Calling in Support for the New Future: What Leaders Need Now
By Karla Boyd, Ph.D. and Andrea Chilcote

The extraordinary events of the past months have brought most of us face-to-face with new fears and anxieties, and they are playing out in the workplace. Are organizations recognizing the very real need for support for leaders and employees at all levels?

A number of years ago, Karla and Andrea explored the distinctions and efficacy of executive coaching and therapy. Then, there was a great need, as well as unspoken requests for both. The question that emerged was simple: "How do we distinguish a need for executive coaching vs. personal counseling?" Now, in this environment, the need is even greater, there is a clear demand for both, and we're finding that the answer is far more complex than ever.

The authors are again collaborating to share their years of coaching experience and reflection, to invite leaders into a deeper resonance and response to this demand. Both share their present thoughts and musings, offering wisdom, insight, and experience. Karla is also sharing results of a survey and interviews that she conducted with leaders and professional counselors.

Andrea
Why Do Leaders Need Support Now?
Very few, if any, of us will emerge from the experience of recent months unchanged. Likewise, our organizations have been fundamentally transformed, because the parts of those systems – people and processes – have changed.

Consider these questions for yourself: What has changed in you? What has emboldened you or been revealed to you? What aspects of your value system and your personality have awakened? And, as a leader, what will you do with this new perspective?

Our most profound personal growth often emerges from darkness. Yet the process must be an intentional one. Just as we learn from the cycle of grief, we do not arrive at a place of meaning and purpose without willingness to examine our literal, mental, and emotional experiences. As conscious humans, it's a personal responsibility. As leaders, it's a responsibility to serve others by drawing forth their awakening, their emergence from crisis into a place of clarity about their unique talents, capabilities, and purpose.

We can't return to the way things were because that way no longer exists. Are you compelled to help others re-enter work with a new vantage point, a new lens? Do you have a sense you are embarking on your most purposeful work as a leader?

As an executive coach, I have never experienced a time in which my work with clients was more needed, valued, and purposeful. As leaders are considering these questions, implicitly or explicitly, they are doing so against a backdrop of fear, pressure, and anxiety. How do we, as leaders and professional practitioners, discern what support they need?

Karla
New Learning Curves and Needs
How do leaders in organizations know when they need coaching or therapy? How do leaders support teams that work from home? How will leaders define new cultures, allowing teams to safely disclose authentic needs?

These questions are a few posed to a wide reach of survey participants. Key leaders and therapists shared insights, wisdom, and successes both through the survey and interviews. Survey participants resoundingly replied that leaders need to deepen their capacity for empathy. They said new communication skills are key. They were resolute in saying that leaders need to create healthy cultures that invite teams to openly share their concerns without repercussions. Even when people thoughtfully declined responding to the survey, interesting dialogue followed. One person noted that Zoom was an:

> *…awkward platform for me, as I am a person that looks for people's responses to me as I speak, and it's hard to see or hear (especially when people are muted) any responses.*

How much that captures how many people, leaders from diverse paradigms, are coming to meet these new times hewn by *at least two major crises*. We are being asked, as if overnight, to learn new communication skills while we are treading water. I have heard from many people who are having new difficulties as they follow protocols to stay at home, utilize innovative media connections, and manage complex family dynamics. The person who noted her own concern about Zoom is a highly sought-after somatic teacher, coach, and therapist. What she has honed over many years is a deeper listening to people's congruence with their body language. For her, this is not a small learning curve as she leans into new ways to coach her clients. For teams reliant on their yearly rope courses for their executive teams; or hospice doctors, nurses, and volunteers now needing to do more online work, it is a huge learning curve in how to move forward. The best hospice teams I know are recognized *for* their personal hands-on touch.

Linda Morgan Roberts and Courtney L. McCluney in Harvard Review, June 2020 communicates that: *"Millions of people are trying to navigate nonexistent physical boundaries between their personal and professional lives within their homes."* They share further that black professionals, who have learned *"code switching skills"* to alleviate cultural tensions, receive fair pay, and maintain privacy, are taxed with facing new conundrums with virtual meetings:

> *They are now literally broadcasting more of their identities from their personal living spaces. Work from home arrangements often require people to (virtually) invite coworkers, clients, physicians, students, and professors into their homes,*

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which undermines their ability to exercise agency and control over how they present their identities.

