

Lowell Nerenberg

Change Your Mind, Change Your Life

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space,” wrote Viktor Frankl, a neurologist and psychiatrist who survived life in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. “In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Lowell Nerenberg was eleven years old when he was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis, a disease that would profoundly compromise the rest of his childhood and present lifelong challenges. But in those challenges, and in the words of Viktor Frankl, he saw that space of opportunity—that chance between stimulus and reaction to escape the automaticity that governs ninety percent of human experience. “The brain is wired to keep us safe, scanning our environment for threats and modifying our experience based on unconscious and subconscious processing,” he explains today. “As a result, we live a lot of our lives on autopilot, which can trick us into thinking that change is impossible. But if you can touch that moment between stimulus and reaction and be mindful of how you’re going to respond, you can actually choose to achieve freedom from your perceived limitations. You can change your mind, and as a result, your life.”

Today, as an Executive Leadership Coach serving chief and key executives and their teams, Lowell guides clients to take an ontological approach that involves discovering what has been driving them to react and behave as they do. “What people *do* comes from who they fundamentally *are*,” he says. “A person’s natural reactions are a symptom of what’s going on underneath, and sometimes we need to work through that. We also examine roles they took on because society told them they should – instead of doing work that utilizes their strengths and feels good. This is particularly important for leaders.

Sincerity and authenticity are key in leadership, since others are able to tell when you’re putting on an act. The most sustainable method of leading and working with people is being able to lead from the heart, and that’s what I help my clients do.”

Some research shows that the heart has a neural system of its own – a set of neurons that communicate with the brain in the head. So the heart isn’t just a machine for pumping blood. There is more research and understanding about this phenomenon to come, and Lowell remains a

student of neuroscience to inform his coaching. Through his own experience and his work with others, he knows that the brain has plasticity, and that people have the power to change how they think, feel, react, and behave – even their life-long habits. With practice, feedback, and guidance, he helps his clients gain the self-awareness needed to change behavior and achieve success. “I love it when people have that ah-ha moment,” he says. “They see themselves and

their barriers in a new light, and they’re able to move forward to become better listeners, better empathizers, and better leaders.”

As a coach, Lowell is often likened to a GPS—that trusted system that doesn’t question *why* the user is here or *how* they got here. With a seemingly bottomless fountain of affection and appreciation for mankind in all its forms, he accepts his clients where they are without judgment and focuses on how to get them where they want to go. This sincerity of feeling and interest garners trust between coach and client, which paves the way for progress. “The first step is accepting who you are,” he says. “Whatever you resist persists, so if you can accept yourself, you can let go of your attachment to the negative narratives that keep you stagnant. The goal is to neutralize that struggle between good and bad so that you’re open and not subject to these forces



that hold you back.”

Lowell’s intuitive understanding of these forces was first cultivated through his childhood, which began with his birth in Philadelphia in 1942 to parents who often argued loudly. His father ran a cigar factory, and because the family needed the money, his mother worked as a talented seamstress. She resented being tethered to a life she didn’t love, and was often very hard on both her husband and her son. She often criticized Lowell, cultivating the sense that he would never be good enough.

As a result, Lowell got other children to like him, and amassed a small gang of neighborhood friends when he was five years old. With both parents working, he was often lonely when left at home in their North Philadelphia apartment above a dry cleaning shop, and enjoyed playing outside on the streets even though it was considered a rough neighborhood. When he was eight, the family moved to a safer neighborhood in the northeast part of the city, where Lowell tended to keep to himself more. “At that point I just didn’t feel like I was a worthy kid, so I’d wait for other kids to come ask me to play,” he recalls.

Life took a dramatic shift one day when Lowell was on a Boy Scout camping trip for the weekend and came down with a mysterious intestinal illness that didn’t resolve on its own. At first he thought it was linked to a dirty knife that had been used to cut a cake on the trip, but the doctors eventually diagnosed him with ulcerative colitis, a serious autoimmune disease. “Sometimes I wonder if I got sick as a way of keeping my parents together,” he reflects. “I do think the mind and body are connected in mysterious ways. In any event, that was the beginning of a long, miserable, and embarrassing five years.”

