

# Renewal in Learning and Writing Center Leadership: Advice from Coaching Expert Richard Boyatzis

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## Abstract

Many directors of learning and writing centers minimize their ability to remain current with the field, conduct research, and delineate their job duties due to pressing daily demands. Scholars urge them to do so in light of the needs of students, new directors, and university restructuring. This article presents the four-step renewal process of coaching expert Richard Boyatzis whose Intentional Change Theory combines neuroscience, psychology, and management literature. Directors assess their work lives, recognize defense mechanisms, articulate original dreams for their work, and set a learning agenda. The value of Boyatzis' work is in the respect it affords the individual, allowing each director to set unique goals.

*Keywords:* leadership, learning centers, writing centers, goals, research

## **Renewal in Learning and Writing Center Leadership:**

### **Advice from Coaching Expert Richard Boyatzis**

Learning and writing center directors (LAWCDs) have been warned many times and in many places: scholars have cautioned that we must find time to read journals (Eodice, 2015), to conduct research (Frizzell, 2019; Geller & Denny, 2013; Wynn Perdue & Driscoll, 2017), and to accurately describe our duties (Casswell et al., 2016). These experts say that if we do not, especially in these times of restructuring, we risk allowing our field and our positions to be described and taken over by others (such as human resources or other agents). These scholars understand only too well why it is so difficult to do so—they state how overwhelming our daily lives are. To address this stress, a number of LAWCDs have contributed to an entire collection articulating the need for self-care (Giaimo et al., 2020). All these scholars care deeply for the future of learning and writing centers because it hinges on the leadership shown in research and in our own articulation of the most important aspects of our work. This article seeks to address one aspect of this problem: even if we know we should shape our future, and even if we address our own serious need for rest, the question remains, how do we individually articulate the goals we have for leadership in our centers and in our field—the goals that work for our individual centers and the ones that speak to the needs of the field at large?

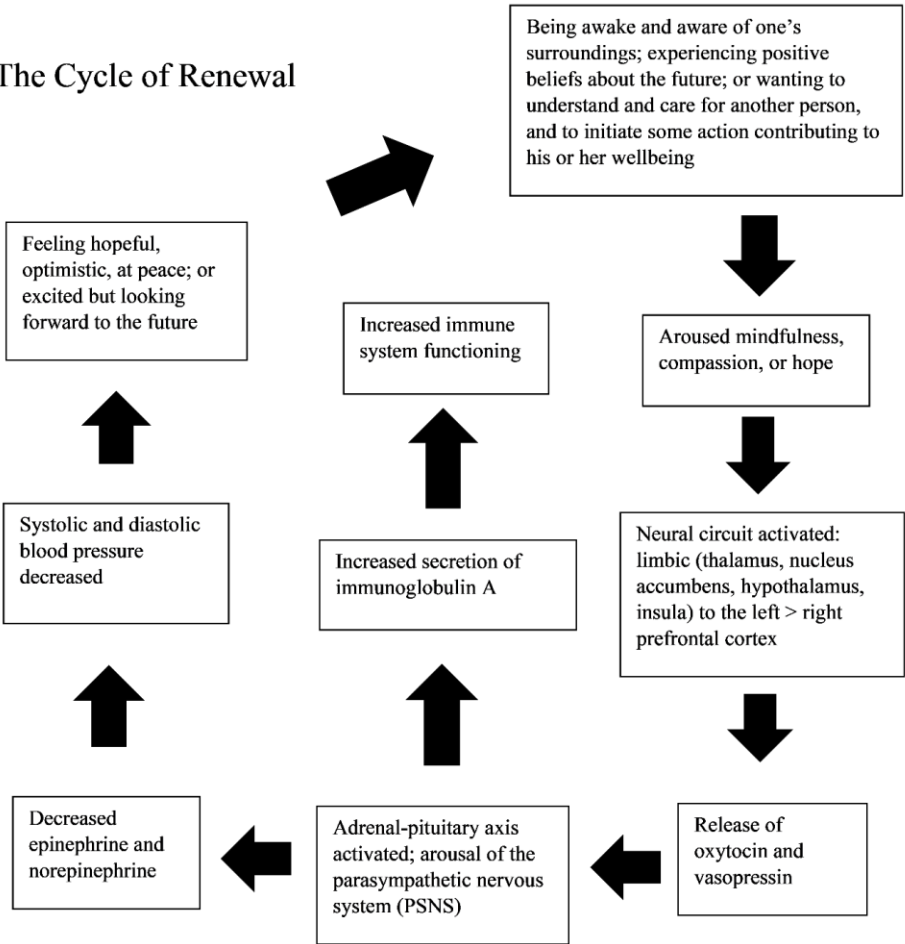
This article offers a holistic four-step process taken from the work of coaching expert Richard Boyatzis.

