

# Know thyself!

## An interview with Manfred Kets de Vries about the transformative power of executive coaching

*Manfred Kets de Vries has been rated as amongst the fifty most influential management thinkers in leadership development and organizational change by noted publications such as The Financial Times, Le Capital, and The Economist. Presently, he is regarded as the leading figure in the clinical study of organizational leadership. He has combined his educational and research activities at the INSEAD Global Leadership Centre, which he founded and built into one of the largest leadership development centres in the world. In over 30 years his research activities and consulting practice have focussed on the subjects of leadership, executive coaching, and organisational transformation and change. In this interview, Dr. Brigitte Winkler discusses with Prof. Kets de Vries how leadership coaching can foster the change capacities of executives and organisations, as well as the value of scientifically generated management theories and psychodynamic approaches for leadership and organisational development.*

**OE:** Professor Kets de Vries, you use leadership coaching interventions in your leadership development programs at INSEAD on a regular basis. Based on your experience, how can coaching interventions help drive transformational change, to begin with at an individual level, but also at an organisational level?

**KdV:** Most of my ideas come from listening to my clients. For example, I have been running for 21 years a CEO seminar titled «The Challenge of Leadership: Creating Reflective Leaders» at INSEAD. In this seminar, I pioneered the group coaching intervention method. Each seminar has a group of approximately 20 senior executives who complete four iterations spread out over a year: three sessions are held in Fontainebleau and one in Singapore. When I founded INSEAD's Global Leadership Centre in 2003, this kind of group intervention became one of our specialities. INSEAD is now the leader, and also by far the largest institution, in group coaching.

Compared to individual coaching (which surely has a value of its own), we found that group (or team) coaching is more effective compared to one-to-one coaching. It creates more opportunities for change. It's more prone to incidents of tipping points – those moments of sudden insights that make everything click in a client's life and result in positive life changes. A tipping point occurs when concerns and negative thoughts that may have previously stymied a client suddenly dissipate as new solutions to what have seemed to be irre-

concilable dilemmas, materialize. But these tipping points do not come out of the blue; they are the consequence of hours of thought, reflection and preparation. I would also like to add that often these tipping points are facilitated by the pressures exerted by the other members of the group.

In group coaching, two dynamics occur simultaneously: first, are the dynamic processes within the individual who is in the «hot seat;» whose life and career issues are discussed; second, and simultaneously «are «cloud» issues, themes that the group-as-a-whole brings to the table. These two dynamics make group coaching more difficult to manage, but bear more interesting fruit.

Of course, there are always going to be certain things that a person may not want to talk about in a group setting – especially when the participants are from the same organization. Thus, during our leadership coaching interventions, we often also provide an individual session, so that the participants (if they have the need) can talk about very private issues. Keep in mind that group coaching versus individual coaching is not an either/or; it is and/and. It also depends on what you are trying to accomplish. For example, group coaching in a Top Management Team of a company can have quite a reverberation effect throughout the organisation.

Group coaching has become increasingly relevant in the world of highly complex and/or virtual organisations. In such organizations it is important to create effective networks, and

successful lateral relationships. In that context, group coaching has proven to be highly effective to help people understand the other's point of view. What's more, it becomes a great way of getting rid of a silo mentality. Much of my work with top executive teams is silo «busting.» People will start to have courageous conversations – and talk about real issues. When there is trust among the members of the team, the team will be more effective in accomplishing group objectives and become better at constructive conflict resolution. Its members will be more accountable to themselves and to one another; they will be more committed. They will start to think out of the box, to see new angles and to be more creative. And most importantly, the organisation will have better results.

**OE:** From your experience is there a key list of conceptual frameworks that you would highly recommend?

**KdV:** I am quite intuitive so I do anything that works. Apart from incorporating management theory, I use conceptual frameworks from a diversity of fields such as psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, neuroscience, developmental psychology, cognitive behaviour, family systems theory, appreciative inquiry, motivational interviewing, and paradoxical interventions. The willingness to borrow from a variety of intellectual perspectives on human functioning reflects the complexity of the phenomena leadership coaches have to deal with when working with today's executives.

