

ROADMAP *to* SUCCESS 1

An interview with ...

DR. KEVIN FLEMING

David Wright (Wright)

Today we're talking with Dr. Kevin Fleming, a talented, one-of-a-kind mind that has combined two unique fields into one—neuroscience and executive development. After receiving his BA, MA, and PhD from the University of Notre Dame in Clinical Psychology, he quickly became tired of humanity's accepting response to psychotherapy's pseudo-success and put his brain power to consulting and coaching some of the world's top business and high performance clientele—a culture traditionally not tolerant to merely “feeling good.” In this position, Dr. Fleming carved a niche “between the shrink and the coach” where his scientific knowledge about human nature and the strategies to work within the laws of reality that create nature meet. Such a perspective put him “beyond motivation” and mere self-help ideologies into hard core transformational work. Dr. Fleming's work speaks about barriers of leadership or behavior change not being an external issue predominantly, but one that is more of an internal addiction, fundamental to humanity; that is, to deny the reality and truth around us all and collude with the projections of the brain that so badly wants “to be right”—many times at all costs.

Dr. Fleming, welcome to *Roadmap to Success*.

Kevin Fleming (Fleming)

Thank you very much. It is a distinct pleasure and quite humbling to me to be included here with such top notch folks.

Wright

There are many bright and talented coaches and trainers out there with good intentions and ideas, attempting to clean up the streets of corporate America, whether it is in the areas of leadership, training and development, coaching, etc. What makes your work so unique and different?

Fleming

That's a good question. I'd love to think that my work's distinctiveness comes from the content camp, where what is offered from a guru is that sort of intellectual contribution about something that has never been heard or uttered before in a certain arena—that revolutionary kind of thing. This is what is most commonly thought of as the source of innovation, but actually, it is just one way of introducing substantive change or evolutions to a way of doing things. The other is in the profound linking and bridging of two (or more) prior established constructs, disciplines, or thinking camps to create something radically new and informative for a field—the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, kind of thing. To me, that is what I feel I am doing for the executive and personal development fields. I am instilling again a standard of intellectual clarity and richness around the power of integrating many important perspectives that influence us without our knowing and are typically not on an MBA program syllabus. These include such areas as cognitive neuroscience, futurism, behavior change science, addiction research, clinical psychology, and organizational systems thinking.

If the world is indeed dynamic and is changing so rapidly with competing, contrasting, and diverse information channels, it is an issue of prudence, in my opinion, to arm my clients with a Renaissance way of looking at problems. Multiplicity of perspective is not only the key to enhancing learning, nowadays, it is an issue of survival, given the increased complexity. There's a Darwinian intellectual "survival of the fittest" paradigm out there, and those ill-prepared to think systematically go extinct.

I feel I not only introduce this rich tapestry of ideas to a sometimes-myopic executive who tends to see reality one way (as we all tend to do), but in the process, through "collateral learning" or accidental learning, I show these individuals the stuff in between the content of things that actually drive change. What do I mean? Well, these are things that transcend information. These include: the unsaid value trade-offs underneath change, illusions inherent to "common" strategy decisions, viewing only first or second order implications of an action, ease of accepting half-truths around being "right," and the power of knowing knowledge in a more intelligent manner. Try

to find a tips and tools success book teaching this meaty stuff that I like to call “practical complexity.” I don’t find it out there. What I do is strive to take this complexity and find a way to communicate it. Whether or not we deny the complexity of decision-making around us, reality doesn’t care. It will win 100 percent of the time anyway—natural laws have a way of doing that to you.

Wright

So it sounds like “the way things are,” be it reality, truth, or natural laws, is a big part of your message. Explain exactly what that entails when it comes to your thinking about executive development and attempts at being successful.

Fleming

Well, I think that’s a very interesting question and one that is a lot more loaded than we think. You see, to me it is not about traditional models, tools, or practices being “wrong” or critiquing some solid approaches of the great executive development firms out there. Rather, it is more about an issue of incompleteness versus fullness of an approach. The logic here is that the philosophers taught us that many things that “make sense” are not necessarily and unconditionally true, despite passing that intuitive gut test we all have. And to make things more complex, some things that have passed the rigor of statistical testing don’t have as much predictive validity as our gut.

So where does this leave us in this contextual quagmire? It leaves us approaching the tricky slope of human nature and executive behavior change with humility and a keen eye that is not easily fooled and if nothing else, purposefully seeks contrarian perspectives and discomfort, conquering pride within, to better approximate “truth”—what matters most, anyway.

