

Leadership embodiment

Enhancing the wisdom of leaders

In this article, I share my work on leadership embodiment. My view is that what we might recognise as wisdom in leadership is strongly influenced by how the leader can be in the situations they encounter, rather than through what they know. I offer my reasons for this view and some practices that should be valuable to leaders and consultants alike.

How do we tap our innate wisdom?

Years ago, I was leading a workshop in Ireland. At the end, I received the highest compliment: “We have had many people come and teach us about the ‘what’ of leadership; this work has shown us the ‘how’.”

So, how do we tap our wisdom – the great potential we all carry within us? What happens in those moments when we exceed our familiar responses to stressors and challenges, and we suddenly find insight, timing and clarity flowing through us? Wisdom, in my view, is not to do with what we know in our heads but more to do with the way we can be in the world. This way will include things we know, however it encompasses our wider ‘how’ of leadership. And Leadership Embodiment is, for me, an exploration of how we are habituated to respond to stressors and how we can teach ourselves to recover the innate capacity for wisdom, compassion and confidence in stressful situations.

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by how some people are able to create great effect easily and effortlessly, while others struggle to get a response. Through my work with horses it became clear to me that the non-verbal behaviours effect interactions more than the

words. In school, I learned about great leaders that changed the world and wondered how they were able to sustain the expansiveness needed to consider entire nations as their family, when I often felt tired sustaining a connection with three other family members. I started paying attention to the posture and gestures of effective people and began to see patterns that repeated through a variety of situations. I saw that whether it was animal trainers, politicians, business leaders, military leaders or spiritual leaders, the ones that were truly effective shared common ways of standing, sitting, gesturing and relating their environment. This view was developed further through my study of Aikido. Like horseback riding, a martial art offers a way to learn how skillfully to affect something bigger and stronger with ease and grace while in a pressured or stressful environment.

I began to look for the underlying principles governing the capacity to be effective in stressful situations.

My study, enquiry and practice have continued over many years. In my work as a life coach and in organizations I found that people are often under a great deal of stress. They are often struggling with relationships and are concerned about balancing their job with the integrity of their spiritual path. In organizations they are working long hours, attending multiple meetings every day, managing multiple stakeholders and taking risks that require audacity. Yet within such a level of intensity there are people who are able to be inspiring and manifest wisdom and compassion.

In this view, wisdom is skillful implementation regarding the contribution we wish to make – the legacy we wish to leave behind. It involves clear perception – the capacity to see the big picture without losing attention to detail along with an inherent sense of knowing when to take action and when to wait. Everyone is a leader, everyone has an opportunity to inspire others and effect their situation in a positive way. Wise leaders manifest three embodied leadership competencies, they are: being inclusive, being able to listen for the whole, and speaking up clearly without aggression or collapsing.

The potential contribution of Aikido and mindfulness

Using principles from the traditions of both Aikido, a non-aggressive martial art, and mindfulness practice, we can find simple yet deep techniques that help leaders recognize how the mind and body habitually react to pressure, and to access more skillful and unified responses. The reason that this is so important is that the body always wins. We know perfectly well that we should be calm and relaxed but often in stressful situations our body constricts and instead of being calm we become agitated.

When triggered our reactions are baseline fight, flight and freeze behaviours. It is unlikely that we can transform ourselves into people who no longer have stress responses – we can, however recognise our reactive tendencies at their inception, and then make a clear shift to a centered state – which accesses our higher functioning brain. To do this we need to study ourselves and train in an alternative response, which in Aikido we call centering.

Stress shows up in the way our bodies organise, before it shows up in the stories or feelings we have about what is happening. We can never analyze our way out of stress. However, by re-shaping the body, we can profoundly shift our response. By simulating pressure, we are taking a shortcut to re-pattern people's conditioned responses. In this work, rather than ask, "What do you feel?" we ask, "What shape is the body taking?" Are your arms or legs crossed, are you leaning forward – or is your posture straight and your arms and fingers unclenched?

As a coach and facilitator I am often asked to help leaders increase their Leadership Presence, their ability to be expansive and inclusive while keeping attention to details. Presence is an important non-verbal capacity to affect and influence the situation and the environment.

Wendy Palmer

Inclusiveness and Presence

We all recognise how important it is to collaborate and work together in organisations. Inclusiveness is the energetic aspect of collaboration. Inclusiveness is the non-verbal message, 'We are in this together.' Everyone knows that people will work harder if they are inspired and feel included. But just knowing this and thinking about it doesn't make it happen.

