

# **How developing the Inner Freedom to Act can help Leaders**

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## **Abstract**

Terms such as the 'Inner Freedom to Act' would have been unheard of within business 50 years ago, even now the concept and use of the term in business is relatively new. Recent research however shows how beneficial developing it can be for leaders, giving them access to greater resources within themselves, and as a result more choice about how to act. This is achieved through a release from external influences and those of the past that limit their thinking and capability. They are also able to see the reality of the context within which they operate and the situations they find themselves in.

The research paper explores in detail how this can be achieved and presents a model to represent how the Inner Freedom to Act affects leadership responses.

**Keywords:** Inner Freedom to act, leaders, leadership responses

## How developing the Inner Freedom to Act can help Leaders

Personal development in the western world has been predominantly based around the pursuit of knowledge, achievement and material success, (Whitmore, J 2002, p. 122-123). As knowledge about personal development and growth becomes available from other cultures, (Wilber, 2007, p.16) it has been possible to learn about other paths for development, for example around spirituality and values. This focus on development through reflection and meditation, and terms such as the 'Inner Freedom to Act' would have been unheard of within business 30 years ago. Even now the concept and use of the term in business is relatively new and it is the purpose of this paper to explore both what it means and how it can be of benefit to leaders in business.

A series of interviews were conducted with coaches who had a psychological background or had been through psychological training, as well as practical experience of coaching leaders in business. Leaders were also interviewed to explore their experience in the area.

### **What is the Inner Freedom to Act?**

The phrase, the 'Inner Freedom to Act' is used within psychosynthesis though not specifically defined, however, the concept of inner freedom is explored in a range of literature. Common elements include:-

#### **Addressing internal and external influences**

One of the key elements of the Inner Freedom to Act is that it relates to ways of thinking and acting that have come about throughout our growth and development, (Ferrucci 2004, p.35 – 36 and Senge, P. Scharmer, C.O, Jaworski, J. and Flowers, B.S 2005, p. 223). Damasio (2003, p.175) refers to the antecedent conditions and process, and Newell and Munro Turner (2008) our past and conditioning.

#### **Availability of resources**

There is a common theme that having the Inner Freedom to Act frees up resources available to an individual. This may be through increased energy as old fears and resentments that have been carried around are 'exposed to be de-energised and disappear' (Ferrucci, 2004, p.35). Assgioli (2007, p.23) refers to Maslow's claim about the healthy self-actualised person as having 'lost fewer of the human capabilities than the average man...a larger armamentum of responses'.

#### **Choice**

Fewer influences and greater resources lead to greater choice. Assagioli (2007, p.9) uses the phrase 'endowed with the power to chose'. This choice comes about through the ability to let go of an influence, subpersonality or role that limits our view and ability to respond to something (Whitmore, D. 2000, p.99).

## **Context**

Context is relevant in that in some situations, for example, when danger strikes, people can find the will to act in a way they take to be right (Assagioli, 2007 p.8). Under pressure they are freed from interferences of the past which may have prevented them acting when the danger is not present. Equally, at survival level the need to rely on the past to maintain order and stability is necessary, though as Childre and Martin point out, this can be restrictive when looking for new solutions (2000, p. 26).

## **What are the benefits to leaders of developing their Inner Freedom to Act?**

The context within which leaders now operate has shifted in the 'Tsunami of Great Change' (Lewin, R. and Regine, B. 1999, p.342). Newell and Munro Turner (2008) describe how it has changed from being 'understandable and engineerable' to one that requires leaders to shape meaning. The focus is away from task and towards identity. This changing role of leadership, means that having the Inner Freedom to Act means leaders are able to disidentify not only from their subpersonalities, but also the sensations and feelings that cloud and limit their responses (Assagioli, 2007, p.216 and Ferrucci, 2004, p.58). Their perception of reality will also be improved (Ferrucci, 2004, p.96 and Fromm 1993, p.41). This in turn provides greater space in which to move and chose their behaviour (Whitmore, D. 2000, p.98). Leaders can be both more aware of and present with what is happening and so become more responsive (Varela F.J. and Thompson, E. and Rosch, E, 1993, p.122).

In summary, leaders will be able to call on all the parts of themselves, make use of all their resources and respond appropriately (Smith, 2000, p.3).

