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Creating Transformational Executive
Education Programs

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CREATING TRANSFORMATIONAL EXECUTIVE EDUCATION PROGRAMS¹

by

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ABSTRACT

This essay concerns the design of transformational executive programs. A transformational program presupposes a change in behavior of the attending executive so that the latter becomes more effective in personal or organizational change. To understand what influences the transformational process three triangular conceptual frameworks (building on the short-term dynamic psychotherapy tradition) are presented: the mental life triangle, the conflict triangle, and the relationships triangle. The first shows that cognitive and emotional processes need to be taken into consideration to create changes in behavior. The second describes the sources of thoughts and feelings that may prompt anxiety and cause defensive reactions prohibiting change and productive use of talents. The third relationships triangle explains how an individual's previous experiences create patterns of response that are repeated throughout life and can become dysfunctional. Five major challenges in program design are also examined: selecting participants; identifying the focal issue on which participants need to work; the creation of a safe transitional space that enables the change process; using the group dynamic to foster transformation and to arrive at internalization of the change process; and the educational implications for faculty, facilitators, and coaches.

KEYWORDS: Leadership; change; executive education, short-term dynamic psychotherapy; transference; emotions; defensive reactions; transitional space; identity laboratory.

OVERT AND COVERT AGENDAS IN EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Our universe is change; our life is what our thoughts make it.

—Marcus Aurelius

It is in changing that things find purpose.

—Heraclitus

Executives frequently join executive education programs, particularly those focusing on leadership or general management, for reasons that go beyond the obvious ones of gaining additional knowledge and insights about the effective operation of organizations: they often look for support or a push in order to make a change in their behavior that allows them to be more effective in their work and life. In fact, in the not so distant past personal development and transformation were the focus of many executive development efforts, as exemplified by the T-group methodology (e.g., Bradford, Gibb, & Benke, 1964; Golembiewski, & Blumberg, 1973). This approach that involved small groups that provided their own personal data for a facilitated discussion within a safe environment of (usually) strangers eventually gave way, however, to more rational, fact-based impersonal knowledge transfer, at least within the context of business schools. Executive education became seen as a source of new cognitive content (theories, models, and conceptual tools) that would be valuable for the success of the organization sending delegates to executive courses.

Recent literature on management development suggests, however, that many executives enter such programs to pursue very personal agendas, in addition to standard reasons of learning new ideas or refreshing their knowledge of a particular field. As suggested by Long (2004), managers often see such programs as an opportunity to take stock of their life and career, and

to solve personal problems. Our personal experience, after many years of research, teaching, and consulting executives worldwide, particularly in open enrollment programs, bears this out. Reading application files and conducting admission interviews, we have observed many executives who view such programs as a “chance for self-renewal”, a “source of new energy”, an “opportunity to experiment with and evaluate their plans or fantasies”, or “preparation for a new role”. Ibarra (2003) writes that taking an educational program is one of the ways people can successfully use to start developing a new work identity. A recent analysis of an extended open-enrollment program in a leading business school suggests that people, in addition to gaining new knowledge and finding out about latest thinking in particular fields of expertise or interest, look for opportunities to facilitate a personal or professional transition, test suitability of a new professional or personal direction, improve their relationships with critical stakeholders, and develop a foundation for a new emerging identity (Korotov, 2005). To achieve those goals, participants, it seems, want to get out of an executive course more than just cognitive input or pure sensitivity training.

A quick look at the program offerings at business schools reveals that many of them claim the transformational nature of their executive education courses, and position consumption of such programs as a special kind of experience that goes beyond purely cognitive enrichment. The transformational nature of executive programs, particularly general management or leadership ones, as follows from course descriptions, involves identifying new opportunities for self and the company, regaining energy and interest in one’s work, making changes in personal leadership behavior, increasing effectiveness of relationships with people around, finding new ways of mobilizing employees towards goals, developing a new identity of the executives involved, etc. Learning and development professionals are increasingly asking for educational interventions that would support organizational change and help leaders transform themselves and their companies.

What makes an executive program then a successful opportunity for transformational attempts, and, potentially, for a successful change within the organization that sends participants to executive education? For a program to be truly transformational, at the outcome, participants need to be able to start doing something new at work or to change the way they exercise their management functions. That requires from the executive making personal changes at the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral levels. For example, participants who feel that such a program was a true change opportunity for them report subsequently not only having learned new theories, tools, and methods, but also having developed a believe in their ability to implement those new ideas in their organizations, and having started behaving in a new way at their workplace and beyond (Korotov, 2005). For this to happen, the program designers need to go beyond pure intellectual knowledge transfer. They need to have an emotional impact. We believe that in order to have such an impact, educators need to take into account the internal theater of the participants; they need to help executives identify the forces that drive their behavior and support or prevent changes in it. Moreover, they need to attend to the intra-psyhic and interpersonal themes that provide stimuli for growth or cause conflicts.

