

ACT for Leadership: Using Acceptance and Commitment Training to Develop Crisis- Resilient Change Managers

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Abstract

The evidence-based executive coaching movement suggests translating empirical research into practical methods to help leaders develop a repertoire of crisis resiliency and value-directed change management skills. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an evidence-based modern cognitive-behavior therapy approach that has been and applied to organizational settings. When utilized as a leadership coaching model, Acceptance and Commitment Training (“ACTraining”) demonstrates effectiveness in increasing work performance and innovation while reducing work stress and work errors. The six domains of ACTraining, acceptance, defusion, values, contact with the present moment, self-as-context, and committed action are all reviewed as a model for executive coaching. Keywords: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) ,acceptance, defusion, values, contact with the present moment, work stress and work errors.

On March 6, 2010, during a stress reduction symposium at the American Psychological Association’s Psychologically Healthy Workplace Conference in Washington DC, an audience member from the Federal Consulting Agency asked an invited presenter: “How do you help a government leader work effectively in a stressful situation? These leaders have a lot to deal with and there is a lot of pressure. They are change managers who also do crisis management. The citizens want them to be crisis-resilient change managers.”

The invited presenter said, “There are two things for leaders in this situation to understand: they need a better understanding of how to lead change and how to manage the stress of change. Next question.” The non-answer from a renowned expert not only took one question and made it two, but missed the spirit of the original question: Government leaders need to be assisted in how to lead others publicly during crisis and manage their own private struggles while producing change in the community. So the question is “Given the difficulty of many leadership challenges, how can behavioral science help leaders commit to principled action in the face of inevitable emotional strain?”

“Crisis-resiliency” is defined as an ability to recover from adversity and respond effectively during a stressful situation, especially when beleaguered by private events, such as fatigue, frustration, and self-doubt. “Change management” is conceptualized as executing an articulated action plan aimed at moving from a current situation to a desired future state, even in the face of minimal feedback. Executive coaching can aim at accelerating a leader’s abilities in both of these domains.

There are myriad approaches to executive coaching (Peltier, 2001), and the evidence-based executive coaching movement posits that translating empirical research into practice will lead to the most favorable outcomes (Wampold & Bhati, 2004). Stober & Grant (2006) suggest that “an evidence-based foundation for professional coaching that moves... toward contextually relevant coaching methodologies that incorporate both rigor and the lived experience of practitioners and client, will result in a comprehensive, flexible, and strong model of coaching” (p. 6). Acceptance and Commitment Training has an evidence-based foundation, is explicitly built from the philosophy of contextualism, stems from the staunchly rigorous science of behavior analysis, explicitly incorporates experiential exercises for the

client, and has an aim of enhancing the leader's behavioral flexibility. As such, ACTraining is up to the challenge of creating an evidence-based framework for executive coaching.

Why ACT is up to the challenge

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; pronounced "act"), an evidence-based modern cognitive-behavior therapy approach, has been and applied to organizational settings (Hayes, Bond, Barnes-Holmes, & Austin, 2007). ACT has shown promise in clinical research for over two decades (Zettle & Hayes, 1986), and has since been shown to influence many important behavioral health measures (Hayes, Luoma, Bond, Masuda, & Lillis, 2006). When utilized as an organizational training model, it is typically called Acceptance and Commitment Training ("ACTraining") because it is not a therapeutic endeavor. ACTraining has demonstrated effectiveness in increasing work performance (Bond & Flaxman, 2006), reducing work stress (Bond & Bunce, 2003; Flaxman & Bond, 2010), increasing innovation (Bond & Bunce, 2000), improving acceptance of new training at work (Luoma et al., 2007) and reducing work errors (Bond & Bunce, 2003). Managers trained with the ACT model can have a measureable influence on the performance of their supervisees (Bond, F., personal communication). With these accomplishments in organizational settings, the ACT model seems reasonably applicable to answer the question posed by the Federal Consulting Agency consultant.

What is ACT?

ACT's framework, processes, and interventions are borne from a systematic, bottom-up approach, expanding upon basic operant psychology research and the evidence-based treatment literature (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Using mindfulness and acceptance interventions in conjunction with behavior change strategies and experiential exercises, ACT aims to foster and maintain psychological flexibility. Improvements in measures of psychological flexibility relate to a reduction in psychopathology measures, and an increase in measures of well-being and value-consistent behavior (Ciarrochi, Bilich, & Godesel, 2010). Admiral Thad Allen, retired U.S. Coast Guard admiral, and top leader in responses to Hurricane Katrina and Rita, and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, states "Good leadership requires flexibility" (Berinato, 2010, p. 79). Psychological flexibility is "the opportunity for [a person] to persevere or change his or her behavior in the service of attaining valued goals and outcomes" (Bach & Moran, 2008, p. 6), and is emblematic of solid leadership because it demonstrates resolve in the face of crisis and stress, and commitment to executing important plans to create a better organization or community.

