

Resonant Leadership by David Boyatzis and Annie McKee (Harvard Business School Press, 2005). Reviewed by Steve Gladis, Ph.D. December 2010

The bottom line of this book is found in its subtitle: *Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion*. This might well be one of the most important leadership books I've read. Boyatzis and McKee – well respected researchers, professors and authors – use the physics concept of “resonance” (being in tune) to explain a simple biologic principle that rules our lives: We're creatures whose behaviors and motivations are fueled by our emotions and stimulated by our leaders. And if those leaders are negative in thought, word or deed, they will produce a negative climate and culture, with a negative impact on employee performance. On the other hand, if they approach leadership with a positive vision, they create a culture of employees who succeed and who are renewed, creative, hopeful and compassionate. The authors describe The Sacrifice Syndrome that produces negative attractors and eventually a default state of dissonance. They also describe how such dissonant, even depressed, workers can learn how to climb out of such a negative syndrome by learning and employing The Cycle of Renewal that produces positive attractors – and makes people want to be around you, as a person and as a leader. This week I will be reviewing this book in some detail. I might add that I now recommend it without reservation to every executive client – it's that big a deal.

1. **The Sacrifice Syndrome:** You've seen this dozens of times in the workplace. The company has a crisis or hits a rough patch. The manager or leader or even CEO begins to bear down, actually sacrificing herself or himself for the cause – works harder, eats poorly, stays longer hours to “fix” the problem. S/he has everyone focused on the problem with what I would call a “do not” focus – do not screw this up, do not let your guard down, do not let things slip. Whatever the “do not” thing is, when a leader approaches this negative stressor (or negative attractor), s/he begins a stress cycle not unlike the early days when we hunted wild game to survive. In the best of circumstances, there is a long period of recovery between stressors. The problem is that today that recovery cycle between stressors is so short as to almost be indiscernible – sending loads of stress hormones like adrenaline, cortisol, and other nasty hormones coursing through our bodies. Such negative stressors can turn an otherwise decent person into a toxic, dissonant victim who can spread the disease at epidemic speeds, especially if that person is a leader. And what's the worst part of it? Those

infected with the Sacrifice Syndrome cannot see their slip into the abyss, instead often seeing others as incompetent, lazy, and useless. Unfortunately, dissonance is the default human setting, to protect us from that which would harm us. While that worked well when we had long recovery periods in our earlier evolutionary stages, it does not work well in today's high-speed culture. Negative attractors come to us in batches of emails, texts, or tweets that overstimulate and push us into a destructive dissonant downward spiral that's unfortunately invisible to us. In short, we need relief and renewal or are destined to crash, by default.

2. **The Renewal Cycle:** Just as The Sacrifice Syndrome can infect anyone, especially leaders, with negative attractors, causing dissonance that can be their eventual undoing and a source of individual and corporate cultural rejection, the Renewal Cycle has the opposite effect. In the Sacrifice Syndrome, the negative stimulus (dropping revenues, a difficult boss or employee) enters the right part of the brain and gets transmitted through the Sympathetic Nervous System. This stimulates the release of hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) which is really good when you're really in trouble...not so great when released several times a day. On the other hand, positive attractors, things that happen that are pleasant, even gratifying (being loved, praised, honored) trigger the opposite side of the brain, and the lucky person secretes either oxytocin (women) or vasopressin (men) – both of which reduce blood pressure and make us calmer, more relaxed, and more able to solve problems more quickly and easily. Such a cycle basically reboots our brain and resets the positive balance, especially when we're out of balance because of The Sacrifice Syndrome. And, like the negative attractors, such positive attractors are very infectious. In fact, the quickest way to attract someone to your positive wavelength is through smiling or music – both of which are hard wired into our limbic, primordial brains. The authors offer three types of positive attractors to get this Renewal Cycle started: Mindfulness, Hope and Compassion.
3. **Mindfulness:** The first of the three sources for renewal is mindfulness, according to Boyatzis and McKee. Mindfulness relates to being self aware and emotionally controlled (emotional intelligence) as well as aware of others and able to manage multiple relationships (social intelligence). The authors talk about being “awake, aware, and attending – to our ourselves and the world around us” (p. 73). And while we're often told to focus on the rational mind, the authors caution leaders to attend to the emotions of others – the seat of all action and reaction. Oftentimes, we can slip into a mindless state when we overfocus on a problem.

