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## **Creating Resonance at the Workplace**

### **Keynote address by Patrick J. Psaila**

Those of us who are in the business of leading, managing, consulting, training, coaching, and mentoring people can appreciate the deep sense of satisfaction that comes with these roles. We can also recognize that being in a position where we are constantly exercising self-control, responding to the needs and demands of others, giving of ourselves, dealing with crises, and being responsible for other people while inspiring them is stressful. If we are not careful, we can gradually slip into a cycle of chronic stress that eventually leads to dissonant behaviour. This is not only harmful to us but also to the people around us and can lead to seriously destructive consequences in an organization. So how can we sustain our effectiveness as leaders and manage the inevitable stress that comes with the job?

Current research into cognitive and affective neuroscience is helping us to answer this fundamental question. Through specific practices we can learn how to sustain our effectiveness by sustaining ourselves. Drawing heavily on the work of two major leadership researchers, Richard Boyatzis and Annie McKee, this paper shall explore the nature of resonance in the workplace and how by managing ourselves we can create a strong positive ripple effect in our organizations.

### **Leadership and Management**

The never-ending and often confusing debate about the difference between leadership and management has occupied people's minds for decades. While leadership is associated with behaviour that influences others to follow, giving direction and vision, and making change happen, management tends to be associated with promoting stability and enabling the smooth running of the organization. According to Northouse (2007) there are currently about sixty-five different ways to classify and define the dimensions of leadership. Throughout this paper I shall be taking a broad spectrum approach to leadership where the term refers to any role that explicitly or implicitly gives a person authority over another as well as the power to influence, motivate, enable and inspire others to achieve personal or organizational goals.

### **Resonance and Dissonance**

A word borrowed from physics, resonance in a leadership context fundamentally refers to being in tune with oneself and others. McKee and Massimilian (2006)

state that resonant leaders are aware of and can communicate what they do and why they do it. They have a high level of emotional intelligence described as having the capacity for high and accurate self and social awareness as well as effective self and relationship management. They are able to build strong and trusting relationships while blending financial, human, intellectual, environmental and social resources in the best possible way to achieve effective results. Resonant leaders are in tune with, and therefore in touch with their people through the power of empathy. They inspire others not only with what they say but by what they do and mostly by who they are. They are a constant source of encouragement and inspiration to their people through their passion and commitment, and deep concern for people and organizational vision.

Dissonance on the other hand is behaviour that results from the often ignored chronic stress that leaders have to face as they struggle to respond to the multiple and often excessive demands made on them. This may be compounded by organizations that encourage short term results and profitability at the expense of long term sustainability, often imposing unrealistic targets with a “make it at all costs” attitude. Regrettably, organizations often cultivate this crises-driven environment where dissonant behaviours become the norm.

### **Dissonance and the Sacrifice Syndrome**

When we work in this environment for a sustained period of time we run the risk of getting trapped in the “sacrifice syndrome” (Boyatzis and McKee (2005)). Our response to the ever increasing pressure and stress is to work even harder and longer inevitably engaging in what are called “defensive routines”. These are ineffective and often destructive patterns of behaviour that serve to protect or distract us from the discomfort of our current emotional state. Defensive routines take the form of many different behaviours and thinking patterns. We begin to overreact to situations, take uncalculated risks, behave impulsively, become cynical, constantly blame others, do things that are out of character and that contradict our values. We may come to a point where we are so far from who we want to be that we begin to lose touch with who we are. Furthermore, and the most dangerous consequence, is the tendency to bury ourselves in our work and deny that anything is wrong with us. We gradually become disconnected from family, friends, colleagues and most of all from ourselves. At best we miss the occasional family event, at worst we become merely visitors in our own home. Physically we begin to suffer from fatigue, illness or neglect and our sense of clear judgment becomes impaired. Our effort to keep up appearances drains us of more energy and gradually shifts us into a destructive pattern of denial and pretense. Eventually, because of the considerable energy it takes to keep up this pattern we may end up burning out. The good news is that today we know how to prevent this from happening and even if it happens we can renew and restore ourselves. The process of renewal is a journey available to anyone willing to take it.

