

# Embodied Leadership and Somatics

A conversation with Mobius Transformational Leadership Faculty, Jen Cohen.



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## **Q** What are some of the central ideas that underpin a somatic approach to leadership development?

In the West we've inherited what's called the Cartesian or dualistic worldview. As the French philosopher, scientist and mathematician, René Descartes, famously said "I think, therefore I am." The Scientific Revolution was a moment of the splitting out of body and mind and spirit. Mind was elevated. Body subjugated. Spirit disengaged. Prior to that in most cultures and for most of time, that separation didn't exist. This separation – the dualism of mind and body, and the rise of the scientific mind over the body – has made all sorts of amazing things happen, like brain surgery for example. But the cost of this dualistic consciousness is the myth of separation: that we are all individual and disconnected from each other and that parts of ourselves are separated. As a result of the Enlightenment, 'mind' became alienated from the body. So in addition to all of the beautiful science and other advancements in civilization this separation produced, it also caused a great deal of harm.

Somatics is an antidote to that harm. If we look at violence, for example, could you really rape and torture someone if you were associated into yourself, if you were really present, and not compartmentalized, disassociated, alienated and stuck in a story of righteousness and separation? There's a psychological

framework that goes with being able to conduct one's self in a violent manner.

The body is a context. It's not the only context that's shaping our lives, but it's one we can change. Somatics operates on the understanding that everything we experience, we experience through our body, and therefore to change how we are in the world and where we are going, we need to change our body.

## **Q** How do you work with a leader who needs to define her vision? Isn't that a more 'cognitive' task?

Somatics is not anti-cognitive. If you video-taped a week of client interactions there's a lot that happens in our offices which – while I don't want to say have nothing to do with the body, because in my map of reality, there is nothing that doesn't – but for idiomatic purposes, some of the work we do with clients has nothing to do with the body per se. Nobody's doing a somatic practice. There's talking. That's where we start: *Tell me what you think your vision is.*

From talking, the work surfaces. I might say: *Let's have you stand up and speak that vision with your arms extended. Or Let's have you walk and speak that vision. Or Let's have you pick the opposite vision from what you've just said.* I would then ask you to notice what each statement felt

like in the body – which of the two opposing visions resonated? Which one sounds like the truth, which one a lie? In this way we begin to marry language and body. That's the ultimate aim of somatic coaching or embodied leadership: that there is a marriage of story and body. Mostly what you find is that the story is ahead of the body, and that the body wins.

Clients often say: *I know what I should be doing and I know where I want to go, but when I try to move towards it, it doesn't work.* It doesn't work because what's embodied is the past and that's what you can access. What's not embodied is the future. You can taste and feel the future, but what you're *organized* around – and this is how we talk in somatics – what you're organized around is what you already know. That's where your history and experience lie.

If for example, you and I are talking about your twenty years' work experience, even though you may be in the process of reinventing your professional life, your voice and your energy hold onto *This is what I know.* You have to cross a chasm to create the new thing you want. There's an aliveness and energy when you talk about your dream, but the organization and an integrity reside in continuing with the line of work you already know how to do. That's not bad; it's just how it is. We have to disrupt that integrity to create a new organization of self *and* a way of tolerating the disorganization. You have to be willing to stay disorganized for a period of time to let the new future happen. That's incredibly frightening to an organism designed around homeostasis

Cells go for equilibrium and stability. That's just what they do. That said, the capacity to stay with dis-equilibrium can be trained and in this world that we now live in, that's a critical competency. It's not just a nice idea. Because the ground underneath us is shifting, leaders must develop this ability to stay with discomfort in order to embody change.

I was speaking to an executive from a high potential program when she said: *We can't make strategic plans*

*anymore. Every strategic plan we make, the entire thing blows up three months later.* Her industry is moving so fast and changing so quickly that three months out and the plan is defunct. There is no equilibrium. Yet human beings crave it. We demand it.

