

Elements of Leadership

Earth - Water - Air - Fire - Ether

The concept of the elements has existed in Western thinking since pre-platonic Greece. It is also found in the Hindu, Native American and Chinese cultures. I have been developing my understanding and application of the concept for over fifteen years now. It plays a central role in much of my work, most explicitly in the "Leadership Presence programme".

In organizational development, for group or individual, the elements can be used at varying degrees of depth, from the behavioural and structural levels right through to core identity. People find the language impactful and memorable, allowing ongoing access to core issues of leadership development.

In this paper I have attempted to give as full a spectrum picture as possible, even if a few of the more esoteric points might only occasionally be applicable in an organizational context.

Earth

The Physical Self

"People say that we are seeking is a meaning for life. I think that what we're really seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our innermost being and reality, so that we can actually feel the rapture of being alive"

Joseph Campbell

Through the Earth element we come home to our bodies, and to physical aliveness. We re-open a connection with our physical body. We experience ourselves in our bodies, we breathe freely, our senses are awake, and we feel our feet firmly connected to the ground. We incarnate.

This is not the same as being 'fit' or working out in the gym. Though these bring obvious health benefits it is possible to work the body into shape while maintaining an objective identification of it rather than an internally felt connection. The Earth element helps us to break through the collective post-industrial condition of 'disembodiment' and numbness. We literally re-member ourselves.

We walk in nature, we feel the pure, simple rapture of the wind in our face, the rain or the sun on our skin, the extraordinary, breathing aliveness of the earth, the plants and the trees.

As children we all had the experience of being connected to full physicality. We can see how children move freely, how loud their voices are, how expressive their faces are, and above all how every thought/feeling is a simultaneous physical impulse. My first mentor, the great 20th century theatre director, Jerzy Grotowski, described one of the central aims of the rigorous physical training of his actors as intended to 'eliminate the gap between inner impulse and outer expression'.

As we grow and of necessity shut down some of the unrestricted physical/emotional energy of early childhood we use two simple methods of closure. We restrict our breathing, and we tense parts of our body. This gradually constellates into the rigidity of adulthood, and also explains why almost any form of bodywork involving

breathing and/or muscle relaxation can release emotion/energy that has been suppressed and locked into the body during our development.

The good news is that as adults we can re-open our physical body through consistent practice, and that so many different forms of class and methodology that guide us towards this re-sensitisation are now available.

With the Earth element comes a deep experience of being 'at home' in ourselves, an aliveness, and a sense of safety/security. This brings a strong feeling of internal presence, which in turn manifests clearly to other people. When someone communicates in a truly grounded way, with their voice open and naturally seated in both head and chest resonators, their impact is massively increased. It's as if, at last, they are truly 'there', effortlessly compelling and authoritative. We feel safe in their presence.

When discussing this it is always useful to ask people to refer to their own experience - "what are the moments when you feel deeply at home and at ease in your physical self? Is it in the gym, is it playing sport, is it in nature, is it after a massage, is it when you first wake up in the morning, is it lying in the sun on a beach, is it while swimming or skiing etc?" Most people can reference such an experience. When then asked how much of their working day are they in touch with this the answer is usually between 0 to 5%.

This is a big loss because, apart from much greater presence, the Earth element almost always brings a clearer functioning of the mind. Many people say they do their best thinking of the day while running/working out.

And beyond this, being earthed also opens us to a wealth of sensory information about the world around, commonly referred to as 'gut instinct' or intuition. The ability to 'sense' the atmosphere in a room, to tune into people around, to walk past someone in the street and receive a deep impression of them in an instant.

In pre-industrial cultures this source of information often reached advanced levels. In the Polynesian Hawaiian Kahuna culture for instance, many of the greatest Kahunas (spiritual masters) were navigators. They had no instrumentation. They felt the presence and movement of the stars in their bodies, they touched fish, they smelt the wind, and so on. They were famed for their accurate navigation of treacherous waters and island landings.

