What’s childhood got to do with it?

How Psychodynamic Leadership Consulting brings depth and impact to assessing and developing leaders

CDP LEADERSHIP CONSULTING THOUGHT PAPER NO 1
DRAFT v4 FOR CONSULTATION
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In January 2018 CDP will be publishing our first thought paper. We are currently consulting on its contents at various conferences and via interviews and social media.

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Introduction

Psychodynamic leadership consulting centres on the belief that because our early experiences shape who we are and how we act, they therefore influence how we perform in the workplace and the extent to which we achieve our potential. Therefore, addressing our development areas requires an understanding of, and engagement with, those dynamics.

Psychodynamic leadership consulting is of immense value to businesses; not only does it work to identify the personality and traits that lead to successful behaviours and skills in the workplace, it also addresses the underlying drivers leading to high performance. This kind of consulting leads to the deeper self-awareness that allows the realisation of someone’s full potential. It helps reduce self-limiting beliefs and the tendency to derail that lead to poor performance and dysfunctional behaviour in the workplace. Because it works at such a deep level, it truly transforms individuals and the teams they work in.

The precepts of psychodynamic leadership consulting sit happily alongside other models of leadership and coaching. For example, one can utilise the ideas of “transformational leadership” or the “GROW” coaching model whilst also being aware of the psychodynamic forces at work behind these. This paper sets out what these psychodynamic forces are, how they are manifest and how they can be addressed. It helps explain what CDP means when we talk about “working deep.”

First, though, let’s be clear about what psychodynamic leadership consulting is not. It isn’t clinical. Its focus is relentlessly on the work place and on performance. There is, of course, an overlap between one’s professional and personal life, and the latter can sometimes make its way into interventions around performance at work. If that happens the focus must be brought gently back onto the professional arena. (Needless to say, as with any form of consulting or coaching, if any actual clinical symptoms emerge — for example, anxiety, depression or a chemical dependency — then the appropriate referral should be made.)

What is psychodynamic leadership consultancy?

It is simply a way of working that holds in mind certain ideas that have emerged, since Sigmund Freud’s time, about how the human mind works, such as the unconscious, transference and the idea of an “inner world.” Not that the ideas in the model are exclusively Freudian or psychoanalytic, far from it. They draw from various schools of psychology, including attachment theory, Object Relations, the Jungian, family systems and schema-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.

There are countless books, papers and even schools and institutions dedicated to psychodynamic psychology which can make the subject appear daunting. However, when critically examined, these different sources have certain common themes which in turn lead to one simple but profound idea — one which, so long as one is a relatively psychologically interested and aware person, is easily grasped. This idea can be summed up in the following way:

How we relate to the outer world i.e. “reality” isn’t solely based on a rational, logical perception that is shared by everyone but is influenced — or filtered through — our own conscious and unconscious “inner world” that is unique to us.
Psychodynamic leadership consulting believes that this inner world is shaped by our early experiences — with our childhood caregivers, our early friendships and experiences at school, and in our first foray into the workplace. There is also, of course, a genetic component but it is the interplay of this, with the environment, that gives each of us our own particular way of seeing the world.

Our inner world provides, if you like, the mood music or backdrop to our way of being. Are we at ease with the world, optimistic and resourceful or are we sceptical, fearful, even paranoid? If our inner world were a stage setting would it be a sunny, meadow or a dark, tangled forest?

Embedded in our inner world — and often in our unconscious — are a series of Core Beliefs.

**What are Core Beliefs?**

Core Beliefs are assumptions that we hold about ourselves, others and the world. We usually only have a dim sense of what our core beliefs are since they are woven into our psyche. We may have a hazy sense of them but they are largely unconscious. Even if we are dimly aware of them we don’t necessarily see the importance we attach to them, and how they colour our approach to almost everything. It’s just “how we see the world.” Imagine someone who’s colour blind, unable to differentiate between red and green; they could go through life blissfully unaware of their condition — until they first come across some traffic lights!

