

A *dare to lead*™ BOOK

Brené Brown
**STRONG
GROUND**

THE LESSONS OF DARING LEADERSHIP,
THE TENACITY OF PARADOX, AND THE
WISDOM OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT



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A NOTE AND A DEDICATION

So many of us wake up in the morning feeling overwhelmed by a world where bluster, hubris, and even cruelty are normalized and sold as a form of leadership. Before our feet hit the floor, we're on our phones witnessing the consequences of misused power and the cost to humanity extracted by leaders who believe they should be served by others rather than being of service to others.

I recognize that choosing courage, discipline, and kindness can feel impossible and increasingly vulnerable in a time when even empathy has been vilified. I understand that fostering care, connection, and belonging in our organizations seems downright subversive.

But I have hope. In my work I get to see people who have not given up on their values and what it means to lead while honoring what it means to be human. They're listening, staying curious, and creating cultures of accountability. I see leaders who understand that performance and impact increase when people feel seen, heard, and respected. I see people who are willing to do the work necessary to understand themselves and to build connection and trust with others.

This book is dedicated to all of you who are choosing to be brave with your lives, your love, and your work. Even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard. Thank you for finding your strong ground and becoming our strong ground.

CHAPTER 1



Strong Ground

WRITERS SHOULD BE REQUIRED TO apply for a permit if they want to use the word *writhe*. It may be tempting to use it metaphorically, but if you’ve ever experienced the kind of bodily pain that reflexively leads to *actual* writhing, you’re not likely to appreciate the off-label usage. I confess to having used *writhing* to describe the discomfort of living in uncertainty, but that was before I experienced the type of pain that drives you to your knees and finds you contorting and twisting your body, searching for even a second of relief so you can catch your breath. Moving forward, I solemnly swear to use the word *writhe* only in its most literal sense.

Let’s get this over with quickly: I was on the pickleball court. If you’re pumping your fist in the air and saying, “Awesome! I love pickleball! Let’s go!” keep reading. If you’re thinking, “Gimme a break with pickleball”—well, you can take some satisfaction in knowing that it almost killed me (and a shitload of other people over fifty who have rekindled their competitive spirit and suffered through multiple appointments with physical therapists and orthopedic surgeons worldwide).

On this sunny afternoon, in a local community center, on an old varnished wooden basketball court where makeshift pickleball lines were marked off with blue painter’s tape and a crappy portable net was barely standing upright, I served the ball as hard as I could. My opponents were better than me, and after weeks of trying to earn my way into a game with them, I was eager to impress. The ball hit my paddle, and the next thing I knew I was lying on the ground trying to catch my breath and wondering if I had been stabbed. Searing pain was shooting from one side of my lower

back up through the middle of my shoulder blades and all the way down my calf until it wrapped around my ankle like razor wire.

I couldn't walk or talk or make sense of what was happening. Somehow, after I spent thirty humiliating minutes writhing on the ground with a circle of stars over my head like in a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon, the folks from my game got me to the car. I barely made it home. Four blocks from my house, in an attempt to straighten my leg and get some relief from the pain, I went up a curb and across a driveway before finally managing to stop and put my car in Park. I sat and cried for ten minutes, then crawled home at two miles an hour.

Steve pulled me out of the car and got me onto the living room floor. He's a pediatrician, so he doesn't scare easily, but I could see immediately that he was worried. I have a high tolerance for pain, and this was different from anything I had ever experienced—far worse than childbirth. I begged him to club me over the head or give me whatever drugs he could find to make the pain go away. He was shocked and said, "You don't even like to take Advil."

I turned to him and screamed, "I don't give a shit. Get me anything that will make it go away! Rehab will be worth it!"

This was 2022, and at that time I was coming up on twenty-five years of sobriety—I gave up smoking cigarettes and drinking the day after I finished my master's degree, and those are the two best things I've ever done. I say that because my marriage and my kids (the two most important things in my life) and my career would never have worked without my sobriety, so quitting maintains "best" status. It can only flow from there. I've never really missed the drinking, but I still roll down the window and fake-smoke when a great rock song comes on. I don't, however, like taking any medication that might change how I feel.

In this case, I took the max dose of ibuprofen and went to the doctor to learn two things: Diagnosing muscle and nerve pain is not an exact science, and God bless the folks who have to balance chronic pain and addiction.

Two weeks later it still hurt, but I was able to sit for thirty-minute stretches. I could stand, and I could walk around the house. Four weeks after the incident, I was anxious to make a plan to get back to the court, and a friend referred me to a trainer named Tony. She described him as a "serious miracle worker."

We'll see.

We Will Not Build on Dysfunction

Tony is my age, smart, strong, occasionally funny when he's not standing on a sled bossing me around, and he has a very disciplined approach to training and running his business. Tony's dad was a successful and beloved professional football player, and Tony's style reminds me of the kind, strategic, and tough coach in all the feel-good sports films I love. His specialty is functional strength training built on an evidence-based protocol. It took me several weeks to get an appointment, but I was persistent. On the first day, we sized each other up, and while I knew he'd be a challenge, I was pretty sure I could take him. I've never met a trainer who didn't succumb to my misdirection or the "Let's talk about research" distraction that I like to use when I want to avoid something torturous.

I was 100 percent wrong about being able to take him. The second I tried to engage him in a conversation about anything other than our work, he'd say, "Focus, Brown."

The first thing he had me do was a series of tests that measured my strength, agility, mobility, and balance. I hate that stuff. I want to be on the court smashing the ball and competing, I don't want to stand on one foot and bend down three inches while holding a stick. Gimme a break.

When I finished the last test, he looked at me and said, "You scored a ten."

I smiled and raised my fist in the air. "Of course I did. Let's go! Let's work on my serve and my footwork at the baseline. Let's lift heavy shit!"

He said, "No. We're not going to do that. You scored a ten out of twenty-two. That means your potential for injury is very high and your core is weak. We're going to get you stable first."

I just stood there and stared at him. He could obviously see the disappointment on my face, but he couldn't see the movie that was playing in my mind. My sisters and I had moved my mom into an assisted living facility two years prior to this, when her dementia started slowly ravaging her body, mind, and spirit. My movie included conversations with her doctors about her deterioration accelerating because of her frailty. For the five years leading to her cognitive decline, she was absolutely unwilling to go to physical therapy or to exercise or to stand on one foot and bend down three inches while holding a stupid stick.

Tony put his hand on my forearm and said, “I can tell you’re tough and you’re a competitor, and I know you want to score twenty-two out of twenty-two on this test—and you will get there. You will get back on the court and play lights-out ball. And your toughness is going to help. But you need to hear some hard things right now and do some even harder things.”

I thought about my mom and her mom, my beloved grandmother, whom we took care of together when she stopped moving and her bones got brittle and her feet turned into gnarled balls of pain, and she lost her strength and her mind—in that order. I thought about a moment when my mom and I were bathing my grandmother, and I could feel my mom’s grief filling the room. I tried not to make eye contact, because I knew what would happen if I did, but at some point, I had to look up to make sure she was okay. When our eyes met, my mom immediately started sobbing and said, “Not me! Not ever! I’ll never do this to you. I won’t let this happen to me.”

That very morning, on the way to my appointment with Tony, I had stopped at my mom’s to help her shower. She was in the cruelest period of the disease, the agonizing space when she still knew enough to know how terrible it was but had lost control of her body and mind. As she stood in the shower, my normally very modest mom’s shame drove her to be uncharacteristically unkind and aggressive with me. If you know this experience, I’m sorry.

I pulled myself out of my movie, looked at Tony, and said, “Let’s have it—tell me everything.”

Tony laid it out in simple terms:

1. We will not build on dysfunction. We’re not going to start lifting and pushing until we understand what’s going on with your body. It’s going to take time to understand and fix the foundation. We’ll build on healthy functioning and a healthy foundation.
2. This test reveals a weak core. I feel confident that you’re getting hurt because your body is compensating with inefficient muscle groups that aren’t meant to be the primary drivers on the court or in your everyday life. Your core—your lats, your stomach, and your glutes—needs to be much stronger if you want to play as hard as you’re playing and if you want to get and stay strong and healthy. You’ve got strong quads and strong arms, but they’re

doing too much to make up for strength you don't have in the big power muscles that you should be depending on. Your back is also working way too hard, and it's not supported enough by the core muscles around it. These muscle imbalance injuries or compensation injuries won't stop, and they'll probably get worse, if you don't focus on your core.

3. On your intake, you wrote out a huge list of what you want to achieve. You wrote that you want to increase your strength, endurance, agility, mobility, and balance. You want faster reaction times, better responsiveness, and to be able to quickly change direction. That means our work here is going to be functional, dynamic, and adaptive. But what happens in this gym won't be enough. You're going to need to work on sleep, diet, stress, emotions, and the stuff that's your specialty. You'll also need to change how you think. We're looking for intentionality and consistency over wild intensity. Winning in here will be a focused and systemic change across your life. This is about you making a commitment to body, mind, and spirit, and holding yourself accountable to that commitment.

Finding the Ground

The work in the gym was physically hard, mentally challenging, and emotionally disorienting. I couldn't find my lats for two months. No matter how many times Tony told me that I was misusing my arms and shoulders and not engaging my lats, I couldn't find them. I'd throw a medicine ball against the wall and before it would come back to me, he'd knock it down and say, "You're not throwing from your core. You're not set. Start again."

It turns out that I was using my body while being completely disconnected from it. Disembodiment is strange to think about: I am deploying my body in the service of what I want to get done, but I'm not fully inhabiting it, or seeking to understand or appreciate it. But after the writhing, I could definitely hear it. The gift of middle age—your body will get your attention, one way or another.

After two months of training twice a week, I was getting frustrated. During a session, Tony stopped me in the middle of a set of squats and said, “Find the ground, Brown.” I looked at him, looked at the floor, and looked back at him with a very serious scowl that I hoped conveyed *What in the hell do you want from me?*

“No,” he said in reference to my looking down and back up. “Find the ground. Not the floor. Find the ground—your ground. Find it with your feet, then connect to it with your entire body. Find your athletic stance, like you’re waiting for a serve from someone who hits the ball really, really hard.”

He stood across from me a couple of feet away, extended his arms, put both hands on my shoulders, and gave me a gentle shove. Nothing hard, but enough for me to involuntarily step back a bit. “Find the ground and use the ground for energy and stability. Find the ground that lets you engage those big muscles that were made for this. Use your mind *and* your body, Brown. Get set.”

For some reason, that’s exactly what it took for me to understand what he had been trying to teach me for two months. *Use your mind and your body.* I had always been told that I was disconnected from my body because I lived in my head—I was too much of a thinker. But in that moment, when Tony suggested that I use my mind to connect with my body through the ground, it all clicked into place for me.

I told him to push again. This time nothing happened. Then I shoved him back. And it was like hitting a wall. We both laughed. And back to the squats.

Before my next squat, I whispered something to myself that I still use daily—on the court, in tough meetings, when I’m overwhelmed, when I’m scared to feel excited or joyful, when I feel unsteady or unsure—anytime I need to find my strength. I whispered to myself: *Strong ground, Brené, strong ground.*

In that moment while doing my squats, my second-least-favorite horseshit exercise right after lunges, I learned how to access a new type of strength by connecting my body directly to the universal source—the ground. I could feel the connection.

To this day, I still have to be super mindful to get the right muscles firing and then to consciously use them. My default compensation muscles seem to be more than willing and ready to go, especially when I’m tired.

But now, I'll even quit playing earlier than planned if I can't feel the ground and get engaged. It's not worth it.

After the first time I felt the power of the ground, I knew that learning to access it again and again was going to be key for me. I also knew that the only way to do that consistently was to make finding strong ground part of my mindfulness practice. I resisted mindfulness for a long time, but the more I studied Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn's work, the more deeply I understood my own resistance. Once I developed a practice, it became the stabilizing force for how I want to show up in the world.

Kabat-Zinn was introduced to mindfulness when he was a doctoral student at MIT. He's spent more than five decades studying and teaching mindfulness, and his work is both scientific and, in many ways, spiritual (but never religious). He defines mindfulness as the "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally...in the service of self-understanding and wisdom."

The very next time I used *strong ground* to summon my strength was to find my lats. And it worked. Again, I still have to pause between reps to think about what I'm doing, reposition a bit, and make sure I'm grounded, but it works.

My slowly changing mindset and my new skill sets led to my getting functionally stronger. I also started working with a great physical therapist named Morgan. She taught me a phrase that I still use: *Recruit the right muscles for the job. Train them, and use them with intention.* I could feel my new strength the most when I had to pull my carry-on from the overhead bin on a plane. I can get seven days of clothes in my carry-on—it's normally maxed out and heavy. If you ever see me on a flight, don't laugh. Yes, I'm in my athletic stance and I'm actively recruiting the right muscles when I pull that bad boy down.

A Deep, Broad, and Disciplined Commitment

Tony and I were both excited about my newbie gains, but the celebration didn't stop him from reminding me about the other commitments and changes I needed to be making, especially improving my sleep, nutrition, stress management, and—his biggest concern—how I often sit for long

stretches of writing or coding data. He told me that gains rarely last or bring about the changes we're seeking unless they are part of a larger shift across all the decisions we make on a daily basis. I needed to change the way I was thinking about my health, I needed to develop new skills, and I needed to keep pushing.

Driving home from the gym that morning, I thought, *Wait a minute. Part of a larger change across all the decisions I make on a daily basis? Mindsets, skill sets, and coaching sets? This is my work at work.*

For the past fifteen years, I've spent the majority of my time working in large organizations facilitating culture and performance transformations. In fact, over the past ten years, I've led transformations inside global companies with more than sixty thousand people and worked with many CEOs and senior leaders who are driving major disruption and growth. And if you zoom out to include all the Dare to Lead facilitators, collectively, we've facilitated our work on daring leadership with more than 150,000 people in forty-five countries. I'll share more about what we're learning in the forthcoming chapters.

Most people know that I'm a social worker, but few know that leadership and organizational work is an area of study in our field. For example, during COVID I was on the cover of *Texas Monthly* magazine with the headline: "How the Pandemic Turned Brené Brown into America's Therapist." This elicited a cacophony of groans from the therapist community, and a "WTF?" from me when I first saw it. I'm not a therapist. I have one and I've interviewed many, but I've never been a clinician. I've always studied the intersection of emotion, behavior, and thinking, but that's very different from being an actual therapist. My interest in leadership and organizational development started when I worked for AT&T. I was a union steward for the Communication Workers of America, and eventually became a people leader. When I returned to school to become a social worker and eventually a researcher, my focus was on how emotion and thinking drive behavior in organizations. That's how I ended up here.

