



## **Leadership: The Art of Relationships**

**By Alex Lobba**

### **AHA! Moment**

Two years ago I had an AHA! moment that set me on a new, unexpected course to create a leadership training: Flow of Leadership. My wife, Mary Jackson – homebirth midwife and pre and perinatal practitioner extraordinaire – had invited me to join her for a Circle of Security Intervention training with Glen Cooper in London. We had been reading his book together, and I had just finished a software consulting project – my main line of business. So, I decided to go. The day before leaving, I managed to find an open seat on her flight right next to her. That was a good start, but things kept getting better.

## **Bringing together somatic experiencing, attachment theory, neuroscience, and intrinsic motivation for businesses and organizations**

In the training, everybody was a social worker or psychologist and nobody, including Glen, quite knew what to do with me: a computer geek. And I was not sure what I was doing there myself, except that I love attachment theory and was learning great information. What impressed me the most about Circle of Security was the simplicity and pragmatism of their model without having to use advanced attachment theory terminology, and the amazing results they have been producing with their intervention. Then, on the third day, the dots connected and I had my epiphany: this is what's missing in business! People want to be good leaders as managers and coworkers, but their early imprints often get in the way of constructive relationships and all hell breaks loose. Just like what happens with parenting. As a result, all too often people in an organization spend more time in threat response mode (usually called "dealing with politics"), unable to tap in their creativity to solve problems.

On that warm summer day in London, surrounded by its multicultural richness, I glimpsed the opportunity to bring together my 30 years of experience in organizations and businesses with pragmatic ways of unpacking early imprints from Circle of Security. I also sensed the fit with the principles of intrinsic motivation and with the direct access somatic experiencing and neuroscience provide. My head was spinning, but I knew from direct experience that people in business are starved for leadership skills and training that go beyond models of personality and communication types, and empower actual self-reflection and transformation.

Not wanting to step on toes, I asked Glen if Circle of Security was focusing on businesses. He replied that families have been their primary mission, and gave his blessing for me to borrow some of the Circle of Security principles to apply them to business.

### **The Journey**

Back at home a couple of weeks later, I shared my thoughts and excitement with my son Marco, who immediately grabbed a notepad and said "Ok, let's start" and we were off to the races – no discussion, no excuses, no maybe later.

The process has been incredibly rich. The best part has been the personal insights and transformation I gained by having to put myself through the program to create it.

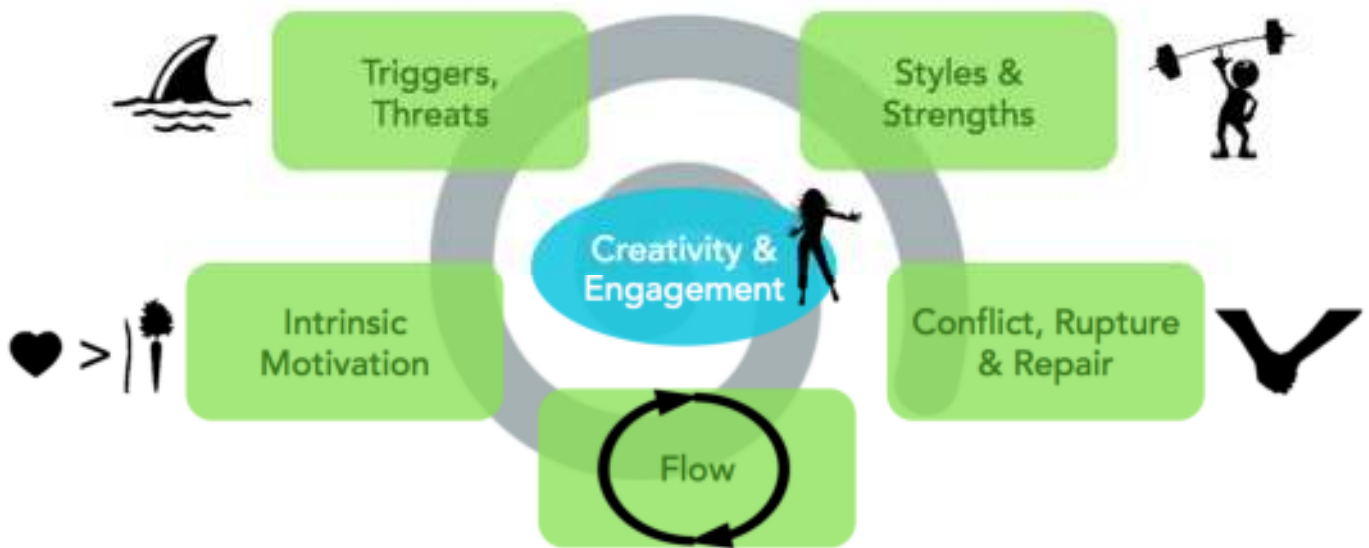
I am indebted to my son Marco for helping me jump start the project; to the friends and colleagues who have been my early guinea pigs; and to my wife for inviting me to London and for helping me refine and deliver the program.

#### **Flow of Leadership**

The goal of Flow of Leadership is to make more choices available for ourselves in those situations where implicit memories bypass our conscious mind, causing us to act or respond in ways that produce havoc and disconnect. Situations where when we look back, we feel like our survival was threatened, and if we have enough objectivity we are left wondering "What the heck happened? Why did I do that?"

The training focuses on six major areas and through a combination of lectures, discussions, and exercises, we build the incremental set of skills that gives us a wider range of choices.

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**Creativity & Engagement** - We start by looking at what makes a team experience memorable and how creativity and engagement are key to most jobs today because they tend not to be repetitive and require problem solving. What happens in our brain and nervous system when we go into threat response, and what happens to creativity and engagement?

