

02. Leadership is a "Contact Sport"



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I can take little credit for the title of this article – the analogy of leadership being a contact sport was first mentioned to me in a meeting with a partner from one of the big consultancy houses. The key message being that leaders needed to get away from the desk and the lap top and engage with their people – it's all about the conversations that leaders have with their team members.

This is backed up in academia. Critchley (2012) described how organisations were not fixed entities or things "but a constant self-referencing process of gestures and responses between people."

It was something that really resonated with me. Before becoming an Executive Coach, I'd spent 30 years in Financial Services, the last decade as a Senior Executive in Lloyds Banking Group (LBG) leading national sales and distribution businesses. Reflecting on what had defined my leadership, it was a values based approach and the ability to motivate.

Thinking about the patterns I saw in LBG and I frequently encounter as a coach. I see lots of really talented individuals in leadership roles with high IQ but low EQ. Their people are looking for those to follow – but there's an absence of leadership

For teams to reach their potential, there has to be intellectual and emotional connection between the leader and the team members, yet what gets leaders their role typically isn't what's needed for them to lead:

- Their thinking can be rigid
- They can lack understanding of others

- When the pressure is on, they can be abrasive and insensitive
- And their working relationships can be managerial & perfunctory

What contact sport is about then is getting the best from the brightest brains:

- Stressors and sensitivities can be quite different for them
- Often they find communication difficult
- As can being part of a team

Contact sport helps the client first to really know themselves. It's about encouraging them to be authentic. Not simply imitating others or applying theoretical learning, authenticity is about being courageous and daring to be different. It's crucially about respecting each other and engendering a feeling of positivity but nor is it being a soft touch. Contact sport helps leaders to practice tough empathy – which is all about giving people what they need not what they think they want.

I get it because I faced many of the same challenges throughout my career – I started off as that high IQ low EQ leader.

Our approach is driven by the paradoxical nature of change – typically coaching interventions start by heading off to achieve a specific objective. Often there is a lack of congruence between where the leader sees the need and where their boss sees the gap. And the harder you try returns diminish. If you really want to change, it's vital to

focus on what's really going on in the here and now and what needs to change will become apparent.

Psychometrics and 360 feedback tools have a place and we use them extensively but can be "gamed" and their validity has been challenged as a predictor of outcomes – Gardner & Martinko (1996).

Our approach then typically starts by spending time in the business with the leader. We seek largely unstructured

feedback from their colleagues 1:1 and observe the client in the workplace to really understand what's going on and how others respond to them. Mike Grant, Executive Coach. Grant Coaching & Consulting Limited.

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