

Resonance and Leadership: Inspiring through Hope and Vision



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Dr Anne McKee delivered the Singapore Institute of Management's 24th Annual Management Lecture recently. She outlined the why resonance in leadership makes the difference between "true" leadership and mere management.



IN HER first Singapore engagement, Dr Anne McKee shared provocative new ideas from her newly released book, *Resonant Leadership*, co-authored with Richard Boyatzis. She melded research and dialogue from diverse fields—management, psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy—as a way to understand how people can develop Emotional Intelligence (EI) and sustain resonance in themselves and with others, through a conscious process of renewal.

McKee is co-chair of the Teleos Leadership Institute, an international consulting firm serving leaders of *Fortune* 100 businesses and major not-for-profit organisations such as the United Nations. She also serves

on the faculty of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, and teaches at the Wharton School's Aresty Institute of Executive Education.

In the backdrop of a new millennium and new challenges facing leaders, McKee believes that never before has change happened so completely or so globally. She says: "Our institutions face daunting challenges. There are profound transformations in organisational models. Operations these days are far more complex. The rise of the information age has resulted in the technological proliferation of work."

These changes call for a new kind of leadership. These are leaders who are attuned—mind, body, heart, and spirit. They inspire through hope and vision. They create resonance. The main issue is not poor leadership. "People understand the 'what' of leadership; the strategy, implementation, management, and control. What only a few understand is the 'how' of leadership. This involves moving people through guiding emotions and passion. Resonant leaders are adept at painting compelling pictures that inspire their subordinates," explains McKee.

She stresses that staff need their leaders to function as "emotional shock absorbers": "In other words, they want them to be resonant, people that they can trust and relate to. Employees increasingly expect their leaders to act with integrity and to be emotionally available, able to relate to them and to understand their concerns, while at the same time they may be fighting for the survival of their company in a turbulent economy."

Employees also realise that leaders are becoming increasingly more vulnerable due to the increased institutional fragility caused by the rapid changes that can take place in the global economy and the shocks that they can deliver to companies.

The ways in which leaders handle shocks and surprises can be a major determinant of a company's survival. The way they do so can resonate through out the organisation and beyond. Being able to control their emotions—as an emotionally intelligent leader—helps them to send the right messages to their people and to external stakeholders.

A leader's ability to tap into and know their workers' feelings and to articulate how he or she is responding to major events in ways that instil confidence and inspire association with the action being taken, are key behaviours that enable leaders to resonate with their people.

To be great, a leader needs to understand the market, the technology, the people, and a multitude of other factors affecting the organisation. While this knowledge is necessary, it is not sufficient to produce sustainable, effective leadership. This is where resonance comes into play.

Emotions

Most managers operate on false assumptions about how to lead. They feel that being intelligent is enough. Most managers believe that good leaders are tough enough to take constant pressure. They do not attribute any importance to emotions.

"The truth is that emotions are contagious. We don't leave our emotions at the door when we report for work. If you are having personal problems those emotions affect your work. Similarly, no one can sustain constant sacrifice. Leaders need renewal too.

Emotional Intelligence is the difference between a resonant leader and a mere manager," says McKee.

Leaders who can create resonance are people who either intuitively understand or have worked hard to develop EI—namely, the competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. In addition to knowing and managing themselves well, emotionally intelligent leaders manage others' emotions and build strong, trusting relationships.

Such leaders know emotions are contagious and that their own emotions are powerful drivers of their people's moods and, ultimately, performance. They understand that while fear and anger may mobilise people in the short term, these emotions backfire quickly, leaving people distracted, anxious, and ineffective.

Resonant leaders inspire through demonstrating passion, commitment, and deep concern for people and the organisational vision. They give us courage and hope, and help us to become the best that we can be.

The problem is that being resonant is not so easy, and sustaining it is even harder. Why is resonance so difficult? We think it has something to do with the nature of the job and how we manage it. Even the best leaders—those who can create resonance—must give of themselves constantly.

For many people, especially the busy executives and managers, little value is placed on renewal, or developing practices—habits of mind, body, and behaviour—that enable us to create and sustain resonance in the face of unending challenges, year in and year out.