I have also developed a battery of instruments that I regularly use in leadership coaching settings. One is, for example, the Global Executive Leadership Inventory (GELI), which is a 360 feedback survey that I developed at INSEAD. It touches on the dimensions that most organisations list among their specific leadership competencies. Additionally, I want to see how people behave in both their private and public sphere. The Personality Audit (PA) combines feedback from people at work with feedback from spouses, siblings, children, other family members, and close friends. I sometimes joke and say that I am into 720 feedback surveys. Feedback from people that are close to the client can have a great emotional impact, even becoming tipping points for change. I have seen some people say, «My boss is an idiot, my colleagues are idiots, my subordinates are idiots.» But, if your adult daughter reports, «Papa is an idiot», then you start to think that there may be something there.

**OE:** Do you also use instruments to assess the role of the executive team, or the specific work environment, in which leadership is practiced?

**KdV:** Yes, I do. With the Leadership Archetype Questionnaire (LAQ), for example, you can identify which kinds of roles you

play in the organisation and at which you excel. The eight leadership archetypes that I have identified are: strategist, change-catalyst, transactor, builder, innovator, processor, coach, and communicator. Of course, returning to how to develop your leadership talents, you have to start with yourself; being self aware of both your strengths and weaknesses, and finding the right people to compensate for your gaps in a team setting. At a senior level, it is best to concentrate on your strengths. At times, I use another instrument that I have developed: The Internal Theatre Inventory. With the help of this instrument, people examine the major themes that govern their lives. Again, this questionnaire should be completed by the client and by people who know the client. The most complex test I have developed is the Organisational Culture Audit, which looks at cultural variances in the organisation: where the organisational participants are and where they want to be. Particularly, in the case of very brief coaching interventions, I recommend using one or two multi-party feedback questionnaires to help jump-start the process. I am not much of an advocate of self-assessment tests as they have limited value due to the social desirability factor. They can sometimes still be very useful, however. But, you know, let's face it, in one-way or another, we should always look at tests as the beginning of a discussion. People are too complex to be summarized in a simple test.

## Biography

Manfred Kets de Vries is the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development and Organisational Change at INSEAD, France, Singapore, and Abu Dhabi. He is also the Founder of INSEAD's Global Leadership Centre. He is the author, co-author, or editor of more than 35 books and 350 articles. Three new books are in preparation. His books and articles have been translated into 31 languages. He is program director of INSEAD's top management program «The Challenge of Leadership,» and Scientific Director of the program «Executive Master Degree in Consulting and Coaching for Change.» He is a member of seventeen editorial boards. He has been elected a Fellow of the Academy of Management. He is also the recipient of the International Leadership Association Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to leadership research and development. In addition, he has received the «Vision of Excellence Award» from the Harvard Institute of Coaching. What's more, he has been given the «Freud Award» for his contributions at the interface of management and psychoanalysis. He is also the recipient of two honorary doctorates.

The thing is, I have become cynical of the reliability of self-reports of senior executives I worked with in the early days of my CEO seminars. Back then, I didn't use 360 or 720-degree feedback surveys. During these early sessions, people would tell me how glorious they were, as a leader, and I believed them. But then I would visit their organisation and would often obtain a very different picture of the person.

Besides feedback inventories, I employ a whole set of other intervention techniques that help to create a safe space where executives can «play». For example, having them draw a «self-portrait» has become a very popular ice-breaking exercise. Participants are encouraged to draw their self-portrait within a short period of time associated with such themes as your head, your heart, stomach, work, leisure, the future, and the past. After drawing these self-portraits, the participants have to explain the significance of their drawing for each theme. Apart from those examples of interventions, it will be up to the coach to make the session a memorable and meaningful learning experience.

**OE:** If group coaching focuses mainly on leaders, how can it serve to foster change throughout the organisation?

**KdV:** My interest is really not just doing simple group coaching. I want to change organisations for the better. That is the reason I work with many top executive teams. In leadership coaching, we always need to be aware of the power dimension. Power can be intimidating to some consultants because of the pomp and circumstance of the office. I guess I am becoming too old for such concerns. My philosophy is that if you have the top team with you, much can be accomplished with respect to organisational change.

I always say, «Give me a top executive team that is not that crazy, and I can make something out of it in a number of days.» It is a very simple calculation: If you have the top executive team on board with you, if they don't spend all their energy fighting each other, and become open to change, their metamorphosis can create a positive ripple effect through the organisation.

It is comparable to the 20 people I have every year in my CEO class. These 20 people may be responsible for 200,000 people. I have the fantasy (and maybe it is only a fantasy) that if I can make these powerholders a little bit more effective, and maybe somewhat more humane, it may have a positive, cascading effect on the entire organisation.

