

THE EVOLVING STORY OF LEADERS ANONYMOUS

by Joe Smerkers

Leaders Anonymous is today a growing community of senior executives who meet together to share their experiences, hopes and frustrations. We have become an oasis, a safe place where executives can reflect in confidence and anonymity, and continue to evolve as leaders of change.

Leaders Anonymous has been however a decade in the making.

When I first entered the consulting business 12 years ago I read books that argued that consultants are supposed to be change agents. Then I discovered that what you get hired for is your expertise in a specific area - Strategic Planning, Market Research, TQM, Reengineering, ISO 9000, etc.

Over the years my own disconfirming data and that of others started to mount. Headlines read, "TQM does not live up to its expectations." "Reengineering slips up," Some truthfully frank consulting firms even admitted failure rates as high as 80% to 90%.

But as a profession we explained away our failures and kept coming up with new ideas, new tools to sell. We assured clients that we finally had the answer they needed to create a "High Performance Organization." If our ideas were implemented success would follow as surely as the sunrise. What followed in many cases was a damp and rainy day. Something else was going on. I am ashamed to admit it but it took me almost 8 years to understand this.

I am deeply grateful to those who allowed me to progress while working in their organizations, and the willingness of many executives to share with me their own feelings.

What I have concluded is that as a consultant I am first and foremost a change agent. If the organization changes for the better, we have succeeded. If not we have failed. Transfer and use of expertise is a means to the end, not the end in itself.

Having accepted my role as a change agent, how do I make it happen. The first part of the

answer is, I can't make it happen. Only the client can, and at that it takes more than the wisdom and power of one person. The following quote from a Harvard Business Review article, [Changing the Mind of the Corporation](#), by Roger Martin might shed some insight.

To get change in a great old company, thousands of grown men and women whose children depend on their acting prudently must see the rationale for change and view it with favor. They must see the reasoning behind a new strategic direction and understand the methods used to shape the supporting data - so that everybody can make or imagine themselves making the calculations for themselves.

The second part of the answer is that my role, and that of all change agents, is to facilitate the change process, to provide insight and new ideas, and to help the client organization "perceive, understand, and act upon process events which occur in the client's environment," (Edgar Schein).

What is it that prevents otherwise Bright rational people from doing What seems so logical?

Paraphrasing ideas first developed by Kurt Lewin in 1947, and elaborated by Schein, people must first see a compelling reason to change. They "must experience enough disequilibrium to force a coping process that goes beyond just reinforcing the assumptions that are already in place." Second, they must see the possibility of success and a way to get there that provides them enough "psychological safety" to move forward. Third, new learning must occur. And finally, new behaviors must be reinforced.

Sounds pretty simple and straightforward - create dissatisfaction, provide a new vision,

give people the tools to get there, and away we go. Easy to do? Not.

What is it then that prevents organizations and otherwise bright, rational people from doing what seems so logical? There are numerous reasons including consultant incompetence but from what I have learned most have to do with the unwillingness or inability of the executive subculture to change their own basic assumptions and beliefs.

Today life in the executive subculture is hard. Threatened by a perceived loss of authority, power or 'face,' many executives seem incapable of being open and honest with themselves or their peers. To maintain a stable sense of their identity within this subculture they deny reality, repress their own anxieties, and attribute blame and frailties to others.

Unwilling to reflect on their own behaviors they embrace training programs that promise improvement through change in others. When these fail, they embrace management methods that seek to control everybody and everything. Trusting no one in this manufactured world they live marginless lives trying to hold it all together. Inevitably errors occur which they, unable to admit their responsibility, blame on others; thus reinforcing this vicious cycle.

What happened to change my life?

I gradually began to realize that a CEO had more to do with the success of organizational change than I did. I started to verbalize to a few trusted friends that an enlightened CEO could achieve organizational change using any one of several consultants or change methods. Running a consulting business I, of course, did not tell my clients this.

How I got to the next part is truly a mystery to me. But I used to say, "If only I could get a CEO to admit in front of their employees that they were an alcoholic, the game would be over." At the time I did not understand that I was really asking them to stand naked in front of their employees and peers.

For several years this was all I had. A mental thought. Then I attended a training society meeting. my first in over three years. AND IT HAPPENED. A CEO from a nationally recognized industry leader stood up and actually said, "I am a recovering alcoholic."

Six months more passed while I continued to research scientific change methods. Then I attended another training society meeting, my second in over three years. I sat down at a round table. Not knowing anyone I started to introduce myself. That is when I met Marie who was sitting next to me. She was a counselor at an Alcohol and Substance Abuse Treatment Center. I had enough. I got the message. I was supposed to do something with this idea.

Many will interpret these occurrences as coincidences. I can't.

As I learned more about substance abuse and methods of recovery I was drawn to The Twelve

Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Let me state now that A.A. has not reviewed or approved what we are doing.