Actually our physical vision is greatly reduced (from 180 degrees to 30 degrees of peripheral vision) when we are under stress. In essence, as leaders, we become blind to outside data that might prove quite valuable to solve the problem. Another state that pulls us unaware into mindlessness is the “lock-step life.” That is, we begin to live out someone else’s vision for ourselves. Perhaps it’s a parent who wanted us to be a doctor or lawyer. So, we go to med school or law school and find ourselves years later bored, burned out in the midst of The Sacrifice Syndrome, and toxic to be around – even to ourselves. The authors offer some solutions. For example, reflection and renewal can take the form of meditating, writing in a journal, taking walks – anything that disturbs the spiral into a negative attractor. Supportive relationships and attending to those around us helps us climb out of the negative hole of dissonance to be more aware and attentive to those closest to us at home, work and play. At the end of all the chapters, the authors offer some effective, easy exercises that reinforce the chapter’s lessons.

4. **Hope:** While mindfulness prepares us to interact with ourselves and others, it’s not enough to protect us from the dissonance default. However, hope is a powerful reset button for us all. Hope can help a leader focus on his or her vision for the future. And vision becomes a very powerful positive attractor and takes us down a path of renewal, not negative emotion and dissonance. The authors cite examples of how positive visioning has helped great athletes win under the most stressful of situations – principally by visioning themselves winning, often in great detail. The neural paths created by such envisioning are very similar to those who have practiced such skills for a long period of time. As a positive attractor, hope becomes like an umbrella of positive protection that draws from your strengths and visions of the future. The result is slower breathing, better memory, and in general a healthy prognosis, whereas negative attractors like hate, jealousy, and envy take leaders down a very different path – one of emotional, physical and spiritual isolation and dissonance. Not fun. The authors offer three key components of hope: 1) the leader needs a vision and to be in touch with people around him/her; 2) the leader must be optimistic; and 3) the leader must see the future as feasible. In fact, their description of optimists vs. pessimists is worth the read.
5. **Compassion:** The authors have a great definition for compassion – empathy in action. They make the distinction between compassion and sympathy: Compassion is a positive action. They use the compelling example of Lechesa

Tsenoli, who was a prisoner in South Africa during apartheid. He reached out in compassion to his own jailers, one in particular. By seeing him as a person and talking about their families, Tsenoli changed the way he was treated. But the compassion started with his changing his view of his own captors. And the simple technique to start this process of compassion toward others is simply by listening to them. The authors offer three components of compassion: 1) empathy for others; 2) caring for others; and, 3) a willingness to act on those feelings. The authors talk about creating a culture of compassion and use an example of a vision statement from Summa Healthcare Systems that is as good a one as I have ever read (p. 189-90). A final section that I particularly liked was how to become a more resonant executive coach – my chosen field. And I think this section might well become a guidebook for internal coaches and mentors alike.

6. **Intentional Change:** Boyatzis has developed what he calls intentional change, particularly useful when making positive change. The model is: 1) Determine your ideal self (who you want to be at your very best – your vision for your best future); 2) Inventory your “real self” (who you are right now); 3) Know your strengths and weaknesses and establish a learning agenda to address them; 4) Experiment with new behaviors that work on strengths (and manage weaknesses); 5) Develop resonant and close relationships to help you in each stage of the process.
7. **Final Words:** As leaders, we all fall prey to the ups and downs that go with the territory. As you see yourself or others begin to tailspin, via the Sacrifice Syndrome, toward negative attractors and ultimately toward dissonance, consider *Resonant Leadership* by Boyatzis and McKee to be a leadership parachute!