ROADMAP to SUCCESS

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An interview with...

DR. THOMAS N. TAVANTZIS

David Wright (Wright)

Today we're speaking with Dr. Tavantzis, a licensed psychologist. He is President of Innovative Management Development (IMD) PC, a leadership and team consulting practice he founded in 1986. He also serves as Graduate Director of Training, Organizational Psychology, and Leadership programs at Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His practical psychological experience of more than twenty-eight years includes executive and leadership roles in non-profits, faculty positions in several American and Greek universities, and for the past fifteen years, a leadership and team development consultant and an executive coach to leaders of nationwide and global companies.

Dr. Tavantzis' style in creating change is typically described as "creative, insightful, growth-producing, challenging, and supportive." During the course of his career he has published professional articles, book chapters, self-help articles, and training videos, as well as appearing on local television and radio talk shows. Dr. Tavantzis recently co-edited, *Don't Waste Your Talent,* which is in its second edition. It is a book that describes a strength-based methodology to personal and career development. Currently, Dr. Tavantzis is working on a new book based on his work developing new leaders.

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

Thomas Tavantzis (Tavantzis)

Thank you, glad to be here.

Wright

So would you tell our readers a little bit about your focus on strengths in coaching and how you help individuals develop a road map to success?

Tavantzis

A fundamental idea for me is that having people understand, learn, and work from their strengths is the key for being able to contribute and be productive to an organization. Additionally, it is also being able to feel satisfied in what one is doing, and in that way it's a win-win for both the individual and for the organization.

However, unfortunately, for the most part, many people aren't aware of their strengths, they're more aware of their weaknesses, and even there, as Peter Drucker said, they are often wrong about what they don't do well. Many of the feedback systems that are in place with organizations don't really give people accurate feedback on what they do naturally and easily. The strength-based idea is getting people to understand, recognize, and use what they do easily and well. Frankly, it takes a lot more time, energy, and effort to remediate deficits in areas rather than having people move from a particular strength and then developing that strength to becoming excellent in an area.

Wright

It's strange that you're talking about people who don't recognize their strengths and weaknesses. I've been directing choral music for almost fifty years now, and you would be surprised at the number of people who sing in choirs, but who have no talent or aptitude for singing.

Tavantzis

Exactly. You'd be amazed at the number of people who are at the senior levels in organizations who really don't have a clear understanding of what they do well, and as a result they're not able to consciously focus in on their strengths. Interestingly, in not understanding one's own natural strengths one is also prevented from easily seeing how other people can best contribute on a team or in work roles.

Wright

In almost every leadership development workshop or seminar that I've attended, they almost invariably ask me to list my strengths and weaknesses. I'd be in really bad trouble if I didn't know what they are.

Tavantzis

Of course, we all learn to respond with the strengths and weaknesses we have learned about from others. What I am really talking about here is a more subtle and yet more basic level. Usually, when conducting a seminar, I ask people two questions: 1) what are the things that you do automatically and without having to think about when you first encounter a problem—how do you think? And, 2) what's your best contribution to a work team in the first five minutes?

Most people are at a loss because they're not really seeing what they are doing or how they process information automatically. These aren't big mysteries—people know somewhat, they just are not conscious of it, and therefore not able to use it purposefully in a situation. My focus is on moving hard-wired, automatic strengths into conscious awareness and purposeful use.

Wright

So how did you arrive at your present thinking model?

Tavantzis

I grew up in Athens, Greece, and had the fortunate experience of working with an American trained husband and wife team—a psychiatrist and a social psychologist at the Athenian Institute of Anthropos. They had both trained at the University of Chicago and returned to their homeland to develop their ideas in Greece. I became involved training with them when I was in college. With the Vassilious I participated in cross-cultural research, group, and family therapy and training, as well as in their work with leaders and organizations. I received early exposure and training before I knew much about anything in using systems thinking to understand people within organizations.

The particular way of approaching situations in our work was less to focus on people's pathology and weaknesses, but, rather, to focus on strengths and ask what skills they needed to develop to be more self-actualized, more competent. Our thinking focused on the premise that while one really can't do much about intelligence—that's fixed—one can help people develop their strengths, and one can certainly help people develop their social and emotional skills in how they interact, how they can be productive, useful, and how they impact others. Now I realize that we were teaching an early form of what is quite in vogue today and that is Emotional Intelligence.

Then when I was in my early twenties, I traveled with my Greek colleagues to different international conferences held in various places—Switzerland, Israel, Cyprus, and Yugoslavia—presenting papers on not only on our cross-culture research, but our work with groups and on what we were finding.

