

Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion: A Leader's Road Map to Renewal¹

How does a leader quell the everyday, inner conflicts caused by the heavy responsibility, the need for constant self-control and the inevitable crises – and still remain an effective leader? One could answer, “Not easily,” and be right. These authors have excellent suggestions for calming and resolving that turmoil – and for going beyond to remain an effective, highly resonant leader.

By Annie McKee, Frances Johnston and Richard Massimilian

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As CEO of Italy's UniCredit Banca, Roberto Nicastro stands out.² Barely in his 40s, he has a quick smile and restless inclination to act that makes him seem to be in perpetual motion. Nicastro's business acumen, emotional intelligence and energy enabled the bank to establish lucrative partnerships with major financial institutions in Central and Eastern Europe, and he had a very promising future. He and his family were happy. To the observer, Nicastro “had it all.”

But in quiet moments of honest reflection, Nicastro knew he was not “there” yet. The press of daily life and leadership felt a bit like a roller coaster, and, while he found his work exciting, he was beginning to realize that leadership was stressful and lonely. The constant crises,

heavy responsibilities and perpetual need to influence people were causing him the kind of pressure that our bodies are not equipped to deal with over extended time periods. As a result of this pressure, some leaders simply burn up or burn out. Nicastro intended to do neither.

Nicastro was -- and is -- a resonant leader, charting new paths and inspiring people with clarity of vision and optimism. But leaders cannot sustain their effectiveness if they cannot sustain themselves, and Nicastro was aware of disquiet and unrest simmering below the surface. This is not at all unusual: many leaders have to cope with pressure day in and day out, year after year. In essence, leaders must deal with “power stress” caused by a combination of responsibility, constant self-control and the inevitable crises, both small and large, that the leadership role demands.

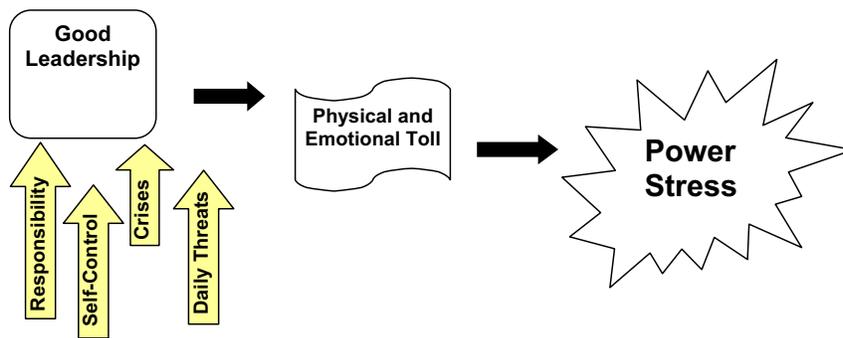
When leaders face power stress over the long term and cannot find ways to manage its downside, they risk becoming trapped in the Sacrifice Syndrome, a vicious circle leading to mental and physical distress, and sometimes even executive burnout.³ He or she may find that things begin to slip at work and/or at home: small problems may seem more than usually troublesome; relationships may become strained; self-confidence may slip and physical health may suffer as well. Some people may even begin to act out; they may make rash decisions, act impulsively or do things that seem to contradict their values.

But that's not all. Emotions are literally contagious, and when leaders are in the grip of the Sacrifice Syndrome, the dissonance they create will spread to those around them. Nicastro recognized this long before it became a problem, but he also saw that he needed to *do something* to

avoid succumbing to the pressures of his role. Rather than letting dissonance take over, Nicastro embarked upon a journey toward *renewal*, deliberately countering the Sacrifice Syndrome through consciously changing his habits and patterns. Nicastro’s particular journey is, of course, unique to him. But the renewal journey is available to anyone willing to take it on. Let’s look at how this works.

Activity in the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) increases; activity in the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) subsides. The PSNS activates a set of hormones that lower blood pressure and strengthen the immune system. Given the demands and pressures of leadership, it is only through balancing stress with renewal that resonant leadership can be sustained.

