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## An Independent Study, 360 Experience - Learning the Client's Way of Knowing

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Working Paper #17-04

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## An Independent Study, 360 Experience - Learning the Client's Way of Knowing

### Abstract

The vista of my story spans a few months.

A time which seems short by comparison to some tales one may read. This one is intensely personal while being centered on my client. It's not so much that I facilitated change, as I learned about helping another human being who wanted to change. Somewhere in you and me, there is a deep instinctive desire to alter reality, especially if it's a straitjacket or has many layers of restrictions, cramping our existence. It may be perceived as being '*stuck*' and that we know happens slowly. Yes, over years, with an imperceptible hardening around the edges as you travel time, as you age, as you *try to fit* into an image of who you *should* be.

### Keywords

360 Experience

### Comments

Working Paper #17-04

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## A window wide open

Amrita V. Subramanian  
Faculty: Linda Pennington | University of Pennsylvania

## Author's foreword

*T*he vista of my story spans a few months.

A time which seems short by comparison to some tales one may read. This one is intensely personal while being centered on my client. It's not so much that I facilitated change, as I learned about helping another human being who wanted to change. Somewhere in you and me, there is a deep instinctive desire to alter reality, especially if it's a straitjacket or has many layers of restrictions, cramping our existence. It may be perceived as being '*stuck*' and that we know happens slowly. Yes, over years, with an imperceptible hardening around the edges as you travel time, as you age, as you *try to fit* into an image of who you *should* be.

I met my client at a point in her life where she was growing into all that she felt she ostensibly wanted. Yet, the environment surrounding her seemed stifling. Her own statements often would be contradictory. Her need to protect her privacy would be challenged by a sudden confession of an intimate detail. I used to wonder about that. Almost like hidden glimpses from another dimension.

As you read my journey journaled here, it is not an *ordinary* yarn of an independent study or client coaching. It's one where a human being remembers one's hidden self, and that process of recollection is a lingering one. We may not be able to witness the whole metamorphosis but get just a hint of it; a whiff of possibilities; a delicate fragrance of green paths that meander closer to heart, home and truth. Almost, as if you opened a window on a lovely day for a room that was closed for a decade or more, and placed fresh flowers on the sill to remind you of all that sunshine that can be let into your life.

My client taught me that.



# My client

Actual Profile removed.  
Let's honor her as the metaphorical Alice in wonderland.



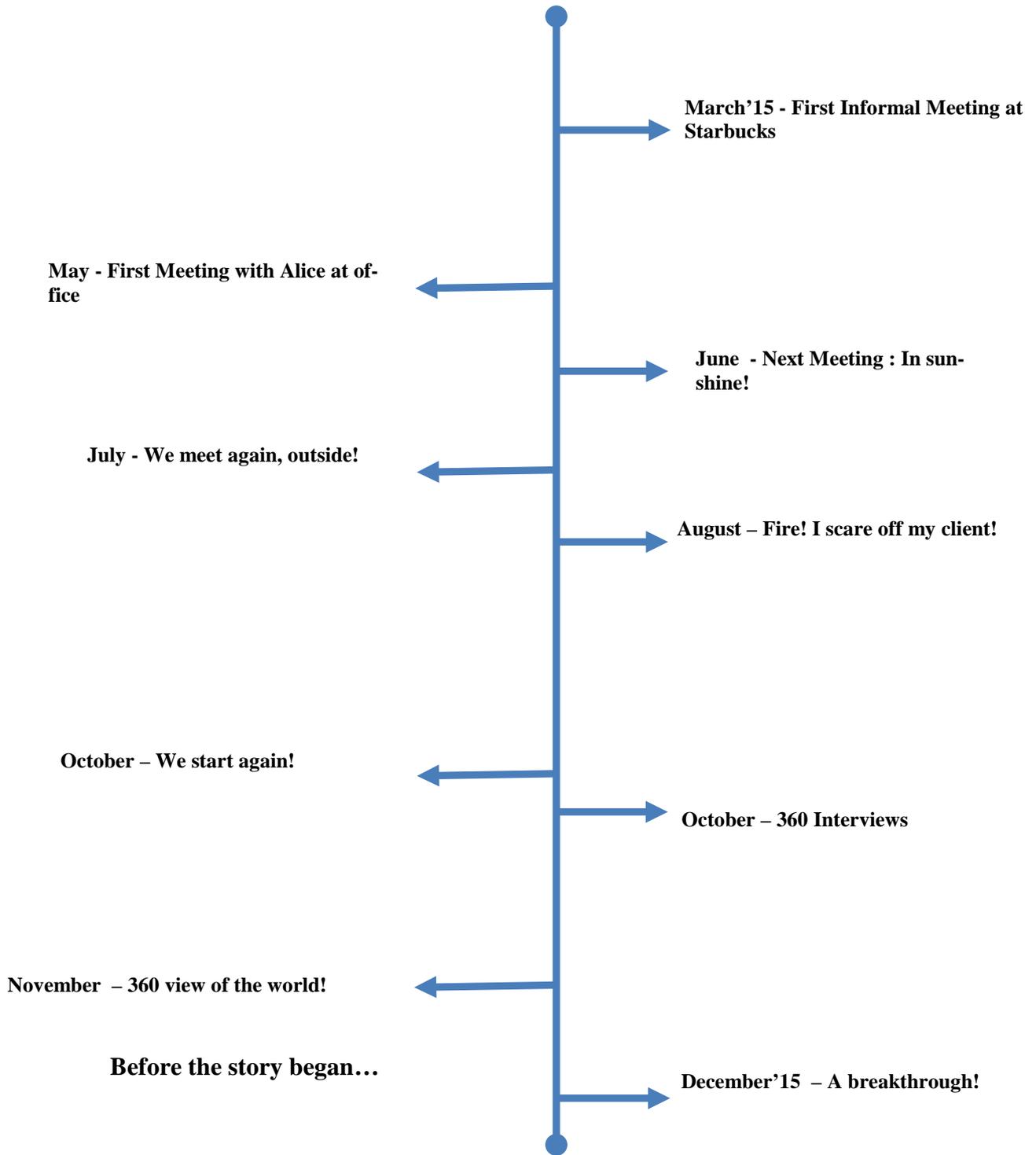
Early in the story, a brief profile:

Apart from what is mentioned on the company website, here's what we knew of my client:

Newly promoted to the firm's management, Client (Let's call her Alice) (preferred first name), is an ambitious Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), at Philadelphia's oldest and one of the most respected law firms.

