



## Michael McElhenie Interview Notes

*Michael is an international organizational development consultant working in leader development with governments, multinational corporations (MNC), the U.N. AIDS in Africa project, etc. Has many years experience dealing with complex systems at the large-scale.*

- Our work is with organizations and clients who are dealing with intractable messes that we can help them dig out of. Large MNCs tend to have those opportunities more often than others.*
- Concurrent with these complex problems is often scrutiny from multiple sectors of society - governments that have MNCs within their borders, citizenry that ask important questions about the nature of MNCs doing business in their country, their impact on the environment, both physical as well as socio-economic quality of living of the citizenry.*
- Helps organizations figure out that complexity to continue to grow and serve their various constituencies, also ensuring they have a sustainable relationship with the various levels of society they're attached to - the globe as a whole, the region they operate in, and the country they do business in.*

- *Work with Boards and executive teams to help them figure out what kind of relationship they want to have with direct stakeholders as well as indirect.*
- *Often deal with organizations responsible for providing primary resources such as coal, oil, precious metals, and how they can continue to extract materials while serving the physical, social and economic environments of the countries they're embedded in.*
- *Bob Kegan says that we human beings are continually "in over our heads," creating more complexity than we can effectively manage. That's the reality every leader in the world is faced with. How can we help them develop to at least keep pace with the complexity surrounding them.*

*You work with some of the most "disliked" companies, such as oil and gas (especially in the more ecologically oriented communities such as ours). How can you really make a difference? What can one integral leader/coach/consultant, or integrally-informed team do, if you get an opportunity to work with high-level senior executives or officials who seem to be on the wrong side of history, in a sense, from a public opinion perspective? There's almost a cynicism - what difference can you really make? All MNCs care about is making money, all the executives are not nice or caring people. How do you answer the cynics?*

- *I want to validate both perspectives - both the "evil" side and the folks who have incredibly good and honorable intentions for the whole world.*
- *We in the U.S. have the luxury of being cynical, because economically we're well-off, particularly compared to an emerging nation.*
- *From an emerging nation perspective, they see an oil company as an important provider of economic stability - as saviors or heroes - no matter how "dirty" they are.*
- *As an oil executive, you can feel yourself treated as a pariah within the larger environmental movement, and at the same time you go into an emerging nation and get treated as a hero. That's the reality these folks are faced with. So of course, given the choice, they'll put their intention on the people who treat them as heroes.*
- *Therein lies the significant problem. We find this everywhere in the world. In "Primal Leadership," Annie McKee and Dan Goldman talk about "CEO Disease." It's clear that as you move up in organizations, power does tend to blind you. That often happens in these large MNCs - people craft a perspective of who they are, based on the perspective that serves them and their ego the most.*

- *Counter to that is the reality on the other side of that arrogance which suggests that they're not as good and capable as they'd like to believe.*
- *As a skillful practitioner, you can't tell an executive, "you're arrogant as hell, you'd better gain some perspective or you'll be in big trouble." But essentially, that's the message we have to bring to our clients -that they're missing an understanding here. And we have to do that in an incredibly skillful way.*
- *Typically the way to do that is to point out the realities that we're seeing that are going very well, as well as realities that they're completely missing.*

*So you help executives come to an awareness that they're missing something... that's what a lot of us do as coaches. Is that part of a larger intervention? It goes back to the question of what can you really do to make a difference in a broader way? Can you share any general examples of large-scale system change that you've been involved with?*

- *I'll use the four-quadrant map to talk about one executive I've been working with who's a regional operational head. They've been dealing with a great deal of complexity around environmental remediation with particular oil and gas production sites that have not produced or lived up to expectations of the parent organization, nor of the people who lease these wells.*

- *This executive is an "up-and-comer," relatively young (late 30's, which is really young for a top operational executive within a large oil company), but very bright. We understand from an integral perspective that high degrees of intellect are certainly an asset, but can also be a liability if you over-rely on that. This is certainly true in this person's case.*
- *The way I talk about the work I do is that I become part of an engaging conversation. Every single intervention that a coach or O.D. practitioner has with anybody they work with, is through conversation... online, over the phone, face-to-face, in many ways. Like every person on the planet, I have the tool of conversation.*
- *So I have conversations with this individual on a variety of issues: as a member of a constituency brought together to deal with the complexity of the financial pressures, and concurrent with that the issues regarding how they're showing up as an environmental steward in the region they're serving.*
- *One of the first things that became clear with this particular executive is (focusing first on the Upper-Left quadrant) that he'd been a leader in the organization for such a long period of time, working under leaders exactly like him, who consider themselves high-degree experts, and who use, primarily, "expert power"; that is, they rule the organization based upon spinning their expertise, sometimes over others*

*who, either in reality or perception, have less expertise than them.*

- *So how this person feels, from the subjective perspective, is that they've been beaten down their entire career. So this individual who then ascends to a top leadership position, is actually reluctant to offer up his expertise to anybody who he perceives as having a greater, better, or more expert perspective of an issue than he has. Which is ridiculous, because the expectation of everyone else around him is that that is the primary way that he's going to lead (by being an expert).*

