

Feeling the System

Numbness, Trauma, Relationality, and Ethical Restoration in Leadership

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We find ourselves in a “time between worlds” – an epoch in which the old paradigm is cracking and new horizons beckon from beyond (Stein, 2019). In such transformational times, leaders face the challenge of how to provide direction, clarity, and inspiration in a world that is falling apart.

Within the current paradigm, the go-to solution in such predicaments has been to improve logical reasoning capabilities and to accumulate more information. Epistemologically, so-called objective facts, data, and “irreducible brute matter” (Whitehead, 1967) have been prioritized by the post-modern materialist worldview. The modus operandi is to expand frontiers and achieve growth and progress above all else (McGilchrist, 2021). A utilitarian ethics has followed, which, exacerbated by technology, has positioned every choice as a means of achieving other instrumental ends (Schindler, 2018; Tyson, 2014).

Many are beginning to sense the limits of the prevailing paradigm. Crises ranging from the mental health crisis (Evans et al., 2018) and the meaning crisis (Vervaeke, Mastropietro, & Miscevic, 2017) to the overarching meta-crisis (Rowson, 2021) are making themselves known. Clearly, the ontologies and capacities that have us got us “here” won’t get us “there”. More effective and appropriate ways of being and knowing are called for in leadership and beyond.

Since the Enlightenment, concepts like “feeling” and “embodied” have been deemed irrelevant obstructions or subjective illusions (McGilchrist, 2021). However, thanks to developments in cognitive and complexity sciences, feelings are coming to be considered as prerequisites for effective action within complex adaptive systems. 4E cognitive science has demonstrated the inextricability of

embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended capacities with cognitive reasoning (Newen, De Bruin, & Gallagher, 2018). Complexity experts describe emotions and feelings as “warm data” (Bateson, 2021) and the “dynamical patterns” (Hufendiek, 2016) that allow a system to be sensed from “within”, rather than talking “about” it from a distance (Bateson, 2021; Scharmer, 2009). Emotions are described as “forms of judgment” (Nussbaum, 2004) that open the possibility of “attending to the possible relational processes within [a] system and between that system and its “environment/s”” (Bateson, 2021). Slowly but surely, academics and practitioners are coming to the realization of what has been unquestioned knowledge in many cultures since the dawn of time: feelings are an inextricable part of what it means to be a living being (Salami, 2020). As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2017) writes:

“Feelings accompany the unfolding of life in our organisms, whatever one perceives, learns, remembers, imagines, reasons, judges, decides, plans, or mentally creates. Regarding feelings as occasional visitors to the mind [...] does not do justice to the ubiquity and functional importance of the phenomenon. [...] There is no *being*, in the proper sense of the term, without a spontaneous mental experience of life, a feeling of existence. The ground zero of *being* corresponds to a deceptively continuous and endless feeling state.”

Clearly, a life without feelings is not a life at all. Being able to feel is very much what *being* and *living* entails in the first place. Emotions are not an add-on, but are an indispensable part of how we make our way through the world. They are necessary both to what are considered the “soft” skills of relating and communicating as well as the “harder” skills of analysis and decision making (McGilchrist, 2009). Contrary to many assumptions of modernity, the structure of emotion has been shown to be prior to the structure of thought (Stein, 2018; Damasio 1994). Emotions and feelings are prerequisites, not obstacles, for rational analysis and decision-making (McGilchrist, 2009; Mercier & Sperber, 2017). Without feelings there is nothing that gives weight to the options on life’s menu (Buchheit & Schamber, 2017). Feelings are the means through which we sense and discern our surroundings and the systems we are part of.

In the context of leadership, sensing and responding appropriately is of paramount importance. In order to respond more adequately to the systems they are embedded within, leaders require capacities that allow them to sense and feel

more of the embodied data at their disposal. For leaders to think and choose better, they need to be able to feel more.

In organizational settings feelings are devalued and often unacknowledged. Leaders assume that they should suppress their feelings and avoid being vulnerable (Inam, 2023). Lifeless machines, robots, and computers are the primary metaphors used to structure organizational language, which eradicates the need or even the possibility to speak about feelings (McGilchrist, 2021). These isolated examples of organizational numbness are in turn symptoms of deeper phenomena, which the lenses of psychology and trauma can shed light on (Maté & Maté, 2022).

