

# Musings from



**Musings from Gate 44** is a series of papers written from one of the most sacred reflective places in a consultant's life – the airport. As we depart our client's cities, we are often decompressing, celebrating, venting, strategizing and reflecting on behalf of those we serve. We're inviting you into our private thoughts about...you. "You" means those of you leading complex organizations trying to grow, change, improve and compete. These "musings" are stimulated by patterns we see over and over again as we work. Our hope is that letting you into our inner thoughts will help you grapple with the issues that frustrate your noblest aspirations and thwart what you seek to achieve. (We hope we'll also have a chance to laugh gently together at some of the silly things organizations can do.)

## **Leadership Transformation: Evolutions in Executive Coaching**

By Mindy Millward

*Two hours into a five hour flight home, I had just ended a great conversation with the person sitting next to me. Mutual signs of "OK, I'm done" were rendered. She strapped on her Bose "cone of silence" head phones (remember Agent 99?), and I cracked open my lap-top. I did consider myself rather lucky because as everyone knows, sometimes it's best not to talk to flight neighbors at all. In this case however, the conversation got really interesting when we delved into a challenge she was facing, namely how to best support a previously high performing senior executive who is currently struggling to be effective in a new BU head role and is ignoring signs that the problems are serious. She told me all about the executive coaching they had tried which*

*everyone agreed hadn't provided the desired outcomes. We shared experiences, ideas and noted a healthy skepticism about some of the latest 9-steps-to-this and the 12-steps-to-that leadership fads promising help to valuable senior team members. Great conversation!*

As I thought about this later in the flight, I was again struck by the stark differences between my conversation partner's hopes and needs for her colleague's leadership transformation and her actual experience – little impact after spending lots of time, effort, money and political capital. She had said, "Our organization has used different executive coaches at different times over the years. They typically were semi-secret attempts to rectify the career path of a once-rising star turned performance management problem pretty high up in the organization. Only our top HR leader was closely involved. The coach was around for six months or so – they observed meetings at the beginning, put the executive through a battery of tests and psychological profiles, spent lots of time behind closed doors with the executive – and then at some point vanished. Yet not much ever changed in terms of the leader's behaviors, practices or results. Some leaders left, others just hung on." Hardly the marquee endorsement for executive coaching!

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This narrative captures some familiar patterns that I have seen over and over in executive coaching efforts that come up short on job one – transforming leadership capability in the service of better business results. Let's take a look at these and examine how to get more out of coaching efforts.

## Coming Up Short: Patterns of Practice That Inhibit Leadership Transformation

Sometimes organizations need to fine tune performance in their executive leadership ranks, while in other instances dramatic change in a leader's behavior – a leadership transformation – is required. Depending on the organization, some portions of leadership transformation efforts entail providing executive coaching. Companies in the US make an immense investment in executive coaching, spending nearly a billion dollars a year on it according to the 2007 Sherpa Executive Coaching Survey<sup>1</sup>. Committing substantial resources often has not yielded substantive results, so what gives? Over the years, we have observed three consistent patterns of practice that contribute to executive coaching results falling far short of aspirations to support leader transformation.

### Coaching Out of Context

If you begin with the assumption that leadership is primarily an individual act, you'll focus coaching support on changing an individual leader's behavior. One problem is that this basic assumption about leadership is itself flawed. Leadership is largely about achieving desired outcomes with and through others, so executive coaching approaches meant to achieve leadership transformation have to work within the broader organizational context that any leader operates in. All organizations are complex constellations of histories, strategies, people, tasks, structures, processes and cultures. Leader effectiveness in any organization system stems from three primary domains – **within** the leader (their individual strengths, challenges,

beliefs, practices), **with others** (their strengths and challenges, quality of interactions with peers, subordinates, bosses, customers, etc.) and **within the organization** (the dynamics that shape leaders' broader impact on the business goals and challenges of the organization to which they and their teams need to be adding value). Ironically, the last category often gets the least attention in executive coaching support despite having some of the greatest potential impact for leader transformation.

