

## PRACTICE BRIEF

# How does WLI use coaching to support women to lead and influence change?

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## Key Points

- Coaching can support individual leadership development in ways that equip people to lead and influence broader social change.
- WLI draws on an ontological approach to coaching and an understanding of change that is informed by research on developmental and adaptive leadership.
- Ontological coaching provides tools to help build leaders' self-awareness and shift their 'way of being'.
- The 'inner work' that ontological coaching prompts connects to the 'outer work' of leading developmental change by helping people to see themselves as leaders, become more open to learning, express their ideas clearly, and interact with others more intentionally.
- Within WLI, ontological coaching complements other support provided through the program, including training, mentoring, individual counselling, funding for small projects, and platforms to connect with other alumni for professional and personal support, guidance and advice.
- WLI is building a cohort of Pacific-based ontological coaches to sustain leadership development beyond the program.

"The coaching helped me shift from reacting to reflecting. I learned to be intentional in how I speak, listen and hold myself — and that has changed how I lead others."  
*(Coachee, WLI Coaching Experience Survey)*

## Coaching as an approach to supporting women's leadership

Leadership coaching is used across many types of organisations as a way of improving individual and organisational performance. Often, it is part of an integrated program of leadership development that may include formal training, performance feedback, mentoring and 'on the job' learning. For women leaders, leadership coaching is seen as a way of addressing gender imbalances and supports women at various stages of their career to develop leadership skills, as well as building their self-confidence and identity as a leader.<sup>1</sup>

In broad terms, coaching can be understood as a structured process of learning through reflection – facilitated by a coach – which aims to improve the coachee's self-awareness and change their behaviour in ways that align with the goals they have identified.<sup>2</sup>

Coaching can sometimes be confused with mentoring – and there are certainly overlaps. Mentoring involves both professional and personal support. Mentors use their position to provide mentees with exposure, visibility and access to career opportunities, as well as sharing their deep sectoral knowledge and skills. They also provide personal support in the form of guidance, advice, counselling, and role modelling.<sup>3</sup>

Coaching can be done either with individuals or small groups. Unlike mentors, leadership coaches do not necessarily need to have in-depth knowledge in the sector. Rather, they have expertise in facilitating conversations which support people to better understand themselves and to think and act in new ways to help them achieve their goals. Coaching is a relationship-based approach to learning and development. Openness and trust between the coach and the coachee are therefore key to the effectiveness of coaching.<sup>4</sup>

Coaching has been applied across a range of areas, with slightly different purposes and approaches.<sup>5</sup> Within international development, coaching is one approach that international technical advisers use to support capacity development, including as part of leadership development programs.<sup>6</sup>

Recently, coaching has been put forward as an approach that can support social change. This draws on critical approaches to learning which argue that inequality and injustice is not a given but something that is socially constructed and internalised in how people think about themselves and the world. This can lead to people feeling inadequate, powerless, apathetic or afraid. Coaching can help people look at things more critically, building their understanding of how their personal beliefs and social norms shape their views of themselves and the way things are and providing them with tools to help them challenge these. In this way, coaching can enable both personal transformation and social transformation.<sup>7</sup>

"I appreciate the reminder of being present and aware of the language I use — how powerful it is in shaping reality."

*(Coachee, WLI Coaching Experience Survey)*

## WLI's approach to leadership coaching

WLI's approach to coaching aims to connect individual leadership development to efforts for wider social change. It draws on an ontological approach to coaching and an understanding of change that is informed by research on developmental and adaptive leadership.

Developmental leadership recognises that social change is inherently political because it is concerned with power, how it is exercised and by whom, and therefore necessarily involves contestation and risk. Change requires 'motivated and strategic individuals who have the incentives, values, interests and opportunity' to push for a different way of doing things. But individuals can rarely achieve change on their own. Instead, they need to work with others, forming networks and coalitions that have legitimacy and power. Ideas are central to how change happens. A key part of the 'work' that developmental leaders, networks and coalitions need to do therefore involves challenging existing ideas that prevent positive change and promoting new ideas.<sup>8</sup>

Adaptive leadership recognises that processes of change are complex, long-term, often unpredictable, and involve losses as well as gains. While some challenges are 'technical' - that is, they are complex but have known solutions and can be addressed with the right expertise - many of the challenges that leaders face "can only be addressed through changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties".<sup>9</sup>

These require leaders to identify what is working and what needs to change, experiment with different strategies and approaches, and learn from this.<sup>10</sup> Adaptive leadership therefore requires leaders to be comfortable with uncertainty, open to learning, and reflective.

