Coaching Extremely Normal Clients in Professional Services Firms: Contemptuous and Compassionate Perspectives from Philosophy and Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate my experience coaching extremely normal clients in a leading professional services firm. I contextualize my experience with insights from philosophical and psychoanalytic writing on normalcy, contrasting a contemptuous view of normalcy in the writings of Nietzsche and de Boton with a more compassionate understanding of normalcy in the writing of Christopher Bollas. I explore Bollas' concept of 'normotic illness,' which he contrasts with psychotic illness, with the latter representing a loss of objectivity, and the former a loss of subjectivity. I conclude with recommendations on how to coach the overly normal using 360 assessments and follow up coaching that emphasizes the importance of authenticity, self-reflection and individuality in leadership effectiveness. I conclude with a reflection on the differing roles philosophy and psychoanalysis might play more generally in human development processes.

Keywords: professional services, normotic illness, philosophy, psychoanalysis

Introduction

Every year I am asked to provide transitional leadership coaching to five new partners in a global professional services firm. I've been doing this for six or seven years now and with some notable exceptions (the details of which I am unfortunately unable to share for confidentiality reasons) I am struck by the overwhelming *normalness* of these clients (interestingly, the example I am unable to share is probably the most extremely abnormal client I've ever had – a return of the repressed, maybe). While much has been written about the unique cultures of large accounting and consulting firms and the particular ways in which power is negotiated within them (Empson, L, 2018, 2020, 2021; Empson and Alvehus, 2020; Lupu, Spence and Empson, 2018), I believe the question of normalness has not been written about. In this paper, I seek to introduce and frame the topic, while stopping short of doing an empirical study that researchers such as Laura Empson do so well.

What do I mean by normal? Simply put, the self-narrative that I encounter in a high number of new partners that I coach goes something like this: "I was born to a family that got along well enough. I went to school, where nothing particularly interesting or exciting happened. I then went to university where nothing particularly interesting or exciting happened. I interned at X company, and I've been here ever since. Nothing particularly interesting or exciting has

happened while I've been here and once I retire at the mandatory retirement age I'm not expecting anything particularly interesting or exciting to happen. In my personal life, I met my partner when I was at university. My partner also works in professional services. We get along well and have two children. Parenting has been reasonably straightforward."

When I first encountered this phenomenon, I assumed there was something wrong with me and my approach. Surely no one is actually that bland. Surely if I was a better coach I would be able to access something of substance in these people, some core conflict or trauma that made them who they are. But try as I might, I couldn't.

It was hard for me not to judge their apparent blandness. They were the kind of people who, in my high school, we dismissed as boring, and in my son's high school they dismiss as 'nobodies' (a word I cringe to hear and cringe even more to write). But even adults who I have discussed this with are tempted to dismiss these folks as dull and uninteresting. And while in general I try to avoid these kinds of judgements, in this case I struggled to keep my judgements at bay. I found this narrative of uneventful progression maddening, and it has taken me a long while to figure out exactly why (this paper will not reveal the full extent of my reasoning as it is more psychoanalytic than the focus of this journal permits).

Initially I thought I was jealous of the seeming ease with which these people moved through life. It contrasts so completely with my own experience, of being raised without a father, being sent away to boarding school at the age of 7, having a psychotic break at 21, and leaving family and friends behind when I emigrated to Canada at 26. To say nothing of the drugs, the spiritual seeking, the sexual experiments, the financial stresses, the failed relationships. How could these folks have it so seemingly easy?

But over time I have come to see that there is something maddening about these people quite apart from my own envious responses and, in this paper, I explore exactly what that is. To do so I will draw on the few instances I know of in the broadly speaking philosophical literature where this extreme normalness is taken to task, notably in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Alain de Botton. I then discuss psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas' take on what he calls the 'normotic,' a word he coins to describe those who are at the extreme other end of the spectrum to a psychotic. My goal is to have normalness of this kind met with compassion and understanding, more than anger and frustration, by myself and other coaches, because despite how things may appear on the surface, there is real work to do with these clients, even if the work is often difficult and unsatisfying, given their almost total lack of reflective capacity.

