



Esther Cameron

Growing leadership maturity

Unleash the leadership power of your body-mindset!

Most of us don't pay much attention to our bodies when we're at work. We've all usually got far too much to think about. The only time the body gets attention is when it goes wrong or gets sick in some way. Then it's our key focus, and all we want is to feel better.

But this approach is limited, and only gets us so far. This is particularly relevant for leaders. Recent neuroscience research, quoted by [Frederic Laloux](#) (cf. The 'Teal' Organisation), and explained by [Soosalu and Oka](#) in their 2012 article, indicates that leading with your whole body is a more effective way of dealing with complexity and uncertainty than simply using your mind.

Three impressive, powerful brains!

It's now an established scientific fact that every individual has three, fully-functioning, sophisticated neural networks, all of which are complex enough to qualify as a brain. These are located in the head, the heart and the gut. The head is the largest and most familiar, and for organizational leaders is often the most dominant.

However, far from being underpowered, the heart and gut are much more intricate and impressive than most people know. The heart is extremely complex and includes a wide range of types of neurons able to learn, remember, feel and sense. Meanwhile, the gut has as many types of neurotransmitter as can be found in the head, and as well as tapping into multiple chemicals and hormones, it can learn, store memories, and perform complex processes.

These three brains combine to form what one could call your 'body-mindset'. This is a combined, powerful intelligence that many of us are barely in touch with.

Attuning to complexity...

This is all pretty astonishing when you hear it for the first time. It is also incredibly important for 21st



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Century leaders to understand and start to work with. Given today's ever-growing challenges and stresses, getting to know these different brains can help leaders to grow their capacity to lead in a mature and 'complexity-attuned' way.

Staying aware and connected to your body-mindset in this way can help you to develop core capacities that will help you to lead in this [ever more complex world](#): thinking and sensing much longer-term, developing more ease with inter-dependencies across multiple boundaries and growing the ability to tolerate and work with unresolvable paradoxes.

Discovering your Head, Heart and Belly

So rather than start to describe the leadership relevance of each of these three brains (as the head might prefer), I invite you to explore. Take a moment right now to check-in with your own body-mindset and see if you can start to become more aware of these three centres.

The Belly: the centre of mobilization

Let's start with the gut, or the belly. Close your eyes, and place your hand, quite firmly, just below your belly-button. Maintain a focus in this area for a minute or so and notice anything you feel in terms of sensations. Maybe you sense a readiness, or perhaps some anxiety. Or both. These sensations can range from quite a lot, to nothing at all. This is all fine. Just allow it.

The belly centre can give us a solid, grounded, bodily sense of ourselves and what we need to do now. As the centre of mobilization, when it is in good order, a leader tends to feel robust and is able to take clear action to get things done. On a bad day however, when the belly gets out of alignment with our head and heart, it can take us crashing into action that's not thought-through, or attuned to our values or relationships.

The Heart: the centre of emotion

Let's change focus to the heart. Place your right hand on your heart, just to the left of your left



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breastbone, and breathe gently into it. As before, see what it's like to keep your focus there. Does your heart feel warm and open, or is it firm and protected? Maybe you don't feel much at all. Again, that's all absolutely fine.

The heart centre processes your emotions, passions and priorities, and allows you to pay attention to the quality of your relationships with others. For leaders, the heart brain helps them to build relationships and trust, and engage peoples' passions. If the heart centre is closed down, this can result in a leader being either hyper-sensitive or tentative, or aggressive and punishing of others.

The Head: the centre of thinking

Now take both hands and place them on your skull, with the thumbs together at the place where the back of your skull meets your neck. Just rub your thumbs there, quite softly, for a minute or so. What do you notice? Do you start to relax a bit? Or perhaps you feel a little 'spaced-out'. This is all fine too.

The head centre is good at analyzing things, making sense of what's going on and bringing clarity. This centre, when in good shape, brings conceptual sharpness, insight and next steps cut-through. On a bad day, if this centre is working too hard, it can make a leader seem remote or fuzzy and over-ponderous. The gentle thumb-rubbing relaxes the tendency of the head to try to override the other centres.

In many leaders, the head centre tends to like to be in control. But the reality is that the head, heart and belly centres all operate independently, and there's no boss. As a leader, you need to learn how to attune to all three, and enable them to align. This will bring you rich information to work with, and your body is likely to feel more supple and healthy too.

Practicing 'immediacy' as a leader

Alignment requires regular sensing into all three centres maybe twice a day and seeing what's there. This is sometimes referred to as 'practising immediacy'. Signs of progress, according to [Bill Torbert](#) who has



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dedicated himself to supporting this type of maturity in leaders, are:

- i) you find fewer and fewer surprises when you check-in with yourself mentally, emotionally and physically
- ii) it takes less time to describe how you feel about things as they happen
- iii) you start to notice yourself rushing and reacting to events with sudden actions, and experiment with letting yourself digest what's happened before deciding on next steps
- iv) you find yourself being more curious about and less resistant to the points of view of others
- v) you notice yourself becoming less foggy in your awareness of what's happening (or more foggy, because you are more aware of the fog).

You can find out more about how to develop your leadership maturity and your 'body-mindset' in Esther Cameron's latest book, [Essential Leadership](#).

You can also watch this video, and hear me talking about how to keep in contact with your head, heart and belly.

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