Participants in executive programs often go back to school to explore how to best use their strengths and talents, how to avoid unproductive allocation of their time and energy, and how not to miss out on emerging opportunities. The motivation for taking the program is often an excitement about one's capacities and new horizons or, in some cases, anticipatory anxiety of possibly not being successful and missing one's chances. For example, many participants join programs when they are promoted to a significantly higher level of executive responsibility or put on a high-flyer or succession lists. The issues of using one's opportunities and potential in full are linked to the inner theater of the individuals, as their successful resolution often requires giving up something from one's past and gaining something new, repositioning oneself in the relationships with others (organizational or personal stakeholders), and

eventually developing a new representation of self (cf., Ibarra, (2003); Ibarra & Lineback (2005)). These tasks often involve developing a new identity which starts with reworking one's own view of self. As suggested by Dubouloy (2004), the context of executive education allows participants to look for what they consider to be their true self and develop it further.

Analysis of our experience (Kets de Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007; Korotov, 2005) also suggests that many of the participants in executive development programs are often struggling with several complicated personal and organizational issues, including conflicted work relationships, the management of disappointment related to career set-backs, doubts about their managerial capabilities, feeling like a fake or failure, and concerns about boredom and burnout on the job. Additionally, many suffer from narcissistic problems. Executives subjected to narcissistic disorders have a tendency to surround themselves with yes-men and women, creating an environment that reflects their own idea of reality, a kind of narcissistic soup that endangers the future of their organizations. Others may have realized that they have grown too comfortable in their current position, and lost the capacity for out-of-the-box thinking, making them incapable of dealing with discontinuous change in a creative way. Still others, while feeling that they are doing fine in the strategy-making process, are failing miserably on the execution side (Kets de Vries, 1989, 2001, 2005, 2006; Khurana, 2004; Hamel, 2002).

In some instances, the executive (and/or others in the organization) becomes aware of these dysfunctional behavior patterns, and such awareness sometimes leads to a recommendation or a request to participate in an executive program. In others, although an individual's dysfunctional behavior may not yet be visible, he or she feels a sense of unease, and that some form of preemptive action is needed to forestall future trouble. A leadership development program is often seen as a possible solution to tackle these issues, with the explicit motivation

often put in application forms as “desire to refresh my knowledge” or “need to follow the latest thinking in the field”, “search for new ideas”, or simply “become a more effective leader”.

Transformational programs come in handy at “natural” transition points, such as moving to general management or taking charge of a foreign subsidiary, or being included in the succession plan. There also are various crisis points that can bring the realization that some form of change is needed, typically: loss of some kind (separation, divorce, missed promotion opportunity, or job loss); developmental imbalance (certain important life expectations remain unfulfilled); interpersonal conflict; symptomatology reflecting inner turmoil (eating or behavioral disorders, sexual dysfunction, and insomnia); work/life imbalance; and fundamental questions about the meaning of existence and actions (Frankl, 1962). “Taking stock of my achievements so far and identifying opportunities for the future”, “taking some time to think and reflect”, and “looking at how I compare with other executives” are often the themes noticeable in essays and personal interviews that we use for participant admission process.

Our direct experience has been primarily with participants in leadership development and general management programs. The issues associated with finding one’s true self, exploring career and life options, or correcting for imbalances, seem pretty legitimate in these types of executive courses. Nevertheless, programs that deal with the functional sides of business, e.g., marketing, operations, technology, and finance, also need, in our opinion, to take into account the emotional and behavioral sides of executive learning and development, if they are to have a transformational effect on the participants. Our colleagues teaching in functional executive programs often mention that participants enthusiastically embrace new models and ideas on the intellectual side, but lament that implementing those may be really difficult in their

particular company. Relatively frequently participants mention that they wish their boss had attended the program – a sign of disbelief in the executives’ own capacity to drive change. If we truly believe that executive programs help bring about positive change in organizations, we should, then, as a minimum, provide the participants not only with good models and ideas, but also with the drive and energy to implement them. In line with Levinson (2007), we concur that executives often need support in gaining psychological freedom of making choices of their own and being responsible for their own behavior.

FOSTERING DEVELOPMENTAL NEEDS: THE THREE TRIANGLES

Once in an executive program, faculty have an opportunity to help participants deal with the perceived needs to grasp opportunities associated with becoming effective in implementing new ideas, developing new executive behaviors, or getting rid of dysfunctional behavior patterns and discovering ways for setting the stage for their personal transformation process (hopefully also leading to successful transformation in organizations). To enable change to occur (i.e., to help participants start implementing new ideas or experimenting with new behaviors), in addition to thinking about the functional content side of the program, the specific developmental needs of the participating executives have to be taken into consideration in the program design and delivery. In guiding executives through a transformational program of this type we have found a three triangle framework borrowed from the psychodynamic tradition extremely helpful in conceptualizing the process. These triangles can be described as the mental life triangle, the conflict triangle, and the relationships triangle.