When I was recently on an escalated tech call with technician who really knew her stuff, there was a moment when I sensed she was torn during our exceptionally long call. We both took a breath so that we could humanize the moment. I could feel her question. *Could she trust me?* I replied to her and it led to a needed, brief but personal dialogue about sheltering in place and working from home. She had a new baby and she was crying a room away. The baby had help; and yet she *was* a mother. I was in need of her help for a computer that was crashing and stopped my project. We both humanized our connection and communication. Hmm, I do wonder how many of us are doing just that? *Or how many of us hold back, not knowing what to say?* How many others want to return to civil but impersonal dynamics as before? But we all are being asked to learn new listening skills as we move forward.

For many people, Zoom *is* a lifesaver and an opportunity, as travel became scant to nonexistent for many business meetings during the pandemic. For those of us feeling relief with Zoom and other media resources, many have new learning curves that are different difficult climbs. Recently, two leaders shared that they felt lost and inadequate during their loved ones' hospital emergencies. One woman connected with her mother via FaceTime while she was quarantined…*and dying*. She could not sit with her mother and say good-bye…*or reassure her in her final hours*. Both leaders communicated that their loved ones died…alone…*and that there would be no funeral*. Burial, in both cases, was postponed. *Where do these leaders go with their grief as they sit working at home?* Do these extreme emergencies and losses affect them…and their teams?

One survey question asks: "When do you believe is a good time for leaders to consider working with a therapist?" This answer just arrived a bit ago:

> *I looked at your survey and was impressed with the complexity and importance of the questions, and I was overwhelmed by them. I don't have the bandwidth right now to take them on, which might be sign that I need another session with* my *therapist.*

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Andrea
The Case for Listening
What people need right now is to be heard. Listening is how we find out what they really need. Listening is something every leader can do more of, and it's not always easy. Many people have a bias for problem-solving and giving advice, and that is not what is appropriate in this situation. The answers to our innermost questions at this time are within us. The leader who is willing to listen deeply then can act to "hold space" for the team member to speak. Then, the individual can get present with her feelings and is more able to articulate what she needs.

Two great questions are: "What's happening right now – how do you feel, what are you thinking?" followed by: "What do you need right now?" I have had many instances in which I have asked clients this sequence of questions over the last 90 days. "What's needed" is rarely something I can give them, including advice. My value as a coach comes from simply reflecting their own thoughts and feelings.

Many clients have expressed profound sadness over the last 90 days. There is no "answer" for that, only empathy. I say, "Yes," when they express a feeling like this – there is really nothing else to say. Other clients point to feelings of anxiety and stress due to their circumstances. "I'm exhausted because I am working around the clock. There's no way to leave work when it's five feet from my kitchen." I ask, "What is one small step you can take?" One client replied, "Set an end time for work today, and honor it. Close the door to the makeshift office and do not re-enter until tomorrow." So simple – and she did honor that, because the answer was hers.

Karla
For Coaches and Therapists, Listening is Key
Overwhelm, anxiety, depression, multicultural concerns, racial disparity, uncertainty, and trauma are just a few of the global factors that have one seasoned therapist scrambling to find space for not only her regular clients in request of more time, but also former clients requesting new support. This therapist is not alone in stretching her workload to meet the growing needs of clients. Many therapists are on the front lines working with corporate leaders as well as ER doctors and nurses. Others specialize in enabling clients to stay safe and well. Most all seasoned therapists work with clients in *"being curious about how one is living his life, of how one's mind and body are helping or interfering with the fulfillment of one's longings and tempering of one's fear,"* as one survey participant aptly describes.

Overwhelm may be the code word for everyone's need to come to grips with 2020 and its multitude of crises. There is a growing mainstream awareness that if individuals and companies return to earlier business models, they could deepen these crises; but if they define new futures, they can help transform these seizures. Skating along on fragmented paradigms, hoping that the ice does not crack, simply will not work any longer. Therapists, like most leaders, are exploring creative ways as they work from home, offering multi-platforms for client work. Leaders all across the map are seeking greater balance in their work and personal lives as we unfold new futures. "How do leaders allow for this new way?" was answered by one respondent in saying:

> *Focus on microcosms –the contexts within which community members spend most*
> *of their time – and ask this question: What am I doing to help cultivate contexts*

that support healthier functioning and increased opportunities for meaningful, adaptive existence for all members?

