

Integrating Somatic Intelligence in High Performance Teams

Stephen Gilligan in dialogue with Andrea Schueller
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Andrea: Hello, Steve. I am happy to talk with you about the new workshop we are designing for COS. COS stands for Challenging Organizations & Society, and our purpose is to create and offer a unique space for learning, transformation and generative collaboration at three inextricably linked levels: individual, organizational and collective or societal. We are hoping that this workshop you will present in May, along with our team, on *Integrating Somatic Intelligence in High Performance Teams*, will be a great way to explore these themes.¹

Stephen: I hope so, too, Andrea! I am really looking forward to the experience.

Andrea: Great. Perhaps you can give us a bit of a description of your work.

Stephen: Well, the work that I have been developing over the last forty years is called 'Generative Change'. This work examines how to develop sustainable deep change in a variety of different contexts. The key organizing principle or core question is about creativity: *What is it that you most want to create in the world?* High performance teams and high performance states are an integral part of that question. We see creativity as always a conversation between different modalities, different positions, different truths, different people, etc. For practical creativity, one major focus is the mind-body conversation or what we in Generative Change work call the "somatic/cognitive intelligence link". So we put these two together and it sounds like a workshop I am really interested in doing!²

Andrea: We will build on what you just said and apply it to teamwork: The challenge is how we get from "*What is it that you most want to create in the world?*" to "*What is it that **we** most want to create in the world?*" and how we keep these two connected in a meaningful way.

Actually what we call a team is a social expression of your definition of creativity: living contradictions operating simultaneously in a unified way. Immediately we touch the challenge of how to connect and cooperate as many, where different capabilities and callings meet, and how to become a unified creative force transcending personal limitations. So the timeless questions I guess – for a rock band as well as for a team of software engineers – are: How do we get there together? How do we find and keep a state of consciousness that can generate new exceptional results? In other words, how do high performance teams cultivate a generative performance mode that doesn't ruin the people or the environment?

The topic of creativity is so popular these days, and it's great that more people and groups are very interested in living in generative ways. Yet at the same

¹ A special thank you to Emma Wynne-Jones for her editing support.

² This dialogue happened during preparations for the workshop „Integrating Somatic Intelligence in High Performance Teams“ in Vienna May 2017.

time, we need to be aware that with each creative act, a shadow is cast. So long as we are mindful of this shadow, e.g. through humility, taking out the garbage, giving back, honoring cycles of regeneration, etc., it's ok, there's a balance. But many people and industries want to touch the sun and fly higher and higher like Icarus, with no limits; weakness is not allowed. The shadow is thrown on others, or others have to pay the price through self-exploitation, or living in the shadow of others. You see teams working within cultures which are demanding such high performance in terms of faster, bigger, more, 24/7 and so on.

What I am asking is: What happens when people and groups start to ignore large parts of their selves and their needs. Can you still be creative in a generative, sustainable way?

I want to bring in somatic intelligence to increase the awareness of the shadow, the unwanted parts of oneself, of the team-body. Let's use body-knowing further - for dealing with the shadow instead of projecting it onto others in the team or elsewhere; the shadow is part of the whole. If we can increase our creativity while also going through all the necessary transformations and conflicts in service to the wholeness of a collective journey, this can bring a special type of satisfaction and result. I guess we are digging for this gold.

Stephen: Well, happiness is one of the great motivators in life. It also increases the quality of your work. This has been shown by people like the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, in his thirty-year research project on what he calls *creative flow*. What he found is that when these creative flow states – which would be a mark of high performance teams – are there, you get two remarkable results. First, the “flow” performance is of a superior quality, you perform at a higher level. Second, it feels so good! It is intrinsically rewarding and you have a sense of, “Oh my God, I just love to do that!” So if you can help yourself and team members to be in flow states, not only can they create a superior outcome or result, but it's sustainable because people want to come back the next day. They will say, “Hey that was fun, let's do it again.”

Andrea: ...it's nourishing.

