



Dancing in the rain

Tips on thriving as a leader in tough times

Leaders who learn a new way to respond to the stress and strain of leadership can enhance their performance and enrich their experience.

By Jerome T. Murphy

In today's education arena, there's no leading without bleeding. No matter what we call it — stress, agitation, loss, frustration, fear, exhaustion, shame, confusion, sadness, loneliness, hurt — there's not an executive alive who can lead without experiencing emotional discomfort. As a Harvard dean, I certainly had my share of spills along with the thrills.

Unfortunately, many leaders inadvertently transmute everyday discomfort into debilitating anguish. In the privacy of our minds, we can make things worse by fighting our discomfort, getting hooked on our troubling thoughts, and scolding ourselves for falling short. As a consequence, we can sidetrack our work and lose sight of what really matters to us. Too often our performance deteriorates, our joy evaporates, our misery escalates, our energy dissipates — and some of us even burn out.

If this pattern sometimes rings true for you, there's good news: Discomfort is inevitable, but anguish is preventable. Indeed, you can thrive as a high-performing leader who takes emotional discomfort in stride, who averts debilitating anguish, and who savors what can often be the exhilaration of leadership. To do so, consider this unconventional approach:

- Open up to your here-and-now uncomfortable experiences just as they are instead of trying to escape them;
- Simply notice your negative thoughts, instead of becoming ensnared by them;
- Treat yourself with compassion and kindness; and
- Concentrate on action guided by your core values.



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This approach draws heavily from Western psychology, which is increasingly applying Eastern practices to challenges ranging from anxiety to optimal athletic performance (Forsyth & Eifert, 2007; Gardner & Moore, 2007; Hayes & Smith, 2005; Orsillo & Roemer, 2011). In this sympathetic look at the painful side of leadership, I explore how insights from this marriage of West and East can help leaders thrive — by fostering a transformation in how we *relate* and *respond* to discomfort. Strange as it may sound, instead of fleeing the storms of leadership, I invite you to step into the rain. Better yet . . . dance in it!

Real leaders feel real discomfort

The strains of everyday life are multiplied and magnified in high-stakes leadership positions. Rick Gins-

JEROME T. MURPHY (murphyje@gse.harvard.edu) is the Harold Howe II Research Professor of Education and dean emeritus of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Mass.



berg has documented this pattern in the life of education leaders who encounter surprising upheavals and the “agony of decision making,” which “can take a heavy emotional toll with which few are prepared to deal” (2008).

Moreover, discomfort levels skyrocket when leaders promote transformative change. We can expect personal attacks, marginalization, and efforts to divert us from our goals. Leaders will be undercut, Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002) argue, because people “want to be comfortable again, and you’re in the way.”

Even if you’re not knocked out of the game, almost inevitably you’ll fail to placate a key constituency, commit a public gaffe, be misunderstood, or face biting criticism. “The harsh truth,” Heifetz and Lin-

the Measure Up Monster — MUM for short — that emerges from its cave wagging a censorious claw as we struggle to do a good job. In our darkest moments, MUM is there voicing such criticism as “Leaders don’t get confused — you’re an impostor!” Little wonder that we try to get rid of the problem.

The solution becomes the problem

While control stratagems solve problems in the physical world — caught in a rainstorm, we put up our umbrella — they often don’t work the same way in the psychological arena. More often than not such solutions as suppression, escape, and avoidance become the problem as captured in this rule of thumb about our inner life: Everyday Discomfort x Control = Debilitating Anguish (Young, n.d.)

For sure, some self-control efforts — e.g., learning to relax — can provide significant temporary relief. In the long run, however, trying to control discomfort is usually like trying to escape quicksand. The more we thrash around, the deeper we sink. As psychologists remind us, what we resist persists.

