

Chapter 15

Systemic Awareness Coaching: Film as a Coaching Tool for Leadership Development



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Introduction

The qualities of awareness, indeed, of a fully human consciousness, have been largely ignored in leadership research but are gaining greater recognition. The skill of holding one's awareness in the present moment is generally referred to as 'mindfulness' and currently mindful leadership research is leading the way in this respect (see, for example, King & Badham, 2018). In this chapter, this present moment awareness notion of mindfulness is extended to the idea of 'systemic awareness' drawing on research in positive psychology, consciousness studies, neuroscience, the psychology of wisdom and leadership.

It is probably fair to say that many around the world are deeply dissatisfied with the quality of leadership in political and business domains. Various competing explanations of the failures of leadership are offered. Some popular explanations include: that it is too easy for narcissists to achieve leadership roles; that neoliberalism's unhealthy focus on competition promotes poor leadership practice; that business schools and the leadership development industry have approached leadership education in the wrong way by disconnecting leadership education from its messy reality (see Grint, 2007); and that poor leadership is frequently supported by overly inflated salaries that attract the wrong kind of person. There is merit in each of

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these explanations but what has not been explored are the qualities of awareness that can affect all aspects of leadership, and which we argue under-performing leaders may be lacking. In addition, we suggest that there is real benefit in further exploring how coaching systemic awareness as a tool for enhancing leadership awareness can help leaders as coachees.

The authors, as practitioners, have found that film can be a very useful tool in leadership development and coaching (King et al., 2020), particularly for clarifying complex social science concepts. In this chapter, an examination of the feature film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2002), as a case study is provided as an exemplary representation of positive leadership influenced by systemic awareness and the iterative interplay between coach and coachee. Doing so prompts a more embodied form of learning and awareness of, and empathy for, others and displays what systemic awareness may look like in real-world situations. We, the authors, argue that using film as a synchronous research tool, data source, model, metaphor and learning experience makes it relevant, flexible and adaptable to multiple applications in coaching and development contexts.

A discussion of systemic awareness follows, together with an examination of current leadership theory that is best aligned to positive psychology, before an exploration of important issues regarding positive psychology coaching interventions for leadership development through enhanced systemic awareness.

Theory, Basic Concepts and Key Developments

Systemic Awareness

Neuroscientific studies of mindfulness are instructive as a starting point for discussing systemic awareness (see Jeste & LaFee, 2020 for an overview), including, for example, interoception (bodily awareness) (Murphy et al., 2017), emotion regulation (Wheeler et al., 2017), dealing with clinical problems (Boyd et al., 2018), and creating pedagogies for developing a more contemplative awareness (Berkovich-Ohana et al., 2019). It is clear in this research that objectively measurable structural changes take place in the brains of mindfulness practitioners (from novices to masters), and that these changes occur in very specific regions of the brain. These are the regions that mindfulness theory tends to suggest would change. Alignment between the (structural) findings of neuroscience studies and Buddhist mindfulness theory is strong.

Beyond neuroscience, positive psychology research also focuses on mindfulness and other contemplative techniques for developing awareness and wellbeing (Dolev-Amit et al., 2020), while wisdom and leadership have also been considered in positive psychology research (Zacher et al., 2013). Branching out from this literature and because awareness is open to empirical investigation, it is possible to change awareness in specific ways, e.g., mindfulness training. When this kind of investigation and process of change is carried out systematically through coaching, we call it

Systemic Awareness Coaching. We use the term, systemic awareness, because there is confusion in the psychology research literature about what mindfulness is, exactly. Traditionally, Buddhist mindfulness meditation includes single point concentration practices, broad awareness practices, and empathy practices, but it is also connected to how one navigates life ethically as someone who embodies mindfulness. To put it briefly, most psychological studies of mindfulness take narrower views of what mindfulness is. Studies tend to understand mindfulness as narrow “attentional” skills rather than the systemic suite of skills, states, and attitudes that it originally was. Systemic awareness captures this broader, deeper, and embodied notion of awareness to make a clear distinction between the authors’ view and that of many psychology researchers. What our coaching approach leaves out are Buddhist (religious) concerns such as the cycle of birth and rebirth and liberation (nirvana).

