



Hope. Mindfulness. Renewal. Relationship management. These terms may sound like the elements of a marriage encounter, but they are also at the heart of the emerging concept of “resonant leadership.”

The term resonant leader was popularized in a 2002 book titled *Primal Leadership*, written by Daniel Goleman, father of the concept of emotional intelligence, along with emotional intelligence researchers Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee.

In that book, they argued that an organization responds to the energy and enthusiasm of its leader. If the leader expresses a positive attitude, an organization tends to thrive; if a leader spreads negative emotions, the organization struggles. Because emotions are “open loop” (positive emotions beget more positive emotions and vice versa) and “contagious,” the leader’s emotional impact can resonate throughout the organization. In other words, they defined the connections by which the emotional intelligence of the leader—whether CEO or manager, coach or politician—translated to the success of the enterprise.

Since then, Boyatzis and McKee have continued their research in this field. In their recent book, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion*, they have come up with surprising recommendations for what it takes to achieve—and sustain—resonant leadership.

As Boyatzis explained in an interview, the goal of the book was to look at leadership with a lowercase “l,” meaning not just corporate management, but leadership within any kind of organization, including families and other social groups. What emerged was an even more basic concept, which he refers to as “leadership around your own life.”

What Boyatzis and McKee found is the emotional intel-

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ligence required not only to create but also to sustain resonant leadership embraces two fairly distinct packages of skills—hence the dichotomous topics in the book’s subtitle: “renewing yourself” and “connecting with others.”

Leadership as Relationship

Building on their work in *Primal Leadership*, Boyatzis and McKee expand the notion of the resonant leader as one who has developed the emotional intelligence to connect with and sustain relationships with his or her team in order to be able to manage the emotional content of the organization.

As Boyatzis puts it, “Leaders who can create resonance are people who either intuitively understand or have worked hard to develop emotional intelligence—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.”

A great leader, he says, is not a person, “it’s a relationship.”

Though challenging enough to achieve that level of resonant leadership, the problem of sustaining it is even more difficult. Added to the normal stress of leadership is a growing list of demands—both internal and external—that is placed on leaders these days. When leaders try to meet those demands by giving more and more time and energy without attending to themselves, they can slip into what Boyatzis and McKee call the “sacrifice syndrome,” resulting in dissonance rather than resonance.

Dissonance is the Default

The sacrifice syndrome is a vicious cycle in which the stress of sustaining a leadership role—whether resonant or not—coupled with some unexpected problems or crises, starts someone down a path of burnout. There are numerous physical manifestations, including gastrointestinal disorders, high blood pressure and a weakened immune system. But more importantly for the leader, burnout leads to negative emotions. Even the most resonant leader, someone who has worked hard to build up the relationships and emotional foundation to be an inspiration to their team, can find her or his leadership style suddenly turning “dissonant”—where fear and anger replace more positive and empathic emotions.

“Dissonance is the default,” says Boyatzis. It is the norm for most leaders in most organizations. Overcoming it is the key to sustaining resonant leadership.

Battling the Sacrifice Syndrome

Being able to cope with the stress of leadership and retain an ability to resonate with your organization requires particular attention to three areas, the authors say:

- **Mindfulness.** This critical skill deals with maintaining awareness not only of what is going on inside yourself, but also to what is going on around you. The authors are open-minded about the path to mindfulness, and they draw upon a range of sources from cognitive psychology to Buddhism. Their suggestions include meditation, prayer, exercise, music and being in nature.
- **Hope.** The authors define hope as determining a plan of action based on clearly articulated goals, believing the goals can be met and eventually reaching them with a sense of well-being. Hope can be a profound source of positive thoughts and emotions, and, through the contagiousness of emotions, in our organizations as well.
- **Compassion.** Resonance, ultimately, requires caring about other people; in that sense, it depends fundamentally upon our capacity for compassion. Boyatzis and McKee define compassion as “empathy and caring in action,” and they argue that it helps both the leader and the led. By caring enough about people to try to figure out who they are and why they behave the way they do, the dissonant defenses of prejudice and pre-judgment are replaced with the resonant qualities of understanding and tolerance.

The Importance of Self-Assessment

Boyatzis and McKee advocate executive coaching—giving it as well as receiving it—and the use of evaluation tools such as 360-degree feedback, in which you receive input not only from your bosses but also your peers and subordinates. Such techniques are particularly important to ward off the sacrifice syndrome because the accumulation of stress can blunt our ability to see ourselves clearly and identify what may be going wrong.

“Contrary to popular belief,” Boyatzis and McKee write, “it is not change itself that is so hard; what is hard is being honest with ourselves, looking at ourselves with no filters and admitting that we need to change.”