Another person replied:

> *I would also advise in these times that leaders need to create space, not for an in-depth dialogue about what is happening, but just space for its acknowledgement. For example, offering more time off, time away from unnecessary meetings, more flexibility as an acknowledgement of living in extraordinary times. The leader does not have to be all things, but they can make space for the humanity of the people they work with.*

I posed two questions to the Conscious Leader course participants, when I was asked to offer a cameo presentation:

> *How do I generate a workplace culture that is sensitive to these current crises, enabling safety, well-being, and trust? What core value will I contribute to the creation of this new culture?*

When leaders invest their time and energy in coaching for themselves, they are more reliable to inspire and co-create the cultures that support teams to move into a new future. One therapist interviewed said she champions business leaders with models that offer direct services to their teams. She gave an example of an organization that is holistically addressing the crises we are experiencing:

> *I was hired as one of Airbnb's referral therapists. I am witnessing my client's fears of the future as they experience depression, anxiety, and trauma. They offer paid services to all employees: therapy and wellness consultants and career coaching. I learned in the corporate office that when they laid off 90 percent of their employees, they still offered this support to them. They also have a genuine commitment to multi-cultural communities being hired. Airbnb is active in outreach to Brazil, Portugal, Guadalajara, and Ireland for their tech hires. They offer employees, including me, free breakfasts, lunches, and dinners.*

Andrea
The Leader's Responsibility
Many people, usually self-aware in ordinary circumstances, are demonstrating stress behaviors in the workplace. These people don't necessarily need an outside referral, yet the behaviors can be annoying or even exasperating to the people surrounding them. The behavior is not new – it simply has been managed by the individual. What's going on here?

I offer that all of us have core needs and motivators – things we want from our environment and other people to keep us engaged and feeling valued and productive. When these needs are not met, we can have a conscious or unconscious reaction that shows up externally as stress behavior. Many of our core needs are not being met in this current environment. For most people, a simple conversation focused on what they need and aren't getting is very helpful.

Sadly, our propensity for avoiding courageous conversations in the workplace, combined with few or no in-person meetings, cause the issues to fester until we deem them performance problems.

Let's say you have a team member who you would describe as a brilliant, analytical problem-solver. He's strategic and loves to create structure and build things. He also happens to be a direct and extroverted communicator. You begin to notice and receive hints that he's being overly critical of his team – and you. The behavior escalates to the point that another team member logs a complaint, stating that he is a bully. What do you do?

The traditional approach is to provide feedback and some ultimatum if the behavior doesn't stop. A better option is to provide the feedback, and simply ask him what's going on. Seek to discover what he needs that he's not getting. In our example, you would learn that his (preferred) predictable world just became ambiguous. You would learn that one of the people he is experiencing conflict with tends to be emotionally expressive, something he is quite uncomfortable with. You would learn that the environment and others in it are triggering stress behaviors, and that you as his leader can help him. You could help him develop a short-term micro-strategy despite the unknowns surrounding the company's long-term direction. You could help him see that the co-worker is also experiencing stress and expresses it through emotion – a stylistic difference, not a cause for judgement or ridicule. You can see that if the leader begins this process at the first sign of these stress behaviors, they might not escalate to this point of grievance.

Leaders I talk with are taking more time with members of their team, and they are allowing them to talk about whatever is on their minds. Often the conversation is enough. In other cases, they are learning that people have needs they are unequipped to meet, and this is where referrals to outside professionals become important.

Many leaders have gained self-awareness through opportunities afforded them throughout their life. I don't meet many seasoned executives who have not experienced therapy, executive coaching, personal development programs, or a combination of those. But rarely have all team members had the opportunity for those experiences. One executive recently remarked, "I have as much anxiety as the rest of my team. But I have tools. They don't. Maybe I need to help them find resources."

Karla
When Do We Refer?
In May 2020, Business Insider reported:

> *Some 53% of 256 employers surveyed by the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions reported providing special emotional and mental health programs for their workforce because of the pandemic.*

Far from this being merely a triage trend, this integral emotional and mental health support was likely absent for a long time in companies. Newly identified, it provides a missing link to engaging a new future that will transform crucial parts of these crises.