You see, we were keen to know that IQ wasn’t everything in predicting executive performance in the tests we created. Thanks to Daniel Goleman at Harvard, we now know more about emotional intelligence (EQ) as a better predictor of this thing we call “success.” However, a couple problems potentially exist in the full unconditional acceptance of promoting EQ at all costs—and these cautionary statements say nothing about the merit of emotional intelligence in and of itself, may I add.

First, with the advent of multiple sources attempting to measure this construct amidst a market strewn with EQ-laden language everywhere, you now have bright and talented executives speaking the language of high EQ while masking more cleverly underlying character flaws. This is the danger of holding any “one” idea too close to the heart in an all or nothing way.

Also, regarding the IQ debate, the Flynn effect taught us all to be careful with assuming we had the end-all/be-all acknowledgment about the alleged racial issues with formal IQ testing. Though we did uncover the racial bias early on, we tended to

ignore the generational increases of IQ on the white population, which were also paralleling the increases noted on the minority population when we attributed their success on the tests due to an increase in educational opportunities. Very interesting. It appeared that our brains were getting smarter over time. And it has been a relatively growing acknowledgment that the problem-solving aspects of the IQ test (versus other content or school educated elements like verbal aptitude or mathematics) could be getting a push from the informational technology and media. Technology and media have been forcing us to think more critically over time around solutions that used to be more 2-D and linear, and most IQ tests are not testing that stuff. Arguably, as Justin Menkes points out in his brilliant Executive Intelligence work, this critical thinking aspect is the mother ship for powerful executive success. Maybe it's not so much that IQ per se is not related to executive development, but that the parts we were traditionally measuring were not so pertinent. It is my prediction that a similar honing will happen with EQ over time and appropriately place emotional intelligence in a more fitting role in the whole picture. I believe there is an affective dimension to critical thinking that this IQ/EQ debate may be missing.

When one applies this different level of thinking to things we have traditionally accepted as linked to executive development, we come up with a "Fleming's list" of sometimes forgotten but radically important aspects of the truly successful individual. For instance, we talk a lot about accountability as crucial to executive decision-making, but I take this a notch deeper with my clients in their assessment; I look for their ability to discern between "decisions" and "choices."

Owning one's decision is actually half the battle if it comes from a more compulsive orientated, overly-rationalized, and a prior scripted part of our "habitual self." You see, our brains love automaticity. Patterns and accountability will always be colored by how one reached a decision that one has to be accountable for. Being accountable to an unconscious, non-free part of you is a "canceling out" element when it comes to the victorious picture of building the most aligned and healthy executive. Choices, in my opinion, are freedom-based and seem to come more from a right hemispheric-based "a-ha" light bulb, symbolizing the integration of heart and mind, and less from the dominant rational and logically sound place. I think we are creating more mechanistic versions of the successful executive by not further drilling down to such distinctions. If you think this stuff is nit-picky, I refer you to a great quote by Eduardo Punset that elucidates this issue quite well. He said something to the effect of, "Never before has it been more critical to discern between what is important and what is essential than in our modern times." Whether it is understanding the depth of the word accountability, applying wisdom, navigating masterfully through apparent paradox, or inviting an ultra-diverse team around you, getting executive development right (or rather "getting the thinking about executive development thinking right") has

never carried such a price for missing essentials and concentrating just on “important stuff” as it does today.

Wright

You talk a lot about “brain-based understanding” regarding your approach with executives. Would you explain more about what that means and why it is so critical to personal and corporate success?

Fleming

Absolutely. We have a lot of people selling the “what you should do” type mantras to leaders and teams. Folks eat this stuff up mainly because: 1) it makes sense and there are no rational arguments against the things we are teaching, and 2) the mere acknowledgement of concepts leaves a lot of room for who is really accountable to implement and execute. This love of the “just right enough” superficial sounding stuff carries a higher cost when you spread this knowledge in a more diffuse way around complicated cultures and teams. Sure, from a neuronal perspective, exposure to new ideas will start the process of new brain connections, but we forget that integrating this good information into brains for long-term habit development takes repeated exposure and a committed system to support the new learning. Overall, the diverse nature of many of the things we train on leaves a lot of room for interpretation internally (in our brain) and externally (the corporate operations).

But even if we truly “get the message,” practice it with good concentration, and take 100 percent of the message to heart, we risk not taking care of a critical aspect of the change process that our brains love that we forget. This includes the power of unlearning assumptions we hold precious, right, and true. Thinking about touching these sacred cows will naturally bring about anxiety within. Our brains want to maximize efficiency in this cost/benefit ratio comparison of doing something about the assumptions or not. Many times what is most efficient equals what conserves energy and that usually means protecting assumptions. This process, therefore, leaves us room to create more dissonant-reducing (versus consonant increasing) stories about why a certain problem happened in Company X or with Boss X. You see, our brains love to reduce anxiety more than it loves to see the fullness of things. This is something we have to strive to overcome, and the first step is to simply be aware of it.