Psychological flexibility is more broadly defined as contacting the present moment fully, based on what the situation affords, as a mindful individual, changing or persisting in behavior in the service of chosen values (Hayes, Strosahl & Wilson, 1999). "Contacting the present moment fully" is important because the only time a leader can act is now. Environment and behavior only intersect in the current moment, and the more capable a leader is in being present, the more accurately the leader will perceive problems and potential resources, and the more likely his or her actions will be decisive and value-directed. Because of the ubiquitous influence of language and the distraction of other private events (i.e., emotions, sensations, urges), people are often not in contact with the present moment, but rather, they can be "caught up" in emotional and cognitive obstacles that take their focus off the current objective. ACT advocates mindfulness practice and other acceptance-based interventions to undermine problematic language processes that can influence a person to lose focus on what matters to them. "A mindful individual" is sober, awake, and aware of what "the situation affords," meaning the information from the environment is acknowledged as potentially important, and none of it is ignored or confabulated. In the presence of a comprehensive view of these environmental stimuli, the leader can alter his or her response pattern in the service of moving toward what is deemed important, or persist in a vital chosen direction. In summary, when a leadership repertoire is psychologically flexible, then the action pattern is clarified,

present focused, and values-oriented, even when private events and external situations might be an obstacle. This ACTraining definition of psychological flexibility, which is over a decade old, appears to be an aim that is well-suited to help managers of change during crisis situations.

The ACT model supports leaders move in the direction of their chosen values by implementing six core processes in the ACT coaching model: acceptance, defusion, self-as-context, contacting the present moment, values clarity, and committed action. (Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, & Wilson, 2004). The six core processes are interrelated and have reciprocal effects on the development of the other processes. During ACTraining, these six processes are used in conjunction and are not considered as robust when used as detached interventions. The six core processes in ACT form a hexagon model (Figure 1).

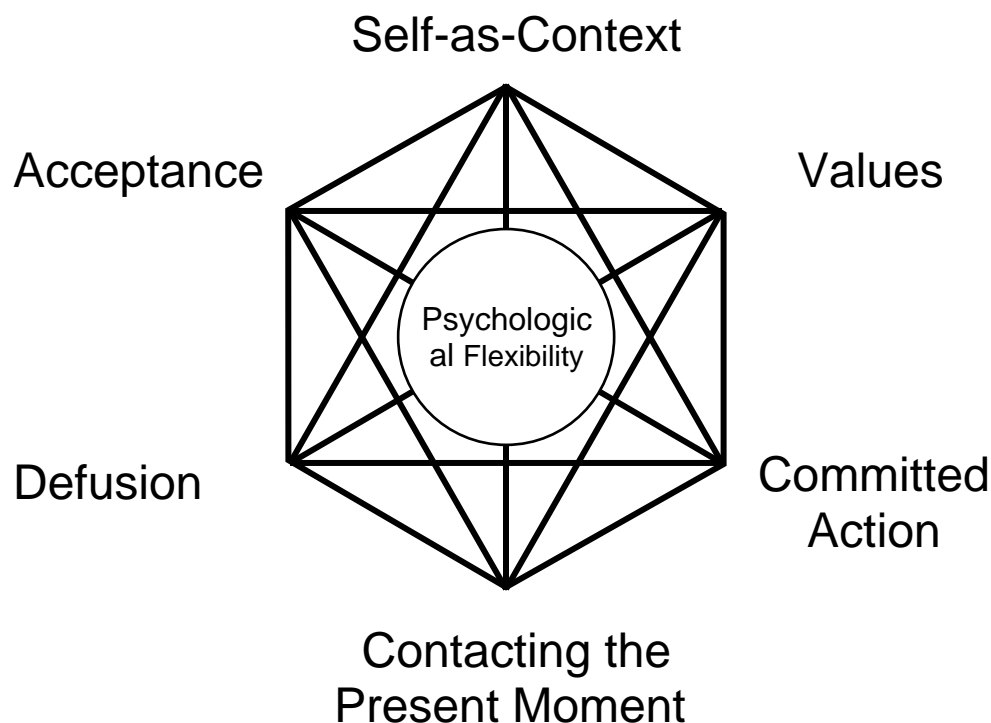


Figure 1. The ACT Hexagon Model. [N.B. This model has been slightly altered from the conventional form (e.g., Bach & Moran, 2008). The positions of Self-as-Context and Contacting the Present Moment have been switched to make future interpretations of the model more readable.]

The six interconnected ACT processes attempt to improve behavioral repertoires by developing greater psychological flexibility by assisting the person in recognizing that certain thoughts and emotions can present obstacles to valued action, and that taking a more mindful and accepting approach to these obstacles can assist in committing to measured and prudent actions. Each process in the ACTraining hexagon model is an area for coaching intervention, and will be used for conceptualizing how to help people be crisis-resilient change managers.

Acceptance

To “accept” is to “take in” or receive an event or situation, and in ACTraining, acceptance is an active willingness to simply notice and have one’s own psychological responses without trying to avoid them. When faced with a leadership concern, certain feelings and mood states are likely to arise, and they may be judged as aversive. Time and effort is potentially wasted in attempting to alter or avoid these inevitable emotional states. The ACT coach uses interventions to help the leader learn that emotions do not have to be changed or eliminated before effective action can be taken because leaders have the option to simply notice their emotions while behaving effectively.