Today, when I'm working with leaders who desperately want to transform their organizations and even disrupt entire industries, it's normal to bump into some resistance up front. They're often hopeful that the big change effort can be predictable, not too messy, and dependent on tools rather than the tough and courageous work of changing mindsets and building new skills. The line I often use with them is pretty close to Tony's:

What you're trying to achieve will require a deep, broad, and disciplined commitment to individual change, team change, culture change, and systems change.

I've learned a lot about transformation doing this work—most of it the hard way. And I have a lot of experience in assessing and recognizing when small, incremental change will work and when nothing short of a “break some protected but no longer useful shit and build something that allows you to seize new opportunities” transformation is necessary.

Tony wanted me to break some shit. He was suggesting the deep, broad, and disciplined commitment route. Dang it.

Despite intellectually knowing better, I, like the vast majority of leaders with whom I work, reached first for tools you can purchase in the hope that a slick external resource might save me from the time- and energy-consuming work of transformation, which includes (but is not limited to) things like:

- Conducting rigorous assessments that lead to accurate problem identification
- Creating the space and time for real change to happen
- Recognizing that the big “aha”s of learning do not equate to new skills without uncomfortable practice
- Understanding *how* people think in addition to *what* they think, and developing new mindsets that align with strategy
- Building new muscles and skills through unlearning, relearning, and discipline
- Creating stronger levels of self-awareness, cultural awareness, situational awareness, and anticipatory awareness
- Examining how larger systems serve or no longer serve strategy
- Increasing skills like pattern recognition and paradoxical thinking capabilities
- Doing all of this while constantly evaluating the relevance of strategy and the progress of change

Basically, we all have to resist the magical thinking that there's a suite of tools that will bring about big change and require less time, less determination, and less discipline than the work necessary to produce

meaningful, lasting change. Unfortunately, the cognitive and behavioral squats and lunges await. There is no app for transformation.

Even though I study resistance to change, I wasn't immune to the lure of cool toys over hard work. Is there any problem that a new planner, a computer upgrade, a new productivity system, and a three-hour spree at an online Japanese stationery store can't solve?

It turns out that yes, there are a ton of problems these things can't solve, but planning for transformation is so delicious. And nothing is more fun than launching a transformation with the easy stuff first—office supplies! I immediately traded in the paper journal I'd been using for two decades for an iPad and four different note-taking apps. Nothing says delay of transformation like twenty hours of studying productivity app reviews on YouTube. I landed on one that allows you to create searchable tags and keywords. And write in an infinite number of colors and pen tips—including one that made my handwriting look like calligraphy. Who would have guessed that calligraphy is easier than firing up your glutes?

I created folders for my body, my mind, and my spiritual development. Then, as a real forcing function, I created files for all the organizations with whom I was working and uploaded several hundred documents and research notes from my laptop. And, just to be thorough, more files for movies that inspire, rock documentaries I want to watch, nonfiction books I need to read, and British mysteries I actually will read. I optimistically committed to six weeks of taking notes only on my iPad. Even if I hated it.

After the first week, rather than comprehensive meeting notes, I'd have pages covered in flowers, rainbows, five variations of my name in 1980s high school bubble letters, and not a single note from a meeting. Thankfully my team doesn't allow me to attend meetings alone out of the fear (based on experience) that I'll commit to something that I later (and almost always) regret. I forced myself to copy my team's meeting notes into my app for practice. This became a bad habit that looked like me not bringing paper to meetings in an effort to force myself to adapt to my new technology, but instead coloring in my app while simultaneously taking important notes on fifty-six Post-its and later transferring the Post-it content into the app. When I didn't have large wicker baskets of Post-it notes available, like I have at my office, I would write bullet points on my arm.

After a terrible six weeks, I finally surrendered and returned to my trusty Leuchtturm1917 and Moleskine journals—the ones I still use today. I

have to say that there might be something to the research that posits that writing on paper offers cognitive advantages over digital writing in terms of memory retention, conceptual understanding, and neural processing.

I spent a weekend moving notes from my iPad app to my paper journal just so I could have everything in one place. To ensure that I didn't miss anything, I did random searches on names and keywords. When I did a keyword search for *agility* in hopes of finding my notes from the gym, I smiled when the app produced a selection of notes from interviews with organizational leaders alongside my notes from Tony. The same thing happened when I typed in the word *strength*. And again when I typed in the words *responsiveness*, *adaptive*, *discipline*, *commitment*, and *dynamic*. At first I just laughed and thought, *These organizations are doing their own strength training. Everyone is focused on the reps.*

When I typed in the word *ground*, four things popped up in the search result:

1. My personal reflections on using the reminder *strong ground* when I needed to feel firmly planted and quietly fierce
2. My notes on grounded confidence—a taxonomy of the grounded confidence skills I introduced in *Atlas of the Heart*
3. Notes on grounded theory methodology, the qualitative research methodology I've used since I was a doctoral student
4. Notes from a meeting with a CEO who'd used the term *grounded* when we talked about the mindset she's working to develop in her direct reports and other senior leaders in the organization

I seem to have a long relationship with the ground, and it looks like we're getting pretty serious at this point.

Despite my best efforts to minimize the level of change I needed to make to get the results I was seeking in my own life, it was clear that I didn't need a new app. I needed a personal version of *the deep, broad, and disciplined commitment to change across my life*. For me, this looked like getting back into therapy, working more with my leadership coach, becoming more spiritually fit, committing to my work with Tony and Morgan, and doing what's always served me: Eat well, move well, sleep well, connect well, and practice thankfulness. And I started wearing an

Oura Ring. I told myself it wasn't a tool or a toy, it was for the data. This got a little dicey when we started a family competition on the app and I named myself "the Mominator."

It was synchronicity but not a surprise that my keyword search on the note-taking app pulled up meeting notes from my leadership development work as well as my documented plan to squeeze all I can out of my life and kick ass on the pickleball court. The micro and macro diagnoses and solutions are strangely similar. Individually and collectively, we are all looking for strong ground right now. We need to push into the source of our strength and sturdiness so we can navigate the world. We need the ground to steady us and at the same time to propel us into purposeful action. Organizationally, we need exactly the same things I wrote on that intake form I handed to Tony: strength, endurance, agility, mobility, and balance. We want faster reaction times, better responsiveness, and the ability to quickly change direction.

From Fortune 100 companies, giant legacy organizations, and small, scrappy start-ups to space exploration organizations, professional sports teams, the military, and global NGOs, I find that the vast majority of people, regardless of position, are struggling to find their ground. Radically changing markets, the exciting and disorienting integration of AI, tariff threats, geopolitical instability, the climate crisis, and the sheer pace of change have leaders and employees scrambling.

I'm watching as that scramble leads down the dangerous path of attempting to build new capabilities on top of old dysfunction rather than assessing and developing core stability and functional strength first. And I get it. Right now, the thought of slowing down to do *anything* can be paralyzing. But at the very least, we should be building new capabilities while at the same time doubling down on core stability and functional strength. Developing core stability and functional strength in organizations means investing in people, because for an organization, *people*, and our connection to each other, are the strong ground.

Being Good at Being Human

I hear a lot of folks trying to soothe people's anxiety about the pace of change, AI, and the general unpredictability of the world by offering platitudes like *What makes us human will ensure our relevance*. I call bullshit on this for one simple reason: I don't think, in this moment, that we're very good at what makes us human. As someone who spends every single day researching and working in organizations, I can tell you that people are struggling—many are in deep struggle, especially young employees, folks struggling with health issues, and those sandwiched between caregiving for children and aging parents. Collectively, I'd say we feel disconnected, distrustful, and emotionally dysregulated. By "emotionally dysregulated," I mean overwhelmed by big feelings that are hard to name and contain and can drive behaviors and thinking that are not always aligned with who we want to be.

In a time fueled by discord, divisiveness, and increasing dehumanization, we need to find ways to actually want to be with other people. It's hard to buy that what makes us human will save our sanity and our jobs when in fact so many of us have become untethered from our humanity and fundamentally disconnected from one another.

This disconnection from our inherent human wisdom—our poetry, our joy, our innate creativity, our yearning for connection, collaboration, and innovation—stems from at least three converging forces:

1. Despite overwhelming data warning us about the detrimental impact on people and performance, there's still pervasive adherence to the type of fear-and-shame-based, rank-and-yank leadership that permeates many organizations and currently holds political center stage in many countries. Our hardwired reflex to this type of culture is basically to self-protect by separating ourselves from our bodies, our humanity, and one another. Disengage, perform to plan rather than to potential, take no risks, and check out. Or, perhaps worse, engage in the brutality of processing our fear by taking it out on others.
2. There remains a strong belief that vulnerability is weakness and that what makes us human is counter to high performance and impact. Again, this mythology has been dispelled by research, including my own, but we seem not to want to accept that vulnerability—the ability to recognize and regulate the emotions

we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure—is the source code for courage. There is no courage without vulnerability. If there's no uncertainty, risk, or exposure, we're not being brave.

3. The false dichotomy persists that leaders can either invest in training and coaching specifically developed to increase performance, revenue, and growth, or they can invest in culture initiatives and coaching that result in more courageous, connected, and collaborative human beings. If this feels like your ROI dilemma, I suggest you back away slowly from the quarter-zipped consultant with the two-hundred-slide deck. Fully alive, well-supported, and connected human beings are unstoppable.

Again, not one of these three belief systems has proven to be true. They're theories driven by fear and scarcity, not reality or data. When we are holding strong ground, these ideas don't align with what we know instinctively about ourselves. Fear is a terrible motivator. It has a short shelf life, and to maintain enough fear to drive behavior, you have to get comfortable with cruelty and create chaotic systems that might feed a hungry investor quarter but will eventually destroy you and your organization.

The transformations we need right now must drive deep collaboration, deep thinking, and deep connection. We're going to need leaders with the capacity for tough and productive conversation. We need a sense of discerning urgency driven by smart prioritization, trust-building skills, strategic risk-taking, paradoxical thinking, pattern recognition, meaning making, situational and anticipatory awareness in the markets served, agility, tenacity, the humility and confidence to unlearn and relearn, systems and symphonic thinking that deliver operational excellence, and the courage to lead people in a way that honors and protects the wisdom of the human spirit.

Organizations are doing their own strength training. Leaders are assessing where their teams are using inefficient muscle groups to do work when their core is weak. And, like me, they're resisting the small, precise movement work that's essential if you want to increase stability and agility. We're heading into a world of major organizational change.

Tony's wisdom is completely aligned with how I think about transformations: *Our work is going to be functional, dynamic, and adaptive. You'll also need to change how you think. We're looking for intentionality and consistency over wild intensity. Winning in here will be a focused and systemic change across your life. This is about you making a commitment to body, mind, and spirit, and holding yourself accountable to that commitment.*

And I'll add this: We are neurobiologically hardwired for connection, and in the absence of connection there is always suffering. Regardless of the tools, including AI, organizations that build and maintain strong ground do so by respecting and protecting human wisdom and connection as foundational. Technology built on dysfunction *is* dysfunction, regardless of the genius of the code or the power of the algorithm. Strong ground is the only thing that can provide both unwavering stability in a maelstrom of uncertainty *and* a platform for the fast, explosive change that the world is demanding.

Let's take a look at what stability and explosive energy can look like on the field.

CHAPTER 2



Tush Push

THE “TUSH PUSH,” ALSO KNOWN as the “Brotherly Shove,” is a variation of the quarterback sneak and one of the Philadelphia Eagles’ most powerful plays. It is used in short-yardage situations when the team needs to move the ball forward just a tiny bit—a yard or less. In this play, the quarterback crouches in front of his teammates, and other players line up directly behind him. On the snap, everyone pushes together, with the players in back literally pushing the quarterback from behind to help him move forward through the opposing team.

In a YouTube conversation with the NFL’s Kyle Brandt, the physicist Neil deGrasse Tyson explains that the tush push leverages fundamental physics principles, particularly the concept of ground force.

Newton’s First Law (Inertia)

The Eagles have an advantage because they move first after the snap, before defenders can react. This “quarter-second head start” gives them momentum, making it harder for defenders to stop them once they’re in motion.

The offensive line and quarterback are already moving forward, and, according to Newton’s first law, an object in motion stays in motion unless acted on by an external force. The defenders, starting from rest, have to overcome this initial momentum.

Newton's Second Law (Force = Mass × Acceleration)

When the offensive linemen drive their feet into the turf, they generate force against the ground. The Eagles' linemen are massive, and when they accelerate forward together, the force they generate is huge—much greater than what defenders can counter, especially when the defenders are reacting after a split-second delay.

Tyson points out that the quarterback's leg strength is less important here because he's often airborne or being pushed; the real force comes from the mass and acceleration of the players pushing him, all of whom are firmly connected to the ground.

Newton's Third Law (Action and Reaction)

Newton's third law says that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The key to the play is that the offensive line and pushers are pressing against the earth. When the linemen push against the ground, the earth pushes back, allowing them to drive forward with enormous force. The earth's mass is so great that it does not move in response to the players' push, so all the force generated by the players is directed into moving the pile forward.

Tyson also notes that once a player loses contact with the ground, his ability to generate force drops dramatically. Airborne defenders or pushers can only exert force equal to their own weight and acceleration, which is negligible compared to the force generated by grounded players who can push off the earth. As a result, defenders who jump or are lifted off their feet become ineffective at stopping the play, lacking the ground reaction force needed to resist the Eagles' momentum. To illustrate the sheer power generated by the ground-anchored push, Tyson jokingly adds that in theory, every time the Eagles run the tush push, the rotation of the earth is affected. This panicked me a bit, so I looked it up, and it's true, although the effect is so minuscule it's not going to knock us off the couch in our living room as we watch the game.

Last note—there is talk of banning the play, which has drawn increasing controversy in the NFL. Tyson's response to this potential banning was wonderful! He suggests that such ingenuity and physical prowess should be celebrated, not penalized, and he draws a cosmic analogy, comparing the unstoppable nature of the tush push to phenomena like supernovas and black holes. Tyson suggests that once the play is set up, it is nearly impossible to stop.

Newtonian Teamwork

I love the tush push as a sports metaphor for what can happen when a team comes together, with each member finding their own strong ground and moving forward toward one goal with vision and discipline. Our strong ground is made up of two elements:

1. Our own footing, including our values, a clear sense of our contribution, our curiosity, and our humility
2. Our connection to another person or group of people who are also grounded

In Newtonian teamwork, everyone must be responsible for understanding that it's the strength of the team that makes winning possible, and, conversely, the cost to the entire team when individuals lose touch with their ground.

