

21st Century Life and Leadership: Addressing the challenges of being a 21st century leader

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Abstract. The 21st century is challenging even the best leaders; their old leadership models are increasingly ineffective and yet the pressure for even greater performance is relentless. Using a narrative inquiry methodology to describe the lived experiences of three senior leaders in diverse business sectors, this paper presents a coach practitioner's perspective of the impact of a holistic approach to leadership development that incorporates intentional change theory and schema therapy.

Key Words: 21st century leaders, intentional change theory, schema therapy.

Introduction

The 21st century is putting unprecedented demands on today's leaders, and coaches are being sought out to help clients adapt their leadership behaviours. While leadership models can be learned, it takes time, the right conditions, experimentation and practice. The behavioural neurosciences offer insight into why making and sustaining such behavioural change is difficult, and why creating time and space for reflection is critical. While short-term results are possible through a traditional coaching approach, long-term sustainable change can remain elusive because the underlying issues can have their roots firmly planted beyond the workplace.

This qualitative research paper describes a theoretical model, based on intentional change theory (ICT) (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2013) and incorporating practices from schema therapy (Young, Klosko & Weishaar, 2003). It explores its effectiveness in improving leadership approaches, through a narrative study of three Australian business leaders and offers insights and practical suggestions for coaches to supplement their coaching knowledge and practice.

Methodology and Method

This paper uses a narrative inquiry methodology (Clandinin and Connelly, 2001). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research approach, which captures people's lived experiences and, through a thematic analysis, allows the stories to be contextualised and theorised. The stories provide researchers with a rich source of data that allows the sociocultural Grand Narrative (Lyons, 2014) to be challenged to give a rich interpretation of how people are experiencing their work and lives. Specifically, within this paper, the narratives provide an insider's perspective of how a coaching methodology using ICT and aspects of schema therapy helped leaders navigate the complexities of a 21st century landscape.

Three leaders agreed to participate in this study. They were shown the following research questions prior to a 90-minute semi-structured interview:

1. How do you characterise effective 21st century leadership and how does it differ from the models of leadership you understood previously?
2. What are the barriers to self-reflection and consideration of possible alternative ways of behaving?
3. What is the impact of creating a vision of your ideal future self on how you engage today?

4. How do patterns of a lifetime, often sub-conscious and with their origins outside the workplace, impact the way you lead?

The transcripts were thematically coded and interpreted through the lens of the research questions.

Conceptual Framework

Areas of Literature Review

Considering the changing nature of leadership. The landscape in which leaders operate today is dramatically different from that in which they grew up. Curry and Peck (2014) describe the 21st century as “networked, open and fluid” compared to a 20th century that was “disconnected, closed and fixed” (p. 12-13). The typical command and control 20th century leadership models struggle to be effective in today’s environment and yet it is difficult to discern a common definition of effective 21st century leadership. Synthesising the leadership literature reviewed for this paper, I would suggest a common thread underpinning 21st century leadership models is the notion of situational leadership; the need for the leader to have a variety of styles, e.g. visionary, coaching, participative, directive, etc., to deploy in response to a particular setting.

There is also a growing voice in the literature suggesting that while “leaders need the prerequisite business acumen and thinking skills to be decisive, if they try to lead solely from intellect, they’ll miss a crucial piece of the equation” (Goleman et al, 2013, p. 27). Technical skills are now threshold, and the emotional and social intelligence competencies are the currency of today’s leaders (Goleman et al (2013) and Crosbie (2005)).

Evolving to be a 21st century leader isn’t for the faint-hearted. While historically it was suggested that leaders were born, and that the skills and characteristics required for effective leadership were innate, a number of authors, including Goleman et al 2013, Crosbie 2005, and Allio 2008, are challenging that notion, suggesting leadership behaviours *can* be learned through experimentation and practice. However for even the most determined leader, there are barriers to making the desired changes.

