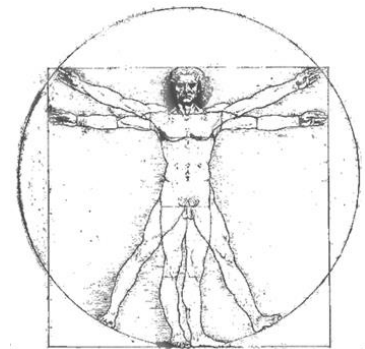


## Embodiment in Coaching

### Somatic Intelligence:

# Working with and through the Body-Mind

*Head, heart and guts are in intimate relationship and everything we do shows up in the body. In this article, I explore how we can learn to operate as an integrated whole. It was first published by Association for Coaching in Coaching Perspectives magazine October 2016.*



Our thinking and emotions are not 'out of body experiences,' but we do seem to have lost touch with what is happening inside us. The body is more than something we carry around, feed, perhaps exercise and park overnight. The somatic field in coaching brings the body into the room alongside the mind, and emotional intelligence as an equal and collaborative partner for influence and change. Generally speaking, where the body has been considered it has more often been 'at effect' rather than 'at cause'. However, the body not only reflects our psycho-emotional patterns; it also influences them.

Evolutionary imperatives are stored in our bodies. So is our personal history, which shows up in muscle tone, posture, movement patterns and energy flow, all of which orientate us (prejudice us) to certain perceptions, actions and reactions. Without awareness and attention, the bodies we are can become our future.

Neuroscience has helped us technically to understand the process of our mind and neurology. Research shows that the majority of our behaviours are not cognitively and consciously controlled, but are rather a function of our instinctive neurology and habitual, learned patterns fired into action before we are consciously aware of them. The triune brain model and Polyvagal Theory of Stephen Porges<sup>1</sup> shows that we are hardwired to be alert to danger and to react to threat by fighting, fleeing, freezing, or folding, or by seeking safety through social engagement if available.

In response to fear and stress we typically, one way or another, contract and separate ourselves from others. The trouble is, we forget or lack the awareness to release that contraction. It stays in the body and becomes a pattern impacting on bodily function and psychological orientation. We maintain tension in the system and become less attuned and sensitive to signals inside and out. By contrast you might have seen a passenger with their dog on the London Underground: as they get off the dog shakes itself, releasing the stress held in their system. Like the dog we need to do a whole lot of shaking or its equivalent in a context of persistent low-grade stressors.

How do we healthily manage the stressors of the modern world, bring our best selves, and leverage the best of our biological inheritance to our daily living? Somatic work in its best, integrated forms provides a technology, philosophy and practices to explore our personal and integrated answers to those questions.

We need to get our head, heart and hara (body centre in Japanese) working together and aligned. In our life's journey we develop strategies for survival that frequently put these at odds with each other, not intentionally but as a consequence of the best solutions we could come up with at the time. Repeated over a lifetime they become habitual patterns of our psycho-emotional-physical world

This is the territory of the Leadership Embodiment (LE) work of Wendy Palmer, which in *The Beyond Partnership* we incorporate with other influences under the frame of Somatic Intelligence. LE makes a simple distinction between Personality and Centre. Personality seeks to manage the environment to create the security it needs. It references the external world with our head seeking control, our heart approval, and our gut safety. As a process it is highly energy consuming. In contrast, Centre references neither self alone nor other, but is in relationship. Being Centred is a state of equanimity and alignment: our sense of 'okayness' is inherent, not dependent on context – and therefore requires less energy to maintain. This helps us move beyond fight/ flight and keep the pathways to our prefrontal cortex clearer. It is not dissimilar to that feeling of being 'in the zone.' 'Coming from Centre' is, however, contrary to our typical functioning – it must be learned.

LE work uses partner activities as simulators of life's stressors and challenges set within various scenarios. We discover for example our non-verbal expression as a leader or follower in different contexts. Engaging the body, we move beyond ideas into physically felt experience. Participants are invited to work with the presupposition that how the body responds will be a reflection of their Personality patterns in response to life stressors. We cannot deny what the body has just done: the body does not lie.

Activities are designed to identify our default psycho-emotional patterns under pressure, i.e. our Personality at work, which may or may not be fit for purpose, and then to learn how to meet those same pressures from a place of Centre initiated primarily through reorganising the body. We learn how to speak up in the face of resistance, listen without taking it personally and generally organise ourselves to meet well whatever or whoever is in front of us.

