A CLINICAL APPROACH TO THE DYNAMICS OF LEADERSHIP AND EXECUTIVE TRANSFORMATION[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this article we urge organizational leaders to recognize and plan for unconscious dynamics that have a significant impact on life in organizations. In dealing with these dynamics we highlight some of the key concepts of what we call the "clinical paradigm," the clinical lens we use to study behavior in organizations. In addition, we make some observations about leadership behavior and introduce an approach to leadership intervention that aims to be a transformational experience for executives. To understand the dynamics of individual change and transformation, we explore three triangular conceptual frameworks (taken from short-term dynamic psychotherapy): the mental life triangle, the conflict triangle, and the relationships triangle. We also explore some of the techniques that help create a tipping point for change.

KEYWORDS: Psychoanalysis; leadership; clinical paradigm; motivational need systems; narcissism; transference; CCRT; change; short-term dynamic psychotherapy; dynamic group psychotherapy; emotions; defensive reactions; transitional space; motivational interviewing.

> We know what we are, but know not what we may be.
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> —William Shakespeare

> What progress we are making. In the Middle Ages they would have burned me. Now they are content with burning my books.
>
> —Sigmund Freud

> Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart... Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.
>
> —Carl Jung

> You cannot discover new oceans unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore.
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> —Andre Gide

Introduction

There is a story about a thief and a rich man who were traveling together on a train. The thief, of course, was following the rich man precisely because of his wealth. Whenever the rich man went to the bathroom, or went to buy food when the train stopped, the thief would rifle through the compartment they shared. At every stop he looked somewhere new. “Maybe in the overhead locker,” “Maybe in his overcoat,” he thought, and continued searching. Eventually, as the train began to slow and their journey drew to an end, exasperated by his failure, the thief confessed to his fellow traveler, “Do you know, I’m a thief, and I have been trying all the time we have been traveling together to get your money—but you have outwitted me.” The rich man went over to the thief’s bed, bent down, and began pulling his money out from underneath it. “I hid it here,” the rich man said, “because I knew that the last place you would look for it was underneath your bed.”

Like the thief in this story, many management scholars studying the behavior of people in organizations not only don’t know where to look, but often don’t know how. Far too often they miss things that are hidden in plain view. Their inability to see affects their understanding of what really happens in organizations. They seem to subscribe to the myth that it is only the conscious—what we see and know—that matters. That myth is grounded in concepts of organizational behavior based on assumptions about human beings made by (at

worst) economists or (at best) behavioral psychologists. The spirit of the economic machine seems to be alive and well and thriving in organizations. Although the existing repertoire of "rational" concepts has proved to be inadequate time and again, the myth of rationality, the need to maintain an illusion of control, persists—whereas in fact the most important things in life are invisible.

Consequently, far too often, organizational behavior concepts used to describe processes such as individual motivation, leadership, interpersonal relationships, collusive behavior, group and inter-group processes, corporate culture, organizational structure, individual and organizational change, and transformation are based on behaviorist models, with an occasional dose of humanistic psychology thrown into the equation for good measure. This approach (where the irrepressible ghost of the advocate of scientific management, Frederick Taylor, is still hovering about) has its merits but is not sufficient to untangle the knotty problems we encounter in organizations. It sets the stage for a rather two-dimensional way of looking at the world of work. Far too many executives (and scholars of management) hold on to the belief that behavior in organizations concerns only conscious, mechanistic, predictable, easy-to-understand phenomena. The more elusive processes that take place in organizations—phenomena that deserve rich description—are conveniently ignored.

That the organizational man or woman is not just a conscious, highly focused maximizing machine of pleasures and pains, but also a person subject to many (often contradictory) wishes, fantasies, conflicts, defensive behavior, and anxieties—some conscious, others beyond consciousness—is not a popular perspective. Neither is the idea that concepts taken from such fields as psychoanalysis, psychodynamic psychotherapy, clinical psychology, and dynamic psychiatry might have a place in the world of work. Such concepts are generally rejected out-of-hand on the grounds that they are too individually based, too focused on abnormal behavior, and (in the case of the psychoanalytic method of investigation) too reliant on self-reported case studies (creating problems of verification).

Valid as some of these criticisms may be, the fact remains that any meaningful explanation of humanity requires different means of verification. In spite of what philosophers of science like to say about this subject, no causal claim in clinical psychology (or history and economics, for that matter) can be verified in the same way as can be done in empirical sciences such as experimental physics or astronomy. When we enter the realm of someone's

inner world—seeking to understand that individual's desires, hopes, and fears—efforts at falsification (in an attempt to discover an observed exception to science's postulated rules) become a moot point (Popper, 2002). Even en masse, people are subject to different laws than can be tested in experimental physics. In addition, like it or not, abnormal behavior is more "normal" than most people are prepared to admit. All of us have a neurotic side. Mental health and illness are not dichotomous phenomena but opposing positions on a continuum. Moreover, whether a person is labeled normal or abnormal, the same psychological processes apply.

Given these observations, business scholars and leaders need to revisit the following questions: is the typical executive really a logical, dependable human being? Is management really a rational task performed by rational people according to sensible organizational objectives? Given the plethora of highly destructive actions taken by business and political leaders, we shouldn't even have to ask. It should be clear that many of these incomprehensible activities ("incomprehensible" from a rational point of view, that is) signal that what really goes on in organizations takes place in the intrapsychic and interpersonal world of the key players, below the surface of day-to-day behaviors. That underlying mental activity and behavior needs to be understood in terms of conflicts, defensive behaviors, and emotions. In that respect, the human mind should be looked at as a dark sea swarming with strange forms of life, most of them unconscious and not illuminated. Unless we can understand how the motives that issue from this obscurity are generated, we can hardly hope to foresee or control them.

It is something of a paradox that, while at a conscious level we might deny the presence of unconscious processes, at the level of behavior and action we live out such processes each day of our lives. Although we base business strategies on theoretical models derived from the "rational economic man," we count on real people (with all their conscious and unconscious quirks) to make and implement decisions. Even the most successful organizational leaders are prone to highly irrational behavior, a reality that we ignore at our peril.

In the case of many knotty organizational situations, a more clinical orientation can go a long way toward bringing clarity and providing solutions. And no body of knowledge has made a more sustained and successful attempt to deal with the meaning of human events than psychoanalytic psychology. The psychoanalytic method of investigation, which observes people

longitudinally, offers an important window into the operation of the mind, identifying meaning in the most personal, emotional experiences. Its method of drawing inferences about meaning out of otherwise incomprehensible phenomena can be highly illuminating. By making sense out of executives' deeper wishes and fantasies, and showing how these affect their behavior in the world of work, a psychoanalytically informed investigation can be highly effective in discovering how people and the organizations they work in *really* function. Far too many well-intentioned and well-thought-out plans derail daily in workplaces around the world because of out-of-awareness forces that influence behavior.

The Freud conundrum

Although a growing group of management scholars are coming to realize that they need to pay attention to weaker, below-the-surface signals in organizational systems, that trend is belied by frequent articles in popular journals asking whether Freud is dead. People who pose that question are not only typically unaware of the extent to which Freud's *Weltanschauung* has been embraced by popular culture, they are also unaware of more recent developments in the theory and the practice of psychoanalysis. They usually attack Freudian views of the early twentieth century, forgetting that psychoanalytic theory and psychodynamic therapy have continued to evolve since that time. Psychoanalytic theory and technique have become increasingly sophisticated, incorporating the findings from domains such as dynamic psychiatry, developmental psychology, ethology, anthropology, neuroscience, cognitive theory, family systems theory, and individual and group psychotherapy. To condemn present-day psychoanalytic theory as outdated is like attacking modern physics because Newton did not understand Einstein's theory of relativity. Although quite a few aspects of Freud's theories are no longer valid in light of new information about the workings of the mind, fundamental components of psychoanalytic theory and technique have been scientifically and empirically tested and verified, specifically as they relate to cognitive and emotional processes (Barron & Eagle, 1992; Westen 1998). As disappointing this fact may be to some of his present-day attackers, many of Freud's ideas have retained their relevance.

