

**Generative Leadership: Responding to the Call for Responsibility**

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### **Abstract**

The responsible leadership “movement” may be viewed as part of the broader sustainability “revolution” (D’Amato et al, 2009; Edwards, 2005). Sustainable development was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). Since then, clear principles have been formulated (Edwards, 2005), pledges of support have been made, and a growing number of early-adopter business leaders like Ray Anderson (1999) and Jeffery Hollender (2010) have shared their experience and issued a call to action. Encouraging signs perhaps, still David Orr (2009, p. 122) recently concluded that “virtually no indicator of planetary health is moving in a positive direction, and we should ask why.” This paper seeks to heed Orr’s admonition to “ask why” by examining what it means to be responsible as a leader at this time and in this context. A consensus view of responsibility is gleaned from an analysis of sustainability principles, which are translated into leadership imperatives. A psychologically based approach to conceptualizing leader responsibility under the normative developmental construct of generativity is presented, and a new model for coaching developing leaders based on recent advances in psychoanalytic psychology is proposed in order to promote development of leader responsibility.

### **Generative Leadership: Responding to the Call for Responsibility**

The purpose of this paper is to offer a point view on the psychology of responsible leadership in an age of sustainability. As a consulting psychologist, my interests are ultimately practical. Although the point of view I present in this paper is shaped by my experience, values, and theoretical orientation as a practitioner, my intention is to offer more than opinion supported by anecdote. Like many practicing psychologists, I strive to keep current with trends in research, theory, and practice, and, above all, to continually improve the quality and effectiveness of my service to clients. Indeed, this paper grows out of such efforts.

After characterizing the context of sustainability and the daunting challenges it presents for leaders, I present an approach to personal development coaching that is particularly well-suited to promoting leader responsibility. Based upon recent advances in psychoanalytic psychology and neuroscience, this approach illuminates the relational dynamics that underlie development of self and mediate transformative personal change throughout life. These dynamics are set within the broader frame of generativity, a normative construct in adult development, which is quite helpful for conceptualizing both the psychological and moral dimensions of development so essential to responsible leadership.

The coaching process is described and a case example exemplifies its use with a faltering executive. My rationale for choosing this type of case for illustrative purposes: 1) It represents a situation in which the levels of complexity and challenge are high; 2) the need for transformative personal change involving one's sense of self and ones values is often a theme; and 3) the need to deal authentically and effectively with stakeholders is critical.

### **Contextual Considerations in the Psychology of Responsible Leadership**

In order to properly frame my approach to responsible leadership it will be necessary to address a few foundational matters before delving into the psychological heart of my point of view: First, since responsible leadership is usually considered part of the wider sustainability movement, I briefly review the current state of progress in sustainability. Second, if we are to look at responsibility through the lens of psychology, responsibility must be properly defined from the standpoint of the experiencing and developing leader. Third, in order to appreciate the implications of sustainability for leader responsibility, we must distill the distinctive leadership imperatives that emerge from this context. Finally, sustainability imperatives suggest a need for a values-based transformation in mindset, motivation, and action; therefore, we must appreciate the nature of such change.

### **Current State of the Sustainability Movement**

Sustainable development was defined almost a quarter century ago as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (The World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987, p. 43). A few years later the “triple-bottom-line” reporting model was introduced, encouraging firms to look at more than profitability, and to measure their impact on the environment and society of the communities in which they operate (Elkington, 1994; Quinn & Baltes, 2007). Since then, coherent principles of sustainable development have been formulated by numerous organizations around the world, which further articulate the core values of sustainability (Edwards, 2005). In the corporate sector a growing number of early-adopter business leaders like Ray Anderson (1999) and Jeffery Hollender (2010) have modeled and advocated a more responsible kind of

leadership. And those reporting on trends of awareness and concern for sustainability issues in business (D'Amato, Henderson & Florence, 2009; Mirvis, de Jongh, Googins, Quinn & Van Velsor, 2010) assure us, based on their surveys and CEO interviews, that both are on the rise.

These are encouraging signs. Still there is reason for serious concern about the pace of progress and the costs of delay. For example, even as I was preparing this paper (June-July 2010) there was a steady drum beat of front-page coverage on the BP oil spill and its disastrous long-term impacts on the environment, the economy, and the social fabric of communities throughout the Gulf region. More recently, the New York Times (Schwartz, 2010) reported stunning trends in how American managers are "leading" an economic recovery: As revenues and worker compensation flatten or fall, profits soar, layoffs continue, and meanwhile companies hold cash at levels not seen in 50 years rather than reinvest in their businesses. Characterized as "learning to run lean," and praised on Wall Street for "cracking the code on a successful industrial turnaround," the priority and focus of these CEOs is clear: maximizing gain for a privileged few, namely, shareholders and management. These phenomena hardly constitute a promising trajectory where realizing the mindset, ethic, and discipline of a positive triple-bottom-line is concerned.

This anecdotal appraisal of progress finds support elsewhere. First, in a 2009 study of over 2,200 products advertised as "green," TerraChoice (2009), an environmental marketing firm, found that 98% of them were guilty of "green-washing," which was defined as "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service." And another more scholarly voice on the matter, David Orr (2009), offers strong cautionary words on claims of progress. He concluded that "virtually no indicator of planetary health is moving in a positive direction, and we should ask why" (p. 122).

Mindful of the disappointing progress in the corporate sector, and in the spirit of heeding Orr's admonition to "ask why," the question of leader responsibility begs to be examined. There is widespread agreement on the important role of leadership. Indeed, there is a virtual consensus among environmentalists (Edwards, 2005; Orr, 2009), leadership researchers (D'Amato et al, 2009; Maak & Pless, 2006b; Waldman & Galvin, 2008), and progressive CEOs (Hollender, 2010; Anderson, 1999) that not much will happen with an historic change initiative like this one without strong leadership. Moreover, most would argue that the scope and complexity of the challenge calls for transformational leadership.

