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You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger

Executive Coaching Challenges

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

*Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development and
Organizational Change, INSEAD, France, Singapore & Abu Dhabi*

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*To Sally Simmons, who as an editor's editor has
contributed much to my education.*

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Preface

The more you say, the less people remember.

—François Fenelon

It requires less character to discover the faults of others than it does to tolerate them.

—J. Petit Senn

If you want plenty of experience in dealing with difficult people, then have kids.

—Bo Bennett

One day a Zen master was walking through a village when he was stopped by an angry woman who blocked his path and began shouting at him. “You have no right to teach others! You are just as stupid as everyone else. There is nothing special about you. You’re a fake.”

The Zen master said nothing, just sat down quietly and smiled. The angry woman carried on insulting him for a while, but when she got no response beyond a smile and silence, she quieted down and left. By this time the Zen master’s disciples were also angry, upset by their teacher’s silence. Finally, one of them asked why he hadn’t responded to the woman’s insults and abuse.

The Zen master replied, “If someone offers you a gift, and you decline to accept it, to whom does the gift belong?”

The disciple answered, “To the person who brought it.”

The Zen master smiled and said, “That’s correct.”

If someone is irrational, or abusive, or behaves erratically, you can mentally decline to accept the “gift.” Or you can do something that the Zen master didn’t—you can welcome the “gift,” as it may help you to understand the person better. As an old friend of mine used to say, “Always welcome the neuroses. They can provide you with a wealth of information.” And I agree with him. What I have learned from dealing with difficult people is that they can teach you new skills or provide new insights.

I have written this short book on executive coaching for two main reasons. First, I want to help aspiring coaches to deal better with people who aren’t only hard to read, but may also drive them crazy. There are more of these people around than you might imagine. But paradoxical as it may seem, their off-putting and even toxic behavior actually gives us the tools we need to deal with them. In their own mysterious way, they draw attention to areas of their personality of which they’re only dimly aware themselves.

Second, executive coaches have to deal with people whose difficult, erratic behavior impacts on the happiness and performance of others in their work environment. The larger context in which they operate increases the urgency to help them create change. From my own experience, I know that if toxic behavior is allowed to continue unchallenged and unchecked, the organization suffers. Toxic behavior has a contamination effect that can ripple through an organization, in the process incurring many hidden, unforeseeable costs. And unfortunately experience has also shown me that the degree of toxicity you see is often only the tip of a very large iceberg.

As many of you will know first-hand, coaching clients can demonstrate a wide range of difficult behavior: rudeness, yelling, shunning, gossiping, manipulating, backstabbing, scapegoating, giving the silent treatment, harassing, whining, ignoring directives they’re given, and sabotaging the work they’re expected to do. This list is far from exhaustive. These kinds of behavior can cause a great deal of grief, not least to the coach. We have to remind ourselves, when we get upset about their behavior, that it has more to do with them and their problems than with us. But even so, and after many years of practice, I can still find it hard to handle myself in a cool, calm, collected manner when I find myself in these situations. There

have been many instances when my clients' behavior has left me seriously emotionally and physically drained.

Throughout my career as an executive coach I have tried to avoid the traps set by difficult clients and I have found that it is easier to do so if I pay attention to my own feelings of hurt and anger. I have become better at harnessing my own emotions when dealing with difficult people and conflict. I have become better at resisting being drawn into becoming an inadvertent participant in a "duel." I always try to keep a modicum of control and resist the urge to try to win an argument. Long experience has taught me that it's always much better to listen. Listening and asking questions leads others to their own, better conclusions. Through the questions I ask, I can help my clients recognize the issues they struggle with.

I haven't always found this easy. Like all human beings I'm tempted to respond immediately when I am challenged or attacked—to try to state my case or prove my point. However, I've learned the hard way that this isn't helpful. It's not a good strategy to get into fight-flight-overdrive. Conversely, by not reacting instantly, by delaying my reaction, I have time to think before I speak. As an executive coach, I'm always mindful about what's happening to me. I have learned to pay attention to whatever emotional issues emerge, and not act on them unreflectively. Also, if I delay my reactions, difficult individuals have the opportunity to reflect on the matter themselves.

Every time I demonstrate a willingness to listen with a minimum of defensiveness, criticism, or impatience, I'm giving my clients a "gift" of understanding and also earning the right to have it reciprocated. Suspending my needs for long enough to hear the other person out is part of willing myself to listen. Again, this isn't always easy. But when my own emotions mess me about, my capacity for empathy suffers. My emotions can damage my ability to understand the mental state of others, to listen to them, to feel their pain or joy. To be empathic I have to be able to recognize my own blind spots, the selective filters I use to look at the world. I need constantly to be aware of my own reality, as well as the other person's. I also realize that I can use other filters; that I have the power to view the world through other lenses.