CHAPTER 3



The Thrill of Victory, the Agony of Defeat, and the Power of Poetry

IN 1970, THE SKI JUMPER Vinko Bogataj came flying down the ramp at the Ski Flying World Championships in Oberstdorf, Germany. The ramp was icy and running much faster than anticipated. Bogataj lost control, flew off the ramp, helicoptered through the air, crashed through a fence, and fell into a crowd of spectators. This footage was played at the start of every airing of *ABC's Wide World of Sports* along with Jim McKay's narration of everyone's favorite sports tagline: "*The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. The human drama of athletic competition.*"

It probably goes without saying that Bogataj's death-defying crash was the "agony of defeat" visual.

It makes me happy to know that eleven years after that failed jump, during the twentieth-anniversary celebration of *ABC's Wide World of Sports*, Vinko Bogataj received a standing ovation from the famous athletes in attendance. The story goes that Muhammad Ali got out of his seat, approached Bogataj, and asked for his autograph. All the athletes seemed to have profound respect for Bogataj's courage and willingness to show the world the truth about what it means to be a competitor.

For many of us, not just famous athletes, Bogataj's crash was the weekly reminder that you cannot separate the thrill of victory from the agony of defeat—the price for experiencing the thrill is constantly risking, and frequently experiencing, the agony.

I watched that show for decades, and every single time, I was riveted by that crash. I grew up in a sports family, so that footage along with the dramatic narration in the background remains a core memory. To this day, I

can't tell you what ran during the "thrill of victory" part of the introduction, but, man, do I remember what defeat looked like. I often still play a movie of the crash in my mind when I try to be brave and end up failing.

Sport provides us the embodiment and visual display of mindset and skill-set development that are almost impossible to observe in other settings, like offices. In a pool or on a field, pitch, court, oval, or track, you can actually see how coaches, players, and teams bring together vision, strategy, execution, operational excellence, and discipline to compete. There's nowhere to hide—it's playing out dramatically, in thrilling real time. Sport delivers poignant leadership and teamwork theater.

The way athletes and performers across disciplines embody and demonstrate skills that exist mostly internally in the rest of us takes me back to a painful moment growing up. A very close family friend's young child died in a terrible car accident. The mother was a professional modern dancer and, as part of her healing, she choreographed a dance to express the grief she was experiencing. She invited my mom and a very small group of family and friends to the performance.

When my mom got home from the experience, her tear-streaked face was swollen in that way that comes only from hard sobbing. When I asked her if she was going to be okay, she said, "I couldn't breathe. I've felt so much grief in my life, but I've never seen it or been able to point my finger at it. I never could touch it. Today I watched grief unfolding and stretching and leaping and falling to the ground in front of me. I saw grief with my own eyes."

The embodied expression of emotion, mastery, and skill demonstrated by all kinds of performers, artists, and athletes can make the invisible visible and the unknowable more knowable. I say *more* knowable because no matter how hard we try and how many gadgets we attach to performers to better understand the biology of their craft, there will always be mystery in artistic, emotional, spiritual, and athletic expression. I believe this is why bearing witness often generates more than appreciation—the mystery of it all inspires awe. And in today's world we need more awe, wonder, and joy. These are the fuel for restoration and meaning.

This mother showed her family and close friends how grief looked and felt to her. For her, spoken language was not enough. I spend a lot of time observing performers, interviewing them, and talking to people about how

they're affected by what they see and hear. I love this part of my job—it is almost always awe-inspiring.

A symphony has inspired me to jump to my feet, and I've read poems that left my heart aching. I think about how I feel when I watch and listen to performances by my friends and fellow Texans Gina Chavez and Carrie Rodriguez. I can actually hear and feel the powerful emotion of hope and the pain of struggle in their music as they take us through their lived experiences. Gina sings in a way that transports me to new places and helps me see through different eyes. Carrie is magic on the fiddle—one minute both she and the instrument are laughing, and in the very next moment, Carrie is telling a story and the fiddle is crying.

I watch how chess grandmasters focus and strategize with such intensity during long tournaments that they weep from exhaustion when they win. Sometimes I watch the video over and over to try to find the moment when a player realizes they've won, just so I can try to understand what emotion washes over them. Weirdly, it rarely looks like joy. It looks like astonishment and extreme mental fatigue. The cognitive lift has been so great that joy seems to come later.

What We All Have in Common

It's often seen as a mistake to use sports metaphors to understand teamwork and leadership because the incredible physical skills and demands on athletes are so rarefied. I understand that. We're not all athletic, we don't all love sport, and none of us can run a hundred meters in a mere 10.57 seconds, like Sha'Carri Richardson. *By the way—I timed this paragraph. Richardson ran the 100-meter race in the time it took you to read the lines in this paragraph—not counting the part in italics.*

In my work, I find that what sports and organizational work have in common is the need for strong ground and embodiment. So many of us who consider an office environment our “field” have become disembodied to the point that we forget our brain is attached to our body. We can go on like this for years, even decades, until our body sends us unavoidable reminders in the form of illness, insomnia, exhaustion, or loss of strength, mobility, or balance.

Does a software engineer or a human resources leader need to be in the same physical condition as someone like the tennis phenom Coco Gauff, or the swimmer and Olympic icon Katie Ledecky? Of course not. But do the engineer and HR leader need to be embodied, strong, grounded, and connected in mind, body, and spirit? *Yes*. That's part of our need for recommitment to the human spirit.

Does a leader who is forced to make a fast decision in the face of looming pressure need the same level of footwork as the former NFL quarterback Tom Brady, a player known for his ability to stay aware, avoid being tackled, and get the ball downfield in three to five seconds? No, but Tom Brady's excellent footwork is a direct translation of a leader's need to have situational, anticipatory, and temporal awareness in decision making.

The limitations of the performance metaphors are often related to talent. I understand that too. Gina Chavez is a Latin Grammy nominee and an accomplished singer and songwriter. Carrie Rodriguez, who is also a singer-songwriter, studied classical violin at Oberlin Conservatory of Music before turning her focus to the fiddle, which she studied at the Berklee College of Music. Is it the requirement of a newly hired social media manager at a hospital or the CFO of a car manufacturer to emotionally transport and soulfully transform people? Actually, yes. Maybe not with lyrics or singing or a fiddle, but by working hard to understand and connect with the people they're trying to influence or impact. Maybe even by understanding the power of emotionally resonant language and the universal appeal of authentic connection.

In an interview that we did with Carrie for my website, we asked her if there's a part of the creative process that's tougher for her than other parts. I loved her answer:

*Yes—writing a song is the hardest part for me! There are so many self-doubting voices that pop up as I'm writing lyrics. Anytime I come up with a little chorus/hook/song idea...my first thought is usually—*Oh my God, this is so cheesy!* And the funny thing is, it's usually the songs that I think are the most cheesy that end up being the best ones. I've learned over time that maybe when I think I'm being cheesy, what's actually happening is I'm being honest, which can be really scary!*

I'm sharing this because of the number of times I've heard managers and leaders say things like "I was going to reach out to my colleague at home and tell her how sorry I was to hear about her grandmother's death, but it seemed too personal." Or "I was going to lead my team in this fun exercise about trust, but it felt too cheesy, so I didn't."

Performers are people. And the one thing we all have in common is straddling the paradox of being vulnerable enough to confront the world with our art, our tenderness, and our openness, while at the same time being tough enough to know our wholeheartedness won't always be received or returned. That's not solely the performer's dilemma—that's what it means to be human. That's where the thrill of victory meets the agony of defeat, and you don't have to be competing in front of the world to experience it. You can just as easily experience it at your desk.

I use poetry, performance stories, and sports metaphors throughout this book. Not on every page, but when nothing will convey what I'm trying to say better than a poem, I'm going to share one that I love. And when a sports metaphor helps me visualize and explain complex phenomena and ideas, I'm grabbing the ball and running with it.

CHAPTER 4



Paradox and the Human Spirit

AS I STARTED ORGANIZING THIS book, I was struck by two threads that were woven across the most important lessons I've learned from facilitating Dare to Lead work and trying to be a daring leader. The first thread is the powerful role paradoxical thinking plays in understanding ourselves, the people around us, and the complex environments in which we work, and, more generally, in getting our head around a world that can feel as though it's on fire.

The second thread running across the lessons is a clear global yearning for more humanity within us and between us, a real call for a collective recommitment to the human spirit. I've seen and felt this need for a shared regrounding in the understanding that what makes us human is not a liability, but a source of wisdom and connectedness across the world. These threads dance alongside each other and are intertwined in many crucial places. To understand the tenacity of paradox and the wisdom of the human spirit is to realize that following these two threads is perhaps the clearest path to making meaning of our lives and our work.

What follows is an exploration of paradox and the wisdom of the human spirit informed by insights from a few of my favorite teachers. Each of them has a radically different approach to these broad topics, but they all land in the same place: Paradoxes embrace ambiguity, expose our intolerance for uncertainty, push our boundaries, and, if we hang on long enough, often force us to deny the comfort of our ideologies for a deeper wisdom that is a more honest reflection of the human experience and the human spirit.

One last note: I love the word *spirit*, and I acknowledge that it's gauzy. Because spirituality has emerged as central to the human experience across all our research over the past two decades, I've attempted to define it based on the data. I define spirituality as "recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love, compassion, and mystery." God, nature, humanity, fishing—there are as many sources of that power as there are people. The human spirit emerged from the data as those undefinable and undeniable connections between all of us that, when honored, allow us to see one another.

A Great Witness to the Truth

When I told my editor that I wanted to use the phrase "the tenacity of paradox" in the subtitle, he half-jokingly said, "I'm guessing this relates to the fact that you never, ever, and I mean *never*, stop writing about paradox. Book after book."

I flashed my slyest smartass smile and said, "Yes. *And no*."

He tried negotiating by suggesting "the power of paradox," but I insisted on *tenacity* for the simple reason that paradoxes are unflinching and stubborn. We can run from them when they confuse us or try to quit them when they frustrate us, but, like me and my subtitle, they never surrender.

In its original Greek, *paradox* is made up of two words, *para* (contrary to) and *dokein* (opinion). The Latin *paradoxum* means "seemingly absurd but really true." In my experience, paradoxes are incredibly tenacious. Humans get so uncomfortable straddling the tension and uncertainty that surfaces when two seemingly opposing ideas are both valid that we often simply give up. We let go of the tension and pick one idea, normally the most familiar one, and make ourselves feel better by discounting or diminishing the competing idea and/or the idea holder.

The gift of the paradox is that if we hang in there and tolerate the tension—grounding down and holding both ideas—a new and deeper level of understanding is born. Paradox is stubborn and never lets go. We are the ones who tap out.

For example, in my work life, I've spent five years trying to run from the paradox of freedom and commitment. The idea of having my life reduced to thirty-minute scheduling blocks sends me straight into one of my least favorite emotions—despair. For me, despair is that soul-crushing feeling of having no agency, no power to change anything. I once heard Rob Bell define despair as the feeling that “tomorrow will be just like today.” This is the heaviness I feel when I lose ownership of my time.

What I craved and still crave more than anything else is time, freedom, flexibility. I want a life that makes me periodically unfindable. I'm sure this is why swimming laps is my love language. When you're underwater, you're totally unavailable. I also need time to read, to write, to create, and to think.

For years, I protected my “freedom” by refusing to plan and schedule. I waited until the absolute last minute to make up my mind about my day, and I overcommitted on a regular basis because, when I checked, nothing was blocked out on my calendar. The result? Chaos, panic, anxiety, and absolutely zero freedom.

Then one day, after I was completely worn down and convinced that I would never outsmart the paradox of freedom and commitment, I scheduled my next haircut before I left the salon. The woman who worked at the desk was shocked. I'm sure she was thinking, *Does this mean she's not going to call crying in six weeks because she's desperate to get in before a big trip?* One scheduled appointment led to the next, and within a few weeks I was calendaring meetings and blocking time for creating in equal measure. Making and keeping commitments and writing them down miraculously led to more freedom (and collective relief from a team whom I had subjected to a lot of unnecessary stress and legitimate frustration).

In Chapter 1, I shared several tough personal paradoxes. I want to compete on the court with intensity, which ultimately means committing to consistency in the gym. I want more speed and agility, which means developing and maintaining a strong relationship with the ground. I guess you could say that I'm also committed to not being the youngest person in my maternal line to end up in assisted living, so I'll need to accept being the oldest person at the gym on many days.

Carl Jung was my gateway drug into paradox. I wish I could take back the many times that brooding teenage me rolled my eyes at my mom when I found her buried under a stack of books by Jung. Mercifully, I had many

opportunities before she died to thank her for the courage it took to read weird books, go to therapy, and surface the unsaid in our family. I could draw a straight line between her reading Jung and my sitting here writing this book. Her determination to change the trajectory of our lives was the purest form of love.

Jung explained that a paradox is one of our most valued spiritual possessions. He explained, “Only the paradox comes anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life.” In a world defined by spiritual crisis, where we seem to be slicing and dicing our fullness by orphaning pieces of our humanity, the paradox seems more important than ever. It’s no wonder that whenever I’m in a room of thinkers I respect but with whom I often differ, paradoxical thinking is everywhere.

I can give you a great example from earlier this year, when I sat in the audience at a luncheon to listen to Google DeepMind co-founder and CEO Sir Demis Hassabis talk about the future of AI. Only a few months before the interview, Hassabis and John M. Jumper were jointly awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for their AI research contributions to protein structure prediction. To make things more interesting, this luncheon took place within days of Trump’s inauguration, and in the same week that the world was learning more about DeepSeek, the Chinese AI platform that shook global markets and sent geopolitical shockwaves around the world.

I was so mesmerized by Hassabis’s poetic insights about AI that it took me a minute to realize that he was explaining almost all of his current thinking on technology in terms of paradoxes. For some reason, I had nothing to write with in my purse, so I borrowed a pen from the guy sitting next to me and took notes on my menu. Hassabis talked about the tension inherent in sometimes opposing forces such as:

- Philosophy and physics
- Innovation and regulation
- Risk and reward
- Human agency and agentic AI
- Speed in discovery and ethics

The entire conference was defined by paradoxical thinking. The most baffling paradox up for debate and discussion across the larger conference was what I would call the paradox of the genius tech billionaire and the

fragile ego. For this one, I'll return to Jung, who wrote, "There are sound philosophical reasons why our arguments should end in paradox and why a paradoxical statement is the better witness to truth than a one-sided, so-called 'positive' statement."

The Grace Paradox

Father Richard Rohr, the renowned Franciscan friar, author, and spiritual teacher, is one of my favorite people in the world. He's taught me so many lessons, but none more important than what I've named "the grace paradox." In almost everything he does and teaches, he always comes back to the loving message that we grow spiritually much more by doing things wrong than by doing everything right. *Whew.*

In 2023, Father Richard asked me to write the foreword for the rerelease of one of his most beloved books, *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. I said yes without a second of hesitation. We had done several podcasts together, and I had visited him in his home and sanctuary in Albuquerque. He's simply one of the deepest, most important teachers in my life and I was honored to be asked.