McKee stresses that it is just the opposite: "Many organisations overvalue certain kinds of destructive behaviour and tolerate discord and mediocre leadership for a very long time, especially if a person appears to produce results. Not much time—or encouragement—is given for cultivating skills and practices that will counter the effects of our stressful roles."

Good leadership begins with EI. Intelligence or intellectual capability is basically linked to cognitive ability. This is to do with pattern recognition that helps good managers differentiate and operate. EI accounts for 85 to 90 per cent of the difference between outstanding and average leaders.

McKee says that in studies of different professions, high EI personnel outperformed average performers. For example, programmers in the top 10 per cent of EI exceeded average performers by 320 per cent in programme development. Insurance agents with high EI sold twice the premium value as average performers. Sales results for staff in the top 10 per cent of EI were twice that of average staff.

Emotions play a bigger part than people think. They affect culture and climate, which account for about 30 per cent of business performance. People "feed" off each other's emotions. McKee explains: "The brain has an open loop system that allows us to pick subtle clues from one another. That is why although we are not always conscious of the messages we are sending or receiving, we are very good at understanding each other's unspoken feelings."

This is why we tend to be influenced by resonant leaders. Resonant leaders drive emotions in a positive direction through hope, compassion, enthusiasm, and excitement. They bring out the best in us partly through creating a culture where people thrive. Leaders who create resonance get results.

"We are drawn to leaders who exude passion, optimism, enthusiasm, compassion, and hope. We want to be with these people, they inspire us to give of ourselves, to strive to be and do our best," says McKee.

Stress impairs cognitive functioning. Leaders who are impaired with stress can be termed dissonant leaders. They wreak havoc as they are volatile and reactive. Often they drive people too hard, for the wrong reasons, and are unaware of the damage that they do.

In such a climate of dissonance, *Figure 1* shows how the 10 deadly sins manifest themselves in the individual and organisational culture.

Figure 1: 10 Deadly Sins in Individuals and Organisational Culture

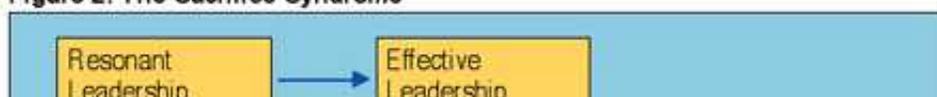
Individual	Culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insecurity • Destructive emotions • Inauthentic behaviour • Cynicism, and • Mindlessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Me first • Win-lose • Short term • Anything goes, and • Cruelty

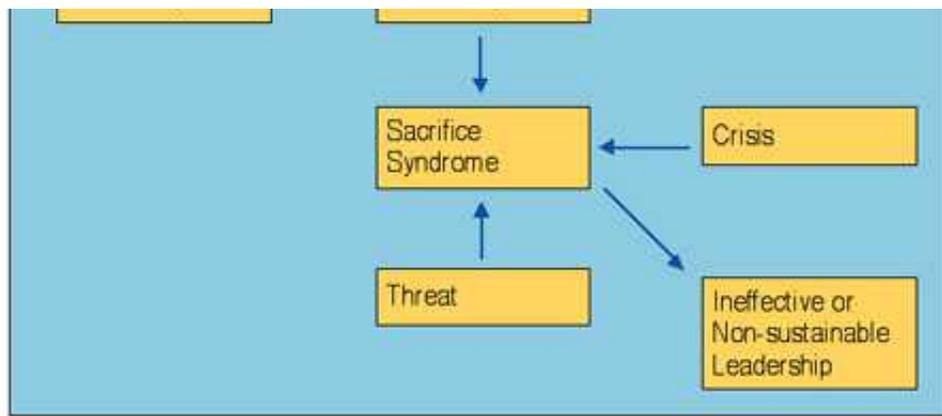
Resonant leaders create environments where we can do our best and offer both courage and hope. But the truth is that good leaders cannot take constant pressure. Over time and unchecked, the physical and emotional toll of leadership limits our ability to sustain high performance and resonance.