The so-called recent ‘mindfulness push-back’ in psychology has raised important issues about the effects of mindfulness and these should be carefully considered (see Baer et al., 2019; Eberth & Sedlmeier, 2012, for broad discussions of the benefits and harms of mindfulness). However, it is important to point out though that some of the criticisms of mindfulness research fail to adequately acknowledge the existing neuroscience research on mindfulness, and also do not discriminate between studies that use theoretically sound measures of mindfulness and those that do not (McMahan & Braun, 2017). Clearly, although some studies claim to be mindfulness studies, they are closer to studies of more superficial modes of awareness. For example, studies that use the Langer Mindfulness Scale (LMS) (Pirson et al., 2012), or the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) approach have questions hanging over them. Both have been subject to ongoing criticism in mindfulness and Buddhist studies (see debates in, for example, Kabat-Zinn, 2011; McMahan & Braun, 2017; Purser & Loy, 2013; Purser & Milillo, 2015; Walsh, 2016) due to their narrow understandings of the ethical/values and contemplative dimensions involved in traditional mindfulness practices. Each of these approaches should be classified separately in meta-analyses and reviews of mindfulness research. One is not comparable to the other because they have each measured something different or used partial measures of mindfulness.

How mindfulness is defined and measured in research is a non-trivial matter and psychology has not necessarily handled it well. In very broad terms, we can divide mindfulness research into three categories: (1) mindfulness treated simply as awareness or concentration (e.g., Langer); (2) mindfulness as a therapeutic tool (for reducing stress, treating mood disorders, etc., e.g., Kabat-Zinn); and (3) mindfulness as a wisdom and spiritual development process (which is its original Buddhist form). Each of these approaches rest on quite different assumptions about what mindfulness is. An additional point for coaches in considering this situation is that much mindfulness research removes the spiritual (self-transcendent) components of Buddhist mindfulness, meaning that this research is of very little use if ethical or sustainability issues are being addressed in leadership. A very recent study attests to this problem (Matko et al., 2021) by showing that including ethical training makes teaching spiritual practices like mindfulness and yoga more effective. Nevertheless,

positive psychology appears to have successfully drawn a great deal from mindfulness and Buddhist psychology literature.

A refined awareness is both a system of knowing and a kind of consciousness. To be an excellent leader, one must, after all, have a conscious awareness of what one knows (and does not know). Therefore, because coaches can be systematic in how coachees use their awareness systems and how they can develop it, coaches can begin to develop suitable tools. A refined awareness may enhance a leader's ethicality, their wellbeing and the wellbeing of people in their workplace, as well as their performance, and the performance of their organisation. If coaches can take a systemic approach to accessing and employing the systems of awareness of their coachees, they are likely to become better leaders (King & Haar, 2017). Systemic awareness, then, is something that coaches can work with to bring significant psychological growth and wellbeing to their coachees.

Neuroscience and consciousness studies have become interested in phenomenological questions. Phenomenology is the study of first-person experience of the world (Schütz, 1967; Varela, 1996). In other words, it is about the private experience of living in the everyday world as your consciousness, as it were, brings experience to you (Flood, 2010). Consciousness is a significant part of what it is like to be you, seen from your perspective (Nagel, 1974). Moreover, as Jung (2014) suggested, conscious awareness is not as simple as aware or unaware, awake or asleep, and, as Merleau-Ponty (2012) was at pains to emphasise, much of our awareness is bodily awareness or 'felt' awareness rather than cognitive awareness. These observations are important if coaches are to make psychological sense of systemic awareness because awareness is a complex system of interactions within a multidimensional construct, including at its most basic biological level (cf. Lou et al., 2017).

Consider: Have you ever had the experience that in the face of a significant decision you knew exactly what you would do, where you were going, and why? What gave you the certainty? What does that tell you about systemic awareness?

Leadership Models

Three established leadership models are appropriate for coaching in a positive psychology context and may be considered forms of "positive leadership"—servant leadership, authentic leadership, and mindful leadership. As Boniwell and Smith (2018, p. 160) state: "Importantly, we do not necessarily view positive leadership as a distinct leadership style, but rather as an umbrella construct encompassing several leadership styles with similar characteristics". It is important to spend a little time discussing each of these models for considering what excellent leadership is and what excellent leaders look like. In this way we can stay focused on the reason for developing systemic leadership awareness.