That damn manuscript sat on my desk for months. I did not want to read it, but I was plagued by guilt, so when I walked by it, I'd just look at it and say, "Peace be with you."

I was in a hard place. My mom was sick, my dad was struggling, the kids were figuring out how adulting works, one tough experience after the next, and my job felt like a never-ending parade of hard conversations and decisions. I was ass-deep in midlife; I didn't want his book to remind me which half of life I was slogging through. I told my coach about my absolute fear of reading it in order to write the foreword, and she pulled her best Yoda from *The Empire Strikes Back*: "You fear going in, so in you must go."

I call that the Jedi bullshit paradox. May the Force be with you, but keep that shit to yourself.

I hated/loved the book. It challenged many parts of me and comforted all of me. As I read it in the evenings after work, I was struck by how, during the day, I was flooded by all different types of organizations

grappling with paradoxical leadership and strategy challenges—AI ethics, localizing supply chains while maintaining global standards of operational excellence, building relational trust in cross-company collaborations by having tough conversations about data governance, manufacturing organizations attempting to move from selling products to selling thought partnership that starts with defining problems. It didn't matter how complex and competing the ideas, the answers to the questions were always *Yes, and*.

Father Richard's book was a not-so-gentle reminder that learning to embrace the power of paradox across every part of our lives—how we live, love, parent, and lead—is the great developmental milestone of midlife. The goal is not to tap out and run toward certainty by letting one idea win over the other, nor is it taking the competing ideas and twisting them until we find some mythical middle ground. The goal is to develop the strength and grounding required to hold the tension of two opposing ideas until a new idea is born—until something more encompassing, more connected, and more nuanced emerges.

Father Richard argues that many core spiritual truths are inherently paradoxical, and that the dualistic mind, which is wired for clear, logical distinction, struggles with these realities. The heart of the work I've done with Father Richard's teachings is about cultivating a contemplative mind and a contemplative practice that allow me to hold contradictions without anxiety or the need for immediate resolution. I'm still working on it, and I'm happy to report that I've contemplated my way to moderate anxiety.

Father Richard writes, "We must learn to accept paradoxes, or we will never love anything or see it correctly," and he insists that learning to love paradox is essential for wisdom, forgiveness, and healthy relationships. He uses the metaphor of "untarnished mirrors" to describe those who can receive the whole picture—including light, darkness, and all the subtle shades in between—rather than insisting on clarity or certainty at the expense of truth's complexity.

The real gift of his teachings for me has been learning how to hold paradox within myself—to love and accept the weird contradictions in me. I'm sensitive but I dislike sentimentality. I'm comfortable talking to ten thousand people, but put me in a cocktail party situation where I have to engage in small talk with two people and I get anxious and overwhelmed. I love to laugh but I'm pretty serious most of the time. I can be really scary

when I'm scared. I've spent my career studying the power of vulnerability but I often still dread putting myself out there. The list is long.

The “grace paradox” has allowed me to be more generous and loving with others (and sometimes with myself). Like Jung, Father Richard believes that spirituality can't be separated from paradox, because the spirit's job is about wholeness—and that's always both/and.

Paradox as Liberation

My experiences working with leaders have confirmed everything I've learned about “paradox as liberation” from Jim Collins, the researcher and author who taught so many of us what makes organizations great. I was lucky enough to spend more than two hours nerding out with Jim on the *Dare to Lead* podcast. We talked about *BE 2.0*, the new edition of his classic book *Beyond Entrepreneurship*, and we talked paradox, of course.

Two of Jim's concepts constantly challenge and shape my thinking about paradox: the “Genius of the AND” and the Stockdale Paradox.

The “Genius of the AND” is a concept that Jim explores in his book *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. In this book, Jim explains how builders of greatness reject the “Tyranny of the OR” and embrace the “Genius of the AND.” He explains how visionary leaders embrace both extremes across a number of dimensions at the same time. He gives the following examples:

- purpose AND profit
- freedom AND responsibility
- discipline AND creativity
- empirical analysis AND decisive action
- ideological control AND operational autonomy
- extremely tight culture AND ability to change, move, and adapt
- investment for the long term AND demands for short-term performance
- philosophical, visionary, futuristic thinking AND superb daily execution

On Jim's website—which is an absolute treasure trove of information from all of his work—he writes, “Instead of being oppressed by the ‘Tyranny of the OR,’ highly visionary companies liberate themselves with the ‘Genius of the AND’—the ability to embrace both extremes of a number of dimensions at the same time. Instead of choosing between A OR B, they figure out a way to have both A AND B.”

In my experience, accessing the genius he describes requires a disciplined practice of recognizing paradox and finding strong ground to push into while holding the tension. I don't think there's a more powerful example of this than the Stockdale Paradox.

Several years ago, our organization did a company-wide read of Jim's book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. When we met to discuss our takeaways from the reading, the Stockdale Paradox was at the top of the list. As Collins explains in the book, the Stockdale Paradox was named after Admiral Jim Stockdale, who spent almost eight years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam. He was tortured more than twenty times during his imprisonment from 1965 to 1973. In addition to fighting to survive, he worked every day to help the other prisoners stay alive and find hope and meaning in the midst of physical and emotional torment.

When Jim interviewed Stockdale, he asked him a tough question: “Who didn't make it out?”

Stockdale replied, “Oh, that's easy. The optimists.”

Stockdale explained that the optimists would believe they'd be out by Christmas, and Christmas would come and go. Then they would believe they'd be out by Easter, and that date would come and go. And the years would tick by like that.

He explained to Collins, “They died of a broken heart.”

Stockdale told Collins, “This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

In *Dare to Lead*, I shared that our organization started calling this paradoxical learning “gritty faith and gritty facts,” and it helped us reconcile a growing divide that was negatively affecting our culture and our impact. Before reading Jim's book, we had unconsciously divided ourselves into two camps: the dreamers and the reality checkers. I was not only the

founder and CEO, but the head dreamer. I'm pretty sure there were days when I made it miserable for the reality checkers—you know the ones, the folks who keep everything operational, legal, and financially viable.

After many difficult conversations about the Stockdale Paradox, and our new commitment to straddling the paradox of gritty faith and gritty facts, we decided that every single individual would be responsible for both dreaming and reality checking those dreams with facts. It was liberating for all of us, and our new process gave birth to some extraordinary dreamers who, up to that point, had felt so locked into their roles as reality checkers that they kept their ideas to themselves. No organization can afford to have people sitting on unexplored dreams. And dreams that can't withstand operational, legal, and financial examination are not yet ready for reality.

Plumbing and Poetry

Leadership is plumbing and poetry.

—JAMES MARCH

On Leadership by James G. March and Thierry Weil may be one of the most important books I've ever studied and that I continue to try to understand. I'm hesitant to use the word *read* because I'm still working through the book, even though I've finished reading it. March was a professor at Stanford University and a true polymath. He was a deep scholar in political science, sociology, and economics, which makes sense as you read his books and lectures.

I was led to the book innocently enough by the quote at the top of this section, a quote that I felt in my bones the second I read it. What I found was a book that enveloped me in the study of leadership and organizations through the eyes of great literary works including *Don Quixote* and *War and Peace*, and a book that took a hard look at power from philosophical and sociological perspectives. The book is based on a series of March's lectures, previously unpublished in English, translated from a French reconstruction and interpretation by noted scholar Thierry Weil.

March and Weil write:

There are two essential dimensions of leadership: “plumbing,” i.e., the capacity to apply known techniques effectively, and “poetry,” which draws on a leader’s great actions and identity and pushes him or her to explore unexpected avenues, discover interesting meanings, and approach life with enthusiasm. The plumbing of leadership involves keeping watch over an organization’s efficiency in everyday tasks.... This requires competence, not only at the top but also throughout all the parts of the organization; a capacity to master the context (which supposes that the individuals demonstrating their competence are thoroughly familiar with the ins and outs of the organization); a capacity to take initiatives based on delegation and follow-up; a sense of community shared by all the members of the organization, who feel they are “all in the same boat” and trust and help each other; and, finally, an unobtrusive method for coordination, with each person understanding his or her role sufficiently well to be able to integrate into the overall process and make constant adjustments to it.

Leadership also requires, however, the gifts of a poet, in order to find meaning in action and render life attractive. The formulation and dissemination of interesting interpretations of reality form the basis for constructive collective action. A leader is equipped with the power and words for this purpose. If power is not used as an instrument for winning personal influence, but as a means of encouraging other people to blossom, its charms can be enjoyed while the fear that it inspires is minimized. Words allow us to forge visions and poetic language, through its evocative power, allow us to say more than we know, to teach more than we understand.

These paragraphs include multitudes. There are fifty places in the book you’re holding where I could instruct you: “Refer back to what James March has to say about plumbing and poetry.” What makes March and Weil’s book both tough and profound is that seemingly simple sentences hold deep meaning across contexts.

From my experience in organizations, some of the most transformative leaders I’ve met—at all levels—have the ability to cast a poetic vision that excites people and gives them a sense of agency *and* can oversee the building of systems and communities of connected people that are able to

deliver against that vision. It's inspirational to see, and I think it's important that these seemingly paradoxical skills are seen as aspirational and possible for leaders who want to be able to do both.

When I look at the mindsets and skills outlined in Chapter 15 on grounded confidence, I see the paradox of the plumbing and the poetry.

All at Once

Clint Smith

The redwoods are on fire in California. A flood submerges a neighborhood that sat quiet on the coast for three centuries. A child takes their first steps and tumbles into a father's arms. Two people in New Orleans fall in love under an oak tree whose branches bend like sorrow. A forest of seeds are planted in new soil. A glacier melts into the ocean and the sea climbs closer to the land. A man comes home from war and holds his son for the first time. A man is killed by a drone that thinks his jug of water is a bomb. Your best friend relapses and isn't picking up the phone. Your son's teacher calls to say he stood up for another boy in class. A country below the equator ends a twenty-year civil war. A soldier across the Atlantic fires the shot that begins another. The scientists find a vaccine that will save millions of people's lives. Your mother's cancer has returned and doctors say there is nothing else they can do. There is a funeral procession in the morning and a wedding in the afternoon. The river that gives us water to drink is the same one that might wash us away.

CHAPTER 5



Ode to Negative Capability

A LONG TIME AGO IN A galaxy far, far away, I was a poetry major at a Catholic university in San Antonio, Texas. It was the mid-eighties, and as I had survived hitchhiking and bartending my way across Europe for six months, the angst of poetry suited me. Not to mention that I had returned to Texas with a penchant for berets and a supply of French cigarettes.

Unfortunately, I quickly realized that I wasn't quite ready to settle down in one place, much less make it to class at eight in the morning. After a combination of dropping out and getting kicked out of school, I decided to trade studying Homer for taking my own odyssey through ~~early adulthood~~ late adolescence. I hated abandoning my poetry career, but given that in my last poem-writing assignment, a cynical but lyrical take on dating, I had rhymed "glasses" with "asses," it was probably the right move.

I tried to find my copy while I was writing this book, but I'm a purger. If memory serves, the stanza was:

Pseudo-intellectuals in wire-rim glasses
Tall denim cowboys with white circle asses

The "white circle asses" referred to all of the guys I dated in high school who religiously carried dip cans of tobacco in their back pocket. The cans left a permanent white faded ring on the back pocket of their Wrangler jeans. It sounds terrible, but these guys were cute and smooth talkers. One daisy bouquet or good waltz at the local dance hall, and the next thing you know you're wearing their navy blue Future Farmers of America jacket and sitting right next to them on the bench seat of their Ford F-150 truck. Now

that I think about it, I guess the real paradox is that I married the smart guy with wire-rim glasses who also wears Wranglers and drives a truck. Score one for paradox!

What I loved most about my short-lived stint as a poetry major was my teacher, Dr. Peggy Curet. She was unlike anyone I had ever met at the time: rebellious, smart, fierce, and incredibly kind. And she was honest. I think she may have been the first official grown-up I'd ever met who openly talked about the way joy and pain walk side by side through our lives. Theoretically, I hated the idea of a life defined by both strength and struggle, but, based on my own experiences that I had kept tucked away, this revelation made me feel less alone.

Until I met Dr. Curet, and, by extension, a mysterious group of poets, I thought pain and sadness were pathologies, indicators that something was seriously wrong with me. I had no idea that experiencing the full spectrum of emotion is what gives meaning to our lives. Poetry helped.

I hadn't thought about Dr. Curet for decades until one day my therapist mentioned John Keats and the idea of "negative capability." My therapist explained that Keats wrote about negative capability as the ability to stay in uncertainty and curiosity without grasping for facts to substantiate your assumptions. I'm pretty sure this was in response to my turning into the biggest asshole trial lawyer whenever Steve and I got into arguments. I was learning how to be more curious and less "The dishwasher has not been unloaded. Are you lying now or were you lying then?"

Driving home from my therapist's office, I experienced this weird sense of fragmented memories floating around me. At first I thought I was just having a little déjà vu moment, but it was less of an *I've been here before* feeling and more of a *Why do I know this about Keats?* moment. When I got home, I did some research and found that John Keats had coined the term "negative capability" in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas, in 1817.

Keats wrote, "At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."

Keats's life was a testament to negative capability. His father died in a riding accident when John was a young child, and his mother died of

tuberculosis when he was a young teenager. Although Keats was a successful medical student, he quit medicine to become a poet. He wrote prolifically over the course of a year, then died from the same disease that had killed his mother. He was twenty-five years old.

In a beautiful article about Keats, Dr. Richard Gunderman writes this about the concept of negative capability:

Negative here is not pejorative. Instead, it implies the ability to resist explaining away what we do not understand.

Rather than coming to an immediate conclusion about an event, idea or person, Keats advises resting in doubt and continuing to pay attention and probe in order to understand it more completely. In this, he anticipates the work of Nobel laureate economist Daniel Kahneman, who cautions against the naïve view that “What you see is all there is.”

It is also a good idea to take the time to look at matters from multiple perspectives. Shakespeare’s comedies are full of mistaken identities and misconceptions, including mixed-up genders. Keats reminds us that we are most likely to gain new insights if we can stop assuming that we know everything we need to know about people by neatly shoehorning them into preconceived boxes.

The more I thought about Keats and read about negative capability, the more I was able to sharpen the focus of those memories that had been floating around me. After a couple of weeks of investigating, my team and I were able to find Peggy Curet. I called her while I was working on this chapter. Even though it had been forty years since I sat in her classroom, I immediately recognized her voice. I introduced myself and told her how much she had shaped my life and how her classes made me feel seen and challenged. She didn’t remember me, but she kept saying how grateful she was that I called. At one point she said, “It feels like Christmas Day.”

