

Transcript - In Conversation with Ann Scoular - The power of effective coaching

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Host 00:03

Welcome to Future Talent Learnings In Conversation podcast series, where we talk to business leaders and thinkers to uncover their perspectives about the changing world of work. This episode is hosted by Future Talent Learnings Tom Ritchie.

Tom 00:17

Today, I'm joined by Ann Scoular, co-founder of the executive coach training and leadership development firm, Myla Campbell. Ann has led a varied career, originally working as a diplomat and international banker, before retraining mid-career as a psychologist.

Tom 00:31

In her work with Myla Campbell, she has been named as a leading expert in business coaching globally by Harvard Business Review and is the author of the Financial Times Guide to Business Coaching. In this podcast, I ask Ann about the attributes that are shared by effective coaches, what leaders can do to create a culture of coaching in their organisations and why humanity must match the growth of technology in the workplace.

Tom 00:53

Well, hi Ann, thanks so much for speaking with us today. I thought we could just start with a quick introduction to your career path.

Ann 01:00

Okay, my career describes a perfect downward graph. I started as a diplomat, and I was then an international banker. I've stood on the podium of the General Assembly of the United Nations. The room was empty at the time, but I've still stood there.

Ann 01:16

And then I moved into a small business, and then about 20 years ago I discovered that the unit of intervention that really works for me, that where you genuinely, genuinely can bring about change, is the human being.

Ann 01:29

The human individual. And so, give me another 10 or 20 years, and if I keep going in that direction, I'll probably be working on quarks and subatomic physics.

Tom 01:40

So as you touched on there, lots of different things that you've done throughout your career. So what's your approach to learning new skills and roles and reacting to new challenges?

Ann 01:49

Well, I'm afraid to say that it's not textbook. My approach is very serendipity. I follow my nose, I listen to what people say, and I follow up, you know, leads and suggestions I get there. I read, I think that The Financial Times is in a fantastic place at the moment.

Ann 02:07

It's really, really good. The Psychologist is really good at the moment. There's some great podcasts. So I'm just, yeah, I follow my nose.

Tom 02:16

And so, which podcasts do you particularly listen to, or what are you reading at the moment that kind of helps you lead down these new paths?

Ann 02:23

Well, podcasts, my favorite is FiveThirtyEight, the American political one. Nate Silver. Nate Silver, because they are absolutely superb at what they do. They are a real benchmark of excellence, but they do it in a relaxed and very human way.

Ann 02:42

It's very real. I like it a lot.

Tom 02:45

So you've consulted with many leaders about the skill of coaching. So what are the attributes of an effective coach in your opinion?

Ann 02:53

Well, I'd like to say two different things about this. And they both have five bits. The first is Myla Campbell's selection criteria. So we've got this new program jointly with Oxford Saïd Business School called Ignite.

Ann 03:08

And the selection, we have five criteria. One, business credibility. Because you've got to have some hinterland for people to want to talk to you. Two, intrinsic interest. So there's no good sending people to learn to coach.

Ann 03:25

Certainly not to sort them out or to solve a problem. You've got to want to do this. It's three, that they're in the right place for. Because if somebody, a very senior leader, is going to pour their heart out to you and really tell it.

Ann 03:42

Because actually, a coach is a rare, rare window where you can completely trust and you completely talk. If they're going to pour their heart out, then you've got to be a safe pair of hands. So if you've had a recent bereavement or something, something, then you might not be in the right place to be that safe pair of hands.

Ann 04:02

Four, the hallmark of a really good leadership coach is that they're open to new learning. It can be quite uncomfortable, but they are prepared to grab it. And five, they're not boring. They've got some unique gift or interest or something that they can strike a spark with people.

Ann 04:23

So that's the five selection criteria for the Ignite program. I'm giving the game away here. But then the other five things are, this is chapter, I think it's actually, believe it or not, chapter five of my book.

