

# A Skillful Human Presence

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Much of what I've written for and about business clients has focused on *incremental* change – ways I've coached people to develop skills that can make them more successful. For example:

- I helped a Two learn to set limits on doing others' work so that he wouldn't slip into his "martyr" role – he left to become CEO of his own company providing a new service in health care, and became able to sleep soundly at night for the first time in years.
- To a Three I suggested she focus on "we" in her language and look for opportunities to acknowledge contributions of people behind the scenes – she gained support and was promoted to President within months.
- A Five developed the ability to build on ideas that promoted creativity instead of his habitual practice of locking people into debate – his senior team subsequently created such a strong organization that they became millionaires when a larger company bought them out.
- I taught a Six to focus her perspective first on the positive potential instead of always looking for what could go wrong – she survived a corporate takeover unscathed while most of her peers were demoted or forced into early retirement.
- A Nine became better able to stay engaged in confrontation by using resistance as a source of positive energy – he was lured away from a Director-level job to become second in command of a larger organization.

However, I believe I failed some of my business clients because – in Enneagram terms – all I did was feed the habits that drove them to *perceived* success. Those of us working in business might initially need to engage peoples' desire to get "better" at what they do – otherwise, we might not be "in business." But I have come to believe meaningful development in *any* setting must have a transformational component – without that we're re-creating the very "problems" we're engaged to "fix." Moreover, I believe we have an individual and cultural obligation to go beyond "personality assessment, beyond marketing, beyond understanding our customers in our use of the Enneagram in business.

In *Character and Neurosis*, Naranjo's "Suggestions for Further Work on Self" include:

"... our collective predicament depends much on individual human transformation and... we cannot afford not arousing the potential and motivation of individuals to work on themselves to the extent that they can." On this path, Naranjo promises us that truth is liberating, "the acknowledgment of the truth about oneself and one's life in spite of the discomfort or pain that this may involve." This requires not only a self-observational focus but the development of a "neutrality in which the desire for change is not 'acted out' in a precipitated and self-manipulative attempt to 'perfect oneself'... this will involve the discipline of self-observations and also a discipline of retrospection – a chewing up of

recent experience,” particularly with regard to negative emotions (“what Gurdjieff used to call ‘conscious suffering’ – a willingness to stay with such experiences as need to be observed and investigated”)... “the truth about ourselves can free us, for once we’ve truly understood something about ourselves, it will change without ‘our’ attempt to change it.”

I suspect many readers will have trouble believing this is possible. We tend to think we have to “do” something, there has to be a plan of action that will modify our behavior. We forget how easy it is to slip into our fixations, to have our “work” become driven by the same compulsion we’re trying to escape. So Ones, for example, can become intent on *fixing* themselves, or Sixes can be driven by the need to *understand* their “type.”

I’m not against incremental skill building with business clients. For one thing it gets their attention – they begin to see results, they feel motivated, they develop trust with the coach. But we’ve lost a rich opportunity if we don’t open up opportunities for transformation by teaching them how to observe their Enneagram fixations impartially. Worse, we run the risk of having given them yet one more tool to reinforce their fixations (an Eight I worked with, for example, initially tried to use the Enneagram to analyze his “foes” and increase his chances of “winning”). Rather than focusing on understanding and *changing* what they’re doing “wrong,” impartial self-observation rests on the paradoxical fact that when they can truly embrace themselves *as they are*, their compulsions simply drop away.

I like the metaphor of *alchemy* in the coaching role. Alchemists believe everything will become something more advanced given time; the “Great Work” is to speed up that process. The image of transmuting base elements into gold is, of course, a metaphor for transformation. According to Marie-Louise von Franz (*Alchemy: An Introduction to the Symbolism and the Psychology*), there’s an unprogrammed aspect to the process of witnessing individuation, the ability to “observe what comes up without drawing hasty speculative conclusions.” There’s also a kind of mystical union, a shared mystery, a felt experience difficult to put into words, unique to that particular relationship through which the individual grows. Finally, von Franz touches upon an important question: do we have the right to encourage transformation when someone has simply asked for help with behavioral problems?