That early exposure to leaders in the field helped me because, when I returned to the United States to begin my doctoral studies, I ended up being able to work with two people who were also leaders in their fields. One is a fellow by the name of Walt Lifton, who is one of the originators of group-centered counseling, and another person, B. F. (Ted) Riess, was a psychoanalyst who also worked with organizations and leaders. From these two people I took what I had learned and went further in working with teams and individuals within organizations. For instance, in consulting, one approach was to study executives or teams in depth by videotaping their behavior in simulated situations, and then giving them feedback on what they were doing and what messages they were sending verbally and non-verbally. This was really a very micro approach to understanding individuals' strengths and building on them in real time.

I was also very involved with the family therapy movement in the late '60s and early '70s. At the time, family therapy represented a tremendous shift in thinking for psychotherapists. It was moving away from thinking about the individual as a container of problems and pathology to thinking that problems exist between people in a system. We needed to shift our thinking to how systems constrain behavior, therefore it made more sense to focus on skills and a search for strengths and not pathology. Now we learned a different question to ask when working with people—not what's wrong with them, but what strengths are they bringing to their situation, to their systems; what strengths do they possess that could be capitalized on to bring change?

It's always easier to shift people to doing more of what they're good at rather than trying to overcome and point out their weaknesses. When you start pointing out people's weaknesses, you don't really gain much. It's just much easier and more helpful to work with people from their strengths and move them further in that direction. Think of this as the difference between a deficit focus versus a strength focus and the reaction of the individual on the receiving end.

In my own small experiments with graduate students, they reported a deficit focus closing them off, increasing emotional withdrawal, and doubts about their worth and goals, while those who receive Positive or Strength-based feedback reports opened up to listening and feeling valued and quite motivated.

Wright

So how is this part of a larger paradigm shift?

Tavantzis

After the family therapy paradigm shift from person to system, some other shifts occurred as well and came along later. First, those of us in the field of psychology, about fifteen years ago, realized that we were overly focused on pathology in our training and research. Since then there has been a shift in focus toward something

called positive psychology, which is about focusing on people, on values, on optimism, and on strengths.

Similarly, in the last decade, a new field has been developed called Positive Organizational Behavior. Several years ago the *Harvard Business Review* actually identified Positive Organizational Behavior as one of the ten big trends in one of their annual editions.

Much of this focus comes from the pioneering work of Peter Drucker, Daniel Goleman, Buckingham and Clifton, and others; they all reflect this paradigm shift in the sense of a focus on strengths. Peter Drucker was a major organizational thinker; he died several years ago. His thinking set the stage, probably thirty years ago, when he talked about Information workers, which is where the majority of the working people are at this point, and their need to know how they best contribute in the workplace. What's most important, according to Drucker, is being able to know how you can best contribute, how you can best learn quickly, what role(s) are you most satisfied in, and how you can contribute best to an organization.

Strength-based thinking has advanced more and more into the center of organizations, and you can see and hear it as you talk with people about what different companies are doing. The book I co-wrote that came out two years ago, *Don't Waste Your Talent,* is really about a methodology to help people develop the answers Drucker talked about as well as how to purposefully move their careers, based on information and data they have about themselves from a variety of resources, forward. It was also written to help individuals develop their own road map for success.

Wright

So how do you assist a person to arrive at understanding his or her strengths?

Tavantzis

I spent a considerable amount of time searching for that answer in the years after my graduate studies. At the time, I was consulting for a number of organizations and I was always looking for different and better individual and team scientific assessment instruments. That led me to quite a bit of research, as I spent about nine months looking at different instruments before I finally arrived at something that I think made sense. Most of the time, especially with some of the names of leaders I mentioned moments ago, people are helped to arrive at understanding their strengths based on one of two approaches: One approach uses a self-report, where you essentially vote for how you think you are. The famous self-report tool that many people have taken is the Myers-Briggs Type Inventory. The MBTI is a self-report because you essentially vote for how you think you are. However, a self-report is not a great source of data because it relies on you knowing yourself, and for the most part, many of us deceive ourselves

quite a bit. Additionally, while a self-report does get to some important aspects, it is not a way to understand how we are hardwired to think and problem-solve.

The other main approach offered by people in our field is a 360-degree feedback, which is a multi-rater instrument. You rate yourself on certain kinds of traits, then you ask people who know you to rate you, and then you compare how you see yourself with how others see you. The critics of 360 surveys often describe it as not only an opinion poll, but a popularity contest too. Depending on how people feel about you they're going to rate you in certain ways. In and of themselves self-reports and 360s are not terrible approaches, as long as they are reliable and valid instruments; they're just not very good ways to get at your natural strengths. They instead get at your perceptions and other people's perceptions.

