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Becoming More Self Aware – A Journey of Authentic Leader Development

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**Becoming More Self Aware – A Journey of Authentic Leader Development**

“If you want to be a leader, you have to be a real human being. You must recognize the true meaning of life before you can become a great leader. You must understand yourself first”
(Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski and Flowers, 2004, p.186).

**Introduction**

To develop a deeper understanding of how leaders become more self-aware, this paper presents research from a qualitative study which explored the socially constructed lived experiences and understandings of 15 senior leaders who have engaged in an authentic leader development (ALD) process through the vehicle of executive coaching. The aim is to understand better ‘what went on’ for leaders during the ALD process thereby developing a deeper appreciation of ‘how’ leaders become more introspective, self-aware, arguably becoming more authentic and self-confident in their leader roles. The motivation for the research is twofold; firstly, the first author’s experiences of commissioning leader development programmes as a Leadership Specialist for a telecommunications company more than a decade ago. She was discouraged by the impact on leaders of the commissioned leadership development programmes. These appeared to lack depth, significance, meaning, challenge and transformation in relation to individual participants. She re-directed leadership development efforts, bringing the programmes in-house and shifting initial emphasis from leadership towards leader development, developing a process that was underpinned by 1:1 coaching. Drawing from these early experiences and her subsequent professional practice as an executive coach, she became increasingly aware that during coaching, leaders were experiencing significant and rather profound insights and she was driven to comprehend what was happening during these encounters. Secondly, despite over 100 years of leadership research there remains a predominance of largely prescriptive and positivistic ‘mainstream’ theory, which overlooks the individual personal development processes of leader development. The major focus of leadership research has been on the development of human capital (Day, 2001), exploring leadership as trait or behaviourally-driven (Stogdill, 1974; Shamir and Howell, 1999). Day et al., (2008) emphasise the absence of “any form of a comprehensive theory of leader development” (p.xi). While Lord and Hall (2005) acknowledge the lack of theory and empirical research regarding the deeper, slower development of leaders over months or years, and in particular, theory that explores how deeper structures of self and behaviours can be changed. Further, Quick and Nelson (2008) call for a more integrative model of leader development, signaling a move away from the traditional focus on competencies and skills, to the ‘whole’ development of the
person as a leader, in particular self-awareness and self-regulation, noting the work of Avolio (2007).

Increasing contextual demands imply that now more than ever, there is a pressing need to support leaders in becoming more self-aware; removing the focus from what they do to who they are. Leaders in practice appear to struggle to secure their leader identity and a coherent picture of self at work, leading to fragile and conflicting values, arguably in-authentic leaders. Leaders are currently in the midst of escalating pressures to respond to the unknown and to lead in relation to conflicting requirements amidst expectations to create a more coherent sense of self at work (Gardner et al., 2005; Sveningsson and Larson, 2006). These multiple and diverse pressures challenge the skills, self-knowledge, assumptions and beliefs of leaders, in particular their resilience but more importantly they test the very sense of self and how individuals conceptualize themselves in their leader role. This bombardment can lead to confusion and despair in relation to whom to be and scholars argue that the existing frameworks are not sufficient for developing leaders of the future (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Avolio et al., 2004a; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Gardner, et al., 2005; Walumba, et al., 2008). The current focus of leader development literature and the first author’s experiences indicates a need to shift away from largely positivistic research towards the ‘whole development’ of the person as a leader.

The research discussed here is guided by the question: Looking through a lens of ALD, ‘how’ does a leader become more self-aware? The objectives of the research are to explore the ALD literature in relation to self-awareness; what it is, how it occurs; to explore how Executives experience a process of becoming more self-aware through the vehicle of Executive Coaching, informed by aspects of authentic leader development and to identify implications for Executive Education and Leader Development Practice. As a result of empirical analysis informed by the existential philosophy of Heidegger (1962), our contribution is to provide deeper understandings of the ‘work’ required to enable self-awareness and to reframe self awareness as key to Leader Development. We begin with a consideration of the literature relating to leader and Authentic Leader development, introduce Heidegger’s philosophy in relation to authenticity and then outline our research approach. We then discuss the super-ordinate theme of Excavation; specifically the underpinning themes of ‘Delving Deeply Inside’ and ‘Bringing ‘Things’ to the Surface’ to outline ‘how’ the leaders develop their self-awareness through a process of ALD. Finally, the implications for practice and areas for future research are identified.