### **The Meaning of Responsibility**

Responsibility is a familiar, weighty, and evocative word, especially in Western societies with our liberal traditions in moral philosophy and political economy. Like other value-laden words such as trust and integrity, the meaning of responsibility registers most immediately in its affective impact. When we hear the word spoken, it feels important and we anticipate something consequential. Intuitively and pre-reflectively we know something "big" is at stake. Its meaning conveys a judgment about what is good, proper, or fitting in the sphere of human conduct. These connotations apply to all aspects of life, and they are especially poignant for those who identify as leaders.

Given the reverberations of evaluation and judgment associated with this word, it would seem prudent to exercise care in the way we use it. Therefore, explicitly defining responsibility as it applies to leadership in an age of sustainability would seem to be in order.

There are two established kinds of definition, both of which are relevant to our purposes. First, there is a lexical or dictionary definition, which explains how a word is actually used. It has the advantage of being based on accepted usage, and in that way it carries a certain

kind of time-tested, consensual validity. The second kind of definition is a stipulative definition, that is, we propose a meaning for the word, and others must agree that it is appropriate; they must see reason, merit, and justification for stipulating to this definition.

Beginning with the lexical approach, the Webster's Third New International Dictionary indicates three current uses for the word responsibility: First, it denotes a personal capacity for moral, legal, or mental accountability. Second, it conveys personal qualities of reliability or trustworthiness. Third, it designates something (e.g., a duty) for which anyone might be accountable. While the first usage refers explicitly to a capacity of the person and may best represent its meaning in a psychological context, the other uses of responsibility better represent its meaning from the standpoint of stakeholders.

The second sense of the word attributes a virtuous quality to a person. For example, "Jane is a responsible operations manager," by which we intend to say that she is someone we can depend on. The third use of the word occurs when we speak of the role and responsibilities of a position, e.g., operations manager. In this context, we have in mind specific duties and an expectation that any person in this role will be held accountable for them. Of course, these two usages may bear a common reference if the person to whom the virtue is attributed, e.g., Jane, occupies the role to which we attribute responsibilities as duties, i.e., operations manager.

In both instances we might describe the point of view of those making attributions of responsibility as external; it is what responsibility looks like from the outside. Persons making such attributions are often those to whom Jane or others in the role are in fact accountable or feel accountable. Of course, we would hope that any leader would be seen to be a responsible person, and would be seen to fulfill the duties of their role. If they were not able to measure up to such stakeholder expectations, it would be difficult to count them as responsible leaders.

Therefore, we might consider such attributions as necessary conditions for being judged responsible.

While important, the viewpoint and appraisals of others do not help us understand the inner experience of being responsibility. For that, we must refer to the first lexical definition, which attributes moral, legal, and mental accountability to a person. This usage stems from the Latin root, *responus*, which means to answer for one's actions and obligations. It implies a personal capacity for deliberation and self-determination, the capacity to reflect upon reasons for taking action, and to be deterred from taking a course of action based upon a consideration of its consequences. No sooner do we invoke this lexical definition, however, than we find it must be modified and contextualized for our purposes, which, of course, calls for stipulation. Let me explain.

What I find most pertinent in the first sense of the word responsibility is the explicit reference to moral and mental accountability, and the implicit reference to agency. These references point to the interior of the person rather than to his or her overt actions alone. We thereby conjure a sense of personhood, a subjective depth of experience and feeling, and the reflective capacity to make considered judgments. Another interesting aspect of this definition, however, is the reference to accountability, which is often used as a synonym for responsibility. And here is where some modification of the definition of responsibility seems appropriate.

First, it seems to me that it would helpful and reasonable to reserve the use of the word responsibility for designating the human capability (actual or potential) to function as a free, autonomous, moral agent. What we accomplish with this definition is to turn our attention to the meaning of responsibility from the perspective of the experiencing and developing subject, i.e., what responsibility looks like from the inside. I propose that in its primary form we label

this sense of responsibility “personal responsibility,” a fundamental form of agenic maturity that involves both psychological and moral themes in development as a person. Further, I propose that we distinguish from this kind of responsibility, a secondary form of responsibility that we call “leader responsibility.” This distinction implies two additional development steps: 1) aligning one’s personal sense of responsibility with one’s situation, context of challenge, and accountabilities as a leader in an age of sustainability; and 2) taking an active role in encouraging the development of personal and leader responsibility in others.

A couple of additional comments are in order before proposing a preliminary definition of responsibility. First, it is entirely appropriate for leader responsibility thus characterized to imply a self-imposed accountability to others, i.e., management and a network of stakeholders. Second, it is also appropriate to regard the tension between externally imposed accountabilities and expectations from others, on the one hand, and the self-imposed accountabilities of a leader as reciprocal pathways of influence. Communications between leader and stakeholders, in this view, would serve to inform one another, provide perspective, validate understandings and assumptions, give and receive feedback, and jointly adjust and fine-tune norms. In this way, we conceptualize a constructive tension that obtains between leader and stakeholders; it is a source of stimulation and vital to driving ongoing adaptation, cooperation, and collaboration.

Based on these considerations, I propose the following preliminary definition of personal responsibility: *Personal responsibility is the capacity of a person to act freely, guided by his or her reflectively considered beliefs and values, and in accordance with what is good and proper under the circumstances.* I believe several norms can be derived from this definition, which I summarize in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1. here]

Insofar as leader responsibility requires that we align our personal sense of responsibility with the leadership imperatives and accountabilities specific to principles of sustainability, it may be helpful at this point to consider a consensus view of such principles.

### **The Context of Leadership Challenge**

We can better appreciate the scope and sweep of the changes implied by a context of sustainability when we consider the cross-cutting value themes that emerge from a review of the sustainable development principles of numerous organizations of various kinds (industry, NGO, governmental, etc). Andres Edwards (2005) captured seven such value themes after examining the frameworks of over 30 organizations in his study of the “sustainability revolution” (see Figure 2 below).

[Insert Figure 2. here]

As you scan these themes, imagine just how challenging they might look to the board and incumbent management of a traditional firm. Imagine how differently leaders, stakeholders, and their organizations collectively would need to think, interact, plan, and operate on a daily basis were they to be guided by them. Upon reflection, perhaps you will agree that Edwards’ use of the term “revolution” is apt. There truly is a paradigm shift inherent to this transformation.

