CONSULTING

# Making A Difference

David Altman, Center for Creative Leadership

**Interviewed By: Douglas Lindsay**

**Lindsay:**  Would you mind sharing a bit about your professional journey, lessons along the way, and how you came to be at the Center for Creative Leadership?

**Altman:**  For the first part of my career, I was in public health.  I have a Ph.D. in social ecology from the University of California – Irvine.  Then, I did a post-doc in cardiovascular disease prevention and epidemiology at Stanford.  I worked at Stanford in a multidisciplinary center that focused on disease prevention and health promotion.  Then, due to family considerations, I left Stanford after 10 years to move to Wake Forest University where I eventually became a Department Chair and tenured Full Professor of Public Health Sciences.  I loved my career in public health.  It was all about studying and intervening on health-related behaviors at the community level including topics such as tobacco, alcohol, violence and physical activity.  I love multidisciplinary environments and I am kind of eclectic in my disciplinary background. I love working at the intersection of theory and practice.

   Then, I got into a fellowship sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation which was a 3 year leadership program (the so-called Kellogg Fellows program).  I still worked full time at Wake Forest, but got released for part of my time to travel the world and explore leadership, put myself through extreme conditions, and as part of that, I took a couple of classes at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL).  Even though I was living in Greensboro, NC at the time and knew some people at CCL, I hadn't experienced the organization directly.  I was quite intrigued by the couple of classes that I took.  Long story short, I was going about my career in public health and then somebody who worked at CCL contacted me and said there was a VP job of research and innovation that was opening up that

**Dr. David Altman** is the Chief Operating Officer for the Center for Creative Leadership.  He earned his B.A. in psychology from the University of California Santa Barbara and his M.A. and Ph.D. in social ecology from the University of California at Irvine.  Prior to joining the Center for Creative Leadership, he had an extensive background in the field of public health where he worked at medical centers at Stanford University and Wake Forest University in addition to numerous national level programs.   He is a Fellow of three divisions in the American Psychological Association and of the Society of Behavioral Medicine.

I might want to consider. I thought they were crazy. I'm a public health guy and didn't really know anything about leadership. I hadn't published a single article on leadership.

But I decided, maybe the fire in my belly wasn't burning as bright as it once did and even more than that, as much as I love public health and still do work in that area, leadership affects all aspects of society and I was always about evaluating how I could make a bigger difference in the world. Every problem that we face in the world, and every solution to those problems has at its core, effective leadership or ineffective leadership. I thought that I could continue pursuing public health while also getting involved in other domains of society. I came to believe that my impact on the world could be even greater if I got the position at CCL. And wouldn't you know it, they decided to go with the outside candidate, and I was offered the VP job.

However, I then had the existential crisis of figuring out if I should leave a 20+ year career in public health that I loved, with great colleagues, and with lots of grant money to go to CCL. That was 15 years ago. My hunch was true that leadership is so central to making the world a better place and there are such needs and opportunities that exist out there that I am inspired by the work that we do. Every day I wake up and look forward to coming into the office to make ourselves, clients, and stakeholders even more effective. And, fortunately, at CCL, I continue to be able to work at the intersection between public health and leadership.

**Lindsay:** That's great to be in a position where you look forward to coming to work and making a difference. I think it is rare today to find people who enjoy what they do.

**Altman:** I think it is. The reality is that I felt that way at Stanford and Wake Forest. Part of it is my personality, part of it is luck and good choices I made about where I worked and the people with whom

I work. And partly it is that I am in public health and leadership and how can you not be motivated by improving the health of people and making the world a better place through helping people become better leaders and organizations and communities build more effective leadership capacity? If that is not inspiring, then I need to go find something else to do!

**Lindsay:** Your point about being multidisciplinary and being at the intersection of theory and practice resonates with me as that is what drew me into the field of leadership. With a background in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, I initially approached things from an organizational standpoint focused on aspects like selection, assessment, and training which gives a process focused perspective on organizational issues. Leadership incorporates the human dimension which is foundational to organizational process and that hooked me.