Literature Review

One approach that purports to focus upon the whole person as a leader and integrates the development of greater self-awareness, is the authentic leadership development process (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Gardner et al., 2005). Day (2011) highlights the lack of empirically-based tests surrounding the component parts of authentic leadership development yet refers to it as a “worthy contribution to the leadership development literature” (p.40). Distinction is drawn between authentic leader development and authentic leadership development (Shamir and Eilam, 2005, Gardner et al., 2005), the former relating to the whole development of the person as the leader and the latter focusing
on the development of authentic relations between leaders and followers. The notion of ‘Authentic Leadership’ has steadily emerged over the last 10 years. Initially, Luthans and Avolio (2003) re-energised scholarly interest around authentic leadership as a response to the concerns relating to the ethical conduct of leaders, claiming authentic leadership is required to navigate through contemporary times, where the environment is unstable and the points of navigation ever-changing. However, despite growing interest in the academic and practitioner literature, multiple conceptualizations of authentic leadership have emerged over the last 10 years, leading to theoretical confusion around strategies for authentic leadership development (Popper and Mayseless, 2007; Gardner et al., 2011) and critiques of the theory as impossible in practice (Ford and Harding, 2011).

Gardner et al.’s (2005) conceptual framework of authentic leadership suggests ‘self-awareness’ is a core element of ALD, conceived as an emerging transformative process, linked in part to self-reflection; introspection through reflection which leads to clarity in self-assessment. This clarity is considered to be critical in relation to greater authenticity, enabling understanding of personal strengths, limitations, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs, desires, needs, feelings, motives and roles in behavior. The ALD process aims to create more authentic leaders; "owning one’s personal experiences and acting in accord with one’s inner thoughts and feelings” (Harter, 2002, p.382). Authentic leaders are considered to be deeply self-aware, whereby actions are congruent with deeply held values, holding a personal perspective, having self-knowledge, including knowledge of one’s values and operating in accord with one’s ideals, one’s vulnerabilities, motives, capabilities and with an ability to be self-reflecting alongside the ability to be self-regulating (behaviours) (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Kernis, 2003; Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Michie and Gooty, 2005; Sparrowe, 2005). Leaders who are motivated to increase and enhance their self-knowledge will become more integrated, coherent and multifaceted selves (Luthans and Avolio, 2003; Gardner et al., 2005; Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Kernis, 2003; Kernis and Goldman, 2006).

The literature presents compelling descriptions of authentic leaders and positions the importance of self-awareness, suggesting it is “a process whereby one comes to reflect on one’s unique values, identity, emotions, goals, knowledge talents, oftentimes triggered by external events” (Gardner et al., 2005, p.349) developed through the ability to ‘self-refer,’ ‘self-reflect,’ engage in ‘guided reflection’ and ‘thoughtful examination’ (Gardner et al., 2005; Shamir and Elam, 2005; Caldwell, 2009; Guignon, 2004). However, Sherman and Freas, (2001) and Quick and Macik-Frey, (2004) claim that the leader role becomes a mask that traps a leader into communications and behaviours that come from neither the heart nor the soul, leading to a lack of personal integrity and failure to become more authentic. Sitting behind the mask is an authentic human being in the process of development (Fosdick, 1943; Luthans and Avolio, 2003). Due to a lack of introspection, few Executives are clear about the distinction between the roles they fulfill as Executives and their performances related to these roles and who they are as individuals outside of the role (Quick and Macik-Frey, 2004). In addition, leaders are not typically introspective personalities (Nelson, 2003), often presenting an image of invulnerability (Gardner and Avolio, 1998). Walumba et al., (2008) claim leaders are unlikely to possess the capacity for self-reflection and introspection, considered necessary to enable an understanding of self.
Rousseau (1762) also highlights the challenge in gaining greater self-awareness, claiming the state of reflection as being contrary to nature. Branson (2007) acknowledges reflective self-inquiry is not a natural act, emphasizing the commitment required to become introspective. Individuals are "generally imbued with a structure of self-descriptions that remain stabilized until subjected to external influences from the social surroundings" (Gergen and Gergen, 1986, p.255) and Trilling (1972, p.5) refers to the ‘arduous effort’ required to avoid being false to oneself. In addition, Kernis and Goldman (2006) claim the process may create negative emotions as one becomes aware of one’s vulnerabilities and the discrepancy between actual self and ideal self. Morris et al., (2005) recognise the challenge to engage “in objective self examination,” “accepting whatever personal shortcomings” may be revealed through that process (p.1340).

