

Leadership and Somatic Intelligence: Creating a Sustainable Future

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Today, a great deal of organizational and economic activity is unintentionally depletive, robbing ecosystems of their health and stability, people of their enthusiasm, and communities of their trust and social capital. *Addressing these complex challenges requires a different kind of leadership than we've seen in the past.* As we move into an increasingly interconnected and “flat” world where even seemingly minor decisions can have global repercussions – and where global trends impact every business and organization – future leaders will be required to take a broader view of what’s going on in the world around them. As the tide turns in our global economy, exemplary leadership is increasingly required in order to function, remain competitive, and advance a positive future for all.

How to Recognize Exemplary Leadership

Leadership is the ability to take responsibility for something that matters to you and then successfully engage others in bringing it to life. Regardless of rank or position, exemplary leaders are creators and drivers in their lives and organizations. Rather than passively accepting the status quo, they see new possibilities for the future and aim to make them a reality. This means setting a clear vision, inspiring others to support it, motivating everyone’s best effort, and then managing their own reactions when pressure and stress, obstacles and conflicts, and competing priorities threaten to impact either satisfaction or results.

Excellence in leadership does not emerge from models or techniques. Theories and models typically *describe* effective leadership, but they rarely *produce* it. Exemplary leadership emerges instead from a *way of being* that is effective, consistent, committed, and trustworthy. One’s primary source of power as a leader – what makes others want to follow – comes not from position or rank or technique, but from the qualities that enable a leader to connect, inspire, and engage. These are personal qualities, and developing them requires developing oneself. As noted leadership scholar and university professor Warren Bennis has said,

“Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple, and it is also that difficult.”

By definition, then, expanding your ability to influence and shape the future requires self-cultivation. It’s been well documented that leaders need emotional intelligence – which accounts for 85-90 percent of the difference between outstanding leaders and their peers – to succeed. Yet leadership is fundamentally a *social* endeavor. To lead effectively, you must not only cultivate self-awareness and strength of character; you must also be acutely aware of the people and the world around you, the complex weave of interdependencies between them, and the impact you have on both. This is what psychologists call social intelligence.

Many leadership development programs address these critical elements, and ours is no exception. But what’s often overlooked is that leaders also require *somatic* intelligence – the ability to accurately read and respond to one’s direct, unmediated sensory experience of the world. A highly developed somatic intelligence supports full access to

the leader's social guidance system, a neural system that gauges trustworthiness in others, creates a sense of resonance between people working together, and keys into the best response in the moment. It enables reliable access to the highly vaunted "gut feelings" and intuition that successful leaders often keep under wraps, yet reportedly rely on with great frequency. And it enables a leader to be present and attentive to current reality while simultaneously taking effective action to change it.

Wanted: Exceptional Sustainable Leaders

We view sustainable leadership as a leader's capacity to co-create a future in which people, organizations and ecosystems all truly thrive. A healthy economy rests upon the foundation of a healthy ecosystem and human community. Leaders who focus on sustainability understand that these are interconnected and mutually interdependent strands of a single braid. They aim to create a future in which

- ✦ people are healthy, prosperous, engaged, and satisfied
- ✦ ecosystems are diverse, healthy, growing, and productive
- ✦ economies and the organizations they are composed of are healthy, mutually beneficial, and generative

This is triple bottom line success, and sustainable leaders are committed to bringing it about, *even when they don't yet know how*. These exemplary leaders are called upon to:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ define organizational success from a global perspective ✦ practice a high degree of imagination and innovation to envision future possibilities ✦ consistently take action toward a clearly defined vision ✦ align and engage employees around a common strategic direction ✦ convey a powerful leadership presence that inspires others to join them ✦ build an environment of trust that enables teams to get things done | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✦ enable teams and employees to deal with ambiguity, uncertainty, and conflict ✦ communicate expectations clearly and delegate effectively ✦ give and receive feedback with respect and dignity ✦ successfully negotiate difficult conversations ✦ use conflict as a way to build trust in relationships ✦ be flexible, resilient, and steadfast in the face of change ✦ grow their own strong leaders within their organization |
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Ultimately, sustainability is the only viable option for our future, and it may well be the defining quest for our time. Making the shift to sustainable operations will require a massive shift in orientation. It requires three things: 1) a clear understanding of what sustainability actually requires; 2) creative innovation on the frontiers of this new challenge, and 3) the leadership, courage and fortitude to create change.