A broad integrative, clinically oriented, psychodynamic perspective that draws upon psychoanalytic concepts and techniques (as well as other disciplines) has much to contribute to our understanding of organizations, the practice of management and the hidden dynamics in the world of work (Czander, 1993; DeBoard, 1978; Gabriel, 1999; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984; Kets de Vries, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1994, 2001, 2006a; Kets de Vries, et al.,

2007b; Kets de Vries et al., 2007a; Levinson, 1972, 2002; Zaleznik, 1966: Zaleznik and Kets de Vries, 1985). Advocates of the psychodynamic approach recognize the limits of rationality and reject a purely economist, behaviorist view of organizations. Behavioral and statistical data-gathering experiments can make only a partial contribution to the understanding of complex organizational phenomena, though advocates of management as a natural science would like to believe differently. An additional dimension of analysis will greatly advance the understanding of the vicissitudes of organizational behavior and the people working in the system. In other words, without a clinical lens we would never know that when we think a thing, the thing we think is not the thing we think, but only the thing that makes us think we think the thing we think we think.

The Clinical Paradigm

Although our brains are genetically hardwired with certain instinctual behavior patterns, that wiring is not irrevocably fixed. Over the crucial first months and years of our life (and in later years, though to a lesser extent) rewiring occurs in response to developmental factors to which we are exposed. The interface of our motivational needs with environmental factors (especially human factors, in the form of caretakers, siblings, teachers, and other important figures) defines our essential uniqueness. Together, these elements draft the scripts for our inner theater. For each one of us, they determine our character and contribute to our mental life triangle —a tightly interlocked frame of cognition, affect, and behavior.

Motivational need systems

To understand the human being in all its complexity, we have to start with motivational need systems, the operational code that drives personality. Each of these need systems is operational in every person beginning at infancy and continuing throughout the life-cycle, altered by the forces of age, learning, and maturation. The importance that any one of the need systems has for an individual is determined by three regulating forces: innate and learned response patterns, the role of significant caretakers, and the extent to which the individual attempts to recreate positive emotional states experienced in infancy and childhood. As these forces and need systems interact during maturation, mental schemas emerge—“templates” in the unconscious. These schemas create symbolic model scenes (what we call “scripts” in a person’s inner theater) that regulate

fantasy and influence behavior (Erikson, 1963; Emde, 1981; Kagan and Moss, 1983; McDougall, 1985, 1989; Lichtenberg, 1991; Lichtenberg and Schonbar, 1992).

Some of these motivational need systems are more basic than others. At the most fundamental level is the system that regulates a person's physiological needs—i.e., needs for food, water, elimination, sleep, and breathing. Another system handles an individual's needs for sensual enjoyment and (later) sexual excitement, while still another deals with the need to respond to certain situations through antagonism and withdrawal. Although these primary need systems impact the work situation to some extent, two other, higher-level systems are of particular interest for life in organizations: the attachment/affiliation need system and the exploration/assertion need system.

Taking the attachment/affiliation motivational need system, we find that there is an innately unfolding experience of human relatedness among humans (Spitz, 1965; Bowlby, 1969; Mahler, Pine et al., 1975; Winnicott, 1975). Humankind's essential *humanness* is found in seeking relationships with other people, in being part of something. That need for attachment involves the process of engagement with other human beings, the universal experience of wanting to be close to others. It also involves the pleasure of sharing and affirmation. When the human need for intimate engagement is extrapolated to groups, the desire to enjoy intimacy can be described as a need for affiliation. Both attachment and affiliation serve an emotional balancing role by confirming an individual's self-worth and contributing to his or her sense of self-esteem.

The need for exploration/assertion also has a lot to do with who a person becomes and how that person sees him- or herself. The need for exploration—closely associated with cognition and learning—affects a person's ability to play and to work. This need is manifested soon after birth: observation of infants has shown that novelty, as well as the discovery of the effects of certain actions, causes a prolonged state of attentive arousal in them. Similar reactions to opportunities for exploration continue into adulthood. Closely tied to the need for exploration is the need for self-assertion, the need to be able to choose what one will do. Playful exploration and manipulation of the environment in response to exploratory-assertive motivation produces a sense of effectiveness and competency, of self-efficacy, autonomy, initiative, and industry (White, 1959; Bandura, 1997). Because striving, competing, and seeking mastery are fundamental characteristics of the human personality, exercising assertiveness—following our preferences, acting in a determined manner—serves as a form of affirmation.

As noted above, each motivational system is either strengthened or loses power in reaction to innate and learned response patterns, the developmental impact of caretakers, and the ability to recreate previous emotional states. Through the nature-nurture interface, these highly complex motivational systems eventually determine the unique "internal theater" of the individual—the stage on which the major themes that define the person are played out. These motivational systems are the *rational* forces that lie behind behaviors and actions that are perceived to be *irrational*. The clinical paradigm looks beyond a person's irrational activities and attempts to acknowledge, decipher, and offer tips for mastering these forms of irrationality. The clinical approach to organizational assessment and consultation helps executives and consultants become organizational "detectives."

The rationale behind irrationality

The "prototype" or "script" of self, others, and events that each one of us carries within us is put into motion by the aforementioned motivational needs systems. These scripts influence how we act and react in our daily lives, whether at home, at play, or at work (George, 1969; McDougall, 1985). We bring to every experience a style of interacting, now scripted for us, initially learned in childhood. In other words, how we related to and interacted with parents and other close caregivers during the early years affects how we relate to others—especially authority figures—in adulthood.

In the course of these maturation processes, we all develop particular themes in our inner theater—themes that reflect the preeminence of certain inner wishes that contribute to our unique personality style. These "core conflictual relationship themes" (CCRT) translate into consistent patterns by which we relate to others (Luborsky and Crits-Cristoph, 1988, 1989). Put another way, these basic desires shape our life scripts, which in turn shape our relationships with others, determining the way we believe others will react to us and the way we react to others. People's lives may be colored by the desire to be loved, for example, or the wish to be understood, or to be noticed, or to be free from conflict, or to be independent, or to help—or even to fail, or to hurt others.

When we go to work, we take these fundamental desires—our core conflictual relationship themes—into the context of our workplace. We project our desires on others and, based on those desires, rightly or wrongly anticipate how others will react to us; then we react not to

their *actual* reactions but to their *perceived* reactions. Who among us doesn't know a leader who is the epitome of conflict avoidance, tyrannical behavior, micromanagement, or manic behavior? That dominant style, whatever it may be, derives from the leader's core conflictual relationship theme. So potent is a person's driving theme that a leader's subordinates are often drawn into collusive practices and play along, turning the leader's expectations into self-fulfilling prophecies. Unfortunately, the life scripts drawn up in childhood on the basis of our core conflictual relationship themes often become ineffective in adult situations. They create a dizzying merry-go-round that can take us into a self-destructive cycle of repetition.

The importance of unconscious processes

As mentioned earlier, Sigmund Freud explored the importance of the human unconscious—that part of our being which, hidden from rational thought, affects and interprets our conscious reality. We are not always aware of what we are doing (even aside from the issue of *why* we are doing it). As we suggested—like it or not—most of our behavior originate outside consciousness. We all have our blind spots. In addition, we all have a shadow side—a side that we don't know (or even don't *want* to know) (Jung, 1973). Freud was not the first person to emphasize the role of the unconscious; many poets and philosophers explored that territory before him. He was the first, however, to build a psychological theory around the concept.

Because the key drivers in the unconscious are in our personal, repressed, infantile history, we usually deny or are simply unaware of the impact and importance of the unconscious. It is not pleasant to admit that we are sometimes prisoners of our own unconscious mind (contrary to our cherished illusion that we are in control of our lives). And yet accepting the presence of the cognitive and affective unconscious can be liberating, because it helps us to understand why we do the things we do, make the decisions we do, and attract the responses we do from the environment. Once we become aware of how and why we operate, we are in a much better position to decide whether we want to do what we have always done or pursue a course that is more appropriate to our current life situation and stage of development.

Prisoners of the past

As was noted in the discussion of motivational need systems, there is strong continuity between childhood and adult behavior. As the saying goes, "Scratch a man or woman and you will find a child." This does not mean that we cannot change as adults; it simply means that by the time we reach the age of 30, a considerable part of our personality has been formed (McCrae and Costa,

1990; Heatherton and Weinberger, 1994). And unless we recognize the extent to which our present is determined by our past, it is quite likely that we will repeatedly make the same mistakes. Organizations the world over are full of leaders who are unable to recognize repetitive behavioral patterns that have become dysfunctional. They are stuck in a vicious, self-destructive circle and don't even know it—much less know how to get out of it. The clinical paradigm can help such people recognize their strengths and weaknesses, understand the causes of their resistance to change, and recognize where and how they can become more effective. In other words, it can offer choice.

