

A personal journey in applying narrative practices to executive coaching

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"We forget that in its essence, leadership is about learning how to shape the future. Leadership exists when people are no longer victims of circumstances but participate in creating new circumstances. Ultimately, leadership is about creating new realities." (Senge in Jaworski, 1996, p. 2-3)

Introduction

I have a long history of working in the leadership development field. In my early career I worked in organisations as a psychologist within the logical positivist paradigm using 'test and tell' psychometric tools, assessment centres and competency models. Later in my career I led and managed teams myself. I have come to develop an appreciation for the complexity of the executive role and the value of a confidential space to explore the challenges the executive faces both personally and professionally. This empathy has come from personal experiences of executive coaching and feedback from executives I have worked with, as well as an appreciation for the nature of the challenges the leader of the 21 century faces.

The primary impetus for this paper has come from my need to share my work in a way that creates a space for reflecting on my practice. In writing and talking about my work, I am engaging in a form of meaning making that I hope will have ripples beyond myself. As Freedman and Coombs (1996) point out "every time we speak, we bring forth a reality" (p.29).

Through the medium of two case studies I will illustrate practically how I have adapted narrative therapeutic practices to support leaders in their own personal journey's to greater coherence, meaning and effectiveness. Firstly, however, I will provide context for the case stories through a brief reflection on leadership and the role of the executive, the history of coaching psychology and definitions of executive coaching, to differentiate this from other forms of coaching.

Coaching as a leaderships development strategy

Coaching as a leadership development intervention has been gaining momentum for the past 15 years at which time few people used the term coaching in the way we do today (Stelter, 2009). Coaching was associated with the world of sport and only in an insignificant way was it associated with professional development of leaders in the business world (Stelter, 2009). However, sports terminology like 'motivation', 'top performance', 'winning', 'competition' were very attractive to the business world and interventions to address performance at a task level were introduced for employee development (Rauen, 1999; Bonning, 2000 in Stelter 2009). The Human Development Movement (HDM) of the 1960's and 70's, with its focus on self-development influenced coaching to include the personal and interpersonal. These two strands, the HDM and sports psychology, can be seen as two of the main

roots of the modern field of coaching psychology (Stelter 2009). Whilst there is no commonly accepted definition of coaching, Myles Downey's simple definition is "the art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another" (2003). The British Psychological Society Special Interest Group of Coaching Psychology (2008) states that "Coaching psychology is for enhancing well-being and performance in personal life and work domains underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult learning or psychological approaches." (Adapted from Grant & Palmer, 2002).

Current understandings about executive coaching

Executive coaching is seen to be different from other kinds of coaching because the executive leverages the whole company system and so potentially does the executive coach (Olsen 2008, p.154).

In a recent article in the Harvard Business Review January (2009) Coutu and Kauffman describe executive coaching as "a confidential, individually-tailored engagement designed to meet the needs both of the executive being coached and the organization paying for the service. A coach meets behind closed doors with an executive, and together they create personalized goals and explore specific ways to achieve them." Sperry (2008) defines executive coaching as a "form of executive consultation in which a trained professional, mindful of organisational dynamics, functions as a facilitator who forms a collaborative relationship with an executive to improve his or her skills and effectiveness in communicating the corporate vision and goals, and to foster better team performance, organisational productivity, and professional-personal development."

Both these definitions suggest the collaborative nature of the engagement as well as the dual focus on the individual and the organisation's needs. The aim of the coaching then is seen as a collaborative and goal oriented learning process through which leaders are able to develop their effectiveness within their business context.

A post modern world and the impact on leadership development

Significant social changes have impacted the way we conceive of reality, work, life and self; social changes that have seen the increasing worldwide demand for a particular kind of coaching support to navigate a world that is complex and ever changing (Stelter, 2009). Drawing on the social science literature Stelter cites the following significant social changes:

- globalisation,
- a hyper complex society where what counts as truth depends on the context and the social agreements of the local culture,

- shifts in understanding of the individual in contemporary society from an egocentric to socio-centric model of self and identity where the self is socially created within a specific context and in relationship with others.

