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# The Inner Net vs. the Internet: A Meditation on Great Leadership

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

**E**VER SINCE THE FIELD OF COACHING HAS EXERTED ITS INFLUENCE in the workplace, leaders have had a better understanding that who we are matters at least as much as what we do—and that applies around the clock. With the technologies that pervade every hour available, seeking balance between our inner lives and the world around us, is not only essential—it is a hallmark of strong leaders.

## Contemplating a New Balance

One such leader who inspires with his ability to maintain this balance is author Lance Secretan. In book, *Inspire! What Great Leaders Do*, he points out that the dramatic rise of technology has been responsible for an equally dramatic rise in contemplative practices such as meditation. That is because, as Secretan explains, “our psyches have required a balance to the heightened electronic stimulation of daily life.”

This brings to mind an image on screen at last year’s HRMA Conference + Tradeshow of employees on a team who were meditating together at the start of their work day. Indeed, meditation and mindfulness are increasingly appreciated as powerful ways to calm our minds so that we can be more fully present and attuned to the boundless possibilities and team purpose alike.

## A Revaluation of Interiority

In conversation with Larry Robinson, a 40-year meditator and past board president of the Leadership Institute for the Ecology and the Economy based in California, he emphasized that when we are well connected with our interiority, we are at once connected with the whole of our world.

Robinson explains that to be well attuned to our inner lives as a leader allows us to better embrace the interdependence of

everything else. This in turn fosters sensibilities that are conducive to an integration of different parts of ourselves; the resulting wholeness further enhances our responsiveness and contributes to the pillars of our character, our humility and our wisdom.

Rather than being fragmented because our attention is constantly being pulled outward by technology, we can cultivate, via practices such as meditation, a deeper integration of our strengths and skills as the true foundational human resource from which to lead and work. In so doing, we are likely to be more effectively attuned to the needs of others on our teams and of the organization.

This, as pointed out by Peter Drucker in his *Harvard Business Review* article, “What Makes an Effective Executive,” can be as simple a difference as remembering to say “we” rather than “I.” Simple, yet easily overlooked by leaders who can forget that their authority comes from the organization’s trust in their leader.

## Empathy: The Ultimate Human Asset

With a great appreciation for the importance of empathy at work, Geoff Colvin wrote *Humans are Underrated: What High Achievers Know That Brilliant Machines Never Will*. He asserts, “empathy is the foundation of all the other abilities that increasingly make people valuable as technology advances.”

Recognizing that we are mostly and fundamentally “social beings,” Colvin validates what many of us know intuitively; that we cannot survive, be happy, nor truly productive without social relationships. Paradoxically, this compels many, especially among the younger generations, to keep in constant contact with others through technology.

Unfortunately, our cravings for virtual networks actually and subtly fail to nurture the real social networks we were built to

kinetically rely on for our survival as a species. There are inherent limits to what can be achieved when we are unable to “be there”—we lose the ability to empathize when we cannot read another person’s body language, sense the meaning behind the words or even hear the tone of voice of the person texting us. When we are over-reliant on technology, we gradually erode that ability and become further disconnected.

In this light, Colvin makes a convincing case for why being able to offer genuine empathy—in an empathy-starved world—provides an increasingly competitive edge in the workplace.

### Humility Another Key Facet

Another gem generated under the lens of self-reflection is humility, and it makes a big difference in the ability to lead extraordinarily. No one knows this better than Jim Collins who wrote the classic *From Good to Great*. Many of his research findings were summarized in the article, “Level Five Leadership: A Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve.” According to his five-year study, only executives who possess the rare combination of high professional will, deep personal humility, and the ability to self-reflect, could transform a company from being good to great.

Collins also shared that the research findings were not what they had expected—the big, imposing personality leaders commonly associated with corporate success were not usually at the head of the most successful companies. Without that combination of well-honed interior qualities and strength in a leader, good-to-great transformation just does not happen.

### Stay Calm: Wisdom at Work

Whether at work or in our personal lives, we have come to appreciate the value of data and information as it circulates along and within high-tech highways and clouds. However, consider how the best, most long-sighted decisions truly come about—from the melding of information and insight. Herein lies wisdom, another resource too often undervalued in the hyper-saturated moment.

Wisdom arises as the reflected integration of heart, mind and experience, in tandem with ethical principles. No computer will ever be able to produce real wisdom, but it can be a struggle for we humans too, until we take the time to disconnect and reflect. More of this dynamic in the workplace can keep our minds calm and grounded, as well as more primed for collaboration, innovation and productivity.

Let us remember to cultivate what lives at the heart of our true human resourcefulness. Let’s plant the seeds that truly grow among our teams, those of empathy, mindfulness, humility and fierce resolve. On that ground, with technology as our servant rather than our master, we can thrive in the balance of our own lives, as we reconnect organizations with their true potential. **P**

Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients two decades of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions. ([inspiredmomentum.com](http://inspiredmomentum.com))



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