The laws of nature will not bend to traditional business conventions. By contrast, what we often treat as the unbreakable rules of business are simply a set of agreements among people. They are not fixed in stone, and they can be remade. But they'll only be remade by the courageous action of committed leaders – strategically inventive game-changers who take a stand for a sustainable economy and successfully enlist their peers, their colleagues, and their teams to join them in re-imagining the way business is done in the 21st century. Those who do so are creating a whole new playing field that will soon make today's game irrelevant.

Creative innovation for the sake of sustainability has the power to unleash tremendous latent potential in organizations. Research has shown that across all industries and all job levels, presenteeism has taken its toll: only 20 to 25% of employees reportedly feel engaged by their work while 50% do only occasionally and another 25% are “retired on the job.” Added to these challenges is the looming talent crisis in leadership and technical ability. Many sources point to a growing leadership gap of unavailable or under-developed leadership talent. What would happen if we unleashed the dormant 75% and put that energy and ingenuity behind finding solutions for sustainability? We contend that a large portion of the workforce would be far more engaged by taking creative leadership on a challenge so crucial to our collective future.

While the need for sustainable leadership is abundantly clear, our collective capacity to deliver on it is at risk. An over-reliance on what's worked in the past, no shared view of leadership for the future, unclear accountability, and few ways to measure effective leadership all contribute to the problem. Nevertheless, there is reason for hope. Despite the age-old debate about whether leaders are made or born, there is demonstrable evidence that leadership capacity can be cultivated. By focusing on educating one's *whole* self for the sake of a sustainable future, we can develop the leadership capacity we need to see our way to the other side of the biggest challenge of our time.

Developing Somatic Intelligence: Leadership & the Neurobiology of Learning

It's clear that masterful leadership is needed to successfully address the extraordinary challenges we face today, including that of achieving a sustainable society. But there are few places in our society where we provide current or emerging leaders a training field on which to *develop mastery*. For most of us, our only opportunity to develop and practice leadership skills is in the very setting where our actions have real and often substantial consequences, for ourselves and for others. That's like putting an athlete into competition all day, every day, without ever giving them a chance to make mistakes, improve their performance and hone their craft.

Most leadership training – in fact, most education of all kinds – takes as its starting point the conveyance of new information, based on the premise that knowledge is power. Books, teachers, models, new ideas and simulations are all great places to start when learning something new. The problem is most training stops there. *And most learning stops there as well.* Once the book is shut and the teacher is gone, we head back to our lives, where we proceed to do things very much the same way that we did them

yesterday. How many times, for example, have you learned a new idea and even *known* “what to do”, but found yourself unable to actually *do* it?

Most people are all-too-familiar with this frustrating and perplexing experience. It turns out that exposure to new ideas is necessary but insufficient to enable us to take new action. Recent research in neuroscience sheds light on why this is so, and exposes the limitations of purely intellectual learning. Quite simply, it has to do with our neurobiological makeup and how our brains change through attention and practice.

Amazing as it may seem, what you focus your attention on literally grows and shapes the various regions of your brain over time. It’s impossible to take in every sight, sound, smell, and sensory stimulus all at once. To manage this sensory overload, attention functions like a gate, allowing some information in, and editing some out. That’s what makes white noise fade into the background. As you focus your attention on reading this article, you automatically tune out many of the surrounding sounds. Unless attention is focused on it, incoming sensory information does not register in the mind.