Developmental leadership helps leaders understand *what* to do to create change. Adaptive leadership supports them to respond to complexity and uncertainty by learning and adjusting *how* they act. But often, that's still not enough. Even with the right tools and understanding, leaders can find themselves stuck — constrained by unconscious moods, habits of speech, and embodied ways of responding. Ontological coaching offers the *deeper* "how-to of the how-to" by working at the level of being.

It expands a leader's capacity to observe themselves in three interrelated domains - language, moods and emotions, and body - and brings awareness to patterns they may not have noticed before. These unseen patterns often arise from historical narratives, cultural norms, and deeply embedded assessments that sit outside conscious awareness.

Ontological coaching brings these into awareness, creating space for new possibilities for action. It does not give solutions but builds capacity for the coachee to observe differently and generate their own action. This new awareness enables more intentional, courageous and compassionate action, and helps leaders move through inner blockers that hold them back.<sup>11</sup>

The 'inner work' of self-observation and behavioural change that ontological coaching prompts connects to the 'outer work' of leading developmental change by helping people to see themselves as capable of doing something to bring about change, become more open to learning, express their ideas in ways that make their views and objectives clearer, and interact with others more intentionally.

## Ontological Coaching

Ontological coaching focuses on a person's 'way of being', which includes how they think, as well as how they feel, speak and hold themselves in their body. A person's way of being shapes how they understand themselves, the world and what is possible.<sup>12</sup>

Ontological coaching provides a set of tools which can help people become more aware of and shift different aspects of their 'way of being'. The 'language' toolkit includes frameworks that help people understand how they can use language to explain how things are, express feelings or attitudes, ask others to do things, or commit to doing things themselves; how they can use different types of conversations to seek clarity, coordinate action and hold others accountable; and how cultural-historical narratives, including about gender, religion, ethnicity, and age, influence their assumptions about themselves and their behaviour.

The 'emotions' toolkit draws attention to how moods and emotions such as resentment/acceptance, resignation/ambition, and anxiety/wonder influence how people see the issues they are facing and what decisions they make. The 'body' toolkit focuses on how posture reflects and impacts on thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and how coachees can adjust their posture in ways that enable them to be more productive and open.<sup>13</sup>

[O]ntological coaching — especially through the Pacific lens — shaped the way I see leadership. It helped me work within our cultural values while standing strong in my purpose.” (Coachee, WLI Coaching Experience Survey)

WLI has found the ontological approach to coaching to be particularly suitable in a Pacific context, by encouraging women leaders to reflect on and challenge internalised social norms and how these have shaped their personal beliefs and behaviours in a supported way. The focus on using language productively and intentionally also complements Pacific relational ways of being. This approach also supports the development of relational authority, enabling women leaders to engage powerfully within both traditional and evolving leadership contexts.

### Leadership coaching and its impact

Ontological coaching is a key part of WLI’s leadership development offering. All participants in WLI’s 18-month Women’s Developmental Leadership Program attend up to 5 individual coaching sessions. These confidential sessions are provided by WLI’s Ontological Leadership Coach. Coaching is also available to all alumni of the Women’s Developmental Leadership Program at any time. There is no limit to the number of sessions they can attend. Outside of the Women’s Developmental Leadership Program, individual and small group coaching is available to WLI Alumni Representatives, Leadership Fund recipients, Leadership Lab participants and selected male and female participants in LeadershipConnect.

Recent feedback gathered through the WLI coaching experience survey highlights the breadth of ontological coaching’s impact, from every-day problem solving and self-coaching to deeper transformation in how leaders view themselves and lead others.

For example, participants said that they used the sessions to help them manage team dynamics, navigate difficult conversations; and deal with workplace stress and conflict:

*“I had gone through a very challenging period at work after returning from studies. After the joys of rejoining the workplace, I reached a plateau where I felt stuck and not progressing. I got overwhelmed easily and stressed out. I was able to in those instances spend time to do breathing exercises and positive affirmations that I picked up from the coaching sessions to help me through.”* (Coachee, WLI Coaching Experience Survey)

*“My mental health is much better. I’m meeting work stress with clarity and compassion instead of frustration.”* (Coachee, WLI Coaching Experience Survey)

Participants also used the coaching sessions to further develop their leadership, including reflecting on and clarifying their leadership goals and style:

*“In the WLI coaching sessions, I used the opportunity to reflect deeply on my leadership journey and identify key areas for growth. I discussed specific workplace challenges, such as team communication and resistance to change, and received valuable strategies to address them. The sessions also helped me clarify my long-term leadership goals and align them with my values. Through guided conversations, I developed greater confidence in decision-making and leading with empathy. These sessions have been instrumental in shaping a more strategic and inclusive leadership approach in my current role.”* (Coachee, WLI Coaching Experience Survey)