Think of people who are good at leading. What do you notice about their leadership presence, their non-verbal behaviour – posture, body language and most important of all, the way they occupy their environment? Relating to our environment as an extension of ourselves is what neuroscientists call 'peripersonal space.' To get a sense of what I am talking about, here is an explanation from *The Body Has a Mind of Its Own* by Sandra and Matthew Blakeslee (2007).

"Put your arms straight out in front of your body, as far as they can reach. Keep your hands flat, fingertips extended straight ahead. Now wave your arms up and down and sideways..... This is the personal space around your body—what neuroscientists call peripersonal space—and every inch of it is mapped inside your brain. In other words, your brain contains cells that keep track of everything and anything that happens within the invisible space at arm's length around your body."

Although the following quote pertains to athletes, it can also apply to organisational leaders. We all know leaders who fill a huge space with their presence.

"When athletes are on the court or field, they are mapping the space around them and people in that space in ways that most of us cannot match. Their personal space and body maps, along with a newly discovered mapping system called grid cells, seem to be exquisitely developed, which may be one reason they score so many baskets and goals."

For great leaders who have a developed leadership presence, their field of awareness is larger than those who seem less expansive. A strong leadership presence can create a feeling of inclusion for others. Whether the interaction is in a home, a meeting room, a big auditorium or a conference call, people have an experience of being included in that leader's personal space. When this occurs, people have a felt sense that they are part of something bigger than just themselves. They feel a sense of connection that is the antidote to a feeling of isolation and separation.

Have you ever been in a place where you could feel someone's presence? Have you been near someone who was very happy or angry and you could feel their energy radiating out into the room? Their presence affects you and others in the room without saying a word. How can you manage your personal energy so you can affect your environment in a positive way, non-verbally?



An exercise in embodiment

Some people have asked, "How big can my space get?" My answer is, huge. I have been in a crowd with about 25 thousand people when the Dalai Lama was giving a talk. His presence was palpable and it affected everyone in the room. His presence is huge and has a positive effect on thousands of people at the same time. He has practised and continues to practise many hours a day to maintain his strong and vivid presence and the message implied is, 'we are all in this together'. His brain continues to map everyone as being in his personal space. You may not be able to match the expansiveness of the Dalai Lama's leadership presence, but you can strengthen and increase a more expansive presence starting with what you have right now.

The following simple Leadership Embodiment exercise is a great way to grow your presence. Whenever you enter a room, look at the corners, assess the size of the space and then extend your personal energy to fill the room -- expanding out and into the corners. Then anyone who enters that room will be welcomed into your personal space. You will automatically be giving them the non-verbal message -- we are in this together.

To develop this capacity for leadership presence it is helpful to notice anything that gets in the way. That is, what keeps you from showing up as a leader living up to your full potential? To learn how skilful and unskilful behaviours manifest in the day-to-day

stresses of leading, we distinguish between reactive and pro-active behaviours, which in this Leadership Embodiment model are called Personality and Center.

