The Deeper Work of Executive Development: Outgrowing Sensitivities

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Often overlooked in management theory and education, how leaders function in an intrapersonal sense—the "inner game" of leadership—is pivotal. We develop this idea in a specific application by describing how psychological wounds sensitize executives to be anxious about getting hurt again. These vigilant and unconscious concerns distort perceptions of organizational reality and lead to unnecessarily intense emotional reactions such as anger, fear, and panic. In turn, this kind of emotional perturbation can cloud judgment and hamper performance. We present a practical psychology of the inner world of distorted beliefs, anachronistic assumptions, and misplaced fears that often lurk beneath counterproductive behavior. Considerable attention is given to what management educators can do to work at this deeper level by helping leaders become aware of, manage, and, ultimately, outgrow being hypersensitive to failure, inadequacy, rejection, dependency, and the like.

The success of individual careers and the fate of organizations are determined by how effectively leaders behave. But enhancing performance isn't just a matter of behavior alone, despite all the talk of behavior-based assessment, behavior modification, or behavior-focused performance coaching. What goes on under the surface of the behavior we see is as fundamental to performance as a solid foundation is to the structural integrity of a skyscraper. Yes, when it comes to performance, behavior is where the rubber meets the road. *And* behavior is the product of perception, self-regulation, and motivation. What leverage might we find for enhancing the performance of managers by delving into the underlying drivers of their behavior?

We argue here for the utility of a deeper approach to management development by describing an application we have created and refined over the last decade in our work with senior leaders. Before describing the theory and intervention model, we locate this particular approach in the broader field of management education.

Mapping the Landscape

Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) have recently conceptualized the field of management education with their domain model, a taxonomy for classifying the various skills that individual managers can develop. The model defines the competencies that educational activities can target in terms of four broad categories: intrapersonal skills (regulating one's emotions, attitudes, and motivation); interpersonal skills (building and maintaining relationships); leadership skills (building a team and guiding it in competition with rivals); and business skills (planning, budgeting, coordinating, and monitoring organizational activity). According to Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003), this ordering reflects a developmental hierarchy where intrapersonal skills are the hardest to develop and business skills are the least difficult to learn.

Furthermore, skills in each successive category build on those found in the previous one: for instance, self-control is needed to maintain effective relationships; interpersonal skills are prerequisite for effective leadership, and so on.

The Hogan and Warrenfeltz domain model helps to organize the comprehensive lists of competencies and skills such as those offered by Boyatzis (1982), Lombardo and Eichinger (2000), and Whetten and Cameron (2002; see Hogan & Kaiser, 2005, for an integration of common competencies into this framework). Another contribution is that this model helps us to appreciate how development in one domain is linked to development in deeper domains (see Figure 1). Understanding the sequence of development across the full spectrum of what is required for success in a managerial role helps redirect educational efforts when attempts to improve business or leadership skills head-on aren't working.

The Deeper Work

Most management development activities are aimed at the domains nearer to the surface of this model: leadership and, most often, technical business skills (Burke & Day, 1986; Csoka, 1997; Porter & McKibbins, 1988). Indeed, recent criticisms have charged that contemporary business education is too concerned with the principles and functions of business and not concerned enough with helping managers develop the skills to actually put those principles into action (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). In particular, these critics have pointed out the lack of education in the leadership and interpersonal arenas. But even less common are interventions that explicitly consider

the underlying drivers of managerial behavior (Kaiser & DeVries, 2000). This approach hinges on the assumption that growing as a manager requires growing personally (Kaplan, 1990; Kaplan, Drath, & Kofodimos, 1991; Kilburg, 2000; Lyons, 2002). In terms of the Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) domain model, work on this deeper level is a matter of digging into the lowland of intrapersonal skills, the province of one's basic beliefs and assumptions, as well as strategies for regulating one's impulses and emotional needs.

The potential leverage that intrapersonal skills hold for improving interpersonal, leadership, and business skills is suggested by how Salovey and Mayer's (1990) construct of emotional intelligence has been appropriated by the leadership industry and touted as a silver-bullet. In the same enthusiastic spirit, but with a measured tone, some newer forms of management education are emphasizing the development of intrapersonal skills. One notable example is the revolutionary program introduced recently by Henry Mintzberg and colleagues, the International Master's Program in Practicing Management. The first module in the curriculum concentrates on self-awareness and introspection, what they call "developing the reflective mind-set." The rationale is that self-knowledge is the cornerstone of all insight (Mintzberg, 2004).

The practical reason for addressing the intrapersonal domain in management development is that improving performance involves not just acquiring or modifying behaviors, but also contending with the skewed mental models, biased expectations, and emotional overreactions that throw off behavior in the first place. It is only practical to work not only at a behavioral level but also at a deeper level that is directly tied to behavior. And because intrapersonal skills are harder to develop (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003) yet vastly consequential for the application of interpersonal, leadership, and business skills, they may also provide a competitive advantage, helping to differentiate managers in the competition for senior leadership jobs (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002: 28). Further, educational institutions that excel in helping executives grow in this way may also realize certain advantages.

What follows is an elaboration of a model we've been working on in action-research with our executive clients (see Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003a). Our intent is to show how this approach might be of benefit to management development professionals such as business school faculty, program trainers, and executive coaches. The model fits nicely in the intrapersonal domain and, by way of example, il-
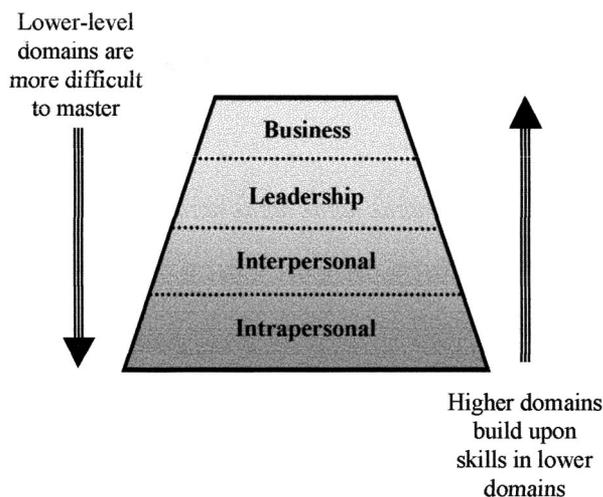

Lower-level domains are more difficult to master

Business

Leadership

Interpersonal

Intrapersonal

Higher domains build upon skills in lower domains

FIGURE 1
The Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) Domain Model

lustrates the utility of working at this deeper level. The central idea is that many executives—like most people—are sensitive to being psychologically hurt by a repeat experience of a painful event from the past. This anxious disposition can distort an executive's perception of organizational reality and cause unnecessarily intense emotional reactions such as anger, fear, and panic. When the individual's intrapersonal skills for regulating this kind of distress are underdeveloped, the result is defensive behavior that is all too often misguided and counterproductive. Our framework is a kind of practical psychology that can shed light on the internal causes of some of the more puzzling performance problems among leaders.

A Grounded Model

The research that led up to this framework wasn't "theory oriented"—rather, it was "problem oriented" (cf. Lawrence, 1992) in the sense that we developed the model in helping our executive clients overcome personal barriers in their leadership (see Kaplan et al., 1991, and Kaplan, 1998, for a summary of the approach). In other words, the model is grounded in the experience of executives struggling to address longstanding performance issues. We do not offer this model as a panacea for all performance problems, but it does provide a fresh approach to some familiar, vexing problems. Also, we were not interested in the wholesale import of existing theory to apply to managers. For instance, many of the dynamics we discuss can be understood in terms of modern psychoanalytic theory (Bernstein & Warner, 1981), in much the same manner as Gabriel and Griffiths (2002) use psychoanalysis to describe how unconscious processes often inhibit emotional learning in organizations. Our experience, though, is that few executives, particularly male executives, are open to traditional therapeutic interventions (cf. Addis & Mahalik, 2003). Moreover, the clinical practice of psychoanalysis requires specialized training and expertise, which the majority of management educators lack.

