills based on her own personal strengths. The ultimate goal was to widen Suzanne's comfort zone and support her efforts to practice new strategies developed during their meetings.

One of these initial assessments was conducted using the "16PF Leadership Coaching Report" developed by David G. Watterson that focuses on the personality dimensions of leadership and how the questionnaire results compare with other leaders. The self-assessment tool is focused on self-awareness in order you increase one's odds of success, by explaining the following dimensions:

- (1) Problem-solving (scale: abstract thinking to concrete thinking)
- (2) Influence (scale: accommodating to influencing)
- (3) Emotional Resilience (scale: stress prone to resilience)
- (4) Extraversion (scale: introversion to extraversion)
- (5) Practicality (scale: receptive to practical)
- (6) Self Control (scale: spontaneous to self controlled)

The results of the assessment were intended to give Suzanne a starting point to begin thinking about the personal characteristics and skills that she possessed and those that she could enhance in order to become a more effective leader. The dimensions in the self-assessment tool are applicable in multiple settings, not just in her work environment. She realized she was fairly balanced in the area of emotional resilience, practicality and self control, even though, she

noted that she could learn to be more spontaneous at times. In terms of problem-solving, she tended to rely on more abstract thinking than concrete thinking. Her score on the influence scale was more accommodating than influencing, which was clearly displayed in her day-to-day work. Lastly, she scored higher on introversion than extroversion scale and recognized that she needed to push herself to get outside of her comfort zone to reach her new goals.

Together Evonne and Suzanne outlined strategies to build upon the outcomes of this self-assessment tool. These included: (1) making efforts to share responsibility and accepting that she could not do everything by herself, (2) learning to present clear expectations and allowing staff to follow through in their own way, and (3) working to more clearly establish and communicate desired outcomes. Using strategies similar to those used in executive coaching, she would set forth goals and coach staff rather than take responsibilities away from staff and over commit her own direct involvement in task-based work. Overall, she would increase her awareness of her own strengths and areas for improvement in order to feel empowered to take on an active leadership role. In this way, she consciously sought to assume a leadership role by pushing herself to practice some of the strategies developed during her own executive coaching sessions.

After her initial meetings, Evonne noticed that Suzanne was experiencing some difficulty in articulating a level of self-awareness (what Evonne referred to as her “authentic self”) that could be carried over into the work environment. She seemed unwilling to let staff and colleagues see some of the same personal characteristics (e.g. humor, care, and fallibility) that are a part of her persona outside of the work environment. Suzanne had expressed difficulty in developing an authentic “work self”, and Evonne recognized this as a potential barrier that would keep Suzanne from achieving the goals she had established during their initial meetings. Evonne observed that first getting in touch with her “authentic self” would be an essential component of Suzanne’s coaching experience. She began to look for additional resources that could help Suzanne address this issue.

Though not usually a component of the executive coaching process, Evonne suggested to Donald that Suzanne attend a retreat workshop called “*Leading from Within*” that was to be held in Colorado. The retreat focused on recognizing authentic leadership and from this foundation help executives develop effective relationships in their everyday work. Evonne checked with Donald on this option first because of the budget considerations, especially

since the coaching process was already a large financial investment for the agency. In total, attendance at the retreat workshop, including travel, would come to about \$5,000. She shared her rationale with Donald, explaining that the retreat would be an important experience for Suzanne and would greatly enhance the coaching experience and would far outweigh the cost. Evonne was confident that a better understanding of her authentic self would prepare Suzanne to make greater gains and make her “learning curve” more manageable. Evonne acknowledged that it was a slight risk because it was not a typical component of her executive coaching, but, if successful, the outcome could substantially enhance the entire experience. Donald agreed and Suzanne was off to Colorado.

The retreat was not only a financial investment for the agency, but also a personal investment for Suzanne where she would address both the personal and professional dimensions of her work. The crossover between her work life and her personal life was a key component of the retreat where finding your “authentic self” included eliminating the idea that you had to keep your work and personal life completely separate.

