

Work, what is it good for?

Phil Renshaw and **Jenny Robinson** demonstrate how coaches can help reframe critical leadership issues amplified by the pandemic.



The COVID-19 pandemic has created new and different challenges for most people, both in their personal and working lives – with the increasing difficulty of identifying distinctions between the two. While some have had positive experiences of continuing to work at home or on site, others have had more negative ones, and the demands of new working patterns have triggered greater levels of stress and conflict for leaders to manage for themselves, as well as for others. This heated mix of pandemic worry, new working arrangements and demands of family or personal frailty has heightened pre-existing leadership challenges and made successful outcomes all the more difficult.

These significant challenges surfaced in a leadership research project we recently completed. The Leaders' Voices project aimed to give voice to leaders' real, unfiltered experience and to examine the nuances and ambiguities that are rarely heard or noticed. Our research took place from late 2019 to mid 2021 and ranged across 20 individual senior leaders, plus four senior leadership teams comprising a further 40 individuals (leading more than an estimated 3,000 people); as well as cross-sectional interviews of the people they led. We sought to uncover the extent to which we can all demonstrate aspects of leadership; how leadership is something we do together; and the outstanding challenges and dilemmas of contemporary leadership.

The participants in our study told us that the higher they climb, the less autonomy they seem to have. Closely associated with an extra zero on the pay cheque is a loss of time sovereignty and an overwhelming workload. Leaders everywhere know that their teams expect them to regulate the constant requests from other departments for reports, deliverables, or activities. Equally, leaders understand that they are 'supposed to' push back on the CEO's last-minute request for an item that will take an army of people working long hours over the weekend to fulfil. Leaders bemoan the pre-8am meeting and excuse it as a one-off, but are not surprised when these meetings proliferate and become routine.

The ubiquity of this sort of situation gives rise to social media memes such as, 'No one ever had "I wish I'd worked harder" on their gravestone'. Or, as one over-achieving leader laid up in hospital following a heart attack posted (which went viral):

'...on the basis I don't die:

1. I'm not spending all day on Zoom anymore
2. I'm restructuring my approach to work
3. I'm really not going to be putting up with any s#%t at work ever again – life literally is too short...
4. I want every day to count for something at work, else I'm changing my role."

It is easy for us to demonise work, and the faceless institutions that just demand more and more, urgently and relentlessly.

Or we can demonise leaders as weak-kneed, two-faced or cowards who can't set boundaries and expect others to endure and ingest the extra workload and stress.

True – and unhelpful.

In this article we propose that, as coaches, we need to help the leaders we work with negotiate these dilemmas: dedication versus time. We remind ourselves that it is possible to be dedicated and to take time off. While they set out with good intentions to do the right thing, leaders

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are as helpless as anyone else to resist the perpetual hamster wheel of corporate life. How can coaches help without demonising work itself? Without demonising leaders? And, without colluding with behaviour or stress that is untenable? To answer these questions, we provide a few ideas we have used successfully in our recent assignments, as well as some insights provided by neuroscience. We recognise that our suggestions may be challenged for leading our clients, but we believe in these circumstances the approaches can be helpful.

Coaching idea 1:

Place work in the context of a life well lived, and help our clients to see that work provides many positives

Questions to help provoke this insight might include:

- **What would you lose if you didn't work?**
- **What would you lose if you didn't work here?**
- **What beneficial effects arise from work?**

When the pace of corporate life is frantic, when leaders and managers are in overwhelm, a key step is the classic 'flip' question: What is work good for? Once money is not a primary driver of work, what is? When we leave work due to retirement, ill health or winning the lottery, what is lost? Most people will freely acknowledge, when asked, that work gives us meaning,



purpose, challenges to overcome, a sense of agency – for some, a sense of self-esteem and mastery. A recent social media post boasted:

*'Seventeen-year-old high schooler Dasia Taylor dreams of being a surgeon and just invented a life-saving surgical suture that changes colour when a wound becomes infected.'*²

That is work. You can be sure that Dasia Taylor worked for that breakthrough. We can speculate how long and how hard she worked, but those amazing sutures did not magically arrive. Hopefully, Dasia experienced the thrill of success. If she did, that probably reinforced for her the lure of work and a job well done.

In another example, a leadership coaching client negotiated extra time away from work to devote to other causes she loved. Without giving anything up in her role, she was able to restructure her work and make time for other things she felt passionately about. For her, work provided the 'proving' ground for her self-development.

Coaching idea 2:

Watch out for the Velcro of just the difficult and unsatisfactory

Questions to help provoke this insight might include:

- What are the good things that you take for granted at work?
- What are the successes that you skip over and don't dwell on for very long?
- Where do you fail to praise yourself for a job well done?