Wrapping one’s mind around this new paradigm from a conceptual and intellectual standpoint is an important first step no doubt. Reading and learning about the issues satisfies our need to understand the rationale for change. We acquire a vocabulary, an historical perspective, and an ability to discuss, explore, and deliberate on the issues and their relevance to our own firm. This is not only informative, it is empowering; we begin to feel connected to the broader debate. In the course of our learning we notice changes in the way we feel about the issues, especially the moral force of the ethical themes, the claims they make upon us, the effect they

have in arousing a sense of responsibility. Of course, our feelings are not always immediately clear and settled. At times we may feel ambivalence and tension, competing pulls that cause us to hesitate and to alternate as we form a point of view. This represents some of the internal psychological work we might do before ever seeking to lead others on these matters.

The psychological challenges of personally navigating such transformative change for leaders and the people they lead are just as sweeping in scope as the paradigm shift itself. They include multiple dimensions of adaptation and change related to values, cognitive complexity, social-emotional dynamics, and new ways of working together with stakeholders. Moreover, these dimensions of change apply at the individual level to each person, but also at the organizational level as we seek to redefine our shared mission and work style, and even more broadly at the collective level that is composed of external stakeholders of every stripe (Mirvis et al, 2010; Quinn & Baltes, 2007).

### **Transformational Change and Values**

Transformational change is often defined in contrast with incremental change, and transformational leadership is contrasted with transactional or instrumental leadership. We associate a kind of rational calculus with the incremental and instrumental, something we associate more with the meaning of management than leadership. The idea of transformation, on the other hand, implies something more radical, qualitative, and far-reaching.

Historic examples of transformative change are suggestive in this regard. Copernicus conceived of a universe in which the sun not the earth is at the center. Freud proposed a theory of mind in which human behavior is motivated by forces outside the field of our conscious awareness. In both cases, change affected the fundamental idea (or form) of the phenomena in question (the universe and human mind); our understanding of them was *transformed*. Such

changes threaten long-held values and beliefs, which may engender resistance. That is why it took time for many to accept these changed ways of looking at the things.

More relevant to our discussion are historic changes in social-economic paradigms. For example, the change from agrarian society and guilds to an industrial economy and society may have been less sudden and swift than the Copernican revolution, but it did transform our way of looking at things. The industrial age was seen as the forward march of progress promised by the enlightenment. Advances in science, technology, and later, industrial management empowered humankind to exploit natural resources and achieve unprecedented prosperity. The industrial economy harnessed labor and concentrated production, creating cities and a burgeoning middle class. This resulted in growing consumer markets, greater social mobility, and the promise of opportunity for all. This optimistic vision resonated deeply with peoples in democratic societies, undergirded as they were by values of liberty, individuality, work as redemption (protestant work ethic), and laissez-fair competition as a form of natural selection.

In this kind of socio-economic transformation the role of values is fundamental. Values bind us personally and as peoples to a way of life that becomes fully integrated with our sense of identity, individual and cultural (See Joas, 2000). Based on these values we generate the social norms that guide our daily lives in the community and at work.

The feelings through which values become known and exercise their moral force are not simply a mood state; they are *intentional* (Goldie, 2000; Joas, 2000; Spader, 2002), they direct us toward an object of consciousness. They are feelings *about something*: e.g., pollution and the concern for protecting our ocean's ecosystems; and growing disparities in health and wealth, and concern for ensuring dignity for all. In each case transformative change occurs as the values at stake, stewardship of nature and ensuring human dignity, make a moral claim on us. At that

point, realizing them in action becomes a matter of great consequence for us personally and as a leader.

My emphasis on the role of affective knowing in the experience of moral valuing follows the philosophy and social theory of Hans Joas (2000) in suggesting that the genesis of values involves an experience of self-transcendence and self-transformation. Self-transcendence here refers to a striving toward some greater good, which loosens self-interested attachments to mere individual goods, ours and those of others. We can facilitate this experience through an attitude of openness and receptivity (Siegel, 2010), but self-transcendence is equally dependent on the intrinsic attraction and pull of the value. Self-transformation occurs as this value becomes a significant cause and purpose in my life, as I begin to articulate its meaning and implications in conversation with others, and as I translate it into action.

### **Generativity and the Psychology of Responsible Leadership**

Generativity, as a psychological construct in human development (Erickson, 1950; St. Aubin, McAdams & Kim, 2004), calls attention to the normative role of care in nurturing the growth of next-generation leaders. Expressed as a virtue in leadership, generativity 1) facilitates the transfer of important knowledge and business practices, 2) places developing leaders in situations that challenge them to learn and hone their judgment, and thereby 3) revitalizes the capabilities of the organization to innovate and remain competitive. In this way, generativity contributes to organizational sustainability; it promotes continuity and adaptive change (Slater, 2003).

Even more broadly, the concept of generativity is uniquely relevant to responsible leadership and good governance. Central to this argument are two theses: First, leadership is essentially normative in purpose and function. The cultivation of good judgment requires

knowledge and skill, but also emotional, mental, and moral maturity, qualities that emerge from the holistic development of the person. A generative leader, as mentor, promotes such development. Second, generativity is the psycho-social variable that most directly ensures organizational sustainability. It does so by 1) placing the greater good of all stakeholders above personal gain, 2) unleashing the creative-productive energies of next-generation leaders earlier and with prudent guidance, and 3) by checking the forces of stagnation that might otherwise prevail and block innovation. Associated with these aspects of one's role as a generative leader are a number of cross-cutting behavioral characteristics. The table in figure 1 summarizes contrasting directions of behavior associated with generativity and stagnation, the former serving to enable and the latter serving to hinder the practice of generative leadership.

[Insert figure 3 here]

A cursory comparison of the normatively positive characteristics of generativity in figure 3 with sustainability norms (figure 1) and values (figure 2) indicates that generative patterns of behavior are quite compatible with them. Indeed, the psychosocial orientation associated with generativity would seem to enable attunement to the prosocial values called for when leading from a stakeholder perspective, (Waldman & Gavin, 2008), and its attitude of care for others including future generations would seem to align well with several of the sustainability values identified by Edwards (2005). All things considered, then, a generative style of leadership would also seem to promote responsible leadership. The question now is, "How can we encourage personal development in leaders that will manifest in a generative style of leadership?"

