Chapter 9

Deep Presencing Leadership Coaching: Building Capacity for Sensing, Enacting, and Embodying Emerging Selves and Futures in the Face of Organizational Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses how a leader’s attention and awareness are prone to becoming insular and disconnected in organizational crisis situations. It makes a case for deep presencing leadership coaching as a process for leaders to learn to embody an emergent self-sense that allows for more flexibility, ingenuity, and courage to sense, articulate, and bring forth creative change within their organizations during such periods.

1. INTRODUCTION

The managerial implication of this is profound but simple. There is only one sustainable tool for leading change in the 21st century. This tool is the leader’s Self. Your Self. It is the capacity of the “I” to transcend the boundaries of its current organization and to operate from the emerging larger whole (I-in-now) both individually and collectively. From this perspective, the leader’s real work is to create conditions that allow leaders and other members of the organization to shift the place from which their organization or system operates. (Scharmer, 2000, p. 22)

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Today’s organizations are typically characterized by high uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and turbulence brought on by the instability of financial systems, global markets, natural disasters, and rapid developments in information technology. Across such contexts, organizational leaders routinely face unanticipated crisis events that can significantly impact organizational productivity and sustainability (Heifitz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009), employee morale (Sandler, 2009), and the psychological health of multiple stakeholders in the organizational system (Mitroff, 2005). To effectively work with drastic change and crisis, Heifitz et al. (2009) argue that organizational leaders need to learn how to develop the capacity for engaging in profound learning that will ensure their organizations adapt, thrive, and ultimately have a sustainable future. Developing the leadership abilities to be highly effective amidst crisis situations requires ongoing leadership development (Day, 2000; Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010), through such approaches as leadership coaching (Gray, 2006; Jones, Rafferty, & Griffin, 2006).

To date, key leadership capacities that are most effective during periods of crisis have not been widely researched. Additionally, there are a scarcity of leadership coaching frameworks and tools specifically designed to support coaches and leaders with the process of their growth and development amidst such periods. In response to this need, our chapter examines presencing (Scharmer, 2000; 2007) in the context of leadership coaching (Goldsmith & Lyons, 2005; Silsbee, 2008), with the intent of making a case for deep presencing as a discipline and practice to help leaders and managers respond more creatively and effectively during periods of organizational crisis.

In the first section of this chapter, we discuss the characteristics of organizational crises and examine how presencing and coaching provide learning opportunities during a crisis. We then go on to introduce and build upon the discipline of deep presencing as a leadership coaching practice, clarifying the key aspects we believe are central to the needs of leaders in times of crisis. Finally, we discuss why leadership coaching is an ideal context to develop this work.

2. A LEADERSHIP RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CRISIS

Organizations – including private, governmental, non-profit, and educational institutions – are facing a historically unprecedented degree of crises (Mitroff, 2005). The nature and types of crisis facing organizations are diverse, including economic, informational, physical, human resources, reputational, psychopathic, and natural disasters (Mitroff, 2005). Pearson & Clair (1998) offer an elaborated definition of organizational crisis:

An organizational crisis is a low-probability, high-impact situation that is perceived by critical stakeholders to threaten the viability of the organization and that is subjectively experienced by these individuals as personally and socially threatening. Ambiguity of cause, effect, and means of resolution of the organizational crisis will lead to disillusionment or loss of psychic and shared meaning, as well as to the shattering of commonly held beliefs and values and individuals’ basic assumptions. During the crisis, decision-making is pressed by perceived time constraints and colored by cognitive limitations. (p. 66)

This definition implies that organizational crises have significant psychological influence felt both individually and collectively as forms of “disorienting dilemmas” (Mezirow, 1978). Further, the ways that leaders respond matters a great deal. As such, organizational leaders face significant personal challenges in periods of crisis (Wang, 2008).

During an organizational crisis period, leaders often experience internal disorientation connected to immense systemic and workplace pressures.