## **The Physiological Impact of the Sacrifice Syndrome**

Our bodies are not equipped to live under constant pressure and stress. Our built-in stress response is a mechanism that helps us deal with emergencies and crisis. Making this a daily part of our life wreaks havoc in our brain and body. Positions of leadership require the constant exercise of making an impact and influencing other people. There are decisions that have to be made and things that we do and say that will have a direct consequence on the lives of others. We are constantly responding to demands from people, challenges from the business environment, and crises that inevitably occur. Throughout all this we try to remain motivated, positive and in control, while trying to inspire and motivate others. The higher we climb the organizational ladder the more power and responsibility is assigned to us. Fewer people are prepared to give us honest and direct feedback even when we encourage it. More people tell us what they think we want to hear rather than what they really think and feel. As a result of this we become lonely and emotionally isolated and this adds to the stress that comes with the role. The responsibility, influence, and constant self-control together with longer and harder hours of work can eventually spiral us into the sacrifice syndrome already described which inevitably translates into dissonant behaviour.

Studies on how the brain responds to stress show how stress increases electrical activity in the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), responsible for the body's ability to react quickly and effectively to physical or emotional provocation. This results in the secretion of stress hormones in the body. Our neural circuitry is also affected and the brain automatically focuses those circuits required for survival found mainly in the right prefrontal cortex. This often means short-circuiting thought processes that take the larger picture and the long-term into consideration. Many common human diseases are attributed in part to the prolonged over-stimulation of the SNS including hypertension, myocardial infarction, autoimmune disorders, obesity, cardiac arrhythmias, heart failure, diabetes, susceptibility to cancer, gastro-intestinal distress, infection, and disturbances in sleep patterns. Arousal of the SNS has long been related to emotions like anger, fear, disgust, anxiety and depression (Tomarken, Davidson, Wheeler, & Doss, 1992).

Prolonged exposure to stress harms our mind and body, draining our energy and ability to function and innovate. This is because the stress response of the SNS is designed for dealing with the occasional crisis and not as a way of life. Besides the detrimental effect that this has on us, it also has a direct impact on the people around us, and it is often those who are closest to us that bear the brunt of our state of being. As we shall see later on in this paper, emotions are contagious and the more influence we have on our social environment the more people we affect. When we are in "poor shape" we generate and radiate dissonance.

## **The Process of Renewal**

While the sympathetic nervous system is responsible for reactions to provocation the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS) is responsible for recovery and helps reverse the harmful effects of the stress response and arousal of the SNS. Activation of the PSNS is associated with enhanced immunity, lowered blood pressure, overall better health as well as positive feelings such as happiness, optimism, and positivity. When we engage in renewal processes we activate the PSNS and restore our sense of well being. Positive states of well-being are also contagious and are quickly picked up by our social environment whether at work, with our family or in the community at large. When we are in “good shape” we radiate resonance. According to Johnston, McKee and Massimilian (2006), “it is only through balancing constant stress with constant renewal that resonant leadership can be sustained” (p. 2).

## **Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion**

This section of the paper will focus on three sources of inner strength that leaders can draw upon to maintain resonance. Through their research on resonant leadership, Boyatzis and McKee (2005) have identified these key sources and practices that together help quell the impact of the pressures of leadership and prevent us from slipping into dissonance. The practices, of mindfulness, hope, and compassion have been found to have a direct impact on our physical well-being by activating the parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for restoring our body whenever it responds to stress. They also have a positive influence on our social environment be it at work, with our family or the general community.

### ***Mindfulness***

Abbot and author Christopher Jamison in his work entitled “Finding Sanctuary” (2006), describes his experience helping hundreds of people in search of themselves. He explains how “*I want to be true to myself*, is a common cry among those who are looking for real personal freedom” (p. 81). He points out how this statement implies that these people are living their life as if something or someone else is running it for them. That their manifest self is something other than who they really are and that who they really are is somehow suppressed, oppressed and sometimes lost altogether. The modern term for this common state of being is ‘alienation’. The irony is that we often deal with alienation by engaging in further acts of alienation. We clutter our lives with activity, dive further into our work, and make sure that every living moment of our day is filled with some sort of distraction, whether it is work, T.V., hobbies, etc. We become human doings rather than human beings as we enter a cycle of restlessness and inability to “be” with ourselves and others.

