



INDIVIDUAL PRACTICES: THE 'ME' IN THE 'WE' OF RELATIONAL CAPACITY

By Kerry-Lyn Stanton-Downes

Humans are relational beings, and that means it is essential for organisations to cultivate healthy relational spaces in which resilience, adaptability, trust, purpose and overall well-being can be fostered and experienced. If organisations are to thrive in the face of the changing needs of the workforce, the impact of AI and technology, and the permacrisis, they need to put relational capacity front and centre.

I have shared my belief that to combat relational poverty and increase relational capacity we need to

embrace the 3 P's –the **Principles, Practices and Processes of Relational Capacity**. In the last article we explored the first of the Ps, the eight principles that can be felt, internalised and ultimately embodied by individuals and teams in every interaction and endeavour.

But while these principles are clearly a significant part of the 'How' of building relational capacity, the questions I am most often asked about them are: 'Do we work on these as a team or as individuals?' and 'How do we actively put these principles into practice?' In this article, I begin to answer these questions by introducing the second of the 3 P's, the Practices. These are how we will empower ourselves to build our own individual relational capacity.

While we are **co**-regulating beings, a key part of that is **self**-regulation. Through self-regulation we can expand our window of tolerance to better deal with stressors and boost our emotional resilience, allowing us to build our foundation of relational capacity and embody the eight principles.

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And to self-regulate effectively we need to increase our self-awareness. One of the most effective ways to do this is to really understand how we process information and stimuli, through whole body listening and by balancing and integrating our functioning.

I'll come back to these terms in a moment! But let's begin by understanding what we mean by 'self-regulation' and 'window of tolerance'. Deb Dana, a leading expert in polyvagal theory, describes self-regulation as the capacity of an individual to manage and modulate their physiological and emotional responses to stressors and challenges by bringing their nervous system into a state of balance so they can navigate any situation with a deep sense of safety. Self-regulation is not about avoiding or suppressing emotions, but rather learning to engage with your nervous system in ways that expand your window of tolerance, allowing you to build resilience, adaptability and relational capacity.

In his book *The Developing Mind*, Dan Siegel describes our 'window of tolerance' as the range of emotional intensity within which we are comfortable operating. When we are forced outside our window of tolerance, he says, our capacity to think, listen and behave effectively is disrupted; we lose our ability to self-regulate and co-regulate in the face of challenges arising within ourselves, within others and between us and others. But when we learn to self-regulate we increase our window of tolerance and can experience uncertainty, change and relational ruptures with a sense of safety and okay-ness.

So to truly embody the eight principles we must first build our individual relational capacity by expanding our window of tolerance, which means paying attention to **the 'me' in the 'we'**. In this article I'll be inviting you to think about how you function as an individual, and in particular about which of the three main inner functions – thinking, emotion and sensing – is your primary one.

We will look at how you can learn to pay attention to all three functions at once as a way to begin to **self-regulate** and build your own relational capacity. This will allow you to show up in relational spaces present, curious, reflective, and with a mindset of abundance, feeling safe to be vulnerable and able to navigate difference and offer respectful candour – all in service of a shared goal and purpose.

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The most important aspect of building our individual relational capacity is cultivating our ability to truly hear what is happening inside ourselves. To do this we need to develop real **self-awareness** of our own internal processing so we can take responsibility for what we bring into the relational spaces we co-create with those around us.

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A vast industry has developed around self-awareness in recent years. Mindfulness apps like Headspace, Insight Timer, Stop.Breathe.Think, Aura and Calm, as well as biofeedback devices, can be useful in developing self-awareness and improving our ability to be truly present and regulate our emotions. (Headspace alone has clocked up more than 70 million downloads in 190 countries!)

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Anything that helps increase our self-awareness and ability to regulate is great, and apps and devices can support you on your journey. But ultimately the real challenge is to maintain our equanimity and ability to hear **even in the high-pressure group situations where it’s most difficult to do so** – and for that working on ourselves in isolation isn’t enough. Instead we need a relational approach, one that empowers us to self-regulate in the service of building effective teams, maintaining organisational well-being, and reaching shared goals.

In my article [‘The science of the relational brain’](#) I shared a little about the importance of polyvagal theory, attachment theory and memory re-consolidation in understanding how and why we function the way we do. The practice we are about to explore – whole body listening – goes to the heart of all three theories, and is the best way I’ve discovered

to empower us to attend closely to our inner experiences in the service of boosting our relational capacity.

This simple but powerful practice has been transformational for me and for my clients over the past two decades, and I believe deeply it can be for you too.

The problems the practices can address

It’s a painful, frustrating experience I’m sure we’ve all shared.

We’re sitting in a meeting room. Everyone appears to be attentive and curious, open to new views and opinions, collaborative and goal-focused. We seem to be listening to one another. But really many or most of us are not.

Even though we may not be aware of it, how we each show up in the room is being distorted by inner processes shaped by our past experiences, attachment styles and survival responses. We need responsiveness, curiosity and real attention to build relational health and form effective, thriving teams. But these inner processes are making us reactive instead, which means we are not able to truly hear those around us. We fall easily into defend or attack mode, and over time the relational environment is so damaged that effective relating becomes impossible.

