



**UNICEF is supplying much-needed support to malnourished young Somali refugees arriving at Kenya's Dadaab refugee camps**

Coaching on UNICEF's global leadership programme requires curiosity, and the ability to embrace diversity and adopt multiple perspectives. **Rachel Ellison** reports

# WE ARE THE WORLD

**A** Kenyan accountant posted to Kabul. A Bangladeshi, married to a Mexican, working in New York. A South African, of Chinese descent, living in Uganda. A Canadian in the Central African Republic. A Venezuelan-born Croatian, stationed in an office in Switzerland. UNICEF's Senior Leadership Development Programme is truly multinational and multicultural.

Next month (April) sees the start of the fourth cohort, with 35 leaders flown in from around the world, to Judge Business School, at the University of Cambridge in the UK. UNICEF leaders' academic and applied learning is being supported by a team of external coaches who, on the outside, appear rather similar: white, female, middle-aged.

"When I saw the line-up of coaches on the first day, I thought, I want that older man, with the white hair. In my culture, he would be the best coach. Then I got you!

The youngest – and a woman!"

"The worst coach," I said, laughing.

"Yes, exactly!" responded Wafaa, also laughing. "I got the worst!"

## A challenging concept

Wafaa Saeed is in her 40s. She's a Sudanese Muslim, posted to Syria. Wafaa comes from an enormous extended family. It's perfectly normal in her culture. What's not normal is that she isn't married. And doesn't have children. Two culturally unacceptable choices.

Our meeting was her first encounter with executive leadership coaching. It was to be a journey of honesty and challenging cultural exchanges, which embraced difference, judgment, prejudice and sexism.

"I must admit", recalls Wafaa, "I was very stressed about our first meeting. I thought, how am I going to talk openly to a stranger for an hour and a half?"

She explains: "In Sudanese culture, going to a psychiatrist is acceptable. But not a coach or counsellor. If you want coaching or

mentoring, you go to your siblings, your auntie or your neighbour."

Wafaa decided the coaching would only work for her if she didn't filter her thinking before sharing it with me. Here's where having a coach from a different culture served her better:

"It made it easier for me. It gave us freedom," says Wafaa. "In Sudan, we have a saying: 'In a country that's not your country, you can even walk naked.' In my own community, one is afraid to open up... You created a safe space."

It wasn't long before, during a Skype session, Wafaa joyously declared: "I have the best coach for me! You are very good at your job!"

## Safe space

I asked Wafaa what I did right, from a cultural perspective, in our coaching relationship:

"You didn't judge. You listened with your heart. Everything I said was respected. You reflected back."

Wafaa continued: "You made it human. Sometimes we laughed. You revealed a bit about yourself. That exchange meant I felt less

**Young boys collecting water in Nairobi, Kenya. Clean water is becoming harder to find in Africa**

embarrassed. I felt you felt what I'm feeling."

One could argue that these are standard, best practice skills of any coach. But Wafaa also cited commonality: "You had worked in Peshawar in Pakistan, where I was also posted at the time. I believe your exposure to different cultures in a meaningful way – not just being a tourist – helped you understand me better."

Where Wafaa felt less at ease, concerned my boundaries around time and relationship:

"Your coach is not like a friend you can call in the middle of the night. I found that difficult. When it was the end of a coaching session, it felt transactional. I had to culturally understand this and adjust to your culture."

**Multicultural mash-up**

Wafaa's story, is just one account from a thousands-strong community of international aid workers within and across multiple cultural systems.



UNICEF leaders may be born in one country, raised and educated in another, and posted to field stations in several more. Many work in a foreign language. They may be coached in another. Some are married to people from different backgrounds, raising children in an international school system.

There's also the culture of the United Nations head office in New York. Some of my UNICEF clients describe the contrast between a hot, dusty field station serving the poorest children of the world, with what's perceived as the cool, male-orientated bureaucracy of HQ.

