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The Story Continues: A Personal Narrative Of Change, Choice And Growth

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Charline S. Russo

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ABSTRACT

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balance and navigate this program on top of the rest of our life. You never doubted I could do it, but you also never failed to give a much-needed pep talk and hug when needed. I couldn’t have done it without you. I’m excited to close this chapter and start the next one with you and the family we are creating together.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

As I began my capstone project, the first question I was asked was obvious, yet incredibly difficult: What do you want to research and write about? The question felt so large and daunting. The possibilities felt endless; where would I even start? After looking into a number of topics related to coaching and organizational dynamics, I stopped looking outside for the *perfect* topic and decided to look inward: What did I really want to spend time writing about? I thought about how I had been looking for the *perfect* topic, one that would be interesting to others, rather than thinking about my own journey and evolution. One of the most challenging and uncomfortable aspects of my time in the Organizational Dynamics program has been what a personal and introspective process it has been. Over time I have leaned into the discomfort more and more. This capstone feels like the final push to dive into the deep end.

The concepts of personal narrative and narrative identity (McAdams, 2001; Adler & McAdams, 2007; Bauer et al., 2008; McAdams, 2018) have resonated with me from my earliest days in the Organizational Dynamics program. Throughout my time in the program, I felt as if some of the most important life moments were occurring—key life moments—which represented a period of transition (Cox, 2006) that needed to be worked through. I recognized the importance of making sense of these life stories by finding and making meaning (Bauer et al., 2008; Frankl, 2006). The lessons from the classroom, as well as the readings, exercises, and experiences in the program, allowed me to take a step back and better understand what was really going on for me at the time; namely, why I may have felt, acted, or reacted the way I did and how I could continue to evolve as a person and in my relationships with others.

While I struggled and continue to struggle at times with the key life question—Who am I?—I have learned that my personal narrative and identity (McAdams, 2001) are not fixed; they continue to evolve based on past and future experiences. According to Adler and McAdams (2007), "As people accumulate new experiences over time, their motivations, goals, and autobiographical priorities change and their personal narratives evolve" (p. 98). My time in the Organizational Dynamics program changed the course of my life story. It permanently altered my way of thinking and my world view (Cox, 2006). While the journey is not over, the key lessons and experiences outlined in this capstone are pivotal to understanding this personal development, and reflection on these moments is key to continuing the journey and evolving as a person.

The theories of adult learning and development have also served as key underpinnings to my journey in the program, particularly those outlined and explored by Cox (2006). While going through my own learning and development journey, it has been important for me to not only understand these theories from a personal perspective, but also as a coach. In order to be an effective coach, I want to use my own experiences to better understand and empathize with my clients, and I attempt to do this through reflection and critical analysis.

Goals of the capstone

This capstone is a personal portfolio of my journey and lessons learned throughout my experience in the Organizational Dynamics program and the Organizational Consulting and Executive Coaching (OCEC) cohort. My capstone is a personal narrative of my journey through the program, weaving together the experiences and lessons I encountered along the way. Through this approach, I illustrate the connections between what I learned through classes and coursework with real-life examples. My focus is on deeply exploring and sharing my personal experiences in the early days as a member of the OCEC cohort, my Executive Coaching engagement, my Organizational Consulting project (an exploration of authenticity and its importance in the workplace) and navigating the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Finally, I attempt to uncover how these experiences and the lessons learned can and will continue to shape and impact my future as I look ahead at what's next.

Personal background

In order to fully understand my experience in the program, it is important to describe the context of what was going on for me personally and professionally over the three-year period when I was enrolled in the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania. During my time pursuing my graduate degree, I had a number of significant and life-changing events occur in my life. I enrolled in the Organizational Dynamics program after I had moved to Philadelphia and was living there for less than a year, after spending my entire life in New York City. While Philadelphia and New York City are not far apart in terms of distance, I felt far away from my family, friends, and the world I knew. Shortly before I began my first course, I got engaged to my now husband and ran the New York City marathon (after only picking up running a couple of years before). The following summer my husband landed a new job in Los Angeles, so we moved there shortly before our wedding in September 2019. In addition, during this time I had a number of developments in my career, including leaving my job at a law firm in Philadelphia where I was unhappy, returning to my former employer as a contractor, and then rejoining that company as an employee in a new permanent role 1 month before our wedding. Finally, while still adjusting to my cross-country move, the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the Spring of 2020, turning all of our worlds completely upside down and personally impacting mine in ways I could have never expected.

Experiencing all of these life developments and changes threw me for a loop. My life story (McAdams, 2001), as I thought I knew it, was completely thrown off course; I didn't know who I was anymore. As McAdams (2001) noted,

> …identity becomes a problem when the adolescent or young adult first realizes that he or she is, has been, or could be many different (and conflicting) things and experiences a strong desire, encouraged by society, to be but one (large, integrated, and dynamic) thing. (p. 102)

I didn't know how to reconcile all of the things that now made up who I was, as many of them felt like interruptions to who I thought I was and what I was going to be. Each of these experiences represented a disorienting dilemma in which my personal beliefs, assumptions, values, and motivations were challenged, resulting in personal transformation from critical reflection and self-evaluation (Mezirow, 1991; Cox, 2006). As someone who desires and finds comfort in predictability and stability, I had an incredibly difficult time adapting and adjusting while, at the same time, going through the Organizational Dynamics program and focusing on coaching and consulting. In order for me to learn and develop in this program, I was required to do a number of things that did not necessarily come naturally and certainly were not comfortable. During my time in the program, I frequently found myself needing to be vulnerable, navigate conflict, and let go of my fear of failing. As challenging and difficult as that was, these actions forced me to throw the predictable out the window and afforded me the opportunity to learn far more than I could have expected and develop further as a person, student, and professional. Through learning about how to help people and organizations manage change, I found myself able to apply many of the lessons to my own life experiences. However, this exercise did not always occur in real time. In looking back and reflecting, I can see how implementing some of the tools and techniques I learned could have served me well in navigating the changes going on in my own life.

While this capstone is a deeply personal reflection on my time in the program, my hope is that my experiences may serve as a helpful reference for others in the program. Many of the lessons I learned may be helpful to others in their work in their organizations and as Executive Coaches. Inevitably, we all experience change and times of stress in our lives, and we carry these stresses to both our personal and professional lives. It is important to look at real-life examples, break them down, and apply what we have learned in order to help ourselves and others navigate these times, leading to more productive lives and work experiences. I have also drawn from the experiences I have had and the work I have done at my company. It is not only a time of tremendous change for my firm, but I find myself having to help navigate employees through this change in my role as Human Resources Business Partner for our new and fast-growing talent populations. I have experienced employees struggle with change, as well as new types of talent come into the organization who feel they do not have a place there.

It is important to note that I do not believe my experiences have been more difficult or greater than those of others; in fact, others have experienced far more life-alternating and even devastating events. However, the short period of time in which these experiences occurred, in conjunction with my enrollment in the Organizational Dynamics program, has provided me with a unique case study in which to view the lessons learned through my courses with real-life experiences.

One of the first phrases I remember hearing in one of my classes in the program was *change is loss*” There is an element of grief that is important to recognize in each change, as it represents the loss of something. This phrase stuck with me over the last few years. With each change in my life, I recognized much of what made the experience challenging was that I had to let go of something else in order to accept the new. Working through this change has given me greater empathy for others going through change and has greatly impacted my coaching practice.

Change is also inevitable. We are bound to experience change in life, both personally and professionally. What are the tools and lessons that can help us navigate these changes that disrupt our norms? While I was working on determining what I wanted to write my capstone about, I kept coming back to the concept of self—the concept that drew me in from my first courses in the OCEC cohort. While researching topics on the subject as it relates to coaching and organizations, I began to think about my own self and how I have evolved during my experience in the Organizational Dynamics program.

This capstone allows me the opportunity to explore and better understand myself, which can lead me to become a more effective coach and in my career in Human Resources (HR). In our current fast-paced culture, it is rare that we have the opportunity to pause and reflect. That’s what I intend to do with my capstone: to pause and reflect on this experience and the impact it has had and will continue to have on my life going forward. McAdams (2018) captures what I intend to uncover with this capstone with these words: “a story about how I came to be the person I am becoming” (p. 364).

Structure of the capstone

This capstone is a personal exploration of my experiences in the OCEC cohort in the context of navigating the personal changes and experiences in my life. In the exploration of each experience, I reflect on the self-awareness that was gained, including what I learned about myself, how my assumptions were challenged, how I changed as a result of the experience, and how it affected various personal and professional aspects of my life. To conclude, I focus on the future and how these experiences and lessons can be carried forward on the road ahead.

My reviews of the literature relating to the theories, concepts, and works that influenced me are embedded throughout my capstone in the examples of my personal experiences and my reflections on how these lessons have impacted me and will continue to impact me in the future.

CHAPTER 2

EXPERIENCE IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS PROGRAM AND OCEC COHORT

When I enrolled in the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) in the Fall of 2017, I admit I didn't really know what to expect. Frankly, I didn't even know what I wanted to get out of it. I had known that I wanted to earn an advanced degree. My father and I had discussed the value of an advanced degree for a few years so when we moved to Philadelphia, I decided I wanted to take advantage of the many reputable institutions and programs there. While I was not looking for an off-ramp from my career in HR, I knew I didn't want to study for a master's degree in HR. I didn't know my ultimate career goal, but I did know that I didn't want to pigeonhole myself into strictly HR. When I found the Organizational Dynamics program at Penn, it felt as if it related enough to HR but would also expand my horizons and, hopefully, the opportunities for me professionally.

When I was accepted into the program, I made the decision to enroll in the OCEC cohort. When I think back at that time, I enrolled because I met Dr. Linda Pennington, one of the OCEC faculty members, at an admissions event, and she encouraged me to apply. In all honesty, I thought to myself, *Why not?* I had no real direction in the program and thought the topics sounded interesting enough. It would also be nice to be with the same classmates for the first six courses of the program; I didn't know many people in Philadelphia and thought this would help me meet others in the area.

Once enrolled, I received the information on our first course, including the syllabus. When I began reading, I realized just how little I knew about what I was about to get into. The words seemed to jump off the page:

> This course is 'experiential,' meaning learning will occur through your direct interaction with course activities and with others in the class. This course will require your willingness to 'be yourself' and to be open to the impact your being has on others. (2017 OCEC syllabus, p. 1)

From those first words on the syllabus, my mind began to race. What kind of activities? What do they mean by direct interaction with others? Most of all, what exactly do they mean by to "be yourself?"

Assumptions and guesses flooded my head. This kind of course description was brand new to me. In my past experience as a student, every course syllabus I encountered specifically laid out exactly what would take place in the course (namely, what lessons were to be learned and specifics regarding the expectations for me as a student). This approach was something completely different—and quite unnerving.

