



The Body's Language of Leadership

Changing the Bureaucracy

by Camilla Rockwell

Ever attended a business workshop where you and a partner challenge each other with rubber-coated sticks by whacking them together? Want to?

Meet Stuart Heller. He'll watch carefully as you move back and forth brandishing your sticks. He'll increase the pace slowly, ask you for more force, and then watch how you react. Sweating yet? Remind you of a hectic day starting to spin out of control at the office? That's the point. Heller wants to see how you respond under pressure: Do you back down? Become more aggressive? Collapse in a heap on the floor? By observing how you move under stress, Heller can discern where in your body you must pay more attention in order to be more successful on the job.

But our minds do one thing and our bodies another, right? Not according to Heller--as twelve Roundstone workshop participants recently discovered. Using exercises derived from classical Chinese medicine and martial arts, Heller helped them identify the habitual attitudes and movements that hinder their success at work.

With the relentless curiosity of a scientist, Heller investigates the mechanics of the disconnect between intention and action. His clients learn how to bypass the limitations of their habitual approaches to projects, presentations, and each other. But instead of focusing on concepts or presentation skills like other business seminars, Heller considers the whole self, body and mind. His focus: *'how do you have to be in order to do what you have to do'*.

The way you move through life is revealed in the way you move through space, Heller believes; so he studies people's movement habits, which he says operate like bureaucracies. "Bureaucracies don't understand visions. They defend themselves against change. That's their job - to stop new things from happening." Habits are constructed of thoughts, feelings and muscles simultaneously. Without change to these underlying structures, the system reverts to old habits, no matter the intention.

He begins by asking clients where they feel stuck: "Have you accomplished results but not as much as you'd like? Is there a particular attitude or mindset you'd like to change? A quality you'd like more or less of? How do you want people to respond to you differently?" Change is so difficult, he maintains, because we have learned to live off center, stuck in old patterns. Since stress tends to unbalance us even more, the first thing to learn is how to center ourselves under pressure. Using exercises that allow people to notice their movement habits when stressed, Heller demonstrates how to expand their repertoire of responses.

Dave Scordato, Manager of Info Technology for the U.S. for Abitibi Consolidated Sales Corporation, has always been uncomfortable doing presentations. Since his company is

asking him to give more of them, he decided to work with Heller. “ I was expecting somebody really mechanical who would just tell me how to present: ‘Stand this way, wave your arms that way, this is what successful speakers do, this is the image you can portray to people....’ But his approach was a lot more hands-on.”

In the rubber sticks exercise, based on a martial arts practice, Heller deliberately sets partners up as opponents. As they walk toward and away from each other wielding the sticks, he observes their movements, pinpointing strengths and weaknesses. Under pressure, which way does one move with strength, forward or backward? Does one turn with strength or hold ground?

He knows that if you have a difficult time really listening to other people, odds are high that, under pressure, you will not step backwards. If, when stressed, you back away easily, you probably also listen easily. People who have a hard time stepping forward under pressure tend to be uncomfortable making requests, being seen, and initiating projects.

“These basic animal moves are in the basement of our infrastructure, our style, our attitude,” he explains. “If I can help you loosen up your foundation, make you more flexible, your entire structure can change more easily. Instead of just teaching listening skills, I find a way to awaken a *capacity* to listen so that listening becomes more natural.”

Heller finds that people respond easily to the language of movement because it focuses on action and avoids personal judgments. He offers exercises so simple that people cannot *not* practice. “My job is to give them a no-blame way of understanding their situation so they can see new actions which, step by step, will allow them to be what they want to be.”

Scordato agrees. “Working with the sticks really made me conscious of how my body felt in different situations and how differently I could perform when I was comfortable in my body,” he raves.

The power of this practice is no surprise to Heller as it is based on the universal laws that govern life forces -- in the language of the martial arts, the qualities of Ground, Water, Fire and Wind. He demonstrates the physical embodiment of each quality to the group and everyone practices. “I had a mini-epiphany about how I approach conflict,” exclaims Linda Beitz mother of two and Vice President of the Board of the Lake Champlain Waldorf School. “When I move forward to make change happen, I tend to be fiery, to hold myself in the domain of Fire. I could see how often that was not working for me.”

As Heller points out, it might appear that leaders only move forward to lead but they also have to be able to *follow* a vision, to *serve* those they lead, to *listen and receive* as well as direct. “How can you align people if you’re not a good listener?” he asks. “No one ever told us that these leadership skills are not head skills, they’re body/mind skills, so there’s no way we would have trained for them.”

To counterbalance her overly fiery approach, Beitz practiced the physical embodiment of Water, its fluid capacity to return after being displaced. “That was something I had been avoiding,” she admits. “I learned that I could also move things forward by coming from Water.” She attended the workshop in order to cultivate flexibility in both her mothering

skills and work with the school. Moving from the quality of Water adds a refreshing new tool to her repertoire.

Heller never promises total change to his clients. He finds sudden dramatic changes are invariably swallowed up by old habits. Instead, he emphasizes small concrete changes that, with practice, build over time. Sometimes altering one small thing will change everything. “After you’ve experienced this approach,” says Beitz, “it seems like common sense but before, you were not aware of it. You think, ‘My God, how could I not have incorporated this before?’”

Heller does not rely on any single method. Since people start from different places and have unique styles, he customizes his approach. And he makes sure they see the result, not just in their bodies but in actual dealings with others during the workshop before returning to the world. “I have a practice or an experiment that will demonstrate whatever we’re talking about. No one has to believe me, they can discover for themselves.”

His central tenet is always the inseparability of mind and body. If ninety percent of communication and learning occurs non-verbally, as researchers say, one must practice with the whole of oneself in order to change. Indeed, Beitz found that the physical exercises created new pathways in her nervous system. “Since the workshop,” she says, “I’ve been noticing how when a remark is made, it affects my whole body. Before I only had one way of responding. Now I’ve got a variety of ways. I just need to practice them!”

“It’s amazing how you can transform the way you feel by doing very simple things with your body,” agrees Scordato. At work, he now remembers to “untangle” himself by putting his feet firmly on the ground, relaxing his knees and centering in his lower body. “This gives me a more stable platform to start from which does a lot for keeping calm in unexpected situations and feeling in control when previously I might have felt off balance. Keeping my physical balance helps me keep my mental balance.”

The future is about strategy and flexibility; expanding one’s repertoire of strategies will be the key to success, believes Heller. His approach is summarized in his book, *Retooling on the Run: Real Change for Leaders with No Time* (with David Surrenda). But he continues to develop his training programs and is awed by the tremendous impact of working directly with people.

Heller has advanced degrees in both Operations Research and Psychology, two black belts in martial arts, and years of study in Chinese medicine. “I’ve been blessed to study things that few others have studied. I encourage people that things are possible, which they didn’t know were possible,” Heller says simply.

This article was published in the ROUNDSTONE INTERNATIONAL Newsletter

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