Dr. Curet shared how hard it is to spend your life in a classroom and never know if teaching students about topics you love has true impact. I assured her that it does and it has. When I asked her about Keats and negative capability, she said, “Oh, yes! I taught my students about that ability because I had to practice it and live it every day. I was rebellious and got into trouble on occasion. It was often hard to stay open.”

In today's world, very few of us are capable of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritably reaching after fact & reason." Our entire culture is defined by irritably and hostile reaching. And if we can't find facts and reason strong enough to rescue us from our uncertainty, we just make up what we need in order to feel safe, then confirm that fiction in our ideologically curated corner of social media. We saw such extreme versions of discomfort and the fear of uncertainty during COVID that people resorted to irritably making up their own scientific facts and falling into the abyss of conspiracy theories.

Negative capability is a difficult muscle to build. We're wired to resolve tension and seek certainty. This capability requires the courage to reach inward toward stillness rather than out toward counterfeit facts and reason. One of the best examples of daring leadership is a leader who can say "I don't know" or "We need to slow down and make sure we're not rushing to make a decision before we're ready." Negative capability is a grounding tool, and it is fundamental to practicing courage.

Keats is buried at the Cimitero Acattolico, or "Non-Catholic Cemetery," in Rome. While there are several inscriptions on his tombstone, researchers believe that there is only one line that, on his deathbed, Keats himself asked to be his sole epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

In the long view of history, I suppose all of our names are written in water. Whether it's you, me, or John Keats, accepting our impermanence is part of the human experience. In the face of that absolute certainty, it is perhaps the ultimate paradox to put much stock in anything at all, knowing it will end. And yet we do. Because along with our need to accept our impermanence is our need for meaning. The gift is the paradox; the skill we need to straddle the tension and develop paradoxical thinking skills is negative capability—resist the urge to reach for certainty where it does not exist.

The longer we can hold that paradox, the greater our capacity to see and honor one another in our fullness and contradictions.

In the next chapter, I'm going to introduce you to my friend Adam Grant. Adam's work on the power of rethinking has shaped my work as a researcher and a leader. As you move through the chapters in this book, I think his advice on thinking like a scientist will serve as a helpful provocation.

Echoing the spirit of Keats's negative capability, Adam writes, "If knowledge is power, knowing what we don't know is wisdom."

CHAPTER 6



Adam Grant

On Searching for Reasons We Might Be Wrong



ADAM GRANT AND I FIRST “met” in a public dustup over the concept of authenticity. I put the quotes around “met” because we didn’t know each other personally at the time, but we were engaged in a fairly serious and

very public debate on LinkedIn. We made up four years later through a series of texts and a phone call, and we became good friends when I was fairly sure the flight we were on was going to crash into the sea. Our entire relationship has been defined by rethinking, so it's no surprise that his book *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know* is one of my all-time favorites.

My love of this book comes from the fact that Adam's work and my work intersect at the exact point where rethinking and unlearning live. The difficult and disciplined commitment of rethinking and questioning what we know is where Adam's love of quantitative cognitive science and organizational psychology crashes into my love of the deeply human, and often qualitatively understood, issues of emotions, courage, and vulnerability. This intersection probably explains why this passage from the book is my favorite:

We favor the comfort of conviction over the discomfort of doubt, and we let our beliefs get brittle long before our bones. We laugh at people who still use Windows 95, yet we still cling to opinions that we formed in 1995. We listen to views that make us feel good, instead of ideas that make us think hard.

Think Again is a mash-up. It's where cognitive flexibility meets organization dynamics meets feelings meets courage meets the vulnerability of changing our position on something. It's exciting like the old Hanna-Barbera cartoon crossovers from the 1970s. I still remember the thrill of turning on the TV and seeing Batman and Robin make a guest appearance on *Scooby-Doo*. In this scenario, he's Batman. I've got the cool van, the dog, and the snacks.

I asked Adam if I could share another favorite learning from *Think Again* in this book, and without thinking (or rethinking), he generously said, "Of course! Honored to be asked."

Here's Adam's work on the importance of understanding how easily we slip into different "professional mindsets" when we are framing, selling, or defending our ideas, and how curiosity and thinking like a scientist can help us make more informed choices and decisions. Core to finding strong ground and embracing paradoxical thinking is a commitment to intellectual humility. We have to challenge ourselves to challenge our thinking.

A Preacher, a Prosecutor, a Politician, and a Scientist Walk into Your Mind: Abridged from Chapter 1 of *Think Again* by Adam Grant

Most of us take pride in our knowledge and expertise, and in staying true to our beliefs and opinions. That makes sense in a stable world, where we get rewarded for having conviction in our ideas. The problem is that we live in a rapidly changing world, where we need to spend as much time rethinking as we do thinking.

Rethinking is a skill set, but it's also a mindset. We already have many of the mental tools we need. We just have to remember to get them out of the shed and remove the rust.

SECOND THOUGHTS

With advances in access to information and technology, knowledge isn't just increasing. It's increasing at an increasing rate. The accelerating pace of change means that we need to question our beliefs more readily than ever before. This is not an easy task. As we sit with our beliefs, they tend to become more extreme and more entrenched. Unfortunately, when it comes to our own knowledge and opinions, we often favor *feeling* right over *being* right.

Two decades ago my colleague Phil Tetlock discovered something peculiar. As we think and talk, we often slip into the mindsets of three different professions: preachers, prosecutors, and politicians. In each of these modes, we take on a particular identity and use a distinct set of tools. We go into preacher mode when our sacred beliefs are in jeopardy: we deliver sermons to protect and promote our ideals. We enter prosecutor mode when we recognize flaws in other people's reasoning: we marshal arguments to prove them wrong and win our case. We shift into politician mode when we're seeking to win over an audience: we campaign and lobby for the approval of our constituents. The risk is that we become so wrapped up in preaching that we're right, prosecuting others who are wrong, and politicking for support that we don't bother to

rethink our own views. An antidote is shifting into the mode of a scientist.

A DIFFERENT PAIR OF GOGGLES

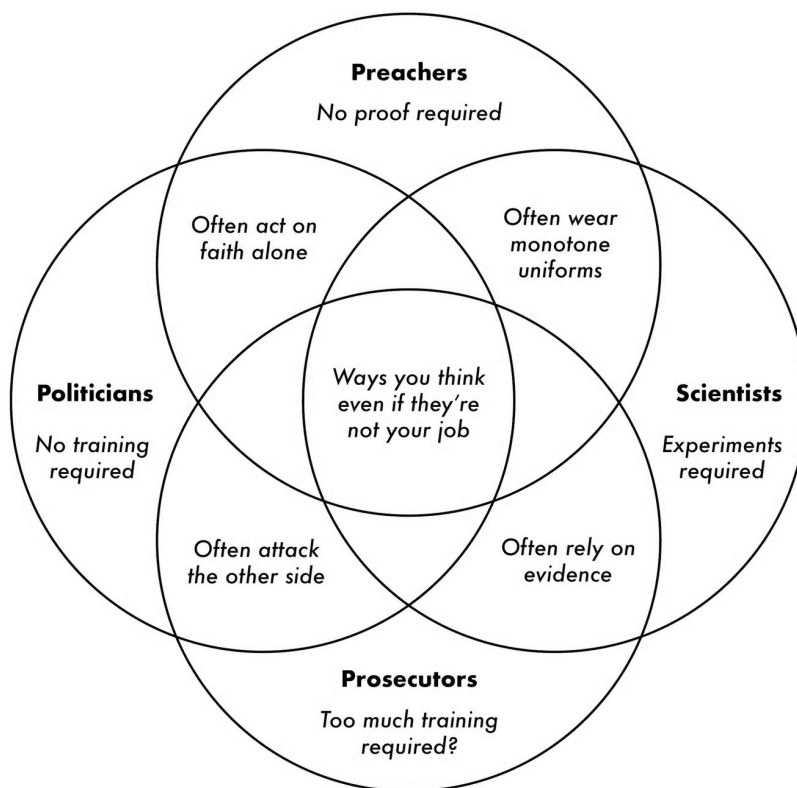
Good scientists are aware of the limits of their understanding. They're expected to doubt what they know, be curious about what they don't know, and update their views based on new data.

But being a scientist is not just a profession. It's a frame of mind—a mode of thinking that differs from preaching, prosecuting, and politicking. We move into scientist mode when we're searching for the truth. Hypotheses have as much of a place in our lives as they do in the lab. Experiments can inform our daily decisions. That makes me wonder: is it possible to train people in other fields to think more like scientists, and if so, do they end up making smarter choices?

Recently, a quartet of European researchers decided to find out. They ran a bold experiment with more than a hundred founders of Italian startups in technology, retail, furniture, food, health care, leisure, and machinery. The entrepreneurs arrived in Milan for a training program in entrepreneurship. Over the course of four months, they learned to create a business strategy, interview customers, build a minimum viable product, and then refine a prototype. What they didn't know was that they'd been randomly assigned to either a "scientific thinking" group or a control group. The training for both groups was identical, except that one was encouraged to view startups through a scientist's goggles. Their task was to rigorously measure the results and make decisions based on whether their hypotheses were supported or refuted.

Over the following year, the startups in the control group averaged under \$300 in revenue. The startups in the scientific thinking group averaged over \$12,000 in revenue. They brought in revenue more than twice as fast—and attracted customers sooner, too. Why? The entrepreneurs in the control group tended to stay wedded to their original strategies and products. The entrepreneurs who had been taught to think like scientists, in contrast, pivoted more than twice as often. When their hypotheses weren't supported, they knew it was time to rethink their business models.

Just as you don't have to be a professional scientist to reason like one, being a professional scientist doesn't guarantee that someone will use the tools of their training. Scientists morph into preachers when they present their pet theories as gospel and treat thoughtful critiques as sacrilege. They veer into politician terrain when they allow their views to be swayed by popularity rather than accuracy. They enter prosecutor mode when they're hell-bent on debunking and discrediting rather than discovering. After upending physics with his theories of relativity, Einstein opposed the quantum revolution: "To punish me for my contempt of authority, Fate has made me an authority myself." Sometimes even great scientists need to think more like scientists.



THE SMARTER THEY ARE, THE HARDER THEY FAIL

Mental horsepower doesn't guarantee mental dexterity. No matter how much brainpower you have, if you lack the motivation to change your mind, you'll miss many occasions to think again. Research reveals that the higher you score on an IQ test, the more likely you are to fall for stereotypes, because you're faster at

recognizing patterns. And recent experiments suggest that the smarter you are, the more you might struggle to update your beliefs.

One study investigated whether being a math whiz makes you better at analyzing data. The answer is yes—if you’re told the data are about something bland, like a treatment for skin rashes. But what if the exact same data are labeled as focusing on an ideological issue that activates strong emotions—like gun laws in the United States?

Being a quant jock makes you more accurate in interpreting the results—as long as they support your beliefs. Yet if the empirical pattern clashes with your ideology, math prowess is no longer an asset; it actually becomes a liability. The better you are at crunching numbers, the more spectacularly you fail at analyzing patterns that contradict your views. If they were liberals, math geniuses did worse than their peers at evaluating evidence that gun bans failed. If they were conservatives, they did worse at assessing evidence that gun bans worked.

In psychology there are at least two biases that drive this pattern. One is confirmation bias: seeing what we expect to see. The other is desirability bias: seeing what we want to see. These biases don’t just prevent us from applying our intelligence. They can actually contort our intelligence into a weapon against the truth. We find reasons to preach our faith more deeply, prosecute our case more passionately, and ride the tidal wave of our political party. The tragedy is that we’re usually unaware of the resulting flaws in our thinking.

My favorite bias is the “I’m not biased” bias, in which people believe they’re more objective than others. It turns out that smart people are more likely to fall into this trap. The brighter you are, the harder it can be to see your own limitations. Being good at thinking can make you worse at rethinking.

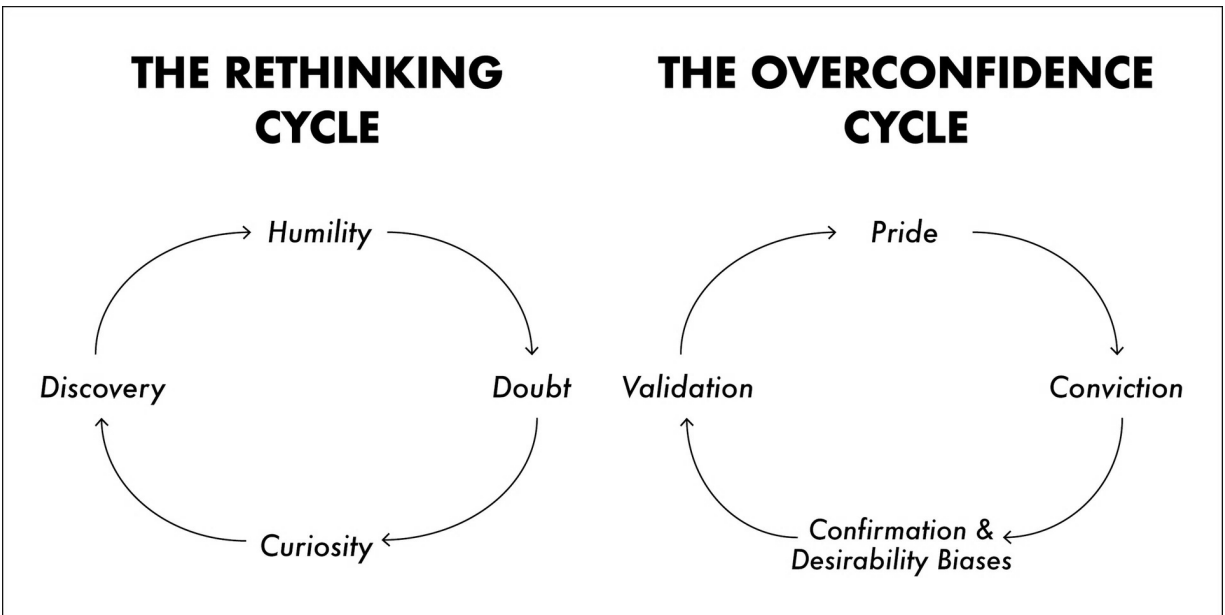
Thinking like a scientist involves more than just reacting with an open mind. It means being actively open-minded. It requires searching for reasons why we might be wrong—not for reasons why we must be right—and revising our views based on what we learn.

When psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi studied eminent scientists like Linus Pauling and Jonas Salk, he concluded that what differentiated them from their peers was their cognitive flexibility, their willingness “to move from one extreme to the other as the occasion requires.” The same pattern held for great artists, and in an independent study of highly creative architects.

