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CAN CEOS CHANGE?
YES, BUT ONLY IF THEY WANT TO

by

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Can CEOs Change?
Yes, But Only If They Want To

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Abstract

This article describes how people change using as their catalyst the leadership workshop offered at INSEAD. During this leadership workshop a transitional space is created, enabling the participants to find new solutions for existing problems. Three conceptual frameworks (in the form of triangles) are presented to better understand the process of personal change: the triangle of mental life, the triangle of conflict, and the triangle of relationships. The triangle of mental life points out that cognitive and emotional processes need to be taken into consideration to create changes in behavior. The triangle of conflict clarifies how psychic conflict arises due to unacceptable feelings or ideas that create anxiety and lead to defensive reactions. The triangle of relationships indicates how certain feelings or ideas that originally were experienced toward family members in the distant past are repeated in response to people in the present.

The leadership workshop addresses the six primary challenges that need to be taken into consideration in the journey toward change. The first challenge looks at how one responds to catalysts for change. The second challenge deals with identifying one's "focal problem." The third challenge concerns understanding and overcoming transferential issues—that is, issues growing out of false connections between past and present behavior. The fourth challenge has to do with the creation of a holding environment that enables the reorganization of one's defense systems, affect, and self-other perceptions. The fifth challenge involves working through a chosen theme, using the group as a screen. The sixth and final challenge has to do with problems of internalization and lasting change. Principles of short-term dynamic psychotherapy and dynamic group psychotherapy are elucidated to help clarify how people change.

KEYWORDS: leadership; change; CEO; short-term dynamic psychotherapy; dynamic group psychotherapy; transference; emotions; defensive reactions; transitional space; countertransference; projective identification.

> Look upon that last day always. Count no mortal happy till he has passed the final limit of his life secure from pain.
>
> Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

Introduction

The lion was completely convinced about his dominance of the animal kingdom. One day he decided to make sure that all the other animals knew he was the undisputed king of the jungle. He was so confident about his position that he decided not to talk to the smaller creatures. Instead, he went straight to the bear. “Who is the king of the jungle?” asked the lion. The bear bowed deferentially and replied, “Why, *you* are, sir – of course.” The lion gave a great roar of approval. He continued his journey and soon met the tiger. “Who is the king of the jungle?” he asked. The tiger, stepping off the path, quickly responded, “All of us know that *you* are the king.” The lion gave another roar of pleasure.

Next on his list was the elephant, whom he caught up with at the edge of the river. Again he asked, “Who is the king of the jungle?” The elephant lifted his trunk proudly and trumpeted with a flourish, then grabbed the lion, threw the startled beast into the air, and smashed him into a tree. As the lion shook his head to clear it, the elephant fished him from among the branches and tossed him forcefully to the ground, then lifted him up once more and dumped him into the river. Drenched to the skin, the battered lion struggled to shore, only to have the elephant jump on top of him, drag him through the mud, and fling him into some bushes where, caught by his tail, he hung suspended. When it appeared that the elephant was finished, the lion – dirty, beaten, and bruised – struggled to his feet. He looked the elephant sadly in the eyes

and said, "Look, just because you don't know the answer, that's no reason for you to be so mean-spirited about it."

Some CEOs are like the lion. Reality testing is not their forte; accurately reading feedback is not their strength. They prefer to create their own reality, seeing only what they want to see. As a result, they are neither interested in nor open to change.

What this tale illustrates is that change is not a simple process, nor is it a comfortable one. In fact, the unlearning of habitual patterns can be decidedly anxiety-provoking. Like the lion, many CEOs I have met are inclined to hold on to a specific logic, *il*logical as this logic may appear to others. They simply do not want to change. They prefer to stick with their present, familiar misery. Why a particular individual clings tenaciously to the status quo is not easy to determine, since there is a wide range of conscious and unconscious obstacles on the path toward change. But cling people do, heedless of the proverb that warns, "All things change, and we change with them."

Many of the senior executives that I encounter are relatively healthy, both physically and emotionally. That they have successfully reached the pinnacle of leadership indicates that they evidence exceptional competence and a high level of autonomy in their particular domain of work. It also suggests a strong ability to relate well with others. These people function well in the sector of attachment, for example, and they use their emotions and reasoning appropriately. But there are exceptions. Some senior executives engage in dysfunctional behavior such as conflict avoidance and micro-management.

Although clinging to dysfunctional behavior patterns is never healthy, the repercussions can be particularly devastating in the case of CEOs. Given the power that top executives wield, dysfunctional behavior can have a dramatic downward-spiraling effect in the organization, contributing to a toxic corporate culture, faulty decision-making, motivational problems, and high management turnover (Morgan 1986; Kets de Vries and Miller 1988; Hamel and Prahalad 1989; Pfeffer 1998). For CEOs, habits that at first glance seem to be quirky but innocuous often have dramatic and destructive consequences. Too many CEOs do not realize that in their

organization they are always on stage. The slightest move they make is carefully observed, analyzed, and discussed. The situation brings to mind an observation of an executive in one of the INSEAD leadership workshops: “Every day that I go into the office I can make the lives of my ten thousand employees miserable, if I choose to. It doesn’t take very much on my part to do that. That’s an awesome responsibility. I need to keep reminding myself daily of the role I play.”

Given the power that CEOs have to affect the lives of large numbers of people, it is more important than ever – in this age of discontinuity – to help them make the right decisions. What can we do to help senior executives execute their role in the most exemplary fashion? What can we do to make them more effective? And if changes in their behavior patterns are advisable, how can they go about becoming better at what they do?

Executing the role of CEO is not easy. Bewildered by the responsibility that comes with the job and unsure what role they should play, many candidates find it a daunting task. They need all the help they can get to get the best out of their people. To obtain the extra employee effort that characterizes the outstanding organization – in other words, to create “stretch” – they need to speak to the collective imagination of their employees. They need to articulate the kind of shared values that make for a group identity. They need to help everyone in the organization buy into their vision for the future of the organization (Kets de Vries 2001; Kets de Vries 2001).

Companies that consistently do well are led by people who realize the responsibility that comes with their position. Such companies are guided by individuals who know what it means to be a leader – individuals with the kind of mindset that makes them a servant to their people. Such leaders put the interest of the organization before their own self-interest. They are not self-centered; on the contrary, they are truly committed to making their organization a great place to work. Furthermore, they can see things in perspective (Collins 2001). For the long-term health of organizations, we need leaders who are not afraid to face reality as it is rather than pretending it is as they would like it to be. Bottom line: we need people who are comparatively well adjusted.

Why Ride a Dead Horse?

I have encountered numerous senior executives who hang on to dysfunctional behavior patterns, ignoring any and all constructive suggestions about how they might do things differently. They keep on doing the same things over and over again, regardless of the dismal consequences that result. We can only assume that what drives such executives is the perverse hope that although they are doing the same old things, the outcome this time (or the next time, or the next) will be somewhat different. Obviously, they are not familiar with the old Sioux Indian saying, "When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount." They believe – all evidence to the contrary – that they can resuscitate the horse.

But even people who claim to believe in the value of change may undertake change halfheartedly when it involves their own patterns of behavior. Although they give lip service to the virtues of change, when it comes right down to it, they want *others* to change; they do not want to change themselves. In one Calvin and Hobbes cartoon, Calvin (a young boy) says, "I thrive on change." Hobbes (his toy tiger) is quite surprised by this statement. "You threw a fit this morning because your mom put less jelly on your toast than yesterday!" he counters. To which Calvin responds, "I thrive on making other people change."

Sometimes it is a matter not of resisting change but of being baffled by it. Many people have the will but not the skill to change. They need help navigating the admittedly complex change process. John Maynard Keynes had a point when he said, "The greatest difficulty in the world is not for people to accept new ideas, but to make them forget their old ideas."

How, then, can corporate leaders proactively run their organizations? What can they do to deal with continuous and discontinuous change? What do they need to do to make their organizations positive and healthy places to work? What can they do to get

the best out of their people? These are questions that have far-reaching effects for leaders. Those CEOs who know (or can learn) the answers may find success within their grasp. Those who do not (or cannot) should know that when organizations go down the drain, it is generally because of rot that started at the top (Kets de Vries and Miller 1984; Kets de Vries and Miller 1988). To use the words of one wit, the bottleneck is often in the neck!

The key word in the answer to all the above questions is *self-awareness.* If senior executives are unwilling to position themselves more vulnerably, if they are not prepared to reassess their actions, how can they expect other people to act differently as situations demand it? Thus greater self-awareness is the first step toward becoming more effective as a leader. People who want to become more capable on the job have to start by taking a hard look at themselves. People who want to reinvent or renew themselves have to understand and evaluate what it is that happens inside them; they have to explore what I like to call their "inner theatre." As Socrates astutely noted, "The unexplored life is not worth living." A willingness to engage in self-exploration – that first essential step in the process of personal change – is a sine qua non for people in responsible executive positions, as are open-mindedness, curiosity, and playfulness.

Falling Off the Fast Track

A Chinese proverb says, "Great men never feel great; small men never feel small." As we have seen all too often, those whom the gods destroy, they first call promising. Many senior executives fail because they become too full of themselves. Caught in the web of narcissism, they lose their ability to consider alternative ways of doing things. They start to believe their own press, thereby creating their own reality. Those around them fall into line, telling them only what they want to hear. Eventually, the self-delusions of such leaders contribute to their fall.

Of course, narcissism is not the *only* reason that CEO's fail (Zaleznik 1966; Kets de Vries and Miller 1988; Lapierre 1991; Pfeffer 1995; Collins 2001; Kets de Vries 2001). When I look at the derailment of senior executives in the course of my consulting work, one thing I observe again and again is a lack of vision. Like it or not,

the "vision thing" is of central importance. The ability to think out of the box and be a rule-breaker often makes the difference between being a great executive and being a mediocre one. As the expression goes, if you have no idea where you are going, you may end up somewhere else. Thus having what I call a "helicopter view" – the ability to think strategically, to see the forest in spite of the trees, to look into the future – is a necessity for any CEO.

Can out-of-the-box thinking be learned? Not likely, unfortunately. For most of us, by the time we are grown up the die has been cast. This view may sound pessimistic, but it is grounded in scholarship: psychologists tell us that the potential is relatively limited, after our developmental years, to acquire greater efficacy in disentangling cognitively complex situations (Heatherton and Weinberger 1994; Hogan, Johnson et al. 1997). That means we have to learn to live with the cognitive assets we already have. If we are self-aware, however, we can discover what our competencies really are and enlist the help of others in those areas where we are weakest, allowing colleagues to counterbalance our own competences. What results is an executive role-constellation in which various executives play complementary roles.

The list of derailment factors goes on. Even an out-of-the-box thinker who leads without narcissism and communicates a great vision has no guarantee of success. Some leaders, for example, stumble because execution is not their strength. Having little interest in the nitty-gritty of management, they are not good at following through from vision to action. Because they do not make their people accountable, such leaders let things slip, often with disastrous consequences. In the end, all they are left with is their vision; and vision alone – even glorious and compelling vision – is little more than hallucination.