This is why we slip back into what is known, even when it no longer works. 'The devil you know' is a deeply biologically and psychologically true statement. We would prefer an organization (and by that, we mean something specific in somatic practice – we mean the way your body is organized, the shape of it, how you carry yourself) that will keep us suffering, to an unknown, disorganized state. For the most part, most of us, most of the time – none of this is true all of the time or nothing would be changing in the world and that's far from the case.



**How do I close the chasm between where I am today and my vision?**

To declare is the first step in creation. In somatic practice, when we declare we speak in a very specific way on purpose. We say "I am a commitment to".

In the example I'm thinking of, we were in a workshop practicing what we call 'embodying declarations'. One of the participants said: *I am a commitment to being in a loving partnership.* Those of us who witnessed her declaration had an immediate reaction. We all felt this statement wasn't 'alive' in her. We all felt this declaration wasn't working. I asked her to try the opposite declaration: *I'm*

*a commitment to being alone.* When she did, those of us watching her thought: *Yes!* That second declaration was more congruent.

So, the first step in closing the chasm is to witness the gap. Her vision was that she wants a relationship. Your vision is about this new business you've set up in Ireland. Then we examine what the person is actually

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organized around. She's organized around historical training and what happened to her in life and in this case she was organized around *I'm a commitment to being alone*.

After we distinguish the gap, there are *many* steps we might take to close it. Some of them are narrative steps, they're about language. There are various maps available to understand this gap. There's 'Immunity to Change' maps, for example. We have many different ways to look at the master assessments we have, the narrative we live in. Different types of leadership development tools talk about them differently, but really they're all concerned with the same thing. We carry certain stories and those stories shape our world: our stories about what's possible; our stories about who we are; stories about life and whether it's trustworthy or not. All of those stories are feeding our capacity in the present moment to walk across the chasm. From *I'm a commitment to being alone* to *I'm a commitment to being in a loving partnership*. Or from your 20 years' career experience to *I'm a commitment to my new business*.

There's narrative obstacles and then there is the question where does this woman's aloneness live in her body? Where does she feel it? What's the shape of the aloneness? She can take the shape of *I'm a commitment to being alone*? But can she take the shape of *I'm a commitment to a loving partnership*? Can she feel how uncomfortable that shape feels? What if she were to do or design one practice to shift her shape in the direction of the new one she's just articulated. That one practice might be to soften her shoulders and open up her chest when she's in conversation with others, rather than to hunch herself in the more closed position she's used to.

**Q** If someone carried the shape of the commitment to being alone, would she necessarily understand what to do with her body to get into the shape of 'I'm a commitment to a loving partnership'?

All that needs to be there is the willingness to experiment. She may not have any felt sense of the desired shape, but usually she has an imagination of it. What might that shape look like? Does she know anybody else who



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## “Two nervous systems walked into a room ...”

shapes like that? A teacher or a mentor? We map and template to each other.

When people practice public speaking, trainers might ask us to watch JFK's or Martin Luther King's speeches. They'll ask us take on the shape, the voice tone, the gestures of these examples – to actually inhabit the energetic template of that shape which is configured in a way that brings a certain kind of life forward. It doesn't matter whether it's the loving relationship example or your new career or whatever it might be, to learn a new way of being we must experiment.

**Q You speak of a 'window of tolerance'... that which we are able to stay present to before we move away or experience difficulty with a situation. Can you give us an example?**

Tolerate in this instance doesn't mean 'to put up with'. What we mean by 'tolerate' is to *be with*. We learn to stay with our bodily sensations when they are uncomfortable without needing to act out (be that shutting down, leaving the room, snapping at a child or laughing at a colleague.) We all have our own psychology, behaviors that press our buttons and trigger an urge to repeat our patterned response. In somatic work we need to widen that window of tolerance for staying with discomfort to create the space to learn new responses. We stop 'acting out' our past.

**Q When you train coaches you talk about limbic resonance, limbic regulation and limbic revision. What do these terms mean and why do they matter in coaching?**

They matter because you are a nervous system. And if you are a coach, then you bring your nervous system to

the coaching process. If you are an anything, you bring it with you. As I sometimes say to people: *You may be well dressed, but you're still a nervous system*. You are a nervous system before you are anything else. And that nervous system is of *influence* to other nervous systems. That's our design. It's the way that it is. You can become conscious of the condition of your nervous system and begin to use that part of the instrument that you are – or not. This is why it matters, because the work of the nervous system is happening anyway.