**OE:** You state that management theories and research results first sound very promising in the executive classroom, but are very difficult to implement once leaders return to the reality of their lives in organisations. Your way of handling this problem is to compliment traditional management theory with the

clinical paradigm that focuses on understanding a person's interactions, motivation and need systems. Why is it critical to combine those two approaches to promote change in organisations and how can it be done?

**KdV:** One of my colleagues, Christoph Loch (who is now the dean of Cambridge Judge Business School) described how to combine those two approaches very well in a book chapter that my associates and myself edited on coaching (Loch, 2010). He explained how management systems tend to look at systemic collective action in organisations. They focus on such themes as roles, processes, and incentives, the various systems that unite people in collective behaviour, but de-emphasise individuality. What's clear is that traditional management theory has no answers for individual dysfunctionality. Organisational designers with a systemic point of view do not want single individuals to have a strong influence on system behaviour or performance. This is, of course, an incomplete picture. It does not provide answers to decode the specific behaviour of leaders. Senior managers have a substantial impact on their organisations and traditional management theory doesn't take into consideration the personalities of senior people who are the key decision makers in the organisation. But by doing so, it carries the risk of ignoring important and seemingly «irrational» aspects of an organisation's dynamic. My argument is that the management systems point of view should be complemented with a more psychodynamic view of the leader and his or her idiosyncrasies. Frequently used interventions to assess and understand an individual within the context of an organisation are individual assessment tools, identification of core conflictual relational themes, the people's (and the organisation's) hidden competing commitments or fears that influence relationship patterns or block performance, personal background analysis, role analysis, and behavioural techniques that help to improve one's professional performance. But I like to add that although individuals influence management systems in important ways, a counter-argument can be that personalities have not developed randomly, but can be shaped, in turn, by the management systems.

**OE:** Does that mean that traditional economic management concepts have limited value for our understanding of organisations?

**KdV:** Yes, I wonder whether conventional management education has become obsolete because the homo economicus, that incredible optimiser of benefits and costs is no longer a supportable concept. Executives are not rational decision makers. Recent findings from neuroscience, contemporary psychoanalysis, cognition, emotional and network contagion, clearly demonstrate that we have to pay more attention to

underlying, out-of-awareness behaviour. There is more to all of us than meets the eye. Modern managerial thinking proclaims that leadership development means becoming more effective, autonomous, authentic and aware as individuals. But is this really the case in practice? It's easier said than done. Leadership coaching intervention within this clinical paradigm is one way to promote small inner revolutions that augment the understanding of self and others, and can create a more accurate picture of how to face career challenges and make the most of professional and personal opportunities.

I have found the clinical paradigm a highly effective method to move beyond the obvious and help us to better understand the irrational, sometimes darker aspects of how people function. It is based on the assumption that many aspects of the individual's inner theatre remain in the shadows. This paradigm pertains to a specific way of looking at the human condition; metaphorically, it is a lens through which to explore people's inner life theatre. Using the lens of the clinical paradigm will help us to examine and reflect on our own behaviour, the behaviour of others, and the interrelationships between the two. I like to add that the word «clinical» means basically being «at the bedside», hence being very close to the individual. The insights provided by this «close to the bone» inner journey will become a key steppingstone to change.

**OE:** How do you see the role of traditional management research in helping leaders to develop?

**KdV:** To gain tenure in a business school, you have to publish in A-journals – unfortunately many of these research projects are not very closely tied to reality. For example, many leadership studies are laboratory-based studies with students as their subjects, or studies of special interest groups – White, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and from Democratic nations – I am referring to WEIRD people, that do not represent the world population: So you ask yourself: how close are these studies to the reality of what senior executives really do? How practical is this kind of research?

For example, if you work at a medical school and do research, your hope is that your research will benefit the patient. The irony of much of the research coming from business schools is that the difference between what is published and the reality of management is quite large. When I read many of these A-Journal articles, all too often I become bored and lose interest. Many articles show the writer's great skills to do statistical analysis. But as a cynic, I am aware how statistics can be manipulated, which is a problem.

I am very much a practical person and much more interested in provoking real change. People come from places as far away as New Zealand or Australia to attend my seminars, not to talk about some written case study about people of

whom they have a limited interest, but to talk about real issues that bother and hinder them. In retrospect, I am very lucky that I have designed an actual, real-life based laboratory, in which executives can have the opportunity to undergo a change process themselves. It is a great learning experience for me. It keeps me on my toes.

