

Career Connections Presents

VOICES OF
Our Executive Coaches
Informative Series

Thibaud
REROLLE



Thibaud Rerolle is an executive coach and was the CTO at Safaricom, at the time of this interview.

We asked Thibaud about his leadership journey and diploma experience, as a graduate from our Practitioner Diploma in Executive Coaching and an executive leader in his field.

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP JOURNEY

There are different components in my leadership journey. I was educated in a set of values and in a system that brought leadership into me, by the Jesuits in France in one of the top schools in France. There was a very strong set of values inculcated there that you are educated to lead and to lead as a servant. For example, very early at the age of, maybe, 10 or 12, you would start giving back to society. So, that servant leadership was very, very natural.

I then went and did three years in a military school where, again, the leadership discipline was expected from you. I would say that I've been a leader even at school. I have this natural tendency, in many different avenues of life. Then in the professional side of things, I'm an engineer. For the past 20 years, I've actually been a people leader, managing teams.

Since then, I've led teams, bigger teams, and teams of teams. I'm still in the technology industry, but now my principal activity is leading people. And then from a personal standpoint, at home, I'm married with kids and of course, with that comes also leadership responsibilities.

WHAT IS YOUR LEADERSHIP PURPOSE?

My purpose is definitely to help and to serve. As a leader, I want to create a scenario and an environment for my team to thrive, to deliver at the best versus what is expected from us. This is also my objective in life, to help.

With one of the teams, we have a joke where they call me "SIR - Super Impediment Remover". My role is to not to tell them where to go, but to remove the impediments along the way.

That's also what we expect from leaders in this environment. So we are in a fairly significant transformation. It's a big, busy and scary world that everybody uses, but it has a reality. We are living the industry 4.0 revolution and this comes with a lot of consequences and very urgent needs for industries to adapt and to adopt new ways of working.

We have this shift in management from a micromanagement, directive leadership style to a place where we need to be more coaching, enabling, and inspiring the teams.

WHAT LEADERSHIP LEGACY DO YOU AIM TO CREATE?

One of the legacies is to create leaders. Because that's what people aspire to as well. When I look at my team and those who have evolved and grown to different roles, different responsibilities, and improve their leadership, I find pride in that. I think this is a great purpose in my leadership- to grow better leaders.

Sometimes it's about just being a better leader, not growing into super job titles, but being better in the 'how you lead', in the 'what you lead', 'what are the responsibilities', 'what can you actually deliver'. That's an important part of my legacy.

Then, the other part is also about the style of my leadership; leading with empathy, listening, appreciation, and respect for people. People come and sit in that chair and ask me, "How do you do that? You don't seem to be in that 'rat race' or 'arms race' or 'fight for domination'". So indeed, it's not me, yet I'm in this position, so maybe there's a recipe.

I want also to lead by example, that it's possible to be balanced in your life. I'm really a family guy, stick to your values in everything you do, and still be successful in the corporate leadership environment. That is also part of the legacy. If people emulate or are inspired by that, I'll be happy with that.

HOW DID TAKING THIS DIPLOMA FIT INTO YOU ACHIEVING YOUR LEADERSHIP PURPOSE?

It definitely fits very, very nicely. I was so excited when Paul started that programme for us in Safaricom. Actually, we'd had a discussion maybe three, four years ago about coaching training for the leaders and I was already so enthusiastic, at that time. But, it just didn't happen. I was so frustrated. When it kickstarted again, I was really happy because coaching speaks naturally to me, in the way I see my role versus the people I lead, to help them and to enable them to get the best out of themselves. It's just that I didn't have any knowledge about coaching.

Something I learnt from the assessment in the programme is that I'm enthusiastic to learn new things, so it really clicked very nicely. The programme provides a very strong framework to be intentional about coaching.

Although, I must say that I also discovered through the process that in terms of my coaching style and my coaching capabilities, it's better for me to coach people who are further away from me in terms of background, position in the organisation and/or their field of activities. I would certainly be a coach to my team, but not necessarily take them as 'clients'.

WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

In the context of coaching, as a Co-Active coach, I work with my intuition. It's a powerful tool. Let's say you're my client and also my direct report. I'm your leader- I know your context and you know my context. Therefore, there's much less space for intuition. Whatever comes to me might be driven by what I know about you, your objectives, how you're struggling with something, so I would try to understand rather than applying my intuition.

That's one element. Maybe it enriches me more. But it also puts me on edge, in the sense that I have to bring something to that person, even though I know nothing about their context.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR DIPLOMA EXPERIENCE?