The first triangle identifies the need to take both cognitive and emotional processes into consideration if we want to create changes in behavior. The second describes how psychic

conflict arises from unacceptable feelings or thoughts that prompt anxiety and defensive reactions. The relationships triangle explains how an individual's early life experiences create patterns of response that are repeated throughout life.

The Mental Life Triangle

The mental life triangle dictates the script of a person's inner theater and links cognition, emotion, and behavior. It is a distillation of peoples' responses to their motivational need systems, and it is often the basis on which choice is made (Lichtenberg & Schonbar, 1992). As change is about making new, different choices, be it about managing people, confronting competitors' aggressive attacks, or introducing a new process or system, executives have to be swayed both cognitively *and* emotionally for any change effort to be successful. People need to understand cognitively the advantages that a change effort will bring or the risks of not changing. Cognition alone, however, is not enough. For example, Levinson (2006: 92-98) has identified twenty psychological dimensions important for executive functioning, where qualities that he groups under the "thinking" dimension go hand in hand with "feelings and interrelationships" and specific "outward behaviors". People also need to be touched emotionally. Affect and cognition go hand in hand in contributing to behavior patterns. Moreover, executives also need to learn to touch others emotionally in order to get buy-in and facilitate change in their organizations.

In designing and running executive programs we have wrestled with the question of how best to help senior executives become even more effective, how to help them start developing a new identity that is congruent with new roles or opportunities ahead, or how to avoid possible derailment. For that purpose our efforts are directed towards turning an executive program into some kind of an identity laboratory that provides executives with the opportunity to "play," to climb out of the day-to-day routine they find themselves in, helping them to pick up

the threads of new opportunities or stagnated development. A program can help individuals assess their strengths and explore ways of using them most productively. Recent work on positive organizational psychology put a big emphasis on capitalizing on strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Realizing one's strengths and not being afraid of working on them is not always easy, however. Sometimes people need to spend some time discovering their strengths and getting confirmation from others that those are the assets that can and should be actively used. An identity laboratory is a psychologically safe but stimulating environment within which individuals can play with their sense of self, stage mental experiments, discuss behavioral scenarios with people around them (faculty and other participants), even do new things right in the course of the program, and get immediate feedback. The course becomes a laboratory space where an executive "tests" new knowledge, feelings, and behaviors before taking them to the real world. The notion of identity laboratory draws on Winnicott's (1951) work on "transitional space" and van Genneep's (1909) concept of liminality that have recently been brought into work on identity, learning, and management development (e.g., Ibarra, 2005, Kets de Vries, 2006; Kets de Vries, Korotov, and Florent-Treacy, 2007, Korotov, 2005).

For those who are motivated by positive opportunities or freshly brewing ideas, an executive program can provide reinforcement of their fantasies and ideas, ranging from making intrapreneurial contributions to completely overhauling their departments or organizations. Those executives who find themselves in a psychic prison, trapped by their job or personal circumstances in a life devoid of learning, playfulness, creativity and pleasure, may gain an opportunity to explore ways of personally reinventing themselves in this kind of executive program. Thus, executives often mention that they start to notice opportunities that are rather obvious from outside but often invincible from within (e.g., Korotov, 2005). Our challenge as program designers is to help executives by guiding them to the realization that they *do* have

options, that they *can* make choices, and that these options and choices are often within close reach, the task, in which according to Levinson (2007) being psychoanalytically informed can be very helpful.

Outside the executive education domain, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists are traditionally known to help people to make long-lasting personal change. Dubouloy (2004) suggests that executive education clients can benefit from using psychoanalytic methodology, concepts and insights within the context of executive programs. Borrowing from the psychodynamic tradition has become an accepted way of helping executives in their growth and development, for example, in executive coaching (Kilburg, 2000; Peltier, 2001, Levinson, 2007) In line with this, years of working with senior managers have made us realize that signing up for a group seminar designed for senior executives is seen as an acceptable way of dealing with internal issues – both opportunities and challenges. It is often easier than making an appointment with a helping professional, even if he or she is an executive coach. Until recently working with a coach was seen as a sign of weakness and something being wrong with the executive, particularly in cultures where asking for help with one's behavior or emotions is not that common. Besides, unlike in individual coaching sessions, executive programs also provide participants with the knowledge and professional tools that are often indispensable for their effective executive functioning. We have noticed that participants often decide to get a coach *after* an executive program as a source of further support in implementing their ideas generating from the executive program. Many say that they wouldn't have started working with a coach without having experimented with it in the executive program. Transformational programs, therefore, offer both factual knowledge and tools and resources (such as coaching) for implementing it in practice. But this does not mean that work with executives in such a course is going to be easy. It is always a challenge for faculty to create a meaningful and enduring learning experience offering both stimulating

content and very personal exploration and experimentation opportunities relating the content to the executive's actions at work.