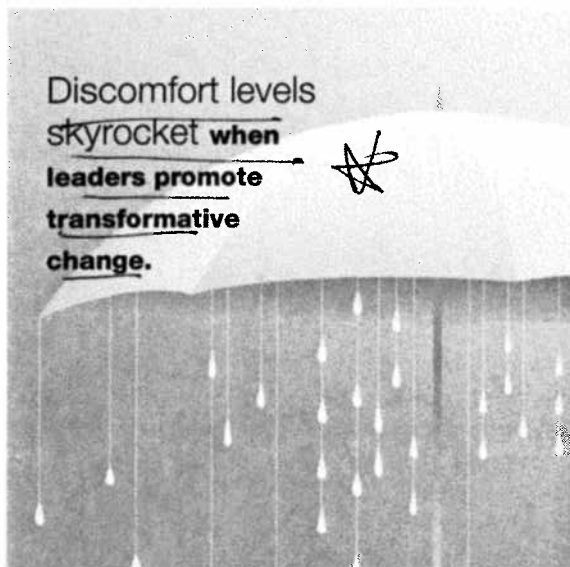
What’s more, our thoughts about our emotions can add to our anguish, particularly when we identify with our negative self-evaluations and worries and take them as the literal truth. In the grip of mind chatter that sounds like a Greek chorus of naysayers, it’s not unusual to rehash the past, fret about the future, and hang ourselves out to dry (Hayes & Smith, 2005).

Whether we pretend we’re not uncomfortable, or we resist pain whenever it erupts, or we become ensnared in our thoughts, or we berate ourselves for failing to master our difficulties, we often end up feeling like we’re trying to hold down the lid on a boiling cauldron; the effort requires unrelenting focus and energy, and demands essential resources that sidetrack our leadership work.

A new approach

To regain your perspective and productivity, consider relinquishing control of your internal drama — that private Hollywood production in which you are writer, director, hero, and victim all in one. You don’t need to be a believer to embrace the familiar wisdom of the Serenity Prayer: *Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

We can all be better leaders if we learn how to accept our emotional discomfort and focus our energies on changing not our *feelings* but our *behavior* — consistent with our true and enduring values. We’d also be better leaders if we could take a step back and watch our upsetting thoughts from a distance, while treating ourselves with more compassion. Of course,



sky remind us, “is that it is not possible to know the rewards and joys of leadership without experiencing the pain as well.”

Controlling discomfort

Not surprisingly, many leaders cope with discomfort by doing what leaders know how to do — get rid of the problem. In private, we invoke control stratagems such as analysis, suppression, escape, avoidance, or denial. For example, we may dissect our anxiety, bury our disappointment, flee our confusion, skirt conflict — or we may simply refuse to admit the pain of leading.

We resist discomfort partly because we humans simply don’t like to feel bad. But the reasons go much deeper. Many leaders steer clear of discomfort because we believe it’s not just a plain vanilla annoyance, but a sure sign that we’re a flop as a leader. After all, we are expected to be winners, not whiners (Murphy, 2007).

In our minds, some of us even create what I call

this is much easier said than done, but here is a template that might help you start the process:

ACCEPTING DISCOMFORT

Acceptance means opening up and welcoming our troubling thoughts and feelings as part of who we are, instead of trying to avoid them, fix them, or banish them. To accept discomfort, we must be *willing to experience it fully*, which is different from *wanting* it. Acceptance entails making room for our internal struggles, greeting them with an open heart, and turning toward them with curiosity.

Acceptance is not the same as giving up. We can accept what we're experiencing at the moment while still working to make things better. We may not love our experiences, but we can choose to stay with our ups and downs, just as seagulls bob atop ocean waves.

A fundamental lesson about the value of acceptance — just allowing things to be as they are — is captured in a story about a teacher who, walking with his students, calls their attention to a huge boulder and says, “Students, do you see that boulder?” The students respond, “Yes, teacher, we see the boulder.” The teacher asks, “And is the boulder heavy?” The students respond, “Oh, yes, very heavy.” And the teacher replies, “Not if you don't pick it up” (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009).

WATCHING OUR THOUGHTS COME AND GO

The wondrous human mind is a veritable thought machine on steroids. Each day an average person spawns an astounding 17,000 thoughts, according to one estimate (Kornfield, 2008). That's more than 1,000 thoughts each waking hour. At this rate, over a lifetime the mind spews out about 50 million judgments, self-evaluations, plans, worries, stories, memories, longings, fantasies, and more.

Many of these thoughts are extremely helpful. After all, our uniquely human capacity to analyze, reflect, and solve problems is what defines us as a species; it is the quality that lets us subdue creatures that are stronger, faster, and far harder than we are. But many of us know firsthand how quickly our big, busy minds can turn on us, spewing out all sorts of crippling distractions, doubt, and criticism. They tell us we're falling short of our potential, failing to live up to our own standards, succumbing to our own weaknesses and imperfections — and we believe them.