These changes represent a post modern world view; a worldview that challenges the certainty of the traditional Western Scientific paradigm. This scientific logical positivist world worldview has been the basis for institutions and leadership over the past century and continues to underpin most practitioner views today (Nicklen, 2008). This way of thinking is obsolete, counterproductive and dysfunctional and does not reflect the nature of the changing times (Senge in Jaworski, 1996, p. 3)

If modern leadership can indeed be conceived of in post modern terms as the task of creating new realities, who within an organisation's context is better placed to challenge the status quo and lead people to answer the question "What are we collectively, able to create?" Surely the executive, by virtue of her position of leveraging the contribution of thousands of people under immense pressure from competition, higher levels in the organisation, investors and or/boards of directors (Olson, 2008).

Given this context and informed by my own understandings of leadership and my work with leaders, I have come to locate my leadership coaching approach within the post modern paradigm influenced by social constructionism.

Post modernists focus on how the language that we use constitutes our world and beliefs. It is in language that societies construct their views of reality. According to this worldview the only world that people can know are the worlds we share in language, and language is an interactive process, not a passive receiving of pre-existing truths (Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p. 28). This paradigm does not do away with empirical science but simply removes its privilege of claiming truth beyond community (Gergen, 1997 in Rowan 2008).

In searching for a post modern coaching methodology, my business partner and I came across narrative therapy and immediately saw its relevance for leaders in organisations negotiating complexity and contradictions. We set about training ourselves in narrative therapy and then translating our understandings to the field of coaching and mentoring with the aim of offering an approach that would resonate with leaders faced with the challenges of leading a 21 century workforce in organisations that have stripped layers to reduce costs yet still demand efficiency and effectiveness. As Wood & Gordon (2009) point out it is a "bottom line requirement for post-modern organisations, companies and communities that leadership be a coachable skill" (p.87).

We piloted our approach within a multinational organisation with senior leaders and evolved a way of working that I will share with you today. A way of working that is

continually evolving, but which holds firmly to the principles of social constructionism and narrative practice.

In sharing with you two case studies (both clients have given me permission to do so, in a way that preserves their anonymity) I am hoping you will gain insights into how I have applied NT principles to executive coaching particularly, and to highlight some of the challenges in working within the post modern paradigm in organisations.

1. Pamela's Conscious Living Initiative

Background and context

A senior manager in a multinational organisation requested coaching at the point of wishing to leave her company as she had in her words "reached breaking point". The organisation's coaching programme offered voluntary coaching to senior management to support them in improving the climate, the engagement and retention of their employees. All the coaching conversations were conducted telephonically over a period of 6 months.

Pamela articulated her current work situation as highly frustrating and stressful due to the following factors;

- Dissatisfaction with the way she was being managed – 'dictated to' by her out of country boss; and an unsupportive and disconnected relationship with her local regional boss;
- High work volumes driven by her need to "hold things together to prevent the whole team from failing" given the low skills and competence levels of the team members she had recently inherited;
- Increased management demands on her time;
- The amount of emotional and physical energy and time work consumed in relation to her other priorities as a single mother of a young son.

Hopes for coaching

She hoped that through our coaching relationship she might be able to manage her relationships with her bosses and team members more effectively; develop her management skills to enable her to respond differently to her current demands; reduce the dominant focus of work in her life so that she might spend more time enjoying being with her young son, family and friends. In line with prevailing coaching practice, we agreed specific goals which I documented in the form of a coaching contract, which also outlined our agreed commitments in respect of meetings and issues of confidentiality and nature of feedback to the organisation. I requested permission to take notes during our conversations, and asked if she would appreciate receiving a letter of personal reflections following our coaching session.

Externalising the problems

In our initial coaching conversations, through the use of externalising language Pamela began to gain a different perspective on the problems that seemed to be taking over her life and her work. According to White (2007) when people come to believe their problems are internal to their self they only sink further into the problems they are attempting to solve (White, 2007). Pamela named the problems as perpetual worry and anxiety, and an inability to 'switch off from work' when at home. When the demands became too great she also spoke of 'going into the anger phase' where anger 'consumed her' and prevented her from 'seeing clearly'.