The existential philosophy of Heidegger (1962) in Being and Time placing authenticity as central to an understanding of ‘being’, also illustrates the challenge to developing deeper self-awareness and greater authenticity. Heidegger, briefly referred to in the ALD literature, identifies two structures of human being; ‘Being the They’ and Being an ‘Authentic Self’. In being the ‘They’, much of what we experience as individuals in our lives is “average everydayness” and we are enculturated into norms and expectations of a particular aspect of society, “proximally and for the most part alongside the ‘world’ of [our] concern, lost in the publicness of ‘the They’...fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being its Self” (Heidegger, 1962, p.220). He suggests authenticity is also constrained by “thrown-ness”, a notion that people are thrown into a world not of their making, a world they didn’t construct, living in the midst of environments they have little control over. As such, people’s behaviours are prescribed by the social environment. ‘Theyness’ for the most part constrains our possibilities of existence, suggesting conformity or in-authenticity as a result. We will remain absorbed in ‘the They’ for the whole of our lives unless we discover ‘how’ to become more authentic. An ‘authentic self’ is considered to be a person who recognises ones dispersal in to the ‘they’; ‘the self that has been taken hold of in its own way’, seeking to ‘find itself’ (Heidegger, 1962, 129), living their life in full awareness: free to make choices and guiding their lives towards their chosen goal or project. Heidegger (1962, p.129) suggests the disclosure of one’s authentic ‘Being’ and the discovery of the world in one’s own way is achieved by ‘clearing away concealments and obscurities’ and ‘breaking up of disguises’ which block the way. This implies a more challenging journey to self-awareness than the need to ‘self-refer,’ ‘self-reflect,’ engage in ‘guided reflection’ and ‘thoughtful examination’ (Gardner et al., 2005; Shamir and Eilam, 2005; Caldwell, 2009; Guignon, 2004).

A further body of literature claiming the creation of greater self-awareness is the Executive Coaching (EC) literature, particularly the psychodynamic approach, conceptualized as an individualized process, enabling the surfacing of unconscious material, leading to deeper awareness of self, greater authenticity, learning, new perceptions and a more consciously engaged approach, enhancing the effectiveness of the leader and thus benefitting the organization (Carey et al., 2011, Lee, 2010; Levinson, 1996; Stokes and Jolly, 2010; Kilburg, 1997). Kilburg (1997) draws from a psychological methodology, perceiving the development of self-awareness to be a key goal of EC. Peltier (2010) claims that psychodynamic coaching aims to make the unconscious conscious, to
become more self-aware, developing a deeper understanding of how we think, feel and behave through a process of self-reflection exercised through introspection. This results in the ability to exercise more conscious choice, making decisions in line with what we believe in, arguably to become more authentic. Despite these assertions, it is not clear how the development of self-awareness is experienced. Kets de Vries et al., (2007) acknowledge the potential of Executive Coaching as a vehicle for leader development, yet suggest Executive Coaches focus upon the obvious; what we see. They call for attention to the “deep structure” (p.xlii); what lies beneath the surface of a human being, some of which is conscious, some beyond consciousness, calling for this as the focus of leader development and indeed Executive Coaching. Focusing purely upon the Executive’s role does not get behind the mask to reach the authentic human being in the process of development (Fosdick, 1943; Luthans and Avolio, 2003).

In summary, there is a plethora of literature proclaiming the affirmative consequences of self-awareness, explicitly making links between higher levels of self-awareness and greater authenticity. However, ‘how’ leaders experience and therefore become more self-aware is difficult to grasp. In considering the ALD literature and Heidegger’s (1962) perspective of the more authentic self, it would appear that individuals must reflect at a profound level to enable the development of a more self-aware and authentic leader. This gives rise to a number of important questions. What ‘goes on’ during a process of authentic leader development through Executive Coaching? How does a leader become more self-reflecting? How do leaders discover and assimilate ‘new’ self-knowledge and make sense of it? These questions cohere in our guiding research question: looking through a lens of ALD, how does a leader become more deeply self-aware?

