

Leadership Embodiment:

Cultivating Leadership Presence with Confidence, Compassion and Clarity

Overview of the Leadership Embodiment framework and a key practice

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FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

Leadership Embodiment has been developed over 30 years by its founder Wendy Palmer. It is a leadership practice of calm and assertive presence that results in a confident, connected and clear state. Practitioners report that this state can quickly transmit to others and can positively influence the atmosphere of a meeting.

In this document you will find an overview of the framework and a description of the three centers of the human body that are used. The practice of shifting between two states of being is described. Some recommendations for further study are given. This document is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the Leadership Embodiment work. Rather it serves as a refresher resource for practitioners who have learned about these exercises, or an introduction to those who are new to them.

Origin of leadership embodiment

Leadership Embodiment was developed out of Aikido and mindfulness. Aikido is a Japanese martial art that focuses on restoring dynamic harmony in every situation. Mindfulness is an awareness practice that increases discernment in the moment and decreases stress and reactivity. The practical and insightful exercises reflect the distilled experiential wisdom of Wendy Palmer's more than 40 years of developing Conscious Embodiment as a self-development path. Leadership Embodiment arose over 10 years ago out of applying Conscious Embodiment techniques in executive coaching activities with organizations like Google, Twitter, McKinsey and NASA and the US Forest Service.

Effects of embodiment and centering

Embodiment practice can be a valuable addition to leadership development because it trains the body-mind to be more pro-active. The practice is

reported to increase our capacity to respond with more presence, dignity and wisdom, especially in stressful or demanding situations.

Research¹ suggests that the practice of embodiment tools such as centering, restores the capacity for the long-term, higher functioning aspects of the brain – big picture thinking, innovation, creativity and intuition. Stress mutes these higher functioning capacities of the brain and activates the short-term survival behavior – narrow focus, hyper vigilance and defensiveness.

The practice is to notice the reactive pattern kicking in and using the breath and body posture to restore a calm, assertive presence.

Next to having a beneficial effect on one's physical state of being and presence, the act of centering might increase the chance to operate from later stages of cognitive and ego-development that we have access to. The following quote² by Ken Wilber illustrates the value of centering.

"(...) what you're really doing when you center is that you are in a sense placing yourself in the very center of the cyclone. You're placing yourself in pure emptiness to the extent you have access to that. So what steps into that emptiness is the highest structure available."

Two states: reactive personality and center

The leadership embodiment framework identifies two states of being. A person can be operating either from one or from the other state at any given moment.

The two states of being are:

1. Personality pattern – manages self, other and stuff. Attention mostly "horizontal." Concerned with the self's control, approval and safety.
2. Centered self – aligned with the "vertical" first: horizontal actions follow out of vertical sense of uplift and inter-connection.

Aligning three centers: head, heart and hara

1. Head center

- Location: center of the head, above the ears just above eye-level
- Type of information: perception, data, insights and facts
- Quality: Clarity; overview, focus

2. Heart center

- Location: along vertical axis of the body that runs just in front of spine, at heart level and just above
- Type of information: feeling, longing and a felt sense of inner knowing

- Quality: Connection to self and other, compassion, sense of one-ness

3. Hara center

- Location: Hara is a Japanese word from martial arts indicating our physical center of gravity. It is located along vertical axis of the body, three fingers below navel, just in front of spine
- Type of information: sensing, sensations
- Quality: Confidence; life-force, strength, safety, instinct, gut-feeling

Leadership Embodiment – Aligning three centers	Reactive state - Wanting from Personality	Pro-active state – Being from Centered Self
1 Head	Control	Clarity
2 Heart	Approval	Connection
3 Hara / Hips	Safety	Confidence
General characteristics:	Horizontal orientation: managing people and stuff Doing from wanting, effort, survival, reactive	Vertical orientation: managing self first. Doing from being, ease, flow state, pro-active

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

The intent of the practitioner is to know his/her personality pattern more deeply and recognize it sooner. Rather than try to change the pattern, the practice is to simply shift to a more upright, centered posture many times a day. Practitioners use the four part centering process below to shift their state of being from personality to center.

The basic method: four-part centering

1 Posture: sit or stand upright and a little bit forward as if weight will be put on your shoulders that you can carry with ease and grace. You're both at ease and ready for action. Strong back, soft front.