There are three quick ways you can tell whether executive coaching work is connected to the broader business context. First, is the upfront diagnostic work structured to provide substantive insights at all three levels of leadership (within the individual leader, with others, and within the broader organization)? The more individual-centric the instruments and data gathering are, the less likely leadership transformation will be supported. Second, if the executive coaching work is too narrowly focused within and down the direct line of reporting of the individual leader, then the critically important relationships **up** to the boss and **out** to other peers and stakeholders are unlikely to get the focus needed as part of the coaching work. That misstep alone can be a huge obstacle to leadership transformation. Typically, the higher up a leader is in the organization, the more critical the lateral relationships and the relationships up with superiors become in terms of influencing an executive's career trajectory. And third, if the executive coaching is largely a "stand-alone" offering provided to an individual vs. as part of a larger systemic leadership capability building effort across the organization, then dramatically improved leader effectiveness – real leadership transformation – is much less likely.

The best executive coaching results I have seen come from collaborations with line leaders and the HR and L&D communities that integrate the executive coaching work into a larger strategy for developing leaders in the organization, which in turn is linked to the drivers of growth for the business. In one organization where I worked, an enterprise functional leader was struggling to deliver results in a way that ensured collaboration and engagement. She consistently hit the results piece – but how she went about it left her at risk of being fired and the organization at risk of losing a highly accountable performer. Her boss and their HR support team asked us to spend four months with the leader, teaching her how to "do" things differently: not to be so abrasive, to better engage her peers in her work, to let her team take the lead, and to be a better listener. Their standard approach had been constructed around a series of individual coaching meetings using a standard survey instrument to collect data. I proposed an alternative approach that leveraged their corporate learning programs, as well as involved role definition and governance redesign with her peer leadership team including her boss. I included stakeholder

mapping and relationship building work with both her immediate peers and those key influencers that she would touch in the broader organization. My initial proposal was for six months, but with the results she experienced, it was extended to provide support throughout the year. I also worked closely with the HR professionals as an integral part of her development and on-going success rather than just as a “Johnny on the spot” outside contractor. As a result the individual is one of their stronger leaders today, as opposed to a casualty that would have been written off due to their inability to “get it.”

## Weak Moorings

Three symptoms indicate executive coaching with either weak or non-existent links to the boss and to the business. The first signal flare is when the executive coaching effort does not include direct involvement of the leader’s boss – both in the contracting discussions that define what the coaching work will be and in terms of the boss’ role as an active participant in the coaching process. Leaving the boss out of the coaching work removes a central aspect of the executive’s reality and cuts off a vital lever for leader transformation. In some organizations it can be challenging to separate leadership development such as executive coaching from evaluation (performance reviews). Leaving the boss out of the executive coaching work for that reason amounts to colluding with what could be a larger organizational problem (e.g., conflict avoidance, abdication of executives’ roles in developing their subordinates, etc.). Additionally, sustainable leadership transformation often is determined by how the leader is coached and mentored over the longer term once the coach leaves the building, and this is almost solely the purview of the leader’s boss. Transformation of an executive’s leadership practices will be better supported if the boss also learns how they must coach differently and where they can help their subordinate behave differently to achieve better results. Whatever rationalization is offered, leaving the boss out of the coaching work is usually not consistent with aspirations for achieving sustainable leadership transformation.