Another major factor contributing to derailment – again one that I have observed frequently in the hundreds of CEOs I have worked with – is a lack of emotional intelligence (Salovey and Mayer 1990; Goleman 1998; LeDoux 1998). In contrast to an inability to deal better with cognitive complexity, a shortage of emotional intelligence is a deficiency we *can* do something about at later stages in life. While IQ is fairly firmly set by the time we are adults, EQ – our emotional intelligence quotient

– is more malleable. Emotional intelligence encompasses such factors as understanding our emotions, managing our emotions, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships. Two elements of emotional intelligence, self-awareness and empathy, have been shown to be critical to leadership effectiveness, differentiating highly effective executives from their less successful colleagues (Stein and Book 2000). Several closely associated elements of emotional intelligence also contribute to effective leadership: the ability to reframe thorny situations in a more positive way, the assertiveness to express one's beliefs and wishes clearly but respectfully, the courage to hang in when things get tough, the ability to function effectively in teams, and the talent to build teams.

So what can senior executives do to develop these competences? How can they modify their own dysfunctional behavior patterns? Even if they are relatively successful, how can they get out of their behavioral rut and improve their effectiveness? To answer these questions, we need to take a closer look at what makes people act the way they do. We need to ask a different question: What kind of inner theatre drives a particular person's behavior and actions?

The Triangle of Mental Life

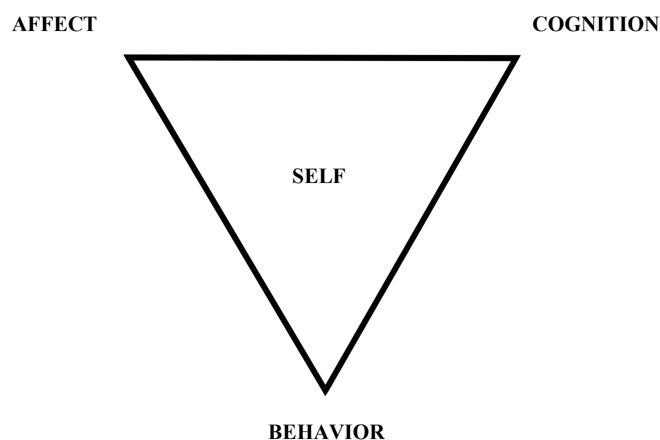
To understand a person's mental life – his or her inner theatre – we need to simplify the complex processes involved. We can distill them into a triad of forces: cognition, emotion, and behavior. The resulting triangle of mental life dictates the script acted out in an individual's inner theatre.

But that simplification fails to get us to the root of things. We need to go deeper still. The triangle of mental life is itself a distillation of an individual's responses to his or her motivational need systems. Each triangle of mental life – and therefore each inner script – is personalized in response to the motivational need systems on which choice is grounded (Freud 1933; Sullivan 1953; Lichtenberg, Lackmann et al. 1992).

Need systems become operational in infancy and continue throughout the life-cycle (though they are altered by age, learning, and maturation). The first, most basic need system involves a person's physiological requirements, such as the need for food,

drink, elimination, sleep, and breathing; the second covers a person's need for sensual enjoyment and sexual excitement; the third encompasses a person's need to respond aversively to certain situations – to defend oneself – through antagonism and withdrawal. In addition to these survival-level motivational need systems, there are various upper-level systems, two of which impact the workplace directly and powerfully: the need for attachment/affiliation and the need for exploration/assertion. As gasoline fuels an engine, the cognitive and emotional patterns that develop out of these interrelated motivational need systems fuel our behavior. Thus they undergird the triangle of mental life.

Triangle of Mental Life



Taking this basic triangle of mental life – with its linking of cognition, emotion, and behavior – as our point of departure, we can see that for any change effort to be successful, executives have to be swayed both cognitively *and* emotionally; in other words, people have to be affected in both the head and the heart if their behavior is to change. People need to understand cognitively the advantages that a change effort will bring, but cognition alone is not enough; they also need to be touched emotionally. Affect and cognition go hand in hand; they are inseparable in all things, including the determination of behavior.

Understanding the Interconnectedness of Cognition and Emotion

It is all too easy to ignore the link between cognition and emotion, as I myself discovered early in my work in this field. During my initial years as an educator and consultant, I used to deliver long harangues, explaining to executives the error of their ways when they made faulty decisions that caused their organizations to malfunction. I went to great lengths to point out why and what they had to change. I used the best logic I knew to explain why they could not continue doing things the way they had been.

Although I may have been correct in my assessments, my attempted interventions rarely made an iota of difference. Sure, most of the executives agreed with what I had to say, but they merrily kept on with their counterproductive behaviors. Eventually I realized that I was hitting my head against the wall. I needed to find a different angle if I wanted my suggestions to be productive. If logic alone was not good enough, I had to reach these people in a different way.

The solution presented itself to me at one of the INSEAD leadership workshops that I lead.[**] On that occasion, one of the executives participating – a high-level banker – received considerable feedback from the other participants and faculty about his tendency to remain emotionally aloof in difficult situations. They noted that when stressed, he would withdraw, using distancing as a defensive mechanism. The banker mentioned that he had heard comments before about this behavior, so he was obviously aware, at a cognitive level, of the problem. This intrigued me: a smart man, a talented banker, who had known for some time that he had a problem but had done nothing to address it. Clearly, understanding the problem in his head was not good enough.

I realized then that he – and anyone else facing the prospect of change – had to experience a problem not just in his mind but in his heart, his gut; otherwise he would not budge. Once it was clear that additional "ammunition" was needed to make him

[**] All case examples have been disguised to protect the identity of the participants.

change his ways interpersonally, the question became, What could be done to get a "hook" into him? What could I do that would make a real difference?

I decided to gather information about this banker from the people who mattered most to him. During the second week of the workshop I presented him with a large amount of feedback not only from the people at the office (those traditionally questioned in an effort to get a better handle on a person's leadership style) but also from close friends, his wife, his children, and other family members. As he read through people's written responses, I could see that the feedback was beginning to stick. What really shook him was an emotional statement from his nineteen-year-old daughter describing how she perceived him and suggesting what he should change about his behavior. With teary eyes (very unusual for this otherwise composed man) he read a note from his daughter expressing her sadness about his inapproachability. She wrote about her long-frustrated wish to be closer to him – to have a real relationship with him. She referred to various efforts she had made in the past to do so, and described his reactions.

That note from his daughter was the turning point. From that moment onward, the other participants noticed a change in the banker's behavior. He became emotionally involved in the discussions that took place at the workshop, finally *hearing* the insights provided by the other participants and allowing them to touch him emotionally. Most important, however, he began to experiment with alternative ways of behaving when in stressful situations, first in the remaining sessions of the workshop and then back at the office and at home.

That is not to say that there were no lapses. There were, human nature being what it is. But whenever he fell back into his old behavior patterns while at the workshop, the other participants reminded him of the feedback from his daughter. They functioned as a "learning community" to reinforce desired behavior. After he returned home, he reminded himself of that same feedback. Gradually, over the course of half a year, his new, more expressive behavior became second nature to him.

This incident helped me to look at change processes in a different manner. It illustrated the power that various constituencies can have in furthering the change

effort. By drawing in people whose opinions are valued, and by working with a learning community of peers, those instigating change can ensure that all parties acquire a stake in the change effort, thereby reinforcing experimentation into more productive behavior.

INSEAD's Leadership Workshop: The "Life" Case-Study Approach

Everything I have learned over the years about the change process, whether through experience, research, or study, comes into play in the leadership workshop I conduct annually at INSEAD. In the pages that follow, we will look at what the workshop is and does, and then examine the particular experience of several participants.

Getting Started: The Preliminaries

The workshop begins with a cocktail party on a Sunday evening. This opening event typically has the familiar artificial quality found on many such occasions. There is the usual nervous laughter, the clinking of glasses, the jockeying for position. People mill around, attempting to make contact, make conversation. Quite a few of the people present are ill at ease, apparently unsure what to talk about, how to relate to each other. Topics of conversation range from recent political events, to travel, to cross-cultural anecdotes.

Just another random encounter of a group of executives, right? Not really! In spite of appearances, the cocktail party has been carefully choreographed. There is a purpose behind the social ritual: though awkward, the get-together launches the leadership workshop.

From all over the globe, the participants arrived earlier in the day (or the week) at their destination. Now they are trying to feel their way around. Specialists on group behavior would call what happens at this initial gathering of participants the "being polite" group phase. During this time, the members of the group struggle with questions of inclusion and exclusion: Who else has been selected into the program? What is the background of the other participants? What will they be like to work

with? The tentative behavior of the party-goers is a snapshot in time, reflecting both their excitement and their anxiety.

A spectator from Mars would be amused to see this gathering of captains of industry, because in this context they look like fish out of water. For once, they are not in control. For once, they do not know exactly what to expect. For once, they are not the ones pulling the strings. For once, they are not masters of the universe. Instead, they are anxiously testing the waters. They introduce themselves to each other. They engage in polite talk. Some maneuver awkwardly to position themselves among their peers. Some of them talk too much: that is their way of coping with an uncomfortable situation. Others try to numb their anxiety by drinking too much. At a subliminal level they are aware, however, that it will be harder to hide behind a public self here than it is at the office. It will not be as easy to keep a mask on or to skate by with formulaic responses. Participants are well aware that they are caught up in a totally unknown situation, and each one fosters specific fantasies and defensive reactions. Many thoughts race through their minds: *Why didn't I stay at the office? Why did I leave familiar ground? There must be a better way to spend my time. What am I going to get out of all this? What if this is just a waste of time? What am I doing here?*

What *are* they doing here? Well, chances are their journey started because their VP for Human Resources gave them a brochure about the program and it lit a spark of interest. Something in the description of the program piqued their curiosity or stimulated their fantasy. Some prospective participants see the workshop as an opportunity to do something different – to take a break from the routine of office life. Others see in the workshop a source of answers to the existential questions they have been asking themselves lately – questions about how to regain the former excitement of work, play, and marriage, questions about how to get out of their rut and restore the sense of discovery that used to make work a joy.

Among the prospective participants who read the brochure at their desk back home, there were a few who dropped out of the process when they saw how complex the admission form was. It asked far too many questions, for one thing. Such forms were good for students, sure – but at *their* level? Some of these questions were downright

puzzling – quite different from the standard questions posed by journalists or investment analysts – and most of them were terribly personal. Who wants to write about things he or she is *not* good at? Who knows how to respond when asked about risks taken (and possibly lost)? While the questions asked on the admission form caused some irritation and anxiety, they clearly indicated that this was not going to be a traditional executive program.

And then there was a telephone interview. Out of the blue, I (as the workshop leader) called to ask even more questions, equally personal (or worse!). I asked what complaints the spouse had about the prospective participant, for example. And what kind of things made the participant angry, sad, frustrated. I even asked questions about wild fantasies. Whose business was *that?* they wondered. What did *any* of that have to do with becoming more effective as a leader? Strangely enough, though, when asked at the end of that phone call if they still wanted a place in the program, everyone in attendance at the later cocktail party had given an affirmative response.

