

THE “ART” OF EXECUTIVE COACHING AT THE TOP: USING CLIENTS’ SELF- IMAGERY AS A TOOL FOR HIGH IMPACT

Karol M. Wasylyshyn

Leadership Development Forum, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States

The “art” of coaching at the top is considered metaphorically and discussed in this article as a co-creation between client and coach. This co-creation is catalyzed by the client’s self-imagery—explicit and highly visual imagery—of how they see themselves as leaders at the beginning, midway, and at the end of coaching. The evocation of this self-imagery is a foundational act at the outset of a coaching engagement and is accomplished by the coach’s use of a specific technique, the visual leadership metaphor (VLM). With the use of this technique, client and coach get rapidly aligned in the identification of client-centered thematic material that not only informs the course of the coaching but also intensifies the quality of their connection and ensures traction toward achieving the client’s growth objective as a leader. Based on the author’s analysis of 180 VLMs, eight overarching coaching themes are identified. These eight themes and a description of the specific coaching tools used are also provided. Important research questions are raised, and practitioners may find value in considering this conceptualization of co-creation; in doing so, they may evolve their own art in the coaching of top business leaders.

What’s It Mean? Implications for Consulting Psychology

Karol M. Wasylyshyn is a hybrid professional having integrated her first career as a journalist at the McGraw-Hill Publishing Company with her training in clinical psychology. As a consulting psychologist, she is among pioneers of coaching senior business leaders in global organizations and long-term engagements with them is distinguished by her conceptualization of the trusted leadership advisor (TLA) role.

Keywords: coaching at the top, clients’ self-imagery, coaching techniques and tools

Karol M. Wasylyshyn  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4978-9052>

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karol M. Wasylyshyn, Leadership Development Forum, 325 Chestnut Street, Suite 205, Philadelphia, PA 19106, United States. Email: kmw@wasylyshyn.com

Making your unknown known is the important thing.—Georgia O’Keeffe

During a conversation that I had with my gifted colleague Randy White, he said of executive coaching with top business leaders, “We know the work at this level is more art than science, right?”¹ Having done this work for nearly 3 decades, I was quick to agree—and then pondered his comment for some days thereafter. Metaphorically—what is the art? How is it made? How does it endure? Who is the artist in this work? And there in the heart of that last question, in that self-provocation, in that renewed examination of my work, I saw what I believed to be the truth of its co-creation. I recognized that these co-creations were made more vibrant and lasting not merely from the palette of my psychological tools, executive coaching experience, and navigation of the work. No, they were animated significantly by the clients’ own “paints,” that is, their words of vulnerability, courage, trust, and commitment to evolving as leaders. Further, the images they “painted” of themselves as leaders lit the fire of our work—a fire that illuminated the pathways of our co-creations and added to the excitement of developmental possibility.

This article focuses exclusively on the use of client self-imagery as a tool for high-impact coaching with senior business leaders. These client self-images of themselves as leaders were elicited using a coaching tool the author developed: the visual leadership metaphor (VLM), which is described subsequently. The VLMs of 180 clients were analyzed by the author, and thematic material was identified; how this material influenced the course and techniques/tools used in coaching engagements is presented in the spirit of exploring the “art” of executive coaching at the top.²

Whereas imagery has been used in leader development initiatives (Palus & Horth, 2010), its use here was multifaceted. The imagery (a) was created by the clients, (b) set the course of the work, (c) served to track its progress, and (d) helped gauge its success in achieving the client’s expressed leadership objective. Surely this notion of client/coach co-creations echoes a sine qua non of effective coaching—the strong working alliance (Baron et al., 2011). However, the author offers it as a tool for accelerating and deepening the intimate and fully trusting quality of relationships practitioners can establish with senior business leaders. Further, although this article is focused on a specific coaching tool, it is important to note that these co-creations have been informed by a compendium of core practice principles and competencies the author believes are essential for coaching effectively at the top (Vandaveer et al., 2016).

Eliciting the VLM: The Client as Co-Creator


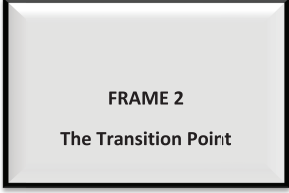

At the outset of these coaching engagements, the author employed the VLM technique by asking clients to describe themselves in highly visual language—language that represented how they saw themselves as leaders. This request was guided by the author drawing three frames (boxes) vertically on a page (see Figure 1) and asking the client to articulate how they saw themselves as leaders in Frame 1, the present; in Frame 2, the transition point midway in the coaching; and then in Frame 3, the future state at which they hoped to arrive by the end of the coaching engagement.³ After that

¹ Dr. Randall P. White is an American Psychological Association (APA) fellow, a member of the APA board of directors, and former president of APA Division 13, Consulting Psychology. He is also co-head of leadership in the eMBA at HEC in Paris.

² Of these 180 VLMs, 132 were men and 48 were women. Because the author’s client base is centered on top executive leaders, this gender difference reflects the current lack of parity in these roles. All 180 clients held responsibilities at the company-officer level (vice president, senior vice president, and C-level roles). They ranged in age from early 40s to late 50s. Further, the author’s analysis of these VLMs was an anecdotal review aligned with what the clients and their bosses and partners from human resources (HR) thought about the clients’ development foci in the coaching.

³ Although this article focuses exclusively on the use of the VLM as a key data point in this insight-oriented coaching model, a battery of psychometrics, a life history from birth, and organization feedback were also included in the work.