It's been great. I loved it. It's been intense. I mean, three months. Very intense. It's very demanding. But I think from the very beginning, I was quite excited to go into that but then when I started the first session, I also came to realise something, even more, an add-on. By listening to my colleagues, when we first introduce ourselves and why are we here and what are our expectations... Of course, I was there because it's a programme from the company and I appreciate that and I'm excited about it and it will help me be a better leader. But then I hear people telling us that, "I want to go into coaching. It's a turning point in my career. It is my retirement plan. I want to do that as a fulltime job."

And then when I started practising coaching and seeing the impact it has on people, it resonates so much with my values and helping people. And it indeed sounds very attractive when I look at myself in 15 years, to be in that space as well.

To still be able to leverage on my own career and experience and say the fact that I can be respected for whatever I have done. And also, continue to give something and continue to have an activity as well.

So from that moment, I looked at it and I said, "Okay. It has to be my leadership plus also being a coach. So that was a very big driver. Then I loved the mix of the being in the classroom and learning from the experts. That's great. But also being thrown into-- you have to coach, go there, find your clients, engage with them. That was great. And I also loved the joint learning in our groups and the exchange that we have and sharing difficulties, sharing a good laugh about what we are experimenting with.

It has taught me a lot, and it's true that at my age, my experience, it's one of the challenge I face personally, and I think everybody in my situation faces-- what can you learn? You need to still learn things, but it takes a mindset, and I'm so happy that we were actually put into that. We go to class. We take notes. There is an exam.

And you go to your e-learning, your progress-- so it's very good because it's highly needed, and actually, I loved it. And it's been couple of years already I've taken that kind of deliberate approach to learn new things. But this one has been very good and I've learned a lot.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF ON THE DIPLOMA?

Many things, because of course we did an assessment and you get feedback from the faculty. I learnt about my enthusiasm, I learnt the fact that I'm always taking charge and jumping into action.

Which I knew of course, but when it's being played back to you, it's interesting. The impact that I can have to people that I don't know and I've just met and we have a couple of weeks relationship where we meet one or two hours, and it impacts them so deeply in their life. That's just a revelation for me. Because of course, people I've worked with for the past seven years I expect have an impact. And my wife, we've been together for 30 years, my kids, of course, we expect to have impact in the life of people.

Through the skills that I have to start with, plus the techniques and the knowledge that we've gone through the program, being able to positively and deeply impact somebody in their life I think is a very great thing that I came to realize and I didn't know it was there. So that's a very interesting part of me that I've discovered.

Then I learn about my competitiveness as well. I think it's the corporate world makes you so competitive. I spent seven years in Safaricom, so maybe a lot of it comes out of that. I mean, it's also about acknowledging who you are and using that to the best effect, so that's fine.

HOW HAVE YOU USED THE LEARNING FROM THE DIPLOMA?

I've continued coaching so that's the main thing I would say because I'm having my IFC accreditation so I need 100 hours. And this is great because that's my commitment to my own plan to follow up. But also, most of this coaching has been internal. So I think I've also then delivered against what is maybe the intention in sending us to that, which is to help developing leaders, people in general in the organisation. I just concluded a six-session programme with one of my colleagues yesterday. And it's fantastic to hear them saying, "I discovered somebody new inside me. I impressed myself. I didn't know coaching could be so powerful". This type of thing is really-- I know it's a good investment of my time in training but also my time in coaching. That's actually quite great.

I would lie to you if I said that my leadership style has changed dramatically but little things like, whenever I have a one-on-one with somebody, I never sit across the table. And I try also not to take notes. Just to be in the moment. I would say maybe it's unconscious that I adjust my leadership style to be more in coaching. And then in terms of the way I can articulate it for the purpose of the company, of course, is much more enhanced. So of course, given my role, where I very often speak to large teams and then I can really tell them what is good about coaching. Why do we need to change that culture? The fact that there's so many coaches around them and they can reach out to HR to get assigned to go to one. So it becomes part of the way we want to deliver it as a culture through the organisation.

WHAT IS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FACING LEADERS TODAY?

It's a big question. I think the challenge is to evolve. There's is that phrase that says, "What brought you here, won't take you there." But it's about the fact that - and it comes back to learning new things - it's about acknowledging the fact that if today, you're a leader because you've spent so many years in your career, the chances that you're obsolete are high. Because the people you are leading in the workplace are so different from you and from the people that you've lead in your career until now. Because the tools and the capabilities and the world out there is just accelerating and the challenges that comes with AI and with all these things that we call tech I mean, industry 4.0 are so huge, so massive, that we need to reinvent ourselves, as leaders.

It's so counterintuitive for a leader to reinvent themselves because, of course, you're a leader because you have a certain recipe that has brought you here. So why would you change it? I think that's the large and the biggest challenge.

And so, if we still want to be a leader in one year, in two years, in three years - unless you're retiring next year - it should be a topic for you. Then, we have to evolve fast, to be able to say to yourself in 2022, "When I look back at how I was in 2019, I've evolved. And that guy will not survive today, but I can survive today."

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