Reflections on Character and Presence

Compiled from Daryl Conner’s Change Thinking blog
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Introduction

Since 2009, I have published more than 180 posts on my Change Thinking blog that address what I believe are some of the issues, challenges, opportunities, pitfalls, rewards, motivations, and responsibilities associated with being a seasoned change practitioner. The blog is a compilation of observations, lessons learned, and information I’ve gathered during my forty years of advising leaders, guiding organizations, and coaching change agents through transformational change. Most of this writing centered on the technical, conceptual aspects of our profession.

From the beginning, it was my intention to first lay down a solid foundation about what we do that could serve as the bedrock for what I consider the more important and more demanding part of a practitioner’s work—who we are (how we show up when we engage in what we do). A few months ago, I felt there was enough of an underpinning to allow me to shift the main focus of the writing to how we come forward as human beings when practicing our craft.

I marked this change in emphasis with the release of two core series—Character and Presence and Cultivating Your Character—that I consider the center of gravity for the who we are perspective. With these two series serving as the core, I asked several practitioners whom I respect to write guest posts about how they related to the concepts.

This document is a compilation of the two series, some answers to questions I have been asked by practitioners related to character and presence, and the reflections of two senior change practitioners. I’ve also included a link to a recorded conversation I had with four additional master practitioners on the same subject.

If you have observations, impressions, insights, etc. you are willing to share about how you show up when serving as professional change facilitators, please contact me at daryl@connerpartners.com.
Chapter 1—Character and Presence

“Character—a reserved force which acts directly by presence, and without means.”  
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“As we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence actually liberates others.”  
—Marianne Williamson
The Importance of Character and Presence

by Daryl Conner

Two aspects of our work contribute to our success as change professionals:

What We Do—the concepts, frameworks, processes, and techniques used when engaged with clients

Who We Are—our true nature—the substance of what we have to offer as human beings

If you are a seasoned change professional, you have already addressed the “what we do” part—you’ve selected a sound implementation approach and become skilled in its application. Without question, proficiency in a dependable methodology is a critical portion of the benefit we offer clients. However, there is a stream of influence much more powerful than any of the terms we use, or procedures we deploy.

Underneath what we do is who we are, and it is here where our optimum impact resides. Of all the things we draw on to create leverage for our clients, our true nature is our greatest asset. Only when we can stay centered on this and see it as core to the value we provide, will we be able to live up to our full potential and help others do the same.

The purpose of this document is to begin to explore this who we are side of being a facilitator of organizational change. In this chapter, I’ll present my views on character and presence—the foundational elements of who we are.

The Role of Character in Our Work

Many of the change practitioners I’ve had contact with over the years had only a vague notion that there was more to influencing clients than what they know and what they do. Most would probably concede that their basic nature has some bearing on their client effectiveness, but they would be hard-pressed to articulate what that effect is.

As a change practitioner, one aspect of who you really are—your true nature—is the “character” you bring into client relationships. Character is grounded in the depths of personal experience. It is etched in our souls from living life. The debate rages as to what parts come from genetic, environmental, experiential, or spiritual influences, but one thing is certain—our character is always in play, regardless of the conditions we face.
H₂O can take the form of water, vapor, or ice crystals. It can flow in a river, fall as rain, or run from our pores when we sweat without ever changing its basic makeup. Our character also endures through whatever circumstances we encounter. Before we were organizational change facilitators, and long after we cease to serve in this role, we were and will be who we are.

Our character is like a true nature “set point.” Physiologically, our bodies have certain ranges for which they are calibrated and, generally speaking, we stay within those limits. For example, one explanation for the weight gain most people experience after dieting is that the body is programmed to maintain something close to a person’s set point of the bulk he or she carries. When people drop below their body’s natural set point, their metabolism slows in order to conserve energy. Conversely, when they gain too much weight, their bodies rebel by increasing their metabolisms, which increases the body’s temperature to consume the excess calories. It is possible for set points to be recalibrated, but a major shift is required for this to happen.

Our character operates in a similar manner; maintaining its inherent essence is generally its default position, regardless of external conditions. We can be oblivious to it or mindfully aware of it; we can disown it or celebrate it; we can sink under its negative implications or soar on its advantages; we can wish we were someone else or leverage what we have. The one option we don’t have is to be other than who we are.

As I’m using the term, our character is comprised of the aggregate features securely planted in our personal landscape. Some attributes are blatant, others subtle. Some edges are rough, others smooth. Some qualities cycle in and out of a prominent role in our lives, while others remain a permanent dominant force. Regardless of what happens at any particular point in time, our basic character is always our companion.

With all the similarities among people who fall into the same demographic categories (e.g., female, over 40, married, mother of two children, professional, medium income, home owner, two cars, churchgoer, Republican, jogger, shops at Target, type-A hard-charging personality), character stands out as one of the most reliable differentiators. Our true nature is so distinctive that, even with all the other commonalities we might share with others, we can still legitimately claim our individuality because of our unmistakable character.

Character is pivotal to the impact change facilitators have with clients. It is who we are, not what is in our bag of intervention tricks, which ultimately determines whether we generate meaningful benefits for clients. The following perspectives help explain why character is so central to our role:

- The term, character, is impartial and can be applied to either commendable or undesirable distinctions. A change agent’s character is comprised of many components. Some promote favorable implementation outcomes; others may not.
  - Positive components might include things such as devotion to serving others, authenticity, commitment to honesty, and passion for the work itself. Many practitioners have a spiritual or philosophical dimension to their character.
  - There can also be a negative side to a person’s character that reflects such things as self-centeredness, manipulation, insecurity, lack of compassion, etc.
Whether it advances or detracts from clients realizing their change aspirations, character is the greatest determinant of the value clients will receive from our work.

- A positively oriented character brings life to our capabilities.
  - It operates as a filter that is applied to what we know and how we act before anything reaches clients. By screening everything through our character, we infuse our unique state of being into the work.
  - It is far more than the change-related knowledge and competencies we’ve acquired—it influences client decisions, guides their actions, and ultimately facilitates their success.
  - It functions as a catalytic agent. Without it, the alchemy between what we do and who we are can’t be activated.

- The knowledge and skills we use in our work are neutral. They possess no inherent positive or negative implications. We can employ the same techniques to connect with, or distance ourselves from, a client. The same concepts can generate clarity and insight or add to existing confusion. The spin our character puts on these otherwise agnostic tools of the trade bends their impact toward either advantageous or adverse outcomes.

- Without the influence of our character, the nomenclature and processes associated with what we do can come across as sterile, left-brained, technical fragments of the implementation process. Only when character and methodology interact synergistically can our heads and hearts merge to release the potential that is there.

- Character distinguishes our work more than anything else, including the methodologies to which we pledge allegiance. Others can use the same concepts and techniques, but no one else can duplicate the outcomes we produce when our character interlaces with those words and actions. Character differentiates our work much more than the tools we sometimes so jealously protect. This means that, as change practitioners, the secret sauce in our profession isn’t in our heads, it’s in our hearts.

The Role of Presence in Our Work

A strong character, comprised of mostly positive components, is necessary, but insufficient, for the kind of client impact to which most of us aspire. Character is your true nature, your essence; as such, it’s an internal phenomenon, not directly accessible to anyone but yourself. Your interior character needs a “voice” to be expressed to the exterior world. Think of the presence you extend to others as that voice.

When people describe someone as having a strong personal presence, they usually mean that being in his or her company, even in large crowds, generates a sense of influence. That is, they pay attention to what the person has to say. As I’m using the term here, a persuasive presence doesn’t lead other people to abandon their free will or abdicate making their own decisions. Instead, it helps them listen to and consider what is suggested or promoted.
What is “practitioner presence?”

- Presence is like a force field you project when you express aspects of who you are in change-related circumstances. This is the temperament you emit in client settings that serves as the conduit through which your character emanates. It’s like an intangible transmission that flows underneath and around your words and actions.

Beyond concepts and techniques, it’s the other key pillar in your intervention repertoire. Whenever you attempt to influence a client, you draw not only on what you say and do, but also on this reflection of who you are.

- Presence is like a subliminal identity signature embedded within your client interactions. The presence practitioners radiate may fall into broad categories such as peaceful, hectic, accommodating, demanding, etc. but each person has his or her own unique frequency that, when released, creates an ambient bubble like no other. Whether the exchanges are face-to-face, by phone, or by text, client interactions inside a change agent’s “influence bubble” are distinctive to only him or her.

This influence bubble is like a sphere of cachet created by the expression of the change agent’s character. Whether the bubble engenders a high or low regard for the practitioner by clients directly affects the amount of influence the practitioner can exert.

Usually, this bubble is created without our awareness. We don't think about sending out these instinctive, involuntary presence messages but, in truth, most of what we say or do has a particular tone about it that is as singular as our personal retina scan. The fact that we are mostly blind to how or when we beacon these signals doesn’t lessen their impact. (Neither ignorance nor innocence provides protection from the consequences.)

The problem is that all the verbal and non-verbal communications inside this bubble are influenced by our presence and yet we pay little, if any, attention to its impact. We think more about our weight, hairstyle, and attire than we do our presence, even though this influence zone we generate has the greatest bearing on whether or not we create value for our clients.

- A positive presence impacts clients in three ways:
  - Practitioners with a powerful, constructive presence are usually seen as having deep and passionate convictions. Politicians, movie stars, and other famous people are often described as “charismatic,” but this is very different from having presence. Real presence is not a function of superficial façades or manipulated images; it’s an expression of one’s authentic being.
  - Presence brings with it an assuredness noticed by others. Clients sense when change facilitators believe they can and will carry out their mission, no matter what the difficulties.
  - Radiating a convincing presence can have the effect of penetrating the unconscious defenses clients typically use to guard themselves against new thinking, challenges that appear beyond their reach, unfamiliar perspectives, or interpretations other than their own.
The combination of definitiveness, self-confidence, and the ability to help people open themselves to new possibilities can have a compelling effect on clients and what they see as achievable.

**What are the implications of presence on a practitioner’s influence?**

- When change agents transmit a clear, persuasive presence, their self-assurance and conviction often become contagious.

  It’s not necessarily the content of the practitioner’s convictions that clients attach themselves to, because they may or may not agree with everything being suggested. What they are drawn to is the excitement, intrigue, and enthusiasm that can come from being around someone living their own truth.

  Even if some of the specific guidance offered doesn’t seem feasible, clients are attracted to working with people who have enough commitment to what they are advocating to incorporate it into how they actually operate themselves. It is both provoking and inspiring to work closely with a trusted advisor who is an exemplar of what he or she suggests for others.

- Your presence will either enhance or diminish the concepts and techniques you use, but, one way or another, it is always a factor in your effectiveness. For example, without saying or doing anything obvious, your presence signals if you are more committed to client success than invested in being pleasant and amenable. Alternatively, it could reveal that you are conflict-averse and uncomfortable about being direct and explicit on tough issues.

- There are two sides to presence:
  - Although a practitioner’s character is relatively stable, due to the unstable variables faced on an ongoing basis, his or her presence will fluctuate in response to client circumstances.
  - At the same time, because presence is a reflection of the practitioner’s true nature, there will be a continuity to how it is projected.

  This means, from situation to situation, a change agent’s presence will likely vary. However, over time, the consistency of his or her character will eventually be revealed.
**How Does Our Presence Reflect Our Character?**

As I stated earlier, aspects of our *character* are deeply embedded in *who we are* and aren’t directly accessible to clients. What they experience is our *presence*. Although character is Intensely rooted and durable, its reflection—presence—is not so unwavering. It is, in fact, very dynamic as it responds to diverse client conditions. The same aspect of a person’s internal character might be revealed to the external world in various ways at different times. Here are some examples of presence reflecting character.

**Humility**

As change practitioners, we fulfill an important function for our clients, but we are no more than their guides for the journey. We can compare our job to the role that Sherpa Tenzing Norgay played for Sir Edmund Hillary in his climb of Mount Everest. We are essential to our clients’ success, but only as a footnote to their entry in history. We live or die on the mountain together, but we must never forget that we are the ones in service to them.

Listed below are two related but different ways we can reflect a humble presence in our work.

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1 A note of clarification: I’ve offered three possible aspects of a practitioner’s character—humility, valuing the client, and showing acceptance—each coupled with conceivable ways presence might reflect that aspect. The matches are intended to be purely illustrative in nature. I’m not implying that the character aspects listed are the ones a practitioner should possess or that the presence samples are the only ones that are “correct.” You may or may not resonate with these specific matches. I hope the examples I’ve selected are thought-provoking but my agenda here is to demonstrate the relationship between character and presence—how the two interrelate. I’m not suggesting that these particular pairings should be part of anyone’s character/presence package.

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**Acting as guides, not directors**

Most people have, to some extent, a talent for finding the correct path and making the necessary course corrections to get where they need to be. What a person does with this capacity is optional, but we are all wired with some capacity for reading life’s road maps. As change facilitators, we help clients pull themselves out of the confusion and dysfunction that tends, over the years, to grow and cover up this endowed inner compass.

It is not our role to impose what we think is best for clients. Our job is to travel with them on their transformative paths and help them make informed decisions about the change-related choices they face. We should be firm in our convictions and express them freely, but we should never lose sight of who is the influencer and who is the decision-maker.

Projecting a constructive presence can help clients get in touch with their own sense of direction and self-determination instead of feeling victimized by their circumstances, as is so common during change. When this happens, they begin to believe in their own ability to chart a course and navigate their lives. Our greatest impact is when we help people 1) find or regain their sense of sovereignty,
and 2) realize they can influence their destiny. The path of that influence is up to them.

**Working from the shadows**

It’s not when we’re on stage, in the spotlight, or holding a person or group in our grip as we talk that we have our greatest impact. We are at our influential best when we work from the shadows, when no one but possibly a professional colleague knows the moves just made or the ground just covered. This is when we are most likely to earn our fees/salary.