**Altman:** Don't take this personally but let me make a comment on that. I am surrounded by extremely capable Industrial/Organizational Psychologists at CCL and I am familiar with and use principles of psychology in my job. I think one of the challenges in leadership development is that it is dominated by psychologists and most of the psychologists are individually oriented. The field is less focused on higher levels of analysis (e.g., organizational, community, society). We need economists, mathematicians, political scientists, gamers, information sciences and experts in other fields putting their hand in the field of leadership development and asking different questions and using different methods in order to advance the kind of work that we are doing. Context matters and social norms affect what individuals do. So, to look at the interplay and different levels of analysis will advance the type of work that we do not only theoretically and conceptually but also practically.

**Lindsay:** That's a great point and brings up a question I wanted to ask. I think there is a segment

of consultancies out there that take a much different view than what you just talked about. It is much more about the tools, techniques, and proprietary measures. One of the things that has intrigued me about CCL, and why I became an executive coach for CCL, is that it is theoretically grounded and evidence based for the majority of what you do. It isn't just about the tool or technique per se. It is based in science, in behavior, and what we know about people. Could you talk a little bit about that? How do the ideas of research, theory, and application play itself out in the CCL model?

**Altman:** I appreciate what you just said as many people don't understand that. We really do aspire to be evidence-based, both in research as well as the experiential work that we do. We are a 501(c)(3) in the U.S. (i.e., we are a nonprofit educational institution). When we were established in 1970, we were basically a think tank. The family foundation that underwrote the initial funding of CCL hired 10 psychologists and said go study creative leadership and cross-country thinking. At the beginning, CCL was focused on studying and not on doing. There wasn't a formal field of leadership development at that point.

We have retained that approach. We have intellectual curiosity and we are always looking to better understand with is happening with leaders and in leadership collectives and we use those data and insights to inform the kinds of solutions that we put in front of our clients around the world. A core message around our branding right now is, "Results That Matter." We are focused on results with practical application which is why we are global. We are not just focused on serving the needs of big organizations that pay high dollars. We aspire to have more scalability. We work with young kids and with underserved

populations on the continent of Africa and in Southeast Asia. We do a lot of work with Habitat with Humanity and with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) out of Switzerland. One person, who has a military background and works for us, says that we are a think tank with a delivery arm. Which I think captures much of our overarching focus. We also have a strong social mission to make the world a better place through better leaders and better leadership.

Our focus is not about putting gurus in front of clients or coming up the next best 2x2 model to wow people. It is about making a true difference in the world. If we help our clients, who come from all walks of life, achieve their goals then we are going to

*Context matters and social norms affect what individuals do. So, to look at the interplay and different levels of analysis will advance the type of work that we do not only theoretically and conceptually but also practically.*

benefit society worldwide. Those are key words in our mission. To increase the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. We are all about making the world a better place. That looms so large for the people that work at CCL. You are a coach, and you know that if you can help an individual leader gain greater insights then the cascading effects of that individual leader being more effective are really significant and go well beyond individual enlightenment or happiness. Those are important goals to achieve but ultimately it is in service of a higher purpose. It is that higher purpose that people who work at CCL are focused on.

**Lindsay:** I appreciate that history because it highlights how CCL approaches the leadership challenge from a different perspective than many other organizations.

What I often see in the leadership space, is a company that has an idea, technique, or practice that they want to export, and they develop a research arm after the fact to provide validity for the purpose of selling to a client. What you described in how CCL started was a greater understanding to help society and individuals within the society and exporting that by connecting with organizations became a byproduct of that idea of wanting to help people. That is a different model under the 501(c)(3) approach, as compared to for profit organizations looking to dominate the $40+ billion dollar leader development industry. There is something core about how you became an organization that allows you to serve in a different capacity than a lot of other organizations. It is a grounded approach. This seems to resonate with the people you bring into the organization because they tend to be very loyal and stay around for a long time because they buy into that approach.