The Psychodynamics of Leadership

Recognizing the role that psychodynamic processes play in organizational life also leads to greater insight about leadership. Understanding humankind's complex nature leads to a more realistic understanding of why leaders act the way they do. Anyone wanting to create or manage an effective organization needs to understand the dynamics of leadership and the intricacies of superior-subordinate relationships.

The study of leadership is difficult because (as one wit said) leadership is like pornography: hard to define, but easy to recognize. At its heart, however, leadership is about human behavior. It revolves around the highly complex interplay between leaders and followers, all put into a particular situational context. Leadership is about understanding the way people and organizations behave, about creating and strengthening relationships, about building commitment, about establishing a group identity, and about adapting behavior to increase effectiveness. It is also about creating meaning. True leaders are merchants of hope, speaking to the collective imagination of their followers, co-opting them to join them in a great adventure. Great leaders inspire people to move beyond personal, egoistic motives—to transcend themselves, as it were—and as a result they get the best out of their people. In short, exemplary leadership makes a positive difference, whatever the context (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1986; Kets de Vries, 1994, 2006a; Pfeffer, 1998; Stogdill, 1974).

Contrary to the writings of various management theorists who attribute all variations in leadership effectiveness to environmental constraints, psychodynamic processes between leader and led have a great influence. That is not to minimize the context in which leaders operate. But a company can have all the "environmental" advantages in the world—strong

financial resources, enviable market position, and state-of-the-art technology—and still fail in the absence of leadership. Without it, environmental advantages melt away and the organization, like a driverless car, runs downhill.

What the clinical orientation to the study of leadership demonstrates more clearly than other conceptual frameworks is that leaders need to recognize that people differ in their motivational patterns (Kets de Vries, 2006a, 2007a). Good leaders see their followers not as one-dimensional creatures but as complex and paradoxical entities, people who radiate a combination of soaring idealism and gloomy pessimism, stubborn short-sightedness and courageous vision, narrow-minded suspicion and open-handed trust, irrational envy and greed and unbelievable unselfishness.

Taking the emotional pulse of followers, both individually and as a group, is essential, but that alone does not comprise effective leadership. The essence of leadership is the ability to use identified motivational patterns to influence others—in other words, to get people voluntarily to do things that they would not otherwise do. Hopefully those things are of a positive nature, but there is nothing inherently moral about motivating people: leadership can be used for bad ends as well as good. History is full of men and women whose leadership was highly "effective" despite pursuing despicable goals—people such as Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein, and Robert Mugabe (Kets de Vries, 2004a; Khurana, 2002). Even well intentioned leaders are not without a shadow side, unfortunately; if they have a distorted view of reality, they may use their followers to attain goals that benefit neither the organization nor its employees.

The vicissitudes of narcissism

When we talk about leaders, we cannot avoid tackling the subject of narcissism, for it lies at the heart of leadership (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1971, 1985; Kets de Vries, 1989, 2001). A solid dose of narcissism is a prerequisite for anyone who hopes to rise to the top of an organization. Narcissism offers leaders a foundation for conviction about the righteousness of their cause. The leader's conviction that his or her group, organization, or country has a special mission inspires loyalty and group identification; the strength (and even inflexibility) of the leader's world-view gives followers something to identify with and hold on to. Narcissism is a toxic drug, however. Although it is a key ingredient for success, it does not take much before a leader suffers from an overdose. The combination of narcissistic

disposition and the pressures of a leadership position can have disastrous consequences. The challenge is how to keep sane people sane in insane places.

A closer look at narcissism confirms the link between childhood and adult behavior. When we trace narcissism back to its roots, we return to a person's infancy. We have to remember that the process of growing up is necessarily accompanied by a degree of frustration. During intrauterine existence, human beings are, in effect, on automatic pilot: any needs that exist are taken care of immediately. This situation changes the moment a baby makes its entry into the world. In dealing with the frustrations of trying to make his or her needs and wants known, and in coping with feelings of helplessness, the infant tries to regain the original impression of the perfection and bliss of intrauterine life by creating both a grandiose, exhibitionistic image of the self and an all-powerful, idealized image of the parents (Kohut, 1971). Over time, and with "good enough" care, these two configurations are "tamed" by the forces of reality—especially by parents, siblings, caretakers, and teachers, who modify the infant's exhibitionism and channel the existing grandiose fantasies into socially acceptable behavior. How the major caretakers react to the child's struggle with the paradoxical quandary of infancy—how to resolve the tension between helplessness and the grandiose sense of self found in all children—is paramount to the child's psychological health. The resolution of that tension is what determines a person's feelings of potency or impotence, omnipotence or helplessness. Inadequate resolution of these quandaries due to dysfunctional parenting—understimulation, overstimulation, or highly inconsistent treatment—may leave a legacy of insecurity (Kohut and Wolf, 1978) often producing feelings of shame, guilt, humiliation, rage, envy, spitefulness, a desire for vengeance, and a hunger for personal power and status, which can be acted out in highly destructive ways in adulthood.

We have classified narcissism as either *constructive* or *reactive*, with excess narcissism generally falling in the latter category and healthy narcissism generally falling in the former (Kets de Vries, 1985). Constructive narcissists are those people fortunate enough to have had caretakers who knew how to provide age-appropriate frustration—i.e., enough to challenge but not to overwhelm—and who provided a supportive environment, leading to feelings of trust and to a sense of control over one's actions. People exposed to such parenting tend, as adults, to be relatively well balanced; to have a positive sense of self-esteem; a capacity for introspection; an empathetic outlook; and to radiate a sense of positive vitality.

Although constructive narcissists are no strangers to the pursuit of greatness, they are not searching for personal power alone. Rather, they have a vision of a better organization or society and want to realize that vision with the help of others. They take advice and consult with others, although they are prepared to make the ultimate decisions. As transformational leaders they inspire others not only to be better at what they do, but also to entirely *change* what they do.

Reactive narcissistic leaders, on the other hand, were not as fortunate as children. As a result, they are left in adulthood with a legacy of feelings of deprivation, insecurity, and inadequacy. Some reactive narcissistic leaders may engage in reparative efforts, but that is not the usual scenario. As a way of mastering their feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, they may develop a sense of entitlement, believing that they deserve special treatment and that rules and regulations apply only to others. They may develop an exaggerated sense of self-importance and self-grandiosity and a concomitant need for admiration. Furthermore, not having had many empathic experiences as children, they typically lack empathy and are often unable to experience how others feel.

Many reactive narcissistic leaders become fixated on issues of power, status, prestige, and superiority. To them, life turns into a zero-sum game: there are winners and losers. They are preoccupied with looking out for number one. They are often driven toward achievement and attainment by the need to get even for perceived slights experienced in childhood. (The so-called "Monte Cristo complex," named after the protagonist in Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo,* refers to feelings of envy, spite, revenge, and/or vindictive triumph over others—in short, the need to get even for real or imagined hurts.) Reactive narcissistic leaders are not prepared to share power. On the contrary, as leaders they surround themselves with yes-men. Unwilling to tolerate disagreement and dealing poorly with criticism, such leaders rarely consult with colleagues, preferring to make all decisions on their own. When they do consult with others, such consultation is little more than ritualistic. They use others as a kind of Greek chorus, expecting followers to agree to whatever they suggest.

Many reactive narcissistic leaders learn little from defeat. When setbacks occur, such leaders don't take personal responsibility; instead, they scapegoat others in the organization, passing on the blame. Even when things are going well, they can be cruel and verbally abusive to their subordinates, and they are prone to outbursts of rage when things don't go their way.

Likewise, perceiving a personal attack even where none is intended, they may erupt when followers rebel against their distorted view of the world. Such "tantrums," reenactments of childhood behavior, originate in earlier feelings of helplessness and humiliation. Given the power that such leaders now hold, the impact of their rage can be devastating, intimidating followers, who then themselves regress to more childlike behavior.