All of us try to manage the cognitive and emotional parts of our brain. They should work in sync. But as coaches, we need to recognize that emotional reactions can get the better of us when we are dealing with difficult people. So, when an emotional avalanche hits me, I always try to pause and reflect. In such instances, I remind myself that while it's important to be able to empathize and understand, it's also important to be logical. For example, each time I deal with a puzzling person, I take account of my own reactions, but I also try to imagine how or what the other person is feeling, and what their take on the situation may be. I have learned that when I'm able to think before reacting (using both sides of my brain), the results tend to be far more positive. In coaching, the reflection-action axis should always be present.

This is not to say that I haven't engaged in some duels over the years, despite my best efforts. I've learned, however, to choose them wisely. I have come to the conclusion that it's not winning these duels that's important, but how many times I have turned away and chosen to look in a better direction. Admittedly, irritation sometimes gets the better of me, and I may get into an argument without thinking it through. But as a rule, when negative (and also positive) emotions emerge, I ask myself questions. I try to reflect on what's happening to me, to force myself not to react immediately. This works well because it forces me to think. This strategy is especially important when I find it difficult to control my own emotions. If my emotions start to get in the way of logic, asking questions has helped me to get back to reality.

Generally, I have become better at not letting my clients get under my skin and sorting out what's me and what's them. Often, difficult behavior has nothing to do with me. So, hard though it may be, executive coaches have to learn to see difficult behavior, of any kind, in perspective, and not to take it personally. While some experienced coaches seem to master the skill of remaining calm in the midst of the storm, others will struggle because of their own temperament. There are very few Zen masters among us.

It should be said that throughout my career as an executive coach I've never met a totally rational human being. All of us, at times, can be

somewhat crazy. In fact, many of the “crazy” people I have met in life have helped me see things from a very different perspective. They have widened my outlook. Coaches have to learn to view the “madness” they encounter as part and parcel of their clients’ ability to adapt. Madness may actually be what gives them their vitality and originality. Some “mad” people have changed the world. As Seneca once said, “No great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness.” My opinion is that too much sanity may be the only real madness. I find it useful to remind myself that I, like all of us, was a kid once—that I once thought anything was possible. I must be mad. Madness is sometimes an appropriate response to the realities we have to face. Isn’t it through mystery and madness that we learn what people are all about?

But even where I have had to deal with true craziness, I have always been able to discover some kind of logic. The challenge we have as executive coaches, however, is to figure out what that logic is all about—and that’s where the catch often is. Even though human behavior tends to be purposeful, at times it can be hard to figure out the other person’s intentions. Fortunately, the behavior of irrational and sometimes hurtful people is often predictable if we already have some basic familiarity with what personality is all about.

This doesn’t mean that it’s easy to identify the different kinds of personality that coaches have to deal with. Some mystery and confusion will always remain. But the older I get, the more I welcome this confusion. Granted, there have been times when “confusion” has been an understatement. There have been times when I have found myself invoking the serenity prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

In this book I’m trying to show that coaching difficult people can be an exhilarating experience. Difficult clients have taught me a lot about my own character. Each encounter has taught me something about my own strengths, weaknesses, hot buttons, and boundaries. As the psychologist Carl Jung maintained, “Knowing your own darkness is the best method for

dealing with the darkness of other people.” I’ve also learned that if I want to know what kind of person I am, I need only look at the type of people I attract.

In my various roles as an educator, psychoanalyst, executive coach, and even as an executive I have encountered busloads of puzzling people. And as if that wasn’t enough, many of my students have asked me to be a kind of Sherlock Holmes and help them make sense of bewildering situations, of people encounters that didn’t seem to make sense. I like to think that I have sometimes been helpful. But there have also been many situations when I have been equally puzzled.

In a nutshell, one of the main threads in my work has been to make my students more effective as executive coaches, and that is one of the main purposes of this book. I want to show my readers that they are not alone in their confusion—but that there also will be moments when they will see the light. There will be moments of pattern recognition, some flash of understanding of what they are dealing with.

The impetus for this book was a conversation I had with David Champion, a senior editor at the *Harvard Business Review* (who was also, once upon a time, one of my students), who had asked me to write an article entitled “Coaching the Toxic Leader.” Feedback from the magazine’s editors was that what I had written was interesting, but it was not a good fit. David asked me if I had ever read *The Screwtape Letters*. I didn’t know it, but got a copy straight away. In C. S. Lewis’s book—a novel by a Christian apologist—a senior devil, Screwtape, advises his trainee nephew Wormwood on how to secure the damnation of a “patient” by undermining his faith, promoting sin, and capturing his soul. David thought I should use a similar format, while remaining on the side of the angels, to explain to aspiring executive coaches how to deal with some of the puzzling people they will meet in their work. Encouraged by him, I began rewriting and discovered that I didn’t really want to stop. What was originally planned to be a short article turned instead into a short book. As well as presenting a number of client profiles, I decided to include reflections on play, authentizotic organizations, and what being a “healthy” individual means.

I have learned not to take things for granted in life. None of us got where we are alone, and this time is no different. In presenting this book, I would like to thank David, who encouraged me to undertake this journey. But I would also like to thank my students and clients, who over the years have taught me all I know.