Rather than turning to pop psychology or crossing the boundaries of professional expertise, we developed a practical psychology for a particular class of developmental issues facing managers. Although our theory is largely inductive, it is informed by existing theory and research, especially the literatures on stress and coping and adult development. For those educators and trainers who take a purely behavioral approach, our purpose is to demonstrate the utility of also working on the individual's personal development. For those who already work on both the outer and inner levels, we offer a framework that is derived expressly from the managerial population and so may be more directly applicable to managers.

AN INTRAPERSONAL APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE PROBLEMS

To help executives improve their performance, it is useful to start with an explicit conceptualization of performance. One useful point of view is to think of executive performance as a matter of *form* (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003a), in the same sense that athletes have form. When an athlete is "on," the person is said to be in *top form*. As articulated in the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), having top form means being fully engaged with the task, where mind and body are moving with little or no friction against the outside world. The mechanics of putting, or shooting a jump shot, or swimming a freestyle race are executed with smooth precision and the individual is able to manage a delicate coordination between the self and the unfolding events on the course, court, or in the pool. There is a dynamic integration between responding to the presenting challenge as well as the internal state of the self.

When form is "off," things aren't so smooth. Physical action is tense and abrupt. Concentration is broken. The individual loses focus on external demands and the execution of form and diverts attention and energy to manage internal demands—primarily self-protection. The person is liable to panic, primed for "fight-or-flight." And form becomes distorted, a crude approximation of what it is supposed to be. The grip is too tight, the follow through isn't there, or the stroke is choppy. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) has found this distinction between high-level and poor performance to apply across a range of athletic, intellectual, and artistic domains.

This description of ineffective performance also pertains in the executive suite. When an executive's form is off, it is often a matter of going to the extreme (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; McCall, 1998). The tendency for intense, driven people to go overboard is all too familiar. Consider the following examples, couched in terms of dimensions commonly found in competency models and skill taxonomies (e.g., Boyatzis, 1982; Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003b; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2000; Whetten & Cameron, 2002). Senior managers must have high standards and *hold people accountable* but it is not uncommon for some to cross over into abrasiveness. Just ask the people that work for them. To *empower* is vital in running a portfolio of busi-

nesses or an entire enterprise, yet it is all too easy for hands-off executives to trust and delegate to the point of abdication. *Strategic thinking* is probably the most sought-after skill in top managers, yet the strategic reach of some expansive visionaries can exceed the organization's grasp—its capacity to execute. And nothing else counts unless you can *execute*, yet it is so easy for executives with a track record for getting things done as middle managers to get bogged down in operational detail when they reach the top of the house.

Executives are also likely to go the other way—to underdo things—despite how counterintuitive that may seem when we think of them as bold, aggressive people. But some senior managers have trouble mustering the courage to address performance issues with their team and deal with the problem only when it becomes a crisis. Others have trouble delegating authority and struggle with truly empowering their team. And some executives spend almost no time tracking trends and contemplating the implications for their strategic position, while others get lost in the big picture and neglect the managerial blocking and tackling needed for their organization to execute.

Each example shows one of two basic types of performance problems: overdoing and underdoing (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003b, c). In all cases, performance of an otherwise valuable skill or competency—accountability, empowerment, strategic agility, driving for results—is distorted: Either the level of performance falls well short or it is excessive. This view of performance problems is important because it helps us to define the developmental agenda as a matter of pegging the elusive virtue between the vices of deficiency and excess, by either ramping up or toning down. It is also helpful in setting up our proposed model for working at the intrapersonal level by posing two questions: (1) Why does the manager hold back in this area— why the "inhibition?" Or, (2) Why does the manager go overboard in that area—why the "compulsion?"

Sensitivities

If this is how an executive's form is off, then what throws it off? As with an athlete, it can be something as simple as fatigue or illness. Low on energy, it is harder to be sharp, one's tolerance is lower, one is more likely to overreact (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). But beyond circumstantial factors, we have also found that an individual's "baggage" comes into play.

Lurking below the surface of poor form is—not always, but more often than is commonly real-ized—what we call a sensitivity (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003a). In everyday conversation, sensitivities are referred to as people's "hot buttons" or "issues." More formally, we define a *sensitivity* as a set of emotionally charged beliefs and expectations generalized from experience that serve to protect the individual from repeating a painful injury—physical or psychological. They are products of the adaptive learning system that functions as an internal alarm to warn us when danger is afoot (Damasio, 1994).

These cognitive-affective-motivational networks operate below the threshold of awareness in the nonverbal experiential information-processing system. This is a part of the human brain shared with all vertebrates and is designed to automatically interpret environmental cues through associations with content in memory (Epstein, 1990, 1994). That is, sensitivities work by matching stimuli in the present perceptual field with encodings from the past without us being aware of this process. Sensitivities create a vigilant disposition to anxiously expect, selectively perceive, and intensely react to symbolic cues associated with a prior hurt. They can also cause individuals to unconsciously create emotionally charged episodes in an attempt to replay historical events and resolve the underlying conflict.[1] Because this pattern takes place outside of awareness, the person is apt to respond with an habitual pattern of behaviors that elicit the anxiously anticipated responses from others, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophesy.

When an executive carries around a sensitivity, it usually has roots in painful experiences in the individual's past.[2] These are events or episodes

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[1]We thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging us to make this point. This dynamic is known in psychoanalytic theory as a "repetition compulsion." Modern thinking about repetition compulsions (e.g., Bernstein & Warner, 1981) holds that these cyclical emotional states and associated behavior patterns were originally adaptive when learned at an earlier stage of life (e.g., childhood), but in the context of the present stage (e.g., adulthood) they are usually self-defeating. They are continually played out as an attempt to symbolically go back and master the prior circumstances that resulted in injury with the hope that this time they will prevail.

[2]In our practice of executive development, we first observed this phenomenon in relating assessment data on early life history to present leadership and personal life data. There was almost always a precipitating painful event, episode, or chronic situation that seemed to instill the sensitivity. But there are two other theoretical ways one can develop a sensitivity. First, through vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977): by observing someone else have the experience and making an association to some aversive consequence and identifying in some way with that individual. Second, there may be no painful or costly prior experience, but the anticipation of an experience that could

from which the person came away feeling hurt or inferior or incapable or unworthy or rejected. Familiar examples abound, from having one's trust in others grossly abused, to being rejected socially by one's peer group, to not doing well in school, to being the unfortunate child of negligent or abusive parents. Although experiences that leave lasting effects classically occur in childhood, powerful events in adulthood can have the same impact (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In effect, these experiences injure "the body psychologic" to the point that the wound remains sensitive to the touch years later. The person is "once bitten, twice shy," as the saying goes. Overlaying the innate survival system is a learned vigilance toward anything that even vaguely suggests a particular harmful experience might happen again. This creates a bias to detect the early warning signs that predict a recurrence, which sets us up to misinterpret a range of objectively benign environmental cues as dangerous (Ayduk et al., 2000). The survival value of this tendency in our evolutionary history is obvious and, although the threats we face in the modern world are more psychological than physical, our neural system is designed for survival in a physically hostile world (Simeons, 1961). It is, ironically, the very same mechanism that accounts for how exquisitely adaptable we humans are.

