

Your Body Is Your Brain

The New Science of Living and Leading with Purpose, Skill, and Wisdom

By Amanda Blake

This is the Introduction to the forthcoming book [Your Body Is Your Brain](#). The book is a work-in-progress, and I invite your comments, questions, and feedback. For more information about this book, for other articles, and to contact the author, please visit www.stonewaterleader.com.

Introduction

This book was born of the union of two stories. One is set on my living room floor, close to midnight in the dark of December. Struck by one of those unexpected late-night sparks of inspiration, I found myself dashing around the house collecting all of my favorite books: books about physics, biology, and adult development, spiritual wisdom, yoga, and neuroscience, business, communication, and relationships. I piled them all on the floor and started sorting them into categories. “What I *really* want,” I muttered to myself with bright-eyed (and decidedly naïve) optimism, “is to write a book about all this stuff.” It seemed to me that the reading that had fascinated me all my life could help explain some of the more mystifying aspects of the work I had chosen and come to love: the work of Embodied Leadership.

The other story takes place on my bodywork table in the bright light of day. After a particularly moving session, my client sat up with a look of wonder in her eyes. Her face had softened, and she was beaming with joy. “What just happened?” she asked quietly. “I mean, seriously. I know something in me has profoundly changed. But really, what just happened? And how did you *do* that?”

This book is an attempt to answer that question.

My own curiosity is what led me to write, but it’s been my desire to share my discoveries with others that’s kept me going. My hope is that this exploration of recent scientific research will ultimately make the power of somatics more accessible and thereby more available to more people; perhaps even to some who might otherwise never stop to check it out.

My passion to do this stems in part from a love of the work and in part from a lifelong fascination with science, but mostly from a deep desire to see a new kind of leadership emerge in the world. The Chinese curse “may you live in interesting times” is tragically apt for our times. The complexity and intransigence of today’s problems – from environmental degradation to economic disparity and beyond – defies easy or pat solutions. If we’re going to make it to the other side of this mess we need more leaders from all walks of life who embody the commitment, courage, and capacity to fight for a livable future on behalf of all sentient beings.

Einstein wisely said you can’t solve a problem with the same sort of thinking that created it. In my view, one of the primary notions underlying the biggest breakdowns of our era lies in a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of interconnectedness. This innocent but misguided thinking has led us to value intellect and reason over love and care, to view human

communities as separate from animal and plant communities, to see ourselves as separate from those we love (and especially those we don't), and to mistakenly imagine that our minds are not connected to our bodies.

For the last several decades studies of physics, biology, and ecology have been putting the lie to these assumptions again and again. Now more than ever, people are beginning to see how deeply interwoven we are with one another and with the world around us. And yet while our thinking is gradually catching up with scientific reality, our pressing problems still remain.

We need more than new thinking and different ideas to address today's ills. As Einstein pointed out, we actually need a different *kind* of thinking. We need leaders and everyday folks who truly *embody* a felt sense of interconnectedness; who have both the care and the skills to act with responsibility to the whole. These are people who have the courage to pursue what they believe in and take a strong stand for it, who are consistently able to bring their best to even the most challenging of circumstances, and who can work effectively with others – often across traditional boundaries – to bring forth a new vision of the future. These skills have nothing to do with positional power and everything to do with personal presence.

And Embodied Leadership develops that presence like nothing else I have ever seen.

One of the things that drew me to Embodied Leadership¹ is that it was discovered, not deduced. Most frameworks for leadership development have been pulled together by incredibly bright academics who study what good leaders do and distill the common themes into models and tools that the rest of us can learn from. This is useful, insofar as it goes.

The history of Embodied Leadership is quite a bit different. In the mid-1980's, my teacher and mentor Dr Richard Strozzi-Heckler was invited to work with the Army Special Forces to help them improve mental and physical performance.² With a doctorate in psychology and a 6th degree black belt in the martial art aikido, he certainly had the qualifications for the job. And indeed the project was an astounding success: on average participants improved their abilities by 75% across the program's stated goals, which included areas such as fitness, psychological well-being, stress management, and concentration.

