

PERFORMANCE ARCHITECT



ENERGY TO LEAD

MORE TO LEADERSHIP
THAN MEETS THE EYE.

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by Andrew Simon and Natalie Boswell

It may seem obvious to point out that leadership is not just a cerebral or conceptual activity. Effective leadership in complex circumstances requires that we use a considerable portion of our brain of course, but there is more to leadership than just thinking well, critical though this is.

The physicality of leadership seems obvious and supporting leaders to cope with the physicality that their roles demand is critical if leaders are to be successful.

We use the phrase 'to lead' or the verb 'leading' for instance, to presumably make the point, that there is some expectation or intention at least of some sort of movement, that we are leading people to or are being led somewhere.

Concepts often associated with leadership like *vision, modelling the way, walking the talk, change, innovation, looking forward* and *inspiration* all suggest some sort of movement, that there is a kind of physicality to leadership. The term inspiration for example, comes from the Latin word "insprare" which means to 'breathe' or 'blow into', breathing being the most basic of physical activity.

Besides thinking, effective leaders do move around, they step out of their offices and they seek out opportunities, people and ideas, they ask questions, they meet, talk and listen. They act and make decisions often under pressure and stress and they encourage, coach, empower, support, guide, teach, direct and inspire.

The physicality of leadership seems obvious and supporting leaders to cope with the physicality that their roles demand is critical if leaders are to be successful.

Helping leaders to prepare for and to thrive in mentally, emotionally and physiologically challenging roles requires a holistic approach. An approach that integrates what an effective leader needs to *know* and *do* with what a leader needs to *be*. In today's rapid fire, interconnected global world, the effective leader really also needs to *be fit*.

To integrate physical movement consistently in a leaders working life, an element of exploration is required to discover personal strategies to help support and sustain leadership performance.

The leader's fitness

A leader's fitness is to do with having the desired energy, stamina, endurance and agility to carry out the demanding cognitive, emotional and physical tasks and goals of leadership.

Such energy comes from paying intelligent and purposeful attention to at least three pillars:

Our physical movement:

We all know that exercise is incredibly good for the body, but the benefits to the brain and cognitive function are enormous. Drawing on principles from neuroscience it is without doubt that our physical bodies can fuel and fertilise the mind to meet the daily demands of leadership complexities.

Thinking intelligently about exercise and leveraging physical movement throughout the day will assist leaders to achieve the following outcomes:

- Increased and renewed energy stores
- Improved ability to make decisions
- Enhanced clarity of thought and improved capacity for creative thinking
- An uplift in mood to better influence and establish effective relationships
- Opportunity for uninterrupted reflection

To integrate physical movement consistently in a leaders working life, an element of exploration is required to discover personal strategies to help support and sustain leadership performance. This all begins with how a leader *thinks* about movement as this is the 'start button' to a leader's actions and behaviours.

The mind shapes where we go, how we go about it and whether we embed and sustain new behaviours. Research suggests that when a leader pursues opportunities (both professional or personal) that are NOT aligned with personal thinking preferences, the likelihood of long term success is significantly reduced. Understanding personal thinking preferences towards exercise will assist to increase motivation and improve chances of developing enduring rituals and habits.

Fit leaders are aware of the foods they eat and how this impacts their own energy, mood and productivity.

To leverage the real power of exercise as a strategy for improving leadership performance, it is important that a complementary balance of aerobic exercise, strength work and flexibility are considered. Other aspects to consider include adding variety, enjoyment and making it social. The objective here is to ensure that movement fuels your energy as opposed to depleting it by partaking in exhaustive exercise programs.

One thing all leaders have in common is being human – and humans are designed to be on their feet. Maximising individual potential for optimum workplace performance will not occur by sitting all day long – the trick is to build your own self awareness, implement simple physical movement strategies and then gradually increase what you do in alignment to support your leadership intentions.

Our nourishment and nutrition:

Being a leader requires a lot of personal energy, therefore re-fuelling the body is key to optimal performance. Fit leaders are aware of the foods they eat and how this impacts their own energy, mood and productivity. The connection that food has to our waistline is often understood, but appreciation and the ability to leverage the powerful connection between real food and human energy is often misunderstood. It is critical for leaders to become more aware of how their body works and what it needs.

We all have unique nutritional requirements therefore leaders must seek out evidence-based recommendations that can greatly enhance their overall health and energy. An honest assessment of current eating habits is a good place to start and enlisting the support of a professional for guidance and support can assist to elevate performance to new heights.

A fit leader is forever mindful about the relationship between what they eat and how this contributes to their performance. Making deliberate and thoughtful choices without depriving oneself from the enjoyment of food is essential for sustaining consistent energy.

Andrew Simon is the Chief Executive of Yellow Edge Performance Architects, an STW company that is focused on inspiring performance at individual, team and organisational levels.

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Our sleep:

'Sleep is an active state, generated within the brain, not a mere absence of consciousness' – Paul Martin

The most basic of activity, we can tend to take sleep for granted and neglect its impact on our leadership efficacy. Lack of sleep is a very common phenomenon amongst many leaders, often negatively impacting the leader's ability to perform, including:

- Eroding our capacity for higher order thinking and tasks that require attention.
- Impairing our ability to make complex decisions where plans need to be revised, to pay attention to relevant information and to communicate effectively.
- Impairing our ability to assign priorities, ignore distractions and to communicate with people.

Research has shown that even a single night without sleep will impair our ability to think flexibly and creatively and to strategize. As well as sapping our ability to perform, tiredness from lack of sleep also impairs our motivation. Many tired people just can't be bothered. Tired people are also emotionally less resilient and prone to irritation and sadness.

Understanding your own sleep patterns is an important yet overlooked form of self-awareness amongst leaders. The first step in getting better sleep for ourselves is to understand our own patterns of sleep and to understand the physiology and biology of sleep. Just because we sleep every night does not automatically mean that we know how sleep actually works or indeed, how to do it well! Knowing how sleep works can help us to manage our sleep better to have the energy we need for our leadership.

Fit to lead

Effective leaders have the energy to think and to act well under pressure to meet the challenges and demands that come with the role. Beyond this, being fit is also central to having sufficient energy to draw on to cut through the busyness, intensity, distraction and pace of the every day, to create and seize the opportunities that all good leaders desire, to move people, teams, organisations and communities forward to worthy goals.

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Being appropriately and intelligently fit is integral to thinking and acting well. Without this integration between our fitness with what we know and what we do as leaders, we cannot really lead with energy, nor can we help the people and organisations that we lead to realise their full potential.

The aim here is not to become elite athletes or the apex of physical perfection (if there is such a thing!) but to have the energy to think clearly, to act well and the endurance to continue to do so over the long haul through the inevitable highs and lows of life without doing damage to ourselves and to the people we lead.

More info...

On fitness

- Young, Damon (2014) How to think about exercise. Macmillan. London

On nutrition and nourishment

- Prescott John (2012) Taste Matters. Reaktion Books. London

On sleep

- Harrington, Carmel (2014) The complete guide to a good night's sleep. Macmillan. Sydney.
- Martin, Paul (2002) Counting Sheep. Flamingo. London.

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