

Canadian Journal for Women in Coaching Online

Physically Distanced Leadership: A Personal Perspective

© 2018 Coaching Association of Canada, ISSN 1496-1539

October 2020, Vol. 20, No. 4

Timely, compelling, emotive, and heartfelt. Writing with clarity and compassion, Cari Din captures the strange and challenging times in which we are living as she maps out lessons learned since the Covid-19 pandemic began. Taking us through her recent personal learning journey, she describes four transformational behaviours and poses questions that guide readers on their own navigation of our present insular, Zoom-dominated world. This article is essential reading for all coaches and leaders. -- Sheila Robertson, Journal Editor

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By Cari Din

On March 13, 2020, my students and I were asked to vacate campus. This was the first time in my nearly ten years of teaching in higher education to be told to cancel a class. It was a dramatic epilogue to a situation and compendium of stories still being written. Like many of you, I have spent spring and summer of this year trying to do leadership at-a-distance. I am reflecting on my effectiveness through screens and over the phone six months into physical distancing. I find myself wondering how I would lead if I was still coaching university-aged athletes.

This personal perspective article explores frameworks I have been learning about and integrating into my leadership during physical distancing. My remote teaching and mentoring as a faculty member in a Kinesiology department with a focus on leadership behaviours is profoundly influenced by being physically distanced. Here I will sketch ideas I have taken up over the last six months and invite you to reflect on leadership practices you could translate to your own coaching or leading in the coming months.

Numerous popular media such as *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review* - even fashion-focused magazines like *InStyle* – are publishing stories about how women leaders have navigated COVID-19. Two scholars in the United Kingdom compared the 19 nations led by women to the 175 led by men during the early months of the pandemic and found, after analyzing decisions and leadership behaviours, the women leader's swift actions aimed at saving lives, being clear, empathetic, and decisive in their communication, had a positive positively impact on population health. Although my article is not an exploration of gender difference in leadership behaviours, the thought-provoking stories being shared about leaders like Tsai Ing-wen in Taiwan and Angela Merkel in Germany, got me thinking about my own leadership, as a woman during this pandemic.

When I paused in late August and asked myself questions about my clarity, empathy, and decisiveness, I started thinking about the most pervasive and comprehensively tested theory of effective leadership: transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is a relational process which develops people

and their performances through inspiring and empowering followers. Transformational leadership is set of quality behaviours shown through research across diverse contexts — think parenting, business, the military and definitely sport — to develop a host of positive outcomes from psychosocial wellness to Olympic gold medals. No one has done a transformational audit of the 19 women leading nations through this pandemic; however, the stories and statistics I have read leave me thinking they have mobilized this type of leadership during uncertainty and at-a-distance.

In my PhD work, I tested transformational leadership theory and discovered that Canadian coaches whose athletes won medals in the 2010 Olympic Games were using it. Transformational leaders empower followers through role modelling their values and encouraging creativity and problem solving. They take the time to get to know their followers and tailor learning to individuals. And transformational leadership includes sketching “a compelling vision of the future”. At the Canadian Centre of Advanced Leadership at the Haskayne School of Business, where I am a leadership fellow, we are using this leadership framework to structure our mentorship program. Research suggests mentoring relationships create fertile ground for leadership development, so building transformational leadership learning into the program this year is a wise decision. I am looking forward to supporting mentors in being transformational while physically distanced.

The question which is yet to be answered but certainly one I have hunches about is: What shifts do we need to make to use the four transformational behaviours effectively when we do not share a physical space? My own leadership through the screen has been at times seamless but in other instances, awkward. I will describe each of the four transformational behaviours which I have been practicing during remote work and invite you to pause and imagine how you can translate some of these practices to your coaching and leading now.

When we take the time to get to know what motivates a person, what makes them tick, and the barriers they face, we are using the first transformational leadership behavior of individualized consideration. One example of my use of this behaviour happened recently through a screen. I sent an email to former students, asking for their advice to future students in a project-based class I am teaching online this fall. One student asked if she could meet me on Zoom to discuss this request. When we met, she shared the barriers to learning she had experienced as the only BIPOC (black, Indigenous, and people of colour) student on her project team. My initial feelings of sadness and remorse were mixed with gratitude because in the moment, I was aware of getting to hear and value the individual experience of this student. When we truly see people and hear them, we do individualized consideration. After our Zoom talk, this student made a video for students in the new cohort of my class to learn from.

