



The Embodied Leadership





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Winning from Within

The theme I'm going to explore in this article is the importance of 'self-efficacy' for those who play an Executive role in an organization and how it can be triggered by the conscious use of our nervous system.

Ariel Fox, entrepreneur and author of the best seller 'Winning from within', after working for years at the highest levels on the development of negotiation skills (Harvard), came to this conclusion: for people in key positions in organizations, the real issue is not having a certain competence – which in any case can be acquired. The crucial ability is to remain in a state of effectiveness that allows us to get the maximum result from those skills we already have.

When a CEO is on stage, speaking in front of his stakeholders, he will not want the tension to manifest itself in excessive sweating, mental emptiness or anything else that could negatively affect his presentation; he wants to be engaging and get straight to people's gut, heart and head. He knows perfectly how to do it. He has tried that presentation countless times; he knows how to use his voice and what words to say. But the neurophysiological state can divert the brain to a state of partial or total ineffectiveness. When Fox talks about 'Winning from within' that's what she's referring to.

The body's way to effective leadership

As in the example of the public presentation, in certain situations, it is our neurophysiological state that undermines our performance. And we all know that it is not easy to change the mind (emotional states) through the mind.

When, for example, we are distracted and do not concentrate on an important task, it's not enough to try to force ourselves to regain concentration and increase our motivation. In the same way, a state of anxiety is not reduced by convincing oneself to stay calm. Instead, it is through the conscious use of our body that we can positively and directly influence our physiological states.



It's not just becoming more effective in a critical moment: I will also try to show you how this set of somatic tools can help us to sink back to our real self and how this return to our body genius has a very concrete, no wee-woo, practical effect. Of course, when a business client brings an issue, we could work on it just at a surface level through coaching techniques. But I'd say, based on my practice, that working with the body allows us to face those same problems at a much deeper level and promote a more enriching journey of achievements.

In the following paragraphs, I will give a series of examples taken mainly from two sources: on the one hand, the **IBP (Integrating Body-Mind Potential)** methodology based on J.L. Rosenberg's work and developed in our counseling institute, and, on the other, the most recent neuroscientific discoveries that confirm the intuitions of the great scientist and expand them with very useful practical insights.



Many somatic techniques can be explained well only in presence, showing them by example, and it's not easy to describe them verbally. For this reason, I have chosen only a few, according to the criteria of simplicity and immediacy of the results that can be obtained. All of my clients have something in common: they don't have time for any add-ons in their busy daily schedules. Therefore, I usually teach them what they can do while they're doing other things.

Using the breath to influence the nervous system

I will start with something which is pretty well-known but we'll go a little deeper into it.

The breath is considered the gateway between our volition and our autonomic processes (those not directly controllable by us – for example, we cannot decide to deliberately increase our adrenaline level or accelerate the heartbeat). If reading this you have already imagined long sessions of Pranayama cross-legged, perhaps you'll be surprised.



You may try this out: inhale completely and when you feel full of air, inhale further by bringing another fraction of air into your lungs; then exhale for a long time, calmly, without pushing your breath; if you can – if you are not surrounded by other people who may be alarmed by your bizarre behavior – utter a sound: “Ahhhhhhh”, letting it vibrate in your chest. This voluntary sigh is enough to significantly reduce the state of hyperactivation (sympathetic) of your nervous system. There are moments when you feel overloaded and your effectiveness depends on reducing that excess tension. So you can use this tool and just breathe calmly, with the exhale longer than the inhale, for a while after that.

There are other times when your basic state may be too relaxed, distracted, or discharged, compared to the task. In this case, the breathing you can adopt is the accelerated one. You can quickly inhale a large amount of air even with your mouth open and release it just as quickly.

The accelerated breathing increases the production of adrenaline and, by activating the sympathetic nervous system (in a controlled way, without reaching a state of fight or flight), increases the state of alertness, focus, and orientation to a goal. Try 5 accelerated breaths and possibly add more if you feel you need them. There is no physiological state that is always valid. While there are tasks that require focus, others – a problem-solving activity, the generation of a new idea, the empathic relationship with someone – require greater activation of the so-called parasympathetic system; that is, they require you to relax.