In helping executives on this journey towards change in their personal behavior, as well as towards their increased effectiveness as instruments of change in organizations, executive education providers need to find non-traditional ways to overcome participants' resistance to looking deeper into themselves or seeing their organizational issues through the lens of their own development and leadership behavior. This often necessitates making people aware of issues of a preconscious or unconscious nature without, however, turning a transformational programs into therapy. Furthermore, faculty also need to ensure that changes in behavior patterns have a chance to be lasting, to turn into something more than temporary "flights into health"—transient highs of the sort produced by the pulp psychology of too many self-help guides and dubious life coaches.

The Conflict Triangle

A part and parcel of the human condition is the "triangle of conflict," the three sides of which are hidden feelings, defensive behaviors, and conflict (Malan, 1963, 1976; Malan & Osimo, 1992). Every individual experiences conflict due to unacceptable feelings or ideas that create anxiety and lead to defensive reactions, including in situations related to one's managerial effectiveness. Often defensiveness leads to failure of using the opportunities available. Ironically, defensive behavior stirs only a vague awareness of what an individual is protecting him- or herself against, because the exact nature of the unacceptable feelings rarely reaches consciousness. In fact, the suppression of unacceptable feelings can be viewed as the *task* of defensive behavior: it works to avoid the individual becoming aware of them, or experiencing them. Indications of defensive behavior include changing the subject when certain issues are raised, denying that there is a problem (or simply ignoring an admitted problem), and

rationalizing questionable acts. When we see these indications in people's reactions to models, ideas, or best practices presented in executive programs, our task, beyond just sharing our knowledge with them, is to help participants act as psychological detectives in order to find out what the person demonstrating such behaviors in response to new ideas is erecting defenses against.

To make the most of the executive education experience and transfer their learning to real changes in organization, executives often need to recognize and overcome defensive barriers (their own and those of people around them) and identify the central issue(s) they are trying to deal with. Fortunately, in a transformational executive program, particularly the one where the role of executive as a leader bringing in new ways of doing things into the organization is given due time and consideration, they are not alone in this particular task. We often rely on a process of *confrontation and clarification* by faculty and fellow participants through which a greater specificity of the problem will be created (Menninger 1958; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Etchegoyen, 1991; Kets de Vries, 2006). Participants in the programs we have in mind experiment with different ways of interacting with others, using the other members of the seminar as 'mirrors' in a plenary or small group setting. *Confrontation* takes the form of questions about issues and patterns of behavior that the presenting participant appears to be avoiding or ignoring. These questions, and the kinds of responses they elicit, help to make the participants' defenses more explicit, allowing a better understanding of the underlying feelings and conflicts, and discovering why certain things work or fail to work in the organization led by the participant.

Positioning an executive program as an identity laboratory, a safe and stimulating place for experimentation, presupposes that many risky things can be done within the psychological safety boundaries of this setting. In these workshops, many executives report to find

themselves for the first time in an environment where they can be both genuinely challenged and supported without hidden agendas and/or career or personal repercussions (Kets de Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007; Korotov, 2005). What makes the process effective is that each executive finds him- or herself in a challenging situation, but also one where people care. The people around, ideally, are also seen as capable of understanding the executive's issues. The faculty and the other participants can then serve as legitimate guiding figures and sparring partners helping the executive deal with opportunities and challenges.

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

Generally, the personal resolutions that grow out of the confrontation and clarification stages lay the groundwork for a considered and detailed reappraisal of professional and, at times, life goals, and for experimentation with new alternatives to deal with organizational and personal issues. Going through this process also furthers the development of ideas, refines approaches to their implementation, and sharpens action plans. By creating greater awareness of a person's inner theater and his or her responses to actions of others, confrontation and clarification work to decrease ambiguity about what an individual really would like to accomplish, leading to greater peace of mind and more focused actions steps. The empathy and support expressed by the other participants, the appreciation that other people truly care, encourages the person to embrace experimentation and, eventually, take greater control of their executive behavior.

While it is important that the faculty leading these seminars remain empathic, the supportive role of the group is critical. We see the group as a powerful learning resource for the participants. Unlike in individual executive coaching, per se a powerful developmental tool, executive programs can offer a combination of content, additional implementation- or behavior-related input from faculty, facilitation by leadership coaches, and, very importantly, significant input and influence from the group of other executives participating in the program (e.g., Kets de Vries, 2005). People who are engaged in self-exploration and experimentation need to feel that other group members, executives similar to them, are going or have gone through similar issues, and are supporting them in dealing with change. And, just as importantly, ideally they need to be assured that these people are not there on a temporary basis but could be there for the long haul. Therefore, a transformational executive program should lay the foundation for post-program interaction of participants, for example in the form of peer coaching elements of which can be practiced by participants in the program (Korotov, 2006) or through encouraging post-program communication or alumni activities.