Servant Leadership

Servant leaders are best understood as leaders who expressly place serving the needs of others at the centre of their professional practice. Servant leadership researchers work from different definitions (Van Dierendonck, 2011). However, servant leadership constructs (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006; Liden et al., 2008; Reed et al., 2011; Sendjaya et al., 2008) characterise these leaders as having (1) a compassionate concern for their followers, (2) a natural orientation towards service, (3) a developed spirituality that motivates them to feel that they have a calling, and (4) followers who regard them as trustworthy. They are (5) people of integrity, (6) emotional healers, and (7) their focus is on empowering their followers (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Experience suggests to many that servant leaders are rather rare, and theory paints an idealistic picture of what excellent servant leaders are like. Nevertheless, it presents as an admirable model of practice and is remote from our historical, authoritarian or transactional, command and control assumptions about how leaders do their work.

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leaders have a highly developed set of pro-social values and are seen as legitimate leaders. That is, they are leaders who have earned their position because they are effective, they are of good character, and followers readily accept them as legitimate leaders. As with servant leadership, there are competing theories of authentic leadership (Avolio et al., 2018). In general terms, though, authentic leaders (1) use balanced reasoning, (2) develop transparent relationships in the workplace because they are open and vulnerable enough to share their thoughts and feelings, (3) are self-aware, and (4) are ethical (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Furthermore, authentic leaders align their personal values and the values of the organisations they lead. To some extent, authentic leadership has roots in positive psychology (Luthans & Avolio, 2003), but also in the growing general concern many have about living authentically.

Consider: Looking back at the characteristics of the two forms of leadership mentioned above—servant and authentic—can you think of any contemporary leaders who display those characteristics?

Recent Developments in the Field

Despite the ethical and values foundation presented in contemporary leadership theories, there is much criticism of it in respect of: (1) containing deep ideological structures that still support unsustainable capitalism (Tourish, 2013); (2) that they do not reflect how real leaders work (Alvesson & Einola, 2019); and (3) that the (individualistic) research designs which underpin such theories are deeply flawed

(Batistič et al., 2017). An important recurring criticism relevant to coaches is that (4) the theories cannot be successfully deployed in leadership training (Beer et al., 2016) because they lack any substantive account of the metacognitive aspects of excellence, like spirituality (Case et al., 2012), and because (5) they foster narcissism in leaders (Berger et al., 2020; Steffens & Haslam, 2020).

Significant investment is made around the globe on leadership training, including coaching, and despite this, leaders may, in fact, be performing less effectively across some dimensions (Grint, 2007). Leadership theory sounds desirable, but it has not translated successfully into practice except in some rather exceptional cases (Heifetz et al., 2009; Tourish, 2020). Steffens and Haslam (2020) point out that narcissism is a predictor of leaders' interest in leadership theory and that leadership theory simply gives a vocabulary to narcissists that is useful for virtue signalling (Wallace et al., 2020). These critiques should be taken seriously, and several researchers have turned to mindfulness and wisdom theory (and practice) to counter these problems. Importantly, there is a clear distinction between someone who has conceptual/theoretical wisdom and someone who has practical wisdom (Eikeland, 2008; Rooney et al., 2010). Readers might also consult Smith and Bretherton's (2021) chapter on this topic in this book. Practical wisdom tends to inform wise leadership research because it is about embodied wisdom (Lord & Shondrick, 2011). This view of wisdom as a practice also views wisdom as an authentic civic virtue and way of being (Guignon, 2004). Wisdom as a way of being is also fundamental to mindfulness—and vice versa. In contemporary leadership and wisdom research, mindfulness has been linked to improving the ability of leaders to reflect and contemplate their inner self and then to form new habits of mind and body, that is, to develop new (wise) ways of acting as a leader. The Diamond model of mindfulness for wise leader development is a useful approach for coaches to consult (Rooney et al., 2019) and it fits well with a systemic awareness approach.