Lowell still managed to have some fun, like the summer he started a laundry service with a friend while on a family vacation in Atlantic City for a month. They would pick up a customer’s laundry, wash and dry it in a laundromat, and deliver it back. He wanted to be part of the basketball team in junior high, and though he was too thin and sick to play, he was allowed to be the manager, where his primary job was to hand out clean towels and collect the sweaty ones. He was excited to be elected vice president of the student body in high school, and he had a close group of friends that had fun and played poker and pinocle together.

Despite these threads of normalcy, however, life for Lowell was anything but ordinary. The disease wreaked havoc on his body, to the point that his weight dropped to 85 pounds on his 5-foot, 7-inch-tall frame. His life was dictated by doctor appointments, hospital visits and blood transfusions when he was too weak, which translated to school absences and academic stress. “My parents didn’t push me to get my homework done, but I felt a lot of pressure internally to not fall behind,” he remembers. “I felt alone, and I didn’t have any energy. I knew it was obvious to everyone around me that there was something very wrong with me, and that was hard for me to deal with, too.”

After five years of frustration and suffering, at age sixteen, Lowell made the difficult decision to have a radical surgical procedure performed. “I was really stuck between a rock and a hard place,” he remembers. “The surgery was scary and the recovery would be hard, but it would finally end the suffering.”

The surgery was more than life-changing—in fact, it is what saved his life. Lowell had to drop out of school for the rest of the semester, but when he came back, he was on the road to recovery. And in his new math class, he fell for a girl named Bev. “My self-esteem was low and I couldn’t understand why anyone would want to be with me,” he remembers. “We wouldn’t have met if I hadn’t had the surgery and needed to repeat that semester. And now we’ve been married more than fifty years. Looking back, it was a bizarre and miraculous set of coincidences – if you believe in coincidence.”

Soon after the surgery, Lowell’s parents divorced. His mother moved to New York, and his father couldn’t understand how his son could spend so much time with Bev. But those two were inseparable, and when they graduated from high school, they both enrolled at Temple University in Philadelphia. The campus was local and affordable, so they continued living with their parents and commuted to classes.

Lowell had always excelled in mathematics and chose it as his college major. He took some summer courses and graduated a semester early, opting to pursue work with computers even though Temple offered no hardware or software courses at the time. He applied for a job at Boeing Vertol, the company’s helicopter division just outside of the city. It was

his only decent lead, and his persistency ultimately landed him a job there as a programmer. “The hiring manager handed me a book on Fortran, a scientific programming language. He told me to learn it and start writing applications programs for the Boeing engineers using huge mainframe computers,” he recounts. “It was all about logic and systems and a new language, and I loved it.”

Lowell and Bev married soon after she graduated in January of 1965. After two years at Boeing, he took a job with a company that rented out programmers to clients on various projects. After several years in that capacity, he became a customer software support trainer for a computer peripherals manufacturer, CalComp, and after several more years, he decided to switch from sales support to sales. “I was doing a lot of work helping sales people close deals when they often didn’t even know what they were selling,” he explains. “I wanted a piece of that action, and I wanted to get out of Philly. Believe it or not, the deep potholes and poorly-timed traffic lights got to me and I was ready for a change of scenery! Feel free to call me crazy.”

Since there were no openings for salespeople in Philadelphia, he transferred to CalComp’s Washington, DC office and started fresh in sales in a new city. Lowell remembers one particular conversation with his sales manager, who reamed him out because he couldn’t articulate why he was justified in asking for a discount for a particular prospect. “My boss really got in my face about being unprepared to sell him on why I needed a lower price,” Lowell recounts. “I was crushed by my being so inept and by the embarrassment, and seriously considered quitting sales. But I used it as a learning opportunity and began to do my homework before trying to sell anything to anybody.”

Learning and adapting to the new environment, Lowell became a branch sales manager responsible for overseeing a sales team and a territory, which presented the new challenge of leading while doing. He became skilled at switching between the two very different hats – player and coach. “It was an extremely valuable experience for me to call upon years later, but in the end I realized pure sales was not my sweet spot at CalComp.”

Seeking a better fit, Lowell took a job at Altek, a local manufacturer, where he served as VP of Marketing. And for the first time in his

professional life, he truly got the sense that he was making a difference. He facilitated communication and trust among the sales, marketing, and engineering teams, and overcame long-standing frictions to solve problems and make things happen. Helping these teams work together and seeing such tangible success garnered through improved interpersonal relationships, Lowell felt he was connecting to something close to his purpose.