But let me clarify this whole idea of combating the natural powers that be in the brain regarding this “unlearning” piece that I think is so critical. Though I do not believe we can unlearn hardwiring (i.e., connections that are so ingrained one would call them part of our “identity”). I am saying something different than most people who comment on this topic and assume unlearning is not possible. What do I mean? Okay, we don’t *literally* unlearn hardwiring. But we do unlearn our filters and biases inherent

in all the cost/benefit ratios that come from comparing potential decisions that get beefed up with new information. So we do create new wiring with new experiences and competing values to impose value trade-offs that, when acted upon, effectively create an unlearning by virtue of ceasing a problematic behavior. It is in this sense that I am talking about initiating the power of unlearning on the human brain and making that more of a conscious process to clients who engage in coaching.

What makes this whole process hard, however, is the chemical rush we feel when we settle on a supposed truth about someone or something. One typically doesn't get an "adrenaline rush" for being appropriately self-critical, and as the great guru Joel Barker noted in his seminal book *Paradigms*, essential paradigm shifts to thinking and innovation also don't start with any physical sensations or stimulating cues. Usually, when we do become aware of it, it's too late. Consequences have cascaded.

To teach a leadership team about how a brain works actually gives an ROI unparalleled to most training efforts nowadays because the executives learn the counter-neuro forces within them that prevent learning—true transformative learning—from occurring. It is in this acknowledgment where they can truly begin to be successful because they learn the necessary pause and the required next step of inquiry, not action. Just like strategic planning means nothing if first, second, or third order implications to their ideals and decision-making aren't mapped out and intricately connected up first, brainstorming sessions end up being futile because the brain craves automatic patterns. Therefore, unbeknownst to you, this apparent "creative exercise" is a lot more predicted and rote than you might think.

Joel Barker's "Implications Wheel" is quite innovative and brain compatible because this tool puts forth an innovative technology "underneath the assumptions of our conversations" that can get at the unintended consequences of a strategy. Most of our training and coaching tools today don't do that. They share the same assumption—truth is in the word. Period. That sets up a conflict about which truth is better than which truth. Chasing this conflict rarely goes anywhere. Truth is Truth. Usually it is a both/and kind concept that has nuances. To understand it one needs the ability to see connections, links, and implicit trade-offs.

The brain needs to be taken into account whenever we assume we are being innovative and doing something different. Check and double-check. As Einstein said, no problem was ever solved on the same level of thinking it was created on. Our brains love to keep the assumptive processes on the same level. It requires therefore an extra paradigm-shifting push, more than the effort of our first hunch.

Wright

Okay, so I hear that we have to almost second-guess, in a healthy way, our thinking in the first place. Is this what you call metacognition? Tell us more about this.

Fleming

Yes, the word “metacognition” is a fancy term that comes out of the cognitive neuroscience literature. (I’m still struggling with a friendly way of phrasing that in the executive world because I know sometimes I lose people when I use it.) Metacognition is really just a fancy word that means thinking about our thinking versus doing multiple approaches or projects from assumptively the same base of thinking.

A metacognitive shift with a client occurs when all of a sudden the filter in the brain that is used to perceive the world lifts, and it’s as if another lens is thrown in front of the person’s eyes; his or her vision changes radically. This isn’t just a minor shift either. Promoting metacognition can be very dramatic. Usually, when you’re looking at problems of sustainability, problems of execution, and corporate transformation, your answers are going to typically lie on a deeper metacognitive level.

The problem is that in many cases, leadership teams do not want the problems that come with initial paradigm shifts (e.g., temporary drops in productivity, turnover, strategic realignments, etc.). In many cases, a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too mentality prevents the process from even starting. We get too comfortable, reactively or fearfully holding on to what we have while ignoring the signs that it’s time to change. We get the comfort of being right, while losing the fight that matters. The goal is to be effective and this will require change.

I had a CEO who missed his metacognitive moment when he chose another traditional corporate retreat planning session over a radical invitation to change assumptions. He ignored my recommendations when I told him that the internal dialogue of his team is compliant oriented and if he did another retreat his problem would be the satisfaction that he would feel. Somehow, he needed to get at what was not being said versus setting up methodologies that fed the verbal, linguistic side of things.

I also told him that if he didn’t believe how common it is to feel that one is changing styles and strategies at a deep level when one is really not, I recommended that he have his executive team list some of the recent initiatives, policies, and change plans that he had rolled out and try to find a common denominator. Chances are they were different versions of the same assumptions previously made.