Author of *The Neuroscience of Happiness*, Rick Hanson, writes: 'The mind is like Velcro for negative experiences, and Teflon for positive ones.'³ By this, he means that positive feelings are short lived and subside quickly (the half-life of

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the happy chemicals in our brain are momentary), while the little downs of life are sticky and hang around for much longer (half-life of stress chemicals is sadly longer-lasting). This means that we have two different types of work experience and two different ways that our brains process those experiences.

After a long, gruelling week, what will we remember? Probably not the team's success from Monday. This explains why we are so quick to bemoan the difficult, arduous, unsatisfactory experiences of the office or working from home (WFH), because, quite simply, these are the experiences that stick.

With much respect, that man in the social media meme with the heart attack, he's forgotten the camaraderie, sense of achievement and the other good things from his work. The Velcro of his mind has stuck on Zoom meetings all day; and, 'sh#%t'. So he, like so many clients, chooses to focus on '...doing less of what they dislike'.

As coaches, this is where we can help: by bringing attention more evenly to the whole range of experiences and helping leaders to see all of it: the good, the bad, the ugly, and everything in between.

Coaching idea 3:

Challenge leaders to restructure their work and the work of others, to involve people who can collaborate well, buoy each other up

Questions to help provoke this insight might include:

- Who else can help you with this task?
- How would someone else approach this task/project/assignment?
- How could you innovate around the process so that it is more interesting to you?
- What would be the most energetic clash of people you could imagine on this project?
- Who 'has your back' on this issue?

Our thesis goes further. All roles include dull, boring, repetitive, thankless tasks, or people who are *@!s, or situations that are difficult, and these are Velcro'd to us, such that they have a disproportionate influence. Because our brain gives these events the Velcro treatment, they hang around a long time and leave behind a legacy of disgruntlement.

On the other hand, time flew when you were brainstorming with the team, having fun, but when writing a report... time... drags. One gives us energy, the other depletes us (and, of course, this example may work in reverse too).

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Project work where the goal is commonly held and purposeful is among some of the most satisfying experiences we can have at work. The leaders we work with often have a sparkle in their eye when they have been in tight-knit huddles with others, for example, as they pursue mergers or acquisitions. The actual hours worked are monumental, but camaraderie offsets some of those effects. Coaches can challenge clients to help identify changing how they work.

Coaching idea 4:

Say 'yes' in a different way

Questions to help provoke this insight might include:

- **When yet another task request is presented to you, how can you say 'yes' in a way that reduces the burden?**
- **How can you say 'yes' and get what you want?**

As the leaders who participated in our Leaders' Voices study told us, the expectation to work longer and longer hours is not ameliorated by seniority – the myth of work-life balance has disappeared over the horizon. If our most senior leaders cannot achieve this balance, what hope is there for everyone else? Continuing to talk about work-life balance as a goal to be achieved is unhelpful: our participants just felt they had failed at 'yet another thing'. Focusing on work-life balance was another stick they could use to beat themselves up.

Yet, everyone agrees that this paradox is not sustainable. Arguably, women appear to be worst affected. Many women

in our survey told us that they are ambitious, but they will not have their whole lives pushed around. In fact, so adamant are they that their life is their own, they do not put themselves forward for promotions that they rightly deserve. They see people above them, knocking themselves out. What's worse is that this is now normalised, helped tremendously by the pandemic and WFH. Long term, organisations will learn they cannot keep or promote their full talent if they self-limit in this way. Meanwhile, as coaches, we can help women – and others – to see that there is another way.

We can challenge clients to reconsider how activities are taken on. What can be changed, rather than added? How would others see these issues and what do other organisations do – or should they do?

We often find clients desperate to find ways to 'turn off the pipeline' of work that they are asked to do. They believe that saying 'no' is taboo and culturally not acceptable, and they set up priority lists to try to address all this. But because everyone can make a sound, rational case for their project/assignment/task, everything becomes a priority.

Naturally, it's easy for coaches to fall into the trap of helping leaders learn how to say 'no', but our assertion is that we should be helping them learn how to say 'yes' more effectively – and achieve much better outcomes than saying 'no', which inevitably leads to further pushback and arguments about exceptions.

There are too many emails, too many instructions and too many priorities. Coaches need to challenge their clients to find ways to accept work requests in creative, resourceful and time-effective ways; to seek input from the requestor, client or colleague, which shares the burden; to help others understand the dynamics of what is being requested and the implications in the broader context. How life-threatening is the underlying need or desire? Increasing collaboration before problems arise can be a route to success.