The fact of using an accelerated breath or a calming breath with long exhalations certainly depends on the situation we want to dive into and also on the state we find ourselves in. In the public speaking situation, if we feel a very high level of tension when we go on stage, we should do something to reduce it. I mentioned long exhalations but we can also imagine shaking the body for a few minutes, hopping on our feet and so on if the tension to be released is very high.



If we are experienced speakers and that situation is very comfortable, maybe we are even a little bored or sleepy, we should try to load ourselves a little with some accelerated breaths in order to have the right energy to convey our message to the listeners.

Using your eyes

Some recent neuroscientific research studies offer very interesting confirmations on the use of the eyes to produce similar effects. In particular, when we focus our gaze on a spot, we tend to increase our sympathetic activation which increases our ability to concentrate, to focus, and to be oriented towards a goal. We know that in order to achieve our objectives, it is not enough to write a list, it is necessary to mobilize physically and intellectually towards them in the same way a gazelle must move to reach the stream.

This is not just a random example: the internal stimulus of thirst tends to trigger those neurophysiological conditions (neuromodulators such as dopamine and epinephrine) that serve to push the animal towards the satisfaction of the need. As we know, many work activities do not trigger this irresistible drive to action on their own. For example, we have just taken a break and would gladly be on break again. If at that point we have to focus on an important goal, we can spend a few minutes focusing our eyes on a target near us. This pure mechanical exercise produces neuromodulators that can support the effect of a double coffee.

This automatic mechanism explains the stress experienced on a physical level by those who are busy for many hours staring at a screen. The look, fortunately, can also be used to reduce tension and increase relaxation. The psychotherapist Shapiro discovered this empirically when she realized that, thinking of a traumatic event in her past while walking in the University Park, she felt the emotional load lightened. In fact, walking in an open space, in addition to bringing other benefits, is characterized by an unconscious oscillatory movement of the eye.



If you can't take a walk in the park or by the sea, from your office window you can still look towards the horizon by defocusing your gaze and this will induce relaxation on a neurophysiological level.

Using your whole body

Sometimes the level of activation is really excessive and is, perhaps, the result of a prolonged series of stressful stimuli. In these cases, it can be useful to release tension using not only the breath and the eyes. Shaking your body or stretching your muscles is an example of what you can do.

Our work contexts are often experienced by our neurophysiological apparatus as a jungle full of threatening stimuli to which we respond unconsciously by preparing our body to defend itself: the muscles are shortened, ready to snap.

Unlike the jungle, however, the muscles never (fortunately) discharge this potential; so we often arrive at the end of the day with our muscles contracted, and that, in a self-referential circularity, signals to our nerve centers that we are in a state of danger. If we want to increase our flexibility, reduce stress and improve the possibility of having a restful sleep, it may be a good idea to make stretches at the end of the working day.

A classic example of how the use of the body can greatly affect our personal effectiveness comes from Amy Cuddy's research: the subjects were asked to assume a 'dominant' position rather than a 'submissive' position. To understand, and feel what we mean, you can stand upright (not with your back curved) with your chest open and shoulders back, your arms relaxed but wide compared to the body; the gaze up. While an introverted and shy person in a state of depression tends to occupy a minimal place in space, the dominant position is visible in his expanded posture. In summary, what the researcher found was that just two minutes spent in dominant posture is enough to significantly increase the level of testosterone and reduce the level of cortisol. Translated: increase the drive to act and reduce perceived stress. A nice way to take care of oneself before an important and potentially anxiogenic event.



