

LESSONS LEARNED FROM INTERCULTURAL COACHING

Two coaches with the EthicalCoach organisation, **Leah Dejenu** and **Marilyn O’Hearne**, share their experiences of co-coaching together across cultures in Ethiopia.

In our intercultural, diverse world, approaching coaching with ACHE™ – awareness, curiosity, humility and empathy – contributes to positive results. This includes staying curious as coaches, being aware of our own culture and how that impacts the lens with which we see the people we are coaching and working with, and staying humble.

Working with a team leader that also exemplified the ACHE approach was one of the most eye-opening and rewarding experiences we had in co-coaching NGO teams in Ethiopia for EthicalCoach over two years. Their self-awareness, humility and openness to feedback, their curiosity and application of learning, their commitment and dedication to the team coaching process and partnership, contributed to an engaged and developing team, with transformative results.

Despite the pandemic and organisational changes occurring, their level of flexibility, understanding and vulnerability transcended cultural norms and barriers and allowed us as coaches to support this team successfully. This was in sharp contrast to another team leader who was not as clear on or dedicated to coaching, and we found it challenging to engage and schedule with them. We found it crucial to have a written, signed agreement with clearly laid-out expectations, including a cancellation policy, especially when coaching is newer to the culture.

While awareness of our own culture is important, we don’t want to look at everything through our own cultural lens – believing that we’re right and everyone else is wrong. For coaches looking to establish trust and safety, it is so important to demonstrate unconditional positive regard. This includes seeing our clients, whomever they are and whatever culture they come from, as creative, resourceful and whole, and co-creating our coaching culture and partnership.

Empathy is having some understanding of what an experience is like for another person. Putting this into action around direct communication, which is hugely different across cultures, Marilyn recommends coaches start with a conversation: ‘This is my culture. Tell me about your culture. How do we want our culture to be, as coach and client partners? How direct will we be with each other?’ Communication has a huge cultural variation. We are all somewhere along the indirect-to-direct continuum. Marilyn’s co-coaching and coaching agreements include: ‘If I were to unintentionally cross a line with you, if I were to say something that offended you, or didn’t land right with you, how would we address that?’ We applied this with both NGO teams in our work in Ethiopia. Ethiopian culture tends to be more hierarchical and less direct than Western ones. We found that both teams wanted direct communication, but at times found it challenging to practise.

Although we are generationally and ethnically different, we are both women raised in North America, and agreed to communicate directly. Curiosity helped our process and collaboration flow flawlessly, contributing to recognising the value each person brings. Despite our differing years of experience, this was an opportunity for us to learn from each other by identifying our strengths and openly communicating our areas of improvement. Removing a hierarchical approach in our collaboration helped foster a trusting, open and compatible space, translating into our coaching styles and sessions, as well as providing a model for the teams we co-coached.

We are thankful that we are a naturally good fit, each bringing ideas and sharing the responsibilities of facilitating our NGO leadership coaching summit breakout sessions and team coaching. We invested time in not only preparing but also debriefing our sessions,

WHAT IS ETHICALCOACH?

EthicalCoach, the philanthropic arm of WBECS, connects world-class coaches to leaders in the non-profit sector. Our goal is to help them multiply their impact over the long term. To us, good coaching means stronger communities, healthier families and better access to justice. Our coaches work with leaders to maximise their personal and professional potential, with the following program design:

1. An initial meeting to identify key issues and establish coaching guidelines and focus.
2. Six months of coaching appointments, approximately one hour in length each, twice a month.
3. A final wrap-up meeting to summarise accomplishments and agree on strategies going forward.

including check-ins with our participants as well as each other. Trust was easily established as we intentionally co-designed our co-coaching partnership and culture. It was helpful having Leah ‘on the ground’ in Ethiopia and meeting with the team in person while Marilyn joined via Zoom from the USA.

Leah and Marilyn’s only encounter before meeting each other in person in Addis Ababa just days before the EthicalCoach summit was at the Breaking Free from Bias programme Marilyn facilitated for the EthicalCoach international and local coaching teams. That programme, along with the cultural briefings the international coaching team received, helped illuminate cultural differences such as time orientation and approaches to hierarchy/equality. It encouraged and provided a process for identifying and managing bias and assumptions.

There has been so much emphasis on identifying biases that the next step, managing them, is sometimes neglected. Marilyn invites coaches and leaders, as she did in our programme, to first pause and take a few deep breaths. That moves us from operating at the unconscious level, where we are the vast majority of the time, to a more conscious state. The next step is to consider the person that we’ll be working with, and do a self-check. Based on their multiple identities – age, ethnicity, culture, gender and so on – what are the assumptions or biases I might be carrying about them? How will I shift those assumptions and biases?

Using the team that we found challenging to engage with, for example, we could have judged them as rude and inconsiderate for scheduling and then cancelling at the last minute with little explanation. We explored an alternative explanation: that their commitment was lagging, whether from misunderstanding and/or changes taking place in their organisation, and felt too embarrassed to communicate this directly.

From our experience, we realised the importance of trust-building not only among team members but with us as their coaches. As someone from an Ethiopian background, Leah knows that self-expression and self-advocacy can be placed on the back burner, which means that honest and genuine communication can get overlooked, especially in team dynamics. The concept of ‘saving

the peace’, in the hope of not offending your manager or colleague, is a common trait. Through trust-building and restating our team agreements (which included confidentiality and curiosity), our teams understood the importance of providing a safe space for others to exchange thoughts, ideas, encouraging words and criticism.

We noticed and celebrated a shift in how our team members approached the concept of criticism: ‘areas of improvement’. This form of criticism in Leah’s Ethiopian culture has negative connotations and may be the only expected form of feedback. This may create a rift between the leader and team members. It can result in the recipients’ negative self-talk. Our teams managed to destigmatise (‘debias’) their perspective of feedback and approach it from a lens of support. It also resulted in expressing gratitude for the team members’ contributions to the organisation and contributed to greater team satisfaction in our follow-up team assessment.

We are thankful for the opportunity to partner as co-coaches through EthicalCoach, contributing to fruitful intercultural exchanges and building the coaching community in Ethiopia and beyond, supporting NGO leaders. Our role went beyond supporting our respective NGOs; we learned about many of the team members and their personal narratives, and the importance of creating a safe and trusting space to facilitate vulnerability and candour. We appreciate how coaching can support not only team and organisational change, but also positive culture shifts nationally, including Ethiopia’s advancement of women leaders.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



With over 10 years of experience in the complex arenas of intercultural collaboration, community advocacy engagement and talents project management, Leah Dejenu has demonstrated her commitment to building solid and equitable relationships and communication both within the public and non-profit sectors. Her work includes organising the first Black youth conference in western Canada, assisting with a federally funded research project targeted towards minority groups. Now based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Leah applies her experience as a project manager, coach and consultant for organisations such as the British Council, Challenges Worldwide, Adelphi and local start-ups and SMEs.

Marilyn O’Hearne, MA, MCC, partners with clients to step confidently into success in our rapidly changing, uncertain, culturally complex world with expanded capacity, deep transformation and fresh perspectives. Her vision is to unlock potential so all can live in prosperity and peace. She’s a globally experienced, culturally intelligent executive, leadership, team and mentor coach; coaching supervisor, working in 40+ countries since 1998; author of *Breaking Free from Bias*; contributor to *Law & Ethics in Coaching*; and an ICF Circle of Distinction Award honouree.