“Will we get worse and worse by becoming more conscious and estranged from nature and lose our balance, or is it the one thing we must do? ... knowledge is either poisonous or healing ... In an actual situation, however, you cannot assume a double attitude. Each time there is the terrible problem, shall I tell them, or not? ... Knowledge is part of the development of consciousness ... and it must be paid for. It is costly, but it is up to you to choose whether you are willing to pay the price or not.”

I believe we need to be forceful and courageous enough to challenge clients to go as far as they can go. It is, of course, their choice. But, in my experience, all humans have a strong hunger for meaning in their lives that can only be satisfied if they stop being slaves to their idealized images. During my first few years as an executive coach I gave clients what they asked for, but I could see I was reinforcing their fixations and so I began to push them farther. Not everyone could make the leap (or wanted to), but those who did have found far more rewards than they could have anticipated when they started out to resolve the immediate problem.

Transformation requires discipline and commitment. We need to help those we coach:

- (1) see the truth about how they play out their patterns;
- (2) undermine their habits, shake up the superstructure that holds self-defeating patterns together;
- (3) see things in a new way, be willing (even eager) to face the unknown;
- (4) create a specific vision of what's possible, one that brings greater meaning and instills hope;
- (5) develop/reinforce the skills, understanding, and will to make the change.

This requires passionate commitment to our work.<sup>1</sup> It requires attention to both the *yin* and the *yang* aspects of relationship. In an article in the summer 1999 Milton H. Erickson Foundation Newsletter, Stephen Gilligan suggested that “disturbances of the ‘normal order’ (are) evidence that ‘something is waking up’ in the life of a person...” He argued that such disturbances can become destructive or provide hidden opportunities for major growth, and the difference is in “whether or not a disturbance can be ‘sponsored’ by a skillful human presence.”

“To transform these seemingly negative experiences into their deeper positive values, sponsorship includes many processes. The ‘yin’ (receptive) aspect of sponsorship involves receiving, allowing your heart to be opened, bearing witness, providing place or sanctuary, soothing, gently holding, being curious, deep listening, and beholding a presence with the eyes of kindness and understanding. The ‘yang’ (active) aspect includes relentless commitment, fierce attentiveness, providing guidance, setting limits and boundaries, challenging self-limitations....”

In the *yin* mode our primary goal is to be *present* with our clients, in the *yang* mode to help them be *present* to themselves. The key injunction in the *yang* mode is a paradoxical one: encouraging them to stay *with* the unwanted behavior, even to exaggerate it, instead of ignoring, denying, or tamping it down.

Helping others transform also requires devotion to our own transformation – using our Enneagram gifts, being open to observing how our own fixations sometimes limit us, and allowing all of this to be grist for the mill. It means:

- Looking for (and finding) the "divine spark" in everyone we work with, no matter how strong our negative bias.
- Being present -- engaging our heart, mind, body – and *listening*.
- Collaborating/offering advice, being compassionate/being tough – situationally and/or according to the *client's* Enneagram dynamics.

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<sup>1</sup> See Irvin Yalom's *The Yalom Reader*, especially Chapter 2: "The Therapist Working in the Here-and-Now."

- Giving them the *experience* of true relationship with us: being flexible, being willing to learn from them, to admit it when we have made errors in action or advice; being self-disclosing.
- Using *process analysis* – making observations about whatever shows up in the room, including our own reactions to them, *especially* if they don't give credence to feedback from others.
- Helping them think systemically, to understand that interaction dynamics form a self-fulfilling system which they keep alive out of habit, even when it clearly isn't working for them.
- Using "Band-Aids" (quick fixes) without shame – they're fine (as long as we keep the whole process in view) because they provide immediate reinforcement.
- Giving homework (if they don't do it, give another kind of homework or have them create something they *are* willing to practice).
- Offering alternatives; arraying their behavior on a continuum; moving them away from either/or thinking.
- Using metaphor, humor, dream-work; telling stories, quoting poetry – anything to slip past the censors.
- Believing in magic – inspiring, challenging, lovingly kicking in the pants as necessary, but never giving up looking for ways to help them be more present to themselves.