Transference: the matrix for interpersonal and group processes

An essential element in the leader-follower interface is transference, or the act of using relationship patterns from the past to deal with situations in the present. Part of the human condition, transference can be viewed as a confusion in time and place (Freud, 1905, 1933; Etchegoyen, 1991; Kets de Vries, 2006a, 2007b). In essence, transference means that no relationship is a new relationship; each relationship is colored by previous relationships. Though the word *transference* conjures up images of the analyst's couch, it is a phenomenon that all of us are familiar with: all of us act out transferential (or historical) reactions on a daily basis, regardless of what we do. The psychological imprints of crucial early caregivers—particularly our parents—cause this confusion in time and place, making us act toward others in the present as if they were significant people from the past; and these imprints stay with us and guide our interactions throughout our life. Though we are generally unaware of experiencing confusion in time and place, the mismatch between the reality of our work situation and our subconscious scenario—colleagues are not parents or siblings, after all—may lead to bewilderment, anxiety, depression, anger, and even aggression.

There are two subtypes of transferential pattern that are especially common in leadership situations (and that are often exaggerated in reactive narcissists): *mirroring* and *idealizing*. It is said that the first mirror a baby looks into is the mother's face. Predictably, one's identity and one's mind are heavily shaped by contact with one's mother, particularly during the early, narcissistic period of development. Starting with that first mirror, the process of mirroring—that is, taking our cues about being and behaving from those around us—becomes an ongoing aspect of our daily life and the relationships we have with others.

For organizations, this mirroring dynamic between leader and follower can become collusive. Followers are eager to use their leaders as mirrors. They use leaders to reflect what they like to see, and leaders rarely mind, finding the affirmation of followers hard to resist. The result is

often a mutual admiration society. Membership in that society may encourage leaders to take actions designed to shore up their image rather than serve the needs of the organization.

Idealizing is another universal transferential process: as a way of coping with feelings of helplessness, we idealize people important to us, beginning with our first caretakers, assigning powerful imagery to them. Through this idealizing process, we hope, as mentioned earlier, to combat helplessness and acquire some of the power of the person admired. Idealizing transference thus serves as a protective shield for followers.

Idealizing and mirroring have their positive side; they can generate an adhesive bond that helps to keep the organization together during crisis. Because they temporarily suspend the values of reality testing and self-criticism, they are key tools in the creation of a common vision and the generation of "committed action" on the part of followers. When these transferential patterns persist, however, followers gradually stop responding to the leader according to the reality of the situation, allowing their past (unrealistic) hopes and fantasies to govern their interactions with the leader.

Reactive narcissistic leaders are especially responsive to such admiration. Idealization fatally seduces them into believing that they are in fact the illusory creatures their followers have made them out to be. It is a two-way street, of course: followers project their fantasies onto their leaders, and leaders mirror themselves in the glow of their followers. The result is that disposition and position work together to wreak havoc on reality-testing: they are happy to find themselves in a hall of mirrors that lets them hear and see only what they want to hear and see. In that illusory hall, boundaries that define normal work processes disappear—at least for the entitled leader, who feels diminishing restraint regarding actions that are inappropriate, irresponsible, or just plainly unethical. Any follower who calls the leader on such behavior or points out cracks in the mirrors risks inciting a temper tantrum, as noted earlier.

Leader Derailment

Given the pressures leaders are subjected to, it is easy for them to act in inappropriate ways. And given their position of power, their actions can have dire consequences on their organizations. It is always tempting to assign responsibility for the failure factor in leadership

to external forces, citing the words of Euripides: "Whom the gods want to destroy they first make mad." But we can find responsibility much closer to home, in the leaders' own shadow sides. We can list some of the more common reasons leaders fall victim to the failure factor.

Isolation from reality

A major contributing factor to faulty decision making has to do with a leader's isolation from reality—too much information filtering takes place. Followers may, with good or bad intentions, contribute significantly to those misperceptions and misguided actions. Here, as we described above, the role of transference is important.

What happens is that leaders become surrounded by "liars"—people who tell them what they want to hear. Leaders need to recognize that *candor flees authority* and that many of the people who report to them are lying to some degree—whether consciously (for reasons of political expediency) or unconsciously (as a transferential reaction). In hierarchical situations, people have a tendency to tell their superiors what they want to hear. People who don't acknowledge this are fooling themselves. Given the prevalence of mirror and idealizing transference, careless senior executives will eventually find themselves surrounded by sycophants. Guarding against this means creating an organizational culture where frank feedback is encouraged. Leaders need continually to ask themselves whether their own mirror hunger is encouraging dishonesty in the ranks. Many leaders don't realize the extent to which people project their fantasies on them; how much subordinates are inclined to tell them what they want to hear as a way of dealing with their own feelings of insecurity and helplessness; how willing subordinates are to attribute special qualities to someone simply because of the office he or she holds. The process by which executives are corrupted by power is so insidious that without that whispered reminder, they don't sense their humanity slipping away. Even those who recognize these tendencies don't necessarily do anything to counter them. And that failure can lead a company astray. In fact, it's a lucky company that survives it.

Conflict avoidance

Though we tend to think of leaders as dominant and unafraid, many have a tendency toward conflict avoidance. Often executives have a desperate need to be liked and approved. The need to be loved echoes in every line scripted for their inner theater. Early childhood experiences may have contributed to a fear of rejection. Afraid to do anything that might threaten acceptance, they're unable (or unwilling) to make difficult decisions or to exercise

authority. They become mere empty suits, unwilling to accept the fact—and it *is* a fact—that boundary-setting sometimes takes precedence over conciliation. Conflict avoidance is neither a successful nor, in the end, a popular management style: the leader who always appeases is like someone who feeds crocodiles hoping that they'll eat him last. There's nothing bad about being nice, but there comes a point when every leader has to say, "My way or the highway." We don't have an exact formula for success, but we know a sure formula for failure, and that's trying to please everybody.

Abrasive behavior

Another pattern that leads to leadership ineffectiveness is the tyrannization of subordinates. This pattern describes those abrasive (and sometimes sadistically oriented) executives who obviously graduated with honors from the Joseph Stalin School of Management. Former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher possessed some of these abrasive characteristics. She would make statements such as, "I don't mind how much my ministers talk as long as they do what I say," or "I'm extraordinarily patient provided I get my own way in the end." The Iron Lady could be a bit of a bulldozer.

We can make assumptions about the inner theater of these individuals. For example, there's often a history of misplaced parental rejection or hostility—that is, the child has been the inappropriate recipient of parental anger. As the most vulnerable member within the family system, the child is the most convenient outlet for displaced aggression, easy to scapegoat and label as "bad." This sort of treatment leads to feelings of resentment. Some children, faced with the powerlessness of such a situation, simply give up. Others confront it, deny their powerlessness, and attempt to gain the upper hand through provocative, belligerent behavior (Kets de Vries, 2006a).

Furthermore, the tyrannization of subordinates sometimes triggers a response that Anna Freud (1966) called "identification-with-the-aggressor syndrome." Through unconscious impersonation of the "aggressor" (that is, the abusive boss), subordinates assume the leader's attributes and thus transform themselves from threatened to threatening, from helpless victims to powerful actors. This is a defensive maneuver, a way of controlling the severe anxiety caused by the aggressor. The people in the one-down position hope to acquire some of the power that the aggressor possesses. Unfortunately, all they accomplish is to become

aggressors themselves, thus increasing the total amount of organizational aggression, the corporate culture created by the key players at Enron being a good example.

Paranoia: the disease of kings

Intel's Andy Grove told us long ago that "only the paranoid survive." But this was not a plea for greater mental illness at work. Paranoia exists on a spectrum that moves from normal and sensible vigilance, through paranoid behavior and on to an ultimately delusional state. Grove argued for vigilance, not manic suspicion.

Still, the paranoid urge may be hard to control once it takes hold of people. They may then succumb to the pervasive and unwarranted suspicion of others, guided by a fantasy that they are out to get them. They believe that trusting others is foolish, because confidential information will be used against them. Other people's actions are misread and misinterpreted.

At the heart of the paranoid disposition there is frequently a negative childhood experience. As children, paranoid individuals may have been exposed to an extremely intrusive and controlling parenting style that fostered feelings of inadequacy or helplessness. Shame and humiliation may have been used as controlling devices by their parents. Early experiences of being spied on, demeaned, depreciated, and/or taken advantage of lay the foundation for a lack of basic trust, creating a need for vigilance at all times to safeguard against trickery, deception, and attack.

Paranoid leaders deploy three defense mechanisms: they split people into camps; they blame others for feelings they themselves possess; and they try to deny the reality of the current situation. They may also fabricate fantasy versions of the truth. Unavoidably, leaders will create some real, non-imaginary enemies. For leaders, healthy suspiciousness can be an adaptive mechanism, a rational response to a world populated by both real and imagined enemies. "Healthy" Groveian paranoia, however, keeps itself in check. If suspicion isn't moderated by a sense of reality, it slips over into paranoia.

