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## WHO DO YOU LISTEN TO?

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*If I listen to myself, I confirm my thoughts. If I listen to others, I have access to other perspectives, and I can reflect collectively*

How is it that some people learn, adapt, progress and reinvent themselves, while others are prisoners of what they know and what they have already learned?

In coaching, we face this issue everyday. Since coaching is fundamentally an individualized learning method, we look for ways to tap into each person's uniqueness.

This process leads among other things to questioning the "coachee" on how he learns, makes decisions and which people are his role models.

Three factors impact the learning process.

The first is the image a person has of himself i.e. his identity. Typically, a person will agree to learn insofar as these new learnings are in harmony with his perspectives and his behaviours. How many times have we heard: "This is not me, I would not look natural if I did that" or "I am not a politician. I prefer to concentrate on my work". For the sake of loyalty to themselves, these people ignore that they can question certain beliefs and increase their capacity to adapt.

The second is the disproportionate importance given to past experiences, in contrast to the particularity of the present. Anyone with a minimum of management experience knows that each of us has developed patterns that we download regardless of the situation. The problem is that these patterns have been learned in contexts often different from the existing

situation. Yet, we continue to apply them almost unconsciously.

Finally, there is the significant impact of relationships. All parents know that success or failure at school depends largely on the relationship between the student and the teacher. As adults, we are equally sensitive to the relationships we maintain, and which determine our openness to learn and to change.

To address these factors, we propose a learning tool that respects the "source code" of our identity, brings together past experiences with future aspirations and takes into account the importance of relationship. We call it: The Personal Board of Directors.

But first we propose to distance ourselves from the narrow view of only associating ourselves with one operating mode. We believe that the development of a manager should be based on a system established nearly 100 years ago by Carl Jung.

Secondly, we propose to redefine the identity concept to include a futuristic component, which consists of our aspirations, our hopes and our ambitions. To this futuristic identity, we will associate a futuristic memory.

Thirdly, we will ask ourselves which factors encourage or limit managers' learning, and we will end by describing the workings of a Personal Board of Directors as a learning tool.

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TYPES

Carl Gustav Jung is the psychologist at the origin of psychological types.<sup>1</sup> In 1921, he demonstrated that from antiquity to today, people have different types of attitudes, which he named introverted and extraverted.

Jung defined introversion as an "attitude-type characterised by orientation in life through subjective psychic contents" (focus on one's inner psychic activity); and extraversion as "an attitude type characterised by concentration of interest on the external object" (the outside world).<sup>2</sup>

Through the years, we have recognized the importance of these psychological types. We have often noted that the majority of disagreements and conflicts in professional relationships result precisely from these vision differences between the introverted and the extraverted.

It is fascinating to note that almost a century later, a large number of managers do not recognize the legitimacy of other people's visions. They try to impose theirs without being conscious of the impact that it can have on those people who do not share it.

The development of a manager leads precisely to more open-mindedness to adopt different perspectives, and to act in a manner to conciliate and integrate instead of fragmenting and excluding.

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<sup>1</sup> JUNG, Carl Gustav, La réalité de l'âme 1. Structure et dynamique de l'inconscient, Le Livre de Poche, La Pochothèque, 2008, 1177 pages

<sup>2</sup> JUNG, Carl Gustav (1995). Memories, Dreams, Reflections. London: Fontana Press. pp. 414–5. ISBN 0-00-654027-9.

We believe that identifying with only one way of performing, either introverted or extraverted, is limiting. To reduce our learning possibilities only to the image we have of ourselves is a sort of alienation.

In coaching, learning this concept of introversion and extroversion gives the managers a reference framework to perceive what they could not have imagined before. Our experience in coaching leads us to believe that the simple act of learning this distinction between introverted and extraverted transforms substantially the leadership style of the majority of managers. Recognizing the other person constitutes the beginning of a trusting relationship.

We all have the capacity to choose and execute the most appropriate operating mode for any situation. Therefore, we are not suggesting a renunciation of our favourite and comfortable functioning style, but only to renounce a unilateral functioning mode.

## THE IDENTITY: PAST AND FUTURE

People again and again, operate with the same pair of glasses and react using the same patterns. We identify with our own way of doing things. We say: "This is me". In this context, learning is more synonymous with improvement than with transformation. In fact, many managers experience discomfort, if not incompetence, with change and are not ready to question certain aspects of their personality and/or identity. Strange as it may seem, several of us have not learned to adapt and to progress.

