

Taking a Leap

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In 2010 I took a huge leap into the unknown. I enrolled for a Masters Degree in Leadership and Change Management through Leeds Metropolitan University UK.

The course work was presented in Swaziland over a period of eight months which meant that I had to fly up to Swaziland every month. Over the eight months we covered topics like: Board and Governance, Corporate Strategy, Change Management, Leadership and Creating the Self, Project Management, Personal and Professional Development, Human Resources.

After every module we had to write an assignment, applying what we have learnt to the work environment. It was very tough. What kept me going, though, was my goal to take the *Seven Conditions* (from Steiner & applied through Psychophonetics) into the corporate world and write my thesis on it or as they call it, a work based project.

I worked with ten participants from the IT Department in a large Financial Services company. I ran the program over three months, two days a week with the choice of one on one coaching in between.

I evaluated the program through the theoretical lens of Emotional Intelligence with the focus on Self Awareness, Self Management, Empathy and Relationship Management.

Compassion Triangle

In terms of Self Awareness and Self Management it was particularly the Psychophonetics process of the *Compassion Triangle* which had the most significant impact. After becoming aware of their inner critic, four participants made significant changes in how they managed their own emotions and how they responded to work situations, for example: arresting undermining self talk, finding clarity in thought and work performance, reversing a decision to resign, being able to speak up in

public meetings, doing public speaking, being decisive and owning leadership ability. For three other participants it brought a turnabout in their relationship towards themselves and towards others.

It is significant that the *Compassion Triangle* had such a deep impact on the emotional competencies of Self Awareness and Self Management. In a study of senior managers and consultants in various organisations, Agryris (1991) found that many professionals are internally driven by an unrealistically high ideal of performance. These high ideals of success are fuelled by an equally high fear of failure.

Most professionals have not developed the ability to tolerate feelings of failure or the skills to deal with these feelings. This leads to an inappropriate level of self-criticism when people do not achieve the high levels of performance they aspire to. The professionals studied referred to this tendency as a *doom loop* or a *doom zoom*. This research of Agryris throws light on why the *Compassion Triangle* had such an impact on participants were all high performers and specialists.

One of the participants in the research whom I shall call *Enrico* described the effect of the *Compassion Triangle* as follows:

Then after we did that Compassion Triangle coaching session, the light just went on. There was such a weight lifted off my shoulders because I could understand how the critic in me was grinding me absolutely to nothing. And just from that one coaching session, there was such a big shift in me, that very dark feeling I had was lifted.

Enrico managed to sustain this shift in self awareness and self management within himself. A month after the course had finished he shared with me the following:

I had such a big project and there was so much I had to put in, I don't know what I would have done if I had to blame myself for everything that goes wrong...every time I would, you know, not beat myself up and say: Look this is the situation, this is what happened, this is why and I could actually look logically at it. It made it just so much more bearable.

Empathy & relationships

Of the ten participants, seven reported improvement in their ability to empathise and manage their relationships. Active listening and deeper empathy resulted in healed relationships with direct reports or with managers, being able to manage meetings better and take a leadership role, experiencing positive involvement with difficult clients and improved relationships at home.

It also resulted in a marked shift for two participants in their leadership styles. For the one from an authoritarian, directive leadership style to a participatory style and for the other from a laissez-faire style to a participatory leadership style. On the whole, the practice of empathy led to more respectful relationships.

The seven conditions

I am going to share the story of one of the participants whom I call *Paul* with you to give you an idea of how the Seven Conditions impacted on an individual. The most important step towards Self Awareness came through Condition One: *Taking responsibility for your well being*. Paul had been drinking 2 litres of Coca Cola a day for many years. He said:

The program actually made me start my quest for well being much sooner than I had originally intended ... I did go for an executive medical and I was a high risk candidate, I would start it and then think I would do it later. You know that whole procrastination thing of putting things off and the program really made me want to work on all the principles, and that one was the first one ... I went to a dietician and got an eating plan and I stopped drinking Coca Cola and I'm still doing that and drinking water.

Paul lost 10 kilos in 11 weeks. He felt the energy it released had an effect on his leadership skills. He described the effect on him as follows:

I've got so much more energy and zest for life and that increased energy level helps you as a leader as well because you need to be a little bit of a high energy person to be able to motivate and drive people and I think that's definitely improved my leadership skills in my team.

Paul furthermore reported that the Compassion Triangle has helped him with his inner critic and this shift also impacted on how he treats others: *"Yes, there has definitely been a shift in my inner critic – I'm less strict on myself as well as on others with regard to striving for perfection."*

In terms of empathy and relationship management there was also a huge shift in Paul. He practised empathic listening first at home and was surprised by the marked improvement in his communication with his daughter. This gave him the confidence to practice it at work. For Paul practicing the empathic listening skills changed his habit of giving advice and telling people to do things his way, instead of really listening respectfully to what they have to say. He described it like this:

Previously what I used to do is listen and as I'm listening, I'm looking for solutions and as soon as the person stops talking I say: 'This is what you need to do.' Now I listen more actively, try and give appropriate responses.

His description of how he responded to people at work now indicated a much more respectful way of interaction. He said that he does not force his solution on people any more:

I try to now guide them in the direction that they can find their own way, especially in the work place, sometimes it's not the perfect solution which in the past I wouldn't let go because I used to obviously see my way and that's the best way, or so I thought. Now even if it is not the perfect solution, it's their solution.

He admitted that this is not always easy in the workplace as one does not want to compromise on quality, yet he realized that in the end it is more important not to stifle people's creativity. He explained it like this:

You obviously don't want to sacrifice on quality but you also can't be too stringent because people like to be creative and if they deliver something and you change it, then that final change, they lose their sense of accomplishment.

He felt that this new way of managing his relationships with his direct reports has made him more human: *"It's definitely humanized me a lot more because in the work*

place I never thought about things like that necessarily, but this workshop has made me reflect."

A surprising spin off of this new way of managing relationships was that it had freed up some time for him: *"because instead of micro-managing and thinking about a solution even before I delegate the task, now it is obviously free time for me to pursue other things."* The reason why he micro-managed before was:

Because I used to feel that I shouldn't give anything that I couldn't do myself so ... I used to think about the whole thing from start to finish so that if they asked me questions, I could answer immediately. Now if I don't know the answer, we will explore together.

Another spinoff was that he was feeling more relaxed because he did not have to have his finger on the pulse of everything. All of these factors contributed to a more effective work environment.

This is just one of the stories of transformation that came out of my research.

Paul also reported that a difficult relationship with one of his direct reports improved since he has been practicing empathic listening. In feedback to the researcher, this person stated that Paul listens better and that their relationship had improved. This person described the impact of Paul's lack of listening as follows:

Unfortunately I did experience him as not listening to me (to the end of a problem that is) most often, and that he grabs control before giving me the chance to analyse and solve a situation myself. This has really given my self-confidence a big knock ... It is terribly frustrating to not be listened to ... I therefore am extremely grateful for the effort he is now putting into our work relationship. Therefore – thanks for (Paul) being able to acknowledge his errors and being motivated into doing something about it.



Graduation Ceremony, September 2011

The graduation had a real African feel with drumbeat as I approached the stage and ululation¹ from the audience as I received my degree.

Although tackling this Masters was extremely tough, I am very grateful that I did do it and that I could take Psychophonetics into a field that was completely unfamiliar to me. It was also wonderful that I could participate in a program with participants from all over Africa.

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"Our vibrations can travel thousands of miles away." – Dadi Janki

¹ An ululation is a long, wavering, high-pitched vocal sound resembling a howl with a trilling quality, to give praises at celebrations.