

leadership

Comes in Where Discomfort Happens

YVETTE MUCHARRAZ

A conversation with **Aithan Shapira**



We had the opportunity to talk to Aithan about what leadership looks like in a world marked by ever-changing environments and conflicting points of view. Aithan claims that true leadership happens precisely when we must make decisions where there is no right answer, right where ambiguity and discomfort begin to appear, and that leadership should embrace the existence of conflicting points of view, as that coexistence is what will ultimately make us thrive.



Aithan Shapira (MFA Ph.D.) is both an established artist and an internationally acclaimed lecturer at MIT Sloan. His subject matter spans more than a decade, focusing on conflicting fields of view in both artistic and business contexts. Aithan is also the founder of TILT, a firm focused on gearing and empowering leaders and cultures for ever-changing contexts, drawing on artists' practices for stretching plasticity in response to change to enable them to artfully engage change together in more creative, agile, adaptive ways. Aithan's transformational executive training methods draw on 20+ years of experience helping unlock people's creative capacities to innovate at the speed of change, pioneering workshops for creating enduring cultures with increased capacity for change and bringing people and organizations together around the possibility of re-imagining how businesses and society approach learning and growth.

How did you start to develop this practice in leadership, being an artist? Where is the connection?

It's a great question. I think art is a discipline. And it's a practice of learning and understanding more about what things are, including myself, and potentiating what I can become. That practice is very much a leadership practice. It's understanding what things are, what I am, and who I can become. That is where the link is very strong. It's a practice and a discipline.

You often talk about fixedness and how you can unfreeze things and gain more from flexibility and adaptability. In our current context, how can we unfix what we have been doing and what probably has worked for us but now needs to change?

I think, in the simplest of ways, all we really have is choice. That's all I have: the choice of being here right now; it is my choice. But we must ask not only how I can make a choice that will make more choices possible but also how I can make a choice that will make fewer choices possible. And we must ask when I should pick one or the other.

That's the practice of unfixing. But it's not only about unfixing things. There are times when fixing is important, and there are times when unfixing is important. But if I am familiar with both and I practice both, then the work must involve also noticing my context: what is happening and what choice I can make that can lead to more or to less. That is also linked to creativity, and in a world that is changing at speed, it becomes a competitive advantage, the practice of doing that.

Sometimes it is about gaining clarity and being more fixed, and then at times about being more flexible and comfortable with ambiguity. And, on the fly, being able to make this kind of shift and not stay in the same modus operandi that has probably worked before.

Absolutely. You must be comfortable with the parts that are on the downside when we experience, for example, ambiguity. When I experience ambiguity and uncertainty, I just look around to see what I can hold on to, but I often have nothing to hold on to. And that's different than being okay with ambiguity. It doesn't mean it's the right thing, to work with it. It's about observing how my body responds, how my mind responds. And how I show up at that moment is important because that's what people are watching, not just hierarchy leadership, but how I show up to the leadership role, the way I lead in every context.

And I'd say maybe one other piece of this is that, when we know what to do, we need good managers who know what to do. But when things are unclear and you are the leader, that's when you have to make those decisions where you say: «I don't know». You have two right choices, and, at the same time, you will upset many people in both cases. What do you choose? That's when you need a leader, not a manager. And that's where leadership comes in. It's when the ambiguity and the discomfort happen. When my body says: «I don't know». That's when we need a leader, and that's a differentiator.

In times of high stress, and especially in the present time after the pandemic,



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there's a lot of anxiety and mental health problems. But if we consider the range of different ways to approach reality and make decisions, apparently, it may also be a time for connection. Do you see that as well? How do you see this in terms of where we are in such a chaotic and anxiety-inducing environment?

That's a great question. And I think one approach is realizing that I need others. We need community. But I want to point also to the word you said: reality. I have a perspective, and sometimes the sentence «I have a perspective» is hard for us to say. And what I mean by that is that what I'm seeing right now, how I'm perceiving what's happening, is a perspective.

It is not reality. It is a perspective of reality. What you're perceiving is a perspective. So, we need to work with reality, understanding that we have perspectives. And then we can go back to what you said about the fact that we need each other; we need community. We actually need a lot of perspectives on what's happening. We must ask: What are you seeing with your eyes that I don't see with mine? And then we can start to make sense instead of just saying: «This is the reality». That is where we need each other to make any decision about anything at any moment.

That is the gift of having community. And having a community that just supports is dangerous. It is important. On the one hand, if we have a community that supports and allows us the kind of safety where we can take risks and grow, we're on the upside of having community. But on the other hand, if we have a community where we risk just staying the same way, keeping our communities just as they are, then we are on the downside, even if it feels that we are so connected, that everything is great and is working. And maybe, at its worst, that will look like: «We're so great, and that community over there is not».

