

BEHIND THE DOOR: KEEPING BUSINESS LEADERS FOCUSED ON HOW THEY LEAD

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Leadership Development

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The importance of how leaders lead (i.e., the individual behavioral dimension of leadership), is emphasized as a necessary component of comprehensive leadership development initiatives. Key practice factors and meta themes of an insight-oriented development model designed to influence executive behavior are presented, as well as a possible typology for recognizing certain behavioral states among business leaders. Several vignettes of executive cases in poetic form are also provided to illustrate these behavioral states, to emphasize the psychological effects on others of both effective and dysfunctional leader behavior, and more broadly to suggest the potential value of metaphorical thought as a consulting tool for influencing the effective behavior of senior business executives.

Keywords: leadership development, insight-driven approach

Through nearly 30 years of consultation to global corporations, I have applied the combination of my business background and clinical psychology training in the observation and development of leadership behaviors that help foster individual executive effectiveness and business success. I have also observed executive development practices in a broad array of industries and companies where the behavioral dimension of leadership (i.e., *how* executives actually lead) is often unexamined in their development as leaders. In part, this is because company-sponsored, competency-based leadership development initiatives tend to be more weighted in the direction of “hard” leadership competencies—the *what* leaders need to have (e.g., abilities such as strategic thinking, setting direction, managing innovation, developing others, driving results, etc.). Even when “soft” leadership competencies—the *how* leaders need to be (e.g., self-aware, emotionally controlled, attuned to others, able to foster strong relationships with all stakeholder groups, etc.)—are included, their relative importance can be diminished or even devalued in comparison to other competencies. Furthermore, bosses are often not as sure-footed about how to handle the *how leaders lead* part of a development agenda, so any behavioral issues can be

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neglected and/or subsumed in the planning of role rotations that require certain behavioral stretch and/or adjustment.

Ironically, it is the behavioral aspect of a leader's effectiveness that is often the most pressing need of top executives and the most powerful derailment factor—as we read in the business press about one ignominious executive failure after another. CEO flameouts within the last several years have included Robert Nardelli (Home Depot), Carly Fiorina (Hewlett-Packard), and Phil Purcell (Morgan Stanley). It may seem axiomatic, but it warrants repetition: leadership *behavior* matters and therefore, comprehensive leadership development initiatives must pay as much attention to *how* leaders leader as they do to *what* leaders need to do in pursuit of achieving strategic business objectives. I refer to this as “total brain leadership,” that is, a leader's integration of necessary cognitive capabilities and experiences with the essential emotional and relational skills for full effectiveness in today's Darwinian business conditions, especially on a global scale.

In a reference to the development of senior executives, Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, and Doyle (2007) stated, “. . .the leadership style that worked in lower level positions may not be as effective or appropriate at the senior level” (p. 116). GlaxoSmithKline senior executive, Steve Stefano (2005) wrote, “Always remember that people don't care how much you know until they know how much you care” (p. 5). Stefano's comment is echoed in Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee's (2002) contention, “The fundamental task of leaders. . .is to prime good feeling in those they lead. That occurs when a leader creates resonance—a reservoir of positivity that frees the best in people. At its root then, the primal job of leadership is emotional” (p. ix). Helping business leaders change and/or channel behavior so they can release the power of their emotional selves, that is, the *how* part of their leadership, is an ongoing and massive span of impact opportunity for anyone involved in executive development work. Because human behavior is one of the domains of psychology, consulting psychologists— especially those practitioners who use psychologically informed models of consultation— have the opportunity to distinguish their work through the identification and application of key behavioral insights that have implications for leadership behavior and effectiveness.

In an attempt to draw us into a deeper consideration of executive behavior, at least as I have seen it behind-the-door in my consulting practice, several poems that I've written about business leaders are included in this article. While my consideration of leadership behaviors in this article is far from—and is not intended as—a compendium of good and bad behaviors, these leader vignettes in poetic form do represent some of the best and worst leadership behavior I have observed throughout my consulting experiences. This poetry may or may not work as a vehicle for transmitting what I have witnessed, but I invite the reader into the power of metaphor, and especially into the *white space* surrounding these poems. In other words, the images of the executives as presented in these poems may evoke applicable thoughts for consultants whose work is focused on leader development. On a deeper level, these poetic vignettes may remind those of us who are psychologists or otherwise trained in the behavioral sciences of our clients' feelings of pain and possibility, desire and torment, their struggles with demons and mentors and bosses alike. Linger in this white space, we may be reminded, too, of the unspoken truths about our clients—the proverbial elephants in the room—that await our discovery, contemplation, and interpretation. In this space then, we are reminded that we must strive to see beyond the glittering images our brilliant clients can project and move into the shadier patches of their lives. Lurking in the shadows there may be truths they need to examine, absorb, and integrate if they are to be truly effective as leaders. In this sense, the power of metaphorical thought may catalyze a renewed realization that we can be more

than mere mirrors or guides. Specifically, we can be weavers, fully courageous weavers weaving the patterns of truth our clients need to internalize for their continued success as leaders and holistic well-being.