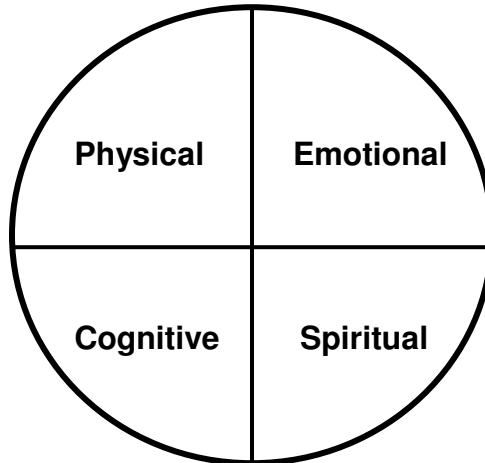
Mindfulness is the antidote to this modern day disease. It is the act of being aware and in touch with what is happening inside us on the level of thoughts and feelings and how this is affecting our behaviour. It is also the ability to be in touch with what is happening around us, attending to other people's cognitive and emotional states. Through mindfulness we can attune ourselves to our inner and outer world so that we can respond more effectively and appropriately. In order to achieve mindfulness in our lives it is essential that we create quiet moments in our day where we can connect with our inner self as well as our social environment. It is also essential that we become comfortable with our own company so that we become more conscious of our internal experience. Often this can cause a degree of discomfort which is partly why so many people tend to avoid it. We may come in touch with thoughts and feelings that we do not like to admit. We may realize that our actions may not be in line with our deeply held values. We may notice that the life we are living is not what we really want for ourselves and for the people closest to us. In moments of quiet reflection we may be revisited by words or even looks that people said to us that speak volumes about who we are and how we come across to others. By allowing thoughts, feelings and sensations to surface in our consciousness, we can then process them and decide what to do with them. Practices such as meditation, contemplation, prayer, listening to music, being in nature, or walking are all ways of helping us listen to our inner voice.

The interpersonal dimension of mindfulness follows from the intrapersonal dimension just described. By really tuning in to what people are communicating to us we can get a true picture of how people really feel; their needs and concerns. It is this same interpersonal mindfulness that can give us a deep sense of what is happening in an organization and identify problems before they turn into crises. By attending carefully to others we can minimize distortion and misinterpretation. It is often by attending to people's subtle non-verbal cues that we can really understand what is going on with them. Through the process of intrapersonal and interpersonal mindfulness, we can "read" the signs around us more accurately and rather than "seeing what we think" we begin to "think about what we see". In other words, because we become sharply aware of our filters and biases we can more easily perceive things for what they really are. We become more open to diverse opinions and ideas, less threatened by honest feedback, and more aware of the emotional sub-context in our organization. This according to Boyatzis and McKee (2005) is "not just nice-to-have or something to be done for private reasons: it is actually essential for sustaining good leadership" (p. 114).

### ***Mindfulness and the four domains of well-being***

One practical tool that can help us in our practice of mindfulness is using the four domains model to attend to the various aspects that contribute to intrapersonal and interpersonal well-being.

This holistic approach to self-management is an essential part of effective leadership. The model includes the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of the self. The four domains are highly interrelated and affect each other but for the sake of clarity each domain is briefly described.



### **The Physical Domain: Care of our body**

This is the physical aspect of well being. We all know about the importance of eating healthy food, doing regular exercise, getting enough sleep and enough rest. Unfortunately these basic self-care practices tend to be the first to vanish from our life when we become too busy or stressed, which ironically is when we need them most. Today we know from considerable research that a good diet, regular exercise and adequate sleep have a direct effect on how we think, feel, and consequently behave during the day. They are also good protection against the negative effects of stress. At work, we need to take all the necessary health and safety measures that reduce the risk of work-related illness and injuries.

### **The Emotional Domain: How we feel**

This is the emotional aspect of our well being. It deals with our feelings. To begin with, we need to be in touch with our feelings through a high level of self-awareness and self-understanding. This is especially important in times of stress when our emotional state may be off-balance and the risk of over reacting to frustrating situations becomes higher.