Executive coaching is introduced to as a developmental opportunity as she evolves into the new role. The initial storyboard tells us of a few general perceptions of her being intelligent...ambitious...not open enough...needs to trust more...so that she can be trusted as the CHRO...been with the firm all her life...she is a natural choice for the next level ...long illustrious career ahead...and so forth.

# Timeline



## Session Summaries (with journal entries)

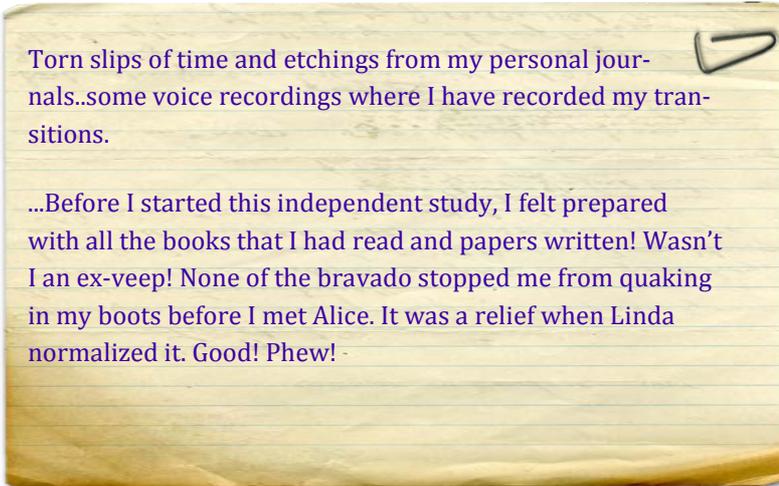
It's almost year now. A period of detoxification of all that I wanted to expel from my being. Education that prompted deep reflection...down to those recesses in my memories that I had sent to the dungeon because there was no forgiveness. Not for the hurts I had gathered, nor was there a capacity to be kind to myself. Yet all of that was in the past, my own straitjackets were coming apart at seams.

One notices the tense of the past as I write on this beautifully sunny day in Philadelphia. My story has developed way beyond I had imagined or had hoped for.

Where am I a year hence? From where have I to measure my miles traveled? ...that will make for a different conversation...perhaps elsewhere...and when I will read these sheets of paper, say 20 years from now, I will marvel at my guts...I will smile through my wrinkles having earned my stripes. For now let me speak to you about my coaching related Independent Study. An international student has a few hoops to jump through, yet it all came through...It was set for Fall' 15. Yet, the process started as early as end of Spring' 15 semester.

### **My story before I met my client...**

My reason to be in this reality, Linda, who also was in a role of my teacher, guide, mentor, friend, agony aunt who kicked ass! All rolled in one. She had hinted that there is an assignment getting in the '*just right moment*' for me to practice my new found craft of

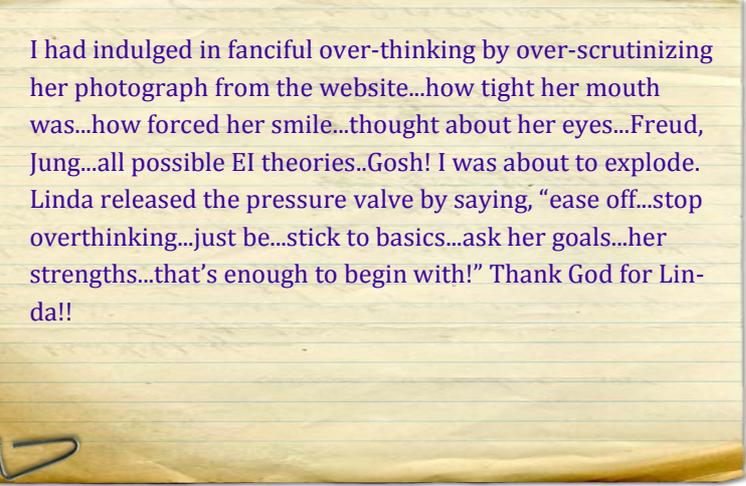


Torn slips of time and etchings from my personal journals...some voice recordings where I have recorded my transitions.

...Before I started this independent study, I felt prepared with all the books that I had read and papers written! Wasn't I an ex-veep! None of the bravado stopped me from quaking in my boots before I met Alice. It was a relief when Linda normalized it. Good! Phew!

coaching.

The erstwhile and current members of OCEC go through the practical training as a part of the curriculum (CPT - Curriculum Practical Training). OCEC didn't take place in the year I was here. Yet, Linda made it happen...thus, it was time I stepped up.



I had indulged in fanciful over-thinking by over-scrutinizing her photograph from the website...how tight her mouth was...how forced her smile...thought about her eyes...Freud, Jung...all possible EI theories..Gosh! I was about to explode. Linda released the pressure valve by saying, "ease off...stop overthinking...just be...stick to basics...ask her goals...her strengths...that's enough to begin with!" Thank God for Linda!!

The profile of my client was complex, different and evolving, and somewhat perceived as "*stuck*", "*not open enough*", now that was very little what I knew before I met her.

### **I met her! | March**

I cannot forget the dust motes suspended in air. Silently traveling the space between the rays of the sun in a very noisy coffee shop. The loud din, cramped space, crowded queue belied the quiet you could find, if a corner seat emptied up, by the glass window. There the dust motes danced.

It was a Friday. My client and I had exchanged a few email notes, all very business-like, very terse, crisp and empty with formalities. A sense of déjà-vu accompanied the exchange for had I not read so many in my life before? Yet, I suspended disbelief until I saw her in person and let her take me in to her world, at her pace. This was an informal chemistry meet...