After the cocktail party, there was a short introduction describing the daily workshop schedule, followed by a tour of the campus and a nice dinner. As the participants chatted politely during the meal, they sensed that they were enjoying the calm before the storm.

The Workshop Proper

The next day the seminar started in earnest. At the announced opening time the anxiety ran high; people appeared quite apprehensive, and they looked expectantly at me for reassurance. I gave a short lecture on emotional intelligence and irrational behavior in organizations and then reiterated the basic premise of the workshop: that it was fueled by the "life" case study (meaning that case presentations from participants would be the main learning tool). I mentioned that each life case study would offer a unique situation that would contribute to the learning process and cautioned that there could be "no interpretation without association." (In other words, each participant would get as much out of the workshop as he or she put into it.) I reminded the group that I had spoken to all the participants beforehand and that all had accepted the ground rules and had committed to work on a number of significant problems that

needed resolution. I also reiterated the confidential nature of the presentations given at the workshop.

From then on the workshop was on its way. How the various participants would handle the emerging anxiety would depend on their personality structure, their historic defense mechanisms, and the specific dynamics that evolved in the group. The immediate behavioral data that would emerge in the group would be used as clues in the exploration of conscious and unconscious material, and of defensive operations.

The INSEAD Leadership Workshop

Once a year I run a workshop at INSEAD called "The Challenge of Leadership: Developing Your Emotional Intelligence." From among a large number of applicants, we invite twenty very senior executives to participate. These executives, all of whom are successful in their jobs, apply to the program for a variety of reasons. The guiding theme is often a seemingly insoluble dilemma, perhaps centered around negative feelings about the self, or around perceptions of the world and others that make fulfillment of personal dreams seem impossible. Typically, however, this central dilemma is not clearly articulated in an applicant's mind when he or she applies to the program.

To be accepted into the program, each potential participant has to complete a complex application form (a reminder of what MBA students have to go through to be accepted into an MBA program). In addition, each potential participant is interviewed by me, either face-to-face or over the phone (if they are at great geographical distance), to see if they have what it takes to go through a workshop in which their own life case study will be the main source of interpretive material. In that interview I look for signs of psychological-mindedness, a capacity to be open and responsive, an interest in understanding the self better, and a degree of psychological health.

The workshop consists of three five-day periods with breaks of approximately seven weeks each. The expectation is that during each on-site week the participants will learn more about themselves; then, based on that knowledge, they agree on a "contract" of change that delineates what they should work on while on the job and at home during their time away from the workshop. Because mutual coaching is part of the design of the program, "homework" assignments are monitored among the participants.

I have a co-leader to run the workshop. Having a second leader in the workshop allows for a more complete view of what happens in the group and serves to protect both workshop leaders from blind spots. The old adage is right: two heads *are* generally better than one. In addition, having two leaders in the workshop at all times gives each of us the opportunity to move in and out of active and passive observational modes. The interchange between the two workshop leaders also provides participants with data to help them understand complex human phenomena, and it models ways of relating to others and handling conflict.

Although the basic material of the workshop is the life case study, the first week is devoted to laying the foundation. Some of the time during that first week is spent on interactive lectures concerning high-performance organizations, organizational culture, leadership, the career life-cycle, cross-cultural management, and organizational stress.

With that foundation, participants can then move on to the workshop's central model of psychological activity and organization: the personal case history. Each participant in the workshop volunteers to sit in the "hot seat" once during the course of the seminar. This experience is extremely important. It is a positive step toward self-discovery, in that experiences and actions become sequentially organized as a person tells his or her story; but it also helps other group members, who gain understanding of their own problems as they hear about the parallel problems of others.

During each case presentation the other participants are asked to listen carefully with "free-flowing attention," and not to interrupt. When a presenter is finished, questions

can be asked – but purely for the purpose of better understanding the narrative. Subsequently, it is the turn of the presenter to be silent and listen to the associations, interpretations, and recommendations of the other members of the group. A considerable amount of time is devoted to the associations (fantasies, feelings, and thoughts) that the presentation arouses in its listeners. An effort is made to prevent the premature closure that results from quick recommendations. Once the feedback is over, the presenter always has the last word, giving him or her the chance to air additional thoughts and to comment on the various observations. The presenter concludes by presenting a proposed "contract for change," outlining those things that he or she will work on in the interim period.

During the second week, as the case histories continue, some time is devoted to the processing of a number of feedback instruments. A key part of this activity is the Global Leadership Life Inventory, a 360-degree feedback instrument I developed that consists of twelve dimensions contributing to leadership effectiveness. In addition, a personality test that I developed (The Personality Audit) is conducted. This latter includes feedback gathered from the spouse or significant other. Furthermore, additional information is collected from other family members and good friends. This broad information provides the basis for a more refined action plan in the hiatus between the second and third periods. The main focus of the third week is the consolidation of the acquired insights and the internalization of change. The presentations continue, becoming increasingly multi-layered and rich as the workshop progresses.

In addition to the plenary sessions, participants spend a lot of time in small groups in and outside the classroom. The interactions within these groups are extremely valuable, because they serve to consolidate newly acquired behavior patterns. Whether in subgroups or all together, the twenty people form an intense learning community. Whenever a group member backslides into a behavior pattern that he or she is trying to unlearn, the other participants offer constructive feedback. By the third week, many of the participants know each other better than some of their family members know them! With that increasing intimacy, the interchange in the plenary sessions becomes extremely free-flowing. The group, exhibiting considerably more emotional

intelligence with each new session, turns into a self-analyzing community, so that much less intervention is needed by the faculty.

In many instances a follow-up session is held a year after the final get-together – in fact, some groups have chosen to hold follow-ups year after year – which offers participants and faculty alike an opportunity to assess the degree to which certain new behavior patterns have become truly internalized.

The Teachings of Research and Experience

In my efforts to help successful executives change, I have struggled for many years to find the "format" that best fosters the change process. I have wrestled with the question of how best to help senior executives become even more effective, be it at work or at home. I have tried to create a "transitional space" that allows executives who feel as if they are in a rut to "play" and to pick up the threads of stagnated development.

Developmental psychologists estimate that by the age of thirty, two-thirds to three-fifths of an individual's personality is formed. We know, then, that people have greater "plasticity" early in life, but that does not rule out their ability to change at a later life-stage (McCrae and Costa 1990; Heatherton and Weinberger 1994). CEOs who find themselves in a mental prison, trapped by their job in a life devoid of learning, playfulness, and pleasure, can reinvent themselves. They can restore good mental health by coming to see that they *do* have options; they *can* make choices.

Unfortunately, many CEOs find it difficult to see innovative options and make choices that lead them in new directions. Those who became successful following path A are not likely to venture down path B. In fact, they have trouble accepting the need for any change in direction at all. Thus they need help getting out of their self-imposed prison. But that is a challenge in itself: most CEOs are not the type to search for improvement via lengthy therapeutic procedures. They want more time-efficient methods for reinventing themselves.

As a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist, I am steeped in traditional methods of creating personality change. Traditional psychoanalytic thinking dictates that the main route to insight and lasting change occurs through a lengthy treatment procedure involving anywhere from two to five one-on-one sessions a week. Needless to say, the prospect of such a monumental undertaking is unattractive to senior executives who have neither the time nor the patience to engage in such an activity.

Furthermore, many senior executives tend to seek individual help only when they are in deep trouble. Signing up for a group seminar designed for "typical" CEOs is a lot less threatening than telephoning a therapist and admitting to an individual and a unique problem. Group work is not an easy solution either, however, because top executives tend to be quite self-centered, meaning that they have a short attention span for topics other than themselves. My challenge, then, was to work successfully with a group of people, each of whom thinks that he or she is the center of the universe – and to work with them in a time-effective manner.

I also needed to remain true to the best of what I had learned during my clinical training. Thus I sought to develop a method of intervention that would accelerate and condense that more traditional therapeutic process while remaining true to basic clinical principles. This meant finding a nontraditional way to overcome resistances to change – usually a slow process – and to bring into awareness problems that were of a preconscious or unconscious nature. To achieve these therapeutic results, I would have to mobilize in an effective way each individual's unconscious mental processes. In addition, I would have to find ways to ensure that resulting changes in behavior patterns were lasting, that they were more than mere "flights into health" – transient highs of the sort produced by the "miracle cures" many psychological snake-oil salespeople sell.

The first question I faced was, What conceptualizations and settings might jumpstart the change process? One theoretical approach I was familiar with that offered considerable promise in accelerating the process of change resulted from experiments in short-term dynamic psychotherapy (Freud 1893-95; Balint, Ornstein et al. 1972; Winnicott 1972; Mann 1973; Sifneos 1979; Horowitz, Marmar et al. 1984; Strupp and

Binder 1984; Gustavson 1986; Molnos 1986; Crits-Christoph and Barber 1991; Malan and Osimo 1992; Groves 1996; McCullough Vaillant 1997; Luborsky and Crits-Cristoph 1998; Davenloo 2000). This therapeutic approach offered a different avenue than long-term psychotherapy to help people acquire insight into the role of the various life-events and ongoing experiences that contributed to their problems. Therapists using this technique discovered that interventions of a more direct nature combined with a solid dose of empathy and psychological support frequently resulted in remarkable improvement of the mental state of clients. They also found that the clarification of defensive reactions, which allowed the presenting problem to be brought into sharper focus, appeared to contribute to behavior change. These techniques made the client's problem more explicit and gave the client a greater awareness of the psychological forces affecting his or her behavior.

After experimenting (with a modest dose of success) with short-term dynamic psychotherapy in one-on-one encounters with executives seeking to increase their effectiveness in their organizations, I realized that more was needed to create lasting change in their behavior patterns. Simple one-on-one coaching had only limited results (Balint 1957). It seemed to me that I needed to increase the discomfort zone of the participants. Research suggested that if I could create a situation of high intensity and total involvement through the creation of a "learning community" – a small-group community in which each member had a stake in creating a "corrective emotional experience" for others – the change process could be further accelerated (Alexander and French 1946). Research also suggested that I needed to create some kind of "transitional space" for participants (Winnicott 1951; Bion 1962; Winnicott 1971; Winnicott 1975) – a space in which participants, protected from the reality of the outside world, could safely experiment with new forms of interacting.

After a great deal of trial-and-error, I conceived that I could create an intense learning community by combining some of the methods used in short-term dynamic psychotherapy with the interventions derived from group dynamics and with concepts taken from organizational and leadership theory (Freud 1921; Foulkes 1975; Scheidlinger 1982; Rosenbaum 1983; Yalom 1985; Klein, Bernard et al. 1992; Kaplan and Sadock 1993; Harwood and Pines 1998; Scott Rutan and Stone 2001). By using

the most effective principles of all these approaches, I was able to set the stage for a more intensified change-effort. The result was the INSEAD leadership workshop, as it is now constituted.

