



Embodied Leadership Presence By Pavini Moray Ph.D.

Many of my clients sometimes feel unhappy or unsatisfied with their work. Their professional lives are mired in the daily grind. There are continual fires to put out. Their boss is unfeeling. Their colleagues are manipulative. They feel belittled and beleaguered by the system in charge. They can feel stuck or trapped, needing the money, but their 'real' life happens after work.

This happens even when they are in leadership, maybe even more so. They look at me with inquiring eyes and ask, "What can I do to fix..." followed by stories of people not living up to their "potential" in the company's eyes.

We all know leaders who mishandle their power and create harm through a lack of integrity. Many leaders are corrupt and don't care about those they lead. Conversely, it is possible to be a leader who demonstrates care, efficacy, respect, and integrity. The people who come to me want to create change in positive and supportive ways.

I believe that leadership is a sacred role. We have to earn the privilege of another's willingness to follow our leadership. One does not become a leader by receiving a title but by acting according to one's values. A leader must learn to hold their power with skill and grace. And, in my mind, by developing somatic awareness or embodiment.

An embodied leadership presence is something you develop, not something you are born with. When you are a leader who lives inside your skin and feels yourself, you can meet challenges from a centered, grounded place. You respond skillfully according to your stated values. You hold your power ethically and know your impact on those you lead. As therapists, we are, in fact, leaders, too.

The best bosses have embodied leadership presence.

My best boss was a somatic educator. My primary duty for eight years was to sit beside him and help with his writing. He focused on helping people inhabit their bodies, feel their sensations, and practice feeling their aliveness. I was tasked with bringing his very alive body to life on the static pages of his text, crafting words so readers felt his bodily presence and, in turn, tuned into their own.

Before writing, we practiced embodiment exercises to ground and center ourselves. Throughout the day, we got up, moved around, stretched, and went outside for fresh air. Self-care, aka 'body care,' was essential.

His detailed attention to embodiment earned him the status of 'my best boss.' With a decades-long somatic awareness practice, he paid attention to his body in a rarefied way. He noticed the flow and depth of his breath and his minute muscle contractions, indicating sensations such as guarding, fear, or intuition.

His embodiment benefited his leadership in countless ways. While working, he paid attention to his inner experience. He had an exquisite and boundaried awareness of others—how we felt while working together mattered. Deeply empathetic, he also paid attention to what was his and what was not.





In addition to his embodiment skills, my boss also developed his listening ability. He frequently absorbed what I offered and incorporated my suggestions. When things were not flowing smoothly in whatever we were working on, he listened to me. It was easy to give him feedback because he received it mindfully. If we had a conflict, he often considered my thoughts and reactions later that day and returned the next morning saying he had decided to change course. It was okay to have boundaries and to say no to him. He made it easy to be a whole person at work.

He had an embodied leadership presence. He held his power with care. He understood the power differential between him and his employees. He was present and grounded. And he listened with his entire being.

His embodied leadership created a work environment where I felt cared for, supported, and invited to bring my whole self. His attention to my consent meant I felt willing and excited about my tasks. I never felt forced, mistreated, or micromanaged. Because my boss's leadership was so attuned, I could do my most brilliant work.

If this description surprises you, I invite you to consider the best boss you've had. What about them worked so well for you? Was it what they did? How they were? How they inhabited their body and their power? How they listened to you?

How you are in your body conveys the type of leader you are. Choosing to live differently in your body to be a great leader is possible. For many of you, the following might sound like a primer for beginners in somatic awareness. And, for many of your clients, especially CEO's and managers in charge who are looking for tools to enact change in their workplace and who are not used to a somatic approach, these preliminary steps might be the path they seek.

Assess your current level of somatic awareness.

When working with clients, I explain that to understand where they can bolster their embodiment practices, we need to start by assessing their level of somatic awareness—how aware they are of their inner experience, AKA their felt sense. I assure them that there is no level of embodiment that they are supposed to be at; this assessment is just for their information.

I have them ask themselves the following questions:

- What percentage of the time do you feel inside of yourself?
- How often do you feel on the outside of yourself?
- When you stop and notice, do you have a sense of being three-dimensional?
- Do you pee, eat, and drink when your body says it's time?
- Can you easily place your attention inside of your body? For example, can you feel your left shoulder? What about your right big toe?
- When you do a physical activity, do you feel aware of your body as you do it?

Whatever their answers to these questions, I let them know deeper somatic awareness is always possible. The key to becoming more embodied is learning to place your attention. Our clients can learn to focus on the sensations and emotions inside them with ever greater degrees of nuance.

I assure them that becoming aware of how they are inside gives many benefits, including:

- More access to the information their body shares
- Noticing their gut wisdom or intuition
- Trusting their decisions to a greater degree because they've checked in with their body
- Trust that even when something sounds like a good idea to their brain or looks good on paper, they can say no because their body senses something is off.

Paying attention to your body's wisdom helps your leadership . . . or not!

I used to run a small six-person company. One day, while meditating, I had a gut feeling about a particular employee. My intuition told me that something was off. Instead of paying attention and speaking with the employee, I ignored what my body told me. Two weeks later, I discovered that the employee had been spreading toxicity within the team. When confronted, said employee blew up and then quit in a blaze of glory! The outburst impacted me, and it threw the team as well.