I told him it was time to make a meta-shift and to think about their thinking in many of the things that were believed to be valuable.

We all have information, thanks to Google. But few of us have knowledge, which to me is depth (versus breadth) and where mastery of illusions truly is conquered strategically. Said another way, the world may be flat in terms of information processing speed in the twenty-first century, but human beings mastering a concept

and needing the ability to make their own connections themselves is a timeless law of humanity that is not affected by technology as much as we want so desperately to believe!

Wright

You have talked briefly about some of the deeper issues involved in the overhaul of the process around executive development. But assuming that the assessment process does indeed go to some of the deeper levels that you have described what exactly are you looking for in this A-level executive?

Fleming

Certainly, as I alluded to earlier, critical thinking is probably the mother trait of them all. As I mentioned earlier, Justin Menkes, in his book, *Executive Intelligence*, talks about this sort of thing and I am definitely a big fan of the argument he makes. I also think that the exceptional executive also has a very strong, conscious awareness of the different value trade-offs that are being made in certain moments.

Full spectrum leaders can see many perspectives simultaneously and can communicate masterfully to tiers of their companies' leaders who are seeing different pieces of the whole pie. This cognitive flexibility, nonjudgmental presence of the importance of all value levels, and unwavering commitment to communicate this importance with authentic engagement to the whole culture is a rare gem. I believe human beings are wired to be self-interested creatures that choose only to go above and beyond the "what's in it for me" impulse when they hold a value greater than that self-interest. If what I just said is true, then we are all in a precarious balance—at a tipping point—where self-centeredness/resentment/backsliding can get switched on in a heartbeat when we are offended or are not acknowledged. An executive who knows this *fragility* will be diligent and mindful and lead high performance as no other. And please note, being aware of humanity's fragility about this does not mean treating people with kid gloves. That phrase alludes to the way one is speaking not to the awareness itself. Be tough on committing one's self to looking for fundamentals of humanity; be compassionate in connecting attempts about it.

I also think an exceptional executive has conquered fear in his or her life. I think at the end of the day, fear fuels reactivity and reactivity fuels poor execution. I am also a big fan of looking all around the radar screen at all aspects of the executive's life because there are many parallels between family life and work life. A keen eye can discern some "natural" decision-making tendencies when the pressure is off and when one is presumably able to choose more naturally. In high stress corporate settings, this natural part of executives gets more opaque over time because they have learned the motions and the patterns needed but not necessarily desired.

I also think they've gotten a handle on what I call the half-truths of success, which is what my new book, *The Half-Truth High: Breaking the Illusions of The Most Powerful Drug in Life and Business*, is about. These are things that are very commonly accepted in the business coaching industry, but when taken out of context and misapplied poorly across time, they become linked to some subtle or extreme failures of thinking. I think they therefore understand half-truths of business life really well and are seeking, with ever more prudent perceptive abilities, a systems-wide answer to things. And this is not easy! I mean, we're learning more and more about how we miss things every day. In other words, we have two hundred billion bits of information coming at us in our brain, and we are processing maybe 5 percent of that at any moment. So what does that mean? It means that we're missing a lot of data as it comes into our brain. Well, exceptional executives are aware of this and are always seeking several opinions from extremely diverse individuals in addition to their own perception because they know that will approximate truth. I think that's a huge, huge trait.

The capacity to unlearn, as I noted earlier, is also big with executives' success—can they unlearn the things they've rationalized to be successful at a prior point in time?

Marshal Goldsmith, one of the eminent executive coaches of our day, has a great book called, *What Got You Here, Won't Get You There*. What he's implicitly saying is that a certain skill set needs to be unlearned and a more radically different set of skills learned when values and goals shift and as new problems get more complex. Great executives can make that train track switch very well. They can unlearn and learn again, so again, there's that flexibility piece.

I think what doesn't get a lot of press, but is pretty interesting as a predictor of success for executives, is the ability to seek and work well with paradox. The more I do this work, the more I realize that I'm more a philosopher than a psychologist, studying ancient laws of the "what is-ness" of things. I see paradoxes in things a lot more, and I think that not being uncomfortable with that is a very good trait and very predictive of great *true* success. This is really critical nowadays because I think the complex "order in chaos" type of universe we live in is not divorced from business. When we invite paradox, we engage with complexity and therefore reality. When one is aligned with reality, one realizes the craziness of this statement: in physics we have three laws that explain everything in the world and yet in management consulting it seems that we have ninety-nine laws that explain 3 percent of what really matters. This may be tongue-in-cheek, but you get the point. The exceptional executive is not what you build. It is what you get when one builds nothing but being at peace with "what is" in him or her and can work with others' "what is-ness" to allow the combination of free choice and a maximization of a vision to happen together. In this presence, the exceptional human being is what you *get* --not what you create through tests and

numbers, pie charts and graphical recommendations. Much like the saying, “happiness is in the waiting room of happiness,” I feel that the truly amazing human being is not something you go after to be. It is the byproduct of choosing well, accepting, and learning more about how to learn.