Methodology

The research is drawn from a wider study where 15 senior leaders who had engaged in an Executive Coaching process incorporating elements of ALD were interviewed, seeking to understand their ‘lived experiences’ and ‘understandings’. The senior managers had previously engaged in Executive Coaching with the first author between 2010 and 2012. Given the often highly personal and confidential nature of conversations between coach and coachee, it was felt that participants would be more comfortable re-living their leader development process in interviews with someone they trusted and had shared the experience with them. As such, ‘purposive sampling’ was followed and the 15 senior leaders who participated were former coachees. There were 5 women and 10 men participants from both the private and public sectors, all at senior management levels (e.g., CEO, Director, Head of Department).

A social constructionist approach underpins the research, as we explore how fragments of individuals’ lives, conversations, experiences and emotions become reconstructed and negotiated into meaning over time. Semi-structured interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes and explored a number of areas (e.g., motivations for starting executive coaching, memorable / vivid experiences in the coaching process, reflections on re-telling of life stories, values as leaders as surfaced through the coaching process, impact on leader/ship). The data analysis of 98,000 words followed the tenets of interpretative
phenomenological analysis (IPA). The roots of IPA are in health psychology, concerned with examining the subjective experience of something, usually an experience that is of particular significance to the person and is considered to be particularly useful if the area of investigation is under-researched or new, as in the case of ALD and EC. It is distinguished by a set of processes that move from the particular to the shared and the descriptive to the interpretative, whilst holding in view an empathy and curiosity.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim and then the process of ‘literal readings’ and ‘interpretative readings’ began, interpreting through ‘descriptive’ (e.g., summarizing content), ‘linguistic’ (e.g., looking at patterns of syntax, repeated words / phrases) and ‘conceptual’ (e.g., moving beyond the text to a deeper questioning of the meanings and possible explanations) lenses. This process resulted in a number of super-ordinate themes, reflecting distinct stages of a leader development process, alongside corresponding sub themes, thus bringing the lived experiences of the participants and the interpretations of the researcher to life. The five stages which emerged are: 1) Dubitation, 2) Excavation 3) Materialization 4) Restoration 5) Amalgamation, conceptualizing participants’ experiences of the ALD process.

The Excavation Stage of the ALD Process

The ‘Excavation’ stage reflects part of the ALD process relating to the development of greater self-awareness and illustrates participants’ experiences of turning inwardly, exploring within and unearthing and revealing ‘things’. Participant experiences point towards a process of unearthing that permeates deep within. ‘Excavation’ appears to go far beyond the boundaries of self-reflection, introspection and the making of links to previous experiences suggested in the ALD and EC literatures. It is experienced by many participants in two stages, ‘Delving Deeply Inside’ and ‘Bringing ‘Things’ to the Surface.’ Similarities can be drawn with the world of archaeology where excavation involves the removal of ‘top soil,’ referred to as the ‘digging in phase;’ in essence the stratified removal of dirt enabling the exposure and discovery of artefacts.

‘Delving Deeply Inside’

‘Delving Deeply Inside’ forms a fundamental part of the ‘Excavation’ process, with 11 of the 15 participants experiencing a ‘turning inwardly’. It describes participants’ experiences of discovering ‘things’ that appear to have been buried, hidden, forgotten or ignored, covered up in some way; depositories that may have been laid down over time. ‘Turning inwardly’ is not presented as a mere change of glance; a peering downwardly or inwardly, it appears to symbolise a process that has significant profundity to it. Depths appear to be scaled to uncover issues and notable work appears to be required to get there. Thus regardless of how issues have been treated; hidden, buried, forgotten or ignored, labour of significant magnitude and depth is experienced and considerable endeavor is necessary to uncover or face ‘things’ before they can be brought to the surface. This conjures up images of scaling an inner core; the inner most self where authentic work can begin.
In the following accounts participants illustrate their experiences of discovering the ‘hidden’ or ‘buried’ issues. Iain introduces the analogy of an onion, implying that previously layers have prevented him from seeing, or indeed finding, the deeper aspects of self. This suggests he has previously functioned with a level of obscurity:

“If you use the onion scenario, [ ] So just peel that one layer off but what the coaching did was strip it right back to say actually let’s have a look at that situation”.

Similarly, central to Amy’s account is a notion that who or what one really is has become indistinguishable, buried beneath ‘dirt.’ She experiences this part of the coaching process as a scrupulous removal of earth, enabling her to discover what is truly deep within and at the core:

“A meticulous process of kind of removing the dirt and just revealing what’s underneath and I think the coaching process could be seen along similar lines”.