Mindful Leadership: The Link to Systemic Awareness

Mindfulness and wisdom theory and practice are new to leadership research and offer a range of innovative and useful perspectives for coaches. By bringing together elements of mindfulness and wisdom research, a model of *Systemic Awareness Coaching* can be developed. These approaches have deep historical roots and a long empirical trail. Mindfulness, for example, has been practised continually for thousands of years and has an extensive historical literature. While mindfulness is not a cure for all ills, its practical use in leader development is quite clear. Importantly, mindfulness is not only of benefit to the individual from a wellbeing and performance perspective, but it is also a social practice and has social benefit. Mindfulness starts with meditation as a means for developing new mental skills such as stabilising awareness in the present and changing our relationship to our habitual patterns of thought. The goal of mindfulness meditation is to move from developing these new skills through meditation to achieving a general state of equanimity. Equanimity refers to a sense of steadiness and calmness, that enables

an individual to decide how to deal with the vicissitudes of living, seeing more clearly what is happening, interpreting events more accurately, deciding how to act ethically in response and with greater perspicacity, and then having the ability to enact the decisions (Collins, 2020).

Wise Leadership

In wise leadership research (Küpers, 2016; Rooney et al., 2019), this ability to enact, (that is, the well-tutored volition for action, which is called conation), and this kind of embodiment of wise decisions is now being explored in some detail for education and coaching (King et al., 2020; Küpers, 2017; Zhu et al., 2016). Moreover, general psychological models of wisdom development have also emerged (Glück & Bluck, 2013; Glück et al., 2018) and their complexity and sophistication resonate with the emerging third wave of positive psychology (Lomas et al., 2020). Like mindfulness, ethicality and values are at the core of wisdom.

Wise leadership (McKenna et al., 2009; Solansky, 2014; Spiller et al., 2011; Whittington et al., 2005) also adds to the systemic view of awareness (and consciousness) in the mindful leadership literature. A key message in this literature is that ‘we have been doing this systemically for thousands of years’ and it is time to learn from that empirical experience. Doing so is particularly important for social practices such as leadership. The techniques for developing systemic awareness were first practised thousands of years ago in the east and the west using, for example, meditation, prayer, formal reflection, and yoga (see Buzaré, 2012; Collins, 2020; Cooper, 2012; Fiordalis, 2018; Hadot & Davidson, 1995; Lifshitz et al., 2020). Our approach is inspired by, extends, and modernises these techniques. Systemic awareness must include developing wise conation by tapping into clients’ personal experiences of leadership.

Consider: Can you recognise a contemporary leader who represents mindful, wise leadership?

Practice: Methods, Techniques and Application

Methods in Leadership Development

Traditional leadership education focuses on the development of leaders as primarily a cognitive process. However, leadership also requires an embodied and practical knowledge so that leaders can enact leadership in context and in real time (Küpers & Pauleen, 2015). This section examines one method employed in the authors’ interdisciplinary, evidence-based approaches. The aim of the method is to coach leaders to develop a greater sense of social interconnectedness and inclusiveness—an approach we have named the 3M coaching method (model + movie + metaphor) (also see King et al., 2020). The 3M method liberates the coach from the pedagogical

limits of abstract theoretical knowledge found in most empirical studies to create embodied knowledge of specific complex behaviours that are exceptionally hard both to teach and to learn. In this way the coach embodies a scientist practitioner mindset and unshackles the leadership development agenda to incorporate practical wisdom.

The method is important because leadership research has been criticised for not translating into exemplary leadership that is authentically inclusive. One reason for this research-practice gap is the complexity involved in developing leadership to address deeply embedded social challenges of our time, often under conditions of significant cognitive overload. The integrated approach—a blend of research, method, theory, and practice—is directed towards creating an embodied and practical learning experience, equipping both the coach and coachee to take wise action in real time. The approach in this chapter is theoretically rigorous and readily applicable by practitioners in the workplace.

Practice: A Novel Technique

The use of film in positive psychology is not new; Niemiec and Wedding (2013) advocate its usefulness for character strength development. A recent paper by King, et al. (2020) outlined a novel approach to developing knowledge with which coaches can facilitate wisdom and leadership development. Originally, the method examined a theory-based *model* to explore current thinking on wisdom as its conceptual framework. This method is equally applicable to a model of systemic awareness. The method then explores the narrative and emotion expressed through a *movie* to elicit a deeper practical understanding of that thinking as its data; and *metaphor* to integrate theories and movies with practice in the workplace. Coaches can apply this method in the following way:

1. Identify the issue
2. Determine a model/theory
3. Find a movie
4. Create a metaphor.

The initial goal of the coach is to assess what coachable issue they need to address with the coachee, then the coach determines an evidence-based conceptual framework that describes the issue. The next task is to find a movie or other kind of film that elegantly portrays either what the goal behaviour looks like in a person embedded in a complex social context, or a bigger perspective on the issue. The final step is to create a metaphor to support embedded learning.