Wright

You certainly sound like a very different type of shrink. What are your thoughts of your other shrink brethren who have made the leap from the clinical world over to the organizational world as you have? Is this style or approach you are espousing common from your side of the clinical psychology fence?

Fleming

It’s a good question. First off, I don’t think that any psychologist who walks into his multivariate stats class in graduate school dressed like Elvis Presley singing a made-up song on his guitar titled “You Ain’t Nothing But a Data Point, Not Fitting on the Line” is any sane human being (laughs). But I digress. Many called me the Patch Adams of my department because I had the courage to shake up things a bit and make us a bit less stiff and more “real.” I sometimes think rule-breaking (with boundaries) is needed in the successful life. I didn’t know it then but I think I still bring that “did he really say that?” effect into my conversations with leaders today.

But putting those memories aside, turning back to the original question, I guess I would first have to say that I would never come down on somebody who is entrepreneurial enough to leave something that may have some issue that doesn’t fit with him or her, and explore something else. Especially with the rise of managed care, I see a lot of psychologists perceiving the squeeze fairly well in the clinical world, and seeing a lot of their autonomy and creativity that they needed to be an exceptional psychologist robbed by paperwork hours for managed care stuff. I certainly see a natural avenue here for a clinically-minded shrink (but not overly so). I mean, here we are as experts in human nature; we understand the brain and pathology better than anybody else, and we know how to set up relationships better than anyone else. So it does make sense from the expertise side of things.

The concern I have, however, is this: I get a lot of psychologists who want to be supervised or coached on how to be an executive coach or life coach. I usually have to be very careful about this because many of these people have motivations I question. Being unhappy with one thing and having a passionate call toward another can be two different motivational poles.

Marty Seligman, one of the greatest psychologists of our time and who is responsible for the Positive Psychology movement, really taught us that decreasing a negative or symptom in our life and increasing a positive or virtue in our life can be two

different centers that aren't necessarily the same. If we confuse these internally, we will likely confuse them with our clients when they want to "change." One person's definition of change could just mean "stop doing something ineffective," and another's could be "stop doing something ineffective and play everything safe from now on." Yet another's could be "stop doing something ineffective and learn the most preferred skill in future instances." All these scenarios require artfully connecting with connotations of change.

I've got many clients who literally want to be only less depressed and still other people who say, "I'm less depressed, but there is something more to life than just making me less depressed, doc. Maybe I am missing something." Well, that's a whole other level of something to grapple with in a session. Or the parallel to leadership quagmires works here too; for some leaders it is really about transformational leadership—internally and externally—and for others it is leading enough to convince others that they are about change.

And so, I really think the critical issue here for psychologists who want to be coaches is: what is the true internal motivation and can you discern some of these finer points in your own life and with your own clients in clinical settings?

When I get phone calls from folks wanting to be coached, I look for a long train of decision-making to see the shrink world differently and start challenging it early on—a type of, "I-know-it-sounds-crazy-but-I-can't-help-but-see-things-this-way" kind of persistence of eccentric thought. To me, these types of psychologists, who have just enough rebel in them but who are also grounded in the principles and ethics of the field, are my ideal client to be coached. They can do nothing but offer a paradigm-shifting perspective to an otherwise unilateral, linear thinking base of business coaches. This is a burst of innovation that really matters and we need to innovate our thinking first, then our technology.

And to clarify, no, I am not an anti-shrink who feels there isn't a place for traditional psychotherapy. Certainly for many there is. My call for change within our field is more about what neuroscience is saying is a key component to accelerating learning and potential within, which is to constantly reinvent yourself for greater good (versus telling others why they are wrong, because this is not true change). According to neuroscientist Dr. Joe Dispenza, this is a key part of the profile of human beings who have transformed themselves. And to me, we cannot lead transformation if we are not doing this ourselves—with accountability for *not* doing it. Think of how many leaders who have others holding them accountable for not breaking through paradigms and challenging conventional thinking. Not many.

Wright

You have a distinct view of the corporate retreat phenomenon that's so common; would you tell our readers more about that?