An internationally known scholar with nine books and 200 articles, Boyatzis drew from neuroscience, psychology, and management literature to shape his Intentional Change Theory. A tenet of this theory is that intentional change occurs when a leader articulates heart-felt hopes for the future that shape a learning agenda needed to accomplish them (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006, p. 624). Most relevant to LAWCDs is the focus Boyatzis (2005) placed on individual physical, mental, and spiritual wellness (Figure 1). Theories of management and leadership are outdated (Petriglieri, 2020) as they shifted from learned leadership skills (Lewin, 1944), to in-born traits (Stogdill, 1948), to aspects of the environment (Fielder, 1964), or the ability of a leader to motivate (Bass, 1985). None of them addresses the pressing overwhelming demands of the daily life of LAWCDs, many of whom are minorities and women. Instead, Boyatzis (2005, 2013) coached individuals to do the following (a) assess the overwhelming demands, (b) understand their own defense mechanisms, (c) listen to themselves, and (d) set a learning agenda. Below is each of the four stages of intentional change structured with learning and writing center goals in mind.

**Figure 1.**

*Cycle of Renewal (Boyatzis, 2005, p. 212)*

## The Cycle of Renewal



### Step 1: Assess the Situation

To begin to set goals, LAWCDs first need to understand their daily lives. The chart below (Figure 2) offers us a chance to evaluate our situations. Giving too much results in what Boyatzis (2005) termed the *sacrifice syndrome* that refers to a state of being where “dissonance is the default” (p. 6). This kind of stress “can become chronic over time, because our bodies are just not designed to deal

with unremitting pressures that go along with the leadership role” (Boyatzis, 2005, p. 40). To mitigate the stress, some leaders develop “defensive routines—bad habits that keep us in denial about what is really going on inside us and around us” (Boyatzis, 2005, p. 40).

**Figure 2.**

*The Sacrifice Syndrome Chart (Boyatzis, 2005, pp. 54-55)*

<p><b>Sacrifice Syndrome Indicators</b></p> <p>Am I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Working harder with less result?</li><li>• Getting home later or leaving home earlier each day?</li><li>• Feeling tired, even after sleeping?</li><li>• Having trouble falling asleep, or waking up in the middle of the night?</li><li>• Finding less time (or no time at all) for the things that used to be enjoyable?</li><li>• Rarely relaxed, or only really relaxed with alcohol?</li><li>• Drinking more coffee?</li></ul> <p>Have I noticed changes in myself or my relationships, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I can no longer really talk about my problems with my spouse.</li><li>• I don't care what I eat, or whether I eat too much or too little.</li><li>• I can't remember the last time I had a long conversation with a trusted friend or family member.</li><li>• My children have stopped asking me to attend their functions or games.</li><li>• I no longer attend my place of worship or find time for quiet contemplation.</li><li>• I don't exercise as much as I used to.</li><li>• I don't smile or laugh as much as I used to.</li></ul> <p>Do I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Have frequent headaches, backaches, or pain?</li><li>• Routinely take over-the-counter antacids or painkillers?</li><li>• Feel as if nothing I do seems to matter anymore, or have the impact I want?</li><li>• Feel as if no one can understand what I need to do, or how much work I have?</li><li>• Sometimes feel numb or react to situations with inappropriately strong emotions?</li><li>• Feel too overwhelmed to seek new experiences, ideas, or ways of doing things?</li><li>• Frequently think about how to “escape” my current situation?</li></ul>
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In their workbook on renewal in leadership, McKee et al. (2008)

noted that

even if we ignore, deny, or pretend we can live with constant sacrifices, stress almost always leaks out somewhere, in us and with others. We can become stuck in a negative spiral,

inadvertently and sometimes unknowingly creating dissonance in our relationships and our organizations. (p. 51)

