

Practice: A Path to Mastery for 21st Century Leaders

By Jen Cohen and Jason Gore

In order to succeed and stay competitive in today's fast-paced business environment, organizations launch big initiatives, create high-profile goals, and reach for new outcomes on all levels. These initiatives stretch us, pushing us to innovate and to use limited resources very effectively. They require everyone in the organization to reach beyond their usual comfort level, embrace change, and navigate ambiguity.

To successfully meet these demands requires optimism, curiosity, a willingness to make mistakes, presence, flexibility, and a long list of characteristics and skills that enable a leader to embrace change as an opportunity – to be able to move through the discomfort of risk and uncertainty towards the future as an exciting possibility.

SUFFICIENCY AND SCARCITY MIND/BODY

When leaders develop and adopt a particular mind/body alignment – one that we define as “being in sufficiency” and “being centered” – we see a marked increase in the success of organizational efforts. A mind/body alignment reflects a leader's mindset. This particular mindset is a perspective based on being aware of, and oriented around, what is already available. It is founded on realistic optimism and curiosity that has leaders look at how to use what is presently available to them, rather than focus on what is missing or the lack of what they need; such as time, money, talent, or buy in. In addition, this leader is also practicing what we call coming back to center: the ongoing alignment of head, heart, and gut, as well as an alignment of values, mind state, and behavior. From center, the leader is acting with his/her whole self, from a centered place, which is why we refer to it as a mind/body of sufficiency.

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“Center is a basic bodily presence, and it is on this presence that the other bodily states are built.” ~ Richard Strozzi Heckler, Anatomy of Change

The sufficiency mind/body generally leads towards having the success of all stakeholders' in mind and finding ways to move forward together, rather than fighting over limited resources. It also generates an environment of collaboration, creativity, innovation, and productivity because leaders have an expanded viewpoint that allows them to see possibilities and options that are often overlooked when overly focused on lack.

However, this mind/body alignment is not widespread. In fact, there is a fundamental tension between the organization's desire for growth and more typical human tendencies that tend to be based in scarcity – a risk-averse mind/body state. Human beings are biological and neurological creatures, and we often are in roles that require action contrary to some of our hard-wiring.

Case in point: David is a VP of Operations at a small, U.S.-based manufacturing company. He is in a meeting with the senior management team and the CEO is announcing his intention to pursue international expansion, starting with Mexico and Canada. Even while listening the CEO explain the strategy, David becomes tense. His breath becomes shallow and his body contracts, although he doesn't notice. David's mind races as he looks into the past anticipating the risks involved and all of the possible ways the expansion could fail; the company has insufficient cash flow, people, talent, and expertise. He looks at the downsides of failure; a failed market entry would be a disaster for the company and his individual career. He quickly arrives at the conclusion that the CEO's intention is simply a bad idea and he decides to set up a meeting to persuade him to move more slowly and stick to expanding domestically this year.

David is reacting to the situation, operating from a scarcity mind/body, which is primarily based in fear and survival. This mind/body creates a lack of willingness to fail or take necessary risk, a discomfort around ambiguity, and a desire to "know" prior to taking action. So how does David get from his scarcity and fear to sufficiency and center?

Most often the leaders with whom we work have some ideas already of their habits and patterns that get them in trouble and have maybe even had moderate success in modifying some of their less than optimal behaviors. That said, many leaders are still struggling to shift into a new way of thinking, being, and acting that will serve them and their organizations more fully. We offer that including the body in all of its wisdom will greatly enhance any leader's ability to shift rapidly to optimal performance.

CREATING CHANGE & EMBODYING NEW PRACTICES

We are what we practice and we are always practicing something. Often referred to as habits or behaviors, we repeat them over and over again. We practice breathing in certain patterns, we practice talking about ourselves in certain patterns, we engage to others in a pattern, we move in certain patterns, we think in certain patterns, and so on. These patterns form the matrix we call our reality.

Top performing athletes understand this intimately – the practice of self-doubt versus self-confidence can radically alter their performance in the game. Athletes learn to re-pattern themselves, they are coached to shift their self-talk, shift their weight, do a daily regimen of warm ups and basic moves, and they practice these moves over and over again until the new patterns become the norm.