Nevertheless I saw the Twelve Steps as a useful process that could be adapted to our purposes. It has taken me several months to understand that standing in front of people and announcing that you are a recovering alcoholic is not about alcohol. It's about trust and faith in community, God if you like. It's about standing naked in front of our peers, letting go of our fears. It's about being honest and open with ourselves and others.

I was certain now that I was on the right track but all attempts to define what leaders were addicted to failed. Many of my friends and colleagues thought the addiction was control. But I remained unconvinced.

Then I looked inward. What was it that I have been trying to do over the years? What is the drug that I have been taking that at times gave me such a 'high' while also making my life so unmanageable?

I finally got it. I was powerless to change others. My attempts to do what I was being

hired for was not serving the best interests of my clients. Whoa!

I recalled how I felt during TQM workshops I would lead. I would motivationally put out an idea. Then I would probe, ask questions of my audience. I would get them involved in the discussion. They liked it. I liked it. The more interaction there was, the higher I got. It was a real show. I was considered a great workshop facilitator. And interestingly people actually left with some new ideas.

So what is wrong with this picture? What is wrong with being entertaining and helping people gain some new ideas? What is the harm'?

As a consultant I have but one priority, to enable the organization to change for the better. Change means that people have to give up old habits and adopt new ones, and people only truly adopt new assumptions themselves.

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Leading, telling, motivating just doesn't work. Try it out on your children. Of course we can manipulate them with rewards or coerce them with beatings. As coaches we can yell from the sidelines. But that's a short-term strategy that doesn't affect their, or our employee's, underlying beliefs. When the reinforcers are removed or a crisis occurs they revert back and behave consistent with their true assumptions.

Certainly we can do something to help people learn. I thought that being Socratic was a way to do this. But what I have discovered is that we were acting out our roles in a kind of perverse play. By effectively presenting and asking questions centered around my message I in fact enabled my clients to avoid discovering the truths of their own realities. They learned the new ideas, but never gave up their old assumptions. Over time when the stimulus, Joe S., was removed they quickly forgot and reverted back to old behaviors.

Within this scenario I became the drug supplier. Management bought them willingly because it made them feel good, and sometimes even produced short-term performance improvements. My scientific improvement schemes were psychologically safe. I complimented myself when I challenged the senior executive to change. I felt morally correct when I said that nothing would work without changes in the executive subculture. I had my warning labels, but continued to sell drugs anyway. I had my business to run, my own family to support.

In fairness to my colleagues consultants face the same problems of change as do our clients. We too are threatened by a perceived loss of authority, power or 'face.' To maintain our psychological balance we employ the same defensive routines - denial, repression, and projection. Maybe I am doing it right now. Is Leaders Anonymous just another drug? You 'll have to decide. I have to go back to my laboratory.

As I continued my investigation I thought of the true leaders that I have known or read about. It became clear that they do not try to change others. They learned somewhere along the line that this is an impossible task.

**“You cannot make the Revolution.
You can only be the Revolution.”**

Instead they create environments, cultures that give people the opportunity to change themselves. The choice remains with the individual. Change is nurtured but not driven. Leaders have faith in themselves and in their community, and they deal openly and honestly with the consequences of this strategy for themselves and others. Ursula Le Guin said, "You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution." In the same vein Gandhi said, "We must be the change we wish to see in the world."

Leaders Anonymous was thus conceived by a management consultant exhausted from

trying to change others and from failing to achieve meaningful organizational change. I have joined with other executives and we meet in community to share our experiences, strengths, and hopes. I suppose what binds us together is a common interest in making a meaningful difference in the lives of those we affect.

Several months ago someone asked me how I would define a leader. I know at the time I gave a very rambling answer, and I am not so sure that today I have the definitive one. But if I was asked the same question today I would respond as follows: A Leader is someone who creates environments which enable others to close the gap from where they are to where they want to be. Our vision is to one day see a leader in every executive seat.

What is our hope for the future?

Robert Kennedy said, "Some men see things as they are and say: Why? I dream things that never were and say: Why not?" Look around and ask yourself if your organization, society is all that it should be? Is your life what it should be?

We have become a society where survival is the primary objective; where externally or internally contrived goals are seen as a motivating solution; and where the idea of enjoying our work is seen as something long lost.

We plan, do, act....and justify. We make excuses that we must serve many masters, that what we are doing is in the best interest of those we are harming, including ourselves. We treat people who do the wrong things well as heroes. And we wonder why things don't get any better.

It is time to stop leading and become a leader. As senior executives we have the ability to institute change that can affect the lives of a lot of people, including ourselves. We have, as Carol Pearson writes in The Hero Within that unique chance to act as magnets attracting and galvanizing positive energy for change.

Many of us are tired. Time and resources are scarce. Whether one is a CEO, a VP, a consultant, housewife, working Mom, or a kid, more than ever before, as Peck said, "life is difficult." Many have fought and are fighting the 'good fight.' Now I am challenging you to do more.

Come join us. The only requirement for membership is the desire to continue to evolve as a leader, to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those we affect.

Our door is always open. Welcome.