

**Leading from Within:  
Developing Self Awareness Through Yoga**

Amanda McCarty

July 2015

Below is a summary of leadership lessons learned from our “Leading from Within” seminar. I have also included links to Yoga Journal’s pages on each of the poses we practiced in case you are interested in learning more about them from a yoga perspective.

*Self Awareness*

Self awareness is a critical skill for leaders to develop. As Himay Zepeda said in the Life Hack article you read<sup>1</sup>, “Leaders, like all human beings, don’t have all the answers, and are, in fact, often wrong or fundamentally flawed. The difference is that the most successful ones are aware of this. That is why they succeed.”

Self awareness requires knowing your strengths, weaknesses, pet peeves, fatal flaws, what distracts you, what your values are, and how you are perceived. It is both knowing who you are and what you stand for and acting in line with that knowledge. Being self aware allows us to take advantage of our strengths, compensate for our weaknesses and be consistent and grounded. Psychologist Sherrie Campbell says, "When leaders are grounded, they are able to be efficient and deliberate in staying on task, and being attuned to those around them. Leaders who have the ability to control their minds and emotions help to guide those around them to develop their own self-knowledge and success."

Through LCDP, we have broadened our self awareness using a variety of tools, including 360 evaluations, the MBTI, the Johari window, and case studies. This seminar took a different approach by using yoga as a form of kinesthetic learning to listen to the self awareness that comes from our bodies. We spend a lot of time in our heads. As scientist-types, we are trained to take logic-based approaches to interacting with the world and making decisions. This is a very useful approach, but it isn’t the only one. We inherently have a compass inside of us that tells us who we really are, what we really want, and what we really believe. Sometimes our thinking can get in the way of listening to that voice. Physical activity is a good way to push aside our minds so we can listen to what our body has to say. By connecting a little more with your physical self, you will get to know yourself better and be more connected to your instincts. This awareness can contribute to better decision making by helping you understand which choices make you feel open and excited as compared to tense and anxious.

*Addressing Judgment*

Yoga is a great way to connect with oneself physically. Yoga isn’t just exercise or stretching. It really is a philosophy for life. The act of doing yoga is called a practice. This gives us permission to show up and try our best, whatever our best means that day, without judgment. It is very easy

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.lifehack.org/articles/productivity/how-self-awareness-makes-leader-successful.html>

to judge oneself, but in yoga, that judgment causes us to tense up and shut down, which prevents success. The same is true in the rest of our lives. So, whenever we start to feel judgment, we can replace that with curiousness and see what else we may think or feel. We can also express gratitude to ourselves for trying something difficult. It can be as simple as saying to oneself, “This is difficult, and I am proud of myself for trying it, regardless of the results.”

*Easy Pose/Comfortable Seated Position: Using the Breath as a Signal*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/easy-pose/>)

One of the most powerful tools we have is our breath. When we are calm and relaxed, our breath flows easily and without effort. When we are tense and stressed, we hold or restrict our breath. Often the rest of our body follows the lead of our breath. Therefore, we can both use our breath to understand how we feel about something and to bring us back to a calm and relaxed state.

We practiced sitting in comfortable seated position, clearing our mind of other distractions and focusing solely on our breathing. With each inhale, we stretched our spines up to sit taller and with each exhale, we relaxed a different part of your body, visualizing our breath flowing into that part of our body and bringing relaxation with it. As we scanned our bodies, we identified the areas where we hold tension. By learning through our yoga practice where we hold tension we can turn to these parts of our bodies to see how our bodies feel when we make decisions or more generally to see how we are treating ourselves in our daily lives.

We talked about how in yoga and as leaders, there will be times where we are challenged to try something that makes us nervous or scared. The challenge may be what someone thinks you need to learn and grow or it may be pushing you beyond what you should do. As leaders, we need to check in with ourselves to determine the difference between the two. At times this means pushing past our perceived boundaries and out of our comfort zones, which requires courage. This does not mean accepting every challenge that comes your way, but instead being thoughtful about what requires your commitment and courage. We can use our breath to help us make this type of choice. By sitting quietly and focusing on our breathing, we can ask ourselves questions like: Is my breath tight? Do I really want to do this? Is it appropriate for me to do this? Am I the right person to do this?