*It's also counter-intuitive to some of our listeners, because there's a perception that senior executives, paid millions of dollars per year, working in a multinational company, are egomaniacs, over-confident, and arrogant. The picture you're painting is of someone who's insecure, in a certain sense, about not wanting to offer that expertise, because of years of being beaten down. That actually helps humanize them, having insecurities and potential blind spots that are preventing their leadership from emerging in a more effective way.*

- *That's exactly right. We think most executives have a lot of confidence in how they lead and what they know. What we're talking about here is a polarity shift. On one side, he can show up and be very confident, and even arrogant. But the*

*other side of the polarity is that he's felt beaten down for so long. So he ends up being less effective. Those polarity shifts, from one side to the other, aren't helpful.*

- *He recognizes that's been important, because he sees that it's been disconcerting to those people who report to him... seeing him on the one hand acting with a great deal of certainty, and on the other hand looking indecisive enough not to be able to make a decision to save his life. That's how he was showing up to his direct reports.*

*What are the implications of a leader being incongruent and inconsistent, in terms of their role as leader and how they're seen by their followers? At that high level, those kinds of decisions can impact millions of dollars and potentially thousands of lives, especially if serious mistakes are made.*

- *The stakes are huge. From one perspective, you have a leader who's oscillating between confidence and indecisiveness.*
- *From a 360 perspective, the boss is saying, "my god, I made a bad decision," and circling the wagons trying to figure out who they can replace this individual with, to get them out of the organization before they do any damage.*
- *His direct reports are looking at him and losing confidence in his ability to lead.*

- *The people he reports to start questioning whether he can carry out their directives, and his direct reports are getting mixed messages of uncertainty from him, which undermines how effectively they follow the directives from him.*
- *So they'll start relying on their own understanding of the issue rather than his, even though his is likely to be a perspective with a great deal more understanding than his reports have, and if they're undermining his decisions, ultimately they may not be addressing the full complexity of the issue, and could be causing major problems.*
- *Here's a simple example of one the things that happens in complex organizations that have very balanced agendas; like attending to profitability and safety in equal measure. By the time that message gets down the hierarchy, they may be hearing an emphasis more on profitability than safety, so ultimately that's what ends up happening... a compromise of safety over emphasizing profitability. That's the not the intention of the execs at the top, but because of this indecisiveness and polarity shifting, that's ultimately the message that gets received. And as we've seen, that can be incredibly dangerous. That happens in every large organization where there are translation problems down the hierarchy.*

*When I think about all the ways things are going wrong in politics, governance, economic regulation and deregulation, the*

*environment, with companies that are just trying to maximize short-term profits... it's kind of scary. The only thing that makes me feel better is the hope that an integral understanding – that having a complex enough map and conscious awareness to hold these different perspectives can start to make sense out of these complicated, messy situations.*

- People try to simplify complexity all the time. One of the ways in western society we simplify complexity is when we look at problems, we tend to look for the heroes and villains. When we look at solutions, we aim the solutions at heroes, and when we look at problems, we tend to try to find the villain. So we tend to take what may be a systemic problem and tie it to a single individual. Because that's what we value most in western society... individual accountability.*
- There's nothing wrong with that. But if the problem is systemic, like the one I described where a communication network doesn't translate effectively down hierarchy...*
- That doesn't mean you don't hold individuals accountable for that. But if you only focus on the individual level, you miss the systemic nature of the issue. We understand that from an integral perspective. You can't just focus on the upper quadrants and ignore the lower cultural and systemic factors.*

*So how has an integral approach, utilizing integral maps and awareness, helped us deal with these complex situations? And*

*in particular, how does your understanding of this emerging notion of integral leadership inform your work and help you design and execute interventions that do make a difference in these huge complex systems?*

- In the example I used with the regional executive, over the course of two years we started by working on the Upper Left - the confidence he had in his own leadership, resolving the two sides of the polarity to give him a more holistic understanding of how his expertise can be brought to the fore.*
- Then we looked at the Upper Right, at his basic communication skills, how to speak assertively, engage body language and behaviors that allow a leader to exemplify good solid assertive communication. So that when he speaks, people listen and respect his authority and comply with his directives, because he doesn't appear indecisive; he really believes what he's telling people.*
- We looked at the Lower Left, and how his communications were landing within a culture that values expertise as much as it does. And when he lets go of some of that expertise and invites others to bring in their expertise, how he can do so without completely relinquishing his own, leading them to question whether he's bringing any value at all. That's about his individual behavior interacting with the culture of the organization and what it deems appropriate.*