Participants found the coaching support increased their self-awareness, emotional regulation and confidence in both personal and professional contexts. It also helped them identify and challenge limiting self-beliefs and develop a clearer sense of their personal values and goals:

*"What I have found most valuable about the coaching is the safe, structured space it provides for reflection, clarity, and growth. The sessions have helped me gain deeper self-awareness, uncover blind spots, and approach challenges with a more strategic mindset. I especially appreciate having a trusted sounding board to test ideas, reframe situations, and develop practical solutions. The coaching has not only supported my professional development but has also boosted my confidence in leading others and navigating complex situations."*  
(Coachee, Coaching Experience Survey)

*"The coaching helped me navigate one of the most difficult periods of my leadership journey with clarity. I learned to diagnose the root issues, take a 'balcony view' of the situation, identify allies, and communicate effectively. Having a coach who understood my frustrations and guided me through the chaos was a tremendous relief."*  
(Coachee, Coaching Experience Survey)

To support WLI alumni and other Pacific leaders over the long term, WLI is helping build a cadre of Pacific-based coaches trained in ontological coaching, with a nine-month Ontological Leadership Coach Training program offered to selected WLI alumni and practising Pacific coaches. A total of 15 women were selected from among 32 applicants to participate in the program, with 9 completing all the requirements to be accredited as a coach. These individuals have now applied to be part of WLI's coaching register.

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Australia Awards Women Leading and Influencing (WLI) is an on-Award (in Australia) and reintegration (in Pacific) enrichment program supporting Pacific women to lead and influence change that promotes positive development outcomes.

For more information see:  
<https://www.wliprogram.org>



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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Passmore, "Coaching Defined and Explained," in *The Coaches' Handbook: The Complete Practitioner Guide for Professional Coaches*, ed. Jonathan Passmore (Routledge, 2021), 3-12.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Stead, "Mentoring: A Model for Leadership Development?" *International Journal of Training and Development* 9, no.3 (2005): 170-184, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2419.2005.00232.x> William A. Gentry, "Mentoring for Leadership Development," in *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Coaching in Organizations*, ed Douglas Riddle, Emily R. Hoole, and Elizabeth C. D. Gullette, (2015. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated), 347-382; Lindsay J. Hastings and Cindy Kane, "Distinguishing Mentoring, Coaching, and Advising for Leadership Development," *New Directions for Student Leadership*, no. 158 (2018): 9-22, <https://doi.org/10.1002/yl.20284>

<sup>4</sup> Passmore, "Coaching Defined," 8.

<sup>5</sup> Passmore, "Coaching Defined," 8.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas P. Champion et al, "Choosing a Consulting Role: Principles and Dynamics of Matching Role to Situation," in *Capacity Development in Practice*, eds. Jan Ubels, Naa-Aku Acquaye-Baddoo, and Alan Fowler (Earthscan, 2010), 57-64; Brian Lucas, "Current Thinking on Capacity Development," (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2013); Ismail, Zenobia. "Technical Assistance and Capacity Building in International Development." (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, 2018); Brigitte Dia et al, "Leadership, the Hidden Factor in Capacity Development: A West African Experience," in *Capacity Development in Practice*, eds. Jan Ubels, Naa-Aku Acquaye-Baddoo, and Alan Fowler (Earthscan, 2010), 208-224.

<sup>7</sup> Hany Shoukry, "Coaching for Social Change," in *The SAGE Handbook of Coaching*, eds. Tatiana Bachkirova et al, (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2017), 176-192; Hany Shoukry and Elaine Cox, "Coaching as a Social Process," *Management Learning* 49, no. 4 (2018), 413-428; Judie M. Gannon, "Applying the Lens of Social Movements to Coaching and Mentoring," *Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal* 6, no. 1 (2021): 5-29.

<sup>8</sup> David Hudson, David, Claire McLoughlin, Chris Roche and Heather Marquette. "Inside the Black Box of Political Will: 10 Years of Findings from the Developmental Leadership Program." *Developmental Leadership Program*, Birmingham, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Ronald Heifetz et al, "The Theory Behind the Practice: A Brief Introduction to the Adaptive Leadership Framework," (Harvard Business Review Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Heifetz et al, "The Theory Behind the Practice,"

<sup>11</sup> Alan Sieler, "The Transformative Power of Ontological Coaching," in *Coaching to the Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change: Volume 2: Emotional Learning and Ontological Coaching*, (Newfield, 2007), 3-15.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Sieler, "Ontological Coaching," in *The Complete Handbook of Coaching*, 4th ed., eds. Elaine Cox, Tatiana Bachkirova and David Clutterbuck (SAGE Publications, 2024), 107-119; Sieler, "Transformative Power".

<sup>13</sup> Sieler, "Ontological Coaching"; Sieler, "Transformative Power".