The Relationships Triangle

The relationships triangle points out that all of us, in all situations, have to deal with two kinds of relationship (Freud, 1905; Malan, 1963; Greenson, 1967; Malan & Osimo, 1992; Molnos, 1995). First, there is the “real” relationship between the person and the “other”—a relationship between two colleagues at work, for example, or between an employer and an employee. This real relationship becomes the context for another, more elusive relationship grounded in the past—what psychologists call the “transference relationship.” The concept of transference suggests that no relationship is a new relationship, and that all relationships are colored by previous relationships (Freud, 1905; Racker, 1968; Luborsky, Crits-Cristoph et al., 1988; Luborsky & Crits-Cristoph 1998). Obviously, the relationships that have the most

lasting potency, coloring almost every subsequent encounter, are those that we have with our earliest caregivers. Our adult behavior has its roots in those privileged, early relationships.

As we relive our earlier, primary relationships again and again, behavior patterns emerge that direct the way we act toward people in the present: although we are now in a very different situation as adults, our responses are still fundamentally those conditioned in our early childhood. In other words, without even being aware of it, we are often confused about person, time, and place. Like it or not, our past relationships have solidified into organizing themes in our personality structure. In our everyday life, we experience attitudes, thoughts, and emotional responses that, although appropriate to the interpersonal processes governing our earlier years, may have become maladaptive. Anyone hoping to make sense of interpersonal encounters at anything but an intuitive level needs to understand (and be alert to) these transference processes, as they sometimes can create obstacles on our ways to realizing our aspirations.

Executive programs centered on leadership sometimes use the relationships triangle—with its three sides of self, present-other, and past-other—to illustrate the effects of transference. It helps participants understand that the earliest feelings they experienced toward others are repeated in relation to people in the present—including, for the duration of the program, the program itself, the other participants and the faculty. This triangle provides a conceptual structure for assessing patterns of response by pointing out the similarity of past relationships to what happens in the present. It helps explain reliance on certain behavioral patterns that may or may not be optimal under current circumstances and sheds light on certain interpersonal issues that the executive may be experiencing at work and at home. Transference interpretation is a crucial tool in the change toolbox. When the link between present relationships and the past is made meaningful—in other words, when a person

understands old patterns of interaction and then learns to assess functionality or dysfunctionality of these patterns in current relationships—the process of transformation and change is more likely to be successful. An understanding of transference allows a person to change how he or she superimposes long-standing past patterns onto current relationships.

CHALLENGES OF DESIGNING TRANSFORMATIONAL PROGRAMS

Our experience and recent research (e.g., Dubouloy, 2004; Kets de Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007) suggest that a leadership program within the context of a business school creates an opportunity for an executive to look into the patterns of his or her behavior and start the process of self-exploration. After all, everybody accepts, at least on a rational level, that leading others involves understanding oneself and the way we present ourselves in interactions with others. An inclusion of a module or workshop that deals with the challenges of practical implementation of models and concepts could become a legitimate addition even to a functional executive course that goes beyond the human side of the enterprise. Nevertheless, for a true understanding and transformation of one's own behavior to take place, a number of challenges need to be addressed in the design and delivery of transformational executive programs.

The Selection of Participants

The first challenge concerns the criteria for selecting program participants prepared to engage in a change effort. In order to create a safe environment where people can play with cognitions, emotions, and behavior, participants need to be willing to engage in self-exploration and self-experimentation. Given the stress that these programs put on their participants, only relatively healthy people will have the psychological strength required to participate and, importantly, be of help to themselves and others. Fortunately, many

successful executives possess a considerable degree of emotional stability. In spite of that, however, we need to be vigilant in assessing the executive's capacity to gain from such transformational programs.

Among our criteria for acceptance are: the level of motivation to learn and change; the capacity to be open and responsive; interpersonal connectedness; emotional management skills; a degree of psychological mindedness; the capacity for introspection; responsiveness to observations of others; the ability to tolerate depression or anxiety; and flexibility. Although truly assessing all of the above criteria when selecting participants is often impossible, some proxy indicators for them can be obtained through a combination of personal interviews with the program faculty and assessment through reflective essay writing. The process of application preparation and interviewing gives the candidate a sneak preview of the program he or she is applying for, and the opportunity to evaluate the initial fit between the program and his or her developmental needs. An in-depth acceptance process also allows faculty to estimate whether the candidate will be able to cope with the psychological demands of the program and whether he or she will fit with the group. This pre-program work may become the first step in the change process, as it brings many psychological issues to the fore. If people are not ready to explore their personal responsibility in making things happen in organizations, a program that positions itself as a transformational one may not be right for them.