*Cat Cows: Taking the Time to Prepare*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/cat-pose/>, <http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/cow-pose/>)

In yoga, we use the Cat and Cow positions to warm up our bodies, particularly our spine and core. They prepare us for the rest of the practice. It can be tempting to skip poses like these and get to the ones that are more challenging, but that does not provide a good foundation for the rest of the practice and it can lead to injury. We also explored variations within these movements so we could each warm up whichever parts of our bodies felt tight.

Similarly as leaders, we need to take time to check in with ourselves and prepare for what is ahead of us. Like with the Cat-Cow variations we each chose, this can mean different things to different people. Do you need an hour at the beginning of each day or five minutes before each

meeting to prepare? Are you more comfortable preparing the night before so you can sleep well? What does it take to ‘warm up’ for your work?

*Child’s Pose: The Importance of Taking a Break*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/child-s-pose/>)

Child’s Pose is an active resting pose. It teaches us to be intentional about taking breaks and also acknowledges the fact that taking a break doesn’t necessarily mean doing nothing. It means settling into a position or activity that rejuvenates us and allows us to re-catch our breath. By intentionally including child’s pose in our practice, we are reminded that yoga and life require a balance between work and rest. I love the way Mark Nepo<sup>2</sup> describes this balance, “Work when there is work to do. Rest when you are tired. One thing done in peace will most likely be better than ten things done in panic...I am not a hero if I deny rest; I am only tired.” We also each chose to add child’s pose at any time when we felt tired or a pose didn’t feel right, so we could get our needed rest.

*Vinyasas: Being Intentional with our Effort*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/slideshow/need-flow-try-vinyasa-yoga-sequences/>)

A vinyasa is a series of yoga poses where each movement is matched with an inhale or an exhale. Through vinyasas, we learn that both movement between poses and holding a position require effort. Given the pose demands constant changes in what parts of our bodies we engage, vinyasas teach us to focus our effort where it matters, so we don’t waste our energy. Often when a pose is difficult, we engage muscles we don’t really need. For example, we don’t really need to use the muscles in your face to hold ourselves in a plank position, but we often find our jaw tense when we take this pose. By knowing this, we can be thoughtful about which muscles you engage. Carrying this principle off the yoga mat, we should always be thoughtful about where we focus our time and energy. Figure out which activities are most critical and do those first. Figure out what is urgent but unimportant and let it go.

*Chair Pose: Dealing with Difficulty*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/chair-pose/>)

Chair pose is a poses that tests and develops strength and endurance. By holding the position for a long time and sinking deeper into the pose, we can identify what motivates us through tough times. We practiced holding the pose while reminding ourselves of goals, values, and people to show how when things get difficult, we can use these as motivation to push a little harder or stick it out a little longer. We also practice rule #6, reminding ourselves that this is just yoga and we don’t have to take it seriously. By simply smiling, we can often relieve tension in our bodies and find that a task is not as difficult (or as important) as we were making it. This gives us the freedom to relax and be creative or just stand up and walk away because in the big picture, it really doesn’t matter if we hold the position for 20 or 30 seconds or complete a memo today that nobody is really going to read until tomorrow (or ever?)

---

<sup>2</sup> From “The Book of Awakening” by Mark Nepo.

*Tree Pose: Focus and Testing Limits*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/tree-pose/>)

Tree pose is a balance pose, and balance both on and off the yoga mat requires focus. We first tried the pose without any direction on where to focus. Some people focused on nothing. Others focused on the person or something in front of them. We talked about the importance of leaders having a vision to guide them. This vision comes both from within (our values) and from outside (external motivators). Using this approach, we tried the pose a second time, focusing our eyes on a fixed point in front of us, and at the same time focusing on engaging the core of our body (pushing our hands together, pushing our foot into our leg, and using our abs, glutes, and back muscles) to find stability in the pose. We also spoke about distraction and how it is inevitable that other people or other ideas vie for and occasionally steal our attention. As leaders, it is important to return to our vision and our core to regain our balance each time that happens. We should be aware of the techniques we can use to do this, such as closing our eyes and breathing deeply.