We can even see it in the Oval Office. Experts assessed American presidents on a long list of personality traits and compared them to rankings by independent historians and political scientists. What set great presidents apart was their intellectual curiosity and openness. They read widely and were as eager to learn about developments in biology, philosophy, architecture, and music as in domestic and foreign affairs. They were interested in hearing new views and revising their old ones. They saw many of their policies as experiments to run, not points to score. Although they might have been politicians by profession, they often solved problems like scientists.

DON'T STOP UNBELIEVING

As I've studied the process of rethinking, I've found that it often unfolds in a cycle. It starts with intellectual humility—knowing what we don't know. We should all be able to make a long list of areas where we're ignorant. *Mine include art, financial markets, fashion, chemistry, food, why British accents turn American in songs, and why it's impossible to tickle yourself.* Recognizing our shortcomings opens the door to doubt. As we question our current understanding, we become curious about what information we're missing. That search leads us to new discoveries, which in turn maintain our humility by reinforcing how much we still have to learn. If knowledge is power, knowing what we don't know is wisdom.

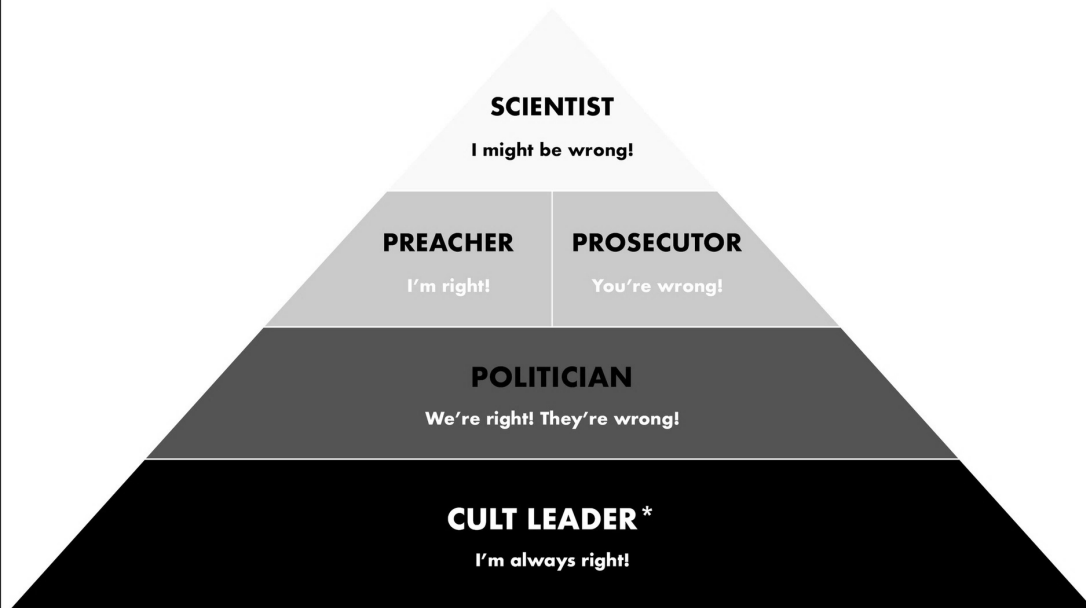


Scientific thinking favors humility over pride, doubt over certainty, curiosity over closure. When we shift out of scientist mode, the rethinking cycle breaks down, giving way to an overconfidence cycle. If we're preaching, we can't see gaps in our knowledge: we believe we've already found the truth. Pride breeds conviction rather than doubt, which makes us prosecutors: we might be laser-focused on changing other people's minds, but ours is set in stone. That launches us into confirmation bias and desirability bias. We become politicians, ignoring or dismissing whatever doesn't win the favor of our constituents—our parents, our bosses, or the high school classmates we're still trying to impress. We become so busy putting on a show that the truth gets relegated to a backstage seat, and the resulting validation can make us arrogant. We fall victim to fat-cat syndrome, resting on our laurels instead of pressure-testing our beliefs.

Our convictions can lock us in prisons of our own making. The solution is not to decelerate our thinking—it's to accelerate our rethinking.

The curse of knowledge is that it closes our minds to what we don't know. Good judgment depends on having the skill—and the will—to open our minds. I'm pretty confident that in life, rethinking is an increasingly important habit. Of course, I might be wrong. If I am, I'll be quick to think again.

MENTAL MODELS



* Does not apply to my wife, who is actually always right.

CHAPTER 7



Lessons from Daring Leadership

I READ A LOT OF BRITISH mystery series. And by a lot, I mean I probably read a book a week and, depending on the length of the books and the length of the series, five or six series a year. At this point, I'm confident that I could pass the detective exam at Scotland Yard. Interestingly, I tear through books faster during intense periods of research, coding, and writing. It sounds weird, but my mystery habit can be explained by a body of fascinating research that spans cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and creativity studies.

Researchers have found that engaging in formulaic, low-cognitive-lift activities often increases creative output. It's framed as creative incubation through deliberate distraction. This happens via an unconscious process that facilitates creative work by spreading activation, enhancing associative processing, and reducing cognitive inhibition. The studies show that this background processing is most effective following intense periods of preparation and when the low-lift formulaic work is not similar to the work you're doing, nor are the activities an avoidance or procrastination tool. *This last one can be a tough call.*

While most of the mysteries and procedurals I read meet the requirement of being formulaic, I'm in a series right now that I've had to postpone reading because I need to think too hard to keep up with all the clues. For the same reason, I can't read complex nonfiction books while I'm in an intense work period. I can never find that deliberate distraction because the book content pulls too much of my focus.

Even though I'm normally processing what I read on the back burners of my mind, I'm engaged enough to appreciate good writing. I'm

particularly impressed by writers who are able to make the seventh book of a series satisfying for rabid fans while also welcoming new readers who begin with that one. Partially I'm impressed because I think it's generous to show kindness to people who read books out of order—I have a hard time relating to that level of rule breaking.

A good series writer offers the right amount of context and history to bring new readers along, but not so much backstory that the diehards get frustrated. You know most of us in the diehard camp are probably thinking something shitty like *They don't deserve to know, they didn't read the books in order*. Luckily, not everyone in the world is a firstborn daughter and rule follower who doesn't allow family game night to start until she's read the game rules aloud.

As this book's cover conveys, this is a Dare to Lead book. I mean this in terms of a category, not that this is a sequel to *Dare to Lead*. My goal for this chapter is to introduce the work to those of you who aren't familiar with the basic premise of *Dare to Lead*, and for those of you who are familiar with the book, to let you know what's changed based on the data we've collected over the seven years since that book came out.

Before we get started, I want to clarify some of the language I'm using. *Dare to Lead* is the title of the book that I published in 2018. The work we do in organizations is also called Dare to Lead; it's sometimes delivered as a training program and sometimes as part of a large transformation at the enterprise level. I primarily lead large enterprise-level transformations with teams of facilitators and, since 2024, coaches certified in this work.

The Dare to Lead Origin Story

Dare to Lead, the book and the program, was based on data from several sources including a study with global CEOs; evaluation data from trainings that we offered through an early iteration of our work called Brave Leaders, Inc.; and data collected during a three-year instrument development study on daring leadership. As a grounded theory researcher, I primarily use qualitative methods, but for instrument development and research with secondary sources, I sometimes use quantitative or mixed methods.

My research with global CEOs was the first time in my career when I asked a large group of research participants a general question and the responses were saturated across all of the participants. In other words, they all gave the same answer.

My question: What, if anything, about the way people are leading today needs to change in order for leaders to be successful in a complex, rapidly changing environment where we're faced with seemingly intractable challenges and an insatiable demand for innovation?

The answer across participants: We need braver leaders and more courageous cultures.

My follow-up question: Why courage? What were the specific problems that CEOs believed increased courage could help address?

1. We avoid tough conversations, including giving honest, productive feedback. Some leaders attributed this to a lack of courage, others to a lack of skills; shockingly, more than half talked about a cultural norm of "nice and polite" that's leveraged as an excuse to avoid tough conversations. Whatever the reason, there was saturation across the data that the consequence is a lack of clarity, a decrease in trust and engagement, and an increase in problematic behavior, including passive-aggressive behavior, talking behind people's backs, pervasive back-channel communication (or "the meeting after the meeting"), gossip, and the "dirty yes" (when I say yes to your face and then no behind your back).
2. Rather than spending a reasonable amount of time proactively acknowledging and addressing the fears and feelings that show up during change and upheaval, we spend an unreasonable amount of time managing problematic behaviors.
3. Diminishing trust caused by a lack of connection and empathy.
4. Not enough people are taking smart risks or creating and sharing bold ideas to meet changing demands and the insatiable need for innovation. When people are afraid of being put down or

ridiculed for trying something and failing, or even for putting forward a radical new idea, the best you can expect is status quo and groupthink.

5. We get stuck in and defined by setbacks, disappointments, and failures. Instead of spending resources on clean-up to ensure that consumers, stakeholders, or internal processes are made whole, organizations expend too much time and energy reassuring team members who are questioning their contribution and value.
6. Too much shame and blame, not enough accountability and learning.
7. People tend to opt out of vital conversations about diversity and inclusivity because they fear looking wrong, saying something wrong, or being wrong.
8. When something goes wrong, individuals and teams rush into ineffective or unsustainable solutions rather than staying with problem identification and solving. When we fix the wrong thing for the wrong reason, the same problems continue to surface. It's costly and demoralizing.
9. Organizational values are gauzy and assessed in terms of aspirations rather than actual behaviors that can be taught, measured, and evaluated.
10. Perfectionism and fear are keeping people from learning and growing.

In *Dare to Lead*, I write:

After finding the roadblocks, our job was to identify the specific courage-building skill sets that people need to address these problems. We conducted more interviews, developed instruments, and tested them with MBA and EMBA students enrolled at the Jones Graduate School of Business at Rice University, the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, and the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. We worked until we found the answers. Then we tested it, improved it, and tested it again.

Before I share more about the courage skills that emerged from our work, I want to call out that no data presented in the *Dare to Lead* book were collected after 2017. Think about what we've lived through over the past eight years and how the world looks today. Life and work feel vastly different, yet these ten challenges are still foundational problems in organizations. We've just added an AI revolution (and the general acceleration of digital transformation), pressing climate issues, geopolitical violence and instability, ongoing fallout from the pandemic, radical market shifts, and daily warnings about the concentration of power and the fragility of democracy.

One change that's developed over the past several years as the challenges mount is that courage skills are not enough—we need to develop daring mindsets in addition to building skills.

One thing that has *not* changed is our definition of leadership. A leader is anyone, regardless of title and position, who holds themselves accountable for finding potential in people and ideas, and who has the courage to develop that potential.

Developing daring mindsets requires getting underneath a lot of fear and self-protecting behaviors. A daring mindset works with courage skill sets, but they are different. In the next chapter, I'll explore the elements of transformation in depth.

New Challenges, Same Humanity

Here are some of the presenting issues we see today. By “presenting issues,” I mean those for which we need to pay special attention not just to the way the concerns are framed, but to some of the underlying issues that are explicated on the list of ten challenges that we just discussed.

1. *Increased complexity and volatility* are driving an ethos of “playing not to lose” versus “playing to win.” *Playing not to lose* drives increased complacency and people working to plan versus working to potential. It also promotes negative emotional

contagion, risk aversion, increased bureaucracy and inertia, and deeper dependencies on hierarchies; as a result, silos become the default. Additionally, the org's sense of urgency and purpose gets diluted as people begin protecting old successes rather than fighting for new victories.

It's worth mentioning here that I've witnessed interesting pushback to the concept of *playing to win* when it's used by CEOs and senior leaders to galvanize teamwork and strive for growth. I'd be less concerned by this pushback if the complaints weren't expressed more often when female leaders talk about *winning* or *fighting to win*. I want to take the opportunity here to say that winning can be great. It's thrilling and it can be a powerful motivator for teams.

Can the concept of *winning* be taken too far by leaders who weaponize it and overplay the "losers" aspect? Yes. But that's poor leadership. People can weaponize everything from God to authentic leadership principles. Don't blame the metaphor, hold the leader accountable.

In terms of gendered criticism of wanting to win, research shows a strong link between high-level athletic experience and women's ascent to the C-suite. The EY Women Athletes Business Network paired with espnW to conduct a global survey of four hundred women in management positions, 51 percent of whom were C-suite executives. Results demonstrated that 94 percent of these women played sports, with 52 percent having played at the university level. In addition, 74 percent of the women said that having played sports can help further a woman's career, and 61 percent said that their own athletic history had contributed to their career success.

Similarly, findings from a 2023 Deloitte study of high-earning professionals indicated that "69% of women who earn more than \$100,000 per year and are in leadership roles played competitive sports—and 85% of women who played sports say the skills they developed playing sports were important to success in their professional careers."

Athletic background or not, many women bring great baller energy to their jobs and are there to build teams and win. My

thoughts? LFG!

2. *A push for growth.* Success over time almost always dismantles the environment that created the success. Everything gets too predictable and comfortable. All organizations are susceptible to success inertia, and most experience varying levels of it. Organizations that maintain a passionate connection with the people they serve and are able to resist the human tendency to slip into patterns that brought success but no longer serve are different only because they have leaders who understand and anticipate this pattern.

We have learned a lot over the past two decades from leaders who keep a critical and anticipatory eye on their organizational culture and who are committed to continually assessing, skilling up, and recalibrating for growth. The question these leaders ask is: *What's our next great dare?*

3. *Digital transformation.* In our Dare to Lead work, we do zero tech consulting; however, as Dr. Linda Hill from Harvard Business School so wisely says, "Getting an organization to its digital future is less about technology and tools, and more about people and culture." She explains:

After all, companies trying to digitally transform must change employees' hearts (why they do their work), heads (how they see their work), and hands (how they do their work). It is no wonder leaders and employees often feel overwhelmed by the adaptations required of them individually and collectively in the digital age. Leaders must be empathic about the stress employees feel as they grapple with the complexity and change that comes with digital transformation.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Dr. Hill on our *Dare to Lead* podcast, and her insights completely resonated with our experiences working inside organizations.

In my experience, CEOs and CTOs often underestimate the importance of emotional and cultural adaptation, and they overfocus on the technology. Dr. Hill's research highlights the

emotional toll and complexity of digital transformations for employees, noting that transformation requires changing mindsets, behaviors, and even the sense of purpose within an organization. Digital mindsets require daring mindsets.

I highly recommend her article for Harvard Business School's online magazine, *Working Knowledge*, "Digital Transformation: A New Roadmap for Success," co-authored with Ann Le Cam, Sunand Menon, and Emily Tedards.

