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# What It Means to Embark on a Journey of Change



By [Isabelle Laporte](#) , INSEAD Knowledge

**Many executives have a nagging sense that something is amiss in their lives. But not all of them find the courage - or the tools - to tackle what needs fixing.**

There is no clear demarcation between anyone’s public and private worlds. What goes on in our personal life affects our professional life, and vice versa. As problems crop up in either sphere, it can often feel like a quagmire, leaving many of us unsure what to do about the predicament.

In a recent [INSEAD Knowledge podcast](#), [Manfred Kets de Vries](#), INSEAD Distinguished Professor of Leadership Development and Organisational Change, said he often receives dramatic pleas for help, including from complete strangers who found him on the internet. In his newest book, [The CEO Whisperer](#), he describes the case of an executive who emailed him, explaining how he was worried about losing his job. His performance at work was suffering because his wife was having an affair with his brother. The brother himself was an alcoholic and a sociopath, which was the root of many more problems.

The actual story – anonymised for the purpose of the book – was even worse than this, said Kets de Vries. As a fully trained psychoanalyst, he knows this well: While most people seem normal, behind this façade often lies a very different reality. At times, the stories people share with him make him feel like he’s a kind of advice columnist like “Dear Abby” or even a guest on the “Jerry Springer Show”, that infamous, confessional TV forum for dysfunctional Americans. At other times, he identifies with the visually challenged fictional character Mr Magoo, who bumbles around the world, forever finding himself in messy situations.

### **Homo sapiens, a storytelling species**

Kets de Vries is the director of [The Challenge of Leadership](#), the longest running Executive Education programme by a single professor at INSEAD. In his career helping CEOs and other top executives become the best version of themselves, one of the most powerful approaches that Kets de Vries has found is the “life case study”. “When people apply to the programme, I interview them. And I tell them, ‘You are going to be the case study. How do you feel about it?’ And they say, ‘Fantastic.’ But they don’t know.”

What they don’t know, or may not be able to suspect, is how profoundly life-changing sharing your own life story can be. Yes, Homo sapiens is a storytelling individual, but making a “documentary of your life” as it were, by selecting its high and low points, is a “scary” thing. However, participants quickly realise that if they stay guarded, they won’t get any valuable feedback in return.

The life case study operates on multiple levels. As participants undergo the cathartic effect of telling their story to a sympathetic audience, the listeners often realise that they are not alone, that someone else has similar problems. Also, the presentation helps the person untangle why he or she gets stuck in specific behaviour patterns. What are their origins? Of course, early family dynamics will play an important role here. The exercise also brings up the power of altruism. “Much of the programme happens outside the classroom”, Kets de Vries shared. After participants have shared their stories, others will approach the presenters to share how they dealt with similar issues.

In Kets de Vries’ seminar, the typical participant works at a large company and may be responsible for some 50 to 40,000 people. Analytical problem-solvers tend to be over-represented...and quick to offer solutions. But in

class, he tells them, “No, no, no. Let's wait. After listening to this story, how do you feel? Were you bored? Mad? Sad?” He wants them to tap other parts of their brain.

## **When you dream**

Kets de Vries also uses dream analysis to promote behavioural change. When he asks his participants whether they dream, they all claim that they do, but can't remember anything. “It's kind of fascinating because after a few days, everybody gets a whole slurry of **dreams**. They just come flowing in.”

While some say that dreams are merely noise in the neurological system, we should pay attention to repetitive dreams and especially nightmares. As Kets de Vries points out, “You are the actor, the director and the producer of your dreams. Somebody's trying to tell you something and you're not listening.”

His suggestion: “Make some free association about your dream.” In a classroom, this can be very effective. Some associations might hit a sensitive cord. Dreams are important, just like our private inner fantasy life. For example, what are your fantasies like? When you listen to people, do you think about something else? When you're daydreaming, what's going through your mind? How do you interpret these fleeting thoughts? How do you make sense out of it?

## **What gives you energy**

In *The CEO Whisperer*, another of Kets de Vries' practical suggestions is to keep a **balance sheet** of the activities that make you feel truly alive. It can be as simple as considering, at the end of the day, which activities gave you energy, and which ones caused you a lot of stress. “What you usually get a lot of energy out, you are probably better at. You can't be good at everything”, he said.

In addition, Kets de Vries mentioned the **Leadership Archetype Questionnaire**, a 360° instrument he developed, which includes eight archetypes – activities you have to do as an executive. Some executives are good strategists, some excel at catalysing change, some are innovators, etc. There are just certain roles in which you feel at your best and it is important to know which. He related this to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow, a highly focused mental state where you lose sense of time.

When Kets de Vries was the head of the INSEAD Global Leadership Centre, he also developed the **Inner Theater Inventory**, a coaching tool to help people understand the major themes in their lives. For instance, some people are chiefly interested in security, recognition, achievement or money, he explained. **Know thyself**, the inscription on the temple of Apollo at Delphi, never gets old.

## **Visualisation and team coaching**

In his book, Kets de Vries wrote, “If you want to change parts of your life, it is important that you clarify what you really want. What do you want to accomplish? This might sound obvious, but there is not much hope you will get what you want unless you have a better idea of what it is.” One suggestion he offers is to practise visualisation, but he also notes that most people don't take the time out to actually do it.

When asked to explain this reticence he observed, Kets de Vries quoted a line from T.S. Eliot's poem, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons”. Many executives keep themselves **manically busy**, because they fear self-reflection. Self-reflection may bring out depressive feelings. They “have put the negative aspect of themselves in boxes, and they don't want to open the lids. They're scared of that”, he said. They don't want to see their **dark side**, but it is an important part of them. As he says, “everybody is normal, until you know them better.”

According to Kets de Vries, if you want to make changes to your life, it is always better not to do it alone. A major reason is that “we have a great capacity to delude ourselves”. He mentioned a client of his, who kept talking about creating a “win-win situation”, but all his actions were going in the opposite direction. A challenge for an advisor and coach like Kets de Vries is to point out such inconsistencies without **having his clients “run away”**.

Kets de Vries has been one of the foremost advocates and **pioneers** of **team coaching** as a tool to help people change. If you're beating your head against the wall and someone offers advice, it's fairly easy to reject it. He said: “If one person tells you that you have ears like a donkey, ignore it. But when four people tell you so, get yourself a saddle.”

## **Incremental change and pain**

Many people hope for a quick fix, but Kets de Vries insists that most changes are incremental. In fact, the path to quantum-like changes tends to be very

dramatic – one that you may not necessarily want to tread. An example would be someone who’s had a near-death experience and comes back wanting to overhaul their life.

But no matter what kind of change is afoot, pain is required as a motivator, warned Kets de Vries. “We are a very change-resistant species. You need a certain amount of discomfort with your present situation”, he said. The change that is called for may be plain as day for onlookers, but unless the discomfort has reached some threshold, “nothing will happen”.

That discomfort tends to build up slowly. Then one day, you feel compelled to make a decision, whether it is to quit a meaningless job, leave a toxic organisation or exit a failed marriage. If pain precedes change, can it also follow it? What if you go from the frying pan into the fire? “That's possible, too. But I hope not”, said Kets de Vries. Ultimately, life is not a rehearsal. Neither is it meant to be static. Living means evolving.

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