Once people experience a breakthrough connection to their bodies they can maintain this connection through simple choices around breathing, maintaining constant awareness in their bodies, grounding and so on.

Hundreds of leaders I have worked with have reported the powerful effect of such simple practices.

The Earth element is thus both a gateway to and a core part of the 'flow' experience. It helps us feel deeply at home, and this is naturally transmitted to those around us.

Water

The Emotional Self

“Emotion is the chief source of all becoming conscious. There can be no transforming of darkness into light and of apathy into movement without emotion”

C.G. Jung

Through the Water element we access fundamental qualities of our humanity. These include empathy, rapport, emotional intelligence and compassion. The Water element opens our heart, as much if not more through the embracing of so-called ‘negative’ emotions as so-called ‘positive’ ones. The Water element helps us feel simple yet strong connection with other human beings, and allows them to connect with us.

Our access to the Water element is largely determined by our relationship to emotion. The more aware of and comfortable we are with the full range of emotions within us, the more our hearts remain open and the more able and likely we are to detect and empathize with emotion in others.

We can (and must) also learn to exercise choice about the appropriate time, place and person and right form of expression for our emotions.

Each of us develops an internal map of which emotions are more acceptable than others. This map develops primarily in the family, and can be reinforced or changed by school and early work environments. Someone brought up in a family where anger was never expressed will be unlikely to feel comfortable with their own or others’ expression of anger. Male children who are taught that tears are a sign of

weakness will be uneasy with theirs and others’ tears, and so on. Cultures/countries also have their collective patterns around emotion. ‘Stiff upper-lip’ etc.

A common collective pattern is that men are comfortable with their anger and not comfortable with tears, and for women it is the reverse. This leads to all-too familiar scenarios in which men who feel hurt/vulnerable first become angry, and women who are angry first cry. How much destruction in the world is created by angry men who are in deep pain underneath...

A key part of our development as people/leaders is to expand our range of comfort with different emotions, and to learn to be accurately aware of our feelings in real time. Unlike IQ, which remains relatively fixed, EQ can be developed throughout one’s adult life if one has the will to do so.

The Water element also teaches us important lessons about not trying to ‘fix’ emotion, but rather to be with it, to allow it to flow within whatever boundaries are appropriate to the situation. We learn to welcome and honour emotion, and we see how when we do this the water flows, meaning people move through and on. It is when we repress emotion that we tend to get most stuck. Fear does not block us. It is *not feeling* fear, or sadness, or anger that blocks.

A leader who is emotionally attuned will manifest a softness within their harder edges. S/he will develop a ‘robust vulnerability’, meaning the capacity to be strong enough to hold and express vulnerability in such a way that others feel safely connected to their own emotionality. S/he will know how to hold a space where individuals and teams can safely express

feeling, and tremendous reserves of energy, trust and commitment can be unleashed as a result.

Through the Water element we access fundamental qualities of our humanity.....

Air

The Thinking Self

"It is the marriage of the soul with Nature that makes the intellect fruitful, and gives birth to imagination"

Thoreau

Through the Air element we access the extraordinary, and as far as we know uniquely human, capacity to think rationally, to reflect, to make sense of the world and to communicate.

Depending on our sophistication we can hold increasingly complex concepts in our mind, and interpret and understand the world around us in ever more subtle and insightful ways.

We can also reflect on and understand the psychological drivers arising from our personal biography and the culture in which we developed, and through this understanding gradually gain an increasing freedom and maturity to act in the world in a more integrated and individuated way.

All art, however visceral, is also dependent on the Air element. When a jazz musician is in full flight during a solo, a part of his/her mind knows exactly what harmonic structure underlies the music, and is calculating their play within the rhythmic framework. What a joy to be able to use both sides of the brain in such an advanced, interdependent way!

Since the Age of Enlightenment the Air element has brought us the unparalleled richness of scientific, medical and technological advancement, improving the living conditions of millions of people.

