



Wisdom in Leadership

Living & Leading in the Field of Awareness

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Carlotta, a senior leader in her early 40s, stood on the edge of a promotion that hadn't yet materialized. As the first in her family to achieve so much academically and professionally, she carried the hopes of her community, mentors, and family. She was ambitious, driven, and ready for her leadership to reflect who she truly was. But in this moment, she needed to rise beyond the constrained version of herself that sometimes surfaced in high-pressure situations.

This morning, she faced a crisis. A major product issue had placed both the company and the community in danger, and tensions between the Board and senior leadership were rising. Carlotta, caught in the middle, had only 30 minutes to prepare before delivering unpleasant news to her team. The stakes were high, and everyone's job was on the line. She knew this moment called for her most sophisticated leadership, but it felt just beyond her reach.

Drawing on her past training in holistic leadership, Carlotta paused. She shut her eyes, "zooming in" on herself. Instead of reacting, she accessed a deeper awareness, a calm strength emerging from within. She could now see the bigger picture—people, systems, and obstacles—without losing sight of potential solutions. Her awareness shifted from anxiety to clarity, and she recognized the allies and opportunities within the organization.

When she entered the meeting, she set a firm but open tone. Soon, a staff member fiercely challenged her decisions. Carlotta felt irritation rising, threatening to shake her composure. Yet, one of her deputies sensed something bigger happening. He built on her calm and reframed the tension, helping bridge the gap between Carlotta and the protestor. Together, they shifted the atmosphere from opposition to collaboration.

The team started brainstorming creative solutions—partnerships, policy changes, and small experiments to test their ideas. The meeting didn't yield immediate consensus, but it transformed into a collective effort, thanks to Carlotta's grounded leadership.

Afterward, Carlotta realized that her ability to lead from awareness, rather than reactive thinking, had inspired her team to do the same. Her voice had sounded different, stronger, and her leadership had allowed others to tap into their own creativity and resilience. This shift—leading from the core of who she was—had not only changed the meeting but unlocked a new level of leadership within herself.

Carlotta's story shows that when we lead from awareness rather than fear, we become more than problem solvers—we become creators of possibilities. This shift transforms us but also those around us, helping us co-create solutions that are greater than the sum of their parts.

The field of awareness is available to each of us. We can enhance our leadership by accessing our awareness of awareness as a practice. When we learn to access this field, we create more spaciousness in our lives and in our leadership.

Wisdom traditions tell us, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you.” Referred to as spirit, soul, heart, and marrow, our essence is our center. It's the core of who we are as human beings and, of course, as leaders. Our essence, our very Being is an existential mystery until we dive deeper and encounter our innermost Self. This is our own true nature, the space in which thoughts and feelings arise. We begin to see how our thoughts and feelings are separate from who we truly are. Many of us are so identified with our mind, this can come as a revelation. No matter the context, it is a life-changing shift to begin to live from our essence and awareness of our awareness rather than from our mind alone.

What is the difference between being in ‘mind alone’ and being in ‘awareness of awareness’?

Often, when leaders think about the mind, they are referencing intelligence, depth of expertise, strategic thinking, and the capacity to hold complexity. We as leaders tend to be proud of our minds.

When we talk about the mind here, we equate mind to ego and mind as the location of thoughts, affects, fantasies and memories which have their limits. Of course, we absolutely need our mind to negotiate the demands of everyday living. At the same time, it can be a non-stop busy place, creating ongoing tension and stress throughout the day. The Buddhist concept of monkey mind refers to the unsettled or restless state of the human mind which makes it difficult to focus on the present moment. Just as a monkey leaps from tree to tree, the mind jumps from thought to thought.

Research in cognitive psychology and neuroplasticity demonstrates that much of the mind's activity is automatic and occurs without conscious input. It gives rise to implicit bias that instinctively tells us who we feel comfortable with and who we should fear. Studies using brain imaging techniques such as fMRI and EEG have shown that the brain can process information and respond before individuals become consciously aware of their decisions.

Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking, Fast and Slow" describes two systems of thinking: System 1 is fast, automatic and emotional; System 2 is slower, more deliberate, and logical. He describes System 1 as dominant most of the time, operating automatically. Research on habit formation shows that as we develop habits over time, the brain creates neural pathways that make the path to these behaviors more efficient, reducing the need for conscious thought. For example, if I create a habit of waking up early every morning to exercise, it becomes just what I do. I don't have to think about it. Our bodies and minds conspire to make life and our decision-making a bit easier for us.

We can see in ourselves how some of our habitual responses may not be adaptive. For instance, if I experience a specific challenge as a leader, like a conflict with a boss, I may freeze and say nothing at all. This response may have roots outside of the work context, but can become a default path in conflict. Over time, this response pattern becomes an established neural pathway and a habituated pattern. I may begin to interpret my response or behaviors as not just what I do, but who I am.