In the workplace, our core beliefs tend to address three areas:

1. **Ourselves**
   
   What do we believe about ourselves? For example, do we see ourselves as smart, competent, confident, at ease in our skin, powerful, dependable? Are we good, authentic or an imposter? Do we deserve success?

2. **Relationships**
   
   What do we believe about other people? For example, can we be open and trusting? Is it safe to show vulnerability? Can we rely on other people or will they inevitably let us down?

3. **Authority**
   
   What do we believe about people in authority? For example, are they fair, generous and decent, or exploitative and out for themselves? Will we be heard or dismissed? Do they care? If we are the ones in authority, do we care?

**Some Core Beliefs are Pathogenic**

The revelatory idea in psychodynamic leadership consultancy is that the core beliefs that people hold don’t necessarily reflect reality or “the truth.” Most do, of course, and often people have a set of beliefs about the world that are essentially benign and balanced — but not always. Sometimes our beliefs are not logical or sensible. When such beliefs are strongly held and moreover are inflexible, they can become restrictive and unhelpful “Core Pathogenic Beliefs” or CPBs — where pathogenic means diseased and unhealthy.

**Examples might include:**

- The brilliant female executive whose inner confidence can get shaky, leaving her thinking she couldn’t ever be CEO.
- The senior manager struggling because he doesn’t trust his team to get on with the job, even though he recruited them himself as proven high performers.
- The high potential executive whose prospects are being hampered by the fact that he keeps clashing with his bosses, whose decisions he consistently disagrees with.

Let’s look closer at the difference between a healthy Core Belief and a Pathogenic one, and what the impact of the latter might be. For example, a healthy Core Belief might be:

“I like the idea of trusting people, and I believe that most people are basically trustworthy so I will approach the world in a trusting way. At the same time, I also keep an eye out in case my trust may not be returned or, at worst, abused.”

An unhealthy, Core Pathogenic Belief might be:

“People can be helpful, but they mainly get in the way and are a nuisance — and they don’t do things my way. I need to
be in control in order to feel safe, but because I can’t trust others to do things the way I want them done, I get anxious.”

Note that this belief would be only “half-known.” The person may have a sense of it but it would be partly unconscious, and not articulated with clarity as it is here. Such clarification is the outcome of the work we are discussing.

The crucial mechanism by which these “inner world” beliefs infect our interaction with reality “outer world” is that of transference, as Freud called it, or projection, as its better known today. We unconsciously project these CPBs out onto the people in our current lives so that they become (unfairly yet unintentionally) overlain with our previous experiences. We cease to see people in the here-and-now as new possibilities but as more of the same — and we then treat them accordingly, based not on reality but on a projected memory or association.

If leadership consulting or coaching work just addresses the symptoms (such as controlling behaviour) rather than the underlying belief which drives the behaviour, then it will be very hard to effect real change. This circle of projecting our CPBs onto everyone we meet, no matter how different they are, must be broken, or it will endlessly repeat. As the depth psychologist Carl Jung said, “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

Where do these beliefs, healthy or unhealthy, come from?
As stated earlier psychodynamic leadership consultancy believes that our core beliefs are largely formed by our early experiences and how we respond to these. The idea that our past affects our present and future is, of course, little more than common sense but its consequences are not always fully considered.

Taking the example from before, we may have learnt that parental or early authority figures invariably let us down, forcing us to become prematurely and/or overly independent. We may have then created a belief that ultimately, we always have to rely on ourselves and that we can’t trust other people to be there for us. It is easy to see how such a dynamic would affect a variety of important issues at work such as the depth and authenticity of the relationships you build, your approach to delegation and empowering people, and your attitude to supporting others and truly collaborating.

If we accept that our earlier experiences affect us today then it follows that we need to devote time to understanding how. We need to ask, for example, what the key things were that we learnt growing up which impacted our core beliefs, and how might those beliefs not be relevant for who — and where — we are now? Exploration of the past to discover what beliefs we hold and how these were formed will enable us to step back from them, challenge them, and loosen their grip on our lives today.