Most executive programs (also at our school) only produce temporary highs. You come to an executive program, you are out of your normal work environment, you are amongst interesting people – you get this temporary high and leave. But then, back at work, you go back on autopilot, and soon your old habits begin to take over. That is the reason my seminars have multiple iterations: you learn something, return to your home or work, try to practice what you learned, and may even fall back into your old habits. You feel somewhat guilty; however, as you know you are to return to the seminar – and other participants will ask what you have done and whether you have followed up on your commitments? Sometimes I make the comment: my allies in change are shame, guilt, and hope. Hope for a new future – shame and guilt are the vehicles to get there. To avoid the typical New Year's resolutions-effect that normally does not last very long, follow-up meetings are quite critical. The group provides accountability and reinforces the commitment to change. Moreover, due to the group process, participants may see in others a role model. They say, «My God, he or she could do it, maybe I can do it too.» This adds an additional layer of fortitude. Change may last for a while, and then probably stagnate; so you have to find a way to keep on stimulating change.

«My allies in change are shame, guilt and hope.»

**OE:** Psychodynamic concepts may be used to help coachees make links between past and present and thus become aware of previously useful patterns that need to be changed. Could you give us an example of why it is important to go back to one's past experiences to alter present behaviours and interactions?

**KdV:** Well-known coaches such as Marshall Goldsmith argue, «Forget about the past; you only live in the present.» But, that's too easy an aphorism. We are products of our past. Our past very much colours our present behavior. Even if you try to ignore it, your past always returns in your dreams. It will influence you, either consciously or unconsciously. The sum total of what makes us who we are is the developmental outcome of our early environment, modified by our genetic endowment. Due to the heavy imprinting that takes place at the earliest stages of life, we tend to internalize certain behav-

journal patterns. These will very much shape our behavior as we go through life. The conundrum we face is whether we want to have a level of control, and not be led by uncontrollable forces of our unconscious. Thus, it is important to understand the underlying themes that determine your behavior. If you know that you often have conflicts with certain people, it might be interesting to find out why. Every time you meet a certain type of person, you seem to go on autopilot, so maybe it is better to have an idea of why this happens and how being on autopilot could potentially destroy your career, especially if the person you are in conflict with is in a position of power and authority. Taking the initiative to look backward is not easy, however. Many resistances may come to the fore. But to ascend, you first have to descend.

**OE:** Could you illustrate this point further?

**KdV:** For example, if you had a very autocratic father, and always got into fights with him, it's very likely that if you meet somebody that reminds you of your father, you might go into autopilot, and repeat that kind of behavior. But what may have been a good defensive strategy when you were ten may not be so good when you are forty. So, it may be high time to change that. To give you another illustration: a friend of mine once told me, «I know that I really like narcissistic women. I also know that they will always attract me, but I have now learned that I don't want to marry them. I now realise that it will always come to a bad ending.» So, basically he has learned from experience and self-reflection to recognise this feeling – very often it may be a bodily tension – and knows how to prevent himself from going into the autopilot modus of his inner theatre.

**OE:** What concepts and tools do you use to explore a person's «inner theatre» – the scripts that determine a person's behaviour and actions?

**KdV:** You can do a lot of things. I already mentioned the «Inner Theatre Inventory» to identify the key drivers in one's life. Another method is to get people into another sphere, to freely associate; I play lots of «games» – metaphoric games, actually, to get them into a transitional space. I just wrote an article, «Get Back in the Sandbox: Teaching CEOs How to Play.» I think as adults, we lose some of our playfulness, which we possessed in abundance when we were younger. It is fantastic to see participants gradually loosen up, to blossom, to have them do new things and to help them think out of the box, which, of course, helps the creative process in the organisation.

In the self-presentation challenge, each participant is expected to volunteer and discuss his or her salient life issues

and dilemmas. It is not an easy exercise. Lives are very complex. Everyone has to deal with many conundrums: What to present and what to leave out? But the presentation becomes a process of self-discovery and also helps the other participants to better understand the problems they have in their own public or private lives.

Before I accept participants to my CEO seminar I interview each future participant. They also have to write a number of essays about themselves before I even talk to them. I want to know if they possess a minimum dose of psychological mindedness. If not, I will have a lot of hard work in front of me. I also tell them that opposed to «normal» courses at business schools, in which they read case studies about model leaders, in this workshop their own «life» case study will be a main source of interpretive material.