Acceptance is often considered an unconventional approach because much of modern culture, and even mental health treatments, suggest that people can control their emotions and sensations. We hear children being told “Stop crying,” when legitimately upset. We also hear phrases like “Don’t worry about it,” “You should be happy about this,” and “Don’t get mad at me!” It appears our language conveys the message that people should control their emotions, and that it is simple to do so. But people do not typically exhibit a practical ability to easily control their thoughts and emotions. In fact, this control agenda, when aimed at private events, might actually compound leadership problems. For instance, by following through on an emotional control agenda, and in an effort to reduce anxiety feelings, leaders might stop performing anxiety-provoking responses, like attending social events, briefings, or work meetings, which in turn leads to a reduced social standing, and diminished understanding of recent intelligence. This reduction in information and social influence leads to further social anxiety which may lead to the vicious cycle of more avoidance. For another example, if a leader feels overwhelmed by a crisis, he or she can control the overwhelming feelings by procrastinating and focusing on less pressing matters. This control strategy might alleviate the overwhelmed feelings, but the crisis might be getting worse during this leadership absence.

To be clear, the focus of ACT is on acceptance of private events, not public events. In other words, the aim is not to have the client just accept a challenging external situation as if it were unalterable and something to simply tolerate. When there are problematic externalities, such as civil unrest, natural or man-made disasters, or iniquitous events, leaders do not consent to abide their existence. Rather, it is their job to change these external situations. However, struggling to rid oneself of private events (such as frustration, anxiety, anger or other internal psychological events that are likely to occur during these events) can be deleterious to giving mindful attention to the mission of changing these public problems. The acceptance interventions in the ACT model target the futile struggle with private events. When serving the public, working to diminish one’s own private events, such as worry or vengefulness, is not good leadership. Working toward valued outcomes is. U.S. president Woodrow Wilson (1908) spoke of public service in a manner consistent with ACT when he stated: “I am not sure that it is of the first importance that you should be happy. Many an unhappy man has been of deep service to himself and to the world” (p. 88). For people in leadership positions, stress is a proximal problem while valued outcomes are distal reinforcers. ACTraining for leadership recontextualizes the stressful proximal problems as part and parcel of executing important goals. Doing something worthwhile is likely to set the occasion for stressful feelings. For example, when a leader is clearly following through on her own values by choosing to hold a press conference to promote her sincere support for a piece of controversial legislature, she is extremely likely to feel “negative” emotions of angst, doubt, and anxiety. (N.B. In the ACT model, it is more workable to consider “negative” emotions to simply be “natural” emotions. The word “negative” is merely a verbal response made in the presence of certain natural emotions, and that label has been reinforced by the social community. See the Defusion section for further explication.) The ACT model suggests that actively feeling natural feelings without needlessly defending against them fosters opportunity toward effective action, rather than waiting to feel less anxious or more assured about such a decision. Leading difficult change is demanding on the leader. Willingness to have those feelings is a step toward greater psychological flexibility and a sign of change management directed toward valued outcomes.

ACT often relies on metaphor to help teach clinically relevant ideas to clients (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999). Metaphors are less likely to evoke a rigid repertoire when the client is learning a new view on how to lead, as might happen if the coach proscriptively told the client what to do as a leader. Metaphors can be more easily remembered than new rules, and have been shown to more likely evoke newly insightful behavior (Stewart & Barnes-Holmes, 2001). ACT trainers will often talk metaphorically in order to demonstrate how unwillingness and non-acceptance can be problematic, and about how “struggling” when caught in a “trap” actually leads to further problems. For example, ACT consultants can present Chinese finger cuffs to the client. These finger cuffs are tubes of weaved bamboo in which a person puts their left and right index fingers. Once ensnared, when the person tries to pull their fingers out of the weavings, the tube becomes more snug, and the harder the person pulls, the tighter the snare. Actually pushing both fingers together, demonstrating a willingness to be fully in the trap, loosens the weave, allowing the person more wiggle room, and greater flexibility to become unbound. Metaphorically, this demonstrates that coming in full contact with emotions that have been previously avoided will allow better focus on the matter at hand rather than on the concomitant emotional struggle. Acceptance and full contact with the situation is required for resolution. The same is true when faced with troublesome emotions.

The Quicksand Metaphor is an ACT intervention that can yield similar results. When an unsuspecting traveler unexpectedly falls into a quicksand pit, the first reaction is often to escape the quicksand. There is much struggle to get out of the current situation, but every time the person lifts a leg up, the other one sinks a bit further down. Ironically, the best way to survive a quicksand pit is to allow every part of the body come in full contact with the quicksand. Sprawling out and “floating” on one’s back on top of the trap, with as much surface area contacting the scary quicksand will prevent the person from sinking into the problem. Accepting one’s emotions fully and without needless defense is helpful because struggling to avoid these events is even more problematic.

