



LIVE FROM THE FIRING LINE

The Power of Introspection for Executive Development

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This article advocates that psychologists help coach senior executives through introducing the appreciation of introspection. Introspection is not a topic that is in vogue, but has a 100 year history in psychology. Helping executives understand and capture the power of introspection is based upon a cornerstone of leadership development . . . objective, accurate self-awareness leads to emotional maturity. Maturity is an essential characteristic of “C” suite executives. With introspection, the majority of the effort is done solely by the executive him/herself with guided instruction from the psychologist/coach. This makes the process low cost and convenient. Mature judgment is most called for when a decision is “51–49.” If the executive is aware of his/her unconscious biases it can positively tip the scales in favor of making the right call. Through asking and reflecting on critical personal leadership questions, understanding the nature of positive introspection, and removing the bias of the ego, executives can grow in their own time and place.

After interviewing several thousand executives I can say that virtually all “C” suite executives agree with this assertion: “The development of leadership potential is vital to our company.” But with budget restraints and tenure at an all-time low, companies have eliminated most executive education and leadership development.

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Is there a means to develop senior leadership ability that is easily accessible at low cost? Can executives learn and grow on their own time and terms to evolve into emotionally centered and wise leaders?

Buddha said "A man should first direct himself in the way he should go; only then should he instruct others." This approach corroborates Dr. Warren Bennis (1989), one of the world's foremost leadership authorities: "Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult" (p. 9). This article is directed toward psychologists who consult with executives to help them make better judgment calls. I argue for an executive development approach that employs three connected concepts:

- Truthful self-awareness leads to clear introspection;
- Clear introspection helps dissipate the bias of the ego; an unbiased ego is a cornerstone of maturity; and
- Emotional maturity leads to good judgment, which is the essence of leadership.

Through this article I will seek to summarize how leaders can develop maturity that creates wisdom through the power of introspection.

SELF-AWARENESS

The core premise of my thesis is straightforward: The deeper and better one understands him/herself, the more successful an executive they will become. I advocate that reflection, looking within, and analyzing oneself is complementary to, not a substitute for, life experience. Experience by itself is inadequate. We are all familiar with executives who tout "experience" as their primary qualification. No one will argue against experience being useful. To have witnessed and worked with scenarios that are analogous and draw parallels is valuable. Furthermore, past behavior predicts future behavior. Yet we also recognize that business issues are often unique and idiosyncratic. Mature judgment and intellect trump experience.

Outstanding executives tend to know themselves well, including their "shadow" or darker side. They understand their proclivities, weaknesses, and strengths. Whether or not they are likable, most have a pretty clear idea of who they are. They don't sugarcoat weaknesses or glamorize strengths. They're able to see and evaluate themselves objectively.

These successful people figured out how to leverage strengths while managing around weaknesses. This deeper understanding of "self" is a real differentiator between people stuck in middle management and people that ascend, and successfully stay, at senior levels.

There are many pathways for leaders to acquire self-awareness. These include taking personality tests and having them interpreted by a licensed and experienced professional. This process is especially illuminating when an executive undergoes several assessments over the years and common themes emerge.

Another way to acquire self-awareness is through the ubiquitous “360°” so popular in the corporate world. This is a process, nowadays often online, where peers, subordinates, bosses, and business partners rate the executive on a number of traits, attributes, and performance skills.

A third path is meaningful dialogues and feedback from trusted associates and advisors who know the executive well. This is analogous to productive counseling and coaching when the coach reflects back behavior with interpretation and insight.

Finally, life itself certainly provides self-awareness. One of the (too few!) benefits of aging is looking back and seeing life patterns and themes.

I believe that the goal of executive development is changing the arc of time. At some point executives realize what they wish they would have known earlier in life. I believe that an underappreciated concept that helps executives grow more quickly is introspection. This skill seems to be a lost art. With the constant deluge of information, interruptions, etc. people do not take the necessary time to deeply reflect on their lives and its ultimate meaning.

To begin the process of introspection I ask the executive to ponder 10 challenging, exigent, open-ended questions. These questions are to facilitate introspection by opening a personal philosophical dialogue. This is what Socrates advocated when he asked students questions and contemplative reflections to unlock inner knowledge.