Coaching that does not sufficiently leverage the leader’s day-to-day work as a primary source for learning and skill acquisition risks coming unmoored from the business context. Namely too much time and focus spent inside an artificial “bubble” created either by the content orientation of the coach (approach, models, tools, techniques) or by the focus of the sessions with the coach creates the risk that leaders being coached will not apply what they are learning. This risk increases geometrically with the amount of time spent in the “coaching bubble.” My tagline for that problem is “lost in translation” and is much like what happens in between the lecture halls of the Executive MBA program and the day to day practices of the executive



on the job. A wonderful and wise colleague of mine once told me of his belief that “most of what the coach and coachee need to work with is already in the room.” Anything that isolates the executive being coached from their true context should be minimized. Taking a step back to reflect and observe is one thing. Being cocooned in an isolation chamber, even with the best of intentions, is another. A leader’s role, their business goals and metrics, their accountabilities and their daily routines and interactions provide a fabulous and rich learning lab with no artificial additives required. It does take a lot of consulting and business experience and proper training for the executive coach to be able to provide that high-context and multi-level support, but that’s partly why great executive coaches who are able to support leadership transformation are harder to find.

Finally, and at the risk of stating the obvious, the value and positive impact of the coaching should closely reflect the business and organizational improvement goals that the leader is accountable for. It’s good for the coach and good for the organization when line leaders are able to draw a direct connection, without any mental gymnastics, between the coaching support and the improved business results. Hence, I would be remiss if as a final point I didn’t point out that executive coaching work tethered to business outcomes (metrics and consequences) is more likely to contribute to leadership transformation.

## Organizational Hypoxia

If organizations at their most basic level are groups of human beings trying to achieve outcomes that they cannot bring about as individuals, then the “oxygen supply” for healthy organizations is the strength of its working relationships. Strong working relationships in organizations fuel increased creativity and insight, support more informed risk taking and speed, provide greater energy, productivity and greater resilience in the face of adversity – in short better sustained performance. The reverse is also true. Dysfunctional working relationships are a stressor on the system in the same way that hypoxia (lack of sufficient oxygen) rapidly leads to tissue damage (and ultimately death) for the human body. Broken working relationships



destroy value in myriad ways, both visible and invisible. While it is not currently a tangible asset tracked on most balance sheets, our work suggests that the strength of working relationships of the top team should be.

Show me a high performing agile team and I will show you strong working relationships that help nurture and sustain that performance, even in the face of major challenges and conflict. By extension, effective leaders need to be exceptional in establishing, building and sustaining relationships at many different levels. It is surprising then that over the years we have repeatedly seen executive coaching that was ineffectual in helping leaders increase their ability to establish or strengthen their critical working relationships both in their immediate and their adjacent organizational neighborhoods.

The results of this neglect show up in numerous ways. I have seen many senior teams struggle to execute on their strategy because they are ineffective in collaborating across the silos of their organization. In one particular situation, the business unit's structure was repeatedly overhauled to fix the problem and a coach was brought in to work with the business unit head. All of this time and effort was expended while one key root cause, namely weak working relationships among the senior leaders, remained unaddressed. Not recognizing the costs of the dysfunctional working relationships was a blind spot for the business unit leader, and the HR and coaching resources also missed it or were unable to support major change at the working relationship levels.

In another instance, I saw a COO attempting to corral the heads of the two largest geographies in his company into a more effective working relationship. Sadly, he was unable to develop good relationships himself, and despite both blandishments and threats, the two regions refused to cooperate with one another, to the point of undercutting work with clients. This was a disastrous situation which compromised the company's reputation and revenues. Finally, I have seen the inability of new CEOs and their senior teams to have effective discussions about controversial new strategies. In two large publicly traded companies I have knowledge of, senior team mutinies and the

ousting of the CEOs ended up reducing share value tenfold and even several years later the relevant brands have not recovered their former value. The lesson is that weak or dysfunctional relationships at the top of the organization can have financial cost that range into literally the billions of dollars and human costs that can't be quantified by the same financial yardsticks but are equally tragic.

Organizational hypoxia can take several forms. For example, I have seen senior executives who are "nice to people" and seem to have good relationships but create chaos in organizations because they avoid tough decisions, don't confront non-performing people on their teams constructively and don't set clear expectations about effective leadership practices. Another key aspect of strong working relationships that many overlook is that strong working relationships get **stronger** through conflict. Dysfunctional working relationships present a business risk to organizations precisely because conflict as an inherent part of organizational life can break the thin ice that people are skating on. Trust is often mentioned as a culprit for weak working relationships. Later on, I will illustrate one example of a heuristic that helps strengthen working relationships through developing a shared understanding of what "trust" in one's organization actually means pragmatically.