Practice: Application of the Technique

The leadership development approach discussed by King et al. (2020) addresses a number of social challenges in the study and development of both leaders and

coaches. The discussion addresses the overemphasis on cognitive skills that epitomises both management and coach development research and instead leans towards developing embodied knowledge and skills that can be enacted at a practical level in the workplace. These skills have also been referred to as direct intuitive practices. The research is applied rather than fundamental and designed to develop more effective ways of transferring knowledge that ultimately will produce more socially connected coaches and coachees. This challenge called for new knowledge creation methods in applied leadership research. The consequent challenge was for the coach to find an accessible way to obtain data and provide analysis to guide coachees that reflect rigorous theory.

The landmark biographical movie, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, was chosen because it captures observations of what theory suggests a leader is like when making complex decisions in real time and translating them into action (see McKenna et al., 2009). In this instance, the central characters are three young indigenous girls from Jigalong in Western Australia, a community based approximately 1250 km north-east of Perth.

Application to Leadership

The task of developing leaders who are both socially interconnected and inclusive is both an urgent and delicate one. Leaders need support to develop the skills that will allow them to navigate increasing levels of social diversity. A multi-billion-dollar leadership development industry shows corporations are trying to improve leadership, even if CEOs find that improvements are not being delivered (King & Badham, 2018). To support leaders to improve the way they lead their teams, organisations and communities, new ways are needed to study and develop leadership. Coaches require methods of leadership development that are grounded in rigorous theory and methods of research that are process-based so that the inter-relational aspects of learning can be observed with the result that teams, organisations and communities can become more socially cohesive. Research suggests that action learning, where people reflect on the action/s they have taken to address real problems would be helpful (McGill & Beaty, 2001). However, the time and experience-intensive nature of developing practical wisdom through action learning can make it an impractical leadership development solution. The 3M method offers a way to fast track this process by enabling vicarious, and very specific, action learning.

Application to Coaching

One aspect of the 3M method was to develop a theory-guided model for coaches to use in coaching sessions. The goal was to facilitate the transfer of knowledge to practice by developing an increase in empathy for others and an awareness of, and interest in, seeking others' perspectives. What is often missing in the 'opinion-based models' regularly used in coaching practice is a rigorous theoretical base (Whitmore, 2010). Despite increasing calls for empirical research to support coaching theory

(Bachkirova & Kauffman, 2009), little has changed. This is understandable as coaching is an emerging field that is experiencing the confusion of constructs typical of fields at this stage of development. The method is designed to support the integration of theory into coaching practice and progress the opportunities for further applied research. The education of coaches aims to integrate and synthesise theory and practice by including training on skills, pedagogical structures and theory, then providing students with opportunities to practice. The method facilitates more direct ways to integrate learning and action. To increase understanding and to optimise the value of coaching, Myers (2017) points to the need for studies that can broaden the context and generate a deeper understanding of the skill being coached and the skills for coaching it. The authors argue that a research method that builds stronger connections between theory and practice can be developed by engaging with models, metaphor and the strong characters and multi-sensory narrative present in movies.

Consider: What, in your view, are the best approaches to educating coaches or for a coach to educate their coachee?

Practice: Using Movies as a Technique in Developing Socially Connected Leaders

Movies can be used in coaching as a technique for illuminating lived experience. A movie was included in the approach because of its potential to engage viewers at emotional, embodied and cognitive levels. In his chapter, 'Reading Film: Using Films and Videos as Empirical Social Science Material', Norman Denzin (2004) outlines four narratives present in any one audio-visual text. There is the visual text, the audio text, the narrative linking the audio and visual texts into a cohesive sequence or script, and, finally, any one viewer's narrative interpretation of the text. In his method, Denzin suggests four steps or phases in the analysis: phase one is observing, phase two is asking the research question, phase three is a structured microanalysis and phase four is finding patterns. Our method modified Denzin's by keeping a constant emphasis on the use of models and metaphor. The following section discusses the modification of Denzin's method that was used to understand more clearly how theory and models in the relevant literature can directly inform and form direct practice.