## **How can coaches work with clients to develop the Inner Freedom to Act?**

Jung is quoted as saying "Without necessity nothing budges, the human personality least of all" (Munro Turner and Wilson 2008). The first step is to become aware of the issues that are holding leaders back. Fromm (1993, p.37) describes awareness as discovering something that was not obvious or expected. The process is described by Ferrucci (2004, p.37) as liberating them from the unconscious energies and letting go of what was previously directing them.

In terms of approach this means creating a safe environment (Munro Turner and Wilson 2008), helping clients to observe and notice their thoughts and feelings (Whitmore, D. 2000, p.99). Techniques in support of this include journaling (Newell and Munro Turner 2008) and stopping what you are doing to notice what is going on, for example using the Freeze Frame tool of Childre and Martin (2000, p. 67). Disidentification from roles or thoughts can be achieved through stepping back and using a Gestalt technique of using a third chair to represent the part of the client that is not consumed by the issue (Whitmore D. 2000, p.99 – 100). Assagioli (2007, p.211 – 217) outlines an exercise of self-identification and Smith (2000, p.126) describes a balloon exercise to let go of different identities.

Meditation can support development of the Inner Freedom to Act by allowing people closer contact with their subconscious (Fromm, 1993, p.53). Varela, Thompson and Rosch (1993, p.27) states how mindful open-ended reflection can cut the chain of habitual thought patterns.

## **What are the issues and challenges around developing the Inner Freedom to Act?**

Assagioli, (2007, p.10) states that freedom is easily submerged by the surge of drives, emotions and ideas. This makes development difficult and it is exacerbated by the closed thinking and action orientation of the West (Newell and Munro Turner, 2008). The fact that looking inside ourselves in the west is new and different makes it uncomfortable. Things about our past have been repressed for a reason and the fear of exposure protects us from harm and self doubt (Bradt 2007, p.177).

The challenge for the coach is whether they have the ability to help clients to 'shed their blindness' and take it to a constructive conclusion (Fromm, 1993, p.41). The danger exists if coaches fail to understand that the areas they are working in can cause harm to people if not treated effectively. In order to address this, proficiencies for psychologically oriented coaching (Bluckert, P 2006, p. 95-96) may help coaches see what is required of them.

## **Research Interview Findings**

The findings from the research have been summarised and presented as answers to the key interview questions.

### **How can the inner freedom to act be defined?**

Some of the words initially used to answer this question included 'important', 'different things to different people', 'tricky and nebulous'. Some interviewees had not heard of the term yet were able to talk about the concept. A literal translation from a psychological background defined it as being about acting from your centre, where you have lots of options to choose from, and that is in line with the will. The theme of acting from the centre was developed by adding 'with authenticity' and from the 'heart'. This is supported in a testimonial from a client who reported that through their work together she had found "the naked freedom of myself" and been "touched inside".

### **What is the impact of developing the inner freedom to act?**

One coach compared developing the Inner Freedom to Act to spring cleaning, another as a process that gets rid of what doesn't help i.e. attachments, and fundamental beliefs that are not good for us. This creates spaciousness, opening up the bigger picture, looking at things from different perspectives, and if you change the relationship to the problem something else can emerge.

Outwardly leaders with the Inner Freedom to Act are calm, reflective and authentic as they are being 'centred' and able to act in line with their values and beliefs. This is of benefit to leaders and organisations as 'energy is unleashed by tapping into values and defining a

strong sense of purpose' (Loehr and Schwartz, 2001). Such a description is the opposite of those people who are fearful in the work place as a result of the insecurities they carry round with them.

Two of the leaders interviewed described having the Inner Freedom to Act as a process that is aligned with your own values, as opposed to those from your childhood, religion or social context.

### **The Benefits**

The benefits of developing the Inner Freedom to Act exist for the individual, the leader and the organisation.

For the individual these include:-

- Greater behavioural choice and capability, the inner world enables what is required in the outer world
- Greater awareness of what is going on cognitively and emotionally both within self, others and the organisation
- More fulfilling life aligned to what you want which brings confidence, peace and assertiveness
- Better at dealing with conflict, success and failure seeing them for what they are
- Reduction in stress
- Better able to deal with international travel and less sleep
- Increased confidence in self and intuition

For the Leader these include:-

- Better at setting a vision through ability to take a broader perspective and look at reality as opposed to being influence by people or insecurities
- Clearer direction helping prevent people getting 'stuck'
- More in control when the stakes and the emotion are high , ie not reverting to old ways of responding to threatening situations
- People around the leader feel nurtured and inspired through authenticity and courage