When we repeatedly focus attention on a new thought or action, the electrical and chemical connections between the involved brain cells strengthen. In this way, frequently trafficked ideas and behaviors are reinforced, until they ultimately become an intrinsic part of both your behavioral and biological identity: who you are, how you perceive the world, the actions you take, and quite literally the structure and function of your brain. Long-held beliefs, expectations, and attitudes about life take on a physiological shape and literally become embodied, so that the very structure of our brains reflects the lives we have led up to this point.

By the time an action has been repeated hundreds or thousands of times, the neural connections are strong enough to make it easy, effortless, and automatic. Aristotle got it right when he said: "*We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.*" He may not have had the benefit of high tech brain scans, but even without medical technology it’s not difficult to see: what we practice, we become. Where we focus attention and what we repeatedly do shapes our entire nervous system. And that substantially influences the actions we’re capable of taking.

This is good news, because it makes it possible to do many complex tasks very efficiently, without devoting much attention to them. That’s useful in a complex, fast-moving world where we don’t have time to stop and consciously consider our every move. But it does make changing our own behavior more complex and challenging than most training models are equipped to handle.

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When you try to change, those strongly developed neural pathways act like ruts, sucking you back into the old behavior again and again, despite your best efforts. That’s why habits are hard to break. You need more than just a good idea – you literally need to change the physiology of your brain at a micro level in order to adopt a new behavior.

This brings us back to that new idea that you learned at a recent leadership training and why, even though you know ‘what to do,’ you’re not doing it. Typical leadership

training focuses on *teaching people what to do* through models and ideas versus *developing who they are*. Logic would suggest that this might be just the right purpose for training – and for some arenas it is. Yet with respect to developing the very personal and interpersonal qualities of leadership, it's a mistake to overlook the neurobiology of learning. Because we've built such strong neural pathways, training in "what to do" – as it relates to the behavioral skills of leadership – often gets translated at a deep neurological level and conveyed to the conscious mind as '*change who you are.*' As you might expect, this can threaten one's sense of identity and create unconscious resistance to change.

Intuitively we know that the most useful insights are those generated from within us, owned, and acted upon, not handed down by prescription. This kind of internally-generated insight, rather than creating resistance, actually releases a pleasurable chemical rush throughout the brain and body. That's the feeling of new neural pathways being laid down – real learning and change created on a deep and lasting level. This is the process of developing somatic intelligence: building the ability to lead from within, regardless of the situation you're faced with. Putting yourself into new leadership practices, versus sitting in a training room absorbing new data, can actually facilitate insight and make it possible to take new, more effective actions.

While there is a place for training in *what to do*, especially in more technical domains, we are convinced that such training alone is insufficient for people develop the deep embodied leadership capacity required to bring forth a better future while managing all of the unexpected surprises that we are each subject to every day.

Real, lasting changes occur when we practice over time in low-risk, low-stakes situations. It's this kind of training in a safe environment that gives people the opportunity to try, fail, and try again without putting their job, their relationships, or their business on the line. It's this kind of training that creates new neural pathways that prepare people for the high-pressure situations that inevitably arise in business and in life. It's this kind of training that allows people to truly *learn*. Athletes know this. Musicians know this. Martial artists know this. You don't become a master by taking a class or reading a book. You develop mastery through *consistent practice over time*. Rather than knowledge as power, we say that practice is power.

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So the question then arises: what and how are we to practice in order to develop leadership mastery? At a minimum, leadership requires intellectual aptitude and domain expertise. But we all know sharp and technically capable people who are not competent to lead. Truly effective leadership taps into our somatic intelligence and those certain *qualities of being* that enable you to get things done in cooperation with others. Qualities like empathy, integrity, and the ability to inspire. Qualities like vision, steadfast commitment, and the responsible use of authority and power. Qualities like courage, accountability, and presence.

And, believe it or not, these qualities can be learned.

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