Assiduousness is required to access beyond the veneer, suggesting a layer cake of ‘dirt’ that appears to be unconsciously gathered and accumulated over time. It feels as though this ‘dirt’ is masking the authentic, precious inner core; the sedimentation moving her further and further from herself; perhaps implying a level of self-deception. These layers of sedimentation or dirt may be insecurities or vulnerabilities acquired throughout life, consciously or unconsciously buried under the assumption that if hidden, they do not really exist; this is a sense of denial, or in-authenticity. It would appear that Amy has an awareness of ‘something,’ given her concern at the start of the ALD process around what may be unearthed. This proffers the question ‘who is Amy ‘being’ when covered in ‘dirt?’ One could assume this leads to some form of deception, a mask being worn or an act being played out in the leader role, in-authenticity. Matthew experiences a process that leads to an encounter with ‘boxes’ that he does not wish to open:

“It’s a bit more like opening a door to a really dark room with lots of boxes in with things that you don’t want to open”.

These boxes may be similar in nature to the ‘dirt’ and ‘layers’ of the onion, suggesting issues or ‘things’ psychologically buried, packed away, in some way obscured. We question the potential to become more authentic through an authentic leader development process if the practice does not seek to reveal and thereby enable the discovery of ‘things’ locked within. Although the participant appears to open the door to the room of boxes he experiences a reluctance to look inside. The multitude of boxes may present an overwhelming confrontation, a shock, triggering defence mechanisms that suggest denial. Similar to Amy and her experience of the removal of dirt, Rachel shares her experiences of a process that removes layer after layer:

“But it’s also a bit like either Russian dolls, so I walk in a big shiny Russian doll and then you take the first layer off and there’s quite a lot there, it’s still X, it’s still me but it’s another layer of me [ ] then as we go through the sessions we’re lifting another lid and another lid and not necessarily to do with size but it’s still me and it was still what I knew but you helped me lift those lids off to uncover that information or that knowledge or that enhanced awareness.

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These participants experience a more gradual process of exposure, ‘peeling’ or ‘meticulous removing,’ ‘opening,’ suggesting a more temporal opportunity to acquaint self with what is emerging. As a consequence, participants appear to experience a more natural discovery of ‘things,’ feeling less apprehension than other participants, “removing dirt and just revealing” (Amy), “strip it right back” (Iain), “opening a door” (Michael), “you helped me lift those lids off” (Rachel). Alternatively some participants appear to experience a slightly more directed EC intervention, a sense of ‘forcing,’ ‘not allowing,’ ‘making,’ suggesting a less natural discovery in comparison to others. Darren suggests the EC was “forcing me to look at perhaps things I didn’t really want to look at”; Peter claims “it doesn’t allow you to hide in any way”, Tom “you made me go back into myself”; Robert suggests “taking me back” and Philippa, “making me sit down and try to capture what it was that was gnawing away at me”. Participants experience being ‘taken hold of,’ enabling them to face ‘things,’ leading to their assuming responsibility for themselves. ‘Holding’ appears to be a fundamental responsibility of the executive coach, perhaps necessary given the challenge of knowing the ‘true self,’ exacerbated by “the determination of men to hide themselves not merely from others but from themselves” (Pascal, 1970, p.60).

The notion of depth is nuanced in many of the participants’ responses, illustrating the significant search within self. This is an inward journey of noteworthy distance suggesting a relatively complicated psychological process. Amy and Michael make particular reference and understanding to the profundity of the process, Amy believing ‘in-depth time’ and ‘structure’ will enable deeper insight: “Taking the real in-depth time out to look at things in a more structured and a deep way”, implies a relatively new experience. Michael adopts more metaphorical language to depict depth, drawing a similarity to being dropped off the edge of a cliff; not pushed, pulled nor slipping, not of his volition but ‘dropped’ which suggests a sense of plummeting, being let go of and potentially out of control; “You kind of dropped off the edge of the cliff and you went down to the bottom”. An inward journey is experienced by Amy as “delve down deep”, “really getting to the core”, Chloe “digging deeper into my mind.” Iain states “it really drilled down”. Tom experienced the turning inwardly as a “delving down”. Peter claimed it “doesn’t allow you to hide in any way” and Philippa who senses, “I was likely to go to places that I’d find uncomfortable”, suggesting places that were not previously visited, not accessible and therefore likely to be deep within. Daniel experiences depth from the coach “who kind of kept digging” and Darren suggests there is a specific area that is rooted deeply within and perhaps not visited very often “whenever we would go into that area, of particularly talking about me, the deep me and my roots”. Rachel draws an analogy with “digging up potatoes for ages, you’re digging and digging and digging and then you sort of shake the earth off which is all my stuff”. Robert describes the internal journey, the ‘removing’ or ‘stripping,’ claiming a “taking me back to ‘what did you do then and how did you deal with that? and so on and so on and so on and you got to a point with me where I was er – well I had got to a point,” the repeated reference to the phrase ‘and so on’ possibly indicative of his experience of ‘stripping’ back.

