***Thoughtful Empowering Self-Coaching*: Helping Individuals and Organizations Flourish**

Laura Gini-Newman and Mary Nanavati

Have you ever known someone who made you wonder, "How is this person so happy, energetic and positive all the time? What is it about them and their life that makes them this way?" Or from a business standpoint, "How does that company manage to attain and retain so many highly productive, motivated and innovative workers for so long?" These are common wonderings about flourishing because such positive experiences seem to be so rare. Everyone at one time or another wonders, "Am I as happy, productive, healthy, appreciative, or fulfilled as I could be, and if not, what can I be doing differently? How fulfilled am I in my life? In my relationships? Or in my work?" Likewise, business owners typically ask, "Are we growing our business in a healthy and sustainable way?" These questions on what it means to flourish are universal with answers that often appear out of reach to many of us. Take comfort in knowing you are not alone and that we all want to possess the secrets of how to flourish. We all want to be empowered to make life choices thoughtfully to do and be our very best.

To help all of us flourish, we propose a new, more powerful way to achieve this universal goal. We believe that every individual and organization can nurture within themselves a flourishing mindset based on an understanding of positive psychology, coaching and decision making. With the development of three core competencies, all people and organizations can independently flourish. If each one of us develops and synthesizes, the abilities to:

1. flexibly apply an understanding of what it means to flourish
2. adopt key self-coaching skills, and
3. learn how to make effective, thoughtful decisions

we can all hold the potential to significantly alter the current status of our well-being.

The journey to achieving the general goal of flourishing begins with an understanding of what it means to flourish. Understanding what it means to flourish is central to helping us customize our own unique, specific set of priorities for flourishing. If we are to make thoughtful decisions as we coach ourselves to a life of fulfillment, we need a set of prioritized guiding targets that keep us focused and on track. Whether it is happiness, financial security, doing what we are passionate about, or building strong, positive relationships with people we love and who love us back, we need to know how and to what degree we are meeting these targets to keep moving forward.

What it Means to Flourish

In general terms, the concept of flourishing has been defined fairly consistently. According to the Lexico English Dictionary, the verb "to flourish" means, "to grow or develop in a healthy or vigorous way, especially as a result of a particularly favourable environment" (Lexico, 2019). Other definitions similarly refer to flourishing as the act of developing or growing successfully or well under, "conditions (that) are right for it" (Collins Online Dictionary, 2019). The verb 'to flourish' comes from the French word *florir* which means to blossom, prosper, or grow. Based on a review of a variety of reputable definitions, the word

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"flourishing" generally refers to the creation of healthy, or positive growth as a result of favorable conditions.

This understanding of what it means to flourish is consistent with the findings of researchers in an entirely new field of psychology known as positive psychology. Researchers of the past two decades have generally come to agree that flourishing refers to high or growing levels of well-being. More interesting is the multi-dimensional nature of the act of flourishing as it seems to fit well with the more specific, targeted questions people and organizations ask in relation to flourishing (Hone, Jarden, Schofield, & Duncan, 2014). Positive psychology identifies multi-dimensional factors that, when present or enhanced, increase our ability to flourish. In other words, they create the favourable conditions needed for high levels of well-being, or healthy growth. Martin Seligman, considered by many as the father of positive psychology, suggests that flourishing is dependent on five factors: positive emotion, engagement in life and work, positive relationships, meaning in life and work, and accomplishments (Van Zyl, 2013). Further research findings (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2015) also suggest that conscientiousness and extroversion increase our ability to flourish. Generally, when a person is conscientious, they are willing to put effort into doing what is right. In the context of flourishing, and from a personal perspective, this is working to do what is right for one's own well-being. Conscientiousness is characterized by the setting of challenging goals and having the necessary self-discipline to achieve these goals (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al., 2015). Extroversion, generally understood to mean a person who is outgoing and enjoys being with others, plays an important role in flourishing as well as it relates to the forming of social relationships that is central to the experience of well-being. Recent writers have synthesized the research on the various factors that influence flourishing. VanderWeele (2017) categorizes them into six domains of flourishing: happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, and financial and material stability. Finally, other sources of research, such as Shawn Achor's work on happiness, tend to focus on one of these domains and through the one domain, highlights the interrelated nature of the numerous factors that influence flourishing. Achor, author of *The Happiness Advantage: How a Positive Brain Fuels Success in Work and Life* (2010), shares how happiness fuels our capacity to flourish within other domains such as mental and physical health and success at school and work. Understanding, and being able to draw on this wide range of domains that impact our ability to flourish, and understanding the relationship between them, ultimately helps us to make the thoughtful decisions we need to make to ensure our self-coaching efforts lead to continuously growing levels of well-being.

