Five hats of effective leaders: teacher, mentor, coach, supervisor and sponsor

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ABSTRACT

Background/aim Teaching, mentoring, coaching, supervising and sponsoring are often conflated in the literature. In this reflection, we clarify the distinctions, the benefits and the drawbacks of each approach. We describe a conceptual model for effective leadership conversations where leaders dynamically and deliberately 'wear the hats' of teacher, mentor, coach, supervisor and/or sponsor during a single conversation.

Methods As three experienced physician leaders and educators, we collaborated to write this reflection on how leaders may deliberately alter their approach during dynamic conversations with colleagues. Each of us brings our own perspective and lens.

Results We articulate how each of the 'five hats' of teacher, mentor, coach, supervisor and sponsor may help or hinder effectiveness. We discuss how a leader may 'switch' hats to engage, support and develop colleagues across an ever-expanding range of contexts and settings. We demonstrate how a leader might 'wear the five hats' during conversations about career advancement and burn-out.

Conclusion Effective leaders teach, mentor, coach, supervise and sponsor during conversations with colleagues. These leaders employ a deliberate, dynamic and adaptive approach to better serve the needs of their colleagues at the moment.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching, mentoring, coaching, supervising and sponsoring are often conflated in the literature. Indeed, multiple systematic reviews, empirical papers and commentaries have highlighted the conceptual tension at the nexus of these overlapping concepts.[1–7] The definitions and approaches associated with each term become muddled when discussing leadership; each concept originates from diverse fields of academic study, and; each brings with them a different conceptual framing.

In this reflection, we describe a conceptual model for effective leadership conversations and clarify the distinctions, the benefits and the drawbacks of teaching, mentoring, coaching, supervising and sponsoring. We outline the 'five hats of effective leaders'—a conversational approach during which a leader dynamically switches between 'wearing the hats' of teacher, mentor, coach, supervisor and/or sponsor depending on a colleague's adaptive needs at the moment. An individual possessing a clear understanding of the benefits and limitations of each hat (ie, each method of conversation) may deliberately alter their conversational approach to engage and develop colleagues.

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Our perspective is that effective leaders are servant leaders.[8] They engage colleagues across multiple dimensions (eg, individual, emotional, interpersonal, organisational) in a manner that empowers colleagues to develop capabilities, enhance sense-making and improve effectiveness.[9] Such leaders view themselves as stewards of their organisation tasked to fulfil organisational mission and embody key values while enhancing the resources entrusted to them.[10] Their effectiveness relates to a focus on building sustainable performance improvements, rather than short-term gains or self-promotion, as they take a holistic, 360-view of how their colleagues relate to their organisation, its stakeholders and the communities they serve.[11]

COLLEAGUE TO COLLEAGUE

An essential tool for effective leadership is one-to-one conversation. Effective leaders employ a collaborative conversational approach as they recognise and empower the needs, interests, desires, goals, strengths and limitations of each colleague.[8] Just as we support peers as critical friends or allies,[12] leaders must similarly engage others to provide guidance in a person-centred manner.[13–15] Effective leaders teach, mentor, coach, supervise and sponsor as they consider—colleague to colleague—both individual and organisational challenges.

Effective leaders engage in collegial conversation with individuals who may be of different ages, have more or less experience and status, and be either formal leaders or individuals without a formal leadership title. Their colleagues may be trainees, be on a similar professional trajectory or have a role at a higher level of the organisational structure.

During some conversations, roles may remain static (eg, teacher to student), while during other conversations roles may bounce back-and-forth dynamically throughout a discussion—the teacher becomes the student—as colleagues engage in mutual discovery and learning. This is similar to other dynamic models of leadership that have been described in the literature.[16 17]

Whereas it may not be helpful for individuals enmeshed in a conversation to split hairs between terminology, those seeking to regularly engage in effective leadership conversations, who wish to hone their craft, may find it beneficial to distinguish between the various roles that one might inhabit during such conversation.

