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From Coping to Transforming

“CALM UNDER PRESSURE.” “A quiet mind with wisdom.” “Peaceful, above it all.” These are the answers I’m hearing from a group of leaders who have joined me for a workshop on Zen and Leadership, after I’ve asked them to describe a “Zen leader.” They have come here for perhaps the same reasons you picked up this book: They want to be more successful in their work, happier in their lives, and more peaceful in themselves. Do I have something to give them—sort of the Zen equivalent to noise-canceling headphones—that will help them cope with their challenging days? No, this is not about coping. Will I help them rise above it all? No, this is not about becoming aloof. Will I give them anything?

“No,” I tell them, as I tell you: You already have everything you need. What I will help you do is clear out what you don’t need.

Break free of the points where you're stuck. See beyond what boxes you in. I will show you how to flip to new levels in your development where the untenable problems of the last level become as easy as child's play. I call these "flips" because they invert ordinary ways of thinking, and radically reframe your sense of self and the world. These flips transform your leadership to truly serving others, and not your own needs for security, achievement, and so forth. Flip by flip, you unfold the dynamic, boundless capacity that is the Zen leader in you. Get out of your own way and what remains is—yes—calm, wise, and peaceful, and also agile, creative, and extremely powerful.

Are you in? That may seem like a rhetorical question, but it's really at the heart of our first flip from coping to transforming, and the foundation of leadership. It's a flip from standing on the sidelines to what Kevin Cashman calls "leading with character,"¹ in which we fully enter the situation with the best we've got, transforming it as we add our value. It is a felt shift in the body from outside-in to inside-out, from putting up with forces or people "out there," apart from ourselves, to diving right in, becoming a part of the chaotic dance, and extending our energy to create value. It is a flip from victim to player, from observer to participant.

This flip is the foundation of real leadership as we'll use the term in this book. Borrowing from Cashman, we define *leadership* not as occupying an elevated slot on an organization chart, but as extending one's authentic, transformative energy to create value for others. Whether at home or at work, even highly skilled leaders will recognize many times in which they cope, rather than transform. This chapter will help you recognize those coping minefields, and feel into the flip that is your own energy for transformation.

Not Just Words

"Okay, rest the blade of your hand on my shoulder," I say to the student, facing her maybe a foot away. This isn't a martial arts class, though I taught Aikido for many years. This is a leadership program in which I'm introducing a simple exercise—"unbendable arm"—that embodies

the flip that is essential to Aikido, and also in moving from coping to transforming. I cup both of my hands over the crook of her arm and demonstrate that I mean to press down, bending the arm. “At first, just resist the pressure,” I tell her. Two arms against one, if we’re of reasonably the same size, eventually her arm gives way. “How did that feel?” I ask, and hear answers such as:

“Pretty awful.”

“Tense; wondering how much I could take.”

“Feeling like I lost.”

That’s what coping feels like: a sense that forces are bearing down on us. Even if we’re holding up for now, we’re struggling with the pressure, and what we’re doing can hardly be called leadership.

“Shake that out,” I tell her, and ask her to replace her hand in the same position. “But this time, don’t resist,” I say. “Instead, imagine a fire on that opposite wall and your arm is the firehose. Water—or energy—flows from your fingers. Or imagine your vision is on that wall and you are extending toward it.” To her amazement, she finds she is much stronger. “How did that feel?” I ask, and now hear things like:

“Effortless!”

“Stronger, more integrated.”

“I can’t believe it—what kind of trick is this?”

That’s what extending energy into a situation feels like, which is how we transform situations. *That*, we can rightfully call leadership.

This flip is so simple that my partner in the exercise I just described—and you, if you had a partner right now—could do it instantly, and yet it can be so subtle that we miss it. It is more than words, more tangible than a concept: it is a felt shift in the body from defensive resistance to relaxed extension. You can get a feel for it if you stubbornly fold your arms for moment and take on the most defensive, hunkered-down posture you can imagine. Now shake that out, extend a relaxed arm, palm up and open, and imagine a line of energy (or water, if you prefer) running through your arm and out your fingers. Comparing these two

postures, notice which one feels more ready to listen, engage, or help another person.

Although not quite at these extremes, moment by moment, we do make a choice that favors either coping or transforming in our posture to the world.

