

Hamill, Pete, *Embodied Leadership: The Somatic Approach to Developing Your Leadership*

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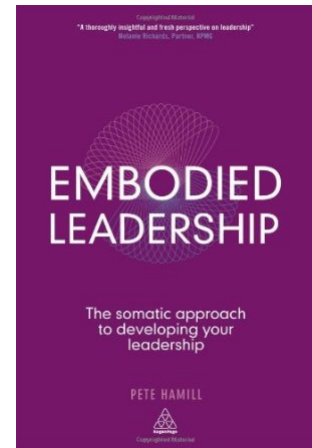
Reviewed by Dr. George F. Simons at diversophy.com

Let's start with a *haiku*:

*We live in bodies
that express stories we tell
about who we are...*

And then a *warning*:

If you are an Interculturalist, diversity or OD professional who is satisfied with your current level of expertise and effectiveness, you should NOT read this book under any circumstances. Doing so could result in serious questioning of premises and practices upon which you depend for your livelihood and self-esteem.



And finally, a *confession*: I felt like putting this book down after the first few pages, because it all seemed so familiar. Firstly, I harbor a gut level aversion to the current rage for superficial repackaging of *Leadership* nostrums that daily spam my inbox. Having been degreed in philosophy and psychology and having trained as a gestalt therapist, the "been there, done that" conversation bubbling in my mind made my body feel tired and impatient. My legs felt heavy, trudging along a worn philosophical path. I nodded my head in "of course" recognition that dyadic perceptions of human nature must go. Affirming the integrity of what are too often seen as body vs. soul, mind vs. matter was well anchored in my heart. Curiosity, however, like an itch, made me persist with a shrug of resignation as I sensed that this lengthy "Setting the Foundation", as Hamill labels it, could be of considerable value for those whose formation lie in different disciplines than mine. This relaxed me a bit.

Speculation about the impact that neuroscience and cognitive science are currently having on explanations of human behavior and culture elicit a quizzical frown from me. A lot of the writing based on these new discoveries, given their relatively recent emergence, makes extrapolation of such findings highly tentative and speculative—in some cases not much more than wishful thinking. So, as you can imagine, I finger flipped pages with a distrustful eye, a bit down at the mouth.

My clouds of skepticism began to lift in the middle of Section 4 of Part 1 and I nodded with agreement to descriptions of how gut feelings and common sense are frequently swept under the rug by the broom of what we like to think of as "more rational explanations" of human behavior and cultural values. We are taught to distrust our instincts and dismiss our feelings in order to become socially and culturally competent leaders and collaborators. We blanket ourselves with inhibition and may, biting our tongue, even adopt a self-righteous veneer of political correctness. We are constrained to abort what we are inclined to say and do in order to kiss, bow, shake hands, and negotiate deals.

Nothing wrong with adapting to circumstances, but it is apparent that a great deal of our ineffectiveness is due to the fact that we do not bring our whole selves to the table. We are more

used to faking it than making it. While to the giving and taking of offense, there is no end, enlightenment has to do with a deeper understanding of ourselves and how we actually embody the cultural discourse of our identity and manifest it. This means both taking our gut (vernacular for integrated self-moments) seriously, knowing how it is shaped, and how we can shape it in new ways. Hamill notes, "Our more automatic responses can be both invaluable, and also useless, depending on how we have educated and trained them, and on the environment we are operating in." (p.107).

It is not a simple matter of insights and awareness and aha's generated by what we read and hear. These are at best starting points for the kind of whole person training that will make us more effective humans and leaders. If we do not get beyond them, we may be missing the real resources of diversity in ourselves and others. This is scary because it may require one "...to feel the same emotion that he has spent a lifetime restraining." (p.101).

The key term that emerges here is *somatic markers*. Hamill observes, "...psychology has often appealed to a process of reasoning to generate change, rather than dealing with the somatic markers that so often drive our responses." (p.92). Just what are these "somatic markers?"

Their reality is due to the fact that our memories are emotional, physical, us:

"As we go through our lives and we collect these experiences, we develop into who we are, our personality, which is the pattern of emotional, attitudinal and behavioural responses we typically portray. We develop our personality through our body. As we develop somatic markers, we develop responses to those markers, and then in future situations we feel the somatic marker and repeat the response. In this way we practise those responses continually, until we become expert in them – we become expert in being us." (p.92)

Despite reason's denials, we continue to know this at a deeper level, and we sometimes express it when we try to act or resist acting in an unfamiliar way, as, "It's just not me." In Hamill's words, "It's only when we encounter something different that we notice our somatic markers, as it doesn't feel quite as comfortable to us. So somatic markers are not good or a bad; they are just how we go about learning at a deep level." (p.96). They mark us at every level, "...our emotions don't just create lines on our faces. Through our somatic markers, emotions create the shape of who we are." (p.100).

"Our culture is passed on this way. We learn at a young age what is appropriate and inappropriate, but if asked to describe our culture we would have difficulty. The somatic markers aren't a set of rules we learnt in our rational neo-cortex (the most recent part of our brain, which allows us to deal with abstract concepts, theories and models); they are more deeply held in our bodies." (p.102).

The disconcerting truth is that, "...we do, literally, embody our selves. And if we pay close attention to others (and ourselves) we will see that who we are at the deepest level is there inside the structure of the body. (p.104). The author insists, "At some level you already know all of this" and you are constantly acting upon it in your assessment of others and of yourself—just as I was assessing this book and my reactions to it as you read in my "confession" at the outset of this review.