As someone who finds comfort in predictability and structure, I knew from the moment I received the course syllabus that I was stepping far out of my comfort zone. No agenda was provided for each of the class meetings nor was a breakdown given about the various activities in which we would be expected to participate. Truthfully, I came into the course feeling skeptical; how could an entire course take place with, based on what I could tell, such loose guidelines and structure? During my experience in the program and upon applying and reflecting upon the readings, I learned that trusting the process plays a major role in allowing oneself to step out of their comfort zone to learn and grow. As I reflect on this time, I recognize it served as my introduction to what Seashore et al. (2004) describe in their work about the "use of self," which "includes intentional conscious actions taken with the hope of bringing about change" (p. 50). For me, my comfort zone is the familiar and the predictable; however, in order for me to learn, develop, and change through this program, I was required to do a number of things that did not necessarily come naturally and certainly were not comfortable. First, I had to be vulnerable. Second, I would have to participate in and navigate conflict. Third, I had to let go of the fear of failing. These three actions allowed me to learn far more than I could have expected; to develop further as a person, student, and professional; and to set the foundation for my ability to absorb the necessary skills and knowledge for coaching and consulting.

My introduction to the Organizational Dynamics program and the OCEC cohort did not start softly or quietly; we were thrown into the deep end head first by being asked to reveal personal aspects about ourselves from the very beginning. On the first full day of the course, it became clear some members of the cohort were ready, willing, and able to allow themselves to be vulnerable. By opening up about their most difficult experiences and various aspects of their lives, I was both moved and terrified.

Too often I find myself trapped in a mindset of being uncertain about who I am and my perceptions of what is needed in the world around me (Seashore et al., 2004), as well as what I *should* be doing, thinking, or feeling . My use of the word *should* come from what I feel are other individual's and society's expectations of me. Rogers (1995) used the term *oughts* to describe what's on my mind: "Some individuals have absorbed so deeply…the concept 'I ought to be good,' or 'I have to be good,' that it is only with the greatest of inward struggle that they find themselves moving away from this goal" (p. 168). Bauer et al. (2008) described the cultural and societal pressures as follows:

"People's conceptions of well-being and of a life well-lived are influenced by prevailing social norms, religious values, economic and political considerations, and societal expectations regarding how lives should develop and what it means to live a good life." (p. 99). Before my time in the program, I wasn't aware of how these inner and external pressures were impacting the way I lived my life and holding me back from becoming a more complete and fulfilled version of myself. Throughout my experiences in the program, specifically with the cohort, I learned that opening myself up by speaking freely and acting in a way that felt authentic, real, and raw allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of who I am as an individual, what I can learn from others, and what I can contribute to others. In other words, "the potential for changing one's own world—the world as we perceive it—and to act on it and leave our mark and legacy for others to appreciate" (Seashore et al., 2004, p. 51). However, this journey of self during the program was not a straight path; there were many twists and turns, ups and downs. The experiences, tools, and techniques I gained in the program have increased my self-awareness and allow me to better understand myself and the way in which I show up in the world.

An early exercise in the OCEC cohort that presented a turning point for me in terms of allowing myself to be vulnerable in the course was the Empty Chair exercise, which was my introduction to experiential learning and learning by doing (Cox, 2006). During this exercise we were asked to express our hopes, concerns, and expectations for the cohort experience. Immediately, certain cohort members began actively participating by sharing their feelings without any reservations or expectations. It was the third full day of the course. Truthfully, I was exhausted and feeling overwhelmed; I could feel myself shutting down, not having any energy to participate. This reaction led to some more emotional feelings, which began to fuel my anxiety about opening up and allowing myself to be vulnerable to my cohort members because I wasn’t sure how they would react to what I had to say.

After everyone had participated, I realized I wouldn’t be able to gain anything from the exercise—and possibly from the rest of the course—if I didn’t participate by speaking up. I began to talk about how I was feeling; I expressed my fatigue, my feelings of being overwhelmed, and how at times I didn’t know how to handle being around everyone with such intensity in such close quarters for so many hours. After I spoke, the momentary relief I felt quickly turned to dread. What would my fellow cohort members say? How did I just make them feel? Immediately after speaking, I received only respect and attentiveness to my words from the other members of the cohort.

People not only seemed to understand how I felt, but they also expressed their appreciation for my honesty and felt they understood me better through my honesty. I recognized that by opening up about how I was feeling, I was letting people in and allowing them to understand me—that’s vulnerability. When I shut down and do not articulate my feelings, people cannot understand why I may be acting a certain way and that, in turn, shuts them out. While I most likely had heard and could have articulated this understanding prior to this experience, it is clear that learning by doing allowed me to experience it firsthand and then “reflect on the effects of the action and understand these effects so that if the same action is taken again in the same circumstances it would be possible to anticipate what would follow from the action” (Cox, 2006, p. 201). While it is not as simple as turning on a light switch that now allows me to be vulnerable, having a tangible experience about the power of vulnerability in that setting has allowed me to practice vulnerability in professional settings. From this experience I learned that by making oneself vulnerable, one can allow others to understand and provide support, creating a more meaningful experience for all involved.

The OCEC cohort was also my introduction into the world of Executive Coaching, which is a space I felt drawn to immediately due to its focus on the individual; it looks at the whole person within a professional and personal context. The first experiential coaching exercise we did as a cohort was one that provided a valuable perspective and learning opportunity. During this exercise we split up into groups and were asked to play each role: coach, client, timekeeper, and observer. I went into the activity expecting to learn and gain the most knowledge while acting as the coach. However, I found my time as the client to be the most illuminating because I gained the most insight. It forced me to recognize what words and actions from the coach allowed me to let my guard down so I could allow myself to be vulnerable within the coaching experience, which, in turn, were the moments when the most revelations and groundbreaking occurred.

By acting as the client, I was able to better understand what a coach needs to do in order to move the client to where they need to be, namely by highlighting what kinds of questions are the most effective, what body language might relay to the client, and how the client's participation is equally, if not more, critical to the relationship and development than the coach knowing what are the *right* questions to ask. This learning is done, in large part, through understanding the values and motivations of the client. (Spence & Oades, 2011), Viewing the client as a whole person with basic human needs is essential to gaining the most benefit from a coaching engagement. Spence and Oades (2011) noted that

> coaches have the opportunity to create (with the coachee) an atmosphere in coaching that enhances needs satisfaction based on what it assists the coachee to think about, what it helps them to feel and what it supports them to do. (p. 43)

Without understanding the client's basic needs and their values and motivations, the coaching engagement will be completely one-sided and will not result in the formation of a relationship.

Building that rapport and relationship is critical to the success for both the coach and the client; it's impossible without vulnerability for both parties involved. As noted by Schein (2016),

> …[W]hen we get to the issue of how to build a relationship, we have to recognize that it is ultimately a joint responsibility and that the building process is a series of interactions where each party is implicitly measuring the depth of the relationship after the interaction. (p. 29)

The client cannot fully invest in the engagement if they do not feel that the coach is equally, if not more, invested. This interaction must also come from an authentic place, not from obligation or for financial gain. This exercise highlighted what Rogers (2016) identified as "the high level of trust that is necessary for both parties and how it is fostering that kind of environment that makes a coaching experience powerful" (p. 25). The exercise allowed me to realize that great or brilliant questions are not inherently so; they are defined by the kinds of answers that are drawn from the client. These questions can only be asked when the coach is in tune with and understands their client in terms of their preferences, attributes, history, and point of view. Rogers (2016) noted:

> Real rapport comes from unconditional acceptance of the client…Unconditional acceptance means that you are curious about the client. You want to know what it

> is like to talk in his or her shoes. You accept not just the positive things…but the parts that are less admirable which they may feel ashamed or worried. (p. 34)

This realization and understanding pushed through the narrow lens of what I understood in regard to the coaching relationship and allowed me to gain a deeper knowledge of the essential elements of what makes a coaching relationship effective. Unconditional acceptance is challenging to put into practice but is essential in forming the relationship and developing trust, which are essential components of a successful coaching engagement.

This lesson stayed with me throughout the course of the program, particularly during my Executive Coaching engagement, as well as at work. In my role as an HR Business Partner, I provide coaching to not only the employees I support, but to the senior leadership of the groups. To be an effective coach and advisor requires I establish trust. While it is important to remain focused on the work, I have also found in my one-on-one meetings with leadership that by asking them what is going on for them and finding out what is challenging, either personally or professionally, I have been able to encourage them to open up to me in deeper and more meaningful ways by creating a safe space for them. They know that I care, can be trusted, and will not judge them.

This lesson regarding looking at the overall experience with others rather than simply executing tasks was highlighted for me during my experience in the OCEC cohort. When we were told in the introduction to the cohort that we would need to learn how to navigate conflict as a group, I didn’t fully understand what was meant. Was this in reference to some people not liking an activity or one another so we would simply have to power through to get a task done?

The importance of this element and the functional dynamics of our cohort were not fully revealed to me until we participated in the Farmer Exercise, which consisted of each participant receiving a few slips of paper with a difference piece of information on each slip. Without showing each other our slips of paper, we needed to answer two questions as a group. We had about 30 minutes to complete the task. With nine participants, the exercise had moments when it seemed as if too much chaos was going on for us to successfully complete the task. However, we all celebrated when we realized we had successfully solved the puzzle. Afterwards, we all formed a circle with our teachers to talk about the activity and how it went. While reflecting, most of the group commented on how we all managed to work through those moments of chaos and how we each played a role in the process.

All of a sudden, in the midst of our positive feedback and celebration, one of our cohort members spoke up and described, quite bluntly, how she felt we had failed. She said we didn't execute the task efficiently and, in her opinion, we didn't succeed at all, even though we solved the puzzle. I was shocked. I felt the heat rise within my body, and a mix of emotions began to swirl within me—hurt, confusion, and even anger. Everyone listened to our cohort member; some other members engaged in a respectful and appreciative conversation. However, I could not bring myself to do so. I stewed in my feelings and swallowed them down, refusing to confront or deal with the issue with anyone but myself.

After the exercise we sat through a presentation on giving and receiving feedback, which is described as "critical for the continual re-direction of efforts based on a constantly changing environment of people, process, and situations." (Seashore et al., 2004, p. 51). During this presentation we learned that receiving feedback does not mean you always have to take it. However, receiving feedback means engaging in conversation skillfully and reflectively. After the presentation we split up into groups of three people and were asked to discuss and reflect upon our feelings regarding giving and receiving feedback. I was placed in a group with the cohort member who was unhappy with the way the previous exercise went. Initially, a sense of dread washed over me: How would I speak to this person after the way she made me, and as I interpreted the rest of the cohort, feel? As we began our discussion, I remembered what we heard in the presentation regarding what receiving feedback really is: engaging in conversation skillfully and reflectively. I decided to ask the cohort member to explain more about why she felt the way she did. Through listening to her describe her past experiences, both personal and work, I began to understand why efficiency was so important to her and why she felt we had ultimately failed the exercise, even though we had achieved the ultimate goal. Her reframing (Seashore et al., 2004) of the experience allowed me to look at the situation from a different perspective. I realized then that we all—myself included—bring various parts of ourselves and our own life experiences to every situation in which we are in so it’s critical to understand this insight when navigating conflict and tension within a group.