Why Invest the Time and Effort to Learn to Flourish

Today, many more people are talking, writing about, or researching what it means to flourish from a wide range of perspectives. So why a sudden focus on this idea when many of us are experiencing a higher standard of living, and people are living longer? Shouldn't we all be flourishing? The experience of young people tells us we are not and highlights some important reasons why that are helpful for all of us to understand. For example, despite 55.0% of Canadian children and youth reporting that they are very happy (UNICEF Canada, 2019), mental health is deteriorating with young people experiencing high rates of depression worldwide. By some

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estimates, depression is about ten times more common now than it was fifty years ago and, "…the average age of first onset was about thirty. Now the first onset is below age fifteen" (Seligman, 2011, p. 79). In reality, there are an alarming number of youth who are not flourishing and although it is predicted that they will live longer, this does not mean they will live *better*. Young people are also focusing too much of their energy on the pursuit of happiness, an activity that has been shown to be counterproductive, rather than on the experience of happiness itself (Maus et al., 2011). For example, young people are struggling to develop positive relationships. Writer and university director Mike Caulfield describes adolescents as, "trust misers — they don't want to spend their trust anywhere, and they think many things are equally untrustworthy" (2018). We have seen repeatedly through current political events what can happen when citizens, not just young people, cannot distinguish between truth and fiction. We simply don't know who and what to trust anymore. As we elect leaders who promise they will protect the well-being of citizens and who then act to the contrary, we too become trust misers. Trust which is at the core of healthy relationships is being eroded in society. In addition, we are losing sight of the importance of perspective, a key factor in the development of social compassion (Bloom, 2016). Paul Bloom, professor of psychology at Yale University, writes a compelling 241-page argument highlighting the importance of thoroughly and thoughtfully considering a broad range of perspectives rather than the limited few that are called upon in the act of empathy. He writes at a time when the most engaged social activists, innovative business leaders and now schools place empathy at the core of character, virtue and social relationships. The need for a broader range of perspectives is further supported by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who reminds us of the danger of 'a single story'—that seeing the world from a limited set of experiences leads to misunderstandings about ourselves and others in our world (2009). In essence, we are living in a "new normal," a different kind of world characterized by geopolitics and global instability, rapid technological change, unique system pressures, an increase in data and information to filter (Rezak, n.d.), and a growing uncertainty about how to deal with and live in this new world. At a time when the very foundation of human well-being is being significantly challenged, it is more important than ever to learn how to thoughtfully make decisions in our lives that will draw upon both our innate human abilities, and our advanced human capacity to flourish.

All of this sounds a little ominous, but there is an upside. Although the evidence seems to suggest that there is a declining sense of happiness and well-being in the world, this decline is making our desire to flourish even more pressing. Those of us in schools see the impact on children and youth daily. Adults want children to flourish, and as role-models and healthy individuals, adults want to flourish. Indeed, our hope is for flourishing to be a foundational human goal, one that is accessible and achievable by all. It is reported by Hone et al. that a "...considerable body of empirical evidence now indicates that flourishing is a desirable condition that any community, organization, or government would benefit from protecting and promoting among its citizens (as)...international research has indicated significantly better individual and public health outcomes associated with flourishing" (2014). The act of flourishing is showing personal and societal promise. We are starting to realize what positive psychologists have anticipated: the significant benefits that come with flourishing include better mental and physical health, increased productivity, and improved relationships. Internal and societal peace

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follow. Seligman predicts that by, "... the year 2051, 51 percent of the people of the world will be flourishing…(as) happiness turns out to be more contagious than depression, and upward spirals around positive goals will occur" (Seligman, 2011, pp. 240-241). Now with an increased desire by many to flourish, there is a momentous opportunity for all of us to learn what it takes to flourish—a highly attainable goal given the ability to self-coach using of a thoughtful decision-making process.