Still, there is a stigma associated with referring employees to outside counselors. Survey respondents overwhelmingly said we must normalize these needs.

Leaders keep asking when do they need to refer themselves or team members to counseling systems or possibly an executive coach? Here are a few of the interview and survey replies:

- Your sleeping patterns are disturbed, or you are not sleeping well.

- You are finding yourself agitated all the time to the point where you say things and do things that you don't normally do.

- You can't slow down your mind.

- You can't turn off the media and the information coming in from there.

- You realize you are having out of character reactions, are more easily angered and reactive to employees and customers. Sleeplessness, loss of appetite, depression.

- Be aware of classic signs of depression and/or anxiety, especially if they are occurring on a daily basis: feelings of hopelessness, loss of interest/motivation, fatigue, disturbed sleep, irritability, feeling tense, change in appetite or weight, emotional lability, etc.

- Some indicators that mental health support is indicated rather than coaching are: heightened anxiety, shutting down, impatience, loss of sleep, nightmares, disruption in relationships, work or otherwise, and a sense of loss of meaning or purpose.

- All leaders would be served by seeking out therapy and doing their own work, as it can only increase their capacity for leadership.

One respondent said: "As a leader, I am recognizing the anxiety only by paying attention to my mind. I said one day to myself, "You must have some fear," and so l watched for it and it is there. That is my sign that I need some additional support.

Andrea
Normalizing Referrals for Counseling
As an executive coach, when I sense a referral to a therapist would be helpful, the first thing I ask is whether the individual is addressing the issue in any way or if he has in the past – through counseling, a physician, etc. If yes, I ask if that has helped or is helping, and work with them to create next steps from there. If they have not, I seek to normalize the recommendation. I'll say something like this: "There are times in every one of our lives when we could benefit from outside help. Would you be open to exploring resources available – Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or others?"

One of the therapists Karla interviewed was very clear about stopping right there. She said that some people could be re-traumatized by even talking about what is going on with them, and that this is of particular concern when the "coach" is someone in an authority role – their leader. She referred to it as "psychological dabbling."

In my experience, dabbling can take the form of what I call self-referencing, comparing what is going on with the other person to something you experienced. It's poorly disguised as empathy ("I have experienced what you're experiencing") but it's far from empathetic. If you use social media, you'll know what I'm describing. It's the post about the loss of someone's beloved pet, job or grandmother that's met with a multitude of responses that go something like: "I know how you feel. I lost my dog two months ago." When we do this in the context of an important

relationship – leader or coach – we destroy foundational trust. In an attempt to connect with the other person, we disconnect because we get it wrong. What we presume they are experiencing, with our limited knowledge and self-referenced approach, may simply be inaccurate. Consider this statement a leader might make in response to someone who tells her she has been sleeping poorly since her husband was laid off: "When my husband lost his job, I couldn't sleep through the night either. Therapy will help you let go of the guilt and learn boundaries." How does this leader know guilt and boundaries are the issues this team member needs to work through? The fact is, she doesn't. The better response would be: "When someone we love is experiencing a very difficult loss, it can be personally helpful to talk with a counselor."

Karla
How Do Leaders Support?
Another survey question asks what is needed for a supportive discussion between the leader and team member:

> *How might a leader engage in an appropriate and supportive discussion when a team member is expressing anxiety, depression, or trauma?*

The answers to this question and others advocate for defining a trust culture and to de-stigmatize the notion of therapy and company support services. Here is a sampling:

- Don't use the word "debilitating," instead normalize emotional responses, make room for expression, listen, be yourself. If EAP services are available, normalize these services, too, and let employees know of this benefit, an extra support for getting through hard times. Use the term professional counselor rather than therapist. EAP specialists are trained to do the assessment as to whether or not the person could benefit from therapy. EAP counselors are, of course, all trained therapists, but EAP is more appropriately referred to as counseling.

- It's important to normalize reactions especially given the current context (COVID-19) and can be helpful to self-disclose regarding your own struggles. Better to err on the side of caution and refer to a professional (for at least an initial assessment) sooner rather than later.

- Let the team member know he/she is not alone; ask what you can do to help ease the situation; really listen to what the team member has to say; refer to a professional if there are any threats of self-harm or harm to others.

