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Becoming More Self-Aware: Removing Sedimentation and Discovering Hidden Treasures

To develop a deeper understanding of *how'* leaders become more consciously self-aware, this paper presents research from a wider qualitative study which explored the socially constructed lived experiences and understandings of 15 senior leaders who engaged in an authentic leader development (ALD) process through the vehicle of executive coaching. The aim here is to understand better 'what went on' for leaders during the ALD process, to develop a deeper appreciation of 'how' leaders become more introspective, self-aware, arguably more authentic and self-confident in their leader roles, to ultimately enable the creation of an actual leader development process. The motivation for the research is twofold; firstly, the first author's experiences of commissioning leader development programmes as a Leadership Specialist for a telecommunications company more than a decade ago. She was discouraged by the impact of the commissioned leadership development programmes on leaders. These appeared to lack depth, significance, meaning, challenge and transformation in relation to individual participants and therefore the learning tended to be rather short lived. She re-directed leadership development efforts, bringing the programmes in-house and shifting initial emphasis from leadership towards leader development, developing a process that was underpinned by 1:1 coaching. Drawing from these early experiences and her subsequent professional practice as an executive coach, she became increasingly aware that during coaching, leaders were experiencing significant and rather profound insights and she was driven to comprehend what was happening during these encounters to enable the creation of a more significant leader development process. Secondly, despite over 100 years of leadership research there remains a predominance of largely prescriptive and positivistic 'mainstream' theory, which overlooks the individual personal development processes of leader development. The major focus of leadership research has been on the development of human capital (Day, 2001), exploring leadership as trait or behaviourally-driven (Stogdill, 1974; Shamir and Howell, 1999). Day et al., (2008) emphasise the absence of "any form of a comprehensive theory of leader development" (p.xi). While Lord and Hall (2005) acknowledge the lack of theory and empirical research regarding the deeper, slower development of leaders over months or years, and in particular, theory that explores how deeper structures of self and behaviours can be changed. Further, Quick and Nelson (2008) call for a more integrative model of leader development, signalling a move away from the traditional focus on competencies and skills, to the 'whole' development of the person as a leader, in particular self-awareness and self-regulation, noting the work of Avolio (2007).

Increasing contextual demands imply that now more than ever, there is a pressing need to support leaders in becoming more consciously self-aware; removing the focus from *what* they do to *who* they are. Leaders in practice appear to struggle to secure their leader identity and a coherent picture of self at work, leading to fragile and conflicting values, arguably in-authentic leaders. Leaders are currently in the midst of escalating pressures to respond to the unknown and to lead in relation to conflicting requirements amidst expectations to create a more coherent sense of self at work (Gardner et al., 2005; Sveningsson and Larson, 2006). These multiple and diverse pressures challenge the skills, self-knowledge, assumptions and beliefs of leaders, in particular their resilience but more importantly they test the very sense of self and how individuals conceptualize themselves in their leader role. This bombardment can lead to confusion and despair in relation to whom to be and scholars argue that the

existing frameworks are not sufficient for developing leaders of the future (e.g. Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Walumba, et al., 2008). The current focus of leader development literature and the first author's experiences indicates a need to shift away from largely positivistic research towards the 'whole development' of the person as a leader.

The research here was drawn from a wider project using a hermeneutic phenomenological research approach involving semi-structured interviews with UK senior leaders. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) we surfaced and interpreted hidden meanings and assumptions surrounding leaders' experiences. The findings revealed that the leaders experienced a multi-staged process of development referred to as iALD, involving: initial self-doubt and concern surrounding the impending coaching process; named as 'Dubitation', followed by a stage of deep self-excavation involving the retrieval and surfacing of personal issues and notable challenges, named the 'Excavation' stage. The 'Materialisation' stage is the outcome of the post-excavation stage and leads to new contextual and personal understandings; the seeds of transformational change. Finally, the leaders' experiences of feeling more authentic, confident and self-aware are apparent in the 'Restoration' stage. The relational and interventionist aspects of the coach-coachee relationship are considered throughout the process, named 'Amalgamation.'

In this paper, we focus upon one stage of this process, that of becoming more self-aware, named 'Excavation' and specifically the underpinning themes of 'Delving Deeply Inside' and 'Bringing 'Things' to the Surface' to outline 'how' the leaders develop their self-awareness through a process of EC-ALD; a turning inwardly, exploring within, which led to the unearthing and revealing of 'things' for leaders. This is characterised by 'digging,' 'exposing,' 'drilling,' 'delving,' 'baring' and 'peeling.' Through an executive coaching process informed by ALD, participants uncover layers of sedimentation which reveals the emotion and cognition that appear to be life-changing in the process of becoming more self-aware. 'Excavation' offers an empirical contribution beyond the boundaries of self-reflection, introspection and self-referring, outlined in the extant literature. This illustrates a stage of the process that works at a deeper level, accessing and working with what lies beneath the surface of the leader, seeking to make the unconscious conscious, to enable one's self-awareness. The research findings contribute to the philosophical literature surrounding authenticity, and the authentic leader development literature, illustrating 'how' a leader becomes more self-aware, confident and authentic and advance understandings of the ALD EC process leading to the development of a more sophisticated leader development process. Thus we advance understandings of 'how' leaders become more self-aware; argue the need to reframe self-awareness as key to leader development and offer greater insights to executive education and executive coaching, informing leader development practice.

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