Effective leaders ground their behavior in sound political practices that limit and test danger, and they rely on trusted associates to help them stay safe and sane. Unfortunately, leaders with a paranoid disposition are often too isolated to engage in constructive reality testing, seeing hidden meanings and secret coalitions everywhere.

Micromanagement

Another cause for leadership derailment is excessive control. The control freak puts the micro in micromanagement. Rules and regulations, order and planning—these are the guiding disciplines of the micromanager. They fear the world will fall apart if they don't adhere to the highest standards at all times, unless every detail is checked or if the rules are disobeyed. They're obsessed with 'shoulds' and 'musts' and the need to drive themselves harder. Not trusting anyone else to do a job as well as they can do themselves, micromanagers are unwilling to delegate. As a matter of fact, one of the most difficult transitions for many executives to make is to go from a functional orientation to that of general management. It is hard to give up one's professional identity. Lack of trust in the capabilities of others has a stifling effect on all organizational processes.

For these people, the internalized image of harsh, judgmental parents is ever-present, haunting them and feeding a punitive inner conscience. Thus it appears that people with a controlling disposition are caught in a permanent struggle between obedience and defiance, a troubling unresolved conflict instilled by parental overcontrol; in childhood, they had to live up to parental expectations or risk condemnation.

There is a well known *New Yorker* cartoon that shows an executive coming home to his wife and saying, "I did it. I just fired all three hundred and twenty-four of them. I'm going to run the plant by myself!" Funny as this cartoon may be, micromanagement clearly isn't the way to get the best out of people. In fact, all it's good for is ruining morale and destroying organizations.

Feeling like an impostor

Many micromanagers experience feeling like an impostor. People suffering from this problem always doubt that they measure up to others' expectations. They live with the secret conviction that they are less intelligent and competent than they appear to others. High achievers in particular possess a deep-seated fear of being "found out." Despite their obvious successes, they nurture secret, intense feelings of fraudulence. Somehow they are sure that one day, someone will point in their direction and expose them for the real fraud they are. No matter how utterly ridiculous and untrue this is, and all the evidence to the contrary, these

individuals have a distorted perception that they are incompetent, clueless or stupid (Kets de Vries, 2005a).

Characterized by a low sense of self-esteem, they tend to externalize success, attributing it to extreme effort or external factors such as luck, contacts, timing, perseverance, charm, or otherwise having “fooled” others into thinking they are smarter and more capable than they “know” themselves to be. They stubbornly refuse to recognize that they really may be talented and gifted. Failures are interpreted as internal faults or lack of certain abilities. They continue to downplay their strengths and exaggerate or are intolerant of any deficiencies or weaknesses. They live under a Damocles’ sword of their own suspension, fearful of their inability to repeat past success. They are their own harshest critics.

The perfectionism of these self-nominated impostors has its positive sides, but can easily become dysfunctional. People who feel imposturous are unable to experience true satisfaction and happiness because they never believe that they are doing things well enough. Their fear of making mistakes contributes to a high state of anxiety.

Since these people believe their successes have been ill gotten, success brings a feeling of guilt and fear. Not surprisingly, these individuals are masters at snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory. Having a tenuous self-view and low expectancy of success may result in their unconsciously engaging in deliberate (albeit self-defeating) ploys to provide an alibi for poor performance. Following extreme over-preparation, these people will worry and suffer acute self-doubt and anxiety—experiences that can result in procrastination and immobility and contribute to failure. Complicatedly, setting high, unattainable goals may provide an alibi for their failure.

Hypomanic behavior

While hypomania can contribute to creative imagination and expression, research also shows that it can be a highly destructive force. Manic executives, possessed with apparently boundless energy, push themselves and others to the limit. But they’re so hyperactive that they don’t always notice what it is they’re doing (even when what they’re doing is completely wrong). Hypomanic executives usually have an inflated sense of self-esteem, as well as an unbending conviction of the correctness and importance of their ideas. Although this sense of conviction can be used for the good, it can also have disastrous consequences. “I’m always

right" thinking and behavior tend to disregard valuable alternatives and contribute to poor judgment; this in turn can lead to chaotic patterns of personal and professional relationships. The grandiosity of hypomanics often leads them into impulsive involvement in questionable endeavors, which can jeopardize the stability and success of an organization.

Hypomanic episodes usually alternate with depressive episodes during which people lose interest and enjoyment in normally pleasurable acts and events. Bipolar disposition encompasses a wide range of mood disorders and temperaments, varying in severity from cyclothymia—which is characterized by noticeable (but not debilitating) changes in mood, behavior, and thinking—to full-blown, life-threatening manic-depression. What makes the behavior of people with any of the bipolar variants unique is the cyclical nature of their moods. These people constantly swing back and forth between two opposite poles of emotion, which can cause impairment in professional functioning and in relationships. (Klein, 1948; Jamison, 1993).

Generational envy

Executives inept at leadership development may suffer from generational envy. One indication of this is resentment of young "upstarts." They're like the mythical figures of Cronus, who ate his own children. They send promising subordinates to the organizational equivalent of Siberia or fire them for supposed incompetence—a "murder" if ever there was one—and then rationalize their fate so effectively that they think they're doing both organization and subordinates a favor.

Many senior executives have a hard time dealing with their successor, even if they themselves have named the crown prince. Archaic Oedipal feelings about parent-child competitiveness seem to re-emerge. A major reason is that CEOs are, almost by definition, masters at power calculation; power is an important property to them, and they know how to acquire and manipulate it. Appointing a successor changes the power equation. Power starts to flow away to the newly named candidate, and CEOs experience subtle changes in power relationship patterns almost immediately. Loyalties quickly shift; relationships realign; new power structures begin to emerge. It has often been said, tongue in cheek that the major task of a CEO is to find his likely successor and kill the bastard. Unfortunately, clinging to power through the derailment of that successor usually has disastrous effects on the organization.

The acid test of excellent leadership is what happens when the leader is no longer there. How seamless is the succession? Does the process occur without too much drama? Is the company still performing successfully after the old CEO is gone? Has the leadership in the company done sufficient planning for leadership succession? If not, give some thought to Charles de Gaulle's comment that the graveyards of the world are full of indispensable men. If after reflection you really believe that you're indispensable, put your finger into a glass of water, withdraw it, and note the hole that you've left.

The role of the followers

We should never underestimate the impact of the followers' own need for power, and the detrimental impact their actions can have on the organization. The world is full of Machiavellian followers who deprive their leaders of critical feedback for the purpose of self-enhancement. The desire to satisfy their own addiction to power may cause them to create situations that contribute to leadership derailment. In such instances, political considerations take over from reality. Just as the shadow side of the leader's personality can have devastating effects, so can the shadow side of the followers. It is possible that the more individuals are in pursuit of power, the greater the temptation to contaminate the current process of influence by distorting the leader's perception of reality. No actual or intended leader is immune from taking actions, well intentioned or otherwise, that can lead to the worst of consequences; and no follower is immune from being an active participant in the process.

Given these collusive practices, leaders and followers need to work at understanding themselves, both the positive and the negative parts of their personalities, and being open to all forms of information and feedback. Additionally, and importantly, leaders need to be sensitive to what followers are really telling them. Finally, leaders need to help followers become leaders in their own right. They need to give their followers opportunities to learn; they need to give them constructive feedback. Leaders need to be aware of the emotional needs of subordinates and accommodate them. Leaders need to harness the creativity of individuals within their organizations. The acid test of exemplary leaders, however, is their ability to preserve their own hold on reality, to see things as they are, avoiding the intense pressure from those around them to participate in these distorted mirroring games.

Changing Leaders

It is here where leadership developmental programs can play a critical part. But to have a real impact, these developmental programs should go beyond simple problem solving and help executives better understand their inner world, and the effect their leadership style has on others (Kets de Vries, 2005b; Kets de Vries and Korotov, 2007). In addition, these programs also need to go beyond mere self-understanding and have an action component. The acid test will be to have the executives go beyond having a "dream," and implement whatever good intentions they have to deal better with their personal and organizational dilemmas. To make a leadership program truly transformational, it will be necessary to help executives identify the forces that drive their behavior, and contribute to conflicts.

