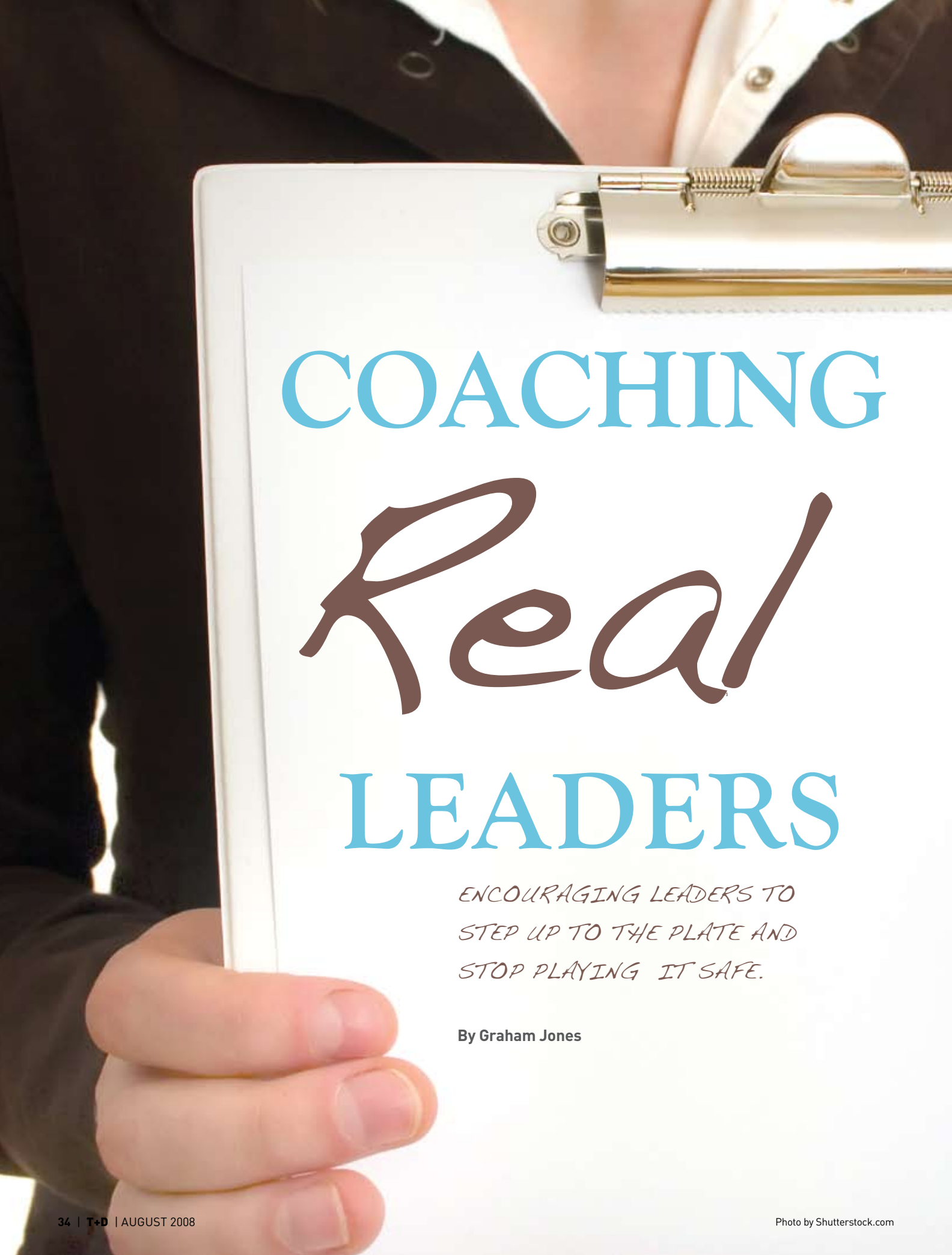

COACHING *Real* LEADERS

ENCOURAGING LEADERS TO STEP UP TO THE PLATE AND STOP PLAYING IT SAFE.

By Graham Jones

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Have you ever considered why leaders choose to lead?

Is it just about the status, power, and authority that accompany the role? Is it the responsibility, accountability, and vision required that attracts them? Or is it about the opportunity to make a difference and really influence the world around them?