Figure 1
Eliciting Clients’ Leader Self-Imagery: The Visual Leadership Metaphor (VLM)

 <p style="text-align: center;">FRAME 1 The Present</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u><i>Client leader self-imagery at the outset of coaching</i></u></p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">FRAME 2 The Transition Point</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u><i>Client leader self-imagery midway in the coaching</i></u></p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">FRAME 3 The Future</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u><i>Client leader self-imagery at the end of coaching</i></u></p>

meeting, the client’s images were given to an artist who drew the tryptic of client leader self-imagery horizontally on a page and placed the client’s words for each of the three leadership states (present, transition, and future) on the back of the VLM.⁴ At the next meeting, a laminated copy of the drawn VLM was given to each client, and the author kept one in the client’s file as a tool for gauging progress. Each client was asked to keep their VLM where they would see it often, that is, to use it as a reminder of their coaching objective. Frequently during an engagement, the coach would place the VLM on the meeting table and ask the client, “What frame do you think you’re in now?” The client’s answer to that question became key fodder for the coaching meeting, and it facilitated an assessment of coaching progress being made—or not.⁵

These engagements unfolded over a minimum of 12 months (monthly 1.5-hr “live” meetings, plus email, Zoom, and phone interaction), with the expectation that by the end of the year the client would see himself or herself in Frame 3 of their VLM. Clients who requested continued coaching typically received a new VLM in which Frame 3 from their initial VLM became Frame 1 in the second. This was because they had achieved their initial coaching objective. They provided new leader

⁴ All VLMs were drawn by Joseph Williams, a gifted freelance artist based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

⁵ Because the author was also in frequent contact with a client’s boss and HR partner, this VLM question also served as a reality test of the client’s objectivity about progress being made in the coaching.

self-imagery for Frames 2 and 3 of their second VLM. This new leader self-imagery represented their next block of aspired leadership growth. Further, at this point, the author transitioned from executive coach into the role of trusted leadership advisor, with emphasis on (a) internalizing and leveraging gains made in the initial year of coaching; (b) providing more directive consultation regarding the client's leadership impact, including relationships with key stakeholders (e.g., CEO's leadership-team members, peers, and board members); and (c) increasing client impact (Wasylyshyn, 2015).

Example of Client Leader Self-Imagery: Its Role in an Executive's Leadership Development

The potency of using client leader self-imagery to accelerate their insight and to influence sustained effects for them is illustrated below. The author received the communication cited below many years after working with an executive who had been a business-unit president in a global manufacturing company. He had participated in a company-sponsored leadership development initiative sponsored by the CEO. This initiative ran for nearly 20 years and placed equal emphasis on a set of leadership competencies and essential leader behaviors (Wasylyshyn & Gupta, 2020).

The Client's Visual Leadership Metaphor (VLM)



What became evident through our sessions was that I was very respected for my high emotional intelligence and business acumen but I was often in the weeds and not decisive enough on the key personnel decisions that deep down I knew I had to make. I was burdened by my own hesitancy to make these changes at the top of my team. With your help, I saw myself going from (1) charging in on a white horse and being more involved than I should have been, to (2) becoming more balanced in my leadership like more of a Samurai warrior acting decisively, to (3) becoming an orchestra conductor not burdened by minutiae, hearing the people, and producing beautiful music in a truly reciprocal relationship with the right people playing the right instruments in the orchestra. I had made the difficult people decisions. This was profound and stayed with me. I learned that a great leader must and can be both tough on talent and empathic, too.

Primary Themes From Client Leader Self-Imagery and Coaching Techniques and Tools

Eight—somewhat interrelated—themes (see Table 1) emerged from the analysis of 180 VLMs. More specifically, these themes represent a coalescence of what the clients stated as their development goals, the congruence of clients' statements about their development with the views of their bosses and HR partners (as expressed in a coaching agenda-setting meeting facilitated by the coach at the outset of the coaching engagement), and relevant thematic material from clients' life histories and psychometric assessments. Because these themes are likely familiar to executive coaches

Table 1
Eight Visual Leadership Metaphor (VLM) Themes

Theme	Number of clients working on theme
1. Setting direction/driving business growth	22
2. Developing others	25
3. Transitioning into a bigger leadership role	21
4. Building confidence	29
5. Evolving from tactical to strategic influence	17
6. Becoming a more inspirational/motivational leader	15
7. Team-based leadership	23
8. Self-focused career striving	28

working with top business leaders, the greater value of this work can be found in the techniques/tools used to address these themes. From an overarching perspective, the use of the VLM technique is emphasized as an accelerant for intensifying the client/coach connection, as well as for ensuring traction and success in these coaching engagements. In varying degrees, these coaching engagements were rivetted on the behavioral “how” dimension of leadership (Wasylyshyn, 2008). These clients did not need to get any smarter—they would not have been in their current roles had there been any reservations about their cognitive capabilities, relevant experience, or industry knowledge. As one former CEO—who had to work on his impatience and perfectionism—once said to the author, “People think these roles are glamorous, but they’re not glamorous. They’re about people coming and dropping one turd after another outside my door, and your job is to help me not step in it” (Pierre Brondeau, personal communication, January 11, 2014).

Often, the art of coaching these leaders is a highly nuanced and courageous holding up of the proverbial mirror by the coach helping clients face the adverse effects of their frustrations in order to ensure that they see what they need to see and adjust their behavior accordingly. Frequently, the coach is the only one who will give the C-level leader candid feedback. To illustrate this, Saporito (1996) wrote the following:

The fact of the matter is, the higher an individual moves in an organization, the less feedback he or she is likely to receive. Senior executives tend to get isolated from real-time, unvarnished feedback about the impact of their individual leadership.