After this discussion I realized the exercise itself was only meant to be a catalyst for reflection and discussion so we could fully flesh out what had happened during the process and what we had learned. Inevitably, conflict would, and did, come up. The rest of us were able to brush off any moments of tension or conflict throughout the exercise because we had completed the goal successfully. However, the cohort member who raised her concerns was the one brave enough to bring these failures to the forefront. The two of us discussed what had happened. I told her that by talking to her I better understood where she was coming from in that moment. She expressed how she recognized how her delivery might have been better so she could be more effective and less jarring to the group. Levi (2016) noted:

> Conflict can have negative effects on a team by creating strong negative emotions and stress, interfering with communication and coordination, and diverting attention from task and goals. Conflicts can destroy team cohesion, damage social relations, and create winners and losers, inevitably becoming a source of conflict in the future. One factor that determines whether a conflict will have a positive or negative effect is the emotional intensity of the conflict.... Mild task conflict occurs when teams debate, express differences of opinions, and are willing to disagree with each other, while intense task conflict occurs when team members clash or argue about differences of opinion and criticize each other. (p. 140)

The conflict our group aligned with felt more like an intense task conflict in the beginning and a minor task conflict upon reflection. I learned from this experience the importance of navigating and dealing with conflict. Levi (2016) noted, "Sometimes [teams] make bad decisions in order to avoid conflict rather than learning how to manage it effectively" (p. 150). In this circumstance, the structure of the program had us reflect upon the exercise so we could see and work through any conflict that arose. By creating a safe environment from the beginning that facilitates feelings of trust, the professors established the proper environment for us to navigate conflict. Levi (2016) stated:

> Improvement of a team's ability to manage conflict can be achieved in several ways. Creating a psychologically safe environment helps teams collaboratively deal with conflicts rather than trying to avoid them. Mediators can be used to help manage communications during a conflict and develop trust among the participants. (p. 151)

Based on my personal experience in this conflict, I recognized the conflict that arises in the teams I support as an HR professional. I am often brought in as the mediator or the advisor to help resolve a conflict within a team. The challenge is that most people want to avoid conflict while addressing it. In other words, they want to resolve the issue without having to *go there*. Kegan and Lahey (2007) noted,

> If we feel snagged by one another and think to resolve or eliminate the snag by teaching the other, we are usually led to trying to drive out as much of the experience of conflict as possible…This is ironic because we end up trying to engage the conflict by driving it as far from view as possible. (p. 214)

The roots of conflict can be so much deeper than what the issues appear to be so it's important to fully address them, rather than try to work around or gloss over them. What I have learned is that I cannot do that without having helped create an environment that provides a safe space for dealing with conflict head on. This approach can be challenging in the corporate environment. My role is to build relationships with the leadership and employees so that when conflict arises, they know they can come to me to help them effectively navigate it. This lesson not only resonated for me personally but also in my professional career. Conflict is inevitable, but what is important is how one navigates that conflict and the experience that creates for others.

Another lesson that resonated with me in my personal journey was the importance of leaning into making mistakes—and even failing. During an exercise in one of the early courses in the program, we split up into groups and were asked to work together on a consulting case. As I was reading the case, I soon became quite confused. When I looked to my group members for answers, I saw they were also confused. My immediate reaction was panic: How could we complete the task correctly if we were confused and didn't understand the assignment? My perfectionist ways and desire for control started to get the best of me. I now recognize these desires were heightened during this time because I felt a lack of control in other aspects of my life. This lack of control led me to strongly seek control in any aspect that I feasibly could. With so little time, we attempted to assemble a rough presentation.

After the first group presented and it was our turn to show the teachers and cohort what we had developed, it became quite clear to me that we had missed the mark. A wave of discomfort and feeling of failure washed over me. How could we have done so poorly? How did we go so wrong? When it was time for us to present, I only felt dread. As Dr. Charline Russo, a member of the OCEC cohort faculty, began to ask questions and make her observations, she talked about how we had put together a coaching plan, rather than offer consulting. My stomach dropped: We didn't complete the task we were given. The story I began to tell myself was that we had failed. That *I* had failed.

As we continued talking about and reflecting on what we had presented as a group, however, it became quite clear this part of the process was an essential one within the program; it has stayed with me throughout my remaining courses—namely, the shift from viewing success as the final product versus what got me there and what I learned along the way—to trust the process. Rather than simply absorb information and do the assignment either correctly or incorrectly, resulting in simply receiving feedback on what we had done well or poorly, I was challenged to think much more deeply. With the idea of answers being categorized as right or wrong thrown out the window, I had to define success in the course—and the entire program, as well as my career—differently. What has changed for me is I have accepted the fact that I don't have all the answers. I don't know it all. I am better able to lean into the discomfort of not knowing something and approaching from a learning and growth mindset. This new mindset has allowed me to be more reflective and self-aware, which I believe not only creates a more open and positive experience for me in situations but also for others working with me.

The self-awareness gained throughout the program occurred across the courses, particularly from the reflective exercises and assessments in which we participated. One of the assessments we were given was the Emergenetics® profile, which is an assessment that combines the characteristics that emerge from life experience with one's inherited genetics. When I received my Emergenetics® profile, I was struck by how useful it was in describing and explaining myself. For example, my profile showed that I am 40% Structural and 31% Social, demonstrating I have a preference for those Thinking attributes. The high-level overview for Structural thinking reflects being a practical thinker who likes guidelines, is cautious of new ideas, is predictable, and learns by doing. For Social thinking, attributes include being relational, intuitive about people, socially aware, empathetic, and learns from others. I felt these were accurate descriptions of how I think, feel, and learn.

What I found to be particularly helpful about the Emergenetics® profile was how one is able to use all of the behavioral and thinking attributes, even though some of them come more naturally than others. That said, while it's possible to apply any of the attributes, operating outside one's comfort level takes more energy. This description and scale approach further pushed me to allow myself to be vulnerable by recognizing the attributes that I don't prefer and better understand why I may feel uncomfortable or exhausted during certain activities and situations. This self-awareness has allowed me to learn more and gain a deeper experience than if I continue to stay within the boundaries of my preferences. I have to allow myself to be vulnerable within the space of where I feel uncomfortable so I can gain the most benefit from each learning opportunity.

Another helpful aspect of the Emergenetics® profile for me was to see it can be a helpful tool in better understanding others. Having a toolbox of terms that aren't judgmental or loaded allows people to work with one another in a more productive way. For example, understanding that someone with whom I was working on a project or activity had a preference for Conceptual thinking and working with the definition of that preference turned out to be more productive and helpful than jumping to the wrong and judgmental conclusion that someone was *out there* or inefficient. Gaining an understanding of a person's or an organization's preferences is essential to coaching and consulting because both processes cannot be successful if the coach or consultant simply tries to adhere to their own personal preferences. Striking the balance in leveraging preferences but keeping minds open to the uncomfortable in order to improve and grow, is essential to the success of any coaching relationship or consulting project. This approach is also essential for understanding team dynamics in the workplace. This understanding is essential in fostering the ability to function as a group and navigate conflict by building the interpersonal relationships necessary to form a cohesive group and function effectively to complete tasks and assignments.

Another tool I learned about in that program that emphasized the importance of awareness is the concept of the Johari Window. When it was first introduced in the early days of the OCEC program, we were asked to think about what is important for other people to know about us that you can bring to the team, such as skills and experiences. By letting others know what our strengths are, we not only reveal how we can help lead to the success of a team or group with our knowledge, skills, or experiences, but the revelation itself is essential to a properly functioning team. As we feel comfortable, we minimize the unknown area. While knowing what each member of a team does well can help a team succeed, the comfort level of the team as a whole with one another is an equally important part of the process. This concept resonated with me because I often feel uncomfortable with what is not known. In addition, a level of vulnerability goes along with this concept. Revealing parts of oneself to others involves making the individual vulnerable in one way or another.

This concept was also demonstrated through our Lego Man exercise when we split up into small groups and were given a bag of Legos. Each team had the same number and shapes of Legos. In the back of the room was Lego Man—a model made of Legos that each team would need to copy using their own Legos. However, only one team member at a time was allowed to go over and look closely at Lego Man, then report back to the team what they had observed so we could re-create it. After we split up into teams, we were advised to reveal to one another what we are good at—namely, which skills we could bring to this specific activity and our team. I immediately felt uncomfortable; not only was I asked to reveal something about myself to people I didn't know well, but I also had to promote something about myself. Being humble was something that I grew up, recognizing it as an important trait and considering self-promotion was often viewed as bragging. This insight reveals what is described as the influence of culture on stories of the self (Adler & McAdams, 2007). Looking back, I can see this story is what I told myself based on cultural influences and concepts: Be humble, and don't self-promote.

Before I had too much time to reflect on my discomfort, my teammates quickly shared what value they felt they could add to the process. Watching them demonstrate the act of self-promotion allowed me to relax and understand these self-revelations weren't bragging but ultimately an important aspect of our team's ability to function. What I learned was the importance of revealing one's unknown areas of skills and knowledge with those who work with us. Whether it be a team at work or in a coach and client relationship, we cannot work with what we do not know. Building an environment of trust so that we and others feel comfortable revealing the good and the bad about ourselves is essential to the success of that relationship.

The OCEC cohort was an experience unlike any other I have had. By diving head first into an intensive learning environment in a cohort setting, I learned more than I expected or would have thought possible. I had my doubts. For example, in looking back at my notes about some of the activities throughout the courses, I must admit I wrote that I didn't always understand the purpose or what I was going to get out of it. However, after taking the time to reflect on how I felt during the courses and subsequently, I have learned each of those moments was part of the process. The challenge itself in letting go of always needing to understand was an incredibly valuable exercise for me. I learned not only did I need to trust the process, but I also needed to trust the faculty and other members of the cohort. This foundation prepared me for not only the rest of the Organizational Dynamics program but also for experiences throughout my personal and professional life.

CHAPTER 3

EXPERIENCE AS AN EXECUTIVE COACH

While I discovered during my time in the OCEC cohort that I, unlike my classmates, was not ready to go out and start my own consulting or coaching practice, I learned how I am able to apply practices from these areas into my career in HR. In addition, I found myself drawn to the coaching space and plan to further explore and gain skills that would allow me to potentially become an Executive Coach later in my career. Much of this foundation was established during my Executive Coaching engagement with my client Julia.

At the end of the OCEC cohort courses, we were assigned an Executive Coaching engagement with *a real-life client*. While we had practiced coaching in the classroom and with fellow students, I was nervous about working with someone outside of the program. This person would be looking to me for help in their professional life, and the task felt daunting.