Rather than clinging to our troubling thoughts like Velcro, we can learn to watch them come and go.

In doing so, we can hold them more lightly, believe them less resolutely, and take them less personally. We can have our thoughts rather than be had by them (Harris, 2009).

TAKING CARE OF OURSELVES

If you accidentally cut your finger, you coddle it — you don't call it a worthless finger and leave it to fend for itself. You know it will heal more quickly if it gets tender loving care. But when it comes to psychological wounds, many of us are more apt to whack our bleeding psyche with a hammer as punishment for letting us down. This makes no sense: Both intuitively and through scientific research, we know that self-compassion is central to our well-being (Germer, 2009; Gilbert, 2009; Neff, 2011).

Self-compassion is also a mental quality that can be developed. Kristin Neff (2011) has done pioneering work on self-compassion and says it starts with self-kindness: “being warm and understanding toward ourselves when we suffer, fail, or feel inadequate, rather than ignoring our pain or flagellating ourselves with self-criticism.” When our imperfections are “accepted with kindness, greater emotional equanimity is experienced.”

Neff also says that self-criticism is “often accompanied by an irrational but pervasive sense of isolation — as if ‘I’ were the only person suffering or making mistakes.” But when we recognize that suffering reflects our common humanity, it “can be acknowledged with nonjudgmental compassion and understanding.” Neff suggests that feelings neither be suppressed nor exaggerated. If we ignore our pain, we can't “feel compassion for it at the same time.” If we exaggerate our pain, we can get “caught up and swept away by negative reactivity” (www.self-compassion.org).

Neff's research, and the work of other scientists, argues that self-compassion is not a self-indulgent act that drains time from our important work, nor is it a ‘soft’ practice that makes leaders weak. Just the opposite is true: Self-compassion — befriending ourselves — is essential in maintaining our balance, and crucial in our dealings with others.

Keeping faith with our values

If humans are discomfort-averse, why should any leader consider opening up to uncomfortable experiences? The answer is that staying in our comfort zone will often force us to compromise our values. To insist on comfort is simply too high a price to pay for undercutting what truly matters to us.

It's therefore crucial to keep our core values front and center in our consciousness — to think deeply about what we treasure and stand for; our deepest aspirations; and even our heartfelt yearnings for how



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we wish to be remembered — and use those values to inform our goals and actions.

It's easy for us to confuse goals with values, but the two are very different. Our goal may be some distant shore, but our values, like the stars overhead, are always with us, helping us chart our course. They keep us oriented, lighting the way forward even into new and unfamiliar waters. Goals, on the other hand, are achievable outcomes in the service of our values. Goals speak to our destinations; values speak to our journey.

Knowing what matters, however, is not enough. Values-driven *action* is crucial, and this requires a willingness to accept discomfort and hardship, and to persevere when swamped by the storms of leadership. In the end, it's this willingness that allows us to remain true to our deepest values instead of retreating to our comfort zone (McKay, Forsyth, & Eifert, 2010).

Learning new tricks

Learning this new approach not only suggests a commitment to action guided by our enduring values, but also new mental qualities, which can be cultivated through mindfulness training. I begin by examining what I call the Balanced Self because learning

to identify with this aspect of ourselves is especially helpful in developing the three mental qualities discussed above: accepting our discomfort, watching our thoughts come and go, and taking care of ourselves. After that, I explore mindfulness — what it is and is not — and identify four other mental qualities central to leadership in tough times.

THE BALANCED SELF

In emotion-charged situations, many leaders identify with what I call the Reactive Self. We 'show up' in an agitated state and respond reflexively with unhelpful thoughts, feelings, and actions — indeed, overreactions. We yell, hide, lash out, and make hasty, ill-informed snap decisions. To ourselves, and to others, we appear to be nothing more than a bundle of reactions.

We can learn to show up with a quite different identity, the Balanced Self, which is a step removed from what's happening, somewhat akin to a curious scientist *watching* our interior dramas from the outside. The Balanced Self can be thought of as

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a place of awareness within us that is separate from our immediate experiences. We can notice and accept our discomfort but not be consumed or defined by it.

