



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Blue Shield of California Foundation Study

**“Breakthrough
Men's Community:
Lessons Learned
and
Future Directions”**

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OVERVIEW OF BREAKTHROUGH MEN'S COMMUNITY

The Breakthrough Men's Community (BMC) consists of the more than 800 graduates of the Breakthrough program. Its central activities are the staffing and running of the Breakthrough program, which consists of two extended workshops - Breakthrough 1 (BT1) and Breakthrough 2 (BT2) – which together total 34 meetings: 28 weekly 3 1/2 hour meetings, 4 day-long meetings, and 2 weekend retreats. In addition, the small, self-led groups (also known as Breakthrough 3), which form after participants graduate from BT2, are supported by the wider community; information is circulated through a newsletter and a weekly email set of announcements; special events (guest speakers & workshops) are organized regularly; as well as an annual Summer Retreat, attended each year by about 90 men.

The fundamental purpose of Breakthrough is neatly captured in its vision statement: *Our vision is to create community by championing the full humanity and gifts of all men and women.* In other words, the program aims to strengthen the hearts and minds of men so they can re-evaluate what it means to be fully human males and to empower them to participate more fully and confidently in their families and in their social and professional worlds.

The most significant influence on the content of the Breakthrough program is the work of Pia Mellody. The work of Charles Kreiner, David Richo, Nancy Kline, and Christopher Spence also contributed to the program.

“Breakthrough saved my life. I live instead of coping.”

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In 2006, the Breakthrough Men's Community solicited and received funds from the Blue Shield of California Foundation in order to conduct an assessment of the program as it passed its twentieth year of operation. The purpose was to characterize the impact of its signature workshops and other community activities and identify what has been especially successful and powerful; to create an organizational development plan for the future; and to identify the aspects of the program most effective in addressing issues of domestic violence. This grant enabled Breakthrough to explore the impact of its programs in some detail, through a series of individual interviews, a 20-page written survey completed by 164 graduates, and a sequence of focus group interviews. These activities, conducted between October 2006 and March 2008, produced a bank of data which is presented and explored in the full report. In addition, an external consultant facilitated a series of discussions leading to a document outlining future possibilities for the growth and development of the organization.

DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

The survey participants form a relatively homogeneous population: of the 164 respondents, 88% are white; the average age is 54; and 69% have attended college. Not unexpectedly, the respondents are generally more involved in the Breakthrough community: one third had at some point volunteered to be part of a workshop teaching team; 82% are or have been part of a self-led group; and 68% had attended at least one summer retreat. There were also commonalities in terms of motivation for joining the program: the great majority cited partner relationship issues as their primary concern; this was followed by lack of self-esteem, isolation and depression. Only 9% identified domestic violence as a reason for joining, while far more (30%) expressed a concern about issues of anger. Clearly, this population turns their anger inward, with the resulting isolation, depression and low self-esteem.

“I had been a pastor for many years, but it was through Breakthrough that I found the spiritual and emotional healing that I had always been seeking.”

ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF THE BREAKTHROUGH CURRICULUM

The survey respondents nominated the following as the most important *concepts* in the curriculum: boundaries, inherent nature, self-esteem and active listening. They represent the core notions of identifying and valuing one’s true nature, protecting it with a healthy boundary system, genuinely connecting with people through effective communication skills, and using the boundary concept to avoid taking on the distress or shame of others. These were followed by the bundle of concepts which permit the men to separate their adult reality from the distress and patterns they carry from childhood, including the inner child (small boy & pre-teen) and carried feelings. It was also clear that graduates value the healing component of the course which enables them to identify and describe their boyhood traumas, discharge the feelings associated with them and then accurately identify their present time feelings and express them appropriately.

“...before Breakthrough, the charge would be about everything in my life focused in on this particular issue. The rage had nothing to do with the topic of my anger at the time. Breakthrough helped me learn how to discharge the charge, and move on. Don’t have to bring on all the other carried rage. Now, I have a charge, I share it, and it is discharged. It is on topic, and not about the myriad of other shit that you spew.”

Active listening skills were prized above all else as the most important *tools* that respondents learning through Breakthrough, followed by the use of boundaries and the ability to deal with issues and discharge feelings appropriately through peer interactions (known in Breakthrough as “sessions”). Also valued was the tool of affirmations, which combines with boundaries and the idea of inherent nature to facilitate increased self-esteem and the establishment of an adult reality.

ASSESSMENT OF THE DELIVERY OF THE BREAKTHROUGH CURRICULUM

Of the various pedagogical components of the Breakthrough program, the following were nominated as having the most significant impact:

- Demonstrations: after the presentation of new material in a given meeting, one of the teaching team takes a volunteer through the day’s exercise in which the new concepts and tools are processed and practiced;
- Small group sessions: after the demonstration, the participants break into groups of three, with a teaching team member to facilitate as each of the three men works through the set exercise;
- The all-day and weekend retreats; these extended meetings were viewed as adding particular depth and intensity to the two Breakthrough workshops;
- Listening exercises; these are introduced early in BT1 and practiced throughout the program.

“Breakthrough radiated hope and relief from pain. It told truth to me –if I was willing to risk opening up, it would promise to be a safety net, and I could break my silence and isolation. I got LOVE, I got witnessed, I was part of a communal creative event.”