But there was also an unexpected result. In the months and years following the program, Strozzi began to receive letters and calls from the soldiers who had participated. They spoke of how the program had affected them: they were more accountable and less combative. They had better relationships at work and at home. They were more deeply connected to their own sense of spirituality. And by the records of their promotions, their own self-reports, and the reports of their commanding officers, they were better leaders overall. While this wasn't one of the originally stated aims of the program, it was certainly a welcome outcome for everyone involved.

Following that discovery Strozzi went on to refine his methodology with an explicit focus on leadership. He drew from his own training in multiple disciplines, blending lessons from aikido – the martial art of peace and harmonious conflict resolution – with insights from Vipassana meditation, which he had been a devoted student of for many years. Early in his career as a body-oriented psychotherapist Strozzi studied extensively with pioneering bodyworkers such as Ida Rolf, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Dr Randolph Stone. He combined his training in martial arts, psychology, bodywork, and meditation, culling the best of what he had learned about how to live

¹ Also known as somatic leadership development or somatic coaching. I'll use those terms interchangeably throughout the book.

² This is documented in his wonderfully readable journal of the experience: *In Search of the Warrior Spirit*

a good, honorable, and ethical life. Working with Chilean senator and business consultant Fernando Flores he began to incorporate management theory into the mix as well. The outcome was a holistic mind-body-spirit approach that reliably develops qualities that are essential for leadership and life.

I'm referring here to the inner qualities that exemplary leaders share: qualities like integrity, accountability, vision, commitment, equanimity, balance, trustworthiness, warmth, reliability, clarity, and respect. People who train in somatics develop those qualities from the inside out. Although this is very personal work, it's far from self-involved navel-gazing. Rather, it is a cultivation of the self on behalf of a larger goal or vision. It is about cultivating the capacity to take skillful action in a wide range of situations, so that you can be as effective as possible with whatever stated aims you choose.

Now, new research in the life sciences and particularly in neuroscience is beginning to illuminate how and why this holistic approach to leadership development gets such consistent, lasting, and indisputable results. It is this synthesis of science and somatics that I wish to explore with this book.

Before we dive in, I want to share a few of the fundamental underpinnings upon which this book is based. For instance: what exactly *is* leadership, anyway? The term is bandied about a lot and can mean very different things to different people. Since I'll be talking a lot about leadership in this book, it seems only fair to tell you what it means to me.

In my view, a leader is anyone who cares about something enough to ask others to care about it with them, and who effectively joins with others to co-create a new future. Let's break that down:

1. a leader cares.
2. she's future focused.
3. she collaborates well.

I don't define leadership with respect to position, title, or level of responsibility. Rather, I see it as a process of connecting to what matters, envisioning what could be, and taking action to bring a new future to life. This invariably requires enlisting active support from others, whether you're tackling new personal horizons (let's move our family to Fiji) or working on behalf of a larger community (let's redesign this product so it doesn't damage the planet).

Because leadership is inherently social and relational, your capability as a leader emerges from the personal and interpersonal qualities that make you uniquely you. Whatever actions you do or don't take, there is one inescapable fact: *you* are the instrument through which you act. And everything you do is affected by that instrument.

If you want different results – for example, let's say you wanted to live in a world where environmental destruction wasn't an acceptable side effect of doing business – you have to take different actions. And in order to change your actions, you often need to change the instrument through which you act. You have to take a look at the self.*

That means that leadership learning requires behavioral learning more than book learning. Academic theories can beautifully and accurately illustrate what makes a good leader. But having access to the officially sanctioned list of bullet points won't, in and of itself, impact your leadership capability. By definition, effective personal learning is inherently transformational. Which means unfurling your leadership potential is necessarily a process of self-cultivation in service of a larger goal. Leadership guru Warren Bennis has said it beautifully:

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

There's no shortage of leadership programs that address your way of being, or at least claim to. But here's a point that's often overlooked: the self is a *physical* self, as well as cognitive, relational, emotional, and spiritual. To be truly effective and lasting, transformational leadership learning must address *all* aspects of the self, including the body.