This painful lesson of ignoring my body's wisdom helped me learn to listen when I received messages from my body. Maybe a year later, I had a similar intuition about a trusted employee. Again, I was meditating and got the download that something was wrong. But in this case, I listened and got in front of the situation. I invited the employee to a meeting, during which they confided their issue. We discussed it until we were able to resolve their problem. They remained happily employed.

Foundational leadership embodiment practices

Once clients have assessed their somatic awareness level and found room to improve, I offer foundational embodiment practices. Sometimes, setting a course for change can feel overwhelming. If this happens, I invite them to remember that even the slightest bit of conscious practice can support significant change. If these practices seem simple, good! They are. They also have a considerable positive impact.



Conscious Breathing

When you breathe consciously, you are participating in being alive. Through mindful breath, you bring your attention to your inner experience. There is no right or wrong way to breathe. Notice how your body wants to breathe right now. Long and slow? Quiet? Deep? Part of developing your embodiment is about paying attention to your body's actual needs at the moment. There is no one perfect breathing technique for every person and situation. I find it helpful to imagine my lungs expanding and contracting like an accordion. To notice the feel of the air filling your lungs or the temperature of the air as it crosses your nostrils. You can notice how your lungs feel as they move inside your body. Mindful breath helps you slow down and connect with yourself.

Ground

Leadership is often a full experience: a lot is going on every moment requiring attention. It is easy to lose connection with yourself. Grounding practice draws your attention to the relationship between you and the Earth. You allow yourself to feel the total weight of your flesh and bones. You let your attention bring you to the presence inside of yourself. You may wish to imagine that you have a cord the width of your body connecting you to the Earth beneath you. You can imagine your energy moving downward towards the cool and welcoming embrace of the planet. You can also imagine being nourished and receiving energy from the green tangle of the world. Grounding allows your system to slow and resource itself from a vast power source.

Observe

While the first two practices in this list are things to do, the practice of observing is about noticing what is. You see the state of your nervous system. You notice the speed or intensity of your thoughts. Creating a moment to observe your living animal body gives a moment of pause and reflection. You can monitor what is happening inside of you. You can also observe what is happening in any situation. For example, let's say you meet with a client and notice that your stomach is tight. This observation may lead you to see the situation's dynamics or that something feels off. Observing and noticing are foundations of embodiment practice. Not only do you live inside your experience, but you also feel the qualities of your experience.

Listen

While not an embodiment practice per se, developing your listening skills is foundational to creating an embodied leadership presence. One way to listen is to utilize your body, not just your mind. In addition to listening deeply to what someone is saying, you feel for the underlayers: how are they saying it? What is the deeper meaning of what they are sharing? It is helpful to articulate your understanding of what you are hearing for both you as the listener and the speaker. When you listen for meaning, you are listening like a therapist, both to what is being said and what is not said. The art of skillful questions for more profound layers of understanding should be in an embodied leader's toolkit. When you listen with body, heart, and mind, it's different than when you are listening only to language. Most people long to be heard and understood; listening skills can set your leadership apart.

In Conclusion

Developing embodied leadership presence is eminently learnable. Somatic practice allows us to feel the power we hold and act with integrity. Being in a leadership position provides an opportunity to develop somatic awareness and relationship skills. And when we do, our leadership improves.

If you'd like to learn more or think this information will support your clients, I invite you to pick up a copy of my new book, "How to Hold Power: Becoming a Leader People Love and Respect," published by North Atlantic Books, available October 2023. You can also learn more about how I can help clients develop the body and presence of a leader at pavinimoray.com.



Pavini Moray (they/them) has started, failed, and succeeded at many businesses. As a serial entrepreneur, they have built private practices, a worker collective, and a for-profit company. These experiences have shaped them into an embodied, service-oriented leader. A Montessori educator at heart, Moray has developed a trauma-informed methodology for embodied relationship skills, teaching hundreds of students how to lead and learn. Moray is also a somatic coach specializing in trauma and relationships. Their identity as a queer, trans, non-binary founder gives them insight into outsider culture and accessibility. Moray holds an M.Ed in Curriculum and Design and a Ph.D. in Somatic Psychology.

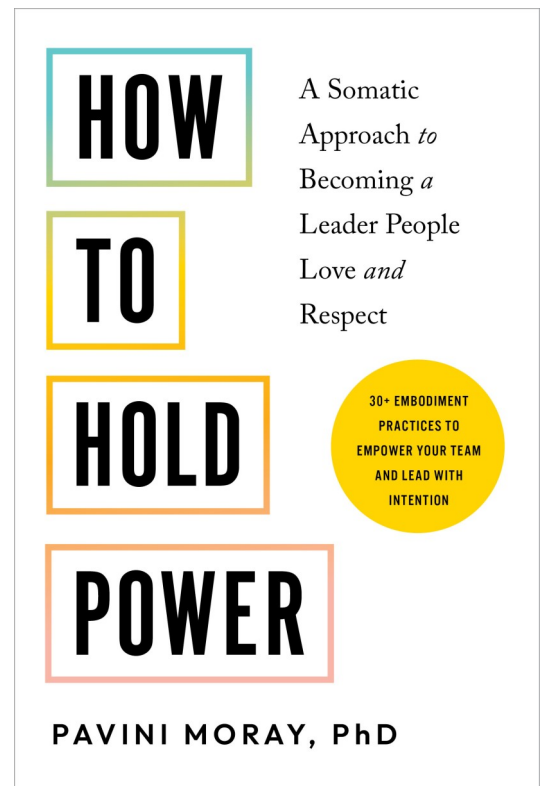


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