

”An MBA makes you smarter, but it does not make you a leader”

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Foto: Torben Nielsen

# Leadership Embodiment

This year it has been 25 years since I began my work in leadership and organizational learning after a career in physical therapy and as a leader in strategy, marketing and product innovation.

Today we are faced with many challenges. The pace is relentless, the demands keep increasing and complexity grows. We constantly need to adjust and adapt, which creates both uncertainty and possibilities.

Things move especially fast in Silicon Valley, where radical ideas and change are the norm. Here leaders bet on the undiscovered possibilities and potentials in both their businesses and their associates.

“Physical intelligence is the new frontier. It is where we can expand our awareness, enter a state of flow, and discover endless possibility and potential

The concept Leadership Embodiment was also developed on the West Coast by Wendy Palmer. She is a small woman with an outsized presence, a six-degree black belt in martial arts, and 50 years of experience in meditation. Wendy herself manifests the intensity she seeks to release in other leaders.

The most efficient way to achieve such a presence is to work directly with the body. Many fast companies like Salesforce, Oracle, and Genentech, as well as NASA and Black Rock have discovered this shortcut and are now tapping into *Leadership Embodiment*.

### Exercise credibility

When you take an MBA (guilty as charged!) you strengthen your theoretical knowledge and analytical abilities. Your business degree makes you smarter, but it does not make you a leader.

By contrast, an education from the US Military Academy does exactly that. I was reminded of this recently when I visited West Point. The cadets may be as young as 17 when they begin their studies. Four years later they are prepared to lead others in war zones, an assignment that demands the ultimate in trust from your “co-workers.”

At West Point they train the head and the body at the same time. You practice, make mistakes, and push yourself and your fellow students ever harder. Because, as one cadet observed: “It’s better to fail here than in Afghanistan.” You develop discipline and become profoundly competent and trustworthy. You learn that it is not about you; it is about the mission!

How can we develop a similar presence based on credibility instead of charisma? How can we train the body so we show up in a way that is calm and clear, confident and kind? How can we take a stand and act decisively?

### Expand your presence

When we are under pressure we can either make our world and ourselves smaller, or we can become larger – more uplifted, open, resourceful, and resilient.

The body is our first responder. When we feel attacked we narrow our focus, become hypervigilant and defensive. Our options are fight, flight, or freeze.

Several seconds, even minutes, can pass before we become consciously aware that we are on the defensive. This is a natural reaction but rarely an effective one.

And it is not just the big tremors that can elicit this response. An annoying email, an unexpected delay, or a critical question can be experienced as a low-grade threat. While we cannot prevent our automatic reactions, we can take the foot off the accelerator. Instead of amplifying ineffective emotions, we can shift into a more open and dignified state.

A key principle in *Leadership Embodiment* is “energy follows attention.” Any parent who needs to get the kids past the candy rack in the supermarket knows this.

## Exercise

As leaders, we can shift our attention by doing a quick *centering*:

1. **Inhale** up along your spine, sense your dignity. **Slow exhale** down, think of someone who makes you smile.
2. **Sense** the space in front and behind you, to the left and the right. How large is your presence right now – a few inches, a yard, or does it fill the entire room?
3. **Ask yourself** “What would it be like if there were just a little more confidence in my body (or clarity, lightness, kindness, humor)?” You decide which quality you want to activate, and it works best if you stay with the same quality for 100 days.

The exercise takes 15 seconds. Wendy Palmer calls it a lizard push-up and it is easily practiced 30 to 40 times a day: when entering a meeting, getting into the car, standing in the elevator, or waiting in line. The possibilities are endless, and you can even do it without other people being aware of it. In time, however, what they will notice is that you have become more open, adaptive and creative.

### The new frontier

I have worked with senior executives for 25 years and rarely seen a highly regarded leader “lose it.” Yet their daily lives are filled with complex challenges and countless surprises. These leaders have simply learned to let go of their frustrations and move on.

Physical intelligence is the new frontier. It is where we can expand our awareness, enter a state of flow, and discover endless possibility and potential.

Partnering with our bodies is profoundly interesting and thrilling. And it works.

