



## Are You Living Up to Your Potential?

By *Linda Adams*

*Our mission is to provide people worldwide with the communication and conflict resolution skills necessary for creating effective and lasting relationships at home and in the workplace.*

It's only when we have freedom and autonomy that we have the possibility of living a life of significance, of becoming what we are meant to be. When we have the freedom to choose our own path, our deepest self can emerge—it becomes possible to do the best work we can, to lead the most enriching lives we can.

If this is an important need, why does it seem that so few people—including leaders—are truly autonomous? Free to become what they are capable of? Authentic, self-reliant and self-directing? Why do we so often settle for so much less than what's possible?

These questions took on special meaning for me recently while on a trip to Estonia to talk about the model we offer to help people take more responsibility for their own lives and develop egalitarian, collaborative relationships in their workplaces, families and schools. There I heard personal stories of the horrendous treatment the Estonian people suffered at the hands of the Soviet Union for over 50 years. They, like other people behind the Iron Curtain, were deprived of the most basic human freedoms. In light of that, it was amazing to see what they have accomplished in the ten years since the last Russian troops left. It confirmed my strong belief that the need to have *freedom from* having our lives controlled by others and the need to have *freedom to* shape our own lives and become what we are capable of are basic and universal human needs.

But it also made me think about why people (like ourselves) who live in a free, democratic country and who have not been subjected to such autocratic rule still have difficulty exercising the freedom to fulfill our own individual potential. So often we settle—for security or for what we already know how to do; we stay in careers that aren't fulfilling, do work that doesn't really matter to us. Why is that? What's in the way of our striving to do our best work or live our best life?

What we often don't have is freedom from the internal constraints that we have put on ourselves. Most of us have been brought up learning to comply, to depend first on parents, then on teachers. While we are now starting to see a shift, our basic institutions—families, schools and workplaces—are still mostly run in the autocratic style. When you think about it, for most of us the first twenty years of our lives were spent functioning as a subordinate in an autocratic system.

And it doesn't end there. This approach continues to be common in most workplaces. (According to the US Department of Labor, less than 5% of the workforce works in a high participative organization.)

The effects of living and working in such an environment are apparent every time we look outside ourselves for answers; when we depend on others to solve our problems; when we don't speak up; when we don't experience ourselves as a source we can trust and count on.

## **A Different Mindset and Skills to Put It into Action**

To be free to realize our own potential and actualize ourselves requires two important elements:

The first is a shift of mind—*a fundamental shift in our thinking*. I think it's obvious to all of us that the traditional autocratic model is not conducive to helping people meet their higher order needs for self-actualization and self-fulfillment. That model stresses compliance and submission, exactly the opposite characteristics that are needed for self-actualization. And because this model is so deeply ingrained in most of us, a fundamental shift in our thinking is needed.

This different perspective is based on the premise and a great deal of evidence which shows that people thrive when they are free of coercion—from parents, teachers and bosses. People can build therapeutic, democratic environments at work and elsewhere which contribute to the physical, psychological and mental health of each person.

Such a shift in perspective is necessary, but it's not sufficient. It must be accompanied by the *learning of skills*.

Why are skills so necessary? Because they go beyond attitude change; skills produce behavior change. Skills reduce dependency, they increase confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

When people learn to think for themselves instead of looking to others for answers and when they trust their own judgment instead of relying on others, they empower themselves. When they learn the communication skills it takes to speak and behave congruently, they take more personal responsibility for their own needs, beliefs and choices; they get in touch with what is most important to them. They begin to free themselves of being dependent on others' expectations and approval. When they learn to truly listen to others with empathy, they enhance and deepen their relationships and help make it possible for others to actualize their untapped potential. And when they learn the skills of developing equitable relationships with others, they can work and live in therapeutic environments in which each person has the opportunity to choose and define their highest calling.

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