The Embodiment of Leadership

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and

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Chapter Twelve

From the Ground Up

Revisioning Sources and Methods of Leadership Development

Kathryn Goldman Schuyler

> The most powerful learning comes from bodily experience.
>
> *Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995, p. 239)*

Mindfulness plus my *Feldenkrais* practice with children and severely disabled people are prime sources of insight for understanding people, change, and leadership. From personal experience coaching corporate leaders, I have seen that leadership requires clarity, the capacity to learn from experience, resonance with people, persistence, and powerful action. In both organizational consulting and university teaching, I have been greatly nourished by two nontraditional sources of change. Mindfulness teaches me to listen, sense the fullness of the moment, and feel a sense of spaciousness that allows for new options. The Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Learning helps me notice how I move through life, vary how I approach tasks, and start from

I thank Dolores Ransom for her detailed feedback on this chapter. Her willingness to discuss the chapter on short notice, combined with her background in meditation and the Feldenkrais Method, as well as her ability to see clear lines of thought, made her comments invaluable.

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where I am, assuming no fixed limits to learning. Both practices remind me to be kind and open. Both speak explicitly about the value of the *ground*, yet they refer to two different kinds of ground. In the world of somatic learning, we speak of the physical ground, and gravity is one of our main teachers. During the movement sequences, our students often lie on the ground. In Buddhism, the ground refers to the foundation of being, our *buddha nature*, an aspect of ourselves that is already perfect and always present. It is the seed within all sentient beings that connects them with one another and with life, and makes enlightenment a possibility. When people are in touch with gravity and the ground of their being, it can be seen in the way they walk and the way they look in your eyes. Leaders who are grounded and nourished by the ground in this way would bring new options to politics, corporations, and society.

I have discovered that embodied learning can be incorporated into leadership development to enable radical simplicity, authenticity, and openness to innovation. This provides a rich and solid foundation for people to use themselves in new ways as leaders and brings wisdom to their leadership, so they can move through life powerfully and compassionately, whether in a corporate or a political role.

This chapter presents the theoretical foundations of the Feldenkrais Method and Tibetan Buddhism, invites readers to pause and sense themselves, presents examples, and explores implications for leadership.

Theoretical Foundations

The Feldenkrais Method

The Feldenkrais Method involves processes analogous to those that happen naturally in healthy infants when they are learning to function in the world (Feldenkrais, 1949, 1972). They learn

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through movement that changes their brains, creating more interconnections (Begley, 2007; Doidge, 2007). Described by thought leaders including Karl Pribram and Margaret Mead as a genius (as quoted in Fox, 1978), physicist and engineer Moshe Feldenkrais discovered how to use touch and what he called "non-habitual" movement patterns to generate change. From his understanding of physics and the martial arts, he saw and was able to teach people how to distribute movement throughout the body so that the skeleton bears one's weight and the spine and ribs move more freely. When no part of the structure has to consistently work harder than the rest, ordinary movements take on the power and grace of a martial art. Feldenkrais (1949, 1972, 1977) combined these core insights with a profound understanding of the human nervous system and the function of the brain. Earlier than most scientists, he recognized that the physical bases of learning are interdependent with the other aspects of a person: how he or she feels, what he or she senses and notices, and what he or she wants to accomplish in life (1949, 1979, 1981). Feldenkrais (1979) included far more than the physical in his understanding of the impact of his method; in exploring the meaning of *good health*, he wrote, "A healthy person is one who can live his unavowed dreams fully" (p. 27).

The Feldenkrais Method has two aspects. Individual sessions are designed specifically for each student; the practitioner gently moves the student, while the student senses how to allow movement to become effortless. In group lessons, called "Awareness Through Movement," the practitioner guides participants through one of many hundreds of movement sequences that train the brain (and body) to move more effectively and powerfully with as little effort as possible. Both aspects of the method enhance the ability to bring awareness to actions in ways that carry over into daily life activities.