I confess that prior to our seemingly casual meet, I had circled that section of town, corporate corridors, lunch venues, coffee joints...not knowing where she might pick a place to



meet...days ahead of our meeting. I had over-thought through everything, and had it not been for Linda to calm me down and permit me to focus on “essentials” God alone knows I would have gone prepared for discovery of a new species of homo sapiens! Well, thank God for Linda! I went there in my human form with very human expectations.

I was at the venue 30 minutes before, fluidly changing seats as the human crowd swirled in and out of the shop. I wanted a vantage point. I got it by the glass window. It was somewhat nippy that day...ever so slight a chill of a receding winter. She walked in through the door, weaving through the throng of bodies, almost ready to wince if someone touched her personal space. Brows arched, she mouthed my name, and I nodded. She reached to our table, and we shook hands, and turned to take in the swarm of folks who truly wanted their afternoon coffee!! It was funny, and I had a nervous laughter bubbling up, and out it came, I laughed and she burst out into one too! Of course, we didn't know why we suddenly cracked up. Yet, it worked to ease the anxiety we were both aware of.

She took her seat, soothing her wind-swept hair back, she asked, “*Ok...so what do we do now?...?*”, I laughed again. She beamed back, saying, “*I know...do you have rules and such things for this meeting...?*”

Observing my negative nod of the nut, she rested her spine against the chair, neck muscles visibly relaxing, and let out a long sigh. As she did that, she turned her face towards the glass and let the sun fall on her face. The dust motes settled on her eye lashes and skin...she looked fresh, frail, tired, youthful, wise and naïve – all in the same moment of time. Caught me looking at her when she came back..and we started sharing our lives.

As a process, I disclosed my life first. Risks I had taken, my failures, the whole “why” of my existence before her as a possible coach. She next took lead and opened up...I

noticed a pattern of her revelations. She'd stay firm on the course of polite things to talk, and straight off shoot me absolutely personal information! That repeated itself. Almost as if she at once craved, and was repelled by, the notion of a trusting intimacy. Exactly how Linda had prepped me for her.

Our colloquy lasted more than an hour and a quarter, and she shot up to leave. We parted with respect and muted admiration for each other. She was fearsomely intelligent, highly competent, great observer of the minutiae, articulate, and positively ambitious. She had every making of a great leader. Except, she did not, and chose not to believe, that leadership entailed a healthy mix of theatrics and political foresight.

I walked away awed by her, and humbled that my assignment has cut me down to size to measure up to challenge to facilitating a true transmutation - of her nature of operating within the context she lived.

Announcements that forced me to listen up closely:

- she wanted out! (of the lair of lawyers...)
- she wanted to move up from micro-to-macro. Wanted to learn stratagem
- she wanted to be "like me"

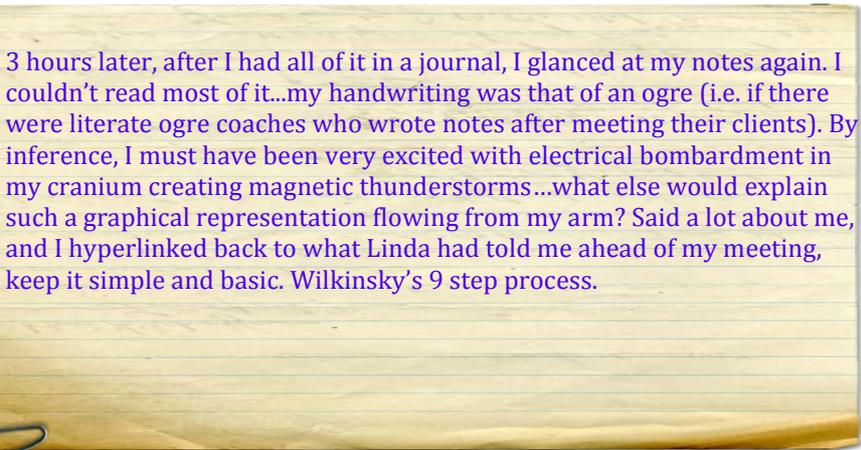
Option C took me aback...I did not expect that. That anyone would want *to be* me.

My client taught me a very important lesson. That, I can inspire change. That my life could be perceived as a metaphor...in telling her my story, she showed me exactly what my story could lead to in others' lives. I so far had not thought of it...

Responsibility struck me full force. There was no way to simply waltz through. Not at this stage of my conscious incompetence. I yearned to talk to Linda. I wanted to run and



tell her all this, before my memory morphs into anything else. So I hastily jotted down all of it and when my arm resigned, I spoke into the voice recorder.



3 hours later, after I had all of it in a journal, I glanced at my notes again. I couldn't read most of it...my handwriting was that of an ogre (i.e. if there were literate ogre coaches who wrote notes after meeting their clients). By inference, I must have been very excited with electrical bombardment in my cranium creating magnetic thunderstorms...what else would explain such a graphical representation flowing from my arm? Said a lot about me, and I hyperlinked back to what Linda had told me ahead of my meeting, keep it simple and basic. Wilkinsky's 9 step process.

### **First formal meet | May**

The tradition set so far with Linda was a call before and after a client meet. I sent out an instant message to her after meeting my client, and prepare my notes for my call with her. This aspect of debrief turned out to be immensely helpful. It gave me time to

chomp, nibble and gnaw over things, and get it over with. I live in my head most of the time, and now am learning to tune in to the beating heart as well. Things that are non-cognitive, and assimilating the myriad hues that exist in the space between my client and I.

Thus, all debriefed, I went in for the first formal meeting. I was a wreck!!

I reached, as usual, 45 minutes ahead. Changed my running shoes for pumps and sat by the fountain. I let the sound of the water calm me down and remind me that *“the success of the process is in my control, the success of the outcome of the process, rests with the client”*.

Linda's voice echoed with the marquee and I sensed a conciliation between my racing pulse, adrenaline and the brain wiring. By the time I went it, I was on!