It is also important that we find ways of expressing our feelings constructively. We need to find healthy outlets to our feelings. Developing assertiveness, for example, is an effective way of expressing our feelings of anger and frustration without exploding or imploding. On an emotional level it is also important to appreciate who we are and regularly practice conscious gratitude for what we have. Finally, our emotional well-being is also related to the type of relationships that we nurture in our work, community, and family life. We all need mutual love

and support through friendship, companionship, and intimacy even in our workplace. In other words, 'love' in its various appropriate forms. Hawley (1993) describes our reluctance to talk about love in business. He goes on to explain how we often put up a 'tough' front of invulnerability fearing that any sign of vulnerability will be taken as weakness. At work, it is important that we create an atmosphere of support, trust, friendship, and teamwork. These characteristics go a long way in buffering work related stress and creating an emotionally healthy working environment.

### **The Cognitive Domain: How we think**

This is the area that deals with the way we process information and make sense of what we do and what happens to us. It is also the area of intellectual development. Although thinking positively has become an overused cliché, it still makes a lot of sense. In today's reality it is very easy to get caught in a negative mind-set failing to appreciate what is positive and as a result missing out on many opportunities. Positive cognitive framing is not fooling ourselves that a negative, painful reality does not exist. Rather, it is choosing what to do with the challenges that life gives us. Every challenge is an opportunity to learn and become a wiser person. From this perspective we take a reflective/proactive approach to life and regard ourselves as 'works in progress' constantly learning and evolving. A good exercise in gauging our cognitive health is to become aware of the nature of our conversations with others and of our inner dialogue. To what extent are these positive, hopeful, and proactive?

### **The Spiritual Domain: Care of the soul**

In this context spirituality is taken in its widest sense, "a state or experience that can provide individuals with direction or meaning, or provide feelings of understanding, support, inner wholeness or connectedness. Connectedness can be to themselves, other people, nature, the universe, a god, or some other supernatural power" (Smith & Rayment, 2007, p.5). A sound spirituality keeps us in touch with our deeply held values and helps us to live according to them. Covey (1992) explains that we all need to have a personal mission statement that guides our daily actions and short and long- term decisions. This can only happen if we dedicate time and energy nurturing our spirituality through ways that we find effective.

Our work needs to be a place that respects the value of every individual and to every possible extent makes work as meaningful as possible for its employees. This can happen through constant communication of how the larger picture relates to the work they do and through the appreciation of the importance of their work.

As leaders, the more we develop and nurture the four domains, the more integrated we become, thus being in a stronger position to lead others. The holistic nature of this model ensures that every aspect of well being is developed, thus bringing about balance. Healthy leaders can be more effective in their work

and sustain themselves longer, even under the inevitable pressures of leadership. The table below describes some of the skills or competencies we need to develop to help us grow in each of the four domains.

Domains	Positive Actions. Competencies & Skills
<b>Physical</b>	Regular exercise, healthy diet, adequate sleep, regular general physical checkups, relaxation techniques, yoga, pilates, tai chi.
<b>Emotional</b>	Self-awareness, self-expression, communication, assertiveness, creative work, music & art, intimacy, friendship, support.
<b>Cognitive</b>	Positive inner dialogue, challenging faulty beliefs, constant learning, problem solving, lateral thinking.
<b>Spiritual</b>	Meditation, prayer, spiritual retreats, upholding positive values and principles, clear mission statement, integrity.

### **Hope**

In the brutal, humiliating and totally inhuman conditions of the concentration camps, Victor Frankl, found comfort as he forced his mind to focus on his beloved wife. He heard her answering him, saw her smile, her honest and encouraging look. He also used to force his mind to visualize himself standing on the platform of a lecture room delivering lectures to an attentive audience. This mental activity gave him hope and helped him survive the brutality of his suffering. He strongly believed in the power of hope. “Those of you who know how close the connection is between the state of mind of a man – his courage and hope, or lack of them – and the state of immunity of his body will understand that the sudden loss of hope and courage can have a deadly effect” (Frankl 1959, p. 85). As early as 1946 when Victor Frankl first wrote about his experience in Auchwitz and Dachau he already recognized the close relationship between hope and well-being. Today, sixty years later, neuroscientific research indicates that “people who are generally optimistic are happier, more resilient, and more productive; they live longer; recover from illnesses faster; and are more likely to create resonance and lead effectively” (Boyatzis & McKee 2005, p. 165). Optimism also contributes to a general sense of well-being, essential in helping leaders cope with the inevitable challenges and disappointments of their work.