About the Author

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries brings a different view to the much-studied subjects of leadership and the dynamics of individual and organizational change. Bringing to bear his knowledge and experience of economics (Econ. Drs., University of Amsterdam), management (ITP, MBA, and DBA, Harvard Business School), and psychoanalysis (Canadian Psychoanalytic Society, Paris Psychoanalytic Society, and the International Psychoanalytic Association), Kets de Vries scrutinizes the interface between international management, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, dynamic psychiatry, and leadership coaching. His specific areas of interest are leadership, career dynamics, executive stress, entrepreneurship, family business, succession planning, cross-cultural management, high-performance team building, and the dynamics of corporate transformation and change.

Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development and Organizational Change at INSEAD, France, Singapore, and Abu Dhabi. He was the Founder of INSEAD's Global Leadership Center, one of the largest leadership development centers in the world. In addition, he is program director of INSEAD's top management program, "The Challenge of Leadership: Developing Your Emotional Intelligence," and Scientific Director of the Executive Master's Program "Consulting and Coaching for Change" (and has five times received INSEAD's distinguished teacher award). He is also the Distinguished Visiting Professor of Leadership Development Research at the European School of Management and Technology (ESMT) in Berlin. He has held professorships at McGill University, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales, Montreal, and the

Harvard Business School, and he has lectured at management institutions around the world.

The Financial Times, *Le Capital*, *Wirtschaftswoche*, and *The Economist* have rated Manfred Kets de Vries among the world's leading leadership scholars. Kets de Vries is listed among the world's top 50 leading management thinkers and is among the most influential contributors to human resource management.

Kets de Vries is the author, co-author, or editor of more than 40 books, including *The Neurotic Organization*; *Leaders, Fools and Impostors*; *Life and Death in the Executive Fast Lane*; *The Leadership Mystique*; *The Happiness Equation*; *Are Leaders Born or Are They Made? The Case of Alexander the Great*; *The New Russian Business Leaders*; *Leadership by Terror: Finding Shaka Zulu in the Attic*; *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory*; *The Leader on the Couch*; *Coach and Couch*; *The Family Business on the Couch*; *Sex, Money, Happiness, and Death: The Quest for Authenticity*; *Reflections on Leadership and Character*; *Reflections on Leadership and Career*; *Reflections on Organizations*; *The Coaching Kaleidoscope*; *The Hedgehog Effect: The Secrets of High Performance Teams*; and *Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior*. Two further books are in preparation.

In addition, Kets de Vries has published over 400 scientific papers as chapters in books and as articles. He has also written approximately 100 case studies, including seven that received the Best Case of the Year award. He is a regular contributor to a number of magazines. He writes blogs for the *Harvard Business Review* and *INSEAD Knowledge*. His work has been featured in such publications as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Fortune*, *BusinessWeek*, *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, and *The International Herald Tribune*. His books and articles have been translated into 31 languages.

Kets de Vries is a member of 17 editorial boards and has been elected a Fellow of the Academy of Management. He is a founding member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), which has honored him with a lifetime membership. Kets de Vries is also the first non-American recipient of the International Leadership

Association Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to leadership research and development; he is considered one of the world's founding professionals in the development of leadership as a field and discipline. The American Psychological Association has honored him with the Harry and Miriam Levinson Award (Organizational Consultation division) for his contributions to the field of consultation. In the Netherlands, he has been awarded the Freud Award for his contributions at the interface of management and psychoanalysis. He has also received the Vision of Excellence Award from the Harvard Institute of Coaching. In addition, he is the recipient of two honorary doctorates.

Kets de Vries is a consultant on organizational design/transformation and strategic human resource management to leading US, Canadian, European, African, and Asian companies. As a global consultant in executive leadership development his clients have included ABB, ABN-AMRO, Accenture, Aegon, Air Liquide, Alcan, Alcatel, ATIC, Bain Consulting, Bang & Olufsen, Bonnier, BP, Cairn, Deutsche Bank, Ericsson, GE Capital, Goldman Sachs, Heineken, Hudson, HypoVereinsbank, Investec, KPMG, Lego, Liberty Life, Lufthansa, Lundbeck, McKinsey, National Australian Bank, Nokia, Novartis, Novo Nordisk, Origin, SABMiller, Shell, SHV, Spencer Stuart, Standard Bank of South Africa, Troika Dialog, Unilever, and Volvo Car Corporation. As an educator and consultant he has worked in more than 40 countries. In his role as a consultant, he is also the founder of the Kets de Vries Institute (KDVI), a boutique leadership development consulting firm.

The Dutch government has made him an Officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau. He was the first fly fisherman in Outer Mongolia and is a member of New York's Explorers Club. In his spare time he can be found in the rainforests or savannahs of Central Africa, the Siberian taiga, the Pamir and Altai Mountains, Arnhemland, or within the Arctic Circle.

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