



Resonant leadership and the role of coaching and other prosocial behaviour

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"Organisational success relies on the leader being able to manage the constant cycle of sacrifice and renewal..."

Power stress

Boyatzis and McKee, in their influential 2005 book *Resonant Leadership*, state that resonant leaders display genuine passion and enthusiasm, and create an emotional climate of positivity that spreads throughout their organisation. Resonant leaders understand that emotions and moods are contagious, and they use their emotional intelligence to manage their own emotions as well as to read and manage those of others. They use their high social intelligence to develop and maintain good relationships. People are happy to follow resonant leaders because it is clear that their heart is in their work (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

But leadership is often stressful and it can be a challenge to maintain this resonance. The nature of leadership and the pressure it entails means that leaders often suffer from *power stress*. (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Boyatzis & McKee (2005:6) write that "our bodies are just not equipped to deal with this kind of pressure day after day. Over time we become exhausted – we burn out or burn up." They state that "constant small crises, heavy responsibilities and perpetual need to

influence people can be a heavy burden, so much so that we find ourselves trapped in the sacrifice syndrome and slip into internal disquiet, unrest, and distress" (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005:6).

When leaders sacrifice their own wellbeing in order to try and maintain their job performance they become locked in the *sacrifice syndrome* – they are sacrificing their wellbeing for the sake of their work. They feel frustrated, empty, unfulfilled, make rash decisions, act impulsively, and display poor judgement (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Leaders suffering from the sacrifice syndrome are more likely to create dissonance within the organisation. Their negative emotions spread throughout their organisation via *emotional contagion*.

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There are certain signs that indicate one is falling into the sacrifice syndrome: working hard but achieving less, fatigue, sleep problems, medical problems, fewer and less meaningful social interactions, and family relationships suffering (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005).

Health and renewal

Therefore, a key skill that leaders need is being able to maintain a constant process of renewal – mental, physical and spiritual renewal, what Boyatzis and McKee (2005) call the *cycle of sacrifice and renewal*. With leadership, as with many other aspects of life, a *proper selfishness* is needed: one must first look after one's own wellbeing to be in a good state to look after the wellbeing of others (Handy, 2005).

The link between stress and health is well established. This link is usually explained by elevated levels of the stress hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, lowering the immune system. Stress raises blood pressure, tightens muscles and slows digestion (Post, 2014).

The significant impact of emotions on health is demonstrated by a study by Williams (1994), a cardiologist who studied the impact of hostility on health. In the 1950s, 225 doctors took a self-completion questionnaire on their own hostility, asking about the hostility of their attitudes, emotions and actions. Williams' 1994 research followed up on the results and found that between the ages of 25 and 50, the doctors who were rated in the upper half of participants for hostility were four to five times more likely to have developed coronary disease, and seven times more likely to have died of any disease.

Positive emotions, such as compassion, can displace negative emotions, such as rumination, hostility, fear and resentment (Post, 2014; Williams, 1994). Indeed, research by Fredrickson (2000:255) showed an *undoing effect*, whereby "positive emotions help downregulate the potentially health-damaging cardiovascular reactivity that

lingers following negative emotions." Positive emotions lead to arousal of the *parasympathetic nervous system*, which slows down heart rate and triggers the release of hormones into the blood, including oxytocin and vasopressin – two hormones that can lead to several psychological and physiological benefits (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Oxytocin, for example, "reduces anxiety and heightens feelings of tenderness, attachment, and closeness to others" (Boyatzis et al. 2012:161).

Compassion itself has three elements: "(a) empathizing with the other, (b) caring for the other, and (c) acting in response to the other's feelings" (Boyatzis et al., 2012:156). Boyatzis and McKee (2005) argue, based on their work with leaders, that compassion is one of the main aspects needed for renewal. And they maintain that for employees, including leaders, coaching is one way to generate feelings of compassion, by caring for the development of another person.

