The Art of Coaching for Personal Transformation

A monthly column for helping others heal and transform

By Dr. Keith Merron

Going Deeper: Coaching Third-Order Problems

Most of my work is in the corporate sector, working with CEOs and Senior Executives. My goal is to help my clients transform. Often, when clients bring their problems to me, they focus on the symptoms. It is my job to help the get to the deeper causes. Transformation, by its nature, shifts the fundamental paradigms that underlie the causes. To help clients go deeper, I often talk about the difference between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd order problems. Let me illustrate.

Patricia, the CEO of a growing company she founded, loved to fix problems. She was really good at it. Wherever she went, she fixed them. And there were an endless number of problems available to her. So, she stepped in, gave advice, and often told people what to do. That she liked to fix things is not necessarily a problem. It became a problem because, while her organization was at one time growing, it had plateaued, in part, because all key decisions continue to go through Patricia. They always had and that is the way a big part of her liked it. She was the hub of a spoke and wheel team and had her hands in everything.

When the organization was small, Patricia being a master puppeteer was not a problem. In fact, her brilliance helped launch the organization and it was

considered for a while as an exemplar in the field. But, as the organization grew, her pattern of stepping in and solving everything posed difficulties. It slowed decisions down and it created a pattern of dependence on her. She hired people who were good at implementing decisions but who were not so good at making them. She became a leader who, unfortunately, did not know how to inspire leadership in others. She could only inspire followership.

When Patricia came to me, she knew she needed some kind of change, but she didn't know how. She believed the problem was who she hired, or that others were not as bright as she is, or that they were a bit lazy. She couldn't see herself as the source of the problem. Like so many people, her paradigm was invisible to her while the paradigms of others were ever so obvious.

It became clear to me early on that I needed to help Patricia see her problem. After exploring a number of situations, I had the sense I was able to connect the dots of her pattern and I "suggested" to her that she seemed to have a particular tendency as it related to problems. "I think that you often take charge quickly but that you may have difficulty supporting others when they do the same."

Now, in my mind, although the pattern appeared clear, I used the word "suggested" because I also know that I am not all-knowing. Moreover, I know that shoving an insight down the throat of someone almost always causes a gag reflex. So, due to my awareness of my fallibility as a human being, and that none of us can always see clearly, and my sensitivity to how paradigms are hard to see and how quickly the ego wants to defend, I almost always offer my observations lightly—as hypotheses, worthy of consideration. I use words like, "I sense," or "it appears," or "I might suggest." And I mean it. This is not a game of being certain and using fudge words to lighten the impact. Instead, I hold the point of view that this is the journey of the person being coached and I only see portions of what their inner and outer worlds are like. Instead of seeing clearly, I am reading tea leaves, in a sense, and cannot know for certain what they

mean. By offering something lightly, I am also engaging the other person in a spirit of inquiry and inviting them to hypothesize with me. This spirit more easily bypasses the ego and allows for greater spaciousness. More on this later.

When she heard my observation, Patricia nodded her head in agreement and asked me to say more. In order to help her see her potential pattern, I explained that there are three different ways of understanding a problem and I call them first, second, or third-order problems. A first-order problem is the presenting problem. For example, a first-order problem might be that there are too many ants in the kitchen. For a leader of an organization, it might be that they can't get their team to work hard enough or perhaps that they believe the team doesn't take enough initiative. In Patricia's case, it was any one of a myriad number of issues that she described to me about people not taking initiative, being passive, not working hard, etc.

A second-order problem is the cause or causes of the problem. For example, if a lot of crumbs are left around the house, and there are many holes in the structure of the house, ants can easily get in. In the case of a leader, a second-order problem might be that the people hired are unmotivated, in general, or that they have become unmotivated over time. Perhaps they feel discouraged in some way. In Patricia's case, the second-order problems were many and each situation had its causes.

A third-order problem is a pattern that keeps the second-order problem from being faced. In many ways, it is indeed the paradigm that needs to shift so that the second-order problems are solved in an enduring way. In the case of ants, a third-order problem might be that there are habits that are not clean, or that there are other priorities that don't make this problem very important, or that no one seems to really care that there are ants that come in. In the case of a leader, perhaps it is that the leader has an unexamined or disowned need to be in control and that control tendency causes them to hire people who are

followers. In Patricia's case, the third-order problem was her tendency to love to solve problems, her inability to trust others, and her high desire to control.

Most people shy away from the deeper, more penetrating examination of themselves that is required to simply begin to affect their paradigms, and most coaches join them, failing to challenge the deeper condition. Either they don't see it or they sense that the client is unwilling and, therefore, they shy away from going deeper. In our instant, quick-fix, change-in-3-easy-steps world, we often avoid the very thing necessary to effect sustainable change. That, in essence, is the goal of this phase of the transformation process—to search and find the third-order problem.

When I offered the first, second, and third-order way of looking at problems, Patricia instantly understood. She tackled first-order problems all the time. In fact, she loved to do that—it gave her satisfaction. Every now and then, she tried to tackle a second-order problem, but she could not see how she created the second-order problems. Being at the center of it all was likely a third-order problem but it was so part and parcel of who she was, and had always been, that it was hard to see. She was the proverbial fish swimming in water that cannot see the water.

To help Patricia, I asked her what her definition of a good leader is. Her reply was, "To get people to accomplish things." I suggested that this was a very useful definition and that it was classic. Many, if not most others, see leadership similarly and she seemed to do that well. I then said, "What if there is more to leadership? What if great leadership has something to do with creating conditions where people solve problems themselves—that they are motivated to take things on themselves—motivated to take initiative?"

Patricia was intrigued by this definition, and we began to explore a world where this might occur, and we then explored what it would take from her and from others to live in that kind of world. It was by offering an alternative goal that

her eyes were opened to another way of seeing and being. Paradigm change is often like that. It involves, to some extent, the exploration of the conditions that create second-order problems, those conditions that are our paradigms.

About Dr. Keith Merron

Keith Merron is the Managing Partner of Leadership Pathways, a consulting firm dedicated to helping organisations with bold visions achieve sustainable high performance and industry leadership. As an organisation effectiveness and an executive development consultant, he has more than 35 years of experience assisting executives and managers in business, government, and education.

In the context of his consulting, he works with the C-suite as a transformational coach. In addition, Keith has designed and led over 100 seminars and workshops for leaders. He has helped create some of the most innovative leadership training programs in the country. Through his consulting firm, he regularly offers a workshop for coaches called: The Art of Transformational Coaching. See his website: www.leadership-pathways.com for more information.

Keith received his Doctorate from Harvard University in 1985, where his studies spanned the fields of human and organisation development. He is the author of five books on human and organisational change and is putting the finishing touches on a new book, tentatively titled: The Art of Transformational Coaching.

Keith teaches at the Hult International School of Business and is in high demand as a speaker on the subject of leadership and building extraordinary organisational cultures.