Presence is not the same thing as charisma. It is more about being than doing. Even practitioners who have rather reserved personalities or are not particularly verbal about their convictions can emit a powerful presence. In fact, one of the distinguishing features of this kind of influence is that it doesn’t require any particular rhetoric or activity.

The effect presence has on clients has to do with coming into contact with someone deeply centered in his or her own truth. *Being and doing* are both essential to achieving optimum influence, but if we had to choose between them, *being with* is more powerful than *doing for*. In fact, the less we’re able to *be* with clients, the more we try to compensate by relying on what we can *do* for them.

**Valuing the client**

One aspect of a practitioner’s character that can have the most impact is his or her deep interest in and caring for clients. For example, nothing conveys honor and respect more than uncompromised listening. It calls for attending to, connecting with, and genuinely valuing who we are in service to. If we hope to be influential with our clients, we must inform our communications with the vitality that comes from having truly heard what they have to convey.

Here are two more illustrations of ways we can reflect how we value clients.

**Paying attention**

Major turning points in life often arrive as small signals at first. This is why it is so important to pay as much attention to the minor details of what is happening with clients as we do to the more obvious elements.

Also central to our effectiveness is recognizing that the background white space is as important as the more noticeable issues and actions that capture most people’s attention. We attend to what’s between and underneath words—the unsaid, the unseen, the unintended, the unthought, etc.

Sometimes our work deals with dynamics that are invisible to the people involved, such as a group’s energy flow and momentum. We respect these underlying forces and are just as comfortable working with them as we are the tangible aspects of change.

**Staying emotionally connected**

We can’t stop caring about clients when they make choices we would not make or we think are not in their own best interest. We should always be honest about our reactions to their decisions and actions, but it is critical that they know we’re still backing them, even when we don’t agree with what they’ve said or done.

In fact, when we believe a client’s position to be particularly ineffective or counter-productive, that is precisely the time to...
show our greatest support. Of course, we’ll be frank and straightforward about the risk they run if they continue on their current course and we’ll offer alternatives for them to consider. What isn’t helpful, however, is to pull away emotionally if they decide not to heed our guidance. If we’re right, they’re soon going to need a strong ally, so it’s critical to stay close and remain accessible. If we’re wrong, thank goodness they listened to their own instincts instead of us.

**Showing acceptance**

There are situations where providing the proper guidance and truly valuing clients aren’t enough to stem the tide that impedes their progress. Regardless of our best efforts, sometimes they are determined to pursue a path contrary to what we have advocated for them. When this happens, acceptance of their decision becomes an important part of what we have to offer.

Perhaps a metaphor could be helpful here—that of a trusted long-time friend. This is someone who understands you and your situation and knows your history, goals, and limitations. A true friend is sometimes the only one who can help you see what you would rather not contend with, to face things as they are (not as you wish they were), and to discern what things can and cannot be changed. That same person, however, may not be able to penetrate your fears and defenses in another situation; all his or her insight falls on deaf ears. Regardless of your readiness to absorb the council being offered, a friend is there for you, even when you make decisions or take actions that are not in your best interest.

While we are not in service to clients to be their friends, there are aspects of caring as a true friend would that are important to our role. One of them is acceptance.

Below, I’ve listed three different ways we can reflect acceptance to our clients.

**Embracing what is**

The combination of using sound implementation methodologies and the character and presence we bring to client situations allows us to facilitate many change efforts that would otherwise founder without our involvement. Yet, we are instrumental only in situations that were meant to succeed. If the change is to be successful, we are a key element in its occurrence, but none of our man-made processes and tools can outsmart or undo what is intended to unfold. If an initiative is not to be realized, no amount of our skill or expertise will alter that outcome.

We are at our best when we balance our directness and tenacity with our capacity to accept—even embrace—whatever outcomes result from our efforts. This doesn’t mean we like or endorse everything that unfolds; it means we avoid playing games with ourselves and our clients about the realities before us.

Our job is to stay true to who we are and adhere to impeccable delivery of our chosen implementation methodology. As long as we do this, we can trust that whatever happens is in everyone’s best interest, even when the results are far different—and may appear to be less beneficial—than we had anticipated.
Being non-judgmental

We can’t change people; they either change themselves, or things stay pretty much the same. When we replace our desire to help clients make informed decisions, with judging them at a personal level for what they “should or should not” be doing, our effectiveness usually drops dramatically.

The paradox is that sometimes it’s the things we accept that have the best chance of one day being changed. Most direct efforts to force (pressure) someone to change result in either a superficial shift or some form of overt or covert resistance. What we struggle against with clients is likely to persist. What we recognize as theirs to keep or discard as they see fit has at least some likelihood of being altered.

To accept something about a client without being personally judgmental is not the same as agreeing with it. As used here, acceptance means to embrace something as a reality (even if an unwanted one) and incorporate it into the decision-making process regarding what to do next.

There is an important distinction between discernment and judgment. To discern is to recognize the difference between a standard and what is being observed without labeling the difference as an indication the person is “good” or “bad.” It’s important that we share our observation if it appears clients are not operating in their own best interests (i.e., their current behavior will not give them what they say they want). However, to say or imply they are somehow “bad” or what they are doing is inherently wrong is not only inappropriate, it’s generally ineffective.²

Finding what’s already there

In many cases, clients already know (although it may be at an unconscious level) what they’re searching for when they ask us to guide them through an implementation. Because they want to avoid some uncomfortable realities or because they lack confidence in the specific steps to take, they may convince themselves that they don’t know how to proceed. Much of the time, however, they have at least an intuitive sense about what must be done. The key question typically isn’t, “When will they realize what they should do?” it’s “When will they act on what they know but are not willing to address?” As a result, our work often involves challenging clients to face and pursue that which they know is the correct path.

Although clients test our skills and patience with the various ways they hinder their own progress, it is important to remain confident in their unconscious competence, latent personal resilience, and hidden organizational nimbleness that lies just beneath the surface. We believe we have much to offer, but we can’t give clients anything they don’t already possess to some degree. Part of our job is to help them realize that what they want from us is already within their grasp.

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² This is not to say that bad people or intrinsically wrong actions don’t exist, or that, when faced with such circumstances, we shouldn’t take a definitive stand about calling it out. However, these situations are rare in the settings where we practice our craft and usually this will not be the case
The relationship between character and presence

Presence is the functional link between our interior character and the external impact we want to have with clients. Like its character counterpart, the constitution of presence determines the effect it has.

• A weak (diffused) character conveys a correspondingly anemic presence and has little effect on clients. A strong (purposeful, focused) character expresses a persuasive presence that tends to get traction with clients.

• If “supportive” or “dysfunctional” are added as descriptors, the results can be anything from a presence that is convincingly influential (in either positive or negative ways) to a benign presence that is neither constructive nor harmful.

Presence can’t be manufactured but it can be “attended to.” We can be mindful of the presence we transmit to others and nurture its growth.

How Can We Nurture Presence?

Change practitioners utilize various concepts and techniques, but, more than anything, it is our presence that informs and mobilizes clients. As powerful as this means of influence is, however, it is usually applied without much conscious intent on our part. I hope that we are mindful of what we say and attentive to what we do, but when it comes to our presence (as it is described in this chapter), few practitioners make a deliberate effort to cultivate a desired impact.

The Presence Disconnect

Many practitioners are unfamiliar with the presence bubble that forms around them because they are basically unacquainted with their true nature. They haven’t pursued who they really are at the level of character I’ve described in this chapter, so they have little appreciation for the connection between character and presence. As a result, the affect their presence has on client interactions remains a mystery to them.

While they may have a degree in psychology, organizational development, or change management; be able to recite their Myers-Briggs scores; or know their preferred communications style, most change agents haven’t deeply delved into their character. I’m referring to a profound journey into their soul—exploring not just what they do but who they are.

As a result, the majority of practitioners go about their work not only disconnected from their inherent character but also unaware of the impact their presence has on clients. Or, if they do have a sense that presence is a factor in their...
effectiveness, they don’t see its connection to their character. They may want to have a more positive impact in client relationships, but they think they can accomplish this by directly modifying their presence.

This view lends itself to endeavors like developing stronger interpersonal skills, or trying to manage their physical image differently rather than probing into the deeper space where character resides. There isn’t anything wrong with developmental activities in these areas but that’s not where the high leverage is. When change agents focus on their exterior in lieu of their interior, it is confirmation they haven’t yet realized that, although presence is the interface with clients, it is but an echo of where attention should be focused—on character.

Here are a few examples of how not to pursue presence.

“I’ll adjust my presence” just doesn’t work.

Since most practitioners haven’t explored their true nature or its relationship to presence, any consideration about a more effective impact with clients is ill-fated from the beginning. They want to enhance their presence bubble but think they can do so directly. They fail to see that only a reset in character would result in a meaningful shift in presence. They mistakenly think their course of action is to decide what presence they want, match that against the presence they currently project, and add or subtract what is required to achieve the hoped-for result.

The best that can be hoped for when taking such an approach is short-term and/or superficial change. Unfortunately, this is not widely understood among our professional community, so many change agents, eager to strengthen client influence, point their attention in the wrong direction.

Since presence is a reflection of our character, not actually who we are, attempting to adjust it is like trying to change the features on someone’s face by altering his or her image on a TV monitor. No amount of modification of the screen’s likeness will have any meaningful bearing on the person’s actual appearance. It is what it is.

Presence is what impacts clients, but that’s not where we should aim our aspirations. The focus should be on the source of presence’s reflection—our character—but not in the sense that normal, left-brain logic would suggest. This isn’t about shifting our internal character to meet our external needs; it’s about embracing our true nature and the presence it broadcasts so we can better attract the clients who will value us for who we really are.

**Personality does not equal presence.**

Even when there is sensitivity to the effect one’s presence is having on client interactions, gauging that impact is commonly misread. How could it be otherwise? When the relationship between character and presence is not fully understood, there is no basis on which to form an accurate opinion about what is being conveyed.

Practitioners can lose a sense of their own impact when they confuse presence (which is a reflection of character—a state of being) with personality (which is a reflection of thoughts and feelings—a state of mind). Presence is not about personality traits, it’s about the nature of our being. Psychology deals with what we do; ontology is about who we are. Both are useful lenses through which to view human interactions.
existence, but it requires an ontological perspective to grasp what character is conveying through presence.

Additionally, there is the issue of full engagement. To accomplish optimum leverage with clients, a practitioner must fully express his or her character—not just the parts that will be well received—while holding back the edgier, more unique facets. It requires coming forward with all you’ve got that could be helpful to your client, whether that is applauded by the client or not.

**We can’t tell what the client is experiencing.**

Much of the time, change agent views on how their presence affects clients are significantly off the mark. If we are unprepared to read our own presence accurately, how could we possibly interpret correctly how someone else responds to it?

One of the characteristics of successful change facilitators is their capacity to know what they can and can’t affect. As a result, they don’t waste time and effort on things beyond their ability to influence. How clients really respond to practitioners involves so many variables (including the client’s own character and presence) that second guessing what’s really going on inside them is all but futile. This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be attentive to how we are perceived by clients; it means we should see our own judgments on this matter as highly suspect.

**We can’t make clients like us.**

Here is where we come face-to-face with the truth—all that matters is the presence that reflects our true character and the impact it has on clients.

Earlier, I said that our presence is what it is because it’s a reflection of our character. Well, clients experience us in the same way. They, too, are pre-conditioned by their character to respond in certain ways based on who they are. We can think of it as chemistry, destiny, fate, how the stars line up, or whatever context works for us, but the reality is that some people positively resonate with our presence and some don’t.

The challenge we face isn’t how to mold our character or presence so it will be well received by all clients. Instead, it is to locate clients who are instinctively drawn to us and can be influenced by who we really are. In this sense, the process of securing new projects to work on should be less about selling ourselves (i.e., How can we project a presence that is acceptable to the client?) and more about identifying prospects that are good matches for us. For these potential clients, the presence we naturally cast is the presence with which they will likely resonate.

If we are trying to facilitate change with clients who don’t value the core of who we are, they will be disappointed and we will be miserable. It is one thing to find ourselves in a situation like this occasionally; it is a deeper problem if we spend long periods in such environments. It’s a completely different level of pathology if this describes someone’s career as a change practitioner. We can make a living, but we can’t practice this craft by serving clients who expect us to be the expert they want instead of the professional we are.

I know some of you are saying, “I don’t have a choice. I have to work with whomever I’m assigned to (or whoever will hire you if you are an external consultant).” If your “job” is to be a change agent, you may be right, but if you are a change professional
seeking mastery in this field, it is imperative that you carefully choose the clients you work with.

This means there will be times you decline situations because they don’t meet your criteria for success. Keep in mind that you are never trapped. You may incur a higher price than you want to pay but you can always avoid or exit client situations where your character and presence aren’t flourishing. (You can read my blog series on victimization here.)

We Can Only Nurture Presence by Evolving Our Character

Enriching presence is not as straightforward as it might appear. It is best refined and deepened indirectly, through the exploration of character.

- Change agents can “work on” things such as physical image or interpersonal skills, but not the presence they emit.
  - Presence is a natural outcome of our character. It’s not who we are, but a “reflection” of who we are. As such, trying to develop it directly usually generates more frustration than progress. We can ensure it fully expresses our character, but we can’t authentically alter our presence to reflect something inconsistent with our character (at least, not for long).
  - The presence we unfold in client relationships emulates our true nature, but it is not the fullness of who we are, so if we want to nurture our presence, we must evolve our character.
- Think of it as Character > Presence > Impact.
  - **Character** is like clay in the shape of our inner nature.
  - **Presence** is a reflection of that shape in a mirror.
  - **Impact** is the positive or negative experience clients have when exposed to the mirror’s representation.

  If we want a more positive impact with clients, we must work the clay instead of reaching for the mirror.