**OE:** From your experience, is it really possible to change those inner scripts that have probably been used for many, many years?

**KdV:** Let's be very frank about it, it is difficult. It is hard work. But you can start to recognise scripts, which are no longer very functional and say, «I am not going there again.» In this work, you need to be realistic. If you are an obsessional character, it is always going to be a part of your personality. If you are extremely narcissistic (and by the way you need a dose of narcissism to be effective as a leader), maybe you can modify it a little bit, and say: My extreme narcissistic behavior has backfired on me several times: my wife left me, my children don't talk to me, and furthermore I got fired; so, maybe I should start behaving somewhat differently. I know that I will always be somewhat narcissistic, but let's try to control my behavior a little bit. I will no longer blame others for what happened to me, but look into myself.»

**OE:** What are the most specific psychological blocks that you have seen in leaders that prevent them from performing, or from productively interacting with people?

**KdV:** Some of the most critical psychological blocks are fear of failure, fear of success, fear of being an impostor, authority problems, perfectionism, procrastination, conflict avoidance, being a bully, and workaholism. I wrote an article some time ago: Feeling like a fake. To illustrate, there are many high achievers who believe they are complete fakes. The public sees these individuals as extremely successful leaders, while they themselves don't believe they deserve their success. The sense of being a fraud is the flip side of giftedness and causes a great many talented and hardworking individuals to feel as if they are «bluffing» their way through life. These people are haunted by the constant fear of exposure and believe with

every success that they are just one step from catastrophe. They feel like an impostor. But perhaps when you run an enormous organisation with thousands of people you have to be somewhat of an impostor. You don't have all the answers and you can't control everything from the top; instead, you have to develop a good team of people around you who can help you with it.

Let's look at another psychological block: authority problems. Quite a number of people who have a problem with authority become entrepreneurs. They need to be in control. Becoming an entrepreneur is one way of maintaining ones independence, even though as an entrepreneur you are still faced with authority issues. You are still bounded by economic constraints and have to deal with bankers and investors. The authority conundrum constantly re-emerges, but at least you have the perception of more freedom.

**OE:** What impact does a leader's personality have on his or her capacity to drive organisational change?

**KdV:** That is a big question. There are two schools of thought. One is that leaders don't make a difference; it is the environment that counts. In this instance, leaders can be compared to passengers sitting in the back of the bus, which goes its own way. The other school of thought says (and I tend to adhere to this one), that although the environment has a big influence, the bus driver can still make a difference. While one often finds that the effects of a leader on the organisation are not as large as was imagined, leaders can still make a substantial difference.

As a caveat I would like to add that the compensation of top executives can be totally out of proportion to what they really contribute. Such pay systems don't contribute to narcissistic modesty. Compensation more often reflects an overestimation of a leader's importance. Actually, many of the people in leadership positions would not work less if they earned less money. Their drive is due to their personality makeup; they are very achievement and recognition oriented. What's important to these people is that their pay is perceived as fair compared to others in a similar position. But most importantly, we need to realise that leadership is a team sport. Nobody can do it alone.

But talking about leader's personalities – I just finished an article on «forgiveness». In your opinion, who is the greatest living political leader? Who would you pick?

**OE:** Nelson Mandela.

**KdV:** Exactly and why is that? The critical factor is forgiveness. I think a leader is someone who tolerates mistakes. People who do not make any mistakes don't do anything. Great lead-

## 7 Premises of the clinical lens

1. **Rationality is an illusion.** Little of what humans do is purely logical, but rather an influence of factors that have effected our psychological makeup.
2. **What we see isn't necessarily what we get.** Much of what happens is a result of unconscious processes. We need to explore our own inner desires, wishes, feelings, and fantasies in order to have a better understanding of why we do what we do.
3. **We need to accept that we all have blind spots.** There are many things we don't want to know about ourselves. We need to accept that inner dissonance is part of the human condition.
4. **All of us are the product of our past.** We must explore our interpersonal history, including our original attachment relationships to make sense of our behaviour.
5. **We need to identify the recurring themes and patterns in our lives.** Our earlier relationships will influence how we act in current relationships; however these strategies may not be appropriate presently and can negatively effect our leadership style, and patterns of decision-making, as well as other aspects of the work and non-work-related parts of our lives.
6. **Paying attention to emotions is an essential part of transformational processes.**
7. **In addition, motivational need systems determine our personality.** These need systems have evolved from the interaction of nature and nurture; some have significant influence on the workplace: for example, the need for attachment/affiliation and exploration/assertion that require that leaders are aware of their influences.