There are a lot of variations to tree pose, so we took advantage of that to explore our limits. We talked about how sometimes we have a good sense of what our limits are and can stop ourselves at just the right level of effort. We also talked about the importance of testing our limits by pushing a little beyond them. We tried variations of the pose where we moved our foot farther up our leg or reached our arms up or out to make it more challenging to find balance. We then tried the pose a final time where everyone picked the version of the pose that was most comfortable demonstrating that just because we can do more doesn't mean we always have to do more.

*Legs Up the Wall: Seeking out Different Perspectives*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/legs-up-the-wall-pose/>)

Creativity and compassion come from seeing the world differently. This is part of the reason yoga practices include inversions. To turn our view of the world upside down, we practiced a relaxing inversion pose, called legs up the wall. As leaders we need to understand different perspectives and be able to see a bigger picture. Often distracting ourselves from our problems frees our minds to find more creative solutions. We need to take these breaks to change our scenery and clear our heads so we can have more open minds. This may be through taking a walk, sitting under a tree outside, laughing with friends or family, or relaxing at the end of a yoga practice.

*Bound Angle Pose/Stretching: Leaning in to Resistance*  
(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/bound-angle-pose/>)

Most often when people think of yoga, they think of stretching. Stretching is a key part of both yoga and leadership. We spoke about how salmon find their way up stream by swimming into the area where the current is the strongest. While physically more demanding, this allows them to avoid obstacles in the river. To test the idea of leaning into areas of pressure, we practiced sitting with our feet together so our legs formed the shape of a diamond and bending forward to stretch our legs and backs. Rather than just folding forward in whichever way was easiest, we were intentional about leaning into the areas where we felt the greatest stretch. This was different

for everyone based on their individual body. We worked on increasing our flexibility by reaching up with every inhale and relaxing into the stretch with every exhale. By leaning in to the tension, we helped it dissolve. As we practiced this pose, we reflected on how as leaders, we cannot avoid areas where we are weak, or we will never have a chance to grow and progress 'upstream'.

*Corpse Pose: The Importance of Recovery*

(<http://www.yogajournal.com/pose/corpse-pose/>)

Corpse pose reminds us of the importance of taking time to recover after we exert ourselves. We laid down on the ground with our arms and legs extended and open. We let our minds and bodies rest, returning our focus to our breath. Many yogis believe corpse pose is the most challenging yoga pose because it requires us to relax completely. We struggled to stay still in this position for a full minute. As leaders, we all need to take time to recharge. It can be especially difficult because we work so hard and are so invested in our work, but it is critical for living a full life and remaining connected to ourselves.

*Namaste: The Importance of Gratitude and Connection*

Yoga practices often end with a bow and the word, namaste. This is a symbol of gratitude and respect that acknowledges the connection we have to each other and ourselves. My favorite translation of namaste is, "the light within me acknowledges and salutes the light within you". We all had the option of placing our hands together at the center of our chest (the heart chakra), bowing forward and saying namaste to each other and ourselves. As leaders it is important to remember and be grateful for those who place their trust in us and who help us in our journeys.

*Good, Bad, and Useful: Another Tool for Getting Feedback*

Finally, we practiced using a tool called 'Good, Bad, Useful' to provide Amanda with feedback. First, everyone was invited to provide feedback on what Amanda did well (good). Then she received feedback on what she did poorly (bad). Finally, the class offered her tips on how she could improve in the future (useful). Each time someone gave Amanda feedback, she responded by simply saying, "thank you". This is a great way to collect feedback from a trusted group on your performance. By simply saying thank you and not asking questions or adding other commentary, you are more open to receiving the gift of feedback, and people are more willing to be open with you.