Environmental factors: Self-awareness is the starting point for change and growth (Allio (2008), Crossan & Mazutis (2008), Goleman et al (2013)) and it correlates with superior business performance (Goleman et al, 2013, p 94). However in today’s highly collaborative work environment it is tough to find time for self-reflection. A recent study suggested that in one organisation “people spent 300,000 hours a year just supporting the weekly executive committee meeting” (Mankins, 2014, p. 2). Leaders are expected to be available 24/7. Cross and Gray (2013) suggest that white-collar employees spend between 70% and 85% of their time in meetings, on the phone or attending to emails. The figure is as high as 95% for some leaders (p. 1).

Leadership habits: Leaders learn their leadership lessons very early in life, from observing teachers, coaches, anyone who has been in the role of the leader in their lives (Goleman et al, 2013, p. 27). Those leaders were operating in the 20th century, at a time when leadership was

about “getting followers to do what the leader wants” (Northouse, 2012, p. 4). As Goleman et al (2013) observe, as leaders step into their first leadership role they put those models into practice, they encounter new leaders and try out new leadership behaviours, adding on to the early initial scaffolding. While few of those lessons involve explicit instruction in leadership, they laid down the brain circuitry for leadership habits, determining how leaders will automatically behave in similar situations throughout life. Each time they repeat the behaviour, the neural connections for that habit become stronger (p. 155).

Stress: Boyatzis, Smith and Blaize (2006) suggest leaders in the 21st century are under a steady flow of “power stress” related to the exercise of power and its responsibility (p. 9). Like most forms of stress, power stress arouses the sympathetic nervous system, which initiates the classic fight or flight response. While potentially helpful in the short run, chronic or repeated activation of the stress response over the long run, negatively affects health outcomes. Importantly as it relates to leaders and their performance, it drains the individual’s energy and capability to function and innovate, closing down the leader cognitively and emotionally (p. 10-11).

Physiological challenges: The work of Boyatzis, Rochford and Jack (2014) into two antagonistic neural networks (the task positive network or TPN and the default mode network or DMN) suggests that when a leader is focused on a task-oriented role (activating the TPN), their ability and desire to attend to the relationship needs of their followers (requiring activation of the DMN) is diminished (p. 7). As problem solving and other activities that require focused attention typically crowd a leader’s weekly diary, it is likely that the leader isn’t spending extended periods of time in the DMN. This is a problem as “the default network is critically involved in self-management, in particular mindfulness, motivation, and affective meaning” (p. 11): activities central to contemplating and sustaining behavioural change. This suggests that actively creating time and space for reflection and renewal should be an essential component of leader development.

Self-regulation: “To master leadership [in the 21st century], you need to change the brain’s default option by breaking old habits and learning new ones, which requires an extended period of practice to create the new neural pathway and then strengthen it. The self-regulation competencies, particularly emotional self-control, may require special effort at first to get to the point of mastery” (Goleman et al, 2013, p. 158).

One reason that self-regulation can be challenging is that we each carry into adulthood, life long patterns of behaviour that in many cases date back to our early childhood and our families of origin. Young et al (2003) describe these as schemas, “a structure, framework, or... broad organising principle for making sense of one’s life experience, ...an abstract cognitive plan that serves as a guide for interpreting information and solving problems” (p. 6). The problem is that these schemas “continue to be elaborated and then superimposed on later life experiences, even when they are no longer applicable” (p. 6). Faced with a situation that triggers one or more of these schemas, people tend to adopt one of three ‘coping styles’; over-compensation, avoidance or surrender (p. 33), which closely mirror the fight, flight or freeze responses that all humans have to threat situations.