The receptionist greeted with a formal air, and I made myself comfortable on a sofa in the lounge. It was dangerous to be walking around for your heels sank in the well-padded swath of carpet, and you could lose your equilibrium. I wondered how the office would look if all men were walking in heels with their suits on. I suppose that was the reason I

looked as if I was smiling when my client turned around the corner, and greeted me. I noticed, she had flats on! And, it was a Friday! Anyway, err on the side of caution, I wasn't too over-dressed. My client, very charmingly, did give me a once over...

The conversation thread from the last to this one had three key themes:

- Goals of the coaching relationship
- Her strengths that she wishes to leverage
- A brief discussion around who she'd like to invite to the 360 process

She went off to bat first. Prepared and armed with what she wanted, she rattled off (what felt like a rehearsed monologue)...she did eventually pause for breath. I took plenty of notes. I shared them with her as she spoke and she then got into the mode of watching how I map her inputs, she took the cue and started following the trails she created, looping it back, circling around it and then bringing me home. Dance of the flamingoes....I digress...Shortly after, she chalked out her covert goals. She kept looking at the door as if wondering if anyone's eaves dropping. The doors were sturdy, and a lawyer firm wouldn't have porous walls. So, there was tentativeness about revealing her inner feelings about the "why" and "what more" of her personal quest. Her fitment in her mind belonged outside the firm, and not within. On the other end of the same thought was fear of the world beyond the law firms...she has always been at one place ...so the unknown milieu was both attractive and scary!

We ended on time. All through the hour and half, I was not asked for water. Perhaps that's not the norm for official business meetings. In East, that's first, then small talk, and then business, then small talk again. It was all about relationships and memories of



“Even the most privileged women expressed the need to be accepted as a “person” as opposed to being oppressed or patronized. Privilege does not ensure freedom... and achievement does not guarantee self-esteem. Indeed, highly competent girls and women are especially likely to underestimate their abilities...several women suspect that they are imposters or good things happened by fluke.”

Blenkley, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, Women’s way of knowing

connectedness. No wonder, even if the companies collapsed, everyone was still having tea together. I am not cynical, it’s an observation, that’s all. I understand it better now.

I went for a pit stop before I left. On my way out, I caught a glimpse of a very suave lady who was holding Linda’s coach purse. Shocked I stopped. Oh! It was just me. Ha! I didn’t recognize myself in my formal attire, I looked very credible and a part of the corporate. It was on! I was *on!*

There was a strange sense of freedom. Linda, in one of her reveries, told how one could just “turn on and off” the performance. “*You are in it*”, she said, “*not of it*”. So, I could turn it off. Be me. The debrief call was insightful with Linda drawing out aspects that I did not vocalize or see. Walking through my notes with her, I realized why my client may feel like an imposter, or why she thinks that she has to prove her technical competence whereas the world just want more of her...her attention...her relationship...her own self. She was tight around the edges, fiercely protective...of what? I was yet to know...

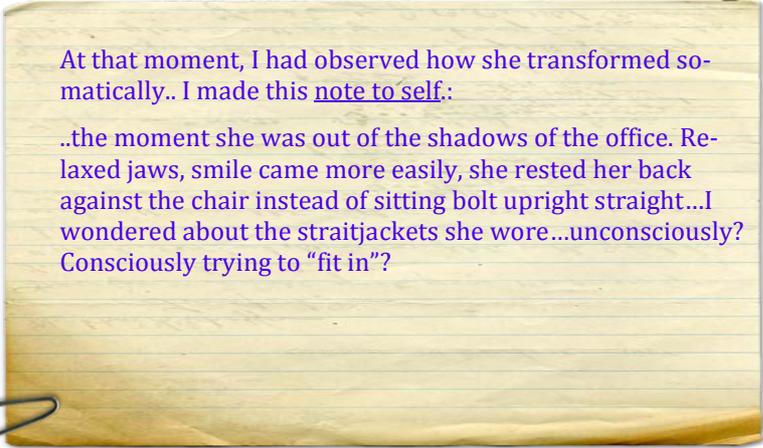
All that I had learned in class, absorbed from the books, was intellectual stardust. In presence of my client, and the space between her and me, I sensed a universe unfolding. Her as much as mine. I was expanding into the unknown along with her. Conversations with Linda gave me a boundary. A line where chaos and order harmonize. I would have drowned without her beaming me from the lighthouse.

### **Profiling the environment | Early August**

A very tidy blue swatch of sky ran parallel to Philadelphia’s Market street. Philly was swarming with people with corporate burdens, all in a rush. Regardless, the sun gleamed a bright yellow smile amidst will o’wisp of clouds. I sighed at the bright white sunlight. It

was a winsome day with cool breeze caressing your collar, tugging your purse, inviting you to play. Yet, I was expected in at office of a posh firm where waited my good client.

This time around, I walked around the edges of the thick carpet. My client turned in a mo-



At that moment, I had observed how she transformed so-  
matically.. I made this note to self:

..the moment she was out of the shadows of the office. Re-  
laxed jaws, smile came more easily, she rested her back  
against the chair instead of sitting bolt upright straight...I  
wondered about the straitjackets she wore...unconsciously?  
Consciously trying to "fit in"?

ment later, and I let out a sigh, "*it's just so beauti-  
ful outside*", and rubbing my arms indicated how  
freezing it was inside. She took the cue.

"*You want to go outside...can we? Yeah, lets!*", she  
asked with the ghost of a smile, and off we  
whooshed down the elevator, back in the sun, next  
to the fountain. The world was smiling, as was my

client.

"*Much better... isn't it*", she knowingly uttered....of course it was. For one, no one was try-  
ing to see at what temperature you froze in summer air conditioning!!

Today's goal **was to reconnoiter the 360 process, its participants, logistics.** We got to the  
first two and then some.

She went to bat again, and this time

paused to ask, what I had in mind.