My experience coaching senior leaders in companies including Coca Cola, Deutsche Bank, and Accenture, has helped me to distinguish between what I call "real leaders" and "safe leaders." This distinction is important because it has implications for the way senior executives are coached.

Real and safe leaders

The current economic difficulties bring with them an intriguing quandary for senior leaders. These are times when leaders must make a choice between opting for safe leadership, or stepping up to be real leaders.

At the extreme, safe leaders are driven so much by their needs for reward, status, and power that they are unwilling to put themselves on the line because of the threat of losing their position if they take the wrong action. They keep their heads out of the firing line, they are risk-averse, and they will sit tight in the hope that more favorable conditions are just around the corner.

There is little or no innovation and challenge to orthodoxy during a safe leader's tenure since his focus is almost exclusively on micromanaging the short term—particularly around items such as achieving this week's numbers. In tough times, the focus is on cutting costs and probably putting a halt on development activities such as coaching.

One thing is for sure amongst real leaders— they are all highly motivated individuals. But it is not simply a case of being motivated. Motivation can assume many forms, and not all of them are conducive to high performance, at least not at a sustainable level.

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REAL LEADERS, by definition, make what is essentially a choice to place themselves under pressure. Pressure can debilitate and weigh heavily on leaders, eventually distracting and overwhelming them if it is not addressed.

Real leaders, on the other hand, are driven more by the challenge and opportunity to put themselves out there and make a difference—this is what leadership is about for them. Real leaders become more prominent in tough times—they are highly visible, and they make things happen. Sure, they have to focus on and manage the short-term challenges as well, but their minds are geared more toward investing for the future.

Real leaders view difficult times as those when development is needed most—when nurturing and retaining talent offers a competitive advantage in the long term.

Coaching real leaders

Coaching real leaders can be tough. I have really had to be on my toes when coaching senior executives in Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 companies. Research on coaching the most successful senior executives, or for our purposes, real leaders, shows that these people need a coach with credibility ("Coaching high achievers" *Consulting Psychology Journal* vol 48, pp 40-50).

This is where my experience of working with the most senior executives proves useful in gaining acceptance. Our research also shows that these people are demanding and want to be challenged by their coach. They want to see rapid results and need to feel they are constantly exploring issues at the cutting edge of new knowledge. Senior executive coaches should

- Provide a high level of stretch that takes executives beyond their comfort zones.
- Have genuine confidence in their own ability as coaches working at this level.
- Be ready to provide feedback at all times.
- Focus on rapid results so that executives feel the time they are committing to the coaching is justified.
- Stay up to date with the very latest thought leadership.

The bottom line is that coaching real leaders can be trying, and coaches who are not up to the challenge are unmasked very quickly. The great thing about coaching these individuals is that it is always stimulating and satisfying when you know you are making a real difference to them.

Coaching mental toughness

Tough times make coaching real leaders especially demanding. Their visibility makes them exposed and vulnerable, which means that real leadership can be a lonely and high-pressure place. I have been told by many senior executives behind closed doors, "Graham, I'm waiting to be found out," or "Graham, I'm wondering how I got to this position; I don't feel comfortable in it."

This is where real leaders require ultimate trust in the coaching relationship. Coaching real leaders will almost certainly touch upon mental toughness. There are four key areas that drive the coaching content: thriving on pressure, staying strong in one's self-belief, preserving motivation, and focusing on the things that matter.

Thriving on pressure. Real leaders, by definition, make what is essentially a choice to place themselves under pressure. Pressure can debilitate and weigh heavily on leaders, eventually distracting and overwhelming them if it is not addressed. But pressure can also facilitate and invigorate leaders so that they thrive on it and use it to their advantage. The key factor in determining how leaders respond to pressure is their mindset.

Seeing sources of pressure as challenges and opportunities rather than threats and constraints is the key to thriving on pressure. Coaches can help real leaders in how they perceive and think about the pressures they face.

A recently appointed managing director—I'll call him Michael—of the legal division of a major car manufacturer asked me to coach him. He was aware that he had been promoted to lead a team of people who had previously been his peers, and who probably thought they should have gotten his job. Or so he assumed.

Michael felt constantly under the spotlight and believed that others were just waiting for him to fail. My first task was to get Michael to realize that he was distorting how he thought others perceived him, causing him to feel threatened in almost every situation where his colleagues were present.