Thus, sensitivities are automatically activated by the features of situations that serve as symbolic representations of past hurts. Once triggered, the alarm is sounded and perceptions get further exaggerated while self-protection takes priority. Appraisals of situational demands and personal resources to meet them get distorted (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). People's sense of what it will take to protect their well-being is overestimated, while their sense of what they can bring to bear on the matter is underestimated. Thus the definition of threat: When something of central importance to a person such as physical safety, well-being, self-concept, reputation, or a loved one is in jeopardy and the demands of getting it out of harm's way are seen as exceeding one's resources to do so (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

When a person is psychologically threatened, the physiological stress response is engaged. This is an intense activation of the sympathetic nervous system to prepare the body for "fight-or-flight" (Benson, 1975; Cannon, 1932; see also Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993). Motivational urges for fight-or-flight manifest in reflexive, self-protective behaviors that appear to observers as odd and noteworthy. They have a rigid quality, and the individual becomes distressed if he is blocked from executing the sequence of behavior (Epstein, 1990). Self-protective actions following the "fight" principle appear aggressive and undercontrolled; those following the "flight" principle look like avoidance and overcontrol. Whether the threat response leads to either overdone (fight) or underdone (flight) behavior depends on the individual's motivational regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997). A promotion regulatory focus, where the preoccupation is with doing all that one can to prevail, produces compulsive "overdone/fight" behavior. A prevention regulatory focus, where the emphasis is on *not* provoking, or on otherwise steering clear of harm's way, engenders inhibited "underdone/flight" behavior.

Figure 2 summarizes the major components of how sensitivities produce distortions in managerial behavior. It depicts the sequence of events that follow the activation of a sensitivity, from exaggerated appraisals through emotional arousal and motivation to the two types of distortions in form—behaviors that are overdone and underdone.

Beneath counterproductive behaviors, many executives are sensitive one way or another—sensitive in the sense of being quick to feel threatened and react accordingly. If you buy the popular idea of executives as supremely confident and capable people, then the suggestion that many of them are vulnerable to feeling threatened may be wildly incongruous. The fact that sensitivities are not visible to the naked eye, however, doesn't mean they don't exist. It merely points to how well we can mask them (see Bunker, 1997).

Sensitivities and Performance Problems

It may be helpful to next consider examples of specific types of sensitivities along with common distortions in the form of "overdo" and "underdo" that they cause. These examples are summarized in Table 1. Note the following caveat: We do not mean to suggest that underlying every performance issue is a sensitivity. In many cases, ineffective performance can simply be a matter of a lack of experience or skill in that area, poor organizational structure, or a person–organization misfit. Nonetheless, sensitivities are often at play, more often than the casual observer might expect.

cause significant psychological or physical loss may also function much like a sensitivity (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, on vulnerability). The key feature both share with how we define a sensitivity is the vigilant disposition to anticipate and defend against an overwhelming attack on something central to one's identity—usually status, but also acceptance, ideology, or even a loved one.
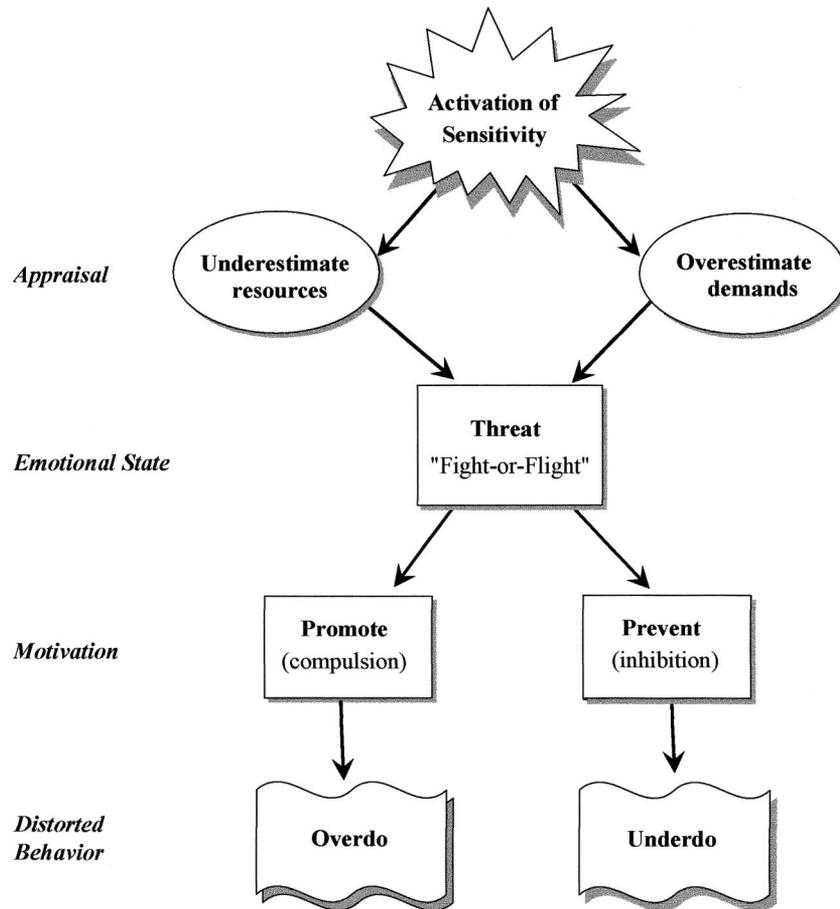
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FIGURE 2
Sequence of How Sensitivities Throw Off the Performance of Leaders

Sensitivity to Intellectual Inadequacy

A prime example of a sensitivity in executives is a concern about their intelligence. It can be a feeling of inferiority that stems from not graduating college or from attending a lesser school. It often has to do with not having been a good student in elementary school or high school. Executives who fear they are not really very smart often worry about being "found out" (Clance, 1985).

If a senior manager were to doubt her intellectual capability, what effect might that have on her behavior? It can go either way: underestimate, underdo and underestimate, overdo (Kaplan, 1999, 2002). Not feeling bright enough, some managers shy away from or avoid altogether activities they associate with intelligence. Often, they will avoid serious efforts to acquire technical knowledge, having concluded that they don't have the smarts to get it. Or they somehow never manage to get around to systematic industry analysis and long-term strategic planning. Or they fall curiously silent in meetings, particularly with more senior managers.

Conversely, some strain to contribute and prove their intelligence—for example, by dominating conversation and making it hard for others to get a word in edgewise. Executives who feel inadequate intellectually often believe they must work extra hard to compensate. It is common for these senior managers to overprepare for meetings and presentations, painstakingly going over all of the material to make sure they've got it all down. You'll see them tied to their notes, not allowing themselves to be spontaneous, or not making room for audience participation. They can also be abrasively impatient with others. One senior person who didn't realize the extent of his intellect used to justify coming down hard on others by saying, "I'm not very bright and I get it. What's the problem with this person?"

Sensitivity to Being Weak

A standard implicit expectation for those who hold senior jobs in a male-dominated leadership culture is that they be strong, dominant figures (Lord,

TABLE 1
Common Types of Sensitivities and Associated Distortions in Performance

Sensitivity to . . .	Impact on Performance	
	Underdo—do too little	Overdo—do too much
Intellectual inadequacy	Doesn't contribute ideas in meetings	Strains to prove self
	Doesn't trust own judgment	Works extreme hours
	Avoids technical learning	Impatience with the pace of others
	Avoids industry analysis and strategic planning	Overprepares for meetings, presentations
Being/appearing weak	Doesn't delegate or empower	Talks too much, a "know-it-all"
	Doesn't seek, listen to, or use input	Taking over when problems arise
	Doesn't check own judgment	Has to always be right, always win
	Short on praise or encouragement	Arrogance
Disapproval/rejection	Doesn't hold people accountable	Indiscriminate with praise
	Doesn't express dissatisfaction	Sugar-coats tough messages
	Doesn't stand his/her ground	Too inclusive
	Not visible	Overreacts to constructive criticism
Depending on others	Difficulty building a team	Micromanages
	Doesn't delegate or seek help	Tries to do it all him-/herself
	Reluctant to partner with peers	Parochial—to focused on own unit
Authority	Avoids conflict with superiors	Too aggressive with superiors
	Ambivalent about own authority	Unduly deferential

Foti, & DeVader, 1984). At least some of the attraction to positions of power and authority in organizations comes from a need for status. Often, but certainly not always, such a need originates from a desire to compensate for feelings of inferiority (Adler, 1917). It is no surprise, then, that some executives are anxious to prove their strength. When problems arise, they swoop in and take charge, crowding out their staff. They can hog airtime in meetings, making it a one-way flow of information that holds others captive to a monologue. To mask uncertainty, they can present themselves in an overly confident way that comes across as sheer arrogance. And sometimes they are so concerned with "being right" that they'll run roughshod over others in an anxious effort to prove their point, no matter how trivial it may be. To say this can be intimidating is an understatement.