Hamill would also meet our previously cited objection to change or learning something new, "It's not me" with, "No, it's not, but perhaps it could be..." And, the rest of this book is about the "could be" as it is embodied in the exercise of leadership, but it is in fact applicable to cultural competence as well as many other areas of endeavor. The author walks us through the development of leadership possibilities in what we might consider a speculative case study about two leaders, an anonymous Jane and John extrapolated from real-life experience.

Whether discussing leadership or cultural competence, how do we purposefully and effectively go about realigning our somatic markers, aligning heads, hearts and hands to do what is needed in our diverse and multicultural situations and systems? We need to "fake it until we make it," but now the "faking" is not a matter of deception, but a matter of doing the unfamiliar, the "not yet me" in retraining ourselves to be as we need to be. The authentic self is not something to be found like a lost memento in the back of an attic cupboard, but something to be ongoingly created. And, that takes work, the kind of work addressed in Part 2 of the book, which introduces us to "...exercises that allow us to see and experience our somatic markers, how they drive our behaviours and how we can learn to do something different." (p.106).

Here again, I encountered the familiar in terms of such practices as centering, relabeled as "centring," things I have learned and experienced in Gestalt and Reichian therapies, in the practice of yoga and in the process of being Rolfed. The difference however is that my original experiences were centered on psychological and physical health and emotional well-being for their own sake. The author, however, goes takes the further step of exploring the consequences they have for performance in leadership. Inevitably they spill over into various areas of life. He also observes how we can speak and act from a "centered place." An important first step is to make and repeat declarations to support the change we want to be. In cultural terms, we are shaping a new discourse that will affect the direction of other streams of discourse within us and in those we share with others. Massage and bodywork also assist in supporting the "position" we are beginning to assume.

We've long known that stress inclines us to regress into our most basic and primitive survival responses, which, despite our body's best intentions, may be exactly the opposite of what is called for to succeed and survive in the situation. Developing resilience in the face of stress involves both the capacity to first feel the energies in play, blend with them and use them to bring about a successful result. Hamill again illustrates this in the continuing story of Jane and John.

In addition to the disciplines offered by the author, For me the practice of Aikido modeled this discipline and could be added to the list. I'm also reminded of the *Positive Power and Influence and Negotiation, Strategies and Tactics* training programs and related tools that I have had the privilege of participating in, leading and training others to facilitate for over 30 years. The effectiveness of these programs has largely to do with their teaching participants to identify energies coming from others and to respond with their own energies. This is about push, pull, attracting, and moving away, all based on the interplay of somatic experience. They are the energies which generate the behaviors that John and Jane are using in the process that Hamill describes as "blending."

Next, the book speaks of making assessments, the kinds of judgments that our inner chatter and feelings are ever colluding to produce. Emphasis here is on identification, reflection on the source of these assessments within us, the depth to which they are embodied in our somatic markers and how they are often stimulated by the manifestation of the somatic markers that we see in others'

appearances and behavior. It's also about sharing these assessments in such a way that they become sources of mutual understanding and enable us to cohabit and collaborate in the same spaces. Meditation allows us to observe both the relevance and irrelevance of the endless flow of discourse that leads us to shape ourselves and co-construct the realities we both inhabit and inhibit. The habit of meditation bleeds over into and can change how we listen to these realities in daily situations.

Part 3 of the book offers a big picture look at leadership and raises questions about ethics and the contemporary challenges of change. With ethics, we are into intercultural issues in a big way. One might say that the mind–body cleft explored earlier is paralleled by the division between the dominant colonial Western European/US paradigm that is alien to many other peoples of the world and in conflict with differing indigenous patterns. Often this is simplistically dealt with as “individualism versus collectivism”, but if we start to look at it from an embodied point of view, it runs much deeper and is more complex than this abstract distinction suggests. Yet Hamill insists on the importance of developing an ethical code for embodied leadership. Ethics runs the risk of both incorporating bias in its standards as well as imposing them on others. It's about facts, discussion, negotiation. This topic launches us on a trajectory beyond the covers of this book and suggests that an ethical or moral code remains essentially an ongoing process of refinement rather than a product.

In this section, as in the philosophical introduction at the beginning of the book, Hamill spends time exploring ethical theory and research as the setting into which to introduce the benefits of embodiment principles. It's about resisting rationalization and social pressure in our decision-making. He delineates the steps the leader can take to avoid behaving in a way that contradicts his or her ethical standards.

Leaders, almost by definition, must deal with complex systems peopled by individuals, each carrying their own agenda and acting to achieve personal and group priorities, benefits, and needs. Diversity struggles with alignment and leadership when it comes to setting organizational practice. The road from creativity to innovation again requires the embodied presence of leadership, living fully in the context of what is taking place, modeling what needs to be and encouraging similar embodied leadership to develop at many levels in the organization. Ultimately the motivation for leadership as well as success in any role lies in getting satisfaction from becoming better at what you do/are in the fullest possible alignment with your declared purpose, your embodied discourse.

Both for would-be leaders, and for the benefit of our ever-changing and perilous world, the author concludes by insisting on the importance of long-term satisfaction rather than hustling for short-term hedonism. To close, he sums up the practices contained in the book with the reminder that each of these requires serious and ongoing practice.