- “Working” our character clay doesn’t involve carving or molding in the way these terms are normally applied to sculpting. In fact, it is just the opposite.
  - This isn’t about imposing a design on our character, it is about liberating the inherent blueprint of who we are—uncovering what has been minimized or neutralized, and releasing the uniqueness that is already there.
  - The task is to recognize, align with, and leverage the most positive impact possible from our character, not try to develop one that suits us, much less our clients.

We can deny, avoid, cover up, or attempt to “modify” who we really are all we want, but ultimately, our essence will prevail. We will serve ourselves and our clients much better if, instead of trying to forbid or negate parts of our character, we come to terms with what we have to work with. It is by accepting and cherishing who we are that we exploit our gifts and route our challenges in positive ways. It is only through embracing and positively leveraging the innate character we have to work with that our presence can mature enough to have the impact with clients we aspire to.
Strengthening presence by way of fostering character may appear to be an indirect path, but it is the only course possible. Trying to enhance an elusive reflection is pointless. Our character, however, is the core of who we are and, therefore, substantive and accessible if we are willing to dive deep into self-exploration.

Examine further the linkage between character and presence might shed light on why the indirect approach to nurturing presence is the best and only way to proceed.

“Love the Music You Play”

Ultimate success as a practitioner hinges on your willingness to 1) fully be who you are and 2) limit your clients to those who appreciate what that means. Think of yourself as a musician with your own radio station, specializing in a particular type of music that truly speaks to your heart. Your broadcast goes out in all directions, but only a percentage of the people it reaches have their radios tuned on and only a few of those are drawn to the kind of music you provide.

This raises a question: Who is your intended audience? Is it all who are within range of your broadcast, or only those who hold your kind of music in high regard and admire how you perform it?

Many practitioners in our field judge themselves (and are judged by others) based on the number of people who listen to their “station.” When this is the goal, the only way to succeed is to appeal to the widest possible range of interests and needs. There is nothing wrong with doing this, but it means you can’t play the music you love and are uniquely good at (or you can’t play it often or as passionately as you feel it). In essence, you are a radio station manager trying to attract as many listeners as you can, not a musician trying to reach his or her niche audience. It’s the difference between 1) being a business first and, whenever possible, being true to what you love most, or 2) being true to what you love first and making a business out of it.

The upshot is, catering to what others want to hear comes at the expense of playing your own music—and keep in mind, this isn’t just the music you enjoy, it is also what you are best at.

You can’t wow everyone, but for those who are predisposed to your kind of artistry, you are literally “music to their ears.” Yet, when the “number of listeners” takes precedence over playing for people who are actually affected by your type of music and distinctive style, not only are you less fulfilled, your audience receives less value.

Playing the kind of music everyone expects may produce crowds, but most of them will be spectators. Audiences receive much more benefit when they truly appreciate the music and the artist. Through their engagement and enthusiasm, they actually help create the overall experience themselves, and don’t just sit back, passively taking it all in. This only happens, however, when there is a match between the musician’s uncompromised expression of his or her style and what the audience loves.

If you interpret your task as seeking the largest possible audience, it doesn’t matter what music you play as long as it
draws a big gathering. If you view your role as that of a virtuoso for a specific sound, you not only want to focus on playing that kind of music, you primarily want to play for people who can appreciate it.

The twist here is that by limiting your audience, you gain, not lose—you enlarge your true fan base by playing to a more select market. True fans are the ones who not only praise what you play, they respect how you play, and they open themselves up to let the music have its intended impact.

This doesn’t mean you never play what people want to hear in order to feed your family, but if this is necessary, don’t confuse it with delivering your best value and don’t forget it is a choice you are making—you are not a victim. To practice this craft to your level of capability requires that you play your own music. This is non-negotiable. If you decide, for whatever reason, that this is not feasible, adjust your expectations about what you will accomplish in this field and keep in mind that it is your decision, so don’t allow resentment to build up with clients or others.

This also doesn’t mean you avoid playing for audiences who show only a slight interest in your music. It is important to be accessible to listeners who are unfamiliar with your work because, through exposure, they may become raving fans. The question is, where do you spend most of your time and energy?

In my opinion, seasoned change practitioners shouldn’t expend resources talking people into listening to their music, playing for people who are clearly unimpressed, or only playing “requested” songs. Believe enough in yourself and your unequivocal brand of music to stand on that as your foundation, instead of pandering to the crowds. It is wonderful if your followers grow into crowds of true fans, but don’t play so throngs will come—play for fans and see how many there are.

When catering to the masses, you become part of the mass yourself. Competitors are everywhere and your only chance with this approach is to be the best of the commodities available. When being true to who you are, you are, by definition, distinct. There are no others who can convincingly replicate your unmistakable presence, so for the listeners who value your music, there is no competition. There may be other performers they enjoy, but when in the mood for your music, they consider alternatives as substitutions, not replacements.

**What are you doing with your music?**

As change practitioners, we each have our respective musical style, if you will. It is a composition that blends what we do (our concepts and techniques) with who we are. Both are important, but it is our distinctive character and presence that has us occupy space that can be claimed by no other.

Here is the inquiry I want to raise with this document: What are you doing with your music? Are you placing a higher priority on being a common denominator so you can secure enough affirmation from clients and prospective clients to be allowed to perform your professional role? Or, are you bringing forth your true nature and boldly expressing your authentic presence so potential clients can easily determine if they resonate with who you are. It is the second of these paths I hope you will consider. I believe it is in your best interests and those of our clients to bring your best game to the table, and that requires that all of who you really are must show up.
Of course, you have to be a good musician for all this to work, but remember, the intended readership for this document is seasoned change practitioners—professionals already skilled in their chosen implementation methodology who are seeking mastery in their craft. Assuming this is an accurate description of you, the critical issue becomes ensuring you are performing in front of the right patrons.

My hope for you is that your intended audience isn’t just anyone or everyone, but that it is a particular constituency made of clients who love to listen to the change implementation music you are passionate about playing. Even though this “market” is smaller than all the potential clients out there who might pay some attention to your music, this is home for you. This is your fan base and you should remain loyal to it by maintaining the integrity of who you are. That’s what they resonate with and what you owe to yourself and to them.

The finest music you’ll ever play surfaces in front of appreciative audiences. To bring out your best and to deliver the greatest value to your clients, your job is fourfold:

- Know who you are and what change-related music truly comes from your heart.
- Play that music with all the authenticity and passion you feel and broadcast your frequency as strongly as you can.
- Recognize that your ability to play the music as well as you do is a gift and strive to share it with people who resonate with its significance. (Others may be listening, but play for your fans.)
- Don’t compromise your musical talent in order to gain a larger audience or to please certain listeners in powerful positions. Be who you are and build your change facilitation practice around that.

Don’t measure yourself by the number of people listening to your music—measure yourself by how many are touched by it—compelled in some way. Clients won’t open themselves to the vulnerability required for them to be genuinely impacted by your efforts unless you are playing unabashedly from your soul.

I realize this poses some significant challenges for some of you, but bear in mind that we’re all in the same boat. As change practitioners, we pay for either our victimization or our sovereignty. Either way, the invoice is expensive, so make a decision and get on with it.

For those who choose sovereignty, the work to be done is comprised of three steps:

- First, deeply explore your character so you can understand and accept who you are.
- Next, embrace the presence you broadcast as a natural reflection of your core and an expression of your unique gifts.
- Finally, seek out clients who value your character/presence package instead of trying to artificially mold yourself to fit all prospects who might come your way.
Summary

Character and presence separate change technicians who merely submit deliverables and meet timelines from those masterful practitioners who provide valuable insight and wisdom to their clients. We all use some kind of approach or framework to support our work, but our character and presence allow us to leverage these enablers for optimum client impact. Clients need to engage both their heads and hearts before they open themselves to meaningful advisory relationships. Well-constructed methodologies can impress a client’s intellect, but it takes a strong character and a trusting presence to speak to someone’s heart.

Your true nature is synonymous with who we are and it has an epicenter called your character, which is conveyed to clients through the presence you cast. It is by way of your inherent character and the presence you emit that you are able to invoke the kind of impact you strive for with those you serve. To feel fulfilled professionally and provide the best possible value to clients, find your voice and perform without reservation in front of the right audience.
Chapter 2—Cultivating Character

“The tragedy of modern man is not that he knows less and less about the meaning of his own life, but that it bothers him less and less.” —Václav Havel
The Need to Care for Character

by Daryl Conner

In the first chapter, I talked about our “character/presence package,” and how it affects clients, as well as the overall results we all want to achieve in our work. Here is a summary:

The “character” (our true nature) we bring into client relationships is the heart of who we really are as change practitioners. It is this essence of our uniqueness, not what is in our bag of intervention tricks, which ultimately determines whether we generate meaningful benefits for clients. However, our interior character needs a voice in order to be expressed to the exterior world; the “presence” we convey is that voice. Even though presence is what we use to interface with clients, the path to optimizing our effectiveness is through evolving our character.

To be successful as an advanced change practitioner, it is important to:

1. Deeply explore your character so you can understand and accept who you are,
2. Embrace the presence you broadcast as a natural reflection of your core and an expression of your unique gifts, and
3. Seek out clients who value your character/presence package, instead of trying to artificially mold yourself to fit the expectations of the various people who might come your way.

In this chapter, we’ll explore step one in this sequence by addressing the question, “As professional change facilitators, how can we cultivate our character to increase the impact our presence has with clients?”

Character isn’t “fixed,” it’s refined.

Many people mistakenly think they can develop character in the same way they might attain new knowledge or better their communication skills. They think they can improve it by simply pushing themselves to greater heights.

Cultivating character, however, isn’t about adding (or removing) parts; it’s about surfacing and honoring what has always been there but which, over time, might have become covered up or is leading to unwanted consequences. We can’t “correct” our character by assessing what is missing and attaching the absent elements (e.g., “I’d like to be more caring so I think I’ll infuse some empathy into my makeup”). There is no Photoshop equivalent for character enrichment.

In other words, it isn’t about learning as much as it is about remembering. Character is revitalized by sinking into the
depths from which we came in order to rediscover it. It is uncovered, not concocted.

The most effective approach to refining our character involves reviving and amplifying existing qualities, not trying to develop something that didn’t exist before. We can also learn to downplay (though not totally eliminate) facets we don’t value, or re-channel their impact into more constructive endeavors. What we can’t do is fashion character features that were never there or destroy the ones we don’t like.

The true nature of who we are has always shaped our lives, regardless of how muted or cloaked that influence might have become. Rediscovering our character is an act of liberation, not acquisition. Cultivating character is about exploring, accepting, and leveraging not only what is already within us but recognizing it as the greatest asset we have as change practitioners.

Simply stated, when it comes to character, you have to play the hand you were dealt. That said, it’s not a static phenomenon. Character evolves and grows stronger (for better or worse) on an ongoing basis:

• It is constantly evolving. There is an elasticity to our inner core—it is always unfolding new, more sophisticated ways to interpret client actions and, (through the presence we convey), interact with them. This natural progression doesn’t add or subtract from who we are, it unfolds more and deeper pathways within which our character can operate.

• Like most assets, it usually becomes a more powerful influence over time. As it matures, its features typically magnify their impact on those with whom we interact.

Are you asleep at the wheel?

If we take as a given that our character is always advancing and strengthening itself, the question becomes, “Is this occurring with or without our attention?” Are we mindful of its continuous maturation or is all this happening without our conscious knowledge?

Even if we are blind to who we really are, deny what we don’t like about ourselves, or are ignorant of how influential our character has become, it still has an impact on clients. Therefore, it is best for professional change agents striving for mastery-level work to be attentive to their state of character. Being vigilant of our character’s effect and intentionally fostering how it unfolds is something we should all make a top priority.

There are many ways to go about encouraging our character’s advancement, but they all have one thing in common—waking up. Since character enhancement involves nurturing and channeling what is innately there, rather than inserting foreign traits or eliminating unwanted attributes, the most important thing we can do is to reacquaint ourselves with what it is about who we are that we have lost contact with.

When did it happen?

When addressing the subject of character, we are talking about something that is indigenous to the center of our being, so, at some level, there must have been a time we had access to it. Yet, as our lives unfolded, most of us went
adrift from at least some aspects of our core. We failed to maintain an open passage to our inner nature and started functioning as if we could feign what others wanted from us instead of honoring our true spirit. We fell asleep and began dreaming that we were other than who we are.

But why do we go to sleep in the first place? How can we lose touch with something as fundamental as who we are and why is awakening so difficult? Why is operating in a “walking sleep mode” even a viable option?

To cut to the chase—the illusions we maintain when dreaming can sometimes be far less stressful than the harsh realities we face when we take life head on. For many practitioners, the truth is, although they stay busy with change-related activities, they operate in environments where they are not viewed as critical assets applied to vital initiatives. To the contrary, they are considered tactical resources assigned to marginally important projects and, as such, doing anything other than what their clients expect is unacceptable. Under such conditions, using unawareness to anesthetize themselves can be preferable to the heartbreak of going unrecognized and/or unvalued by those whom they serve.

Falling asleep means forgetting that we each have a unique center worthy of expression. It is succumbing to victimization so thoroughly that our senses no longer register when we sell ourselves and our profession out to keep a job or keep powerful people contented. This kind of self-induced slumber requires that we feed ourselves a litany of bumper-sticker platitudes so we’ll remain oblivious to the real implications of what is happening:

- “That’s just the way it is.”
- “This is what it takes to keep the client happy.”
- “It’s easier than fighting with my boss about how honest I should be.”
- “Leaders want to be told what they want to hear, not what is really taking place, or what is needed for change to succeed.”

New practitioners are at risk when indoctrinated by incumbents.