What I and others find is that the gold standard in psychometric testing is the use of work samples. A work sample is a timed test that isolates a particular cognitive trait. Let's say you want to understand how a person uses a particular way of problem solving. You would present him or her with a problem or puzzle that needs to be solved in a limited period of time. The person either possesses that ability and can solve the puzzle easily, or struggles. Time expires and that particular problem-solving ability might be revealed as not being a particular strength that the person has.

In the early nineties I found an instrument called The Highlands Ability Battery (THAB), which is based on measuring people on twenty-three different work samples. Each work sample measures a different natural strength or ability that we are "hard-wired" to use. What is revealed is how we naturally think, how we problem-solve, and what roles we seek out. The THAB is the foundation for my working with people in helping them look at their strengths. Instead of trial-and-error or having you "vote" for how you think you are, the Battery work samples reveal very clearly and objectively as to what are you hardwired to do easily.

Wright

Will you provide some examples of abilities that you measure?

Tavantzis

As I said, there are twenty-three that we measure (and probably more abilities that we have not yet figured out how to measure), but one of many that I find most interesting is something we call "Time Frame." A person is presented with a puzzle and we ask him or her to respond under the pressure of time in a particular way to a series of line drawings. Then from the responses, we look at the normative data of those who have also taken this work sample. We can then arrive at the person's percentile ranking.

What Time Frame purports to measure is one's natural way of thinking ahead. For instance, what's the distance between the time you make a decision and the time

frame you can tolerate before you need to see a result? How far into the future do you think? Are you one of those people who can think five or seven years ahead? Not that you spend all your time there, but when something happens, you're able to look ahead into the implications of a decision.

People who score high in Time Frame—who have this as a strong ability as measured by this particular work sample—are people like CEOs of global companies, five-star generals, labor union negotiators, people who have to negotiate long-term contracts, people who seek out and do well in long-range planning and negotiations, and strategic thinkers in organizations. These types of people typically come out to be high in Time Frame.

Now, people who struggle with this work sample are more likely to be in what's called low or immediate time frame. They are like the "firemen" in an organization; it is almost as though they thrive in situations where they are asked to "put out fires." Give them a problem to solve, give them a project that is broken, and let them get on it, turn it around, and get immediate results; that's the key for Immediate Time Frame people. Typically, they're looking at a turnaround anywhere between three and nine months and so they are propelled by that sense of closure and the gratification of wrapping up and moving on.

Now, this doesn't mean to say that if you score low in Time Frame you can't think ahead. I've worked with engineers in plants and, almost uniformly, they're all immediate time frame. When I asked them about their job, they saw their job as "When the lights go out, our job is to put the lights back on." However, they also had to think about planned obsolescence of equipment, so that demanded that they spend some time thinking ahead. This is where skills come in versus abilities. Skills are what you've learned through experience and training, so they've learned to do planning, but it just wasn't as easy or as stress-free, and it didn't come as automatically as being driven for results in the immediate.

Wright

I wish I had talked to you before my daughter went into college last year.

Tavantzis

Recently, I received an e-mail from someone who had been part of a corporate program I conducted in 2003. His son had just turned sixteen and he recalled my saying that "the children can take the Ability Battery after fifteen." This man's son is sixteen and, as the father said, "I'd sure like him to take The Ability Battery because, as he comes up to thinking about his junior and senior year, it's going to help how he studies and how he thinks ahead." Across their lifespan people have found The

Highlands Ability Battery useful when it comes to making decisions about roles, tasks, and work environments.

Another ability we measure is called "Classification." Now, this is a fast-paced, problem-solving ability. If people score strongly in this they need to be in roles that call for fast-paced decision-making.

Here is how it works: people are presented with a series of seven pictures, and they have to pick three that have something to do with each other. Sounds easy, doesn't it? However, the work sample is composed of nineteen increasingly complex problems and less time to solve them. A person who has this ability can look at how unrelated facts go together quickly and can solve problems without a lot of information. We are really measuring inductive problem solving and decision-making where one takes disparate information and pulls it together quickly to conclusion.

People who score high in Classification are typically drawn to roles or environments that are very chaotic, unstructured, and where they're being asked to solve problems—novel problems—on a regular basis; that is exhilarating for them. Typically, people who score high in Classification would be drawn to work where new and novel problems come at them rapidly (e.g., trial attorneys or emergency room physicians).