The eight coaching themes and the tools/techniques used in the coaching of leaders working on these themes can be seen in Table 2. Rather than an exhaustive discussion of this material, what is provided here is a description of the themes, an example of a VLM that illustrates each theme, and a summary of the specific techniques/tools used to support clients’ progress. In this context, *progress* refers to clients moving from Frame 1 to Frame 3 of their VLMs. Although some of these techniques/tools will be familiar to experienced executive coaches, there are others that will not be because they evolved through the author’s decades of practice. Like other senior practitioners, she often conceived them spontaneously in efforts to facilitate coaching progress. In other words, some of these techniques/tools are unabashedly “homespun stuff” that may or may not hold up to the rigor of empirical research. However, they have nevertheless proved helpful in the author’s work, that is, metaphorically they are part of her art in coaching at the top. They are offered here in the spirit of transparency and professional collaboration. It is hoped that they may spark new practice considerations for other executive coaches who are working at the top or who aspire to do so.⁶

⁶ Further empirical scrutiny of practitioner techniques and tools when working with senior business leaders would contribute to the evolution of executive coaching as a significant and enduring subspecialty within consulting psychology. In the meantime, the author encourages less experienced professionals and grad students to use these techniques and tools, and she remains available to provide any necessary guidance.

Table 2
Eight Coaching Themes and Techniques/Tools Used

Theme	Coaching techniques and tools
1. Setting direction/driving business growth	Coach interaction with client's boss and HR partner The five leadership boxes Perspective-making model
2. Developing others	Truth-telling The attunement dimension of emotional intelligence Visibility of high-potential employees Creating out-of-the box development opportunities
3. Transitioning into bigger roles	States of presence Self-transcendence Discernment about time Collaboration Self-compassion
4. Building confidence	The "psychological paychecks" Reframing the word <i>fear</i> Locus of control The self-narrative
5. Evolving from tactical to strategic influence	Emphasis on prioritization The <i>Bloomberg Business</i> cover-story exercise Being mentored by strategic executive External learning experiences
6. Becoming an inspirational/motivational leader	Use of psychometrics Emulation of role models The power of vulnerability The "3 Rs"
7. Team-based leadership	Focus on work–family integration
8. Self-focused career striving	Self-transcendence Two CEO succession factors

Note. HR = human resources; CEO = chief executive officer; the word *fear* is an acronym for "false evidence appearing real"; "3 Rs" = the right people in the right roles, with the leader committed to maintaining the right culture.

Theme 1: Setting Direction/Driving Business Growth

The VLM of a CEO, Global Manufacturing Company



FRAME 1

It's 2017 and we've achieved the transformation plan. The company is rock solid now and we are ready to set the next plan.

We are poised to do a lot of things so the question now will be: what do you want to become?



FRAME 2

I've continued to drive the success of the company by ensuring execution on our three-year plan. The culture is cemented and completely reflects our five values: (1) customer centricity, (2) refreshing simplicity, (3) collective entrepreneurship, (4) safety obsession, and (5) unshakeable integrity.



FRAME 3

It's around 2020 or 2021 and I've turned over the company to a person who's ready to take it to its next place—a different place.

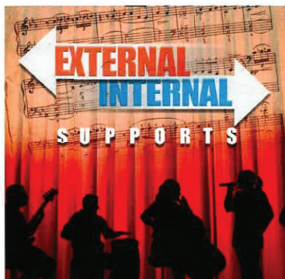
The leader self-imagery of clients representing this VLM theme was focused on their setting clear direction and objectives that they believed would accelerate business growth. These clients were either already C-level leaders or were considered high-potential leaders on the verge of being promoted into C-level roles. Their primary coaching foci involved (a) the need to stay focused on impending business challenges versus being mired in quarter-by-quarter business pressures and (b) conveying a steady and future picture of business prospects to the people they were leading.

Three tools proved to be especially helpful for clients representing this theme:

- Coach interaction with boss and HR partner: The coach maintained ongoing contact with the client’s boss and HR partner to assess the extent to which the client identified and practiced ways to increase time spent on big-picture issues versus short-term pressures.⁷
- The five leadership boxes: The coach emphasized the need for the client’s simultaneous focus on five factors: strategy, structure, people, results, and rewards. This became a useful tool for the client’s frequent mental review.
- Perspective-making model (see the Figure A1 in Appendix): This was used to reinforce the client’s need to (a) provide key stakeholders in the organization with timely truth-telling about any problematic issues, (b) highlight aspects of the organization that boded well for current and future success, and (c) clarify, anchor, and build an inspirational bridge into the future, that is, to ensure alignment and shared optimism for achieving the client’s vision and strategic objectives intended to accelerate business growth.

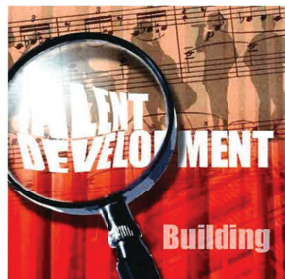
Theme 2: Developing Others

The VLM of a Business Unit President, Global Real Estate Company



FRAME 1

I’m in band-practice mode—it’s a lot of discovery of things I didn’t realize. I’m discovering the talents of others as we develop what will be a blend of external and internal supports.



FRAME 2

A real focus on talent development now—it’s going to take all the things I’m good at but also my needing to speak out and building trusting and candid relationships in the development of people.



FRAME 3

I’m more of an orchestra conductor now who’s precise, on-time, multi-faceted, and evoking a certain positive feeling from the audience.

These leaders needed to focus on the development of others in their organizations. Company bench strength was often an issue—especially for clients in companies without robust talent-review and development processes. Further, some of these clients were specifically focused on their own succession and the readiness of key individuals in the company to meet greater responsibilities.⁸

Key tools in the work with these clients were as follows:

⁷ The author was especially mindful of the need to maintain appropriate boundaries of confidentiality during these conversations (Blanton & Waslyshyn, 2018).

