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FUTURE
CONSIDERATIONS

**THE BODY
OF A
LEADER**

by **Paul Gibbons**

Introduction

With a nod of his head the randori begins. One after the other, “attackers” enter from the circle and Peter moves to dispose of the threat. Someone among the observers shouts: ‘Connect with your people, Peter – really see them, lead them’. Peter deflects some attacks, seems to blend with others, or sidesteps and lets some pass without contact. The master indicates his approval with the briefest of smiles, and come the end, Peter himself is beaming; this was a vast improvement. He is able now to focus on the main threat, but keep his head up, see the bigger picture. He anticipates threats and opportunities much earlier. He moves more gracefully, keeps his balance. When he does make contact with an attacker he is neither too forceful nor too passive, doing so with just the right amount of effort. During the event, he is aware, calm, centred, and present. He achieves this by noticing his habitual physical response to stress; the clenched jaw, the knotted forehead, the dropped head and gaze, and having noticed these, he consciously eased the tightness, focused on breathing deeply, and raised his gaze so that the bigger horizon was in view.

A randori is a martial arts exercise designed to train the black-belt candidate to deal with multiple threats – this randori, however, is different. Peter and his ‘attackers’ are dressed in ‘business casual’ and not the starched, white gis of martial artists. The threats in Peter’s life are pitched political boardroom battles, complex strategic decisions, fast-changing market conditions, 100 emails a day and a difficult relationship with his Chief Financial Officer. Peter is a CEO of a fast-growing corporation and he faces the corporate equivalent of the randori almost every day. The randori here isn’t just an ‘ice-breaker’ on a corporate offsite. In this exercise, Peter is learning to be a better leader by observing and working on how his body responds to threats and opportunities, transitions through change, and connects and moves with others.

Peter is being trained out of a new school of leadership development, one that is part of a continuing trend to expand our understanding of human performance and development. Who we are, (our performance, personality, behaviour, mood, character, habits,

predispositions, and so on), is not solely determined by the thinking mind. There is a complex interplay of anatomy, physiology and biochemistry that predates (in an evolutionary and developmental sense) our cognition. These ‘body’ factors can move faster, more surely and more strongly than cognition. They may act in an opposite direction to what the mind would prescribe. Therefore, to understand and improve human performance, we need to consider them.

In the leadership development world, we now know that emotions and emotional intelligence are important phenomena. More recently, the question of how leaders provide meaning to, and connect with the concerns, values, and deeper purpose of their followers has introduced spirituality into leadership development. In one sense, these new ideas on the role of the body in leadership round out and complete the picture of what makes an effective leader. While this smacks of new age thinking, the concepts are grounded in biochemistry, anatomy and physiology, developmental psychology and another field called ‘somatic psychology’. CEOs and directors of major corporations attend the programmes based on this thinking, and this type of training has also been used in the US Marine Corp and Navy Seals – organisations not renowned for their fluffiness.

This school of leadership development reaches more deeply into personal development than do many other approaches and has five aspects: Leadership Presence, The Self, Bodily Awareness, Shifting the Self, and Generative Practices.

Leadership Presence

“When Olivier walked onto the stage, they felt and were captured by his presence before he spoke his first line.”

Take a leader you admire (King, Churchill or a contemporary figure) then try and map what you admire about their leadership onto what you think leadership consists of. Most of the time there will be something unexplained –



“This program has provided me with more than the lifetime of leadership education I’ve undertaken previously.”

— Paul Gibbons

a 'je ne sais quoi'. Even leadership experts have trouble explaining this. There seems to be an aspect of leadership that is ineffable, hard to put into words. Perhaps it could be called charisma, gravitas, passion, or more nebulously, 'energy' – the same kind of feeling in an audience generated by a great actor on stage or screen – think of Marlon Brando in the film of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Mark Giannini, chief executive of BIA, a fast-growth strategy consultancy, puts it this way: "As a business leader, I have to maintain my poise and bearing. People react to how I carry myself even just walking down the hallway or entering a meeting. I need to have a big presence and make a strong impression on people, but I also need a certain openness and softness, so they are comfortable around me. So just puffing myself up artificially wouldn't do it, the presence and the openness had to come from deep within me."