- It is important for leaders to recognize their motives when engaging in any kind of dialogue about personal issues with an employee. If any employee is actively speaking about a mental health issue, something a leader might offer is, *"How can I be of most support so that you can get the help you need? Do you need more schedule flexibility? Change in amount of meetings required for your job? What can I do so that you can make space to take care of yourself?"* And to truly be open and without fear that their employee taking care of themselves will cause a work disruption, or even better to prioritize their employees' humanity over their job performance.

- Do a general check-in with team members to see if they feel like any changes in the team system, structure or process can be implemented to better support the team members.

- Normalize the probability that this context can be distressing. Listen for specific challenges and needs, identify if they can be addressed by leadership, and if not – or if noticing after implementation that they are not effective enough – compassionately reflect back to the particular team member that outside resourcing seems appropriate; that distress, dysregulation and/or dysfunction seems significant enough and that professional support could be quite valuable in processing, relieving, reducing or resolving anxiety, depression, or trauma.

- If it is interfering with job performance, office dynamics, or meeting dynamics, help the team member get to a professional.

One person listening to the Conscious Leadership series tuned out when he heard two of us talking about EAP services. How does this lack of deep listening for EAP come about? Leaders do not have an easy register for someone in need of EAP. Historically, an alcoholic's confidentiality was not honored. Performance studies were what justified EAP use. This deeper question remains:

> *Are company cultures and leaders taking a stand for support systems like EAP, counseling services, coaching, and emergency therapy services?*

Theresa Agovino of shrm.org, told us as of fall, 2019 that EAP was deeply under utilized…with a 5.5-10 percent usage. Ms. Agovino quotes Jason Richmond, a senior vice president at Beacon Health Options in Boston, who admits that their EAP utilization rate is about 5 percent: *"We tell people on the phone, on the website, everywhere."*

Telling and posting about EAP services to employees is not enrolling leaders and teams in the valued partnership that EAP (and counseling and coaching) offers. The survey and interview responses indicate that both individuals and companies may have bias in generating EAP and counseling cultures in their companies. Their replies express the need, for all of us as leaders, to not only offer new support for team members but also to enroll them…with a promise that participation will not stigmatize or threaten employment.

Andrea
What Is the Change That Can Emerge From You and Those You Lead?
To answer that, we have to examine what no longer serves our organizations. The crises of recent months have taught us key lessons about what leaders are doing – sometimes for the first time ever – that promote engagement during difficult times. It has also taught us that what doesn't work in normal circumstances is even more harmful now.
There are implicit and explicit biases in the workplace that govern behavioral expectations, and they hold dangerous unintended consequences.

Bias #1 - Keep your "self" out of your work.
There has been an expectation that our personal lives belong at home and that our work persona should be a zipped-up version of our real self. Why? While we say we value diversity, being different makes us uncomfortable, as Karla points out at the start of this article. So we tolerate what we can see, and manage expectations for keeping the rest unexamined.

In many organizations, there is clear message to conform – to work to fit into the culture. One executive recently told me that when, years ago, he made a bittersweet departure from his company, a colleague said, "You never really fit in, did you?" He asked me if, in my experience, leaders still tend to try to change themselves to adapt. Sadly, the answer is yes. We have only one personality, albeit complex. When reviewing personality style assessments, I will ask, "Is this an accurate description of you?" I get concerned when the reply is, "It depends. At work, I am one way and in my personal life another." We are subjected to years of conditioning about what is expected and appropriate, and we begin to think it's part of who we are.

An organization whose cultural norms and standards are so rigid that people feel a need to "fit in" despite their differences does not have a healthy culture. These are usually the product of history and small group of influencers. Strong cultures are deliberately built through an examination of existing and aspirational values. And, they almost always include some aspect of creativity, innovation, and risk-taking, none of which can be achieved when we hold back who we are. Further, we know from decades of research that the most highly functioning teams have a high degree of trust among team members. That trust is achieved through authenticity. Getting to know one another on a personal basis breeds a willingness to be vulnerable and a willingness to extend positive intent to others – key factors for trusting business and personal relationships.

Now, as many quite literally "work from home," and all of us share a number of collective traumas, it is impossible to expect the kind of separation between our work and personal personas that has been convenient in the past. Leaders who are uninterested in the personal well-being of their employees, or are awkward in eliciting their fears, hopes, and goals, will find employees to be even more disengaged and disconnected. This relates to bias number two.