Loyalty to oneself is one of the most significant reasons why a person resists adopting a new pattern. Often perceived as a value held in high esteem in society,

loyalty, when applied to oneself, can be a major restraint in the progress of a person.

Traditionally, the debate has always been whether our personality is innate or acquired. For the supporters of an innate personality, a person becomes what he was “programmed” to become, taking into account his personal characteristics, values, interests and motivations. For the supporters of an acquired personality, a person develops through the influence of his environment. The development possibilities are numerous and our personality is the sum of our past experiences.

The recent research, particularly in the field of neuroscience and of leadership development, provides us with an additional perspective on identity.

Research now concentrates on the “connectome” instead of the “genome”. This in fact, connects the theories of both innate and acquired personalities. The human being possesses a certain genetic knowledge, but what determines his cognitive development, adaptability, creativity and even his personality, is not so much his neural networks created genetically, but rather the connection networks developed by external stimuli.

Herminia Ibarra, Scott Snook and Laura Guillen Ramo of Harvard University<sup>3</sup> define identity not exclusively as a meaning of the past, but also as a projection of the future.

Thus, according to this new perspective, there would be a past identity made of all the things we have done since our birth and a futuristic identity made of our hopes and aspirations. Each action we take either

strengthens our past identity or fosters our futuristic identity. We are a little of what we have always been and become a little more of what we want to be.

In the past ten years, we have accompanied hundreds of managers on their journey to integrate in their new functions. We know what the best practices of integration are. However, our practical experience teaches us that integration to a new function is first and foremost an identity transition.<sup>4</sup> Our role as a coach is not so much to communicate the best practices, but rather to facilitate the process by which managers adapt from their past identity to their futuristic identity.

Managers are promoted by their organisations to new functions, but very often, the managers delay to “upgrade themselves” to the new function and adopt the identity that suits it.

The examples of this phenomenon are numerous. Here are a few to help us understand its complexity:

- A manager, who defines herself as a “doer” and now, as a vice-president, still awaits the “orders” of her president;
- A chief financial officer who still defines himself as a finance person and regards his finance group as his work team, when, as a member of the leadership team, his perspective must be corporate;
- A vice-president, Sales, promoted to general manager, who does not take an interest in the other functions she is now responsible for, and continues to see her business unit from the perspective of sales;

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<sup>3</sup> IBARRA, Herminia, SNOOK, Scott et GUILLEN RAMO, Laura, «Identity-Based Leader Development» in Handbook of Leadership Theory and Practice: A Harvard Business School Centennial Colloquium, Harvard Business Press, 2010, 22 pages

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<sup>4</sup> CAMIRÉ, André, «De professionnel à gestionnaire: pour un passage réussi» Effectif, Le magazine de l'Ordre des conseillers en ressources humaines agréés, Vol. 15 No 4, Septembre/Octobre 2012, pages 24-27

- A professional, specialist in his area, who continues, in spite of his manager's role, to spend more time developing his technical expertise rather than developing his team.

So, managers usually approach their new functions with the same perspective they had in their last functions. They are conscious of the differences, but still face these differences the same way they are used to, because the old methods were successful in the past.

However, as soon as the question of identity is addressed, there is a transformation of the past identity and the adoption of new behaviours in line with a futuristic identity.

In coaching, when we fail to initiate a real identity transition, the best practices available to the manager are evaluated and filtered through beliefs based on past successes. At best, knowledge is acquired, at worst, in 40% of the cases, there is no adaptation and the integration fails.<sup>5</sup>

In short, the development of management skills is inextricably tied to the manager's identity. One can hardly imagine that a person can develop as a manager without a transformation of the image he has of himself or, inversely, that a change of identity does not induce a development of his management skills.

Our identity, far from being static, is an evolving concept, which develops through experiences and relationships.

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<sup>5</sup> FISHER, Anne, «Don't Blow Your New Job», Fortune, June 22, 1998

## MEMORY OF THE PAST - MEMORY OF THE FUTURE

Early in life, we memorized comments and impressions from significant people. All these accumulated messages over the years have contributed to forge the image we have of ourselves. We end up believing that we are the sum of the impressions that others have of us. This image, because of the emotional charge it generates, becomes a belief, something we cannot question.