Fleming

That's right, the thing about many corporate retreats is that they don't quite do what we think they are going to do, but they give us the perception and feeling that they will, which is actually a dangerous combination. It's one thing if a CEO could say, "Let's go do a corporate retreat that will actually do nothing to change things, but let's have a good time and make everyone feel as if we are, okay? Here we go!" That would be great to hear; at least we are aligned with reality. But since people learn a lot more on a collateral level (i.e., adventitiously or in-between-the-main-stuff-you-are-teaching kind of learning), one has to watch out what type of learning you are doing underneath your structured content. Implicit learning and assumptions are always found right next to an agenda or a meeting planner's prescribed sheet of events—they go hand-in-hand.

To promote a radical shift here, I've always thought what would be interesting is to prepare HR and OD staff for the presence of this phenomenon by "pulling them into what's really going on here" with a reality television show type of video of a corporate retreat. I guarantee it would make them think twice about budgeting for something like this next quarter. It would also jumpstart their creative heads and hearts to better align with "what is" in their company. What do I mean? In this show, corporate retreat participants would be filmed in and out of the event sessions having off-the-cuff and transparent dialogues about what they think of the speaker and topics. Coveted secrets would be "spilled" to certain divisional operations by way of confessional booths (video diaries) where folks tell it all about so and so. Talk about making a 360 degree assessment look stale! All and all, it would be a show about "the internal dialogue" of employees.

And if you think this is just more of a metaphoric play on a reality show to make a point here, think again. Steven Johnson, in his mind-bending book called *Everything Bad is Good For You*, talks about how pop culture television is not only "not disintegrating" our minds and brains, but actually making us smarter. He analyzes reality television shows and the mental modeling around the intense social networking that it teaches observers. One may think that television viewers are passively tuning out with the flat screen television; but rather, we are participating in critical thinking, such as what would we do in those double-blind scenarios of reality show relationships? Through neuroplasticity we are reshaping our brains to be better prepared for the real life cost/benefit ratios of trying to navigate truth in a half-truth social world where agendas rule. This kind of television program is actually enriching our prefrontal cortex because we are navigating this stuff every day anyway, even if we minus out the artificiality of certain settings.

If this is a true argument, it makes an important case to re-evaluate whether or not our corporate training methodologies used on these two-dimensional corporate retreat escapades really match the complex neural networking and mapping we are responding to every day back in the office. If not, maybe our corporate retreats, not pop culture media—the token fall guy—are making us dumber (if not, certainly ill-prepared for the non-rope course reality that we know).

Wright

You're recent book is titled, *The Half-Truth High: Breaking the Illusions of the Most Powerful Drug in Life and Business*. How did you come up with that title, and what exactly is the book about?

Fleming

The title has an interesting evolution that is not typical, I would imagine, of other business books. You see, I attended Notre Dame and, as a Catholic, was raised to love many of the great theologians of our day. My favorite was C. S. Lewis. While at the University, I was exposed to his classic, *The Screwtape Letters*. I fell in love with the brilliant methodology in this book. What C. S. Lewis did was create this dialogue, through the writing of letters, between a father demon of sorts and his nephew, Wormwood, about how to secure the damnation of earthly mankind. But what was really interesting about it was the insidious ways in which it was done. The plans made did not use the stereotypical means of evil such as brute force or overt destruction; but rather, predominantly through excessive confusion. They utilized things that weren't so bad on the surface but over time could erode and tie up neurotically the most noble soul. The way, therefore, to best prevent insight and truth was to make people think that they were on the right path, but in actuality they were far from the righteous path.

So that's where I came up with the idea over time (because I've reread this book over the years) that the most insidious thing we can do for change is to sell half-truths, not "not do" anything at all, which is what people want to think is the true nemesis to change. You know, we clearly can read and see things that are not good for us. If someone came up to a company leader and said, "I think you all need to have a notorious convicted murderer as your keynote speaker next week," I think we'd all agree that's probably not going to be good for the spirit and integrity of the company. But what's more difficult to discern are the half-truths of success because they wear no sign per se on their head, and instead, evoke a certain kind of reasonability among the people hearing the ideas.

Before we get into an example, let me tell you how the book was divided. I wanted to tap into three of the most vulnerable areas in modern society where using half-truths is at work. The book is made up of three sections: the half-truths of psychotherapy, the

half-truths of business coaching, and the half-truths of the Judaeo-Christian culture. (The latter, as you know, is riddled with a lot of politics and contention these days amid the backdrop of Islam that has brought religion issues front and center more than ever.) In essence, I wanted to offer a section of the book that touched on some of the real-world issues out there now.