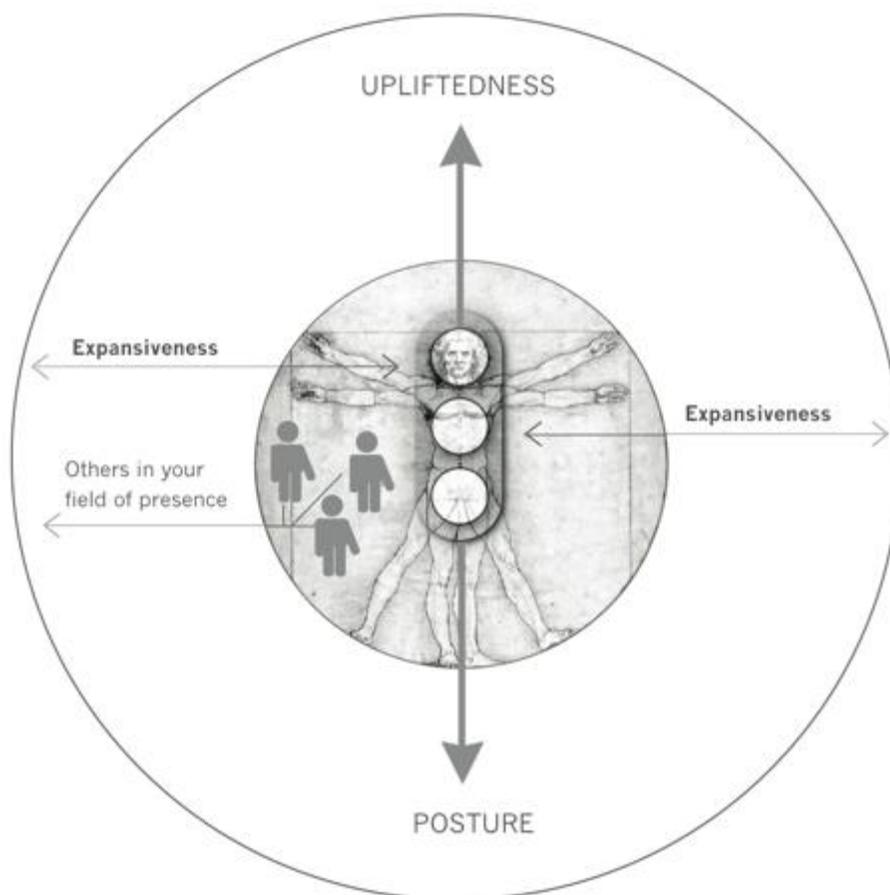
Personality

In every moment of life you affect the people around you. When you are centred, clear and confident, things can go well. But when you become stressed and overwhelmed you revert to baseline survival

reactions, some variation or combination of flight, fight, and freeze. This is personality responding to stress. We develop these patterns in early childhood in an attempt to have more security. Children want the maximum acceptance and approval, and minimum criticism and abuse, from their family members.

Personality is the part of you that focuses on managing the stuff of life – people, things and concepts. It is afraid of loss; it is always looking for security. Everyone has a particular way of organising their body energetically to achieve maximum security and minimise perceived threats. Under pressure or stress, muscles constrict and perception narrows. Somatic constriction triggers a shift from connection to individuation. Suddenly you are isolated and must manage the world around you.

This pattern shows up in your body before it comes to conscious awareness. We know this because small children and animals know before we know when we are mad, sad, glad and afraid. This means that by the time you realise that you are irritated; you have been running that energy for between 10 and 30 seconds.



However, if you can tune in to your body's energy patterns, you can recognise your stress response before it gains momentum. It is easier to shift it when it is still in the beginning stages. In other words, when you notice the tendency of a pattern beginning, in your body you can offer your body an alternative energy pattern. We call this alternative pattern Center.

Center

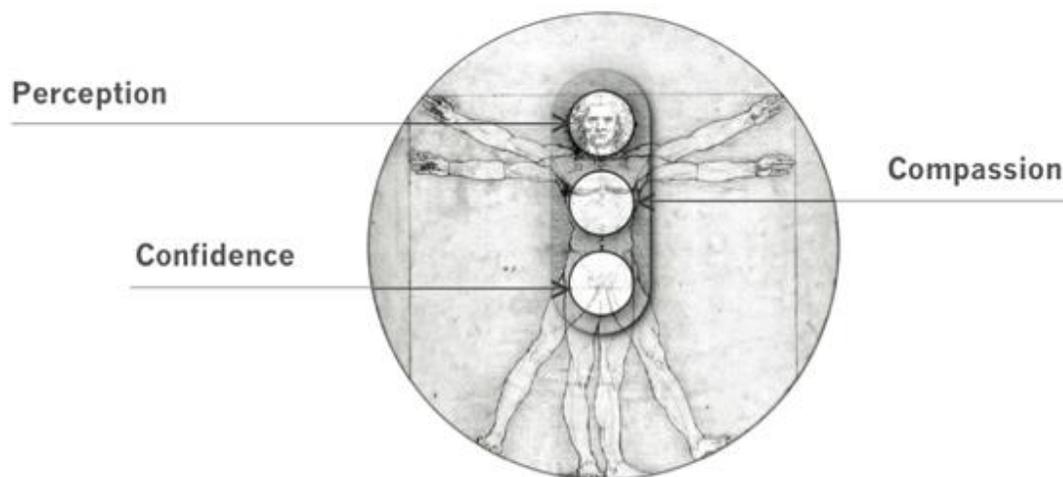
If personality references on managing things, then center focuses on interconnection, and the collective

intelligence of shared space. Space is the common element that unifies everything in existence. There is more space than particles everywhere in the universe, even in our bodies. Remember learning in school that everything is made up of atoms? An atom contains protons, neutrons and electrons, but is primarily made up of space. When a person studies an art – music, poetry, painting, sculpture

and photography – they are taught about space. The use of space enhances objects, words and notes. It also activates a perception that can calm or stimulate the nervous system, which affects how we relate to a word or object. It is simply not true that things are solid and that space is empty.