Using light and natural rhythms

Our body is in a constant relationship with the environment that surrounds it. I will give two very simple examples of how to use environmental stimuli to increase our well-being and effectiveness. We know, for example, that it is difficult to be in an optimal state (and therefore to be in our state of effectiveness) when our sleep is poor and we get up tired. From a neurophysiological point of view, the quality of sleep is regulated by neurotransmitters that are related to the quality of light. Waking up in the morning and allowing a large amount of light to enter through our pupils is critical to triggering the cortisol cycle that regulates the wakefulness cycle, and the energy available. Likewise, the vision of the yellow-blue light that characterizes the sunset is fundamental to signal to the body that the day is ending and thus stimulates endogenous melatonin. Therefore, to rebalance our wake-sleep cycle we should expose ourselves to natural light at least at these two times of the day. The light we are talking about is not the one that passes through the window or windshield of the car that can be up to 10 times less intense. We need to be outdoors for 10, 20, or 30 minutes (depending on the intensity of the light which obviously changes at different times of the year).

Another example of how we can take advantage of natural circadian rhythms is the way we place different types of activities. Because of the cortisol cycle and its knock-on effects, it is more effective for most people to perform analytical tasks in the morning and more generative tasks in the afternoon.

Long-term benefits of bodywork

The body exercises just presented certainly have the function of supporting a change that we need immediately. If you need to relax, take a sigh and a long exhale, defocus your gaze and do some muscle stretching. If you need more activation, take 5 accelerated breaths, focus your gaze on a target and rest your feet firmly on the ground. Easy.



The speed with which we can self-induce neurophysiological modifications through the body is precisely one of the reasons why they should be part of a Leader's toolkit. In addition to this, taking care of one's body part induces benefits in the medium to long term perhaps even more decisive. I would like to expose two of them:

Developing neurophysiological elasticity

A successful person is not always calm or always 'on the ball'. Effectiveness consists precisely in the ability of our inner system to calibrate itself according to external objectives and stimuli; now it relaxes more and then returns to activation. And it is precisely in this variety that its 'batteries' are recharged. If we were always in constant tension towards outcomes, we would end up devastated in the evening. The exercises listed here are also a great way to train this flexibility.

Our nervous system is designed to actively respond to changes but it happens that long periods of chronic stress lead it to be stuck in one state; what we might feel as internal sabotage, meaning that our body does not respond as we would like in times of need, in many cases, is nothing more than the consequence of this chronic stiffening: we are always in a state of hypervigilance or we are always tired.

If paying attention to what we feel and dedicating ourselves to a breathing or stretching practice were not confined to a Yoga session twice a week, but became a frequent and constant practice, we would provide a great contribution to our neurophysiological elasticity.

Hence the importance of so-called 'micro-practices'. Even very short moments, of less than a minute each, in which we focus on the sensations and according to what we need, we voluntarily induce a change. Maybe through 5 accelerated breaths or 5 relaxed ones. We can do this every time we take a break at work, or every time we finish a task before diving into the next.



The secret of micro-practices is that they can be done even twenty times a day, training our neurophysiological system to enhance its natural flexibility. In other words, the more you train it, the more your nervous system will tend to respond, autonomously, and flexibly when you'll most need it.

Increasing the 'speed limit'

An interesting concept introduced by J.L. Rosenberg in the late 70s is that of Speed Limit. He noticed in the course of working with his patients that for each one there was a sort of limit to the vitality they could afford. And this limit depended on the patterns received in one's growth. The father, not because he is bad, but because he is tired at the end of a work day, asks his son to stop jumping and making noises. Mom teaches through her submissive behavior that others come first, that you have to endure and say yes even if it brings you harm. The grandmother, through her example, shows her daughter how it is necessary for her to be ashamed of herself by blushing every time she says something. There are endless direct or indirect ways that have taught us not to ask more than this, not to express ourselves beyond that measure.

The practice of so-called charging breaths, in **IBP**, has this primary function: when you breathe quickly, as we have said, you increase the heart rate and stress hormones in the body. It increases the activation of the body; you can feel it in a tickle in the extremities or in an increase in heat blowing up to the face. When this stress becomes too high, your head may start to spin and you might feel lightheaded and dazed. Stop breathing just before that. And get used to being present in that higher activation state. Bring attention to the contact of your feet with the ground. The next time, you will find that your body has become a larger container, capable of accommodating a greater amount of activation. Instead of holding 'only' 5 breaths, you can take 10 or 15 before you get dizzy.