⁸ These clients were not employed in companies that had specific succession-planning processes in place.

- Truth-telling: Clients were helped to frame and rehearse the courageous and constructive conversations that needed to be had with individuals who were not as realistic as they needed to be about their career potential.
- The attunement dimension of emotional intelligence: Clients were urged to spend sufficient one-on-one time with direct reports to form an accurate understanding of their aspirations and development needs, and then to commit the influence and resources that ensured their development including costly investments in external leadership learning experiences.
- Promoting visibility of high-potential employees: Clients were encouraged to give high-potential employees greater visibility with key stakeholders (including, as appropriate, board members and investors).
- Supporting/creating out-of-the-box development opportunities: Clients were urged to endorse development experiences for talented direct reports such as line-to-function leadership, function-to-line rotations, community-board leadership roles, and assignments to special task forces.

Theme 3: Transitioning into Bigger Leadership Role

The VLM of a Chief Operating Officer, National Publishing Company



FRAME 1

I see myself as a steadfast and constant leader like a freight train running on time.



FRAME 2

I'm more of a passenger train now. I'm growing in this role and becoming a more inclusive and empathetic manager who's resonating well with others.



FRAME 3

I've wedded my steadfast, constant self with being empathetic and also self-actualizing.

I've become the conductor of the train.

In commenting on the CEO (chief executive officer) and other C-level roles, Raj Gupta, the former chairman and CEO of Rohm and Haas Company, observed:

No one is ever fully ready for these C-level jobs. It takes time to settle in, and as talented as these people are, they need support, especially in terms of their behavior and how to lead in these big jobs. (Personal communication, June 10, 2006)

The following tools proved especially useful in these engagements:

- States of presence: a persistent focus on meeting the client where the client needed to be met. This involved the coach's (a) vigilance regarding the client's state of presence in coaching meetings and (b) the ability to make nimble coaching adjustments among differing states of presence—even in the course of the same meeting (Wasylyshyn, 2015).
 - Crucible state: Whenever a client arrived in a state of distress given the intensity of business challenges. The coach built a container-for-two strong enough to settle into an objective

exploration of the issues, to clarify/integrate the most relevant factors, and to guide the client into a mood of sound problem-solving.

- Sanctuary state: When clients arrived in an uncomfortable state of vulnerability feeling frustrated, misunderstood, unappreciated, or unfairly burdened with blame for lagging business results. With the coach as an empathic and nonjudgmental listener, the client could openly express such feelings and experience the psychologically liberating and energizing effects of being vulnerable.
- Personal harmony state: When clients began to share their emerging and somewhat unsteady thoughts of retirement. The coach helped them (a) to ground their reflections in a review of their readiness for retirement and (b) to craft a plan for discussions with their boss or HR partner about issues to include timing and succession.
- Self-transcendence: The coach conveyed the importance of Maslow’s growth state beyond his more well-known articulation of self-actualization: self-transcendence (Venter, 2012). The coaching mantra for the client then became “stay focused on what’s in the best interest of the organization” versus undue anxiety about their performance in the new role.
- Clients’ discernment about time: The key coaching breakthrough is getting clients to question themselves—Does this really require *my* time and if not, to whom can I best delegate it? How can I better use delegation as a development resource for others?
- Collaboration: The more judgmental clients benefited from a serious reframe away from their transactional orientation to others (What have you done for me lately?) to one that was more interpersonal and empathic (How can I be more helpful given the pressures you’re facing?).
- Self-compassion: This was often taught to clients as a tool for both relieving high levels of personal stress and for fostering their resilience. In the presence of this learning, clients recognized that a significant benefit of their being self-compassionate had certain cascading effects—especially in terms of their fostering a more compassionate workplace culture (Wasylyshyn & Masterpasqua, 2018). Self-compassion as a tool seemed to have particular impact for leaders trying to keep remote-working employees motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is speculation at this juncture but could warrant research.

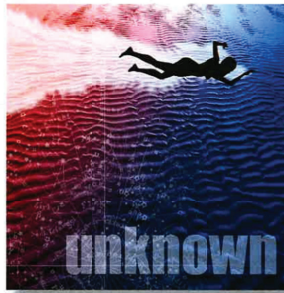
Theme 4: Building Confidence

The VLM of an R&D Vice President, Global Pharmaceutical Company



FRAME 1

I’m very comfortable in the role I’m in and with the leadership team I’m working with now. I’m concerned that the next phase of my career here would have me swimming with sharks. I can’t be a shark and I don’t want to go from a highly collaborative leadership team to one where most people are operating like sharks.



FRAME 2

This is the unknown—but I could imagine myself being an effective leader here without being a shark. That would be because the tides have turned, and you don’t have to be a shark in these waters now to be seen as credible and to make a contribution.



FRAME 3

I’ve gone into the unknown and I’m not sorry that I did because it’s OK to speak your mind, to be wrong, and I don’t have to become something I’m not to be effective in these waters. I’m a credible member of this team—but I’m not a shark. In these waters, we’re all swimming together and the shark teeth are gone.

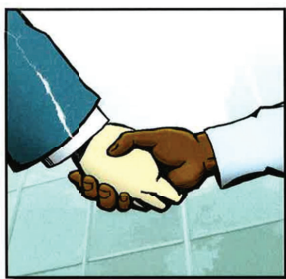
For some, the arrival at an aspired career pinnacle aroused an unexpected level of anxiety or confidence dip that needed to be normalized and understood given the stretch demands of the new role.