Bias #2 – Be objective (because we're afraid of feelings).
Despite the publication of Daniel Goleman's groundbreaking work "Emotional Intelligence" in 1995 (that was 25 years ago), we still are not comfortable with emotion in the workplace. Yet two basic constructs for team cohesiveness – productive conflict and courageous feedback – require that we are aware of our own emotions, can identify others', and can share and elicit feelings in a way that builds rapport and shared understanding.

Leaders also are charged with setting appropriate boundaries and de-escalating conversations in which people yell, cry or get defensive.

Whether we're either afraid of emotion or ill-equipped to deal with it, the lack of productive conflict and feedback creates a build-up of unspoken assumptions and feelings that lead to unconscious prejudices, poorly examined decisions and less than ideal employee engagement.

We can start with the nature of our business conversations. A team member's "feelings" about a matter are valid and important. Team-building exercises are not trivial "touchy-feely" events. As Bradbury and Greaves state in their work "Emotional Intelligence 2.0," lean into your discomfort.

Bias #3 - Productivity eclipses grace
Executive coach and author John Baldoni says:

Love, sacrifice, truth, and courage are virtues made actionable by grace. We may be disposed to do what is right; grace gives us the impetus to act upon doing it. Grace then becomes the inspiration for treating individuals with generosity, respect, and compassion. It manifests itself as action in the name of others, and it energizes us to act upon our beliefs.

I have seen more organizational leaders exhibit this type of grace in these past four months than in the past four years. And while challenging for sure, work is getting done. Customers are being served, and projects are moving forward. Yet I fear some are longing to be free of the careful consideration of what people are going through and are eager to go back to the management practices and metrics of the past.

This work and Karla's survey are, in part, about organizational grace. Grace that's extended to those experiencing overwhelm. Grace that's extended if a mistake is made, a promising risk does not fulfill, or one's behavior is momentarily less than professional.

I personally hold a vision for a new organizational culture in which we can transform these biases. In this state of "Emergent Leadership," the outcomes include:
1. One's value becomes aligned with their unique self, style, capability, and talents. Conscious and unconscious prejudices are examined and transformed.
2. Valuing and growing emotional intelligence becomes a new norm.
3. Grace leads and productivity follows.

Please, let us not squander the opportunity before us. As leaders, we can show up authentically and reliably to help our teams navigate uncertainty, draw forth resilience from individuals, and build team cohesiveness. We can affect sustainable and positive change in organizational culture as a result of the crises at hand.

Karla
This Golden Opportunity
We have this golden opportunity to shape a new future, one defined by our collective crises' needs. We will be exploring, in future articles, what more is needed. We welcome learning about any of your difficulties in supporting your own leadership…and in engaging team members during this time. We would love success stories as well.

About the Authors:

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Karla Boyd PhD, a lover of animals and people, is an organizational and leadership development consultant, Equine Guided Leadership Coach, and a writer.

In all of her work, she helps people connect with their passion more deeply. Karla inspires all to have a more intimate relationship with nature, animals and making a difference in the world, and she inspires a deepening and revitalization of loving and healing initiatives in our world. Karla has joined others in creation of innovative designs for palliative and hospice care for people and animals, honoring the dignity of all life. As founder of Namaste Global Vision, she empowers

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Karla designs curriculum for non-profits, small businesses, and large organizations. She has designed and implemented comprehensive leadership development programs in diverse organizations including philanthropist and animal steward communities, created high-potential leader programs, and integrated innovative system change designs. She has worked with hundreds of leaders to improve performance and individual leadership capacity, and her many certifications include Ontological paradigms, Appreciative Inquiry, and Equine Soul of Leadership Coaching. Her blog is *Conversations with Karla*.

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Andrea Chilcote holds nearly three decades of experience in the organizational development coaching and consulting field. Her notable work includes enterprise-wide organizational development initiatives as well as executive coaching, partnering with executives and their teams across a variety of Fortune 500 companies and diverse business sectors.

A recognized, trusted partner who gets results, Andrea focuses on client relationships – taking much pride in her track-record of longevity and sustainability in client connections. Her programs and methods meet leaders on their development trajectory, moving them beyond the superficial to integrated behavioral change.

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