At the other end of the spectrum of hypoxic organizations, I all know leaders who deliver the numbers but trash the work climate, and who get passed around to various departments because no one is willing or able to help the struggling leader improve their ability to develop and maintain effective working relationships. Clear diagnosis of the pattern and the requisite high integrity conversations about potential lack of fit are typically avoided. Shuffling the problematic leader off to other areas rarely resolves the issue. The examples of business leaders who lack sufficient relationship skills and thereby destroyed value are innumerable. For every one of those train wreck stories, there is often the accompanying footnote about the organization's lack of effective support to help leaders develop sufficient relationship capabilities.

If strong healthy working relationships are generally in short supply in an organization, then a struggling individual leader typically has a scarcity of resources for getting help that compounds their personal challenges. There are often few strong role models and mentors, the support systems available may not address root cause relational issues, and peers usually don't talk at the level of "quality of working relationships". In this type of environment, "parachuting in" a coach to focus on changing one individual leader is much less likely to yield leader transformation. Nor is that tactic likely to alter the directional inertia of the undesirable organization climate. This reinforces the point we made earlier about the importance of an executive



coach's orientation to working at multiple levels at the same time and having the boss fully engaged. The central idea is that executive coaching aimed at transforming leadership has to be grounded somehow in fostering, enabling and developing strong working relationships with all the key stakeholders of the leader being developed. Coaching work that misses working at the various relationship interfaces of a leader's role is limited in its ability to support leadership transformation.

## Rites of Passage: Five Strategies in Executive Coaching That Enable Leadership Transformation

### The Coach's Entry

In terms of how to successfully begin a coaching assignment, an experienced colleague of mine once observed that "how you start out largely determines where you will end up." For starters, approach your entry into the organization or unit as the first opportunity to model the type of relationships and the type of work you will be doing. Position yourself well by doing a simple exercise. Draw a simple stakeholder map for the coachee and figure out who the primary client is and what the constellation of other key stakeholders looks like (e.g. sponsors, peers, subordinates, mentors, advisors). How will the key people in the key roles need to be engaged in the executive coaching work so that they can provide effective support over time?

Another key positioning issue is to ensure you start at the right altitude. If leadership transformation is an objective, then it is important to scope your work with the key stakeholders properly to ensure you are positioned to help at the individual, team and *organizational* levels. Try to avoid being prematurely pigeon-holed into someone else's idea of solutions and process without thorough dialogue about the strengths and trade-offs with key stakeholders. Since you typically don't know exactly what the highest leverage points for transformation will be in the broader system at the beginning, the conservative approach is to scope your diagnostic work to start broader and then narrow down later as coach and coachee learn more.

Consider this – right or wrong, organizations just love to pin all the problems on one person. Yet it is entirely possible that the senior team, or certain organizational practices (e.g. measurement and reward systems) or even the leader's boss are contributing to the problems. The key question then is this – are you positioned from the start to gain enough altitude to see and constructively address some of the more systemic issues you might

uncover? If step one is to ensure the right altitude to enable transformation, step two is to ensure the work is anchored solidly in the reality and context of the coachee's job and role(s). That means the boss needs to agree upfront to be actively involved in the coaching work. It also means stakeholders (like HR, L&D, key peers, etc.) understand that the coachee's day to day work will be the primary raw material for the coaching support. Finally stakeholders should understand that the tangible and intangible results that the business expects from the coachee will be a key part of how the impact of the coaching will be measured.

A thoughtful and well executed entry and contracting process (shared understanding on desired outcomes, roles and approaches) with the leader and key stakeholders that includes the above points will help ensure you enter the system set up to support leadership transformation.