Directors may not ever recognize such stress or their reactions to it because, as McKee et al. (2008) related, the position of a leader often means that “real connection and real relationships are very hard to find and keep. All too often this translates into cautiousness or callousness—and very little straight talk” (pp. 50-51). Likewise, our tutors may not feel comfortable sharing their observations with us. Often, the sacrifice syndrome begins with a failure—small or great—that signals something is wrong. Boyatzis termed this failure a “wake-up call,” something that can happen as a result of any of the items on the chart in Figure 2.

### **Step 2: Identify Defensive Routines**

Once LAWCDs establish whether or not they experience the sacrifice syndrome, the next step is to identify defensive routines (Figures 3 and 4) in order to establish how these behaviors affect us and those around us (McKee et al., 2008, p. 62).

**Figure 3.**

*Defensive Routines Chart (McKee et al., 2008, pp. 60-61)*

**My Defensive Routines: How I Cope with Pressure and Problems**

**Step 1: What do you tend to do when under pressure?** Check all that apply to you.

**Approach and Internalize**

- I get to work earlier and stay at work later
- I continue to add new projects or take on more roles despite a realistic shortage of time or results
- I constantly remind myself of my own or others' high standards for me
- I expect everyone to perform to my high standards
- I can never say "no"

**Avoid and Internalize**

- I move further inside: my office, my projects, my thoughts and concerns
- I become detached from relationships with colleagues, friends, and family
- I communicate less than usual and only about what I feel is essential
- Only my mission and goals seem important
- I don't need input from others
- I feel that other people just get in the way

**Approach and Externalize**

- I am the only one who knows the answer
- If anyone disagrees with me I will disregard them or make them sorry for disagreeing
- My closest friends and advisers always agree with me
- I never waver on decisions

**Avoid and Externalize**

- I focus on negative aspects of situations
- I wear anger and disappointment as a badge of honor
- I criticize or become cynical with those who want things to change or have hope
- I blame my mood/circumstances on the situation or someone else
- I enjoy being with like-minded people and talking about what we think is wrong

**Step 2: Circle the five check marks that indicate your primary ways of dealing with life and work when you are stressed.** These are defensive routines—they help you defend yourself from the stressors and may inhibit change. The next step will help you unravel the impact of these habits.

**Step 3: On the chart below, list your top five defensive routines** and note whether they are linked with approaching or avoiding issues or your feelings, and whether you tend to internalize or externalize your responses. Then, write some notes about how your routines affect you, people close to you, and possibly your organization.

**Figure 4.**

*Isolating the Top Five Defensive Routines (McKee et al., 2008, p. 62)*

<b>My Defensive Routines</b>	<b>Approach, Avoid, Internalize, Externalize</b>	<b>How this affects me: mind, body, emotion, spirit</b>	<b>How this affects my team/close colleagues, family</b>	<b>How this affects the degree of resonance or dissonance in my environment</b>

Once LAWCDs understand the influence of their own defensive routines on those around them, they can choose to mitigate the influence. Additionally, this understanding opens the way to renewal.

### **Step 3: The Renewal Cycle**

Once leaders have understood their responses to intense stress, they can begin the renewal cycle that cultivates mindfulness, hope, and compassion—all of which “evoke responses within the human body that arouse the parasympathetic nervous system, reversing the effects of the stress response and arousal of the sympathetic nervous



system” (Boyatzis, 2005, p. 211). The parasympathetic nervous system opposes the flight-or-fight response of the sympathetic nervous system that prepares us to face dangers. Mindfulness, hope, and compassion promote connections with others, which Boyatzis (2005) claimed is the heart of renewal physically and psychologically: “Attachments cause a decrease in the sympathetic nervous system reactivity via oxytocin and vasopressin’s release from the hypothalamus” (p. 211). Increased neural activity comes through compassion, which leads to “elation” (p. 211). Boyatzis advised leaders to keep a journal where they note how they feel (mindfulness), what they hope for regarding their position and goals, and how they can develop compassion for both themselves and others they serve (Figure 5).