That said, our bodies are optimized for physical survival. When the stakes are high and change is on the table, there is a tendency to let our biology lead the way and to operate from our past, rather than embracing change from a place of creative, reflective thinking.

David, our hero, is engaging with expansion as a threat. His body tightens and his breathing shallows—reactions that were embedded during his childhood and are part of his legacy as a biologically based organism. He immediately starts focusing on the risks and why it's a bad idea. This is all automatic. He doesn't actively make this choice—it's just what arises or, as we say, it is what is embodied.

*"Under pressure we do not rise to our expectations;
we fall to the level of our training." ~ Bruce Lee*

And this mind/body limits his ability to think creatively about the opportunity. The human organism is optimized for homeostasis and stability. As biological creatures we attempt to stay stable and resist change.

"This condition of equilibrium, this resistance to change, is called homeostasis. It characterizes all self-regulating systems, from a bacterium to a frog to a human individual to a family to an organization to an entire culture—and it applies to psychological states and behavior as well as to physical functioning." ~ George Leonard, Mastery

If something is not a threat to survival, it's better to keep everything as it is rather than take the risk of making a change.

This "somatic training" is deeply embedded in our bodies, our breath, and every interaction tends to reinforce the patterns that became unconscious habit when we were children. The word "somatic" comes from the Greek word *soma*, which means the unity of mind, body, and spirit. Embedded so deeply, this patterning shows up without thinking and most often when we are under pressure or threat. And we've been "practicing" these reactions so long that often we don't even know how to choose anything different, especially in the heat of the moment.

This poses a dilemma for leaders and organizations that want to create change. How does an organism that is designed to seek stability thrive in the face of constant pressure and growth-inspired change?

If David was in a mind/body of sufficiency and center, he would engage the CEO's request quite differently than he does in our example. Instead of trying to persuade the CEO to lower the goal, David would be more likely to use his time and energy to figure out a way to manage the risk while pursuing the upside.

The result is that new possibilities could emerge quickly. David might talk to his team members who know something about Mexico and Canada. He might begin looking for expertise, for possible expansion partners, or explore possibilities of a merger. When he sees it as an opportunity, he can use his energy first to explore possibilities, gather information, and take a

moment before responding to his boss at all. He will have time later to fine tune all the details, and perhaps ultimately negotiate with the CEO an optimal solution.

This may not be natural for David, so to switch into this mind/body alignment, David would first need to recognize his automatic reactions—something we'll explore in more detail in a few moments. Let's look first at another key factor at work in how we do, or do not, shift from one state to another.

We are contextual beings. As human beings, context is always operating as the background of thinking, feeling, and doing. If the context is one of scarcity, change will be avoided. If the context is one of sufficiency, change is more likely to be embraced.

All external events are interpreted within one's context. These interpretations, in turn, drive our conversation and actions—and essentially cause us to shape our reality. It is indeed a “self-fulfilling prophecy.” We shape our world and are shaped by it simultaneously. The context we bring shapes both interpretation (how we see the world) and behavior (how we change and shape the world around us through our actions). For example, if we think someone doesn't like us, we start acting like they don't like us. We engage in actions of avoiding eye contact, speaking curtly, making assumptions, etc. Soon enough, the person who we thought doesn't like us will indeed start not liking us. A feedback loop forms that creates a world fully consistent with our own context.

Science has proven over and over again that our mindset influences our body. The placebo effect, for example, is the most documented correlations in all of medicine. If you give someone an inert, inactive pill that the person believes will improve his condition, his or her condition has a high tendency to improve. We shape our reality in incredible ways that science can show, but not fully explain.

So, if we can learn to shift our context, we shift how we see and shape our world.

Most of us see our body as something we *have*. Our perspective is different: we do not have a body, we *are* a body. Even though the business environment and the daily actions required in business may seem intellectual or strictly mental exercises, our context and mindset arises in and through the body, shaping all of our decisions, actions, and interpersonal communications.

Our body is our primary context. All of our experience in this life is experienced through the body.