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Prosocial behaviour

Coaching falls under the category of *prosocial* behaviour, forms of behaviour aimed at helping others, and prosocial behaviour has been shown to generate positive emotions for the helper, and thus lead to tangible health and renewal benefits. Indeed, Post (2014) summarises that "contribute to the lives of others and as a by-product or side-effect, you are very likely to experience happiness, health, and live a bit longer."

Volunteering, for example, generally leads to a range of renewal benefits: Gebauer et al. (2008) report that "the

existing literature indicates that volunteering – at a level not experienced as overwhelming – does have positive impacts on happiness, mood, self-esteem, and mental health.” One study of thousands of volunteers found that around half answered that volunteering gives them a ‘high’ feeling – what Luks (1988) refers to as the *helper’s high*. This is likely a result of dopamine being secreted (Post, 2014).

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A large-scale study of 4,852 volunteers in America found several positive impacts, such as 89% answering volunteering “has improved my sense of well-being”, 73% that it “lowers my stress levels”, and “77% that it “improves emotional health” (Post, 2014). Volunteering also improves insomnia, anxiety, depression, stress, social networks, and feelings of greater control over chronic conditions (Post, 2014). (These large-scale studies do take into account potentially confounding factors such as that it is happier and healthier people who are more likely to engage in volunteering in the first place, and relevant demographics.)

There are several occasions where volunteering can occur within the workplace. Handy (1995) coined the term *discretionary effort* to describe those activities undertaken voluntarily by staff, which are not part of their job description. In schools this could mean leading an after-school club for children, for example. When people genuinely care about an organisation, they are more willing to volunteer their time to do things that will benefit it. Volunteering

at work also improves the volunteer’s perceptions of their employer (Post, 2014).

Post (2014) argues that prosocial behaviour reduces pain, not only by taking attention away from oneself but also by releasing endorphins, the chemicals the body naturally secretes to reduce pain. And Brown et al.’s (2003) research found that the act of giving safeguards stress, and involves the body releasing complex hormones, such as vasopressin and oxytocin. Furthermore, there are indications that altruism and empathy can reduce cholesterol and inflammation (Post, 2014).

Research has also looked at the health benefits for those suffering from certain illnesses of helping others with the same illness, what Reissman (1988) refers to as the *helper therapy principle*. This has been studied in relation to Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, where several studies have shown that those members who have a helping role for another member are significantly less likely to relapse (Pagano et al., 2010). The helper therapy principle has also been found to be effective for sufferers of other conditions, including multiple sclerosis, depression and diabetes (Post, 2014).

Kindness and wellbeing

Pressman et al. (2014) note that *random acts of kindness* over lengthy periods have been shown to increase the giver’s wellbeing. But they set out to study whether *brief* acts of kindness, those over a specific day, such as giving small gifts, favours or helping with chores, could have a similar effect as longer term. The results did indeed show increased wellbeing for the giver.

An interesting aspect Pressman et al. (2014) included in their research was *pay it forward* (PIF), whereby the giver encourages the receiver to themselves do an act of kindness for someone, who in turn encourages the receiver to do the same. Thus there is, in theory, a never-ending chain of acts of kindness created, and the wellbeing of society is increased. (Indeed, an initiative created on Facebook aimed to create a PIF chain, and resulted in hundreds of thousands around the world posting that they had taken part.) The PIF process did produce benefits for the givers in Pressman et al.'s study, primarily increasing feelings of joviality and optimism.

Research shows that it is the prosocial aspects of organisational behaviour that are the most beneficial to the helper's wellbeing (Glomb, 2011). The feeling of gratitude the helper receives increases his/her wellbeing, for example, as does the feeling of competence gained from helping others and feeling socially valued (Grant & Sonnentag 2012). And the helper benefits from the escapism that prosocial behaviour offers: "research indicates that the experience of helping others promotes other-focused attention, distracting attention away from one's own problems, distresses, and frustrations" (Grant & Sonnentag, 2010:14).