Students are encouraged to experiment and attend to the *way* that they move. Rather than focus on *what* they do or the out-

come, they are asked to notice *how* they approach a given task and where they hold on and use force unnecessarily. Such holding on reduces the fluidity and power of all actions. By starting with movements that are similar to those of infants (like lifting one's head while on one's stomach or rolling over) and progressing through increasingly complex and varied movement patterns, a learning process unfolds that taps into the inherent plasticity of the brain (Reese, n.d.). Practitioners are trained by doing such movements themselves for years, in order to recognize subtle shifts in the quality of movement that are imperceptible to most people. An effective practitioner becomes an extension of the student's own proprioceptive system. We convey ease and presence nonverbally through touch and our own movements when we are in contact with the learner, thereby allowing students to experience themselves "through" us. Our contact extends the sensitivity of the student's own nervous system.

I was drawn to this method because Moshe Feldenkrais, my teacher, emphasized that it addressed the mind and the self, not just "pushing bodies around." He approached the body as a physical representation of something less tangible that we were trying to touch—perhaps the mind, perhaps the self. From Feldenkrais, I learned to experience and observe movement as a way of accessing something more. Mental and cognitive functioning, emotions, and all of the deeper structures of the self are literally "embodied" in the way we hold ourselves and move through life. The method develops the capacity to move smoothly, without hesitation, retaining the ability to reverse the action, so that a person is able to meet whatever occurs. This yields a combination of strength and fluidity that is both mental and physical.

Mindfulness and Dzogchen

Mindfulness meditation practices have existed for thousands of years and were developed to lead to freedom from absorption

in everyday cares. Research on mindfulness suggests its potential importance for leaders (Baron & Cayer, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009; Weick & Putnam, 2006; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006). Personal statements about their meditation practice by globally respected social scientists Peter Senge (2012) and Margaret Wheatley (2012) vividly described how they have found it important in their lives. These methods can substantially enrich leadership education to develop resonant leadership, simplicity of action and vision, authenticity, and a rich cognitive map of life (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Fisher, Rooke, & Torbert, 2000; George, 2003, 2007; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2004; Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1999).

To date, most outcome research on mindfulness and meditation is based on two traditions: Theravada practices from South Asia, which are the basis of the trainings introduced in health care by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2005), and Transcendental Meditation, which was brought to the United States by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the 1970s. Instead, I focus here on *Dzogchen*, a form of meditation that is often called *nonmeditation*: it involves moving beyond the use of any particular methods or techniques and being fully present, without reflecting on, judging, or reacting to whatever is occurring. It is regarded by many as the highest form of meditation (The Dalai Lama, 2007; Ray, 2002; Shabkar Tsokdrug Rangdröl, 18th century/1993, 18th century/1994; Sogyal Rinpoche, 1993).

Mindfulness meditation involves being quiet and attending to any object of consciousness. People are taught to begin with mindfulness of the body, particularly of breathing, but anything can be used as a focus of concentration: sounds, physical objects, and even thoughts. The goal is to steady the mind, which has been compared by many to a wild horse that dashes about in all directions and to a lively monkey (Mingyur Rinpoche, 2007; Patrul Rinpoche, 1800s/1998). The practice of mindfulness generates

steadiness and emotional resilience. It is not intended only to generate calm, but primarily to develop the capacity to be fully present and alert, simultaneously relaxed and awake. This is comparable to the Feldenkrais notion of being ready and able to move in any direction with ease, instead of pushing hard or contracting under stress.

In the Tibetan traditions, Buddhist practice incorporates study of the underlying concepts and *view* (or philosophy of life) with practice (Goldman Schuyler, 2012; Ray, 2002; Sogyal Rinpoche, 1993). What we in the West call *meditation*, the Tibetans regard as *familiarization* with the workings of one's mind (Sogyal Rinpoche, 1993). In traditional Tibetan Buddhist education, years are spent training the mind, appreciating the importance of developing an ethic of compassion toward all beings, and understanding the interdependence and impermanence of all that seems so concrete and materially real in the world. In addition, meditation practice in the Buddhist tradition rigorously trains one to be alert and at ease. Being present (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004) is essential in both modes of working with people.