### Systemic Diagnosis

The art and science of diagnosis in organizations spans several fields and over thirty years of research and experience. Several key points arise from this work. For starters, the executive coach should use some model of the organization as a system to guide initial data gathering and synthesis of the patterns you will help your sponsor/client discover. Different from individual-centric models like the MBTI or other often-used tools by executive coaches, using a framework of organizational effectiveness that provides a systems perspective will help you and your sponsor/client take the right approach to understanding the full context of the leader being coached. A more complete picture of the situation serves both the coach and the sponsor/client. Second, use the principle of guided discovery when possible. Rather than having the executive coach gather up all the data, go into a dark cave and re-emerge with all the answers, let the client do the hard work of discovery alongside you (though be careful to protect confidentiality as needed). This not only increases their buy-in to eventual solutions and actions, but further enhances their own capabilities to make sense of similar data in the future. Finally, if you don't ask the right systemic questions up front, then you



will not be well equipped to do what we describe next – namely work at three important levels simultaneously.

## Three Dimensional Coaching

Over the years I have developed an approach to executive coaching that in some ways makes the term “coaching” a bit misleading. I strive to help my clients understand the dynamics of the larger system (the business context, the organization, the senior team, the individual’s strengths and challenges, key stakeholder politics, etc.) and effectively navigate their system’s inherent interdependencies and idiosyncrasies. Without that context, and the ability of the executive coach to be effective working at all three levels, we don’t believe leadership transformation is likely.

As mentioned earlier, a key principle behind this approach is that the coaching work most closely approximates the domains in which the leader needs to be highly effective. They need to have (or develop) a high degree of self-knowledge (within). They need to be able to build, develop and sustain strong working relationships that enable high performing teams and cross-unit collaboration (with others), and they need to be organizationally savvy, understanding how organizations function, how the inherent interdependencies impact performance at the individual, team and organization level, and how the importance of being effective politically in the organization increases with altitude (within organizations). The higher up you go, the more important it is to be able to influence and advocate effectively outside of your chain of command and domain of expertise and to get work done with and through others.

## Anchored in the Business

There are three principles that guide anchoring the executive coaching work to the business:

**Principle # 1:** Connect the executive coaching work to measurable and well understood outcomes. The tighter the connection is to what line leaders measure, the better. That means developing a deep understanding of not just the organization’s metrics, but how they are linked to the strategy and the growth of the business. Be specific from the outset about what success will look like – what are the key metrics that your client’s boss wants to see move? What are some key milestones you need to reach? What are some measurable early wins you can help your client reach? In a very real sense, where you’re going is how you will get there – understand how to measure success from the outset and embed that into your work from day one.

**Principle #2:** As much as possible, coach in-situ (i.e., on the job using live situations when possible). Use the stuff that is happening in real life right now in their role – their daily routines, their stakeholders, their revenue targets, their performance problems, their conflicts, etc. – as the “source material” and context for the coaching. The risk of leading one’s coaching work with prescriptive leadership models or off-the-shelf tools is that it potentially puts distance between your support and the real-life challenges of your client. Best practices and constructs derived from research are all fine, but they have to connect as directly as possible to what the client is dealing with day in and day out. If you can stay closely connected to their space, your ability to help them transform their mind-set and their leadership practices is much greater. In practice, that requires a familiarity with both the business challenges facing the company and the ways the company handles them in both a formal and informal sense. Understanding the organizational systems will enable you to both help your client reach better outcomes and get cues as to which examples and best practices you can introduce.

**Principle #3:** When possible and appropriate, link your work with on-going HR and L&D efforts to establish synergies and sustainability. A good example of this can be drawn from a couple of years of work with the manufacturing organization of a leading consumer packaged goods company. When we began, the chronic performance pattern was that line leaders typically worked one or two levels below their formal role in the company, creating collateral lack of attention to issues like clearly articulated strategies and effective and timely development of the next generation of leaders. The client encouraged me to reach out to the Corporate HR and L&D organizations, and within nine months we collaboratively designed and rolled out a leadership experience that could be offered widely and that helped leaders lead at the right level. What began as a solution provided by an outside firm for one leader was integrated into the HR and L&D organizations to meet a broader leadership development need.