We see our life as a story, which subsequently must reconcile with the chapters already written. Every time we interact with someone or take action, it must necessarily be consistent with our story.<sup>6</sup>

It is legitimate that our past identity has such importance for our decisions and our actions. But the identity of the future, made up of hopes and aspirations has as much importance as our identity of the past. It appears that it is the same with our memory.

David Ingvar, a Swedish neurobiologist, has researched how the human brain plans for the future.<sup>7</sup> The brain constantly makes plans, evaluates possibilities and thinks of alternatives for the future. He named his concept "The memory of the future". It is made up of scenarios, which only await the signal, i.e. the information that will activate them.

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<sup>6</sup> BREGMAN, Peter, «A Story About Motivation», February 3, 2010, <http://blogs.hbr.org/2010/02/a-story-about-motivation/>

<sup>7</sup> DE GEUS, Arie «Strategy and Learning», Reflections, Volume 1, Number 1, pages 75-81 and The Living Company, Habits for Survival in a Turbulent Business Environment, Harvard Business School Press, 2002, 215 pages

Instead of downloading reactions stored in the past memory, Ingvar believes the human beings already have the capacity to anticipate, and it is in our best interests to formalize the use of this talent. The principle is the same as establishing a contingency plan, but the memory of the future can manage much more than a threat or a crisis.

For example, a manager who is vying for an award and prepares his acceptance speech, develops in this instance a scenario with his memory of the future. With that option, he will probably perform better than if he had not prepared.

Our anticipation of future possibilities is an asset as important as past experiences in achieving our objectives. The anticipation of scenarios makes us more conscious of our environment and allows us to perceive information, which otherwise, would go unnoticed. The more a person plans for various situations, the more a person is apt to perceive information that is related to these plans, and eventually act in a more opportunistic manner.

Ingvar also argues that all these stored scenarios serve to filter information that we encounter daily and help us to retain only the significant ones in the memorized scenarios.

Let's illustrate this concept with an example. A client had the unfortunate habit of defending his point of view by arguing, without taking the time to understand the others' perspective. For him, as soon as someone expressed a disagreement, his only possible reaction was argumentation.

We agreed that this reaction was not appropriate to develop and maintain harmonious interpersonal relations. He therefore filed in his memory of the future another scenario, one in which he did not initiate a disagreement before listening, understanding and reformulating the other's point of view.

Now every time the client faces a situation that relates to this scenario, he first perceives the situation and the proper scenario is immediately switched on. The memory of the future and the new scenarios offer a more efficient alternative than the memory of the past.

After a few months, the client became easier to approach, and more open-minded. He had forged his identity of the future.

Here's another example. A client had an exaggerated notion of excellence. His pattern, focused on perfection, rested on a well-defined process. He achieved results based on the methodology of investing a lot of effort and energy.

As a child, he had learned that "Anything worth doing is worth doing well". He behaved as if perfection could and should always be achieved.

Coaching led to a resetting of his perspective of excellence. The client agreed to re-evaluate his usual way of responding. He learned to better evaluate the level of quality expected by the client rather than put forward his own criteria of excellence.

The stored scenario in the memory of the future waited only for the opportunity to be activated. Now, when he responds to a request, the client, instead of using his usual pattern, triggers his re-evaluation process and achieves expected results with less effort. He has achieved the first step toward his identity of the future.

In short, our self-image can be both the engine and the brake as we drive towards what we want to achieve professionally. Rather than relying on the past, we propose that people should use their aspirations and their ability to anticipate in order to influence who they want to be and can become. This way, identity and memory look to the future to get around the legacies, the leftovers, and the relics of the past. To the memory of the past, we propose to add the memory of the future!

But, we must have the will to do so.

## THE OPENNESS AND THE MOTIVATION TO LEARN

The will and the capacity to learn are among the main success factors in the career of a manager. Despite this, managers are not as open to learn as we would think. There are a number of explanations for this.

One reason is that organisations continue to promote high performers regardless of their capacity to be as performing in another function. The classic case is that of the best salesperson being promoted to director of sales. Not only does the corporation lose its best salesperson, but in addition, it acquires a bad director of sales. Dr. Marshall Goldsmith demonstrated in his book "What Got You Here Won't Get You There,"<sup>8</sup> that what has made us successful in the past could be a restraint on our success in a more senior position.

A second reason is that learning requires a manager to leave his comfort zone, which demands high energy and confidence.

We have seen earlier that most managers accept and recognize only the information which confirms, completes or validates their thinking mode, their past experiences and their values. No matter what situation a manager faces, he will tend to react using a pattern inherited from the past and stored in memory.