Tools that proved helpful with these clients included:

- Psychological paychecks: The coach conveyed to these clients the affirming observations made of them by bosses and other key organization stakeholders. The objective was to minimize the client's negative self-chatter (Kross, 2021).
- Reframing the word *fear* as an acronym for false evidence appearing real: This reframing often helped clients recognize that issues such as their harsh self-criticism, perfectionism, or inability to read organization psychodynamics accurately induced a level of stress that was unwarranted, that is, not supported given the positive perceptions of their performance by others in the organization.
- Locus of control: By teaching this psychological concept (Rotter, 1966)—including the advantage of internal versus external locus of control—the coach was able to ameliorate clients' tendencies to doubt themselves as well as their hypervigilance about factors external to them (e.g. boss approval)—especially as they settled into new roles. Clients were encouraged to create their “litany of strengths” that included both leadership competencies (e.g., strategic thinking, analytical problem-solving, innovation management, driving results, and customer focus) and leadership behavioral assets including dimensions of emotional intelligence (e.g., empathic resonance with others, self-awareness, self-management, and relationship-building; Goleman et al., 2002).
- The self-narrative: The coach encouraged (“On a deeper level, tell me what you say to yourself about yourself”) the client to verbalize their story-of-themselves, that is, the unspoken self-narrative carried by many as a kind of psychological albatross. Clients were helped to see how this deeply embedded self-narrative—when negative—eroded both their confidence and ability to fully leverage their talents (Kross, 2021). For example, the founder of a U.S. regional restaurant chain held the self-narrative, “I’m just an uneducated, blue-collar kid from the sticks.” Using a cognitive-behavioral approach, the coach helped him pierce this self-narrative; the client’s confidence soared, he drove the expansion of his business, and even came to perceive his humble roots as a plus.

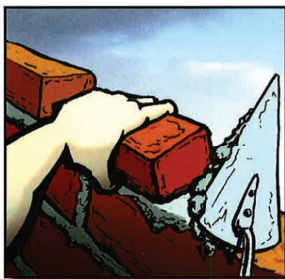
Theme 5: Evolving From Tactical to Strategic Influence

The VLM of a Senior Vice President, Global Manufacturing Company



FRAME 1

I’m a **DOER**—I’m meeting customers, R&D managers, functional leaders and dealing with a lot of day-to-day problems in the workplace.



FRAME 2

I’m a **BUILDER**—I’m building the organization. In addition to being a deal-maker on the outside, I’m recruiting top talent for the inside.



FRAME 3

I’m a **SENIOR CORPORATE EXECUTIVE**—This is being very savvy about the business and the organization. I’m acting in more of a *big picture* kind of way by providing strategic direction. I’m having real impact on the future of the company.

The clients representing this theme had, for the most part, been successful largely based on their ability to get things done. Their companies valued and rewarded them for this. They valued themselves for it and identified strongly with how they could drive initiatives to completion given their reflexive operations-oriented mentality. Then later in a career, as one client said:

Things can kind of hit the wall. Last year, I got a special award for running a major project that’s going to save the company a shitload of money. I figured this would get me a job as a business-unit president but now they’re saying I need to show more strategic thinking before that can happen.

In the author’s experience, strategic thinking is one of those leadership competencies that clients may possess but have yet to demonstrate this capability. However, for those who really do not possess this competency or for whom this competency is limited in comparison to other strengths, coaching may not yield much progress.⁹

With this as a caveat, here are coaching tools that proved helpful to those clients who had the “right stuff” but needed help in releasing it.

- **Emphasis on prioritization:** For many clients, their preoccupation with the day-to-day and pride in getting things done overwhelmed their making the time to step back, to quiet the cacophony within, and to dedicate time—meaningful time—to challenge themselves with a key question like *what could we do with this company?*
- **The *Bloomberg Business* cover-story exercise:** Clients were asked to write a short albeit compelling story about their company—and how they were/or could be key in accelerating its strategic growth.
- **Mentoring:** Clients were urged to establish short-term mentoring relationships with senior executives known in the company for their strategic-thinking capability.
- **External learning:** Clients were encouraged to participate in specific external learning experiences (e.g., Michael Porter’s strategy seminar at Harvard, Wharton Advanced Management Program, executive-education seminars at other business schools) that would ignite strategic-thinking capability, as well as expand their external networks.

Theme 6: Becoming a More Inspirational/Motivational Leader

The VLM of a Chief Strategy Officer, Global Chemistry Company



FRAME 1

A painter painting imagery, powerful motivating imagery for a team, that is, a race car going into a turn. This imagery engages and inspires people and has them thinking about possibilities for the business—possibilities they’ve not imagined before.



FRAME 2

A trainer/coach who’s getting the team to not only envision a positive future but to “practice” what it feels like to take the appropriate actions and win and gain the energy/focus within themselves to drive business success as intuitively as an athlete does. it’s like breathing!



FRAME 3

A dragon boat with 16 people pulling simultaneously on the oars in sync with the front two rowers as “pace leaders” with another person steering from the back. This team is really working together as one—pulling hard when needed, laying back a bit when needed, following the leadership within their own ranks with the “steering” being provided by the leader. There is this beautiful motion of the boat cutting through the water—like a winning team

⁹ The work of Lombardo and Eichinger (2001), *The Leadership Machine*, could be a helpful resource.

It's difficult to generalize about the clients who were representative of this theme; however, it is accurate to say they all needed to be something other—to bring more of themselves to the context in which they were leading. In the words of one CEO successor candidate:

I've always been a very compartmentalized person—few people at work have ever really known the real me. They know what I can do, and they trust my business judgment but no, they do not really know me. There's more I could show so I can motivate and inspire others, but I've never had to do that—until now, I guess.