In exploring the conditions that allowed the anxiety and worry to dominate, she spoke of the fear that worked alongside anxiety and worry to drive the relentless striving to get things done. She noticed that the problems main tactic seemed to be to wrest control from her and switch her onto automatic pilot. Whilst on automatic pilot she did not claim any time for reflecting and that she spoke of having lost touch with what was important to her at the expense of delivering her agreed performance contract.

Early on in our coaching relationship, she realised she could put distance between herself and the problems that were claiming her time and energy by asking herself a number of questions. As White (2007) says "through externalising conversation it is possible for people to experience an identity that is separate from the problem and options for successful problem resolution suddenly become visible and accessible." (p. 9). The combination of consciously stepping back and asking questions disabled the automatic pilot and put her back in control. She also found this to be effective in weakening anger's strategy to 'blind her' and make invisible the intentions and hopes she held for her career and her life; intentions to live with purpose, balance and joy.

Through our conversations we explored her beliefs about leadership. We examined the assumptions she was holding about what to expect and hope for from her manager, what was reasonable for the organisation to expect and hope from her and what might she expect of her team members. This created a framework within which she started to articulate an alternative and preferred style of leading which was less about "holding things together with no support" and more about taking steps to ask for support. She started saying 'no' to client demands when appropriate and allowing her team members to fail. These steps and the unravelling of the problems as separate from her encouraged personal agency, and moved her from feeling a victim of the organisation's and her bosses' demands to a place of considering how she would prefer to respond.

Following each session, I sent her a narrative letter with the aim of capturing and reflecting back to her the steps she was taking to wrest her life back from the control

of anger, anxiety and fear and other's expectations of her. "Conversation is, by its very nature, ephemeral. But the words in a letter don't fade and disappear in the way conversation does; they endure through time and space, bearing witness to the work of therapy and immortalizing it" (Epston 1994). I used her own words in capturing aspects of the conversation that struck me. I also included a number of questions that I was curious about and occurred to me after our session. These questions linked each session to the next and she came to value my witnessing her journey and the progress she was making.

Alternative Story Development

She experienced almost immediate relief from the new understanding she was developing about her situation, her values and beliefs and her options for action. A key part of this new understanding was the value she accorded living with purpose. She named the shifts she was making as her efforts to live consciously. In naming the alternative story as her conscious living initiative, we explored in some detail her values and beliefs around success that detracted from her conscious living initiative. She spoke of success being linked directly to output and performance and that she had a long history with this dominant discourse about success in both the school system and in all the organisations in which she had worked. These dominant narratives specify the preferred ways of believing and behaving within the particular culture (Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p 32). She linked this back to growing up very poor and in a disadvantaged community with very ambitious parents that instilled a work ethic in her from young as a way of equipping her to escape poverty – a work ethic that manifest in their valuing and noticing exceptional performance at school as the primary measure of her success and value. Within the social constructivist worldview, it is important to attend to cultural and contextual stories as well as to individual people's stories (Freedman & Coombs, 1996).

In this context the cultural stories about success linked to hard work are well established in Western society; and deeply entrenched in organisation's whose very survival depends on 'bottom line' performance such as return on investment and profit measures. According to Morgan (2000) the ways we understand our lives are influenced by the broader stories of the culture in which we live (p.9).

Through our conversations she was able to appreciate how she was participating in the fashioning of her own life, identity and relationships according to the constructed norms of society (White 2002). As White points out that because " it is claimed that these norms represent the 'truth' about human nature, about what is natural or universal, the options for questioning these norms through critical reflection are significantly reduced" (p.47).

Our coaching conversations offered Pamela an opportunity to question these truth claims. She came to understand that it was her relationship with this particular normative judgement about success that kept her trapped in relentless activity to

deliver high levels of quality output and these in turn led to her to being so highly regarded in the organisation. She started to appreciate how in this way she was an unwitting instrument for perpetuating this insidious and pervasive source of power and control within organisations. She appreciated that in defining success in these normative terms, she was rendering invisible valuable components of her own personal definition of success linked to mothering, friendships, spirituality, health and wellbeing.