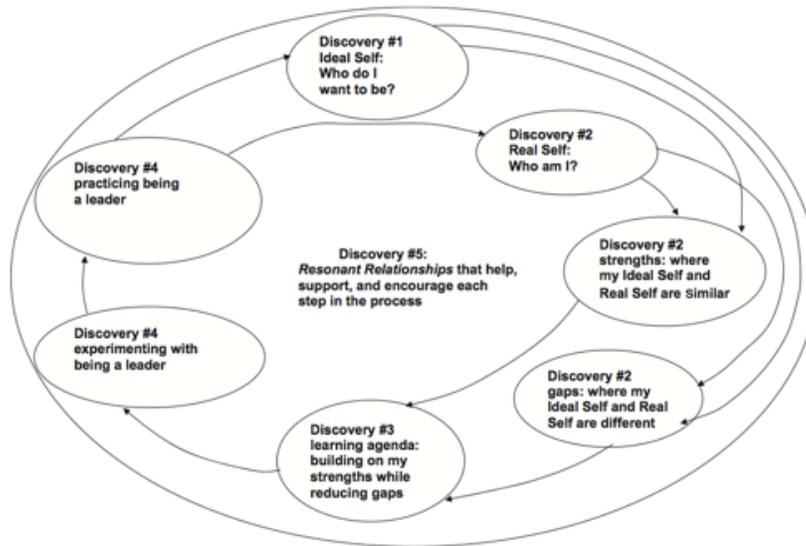
The work of Young et al (2003) suggests that in addition to practising the desired new behaviours, leaders may also need to deal with their underlying schemas and coping styles, otherwise certain situations will trigger old responses. They outline four steps:

- Education – discovering unhelpful life patterns and associated triggers, understanding their origins, and identifying predominant coping styles and responses (p. 63).
- Cognitive strategies – building a logical, rational case against the schema, which is critical as people typically accept their schemas as ‘givens’ or ‘truths’ (p. 91).
- Experiential strategies – helping people identify and then fight their schemas on an affective level and linking the schema and its origins to the presenting problem (p. 110).
- Behavioural pattern breaking – replacing schema-driven patterns of behaviour with healthier coping styles (p. 145).

To overcome the barriers listed is hard work and takes time and commitment. According to Goleman et al (2013) “the brain’s ability to sprout fresh connections continues throughout life. It just takes more effort and energy to learn in adulthood, lessons that would have come more readily in our early years, because these new lessons fight an uphill battle against the ingrained patterns the brain has already in place” (p. 104). “Whenever people try to change habits of how they think and act, they must reverse decades of learning that reside in heavily travelled, highly reinforced neural circuitry, built up over the years of repeating that habit” (p. 111).

ICT provides a useful model for leader development. ICT offers a useful framework to support desired, intentional change, the first discovery of which is the conceptualisation of an ideal self (Figure 1). Without this, leaders “may feel compelled to recreate conditions of the past in order to continue to utilise their ‘strengths’ and not experiment with new behaviour” (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006, p. 633).

Figure 1.
Intentional Change Theory



Source: Boyatzis, R. E. (2008). Leadership Development from a Complexity Perspective. *Consulting Psychology Journal* 60(4) 298-313.

The second discovery in ICT, uncovering the real self, is “akin to looking into a mirror to discover who you actually are now – how you act, how others view you, and what your deep beliefs comprise” (Goleman et al, 2013, p. 111).

The third discovery in ICT is the articulation of a way to get to the desired ideal self through the development of a learning agenda. Critically, this should be a plan for things the person wants (and maybe even is excited) to try and explore (Goleman et al, 2013, p. 141).