This idea might seem quite radical in a modern mechanistic worldview where we abide by Rene Descartes' words, “We think, therefore we are.” Descartes' words were symbolic of the birth of rationalism and the subsequent divorce of mind and body. Ironically, modern science, a direct offspring of rationalist thinking, is now definitively showing that all of our experience happens from within the framework of the body.

For example, in one research study, people were sitting in a waiting room and were asked to take a pill in preparation for the experiment. For some, the pill was inert (a placebo), but for others, the pill slightly increased their heart rate. People that were given the heart-rate increasing pill had a much higher tendency to be anxious and report being nervous about the experiment. The sensations they felt in their body impacted how they were seeing the world. The placebo group did not report anxiety.

Just as the mind influences the body, the body influences the mind. We are “structurally determined” creatures. The shape of the body itself – from the structure of the eye and ear to posture, breathing, facial expressions, neuronal pathways, and activity – gives rise to our experience of life.

In another study, when participants hold a pencil in their teeth engaging the muscles of a smile, it increased their reported happiness. They comprehend pleasant sentences faster than unpleasant ones. And, it works in reverse. Holding a pencil in their teeth to engage the muscles of a frown has them comprehend unpleasant sentences faster than pleasant ones.

“The body is the living shape of the self.” ~ Jeffrey Maitlin, The Spacious Body

Renowned leaders often talk about leading “from their gut” and following their instincts. We now know that there is a reason that this is so effective, our bodies have information that we can access if we slow down and learn how to listen.

Research suggests we have cells throughout the body that resemble human brain cells in shape, size and function. Biologist and researcher Dr. Candace Pert reveals that most of these cells are clustered in the gut and the heart, and operate much like a second and third brain.

When we assume the body is simply a complex, and perhaps even cumbersome, transportation system, we are missing huge amounts of information – data, intuition, deeper knowledge, etc. – that is constantly being offered by the body.

When we take the time to get acquainted with our bodies, we get access to huge amounts of subtle but relevant and important data. This can translate to intuition, knowledge, and even wisdom that can be of great service to the wholeness of our self and, of course, our leadership.

Even though cognitive biologists like Maturana and Varela will tell us “we are structurally determined and limited,” we are tremendously elastic and malleable. We can and do change. This changeability is as much a part of our biological imperative as is stability. Knowing how to work skillfully with the dynamic tension between stability and change is a key ingredient to the art of embodied leadership and stepping into a mind/body of sufficiency and center.

It is important to become an observer of how we are, in fact, participating in creating our world. That world, an amalgam of our structurally determined bodies, our contexts, our thinking and feeling and being is impacting how our teams interact, how we relate to our employees, and how we relate with managers, spouses and children. Once we can see and feel all the parts of

the whole, we can learn to shift ourselves and leverage our elasticity, which gives us tremendous power in the face of being an embodied human. Let's explore the path together.

SIX STEPS TO SHIFTING TO A SUFFICIENCY MIND/BODY STATE

1. **Observe your patterns under pressure, in your behaviors and internally in your body:**

Although you may be eager to create change, first you have to learn what you do when under pressure. Only by becoming aware of these patterns, can you change them. We distinguish this from learning about why you do what you do. That is the work of psychotherapy more specifically. In our investigation, we turn our attention to how we do what we do. You can begin by being curious about your own reactions under the incoming pressure of daily life, the modern day equivalent of the tiger chasing us in the tundra.

How do you respond when asked to innovate, do more with less, are given bad news, or feel threatened? Do you:

- Move faster and make quick decisions? Or hold off on important decisions?
- Get bossy and bark orders? Or pull back with a wait and see attitude?
- Delegate more? Delegate less?

Although everyone's expression is unique, there are a finite number of patterned responses to the pressures we face. When the sympathetic nervous system is aroused, heart rate increases, respiration rate increases, cortisol – a stress hormone – is released in the bloodstream, and the body prepares to react. What happens next varies by person, but almost always, people react in one of four ways:

1. **Fight:** Push for what you want, often through attacks, getting bossy, etc.
2. **Flee:** Although it might be "running away," flee almost always looks like someone trying to end the conversation quickly. They may make an excuse to end the meeting or may appease the other person so that they can leave.
3. **Freeze:** This is when the brain responds by simply taking your thoughts away so that you don't act or do anything to worsen the situation. You may find yourself speechless, unsure how to react, or caught like a "deer in headlights."
4. **Flock:** You scramble to find other people that are in your "in group" and associate with them. Flocking is more often done by women than men.