Ann 04:40

What are the five basic things that we're doing as a coach? So one, contracting. Whatever the problem in coaching, the answer is always contracting, failing to do it. So it might be big posh contracts, but it might be just standing by the water cooler.

Ann 04:57

How can I help? How long have you got? Two, listening? Important. Three, questioning. Four, non-directive. So the ability to believe that what the other person's got inside their head might actually be more beneficial than giving them the benefit of your infinite wisdom.

Ann 05:16

And five, the grow model.

Tom 05:19

And so, when you're saying non-directive, that to me is what really distills the difference between a coach and a mentor. Would you agree with that? Good man. Because mentoring is often, will stick the youngest employees with someone who's been there for 10 years and they will tell them exactly how things are done here and if you don't do it that way then there's a chance that they might, you know, tell the boss and say they're not really fitting in.

Tom 05:43

Is that, is that, do you subscribe to that idea?

Ann 05:46

Yeah, yeah, God bless you for raising that question of difference between coaching and mentoring. But very, very briefly, let's define the two. So traditional mentoring, consulting, advising, put in content, skill, information.

Ann 06:00

Coaching pulls out the capacity that people have within. So of course a mentor needs to be able to coach. And of course a coach has to be able to chuck something in there just to keep them on their toes.

Ann 06:11

But that ability to elicit, to inspire, to draw out, because leaders these days, they cannot do it by command and control anymore. It just isn't time. And they have got to work collegially. They've got to draw out the capacity of everybody else.

Ann 06:32

So coaching is absolutely vital. And two problems with mentoring. I mean, mentoring is important. Mentoring is absolutely vital in the right place. But two potential problems with it. One, the mentor can be out of date, as you hinted.

Ann 06:46

My colleague Nigel does this brilliant reverse mentoring thing with that works. But two, being talked at for too long, like I'm doing to you now, sorry, depresses people's energy. Coaching raises people's energy.

Tom 07:01

And there's something else that you talked about that I really want to touch on as well is that is an effective coach someone who also appreciates being coached themselves like they're inquisitive and they like to bring out parts of their own ideas that maybe they wouldn't have been able to unlock without the person they're coaching or someone else coaching them.

Ann 07:21

Yeah. Um, what you've just touched on is actually it's, it's basic professional discipline. Um, I mean, it, you don't want the Gerald Ratner problem. Actually you're probably too young to remember who Gerald Ratner was.

Ann 07:32

Um, but he described, he ran a jewelry business and he described his products as a very rude word. So he didn't believe in his own product. So in a coach, you couldn't have somebody who believes in what they're doing and therefore they'll want it for themselves.

Ann 07:44

But actually there's beyond coaching, there's supervision where you, you go and offload to a real expert fairly regularly to make sure that you're not messing with somebody else's mind because the decisions taken in the presence of our graduates, okay, our graduates aren't advising, but they, they are creating the crucible where absolutely extraordinary decisions are taken, affecting thousands of people, millions of pounds of investment or whatever.

Ann 08:15

They've got to be in the right place.

Tom 08:19

And so how can leaders implement a culture of coaching in their organisations?

Ann 08:22

Slowly. My colleague Nigel is the expert on how long it really takes. There's so much that you could say about this but actually if I can be controversial I think the leaders have got to be the change they want to see in the world and if the leader is up for federal indictment or being pursued by constant claims of sexual harassment etc etc etc.

Ann 09:04

Sounds familiar. Then there is, as my mother would used to say, save your breath to cool your porridge. It's a waste of money in a traditional hierarchical context because somebody wrote a book called The Fish Rots from the Head.

Ann 09:21

If the leaders are not modelling it then forget it. Find an organisation that is. However having said that in the new world with technology, I mean there's extraordinary change happening at the moment in coaching, it's becoming very democratised.

Ann 09:36

It's becoming right through the organisation so maybe that's no longer true. Maybe we can compartmentalise a bit. Maybe you can inspire and bring on and develop and get them to perform out of the box people.