Going overboard in asserting oneself is but one reaction to worrying about appearing weak: Others include putting too little emphasis on enabling others to be in a strong position and treating them with less than due consideration. Executives worried about not measuring up personally may not seek input on important decisions. And when others take the initiative to serve up solutions or suggestions, these managers can be nearly impossible to influence. They are also challenged in their efforts to sit quietly and listen to someone else, frequently giving in to the urge to interrupt a speaker with their opinion or with a midstream criticism of that person's point. They can have trou-

ble stepping back to let a direct report learn by working through a tough problem. And they are frequently sparing with words of encouragement and praise.

Sensitivity to Disapproval

Executives who are acutely concerned with being liked often find it unbearably difficult to express dissatisfaction and hold people accountable. They equate being firm with being harsh and hold back when an individual's performance isn't cutting it. They'll also procrastinate in removing a person from the job, even when that person is clearly failing. Others with a fear of being rejected have a hard time drawing boundaries around participation. Not wanting to offend, they'll allow decisions to stall while giving everyone ample opportunity to weigh in. When a consensus isn't forthcoming, they have a hard time taking a stand and moving forward. They can also have difficulty with influencing. At the first sign of opposition, the tendency is to cave in and avoid the conflict.

One executive we coached kept himself holed up in his office and avoided walking the halls and having informal conversations with his staff. He feared forgetting someone's name or what project a person was working on and made the assumption that this would be an inexcusable faux pas, leaving the other person "totally deflated." The shame of it was that he was very well liked by his staff and had a lot of interpersonal credit with

them. But as a result of sky-high expectations for what it takes to be likable and his insecurity about being able to meet those self-imposed standards, he scared himself away from opportunities to regularly check the pulse of his unit and make a personal connection to his staff.

A sensitivity to disapproval can also lead to overdoing it. One example is when an individual is indiscriminant with praise. Over time, these kind words lose their currency. These managers may also lose credit for their niceness, instead being criticized for being soft or sugary-sweet. Managers with an excessive concern about being accepted also tend to take constructive feedback personally, no matter how respectfully delivered. If they don't go into a tailspin, they might react defensively, perhaps even with hostility toward their "accuser." They overgeneralize the feedback about a specific instance and take it as an indictment about them as a human being.

Sensitivity to Depending on Others

Managers who subscribe to the saying, "If you want something done right, do it yourself," run into problems in senior roles that require building a strong team. A history of being let down in some significant way makes it hard for people to trust others. An inability to delegate important tasks leaves these managers spread thin. They find that there just isn't enough time to get everything done and only get a fraction of their people's potential contribution. Or once they reluctantly hand over responsibility, their tendency to check up constantly on their direct reports' progress becomes maddening micromanagement.

Some suspicious executives have difficulty in cross-functional collaborations because of the worry about being let down by the other party. They might let an issue escalate, preferring not to ask for help lest the helper come back with a request for an even bigger favor of his own. Or conversely, they may be unwilling to make sacrifices for other people, expecting the favor will go unreturned or unappreciated.

Sensitivity to Authority

Effective policy making and strategy formation requires senior managers to take their seat at the table and be a real player with their peers and bosses. But some who have had painful experiences with authoritarian or volatile parents can have trouble engaging in dialogue and debate with authority figures. In some cases, they are too quick to defer, fearing dissent could get ugly. In

other cases, expecting resistance, they'll attack with counterpoints, bludgeoning the audience with their position rather than simply offering another perspective to factor into the discussion.

One executive grew up with limited means and with a physically abusive father. The feedback we gathered from the rest of the senior team indicated a unanimous concern that he was strangely quiet in team meetings. One person said, "I'd like [him] to be more assertive, to call me on my assumptions, and challenge me to understand the needs of [his business units]. I've grown up in a silo and don't have the perspective on his businesses. I need him to educate me." When we asked the client questions to unpack the assumptions behind his choosing not to point out how his colleagues' ideas for running the company were shortsighted, he said, "If I challenge them, they'll skewer me. They won't fight fair. And if I take on [the CEO], I might lose my job. I grew up poor . . . it's something I'd never want my family to have to go through." In the throws of an emotional hijacking of his otherwise clear thinking, he was unable to accept that his colleagues were asking him to push back and challenge them. And he seemed to forget that his personal financial situation was quite comfortable. But that is what happens to perception and judgment when we are utterly captive to our greatest fears.

Intrapersonal Skills as the Bedrock of Performance

Hall has argued that career success in the modern era hinges on two metacompetencies that he calls adaptability and identity, which largely involve self-awareness, emotional regulation, and the ability to learn from mistakes (Briscoe & Hall, 1999; Hall, 2002). These skills are thought to facilitate the development of other competencies. Similarly, Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) suggested that intrapersonal skill is the foundation on which management careers are built because how one manages the self has implications for all other aspects of managerial performance. Impoverished skill at regulating the emotions and impulses from an activated sensitivity can pose problems in interpersonal relationships, in fulfilling important leadership roles, and in applying basic business skills.

The disruptive influence of unregulated feelings of threat in relationships is transmitted through behaviors that appear curious and idiosyncratic, if not annoying, to coworkers. We often make an attribution of malicious intent on the part of an executive who is, under the surface, trying to protect himself. It is sadly ironic that the behavior we

experience as offensive so often originates from a defensive posture in the actor.

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Sensitivities also account for one-sidedness or a lack of versatility in a manager's leadership style. Executives who tend to be too forceful and directive, for instance, also tend not to be as participative or empowering as they need to. Similarly, executives who shy away from strategic responsibilities tend also to put too much time and energy into the tactical and operational aspects of their jobs. Since versatility on major oppositions like these is integral to overall effectiveness (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003b, c; Dennison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995), failure to contain the polarizing effects of a sensitivity can also limit a career.

And the effective application of basic business skills like budgeting, monitoring, and coordinating resources depends on clear judgment—when the emotional perturbation kicked up by threat clouds one's thinking, this becomes difficult to achieve. Again, sensitivities are often at the root of problematic behaviors that can undermine both an organization and a career.

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Without the requisite intrapersonal skills to regulate the effects sensitivities have on behavior, motivation, and judgment, performance deficits will show up in the interpersonal, leadership, and business skill domains. Education and development efforts to remedy these needs will be only partially effective, at best, to the extent that they neglect consideration of an individual's functioning in the intrapersonal sphere.

The value of business schools and leadership programs has come under question in recent years, in large part because of a lack of evidence linking career success with either holding an MBA degree or graded performance in MBA programs (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). A persistent criticism is the near exclusive focus of such curricula on functional business knowledge to the neglect of deeper, harder to develop competencies like leadership, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Porter & McKibbins, 1988). To the extent that management development interventions can enhance intrapersonal skills, they may have a stronger positive impact on the careers of the managers they educate. This raises a question: "How do managers develop intrapersonal skills?" Surely there are many ways to incorporate self-development in business schools and leadership programs. In the following, we describe one way with strategies, tactics, and techniques that we have found useful in our work helping executives gain a measure of control over a sensitivity of one kind or another.

ADDRESSING SENSITIVITIES IN EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

> *"All the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble . . . They can never be solved, but only outgrown"*
> —C. G. Jung (quoted in Fritz, 1989).

