



THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT LEADING IN A DIGITAL WORLD

How can working with the body help leaders develop greater behavioural flexibility and the resilience needed to lead in this time of exponential change? How can we help those leaders putting on a brave face in an environment of mounting complexity and uncertainty? The body holds the answers, says **Claire Dale**.

Many of the topics that crop up when we coach leaders take us directly to the body. Confidence is a feeling, a neurophysiological state, a dance between sympathetic and para-sympathetic nervous systems and our perceptions and beliefs. Motivation is another neurophysiological state and a dance with the dopamine system. Risk-tolerance is the balance between testosterone and cortisol. Self-esteem? That's serotonin. Empathy and compassion? That's oxytocin. Managing energy and developing resilience – those crucial leadership competencies – are pure neurophysiology too.

It turns out that, at a fundamental level, all our thoughts and emotions have a chemistry: neuropeptides racing through our bodies and brains in our nervous systems and bloodstreams, and our memories and experiences are chemistry too.

WAKING UP TO THE POWER OF THE BODY

Our bodies are incredible technologies. Research tells us that, when we regulate our breathing patterns, we have the potential to achieve a 62% improvement in cognitive function on complex tasks. When we are walking rather than seated, we are 45% more likely to have a high-quality, innovative idea. And when we move freely in an unplanned way, we can think more divergently; moving in a structured way helps us think more convergently.ⁱ

Not only that, but where leaders behave in ways that develop trust and shared purpose, levels of the neurochemical oxytocin increase – and, according to the research of Dr Paul Zak, employees have 105% more energy, are 50% more productive and 40% less likely to burn out.ⁱⁱ

All of this creates a powerful, science-based argument for working with the body to give us greater behavioural flexibility, and there is a growing realisation that embodiment – or, as we call it, our physical intelligence – is the next core competency that coaches need in their toolkit. Why? Because all change happens in the body. However much thinking happens, leaders remain stuck in old patterns of behaviour unless we help them embody and rehearse new ones. And in today's fast-paced, digital, uncertain world, stuck is not a good thing for a leader to be!

PHYSICAL TENSION: AN ENEMY OF BEHAVIOURAL FLEXIBILITY

One cause of behavioural inflexibility is physical tension. Try this experiment. Tense the muscles in your upper body, arms and abdomen, and limit your breathing. Maintaining the tension, try saying out loud: 'I feel flexible and responsive'. How true can that statement feel when your body is holding that level of tension? Now, release the tension, drop your shoulders, shake your arms loose, free up your breath and repeat the statement. It is likely that with the tension the thought didn't fit with the body state, but that when you released the tension you felt more congruent. From this experiment you might note how powerfully our physical state influences our emotions and thoughts.

During change and complexity, unhelpful patterns of physical tension can build up in the bodies of leaders as they try to gain control. This is caused by elevated levels of cortisol: the arousal, threat and stress chemical that switches on our sympathetic nervous system, firing up our muscles ready for action even when no action is needed. This has an impact on key flexibility chemicals such as the steroid DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone), which underpins our vitality, and the neurotransmitter serotonin, which is vital for gut health, sleep and the suppleness of the connective tissue between muscle and bone. Our body becomes more rigid, shaping and being shaped by patterns of thought and emotion that become part of our identity and belief system, giving rise to limitations in our behavioural flexibility.

With this chemistry leaders lose touch with their more expansive, creative selves, yet are pressured into putting on a brave face. They feel less than authentic with their people, and the social bonding and trust (oxytocinergic) system is also affected. Leaders might huddle with their key team members in times of change and fail to communicate with compassion to the wider team or organisation.

Talking will not shift these patterns of tension alone; for that we need to work with the body. One tool that coaches certified in coaching with physical intelligence learn to use is the MOT (map of tension), drawn from the flexibility section of our curriculum.

Working with tension is one route into working with the body. The physical intelligence toolkit also includes: working with posture to gain clarity, strength and vocal power; monitoring and working with breathing patterns and heart rate for mental and emotional stability; understanding the seven systems of the body; creating a higher level of cognition and mental clarity through use of the body; generating habits that support creativity and innovation; accessing our three brains, including our gut (enteric) and heart (cardiac) brains; developing the ability to view the world from multiple perspectives; handling complex relationship issues; and building thriving systems

THE MOT (MAP OF TENSION)

When a block is identified in leadership coaching, the coach can ask if/where the coachee is currently aware of tension or discomfort in their body.