“We need to be able to really hear each other. But we can only do that when we have first learned to attend properly to what we are experiencing in our own internal worlds”

In a room such as the one I'm describing progress slows or halts, the organisation functions poorly, and the experience and well-being of everyone within it deteriorates. When this kind of relating becomes the norm the relational space becomes polluted. Individuals and teams experience long-term burn-out, anxiety, hypervigilance, depression, heightened stress responses, insomnia and other painful outcomes.

To build healthy relational spaces where we can thrive and serve shared goals, it's essential that we each take responsibility for how we show up and for building relational capacity. We need to be able to really hear each other. But we can only do that when we have first learned to attend properly to what we are experiencing in our own internal worlds. That's how we will become aware of the past experiences and survival responses that are shaping how we show up, and expand our window of tolerance and capacity for healthy, effective relating.

Not just brains but embodied beings

I've just offered you a brief sketch of the problem. But modern neuroscience backs it up, showing how our inner world drives and shapes the way we relate to the world around us. It demonstrates it is essential we attend closely to that inner world.

Some of the world's foremost experts, scientists and psychologists have contributed to this area of thought

- Bruce Ecker (the 'father of memory reconsolidation'), Bessel van der Kolk (author of the revolutionary bestseller *The Body Keeps the Score*), Gabor Mate (founder of Compassionate Inquiry) and many more. What the science reveals is that only by understanding our attachment styles and survival responses can we consciously make meaning of our past experiences, give ourselves permission to have more positive, corrective experiences in the present, and be conscious and deliberate about what we are bringing to our relational environments.

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Step-one in that process is learning to attend to our **embodied experience**.

Neuroscience has given us is a new understanding of the relationship between our bodies and our brains. Historically we have often thought of the brain as a kind of pilot for the body. But in fact, as Deb Dana explains, around 80% of the information-traffic that occurs within our nervous system is going from the body to the brain, with only 20% or so moving in the opposite direction - very opposite to what we might expect! As Amanda Blake puts it in her book *Your Body is Your Brain*: 'your body is your social and emotional sense organ. It is the lens through which you perceive your relational world, and the instrument by which you act in it.'

“Often we do not understand our own thoughts as clearly as we think! As a result, even while we overemphasise thought, we also fail to make the most of it”

So, far from being a mere vessel, the body has a profound intelligence, and tells us a lot of what we know about the world. Our conscious mental processes are crucial – but they are not even close to the whole story.

Our somatosensory cortex – the part of the brain that deals with sensory experiences and movement – is active from birth and usually fully developed by age four. On the other hand, speech and language processing develops later and more slowly. So as children we understand the world primarily through what we sense and feel through the body. This puts in place the emotional and relational patterns that will influence and shape our entire lives, even when they are buried beneath the kind of cognitive functions and higher-level thinking that only develop later.

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As a result, to build relational capacity and increase our window of tolerance we must cultivate the ability to ‘hear’ all the internal, embodied processes that are shaping how we ourselves show up in the room. Whole body listening is the best way I know to do it.

Whole body listening

To move ourselves out of a reactive state and into a truly relational one, we need to attend closely to what’s happening within us. But as we now get into the real ‘How’ of building relational capacity, let’s be more specific.

We need to pay equal degrees of attention to our thoughts, to our emotions and to our senses.

Many people tend to privilege conscious thought. But our emotions and senses are in fact two of the most powerful tools we have for understanding the world around us. What whole body listening can do is bring the three into balance, allowing us to separate out what we are experiencing from who we are. This is an essential distinction if we are to relate in an empathetic, thoughtful, constructive way and be truly present.

Thought. A big part of why many people privilege conscious thought is that it seems the clearest and closest to the surface of our mental lives (society and education also encourage us to do so). Yet often we do not understand our own thoughts as clearly as we think! As a result, even while we overemphasise thought, we also fail to make the most of it.

In my practice nearly every day I see people failing to ‘think about their thinking’. They blindly follow well-worn neural pathways into patterns of behaviour that

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make proper relating impossible – interrupting colleagues, for instance, or making assumptions about what is going to be said next, or instinctively dismissing certain types of ideas. To break these patterns and habits, I encourage my clients to step back from their thoughts with questions like ‘Where does that thinking come from?’ and ‘How did I come to think in this way?’

This turns their focus inward and away from what is happening around them. This might seem a strange goal given our ultimate aim is to improve the quality of our relating! But only through this process of whole body listening can we start thinking with real effectiveness, and attend properly to the other internal processes we need to understand if we are to build our relational capacity.

Emotion. It’s broadly agreed that we are always experiencing emotion (and usually a mixture of emotions) whether we are aware of it or not. What makes things even more complex is that a range of influences act on our emotions: deep-seated survival responses, past experiences and relationships, social contexts, physical experiences and thoughts. It is this complexity that makes it so essential we learn to cleanly identify and name the emotions we experience.