Emotions generated at work can spill over to life at home (Sonnentag & Grant, 2012). These can often be negative, stressful emotions that one ruminates over and affect one's wellbeing. But there is research showing that helping others at work leads to an improved mental state when out of work. Interestingly, this was most prominent later in the evening rather than immediately after work, suggesting that

there is a delayed action of improved mood once the day's events have been fully processed (Sonnentag & Grant, 2012).

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How employees evaluate themselves and their work tasks can make them dwell on the unpleasant aspects of their job, and this can have a large impact on their emotional exhaustion (Grant & Sonnentag, 2012). When employees, including leaders, feel no personal enthusiasm towards their work, greater self-regulation of mood is required, and this can lead to stress. Perceiving one's work as prosocial can reduce negative self-evaluations and thus emotional exhaustion (Grant & Sonnentag, 2012).

Given, therefore, that prosocial behaviour can increase mental and physical health, and thus aid the renewal of the helper, several authors argue that prosocial activities should be deliberately incorporated into the workday, not just for the benefits of the recipient but also for the helper (Böckerman, & Ilmakunnas 2012; Glomb, 2011; Post, 2005). Post (2005:72) asserts that "an altruism-health correlation appears established. Might generous emotions and behaviors be taught as an aspect of mental and physical health in schools and the workplace?"

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Motivations for prosocial behaviour are important, however. Indeed, the

renewal benefits gained from coaching and other prosocial behaviours are largely dependent on the motivation for carrying out such behaviour. Boyatzis and McKee (2005), for example, make an important distinction between *coaching for compassion* and *coaching for compliance*. Coaching for compassion involves the coach displaying genuine care for the development of the client, based on the client's vision of their *ideal self*. In contrast, coaching for compliance is based on the view of the coach or organisation for the client's development, the client's *ought self* (Boyatzis et al., 2012).

Emotions such as compassion transfer between coach and client via emotional contagion (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Compassion generates a positive emotional and thus psychophysiological response, and is therefore contributory towards renewal (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). Coaching with compliance, however, likely generates stress because of feeling pressure to change to the *ought self*, rather than to one's *ideal self* (Boyatzis et al., 2012). Coaching for compliance is largely *instrumental*, in that it is primarily for specific organisational purposes. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) acknowledge that, in reality, coaching in the workplace can rarely be purely for compassion, but they argue that it should be a significant part, even when a somewhat instrumental approach is required.

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Autonomous motivation

Weinstein and Ryan (2010) make a distinction between *autonomous*

motivation for prosocial behaviour and *controlled* motivation. Autonomous motivations are congruent with one's self and do not feel externally forced; there is therefore a feeling of freedom involved. In contrast, controlled motivations are from external pressure, or self-imposed through, for instance, feelings of guilt or pride. Their research found that helpers report greater wellbeing, self-esteem and vitality from autonomous helping, but not from controlled helping. In addition, helpers feel closer to the person they helped, and those being helped also rated the help of higher use and felt a warmer relationship. Weinstein and Ryan (2010) therefore emphasise the importance of volition in a helping relationship.

Furthermore, Gebauer (2008:399) makes a distinction between *pleasure-based* prosocial motivation and *pressure-based*. Pleasure-based can be considered *intrinsic* motivation, based on satisfying one's natural psychological desire to help others. In contrast, pressure-based can be considered *extrinsic* motivation, largely a result of external pressure. Their research found that *pleasure-based* motivation leads to self-actualisation, life satisfaction, self-esteem, positive emotions, and self-esteem, but *pressure-based* motivation does not and can in fact have a negative impact on wellbeing.

Resonant leadership, and therefore organisational success, relies on the leader being able to manage the constant cycle of sacrifice and renewal needed to cope with the inevitable power stress generated by the leadership role. It has been shown here how prosocial behaviours such as coaching can play a key part in this renewal process. In addition, from the various authors' work on motivation, the implications for

coaching are clear: for coaching to have renewal benefits for the coach, it must be based largely on intrinsic, pleasure-based motivation, and focused on coaching for compassion rather than for compliance.

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