In the following, we outline a process and set of techniques for helping executives overcome the limiting effects of a sensitivity. Our goal is to provide some general ideas for doing this kind of work to management educators—business school faculty, leadership program trainers, and executive coaches. Our intent is not to offer a cookbook set of ingredients and procedures but rather to describe the process we have developed and make reference to additional resources for further understanding and application. Table 2 includes examples of possible curriculum content to stimulate ideas for how to implement this approach in the classroom. The contents of this table are discussed more fully below. Again, we do not regard this as a fixed design; our hope is that educators will regard this material as a starting point and adapt it according to their expertise, resources, and setting.

The process we outline below has much in common with the themes identified by Pfeffer and Fong (2002) that characterize innovative MBA programs and new leadership development programs that hold promise for making executive education more relevant to the practice of management. First, it is only applicable for experienced managers and ex-

TABLE 2

Sample Content and Materials for a Curriculum to Address Sensitivities in Management Education

Developmental Track Content	Instructional Method				
	Lecture	Reading assignment	Writing assignments	Group activities	Facilitated activities
Track 1: Managing the symptoms of a sensitivity					
Becoming aware of the sensitivity	General orientation and overview of sensitivities theory	Kaplan & Kaiser (2003a) chapter on sensitivities	Journal entries about things that "get under your skin" and examples across time	Small group discussion of sensitivities, how they operate, and visible examples from daily life	Kegan & Lahey's (2001) "four column"/competing commitments exercise for identifying sensitivities
Recognizing when you are threatened	Cognitive, affective, and physical aspects of stress & coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Articles, chapters, or websites on biofeedback	Journal entries around feelings and bodily sensations associated with overreacting	Role playing and practice using biofeedback	Biofeedback demonstration and training
Short-circuiting the fight-or-flight reflex	Introduction and overview to basic stress management techniques (e.g., applied relaxation, deep breathing)	*The Relaxation Response* (Benson, 1975); *Learning to Relax*, cassette tape, available from the non-profit Institute for Rational-Emotive Therapy (www.rebt.org)	Identifying multiple coping techniques for dealing with different types of distressing situations	Role play for channeling counterproductive tendencies into appropriate outlets	Demonstration and training in applied relaxation (Ost, 1987)
Managing energy	Importance of maintaining energy, practical guides to a healthy life-style	Loehr & Schwartz (2001) *Harvard Business Review* article on ideal performance states	Setting goals for diet, sleep, and exercise and keeping a log of performance against those goals	Discussion and sharing on building in oscillation between stress and renewal in daily life (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001)	Materials for teaching the Loehr & Scwartz, (2001) energy management program are available from LGE Performance Systems (www.corporateathlete.com)
Using others to keep you in bounds	Research on social support and help seeking associated with development (Addis & Mahalik, 2003)		Generate a list of individuals with potential to be a confidant, deputy, and/or advisor	Role playing the role of confidant, deputy, and advisor as well as the role of help seeker	
Track 2: Outgrowing a sensitivity					
Uncover basic beliefs/assumptions	Theory of social constructivism (Kegan, 1994), overview of stress and appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984)	Chapters from *In Over Our Heads* (Kegan, 1994) on how we make meaning; Albert Ellis' *A New Guide to Rational Living* (Ellis & Harper, 1975)	Journal entries about situations that elicit sensitivities—what of personal significance is at stake? What are the demands and my resources? How do I *know* what is going on?	Discuss and role play beliefs, expectations, and assumptions that are active during distressing situations	Refer to learning from Kegan & Lahey's (2001) "four column" exercise, distinguish assumptions from facts

(table continues)

Conduct behavioral experiments	Overview of systematic desensitization (Seligman, 1993)	Write down expectations for experiments: "If I do this, then what negative outcome do I expect?" How often do "if, then" expectations prove true? What are the boundary conditions? What am I learning by testing my assumptions?	Role playing exercises to practice with new behavior and receive feedback	Training and practice identifying opportunities for low-risk experiments with new behavior
Systematic reflection on experience		Listing "me" and "not me" attributes and behaviors along with counter-attitudinal essays about them	Discuss examples of practicing new behaviors in the workplace and lessons learned	
Explore values and the self-concept	Selected chapters from Ibbara's (2003) *Working Identity*		Group discussion of "possible selves" (Ibarra, 2003) and their potential and risk	Training in the journaling technique of "autobiographical self awareness" (Torbert & Fisher, 1992)
Form a support system	Overview of ground rules and norms for learning communities (Kegan & Lahey, 2001)	Chapters 4–7 in Kegan and Lahey (2001)	Identify potential mentors and teachers in the workplace	Establish and enact a "learning community" with classmates

Notes: This table describes content and does not treat the question of sequence and ordering in curriculum design. Alternative instructional methods are presented for each content theme to illustrate knowledge acquisition (lecture, reading), reflective processing (writing), and interactive/experiential practice (small group process, work shop). Note that the content of Track Two is intended to supplement the iterative cycle of action and reflection discussed in the text.

ecutives because the work is grounded in their direct experience. Further, it requires an iterative cycle of action and reflection, which also must be grounded in meaningful, real-world experiences. Second, the focus is on changing how managers think about business issues—in this case, how they understand their own leadership and the emotional drivers of their behavior. Finally, this process involves a significant action component. It is designed with constructive behavior change foremost in mind and thus requires a great deal of behavioral experimentation and practice on the job. Rather than "make work," executives can use existing work situations and naturally occurring performance episodes as a high fidelity training ground, thus minimizing the transfer problem.

Ethical Concerns and Professional Boundaries

Before discussing intervention techniques, a few words of caution and a discussion of professional boundaries are in order. When we present this approach to professional groups, the following question comes up: "Is this training, consulting, counseling, or therapy?" These questions are part of a larger debate concerning lines of professional demarcation initiated by the rising popularity of executive coaching (Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2001). At present, there are no legal guidelines or standards of practice set forth by professional bodies such as the American Psychological Association or the Academy of Management that unequivocally designate this type of executive development work as exclusively in one domain or another (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Lowman, 1998). The process we describe includes elements discussed by some (Hart et al., 2001; Kilburg, 2000; Sperry, 1993) as clearly in the consulting or coaching domain (e.g., focus on current and future work performance, linking awareness to action) as well as some elements that verge into the therapeutic realm (e.g., interest in past experiences, underlying dynamics). The process also involves elements common to both domains (e.g., voluntary participation, confidentiality, a collaborative client–service provider relationship). As Kilburg (2000: 16–17) suggests in the context of executive coaching, the lines of distinction are fuzzy, and effective executive development necessarily involves examination of emotional dynamics and prior experiences (see also, Kampa & White, 2002). We agree with Lowman (1998) who has argued that when it comes to psychological consulting to managers, the question is less about licensure and more about professional competence. Professional bodies tend to agree: for instance, psychologists are bound by a

code of ethics governing their professional conduct to practice only within their area of expertise (American Psychological Association, 2002). Similarly, the Academy of Management's (2002) *Code of Ethical Conduct* maintains that members shall only accept assignments for which they have appropriate expertise.

We offer the following considerations to those who would engage in this approach to management education and development. First, educators and consultants need competence with psychological principles including emotion, motivation, and unconscious dynamics (see also Kilburg, 2000). We strongly discourage professionals who lack this kind of expertise from attempting this type of work (see also, Lowman, 1998). However, such training may be available through local psychology departments.

Second, responsiveness to the learner is a must. Thus, participation in such a process must be strictly voluntary and confidential. For instance, in a business school setting, this type of process should be elective, not mandatory. In a coaching setting, there should be no mandate that the details be shared with the organization. Another form of responsiveness is to be mindful of the functioning of the individual. This process is only intended for well-functioning adults; it is inappropriate for individuals who suffer pathology or are significantly impaired. According to conventional criteria, holding down a job, successfully attending higher education, and so on suggests a lack of pathology and a sufficient level of functioning (see American Psychiatric Association, 1994: 32, for assessing level of functioning and degree of impairment). This is one way to distinguish between personal development and therapy.

