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**FEATURE**

CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT FROM WITHIN

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**Some practitioners demonstrate a high level of personal mastery. What do they have that the rest of us long for, and where does it come from? Is such behaviour a technique that can be acquired through training?**



I have met capacity development (CD) practitioners whose initiatives have a meaningful, lasting impact. Their names may never be memorialised in books, nor etched in monuments, but their behaviour inspires us. They have a unique combination of determination, courage, humility, and the ability to listen deeply. They create authentically empowering relationships and can bring people together to collaborate on complex change. We can analyse their skills and behaviours, and break down their work to identify their competencies and knowledge, but that does not tell the whole story.

Just like truly exceptional teachers, nurses, and other professionals, exceptional CD practitioners demonstrate behaviours, practices, skills and ways of being that are aligned and authentic. What separates them from competent practitioners is that they have access to the deeper layers of who they are. They consciously attend to the quality of their doing, as well as to their inner state of being.

***Doing and being***

What is the difference between 'doing' and 'being'? In an article on authentic leadership, Galvin and O'Donnell discuss the seven layers of leadership practice that apply equally well to CD practice. Their model (see box) offers a powerful way of seeing the unique differences between 'doing' and 'being'.

The top three layers – behaviour, practices and skills – are about 'doing'. These tend to be the focus of human resource development activity in the organisational context. They represent the skills and knowledge you have practised and bring to the job. You probably learned them in training programmes and in your day-to-day work.

The bottom layers – framing, character and alignment – are more fundamental personal 'roots'. They inform the way you see the world, they colour your choices, and they offer a way of understanding why you are called to do what you do. They nurture and inform the fundamental principles you believe in and the spirit of your practice. You learned these from your family and community; you have been learning and testing them your whole life.

The middle layer – self – spans the two big pieces of 'doing' and 'being'. It is a combination of the 'you' we see in your unique physical characteristics, and the unique 'you' that manifests itself in the way you express yourself: your preferences and tastes, both inward and outward.

	Layer	Definition	Indicators	Development
DOING	Behaviour	Directly observable actions and activity	Effort and immediate results	Look for tools, tips and practical techniques to improve your execution
	Practices	Well established, repeatable patterns of behaviour	Consistency and transferability	Look for best practices that you can adopt to improve effectiveness
	Skills	Acquired knowledge and proficiency	Competence and efficacy	Develop your abilities to increase your capacity and performance as a leader
	Self	Unique capabilities and limitations of body, mind and spirit	Personality, strengths and style	Develop a growing awareness of who you are at your best
BEING	Framing	Assumptions and mental models in use when engaging the world and others	Connection to reality and to others	Examine your worldview and engage others in thinking deeply and learning together
	Character	Internalised principles that drive choices and behaviour	Values, ethics and integrity	View your greatest challenge as becoming a more authentic person
	Alignment	Being in step with a larger purpose outside of yourself	Sense of calling, synchronicity and flow	Ask yourself, "What is trying to happen through me?"

*Seven layers of leadership. Source: Galvin and O'Donnell (2005).*

The dominant forces in the world tend to reinforce our addiction to 'doing' and emphasise that successful or effective CD practice can be produced by concentrating on the top three layers. Various forms of behaviour and practice are assessed and it is for these that we are compensated. Development work is not highly routine, but there are many routine and technical aspects to capacity development practice, from writing reports to specific methodologies for facilitating planning and change (e.g. logframe analysis).

There is no doubt that these upper, more visible layers are important in terms of performance and effectiveness. The difficulty is that when the situations we face do not fit what we 'know', or are too complex for our skill sets, we feel threatened or unnerved. Instead of stopping to re-examine our mindsets or models, we tend to try and break down and oversimplify things; often forcing the problem into pre-existing models, or fitting ideas to the way we think things should be. This approach puts our perfectly good 'skill ladders' up against the wrong walls, and ultimately wastes time and energy.

Even after many years of working on complex change initiatives, there are times when we can feel lost. I have often come up against new problems or new complexities, and I feel disoriented for a while. The situation is unfamiliar; none of the old frameworks and 'recipes' work. Questions and self-doubt appear: Am I up to the task? Is it possible to make a difference here? Do I have the courage, the audacity to continue on this path? And then, I look more deeply within myself, and find a way forward.

In talking with CD practitioners, I see they are often burdened with similar uncertainties, self-doubt and feelings of discouragement about their capacities to really make a difference. They look for courses to learn new behaviours. They ask about books and courses that could help, and sometimes they do. But layering new behaviour upon new behaviour does not truly address their fundamental concerns; the challenge is in understanding how to be.

### **Exceptional practitioners**

When we examine what truly authentic, effective and credible CD practitioners actually do, and what they and others see and say about their ways of working with people and systems, we discover a richer, more complex picture.[1] These exceptional practitioners demonstrate several approaches and characteristics in their work, which include:

- **An innovative mindset**

They recognise that they may have some technical knowledge or expertise, but this will not be sufficient for sustainable change in a complex system. They can shift from a know-it-all, authoritative stance to one which facilitates and mobilises small experiments or innovations. Once these have been proven, they work to scale them up.