Whether it is used to positive or negative ends, and to serve enough people, is not the fault of technology itself but rather depends on the level of moral development of those who use it and control it. Its very existence is a miracle of the Air element.

However this rapid advancement of our rational mind had also brought its considerable shadow, expressed by Einstein in the question: does our mind serve us or dominate us?

He warned: "We should take care not to make the intellect our god. It has, of course, powerful muscles, but no personality. It cannot lead, it can only serve."

The extraordinary capacity we have to analyse, to consider, to reflect, to gain insight, to unpick and dissect, to make metaphor, to remember, to tell stories, to understand different points of view.....does it serve us, making our lives immeasurably richer and continually open to development, or does it imprison us in a fixed set of beliefs about ourselves and the world, condemning us to a tired, small minded cynicism and rigidity and the ultimate insanity of "if you can't measure it, it doesn't exist".

Can we step into the next phase of our evolution as human beings and bring the sensory, emotional, imaginative and rational functions into a higher level of integration? Balancing Being and Doing, Yin and Yang, the Masculine and the Feminine?

The sweep of human history suggests we have inevitably swung from one polarity to

the to the other...from oneness and immersion in group consciousness, to a sense of separation and individuality that has lost touch with the greater whole. Can we now move into the possibility of integrating both, of maintaining the richness and sacredness of individual identity, while also connected to Oneness?

Can we, as William Blake put it, move beyond 'innocence' and 'experience' into 'higher innocence'? Can we experience the full, sensory richness of the Earth element, the experience of incarnate reality, the beauty and power of our emotionality and Heart-based Water 'wisdom', the meaning and purpose that come from the Fire element, alongside the unique richness of our thinking capacity?

Can we remember that knowledge is not wisdom? That knowledge brings incredible understanding of the parts of a system, while wisdom integrates this into a much deeper connection with the emergent whole. Can we use our minds, rather than be dominated by them....?

Fire

The Passionate, Purposeful Self

"I have a dream....."

Through the Fire element we access our passion for life. We connect to what really matters to us, to our core values, and to the sources of inspiration that bring us most to life.

The Fire element brings meaning and purpose to our lives. It strengthens us and gives us courage.

"I have a strategic plan" is Air. "I have a dream" is Fire. They are equally important, but fundamentally different.

What is our 'dream'? What is that gives us a sense of purpose? What is it that, at least on a good day, gives us a sense of meaning and a fire in our belly as we walk into and through the world?

Are we aligned with our dream? Did we betray it somewhere along the line? Did the many forces, pressures and responsibilities of life bend us out of shape? Have we betrayed our 'soul's calling'?

Do we create the spaces for ourselves in our busy lives to listen to our calling, to check in with ourselves, to have that conversation with ourselves?

Are we caught, however subtly, in living someone else's dream, perhaps the dream of our father, or mother, or our ancestral family, a dream that in the end is not truly our own?

And when we are in touch with our Fire do we show up with it? Can we express it in a way that warms rather than burns people, that inspires rather than alarms? Do we let people see what we stand for, and what we stand against?

Do we experience a sense of personal purpose that is linked to larger purpose? What are the times and the ways in which we experience ourselves as a vehicle for some kind of bigger purpose, when we feel connected to the larger family?

What are the stories, the narratives, the myths that animate our life?

It is a natural part of our journey that our fire burns more strongly at some times than at others. We may live through periods where the flame is very low, almost

extinguished. These periods can become 'dark nights of the soul', difficult to bear yet also somehow essential. The experience of emergence from a dark night is often one of rebirth, in which the fire has been refined or re-defined, often both simpler yet stronger.

Ether

The Infinite Self

"Only when you have found that which never comes and that which never goes will you have found what you are truly looking for"

Ramana Maharshi

Through the Ether element our consciousness breaks free of all its bounds. Free from content, from temporal reality, from identification with anything, inner or outer.

What do we discover in this freedom?

No-thing. Pure Emptiness. Infinity. That which always has been, and always will be, and is utterly unchanged by anything that happens in the temporal, relative world.

