



## EVENT REPORT

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### ***Empathetic Listening as a Management Tool***

*A report of the Business Renaissance Institute's  
1<sup>st</sup> dialogue session for 2011*

Joan Marques, SatinderDhiman, and Richard King

#### Abstract

*In front of an audience of business and academic executives, Dr. Gerald Davison presented his reflections on the application of a non-directive strategy that is based on Carl Rogers' Client Centered Therapy, CCT. Dr. Davison explained the advantages of this strategy in workplaces that harbor highly intelligent employees, such as universities, financial institutions, law offices, accounting firms, and many more of the service based industries that the US holds. Empathetic listening, and enabling the other party to formulate his or her own answers through a gentle process of rephrasing and questioning, may very well become the key strategy for leaders who want to ensure a happier workforce and a more successful organization in the near future.*

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#### **Leadership is Not Always about Walking Ahead**

On Saturday, February 5, 2011, the BRI organized its 1<sup>st</sup> dialogue session for 2011. The speaker of the day was Dr. Gerald C. Davison, William and Sylvia Kugel Dean's Chair, Professor of Gerontology and Psychology, Dean of the USC Davis School of Gerontology and Executive Director of the Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California. In front of an audience of about 60 business and academic executives, Dr. Davison opened up about the challenges and lessons involved in leading others.



He advised his audience that leading is not always about showing others the way in new ventures. While leaders have been facing increased pressure in recent years to meet shareholder needs, especially in for-profit environments, it is rarely responsible to ignore the emotions of the team one works with, as this only augments dissatisfaction, lack of motivation, stress, and turnover rates.

### ***Compassion and Empathy***

Many times, leadership involves compassion, and along with that, empathetic listening. Dr. Davison explained that this is the case in practically any work environment where there are people involved, but underscored the complication of the academic environment, where faculty members are not hired on basis of their people skills and team player qualities, as is often the case in corporate settings, but on basis of their expertise in a certain field. In fact, academics are often not very team oriented, because they are such outstanding performers, and have often come a long way solely on basis of their own merit. This entails, that faculty in any educational setting, and mostly in higher education where almost everyone is highly educated, are not looking for someone to tell them how to do their job or how to work collaboratively toward a common goal. Rather, they look for a leader who is willing to lend an ear when problems arise. Dr. Davison explained that he often encountered anger and despair within faculty members, because there are oftentimes character-collisions in academic settings. It is exactly then that the greatest care and service-orientation is required to help these bright, intelligent individuals stay their course.

A highly respected Psychologist for several decades and author of many hallmark works on psychology, Dr. Davison has found that leadership often requires psychological skills, as the leader should be able to en-



courage the employee to vent, calm down, and see the solution. Very often, the questions the leader asks can be critical in such settings. Through questions, an attentive and empathetic leader can rephrase the issue the employee mentioned, and upon agreement, gradually move toward a gentle directional guidance by including some observations that emerged during the dialogue, yet without giving the employee the impression that he or she is being forced in any direction. This strategy of rephrasing and careful suggesting requires immense caution as well as a deep understanding of the characters one works with.

### ***Leadership and Carl Rogers' CCT***

The strategy Davison highlighted in this session was based, as he explained, on Carl Rogers' Client Centered Therapy (CCT), which entails a non-directive approach of allowing the person to self-reflect on their experiences. The assumption is that the party that came in to discuss his or her problem is the expert on his or her life and harbors the solution all along, but just needs guidance to find this solution.

The non-directive approach is the opposite of a *directive* strategy, which entails asking questions, suggesting solutions, and providing explanations. Most forms of US-based psychological therapies are directive. However, the non-directive approach, which Dr. Davison found so useful in his empathetic leadership style, has high appeal in cases of highly educated, determined faculty-members. The reason is simple: they remain in charge of their circumstances and are not evaluated or "figured out" by the leader.

In this non-directive way, a leader respects the insights brought forth by the co-worker. There is no questioning that the co-worker is moving toward growth, and therefore has the ability to formulate his or her own answers. All that is needed is an under-



standing counterpart, who merely lends a gentle hand in shaping what is already there: the solution.

### ***Suggestions for Leaders***

Some important suggestions for leaders who want to apply this strategy are:

- Listen deeply and attentively, and try to see matters from the other person's perspective.
- Verify this understanding with the other person if you have any doubts as to whether you are fully on the same page.
- Show respect and willingness to help at all times.
- Be authentic and open. An intelligent employee quickly senses when a leader is holding something back, or is putting forth behavior that is not aligned with his or her real feelings.

### **Dialogue Session**

Dr. Davison admitted in the lively dialogue session that evolved after his presentation, that the empathetic leadership method, originating from Carl Rogers' Client Centered Therapy (CCT) may still require some time to become widely accepted in a society where people are so highly action oriented. Particularly in the business world, it may require some retraining for leaders. However, CCT is key in helping people formulate their own solutions, expand their horizons, reach beyond prior limitations, and gain greater self-confidence.

Dr. Davison's empathetic leadership reflections were received with great enthusiasm. The general conclusion of the group was that, as we are moving toward a work environment that is increasingly educated, the empathetic listening strategy may become much more



of a must for leaders who want to maintain a satisfied workforce.

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**Dr. Joan Marques** stands for more than 20 successful years in advertising, radio- and television production, show-hosting; and dynamic entrepreneurship, executed in Suriname, South America, and Burbank, CA. She has founded and managed several businesses and a non-profit organization prior to her migration to the U.S. Dr. Marques holds a B.Sc. in Business Economics from MOC (Suriname), an MBA from Woodbury University; and a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University. She has done significant research on the topics workplace spirituality and leadership, and has authored/co-authored multiple articles and nine books, pertaining to workplace contentment and emotional intelligence. Her current research interests include workplace spirituality, enhanced consciousness at work, and awakened leadership.

**Dr. Satinder Dhiman** has guided business leaders for the last 30 years, and served for 10 years as a Senior Lecturer in Commerce at DAV College in North India. He has co-authored various textbooks in the area of accounting and management. He currently serves as Professor of Management and as Associate Dean, School of Business, at Woodbury University. Dr. Dhiman has won several teaching excellence awards, including ACBSP's prestigious International Teaching Excellence Award in 2004, the Steve Allen "Excellence in Education" Award in 2006, and "Excellence in Management Education Award," presented in 2008 & 2011 by the Punjab Government and IPCSI, India. He holds a Masters degree in Commerce (with Gold Medal) from Panjab University, India; a Doctorate in Organizational Leadership from Pepperdine University and has completed Executive Leadership Programs at Stanford, Harvard, and Wharton. His current research interests include transformational leadership, spirituality in the workplace, and the role of mindfulness in life and leadership.

**Dr. Richard King** is a recognized authority on United States - Pacific Rim business relations, and founded his company, King International Group, to carry out his personal commitment to strengthening these relations. He has held top management positions at major organizations and currently serves on the boards of various Pacific Rim oriented organizations. He is a



longtime member of the Noetic Institute and the World Business Academy. Dr. King is a frequent writer and speaker on Pacific Rim business issues, and is the initiator of the Business Renaissance consulting project, which focuses on ‘adding humanity to the bottom line.’ He is also Chairman of Go Green Solutions, a company dedicated to sustainable development, emphasizing LED lighting solutions and consulting. He holds a B. Sc. From Syracuse University, an M.A. from Occidental College and an Honorary Doctorate of Business Administration from Woodbury University.



## Board of Directors of the Business Renaissance Quarterly



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