

THE LEADERSHIP DOJO™

LEADERSHIP AS A PATH OF AWAKENING

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For the past three decades I have been working with the military, Fortune 500 companies, government agencies, entrepreneurial technology companies, and utilities groups in the U.S., Canada, Europe, and Latin America developing programs in team building and leadership training called the Leadership Dojo™. These programs have demonstrated that leadership is a skill that can be learned and institutionalized within organizations. In the Leadership Dojo we work with the premise that the ‘self’ is the leader’s primary source of power. Clearly, intellectual capacity and specific technical skills matter, but alone they do not make a powerful, effective leader. We have seen time and time again that the value one is, the self that one is as a person, ultimately becomes the deciding factor in success as an exemplary leader. Furthermore, we submit that the body is indistinguishable from the self. This is not a trivial statement; it is essential to include the body if one wants to build the skills of exemplary leadership.

In this article I will speak first about the learning environment of the Leadership Dojo and then the role of the body and the ‘self’ in leadership.

Dojo: A Place To Train

The term ‘dojo’ is from the Japanese traditional arts and means the “place of training”. Its origin is from the Sanskrit word *bodhimanda*, which translates the “place of awakening”. From this we can gather that since humans have recorded their history they have evoked the importance of coming together in a place in which they can wake up, learn, and transform themselves. A dojo, then, is a place to awaken to and learn new ways of being in the world. In a dojo students traditionally practice a specific art with other students under the direction of a qualified teacher. While the students learn and gain competency in a specific discourse, like martial arts, flower arranging, theatre, tea

ceremony, for example, they also build the foundation for a moral, ethical, and spiritual life. In other words, they begin to evolve as people.

As they learn a particular art or skill they will also, over a period of time, learn the universal principles necessary for producing personal mastery, social dignity, and pragmatic wisdom. In the case of the Leadership Dojo a specific skill is learned, such as making strategic assessments, while at the same time the self that one is, matures and evolves. In this way character values and pragmatic skills are joined as a powerful leadership presence. This is what it means to be on a 'Path of Awakening'.

The Importance of Practice

A fundamental claim of the Leadership Dojo is that the cultivation of the self, which is the foundation for exemplary leadership, occurs through engaging the body in recurrent practices. This is opposite of our common sense that tells us that by reading a book or going to a weekend seminar we will suddenly have the capacity to perform differently. In the Leadership Dojo the emphasis is on practices that allow us to *embody* new skills and to act in new ways.

As an example, consider a martial arts dojo where the focus is on learning to resolve conflict through perfecting certain techniques (a physical skill) and presence to employ the appropriate force at the appropriate time (an ethical and decision-making skill). In the dojo environment it is understood that these competencies and virtues come to maturity through recurrent practices, not by academic learning. In other words, it isn't assumed that by merely reading books, studying CDs, or watching classes at the dojo one will automatically absorb the sensibility and skills necessary to be a warrior. What is required is that one place oneself under the direction of a competent teacher, alongside other committed students, to train towards mastery. What is critical is the notion of practice: placing your body over and over again in the moves, with awareness, so they become available (embodied) when needed. In the same way we emphasize practice in the Leadership Dojo so that one can learn the specific techniques required to fulfill professional commitments such as sales, management, product development, and marketing, while also developing the more ontological leadership skills of meaning, purpose, relationship and team building, and culture.

A New Interpretation of Body

When I speak about training the body I do not simply mean the physical body as a motor system, or the rationalistic notion of the body as a collection of parts—legs, lungs, muscles, nerve endings – but a domain of action, mood, learning, and coordination with others. Training the body in this sense doesn't mean losing weight, building big biceps, having a flat stomach, or hitting a golf ball a long way; it means training the self to be an effective and ethical leader.