That which has never been born, has never been manifest. The One that is both beyond and the source of all religions.

Nothing ever has, ever will, or ever could have any effect on the pure consciousness that is Ether. It is the 'peace that passeth understanding'.

Whatever has any kind of content - be it a body sensation, thought or emotion, comes from one of the other four elements.

Ether has NO CONTENT. It is consciousness itself.

It cannot be grasped or understood or made into an object by the rational mind. It is completely 'beyond'.

When we have no sense of the Ether element we are like a wave that has forgotten the ocean, or a spark that has forgotten the fire. We are truly lost.

The human being has apparently always had this capacity for transcendent consciousness.

This is evident as much in the mystical and poetic writings of different traditions throughout history, as it is in how sports men and women from all disciplines describe the high performance state known as 'the zone'.

It is also evident in the way many people describe moments of heightened awareness that arise in the middle of almost any activity in which they are immersed.

In his book 'Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience' Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's research revealed a dimension of human experience that is common to people the world over, regardless of culture, gender, race, age, or nationality, and all describe the experience in essentially the same words: a deep feeling of oneness with everything, the interconnectedness of everything, a deep sense of peace and stillness, a feeling of timelessness, and often a feeling of pure unconditional Love for everything that exists, human and beyond.

Ken Wilber calls it Absolute Reality. Spiritual teacher Andrew Cohen calls it 'the ground of Being'. Many traditions call it 'non-dual awareness'.

Best-selling author of 'The Power of Now', Eckhart Tolle, calls it the Unmanifest, or

pure Being, and speaks of the manifest world as being, in his experience, 'ripples on the surface of this Being'.

In leadership the Ether element gives us access to a wide field of attunement and presence, and to a spacious capacity to hold ambiguity, paradox and emergence. When, through practice, even a small part of our consciousness is resting in this element, we navigate external situations with more equanimity, and a sense of being able to better handle even the most difficult of circumstances and people.

Neuroscientists now know that this equanimity is a symptom of our brainwave patterns changing from what they call beta waves (14 to 20hz per second) to alpha waves (8 to 13hz per second). On a computer screen the former are jagged and chaotic, the latter smooth and harmonious. In a recent experiment the brain wave patterns of both athletes performing 'in the zone' and experienced meditators were shown to be firmly anchored in the alpha range.

This experience of harmonious Emptiness is also a core part of the creative process. All writers, painters, musicians, composers, and indeed many scientists who have had 'eureka' experiences, speak of the moment when something 'comes to them' that they must follow, becoming like midwives as the creative waves flow through them. Beethoven spoke of walking in the woods and starting to 'hear his music'.

Through Ether we learn to 'get out of the way', to hold a space of deep, empty receptivity and listening in which individual and collective creativity and Intelligence may flow. We feel the power of immanence.

And to return to the beginning...when I once asked a well-known author who wrote every day for six to eight hours how he recognised when he was in a particularly strong creative flow, he thought for a moment, then said: "my breathing changes..."

It is through the Ether that we perhaps come most deeply home to what so many traditions have always called our true Self, the Self that is infinite, and One with all that is.

"The highest feeling is the experience of unity with All That Is. This is the great return to Truth for which the soul yearns. This is the feeling of perfect love."

Neale Donald Walsch - "Conversations with God"

Conscious Leadership

"When the 75 members of Stanford Graduate School of Business's Advisory Council were asked to recommend the most important capability for leaders to develop, their answer was nearly unanimous – self-awareness"

Harvard Business Review Winter 2008

Unless we make a conscious effort to do otherwise most of us fall easily into habitual patterns of behaviour and reaction. Making an effort to step beyond these patterns has often been referred to in traditions of self-development as the difference being 'awake' and 'asleep'.

The more 'awake' we are, the more energy we give to and receive from the world, and the more vivid everything seems. We experience each situation, each person,

each group with a much higher degree of attention, and attune to multi-level input from the world around us - sensory, emotional and intuitive as well as rational.