My experience as an Executive Coach to Julia was a very rewarding and meaningful one. I learned a lot about myself as a coach, as well as how impactful the coaching relationship is for the client. While this insight may sound obvious, it didn’t truly resonate with me until I could witness it firsthand. It was exciting to put to use the tools and theories we learned about in the classroom and through readings into practice. It also made a tremendous impact on me to see how my coaching helped my client make progress toward her goal and had a positive effect on her career.

My client Julia originally sought coaching for two main reasons: (1) to help her make the shift from individual contributor to leader and (2) to improve her relationship with feedback. She was also navigating the challenges of balancing her career and parenthood. When we first met in December 2018, she had recently returned from parental leave to her role as Director of Product Marketing at a start-up business. She explained to me that she had originally been hired to lead all of the marketing operations but was, for all intents and purposes, demoted to focus only on product marketing. She noted that during her career to date, she had been an individual contributor and was now expected to be a leader within this start-up but was having trouble making that shift.

She also explained to me her relationship with feedback. Julia noted that she relied on positive feedback to motivate her and allowed negative or critical feedback to completely bring her down. During this initial conversation I mostly listened because I wanted to get to know my client and better understand her point of view. I then explained the coaching process to her by identifying three components: the collection of feedback, the assembly and delivery of the feedback report, and the coaching sessions based on her goal. We immediately clicked and had a warm conversation. By the end of our first meeting, she indicated she was excited to get started.

During my time working with Julia, I often referred to the work of Rogers (1995) because it explores the relationship between therapist and client and takes a humanistic approach, focusing on the people (who they really are) involved. While coaching is not therapy, the lines are often blurry; the theories of counseling can and should be taken into account in any successful engagement (Bachkirova & Cox, 2005; Grant & Cavanaugh, 2007). While coaching shouldn’t intend to address the psychological needs of the client, the coaching engagement can often result in therapeutic outcomes (Grant & Cavanaugh, 2007). It became clear to me that Julia subscribed to many *oughts* (Rogers, 1995); she was an overachiever and perfectionist who placed many unrealistic expectations on herself, particularly in her professional life. She had an underlying urge and need to please others, which often detracted her from doing what she needed or wanted to do in service of herself. She also tended to default to what she was already good at, rather than throw herself into a new arena and take risk—even if the default kept her from experiences necessary for her professional development. This insight represented a lack of confidence and an avoidance of challenges in an effort to avoid potential failure (Cox, 2006).

On a personal level, I could relate to much of what she was experiencing—namely, navigating life changes while reconciling a personal inclination toward the predictable and one's comfort zone. As Cox (2006) noted, "…the coach can use the appropriate point in the learning cycle, possibly augmenting the feedback with reflections on his/her own experience if appropriate in order to encourage different perspectives." (p. 210). This insight was important for me to recognize not only to empathize with my client but to integrate into my practice.

As her coach, I wanted to help Julia unlock the personal potential I knew existed from within. I found myself referring to and implementing concepts of the use of self (Seashore et al., 2004) and self-help while working with Julia. As described by Seashore et al. (2004), the self-help and human potential movements:

> …embodied ideas, philosophies, and ways of teaching that were to become vital forces in shaping the construction and protocols of coaching as we know it today. Though they took a variety of forms, they shared the premise that transformation is within one's own power; that through the development of one's innate

> potential, one can experience an improved quality of life, characterized, at best, by happiness, creativity, inner pace, and fulfillment. (p. 195)

The concept of one having the natural ability and power within oneself to take charge of and change their own life deeply resonates with me and what I want to provide to my clients as their coach. As a coach, I view much of my role as being able to draw out what already exists innately but may not be visible due to the complexities of human nature, relationships, and dynamics. On a personal level, I have found throughout my life that once I feel that something is within my own control, I am better able to manage my stress and anxiety levels. Even though that control may be difficult and requires hard work on my behalf, feeling more in control so I'm able to affect change has been extremely powerful. I wanted to instill that feeling and power within Julia. As Wildflower and Brennan (2011) noted,

> Help your client envision the life they would like to be leading. Support him in taking steps toward that future and encourage him to speak to other people about this, so that they are more likely to support and amplify his new sense of who he is. (p. 198)

Adopting this approach is what I wanted to do for Julia, which would allow her to recognize her own sense of agency in her career and where it would take her, rather than default to feeling stuck in what those around were dictating. I also wanted to help her identify the choices she had and was able to make. Looking back, I can see I was desiring a greater sense of control within my own life and was navigating the choices I had in front of me. I knew what a struggle making such decisions could be and wanted to help Julia navigate it.

Over the next few months I worked with Julia on her 360 feedback questions and providers and met with them to gather their feedback. Her providers were a good mix of managers and peers, both at her current and previous companies. While I was conducting the 360 interviews, I had regular sessions with Julia so I could get to know and understand her better, build our relationship, and learn more about what was going on for her at work during this time. We developed a strong rapport; I genuinely looked forward to our time together. A lot of changes were happening at her company, including the termination of her manager and the hiring of a new one. Such changes understandably led to uncertainty and angst on Julia's part, but I continued to make the coaching engagement all about her: her goals, her needs, and her aspirations. As Cox (2006) noted, "Learning to understand their motivations is an important step for coaching clients" (p. 203). This approach allowed her to continue to focus on herself and what she had control over, despite the unstable circumstances around her.

Finally, it was time to deliver the 360-feedback report, and Julia expressed she was nervous. Her nervousness was not surprising, given her relationship to feedback based on what she described to me when we first met. But it also made me recognize what a deeply vulnerable place coaching clients put themselves in. They are allowing their coach to speak to those in their lives and have them share feedback and information about themselves, with no control over the narrative. This aspect of coaching struck me and changed the way I see and treat my coaching clients in the future.

When I asked her to tell me more about how she was feeling, she told me that she felt she knew what the feedback was going to be. I was pretty stunned when she described what she expected in the feedback; she was, for the most part, spot-on. This insight showed me her level of self-awareness (Seashore et al., 2004), which was feedback also reflected in the 360 interviews. Rather than confirm her thoughts on what the feedback report was going to indicate, I instead posed the questions: What if, instead of focusing on the feedback itself, you focus on your reaction to the feedback? How can you best prepare yourself to receive the feedback—both what you perceive as positive and what you perceive as critical? This shift and attempt to reframe the feedback represented an opportunity for Julia to make a choice in how she could experience this feedback so she could gain the most benefit from it (Patwell, 2019; Seashore et al., 2004) Through this reframing, Julia was to take a step back and make the focus on herself, rather than others. In addition, we discussed other things she could do to prepare for the feedback exercise (e.g., practice mindfulness, breathing exercises). This preparation would allow her to receive the feedback from a more open place.

The delivery of the feedback went smoothly. When we met, I asked her how she was feeling; she admitted she was nervous but felt as if she was in a good place to receive the feedback. This development showed me the importance, yet again, of focusing on the client. By suggesting that Julia focus on herself rather than the feedback, she was more in control. While we cannot control what others are going to say about us, we can make a choice in how we react. The transformational effects of reframing (Cox, 2006; Seashore et al., 2004) represented a pivotal learning for me not only as a coach, but as a person navigating choices in my own life.

I let Julia know that I would sit with her while she read through the report and that she could take as much time as she needed. I also explained that she could vocalize her initial thoughts and ask any questions, but she also didn’t need to feel pressure to do so. This was her time so I wanted to make that clear to her. Julia took her time reading through the report. She occasionally asked questions and took time to reflect between questions. One thing she did that surprised me was she became quite fixated on who said what. She would read a piece of feedback and say, "Was this Matt?" or "I think I know who said this so…" After two or three of these, I asked Julia to pause and reflect on why she kept asking who provided pieces of feedback. She explained that she felt she needed to know who provided the feedback so she could understand it. I explained that the feedback is what it is; she can take it or leave it, regardless of who said it. So instead of spending energy figuring out who said it, why don't we keep the focus on Julia and what you need? At the time I wasn't sure this completely registered, but I do think it allowed her to reflect a bit on how she views and takes feedback. I thought about Rogers (1995) and how he explains the process: "As a client moves toward being able to accept his own experience, he also moves toward the acceptance of the experience of others. He values and appreciates both his own experience and that of others for what it *is*." (p. 174) I wanted Julia to focus on her own experience and to allow herself to be vulnerable when reading the feedback. If she spent the whole time reading the report thinking about those who wrote it, she would not be able to absorb and understand the most important person in that report—herself. This approach would also prevent her from fully seeing how others experience her and not allow her to get what she really needed from this engagement, which was a better understanding of herself and her strengths, weaknesses, and desires professionally.

After she was done reading, I let her know that we would schedule time to fully reflect on and discuss the feedback she received. I told her not to look at the feedback report for a few days and to let what she read sink in, but not to fixate or overanalyze.

She was grateful and appeared relieved that the anticipation of the report was finally over.

When we connected the next week, she said she allowed the feedback to sink in. While Julia focused more on the critical feedback, she did not appear to be too hard on herself or let it unravel her. In fact, she came to our meeting with thoughtful notes on her preliminary goals. When we started to discuss them, she came up with the following areas for her to work on based on the feedback:

1. Planning and executing
2. Building self-confidence
3. Building expertise

As Julia's coach, I wanted to help ensure that these goals were not only aligned with what was identified in the feedback as areas needing improvement, but that they were also aligned with Julia's personal values and motivations because this approach would more likely result in successful outcomes for her (Cox, 2006). As we began to discuss these goals, I asked her questions about how she could become better at planning and executing and how she could become more confident. These questions were intentionally hard questions to answer. From getting to know Julia, I knew that planning and executing (i.e., setting quarterly goals and making progress on those) were challenging for her so I felt it would be hard for her to start from scratch and see improvement there. She was far more comfortable raising her hand for one-off needs around the office than focusing on her role and being strategic. I also feel that building confidence is a tricky goal in that focusing on confidence rarely leads to more confidence.

When we discussed building expertise in her area, I asked Julia questions on how she can do that and what that would look like. She immediately came up with action items that would help lead to this: attend a conference for her customers, conduct the leadership offsite, read through reports. This feedback was clearly something Julia could grasp. I also recognized that becoming an expert in her space would allow her to better plan and create business goals, as well as execute on them. This action, in turn, would lead to her feeling more confident as an expert in her area. Julia was very excited about her goal, and I was excited for her. I felt this was something that would have significant impact on her role and her original goal to shift into a leadership position.

When I asked her what she wanted to focus on within her goal over the next 2 weeks, Julia gave me a laundry list. Cox (2006) noted that during the coaching engagement, "…it is essential to review the actions detailed in the action plan and to provide feedback" (p. 209). I knew that with such a long list, we would never be able to track each goal and make progress. She said she wanted to attend this HR conference, plan her company offsite, and read through the McKinsey report. When I asked her if that felt like a reasonable amount of work and time for the next 2 weeks, she paused. I asked her, "What if you just focused on the conference while you are there? Focus on being there, talking to as many people as you can, learning as much as you can?" She said she hadn't thought about that before and that approach sounded like it would be a more pleasant experience.