Third, know your professional limits and the boundaries on your expertise. And stay within them. For instance, the learner should do the lion's share of making sense of introspection and reflection on historical life events. The educator's role is to provide a structure and facilitate a process; the content is up to the learner. Avoid making diagnoses or interpretations on the individual's behalf. Also, be prepared to make an outside referral if a participant shows signs of significant distress (e.g., intense and prolonged changes in mood, a major change in personality, reckless or self-destructive behaviors). To that end, it is wise to have a prepared list of mental health professionals in your area for making referrals.

No set of prescriptions can substitute for measured professional judgment. This type of work requires true expertise; we urge readers contemplating this approach to stay within their knowl-

edge base or to seek additional training and education where needed.

Setting the Stage

By the time education and development professionals begin working with an executive whose performance is hampered by a sensitivity, many habits of mind and behavior have been firmly established. Indeed, we frequently hear from executives who receive a hefty amount of feedback describing their shortcomings something along the lines of, "This isn't new—I've heard this message before." What is most helpful to the individual at this point is a more complex understanding of the counterproductive behavior and a rich array of strategies for change.

Assessment

In determining whether a sensitivity is in fact the culprit, it helps to have a comprehensive assessment of the individual's leadership in the context of his life history. Data on early life, current personal life, and previous and current job performance supplemented with a battery of psychological assessments provide the unique pieces to the puzzle. Jointly sifting through all of the data, one can work with the manager inductively to build a theory of the individual's leadership strengths and limitations as well as motivating factors (see Kaplan, 1998). As the pieces are laid out, one guides the manager through the dynamics of how sensitivities play out so the individual can have authorship in how the pieces are put together. This step is crucial because the final picture has to feel legitimate and make sense to the manager. This can be a powerful reflective exercise. It is not uncommon for the individual to report being significantly moved from this process of constructing a view of leadership role performance problems as a function of lifelong issues explicitly connected to private fears and powerful unconscious needs for self-protection as well as the unrealistic assumptions and expectations that come part and parcel with these intense emotions.

The foregoing assessment model was borne out of our consulting practice and may be difficult to implement in traditional classroom models. However, we have two alternative suggestions: One is to add assessment and sessions with feedback deliverers to the curriculum design. Or to establish relationships with university or organizational resources such as counseling centers, psychology departments, or even human resources. A less elaborate alternative is to adopt a process known as the "column exercise," described in full detail by Harvard psychologists, Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey (2001) in their book, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*. The process can be used with classroom-sized groups to facilitate individual learners through a self-discovery process beginning with a frustrating work situation to identifying how one is contributing to it and how this is related to basic feelings of fear and urges for self-protection. It typically reveals a heretofore-unconscious set of fear-tinged beliefs, assumptions, and commitments akin to what we call a sensitivity.

Managing Expectations

Fresh from having their eyes opened to a new way to understand issues they have struggled with, executives who are characteristically action-oriented often feel a pull to get to work on "solving the problem." It's the educator's responsibility to calibrate expectations. For one, the work of outgrowing a sensitivity is a long-term process and demands a different mentality than executives typically bring to the problem-solving table (Sperry, 1993). For another, there is a wide range of options to promote such development. This can be sorted out by helping the leaders develop action plans tailored to their specific issues and preferred learning styles, plans that run on two parallel tracks, one for dealing with symptoms in the short-term and another for the long-run proposition of outgrowing the sensitivity altogether.

In setting up this kind of work, trainers, consultants, and educators should also actively manage expectations about seeing results. The work is hard and requires a significant investment of time and emotional energy to outgrow a deep psychological wound, if indeed it can be outgrown. The literature on how people actually change addictive behaviors and other powerful habits is clear: It takes sustained effort over a long period of time. Moreover, people cycle through the stages of change, making substantial progress for a period, then having a relapse, and cycling back to making progress again and so on. People go through this cycle several iterations before making a lasting change, which then requires ongoing maintenance (for a validated model of how people change, see Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992). Understanding the implications of a commitment to this kind of personal development is necessary to keep developmental goals in perspective and persevere through the inevitable setbacks and frustrations.

Track 1: Minimizing the Disruptive Effects of α Sensitivity

Although we suggested that outgrowing α sensitivity is ultimately α long-term proposition, we find it useful to approach development on two parallel tracks: one concerns containing the counterproductive effects sensitivities have in the here-and-now, and the other concerns personal transformation in outgrowing the sensitivity over time. Developmental goals on the first track are focused on managing symptoms to *minimize* the disruptive impact of sensitivities on day-to-day behavior. Learning to do this includes becoming aware of one's sensitivities, learning how to recognize their onset and how to interrupt the sequence, managing one's energy level, and seeking the support of α colleague. These steps build generic intrapersonal skills in α way comparable to traditional stress management training and the emerging soft-skills training conducted under the emotional intelligence banner (Cherniss & Adler, 2000).

Becoming Aware

According to constructive-developmental theory, the basic grammar underlying adult development is the movement from being utterly subject to something to being able to take it as object (Kegan, 1994). When we are subject to α sensitivity and the network of beliefs that grow up around it, we are under its control. It has us. When we can take it as object, though, it becomes something we have and can therefore control in some measure. So the first step on this developmental path is bringing the unconscious fears, perceptual biases, and exaggerated response tendencies into awareness (see Assessment section above).

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It can be difficult to penetrate the wall of rationalizations and defenses that shelter α sensitivity from awareness. It is painful to poke at α psychological wound. Further, seeing one's vulnerability can conflict with α self-image as capable and strong (Bunker, 1997). Nevertheless the only way to contain α sensitivity's disruptive effects is to acknowledge it.

Learning to Recognize the Signals

Emotions evolved in humans to serve an adaptive function, namely, to prepare the body for action appropriate to the interpretation of what is happening in the environment (Plutchnik, 1980). We call them feelings precisely because we can sense the physical vibrations and excitations various emotions produce.

The emotions of fear and anxiety have characteristic physiological correlates (Benson, 1975; Tomaka et al., 1993): increases in heart rate and vascular resistance produce α dramatic increase in blood pressure and bodily tension. Helping executives recognize these emotional signals enables them to detect the onset of threat and the triggering of α sensitivity. It's α matter of moving attention from the head to the body, of settling into oneself. When executives learn to do this, they are in α prime position to use their natural biofeedback loop to "catch themselves" before the fight-or-flight response kicks in and engenders counterproductive defensive behavior.

Learning to Short-Circuit the Fight-or-Flight Reflex

Learning to recognize when one is falling into the sequence of experiencing threat and the motivational urges for fight-or-flight is α necessary precursor for bleeding off the tension that produces exaggerated behavior responses. But now the question becomes: "Once one senses the pattern is set in motion, what to do?" One technique is simple to employ—redirect the tension and urge to act from something counterproductive to α benign activity. For example, one executive had α habit of interrupting people in meetings. She was compelled to raise her concerns or objections spontaneously. After she learned to recognize when she was about to fall into this habit, we worked with giving her α behavioral alternative. Now she writes her comments and objections to α speaker's message on paper instead of blurting them out. It took practice to reroute this tendency, but she has managed to minimize its occurrence. And to boot, she has α written record of her thoughts and responses to refer to later—after having the chance to reconsider if they really are worth mentioning after all.

Another way to short-circuit anxious behavior is to develop skill at calming the mind and body at will. There are two approaches to this that have

been experimentally demonstrated to work (Seligman, 1993): applied relaxation and transcendental meditation. Through repeated practice, people can classically condition their bodies to calm down at the sound of their internal voice saying "relax" or some other phrase (see Ost, 1987). People can also train themselves to substitute a "relaxation response" for a threat response with the breathing and passive mindfulness techniques employed in centuries-old meditation rituals (see Benson, 1975).

