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The Greatest Story We Could Ever Tell: A Provocative Proposition

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Introduction

Dr. Michael O'Brien and Dr. Neil Stroul have been working with corporate clients on the strategies and tactics of organization development for nearly twenty years. Since 1996, they have focused increasingly on developing corporate executives as leaders of organizational change. Through individual executive coaching and executive team development, they help people improve their effectiveness as leaders and managers. The coaching relationships generally last a year or more, with in-depth sessions and/or observations every couple of weeks.

The Greatest Story We Could Ever Tell.

All of us are the authors of the greatest story we could ever tell - the story of ourselves. Our stories have all the elements found in fictional stories. They are told in first person and are filled with mysteries and challenges that unfold and are resolved. Interesting characters enter and leave. There is ongoing development of the main character. There are moments of melodrama, tension and comedy. As both authors and narrators, our stories are undeniably poignant and real.

We live and continually create the stories of our individual lives. As the protagonists, we strive to be heroic. But just like our fictional counterparts, our heroes are inevitably flawed and inevitably noble.

The approach to coaching we've developed and practice at O'Brien Group relies on working with our clients so that the story of their lives becomes a story they want to write because it excites them. Our goal is to engage our clients as individuals in a dialogue in which they are not only willing and able to share their stories, but claim the responsibility of authorship as well. They are the authors of the stories they have already lived. And authors of all the chapters they've yet to write.

Our challenge is to enter their story without becoming part of it. To extend the literary metaphor, the coach's task during the coaching dialogue is to introduce the "third person" perspective into the telling of the story on one hand - while serving as a literary critic on the other.

As psychologists, we make it clear to coaching clients that coaching is not therapy. Our role is neither to fix nor cure them.

Instead, our premise is that they are gifted people. Their gifts are the character traits that make them compelling characters in their story. Our purpose is to work with them to better understand the nature of their gifts. As they write the story of their lives and understand how to use their gifts to propel the plot, their lives will be more fulfilled and more effective.

The Provocative Proposition.

These gifts define the heroic version of who we are as individuals. They represent the best of who we are capable of becoming and the deepest, most authentic version of ourselves. The act of embracing our gifts - of provoking our own greatness - is the essence of The Provocative Proposition.

Conversely, the hero in us can be threatened or in retreat. When we are threatened, a distorted version of who we are may also become the main character in our story. In this alternate story, our hero struggles and the outcome is in doubt.

When the hero is in retreat, the story is laced with tension. It becomes the time-honored myth of the lost birthright, and the unfolding story becomes a quest for mastery, the rediscovery of lost gifts and the capacity for using the power of the gifts to respond to the challenges ahead. Claiming and using one's gifts is The Provocative Proposition.

The story is both a blend of fiction and inner truth and becomes our own personal mythology. Its plot and sub-plots are written by actual events and experiences - and yet represent only one version of the truth interpreted by our personal point-of-view. The process of coaching is to explore the story without getting lost in its details - and open up the truth to other interpretations.

One of the key tasks of the coach is to help the client appreciate the story while also accepting that it is only one version of reality. When told in the first-person, the story's fictional elements are difficult to grasp. The individual and the story are one and the same.

When reexamined from a third-person perspective, new interpretations and possibilities emerge. The coach is the initial impetus for introducing the third-person perspective. Ultimately, the client also appreciates the third-person perspective and becomes less inclined to regard the original story as "the truth;" rather, he or she comes to realize that the story he or she has constructed is only one way of understanding the past. The coach helps to shine a light on the clients' internal reality so that they can separate themselves from their story. At that point, the individual discovers the capacity to move the narrative in new directions and to reclaim his or her gifts.

Focusing on the story allows the coach to facilitate greater learning. The client is able to transform himself or herself by transforming the inner reality. The coach helps the client pay attention to his or her internal experience, cultivate mindfulness, introduce new assessments and possibilities about the kind of person he or she chooses to be as new chapters are added to the story.

As this transformation evolves, the now more mindful person dictates the story rather than the (past-based) story dictating to the person. The character is active instead of passive. The person is then able to achieve a balance between need, opportunity and the capacity to make decisions about the most appropriate action to take, the gifts needed to take it and any additional capabilities the individual needs to acquire.

As a result, the client assumes full responsibility for pursuing his or her development goals.

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The Provocative Proposition: A Case Study

Let's explore an example derived from a real relationship. Naturally, certain key facts have been altered to protect confidentiality. The male client, who we will refer to as Sam, is one of five group directors for a midwestern market research firm. The firm is one of several portfolio companies owned by a holding company located in Chicago.