Limbic regulation is the way we affect other nervous systems. We're an open loop design. My physiology is designed to shift your physiology. When a mother picks up a crying baby, the baby stops crying. The contact – physiology to physiology – actually alters my biochemistry and yours.

This is why the condition of the leader matters. If I'm frantic and I walk into the team room, my nervous system sends a limbic message to all the other nervous systems in the room. The team goes on alert. I'm regulating their nervous systems whether I like it or not. I can bring dysregulation or I can bring the other nervous systems into harmony.

The potential of the coaching relationship – not just deeper therapeutic ones – is 'limbic revision'. This is the possibility that we can create new neural patterning. When people say: *I always go after the alcoholic. I've had three marriages and each one was to an alcoholic*, it's because our nervous systems create bonding patterns. If as a child, we were bonded to somebody who was chaotic and dysregulated, then despite our best intentions, we will probably go towards somebody in our later life who's also very dysregulated. The possibility in a relationship with a coach or conscious counsellor, a person who's using their whole instrument, is the possibility that my nervous system becomes a tool of revision and health for yours. You can start to pattern towards a nervous system that may feel very foreign to you, but is the future you want.

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If you keep marrying alcoholics, it’s because your nervous system is patterned around that. This goes back to the equilibrium we spoke of earlier. We prefer the patterns we know even if they are incredibly painful to us – or part of us prefers them. The part that doesn’t is longing for something different. The part that doesn’t is the part that’s in the coach’s or the therapist’s office.

### **Q What is the role of the coach or indeed the role of the leader in bringing into harmony other people’s limbic systems?**

You might have had this experience yourself if you’re lucky enough to have someone in your life who, whenever you’re around them, evokes a calm or an empowered or a peaceful feeling in you. You may not be able to identify how or why their nervous system positively influences yours, but you can discern that it does. That’s limbic resonance and limbic regulation in action.

Going back to the example of the leader who brings panic into the room, if that leader wants to bring harmony – where they have a positive influence on the people in the room, how do they begin to do that?

The answer is this: Practice.

First we must ask: *who is it that I want to be?* We need to get conscious of the leader we want to be, not just the leading we want to do. *I want to be the person they come to; I want to be empowering; I want to be the rock for them.* There are many things we might want to be as a parent, as a leader, as an executive. To do this, we must become conscious and ask ourselves the question. Then we have to believe it’s cultivatable. Then we have to begin to align that intention with what we’re practicing. What we’re practicing at the level of breath, at the level

of compartment, at the level of shape, story.

For the most part, insight does not equal embodiment. People get feedback about their leadership style or attend a training program or read something that really makes them stop and think, but then cannot enact these insights without practice. It is practice that lives in the body. Always.

If you walk up to somebody with your arms crossed and your jaw set and then you say: *I’d like to have an intimate conversation with you.* Are you sure? Because what’s embodied is fight and protection, despite the fact that what you intended was openness and contact. In somatic coaching we work with expanding our window of tolerance for sensations in our bodies that may make us want to act out or shut down. We learn how to do this with breath work, awareness work, through mindfulness and sometimes through actual body work with healers. Our bodies need to unlearn some of our habituated muscular responses, so that we can start to relax and not hold so tightly in a certain pattern. That softening begins to produce a different set of assessments in other people – about your availability or your openness or trustworthiness.

Our lives are not our fault. But they are our responsibility. Not our fault, but ours to mold and shape and create. One of the main ways we do that is by examining and shifting the context that is our body. ■

Jen Cohen was interviewed by Mobius Chief Knowledge Officer, Nathalie Hourihan. Nathalie is a former global knowledge expert for McKinsey & Co. and has recently set up Wolf Knowledge Ltd ([www.wolfknowledge.com](http://www.wolfknowledge.com)). She is acting editor of the *Mobius Strip* and serves Mobius to capture and codify the firm's deep body of work.