He was right: Given the interpersonal demands of global-business dynamics of the 21st century, there's an expectation that leaders will connect in ways that are instantaneous, transparent, and technology-based (e.g., text and instant messaging). There's also a premium placed on leaders who favor—and who are authentically good at—working closely in teams and socializing, too.

Tools that proved helpful to these clients included:

- A battery of psychometrics: Integrating findings from the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Life Styles Inventory, NEO Personality Inventory-Revised, and instruments assessing emotional intelligence was useful in highlighting specific interpersonal aspects of clients' leadership profiles. Further, these tools often provided clients with insights they leveraged for greater leadership impact. For example, there was the rapid-fire speaking extrovert who recognized the need for and value of his slowing down long enough to take a room's temperature, gather others' thoughts, and influence collective excitement about a new business plan.
- Emulation/use of role models: Clients were asked to focus on the behavior of both real-time inspirational/motivational role models they'd experienced throughout their careers, as well as historical or fictional characters that they admired as leaders. A key coaching question became, "What would your version of that role model look like?"
- The power of vulnerability: Often unpacking clients' fears of "not knowing" or "being wrong" liberated their willingness to be spontaneous, express ideas not fully baked, and open themselves to the input of others.

Theme 7: Team-Based Leadership

The VLM of a Corporate Human Resources Officer, Global Healthcare Organization



FRAME 1

I am in the middle of my team—I envision *Survivor* images like for the TV show, *Lost*.

Metaphorically, we have boxes we must open to be successful; these boxes hold the more emotional, right-brain part of our capabilities. This is especially true for me as the leader of the team. These boxes are still locked for all of us.



FRAME 2

We are opening the boxes now and as a result, we have grown in the quality and impact of our engagement with one another, and with those others in the organization whom we support.



FRAME 3

Ultimately, we get through this journey and we know that no matter what, we've seen it all and have been successful despite all the challenges of this journey. We are filled with an incredible sense of confidence, and we feel great stamina and energy for any new challenges ahead.

One of the clients dealing with this theme in his coaching commented to the author:

It was not until I realized that a team could really come up with something better than I could myself that I started to think about the power of teams—and how important it is to get your leadership team right.

His comment was emblematic of clients and representative of the theme of team-based leadership.

The following two tools proved particularly helpful in their coaching progress:

- The “3 Rs,” which refers to the client ensuring that there are the *right* people in the *right* roles and that the leader is committed to maintaining the *right* culture in which talented people can not only get their jobs done but also thrive in their positions. Clients often struggled with their leadership-team compositions—old ties, loyalty, concerns about team members’ future employability—a host of reasons often interfered with their making the tough people decisions to ensure the “3 Rs.” By using a two-factor model—results and behavior—clients were asked to place the initials of each team member in the appropriate quadrant (see Figure 2). This tool helped clients make team-member decisions needed to ensure optimal team performance. These actions included more intentional focus on the aspirations of their top performers, seeking more clarity regarding why potential good performers were falling short of expectations, giving candid feedback to people who were delivering results but were sabotaging a positive team dynamic, and making tough decisions to separate or reassign poor performers into roles where they could be successful.
- Work–family integration: Clients were encouraged to be proactive and empathic leaders who influenced policies and practices that promoted both employee contentment with the company and their increased ability to manage the tension between work and family priorities. The issue of leadership flexibility was especially huge in fostering post-COVID hybrid models of working.

Figure 2
Results/Behavior Grid

<p>Top Performers</p> <p>+ R + B</p>	<p>Potential Top Performers</p> <p>- R + B</p>
<p>Saboteurs</p> <p>+ R - B</p>	<p>Poor Performers</p> <p>- R - B</p>

Note. Adapted from a 2 × 2 matrix used at Eli Lilly and GE with the factors results and values. R = delivers results; B = good behavior “fit” on the team.

Theme 8: Self-Focused Career Striving

The VLM of a Chief Business Development Officer, Global Medical Devices Company



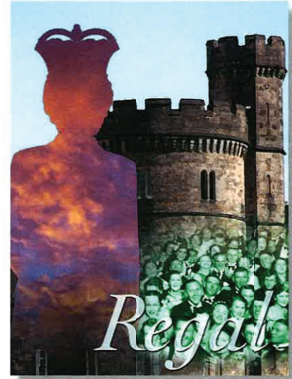
FRAME 1

I'm a very loyal and strong warrior with multiple scars on my back and I'm navigating in a jungle where there are many paths in front of me. There are also snakes in the trees and spiders too, but I have weapons that I can use to fight them.



FRAME 2

I've chosen the right path that has led me to a peaceful place—a beautiful field of grass and there are horses there, too. There's nothing coming at me so I can contemplate things, relax and just enjoy the beauty of the stream and the rest of the landscape around me.



FRAME 3

I am a woman king of the castle. It's one of those big Irish castles and the workers are all happy. I'm standing there looking regal and I'm not being questioned or fought. I've conquered what I needed to conquer.

These clients were what Maccoby (2000) described as “productive narcissists:” brilliant, driven, single-minded leaders who were as focused on achieving their next career role as they were on the results they believed should get them there. In short, their identities were significantly dependent on achieving specific career milestones.¹⁰

The following two tools proved helpful with these clients:

- The leadership concept of self-transcendence: The coach used this level in Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs (as indicated earlier in this article) to support clients staying focused on advancing their organization's business objectives versus the overt pursuit of just their specific career objectives (Venter, 2012).
- Two CEO succession factors: CEO succession clients were reminded of and coached to address the critical succession factors of (a) readiness to meet major business imperatives at the time of the succession and (b) the board's comfort level with them. Regarding the readiness factor, clients were urged to clarify their thinking and to convey their strategic business perspectives in both informal and formal (board presentation) contexts. And in terms of the board-member comfort factor, clients were encouraged to pursue opportunities to spend one-to-one time with board members and to make the most of dinners or other social events when board members were present. These clients were also encouraged to read a superb book by Saporito and Winum (2012) on the topic of CEO succession.