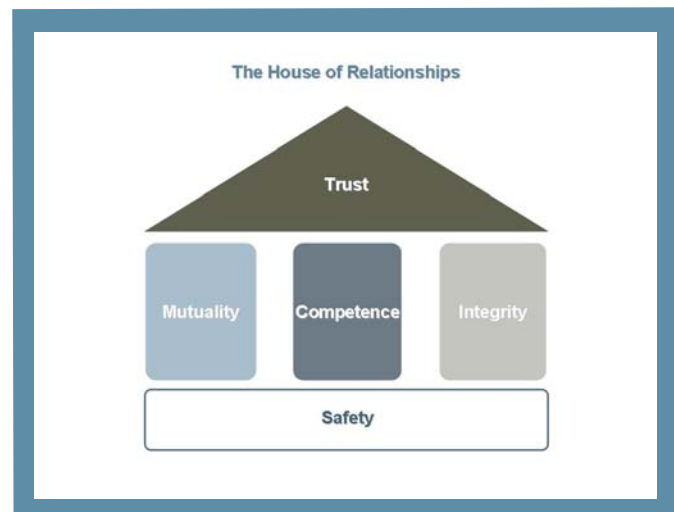
## Work on Relationships

Executive teams talk a lot about the importance of having good working relationships – privately if not publicly. Yet few know where to start when they find themselves having to make significant improvements in this “soft” domain. An effective executive coach can offer multiple access points through skill, experience and empathy and take fuzzy yet important topics and make them more accessible, more visible and connected to measurable improvements valued by the business. One way executive coaches can provide support in the relationship domain is to take fuzzy ideas and make them more practical. As an example, I included a heuristic for trust that was developed to help clients strengthen trust between two individuals or within a team.

Trust is usually on the top of everyone’s list when you ask leaders and/or teams about the key ingredients of good working relationships. Yet when you explore what trust is by asking people to define it, you quickly discover how complex and “fuzzy” the concept of trust really is. The trust heuristic was born in a conversation I had with a distraught son who was having some troubles with a friend at school. After listening to him for a bit, it became apparent that he was struggling with how to sustain a relationship with a friend through a conflict. Telling him how important trust was to friendships elicited the question “What is trust?” This was an awkward moment – the only “answer” ready at hand was “I don’t have a good answer now. Let me get back to you when I do because it is an important question.” I have since posed the same question to quite a few very smart individuals and found that most adults struggle to clearly define trust as well. After doing a lot of reading in various domains including work on understanding core human needs, reflecting on personal work experiences and lengthy discussions with others, it was possible to synthesize something equally useful both to a child at school and adults in various settings, including at work. My colleagues and I ended up calling the framework the House of Relationships® (see illustration at right). The foundation of the house is safety (our health, our resources, our growth and our reputations are mutually respected and protected). Three pillars anchored in the foundation of Safety hold up the roof of Trust. One pillar is mutuality – that both parties understand and honor the needs that are important to the other. Another pillar is integrity – that we will each do the right thing (subjective at times), even if it is hard, and that we will do what we said we would do. And the middle pillar is competence – that we each have the knowledge, skills and experience to do what we need to do well. These three pillars hold up Trust and form the basic structure of the house (relationships). The model is very helpful anytime one or more individuals are experiencing a strained relationship, or are forming a new relationship. The



simple model helps to deconstruct the notion of trust we all have strong feelings about but often struggle to articulate in pragmatic and actionable terms. The four elements of trust suggested by the model make it much easier to talk about observable actions and practices that either contribute to or detract from trust.



