

LYSSA ADKINS

# #future-fit leaders

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR  
THEIR STATE AT ALL TIMES

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# AWARENESS BEGINS: RECOGNIZING TRIGGERS IN LEADERSHIP

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A few years ago, I was working closely with a leadership team and I remember the moment I thought to myself, ‘Half of these people are triggered and do not have the capabilities onboard right now to make the decision they are pushing each other to make.’ I didn’t have a way of working with that realization, so I employed my tried-and-true facilitation moves and we got through the moment. But I couldn’t unsee it. Having seen it once, I started to see it everywhere.

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Well-meaning, smart, talented people unconsciously shutting down, cutting parts of themselves off but still operating as if “everything is OK.” Worse than that, they were making decisions of great consequence from that less-than-skillful place.

These days, I have approaches from trauma-informed coaching and trauma-informed collaboration on board, so I have more effective ways of working with these moments. What’s common between these approaches is that they start with helping leaders become aware of their state.

# Responsibility for State: The Role of the Nervous System in Leadership

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I assert that future-fit leaders take responsibility for their state at all times. What kind of state you might ask? I'm talking about the state of your nervous system, your physical nervous system, the one in your body. You may have noticed that we are in pretty anxiety producing times and it can often get overwhelming. People are not always at their best. They may act in ways that harm others, usually unintentionally. At the least, they are not in good enough shape to think well and decide well. In our modern working world, it's pretty easy to get triggered, or hijacked. What does that mean? Let's take a tour through Nervous System 101.

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## The Threat Response:

# HOW EGO AND IDENTITY IMPACT DECISION-MAKING

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A threat to our ego or identity is felt as strongly as a physical threat to our bodies. Our amygdala, a very old and important part of our brain, jumps into action before our thinking brain has time to even register a “threat.” Stress hormones such as cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline dump into our bodies. They get our bodies ready to fight, flee or freeze. Because they're doing that all-important job, they shut down non-essential functions.

The “non-essential” functions that get shut down are the most important capabilities for leading in constant and turbulent change. They are called the executive functions of the brain: logic, reasoning, problem solving, listening, empathy. All this goes offline. When this happens, you are triggered, your brain has been hijacked. It takes about 18 minutes for those stress hormones to make their way through your body and for your executive functions to come back fully online. That is, if you don't get hijacked again.

# Amygdala Hijack: Impacts on Executive Function and Team Effectiveness

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What I see as I expand my capacity to work more directly with people's nervous systems is that it's quite possible that at any given moment a leadership team is functioning with one or more of the members in an amygdala hijack and maybe even the majority of them. That means that people's executive functions are offline. Not a great place for working with complex topics and definitely not a good place for making decisions.

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# The Separation Dilemma: Outer Striving vs. Inner Knowing

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Most leaders are unaware of the state of their nervous system at any given moment. It's not something we have been conditioned to pay attention to and to include in our hyper-rational business world. This is related to the story of separation as told in the [Regenerative Leadership](#) book, specifically the separation that occurs when we privilege outer striving over inner knowing. Your outer striving goals are important: the things you want in the world, the things you want for the people who work in your organization, the things you want for the organization itself. These outer goals don't need to take a back seat, but they do need to come alongside your inner knowing.

Your inner knowing shows up in myriad ways but for most of your life has probably been repressed, marginalized or completely ignored. Just because your inner knowing has not been included does not mean it has not existed. It has existed the whole time. To get your attention, your inner knowing may show up in you now as heart stress, as anxiety, as many physical and emotional symptoms, as so many mental challenges, stressors and limitations. It shows up in you now in how often you get triggered. It is trying to get your attention. We can include it.

# Integrating Outer Goals with Inner Wisdom

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A really magical thing happens if we change the word *over* to *and*.

Instead of outer striving *over* inner knowing, how about:

Outer striving *and* inner knowing.

Working with triggers is just one way to access your inner knowing. Other beautiful and rich ways to tap into your inner knowing are to access the wisdom of your body through contemplation or movement, to fill yourself up by connecting to a source of energy and support such as nature, and to create stillness that allows that small, quiet, sure voice inside you to be heard.

# RE-MEMBERING YOURSELF: THE POWER OF BEING PRESENT

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It is possible to re-member yourself, to re-member what has been dismembered by the dominance of outer striving over inner knowing. When we do so, we can be present more of the time. We can “be with what is” rather than being with our thought-filled minds that are worried about the future, rehashing the past, or trying to bend the present to our will.

**“BEING WITH WHAT IS’ MEANS BEING PRESENT TO WHAT IS HAPPENING AND HAVING A MORE STILL MIND BUT IT’S NOT SIMPLY PASSIVE. BEING WITH WHAT IS OPENS THE DOOR TO FULLY ENGAGING BODY AND MIND, AND RESPONDING WITH NEW OPTIONS AND ACTIONS.” - DIANE MUSHO HAMILTON**

These new options and actions are needed for the new era in which we operate. We are not simply attending to well-known situations and still-useful playbooks. More and more, we leaders are working with novel situations, usually stress-inducing ones, and we realize the playbooks are fit only for the recycling bin.



# MASTERING PRESENCE: INSIGHTS FROM FUTURE-FIT LEADERS

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One of the leaders I admire for her ability to gracefully navigate the complexity of the business world has this to say:

**PRESENT-FIT LEADERS ARE FUTURE-FIT LEADERS. THE WORK OF MASTERING PRESENCE IS ALL A PART OF WHAT LEADERS DO.” - COLLEEN KIRTLAND**

Learning to be present and to gather pearls of wisdom from the present moment is one of the ways we become fit for a future that is already here.

# IDENTIFYING AMYGDALA HIJACK: SIGNS AND TRIGGERS

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To get started, here is a bit of inner work. Begin noticing when you are in an amygdala hijack and get familiar with the effects. To do this, let a little part of your brain watch yourself in action as you go through your normal day. Notice signs of amygdala hijack such as short breaths in the upper part of your chest, heart beating fast or even pounding, a rash crawling up your neck, a churning stomach, tightness in your shoulders or anywhere else in your body. These are just a few of the telltale signs of amygdala hijack. At first, you will only recognize this in retrospect, usually by doing an inventory at the end of your day and thinking through the interactions and moments you experienced. That's a good place to start. Even in retrospect, you can think about what occurred just before and just after the hijack. What are the triggers? What are the effects? That's what we are trying to unearth from the wisdom of your inner knowing.

# BUILDING AWARENESS: MOVING FROM RETROSPECTIVE TO REAL-TIME RECOGNITION

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Keep this up for a week or two, or however long it takes for you to become aware of your common triggers, your physical early warning signs, and the impact of being hijacked. If you do so, you will likely develop the ability to recognize amygdala hijack closer and closer to when it actually occurs. If you remain gently diligent with yourself, you will likely get to the point when you can recognize it in real time. As you go along, a whole world of options and actions opens to you. You can learn how to [get de-triggered](#) at the moment it happens. You can also recognize what situations trigger you and prepare ahead of time, thus avoiding getting triggered in the first place.

It is your responsibility to attend to your state at all times. Are you in a healthy, open, creative state where you can be present and responsive to what is actually happening? Or are you triggered with your executive functions offline? Only you know.

# A Preview of FUTURE-FIT INSIGHTS

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To give you a sense of where we are going, let me whet your appetite with the next headline:

**#Future-fit leaders extend their future-fit capabilities to the groups they work in.**



# LYSSA IS A LEADERSHIP COACH & AN EXPERT IN THE FUTURE OF WORK

Explore being coached by Lyssa

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