Managing One's Energy

Most people intuitively understand that it's harder to cope with demands in both the external and internal environment when you are tired or ill. It requires a real effort to catch oneself in the act of falling prey to the threat response. Indeed, recent theoretical and empirical work has demonstrated the existence of a single, finite energy source responsible for the functioning of all physical and psychical activities (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). When this energy source is low, people have greater difficulty regulating their behavior and fall into old habits and routines. So another thing executives dealing with a sensitivity can do is actively manage their energy levels. This includes the things we know we ought to do: Maintain a healthy and balanced diet with plenty of water, get a good night of sleep, don't overindulge with alcohol or smoke cigarettes, and make regular time for aerobic exercise.

Another less known technique comes from Jim Loehr, a sport psychologist who works with world-class athletes on maintaining what he calls an "ideal performance state" (Loehr & Schwartz, 2001). There are two key components to his model of energy management. First is what is called "oscillation"—the rhythmic movement between energy expenditure (stress) and energy renewal (recovery). What Loehr has found is that the primary enemy of high performance is not stress, but rather the lack of a disciplined recovery regimen to punctuate periods of stress. The second component includes rituals that promote oscilliation. These rituals are regular sequences that need to be established as a regimen. An example is always taking a brief, uninterrupted break between meetings rather than dash from one to another. Another example is taking regular vacations, especially following intense periods at work. As counterintuitive as it may seem, systematic use of downtime can enhance one's productivity.

Enlisting Help To Keep You in Bounds

The extent to which executives don't take full advantage of the social support they have available is surprising. So another thing we recommend to executives working to curtail the effects of a sensitivity is to enlist a confidant, deputy, or advisor. Although we recommend reaching out for help on the deeper, long-run developmental activities, a helping relationship with a trustworthy colleague can also provide invaluable assistance in containing the disruptive effects in the near term. Three particular ways are keeping the individual focused on developmental issues with real-time feedback, providing a source of advice or counsel, and defining an open space in which to vent or process distressing emotions.

There is a pragmatic basis for encouraging executives to share with a trusted coworker what they are learning about themselves and working on developmentally: It holds them accountable to staying focused on the developmental agenda. The psychology of public commitments is well documented: Telling other people you will do something dramatically ups the odds that you will in fact do it (Cialdini, 2000). Noteworthy here is that managers engaged in executive coaching who share their development plans with coworkers are more likely to show performance improvements (Fulmer & Goldsmith, 2001).

Having someone in the workplace to turn to for advice when one is struggling with an emotionally charged issue is highly advantageous. Tapping into that person's experience, knowledge about the situation, and understanding of the particular issue can broaden an individual's view of the situation and possible solutions. The colleague can also provide a safe way to check one's assumptions and see if one's assessment is out of alignment. The individual also can authorize the confidant to provide real-time feedback when overreacting is detected.

A confidant also provides opportunities to blow off emotional steam in a safe setting. The process of giving voice to unsettling emotions and doomful expectations has an uncanny way of helping us to see straighter about the reality of a situation. The mere process of talking about something that is feared can be relieving. After having been listened to, and listening to yourself speaking out loud, it is common to experience a release of pent up tension and stress.

Track 2: Outgrowing the Sensitivity Altogether

In many ways, the goal of efforts in Track One is damage control: preventing a sensitivity from getting the best of you in daily life. The goal of Track

Two is to promote personal growth over the long haul. Adult development and learning is fueled by an iterative sequence of reflection and action (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003; Mintzberg, 2004). That is, introspection into one's experience provides inspiration for trying new ways of doings things, while trying out new behaviors provides grist for the mental mill to generate ways in which one might approach things differently. Both action and reflection are necessary; as Mintzberg (2004) quipped, action without reflection is thoughtless while reflection without action is passive.

Most adult learning is incremental—it's a matter of adding knowledge and facts that fit into one's existing mental models. Except for the self-awareness component of identifying one's sensitivities, the content in Track One above largely requires incremental learning. Transformational learning is different altogether—it concerns changing fundamentally the nature of the mental model. Informational learning changes *what* we know; transformational learning changes *how* we know (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). And transformational learning is the key to outgrowing a sensitivity because it promises to reconstitute the way a person conceives, perceives, and experiences the self and the world. This does not mean that outgrowing a sensitivity requires people to radically alter their identities. But achieving a developmental milestone of this sort requires a character shift (Kaplan, 1990). Such a shift is not so much a revolution in who one is, but an evolution significant enough to be considered fundamental.

What follows are steps that build on the incremental learning from the short-term, containment-oriented techniques to facilitate the natural course of adult development. Using these techniques takes time, patience, and discipline. Counterproductive patterns established by a sensitivity are powerfully resistant to change and become deeply ingrained habits through years of repetition. This doesn't mean that it is impossible to make a transformational shift, but it does mean that the resolve to grow must be fierce. When approached with discipline and steadfast commitment along with a sense of humor and compassion for oneself, following these guidelines can result in expanding the complexity of one's way of knowing and being in the world, making one more adaptable to cope with the exigencies of life and work.

Uncover Basic Beliefs and Assumptions

To get perspective on a sensitivity and hold it as object requires an understanding of how it is set off by how one makes sense of one's circumstances.

People construct their understanding of the environment by drawing upon the contents of their mental models—the basic beliefs and tacit assumptions they hold about the nature of the self, other people, and the world (Kegan, 1994). To move this kind of knowledge from subject to object, individuals can build from skill at using biofeedback established to monitor for the fight-or-flight response. Now they take this one step further by noting the circumstantial contingencies that are paired with the fearful feelings. The goal is for learners to get a clearer sense of what it is about how they interpret events that threatens them: "What meaning do I make out of these situations and how does this produce fear?"

As they get better at short-circuiting the fight-or-flight response, learners can devote attention to identifying the appraisals that immediately precede the shot of anxiety that comes with being threatened. Here it is important to identify the thoughts about what of personal significance is thought to be at stake in the encounter, what was assumed to be the demands for ensuring its security, and what were the estimates of one's ability to meet those demands (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

This exercise is designed to identify and unpack tacit beliefs and operating assumptions that shape appraisals and determine emotional experience (Lazarus, 1991). The reason is that those assumptions will need to be carefully examined. Assumptions get you into trouble when you forget that they are assumptions and instead take them to be facts. The learning opportunity occurs when tacit beliefs are recognized as assumptions rather than self-evident truths; they then become open to disconfirmation. There's no point testing the validity of something one holds to be true. Learning to distinguish between facts and assumptions breaks the seal of self-limiting ways of interpreting the environment that contain a person.

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The basic course of learning is to begin with a fuzzy boundary around a principle and to slowly establish a more precise definition through repeated experience and contemplation. Because the

beliefs associated with a sensitivity are acquired under conditions of high arousal and fear, they tend to be broad overgeneralizations (Epstein, 1990). And because they reside in the unconscious experiential part of the mind and are vital to a person's sense of security, one is typically subject to them. Thus, these beliefs and assumptions are unlikely to have been formed under rational scrutiny. Being able to tamp down the excessive distress associated with threat, the individual is in a strong place to begin exploring the validity of these assumptions, articulate boundary conditions, and make a more accommodating mental model.

Conduct Behavioral Experiments

Exploring revisions to one's mental models opens the door for trying out new behaviors. As individuals grow somewhat more comfortable with being in situations that have traditionally been threatening, they are ready to experiment with new ways of acting. This includes freeing oneself from inhibitions of not doing something because of a fear of increasing the likelihood of harm (doing the underdone) as well as holding back on compulsions that were thought to be vital to overcoming the threat (not doing the overdone).

This process is best taken one small step at a time by capitalizing on naturally occurring, relatively low-risk opportunities to try out new behavior on the job. The purpose here is to test the network of implicit beliefs and assumptions identified in the previous exercise. Being able to recognize assumptions for what they are, the person can seek out disconfirming evidence. It is important to take stock of when the expected negative consequences don't occur—and guard against rationalizing away the reasons for disconfirmation.