Friedrich Nietzsche on the Lazy and the Fearful

No one can accuse the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche of being normal. Bombastic, sexually plagued both psychologically and physically, and in his later years full on mad, he is the philosopher I feel most sorry for – despite absolutely loving his writing and deeply admiring his courage and commitment. Among his many disparaging remarks about people (I don't think it's unfair to say he is both a misogynist and a misanthrope, although he is most definitely not a fascist, as his sister attempted to make him out to be), those I have chosen to focus on here appear in Untimely Meditations, completed in 1876. In less than 1400 beautifully

evocative words Nietzsche challenges readers to take themselves and their lives seriously enough to resist the easy comforts of normalcy and instead honor their uniqueness.

He begins by claiming that everyone knows deep down that they are unique, that someone like them will be in this world only once – but that they hide this knowledge from themselves, because accepting it would require them to resist the comforts of conventionality and risk being weird, different, judged by others. For most people, Nietzsche claims, they are too lazy to take that risk. "Men are even lazier than they are timid, and fear most of all the inconveniences with which unconditional honesty and nakedness would burden them" (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 127).

There are, he claims, exceptions to this rule. Artists and creative thinkers despise this form of laziness and are prepared to follow their conscience and answer the call to "Be your self!" (p. 127). In doing so, they open themselves up to a life of happiness that contrasts with the "dismal and senseless life" (p. 127) that is the lot of those who lazily and timidly follow convention. From the perspective of the artists and creative thinkers, conventionalists are legitimately worthy of contempt, which Nietzsche expresses in particularly dripping form, even for him:

> There exists no more repulsive and desolate creature in the world than the man who has evaded his genius and who now looks furtively to left and right, behind him and all about him. In the end, such a man becomes impossible to get hold of, since he is wholly exterior, without kernel, a tattered, painted bag of clothes, a decked-out ghost that cannot inspire even fear and certainly not pity. (p. 128)

This exhortation for us to see our lives as unique opportunities to BE, to not settle for an outside-in sense of ourselves, but rather to bring something genuinely new and original into the world through sheer will and courage (more on how exactly to do this later), is what at least one aspect of Nietzche's philosophy is all about.

Alain de Botton on Accountants

Alain de Botton, the British popular writer on philosophy and psychotherapy, is remarkably aligned with Nietzsche in his view of the 'normal' person, to the point that I imagine that he directly modeled the paragraph quoted below, that appears in the book *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, directly on Nietzsche's paragraph above. After spending 20 minutes interviewing the chairman of "one of the world's largest accountancy firms" (p. 227) and being spoken to "in the same congenial but impersonal tone he [the chairman] might use to address a crowd," (p. 252) de Botton writes

> I am tempted to ask when he was last troubled by his bowels in a meeting. But perhaps he speaks like this not so much because he wishes to keep secrets as because years of circumnavigating the earth, breathing conditioned air and headlining conferences, have hollowed out his personality. It may have been a decade since he was left alone in a room with nothing to do. I feel my boredom turn to pity for someone who one might otherwise imagine had precious little to be pitied for. (p. 252)

This paragraph has the same bitter and contemptuous tone as Nietzsche's, and highlights the same inner lack, which Nietzsche describes as "without kernel" (where kernel is the central or most important part of a thing) and which de Botton describes as "hollowed out." What is it about this apparent lack of substance that so irritates these two philosophers?