When it comes to our relationship with who we really are, hibernation can prove to be a much less painful alternative to feeling small (if not invisible) and/or contorting ourselves into who or what others want. Unfortunately, this kind of sleep *modus operandi* has turned into the approach of choice for many change agents. Operating while “comfortably numb” is a pattern that is playing itself out within our professional community far too frequently: we first trade off, then disregard, eventually discount, and finally lose awareness of who we really are.

What is particularly disheartening is to see a new generation of change facilitators entering the field and being coached by incumbent practitioners who went numb a long time ago and no longer carry the flame of their own truth. Novices are being indoctrinated into the dysfunctional view that they should pretend to be what clients want rather than who they really are—that this is the *only* way our profession can function in the politically charged environments in which many of us operate. To the contrary, I believe this *is not* how our craft should be practiced.
Incumbents who pass along this perspective to beginners don’t declare it as clearly as I am stating it here. They don’t need to. The strongest imprinting takes place when apprentices observe what the senior practitioners they admire do on a daily basis. With this in mind, it is easy to see how trainees can conclude that our profession considers it acceptable to say yes to client demands, even though they are not in the clients’ best interests, and then artfully dodge the flack when the initiatives subsequently fail to reach their intended outcomes.

The mastery path carries great responsibility.

Going to sleep means losing the distinction between keeping clients happy and practicing our craft as called for at the mastery level. Waking up doesn’t guarantee we’ll never again capitulate to political pressure. It means that if we do subdue our true selves in order to “keep the peace” (if not our jobs), we are aware of what is happening and we make an informed decision. We don’t fall unconsciously into numbness and/or feel victimized by circumstances.

To wake up, we must unravel the conditioning that has influenced many of us since infancy. To say this conditioning is entrenched in how we function as professionals is an understatement. In virtually every aspect of our lives, we have been instructed in how to subjugate our nature to the surrounding pressures, not the other way around.

The intent behind this kind of guidance was usually well-meaning. It helped us “fit in” (initially with our families, then friends, spouse, community, religion, school, work, etc.). The net effect, however, has been incredibly detrimental for us as change practitioners. We have been taught to trade truth and authenticity for the love and acceptance of others—not a pact that is ultimately in our best interest, nor that of our clients.

An inculcation process that permeates virtually all aspects of life is difficult to see, and harder to extract ourselves from. It is the water we swim in, and the air we breathe, so it’s tough to be objective both about its existence or how to handle it.

This is easy to see in our own ranks: the shortfall of sovereignty among so many change practitioners has been mostly unexamined within our professional community. The rampant timidity with which many practitioners perform their role is simply not something that is often examined when we gather at conferences or write about our work. Do we fail to discuss this blight on our profession because we are blinded by the limitations of our own perspective or because we lack the courage to speak the truth?

In some respects, it makes no difference. What does matter is that we come to grips with what must first be acknowledged, then addressed, and finally resolved—to pursue a mastery path in the change business, the tenacity to bring our full selves forward must be seen as an imperative, not a preference to be exercised or not.

My purpose in raising this issue isn’t to advance autonomy for its own sake. This isn’t about some adolescent fantasy of emancipation without accountability, nor is it about independence for the sake of making practitioners feel...
entitled to a carte blanche relationship with their clients. My motivation for probing into the kind of personal space occupied by character is fueled by the responsibility that comes with pursuing mastery of our craft. The intended readership for this document is seasoned professionals dedicated to elevating their practice of the craft to new heights. I believe doing so necessitates an introspective dive into the depths of who we are, and that can’t be done unless we wake up.

This is damn hard work.

There is nothing easy about waking ourselves from a lifelong slumber that results when professionals regard their innate being as less valuable than what clients want. But then, if easy is what you are seeking, this is the wrong document for you.

Mastery in our field is a double-edged sword. There is the satisfaction and the economic rewards of being at the top of your game, and then there are the associated responsibilities that come with those benefits. Mastery-level work means living up to the respect that clients grant to professionals who work at that level. Nothing less than our all-out best is permissible if we claim the high ground of being exceptionally skilled at what we do, stand on our truth, and authentically express who we are.

If you want to accomplish all this and excel in our field, you must wake up. It’s non-negotiable. Either pull yourself out of the conditioning that encourages you to water down what you say and do so people can stay in their comfort zone during change, or stop kidding yourself that you are on a mastery path. Wake up from the dream that you are other than who you are. Rejuvenate the connection to your true nature and the value you can create for clients when you allow your character to be the center of gravity for your work.
“The Life Within”

Character’s Hidden Assets

I like to use metaphors when describing human dynamics. Good ones provide a simple way to convey complex characterizations. They also inform us of implications we might not otherwise recognize. Such was the case when I came across the picture you see here.

For some time now, I have been looking for a simple image to portray the complex nature of a practitioner’s relationship with his or her character. I had just about given up hope when a friend sent me this incredible picture. In an instant, I knew this was what I had been looking for. Its simplicity captures all the intricacies and entanglements of how our character forms and then gets covered over. It also offered me new insights into the process I hadn’t previously considered.

The sculpture, by Italian artist, Giuseppe Penone, is called, “The Life Within.”

Penone’s body of work is phenomenal in many respects, but my purpose in sharing this particular carving is to help examine our relationship with the core of who we are—our character. To appreciate why I think the image is so perfect for this purpose, it is important to understand the process the artist used.

Penone revealed the past of an old tree by carving a young tree from it. But he didn’t create “a” young tree from the old one; he found “the” young tree that once was by chipping away the trunk that had evolved around it. He carved out the inside of the trunk and left the knots in place that eventually allowed tiny limbs to emerge. He continued to remove the rings of growth until the “sapling within” was revealed.

Rather than impose a new form, he drew out an existing one. “My artwork shows, with the language of sculpture, the essence of matter and tries to reveal with the work, the hidden life within.” —Giuseppe Penone

The Unfolding of Character

To me, this image of the sapling emerging from a larger oak’s trunk represents the nature of a practitioner’s character. I find it useful to also include additional

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4 To make some of the points I want to emphasize in this portrayal, I have arbitrarily designated the tree as an oak. I have no idea what kind of wood Penone used for the actual carving.
references to this metaphor so other contributors to the tree’s maturation process can be reflected:

- The *acorn* from which the soul of the tree originates
- The *seedling* that establishes the first foothold on life
- The *sapling* that embodies the spirit of the tree, and
- The *trunk* that protects the sapling’s inner core

Between these stages of a tree’s growth, there are key exchange points—junctures where there is a kind of passing of the baton. Each transition is vital for the tree’s ultimate well-being and is therefore risky business:

*To fulfill the oak’s destiny, the acorn needs the seedling to emerge from the ground and engage the first struggle for life. In turn, the seedling needs the sapling to advance beyond mere survival and bring forward the tree’s essence. Finally, the sapling needs the trunk in order to have a defense against the weather, disease, and animal life that might otherwise preclude its destiny.*

We can use these four interdependent, but distinct, facets of a tree’s development to help understand:

- Character’s role in the unfolding of *who we are*, and
- Why character so often remains unfamiliar and underutilized by practitioners.

**The Acorn:** Its main purpose is to be the uncompromised source of what the adult tree will later represent. When it releases its energy to the seedling, it passes on the essence of being a tall and sturdy oak (the tree’s character, if you will), as well as the genetic guidance for further physical growth. The risk is that the acorn won’t survive long enough for the seedling to gain a foothold.

**The Seedling:** Its major mission is to fight against the odds and endure long enough to provide the underpinning from which all future growth can occur. The risk is that it won’t survive long enough for the sapling to bear the tree’s essence.

**The Sapling:** Its central function is to establish a foundation for growth and be the keeper of the tree’s inner nature throughout its life. The risk is that the sapling won’t survive long enough to benefit from the trunk’s defenses.

**The Trunk:** Its principal aim, year after year, is to add rings of hardwood to protect the tree’s true nature. The risk is that the trunk will become so dominant that it smothers the sapling’s spirit, producing a tree that is large and strong but also inanimate and arid—big, thick, sturdy, and impressive, but at the same time rigid and lifeless.

Each of these turning points is pivotal to the oak’s existence, but it is the relationship between the sapling and the trunk that I want to use for our exploration of a practitioner’s character.
Learning from Parallels

As professional change agents, we can draw some parallels between the sapling/trunk relationship and our own struggle to stay connected to our inner nature. Here are five ways we can learn from the oak.

1. **Protect your essence without snuffing it out.**

   The sapling is the keeper of the tree’s character, but it is a fledgling and lives an extremely precarious existence. As soon as it is established, it triggers the buildup of a more durable envelope in which to keep the tree’s essence. This is where the trunk’s growth comes in. The sapling’s charter is to hold and nurture the quintessence of who the tree is, not to protect it from possible harm. It is the trunk’s job to encircle the sapling with layer after layer of hardwood so its spirit is sheltered from outside damage. The trunk does its job well, but the security it offers can also be the sapling’s demise. If the trunk grows too dense, it can overwhelm the sapling’s ability to function as a reservoir for the tree’s vibrancy.

   It can be said that a similar bond forms between the core of who we are and the protection mechanisms we create to buffer our character from harm. The conditioning we have been exposed to throughout our lives (described earlier) morphs our uniqueness into ways of operating that are more acceptable to the clients than would otherwise be the case. Without some means of protecting the essence of who we are, the conditioning process could completely overcome the truth of who we are.

   Even slight infractions on our core nature can be distressing, so the prospect of our character being lost altogether is avoided at all costs. To prevent this from happening, we create defenses to shield the integrity of our character and insulate us from the emotional pain we would experience if it were breached. In this way, we can “accommodate” others who expect something different from us than who we really are, without actually transgressing our inner core.

   Whenever we find ourselves in settings where our true nature isn’t valued, the tendency is to grant people what they want but then add another layer of defense. Over time, a debilitating rhythm can be established: *keep people happy/add a layer…keep people happy/add a layer*, etc. The defenses are an effort to “be in the world but not of it”; yet, after enough years of *keep people happy/add a layer*, the core spirit that is supposed to be protected becomes no more than a faint echo.

2. **Don’t build so many defenses that even you can’t find your true nature.**

   The sapling/trunk relationship is a paradox. On the one hand, the sapling depends on the trunk’s ever-growing strength to buffer it from jeopardy but, at the same time, it runs the danger of becoming completely engulfed and eventually assimilated into the very thing that is there to preserve it.

   Every safe haven has its price; for the sapling, it’s that the trunk can become so dense the sapling’s identity (and therefore, the tree’s soul) can appear to vanish. The tree is living but it lacks “aliveness.” If the sapling can’t withstand the pressure of the trunk’s growth, the tree will still be left standing, but will not truly flourish without the vitality that comes from its inherent spirit.

   Life is a risky proposition and not every acorn yields a seedling. Many seedlings never produce a sapling, and
there are plenty of saplings that fail to properly safeguard themselves with an adequate trunk. Likewise, not every sapling that generates a protective trunk survives the pressure of its defenses. When this happens, the sapling is absorbed into the trunk itself to the point that the tree’s spirit is lost. The protector becomes the assailant of that which it was supposed to protect.

We can say the same for many change practitioners. Their character becomes overwhelmed by the protective mechanism they set up to safeguard their uniqueness. Compromise after compromise leads to layer after layer of protective defense. At a certain point, the basic nature of the tree becomes so entombed within its own defenses that it is rendered inaccessible.

3. **Don’t let your tough exterior become who you are to others.**

Saplings that have been lost to the layers of their own hardwood never actually cease to exist, but their appearance can become so obscured by the trunk’s dominance that it is no longer apparent to onlookers. All saplings become encased in their trunk’s denseness—that’s inherent in the protective process. The problem occurs when the tree’s spirit can no longer be distinguished—when its identity loses its definition to the encircling mass. If this happens, the oak’s inner nature is still there but its beacon can no longer penetrate the thick enclosure it is in. Its vitality can’t pass through the trunk and be visible to the external world.

No one can see anything but the massive trunk, so, to the outside observer, the tree is the trunk (along with its branches and leaves). To a passerby, the essence of the oak’s true nature wasn’t “replaced” by the trunk’s imposing nature. As far as the person is concerned, there was never anything but trunk, branches, and leaves.

There is no thought that, at one time, a sapling was chartered to carry the tree’s soul and that it was still in there—very much alive, even though buried beneath the trunk’s weight. The sapling and the innate spirit it holds is all but forgotten.

The same can be said for change practitioners who lose contact with their character. Our autonomous spirit isn’t something that actually goes away, even when smothered and left unattended for long periods of time. What can happen, however, is that our defenses become so concentrated and impenetrable that, to others, our essence becomes invisible. Our true nature is nowhere to be found. All that is noticeable are the layers of hard, compressed defenses that have built up.

4. **Don’t forget about what makes you unique.**

It is bad enough when a sapling’s “aliveness” becomes engulfed in its own protective trunk to the extent that no one else can see it. What is even more devastating, however, is that when this happens, the tree also loses contact with its essence. Never mind that a passerby can’t discern the tree’s vitality; its own true nature becomes dead to itself.

Practitioners can fall prey to the same fate. When our defenses against character infringement and the accompanying emotional pain becomes too great, we forget our character is there. Going “comfortably numb” starts to look like a viable option. Unconsciously falling asleep to our uniqueness becomes preferable to having our distinctiveness go unrecognized or devalued.
5. **It's about achieving a dynamic balance.**
   It is natural for the fragile sapling to encircle itself with a more stable buffer for protection, but does the maturing process produce a trunk that nurtures and protects the sapling's essence, or does the trunk overtake the sapling and, in the process, lose all connection to the nucleus of its own essence?

   A sapling without a substantial outer layer to shield it from the elements is unable to survive, much less prosper. Trunks that strangle and overpower their sapling core, however, can grow to be impressive structures, but they tend to be lifeless, hollow forms without much of an energetic center.