Coaching idea 5:

Focus on fun management, not time management

Questions to help provoke this insight might include:

- **When was the last time you had fun at work?**
- **What's it like when you are having fun at work?**
- **How could this be fun?**
- **How can you help your team have fun?**
- **How are time/energy transformed when you're having fun?**
- **How are time/energy transformed when you're just accomplishing tasks?**

In helping senior leaders wave goodbye to unrealistic ideals of time sovereignty, we can transform mindsets from time-management to fun-management. Of course, this doesn't give a father time back with his children if he is always absent from story-time; nor does it allow a carer time to be present with their loved one; similarly, sports days may still be in jeopardy; and personal recreation may be squeezed. As sculptor and mother of four, Barbara Hepworth, noted, 'I've slowly discovered how to create for 30 mins, cook for 40 mins,



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create for another 30 and look after children for 50 and so on through the day. It's a sort of miracle.⁴ Sandwiching different tasks together can be helpful. Nonetheless, working too hard, multitasking, and having attention stretched too thin, are fast becoming the new smoking, and we will wonder why we ever did it – so let's work with clients to investigate changing how work feels and how it is experienced.

For those who choose to climb higher and find they are expected to make these sacrifices, adding more fun into work can make it less stressful and more restorative. As coaches, we can enable this adjustment. Too often, we seem to assume that what happens at work cannot be enjoyable. Of course, people often talk about loving and being passionate about their work. But this is not true for everyone, nor everything. And while it may be true for the highly paid senior executive, they have a responsibility to others.

Whatever our clients may be focused on, coaches have an opportunity to open this door.

As these issues have become more salient in our coaching work, we have reflected on the deeply held assumptions that motivate our questions and responses to clients. While not universally true, we propose that understanding where we are as individuals on issues of work overload, time and priorities makes us more sensitive coaches. To aid readers' reflections, we offer the following (gross) generalisation as provocation:

Do you...	How often do you...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • treat overwork and time management as a 'bad habit' that can be behaviourally remedied? • accept fully your client's worldview? • put your focus on the client you are coaching? • frame 'work/life balance' as a 'goal' to be 'achieved'? • consider work as functional? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • flip the issue? • help your client to rebalance their worldview? • include a broader focus on the wider community that surrounds your client? • include energy as a complementary metric to be aware of? • include consideration of joyfulness, happiness and fun as issues of concern?

Our Leaders' Voices project has disabused us of the long-held belief that seniority confers sovereignty. Leaders have told us they are pushed from pillar to post and that more seniority means they actually often feel more obligated. Women in particular are saying 'this isn't right' and are avoiding promotions where pressures will increase, and tasks will encroach on their personal/family time. Critical to our approach is the understanding that relentless work stress

is unacceptable, and coaches need to bring awareness to each individual's stress response. That said, as coaches, we too hold biases and as we often have more time sovereignty than the people we coach, it can be hard for us to see an alternative worldview. For ourselves, we have learnt some invaluable lessons throughout COVID:

- Time is not linear and not all time is equal. Hold your breath and a minute is a lifetime; listen to the dawn chorus and a minute is a blink. Coaches, through their questions, can help clients to see that they are attending to their work in different ways.
- Too much attention to the difficult, unsatisfactory and boring aspects of work heightens the impact these feelings have on satisfaction and self-esteem. Too much attention to what is unsatisfactory makes work draining and enervating. Too little attention to the fulfilling and uplifting, limits the feel-good effects, sense of camaraderie and achievement. Before we decide that work is all-consuming, let's help clients to see how they are framing their work.
- If our clients can't time-manage, the other option is that they can transform time. Our clients have invented ways to connect with others and collaborate; add in some fun and say 'yes' to achieve the outcome they seek. Including others is a powerful antidote to the burdensome feelings of big challenges. They bring fresh thinking, new perspectives and a lightening of the load. Laughing and being playful at work is one of the most restorative acts we know.

It is so easy to coach leaders while holding an assumption that leaders can manage time and tasks. Yet if we have that mindset, we unwittingly set leaders up to fail. From our data, we propose that it might be better to help them see what's really happening and then give them the tools to flourish on this bed of nails. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Phil Renshaw and **Dr Jenny Robinson** are the authors of *Coaching on the Go* (Pearson, 2019), which offers a unique perspective on coaching skills for leaders and the power of coaching by focusing on everyday life situations. They also run Leadership On the Go Limited, a leadership development, mindfulness and coaching consultancy dedicated to learning on the go. Phil and Jenny deliver workshops facilitating leadership development and write together regularly, and they welcome your views on the issues raised here.

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