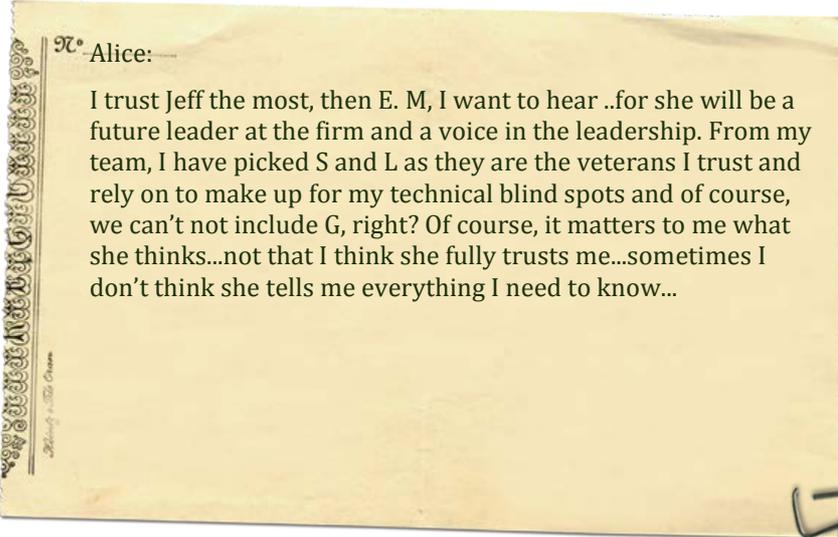
We went over the overview, once

again, of the process of 360 and

how each sequence links with the

other. I had made a hand-written

mind map of the flow and its log-



☞ Alice: —

I trust Jeff the most, then E. M, I want to hear ..for she will be a  
future leader at the firm and a voice in the leadership. From my  
team, I have picked S and L as they are the veterans I trust and  
rely on to make up for my technical blind spots and of course,  
we can't not include G, right? Of course, it matters to me what  
she thinks...not that I think she fully trusts me...sometimes I  
don't think she tells me everything I need to know...



Take it as axiomatic that all clients, whoever they are and however grand, successful and important, fear two things : vulnerability and loss of control. They are right in these fears because coaching is about change and to change you do make yourself vulnerable and you may indeed not appear to have the degree of control you want over your life while the changes are happening.

Jenny Rogers, Coaching Skills

ic. She got the concept, and then went into each profile that she wishes to participate. We spoke of the “why” of her choice, what makes her think/feel/say so...the contrast of the characters...what she really needs to know versus what she thinks she needs to know...she made copious notes of her own reflections. She had come thoroughly prepared to this day’s purpose and our meeting was extremely productive. I was very pleased with how she had come so *open* to the table. I have captured a tiny excerpt of a running monologue of what her own script-and-reasoning was about her selection of participants.

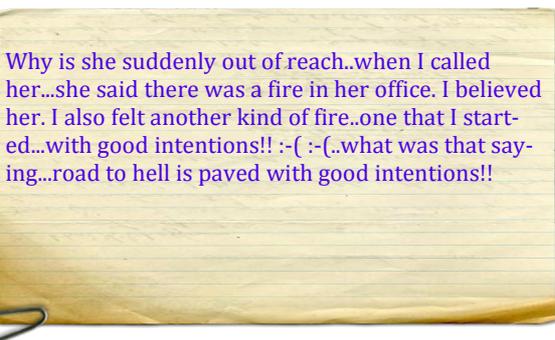
We didn’t finish the last part on logistics and questions, per se. I offered a future window of Monday. She was exhausted for she had truly taken a deep dive into each profile and one could sense that she had begun to see things she hadn’t before. It was fascinating to watch her almost visible neural reaction to our time together. I was learning so much from Alice, more than she’d ever know. She is someone who I’d like to be a friend to, all my life. She is rich on the inside, warm, caring, loving mother and a doting wife. She kept surprising her own self with her fierce intelligence and determination to make this work, and her restlessness is a harbinger of a wider horizon that she wished to view. Her eyes are ready though there isn’t a synchronicity between her mind; its mental model of the world; the theatrics and politics of a law firm, and her humanist values as an individual. Sometimes I felt there were 2 versions of Alice : Alice, the human being and Alice, the CHRO/professional.

On the following Monday, I dropped her note stating that I am very flexible in case Murphy’s laws come up at work. It did. She requested if we speak at 3.30pm instead of 3pm. I sat outside the Furness library. It was beautiful, whimsical evening with a slight nip. The squirrels and the pigeons closed in on the peanuts I offered. I felt great in that moment of history...I felt I was in touch with the sacred intents of Penn’s founding fathers. She called, dot at 3.30 and went on to speak of “non-work” stuff...life, family, daughter, son...it was a

pleasure seeing her unfold her life over a call. I took her cue and listened. She came around to work stuff and shared her perspective on who, what, why, secretaries, time, how to share my profile...all transactional questions. Eventually she ended with, “*ok, I will do my homework and send it to you...will you tell me how it is? Please?*” As I agreed, I also asked as to why she’d been sighing so much...long ones, short ones...she clearly didn’t know that she was exhaling long wistful sighs...the kinds that birds in a cage might.

Anyway, we ended the call and she sent me a long note on the agreed stuff soon after (2 days later, at night, around 9.30pm!) and it was an endearingly honest email. I worked on her structure and questions and sent out a consolidated template for her. She has been quiet...

I wonder why...I have a bad feeling. So, I dropped a note this morning (24th August) to quickly check in her reactions, creations, her own reaction to her creations, dates, schedules....etc. She is mighty caught up on the transition at her workplace, and I wish her all the wits to navigate this well.



In that email, I had requested for a date for us to meet so that we could do a dry run on the questions...*hmmm, it's all quiet. I will ask after a while.*

I wanted to co-create the data format with her so that she feels a sense of ownership and familiarity. I had to design an interview sheet with her own questions. That's for later.