Body is used in the somatic sense of the word. Somatics, from the Greek, refers to the living body in its wholeness. This is the human possibility of harmonizing body, mind, emotions, and spirit. What somatics proposes is a fully integrated individual who embodies athletic prowess, emotional maturity, and a spiritual sensibility. As the poet William Blake said, "There is no body distinct from the soul." This is not the sleek, airbrushed body on magazine covers or the Cartesian notion of body as beast of burden that ferries a disembodied mind to its intellectual appointments. Nor is it the mechanical, physiological body of modern medicine or the religious formula of flesh as sin. Somatics envisions a responsible citizenry that has the physical, emotional, and moral commitment to work and live together in integrity and dignity. This is a person of feeling, authenticity, and commitment whose emotional range encompasses everything from gentleness to the rage of indignation. The body expresses our history, identity, roles, moral strength, moods, and aspirations as a unique quality of aliveness we call the 'self'. These virtues mature when they extend beyond the individual self and create communities of ethical cooperation. This is the wisdom of 500,000 years of biological evolution. The body we are *is* the life we live.

Embodied Knowledge vs. Intellectual Knowledge

Because dojo learning is characterized by placing our body, over and over again in practices, it runs counter to our conventional educational system. In the dojo the teacher declares the subject being taught, then speaks to what concerns it addresses in the student's world, then through a demonstration reveals it in action for the students, and then the students practice.

The focus is on the practices and the coaching of the teacher. This is radically different than sitting passively and listening to a lecture or studying charts and diagrams.

Learning is possible in a lecture hall, but it's the difference between academic knowledge and embodied knowledge. Academic knowledge is an intellectual understanding; it fills the head with information. In that model we say someone has learned something if they can understand and analyze data. That has its place, but it is not designed to necessarily produce effective leadership. Embodied knowledge, on the other hand, is the skill to act appropriately at the appropriate time. It is immediate, available, and responsive. Academic knowledge does not live in the present moment; it is stored in theories, books and computer chips. Embodied knowledge occurs through recurrent practices, not with memorization or rote learning. This is not an argument against theoretical learning; it is declaring that learning in the Leadership Dojo leads to the capacity to take new actions. We are now in a historical transition in which it is crucial that learning be placed in a context of action, as a way of being in the world. Action requires a commitment and a commitment reveals what one cares about. The commitment to action means taking a stand for what matters to us. Simply having knowledge about something doesn't require acting on the behalf of anything. More than ever it is necessary for leaders to take a stand for what sustains and fulfills us.

Building a Leadership Presence

Consider the experience of Paul, a newly appointed sales manager for a large technology company. Paul had been highly successful in sales, but lacked background in leading a team or delivering presentations to upper management. In his new position he was well prepared in his research, but when he gave his presentations he was thrown into a state of anxiety. He constantly fidgeted, tugged at his tie, stuttered, and broke out into a sweat. His discomfort drew more attention than his report. People had a hard time following him and they began to distance themselves from him. His anxiety spread to others and it had an overall negative affect on his team. He was unable to motivate or mobilize others and he couldn't bring his teammates into alignment. He appeared afraid and out of contact with others. He was smart, well meaning and sincerely cared for people, but his body betrayed him and he

was caught in a repetitive cycle of isolation and failure. Realizing this could jeopardize his career he read books on stress, attended a workshop on public speaking, and eventually saw a counselor. This made him more aware of the causes of his anxiety, but it did nothing to shift his performance. This added to his distress and he became increasingly resigned.

When he and his team began the Leadership Dojo he was introduced to practices that allowed him to perform differently, rather than make himself “better”. He learned what it meant to center himself so his actions and behavior were consistent with what he cared about. He learned to identify the sensations, breath patterns, and muscular organization that immobilized him. Identifying these patterns allowed him to quickly ‘return to center’— a state where he was present to others, open to possibilities, and connected to himself and what he cared about. He did this by dropping his breath to his abdomen, relaxing his body without going slack, moving his attention from his thoughts about performance to feeling himself. Learning how to become a ‘centered presence’ enhanced his self-awareness and awareness of others increasing his ability to listen to them and building his skill in generating positive moods. Others began to trust him more as they saw he was more relaxed and present. Their confidence in him had been restored and the team gained alignment and momentum.