Taking the Road Less Traveled

When executives go on a journey of personal change via my leadership workshop, they face six primary challenges. The first challenge has to do with responding to catalysts for change. The second challenge deals with identifying one's "focal problem." The third challenge concerns understanding and overcoming transferential issues – that is, issues growing out of false connections between past and present behavior. The fourth challenge has to do with the creation of a holding environment that enables the restructuring of one's defense systems, affect, and self-other perceptions. The fifth challenge involves working through a chosen theme, using the group as a screen. The sixth and final challenge has to do with problems of internalization and lasting change. Let's take a closer look at each of these challenges.

Challenge 1: Preparing for the Journey

Certain conditions have to be met before a person can undertake a successful journey of self-discovery and change. The primary precondition for change is a *willingness* to change, a strong sense of *motivation.* Only relatively healthy people have the psychological strength to participate in a seminar such as that offered at INSEAD. Fortunately, few executives reach a high level of success without possessing considerable psychological resources. That being said, not everyone has the personality make-up to participate.

The criteria by which I assess potential candidates for inclusion in the leadership workshop reflect the psychological nature of the endeavor:

- *Level of motivation*. Are potential participants prepared to take a hard look at themselves? Are they willing to do serious work, or are they looking for a quick fix – a magic pill that will take care of all their problems?
- *Capacity to be open and responsive.* Are potential participants not only willing but also able to open up to others? Can they establish relationships without years of groundwork?
- *Interpersonal connectedness.* Are potential participants willing and able to engage in meaningful emotional interaction? Having the capacity to talk about very personal thoughts and feelings makes the change process a lot easier. Experience has shown that people who have a history of give-and-take with a number of significant people in their lives are more likely to change. (Hermits, please do not apply!)
- *Emotional management skills.* Can potential participants tolerate the anxiety that comes with putting themselves in a vulnerable position? Is their emotional life passionate, or are their emotional experiences rather flat? When other people talk about life's ups and downs, do these incidents touch them? Do they ever get tears in their eyes during emotional movie scenes (at least if the movie theatre is dark)?
- *Degree of psychological-mindedness.* Are potential participants curious about their inner life? Would they like to learn more about themselves? Would they like to understand better why they behave the way they do? Can they sometimes look beneath the surface and grasp the emotional meaning of maladaptive behaviors? Can they verbalize their thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and inner life?
- *Capacity for introspection.* Do potential participants have the ability to recognize how contemporary psychological processes are integrated and related to past experiences? (As Kierkegaard noted, "The tragedy of life is that you understand it only backward but you have to live it forward." Thus one's understanding of the connection between past and present is an important variable in the change equation.)
- *Responses to observations of others.* Are potential participants receptive to interpretations of their actions and attitudes by others, or do they become

defensive? Do they generally understand what other people are trying to tell they?

- *Flexibility.* Do potential participants react constructively and appropriately to stressful interventions, or do they seek refuge in indirect defensive behaviors?

Case Study

Perhaps the best way to illustrate preparedness for the journey of change is by presenting a sample case study of a participant. The case study is introduced here and then referred to and fleshed out as we discuss the remaining five challenges of change.

During the first week of one INSEAD workshop, a CEO at the helm of a high-tech firm made a number of the other executives very uncomfortable by starting her hot-seat presentation with the declaration that she was an unwanted child, an accident. She mentioned that she had been a latecomer, an unexpected arrival to parents who had already had four daughters. Taking care of another daughter was the last thing they wanted. Her mother, said the CEO, had seriously considered aborting her pregnancy, and the older woman had frequently hinted to her daughter that she regretted not having done so. All during her childhood, her mother had made quite clear her disappointment about the girl's unexpected arrival. If she had planned for another child, the mother had said often, she would have liked it to be a boy. The executive, in her presentation, expressed sadness about her mother's comments and explained how her mother's attitude had shaped her life. The theme of being unwanted had always haunted her.

The CEO also mentioned her father, a person who had not been very present during the girl's formative years. He had worked long hours as a specialist in internal medicine at a local hospital. And when he *was* around, he remained distant; it was always difficult to get his attention. Furthermore, he took his wife's side whenever the girl had a fight with her mother about some behavior that the latter found inappropriate (and there were many behaviors which fell into that category). Rarely could the daughter count on his support. As a youngster, she had felt that she needed to compete for her father's attention. Looking back, she thought that it had been the sister who came before her who had had to bear the brunt of her competitiveness. She

told the workshop a funny story about the way she had succeeded in shifting to this sister the blame for a dent that she herself had put in the family car. She mentioned to the group, almost as an aside, that she had always been good at shifting responsibility, at making others take the blame.

She realized, she told her workshop colleagues, that a major theme in her life was proving that she was worth having around, that she counted for something. To get her parents' attention, she had excelled in school and at sports. But she emphasized that she had not been just a teacher's pet. There was another side to her – a rebellious streak that had generally been kept hidden. She noted that this rebellious streak had often showed itself in the number of boys she went out with as a teenager (and beyond), and in their disreputable nature.

After graduation from high school, she had chosen engineering as her field of study, to impress her father. Computer science was her undergraduate specialty, so after obtaining her engineering degree, she had taken a job in the computer industry. Fairly soon thereafter, she had married for the first time, and the young couple had had a daughter. After an uphill struggle at work and in her personal life – including several career setbacks, a divorce, and a second marriage and breakup – she had eventually become the president of a very successful software company. While that business victory gave her pleasure, the price she had paid for her success – the two failed marriages, a difficult relationship with her only daughter, and a long list of stress symptoms that included migraine headaches – was terribly high.

When commenting to the workshop on her leadership style, she noted that she had always had quite a temper. As she mentioned jokingly, "Speak when you're angry, and you'll deliver the best speech you'll ever regret." According to her, people in her company either loved her or hated her. Because she set extremely high standards for herself, she could be a harsh taskmaster with others. Unfortunately, she had lost a number of very capable executives as a result. The latest departure (a high-potential woman who had been liked and admired) had irritated the company's chairman, who had strongly suggested that the presenting CEO needed to work on her leadership style. She had heard his comment but let it be.

What had gotten her started to really think about her life and her lack of close relationships was the discovery of a lump in one of her breasts. Though after a biopsy the lump proved to be benign, it had given her a real scare, one close family member having recently died of breast cancer. Her decision to apply for the leadership workshop had been a response to the convergence of these two things – the cancer scare and the comment from the chairman about her leadership style.

This executive's frankness as she talked about her life loosened up the group early in the workshop. Many of the participants were touched by the intensity with which she described her feelings and experiences. Because of the strength of her presentation, she made it easy for others to visualize (and empathize with) what she had gone through. Furthermore, many of the themes she touched upon echoed themes in the lives of the others, evoking for many a host of memories and associations.

Her presentation made it quite clear that she was a woman highly motivated to do something about her present situation. Because she realized that her personal life was a mess and that she had to work on her leadership style, she was a good candidate for change. She also revealed herself to be a person with considerable skill, wisdom, and strength, as both her work history and her presentation demonstrated.

In presenting her problems to the group, she expressed considerable emotion, on several occasions wiping tears from her eyes. That indicated that there was a degree of human connectedness. In spite of her being a harsh taskmaster at the office, she could relate well to the other group members and, from what she told us, to her colleagues at work. Psychological-mindedness was not likely to be an issue either. She was clearly interested in better understanding herself. Furthermore, her responses to questions from the group made it clear that she was able to make connections between her present behavior and her past experiences. She seemed to be ready to take the jump, to try to change some of her destructive behavior patterns.

Catalysts for Change

We have looked at how to assess preparedness for the journey of change. Now the question is, Where does that preparedness – that motivation to change – come from? If the human tendency is to resist change, how does the process of change ever get underway? Why does a person's resistance start to weaken?

As we saw in the above case of the CEO, disrupting the relative stability of personality to get the process of change into motion requires a strong inducement in the form of pain or distress – discomfort that outweighs the pleasure of "secondary gains" (psychological benefits such as sympathy and attention) that hanging on to the present situation offers. People must experience a sense of concern about their present situation, whether the trigger be family tensions, health problems, negative social sanctions, an accident, feelings of isolation leading to a sense of helplessness and insecurity, problem behavior at work, distressing incidents happening to someone close, or basic daily hassles and frustrations. Given what had been happening to her, the CEO in our example above certainly had the motivation to do something about her life. She recognized that she would end up as a very lonely person if she continued on her present path.

Surveys of people who have undergone major internal change confirm that a high level of unpleasant emotion (anxiety, anger, sadness, or frustration, for example) exists in the period just prior to change, generally precipitated by a stressor such as one of those listed above. This negative emotion, which brings to awareness the serious negative consequences that can be expected if dysfunctional behavior patterns continue, makes the status quo increasingly difficult to maintain.

When we realize that bad days are turning into a bad year – in other words, that the isolated occurrence of occasional discontent has become a steady pattern of unhappiness – it becomes harder to deny that something needs to be done about the situation. From this point on, every new disturbance is recognized as part of the general pattern of dissatisfaction. Complaints coalesce into a coherent entity. Many people have an "aha!" experience at this stage, a moment when they are finally able to interpret decisively what is happening to them. They see clearly that neither the

passage of time nor minor changes in behavior will improve the situation – indeed, the situation is likely to become even worse if nothing drastic is done about it.

Even the insight that drastic measures are required does not automatically compel us to take action. However, it typically sets into motion a mental process whereby we allow ourselves to consider alternatives to the adverse situation. We all have both a conscious and an unconscious wish for the redress of our grievances. This wish for redress can turn into one of the engines of change, because it helps us realize that we need to do something about our present situation. Having made the transition from denying to admitting that all is not well, we are able to undertake a reappraisal process. Although initially every alternative to the troubling situation appears more frightening than the status quo, gradually a preferable alternative to the stalemate begins to emerge. The hurdles may still seem insurmountable, but at least a goal is in sight.

Accepting the need for change is a necessary first step, but on its own it is no guarantee of action. People need a push, in the form of something that can be described as a "focal event" – a crisis, if you will. Although we typically think of a crisis as something so acute that it is obvious, the focal event that triggers change is sometimes only retrospectively interpreted as a milestone.

The metaphor of the last straw is appropriate here, because it indicates that if a person is prepared – if not actually ready – to take a decisive step, the triggering event can be minor: the final additional element (one among many) that puts matters into focus. Experience suggests that while major events certainly can be focal, the focal event is often a minor occurrence that is seen as focal simply because it enables a discontented person to take that long-delayed first step. Thus it is the catalyst in the change process, whether it is perceived as major or minor to an outside observer. A focal event often involves someone important to the distressed person. In the case of the CEO in our case study, it was the conjunction of problems with her daughter, a cancer scare, and problems at work (including a cautionary word from the chairman of the board) that called her to reevaluate her lifestyle.

Challenge 2: Identifying the Problem

To be able to change, we have to know what it is that we *want* to change. Thus we have to identify our central problem and formulate explicit, trackable improvement goals. When we tell our history to others, we often see a thin red line that began in our past and continues over time into our present. The challenge we face is to identify this thin red line – to clarify what it is all about. That means carefully listening to our own story.