Making It Real: Accessing Ourselves Through Movement and Attention

Sit for a moment before questioning the notion that we can learn about leadership from infants, children, and the disabled. Sense yourself present. Notice your weight in the chair, how you feel as you breathe, what you see without trying to see anything in particular. Take a few breaths and simply be. Listen. . . . Are birds singing? Children laughing? Does the heat make a soft background hum? Are there traffic sounds or sirens? What is the farthest sound you hear? Do you sense yourself and hear and see all at the same time, or are you aware of each in sequence? How is your mind as you try this experiment? Alert? Peaceful? Restless?

Brief stories about "Jenny" and "Paul" (pseudonyms) suggest how working with children and disabled adults can be relevant to leadership development. After these vignettes, I'll describe the applications and implications of these concepts.

Jenny

Jenny is a four-year-old whose mom initially brought her for Feldenkrais lessons because Jenny was staying awake at night. After a few lessons, she began to sleep well. It seems quite likely that when she is aware and comfortable, it is easier for her to sleep at night. This little girl is vibrant, full of life, and high strung. Her body and mind are lively, leaping constantly. Adults are expected to lie quietly on the table as the practitioner touches and moves them gently, but not children.

With children, most of the time learning has to be a game. Since Jenny wanted to move all over the table, I created a game that caused her to pay attention to herself as she did what she wanted to do. In other words, I applied a basic principle: seeking what interests the student. She wanted to scramble and wiggle on her back away from me to the other end of the table. I played with her so that it became a game. Even though it wasn't originally what she wanted, she was willing to allow it to become "her game." First I let her just move around in her own way. Then I said, "Now do it very slowly" in a slow and quiet manner. She'd say "No!" and I'd say, "Oh come on. Do it slowly." So she did the same movement somewhat slowly. I said, "That's wonderful! Now do it slowly and quietly." Gradually, she became willing to do it slowly and quietly. Then I pulled her back to me, slowly and quietly. Then I'd say, "Now go fast and noisy," knowing that she liked this best. Then, "Go medium and noisy." And she'd go at a medium pace, making lots of noise. I varied the two elements: the speed and the amount of noise she made. It was not easy for her to move slowly and quietly, and she didn't want

to move quickly and quietly. Gradually by playing the game, she developed the ability to modulate the speed at which she moved down the table and the way that she wiggled and whether she made noise or not.

For adults, Moshe Feldenkrais created a vast number of movement variations that support people in moving in *non-habitual* ways. They are like a musician's finger exercises for the whole self: they help people discover variations they never thought of in how to move, so as to be fluid and creative in their lives. The movements we use with adults are based on movements people do naturally in infancy. In developing lessons for children, I have to find a way to draw on the principles that I know and apply them in the moment, building on what they want to do.

Does embodied learning help one change one's relationship to how one moves through the day and how one thinks and feels? Moshe Feldenkrais said yes, definitely. Does the student need to understand how it works, cognitively, as we might teach in a graduate program? Not at all; we work with infants and children who have neither the ability to learn nor the interest in learning that way. Being able to apply principles about learning and change in the moment, as needed, rather than adhering to a preestablished sequence of steps, is a skill that is fundamental for leadership development.

Paul

Paul is a man of about thirty-five years old who has used a wheelchair his whole life, with movement and speech limitations caused by cerebral palsy. Very slim with intelligent eyes, he talks by responding to questions with movements of his eyes. He looks up to mean yes, down to mean no. The smile or laughter in his eyes is palpable. He used to be able to drive his own electronic wheelchair, but now he is limited to pressing a lever that adjusts the tilt of his chair.

I began the lesson by asking him, "How are you doing, Paul? How are your arms? Any pain?" He quickly indicated no. The last time I had given him a lesson, he had also indicated that he was not in pain. That was a major shift. These were the first times in six months that he had indicated that he had no pain in his arms or his back!

What led to a reduction in pain? I had taught him to imagine doing movements, to picture color in different parts of his body, and to have imaginary conversations between (for example) the hand that felt good and the hand that didn't feel good. The hand that feels poorly can "tell" the hand that feels well how it feels, and that hand can be compassionate to the part of one's self that doesn't feel so well. The "better" hand can "listen" to what the other hand is "saying" about what's tough in being a hand in pain, or what it understands about life from being a hand in pain.

