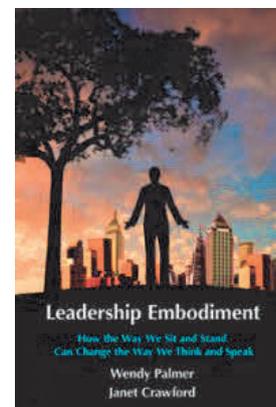


Leadership Embodiment

How the Way We Sit and Stand Can Change the Way We Think and Speak

by Wendy Palmer, Mobius Transformational Faculty,
and Janet Crawford



Evolution of the Practice

Years ago, at the end of a workshop in Ireland, I received a defining compliment: “We have had many people come here and teach us about the ‘what’ of leadership. Wendy, you have taught us the ‘how’ of leadership.”

This book is about the how of leadership. We will explore how our posture—the way we sit and stand—can change the way we think and speak. Leadership Embodiment (LE) practices develop centered, powerful leadership. Centered leadership incorporates mindful interest in the situation, the ability to shift from reactive reflexes to responsive choices, cultivation of a centered state of being, and the use of three energetic leadership competencies.

Mindful interest means that there is openness to examining problems and the possible remedies while relating to a continual stream of discovery. This type of openness is the hallmark of a great leader and includes the practice of dropping the defensive mask of self-protection and allowing oneself to be transparent and accessible as a human being—one who wants to work with, rather than control others.

Acting and speaking from a responsive, centered state of being increases one’s ability to see the big picture and be creative while being able to process more information and respond effectively.

The leadership competencies advanced by LE practices are: Inclusiveness, the ability to create an understanding and the felt-sense that everyone is in this together; Centered Listening, the capacity of being able to hear what is being said without taking it personally; Speaking Up, the skill of speaking one’s truth with clarity and precision while taking a stand.

During LE training, we explore our habitual reactions

to stressful situations, then learn and practice LE techniques that shift the way we sit and stand to give us greater access to our innate capacity for wisdom, confidence and compassion. LE training explores the realm of leadership with questions like: How do we tap the great potential that we all carry within us? What happens in those moments when we rise above our familiar responses to life’s challenges and suddenly find insight, timing, and clarity flowing through us? LE techniques unify the content of what is being said with the non-verbal communication of posture.

How Leadership Embodiment Evolved

For as long as I remember, I have been fascinated by how some of us are able to easily influence people and situations, while others struggle to get a response for their effort.

When I was young, I loved horses and had some wonderful experiences riding and training my own and my friends’ horses. Through these experiences, I saw that non-verbal behavior affects interactions more than words. In school, I learned about great leaders who changed the world and I wondered how they were able to do it. Those leaders seemed to have an expansiveness that included entire nations as if a whole nation was their family. I wondered how they were doing that because I had to work so hard to sustain my connection with just three other family members.

I started paying attention to the posture and gestures of effective people and began to see patterns that were repeated in a variety of situations. I studied the non-verbal communication of countless people that included animal trainers, politicians, business leaders, military commanders, and spiritual leaders. I observed that those who were truly effective shared common ways of standing, sitting,

and gesturing in relationship to themselves and others, especially in challenging and complex situations. These observations were enhanced through my study of the non-aggressive martial art of Aikido and my practice of mindfulness meditation.

As I simultaneously studied Aikido and mindfulness, I looked for the underlying principles governing an individual's ability to be effective in stressful situations.

Aikido

The non-aggressive martial art of Aikido has always given me great metaphors for leadership. Aikido has shown me what a centered, powerful leader can accomplish in situations of conflict and overwhelming odds.

In Aikido we say that, "It is not the size of your biceps but the size of your spirit that makes the difference in how the conflict is resolved." When a leader is centered, their spirit expands their personal space to include their environment and everyone within it.

The study and practice of Aikido offer real in-the-moment opportunities for learning how to deal with stress and confusion. Aikido allowed me to learn how to fall skillfully—not just physically, but emotionally and psychologically as well.