**Flow** - To be able to understand what we experience as triggers and threats, we explore the natural flow in all activities and relationships. What were the aspects of the flow in which we experienced safety growing up and those where our needs were not well met? The flow is simple: there is an OUT phase and an IN phase. The OUT phase is where we explore the world and get things done. The IN phase is where we integrate our experiences and reflect. Throughout each iteration of the flow we need to CONNECT.



It's fascinating to overlay this flow with the sequences and needs of birth or childcare, and to correlate our earlier experiences to areas where we are most comfortable in relationships and at work. For me, for example, it's been a lot easier in my life to be in the OUT phase and focus on getting things done than dealing with somebody who may be upset and IN need of help integrating and connecting. My family was extremely loving, but there was also a lot of insecurity from my parents on how to parent, so I was often in a

position of taking care of their emotional needs. Not an appropriate role. How did this impact me? If somebody at work needs a lot of hand-holding, I tend to get impatient. Another example is that when my wife was in labor with our first child, I expected to be giving her massages between contractions and do all this cool stuff to support her, but she didn't want any of that and just wanted me to be there within a foot of her. Be there and do nothing? Are you kidding me? My whole being freaked out, but how could I resist her? I was able to settle in that role and ended up loving it and truly being there, connected.

The bottom line is that it's optimal to be comfortable around the whole flow and recognizing where we have over and under-utilized strengths helps us focus on developing those under-utilized strengths and widen our range of choices.

Intrinsic Motivation - Next we overlay intrinsic motivation to the flow. Extensive research has shown that as we evolve to a society where focus shifts from basic physical survival to activities that require creativity and innovation for problem solving, Maslow's pyramid of needs and motivation becomes inverted. The old carrot and stick approach to motivating people no longer works, in fact, using it has the opposite effect. The scary part is that 93% of managers do not understand what motivates employees<sup>1</sup>, and only 3 out of 10 people are engaged in their work<sup>2</sup>! The personal and economic impact are huge (over \$500B per year to the US economy), and this type of leadership work in organizations is badly needed.

Research shows that carrot and stick must be replaced by: Purpose, Autonomy, Mastery, and Relatedness. Interestingly enough, these map very well to the flow.



To be effective and feel secure at work, for the OUT flow, we need a clearly articulated vision and expected outcomes (Purpose), then we need the space to make decisions and make our own mistakes (Autonomy). To have a sense of Mastery we need our strengths and successes celebrated, we need leadership that helps validate the lessons learned and removes obstacles. We need leaders who are strong, wise, and kind.

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1. Walter Chen (7/14/2014) 95% of Managers Follow an Outdated Theory of Motivation - <http://blog.idonethis.com/management-maslows-hierarchy-needs/>

2. 2014 Gallup State of the American Workforce - <http://www.gallup.com/poll/181289/majority-employees-not-engaged-despite-gains-2014.aspx>

Triggers, Threats - Chances are that the over and under-utilized strengths we discovered looking at our early imprints also reflect on how we do in the flow at work and on how well we support intrinsic motivation needs. It is also very likely that the aspects of the flow that we are the least comfortable with are those that activate our triggers and put us in the threat response modes of fight, flight, or freeze.

Because these triggers are from implicit memories, registered in our primitive brain, they are activated very efficiently, without us being aware of it, to protect ourselves from threats (same response if they real or just perceived). And off we go, in auto-pilot mode, as if our life depended on it.

The most effective way to access these triggers and move them from implicit to explicit is by tracking body sensations through somatic experiencing, giving them language and therefore engaging the frontal cortex of our brain to make choices. "Name it to tame it!"

## Threat responses from the primitive brain:

Fight



Flight



Freeze



## Recognizing the triggers and the sensations that turn-on our threat responses



Styles & Strengths – The blueprint we all come to the world with has a full palette of strengths. Our triggers are the expression of defensive strategies we developed from early imprints in order to cope with the pains and emotions we learned to avoid (under-utilized strengths), and in order to focus on the behaviors that got positive reinforcement (over-utilized strengths). The combination of under and over-utilized strengths that drive us defines the primary style in which we operate.

In the training, we explore the three primary styles, and understanding them helps us acknowledge our over-utilized strengths, nurture our under-utilized strengths, recognize our triggers, and develop more choices for ourselves and more empathy for the people around us.



Conflict, Rupture & Repair – In leadership, just like in parenting, it’s not about being perfect all the time – that’s impossible. If we are doing the right thing 30-40% of the time, we are doing great! Besides, conflicts and mistakes are what deepen trust and strengthen relationships, when handled well. *This article is continued on page 85*

## We make mistakes



## Opportunity to strengthen relationship

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And sometimes rupture is not caused by a “mistake”, but a necessary step by a person in a role of authority. Repair is not about abdicating authority; it’s about focusing on the impact of an action regardless of the intent.

So just when most of my peers are getting ready to retire, I am thrilled to once again reinvent myself and bring this important work to the world of businesses and organizations. Because work can and should be exhilarating, and because relationships are the foundation of everything in our lives.

**Alex Lobba** is the founder of Flow of Leadership ([www.flowofleadership.com](http://www.flowofleadership.com)), and a 35 year veteran of the software industry, with over 20 years of experience facilitating workshops and council circles. Alex and his wife, Mary Jackson -a midwife who brings decades of experience in pre and perinatal work- have created an engaging and pragmatic platform to facilitate self-reflection, cohesion, and communication. Flow of Leadership is a transformative leadership training program that helps unpack early imprints for

team members and managers to excel at the toughest part of work: relationships. Alex can be reached at [alex@flowofleadership.com](mailto:alex@flowofleadership.com).

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