So let's look at one of the half-truths I note in the book: "Just do it." It sounds good and reasonable, right? It certainly makes sense for the victim, the lazy one, or for validation of all the enthusiastic passionate ones out there. However, if you dive into this thinking a bit deeper you can catch more subtly an implicit half-truth that needs "to be owned" and inquired about more delicately before such a mantra could graduate to the full truth dictionary of definitions, so to speak. What do I mean? The half-truth that I think is implicitly in there is this (as it speaks to us in a kind of Screwtape-type letter) all knowing instructional-like way:

Just do it—Search for most of the elements in your life where a just-do-it attitude has gotten the job done, and use that as your proof that you're getting things done in other realms of your life, when in reality, "just doing it" is actually missing the boat, including all the complexities, nuances, and the under-the-radar-screen stuff that you need to address. But when you feel a pang, continue to move on because the consistent action and commitment to moving will ensure you that you are not stuck.

This sounds so reasonable, doesn't it? Don't you know a few people like this who plow through life, not with malice but with a self-justified logic like the above?

So you can see I am trying to get people to slow down a bit and inquire. I want them to wonder more completely about why they are doing what they are doing. I'm attempting to call their brain out on its "automatic sentence completion" tendencies. Instead, I want them to double-check and reread all the meta-level scripts that are being filed away about their thinking and why they are doing what they are doing. The best red marks from your meanest teacher on your homework papers could probably not catch the crafty half-truths that you have filed away as "gospel."

And yes, some people may say that I am suggesting we all become the neurotic Woody Allen character, but certainly that is not so. Neuroticism is excessive inquiry in a looping fashion that has no proven impact or value evidenced in behavior change. It's thinking the same uncritical way over and over while expecting change irrationally. I am talking about inquiry with intentionality and intelligence—changing assumptions

and paradigms inside thoughts so as to make your goal of behavior change less insane and more of a reality.

Wright

You have mentioned a quote earlier on that I want to go back to. It was from Eduardo Punset about discerning between what is important and what is essential. I am seeing it in so much of what you are doing. What exactly does this mean?

Fleming

I fell in love with this quote when I read his book, *The Happiness Trip*, it was somewhere in there. I remember writing it down on a scrap of paper and thinking about it for many days. It hit me that its power is in the two poles it compares: importance and essence. When framed this way, it forced reason to be more precise and more reliable over time. It raised the bar of critical thinking. And I think that is what our culture is forcing us to do inside all our decisions these days. I think we may have the best technology for entertainment or brain soothing activities, but our thinking quality for social complexities pales in comparison. We have lost the art of thinking well. Even our rationalizations have evolved hand-in-hand with our higher IQs.

Case in point: In *Harvard Business Review's* February 2008 edition, a very interesting article was written called "How Honest People Cheat" by Dan Ariely. In this provocative piece, an enlightening notion about humanity was uncovered that I think shows the need to better measure such finer discernments of our thinking these days.

While most people would agree that our society is not predominantly made up of overt liars and over-the-top sociopaths. One would have to admit that many of us "stretch boundaries" and evoke our dishonest potential in more subtle ways. They are masked in the whole "how much can we get away without being caught" mindset. And so, in some university experiments that are set up to test under what conditions otherwise honest people would cheat, some interesting observations were made. First, when tempted, most of us are willing to be a "little dishonest" regardless of the risks. Secondly, even when we have no chance of getting caught, few of us really become wild liars to an extreme, and exploit the situation. It is as if our conscience puts some sort of limit on us. Lastly, it appears as if we fall victim to justifying our manipulations the further removed we are from cash or monetary stakes. That is, nonmonetary exchanges seem to give us more latitude for half-truths.

And given that life is made up mostly of these types of exchanges, I argue that Punset's quote is right on in telling us we must keep up with this closing gap between what we think is important (which could be a half-truth) and what is truly essential.

This happens because there are more and more negative forces telling us they are essentials; but they aren't.

What are some of these things that I think are the essential things to know? Well, they may sound rather heady but these three principles, if you think about it, really do give you a brilliant framework to catch your half-truths:

First, I believe in the psychological law of reactivity. For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If you resist this, then the message to drop your foolishness will get stronger in terms of negative consequences and will typically lead you eventually to this point of reason. Many people try to fight nature and the law of gravity and they lose. But if you fight this, the dangerous part is not in your pain, it is in the attachment you feel to the thing you push against—you become the thing you push against. Any belief should be held up to the light for its beauty and truth to be fully seen. Said another way, seeing one's decision-making outside of an interconnected system of choices and consequences is a violation of what is-ness and eventually will show you the error of your ways, even if in some subtle manner. If you push down on an air bubble, it is going to come up somewhere.