Individualized consideration allows us to reach people. For me, it is the threshold to engagement and although challenging to do in large groups, the leadership behaviour I feel my best sport coaching was built upon this practice. What are you doing to increase your understanding of the individuals you coach or lead? How can you improve this practice at-a-distance without adding hundreds of hours to your day?

The second transformational leadership behaviour I have practiced during physical distancing is idealized influence. This behaviour is seen when we talk about our values and purpose, we model what we seek, and earn people’s trust. I think the women decreasing death rates in the nations they lead are doing idealized influence. My personal example of idealized influence happened under pressure, when a researcher I was supervising was unresponsive. Rather than scold this person on deadlines and expectations, I set up a time to talk on the phone and describe my core values, and the purpose of our shared work. This was a conversation I would have preferred face-to-face, ideally walking outside. I used the phone rather than Zoom or Microsoft Teams because I did not want to stare directly into her eyes, I wanted to tell my story and invite her into it.

Idealized influence in the most influential sport coaches I learned from was embodied – their values and our purpose emanated from their physical presence as much as their words. Imagining how we can clarify our principles is crucial at-a-distance because our presence is digital. Genuine conversations with the people we are coaching about shared values and purpose are as important to plan as training cycles. How are you doing idealized influence right now?

Inspirational motivation happens when we paint a compelling vision of the future in which people can see themselves. Our athletes, direct reports, and students engage meaningfully to the journey when we do inspirational motivation effectively. This transformational leadership behaviour is intentionally designed into my fall classes. One of the strategies Flower Darby and James Lang suggest in their excellent book, *Small Teaching Online: Applying Learning Science in Online Classes*, is to describe the vision and final destination of a course to students as we begin online. This is akin to painting a compelling picture of the future and welcoming people into the process of achieving a shared purpose in sport in which athletes can see themselves.

This summer, I challenged myself to distill courses into one or two big ideas which I can describe simply in our first class to help students imagine achieving these aims with me and their peers. In sport, I often conceptualized the vision as the score. But I learned as an artistic swimmer to pay attention to the process and set performance goals we *could* control, because a judge's score would not always reflect the work we did. This helped me as a young coach to teach athletes to trust their process and retain our vision. It also helped me to teach athletes that vision and purpose are multi-dimensional and nuanced; that is, a best performance may not earn the highest score.

I think we must be incredibly intentional about starting with a clear and accessible vision at-a-distance and I invite you to consider how you do this. How do you enable buy-in and engagement with the process, plan, and future state?

The fourth transformational leadership behaviour is intellectual stimulation. We do it when we ask people to take more than one perspective, to design creative solutions, and disrupt the status quo. In some ways, being at-a-distance has me in a near constant state of intellectual stimulation; very few things are being done the way they were before 2020.

My example of intentionally practicing intellectual stimulation comes from mentoring a team of three students throughout the spring and summer. As this team stepped into new terrain, I invited them to be resourceful and represent their thinking in ways which made sense to them. If we had been working face-to-face, I would have demonstrated how I organize large groups of ideas and sources in my office at the university; yet at-a-distance, I encouraged each individual researcher to come up with a system and use a technology that works for them. Without an exemplar on my massive whiteboard, each person began imagining different ways they could make sense of their work. The pride and clarity each showed me in their report back reminded me of the indelible impact this leadership behaviour makes on all of us.

Intellectual stimulation also reminds me of genius hours, a concept first used at Google, where engineers were given 20% of their time to work and play with ideas they were personally passionate about. Genius hours ultimately led to increases in productivity and great ideas at Google. Some suggest just 60 minutes out of a regular work week pursuing one's curiosity positively influences objective and subjective outcomes at work. Educational leaders certainly advocate for this in Kindergarten-Grade 12 learning. I wonder if we use this leadership behavior enough in sport. What can you do to intentionally enable an athlete's or direct report's resourcefulness at-a-distance? Where can you create space for your follower's creativity and novel approaches to a taken-for-granted practice or process?

Another framework which I spent time in summer 2020 reading and translating to my fall projects is Flower Darby and James Lang's book mentioned earlier. Darby and Lang's work overlaps with being clear, empathetic, and decisive, the leadership behaviours women leading their nations through COVID-19 are employing. Their suggestions also intersect with transformational leadership behaviours. Although not written for coaches or leaders in sport, I see extensive parallels between their evidence-led recommendations for excellent teaching online and leading effectively in sport during physical distancing.