Ann 09:54

But leaders need to look into their own hearts and consciences pretty hard because they are still hugely influential.

Tom 10:04

So do you think that the best way of implementing a culture of coaching within an organisation is making the hierarchy flatter?

Ann 10:12

No, I'm not expert at that. I wouldn't I wouldn't presume to comment on that. The best way to do it is thoroughly, you know, whatever the question and coaching the answer is always contracting. So get really, really clear on your objectives.

Ann 10:28

Define a plan and implement it properly. You know, you have to train people, but you then have to provide ongoing support and challenge and modelling that there's a whole lot of elements that have to be in place for it to work and it takes time.

Tom 10:47

So when I was looking at your bio, it said that you took a break and retrained as a psychologist in your career, halfway through your career.

Ann 10:55

I'm very old, I've done lots of retraining.

Tom 10:58

I'd like to look at how concepts from psychology and neuroscience can be applied to leadership development in a little bit more detail. So how does that work in practice?

Ann 11:10

Well, again, there's so much to say about this. How do I summarise 30 years of my life in 15 seconds? Go. One, health warning. There's a lot of junk talked about neuroscience. Two, however, there are some useful bits coming out.

Ann 11:30

We don't yet have the great rule. I hope we never do, really. But maybe one small example is our reaction under stress. So we've always known, you know, fight or flight, blah, blah. But what we're discovering recently is that if the body is thrown into a state of grief, for example, particularly a sudden, a close bereavement, we're seeing what happens in the brain.

Ann 12:02

And what happens in the brain, a short, sharp shock, of course, the front brain, the neocortex, is switched off because you want to run away or fight. And all the blood flow and so on goes to the old parts of the brain that fight or run.

Ann 12:18

I mean, it's a cliché, but it turns out to be true. Which means that in your organisation, if your people are constantly under stress, then by definition, they are not opening up their neocortex, they're not opening up their higher thinking functions, and they're not opening up their creative thinking.

Ann 12:39

So it's just a health warning for the constant levels of stress which everybody I'm talking to is experiencing. And so again, from the leadership point of view, I think, be careful.

Tom 12:54

So don't put undue stress upon yourself in the first instance, but then also create an environment where you're not firing off those chemical reactions in your people's brain as well. So it's about really more of a scientific approach to almost what a lot of businesses are doing at the moment in terms of mental health and wellbeing at work anyway.

Tom 13:16

It's kind of a more.

Ann 13:17

It's a research indication that what they're doing is even more important than we think.

Tom 13:25

It's really interesting. And you've also conducted a lot of research into women in leadership. Again, could you explain that in a bit more detail? I don't want to kind of just constantly ask you these questions that you spent a lot of time researching and then say, could you explain it in a bit more detail in two minutes?

Tom 13:39

But I'm going to.

Ann 13:40

It's fun. Well, not women in plural, but one woman. So over the last few years, my research, I mean, my colleagues at Oxford are doing amazing things on women as groups, and I've had the privilege of going to some hair-raising seminars.

Ann 13:55

I mean, so, so good. But if I'm only allowed two minutes, let me talk about my own, the woman I'm researching, which is Queen Victoria. You might think, what the hell has she got to do with a conference on technology and humanity and so on?

Ann 14:10

But actually, she was the first global female leader. And in terms of 100-year life, she reigned for 63 years. She had a terrible crash in the middle period of this. That's why I'm interested in this shock stuff and the effect on the brain, because it happened to her.

Ann 14:30

She recovered. So there's great, and a lot of people don't. So there's huge learning there for resilience. There's learning there for who were her coaches, who were her mentors, like many, many leaders.

Ann 14:42

If you draw a graph and plot coaching and mentoring on it, she didn't have what she needed at the time that she needed it, often sadly true. Blah, so that's the woman I'm interested in researching.

Tom 14:55

And is there any one specific like lesson that you've learned from looking at her reign that you could apply to coaching or?