That, to reference this paper’s title, is why childhood matters. Though it is not just about childhood. The way you experienced adolescence, your time at university (if you went) your early experiences of work — your first manager; or the culture of your first workplace — can also be crucial. So can particularly powerful more recent experiences, such as an important project going wrong, a new unsympathetic boss or being made redundant. While the fundamental structure of our core beliefs is erected in childhood, we know that the brain retains neuroplasticity throughout life, which means our core beliefs are always open to being amended by our experiences. The good news is that they can also be influenced by our development experiences i.e. the work we do on ourselves, especially around our self-awareness.

How do Core Beliefs fit into a theory of Potential?
The CDP model of potential is known as DEEP, which stands for:

- **Decision making**
- **Execution**
- **Emotions and Motivations**
- **People Skills**

Based on extensive research into the psychology of success and the study of 40 different models of potential, along with over 10 years of applied work in this area, the “DEEP” model identifies the crucial 12 factors that act as indicators of future success or potential.
These 12 factors are the qualities of a person’s psyche that are formed through an interaction of genetics and early experiences. You can see them beginning to emerge in early childhood. The extent to which they are developed in each of us depends on what happens to us as we grow up. We also look at how these convert to actual performance, as shown visually here:

**CDP DEEP MODEL OF POTENTIAL**

![Diagram showing the relationship between factors and performance]

Your potential is indicated by the degree to which you possess each of these 12 attributes. These convert to your Performance through 3 Conversion Factors: Experience, Choices and Fit.

**The 12 factors look at who you are**
- **Experience** looks at what you’ve done
- **Choices** looks at what you believe
- **Fit** looks at the interaction between you and the world

Your Core Beliefs are embedded in your potential profile. They will affect, for example, how ambitious you are, how inspiring you feel you can be, or how creative you are. When looking at each aspect of potential it is helpful to explore what Core Beliefs may be at play — and whether any of these are Pathogenic and therefore limiting your potential. In such cases, they will need to be addressed.

CDP believe it is possible to develop each of the 12 “DEEP” qualities later in life. Through our Leadership Development Audits, we identify where people are stronger and weaker across the 12 Factors — and crucially, why. Our DEEP Personal Development Guide provides the resources to help people change, and our development work and coaching supports them on their journey.
So what does all this mean for the world of leadership consultancy and coaching?

This is what we believe:
To truly understand ourselves, other people, and the groups and organisations we are part of, we must consider things on two levels: the rational, surface phenomenon we can more easily make sense of, and the harder to grasp, hidden, possibly darker dynamics of the “inner world” and its Core Pathogenic Beliefs. Considering either without the other will only present a partial picture.

Crucially, if we only pay attention to the surface phenomena and don’t increase our awareness of the more hidden dynamics we will only be addressing the symptoms and not the causes. Any progress will be temporary and unsustainable because the underlying core pathogenic beliefs won’t have been treated and so will simply reassert themselves when the immediate effects of the work fade way.

All this can be shown diagrammatically:

THE CAUSE / OUTCOME PYRAMID

Here, the bedrock of early experiences form the Core Beliefs which feed up into the development of personality, eventually finding expression at work behaviourally (at the top of the pyramid).

If all that is addressed are the outcomes at the top of the pyramid, behaviour may change temporarily but the Core Beliefs which have been left unaddressed will reassert themselves, pushing up from below like lava in a volcano — or, to offer another metaphor, like the oil in a deep sea well which has been capped but will increase in pressure until eventually it bursts once again through to the surface.
So, what can be done to change our Core Pathogenic Beliefs?
The key task of psychodynamic leadership consultancy is to explore the deeper “inner world” of the client so that the effects of their early experiences on how they approach the world of work can be better understood. This sheds light on what Core Pathogenic Beliefs might be at play, and by bringing these to awareness, allows them to be challenged with healthier beliefs that rely less on the distortions caused by past experiences.

One way of gaining more awareness of one’s “inner world” is by using personality tests and psychometrics. Psychodynamic Leadership Consulting goes one step further, though. It isn’t just about describing one’s traits and tendencies; it is about really understanding where these came from and why — and setting out, if appropriate, to try and change them, or at least manage them in a better way.