The premise is that space contains an intelligent self-organising principle. You may have experienced this self-organising intelligence at times when you were working, perhaps even struggling with a task, and suddenly it became easy. This phenomena is called the 'zone' in sports and the 'flow state' when it appears during mental work. It is a shift from exertion to effortlessness and is often described with phrases such as – “suddenly there was plenty of time and space and everything became clear and easy.”

We find that the practice of centring restores the capacity for long-term, higher functioning aspects of the brain such as big picture thinking, innovation, morality and intuition. Stress mutes these higher functioning capacities and activates short-term survival aspects of our brain such as narrow focus, hyper vigilance and defensiveness. By essentially shifting the energy in the body from contraction (narrow focus) to expansion (big picture thinking), it's possible to access far more resources, allowing us to lead more effectively. There is also a shift in the way the three major centres – head, heart and core – respond to internal or external input. When centred, this could be described as the head shifting from control to perception, the heart from approval to compassion, and the core from safety to confidence.



Practice and repetition

Understanding the need to shift with one's mind is not enough. If understanding were enough then any of us could simply read about how we should behave and manifest that behaviour any time. Clearly that is not the case. Remember in stressful situations the body always wins. Your body needs to understand how to activate expansive confident behaviour – and here is the important caveat – do so while under pressure, in stressful situations. And so we return to the importance of practice and repetition.

Just like a muscle, leadership presence can be strengthened and developed. And like any muscle this occurs through practice – and practice is training sustained over time. In his book, *The Talent Code* (2009), Daniel Coyle clearly states the importance of repetition.

“There is, biologically speaking, no substitute for attentive repetition. Nothing you can do — talking, thinking, reading, imagining — is more effective in building skill than executing the action, firing the

impulse down the nerve fiber, fixing errors, honing the circuit.” (p87)

Statistics differ on the amount of repetition it takes to become fluent in a new response when you are in a threatening situation. The US military says it takes about 500 repetitions to be able to repeat an action fluidly — and about 5,000 repetitions to repeat the same action fluidly in a stressful situation. Malcolm Gladwell (2008) says that it takes 10,000 hours. And some brain scientists say that it can take 100,000 hours for a response to become a reflex. In any case we are talking about a lot of repetitions.

The good news is that each repetition of the exercises we attend to when working with embodiment can take just five to ten seconds. So depending

on how many times you practice each day, you can get to 5,000 in a few weeks. Because so many repetitions are needed in order to make the centred state a valid option it is important that the centring process be quick, easy and appealing. The last thing you need is another chore and so make sure that centring doesn't become a chore.

To allow the brain to access the creative, innovative and inspired part of its capacity, it helps to have a focusing device.

Here is a quick three-step practice: Uplift your posture, Extend your personal space to fill the room Relax your shoulders

When you do this practice, you change the way you are organising your energy which can actually change how you access parts of your brain.

We can think of the practice of strengthening center as working with numbers, percentages. For example, I can ask myself, “On a scale of one to 100, what level of intensity is a situation?” Let's say that the situation is a 75 and I can only activate 65 watts of center. I will likely revert back to personality. On the other hand if the situation has 50 watts of intensity, then I will probably be able to maintain my centred state and listen and speak with clarity and presence.

The good news is that the more we practise, the stronger our center becomes. We can raise our numbers. Soon 75 watts of intensity are workable, the bar has been raised and we start practising for 80's.

It's for all of us

For those of us who coach and facilitate people working in organisations I believe that transparency is the

key to credibility. We need to be working on the same practices we are suggesting for our clients. The point

is not to be an expert or have great mastery – the point is that we really are

in this together. As humans we are all evolving and seeking wisdom and happiness. If the embodied practices resonate then let's use these tools to further skilful action allowing coaches and clients alike to experience success and satisfaction, and to demonstrate wisdom, in their lives and work.

References

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About the author

Wendy Palmer holds a sixth degree black belt in Aikido and has practiced mindfulness for more than 30 years. She has worked with executive teams and individuals for Twitter, The Gap, NASA, McKinsey & Co, Oracle, Genentech/Roche and The Daimler Chrysler Group. She is also an author of two books, *The Intuitive Body* and *The Practice of Freedom*. This article is adapted from a book she is currently writing – *Wisdom to Go: How the Way we Sit and Stand Changes the Way We Think and Speak*.

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