For example, when you go to see your doctor you want to give him or her a constellation of symptoms and you want a tentative diagnosis quickly. You don't really want the doctor to say, "Well, okay, why don't you come back next week? Let me think about it and I'll get back to you." One expects to be given a diagnosis, if at all possible, while in the doctor's office. That's an example of a role where having high classification is helpful.

Now, while scoring high in Classification sounds great and everybody might like to have that ability, on the other hand, in large corporate environments when you're in a leadership role, being that kind of fast-paced problem-solver is not necessarily a good trait for a leader. The person who scores high in Classification really thrives on being the sole decision-maker. The person is an expert in diagnosing the problem and then wants to move quickly on to another problem. Most decisions in large organizations are not made by the solo trouble-shooter—there is not usually a need for decisions to be made in this quick fashion. Problem solving is really done through teams, discussion, and collaboration. In fact, an important point is that high scores on this ability battery don't necessarily mean that you can function in all roles—sometimes your higher abilities can be more challenging in a role where lower abilities, as in our example of Classification, may work better.

To continue with this example, people who score low in Classification have a different way of problem solving. When I describe it you'll see that it makes more sense in terms of executive leadership for someone to be lower in Classification. People who

score lower in Classification are more about gathering information. They are better able to listen to what people are saying because they are not rushing to solve a problem. They seek out information from others when they're faced with a novel problem.

For the most part people who have been experienced in a role, such as a manager for ten or fifteen years, thrive because they are seeing problems in the present and then they can compare what is coming in with past experiences that they've had. They can apply past experiences to solve current problems.

People who score low in Classification are intuitive. They can be very fast-paced but it's derived from a different way of decision-making and problem solving. We know from one study of executives leading nationwide firms and from our experience that people who are typically in major leadership roles are more likely to score low in Classification or are problem-solvers who use their past experiences versus the fast-paced, diagnostic problem-solvers.

Again, we measure twenty-three different abilities in all with the Battery.

Another set of crucial abilities we measure are Learning Channels. We measure five Learning Channels:

1. Designs and pictures and graphs (Design Memory)
2. Reading recall (Verbal Memory)
3. Listening (Tonal Memory)
4. Movement (Kinesthetic Memory)
5. Numbers, and trivia and data (Number Memory)

Knowing your learning channels is significant in order to understand your easiest and quickest way of taking in new information. For example, do you learn easiest through reading (e.g., if you read something, does that stick in your head?)? Perhaps you learn easily through listening (e.g., you hear a conversation and then recall it six months later when you run into a client again, and you relate the story he or she told you about his or her kids, and now you instantly connect).

Wright

Most of the folks I talk to who are sales trainers are auditory learners.

Tavantzis

Exactly—the learning channels aren't new but how we measure them is different since we use work samples. We actually use music tests to measure some of the learning channels. These tests were developed by a psychologist, Charlie Seashore, to be used for identifying musical talent in young children. There are other resources that suggest that these same tests are related to ways you learn.

People who have high kinesthetic memory not only have trouble sitting still; they have lots of energy and they learn through doing—hands-on experience—and they take notes when they're listening to something. Of course, by taking notes they're bringing it into their brain in another way, and when they're with people they can pick up more on nonverbal behavior because they are attuned to physical movement.

My own personal theory of why I'm a terrible golfer is a result of my very low rhythm memory. If you're an athlete, rhythm memory is about your body remembering muscle movement through time, and so you can repeat the same movement over and over again, rather than reinventing that movement. It is almost as though I have to reinvent my golf swing every time I get on a tee because my body has difficulty with remembering muscle movement.

However, it's not just about abilities when we're looking at strengths from the perspective of Positive Organizational Behavior. I'm not one for reducing someone down to one factor (i.e., you are only your abilities). Both common sense and research suggest that we as people are more complex than that. In fact, over the past sixty years there seems to be a consensus in the literature that there are eight factors that go into personal effectiveness, and abilities are just one factor, although it is a fundamental one.

Wright

Would you go through the eight-factor model?

Tavantzis

First, it is helpful for people consider where they are in their career and how they arrived at the current role; this is the *Career Development Factor*. Here we are providing an opportunity for clients to examine their stage of career development and whether they are at a Turning Point or a Building Stage.

A Turning Point is when people find answers they gave to some of life's basic questions (e.g., how to do I balance work and family? How do I contribute? Am I satisfied?).