The master practice that glues all of this together is awareness. Paying attention or, as it is called in many Eastern practices, Mindfulness. Many traditions say that if we can remain conscious and mindful for more than 50% of any one day we have crossed a significant threshold. The very act of paying attention creates a spaciousness in our interaction with the world that helps us move from reactivity to responsiveness, and ultimately gives birth to the capacity to be both 'in' the world but not 'of it'.

The simplest starting point is learning to hold a part of one's attention in one's physical self continuously. This greatly facilitates the sense of inner space and Presence. When our inner space becomes too contracted we easily lose ourselves in the world around, and revert to more automatic, reactive behaviour.

Learning to hold attention in both the inner and outer world simultaneously is a master-practice that underpins and builds a quality of great Presence.

The map of the elements is one of many that we can use as both a theoretical reference point and a practical resource in our efforts to stay 'awake'. Making a conscious commitment to stay awake in all five elements is just one of many paths available to us. Much of the work can be done on our own, though good coaching will often help us move forward, helping us to unlock parts of our psyche that are very difficult to access on our own, and/or dissolve inner barriers whose very existence may be beyond our conscious awareness.

We can therefore draw on different practices in each of the elements as follows, and commit to at least one practice from each element on a regular basis:

Practices In The Five Elements

Earth

- › Keeping well grounded - always feeling our feet on the ground, or our bottoms on a chair
- › Attention to breathing, making sure our breathing is full and rooted in the belly (stomach expands on the in breath, contracts on out breath)
- › Staying in touch with the physical experience of walking, standing, sitting
- › Physical exercise - anything can be good if practiced as a means of connection to our physicality. Disciplines such as yoga or any of the martial arts bring additional benefit as they awaken our bodies at a deeper level, and also alter our consciousness
- › Development of vocal capacity - range, openness and expressiveness
- › Physical nurture - relaxation, massage or equivalent treatments.

Water

- › Learning to be aware of and name our feelings as they occur.
- › Learning to accept the full range of our feelings without labeling some as good/positive, and some as bad/negative.

Elements of Leadership

By Nicholas Janni

- › Practicing a listening sensitivity to other people's feelings.
- › Practicing being present to others' feelings without trying to fix them
- › Consciously making simple empathetic/respectful rapport with different people whose paths we cross in our daily lives.

Air

- › Study of leadership theory
- › Study of psychology
- › Expansion of one's knowledge in fields related to our profession
- › Attention to the language we use in communication
- › Rigorous analysis of one's psychological drivers
- › Keeping a journal
- › Opening and enriching our minds through:
 - Study of other cultures
 - Study of the world's religions
 - Study of history

Fire

- › Spending time with the literature/music/movies/images that inspire us, on a regular basis
- › Visiting the places that inspire us
- › Making time to have the deeper conversations about purpose and inspiration
- › Connecting to different sources of Beauty
- › Writing or telling the story/narrative of our life

- › Reading 'big picture' thinking
- › Creative practices
- › Feeding our imaginations

Ether

- › Commitment to regular practices of meditation and/or contemplation that facilitate the experience of Emptiness and Silence
- › Reading sacred literature
- › Yoga or Tai Chi
- › Immersion in Nature
- › Visiting sacred sites
- › Reading mystical literature/poetry

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Nicholas Janni is the founder of Core Presence, a leadership consultancy. Over the past twelve years he has gained international reputation for his seminars and coaching, in which he bridges the worlds of creative, personal, spiritual and professional development in a uniquely powerful, accessible and relevant way. In his previous career he was a theatre director and taught acting at The Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. Since co-founding Olivier Mythodrama in 2001 he has been working exclusively with organizational development. He delivers leadership seminars and coaching to CEO's, boards and senior leaders worldwide. Some of his clients include HSBC, Lafarge, Teva, Amdocs, Microsoft, FedEx, The National Health Service (UK), and senior members of the UK civil service and government.

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