More often than not, the stories we tell about ourselves have to do with seemingly insoluble dilemmas grounded in a negative self-concept or a misguided perception of the world and of others. Though these dilemmas, and the sense of incompetence and low self-esteem that underlie them, contribute to unhappiness and a lack of fulfillment, they generally are not clearly conceptualized in our mind. Rather, they are preconscious and thus only vaguely experienced. What we feel instead are various mixtures of helplessness and hopelessness. So how can we arrive at greater specificity? With the help of others.

At the INSEAD change workshop, the people in the "hot seat" and the "audience" hearing their case presentation talk through issues such as personal identity, and they identify together, in each presenter, specific present-day dilemmas that have grown out of underlying problems of esteem and worth – dilemmas that can be remedied by addressing those problems. These specific dilemmas are then the basis for "contracts" between the each presenter and the rest of the participants.

Major Themes for Executives

Looking back at the hundreds of CEOs and board members who have gone through my change workshop, I can see a number of common themes or change-triggers. Among them are loss, developmental imbalance, interpersonal conflict, symptomatology that reflects inner turmoil (for example, habit disorders, sexual dysfunction, and insomnia), life imbalance, and questions about meaning. Let us look at each in turn.

◆ *Loss.* Loss is a broad theme, inclusive of events and situations that are past, present, and impending (Bowlby 1969; Parkes 1972; Bowlby 1973; Marris 1974; Bowlby 1980). The most dramatic example of loss is the death of an important figure in one's life, or the loss of a spouse through separation or divorce. Such a loss can have enormous life repercussions, as can the loss of one's own health and well-being through illness. The loss of a job (and of one's community of colleagues) can also be devastating. Career setbacks can likewise be experienced as a form of loss.

Regardless of the form that loss takes, its consequences may linger for months or even years in the form of depressive reactions (Solomon 2001) as the person grieves about what could have been, about the poor hand of cards he or she was dealt. The challenge facing victims of loss is how to break out of their depressive cycle, to reframe the situation, to recognize and appreciate alternatives, and to arrive at a more hopeful outlook on life. One way that they can accomplish these things is by establishing new connections, forming new relationships, looking (in the case of career setbacks or job loss) for new opportunities.

◆ *Developmental Imbalance.* Another issue that regularly emerges among the CEOs who participate in the leadership workshop is developmental imbalance, which is the label given when certain expectations about life remain unfulfilled (Erikson 1963; Levinson 1978; Kets de Vries!995; Kets de Vries 1995; Sheehy 1995; Sheehy 1998). Developmental imbalance occurs when a person moves from one social role to another and struggles to adjust to the new role. Consider, for example, the man who one day, realizing with a start that everybody his age is married, fears that he is doomed to bachelorhood – a sorry fate made even worse by his longing to have children. Consider the woman who faces a demotion, the loss of a much-loved job, or retirement before she is ready.

Though, as these examples show, developmental imbalance can strike both on the job and off (and as a later example will show, can interweave job and inter-relational dilemmas), executives are most often plagued by an imbalance between career expectations and actual achievement. Many, having reached a career plateau

somewhere in the lower ranks of the top echelon, doubt that their original dreams of running a company will ever be fulfilled. Is she ever going to be the chairman of the company? Is he ever going to be a member of the board? What can be done now to achieve their career goals? Are there any power games that might help? And if the answers to these questions are negative, how are they to manage the encroaching disappointment? People who fail to cope adequately with such transitions experience their failed dreams as a loss, and their reaction is akin to grief and bereavement.

The issue of developmental imbalance was pointed out to one executive during one of the leadership workshops. This executive repeatedly referred, both in his major presentation and in conversations, to the terrific relationship that he had with his girlfriend. He went to great lengths to explain what a good time they had together. After some questioning it became clear that this relationship had been going on for more than seven years and that the girlfriend was becoming increasingly exasperated by his lack of commitment. During the discussion after his presentation, the problems he experienced with commitment (whatever the context) became increasingly clear. The marriage of his parents had ended in a painful divorce, a factor that was revealed, after some questioning, to play a role in his unwillingness to take the next step with his girlfriend. He spoke of wanting to have children someday, however, and he described his pleasure in playing with the children of his brother, commenting with pride that he was their favorite uncle.

This executive's lack of commitment was not confined to his private life. On the contrary, it spilled over into every hour that he spent at the office. Making decisions was not easy for him. On many occasions others had to push him to decide on closure. Furthermore, he was a great procrastinator even when decision-making was not on the agenda. Although he was now running the business, this pattern of behavior had delayed his career progression.

- *Interpersonal Conflict.* Another area of difficulty that is often identified by workshop participants is interpersonal conflict, perhaps focused on a close friend or spouse or a respected colleague at work. Disputes frequently develop when two intimates (whether colleagues, spouses, parents and children, or good friends) have

nonreciprocal expectations about their interaction and relationship. Interpersonal deficits are often at the core of such disputes. Some people simply lack the skill for initiating and sustaining meaningful interpersonal relationships (Sullivan 1953). Because they do not know how to overcome their shyness, they remain isolated and lonely. Others have the skill to start a relationship but cannot sustain it when the relationship demands true commitment and intimacy or tests the bounds of fidelity and loyalty.

◆ *Symptomatology.* At times, the thin red line that determines a problem area is of a more symptomatic nature (Kaplan and Sadock 1985). In such instances identification of the problem is easier. The range of potential symptoms – all troubling – is enormous, ranging from habit disorders, to sexual dysfunction, to alcohol or drug problems, to insomnia, to phobias such as a fear of flying or of public speaking. The origin of such symptoms varies. Many of them, however, are triggered by long-ago frightening experiences that have long since been forgotten by the conscious mind. Whatever the origin, these symptoms can become so severe that they interfere with everyday functioning and become a significant source of distress.

◆ *Life Imbalance.* Another theme that recurs often in the presentations of senior executives in the leadership workshop is life imbalance (Sheehy 1995; Sheehy 1998). As life passes and children grow up, many people feel increasingly that they are leading a mortgaged life. Finding time for the family becomes an ever-steeper uphill struggle. Executives clinging to the career ladder feel that they are missing out on quality time with their children, missing out on soccer games and teacher conferences and ballet performances. As the children grow older, these executives find themselves increasingly estranged from them.

Though these executives regret missing the family time, they do not know how to regain it. They feel like prisoners of their own ambitions: they like being on the fast track, but they feel guilty about what it means for their relationship with their family. One executive told me that the turning point for him – the event that brought his life imbalance clearly to the forefront of his consciousness – was when he found himself

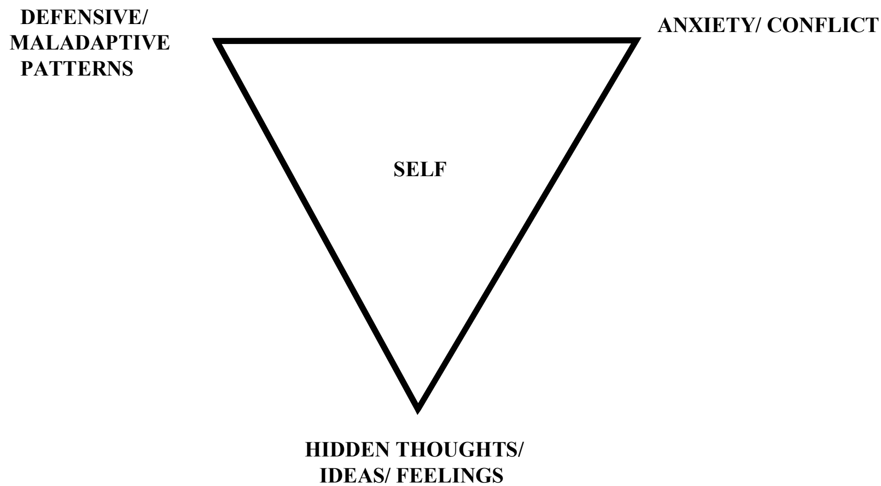
alone with his seven-year-old daughter and discovered that he had nothing to say. He felt uncomfortable with the little stranger beside him. That was his wake-up call.

◆ *Questions About Meaning.* Finally, last but not least, many of the executives in the leadership workshop raise questions about meaning (Frankl 1963; Kets de Vries 2002). What can they do to give their life more meaning? they ask as they survey the accoutrements of their success. Often belatedly, they realize the importance of the words of Carl Jung: "The least of things with meaning is worth more in life than the greatest of things without it." For some, the search for meaning has been a theme throughout their career. For others it has come to attention only recently. This latter group, having been very successful in their careers, suddenly feel a strong urge to give something back but do not know how to proceed. Can they find meaning within the context of work, or must they seek outlets outside work for this kind of gratification? How can they have the biggest impact? What kind of contribution would be most suitable to their personality makeup?

The Triangle of Conflict

To understand conceptually the reasons behind the emergence of a central theme in a person's life, we need to look at the "triangle of conflict" that is part and parcel of the human condition (Freud 1933; Menninger 1958; Malan and Osimo 1992). This triangle – whose three prongs are hidden feelings, defensive behaviors, and conflict – illustrates graphically that each individual experiences conflict due to unacceptable feelings or impulses that create anxiety and lead to defensive reactions. Ironically, defensive behavior stirs in the person only a vague awareness of what he or she is defending against, because the exact nature of the unacceptable feelings rarely reaches consciousness. In fact, that's the *job* of defensive behavior: it works to avoid the awareness or experience of unpleasant thoughts or feelings. Indications of defensive behavior include changing the subject when a certain issue is brought up, denying that there is a problem (or simply ignoring an admitted problem), and rationalizing questionable acts. When we see such indications, our task as psychological detectives is to find out what the person is defending against. What are the underlying feelings and fantasies that drive the person's actions?

Triangle of Conflict



The challenge for the people in the leadership workshop is to overcome defensive barriers and identify their central issue. Fortunately, they do not have to do it alone: a process of *confrontation and clarification* by workshop leaders and fellow group members generally leads to greater specificity of the problem (Greenson 1967; Kets de Vries and Miller 1984). *Confrontation* takes the form of questions directed at issues and patterns of behavior that the presenting participant seems to be avoiding or ignoring. Such questions, and the responses they elicit, make explicit the presenter's defenses, allowing for a better understanding of the underlying feelings and conflicts. In the case of the high-tech CEO profiled earlier, for example, the other participants asked her specific questions about her interactions with women other than her mother. They also prompted her to talk more about her daughter and their relationship.

Clarification is an elaboration of this process whereby the problem brought to the fore by confrontation is analyzed more closely and brought into sharper focus. The CEO, for example, was asked if she tended to have problems managing women. Were her demands toward women different than from men? Was she more combative with men than women? Through a process of summarizing, paraphrasing, organizing, and, very

importantly, associative thinking to the presenter's comments, clarification helps to sort out cause-and-effect relationships and fosters an appreciation of the connections between past and current patterns, setting the stage for various forms of interpretation.

Generally, the personal resolutions that grow out of the confrontation and clarification stages lay the groundwork for a thoughtful, detailed reappraisal of goals and for experimentation with new alternatives to living. Ideas and plans become clearer and more definite in form as a result. The destination of each presenter's sometimes painful, inner journey is increased self-knowledge and a new beginning. By creating greater awareness of a central life theme, confrontation and clarification work to decrease ambiguity about that ultimate destination, thereby leading to greater peace of mind.