THE FIVE HATS MODEL

Inherent within a conversation is the professional identity of the participants. Just as our professional

identities are multifaceted, assisting a colleague within the complexities of their career may require one to embody multiple roles (at times a mentor, a teacher or a coach) within the very same conversation. In this manuscript, we build on Hicks' and McCracken's three hats model of teacher, mentor and coach, to describe a five hats model of effective leaders that incorporates the hats of supervisor and sponsor.[10 18]

One might envision a leader 'wearing the hats' of teacher, mentor, coach, supervisor or sponsor dynamically during a single conversation depending on their colleague's needs at that moment. Each 'hat' represents one of the different methods of interaction; each method with its own set of traditions, benefits and limitations. Each 'hat' is enhanced when deliberately paired with other 'hats'. A leader, armed with a clear understanding of the pros and cons of the various hats, may intentionally alter their approach—they may 'change hats'—during a conversation to help their colleague develop technical skills, make sense of the complex world, and realise goals.

In *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz introduced the analogy of the dance floor and the balcony to represent the different perspectives of leadership at the moment.[19] The dance floor is the arena of existence: the meetings attended, the decisions made, the interactions with others.[20] The dance floor perspective represents the real-time interpretation of reality: thoughts, emotions, and behaviours; the moves made; and how the environment responds. The leader observes their colleague on the dance floor, and may escort them to the overhead balcony, above the fray of the dance floor to a framing more suitable to see a bigger picture. A step up to the balcony away from the pressures of real-time interaction offers an opportunity to reflect and discover depth in experience—to expand interpretations of the dance floor. The vantage point offers the colleague an opportunity to question beliefs, synthesise the perspectives of others, and appreciate that change is the natural order of life.

As leaders better understand the benefits or shortcomings of each method, they may more intentionally adapt to each colleague's developmental needs. Effective leaders learn to perceive what is needed—which hat to don—as they survey the discourse of active dialogue.

It is important to note that the five hat model of conversation should not be restricted to the domain of leaders with formal titles. A dynamic approach to discussion is helpful for leaders at all levels—including those without a formal leadership title or role. Indeed, our best teachers, mentors and friends likely employ a dynamic five hats approach to one-to-one conversations. An effective teacher, for example, may teach, mentor, coach, supervise and sponsor. During such conversations their students benefit from the various modes of perspective-taking. Likewise, effective mentorship often includes teaching and coaching, and may include opportunities for sponsorship.

During five hats conversations, individuals maintain an open, curious and flexible mindset. They foster environments that support mutual trust and safety. They display presence that is open, grounded and confident while being fully conscious of what is being communicated (and not explicitly stated) in order to support self-expression, promote autonomy and investigate the context of systems.[21]

Next, we explore each of the various 'hats', to discuss the nuances of each role and how they might be best used. Figure 1 briefly summarises each of the five hats of effective leaders. Table 1 summarises conversation tactics and limitations for each of the five hats and the potential consequences of only wearing one hat.

The Five Hats of Effective Leaders
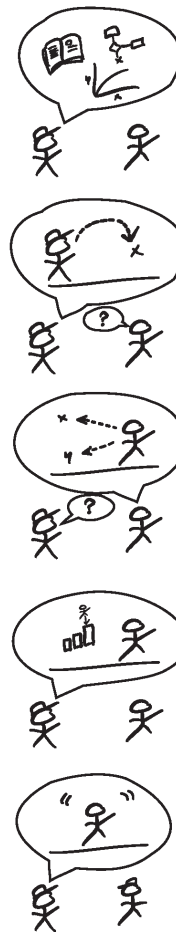
Teach
Teach to help your colleague learn new knowledge and skills.

Mentor
Mentor to help your colleague consider the world through *your experienced eyes*.

Coach
Coach to help your colleague investigate and consider their perspectives of the world through their *own* eyes.

Supervise
Supervise to oversee and promote the day-to-day and long-term effectiveness of your colleague.