Falling and then quickly standing up in a new position without stress or judgment is one of the gifts my body continues to receive from Aikido training. We call it "the art of falling." My whole being learned how to recover, adapt, and go forward within situations that are continually unfolding.

Many great leaders have said that they learn more from their failures than their successes and that their failures lead to success. This quote from Michael Jordan testifies to his relationship to failure, "I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." One of my favorite poets, Rainer Maria Rilke says, "The purpose of life is to be defeated by greater and greater things."

I believe that balanced, centered, and embodied leadership skills give us the ability to lead ourselves and others out of the dark morass of fear, our sense of scarcity, our deep-seated desire for security, and our need to fix things and into our full potential. The centered leader is brave and can welcome both success and failure with complete openness.

Powerful, centered leaders are adept at working with intensity without constricting. On the Aikido mat this is shown in the ability to deftly manage physical impact. We learn how to deal with physical impact without collapsing or becoming aggressive. In Aikido, we speak of receiving the attack. We learn to relax and allow the resilience of our body and our personal space to act as shock absorbers.

My work to translate the concept and practice of skillfully receiving an attack into the psychological and emotional arena of leadership has been challenging. Nevertheless, it has yielded some of the most useful LE techniques.

On the mat, we learn by feeling the relaxed power of our teachers. Then, little by little over years, we develop our ability to relax and be open while receiving impact. On the mat, we invite attacks so that we can practice, grow stronger, and develop capacity for tolerating the hit or grab with relaxation and openness.

In every day life, the impact we experience is not physical, but rather the impact comes in the form of words and thoughts. In LE trainings, we use partner and group interactions as we do on the Aikido mat to simulate stress. Rather than strikes and grabs, we use words, gestures, and mild physical pressure to simulate impact so that we can practice dealing with intensity and learn more skillful responses. During these exercises of simulated impact and stress, we examine posture, the way we use our muscles, and the quality of our attention. We work with LE techniques to practice relaxing and opening in the face of stress; we grow stronger as we develop our capacity for managing the negative connotations of words and thoughts.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a wisdom tradition of individual practice in which one studies their thoughts and feelings as they occur. Practicing mindfulness helped me wake up and continues to keep me awake. As I became more aware of my habitual thought patterns and reactions, I noticed the bias of my thinking. As I acquired this knowledge, I began to be able to shift from reactive reflexes to responsive choices. As I sat in mindful meditation, I was removed from external stimulus and could notice that I was so caught up in judging and planning that I was not present in the moment. In my daily life, I began to notice the same thought patterns and then could choose to be present, more aware of my environment, and more interested in what people were saying.

I began to see my habits of judging, planning, and want-



ing things to be different than they were. I saw how these habits were coloring the way I experienced my interactions with the world. Before I began mindfulness practice, I thought that the world was coloring my thoughts and feelings. Now, I see that it is the other way around. With mindfulness, I am not at the mercy of what is happening to me because I can choose how I respond to events.

Learning and practicing LE gives us skills to be more effective leaders. We begin with taking a good look at our behaviors that arise when stress occurs. We use mindfulness to turn inward and become aware of our reactive thoughts that limit our choice of action. We come to realize how deeply the needs for control, approval, and safety are planted in our psyche. Mindfulness practice is not easy, but mindfulness opens the door for us to step into honesty and bravery.

We have tremendous resources available to us when we are in a centered state of being, able to include others, listen without taking what is said personally, and speak up for our truth. LE centering techniques and competencies rehabilitate our capacity for optimism.

Shifting to Center

- Sit in a slightly slumped posture.
- Think of something you need to do but would rather not do.
- Let your mind go along with any resistance or irritation for about 10 seconds.
- Notice any sensations of constriction or negative thoughts.

Now:

- Shift to an upright posture.
- Inhale and lengthen the back of your neck.
- Slowly exhale down to settle and relax your chest.
- Focus on your Personal Space, expand it all around, above and below you with a sense of openness.
- Allow your shoulders to soften and settle with gravity.
- Again think of the thing you need to do but would rather not do. Is your experience of the task different?