   The trunk's function is to safeguard the sapling's inner nature, and not to become such a dominant force that the sapling's spirit is lost. Professional change agents must achieve the same dynamic balance. There is no question that we need defense mechanisms to cope with the demands from clients that we subjugate our true core in order to cater to their wishes. The challenge is how to employ this armor without losing our connection to what it is to protect—how not to fall asleep and forget who we are and the positive impact our uniqueness can have on client effectiveness.
It’s Time to Wake Up

Let’s go back to artist Giuseppe Penone for more insight and inspiration.

This is an inside job.

In the picture on the previous page, Penone is literally climbing into the work of finding and revealing the sapling. What this picture evokes in me is a heightened awareness that nothing short of crawling into our own depths will suffice. If we are to reconnect to and reacquaint ourselves with our inner nature, it will require a lot of hard work that can’t be detoured around, truncated, or delegated.

There are no shortcuts to make it quick, apps to make it easy, or surrogates to do it for us. Liberating a character that has been lost to the dense trunk of defenses that grew up around it can only be accomplished when the practitioner painstakingly extracts layer after layer of the obfuscation that has built up.

Done right, this is a messy, extended, resource-consuming, and emotionally laden process—not something most people would describe as a lot of fun. It’s not for the timid or faint of heart.

That’s why the only practitioners I know who have pursued such a path are the ones who did so in conjunction with their mastery journey. They may have had reasons to engage this very personal work other than raising the bar on their professional capabilities—it is not for me to say. I’m just observing that the only practitioners I’ve personally
had contact with who have engaged this kind of deep, introspective self-learning are ones who also rose to the top of their games.

Is mastery your aspiration?

The kind of effort involved in “waking up,” as I’m describing it here, runs contrary to what many people want when it comes to advancing professional competencies. What is popular today is the notion that people in our field can elevate their game by accelerating their change agent proficiencies (knowledge and skills). This view is favored because this kind of “technical” training is relatively straightforward:

- It’s easy to deliver and participate in. (A certain number of days in length are offered at specified times.)
- It’s easy to verify results. (Either you pass the final exam or you don’t.)
- It’s easy to document. (Either you receive a certificate or license or you don’t.)
- It’s easy to draw learning from. (It mostly involves cognition, with few demands on emotions.)

Don’t get me wrong—technical training in change implementation concepts, tools, and methodology has its place. It is precisely what people in entry-level positions, and even those in mid-career change agent roles should focus on. It is not, however, what seasoned practitioners should be emphasizing in order to move their work to the next level.

A problem occurs when change agents aspiring to mastery-level work assume they can prepare themselves for the leap by simply attending more technical training. It doesn’t work that way. As they mature professionally, additional technical training tends to generate less and less benefit.

Change practitioners pursuing mastery of our craft generally come to view technical preparation as maintenance—something primarily aimed at keeping them attuned to thought leader perspectives and the latest trends. As such, this kind of activity usually takes up only a small portion of their time and mindshare. Instead, they place their learning emphasis on “who to be,” not “what to do.” They learn how to show up as they apply the techniques with which they are already familiar, instead of becoming skilled in yet another technique. They invest in waking up.

People with primarily technical training as their foundation are called technicians; they deliver accuracy. Those who have been prepared to apply their technical skills as grounded, authentic human beings are called masterful practitioners; they provide effectiveness. Many of today’s new change agents entering our field aren’t being exposed to this differentiation. They are being taught that technical training is all that is required. A more truthful statement would be, “Technical training is all that is required UNLESS you aspire to take your game to the mastery level. At that altitude, who you are becomes more important than what you do. Pursue your technical training now, but know that, down the road, you’ll need to put more and more emphasis on cultivating your character.”

Don’t be surprised when you are surprised.

This kind of an endeavor isn’t about creating a sapling-looking figure from a larger piece of wood. This is more like archeology in that it involves uncovering what is already there. Michelangelo said he didn’t carve his sculptures into the stone he worked on, he freed them from the marble that
surrounded them. Character isn’t developed, it’s emancipated. We don’t determine what it should be; it divulges itself to us.

This is about honoring what is, not imposing what should be. In this sense, we must be prepared to be surprised by what our character reveals about itself. If we only allow it to bring to light what we want or expect, we will defeat the whole purpose of the rescue effort. “Don’t be surprised by what you learn about yourself when you wake up” would be the wrong advice. In fact, if you aren’t surprised by what your inner core announces about itself, you are probably still trying to control the outcome too much. “Don’t be surprised when you are surprised” is a better angle for approaching this undertaking.

It would be wise to take a cue here from improv comedians who are masters at acceptance. Regardless of what is said or done by their fellow comics or the audience, it is taken in as information to fuel the next joke. They don’t engage the typical left-brain logic filters to determine which input best fits with where they want to go. They assume where they are going will become clear by the input they receive. They don’t direct the outcome; they allow it to tell them how to get there by listening to and using whatever information is made available.

You must find your own path.

Waking up and staying awake to our inner nature can be approached from several perspectives, such as:

- In personal relationships (friends, family, etc.),
- In health matters (nutrition, exercise, etc.),
- In solitude (prayer, meditation, etc.),
- In the work setting.

The purpose of this document is to examine how our character is either inhibited or brought forward, and the impact this has in our work environment, when we are functioning as professional change facilitators.

Delving into how our inner nature affects the way we practice our craft is something that we each have to commission in our own way. There are various enablers we can call on to help guide and facilitate as we reacquaint ourselves with our core and learn to authentically express ourselves with clients. Some routes are very interactive (e.g., using a coach, mentor, or peer community for exploratory discussions). Other approaches are more introspective. This is not something where “best practices” will be of much help. Anyone drawn to enroll in this kind of a journey must determine for himself or herself how best to proceed.

That said, here are some questions that might be worth considering either on your own or in a dialogue with others.

I’ll continue to use Penone’s “The Life Within” artwork as a metaphor to frame the inquiry.

The Sapling That Holds Your Essence

- What is your character made of?
  - What are some words, phrases, stories, or images you can use to portray what your character looks and feels like from the inside? What is the experience like to be your sapling? Describe your “inner sapling.”
  - What were the “growing conditions” under which your acorn grew into a sapling?
Was it free to grow in its own way or was it “pruned and prodded” toward a predetermined outcome?

- When are you aware of your character’s existence?
  - Does it feel any different when you have a clear channel to your inner nature versus when you have fallen asleep, and it is in the background or hidden altogether?
  - Can you think of times when your character has fallen asleep?
  - How did/does that feel compared to times when you were aware of your inner nature?

- Are there patterns to when the essence held by your sapling surfaces into your awareness and when it doesn’t?
  - What triggers your character to come forward or reseed in your attention?
  - Under what conditions does it flourish?
  - What inhibits it from revealing itself?

- How do clients relate to it?
  - Your character is conveyed through your presence, so how do clients let you know whether or not who you are is valued?
  - What impact does your character/presence package have on your clients?

- What are some of the indications that your sapling is thriving beneath the protective cover of your trunk? Are there any indications that it is overwhelmed and in jeopardy of losing its identity?

- As far as keeping your character vibrant and functioning as your center of gravity…
  - What are the ways you stay “awake”?
  - What do you have to watch out for? What makes you go to sleep?

The Surrounding Trunk That Protects Your Character

- What is your trunk made of?
  - What are some words, phrases, stories, or images you can use to portray the defenses you have built up to protect the integrity of your character and buffer you from emotional pain when who you are is devalued or ignored?
  - What were some of the contributing factors that led to your trunk’s development?

- Are you aware when your defenses kick in, or do they unconsciously engage?
  - What prompts your trunk to add new layers of defense?

- Are there signs that your trunk has overwhelmed your sapling?
  - What impact does this have on clients when it happens?
  - What impact does this have on you?
  - How many layers do you have at this point?
  - Are you more invested in adding or lessening the number of layers?
Summary

We can’t cultivate character by acquiring new concepts or skills. It isn’t about learning, it’s about uncovering our true nature and realigning with its inherent value and impact. We must reacquaint ourselves with who we are and stop denying our essence in order to keep others comfortable. It isn’t easy to untangle ourselves from all the conditioning we’ve taken on over the course of our lives, but to excel in this profession demands nothing less.

We each have “a life within”—a vibrant, dynamic, spirited sapling that is the primary source of the benefits we provide clients. Practitioners on a mastery path have a responsibility to themselves and those they serve to crawl through the layers of their trunk to reveal, honor, and express what is there.
Since releasing Character and Presence and Cultivating Character, I’ve received a number of written inquiries and had several live conversations with change professionals wanting to explore how the way they “show up” impacts the outcomes of their efforts. Several themes emerged in the questions, and I thought I would share a few of them here, along with my answers.
I’m particularly struck with how many people strongly resonate with the topic of Character and Presence—the responses have been quite remarkable, and the depth of interest I’m seeing around this subject is worth noting.

Many of the questions posed are extremely personal. (“How do I find the courage to express who I really am with my clients?”) In addition, most people want to know about practical application. (“Authentically expressing who I really am to my clients as well as my boss is attractive but I also have to pay the bills. What do you suggest?”)

There is something unfolding here that I don’t fully understand, but I think it warrants some attention. I don’t assume my recent writings about character and presence generated the interest. Instead, I think the attraction and curiosity means the need for this kind of examination has been smoldering beneath the surface for some time.

The distinction between what we do and who we are appears to be a boundary that is especially intriguing to many in our field. This can’t be because it’s new territory—it isn’t. Although the subject is intellectually stimulating, that can’t explain the enthusiasm, either. Finally, the attention I’m seeing this issue receive is far from esoteric. The exchanges I’ve had with people are about the realities of how their character and presence affect client relationships and their own sense of well-being as practitioners.

The energy stirring around this issue is intense and deep. For many people, this query is prompting potent, emotional introspection. That in itself isn’t so unusual; we’ve all experienced personal events or circumstances that provoked self-examination. What is significant, I think, is that this internal reflection is being induced by professional triggers, not private ones. Said differently, the very individual nature of this interior scrutiny is being spurred by a desire for greater exterior professional effectiveness.

I have seen some exceptions, but generally speaking, the practitioners with an appetite for this conversation aren’t entry-level change agents still trying to gain a foothold on the basics of our profession. They are practitioners solidly grounded in the fundamentals of change execution and yet, they are seeking even greater influence with those they serve. More specifically, they are scanning for something beyond what can be attained by applying knowledge and skills alone.

These practitioners know how to diagnose and intervene, so their search for greater impact has led them to delve within themselves rather than look for the next framework or process to add to their already considerable “technical” proficiencies. They have discovered that there is a point where mastery in this field isn’t just about the tools in their kit—it also involves the substance of who they are as human beings and how they reflect that in their client relationships. For them, advancing to the next stage of capability has become a function of what’s in their hearts, not their heads.

I want to provide as many opportunities as possible to continue probing and questioning our various perspectives about this subject. Therefore, I’m using this blog as a vehicle for my exploration into this space. I invite you to use it to express your views as well.

In this light, several themes have emerged in the questions practitioners have been asking me about all this. I thought I would share a few here, along with my answers.
Can character be modified, or are we stuck with it?

Q: I always thought developing one’s character involved altering something fundamental, but you take the position that it is more about accepting who we really are and leveraging it rather than trying to refashion the core of who we are. How did you come to this way of seeing character?

A: My view on this is based less in theory than on my experience. I’ve been a professional facilitator of organizational change for four decades. Before that, my work was in the area of counseling psychology. Throughout that time, I can’t think of a single situation where I witnessed someone who substantively changed the essence of who they are, or the core nature of someone else.

Early in my career, I accepted the conventional notion that character could be purposely “developed”—that is, there were activities, processes, or practices that, when engaged properly, could create or eliminate specific features of our own character or that of someone else. Then I began to notice that these kinds of results were not actually taking place among the people whose character I had been asked to help change. (Initially it was while counseling people seeking fundamental shifts in themselves or their spouses/children. Later, it was with sponsors or change practitioners who had asked for guidance to address issues at the core of who they were as human beings that were impairing their effectiveness.)

Because I saw so little character change resulting from my own work, I started paying closer attention to what others were describing when they discussed success at causing change in someone’s fundamental nature. It became more and more clear to me that the modifications they were describing were not parallel to what I considered character. The shifts were not at the core level of a person’s foundation of being.

More observation and pondering on all this helped me come to a very personal realization—nothing I had ever done to myself or that had happened to me had actually varied in any significant way the essence of who I had been all my life. Is my character different today from what it was twenty years ago? Absolutely. I can find no evidence, however, that the difference can be attributed to an action I or anyone else took as a deliberate effort to create the specific outcomes that resulted. Did my character evolve? Yes. Was it by intentional design? I think not.

I concluded that character did unfold or evolve, but not as a function of being intentionally “developed” as this term is typically used (i.e., altered by design through applying certain actions that accomplished specific outcomes). Character is amenable to maturing into more advanced versions of its basic nature, but it can’t become something less than or more than its inherent state.

So, my views on whether a practitioner’s character yields to change is grounded in my personal observations and experience. I can’t corroborate the claim by some that people somehow are able to make substantive additions to or deletions from their basic nature (by their own actions or those of others). On many occasions, I have
been part of change endeavors where a practitioner’s character emerged very differently than was apparent earlier. However, to say these people started displaying features of their character that either didn’t exist before or had become newly formed is beyond what I can substantiate or that I believe to be true.

Q: As change professionals, we see people advance themselves in new ways all the time. How does that match with your view that the essence of who we are doesn’t change?

A: I agree that since we are in the business of facilitating organizational transformations, we are exposed to an abundance of real and meaningful change in people. The point I’m making is that I believe close examination reveals most of these shifts are not at the level of character.

