
WHY IS CHANGE SO HARD? USING YOUR BODY TO BRIDGE THE GAP

BY SANDY MOBLEY

UNDERSTANDING THE GAP

An amazingly hard human lesson to grasp is how often we fail at something we've set out to do. Think about the commitments you've made to keep your desk neat, to return phone calls or respond to emails in one day, or to get to meetings on time. Since most of my education had been biased toward cognitive learning, i.e., facts, theory, etc., I was shocked to learn in an initial Strozzi Institute leadership course how often *knowing* doesn't translate into *doing*. In a physical (somatic) exercise designed to model making a request, we were told to walk toward the person we were making a request of with our hand out and touch the person just below the throat with an open palm. With the best of intentions my hand always ended up on the other person's shoulder. I don't have vision problems, and I could walk up to someone and touch them under the throat, but in the context of making a request, I missed every time. That's when I saw my own gap. My body knew something my mind did not.

For example, many people *know* the importance of making an effective request and can even recite the criteria perfectly. But under pressure or in certain situations, they often fall into old ineffective patterns. Or they might say the right words, but their tone of voice or body language conveys an undermining message. Seeing this dilemma made me more aware that, in working with executives, I need to look for and bridge this gap.

After the somatic exercise, my awareness was raised further as I listened to how I

made requests. To staff I said, "Please make sure you include me in that client meeting." But with the boss, the same "request" sounded like, "It would be useful to me to attend client meetings." I clearly *knew* how to make an effective request yet wasn't able to *do* so in some situations. This made me curious about what happens in that knowing-doing gap.



Human beings get conditioned through upbringing and culture to behave in ways that might have served at one time, but are no longer effective. These behaviors are so ingrained that we don't realize we have a choice. For example, I was taught as a child to *not* make direct requests of others. This behavior became so automatic that it occurred whenever I wanted something; I had buried the ability to make direct requests. I can remember being at my aunt's house when I was 8 years old, wanting desperately an Eskimo Pie ice cream from her freezer and knowing that I dared not ask for it. I could only make a series of hints. "My throat is burning up," I said, prompting my aunt to offer water. "No," I responded, "water won't do it; it needs to be *colder* than water." Perhaps some milk, she suggested.

“No, milk won’t work; I don’t like the taste of it, but that is closer to what I’m looking for.” Finally, my aunt asked if I’d like an ice cream. Imagine the inefficiency and waste of time if I used that process at work.

I learned with staff to make powerful requests that left no room for interpretation. By bringing this skill into my conversations with superiors, I realized I would save myself a lot of aggravation and disappointment when they couldn’t decode my veiled requests. Until I became aware of this conditioned response, I could only hint and hope that others would know what I desired and respond positively. To undo the conditioning, awareness of the behavior had to come first. To be effective, coaches must help leaders recognize the ingrained, habituated responses that they can’t see and assist them in adopting more productive behaviors.

Clients aren’t disembodied heads, required only to *think* leadership. Without the ability to *act*, leaders can’t motivate others, align behavior, or influence change. Action occurs through the body. Action follows awareness, so it is important to notice what we are paying attention to. For example, if a leader is focusing on keeping others happy, he may not make requests that he feels are unpopular. And, on the flip side, if the leader is only concerned with getting the work done and not how others feel about doing the work, he runs the risk of alienating the workforce.

A key factor for effective leadership is authenticity – alignment between saying and doing. People evaluate their leaders more by what they *do* than what they *say*. Albert Mehrabian from UCLA studied this behavioral difference. He found that when people communicated feelings if there was dissonance between what was said and how that person behaved, the audience judged the

person’s actual words to have only a 7% impact, while the person’s voice and body language had much higher impact, at 38% and 55% respectively. (1) Clearly a person’s actions and voice, with a 93% impact, carry far more weight than the words a person uses.