Source: Kets de Vries, M. (2012). The Group Coaching Conundrum, INSEAD Working Paper No. 2012/53/EFE. <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2063730>, S. 18-21.

ers are people who realise that nobody is perfect. The human condition comes at a price, and we don't have to always practice an eye for an eye. What made Mandela such an incredible transformational leader was his ability to forgive after having been imprisoned for 27 years on Robben Island. But many of today's leaders are not exceptional or inspirational. Looking at the political scene in Europe doesn't create much hope, or happiness. Most political leaders are short-term oriented. There are exceptions. By the way, among the Europeans, Mrs Merkel was my «heroine» for awhile. I always found her plain talking rather refreshing. But she also has to manage a constituency. Presently, you start to wonder about the effectiveness of her policies. It may be time to switch. Her stubbornness to hold on to an economic policy that is not showing the expected results may come at a great price. By now, she has proven her point vis-à-vis a number of countries that have not been playing by the rules. She has been, at least in the past, a woman of principles compared to many other heads of state.

**OE:** What role does organisational culture and emotions play in shaping identities and behaviours of leaders?

«Soft skills are the hardest skills – they are critical for being an effective leader.»

**KdV:** I remember when I started studying organisational behaviour, nobody talked about corporate culture or emotions. Scholars in this area of studies talked predominantly about structures and organisational design. It was really Ed Schein, from MIT, who started to put organisational culture on the map. Gradually, management scholars studies began to realise that if they didn't have the culture equation right, most mergers and acquisitions would fail. Equally important as well, emotions play a vital role in shaping who we are, and what we do. Emotions mould and influence our identity and behaviour. They provide the vitality needed for organisational performance. We tend to forget that intellectual insight is not the same as emotional insight, which touches us at a much deeper level. If you want to change people and organisations, cognition alone is not enough. For behavioural change you need a double whammy: cognition combined with emotion. Emotions are an essential part of transformational processes. This brings us back to the theme of emotional intelligence in organisations. As I have always said, soft skills are the hardest skills. There is nothing soft about soft skills. These skills are critical for being an effective leader. To acquire emotional intelligence, we would do well to remind ourselves to think of what was written above the temple of Apollo in Ancient Delphi: know thyself! Another question that needs to be raised in the context of emotional intelligence is: «how do you man-

age your emotions?» When I interview people, I always ask them: what makes you feel mad, bad, sad or glad? I want them to be aware of the emotional material that makes them tick.

Another important thing I teach my students who want to be coaches, consultants, or effective leaders, is how to use yourself as an instrument. How good are you in identifying the subtle signals of your actions and reactions? Another way of saying it, using a more clinical terminology: you need to be aware of transference and counter-transference, and how to react to that. When you talk to a person, you need to go beyond mere cognition, you have to ask: How does the other person make you feel? What does the person project into you? Does the person make you happy? Do you feel irritated, seduced, bored? Does the person give you strange fantasies?

When people make a presentation about their life in my workshops, eventually they want some recommendations for what they can do to be more effective. But before the other participants deal with that question, I ask them: «How did you feel as you listened to the presentation? What did the person do to you?» I want them to get in touch with these feelings. The reactions of everyone should be seen as additional information. Thus, to reiterate my point, emotions are extremely important. What we should realise, however, is that emotional literacy is very much influenced by early attachment behaviour. It has to do with how our parents dealt with us emotionally. There are various patterns that can vary, from being securely attached, to anxious attachment, to having an avoidant attachment pattern. How your parents dealt with you emotionally will colour the way we will react to others during our lives. Here I would like to add, if you want to drive others crazy, never express emotions – never express feelings.

**OE:** You once suggested that in the 21st century we need more «Authentizotic Organisations.» What do you mean by that term and what are the crucial skills leaders need to create more effective and healthier organisations?

**KdV:** That word authentizotic is a result of my own narcissism (laughter). I invented this term by combining two words from the Greek language: authenteekos and zoteekos. The first conveys the idea that the organisation and the people in it behave authentically. The second term zoteekos means «vital to life.» In an organisational context, it describes the way in which people are invigorated by their work. Unfortunately, too many organisations have some kind of gulag quality. People feel suppressed, and trapped in a state of affairs that doesn't get the best out of them. So maybe I am pursuing an ideal: what can you do to create the best places to work, where people really feel comfortable, have voice, can express themselves, can learn, form a community, and have fun?