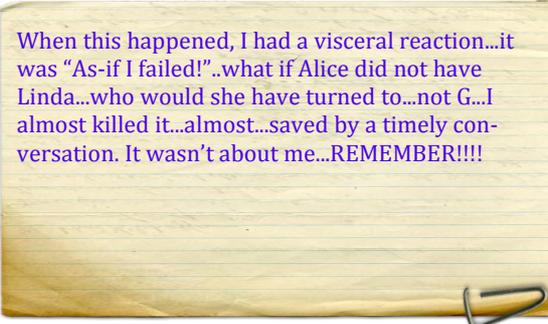
## I scared my client | August

In all my excitement to help her, I created a document of communiqués. The kind I had for the CEOs of the firm I used to work back in the days. It was detailed, sophisticated and very unmindful of how Alice communicated or perceived the benchmark of electronic exchange at the firm. It was a shock to her system. Thus the silence.

I should have heard the hesitancy. I didn't. She had offered over phone that the document was neat, but it wasn't usual for her. *"Of course Alice, it's for you to change and use as you wish!"*, said the coach. What I totally missed was how a construction of this situation was explosive for her! I was pushing at her something she was least prepared for...forget communicating, her very self was wanting out of this zone. Had she not told me this before? Yet, classic controlling-taking gesture, I scared her away.

After 2 weeks of silence, Linda shared that Alice had reached out and requested an appointment. I was struck with a physical force. After a few moments, that feeling waned off and sanity reasserted itself. Of course, Alice is asking for help. That's her figuring a way out. Authority could provide clarity. Finally, it was the document that triggered an avalanche of her fears...after initial clouds of doubts about other superficial issues (that dissolved when Linda did what she does), and we were back on!

Linda's debrief to me was pithy. I absorbed how lopsided was my assessment of partnership that I thought existed between my client and I. I was wrong. I was "one-up" in Alice's mind and had provoked a resistance. Yet, it was much deeper than a knee jerk yowl.



When this happened, I had a visceral reaction...it was "As-if I failed!"..what if Alice did not have Linda...who would she have turned to...not G...I almost killed it...almost...saved by a timely conversation. It wasn't about me...REMEMBER!!!!

She felt *naked, exposed, vulnerable* and *nervous* about asking these powerful people opinions about her. It kept recurring in her conversation with Linda.

As I write this (after speaking with Linda) I feel calmer. Alice was fighting a tug of war. Her inner self was fraught with her need to protect (what? something precious..unsaid), feeling as an *imposter* at the firm, *wanting to be accepted* in the persona she had projected, and *admitting* that she was not what she portrayed. Her contradictions and paradoxes were on moving axis. It was not *about me*. Alice was struggling to fight out of her “*stuck*” life and she was in violent strife. I could imagine her pain, frustration and cluelessness. She was caged in and she was scared.

I waited. Her email came. It was honest and open and asked for another conversation over phone, stating clearly why she paused and how the conversation with Linda helped. The distance I had covered in her realm of trust was lost, temporarily. I sensed that, and I respected that. I paid heed to my mentor’s advice of letting my client feel the *equalness* of our relationship. I let Alice etch out the future steps, even though I wanted to rush to her and apologize wholeheartedly for my rookie mistake. Or, was it? Had I not wrestled with this streak of controlling-taking before? Of course, that was the non-coach profile!

### **Gathering panoramic view | Late October**

Nestled on the 26th floor, the view of the city was spectacular from the conference room that was to be my base on the day of 360 interviews. I could touch the sky and its wispy clouds!



The city and its meandering river sighed away at a silent speed. There were 5 conversations to be had, all except the managing partner.

Alice was exceptionally attentive to my need, and was *right on edge!!*

Looking at her, I felt dizzy. Any tighter, and her inner spring would snap (twannng!) I laid my hand on her arm, and said nothing. She withdrew and sighed...*I am so nervous...oh! God why did I even agree to this...what'll happen...I hope it all works out...too late to stop, right? Now, I want it done with!* A tight smile. Barely holding on to a composed façade. I was there to do a job and I meant to do it well. I needed Alice to know that and so I stated. She relaxed. She perhaps needed to feel my assertion of competence. That was one quality she worshipped, and was aspiring towards in her own context.

The day unfurled. It was easier after the first few minutes. I met her team member, mentor, peer, boss and ended with another team member. The pattern was visible:

- The ones lower in rank and authority (to my client) were hedging their comments until late into the interview, and the endings were full of volley of information and insights. It took them time for they had to decide if they trusted me enough to tell me anything.
- The ones at par or slightly above, were eloquently non-descriptive. A lot was said, without any real meat. It was amusing. Again, until the end of discussion, and then a gush of details. So, I was constantly tested for credibility and trust quotient.
- The ones ranked above (my client) in pecking order had me in her cross hairs. She declared she owned the room without saying a word. Circled close to my personal

space. Watched me watch her with a smile. She *knew* I knew that she *knew* that I knew – what she was doing. It was fascinating, her behavior. I got my first insight into Alice's quiet discomfort with her boss whose personality was chemically different. I was in presence of a wizened doyen. She had played the power game for a long time and was simply throwing me bait. I didn't take it. I wasn't there to prove my worth to her, I was there as a coach for my client, and that's what I did – ask questions.

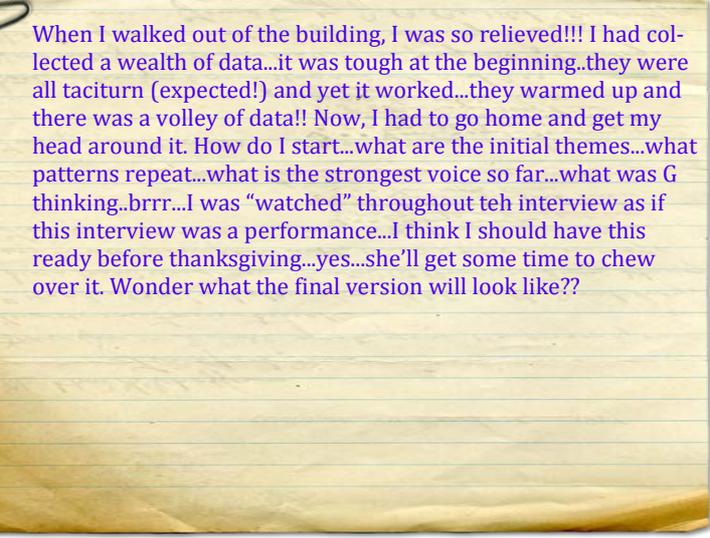
Alice near died of the *unasked* question, *what did they all say?*