Before presenting these poems, a few practice points bear mentioning—as they relate to my consultation and explicit focus on leadership behavior. These points are (1) the importance of a rigorous needs assessment before accepting coaching for development engagements, and (2) the value of an insight-oriented model of consultation—the key factors and meta themes that characterize this model. I will also present for consideration a possible typology of senior business executive behavioral states, a typology that has influenced both the writing of these poems, as well as my ongoing consultation.

Two Coaching Practice Points and the Emergence of a Possible Typology

The Importance of Rigorous Needs Assessment in Accepting Coaching Engagement

The likelihood of a successful coaching engagement with business executives participating in company-sponsored leadership development initiatives pivots significantly on their *intention* to learn and/or change. The early days of coaching in business were dominated by remedial engagements, and as Peterson (2002) wrote, “Before 1990, a suggestion that a manager needed a coach was invariably perceived as a personal indictment. . . most people referred to coaching were, in fact, viewed as talented but flawed” (p. 161). This initial perception has complicated the establishment of coaching as a development resource for talented people; however, the tide is shifting quickly. To illustrate, in 2008 members of GlaxoSmithKline (GSK)’s U.S. Pharmaceutical business conducted an Executive Coaching Faculty Update meeting (S. Trotter, personal communication, February 12, 2008). In attendance were external consultants who had been qualified by the company as competent coaches. The primary goal of this company’s Executive Coaching Program was stated as being: “To gain benefits for the business from executive coaching by applying the resource to the right people, providing more structure for the process and obtaining better measurement on our investment” (Trotter, 2008, slide 7). In this context, “right people” refers to high potential managers and leaders. The references to “structure” and “better measurement” have obvious return on investment (ROI) implications.

As in many companies, decision-makers at GSK have concluded that derailing executives usually cannot recover from that perception. One of the author’s human resources (HR) contacts at GSK expressed this view: “We are reserving executive coaching as a development resource for just top high-potential individuals—our ‘Olympians’—who are the future of the company and who fundamentally understand the more they know about themselves, the more effective they’re going to be” (Wasylyshyn, 2003a, p. 321).

It would seem then that a careful scrutiny of prospective coaching candidates is essential if this resource is to advance as a value-added tool in the armamentarium of leadership development experiences. Absent a careful needs assessment, ideally through candid conversations with the prospective coachee’s boss and HR partner and an introductory meeting with the prospective coachee, the ROI of coaching will be jeopardized. Executive coaches are already seeing signs of commoditizing that do not bode well for the future.

As executive coaches engaged in leadership development work scrutinize these referrals, there are a number of complicated dynamics that must be managed, not the least of which are as follows; (1) the well-meaning boss's or HR partner's desire to "salvage a good person," (they are masking a derailment or "rescue" mission), (2) the less well-meaning boss and/or HR person who wants to use coaching as a "cat's paw" ("See, we even tried coaching and he/she still couldn't do the job"), (3) the consultant's ego ("I can be successful where the boss or others have failed"), (4) managerial abdication ("Get a coach in here to handle this"), and (5) the consultant's need to earn a living, making it tough to turn down business—even when the identified objective is one on which the consultant probably cannot deliver. Paradoxically, turning down a doomed coaching engagement and supporting the manager in making a better decision (e.g., placing the person in a more suitable role or dismissing him/her from the company) can actually lead to other engagements later.

The Value of an Insight-Oriented Approach: Key Factors and Meta Themes

Berger and Berger (2003) used the term *superkeepers* in referring to great talent in business organizations. In my discussion of coaching *superkeepers* in his book on talent management, I described four factors and three meta practice themes that comprise the core of an insight-driven development approach (Wasylyshyn, 2003a) that could likely influence executive behavior. A rich tradition of insight-oriented coaching is represented in the work of Kilburg (2000, 2004), Tobias (1996), and VanFleet (1999), to name just a few.

The conceptual spark for this insight-oriented approach occurred in 1985 when Mark X. Feck, the then head of corporate HR for Rohm and Haas Company, a global innovator of chemistry technologies, invited me to collaborate with him on the creation of a leadership development process for their top 40 high-potential employees. He expressed the essence of what he believed it took to develop *superkeeper* leaders: "We need to go inside out. We need to assess the *whole* person, not just his/her profile of leadership competencies. We need to have real relationships with these people. They need to *know themselves* and understand what influences their behavior in good times and in bad. Their accurate self-awareness is essential for continued learning and personal growth. Continued learning and personal growth are essential for the evolution of a world-class leader" (M. Feck, personal communication, October 12, 1985).