Furthermore, because the questions raised show that fellow group members have a genuine interest in what is going on, confrontation and clarification have a supportive effect. The group reaches out to the presenter with a concern and intimacy that he or she typically has not experienced in any context remotely connected with work. A process of empathic bonding takes place. Thus the presenter generally feels deeply understood in reference not only to current difficulties but also to the way he or she is at heart. That the group can understand so much in such a short time gives the presenter a feeling of being truly supported. In the safety of encouraging relationships with members of the group, and with their support and validation, the presenter allows him- or herself to venture ahead on the inner journey.

The benefit of support is much more than simply a feel-good rush. The empathy expressed by others, resulting in a feeling that other people truly care, makes a real difference to someone confronting major issues (Kohut 1971; Kohut 1977). While it is important that the workshop leader be an empathic person, the role of the group is critical. People who are in the hot seat need to feel as if the group has aligned itself with them and will remain beside them for the long haul. And typically the group does just that: participants make an enormous and sincere effort to feel and understand what each presenter feels; they reach in deeply and are truly concerned; they accept the presenter with all his or her frailties and are neither frightened,

depressed, nor disgusted by what they see; and they reveal and talk openly about their own similar experiences. Because of the generosity shown by group members, the presenter feels a deep gratitude and trust reminiscent of earlier experiences in life.

As the high-tech CEO profiled earlier went through the process of confrontation and clarification, one underlying issue that came out had to do with childhood anger toward her mother. At times, she said, she had felt as if she “could kill her.” Acknowledging such a thought is a conflict-ridden proposition, regardless of a person’s age. How much more so for a small child, given her dependence on her mother. Therefore, she repressed such thoughts, keeping them out of conscious awareness. She was also angry with her father for not standing up for her, but that lesser anger she repressed as well, pretending that everything was all right.

In addition to the defense of repression, this woman (and the child she used to be) used displacement. In other words, she redirected the anger she felt for her mother and father toward people who were less “dangerous”: sisters, friends, husbands, daughter, and people at work. She also suffered from what psychologists call “conversion symptoms” – somatic symptoms that have been “converted” from psychic conflicts – in the form of migraine headaches. She needed to identify who it was who was giving her head an ache!

Challenge 3: Unhooking “False Connections”

The interpretive process is complicated by an issue that can be represented by yet another triangle: the triangle of relationships. What this triangle points out is that in every situation there are two kinds of relationships. 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 – what psychologists call the “transference relationship” (Freud 1905; Greenson 1967; Kets de Vries 1989). The concept of transference suggests that no relationship is a new relationship; all relationships are colored by previous relationships. And obviously the relationships that have the most lasting potency, coloring almost every

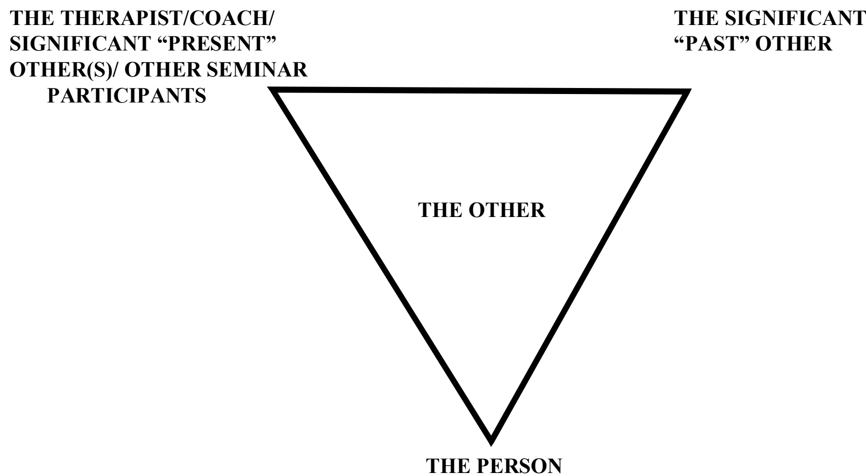
subsequent encounter, are those that we had with our earliest caregivers. Thus our behavior today has its roots in those privileged relationships.

As we relive our earlier, primary relationships again and again, behavior patterns emerge by which we act toward people in the present as if they were people in the past: we behave toward them as children behave toward their parents, for example, forgetting that we are now adults. In other words, without even being aware of it, we are often confused as to person, time, and place. Like it or not, our past relationships have solidified into organizing themes in our personality structure. In our everyday present, we experience attitudes, thoughts, and emotional responses that, though appropriate to the interpersonal processes governing our earlier years, are maladaptive now. Anyone hoping to make sense of interpersonal encounters at anything but an intuitive level needs to understand (and be alert to) transferential processes.

The Triangle of Relationships

In the leadership workshop we use a triangle of relationships – with its three prongs of self, present-other, and past-other – to illustrate the effects of transference. It helps participants understand that feelings they originally experienced toward family members in the distant past are repeated in relation to people in their current life – including, during the workshop, the other participants and the leaders (Malan 1963; Luborsky, Crits-Cristoph et al. 1988; McCullough Vaillant 1997). 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.

Triangle of Relationships



Linking the Past with the Present

In my work with executives, I have discovered that transferential interpretation is a crucial tool in the change toolbox. When the link between present relationships and the distant past is made meaningful – in other words, when a person understands old patterns of interaction and then learns to recognize those patterns in current relationships – the process of change is more likely to be successful. An understanding of transference allows a person to change how he or she superimposes long-standing and maladaptive past patterns onto current relationships.

For example, returning once more to the high-tech CEO featured in the earlier case study, the other workshop participants pointed out similarities between her relationship with her mother and her relationship with female executives at the office, a comparison that made sense to her. Participants also pointed out the transferential implications of the brief but irrational outbursts of anger with which she responded to certain seemingly innocuous comments by other female workshop participants. They helped her see the underlying theme for her angry lashing out: it was as if she were saying, "You're a bad mother; you really don't care how I feel." Another transferential theme that emerged, echoing a memory of her father's behavior, was "Men are weak. Why don't you stand up for me when I've been wronged?"

Both these themes, carried over by the executive from her childhood, were apparent to the participants after they had heard her description of her past. When they pointed out the connections to her, she realized the dysfunctional behavior patterns she had gotten stuck in. And that was half the battle, if not more: the recognition of transference is a crucial point in the change process, because it signals a weakening in defensive resistance. Once the executive could see how her emotional energy had been "transferred" – held over from concerns of the past to aspects of the present and the future – she was mentally ready to take the "toxic" element out of the relationship and tackle a more constructive future.

Perhaps another example would be helpful in illustrating what transference is all about. A workshop participant in a different group – this one a CEO in the telecommunications industry – had a father who was rather autocratic, always wanting to have his way. This executive had discovered, during his growing-up years, that the best way of dealing with his father was not to confront him (that only led to violent arguments), but to comply. With knowledge of this childhood, anyone with a psychological bent could have predicted with a higher than average probability that in a difficult situation with a rather assertive person, the executive would avoid conflict.

Sure enough, he described to the group how irritated he often got at himself for letting people have their way against his better judgment. At times, he said, he let people walk all over him, and he just could not understand why. "I don't know what happened," he said of one interaction with the chairman of his board. "I knew that the organization was making a wrong decision, but I let this man have his way. Do you know how much money we wasted by me agreeing to this insane decision?"

As we talked about transference in the workshop and looked for its footprints in this executive's behavior, he came to understand the transferential nature of his relationship with the chairman. Seeing the extent to which his past behavior influenced his present behavior, he could also see that he had a choice: he could go on automatic pilot and do more of the same, or he could stop the process and say, "There must be a better way of handling this situation. I'm no longer the child I used to be."

Challenge 4: Creating a Holding Environment

Change is so difficult that, even with the best of intentions, people can rarely manage it single-handedly. Asking for help is difficult too, however. Thus the next challenge in the change process is getting others involved.

Techniques of Intervention

In a group setting, no one will speak up and express failings or requests for help unless the setting offers a solid "holding environment" – an environment in which people feel relatively at ease talking about their feelings, anxieties, and concerns. The key feature of a holding environment is *trust,* a critical factor in the change process. At our leadership workshop, the person in the hot seat must perceive the group as a safe place in which to experiment, must believe that the leaders and members of the group have his or her best interests at heart. If the climate of a group is confrontational rather than supportive, some participants are too anxious to open up, "play," and learn. However, as participants in a supportive group gain experience with and confidence in the beneficial effects of collaboratively examining dysfunctional behavior patterns, they feel increasingly free to modify conflict-ridden attitudes and behaviors.

To encourage the sense of trust that a holding environment requires, my fellow workshop leader and I use various techniques, including positive reframing, encouragement, and the anticipation or rehearsal of difficult situations (Watzlawick, Weakland et al. 1974; Winnicott 1975; Weeks and L'Abate 1982). *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 at not only what has gone wrong but also what has gone right in his or her life. Psychological strengths can then be leveraged to deal with the conflicted areas. *Encouragement,* which is a sibling of reframing, encompasses reassurance, praise (which, to be meaningful, must affirm something that the recipient considers praiseworthy), and empathic comments such as, "That must have been very hard for you," "I guess you must have been pretty scared," or, "It sounds like you handled that situation quite well." *Anticipation* allows a person to move through new situations hypothetically and to weigh different ways of responding. By permitting

someone to become better acquainted with a situation, it reduces anticipatory anxiety. *Rehearsal* permits a person to actually practice more appropriate ways of engaging in future events, expanding his or her adaptive repertoire.

As indicated, gaining insight into one's problems is generally not suffcient to bring about change. An empathic stand by itself is not good enough. Constructive suggestions on what and how to change are also needed. Within the holding environment of INSEAD's executive workshop, those suggestions come not only from the workshop leaders but from fellow participants, who point out better ways of doing things in light of what they have heard about each person's story. Given the senior roles that they play in their organizations, many of these participants have great skills in problem-solving. As the case presentations reveal competency gaps in certain individuals, these colleagues can not only point out those gaps but assist in skill acquisition and practice.

All these techniques were used with our high-tech CEO to help her deal with her issues. Anticipation proved to be especially useful in her case. One of the other executives in the workshop presented a dilemma he was facing with one of his subordinates, for example, and he asked the CEO how she would deal with the situation. While in real life she might have simply lashed out at the offending subordinate – that would formerly have been her way of handling such things – she thought the problem through and concluded that she would go to his office and talk with him at the first sign of trouble, to get his side of the issue. She had discovered, she said, that one way of controlling her hair-trigger temper was by asking her "opponent" lots of questions as soon as she got the tense feeling in her chest that she had come to recognize as an early-warning signal of anger. She then cited several possible solutions that she and the subordinate could consider.