The Coping Trap

I'm 14 years old, playing the old family piano. My 7-year-old brother has snuck up behind me and—gitch!—jabs me in the ribs. I freeze as every muscle contracts with being startled. This is my coping reaction, and, as you might imagine, the music gets pretty awful.

Fast-forward 20 years and I'm a shiny, up-and-coming manager on the Space Station Program at NASA, trying to influence the 20-year veteran in front of me to get his part of the communication system to work with the part I represent. "No, we can't do that," he says to my proposed interface. "Our design is fixed." Mind you, these are early days in the design process; the station won't fly for another 12 years. But his defenses are up, shields in place: "No, the answer is no," he says. I had no idea how to influence him, and I recall the frustration to this day.

Whether a momentary startle or a long-term defense, coping is our way of registering a *no* vote: no, I don't like this; no, I don't want to do this; no, this isn't really happening. Whining, worrying, complaining, defending, denying, resisting, tolerating, storming out, blowing up, folding our arms in defiance—coping takes many forms. It can be loud and dramatic or passively resistant. It can be justified—someone has just stolen our wallet, trashed our cherished project, or hired away our best employee—and we often take great pains to explain just how justified we are in our coping. Yet this mode is fundamentally defensive, reactive, and negatively tinged, as in, "How much of this can I take?" At its root is a simple protest: Something is happening *to* me and I don't accept it.

Outside-in. That's what we could call the energetic direction of this mode: a force out there is impinging on me in here, sticking me to the spot, or, as we say in Zen, "stopping the mind." If you closely observe

yourself or anyone in coping mode, you'll see signs of this stopping or stuckness (try the Gotcha! exercise). Physically it might register as freezing—if only for a moment—or a tightly held posture, a frozen jaw, or repeating the same animated gestures again and again. In thought, it's a storyline that keeps replaying, a neurotic loop—"...after all I've done for this company..."—that re-justifies itself. I've come to recognize mental replay as an early warning sign of coping mode. If that little voice in my head replays the same tape twice—as in why someone's behavior has every right to anger me—I know I'm in coping mode.

"Get over it," we might say to shake ourselves out of coping mode. Or even more truthfully, "Get over yourself," as we sense that coping has us stuck in a self that is small and out of sync with what's going on. Coping pins us to a spot—however uncomfortable, at least we know where we stand. As we play out our various coping dramas—being overworked, underappreciated, double-crossed, undercut, cut off on the freeway—we increasingly identify with them (in other words, the ego

Gotcha!

Imagine you're in a play, asked to depict a character suddenly startled by very bad news. How do you show the audience you're startled? What's the first thing your body does? What's your facial expression? What happens to your breath?

Now shake that out, rewind the play, and imagine your character is startled by news that turns out to be good. After your initial startle reaction, how do you show your transition to realizing the news is good?

You may notice that the startle reaction in both cases has a quality of frozenness, indicative of coping. When the news turns out to be good in the second case, notice how acceptance melts or relaxes the body. One's sense of whether the news is good or bad can have a great deal to do with how quickly we move to acceptance—or whether we get there at all.

identifies itself with the spot they stick us to), making them more likely to repeat again. Which is why, even though coping feels somewhere between neutral and awful, we do it so much. Even if it drastically limits our life, we're still drawing a sense of identity from it, however twisted. A story I heard early in my coaching career illustrates this point.

I'm in a five-day leadership program with Gary, one of the handful of people with whom I'll be having several one-on-one coaching sessions. The point of these sessions is to help people make sense of all the feedback they're getting in the program and figure out how to use it. Gary's feedback is terrible. His people don't know where they're going, he's not helping them develop, and he's negative and complaining all the time. If coping were an occupation, he'd be fulltime. In my second coaching session with him, when we're supposed to be connecting the dots in the data, he's mentally somewhere else. Arms crossed, report closed, he doesn't even want to look at the data. I don't know what to say, so I toss in a question and listen. He wanders around in his answer. I listen. He wanders more. I listen more. The session ends in what I judge to be complete failure. I have no idea how to be useful.

The next day we have our third and final coaching session. Gary strides into the room, slaps his report down on the table in front of us, and announces, "My mother died when I was 4 years old. Everyone felt sorry for me. I learned very quickly that if I played victim, I could get what I wanted. Well, my people are telling me that I can't lead as a victim. And they're right." My jaw drops with the sudden insight coming from this man. I can sense his newfound freedom; it's as though he's expanded into a larger version of himself.