In the chapter from which the above paragraph is taken, simply titled 'Accountancy,' de Botton quite beautifully reflects on the particular kind of life lived by accountants at a top accountancy firm. Approaching his subject much like a zoologist, he notes the cleanliness and orderliness of their routinized lives, the gulf between their nightly dreams, filled with random and emotionally rich associations, and their waking hours filled with clinical number-crunching, the defences and sexual repressions on which office life relies, and the habits that keep everything moving along tickety-boo. Noting, for instance, that the daily commute is invariably spent catching up on the news, de Botton writes that in today's news

> There is a story about a man who fell asleep at the wheel of his car after staying up late into the night committing adultery on the Internet – and drove off an overpass, killing a family of five in a caravan below. Another item speaks of a university student, beautiful and promising, who went missing after a party and was found in pieces in the back of a minicab five days later. A third rehearses the particulars of an affair between a tennis coach and her thirteen-year-old pupil. These accounts, so obviously demented and catastrophic, are paradoxically consoling, for they help us to feel sane and blessed by comparison. We can turn away from them and experience a new sense of relief at our predictable routines; we can be grateful for how tightly bound we have kept our desires, and proud of the restraint we have shown in not poisoning our colleagues or entombing our relations under the patio. (p. 237)

It is the daily consumption of these stories of extreme abnormality that keep the fear and laziness that Nietzsche saw as underlying extreme normality in place. And the payoff for staying resolutely on the straight and narrow, refusing to stray from a conventional path, is not to be scoffed at. As de Botton puts it, "the start of work means the end to freedom, but also to doubt, intensity, and wayward desires. The accountant's ten thousand possibilities have been reduced to an agreeable handful" (p. 238). Faced with a clear, boundaried, time sensitive task, the accountant no longer has time for existential questions of meaning and purpose. And what a relief that must be! Accountants, de Botton claims, "are well adjusted enough to have made their peace with oblivion. They have accepted with grace the paucity of opportunities for immortality in audit" (p. 242).

Indeed, this acceptance or even embrace of normality has become almost deified in the sterile confines of the corporate office. Just as I was shocked to discover that a very senior accounting executive that I was coaching had a tiny little fishbowl office in the stately environment of a prestige skyscraper, de Botton is surprised that the global chairman he interviews doesn't have his own office. He chooses instead to sit, just like everyone else, at a regular desk in the open plan environment (presumably using shared meeting rooms when privacy is required). de Botton rightly notes, however, that power has not disappeared entirely; it has merely been reconfigured. It is by posing as a regular employee that the chairman stands his best chance of preserving his seniority. His subordinates admire the sincerity with which he pretends to share their fate, while he privately recognizes that only a convincing show of normalcy will prevent him from ever having to be normal again (p. 251).

It is only by signifying his aspiration to be 'normal' that the chairman is able to, in this context, be abnormal enough to lead an army of normals.

Christopher Bollas on Normotics

While philosophy has the tools to perceptively and evocatively describe and decry the fear and laziness underlying gross conventionality, it is to psychoanalysis that I now turn to look more compassionately, and perhaps more insightfully, at the phenomenon. In general, psychoanalysis has not pathologized the overly normal – some might say that, quite the contrary, it has set 'normal' as the goal to which we should all aspire. As Freud so memorably put it, the goal of psychoanalysis is to transform neurotic unhappiness into common misery. What could be more normal than that?

Christopher Bollas, however, a psychoanalyst in the British tradition that includes Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, sees extreme normalness as the polar opposite of extreme psychosis, not as a goal to be achieved, but rather as its own form of illness – what he calls 'normotic illness.' Characterized by an overriding need to be normal (Bollas, p. 87), he contrasts normotic illness with psychotic illness, claiming that while a psychotic has lost touch with consensus reality, having become fully immersed in his own idiosyncratic subjective experience, a normotic has lost touch with his own subjectivity, becoming instead fully identified with consensus reality. As Bollas puts it

> If psychotic illness is characterized by a break in reality orientation and a loss of contact with the real world, then normotic illness is typified by a radical break with subjectivity and by a profound absence of the subjective elements in everyday life. As psychotic illness is marked by a turning inward into the world of fantasy and hallucination, normotic illness is distinctive as a turning outward into concrete objects and towards conventional behavior … if the psychotic has 'gone off at the deep end,' the normotic has 'gone off at the shallow end. (p. 94)

Psychoanalytic writing at its best, surely.

