

**NOT AFRAID OF THE DARK.....
EXECUTIVE COACHING IN TROUBLED TIMES**

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Just as individuals over the course of a lifetime can experience the dark night of the soul, so do organizations. Like the underbelly of an iceberg, the dark side lurks, and actually holds up the visible expression of the organization. For many spirited accomplishments, such as increase in market share, or innovation, there is an potential counterpoint and soulful response.

Many eloquent writers have explored the subject of the dark underbelly of organizations, and have provided useful lenses for analyzing and making sense of it. Peter Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline*, describes them as organizational disabilities- those blind spots that are talked about in organizations as if they were a reality, when in fact they may be a figment of the leaders' imaginations. Some paraphrased examples from Senge include:

	REALITY	BLIND SPOT
1	Title is a substitute for meaningful responsibility	Leaders think it is a compassionate way to move a poor performer out of the way, but everyone else knows why it is occurring, and it demoralizes both the individual and the organization
2	Scapegoats for errors are identified somewhere within or outside the organization	Leaders avoid taking responsibility for their part in the error, and lose credibility with their peers, subordinates and clients.
3	“Do it because I said so” is the underlying reason for decisions that are forced on organizations.	Leaders think that they are being decisive and strong, when in fact their failure to prepare the organization leads to unproductive stress and results that miss the mark because the initiative is poorly thought through.
4	Focus on short term results	Leaders sacrifice the long term viability of the organization in favour of immediate gains that seriously compromise financial and/or human resources.
5	Silence in the face of significant events	Leaders who remain silent because they don't have the “right” answer compromise their credibility with subordinates who are looking to them for wisdom and direction.
6	Repeating, ignoring, or punishing	Leaders miss the opportunity to

	mistakes	strengthen the organization by learning from mistakes and building capacity for future challenges.
7	Naming dysfunctional work groups “teams”	Leaders fail to provide the training and environment that supports teams to work effectively by simply re-naming work groups with the “team” label.

The role of an executive coach is to address those blind spots and transform them from organizational disabilities or liabilities into organizational assets. The place to begin is with the leaders, meaning those individuals who have positional power and /or significant influence on the minds and hearts of the workforce.

What qualifies a coach to tread in such troubled waters? First and foremost is the coach’s willingness to learn from their own experience in organizations. This is different from their formal training in organizational development, human resources, or executive coaching. It is different from a consultant or mentor who uses their experience as a roadmap for how their client should do things.

The most powerful coaches are individuals who may have some or all of the above credentials, and who have taken the trouble to learn from their own painful experiences in organizations. More than being self aware, these coaches have transformed the challenging experiences into a source of wisdom and compassion for their clients.

Personal Example from an Executive Coach

I spent 30 years in the same company, eventually retiring as a Vice President. Early in my career, I made several grave mistakes for which I should have been fired-like embarrassing the CEO in a public meeting by referring to his ethnic origin in a disparaging way; or interrogating a division leader about his personal commitment to living a balanced life while being interviewed for a VP position (which I didn’t get); or writing a scathing comparison between two men who were in senior positions. These corporate faux-pas were fueled by an uncontrollable rage that seethed inside me when men in positions of power did not behave in the way I thought they should.

Only as I began to learn about family systems through the work of John Bradshaw, and faced the pain of my father’s death when I was 14, did I begin to make the connection between my behaviour at work and my inner world. As I took the time and paid attention to healing my grief and sadness, I noticed that my raging reaction to the men in my company faded.

Thankfully, as I made the family systems connections with the organizational system in which I lived, my relationship with those same men transformed into compassionate and powerful alliances, that resulted in my joining the executive ranks and making a meaningful contribution to my colleagues and the clients we served.

As an executive coach, this inner work gives me huge compassion and understanding for the stressful situations my clients grapple with. My familiarity with the inner game allows me to be present to the journey out of their own version of darkness into the light of understanding and courageous action.

How do masterful coaches work with soulful issues? They begin with leaders who are self aware and willing to venture into the dark. The coach's role is to hold the lantern. This can mean providing assessment tools that clarify where the blind spots are. It certainly means establishing an environment of trust in which the leader can say whatever is on his or her mind, knowing that what comes back will be thought provoking, insightful, and serve to clarify the next best step to take.

What are some of the results that coaching offers organizations? The most significant results may not be readily apparent, nor trackable directly to the bottom line. They **do** transform organizational disabilities into assets that may look like this:

1. **Sponsoring meaningful work:** Coaching focuses consistent attention on providing people with the opportunity to experience meaningful work, regardless of title or position. Leaders more than anyone are hungry for meaning beyond meeting shareholder or bottom line targets. Leaders are interested in living a legacy that will make a positive difference in their world. Coaches pay attention to these questions and provide a sounding board for leaders to explore the issues and find solutions that make sense to them. Leaders who grapple with these questions create an environment for others to do the same, and eventually the organization's culture transforms.
2. **Looking in the mirror:** Coaching allows leaders to be self-reflective at the most difficult times. By exploring the leader's part in the complexity of issues such as employee turnover, diminishing market share, or lack of investor confidence, the coach assists the leader to reclaim their personal power through their own vulnerability. The leader's own journey into the dark then becomes a beacon for others in the organization who are experiencing the external pressure, and who would otherwise have nowhere to express it.
3. **Implementing wise decision-making:** Coaching takes strategic decision making up a notch by inviting leaders to consider *all* the implications, rather than focusing on the urgent or expedient. While this may appear to be a slower process, it actually results in decisions that have more positive long term effects, and thus require less re-work or re-consideration.
4. **Focusing on long term viability:** Lessons from the dot com explosion apply equally to other organizations, and coaching can assist leaders to avoid the same pitfalls by using a clearly articulated long term vision as a touchstone for ongoing initiatives. The coach approach to strategic planning makes room for the people factor that ultimately determines the success or failure of an organization.
5. **Initiating courageous communication:** Coaches model telling the truth in a way that makes room for new learning. The impact of global conditions since 9/11 and the current war in Iraq is an increased need for the truth to be expressed by everyone in the workplace. Leaders are being called on to model truth-telling, and working with a coach gives them a place to practice for the higher risk environment outside their office doors.
6. **Taking the best from the worst:** An organization's stories are its lifeblood. Coaching draws story from the most damaging situations and assists leaders to first see the gold for themselves, and then to share that learning with the organization.

7. **Practicing what is preached:** People take their cues from what leaders **do** more than from what they say. For an organization to create a team-based culture, the leadership must model what a high functioning team looks like. To break through habits of silo thinking and shift from reward systems that focus on individual achievement to collective achievement requires skill and dedication. Coaching provides feedback to executive teams that bring dysfunctional interactions to light and co-creates strategies for breaking habits that no longer serve the organization.

People are dying at their desks because they are afraid of the darkness that hides under the desk. Coaches earn the right to be companions on the journey into the dark places- where leaders and people at all levels of organizations find themselves- because of their commitment to face their own darkness. Coaches and their clients come out the other side with courageous life long learning marked by lasting concrete results.