Chris Argyris, internationally recognized for his theories on learning, has developed the concept of loop learning.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> GOLDSMITH, Marshall, What Got You There Won't Get You There, Hyperion, 2007, 236 pages

<sup>9</sup>[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris\\_Argyris](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chris_Argyris)

Learning through a single loop happens when a person perceives a gap between his intentions and the results achieved, and corrects the gap without questioning his operating mode.

Learning through a double loop happens when a person questions his mode of functioning, his values and the strategic choices up ahead. The person must develop a new perspective, starting with fundamentally different beliefs and knowledge. The person must reflect on how he perceives the world.

The problem identified by Argyris is that, even when the situation requires us to question the operating mode and the bias on which it is based, many people will adopt a defensive behaviour and justify their decision, even going so far as blaming others for their own mistakes.

Research by the Corporate Leadership Council on high potential suggests that less than 30% of high performers have the potential to access senior positions, given their weak motivation to learn.<sup>10</sup>

In our coaching practice with managers, we note the following:

- A manager will be less inclined to learn and to adapt as long as those who want to "change him" have not recognized him. In other words, as long as his immediate environment, his superior, and his colleagues have not taken the time to know and to recognize him, he will not adapt.
- Before learning new behaviours, a manager must be conscious of the

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<sup>10</sup> DE MEUSE, Kenneth, DAI, Guangrong, HALLENBECK, Georges S., «Learning Agility: A Construct Whose Time Has Come», Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 2010, Vol. 62, No. 2, pages 119-130

characteristics, the advantages and the limits of his operating mode and have become a virtuoso of that mode.

- Learning is demanding and a manager will not devote energy to learning if he is not convinced of its absolute necessity. The success that comes from mastering his operating mode will provide him the necessary energy to aspire to another level of efficiency and excellence.
- Finally, managers will be open and motivated to learn insofar as the organisation and its management show a similar interest, and provides a favourable learning environment.

## WHO DO YOU LISTEN TO?

One question that generates a real reflection in people we coach is: "Who do you listen to"? Who are those significant persons that are credible and that you think of when you are confronted with particular situations or challenges? Are they virtual or real guides whose perspective and advice, motivate you to take action and to act in a way that they would. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we are all influenced by people, ideas, and principles. The purpose of this question "Who do you listen to?" is to realize our sources of influence, characterize them and validate their pertinence, given who we are and what we want to become.

As you can imagine, we get many different answers. We regroup them in four categories:

- The "me-me-me";
- The "I should";
- The "guardians of the past";
- The "stage directors";

The "me-me-me" do not have significant people they can refer to. They say they consult, but consider the final decision theirs. In their eyes, they are the only judge of the situation and do not allow that another person, not having the same experiences and the same values as theirs, can substitute for their own judgment.

A client in the field of information technology told me that only he could have access to his "source code", and that his firewall prevented all intrusion in his system.

The "I should" have, as significant people, expression of values conveyed by society. A manager that I coached told me: "People (voices) that influence me the most say: I should be a good mother, I should be a good wife, I should be in good shape, I should be affirmative, I should be "business", I should be a good leader etc.". That manager had internalized the expectations that society communicates, in this case, to female managers.

The "guardians of the past" also have a network of significant people, but it embodies the past. A client, around 45 years old, had kept, as a leadership model, his hockey coach when he was 12 years old. His leadership style was based on a child's memory: we can easily imagine his leadership, as a vice-president, was questioned by his employees.

The "stage directors" have a network of significant people based on mutual trust and acknowledgment. These significant people often originate from different perspectives. The "stage directors" consult their network depending on the situation and adhere to the proposed scenario.

A client, a strong advocate of "meritocracy", had always worked hard and earned her promotions. Conscious of the limits of her operating role, she approached two people to join her Personal Board of Directors: one has expertise in interpersonal relations and active listening; the other, efficient and

opportunistic. A few months later, she had developed a more positive vision on relationships and efficiency, and had freed herself to spend more time with people.