Tension hotspots can be drawn on a diagram of the body for visual reference. Then ask: what level of intensity between 1-10 is the tension? What do you notice about that area of your body? What happens when you intensify it, and what happens when you release it? It helps if the coachee places their hand on that body area and 'breathes into' the point of tension.

Then ask: what does that area of tension need? Movement, stillness or something else? What kind of breathing helps? If they move you can mirror them, reflecting the movement back, or play it back verbally. Then ask: if that part of your body could speak to you, what would it be saying? Are there emotions connected with this area of tension? What connections are you making to the leadership challenges we discussed? Is there a regular physical practice you'd like to adopt?

With this powerful process you can help the leader make profound new connections, and resource themselves with physical intelligence habits.

for working and living. There are also processes to boost optimism, process powerful emotions, unlock somatic markers and use visualisation to create a future focus and accountability, enabling leaders to quickly let go of the past and generate energy for the future.

Where personal resilience issues arise, it is helpful for leaders if their coaches feel confident to make connections with aspects of exercise, diet and sleep, because these are important components of being in a fully resourced leadership state. Many leaders also now use wearable technology to monitor their physiology, and coaches can easily gain enough knowledge to be able to discuss this too. For all of us coaches, our own standards – and impeccable physical intelligence practice – are what put us in the most resourced state for our clients and enable us to feel confident in this area.

BEHAVIOURAL FLEXIBILITY AND NEUROPLASTICITY FOR LEADERS

A flexible human system has the greatest possible neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to restructure or rewire itself when it recognises the need for adaption. This has significant implications when we are coaching leaders who have identified styles of leadership that they would like to develop.

The body provides the perfect entry point to creating new patterns of behaviour outside our habitual ones. Exploring different ways of moving, speaking and engaging enables us to access less-well-known parts of ourselves.

Underpinned by theories drawn from Antonio Damasio (on consciousness and somatic markers^{iii,iv}) and Rudolph von Laban (on how we use our energy in the form of effort and flow^v) we have developed detailed protocols for exploring and re-patterning physical and vocal habits. Through this process, leaders access new choices and became more flexible, integrated and emotional, mentally and physically, which also results in their intentions being clearer to those they lead.

I began this work at RADA Business, where the pedagogy is entirely embodied. Posture, grounding, breath, voice, narrative, rehearsal and repetition were the tools of the trade in order to manage nerves, stand on any stage, tell a story and move an audience, many of which we might call leadership skills.

Here I met Kevin Chapman, co-founder of the Physical Intelligence Institute, and we soon realised that whenever we were working with the body at this level of depth we were working with neuroplasticity. I mapped the neuroscience onto different leadership styles, and we discovered that neuroscientific knowledge combined with the rehearsal of new behaviour can help unlock a greater range of positive states that leaders can access.

This has become a radical new way of working with C-suite executives, enabling them to adapt their leadership style to suit different situations and handle complexity while retaining their naturalness and authenticity in their interactions. As Daniel Goleman has observed, leadership style is not a function of personality but rather a strategic choice, and that situational flexibility between styles is key.

Taking a Jungian approach, we often work with the embodiment of four leadership styles; authoritative, inspirational, compassionate and analytical. In the exponential digital age the compassionate leadership style is arguably the most significant behavioural style to fall by the wayside amid digital, remote and global working. Masterclasses in 'becoming a compassionate and empathetic leader' have been among the most popular with coaches who are members of the Physical Intelligence Institute.

A FINAL WORD

Korn Ferry's recent paper on enterprise agility explains how the expectation of leaders in this exponential, digital age is to perform and transform simultaneously.^{vi} Performing requires the control leadership styles of authority and analysis, while transforming requires the people-centred styles of inspiration and compassion.

Addressing this, according to Ferry, is pivotal to an organisation's ability to be an agile enterprise. If this is the current requirement, then coaches need a toolkit to enable leaders to gain the necessary behavioural agility. It is a fascinating challenge, and while we have already created some practical solutions that we are sharing with coaches, this area of research has incredible scope and will be the topic of my PhD over the next two years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Claire Dale has spent 20 years researching movement, neurophysiology and coaching. She is the author of the award-winning book *Physical Intelligence* (Business Book of the Year 2020) and since 2004 she has been director of Companies in Motion. In 2021 Claire launched the Physical Intelligence Institute with Kevin Chapman, bringing accessible, science-based embodiment practice to coaching. Claire is a regular contributor on BBC Radio London. She supports ending modern-day slavery by coaching Nasreen Sheikh, director of the Nepal-based Empowerment Collective to influence influential figures such as Jeff Bezos and the Pope, and she once taught Ed Sheeran to dance!

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