Stephen: Yes, very nourishing, but being spontaneous is hard work, too!

Andrea: Internally rewarding hard work, so you are less dependent on external stimuli or rewards...

Stephen: Well, ego needs — fame, fortune, being liked — are still there, and that's not a problem, as long as there is an even deeper set of motivators. In the flow state, you can find and express your mission and vision, in ways that are deeply rewarding. You get a feeling: “Maybe I have been able to make a useful contribution not only to the company but to the larger community.” And we feel like, “Wow, I'm doing the work that's rewarding for me.” Nowadays it's gotten harder to move in this “flow state” of a higher consciousness because

of ever-increasing pressure to go *faster, faster, faster*...and focus primarily on short-term results. I've worked with people in the financial industry who are so burnt out, they just say, "Well, I'm going to make a big pile of money in five years or so and then just cash out." Needless to say, this is not good for the deeper health of the person or the culture.

Andrea: The shadow then asserts itself...

Stephen: Yeah, and of course "the shadow" means something that is needed but denied. So again, we are trying to look deeply into this question: What sort of mind-body-state, what sort of social community state is going to allow sustainable high performance that is also intrinsically rewarding? I think people are really looking for that. Not only in terms of the practical things, like how to get people to work for your company, but in how they continue to be motivated, how people can be nurturing each other within the company. Ultimately your bottom line is in no small part a reflection of the quality of the interconnectedness in the team.

Andrea: What can we do to optimize the performance not only of the individual but of the team as a whole? What will allow a superior level of creative joint performance?

Stephen: When we look at creativity, we have seen that unfortunately on the world level we have been devolving into a left, verbal and analytical hemisphere of consciousness, isolating the right hemisphere of consciousness. The Oxford neuroscientist Ian McGilchrist, in his brilliant book, *The Master and his Emissary*, has provided an exhaustive and up-to-date review of brain hemisphere research. He shows that the nonverbal hemisphere creates the vision of the world, and then sends it over to the "managers" of the verbal hemisphere to implement the vision. In that view, creativity is a conversation between the two brains. However, each hemisphere can functionally isolate the other, and he marshals evidence showing how this is happening at an epidemic level in virtually every area of modern life, with disastrous results.

So to train an individual or an organization to create new realities, we start with awakening the nonverbal hemisphere. Walt Disney used to call this *the dreamer* world in which we start our creative process, before shifting to the engineering of the imagination into reality. (He coined the term "imagineering" to describe this joint process.) So creativity is a conversation moving between these two fundamentally different modes of intelligence. In addition, we need to move on the "vertical axis", that is, shifting between the "head knowing" and the somatic intelligence of the "body knowing". Interestingly, brain research shows that you can't get to the somatic intelligence through the verbal hemisphere, only through the nonverbal brain.

Let's be clear that this is not in any way an anti-intellect view. It's rather an argument that real creativity is a conversation moving between multiple brains, multiple ways of knowing, multiple truths—not only in the nervous system, but in the social community. The research is quite clear on this. So

our challenge in working with both individuals and groups is to foster a disciplined conversation between many points in the system, thereby creating the conditions for a “miracle”. This is a shift from the dominant practice of being locked into one brain of many brains, or trying to have one part of a system trying to control the whole of a system; we have to learn to access and make use of the conversation of the parts with the whole. If we don’t, the result is that we are in a sort of hamster wheel, so to speak, spinning wider and wider, with no access to the body and no awareness of the embodied nature of the primary human knowing. And the results are disastrous.

Andrea: My daughter would ask: What does it mean, “You are locked in one brain of many brains?”

Stephen: It basically means you are caught in a closed box of thinking, analyzing, dissecting. This mode becomes the dictator of your talk and action. One part of your whole brain is working and the rest is being suppressed. If you do that all day long, you will have very little or no power to do something new or in new ways. And you might also force yourself and others to fulfill the exact concepts and plans, and if that doesn’t work you would go on and on till you get stuck, unhappy, aggressive or show other symptoms.