The practices of LE and somatic intelligence are about creating the awareness and responsive capacity to override, rather than succumb to, our default patterning and biological inheritance, when it serves us to do so. Under threat and pressure, we naturally put up a boundary and narrow our vision. The issue is how quickly we can get back to Centre.

LE is not about stress reduction (we are actually programmed to deal with stress), but about using stress, and learning how to turn pressure into a resource: how to get the cortisol, oxytocin and testosterone hormonal mix right to act from resilience through working with the breath and posture.

Cortisol supports fight-or-flight and triggers contraction in the muscles while also reducing access to our higher order thinking, useful when the need is for a quick reaction without conscious deliberation. Cortisol's presence in the body is meant to be short term, but with today's persistent pressures, patterns of muscle tightness and inadequate attention to recovery, it is regularly generated and

held in the system. Over time these levels of cortisol weaken the immune system. While contracting the flexor muscles for more than a minute stimulates cortisol production, activating extensor muscles raises testosterone, the hormone that opens us to big-picture thinking, greater confidence and more tolerance for risk-taking. The other key hormone in the mix is oxytocin. Released through felt connection to another it generates a sense of care and relatedness. In working with the body LE deliberately induces hormonal shifts for positive outcomes.

Our resilience and capacity to be at our best under pressure can be supported by being open in our posture, increasing our sense of length, softening the front of our body (a gentle smile helps), and working with the breath to bring our autonomic nervous system into balance.

Working with the body offers short cuts and quick wins to shifting the quality of one's thinking and emotional states. When we are under stress our unconscious habits will usually win out. If the body is not 'online', the mind will not sustain its intent. Willpower is a limited and highly energy consuming faculty.

Somatic Intelligence is about helping clients present their strength and confidence combined with warmth and compassion and a clear perception from their Centre – all with a certain ease. It is about learning to shift beyond our habit of organising ourselves around what is resisting us. As one person described it, 'It is connecting to our most vital source of knowing.'

Some key principles and intentions of Somatic Intelligence:

- Connect to Centre
- Balance and equanimity
- Stay open and inclusive in the face of pressure
- Listen without taking it personally
- Speak your truth with clarity and without aggression or attachment
- Be with what is without judgement
- Extend and include, not contract and separate
- Alignment of head, heart and hara (gut) – cognition, emotions, intuition and instinct.
- Transparency
- Comfortable with not knowing, remaining balanced and open, listening to the signals
- Working with patterns and emergence, not fixing solutions from the start

Please note: these are processes, not final states. The practice is learning how to re-find Centre and the other qualities quickly, when we need to.

As coaches, somatic intelligence and its practices enable us to develop and support ourselves and our clients, to bring the body fully on board and be our best. As a somatic coach we use our own body-mind to coach as well as coaching the body-mind of the client.

A workshop participant asked for 1:1 coaching on an issue she had been working on for some time. I met her a couple of weeks later and listened to her story. Then she took a break to go to the loo. I watched her walk down the corridor and suddenly realised: there is her pattern! Her walk was contained, her arms barely moving. She was looking down and I saw a certain instability from everything held in tension. On her return I proposed we experiment with her walk, engaging her arms and focusing on her pelvis and hips. Her head raised and her self-presentation shifted noticeably. She said she felt her outline for the

first time and also felt a little bold and brazen. Even a small body shift can sometimes feel huge and challenging. We played with toning this down, and then related her experience to the issue at hand. Over the coming weeks she practised her walking and felt bigger, more 'grown up' and less dependent on other people. We continued to refine this and add other practices over further sessions to create choice in how she responded and greater resourceful freedom to step forward into the world as she wanted.

The internet and social media have grown our circle of concern and potentially also our circle of influence, although it can conversely feel as if this is diminishing. However, there is at least an increasing demand from the world, including the business world, for a greater appreciation of interrelationships, connectivity and sensitivity, and for a healthier expression of power. As coaches we need to learn how to engage the body alongside our mind and emotions, to have more discrimination, and to move to opening and including rather than contracting and separating – and help our clients do likewise. Greater connectivity and sensitivity to ourselves and our body-mind enables greater connectivity and sensitivity to others and to the dynamics and challenges of this complex world.

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