By conducting increasingly more "risky" behavioral experiments like these, the person is following a proven method for overcoming fears and phobias called systematic desensitization (Seligman, 1993). By doing the thing that fear precluded—and doing it not just once but consistently—people gradually learn subtle nuances that indicate when their fears are and are not warranted. Phobias become self-sealing by depriving the individual of the very experience that could disprove the fearful assumption. Therefore it is no small accomplishment to get over this barrier. The way to reduce one's fear is to do what one is afraid of, safely.

It is naïve to assume that all experiments will prove the individual's self-protective beliefs and assumptions are wrong. That is why it is important

to conduct the initial experiments when the risk is relatively low. As comfort with conducting them grows and the mental models become more differentiated, one is then ready to raise the stakes—slowly and deliberately. This is another instance of where the help of a coach, confidant, or learning group in a classroom comes in handy.

Systematically Reflect on Experience

To capitalize on the potential learning from behavioral experimentation, it is useful to take time to think through the results. One technique for doing this is to make regular entries in a journal. Writing out one's experience and observations is more than a kind of exercise in discipline—it's a way of processing the lessons learned at a deeper level (Mintzberg, 2004). When a person has to take the time to articulate an idea or a lesson, the changes to the mental model are strengthened.

Writing in a journal doesn't have to be a big deal—like writing a dissertation. It's not intended to be read by a critical audience. Actually, it is only intended for the author. There is no imperative to toil over grammar, structure, and composition either. The habit of regularly structuring thoughts to some minimum degree and writing or typing them out is enough. We should emphasize this point: We know of several cases where executives would avoid using a journal out of a fear that they weren't good enough writers, that they didn't have time to "write the whole story" and so on.

There is evidence that journaling can in fact facilitate transformational learning. A study of MBA students who were trained in the journaling and reflection method of "autobiographical self-awareness" found that a significant proportion of these adults made a developmental stage transition over the course of a year (Torbert & Fisher, 1992). Moreover, reflective exercises like journaling are relatively easy to implement in both short courses and longer programs. And executives typically don't engage in these exercises on their own, but do report finding high value in them when instructed how to do so (Mintzberg, 2004).

Explore Values and the Self-Concept

Values and ideas about what "is me" and what "is not me" derive from conclusions about what is the subjectively right way to be (Ibarra, 2003). And because people are motivated to appear rational, those things that a person finds threatening tend to get devalued in the process of justifying behavioral choices. Behavioral choices in the context of a sensitivity owe themselves to one of two basic

motivational strategies for dealing with threat (Higgins, 1997): the prevention regulatory focus that causes avoidant, underdo behaviors and the promotion regulatory focus that produce aggressive, overdo behaviors.

As self-awareness of the emotional basis for preferred ways of behaving expands from following the prior steps, executives have the opportunity to cast their value structure in a new light (Lyons, 2002). Consider how values are expressed in one's leadership style. We routinely find that the leadership style of an executive is often lopsided because the individual polarizes on fundamental dualities like forceful versus enabling leadership or strategic versus operational leadership (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2003c). The pattern is to overdo one side of the equation and underdo the other. The overdone side is highly valued by the person, a central way in which he defines himself. The underdone side is devalued, often viewed as a caricaturized version of the vital organizational role that it is in reality, and regarded as the antithesis of the individual's self-concept. If the person defines himself through identification with the overdone side, he also defines himself through dis-identification with the underdone side. And through the process of justifying one's leadership behavior, values and beliefs about leadership in general get formed.

One way that growing as a person is central to growing as a leader is by coming to recognize when biases in implicit beliefs about leadership spring from the same network of assumptions and beliefs wrapped around a sensitivity. As executives gain greater perspective on this, they can entertain the possibility that the need for protecting themselves from threat has influenced their beliefs about leadership more so than the reality of organizational needs. This puts the person in a prime position to reformulate their leadership values.

The effect of reforming the structure of one's values is that it frees the individual to be more versatile. Behaviors that were once out of the realm of possibility become accessible (Lyons, 2002). And behaviors that were taken to the extreme continue to be seen as important, but the negative consequences of their rigid intensity can be considered. So the person can reallocate emotional investments in the way he understands how he leads, manages, and relates to others. Another benefit here is that roles that the individual heretofore undervalued—and thus may be absent from the team he has staffed—can be appreciated and filled accordingly.

Form a Support System

Finally, some measure needs to be taken to provide social support for the individual's ongoing effort to bring about personal transformation. It is all too easy to slip back into old habits, especially in periods of chronic or intense pressure. Also, the human mind has an innate mechanism for pushing unresolved issues into the unconscious recesses. Forming a network of other people to sustain the effort can be most effective in keeping the developmental agenda on the radar. This is an extension of the reasons for enlisting a confidant discussed earlier.

A coaching relationship is one way to build social support. But the danger here is in becoming dependent on the coach. The coach's role is not about giving the manager a fish, it is about teaching him how to fish. Further, a formal coaching relationship is time-bound. An additional, more sustainable support system can be found in the people with whom an individual works.

More sustainable forms of support can be found inside the organization, with one's coworkers. One example is mentoring (Kram, 1985), which involves a developmental relationship between a more experienced manager and a less experienced protégé. Mentors serve two roles, one of socioemotional support through acceptance, counseling, and encouraging the protégé, and one of career facilitation through providing challenging assignments, sponsorship, and sharing insights and skills. There is clear evidence that mentoring is related to career and job satisfaction as well as an enhanced sense of professional identity and competence (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004). Mentoring programs are most effective when participation is voluntary, mentors get to choose their protégés, and role expectations are clarified at the outset. Using this general technique in the present context would involve explicitly identifying the goals of personal growth and gaining some measure of control over one's sensitivities. Obviously, it would be advantageous for the mentor to have had a similar experience with such an issue, either personally or in a mentoring relationship with another individual.

In the right environment and organizational context, one can also engage with peers to form a "learning community" (Kegan & Lahey, 2001). The purpose of such a group is to create a holding environment where people can jointly work on their development. A peer learning community needs to be a trustworthy and safe place where individuals can share what issues they are grappling with and what they are learning about them-

selves, and find support for the inevitable growing pains that come with development. Challenge is another essential ingredient. It takes a good colleague to be able to feel both empathy for the struggle and the comfort to keep you honest. In the spirit of dialogue and continuing commitment to development, these groups should meet on a regular basis.

Beyond supporting individual development, this technique also holds promise for promoting development at the team and organizational levels as individuals come to understand each other more completely and mutual trust and respect deepens. We have seen powerful, unanticipated effects among the teams we've helped set up these kinds of peer learning communities. Outsiders report a noticeable increase in collaboration, communication, and mutual support. They also recognize an enhanced ability for constructive debate and healthy conflict over key decisions. And over time, as the individuals move up and out in their career trajectories, they bring these deeply personal/professional bonds with them. The result is that functional boundaries become permeable and silos erode, enhancing organizational effectiveness through the relational conduit formed through the shared process of peer learning.

CONCLUSION

At the root of many executive performance problems are sensitivities that dispose the individual to feel threatened. Unless these motivational sources of ineffectiveness are acknowledged and the individual learns how to regulate them, significant and sustained performance improvements are unlikely. The deeper work of executive development requires becoming aware of one's sensitivities and learning how to minimize their disruptive influence. In the best case, through a variety of means, relationships, and sustained effort, individuals may develop better intrapersonal skills and even outgrow their sensitivity to attain a greater peace within themselves that is reflected in the actions we see as observers.

Looking over the course of a life that has made such a journey can be like examining a cross-section of an aged tree. In the rings representing the earlier years of life we might find evidence of a wound, a distortion in the rings where the tree was cut. For several succeeding rings, the distortion persists and is even amplified. But as we move our eyes to the outer rings, we find that the years have had a mellowing effect. The once prominent distortions have given way to a smoother form, one that approximates a perfect, unbroken circle, save

for the slight asymmetry telling of the path the gentle old perennial has traveled.

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