And let's not forget UNICEF's purpose, its core customers –

disadvantaged children – from a multitude of tribes, castes and communities, in the cities and villages of Africa, Asia, Russia and Latin America.

It's this multicultural mash-up that prompted me to reflect on how many cultures are in play, when working with UNICEF leaders.

Indeed, the leadership learning programme itself, creates its own UNICEF sub-culture. Judge Business School, providing the academic inputs, is another. Just 25 years old, it sits within the 800-year-old British educational institution, the University of Cambridge.

Another sub-culture is the coaching team itself. Earlier, I mentioned a lack of diversity: We're all British. We're all white. There's only one man. But one coach was born in Iraq, another discovered coaching in India, one has worked in Afghanistan and another adopted a son in China. The coaches' business backgrounds also offer diversity: from international banking to human rights lobbying, environmental science to broadcasting.

The cultural plethora goes wider and deeper, as one considers who supervises the coaches.

It's an interconnected 'dance' of cultures, which reminds me of Professor Peter Hawkins' Seven-eyed Model of Supervision.

## Choosing the right coach

**You should look for:**

- resilience
- generosity and tolerance
- good containment, for self and for client's 'stuff'
- high compassion for the client's environment – it may be dangerous, not just stressful
- ability to hear and handle traumatic stories from the client
- ability to build rapid rapport
- ability to judge appropriate flexibility around time boundaries and reasons for cancelling, yet still hold clients to account
- cultural stereotyping when coach-client matching, both by similar and different cultures alike
- cultural commonality – meaningful experiences that give the coach more credibility with the client
- how culturally similar your supervisor is to you

Professor Hawkins recently re-created the concept into a 10-eyed model of coaching, mentoring and organisational consulting<sup>1</sup>.

I asked him what he thinks coaches need to bear in mind, when working across multiple different cultures:

“Coaches need to explore the cultural conflict within the client, ie, where they were born, brought up, educated and how this influences them as people and leaders. Then, both coach and client need to explicitly examine their cultural assumptions about each other. For example, a Western coach might ask about ambition. They’re likely to mean individualistic achievement. If the client is Asian, they may well answer from a collective perspective.”

Hawkins, who is white, recalls work he did with a mental health organisation in the West Indies:

“When I walked into the room, the man I was to be working alongside said: ‘Ah, Peter Hawkins...that’s an interesting name.’ Hawkins was the name of one of the first slave traders and slave owners. The client [who is black], had a slave owner’s name too. Not an African one.”

Hawkins argues that coaches need to ask themselves what baggage they are carrying into the room. To notice what they’re not aware of culturally. He calls this the cultural interface between coach and client. He prods further, asking coaches to notice what we don’t recognise about our own culture. This is particularly important if the coach is from the dominant culture. “For example, white people often don’t think of themselves as a colour<sup>2</sup>.”

For that reason, it’s important, he argues, to monitor the culture of

## Top tips on how to coach multiculturally

- Work shoulder to shoulder with the client
- Ask what do we need to understand about each other’s cultures for the coaching work to be successful?
- Enquire about cultural assumptions, ‘baggage’ and internal conflict
- Ask about cultural stereotypes – on both sides
- Don’t seek to diminish difference
- Treat everyone as unique, however much you know about their culture
- Ask how many cultures might be in play for the client
- Hold the tension around individuality and human universality
- Identify what we don’t recognise about their own culture – especially if coming from the ‘dominant’ culture
- Explore how the client’s cultural experiences inform their leadership behaviours and choices
- When working trans-culturally, all coaching is group coaching, even if there are only two people in the room
- When contracting, explore issues such as timekeeping and boundaries, in cultural terms
- Remember, in some cultures it’s not acceptable to sit alone in a room, talking to a stranger (particularly if they are of the opposite sex)

the coach and their supervisor. What might they miss, because they’re culturally too similar?

Fellow UNICEF coach Carole Pemberton, describes her English upbringing as “anglocentric and narrow”. She says: “There was a lot of curtain twitching when a black family moved in opposite.”