Figure 1: Dissonance is the Default



The road to renewal: Mindfulness, hope and compassion

True renewal relies on three key elements that may initially sound too “soft” to be part of the hard work of leadership, but in actual fact are absolutely essential if a leader is to sustain resonance. The first element is *mindfulness*, or living in a state of full, conscious awareness of one’s whole self, other people, and the context in which we live and work. In effect, mindfulness means being awake, aware and constantly attending to ourselves and to the

world around us. The second element, *hope*, enables us to believe our vision of the future is attainable, and to move toward our goals while inspiring others to reach for their dreams as well. When we experience the third critical element for renewal, *compassion*, we understand people’s wants and needs and feel motivated to act on our concern.

Managing the cycle of sacrifice and renewal

On our best days, when we feel in control, rested and hopeful, most of us are effective leaders, able to sustain resonance and the relationships we need to do our jobs well. But too often, this equilibrium is lost. Our relationships aren’t what we want them to be, our bodies suffer from fatigue, illness or neglect, and our judgment becomes impaired. What is going on, and what can we do to help ourselves be at our best most of the time? Leadership is stressful, and researchers have clearly articulated the impact of stress on the human body. Stress increases the electrical activity in the right prefrontal cortex and releases hormones that activate the “fight or flight” response. Our bodies go on high alert and respond accordingly. Ideally, our bodies need time to rest and assimilate these stress hormones and physiological responses. But in today’s leadership environment, the stress is ever-present, and we don’t get a break from it. For this reason, leaders need to intentionally manage themselves to address the stress and create ways of renewing themselves.

Mindfulness starts with *self-awareness*: knowing yourself enables you to make choices about how you respond to people and situations. Deep knowledge about yourself enables you to be consistent, to present yourself authentically. As importantly, mindfulness allows you to notice the subtle clues that tell you to attend carefully to self, others or your surroundings. Nicastro did just that—he noticed small but important changes in the way he felt and in people’s response to him. He woke up to the fact that things might need to change a bit.

Renewal occurs as different parts of the limbic brain are activated to offset those parts aroused under stress.

Nicastro was not driven to change by any sort of fear of impending failure; he wanted to build on his strengths. The spark that ignited his commitment to change was the desire to be the *best person* he could be.⁴ He imagined an ideal future for himself and his family, as well as success in his leadership role. Reflecting deeply and talking with friends and colleagues, he took stock of his current

situation. As he looked at himself holistically -- mind, body, heart and spirit -- he came to the surprising conclusion that some of his greatest strengths were becoming liabilities.

Nicastro's creativity, energy and ambition were the source of much of his success, but as he looked more carefully at himself and his leadership, he saw that these strengths were also at the root of some problems. His adrenalin was constantly pumping. He was in a physiological state of high alert most of the time, and he realized that his intensity and pace were at the core of some of the internal unrest and stress he was experiencing.

Moreover, his action-oriented style was beginning to create problems in his work relationships. His tendency to move rapidly from one goal to the next, and to constantly generate new ideas and projects, was becoming overwhelming for some people. He saw that he moved too fast, that some people experienced him as impatient or even dismissive, and that he could lose sight of the people around him.