What emerged from our collaboration was Leadership 2000 (now Leadership 3000), a psychologically oriented and competency-based development process still in existence nearly 25 years later. The wisdom implicit in Feck's thinking about leadership development is reflected in the work of Goleman (1998) and others (Goleman et al., 2002) who emphasize the centrality of self-awareness in leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, the business case for the importance of emotional intelligence as a differentiator among top high potential employees has been well established through the research of Boyatzis (1982), Chen and Jacobs (1997), Cherniss and Goleman (2001), Druskat and Wolfe (2001), Brienza and Cavallo (2005), and Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso (2002), among many. As widely acclaimed business executive, Jack Welch (2004) stated, "No doubt emotional intelligence is more rare than book smarts, but my experience says it is actually *more* important in the making of a leader. You just can't ignore it" (p. A14).

Briefly, the four factors that ground Leadership 3000 and all of my practice with senior executives are as follows: (1) a holistic approach, (2) behavioral insight, (3) involvement

of corporate executives, and (4) a sustained relationship. Employing a holistic approach means working with executives in a manner that addresses the critical intersection between work and personal priorities. Delivering behavioral insight involves the use of psychometric tools (self-report inventories and projective techniques), life history, and competency-based and observational data to foster rapid and sustained engagement. The involvement of corporate executives requires the consultant's orchestration of the active participation of C-suite executives in the creation of focused development plans for executives participating in company-sponsored leader development initiatives. This also requires C-suite executives to identify opportunities that would give program participants more visibility to senior management and, as appropriate, to the Board. Essential in the sustained relationships factor is the consultant's commitment to forging a *relational* experience with the executive—not merely a transactional connection. As such this development work is a boundary-less process—not a contained program. This also requires steady collaboration with the boss and HR partner. This is accomplished through frequent updates, the sharing of mutually beneficial collateral information, and the consultant capitalizing on spontaneous secondary gain coaching moments for the boss.

The sustained relationships factor could be misconstrued as fostering dependency. However, it is in fact the special alchemy that can develop between a consultant and executive, that is, the reciprocal relationship that deepens in trust and intimacy over time. For C-suite executives, there can be special benefits from this type of relationship for it can serve as the glue, the oasis, and the open forum for executives who need safe, objective places to talk through their most difficult business and personal leadership issues. They also need to have timely and candid feedback on their performance. Saporito (1996) states, “. . .the higher an individual moves in an organization, the less feedback he or she is likely to receive. Senior executives tend to get isolated from real-time and unvarnished feedback about the impact of their individual leadership” (p. 96).

Based on my experience, three meta themes have been central in coaching or advising business leaders especially when behavior change is the goal. These are as follows: traction, trust, and truth-telling. A host of interrelated practice considerations are embedded in each of these meta themes. In traction are the “rightness” of the coaching referral, good timing of the coaching work, the executive's participation in the choice of his/her coach, the coach working collaboratively with the boss and HR partner (as well as with the client), customization of the coaching process, and the importance of the coach maintaining momentum.

Trust, surely the heartbeat of any constructive relationship, requires careful and persistent orchestration at the outset so as to ensure the working alliance between the executive and coach “clicks” fully. A number of critical elements are involved in doing this well; contracting specific boundaries of confidentiality, maintaining those boundaries, the emotional competence of the coach, the effective “positioning” of the coaching engagement in the company, the executive's capacity for forming a strong connection with the coach, the coach's knowledge of the business and company culture, and the coach's ability to excite the boss and HR partner, as well as the participating executive, about the potential benefits of their collaborative effort.

The meta theme of truth-telling is like a dance, a dance in white shoes with the executive and coach moving forward and back, remaining fluid and consistent lest either misstep leaving the other's shoe torn or scuffed. The critical steps here include the coach using a “double feedback mirror”—giving candid feedback to the client but also giving relevant culture-based feedback and contextual observations to the boss and HR profes-

sional; eliciting the candor of company sources (boss, HR partner, 360 data-gathering participants); and the coach's courage and skill in maintaining a steady stream of feedback to the executive that includes fresh behavioral observations, as well as psychological insights/interpretations.