I recommend executives write down their answers and thoughtfully analyze their responses with the insights and coaching of the psychologist/coach.

TEN QUESTIONS THAT FACILITATE INTROSPECTION

- To understand strengths: What were you good at, even as a child? What skill(s) with just a little bit of training, rapidly improved?
- How are your strengths the mirror opposite of your weaknesses? How are your weaknesses the opposite of strengths?
- What are core strengths that really helped your career?
- What would you like written on your career gravestone?
- When have you received a career setback?
- How long did it take you to overcome anger and look back with some level of detachment?
- What did you learn about yourself that helped you to improve?

- What are your life lessons, such as themes that come back again and again?
- Whom do you genuinely dislike? Does this person activate a weakness of yours?
- How would your worst enemy describe you; any truth to the description?

Introspection has been described as self-scrutiny; it a process of direct personal observation or dialog with the self. Introspection is personal; the privilege of the phenomenon is limited to one, and that one is you. People are uniquely positioned to articulate what they believe is true about themselves. A person is always present to observe his/her own behavior; he/she is the preeminent authority. Nobody can ever know more about a person than that person.

This ability should be treated with honor. Humans are the only species capable of introspection. Introspection is not a choice one makes but is a part of our collective genetic heritage and composition. All races and cultures are able to think about themselves. The choice is how to best harness this ability.

As a general principle I have noticed that executives, like most of us, tend not to introspect for psychological growth when life is fundamentally going well. Why would they? Bills are being paid, kids doing well, spouse isn't threatening divorce, the job is actually enjoyable, and the money good. But, as we all know, things change, often quickly and radically. In our world today, with instant answers, packed schedules, and uncertainty, we do not consider introspection to be indispensable. Indeed the word hardly comes up in any boardroom discussion. It is not a phenomenon that is deliberated to any degree, nor is it a behavior that is practiced and consciously thought about. When is the last time that the reader heard an executive say that he needed to actively introspect in order to arrive at a decision? Yes, an executive may say "I need to think about it." But rarely does he say "I need to think about how I think about the decision." Thus, as Nisbett and Wilson (1977) would conclude the introspection would give content, but not process. The psychologist helps with the process thus helping to obviate the "introspection illusion." When a person introspects, she needs to go through a process to think about how she really thinks.

For example, an executive has to make an important hiring decision. She interviews the final two candidates, gets opinions, checks references, etc. At some point she goes with her feelings and makes a decision. But as a coach to the executive you might have her go through a guided introspection process such as:

- Why, specifically, do I like this candidate?
- What business problems do we have that this candidate will help solve? Do I have behavioral examples of how the candidate has approached these issues?
- What aspects of the candidate's personality activate my affirmative response, for example what causes me to feel positive toward the candidate?

- What weaknesses do I have that this candidate will help counterbalance?
- How have I arrived at this decision . . . let me walk through the steps as vividly as I can:
 1. Let me sit comfortably and relax. I want to take two or three deep breaths. Now, I want to recall, as clearly as I can, the most memorable event during the interviews and dinner. I want to recall and think back to the most important event that happened.
 2. I want to recall vividly as if I were producing a movie.
 3. I want to strive to see in detail what happened to make the event so memorable. Recall the feelings, thoughts, emotions, the sounds. Recall my words and conversations.
 4. When I see something in my mind's eye that I particularly approve of, I want to hold the thought, suspend it temporarily, and reflect on what I really liked. I want to recall the thinking, feeling, and behaviors that contributed to my assessment. What made the event good, what made me react to the event and see something I hadn't contemplated before?
 5. I want to stop and reflect at each point and become aware of each part where I was impressed with the candidate's behavior . . . where he said words that proved constructive to the conversation.

We see that by going through a deeper, guided introspection, the hiring executive thinks about how she thinks, and arrives at a decision by trying to overcome errors in logic and ego.

POSITIVE INTROSPECTION

Introspection occurs on two levels. The first level is awareness of inner dialog. We become attuned to the fact we have ability to communicate to ourselves. We do it anyway. We just realize more directly we are doing it.

