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VOL.2, NO.2 - MARCH/APRIL 2006

featured article

Book Excerpt: Resonance or Dissonance

The Leader's Choice

By Annie McKee and Fran Johnston

Karl was once a managing partner in a well-known professional services firm, a bright, successful leader with a rosy future. But when we met him he was on a kind of probation, with his career just about over. How did this happen to a man who once seemed so promising?

A combination of mounting pressure at work and at home meant that Karl, although working harder than ever, soon stopped doing some of the key things he had always relied on to create resonance and to inspire those around him. He paid less attention to the dynamics between his co-workers; he stopped taking into account other people's emotions; he began to openly resent colleagues and clients alike.

The stress spilled over into his private life, where he started to become reckless with money and spent more nights out drinking with young associates. His work had started to suffer—making bad decisions, alienating people and generally creating dissonance in the workplace—while his management team despaired of his behavior. But Karl, who was as smart as he had ever been, was baffled as to where things had gone wrong.

Why Good Leaders Slip: Power Stress and the Sacrifice Syndrome

Karl was experiencing power stress—a unique brand of stress that is an integral part of being a leader. The unending day-to-day crises, complex decisions, responsibilities and the loneliness that comes with occupying the top spot put huge pressure on leaders—and add up to a chronic, slow burning strain that is often interrupted by bouts of acute stress.

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But stress has always been part of the leader's reality and always will be. It is not power stress that is the problem in itself, but lack of recovery time, or the effective management of the stress. Worse, many successful leaders literally bury themselves in their jobs in times of trouble, often compounding problems elsewhere in their lives. Falling victim to power stress and sacrificing oneself continuously to one's job, while seeing things slip at home as Karl did, is how formerly resonant leaders slip into dissonance.

When this happens, dissonance becomes the default—for the leader personally, and for those around him. The physical and emotional toll of leadership and its continual stress undermines people's ability to sustain effective performance. At this point, leaders are in danger of becoming trapped in a vicious syndrome of stress, dysfunctional responses, and more stress—what is called the Sacrifice Syndrome.

To make this worse, some organizations actually encourage dissonant behavior in the workplace, believing it will get short-term results. This is dangerous and destructive, because emotions are literally contagious, and when a leader is in the grips of the Sacrifice Syndrome, the dissonance he creates will spread to those around him. On the flip side, resonant leaders are so much more effective and pleasant to work with not only in themselves, but also because they inspire hope and motivation in those around them.

Sustaining Resonance Through Renewal

Leadership has never been more stressful than in the 21st century, and the challenges never more daunting. We live in an increasingly unstable and dangerous world, and in a society in the midst of profound transformation on all levels. Resonant leaders are more needed than ever.

We all recognize resonant leadership when we experience it—leaders who are able to inspire those around them, create a positive work environment and produce great results. But what is it that makes a good leader great?

Leaders cannot sustain effectiveness if they cannot sustain themselves. And if we, as leaders, are to sustain effectiveness, we must avoid slipping into dissonance and learn how to manage what is known as the Cycle of Sacrifice and Renewal.

For busy executives little value is placed on the holistic process of renewal, of developing self-awareness in body, mind and soul, which allows us to sustain resonance in the face of the never-ending challenges of leadership. True renewal relies on three key elements that may at first sound "soft," but are in fact essential in supporting the tough work of becoming a resonant leader. These three elements are: mindfulness, hope and compassion.

Mindfulness means being awake and aware of ourselves and the world and people around us.

Hope enables us to believe in an attainable and optimistic vision of the future and to move towards our goals, while inspiring others to do the same.

Compassion allows us to understand people's wants and needs and to act on those feelings.

However, cultivating the capacity for mindfulness, hope and compassion—and thereby resonant leadership—is not something that just happens. Most of us have to engage in a process of intentional change, an honest assessment of where we are now and where we would like to be in the future, including what we need to learn and/or change to make it happen. This is the hardest part of achieving resonant leadership, but on the other hand, people who think they can be truly great leaders without engaging in personal transformation are only fooling themselves.

Let's look at "Ellen," one leader who woke up to the need to change and recaptured resonance. Ellen is a general manager of a small business within a Fortune 500 company

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that makes a variety of automotive and truck parts. Following a series of fast-track promotions and rave performance reviews, she was brought down to earth when a new HR manager handed her a list of comments people had made about her in their exit interviews following a period of layoffs.

The list said things like, "I can't trust Ellen." "She doesn't care about her people, she only cares about results." "She expects a lot out of people without taking time to develop them." Although devastated, Ellen did not bury her head in the sand. She went to talk to her boss, who reiterated his pleasure at her results, but also said: "You have to get your people to be as results-driven and passionate as you are—then you'll be 10 times more successful."

This was Ellen's wake-up call, and over the next few weeks as she crafted a vision of her future she came to realize that her new mission was to get results through others. She worked with a coach to refine her image of her ideal self and agreed that she needed to focus on the problem she had showing empathy in the workplace. She engaged in long conversations and exercises with her coach that enabled her to explore empathy and practice it at work and at home. Ellen developed mindfulness and began to tap into her natural (but recently dampened) hope, optimism, empathy and compassion for the people around her.

She also asked for her next two promotions to be in staff positions, where she had to use her interpersonal sensitivity and skills to get things done. Some years later, she took on the job of general manager of the business unit with over 100 people reporting to her. Ellen's latest 360-degree feedback included comments such as "inspirational" and "exciting" to describe her leadership.

Ellen has become a resonant and emotionally intelligent leader, but it took hard work and an engagement in intentional change to achieve this transformation.

Creating resonance in ourselves and with those around us may be the most important choice a leader can make. It doesn't happen by accident: the pressures of the job, against the backdrop of ever-increasing complexity, can push even the best leaders into dissonance. But, through mindfully attending to ourselves and others, and engaging consciously in practices that counter the effects of stress—such as living with hope and practicing compassion—leaders can avoid the natural slide into dissonance and sustain effectiveness over time.

Resonant leaders are in tune with those around them. In addition to knowing and managing themselves well, they manage others' emotions and build strong, trusting relationships. They know that emotions are contagious, and that their own emotions are powerful drivers of people's moods and ultimately, performance. They know that resonance will bring personal effectiveness over the long term and leads to results through inspiring and motivating others.

Editor's Note: This article is an adaptation of Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion, by Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee (Harvard Business School Press, 2005). Special thanks to Tara FitzGerald for her contributions to this article.