Dr Richard Strozzi-Heckler has pioneered this area for 25 years and has used a body-oriented approach to leadership development with vice presidents at Fortune 500 companies, and in the highest reaches of the US military. Dr. Strozzi-Heckler calls it 'presence' and insists it is a phenomenon of the physical body that existed prior to language and conceptual thinking. We recognise 'presence' not cognitively in the cerebral cortex, but pre-cognitively in the much older brain structures such as the cerebellum and limbic system – the parts of the brain that we share with pre-mammals. Further, he believes that this more primitive presence is a significant part of what attracts followers to the vision; values and ideas leaders develop with their higher cognitive faculties.

To illustrate this point, consider herd animals, such as horses, which have elaborate leadership structures. The lead mare doesn't have language, reward systems, organization charts, or any of the visible symbols or sources of power that corporate leaders have to support their leadership. Yet her herd knows who the boss is, and even human observers can detect this. Furthermore, recent primate studies have shown that this higher status is correlated with higher levels of serotonin – a neurotransmitter associated with mental acuity, wellbeing, and memory. It seems that both on the outside (appearance) and the inside (biochemistry), there is a relationship between the body and leadership.

As human animals, we have the same biochemical and physical machinery. Dr. Strozzi-Heckler claims that our pre-language brain is constantly making the same judgments. Do I trust this person? Do I want to get close to them? Do I believe what they say? Would I follow them?

For leadership developers, the question becomes: where does 'presence' emanate from, is it inherited, or is it teachable?

Let me introduce you to your Self

"There was a very great gap between whom I thought I was and what I said; which contrasted with my presence and what I actually did. That lack of alignment killed trust. I now believe that how you 'show-up' shouts louder than what you say."

Bill Hill, CEO, MetaDesign

Ed Perry, chief executive of Human Code, director of the Austin Chamber of Commerce, and former executive VP at Apple, put it this way: "Apple spent 30-45K per year expanding my quiver of tactics and techniques. Some of those were influence, negotiation, strategic planning, leading change, and self-management. They are great tactics and techniques, but learning them made little fundamental impact on the Self that I was."

What is this Self that Ed is talking about? Arnold Palmer once said, "I can tell everything I need to know about a person by watching them play 18 holes of golf". He meant that the Self can be seen in every move on the golf course – does the golfer attempt to drill the ball off the tee, are they purposeful and graceful, or reluctant and hesitant? Do they hustle up to the ball, swing and get it over with, or are they thoughtful in the way they play? How do they handle their bad shots? Are they different when they are winning or losing?

Under pressure, the Self becomes even more visible. What happens when they miss one short putt to leave a longer one coming back? How good is their focus and concentration as they approach the 18th tee one shot in the lead? How do they treat their partner when he slices a second tee shot into the woods?

We began in the randori, where this Self is instantly revealed. Some people expend considerable effort avoiding hits, others freeze as incoming pressure mounts, still more look like they are 'processing' people on an assembly line or 'manhandle' participants; others fix a social smile as the pressure mounts.

In the pressure of a business meeting this is also easily seen. Simon is the CIO of a leading investment bank. He is an exceptional businessman and a well-liked guy. He is a driven and competent manager. Yet he manages and controls everything. He doesn't leave much room for his team to demonstrate their competence. Furthermore, every time he gets into a heated discussion with one of his followers, his face flushes, he leans forward, raises his voice, and gesticulates. He has an angry presence when he gets going. Because he is so smart, you have to be very sure of your ground when challenging him. So nobody does. He doesn't get much open challenge, but as always happens when challenge is suppressed, it leaks out in other ways: resistance to change, prevarication, and power struggles. Simon is good at getting things done, but he doesn't get the kind of proactivity, teamwork, commitment, or leadership from his team that he wants.

These habits and their effects are quite hidden from Simon. The Self usually is. And no matter how many courses in influencing, negotiation, or conflict management Simon attends, something deeper is required. He wants an empowered, proactive, challenging

team of leaders, but his Self shouts: “Don't argue with me – you will lose”.