Indeed, we need each other, but we need to support each other in a way that we get more different perspectives from each other. We must leverage community to gather more, not to make one single perspective, but to make a general sense and be available to keep practicing,

getting more perspectives so that we can grow and maybe even challenge each other in the community to help each other grow.

Do you see a connection between this kind of community, creativity, and resilience?

Absolutely. One part of resilience, the way I see it, is what we will do when we come up against something that is different from us. What do we do with differences of any kind? A different idea, a different perspective, a different type of person, a different quality, a different understanding, a different reality. What do I do with that? I can certainly recoil, but that is not so resilient, right? When I recoil, I become more of what makes me secure. But I may be giving up some good qualities by doing that. There's also danger in doing that.

Alternatively, I can engage with the part of me that doesn't want to change. I can ask myself: How do I become intimate with the part of me that doesn't want to change? The part of me that sees something different to me and wants to recoil, and I can try to have a participation in that part of me. That is the discipline and practice of art. And now I'm having a conversation with myself: «Aithan, is that what you see? Okay. I notice a pattern. Aithan, you're doing this. What if you change the pattern?» Ultimately, it is a practice of working with the part of me that doesn't want to change. That is a kind of art. And in a way, I think it is the kind of art that helps us grow.

It takes curiosity, in that sense, to experiment. Even if you don't necessarily know the outcome, it can be much better than what you have seen before, even if it is not in your comfort zone.

Absolutely. Curiosity is one of the key components. And it takes a lot of things. The practice of curiosity, commitment, and an intention to grow. It is the practice of letting go. It's not just about adding things. We also need to let go. We need a little bit of surrender, and that takes practice. It's hard to let go. So, there are many things, and I think curiosity is one of the big things. It's about what something might be.

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And how do you combine your work as an artist with this consulting practice with leaders?

All the things we have been talking about right now are principles. They're concepts. They're frameworks. And my work is to make it practical and practicable with people to take away all the frameworks. One of the core frameworks that I use is from the field of adult development, focusing on how we grow mature as adults. There are many amazing scholars in that area, some of which I'm very fortunate to have worked with firsthand and studied with. And I'm in the practice myself of studying, learning, and practicing those principles all the time. And, in a consulting practice, if I'm working on the coaching component with someone, I first try just to listen. And I say «just» as a careful term because there's actually very active listening that happens there. And a part of listening is letting go. It is a practice of what something can become, what a person can become. It is about potentiating our relationship, potentiating myself to potentiate what she will become.



So, when I work with a leader or with an organization, a community, or a team, we do a lot of listening to discover where they are. And then we work with them. But one thing we don't do is we don't add another thing to compete with where they are right away. If they have invested \$1 or \$2 million in one practice, one procedure, one framework, we don't come in with our framework and say: «Okay, all this stuff, that was a great investment. Here's the next thing». What we do is listen and ask: «What is working about this framework? What is working about how you are doing things, and where is it not working for you?» And then we ask what we might do about that. So, my practice is to work across frameworks to be able to pick up and drop different things, always focusing on what they need, on what a team needs, and on how we can potentiate it.

So, I work just like I would on a canvas, just like I would do with an orchestra or a jazz group. But we're working with teams and organizations to build and potentiate capabilities, not a specific skill, but a capability that will take us in the long term to where we want to be and what we want to become.

IPADE conducted a study on Mexican leadership, and one of the findings was that there is still too much emphasis on delivering results. That is the number one thing at the top of mind of our leaders. So, what would you say in terms of building capabilities? What capabilities would you invite these kinds of leaders to add, considering they focus on having good results? What might be missing there?

I love what you're asking. And we can adopt the same approach we just described. Instead of adding, we must ask first what is right about delivering results. It's the greatest thing to deliver results. It's efficient; we get action; we get movement; we get success. So, getting results is great. Until it's not. We must also ask about what we are risking, about the consequences of only focusing on results, about where we might not be efficient, about where we might not be going fast, and about what we could slow down in service of getting fast in the long term. And here's where I

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want to step back for a moment and consider that short-termism can be dangerous, at least from the point of view of one person. Short-termism is about right now, about cause and effect. But those short-term results can put relationships at risk and create gaps in wealth distribution, etc. So, what might we do differently? Where else can we get results that can get us faster to the long-term perspective? That is, in building relationships, being able to flex with change instead of investing more and more in only strengthening what we are currently doing.

But when are we going to tip and change? Because the world is changing next to us. And we might lose. So, there are many possibilities on the other side, but we must start with what's right about it, and then we ask: What might we shift, and what more can we become if we just notice what we are giving up? </>

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Luis Carbajo
Programa de
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