There is a whole current of research that in the last ten years has confirmed the beneficial role of localized (and voluntary) stress.



While chronic stress generates dramatic consequences at the level of our health, small voluntary stresses have the power to strengthen us at the level of the immune system as well as at the emotional level.

Stimuli such as freezing showers, rapid breathing and intermittent fasting have been studied by Dr. David Sinclair and many others, in their ability to stimulate us to become more resilient. Our immune system tends to fall asleep when everything goes too well (a large amount of food, always optimal temperature, etc.), becoming less reactive in defense against external and internal pathogens. On the contrary, subjecting it to small daily stresses tends to keep it active and to play a fundamental role in the prevention of diseases typical of aging. Starting the day by voluntarily taking us out of our psychosomatic comfort zone, for example with accelerated breathing, has precisely this function of training us to respond better to possible stressors of the day.

Rosenberg looked also at the other side of the coin: positive events, emotions like love, joy, compassion, and the experience of beauty, also have energy shaking our nervous system. And if we cannot bear a negative energy, what we commonly call 'stress', we cannot either contain a positive event that shakes us at the same level of energy. And if we have a speed limit, we will not be able to welcome and enjoy these positive experiences. On the contrary, we might even sabotage them. Sometimes when we can't achieve our goals, it's just a kind of self-sabotage to keep us low. These bodily practices are therefore, for Rosenberg, a way to overcome the conditioning we have received and reopen ourselves to our full potential.

Conclusion: mens sana in corpore sano

Although we come from a Cartesian culture that has always decreed the supremacy of the mind over the body as well as a split between the two, the truth is that the mind is rooted in the body. It is no coincidence that in recent years we began to talk of Embodied Leadership. Thus, our personal and professional effectiveness depends on the proper functioning of our body and nervous system.



If we guarantee restful sleep and good neurophysiological elasticity, accessing our resource states will be easier. On the contrary, if we have rested badly, if we are excessively tense or not very present, it will be difficult to be perceived as empathetic people when we relate to others, to be convincing and motivating when we present our ideas, to be focused when we are engaged in a specific task.

The tools presented here represent a small part of the repertoire from which we can draw, but they are a very effective way to respond to specific situations in critical times. We've seen the difference between charging breathing and classical long-exhalation breathing; we discovered the power of very tiny adjustments such as voluntary sigh, focusing or defocusing your gaze; we've appreciated how much can the stretching of a single muscle, like the psoas, do to interrupt the circle of stress; the impact that a body posture can have on neuromodulators and therefore on our drive, motivation and resistance to stressors; how much can be done just through our relationship towards sunlight. They all are easy-to-adopt behaviors.

And it's much more than that. Constant training through micro practices is a way to expand our boundaries and increase our flexibility and the ability to contain more vitality. Sometimes they may be mistaken for a way to treat our body as a machine, an object we can manipulate, but it's not the outlook from which IBP was born.

On the contrary, the aim is to unleash our true self, letting it flourish out of all the conditioning that we received. And being present in the body is just an additional but fundamental asset in that journey.

Actually, when I work with clients, I consider this body awareness a foundational first step; and I can say that it allows a much more deep work on the critical issues they are bringing to me, whether they are pure business issues, their self-efficacy or the relationship with other people in the organization.



It is evident that these tools can be useful in general to all people, regardless of the work they do. In my work, I decided to focus on executives simply because by achieving a positive change at their level I can likely influence tens, hundreds if not thousands of people.

Because a curious aspect that concerns our nervous system is that it is contagious. Just as a child, you were reassured not so much because your mother told you to be calm, but when you felt your mother's calm attitude; an empathetic leader, who is aware and in harmony with his environment, has the power to influence all the people around him and to let them flourish as well.


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