For the Organisation these include:-

- More energy is released throughout the organisation through the cumulative effect of more resources from more identities and fewer energy sapping insecurities
- Greater efficiency throughout the organisation by making better decisions more quickly without the fear of getting them wrong and by empowering people and being able to trust them
- Greater effectiveness through finding better ways of working by introducing challenge and creativity
- Better engaged, motivated and developed workforce benefiting from role models of authentic leadership

- Greater flexibility and responsiveness
- Increased productivity

At an individual level the benefits are associated with achieving greater well being through feeling fulfilled and a reduction in stress. The benefits for leaders come through their ability to mobilise people, energy and resources. This comes from setting clear vision and direction, being consistent through having more control of their thoughts and emotions , being inspiring, and nurturing their people. The leaders were best able to articulate the benefits for the organisation and these include greater efficiency and effectiveness, increased productivity and greater energy release throughout the organisation.

Many of these benefits would be available through coaching generally. The difference is that they come as a result of the leaders 'being' who they are, not just doing things and 'acting' that way. This means that that less energy is required as the leaders are 'being natural' as opposed to putting on a show and they can also be consistent. Acting the part of a nurturing and inspiring leader may become tested when things are difficult as the leader reverts to type. A table compares the benefits with and without the Inner Freedom to Act, see Table 1.

One other impact of developing the Inner Freedom to Act is that it can cause concern for the people who are led, for example if they are not used to such an empowering way of working. This confirms that leaders work in a systemic way i.e. consideration needs to be made of the impact developing the Inner Freedom to Act will have on all those around the leader.

### **Development**

The tools and techniques selected to develop the Inner Freedom to Act will be influenced by the background and ability of the coach. They can also be used at different stages of development.

To raise awareness:

- 360 tools and image studies
- Patterns of behaviour
- Gestalt approach

For reflection: Psychological journaling

For clearing out the chatter: Meditation

Generally:

- Create dissonance – can't hold 2 positions at once, use subpersonalities
- Imagery
- Transactional analysis

All of the leaders interviewed had experienced the opportunity either through working with a coach or attending programmes to raise their awareness and specifically mentioned meditative and reflective practices to support its development. One leader described it as 'peeling back the layers to find out who you are', another escaping the 'tyranny of conventional thinking'.

## **The issues and challenges around developing the Inner Freedom to Act?**

The challenges around working in this area concern the ability of the coach and the openness of the client to work on it.

The coach needs to have the personal development, approach and capability necessary to work effectively at this level. Personal development includes having their own lack of ego, this means being free themselves of prejudices, bias and insecurities that might impact the coaching. The approach needs to be one that can formulate it in a way that doesn't sound too alien to the client and that uses language that 'chimes' with people. The capabilities required include being able to create the rapport and trust necessary to develop a fully open relationship with the client, and still challenge leaders to go outside of their comfort zone. The ability to help the client disidentify, explore and release what is necessary, and then find a way to ground it practically and go somewhere positive with it is also fundamental.

The client's understanding about the coaching in terms of how deep it can go will be relevant. Some clients don't want to and cannot go beyond performance coaching. They are unable to make the shift from thinking about 'doing' to 'being'. They may also not have the time commitment necessary. Finally there may be an issue when the authenticity of the individual is in conflict with the organisation.

## **Conclusions**

Based on the interviews conducted and literature reviewed it is possible to conclude that developing the Inner Freedom to Act helps leaders by giving them access to greater resources within themselves, and as a result more choice about how to act. This is achieved through a release from external influences and those of the past that limit their thinking and capability. They are also able to see the reality of the context within which they operate and the situations in which they find themselves.

## **A definition and model to describe the Inner Freedom to Act**

Based on the research for this paper it has been possible to develop a definition and model to represent the Inner Freedom to Act.

***Having the Inner Freedom to Act means having greater choice about what to do in a way that responds to each situation, in the most effective way that is not limited by previous experiences, conditioning, external influences or prejudices***

Figure 1 represents how the Inner Freedom to Act affects leadership responses. Without the Inner Freedom to Act leaders may respond in a habitual and automatic way. This will be based on what they have done before and represents little thought or consideration, either to the reality of the situation, or what the most effective response will be. Operating with greater Inner Freedom to Act means leaders are able to look for the reality in each situation and respond in a way that is most effective.