Because the point is so simple it bears repeating: Paul learned new ways of acting by putting himself into new practices that changed his behavior, not by reading books or memorizing a formula for success. These practices included centering practices with himself and his teammates: he had frank and direct conversations with his team; he began to pay attention to the breath patterns in himself and others; and he saw how moods like resignation, resentment, and possibility lived in his posture and comportment. He saw how this produced identities that either opened or closed possibilities. Over time he even developed his ability to coach his team members around individual performance and enhanced team cohesion. The practices from the Leadership Dojo became a standard routine for his team and it was remarked on how their business processes and mood had dramatically improved. He is still nervous before presentations, but he can now work with the situation through his centering practice.

It is important to note that the practices in the Leadership Dojo include the specific conversations, actions, and issues that the individuals and teams are dealing with in their organizations. One does not learn leadership in a vacuum as an intellectual exercise for its own sake. Leadership is a social phenomenon that has meaning inside of an already existing set of commitments and anticipated future concerns. While one learns the fundamental embodied practices of an exemplary leader in the Leadership Dojo, they are doing so as they take care of the business at hand. It is not in a retreat situation in which one embodies the virtues of leadership, but in the heat and liveliness of the very issues that require one's leadership.

The Self in Leadership

The development of the self in the Leadership Dojo is not to be confused with self-esteem training, personality development, or self-improvement seminars. Our interest is not concerned with getting better or fixing oneself, but performing with mastery. Self-esteem training concerns itself with producing positive self-regard. It is a process where one feels better about oneself, but it may not necessarily lead to new actions or improved performance. The leadership path of self-cultivation in the Leadership Dojo is concerned with developing leaders who embody the ethics of individual responsibility, social commitment, and spiritual legacy. It is a rigorous discipline that has its roots in two ancient traditions, from the East and the West.

In the Western tradition Aristotle, in *Rhetoric*, speaks of *ethos*, a type of leadership which is "a form of influence that causes other people to change their values and so their performance of tasks." He goes on to explain that *ethos* is a leadership virtue distinct from rhetoric or persuasive language. *Ethos* is not what a person says or promises, but it's their way of being in the world. It's a presence and comportment that affects others to follow them and to be open to their ideas. Here, the words of William Shakespeare come to mind when he said, "By my actions teach my mind." This implies that the fundamental and distinguishing elements of an individual's character, as observed in their countenance, has the power to mobilize and change another's outlook and performance. When someone is the embodiment of *ethos* those around them act with velocity and conviction. *Ethos* is not simply an intellectual principle of character but a living bodily presence. In this state one has the strength to take a stand for what they care about as well as the flexibility to

adapt to a changing world. It is the opposite of pathos, which arouses one's pity and sympathy. Ethos arouses respect, mobilization and action.

In the Eastern tradition, *shugyo* consists of two Chinese characters, “to master” and a “practice”. Literally then, it means to “master a practice”. In everyday speaking, however, it is understood as self-cultivation. In this tradition the goal is to discipline one's spirit, or character, by using one's body. In a general sense the activity is not what is important – we could include walking, running, yoga, swimming, or even golf as the practices. It is the intention behind the practice that produces the meaning. Shugyo, or self-cultivation, carries the meaning of developing the human spirit through physical practices. This is not to be mistaken with the modern Western sports goal of developing the motor capacity of the body while ignoring the power of mind/body synchronization. Shugyo has the goal of achieving a mature personality that can generate positive emotional states and control negative ones. This is a different end than the sports objective of strengthening the body so that it can successfully perform certain movements.

The practices of shugyo are designed so the personal self will ultimately be absorbed into the world self. While this may initially sound vague and amorphous it simply means that it is a leadership virtue to master one's personal wishes, cravings, and desires for the sake of a larger commitment. Shugyo reflects the importance of going beyond the appetite of the self-centered ego if one wishes to gain mastery, live an exemplary life, and lead people. In this state the body is relaxed, the mind is free of self-conscious thoughts of success or failure, and one's energy, or intention flows freely without obstruction. There is a balance between pushing forward and hanging back. From this centered presence one can act directly and appropriately to take care of the situation at hand. This state of bodymind synchronization is more effective than the personal, centralized self. The result of shugyo is pragmatic wisdom—a self that is not driven by compulsion, fear, or self-interest, but acts for the greater good.