The Emergence of a Possible Typology

The author recently reviewed nearly 300 executive development cases (engagements conducted between 1982 and the present) to test her speculation that these cases might cluster in some way. This review began with the question: Were there any overarching behavioral states that characterized these executives? This review continued with a careful scrutiny of the following: (1) the content of the initial referral conversation (usually held with the senior HR professional or the referred executive's boss), (2) the author's notes from her introductory meeting with a referred executive, (3) the coaching issues cited in the agenda-setting meeting that she facilitated among the executive, his/her boss and the HR partner, (4) the executive's life history data, and (5) the actual course and outcome of the coaching. These cases did appear to cluster into three categories or behavioral states that the author named *unusual*, *unrequited*, and *uninterested* based on her clinical impressions of these executives and the aforementioned data—particularly the life themes as they emerged in the half-day of life history-taking she conducted with each executive. In brief, executives whom she characterized as predominantly *unusual* were mature business leaders who were especially interested in self-improvement. The *unrequited* executives, while highly talented and effective, remained fundamentally dissatisfied with their accomplishments, were discontented with their lives generally, and exhibited only a mild interest in self-development. Those who appeared as predominantly *uninterested* were not drawn to self-development activity. To the contrary, many of these uninterested executives experienced any suggestion of their working with a coach as an indictment of their capabilities and, therefore, sabotaged the likelihood of a meaningful engagement.

Rather than conceptualizing executives as definitively locked into a particular category, this possible typology is offered as an aid in identifying executives' primary behavioral orientation—particularly as it relates to their potential for growth and development. In my experience, executives can and often do behave in ways that are representative of more than one of these categories. Specifically, what behavior they exhibit under what circumstances is influenced by any number of factors including work context, state of their business, life stage, physical well-being, and personal relationship issues. What has been and continues to be helpful to me as a coach and/or trusted advisor to senior executives is the rapid recognition of whatever state my client is in and how this recognition informs in-the-moment adjustments in how I am working with them. I suggest that through the lens of these categories, behavioral learning or behavior change challenges can be conceived as follows: (1) ensuring that unusual executive behavior is acknowledged and leveraged fully; (2) assisting unrequited executives in breaking through self-limiting patterns of behavior; and (3) being diligent in our needs assessments of executives who display uninterested behavior—and, if despite pre-engagement scrutiny, we find ourselves working with executives who really have no intention to learn and/or are rigidly defensive about the need to evolve as leaders—we confront them directly albeit as constructively as possible.

A fuller description of each category is provided below. While I have begun to develop a system—a way to operationalize this typology as a potentially useful tool for other executive development consultants—this work is beyond the scope of the current article.

For the purpose of this article, I focused on 96 of the 300 cases referenced above. These cases were chosen on the basis of how much accurate follow-up data I had for each, that is, my ongoing contact with these executives. Furthermore, this data plus what I heard about them from their superiors and/or HR partners revealed some interesting findings regarding their career progress or lack of same. Specifically, 73% of the predominantly *unusual* executives had advanced in their careers and the remaining 27% were in a temporal plateau, that is, soon to receive increased responsibility. Among the executives who were predominantly *unrequited*, 50% of them were in a longstanding plateau and the remaining 50% had been fired. In the predominantly *uninterested* group (all of whom I worked with before 1995 when I stopped accepting “remedial” engagements), 55% were locked into a plateau, 37% had been fired, and another 8% had been “retired early.”

The poems below are based on seven of these 96 cases—two poems representing the *unusual* category, two for the *unrequited* category, and three poems for the *uninterested* category. The leaders in these three categories can be viewed through multiple frames. However, in the interest of space and accessibility, the descriptions of them are based on (1) my observations of their behavior, (2) leadership competency-based data, and (3) character strengths and virtues as articulated by Peterson and Seligman (2004).

Description of the Categories

The Unusual

These executives were especially gifted and evolved as leaders. They all possessed strong leadership competencies to include capacity for vision, strategic thinking, innovation management, customer focus, driving results, people development, executive presence, and command skills. To varying degrees they all exhibited essential leadership behaviors including enterprise thinking, pragmatic optimism, resilience, accountability, persuasion, integrity, and truth-telling. They were able to reveal their weaknesses, rely on intuition as well as data analysis to inform decisions, empathize with their employees, and leverage their unique strengths (Goffee & Jones, 2000/2004). Furthermore, they all displayed what I refer to as total brain leadership, that is, a strong combination of innate strength (IQ) and emotional intelligence (EQ). I use the acronym SO SMART to describe the four dimensions of emotional intelligence (Wasylyshyn, 2003b). Briefly, these executives were self-observant (SO)—they knew their strengths and weaknesses and what drove them to do what they did (Michelman, 2004); they self-managed their emotions both positive and negative effectively (SM), they were well-attuned to others and displayed empathy (A), and they possessed strong relationship traction (RT), that is, the ability to form relationships that are real and meaningful versus just transactional.

