

Leading from the Heart in the Workplace

By Sally Mahé, ITP Mastery Teacher & Integral Leadership cohort member

Maria Jose Hobday, a Native American elder, once said to me, “Lift up your heart-bone!” We can lift our “heart bone” literally. With an intentional in-breath, we can give a lift to the chest. A little inhale “push up” opens our chest and lifts our heart-strength back into action.



Leading from the heart in the workplace has to do with bringing courage to the workplace. Courage, coming from the French word, “coeur” is another name for heart-strength.

In a personal way, my heart strength was called into action several years ago. Work gave me opportunity to let go of divisive judgment and become a better leader. I was serving as the Director of Organizational Development for the United Religions Initiative (URI), a global interfaith bridge building organization. Our work included creating a supportive network for grassroots groups made up of people from diverse religions and cultural traditions who took it upon themselves to cooperate together and organize for positive change in their communities. As we developed a network of support groups from all parts of the world, we continually asked ourselves, “What can the people do for themselves? What kind of outside assistance is most useful?” Limited staff and budget made priority setting challenging.

As a way to deepen respect among diverse people, we had developed the protocol of opening and closing meetings with moments of blessing and prayer offered from different faith traditions. I was in one of these opening circles. I had been feeling bad – stuck. I had been convinced that URI’s primary service was to uphold the creative initiatives of the local groups. I knew that other staff felt URI’s priority was to train groups, to provide “how to” manuals, etc. To me the two positions were mutually exclusive. My ego had become invested. I felt angry knowing that my stance was correct and theirs was wrong. During that blessing moment, a voice rushed into me and said, “Sally, don’t you know that loving is more important than being right?”

Actually, I didn’t “get it” in that moment but in time the truth that LOVE was a preferable leadership skill came clear. I asked myself, “What do I need to do differently to lead from my heart?” I realized I needed to change. I needed to recognize my ego defended behavior. I practiced honoring my own perspective as well as wholeheartedly respecting opinions different than my own. I started loving more and judging less.

Likewise in the public sphere, no matter what kind of work we do, the dangerous and transformational times we live in call for tremendous heart strength. Where does our resilience in face of seemingly unsurmountable problems come from? Where does our resolve to work hard to meet needs without guarantee of positive outcomes reside?

A few years ago my favorite movie was *Wonder Woman*. Not the usual action-super hero movie, this story revealed that Wonder Woman's strength came from a place inside herself – a deep well of fierce love and compassion. There is a scene, WWI, Battle of Verdun, enemy lines are dug in, each side packed into trenches for months shooting bullets and bombs at each other. Soldiers say they're stuck, positions entrenched. Wonder Woman realizes that people of Verdun are starving and freezing, and she's resolved to do something. She leaps out of the trenches and rushes into enemy fire. Soldiers behind her say, "She's taking the fire - let's go in after her." We see her endure the fusillade, as she wobbles and grimaces and falls a few times while she moves into the fire. Slowly, she moves forward, her super-hero tricks are there but there is also strength from a deeper source. The film story suggests that her motivation, LOVE, was the super power that mattered most. Love endures against the toughest odds. Love is the domain of the human heart.

George Leonard and Michael Murphy's insight is relevant here: *Like the human heart, the world points beyond itself to something greater and more beautiful than its present condition. That something attracts us all, in different ways, and leads many of us to seek transformation. Does it secretly inform the entire evolutionary adventure? Could it be that the human heart and the world's heart are one in self-surpassing? We believe that they are. As we grow in love and strength we become vehicles for the world's growth.*

Most of us work in workplaces. As we go about our daily duties we can choose to lead from the heart. We can see ourselves in love with the world and participants in an evolutionary adventure that surpasses our present condition. Our ITPI community believes we are here to "become vehicles for the world's growth." This means to change entrenched patterns of ignorance, hatred, violence and injustice in our midst. This means to help give birth to a better world, to combat climate change, heal the Earth, build a deeper democracy, bring the best of ourselves forward and learn to bring forth the best in others. This kind of leadership takes courage. The stakes are high. We are not called to play little but to play big and at our best. We are called to lead from heart strength and move into the fire.

Take a breath, lift up your heart bone, get to work, feel the love that is in you and move on in!