Use of Metaphors

In appreciating the tensions between the different definitions of success she valued as a business woman and mother we started to explore notions of balance through metaphors. We used 3 different metaphors; a scale; the moon's eclipse of the sun and juggling balls. According to Freedman and Coombs (1996) the metaphors we choose to use have an impact on both what we perceive and what we choose to do.

In the first she spoke of the scale tipping too far into crises and adrenalin mode and wanting balance but not boredom; happiness but not artificial highs from adrenalin. We also used the metaphor of the moon's eclipse of the sun to explore the impact of work on the rest of her life and priorities. She spoke of the darkness and lack of joy that came into her life when the work sphere dominated and blacked out the warmth and love she experienced from being with her family and friends.

Later on in our conversations she introduced the metaphor of a juggler balancing 5 balls referring to an email she had received speaking of the relation of work to one's other commitments. What struck her most about this email was the image of the work ball as rubber and bouncing every time it was dropped, whilst the other balls of family, friends, spirituality and health being made of glass. If dropped these other balls would be irrevocably scuffed, nicked damaged or shattered. This knowledge, enriched by the juggling metaphor, paved the way for her to start leaving her work at work, and consciously finding time for those other aspects of her life that were receiving so little attention. This knowledge was developed in our conversations, a notion that is well appreciated in the social constructionist and narrative therapy literature, where knowledge is challenged as something that exists as a mental representation inside the heads of people, but seen rather as something that people do together (Gergen, 1985, in Freedman & Coombs, 1996).

With these new understandings about her life and what she valued she started to question whether she would be able to stay within this role for much longer. She made conscious decisions at work to address the lack of support, high work volumes, and low competence of staff. These actions included contracting a technical specialist; putting her poor performing employee on a performance contract and speaking to her boss about alternative job opportunities in the organisation that matched her own need for more learning, growth and support.

She pursued other opportunities outside the organisation too. We have extended our coaching relationship till the end of the year and our conversations currently are focused on developing a career-life plan that looks beyond her current role to the future. All the actions she has taken are in support of her conscious living initiative where she is making choices that reflect a deeper sense of what is important to her. In our most recent conversation she spoke of still being under extreme work pressure but the difference now is "I am doing it consciously and it is not happening to me. I'm aware and in a way this makes it ok. I have hope because I know that this will not be forever." She is currently interviewing for a new position within the same organisation and feels that this is a further example of her taking steps to navigate her career and her life consciously in line with her values.

In working with Pamela I came to appreciate how much I also struggle in my own life to balance career and work with my other priorities; she enabled me to freshly appreciate that it is when I exercise my choice of where I deploy my energy given the specific nature of the situation, and what I value in life that I am happiest and most in balance. Through our conversations I have a sense of our lives joined together in our respective attempts to consciously balance the tensions of holding onto all that we value as woman, mothers and business leaders; a notion that White (2002) refers to as transport when the journey we take with our clients reverberates into the history of our lives. The energy and personal she brought to her role as leader, she too applied to our coaching relationship and she is learning to stay on top of anger, worry, anxiety and self sacrifices' strategies that keep her from living the joyful, balanced and richly connected life she is in the process of articulating for herself.

This case study illustrates how addressing the individuals uniquely personal challenges within context benefits the organisation. Had Pamela not entered the coaching programme, the chances of her resigning from the organisation would have been extremely high. It is likely that the organisations will retain her should she be offered the alternative role internationally.

2. Joe's resistance against injustice

"Stories inform life. They hold us together and keep us apart. We inhabit the great stories of our culture. We live through stories. We are lived by the stories of our race and place." (Mair, 1998, p.127 in Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p. 32)

Background and context

Joe is a Board Director of a subsidiary of a global multinational company. He entered the coaching programme offered by the organisation in his words to "manage up more effectively" as he described himself as having a "profile problem". Nine face to face coaching sessions were conducted over a 10 month period. In line with narrative practices, I requested permission to take notes and offered a reflection letter following each session. During the course of our coaching

conversations we covered a number of key themes linked to the challenges he faced. These themes revolved around

- His leadership identity as a Christian and how this informed his leadership beliefs and practices;
- Barriers to promotion for people in non-dominant groups where all members of the senior executive team represent the dominant group
- Resistance to injustice and his options for action in the light of what he held as precious in life.