Practice: Using Movies as a Data Source for Understanding Leadership and Coaching

At the heart of the movie, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, is an epic journey that simultaneously requires reflection, action in real time and overcoming external dangers, challenges and pressures. If, at any time, the three young indigenous girls, Molly, Daisy and Gracie, are found, they will be forcibly returned to the camp at Moore River Native Settlement for the purposes of re-education and training. The arduous physical

journey on foot covering more than 1250 km is the metaphor used by the film to generate empathy for and understanding of the central characters. It is also a model that can be applied in the context of the workplace.

The world represented on screen is helpful because it offers scenarios for both coach and coachee to contemplate in terms of how to navigate obstacles and uncertainty, as well as overcome adversity. In the process, it also generates empathy for ‘the other’, in this instance, three girls from an indigenous community in the early 1930s. The purpose is not to provide an analysis of Australia’s post-colonial history, rather, it is to increase empathy in the viewer and, more generally, develop a sense of social cohesion by drawing attention to past experiences endured by members of the indigenous community in Australia. It also models an indigenous awareness and connection to the land and to each other which allows three girls to outwit the police and government authorities. Systemic awareness is the key to the girls’ success and, most importantly, it is a system of awareness that extends beyond the individual. It is intersubjective. Even the indigenous tracker is unable to find them. In the midst of challenging circumstances, the three girls set a highly ambitious goal, undertaking difficult reflection and meeting adversity of all kinds. Similarly, how a coach and coachee learn how to develop the awareness needed to set worthwhile goals and overcome difficult experiences is important.

Which Coachees Benefit Most?

As a coachee confronting new experiences and challenges in a fast-moving context demanding new skills, the use of film provides an opportunity to observe behaviours modelled and made explicit through the power of story and character. It provides safe surrogate experiences open to considered analysis particularly where their work or life calls for the complex meta-competencies involved in leadership, team-based contexts and the challenges sometimes faced through diversity of cultural experiences and expectations.

Perhaps its best use is in a group context where perceptions can be shared, and values challenged, as commonly occurs in university settings (Scott & Weeks, 2016). The experience needs to be grounded through an understanding of the underlying theories and by guided materials and observational tools. A chance for reflection and debriefing either individually or in a group is an essential part of the learning process.

The Case Study: Rabbit Proof Fence

The Coachee/s

By using movies that immerse the coach and coachee in an experience, the 3M technique merges observations of the coachee’s workplace interactions, embeds the

learning at an emotional level through modelling and metaphor, and provides a data source for shared reflection. With this movie, the leader/coach models (Molly) and the coachees (Gracie and Daisy) confront the life-threatening challenges and emotional dislocation through forced relocation from family and culture. Three focus scenes were selected for study. The first showed our three heroines (two sisters and a cousin) escaping from Moore River Native Settlement. The second showed the three girls escaping from a farmhouse where they have been discovered. The final focus scene is where the two sisters collapse from exhaustion and dehydration.

Through the movie, the viewer (coachee) becomes most closely aligned with Molly, who, at 14, is the eldest of the three girls. In Molly, whose character encompasses the entwined roles of both leader and coach of her companions, we see systemic awareness modelled. She carefully observes her surroundings and those around her, reflecting on what she witnesses and notices. She enacts mindful leadership throughout, in a way that encourages analysis and interpretation by the viewer.

Shortly after arriving at Moore River Native Settlement, it becomes clear that all three girls are being trained to become domestic workers—demanding they abandon their familiar dress, spiritual practices, connection to family, language and food. Molly expresses empathy for the babies in their cots, asking after their mothers, and connects with a child who is isolated in the small shed or ‘moob’ by making eye contact with him through a small gap in the corrugated iron. At night-time, while the others sleep, Molly’s eyes are open, and her thoughts as she reflects on the day, are represented on screen. They take the form of the policeman who abducted them, the slightly menacing tracker, Moodoo; Mr. Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines; and one of the nuns who takes care of them. They all ‘make [her] sick’. When Molly finally does fall asleep, she dreams of the spirit bird flying in a bright blue sky. This scene allows coach and coachee to discuss the power of connection with others, here Molly’s connection with the spirit bird and the bird’s association with Molly’s mother, and the scene also provides a visualisation of goals and wishes.