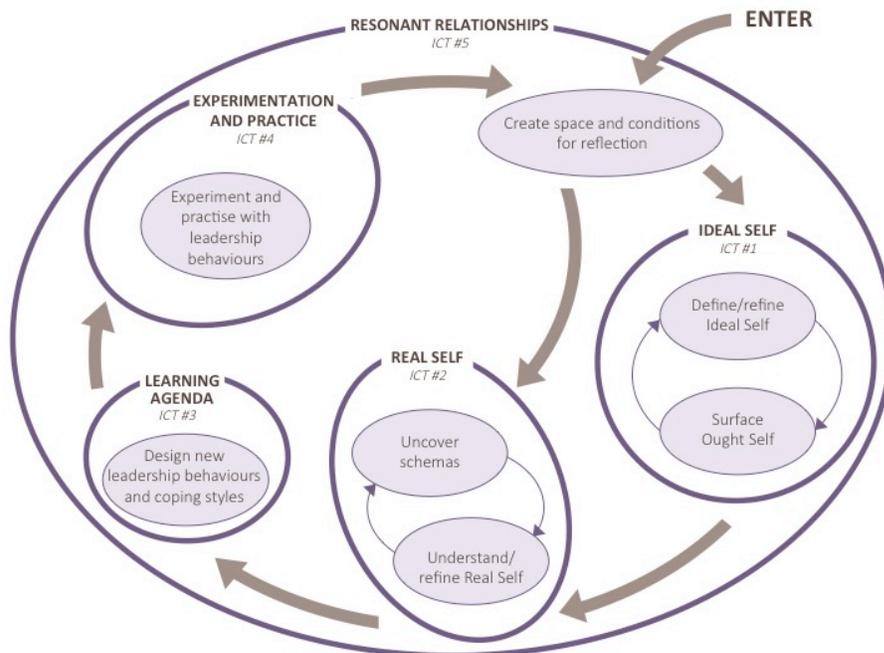
The fourth discovery comes in the form of experimentation and practice until the desired behaviours become second nature. It is possible to improve your leadership skills if you do three things: “bring bad habits into awareness, consciously practice a better way, and rehearse that new behaviour at every opportunity until it becomes automatic” (Goleman et al, 2013, p. 156).

Finally and critically, each of the discoveries is facilitated by the observations, interpretation, feedback, and encouragement of others with whom the person has a trusting (or resonant) relationship (Boyatzis, 2008, p. 307).

A Theoretical Framework for Achieving Sustainable Change

Based on the review of the literature, my work as a coach, and my own lived experience, I would like to offer a theoretical framework that builds on ICT, incorporates practices from schema therapy and importantly is tailored to the challenges I see leaders facing in the field (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Modified Intentional Change Theory



The model begins with helping leaders build into their lives regular opportunities for reflection and renewal, thus creating the conditions for growth.

Next comes the process of invoking the ideal self (the first discovery of ICT). However while Boyatzis (2008) recommends avoiding triggering the ‘ought self’, or version of ourselves given to us by important others, e.g. parents, spouses, bosses etc., (p. 304), my experience suggests that the power of the narratives leaders hold in their heads about what constitutes effective leadership, where those leadership models came from and the influences of important others on their current view of leadership, is such that if you don’t deliberately invoke and interrogate the ought self, it can sabotage the good work the leader is attempting.

The next step is to uncover the real self, which is notoriously difficult because, as Boyatzis (2008) suggests, “the human psyche protects itself from the automatic intake of information, but this ego defence mechanism can confuse us into an image of who we are” (Boyatzis, 2008, p. 305). While traditional methods of gaining self-awareness, e.g. through 360 feedback, psychometric testing and observational feedback, are useful, in some cases it may be necessary to ‘go deeper’ and, using the approach outlined by Young et al (2003), explore the underlying schemas that are colouring the leaders’ views of their real selves.

Next comes the creation of a learning agenda (the third discovery in ICT), which is a great place to design coping styles that more effectively deal with the schemas that have been uncovered.

Finally, during the process of experimenting and practising with new behaviours (the fourth discovery of ICT), leaders may well get ‘tripped’ by their schemas, which as Young et al (2003) state, “fight for survival” (p. 8), and thus there may be a need to return to (and refine) the real self as they gain greater awareness of what is helping/hindering the changes they are trying to make. At times it may also require revisiting the ideal self.

Findings

Introducing the Participants

The three participants interviewed for this study sought out coaching because they were restless with who they were and were being challenged by the leadership roles they held. Each was also considering whether they wanted to stay in their organisation.