A Building Stage is when you have chosen a path and spend time and energy developing skills and competencies. However, life can throw you curveballs and suddenly you find yourself thrown from a Building Stage to a Turning point through company downsizing.

Another factor is *Skills*. Here we are looking at what skills people have learned to date. Skills and abilities are different. For example, let's say you have high rhythm ability. Just because you're naturally coordinated, have lots of energy, and can learn through muscle movement easily doesn't make you a good tennis player. You still have to practice and develop the skills. However, it will be easier to acquire the skills because of your natural ability in that area. Thus, skills can be ways to expand your abilities. We

can also develop skills to compensate for low abilities in certain areas; people do that too.

Another factor is *Interests.* We often hear "do what you love," so in this factor we examine what excites you, what fascinates you, what are you passionate about in your life? Your Interests are a source of energy and creativity. This is another major component in helping people think about their careers and be successful.

Personal Style is another factor and here we are seeking what work environment pulls you personality-wise. We look at several personality dimensions including the continuum of introversion-extroversion. Some of the questions we ask here are: What kind of interpersonal work environment comes easy to you? What kind of roles do you seek out? Do you seek out roles where you can work through and with other people in a team-oriented approach or do you seek out a role where you can learn something and lead through your expertise? How you "do" these roles will be influenced by whether you're more in the introverted or in the extroverted world. People lead most easily based on what their Personal Style is; however, leaders adapt and need to learn how they can become stressed by temporarily moving into another style.

Just to reiterate, so far I have outlined five of the eight factors: *Abilities, Career Development Stage, Skills, Interests,* and *Personal Style.* Another of the eight factors we also look at is *Family of Origin.* We are not interested in the family dysfunction that each of us brings from our family; but rather, the work roles learned. Essentially, what did your family teach you about the world of work before your brain was fully formed? This usually occurs around eight years old. Early on you form impressions about the world of work. You get ideas about how work and daily stress is handled by the big people in your life—the people you depend on. You are not able to articulate these insights, but they are certainly coming in as information for you and they form your mental model of the world and work relationships.

People in the work environment, especially when their perception of stress increases, tend to approach the workplace as a reflection of their own family of origin and unconsciously use coping mechanisms based on these same earlier perceptions. For example, we see people jockey for the position of being a "favorite sibling" or dealing with present day authorities based on how they dealt with authorities from their past.

The Family of Origin piece is significant because, in our individual coaching work and in our corporate workshops, we are assisting people in looking at what messages have been communicated and passed down over the generations within their family. We find for many it's almost an awakening to the fact that their family's history has influenced who they are becoming in ways they usually are unaware. For instance, routinely the following questions emerge: What has been the role of women in my family over three generations? What are the messages I live by? What was passed on

from my family as a philosophy about work? Our goal is to try to pick up on these themes, to understand them, and assist you in understanding how they impact you as a leader, as a team member, and as a worker.

And briefly, the last two factors of this model are *Values and Goals*. Values are quite significant because we ask what people stand for as they move into the future. Are you able to articulate your values? Are you living your values? A related key question is what values do other people see you living? And lastly, putting it together, we ask people to examine and develop their short- and long-term goals.

Once we have worked through the eight factors, the next phase of the work is even more critical because now we move into integrating all this information into a new and different narrative for the people creating a Personal Vision, thus providing them with a blueprint or road map to success.

Wright

To whom have you applied your methods?

Tavantzis

Over the past fifteen years I have applied these methods to a variety of groups. As the Director of Organizational Psychology and Leadership at St. Joseph's University, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, I direct two programs, one for evening classes for adults seeking to complete this undergraduate degree, and the second program is the Graduate program in Organizational Development, Psychology, and Leadership. Among other courses, I teach career development courses in both programs.

In the Undergraduate courses we can have students who range in age from twenty-five to sixty. Our graduate students are typically part-time students with considerable years of experience in the working world and have arrived at a certain point in their careers where they want (and in some cases need) to come back for their master's degree. I am fortunate because I also get to work with these very experienced people in training and development, management, HR people who are already working within organizations. In both of those different groups I've been teaching a course called "Career and Personal Development," which is based on the method I described. Essentially, I use an experiential approach to teaching about career development and how you work with people as a career coach using this eight-factor model. The university setting has offered me an excellent place to test out my ideas over the past years and get feedback from my adult students.

Most of my work, however, consists of individuals who seek me out in my private coaching and consulting practice. These are adults in transition—college students, graduate students, and some high school students—much like the example I gave earlier. Over the last fifteen years, my passion for this work really comes out in my main

life work applying this model within a variety of industries—pharmaceuticals, energy, technical, engineering, and communications.