In our first conversation I found it quite difficult to elicit information in both the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness. White (2007) referring to Bruner's work derived from literary criticism, speaks of the two principle landscapes of which stories are composed. The landscape of action is the material of the story and is composed of a sequence of events that make up the plot and the underlying theme, whilst the landscape of consciousness comprises the consciousness of the protagonists within the story and what they think, feel, know and don't know about the events and action. Our conversation inhabited the landscape of consciousness with some landscape of action covering his early days in the organisation, but insufficiently detailed for me to piece together a coherent story. I found myself with only a very vague grasp of the circumstances and challenges he was facing and what he hoped to achieve through the coaching programme. I questioned whether I was in fact the right person to assist him and wondered why he thought I might be able to coach him. I became even more uncertain when I tried to articulate my understanding of his goals for this process and questioned whether we held commonly understood expectations. Notwithstanding these concerns, I reflected on my experience as a leader and wondered whether he might be holding back information in line with a commonly held belief in organisations that the sharing of personal information is a liability at the top of the pyramid where competition is fierce for few promotion opportunities. I wondered whether he trusted that this was indeed a confidential relationship or whether the information would be fed back to the organisation in a way that compromised his confidentiality and be used against him. In an effort to address these issues I focussed on building trust by sharing with him what feedback would be given to the organisation and clarified in writing confidentiality agreements. I reflected back to him via a narrative letter my tentative understandings of the challenges he was facing. He indicated a willingness to proceed with coaching following a conversation where I expressed my doubts.

I decided to continue through the uncertainty and held onto a few key narrative principles in my work with him:

- To centre him as the expert in his own life
- To adopt a stance of curiosity and to ask questions from a stance of genuinely not knowing

- To appreciate that no single story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction
- To see our conversations as a journey with multiple possible roads to traverse
- To be alert to the influence of the broader stories of the culture we live in
- Not to assume understandings based on words but to negotiate meaning (Morgan, 2000; Freedman and Coombs, 1996).

Negotiating meaning

As Freedman and Coombs (1996) point out meanings are always somewhat indeterminate and therefore mutable and that the meaning of words is always something to be negotiated between two or more speakers. This principle I held onto as I explored with him the meaning of “managing up” and his “profile problem”.

He spoke of his desire to manage up more effectively as he hoped for a promotion within a year. He spoke about his understandings and knowledge of what ‘effective managing up’ entailed in this organisation, citing people that had been promoted or had a profile at the most senior levels. Yet he faced a dilemma - the kind of managing up that he had witnessed as effective in achieving this kind of recognition contradicted his values and beliefs as a Christian. He spoke of it as “lying and telling on others” and spoke of his style of preferring “containment to managing up”. For him containment meant taking responsibility for managing his team and accountabilities to avoid escalating problems to the main board. In our conversation it became clear that this strategy, although it aligned to his belief about personal responsibility, was potentially working against his getting noticed and keeping his contribution below the radar of those determining future promotions.

In exploring his ‘profile problem’, Joe spoke of receiving feedback that he was negatively perceived by certain of the global company’s main board directors. He spoke of having heard via other people that they thought of him “arrogant and a smart Alec”. He gave examples where he had challenged the way of doing things in the organisation and had been labelled as a result. He also spoke of how he had contributed to the managing of the organisation from an unhealthy position to one where the share price reflected a significant turnaround of the business during his tenure. He expressed some disbelief that given this obvious performance, he had been unable to impress his bosses and be considered for a promotion. He understood the barriers to his progression with the organisation in terms of his race and that by breaking the stereotype by being “black and clever” and “black and arrogant” he was not well received. So managing up for him became about influencing those individuals or in his words “his detractors” to become more positively predisposed to him and to notice his contribution to the organisation in service of his goal of career progression.