We might imagine a conversation where one arm says, "Oh, I feel so much more ease now! This is like the way I feel when I'm in the park, and it's a sunny day, and the breeze is blowing." And the other arm might say, "You do? How amazing! I feel like a rainy day—all tight and tense." Most students can make a part of themselves that feels good feel the same way as a part that is suffering. This seems backward, since all wish to feel good and well, but it is easier to copy feeling badly than to copy feeling well. By feeling ease of movement in one place, our nervous system (with its wonderfully smart and well-wired connections) can transfer that learning to other places. It's much easier for whatever part of ourselves that is feeling well to learn, than it is for parts that are uncomfortable, tight, or tense. So instead of asking Paul in his imaginary conversation to have the arm that's feeling more pain move like the one that moves easily, I'll ask him to imagine the one that moves more easily becoming like the more limited arm. I'll also use touch to bring increased awareness to various places, combining my touch and Paul's imagination.

You can experience such learning yourself. Are you sitting turned in one direction or leaning on one arm? Is your head cocked to the right or left? Notice how you're sitting right now. Now see whether you can sit in the mirror image of yourself. Notice how your weight is as you sit, how the pressure is on your feet, whether you're leaning with your upper body. Is there a twist or a tilt through your torso? Is one ear closer to one shoulder than the other? Where are you looking? Get a sense of the whole of your body as if you were sketching it. Once you have a clear sketch, switch to a mirror image. Many readers will discover that it is not easy to notice such details, and that if they can, it is even harder to replicate them precisely in the other direction. To replicate them approximately is relatively simple, but to do so precisely is not easy. You have probably been sitting, leaning, moving, twisting, walking, and distributing your weight in the same way for years. These patterns of movement are engraved in our bones, our nervous systems, and our tissues at very deep levels, and we do not even know it.

Facilitating embodied learning in such very different students has helped me to quickly see what is needed in a difficult or unexpected moment, to significantly adapt my style of relating to people from one person to the next, and to find ways to assess whether change is taking place while it is almost imperceptible. All of these skills are relevant for leaders, since they need to adapt to change; take action very quickly or quite slowly, as appropriate; modify their actions and communications to fit the varied people in their organization; and be adept at listening deeply before taking action. For me, being able to appreciate and learn from a child like Jenny and a man like Paul develops capacities useful for interacting effectively with marketing, engineering, R&D, manufacturing, and all the diverse types of people in an organization. Applying Feldenkrais principles to leadership after experiencing them creates a new view of leadership.

Implications: How Can Recognizing *Wisdom Mind* and Seeing the Moving Body as a Source of Knowledge Enhance the Study and Practice of Leadership?

In all parts of the world today, leadership at any level of business or government is challenging. The situations to be understood and managed are extraordinarily complex, with many forces that drive leaders toward overemotionality and fear. People are cynical about their leaders; many use leadership to accumulate wealth or power. Wisdom teachings provide a countervailing force that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life. These teachings say that all beings have the same nature as the buddhas, but that we do not recognize this and thereby drift into a sense of separation from one another and then fear. This negative spiral accelerates. We quickly move from vague feelings of distance, to fear, hostility, and anger, finally seeing others as enemies. By not recognizing our underlying goodness, we have no contact with the "ease and comfort of our beautiful, spacious, minds" (The Dalai Lama, 2007; Samantabadra, n.d.), and instead, "getting and spending, we lay waste our powers" and "give our hearts away," as Wordsworth (1806) wrote two centuries ago.

