



SOPHIA ASSOCIATES

Awakening Leadership Within

Finding Your Ground

"Hang out with your fear when you're feeling afraid. Follow its movement. Become intimate with it. Fear is an opportunity. Approach it like a tracker in the forest — watch where it goes, what it does, what it eats, where it eats, where it rests, where it turns, where it stops, where it hides. Embrace it. Stay with it."

~ Paul Rezendes, author of *The Wild Within: Adventures in Nature and Animal Teachings*

Paul Rezendes is a friend of mine. I met Paul in 1993 when he took me tracking in the woods of Western Massachusetts. It was Columbus Day weekend in the Berkshire Mountains and the woods were vibrating orange, yellow and brown. The cold wind whispered invisible paths through the trees as a ragtag group of neophytes entered the woods with the master tracker. It was an unforgettable day.

Paul's insights as a tracker apply to today's CEO reality. Paul learned about life and leadership from Mother Nature, the most generous and most unforgiving and unpredictable teacher there is. He knows about finding ground. He knows how to look for signs that indicate the way to go and that identify the creature he is following. Paul was schooled in the art of presence and the science of navigation. Being in the woods and becoming a master tracker meant coming to terms with fear, death, compassion, aggression, silence, the senses, and love. They all exist in the woods. Don't kid yourself; they exist in your environment too.

You may believe that you know what is next. You may believe in your plan and in your strategy. You may believe that the course you have plotted for your organization will take you to the destination you have envisioned. You may have mounds of data born of hours of analysis and research. You may have the best and brightest working for you. But do you really know? Really?

Nothing is as certain as uncertainty. You are in the woods and it gets dark here. Storms rise up from nowhere. You encounter your own variety of unforeseen situations in the form of new technologies, competition, market crashes, and cultural, global and social shifts. How will you find your ground when there you stand on groundlessness?

You have all the skills and tools that certainty can buy. You know how to set goals, create strategies, and execute plans. You've been told that with enough data, with the best knowledge and information you can arm yourself with all the tools for manifesting that vision you have for your company. And you rely on that. You reward that knowledge. You rely on success models to navigate through today's extreme complexity. And in all of this is an underlying assumption that this will keep you safe and stable. It won't.

THE KEEN OBSERVER

This environment is calling you to be present and engaged in a completely different manner. Like the tracker, pausing to sniff the winds, dig through the leaves for signs and listen to the tiny movements in the environment that can indicate what is approaching, if you pay close attention with a genuine openness and curiosity. Like a tracker, become a keen observer. Projecting your belief about what should be there will keep you from seeing what is there. Here is a new skill to develop, one that runs contrary to what you have been taught. Curiosity and imagination can be as valuable if not more valuable today than information and knowledge. They allow you to receive your new reality and then respond to what is right there.

Look for data in expected places

Remember that your metrics aren't the only data that is relevant. Scan the horizon. What's happening in your industry, in your society and in the places that you can impact or that impact your company? Who is successful and what are they doing that is different and inspired? Model for your leadership team this attitude of curiosity and your appreciation for imaginative thinking so they can model it for others.

Improvise

You must learn to invent and improvise in order to take advantage of the possibilities generated by chaos. Game changing innovation often comes out of chaos. New markets, new products, new services are created out of challenging old beliefs and assumptions. Find a way for your people invent and create. Start asking: "What if..." questions. They will tap their own ingenuity given the opportunity to work on something they care about. Innovation comes from groups of individuals that are passionate about something and that have a platform to share information, combine ideas, test innovations and learn from each other's failures and successes. Think Wikipedia and crowdsourcing companies [Threadless](#) (T-shirts), [John Fluevog Shoes](#) (open source footwear) and even [Lego](#) (yes, you can design your own models) as examples of radical game changers.

What are your patterns of thought? What ideas, behaviors or values do you default to when you feel lost? Who do you have around you that can point out your familiar ground? Applying control can have the opposite effect creating more chaos instead of fluid movement towards new possibilities.

See the big picture

Learn to see the whole without judging the individual elements as good or bad. Like the hawks that fly through the woods, widen your field of vision, keep a sharp eye on the discrete movements while seeing the entire sky, learn to stay centered and focused within yourself. An effective leader cannot be reactionary, changing course without understanding the whole environment and discerning the inherent complexities.

Cultivate a reflective state

Reflection is one of the skills that will help you leverage complexity and imagine possible scenarios to accomplish your leadership objectives. How often in your day do you pause to open your mind in a reflective manner, with no agenda crowding out your senses and wisdom? Make time for silence.

THE EMPTY CUP

Ultimately, you will find your ground within yourself. Cultivate your wisdom and personal clarity as a priority for finding your ground when you most need it. Get to know yourself. Be an empty cup, receiving what comes towards you with grace. Build your resiliency in all domains – mind, body, heart and spirit.

On that day in 1993 Paul told me something that has made a world of difference for me. He said, *"This animal I am tracking is my own trail. A trail to a deeper knowledge of self. More intimacy with self. That to me is what tracking is all about...all self exploration...How can you do anything else?"*

I would suggest that leadership is "a trail to a deeper knowledge of self". Today's groundlessness can be met with strength when you know who you are and what you stand for. That is how you will find your ground.

© 2011 **Error! Reference source not found.** is founder of Sophia Associates, Inc., a leadership development firm offering executive coaching and custom learning services.

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