The following morning, Molly takes a thorough look at the stormy clouds in the sky and the viewer’s attention is drawn to Molly’s eyes in close-up at several points. She looks at the clouds on the horizon before quickly announcing to Gracie and Daisy that they are going to leave—a reflection of the discipline that comes once intention is determined. Such awareness, then, aids decision making by understanding what is relevant in the context—in this case, the coming storm is useful for an escape.

It is Molly’s idea to escape and her conviction that they will be safe that persuades the other two to leave with her. She exemplifies leadership by continually supporting the other girls as a natural leader and practical coach, reassuring them that ‘the rain will cover our tracks.’ Once they have established there is nothing to fear, they pick up their shoes, leave the bucket of urine and run. The soundtrack builds as they leave. The surrogate experience and the opportunity to share varying perceptions of role, leadership, character, persuasion and influence in this scene opens up strong dialogue between coach and coachee in a way that theory, models and general discussion cannot.

The Coaching

The first step in designing this process was to select a feature film (*Rabbit-Proof Fence*) that represented indigenous experience and leadership in action. The coaching then followed a structured sequence of four steps or phases guided by Denzin (2004). In the first of four phases outlined by Denzin, the person planning the research and coach development should observe and listen to the materials, noting on an individual basis the patterns of meaning that occur to them. As the coach and coachee watch *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, notes should be recorded on any scenes that come to their immediate attention. Scenes should then be discussed, with both coach and coachee noticing and commenting on points of individual interest. In the first phase of observation, both coach and coachee should note each character's way of being, their gestures, the development of character and debate the overall meaning and significance of the scene.

In the second phase, the film script is read, and the musical soundtrack listened to, helping to refine the search as the process unfolds. What does indigenous leadership look like generally, and in different specific circumstances? Which character exemplifies leadership? What about the coach? What of the coachee is represented in the narrative? The coach continues to consider the key scenes outlined above and, simultaneously, examines the central image of the journey that runs throughout. Objects might also be important such as the central object in this film, the rabbit proof fence, which has its own shape, and which is symbolic of the major barriers and constraints confronting the girls and potentially the coachee in the workplace.

Phase Three of Denzin's method suggests that the researcher/coach keep the focus on the purpose while engaging in what he refers to as "Structured Microanalysis" (p. 242). Each physical location in the film forms a different unit, and each unit can be analysed for point of view and camera position. In this case, attention was given to scenes in which there were "conflicts over values" (Denzin, p. 242), for instance in Jigalong when there is a clash between those who enact government policy and the indigenous community. The early scene at Moore River Native Settlement where the three girls are urged to 'stop jabbering' as they must speak English at Moore River exemplifies this. The girls reject the unfamiliar food served to them and are immediately reprimanded. In the last scene, there is a powerful affirmation of indigenous values such as the importance of family, community, place and home. In this way, the significance of values conflict in the workplace can be highlighted.

In the final phase of the coaching interaction, Phase Four, the coachee can offer an interpretation of the data (the film) based on thorough analysis of the visual materials. The method provides the means of enquiry as well as responses to the key issues under consideration.

The concept of systemic awareness is put into practice on multiple occasions by Molly, her sister and their cousin as they journey back to Jigalong. But it is Molly who understands the urgency of each situation as it arises, and she is the one who mostly urges the other two to follow her instructions. In the early river scene, shortly

after leaving Moore River, she uses her senses to evade the tracker and his horse, who are very close by. A sense of hearing is particularly relevant as the horse's hooves splashing in the water make a very different sound to the one of burbling water. Molly is implicitly attuned to that difference and responds by standing still. The camera changes its position rapidly several times, focusing on the horse's legs, then the girls' legs and feet, Moodoo as he dismounts the horse and walks in the river himself, and the sound of the water each time. Shortly afterwards, they leave the river and opt to hide in the long, lush grass. This awareness of subtle changes in the context is witnessed frequently as the girls journey through the bush.