These analogies (and dozens of other similar exercises from the ACT literature) can prepare a leader for crisis if trained properly. The leader learns that problematic external events will certainly occur during his or her tenure, and that concomitant private events such as anger and anxiety are natural. These private events are not inherently dangerous, but the *struggle and avoidance* of these emotions can lead to ineffective behavior. A willingness to *have* those feelings and sensations, fully and without needless defense, creates a context where the leader can focus on important external public issues.

Defusion

In addition to having problematic feelings and sensations, private *verbal* events (i.e., thoughts) also arise during leadership challenges. Human beings appear to have an unstoppable stream of consciousness and are constantly thinking. This ability to use language for describing, evaluating, and problem-solving is incredibly helpful to people, and certainly helps leaders thrive. Language skills can be a leader’s most incisive tool. However, during a provocative event, this internal monologue can be plaguing and unhelpful.

“Cognitive fusion” describes the problematic influence of private verbal events. Fusion occurs when thoughts are taken literally and then influence the person to act in a problematic manner. Fusion happens when a person inflexibly responds to verbal events and evaluations without the full consideration of the practical events of the present moment and/ or without regard of their personally chosen values. The word “fusion” implies that two different things are welded or melted together to become one thing. Metaphorically, this describes what happens with cognitions and the events to which they refer. For instance, a client who is fused with the cognitive event “This problem is unsolvable” does not mindfully notice these four words as merely a thought, yet instead takes that cognitive event as a literal truth thereby approaching the problem through the lens of “unsolvable.” Having a rigid relationship with one’s own

thoughts will likely impede flexible thinking, collaboration, and coming up with a solution. Fusing to the automatic thought “This problem is unsolvable” may lead to giving up on fixing the problem, which is antithetical to good leadership. Defusion allows the individual to see thoughts *as thoughts*, rather than regarding thoughts as literal truths about the world. This in turn, frees the leader to act on the basis of his or her personal values and the current environmental situation rather than on the automatic, unreasoned thoughts about the problem.

In ACT Training, defusion is typically introduced in a three-step process. The coach and client discuss the automaticity of thoughts, then discuss the undeniable power thoughts can have over behavior, and then finally collaborate on an experiential exercise that this power does not have to be so strong.

Automaticity

The ultimate aim of defusion is to have the client learn the skill of discriminating that he or she is simply having a thought, and to mindfully choose its effect on his or her behavior. This private verbal event does not have to result in behaviors that take away from the person’s ability to lead well. It is helpful for the leader to see that the thoughts that “happen between your ears and behind your eyes” are often completely out of voluntary control. One interesting exercise shows the automaticity very easily. The coach presents an unfinished, but very popular sentence that the client will know, such as “Jack and Jill went up the _____.” Obviously, the chosen sentence must be popular enough to evoke a response from the client. Most people answer “hill” aloud, and then are asked not to think “hill” when the phrase is presented again. Typically, people admit that all attempts to stop thinking “hill” are futile. Occasionally, clients say they replaced the word with another word, but the coach can always ask how the client would know that this substitution worked. The client inevitably must compare the substitute response to the word “hill” to check to see if their strategy worked. Even if the client says they cleared their mind or concentrated on something very intensely, re-presenting the stimulus “Jack and Jill went up the _____” will likely elicit the private event again. This exercise demonstrates that when people are not on guard, certain thoughts are conditioned to show up in particular circumstances. If the control agenda for preventing thoughts did work (and it rarely does), it takes a distinct amount of concentration and attention, which reduces the ability for a leader to behave flexibly in the face of challenges. This exercise shows that the environment and the person’s own personal history sets the occasion for certain thoughts to happen automatically. In other words, in some situations, a leader cannot help but think some things. It is important to make sure that the demonstration of automaticity is done with genuine caring for the client, in order to elucidate the properties of language for all people. The fact that it is beyond a person’s ability to prevent certain thoughts is not a weakness of the person, but a powerful by-product of our ability to benefit from language.

The power of language

The second step in a defusion exercise is to demonstrate that language is very powerful from a psychological standpoint. One typical ACT exercise used to convey this idea is to describe a lemon in graphic and evocative details. Talking about cutting a sour fruit in half and sucking the juice out of the lemon can elicit a salivary response, even in the absence of citric acid actually being on the tongue of the client. The actual lemon juice does not have to be present, but the psychological reaction can still occur in the presence of words about the actual event. Talking about roller coasters can give people goose bumps, and talking about repulsive events can lead to disgust responses. Talking about injustice can make people feel very angry and even be moved to do something about the problem. Much of this should be easily understood by the leader because good leaders often know the power of speech to motivate people into action.