Self-Coaching Sustains Flourishing

Coaches help individuals, groups and organizations flourish and sustain higher levels of well-being. "The International Coach Federation (ICF) defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential" (n.d.). According to the ICF, individuals report benefitting from coaching in terms of improved communication skills, increased self-esteem/self-confidence, increased productivity and optimized individual/team performance. Individuals usually come to coaching because they want to make a change of some sort in their lives. Often, they may be unaware of a misalignment between their values, behaviours and goals. When this misalignment becomes uncomfortable, change becomes desirable (Brown, 2018, p.129). Coaches can use their skills to draw attention to this misalignment and whatever else is keeping individuals from forward movement. To do so, coaches use a strengths-based approach that fuels a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016), a 'can do' attitude, and confidence, leading to greater self-discovery and fulfillment over time. Coaches help those they work with to believe in themselves. In an age of higher levels of poor mental health, anxiety and depression, the good news is that basic coaching skills can be learned, and individuals and organizations can learn to coach themselves to deepen relationships and help others and themselves to flourish.

The field of coaching uses a wide range of skills and processes to support the attainment of personal and professional goals so that people can live more fulfilled lives. Deep listening, asking thoughtful questions, goal setting, championing, and facilitating learning are some of the foundational coaching skills that can help individuals and organizations move forward (ICF; (Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, Sandahl & Whitworth, 2018). Deep listening, the ability to focus on another human being without interruption, can lead to profound reciprocal learning. Deep listening involves controlling the environment around us to enable this type of focus to occur. Closing the office door, putting the phone on do not disturb, and sitting within close proximity to someone, are only a few ways we can enable deep listening. Giving someone our undivided attention involves managing our own distracting thoughts and emotions. Deep listening happens when our senses become heightened, and we openly receive the other person's communication. Coaches listen deeply, suspending judgement to build trusting and caring relationships (Kimsey-House et al., 2018, Chapter 3). Likewise, when an individual self-coaches, they give themselves time and space to manage distracting thoughts and emotions to focus on the issue at hand; they draw on the full range of their senses; consider multiple perspectives; and are self-compassionate as they suspend judgement on their initial limitations.

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Deep listening is foundational to all other coaching skills (Kimsey-House et al., 2018, p. 49) including the ability to ask thoughtful, open-ended questions that cause individuals to reflect and learn from their life experiences. Powerful questions can cause individuals to stop in their tracks, think deeply about their current circumstances, reflect on the past, and project into the future. They help individuals reflect on obstacles that might be standing in their way and that impede confidence and forward movement. Being able to frame these questions relies on curiosity and risk-taking (Brown, 2017, p. 93) and creates, "the conditions that inspire learners to continue to wonder and figure out how to…seek more questions" (Martin, 2018, p. 21). Coaches create these powerful learning conditions, helping others to ponder great questions and to develop the skills to ask thoughtful questions of themselves. Ultimately, through powerful questioning, coaches help individuals understand how to frame and use their own powerful questions to build self-awareness which is foundational to self-confidence, powerful learning, forward movement and well-being.

Coaches also focus on goal setting and on strategies to help individuals and organizations flourish. Coaches believe that individuals are naturally capable of doing whatever it takes to move forward in their own lives, viewing individuals as resources whose goals come from within themselves. As Kimsey-House et al. emphasize: "(People) are, by their very nature, naturally creative, resourceful, and whole. They are capable: capable of finding answers, capable of choosing, capable of taking action, capable of recovering when things don't go as planned, and, especially, capable of learning" (2018, p. 4). Using coaching skills, coaches help individuals learn how to self-identify their own goals, prioritize and attain them. Encouraging people to think about their thinking, individuals learn how to make better decisions. Through the coaching process, individuals become their own cheerleaders, championing themselves, and building the self-confidence to follow through on their decisions. Through the building of a powerful, trusting relationship between coach and client, individuals become more courageous, willing to take risks, and open to vulnerability (Brown, 2017, p. 144; Kimsey-House et al., 2018, pp. 23-24). From this, individuals can learn how important it is to build this relationship with themselves, allowing themselves to experience sustained forward movement so that they can continue to flourish.