Acknowledging the choice he had over his perceptions of the world and the people in it, Michael worked hard to see these situations as opportunities to build respect and good working relationships with his colleagues.

He began to see how he could actually derive some pleasure and enjoyment from his new role. He had been operating as a safe leader who was fearful of the consequences of making mistakes, and was now beginning to seize opportunities where he could make things happen. Michael was using pressure to his advantage.

Staying strong in your self-belief. Self-belief enables leaders to operate in a way that engenders consistent high performance. It does so by

enhancing their desire and ability to

- set and achieve stretching goals
- accept and learn from criticism
- take risks
- make decisions without fear of being wrong
- rebound from setbacks.

But self-belief can be brittle and fragile, particularly for those in highly visible and exposed positions. This is where coaches can be really supportive of leaders who are "waiting to be found out." I began coaching Tiana, a senior leader on the male-dominated board of a manufacturing and distribution organization because she was struggling with her self-belief.

I helped her recognize that she was trying to prove herself to her male colleagues—relying on their approval and recognition as an acceptance of her competence. Her need to demonstrate her abilities and skills resulted in an inflexibility that damaged working relationships with the very people from whom she needed reinforcement. Tiana refused to budge on issues and was reluctant to listen to and consider others' views.

We worked on instilling a deeper internalization of Tiana's self-belief so that she would not be dependent on how she thought her colleagues valued her. The coaching focused on raising Tiana's awareness and reminding her of the skills and attributes that had helped her achieve such a senior position. This enabled her to build a more robust belief that was hers to control.

Making your motivation work for you. One thing is for sure among real leaders—they are all highly motivated individuals. But it is not simply a case of being motivated. Motivation can assume many forms, and not all of them are conducive to high performance, at least not at a sustainable level.

So motivation can actually work for you and against you. Consider two real leaders who are both very highly motivated to do a good job. One of them really enjoys and thrives on the challenge and looks forward to going into the office every day. The other has equally high motivation, but it is in the form of desperation to succeed. The latter probably lies awake at night worrying about the threats to his ambitions he will encounter the following day.

I coached a very successful investment banker, Chuck, in a large global bank who aspired to sitting on the board of directors someday. His efforts to be a real leader led him to work incredibly long hours, and he seemed incapable of switching off from his job when he was away from the office.

Chuck was a control freak who resisted delegating to his team because he did not have the necessary confidence in them to perform to the levels he demanded. His motivation was clearly driven by a fear of failure, which caused stress when there was any hint that his huge expectations might not be met.

My first task was to help Chuck understand that his motivation was driven by external recognition, almost to the complete exclusion of him deriving any personal satisfaction and pride from a job well done—he was not enjoying being a real leader because of the fear of the consequences of failure.

We worked on setting goals that were more short-term and centered around the day-to-day processes that he was good at, rather than tangible outputs. This reminded him of what underpinned his success to date, and he started to gain satisfaction from his job again.

Maintaining your focus on the things that matter. The problem with "focus" is that it is a limited resource, so the way in which leaders direct it is important. Some can waste time and energy focusing on things that are not really relevant to what they are trying to achieve, and coaches can help these people identify the key factors that influence performance and, crucially, that they can control; these are the things that matter.

Many years ago, I coached Jim, the leader of a pharmaceutical company. He had taken over a struggling business five years earlier and had led it to double-digit growth in each of the previous three years. The business had become a thriving operation headed by a real leader who had put his neck on the line for its success.

Their success, however, was rudely interrupted when news broke one day about serious problems with one of the company's new drugs. The hype in the media increased rapidly as more and more people came forward to tell their own stories of problems with the drug. My coaching conversations with Jim centered largely around what the media had been saying and the effect it might have on the business. My role was to challenge him on where his focus was and where it should be.

We identified factors outside Jim's control, one of which was the media, and he quickly realized he was wasting valuable time and energy focusing on something he could do nothing about. What he could control was what was happening within the business, and he focused on the morale of the people and what he could do to reassure them during this difficult period. Only then was he being a real leader and focusing on the things that really mattered.

Coaching real leaders is both challenging and stimulating because it involves more than focusing on leadership competencies. Their visibility and exposure requires a level of mental toughness that will sustain them during difficult times, and it is the difference between safe leadership and real leadership. So coaching senior executives is more than coaching them on what to do and more about coaching them on how to be. **T+D**

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