We have learned—having run programs for CEOs for many years—that leaders frequently join executive education programs for more reasons than the obvious ones of gaining additional knowledge and insights into the effective operation of organizations. Frequently, they see it as an opportunity to engage in a form of self-renewal. From our experience, many of the participants in our programs are struggling with complicated personal and organizational issues, including conflicted work relationships, the disappointment of career set-backs, doubts about their leadership capabilities, feeling like a fake or failure, boredom, and even burnout. Additionally, many (as we have suggested earlier) suffer from narcissistic problems, having surrounded themselves with yes-men, creating a kind of "narcissistic soup" that endangers the future of their organizations. Others may have grown too comfortable in their current position, and lost the capacity for out-of-the-box thinking, making them incapable of dealing with discontinuous change in a creative way (Kets de Vries, 1989, 2001, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2007b, 2008; Khurana, 2004; Hamel, 2002).

In some instances, the executive (and/or others in the organization) becomes aware of this dysfunctional behavior pattern, which leads to participation in an executive program. In others, although an individual's dysfunctional behavior may not yet visible, he or she feels a sense of unease, and decides that some form of preemptive action is needed to forestall future trouble.

Various crisis points that can bring the realization that some form of change is needed, typically: loss (separation, divorce, missed promotion opportunity, or job loss); developmental imbalance (certain important life expectations remain unfulfilled); interpersonal conflict; symptomatology reflecting inner turmoil (eating or behavioral disorders, sexual dysfunction,

and insomnia); work/life imbalance; and fundamental questions about the meaning of existence and actions (Frankl, 1962; Kets de Vries, 2008).

A leadership development program is often seen as a possible solution.

Once executives enter a program, the specific developmental needs of the participants need to be taken into consideration in the program design and delivery to enable change to occur. In guiding executives through a transformational process we have found a three triangle framework extremely helpful in conceptualizing some of the dynamics. These triangles can be described as the mental life triangle, the conflict triangle, and the relationship triangle.

The first triangle identifies the need to take both cognitive and emotional processes into consideration if we want to create changes in behavior. The second describes how psychic conflict arises from unacceptable feelings or thoughts that prompt anxiety and defensive reactions. The third relationships triangle explains how an individual's childhood experiences create patterns of response that are repeated throughout life.

The mental life triangle

The mental life triangle dictates the script of a person's inner theater and links cognition, emotion, and behavior. It is a distillation of peoples' responses to their motivational need systems, and it is often the basis on which choice is made (Lichtenberg and Schonbar, 1992). As change is about making new, different choices, executives have to be swayed both cognitively *and* emotionally for any change effort to be successful. People need to understand cognitively the advantages that a change effort will bring. Cognition alone, however, is not enough; people also need to be touched emotionally. Affect and cognition go hand in hand in contributing to specific behavior patterns (McCullough Vaillant, 1997).

Psychotherapists, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists help people to make long-lasting personal change. Senior executives, however, are unlikely to seek improvement in their psychological condition via lengthy therapeutic procedures. They look for different, more time-efficient methods to reinvent themselves and tend to look for help only when they are already in trouble or experiencing a considerable amount of discomfort. Years of working with senior managers has made us realize, however, that signing up for a group seminar designed for senior executives will be much less threatening than making an appointment with a therapist.

The challenge for faculty becomes to create a meaningful and enduring learning experience, given these executives' short attention span and self-centeredness.

In helping executives on this journey toward personal transformation and change, executive education providers need to find non-traditional ways to overcome participants' resistance. This often necessitates making people aware of problems of a preconscious or unconscious nature. Furthermore, faculty also need to ensure that changes in behavior patterns will be lasting, more than temporary "flights into health"—transient highs of the sort produced by the pulp psychology of too many self-help guides and life coaches of dubious credibility. We need to help these executives realize that it takes a lot of courage to release the familiar and seemingly secure, and to embrace the new.

The conflict triangle

A part and parcel of the human condition is the "triangle of conflict," the three sides of which are hidden feelings, defensive behaviors, and conflict (Malan, 1963, 1976; Malan and Osimo, 1992). Every individual experiences conflict due to unacceptable feelings or ideas that create anxiety and lead to defensive reactions. Ironically, defensive behavior stirs only a vague awareness of what an individual is protecting him- or herself against, because the exact nature of the unacceptable feelings rarely reaches consciousness. In fact, the suppression of unacceptable feelings can be viewed as the *task* of defensive behavior: it works to avoid the individual becoming aware of them, or experiencing them. Indications of defensive behavior include changing the subject when certain issues are raised, denying that there is a problem (or simply ignoring an admitted problem), and rationalizing questionable acts. When we see these indications, it is our task to help participants explore what such behavior is erecting defenses against. What are the benefits of continuing what seems at first sight a self-destructive path?

The challenge for executives is to overcome defensive barriers and identify the central issue(s) they are trying to deal with. Fortunately, in a transformational leadership program they are not alone in this particular task. Through a process of *confrontation and clarification* by faculty and fellow participants, greater specificity will be created (Menninger 1958; Kets de Vries and Miller, 1984; Etchegoyen, 1991; Kets de Vries, 2006a; Kets de Vries et al., 2007a). Participants work on their issues by presenting them to the other members of the seminar in a plenary or small group setting. *Confrontation* takes the form of probing but not

threatening questions about issues and patterns of behavior. These questions, and the kinds of responses they elicit, help to make the participants' defenses more explicit, allowing a better understanding of the underlying feelings and conflicts. It helps create a balance sheet listing the advantages and disadvantages of remaining in their present state. Here the notion of articulating a client's immunity system against change, thus clarifying competing commitments, has shown to be a highly effective eye opener (Kegan and Lahey, 2001). Furthermore, in helping the person on the road toward change, we have found it useful to clarify the concept of "secondary gain" to our clients, the interpersonal or social advantages gained indirectly from a problem (Fishbain et al., 1995). When executives become more cognizant of why they behave the way they do, then only can they engage in lasting change.

The concept of a leadership program as a transformation laboratory presupposes that many risky things can be done within the psychological safety boundaries of this transitional space (Winnicott, 1951). Many executives find themselves for the first time in an environment where they can be genuinely challenged without real risks. What makes the process effective is that each executive finds him- or herself in a challenging situation, but also one where people care and share experiences. The faculty and the other participants serve as guiding figures and sparring partners.

In *clarification,* the problems brought to the fore through confrontation and feedback are analyzed more closely and brought into sharper focus. Clarification helps to sort out cause-and-effect relationships and fosters an appreciation of the connections between past and current patterns of behavior, setting the stage for various forms of interpretation and the creation of greater insight about a specific problem.

Generally, the personal resolutions that grow out of the confrontation and clarification stages lay the groundwork for a considered and detailed reappraisal of dysfunctional patterns, of career and life goals, and for experimentation with new alternatives to deal with organizational and personal issues. Going through this process also furthers the development of new ideas and action plans. By creating greater awareness of a person's inner theater, confrontation and clarification work to decrease ambiguity about what an individual would really like to accomplish, leading to greater peace of mind. The empathy expressed by the other participants, the appreciation that other people truly care, encourages the person to take greater control of his or her life. The support given by the group contributes to the creation of

a tipping point to take specific actions executives may have thought about but were never able to implement.

In the creation of a tipping point some of the concepts of motivational interviewing also have been found extremely helpful. Motivational interviewing is a directive, person-centered, clinical method to help resolve ambivalence and resistance to change, originally developed in addiction counseling (Miller and Rollnick, 2002). Using this very subtle, non-confrontational intervention technique, clients become ready to re-evaluate their perceptions and more prepared to discuss the pros and cons of change. The intervention technique contributing to change talk includes such elements as empathic listening, having the clients (not the facilitator) discuss the ambivalence (and have them argue for change), resistance "judo," and emphasizing self-efficacy.

While it is important that the faculty leading these leadership seminars has an empathic attitude, as we mentioned earlier, the supportive role of the group will be critical. People who are engaged in self-exploration and experimentation need to feel that the other group members are supporting them in their process of change.

The relationship triangle

The relationship triangle concerns the transference processes mentioned earlier. It points out that all of us, in all situations, have to deal with two kinds of relationship (Freud, 1905; Malan, 1963; Greenson, 1967; Malan and Osimo, 1992; Molnos, 1995). First, there is the "real" relationship between the person and the "other"—a relationship between two colleagues at work, for example, or between an employer and an employee. This real relationship becomes the context for another, more elusive relationship grounded in the past (Freud, 1905; Racker, 1968; Luborsky and Crits-Cristoph, 1988, 1998). Obviously, the relationships that have the most lasting potency, coloring almost every subsequent encounter, are those that we have with our earliest caregivers. Our adult behavior has its roots in those privileged, early relationships.