Sponsor
Sponsor to use your influence and connections to provide opportunities for your colleague.

Figure 1 The five hats of effective leaders.

The teaching hat

When a leader teaches, they stand next to a colleague on the balcony to convey new information and skills to be used on the dance floor. While wearing the teaching hat, the leader reveals knowledge previously unknown. The transmitted knowledge rests on a body of accumulated wisdom within a field or an organisation that is not yet known to the colleague. For example, a leader might teach a colleague the reasoning behind a key organisational strategy, shine a light on regulatory limitations, or demonstrate how to examine a financial report. Teaching imparts knowledge which unveils new ways for their colleague to interpret experience and consider opportunity.

Teaching has limitations. The decision of how and when to apply what is learnt may be challenging, or even obscure. For example, the application of a simple learnt best practice may be obvious; however, applying expert knowledge in a complex environment where contentious colleagues disagree—this is both nuanced and challenging.[22] In such an instance, a leader has an opportunity to switch hats from teacher to another role to help the colleague make sense of how they might personally apply what has been learnt within the dynamic environment.

The mentoring hat

As a mentor, the leader stands on the balcony alongside a colleague as a subject-matter expert—helping the colleague envision the world from the perspective of the leader's own

Table 1 Tactics and limitations of the five hats of effective leaders

The five hats	Conversation tactics and limitations
Teach	
Tactics:	▶ Convey new information and skills. ▶ Reveal knowledge and accumulated wisdom previously unknown to a colleague.
Limitations:	▶ The decision of how and when to apply what is learnt may be confusing and obscure.
Potential consequence of only teaching:	Your colleague learns new information and skills. However, they are unsure of how, when and where to apply what you taught them, how others apply such teachings, and how it surfaces within individual, interpersonal, and organisational ways of knowing.
Mentor	
Tactics:	▶ As a subject-matter expert the leader helps the colleague envision the world from the perspective of the leader's own experienced eyes. ▶ Guidance comes from the leader's experience of 'having been there and done that'.
Limitations:	▶ May draw from the leader's singular perspectives (and blind spots). ▶ Their colleague may attempt to offload decision-making to the leader—'"just give me the answer'. ▶ Blind spots across gaps of perspectives in such things as gender, ethnicity, identity, culture, age and ability.
Potential consequence of only mentoring:	Your colleague envisions the world from your experienced perspective. However, they fail to consider your blind spots and how your past experiences may (or may not) apply to their own situation. As a result, your colleague follows a path that is not their own. This results in a sense of unfulfillment and of personal failure for not being able to follow your footsteps in an ever-changing environment.
Coach	
Tactics:	▶ The colleague is the subject-matter expert of their experience. The leader helps the colleague make sense of the world from the perspective of the colleague's own eyes. ▶ Ask open-ended questions to promote reflection and reframing. ▶ Challenge and support colleague's thinking and action.
Limitations:	▶ When constrained by a lack of knowledge, experience and sense-making on the part of the leader and/or the colleague the conversation may develop into blind, never-ending, and uninformed loops of questions and lead to ineffective action.
Potential consequence of only coaching:	Your coaching questions promote insight. However, your colleague has big gaps in knowledge, a lack of experienced perspectives and constrained opportunity. Your questions dance around what your colleague currently knows through a restricted lens and your support feels disconnected.
Supervise	
Tactics:	▶ The leader has the authority of oversight with judgement of a colleague's execution and accomplishment of tasks, projects or roles from the perspective of organisational values and strategy. ▶ Help the colleague align with organisational norms and achieve organisational goals.
Limitations:	▶ Easy to fall into a prescriptive model of directing or ordering a colleague around. ▶ May fail to connect with a colleague and develop a deeper understanding of the colleague's experience. ▶ May encourage the propagation of organisational blind spots.
Potential consequence of only supervising:	Your colleague follows your supervision; however, they do not feel seen. Their sense of autonomy, personal growth, alignment with purpose, connection with colleagues, and self-acceptance erode. They surmise they are a cog in a big machine—a replaceable commodity.
Sponsor	
Tactics:	▶ The leader leverages their social capital and reputation to advocate for the colleague. ▶ The leader builds connections and options for the colleague.
Limitations:	▶ Sponsorship may precede or preclude a colleague's learning and sense-making. As a result, the colleague may underestimate or overestimate their value and the options available to them.
Potential consequence of only sponsoring:	You sponsor your colleague. However, they become overwhelmed in their new role. They feel like an imposter as they sense their own lack of knowledge, experience and perspective when compared with their more seasoned colleagues.