Expanding Personal Space Grows Leadership Presence

Strong leaders with strong personal presence can create a feeling of inclusion anywhere—meeting room, big auditorium, playing field, and even on a conference call. Everyone included in the leader's expanded personal space has a felt-sense that they are part of something bigger than themselves. This felt-sense of connection is an antidote to feelings of isolation and separation. Any group, be it family, audience, staff, or team, is unified when there is a sense of belonging and connection. LE techniques help you to better manage your personal space so you can affect your environment in and those in it in a positive, non-verbal way.

The phenomenon of expanded personal space is described as being easily observed in elite athletes in *The Body Has a Mind of Its Own*: “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.”

Expanding your personal space begins from the boundary that you notice when you first focus your attention on it. This boundary of your personal space is the starting place from which you can grow your leadership presence. Some people have asked, “How big can my space get?” My answer is, HUGE. Think of the Dalai Lama or the president of a large country when they speak in front of tens of thousands of people. I have been in a crowd with about twenty-five thousand people when the Dalai Lama was giving a talk. His leadership presence affected everyone in the space, having a positive effect on thousands of people at the same time. His strong and vivid presence is the result of a lifetime of spiritual practice that includes various forms of meditation and spiritual reflection for many hours every day. You may not be able to match the expansiveness of the Dalai Lama’s leadership presence, but you can strengthen and increase your presence starting with what you have right now.

Our body heat can give us a sense of our personal space. Sensitive instruments can measure the heat radiating from your body. Think of a time when you or someone else had just completed some vigorous activity or exercise. You would be able to sense or feel the heat radiating from the energized body. You can use this sense of radiating heat to represent your personal space.

Here is a great way to practice growing your presence. Whenever you enter a room, look at the corners, assess the size of the space, and then extend your personal space to fill the room expanding it all the way into the corners. Use your intention to be inclusive so that the people in your expanded personal space feel they are a part of your vision and a part of a community. When you expand your personal space with Inclusiveness, everyone who enters the room will feel welcomed into your personal space. You will automatically be giving them the non-verbal message, “We are in this together.”

The practice of LE gives us the gift of having a choice to be centered and mindful. When we are centered and mindful, we automatically act with wisdom, compassion, and power.

Biology and Neuroscience

To people accustomed to doing business in the Western world, the concepts presented in LE may initially

seem foreign, bordering on new age. We live in a culture that privileges the rational mind, while tending to dismiss the somatic, emotional, and subconscious aspects of ourselves as irrelevant or counterproductive to intelligence. From a Western model, we feel we should have the mental fortitude to think our way out of stressful situations. Over the past several years, advances in biology and neuroscience have started to provide solid scientific evidence for why this is simply not possible.

A few years ago, I met Janet Crawford, whose company, Cascadance, specializes in helping leaders build organizations that leverage the best in human biology. A former environmental scientist, Janet has immersed herself in the study of recent advances in social neuroscience and evolutionary biology. We have had numerous rich conversations about the nexus between her work and mine. LE students are often fascinated by the biological underpinnings that provide probable explanations for the effectiveness of LE techniques. In that light, Janet has been my collaborator in developing this book and has provided the companion text which is the second part of this book, *The Biology Behind It All*.

The following section on stress is from Janet Crawford’s text *The Biology Behind It All*

Stress

A final area related to our evolutionary history is stress. Recently, stress has gotten a very bad reputation. It underlies everything from belly fat, heart attacks and alcoholism, to depression, memory impairment and chronic underperformance. For most of our evolutionary history, however, stress has been more friend than foe. When we encounter a potential threat, the stress reaction prepares the body to rapidly handle the situation. Cortisol and adrenaline course through our system. Blood flow is diverted away from digestion, tissue repair and reproduction. It’s all hands on deck to help us overcome an imminent threat and live to see another day.