The objectives of the ‘Living From Within’ retreat were to:

- (1) gain a whole new self-awareness regarding your ability to lead your life with purpose, passion and integrity,
- (2) become aware of how to integrate your true leadership abilities into all facets of your life,
- (3) develop the resources and skills needed to lead your life as an authentic leader,
- (4) identify unwanted patterns of your past and re-create new patterns to live and lead by, and
- (5) create your own unique personal leadership, vision, and purpose that will guide you to optimal performance in both your personal and professional world.

The retreat used an individualized approach, similar to that used during the executive coaching sessions. With only a few participants, the retreat was held in a remote location and Suzanne was given the opportunity to spend time alone reflecting on the learning process and applying concepts to her own experiences. The connections to her coaching process were clear to her.

The retreat consisted of a combination of individual and group work, trust-building exercises, self-assessments, group presentations, and focused on identifying the barriers that often prevented a person from going outside of his or

her comfort zone. In addition, near the end of the retreat, Suzanne created a personal strategic plan that would set the direction for her future coaching sessions. The plan helped her maintain a clear vision of where she was going and how she was going to get there.

Attending the “Leading from Within” retreat gave Suzanne the opportunity for reflective observation, something many managers and executives seldom have the time to do. Setting aside this time, not only during the retreat, but on an ongoing basis, gave Suzanne the opportunity to engage in visioning, planning, and alternative thinking. This time investment allowed Suzanne to build the confidence and competence to help her reach her professional goals.

As Suzanne herself describes, moving into the role of leader can be a difficult transition if a person does not have a strong idea of the realities of the new role. Advancement in the work environment is often perceived as holding certain promises or advantages, but once people get there they may not have the support to manage the difficulties of the transition and are therefore not ready to be successful in this role. The opportunity for reflection and self-analysis was a critical component in enabling Suzanne to be as successful as possible in her role as leader.

After the retreat, Suzanne continued her meeting with Evonne on an ongoing basis. For over a year, they would continue to build on Suzanne’s strengths as a leader. Suzanne’s executive coaching continued to be built into her work schedule, and she set aside time for self-reflection and entering thoughts and observations into her journal on a regular basis. She would often refer to additional readings and the application of theories to practice as well as her personal strategic plan as she continued to develop her understanding of effective leadership and collaborative management. The transformation is ongoing, but Suzanne has committed to her work and her colleagues have seen the changes for themselves.

### **Impacts on the Department**

Suzanne was making noticeable strides as she made the transition from a manager to leader. The changes were evident in her relationships with staff and the resulting positive outcomes. For example, she is no longer directing staff to carry out the work within her department, but rather coaching her staff to set goals and objectives for their own success while at the same time identifying innovative ways to improve organizational processes. Suzanne began leading her own staff through a process of inquiry and self-discovery, similar to what she had experienced with her executive

coach. This process emphasized asking questions, allowing a person to articulate what they were thinking and describe how they would work through the presenting problems and potential solutions. Use of an “inquiry and discovery” technique allows a leader to assist an individual in identifying for themselves the pieces they are missing, where they are going, and help them to clarify potential solutions. This method is purposely neutral and collaborative in nature and can change the way a department functions.

A trickle-down effect began to take place, as department supervisors were practicing the type of coaching relationship exemplified by Suzanne. An often slow and challenging process, management was learning to use Suzanne’s techniques, such as inquiry and discovery, with their own staff. This resulted in a greater sense of shared responsibility, wherein members of the department were held accountable, and Suzanne could let go of some of the fear and frustration associated with the idea that certain responsibilities would not be met. Suzanne was no longer carrying the weight of the department on her shoulders alone and was empowering management, and therefore supervisors and line staff, to set their own standards and meet individual goals. Some staff members have described the process as being slow with some resistance, but Suzanne’s ongoing commitment and continued use of these leadership techniques has fostered ongoing change within the department.