Ann 15:03

Yeah, strengths, inventories. So we've all had thousands of bits of paper and interviews telling us what's wrong with us, right? Appraisals, blah, blah, blah. And about 20 years ago, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman had one of those basic brainwaves in science that for a hundred years, been looking at what's wrong with people.

Ann 15:29

And they thought, oh, what have we applied? All that robust science of the last hundred years and helped it, helped took it across and applied it to healthy people to look at what's right with them, duh.

Ann 15:41

They might get the next Nobel Prize for that if the psychologist can nick another one from the economists. And they raised massive amounts of money for research. And as a result, we've got very evidence-based means of you and I taking a personality test and identifying what our strengths are and then playing to our strengths, which as you can imagine, is so much more energizing than flogging ourselves at something we're bad at, which is what the organisations as traditionally structured did all the time to people.

Ann 16:21

Queen Victoria, unquestionably, unquestionably, she had two major strengths. I mean, I don't need to do a psychometric with her. She's not around to do it. But it's so obvious from the data that she one, had huge physical stamina and boy, did she use that and she needed it a lot of the time.

Ann 16:40

Two, she was extraordinarily honest. Now you might think, is that useful in the workplace? And she did get in people's faces about it. But I think long-term, playing to that strength of honesty as she was utterly truthful, she was who she was, she was authentic to use the modern word.

Ann 17:02

And I think that was a deep basis of the real popularity, the true popularity she had by the end of her life.

Tom 17:10

So, speaking about technology and how our humanity has to rise up around it as it plays a great spot in our lives, what role does coaching play in achieving this?

Ann 17:21

I say nothing about technology. Believe me, you don't want to have me talking about technology. How do we reconnect with our humanity? There have been answers for thousands of years. Coaching is one of them.

Ann 17:35

Why do we need to connect with our humanity? Well, that's all we're going to have left. That's what differentiates us, is the obvious reason. But the other reason is, as the technology rises, yes, there are huge rewards, but there are huge risks.

Ann 17:50

And if we are constantly being knocked sideways and so stressed and exhausted that we're not really connected with who we are and what we believe and what we stand for, then we may not spot and we may not call out those risks.

Ann 18:04

So we really need to be securely grounded in who we are and understand ourselves. And coaching can do that.

Tom 18:12

So how has technology changed the way that you coach?

Ann 18:16

Well, there's lots of answers to that. In some ways, it's not changed at all because the very basics of listening, of connecting with another human, of structuring, et cetera, et cetera, unchanged. Of course, it's changed the vehicle through which we can do it, Skype, FaceTime, et cetera.

Ann 18:37

And it's completely changed the landscape in which we're coaching, the levels of stress, the levels of expectation, et cetera. But there's a really quirky new thing that's just come out in some recent research on Generation Z, believe it or not.

Ann 18:52

Do you feel old, Tom? A little bit, yeah. So Generation Z, there's some very recent research which my chief executive told me about yesterday that they prefer face-to-face contact. And we are all assuming in organisations that they are glued to their phones.

Ann 19:08

No, that someone's ahead. They've grown up with that, of course, they're digital natives, but actually, they're coming back to human connection.

Tom 19:18

And so what is your advice to leaders to make sure that their humanity of their organisations isn't lost with the proliferation of technology?

Ann 19:26

Be human themselves.

Tom 19:27

So what does that look like in practice?

Ann 19:33

Funnily enough and sorry this is a cliched response but they could have a coach but actually having a coach is not the answer what they need is the right coach so they need the coach that they can relate to enough that they can really connect these are people living you know in the media spotlight etc etc they've been taught not to trust there's got to be... it's an extraordinary ability to connect truly with it with a very senior leader but at the same time they can't be too connected the coach has got to be prepared to challenge as well so that's a jolly good start

Tom 20:11

And we'll leave that as the final bit of advice to our listeners. Ann thank you so much for your time today, it's been a really interesting conversation.

Host 20:20

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