The Self can be thought of as the sum of character, habits, predispositions, personality, attitudes, and presence. In our culture we have many aphorisms that suggest it doesn't change ('the leopard never changes its spots...', 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks'). But Dr. Strozzi-Heckler believes the Self can, and does change. He also believes that there are some good reasons why it normally doesn't.

First, as Scots poet Rab Burns observed, “give us the gift tae see ourselves as others see us”. We don't always see ourselves clearly. Second, whatever limitations the Self produces, we are used to those by now. Sometimes, we can produce very elaborate justifications for why it is the world that needs to be different. Third, the way we approach personal change in our society is limited. Coaching or talk therapy, personal improvement books, self-development courses, and New-Year's resolutions are principally cognitive in orientation and that – Dr Strozzi-Heckler believes – is a fatal limitation.

Awareness – Finding the Self

**“Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body.”
James Joyce**

Joyce could have been talking about today's executives as they hustle around in a world of symbols and concepts, brand, strategy, return on equity and the like. This creates a distance from the world of sensation, and from the energetic rhythms and pulses of body that are grounded in our physiology and biology. The costs of this are fourfold.

Most dramatically, there are the obvious health risks as eating, sleeping and exercising habits become out of tune with the biology they are supposed to support. Second, being a vital and energetic leader requires a vital and energetic body, not one flaccid from lack of exercise, or tired from lack of sleep or sluggish from carrying an extra 40lbs. Less obviously, being flexible and open requires a body that is not tense, knotted and closed. Try bunching your fists, hunching your shoulders, and knotting your forehead. Simultaneously imagine being open and flexible.

Third, beyond the health risks, and the ability of the leader's physical body to perform, there is something deeper and essential here: lack of access to the fountain of information that is available about the Self and others by being in touch with the sensation and energy of the body.

Ed Perry tells the following story:

“I was in a board meeting where we were making a crucial and sensitive strategic decision. While in the midst of spelling out our position, I was attacked very directly by one of the executive directors. His challenge had the potential to dis-empower the entire group and had far-reaching implications for not just the strategy, but for my position as CEO. My instinct was to counterattack, belittle him, and make him lose. I'd done that before in boardrooms and was pretty good at it. It would be over quickly and we could get on with the job. However, as I prepared my attack, I felt the clenching stomach, pounding heart, and tightened throat – how

my body normally responded. I knew I had been triggered into an old habitual response. Then came the tough and scary part: I breathed deeply, found my center right there in my seat and let him continue until he was entirely finished. The result was astonishing. By letting him speak fully a great discussion and a landmark decision from the board was precipitated. Through the creative conflict, we created something greater than either one of us saw as possible. By not shutting this executive down, I won greater trust from the whole board. By noticing the anger and anxiety that I was feeling in my body, and allowing those difficult feelings to remain, I could paradoxically respond more thoughtfully, and make different choices.”

Ed's breakthrough board meeting began with his ability to notice and observe the physical sensations and not act upon them. He was aware he was angry but the sensations also told him he was threatened and afraid of what the executive was saying. Most people know when they are angry, but principally because they see their behaviour retrospectively, and by then it is too late for everything aside from the apologies. By developing the capacity to observe his emotions, Ed was no longer dictated to by them. This capacity is fundamental to Emotional Intelligence, but hard to develop in a culture where we are, to some extent, numbed and desensitized to bodily experience.

Fourth and finally, when disconnected from our own sensations and emotions, it is impossible to connect with those of others. Being able to read people's emotions isn't only valuable at the poker table; it is equally valuable at the negotiation table or at a crunch meeting with a key customer. Peter Reilly, CEO of the NY State Board of Education technology agency, remarked: “It was incredible! By heightening my own bodily awareness, I became more aware of others' bodies. Their breathing, coloration, movements and subtleties of expression – completely obscured previously – became visible to me. I could even detect emotional reactions in people that they weren't expressing – the slight flush around the neck, the ripple of a jaw, the quick downward glance as they were communicating something uncomfortable. This provided me with a huge edge in high-pressure meetings, and in meetings with staff.”

So it can be argued that bodily awareness can produce some of the concrete benefits about, but it has another value: it provides the 'ground' or the basis for changing aspects of the Self that are no longer producing results.

