

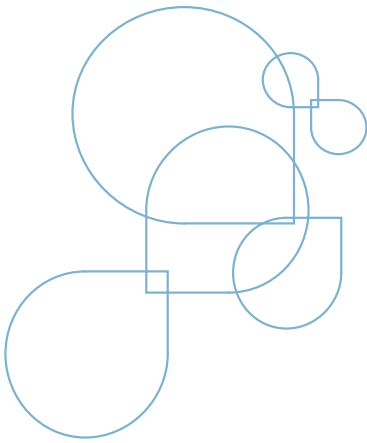
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A Closer Look at the Co-Active Leader™ Program

An Interview with Art Shirk,
Senior Faculty Member at CTI



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We are often asked “What does the Coaches Training Institute (CTI) do?”, “What is the value of the Co-Active Leader Program?”, or “What can I expect to get out of these programs?”

Admittedly, these are deep topics and the answers are partly based on participants’ subjective responses to these programs. So we thought the best way to provide answers to these questions would be to pose a few of our own. We recently sat down with Art Shirk, senior faculty member and lead program designer at CTI, to get his view of leadership today and how the Co-Active Leader Program can help everyone become a better leader.

CTI: Art, we tend to view leaders as people who take us somewhere; for example, a path finder who sees a possible future and then inspires us to follow him/her to that destination. How does CTI’s vision of how leaders act in the “real world” align with this view?

Art: There are some aspects of Co-Active Leadership that are similar to this idea, and some that differ. Co-Active Leaders are path finders – they do see possible futures that are aligned with a deep sense of purpose, and certainly they do create impact, including mobilizing others around their vision.

There are some important distinctions though, about being a Co-Active Leader and about Co-Active Leadership. In my opinion, the most important thing is that a Co-Active Leader is intimately connected to others and the world around them, and is creating *from* that connection and relationship. Rather than having an individual vision and striving to make others follow their path as directly as possible, a Co-Active Leader is engaging others in that vision. In addition, they have the capacity to actually create that vision *from* the world around them – consider this to be a “level one,” “level two,” and “level three” phenomenon all at the same time. As a Co-Active Leader, the path I am creating has roots in my own sense of who I am and my purpose,

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but it comes alive when I can also create it from my relationship with others, and from my deeply connected sense of what the world around me needs and wants.


The other distinction that I see is that “leadership” is not just about a person and his/her capabilities or actions to lead others, but it is a process that happens among people and in the world. So, in a sense, Co-Active Leaders are able to create leadership from what is happening around them; it is a way of being that, once turned on, doesn’t turn off very easily.

CTI: The Co-Active Leadership model’s invitation to lead from those essential qualities that make you unique seems to invite a much wider range of leadership styles than we might be used to. How does that play out in the real world, where we expect leaders to demonstrate certain virtues such as charisma and great oratory?

Art: Well, a few decades ago, the idea that there is a single set of leadership attributes and competencies that were the “right” set was the predominant way of thinking. While there are sets of competencies and skills that we know are critical for effective leadership, it is more effective for a leader to express himself/herself authentically rather than try to fit into a prescribed box of how they should be.

We go through much of life learning to “be” a certain way – to be smart, strong, assertive, professional, and more – and for much of our lives, those things may serve us well and contribute to success. However, we reach a point in our development where an awareness begins to emerge that a more essential and authentic part of ourselves has been missing, or hasn’t been fully expressed even though it wants to be!

I believe that within each leader resides an authentic being which seeks a true and essential way of expressing itself, a being that wants room to move. Leaders who have the courage, confidence, and self-knowledge to be themselves authentically – and to use those authentic strengths – have greater impact in creating the results they want. My goal in the first retreat of the program is for every single person to uncover more of that authentic leader within them and give it room to move.

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CTI: In what way can Co-Active Leadership empower our ability to co-lead with others (e.g., a partner, a colleague, or other members of a group)? And what impact can this have on the people we are hoping to lead?