### **The Psychological Dynamics of Challenge, Development, and Change**

In a psychologically based approach to leader development, assessment and development focus on both the inner world of the person as well as the overt domain of interpersonal behavior

and style (Kets de Vries, 2006; Kilburg, 2004, 2006). The inner realm consists of subjectively experienced feelings, thoughts, and strivings that underlie and energize our personality, temperament, and motivation. The architecture of this world is shaped early in life and takes the form of a personal narrative, which defines our core identity (Siegel, 1999; Wallin, 2007). Interpersonal style, on the other hand, is the public expression of self, the social self. It is conditioned by the psychodynamics of our inner life, but it is also shaped continuously by our social experience (Wachtel, 2008, 2009).

Self-awareness of our social self – our self as presented to and experienced by others – being imperfect, does suffer “blind spots” (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003; Hogan & Hogan, 2001; Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996). Compared to the interior realm of subjective experience, however, this manifest aspect of self is generally more accessible and amenable to conscious control. That is why when those whose motivations we trust offer constructively framed feedback, most of us, despite some momentary feelings of defensiveness, are able to hear their comments, appreciate their point of view, and adaptively use them to adjust our style and enhance our impact.

The capacity to use well-intended, constructive feedback is fundamental to our ability to cope with leadership challenges that require of us significant change. Indeed, recent research (DeRue & Wellman, 2009) confirms anecdotal reports that those who are skilled in the art of proactively soliciting stakeholder feedback from the right people at the right time enjoy an important advantage as leaders. However, the ability to use such feedback can be compromised when our inner self is in a state of distress, like when we are feeling overwhelmed by a complex and daunting challenge.

Once this kind of inner distress builds to a certain level (different for each of us) we lose perspective, become anxious and insecure, our confidence is undermined, and our unconscious

defenses take over (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). With each successive failure (real or perceived) our resilience to bounce back and cope adaptively is further weakened (Leipold & Greve, 2009). As this cycle of psychological decompensation progresses it operates more and more automatically and outside our conscious awareness (Schore, 2009). Consequently, it becomes very difficult for us to halt our self-defeating behavior let alone seek, accept, or make use of help from others.

These considerations suggest a knotty problem: At just the moment when openness to feedback and perspective-taking are most needed by a struggling executive in order to recognize and address his blind spots, and at just the moment when the support and encouragement of others might be most heartening and helpful to him, at precisely this point his defenses are apt to be so highly aroused that he may be feeling too anxious and insecure to welcome feedback and consider alternative points of view.

Such are the unique difficulties encountered by the faltering executive and by those who would help him. The main purpose in what follows is to discuss a special approach to coaching one informed by recent advances in relational psychoanalytic theory and practice (Allen & Fonagy, 2006; Schore, 2010; Wachtel, 2008; Wallin, 2007) that is more likely to prove effective when such difficulties do arise. In fact, I argue that beyond the goal of merely averting failure in one's immediate situation or role, this approach provides profound, long-term benefits for the individual executive, the organization he serves, and the stakeholder community with whom he collaborates.

### **The Presenting Situation**

Every organization has experienced it: the recently hired executive, who comes with high expectations but soon begins to disappoint management; or the successful, high-potential manager, who struggles when promoted to a bigger job. Initially, management may be

restrained, expressing less concern than they truly feel. Then, as early feedback fails to prompt improvement, unease grows. Others, including colleagues, direct reports, external stakeholders, and perhaps even the board, have begun to notice, and the conclusion that “this is not working” registers without being explicitly stated.

As for the struggling executive, despite her anxiety and doubts, she may at first offer plausible explanations. But as time passes without improvement, her explanations begin to sound like excuses. Initially, she may have conveyed an earnest tone, an apologetic attitude, perhaps followed by assurances that she will redouble her efforts. However, as subpar performance persists, her nagging doubts and fears build, often manifesting in increased signs of defensiveness, retreat, even isolation.

In this way, pressure mounts for the struggling executive and for management. After all, both parties are under pressure to produce results, and business performance is lagging with little promise of a change in its trajectory. By now, the organization has tried to intervene and is running out of patience. Not only is the executive’s confidence shaken, her support among colleagues and key stakeholders has probably softened. Perhaps the credibility of management is even on the line: “How long will they allow this to go on?”

Against this backdrop, alternative courses of action are discussed: 1) If she has a good history with the firm, she might be willing to acknowledge that it is not working and take a step back into another role. 2) If she was recruited externally specifically for this job, management may be more inclined to cut its losses and offer her a package. 3) Then again, management may have reason to believe that they have caught it early enough to warrant engaging an external coach. What shall management do?

### **Situation Analysis**

Some contend that the term “faltering” is a euphemism used to conceal a more serious problem, i.e., a compelling pattern of failure. In some cases, however, the term may be quite apt in characterizing a tentative, halting style of leadership prompted by novel, complex, and/or unforeseen challenges, problematic but reversible. Clearly, what we observe in the narrative above, especially when it stretches over a period of several months, is not simply “faltering,” it is failing. An important question, then, is at what point does faltering toward failure become terminal? And for management, how do they know when to rule in or rule out the feasibility of coaching as a solution?

Experience suggests that if the downward spiral has persisted for six months or more, confidence in the executive will have been eroded to a point that a turnaround through coaching is unlikely. If, on the other hand, she is still within the first 90 days, producing mixed results, but she is able to hear and use feedback, then coaching may be quite promising. Between these poles is where the decision becomes more difficult.

Anyone who has witnessed or experienced the personal dynamics of this struggle first hand will readily acknowledge that it affects achievement-oriented people quite deeply, often manifesting all the intensity of a fight for survival. Depending upon how one’s failure experiences are processed and interpreted, they can either spur and accelerate significant growth (Avolio & Hannah, 2008) or profoundly shake one’s confidence, perhaps even create a crisis of identity (Brunstein, 2000).