Finding the Focal Issue for One's Personal Change Efforts

The second challenge concerns the identification of the focal opportunity or challenge that each participant needs to work on and how to fit this into the overall structure and content of the program. In order to achieve or change something, executives need to be clear about what

it is that they *want* to achieve or change. They have to identify their central issue(s) and need to be able to formulate explicit, tractable goals. We have noticed, for example, that when people tell their history to others (and listen to the stories of the other participants), they are often able to identify specific themes that began in their past and continue over time into the present. Their challenge (which is also a challenge for faculty and other participants) is to identify these themes. This means not only having a better understanding one's own story but also making sense of other people's stories. We have noted that, more often than not, the stories people tell about themselves center on seemingly insoluble dilemmas grounded in perceptions of their own world and the world of others, or on barriers to realizing their dreams.

As programs are put together, we put a major emphasis on the personal narrative of participants (Loewenberg, 1982; Spence, 1982; McAdams, 1993; Rennie, 1994; McLeod, 1994). Telling life stories becomes a way of exploring the self, leading to questions like who am I?, where am I going?, and how will I get there? Telling stories is a way of working through internal issues and developmental challenges. It is also a way to arrive at meaningful career or personal life integration or at a coherent understanding of what happens in the participant's organization. Additionally, *listening* to others' stories is another highly effective way of understanding one's self and/or challenges of one's own workplace, and a powerful tool for managers at all levels.

In order to use the benefits of story-telling, opportunities must be created for people to tell their stories and for the audience (the other participants) to identify the issues together, and talk them through. Stories reveal specific present-day dilemmas that have grown out of underlying dilemmas that often can be resolved by addressing those deeper issues. These

dilemmas will be the basis for “contracts” for reflection and action between the presenter and the rest of the participants.

Executive program that we run strive to create opportunities for each participant to take a “hot seat” and present their stories to the rest of the class, or participate in small group coaching sessions in which participants take turns to present their stories, supported by a number of exploratory tools, such as personal self-portrait, a 360-degree leadership feedback package, a review of personal non-anonymous feedback from work and non-work environments, and observations and reflections of other participants (for a detailed description of the methods see Kets de Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007).

Trust is, of course, essential for such programs and the old Hippocratic dictum—“Do no harm”—is constantly stressed. As the program unfolds, participants gradually develop the trust necessary to be able to open up and learn from each other. We have observed that programs consisting of several modules that give people an opportunity to interact with each other over a longer period of time (both in class and through structured out-of-class activities, like working together on assignments or participating in personal case-study discussions via conference calls) have a significantly higher chance of making a lasting impact on executives than the temporary highs created by one-shot events. Such programs create conditions for people to foster longer-term relationships with fellow participants who may eventually form a pool of their peer coaches to rely on in implementing one’s action plans after completion of the executive program.

Creating Transitional Space

The third challenge concerns the creation of a safe experimentation environment, some sort of a transitional space where exploration is allowed and encouraged (Winnicott, 1951;

Dubouloy, 2004; Korotov, 2005). Exploring oneself, one's emotions, and behavioral patterns, even if it takes the form of discussing organizational issues through the eyes of the executive concerned, may be a stressful undertaking. Change is difficult, and changing oneself is often the most difficult task executives have to handle in their life or career. Even the best-intentioned people rarely manage it single-handedly. Asking for help is difficult, too, especially for successful executives who are closely watched by their internal and external organizational stakeholders. So a major challenge of executive education providers concerned with creating transformational programs is how to get others involved in helping the executive initiate and carry through the process of change.

To encourage the sense of trust and support that the holding environment of a transformational program requires, executive education providers can use various techniques, including positive reframing, encouragement, and the anticipation or rehearsal of difficult situations. *Reframing* is a cognitive technique used to assist people in diffusing or sidestepping a painful situation, thus enhancing self-esteem. An essential part of reframing is assessing a person's strengths—looking at what has gone right in his or her life (Seltzer, 1986; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Psychological strengths can then be drawn on to deal with the conflicted areas. *Encouragement*, which is closely related to reframing, encompasses reassurance, praise (which, to be helpful, must affirm something that the recipient considers praiseworthy), and empathic comments (Rogers, 1951). *Anticipation* allows a person to move through new situations hypothetically and to weigh different ways of responding. Allowing someone to become better acquainted with a situation reduces anticipatory anxiety. *Rehearsal* allows a person to practice more appropriate ways of engaging in future events, expanding his or her adaptive repertoire (Kilburg, 2000). The purpose of all these interventions is to help the person acquire a greater sense of self-

efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and get engaged in thinking through new opportunities and discussing them within the program.

Constructive suggestions about what and how to change are also needed. Within the executive program, those suggestions should come from both faculty and fellow participants, who can point out better ways of doing things, building on what they have learned both through classroom sessions and listening to each others' stories (both in structured course activities and during course-related social events, such as dinners). Unsurprisingly, many participants have great problem-solving skills. A constructive use of the collective mind, heart, and experiences of participating executives requires intensive interactions and ample opportunity to work with one another and faculty. Often a team of professors, executives in residence, and trained leadership coaches is required to guide and facilitate fruitful interactions among the participants who may not necessarily be accustomed to working so intensely on their own and others' issues that often involve an emotional component.