Sam had been at a meeting in which he had the occasion to speak with the Global Vice President (GVP) of Human Resources, with whom he had a long-standing relationship. Sam told his friend and colleague about a series of struggles that he had been experiencing during the last 10 months. Coincidentally, Sam's manager had expressed to the same GVP on an earlier occasion that she had concerns that Sam was in over his head, and that she had doubts about whether or not Sam was the right person for the job.

The GVP suggested to Sam that he felt Sam would benefit from working with a coach. Sam welcomed the assistance. In the initial coaching session, Sam told a variety of stories. Unfortunately, they didn't have happy endings. They were about his relationship with his manager; why the numbers were off for the whole firm; how he was unable to further penetrate his markets because of slow product development; the difficulty of being pressured by the absentee executives of a holding company who did not understand his firm's business; and the challenge of overseeing inexperienced field managers in key positions.

The coach asked Sam to think of the various stories as the current chapter in a longer story. Sam was also urged to share some of the earlier chapters, particularly chapters in which Sam faced and overcame an obstacle as a hero in victory, and chapters in which he experienced setbacks as a hero in retreat. Later, Sam introduced and described key figures who appeared in the story and elaborated on their relationships with him. At another point, the coach asked Sam to list the personal gifts that historically brought him success or victory. Together, the coach and Sam assembled a story of success and satisfaction.

In helping Sam reconstruct the story, the coach continually probed Sam about the characteristics and sensations associated with the hero in victory versus the hero in retreat. The coach helped Sam identify traits of each version of the hero. Sam needed to learn how to notice "in the moment," which version he was running and then choose the more powerful story.

Later, Sam explored his current behavior. Particularly, he looked at how he was spending his time at work. He was dismayed by the immediate flash of insight of discovering that his recent behavior more resembled the hero in retreat.

However, he could not see how to engage his gifts (doggedness, planning, self-discipline, open-mindedness, problem-solving capabilities) to address his current struggles.

Sam was directed to complete several homework assignments. In one assignment, Sam was encouraged to write a story in which a hero who possesses gifts like his overcame challenges that resembled his own.

Sam discovered that the hero in his new story was assertive where he had been passive.

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The hero in the third-person version of the story rallied the troops. The hero in his first-person reality spent a high percentage of his time in his office making excuses and blaming others.

The hero in his new story produced a strategic marketing plan while in the story he was living, he operated in a reactive mode to his manager's demands. From that point on, coaching focused on how Sam could re-write his story. His own gifts or core competencies became The Provocative Proposition for his story.

As Sam and his coach examined Sam's story, Sam was able to perceive that it was a story. He had no difficulty recognizing his talents and abilities and was able to discern how he was a different version of himself when he struggled. By adapting, he stopped relying on old, understandable - but dysfunctional - habits.

The Provocative Proposition is a universal phenomenon that involves reclaiming one's strengths and developing strategies to discover how to apply them in the present tense.

In Sam's case, he discovered that he had stopped leading. He needed to generate a leadership agenda and then enlist others to follow him. For Sam, crafting that agenda became his Provocative Proposition. He also discovered that, in order to fully implement his agenda, he would need to supplement his capabilities with some new skills.

In that manner, coaching was the springboard for Sam to be in development, to embark on his own personal quest for mastery, to improve and expand his capacities, to become even more heroic and to continually edit and update his story.

Coaching Executive Teams

The same basic dynamics apply in working with executive teams. Each executive brings his or her gifts and stories to the team. Executive team development involves a blend of individual coaching consultations with real-time team interventions. The coach's role is to work with the executive team to ensure that each story is respected and that each executive is able to contribute his or her gifts to the overall well-being of the enterprise.

A straightforward way to understand the relationship between executive coaching and executive team development is to realize that when groups of heroes congregate, the room tends to get crowded very quickly. The coach's challenge is to help each member of the executive team appreciate that there are stories other than his or her own, and that in weaving together several heroic tales, epics are created.

In coaching at the team level, the coach helps the team members coordinate with one another and create a story line that best utilizes each team member's individual gifts in achieving organizational goals. The coach works with team members on how to work together, so that each member can bring his or her story to team meetings in a way that reduces confusion, appreciates others' strengths and helps move the organizational story forward.

Conclusion

Through all the work we've done, the stories we've heard, and the new stories we've helped executives discover, we've learned a couple of key principles:

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Development is mostly about adding to, not taking away. We help people add more awareness to their daily lives, to notice when the story they are living in is not working, and to shift to another more powerful story.

Development is a conversation - a long conversation. We learn how to change our old stories and habits slowly over time and only with a sustained effort, a small discipline of noticing, imaging, and reframing. Coaches are there to help keep the conversation alive.