Art: That is a great question. Often, after a CTI Co-Active Coaching course, people will say things like “There is something special about the way the course leaders worked together. What is it?”


A key answer to that question is that the training the course leaders have in common is the Co-Active Leader Program. The original intent of the program was to build the skill of co-leading, of leading with another person or people in front of a room or group. Since that original design, the program has grown, deepened, and been redesigned, to the point where its purpose and impact now go way beyond the original objectives. Now the intent of the program is to build the capacity to create impact with anyone, in just about any situation, and that is aligned to a clear sense of purpose and intention.

Before I grew my Co-Active Leadership “muscles,” I often found myself feeling like it was all up to me, or that the success of my efforts would depend on my expertise, my qualifications, or my overall polish. One of the biggest lessons I learned was that I am never alone as a leader. I am always leading within a context, within a space (or a field, or an energy), and I am always leading in relationship with other people. Once I truly understood that the answers (or solutions, or direction) already exist in others, “leading” became more fun and more effective.

CTI: The names of CTI’s *Leadership retreats* – “Creating from Self,” “Creating from Other,” “Creating from Nothing,” and “Creating from Everything” – make it clear that leaders have more than just themselves to work with. But what exactly do Co-Active Leaders actually create?

Art: We use the phrase, “create from” very intentionally, and it is a core aspect of Co-Active Leadership. It is very much like an internal muscle that grows and expands the more it is nurtured. It is a capability that really is quite revolutionary, and dramatically improves your ability to lead.

First, consider the word, “create,” and think of the energy of creativity. It means to bring something into being that didn’t exist before. Creating can come from intention, from love, or from passion. “Create” is a very positive energy and stands in contrast to “react.”

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The other part of the phrase, the “from,” is essential and stands in contrast to “to” as in “do to.” When I create *from* something, whatever I create becomes a rich resource for me. I think of it as gas for the engine; something that actually becomes a part of me and the process.


In Co-Active Leadership, our starting point is “creating from” our most authentic selves – all of the natural strengths, gifts, talents, and wisdom that we already have as unique individuals. But that is just the starting point. When we “create from other,” it means that others around us – family, team members, students, and others – are resources that we are intimately connected to, and we can draw on *their* gifts, talents, and wisdom. This may sound simple, but this represents a radical shift for many leaders. If I am always able to create from others, it means that I am *never* alone and *never* need to rely on just my own abilities (thank goodness!).

The most impactful and revolutionary parts of Co-Active Leadership for me, however, comes from building a consciousness of what it means to create from *nothing* and from *everything*. Don’t tell anyone, but I would say that these are actually two perspectives on the same thing. The profound point is that when I allow myself to become present and connect to all of that is around me, I have access to a tremendous wealth of resources.

The really great news is that I discover that *everything* around me is a valuable resource, including what often seems like obstacles, opposition, conflict, or difficulty. When people grasp this concept, they begin to “dance with everything” as leaders, meaning that they become very nimble and adept at leading fluidly with whatever comes their way. This is the single most profound concept that has improved my leadership abilities.

CTI: In what way does Co-Active Leadership empower participants to work directly with chaos that we find in the world today such as natural disasters, financial crises, environmental meltdowns, and war?

Art: “Creating from Everything” is our theme in the fourth retreat of the program, and by that we mean growing the ability to “dance” with whatever shows up, including the unexpected chaos and mess. In doing so, a fundamental shift occurs. Rather than ignore, push away, resist, work-around, or avoid the mess that is happening, Co-Active Leadership teaches us how to create from it by embracing whatever is happening in the moment. And, according to my purpose or intention, it is important to give myself full permission to take action in my own unique way to have the impact that I want.

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...Co-Active
Leadership is about
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A perfect example of this is our colleague Kyoko Seiki in Japan, who is a phenomenal Co-Active Leader, and her response to the tsunami of 2011. I was struck by her presence to what was happening around her and her ability to deeply sense what was occurring, and to be keenly aware of her leadership instincts and purpose in that situation. In the midst of very tragic and chaotic circumstances, she was able to stay true to her own inner compass, create from all that was going on around her, and have a positive impact in her own community.