Psychodynamic Leadership Consultancy contends that awareness of our Core Pathogenic Beliefs, and a sense of where they may have come from, are the key steps that lead to change. Working through how and why these beliefs were formed, and how and why they are not relevant to the reality of today will lead to new, healthier beliefs being formed.

Psychodynamic leadership consultancy and coaching in practice
Psychodynamic leadership consulting fits with the general CDP approach to high performance coaching:

The CDP Leadership Consulting High Performing Coaching Model
Psychodynamic leadership consulting is the method by which we undertake the element of coaching involving a “deep understanding of the coachee’s psychology,” exploring the outcome/cause pyramid.

The key difference between psychodynamic leadership consultancy/coaching and other approaches is that psychodynamic leadership consultancy always starts by looking at the client as a whole person, embracing their past, present and future. So in our assessments or coaching, the client’s story would always start with their upbringing, and key early experiences. The consultant/coach and client would, look together for ways that their early experiences influenced their core beliefs. Likewise, the consultant/coach and client would consciously be on the lookout for indications of the client’s inner world, and how this might affect how the client behaves at work, in addition to considering what might currently be unconscious and how to bring that out into the open to be explored.
Consequently Psychodynamic Leadership Consulting has three loci of attention:

1. **The unconscious inner world**
   Most people have a good understanding of who they are and why they do what they do but it is rarely a full understanding. We aren’t aware of everything about ourselves as much of our mind is unconscious. For example, have we repressed some parts of ourselves? Are there things we don’t want to own or face up to? What about our “shadow” side as Freud’s ally then rival Jung called it?

   Stepping back and making space to explore what we think, feel and do can throw light on these “buried” instincts and motivations. In psychodynamic leadership consulting, the possibility that things can’t be rationally or logically explained is held open. Indeed, unexplained connections and consequences are deliberately looked out for; just having that mindset — and the freedom it brings not to understand — can be freeing and can lead to new ways of thinking which open up the unconscious and bring forward new insights. This is simply about making room for the idea that we don’t know everything and that we may need to go beyond our initial, conscious explanations to really understand what is going on.

   What might be hidden from view, though, isn’t just the unconscious in the traditional psychoanalytic sense; the latest evidence from neuroscience shows that there are certain parts of our more primitive brains (i.e. those that were created earlier in evolution) that can drive our behaviour too, without us realising it. Psychodynamic leadership consulting respects these possibilities and looks to explore them, not shy away from them because they might be uncomfortable or challenging.

2. **The There-and-Then**
   There is a need to dive into past events and experiences, primarily from childhood but also from more recent years — as we tend to repeat the same set of experiences over and over again.

   In the exploration of the past — the there-and-then — we look at how we interpreted key events and experiences and how the beliefs we formed about ourselves and others back then might be driving what we believe about ourselves and others today. Doing this allows us to explore those interpretations, thus challenging the beliefs.

   We are also looking to identify emotions and feelings around these events. Often, feelings that occur in the present are echoes of the past, and we respond to these emotions as if we were in the middle of those past events. Clearly, however, we are not.

   Bringing awareness of the there-and-then allows us to check out different, more appropriate and healthier courses of action.

3. **The Here-and-Now**
   Of course, great notice is also taken of the personality traits at play in the here-and-now (psychometrics can be used to elucidate these alongside observation and reflections made by consultant/coach and client). It is vital to understand and explore the surface skills and behaviours that manifest at work — and to develop strategies to enhance one’s strengths and overcome weaknesses.

   Psychodynamic leadership consulting isn’t about “just” addressing early experiences. That would be nonsensical. It embraces a holistic understanding of the person, moving from the surface to the deep and back again until understanding and self-awareness are built.

**What this means beyond the individual**

Similarly, in psychodynamic team work, the early experiences both of the individuals in the team (and what this might mean for the interactions between them) and the early experiences of the team itself need to be considered. In team development work the team members should be relating to each other in a deep and authentic way that allows them to understand each other as whole people rather than just as “work colleagues.”