In his book, *The Anatomy of Change*, Richard Strozzi Heckler writes, “Somatics... defines the body as a functional, living whole rather than as a mechanical structure. Somatics does not see a split between the mind and body but views the soma as a unified expression of all that we think, feel, perceive, and express.”(2) Somatic coaches show clients how their body language correlates with often hidden and limiting inner feelings, narratives, and mindsets. Specifically designed, somatically based practices allow these internal states to shift, enabling clients to take new actions to achieve their goals. For example, if a man grew up being told that “nice boys” don’t brag, he may drop his voice and look away from his peers when asked to talk about his projects in a team meeting. He may have no awareness that hiding his talent is limiting his career progression. Once these behaviors are brought to his attention, he will still need time and somatic practices to keep his voice strong and maintain eye contact when talking about his work.

GETTING CENTERED AND USING SOMATICS FOR COACHING

To understand somatics and apply it to coaching, you must be attuned to your own body and what you are feeling. Many people have become anesthetized to feelings and tell themselves – that is, tell their bodies – what it can and can’t feel. A person may feel sad at the death of a relative or the loss of a meaningful job, but feels compelled to put on a happy face and dismiss the feelings. Another person whose boss yells at her sev-

eral times a week may say, “Oh, he is under pressure and doesn’t really mean it.” For both people, their bodies ache nonetheless. Denying feelings doesn’t ease pain. And numbing painful feelings decreases the capacity to experience other feelings – joy, fear, surprise, etc. On the other hand, some people can be overloaded by the intensity of their feelings to the point that it becomes intolerable and they boil over in rage or panic. Daniel Goleman refers to this in his book *Working with Emotional Intelligence* as an amygdala hijack. (3) In these situations, the primal part of the brain senses an old and uncomfortable emotion and the person is thrown into one of three basic responses – fight, flight, or freeze. The higher functioning part of the brain is cut off and the behavior that results is seldom pretty.



To avoid having to swallow feelings or be ruled by them, it helps to have a place of safety inside oneself that allows time for choice and greater ranges of possibilities. The first step to finding that internal oasis in the body is to learn what it feels like to be centered. Being centered in your body is like shifting to neutral in a car with a manual transmission. It is the place of flexibility that allows for easy movement in any direction. It is a place where you can access your power, focus on what you care about, and tap into the inner wisdom of your body, feelings, and emotions.

There are times when being centered can mean the difference between life and death. Consider the police officer who has a split second to decide whether the person in the heavy overcoat coming his way is carrying a bomb, a weapon, or something harmless like a cell phone. Being centered can affect whether you win a negotiation, get a job, or hear what is really bothering your teenager.

Somatics begins with you as a coach. It is important to be centered before beginning a coaching session. This allows you to be open and connected to your client. You become a more powerful observer because your focus is on your client and his needs, not your worries about what to say next or whether you sound intelligent. Centering keeps your internal chatter at bay and opens you to hear what the client has to say. Your ability to center helps your client center as well. Think about how one scared horse spooks the others in a corral or the impact on others of a hysterical person at the scene of an accident. Being open, centered and confident helps the client become open and calm, too.

To center, pay attention to your breath. Is it low in your belly and moving fully through your body? Bringing your attention to your breath helps you center. Notice your posture. Are you slouched or rigid? If so, sit or stand tall with your weight evenly distributed on each side and from front to back. What about your forehead – is it wrinkled or relaxed? Notice your eyes. Are they staring fixedly or wide open like a deer in the headlights? Relax your eyes – let them soften and increase your peripheral vision. How about your jaw? Is it held tightly? Are you grinding your teeth? Open your mouth as wide as you can and then relax your jaw. How about your shoulders? Are they pulled up tightly near your ears as you carry the weight of the world? Tighten them more and then relax

them, feeling the tension slide away. These are some of the key areas where we hold tension. Tension dilutes center. If we are feeling tightness or pain, our attention goes to these areas and away from feeling centered.