Darby and Lang suggest intentionally creating the conditions for learners to take greater responsibility for their progress at-a-distance. This could sound counter-intuitive, but they offer numerous ways to draw learners into becoming active agents rather than recipients of information. I will summarize the four recommendations I think we can translate to sport coaching and leadership.

Explain the value of the specific activities you have designed. Keep the rationale for what you are asking people to do in full view and continuously tie work to its overarching purpose. This may mean posting our mission, vision, and values more often, adding reflection against these guiding tenets to a meeting or talking with your athletes about the ultimate aims of training regularly. This year, students will hear me explaining the relationship between their activities and learning, why team-based learning is valuable, and the benefits of coming to class live on a modified schedule. If I were coaching a university team this fall (I did between 2008 and 2014), I would not assign an at-home fitness regime without linking it to the goals and aims we brainstormed as a team. Clarifying the purpose of each step in the process is crucial at-a-distance.

Break down large or complex tasks into logical, manageable chunks. In one of my courses, I have added a research project where students will focus on a nagging problem they have experienced in sport coaching, search the scholarly research, and develop solutions. I have carefully designed week-by-week tasks for teams to dig into and check off during this multi-faceted project. The final product, a podcast designed for volunteer coaches working with public school sport teams, will be the culmination of 12 weeks of discovery, design. What could you add to a work plan or Yearly Training Plan which would help athletes and people who report to you become engaged in and motivated by the large, complex journey they will take while we are physically distanced? How can you involve your athletes and reports in breaking down of a complex project or process?

Create more support for working on one's own. I am using intentional teamwork in my courses this fall, to combat the loneliness of doing university from one's bedroom. I know that many hours of work will be done by students on their own, and the isolation physical distancing can create is something I am deeply worried about. I am translating the structure and extra framing Darby and Lang recommend into questions for my students to consider while they consume course content. When I release a video or article to students, I will include a series of questions to pause and answer as they work through the content. This has been shown to increase engagement in learning on-line. If I were coaching this fall and had workouts athletes need to complete on their own, I would add check-ins and responses during sessions which in person would seem unnecessary. Specifically, if athletes needed to complete a 45-minute strength workout, I might integrate 5 to 10 micro-responses into the plan, asking them to jot down or record a comment regularly to deepen their engagement and my sense of how they are doing.

Talk about the role of belonging in making progress. We know that feeling as if we belong to a group positively influences our progress. I have said this in my face-to-face classes repeatedly over the years. I use the fundamental need of feeling like we belong to help one of the most fragmented university teams I ever coached navigate some significant personality clashes. This point from Darby and Lang is at the heart of my beliefs about teaching and learning. Team learning and reliance upon peers frames my fall 2020 courses. Sport itself gives us the conditions for team, even when we compete on our own. An advantage to coaching through the pandemic might be in leveraging the taken-for-granted connections teammates have with one another. I imagine surfacing and celebrating these links in sport. This should strengthen and expand them. What can you do to catalyze meaningful conversations about the role of belonging to a group and making progress in sport? Who can you enlist in your team to make this memorable and impactful?

In many ways, beginning this fall term — something I associate with sunny afternoons, crisp apples, and the smell of sharp pencils — feels like a moon landing . And I am not certain I have enough oxygen in my tank or the right boots. While writing this article, my calendar is full of orientation meetings, graduate student checklists, planning to create something meaningful for nearly 160 students I have not met yet. By the time this article is live, we will be six weeks into term, those early steps too far behind me to see clearly perhaps. I am wondering with a potent mix of nervousness and curiosity: What are we paying attention to? What are we learning? Is this a leadership chapter we can be proud of when we take stock of the choices we made, the boundaries we maintained, and the examples we set? Was I clear, decisive ,and empathic enough? To be determined.

About the Author

Dr. Cari Din holds a PhD in Leadership Behaviour and has earned teaching excellence awards at the University of Calgary five times since 2015. She is a Teaching Scholar at the Taylor Institute of Teaching and Learning working to enrich experiential learning through lab reform and is a faculty member in the Faculty of Kinesiology. Dr. Din brings a keen interest in how people *learn* leadership to her CCAL Leadership Fellowship, which began in July of 2020. She was an artistic swimming coach for 25 years and alongside her teammates in 1996, won an Olympic silver medal.

References Available Upon Request