



Making Sense of Center: Gaining Full Access to Choice, Growth & Freedom

“Somewhere between stimulus and response, there is a space.

In that space is our power to choose our response.

In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Victor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning

Victor Frankl was an extraordinary human being who, under the most adverse conditions in a World War II concentration camp, discovered what remained, when all else was stripped away: his ability to choose his response. He was a model for us all.

Through our center, we can find this space to which Frankl refers, we can expand it, and we can inhabit it with new choices. With this evolution, leaders can choose “right action” (the choice for the greatest good) vs. “reaction” (their individual, historical response to the type of stimulus.) This kind of choice is central to true leadership. Without it, a leader is actually “following” their conditioning vs. choosing the very best option for current conditions and for future outcomes.

How do we bring this evolution about? “We are what we practice.” Dr. Richard Strozzi-Heckler, The Leadership Dojo

Strozzi-Heckler’s work has shown that through embodied practices, clients can learn to align their attention, moods, actions and physical presence with the internal compass of their core values, beliefs, and commitments. This is not just about insight; it is about capacity and skill building. New research and writing in neuro-science is supporting what has been demonstrated in embodied leadership work for many years: through ongoing training to introduce the desired inputs into their physiology, clients can cultivate new embodied capacities.

In partnership with a skilled centered-leadership coach, this development work is done in three steps: identifying what needs to be cultivated; identifying practices that will generate embodied capacity to meet these needs, and practice!

This process starts with the development of three foundational and parallel centering capacities that will serve a leader for a lifetime, and that mutually support and strengthen each other:

- **Centered Presence:** the ability to collect one’s body, mood, and focus into a calm yet ready state. With nearly universal applications, cultivation of this skill profoundly increases one’s ability to truly lead vs. simply react in a whole range of situations, including arenas of high change and high conflict. This is the foundational skill to better interface with others. When one is more present, others are called into greater presence as well. In relationships and organizations where heightened presence exists, one can “drive towards more honesty and directness” with “compassion that respects and legitimizes others,” thus creating truly compelling leadership.¹
- **Internal Radar:** the ability to enter one’s center to observe one’s current state: “what am I actually thinking and feeling? What am I noticing?” This includes physical sensations as well as deeper stirrings of intuition. In InnerCompass work, this is the foundation of noticing and awareness, with compassion and without judgment, on which self-coaching and access to choice are then built. This is both an in-the-moment skill, and an ability to notice over time: e.g., ‘what did I notice this week in relation to this key decision I need to make?’
- **Internal Compass:** the ability to center one’s time, attention, and resources within purpose and meaning – within what matters most based on inner wisdom and attention to needs beyond the self. In Strozzi-Heckler’s words, when this is done based on “honoring the voice of wisdom inside of us, which may be outside of the cultural norm” this is the capacity to be “self-experiencing.”

¹ Quotes in this section are from Strozzi-Heckler

How do these foundational centering skills support each other?

Returning to Victor Frankl's quote, cultivation over time of these three centering abilities makes possible the following:

- **Notice the Space:** By growing a powerful internal radar, integrating awareness of sensations, moods and thoughts, leaders can notice the shifts and conditions that might lead to thoughtless reactions. For example, an anger-prone leader will be able to notice the onset of anger earlier, when self-management for a different outcome is much easier.
- **Expand the Space:** as leaders learn to find and return to center, they can cultivate calm, open focus - both in the moment and for the long haul - on what matters. With practice, this becomes possible even as waves of change or stress build around them. Access to centered presence is both key to building a solid internal radar – it becomes the home territory we strive to inhabit as much as we can, such that we live in expanded space – and it is the primary intervention skill in the moment when we notice that we are not centered.
- **Inhabiting the Space with New Choices:** With the infusion of breath, physiological settling, and conscious focus that the practice of centering brings, leaders have far more access to conscious choice in how they will respond in any given situation. This spaciousness allows for a broader lens for decision-making. “What choices will serve the greatest good? What choices will serve for the long term?”

Where do these new choices come from?

Just as we can develop new skills that require unconscious coordination (like riding a bike or playing a musical instrument) so too can we learn to embody new capacities of response to both historical triggers and current challenges. Through the right practices, the embodied leader cultivates not only insight about right response and right action, but also the ability to access right action: they are able to fully live the new choice by aligning mood, words, and actions with core values in the moment.

- **Identifying what needs to be cultivated:** As the client's strong, clear internal compass emerges to consistently point towards what matters most, coach and client together are able to more accurately identify the new choices and capacities needed in order for the client to be the leader they need and want to become. "What is missing in me, or in my abilities, that if it were present, would make all the difference in my ability to be leader I need to be now? What will help me grow into the leader I am capable of becoming?"

This can reveal many possibilities, ranging from self-mastery (e.g., the ability to focus or to follow through, the ability to better manage one's moods or energy) to interface with others (e.g., the ability to make powerful requests, or the ability to truly listen to others.) While the range is enormous, there is a common thread: the potential to cultivate not just insight about the need, but embodiment of the underlying skill that will meet that need.

- **With this identification work done, coach and client can then together customize choices of embodied practices to needs, learning style, and temperament.** The goal is to maximize effectiveness with minimal effort, so highly trained, insightful help to accurately assess needs, design practices, and add practices in the most effective order is key to efficiency and return on investment of development dollars.
- **Practice:** As in all other learning endeavors, regular practice of *the right things* is the secret to success. *It is not just what we do that matters, but how we do it.* For example, two thirty-minute workouts might be identical in metrics (same distance covered or heart rate achieved) but can be worlds apart in felt sensation: powering through and high tension, vs. grace and maximum ease. Therefore it is key to consistently connect the 'what' with the 'why'. For example: "I am in this centering practice so that I can be a calmer, more focused leader." Speaking this commitment before engaging in the practice and speaking these commitments to those we engage with are powerful practices in and of themselves.

Over time, the coach and client partner to fine-tune practices to best align with emerging needs. As in all things, consistent, conscious practice, connected to meaning (naming the desired state - why we are practicing) produces the best results.

The end result: While this process of developing new capacities takes time, this is the ultimate power of learning to lead from center: leaders become capable of new action – fully integrated with their thoughts, moods, spirit, and aligned with their highest sense of meaning and purpose. Consistently centered leaders are capable of doing this in the moment; right action is who they are.