## THE PERSONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

The proposed Personal Board of Directors as a tool to facilitate learning rests on these findings:

- Every person develops in the early years a system of perception and action with which he identifies gradually;
- The dominant culture holds the idea that our personality/identity is rather stable over time;
- The more we identify with our way of the world, the more we have the tendency to think we are right and impose our point of view, thus reducing the possibilities to understand others;
- Knowledge clusters around this self image/identity and over the years, there is crystallization of our identity;
- We are limited by our vision of the world and we have the tendency to judge others from our own perspective. We project our vision of the world on others;
- To have access to other views of the world, we must hold our judgment and let emerge other perspectives expressed by people with whom we have developed a trusting relationship;
- A suitable context for learning is as, if not more important, than the person's temperament during the learning;

The objective of the Personal Board is to have access to other views of the world,

and to a repertoire of significant people (role models), in order to work in harmony with our environment.

The Personal Board is a way to assemble people who represent different identity possibilities for the future. "I would like to be able to do like this role model".

Choosing the members of the Personal Board is an interesting way to activate the memory of the future i.e. accept that someone else can have a different perspective and perhaps a better solution. Once operative, new information is now accessible and provides new opportunities.

The Personal Board should grow progressively to eight members, each representing a different perspective. They must represent all the perspectives through which you can find new solutions.

The members of the Board must be pertinent to your aspirations and make a positive contribution. It is not a parliamentary democracy.

Selecting people who conform to your vision must be avoided: the Board is not a complacency Board. The people selected must increase your possibilities and strengthen not only your existing views.

Through your relationships with the Board, your identity expands, and integrates other perspectives. You become more sensitive to your environment.

Managing your Personal Board is a proper test to gain greater understanding of others and provide greater leadership to your environment.

The Personal Board operates as follows:

- The manager makes up his Personal Board according to the talents he needs to meet his challenges;



- The manager can then perceive situations he can relate immediately to a Board member's talent;
- This perception is soon converted to a memory, which has stored the operating mode of each member;
- The actions taken match with the best strategy personified by the member. "If this were to happen, I would do..."

## LEARNING : AN EMOTIONAL PROCESS

We started by asking the question "Why is it that some people learn, adapt, evolve and reinvent themselves, while others are prisoners of what they know and what they have already learned"?

We know that our perception is limited to what we have already experienced and what we already know. In fact, we generally detect only the information that confirms what we already know.

The behaviours we adopt are in accordance with our identity or the image we have of ourselves. We tend to reject all behaviours that do not confirm this image: "I am the type of person that acts this way".

We all project our vision of the world on others. This projection prevents us from really connecting with others and seeing them as they are. We judge others from our own perspective, which can distance us from listening, learning and working collectively.

We only listen to and accept the influence of people who have shown interest and acknowledge us. Unfortunately, the dominant present culture conditions people to be more interesting than interested. This would explain why so few people accept the

influence of others and are confined to their own point of view.

The pitfalls associated with learning are thus important. To quote Albert Einstein: "A problem that is created cannot be solved by thinking in the same manner that created the problem".

We must review our perspective on learning. Many people still think technology will be at the heart of a new learning culture. However, as the proverb says: "We can bring a horse to the river, but we cannot force him to drink". Technology is an extraordinary tool for spreading knowledge, but relationships still remain today as the best way to be receptive to people that surround us, and to learn and to evolve.

Our coaching experience has convinced us that learning requires relationships. The time we devote to relationships allows us to discover and to become interested in others. This recognition creates trust, which then creates the influence.

Dr. Taguchi said: "Learning should not be considered an intellectual process, but an emotional one".<sup>11</sup>

The Personal Board of Directors is a form of encouragement:

- To go toward others. Not only those who think like us, but mostly those who have different perspectives, because they have experienced the world differently.
- To recognize the person, and not only the function and the role he occupies. We must go beyond the utilitarian and instrumental aspects, and have on the Board, members with different views. To establish a Personal Board of

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<sup>11</sup> TAGUCHI, Yosh, Le Zen en Action, Édition Guérin, 2006, 232 pages

Directors is a gradual process, which requires time in order to build relationships of trust.

- To manage consciously and in real time our actions before our challenges. To disengage the automatic pilot and take control of our actions, allowing us to question our intentions instead of only reacting emotionally and unconsciously. In coaching, we invite the “coachee” to question her real intentions before acting. Experience has shown us that very often the “coachee” has no intentions, and no objectives: she only reacts. The dialogues with board members and the scenarios that follow carry an intention and an objective.
- To broaden our self-image and no longer be defined by what we have been. In coaching, we invite the “coachee” to be a “stage director” who decides which actor comes on stage and when. The manager performs all the roles. It is a graphic way to see the world, and to take a role that uses all our talents.