Maintaining hope, even in difficult times involves a deliberate decision to focus on opportunities for learning from every situation. It is a conscious decision to see the glass as half full rather than half empty and if the glass is empty, seeing it as an opportunity to fill it with something meaningful. It involves constantly visualizing one's dreams and persisting towards achieving them. Associated closely with hope is the leader's sense of self-efficacy, that is, a sense of mastery over one's life situation. Today, researchers believe that self-efficacy is one of the main predictors of people's actions and their degree of success in achieving their goals. As leaders in organizations we need to learn how to nurture a hopeful attitude through constantly keeping our feasible dreams alive in our minds. We can also nurture hope by making sure we have frequent contact with inspiring people, acts of goodness, stories of courage and success. It is so easy to get bogged down in hopelessness and negativity when we are bombarded by so much of it every day. As with mindfulness the conscious practice of hope activates the parasympathetic nervous system. It has a direct effect on our perception and attribution, slows breathing, lowers blood pressure, and strengthens our immune system.

### ***Compassion***

In a research review McWhinnie (1999) looks at various studies that focus on the qualities to look for in a company and what keeps people working well and staying in their jobs. He concludes that it is primarily the quality of the relationship with their bosses and not necessarily the pay and the perks that make people want to stay with the company. People want to be valued and cared for in the same way they would in a family. Respect for the individual came up as the most striking feature in his study. Resonant leaders are leaders who are able to show compassion in their interactions with their people. Boyatzis & McKee (2005) understand compassion as having three main components: Understanding of, and empathy for, others' feelings and experiences; Caring for others;

Willingness to act on those feelings of care and empathy. For this kind of compassionate attitude to be possible, leaders need to be genuinely interested in their people, get to know them, be ready to listen closely to them, caring for and respecting them as whole persons with lives and experiences that reach far beyond the boundaries of their working lives. Leaders need to focus outside themselves and their needs, and must avoid the common pitfall of narcissistic self-centredness that is so easy to slip into when power is combined with high levels of stress.

Boyatzis and McKee (2005) make a compelling business case for compassion in organisations, pointing out that a culture of compassion results in more people developing into leaders, a higher level of commitment from staff, better standards of responsiveness to customers, and a sense of social support and responsibility. Moreover, there is a great physiological, emotional, and mental restorative impact on the person exercising compassion and this is essential for maintaining

personal and professional effectiveness. This in turn positively impacts the performance of the organization especially during difficult times.

One way of fostering a culture of compassion in an organization is to develop its leaders into coaches or mentors. This creates a built-in system of care and helps leaders stay in touch with the developmental needs of their people and be less self-absorbed while remaining open to feedback.

## **Emotional Contagion – our Neural Wi-Fi**

We have seen how mindfulness, hope and compassion are essential for resonant leadership, how they have a direct restorative role in managing the stress of being in a position of leadership, and how this in turn positively effects an organization. This section will briefly explain, how the state of key people in an organization influences others. In the mid-nineties professor Giacomo Rizzolatti, one of the world's best-known neurophysiologists, and his colleagues, made a discovery that has revolutionized the way scientists look at the human brain. This was the discovery of mirror neurons. Goldman (2007) describes them as neuron clusters (mirror mechanisms) that enable us to directly understand the meaning of the actions and emotions of others by internally replicating ('simulating') them without any explicit reflection or reasoning about them. For the first time in history we have a neurophysiological account of how we involuntarily and experientially comprehend both the actions and the emotions of other people. This discovery triggered a barrage of research all over the world, in an attempt to further understand these mirror mechanisms and their implications for social behaviour.