This experience taught me so much as a coach about the power of listening and not trying to be so useful with all my answers. But it also taught me how coping mode can become an insidious habit that weaves its way into our sense of who we are. For years, Gary had stopped his mind on being the little boy whose mother had died, and he'd found all the ways to be a victim. He got something out of it, to be sure—including a sense of identity—but it was too small an identity for the role of a leader. In a flip, he saw it.

Likewise, if you reflect on the coping modes or moments in your life, you'll see that coping arises from and reinforces a freeze-frame identity—a *self* that something is happening *to*. *But aren't we selves that stuff happens to?* you might ask. The answer, which we'll play with through every flip of this book, and which you must not take my word for but rather experience for yourself, is yes and no, and neither yes nor no. The insidious trap of coping mode is that it makes us think this dot of ego is *all* that we are. Stuck to this dot, we cannot lead effectively because we're not going anywhere. We're stuck defending the dot. Worse yet, mistaking a dot to be our self, we miss our boundless, flowing nature that can enter circumstances and forever transform them.

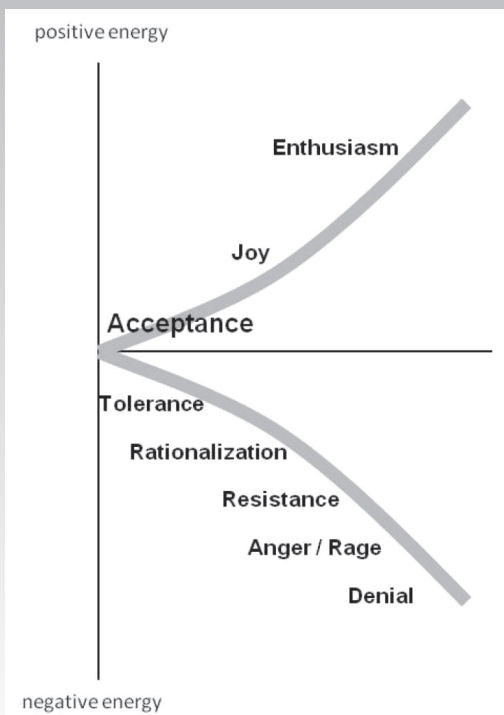
The Challenge of Transformation

I don't know exactly what Gary went through between our second and third coaching sessions, but I imagine it went something like this: He's trying to ignore the data, but it keeps haunting him. It makes him mad; how dare they say all those bad things about him, blah, blah, blah. He gets all tight and anxious, and then a tiny voice within clears its metaphorical throat and says, "Excuse me. Haven't you heard some of this before?" At some point a wall of defense crumbles, and the light of acceptance shines over the rubble. The tiny voice gets bolder: "They may have a point...they know I'm not helping them...they're right!"

Acceptance is always the first light of transformative energy. Acceptance doesn't mean we have to *like* what we're dealing with. It means we don't get stuck in whether we like it or not, we simply work with it. Gary certainly didn't like the feedback he was reading. But he got to the place of accepting "It is what it is," or "This is what's true for my people." As soon as acceptance starts working, it opens up the possibility of further transformation, as it did for Gary when accepting the feedback let him see a deeper truth about his own life.

Acceptance marks the flip between coping and transforming (see Figure 1.1 on the next page).

Figure 1.1



The flip from coping to transforming.

It differs from tolerating, which is as good as coping gets, still holding the situation at arm's length as something we have to put up with. Acceptance ceases to resist. By setting aside its opinions, agenda, likes, and dislikes, acceptance is able to channel our full energy into working with the situation. The less energy gets siphoned off in reaction, the more energy is available for proaction.

But it gets better yet, for the energy of transformation is fundamentally positive, joyful, and enthusiastic, which is highly

contagious and readily amplified. I'm sure that positive emotion is why I remember the conversation with Gary like it was yesterday. When he walked into that third coaching session, he was positively triumphant. As I felt the relief in him register in my own body, the sensation was sheer joy.