Adyashanti, a spiritual teacher in the west, says "Our egos are basically the past expressing itself in the present. . . This trance state of egoic consciousness is where 99 percent of humanity lives and breathes, yet it's the very thing from which we yearn to escape." Because ego consciousness creates a sense of separateness and isolation, he says it takes us further and further away from "the very thing, in our deepest source, that we have always been."

In the final analysis, we each live in our own context, but the essence of you is not your mind, not your thoughts, your yearning or your feelings. It is awakened awareness—the essential you. It isn't something you do, it is your true nature, fundamental to who you are. We are the source in which thoughts and feelings arise. Thoughts and feelings are temporary and changeable whereas the essence of who we are is continuous.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a process you can learn which involves noticing what's happening in the present moment, without judgment. It has become increasingly popular as people try to deal with stress better by settling their busy minds. In mindfulness, you might take notice of your mind, body or surroundings. You might watch your thoughts. Research on mindfulness conducted at the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center since the 1970's has found mindfulness to buffer against depression and anxiety, as well as to boost the immune system and overall feelings of well-being.

It allows us to get to know our patterns of automatic thoughts as well as our beliefs, and it decreases our reactivity by giving us distance from our thoughts. This defuses the power we give our thoughts over us, helping us realize that our thoughts are "just thoughts" and that we can choose whether we want to act on our thoughts. It is extremely helpful.

Mindfulness is a stop along the way to being established in the field of awareness. If we gaze at our thoughts, our feelings, memories, gaze at others and at the world, we witness, we observe. But we can go further.

How do we go beyond mindfulness?

When we dive into esoteric wisdom traditions, we learn to enter into awareness and to go even further when we learn to enter into awareness of awareness. It is often referred to as being in the field of awareness. It is something that has been there all along inside of us that we drop down into. We awaken to it as if it is new, and begin to experience it all around us as well as inside of us. This is what Adyashanti, mentioned above, is referring to when he talks about “the very thing, in our deepest source, that we have always been.” We ARE awareness, the space in which the mind arises. We are Beingfulness itself.

“This is a different way of knowing,” notes Rudy Bauer, PhD, an expert in such distinctions. “Awareness knows itself as the field of non-dualistic Being. Awareness knows indivisibleness, awareness knows oneness. Awareness knows Being and Awareness knows the Being-ness of beings. . . .” He points out that the natural unfolding of Being and Being-fulness is what self-liberation is about.

Being in the field of awareness is the profound experience of being conscious. It is both ordinary and extraordinary. Being in the field of awareness is knowing that you are divine and living into that knowing. The awakening of our awareness in the field is what frees us as beings and is wholly individual. It is our life’s journey.

What does it mean to live in the field of awareness?

You already know the answer to this question. We’ve all had these moments. You might close your eyes right now and remember a time when it felt like time stood still, a time when you felt extraordinary, spacious and connected to yourself, others and your surroundings, simultaneously. Perhaps it was a moment when you felt transported, maybe in bliss like the experience of falling in love, or gazing at the ocean, noticing your cares and worries dissolving and feeling at one with it all. Or, maybe a time when you felt broken open by a shocking experience such as the cancer diagnosis or death of a close friend or family member.

Jan remembers it being a sweltering day in July in Florida when the air conditioner stopped working during her wedding and she shifted from sweaty misery into radiant and sustained joy. And how when she gazed into her newborn daughter’s eyes for the first time, her exhaustion vanished and she immediately shifted into enormous blissful ecstasy that lasted for hours. She remembers moments in her therapeutic work as a psychologist when she and her client felt a oneness with each other and with the unseen numinous aspect of life in a breakthrough

moment when something that had been confusing and upsetting for years suddenly became clear, deeply understood, and transformed. She cherishes moments in teaching awareness of awareness when someone in class experiences boundless love, or the presence of their ancestors protecting and guiding them, or are filled with wonder at experiencing themselves as permeated and surrounded by light.

Vernice remembers being transfixed after hiking the majestic mountains at the foot of fjords in Norway. She was transported by the vista of ocean and ice meeting mountains, embodying the incredible beauty of that landscape. Or, the first time she had a conversation in Mandarin in China, and felt a visceral connection to that person that opened up a well of connectedness to all humanity, vivid and pure. Or, being at work in a context that had always been overwhelming and thorny; and noticed an arising serene existential awareness, feeling spacious, grounded and wise. Speaking from that place felt effortless and spacious.

What does it mean to be in the field of awareness while leading?

You may remember a time when you were ‘in over your head’ at work, when all your experience, expertise and positivity couldn’t possibly prepare you for the crisis or challenge at hand. You may have recognized the complex adaptive system in front of you, and found yourself suddenly seeing *more* of the system, its power centers, interdependencies, recognizing more of the possibility frontier ahead. You might have noticed like Carlotta did in the story above, that you were able to see, navigate and work with systems more deftly. You didn’t sweat the small stuff.