Daniel reveals his experience of the activity undertaken to uncover things, yet atypically attempts to avert the turning inwardly, nevertheless the coach keeps “digging.”

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“So when I tried to gloss over things or move the conversation on, without really answering the question, you kind of kept digging”. “I was trying to keep you at arm’s length initially; I didn’t want to let you inside”.

Although he acknowledges the coaching involves a turning inwardly, he illustrates a way of being that is so entangled, so entrenched and familiar, the natural reaction is to keep oneself contained, to not allow disequilibrium, perhaps the suggested power of the unconscious. Subsequently significant internal struggle and tension is experienced by the coachee. Similarly, Rachel claims “you were needling and needling and trying to get it out of me”. This implies a level of effort was required from the coach and the presence of some kind of barrier from the coachee. Whether buried, hidden or ignored, it appears most participants experience significant introspection, looking deep within to uncover or face issues, suggesting; ‘peeling,’ ‘stripping,’ ‘baring,’ ‘exfoliating,’ ‘exposing,’ ‘digging,’ ‘gnawing,’ ‘drilling,’ ‘opening,’ ‘forcing,’ ‘unearthing,’ ‘needleling’ or ‘delving;’ all imply activities that enable the removal of ‘things.’ This language highlights the ‘work’ needed here. This is not the equivalent to blowing dust from items; this requires energy, effort, courage, tenacity and ongoing challenge to penetrate the unconscious. Heidegger (1962) suggests the disclosure of one’s authentic ‘Being’ and the discovery of the world in one’s own way is achieved by ‘clearing away concealments and obscurities’ and ‘breaking up of disguises’ which block the way (p. 129).

‘Bringing ‘Things’ to the Surface’

‘Bringing ‘Things’ to the Surface’ follows from the ‘Delving Deeply Inside’ part of the ‘Excavation’ stage and reflects participants’ experiences of releasing ‘things’ and bringing them out into the open and is presented as a significant stage in becoming more self-aware. In their descriptions, participants are unable to eloquently articulate the nature of what is brought to the surface, referring to ‘things,’ ‘stuff,’ ‘lumps,’ ‘something,’ ‘areas,’ ‘it’, ‘issues.’ This may be as a result of the newness of the find and an inability to comprehend it, or the need for a period of adjustment, bringing something into the light for the first time, much as one’s eyes need to adjust when going from darkness to light. This theme is not dissimilar to that of an archaeological excavation where ‘things’, (artefacts) are carefully removed, retrieved, brought into the light, their sense and value perhaps not yet comprehended but their actual retrieval an achievement and liberating. Carl describes his experience of liberation when “stuff” that has been caught within and contained is voiced enabling release to the outside, bringing it to the surface:

“I probably realise now that I was quite, quite distressed internally [ ] it was quite cathartic and helpful to kind of get it out, you know, to talk about it. So it was stuff inside bubbling around that just didn’t have a, didn’t have a kind of escape valve anywhere really and that was – and I had put all of that defence into work and through - coaching just – the vivid thing is just it kind of helped me get all that personal stuff out”.

Remarkable in his account is the sense of entrapped “stuff.” His suggested coping mechanism being his work; a sense of trying to keep going to ignore the ‘bubbling’ inside. There is the sensation of something simmering away inside, feeling at some point it may
erupt. One could assume some sort of internal damage could ensue as a result of the trapped “stuff,” repression or burial. It appears the participant assumed there was only one way of dealing with the trapped “stuff”. Why was he unable to find the ‘escape valve?’ This suggests the frames or patterns of assumptions become so embedded in the unconscious, so out of reach that we struggle to let go of them. Perhaps this illustrates why significant energy is required to unearth ‘things.’ One can sense the chaos that is going on here for this participant and the challenge and support of another that enables the ‘escape valve’. The notion of ‘self-awareness’ proffered in the ALD and EC literatures alongside the need to ‘self-refer’ and ‘self-reflect’, appear inadequate in light of the significant challenge that is experienced.