When she returned from the conference, Julia sent me a text saying, "The conference went well! Learned a lot and am doing follow ups + documenting learnings today. Definitely good timing in advance of the off-site Monday-Tuesday. Great advice to focus on making the most of it."

While I felt the urge to explain that I was not giving her advice, I recognized that she was confusing my steering her to that decision as advice. She did the work on her own, and I was simply helping to facilitate. It was another example in our coaching engagement of the power of listening. Just by listening to Julia explain all of the things she wanted to accomplish in two weeks, I was overwhelmed. I went with my gut and questioned her about it, leading her to reflect and to make a decision that ultimately had a positive experience and led to a better outcome for my client.

After she attended the conference, we had our next session. I asked Julia about the conference, and she told me it went well; she had a lot of conversations and learned a lot. When I asked her to tell me more, she paused and looked confused. I didn't fill the silence and instead waited it out. She launched into all of her lessons from the conference and included many details. After our session, I received the following email from Julia:

> Subject: Very helpful!
>
> Hi Caroline,
>
> I was surprised that you had me talk about specific substantive learnings from the conference, but it ended up being so helpful! Documenting those has felt daunting, but now that I've had to articulate them to you it feels much more accessible.
>
> Thanks!

Her response represented a pivotal moment in my own journey of becoming a coach. Rather than think about what I was going to say or ask, I allowed room for silence and let my client guide the conversation. She went to a conference so she could make progress on her goal; I was curious about what she had learned. By allowing myself to be curious and let the client do the talking, I ultimately helped my client gain even more from the experience. It was one of the most impactful lessons of the entire coaching engagement for me.

Over the next few weeks, we continued to have bi-weekly sessions and discuss the progress she was making toward her goal as well as what was going on with her at work. By the fourth session, I got a sense that her energy seemed lower. When I discussed this with Charline during our supervisory call, she said that I could bring it up with Julia during our next session if that felt right. She also asked me if it could have been me: Was my own energy affecting how I was reading Julia? I realized we were having our coaching session late on Friday afternoons because this time worked well for Julia's schedule. However, this time of day and week for me is challenging because I am typically exhausted from the week. Relating to Rogers (1995), Charline helped me recognize the importance of self-awareness as the coach. Going forward, I will ask myself the questions that I may be wondering about my client and self-reflect.

A few days before our last session, Julia sent me a surprising message letting me know that she had been let go. In her words, "It was a bummer and pretty surreal, but also a gift. I'm getting severance pay, so I now have the opportunity to take my time exploring what's next." While the timing of this was surprising, I cannot say I was completely shocked. Thinking back on our conversations and the kind of feedback she was getting, it was clear that the company was still trying to figure out their direction. Her role became much less of a focus area, and her manager was making that clear. During our final session, we focused on reflecting on what she had learned during our engagement and looked toward the future. It became clear I was leaving Julia during a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991) and in the Ending phase of William Bridges' (2009) three phases of transitions. Julia had expressed previously not being entirely sure what she wants to do with her career; now she was faced to navigate her future after being let go.

While I knew she would spend time in the Neutral Zone and the Valley of Despair (Bridges, 2009), I also knew she would eventually reach the third phase: New Beginnings (Bridges, 2009). We talked about her viewing her termination as a gift; this reaction is a powerful word, and typically the client is not the one who can see the positive during such a difficult time. However, Julia felt she had been freed from a situation in which she felt stuck. I felt confident that while there would be difficult moments, Julia was well equipped from her 360 feedback as well as our coaching conversations to navigate this next phase of her journey in a way that would lead to something new, exciting, and rewarding for her.

Recently, Julia and I caught up. She let me know she has been consulting and is continuing to look for her next role, focusing on product management. It was exciting to hear that she had focused in on what she wants to do, but also giving herself time to explore before diving into the next job. Most importantly, she told me she and her family are spending more time together, which has been incredibly rewarding.

Overall, my Executive Coaching engagement was one that impacted me not only in my future practice but personally. It helped me better recognize and understand the importance of choice, navigating change, and the power of the use of self. It was also the ultimate lesson in the power of listening and being authentic in coaching. Working with and building a relationship with Julia were organic and showed me the importance of clicking with your client so the engagement can be truly effective. I was able to put into practice and use the tools we learned in the OCEC cohort, such as asking questions and allowing for silence. This engagement further deepened my passion for helping others find fulfillment in their careers. I plan to continue working with these kinds of clients in my future practice as an Executive Coach, as well as in my career in HR.

CHAPTER 4

EXPERIENCE IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTING

As previously mentioned, while I joined this program with the intent to broaden my possibilities from a professional standpoint, I was not looking for an off-ramp from my career in Human Resources. I found my way to HR about a year and a half after graduating from college. When I graduated, I did not have a solid idea about what I wanted to do. I took a couple of jobs after graduating, but quickly found myself feeling uninspired and restless. Having already worked for two organizations within a year and a half after graduating, I knew that my next move needed to be intentional. Instead of focusing on the broad mission of the organization, I thought about what kind of work I liked doing and what fulfilled me. Helping others, being a resource and "go to" for people, interacting with others, and problem solving were the things that fueled, energized and inspired me. Through my research, I stumbled upon articles about Human Resources and found my first HR job at my current organization relatively quickly. Luckily for me, I began working for an organization with a huge focus on training and professional development and had a team and boss who were inspiring, hard working, and wanted to make an impact. I was able to help employees navigate through the highs and lows of their personal and professional lives. It was rewarding, energizing, and most of all, it felt like me. What I had been searching for was authenticity and the ability to experience that in my professional career. Working for my organization in Human Resources was my first taste of authenticity in the workplace – feeling a true sense of alignment between who I am and what I am doing.

When I enrolled in my first course in the Organizational Dynamics program, I had recently moved to Philadelphia and had to leave my job at that organization. It was one of the hardest things I had ever had to do at that point. I had loved my experience working there, had incredible colleagues and always felt supported. My new job in Philadelphia was at a law firm where I was an HR Business Partner. Work-wise, I enjoyed much of what I was doing and was given increased responsibility and autonomy, which was an important next step in my career. However, from a culture and colleague perspective, I realized quickly that this would not be a good fit. The way this organization viewed HR was with much more of a traditional "hire and fire" mentality. There was no innovation; in fact, it was discouraged. The main purpose was to maintain the status quo and keep the attorneys happy. This did not align with my core values and motivations and I realized quickly that I had a choice and the ability to make a change. (Cox, 2006, Seashore et al., 2004).

Looking back on the experience, I was not only fortunate enough to make my way back to my current organization, but also for the timing of this whole experience and how it aligned with my time in the Organizational Dynamics program. I was able to dig into the experience and better understand what it is about organizations that make for positive or negative spaces for employees. As I began working on my Organizational Consulting project, I came back to what drew me to my career in the first place. For me, it's always come back to people. I am fascinated, energized, challenged, and rewarded in my career by the people with and for whom I work. I needed to be authentic to my own values and motivations. My project became a research paper entitled, "Bring Your Whole Self to Work: Encouraging and Promoting Authenticity in Organizations," where I explored the concepts around authenticity in the workplace and its effect on the employee experience. Through my research, I was able to discover just how powerful authenticity can be in the workplace, as well as its importance to me in my own career. It matters to me to work somewhere that I feel aligns with my own personal values and morals. Through this work, I was able to explore those concepts and recognize their importance in my own professional life.

From an early age, we are told to be true to ourselves. We hear sayings such as "be true to yourself," and are told to celebrate our uniqueness as what makes us special. However, throughout childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, we are pressured to conform and adapt into communities and societal structures. Slowly, but surely, what originally made us unique becomes something weird, unfamiliar to others, strange and alien. We learn how to adopt the interests, viewpoints and even feelings of those around us.

However, the true "you" does not disappear. Effective Use of Self allows an individual to recognize their choices and create a sense of agency and control in a given situation (Seashore et al., 2004; Patwell, 2019), which are critical to establishing self-efficacy (Cox, 2006; Seashore et al, 2004). In order to find meaning, we ask ourselves such questions as: What is the purpose of my life? and How do I find personal fulfillment? For many of us, these questions are the ones that lead us into our jobs and career paths. We work to determine what energizes us and what is our calling.

For those who work in organizations, we often find ourselves struggling within the corporate culture. Yet again, we are expected to adapt, fit in, and not disrupt. On top of this struggle, we are expected to get our jobs done and do them well. To do that we need to be innovative and creative and work well with others. These actions work against each other; we are asking people to suppress many elements of themselves yet still produce, problem solve, and add value. If we are not encouraged to be authentic and true to ourselves, how can any of this be truly achieved and sustained?

While few studies have been specifically focused on the results of promoting authenticity in the workplace, those studies that have been conducted have shown a correlation between promoting authenticity and positive work outcomes. One study showed strong evidence that paying attention to employee authenticity can help organizations create and sustain more positive work environments by promoting employee well-being and their long-term job satisfaction (Metin et al, 2016). Another study showed how authenticity is as important as drivers such as economic value and development value; authenticity can be used to attract talent and brand strategies in companies who incorporate and promote it (Reis et al., 2017).

During the summer of 2020 when racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement took center stage in the United States, I began to more clearly recognize the role that organizations need to play in increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace, as well as the importance and significance of authenticity. By allowing employees to be authentic, organizations can foster and attract more diverse, creative, and innovative talent. Their employees can have greater job satisfaction and fulfillment in their jobs and careers.

The definition of *authentic*, according to the *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.) dictionary, is an adjective with three meanings:

- “worthy of acceptance or belief”

- **“**not false or imitation”
- **“**true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character”

The concept of authenticity can be traced as far back as in ancient Greek philosophy and William Shakespeare’s statement: “To thine own self be true” (Harter, 2002, p. 382). Harter (2002) defines authenticity as “in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings” (p. 382). While other literature defines and alludes to authenticity, the common themes of truth, agreement, and harmony between the internal and external exist.

According to Brown (2010), an acclaimed researcher who has brought the concept of authenticity to a wide-ranging mass audience through her books, Ted Talk, and Netflix special, “Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are” (p. 50). By describing authenticity as a practice, Brown demonstrates that authenticity is not fixed; it is a state that we work toward through everyday actions.

Brown (2012) also made a critical connection between authenticity and vulnerability. She defines vulnerability as the gateway to courage, empathy, and creativity. We cannot reveal who we truly are unless we open up and are vulnerable. Brown discusses *vulnerability armor*, which is the concept of individuals pretending that they can avoid being vulnerable; however, experiencing vulnerability is not a choice. In my own journey in becoming more comfortable with vulnerability, I have learned that it is inevitable; the only aspect of vulnerability we can choose is how we respond. In order for us to reveal and be seen for who we truly are and be authentic, we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable.