**Figure 5.**  
*Renewal Concerns*

<b>Mindfulness</b>	<b>Hope</b>	<b>Compassion</b>
How do you feel right now? Check in briefly.	What is the hope you originally had regarding the work in your writing center? What’s blocking that (if it’s blocked)?	How can you extend compassion toward yourself and your students?

### *Mindfulness*

LAWCDs might experience shock at how they feel once they stop the sacrifice syndrome and key into their day-to-day feelings. Mindful of daily demands, they can begin to cultivate awareness of spontaneous defensive reactions. According to McKee et al. (2008), mindfulness refers to

living in a state of full and conscious awareness of one's whole self, other people, and the context in which we live and work. This means developing our intellect, taking care of our bodies, using the power of our emotions, and attending to our spirituality. We define mindfulness as being awake, aware, and attending—to ourselves and to the world around us.

Mindfulness enables us to pay attention to what is happening to us, and to stop the Sacrifice Syndrome before it stops us. Being mindfully aware of ourselves and our surroundings, human and environmental, invokes the capacity for renewal. (p. 73)

Such mindfulness leads to “more cognitive flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving skills” (McKee et al., 2008, p. 74) that expand to compassionate behavior toward themselves and the entire learning and writing center environment.

### *Hope*

Dreams a leader once had about a particular business—why a leader entered the field in the beginning—are at the center of Boyatzis' (2005) theory. In the workbook, McKee et al. (2008) suggested leaders write in a journal to reawaken these dreams. Once in touch with them, LAWCDs then can align their current situation with the hopes they had originally. This process can bring their focus back to what really matters as opposed to what might be troubling them currently.

## ***Compassion***

Three aspects of compassion need to be cultivated: “understanding and empathy for others’ feelings and experiences, caring for others, and the willingness to act on those feelings of care and empathy” (Boyatzis, 2005, p. 179). In a journal, LAWCDs can cultivate compassion through imaginative exercises where we picture someone who needs compassion and see them through an average day.

### **Step 4: Establishing Learning Goals**

When LAWCDs compare their defensive routines to their hopes, they should be able to craft learning goals to decrease that gap. However, “The goals should build on your strengths, as well as challenge you to overcome limitations” (Boyatzis, 2005, p. 165). Along with setting a learning agenda, McKee et al. (2008) suggested setting milestones for progress (Figure 6). Milestones are “noticeable markers that indicate your progress toward your goal” (p. 165). The workbook is very helpful for planning out long-term goals.

**Figure 6.**

*Learning Agenda and Milestones*

<b>Statement of My Learning Goal:</b>		
<b>Milestone 1:</b>	<b>Milestone 2:</b>	<b>Milestone 3:</b>
<b>Action Steps:</b>	<b>Action Steps:</b>	<b>Action Steps:</b>
<b>Key People to Help Me:</b>		

### **Scenario: Creating Leadership and Renewal**

What follows is an example of how the application of Boyatzis' (2005) Intentional Change Theory created renewal in one writing center. Previously housed under the Provost's Office (and currently under the English Department as an Academic Support Unit), our Midwestern urban writing center has four-to-six graduate assistants on a stipend from the English Department who tutor 20 hours a week; they are enrolled in either our MFA or MA in Literature program. When four of them several years ago had debilitating physical and mental health issues and could no longer perform their duties, I could not have them removed (as, technically, I did not hire them), despite many discussions with my supervisor, the department head, and the graduate students themselves. The center was chaotic, and I began reading *Resonant Leadership* (2005) in my library carrel at lunchtime. I'd been given the book by a business

graduate student I had tutored who used his work in her dissertation (Butko, 2016); we both were amazed at his holistic approach to leadership that highlighted individual differences.