Even in OD and culture work, the psychodynamic approach is relevant. In this case the organisation’s past history, its implicit or informal ways of working and its collective unconscious need to be borne in mind.
The further insights that psychodynamic psychology offer to team and group psychology — and OD and culture work — will be the subject of a separate, forthcoming thought paper.

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, psychodynamic leadership consultancy does not seek to replace other approaches, models or ideas. It is a way of bringing an extra — deeper — perspective to psychological work in the professional setting. Without it there is a danger that consultancy work will be done on a surface level only. If just the symptoms are addressed, the power of any underlying Core Pathogenic Beliefs will be left in place, ready to undermine any good work done.

To bring about real transformation, the kind that is fundamental and sustainable, it is necessary to draw out and address the underlying reasons for people's thoughts, feelings and actions. Psychodynamic leadership consulting and coaching offers a way of doing that. The model in this paper shows how this approach is accessible, and can be utilised by psychologically aware consultants and coaches without extensive academic knowledge, instead drawing on this simple, intuitive model and their own openness, curiosity and common sense.

CDP offer resources and training in psychodynamic leadership consulting which you can find out more about on our website www.cdp.consulting/psychodynamic. You can also download our short book that explains our work and approach more generally www.cdp.consulting/workingdeepbook

A Case Study

This is an abridged case study taken from the forthcoming book “Creating Space: How to Succeed in a Fast and Frantic World” by Derek Draper; to be published by Profile Books in summer 2018.

Creating Space to Learn – Rachel and Her Need to Go It Alone

Lesson: In today's fast-changing world you must operate with genuine humility and curiosity and be open to re-learn everything.

Rachel is a high-flyer in a global snacks business. A Human Resources specialist by trade she has been desperate for several years to make the jump to general management. Having proved some aptitude during a six-month stint in the Commercial department, she has been moved from troubleshooting for the HR and Finance Director to head up the company’s account with a major retailer. But things are not going well. For the first time in her glittering career she feels she is failing — and her colleagues seem to agree.

Such is the importance of the retailer to the business that even the CEO has now got involved in the debates over Rachel and whether they should pull the plug on what was always an audacious, even risky, appointment. The business runs on a strict quarterly rhythm and she has about six weeks to show she has rescued the situation.

The first hurdle we had to get over was her sense that the coaching itself was proof that she had failed. Luckily, I had an important ally. A colleague of mine had been coaching the CEO himself for over a year and one day, we arranged to meet our respective clients at the same time in the company’s soaring glass atrium. My colleague had tipped off the CEO to come down to meet her: ‘Ah!’ he beamed as he made his way through the parting throng in reception. ‘It’s Rachel, isn’t it? Have you met Kylie, my coach?’

That did the trick and she felt more able to embrace coaching as a support rather than a stigma. She was still riddled, though, with the sense that she had failed. As she told me her story there were clues as to why.

She had grown up in a single-parent family and her mum had been pretty directionless, never sticking at jobs and eventually ending up long-term unemployed. She’d clearly been depressed but never received treatment and eventually Rachel admitted, with tears in her eyes and a great sense of shame, that when she was at university her mum had spent some time homeless and sleeping rough.

Sometimes we get thoughts that seem to come from deep within us. We can feel them in our bones. When they happen in a session I don’t think they really come from me but from some connection between me and the coachee, a part of what psychoanalyst Carl Jung called the ‘collective unconscious’. When it happens I have learnt not to repress the thought but offer it up, even though it might not be fully appreciated or even completely rejected. It’s extraordinary how often it is, instead, accepted as a deep if unwelcome truth.
I had such a feeling about Rachel. I felt that she feared, irrationally, that she would end up like her mum. ‘You feel that if you don’t keep pushing, keep succeeding, that you’ll end up like that too?’ I ventured. She looked straight at me, with a startled expression. ‘That’s my dream, I literally dream it and then wake up and lie there picturing it. Me, homeless, without Neil [her fiancé], without our flat, in the park, on my own, in rags.’