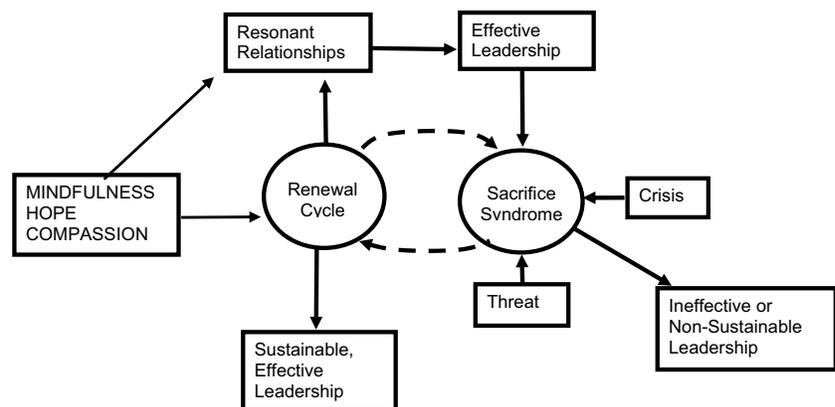
Seeing yourself as others see you and honestly considering your impact on people is probably one of the most difficult developmental challenges. But openness is key to personal transformation; without openness, professional development is virtually impossible. This is why it is essential to cultivate mindfulness as a habit, a lifelong practice. Without attention to self and others, many of us begin to act like frogs in boiling water: Drop a frog into a pot of boiling water, and it will immediately jump out, but place a frog in a pot of cool water and gradually raise the temperature, and the frog will remain in the water, unaware of the rising temperature -- until it is too late.

It's easy for leaders to become boiling frogs. First, many leaders are quite resilient, and even train themselves to ignore stress and its effects. Second, it is a natural human tendency to see only what we want to see, particularly when we are under stress. And when caught in the grips of the Sacrifice Syndrome, many people just can't handle any more pressure; they will actively (if unconsciously)

seek to deny problems. Third, people rarely give honest feedback to leaders. Few are brave enough to confront a leader when dissonance is taking over.

So, cultivating mindfulness -- habits and practices that allow for reflection and attending to self and others -- is a necessary antidote to the narrowed focus that comes

Figure 2: The Cycle of Sacrifice and Renewal



with the Sacrifice Syndrome. Mindfulness allows us to ask, Am I acting in concert with my values? Am I the leader I aspire to be? How am I doing managing the stress of my current situation? How are my key people feeling these days? Are we in sync with each other? Questions like these help you to maintain continually and consistently your equilibrium and values, and attend to subtle messages from the people you lead. Consistent practice of this discipline establishes trust and helps create an environment in which you get proactive feedback, nurture authentic relationships and foster reliable followers.

But mindfulness in and of itself is not enough. Part of managing the cycle of Sacrifice and Renewal is being able to articulate and believe in a hopeful, yet feasible vision of the future. Such an optimistic outlook, coupled with belief that we can, indeed, impact our environment and seek our goals, is a powerful driver of renewal.

Hope, like other positive emotions, has a positive impact on our brains and hormones. It affects our perceptions of the events around us, so that we tend to see things more positively. Such contemplation then slows

breathing, lowers blood pressure, strengthens the immune system and engages the parasympathetic nervous system. We feel calm, happy, amused and optimistic. We are up for the challenges ahead.

And hope is contagious: leaders who believe in the future will inspire their co-workers to do the same, thus creating a resonant environment even when things are tough. This is especially important in times of crisis, as hopeful people are better able, both physically and mentally, to cope with challenges.

As Nicastro articulated his vision for his life, he began to see that it was possible for him to become content *and* to achieve his goals and dreams. This gave him the impetus to turn his drive for excellence inward, on himself, and to slow down long enough to look at what in his life might help him realize his vision and what might get in the way. His hope for the future motivated him to spend several months seeking input, and deciding which strengths to leverage and what he needed to change.

Our experience in working with leaders such as Nicastro, who demonstrate the power of hope every day, has led us to three key lessons:

- The leader needs to have dreams and aspirations, but also to be in touch with the people who surround him or her. This helps to form a desired image of the future that can be shared.
- The leader needs to be optimistic and believe in his or her ability to effect change.
- The leader must see the desired future as realistic.