2 Breath:

Breathing in: inhale up the spine, lengthening the body from the back and neck

Breathing out: long exhale down the front, softening the jaws, shoulders to gravity

3 Field: Balance the field of attention and presence, sensing the heath radiating off your body, expanding that a little more and balancing it using the question: *“What would it be like if my field was equal and even at all sides, balancing the front and back, left and right, below and above?”* Feel the answer in the body.

Now settle into the recovered centered state while allowing your attention to come back out, keeping part of your attention on the inner state of centeredness and alignment of hips, heart and head.

4 Quality: Invoke a quality in your being by asking:

“What would it be like if there was a little more ... ease (or another quality) in my being right now?” Listen for and feel into to the answer of your body.

The need to practice

Just like in becoming a black belt martial artist you need to practice to be able to perform these techniques under pressure, when you most need them. Then they become a second nature. It is important not to allow the centering to become like a chore, to keep it interesting through zooming in on certain aspects in order to keep the experience fresh every time. Although the basic centering always has a positive effect, the challenge is to remember to practice regularly and frequently in order to deepen the centered state experience and the confident and connected presence and agility as a leader. That way you are ready for anything at any time. Don't try to stay centered. Re-center. The power is in the recovery.

In order to perform calmly and confidently while under pressure (stress, great success, deadlines, unskillful communication, or a big compliment) instead of contracting into instinctual reactive behavior, it is necessary to practice re-centering many times. This ensures that the neural pathways involved in centering under pressure get covered with an extra layer of myeline³. Thus one's capacity to notice reactivity taking over and to restore a centered state increases. So it is not about staying centered. The power is in the recovery. Even the founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, stated that he did not stay balanced all the time: "... I just rebalance myself so fast, nobody notices."

Basic centering practice frequency:

In order for the centering to become available as a valid pathway under duress this is the recommended practice frequency.

- Every morning before work – five to ten minutes of centering, can be integrated with existing meditation practice
- Five times a day at fixed times – three exhales
Before important meetings – three exhales
- As often as you notice you have dropped out of the centered state – one breath version

Dealing with inner resistance to change:

This quote⁴ by George Leonard from his book on Mastery offers a way to deal with possible inner resistance in a skillful way.

"Backsliding is a universal experience. Every one of us resists significant change, no matter whether

it's for the worse or for the better. Our body, brain and behavior have a built-in tendency to stay the same within rather narrow limits, and to snap back when changed...Be aware of the way homeostasis works...Expect resistance and backlash. Realize that when the alarm bells start ringing, it doesn't necessarily mean you're sick or crazy or lazy or that you've made a bad decision in embarking on the journey of mastery. In fact, you might take these signals as an indication that your life is definitely changing—just what you've wanted....Be willing to negotiate with your resistance to change."

Summary

The centering process is the foundational practice of Leadership Embodiment. Centering is a fast and effective way to cultivate leadership presence with confidence, compassion and clarity.

"The greatest gift you can give someone is to get yourself together." – Wendy Palmer

References and recommended resources

¹ "Power Posing: Brief Nonverbal Displays Affect Neuroendocrine Levels and Risk Tolerance" by Dana R. Carney¹, Amy J.C. Cuddy², and Andy J. Yap¹ - ¹Columbia University and ²Harvard University in [Psychological Science](#) published Sept 21, 2010

² This Ken Wilber quote on the value of centering was transcribed from a conference call on November 3 2011 as part of the course "Conscious Leadership for Sustainability – Advanced Practices" organized by Barrett Brown.

³ The book "The Talent Code: Greatness Isn't Born. It's Grown. Here's How." by Daniel Coyle in 2009 explains this principle of myelin wrapping and the power of practice clearly.

⁴ Taken from: "Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment" by George Leonard (Plume. Feb 1, 1992), p. 107-115

- Wendy Palmer (1994). *The Intuitive Body. Discovering the Wisdom of Conscious Embodiment and Aikido*: Blue snake books; Berkeley, California, USA. (3rd edition published in 2008). She also wrote "The Practice of Freedom" and is in the process of writing "Wisdom to go" about Leadership Embodiment.
- Connect to Anouk@experienceintegral.org for more resources (articles, websites, and video) on Leadership Embodiment and Integral Leadership. Anouk is available for Leadership Embodiment coaching and training, both online and in-company.