Wright

Do you have any success examples?

Tavantzis

A very recent example comes to mind. I was engaged by a scientist who was also a Senior Vice-President (SVP). His challenge, and the basis of the engagement, was to reduce the significant conflict that existed within his department among the managers while assisting them in developing a vision for themselves within the company so they could emerge as leaders who were "initiators" rather than "reactors."

My approach was to first work with him individually, going through the eight factors, coming up with a model for him of his leadership style, which meant being able to look at how he led and what role(s) he could contribute from.

As we went through the individual coaching process he realized that he had to rethink how he organized his department! He was under the mistaken impression that as a manager, leader, and director, he should be the center of all things and all decisions, which was extremely stressful for him. However, that's how he was trying to hold the department together. An alternative model emerged from the results of the Ability Battery and from understanding the impacts of the other factors. An approach that would work better for him and build on his considerable talents because of the kinds of abilities he had and family background as well as values, was to form and understand the people in his team who were the more senior people and who had abilities that complemented his. Instead of trying to "do it all" and thinking that if he didn't do it all he was a failure, his main task became to convene a small group of people, give them the current problem, and ask for a discussion. His job as manager, leader, and director was really to pick the best answer, the best idea, or the best solution, and then work it through the corporate bureaucracy. This was much more consistent with his natural abilities of being able to focus and drive for results and keep a long-term vision in mind. As he shifted his role and saw positive results, he then brought me in to successfully work with the rest of the team.

I ended up working with that group for six months. Over time the conflict was replaced by teamwork and collaboration. I spoke with the SVP a year later, and what he said was quite remarkable. Apparently, immediately after I left, the company started going through a merger. Many of them would lose their jobs, and conflicts throughout the whole company intensified. People were acting out their anger all over the place. They would more frequently call in sick and there was vandalism because people were angry. What this SVP was able to see during that more chaotic time was that his

department was actually one of the better functioning departments in the whole organization because they were helping each other figure out the transition rather than competing with each other or withdrawing and being angry about what was happening. To me this is a significant intervention that worked and helped these folks out.

Another global company I had been working with for several years was being taken over by a British company. Many of the executives I had worked with didn't know what their next step was going to be—either they would be offered a position in the new company or not. If offered a position they would either take it or not, which might mean relocation for them and their family. They brought me in based on the past relationship I had established with people. We were able to work with mostly VPs in Germany.

I think there was one American among the twenty-seven people who were in the room, and we worked over three days in helping each of these people develop a career plan. It involved doing career coaching in a group intensively for three days. These folks worked very hard—sometimes twelve-hour days—to come up with individual plans. We asked each of them to look ahead in their careers, while also helping them to manage this continuing transition, which they were finding incredibly stressful. For many of the participants this kind of downsizing was a completely novel experience, especially in Germany and in France, because it was unheard of. Downsizing for them was more of a recent American import that we gave to Europe. They were not used to having to deal with this kind of sudden and major life and career transition.

For us this was a very different audience and a unique experience at that point of our work. It's been over seven years ago and I'm still in touch with many of them—they contact me periodically. They all saw this experience as one of the major highlights and successes for themselves in their career, and we felt the same.

There are many other successes I could point to but these are the ones that stand out as turning points for us in our approach. More recent successes include a summer Career and Personal Development graduate course I am teaching right now. The students in their Reflection Journals routinely describe this course as the "single most important developmental experience in their career." Their excitement for their journey is palpable. We recently completed a pilot program for twenty-eight IT employees from an energy company that we created to assist their employees in planning and managing their careers. The evaluations of the pilot were so positive that this program will be rolled out immediately across the enterprise.

Wright

So switching gear for a minute, would you tell me more about how you approach coaching with individuals and how you help them in developing a road map for success?

Tavantzis

I think one first needs to consider the difference between someone who is a trained psychologist versus someone who comes at coaching from an MBA perspective. I would argue that someone who has been initially trained in in-depth counseling and psychotherapy is going to bring a greater level of awareness and sophistication to understanding the coaching relationship and the how of developing a road map for success for a person. That person is better able to actively listen to an issue at multiple levels and can then decide with the client where to focus in the here and now and where to focus on the future. A trained counseling professional will bring an empathetic understanding of the different ways people struggle with change and how they both defend themselves and maintain the status quo while wanting to grow.