Secondly, no two objects can occupy the same space at the same time. This physics notion sounds trivial, but is it? There are many professionals who, if you don't slow their angry diatribes down, violate reality as they try to mix two emotions, for instance, together at the same time and place. Since many decisions—good and bad—are born from the affective dimension, this essence principle becomes a good one to know and coach on.

I also try to take apart sentences when executives attempt to inadvertently trick me in the need for speed in what they are saying. Nine times out of ten there is some push to violate awareness of this law and blow off the table the actual trade-off that displaced one thing for another.

Third, if you let anything be as it is and complete its "cycle" of behavior, it will go to fruition and eventually disappear. Our fear and perceived double-binds make us think that something needs to be controlled or fixed when we will actually do more harm both to the actors themselves and to the "reap-and-sow" process that defines all that we do and "that is."

To me, these are the things of essence that ground us. They are certainly the common denominators of many perceived problems in attempts to be successful. Success is what happens when you align with natural laws. We have brainwashed ourselves that success is something you do to yourself in some prescribed code of things. Actually, the ignorance factor around us has grown so much that the contrast effect has led us to believe success is something we do to climb the ladder. But, nowadays, I think success is climbing back out of the hole we have created to the

ground base of reality. If we can climb this ladder, it is the most essential thing we can do.

Wright

In a market saturated with success books, all promising a certain taste of it if you do xyz, what promises do you make, then, if a client chooses to work with you?

Fleming

I promise people that they will know the truth of how ready they *really* are to seek the things they say they want. In my years of doing this work, I have grown to become comfortably skeptical about the script of what people say they want to do in a change effort. Many times this is the “should” part of them speaking and it is difficult to discern, so I like to tilt the scale so dramatically that the compliant folks fall off—the angle is too tough for their weak heart and myopic eyes.

I promise folks that they will become more acutely aware of the trade-offs and implications of their supposed choices. This is a very personalized process and one that, if chosen, will always trump the compliant process that dutifully engages, but for inauthentic reasons.

And assuming one approaches the change process with commitment not compliance, I promise my clients that their change plans will be full of what Jim Collins called “catalytic mechanisms”—things that are truth detectors and air-tight governors on their decisions that prevent their failure. These are powerful and not for the weak-hearted.

Jim tells a story about a company searching for a catalytic mechanism to ensure their empty words about being committed to “customer service.” The answer? Allow customers to cross out the amount on an invoice and write their own amount in and the reason why they are not paying full price. Amazing. But this is a true, air-tight process to ensure you are really doing what you say in your coaching that you want to do. This decision may not work for you and your company, but I say that the principle remains. Putting the same air-tight intensity around what you *say* matters to you and your team.

My clients are creatively challenged in the same way to ensure preventing the inadvertent building up of half-truths while spending money and time on illusions. I wrote an article recently for *Executive Decision* magazine titled “ROI: Return on Investment or Return on Illusion?” I discuss many of the metric issues that plague us in this search for air-tight truth and transparency in our efforts. It’s a lot trickier than we think.

Lastly, I promise my clients that I am not God and cannot change the order of things—to give them no pain in the process of transformation. There is always the parenthetical portion to growth and development that is unsaid but there. For example, “Doc I want—(and please don’t let it hurt too badly or take away another thing that I actually want more but won’t tell you upfront).”

My clients get real with me right off the bat. It may not feel good, but it gets real. I have learned that if you seek reality it may not feel good, but you will find lasting joy. (And the good news is that there are collective parallels here, not just for individuals, but for teams and cultures). I don’t know about you, but I will take that any day; it doesn’t sound like a trade-off to me!

Wright

Well, what an interesting conversation. I have really learned a lot and I appreciate the time you’ve taken to answer all these questions this afternoon.

Fleming

It’s my pleasure; it’s really good to be with you.

Wright

Today we’ve been talking with Dr. Kevin Fleming, who has combined in a fascinating way neuroscience and executive development thinking that is bold and truth-based. Definitely what our world needs to today.

Dr. Fleming, thank you so much for being with us today on *Roadmap to Success*.

Fleming

My pleasure.

ABOUT DR. FLEMING

Dr. Fleming is President and CEO of an international executive development and coaching firm concentrating on aligning best practice ideas with neuroscience and brain excellence. He is a trained neuropsychologist-turned-executive coach and has been a cited expert in the *New York Times* and *Christian Science Monitor*. His latest book, *The Half-Truth High*, prompted a request to speak to the Ministers and Prime Ministers of Jordan and United Arab Emirates. He is an expert columnist on “Transformations” for *Executive Decision* magazine. Richard Koch, bestselling author of *The 80-20 Principle* has noted Dr. Fleming’s work as “a wonderfully authentic approach from the shrink who doesn’t like shrinks.”



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