

A Leadership Opportunity

Russ Volckmann, PhD



Subscribe to
Integral
Leadership
Review

Leadership

Coaching

Training

About the Book

Order Book

About Russ

Archives

Links

Home Page

An Integral Meeting by Russ Volckmann, PhD 11/11/01

"Life is an unanswered question, but let's believe in the dignity and importance of the question."

- *Tennessee Williams*

I was recently invited to attend a meeting of people interested in integral theory and applications in Alameda, California -- for which I am very, very grateful. There were about sixty people there. Key players in Ken Wilber's world, in the world of the Integral Institute, "independent" consultants, coaches, therapists, a scattering of academics from UC Berkeley, JFK University, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology and California Institute of Integral Studies -- where, I learned, there has been a history of negativity toward the work of Ken Wilber. Interestingly ironic.

There was a world of experience and mind power present in that room. The conveners of the event were partners in Integral Development Associates most of whom had come from Seattle. I spoke with one person who had come all the way from Ohio. I'm not sure I have the titles right, but Integral Institute's Director of Operations was there, as was the Chief of Staff who also is one of the partners in Integral Development Associates.

In these comments I want to share a couple of concerns that came up for me and some preliminary thoughts about how I am thinking about these. First, there is the question of language as represented by people's frustration and interest in how to communicate integral ideas in the world of business

so that they could be heard and developmentally engaged with. Second, there is the question of delivery, i.e., what is our role in bringing the wisdom of the integral to others through our work. A third concern had to do with occasional undertones of the very politics among practitioners for which Ken Wilber had railed against postmodernists in academia.

Integral Language

The work I have been doing for the last three and a half years on applying an integral perspective to executive leadership in organizations has been very challenging to me. As a result of the unwavering focus of a colleague, Chris Newham, I was forced to confront my own proclivity for jargon. My strong academic background, my years in organization development, my continuing interest in theory, ideas, concepts, have all led to the frequent trap of forgetting that if what you say is not heard and understood by others, you haven't spoken.

Consequently, the integral leadership approach offered in my writings and in the program on executive development offered through LeadCoach is devoid of most of the language of the integral. The process isn't complete, but I am learning how to talk about this stuff and work with others in a way that does not require this jargon. It talks about playing on the same field, right action and engaging with stakeholders. Still a little jargon, but a simple foundation upon which to build an edifice of effective executive leadership, individually and collectively.

So what's the point? It is that I observe a phenomenon common to people like me who are interested in ideas and in development of our talents and skills in helping others, whether through teaching, consulting, therapy or coaching. We have a tendency to want to share what excites us and turns us on. We want others to know about the richness or the depth of this new concept, this new model, this new method.

I see this most clearly when I coach professionals -- be they in the health professions, law, real estate, consulting or

coaching -- in relation to how they market their businesses and practices. Their web sites, brochures, presentations, elevator speeches are mostly about them and their models and methods. Now this is about bringing their talent and the skill to help others. Most of their preliminary efforts are attempts to sell the latest -- whatever. And they do it in the language of that latest -- whatever. I have been and probably am still as caught up in this as any of my clients have been.

The challenge is to shift to what is important for the helpee (curious term that spellcheck doesn't like). The language we use must be language that they can relate to. I doubt that even a Freudian psychotherapist would advocate for teaching his or her patients to become conversant in Freudian theory, so why do people who follow an integral approach feel the need to convey its concepts and models in the jargon of that conceptual perspective? In my area of interest, bringing an integral perspective to executive leadership, that is the language of business. We can be as well read, thoughtful, spiritual or whatever, but business reality (as my coach Mike Jay frequently points out) doesn't care.

An idea that I heard at the meeting that caught my attention went something like this. We want to work with organizations and their leaders in a way that goes beyond just doing business for the sake of making money. Now that is not a direct quote, but it makes the point. Business reality does not care that that is what we as consultants, therapists, etc. want. What is important is what the client wants. And I have yet to have a client who didn't think that making money was primary and not exclusive, but still primary. Obviously, if they don't make money, they don't stay in business.