experienced eyes. According to Hicks and McCracken, mentoring is similar to teaching; one person is transferring information to another.[18] The critical difference is that with mentoring, the information is derived from knowledge and wisdom rooted in the leader's own experience (whether personal or professional).

A mentor's guidance comes from their experience, for example, 'having been there and having done that'. In fact, this may be why a colleague approaches the leader for perspective: Mentors are often seen as individuals with admirable characteristics.[23] Cues that one is slipping on the mentor's hat would be statements like: 'Given my experience, this is likely to occur…', 'Your next step might be…'. By becoming a mentor, the beneficiary colleague gets to see how 'an expert would dance', allowing the leader to proffer advice based on their experience.

Mentoring has limitations. Mentorship and mentorship programmes are relatively common in academic medical settings,[24–31] but the evidence base for how best to do this as a singular task is not strong.[32] To date, it is not clear if it is the act of mentorship alone that helps with academic success,[31 33–35] or whether it is due to other acts that are often muddied together (eg, sponsorship for starter funding in research).[32]

Mentoring draws from the leader's singular (although seasoned) perspective of the dance floor. Experts often disagree on complicated issues and a leader's influential perspective may differ dramatically from other interpretations.[22] A mentor's ability to represent divergent viewpoints is based on their idiosyncratic sense-making. Inherently, a mentor has blind spots and views the world while enmeshed in the limitations of their vantage point. Understanding the pitfall of blind spots is especially useful when mentoring across gaps of such things as gender, ethnicity, identity, culture, age and ability.[36] For example, although men can be very successful at mentoring women (and vice versa), there are limitations and assumptions derived from men and women gender-based experience, which may not translate to those of women mentees.[37] As there are other intersectionalities at play (eg, race, socioeconomic status, primary language), it is also crucial to encourage colleagues to seek multiple and diverse mentors and mentees to foster inclusiveness.[38–41]

Individuals seeking mentorship may attempt to offload decision-making to the mentor. Colleagues may want a mentor to 'just give me the answer'—and while a mentor may sense efficacy directing colleagues based on seasoned expertise, this

stifles the colleague's ability to construct their own solution within their own complex reality. When the leader as a mentor is stuck in this conundrum, switch hats. By becoming a teacher, the leader might provide the colleague with insights from others' stories. Or by entering into coaching mode, it is possible to challenge a colleague more effectively using the colleague's own perspectives.[42–44]

The coaching hat

There is a wide range of definitions of coaching.[1 3 4 7 45 46] From the vantage point of leadership conversations, it is most useful to view coaching from the lens most commonly used in the business literature—the executive coaching paradigm.[18] Coaching is the art and science of facilitating self-reflective and self-directed change.[18] When a leader puts on the coaching hat they take their colleague onto the balcony to help them make sense of the world from the perspective of their colleague's own eyes. The coach asks open-ended questions to promote reflection and to reframe (eg, 'On the one hand you stated this, but on the other hand you expressed that…how do you put these two thoughts together?'). Effective coaching inquiry uncovers the nuanced (and at times divergent), perspectives of a colleague's reality.