The theoretical underpinnings of authenticity can be found in the work of Rogers (1995), specifically in a chapter entitled "'To Be That Self Which One Truly Is': A Therapist's View of Personal Goals." While he doesn't explicitly use the term authenticity, the concept of being one's true self clearly aligns with the definition of authenticity. Rogers (1995) uses examples from his own practice in psychotherapy to illustrate the human desire to be their true selves freely:

> As I watch person after person struggle in his therapy hours to find a way of life for himself, there seems to be a general pattern emerging [...] The best way I can state this aim of life [...]is to use the words of Soren Kierkegaard = "to be that self which one truly is." (p. 166)

Rogers makes the correlation between his patients' desire for who they are on the inside to align with who they are on the outside—namely, who they are, what they do, and how they function in the world. He explains that his clients demonstrate a desire to move away from what feels to be in conflict with who they feel they are as follow:

> I observe first that characteristically the client shows a tendency to move away, hesitantly and fearfully, from a self that he is *not*. In other words even though there may be no recognition of what he might be moving toward, he is moving away from something. (Rogers, 1995, p. 167)

While this was something he saw in his individual clients and their personal conflicts, he also recognized it in terms of organizations as follows:

> Other clients find themselves moving away from what the culture expects them to be. In our current industrial culture, for example, as Whyte has forcefully pointed out in his recent book..., there are enormous pressures to become the characteristics that are expected of the "organization man." Thus one should be fully a member of the group, should subordinate his individuality to fit into the group needs, should become the "well-rounded man who can handle well-rounded men". (Rogers, 1995, p. 169)

Nearly 60 years later, it is extraordinary to think we are facing the same issues and in a more drastic way. In my HR work, I have come to realize employees are craving more diversity, recognition, and work-life balance, which all play into the theme of being recognized for who they truly are. Rogers (1995) noted:

> [Clients] do not wish to be what they "ought" to be, whether that imperative is set by parents, or the culture, whether it is defined positively or negatively. They do not wish to mold themselves and their behavior into a form which would be merely pleasing to others. They do not, in other words, choose to be anything which is artificially, anything which is imposed, anything which is defined from without. They realize they do not value such purposes or goals, even though they may have lived by them all their lives up to this point. (p. 170)

We continue to see this theme in our organizations today in that young, smart, driven employees are leaving one company for a less rigid, more flexible one. They look for newer companies (i.e., start-ups) in which they can help create the culture versus having to conform and fit into one. Companies, in order to survive, need innovation, different perspectives, and new ideas yet continue to hire with the expectation that their employees will conform to the current culture, rather than disrupt or add to it. If companies themselves are looking to disrupt industries and continue to rise to the top, they cannot expect to do so without encouraging the same innovation and diversity from their employees.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (as cited in Rogers, 1995; Cox, 2006) is a tangible demonstration of what it means for a person to realize their full potential. Rogers (1995) makes this connection as follows:

> Maslow, in his study of what he calls self-actualizing people, has noted this same characteristic. Speaking of these people, he says, "Their ease of penetration to reality, their closer approach to an animal-like or child-like acceptance and spontaneity imply a superior awareness of their own impulses, their own desires, opinions, and subjective reactions in general." (p. 174)

As noted, he recognizes the link that a person's natural self leads them to self-actualization, which is the highest point on the hierarchy of needs pyramid. A component of reaching one's full potential involves personal success and creativity, which are integral to the success of an organization including how this approach impacts interpersonal relationships. Rogers (1995) stated, "As a client moves toward being able to accept his own experience, he also moves toward the acceptance of the experience of others. He values and appreciates both his own experience and that of others for what it *is*." (p. 174) In order to experience authenticity, employees need the space to explore and be creative—namely, to find the things that drive and fuel them. The more people can be authentic to themselves, the more open they can be to others so deeper connections can form. When this authenticity occurs in the workplace, employees can experience high levels of creativity, innovation, connection, and fulfillment.

It can be daunting for leaders in organizations to want to encourage authenticity for their employees. After all, won't it cause more trouble? People are messy; they are emotional and complicated. The more people are themselves, the more risk might be involved. However, Rogers (1995) explains the importance of trust of self as follows:

> Time and again in my clients, I have seen simple people become significant and creative in their own spheres, as they have developed more trust of the processes going on within themselves, and have dared to feel their own feelings, live by values which they discover within, and express themselves in their own unique ways. (p. 175)

Despite these benefits, organizational leaders generally want to keep the personal sphere separate from the professional sphere. There is a sense that the human aspect of employees and the personal do not belong in the workplace. Rogers (1995) addresses the concerns that being one's true self may imply that there is *evil* involved, which may inherently overtake any of the good. However, Rogers (1005) notices the opposite:

> The reason seems to be that the more he is able to permit these feelings to flow and to be in him, the more they take their appropriate place in a total harmony of

> his feelings....His feelings, when he lives closely and acceptingly with their complexity, operate in a constructive harmony rather than sweeping him into some uncontrollably evil path. (p. 177)

Rogers recognizes that when a person can allow their whole self to come into place, there is a natural balance that occurs. It is not simply that the complexity of a human being makes things more complicated; instead, allowing the complexities of a person to be at the forefront rather than hidden lead to a more harmonious and productive environment.

During the summer of 2020, as I navigated work and the many challenges that were a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest in the United States, I reached a level of stress, exhaustion, and depletion that I had never experienced before. My therapist enforced that I needed to take a break so I took a week off. During that week I completely detached from work, allowing myself the space and time to not only recover but figure out a path forward so I could avoid this burn-out from occurring again. During this time, I realized that the circumstances around me were not going to change anytime soon—not only the situation in the country and world at large but also my circumstances at work. My organization has a highly intense, high-driving and fast-paced culture and environment. Instead, I came back to myself with these questions: What were the choices I could make? What could I find within myself to change my circumstances?

When I returned to work, I had an open and honest conversation with my boss. I explained to him what I had been experiencing and opened up to him in a way I never had before. My boss listened to me and provided a safe space for me to explain that I needed to create more boundaries in my life around work. He allowed me to show up in a way that allowed me to be my whole self and be vulnerable. As Rogers (1995) noted:

> And what I am trying to suggest is that when one is truly and deeply a unique member of the human species, this is not something which should excite horror. It

> means instead that one lives fully and openly the complex process of being one of the most widely sensitive, responsive, and creative creatures on this planet. Fully to be one's own uniqueness as a human being, is not, in my experience, a process which would be labeled bad. More appropriate words might be that it is a positive, or a constructive, or realistic, or a trustworthy process. (p. 178)

Our open and honest conversation fostered a deeper connection and a more understanding relationship between the two of us. During the weeks and months that followed, I began to find more balance at work—and even joy again in what I was doing. This experience demonstrates the power that vulnerability and authenticity can have in the workplace. They can break down walls, eliminate dysfunction, and lead to greater success and better fulfillment at work.

To be human means to be fallible—namely, to make mistakes, hit hard times, feel pain, anger, and sadness. The other essential parts of human nature are triumph and resilience. However, one cannot have the latter without the former. The desire to be authentic is at the heart of the human experience, and people are the heart of an organization. Therefore, promoting authenticity in the workplace may not only benefit employees but companies as well. Rogers (1995) makes this claim:

> In trying to explore the limits of such a concept, I have suggested that this direction is not a way which is necessarily limited to clients in therapy, nor to individuals seeking to find a purpose in life. It would seem to make the same kind of sense for a group, an organization, or a nation, and would seem to have the same kind of rewarding concomitants. (p. 181)

The founder of the humanistic psychology movement recognized this insight in 1961, yet organizations continue to struggle with promoting authenticity for their employees despite the findings of Rogers and many other experts who followed him. I have recognized this within my own experiences working in HR at two quite different organizations. When we can allow more of the reckoning of all parts of the individual, we can experience greater organizational success and individual fulfillment, leading to more positive work environments.

Brown (2018), a researcher, writer, and speaker who has brought the topics of authenticity, vulnerability, and shame into the mainstream, focuses on leadership and leading courageously in her work. Brown (2018) identifies ten behaviors and issues in our culture that get in the way in organizations:

1. Avoiding tough conversations/giving honest feedback
2. Spending most of our time reacting to problematic behaviors instead of proactively addressing fears and emotions
3. Lack of connection and empathy leading to lack to trust
4. Fear of being embarrassed or put down leading to less people taking smart risks or sharing bold ideas
5. Letting failures and setbacks define us
6. More shame and blame instead of accountability and learning
7. Fear of saying the wrong thing getting in the way of conversations around diversity and inclusion
8. Rushing to ineffective and inefficient solutions instead of identifying the problem and solving it
9. Organizational values focused on the aspirational vs. teachable and measurable behaviors
10. Perfectionism and fear holding people back from learning and growing (pp. 7-9)

All of these issues can be tied to a lack of authenticity in the workplace. When employees act in fear of doing the wrong thing, being embarrassed, or being fired, they are acting in contrast to who they are as people. They cannot bring their best selves to work or produce their best work.

As Brown (2018) noted,

> I think most of us can look at this list and quickly recognize the challenges in our organizations, but our own internal struggles to show up and lead through discomfort. These may be work behaviors and organizational culture concerns, but what underlies all of them are deeply human issues. (p. 9)

What Brown taps into here is that organizational issues are rooted in human issues; as much as we try to separate the two and keep the personal away from the professional, we are only continuing to chip away at a functional or healthy work environment. Organizations need to create cultures in which employees can connect with themselves and each other so they can build trust and establish deeper, more meaningful relationships. By the ability to bring their whole selves at work, a more authentic experience can be created.

A critical element of authenticity is empathy. Empathy, as defined by the *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.) dictionary, is

> the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.

Brown (2018) described how empathy is the destroyer of shame as follows: “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, and connection” (p. 126). Shame exists in organizations in covert, not obvious, ways that are deeply embedded in the organizational culture that work to destroy trust, relationships, and creativity (Brown, 2018).

By tapping into empathy, organizations can combat shame and its negative effects. Brown (2018) makes the important distinction that “[e]mpathy is not connecting to an experience, it’s connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience” (p. 140). When we make these kinds of connections at work, we create a space for trust and deeper relationships, which ultimately lead to better and more meaningful work. Brown describes how choosing to be empathetic is a vulnerable act because it requires connecting to something within yourself that is painful and difficult (Brown, 2018).

Empathy is the true act of showing up for another person. When this happens at work, we create a deeper bond with those we work with. When we think about how many hours of the day we spend with our coworkers and how we can sometimes know them for years, it's incredible to think how rarely real connection can occur. I have experienced this firsthand when I have provided space for employees to come and talk to me without any judgment, allowing them to share how they are feeling and explore what can be done about it. This approach takes a level of vulnerability on the employee's behalf, but it is really created by the person giving them that space so they can open up and share.