He went on to work at one other tech company, and while he enjoyed the business world, he couldn’t shake his dissatisfaction with the actual businesses he encountered. “In every job I had, I got the feeling that I simply didn’t fit. I wanted to have more influence on how they ran the show,” he recalls. “And even though I was married with two kids and a mortgage, I had this persistent feeling that I still didn’t know what I wanted to be when I grew up.”

Finally, in 1985, Lowell was fired— not unexpectedly—from his last job. He came to believe that maybe it wasn’t his employers, or his managers, or the subject matter that was the root of his dissatisfaction. The problem was the most pivotal of all: his heart just wasn’t in it. He wondered if he just wasn’t cut out to work for someone else. It was a truth Bev had realized years earlier, and now that Lowell began accepting it for the first time, he decided to start his own business.

The entrepreneurial challenge was undertaken begrudgingly, as Lowell feared taking on that much responsibility, and he knew the road ahead would not be easy. But he felt it was something he had to do, so he bit the bullet and changed his mind in order to change his life, setting the goal of launching a wholesale distribution company specializing in computer graphics equipment and software. “I contacted a few manufacturers I knew, letting them know I wanted to be their regional distributor,” he says. “One of them decided to take a chance on me, and an incredibly generous friend agreed to loan me \$50,000 to get things started.”

With that, in 1986, Lowell launched Computer Graphics Distributing Company (CGD) in his family room in Rockville, Maryland—a defining moment born of a courage he didn’t know he had. His intention was to follow the wisdom of Zig Ziglar, a successful pots and pans salesman who became an inspiration to many. Lowell kept Ziglar’s words in his mind: “You can get

everything in life you want if you will just help enough other people get what they want.”

After two or three months, Lowell realized he needed help while he sought more vendors and did all the marketing and selling of products. So he brought in Bev to manage CGD’s operations. She sold her home-based bookkeeping service, Balancing Act, to join the startup. They eventually assembled a strong team, moving out of their house and into larger and larger office and warehouse facilities. The staff gathered and agreed on a set of eight core values for all employees to adhere to, embracing ideas like “Treat everyone with dignity and respect”, “Be easy to do business with”, and “Go for win-win solutions”.

The company took innovative approaches to employee and customer engagement based on the power of having a customer-centered purpose in business. And they embraced unique marketing strategies with a comic edge that garnered wide popularity, like the tagline “Trust us—we’re in sales!” and the hilarious, home-grown commercials that played instead of music when callers were placed on hold. People would literally call in just to be put on hold and laugh at the commercials. In what seemed like no time, CGD landed the 144th spot on the Inc. 500 list of America’s Fastest Growing Private Companies – a stunning accomplishment for a man who still felt he was figuring it out as he went along.

Finally, Lowell knew what he wanted to be when he grew up, and it was exactly what he was doing as an entrepreneur and business leader at the helm of CGD. His intuitive sense of business best practices, the absence of which had generated friction in other workplaces, proved to be the key to success for his own company. And most importantly, he was living his purpose every day. “We were selling products to value-added resellers who integrated them and then sold complete systems to end-users,” he recounts. “We were driven by the intention to make our customers outrageously successful in reselling our products. There was a lot of energy behind that mission.” Also, through the final four years of the business, Lowell joined Vistage (then known as TEC, The Executive Committee), a peer-to-peer coaching program for CEOs and senior executives.

By 1997, CGD had grown to \$13 million in annual revenues, and Lowell decided to sell it and merge as part of a roll-up deal along with five other regional computer graphics focused

distributors he had grown to know and trust over the years. Each of the CEOs took a leadership position with the new entity, with Lowell assuming the role of VP of Marketing. The merged company soon went public on NASDAQ—which sounds a little more exciting and lucrative than it actually was. “The company who led us through that transition was just not very savvy,” he recalls. “We independent entrepreneurs could have used better adult supervision.”

Lowell stayed on for two years as VP of Marketing and then left in 2000 to start a corporate seated massage therapy business, reflective of his and Bev’s interest in alternative approaches to health and wellness. Then, in 2005, he became a Vistage Chair, marking his official foray into leadership coaching. “It was a very natural role for me, as I loved serving my clients and their companies,” he reflects. In 2008, he decided to start a coaching business of his own as Coach Lowell, and for the past eight years, he’s applied the lessons he learned from his professional journey, his experience as a successful CEO, and his independent research.