At their best, these business leaders were emblematic of what Darth (1998) referred to as the “future” model of leadership characterized by reciprocal relationships, mutual meaning making, and a developmental focus on high-quality group (team) interaction. Especially gifted in building relationships, these leaders are among the people a prescient Wheatley (1992) described when she wrote, “Leaders are being encouraged to include stakeholders, to evoke followership, to empower others. Earlier when we focused on tasks, and people were the annoying inconvenience, we thought about ‘situational’ leadership—how the situation could affect our choice of styles. Leadership is always dependent on the

context, but the context is established by the *relationships* we value. We cannot hope to influence any situation without respect for the complex network of people who contribute to our organization” (pp. 114–115).

Through the lens of character—that represents some overlap with EQ dimensions—these executives were strong on the Peterson and Seligman (2004) “high 6” character virtues; (1) wisdom (strong cognitive capabilities characterized by creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning and capacity for perspective), (2) courage (emotional strength especially in dealing with opposition and displaying persistence in the face of adversity), (3) humanity (interpersonal effectiveness characterized by kindness and social intelligence), (4) justice (civic mindedness and a focus on fostering a vibrant and healthy work culture where fairness is paramount), (5) temperance (leadership behavior that is characterized by humility, prudence, and self-control), and (6) transcendence (leadership behavior characterized by a commitment to excellence, gratitude for the efforts of others, humility, and perspective-making that inspires hope for the future).

The wise leaders represented in the *unusual* category knew what they did not know and so they remained open to integrating the wisdom of others—especially in their pursuit of growth opportunities for their companies. Courage was manifested by their willingness to stand alone—regardless of “political” ramifications. Their humanity was evident in their genuine attunement and responsiveness to the needs and concerns of all stakeholder groups. They were just in their efforts to share knowledge within their companies and to break through silo mentality thus forging greater collaborative innovation.

These leaders were temperate in that they did not hold political grudges, grudges that could erode the potential for rapid progress on key business challenges. They did not let ego, personal ambition, or competitive instincts diminish effective peer relationships. Their transcendent orientation to work could be seen in efforts to distinguish their companies in the marketplace, their commitment to recognizing the accomplishments of others, and the sense of hope they fostered as a function of their confidence, sound decision-making, and resilience under fire.

Discussion of poems. The leader behavior seen in the following poems surfaced in various striations of truth and urgency. In *Empty Next* we find the conundrum of meaning as exacerbated by the “empty nest” phase of life. What did she really want to do next? This CEO, uncommonly introspective and attuned as a rule, had been ricocheting between uncertainty and constriction on this issue for months. And then during a lunch, our conversation lifted and settled into a consideration of *legacy*. With this as an organizing principle, she identified compelling objectives and used her exquisite project management and networking skills to make them happen. From a leadership perspective, she drew upon the power of legacy-oriented thought and action as a guiding force for others in her nonprofit organization. Relieved of the free-floating anxiety that had invaded and unsteadied her effectiveness, she was now better able to stay focused and provide that clarity and focus for others.

Empty Next

We escaped it again, didn't we?
 We Freudian-slipped *nest* to *next*—
 do you remember, an hour ago at lunch
 that quick creeping up to it
 that semi-glow feel of it
 that open, brave dew of it
 like we were really on it?

Then the fading. . .fast fading away from it;
 we are strong masters of elusion you and I
 even knowing It is the silken thread
 to open, or lift the heart anew.
 If you lie still, I will pull it gently through your throat
 this will not hurt,
 there will be no blood
 it will be a sudden sliding and
 when you see it—NO, when you hold it
 it will become your kite's string and
 you will fly—fly mighty from your familiar nest;
 empty will become full again.
 Let me pull it. . .let me pull it. . .
 let me pull it now, and we can soar together.

In *Duende* we see the magnetism and charm of a C-suite executive who has not only taken the time to speak straight and fully to his subordinate, he has inspired and drawn the other into a rare conversation. This conversation is anchored in an atmosphere of hope and excitement about the future, a future that they will create together. In the fading light of this important afternoon, there is a fierceness about the power of candor and clarity. There is a normalizing of the slippery truths that can invade business, about the bridges that must be built for success to happen, a respect for what has been, and an urgency about stretching beyond the present. Here we are reminded again that the most remarkable leaders are inspirational, transparent, and strive to achieve harmony, excitement, and alignment with the people they are leading. In coaching or consulting to them, they need only be reminded of the importance of their leveraging these rare and essential behaviors.