Overall, respondents felt that the teaching team members, volunteers who support the presenter (workshop leader) and conduct the small group sessions, have a vital role in the success of Breakthrough. They also acknowledged that the group became a powerful healing environment, as the men built meaningful connections and recognized the universality of their feelings and processes.

GENERAL IMPACT OF BREAKTHROUGH

One word best captures the impact of Breakthrough: **transformative**. 91% of survey respondents used the word “enormous” or “considerable” to describe the extent of the impact that Breakthrough has had on their lives.

Men described powerful shifts in both attitudes and behaviors as a result of their involvement with BMC. The following categories emerged from the survey respondents' descriptions of the nature of this transformation:

- Developing self-esteem, self-confidence, self-knowledge.
- Moving from isolation, hopelessness, and depression to feeling connected, hopeful and empowered.
- Ability to identify and express emotions.
- Ability to deal with issues of anger.
- Overcoming fear.
- Ability to separate own feelings and responses to those of others (i.e., boundaries).

Extent to which Breakthrough has brought about change in your life?

	#	%
None	0	0%
Very Slight	4	2%
Some	11	7%
Considerable	66	40%
Enormous	83	51%
Considerable or Enormous		91%

When asked for specific examples of changes in their behavior, men cited most frequently *behaviors with spouse or significant other* (27 responses), followed by *behaviors with other men* (17 responses), *expression of feelings* (17 responses), *taking care of myself* (15 responses), and *expressions of adult love* (14 responses).

IMPACT ON ANGER AND VIOLENCE

As anticipated, Breakthrough men were much more inclined to internalize their anger, as opposed to expressing their anger in the form of either verbal or physical abuse. The most common responses to conflict identified by the men were withdrawal, isolation, passive-aggressive behavior, and depression. In addition, respondents identified alcohol, drug and sex addictions, as well as workaholism as primary responses to conflict. However, there was a significant transformation pre- and post-Breakthrough in the respondents' ability to express anger appropriately. While only 16% of respondents claimed that they expressed anger "mostly" or "always" appropriately before Breakthrough, that number increased to 80% post-Breakthrough.

Respondents identified the following concepts from Breakthrough as central to their increased propensity for the appropriate expression of anger; 1) Understanding the source of anger in childhood trauma, shame, and carried feelings; 2) Self-esteem and self-worth; and, 3) Understanding feeling states, and being able to separate one's own feelings from the feelings of others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Breakthrough is clearly focused on facilitating a deep healing process for men, which is distinctly different from the work of most anger management and domestic violence classes. The data point to three aspects of growth and awareness which are essential:

- Reinforcing men’s own internal sense of self-value, self-esteem, and the goodness of their “inherent nature;”
- Exploring the source of men’s pain and distress in early hurts and childhood trauma, and discharging the volatile load they carry through life; and,
- Helping men to understand their feeling states, to be able to express their feelings, and to know that feelings are separate from their current reality and sense of self.

*Relationship to expression of anger
(Pre and Post-Breakthrough)*

	Pre-BT		Post-BT	
	#	%	#	%
Suppress	58	35%	7	4%
Always inappropriately	6	4%	0	0%
Mostly inappropriately	45	27%	0	0%
Sometimes each	28	17%	16	10%
Mostly appropriately	24	15%	117	71%
Always Appropriately	2	1%	15	9%
Mostly or Always Appropriately		16%		80%

This Breakthrough curriculum provides men with the tools and knowledge to make this growth and awareness possible. The data point particularly to active listening skills, boundaries, and discharge techniques as essential elements to the process.

“...that was huge for me, to have a witness not only to my pain, but to my healing. I’ve been to numerous anger management, domestic violence courses, and have successfully completed them all, and have re-offended on every occasion. I didn’t get that there. I got sitting around in a room of broken men, with no direction, with no healing, with a lot of statistics, with a lot of shoulds and shouldn’ts, and how to try and curb your temper, rather than trying to deal with what is underneath, where that anger is...”

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Building community is an essential component of this deep healing process. The course itself becomes a powerful support community for the men as they go through the program. In addition, graduates are encouraged to continue with self-led groups and check-in partners; to “give back” as members of the teaching team; and, to engage in additional community activities to support the on-going growth of the men and the community (summer retreats, additional workshops, etc.).

“My spouse was most often the recipient of the effects of my suppressed anger and low self-esteem. This was mostly expressed in irritability and withdrawal. Our time together is now much more open and loving.”

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES FOR BREAKTHROUGH MEN’S COMMUNITY

The organizational development working group identified the following priorities for BMC to take in its journey to support men in living healthy and full lives and in supporting the same for their communities. They are presented in order of relative priority, as identified by the working group:

- Institutional Capacity
 - Intellectual Capacity
 - Management Capacity
 - Physical Space
- Curriculum Development
 - Documentation for Practitioners
 - Clarification of Purpose
 - Technical and Popular Documentation
- Community Membership
 - Membership Working Group
- Specialized Content
 - Short-term Opportunistic Development
 - Long-term Planned Development
- Geographic Expansion

“I look forward to Fridays [the day after he comes back from Breakthrough]. It is like someone has plugged in the lights on the Christmas Tree.”

-a spouse speaking on the impact of Breakthrough



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