The 14th Dalai Lama as an Example

The 14th Dalai Lama can be seen as an example of the way that Tibetan wisdom traditions contribute to exceptional leadership. Although he said of himself, "I am no one special; I am just a human being," he is a rare leader who has influenced the heads of many nations (The Dalai Lama & Stril-Rever, 2010, p. 7). As described by Thupten Jinpa (2012), his twenty-five-year translator, who knows him well and who has experienced both the Tibetan and Western doctoral levels of education, the 14th Dalai Lama has demonstrated the same principles and advocated consistent policies for decades. Jinpa's analysis of

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the Dalai Lama as a global leader shows the importance of four main themes: (1) his embodiment of compassion, (2) his understanding of the interdependence of all things as central to both Buddhist thought and practical leadership, (3) his longtime commitment to secular ethics as being critical for the West, and (4) his humility and focus on "self-examination" by leaders—things often neglected by the powerful. The Dalai Lama's stands for interdependence, the "philosophical cornerstone of the Dalai Lama's worldview" (p. 38), compassion, peace, and an ongoing dialogue between Buddhism and advanced scientists have been sustained for more than thirty years. People experience him as embodying what he advocates: he not only speaks about the equality of all beings, but manifests a warmth and closeness to people that are present regardless of people's status (Jinpa, 2012).

Jinpa (2012) attributes the Dalai Lama's leadership style and qualities to a combination of the "Tibetan cultural upbringing" and his education. He emphasizes that Tibetan classical education includes contemplative practices that integrate philosophical perspectives and "*embody* . . . them in one's very person" (p. 43, italics added), as contrasted with Western education, which emphasizes "the rational part of the brain and acquisition of knowledge and information" (p. 44). This insight is critical for revitalizing executive development. Western education can retain its excellence in conveying cognitive knowledge and become stronger by enriching what it offers with regard to contemplation, awareness, and presence.

The Feldenkrais Method and Leadership Development

I have drawn upon the Feldenkrais Method as an underlying "organizing principle" for my consulting and have taught it as an approach to change in workshops for managers and university students. It can be described in terms of the following four

principles that students have appreciated and incorporated into their lives.

1. *Notice differences*. To increase the possibility of learning, reduce effort to a minimum so there is more chance of noticing slight changes. Introduce variation, which also increases the likelihood of noticing differences. Introduce choice: Feldenkrais said often that choice means having three options; when possible, seek at least three different ways to approach a task or challenge.
2. *Be awake to what is happening*. Begin where you are, creating small steps in the direction you wish to go. Experiment. Play. Notice what effects come from different attempts.
3. *Use your body and movement as a source of learning*. Notice what moves easily. See how small, varied movements can lead to greater ease and more powerful action. Instead of trying to "hold on" to what you have learned, let it go; recreate it again and again.
4. *Pay attention to what draws your interest*. Focus on places where learning and change are possible rather than on the problem. Sometimes this will be at the core of the system, sometimes at the periphery. Instead of putting pressure on yourself and others, know that learning occurs through a series of successive approximations.

When I applied this approach to coaching a manager about her career, she was able to eliminate her back pain, become (in her experience of herself) easier to be with, and gain entirely new perspectives on herself as a worker (Goldman Schuyler, 2007). She realized that she had been forcing herself to follow others' patterns and rhythms, and that she worked much more powerfully and creatively when she got in touch with herself and worked in accord with her own natural rhythms. She enjoyed

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working in passionate bursts of activity. We saw that this did not fit with industrial society's norms, yet enabled her to be her most creative self.

There were clear outcomes in a course entitled "The Art of Change: Somatic Awareness and Systems Thinking" that I developed and taught in two graduate schools. I introduced Feldenkrais movement sequences as a means to assist the students in bringing change to their work lives. After they experienced a few sequences, they discussed the principles and applied them to personal change projects (Goldman Schuyler, 2003). Students found that the process of paying more attention to themselves via these intricate, structured movements produced insights about how to improve other parts of their lives. Their papers reported on changes in areas ranging from a mother's relationship with her five-year-old daughter to the way the students approached pressure and leadership at work.

I have been asked whether it was the movement, discussions, reading, or personal project planning that made the difference. I believe that it was the combination that enabled students to experience such broad impact. The movements took them out of established habits, the reading helped them think about the implications of what they were experiencing, and the personal project invited them to bring new patterns to their actions. These workshops were life changing because the students carried awareness from the workshop sessions into their lives.