For example, all of us have witnessed plenty of behavioral and mindset adaptation in our clients. There is an abundance of evidence that intentionally modifying human behavior (our own or someone else’s) is amenable to successfully engineered outcomes. Though much more challenging to pull off, under the right conditions, even mindsets can be deliberately reshaped. Generally speaking, short of outright brainwashing, these endeavors are more encouraged than forced, but nonetheless, a person’s or group’s frames of reference and priorities can be intentionally adjusted, if not transformed. As impressive as these kinds of reconstructions can be, however, I don’t believe they are adding to or subtracting from someone’s baseline character.

Without a doubt, our behavior and mindsets are certainly linked to our character, but they are not synonymous with it. Nonetheless, most people confuse thinking/doing modifications with ontological alterations. Our character is about our beingness, not the mindsets and behaviors we display. This confusion leaves many practitioners inappropriately focused on trying to mold their appearance (projected presence) to increase client effectiveness instead of cultivating their character.

Q: So you are saying that, most of the time, what we might think of as a shift in character is actually a revision of mindset or behavior, not at the level of who people really are?

A: Yes, but there is another layer your question raises. It is true that a great deal of what is attributed to character change is actually mindset and/or behavior change, yet neither of these come close to the biggest misperception. What is an even more common misreading with far greater impact is what comes about from “masking” character. As I’m using it here, masking is the conscious or unconscious lessening or negating of who we really are in order to gain acceptance by others. This isn’t about confusing one kind of change for another; this is intentionally or unintentionally creating a façade to disguise our real selves.

At the center of who we really are is our character, which is conveyed to others through the presence we project. In most situations, what passes as a shift in character is more likely than not a practitioner’s efforts to hide who he or she really is by bringing forth an artificial presence intended to gain favor with clients.

Q: How extensive is masking within the change practitioner community?

A: Masking is a blight that runs rampant among change agents. It is so pervasive within our professional community that many practitioners have never known
any other way of operating. Of course, masking is widespread in all walks of life, but the focus of this writing is on change facilitators, so I'll keep the spotlight here. For most people in our field, masking their character with a presence that is hopefully more acceptable to clients is ubiquitous to the role. It is considered an inescapable reality of our profession.

Based on my years of training and coaching change practitioners, I can safely say the vast majority routinely portray their observations, insights, ideas, etc. in ways that are significantly watered down, if not completely compromised, from their true understanding of situations. Although this is often done with conscious volition; masking is more typically an unconscious act—we are so used to assuming that hiding who we are is the only option available that we engage it without even being aware of doing so. From my perspective, masking is the universal default modus operandi for most of our professional colleagues.

Q: When people go through experiences that markedly change them in ways that others notice are sustained over time, doesn’t that mean their basic character has been altered?

A: Not necessarily. *Bonsai* is a Japanese art form that involves shaping woody-stemmed trees or shrubs in containers to produce small replicas that mimic the shape and style of mature, full-size trees. The technique of bonsai dramatically alters the size and appearance of the trees to which it is applied, but it doesn’t change the kind of tree it is. For example, before bonsai treatments, a Japanese maple would have had a specific trajectory to its natural growth pattern. After years of carefully "developing" the tree, it may be almost unrecognizable compared to other similar trees that were allowed to follow their normal growth disposition, and yet, it is still a Japanese maple. The process of bonsai stunted, twisted, pruned, negated, graphed, amended, and/or rechanneled the tree’s basic tendencies, but its character remains that of the young sapling it was early in its life. The tree is what it is, regardless of the circumstances in which it finds itself. The same can be said for people. They stunt, twist, prune, negate, graft, amend, and/or rechannel themselves (or someone else does it), which may result in new mindsets and behaviors that in no way resembles their fundamental nature. Yet, the essence of who they really are remains intact. Their basic nature might be concealed by engineered alterations, but their beingness endures, despite the mutation or cloaking. Their presence can be altered to project any contrived image they choose, but the core of who they are will abide.
How do I find clients that resonate with my “character/presence package”?

Q: You say that once practitioners have embraced character and aligned presence, they must find clients who will value their “character/presence package.” That’s fine for an outside consultant who has a solo practice with no one telling him or her where the next engagement is, but I don’t live in that world. For the last few years, I have been an internal change facilitator inside a large multinational firm, and before that, I was part of the change management practice for one of the major professional services firms. In both situations, I didn’t choose clients—they were assigned by my boss. “Express your character through authentic presence and work for clients who appreciate who you really are” sounds great, but how am I supposed to apply it when who I work with is defined by others, not me?

A: Creating a line of sight from embracing who you really are, to the authentic conveyance of that to the outside world, to engaging clients who resonate with the presence it generates isn’t easy or risk-free under any circumstances. So if you are serious about standing on your truth as a change professional, my suggestion is to stop looking for a stress-free way of making that happen. “Comfortable” and “safe” have nothing to do with the pursuit of being who you really are and making a living at the same time.

Choosing to live your life, versus the one someone else has in mind for you, isn’t for the faint of heart. You can’t ask, “How do I find a sheltered environment out of harm’s way so I can be straightforward with clients about my unique talents and perspectives and not face any risk?” Instead, the question is, “How do I find the strength and determination to authentically express my character/presence package even when doing so isn’t always understood and/or valued?”

Yes, there are some significant struggles to face when functioning as an internal practitioner, but they are impediments, not insurmountable barriers, to bringing your full self forward. It boils down to this—either come to terms with what must be done where you are or take the plunge and be your own boss.

You essentially have six options:

- **Raise awareness:** Stay where you are but find ways to show your boss how much more valuable you would be if you were allowed to be who you really are.
- **Claim your sovereignty:** Remain where you are but take responsibility for staying in an environment that doesn’t support you being fully yourself with clients.
- **Be a victim:** Remain where you have a boss who is unsupportive of you being fully who you are, and continue to complain.
- **Go back to sleep:** Stay where you are, but stop aspiring for character/presence/client alignment.
- **Establish a new footing:** Find another boss (in the same or a different organization) who is supportive of...
matching up your character/presence package with clients that will value you for being you.

- **Go out on your own:** Establish a new consulting firm or a private practice where you can make your own decisions about who to work with.

A word of caution about the last bullet, for those of you who have spent your entire change career with a boss. (And that can be either as an inside change agent for a company/agency or inside a consulting firm serving those companies/agencies.) If you’ve never operated without someone else giving you direction as a change practitioner, you might fall prey to the romantic notion that being your own boss is the ultimate freedom that allows you unrestricted access to do whatever you want. Ask any entrepreneur who has ever taken the plunge and you’ll learn that being the captain of your own ship is no free ride. You still have a master to serve—it’s just shifted from the person above you on the org chart to your own monthly overhead cost to feed your family and stay in business.

When you report to a boss, there are fewer decisions to make but also (generally speaking), fewer burdens to carry. What you get with your own autonomy is the latitude to make your own decisions as long as you are able/willing to pay for the implications. Said another way, when someone else sets the standards, the cost is high if you don’t have the leeway to relate to clients as you would always like. When you set the standards, the financial risk is high for being truly who you are with clients. Either way is pricey, but the question is, “Which exorbitant fee do you want to pay?”

My point is, don’t think you are out of the woods just because you decide to venture out on your own. Even independent practitioners who operate autonomously can find excuses to shy away from doing whatever is necessary to be who they are. Many of them say, “I’ll do it when I can, but I have to eat.” Here, the justification for not living up to the standard isn’t someone else, it is something else. It’s not the boss, it’s the harsh “economic realities.”

The excuse, “It can’t be done unless you are on your own” is a convenient myth many internal practitioners use for justifying the difference between their stated aspirations and the reality they live. Everyone has an alibi. Why? Because matching character, presence, and clients is not just tough, it’s hazardous duty in the sense that there can be some significant political and/or financial implications for staying grounded in your true nature. It’s the opposite of playing it safe, yet this is the way it is played when you are committed to the belief that bringing your full self to engagements is what is in the client’s best interest as well as what will be fulfilling for you. Both of these are important for long-term success as a professional change agent (which, by the way, is how you feed your family).

Being who you really are with clients isn’t an alternative to being a successful practitioner; it is a way of being a successful practitioner.

**Q:** You’re making it sound very difficult to align character with presence and then find clients who are drawn to your particular combination. Aren’t you concerned that people will get turned off when you describe such a high bar?

**A:** From the onset of my writing about the importance of being who we really are when in the role of change facilitator, I said the topic wasn’t something all
practitioners would have an appetite for, nor would I be attempting to make the issues appear less demanding or less perilous than they are:

- I don’t expect most people in our profession to have an interest in this perspective—the majority are focused on “what to do,” not “who they are” as they do those things. This isn’t meant as an indictment; it’s just an honest reflection of how our profession has evolved. The value created in our field is thought to be primarily methodology-based rather than ontology-based. It’s about what is known and done, not how to “show up” to leverage what we know and do toward an optimum client impact.

- There are considerable demands associated with making who we are as important as what we do. It not only calls on the practitioner to invest himself or herself in introspective discovery work to reclaim aspects of character that have been muted or disregarded, it also requires keeping a vigilance for the right match between client predisposition and the character/presence package being offered. The most challenging requisites for operating this way are finding the courage and discipline to stay true to this course on a consistent basis. I’m not referring to a set of naïve, idealistic platitudes like accepting every part of your character, conveying a presence that is unfailingly aligned with your true nature, or never working with clients who fail to recognize or value who you are. This isn’t about some pseudo-zealousness directed toward unrealistic perfection. It’s about the resolve necessary to face the hard realities of what we say is vitally important for both our clients and ourselves.

Courage and discipline are critical elements for practitioners committed to maintaining a balance between knowing what to do and how to show up:

- We must have the **courage** to maintain an unvarnished alertness for the good, the bad, and the ugly:
  1) what our character is revealing (not just what we like, but what we don’t like as well)
  2) what our presence may be hiding
  3) what happens when we take on clients who don’t understand or appreciate the benefit to them of us bringing forward our full selves

- The **discipline** to make an informed decision each time we become aware of a gap separating 1 and 2 or 2 and 3. The rigor here isn’t so much about what determination to reach but to ensure that all the gaps lead to some kind of mindful resolution. Here are some options: ignore the gap, defer dealing with it until conditions are more suitable, develop a strategy for closing it, start taking action to close it, recognize that this is the tenth time you have started with the same strategy or have come up with a new one, etc. Do whatever you are ready to do but do something—take responsibility for the gap by acknowledging it and making a conscious choice about what to do or not do next.
What does it mean when we let character and presence “fall asleep at the wheel”? What does it mean when we let character and presence “fall asleep at the wheel”? Another category of inquiry that has come my way deals with our tendency to “fall asleep” rather than face the daunting task of coming to terms with who we are and its place in practicing the craft.

Q: Would you elaborate on your statement in one of your posts: “We fell asleep and began dreaming that we were other than who we are”? What does “going to sleep” mean within the context of character and presence?

A: Many change agents perform their assigned duties in environments where they aren’t viewed as valuable assets. They may be treated cordially by the executives they serve, but they aren’t thought of as key resources who are vital to the leader’s success or the organization’s viability. Some of these practitioners are not only undervalued; they are “unrecognized.”

One of the most powerful affirmations someone can bestow on you is the gift of deep recognition—distinguishing you from others, identifying something special in you (particularly when it can’t be easily articulated), grasping the real value you bring to situations, acknowledging your unique perspectives or insights, knowing when to appropriately leverage your distinctiveness, and openly expressing appreciation for the contribution you make.

There are two levels to this kind of recognition. All of the above (distinguishing, identifying, grasping, leveraging, and appreciating) can be applied to what you do as a professional change agent, or they can be directed toward who you are as you go about your work. You can also be authenticated in this way at both levels. It can feel awkward, if not humiliating, to go unrecognized for what you do, but it can be even more disheartening to feel those to whom you are in service hold little deep recognition of you as a person and disregard how you show up as a crucial part of the value you bring to the implementation process.

Most change professionals are aware of and intentionally seek out client relationships where they are endorsed for what they do. The currency for this kind of affirmation is called “expertise.” When practitioners are respected for what they know or do, we say they have built a strong reputation based on their expertise. Being designated an expert in the facilitation of organizational change is highly sought after. In fact, without it, securing meaningful job positions or assignments in our field is virtually impossible. Garnering admiration for the contributions you make by showing up in the way you do is a less common experience for most practitioners. Many have gone their entire careers without this kind of validation.

When there is little or no recognition for who you are, the negative repercussions spread in both directions—clients receive less value from the practitioner than they should and the practitioner becomes less invested in the client’s situation than they could be. Over time, this cycle of less client value leading to less practitioner investment compounds on itself, resulting in a lose/lose situation for all concerned.
One of the long-range implications for practitioners in this scenario is the tendency to “go to sleep” rather than experience the alienation and distress associated with not being valued for who they are. Unless a change agent has no regard whatsoever for the people or organization involved, going unrecognized is a lonely and painful experience. From a psychological standpoint, it can be much more demoralizing to be ignored than to engage in open conflict. Even brief exposure to environments like this can drain the life out of practitioners, but with extended periods of working in these conditions, they run the risk of disenfranchising their very souls.

Unfortunately, many change agents practice their craft in these kinds of circumstances. For some, it means periodically enduring an uncomfortable assignment while not being acknowledged for who they really are. For others, their entire professional experience has been void of any deep recognition for the contribution they could be making if their presence boldly reflected their true character.

Faced with these circumstances, practitioners often anesthetize themselves without realizing it to avoid the pain. Some use alcohol, drugs, or superficial relationships to induce this numbness. Others bury their discomfort in their psyche and learn to function on autopilot. They participate in change-focused dialogues and related activities, but without any mindful awareness of the deep personal recognition that is missing. Here is the unconscious logic trail:

1) There is no pain if there is no foul.

2) There is no foul if I have no expectation of being recognized.

3) If I have no expectation, I have no awareness of what is possible.

4) There is no awareness if I am oblivious to the way who I am could be of value to clients.