The Origins of the Self

**“What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves?”
Thomas Merton**

To understand how to shift the Self, it is important to have some idea of how it is formed. One discipline that attempts to understand this is called Somatic Psychology. It is based on a view of psychology developed by Wilhelm Reich; a controversial student of Freud's who had as many absurd ideas as good ones. However, Reich observed during his therapeutic work that elements of the mental

neurosis of his patients seemed to be visibly held in their bodies. He called this phenomenon 'armouring' and it is sometimes visible even to untrained eyes today in the slumped posture, knotted forehead, 'coat hanger shoulders', over muscular jaw, or inflated chest of the people we encounter in everyday life. According to Reich, armouring exists in everyone, not just his neurotics. During our development, critical incidents or repeated messages began to shape us, emotionally, mentally and physically. According to Drs Reich and Strozzi-Heckler, the physical shape is not just an external representation of our mental and emotional lives, it is causative. It shapes and determines our emotional and mental reactions, and doesn't just display them.

Physiologically this armouring may shorten the breath, limit blood-flow, restrict eye-movement, reduce sensation, and restrict emotional expression. These very physical phenomena shape mental and emotional life producing habitual patterns of thinking and emotion, and thereby limit choices. Furthermore, this 'shape' (the armouring) is visible to others and communicates very loudly and very deeply. Whatever our words say, the Self may have a different message. For example, squinting eyes and rigid jaw will predispose certain kinds of thinking, feeling and action but the shape will also communicate 'I'm angry: stay away', or 'I'm not moving here'.

This integration of body, thinking and emotions is recognized by various schools of psychology such as Gestalt, NLP, and Bioenergetics. It is also how various 'body-disciplines' such as sport, regular exercise, Rolfing, Alexander Technique, Yoga, and Massage produce their mental and emotional effects. However, these various other disciplines only part of the puzzle. A Gestalt therapist would not work on the body, and very few 'body workers' or gym-goers integrate their bodywork with career-goals, emotional predispositions, and personal aspirations or limitations.

A more integrated approach is needed to produce major shifts to hardened ways of thinking, feeling and relating. How can business leaders shift the Self and so make available different choices?

Shifting the Self – Centering

“The work I did affect not just the way I ran the company and my golf-game, but reached further and deeper into my relationship with my wife and sons, and deeper still to my relationship with myself.”

Ed Perry, chief executive, Human Code

Most people know what 'off-center' feels like: out of kilter, off balance, over-reactive, stressed or over emotional. By contrast, 'centered' feels present, grounded, connected, alert, vital and relaxed. When a tennis player is centered their weight is evenly balanced so they can move in any direction, they are present and focused on the current point (not the last or ones to come), and they are ready but relaxed in the way that highly trained bodies can be.

Although centering begins with the alignment of the physical body, its implications go far beyond posture or a particular way of behaving. In the words of Strozzi-Heckler, “Center is a state of unity in which effective

action, emotional balance, mental alertness, and vision and values are in harmony and balance.” He defines it as “present, open and connected”: 'present' where you are fully focused on what is happening now; 'open' to others, new experience, and creative opportunities; and 'connected' – both to what you care about, and to others you are in conversation with.

Reading this, try centering. Start physically. First, feel your feet on the floor, take a deep breath, feel your seat, relax your neck and shoulders and feel your length. Take another deep breath and center emotionally. Note any changes in your mood. Notice thoughts. Observe any changes in thinking as you center. Notice any default skepticism, or any unconditional acceptance unbalanced by thoughtful critique. Finally, connect with what is important: why are you reading this, what do you care about, what openings does it create?

When a leader is present, open and connected, with a Self that is balanced, focused, vital and relaxed, a full range of choices is available. Like our tennis player, who can move in any direction to return a 120mp serve, a leader can be decisive and respond flexibly to what matters.

Ed Perry's board meeting was a great example. He first became aware he was off-center through his body. He was then able to re-center, and move differently – in his case to hear out a particularly threatening point of view from another exec.