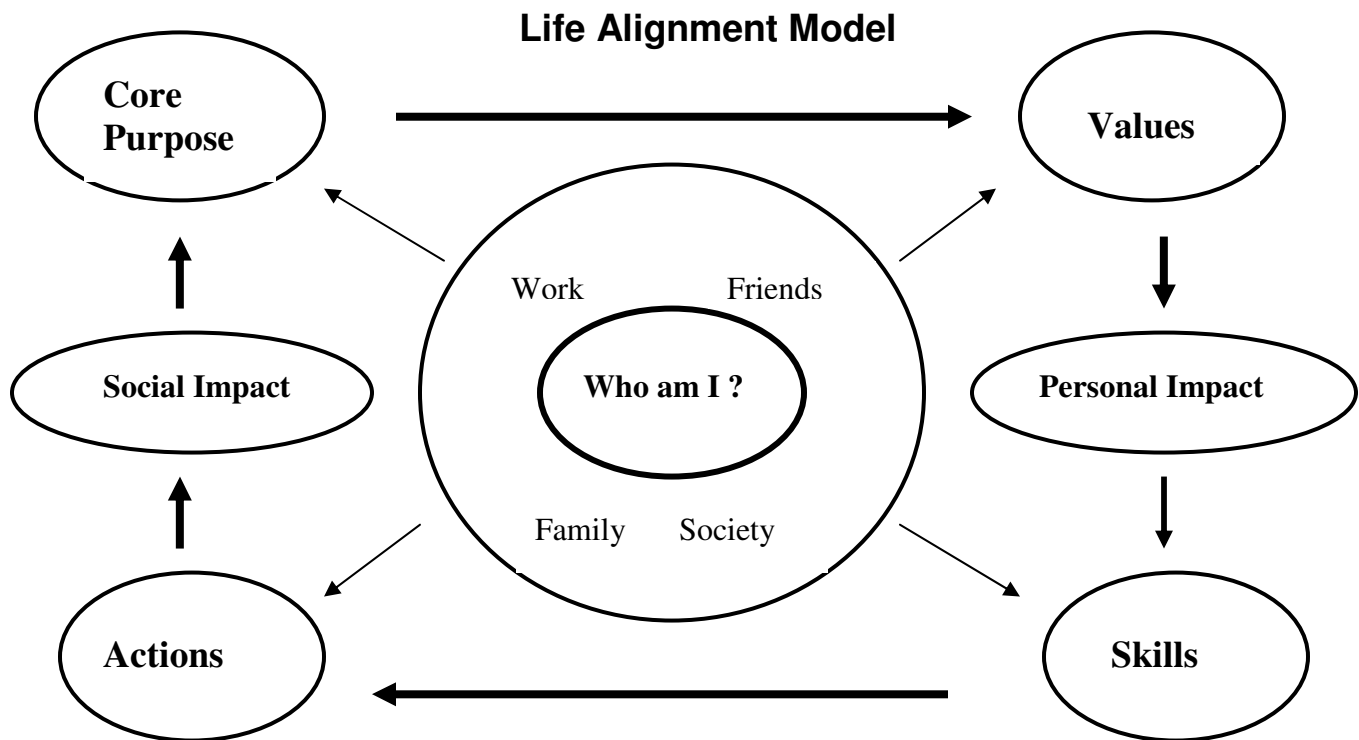
Goleman (2006) describes this process as a "neural wi-fi" automatically connecting human beings at a neurological level. He explains how because of this connection emotions are contagious, in other words, the internal emotional state of one person triggers off the same internal state in another. The more power and influence this person has, the stronger the level of emotional contagion. People in positions of leadership therefore have a great responsibility for the emotional climate they create in their organizations and this has a direct impact on people's performance. Bayne & Freedman (2007) explain how a leader's emotional state, whether negative or positive, has a direct effect on group task performance, group effort, cooperation, efficacy, conflict, and positive behaviours in favour of the organization. Caruso & Salovey (2004) highlight the importance of emotions in the workplace, particularly but not only, of people occupying leadership roles. They state that "emotions at work influence judgment, job satisfaction, helping behaviour, creative problem-solving, and decision making" (Caruso & Salovey, 2004, p. 8). Their research focuses on the fundamental role of emotional intelligence in effective and successful leadership and management.

The current research on emotional contagion has major implications for the responsibility of leaders in looking after themselves, so that they avoid the pitfall

of the far-reaching destructive effects of dissonance on themselves, other people, and organizational performance. Through the practice of mindfulness, hope and compassion, leaders can radiate positive, encouraging, caring and motivating ripples throughout their organization. In the last section of this paper, I offer two models that leaders can use in order to evaluate their degree of resonance, identify gaps, and plan intentional change.