Andrea: Eugene Gendlin speaks about these splits and dead ends in his philosophy, and how to go further in alignment with evolution. He points out that language is deeply rooted in the human body in a way that is not commonly understood. Like McGilchrist, he sees us limited by what he calls the classical Western unit model. What we typically call “thinking” seems to require disconnected units that compete or exist in a dominant/submissive relationship, in a zero-sum game. We can hardly think in any way other than $1+1=2$. But in a creative view, each life situation, body and language form a system and the words come from the interactive body. Progressing rationality and ego-differentiation in Western culture over the last 2500 years has made us take the parts for the whole and splitting a dominant mode of processing and interacting.

I like what you made so clear from the McGilchrist research, that the generative force is only accessible through the body, and through conversations between the different types of intelligence. For Gendlin, the *felt sense* in the body is the entry point from where you get access to wider somatic, cognitive, relational networks and knowing, and from where you take the next step. Connect with the whole to become whole again, we could say. How do you incorporate this in Generative Change?

Stephen: We could say the magic formula for creativity is threefold. First, you have to say it, name it, declare it – that’s one brain. Second, you need to envision it and picture it – that’s a second modality. Third, you have to feel it and embody it into the world – that’s the third modality. So creativity is some sort of balance between these three different brains or three different modalities: verbal, visual, somatic.

Andrea: For teamwork we have to transpose the formula. We must balance our three brains within the cosmos of the team, and master the constant swing between different MEs and WE: we all say it, name it, declare it; we all envision it; and we all embody and carry it out into the world. Sounds simple, but it is not easy.

There are two major dynamics in becoming a team that potentially can turn into hamster wheels in the social realm if mindlessly repeated: One is mistaking “we say it” and “we embody it” with a conformist, uniform or undifferentiated and in this sense destructive collective movement, where deviation cannot and must not grow. In other words, all feel the same, all think the same, all act the same – “we-without-me” – resulting in simple oneness, but not a team.

The other is the “me-without-we” hamster wheel. We just talked about it for the individual state – “one brain locked in many brains” – but the same can apply to the interaction of teammates. People are locked in thoughts, splitting, existing next to each other like individually wrapped sweets in a box, separated, disconnected from each other with weak ties to the whole.

Neuroscience is increasingly showing us that the brain is a social organ, so when teams function in these suboptimal ways, complex patterns of interaction are absent, thereby diminishing the team’s creative capacity. So the team becomes a dream or a nightmare depending on how we filter our perceptions of what is going on, which in turn depends on the state we ourselves are in. Team players become their collective individual practices, in so far as each team player relates to the other team players while individually practicing. In generative group dynamics we use to say “the individual speaks through the team” or “the team speaks through the individual”...

Stephen: In complexity theory, this nesting of identical form is called self-similarity....

Andrea: Each player is an environment for the others. The state of each player is potentially infectious for the others, from thoughts to heartbeat. So it makes sense to say it all starts with the individual, and at the same time it is the interaction that comes first. The road map of a system or team is built through our micro interactions. And the quality of our micro interactions is largely dependent on our individual inner state. Through interactive bodies a microclimate instantly emerges which can be, for example, inviting, interesting or hostile, either opening or closing possibilities for generativity. We have countless opportunities to jump out of the hamster wheel and open a generative field - a different behavior, the expression of a bodily felt sense, a joke, a certain team practice. If others build on that, the patterns of interaction, the collective beliefs, the team spirit will change. What is required is an embodied awareness amongst team members: the ability to receive subtle signals when the life force is getting weaker or distorted in the team and to consciously address this. This is a great skill.

Stephen: It’s definitely a skill.

Andrea: Do you have an example?

Stephen: Well, how about team sports? You have the skill of an individual player that is not the only important characteristic of that player in terms of the value to the team. You hear about the really great team players, they make all their teammates better. When he's playing, the performance of everybody else, the performance of the whole team is better. So true diversity is when you have all the different perspectives being included. But just as important as diversity is to have a shared common language and a common vision. Again I would say that high performance creativity is always a system where opposites are simultaneously operating.