My subtle wake-up call was noticing a reluctance to go to the gym (saying to myself that all the parking spaces were full when I knew another lot was open) (Step 1: Assess the Situation). Using the worksheet on the sacrifice syndrome, I noticed that I had indeed decreased the time I spent exercising and increased the time I spent working as well as the amount of coffee I drank. From the second worksheet on identifying defensive routines, I admitted that I spent more time in my office instead of being out with my tutors, telling myself I was working on an assessment project. My top defensive routines in worksheet three showed my tendency to retreat, or as Boyatzis would say, to internalize stress and avoid it (Step 2: Identify Defensive Routines). This tendency left my family and coworkers alone, and it meant I neglected the problem. From the worksheet on the renewal cycle, I began Boyatzis' process of cultivating each day mindfulness, hope, and compassion in a small journal I kept in my library carrel. Though I spent just a few minutes each day writing, I was unnerved to see how deeply disturbed I was—and yet, as soon as I began, I felt I could do something about all this. My hope for a peaceful, productive workplace revived, and the compassion I felt for my graduate students empowered me to address my own and others' behaviors

(Step 3: The Renewal Cycle). This journal also allowed me to begin a learning agenda (Step 4: Establishing Learning Goals).

For learning goals, I wanted to know more management techniques. At the time, our Human Resources Department offered a six-month leadership course that I took that had many management strategy lessons (Step 4: Establishing Learning Goals). Another goal I set was to get advice about the particular aspects of the staff problems I was having through various support systems offered in my university, such as our Counseling Center and our Employee Assistance Program (Step 4: Establishing Learning Goals). This support, along with that of the lawyer in the Office of Institutional Equity and the English Department Head and the Graduate Studies Director, enabled me to draw up a code of professional behavior that stopped all the problems I was having (Step 4: Establishing Learning Goals). This code is supported by the English Department, which means that any graduate students not abiding by this code must meet with the Director of Graduate Studies and the Department Head after two warnings and risk losing employment. This learning agenda resolved the entire problem, provided me with the training and support I needed, and did result, as Boyatzis related, in lowering stress and creating caring relationships. Our Writing Center is now a peaceful and productive place. Without the research of Boyatzis' guiding my work, I would have sought personal counsel alone, but I doubt I would ever have

reached the completion and peace that I found because it trained me to spot defensive mechanisms before they grow and to craft learning agendas.

What about the bigger challenges facing LAWCDs mentioned in the introduction—the need to read journals, conduct research, and delineate job duties so that our field advances in a time of restructuring? Boyatzis (2005, 2013) would encourage LAWCDs to take stock of individual hopes for our professional and personal lives. He would ask them to hold this “ideal” next to the reality of daily work and home lives. That gap between the two, he said, would be the place to formulate learning goals based on his four-step Intentional Change Theory.

Let us imagine LAWCDs in urban settings who work through the sacrifice syndrome and defensive routines worksheets to discover that they hope to maximize the value of tutorials for non-traditional students. They need to be mindful of how they feel about current tutorials for this group, articulate hopes, and have compassion for all involved. With this compass, they can frame potential research projects and ask for help from peers at conferences.

### **Limitations**

These worksheets do not substitute for the lengthy searching that Boyatzis advises. Boyatzis himself noted that this process of renewal can be daunting. Realistically, the process takes years. Other

limitations include experiencing dissonance for which some LAWCDs might require psychological support.

### **Conclusion**

If the application of Boyatzis' (2005) Intentional Change Theory resolved the scenario presented in this article, it could resolve more pressing needs of LAWCDs regarding research in this field and in delineating job duties. In five or 10 years, how do we see ourselves individually as leaders and as scholars? What do we want to offer our future young directors and our communities? If we maintain only what we do now and who we are now in a state of stress, Boyatzis warned there will be negative consequences in all areas of our lives as the stress most of us experience cannot be sustained indefinitely. The Intentional Change Theory might be exactly what LAWCDs need to consult in these worksheets and in his books and articles so that they can honor both their individual values and those of the field itself—a field that seeks to guide writers and aid communities.

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