Any more and her neck muscles would have snapped. So I answered her casually as we went down the corridor. She did not take in a single word I said. What she sensed was that I was telling her that she was *safe*. I saw her blink rapidly and ask *so it was alright?* I cocked my brow with an amused expression and she burst out laughing. *I was nervous for nothing...wasn't too bad...wow! Now I want the report!! Can't wait....* Meet Alice, the boss! I reminded her we have one more to go, then a week or two for me to seam the edges of conversational data and voila! A report.

The data I had collected was immense. Most of it I wrote in scribbles, and offered the participants an electronic copy with bullets. For the next one hour, I sat in the coffee shop, making mind maps and jotting all silent data that I had observed. It was priceless. Truth and guile were present in equal measure and I saw how much Alice needed to believe what I was going to tell her...



One more interview in the following week with the managing partner. It was a wrap! That



When I walked out of the building, I was so relieved!!! I had collected a wealth of data...it was tough at the beginning..they were all taciturn (expected!) and yet it worked...they warmed up and there was a volley of data!! Now, I had to go home and get my head around it. How do I start...what are the initial themes...what patterns repeat...what is the strongest voice so far...what was G thinking..brrr...I was "watched" throughout teh interview as if this interview was a performance...I think I should have this ready before thanksgiving...yes...she'll get some time to chew over it. Wonder what the final version will look like??

day, we had the meeting with doors open, and it was all done with a seemingly practiced air of transparency.

There was nothing transparent in what he said. It was all implied. He was good at insinuating and then rushed in to validate those insinuations. Sort of a tennis match. Sophisticated, shrewd and desirous of appearing to be the Big Guy who has Alice's best wishes.

I received all sorts of unnecessary information about his life, in the aftermath of the interview. How much money he made and how he and his wife had decided not to be poor – for instance – had no relevance in the context I was in. Yet, spoke volumes of his need to micro-manage and be in the know of everything that went on in the firm. Oh yes! I could begin to see the landscape just as clearly as that morning when I surveyed the city laid out in front of me. I could see where Alice needs to be. She was between two powerful people who were running the machinery of the firm, in opposing ferocity and stunning dexterity. Alice was no naïve damsel, she had been playing them too...but her inner self was rebelling.

Same process. Came out of the office, wrote my notes and spoke into the voice recorder when my hands tired.

### **The 360 perspective - the report | Mid November**

It took me one sitting. With the mind-maps stuck on the wall and data processed in themes, it was fluid and fluent. Alice wanted a comprehensive report with visual representations. She learned the world by *seeing* it first, so a visual story followed the question-led narrative. I merged perspectives to share the views from different angles so she can have a kaleidoscopic understanding of how *she was perceived*.

After reviewing the first draft, Linda encouraged me to distill further and *un-bury the lede* hidden in the quotes, statements and paragraphs of information. My fear was Alice may not see the positive lean of the report, she will look for the negative. She would almost wish it to be negative! So, I created curial gists of each question...and that pointed to true North..for Alice always needed to learn to appreciate the *frame of reference* of each quote/statement.

I had a long conversation with Linda before I had a feedback session with my client, and that allayed my *over thinking* and my *fears*. I was there for Alice, and Alice needed to hear the truth, as it was, told in a way she understood and could accept and grow from there. Again, it wasn't about me or what I thought! Had I not read it a zillion times...yet *doing-knowing-being* are very distinct when it comes to real life enactment of the role of a coach. Innumerable books of wisest authors won't prepare you for that realization until you are in the moment, all by yourself.

The strengths illustrated in the report were simple enough. What wasn't, was Alice's own objections to accepting that these strengths were her own, were known and were obvi-



ous. *I am not good enough* came up several times, as did *I cannot believe that* with a smiling unsaid expression that said *I want to believe that!*

The conversation lasted an hour and half as I walked Alice through the report.

A follow through meeting was planned in early December where she would walk me through the goals for the coaching sessions, and of course, I shared with her that I would like to turn in my paper after my first session with her. She was well-versed around my obligations towards my course at the university and agreed immediately...and an apology about the delay caused by her sudden *sullen silence* (her words!) and how surprised she was that this experience was nothing like she feared...it was all about her and everyone wanted her to be successful and flourish in the role. She had expected big-red-ink marks (old school memories?) on the report...instead it spoke of her dreams, hopes, and choices! A window opened and that led to many more open windows....

### **First Coaching session: 45 goals! | Early December**

When she walked into the coffee shop nearby, she had her hair down and was wearing a new perfume. She looked rested even though the story she shared was how busy she had been now that a 2-week leave was just around the corner. Speaking of the report, she flipped her notepad and I saw merry many pages and of course a frown had emerged on her forehead.

**Alice** : *I don't know...where to begin? (chewing her lips) and I mean..the report has given me a permission I never had before...I feel encouraged...empowered to make changes - in me, in the role I hold - for the first time I feel as if there is a mandate for me to grow and flourish in the role...I had an amazing conversation with Jeff..he walked in just as I was reading the report and he said that I should trust the firm more and trust that the firm wants me and needs me...it was nice to know...especially now that my boss and I hardly ever talk unless absolutely necessary...so I don't know where to begin (her eyes hungrily looking at the waiter passing by with steaming breakfast) ...I have made 45 goals (questioning eyebrows lifted towards me)...what do you think...why are you laughing...?*

*Amrita : Do you want to order something..?*

*Alice: Oh yes! I am famished...didn't have breakfast..feel like celebrating..how about eggs and bacon?*

*Amrita : I'll go with a French toast if they have it..while we celebrate...and what are we celebrating?*