We worked on shifting this core pathogenic belief, replacing it with a more realistic sense of things. Her eventual supportive mantra was, ‘It’s OK to fail, it won’t be the end of the world, I will survive and do OK.’ Pretty simple and obvious to most of us but a revelation to her, who had been semi-consciously behaving as if the opposite was true. We spent a while talking about vulnerability, something she’d never felt able to show growing up, and we watched the brilliant Brenè Brown TED talk on vulnerability together.

However, as in many coaching assignments there was more than one factor at work — what Sigmund Freud called over-determination. The other surfaced from the stakeholder feedback calls I did with the people she worked with. As ever, I push to have so-called junior people included in these, and it was her PA and the most junior sales guy in her team who shed light on what was going wrong. They both used the same expression: ‘She won’t admit what she doesn’t know.’

Again, her childhood story held the key. With her mum proving so erratic and unable to cope Rachel has taken on the role of looking after her younger brothers and sisters. In the psychological jargon she had been ‘parentified’. This can have positive consequences — such children mature earlier and are often high achievers, able to take on responsibility and deliver, but the phenomenon also has a shadow.

In Rachel’s case she had been terribly worried, anxious and frightened but hadn’t been able to show it: to her mum, her siblings, or even herself. Instead, she had developed a way of reassuring herself that she could cope. She knew everything. She didn’t need help. In fact her second core pathogenic belief was that if you ask for help, the whole world will come crashing down, and you won’t get the help anyway.

Her pronounced fear of failure and inability to seek help were the twin dynamics that were driving her towards the very failure she dreaded. Like a small plane plunging helter skelter towards the ground we had to yank the controls hard and get her up and out of her nose-dive fast.

The breakthrough came as we chatted one day. She had been opening up more and more and as she talked about what she might do differently she suddenly said, ‘You know, Derek, I don’t really know what I’m doing. I don’t get it.’ She seemed surprised to hear herself saying this out loud but, of course, it was just the echo of what her PA and colleague had said a few weeks ago.

Sometimes if I feel the need to say something — what in psychoanalysis is called an ‘interpretation’ — I don’t. Often the person will say it for me. Rachel didn’t disappoint. ‘But why don’t I just bloody ask?’ she said. She looked deep in thought for a moment and then caught my eye and laughed. ‘Why don’t I just bloody ask??’ she repeated.

Of course the answer was that her twin binds of being petrified of failing — and being seen to fail, and her reluctance, even phobia, about asking for help, was why she hadn’t. But our work had loosened these binds and she had created the psychic space to think differently.

The next fortnight was a whirl of activity as she went round telling people that she’d gotten things wrong, and needed their help. She asked the right questions, truly listened and synthesised everything into her own solutions. She paid particular attention to people on the ‘coal face’, mining them for information. This reminded me of something Carolyn McCall, the CEO of Easyjet, does regularly. She gets out of her office in HQ and spends a day behind the check-in desks or assisting a flight crew, believing that if you aren’t listening at that level, you’ll never really know what’s going on. The Japanese have a word for it — going to the ‘gemba’ or ‘real place.’ By the end even people at the big retailer itself were enlisted as Rachel’s ‘teachers’. A risk, but one that paid off.

Once she’d freed herself from her core pathogenic beliefs her intellect, creativity and ability to get on with people asserted themselves. She managed to right the plane and get on a steady course. It actually took another six months until the account was really sorted, and the company, to their credit, stuck with her on that journey. As she showed increased confidence and resilience, it allowed them to relax their own fear of failure a bit, too.
CDP’s purpose is to help you and your business be more successful by auditing and developing your leaders, teams and organisation.

Our focus is on improving performance and therefore providing significant ROI to our clients.

We offer:

• In-depth individual leadership audits for selection, promotion and development
• High performance executive and transitions coaching
• Team effectiveness interventions (including Board effectiveness)
• Organisation Development and cultural change support
• High level leadership and talent consultancy at CEO and HRD level

We would relish the chance to partner with you to ensure your business achieves its goals by enabling your people to operate at their very best. Get in touch today to discuss how, together, we can make that happen.