The coach perceives, holds and represents various aspects (both convergent and divergent) of a colleague's perspectives to enable more powerful sense-making. A coaching style uncovers the options colleagues might choose, or the roadblocks they imagine they might encounter. The coach's role is to both support and challenge colleagues as they think and move to action.[47] A coach helps colleagues uncover their own unique, informed viewpoints. In the coaching paradigm, the colleague is the expert of their experience.

Coaching has limitations. Coaching, however, can be constrained by a lack of knowledge, experience and sense-making on the part of the leader and/or the colleague. Without knowledge or expertise, discussions may develop into blind, never-ending loops of questions—leading to ineffective action. When this occurs, it is essential to consider switching hats to that of teacher (to impart additional knowledge), mentor (to convey outside perspective) or supervisor (to reflect on organisational constraints), as this may broaden perspectives and increase the effectiveness of facilitation.

The supervising hat

Supervisors have the authority of oversight, standing next to colleagues on the balcony with the responsibility of ensuring the dance floor reflects organisational values and strategy. The supervisor oversees his/her colleague's execution and accomplishment of tasks, projects,or roles. From this locus of responsibility, supervisors are charged with ensuring that their colleague maintains the norms and achieves the goals set by their organisation. Within this role, a supervisor may also be charged with conducting assessments of performance (eg, a clinical supervisor completing a workplace-based assessment), which can further complicate the relationship.[4 5]

Supervision involves discussion of a colleague's position on the dance floor as it relates to organisational or professional targets: 'You are excelling' or 'You are not achieving expected results'. Supervisory dialogues may reference metrics or performance reviews, for example, related to such things as competency, productivity, or interpersonal relationships.

Table 2 A colleague seeks advice on career advancement

A colleague seeks advice on career advancement. Which of the five hats of learning conversation might the facilitator wear?	
Teach	'This is other information which you may not have considered…'
	'The data behind what you are considering shows *this*…'
	'The typical qualifications for *this opportunity* are…'
Mentor	'Based on my experience, I suggest you pursue/avoid…'
	'If I were you, I would first *do this* and then *do that*.'
	'I think they're likely to respond *in this way*…'
Coach	'What do you see as the *benefits/limitations* of *each choice*?'
	'What other approaches are you considering?'
	'What if you couldn't *do that*?'
	'How will you make this decision?'
Supervisor	'You *are/are not* on track for *this opportunity* in our organization.'
	'We need to see the following from you…'
	'Given these evaluations from your colleagues…'
Sponsor	'I will speak with *this individual* and recommend you for *this opportunity*.'
	'Let me introduce you to *this individual*, they know this space well.'

Table 3 A colleague is experiencing burnout

A colleague is experiencing burnout. They seek help. Which of the five hats of learning conversation might the leader wear?	
Teach	'The data shows that 55% of our colleagues experience burnout.'
	'This book notes that stress plus rest are essential for personal growth.'
	'Eudaemonic well-being is made up of the following six domains…'
Mentor	'I have also experienced burnout, and this is how I approached it…'
	'You need to stop *doing this*, and start *doing that*…'
	'Based upon my experience, I think you stay the course, and *this* will pass.'
Coach	'What are your thoughts about how to best approach this?'
	'What would happen if you changed nothing in your approach?'
	'On one hand, you *say this*, and on the other, you *say that*, how do you reconcile those different thoughts?'
	'What are your next steps?'
Supervisor	'Given what is occurring, I will recommend to the executive committee that we *make this change*.'
	'I am going to decrease your time *doing this* and increase your time *doing that*.'
	'We will hire a professional coach to help you…'
Sponsor	'We need to use your talents better, and I will champion your efforts with *this influential person* to try to get you the resources you need.'
	'I will recommend you for *this committee* in *this area of your interest*.'
They seek help.	

Supervision has limitations

As a supervisor, it is easy to fall into a mode of telling or ordering colleagues around, but this may prevent an opportunity to connect, to create a deeper understanding of the issues enveloping the colleague. Perhaps organisational processes and interpersonal issues affect the colleague—but if the educator as a supervisor employs a prescriptive approach, they may not hear about organisational blind spots—and an opportunity to understand is missed.