Our biology is primarily designed to manage episodic and rapid physical threat. Were you to encounter a predator on the plains of Africa, the ensuing scenarios were limited: you outran it, fought it off, or made yourself still enough to escape detection. In any case, the threat was sudden and it resolved itself in your favor...or not...on short order. Both running and fighting served to clear

stress hormones out of your physical system. When the threat was over, it truly was over.

Fast forward to today. Our evolutionary coding tells us to react to stressors in the modern world that no longer represent threats to our survival. In the past, a flash of light, sudden movement, or a sharp noise like a twig breaking were all indicators of a predator and warranted our full attention and quick response. Now, we startle when a computer icon bounces or our myriad technology gadgets vibrate or ring. The environment is full, often to the point of sensory overload, with unexpected noises, lights, and movement, yet rarely do they indicate anything truly dangerous.

Social threat cues also abound. Our daily worlds are filled with strangers, unpredictable outcomes, and uncertain status. Running away, freezing, or fighting rarely constitutes a useful and appropriate response. When the “predator” is someone across the table in the boardroom who has just attacked our favorite project, we don’t (hopefully!) hit them or run to a hiding place. We still experience the physiological stress response, but the outward manifestation is a psychological equivalent: we clam up, say something sarcastic, shut down and check our email, or forget our presentation.

The powerful hormones released to prepare us for gross muscular movement now have no way to exit the system. Instead, they circulate, damaging the body and leaving us primed to be even more easily triggered. Instead of the episodic threats we’re designed to handle, we now face continual change and non-stop pressure. Modern life exposes us to an ongoing barrage of false threat cues. Unacknowledged and unmanaged, the cumulative effect is life in a soup of stress chemicals never meant to persist beyond their momentary utility.

To make matters worse, for most of our history it has been beneficial to overreact to threats rather than underreact. Better to be intently alert to rustling in the grass than to ignore it. If you fail to detect a tiger or snake, you risk death. If you activate your muscles for flight and it’s only a bird, no harm done. In either case, on the Savannah, your default lifestyle (lots of walking, sunlight, social connection, etc.) ensured that stress hormones processed through and out of your system quickly.

These automatic responses no longer serve us in the way they were evolutionarily designed. The practice of Centering is the practice of wresting control back from these instinctive responses, so that instead of responding

reflexively from habit or fight and flight, we are engaging with the stressor from a place of curiosity and calm.

Most of what we do is neither conscious nor volitional. Until we become aware of what drives us, be it thoughts, emotions or body dispositions, we are powerless to change. The body takes a shape before the mind consciously identifies a thought or feeling. Our physical being is the most direct point of intervention. In the West, it is also the most ignored aspect of our emotional, intellectual and spiritual being. I hope we’ve intrigued you to appreciate the power of the body to change our experience. How you sit and stand will change the way you think and speak. ■

WENDY PALMER is the founder of Leadership Embodiment, a process that uses principles from the non-violent Japanese martial art of Aikido and mindfulness to offer simple tools and practices to increase leadership presence and respond to stress and pressure with greater presence, confidence and compassion.

She works with organizations, groups and individuals in the United States, Canada, Europe and South Africa. She believes that we can increase our wisdom, compassion and power to meet the challenges that arise in our lives and our organizations with inspiration and dignity.

Wendy is the author of *The Intuitive Body and The Practice of Freedom*, *Conscious Embodiment DVD*, and *Recover Your Center CD*. She holds a sixth degree black belt in Aikido and has practiced mindfulness for over 40 years. To learn more go to <http://www.leadershipembodiment.com>.

JANET CRAWFORD is a leadership coach, speaker and culture designer with nearly two decades of experience working with leaders at Fortune 500 companies and high potential start-ups. She is the founder and CEO of Cascadance, a company specializing in aligning business and biology for organizational excellence. A pioneer in the application of neuroscience to leadership development, her vision is a world where innovation, engagement, health, caring and accountability are common denominators in business. To learn more, go to <http://www.cascadance.com>.