¹⁰ At the time of this writing, only four of the author's C-level clients were facing this issue. Further, the author prefers the term *work-family integration* to the well-established semantic of *work-family balance*. For the most part, top business leaders do not balance the spheres of work and family, many do not aspire to do so, and some can be openly critical of those who do hold this as a priority. It will be interesting—and perhaps even compelling—to see how post-COVID “reworking work” efforts influence this issue.

Discussion/Questions to Ponder

The art of executive coaching at the top continues to attract, challenge, and even fascinate senior practitioners equipped to meet the demands of this established but still-evolving subspecialty area within consulting psychology (Vandaveer et al., 2016). Nearly 15 year ago, Kilburg and Diedrich (2007) referred to executive coaching generally as “still more art than science” (p. 64). Are we any closer to understanding this art? Are we any clearer about what distinguishes our work with top business leaders? Can we point with certainty to the factors that make of senior executives avid clients who want to include the psychological expertise of a coach in their armamentaria of other essential disciplines to include finance, technology, and human resources? Maybe. In the meantime, these are questions that warrant further research.

This article has explored the art of coaching at the top through a metaphorical lens that posits the work of the client-coach relationship as a co-creation. In this co-creation, the client’s voice is amplified by their self-imagery of themselves as leaders, which is highly visual imagery evoked by the coach using a specific coaching technique: the VLM. The coach’s voice and navigation of the coaching work is informed by the client’s leader self-imagery. Further, the client’s VLM also serves as a tool throughout the coaching to maintain traction, gauge progress, and assess success of the coaching. Although Kilburg and Diedrich (2007) rightly emphasized the complexity of coaching at the top given the “psychodynamic tension between a client’s workplace and ego systems” (p. 24), exploring this tension is beyond the scope of this article.

Rather, the intention here has been to encourage practitioners to consider the use of clients’ visual leader self-imagery as a potentially powerful coaching resource. This resource reveals key thematic material early in a coaching engagement—thematic material that is used in a shared partnership, in a co-creation that pursues the client’s leadership growth objective(s) as the desired outcome.¹¹ Further, specific techniques/tools that were used in response to identified thematic material are also presented. Admittedly, many of these have been “homespun” by the author, and although they were central in achieving coaching objectives and helped foster an atmosphere of trust, intimacy, refuge, and objectivity, they await the rigor of empirical research. Finally, although others have used visual tools for leadership development (Palus & Horth, 2010), the VLM is created completely by the client and, as indicated above, serves as high-octane fuel in the power of the coaching engine.

As we consider the art of coaching and explore how engagements with top business leaders are co-created, numerous questions are raised, in addition to those mentioned in the preceding text. Most significantly, to what extent does VLM client imagery abet successful coaching outcomes? Further, even though these development themes have been repeated through decades of her coaching top business leaders and her tools/techniques have fostered successful coaching outcomes, can this work be replicated? Other questions include the coaching working alliance—specifically, is there a vitality released through these client self-images that really intensifies and differentiates the client-coach relationship from what’s already understood about this working alliance? Is there a ferocity and focus in these leader self-images that further inform the coach’s more nimble and effective actions in the coaching? And, if in fact, the use of client leader self-imagery intensifies the intimacy of client-coach relationships, what is the impact of this art in terms of clients’ sustaining outcomes and their commitment to continued learning?

Finally, the thematic material as revealed in the VLMs of these top business leaders reminds us that despite their positional power, leadership competencies, and career accomplishments, there is more for them to learn, especially in terms of the behavioral “how” dimension of their leadership. Clearly, given the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) reality of 21st century business dynamics, top business leaders come to value the steady, safe, and uncommon relationship

¹¹ Many senior practitioners working with top business executives are, in fact, making co-creations with their clients and surely their “art” involves a panoply of practice tools and theoretical orientations that differ from those of the author.

with executive coaches who integrate training in the behavioral sciences and business acumen. In the words of Ellen Kullman (personal communication, March 23, 2014), the former chairman and CEO of Dupont, “My global peers and I all agree that if we do not have a coach like you, someone we can really trust, we do not have all the resources we need to do these jobs.” At this writing, the world had begun to crawl out of the global COVID pandemic. The repercussions of remote working, the rise in mental-health issues, and the need for companies to identify their new ways of working will persist and thus exacerbate the pressure on top leaders. The best among them will flex and adapt because they understand that the business world’s “new normal” will not be—and cannot be—just a variation of the old normal.

Conclusion

The question of whether executive coaching with senior business leaders is more art than science will persist on a landscape of fertile debate and practitioner development—much as this question has been perpetuated in the field of psychotherapy. In the context of this article, the art of coaching at the top—how this art is made, how it endures, and who makes it—has been conceived as a *co-creation* between client and coach that in tone and depth differs from what is understood about the necessary working alliance in coaching relationships. This difference begins to emerge at the very outset of a coaching engagement when the coach uses the VLM technique to quickly unearth client thematic material that informs tools and techniques used throughout a coaching engagement. In short, client and coach become partnering artists in these co-creations, bringing their respective experiences and “paints” to the canvas of developmental possibility.