Externalising conversations

In our early work together I attempted to externalise his notions of arrogant and smart Alec. He spoke of arrogance as a 'survival technique' and of "a lack of arrogance can hold you back". Arrogance for him linked to a notion of "never doubting", "operating with a fair degree of certainty". Fostering his relationship with arrogance seemed to him necessary since it sustained confident action despite his detractors and conveyed in his words the "executive presence" that was a prerequisite for being taken seriously in a board room. He spoke of valuing his many qualifications and of his long relationship with cleverness citing his numerous post graduate qualifications, feedback he had received from teachers and psychometric tests through the course of his school and work career. Despite mentioning race a number of times, I found it extremely difficult to deconstruct his notion of what it meant to be black in an organisation that seemed not to value diversity. Within the social constructivist worldview, it is important to attend to cultural and contextual stories as well as to individual people's stories (Freedman & Coombs, 1996). And I have wondered whether I did not spend too much time initially in his individual story without attending sufficiently to the contextual and cultural story of his growing up in Africa yet spending the majority of his life in America.

As an entry point to support him in his endeavour we explored what alternative strategies to managing up might look like that accorded with his Christian values. In hindsight this exploration seemed not to be particularly fruitful. I sense now that perhaps I might have explored earlier the avenue of cultural context and organisational discourses related to promotion, and barriers to promotion for traditionally marginalised groups. One of my reasons for not pursuing this avenue earlier and with greater vigour was his reluctance and perhaps my lack of truly appreciating the significance of the challenges he was facing. These emerged in bits and pieces as our coaching relationship and the trust between us developed, till it became clear that the organisation was in fact trying to exit him, and that exploring avenues for managing up were likely to be fruitless given the organisations intentions for his career. With this newly emerging understanding between us we explored the theme of resistance. An injustice where marginalised groups experience subtle and intangible forms of discrimination that are hard to substantiate, and where certain voices are privileged over others in the giving and receiving of feedback; where negative conclusions are attributed to people by virtue of their belonging to a marginalised group rather than being appreciated and noticed for their individual contributions or for their different perspectives. I reflected on my experience of being marginalised in my last role as a woman in a dominant male executive team, and how that experience had silenced me. But I am not sure that this enabled me to do anything more than appreciate how hard it can be to influence within a system which privileges certain voices over others.

I also wondered about the certainty with which he held onto the 'labels' others used to describe him. We explored how his notion of racial stereotypes influenced how he chose to manage his profile. In consciously trying not to play into race stereotypes I wondered to what extent this operated to trap him into a narrowly storied leadership identity.

In an effort to thicken his leadership identity I attempted to identify unique outcomes from his previous career history where this was not his dominant experience. Whilst he was able to site a few examples, his dominant experience seemed to be one of being viewed with suspicion and competitiveness for being clever and black. I then explored with him the value of eliciting feedback from his boss, peers and direct reports with the aim of gaining some concrete examples of how they witnessed him in the work environment. I was hoping to work with him to enrich his leadership identity beyond the categories of clever, arrogant and black, since I was feeling that the languaging of his identity was thin and was possibly rendering invisible many other positive identity conclusions linked to his leadership.

The organisation has a standard 360 degree feedback process that involves administering a competency based questionnaires and gathering anonymous input against specific leadership success factors. Whilst he appreciated the value that alternative voices would bring to the coaching endeavour, the mistrust that had developed between him and the organisation meant he refused to participate in such a process as he felt it would not provide fair and objective feedback. The organisation at the time was unwilling for me to adopt another approach. I had wondered about whether an outsider witness practice (White, 2007) with his team members might assist him in thickening his leadership story. I felt constrained in my options to support Joe more effectively by the organisation's culture and way of doing things. It took me 6 months before I was able to agree with Joe and the organisation an alternative strategy for gathering feedback about his leadership style from others within the organisation.