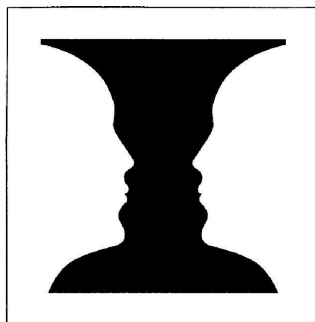
Leading from this place of awareness of awareness brings in more of our capacity as leaders and is profoundly practical. Many of the competencies that we as leaders aspire to, such as listening, having curiosity, being present, take on a different quality if we are doing these things from the mind alone. When we bring the mind and awareness together in an integrated whole, we access both simultaneously. It can be a helpful exercise to check in with ourselves and see if we are coming from that deeper place within when we are doing our work. When the source of our curiosity and noticing is our mind alone, we are still in the flow of ‘doing.’ If you ask a question of a colleague or client in order to feed your mind, the result can be quite different than when the question comes from a place of wonderment, allowing what was beginning to unfold to continue to do so. If you’re asking from wonderment, it can unfold in a whole new way.

Wherever we are on our personal or leadership journey, we always have access to this awareness within and around us. For some of us, part of our journey is to embrace our divinity, reclaiming our power because we are too humble. For others, perhaps we need to embrace our humility by not reveling in how much we have achieved or how ‘evolved’ we are spiritually. As we become aware of our own awareness, we can intentionally return to it throughout the day, but at first it appears as distinct and spontaneous events.

How does a leader create the field of awareness?

Wouldn't it be nice to have this sense of divinity and expansiveness more often? To be divine and in the field of awareness is also to be fully human. How do we create the field of awareness as an ongoing experience rather than as a few disconnected, spontaneous events that take place once in a blue moon?

Once you've consciously entered into awareness, it's easier to go back to it. Imagine a picture with an optical illusion embedded in it. In the images below, are you seeing a vase or two faces? (Example 1.) Are you seeing the young woman or the old woman? (Example 2.) Once you see it, you can experience it again. Once we tune into the field of awareness, we tune into that unchanging element of our lived experience and can harness its power. There's something about when you move to that larger vista, that you can't even see when you are not in awareness. You have more to draw upon to help you deal with whatever is before you.



In the expansiveness of awareness, like dissolving a drop of red dye in a vast lake, we also find ourselves suddenly able to dissolve parts of ourselves that keep us stuck or hold us back, even in difficult circumstances. This includes the voice in our heads, constantly lying to us and pointing out our flaws. This expanded awareness may feel especially useful in contexts and seasons of life that can be sticky, but it can support us all the time. Even in the midst of crisis, awareness can change lives for the better, internally, in our decision making and in how we handle things.

How do we go into awareness of awareness?

There is no one way to enter into awareness. You can begin by suspending your mind. As your mind drops back, awareness comes to you. You might also try feeling the solidness of the ground beneath your feet and embodying that. You can focus your awareness on its own self like you're gazing into your own awareness. You can actually become aware of your awareness.

When we do this, we are less organized by objects or phenomena, we as human beings can know Being directly. We embody awareness. Qualities of awareness begin to manifest: spaciousness, openness, energy, shakti, qi, light, radiance, oneness, compassion. We begin to feel an interconnectedness with all that is and we are aware of our own signature Self, simultaneously.

Awareness is a field and it has field characteristics: it opens and closes, it has depth and breadth, and it goes beyond the body. In other words, the nature of awareness itself is that we weave in and out. We are not in awakened awareness during every minute of every day, or in every situation and every season of life. But when we notice ourselves out of awakened awareness, we can invite ourselves back home.

If you're curious to learn more about this work of awakening awareness, we know that walking this path can be lonely. It can be hard to find safe spaces to practice and integrate both the knowable and the unknowable but accessible wisdom into your leadership. Whether you're new to these concepts and want to learn more, or familiar and want to further integrate this part of you into your leadership, we welcome you to join us in the Wisdom in Leadership: Your Evergreen Spiritual Companion and/or Wisdom in Leadership I and Wisdom in Leadership Advanced Topics. Together, we'll explore how cultivating consciousness can impact your leadership and life.

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VERNICE JONES is a Developmental Coach with extensive experience coaching senior and C-Suite global leaders of color and/or from the LGBTQIA community. She is core faculty for [Growth Edge Coaching](#) and the Wisdom in Leadership series. Vernice founded [Sister Leader Circles](#), a cohort-based program and community created to provide sacred space, sisterhood, growth and development for a diverse mix of leaders - of national origin, of color, of faith, of ethnicity and gender expansive leaders.

DR. JAN NICHOLSON is a compassionate [Harvard-educated psychologist](#) with many years of experience in the integration and healing of mind, body, and spirit. Dr. Jan specializes in psychotherapy that [goes beyond the conventional](#). Her work centers on the interconnection of mind, body and spirit, recognizing their integral roles in your unique story. She uses innovative integrative approaches such as hypnosis, EMDR, and awareness meditation, fostering the growth of your holistic well-being.