This extreme normalness, at least on the surface, seems to be highly adaptive. Normotics, he claims, are stable, secure, driven to pursue socially sanctioned goals like wealth and status, and hence highly effective in organizational settings. They can think clearly for long periods of time about things that might bore the average person. They have an almost robot-like approach to getting things done, and are able to navigate office politics easily, as they don't see themselves as individuals with subjective needs, and hence don't require others to see them as such. They are happy not to have opinions, so don't get upset when their opinions are not solicited, and they can get by with expressions of faux authenticity or pseudo-intimacy. (They are not actually fake, because there is nothing to fake – their utter conventionality is real.) They like structure and can plan effectively, and enjoy having their days filled with activities of one sort or another. The arts don't appeal to them, and consequently don't distract them, for there is nothing in the normotic to connect with the artist's drive to self-expression. All in all, they make excellent, low-maintenance individual contributors, so long as the work doesn't require creativity or imagination.

But as any leadership coach knows, the move from being a highly effective individual contributor to being a leader can be a fraught one, a fact that is particularly true for the normotic. Without a sense of his own subjectivity, the normotic struggles to connect with others except through action and convention. The question the normotic asks as he ascends the organizational hierarchy is not 'How can I develop a powerful vision that moves the organization forward and

brings people together in motivated pursuit of that vision?' There is far too much 'I' in that question for the normotic, who barely has an I. Instead, he asks 'How does one act in such a way that one is seen as a leader?' This question, despite being inherently un-leaderly in my mind, nevertheless takes you much farther than you might imagine in certain contexts, most notably large global accounting firms. But it will not get you, I believe, into the inner sanctum of leadership – the C-Suite, or the Executive Leadership Team – unless the organization has really lost its way, because without real leadership, as opposed to the mere simulacrum of leadership, no organization can survive.

Bollas' theory of how the normotic comes to be is instructive for coaches seeking to help normotics develop real leadership capabilities. He claims parents of normotics were not sufficiently alive to their children's inner reality; that instead of cultivating and facilitating the expression of a true, creative, inner core self, they praised the conventional and unoriginal false self. Instead of cultivating imagination, they oriented their children toward objects or school subjects that required little self-expression – a computer more than a musical instrument, math more than literature. If the child expressed an opinion that differed from the norm in any way, that made them stand out as odd, different or unusual, they were discouraged, coerced subtly or threatened until they held a more acceptable view. In short, the child's creativity and sense of themselves as unique, interesting, and important became stymied in favour of a view that they were capable at interacting successfully with objects, whether a TV, a football, a computer, or numbers, but not having much to offer in terms of human connection and command.

Working with Normotics

Leadership coaches working with normotics thus have quite a task on their hands, as real leadership is all but impossible without human connection and command. While coaching mandates in organizations where normotics are prevalent are often brief and almost pointless, with 6 sessions spread out over 12 months such that the client barely becomes memorable for the coach (this denial of any relational aspect to the coaching is in line with everything we know about normotics), occasionally interview-based 360 survey coaching mandates are offered that may, at least once the formal process of the 360 is over, provide real opportunities for meaningful work.

Coaches working with normotics in debriefing and working through a 360 feedback survey can highlight not just what's there on the page, but also what isn't. To what extent is the client seen as an individual, and capable of presenting themselves as such? To what extent are they perceived as making their own decisions, in their own way, based on the full range of sources available to them, including their own multiple intelligences? To what extent are they seen as authentic, as courageous, as reflective? To what extent are they seen as capable of galvanizing others to a purpose? These are questions that a normotic most likely hasn't even seen as relevant to their leadership development, but the unique opportunity afforded by a 360 creates an opening for new questions that prompt new conceptions of self and new conceptions of leadership, penetrating the defences that have kept them stuck since childhood. As Bollas puts it, "It is not easy to describe the nature of [normotic] identity, other than to say that an observer may feel that it seems to be an artificial acquisition, as if no mental work has been employed in the historical fashioning of this identity" (p. 89). Calling forth a client to do the mental work of fashioning an

identity that better accords with the needs of today is what a leadership coach, supported by 360 insights, is in a strong position to do.