In addition to a trickle-down effect, management and supervisors who have been with Suzanne from the beginning of her executive coaching experience to the present can see other tangible differences within the department. Collaboration, particularly at the management level has improved. Departmental managers hold ongoing team meetings, supporting autonomy and responsibility, while emphasizing the supportive nature of their work. Managers take this back to their staff, adapting the leadership techniques to their own needs and modeling the transparency and motivation Suzanne has shared with them. This has resulted in general improved moral and fewer negative feelings about “management”. With shared responsibility, staff cannot simply blame “top management”. Staff at multiple levels can work together to develop new solutions and build a sense of ownership over improved client outcomes. As one supervisor in Suzanne’s department describes, line staff may not even realize or know that Suzanne went through an executive coaching process, but they can feel the effects of her efforts at becoming a more effective leader.

Staff describe these changes as an evolution, releasing the burden of sole responsibility and accepting failures (as

well as success), moving through ups and downs, and maintaining humility throughout the process. It would appear that the agency's large financial investment in expanding Suzanne's leadership skills were far outweighed by the outcomes. She has been able and continues to share the benefits of her executive coaching experience with department staff at a variety of levels.

Donald has been able to observe the impact of social leadership with data from outside of the department. Suzanne's team of 85 to 90 staff is large enough to reflect significant trends in the county. For example, there has been a marked downturn in Human Resources complaints related to caseload re-organization and the need for more team-based work. He also saw a general increase in job satisfaction and effective teamwork that translated into lower rates of absenteeism and staff turnover. In addition, a major shift in resources and policies occurred across the agency which enabled Suzanne to more effectively implement changes throughout the collaborative management environment she had developed. Under her leadership the department moved from one that effectively administered public benefits to one that truly believed they could move clients from dependency to self-sufficiency. This belief soon went from the staff perception of an elusive goal to an enthusiastically supported mission that guided the department's work. Donald believes Suzanne would have moved the department in this direction, regardless, because this is what she believes in. But he also acknowledges that the benefits of executive coaching allowed her to move farther and faster. He can easily identify a direct return on his investment, both organizationally and in terms of the benefit to the community.

He described the payoff from the investment in executive coaching as "immediate and ongoing", commenting that one of the major benefits of the coaching experience was that:

*"this manager has become a role model in collaborative management practices and a mentor for other leaders in the agency. She has reorganized the management structure within her division, creating a collaborative management team. Staff satisfaction polls have risen. Complaints and employee grievances have dropped substantially. While the economic downturn is certainly a major contributor, it is clear that the changes the manager has made in her leadership style have been key in supporting an increase in productivity of approximately 25 percent across her division in the past two years, measured by caseload per staff."*

## Concluding Thoughts

Suzanne's successful transformation into an effective leader is an ongoing process. While she can already see concrete changes both in her management style and departmental outcomes, Suzanne continues to make a conscious investment and time commitment in her evaluation as a leader. The executive coach guided Suzanne through a process of self-assessment and helped her develop new strategies needed to balance the demands of managing and leading. Suzanne continues to employ these strategies as she applies the tools of self-assessment and reflection to new issues on a regular basis. Setting aside the time to add this component to her regular work responsibilities has allowed Suzanne to continue moving forward in a way that is innovative and responsive to her ever-changing work demands.

Suzanne remains in contact with her executive coach, though the coaching component is no longer central to the process. She continues to make entries into her journal and reflects on her personal strategic plan. In addition, she references many of the learning materials used during her executive coaching experience and uses the skills and strategies developed during her coaching experience.

In the five years that Donald has been a director, he has sought out the assistance of an executive coach about five times and organizational consultants another five. He strongly believes that the introduction of outside resources can provide excellent support for leadership goals, particularly for people who can already do their job well, but just need a little extra push to keep moving forward. He understands that managers and executives who have been working for a long time can benefit from an outside resource to help promote change by gaining new perspectives to address old and new problems. In the end Donald feels that the financial investment in coaching and training far outweighed the costs and can actually save public money.

This form of evidence-informed management practice illustrated how the culture of public human service organizations can be changed and improved in the same way that public agencies seek to help their clients. These same agencies need to invest in finding new ways of helping their staff. In this case, a unique, individualized approach supported the successful transition of a manager into a successful leader who in turn helped to transform her staff and work environment. It took the strong commitment of an agency director AND an external executive coach to help Suzanne become and remain a successful leader.