

THE HOW OF LEADERSHIP RICHARD STROZZI-HECKLER OF THE STROZZI INSTITUTE

Richard Strozzi-Heckler, PhD, is an internationally known authority on Leadership and Mastery. His wisdom about leadership has been inspired by his thirty years in business process, linguistics, psychology, biology, martial arts and philosophy. He is known for pioneering the field of somatics — the pragmatic application of skillful action, emotional balance, and spiritual vision — in such diverse arenas as business, technology, military, education, health and politics. His unique approach incorporates physical practices with conceptual learning, so that the competencies being developed actually become embodied rather than remaining good ideas forgotten in the heat of conflict. He received his doctorate in psychology from Saybrook Institute and was an NDFL Fellow at the University of Washington in 1970. He holds a sixth-degree black belt in Aikido as well as ranks in judo, jujitsu, and capoeira.

*Dr. Strozzi-Heckler is the author of the nationally acclaimed **In Search of the Warrior Spirit** (chronicling his training of the Green Berets and his vision of reclaiming traditional warrior virtues in a technologically oriented society); **The Anatomy of Change** (an embodied approach to learning and creating transformational change in performance); **Holding the Center: The Mind/Body Interface**; **Aikido and the New Warrior**; **Being Human at Work** and many other publications.*

Richard has a presence you feel the moment he walks into a room. I put his leadership conversation here because his thinking about and sensitivity to the notion of the call seemed quite striking. And while



he does not focus on embodying leadership per se in this interview, he clearly is someone who has thought long and hard about embodying his values, living a life congruent with and taking full responsibility for those values. It shows up quite powerfully in his work and in his way of being.

LISA MARSHALL: Richard, I know you have thought deeply about the nature of leadership and people's power to lead. Let's start there. First, how do you define leadership and what is the internal drive to lead?

RICHARD STROZZI-HECKLER: Leaders open the future for others. They organize and focus the talents and skill of others towards an observable result. They do this by producing narratives and practices in which one can design and build the future. The drive is to contribute. There is a thrust to be of value to others, to be of value, to move towards the higher ground.

LM: What is the source of that thrust?

RSB: The source is a compelling, irresistible urge toward possibility. In part, I think it's in people's genetic makeup. That's the nature part. The nurture part is growing up in an environment where there is an ethic or moral value of contribution. Or for some people, if they grow up in an environment where they're not encouraged, where they experience trauma and/or abuse, then they may use that experience to "show you," to overcome. In any case it is an urge that one follows to explore and open possibilities.

The skill or art of accessing the source of this urge is in paying attention to the stories, images, and feelings that move you, so that you then base your actions on these internal things. The quality of that attention is what moves people; energy follows attention. At the same time it is not a self-centered, obsessive compulsion. It always involves people and what they need and what you see you can offer them.

LM: What was your first experience of, or discovery of your ability to lead?

RSB: When I was young I always seemed to have a knack for organizing the other kids. I didn't feel like the boss or the best, but I could see certain things that allowed others to trust me and seek my counsel.

I began training in the martial arts as a Navy brat looking for a way to handle the harassment that inevitably went with being a new kid on a base. Ultimately I found Aikido and recognized that it called me, it was the right form for me. Then, when I had been in the discipline for a period of time, people began to look to me for decisions and direction. They also saw that I would listen to them and hear their concerns without interrupting them with my agenda. That happened in my role as an athlete and as a martial artist.

Then, in the Marine Corps, I was put in leadership roles. Other men, younger than me, started responding to something else in me. After that, I had teachers who revealed to me that there was this potential for me, and put me in front of groups. They were men and I was a young man and that was important to me. I remember in the dojo one day, when the teacher didn't show up, I was chosen to teach. This surprised me, but it also felt appropriate.

LM: How have your gifts matured over time?

RSB: I'm not sure I'm the right person to answer this. I'm sure that those around me could have a better handle on how I've changed ... or not. That being said, I believe that my horizon of time has expanded. I see that planting and nurturing seeds is very important and I'm more patient about the fruition or harvest. It all doesn't have to happen in "this moment." Looking at how our actions will impact generations seems important and to plan for that long distance future. I am also clearer about who I am, what my footprint is. This has allowed my passion and my ability to take a stand and fight for what I care about to be more fully expressed.



LM: When do you know you've received the call to leadership?

RSB: To receive the call, I think it is necessary to have a deeply rich and mature emotional life. One must feel things deeply, the pleasant with the unpleasant. If we're in touch with our bodies, it becomes harder and harder to ignore the call. I think of it as mission or destiny. There is a moment in people's lives, an event, and the calling comes and they respond.