The CEO was also greatly helped by efforts to get closer to her daughter – something that she and the group had agreed was a necessity. As she strove to develop a different relationship with her, less competitive and more giving, she found her emotions decreasingly volatile. Between two modules of the workshop, she invited her daughter to join her on vacation, and she asked the younger woman how she would like to

spend the time. They ended up going on a photo safari in Botswana and made great strides in rediscovering each other. They had very meaningful, open conversations, and the CEO felt that for the first time in a long while the two of them really *enjoyed* each other's company. She was thrilled to be forging the link with her daughter that she herself had *not* had with her own mother.

As her case demonstrates, doing for others what one would have liked to have experienced oneself – in other words, making up for past psychological deprivations – often speeds up the change process. Such an approach is particularly effective vis-à-vis one's children, but it also works well with a spouse or with associates at work. Many people discover that the "doing" is more effective than the "receiving."

Making a Public Commitment in the Safety of the Holding Environment

A safe holding environment gives someone engaged in a change effort a good opportunity to make a public commitment about what changes he or she would like to see made. Such a commitment accelerates personal transformation, because it doubles momentum: it not only influences the person making the public commitment (cementing his or her willingness to confront a difficult situation) but also enlists the cooperation of others, thus working as a strong reinforcement for change. If a person states the wish and intent to give up an addiction to alcohol, for example, any listener who approves of that decision will be less likely to offer him or her a drink and will probably make negative comments if one is taken. Furthermore, by taking a public stance, the speaker gives an ultimatum to him- or herself: go through with it (whatever the change may be), or lose face.

In the case of the high-tech CEO, her public commitment in the workshop centered on finding better ways of dealing with her temper. Success would be indicated, the group agreed, by better relationships with the people at work, improved contact with her daughter, and the ability to establish a new and meaningful relationship with a significant other.

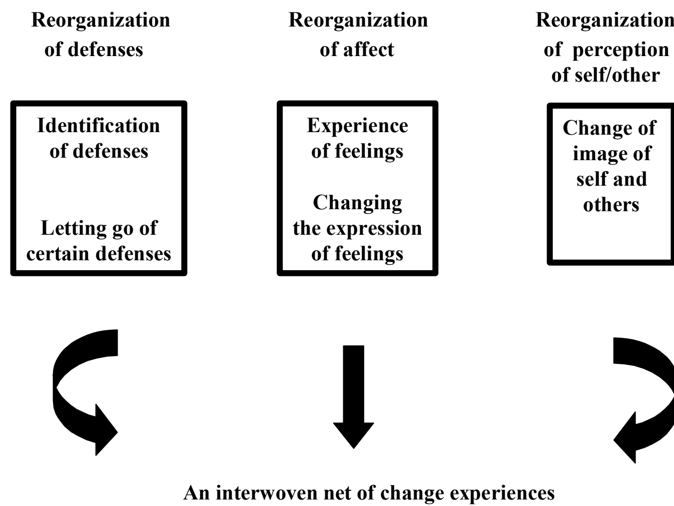
Challenge 5: Actively Working on the Problem

Far-reaching personality changes *can* be achieved through active pursuit of a chosen theme. As we have seen, such changes demand systematic challenges to one's defenses, conscious manipulation of one's transferential reactions, and respect for the complex interconnections of the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the problem. Such changes also require careful timing. Contrary to the usual saying, people striving for personal change must "strike when the iron is cold." Interpretations cannot be heard by, let alone become effective in, an individual in the middle of an emotional crisis. When emotion subdues cognition, integration of interpretation is all but impossible.

Reorganizing the Inner Theatre: The Interwoven Elements of Personal Change

From a conceptual point of view, the three triangles that have been described in these pages (the triangle of mental life, the triangle of conflict, and the triangle of relationships) clarify the dynamics of the change process. As participants in the INSEAD leadership workshop apply the insights derived from these three triangles, they begin to make incremental changes on a number of different fronts: *defense* reorganization, *affect* reorganization, and perception of *self-other* reorganization (McCullough Vaillant 1997). In other words, as depicted in the table that follows, they begin to manipulate the forces that make up the core of their personality: their affect (or feelings), their defensive structures, and their image of self and others.

The Interwoven Elements of Personal Change



Let's take a look at each of the interwoven elements of the change process individually, starting with the restructuring of the personal defense system.

Defense Reorganization. As we saw in our earlier discussion of confrontation and clarification, giving up inappropriate or excessive defensive behavior patterns is a crucial challenge to anyone who wants to change (Wachtel 1982; McCullough Vaillant 1997). The initial step in defense restructuring, and perhaps the hardest one, is the recognition of specific defenses. A person who senses the need for change needs to identify patterns of defensive behavior and then monitor the intensity and duration of that behavior. With that groundwork, he or she can then formulate hypotheses to explain why these defenses emerge.

Most defensive reactions that are now maladaptive were usefully adaptive in the situation in which they were first learned and applied. As we saw earlier, our high-tech CEO came to see that she had a tendency to deny responsibility for her actions, redirect angry feelings toward people other than the true targets, and experience conversion symptoms (such as migraines) when under stress. Why? Because those approaches worked for her in the past. Denial of responsibility, for example, was a successful survival mechanism in the CEO's family; already feeling worthless, the

young girl sensibly avoided anything that would put her in an even worse light with her parents. Migraine headaches and other physical problems worked well as a way of getting some attention from her father, the doctor. Unfortunately, these antiquated solutions – and the parallel solutions that each one of us carries over from childhood into adulthood – are no longer good enough. Rather than *fixing* problems, these learned patterns now *cause* them.

After we recognize our dysfunctional defensive reactions, the next step is to replace them with better coping mechanisms. After weighing the costs and benefits of using certain defenses, we need to consider our alternatives. What would it mean to give up certain defenses, and what would we gain by adopting other, more present-focused approaches?

In my leadership workshop, these issues are tackled by each presenter, with the help of all the group members. For example, when our high-tech CEO described an incident where she publicly humiliated someone and took no responsibility for the consequences, her colleagues in the group asked questions such as, "Looking back, do you think that this was a constructive way of handling the situation?" "Have you found that not thinking about the incident makes you feel better, or is it festering anyway?" "Do you now think that you should have apologized?" "What do you think would have happened if you *had* apologized?" "How else might you have handled the situation?"

Affect Reorganization. The second element of personality change addresses how we experience emotions. If we hope to change, we have to recognize the way we feel and express emotions, and then we have to restructure our affect and its expression in those areas where we are weak. For people who have little experience expressing emotions interpersonally – and there are a lot of them in top management – this step is a difficult one. In the leadership workshop, we have found that the exploration of psychological experiences in fantasy helps in understanding what emotions are all about. This use of fantasy creates greater awareness of how emotions can be used both appropriately and inappropriately in interpersonal situations, and it helps participants bring their emotional reactions into conscious awareness. We also role-play difficult

emotional situations and discuss questions such as, What kind of emotions does an accusation of incompetence (versus a note of commendation) evoke? Do certain types of emotional reactions always lead to conflict, or are there ways of constructively dealing with them? How do we physically feel when expressing a certain emotion? Are there other ways of expressing emotions than those favored by each participant?

Self-Other Perceptual Reorganization. The third element of personal change involves the restructuring of perceptions about the self, especially as the self relates to others. As we interact with our initial caregivers as infants, and then move into a wider social sphere as schoolchildren, we develop expectations about how others will respond to us. These expectations are likely to be self-confirming; in other words, they are likely to *determine* our future interactions with others. The child who is treated with empathic respect and understanding, for example, is likely to grow up into an adult who likes him- or herself, enjoys human interaction, and has few difficulties establishing supportive relationships. In contrast, the mistreated child will most likely understand relationships in negative ways, frequently behaving in a manner that confirms the expectation that others will disapprove of him or her.

Because the way we construct reality tends to create the reality that we confront, having a negative sense of how others perceive us can lead to serious interpersonal problems. To reframe this dysfunctional perception of ourselves, we have to find the origin of the low self-esteem. We need to identify both adaptive and maladaptive inner representations – most of us carry some of both into adulthood – and initiate a self-affirmation process to rebuild our perception of self and others (Winnicott 1951; Kohut 1971; Winnicott 1975; Kohut 1977; Kohut and Wolf 1978; Basch 1980; Basch 1988; Basch 1995).

The supportive holding environment of the leadership workshop helps participants create a more positive and realistic perception of themselves. Group members assist each presenter to cull from his or her story the adaptive and maladaptive inner representations of self and others. They then work to alter the perception of self in a supportive and caring way. In the case of the high-tech CEO, for example, group members pointed out that she was engaged in a self-fulfilling prophecy in regard to

her relationships with men. Because she perceived herself as unlikable (after all, she was an unwanted child), she created situations that *made* her unlikable. Her two failed marriages, as she described them, were living proof: she had picked fights with her two husbands almost from the wedding day on, as if she were testing their attachment to her – and eventually, of course, each man in turn left her. She had proved her theory of being unloved!

The challenge in her case was to change her perception of unlovability. Recognizing her own tendency to *make* herself unlovable was a first step toward change. The next step was to trust other people's view – expressed often (and with conviction) by group members – that she was in fact likable when she let her true self shine through.

Keeping on Track

As people learn new skills within the sately of the leadership workshop, they need to keep on track by repeatedly asking themselves where they are in regard to the interwoven elements of personal change. Questions such as the following can keep them from going astray:

- What habitual defenses do I use to deal with stressful situations? Are there certain patterns that I can recognize? What can/should be changed about these defenses?
- How do I use emotions? How could I express emotions more appropriately?
- How do I perceive myself? Do I feel secure about who I am? What do I think others think about me? Do I see myself in a one-down position? Am I capable of honest self-appraisal?

Honest responses to these questions, and the investigative and affirmative responses of fellow group members, help workshop participants begin to relinquish defenses, express emotions honestly, and perceive self and others in ways that accord with reality. As they become increasingly adept at recognizing patterns of interaction that reinforce maladaptive attitudes and feelings about self and others, they practice their skills at altering those patterns. Therapeutic learning is *experiential* learning: workshop participants change as they work through emotionally painful and ingrained

interpersonal scenarios and as the interaction with fellow group members gives rise to outcomes different from those anticipated (and either feared or hoped for).

Group Members as Implements of Change

Although interpretations by workshop leaders have an impact, interpretations by peers are of particular importance in the leadership workshop. In the group setting, executives often have less resistance to learning about themselves from peers than they have to input from people in positions of authority. Consequently, one of the challenges for the workshop leaders is to resist the impulse to make an interpretation and wait for group members to suggest and develop solutions. As the saying goes, there are two parts to wisdom: having a great deal to say, and not saying it!

As workshop participants move from identifying their problems to actively seeking and implementing solutions, the seminar leaders and group members must continue to challenge each other with questions, confrontations, and clarifications. Furthermore, they must continue to pursue transference interpretations. This process of the unlocking of the unconscious is critical in helping group members work through their problems (Davonloo 1994; Davenloo 2000). Within the group, each individual has the opportunity to re-experience problematic relationship issues in the here-and-now and thereby gain the meaningful insight that precedes greater freedom of action. Frequently, “parallel processes” take place: the group reenacts, not by design but by accident or as the result of subconscious motivation, problems that the participants experience in real life. As these parallel processes are recognized and analyzed, group members learn from seeing new editions of the old relationship problems appearing in the relationship within the group. Successive editions of the problem are worked through as they are expressed in the group setting.