Which of these do you most relate to? Where awareness goes, attention flows. So as you become aware of what you are doing, you can now use that awareness to shift your attention and intention to something new.

- ### 2. **Catch yourself in the act. Be aware, in the moment, of how you are responding:** Once you are aware of your pattern, you can see it in action – how it functions and how it hijacks your best intentions. In the beginning, you may notice the pattern long afterwards, then you'll get better catching yourself just a few minutes into the reaction, and then finally, you'll catch yourself just as the reaction is arising. Once you can catch your pattern in the act,

rather than just react from within your pattern, you now have a foundation for choice. Choice and power start by catching yourself in the act.

- 3. Center yourself:** When you catch yourself in the act, you have the opportunity to choose a new behavior from a centered and powerful place. Instead of reacting from being off balance, center yourself first, so that you can move from a place of clarity, openness, strength, and determination.

We center ourselves by dropping our attention into our anatomical center of gravity, usually in the belly area, from which we can generate momentum with ease, power, and economy of movement. In Aikido, and in other Asian martial arts and traditions, the anatomical center—the *ki* (pronounced key) – is where we have our greatest life force. Coming from the center, or the *ki*, opens up new possibilities that require less force accessing our natural power. With practice, centering takes only a short moment, often with breath and attention, and over time we can become agile at shifting from a survival/scarcity/fear biology and mind state to a place of center and a mind state of sufficiency.

With training this becomes not just a good idea or concept but an actionable set of practices a leader can use to create the mood, direction and trajectory of a top performing team.

David reacted to the CEO's response with a mild fight response – as a result, he was going to try to get the CEO to change his opinion. If he catches himself in the act, he will notice that he wants to push back. He will pause, center himself, and then decide what course of action is really best in the situation.

- 4. Open with width & a relaxed stance:** Where our attention goes, our energy follows. Instead of focusing on the boundaries and constraints of a situation, start by focusing on the possibility and opportunity. Somaticly this is placing attention on your breath and widening your physical frame and field of vision – literally relaxing your eyes so that instead of being narrowly focused, they are soft and you are able to take in a lot of peripheral information. Hunters use this technique so that they don't spook their prey.

As you soften and release—opening instead of contracting – you are cultivating the leadership mindset critical for leading yourself and others through change. Relaxing under pressure opens up new actions and possibilities, and creates a wider perspective so that you can see the forest through the trees, choose the best course of action, and then change direction whenever appropriate.

“The manifest universe and all that is in it is like a great work of art. Art can happen only in form...art like the realization of human freedom, happens by being released in form and limitation, not apart from...(it).”

~ Jeffrey Maitlin, Spacious Body

If David softens, he will start to see that there are many choices available to him. He could push back, but there are many other actions he could take instead, including doing more research, engaging others, etc. With a relaxed, centered stance, David realizes that there is no need to resist the initiative immediately. Instead, he'll collect more information and re-evaluate the situation when he knows more.

5. **Connect:** We are all connected already, but in times of crises, we often disconnect. Articulated so beautifully by Martin Luther King, even when we think we are not connected, we are deeply affecting one another.

“Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.” ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

In our leadership case, David's mind/body will impact everyone on his team and the people around him.

Human beings are an “open loop” system, which means our nervous systems are greatly influenced and impacted by other people, and vice versa. We tend to mirror each other. Spouse's heart rhythms start to match. And if two people are sitting in a room, the EKG (electromagnetic energy) of one person's heart impacts the other persons. Changes in one person's EKG are seen in the other person's EKG.

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Likewise, when a baby comes in contact with a primary caregiver, the baby's heart rate changes, relaxation hormones are released, and blood pressure changes. This reciprocity in our regulatory systems does not change when we reach adulthood. While we do learn to self-regulate, we remain an open loop, subject to the nervous systems around us, and highly influenceable.