The second level is making judgments about the contents of our thoughts. When we say "judgment," we are not referring to condemnation or negatively labeling our thoughts. Rather, we refer to judgment in an improvement sense. For example, we recognize and become aware of an inner dialog—we are worried about an important business relationship. The person we need on our side is duplicitous. But that fact doesn't alter our reality . . . we need him supporting our agenda. We say to ourselves, "I am anxious and nervous. My colleague can't be trusted. Yet I must establish trust and hope he is supportive even when I am not present in critical meetings."

Now, if we are able to tap into the richness and deepness of our higher self (our higher self is always what we could be if we removed fear from our egos) we

judge the introspective dialog by saying, "I acknowledge my anxiety; but in this and every human dynamic lies opportunity. Let me think creatively to turn this negative into a surprisingly ambitious positive." By stating the problem clearly to ourselves, examining and acknowledging our emotions, and then framing the issue without fear, we gain control. Our stress dissipates.

When the psychologist works with an executive a dialogue might resemble:

What is an issue you are currently grappling with? Right now, articulate it clearly, concisely to yourself . . . Now, say to yourself . . . "I am going to remove fear from my conscious awareness." Allow your higher self, in your mind's eye, to visualize a solution. Note the feeling of being relaxed, being in control . . . this is because you removed your ego.

INTROSPECTION IS COGNITIVE

Introspection at its core needs to be seen for what it is, a cognitive/thinking knowledge source. Introspection is active. It is something to be done, an act to be taken. Introspection is internal observation through internal dialog. It is a cognitive achievement that takes effort. Thinking about you to yourself is a conscious mental and purposive process. You are aware you are thinking about yourself.

Here's an example. A client is faced with a new job opportunity, so the coach helps him *think* about it . . . the up and downside. Get him to imagine various scenes or possible situations and play these out in his mind's eye. This imagining is not introspection. *It is introspection when you ask him how he feels or the emotions he experiences when he thinks about the new job.*

When executives think about something, they will know, if they actively consider it, how they feel about something. If asked whether they should make an investment into a new service offering, they go through some type of introspection and arrive at a decision . . . *the clearer the introspection, the clearer the opinion. This principle is always true.*

When executives know themselves well they are able to acknowledge certain weaknesses they have that a job candidate might activate. For example, let us take an example of an introverted, financially savvy executive. He tends to appreciate and relates to candidates who demonstrate similar qualities. But how about if the interviewee is an extroverted, outgoing, and dynamic candidate? Perhaps this is exactly what the job situation calls for, especially in a turnaround.

If our introverted senior executive is aware that he can be intimidated by more extroverted types he can interview the job candidate knowing that the interviewee can activate a weakness. Therefore our senior executive is now in a better position to judge the candidate more rationally without unwarranted unconscious ego

biases. In other words, when we have less ego-based interference we introspect with more accuracy. Decisions become purer. All of us can identify with the quality of our lives and decision making when we are without guilt, fear, or trepidation.

Introspection means tearing away the outer layers of perception to more deeply examine motives. It takes conceptual sophistication to know you are *aware* of your thinking. We think all the time. Introspection requires us to be aware of our thinking. When we think, we don't think about thinking. With introspection we reflect on the content and accuracy of our thinking.

Coaches can help executives think of themselves as a scientific observer of their own mind. One objective of the coaching experience is to help executives create an internal schism between themselves—and the object of study—their own thoughts. The coach's advantage is that she listens and observes with objectivity. This is probably the biggest obstacle or hurdle to introspection. As a coach the psychologist (hopefully) doesn't have bias in relation to their client. Awareness of partiality is an important first step toward objectivity. Coaches can do clients an enormous amount of good by helping eliminate client's biases and become more objective.

A simple exercise to help clients create this internal schism is to suggesting that they gaze into a full length mirror and talk out loud to themselves. Although initially awkward, advocate that they try it for 30 seconds. They quickly appreciate that there are two of them . . . the consciousness being emoted, and the recipient of the words, their physical self. Often executives feel a sense of power as they see themselves as they could become—their ideal self.

REMOVING THE BIAS FROM THE EGO TO IMPROVE INTROSPECTION

Essentially, "ego" is the mind lying to itself. The magnitude between who a person is and his inflated/projection sense of "self" is the size and illusion of his ego.

When an executive reaches the point where he/she can easily acknowledge that his/her opinion is only that (an opinion) and that there are multiple ways of perceiving a situation, the executive will have made a strong maturational leap forward.