Dyssynchrony between the supervisory statements and the colleague's perspectives exposes an opportunity to consider switching hats again. As a coach, or mentor, or teacher, the educator might explore the colleague's sense of purpose and autonomy, share experiences of challenge and personal growth, and shed light on alternate ways to make sense of the situation.

The sponsoring hat

When a leader sponsors, they leverage their own relationships and positionality to advocate for a colleague. To use the dance club analogy once more, this is about ensuring one's colleague can get into the club and be welcomed onto the dance floor. A sponsor borrows from their own social and professional capital in conversations to find opportunities and build connections for colleagues. When sponsoring a colleague, the leader leverages their reputation to direct the time, resources and focus of others toward a colleague-in-need. Sponsorship is key to providing opportunities for professional growth.[48] The literature has shown that women and minorities, for example, may have mentoring opportunities; however, sponsorship is lacking.[36 49] Effective leaders sponsor colleagues to encourage autonomy, support personal and professional growth, and promote an organisation that embraces diverse experience and perspectives.

A leader may find that their sponsorship on behalf of the colleague-in-need is improved when they approach the sponsorship discussion dynamically. They may wear the hats of teacher, mentor, coach and/or supervisor to help the target of sponsorship (the colleague with resources) see the best qualities of the sponsored colleague-in-need.

Sponsorship has limitations

A colleague may encounter personal and professional setback despite sponsorship when the sponsorship occurs prior to investigating other potential opportunities or areas of development. Without coaching, teaching and mentoring, a colleague may underestimate their value, their opportunities for growth and the options available to them. A more dynamic and substantive conversation may reveal a plethora of opportunities that might be a better fit.

THE FIVE HATS MODEL IN ACTION

Leadership conversations rarely require only one hat. For example, if the leader only wears the hat of a mentor, they likely fail to consider their colleague's unique perspectives. Whereas, if the leader only wears the hat of coach, their colleague loses an opportunity to learn from the leader's valuable experiences. However, there is no recipe for when to switch hats. Which hat to wear in each moment is a choice each leader makes given their experience and the developmental needs of their colleague. During some conversations, a leader may coach more than mentor, while during others, they may teach more than supervise; the amount of time spent wearing any of the hats is tailored.

How might a leader approach a colleague seeking advice on career advancement (table 2) or a colleague seeking help with burnout (table 3)? Each table presents a case to highlight the Five Hats Model in action. Each case offers examples of how a leader might wear each hat.

It is enticing for a leader to want to jump in and fix things for a colleague based on the familiar lens of their own experience and favoured mode of conversation (eg, supervise). Compare the initial instinct of how to approach each conversation, with the different approaches offered by wearing each hat—and then consider how to incorporate the model to enhance the effectiveness of learning conversations.

CAVEATS

There is no requirement to wear all of the hats. For example, when offering feedback about suboptimal performance, the leader may wear the hats of supervisor, teacher and coach, but avoid sponsoring and mentoring.

The leader must pay attention to the non-verbal cues (eg, the disengaged look) in addition to the verbal reflections to their comments. Verbal and non-verbal cues provide information. These cues may prompt the leader to alter approach and don a different hat. For instance, if the leader relies too heavily on the mentor hat, it may lead to tangential thinking expressed by flat vocalisation and inattentive gaze of their colleague. In this situation, a leader must realise: 'It's their experience and not mine that they wish to discuss.' At other times, a leader's mentorship and point-of-view may be exactly what is needed, but both parties need to recognise the limitations of this approach—what is comfortable may not promote optimal development.

CONCLUSIONS

Effective leaders teach, mentor, coach, supervise and sponsor during dynamic conversations with colleagues. These leaders are deliberate and purposeful in their conversational approach to realise the benefits and limitations of each method and to better serve the needs of their colleagues at the moment.

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