This kind of distress, emerging as it does from the emotional right brain, will not be resolved through left-brain reasoning (Greenberg, 2007; Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007); indeed, it typically arises as a result of repeated, failed left-brain attempts at problem solving

(Schoore, 2010). What is needed at this point, then, is a “right-brain to right-brain relationship”, a relationship of safety and trust that provides both a secure base from which the executive can explore her experience, as well as safe harbor to return to when she needs support. The relationship must learn to tolerate tensions and conflict, and to repair ruptures and restore safety and trust afterwards. And ultimately, the relationship must enable the client to reflect on her experience, verbalize its meaning, and integrate key insights into a revised and coherent personal narrative. Through this kind of coaching relationship she is able to internalize adaptive changes and bring them to her work as a leader.

There is a relational quality and a dimension of depth that is essential to such a course of guided self-examination and reflection. It yields a vantage point seldom accessed in daily life and allows one to critically examine the implicit and often deeply rooted feelings, beliefs, and strivings, many acquired in the preverbal years of childhood, which continue to shape us in adulthood. These are affective structures that enliven or mute aspects personality, mediate perception of others, and trigger reactions in times of stress. We will explore this dimension of depth in the case of Adam, but first it will be helpful to examine the distinctive features and foundations of the approach to developmental coaching used with Adam.

### **The Coaching “Cure”**

In citing the unique psychological dynamics at work in achievement-oriented people, and the depth at which they are rooted in our personality, I do not intend to suggest that we are talking about so-called “hard wired” characteristics. We use that language to denote something that is innate or unlearned, which is not the case with the development goals I have in mind, i.e., resolving fundamental feelings of anxiety or insecurity that affect our readiness to adaptively explore and master new challenges, and to form enduring relationships that can survive episodes

of tension and conflict. The potential for this kind of personal change and development is borne out in psychotherapy efficacy studies (Norcross, 2002) and in neuroscience research on the role of relationships in psychological development (Siegel, 1999).

Much of what we know about human development points to the critical role of secure attachments, the supportive and encouraging social-emotional connections we form with significant others (Bowlby, 1988; Shore, 1994; Siegel 1999) . Relationships of this kind provide what Donald Winnicott (Tuber, 2008) called a “holding environment” that promotes reasonable risk-taking and encourages us to venture out from a safe harbor in order to actively explore our surrounding world, all with the belief that support is available if needed and that frustrations and setbacks are survivable. Since the original and paradigmatic source of such confidence and well-being is the infant-caregiver relationship (usually mother) a great deal of attention has been paid to its lasting effects and how they persist into adult life (Stern, 1998).

More recent trends in attachment research (Wallin, 2007) have probed our capacity to modify an attachment style acquired early in life that might prove problematic or self-limiting in adult development. For example, perhaps early experience with a preoccupied caregiver (e.g., mother) led us to conclude that expressed needs for support or encouragement are often neither welcome nor met with an empathic and helpful response. Based on such exchanges we might have learned that manifesting our vulnerabilities and needs actually jeopardizes our connection with this caregiver. To compensate for this risk, perhaps we adopted a strategy of anticipating and accommodating our caregiver’s emotional needs, ever vigilant for mood shifts or signs of rejection. This early attachment orientation enables us to maintain a secure base, but it compels us to conceal our needs and manifest a “low-maintenance” profile. It all happens intuitively, unconsciously via processes governed by our right brain (Shore, 2010).

A predisposition to suppress expression of our genuine vulnerabilities and needs is often accompanied and bolstered by a suppression of self-awareness. The “preverbal logic” here, quite simply, is that if we block our awareness of these needs we are less likely to express them and suffer painful rejection as a consequence. This kind of nonconscious navigation of relationships has been called *implicit relational knowing* (Lyons-Ruth, 1998). It is a nonverbal, interpersonal savvy that first arises in infancy but continues to operate implicitly throughout life. As intuitively clever and tactically effective as a strategy might be in the original infant-caregiver situation, when it manifests in adult relationships that are intended to be collaborative it can have crippling effects.

As a practical matter, we may be able to thrive and advance professionally for some time using this attachment style because managers often welcome, appreciate, and favor so-called low-maintenance subordinates. It may even be explicitly praised as a virtue of self-reliance, further reinforcing its use in relationships. Sooner or later, however, everyone encounters a stretch assignment or novel challenge that overwhelms his/her confidence and competence. At these times, success may hinge upon our learning to appropriately recognize, explore, and respond to our felt needs for help. Although accessing this insight and acquiring the learning that must follow requires conditions of emotional safety, prior experience may have taught us that exposing our vulnerabilities and needs is dangerous. What we encounter in this moment, then, is a dilemma that can paralyze the developing leader. However, this moment can also become the occasion for breakthrough learning and growth.

Fortunately, researchers and practitioners agree that adults are able to access and revise the personal narrative underlying an original attachment style that presents such limitations (Holmes, 2001; Siegel, 1999; Wallin, 2007; Wachtel, 2008). This revision (i.e., adaptive

personal change) is facilitated by a secure and highly skilled helping relationship. We can learn a lot about the methods most likely to propel the client-coach dyad toward professionally relevant, frame-changing insights into self by considering recent advances in the clinical arena.

One of these advances comes from those (e.g., David Wallin, 2007) who have been exploring ways to apply attachment research and theory to clinical practice with adults. An immediate suggestion from this work is the practice of incorporating an assessment of the client's attachment history and style in the early phase of the coaching engagement. This is done not through the use of psychometric assessment tools; rather, it emerges from intimate, client-centered dialogue between coach and client (e.g., see Wallin, 2007, pp. 29-30). Therapeutic dialogue, by which I mean a highly individualized and developmentally enabling dialogue, builds on a foundation of empathic engagement with the coach. The coach sets this tone by conveying a genuine sense of mutuality, e.g., "We are both human beings who identify deeply with our professional roles, and our felt need to live a life of significance."

The client is then guided to share the story of his life, starting with his family of origin and giving special attention to relations with his primary caregiver/s. It involves discussion of and reflection upon family dynamics and the important shaping influences that emerge as salient in the course of his development. The goal is to elicit and explore the subjective experience and meaning of the client's early life. What did he feel, and how did he interpret, respond and adapt to this early experience? How did the experience serve to define who he is as a person, how he views himself, and what he can expect from others and relationships in general? What is the pattern of motivations and purposive strivings that arises from his early life? How is it that they set him on a path in life? This kind of assessment is exemplified in the case of Adam below.