Duende

The words fall into each other rolling over and over
 smooth, steady ball bouncing between them
 the room drenched in an amber light
 as their breathing. . .their breathing keeps moving
 moving in a rhythm—soothing the weight of the hour
 and their eyes, their eyes locked onto each other whilst
 dismissing the assembled papers on the table
 the papers masquerading as real information.
 Neither one of them notices the fly
 big buzzing house fly that's broken through
 the hermetic seal of the company;
 it careens from window to ceiling to wall unable to land. . .
 but they never see it—so intent in their words, words buzzing
 buzzing back and forth intensity and unity with the fly
 for they are strangers, too but their words, their words keep falling
 landing into each other rolling over and over into the amber light.
 Nothing will be left unsaid. . .there is no perch for confusion
 no berth for resting; no corner for escaping the words
 all the words are being said—and heard
 . . .heard over and over as each provides a bench for the other.
 They are stepping from moss to wet rock without slipping,
 they are building a bridge to the table cleared and set anew.

They have maintained reverence for the past, shed truth on the present,
and staged the future for change: coveted vermilion gate.
This was not the usual performance review.

The Unrequited

These *unrequited* executives were no less talented than those represented in the *unusual* category. However, despite their successes and indications of further potential, they diminished their accomplishments, questioned their capabilities, were preoccupied with hypervigilant concerns about the future, obsessed about less than perfect performances, and remained locked in self-limiting thoughts. Their chronic feelings of inadequacy bled into their personal lives, too thus having adverse effects on the quality of even their most personal relationships. Some sought relief from the cacophony within by abusing alcohol or prescribed medications.

Their profiles in terms of company leadership competencies were variable—some clear strengths and some clear limitations as well—often related to strategic clarity and the ability to deliver consistent results. In terms of essential leadership behaviors, they presented a labile picture—swinging between confidence and near paralytic uncertainty. Intense feelings of doubt, inadequacy, and rage were more familiar than pride in their accomplishments.

Compared with the great leaders analysis of Clemens and Albrecht (1995), these *unrequited* executives fell short in that they were overburdened by their own feelings of frustration, disappointment, and discontentment. Harsh self-criticism compromised their ability to break through complacency, influence transformational shifts in a business, and/or to disagree constructively. Their inclinations to share the limelight with talented others, network with ease and determination, and be consistently decisive were also limited. Furthermore, they could not distinguish well between when to follow versus lead, and lacked sufficient frustration tolerance to bear the pain of achieving tough goals.

Through the lens of the “high 6” character virtues, there was also considerable variability among these *unrequited* executives. While some possessed significant wisdom, their doubts, fears, and/or anxieties eroded their ability to apply it fully. There were situational manifestations of courage for some—situations in which they stood strong in pursuit of objectives they believed in strongly for business success—but this behavior was not the norm. When they felt scrutinized, disappointed, or unfairly treated especially relative to peers, they often regressed to petulant behavior or otherwise overreacted such that questions were raised about their maturity as leaders. Chronic preoccupation with the pace of their own career advancement blocked their capacity for humane expressions of encouragement or acknowledgement of others’ successes.

While many in this *unrequited* category possessed a patina of interpersonal effectiveness, this evaporated in the face of their often irrational feelings of exclusion, career malaise, and/or peer envy. The character virtue of justice was not usually evident given self-preoccupations that overwhelmed any inclination toward community service and/or focus on company culture from a perspective of fair policies and practices. Because temperance or self-management was in moderate to short supply given their underlying feelings of doubt, frustration, and/or anger, they were unlikely to express forgiveness, affirmation, or kindness to others. Many also experienced considerable difficulty managing their negative emotions or impulses to gratify themselves with sex, drugs, or alcohol. In terms of transcendence, executives in this category were too self-absorbed and fundamentally dissatisfied to appreciate the world around them. Expressions of gratitude, hope, or humor were not a consistent part of their behavioral repertoires.

Discussion of poems. The primitive hope for parental approval and its continued adverse effects dominate *Night Moves*. While no executive is ever fully ready for the role of CEO, this executive's stress was exacerbated by his mother's fundamental unresponsiveness even in the wake of this long-sought accomplishment. Convenient target of his mother's lifelong dependency over her own frustrated career goals, he endured the brunt of her self-repulsion spread over him like sleet. Emotionally frozen and isolated socially—even from his wife and children—he struggled to form productive relationships with his Board. Instead of benefiting fully from the insights he might have gleaned from his coach, he invariably tried to defend or divert with stimulating conversation about art, current political events, or their mutual business relationships in his company. He harbored reunion fantasies with people from the happier days of his youth. He wrestled mentally with schemes for greatness. Most days ended with his consuming way too much alcohol, and this drinking further reinforced his isolation.

Night Moves

Two martinis and a bottle of Chardonnay later,
 he's as loose as rain,
 as expansive as paint, and ready to sleep for the first time
 since he became CEO.
 But sleep rarely came again
 having been hijacked by images of
 snakes, leopards, lizards, tigers
 every member of his board—
 and an especially haunting hyena
 with his mother's face,
 and her endless ferocity.