But a 360 debrief can equally well serve the exact opposite purpose for the normotic, because the normotic, as I hope I have now made clear, is excessively focused on the external, on themselves as object, and a 360 can easily be taken up as affirming this very orientation – that what is important is other people's perceptions more than one's own. Consequently, it is important for the coach debriefing a 360 to use other people's perceptions to open up new opportunities while resisting the authority that the normotic leader is tempted to grant external perceptions. I do this by drawing a clean line between what other people want a leader to work on, and what the leader wants to work on, with only the latter being taken up as a meaningful focus for the coaching engagement.

Conclusion

Not everyone is destined to be a leader, and finding and connecting with that part of a person that is willing and able to step up and lead – which is to say, to bring their subjectivity to bear in the running of an organization – especially later in life, may not always be possible. Nonetheless, it is what we are often paid to do, and the tools we have at our disposal to make it happen are various. My own toolset, which is increasingly psychoanalytic, involves using a broadly speaking free associative method to help the client become aware of unconscious conflicts that, via defences, inhibit self-acceptance and authentic self-expression. The details of this approach are beyond the scope of this paper and have been written about extensively elsewhere (Bluckert, 2005; Brunning, 2006; De Haan, 2012; de Haan & Sills, 2012; Drake, 2009; Gray and Goregaokar, 2010; Halton, 2016; Huffington et al., 2004; Kets de Vries, 2005, 2011, 2011b; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007; Kets de Vries et al, 2007; Kilburg, 2004; Ladany & Friedlander, 2015; Nagle, 2019; Obholzer & Roberts, 1994; Palmer & Carter, 2012; Pelham, 2015). Nietzsche (1997), however, in his own inimitable style, years prior to Freud's first forays into psychoanalytic method, offers his own account of how a person might access what is most true about themselves. After acknowledging that we are beings "dark and veiled" (p. 129) that it is "a painful and dangerous undertaking" (p 129) to "tunnel into oneself and to force one's way down into the shaft of one's being" (p. 129), he advises the following

> Look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature and their sequence will give you a law, the fundamental law of your own true self. Compare these objects one with another, see how one completes, expands, surpasses, transfigures another, how they constitute a stepladder upon which you have clambered up to yourself as you are now; for your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be. (Nietzsche, 1997, p. 129)

Nietzsche is proposing a quasi-artistic method for fashioning the self, fueled by aspiration and evidenced by subjective experience. It is precisely this – the values of the artist – that the normotic lacks and needs to cultivate to succeed in a leadership position. Coaches would do well to cultivate these values in themselves – through their own artistic practice or at the very least informed appreciation of the artistic practices of others – to better cultivate these values in their leadership clients.

One final thought

I have written elsewhere in this journal about the perils and possibilities of description and re-description (Humphreys, 2023). It occurs to me now that Nietzsche and Bollas describe the same phenomena in significantly different ways. Nietzsche, in prose laden with contempt for the weak and the conventional, exhorts us to do better by being less lazy and more courageous, shaming us if we don't. Bollas, on the other hand, takes a clinical approach to describing the behaviours, and their origins in early childhood experience, in order to characterize and categorize human beings within a broadly medical model. Both are moving, at least to me, and offer a pathway to growth and development. I find Bollas more compassionate, ultimately, but Nietzsche more memorable – just as, perhaps, the stick is more memorable than the carrot. Which approach is ultimately more generative of valued change (even, or maybe especially, if that value is conferred retrospectively) is still an open question for me, with perhaps larger implications for the respective roles philosophy and psychoanalysis can play in processes of human growth and development.

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