As we relive our earlier, primary relationships again and again, behavior patterns emerge that direct the way we act toward people in the present: although we are now in a very different situation as adults, our responses are still fundamentally those conditioned in our early childhood. In other words, without even being aware of it, we are often confused about

person, time, and place. Like it or not, our past relationships have solidified into organizing themes in our personality structure. In our everyday life, we experience attitudes, thoughts, and emotional responses that, although appropriate to the interpersonal processes governing our earlier years, may have become maladaptive. Anyone hoping to make sense of interpersonal encounters at anything but an intuitive level needs to understand (and be alert to) these transferential processes.

Leadership programs sometimes use the relationships triangle—with its three sides of self, present-other, and past-other—to illustrate the effects of transference. By deconstructing conflict situations, participants come to understand that the earliest feelings they experienced toward others are repeated in relation to people in the present—including, for the duration of the program, the program itself, the other participants and the faculty. This triangle provides a conceptual structure for assessing patterns of response by pointing out the similarity of past relationships to what happens in the present. It helps explain certain interpersonal problems that the executive may be experiencing at home and at work. Transferential interpretation is a crucial tool in the change toolbox. When a person understands old patterns of interaction and then learns to recognize the dysfunctionality of these patterns in current relationships, the process of transformation and change is more likely to be successful.

Facilitating the Process of Change

A leadership program within the context of a business school gives a legitimate reason for an executive to look into the patterns of his or her behavior and start the process of self-exploration. After all, everybody accepts, at least on a rational level, that leading others involves understanding oneself and the way we present ourselves in interactions with others. Nevertheless, for a true understanding and transformation of self to take place, a number of challenges need to be addressed in the design and delivery of transformational leadership programs.

The selection of participants

The first challenge concerns the criteria for selecting program participants prepared to engage in a change effort. In order to create a safe environment where people can play with cognitions, emotions, and behavior, participants need to be willing to engage in self-exploration and self-experimentation. Given the stress that these programs put on their

participants, only relatively healthy people will have the psychological strength required to participate and, importantly, be of help to themselves and others. Fortunately, many successful executives possess a considerable degree of emotional stability. In spite of that, however, we need to be vigilant in assessing the executive's capacity to gain from such transformational programs. A serious misunderstanding is the assumption that insight will work with people who are unmotivated to change. Communication does not depend on syntax, or eloquence, or rhetoric, or articulation but on the emotional context in which the message is being heard. Executives can only hear when they are moving toward the other, and they are not likely to hear when interpretations are perceived as persecutory. Honoring the Hippocratic oath, "Do no harm," is essential.

Among the criteria for acceptance are: the level of motivation to learn and change; the capacity to be open and responsive; interpersonal connectedness; emotion management skills; a degree of psychological mindedness; the capacity for introspection; responsiveness to others' observations; the ability to tolerate depression; and flexibility. We believe that all these criteria need to be assessed before the start of the program through a combination of personal interviews with the program faculty and assessment through essay writing (which will reveal the level of a participant's skill at putting thoughts into words). The process of application and interviewing gives the candidate a sneak preview of the program he or she is applying for, and the opportunity to evaluate the initial fit between the program and his or her developmental needs. An in-depth acceptance process also allows faculty to assess whether the candidate will be able to cope with the psychological demands of the program and whether he or she will fit with the group. This pre-program work is the first step in the change process, as it not only brings many psychological issues to the fore, but is de facto the start of the program as it will be the beginning of the process of self-discovery.

Finding the focal issue

The second challenge concerns the identification of the focal issue that each participant needs to work on and how to fit this into the overall structure and content of the program. In order to change, executives need to be clear about what it is that they *want* to change. They have to identify their central problem(s) and be able to formulate explicit, tractable improvement goals. When people tell their life story (and listen to the stories of the other participants), they are often able to identify specific themes that began in their past and continue into the present.

We have noted that, more often than not, the stories people tell about themselves center on seemingly insoluble dilemmas grounded in misguided perceptions of the world.

The act of articulating one's personal narrative takes on a major transformational role (Loewenberg, 1982; Spence, 1982; McAdams, 1993; Rennie, 1994; McLeod, 1997). It becomes a way of exploring the self, leading to questions like: who am I? Where am I going? How will I get there? Working through internal crises and developmental challenges helps participants to arrive at meaningful personal life integration. In addition, listening to others' stories is a highly effective way of understanding one's self. What we have learned from the feedback given by the participants is that every story resonates with the listeners.

In order to maximize the benefits of storytelling, opportunities must be created for people to tell their stories and for the audience (the other participants) to identify the issues together, and talk them through. Every story will reveal specific present-day dilemmas that have grown out of underlying problems—dilemmas that can be remedied by addressing those deeper issues. These dilemmas will be the basis for "change contracts" between the presenter and the rest of the participants.

In our programs, we create opportunities for each participant to take a "hot seat" and present their stories to the rest of the group, or participate in small group coaching sessions in which participants take turns to present their stories, supported by the creation of a "self-portrait," a debrief of the results of a 360-degree leadership feedback package, a review of personal feedback from work and non-work environments, and observations and reflections of other participants (Kets de Vries, 2004b, 2004c, 2005b, 2006b, 2007a; Kets de Vries et al., 2007c).

Trust is, of course, essential. As the program unfolds, participants develop the trust necessary to be able to open up and learn from each other. We have observed that programs consisting of several modules that give people an opportunity to interact with each other over a longer period of time (both in class and through structured out-of-class activities, like working together on assignments or via conference calls) have a significantly higher chance of making a lasting impact on executives than the temporary highs created by one event.

Creating transitional space

The third challenge concerns the creation of a safe transitional space. Exploring oneself, one's emotions, and behavioral patterns is a stressful undertaking. Change is difficult, and changing oneself is often the most difficult task executives have to handle in their life or career. Even the best-intentioned people rarely manage it single-handedly. Asking for help is difficult, too, especially for successful executives who are closely watched by their internal and external organizational stakeholders. So a major challenge of leadership education providers is how to get others involved in helping the executive initiate and carry through the process of change.

For that purpose our efforts are directed towards creating a transitional space—a safe and empathic identity laboratory—that allows executives the opportunity to "play," to climb out of the rut they find themselves in, helping them to pick up the threads of stagnated development (Winnicott, 1951, 1975; Korotov, 2005). Leaders may be stuck in a psychic prison, trapped by their job or personal circumstances in a life devoid of learning, playfulness, creativity and pleasure. We go to great lengths to create opportunities for them to reinvent themselves. We help them realize that they *do* have options, that they *can* make choices, and that these options and choices are often within close reach.

As well as short-term dynamic psychotherapy and motivational interviewing, we use a number of eclectic intervention methods to encourage the sense of trust and support that the holding environment of an identity laboratory requires, including positive reframing, encouragement, and the anticipation or rehearsal of difficult situations. *Reframing* is a cognitive technique used to assist people in diffusing or sidestepping a painful situation, thus enhancing self-esteem. An essential part of reframing is assessing a person's strengths—looking not only at what has gone wrong but also at what has gone right in his or her life (Seltzery, 1986; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). Psychological strengths can then be drawn on to deal with conflicted areas. *Encouragement,* which is closely related to reframing, encompasses reassurance, praise (which, to be helpful, must affirm something that the recipient considers praiseworthy), and empathic comments (Rogers, 1951). *Anticipation* allows a person to move through new situations hypothetically and to weigh different ways of responding. Allowing someone to become better acquainted with a situation reduces anticipatory anxiety. *Rehearsal* allows a person to practice more appropriate ways of engaging in future events, expanding his or her adaptive repertoire (Kilburg, 2000). The purpose of all these interventions is to help the person acquire a greater sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Constructive suggestions about what and how to change are also needed. Within the holding environment of the leadership program, those suggestions should come from both faculty and fellow participants, who can point out better ways of doing things, building on what they have learned listening to each others' stories. Unsurprisingly, many participants have great problem-solving skills. Constructive use of the collective mind, heart, and experiences of participating executives requires intensive interactions and ample opportunity to work with one another and the leadership facilitators.