In *Scorched in Paradiso*, we witness the predatory seduction and vicious abandonment pattern of an executive whose primitive defense of splitting occurs blatantly, suddenly at the table in a public restaurant. Despite his labile mood, chronic feelings of emptiness, punishing treatment of others, and drinking, he ran a successful business in a competitive marketplace where his reflexive aggression and paranoid ideation paid off. He described the advisory efforts of his consultant as a “bossy” intrusion into his certainty of how things needed to be run. At other times, he expressed gratitude for her insights and input especially as they related to his giving sound performance feedback to members of his leadership team. Once, when he opened the topic of his seeking psychotherapy, the consultant dug deeply and quickly into her network for an appropriate referral but he ultimately rejected this as potentially useful.

Scorched in Paradiso

1.
 Rarely satisfied by day
 he takes his need into the night
 he works it hard into the night
 his patina of grace and charm
 splaying his prey open
 pushing it around on the carpet
 feeding it royal grapes and tuna;
 he is weaving their thoughts together

narcissism. Behaviors that typify these individuals include exhibitionism, feelings of entitlement and omnipotence, intolerance of criticism, attempts to control others, the expectation of special treatment, and a tendency to see talented others as extensions of themselves.

Hogan, Raskin, and Fazzini (1990) underscore the real danger posed to organizations by the behavior of narcissistic leaders. These dangers include their (1) unwillingness to accept suggestions/be advised by others, (2) tendency to take more credit than is due them, (3) avoidance of accepting responsibility for their failures and/or shortcomings, (4) rendering judgments with such conviction that they dominate/diminish others, and (5) tendency to “self-nominate” for special leadership opportunities.

In viewing these executives through the lens of the “high 6” character virtues, there were some interesting contradictions. Regarding wisdom, especially in terms of cognitive capabilities, many of them were quite brilliant but could not leverage this strength fully. Their suspicions, skepticism, cynicism and ego centricism—often bordering on megalomania—prevented any prospect of engaging them in learning. While many were ferociously bold and daring, this was more about domination than courage. Their capacity for humane, supportive interaction with others—particularly subordinates—was negligible. What interpersonal skill they possessed was reserved for situations in which they needed to manipulate others to meet their needs.

These *uninterested* executives cared little about just and fair practices, unless something did not meet their needs. Impatient and intemperate by nature, their behavior escalated others’ stress. Relentlessly difficult to please and mercurial, their ability to motivate others and promote feelings of hope and opportunity was severely compromised. At times the coach’s use of paradoxical intention (*There’s probably nothing you could gain from coaching, so let’s not waste our time or the company’s money*) could pull these flawed leaders into a meaningful coaching dialogue, but this was the rare exception.

Discussion of poems. In *Spin Me* we see the rage of a wounded narcissist intent upon protecting and perpetuating his deluded sense of self. Because he happened to be running a business in a hot market niche, he continued to deliver double-digit growth annually, which was the only thing about which his CEO, an equally noxious narcissist, cared. With a history of hiring and firing consultants, he favored tautological debate to true learning. While he valued this consultant’s assessments of members of his leadership team, he lacked the will to make necessary staff changes, and he ultimately rejected her as a value-added resource.

Spin Me

I saw the monster
sudden radioactive glint
from the corner office
terror and toxin
spreading
people walking backwards
in the tangled quiet
contamination spreading
spreading fast
to the wires
wires now stripped down
Stark
to the truth. . .

truth tinder box
 tinder box of truth
 ignited, and he's revealed;
 but he'll not tolerate
 this intrusion; he
 strikes another flame
 his spinning top ablaze now
 furious burn. . .to ashes
 destruction enough
 to satisfy
 his ravenous delusion.

Cracked depicts an example of serious psychopathology—in this case the CEO/ owner of a privately-held business that was in the words of one of its senior leaders, “Successful despite the bizarre behavior of our CEO.” This behavior included his voracious need for affirmation, sexual harassment of administrative personnel, marital infidelities, chronic pattern of idealizing and devaluing his top sales people, sudden and inexplicable explosions of anger, constant stream of profanity, and paranoia. When faced with a life-threatening illness, he invested in coaching for his newly minted President as a strategy for the perpetuation of the company. Although he recovered fully from his physical illness, his coach limited her interaction with him to quarterly update meetings. Only the most masochistic employees (or consultants) remained with this company for any extended time, and he remained unwilling to examine his role in this.