**Altman:** Those are really insightful comments. We do struggle with some of that. We do pursue investigator-initiated research. We aren't telling our researchers to go study this or go develop that because a client needs it. We are not a contract research organization. We hire smart people and have them go study topics they deem to be important and then they let us know what they discover. As the space gets more competitive or when there are downturns in the economy, there is pressure to produce things that have tangible viability in the short term. So, we do struggle at times between the balance of just studying things and that good things may come out of it over time versus being focused on developing particular tools, assessments, solutions, or modules. Whatever we do, we make sure there is evidence behind it. The last thing we want to do is put a leadership solution out into the world for which there is no empirical or experiential support behind it.

**Lindsay:** By not being a contract research organization that allows you to have some independence. So, you aren't dependent on another organization's dollars and the influence that comes from that. It seems like what you are suggesting is that you take what you see in the workplace and what you are learning about where there are gaps or future challenges to help shape the research. While not fully independent of having a researcher go study whatever they want, it is still grounded in what you are hearing from the field in terms of where there are gaps. Am I characterizing that correctly?

**Altman:** Yes, but to be brutally honest, sometimes we fall short. The aspiration we have and the majority of our work, value proposition, and strategic differentiation is being evidence-based. The reason we fund, do, and appreciate research is for that reason. It is like it was in medicine. In the early 1900s medicine was dominated by charlatans, bloodletting, skull drilling and the like and then there was a report called the Wexner Report that changed the face of medicine. It was the beginning of evidence-based medicine. Not too long ago, in the Academy of Management, a leader of that organization said we need to bring evidence-based management borrowing from evidence-based medicine. We really subscribe to that. Like David Day's work, or Barbara Kellerman's work as two among many examples, they take somewhat different approaches. But what they have in common is what they are putting out has evidence behind it. That is the kind of source material that we like to use to drive the solutions that we develop. We do research and we are consumers of other people's research but our mission in the world is to put it in the hands of the people on the front lines so that they can make a bigger difference in the world.

Part of our orientation is that we don't embed ourselves in an organization like a consultant would do. For a consulting company, that is a dream. They go into the organization and work shoulder to shoulder and hip to hip by being embedded so that they can drive the kinds of outcomes to which the organization is aspiring. We are more interested in sustainable change. What is

required for that is a developmental mindset. Our goal is not to embed ourselves in an organization. Instead, our goal is to increase the capability and capacity of an organization, community, or leader to do what they need to do to accomplish the task they have. If we create a dependency on us, then sustainability is not achieved. We have a very developmental orientation and one that is ultimately about what is left months and years after our work ends.

**Lindsay:** That is sustainable change and that ties into what you mentioned earlier about working with communities, countries, and NGOs. In your work, what are you seeing as trends within the field in terms of what people want and what organizations are looking for?

**Altman:** I think at a meta-level, goals and aspirations aren't changing that much. People want individuals and leadership collectives to be more effective in a rapidly changing world. We don't see any evidence that the fundamental tenets of who we are and what we do is being challenged. That said, there are substantial changes in client expectations and needs. We are more global than we ever have been. There is a desire among large organizations to be able to do leadership development across time zones, culture, languages, and geography. So, that has become more dominant in the last decade.

Certainly, the technological revolution with social media, artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, big data, and all the client-facing technology are having an impact. There is a rather significant transformation occurring in learning. What emanates from that is a desire among many clients to incorporate technology, and I am using that word broadly, into the leadership solutions. It is also very easy to get persuaded by the notion that everything has to be technology-focused. What we find is people want, and need face to face contact. It is the blend of things that we are working on in response to our client's needs.

A corollary is, as you know, there is quite a bit of attention these days on data privacy and security. So, there is a bit of a tension between the widespread availability of technology and data privacy and security. I think where that is going to end up is unclear.

Staying on learning, people today in developed countries want on-demand learning, that is bite-sized, non-classroom based, synchronous/asynchronous, and just-in-time. These are the themes that are coming up. People clearly want impact. Very few organizations are

> *There is a rather significant transformation occurring in learning. What emanates from that is a desire among many clients to incorporate technology, and I am using that word broadly, into the leadership solutions.*

willing to invest the time and money in doing formal return on investment studies, but we are seeing an increasing demand for "show us." Prove to us. Show us cases studies. So, that ties back to our previous conversation about evidence. People's expectations are increasingly around evidence. But, it's not always hard-core science that is needed.