Fred. Fred is a senior leader in a financial services organisation. He is a member of the executive leadership team reporting to the CEO. Fred felt that he wasn't “being the person he wanted to be” and he was “burdened by his leadership role”, which was affecting him more broadly. In our early conversations Fred expressed concern about whether he needed to contemplate a career move as a way of addressing some of the issues he had identified.

Leo. At the time Leo entered coaching, he held a school leadership role, having returned to schools after completing a Masters in Leadership in the UK and then a PhD in Australia. Leo's background included teaching and leadership roles in schools, and academic and teaching roles in universities. Leo described himself as "confused professionally and personally". He had taken the school leadership/teaching role because it was 'safe' but quickly realised that it was not what he wanted. He was unsure of his long-term objectives and how to pursue them.

Lara. Lara holds a senior leadership role, reporting to the CEO of the Australian business of a global consumer goods company. Recognised as a high potential leader, Lara had completed an internal leadership development program and coaching was offered as part of her ongoing development plan. She has a passion for continuous improvement and knew she could improve her leadership approach, but "needed a different perspective to help her" make those changes. She too was uncertain as to whether her future lay with her current company.

Analysis of the Data

Considering the changing nature of leadership. The leaders in this study talked about the leadership models with which they grew up and they reflected the command and control styles typical of the 20th century. Lara commented that 20th century styles were "more dictatorial, instructional and task driven" and about "being in control" with the approach "primarily benefiting the person in the leadership position", a leader who was "typically more ego-centric". Using a sporting metaphor, Fred's views were similar, "if the coach told you to run through the wall, you did it, without asking why". Leo agreed, adding that telling people what to do is now "very dated." He saw 20th century leadership as being "much more about process, with clear choices to be made that were more 'black and white'".

By contrast, they spoke of 21st century leadership being characterised by "walking with" rather than "walking in front" of others and being able "to read people, invite them into the conversation, understand and value their lived experiences and link them to the vision" (Leo), and by needing to "challenge teams and move them out of their comfort zones to optimise their contribution... by supporting, empowering, enabling, but not micro-managing" (Lara). "You need to be an orchestrator, look into people's worlds, engage their hearts and minds and connect that to the vision. The big difference is that today's situations are vastly more complex, and you need to be okay with that level of ambiguity" (Leo). "You need to be a facilitator of a conversation, helping senior executives grapple with change and make choices... you need to help others solve problems, give them the space, the tools, put up the guard rails, and then get out of the way – theirs and yours" (Fred).

Their views also echoed the idea that knowledge and technical qualifications are now threshold. "There is so much emphasis on the CV – you see CVs that have been managed since the person was seven years old and yet the half-life of technical qualifications is getting shorter and shorter" (Fred). "Leaders have to have to have the smarts and the knowledge, but the mix is changing ... maybe 60:40 to emotional intelligence, to being an effective communicator, to inspiring others, to providing support and genuinely investing in your team, to being strategic and more adaptable than ever before" (Lara).

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In reflecting on their own leadership journeys the leaders interviewed all talked about shifting from “doing (talking and lecturing) to leading (listening, thinking and reflecting)” (Fred), to “coming alongside and asking more questions” (Leo), from “being a playing coach to a person sitting in the box above, helping, supporting, offering insight and experience but not actually on the field” (Fred), and from “*knowing* that a leader needs to be able to inspire, enable and empower” to actually “*being* comfortable with less control and asking more questions” (Lara).

Environmental factors: The study participants agreed that the changes they are attempting to make are made all the more difficult due to:

- A lack of time and space for reflection: Creating a space to reflect is rare and precious in a constantly changing, uncertain world that demands so much of the leader's time. Each of the leaders interviewed struggled with doing this on a sustainable basis and yet they were unanimous in their view that it is a prerequisite to initiating change. “It's about the headspace; you can't think about new ways of doing things when you are totally under the pump, exhausted and just focused on pushing through” (Leo).
- Organisational culture: All the participants described the challenge of swimming against the tide; making changes to their leadership approach in the face of a culture that actively rewards and recognises more of a 20th century approach. “Leaders are constructed to be problem solvers” and “the voices that reinforce the old approach are covert; if you don't behave in a certain (and narrow) way, you get negative messages” (Leo). “The system rewards you ‘for doing’; you are good at what you do and so you are given more to do” (Fred).