The following case study exemplifies how cultivating the self produces a leadership sensibility that contributes to the success of the entire enterprise.

Jerry is the CEO of a successful international leasing corporation that he founded fifteen years ago. He received his MBA from a prestigious university and before starting his own business he was the executive vice-president of a Fortune 100 company. His traditional business credentials are impeccable. His

fellow students at the business school admirably called him “Patton” for his hard-driving approach. For the first five years Jerry’s company thrived and grew an average of 15% a year. A leveling-off period began which resulted in a stall that affected profits and morale. He tried to “fix” this downturn by increasing his autocratic command-and-control style of leading. Some of his best talent began to leave and it was questionable whether the company would survive. In the words of one his managers, “With the added pressure his volume went up and his listening went down. He became more demanding, shriller and harsh. People around here felt alienated and even our customers started seeing him as needy and desperate. He was hard to be around.”

When he came to see us he was looking for tips and techniques to fix his management and sales teams. He saw the problem as outside of himself, something that technology or a systems change could solve. When we told him that it was necessary that he first examine his leadership style he was taken back. It had never occurred to him that he might be part of the problem. “After all,” he said, “look at my history of success, why do I need to change?” Jerry lived in a world in which mood, passion, relationships, and the joy of team collaboration didn’t exist. His business acumen, the marketplace, and his hard-driving style had allowed him to succeed up to that point without engaging in these fundamentally human issues. But he was now at a crossroads that required a transformation in his leadership style... or fail. I initially worked with Jerry individually and then had him and his management team participate in a Leadership Dojo.

Jerry and his team went through three phases in their work with us. In the first phase their historical way of being in the world, as individuals and as a team, was revealed to them. This illuminated the different patterns, both positive and negative; they automatically fell into with each other. By observing themselves from this perspective it made them less reactive to each other and more accepting of their individual strengths and limitations. They could see what traits were useful and what were simply conditioned responses that no longer had value for their business mission. They learned this by interacting physically together in practices appropriated from the Japanese martial art aikido and somatics. They weren’t doing martial arts but engaging in physical practices that quickly revealed their styles to each other. This is more powerful than taking a standardized personality test like Myers-Briggs as it allows one to literally feel and directly experience your patterns of behavior. One’s embodied history then is not simply an intellectual idea but something that one can

observe. For Jerry and his team there now existed choice where before there was only unexamined reaction. This created a trust with each other out of which more effective collaboration and cooperation practices were possible. In this stage Jerry was able to see how he created a mood of resentment and resignation within the company. He and his team also saw how their automatic reactions affected the way they related to customers and the marketplace itself. It became obvious that Jerry's personal style had become a company style and it hindered the way management moved with business opportunities. They saw how much their recent failures had to do with how they mismanaged their relationships with customers and how they had missed possibilities in the marketplace.

In the second phase we implemented relational practices and business processes that were necessary for them to succeed at the individual, team, and company level. This included structured conversations that ranged from intimate conversations about personal style and history to tactical and strategic business conversations. We engaged in movement practices that increased their capacity for coordination in business processes. They learned to be direct with each other in a way that enhanced both their dignity and success as a business team. We taught them how to receive and deliver assessments that produced action and collaboration. It is important to note that these conversational practices were not simply following a script or learning a recipe of "ten easy steps". They practiced speaking to each other from a centered presence in which they paid attention to mood, dignity, and capacity. Their trust deepened and it made it possible for them to strategize and innovate in ways they never thought possible.

In the third phase they engaged in practices of reading and anticipating the world. This allowed them to perceive each other, their customers, and their marketplace from a fresh perspective. They investigated marginal discourses that challenged their traditional belief systems, having conversations with those who could articulate the historical forces which were shaping the world, then engaging in movement practices to shape an identity that would produce success in a fast moving world. Built on the foundation of trust and cooperation they had developed in the previous two phases they were able to speculate, collaborate, and innovate in new ways. This kept their thinking vital and their capacity to move in the marketplace agile and flexible.