A second area of progress stemming from the clinical arena is the work of the Boston Process of Change Study Group, founded in 1995 (Lyons-Ruth, 1998; Stern, 1998). The group is composed of psychoanalytically oriented developmentalists, clinical practitioners and theorists. They draw upon recent research in infant development and from dynamical systems theory to conceptualize how change occurs through relationships in normal adult development and in a clinical context. They use infant research as a point of reference because nowhere in human life does change occur as quickly and dramatically as in infant development. Moreover, since infant development occurs in a context of preverbal interaction, it sheds light on the role of nonverbal communications in the process of change.

The Group identified a few core concepts that describe the process of change. First, it should be noted that they began their study with a belief that all therapeutic change and normal development is grounded in relationships, or as some theorists would say, in intersubjective space. Given this premise, they gave special attention to the two basic ways in which meaning is constituted, i.e., it emerges either from implicit, nonverbal interaction, or from explicit, semantic-conceptual modes of interaction. They concluded that most change in therapy and in normal development occurs through *implicit relational knowing* (Lyons-Ruth, 1998), knowing that concerns how to be with someone. It is made up of the affectively toned, value laden, understandings we form in a rather intuitive manner through the dynamics of interaction with another person.

In a helping relationship, then, client and coach interact through a series of “present moments” which convey what is happening between them right now. In the course of this intersubjective flow, certain moments may acquire an especially intense affective charge that pulls client and coach into a heightened state of attentiveness and shared focus on something that

feels important. This is called a “now moment”, and some of them rise to a still further level of significance, a “moment of meeting, which is transformative in the sense that it creates an “open space” (Stern, 1998) in which the client achieves insight into a new way of being with and relating to others. The moment of meeting includes a corrective emotional experience (Wallin, 2007). It frees the client from a constrained pattern of responding and relating to others. New ways of being (i.e., attachment style) register as attractive and achievable, reflecting a growing confidence in the client attributable in part to the fact that these insights have grown out of an actual relationship with the coach that the client had a hand in shaping (Fonagy, 1998.)

A third area of research we can draw upon from the clinical domain derives from the work of Peter Fonagy (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist & Target, 2002) in “mentalization.” Briefly put, mentalization is the capacity to reflectively consider state-of-mind variables that mediate and moderate the relational tendencies and interpersonal behavior of self and others. Of course, in the context of leader development, we are most interested in mentalization as a capability insofar as it affects our ability to cultivate enduring relationships of cooperation and collaboration. Among other things, mentalization skill is associated with an increased ability to read and respond accurately to others, and to restore connection with others that has been temporarily broken in moments of conflict (Allen & Fonagy, 2006).

Mentalization skills are manifested when we exhibit a capacity to suspend judgment, examine alternative points of view, and recognize that others, like us, act from a state of mind which is subjectively distinct from ours. Further, we show a greater readiness to entertain multiple interpretations of events and attribute causal influence of another person’s actions to multiple factors, internal and external. The reflective function at work here is something that is exercised in the helping relationship. This function is repeatedly employed to “disembed”, as

Wallin (2007) would say, the person from his more automatic-reactive patterns of interpreting the dynamics of a relationship.

These developments from the field of relational theory and psychotherapy serve as an important reminder that although early life experience plays a profound role in shaping our habitual tendencies of mind, our sense of self, and what we can expect of others (e.g., their trustworthiness, and their willingness to help and encourage us), the narrative underlying these tendencies is subject to revision. Moreover, there seems to be no reason to believe that these findings would be any less applicable to the personal process of change undertaken by a faltering executive. Indeed, P. Fonagy reported (personal communication, April 8, 2010) that mentalization-based practices are being used with executive coaching clients. The author too has been trialing practices informed by attachment theory and mentalization theory with executive coaching clients over the past year and in consultation with David Wallin with encouraging results.

Given this characterization of coaching, it may be appropriate to comment briefly on how it relates to some common practices in organizational development. When we distinguish between personality dynamics and overt style, or between intrapersonal and interpersonal development, we immediately recognize an inner/outer directedness that differentiates the members of these pairs. Most standardized assessment tools used in an organizational setting (e.g., Myers-Briggs, FIRO-B, and DiSC) are principally focused on identifying overt patterns of behavior, a person's de facto style. The same is true of standardized multi-rater feedback instruments (360's). While these tools can be a helpful supplement in executive development, they are generally not sufficient to facilitate transformative change with a faltering executive. For what we are aiming at with the faltering executive is not to categorize and interpret his

tendencies in terms of a general typology of human behavior (e.g., introversion-extraversion) in order to facilitate incremental adjustments in style. Faltering executives are by definition “stuck”; they and their organizations have tried their best to no avail. We are helping a person at a moment that is at least an inflection point in his career and perhaps feels more akin to a personal crisis. At this time he needs to explore his subjectively experienced situation and what he brings to it, including his unique personal narrative. And in the company of a trusted other, he must stabilize his emotions, and find a path forward. The fictional case of Adam below will illustrate

### **The Case of Adam**

Like many with high potential for senior leadership, Adam is ambitious and has a sound track record of achievement. However, since being appointed as executive director of clinical operations by his employer, a global pharmaceutical company, he seems to be faltering. Adam has not yet expressed concerns explicitly, and his supervisor and HR partner, not wanting to shake his confidence, decide it may be best to wait another week or two before broaching the topic with him. After all, he’s only been in the role a few weeks.

Meanwhile, the vice president to whom he reports notices that Adam is struggling with his role on the senior team. He remains rather quiet during most of the meeting, and when he does speak up it is often to express dissent when the rest of the group is ready to finalize a decision. His supervisor is moderately annoyed by this but not quite sure how to interpret it. It is not that Adam’s insights or ideas lack value; it’s his timing and style.

His supervisor has also received mixed reviews from stakeholders outside his department. These are people with whom Adam is expected to regularly communicate, coordinate, and

collaborate. He has not made any grave missteps, but he seems to rely on his direct reports too much, and stakeholders complain that they hardly hear from Adam unless they initiate the call.

With his direct reports the news is somewhat better. They respect his knowledge and his ability to offer advice when asked. Moreover, he expresses trust in their competence and does not micro-manage their work. However, in light of recent top-down changes in the firm's strategic priorities and associated budget cuts, they fear for their security and don't see Adam as a strong advocate for them.