4. *Operationalizing and reoperationalizing existing values.* One hundred percent of the organizations that we've researched or partnered with have a list of values. Approximately 10 percent have operationalized their values into observable behaviors that are grounded in their mission and integrated across their systems. The lack of translation of values into behaviors is dangerous for organizations and serves as an open invitation for a culture to form on its own, without intention or connection to vision or mission. A list of values means nothing if the values are not translated into behaviors that are grounded in your mission and integrated across the organization. Sometimes my team and I come in to help with that process, including developing the mindsets and skill sets that support the behaviors.

In the past year, C-suite leaders have been struggling to "update their values." When we dig in with them, we learn that it's not their values that need to change. Their values are solid and core to their organizations in the best ways. What needs to change to meet the new demands of changing markets, shifting competition, technology, and geopolitical instability is how they're operationalizing those values.

For example, if collaboration is an organizational value, it's time to expand that to include cross-company collaboration and the set of skills and behaviors that supports that value, because we're all going to be doing work across company boundaries in the next twelve to eighteen months. No single organization will have all of the right questions moving forward, and forget about having all of the answers.

Another example: If integrity is one of your values, how are you translating and operationalizing that to include AI ethics

and data privacy? You don't need to change who you are, you need to meet the moment by being who you are and confronting the realities we're facing today with new mindsets and skills.

5. *We're so paralyzed by being nice that we're often not kind*, and we don't engage in the productive challenging that will make us stronger and more strategic. We'll talk a lot about this throughout the book, but suffice it to say that if you don't have a culture that teaches productive challenging and rewards that behavior, you're at a major strategic disadvantage. First, a culture defined by a fear of challenging can quickly become a culture driven by compliance versus commitment. We need commitment. Second, and counterintuitively, we see much more micromanagement in cultures where challenging is not the norm. Micromanagement is driven by distrust and compliance thinking. Challenging is driven by trust and commitment to mission.

There are other big issues that we'll explore in the chapters to come, but these are some of the challenges that drive the need for daring mindsets and courage-building skills. What I think is fascinating from a research perspective is that underlying these "new" problems are the same core issues that emerged before the world seemed to fall apart and is now getting stitched back together by an AI robot named Sue.

It's Not About Fear. It Never Was.

We often we think of courage as an inherent trait, but research tells us that courage is less about who people are than about how they behave and show up in difficult situations. Fear is the emotion at the center of that original list of problematic behaviors and culture issues—it's precisely what you'd expect to find as the underlying barrier to courage. However, all the daring leaders we interviewed talked about experiencing many types of fear on a regular basis, which means that feeling fear is not the barrier.

The big learning from the original research and substantiated by every study we've done since is that the real barrier to daring leadership is our

armor—the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that we use to protect ourselves when we aren’t willing and able to rumble with vulnerability. Regardless of what’s driving the pressure—agentic AI or a leader we can’t trust—without a daring mindset and the skills to back it up, we’re going to reach for the same armor.

In grounded theory methodology, a theory is only as good as its ability to work new data.

The ten presenting issues on the original list are still relevant challenges. And the four skill sets of courage (see [this page](#)) have stood the test of new data sets collected over the past seven years. I’m pulling some of the information below from *Dare to Lead* (the book), but I’ll let you know where we’ve made some changes and shifts. What’s exciting for us is that the core holds.

The Heart of Daring Leadership Remains

1. You can’t get to courage without rumbling with vulnerability.
Embrace the suck.
2. Self-awareness and self-love matter. Who we are is how we lead.
3. Courage is contagious.

At the heart of daring leadership is a deeply human truth that is rarely acknowledged, especially at work: Courage and fear are not mutually exclusive. Most of us feel brave and afraid at the exact same time. Sometimes all day long.

The definition of *vulnerability* that emerged from the research is simple: Vulnerability is the emotion we experience when we feel uncertain, at risk, and emotionally exposed. In these moments, we have two choices: to self-protect and armor up, or to recognize what we’re feeling, acknowledge that the emotion is tough to navigate, and choose courage anyway.

Let me give you some answers that people shared when we asked them to give us examples of vulnerability from their lives:

The first date after my divorce
Trying to get pregnant after my second miscarriage
Starting my own business
Having an honest conversation about race with my team
Watching my child leave for college
Remembering that not knowing is okay, even when you're the
 leader of the team
Apologizing to a colleague about how I spoke to him in a
 meeting
Sending my son to orchestra practice knowing how badly he
 wants to make first chair and knowing there's a really good
 chance he will not make the orchestra at all
Waiting for the doctor to call back after a biopsy
Giving and getting feedback
Getting back up to bat after striking out. Twice in one game
Saying "I love you" first

Are these vulnerable situations? Yes.

Are they acts of courage? Hell, yes.

One day, a decade ago, standing in front of more than one hundred military special forces troops, I asked them a straightforward question: *Can you give me one example of courage that did not require vulnerability—uncertainty, risk, or emotional exposure?*

Very quickly heads fell into hands and the room got uncomfortably quiet. You could feel the heaviness of the emotion. After what seemed like ten minutes but was probably forty-five seconds, a young man stood up and said, "No, ma'am. There is no courage without vulnerability."

A little over a week later I was with Coach Pete Carroll and the Seattle Seahawks team, and I asked the same question. After a brief huddle, the informally designated spokesperson for the team said, "No. Not on the field or off the field. There is no courage without vulnerability."

Since that time I've challenged thousands of audience members and Dare to Lead participants to come up with an example of courage that didn't start with vulnerability, and not a single person has been able to give me one. For this reason: If you think you're being brave and you're feeling no uncertainty, risk, or emotional exposure, you're probably not being that brave.

We go into organizations to do this work for two reasons: Our work requires courage, and when we're pulled between our fear and our call to courage, we need shared mindsets, skill sets, language, tools, and daily practices that can support us through the rumble.

The word *rumble* is the language we use to convey *Let's have a real conversation, even if it's tough*. The term has become a serious intention setter and a behavioral cue or reminder.

A *rumble* is a discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous, to stick with the messy middle of problem identification and solving, to take a break and circle back when necessary, to be fearless in owning our parts, and, as the psychologist Harriet Lerner teaches, to listen with the same passion with which we want to be heard.

More than anything else, when someone says "Let's rumble," it cues me to show up with an open heart and mind so we can serve the work and each other, not our egos.

Our research led to a very clear, very hopeful finding: Courage is a collection of four skill sets that can be taught, observed, and measured. The four skill sets are:

LIVING INTO OUR VALUES—Understanding the one or two core values that ground and drive us, operationalizing these values into observable behaviors, and developing personal systems to keep our intentions and behaviors aligned with our values.

RUMBLING WITH VULNERABILITY—Vulnerability is the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.

BRAVING TRUST—We use the acronym of BRAVING (boundaries, reliability, accountability, vault, integrity, nonjudgment, and generosity) to talk about trust, building self-trust, becoming trustworthy, and building trust in relationships and teams.

LEARNING TO RISE—Resetting and staying agile during setbacks, failures, and disappointments, and leveraging the alchemy of failure and learning so every person and team is accountable for their own bounce and lessons are embedded in the culture.

The foundational skill of courage building is the willingness and ability to rumble with vulnerability. Without this core skill, the other three skill sets are impossible to put into practice. Consider this carefully: Our ability to be daring leaders will never be greater than our capacity for vulnerability.

To scale daring leadership and build courage in teams and organizations, we have to cultivate a culture in which brave work, tough conversations, and whole hearts are the expectation, and armor is not necessary or rewarded.

Dare to Lead Today

Today, our Dare to Lead Transformations is an empirically based program that focuses on developing daring mindsets in leaders and building the four skill sets of courage that transform those mindsets into bold action. Our goal is to replace armor with grounded confidence so that people can fully contribute to team and organization goals to innovate, solve problems, and serve people. At the core, we have to be vigilant about creating a culture in which people feel seen, heard, and respected.

Daring Versus Armored Leadership

To give you a better sense of how we assess daring in teams and organizations, here is an overview of the dimensions we measure. The instrument breaks down each of the categories into observable behaviors, but this overview of the topic areas will give you a broad sense of how we think about daring mindsets. Again, you'll see those core ten challenges discussed on [this page](#) threaded throughout the assessment areas.

ARMORED LEADERSHIP

Leading from Self-Protection

Vs.

DARING LEADERSHIP

Leading with Grounded Confidence

1 Being a knower and being right

Being a learner and getting it right

2 Tapping out of hard conversations

Leaning into vulnerability and
skilling up for hard conversations

3 Using shame and blame to
manage ourselves and others

Leading ourselves and others from
a place of empathy, accountability,
and learning

4 Fostering a scarcity-driven culture
("There is never enough ____")

Committing to and modeling "We
are enough, and we have enough."

5 Professing values

Practicing values

6 Driving a "fitting in" culture

Cultivating a belonging culture

7 Leading for compliance
and control

Leading for commitment and
shared purpose

8 Leading reactively

Leading proactively and strategically

9 Resisting change

Accepting and embracing change,
including productive urgency,
strategic risk-taking, and agility

10 Getting stuck in and owned
by failures, setbacks, and
disappointments

Owning our failures, setbacks, and
disappointments through open
discussion, learning from them,
and embedding the learning in our
work and our teams

11 Perceiving leadership as
being served by others

Understanding leadership as
serving others

Four New Insights from Daring Leadership

1. In 2024, a journalist in Amsterdam asked me a thought-provoking question during an event: *How would you rewrite your thoughts on vulnerability if you had it to do over again?* Maybe it was the jet lag peeling away my filters, but I responded with “Learn how to do vulnerability or risk being an asshole when you reach for that armor. The choice is yours, but those of us on the receiving end of your self-protection would appreciate it.”

I’m sharing this here because it’s true. I’m as uncomfortable being vulnerable as the next person—maybe more, given my upbringing. And I’m not advocating for a world of oversharing, which is actually a behavior driven by not having the skills or emotional regulation to manage emotion.

I’m simply saying two things: First, everyone wants to be brave, yet no one wants to be vulnerable. That’s not the way it works. It’s hard. Secondly, we are rarely aligned with our values when we’re armored up. Sometimes this means we can behave in destructive or hurtful ways. Values misalignment is death by a thousand cuts—it diminishes our mental health, our physical health, our relationships, and our spirit.

2. For the first couple of years of our Dare to Lead program, Rumbling with Vulnerability was the first skill set, and Living into Our Values was the second. A wise group of five summer high school and college interns who went through the program challenged us on the order. Their feedback was spot on: Start with values. People will quickly see that to stay aligned with our values, we have to be brave, and that means accepting vulnerability. Let our own values do the convincing that vulnerability is not a choice if you want to dare greatly.

More evidence to support our intern policy: Pay them, teach them, and learn from them.

3. In *Atlas of the Heart*, I share that one of the biggest shifts in my thinking over the past two decades was related to humiliation. Given the

world we're living in, I think it's important enough to share an edited version of it here:

I've been researching and writing on shame, guilt, humiliation, and embarrassment for more than twenty years. Over these two decades, we've learned more about how these emotions work, and researchers have come up with innovative ways of measuring them, but nothing has fundamentally shifted my thinking on them—until recently. New research on the connection between humiliation and violence has completely changed the way I think about that emotion and reinforced my belief that shame and humiliation will never be effective social justice tools.

We're going to talk about these four terms together because we have the tendency to use them interchangeably, even though the experiences are very different in terms of biology, biography, behavior, backstory, and self-talk. And they lead to radically different outcomes....

Let's start with some short definitions and examples to differentiate the four emotions, then we'll dig deeper into each one.

SHAME—*I am bad.* The focus is on self, not behavior. The result is feeling flawed and unworthy of love, belonging, and connection. Shame is not a driver of positive change. You get back a quiz and your grade is F. Your self-talk is *I'm so stupid*.

GUILT—*I did something bad.* The focus is on behavior. Guilt is the discomfort we feel when we evaluate what we've done, or failed to do, against our values. It can drive positive change and behavior. You get back a quiz and your grade is F. Your self-talk is *Going to the party instead of studying for this quiz was so stupid* (versus *I'm so stupid*).

HUMILIATION—*I've been belittled and put down by someone. This left me feeling unworthy of connection and belonging. This was unfair and I didn't deserve this.* With shame, we believe that we deserve our sense of unworthiness. With humiliation, we don't feel we deserve it. The student sitting next to you sees the F at the top of your quiz and tells the class, "This idiot can't even pass a quiz in here. He's as stupid as they come." Everyone laughs. You feel enraged.

EMBARRASSMENT—*I did something that made me uncomfortable, but I know I'm not alone. Everyone does these kinds of things.* Embarrassment is fleeting, sometimes funny. Your teacher is handing out quizzes and you come back from the bathroom with toilet paper stuck to your shoe.

Until several years ago, I held the belief that humiliation, though detrimental, was a less dangerous emotional experience than shame. The reasoning behind that thinking (and what emerged from our data) was that we hide our shame because we think we deserve to feel that way. In other words, we buy into the messaging that we're not enough. In contrast, when we feel humiliated, we think that we didn't deserve whatever happened to make us feel that way. In our interviews, participants seemed not to buy into the messaging that they were flawed as much as they did with shame.

A collection of studies changed my mind. Dr. Linda Hartling ties together the research from several areas to propose a model explaining how humiliation can lead to violence. Hartling suggests that humiliation can trigger a series of reactions, including social pain, decreased self-awareness, increased self-defeating behavior, and decreased self-regulation, that ultimately lead to violence. Hartling and colleagues state that “humiliation is not only the most underappreciated force in international relations, it may be the *missing link* in the search for root causes of political instability and violent conflict...perhaps the most toxic social dynamic of our age.”

I believe this connection between humiliation and aggression/violence explains much of what we're seeing today. Amplified by the reach of social media, dehumanizing and humiliating others are becoming increasingly normalized, along with violence. Now, rather than humiliating someone in front of a small group of people, we have the power to eviscerate someone in front of a global audience of strangers.

Shame and humiliation will never be effective social justice tools. They are tools of oppression. I remember reading this quote from Elie Wiesel years ago, and it's become a practice for me—even when I'm enraged or afraid: “Never allow anyone to be humiliated in your presence.”

4. Over the past few years we've learned a lot about how and when these conversations are embraced by leaders and when they're flatly rejected, and why. Honest conversations about power are a crucial element in developing daring mindsets. This is the big finding:

Leaders who are unwilling to talk about power are either actively abusing it or prefer to preserve the option of misusing power in the future by avoiding the discussion and maintaining plausible deniability. Daring leaders welcome conversations about power and model self-reflection and curiosity, which is in itself a demonstration of using power in service of mission, not ego.

Here's an expanded version of how I explained the nature of power in *Dare to Lead*:

To date, I believe the most accurate and resonant definition of power comes from a 1968 speech given to striking sanitation workers in Memphis by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: the ability to achieve purpose and effect change. The definition does not make the nature of power inherently good or bad, which aligns with what I've learned in my work. What makes power dangerous is how it's used.