During our work with Jerry he learned how to manage his moods and became a more effective listener to his employees and customers. He was able to recruit

and retain ambitious new people. His management team learned processes that allowed them to coordinate and collaborate more powerfully together. The company turned around and once again became a leader in their field. During this same period of time they also added new technology and became successful in Internet commerce, but Jerry's report, as well as his colleagues', was that the company's success couldn't have happened without the change in him and his team.

In their final evaluations Jerry and his team noted significant improvement in these areas:

- ❑ An executive presence of integrity and authenticity.
- ❑ The capacity to generate and manage moods to create a productive and balanced life.
- ❑ The ability to cultivate, manage, and repair trust.
- ❑ The ability to coordinate effectively with others.
- ❑ The ability to motivate and mobilize others.
- ❑ The capacity to stay emotionally balanced in times of adversity and change.
- ❑ An ability to listen more deeply to the concerns of internal and external customers.
- ❑ The ability to resolve conflict more effectively.

These skills of leadership may seem obvious to the point of being elementary. Certainly they are not novel or contestable in what are commonly seen as the necessary social skills for a leader. Yet it is rare to be in an environment in which there are practices that develop them. The Leadership Dojo addresses how this knowledge is translated into performance.

While the emphasis in the Leadership Dojo is building the skills for exemplary leadership and team enhancement there are also principles structured into this learning environment that form the internal culture of an organization. These principles become the ethics, or ways of doing business with internal and external customers. These principles are the integrity between speech and action (telling the truth to customers and colleagues); proper respect and obligation to the teacher (customer, boss), to fellow students (colleagues), and to the dojo (workplace) itself; synchronization of mind and body (making and fulfilling commitments); honoring tradition (business processes) while being open to innovation; taking a stand for one's position without arrogance or

aggression; a life-long commitment to learning; and maintaining a proper equilibrium between self-gain (career) and the concerns of the community (corporate vision). These principles are always present when training in the Leadership Dojo and inform the background ethics, morals, and norms of the company.

These distinctions are useful as well in start-ups that are building a corporate culture from the ground up or in companies merging with different cultural backgrounds. In the Leadership Dojo we emphasize building a company culture parallel with building a common set of business processes. Teams learn how they live in different and unshared interpretations of what it means to work and learn together. They see how this produces many of the problems they are having. It also becomes clear that it isn't enough that teammates are all good at what they do, because if they don't work in unison they are often unable to get their product out on time or without major suffering, creating a mood of resentment and despair.

To close this gap we train in conversational practices that include embodying shared interpretations of accountability, commitment, and responsibility. Participants train to be empathetic and direct with each other. They learn to declare breakdowns in a way that take care of their dignity and the dignity of others. They begin practices that center them on enhancing their individual careers as well as building a team committed to the success of the enterprise. From this foundation we look at what is the over-arching vision they have for their lives and for the life of the business. These practices open their humanity and produce a trust that increases over-all effectiveness.

When we learn through our bodies in an environment like the Leadership Dojo we learn the social skills necessary for leadership and in a virtual age we reap the inestimable benefits of interacting face to face with our colleagues. Over time the steps necessary to learn and transform ourselves become embodied and we can then see how we can help others learn and change. Our ability for coordinating with others is increased and we become more capable of shaping a future that takes care of our personal and professional concerns. We increase our value to our colleagues and customers. The need to adapt and transform ourselves in today's world is cause for a revolution in how we learn.

Our biological humanness is a work-in-progress that began as a single cell protoplasm three billion years ago. 100,000 years ago we stood as Homo sapiens, and now we extend our influence far into the galaxy and deep into the

soul of man. As moral agents we can guide the human trajectory to include the best of technology while cultivating the practices that sustain our biological wisdom. But if we continue on our present course we will doom our creativity and erode our instinct for self-generation. The moment has come, the choice is ours, and all around us we hear the call for a revival of our humanity.

Together let us commit to the practices that produce leaders and teams of pragmatic wisdom, skillful action, and grounded compassion.