This joy is no accident, but rather a reliable indicator of transformative energy acting through us. When we flip into transforming, we feel more alive, present, connected, and conscious. No longer stuck to one point, we're free to maneuver, create, and explore. What happens to the self we were defending (and defining) in coping mode? Suddenly it flips

from being a black hole of worry to a source of possibility as we tap, however briefly, our infinite nature. The Zen leader in us pours forth as we flip into being a generative hub, radiating from inside out the best we have to offer to the person, the problem, the situation. We may not register this flip consciously or have words to express it, but we will feel the joy transcending our smallness.

This joy tells us something beyond a self-serving ego is at work. Eckhart Tolle calls joy “the dynamic aspect of Being.”² As we experience and express our universal Being, joy naturally arises. Enthusiasm follows, attracting others; when our inspired acts line up toward a vision or purpose, this we can call Zen leading. Acceptance, joy, and enthusiasm are the hallmarks of the Zen leader functioning in us. They’re so essential to adding real value in the world that, as Tolle advises, if we’re doing something *not* in one of these states, we should just stop. *Stop*. For otherwise, we’re acting in coping mode, creating problems for ourselves and others, whether we know it or not.

Acceptance, joy, and enthusiasm may seem like tall orders—especially amidst the cacophony most leaders face every day. Yet most of us have tasted this possibility, and some make a steady diet of it. I often ask leaders what gives them joy in their work—not the big ego-stroking moments, but intrinsic, day-to-day enjoyment—and routinely hear answers like, “the work itself,” “getting stuff done,” “seeing the team succeed,” or “watching my people grow.” Doing work we enjoy, we may slip into a sort of “work *Samadhi*,” or flow state; when we lose ourselves in the task, time disappears, and we only recognize we’ve been in this state once we leave it. Working with people we care about, toward meaningful goals, we may find it easy for our energy to flow from inside out, adding value to those relationships, making progress toward those goals. Any concerns for self seemingly disappear.

Until something happens.

An irritating e-mail, a financial setback, an unrealistic demand, or all of these at once, and suddenly we can find ourselves in a pit of worry, anger, or indignation—that is, coping. How long do we stay here before we can flip back into transformation and re-enter the situation with

acceptance? Given that coping feels bad and transforming feels great, you'd think we'd make the flip instantly. But many of us don't, and most of us take our time about it. Because to flip, we have to let go—let go of the one who is worried, angry, indignant or self-berating. Even if we want to let go at a conscious level, we're working against a body of habits that has been trained by the cycles of drama we've lived up 'til now. Which is why to make this flip, like all flips, we have to engage the body. We can't just think our way there. The clear intent of thought can help, but grasping is deep in our muscle memory—starting with our grasp for life or survival instinct—and right before we let go, even if experience tells us it will feel great on the other side, it feels as though we're losing something: a little death.

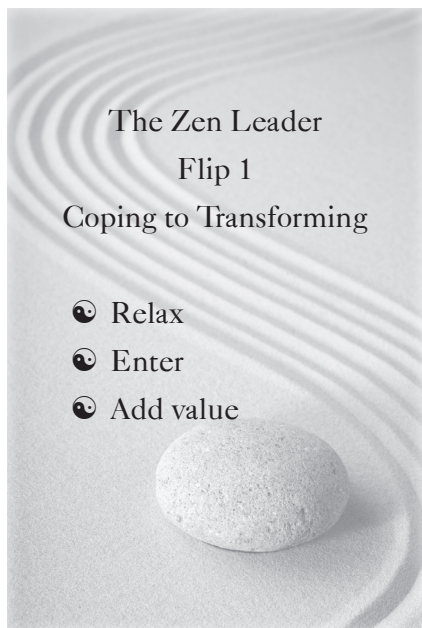
Good news: The more we practice flipping from coping to transforming, the easier it gets, and the more confident we become that it will lead to something good. This transformative flip takes us down the path of transcending “I”-centered consciousness, which is a huge leap in human development as well as leadership development. Like plants growing toward the sun, our very nature pulls us toward the possibility of

this transcendence, even as the impossibility of coping with ever more pressure pushes us out of old ways of thinking. Enough push, enough pull, and we're ready to flip.

How to do it?