It may be useful to do a centering practice with your client at the start of your session. Coaching sessions often take place in the middle of a busy day. Helping your client get centered allows her to let go of other concerns and be fully present for the session. The more you can bring your client's awareness to her stance and sensations, the better. Pay attention to your client's body. Are her shoulders high? It could mean she is taking on too much responsibility. Notice tightness in the jaw area. This may indicate the need to control things or that she is *chewing* on a difficult problem. How is her eye contact? Do you see a "deer in the headlights" look, an intense stare, a sleepy gaze? What do these things mean to you? You are helping your client see what has been invisible to her. For example, you may point out that she smiles broadly when she is saying no. And then she wonders why people don't accept it when she turns down a request.

Rather than keep a checklist that says if you see this, it means that, it is more useful to be curious. I sometimes mirror what I see to the client and ask what that posture or look provokes in her. That tends to give me more insight about what the client is experiencing and she in turn sees herself from new perspectives.

HOW IT WORKS: SOMATICS IN ACTION

Carol is a senior government official in an important position with the Department of Defense. I assumed she'd be somewhat rigid in her posture, buttoned down and stern.

When a slight woman dressed in a flowered blouse and light blue skirt, with wispy blonde hair and a shy demeanor met me on our first appointment, I presumed she was Carol's administrative assistant coming to escort me through security. Imagine my surprise when she introduced herself as Carol.

Carol possesses a brilliant mind and is one of only three women to rise above the Director level. I learned that she is an excellent project leader, able to see the big picture while still keeping track of all the details needed to make a project succeed. Possessing strong influencing skills, she would thrive in a more collaborative work environment, but her difficulty making direct requests allows others to take advantage of her in this competitive workplace. Carol was referred to me because in order to meet her goals, it is essential she get other parts of the organization to work together. To do this she must learn to make requests effectively.

When I asked Carol to show me how she makes requests, her body and words betrayed her intent. She blinked her eyes nervously, her mouth twitched, and her posture became slumped. She appeared to be begging. Her language became indirect, prefacing her requests with words like, "I would like it *if* ..." or "We need ..." or even "I wish..." She told me people would respond to her with nods, but rarely would anyone take action. She was burning out from lack of support.

I asked her to give me examples of assertive people in her organization. She described only men. I asked her to tell me about some assertive females. She said there were two, both of whom she described as aggressive, attacking terrors who frequently raised their voices, barked out orders, and never listened. She could not identify a single woman who was assertive in a positive way.

In her world, women were either vicious sharks or meek little mice. She felt revulsion at the thought of being a shark.



I began by demonstrating a continuum of behaviors between Mouse and Shark. First I made a request at the Mouse end. I rounded my shoulders, crouched down, looked up through my eyelashes, avoided eye contact and said in a soft voice, “It would be nice, uh, uh, do you think maybe we could finish the project today?” Carol observed that the Mouse-me was so hesitant that she was unclear what my request actually was and felt no urgency to comply. I asked her to match my Mouse posture. She did it easily and said that this stance felt all too familiar.

I then demonstrated the Shark-me. I puffed up my chest and demanded, “I want the completed project on my desk by the end of the day or you can look for work elsewhere.” She took a step back, her face froze into a mask and the light went out in her eyes. I asked her what she experienced and she said she felt afraid. “But,” she added in a feisty voice, “if you didn’t have the authority, you could hold your breath before I’d respond to a demand phrased like that.” I noted that she sounded angry. She agreed and said, “People who abuse their power

really infuriate me.” I asked her to notice her posture. She was standing tall and making direct eye contact. “This is you stepping into your power,” I said. “Notice how it feels.” I suggested there might be some benefit to harnessing her inner-Shark. “For example, you notice this feeling when someone has stepped over a boundary. Instead of shrinking, you can use the feeling to get in touch with your power and prevent someone from pushing you where you don’t want to go.”