While this approach can feel like a risky action, Brown (2018) describes how it can open the door to a more authentic experience at work:

> For example…you could say: "I'm sorry about the project assignment. That sucks and must be so frustrating. Want to talk about it?" This question tells your colleague you're willing to "go there" and rumble openly about what they're feeling. Because you were willing to put emotion on the table, it gives them the opportunity to come back and say, "I don't know about frustrated. I think I'm actually really embarrassed and disappointed. I mean, everyone talked about me being the perfect person for it. I never imagined not getting it. Now I have to explain why I didn't get it and I don't even understand." This exchange alone builds the connection and alignment that we need to have a meaningful, trust-building, and even healing conversation. (p. 148)

Incidents such as this example at work can often be an isolated experience. Employees are rarely given the opportunity to voice their authentic feelings and experience. Instead, their negative feelings are left to stew and fester internally, perhaps only brought up when the employee goes home and vents to their spouse, family, or roommate. If we could instead foster open and honest dialogue among colleagues, people would have the opportunity for discussion, to be heard, and to problem solve.

Throughout my time in the Organizational Dynamics program, I have thought a lot about how I can help my organization foster a greater sense of authenticity within the workplace. A space that that been identified as a key priority over the last few years involves focusing more attention on diversity, equity, and inclusion. Admittedly, while I have always been morally aligned with and supportive of these efforts, I didn't see my role or responsibility as an HR professional in that space beyond compliance. What I have found through my personal experience in the program is that one cannot make meaningful progress in this place without authenticity as a critical part of the equation. Roberts et al. (2009) noted that "...becoming more authentic means finding ways to integrate one's gendered and cultural experiences into the values and practices of their work environment" (p. 160). What can also be argued is that for diversity and inclusion to truly take place, authenticity must be established and supported for employees. If employees cannot bring their full selves to work, they cannot bring their backgrounds, culture, gender, and other experiences.

One way to bring diversity and inclusion into the employee experience is the establishment of and support for affinity groups, which are networks made up of those identifying as women, LGBTQ, Black, Latinx and Asian. These groups provide safe spaces for employees to connect with one another and to provide and receive guidance, coaching, and professional development. This kind of environment is a safe space and is fundamental to experiencing authenticity, as described by Roberts et al. (2009):

> [Some] construe authenticity as fundamentally relational—determined by the extent to which two parties are true to the relationship. Specifically, authenticity is achieved when two parties experience one another as engaging with transparency and mutual commitment to understanding and appreciating one another's strengths, limitations, and unique social situation. (p. 151)

Affinity groups create a community and environment in which employees can have open and honest dialogue with one another in a setting that feels safe and in which others can relate to their individual experience. Not only do these groups provide benefits for those who identify with and join a particular group, but also for those who do not. Affinity groups can educate their colleagues through hosting guest speakers or lunch and learns, which provide opportunities for education, connection, and better understanding of those with whom we work.

By creating an environment that allows employees to hear about each other's varying and diverse experiences, witness others being vulnerable, and having the chance to be vulnerable themselves, there is a foundation for employees to have a much more meaningful and fulfilling experience at work. As Kate Reilly quotes LinkedIn's HR Chief in her article *How LinkedIn's HR Chief is Changing the Diversity Conversation with "Belonging"* (2017):

> "You may not know what it's like to be gay or Latino, but you probably have friends or family who do," says Pat. "When we listen and celebrate what is both common and different, we become a wiser, more inclusive, and better organization." (para. 13)

Allowing employees to express their unique identities opens up the dialogue and breeds a healthier environment, particularly for employees who do not feel part of the dominant culture.

The ability to be authentic at work allows minority employees to feel less at odds with themselves and inherently allows them to feel accepted in the workplace, as highlighted by Roberts et al. (2009): "Inauthenticity can also impose psychological stress on organizational members. People who feel that they must behave inauthentically (i.e., suppressing ideas, values, or behavioral preferences) to conform to social expectations may experience identity conflict or feelings of dissonance and distress" (p.153). Not only is this approach negative for the employee but also for the organization. By feeling safe and hearing about others' experiences, there are lessons to be learned. This kind of educating and sharing can allow employees to have more knowledge and take more risks in their jobs and careers, which, in turn, bring new, innovative ideas to the company.

The culture of a company is typically used positively as a way to recruit new employees and describe what it's like to work at a company. Alternatively, it can also be used to describe the negative. Terms such as *toxic* can be used to describe a workplace culture when employees experience discrimination, harassment, or exclusion. Many companies get stuck in their culture when defined from their establishment. They use the term *culture fit* to describe those who would be a smooth and easily integrated employee who will continue to promote the culture as it exists. However, this approach further perpetuates an often exclusionary culture that doesn't allow for alternative views, perspectives, ideas, or feelings. Reilly, in *Ban the Term "Culture Fit" and Other Great Diversity Tips from Pandora* (2016), noted that

> ...hiring for "culture fit" often gets in the way of increasing diversity. If you assume that people who don't look or act like you won't mesh with your organization, then you end up choosing people who are too similar to yourself. This then leads to complacency, lack of innovation, and underperforming teams in companies. (para. 3)

Placing the emphasis on inflating the culture doesn't allow employees to be innovative or creative. In order to do so, employees must be able to be vulnerable. If employees are fearful of not fitting into the culture of their company, then it is quite difficult to be vulnerable and express to others their ideas for change. This approach prevents diversity, which, in turn, prevents authenticity. As Reilly (2016) noted, "That's why Pandora looks for 'culture add' in candidates instead—new and unique skills and viewpoints that don't already exist at the company. 'Culture add' means shaping the culture rather than fitting into it" (para. 4).

When I was asked to hire my first direct report, I took all of these considerations to heart. In turn, I hired an African American male who came from a quite different organizational background and experience. While there has been a learning curve and I have had to lean in significantly in coaching him to understand the fast-paced and high-expectation environment he is in, he has, in turn, brought a different perspective and outlook to our team. For example, his more laid-back nature allows him not to get flustered under pressure—something I easily do and is a much more frequently experienced quality among employees at my company. While I have had to adjust and become more comfortable with his style, it has taught me that different styles are necessary in an organization. My support and investment in this individual is a priority of mine—one that I take seriously.

Representation of diversity in organizational leadership is imperative to employees experiencing authenticity at work. If the culture as it stands is not open to unique or different perspectives, then it will continue to prevent employees from minority groups from being accepted as true leaders and thought partners. As Roberts et al. (2009) noted:

> ...studies emphasize the strong pressure individuals often feel, in groups of all kinds, to conform to the views and expectations they believe are held by the majority...As a consequence, individuals often engage in self-censorship, suppressing their ideas and opinions because they perceive that others in their environment hold different or less controversial views…. (p.153)

In order to allow for authenticity at work, it is essential that employees are able to be honest to their perspectives and points of view, rather than fit into and adapt to the current framework. A company's culture cannot be fixed; it must allow for its employees to be vulnerable and express different and even opposing views in order to allow for diversity within the employee population. Starting at the top, the term *culture fit* must stop being used. It is not enough to have a few representations of women or nonwhites in leadership. They have to be given the opportunity, on a company-wide level, to express views that are different from the norm and the status quo. When there are sessions on innovation and creativity, they must be included and perhaps even lead those conversations.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts cannot reach their full potential without the fostering of authenticity. For employees to be able to bring their unique backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives into the workplace, they must feel supported and safe. By using diversity and inclusion initiatives to foster open and honest dialogue and the acceptance of differentiating views, organizations can experience authenticity. This work can be done through the support of affinity groups, leadership training (in areas such as diversity and unconscious bias), and representation in leadership. Organizations must open up to those who can bring diverse representation and perspectives to their culture, not only those who fit into the current culture. Once we allow employees to be authentic at work, we can begin to chip away at the conflict employees experience between their personal and professional lives, creating a culture in which people can be true to who they truly are rather than assimilate into a preexisting culture established by white men. Through this approach, we can have more innovative, creative, and happier people within our organizations, benefiting employees and employers.

As I continue to advance in my career, I have also thought about how I will continue to be authentic as a leader in my organization. Authentic leadership is defined as those who “demonstrate a passion for their purpose, practice their values consistently, and lead with their hearts as well as their heads” (George et al. 2007). This approach aligns with not only the type of leader I want to be but also with my core values. I have recognized the role I have to play in creating the type of organizational culture in which I would like to work.

Authenticity, like any form of exercise, takes practice. It is a journey, not a fixed state. Over time the more it is practiced, the more it becomes muscle memory. If employees experience authenticity and its benefits, they will only continue to practice it more. However, such change can only occur when organizations create an environment in which it can be practiced.

This change is no easy task and involves risk. Human beings have complex natures, and their struggles are real and messy. However, keeping these elements separate from the workplace doesn’t make them disappear; it only causes them to create more conflict. As Brown (2018) boldly stated, “When we have the courage to walk into our story and own it, we get to write the ending. And when we don’t own our stories of failure, setbacks, and hurt – they own us” (p. 249). Our organizations and their leaders need to own their stories and encourage their employees to own theirs. Through this approach, we can all experience the tremendous benefits that resilience, courage, and triumph bring to our employees and, in turn, to our organizations.

CHAPTER 5

PARADOX AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

For the Spring 2020 semester, I enrolled in the course entitled *The Art & Science of Understanding Paradox in Organizations.* I had taken a course with Ms. Amrita Subramanian and Dr. Alan Barstow the previous semester and greatly enjoyed the experience. However, in all honesty, taking this course was mostly driven by the fact that I could participate remotely. After moving to Los Angeles, I was limited in the courses I could take from so far away. Most of the Organizational Dynamics courses had not adapted to virtual learning so required in-person attendance. Thankfully, this interesting course with supportive faculty was available so I jumped in and enrolled. Little did I know what was to come over the course of the semester and how the syllabus and real life would collide in a way I never could have expected.