A safe holding environment gives the individual experimenting with change possibilities a great opportunity to make a personal commitment in front of caring fellow participants about what actions he or she would like to take. This sort of commitment accelerates the personal transformation process, because it doubles momentum: it not only influences the person making the public commitment (cementing willingness to embrace an opportunity, capitalize on a strength, or confront a challenge) but also enlists the cooperation of others, a strong reinforcement for change, and creates a network of support. By taking a public stance, the speaker issues a self-ultimatum: go through with the opportunity or change, or lose face. Facetiously, we sometimes say that our major allies in the change process are the forces of shame, guilt and hope.

Sometimes people can start the process of change by staging small experiments with their potential selves (Ibarra, 2003). Again, a multi-modular program allows participants to try new behavior patterns, experimenting outside the class, and then reporting back to the group on the results and learning points of the experiment they staged. Further clarification of goals then takes place, new alternatives are assessed, and new commitments can be made.

Making Change Last

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

Internalization is a gradual process by which *external* interactions between self and others are taken in and replaced by *internal* representations of these interactions. In our leadership programs, telling (and retelling) one's own story and listening to others' stories—and recognizing similarities among them all—are aimed at consolidating this process of internalization. Work between the modules, conference calls with other participants and peer coaching sessions held as part of the learning process should also contribute to internalization. Again, multi-modular programs allow more opportunities for 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 and faculty are no longer there to provide external reinforcement. If the program experience encourages the participants to maintain their network for future support, that can also be seen as a sign of internalization.

What we consider a good outcome from a program is getting reports from participants about what they are trying to implement in the organization or in their personal career and life efforts after the course. Very often this involves not only a change in the content of what they do, but also new processes, new ways of relating to self and others. Sometimes former participants start a parallel career experiment (cf. Ibarra 2003), get a new responsibility or make a change in jobs – in most cases perceived as a positive step – and they try to implement the content and processes learned in their new positions. We also hear from some participants that they *finally* implement the plan that they had had in their head (or even on paper) for quite some time, but were reluctant to start working on. Yet at times we hear that people fall back into old behaviors, or fail to gain intra-organizational support for what they try to achieve. What is encouraging, however, is that some people even under these circumstances try to use a variety of lenses, including their personal inner theater-related one, for analyzing the reasons for their failures and gaining new insights for success in the future.

Having the Right Faculty

The final challenge concerns the faculty, facilitators, and leadership coaches who are involved in the process of creating an impact-oriented executive education program. Managing this sort of programs demands the kind of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are not typically found in a traditional executive educator. One theoretical approach that offers considerable promise in accelerating the process of change has come from experiments in short-term dynamic psychotherapy and group psychotherapy (Mann, 1973; Sifneos, 1979; Rosenbaum, 1983; Horowitz, Marmor et al, 1984; Strupp & Binder, 1984; Yalom, 1985; Gustavson, 1986; Molnos, 1995; Groves, 1996; Scott Rutan & Stone, 2001; Rawson, 2002). This therapeutic approach provides a different route than long-term psychotherapy in helping people acquire insight into the way various life events and ongoing experiences contribute to their issues. Obviously, goals of executive education are different from those of therapy. Nevertheless,

recent thinking on executive development suggests that managers need *to be helped* to recognize their talents and strengths and use them without the feeling of guilt. They also need *to be helped* to recognize their irrational behaviors that may lead to negative reactions from people around (Levinson, 2007). Therefore, faculty members and facilitators familiar with therapeutic approaches find that, when combined with a solid dose of empathy and psychological support, they often result in remarkable progress of their program participants in bringing the learning from the classroom to their organizations or personal careers and lives. Obviously, incorporating such approaches into program design is quite different from, for example, selecting a case study or a set of slides.

Faculty and facilitators involved in transformational programs should undertake a process of personal self-exploration, experimentation and change themselves before they try to help others. Turning one's executive course into a transformational program requires a deep understanding of the mental life, conflict, and relationships triangles described earlier. Someone working in this sort of program will dispense an enormous amount of emotional energy engaging with participants, challenging them while simultaneously showing empathy and care. Last but not least, the time commitment required for these programs from faculty in such programs is much higher than for more traditional programs.

Our recent research efforts dealing with how participants experience transformational programs (Kets de Vries, Korotov, & Florent-Treacy, 2007; Korotov, 2005) strongly suggest that executives attending programs in business school benefit not only from the content of the programs, but also from the process they get exposed to. Transformational programs serve as opportunities to work on oneself, with the structure of the program allowing executives experimentation with their priorities, styles, choices, beliefs, and so on. Effects reported by participants include clarification of goals, prioritization of one's efforts, increase in self-

efficacy, overcoming internal barriers to doing new things, readiness to try out new things, career changes, and even personal life changes (Korotov, 2005). We also observe long-lasting effects of going through a transformational program by means of staying in touch with the participants: our participants join our research efforts, became protagonists in our case-studies, and come to follow-up workshops designed for program alumni. One of the observations we make is that participants who have been through a transformational program make an attempt to create elements of transitional space in their organizations, as a minimum, within the boundaries of their own close team of executives and, sometimes, beyond it (Korotov, 2005). What is important, then, is that executive educators creating identity laboratories can have an impact on the life of organization by supporting or rejuvenating their leaders and creating executives' drive for change and transformation and a true belief in possibility of succeeding in such efforts.

