

# Coaches as Wise Elders

Lessons from Africa in mentoring and influencing youth

By Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC

**C**hildren are our future. Can the coaching approach help? Let's look at how coaching can be a more vital part of the development of adolescents and young adults into productive, responsible, and positive global citizens.

For coaching to be powerfully effective with youth, we have to offer something new and different. We must model vital aging and the attributes of wise elders. Youth are the modern-day mine canary, capable of telling (in most cases) when something from adults is inauthentic. We have to show up as open, curious, and willing to engage in honest dialogue. I believe we can learn a great deal about this process from how other cultures create elders who can then guide youth into their eventual role as elders.

## Acting as elders

In March of 2006, I traveled to Tanzania with ten other men, led by Richard Leider (author of *The Power of Purpose* and *Claiming Your Place at the Fire*). For the past 25 years, Richard has led small groups on 'inventures' — journeys of personal transformation to the land where human life began. Participants travel side by side with Hadza and Maasai tribal leaders to observe their grace and connection to the earth. They also learn a great deal about how these two tribal societies mentor their youth and revere and honor their elders.

One central theme of our invention was to learn from these tribal peoples about their age-old traditions of youth becoming warriors and then young elders. We had opportunities to learn and observe the role of full elders (wise elders) in the development of the younger men. We witnessed the reverence of these full elders for the land, their family and their history.

Honoring and seeking the wisdom of elders is emphasized and remains a value. This is a distinctly different way of respecting elders than we see in the West, where elders are relegated to nursing homes or simply seen as having nothing to offer the younger generations. Although Western culture changes much faster than other cultures around the world, life wisdom is a constant that does not change as quickly. As coaches, we can empower our elders to take a larger role in the maturation of young people.

But this is only half of the process. We, too, must act as elders to our younger clients. In our fast-paced, detached, and disconnected media-driven modern society, what role can we coaches play in guiding our youth and modeling for our clients and for youth the value of wise elders?

## Living and sharing

Coaches can become more visible as wise elders in many ways. Experienced coaches understand that we

often gain as much from our coaching relationships as do our clients. In fact, engaging in this kind of work has often been described by coaches to be rewarding, fulfilling, gratifying, and inspirational. As much as we get from coaching, however, we are giving much more to our younger clients.

In a recent book by Steven Post and Jill Neimark entitled *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*, the authors summarize much scientific data suggesting life-enhancing benefits that are the result of compassion, kindness, and caring relationships. When we give of ourselves, the authors say, "Everything from life satisfaction to self-realization to physical health is affected." This was well demonstrated in the short yet powerful book by Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a beautiful story of a professor who later became a mentor for Albom on how to live life with zest, optimism, and possibility, and even face death in the eye. As a younger man, Albom received a powerful new perspective on living a meaningful life through his time with Morrie.

Just as Morrie did with Albom, coaching youth will be a combination of assisting young people in designing and cre-

## Coaching for Students

The State of Georgia has created a High School Graduation Coach Initiative that allows each of the state's high schools to employ a coach. The coach's primary responsibility is to identify at-risk students and provide the resources to help them succeed in school. Coaches, for example, recruit adults to act as mentors as well as students to act as peer mentors, while the Georgia Department of Education provides training, support, and technical assistance.

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ating a vision and plan for the life they want to live, as well as in discerning their inherent purpose as it unfolds over the course of their development. This is a crucial point. Too many young people choose a path in life based on exterior

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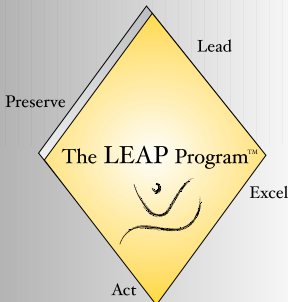
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factors such as income, prestige, or location. But a meaningful life comes from following interior motivations — one's bliss, as Joseph Campbell was fond of saying.

Richard Leider says that becoming a wise elder does not happen just because we have lived a long time or have had many experiences. Becoming a true elder requires that we pursue and involve ourselves in the growth opportunities of elderhood. It is a process of what I call 'eldering, not oldering.' Leider says that "first we must embrace elderhood as a stage of development." Second, we must do "the personal work necessary to growing whole. Becoming an elder involves growing, loving, learning, and giving in the second half of life." (From the handout *Claiming Your Place at the Fire: The Four Flames of Vital Aging*, copyright Richard Leider, 2006.)

Leider is passionate about vital aging and purposeful living. This vitality of elders will be impressive to youth and will model for them that life is indeed a journey — and it may be a very long one, so having guides can be helpful.

Few things are as powerful as leading by example. Coaches

should be willing to share their own journeys when appropriate. This is one of the many lessons we can learn from cultures such as the Hadza and Maasai. Becoming wise elders requires that we, as coaches, live and share wise lives.

As coaching becomes more vital and effective with youth, we have to present ourselves as both mentors and models. It is no longer sufficient to simply use the traditional tools of coaching without also modeling the attributes of wise elders. Young people are extremely perceptive and will not tolerate or accept superficial answers to complex problems. Coaches must be authentic, honest, open-minded, and willing to engage in challenging dialogue and to honestly deal with tough issues when asked. We also must be willing to ask the powerful questions that are not usually asked of young adults — and hang around long enough to listen to all the answers and other questions that arise in response. •

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