Making the shift from being perceived as a technical expert, to being seen as a colleague who is working with the system to mobilise innovation, requires a deep connection with the 'being' levels of Galvin and O'Donnell's model. To realise innovation, the practitioner must authentically demonstrate humility and show a willingness to explore ways to incorporate differing, sometimes conflicting worldviews about what is 'right' and 'necessary' for change to happen.

- **An understanding that change happens through trusting, mutually supportive relationships**

Exceptional practitioners have learned that trust must be earned, and this is achieved by *proving to be trustworthy*. This can be done various ways. One of the most effective is for the practitioner to non-judgmentally raise issues and ask

questions that are perceived to be risky, and not back away when resistance surfaces. This requires more than effective communication skills; it requires *inner courage*, which comes from continuously examining and testing the principles which guide your entire life, not just your work.

- ***The ability to understand resistance and treat it with compassion***

CD requires practitioners to skilfully disturb and change enduring patterns of activity. Resistance arises most strongly when actors see that changing patterns will result in direct losses (status, wealth, power, importance), competence losses ('we only knew how to do it the old way, we don't know a new way'), or loyalty losses (asking people to do things differently from their teachers subtly threatens or betrays loyalty to their ancestry or traditions).

Treating resistance with compassion is much more than having good negotiation skills. It is about deeply understanding one's own inner resistance about threat and loss. It means being aware that positive change happens when substantive values are respected and preserved *while* we add new ways of being and learning to grow and change.

- ***Integrative thinking***

CD theory is always changing, and there are innumerable theories and models to inform it. Unfortunately, I have seen how these models can become entrenched as unhelpful 'truths,' 'recipes' or 'formulas' for change. Exceptional capacity development practitioners realise that their fundamental assumptions and mental models *always* shape what they see and call 'reality', and that these are *not* always the best fit for the situation. They are willing to reflect on what they see and acknowledge a *profound dissatisfaction with existing models*. They are willing to find or create new models or ways of moving forward, and give themselves time to test their ideas.

Most importantly, they are skilful at getting others to sit with them to explore how to do things differently and more effectively, rather than following accepted wisdom. Instead of seeking to influence people and systems towards the 'right' model, these integrative thinkers constructively face the tensions of opposing models and generate a creative resolution, bringing the best elements of opposing models together.

### ***Holding the light***

How do exceptional CD practitioners acquire these skills? How do they nurture and develop their 'being' so that the quality of their 'doing' will also be enhanced? Of course they can be learned, but they are more about practice. How and what to practise is worthy of a longer article, but here are a few thoughts.

Learning how to 'be' (or, more subtly, to know how to be, or *savoir être* in French), cannot be trained in the same way that we can learn how to 'do' (*savoir faire*). Similar to the development of good health, the development of our 'being' is not an outcome; it is a state that arises from healthy personal practices.

Some exceptional practitioners have learned how to 'hold the light.' They have activities or routines (such as reading poetry, practising music, or connecting with nature) that help them remember their greater purpose and stay grounded. Many consciously develop what has been called 'unconditional confidence' — a sense of kindness or gentleness towards themselves. When they make mistakes, they can forgive themselves for the fact that they are human and therefore likely to fail. They nurture their originality and independence of thought by reflecting on their actions and by practising genuine inquiry through research and writing.

With these and many other practices, they learn to 'unfold'. With this 'unfolding', they can step into new challenges, knowing that no matter how the situation turns out, they can extend again and again.

*I want to unfold  
I don't want to stay folded anywhere,  
because where I am folded, there I am a lie.  
and I want my grasp of things  
true before you. I want to describe myself  
like a painting that I looked at  
closely for a long time,  
like a saying that I finally understood,  
like the pitcher I use every day,  
like the face of my mother,  
like a ship  
that took me safely  
through the wildest storm of all.*

— From Rainer Maria Rilke, *I am too alone in the world, and not alone enough*.

### Further reading

*Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Robert Bly, Silver Hands Press, New York, 1981.

Chödrön, Pema (2002) *The Places That Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times*. Shambhala Classics.

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Intrator, S. and Scribner, M. (eds) (2007) *Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead*. Jossey Bass.

Martin, R.L. (2007) *The Opposable Mind: How Successful Leaders Win through Integrative Thinking*. Harvard Business School Press.

Palmer, P.J. (1999) *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. Jossey Bass.

Senge, P.M., Scharmer, C.O., Jaworski, J. and Flowers, B.S. (2005) *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations and Society*. Doubleday.

[1] For detailed examples of effective capacity development practice, see the case studies published by SNV:

Visser, H. and Richter, I. (2009) *Multi-stakeholder Sector Development and Complex Change Facilitation: Environmentally Friendly Road Construction in Bhutan*. SNV. [View PDF](#)

SNV (2006) *Cultivating a Canopy of Relationships: Perspectives on Change Process Facilitation*, Communal Forestry Initiative, SNV Albania.

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