I conducted a narrative style interview with his boss, 2 peers and 3 of his direct reports. All of the people I interviewed, but one, agreed to participate as long as the feedback I provided to Joe would not be individually attributable. This spoke to me of the lack of trust in the organisation and the wariness with which people were willing to speak up. I purposefully chose not to use the organisations normative criteria about leadership and communication effectiveness, preferring rather to tap into the nature of the relationship between Joe and the person I was speaking with. I asked questions about what they witnessed in him as a leader, what they valued about him and his contribution to the organisation and if they were coaching him, what might they wish to feedback to him about areas for improvement. Whilst the feedback was rich and provided many avenues for further exploration in our coaching conversations, I have come to doubt the value of this kind of a process and questioned how it can undermine the very purpose for which it is designed –

namely to open up communication and improve a person's sense of himself as a leader. This doubt has stemmed from the way in which he received and gave value to the feedback. It seemed to lack validity and authenticity because it was offered via me and anonymously, and so seemed to me to lose its impact. I am left questioning what alternative options might be possible in low trust organisation cultures where speaking out is high risk.

Including the Significant Other in our conversations

As our work together progressed, I attempted to make the coaching space open enough for the most significant conversations to be heard and understood, and for the most significant Other, to be included in the construction of meaning" (Elliott Griffith, 1995, p. 124).

He spoke of his belief that he was in exactly the right place and that he would know when to move on. He spoke of his primary task being to perform his job well and learn as much as he could since this would be preparation for the next role that God had in mind for him. This influenced how he thought about his options for action – i.e., leaving the organisation; the strategies he was prepared and not prepared to adopt to influence others; and the extent to which he felt an imperative to act at all. Towards the end of our coaching contract, the organisation issued him with a termination letter. It was in the lead up to this that we explored what was sustaining him in this extremely difficult situation. He spoke of resilience as "my trademark". He also spoke of his leadership path as the Joseph story from the Bible. The betrayal theme resonated with him as did the theme of triumph through adversity when Joseph later became ruler of Egypt. He came to appreciate his resilience in sustaining his performance under the extremely difficult circumstances; a resilience that was borne of a belief that God was in charge and 'he should fear no evil'; a belief that he, like Joseph, would prevail in the end.

The coaching conversations offered him a confidential and reflective space to make sense of what was happening to him and to explore his intentions and options for action in the light of these intentions. He spoke of standing for truth and justice; of not wanting others to endure what he had endured; of 'never fearing and doing the right thing'; of acting on the side of God. As White (2007) says these intentional state understandings provide a foundation for the expansion of a preferred sense of identity and provide people with a sense of agency and are shaping of people's lives.

In reflecting on our work together, I came to appreciate that I had held certain expectations of what a good coach might do informed by a lot of the literature on executive coaching. The prevalent trend in the coaching industry is to offer solutions or to be goal-oriented (Stelter 2009). This discourse emphasises tangible measurable outcomes. I at times found myself questioning whether this process was at all helpful and whether it was conforming to the accepted brief of what executive coaches

are expected to do. In allowing this 'professional gaze' to influence me, at times I failed to notice the value Joe was giving to the trusting partnership we had forged and the truly confidential space we shared that enabled him to reflect on his challenges in all their complexity and what his options for action might be given what he stood for in life. I underestimated the significance of our relationship in sustaining him through the pressure the organisation was exerting on him and the experience of injustice he was enduring; the value of his giving voice to his experiences as a way of making sense of them and of shaping his identity.

Through Joe's story I came to appreciate that by inviting people to describe their experience in new language, the very act of doing so brings forth new worlds of possibility (Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p. 29). For Joe this represented a conscious choice to resist the organisation. He did so by questioning their rationale and motives for termination; by speaking to his main detractor – his out of country boss; by refusing to sign the letter of termination of service; by lobbying local in country board member support given the non-procedural manner in which they had requested his departure and the unsubstantiated performance grounds they cited as their rationale. At the time of ending our coaching relationship he was still resisting the organisation efforts to dismiss him unprocedurally and continuing with his efforts to deliver in his job. He spoke of wanting to choose how and when he exited and he is currently in the process of making decisions about his next career move. In our final coaching conversation he said "I'm going to leave as a professional and dignified man. I won't retaliate and go in the same way I've been treated."

Narrative Letter

My final narrative letter reflects where we came to in our coaching journey together.

From our conversations last week the Joseph story has remained with me. You said that over the course of our coaching conversations, you have developed an increased focus on the spiritual dimension in your life; an awareness that "I am dealing in a higher plane". Is this the Joseph story in your life?