The Zen Leader Flip 1: Coping to Transforming

Perhaps you've made this flip thousands of times—unwittingly, unconsciously. But let's tease apart what makes it work, so that you can make it a ready companion: a conscious competence. We'll break it

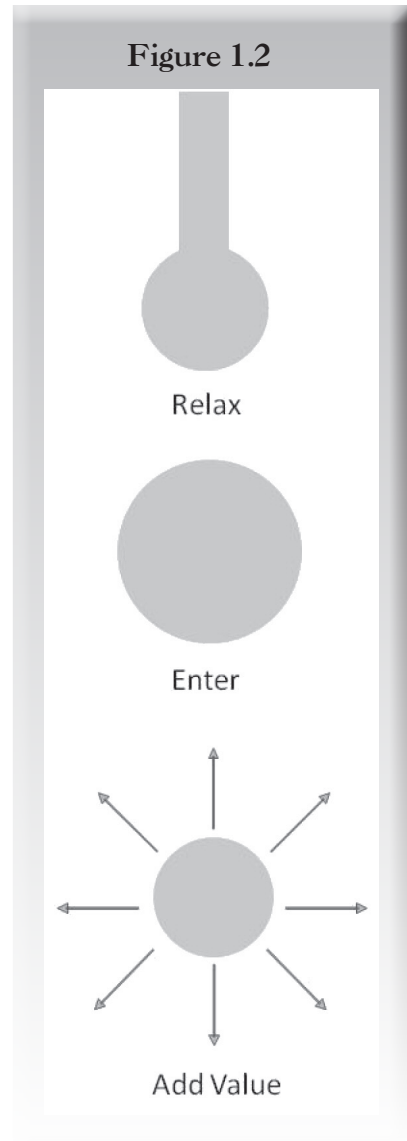


into three parts, though in practice these flow seamlessly together and arise almost at once: relax, enter, add value.

Relax. You can simulate coping mode instantly by raising your shoulders up toward your ears (the way tense people look all the time). If you do that for a moment and then drop that tension—try it—you instantly feel less tight, less stuck. You might also notice that you simultaneously exhale, and you feel a sense of dropping down in the body toward your center, or lower abdomen. What's harder to do is relax the residual tension you unconsciously carry all the time, but breathing deeply to and from your center is a great way to approach this. The key to centering is to get out of your head, and allow tension in the upper body to drop away—as in a sigh of relief: ahhh! As an image, you might think of a big thermometer in which the bulb is your belly, filled by each breath (see Figure 1.2).

The more centered and relaxed you are, the more completely you can take the next step, which is to enter.

Enter. To enter is to become one with whatever is going on, to merge with it in a completely relaxed state. It is not a tentative dipping of one's toe into the water, but instead a complete immersion. It is not being buffeted by the frayed edges of a situational hurricane, but rather moving right into the eye of the storm. Fear,



anger, confusion, and other coping reactions may arise, but if you can feel into whatever resistance arises with a willingness to acknowledge it, and not let it stop you, you've found the door to entering.

To enter is to become the entire picture; an image for this stage is that of an all-embracing circle that is both you and the situation—subject and object—at once. If you imagine the flow state you enter when doing one of your favorite activities, you can get a sense of how total entering lets one disappear into an activity. Entering is like a child playing in a sandbox, or a kayaker deftly paddling in whitewater—no self stands apart. To get a firsthand experience of centering and entering, try the Chapter 1 exercises downloadable from our Website (www.thezenleader.com). The more completely you enter, the more completely you can add your value.

Add value. At the eye of the storm, the only direction for your energy is *out*. Having fully entered, your energy can flow from inside out, adding your value to the situation, transforming it through your presence as much as through anything you might do. You can feel this extension of energy by imagining—as my partner in the Aikido exercise did earlier—your arms as fire hoses, and the water (your energy) pouring forth to put out flames. An image for this stage is the radiant sun, extending its energy, transforming everything that basks in its light.

If you have a sense of this flip, you know how empowering it is. If you don't quite feel it yet, you surely can with practice, and the Website exercises will help. You may find this flip becomes even more clear and useful to you in actual application, which we turn to now.

Putting It to Work: Leadership that Transforms

One of the greatest challenges facing leaders every day is, well, re-framing challenges. Is it a challenge or an opportunity? This is more than rhetoric, for this flip has to happen first in the mind of the leader. To find the opportunities in problems is a quality of can-do optimism that characterizes the most motivating leaders. While others are standing on the sidelines caught up in their fault-finding and blame-placing,

the leader who can make this flip shows a way forward. Accepting “it is what it is,” the Zen leader in us flips from defensiveness to curiosity, from resistance to creative engagement. What can we learn from it? How do we use it? How do we fix the damage, change the game, or leverage larger forces at work?