Noticing language

The third step is the critical defusion piece of the intervention, and it is aimed to teach the client that despite how automatic and powerful words can be, they do not have to be so influential. After the client experiences salivation during the lemon exercise, he or she can be invited to join the coach in repeating the word “lemonlemonlemon” at a high rate for about 25 seconds. After this exercise, the word “lemon” typically becomes deliteralized. In other words, the client can perceive the word as simply a sound made with his or her mouth and throat. The meaning of words becomes less apparent after about 25 seconds of repeating (Masuda, et al. 2009). This demonstrates that words can be considered arbitrary stimuli, and that context imparts a word’s meaning. Such exercises help the client learn how to look at words from a new, more flexible context. People do not have to respond to words as if they were actually the thing they refer to. Words can be conceptualized as arbitrary stimuli in order to help the person gain some flexibility or distance from the on-going, potentially unhelpful stream of cognitions.

This intervention is not aimed to depotentiate the strength of words outright, but it is used to demonstrate that words do not have to be powerful. The word and the event become defused; they are no longer one and the same. This allows the leader to take a new perspective on the automatic, potentially powerful and deleterious private events that come up during times of crisis. Additional exercises and conventions of speech can support this more flexible view of verbal private events. For instance, clients can be taught to notice their private words as merely thoughts and not as decrees, by announcing “I’m having the thought that...” before each verbal event that has the potential to lead to inflexible behavior. A client saying “I’m having the thought that this problem is unsolvable,” may be less rigid in his or her responses to that problem.

Contacting the Present Moment

A mindful ACTraining coach would be prone to teach a change manager: “Lead now, because you cannot lead yesterday or tomorrow.” Behavior occurs only in the present moment, yet language has a tendency to pull a person’s attention from experiencing the ongoing present. Psychological flexibility is partially about either changing or persisting in behavior, but no matter what the leader is choosing to do, it will be done in the current moment. This is why it is advantageous for leaders to become adroit at contacting the experience of here-and-now. Mindfulness and meditation exercises can be influential on improving a leader’s ability to contact the present moment.

A robust review of the benefits of mindfulness and meditation goes beyond the scope of this paper, but in brief, there are scientifically supported reasons for engaging in mindfulness practice that can assist leadership skills. In a book-long review of this topic, Roemer & Orsillo (2009) conclude that “research suggests that mindfulness- and acceptance-based behavioral therapies hold promise for individuals... with a range of presenting problems, from significant, chronic conditions to milder presentations” (p. 9). Research participants given an eight-week course of mindfulness meditation showed that the more time participants spent practicing mindfulness, the more improvement they showed in their ability to be mindful in daily life with a concomitant improvement in well-being and dealing with psychological obstacles (Carmody & Baer, 2008). Mindfulness can be influential in “disengaging individuals from automatic thoughts, habits, and unhealthy behavior patterns and thus could play a key role in fostering informed and self-endorsed behavioral regulation” (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 823), and can be associated with enhancement of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Meditation practices have demonstrated greater reduction of psychological distress compared to progressive muscle relaxation (Broome, Orme-Johnson, & Schmidt-Wilk, 2005) and workers who engage in meditative practices have shown reduced physiological arousal, trait anxiety, job tension, substance use, insomnia and fatigue, while increasing general health, employee effectiveness, job satisfaction, and interpersonal functioning (Alexander et al., 1993). Additionally, participants in meditation training “grew more in their expression of leadership behaviors measured by the Leadership Practices Inventory” (McCollum, 1999, p. 149). The

accumulating data indicate that practice in contacting the present moment can foster greater crisis-resilience and commitment to leadership.

Mindfulness practice can be done as a secular activity. There are classic exercises to help build this beneficial skill, such as learning to pay attention to one's own breath while allowing private events (i.e., thoughts and emotions) to simply occur and be noticed, while reorienting back to one's breath if distracted by the private events. The leader is taught to follow his or her breath during inhaling and exhaling. When the inevitable thoughts and feelings occur, the leader is invited to simply allow these private events to happen in a detached manner, as if the thoughts were placed on a leaf floating down a stream, and then reorient attention back to his or her breath. Thoughts, images, sensations, and urges surely arise during the exercise, and the leader is encouraged to be aware of their presence as events that are happening "now," and not attempt to change the event. The leader is invited to embrace these stimuli as part of the on-going moment, and to refocus on breathing. The purpose of this exercise is often misunderstood to be about breathing, and it seems more prudent to conceptualize the exercise as being about the present moment. Breathing is always happening "now" so it serves as a simple and universal teaching tool about contacting the present moment. Yet the exercise could also be about feeling the sensation of the ground contacting one's feet during a walking meditation or the flavor of a mint placed on one's tongue. The client is invited to pay attention to those particularly related sensations, as exclusively as possible, while simply acknowledging and releasing any distractions from that chosen behavior.

In the ACTraining approach, mindfulness exercise helps the leader develop a new relationship with thoughts and emotions by strengthening the ability to notice private events without getting caught up in them or "hooked" by old patterns of thinking. In addition, the exercise helps build the skill of focusing on work tasks in the present moment. Maintaining a committed pattern of ongoing activity, even in the presence of distractions, will help the leader progress toward valuable outcomes. Engendering these abilities will allow greater psychological flexibility. If a person has certain goals to be reached, and there are unique obstacles to reaching the goal, old thinking patterns might lead to inert solutions. "Being present" allows the leader to look squarely at the current challenge, while being open to new solutions, and even weighing the merits of old options, to see what course of action will lead to advantageous directions.