I sometimes talk about the three meta-values essential for great organisations, which are fun, love, and meaning. When you have fun at work, when you play together, you are more creative and productive. Love means the creation of a community of people that like and care about each other. Finally, and most importantly, there is meaning. People work for money, but die for a cause. It's essential to build purpose in an organisation because the Homo sapiens is a meaning-seeking creature. But at times, creating meaning is not easy. For example, think of companies that make cigarettes, weapons, and so on. Thus, the authentizotic organisation is basically an organisation where people feel at their best, work well together, and are good corporate citizens find meaning in their work.

Interestingly enough, during the last years, management scholars increasingly use the term authentic leadership. By virtue of being a leader, you are playing a role, however, mere role-play is not enough. Authenticity is important and without it, your people will see you as a fake. Of course, I do realise that as a leader, you cannot be completely authentic. You cannot be completely open. You have to make difficult decisions that may require some discretion. For example, if the company is going through a merger or a restructuring activity, you may not be able to disclose everything. So, you can only go so far with respect to authenticity, but at least you have to try to integrate it as much as possible into your behavior and interactions with others.

**OE:** What are the crucial skills that leaders need to create those authentizotic organisations?

**KdV:** Effective listening is very important, so that you get a sense of the pulse of the organisation. Most leaders are not the best of listeners. It is one of the major complaints executives have about their bosses. Furthermore, as a leader, you should be very aware of the fact that the moment you are in a leadership position, your subordinates have a tendency to tell you what you want to hear. The transferential tendency of wanting to idealise people in a leadership position is always there.

Another important factor of an effective leader is, of course, that it helps if you have good ideas and a vision. People in organisations usually look to a leader or leaders for a sense of direction. I sometimes go back to evolutionary psychology and ask: «If you were a silverback gorilla living in the rain forest what is the first thing you need to do vis-à-vis the other gorillas?» Usually people are confounded. So, finally, I say, «The first thing to do is to find the bananas.» Never forget that leaders are merchants of hope. They need to provide a sense of direction. They also need to speak to the collective imagination of their people to create a group identity. Leadership is getting people to do things that they wouldn't

have otherwise done, to enjoy themselves, and to really stretch their horizons.

Leadership is also about inspiring people, and getting the best out of them. That means that you need to understand your people's inner theatre. Effective leaders are very talented in positively reframing difficult situations. Furthermore, as a leader you need to realise that you are always on a stage. You need to set the example; you need to walk the talk. Additionally, the issues of integrity and courage – the ability to make tough decisions – are also vital.

I have been teaching leadership for many years. But, the more I have studied this specific phenomenon, the less I feel I know. You have to keep in mind that effective leadership is very much dependent on the context. There are many other factors involved in being effective as a leader. For example, to be a leader in a steel factory in Russia is very different from being the managing partner of McKinsey. Leadership qualities are like koans – or paradoxes. You have to be holistic, but also atomistic. As I said earlier, you need to have the ability to positively reframe things, but remain realistic. You need to be able to think divergently, but also convergently. You need to have a solid IQ and also EQ. You need to be introverted, but also extroverted, and so on.

I have also argued a number of times that for the very complex matrix organisations – the kind of networking structures we see currently – lateral communication becomes essential. My experience is that women are better in these matters. Women may even make better leaders.

**OE:** What makes you believe that women might make better leaders?

**KdV:** To start with, they are less narcissistic and more relationship-oriented. There may also be a physiological dimension. Men don't produce babies. Thus, for women (from an evolutionary survival point of view), there is a built-in relationship pattern that is essential if the baby is to have a chance of survival. But in spite of this female advantage, in the contemporary organisation, the default model of the organisation is women unfriendly. What's not always obvious is that many men aren't very comfortable with women. In this context, we should also not underestimate the sexual dimension – which adds to organisational anxiety. Men may not explicitly say so, but it is there. They may have had a very dominant mother against whom they compare successful women. Men's dreams can be the give-aways. In these dreams, there are too many spider women, witches, or phallic women.

In many different cultures, men go out of their way to dominate women. This kind of attitude is very short sighted. I have learned from hard experience that if I have no women in my programs, it is a disaster. A lack of gender diversity (or any

form of diversity for that matter) hampers the creative process. In my experience, the women I have in my CEO program are often the most competent leaders. Unfortunately, reaching that level in an organisation can come with a high price. More than men, women often sacrifice their personal lives. Consequently, they can become quite bitter when they are older and question themselves: «Was it worth it?»