This essay reflects on our practice of working with executive from all over the world in leadership development and general management programs. Such programs by definition create more opportunities for participants' reflection and discussion of how they themselves impact individuals, teams, and organizations. As indicated in many instances above, however, there may be room for work on the executive's identity and behavior as they impact bringing new ideas and concepts from executive courses into the life of the organization. We think that other types of executive courses could incorporate elements that look at executives' behavior, although this would require a change in both the approaches used by program directors and involvement of multidisciplinary faculty in course design and delivery.

In this essay we have reflected on our own practice of designing and delivering what we believe and our participants report to be executive education programs that have a transformational effect. We have outlined what we consider to be some of the important

conceptual elements that have an impact on the executive's capacity to transform themselves and that need to be taken into account when developing such programs. We have also identified some challenges that are associated with running a transformational program. Obviously, further research is necessary in distilling the concepts outlined here, formulating and testing hypotheses, and coming up with further ideas about making executive education more useful for change in both individual executives and their organizations. In writing this essay, we wanted to raise awareness of the issues associated with the task of business schools in helping executives create healthy and sustainable organizations and manage successful careers through their educational programs. As the world in which executives operate changes, the offerings of the executive education programs should reflect those changes and help executive embrace the change successfully.

Although the costs and risks of embarking on transformational programs are high, so are the rewards. Creating and delivering an impact-oriented executive development program allows participants and faculty to discover new ways of embracing opportunities and coping with challenges of life. How we deal with the opportunities and obstacles that we inevitably encounter on the journey determines the richness of our careers and life. Participants in transformational executive programs learn, through their extensive self-exploration and experimentation, 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.

LABORATORY FOR EXECUTIVE CHANGE: A PROGRAM EXAMPLE

Once a year we run an open-enrollment leadership workshop that is aimed at creating reflective leaders capable of reinventing themselves and their organizations. Twenty very senior executives are selected to participate from a large number of applicants from all over the world. 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 on 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. The workshop consists of three 5-day periods with intervals of approximately seven weeks between each one, plus a final three-day module six months later. The expectation is that participants will learn more about themselves during each on-site week; then, based on that knowledge, they agree on a "contract" of change that delineates what they should work on at work 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.

Although the basic material of the workshop is the life case study, the first week contains a number of interactive sessions on high-performance organizations, organizational culture, the impact of M & As. effective and dysfunctional 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 (Spence, 1982; McAdams, 1993; Rennie, 1994; McLeod, 1997). 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 experience 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 opportunities and challenges 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 understanding the narrative better. Once the narrative has been clarified, 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. The use of counter-transference observations is essential to the understanding of the salient themes in the presenter's life (Balint, 1957; Menninger, 1958; Greenson, 1967; Racker, 1968; Balint, Ornstein & Balint, 1972; Etchegoyen, 1991; Kets de Vries, 2007). An effort is made to prevent the premature closure that results from quick recommendations. Once the feedback session is over, the presenter is given the last word, airing any additional thoughts and commenting on the various observations. The presenter concludes by presenting a proposed "contract for change," outlining the things that he or she will work on in the interim period.

During the second week some time is devoted to the processing of a number of feedback instruments. A key part of this activity is a 360-degree feedback instrument that consists of twelve dimensions contributing to leadership effectiveness. In addition, feedback from a personality audit instrument is conducted. This includes information from each individual's private life through feedback gathered from a spouse or significant other. Additional information is collected from other family members and close 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 acquired insights and the internalization of change. In addition, a leadership style instrument is introduced (Leadership Archetype Questionnaire). The presentations continue, becoming increasingly multi-layered and rich as the workshop progresses. The fourth workshop session furthers the internalization process.

In addition to the plenary sessions, participants spend a lot of time in small groups in and outside the class. The interactions within these groups are extremely valuable, because they

consolidate newly acquired behavior patterns. Whether in subgroups or in the plenary, the twenty participants form an intense learning community—an identity laboratory. 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 members of their own family. 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 faculty.

A follow-up session is held after six months to see how well the action plans have been dealt with. In many instances, follow-up sessions are held 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.

As the above example suggests, a program like this requires a lot of energy and resources from both participants and faculty, and it requires discovering or developing new strengths and competencies in the people who design and run such courses. Going the extra length in making such programs happen is ultimately very rewarding, as it truly shows that executive education can really make a difference.

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