Being asleep means you lack the mindfulness about how bringing forward your full essence could be a benefit to clients. It also means ensuring that the presence you project is one with which clients are comfortable. There is no place for conflict with this kind of slumber because tension heightens awareness, whereas contentment has a tranquillizing effect. Being a provocateur or in any way offering views or feedback contrary to what clients expect or want to hear is unacceptable and inconsistent with keeping ourselves anesthetized.

Falling asleep means forgetting that we each have a unique center that is worthy of expression and that failing to offer it is an unprofessional act of withholding value from clients. It means we lose sight of our responsibility to use all possible means to serve clients, including accessing our own authenticity as an intervention asset.

This lack of conscious awareness is so filled with victimization we no longer even register when we water down what we offer clients in order to keep them appeased and contented. We fall asleep when we fail to open a passage to our inner nature and we convince ourselves we can fake what others want from us instead of honoring our true spirit. This is when we start dreaming we are someone other than who we really are. The dream turns into a nightmare, however, if the sleep state is sustained too long and we lose the ability to pull ourselves out of the comatose condition called “comfortably numb.”
We awaken when we reacquaint ourselves with what it is about who we are that we have lost contact with. We can wake up in two ways:

- When we are reminded of how painful it is to not stand on our own truth, or
- When we are reminded of the gratitude we feel because we have been graced with the courage and discipline to stand on our truth.

Either pain or gratitude can serve as an effective doorway to awareness. Without one or the other to keep our equilibrium off balance, however, we tend to get lulled into complacency.

**Q: Why has the who we are side of being a change agent been so neglected?**

**A: A case can be made that, not only have we as individual practitioners fallen asleep, our entire profession has gone comatose.**

One indication of this is that who we are has taken a back seat to what we do when considering what it takes to be properly prepared for this kind of work. Topics such as character and presence and bringing our full selves forward aren’t typically thought of as something we have to be educated or coached in. This has led to a mindset that is heavily skewed (if not totally consumed) toward “technical” instruction (what methodology to adopt, what concept to apply, what technique to employ, what intervention to engage, etc.). Little, if any, attention is given to helping practitioners see that their greatest contributions depend on combining what they do with who they are.

Learning what to do is “table stakes” in our profession. Without a set of properly applied concepts, frameworks, and tools to guide the implementation process, one is considered either a novice or an incompetent change agent. However, optimizing one’s full potential as a practitioner requires bolstering what to do with who to be.

I feel strongly that, as a professional community, we cannot afford to continue neglecting this aspect of our work. Specifically, there are three lines of pursuit within our ranks that we should raise awareness of:

- Exploring, acknowledging, and embracing our innate character
- Aligning our character and presence to project our authentic selves to clients
- Securing clients who value the character and presence “package” we convey
How can I express my opinion on character without being pushy?

Q: At times, you seem adamant about your views on character and presence. At other times, you seem to leave the topic open for interpretations other than your own. Does this mean you are unsure about your own perspectives on this topic?

A: I think your question accurately depicts where I am regarding how character and presence fit in our role as professional change agents—I am both confident about what I’m stating and equally sure that, at some point down the road, my current views will appear naïve, if not downright wrong, to me and probably to others.

I hold these two stances as equally true at the same time by subscribing to a philosophical view on character and presence, as well as relying on what my experience has taught me about it. When the two don’t align, my experience usually takes precedence, but that doesn’t mean my philosophical view is negated.

Let me explain. I believe that often what appears to be two or more contradictory alternatives are actually multiple solutions addressing different aspects of the same phenomenon. For example, I have been very explicit in the blog that I believe character is uncovered, not “developed” in the typical sense of the word. This view is based on my experience. Yet, philosophically, I can see that it is possible for character to mature both by intentionally modifying it to suit external standards and by exploring and accepting what is already there.

By endorsing this “both-can-be-true-but-I’ll-stand-on-what-my-experience-tells-me” stance, I don’t mean to negate the philosophical side in any way as whimsical.

In fact, for something to be philosophically true for me means I hold it in high regard, often allowing it to represent an aspiration I might strive for. In this case, I’m using the term philosophical to say that, although my experience points in a different direction, it would be the height of ignorance and arrogance to declare that there is only one way character can unfold and it just happens to be consistent with how I see things.

Philosophically, I respect that life is essentially a mystery that neither I nor any other human being will ever fully comprehend. For this reason, I’m committed to leaving plenty of “breathing room” on either side of any conclusion I draw. At the same time, I’m comfortable declaring when parts of life appear understandable to me by applying certain lenses through which to interpret my experience.

Philosophically honoring what I can’t comprehend doesn’t preclude me from stating emphatically what my experience has revealed as true for me within my current frame of reference. (The bold font is to emphasize that it is only the truth as I see it and is not to be confused with THE truth everyone should adhere to—and that it remains true only as long as my frame of reference doesn’t shift.)

In this case, I have 40 plus years of experience to support my belief that character is to be owned, not constructed. As a result, that bias is firmly established in my frame of reference. Yet, it is important that I remind myself (and anyone who places any value on my perspective) that our profession is generations away
from earning the right to be confident that we truly understand all the key variables associated with humans in transition.

Q: If you are less than completely sure you are right about character and presence, how can you advocate that others incorporate your views into the way they practice the craft?

A: I don’t see my function as determining what is or should be true for change professionals who read or listen to my views. I’m here to report, as accurately and honestly as I am able, what is true for me in the moment. My intention is to help change professionals make informed decisions about what they will hold as true for themselves regarding how they approach their work.

I’m a resource for people who want to access the lessons I’ve drawn from my experience that seem to work for me. I’m not a good match for those seeking formulaic answers or gurus who have it all worked out for everyone else.

If people are looking for someone who claims (or implies) to have all the answers related to how change agents should conduct themselves, I’m not the one they should be listening to anyway. In addition, my intended audience is comprised of practitioners who appreciate that I measure the number of years of doing this kind of work in decades and not years, but who also respect how little any of us really knows about what contributes to mastery in this field.

Some of the questions posed to me have been about the impact of character and presence on our passion for this work.

Q: As Joseph Campbell would put it, you seemed to have found “your bliss”—your calling in the change-related work you do. I enjoy being a change practitioner but I don’t yet feel it is a calling for me—at least, not in the way it appears to be for you. Is the alignment of character and presence part of the bliss equation?

A: You may not have intended it this way but when I hear “equation” in your question, it sounds like you might be looking for a logical set of “To Dos” that, if performed correctly, will decode whatever has been blocking your path to change agent bliss. Whether you meant to convey that or not, in my experience, it doesn’t work that way.

First, being fortunate enough to find a professional “path with heart” is an act of grace, not the result of a set of activities well pursued. I’m talking about grace that is on the other side of any simplistic willingness and ability criteria we might place on an unfulfilled desire for something.

I strongly feel that you don’t get a vote on this. The best you can do is to keep yourself open to the possibility that change execution might one day evolve into a passion rather than a vocational interest for you.

And, by the way, the fact that it hasn’t yet landed on you as a passion isn’t an indication of what is to come. Grace comes to you—you don’t employ it. You can, however, decrease your chances of it showing up. Failure to remain open to what might unfold can be a show-stopper for grace. Another one is impatience. Be open to the possibilities in life and have the patience for them to appear in their own time. That’s about all you can do to facilitate the process. After that, it is out of your hands.
That said, I do believe there is a correlation between change work being a calling and the extent to which practitioners have aligned their character-presence package and focused their work on clients who value who they really are. It’s too one-dimensional, too linear, to suggest that a strong character-presence alliance opens the doorway to bliss. (For all I know, it might be the other way around.) All I’m suggesting is that most of the practitioners I know that have access to one, have both manifesting in their lives.

I’m actually more passionate today about the part I get to play in our profession’s journey than I was at any previous point in my career. In recent years, my role has evolved from being a change expert to that of an elder in the change practitioner community. I’ve enjoyed this shift, in large part because it has freed me from the boundaries and burdens associated with focusing so much on what general methodology or specific techniques are best to apply and when. I now feel the latitude to explore more fundamental issues regarding what I think are further-reaching implications. One of those implications is that, regardless of the concepts or tools we use, we can create better value for clients through allowing our own beingness to be one of the most powerful assets we have to work with.
Chapter 4—Practitioner Reflections

I asked several seasoned practitioners whom I respect to write about how they related to the Character/Presence and Cultivating Character series. I included two of them here. You can read several others on Change Thinking.
Connecting the Dots between Character, Presence, and Client Effectiveness

by Luc Galoppin

“The reward for conformity is that everyone else likes you except yourself.” —Rita Mae Brown

Are you one of those readers of Daryl’s blog who, like me, eagerly consumes his writings and podcasts at length? Even prints them out for further study? Do you find yourself silently saying “yes” when he talks about character and presence? If so, then I bet that, like me, you must have been frustrated when holding your track record against the light of his writings. It’s the frustration of being bitterly aware of how things are supposed to be—or even more confronting: how YOU are supposed to BE—and observing the opposite in and around yourself.

I am going to suggest a way to work with what we have—in this case, the energy of the frustration, plus the sense of direction we obtain from our awareness. As it turns out, this is a good way to connect the dots between our character, our presence, and the profession we are in service to.

But first, I need to tell you about the chameleon law. The term was coined in 1944 by René Daumal in his unfinished novel, *The Mount Analogue*. The story of Mount Analogue is about making something happen that everyone around you says is impossible. The chameleon law, which he described as “the inner resonance to influences nearest at hand,” is our reptile-brain reflex to fit in whenever the circumstances are nudging us in a certain direction. As it happens, organizational change projects are mostly about creating a situation that does not yet exist; and thus we, as practitioners, have a higher likelihood of being exposed to the chameleon law.

As Daryl pointed out in the Character and Presence series, we have a choice in how we spend our days as organizational change practitioners:

“When it comes to our relationship with who we really are, hibernation can prove to be a much less painful alternative to feeling small (if not invisible) and/or contorting ourselves into who or what others want.”

I am painfully aware of those moments when we are running against our true character—just because the chameleon law is preventing our true presence from shining as it is supposed to. Those are the days when I come home tired. The days when my head is bursting with “should-haves” and
“could-haves.” In terms of numbing scenarios, the three below more or less sum up my career as a practitioner:

- **Zero-numbing.** On multiple occasions, I have stepped out of an assignment to be true to my character and I showed it in every bit of my presence. At least, that’s what I thought, because people experienced me as obnoxious and hard to handle, and I wasn’t really listening that well. The sentence I heard myself saying most in those days was, “At least I can come home and look myself straight in the mirror.”

- **Full-numbing.** On other occasions, I stayed in—often disgusted and fatigued by my own sheepish behavior to fit in. I did exactly what was asked of me and even did the wrong things against my own will. Alas, I got tired of being comfortably numb faster than my clients, so I left—even without having any other prospect, and very much against the client’s will.

- **Alternating.** On still other occasions, I stayed, fit in, and used the occasion to create the right circumstances. The least I can say about those assignments is that they are everything but a piece of cake. If I were to draw a feelings diagram of those assignments, you would see a mountainous landscape. In this scenario, feelings of self-doubt and flow frequently take turns.

Not a pretty sight, right? If your track record looks the same, the challenge at hand is not to start feeling guilty about any of those moments. Guilt is the false price we pay when we don’t want to dig deeper to solve the root cause. As I stated above, I am not describing a pain relief for this dilemma, but rather a way through. Instead, what you and I should do when we wake up from either one of those bad dreams is to examine closely what exactly caused us to obey the chameleon law. That’s the starting point: look for cues in your own behavior.

Here are some examples of cues that I have discovered in myself:

- I am zero-numbing when I fall prey to extreme perfectionism, suspicion, being right, and not getting over it when I’m wrong. Basically, I act as a persecutor on those occasions.

- I am full-numbing when I find myself not being interested in any detail, missing out on important information, and basically being the victim of circumstances.

- During alternating moments, I find myself feeling alive and very tired, and this can happen several times within the same day or week. Basically, the work is meaningful in those occasions, and overwhelming at the same time.

Learning “how” I am in any of those circumstances helps me to detect and course-correct “who” I am. Guilt makes a place for searching a different path. All in all, that “path” is an inner journey worth pursuing. The key words on that alternating journey are meaningful on the one hand, and balanced on the other hand.

It’s worth pausing there for a second because this is exactly where we can connect our inner journey to the third dot of client effectiveness. Where does the energy come from when our work is meaningful and we are able to strike a balance between the ups and downs? Time and again, I notice that this happens when I am grounded. To me, feeling grounded is tied to a specific experience:

- Being connected to myself. This is the opposite of the physical experience of numbing. It’s the physical awareness of being present.
• Being connected to the world. Like a lightning rod is connected to the earth, being grounded is what enables me to serve/conduct something bigger than what is on my personal agenda.

It is only by grounding ourselves that we can tap into an internal source of energy (as opposed to persecuting or victimizing for external energy sources). Grounding is an absolute necessity if we are to navigate toward client effectiveness. In our case, client effectiveness is all about gravity: our profession is about shaping the path for a future that has no gravity (yet) in the present.

Our own grounding is needed before a project can have some gravity or traction. All of a sudden, it becomes clear that reaching our inner alignment of a meaningful and balanced profession is a necessary precursor to client effectiveness. Without grounding into our character, there can be no presence. Without our grounded presence, there can be no traction for the possible to become thinkable and consequentially to come into being.

The moral of my story? The one thing you should remember is that there is no use in feeling guilty about hibernating. There will always be ups and downs. Focus on staying connected with yourself and hang on to the memory of what it’s like to be grounded. To quote René Daumal:

“You cannot stay on the summit forever; you have to come down again. So why bother in the first place? Just this: What is above knows what is below, but what is below does not know what is above. One climbs, one sees. One descends, one sees no longer, but one has seen. There is an art of conducting oneself in the lower regions by the memory of what one saw higher up. When one can no longer see, one can at least still know.”