*Alice : (almost with a giggle) ..that there is nothing wrong with me!! I mean there is nothing wrong per se...everyone wants me to do more..be more of what they imagine me to be in the CHRO role..you know my husband said after he read it? ..that I must really be very impressive in the role...to have such an awesome feedback...I wonder if I dad would ever believe it!? I do.*

*Amrita : I am not surprised at all...I don't think you were either...you always knew you were as good as anyone in the role...and your fear of substantive knowledge was to strengthen the role and your performance in it...I am curious. What would you like to gain from the report...*

*Alice : I don't know where to begin...(food arrived)*

*Amrita : Let's start with what's most important to you...*

*Alice : I want to be strategic in the CHRO role...*

*Amrita : We'll get into the role...first, Alice, the human being...what's most important to you...as a human being? We'll compartmentalize later...*

*Alice : I want freedom...to be who I naturally am..*

*Amrita : And, who are you naturally...*

*Alice (stays silent, chewing a crisp bit of bacon with a far seeing eye): You know there is something in the report that got me. I have always liked to build things...construct...create. When I was married, I would buy wood and make the woodwork, paint my window frames..build things out of nothing..that's how they are at home..of course, now I barely comb my hair with 2 of my little ones around...but yes, I like to create order out of chaos...I could do that all my life..it is natural to me.*

*Amrita : So, that's an old pattern..what else comes to you...*

*Alice (again silent for a while...she had stopped chewing) I am connecting something...you know I always loved outdoors...I am an out-and-out outdoor person...happiest when I am in the mountains...that's why I picked my college in Colorado Springs..that's where I met my husband. He was born amidst the mountains...his home in Scotland has mountains in the backyard and this time we went hiking all over...you know (slowing down even more) in my major, first year, I had Kinesiology...I wanted to rehabilitate injured athletes...I dropped it because of Physics...why did I do that...but you do stupid stuff when you are 18...anyway..I wonder if That's what it is. Oh my god! (she re-establishes eye contact with me) how did I*



*forget that...that's what I wanted...I wanted to stay outdoors..help people who stayed outdoors so that they can go back to being outdoors...eventually become a sports therapist!!! How did I forget that...how did I land up here...what...(trails off into silence, food forgotten) Yes, that's it..may be I look for a job in a sports/outdoor related firm..if it is good enough money...it should be... I can do that...where can we begin? I think if I pay a retainer to the search firm, they can do that for me...get me in..I have the skills..what do you think? I think I may have just found my secret to happiness after all! (laughs out loud her eyes twinkling) ..how was I so foolish..for 10 years, I forgot. It's silly that I needed this report to remind me who I was...I need to do my goals again...(took out the notepad and flipped to a fresh page. Wrote - Sports, Kinesiology, HR role. Slashed out the old pages.)*

I was speechless. I had witnessed a breakthrough and my client had done all by herself!! I could do a penguin flip with toast in my mouth! The rest of the conversation naturally came to an end with 2-3 main goals; balance the professional and the personal; fulfill the CHRO role obligations while preparing her transition and so forth. Yet, *thinking-it-through* came first! Alice decided that she would put up her feet with her favorite Vodka and write her future. She came around the food table and gave me an ever so slight a hug. I was speechless, yet again.

Her parting words by the fountain, *'you know this felt like a little-therapy even if we only spoke my work and my goals at work...I feel lighter...as if some part of life wanted me to remember what I had forgotten...I feel happy inside..is that possible There are so many choices now...I know you said this wasn't therapy..but you know it felt like it. You are a natural at this, Amrita. You must know this...don't you?'*

I could only smile for if I didn't she'd sight the slight glister in my eyes for what it was. I gave her hand a tight squeeze and waved good bye..until we meet again.

A week or so later, I received an email that was far beyond what she had ever written...so full of life and I could hear her rich laughter through it. I end my independent study and nestled in it are the beginnings of my client's new personhood. A new way of being.

I can imagine how the next few sessions might be...I can imagine more breakthroughs...I can imagine my client's sense of sovereignty over her life's choices...I can imagine her being happy, fulfilled and complete.



*T*he story, as I had envisioned, did not unfold that way...or in any other way I had initially

wanted. A true blessing!

The unplanned consequences, the peculiar texture of this experience, the complexity of my client, the paradoxes in the equation - they were cathartic for me. An ongoing alchemy of

sorts...somehow the purification process that I

submitted to in the role of a coach, and a human being.



Yes, I did not get to practice my own coaching model, per se. Neither, anyone else's. Yet, I practiced self restraint of a new kind. The kind that set my client free. I made mistakes. I had excellent debriefs. I was richer for each moment that happened within the bracketed and unique landscape of this practicum.

Life will rarely follow a sequential *Table of Contents* of an academic phenomenon. The moment you step out of the classroom, that *phenomenon* becomes an adventure. You let your heart and mind *be*. Yes, one must do the things in a certain order but that comes after thinking through the chaos of human experiences and within that, learning accrues. Sometimes scales fall off your eyes and you see yourself for who you are in an absolute moment of clarity, and other times, the process repeats for your client. On both ends, tremendous release.

Could I have learnt this without the practicum? For instance, through simulated role plays? Observing someone coach? Or, live coaching? In a limited way, yes. The colors wouldn't be as vivid, neither would I have the vertigo of exultation when lessons make historic moon landings! Classrooms prepare you with an active repertoire, an actual exploit tells you the sharpness of your aim or the vitality of your game plan.

You may find yourself, as I did, asking *who was I really in this moment? What need is this? Whose need is this? What is important in this precise moment as my client connects the dots? Oh! The silence feels eternal....and my client meets her new self or old self..as do I.*

Reflected in my client's discoveries, I had my own. Nestled in her travails, I struggled with my own. Revising her inner script, I re-wrote my own. She began to sign her carte blanche, I begin with my own. The parallels, intersections, undertows - contrapuntal in their nature - we danced together in a strange unity. I could not and did not plan or predict it.

With my client, I have a new view from the windows wide open. I now see.



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