For me, there was something missing, something I didn't see anyone else stepping up to fill. Why did I "see" it? Emotionally, it felt like it would be a huge loss not to fill that void, for myself, for others, for a discourse. Intellectually, there was an ethic that I had to step up and live. It seemed like the proper or right thing to do. I believe ethics are biological in origin. I experience the call as a felt sense rather than something heard or known. I feel it in the trunk of my body — from the top of my pubic bone to my clavicle. I'm galvanized into taking action from that place.

LM: When do you recognize it in someone else?

RSB: They can't not do what they're doing. There's a focus and passion and energy that appears. Yet somebody could have all that and still not be a leader, not be magnetic, compelling, someone you want to follow. The Japanese word for the difference is *kibali* — the ability to extend that force, that quality, out so that it touches somebody else, enrolls others and brings them along.

LM: How do you know the call has been answered?

RSB: When other people show up. When they appear. Responses ranging from "Where do I sign up?" to "I think you're full of shit" tell you the call is being answered. People are reacting to you.

LM: What do you as a leader need from others in order to be effective? What roles do you need them to play?

RSB: I need people to be in the same story, to have the same standards, have the same grounding for the future and similar practices. I need them to see that the story is beyond both them and me. It's a requirement that they make a commitment to not only seeing themselves in the story, but producing certain futures, certain results, based on shared standards. It's also important that they acknowledge they need other people around them in order to get the work done, and then, as the story gets filled out, they need to allow others into the story in order to replicate themselves. They have to grow and evolve.

I also need people to tell me when I'm off, people to give me straight feedback. I need to continue to stay in my own practices, in my own discourses — that keeps me honest, keeps me straight, keeps me evolving, gives me perspective.

LM: Describe for me your own leadership journey, please.

I was asked, or as you say “called,” into a leadership role. I saw that something was missing and that it was important to bring it into form. No one else was doing it, so I stepped up to the plate. There was a requirement to occupy and be a space, be a provider of a certain kind of learning. This means I had to let go of what was comfortable and known, to go beyond myself. This always seems to have anxiety and fear. It's a death of a certain self to evolve into a larger self. At this point one has to go beyond oneself.

RSB: What do you think is its destination?

Does it end? I have no feeling for what the destination is. I've got a good thirty years ahead of me and I'm putting one foot in front of me while I look to the horizon. But then there's maybe a period of detaching, the interest changes. What happens then? I'm closely studying the one living teacher I have left. It helps me read the world and see what's possible in it. I see that the body changing has a lot to do with what's possible. I'm trying to keep my ear to the track and see what's calling and what's needed.



LM: What gets in the way of your leadership?

RSB: My hankering for comfort gets in the way. Sometimes I just want to lay down in the snow and go to sleep. I also observe myself becoming rigid in the transitions, hanging on to people or to conversations in ways that are inappropriate, and that gets in the way. These are old, conditioned historical conversations that I have to continually monitor.

LM: What are the dilemmas that cause you the greatest concern?

RSB: I struggle to find the balance between the leadership role and the other relationships and responsibilities in my life — my children, my relationships, my wife, the land and the animals.

LM: What have been your most transformational experiences as a leader?

RSB: Seeing the places where I've produced breakdowns — where I've fallen short, broken commitments, made declarations without a ground under them, where I was out of integrity or not accountable. Those things have clearly offered opportunities for transformation and learning. Certain things my teacher has pointed to have been transformational. When these things happen, I'm much more mobilized with velocity, certitude, alignment.

LM: What do you understand about leadership now that you didn't five or ten years ago?

RSB: That there's really a joy in it. That there's a continuity about it, you do it 24/7, but not in a grim, drudgery way. You're open to possibilities. That in some way or another we're in a time which we must all step up to leadership. Leadership as a role or leadership as a way of being.

LM: What's the how of leadership?

RSB: The how of leadership is what Socrates called ethos: how one carries oneself. What is the energetic presence of a leader? How do you comport yourself that generates trust and accountability? We must be the change. When one has the leadership presence, others are compelled to say, "I want to go forward with you."

LM: What's the relevance of leadership today?

RSB: We find ourselves in a time of confusion about the relationship of humans to technology. We're soft and overfed, and we live in entitlement. There's confusion between humans and media; our stories are in bad shape and we're fed so much information that we can be wonderfully informed and never take a stand. It leaves a huge opportunity and opening for reconnecting to the ground of our being. Our humanity is at stake and leaders are called to take a stand for wisdom, compassion, authenticity and courage.