To see how this flip might apply to you, think of a problem that has been troubling you or keeping you up at night, and try this exercise:

1. Write down a statement of the problem starting with the words “The Problem is...”

For example: *The problem is we lost a key customer and we may not make our revenue number this quarter.*

2. “Hold” this problem statement and notice what tightens in your body, and what thoughts and feelings arise. Jot down whatever reactions you notice. These are the signatures of coping, and the more you can get to know them in yourself, the easier they become to work with. Notice one place of tightness in your body and breathe into it, releasing it, relaxing it.

3. Go back to your problem statement and invite a bit of brainstorming. Starting with the phrase “The *real* problem is...,” restate your problem six to 10 different ways from inside out—that is, using only “I”- or “we”-based statements (no blaming others!).

For example: *The real problem is we aren't sure that our people are properly trained...we don't have enough customers in the pipeline...we don't know if our customers are happy...we're not reaching customers the way we used to...we're not solving our customers' real problems.*

You may notice that as answers tumble out, new themes emerge and your initial story gives way to submerged insights. Keep restating the *real* problem until you sense that you've hit upon something important; something new.

4. Relax. Let go of the problem. Let go of the self the problem is happening to. You might imagine that self-who-has-the-problem as a player on a board game and now you want to become the one playing the game. You might think of this as stepping back

from a problem to gain perspective, or entering beyond the problem, where you become the entire picture, and can see the entire board, now with wisdom for your little board-playing self.

5. With this relaxed sense of bigness, look over your restatements with an eye for what the opportunities are here. Again speaking from inside out, starting with the phrase “I (or we) have a real opportunity here to....” Fill in the end of the sentence with as many opportunities as you can spot.

For example: *We have a real opportunity here to get closer to our customers...learn what's not working for them...help them move forward...hone our coaching skills...find people who need us on social media...give them something useful for free....*

6. Look over your opportunities and pick one or two that seem most promising to pursue.

This is one empowering flip. It reframes everything from a focus on the self-having-a-problem to the creative agent who learns from what's going on and often changes the game. This flip won't supply all the answers, but it will get your energy going in the right direction, which is from inside out—adding the best value you have to offer.

Problems repeat when we respond to them by coping. When we respond in the spirit of transformation and pick one or two promising ways to do that, we're no longer in the same place that allowed the old problem to appear. Even if what we try doesn't work exactly as planned, we've learned something. Even if a comparable problem arises again, we won't be in the same place we once were for dealing with it. Our transformational leadership has transformed us.

If this flip still feels elusive, or you find you can't stay here for long, have patience. The next chapter will guide you deeper into the underlying physical flip that makes transformation possible. If coping mode is a ready companion, at least now you have more insight into what's holding it in place. If you find it hard to let go of the anger, indignation, blaming, or self-righteousness that makes acceptance impossible, you're in good company. Coping makes for good drama, and we're surrounded by it, from “not our fault” finger-pointing to “it's good for the ratings” political

talk shows with their endless stream of attack and counter-attack. Or maybe for you, coping mode takes the form of self flagellation, as in, “I’m not good enough,” “I’m a screw-up,” or “Everyone’s right and I’m wrong.” This, too, is good drama, and no less than self-righteousness, it sticks us to the dot of self.

What we know with certainty is that although coping may make life interesting, it doesn’t make for good leadership. Neither does it lead to joy, enthusiasm, nor anyplace that truly serves us. For that, we need to flip.

The Zen Leader

Flip 1 Takeaways

Coping to Transforming

Coping is stuck. Transforming creates movement. Acceptance is the turning point. This flip is the **beginning of real leadership**.

Acceptance allows you to **relax**, engage, or **enter** a situation, and **add value** where you can.

Apply this flip using **5 steps to convert problems to opportunities**:

1. **Problem statement.** “The problem is...[state your issue].”
2. **Hold.** Notice what tightens or tenses as you “hold” this problem.
3. **Restatements.** “The *real* problem is...[brainstorm six to 10 “I”- or “we”-based answers].”
4. **Relax.** Let go of the problem, let go of your self having it; come up a level.
5. **Opportunities.** Reframe your restatements: “I (we) have a real opportunity to...[choose one or two that are promising].”