In parts of the world, scalability has become a significant issue. In the past, leadership development has been for the elite, for the endowed organizations where people paid premium pricing. That still exists, but in many countries like on the continent of Africa, in India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and many other countries, there is a desire to reach more people. We are

seeing demand for solutions that are scalable and low priced that still have impact. So, there is a challenge and an opportunity for the field to do that. Can you deliver to tens of millions or hundreds of millions of people low cost solutions, in different languages, at different reading levels, sometimes using images instead of words, with proven impact? Even if the effect size is small, if you are reaching millions, the collective impact can be quite substantial. That is an area that is of particular interest to us which would not be of interest to many consulting firms and most business schools. Scalability looms large relative to our mission. Consumer product companies like Unilever and Procter & Gamble have been dealing with these issues for some time. How can they get product, at low cost out to markets where people can afford to buy the products? They have innovated a lot of ideas at the "bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid." It is not like we are following that, but there are seven billion people in the world and maybe a million or two have been exposed to current leader development. That is a huge gap. Even if you believe in trickle down effects, you aren't going to reach seven billion people, or five billion, or a billion people with the leadership development methods we currently employ.

**Lindsay:** Bringing some of those themes together, what are you hearing from people about why they come to CCL versus many other learning opportunities? What is it that you are hearing about what differentiates you from other choices and organizations?

**Altman:** It is word of mouth and reputation. We have been around almost 50 years. We do marketing but it is a very competitive space and thus hard to differentiate. So, people come to us because the word on the street is a lot of people, in a lot of organizations, have experienced what they consider transformational impact by working with CCL. Some come because all we do is leader development. If you are a consulting firm or a business school, you are doing a broad range of things

like strategy and finance. We focus exclusively on leader and leadership development. That is attractive to people. We are sort of like barbers and hair stylists in that the need for the work that we do is never going to go away. Everybody needs more effective leaders and more effective leadership collectives.

There is a commonly held view that you can never have enough good leaders and enough effective teams given the rapidly changing world. Some come because of the evidence. We put out a lot of books and blogs. Our intellectual property is largely accessible free of charge or at low cost and I think people find that valuable. We are not overly proprietary. Hopefully, we come across as confident, but humble. It is a combination of factors, but the main thing is that you live and die by your reputation. In most circles we have an excellent reputation and we are known to produce positive impact.

**Lindsay:** What do you see the future of leader development being over the next 10 or 20 years? You mentioned technology, the rapid pace, and the need to be global as current challenges, so where do you see what we are learning about leader development going in the future?

**Altman:** Some of those things that I talked about earlier address your question. What I didn't talk about is the so-called "gig economy," an issue you are seeing the U.S. and in other developed countries. Contract workers and the relationship between individuals and organizations is changing. If the trend continues, then there is going to be a model out there where individuals, who are contractors, wouldn't have access to organizational sponsorship of leadership development. But they are still working in teams and are leaders of themselves, and through influence processes with other people, are going to desire effective and fairly priced leadership development. I think that is an untapped market need. Work force dynamics could

fundamentally affect how leadership development is conceived and provided.

Despite the tribalism that is dominant in the world today where people are looking more inward in terms of their identities, we are a more interconnected and interdependent world than we have ever been. I think the leadership solutions and the knowledge driving those solutions will be impacted by that. For the most part, the intellectual underpinnings of leadership development are informed by Western models (particularly from the United States). I think as time goes on, Eastern approaches will come more into play. I think collectivistic, non-heroic individual, models will come to inform and affect how we approach leadership development. Many of our Asian clients want to know how the West does leadership development. What we are seeing, however, is that they want us to take into account Eastern models and weave it together with the Western models. Let's look at a topic like feedback. If you work in a culture where there is high power distance, giving feedback to superiors is inappropriate. Likewise, where "saving face" looms large as a cultural norm, some of the models that we use like feedback and 360 degree feedback aren't going to work in the same ways. We have put out recently some interesting leadership research reports on Asia and India. Thus, we are beginning to invest in that and we are seeing that as a way of innovating, contributing substantively in new ways to the enhancement of the predominate paradigms on leadership development that exist today.