Ultimately, coaches enable individuals and organizations to flourish. Kimsey-House et al. capture the essential goal of all coaches: "By taking a stand for the greatest possible impact from even the smallest action, coaches encourage – and ultimately evoke – transformation" (2018, p. 8). More importantly, coaches give their clients the tools and strategies, that when made explicit and practiced by the client themselves, empower individuals to engage in self-transformation. Individuals, groups and organizations benefit from the skills of a trained coach, and over time, can be taught to internalize these processes and skills and transfer them to a multiplicity of situations. Deep listening, asking powerful questions, goal setting, championing, facilitating deep learning, ensuring forward progress, and many other coaching skills and processes can lead to greater self-awareness, improved relationships, thoughtful decision-making and ultimately to positive results. As individuals and organizations work with coaches and adopt these skills as part of a lifelong journey, flourishing spreads and becomes sustainable.

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The Role of Thoughtful Decision-Making in Flourishing

As previously noted, flourishing in simple terms refers to growth, more specifically growth that is healthy and promotes well-being. For something or someone to flourish, it helps if the conditions under which the growth takes place are favourable. Imagine planting a seed in the hope of creating healthy plant growth. To achieve this goal, you will need to plant the seed in an environment that will support its growth; that is, create favourable conditions for its growth. It will need to be somewhere with an appropriate amount of sunlight, rain, little to no exposure to harsh elements such as wind, salt, or cold, and within proximity to other plants if crosspollination is needed but not so close as to hamper its full growth potential. There is clearly a great deal to think about to successfully achieve healthy plant growth. To increase the likelihood that your plant will grow, many important decisions must be made and how well these decisions are made ultimately impacts on how healthy a plant grows.

It is impossible to make good decisions to create favourable conditions for healthy growth without understanding what it means for growth to be healthy. How many of us have had a plant, or planted seeds, only to find that we watered the plant too much or too little even though we thought we were giving it the appropriate amount of water. Being able to observe the plant's growth and continuously look for evidence of its 'healthiness' is necessary to make effective ongoing decisions to ensure growth continues. In other words, if you don't know that a healthy plant continues to sprout new leaves, that its leaves should be a bright even colour (not yellowing or brown and dry around the edges), that there should be no pests infesting it and signs of disease (holes on leaves), and that its roots ought to be strong and growing, it would be difficult to make decisions, and take the necessary actions, to ensure your plant's growth is healthy. Understanding the attributes of a healthy plant helps us to make decisions that are thoughtful, ongoing, and flexible so that changes or modification can be personalized to meet the needs of each different plant.

Humans and organizations are very much like plants. To flourish, that is, to grow healthily, they need favourable conditions. To create these favourable conditions requires an understanding of what healthy growth is and how to sustain it. Seligman maintains that we need to understand "what makes happy people, happy" (Van Zyl, 2013). More generally, we need to understand what makes healthy people and organizations, healthy. Knowing this, we can use the attributes of healthy growth, or well-being, to not only understand the favourable conditions needed for flourishing but to also support us in an on-going series of thoughtful decisions we need to make. These include identifying, monitoring, working towards, achieving and sustaining our specific, personalized goals for flourishing. Take for example, an individual who, through self-coaching and the use of a thoughtful decision-making process, has identified the domain of healthy relationships as an important area in need of improvement in his life. To make the necessary decisions and take appropriate actions to make his relationships healthier, he must understand what it means for relationships to be healthy. In other words, he needs to understand the attributes of healthy relationships, for example respect, trust, honesty, equality, and safety, to name a few. He also needs to consider these attributes to assess how healthy his current

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relationships are; decide on the most appropriate actions to take to realize these attributes; and monitor changes in these attributes until he has successfully formed healthy relationships to the fullest extent possible. It is clear to see that no matter what an individual's or organization's goals for flourishing are, their successful attainment depends directly on the capacity to make ongoing, thoughtful decisions.