As an executive coach I have to be mindful of business reality for my own business as well as the businesses of my clients. And I have to be at the edge with the person being coached. Is it my edge? Sometimes. But the edge I am most concerned about is their edge. From an integral perspective I try to be aware that there is not one edge, but many: body, mind, spirit and soul and business are among those. The focus of my work, then, when I am at my best is on their edges.

I think their edges are important because, at the risk of sounding green (a spiral dynamics concept for those who haven't gotten there yet), I still believe that I have to start where the client is at. And I do not believe that I am the standard bearer or conscience of where they "should be."

Integral Development and Spirit

The danger in our developmental psychologies with their hierarchies of development, it seems to me, is that the higher levels get represented as desirable, good, something to which we should all aspire while the lower levels are treated as something to transcend, to move away from, to purge.

In a presentation recently, Don Beck made it very clear that this is not his position. Rather, it is important to develop each level to be healthy (a dangerous term, and prevalent among the followers of spiral dynamics) as a part of the evolution of consciousness and action. Nevertheless, I think I detect this idea of transcending and not including in the way many of us "helpers" talk about development. I think that we have a purge mentality as a holdover from centuries of mythology, religion and psychology. We must exorcise the demons, the psychoses, whatever.

A small popular book in some coaching circles is Richard Carson's **Taming Your Gremlin**. It is unlikely to appeal to intellectual, spiritual and developmental snobs, so the fact that I like it so much is a little reassuring. And I know that ego psychology is not out of harmony with these ideas, but what delights me most about this work is the idea that what we bring with us is with us for a lifetime. We might as well make friends with it and engage with it in a way that puts us in a place of taking responsibility for making choices in what we do in our lives. I find this a refreshing alternative to purging; toss out the intellectual and psychological leeches.

Now I have really gone and done it. I have committed the very same error that I have been ranting against. I have said that we don't need to include purging. We can transcend it

and leave it behind. Well, I will work out that dilemma some other time and some other day. For now, I will just live with the paradox.

Back to the meeting: There were many people there who were steeped in various spiritual traditions, particularly meditation of one sort or another. And this is good. The spiritual is part of the integral and the meditators, as well as the non-meditators who pray or don't. It was interesting that there was someone there involved in a project to open up and make available to the rest of the world the many sacred texts of India that heretofore have been inaccessible. I believe his claim was that only about 5% of Indian spiritual wisdom is currently available to people outside that culture. I would suggest that it is probably available to an even smaller percentage of people within that culture. There were others who had introduced themselves, as meditators tend to do, with phrases such as, "I have been a meditator for seventeen years." There was also an attorney there who represented himself as a Christian. So there were a myriad of spiritual traditions that were in the same room. What could be more integral?

I meditate. Mostly I use a chakra breathing meditation that was taught to me by a client, friend, and follower of Osho. I am not a follower of Osho. Nor am I a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Moslem, a Christian or any of the other spiritual labels that many of those attending displayed and wore so proudly. I am reminded that when Ira Progoff observed to Carl Jung, "You are not a Jungian," Jung agreed. For me, this attitude of attachment and pride to a spiritual tradition represents a gap between espoused theory and theory in use.

I have a very green attitude toward spirituality. I don't know if it is healthy or not. But when it comes to spirituality, mostly an upper left quadrant phenomenon, I cannot think of many things that are more individual. Each individual, ultimately, is the master and the consort of their own spirituality. Sure, like everything else, we can learn a lot from others. We can learn from various disciplines and actions and we do -- each learning partially a product of (d)evolving consciousness. (It goes all ways.)

But why from an integral perspective continue to wear the products of our own unique experiences as badges and symbols of status and meaning? No matter what religious tradition, no matter what meditation technique, why create relationships to them based on attachment and representations of knowing. For me, it isn't about knowing. It is about becoming. And so what? That's just me and mine. Maybe there are a couple of other folks out there who think the same way. But I do not find it integral when others attempt to proselytize or treat spirituality as something they can bring to others whether through a traditional religious or integral perspective. As helpers we can support others in their quests, but we cannot know their paths.

Integral Delivery

The last point I wish to explore is that of delivery. My comments on supporting others in their spirituality relate to this. It is fundamentally the idea that we don't know what's in the future, what is right all of the time, what is important all of the time. I think of this as a kind of mysticism, but my attitude is to turn it to practical mysticism in that living in a state of intentional learning is what life is about. Do I have to add the phrase, "for me?"