Woody Allen, former CEO and Chairman or Director of a number of companies, describes the feeling of centeredness as follows: “When I can feel myself breathing, I can realize that the challenge or threat is principally illusion. When I notice anxiety or anger, I take a second to center. It runs off my back like water and I don't get hooked in. I connect with what I care about, my relationship with the individual, and the results I want to produce. Centering helps me choose differently and move more powerfully.”

What are the 'moves' that leaders make? How does a body-oriented approach help?

Shifting the Self – Moving Differently

“I can only change this organization as quickly as I can change myself.”

Larry Bossidy, CEO, Allied Signal

Rapid change sends an organization into chaos; therefore leaders need to move through transitions with grace, balance, strength – and from their center. In the leader's work (for example, establishing vision and direction, or building trust and community, or setting performance standards and requiring they are met), they must make certain linguistic 'moves'. Some of these might be 'taking a stand', or 'making a request', 'saying no', or 'offering a judgment' of a person, situation or future.

In most views of leadership, these moves are seen as purely linguistic, but there is enormous value in observing and working with the body during these transitions. For example, a declaration (stand) such as “we will be number one or two in all our markets” made in tandem with a slouched stance or hunched up shoulders, is incongruent.

The sluggishness or nervousness indicated isn't congruent with the declaration itself: this doesn't build trust, and won't inspire followers to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zone.

In some instances the leader's move will be a 'strike' or a 'cut'. This could be making a decisive strategic choice, or giving a colleague some critical but difficult feedback, or seizing a new market opportunity. For our hominid ancestors on the savannah 40,000 years ago, a strike had to disable the predator to protect the family or community. But if the 'strike' is giving feedback to a valued customer or colleague, we don't want them 'disabled'. Off-center, we might do just this. (In fact well-given feedback should build trust and relatedness no matter how hard the message.)

At the other extreme, our social conditioning teaches us to be polite, not to hurt feelings, and to skirt difficult issues. Every organization has a feedback problem – too weak and the message doesn't get its work done, too strong and the dignity and trust of the person on the receiving end is on the line, not to mention the relationship as a whole. A good 'strike' balances 'how much is too much, how much is not enough'. This phenomenon is as much physical as linguistic. Research suggests that tone of voice, cadence, gestures and facial expressions communicate 90 per cent of the message. This balance between weakness and strength, will be widely different from person to person, and therefore requires being very sensitive (read 'present, open and connected') to the person receiving the communication.

This brings us back to Peter's randori earlier. In this artificially stressful environment, his body was learning to move with other people's. He had to connect with people, get a felt-sense of how to move them, and then execute the move with grace. After each interaction, it was essential to come back to center, especially when he took one of the inevitable 'hits' that happen during the randori.

Fast-forward to another exercise from later in the course. Pairs of people are learning how to embody saying 'No'. It could be to distractions, it could be to actions not aligned with purpose, it could be to internal dialogue ('they won't go for this idea'). One person walks toward the other quickly with an outstretched palm. Their partner must say no, which physically means turning them around. Sixty-kilogram women must turn around bulky 100kg men – it requires more than a physical approach. How much is too much, how much is not enough? In some pairs, you can see the people working to soften and connect – they don't make eye contact and the physical move is too rough, leaving their partner way off balance. (You don't want your clients and employees off balance.) In other pairs, you can see people for whom, 'No' is a tough word. They smile, wait, wait some more, and then lose their balance and purpose in the face of the incoming request.

In a later exercise, leaders are learning to 'declare a future' – a core skill. They are speaking about a future they care about and receiving feedback on whether their bodies communicated confidence, insecurity, bravado, sincerity, passion or listlessness. When they walk up with head bowed, or fixed smile, they are asked to try again. They are

practicing presence, authenticity, and embodiment so that their vision, values and goals attract committed followers.

Conclusion – Embodiment

“You sometimes get fired around here for not making your numbers, but you always get fired for not embodying our values.”
Jack Welch, former chief executive, GE

The phenomenon of embodiment is a critical issue for business. The lack of it is why so many mission statements and values statements are just pieces of paper – in a drawer or hanging on a wall. Leaders who don't embody the values they speak about kill trust and build cynicism. It leads to the 'implementation gap', which in turn leads to a credibility gap.

Why does this happen?