As we know, most people, even though they might say to the contrary, are really reluctant to embrace change because it's filled with ambiguity and uncertainty. In fact, the implicit message people often send is less about changing themselves and more about how others should change! Being empathic and supportive are critical pre-conditions in helping a person look at what his or her next step is and what the person needs to do. Additionally, people need to find out how to move past embracing behaviors and attitudes that aren't working. At the same time they need to at least feel safe and secure and move to the uncertainty of something new that they're not really convinced will make a difference.

And why should they be convinced? Change is a difficult step. It's like walking into a dark room and not knowing where the furniture is located and stumbling around. Your task as a coach is to guide and to help the client make that transition from the comfort of knowing to the discomfort of not knowing exactly the placement of all the pieces in the room. And when we think of this transition, what we mean is trying to have people see the gap between what they would like to be, and what they'd like to do, and where they are now. Our goal is to help them move past that discrepancy through focusing on their strengths. For me, I think it is clearly about having people rewrite the stories—their life narratives—by going through each of the eight factors, collecting data about themselves, and enabling them to discuss their data with other people (not just with me) in a supportive workshop format or a group or one-to-one relationship.

In coaching you're changing people's narratives about themselves. All of a sudden the narrative that they have, which might be a narrow narrative based on their family of origin or the feedback they've gotten from others over the years, must be changed. Their narrative might also be something like, "I'm this kind of person." Suddenly, their narrative is expanded into, "I'm also this kind of person, as well as this other person, and I have these interests and these strengths," and so on. By being able to move clients to a richer narrative about what they tell themselves, we move beyond the constraints of those earlier years and the limited views about what they can do.

Again, one needs to have the clinical sensibility to recognize this is hard personal work, fraught with risks.

Consider this: we're all engaged and involved within systems, either with our families or our friends; it's hard if we start to change because that pushes our system out of balance. As a result, there are system forces at work that constrain people from changing. For example, in a work setting you really have to intervene, not only with the person who is the client, but also with the person's work team. One needs to recognize and answer the question: just because a person is willing to start trying something new, is the team able to make changes in how they are viewing this person?

It is similar when working outside of an organization when an adult is the one who wants to change work and career but his or her change is going to impact what the spouse and children are doing. Is the family prepared? Have they been prepared? Has anyone prepared them for what change means to all of them? Will the family support the change? Will friends support the change? These are critical questions that need to be answered within the coaching relationship.

Again, when we speak of changing the networks we are embedded in, our work, family, and friends are involved. Our systems are not maliciously "doing it to us." But systems by their nature do constrain us from changing.

One mechanical system example is, for instance, when you want to change the temperature on your household thermostat, no matter what you try, the temperature range that kicks off the furnace stays the same until you reset the thermostat. Therefore, to "reset the system," good coaching involves not just working with the person, but also working with the system in which he or she is embedded.

In my work there is quite an emphasis on role-play and practicing new behaviors, as well as considerable homework. My expectation is that clients will make a commitment of time and energy. They have to do homework and they have to go out and interview people. We ask people to be quite active; it's not just reflecting and it's not just counting on me to come up with solutions—they have to generate information and data about themselves and about their world so they can start finding different connections for a new narrative and creation of a personal vision.

Wright

So why do leaders need to understand themselves?

Tavantzis

The road to success for a leader is about being someone who can move others into a direction or activity that is in their collective best interest. To me this suggests that the leader has to be communicative, knowledgeable, and collaborative with others. In a sense, leaders have to be able to take on at least three different roles: 1) head of the

team, essentially saying, "Okay folks, follow me; let's go make it happen," 2) at another time they're part—they're members—of the team, and 3) they should be able to pick up on the collective dynamics of the team and follow leaders they are creating on the team.

For me, this is a more flexible way of thinking about leadership. We know from Jim Collins' research that leaders don't have to be the larger than life charismatic voices people are going to be thrilled and swayed by; no, actually you don't want that. What you want are leaders who help people think and use their ability to be innovative, to contribute, and who require a leader who has a enough sense to get out of the way sometimes and follow what they've supported creating.

To be able to contribute as a leader from this view, a leader or someone who aspires to be a leader, needs to know what he or she can contribute. Instead of thinking that leaders can do everything, they need to find out what their best contribution is. They need to determine the areas in which they need assistance from others, and who complements them in different ways. Another question would be what their stimulus value as a leader is—when they're talking, what happens to people around them? Do people want to get involved at that point, or are they being turned off? Leading is not just being authoritative and having a job title; it's also mutual respect and strength-based acknowledge of the people around you—those you are asking to work with you. By knowing themselves, leaders model the way for their organization, as eventually all leaders are scrutinized by their deeds and not by their words.