By now, Adam is still only six weeks into the new role, but his supervisor in consultation with her HR partner decides it is time to suggest coaching. While he initially expresses concern, Adam warms to the idea as his supervisor explains what coaching is about and how valuable it was for her at a critical point in her personal development as a leader. Adam is subsequently connected with an executive coach. The coach, who is a consulting psychologist, proceeds to conduct an in-depth, confidential assessment of Adam.

In the assessment process, Adam shares the story of his early years: His stay-at-home mother yearned for education and a professional life outside the home. Soon after the birth of Adam and his brother (two years older), she pursued college in earnest, and then advanced degrees including a doctorate from an Ivy League University. During his adolescence, Adam's mother divorced her less educated husband, an entrepreneur with mixed success. Adam went to live with his father while his brother stayed with his mother.

Soon after their initial meeting, Adam is presented with assessment feedback from his coach that highlights developmental themes from his early life. The feedback report presented below is characterized by the coach as a set of impressions or working hypotheses, nothing to be accepted or rejected too quickly, but to be used as a stimulus for discussion and joint interpretation:

*Adam experienced his mother as preoccupied, distracted, and going through the motions. His basic needs for her availability, attention, responsiveness, and affirmation were not a priority. His mother's lack of attunement was clearly communicated in the nonverbal interactions of the relationship. What would this have felt like for a young child, for Adam? Would he have felt important, valued, or significant? How did this affect what was mirrored back to him about who he was, about whom he could rely upon for help?*

*Such early life experience may naturally lead a child to suppress expression of his dependency needs. He might do this to avoid the pain of having these needs repeatedly frustrated and for fear of alienating this person he continued to need in spite of her limitations. Over time, he came to "down-regulate" these emotions (dependency needs) in order to accommodate his mother's inability to be present and responsive to him.*

*A young child naturally takes this experience as a fact about how the world is, i.e., that he cannot rely on others to be available when he needs them, or count on them to provide empathic understanding, and to respond with sensitivity and love to his needs for emotional support. Rather, he concludes that he must be self-reliant, that he is left alone to organize his emotional life and cope with life's challenges.*

*In summary, this most important relationship in early life falls short of providing a secure base from which Adam could explore his surrounding world, share his experience, discover his competencies, and freely express his dependency needs, knowing that he always has someone to help him when there are fears, setbacks, and needs for encouragement. It is from this experience in early life that we form a sense of self and an attachment orientation toward others (secure or insecure). When a child's security needs are not adequately met, the child adapts, but at a cost.*

*Having learned to accommodate his mother's limitations, Adam's expectations for support were far lower when he came under his father's care. His father was also preoccupied, but Adam found that he could connect with his father around sports and later as a helper in his father's businesses. His father's ethic – "you will never be the smartest guy in the room, but you can always outwork the other guy" – became a shared source of identity, motivation, and mission. A life of significance could be based on effort, perseverance, and what you do – no one has to know that you are really not so smart, not so able.*

*In this relationship, Adam was able to feel valued by his father, and it provided him with a sense of potency, an active and functional way of coping with life's challenges. However, after high school, as Adam's role as over-achiever in sports and a helper in Dad's business came to an end, he entered a state of uncertainty, perhaps even a crisis of identity. Now in college and having lost the support with his father because of his declining involvement in athletics and his father's business, he turned to his mother.*

*By his second year in college, Adam found that he could channel his over-achiever work ethic into academic and career pursuits with success, a lifestyle with which his mother could identify. This area of overlapping interest became a basis for connecting with his mother. He felt he had "outgrown" his father and had grown into a relationship with his mother. Of course, there was a good deal of contingency in the new scheme of values: One is as good as his accomplishments, the heights to which he is able to cultivate his intellect, and the status of the schools he attends and the professional positions he is able to attain.*

*These shaping influences in Adam's life set in motion certain problematic tendencies. From the insecure attachment with his primary caretakers, Adam learned that care and*

*affection from others is generally conditional. He must be on guard, self-reliant, and sensitive to signs of disappointing others. More generally, he must be “on” in social situations and ready to accommodate. One is only as good as his last performance, thus his inclination to a perfectionistic style of overwork.*

*All of this registers internally as anxiety, intensity, and especially fears of failure, rejection, and abandonment. Outwardly, it manifests in tendencies to amplify signs of risk, worry too much, and work himself to exhaustion. Socially, he finds it difficult to be truly relaxed, spontaneous, and open in relationships with others. He finds that it is easier to simply minimize such contact. It is the force of this narrative that he must interrupt.*

*Fortunately, Adam’s relationship with his wife of four years offers a base of support from which to build. This relationship reflects his yearnings for unconditional love and acceptance as a person. While she too defines herself largely through goal strivings and achievement, in their relationship they can acknowledge their fears, vulnerabilities, and insecurities. They are able to be a secure base for one another as they both continue to explore life’s possibilities and to learn that it is okay to be less than perfect in the eyes of others.*

These highlights tell a story about Adam’s humanity, the less-than-perfect parenting to which he adjusted and found a way to thrive. His drive and achievements, like those of many successful people, are in part explained by his “compensatory” motivations to overcome feelings of inadequacy engendered early in life. His willingness to examine these imperfections with an attitude of compassion became essential to his growth and development as a person.

There are many strengths and virtues conveyed in Adam’s story: his determination to thrive and live a socially responsible life; his attunement to and compassion for ordinary people; and

his openness to self-examination and readiness to explore his vulnerabilities when offered a safe and supportive environment in which to do so. Adam did need to be regularly reminded of these positive qualities, and he had to be dissuaded of tendencies toward harsh self-criticism, which is so often the dark side of one's achievement drive.

Paradoxically, it is often only when the executive knows that his coach is willing and able to help him explore and address his vulnerabilities, that he will give credence to the coach's insistence that he recognize his strengths and moderate his self-criticism. One important payoff of achieving a more balanced self-appraisal is that it leads to more realistic expectations on important questions: How autonomously should a leader function in the various aspects of his new role, and where and how must he be willing to acknowledge his limits and depend on others?