### The Life Alignment Model – A Model for Personal Change

An effective approach for assessing personal effectiveness and creating transformational change is the Life Alignment Model (LAM). This model is an adaptation and development on a model of personal change developed by Dilts (1990) that puts spirituality at the core of human existence followed by identity, beliefs, behaviours, and environment. Dilts suggests that for real and lasting personal change to occur there needs to be congruence at all levels. The Life Alignment Model puts the Self at its centre with the various life roles that make it up. Surrounding the self in a progressive cyclical fashion, are four facets; Core Purpose; Values; Competencies and Actions. Our core purpose and values are externally represented through our competencies and actions. These have an impact on our physical and social environment and ideally this impact is in line with our core purpose. The more aligned the four facets are in our life the higher the probability that we become deeply satisfied and contented. The figure below is a graphical representation of the Life Alignment Model showing how one facet builds on the other starting with the facet of core purpose.



When we have a clear sense of purpose in life, and embrace values that truly reflect that purpose, then we are on the right road to life alignment. Our skills and competencies need to be a manifestation of our values, which in turn need to reflect our core mission. Likewise, our decisions, actions, and behaviours need to represent our strengths and talents. With this alignment we can have the best positive impact on our social and physical environment and as a result we generate resonance. We can also achieve our full potential and become who it is that we really want to become. Parsons (2002) encourages us not to settle for success but to strive for significance that has a positive impact on our environment and leaves us with a deep sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. This may involve taking Covey's (1992) suggestion to take time to create a personal mission statement and spend the rest of our lives working towards it. He also suggests that sound principles be at the heart of our mission and that all our decisions and actions are in line with it. In the leadership context, as we have already seen, mindfulness, hope and compassion need to be core values and practices if we want to have a resonant impact on our workplace and beyond. The following eight questions will help you evaluate and reflect on the extent to which your four facets are in alignment. Once we identify areas of misalignment between levels we can begin to formulate strategies that enable us to realign ourselves and bring us closer to our ideal self as expressed in our core purpose and core values.

1. What is my mission in life; that which gives me a deep sense of purpose and a reason to live?
2. Do my most deeply held values adequately reflect my life purpose?
3. What are my strengths and skills in areas such as career, relationships, family, personality, etc.?
4. Are my skills a strong reflection of my most deeply held values?
5. How do I behave every day in terms of the decisions and actions that I take in my various life roles?
6. Are my decisions and actions a manifestation of my skills and competencies? Do I do what I am best at every day?
7. What impact do I have on my social and physical environment?
8. Is this impact in line with my core purpose and mission statement?

Another useful model is the Intentional Change Theory developed by Boyatzis (2006). He suggests four steps in personal transformation. These are:

1. Identification of an ideal self where we create a vision of who we want to be.
2. Identification of real self through feedback from others and comparison of the ideal self and the real self.

3. Identification of areas of misalignment between ideal and real self and creation of a learning agenda that capitalizes on strengths and works on weaknesses or gaps between the ideal and real self.
4. Experimenting with and practicing new attitudes, skills & behaviours while assessing them using our ideal self as the benchmark.

Boyatzis (2006) recommends that in engaging in this change process we involve other people so that we can get honest and constructive feedback and support during each step of the process. This relationship can be with a close and trusted friend, life-coach, mentor, counsellor, or psychologist. Boyatzis puts this relationship at the centre of his model emphasizing its importance.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have seen how by leading from within and focusing on our inner growth and development we can create a vibrant organizational climate built on respect, dignity and compassion towards people. We have also seen how through constant renewal, we can avoid slipping into dissonance, which is the default consequence if we neglect the warning signs and wake up calls that occur within and around us. Unfortunately, in today's business environment organizations tend to encourage a quasi-machiavellian approach where business ends justify the means irrespective of values and human casualties. Current research into organisational behaviour and business success clearly indicates that the high-adrenaline, crisis-driven environment is detrimental to both individuals and to organizations. Resonant organizations are the key to long-term sustainable business success. It is people who drive our organisations and only through creating optimal environments for excellence in performance can we meet the ever increasing challenges of the business environment.

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