Wright

It's very interesting for me to learn that you believe leaders become increasingly more isolated from feedback. In my company, I used to hold all the meetings, now I've got divisions holding their own meetings, and I don't get feedback as quickly; sometimes I don't get feedback at all.

Tavantzis

Yes, of course—who is going to tell the "emperor" she or he "has no clothes on"? Information doesn't flow up the hierarchy very easily. I think that's where a reliable coach helps leaders—by helping them take a look in the mirror in a way that they are most likely not doing.

Wright

I seem to get a lot more interpreted feedback than I do raw feedback nowadays.

Tavantzis

Yes, feedback all too frequently becomes filtered and cleansed when delivered upward. There is no question that reality checks work for leaders.

Recently, at a conference for bio-pharmaceutical executives of small- to mid-sized companies I was stunned to hear one executive note that one significant issue for him in trying to get his business to go from just a start-up to a mid-sized pharmaceutical company was the time he takes to understand himself. That was a beacon of hope there, because the other CEOs on the panel looked at him with astonishment as if to say, "What are you talking about? Oh, you're talking about self-understanding. Yes, that's good, let's get back to business—" What this CEO was describing was a great example of knowing full well that he'll be increasingly isolated from feedback; he's trying to build up ways to get unfiltered information.

We all have our blind spots, however, they become magnified when we're in a leadership role. And, consider this, if we combine the blind spots that we already have with the decrease in feedback, we have a recipe for what we see in corporations that have been in the media—CEOs who think they can do just about anything and that they are immune and impervious.

Of course, what I am saying also pertains to potential leaders. When I consider the larger picture I am really looking at how to help employees—from the top to the bottom—to understand their careers, their strengths, and how they can be involved to maximize their own satisfaction and their own contribution; that's the win-win.

On a practical level, what I do these days (and the coaching is a piece of it) is work with companies to install end-to-end solutions to talent development and succession planning challenges and issues. I also help companies develop their competency models in a cost-effective manner. As an organizational psychologist/consultant, I assist leaders who want to focus on developing their organizational talent systems and then align that to different assessment tools so that there is a seamlessness to the process—from selection to hiring to development to employee appraisals that are built in—helping their people develop in a strength-based way.

Wright

It sounds as though you're thinking larger than just coaching leaders.

Tavantzis

Right. For me, my work is coming full circle and back to my initial training in systems thinking in Athens, Greece. My own initial training and thinking was itself greatly influenced by the systemic view originally inspired by the ancient Greeks and the Hellenic world. Thinking and acting from a systems point of view in a coaching relationship means understanding their context and creating interventions that can

shift entire groups. To do that effectively, first one needs to have the leaders on board and then work through the whole organization. For me here lies a much greater sense of accomplishment; it is also more meaningful to me—I feel I can be useful to an organization and its people. My larger mission is about helping organizations develop their people by providing road maps to be successful both within and outside the organization.

Wright

What a great conversation, Dr. Tavantzis. I think I've been through an Advanced Graduate Psychology course today. It's very, very interesting. You've given me a lot to think about. It sounds like you've come up with some great ways of helping leaders and individuals in developing their road maps for success!

Tavantzis

Yes, and thank you for your kind words.

Wright

Today we've been talking with Thomas Tavantzis, PhD. A licensed psychologist, Dr. Tavantzis is President of Innovative Management Development (IMD), a leadership team consulting practice that he founded back in 1986. People talk about him as being creative, insightful, growth producing, challenging, and supportive. I don't know about you, but I agree with all of that.

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

Tavantzis

Thank you.

About Thomas Tavantzis

Dr. Thomas Tavantzis is a licensed psychologist who specializes in people development. He is President of Innovative Management Development (IMD) PC, a leadership and team consulting practice he and his wife founded in 1986. He also serves as Graduate Director of Training, Organizational Psychology, and Leadership programs at St. Joseph University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His practical psychological experience of more than twenty-eight years includes executive and leadership roles in non-profits, faculty positions in several American and Greek universities, and for the past fifteen years, a leadership and team development consultant and an executive coach to leaders of nationwide and global companies.

Dr. Tavantzis' style in creating change is typically described as "creative, insightful, growth-producing, challenging, and supportive." During the course of his career he has published professional articles, book chapters, self-help articles, and training videos, as well as appearing on local television and radio talk shows. Dr. Tavantzis recently co-edited, *Don't Waste Your Talent,* which is in its second edition. It is a book that describes a strength-based methodology to personal and career development. Currently, Dr. Tavantzis is working on a new book based on his work developing new leaders.

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