By the way, René Daumal, who was one of the most gifted literary figures in twentieth-century France, died before the novel was completed, providing an extra symbolic meaning to our own journey.

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Luc has been a managing director of Reply-mc since 2002. His specialties are organizational change management, speaking, teaching, and facilitating organizational change.

In 2008, he founded the LinkedIn group Organizational Change Practitioners With more than 37,000 members, it the largest online community for our profession.

Luc has a master’s degree in European Industrial Relations from Warwick Business School and a post-graduate degree in Industrial Relations as part of an exchange program between Warwick Business School (University of Warwick, UK) and UCL (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium).

Luc’s second master’s degree is in Applied Economic Sciences from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven.
Adding Value by Being Self-ish

by Peter Meyer

Daryl, in his very clear and eloquent way, has expressed the most important part of being a masterful practitioner. This chapter is about being selfish and self-ish. I’ll discuss how you and your client both benefit when you are selfishly enjoying yourself as you do great work. It also includes some practical tips, based on my experience, to increase value for you and your clients. As you know, if this seems obvious, it means I’ve done my work well. So I hope you find this a flash of the blindingly predictable.

You’ll see that my Character/Presentation model differs from Daryl’s in a significant way. I start one step before character, with the potential for what we can do. So this gives us three steps:

• Step 1—Our potential is limited in the moment by our decisions and current understanding.
• Step 2—Our character is our current understanding of our potential for growth. It is the very best of us today—it is today’s acorn. Our character can and will get better. Right now, it’s ideal.
• Step 3—Our presentation is what we show our family, friends, and clients.

When we are done here, you might just have more fun from showing what you are at your best: your character.

Why Should We Explore Our Character?

Daryl clearly points out that what we are at our core is greater than who we present as. Character is not presentation. Instead, we choose what to present from our character.

Why does it matter? One reason is that we want to give more value to the client. Since character is greater than presentation we can supply greater value when we work from character.

But wait, there’s more! We want more satisfaction in our experience. We want to have more fun in the projects we do. For many of us, we truly want to do the best work of which we are capable. That is why we would want to invest our time and energy into mastery. We give ourselves joy by growing into our potential, and then by growing our potential even further. Growth and satisfaction and joy are part of the nature and activity of our character, our essence. They feel good, as they should.
We are, in essence, selfish. We want the most satisfaction we can get. We want to grow, and to gain the satisfaction of helping others grow and change as we do.

We are also, in essence, self-ish. Our strongest asset, best tool, and most important contribution to our work comes from our character. It comes from our self.

Now, what good is it to us in our work?

### Infinite Acorns

Daryl offers a great metaphor in the Cultivating Character chapter. He talks about us as oak trees, starting with an acorn and then growing into seedling and sapling stages on our way to a mature but still-growing oak. One of the attributes of an acorn is that it represents infinity. Another is that the tree ceaselessly reaches for more growth. It does this in every direction. Growth and infinity are very useful to our work, but let’s begin with the acorn.

We start there, but we don’t originate just once. We generate again, and then again. This is Continuous Improvement, and, at our best, starting fresh is a continuous process for us. It’s part of our nature, and for almost all of us it is a defining part of our character.

Why do I refer to “infinity”? The acorn’s character is its potential. It can generate a tree. One oak can spawn literally tens of thousands more acorns. Some of the next generations of acorns will sprout. Each following tree can originate many more tens of thousands of acorns. One acorn, like one good idea, generates what is, in practice, an infinite number of trees. One acorn presents infinite potential and growth. As we use this acorn idea, as we start anew, we each represent limitless growth. I won’t speak for you, but I’ll say that I find growth to be very satisfying.

Our oak tree grows in almost every conceivable direction. It reaches for light, for space, for soil. It develops in all dimensions. As long as it’s alive, it reaches to grow more. For the tree, there is always potential for more expression. Every living tree strives in its own way to reach out for that potential. That describes us, doesn’t it?

Acting from our cause or character, we each do the same. Our self, our essence, characterizes infinity. Our desire to grow then characterizes our infinite potential. Like Daryl’s oak tree example, we automatically reach for that potential. It is part of mastery.

In the hands-on experience of our daily life and our practice, will we ever reach infinity? No, we will not. Will we achieve perfection? No. The better question is, “Will we perfect?” The answer is always “Yes.” Growth is an activity; it is about perfecting, not about reaching an end. Perfecting and growing are the enjoyable compensation for our best work. They are the highest reward for mastery.

What are the practical limits of our ability to grow ourselves? I think that there are no practical limits. It is as Henry Ford is quoted as saying: “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t—you’re right.” A more thorough discussion of growth versus limited perspectives is in *Mindset*, by Dr. Carol Dweck. A key finding of our research is that our mindset is an individual choice. You can choose to live a life of growth, or you can choose to live a life defined by rigid limits. Which of these is the presentation that you want to take into your work of engendering change?
The good news and the bad news is that none of the tools that we gain in traditional training help with any of this. Knowing how to use a Gantt chart or facilitate a meeting does not equip any of us to grow. They are tools with which we do our growing. We need good tools, but more—to perfect we need to know how to grow. It is knowing where to invest our time and energy that gives the best possible rewards. This is for self, and to focus on your character is to be very appropriately self-ish.

**Clients Like It When We Grow**

Growth is good for us and for our clients. The good news is that our customers usually recognize our bias toward growth. Some clients are scared of it. Some embrace it. The ones who embrace and value growth are the people we usually enjoy the most. It makes sense for us to appeal to and sell to those customers.

When I say “sell,” you know that I’m not talking about money. To be effective as a practitioner, you need people to buy your ideas, your questions, and your challenges. They need to invest enthusiasm and time. How can you increase the chance of clients investing? You can increase your odds by being more attractive as a product. *Your character—your self—is attractive to the best clients.*

These are the clients you want. They value moving forward, they honor learning in themselves and in others. They value and respect you even more for what you are than how you present yourself to be. They will invest time, people, and money when they see more of your character than of your safe layers.

This does not mean to act crazy or wear bright clothes. It means you should express growth so that your clients see it. This starts with learning how you grow, and how you can present it. When you choose your next development course, focus on how to understand your own ability to grow.

Discuss your desire to grow with your client. Smart clients want people who can and will grow. Then discuss how the client can take advantage of your growth to enhance his or her own progress as well as the desired results. Your next course should be centered on you, not on tools. You can help make your client happy by being self-ish and selfish.

Exposing your desire to grow may seem risky. In some organizations, growth is not valued, and in those, you will no longer be an appropriate fit. This focus on growth and character will attract some clients, and it may also cost you work that you don’t want. *Take that risk!* You will reward yourself. You will get satisfaction, fun, and growth when you act self-ish.
Three Steps to Get and Share More Satisfaction, Fun, and Growth

If you hold satisfaction, growing, and fun to be important, then you are self-ish and selfish in the right way. You have the groundwork for mastery today. Once you know what, how, and why you grow, you are ready to grow exponentially. What do you do? You don’t work at self, you work from it.

One way to accomplish this is to follow a three-step process for self-direction or growth. To summarize it:

• Step one would be to desire to grow or change. That is solely individual, solely personal. You have it, or you don’t. But realistically, if you are reading Daryl and reading this, you probably have the desire.

• Step two is to look, with total candor, at your current state. It is pretty, it is ugly, it is admirable, and it is sometimes what you would rather have already outgrown. It is unblinking self-ish examination of how your character presents now. Not how others would have you be, but how you are in this moment.

• Step three is to look, with total candor, at your practically limitless potential.

This third step is hard, because in many cultural models we are asked to feel limited. I am going to argue that you are not. Is there a question that you can ask for which you cannot find the answer? The accurate reply is that there is no such question. The implication? Your growth potential is practically limitless. In terms of your career as a change practitioner or an executive, you are, for all intents and purposes, looking at limitless growth potential. This limitlessness is the essence of our character. Step three is to look at yourself as without limits.

Your nature is to grow. That is limitless. It is the point from which we each initiate every effort.

When you look at your present state, and then your character, as practically infinite growth potential, you have the option to run away or to try and close some of that gap in potential. An oak tree automatically grows toward potential. So do we. When we have the desire to improve, we will grow toward what we see in step three.

Is it scary? It can be. What is in it for us? First, satisfaction. Second, fun. Third, success. And best of all, more growth.

Presentation is measured by what you have done, character by what you can do. Bring them both to every interaction. Be selfish and self-ish, work on your character before you talk to your clients. Work on it constantly, and make more oak happen. That is you growing.

Why should you do this? The overriding principle is easy: Don’t put off until tomorrow what you can enjoy doing twice today. Focus on your own self-ish growth, fun, and satisfaction. Your client will benefit, and you will be on a road to mastery.

For several of the best ideas here, I am beholden, not only to Daryl, but to Bruce Smith and William W. Walter as well. They have my gratitude.

You can learn more about Peter and his work from his website, www.meyergrp.com. Peter invites your questions and comments. His email is peter@meyergrp.com.
Chapter 5—A Conversation About Character and Presence

“Faced with crisis, the man of character falls back upon himself.” —Charles DeGaulle
I was honored to host a conversation recently with Mel Toomey, Brent Robertson, Wendy Appel, and Al Bhatt about their reactions to chapters 1 and 2. Given that each is a seasoned change practitioner (you can read their bios below), I was sure the exchange would be intriguing and thought provoking, and that proved to be the case. I was also confident the dialogue would be compelling because these are colleagues and friends, so I’m used to the kind of lively discussions that ensue whenever there is an excuse for us to converge around a topic of mutual interest. The five of us have a common frame of reference in that we are all associates at the Center for Leadership Studies (CLS)\(^5\).

During the conversation, you’ll hear about “safety” issues related to change practitioners bringing forth their authenticity. What contributes to our “awakeness” or mindfulness as we practice our craft? What part does curiosity play? Do we genuinely care about clients as human beings going through change-related struggle? Is that part of the character and presence relationship? And what about compassion? Is that different from curiosity or a caring attitude?

I hope you find the exchange both enjoyable and informative.

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\(^5\) The Center for Leadership Studies (CLS) is in service to organizations seeking new levels of effectiveness & impact through transformational endeavors. By way of its offerings, CLS provides leaders and change agents with the means to realize their aspiration’s full potential to make a real and lasting difference in the world.

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Mel Toomey

Mel’s work centers on the development of people who are preparing to engage in breakthrough levels of leadership on an organizational scale—people who will lead change from the view that it is a condition to be mastered, not a problem to be solved. These leaders are committed to building “change ready” organizations that can transform their relationship to change.

Holding an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters for his contributions to establishing leadership as a profession, Mel is an educator, executive advisor, and organizational consultant. He founded the Center for Leadership Studies and Generative Leadership Group. He is the principal designer for one of the first Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership programs ever offered at the university level. Mel serves as Scholar in Residence at the Graduate Institute in Bethany, Connecticut, and teaches at the University of Arkansas.
Brent Robertson

Leaders who work with Brent begin to see their organization’s future as a network of relationships...those relationships that exist, those that will come to be, and those that are needed to realize the future. His talents help leaders see the future as possibility, and as something relevant and achievable. His work points to what needs to change, what needs re-calibration, and how to manifest those relationships. Brent works with leaders to identify the registers for accomplishment that mark the progress to ensure a future that is sustainable by the organization itself.

Brent has helped organizations find their unique voice and expression for two decades. He is a co-founder of Fathom, an internationally recognized transformational branding firm. His work clarifies purpose for organizations that experience remarkable growth. Degreed in design and sculpture, he lectures on design thinking and organizational legacy.

Wendy Appel

Wendy works at the intersection of individual and organizational change. She’s lived in three countries, holds a master’s degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology, and she’s masterful at meeting cross-cultural challenges, evidenced by her international work. She is uniquely qualified to work with transformation and change at a global scale and offers a depth and breadth of experience that forwards understanding of cross-cultural change.

Wendy is particularly astute at working with the dynamics of individual and team behavior. She is a gifted participating-observer—one who travels with you on your journey while providing valuable insight—someone who understands leadership from both the inside (the individual experience) and the outside (how one is seen in the world). She is also known for her ability to quickly build trust with individuals and teams, thus accelerating their development.

Descriptive titles for her work include coach for leaders and teams, consultant, thought partner, facilitator and author. When you work with Wendy, you get the wisdom born of her years of experience as a leader in business operations (product development), as an internal consultant and external advisor.

Among her many accomplishments, Wendy has written a five-star rated book for leaders and teams. InsideOut Enneagram: The Game-Changing Guide for Leaders, takes
complex theories of personality and behavior and puts them into action in ways that open and accelerate access to effective leadership and team interactions. *InsideOut* is practical, reliable, and immediately applicable. This is a book you’ll keep within arm’s reach.

**Alpesh M. Bhatt**

Al is a walking provocation. His observations make you uncomfortable…but you want to hear more. He disrupts what you thought was “real”…and invites you to create a new reality. He hears who you are…and calls forward who you could be.

Al works as a deep and trusted advisor to senior executives as they navigate the paradoxes of running a business in the 21st century. From the formulation of business and marketplace strategies to the work of organizational development to the exploration of one’s own potential, Al provides leaders with the frameworks, tools, and provocations that fundamentally reframe their understanding of their world and open up new avenues of growth and value creation.

Al has led businesses—including turn-around situations—as an internal manager. He has also been an external advisor to senior executives in Fortune 100 companies as well as privately held businesses and entrepreneurial start-ups in the US, Europe, and Asia. He holds a master’s degree in organizational psychology and is on the faculty of the Graduate Psychology department at UNH. He is a regular public speaker, having delivered over 150 speeches at national conferences and private association events. Al has also published a small book, *The Triple-Soy Decaf-Latte Era,* that has been called a “mini-MBA for the 21st Century.” He hopes to write bigger things in the future.

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