‘Name it to tame it’ is a well-known saying in psychological circles. By developing a detailed

vocabulary that allows us to move beyond emotions such as happy, sad or angry to a more nuanced level (for instance fearful, content, disappointed, relieved or lonely), we empower ourselves to understand more deeply the psychological meaning of our emotional experiences.

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Faced with the urge to interrupt a colleague or instinctively dismiss an idea, if I’m engaged in whole body listening I will take the time to carefully identify the emotion linked to that urge – fear of a colleague receiving praise, for instance, or that I won’t be heard before the meeting ends. I will really understand the inner processes that are influencing how I show up and my part in co-creating the relational spaces around me.

Sensing. By ‘sensing’ I mean more than the information we receive through the five familiar senses of sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing. Rather, I’m referring to the subjective physiological experiences we are having in our bodies at any given moment. Sensory experiences interact with our thoughts and emotions – they are bound up with them in a loop of mutual causation.

“Whatever the combination of thought, emotion and sensation, it is so important to become aware of how they are interacting and shaping the way we show up in the room”

If you are feeling fear, for instance, the physiological experience of and response to that emotion might include sweaty palms, increased heart rate, dilated pupils, rapid and erratic breathing and a dry mouth. To take another example, the physiological experience of anger might include increased temperature, tensed muscles or blinkered vision. But whatever the combination of thought, emotion and sensation, it is so important to become aware of how they are interacting and shaping the way we show up in the room – and we can only do that by cultivating an awareness of what’s happening in our bodies.

Integrating thought, emotion and sense

For many people, thinking becomes the primary way of engaging with experiences. This can make them very good at decision-making and strategising. Yet, disconnected from their emotions and bodies, they can come across as rational, unempathetic and non-vulnerable, leaving others feeling unheard and alone. For these people, the journey towards balance will involve reconnecting with their emotions and embodied experiences.

“Rather than a tool or a skill, whole body listening is really a way of being”

Others have learned to make sense of their experiences by prioritising emotion. These people will often be experienced by those around them as empathetic and compassionate communicators, relationally-focused and adept at resolving conflict. Yet they will frequently struggle for objectivity, find high-stress environments difficult, and be easily exploited. For them what’s needed is greater awareness of the power of rational thinking and of the embodied experiences that run beneath their emotions.

A third type of person – and we’re talking general types here; in fact people can be a mixture of all three – has come to prioritise the sensory, embodied experiences neglected by the others. But while this often makes them very good at observing and intuiting what is going on around them, they are also frequently prone to making rash decisions, to putting instant gratification above long-term goals, and to struggling with ambiguity. This type of person will truly thrive if they can integrate their rational and emotional processes more deeply.

Learning the ‘how’

Rather than a tool or a skill, whole body listening is really a way of being. It empowers us to move beyond reactivity to conscious and deliberate responsiveness. It offers us the self-awareness we need to self-regulate and to co-create relational spaces that foster well-being, effectiveness, and true collaboration in service of shared endeavours.

“Mindful and deliberate breathing is one of the most effective ways to move ourselves into a balanced, stable, and calm state”

Other practices can help as well. There isn't time here, but in my forthcoming book I will talk in detail about a number of them, including **breath work**. Mindful and deliberate breathing is one of the most effective ways to move ourselves into a balanced, stable and calm state where we can attend to our inner processes.

As Stanford neuroscientist Andrew Huberman explains, breathing lies at the nexus of conscious and unconscious behaviour. Like digestion or liver function, breathing continues even when we are not aware of it. It's even hypothesised that our brains control their own excitability by regulating our breathing.

But unlike those other examples, we have the ability to take conscious control of how we breathe. We can speed it up and slow it down or take deeper or shallower breaths through our nose or mouth. Miraculously, this gives us the ability to change the state of our body and brains and what they are capable of dealing with. We can bring about real physiological changes and reduce anxiety, depression, stress and insomnia. We can bring ourselves into the present moment, improve performance and increase well-being across every aspect of our lives. So breath work is an incredibly effective practice for improving self-regulation and widening our window of tolerance!

At this stage, I encourage you to focus on one of the three elements of internal experience until you grow comfortable enough to pay attention to another as well, and so on until you can bring all three into

balance. Ultimately, by using whole body listening to understand how you process information and stimuli, you will achieve the self-awareness you need to integrate your functioning, take control of how you show up, and co-create healthy relational spaces around you.

As you do so I'm confident you will quickly see progress for yourself. What you might find even more remarkable is the dramatic improvement in your entire team once everyone begins to engage in whole body listening. When we understand what's going on inside ourselves we can be conscious, deliberate and constructive in how we contribute to forming the relational space around us – and once we master that the sky really is the limit, for individuals, teams and organisations alike.

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We've now introduced the individual practices of relational capacity. In the next and final article we'll move on to the third of the 3 Ps: the processes – not policies or procedures! – that leaders and organisations can put in place to create relational spaces where individuals and teams can come together to create, innovate, adapt and thrive.

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