Values

Much has been said about family values, corporate values, and the value systems that must be embodied by a leader. The term is ubiquitous in the leadership and management literature. In ACTraining, values are "verbally construed desired global life consequences" (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999, p. 206), and they set the context for discussing with the leader what are the vital and purposeful elements behind leadership goals. Values give leadership meaning. Wilson & Dufrene (2008) further define values as "freely chosen, verbally constructed consequences of ongoing, dynamic, evolving patterns of activity, which establish predominant reinforcers for that activity that are intrinsic in engagement in the valued behavioral pattern itself" (p. 64).

More succinctly, a person's values answer the question: "What you want your life to be about?" Working on values in ACTraining focuses on what the client describes as the desired, broad consequences related to his or her executive behaviors. Thus, leadership values can be assessed with questions such as, "What can you do to bring meaning to the lives of the people in the community?" or "What do you want your tenure as leader to stand for?" The answers to these questions guide the direction of the coaching, and also the leader's professional (and perhaps private) life. In 1860, U.S. historian Henry Adams said the chief executive office of the U.S. "resembles the commander of a ship at sea. He must have a helm to grasp, a course to steer, a port to seek" (Remini, 2002, p. xiv). Values are the course, goals are the ports, and according to a political science survey by Schlesinger (1997), they constitute the first requirement for

leadership greatness among U.S. presidents. In fact Franklin D. Roosevelt opined, “All our great presidents were leaders of thought at times when certain ideas in the life of the nation had to be clarified” (Jenkins, 2003, p. xv).

Values can be discussed as “chosed life directions” and undoubtedly need to be clarified before a captain can start sailing. Intrinsic in leading is getting in front of followers and going a certain direction, and without a clarified leadership agenda, the captain and followers will be aimless. Assessing the leader’s chosen directions, and even codifying them as a touchstone for review in treacherous waters, will be an important part of ACTraining.

Clarifying values in the coaching relationship allow a few things to happen. First, knowing the direction the leader is choosing is critical to charting the course. One cannot map out a course without first knowing if he wants to head West or East. In a more partisan and perhaps oversimplified explanation, the leader usually must declare right-wing or left-wing leanings. However, direction of leadership values includes discussing the spectra of honesty-expediency, self-promotion-credit sharing, and representation of the electorate’s expectations-authoritative execution of one’s own convictions. The ACTraining coach helps illuminate what the chosen leadership direction is, and assists in constructing what patterns of action should be prioritized as a leader (see Committed Action section). Elucidating one’s core values – what the leader wants to stand for – is like determining an orientation point, a North Star, by which the leader can always refer to in order to assess if the leader should persist or change in his or her direction.

Second, clarifying values can support the leader in the challenge of accepting certain emotions that arise during difficult times. Values also bolster the leader’s abilities in defusing from unhelpful thinking patterns. In other words, the aforementioned coaching moves, acceptance and defusion, asks the client to do something culturally-deviant and demanding, yet knowing why you are choosing to do something difficult can dignify the pain in doing it. The ACTraining approach invites the client to “live in the space” of the very existential challenge that arises with the following dilemma: When committing to actions related to one’s core values, challenging emotions are likely to arise. And the pain that comes from moving toward important directions cannot be avoided, because any attempt to mitigate the pain is likely to slow, if not completely derail, progress toward the valued goals. So instead of avoiding the stress, strain, and emotional pain, the ACT model suggests acceptance of those emotions and defusion from the unhelpful thoughts. Values dignify this process by asking: “What do you want your leadership to stand for? Do you want your tenure to be about avoiding personal stress or leadership toward valued directions?” ACT coaching is not about training people to become masochistic, but rather to take a new perspective on the private events (emotions, images, sensations, urges, and thoughts) that inevitably arise while committing to vital patterns of action. Taking a journey in an important direction can have concomitant emotional baggage, and the ACT model suggests to the sojourner to “Take the baggage with you.”

Leadership as process

Values are not only linked to acceptance and defusion, but also to contacting the present moment. Leaders are consistently given the message that they must produce results, and it is important that such goal-directedness be reinforced for the client. However, goals are something to achieve in the future (either in the near- or distant- future) and values-oriented behavior can happen right now. An ACTraining coach can suggest that there be outcome goals and process goals. In other words, it is one thing to try to pass certain legislation sometime during one’s tenure, even if it takes a few years. It is another thing entirely to work toward that goal in an honest, forthright manner on a moment-to-moment basis. Leadership is not only about reaching the goal, but it is also about how that goal is reached.

Sportsmanship is not only about scoring a goal, but it is also about playing fairly and not tainting the score by cheating.

Leaders chose a bearing and set certain destinations along the course to assess that they are headed in the right direction. Values-based leadership is emblemized not by just reaching the final destination, but by how the journey was travelled. Each step is taken in the here-and-now.