Rachel adopts a metaphor to describe her experience of becoming more self-aware, carried along by a rising tide, which becomes higher and higher bringing her closer to something being revealed. She is unable to articulate what it is at this stage, referred to as a ‘thing’ and ‘it’:

“I felt it was just sort of rising up and I was just at the cusp of the wave going along along along and then we eventually got the nugget and then it crashed down and I went ashore. So I remember that and there was quite a wave – I felt quite a wave of emotion afterwards, I felt like I was actually having to choke back the tears because it was so powerful unearthing that thing that I sort of left feeling quite blown away that we’d managed to pull that out because again it’s that thing where it’s there but you don’t know necessarily know that information or knowledge or that feeling is there [ ] I could feel it there, I just couldn’t quite – the wave just wouldn’t quite crash. You obviously hit the nail on the head because it’s literally the hairs on the back of my neck were standing up, I was completely trying not to cry. I’ve reflected a lot after that, it’s just what does – trying to pull it out, pull the stone out”

The temporal nature of her experience is noteworthy, the time taken to reveal something that she senses is there but can’t quite reach, yet she now knows given ‘it’ has come to the surface. It appears to be very deeply rooted and yet the apparent release she experiences afterwards is profound, appearing quite remarkable to her. This suggests significant hidden depths and reinforces that ‘self-reflection’ will not be powerful enough to access the inner recesses (Branson, 2007; Rousseau, 1762). Kets de Vries et al. (2007) call for attention to the “deep structure” (p.xlii); what lies beneath the surface of a human being, calling for this as the focus of leader development and the senior managers’ accounts begin to illustrate what lies beneath.

The ALD extant research claims deep levels of self-awareness enable a more authentic self; positioning self-reflection as a vehicle to deeper self-awareness. The EC presents an individualized process, enabling the surfacing of unconscious material, leading to deeper awareness of self, becoming more authentic, learning, new perceptions and a more consciously engaged approach and Kets de Vries et al., (2007) acknowledge the potential of coaching as a vehicle for leader development. However, participants illustrate experiences that stretch far beyond the narratives contained in the fields of literature. They describe a process significantly beyond the boundaries of ‘self-reflection’ and ‘self-knowledge’; they express a process which was interpreted as ‘Excavation’. This is
characterised by ‘digging,’ ‘exposing,’ ‘drilling,’ ‘delving,’ ‘baring’ and ‘peeling.’ Participants uncover layers of sedimentation which reveals the emotion and cognition that appear to be life-changing in the process of becoming more self-aware.

**Conclusion**

We contend that this research considerably progresses research into self-awareness. Whilst discussed in many leader/ship theories, ‘how’ leaders become self-aware is under researched and therefore the ‘work’ required is largely understated. Through an analysis of senior leaders’ experiences of the authentic leader development process through the vehicle of executive coaching, we have been able to illustrate a deeper appreciation of ‘how’. Informed by Heidegger’s philosophy of authenticity and the challenges contained in seeking a more authentic self-aware self, we have focused our discussion on a key stage of the ALD process that emerged within a wider empirical process, that of ‘Excavation.’ This is experienced by leaders as a ‘turning inward’ and subsequent progression of the development of self-awareness. For leaders, the process of ‘how’ is emotional, liberating, cathartic and rejuvenating, experienced as the removal and discovery of ‘things’ enabling leaders to become ‘unstuck’. They grow a sense of what is important to them as individuals in the form of values, that once discovered appear to remain apparent, allowing them to share their beliefs in a more natural way with the external world, argued to be increasingly necessary within volatile, complex and uncertain environments where leaders face ever challenging expectations of their performance in the leader role. We argue that ‘Excavation’ offers an empirical contribution, demonstrating ‘how’ leaders become more self-aware through an ALD process and how critical and important the progression of deeper self-awareness is in a leader development process. We propose future research and practice, particularly through extended empirical research studies, to enable executive education / coaching practitioners to engage more explicitly with the ‘how’ of developing self-awareness.

**References**


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