It is without a doubt possible for people and organizations to achieve the challenging, often seemingly elusive goal of flourishing. At the core of this goal is thoughtful deliberate decision making, or more technically speaking, critical thinking. Critical thinking has taken on many different meanings over time. Often words like evaluating, assessing or analyzing are used to describe critical thinking. Many people believe critical thinking is to criticize, an unsurprising conclusion given that we typically describe people who criticize as being critical (Case & LeRoi, n.d.). Fortunately, the true meaning of critical thinking is much more positive, productive and powerful. It describes a way of making decisions that leads to the best, often most unexpected, results or outcomes (Gray, 2006).

To understand what this thoughtful decision-making process involves, consider a time when you were faced with a decision. There were most likely many different actions or possibilities for you to consider, otherwise there would be no decision for you to make. You were also probably making a decision to meet a specific, and at times an important, objective or goal (remember the goal of healthy relationships); in other words, there was a reason or purpose for why you were making the decision in the first place. As decisions are typically made to solve a problem or dilemma, there are often many factors that need to be considered. Perhaps you were deciding what new job or career to pursue, how to be more productive at school or work, how to improve the relationships in your life, or maybe just simply where your next vacation should be. In making any of these decisions, many factors affect how and what we decide. As our resources are limited, we need to think about what resources we can access whether it be time, money, information, expert knowledge, or experience. We also have unlimited wants and needs—it is naturally human to want to be better, want more, and progress—so when we make a decision, we think about what needs and wants we wish to satisfy. Because both humans and organizations fundamentally wish to maximize their wants and needs in the face of limited resources (a fundamental problem of economics), we all face the same problem when we try our best to flourish. And so, to flourish we must learn to make deliberate *thoughtful* decisions. We must learn to make the effortful choice to deliberately and consciously consider all possibilities, or possible solutions or actions available to us (no matter how realistic or far-fetched we believe them to be), and consider how our limited resources and unlimited hopes, desires, and goals—ordered from most to least important— impact on those alternatives to decide how to flourish in every aspect of our lives.

To many of us, this may seem a daunting task. With the fast-paced nature and demands of work and life in the 21st Century, we may feel there is limited time for this type of decision-making. After all, it is simpler and easier to just go with our gut or ask someone else what they would do. Chances are you don't really want to make decisions about something as important as flourishing on a whim or based on what someone else would do—others see the world through

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their eyes unless properly trained to help you. How you will flourish is personal and dependent on the nature of factors that are unique to you and although drawing on the shared experiences and perspectives of others may be helpful, ultimately the decisions needed to be made to help us flourish must be our own.

A Flourishing Way Forward

The big question now is, how do we make flourishing happen? Flourishing is not a simple task and unfortunately it does not come to us easily, especially if we have had limited experience with it. Yet once we begin to experience flourishing in a sustained way, learning how to achieve our specific, personalized goals in specific contexts over time, we are able to store these repeated experiences in our long-term memories. These memories can then be activated by cues in our environment, offering us insights on how to best solve problems and make thoughtful decisions that lead to flourishing. Ultimately, this type of intuition, one that we have named profound intuition, can replace the ongoing hard work of deliberate conscious reasoning for flourishing to take place (Dörfler & Ackermann, 2012; Sadler-Smith, 2016), allowing the act of flourishing to become a more natural and instinctual way of living. And so, every person and organization can learn how to flourish by learning how to self-coach and by making on-going thoughtful decisions considering the goals they wish to achieve (Lipman, 1992).