Cracked

There is a crack in his head
 his head has a crack
 a crack full of crackers
 clogging his thinking with crumbs
 crumbs falling out of his head
 onto the floor, over the desks
 and the chairs of his company
 abundance of dirt
 and egg shells. . .hip deep in egg shells and dirt.
 They pull on their armor, navy wool gabardine
 brushed clean in steel spinning booths;
 they strap into the spinning booths daily
 —furious turning as the brushes
 clean and baste them in revision enough
 for King Crumb to bind them in promises.
 There is more dirt than reason,
 more crackers than time,
 more time than truth;
 most are too stuffed to move
 but the others. . .
 the others have opted for sanity.

Finally, in *Stranded* we are reminded of the cavalier rejection employees can experience at the hands of leaders who are driven most by their own insatiable needs for gratification. In this context, the coach had worked with a few people reporting to the General Manager of a global business. Her interactions with him were of a collaborative,

consultative nature related to the coaching cases. Even her softest attempts to influence his assuming a more disciplined, team-oriented leadership approach (e.g., “What might be the value of a monthly team meeting?”; “How might his direct reports benefit from more specific direction and/or appraisal of their performance?”) were met with barely veiled derision. The running joke in the company was whether people—internal or external to the company—were on this his “good list” or “bad list” in any given week.

Stranded

If you went to the roof of his building at night
lantern lit, swinging it once to the left and three to the right,
they would signal back once to the left and three to the right
over and over these low stars on the sea
shooting once to the left and three to the right
these stranded workers on ice, no possibility –
but to wait for the light once to the left and three to the right
ready again – for him to feed of their waning vitality.

Conclusion

I have underscored the importance of companies including executive *behavior* as a priority in leadership development initiatives. I have also presented individual leader vignettes in poetic form, a kind of peek “behind the door” of my work to highlight either impressive leadership behavior that could be leveraged further or, flawed behavior in need of change. Given the character pathology represented in some of these poems, we can also recognize executives for whom a focus on their behavior or behavioral change would not be possible within the boundaries of a leadership development contract. Furthermore, because assisting senior executives for whom behavior learning or change is possible can be abetted by an insight-driven approach, I have presented the core factors (holistic approach, behavioral insight, involvement of corporate executives and sustained relationships) and meta practice themes (traction, trust, and truth-telling) of my leader development model. Although there is an array of coaching approaches that can deliver on the objectives of executive behavior change and/or learning, my model represents nearly 30 years of experience and as such may provide specific guidance to those who are interested in applying an insight-oriented approach to leadership development consultation.

I have also presented a possible typology of executives that depicts in broad terms the dominant behaviors I have observed among them. This typology consists of three categories—*unusual*, *unrequited*, and *uninterested*. With an eye toward practice implications for consulting psychologists, I have described each of these categories and considered them through the lens of character virtues. Because one or more of these states can be witnessed in a single encounter with an executive client, the challenge—and perhaps the real value of this categorization—is to rapidly recognize an executive’s behavioral state and to make the nimble coaching adjustments necessary for effective work to continue. My upcoming effort to operationalize this categorization may prove helpful to those engaged in ongoing coaching/development work with senior executives.

Furthermore, as we reflect on the commonality of challenges facing business organizations in this 21st century, talent management, including leadership development as a critical dimension, persists as an escalating concern. In emerging markets such as India, Northern Asia, and Eastern Europe this is especially true. But even in North America, in

companies with a tradition of focusing on leadership development, talented and fully formed leaders are in short supply. This begs the question about what more consultants in the leadership development space can do to further assist our General Management and HR colleagues in meeting this crucial challenge? Consulting psychology is well positioned to capitalize on a long tradition of integrating psychology and business. As related to leadership development initiatives, I believe we need to intensify the business case for the importance of the so-called “soft” behavior-oriented competencies to be included on a par with the classic “hard” leadership competencies. This will aid organizations in developing executives with total brain leadership capabilities. Such leaders will be fully equipped—cognitively, experientially, and behaviorally—to address current business imperatives, both inside and outside their organizations. When companies seek to achieve operational savings by cutting sound leadership development initiatives, consulting psychologists along with their corporate HR partners, must be persuasive, persistent, and courageous in our arguments about why this just does not make good business sense.

Finally, circling back to the power of metaphor, I am reminded of David Whyte’s (2007) contention that poetry can help us identify clear and important developmental milestones, especially the relational identities essential for managing the future well. For business leaders, I believe that these milestones must include behavioral insights about *how* they lead people, as well as clarity about *what* they need to do to achieve successful business outcomes. I offer metaphorical thought as a key for unlocking another way of understanding our clients, another way of engaging them in necessary conversations, another way of being “behind the door” in the privacy of our deepening our relationships with them—relationships that can help influence their most effective leadership behavior.

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