At other crucial moments, Molly senses when and how to hide. She seems to possess an unusually developed awareness of her physical surroundings and an intuitive grasp of whether someone can be trusted or not. She frequently shields and protects the two younger girls, exposing only herself to risk. On one occasion, standing behind the trunk of a tree, and virtually blending into the landscape, she watches two indigenous men walk towards them up and over the brow of a hill. After deciding that they are to be trusted, she uses a hand gesture and an upturned palm to open up a non-verbal conversation with them. The girls are hungry and as one of the men is carrying a dead animal on his shoulders, they seem to have fallen on their feet. Without Daisy's words, however, the gesture would be unclear to certain members of the audience, particularly those unfamiliar with indigenous culture. Similarly, much further along on the journey, a non-verbal cue, in this instance a specific whistle, enables Molly to communicate with Mavis, an indigenous maid who is hanging out laundry in the wide-open grassy field. Mavis' genuine offer of help inadvertently and indirectly puts the girls in great danger but the scene with all its detail demonstrates the girls' acute awareness of their immediate environment, as well as an ability to make decisions which avoid capture. An important learning here is that communication is much more than words and that sometimes non-verbal communication is what really matters.

Finally, in a climactic scene of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the two sisters struggle on their own through the desert. Before reaching the salt flats, their cousin, Gracie, is captured and abducted once again. At one point, the two sisters collapse on the sand, lying motionless and silent, grazes, sweat, salt and sand intermingled. It seems as if they have been overwhelmed by the heat and the hardship, the enormity of the challenge. Yet in the salt pan of the desert, the call of the spirit bird can be heard. The spirit bird appears to awaken both girls and bring them back to consciousness, enabling Molly to carry her sister the rest of the way back home where they are reunited with their mother, grandmother and family. This shared and unifying image begins to tie together the beginning and end of the movie but more than that, the spirit bird is a transcendent aspect of shared culture, spirituality, identity and purpose in life. As such, the bird represents a meta perspective on what connects us to all life. A perspective that will guide a leader to stay tuned in to their systemic awareness, act for the greater good, and to feel confident in their decision to do so. A question for coaches and coachees is what are the images, identities, shared consciousness and other things that unify the members of their organisation by creating a shared spirit, a shared sense of belonging to the same thing, together, and that no individual

(including leaders) are above? In short, the spirit bird, represents what makes indigenous culture fly safely above adversity in kinship with the environment (for a range of views on Aboriginal spirituality see Pattel-Gray, 1996). Arguably, this is systemic awareness.

The film encapsulates and models systemic awareness, leadership, situational coaching, goal setting and motivation in ways that make the coaching experience live and draws from experiences that cannot actually be lived as a teaching/coaching tool.

Consider: *After watching the movie, to what extent could you clearly identify the coaching moments and examples of Molly's systemic awareness?*



Rabbit-Proof Fence tells the story of three Stolen Generations girls who walked 1500 km back to their homeland. National Portrait Gallery

Conclusion

The discussion above focuses on specific models of learning and leadership as well as the central metaphor of the journey, both of which enable insight into important dimensions of social experience, including that of a leader and coach. The movie is an appropriate tool with which to generate further discussion and reflection. The chapter used Norman Denzin's four steps or phases for critically analysing empirical visual material. Denzin's method was modified and enriched so that the focus was maintained on indigenous values and leadership development models, as well as one or two powerful metaphors that resonated throughout. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* helps us to envisage practical wisdom in a leader and its enactment across a wide range of circumstances. Both coaching and performing interrelated leadership are represented as practical activities enacted in the real world. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a representation of a longitudinal cycle of events and processes that vividly demonstrate what a leader can do, and which can frame the coaching experience.

Discussion Points and Suggested Reading

- The world of movies is rich in narrative that can be used to model life experiences and provide a source for discussion and analysis. How useful do you feel film might be as a tool for coaching?
- *Rabbit-Proof Fence* shows systemic awareness in depth. Do you agree with our insights? How else could you effectively convey the concept to a learner or coachee?
- The three girls were struggling to survive and return to everything that mattered to them. What contemporary parallels could you suggest where systemic awareness might be an essential capability?
- What other movies have you ever seen that could be used as a model for wise leadership and systemic awareness? Consider the following
 - *Joy*, a movie exploring the everyday resilience of a female entrepreneur in the face of extreme adverse conditions.
 - *Life of a King*—a movie based on the theme and story of chess and the remaking of the central character’s life as a coach and leader even though his formative adult years were spent in prison.
 - Or for a bit of fun, explore office politics and the ecosystem of work through the light-hearted movies of *Nine to Five*; or *Working Girl*. What conclusions can you draw about leadership and in-situ coaching?

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Further Readings

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