

The Leadership Game

Leadership Demands a High Physical Intelligence Quotient

By Mariah Burton Nelson



Physical intelligence is the ability to listen to the body's subtle signals, then respond wisely.

How would you complete this sentence? A leader's primary responsibility is to:

- a) Take care of the people in the organization.
- b) Make sure the organization is financially sound.
- c) Provide ethical standards.
- d) Stay healthy.

All are valid answers, but I like d, which is another way of saying "all of the above." A leader who is sick or tired due to poor physical fitness can't guide a business toward fiscal fitness. A leader who functions at less than full capacity can't offer the vision, team spirit, or ethical guidance a company needs.

Physical intelligence is not about what you should be eating or not eating; how many glasses of water you should drink; why you need more exercise and sleep. It's not about what doctors or chiropractors or aromatherapists could do for you, if you'd let them treat you.

It's about how you treat yourself. I define physical intelligence as the ability to listen to the body's subtle signals, then respond wisely. Our bodies are good at telling us what they need, from one moment to the next and over the course of a lifetime.

When we listen carefully, our bodies reward us by feeling good, by behaving well, by taking us places we want to go—pain-free. How does a body communicate what it needs? Sometimes it screams: broken bone! seizure! More often, it speaks in whispers: stiff neck, sneezing, pain, discomfort, weight gain or loss.

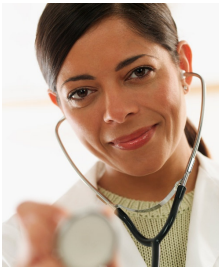
Physical intelligence requires that we not only be on the lookout for times when the body is telling us that something is amiss, but also for times when the body is rewarding us for good behavior. Often, it's thanking you for that workout, nap, or hug. If we take note of that pleasure, we'll be more likely to make time for health and fitness in the future.

Leaders often tune out their own body's pleas for attention. An executive is likely to ignore lower-back stiffness in the middle of a meeting, then sleep poorly and take ibuprofen or stronger medications to mute the pain. He or she might ignore the stiffness for months, then "all of a sudden" suffer from debilitating back pain.

At that point, the back will be impossible to ignore. The body will have "won" by forcing the executive to take time off. But by paying attention earlier—even by simply standing and stretching now and then—the executive might have prevented the problem in the first place.

A few years ago I was diagnosed with cough-variant asthma. It's like regular asthma but instead of wheezing you cough. After seeing various health professionals about the problem, I found a pulmonologist who explained that asthma can be triggered by allergies. When he asked what I was allergic to, I said, "I don't know. I've never been tested."

Don't depend on physical intelligence alone. Periodically seek help from professionals.



"I bet you do know," he said. "Think about how your body responds in various environments."

After just a moment or two, I responded decisively: "I'm allergic to dogs, cats, dust, fallen leaves, and dairy products, especially yogurt."

Sure enough, my own subsequent tests—and medical tests, too—proved me right. When I began avoiding those allergens as much as possible, I stopped coughing. Giving up Rocky, my shepherd/lab/retriever, was not an option, but I removed many rugs from the house, started wearing a mask while raking leaves, and stopped eating a big bowl of yogurt for breakfast. Now I almost never need to use the inhalants my doctor originally prescribed. I just avoid the things that make me cough.

My body had been explaining that allergic/asthmatic reaction to me for years. I used to cough for several minutes after every breakfast. How obvious! But I hadn't been physically intelligent enough to pay attention. Now I am, and I do.

Here are three guidelines for developing physical intelligence:

1. **Awareness.** What is your body saying? It's trickier than it sounds. When your knee hurts, is it okay to keep running or not? When you're hungry, are you hungry for food or affection? Note the physical sensations, then employ emotional and intellectual intelligence before deciding what, if any, action to take.
2. **Commitment.** What if you promised your body you would have and hold it, love and cherish it, in sickness and in health, from this day forward? Considering the stakes (illness, disability, even death), isn't it remarkable that so few of us make the same commitment to ourselves that we make to others?
3. **Humility.** Your body can't tell you everything. Tests (Pap smears, mammograms, prostate exams, colonoscopies) can detect cancer and other ailments that you can't detect on your own. So don't depend on physical intelligence alone. Periodically seek help from professionals.

Your relationship with your body is the most important relationship you have. If you refuse to listen when your body speaks, the resulting poor health, poor body image, lethargy, and discomfort will interfere with every other relationship, and any leadership role you may have.

A leader's primary responsibility is to stay healthy. Fortunately, your body is telling you almost everything you need to know to achieve and sustain that health.

Mariah Burton Nelson is executive director of the American Association for Physical Activity and Recreation, Reston, Virginia.

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