Stress. Each of the participants was experiencing levels of stress, whether that was due to “facing an uncertain outcome” in a role where your performance is measured in very quantifiable ways (Fred), or where you are constantly being “aware of how others perceive you” (Lara).

Physiological challenges. All three leaders are highly successful individuals who are also high achievers; they set their own performance bar higher than for anyone else. Their working weeks are characterised by problems needing to be solved. For these leaders, taking the time to step back and coach and build capability in others, rather than stepping in and ‘doing’, is time consuming. “When there is a time crunch, it is easy to go back to ‘here's what we need to do, off we go’; in that moment you stop asking questions” (Leo). “Leading takes a lot of energy; so does doing, but it is a different kind of energy and the latter is easier and more comfortable” (Fred). “As the pressure increases, I tend to go more inwards to address issues and find answers ... you become a barrier to yourself ...it is hard to give yourself permission” (Lara).

Leadership habits: The power of the ought self was evident in the stories of these leaders and the roots of their perceptions of leadership lay in the messages they received (consciously or otherwise) from their families of origin and their lived experiences. Each leader grew up in a family with high levels of expectations of performance (academic and/or sporting related). Other messages included ‘leading is about doing’, leaders need to be ‘the public figure out in front’, and ‘leaders fix things and don't ask for help’.

Interestingly all three made early career choices that actually reinforced these messages, and the organisational systems in which they operated rewarded and strengthened the definitions of leadership they described.

- In the case of Leo, good leadership was about “being a good person”, which was a strong family value; “you are not only a leader in a business context, you are a leader in your local community”. Leo’s early teaching roles were in smaller regional communities where the teacher was also a community figure and led from the front.
- Fred also pointed to the contribution of family values/messages to his early career leadership style. In his case the message was “don’t just sit there, do something”. Fred found himself in early career leadership roles in investment banking where he was “in the weeds, ‘doing it’ more efficiently [than others]” and being rewarded for that.
- The message to Lara from early childhood was about independence and self-sufficiency, “you don’t ask for help, you need to be across everything and you just step in and make it happen...” and “in times of increased pressure, you just run harder and faster”. Lara’s early career choices landed her in highly aggressive, results driven, competitive cultures, which embedded her early childhood messages and behaviour.

Self-regulation: One of the ‘ah ha’ moments for these leaders came with identifying their life patterns (schemas) and realising just how strongly they *continue* to influence how they behave in their leadership roles and beyond. “At times of pressure, the old behaviours come to the fore, like the hamster on the wheel, you just run harder and faster” (Lara). They also talked about the fact that their schemas and self-narratives influenced not just how they lead, but how they viewed themselves and life more generally. They described this insight as important, commenting that they were not sure that they would have been able to make sustainable progress without it. “It is about having a different lens through which to see yourself and an ability to access more active, productive, positive ways with which to interact” (Leo) and moving from being “stuck, to understanding the connections” (Lara).

ICT provides a useful model for leader development. Each of the study participants had engaged in work to identify their ideal self, including their ‘leadership self’ and they saw this process as helpful, for both their leadership selves and beyond. Fred found an ideal self “empowering and liberating as it gives you insights into yourself and something to work towards in the medium to long term... you are less buffeted, more grounded, able to withstand more, and have greater resilience”. Lara “wanted a sense of where [she] was going, to not give it up to chance”. For her, greater clarity of the ideal self brought “greater conviction and a process and way of measuring progress”. For Leo it stabilised and empowered what had previously been a fluctuating view of how he wanted to live his life.