In March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic became a global crisis and arrived in the United States. Suddenly, I wasn't the only remote student; we were all participating in the course via Zoom. We were working from home and staying at home, venturing outside only for groceries and to fruitlessly search for toilet paper. Life took a more dire turn personally as I found myself facing not only the loss of normalcy, but also the possibility of losing some of the closest people to me. With New York City as the epicenter of increased cases and hospitalizations, my immediate family, as well as the woman who helped raise me from infancy, were all struck with the virus. At the time it was absolutely terrifying as hospitals were filling up and images of makeshift morgues in Central Park were flashing across nearly every television news channel. I was overcome by fear, anxiety, and a tremendous sense of loss. My personal narrative, life story, and identity (McAdams, 2001; Adler & McAdams, 2007; Bauer et al., 2008; McAdams, 2018) were fundamentally anchored by my family, specifically the people who had fallen ill. Suddenly, I was facing the inconceivable that I might lose them. I found myself filled with sadness, anger, and desperation for people and things I had not yet lost. Through research, I learned I was experiencing what is referred to as anticipatory grief. Kessler (as cited in Berinato [2020]) noted how humanity is collectively feeling during this pandemic with these words: “The loss of normalcy; the fear of economic toll; the loss of connection. This is hitting us and we’re grieving” (p. 2). Our feelings of loss for our routines, our jobs, and our ability to physically connect with one another, to travel, and of our freedoms are feelings of grief. However, there is also grief for the things that have not yet been lost. As Kessler noted:

> Anticipatory grief is that feeling we get about what the future holds when we’re uncertain. Usually it centers on death. We feel it when someone gets a dire diagnosis or when we have the normal thought that we’ll lose a parent someday. Anticipatory grief is also more broadly imagined futures. There is a storm coming. There’s something bad out there. With a virus, this kind of grief is so confusing for people. Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can’t see it. This breaks our sense of safety. We’re feeling that loss of safety. I don’t think we’ve collectively lost our sense of general safety like this. Individually or as smaller groups, people have felt this. But all together, this is new. We are grieving on a micro and a macro level. (as cited in Berinato, 2020, p. 3)

As soon as the magnitude of this crisis became clear, I began to feel this sense of looming loss. It’s fair to say I am someone who has always felt emotions deeply (as my grandfather used to tell my mother when I was little, “That child runs deep.”); I’ve always struggled with managing anxiety throughout my life. I immediately jumped to the worst-case scenario. Once my mother began to experience symptoms, followed by my father and sister, my worry reached its peak. And when the woman who helped raise me since I was four months old, our family nanny, was hospitalized, I lost it and spiraled emotionally into deep grief. As we discussed throughout the OCEC cohort, I was in the midst of a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991), an event and moment that would alter the course of my life and challenge my beliefs. Concurrently, I was also in the Valley of Despair or Neutral Zone (Bridges, 2009), experiencing extreme stress, anxiety, and fear as a result of my world being turned upside down. I began to mourn even though these people were still alive. This situation felt like the ultimate paradox: How can you grieve for something that you haven't lost? Looking back, it is clear this experience created a paradigm shift in my life, allowing for the New Beginnings (Bridges, 2009) to begin unfolding, as feelings of relief and hope would eventually replace the darkest feelings. However, I was far from being able to see that light at that time.

After a few days I was able to take a step back from my emotions and ask myself the question that was posed by my professors in my first Organizational Dynamics course: What's really going on here? I realized I was indeed grieving for many things; once the threat reached those who mean the most to me, it was overwhelming. I had to allow myself to grieve; I let my emotions come out and spent time in the Valley of Despair (Bridges, 2009). Once I allowed myself to feel what I was feeling, instead of questioning or discrediting it, I was able to start thinking more clearly. While there were certainly elements of anticipatory grief, I realized the uniqueness of this current moment was having an effect on my feelings and emotions. During any other time when a loved one has been sick, family and friends have come together to not only provide support for that person but for each other. Such times bring people together, from near and far, to lean on each other emotionally and physically. We take shifts in the hospital room and bring food or a change of clothes. However, during this time I couldn't hop on the earliest flight and get myself to New York. Even if I could, it was not advised to be with my sick relatives so I wouldn't be able to go to the hospital. This state of affairs left me feeling helpless, frightened, and alone. It was so hard for me to grasp the reality that I couldn't physically be with those who mean the most to me during such a terrifying time. I couldn't do anything for anyone who means so much to me when they were lying in a hospital bed. I felt trapped, far away from my loved ones, with nothing but the horrible and anxious thoughts swimming in my brain.

In the *Paradox* course, Amrita described paradoxes as *covert* and *anxiety producing*. That's exactly how this time had felt to me. This crisis felt as if something had snuck up on its unsuspecting victims and caused tremendous fear and anxiety. During one of our last class meetings, Amrita told us to *choose grit and resilience instead of misery*. I have been coming back to that choice regularly. However, I had to define for myself what the choice was. What did I actually have to choose in my thoughts and actions to accomplish this? I had to identify specific ways in which I could choose resilience so I could get through it all. This insight made me think about my Organizational Dynamics toolkit, which I have developed over the course of my time in the program. What are the tools I have to choose from to help get me through the fear and anxiety? Looking back, the most important tool I had was the use of self and access to choices (Seashore et al., 2004; Patwell, 2019) in how I navigated this personal crisis. I could let it destroy me, or I could seek to find meaning and purpose in all of it.

I turned to those whose wisdom has led many of us through previous challenging times. While reflecting on this experience, I thought about Viktor Frankl's memoir, *Man's Search for Meaning* (2006), and began to recognize the importance of vulnerability to one's ability to learn and evolve. According to *Merriam-Webster* (n.d.) dictionary, the definition of vulnerable is "capable or susceptible to being wounded or hurt." As I read this definition, I was immediately struck by how much that resonated with this current moment. I was feeling the most vulnerable I have ever felt. However, Frankl's circumstances were far more horrific. In the most vulnerable state imaginable, Frankl emerged as resilient and strong, far beyond simply surviving. Frankl (2006) wrote:

> …[T]here were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would becoming the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate. (p. 66)

While our situations were vastly different and are difficult to compare, I was able to connect with Frankl's words even more during this moment than I have in the past. Frankl's ability to find meaning and purpose during the darkest of days is so powerful. His work demonstrates how humanity cannot avoid suffering, but we can make choices to get through it and even find meaning within it. It doesn't just appear; it is through our choices that meaning is found. These choices are our inner freedom, as Frankl describes, that cannot be taken away. Today, though much of our freedom has been temporarily taken and may in some ways be permanently changed, we still have our inner freedom and the ability to make choices that will get us through. His words have provided me with examples of the choices I could make so I can get myself through this difficult time.

Frankl's words led me to think more about meaning and paradox. Kessler, who co-wrote a book entitled *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss* with Kübler-Ross, has written a new book entitled *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, which adds another stage to the process of grieving. As I looked back at our notes from the class, I found something I wrote down during our first class session: How do we make meaning in paradox? At first I wanted to dismiss the possibility that any sense of meaning would come from this horrible crisis. However, I began to realize that finding meaning was part of the process to not only survive but to thrive. As Kessler noted,

> And, I believe we will find meaning in it...I do believe we find light in those times. Even now people are realizing they can connect through technology. They are not as remote as they thought. They are realizing they can use their phones for long conversations. They're appreciating walks. I believe we will continue to find meaning now and when this is over. (as cited in Berinato, 2020, p. 5)

I started to think about how this crisis felt like it had stopped us all in our tracks. We were going and going—evolving, inventing, creating, and constantly driving forward. All of a sudden we have been interrupted. We have stopped. Through the Organizational Dynamics program, we discussed the power of the pause, meaning that so much can be found in silence or when we take a step back. The COVID-19 pandemic feels, in some ways, like a giant pause. We have hit the pause button on so much of life—school, work, sports, gatherings, travel, and more. It has caused us to question everything we thought we knew, including our assumptions, biases, and prejudices that have infiltrated every facet of everyday life. Yet life also continues to go on, but it looks quite different than what we are used to. As Kessler noted,

> Anticipatory grief is the mind going to the future and imagining the worst. To calm yourself, you want to come into the present. This will be familiar advice to

> anyone who has meditated or practiced mindfulness but people are always surprised at how prosaic this can be. You can name five things in the room. There's a computer, a chair, a picture of the dog, an old rug, and a coffee mug. It's that simple. Breathe. Realize that in the present moment, nothing you've anticipated has happened. In this moment, you're okay. You have food. You are not sick. Use your senses and think about what they feel. The desk is hard. The blanket is soft. I can feel the breath coming into my nose. This really will work to dampen some of that pain. (as cited in Berinato, 2020, p. 4)

By reframing this experience as one of tremendous learning, I have been able to find meaning from the experience so I can better understand myself and build resilience for future experiences (Patwell, 2019; Seashore et al., 2004). In addition, this reframing allows me to avoid reflecting on this experience as purely negative, which would prevent me from moving forward (Bauer et al., 2008). A struggle I have identified for myself throughout my time in the Organizational Dynamics program is being in the present moment. It feels as though I am always either in the past (i.e., feeling nostalgic for a previous time) or in the future (i.e., worrying about what is to come). Mindfulness and meditation are tremendously challenging. However, this current crisis has allowed me to see the present in a more comforting way. When my family was sick, I initially didn't know how to cope. While I would typically think about my childhood for a sense of comfort, it was not providing any comfort because it reminded me of what had changed or what I felt I was about to lose. Instead, I needed to find a way to find comfort in the present moment—within and despite the discomfort. By focusing on the present moment—my home, the food on the table, the birds chirping, my husband next to me—I effectively used my sense of self and made choices so I could change my reaction and get through a challenging situation (Seashore et al., 2004). I was able to pause and gather inner strength, rather than spiral further downward. I visualized them getting better, and then, slowly, they did.

Incredibly, all of my family members recovered, including the woman who helped raise me after her 8-day stay in the hospital. While the crisis of the pandemic is still far from over, the experience I had in the early days with my family completely altered the days, weeks, and months that followed. While there have been challenges, I have been able to keep a positive perspective and recognize what is truly important. That experience was the ultimate demonstration of the power of choice, as well as finding comfort within and from oneself. As a result, I have found hope in the future, what Bridges (2009) describes as the New Beginning, despite the difficult and dark circumstances around me. In fact, I've found enough hope to imagine a better future—one that involves my husband and our first child to be born in the spring of 2021.

Conclusion

Looking back at my time in the Organizational Dynamics program, I could never have anticipated the change and growth that would occur for me personally. As I close this chapter, the story is far from over. The lessons, experiences, tools, techniques, and theories will not only stay with me but will serve as road signs along the way, guiding my journey. I look back at the whole experience—the early days in the OCEC cohort, my coaching engagement, my organizational consulting project, and navigating a deeply challenging personal moment—all within the context of the life changes I was experiencing and am amazed. I am amazed by how different I am as a person and how much the program helped me evolve. Looking back at the self I was at the beginning of the program, I now see a young, scared, and more closed-off person. My experience in the program cracked my outer shell. It forced me to step out of my comfort zone in many different ways. It introduced me to people from such a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. It changed me.

Professionally, I will seek to advise and coach others from a place of curiosity, practicing a desire to understand and listen, and come from a place of authenticity. I will allow employees to bring their whole selves to work and provide a safe space for them to explore and create. In turn, I will ensure I have that space as well as I continue to set boundaries and allow myself the space to ignite my own curiosity and creativity. I will continuously seek out and find love and joy in work throughout my career.

Personally, while life will continue to throw roadblocks and twists and turns, I will remind myself to embrace these events, knowing they can be catalysts for things that I could never imagine. I will embrace change and recognize the choices I have and can make. I will be a lifelong student, seeking opportunities to further my learning. As difficult as it can be, I will allow myself to open up to others and be vulnerable so I can develop more meaningful and deeper relationships and experiences. Most importantly, the next phase of my life will involve the birth and raising of my first child, which will be the biggest adventure of my lifetime. While I cannot plan it out or know what to expect, I couldn’t be more excited for the challenge and for the life-altering shift that will occur.

I will continue to remind myself of the lessons learned during my time in the program. Not only will I turn back to these lessons, but I will feel and believe they came as a result of the experiences gained during this time. Change is loss but can also provide growth and a new beginning. There is a choice in everything. Trust the process. Embrace the journey.

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