Committed Action

U.S. president Wilson (1909) spoke poetically about the connection between committed action and clarified leadership values by saying, “I do not believe that any man can lead who does not act... under the impulse of a profound sympathy with those whom he leads - a sympathy which is insight - an insight which is of the heart rather than of the intellect” (p. 226). The ultimate aim of the ACT consulting model for leaders is to allow the individual to make committed actions based on a clarified value system (influenced by the law, constituents, and advisors) from a perspective unencumbered by obstacles of faulty thinking patterns, or of emotional distractions, and to execute these behaviors in the here-and-now.

Committed action is where the “rubber hits the road” in ACTraining. In other words, the ACT model is elegantly constructed to produce results so that there is traction between the leader’s behavior and the external environment. An empirically-supported behavior change treatment requires measurable, overt forward progress. Committed action is persisting or changing in measurable behaviors that are in service of chosen values.

In ACT treatment, this domain typically involves evidence-based behavior therapy treatments. In ACTraining, this part of the model includes the types of interventions that are related to improving the leadership and management repertoire. Using evidence-based coaching models and applied behavior analysis (Daniels & Daniels, 2007; Gilbert, 2007; Lees, 2010) inherently evokes committed action. Narrowly speaking, this might engage the leader in time-management practices, communication skills-building, or assertiveness training. It can also include enacting a contingency-management plan where the leader is either accountable to himself or the coach for engaging in a certain rate of leadership responses, which includes data collection and detailed reinforcers for meeting personal goals for improving leadership skills. More broadly, the focus of committed action might include a government leader obligating herself to a detailed, step-by-step action plan with her think tank in order to meet certain legislative objectives.

Conventional executive coaching often takes the form of presenting suggestions, rules, and training programs to the leader. Such directives can be helpful, but these antecedent interventions are limp without consequences tied to outcomes or objectives. Behavioral coaching typically weaves in a variant of contingency management that consequates defined goal-achievement. Such behavioral interventions likely lead to better outcomes and greater duration of the program, but do not usually address the other contextual obstacles that can impede executive behavior, such as plaguing thoughts, emotional avoidance habits, lack of clarified values, and concretized self-statements (see Self-as-Context section). The ACT model incorporates the tried-and-true behavioral coaching interventions aimed at accelerating leadership into a broader training context which addresses psychological obstacles.

Self-as-Context

Sun Tzu (1910/ 2010) spoke poetically about the connection between self-as-context and clarified leadership values by saying, “The general who advances without coveting fame and retreats without fearing disgrace, whose only thought is to protect his country and do good service for his sovereign, is the jewel of the kingdom” (p. 34). Some leadership advice suggests the leader be “selfless.” In ACTraining, the conventional idea of selflessness may play a role, but further clarification is needed. Most major

psychological theories discuss the concept of “the self.” Contextual behavioral science delineates three different senses of self: the self-as-content, self-as-process, and self-as-context.

Self-as-content

Self-as-content is expressed as verbal descriptions of characteristics and evaluations of one’s own person and history. This encompasses such statements as “I am a congressperson,” “I am tall,” or “I am bad at relationships.” This sense of self includes the “content” or the concepts people use to express their roles, proclivities, and attributes. When people are “fused” to these descriptions, it can lead to an inflexible behavioral repertoire. Once something is labeled, its use has a tendency to become less flexible. To illustrate the restrictiveness of labeling, Blackledge, Moran, & Ellis (2009) tell how a bench, which was once considered highly practical for sitting and resting, is discovered to be an “antique footstool,” and then revered, no longer sat upon, and considered to be put up for auction. When it comes to describing the content or conceptualizations of oneself, truly “buying into” such verbalizations can hem-in behavioral opportunities. Imagine someone saying, when asked to write a new initiative, “I’ve never been good at policy writing. I’m more directive and persuasive. Paperwork isn’t my thing.” With this self-as-content statement, the leader essentially restricts behavioral possibilities. While self-as-content is important in order to let social contacts know about one’s characteristics and accomplishments, strengths and weaknesses, these descriptions can become confining.

Self-as-process

Self-as-process is expressed as the verbal evaluations of one’s ongoing behavior. This includes verbal descriptions of overt actions, and also thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. The term “process” can be defined as a series of actions or natural occurrences (Encarta Dictionary, 2010), and self-as-process describes how the individual is engaging in a series of actions or natural occurrences in the on-going moment. For instance, while at a podium in front of a crowd, the leader can notice “I am giving a speech,” and is noticing self-as-process. “I am feeling exhausted,” can be another verbalization of the leader’s self-as-process. Both self-as-content and self-as-process are both verbally describable. They both encompass the “things” and “actions” related to oneself. Self-as-context is certainly different from both self-as-content and self-as-process.