In view of the inexorable flux of life and leadership, eliciting the client’s leader self-imagery is presented as a foundational act in the coaching of senior business leaders. It represents one coach’s effort to take the client inward, to explore, to discover, to specify their objectives in the work, and to move together on the coaching canvas into what are often unexpected arenas of autonomous growth. This “art,” these co-creations, are intensified because the coach has chosen to raise the volume level of the client’s voice. Given this hearing, the coach provides the necessary clarity and support so that clients need not grope or stumble their way through the dark of relentless 21st century business dynamics. There is a reciprocal artistic sensibility between client and coach that transcends the boundaries of familiar expression—and intensifies the enduringness of this art—because the client’s unknown has been made more known. And so, too, for executive coaches who with each successive co-creation—with each stroke on a coaching canvas—evolve themselves, apply their “paints,” and deepen the trust and intimacy of this art by conveying to their clients perhaps the most compelling message of all: “I see you.”

References

- Baron, L., Morin, L., & Morin, D. (2011). Executive coaching: The effect of working alliance on the development of coachees’ self-efficacy. *Journal of Management Development*, 30(9), 847–864. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02621711111164330>
- Blanton, J. S., & Wasylshyn, K. M. (2018). Beyond the client/coach dyad in coaching senior business leaders. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 70(4), 339–350. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000117>
- Goleman, D., Boyatzis, R., & McKee, A. (2002). *Primal leadership: Realizing the power of emotional intelligence*. HBS Press.
- Kilburg, R. R., & Diedrich, R. C. (Eds.). (2007). *The wisdom of coaching: Essential papers in consulting psychology for a world of change*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/11570-000>
- Kross, E. (2021). *Chatter: The voice in our head, why it matters, and how to harness it*. Crown Publishing Group.
- Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (2001). *The leadership machine*. Lominger.
- Maccoby, M. (2000). Narcissistic leaders: The incredible pros, the inevitable cons. *Harvard Business Review* (pp. 69–77).
- Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. Harper and Row.
- Palus, C. J., & Horth, D. M. (2010). *Visual explorer facilitator’s guide*. The Center for Creative Leadership.

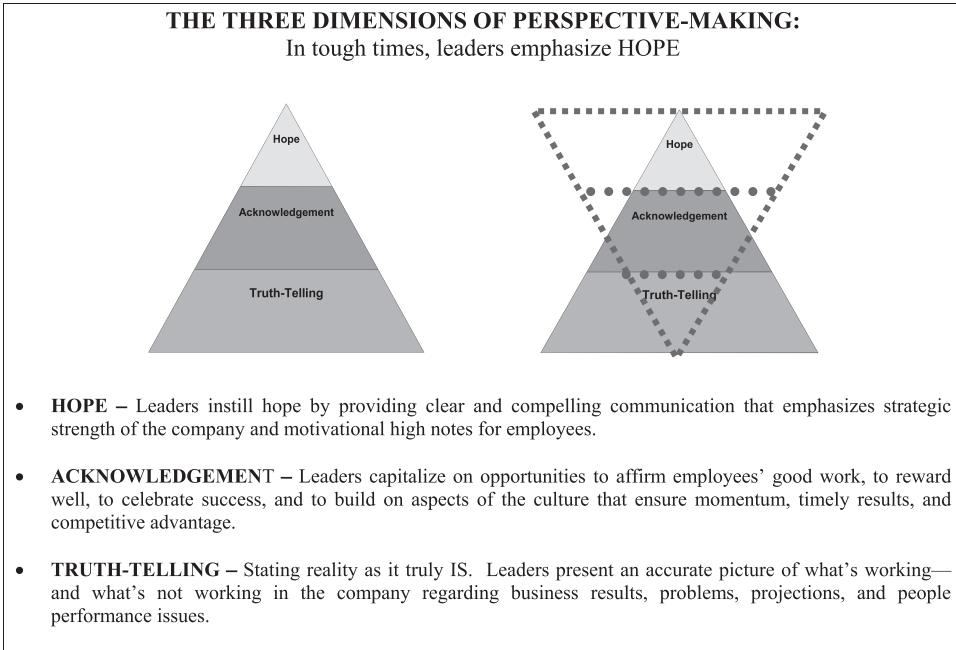
- Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs*, 80(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0092976>
- Saporito, T. J. (1996). Business-linked executive development: Coaching senior executives. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 48(2), 96–103. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1061-4087.48.2.96>
- Saporito, T. J., & Winum, P. (2012). *Inside CEO succession: The essential guide to leadership transition*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Vandaveer, V. V., Lowman, R. L., Pearlman, K., & Brannick, J. P. (2016). A practice analysis of coaching psychology: Toward a foundational competency model. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 68(2), 118–142. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000057>
- Venter, H. J. (2012). Maslow’s self-transcendence: How it can enrich organization culture and leadership. *International Journal of Business. Human Technology*, 2(7), 64–71.
- Wasylyshyn, K. M. (2008). Behind the door: Keeping business leaders focused on how they lead. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 60(4), 314–330. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014041>
- Wasylyshyn, K. M. (2015). The trusted leadership advisor: Another view from the bridge between business and psychology. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 67(4), 279–297. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000050>
- Wasylyshyn, K. M., & Gupta, R. (2020). Leadership development: Psychologically-informed process that spawned a generation of CEOs. *Management and Business Review*, 1(1), 71–79.
- Wasylyshyn, K. M., & Masterpasqua, F. (2018). Developing self-compassion in leadership development coaching: A practice model and case study analysis. *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 13(1), 21–34.

(Appendix follow)

Appendix

Perspective-Making Model: A Fundamental Leader Responsibility

Figure A1



Received June 15, 2021
Latest revision received August 5, 2021
Accepted August 5, 2021 ■