Adopting a son in China changed Pemberton’s view of difference. Instead, she started to see human connectedness and the universality of people from different cultures. She describes UNICEF leaders as ‘global citizens’:

“Coaching UNICEF leaders is not like a Brit coaching a German or an American coaching someone from China. With UNICEF clients, you’re coaching across multiple cultures simultaneously: the home culture, a person’s faith, their partner’s background, the corporate culture and their regional posting. All of these need attention, as they all influence the potential of the client’s growth, behaviour choices and impact.

“One of my clients has never had a drink with his boss. He can’t. He’s Muslim and he won’t go where alcohol is served. The boss doesn’t realise. Imagine the potential impact of that in a competitive organisation.”

Another client told Pemberton that she reminded him of his mother. “For the client this wasn’t an oedipal thing. That was my Western cultural assumption. It was about huge respect. But when he said it, I was so bewildered – what had I done to create a mother-client dynamic? The quality of my coaching went out of the window.”

When Pemberton had calmed her inner dialogue, she was able to attend to her client again: “He was saying he felt safe and supported to think for himself. His mother must have made a great coach!”

### Shoulder to shoulder

So how do you select and match the right coaches for such a cross-cultural piece of work? Jane Thompson, from Hayfield Group,

“One of my clients has never had a drink with his boss. He can’t. He’s Muslim and he won’t go where alcohol is served. The boss doesn’t realise. Imagine the potential impact of that in a competitive organisation”

is coaching director on UNICEF’s senior leadership programme. She shares: “Each coach on the team has a values fit with UNICEF’s core purpose. They also have the desire to help the end user – children – they’ll probably never meet. The coaching team are self-starters, with a higher than average level of generosity and tolerance.

“[It is about] the juggling of diaries and empathy. Phone coaching sessions are bumped because a bomb’s gone off, there’s a siege or lines are down. Because of that, coaches [will] hear clients recounting difficult, sometimes traumatising, experiences.”

UNICEF leaders receive two face-to-face coaching sessions, with the rest done on Skype or over the phone. “That’s why UNICEF coaches need to be able to build rapid rapport. They must create a safe environment for a leader who’s just flown in from a war zone.

“That means being a resilient, yet compassionate coach. And a well-supervised one.

“Coaches working trans-culturally need to coach shoulder to shoulder with their client. They need to ask them: ‘What do we need to acknowledge or know about each other’s cultures, for this work to be successful?’”

He believes: “With multicultural coaching, all coaching is group coaching, even [with] two people.

“The distance between me and my clients from different cultures, has reduced because I now live with difference,” comments Pemberton, identifying the impact of her son on her coaching. “I don’t think coaches should try to diminish difference, but rather, to seek it and enquire about how it influences that leader’s behaviours and choices.”

“And let’s not forget about cultural stereotypes,” argues UNICEF’s Wafaa Saeed. “People from your own culture can be just as guilty of stereotyping – or worse, than someone from outside. I believe we need to remember to treat everyone as unique.”

### Conclusion

This article invites coaches working with leaders across multiple cultures to coach shoulder to shoulder with the client, to investigate the cultural ‘dance’ going on between coach and client, within both the client and the coach. To ask: What cultural baggage am I bringing into the room? What cultural influences am I not even aware of?

Exploring the impact of these may be particularly important when one or both parties come from the perceived ‘dominant’ culture.

How many different cultures are in play for the client’s system: work, home, community of origin, geographical posting, the organisational culture of head office? Where are these cultures congruent, and where are the disconnects?

Coaches might reflect on holding the tension simultaneously, between individual uniqueness and human universality. One stance is to seek to identify and understand difference, not minimise it. And to stay curious about the multiple cultural stances clients may have to hold when they go to work for an organisation like UNICEF.

Finally, be mindful about your status as a coach. What you assume about your status may be different from how your international global citizen client thinks of you. Of course, the notion that equality of status is better, may merely be another culturally informed slip-up on the part of this article’s author. ■

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