Numbness is a normal and natural outcome of the trauma-response (Mollica & Hübl, 2021; Thompson-Hollands, Jun, & Sloan, 2017; Schauer & Elbert, 2010). In traumatic situations of emotional and sensory overwhelm, the nervous system enters a shut-down “dorsal vagal” state, which curtails all but the most essential bodily functions (Porges, 2011). Depressed aliveness, dissociation from the body, and numbness are the result, which dilutes the magnitude of otherwise unmanageable sensations (Thompson-Hollands, Jun, & Sloan, 2017; Schauer & Elbert, 2010). The benefit of this response is that pain is numbed. The cost is that a separation from one’s body, feelings, and environment ensues (Maté & Maté, 2022; Eisenstein, 2013). When exacerbated over decades, this distancing from oneself, one’s feelings, and the world at large become lodged as belief structures (Thompson-Hollands, Jun, & Sloan, 2017). People grow up learning, for example, that the world is “over there”, that the body is merely a vehicle for moving the brain around, and that we are ultimately separate individuals (Eisenstein, 2013; Hübl, 2023; Hübl, 2020).

Numbness can appear to be an absence of feeling, but a more precise definition is that it is an active process of not-feeling (Hübl, 2021). Numbing oneself is not an error or a fault; it is rather an ongoing suppression of unmanageable emotion. This continuous process of not-feeling demands resources. Much like a refrigerator that requires energy in order to keep food chilled, numbing oneself requires energy in order to keep our feelings numb (Hübl, 2021). Many of the energetic resources that could be used for other means (such as creative thinking, presence, compassion, and more) get continually re-invested in a process of keeping oneself numb, distant, and cut-off from the subtleties of the emotional and somatic realm (Maté & Maté, 2022).

The numbing aspect of the trauma-response is, perhaps despite appearances, relevant to leadership. Studies have shown that two-thirds of people report having been subject to at least one adverse or traumatic childhood experience (Dube et al., 2001; La Greca et al., 2008). Growing up in a society that systemically separates and neglects human needs has a traumatic effect in itself (Maté & Maté, 2022). Leaders are molded within these environments as much as anyone else – and some studies suggest that leaders have been relatively overexposed to trauma in their lives (Gloria et al., 2022). Separation and numbness are inevitably part of programming under the hood of today’s organizations and leaders (Hübl, 2020; Eisenstein, 2013; Janni, 2022).

Addressing the prevalence of numbness in leadership is necessary in order to develop more appropriate responses and interventions. If leaders are numb, then part of their capacity to sense their surroundings will be compromised (Janni, 2022). Their decisions will lack an embodied awareness of the contexts they are operating in. Solutions will come through logic and the intellect, but will lack attunement to the prevailing situation and systems (Hübl, 2023). Responses to challenges, ranging from small-scale internal conflicts to global predicaments such as environmental destruction, will remain distant, obtuse, and out-of-sync with the needs of the moment. Leading through numbness in these ways perpetuates societal and organizational permafrost: layers of toxic stress, unresolved conflict, and power-over dynamics will remain frozen and unaddressed. Only when the numbness is noticed, felt, and included can the ice of not-feeling begin to melt (Hübl, 2020).

Being aware of one’s numbness is a notoriously challenging task. Yet it is the first step on the path of dissolving frozen layers of numbness, separation, and defense mechanisms (Hübl, 2023). This process is one of “healing through meeting” (Buber, 1923), which means noticing, honoring, and becoming curious about the numb parts in oneself. As these wounded inner parts are met with precision and care, numbness and separation start to subside and increased feeling and connection ensue (Heller & LaPierre, 2012; Schwartz, 2021). Whether with trained therapists and coaches or in group settings where people simply witness the person speaking, establishing an ecology of relational practices can transform numbness into feeling and embodiment (Vervaeke, 2022). These practices invite the originally wounded and exiled parts of oneself back in from the cold, giving a home to more of oneself again (Schwartz, 2021).

By doing the inner and relational work required to dissolve numbness, people being to sense the nuances of relationality and the “entanglements of living” (Tsing, 2015) of the systems they are embedded within (Hübl, 2020; Scharmer, 2009). By “descending into the abyss” and “straightening oneself out” (Buber, 1923), leaders can move from separate, reductive, instrumental stances to more relational, inclusive, present modes of knowing and leading (McGilchrist, 2021). An epistemological revolution takes place, as information which was invisible or deliberately ignored before now comes into the foreground. Mood, tone, and energy become fundamental data sources for systemic coherence. An ethical restoration follows, as what was previously numb can be felt with emotional and moral weight (Hübl, 2020). Finally, in doing this inner work themselves, leaders develop the capacities to offer the same spaces of healing and transformation for others (Janni, 2022).

Given the state of the world, it is clear that the prevailing paradigm of leadership must evolve. Command and control models of leadership defined by numbness and separation are insufficient to meet the demands of our current predicament, and are a contributing cause to the challenges we face in the first place (Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Hine, 2023). The world requires leaders who are emotionally skilled and attuned enough to sense themselves, their organizational contexts, and the systems they are embedded within with precision and care. By melting the frozen numbness within, leaders can help to unleash rivers of creativity, compassion, and clarity on the parched grounds of our inner and outer worlds.

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