But we must be careful. Although our intuition can *at times* be right, particularly when it is profound and built on having had lived the same situation or problem over and over again, unless we've had time to previously think about, and work through our experiences repeatedly, our intuition may not be that reliable. Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Herbert Simon describe human intuition as "...thinking that you know something without really knowing how or why you know it" (Farnam Street Media Inc., 2012). They argue that intuition is where all our thinking begins; it occurs naturally, quickly, and is for the most part unconscious (Kahneman, 2011). It is important to recognize, however, that this is only one type of intuition; that there are a range of levels of intuition, from superficial to profound. At the superficial level, our intuition is, "lazy and easily tired" (Kahneman, 2011), and so we need to take the time and make the effort to be thoughtful as we move forward and tackle the most important and at times, most difficult problems. When our intuition is superficial, planned thoughtful decision making through self-coaching practices, enables us to see patterns in our experiences over time so that we can connect them to new and similar experiences. It gives us the process needed to move from superficial to profound levels of intuition so that we can transform our lives, and the lives of others. It is a type of thinking that is necessary for us to successfully navigate a world that is increasingly becoming more and more unpredictable; where technological developments are leading to decisions that are number-driven and "me"-centric, rather than on meaningful goals of great personal and social value. So, although our abilities to flourish are, for the most part, underdeveloped with only 18 percent of the world's adult population currently considered to be flourishing (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011), acquiring the ability to use a simple thoughtful decision-making process will allow many more people and organizations to use their profound intuition to serve them well and improve their well-being.

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A Transformative Synergy

Together, coaching and thoughtful decision making can empower a person or an organization with the capacity to enjoy a lifetime of flourishing. To flourish, a process involving both critical and creative thought is needed. A well-trained coach uses the skills of deep listening, questioning, goal setting, and perspective-taking to nurture healthy personal and professional growth, but they also need to build the personal capacity to make on-going thoughtful decisions when using these skills. Decision-making is an integral part of a coach's toolkit. When listening *deeply,* a coach needs to consider a wide range of factors captured in the emotional, physical, and language cues provided to them. To frame *powerful learning* questions, a coach needs to uncover goals, help explore alternative perspectives, and surface obstacles to help individuals and organizations reflect and learn forward. But the coaching process also needs to make this decision-making process explicit. And so, to empower others or ourselves with the capacity to successfully continue a unique, ever-evolving journey towards optimal well-being, this decision-making process must be learned.

Flourishing is on-going work; it recognizes that everything around us is continuously changing. But we too can also change and evolve. If we choose to take the time and make the effort to learn how to coach ourselves in thoughtful ways, we are all capable of greatness; we are capable of flourishing.

A New Vision for Flourishing

There is an abundance of resources available to help people and organizations learn about flourishing in the context of positive psychology. There are books worth reading that describe new approaches to happiness and well-being. There are also many people who stand behind the idea of flourishing and want to help others achieve it. It is, after all, a noble cause. Yet what seems to be missing in all this work is the idea that ultimately individuals and organizations need to be empowered with the capacity to continue to flourish independently over time. What is missing is the need to build the capacity for thoughtful, empowering, self-coaching.

This is a new vision for flourishing; a vision in which every individual and every organization is provided the opportunity to develop the capacity to flourish independently, in the absence of a dependency on coaches. This makes the job of every coach vitally important. Despite ultimately working themselves out of a job, the goal of every coach should be to guide others in the development of an internal capacity to coach themselves in a thoughtful and empowering way.

To achieve this goal, individuals and organizations need to develop a ***Flourishing Mindset©***: the thinking habits and behaviours that support sustained well-being. This thinking results from an intentional and conscious desire to maximize the well-being of self and others. It is designed to guide decisions on how to act to optimize the likelihood of meeting well-being goals.

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The following provides a list of the various thinking habits and behaviours that are integral to a ***Flourishing Mindset***©. Each of these involves a way of thinking that can be learned to support the well-being goals of individuals and organizations.

Thinking Habit or Behaviour	**Related Thinking Process**
Being Self-Aware	Perceptive thinking
Being Curious	Inquisitive thinking
Being Self-Accepting	Introspective thinking
Being Emotionally Aware	Emotional thinking
Being Optimistic	Hopeful thinking
Being other-aware	Relational thinking
Being Compassionate	Benevolent thinking
Being Kind	Altruistic thinking
Being Forgiving	Cathartic thinking
Being Grateful	Appreciative thinking

Aligned to these thinking processes are practices that can be supported by specific strategies and tools that will empower individuals and organizations with the capacity to flourish in any context. Together, these processes and supporting tools, help to empower all people with the capacity to flourish in all aspects of their lives. Through *Thoughtful Empowering Self-Coaching*, others can learn how to coach themselves by deliberately using these thinking processes that are foundational to flourishing.

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