Conclusion

Both Buddhist meditation and Feldenkrais offer subtle methods for being aware, but their views of the body and its importance differ, as does the way they address relating to humanity. I compare them here to sharpen our thinking about how embodiment includes a person's connection to the ground, to share my experiences with the way that apparently unrelated ways of developing

awareness can be more similar than they appear, and to encourage leaders to incorporate such refined and rigorous self-training in their development.

Some forms of Buddhist meditation regard the body as a "thing" that carries us around and can be discarded; a *piece of wood* is even used at times as a metaphor. From my perspective, both Dzogchen and the Feldenkrais Method approach the body as a foundation for being aware and for noticing differences, and as something to appreciate. Both include methods for shaping one's state of mind through somatic methods, such as sensing the body in movement or the movement within stillness (for example, breathing). Both draw students' attention to the rich, interdependent nature of actions, thought, and sensing, and to the impermanence and fluidity of life. *Embodiment* is not simply material and physical in either practice: it is something that one senses in itself and draws on to access the mind. Both practices nourish a person in being fully present to the body, life, other beings, and the world. Both train a person to be simultaneously at ease and alert.

They differ most in their views of what *mind* is, which is not a simple question in either domain. Feldenkrais focused on the mind and body in action; he discouraged people from speaking abstractly about the mind, out of the context of the body. Dzogchen points to a notion of mind that extends far beyond an individual person and connects with the continuity of being. While the underlying assumptions may differ, both offer highly refined methods for functioning in the world with awareness. Despite these parallels, there is an important distinction between the ways each views the *ground*, as pointed out at the start of the chapter. Relating to the ground is core for each body of practice, but they relate to different grounds.

For Dzogchen practitioners, the *ground* is the ground of our being that is beyond the rational, analytical mind's comprehension. The ground is the fundamental *nature of mind* or *buddha nature* that is in all sentient beings and has been described as

being like the sky, yet knowing and luminous. In this context, *wisdom* refers to a deep appreciation of the way that nothing is fixed or certain or permanent, which is often described by the term *emptiness* in English. A wise person moves through life with this understanding, combined with an inevitable compassion for all beings who do not yet see this and therefore suffer. The purpose of Dzogchen practice is to live with such awareness and help others to do the same (The Dalai Lama, 2007; Shabkar Tsokdrug Rangdröl, 18th century/1994; Sogyal Rinpoche, 1993; Tsoknyi Rinpoche & Swanson, 2012; Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, 1999/2004, 2006).

The realm of the Feldenkrais Method is more concrete, although Feldenkrais himself drew his understanding not only from engineering, physics, and the martial art of judo, but also from his upbringing, which was steeped in esoteric Judaism (Kaetz, 2007). In one book, he used a Tibetan story to help people grasp what he perceived about the relationship of the mind, body, and emotions (Feldenkrais, 1972, p. 54) and at least once in a major training program for new practitioners described the work itself as "practical loving" (Amherst Professional Training program, personal communication, 1980). However, the method itself focuses on developing sensitivity to oneself as a moving, sensing material person and the capacity to vary and learn from one's actions. Students literally lie on the ground and learn to roll, almost as babies do. The actual material ground becomes one's friend. The practitioner's trained sensitivity and fluidity become a means of learning for the student, and practitioners become so attuned to others that a room full of people can roll across the floor in unison without verbal communication. With no directions, they move together, sensing when to speed up or slow down, so as not to roll into one another. When practiced with such simultaneous awareness of oneself and others, the Feldenkrais Method becomes a compassion meditation in action. The "line" between meditation and Feldenkrais disappears.

Effective leaders move quickly, incorporating vast bodies of knowledge into clear actions. Their actions need to be crisp and definitive, yet sourced by deep listening to those they lead and the broader environment. They need to act on their own, yet help others to move together as one body. As stated initially, powerful leadership requires simplicity of action and vision, authenticity, and a rich cognitive map of life. All of these are enhanced by mindfulness, and authentic presence is hard to imagine without living in an embodied way. Mindfulness enables one to be in touch with the ground of one's being, while Feldenkrais Awareness Through Movement brings the grounded playfulness of a child into the adult sensibilities of a leader. Both are powerful, rigorous methods for bringing embodiment into consciousness and action.

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