To begin with, the type of learning prevalent in our society is conceptual, cognitive learning. But leadership isn't principally about thinking or knowledge, it is about building partnerships and communities of people: that is, relationships. Yet leadership training is frequently conceptual and classroom-based and reapplying conceptual learning in new or challenging situations is fraught with difficulty. In contrast, embodied learning means the capacity to take new actions in the world, to move in these partnerships and communities differently. A body-oriented (or 'somatic') approach to learning starts with the body; moving, acting and being differently. Only then are abstractions and concepts derived from that learning. Participants 'act their way into a new way of thinking, rather than think their way into a new way of acting'.

The second reason is an absence of the distinction 'practices' borrowed from the martial arts and Eastern philosophy. In Strozzi-Heckler's words, “you are what you practice”, but the distinction 'practice' or 'practices' are entirely missing from the business discourse. Contrast business leaders with sportspeople. A great athlete practices at least three times more often than they execute. Even the best drill the fundamentals: Michael Jordan practiced 100 free throws every day of his career. Never has a professional athlete said, “I don't have time to practice” or “I already know how to...” – it would be ridiculous.

In corporate life it is different. The unspoken attitude of most senior executives toward practice and learning is a subtle arrogance. It seems the further up the ladder one travels, the less humility, less practice, less learning and less personal change. “If I haven't learned it by now, it probably isn't worth knowing – after all, I'm successful” is the unspoken message (however different the rhetoric might be). At a leading British airline, a senior executive meeting was convened to solve the problem of low attendance of junior staff on training programmes. An on-the-spot survey revealed the total number of days training of these five executives over the previous year was one day! Clearly, learning is for underlings!

This bodily way of looking at leadership also opens the

door for physical practices that develop a leader's capacity to embody what they say. But what are the fundamental practices for a top business leader? Different leaders will have different aspects of the Self on which they are working, and it is clear by now that working on the Self requires working with the body. Whatever the leader is working on, from connecting with followers, to having a 'vital' presence, to 'being a stand for a different future', there are practices that can build this capacity. But perhaps one new practice that should head everyone's list is centering. The practice can be done in about two minutes and should initially be practiced twice a day. Once the practice is 'in the body' like a golf or tennis swing, the leader will find themselves using it at crucial stressful junctures to great effect. Just like a basketball player who prepares himself or herself for a critical free throw, a business leader who centers before making a critical move will find themselves producing consistently better results.

Consider Peter's new viewpoint after experiencing the randori with which this story opened: "My body was something to cart around what mattered – my head. It was an inconvenience, I had to feed, water and sleep it. Furthermore, the lack of attention it had received meant it

had aches and pains, or lacked vitality when my I really needed it. There was a gap between my aspirations and stand as a leader, and how my body felt and how it looked to my followers. It may seem strange, but now it is a part of me again. I am aware of what my body is telling me, and also what it is communicating to others. How I 'show-up' is more aligned with what I say, and I am able to 'center myself' and control my thinking and emotions – especially stress – in new ways."

Leaders who have presence, embody their stand and their values, connect with people, strike with compassion, and move with grace and balance through difficult transitions are valuable currency in today's business and political worlds. We see few of them because the way in which leadership is conceptualized misses an entire dimension. In our technological society, we tend to assume that right thinking and right intentions will produce right action. But the body acts, communicates, and learns as well as the head. Where the head goes, the body doesn't always follow. The body is the seat of action and learning; and in business we are interested in actions, not just ideas. When our models of leadership include this dimension, we will be able to groom and develop leaders like Ghandi and King rather than wait for history to bring us a new one.

Future Considerations is a London-based management-consulting firm that specialises in leadership development, organisational change, diversity, sustainability and human rights.

Paul Gibbons, former Managing Director, previous writings include "Spirituality at Work: Fundamental or Fad", Work and Spirit (co-author), "Convenience 4 – Ethics 1" (consumer ethics for the 21st century), and "Making the Leap: From Management to Leadership". He is an associate faculty member at the University of Surrey teaching a course called "Work, Spirituality and Society".

Dr. Strozzi-Heckler's company, The Strozzi Institute, delivered a four-day programme in London in May 2004. See www.futureconsiderations.com for details.

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