Twenty plus years of organization development and the recognition that, as I believe Peter Senge pointed out, 80% of organization change efforts fail and we don't know why the other 20% succeed has brought me to the conclusion that really what we are about is action-learning. Bill Torbert's ideas and methods are one representation of this. So is the action research common to organization development.

This has implications for how we think about bringing integral perspectives to the world, particularly the world of work. There are as many modes of delivery as there are media through which to deliver. Publishing, dialogues, conversations, teaching all have their place. But proselytizing, expert consultation and trying to convince others that they "really-oughta-wanna" is counterproductive, unless it specifically contracted for as a way of bringing specific knowledge and skills into the system.

There is some learning that will take place. The best consultants leave their clients more informed, more knowledgeable, more skilled and more empowered. I am guessing that developmental coaching is a far more powerful approach to change than consulting when working with individuals and businesses. If we approach clients with the attitude that we know what they "really-oughta-wanna" do, then I think we are impeding their learning. We are distracting them from their developmental path.

Chris Argyris and Donald Schoen wrote about single and double loop learning. Robert Hargrove and Mike Jay have also talked about triple loop learning. My short hand for these is that single loop is about learning how to do better something you already know how to do. Double loop is learning about how to do new things. Triple loop is learning about the person who is learning. When coaching, Hargrove posits these as questions:

- Single loop: "How do I shift others' actions?"
- Double loop: "How do I shift others' mental models?"
- Triple loop: "How do I shift others' view of self?"

I find the questions somewhat pretentious about the role of a coach, but the ideas seem sound. How do we support others around actions (UR) and mental models (UL) and view of self (also UL). Developmentally, shifting view of self is at a deeper level than shifting mental models. Actions appear at all levels.

With this framework in mind I am then positioned to work with clients from the point of view of their development in their businesses and their lives -- since they are intertwined. In coaching the CEO of an organization recently, he suddenly shifted the focus of our work from strategy to balance in his life. He talked about how his investment of time and energy in his work was distracting from spending quality time with his two-year old son and his physical fitness. No amount of telling him what he should do would make a difference in this man's life. He already knew what he should do. He was working with issues that were more about his view of himself, and more accurately his understanding of his own

way of bringing balance to his life.

Coaching seems to me to be a powerful way of helping business clients develop along their own paths by helping them at all levels of their learning through means that are most effective to them. While teaching and consulting, etc., potentially bring useful approaches to change their effectiveness is going to be most profound when accompanied by effective executive and business coaching. It is through coaching that we can work most effectively with development because the client is clearly at the center of their developmental universe, not some concept, model or theory.

Unfinished Business

In conclusion, we are all challenged to discover the opportunities for bringing the integral perspective into our own lives and into our work. How we do this is very important. If we continue to do "politics as usual" we are still caught in an old competitive paradigm. We need to continue to develop our ability to transcend and include all of the different perspectives and dimensions that I have alluded to in these comments.

I recognize that I addressed spirit and not soul. The distinction isn't important to me today. Forgive any distortion that may arise from this. I am still learning about this aspect of life, too.

Clearly, for me, this is a work in progress. I suspect that it is for anyone who might be reading this, as well. These thoughts are not the answer, but the questions and some notions that arise for me in response. Lest there be any misunderstanding, I am deeply grateful to the conveners and participants in this meeting. Like some others there, I felt like someone who had come out of the cave to discover who else is thinking about these things. I have been disappointed that the Integral Institute strategy has been so, well, "closed kimono." This meeting was an important step in connecting each of us to a community of learning and discovery that I believe is vital in our world today.

I am grateful to the participants of the meeting for unknowingly encouraging me to step back and take a look at my experience. I hope my comments are a little provocative for some, I fear they may be a little irritating for others. And for those of you who see this as sophomoric babble, congratulations on your achievements.

Russ Volckmann, PhD, LeadCoach™ ↗
733 Mermaid Avenue, Pacific Grove, CA
93950

(831) 333-9200

Copyright © 2001, 2002, All Rights Reserved, Russ
Volckmann

Even everyday people succeed
with **everyday**
wealth