The number of women in top executive positions has remained very small. Change in their situation has taken place at a snail pace. Germany is certainly not a role model. The organisational default model is very masculine, while people in Germany still have quite old-fashioned ideas about child rearing. The willingness of the government and the states to be involved in establishing support and school systems so women can work has been disappointing compared to Scandinavian countries. Countries like Sweden and Norway are really pathbreakers.

**OE:** What would you recommend to an Executive Team that wants to start an effective corporate top management coaching program?

**KdV:** I think they first need to realise that to undertake such a venture is not a one-shot deal. It is a journey. Then they should find a consultant who has some clinical background – someone knowledgeable about psychological matters, but also who has a deep understanding of organisational dynamics. Unfortunately, such coaches are hard to find.

Very often a new CEO approaches me and says, «I would like to avoid a long start-up time for my team. Can you help me to get my team up and running?» A well-designed coaching program can accelerate this process. Furthermore, when an organisation wants to take the next step and create a coaching culture, it is important that the top team is heavily involved. In too many organisations, this team sees itself as being almighty and beyond learning. They have this fantasy that their only role is to strategise. What's more important, and often neglected, is to get the best out of their people. Not becoming involved is a great mistake though. The top team should set the example if they want to embed a true group coaching culture within their organisation. For example, I remember (and this was many years ago) that when Nokia was expanding and moving away from their conglomerate structure into the mobile phone sector, they implemented an executive program for the development of their top executives. I remember taking a plane to Helsinki and meeting with the whole top management team. I asked Jorma Ollila, who was the CEO at that time: «Jorma, the first time the program starts you have to be there; and being there is fun; it is new and exciting. But the 20th time, are you going to still be there?» But he was and remained really involved.

That's commitment. They saw this executive program truly as a change tool, and not simply as a superficial «we have to give our people some education» statement, which I have seen all too often.

**OE:** What experiences, qualifications and skill sets would you recommend for coaches who aim to specialise in leadership development and organisational change?

**KdV:** Coaching at the moment may be in the same state as psychology and psychotherapy were in the 1930s. It is still a work in progress. Presently, there is a mad rush by different organisations for positioning; saying that they are the best; that they provide the best training. It worries me. There is too much hype in the coaching profession. Money may also play too big of a role. That, of course, will come to a culmination in the next five years. I think certification is going to be more important because many companies are starting to ask for it. Personally, I have not been certified by any coaching group. Of course, I have had my training as a psychoanalyst, apart from having had an economics and business school education, which is a rather eclectic background. At the moment, I am involved in writing a series of books on coaching to illustrate how we work at INSEAD. I think it is important for a leadership coach to have an attitude of continuous learning and to be aware of his or her blind spots. Discovering your own blind spots implies a willingness to undertake a personal inner journey to better understand your inner theatre. I highly recommend to all leadership coaches some form of exposure to personal psychotherapy.

Additionally, supervision or the use of peer groups where you can present difficult cases is also a must. Otherwise, you may be on a self-delusional journey. Of course, I have my biases concerning ways of learning. I have developed (with two of my colleagues) a highly successful executive master's degree program «Consulting and Coaching for Change.» This takes participants deep into the basic drivers of human behaviour and the hidden dynamics of organisations through a combination of lectures, simulations, exercises, life case studies, group and individual coaching.

However, there are still many unanswered questions about the measurable impact of coaching interventions. We still do not know enough about the interaction between the science and art of coaching and about the effectiveness of various types of coaching processes on long-term change. Moreover, we do not have sufficient knowledge about the coaches themselves; how they acquired their expertise and developed their competencies. There is also the question of coaching (very relevant to a school like INSEAD) of coaching across cultures. As a profession, coaching depends on the ability of people to learn from practice and from one another.

To sum up, leadership coaches can be like mirrors. Often, they are guides in an exploratory journey. They assist their clients in a self-discovery process; they explore what they are good at, and not good at; how they can improve. Successful leadership coaches facilitate transformational change by creating a transitional space for their clients – a place where the client can experiment with fresh perspectives without being afraid of failure or criticism. But whatever we do as a coach, Here it is good to keep in mind the comment of Leo Tolstoy: «Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.»

**OE:** Professor Kets de Vries, we thank you for this conversation.



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