- A story of betrayal – betrayal of you and also of the individuals' own values and
- A story of hope - what appears to be is not what will prevail in the long run?

I have noticed in you an acceptance of your fate, and trust that all will work out well as long as you do the right things. I have heard you speak of your belief that you are destined for 'bigger and better things' and you speak of your relationship with conflict -"I have to embrace conflict and resistance".

In your words "There are no easy answers; when you walk with God you are to be tried and purified in the furnace seven times. You will be in these situations and you have to look for the learnings. God will play his part when the time is ripe." In hearing these words and re-reading them I am struck by how the knowledge of God's work in the Joseph story has sustained and continues to sustain you in these hard times. I am also struck by your choice of living for God and standing on the

side of hope and 'not allowing your spirits to be dampened'. In reflecting on this as your story, what might it say to you about what you value as most important in your life? And what does it say about you about the kind of leader you prefer to be? And how might this influence how you choose to leave the organisation?

I have wondered whether your identifying with the Joseph story is particular to your ____ experience, or if you see it having a long history with you? What possibilities might there be for you to develop your story in ways that are more about collaboration and joining? What might be possible for you if you were to minimise the conflict/resistance theme in your life and work? In the Joseph story, there is time of reconciliation, weeping and joining together, and I wondered what this demanded of Joseph? And whether this offered you avenues for thinking about your leadership focus when you move beyond the resistance and conflict into a new role?

I have valued our conversations and have been truly privileged to participate in your journey.

With thanks and appreciation for the trust with which you have shared your story; a trust that speaks of a value for openness and honesty in relationships; a trust that through dialogue and sharing we envisage and co-construct preferred stories for our lives. I too have had the privilege of being enriched by our dialogue in ways that I could not have imagined at the outset.

I wish you well Joe as you continue to walk your path guided by your Master.

Reflections and Challenges

Applying narrative practices to executive coaching has been both challenging and rewarding. Both leaders have deeply valued the coaching relationship in supporting them with the complexity of very different situations and circumstances. I have been privileged to work at such a personally meaningful level with both these remarkable leaders. Yet I am left questioning how such a uniquely personal and post modern approach prepares leaders to deal with organisational systems and cultures that privilege certain voices over others and marginalise members of non dominant groups.

I have come to appreciate in new ways how my own knowledge, understandings and beliefs about organisations shape my conversations. My learning is despite the narrative principles I have held to in my work, I am still significantly influenced by society's normalising judgments. As might be obvious from my construction of these two stories, it is Joe's that presented the most challenge to my beliefs about coaching and my role as a coach. Both Pamela and Joe's stories have sensitised me too to how easily my training as an industrial psychologist gets me to focus too narrowly on the individual story and accepting the organisation's normative judgements. Both these stories richly illustrate to me unexplored territory that might

fruitfully be explored in future journeys with them. Joe in enriching his leadership identity beyond the resistance and struggle conceptualisation and Pamela's appreciating the choices she has in the context of being a single mother with strong ethnic roots. Both these avenues are deeply linked to an appreciation for the value of assisting people to situate their problems in the political, cultural, and socio/economic contexts of their lives (White, 2002).

If indeed the executive leverages the whole or aspects of whole systems, is there not more opportunity for us as executive's coaches operating from a narrative paradigm to conceive of our work as a political 'p' endeavour (White 2002)? An endeavour to develop our practice in ways that do not directly reproduce the constructed norms of contemporary organisational cultures which perpetuate exclusivity and homogeneity at senior levels, and fail in advancing the cause of diversity and inclusion? Cultures that emphasise performance and output at the expense of employee wellbeing? How might this be possible when the organisation mandates the use of our services? How might we be alert to the consequences of a lack of consciousness in our work? A lack of questioning that inevitably sees us as vehicles privileging the dominant discourses of power and unwittingly supporting leadership practices that perpetuate injustice; what Foucault terms becoming "docile bodies" under "the internalised gaze" of those who control the discourses of power (in Freedman & Coombs, 1996, p.39) in our business culture and our organisations?

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