At this “working-through” stage the participants are developing their capacity to examine themselves, understand conflicts and areas of vulnerability, examine their own behavior, and develop more varied and flexible defensive systems that protect them from emerging anxiety. Feeling increasingly safe, they experiment with greater intimacy with others and attempt to pick up the broken thread of their own creative potential. This period of increased creativity and personal growth takes time, however.

Pathological behavior patterns may disappear, only to reappear in another form that must likewise be vanquished.

The group is no less important during the working-through process than it was during the problem-identification process. Achieving change requires many repetitions in the effort to recognize new realities and practice new ways of thinking and acting; it requires experimentation and assessment. In the safety of the group, participants can hear and respond to the feedback of respected peers, gaining a reality check that they can trust. In the group, each member repeats his or her problem in all its richness and nuances (Scott Rutan and Stone 2001), exposing and exploring many variations on a common theme as it plays out in the multiple relationships that the person is engaged in; and as the theme is developed, he or she learns from the feedback about behavior and character that is continuously given.

We have already seen how important it is that the group provide a holding environment. The group must also provide what psychologists call "transitional space." This space has its beginnings in the illusionary transitional world of childhood – a play area created by parents and children between reality and fantasy to help in resolving the developmental tasks of childhood. Transitional space is the incubator of creative thought. It is the place such processes as symbolization, make-believe, illusion, daydreaming, playfulness, curiosity, imagination, and wonder all begin. The challenge in the workshop is to recreate this illusionary space so that participants are encouraged to express themselves in ways that are out of the ordinary.

In this transitional space – this sphere of illusion – each presenter does something to the other participants (and vice versa), each evoking in the other members subtle unconscious reactions known as "countertransference reactions." These countertransference reactions then shape the observations of each member (Heimann 1950; Racker 1968; Etchegoyen 1991). The emotional responses of the group members to any given presentation reveal members' sensitivities and offer evidence of the presenter's attempts (both conscious and unconscious) to evoke certain reactions in others.

This process of subtly transferring feelings and thoughts can also be conceptualized under the heading “projective identification” (Ogden 1982; Thoma and Kachele 1987). Through this primitive form of communication – whether it is labeled “countertransference” or “projective identification” – part of what a person experiences is “expelled” and “deposited” in other people. Thus the initiator of communication gets the receivers to experience a set of feelings similar to his or her own. Such communication leads to reverie, a state in which participants allow themselves to be led by memories and imagination. With those tools, they then build empathy, which enables the receivers of communication to “read” what the initiator has to say. Because intuitive thoughts and ideas are based on these primitive processes, participants are encouraged to “listen with the third ear” – that is, to understand at an intuitive level the presenter’s psychic reality (Reik 1949).

The conjunction of countertransference and empathy allows participants to put themselves in the presenter’s place and experience whatever he or she thinks and desires. Sensitive participants can penetrate, by thought and feeling, the inner life of the presenter, though they retain enough objectivity to create hypotheses and theories about that inner life. The information provided as group members talk about the feelings and fantasies that came up in response to a presentation helps the presenter better understand what his or her key issues are. In fact, these emotional responses to presentations represent one of the most important tools as participants strive to change.

The spectrum of countertransference reactions ranges from subtle responses such as vague feelings of anxiety, sleepiness, boredom, futility, helplessness, or disdain; to more blatant responses such as becoming angry, feeling intimidated, experiencing sexual arousal, or not listening; to dramatic forms of acting out such as blowing up at a fellow member, leaving the room in a huff, or being paralyzed by the fear of losing control and causing harm. Over time, participants become increasingly proficient at translating these subtle (and not so subtle) signals into imagery that has meaning, and they learn to notice not only what is expressed verbally and nonverbally, but also what is avoided.

After the high-tech CEO gave her presentation, fellow group members were asked what feelings it had evoked in them. Anger was the theme that recurred most often. (While every participant's individual feelings are important, a convergence of specific feelings is an additional, important data point.) Some of the participants spoke of an upwelling of their own anger toward the CEO's mother because of the way she had treated her daughter. They created a vivid verbal portrait of the psychological dynamics that had taken place in the executive's girlhood family. That portrait helped them to better understand the CEO's behavior patterns. More important, it helped her to see herself and reinforced her commitment to change.

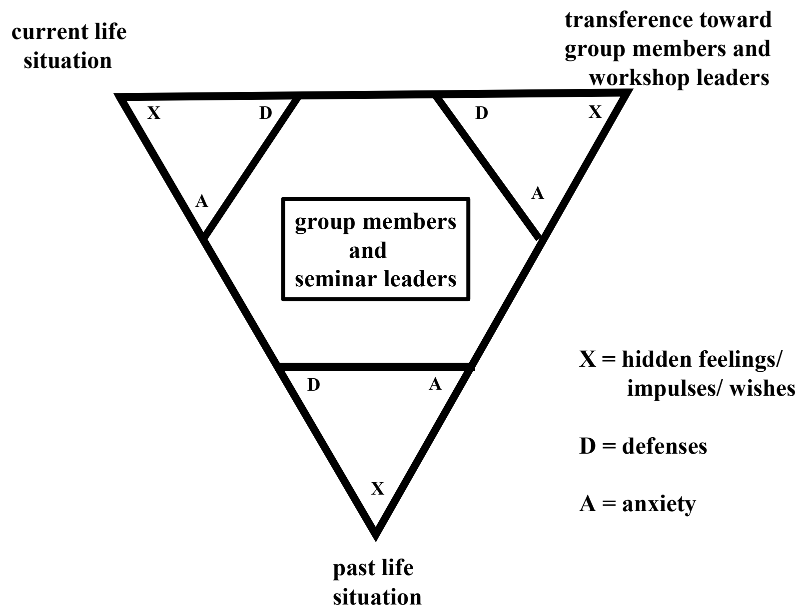
Having come to recognize and understand the CEO's feelings of anger, group members raised a red flag every time the harsher side of her personality came to the fore. If she snapped at another participant inappropriately, for example – whether at a plenary session, in a small group, or in a social setting – group members would comment on and analyze her behavior. Thus every workshop interaction was a new learning opportunity; each encounter with another participant offered an occasion to gain understanding, attempt new behavior, and work through chronic personality problems.

The task of the group is huge indeed. In the complex interpersonal encounter of the workshop, past and present experiences intertwine. Participants have to try to unravel the resulting knots of past life situations, current life situations, and transferential patterns, bringing to awareness hidden feelings and wishes, defensive reactions, and underlying causes of anxiety. They have to integrate in their minds and feelings what was, what is, and what will be. What *was* consists of memories of people and events of importance to each individual, and the feelings attached to those people and events. As participants recall their affect-laden memories, reviewing and picking up the threads of their past, present, and future, they grow in knowledge about themselves, expanding their awareness of what was, what is, and what will be. Succinctly put, by facing up to the past, they acquire mastery of the present and learn to shape the future.

The Triangle of Personal Transformation

The complex transformational process that is the workshop's goal – a process that, as we have seen, interweaves participants' past and current life situations (and the anxieties, defenses, and hidden feelings underlying each) via transferential patterns exhibited in group members' relationships with fellow members and with workshop leaders – are depicted in the following triangle of personal transformation and change (Molnos 1984; Molnos 1986; Malan and Osimo 1992).

THE TRIANGLE OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION



Challenge 6: Consolidating the Change

Once workshop participants have identified problems and practiced alternate approaches to them, they face the critical task of maintaining acquired gains. Gradually, over time, they need to reword additional lines of the script of their inner theatre, all but rewriting the entire thing. But that kind of serious inner transformation can take place only once a new way of looking at things has been *internalized*.

Internalization is a gradual process by which *external* interactions between self and others are taken in and replaced by *internal* representations of these interactions (Pine 1985). In the leadership workshop, telling (and retelling) one's own story and listening

to the stories of others – and recognizing similarities among them all – consolidates this process of internalization. Once participants leave the group, they have to try to hold on to the insights they acquired through the internalization process, even though the group is no longer there to provide external reinforcement.

After this process of internalization has taken place, do people feel changed? Is there a palpable difference? Yes and no. When I talk with people at their follow-up session a year after the workshop, they often say something like, “I'm basically the same.” And yet they often talk of evidence of change. The following quote from a “graduate” illuminates that summary:

“I feel about the same, although I'm more certain about what I can and can't do. I have more confidence in my abilities. I always used to feel like an impostor in my management role. It was as if I were acting in a role that wasn't me. Now, though, I enjoy what I'm doing. Also, I have a more positive outlook on life. I'm much clearer about what my priorities are. My wife tells me that I've changed too, so I guess *something* must have happened. I play much more with my children; I'm no longer so opinionated; I find it easier to open up to others. But have I changed? I really don't know.”

Most participants are able to hold on to the gains they have made, although many mention that some erosion occurs over time. They speak of improved quality of life, something that can be assessed in terms of an increase in self-esteem and adaptive functioning, a decrease in anxiety, and a rebirth of the ability to play. They note that better feelings about who they are allow for a broader vision of their relationships with others and facilitate different and better ways of responding. They reveal, in behavior if not words, that the automatic defense mechanisms with which they used to cope (albeit ineffectively) with life have been replaced by the awareness of choice.

Making the Best of a Poor Hand of Cards

The journey taken in INSEAD's leadership workshop leads, through education, to optimal personal freedom within the demands of reality and society. The challenge participants face is to feel free in a gentle harness, to subordinate their impulsive strivings to controls from the outside until their personal responses unfold into *self*-control. This they accomplish by modifying their inner script, making it their own document, not a script written by others. We all have to own our own lives. That is what mental health is all about.

Workshop participants develop a strong sense of what they are all about – allowing them to achieve growth and maturation – by learning to trust others. The trusted others that they come to know and respect are the guides on their inner journey. Helped by those guides, participants gain a better perspective on their past, their present, their future, their wishes and desires. They discover new patterns of behavior more suited to present-day reality than their self-defeating patterns of behavior and thought were, gaining perspective on these patterns by seeing their feelings and behaviors in context. As a result of these changes, they develop a more flexible, self-directive, and mature way of dealing with others.

One of the lessons I have learned from listening to executives over the years is that all outward success, if it is to be truly appreciated, must be matched by inward success. If we are to attain that inner success, we need faith and confidence in our own powers. We have to realize that living a full life is not the result of having been dealt a lucky hand of cards. On the contrary, a full life grows out of our ability to make the best of even a very poor hand.

The recipe for living life to the fullest – if such a recipe exists – is to laugh heartily and often, play with abandon, appreciate beautiful things, build and maintain deep friendships, take pleasure in family, and enjoy the task at hand. It is the *journey* of life that counts, not the *destination*. How we cope with the obstacles that we inevitably encounter on that journey determines the richness of our life. Participants in INSEAD's leadership workshop learn, through their extensive self-exploration, a lesson that can help all of us: most of our obstacles are self-made. If we want to, we can remove or restructure them. We can learn from experience.

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