Ego and self-esteem related fears are generally found together. The ego attacks because of fear or threat. Executives can be pompous, self-centered, narcissistic, and arrogant. A "big ego" has an exaggerated sense of self-importance; a feeling of superiority. They believe they are the "smartest guy in the room" and their body language reveals it. There is a desire for intellectual dominance and challenges are to be resolved through victory over rivals. Needless to say when the "C" suite is composed of these types, chaos ensues.

As psychologists have noted since Freud, portraying one's self in a manner that doesn't accurately reflect the real person, or counterbalances deficiencies, is "compensation." Authoritarian, dominating executives may want to appear tough, macho, or self-important to compensate for unconscious inferiority complexes.

A quality executive understands the role of cooperative debate where parties appreciate that contrary viewpoints help creativity. When the executive's goal is victory, not higher truth, problems emerge. Large egos filter out truth. Big egos are too susceptible to being swayed by personal likes and dislikes. Large egos too often mean leaders project problems and issues onto the team, not taking responsibility for the situation the company finds itself in. When leaders truly take full responsibility for every aspect of their lives, there is a grounded sense of empowerment.

Because of being in-charge too many executives inwardly feel a cut above. The executive who neurotically desires power and prestige judges other people solely on how many of these qualities the others have. The higher they move within an organization, the more they look down upon those they have passed over.

Conversely, true confidence is realistic assessment and appreciation of innate, acquired, and developed strengths. Pride is when there is a correct level of respect for hard work and accomplishment. Vanity is when pride becomes excessive. Vanity is beyond the legitimate motivational force of pride.

True leadership development is for all practical purposes impossible until the executive's ego is grounded. Indeed, the purpose of executive development is for leaders to recognize ego defenses so as to overcome them. An important component of executive education is to transcend the ego's influence over behavior.

Executives keep egos in check when it is considered an honor to lead as opposed to believing innate superiority. The best leaders demonstrate humility. All employees possess strengths. Everyone is valuable or they shouldn't hold their job. A leader's purpose is creating an eco-system and culture that nurtures success by fostering creativity and motivation. It is now accepted that the key to motivation is for the executive to understand his/her subordinates strengths and create an environment to allow those strengths to manifest (Clifton & Nelson, 1992). Richard Boyatzis' recent work on emotional intelligence and resonance demonstrates this observation (Boyatzis et al., 2012). Professionally employed subjects neural areas were positively activated when asked to recall previous incidents with resonant leaders. Conversely, when asked to recall incidents from dissonant leaders, neural areas related to negative emotions were activated.

Egos seek information that conforms to its beliefs. When ego gets in the way of good decision making it often is because biased emotions are substituted for knowledge and fact. To not look at the ego when considering important decisions is foolish, although the majority of executives refuse to ask "how is my ego interfering with my ability to see the truth" or "how is my ego distorting the

issues?" The only way out of bias is clear perception that leads to clear decision making.

The egoless leader tries, as best she can, to overlook the ego or to look past it. Coaches can play a useful role to help executives to at least try and recognize the sway of their egos. This is especially true when executives are overly pleased with themselves due to recognition and compliments. A good sign of when a leader's ego is under control is when the leader honestly seeks out different points of view and tries to find contrary information to his/her perceptions.

Coaches can counsel their clients to be especially vigilant and observant when life gets out of kilter. If the executive feels stressed out, fatigued, irritated, fearful, indecisive, and they don't make any attempt at self-analysis, he/she is psychologically adrift. This is when executives can derail most quickly. Even though they are perfectly capable of doing so, they fail to look within for the meaning of their difficulty. They don't ask what they did to bring the negative energy into their life. Too often they quickly blame others, their environment, or luck. Without introspection, they never arrive at a clear, aggressive pathway out of their issues and problems.

In summary it is through the power of quiet introspection that executives come to know themselves. Make alone time more effective by helping clients acknowledge they want to deepen and clarify their thinking. Challenge them by asking how their ego is affecting opinions and conclusions. Encourage them to strive to know themselves. Recognize the more mature they become the better leader they become. It is not through the intellect that coaches help client's unlock leadership potential, but through emotional intelligence fueled by emotional maturity.

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