
Dream Journeys: Insights into the Executive Subconscious



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

Dreams can provide remarkable insights into the subconscious. Making sense of them can be a powerful problem-solving and inspirational tool assisting executives in recognising and addressing obstacles in their waking lives.

The CEO of an IT company had a dream he was walking towards his summerhouse when he realised he was completely naked. The only thing he had to cover himself with was a very small towel. As he started to run home he noticed neighbours on their balconies laughing at him. Suddenly he tripped over, lost his towel and spotted his wallet lying empty on the ground. He woke feeling vulnerable and unprotected.

Ranging from the ultra-normal and ordinary to the overly surreal and bizarre, dream events can appear intensely real and full of meaning while we are dreaming, and leave us with a sense of discomfort when awake. But understanding these night-time meanderings can be a very powerful problem-solving tool providing a short cut to better understanding the pressures and stress affecting today's executives.

In this case the CEO in question had no trouble relating his dream to the exposure he felt from an up-and-coming annual shareholders meeting. But did his nudity mean he was going to be caught off guard, was he going to be accused of a cover-up or exposed to fraud? His greatest fear was that he would be asked to divest some of the company's holdings – did the empty wallet signify resources being taken away?

Finding answers to hidden challenges

In my work outlined in the research “[Dream Journeys: A New Territory for Executive Coaching](#),” I have had to deal with many intriguing dreams recounted by the executives I have worked with. I have also seen how many of them made these dreams work to find answers to the challenges they have to deal with.

In some cases dreams may force dreamers to ask themselves difficult questions they do not wish to face. They may help them to see colleagues or family members through clearer eyes or act as a short cut to really get to the essence of an issue or challenge.

A case in point is Elias Howe, the inventor of the sewing machine. He had an idea of a machine with a needle which would go through a piece of cloth but he couldn't figure out exactly how it would work. Exhausted by frustration he fell asleep and dreamt that he was being chased by savages in a strange place. Native warriors caught him and threw him into a cooking pot. As he frantically tried to get out they poked him back in with their spears. He woke terrified but on later reflection remembered each spear had a hole through it like a huge sewing needle only in this case the holes were at the head not near the tail. Translating this idea into his machine and having the thread pass through the point of the needle was a major innovation which led to the design of the first modern sewing machine.

Dream recall: A holistic approach to executive coaching

Some people may have difficulty remembering dreams, but dream recall is a skill that can be learned. It helps to remain motionless immediately after waking, letting thoughts drift and dream images surface. When waking from a dream, we have only a few precious moments before details begin to dissipate and memories fade. One way of retaining dreams is to keep a pen and paper or recorder beside the bed, and note down dreams before they evaporate. Just a few notes that capture the essence of the dream will make

the unconscious content more concrete.

Studying dreams is new territory for executive coaching giving coaches a more holistic approach to the information clients present. Executive coaches who choose to work with clients' dreams should encourage them to reflect on the dream imagery they recall and record the emotions they experienced. Were they scared, angry, embarrassed, joyful, depressed? Can they identify any recurring thoughts associated with their dreams? Have they had those thoughts throughout the day? If so, in what other situations have they had them?

Pushing the boundaries

While trying to make sense of a client's dreams, executive coaches should always keep in mind that it is their client's dream - that they are the directors, producers, and scriptwriters of the nocturnal production - and it is up to the dreamer to decipher their own dream symbols.

It takes some courage to share dreams. It implies a willingness to be vulnerable. Talking about our dreams to others necessitates revealing things about ourselves—topics we may never discuss in normal conversation. For some clients, however, dream language seems to be the easiest or only way to be honest without having literally to tell what's really troubling them.

There isn't a set of stringent rules that needs to be followed in working with dreams, and there are no specific formulas or prescriptions, every person and every dream is unique. In addition, all dreams may have multiple meanings and layers of significance. One cannot rely on dream dictionaries to do this kind of work. To quote Freud, dreams are really the royal road to the unconscious.

By taking them seriously and relating feeling and events in dreams to what is happening in their waking lives executive coaches can gain useful clues into their client's internal struggles, behaviour and concerns and awaken them to a more real level of awareness.



Manfred Kets de Vries is a Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development and Organisational Change at INSEAD. He is also the Founding-Director of **INSEAD's Global Leadership Centre**, programme director of INSEAD's top management programme, **The Challenge of Leadership: Developing Your Emotional Intelligence**, and Scientific Director of the

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/dream-journeys-insights-executive-subconscious>

About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.