So to answer the question more directly, I think that Co-Active Leadership supports our sense of purpose, our capacity to be present and aware, and to take full action, even in the midst of extreme chaos like a natural disaster.

CTI: How can Co-Active Leadership improve our personal lives and our relationships with our family and loved ones? Do you have a personal experience you can share?

Art: Generally speaking, I get very skeptical when people say that something changed their lives. Yet my participation in the Co-Active Leadership Program in 2001 was the catalyst that opened up a very different trajectory in my life. It is why I can speak so passionately about it and lead the program with a very personal and heartfelt conviction that it can be a major influence in people's lives.

In my personal life, I learned that part of Co-Active Leadership is about intimacy and the capacity to open your heart to another, to really let them in, as well as to take the vulnerable risk of entering into their hearts. Two specific things come to mind as most important to me. One was the transformation that happened in my relationship with my Dad. After Retreat 2 of the program, I remember having some time with my Dad, and noticing that I was able to see him – to feel him – in a more present way and more as a human being than I had been able to before. It showed up in small ways; for example, simply being able to listen to him and hear him without a lot of “inner noise” or judgment in my head.

And so, I began to respond to him differently and more openly, and we began to know each other more deeply, and began to give ourselves permission to simply love each other more than we had before. When he passed away, at the age of 91, I felt so very grateful to have built what was a profoundly loving relationship with him.

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Many people exit the program with lifelong friends who are allies and supporters from all around the globe.


While there are many “professional” benefits of Co-Active Leadership, in the end, I believe that the most profound rewards appear on the personal level. I believe that my capacity to love and be loved are what really matter.

CTI: CTI’s Leadership Program brings people into a “tribe” to live together for 22 days over the course of four retreats, over ten months, and with many more hours collaborating on the phone and online. In what way is the idea of the tribe living and learning together in this way so important to the success of the course?

Art: We make the promise to participants that they will have an experience of community that will change their lives, and we mean it. This aspect of the program is essential for several reasons, and has great long-term benefits as well. It is essential because the community (or “tribe”) forms a very solid “learning container” for the program over the ten-month period. Everyone who is there has deep desire and very high hopes and dreams for what will happen, and they bring a very high level of commitment to the process. It is an environment of both challenge and support – considering that everyone is counting on everyone else to be there to challenge and support them, and everyone knows they are being counted on just as much.

Of course, most people start out with some anxiety about how they will show up in this new community. But the thing is that everyone feels that to some degree, everyone is in the same boat, and it does not take long for them to become willing to experiment, try new things, fail, stretch, recover, and try again so they can really blossom. It is truly the most exciting, loving, fun, and challenging learning environment that I’ve had the privilege to be a part of.

The community is also essential because it provides a real laboratory for everyone. Just as in a coaching workshop where participants are coaching one another, in the Leader Program, you are always having an impact and leading others in the community. I have been involved with more than ten tribes over the years, and the most gratifying results actually show up long after the program has ended, when I learn of projects that tribe members launch together years after their program ended, but that had its original seed in the Leader Program. Many people exit the program with lifelong friends who are allies and supporters from all around the globe.

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CTI: What would you say to someone who is considering the Co-Active Leader Program, but may not be sure if now is the right time?

Art: That's an important question because I actually discourage people from joining the program if it doesn't seem right to them, or if it is not the right time for them. I want people in my program who know in their heart of hearts that it is the right thing and the right time.

If people aren't sure, I recommend that they listen to the deepest, most knowing part of themselves, and then notice the difference between what the logical mind has to say and the deeper voice. The most powerful questions would be: What do you already know? What does your heart tell you? Is the voice inside you hungry? What does it want?

If you feel you want to do it but have fears and concerns, first get support for these concerns, but put yourself into the process. Everyone arrives at the program very nervous and apprehensive (and that's a good thing!). They soon discover that there are 22 other hungry souls who are also a bit scared of what is to come, and it creates a very powerful container for transformation.

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