## Finding the Help We Need

The best coaching I see and do involves playing at three levels at the same time – and not everyone, including the client, is always prepared for that – leading self (within), leading (with) others, and leading with organizations. To do this well requires a breadth of knowledge, training and experience that few seem to have. It’s not that they can’t, it’s often that they don’t. You need many things as an executive coach to be able to help others grow at all three levels. Among the more important ones is the ability to play a dual-role of trusted advisor and change agent. The table on page 9 gives you some basic ideas for each role describing what they do, how they engage and what they bring.

Thinking about how you would select for and/or develop these attributes of effective executive coaching becomes critical for organizations serious about true leadership transformation.



It is perhaps a platitude to say “Leadership is vital to the health of every company.” Yet the experience many organizations have of leadership coaching – a couple of months of closed door meetings that end without clear and sustainable results – illustrates a deep disconnect between the importance of this work and how it actually turns out. I have seen time and again that leadership transformation is much more likely when the executive coach works within the context of the larger system, has engaged the right stakeholders along the way to ensure sustainability and works in-situ most of the time with the coachee. I find that the real key to results involves operating at the three levels of within, with others and with the organization – this is vital to supporting the delivery of business results. The good news is that executive coaching can indeed bring about leadership transformation and make a huge difference in the life of the organization. It’s a matter of deploying an effective approach and having an experienced and agile executive coach to achieve the desired leadership transformation.

*I am about to land so I’m shutting down my laptop. Hopefully, I’ve given you a clearer picture of what needs to happen for leadership coaching to be truly transformative. If you make sure that any coaching work is informed by a systemic view of the context of the leader, is integrated with larger capacity building efforts of the HR/L&D resources, and is focused on relationships, you’ll be ahead of the game at the outset.*

*If you want to hear more, drop me a line at [mindy@passagesconsulting.com](mailto:mindy@passagesconsulting.com)*

1 - 2007 Sherpa Executive Coaching Survey; <http://www.sherpacoaching.com/GlobalCoachingSurvey2007ROI.pdf>

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## Appendix: Roles of the Trusted Advisor and the Change Agent

### Trusted Advisor

#### What they do...

- Build trusting relationship
- Seek a balanced understanding of the situation
- Energize for innovation and improvement
- Provide personal guidance

#### How they engage...

- Curious and open to multiple perspectives
- Active learning
- Committed to others' success
- Nurture a personal connection

#### What they bring...

- Integrity
- Self awareness
- Drive to help others win
- Perspective

### Change Agent

#### What they do...

- Connect the work to the business priorities
- Use systems thinking
- Accurately assess and support talent
- Plan for and manage transition

#### How they engage...

- Ask great questions
- Clear focus
- Teamwork
- Organization savvy

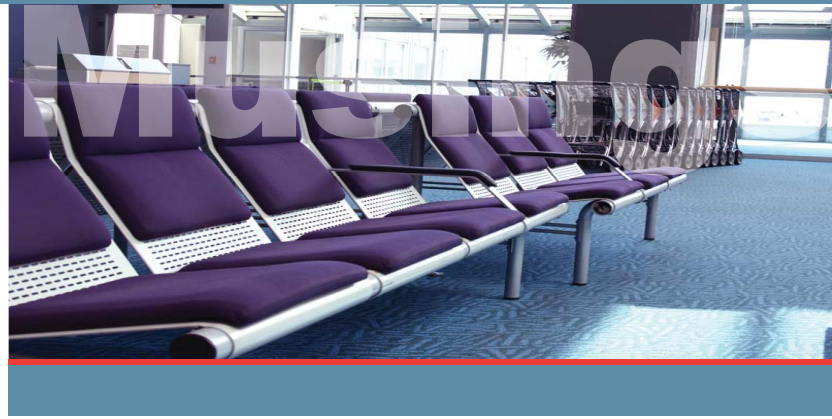
#### What they bring...

- Bias for “teaching others how to fish”
- Systems orientation
- Problem solving rigor



## *Notes*

# Notes



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