While most high-achieving people will sooner or later acknowledge that a career in senior leadership implies a nonlinear step in development, they may not immediately appreciate how much this nonlinearity is tied to self-knowledge. What they soon learn, however, is that by seizing on the right development themes, i.e., vulnerabilities that arouse feelings of insecurity and constrain their adaptive capabilities, they unleash their potential to make a dramatic step forward in their maturity and competence as a leader.

And that is exactly what Adam proceeded to do. He came to view his long-standing insecurities from childhood with a compassionate attitude, just as a good parent might. Recognizing them for what they are, i.e., beliefs and assumptions that were at one time adaptive, he was able to be more patient in hearing them out. After considering them in the "light of day," some of his insecurities rather immediately diminished in strength. Other worrisome feelings

came to be appreciated for their value as helpful warning signs, alerting Adam to the need for reflection rather than automatic reaction.

In this way, Adam came to regard his more intuitive judgments and affective experience as the correlate of a point of view. They merit consideration but are not to be simply taken as indisputable facts. This attitudinal shift freed him intellectually, emotionally, and interpersonally to reconsider his ways of responding to the new and complex challenges of his leadership role and the worrisome feelings of uncertainty they engendered. From this reflective point of view, he was also able to empathize with the vulnerabilities of others to react out of immediate and overriding anxiety or insecurities, and their needs for a “holding environment” in their relationship with him that allows them the emotional space to reconsider their appraisal of and response to the situation.

Now, rather than avoiding contact with others in times of uncertainty for fear of being “found out,” he experimented with a more inclusive and collaborative style, expressing himself more freely, including his feelings of uncertainty. His purpose changed in these encounters from needing to prove himself to seeking the input and advice of others. In team meetings, rather than reserving his comments until he was sure of himself or polishing his ideas until he had something “important” to say, he verbalized his questions and impressions earlier and more spontaneously.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges of sustainability call for transformative change and transformative leadership. Underlying the imperatives for change is a shift in value commitments, which moves us away from industrial age modes of thought, motivation, and action and toward a vision of economic development that parallels a leave-no-trace camping ethic. This kind of commitment is neither casual nor painless. It calls for moral maturity and courage. It is expressed in the kind

of personal responsibility that is highly attuned to the needs and interests of others, i.e., business stakeholders, communities, and the diverse ecosystems that are the foundation of our existence.

There is no way to achieve this transformation absent some rather intensive soul searching, first by those in a position to initiate organizational action, and then by all those who wish to be active agents of such change. There may be executives who will have a road-to-Damascus experience and form these commitments without the help of a coaching intervention. However, we can anticipate that many others will need help. The point of view offered here emphasizes the value and importance of a guided path of in-depth personal reflection and development. It is a way of pursuing transformative personal change that results in the moral maturity and concern for the greater good that we associate with a generative style of leadership. This, I submit, is one way of conceptualizing responsible leadership in an age of sustainability.

Figure 1.

Norms associated with the proposed definition of personal responsibility.

<b>Norm</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b><i>Inclusion</i></b>	Inclusion of all relevant stakeholders and concern for their well-being is essential to the meaning of what is proper. Propriety, according to Wendell Berry (2001, p.13), “is a reference to the fact that we are not alone. The idea of propriety makes an issue of the fittingness of our conduct to our place, circumstances, even to our hopes.”
<b><i>Cognizance</i></b>	Cognizance of relevant facts, history, principles, and values gives meaning and importance to the presenting situations in which we must take action, as well as appreciation for the anticipated consequences of our actions.
<b><i>Deliberation</i></b>	Deliberations that involve perspective-taking and reflection on beliefs and values, our own and those of others, that are pertinent to the issues at hand enable us to form well-considered judgments with personal integrity.
<b><i>Communication</i></b>	Communication that is open promotes mutual understanding, is characterized by genuine curiosity, empathic dialogue, reason-giving, and a persistent striving to achieve consensus and base norms on areas of overlap in values.
<b><i>Attunement</i></b>	Attunement to the affectively toned experiences and narratives of others is critical for gaining insight into the binding force of values and norms that underlie the interests and positions of peoples and stakeholders involved.

Figure 2.

Summarized below are seven cross-cutting themes synthesized by Andres Edwards (2005) from the sustainability principle frameworks of over 30 organizations.

<b>Value-based theme</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<i>Stewardship</i>	Importance of an ecological ethic for managing and preserving the biological integrity of ecosystems.
<i>Respect for limits</i>	Living within nature’s means by preventing waste, pollution, and unsustainable resource depletion.
<i>Interdependence</i>	Relationships between species and nature, and economic and cultural ties at local, regional, international levels.
<i>Economic restructuring</i>	Expanding employment while safeguarding ecosystems, emphasize cooperation/efficiency vs competition/waste.
<i>Fair Distribution</i>	Social justice in employment, education, healthcare, addressing issues that face by low-income communities.
<i>Intergenerational Perspective</i>	Long-term rather than short-term view, concern for how decisions/actions affect our children and grandchildren.
<i>Nature as model and teacher</i>	Nature as a reservoir of expertise, 3.5 billion years of experience, “biomimicry”, respecting nonhuman species.

Figure 3.<sup>1</sup>

Developmental Themes: Generativity versus Stagnation

<i>Characteristics of Generativity</i>	<i>Characteristics of Stagnation</i>
Attitude of care and inclusion	Attitude of exclusion (rejectivity)
Open to experience	Closed to experience
Tolerant of differences	Intolerant of differences
Creative-productive tendencies	Conservative tendencies
Broad scope of concern	Narrow scope of concern
Other-focused (next generation)	Self-absorption
Conscious of being a guide	Focused on personal needs
Generous, motivated to impart knowledge	Ungenerous, little selfless giving and outreach
Encouraging of others to lead in their own style and voice	Oriented to enforcement of current practices and conventions
Emphasis on the interpersonal	Emphasis on the instrumental

**Note:** Erikson believed that the successful resolution of conflict between the forces of generativity and stagnation implies a constructive tension between the two poles, leaning toward the normatively positive.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the information on the contrasting behavioral characteristics associated with generativity and stagnation presented in this table is from research summarized by Slater (2003) and St. Aubin et al. (2004).

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