For Lowell, coaching and leadership begin with the simple acceptance of others, just as they are, in the moment. He recognized that criticism and dwelling on what’s wrong as negative are forces that knock the wind and the spirit out of people. Instead he encourages refocusing promptly to imagine potential solutions. “A leader’s job is to grow people into being better at what they’re here for,” he says. “It’s about being mindful of the current moment so that we choose freely instead of repeating our habitual failed behaviors from the past. And it’s recognizing that you’re always leading, even when you’re on your lunch break or out of the office. Everything you do and say is an example of who you are as a leader, so it’s important to stay aware of that.”

Lowell embraces the sports coach model of leadership and management. “I feel that execution is sorely lacking in many organizations,” he says, “and it’s due to either poorly trained managers or a dysfunctional style of managing. Managers need to act more like coaches than bosses, partnering with each subordinate to grow and develop their competence at getting things done and being a collaborative leader. As a fan of professional sports, my experience developing company leadership teams convinced me of how energizing it is when everyone is aligned on the mission,

when there's mutual trust and cooperation, and when you embrace a culture of 'one for all and all for one.' That infectious spirit breeds an unbeatable team, and the rest of the company is influenced by that energy. They get clear about the contribution they all deliver to their customers and realize that they each play an important part."

With eleven years of experience as CEO of his own Inc. 500 company, and another eleven as a leadership coach, Lowell is a thinking partner and strategic adviser to CEOs and business leaders, and excels at helping clients stay on task in meeting their goals amidst increasingly competing demands for their time and attention. He also helps them understand and relate to their employees in the most constructive, positive way possible, so that his clients can better support their teams in becoming leaders in their own right, both personally and professionally.

These are invaluable leadership skills he's developed over the years, thanks in no small part to the love and support of his wife. "Bev has what I'm missing," he says. "She's a doer who is very good at execution and she helps me get on course and stay on course. She never gives up and she's always the one to illuminate my blind spots when I'm too focused on the vision." Lowell and Bev have two wonderful sons and three grandchildren.

Today, Lowell and Bev support Create Global Healing, a nonprofit launched by Dr. Lori Leyden to help restore peace and dignity to traumatized youth in war-torn countries. In 2007, Lori began employing Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT - Tapping) to help orphans in Rwanda overcome PTSD and to become productive members of society. She was then called to Newtown, Connecticut, to use the same techniques with children and parents traumatized by the school shootings, and she later facilitated Newtown children who wanted to raise money to help the Rwandan children attend university. "Bev herself is certified in these techniques and leads workshops for nurses at the Cleveland Clinic and elsewhere, so it's very meaningful to us that Lori is taking that power and energy to people all over the world who desperately need it," Lowell says.

In advising young people entering the working world today, Lowell underscores the

importance of fostering respectful and positive interpersonal relationships. Reminding us that most people are locked on autopilot as their mind skips from stimulus to reaction, he urges empathy and understanding. "It can be hard sometimes to understand why other people do what they do, but remember that we all have unique life histories and experiences and we see things differently," he suggests, reminiscent of the Erhard Seminars Training (now called Landmark International) that so impressed and impacted him in his earlier years. "It's important to respect each other and try to get to know each other in order to create mutual trust. Forego judgment for acceptance and curiosity. Just being interested and open can mean more to people than you know."

Beyond that, Lowell underscores the importance of honing your intuition and learning to trust it – something that can be aided through meditation and mindfulness training. "Remember that your emotional state plays an important role in creating the environment that surrounds you," he says. "Never forget that changing your mind can change your life, and never underestimate the power of a compelling purpose. I first connected with mine back in the early '80s when it hit me out of nowhere. My purpose is to make a significant positive difference in other people's lives. It's as simple and profound as that."

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About Gordon J. Bernhardt
President and founder of Bernhardt Wealth Management and author of Profiles in Success: Inspiration from Executive Leaders in the Washington D.C. Area, Gordon provides financial planning and wealth management services to affluent individuals, families and business-owners throughout the Washington, DC area. Since establishing his firm in 1994, he and his team have been focused on providing high-quality service and independent financial advice to help clients make informed decisions about their money. For more information, visit www.BernhardtWealth.com and [Gordon's Blog](#).