- *From the Lower Right perspective, this executive inherited his job from an incredibly capable individual. That capable individual, over the course of his tenure, took on fourteen direct reports. That's a lot of people to manage... typically we'd recommend four to ten at the most. The complexity of managing fourteen direct reports is incredible, especially considering their responsibilities, which end up being billions of dollars of revenue. So structurally, he had a problem he couldn't manage. That got communicated up the chain... that while the first guy might have been able to manage it, it was way too much – almost disrespectful – for this new guy to be expected to manage. That message led to some healthy reorganization.*
- *That's what an integral perspective gives us, understanding an individual from a subjective, attitudes-and-beliefs perspective. It allows us to look at his behavior, what does well and not so well. Then looking at the subjective culture of the organization – how the individuals, as a collective, held expectations for how leaders behaved in the organization; where he violated those expectations and norms, and where he applied them well. And from a structural perspective, how the organization, and his job, was organized.*
- *These things evolve slowly. Take physical infrastructure, for example. We found offices within his area that had created separate "fiefdoms" that, due to the physical layout,*

*decreased the capacity for communication. It takes an integral perspective to look at the solid, physical reality in which people work.*

- You need to be able to ask questions about the influences that can be categorized by the four quadrants. Asking these questions is what an integral practitioner can bring to the table.*
- And as we're asking these questions as integralists, we're working with the leaders so that they develop the lenses we're exemplifying with them. The questions we ask stick in their minds, and help them begin to see the power of an integral perspective. So once they've been exposed to it, they then begin to think more integrally themselves. Over time, you increase their capacity to gain awareness. That's what the integral perspective is all about - awareness.*
- We face these complicated maps, and offer people a way to think about them, so people can better understand the complexity.*
- Jesus Christ said, when I speak to some people, I speak to them as if they're young children who cannot eat solid food. When they're capable of eating solid food, I feed them solid food. And when they're capable of eating adult food, I feed them adult food.*

- *That speaks to how we, as practitioners, need to aim our interventions. You don't bring an integral perspective to someone who can't eat solid food yet. You bring the perspective they can hold.*
- *Initially, the conversation helps reveal to a budding integral leader the kinds of questions they should be asking. Then over time, you expose to them to the complete map and territory they've been exploring through their questions. That's when you start to see the aspiration of an individual towards an integral perspective.*

*The Buddha used the term "upaya," which translates to "skillful means," which is like giving food that can be digested, meeting people where they are, influencing and motivating them accordingly. Do you have any further perspectives on integral leadership... (as a form of applied integral theory)?*

- *The integral practitioners I speak with have a tendency to over-complicate their interventions and their coaching. In our organization, Stagen, we do a lot of "two to one", taking second-tier perspectives and offer them to first-tier leaders. The way I think about integral leaders is that they aren't always operating from the second-tier. What they are is "fully integrated" leaders; meaning that wherever they're at, they're making decisions, behaving, seeing their reality in the most healthy way they can. If they're operating at Orange, or*

*strong achiever center-of-gravity, then my intention for that leader is to make sure that where they're at, their actions and behaviors, is the most healthy expression that that particular meme can manifest.*

- We help leaders see how they're operating in healthy ways and where they're not, thus causing difficulties for themselves and their organization. That helps them come to their own conclusion about how to better integrate all the aspects of themselves to be as effective as they can be. We don't tell them what to do; we help them recognize that the more integrated they are, the more successful they'll be.*

## Michael McElhenie

Michael McElhenie, Ph.D., has led major humanitarian projects, many for the United Nations, in regions around the globe: Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and the Caribbean. Michael's key area of expertise is helping executives assess the organization's culture, discover optimal mission-alignment and bridge the gap through intentional, integral leadership. He has designed and implemented major leadership, executive coaching, change and learning projects for global and national clients, including American Airlines, Anadarko Petroleum, Berlex Pharmaceuticals, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Exelon Energy, H&R Block, Intel, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, Motorola, Nortel Networks, Progressive Insurance, Sabre, Texas Children's Hospital, Texas Instruments, Unicredito Banca, Unilever, United Nations, Victoria Order of Nurses (Canada), Wal-Mart, World Bank and YMCA. Michael has over twenty years of leadership and consulting experience, and he currently runs Metatropia Institute, a leader development and change management firm out of Dallas, Texas. He is a faculty member for Duke Corporate Education's Global Learning Resource Network, a faculty-coach for Southern Methodist University's Advanced Leadership Program and a member of the Business & Leadership Center for Integral Institute. He is also a Senior Associate for Teleos Leadership Institute and has worked with Teleos since its founding in 2002.



## Brett Thomas

Brett Thomas is the co-founder of Stagen, a Texas-based organizational consulting firm that specializes in Integral Leadership. He is the author and architect of the Stagen Leadership Academy's 52-week intensive *Integral Leadership Program* (now in its 10th year). Brett is a 20-year veteran in the field of human performance and organizational development having designed and facilitated hundreds of workshops and corporate training programs. Brett has logged over 10,000 hours coaching CEOs. He has published hundreds of pages of applied integral theory and has co-designed and co-delivered numerous international conferences and seminars on applied integral theory. Brett served many years as the Managing Director of the Integral Institute *Business and Leadership Center* and on the Editorial Board for the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*. Brett currently serves on the boards of both *Integral Leadership Review* and *Integral Publishers*. He is writing a book with Russ Volckmann on the subject of Integral Leadership.