While the study participants saw the benefits of invoking an ideal self, “far outweighing the potential negatives”, it can be “disheartening in the short term when you inevitably fall short of that vision on occasions” (Fred). This is a point worth noting for coaches; clients need support, and at times reassurance, to move towards even the most powerful ideal self, as the schemas and ought selves will “fight to survive”.

The process of uncovering their ought selves (which in all three cases were strong), understanding where they came from, and their impact, was also an important step in letting the

ideal self emerge. It was this separation that on the one hand propelled Leo to leave his school leadership role and return to academia, and on the other convinced Fred, that contrary to his initial perception, he could remain in his current role, but approach it and execute it differently.

The role of coaching in the process. Consistent with the fifth discovery of ICT, the resonant relationship with a coach and the coaching conversations themselves created the space for these leaders to reflect on their current leadership styles and the factors (personal and professional) influencing them, to consider what they wanted to be like as leaders, professionals and people, and then to identify the changes they wanted to make. For Lara it was “having a circuit breaker” and “gaining a different perspective”. For Fred it was about recognising that he couldn’t do or control everything and that meant “letting go” and “trusting others”. For Leo it was about “empowering a version of leadership, both self and professional, that [he] valued”; valuing his own innate leadership style that was naturally more inclined towards a 21st century approach, but which was not valued or rewarded.

The combination of the discipline of a coaching engagement (which created the necessary time to reflect and challenge their behaviours and perceptions), an understanding of their patterns and from where they originated, together with a clear view of what they really wanted from their lives, was central to these leaders’ success in embarking on and, thus far, sustaining the changes they wanted to make.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The leaders in this study can see the leadership landscape of the 21st century; they know that it is different from that in which they grew up, and intellectually they know what they should be doing to adapt. However knowing and doing are very different; numerous physical, physiological and psychological barriers stand in the way.

Repeatedly I have watched leaders struggle to make changes, and to do so whilst in the midst of an ambiguous, constantly shifting environment, where the pressure to perform is relentless, the vast majority of days are spent solving urgent problems and chronic stress is evident. Paying attention to physical health, and creating time and the conditions for reflection and renewal is underemphasised in the coaching literature, and yet essential to create the resilience and mental health necessary to undertake the journey of leadership transformation. Thus the starting point in the model I offer in this paper is to help leaders create a routine that builds time and space for this reflection into their busy schedules.

Explicitly exploring and understanding the ‘ought self’, was a key learning from the narratives of the leaders interviewed. The ‘important others’ who have contributed to the leaders’ ought selves, often have their own narratives, and operate in contexts that don’t reassemble the conditions in which the leaders are operating. Understanding this gives leaders ‘permission’ to let go of this version of themselves, which otherwise can undermine their intentions.

Similarly, taking time when addressing the real self to uncover schemas can provide an awakening for people. Previously invisible lifetime patterns that exert a powerful hold over how leaders behave, become visible, thus creating an opportunity for leaders to build healthier coping

styles, that not only improve leadership performance, but also can enhance other aspects of the leaders' lives.

Articulating trigger points, designing new healthier coping styles as part of the learning agenda, and focusing on small incremental steps made the change process easier and, as suggested by the work of Boyatzis and his colleagues, leaders interviewed for this paper found conceptualising an 'ideal self' helpful to anchor their change efforts when the 'going was tough'.

The theoretical framework offered in this paper, which builds on Boyatzis and Goleman's work on Intentional Change Theory and incorporates Young et al's approaches from schema therapy, appears well suited to supporting sustainable leadership behavioural change and potentially reawakening the leader's passion for their work and for life more generally.

In adopting this holistic framework, leadership coaches can build bridges into, but not overstep the boundaries of, the arena traditionally occupied by behavioural therapists and holistic health and wellbeing specialists and help leaders create lasting positive change both within and beyond the teams they lead.

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Warrant Statement

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