Self-as-context

Self-as-context (SAC) “is not an object of verbal evaluations; instead it is the locus from which a person’s experience unfolds” (Bach & Moran, 2008, p. 10) Self-as-context is transcendent in that it has no verbal content or form and might best be described as “pure consciousness” (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999, p. 187). It can be considered the on-going experience from which a person will make their observations. The SAC is the continual point-of-view one privately encounters, and looks at the world from, throughout his or her life. It can be considered one’s unique perspective, and in this case, “perspective” is not synonymous with verbal judgments, but rather a non-verbal viewpoint. Self-as-context is likely the most theoretically complex part of the ACTraining model and discussing SAC didactically can be counterproductive; however, the experiential exercises performed in coaching often lead to a greater understanding than the academic discussion about the SAC. Experiential exercises are often used to help clients have greater contact with the SAC with the aim of increasing the person’s ability to accept private events, as well as establish a position from which to clarify one’s own values.

The classic ACT exercise for promoting a growing awareness of the SAC is the Chessboard Metaphor. The client is encouraged to envision her thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations as chess pieces, and that there are two sides to the game: the “bad” and the “good” pieces. For instance, leaders are sometimes besieged by unconfident thoughts, feel inadequate, or are gripped by anxious feelings, and

these are often thought of as “bad.” These events can be conceptualized as the opponent pieces. Conventional wisdom, westernized thinking, and even CBT coaching models might suggest that the leader think positively to mitigate such private events. This places a new set of pieces into the chess game, such as: “I’m confident, strong, and unafraid.” The introduction of new “good” thoughts (or reintroduction of old disputational thoughts) might help the leader think rationally about her abilities and emotional status, but such a strategy will never truly rid the leader of such thoughts. In fact, it essentially influences the leader to be “up in her head” trying to avoid, escape, or eliminate unhelpful thoughts. This experientially avoidant move is not only distracting from the leadership mission (to manage change in the community), but might also exacerbate the lack of confidence when the leader finds that she cannot rid herself of thoughts by thinking other thoughts. The leader is invited to not take sides in this chess match, and to cease rooting for one set of pieces while hoping for the decimation of the opponent pieces. The ACT rationale for suggesting a different strategy is because one never can fully avoid certain private events that have been fluently conditioned to occur in the presence of particular environmental stimuli. And (metaphorically) if one cannot delete the chess pieces of feelings, thoughts, and sensations, perhaps it is more workable (and existentially authentic) to perceive oneself not as the pieces, but as the accepting and embracing chessboard. The chessboard sets the context for the game. It makes itself available to all that naturally arises in the course of a game and harbors no resentment to either side of the game. The chessboard simply provides a simple framework for the pieces and accepts their presence. A psychologically flexible, crisis-resilient change manager has the ability to make room for and accept the presence of certain thoughts, emotions, and sensations. The resilient leaders notices both “pieces” that say: “I’m not competent to deal with this problem” and “I am a well-trained problem-solver” fully and without defending against or rooting for either thought. The justifications for this perspective are like the two sides of the same coin: 1) spending time trying to win this mental chess game does not work because once private events are fluently learned, thinking disputational thoughts rarely stops them from happening, and 2) playing this private chess game is not a necessary part of change management. It is likely more expedient to simply execute value-based directives in the presence of these private events.

The experiential exercises help clarify that a person is *not* comprised of the mere verbal descriptions and cognitions they have been conditioned to say and believe about themselves. There is more to being a person than articulating one’s roles, memories, body, sensations, emotions, and thoughts. There is an on-going point-of-view from which all of these phenomena are observed and accepted. (In the ACT literature, the term “self-as-perspective” is sometimes used interchangeably with SAC.) The idea of incorporating SAC into executive coaching is to help the leader establish a solid perspective from which to observe, clarify, and direct one’s values, and from there, to move toward a committed action plan.

How can ACT influence crisis resilience and leadership?

ACT training attempts to shape up a behavioral repertoire so the leader can make a distinction between his or her self-as-context and other content, such as emotions, urges, and sensations that are experienced, and then accept those private events as they occur without pointlessly defending against them. The leader also learns to defuse from unhelpful thinking patterns while committing to action plans influenced by conscientious values clarification, and then executing those behaviors in the here and now. The ACT model has been demonstrated to lead to psychological flexibility (Ciarrochi, Bilich, & Godsel, 2010) which is likely to be a key ingredient to crisis-resilient change leadership.

The Federal Consulting Agency professional who posed the question about crisis-resiliency and change management was looking for a method aimed to improve the leadership qualities of public servants. The prudent answer to that question should include a comprehensive, flexible, evidence-based coaching model created from behavioral science. Preliminary evidence suggests ACTraining fits such a need because it dovetails nicely with the empirically supported behavior change strategies that executive coaches often use, such as assertiveness training, stress reduction approaches, and contingency

management programs. ACT also provides strategies to contend with private events (i.e., thoughts and emotions), promotes the clarification of leadership values, and incorporates the recent research demonstrating the benefits of mindfulness practice. Research on ACT's efficacy and effectiveness in clinical and industrial-organizational environments shows promise, yet further research is required to ascertain all the limits and benefits of the ACTraining model.

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