I then demonstrated a centered, confident, direct request for her. I stood with my feet shoulder width apart, my back straight aligned with head over shoulders over hips over feet, all in one continuous line. I made direct eye contact. Breathing in a relaxed manner, I spoke in a strong, even voice, “Please have the project on my desk by the end of the day.” As I made the request, I noticed that Carol also seemed relaxed. She met my eye contact and her posture shifted from slouched to more erect. She was surprised that I could be so strong without being offensive and she said she felt ‘invited’ to hear my request.

For the rest of the session, I modeled and she practiced moving in small increments along the Mouse-Shark continuum. Sometimes when people make a change, they go too far in the opposite direction. My goal was for Carol to know what degree of directness was appropriate for her. Awareness is the first step toward making a change. At the end of the session Carol was aware not only of her inability to lead her organization from the Mouse end of the spectrum but also of a range of responses and their impact on her. As we walked toward the elevator, a colleague walked by and called her Cheryl. I asked if her name was Carol or Cheryl. She admitted it was Cheryl. She had let me call her Carol throughout the entire first session because she was embarrassed to correct me.

Cheryl's homework for the next week was to practice making requests in a direct, not indirect, way – like asking her change-resistant secretary to re-do the filing system or asking her coach to call her by her correct name. When we met again, Cheryl had made requests, and for her, that was a positive step forward. I began by calling her Carol. She quickly asked me to call her Cheryl. As she described successes, it became clear that she had made most requests of people she thought would be amenable. For the following week, I challenged her to make more difficult requests and to notice her body language and what she was feeling and make notes for us to discuss at our next session. My goal was to help Cheryl *feel* how to make requests from a centered place and to notice her own and others' responses when she did so. I wanted her to embody making strong requests and not lapse into her Mouse body, which made requests that were easy to ignore.

At our next meeting, she reported that she had been able to make more challenging requests of her staff such as asking them to take on more project responsibilities. Most of her difficulty had occurred when asking peers in other departments for help. She recounted many instances when she had helped others with resources, provided support for their proposals, and even times when she shared money from her budget to help fund other's projects. But, when she needed assistance, her peers consistently failed to reciprocate. Two things became evident: 1) she never let others know that helping them was a cost to her, so they thought she had excess budget and resources, and 2) she never stated her expectation that they reciprocate. She had set up an expectation of a one-way relationship (she gave, they didn't) and they were happy to keep it that way.

Underlying Cheryl's difficulty was her quaint notion that if she did nice things, people would naturally reciprocate. She wouldn't *have to* make requests. I asked her how she would feel making a request of her peers. She said she actually had several requests in mind. Her posture was strong and I could see that she was harnessing her Sharkness. She said that she was tired of their ignoring her and never offering help with her projects. I asked her to remember the sensation in her body when someone called her by the wrong name and instead of ignoring the feeling, to use it to get in touch with how irritating it feels to be dismissed and ignored.

Her homework for the next session was to continue making challenging requests and to pay attention to her feelings when she made them.

When we met again we discussed requests she made to her peers. She reported several successes and one devastating failure. She had asked Tom, notoriously rude and the most alpha dog on the team, to loan two people from his department to assist with a project that had a tight deadline. He ignored her and simply walked away. She felt angry and hurt, but rather than bury the feeling, she followed him to his office and made the request again. He didn't look away from his computer as he said, "Look, my people are overworked. I can't help you." She didn't know what to say then. She felt so low she could have slipped under the door.

I suggested we practice. I role-played Tom and asked her to make a request of me. As direct as Cheryl had been in a previous session when she asked me to call her by her correct name, her posture reverted back to Mouse with resigned body, slumped shoulders and downcast eyes. I asked her what

she noticed. She said that as much as she wanted to be strong, she felt all her emotions pulling her to be indirect. “What feelings?” I asked. “Be specific.” “I think . . . just the pain of being rejected,” she said. As a peer, she had no power to reverse his rejection. Tom’s “no” represented disrespect and powerlessness and she feared that when he rejected her request she looked even weaker for asking. This was another layer that kept Cheryl from making direct requests. It brought back all the shame she felt as a teen asking her father for money when he said no – most painfully when she asked him for money to go on a class trip and he said no. And, it brought back as well the sadness of having to tell her friends that she couldn’t go with them and her loneliness the week they were gone.