Sacrifice Syndrome

Talented, smart, high-energy people give a lot, strive for excellence, manage impulses, and are highly effective—but over time, dissonance is the default, given the sacrifices of leadership. McKee calls this the Sacrifice Syndrome as shown in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: The Sacrifice Syndrome





When caught in the Sacrifice Syndrome, leaders become dispirited, act in unhealthy ways, disregard deeply held values, and tend to burn out. Most leaders in such a situation try to cope rather than find a cure. They try harder by working harder, increasing both intensity and pace. Switch to oversimplification, where they have tunnel vision to concentrate on what is at hand rather than the "big picture". They switch to defensive routines where they blame others and take bigger risks.

When leaders sacrifice too much for too long and reap too little, they are often cut off from support and relationships with people. McKee explains: "Our bodies are not equipped to deal with this kind of pressure day after day. Over time, we become exhausted—we burn out or burn up. The constant small crises, heavy responsibilities, and perpetual need to influence people can be a heavy burden, so much so that leaders find themselves trapped in the Sacrifice Syndrome and slip into internal disquiet, unrest, and distress. In other words, dissonance becomes the default, even for leaders who can create resonance."

And, because emotions are contagious, dissonance spreads quickly to those around and eventually permeates organisations. Dissonant leaders wreak havoc. They are at the mercy of volatile emotions and reactivity. They drive people too hard, for the wrong reasons, and in the wrong directions. They leave frustration, fear, and antagonism in their wake. And they are often completely unaware of the damage they have done.

Stress has always been part of the leader's reality and always will be. The problem is too little recovery time. Many leaders fail to manage the Cycle of Sacrifice and Renewal that must be regulated in order to maintain resonance. What can we do? To sustain effectiveness once it has been achieved, we need to manage the syndrome of sacrifice, stress, and dissonance—not be its victims. Using renewal to return to resonance again and again is the key.

So, sacrifice, if unchecked, leads to less effective leadership and dissonance, even

when intentions are good and even if we are capable of resonant leadership. To counter the sacrifice syndrome, McKee says we have to manage the cycle of sacrifice and renewal.

Keys to Renewal

Renewal relies on three key elements that might at first sound too soft to support the hard work of being a resonant leader. But they are absolutely essential; without them, leaders cannot sustain resonance in themselves or with others. 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.

The second element, hope, enables us to believe that the future we envision is attainable, and to move toward our visions and goals while inspiring others toward those goals 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 feelings.

Renewal is a conscious process that invokes physiological and psychological changes. It counters the effects of chronic stress and sacrifice. It begins with mindfulness, hope, and compassion. People who cultivate mindfulness have more cognitive flexibility, creativity, and problem skills.

Mindfulness engages our passion and builds on positive emotional states. It lets leaders catch problems before they become serious by letting them recognise when they are heading down the wrong path.

Hope is contagious. Resonant leaders offer optimism and the belief that their vision will be attainable. It is an emotional magnet that keeps people going even in the midst of challenges. A leader's hopeful outlook enables people to see beyond today's challenges to tomorrow's answers.

People often wonder if compassion has a role in business. McKee counters that compassion leads to a more positive organisational culture. It affects how the organisation performs. It enables us to face tough times with creativity and resilience. It connects with people, helping them deal with power stress, sacrifice, and helps get things done.

Key to compassion is deep listening. Resonant leaders use this skill to develop mutual understanding that is itself a manifestation of compassion. Such resonance within an organisation is a vehicle for renewal and moves people and organisations to service.

It develops a steady stream of effective leaders as resonant leaders provide support and counsel on a variety of issues through an environment where they teach

leadership and even management skills.

Leaders today face unprecedented challenges that can result in a vicious cycle of stress, pressure, sacrifice, and dissonance. To counter the inevitable challenges of leadership roles, we need to engage in a conscious process of renewal both on a daily basis and over time.

To do so, most of us need to intentionally transform our approach to managing ourselves, and we need to learn new behaviours—practices that enable us to maintain internal resonance and attunement with those we lead. As leaders we need to cultivate mindfulness and learn to engage the experiences of hope and compassion. Leaders must focus deliberately on creating resonance within themselves—mind, body, heart, and spirit—and then channel their resonance to the people and groups around them.

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