### **The relevance of developing the Inner Freedom to Act now**

Being able to develop their Inner Freedom to Act is relevant for leaders now because of what is required of them. Business leaders are currently operating in the most uncertain environment since the 1930's (Bryan, L. and Farrell, D 2009). The scale of the change going on has led some people to suggest that they now need to be able to operate in a 'permanent crisis' (Heifetz, R, Grashow, A and Linsky, M. 2009). In the same article they suggest that the key tasks for leaders are to foster adaptation, embrace disequilibrium, generate leadership and look after themselves. All of this requires that leaders are able to adapt to the shifting conditions and mobilise resources efficiently and effectively both within themselves and other people. This is not the time for habitual and automatic responses.

### **How coaching can support the development of the Inner Freedom to Act**

The drive for efficiency and effectiveness in a changing world is not new. Work is continuous to implement new structures, systems, processes and cultures that will drive out improved performance. Leadership behaviour has also been addressed through one to one and larger scale development programmes. At one level it is possible to see how coaching is all about working with people to develop their Inner Freedom to Act, Tim Gallwey defined that performance = potential –interference, (Gallwey, T 2000, p.17). He also recognised however that behavioural development often focuses on the symptoms as opposed to the root cause of the problems, (Gallwey, T , 2000, p. 9). By working with leaders at a deeper level, 'behind the barrier of thoughts' it is possible to raise the leaders awareness of what is driving problematic behaviour. Things that are outside our field of consciousness are brought into the conscious (Whitmore, D. 2000, p.126). From here it is possible to explore how they might be impacting behaviour, and make choices about how to act.

### **The challenge facing leaders**

Journeying into the unconscious is a new and difficult concept for many people. In western society there has traditionally been a focus on quantitative development and achievement that sat well with the Victorian ethic for hard work and a stiff upper lip. A lack of knowledge, experience and understanding can lead to clients describing it as 'tree hugging'. The concept is not always easily received and this barrier makes work in this area with clients difficult. Additionally the personal vulnerability that comes with stepping out of your comfort zone and talking about personal issues from the past supports the experience of one coach who estimated that only 25 - 50% of his clients are happy and willing to work at this level.

Moving forward, based on the experiences of the leaders interviewed, every leader could find a new and effective set of resources within themselves. The issues are around how many leaders want the benefits of developing their Inner Freedom to Act enough to start the journey: and how many coaches are able to help them?

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## Table and Figure

Table 1: Comparison of behaviour with and without the inner freedom to act.

Benefit	Without the Inner Freedom to Act	With the Inner Freedom to Act
For the leaders as an Individual	Many leaders may be able to put on the show of having all that is required for a fulfilled life. They may also have the capability to manage their responses, at least at work. However at some point the tension created and energy required to perform may be exposed or become problematic. The literature supports this, Fromm (2001, p.173 - 176) recalls a medical student who occasionally experienced shortcomings in his performance. This was traced back ultimately to him feeling he had to conform to what was expected of him, having repressed his real wish to move into architecture following a conversation with his father. He was able to achieve what was required to meet the requirements in medicine, however always trying to do something that was not his passion created an insecurity and fear of failure.	The increased awareness that comes through developing the Inner Freedom to Act allows leaders to explore their meaning and purpose and make choices about how they live. Even if a leader is constrained by responsibilities and not able to suddenly follow his or her passion, they understand their position. Having owned and taken responsibility for the choice it is not an act and is therefore sustainable, tensions are reduced and energy flows positively. This is not to say the leaders will never be susceptible to emotion swings and changes in temperament, fundamentally however they will be more consistent over time.
In the role as leader	Many of the benefits for leaders can come as a result of good communication and processes. By following the examples of other leaders in their organisations they can also see what they need to do and what works. This works when the environment within which they work remains stable and the old responses are appropriate. Considerable change in the organisation and environment however means the script they are following is no longer relevant.	The complex and ever changing environment in which leaders operate means that having the skills to 'be' who they are at work naturally means they can focus on what is required as opposed to what they feel they should be doing. Seeing the 'wisdom' in the situation allows for a better response
For the organisation	Tracking energy within people let alone organisations is a difficult concept. However, everyone knows when they feel energised coming out of a meeting and when they don't. Much can and has been done to put in processes and measures that will facilitate flexibility and creativity. Their success is however reliant on their implementation and the attitude of the leaders and people. The insincerity of acting will become apparent through disintegration after a short time and lack of consistency.	The specific impact on organisations of having leaders with the freedom to act would be an interesting area for further research. One sign of when the leaders do have the Inner Freedom to Act would be that the interventions such as process changes and other interventions to change the culture are continuously developed and adhered to.

**Figure 1**