“Adults remain social animals; they continue to require a source of stabilization outside themselves. That open-loop design means that in some important ways, people cannot be stable on their own - not should or shouldn't be - but can't be. The prospect is disconcerting to many, especially in a society that prizes individuality as our does. Total self sufficiency turns out to be a daydream whose bubble is burst by the sharp edge of the limbic brain. Stability means finding people who regulate you well and staying near them.”
 ~ Amini, MD, Lannon, MD, Lewis, MD, *A General Theory of Love*

This has huge implications for leadership. If your body as a leader is contracted, shaped by scarcity, fear or cynicism, how capable will you be of inspiring others to change? And if the leaders in your organization have the mind/body of scarcity, the whole organization will mirror that mind/body.

To shift yourself most quickly from one mind/body alignment to another, we assert that the most effective and efficient way is through the body – by practicing something new and learning how to use the plasticity of our mind/body to access new mind states, new behaviors, and therefore new worlds.

Leadership, at its best, is with full awareness of this connection. By skillfully cultivating their open loop nervous system, leaders can inspire others, build trust, and move people into action in the face of ambiguity and challenge.

Even through difficult conversations, it is possible to maintain a connection with the other person while also being tough on the problem itself. David can push back on his CEO while maintaining his connection with him. This will generate an engaged conversation where both the CEO and David can learn together.

6. Investigate what is enough and where is enough already

present: The art of leadership starts with relaxing under pressure and inviting leaders to investigate for themselves what is enough: enough change, enough pressure on the team, enough direction, enough empowerment, enough delegation, enough tough love, enough stretching and reaching forward. Too much of any of these and we flood ourselves and our people, and they resist. Too little attention or care or pressure, and the system stays so stable that nothing moves forward. Just enough and we can maintain connection to ourselves and others and invite them to shift with us.

As Buckminster Fuller suggested 50 years ago, if you stand in the reality that there is already enough – food, water, clean air, goods, etc., and you are already enough – as an individual – many subtle and not so subtle shifts in body, mind, and behavior ensue.

If you get inside David's body/mind, you'll see that the reason he thinks the company's international expansion is a bad idea is partly generated from self-doubt. He wonders if he's a good enough leader to pull this off. If David allows doubt and scarcity to prevail as his fundamental state, this will have tremendous impact on his approach, the questions he asks, and ultimately the mood of his whole team. He may go to one of his teammates and ask,

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As the Zen master tells the student: "Not too much suffering so that the student is flooded and unable to learn and not too little so there is no incentive to practice. Just enough suffering so that the student may fully awaken."

“Do you think we can pull this off?” This very question is projecting his doubt. Instead, if David is standing in sufficiency and coming from a clear, connected, and open space, he would ask a forward-looking question, such as “What ideas do you have to successfully make this happen?” A question like that will generate a different mood, one of possibility, and a different response, one of new information, in the conversation.

These six steps are practical ways to find your center in the face of a difficult situation and have more choice. By practicing a sufficiency mind/body alignment in low stakes conversations, it is more likely you can generate that mind/body when the going gets tough. Identify your core pattern of relating under pressure, and design a regimen that cultivates a more desired pattern:

1. Observe your patterns under pressure – in your behaviors and in your body
2. Catch yourself in the act. Are you able to accept and presence the truth of what is?
3. Center yourself
4. Open with width and a relaxed stance
5. Connect
6. Investigate what is enough and where is enough already present?

We all lose balance. There is a story of a student standing in front of Satomi Sensei, the founder of Aikido, who asked, “Sensei, why is it that you never go off center.” He looked at the student and replied, “It’s not that I don’t lose center. We all do. It’s just that I come back faster.” This is the result of lots of practice. Fears, contraction, and moments of scarcity will inevitably arise no matter how skilled you are. The goal is to regain your balance quickly.

Working through the body is a potent gateway to reshape a leader’s context and capability to embrace change, inspire others, and reach goals greater than they previously thought possible. When physical patterns, mental clarity, emotional acumen, and spiritual connection are all lined up, leaders increase their ability to produce results and inspire others to do the same. By practicing these steps, you will be able to stay centered, open, and connected in a much wider range of situations and engage with choice from a sufficiency mindset. As with all arts, those who practice wholeheartedly and with rigor rise to the top of their game. Being masterful at leading others from a centered place is a task well worth the effort.