We are not talking about an anti-intellectual approach, but the communication is flowing through multiple parts of the system. The conversation is flowing between different minds, and when everybody is on the same page and everybody is sharing a common vision and all the different parts of the system are being referenced in some way then naturally you begin to have these emergent properties. These emergent properties account for happiness, increased motivation and superior creative performance.

Andrea: ... you mean properties of a system which single individuals don't have: Atmosphere, values, team spirit, consciousness – arising from the specific quality of the interconnectedness, pulling you into the future.

Stephen: To me that's one of the things that leaders can bring to a team – by leaders, I am not talking about a single authoritarian leader...

Andrea: ... a human presence, call it a leader, touchable, able to open up and hold space for new interplay to emerge, socially sensitive, stepping out of the comfort zone herself, connecting teammates to the collective vision and its joint creation, mirroring back the strong and the weak parts ...

Stephen: ... and again somewhat of a counterpoint to leader ideals: any creative system holds multiple contradictory truths simultaneously. As the quantum physicist Niels Bohr used to say almost one hundred years ago: In the shallow type of truth the opposite of a true statement is false; in the deeper truth, the opposite is equally true. So a good creative team player is always somebody who is able to embrace opposites and feel what the musical and dynamic connection is between those opposites. It gives you the sense of *I am committed* and *I have confidence* and *BUT... I don't know exactly how it will be happen*. So I need to keep learning, keep revising, keep being open to realize that at multiple points in the performance of the team, I have to let something come from someplace else.

Andrea: The bliss of teamwork when things start to flow as if by themselves.

Stephen: Yes.

Andrea: In organizations and teams we have to manage and make sense of a lot of complexity on many levels - individually, politically, technically, relationally etc. Without an intelligent body perceiving the multicity of the situation, we cannot do it. The body is like a parachute, containing all the information of a situation embedded in time simultaneously. Without a parachute you are liable to crash. Equipped with this great parachute that everyone knows and learns how to operate, the team can safely land on the ground – that is to say, the team won't crash from the complexity, or the millions of problems and to-do lists, but the parachute will enable the team to integrate different views, find the unified field and manifest one solution, product etc. out of the many possibilities.

When team members are capable of sensing and holding the full spectrum of what is present – their thoughts, their felt sense, their gut feeling – and are able to bring it into the conversation, then the team is opening its channels to more than just logical thinking, and a bigger force comes on line, creating new results which you could never plan for. If you really want to do something new, you need subtle awareness. Touching the body-knowing with mindfulness elicits new information; impulses unfold or pop up and these new sparks can be built upon. Opening the body-mind parachute as a team means this generative potential can be multiplied exponentially.

Stephen: Yes, the term we are using here is *somatic intelligence*. This is our first way of knowing, our mammal mind. If you have any good connection with dogs or horses you know they are exceptionally intelligent even without linking a cognitive mind to it (like humans need to do.) The mammal mind is not thinking like a separate ego, mammals are always thinking in terms of a connection to a community. It is feeling, *what is my place within the whole community*. So the sense of an isolated self is not there.

Andrea: One huge benefit of integrated somatic intelligence is that team players can operate more instinctively. They can trust in their intact collective intelligence to close any window of vulnerability as efficiently and effectively as possible. This cannot be underestimated; it is the bottom line for dealing with risky, uncharted territory and opening up to differences without falling apart.

What else happens if we are disconnected from this preverbal somatic intelligence?

Stephen: Somatic intelligence is two to four times faster than intellectual intelligence. So we know with our preverbal intelligence within 250 milliseconds whether we like something or not, whether something feels good or not. And it takes us up to a full second to recognize something with our cognitive mind. In other words, we feel a relationship to something before we even recognize it's there.