Attending to self and others, and engaging a positive, hopeful attitude, are two ways to engage physiological and psychological renewal. And there is one more element of renewal: this third element, compassion, is not often considered to be a critical component of leadership, but in fact it has everything to do with business and leadership. Compassion is a fundamental human experience that sparks both personal renewal and organizational resonance

Compassion, then, is the third key to renewal. Some might ask whether compassion has a place at work -- shouldn't it be left to the philosophers? Paradoxically, compassion is natural. Why? Because compassion starts with curiosity -- about other people, what motivates them, and how the world outside of our own actually works. As any parent knows, children are naturally curious. It is

only as we age that our natural curiosity is often replaced by an ersatz wisdom masquerading as worldly sophistication. We become so certain that we know other people, and how the world works, that our ability to be pleasantly surprised and even delighted wanes, withers or expires. Compassion, then, by definition, involves a renewal of the innate curiosity with which we were born.

Effective leaders are in tune with people. Being in tune with others involves *caring* about them, and caring is what invokes the curiosity, respect and real empathy that constitute compassion. We define compassion as having three components:

- Understanding of, and empathy for, others' feelings and experiences
- Caring for others
- Willingness to act on those feelings of care and empathy

Being open to one another enables us to face tough times with creativity and resilience. Empathy enables us to connect with people and understand what moves them. It helps us to get things done and to deal with the stress and sacrifices inherent in leadership. When we consistently act based on real understanding of others, and with care and concern, our relationships grow and deepen. This can also help ameliorate the isolation and alienation many leaders feel.

Leaders have power over people -- if not formally, certainly emotionally and psychologically. And this can be a lonely experience, as power can create distance between people. However, compassion and power are not mutually exclusive. Quite the opposite: the benevolent expression of genuine caring for people is empowering for both the leader and the follower. In fact, one of the ways in which we suggest that leaders can develop compassion is through coaching -- engaging people in a process of development and growth. In helping another this way, a leader cannot help but experience compassion, and he or she may also create resonance in the relationship. As Nicastro became more self-aware, he became more aware of the people around him and his impact on them. He began to understand better the source of some of the tension that seemed to be interfering with otherwise positive relationships. This in turn led him to try to manage his intensity and creativity, and to attune himself to the needs and concerns of the people around him.

Nicastro now manages himself much better around the people with whom he works. He rarely overwhelms people with new plans and projects because he is now more apt to pick up the subtle clues that tell him to slow down. He has learned to control his impulses, to manage his emotions and his strengths so that his best ideas are presented to people when they are most ready.

Nicastro's journey of renewal through developing his capacity for mindfulness, hope and compassion has enabled him to consciously manage his strengths and leverage his talent and energy. He has learned how to use his many talents consciously so that his enthusiasm and passion are not a liability, but a source of inspiration for others. In addition, Nicastro's internal state is much healthier as well; he is calmer, more in control of his desires and more content as a person.

The journey to renewal is available to anyone willing to embark upon it. But personal change of this order is not easy. Many people respond to the pressure inherent in leadership by working harder and doing more of the

same. That is like turning up the heat on a kettle in danger of boiling over. The real solution lies in renewal, which is a function of our individual capacity for mindfulness, hope and compassion.

Being honest with oneself is the first -- and hardest -- step toward renewal. Through mindfulness, we learn to reflect, and to attend to both the quiet voice inside and the subtle clues from others and our environment, which can steer us in the right direction. Through hope, we reinvigorate ourselves and inspire others. Through compassion, we spark physiological and psychological renewal, while building strong, trusting and meaningful relationships. Consciously attending to ourselves and to those around us, including the communities where we work and play, can pay important dividends to ourselves, our relationships and the organizations we serve. **■**

¹ Adapted from *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion* Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee (Boston: Harvard Business School Press,

2005). Special thanks to Tara FitzGerald and Kathleen Brannan for their excellent contributions to this article

² All information regarding Roberto Nicastro is drawn from personal correspondence with the authors and presented here with permission. A version of this case is presented in: Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion*.

³ For a thorough review of research and literature on stress, power stress, and leadership see Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion*.

⁴ For a review of the Intentional Change Model, see Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

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See also Richard Bayatzis and Ellen Van Oosten, A leadership imperative: Building the emotionally intelligent organization in the *Ivey Business Journal*, January/February 2003.

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