In my line of work, we refer to this as somatics. Soma is a word that comes from ancient Greece. Roughly translated, it means “the living body in its wholeness,” or “the art of living in the human body.” Historically, the word soma was intended to convey the multi-faceted strengths of the ideal Greek citizen: mental alertness, emotional balance, physical agility, and a spiritual or a moral compass. Ultimately, the word somatics points to a holistic approach to being fully human.

And to be a truly effective leader, you must be fully human.

Including the body in leadership learning may seem mystifying to you, or perhaps it makes all the sense in the world. (I regularly run into both of these points of view.) As you'll see throughout the book, not only does the body have an intelligence and a wisdom all its own, but it's a critically important component in how we learn almost anything, and particularly in how we learn the very personal and interpersonal skills that make a leader who he is.

Picture, if you will, a really excellent skier. One of those really accomplished extreme skiers who can ski impossibly steep slopes, jump cliffs, outrun avalanches, melt through moguls, and run gates. This is someone who is totally comfortable moving over almost any kind of snow-covered terrain with long, slippery sticks on their feet. Their body responds immediately to what the moment requires without them having to think about it for even a nanosecond. This skier has embodied the skills of skiing. “What comes next” is simply second nature to them. They react appropriately to what the moment calls for, at least most of the time.

You may not be an extreme skier, but you have embodied skills, too. Can you drive around a corner on a winding road without looking at your speedometer? Or do you need to calculate the optimal speed for any given turn? More than likely, you've been driving long enough that you can just *feel* what speed would be appropriate for the curve, so you guide the car around the bend without even thinking about it. You might even be talking on the phone or drinking a cup of coffee as you do.

As you'll come to see, our bodies also learn ways to be in relationship with others. We learn certain skills, habits, and default behaviors that impact how we go about pursuing our dreams, how we handle ourselves in difficult situations, how we ask for help when we need it, how we move into conflict or avoid it, and so on. These ways of being are to a large extent learned, and to a much larger degree than you might expect, your body is involved in the learning. In the same way the skier embodies the ability to make the right move at the right moment, you embody certain behavioral and relational “moves”. Depending on how well-matched your embodied skills are to any given relationship terrain, you'll either sail through beautifully or crash and burn.

As I use the term “embodiment” throughout this book, it's this phenomena that I'm referring to: our extraordinary ability to put complex actions and interactions on autopilot, so that “what comes next” or “how to respond” is second nature. In fact it's not too much to say that the personal traits and behavioral tendencies we develop and embody become part of who we are: part of our nature, our identity, and our personality.

This is why I disagree when people say leaders are born, not made. All leaders are made by their own life experience. Some have had life experiences that lend themselves more naturally to leadership; these are the people we call “born leaders” or “natural leaders.” But most of us, including highly skilled leaders, have at one time or another run into situations where we got in our own way... where we embodied some way of being that put limits on our aspirations or even created breakdowns. All of us have something we can learn in order to reach our full potential.

You can see here I’m not talking about body image and beauty, or the body as an assemblage of medical parts, or the body as an athletic machine. I’m talking about the body as a reflection of the self that lives within it. As you’ll come to see, your body reflects who you are just as much as your personality, your preferences, and your actions and choices in life.

Bear in mind, though, that the body experiences life directly, not through the abstractions of language. You can’t experience somatics through a book any more than you can experience swimming by reading about it. If you want to know what swimming is like, you have to actually get wet. Likewise, to experience the transformative power of somatics you will have to put yourself in it directly by working with a teacher, coach, or community that’s been trained in this or a similar methodology. (There are some resources for this at the back of the book.)

Furthermore, as I attempt to paint a picture of a holistic, sensation-based, experiential approach to learning via the inherently linear and linguistic nature of a book, I have invariably run up against the natural limitations of the medium. For this, I beg your forgiveness in advance, and ask that you please read accordingly. What this book *can* do, and what I hope it *will* do, is open a new perspective on how your body is relevant to your success and satisfaction in life, and how body-oriented personal learning can be of value to you.