So if we are disconnected from our somatic intelligence we are really slow. In terms of sensing things and by the time we start to intellectually sense it, things have already happened. You know, things can happen in a second – I

mean in terms of a subtle flow of social or emotional intelligence. If you are missing cues you are going to fall out of sync with what is going on in the group in this moment and you'll be misreading it. And also, people will feel that you are not a part of it. So they won't want to support you or listen to you because it doesn't feel like you are one of them, like you belong to them. So somatic intelligence has so many advantages in terms of mere intellectual intelligence – I could go on and on and on about it!

Andrea: In other words, without somatic intelligence, you may be intellectually brilliant, but you are just living as a “rumor” or “fantasy”, until you're able to touch others with it in the social community. And for that you must hook yourself to somatic intelligences, social intelligences, emotional intelligences, to something much bigger than you. If your body is shut down or if you are disconnected from your body, you just can't do that, you just can't.

Steven: That's right. Let's dig a little deeper here. We were touching upon the idea of “filters” earlier, and this idea is crucial for understanding creativity. In Generative Change work, we see that all reality is constructed. (We don't mean that each individual totally creates their own reality, which is sometimes the misunderstood version that comes in the new age; this is a very narrow interpretation in a disembodied sense.) Many traditions speak of this but nonetheless I think some of the converging ideas in neuroscience are that all we really know is our brain maps. You could also call these filters; psychology in general is the study of filters. What we look at in the work is how does this construction process happen?

Your identification with a social group, your identification to a certain belief, will significantly influence the reality that you find yourself in. Filters are like the stained glass windows through which light moves, producing a form on the other side.

That's of practical importance in a team: What makes one person look out and see things optimistically, whereas the next of them sees the glass half empty? These are the filters. There are three main types of filters that we are working with in Generative Change. The first one is the somatic filter. So if you want to generate a creative outcome, it all starts in your body. If I am sitting slumped over or shut down with my arms crossed, I won't be able to really experience any successful or confident possibility. It means what I embody as a leader or member I am going to contribute to my group.

The second set of filters is the cognitive filters: what we believe, what our intention is, what are our ways of interpreting things, how do we name things, so on and so forth. Working with creativity, we are working with both of those filters in tandem. What is your embodied state? What is your intellectual state?

And the third is what the state of the larger space of the group is. That group could be negative groupthink where, for example, you have a commonly accepted belief of, ‘Nothing is possible the way we do it.’ The filters are all equally important in order to create sustainable change. What we have to do

is to make sure that the quality of each of those filters – the quality of your somatic intelligence, the quality of your cognitive maps and the quality of your social communities are at these high levels. And I think this is something that we can intentionally focus on in a way to upgrade the filters, if you will, in order to improve the performance.

In Generative Change work, once we start to think about optimizing these three filters – the state of the body, the state of the cognitive intellect, the state of the social community – another distinction becomes even more important. That is, what is the human awareness or the human presence that is there to hold those structures?

Here we have the general distinction between COACH state vs. CRASH state – where we have these acronyms. COACH is an acronym in English which means:

Centered, Open, Aware, positively Connected, willing and able to Hold whatever is there.

Whereas CRASH is:

Constricted, Reactive, lost in Analysis Paralysis, feeling Separated and isolated and feeling Hurt and Hurtful.

So you not only need a superior somatic patterning or superior group organization, but you need some living awareness or mindful presence that's permeating all those things.

Andrea: That's crucial: the human presence of a person — a team member, a team leader, etc. — must be able to hold what's there without initial judgment or reactivity. Hold and skillfully process with COACH no matter how strong it is, and use the inherent energy for transformation.

Stephen: One of the things that I see all too often in professional groups is that you have a top-down slogan that is being pounded into the people and they have to go to these trainings and they are supposed to build up to this positive attitude but it's not really held in any sort of mindful state. And so it doesn't really take hold and it actually feeds the cynicism in a significant way. I've seen a lot of group training that actually breeds more of that cynicism. What are we supposed to say? We are supposed to speak with these platitudes. The real creativity is coming from being able to find something underneath the words that is more basic. And to be able to take the opportunity to make sure that people have that as a base. That's something that's hard to just read in books but I think it's what good coaches do, it's what good team leaders do, it's what good leaders do, they are touching something really basic in people.