The difference between the Reactive Self and the Balanced Self is the difference between saying to oneself “I’m furious at my colleague for making a bad decision” and saying “I notice something in me that’s furious. . .” In the midst of our discomfort, if the Reactive Self were asked the question — who am I? — the answer would probably be “I AM my reactions.” The Balanced Self’s answer would probably be “I’m that aspect of me that’s aware of my reactions” (Deikman, 1982; Cornell, 2005; Harris, 2009).

By identifying with the Balanced Self, we no longer feel a desperate need to escape discomfort — or over-react — because our uncomfortable thoughts and feelings no longer define “who I am.” Our internal dramas may still be intense, but we can witness them from a safe place without becoming overwhelmed. Consequently, it’s easier to make room for our discomfort, watch our troubling thoughts, show compassion for our predicament — and respond wisely.

Indeed, I call this observing state of mind the Balanced Self because it enables us to balance emotion with reason, to intuitively grasp the whole situation, and to develop responses that are calm, clear, and deliberate.

To be sure, the Balanced Self is difficult to fathom fully without experiencing it directly, but this state of mind can be developed and en-

hanced through the practice of mindfulness as well as through other techniques (Cornell 2005). It’s worth the effort because it’s the shift in identity from the Reactive Self to the Balanced Self that lies at the heart of changing our relationship with discomfort so that we can deal with it more effectively.

MINDFULNESS

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a pioneer in adapting Buddhist practices to stress reduction, defines mindfulness as the “awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (2003). “Attention” speaks to *observing* our experiences as distinct from *thinking* about them. “Nonjudgmentally” speaks to *how* we pay attention — with an open mind that is accepting and curious (Boyce, 2011; Ricard, 2010; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009).

Mindfulness can also be defined by what it is not. It’s the opposite of everyday habits — operating on

autopilot, multitasking, getting lost in thought, and daydreaming. It’s the opposite of having your body in one place and your mind in another — e.g., walking along a beautiful beach while perseverating over your e-mail. Mindfulness is not aimed at making us feel better, but rather at getting better at noticing our feelings and thoughts.

I emphasize mindfulness not as a spiritual pathway to enlightenment, but as an evidence-based secular technique that fosters the development of qualities of the mind that are central to leadership (Boyce, 2011).

In addition to the mental qualities described above, mindfulness training can help us cultivate four other important leadership qualities, to name just a few:

- Situational awareness — observing with clarity and objectivity our inner and outer experiences as each moment arises, as distinct from judging them and trying to fix them;
- Task attention — focusing our mind’s eye on the task at hand and quickly regaining concentration when distracted by discomfort;
- Poise — calmly taking action guided by our values, while letting our discomfort just come and go in private; and
- Resilience — snapping back when we are startled and lose our poise in leadership situations (Gardner & Moore, 2007).

All these mental qualities can be strengthened through mindfulness meditation as well as through other practices and exercises (Orsillo & Roemer, 2011).

Shall we dance?

Faced with relentless pressure to transform education, it’s easy to get dragged down by the demands of leadership and think of ourselves as weak leaders when we struggle. Whipsawed by our emotions, it’s all-too-human to try to escape our discomfort, but that can unintentionally undercut our performance and drain joy from our work.

Given this gloomy picture, it’s only natural to ask: Why lead? Because leadership work can be enormously rewarding — and these disheartening outcomes are optional. Indeed, I’ve suggested a counter-intuitive approach that can help you survive, thrive, and make a difference in these tough times — a realistic approach that’s optimistic and that can be learned through dedicated practice.

Faced with emotional storms, we can change how we relate and respond to them. Instead of fighting uncomfortable feelings, we can accept our here-and-now reality. Instead of getting snagged by disquieting



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thoughts, we can watch them come and go. Instead of chastising ourselves when things go awry, we can treat ourselves with compassion. Instead of obsessing over what's going wrong, we can relish our moment-to-moment victories. By getting out of our own way, and pursuing our values and dreams with passion and zest, we can reach our peak performance.

Transforming education starts with transforming our minds. And our inner transformation starts with opening to — indeed, welcoming — the inevitable cloudbursts of leadership. To thrive as a leader, I invite you to pause, close your umbrella, and dance in the rain. **K**

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