A safe holding environment gives the individual experimenting with change an opportunity to make a *public commitment* about what changes he or she would like to make. Public commitment accelerates the personal transformation process, because it doubles momentum: it not only influences the person making the commitment (cementing willingness to confront a difficult situation) but also enlists the cooperation of others, a strong reinforcement for change. By taking a public stance, the speaker issues a self-ultimatum: go through with the change, or lose face (bearing in mind that there will be a follow-up). Facetiously, we sometimes say that our major allies in the change process are the forces of shame, guilt, and hope.

Again, a multi-modular program allows participants to try new behavior patterns, experimenting outside the class, and then report back to the group on the results and learning points of the experiment they staged. Further clarification of goals then takes place, new alternatives are assessed, and new commitments can be made.

Making change last

The fourth challenge is concerned with problems of internalization and lasting change. Once workshop participants have identified the focal problems and practiced alternative approaches to dealing with them, they face the critical task of maintaining acquired gains. They need to arrive at a state of self-efficacy. They need the skills to edit the script for their inner theater, even if they fall short of rewriting it. But this kind of inner transformation can only take place once a new way of looking at things has been *internalized* (Kets de Vries, 2005b).

Internalization is a gradual process by which *external* interactions between self and others are taken in and replaced by *internal* representations of these interactions. In these leadership

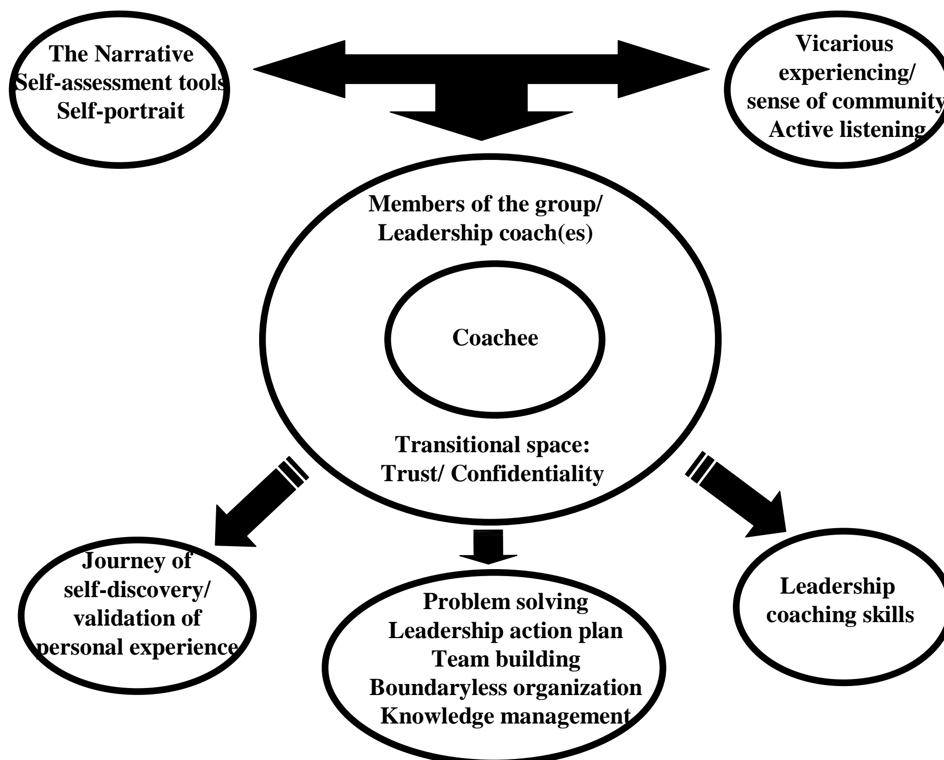
programs, telling (and retelling) one's own story, listening to others' stories—and recognizing similarities between them all—consolidates this process of internalization. Work between modules, conference calls with other participants and peer-coaching sessions held as part of the learning process also contribute to internalization. Once participants leave the group, they have to try to hold on to the insights they have acquired through the internalization process, even though the group is no longer there to provide external reinforcement.

Advantages of group intervention

If leadership interventions like this are done within a specific company context (a "natural" top executive working group), they will bring the additional advantage of helping to create a high performance team. Everyone in the team will have a stake in the other executives' leadership development plans, increasing the chances that something will be made to happen. It also contributes to a boundaryless organization as the members of the top executive team become less turf-defender and develop a more holistic attitude to the organization. Finally, it will give true meaning to the term "knowledge management," which is more than just setting up a shared data base. Knowledge management needs another essential—people have to trust each other. Without trust, there will be no exchange of information. If there is trust, people will engage in constructive problem solving, be more committed and more accountable, and organizations will have better results (Kets de Vries, 2005b). (For a summary of the group intervention process see Figure 1.)

Figure 1

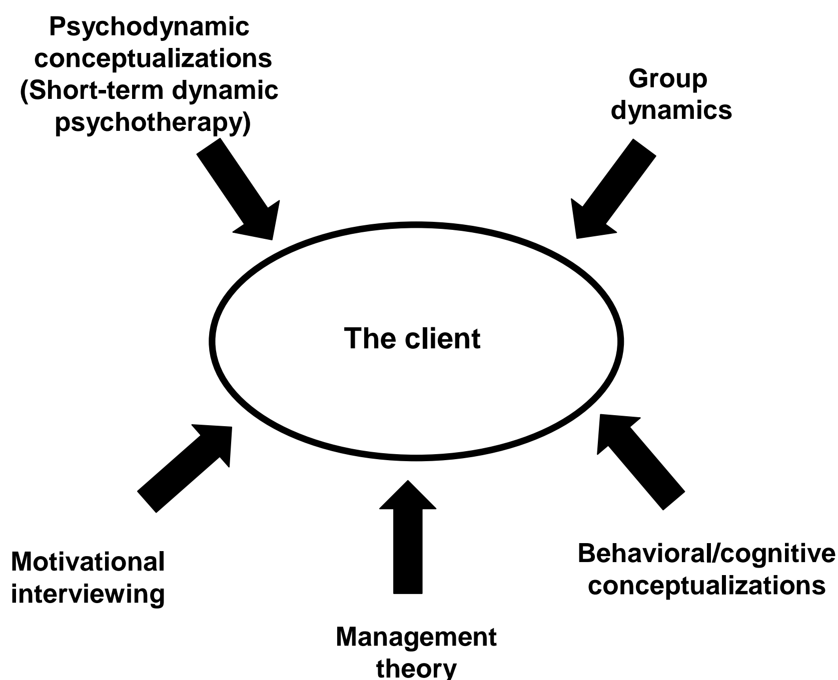
Group Leadership Coaching



The leader-faculty dance

We draw on many different intellectual sources to help our clients in the change process, including concepts from psychoanalytic and developmental psychology, group dynamics, management theory, and behavioral/cognitive insights. One theoretical approach that offers considerable promise in accelerating the process of change has come from experiments in short-term dynamic and group psychotherapy (Balint, 1957; Balint et al., 1972; Bion, 1959; Mann, 1973; Sifneos, 1979; Rosenbaum, 1983; Horowitz et al., 1984; Strupp and Binder, 1984; Yalom, 1985; Gustavson, 1986; Molnos, 1995; Groves, 1996; Scott Rutan and Stone, 2001; Rawson, 2002). These interventions, together with the motivational interviewing technique, have been of great help in creating a tipping point for change (Miller and Rollick, 2002; Kegan and Lahey, 2001). Faculty members and facilitators trained in these techniques find that, when combined with a solid dose of empathy and psychological support, they often result in remarkable progress for their program participants. (For a summary of the theoretical concepts used in group leadership coaching see Figure 2.)

Figure 2



Faculty and facilitators involved in impact-oriented programs should undertake a process of personal self-exploration, experimentation, and change themselves before they try to help others. Creating this kind of transformational laboratory requires a deep understanding of the mental life, conflict, and relationships triangles described earlier. An enormous amount of emotional energy is dispensed when engaging with participants, in order to challenge them while simultaneously showing empathy and care. Last but not least, the time commitment required for these programs is much higher than for more traditional programs.

Although the costs and risks of embarking on transformational leadership programs are high, so are the rewards. These programs allow participants and faculty to become aware that it is the journey of life that counts, not the destination. Embarking on such a journey—letting go of the familiar and secure to embrace the new—takes a lot of courage. But when things no longer make sense, security matters less. In fact, there is more security in adventure and excitement, because there is life in movement and change. As George Bernard Shaw put it, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

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