I wondered if Cheryl realized that making a request means the other person has the power to say no as well as yes. I asked her if she was making a request or if she were *demanding* that he do something. “I hoped he would agree, but realized he could say no.” She took a deep breath and sighed. I asked what the sigh was about. “Maybe I never feel that *I* can say no,” Cheryl admitted, “so I resent it from others.” Now, another layer had surfaced. Cheryl didn’t allow herself to say no, so she didn’t think others had the right to do so. Furthermore, she felt someone saying no to her request was a sign of disrespect. Working through the body is interesting to me because at each step, the body reveals more of what is being held back.

The next step for Cheryl was to learn to accept a “no” without relapsing into her internal story of disrespect and powerless. As in learning to make direct requests, gaining the ability to accept a rejected request took three sessions before Cheryl could maintain her poise without crumbling into Mouse. One

key to change for Cheryl was to recognize that when her shoulders curled and her chest tightened, she could practice dropping her breath into her belly and get centered. From here, she recognized that she felt less afraid. It brought back the memory of how she anchored before a track meet in college – the crouch in the blocks before the starting gun. Accessing her center deactivated her Mouse-body, where her breath was high and her chest felt tight. As in making requests, Cheryl found being centered made all the difference in calibrating how forceful to be. Later that day she asked her boss for an additional person. Although he said no, she said the rejection wasn’t hard to take at all. And, she felt proud of herself for having the courage to make the request.



A few weeks later, I got a surprise telephone call from Cheryl. “This amazing thing happened,” she said. “Tom said no to me again.”

“Then why do you sound so happy?” I asked.

She related that while making the request she had been able to drop her breath, stand tall and stay centered the whole time. She felt the strength of her stance made him pay attention to her. And even though he said no, he looked up at her and said courteously, “Sorry, I can’t help you this week.”

“He was so polite I thought maybe an alien had invaded his body,” Cheryl joked.

I asked how she felt. She said she felt courageous and inspired to ask for what she wanted and to say no when she needed to. “What does that feel like in your body?” I asked. “I feel tall and powerful like when I crossed the finish line in a race,” she said, “like I can take care of myself.”



To achieve our goals or be who we long to be, we must be able to take new actions. New ways of engaging can feel uncomfortable, sometimes even unsafe. Being centered allows us to try new moves and to make the moves in ways that work. Having a coach as an ally to weather the discomfort of learning new actions and to calibrate how far to go makes it easier to take risks. Consider the pain Cheryl felt at being taken advantage of and feeling unsupported by her peers. To learn that she could get support by behaving differently was a life-changing experience for her. Imagine how many possibilities opened when she became able to make direct requests and decline others' requests.

When we consider that we all have behaviors that limit our effectiveness, we gain an even greater appreciation of somatics' power to increase our awareness and capacity to change – both in our clients and ourselves. Thinking about a change is a necessity, not an end. Change must be embodied. Over time new behavior becomes deeply rooted and can be relied on to produce the results we want.

Notes:

- (1) *Silent Messages*, Albert Mehrabian, Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1971.
- (2) *The Anatomy of Change: A Way to Move Through Life's Transitions*, Richard Strozzi Heckler, North Atlantic Books, 1984, 1993.
- (3) *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman, Bantam Books, 1998.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...

Sandy Mobley is a master somatic coach, certified by the Strozzi Institute. She works with managers and executives to develop greater leadership presence by letting their bodies talk for them in the way they intend.



With an MBA from Harvard and masters degree in mathematics and computer science, she understands the unique challenges leaders face in the business world, and knows the value they can bring to an organization when they have impact. Sandy has been working with leaders in Fortune 50 organizations, major associations, and government for over twenty years. Her expertise is in individual and team coaching, organization development and training, especially in the areas of leadership and change.

She can be reached at 703-979-2133 or visit her website at LearningAdvantageInc.com.