Andrea: Any other secrets to share about high performance in teams?

Stephen: High performance level takes a lot of practice. And you are only as

good as your practice. There's a quote I heard attributed to the famous South African golfer Gary Player. A reporter said, "Mr. Player, some people say you're a lucky golfer", to which he responded: "I may be lucky but I've noticed the more I practice the luckier I get". Training is effort because you are putting yourself at your edge and you are demanding of yourself that you go beyond your edge and so there's some pain that's in there and we want to appreciate that. There are a lot of ways of describing it. But I think the simple thing is high performance takes a lot of practice. There's this general principle, you need at least 10,000 hours of practice to have sustainable generativity.

Andrea: Yes, let's make joint practice attractive in companies and communities. Teams often lack the time to physically practice together – bad news for the mammal! Exchanging, mixing and re-assembling people can be done very quickly. But you don't get a team from that. Teams in the sense we are talking about here need to organically bond and grow through working and learning together. There's this widespread belief, "Let's just cut out the unproductive stuff, go directly to the results", but understanding is needed through baby steps, quick prototyping, walking the dead ends and finding ways out together. It is the joint mastery of various challenges, the growing strength and inherent knowledge base of a team that is essential. This becomes the embodied treasure for dealing with bigger and new tasks. We need and must give physical time and space for teams to grow through mindful practice in the midst of work.

Our culture or our company might not give the amount of actual time we need – which is hard to exactly define anyway – so we must find another way of organizing around this problem. If I only believe in linear time, my head begins to smoke, I burn out and you can carve my to-do lists on my gravestone. Linear time is an expression of the Three L's (language, logic and linearity), so if obeyed as a single truth the danger of being locked into one brain is there again. We need to shift from linear to generative time to face this challenge. In other words, it's not how much time you have, but in which state of mind you are. We can learn to cross over to somatic intelligence immediately and jointly. In an instant the perception of time and space will change; allowing us to relax into the physical moment and tap resources for mindfully relating, embodied thinking and planning, truthful expression, collective visioning, prototyping, holding and transforming tensions and so on. Connect different brains and you connect different dimensions of time and space.

To all those who want a dream team overnight we could say: Allow somatic intelligence to unfold at work; it's fast, direct and powerful. On the reverse side you can expect the power question to be renegotiated: live bodies tend to talk back to bosses but that is for another conversation...

Steve, any more secrets of high performance you want to share?

Stephen: Superior performance requires superior effort. That is one of the secrets to success. In order to outperform others you have to be so committed to and prepared for the process. There is no substitute for that. I like to follow

sports and what is really interesting is that the greatest players, somebody in basketball like Michael Jordan is that he was already the best five or six years into his career and every offseason in the summer he would add a new piece to his performance capacity. He would say, well, I don't do this so well, I better improve that. So he showed up the next season and he had gone to a higher level. Of course we want to be relaxed and have the most simplified way. Ultimately it is not rocket science in the sense that if you want to outperform others you have to work harder than others.

How do I engage with a group so that not only does it have my full commitment but in doing so it is getting the most from me for the least? It brings up questions of motivation and commitment, sustainable commitment for high performance teams, and that requires a lot. I am only as good as the quality of my commitment, and this changes over time. Knowing where I am, knowing where I want to be: these are old-fashioned clichés. So I hope we can embrace the virtues of hard work and make sure that we are connecting to ourselves and others in a way that we have flow, so that not only we are working hard but that it also is fulfilling. I hope these are some of the things we will be able to practically explore.

Andrea: Like my dancing teacher keeps saying: Discipline creates freedom. Steve, thank you very much for the inspiring conversation and covering some ground on this wide and exciting topic together. I am looking forward to putting our words into practice and future collaboration!