The concepts of “powering over” and “powering with” were introduced by the social worker and management theory pioneer Mary Parker Follett in her 1924 book, *Creative Experience*. Follett wrote, “Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but coactive control. Coercive power is the curse of the universe; coactive power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul.”

These concepts were later expanded upon by the organization Just Associates, a global interdisciplinary network of activists, organizers, educators, and scholars.

Power over “exploits or controls people by setting the rules, defining access to resources, and shaping what is considered ‘normal.’”

What's perhaps most insidious in power-over dynamics is that those who are powerless typically repeat the same behavior when the tables are turned and they are promoted into power themselves. We see this in hazing rituals, and we see it in the perpetuation of policies that do not support the disenfranchised. Why should I care about young working mothers when nobody cared about me? The phrase “power over” is typically enough to send chills down spines. When someone holds power over us, the human

spirit's instincts range from cowering and complying to resisting and rebelling. As a construct it feels wrong; in the wider geopolitical context it can mean death and despotism.

Power with “has to do with finding common ground among different interests in order to build collective strength. Based on mutual support, solidarity, collaboration, and recognition and respect for differences, *power with* multiplies individual talents, knowledge, and resources to make a larger impact.”

Power to translates to giving everyone on your team agency and acknowledging their unique potential. It is “based on the belief that each individual has the power to make a difference, which can be multiplied by new skills, knowledge, awareness, and confidence.”

Power within is defined by an ability to recognize differences and respect others, grounded in a strong foundation of self-worth and self-knowledge. When we operate from a place of power within, we feel comfortable challenging assumptions and long-held beliefs, pushing against the status quo and asking if there aren't other ways to achieve the highest common good.

In our work, we've found that:

LEADERS WHO WORK FROM POWER OVER

1. Believe that power is finite and use fear and control to self-protect and serve self-interest.
2. Leverage fear and control to divide, destabilize, and devalue decency.
3. Give people experiencing fear and uncertainty a sense of false certitude and safety based on ideology and nostalgia rather than facts.
4. Give people someone to blame for their discomfort—preferably someone who looks/acts/sounds different from them.
5. Maintain power over by demonstrating an ever-increasing capacity for cruelty, especially toward vulnerable populations.

LEADERS WHO WORK FROM POWER WITH/TO/WITHIN

1. Believe that power becomes infinite and expands when shared with others.

2. Leverage connection and empathy to unite and stabilize. Value decency as a function of self-respect and respect for others.
3. Offer people experiencing fear and uncertainty transparency and create learning cultures based on critical thinking and evidence-based data from multiple perspectives.
4. Normalize discomfort and move away from shame and blame and toward accountability and meaningful change.
5. Frame leadership as a responsibility to be *in service to others* rather than *served by others*.

In *Atlas of the Heart*, I share that my most significant learnings around power are that power is not bad, and that the abuse of power or using power over others is the opposite of courage. Power over is a desperate attempt to maintain a very fragile ego. It's a desperate scramble in self-worth quicksand. When people are hateful or cruel or just being assholes, they're showing us exactly what they're afraid of. Understanding their motivation doesn't make their behavior less difficult to bear, but it does give us choices. And subjecting ourselves to power over by choice doesn't make us tough—it's more likely a sign of our own lack of self-worth, or a way to process our pain.

The Kettlebells of Grounded Confidence

In addition to wrestling with paradox, another developmental milestone is asking ourselves these tough but liberating questions: “What armor is no longer serving me? What's become too heavy to bear? What armor is preventing me from growing into the person I want to be?”

Without finding our own strong ground, it will feel impossible to put away the armor that we've spent a lifetime putting on and taking off (and for some of us, leaving on because it's exhausting trying to constantly evaluate when and with whom we need it).

When you get to Chapter 15 on the elements of grounded confidence, you'll see that building our core strength is going to take some work. In the

real gym, I love kettlebell workouts because they hit so many areas at one time. Tony and Morgan would be quick to add *If your form is good*.

In the Dare to Lead program, there are “needle-mover” teachings/exercises that always get the highest marks from the participants because they build skills across muscle groups. I want to share as many of these as possible with you in this book.

You’ll read about the 5 C’s in Chapter 10, the powerful Above/Below the Line Practice in Chapter 12, and empathy misses in Chapter 15. Here, I’m including a list of rumble starters and rumble tools that we use to help us stay curious (rather than judgmental) in the midst of tough conversations. I’m also sharing a graphic that explains how we talk about the seven elements of trust and our feedback readiness assessment.

RUMBLE STARTERS

- 1 The story I make up . . .
- 2 I'm curious about . . .
- 3 Tell me more.
- 4 That's not my experience (instead of "You're wrong about her, him, them, it, this . . .").
- 5 I'm wondering . . .
- 6 Help me understand . . .
- 7 Walk me through . . .
- 8 We're both dug in. Tell me about your passion around this.
- 9 Tell me why this doesn't fit/work for you.
- 10 I'm working from these assumptions—what about you?
- 11 What problem are we trying to solve?

RUMBLE TOOLS

- 1 What's my part?
- 2 What does support look like?
- 3 What key learnings can we take from this?
- 4 Are there stealth intentions that we need to surface and name?
- 5 Are there stealth expectations driving us?
- 6 Is horizon conflict at play here?
- 7 Do we need to check our gritty facts and gritty faith?
- 8 Time-out

BRAVING TRUST

The acronym BRAVING breaks down trust into seven elements:

**BOUNDARIES, RELIABILITY, ACCOUNTABILITY, VAULT,
INTEGRITY, NONJUDGMENT, AND GENEROSITY.**

BOUNDARIES

Setting boundaries is making clear what's okay and what's not okay, and why.

RELIABILITY

You do what you say you'll do. At work, this means staying aware of your competencies and limitations so you don't overpromise and are able to deliver on commitments and balance competing priorities.

ACCOUNTABILITY

You own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends.

VAULT

You don't share information or experiences that are not yours to share. I need to know that my confidences are kept, and that you're not sharing with me any information about other people that should be confidential.

INTEGRITY

Choosing courage over comfort; choosing what's right over what's fun, fast, or easy; and practicing your values, not just professing them.

NONJUDGMENT

I can ask for what I need, and you can ask for what you need. We can talk about how we feel without judgment.

GENEROSITY

Extending the most generous interpretation to the intentions, words, and actions of others.

The BRAVING Inventory can be used as a rumble tool—a conversation guide to use with colleagues that walks us through the conversation from a place of curiosity, learning, and ultimately trust-building.

ENGAGED FEEDBACK CHECKLIST

I KNOW THAT I'M READY TO GIVE FEEDBACK WHEN:

- 1 I'm ready to sit next to you rather than across from you.
- 2 I'm willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you).
- 3 I'm ready to listen, ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue.
- 4 I'm ready to acknowledge what you do well instead of just picking apart your mistakes.
- 5 I recognize your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges.
- 6 I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming.
- 7 I'm open to owning my part.
- 8 I can genuinely thank someone for their efforts rather than just criticizing them for their failings.
- 9 I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to growth and opportunity.
- 10 I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.
- 11 I am aware of power dynamics, implicit bias, and stereotypes, and I engage with others from a place of this awareness.

CHAPTER 8



The Anatomy of Transformation

I'VE BEEN THINKING A LOT about the word *transformation* lately, and the transformation weariness that I'm observing across many different orgs and sectors. As is the case with all overused words, especially those vulnerable to hyperbole, I think it's smart to question whether anything can be regarded as transformative in a world where everything including breakfast bars is described as "life-changing" and "transformative."

With my experience in both facilitating organizational transformations at scale and leading more focused, adaptive change projects, I can say without hesitation that the differences across every dimension—mindset shifts, skill building, system changes, evaluation, operations, and communications—are profound.

Part of the overuse problem is that leaders use the term *transformation* to convey importance and urgency, even when the change is intentionally incremental or adaptive. We try to demand the attention and commitment of employees by saying "transformation" because we're concerned that that a "continuous improvement program" or "strategic shift initiative" will elicit the collective "Oh, it must not be that important." *Who's getting pumped about evolutionary change when revolutionary change is an option?*

The word *transformation* comes from the Latin verb *transformare*, meaning "to change in shape" or "to metamorphose—to change completely in form or structure."

Adaptive, incremental, and evolutionary changes are rarely driven by the need to change an organization completely, in form or structure.

Significant, even critical, shifts in strategy or prioritization rarely require organizations to change completely in form or structure.

Changes in leadership, markets, or operations—even when dramatic—rarely necessitate wholesale form or structure change.

Real transformations are relational, not transactional; rare; time- and attention-intensive; absolutely disorienting; and immersive. When a leader calls something a transformation that is designed to be more incremental, that leader loses trust, credibility, and respect.

It's obvious to us when we are in the midst of a well-executed transformation and when we are not. We can feel it. The environment of transformation is inescapable, and small, perceptible shifts in our way of working happen almost immediately. We see senior leaders making time for change when seemingly no time exists. Leaders are so invested in the change that they are willing to model new mindsets and skill sets. They are open to demonstrating and discussing how difficult the learning and unlearning are for them personally, and they're talking openly about the awkward nature of trying on new ways of working. Again, effective transformations are led by relational leaders.

It's thrilling *and* scary.

It's clarity-creating *and* it's disorienting.

There's constant time pressure *and* there is no chance of real change without space and expansiveness.

People *look brave* because they're trying new things *and* they *feel vulnerable* because they're trying new things (which is the definition of courage).

Deconstruction requires discipline and teams that are willing to engage in productive debate and challenge. The word *deconstruction* comes from the prefix “de-” (meaning “undo” or “reverse”) combined with “construction” (the act of building). It literally means “a taking to pieces” or “undoing construction.” The word was used in English as early as 1865, in the context of building, architecture, and engineering, referring to the disassembly or dismantling of structures.

For me, the term *deconstruction* leads straight to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. A significant part of my dissertation was related to challenging binaries, and Derrida is considered to be the founder of deconstructing—a critical approach that challenges and reworks traditional hierarchies and binaries. He adopted the architectural term in the early 1970s, and his work on deconstruction has profoundly shaped philosophy and literary theory.

Irreducible Requirements of Meaningful Transformations

The most basic and irreducible requirements of meaningful transformations push against our wiring because big changes to form and structure introduce complexity, require time, and are defined by paradox.

1. Transformations are about building *and* they must start with dismantling. Specifically, transformations require strategic and intentional deconstruction.
2. Leading transformation means you will be breaking big stuff across the organization *and*, at the exact same time, you'll need to fiercely protect the parts of your organization that are central to your mission and critical to your identity. During the breaking, you'll need a functional and mission-grounded foundation to stand on, and after the breaking you'll need a strong core to provide stability for building new ways of working. It's breaking *and* protecting.
3. With the right assessments, choosing what to protect and what to break will be clear *and* everyone will still disagree *and* it will still be challenging. Change always drives fear and territorial behaviors. It always feels personal.
4. A successful transformation respects existing strategies or organizational waypoints that are mission-grounded and will continue through and beyond the transformation. The conflicts that arise in our efforts to integrate existing systems with new systems always reveal important data about what's core and enduring about an org.

I recently had a CEO in the middle of a Dare to Lead transformation look at me and say, "I have to tell you, it feels like we're breaking a lot of shit around here. I get it, but some of these things have been on our *Look but Don't Touch* list for years, well before my tenure as CEO. Now we're looking, touching, *and* breaking."

It was a very accurate observation of exactly what was happening and what needs to happen for transformations to be successful. Most of us grew up with grandparents or aunts who had that one room where no one was allowed to go. The couches were covered in plastic, and there were ugly ceramic figurines everywhere you looked. In my case, there were also lots of crocheted lace doilies. Transformations can feel like hosting a kindergarten slumber party in the “off-limits” room. With a chocolate fountain, glitter, and puppies.

As part of the initial transformation assessments, we need to dismantle almost everything—the breaking starts early. And we’re not deconstructing only the ways of working that are fun and rewarding to break because we’re tired of them; we also need to put our darlings on the chopping block. We have to be willing to take apart the off-limits stuff, the systems and ways of doing things that no one has been allowed to question.

- Are people working to plan versus working to potential because they’re rewarded either way?
- Is a “nice” culture getting in the way of giving and receiving productive feedback?
- Is action bias pushing teams to solve problems before they define them?
- Are there systems that reward fear and shame as management tools?
- Is there a fear of smart risk-taking that results in losing competitive advantage?
- Do we have teams that are so large they’re unmanageable?
- Do we favor action over impact?
- Have we won for so long that complacency is threatening our success?

One thing to note: The breaking is not supposed to be fun. It’s a painful disassembling of the ways of working that we know are ineffective but that have become part of us. We have to break carefully and strategically, with intention and with affection.

No one who enjoys breaking should lead the breaking efforts. Recklessly taking a chainsaw to systems and people as a show of power or as an act of dysregulated emotion is not transformative breaking. That type

of breaking is undisciplined indulgence that is normally meant to terrorize and threaten people and is driven by people who operate from a place of smallness, ego fragility, and fear of their own powerlessness.

Defining Transformation

Based on my experiences and the data we've collected, this is my working definition of transformation:

Transformation is an iterative process that begins with the application of rigorous assessment sets to identify and critically interrogate the assumptions and thinking that underpin existing systems, structures, and ways of working that are no longer creating value, driving growth, and supporting employees in meaningful ways.

These systems are intentionally and strategically dismantled and deconstructed so that what remains is a strong mission-grounded foundation on which new mindsets, skill sets, tool sets, coaching sets, and system sets are built to support the vision of the organization.

If you want transformation but you're not ready, willing, or able to break anything, you will fail. An honest inventory of readiness, willingness, and ability requires a high level of self-awareness on the part of senior leaders, as does the ability to critically assess the state of the organization. Highly transactional leaders rarely work from this level of self-awareness. Magical thinking about any one of these prerequisites can lead to a lot of pain for everyone involved. I have immense respect for leaders who say "We are not in a position to do this right now, but we need it. I'll work on getting us ready."

Additionally, if you break the spirit of the people who are providing the strong ground for transformation, you will fail. And this is, without question, the greatest challenge of a transition. People are the strong ground on which big change happens; therefore, people must always be the priority

in transformation. This means clear communication of the why, making space for questions and conversations, and a constant flow of well-crafted and honest messaging. In our transformations, the person who leads comms is a linchpin of our success. This is why you will see care, connection, and mission-grounded communications as the nucleus of the transformation illustration at the end of this chapter.

Perhaps the toughest part is that while all of the breaking is happening, everyone involved has to resist the human urge to simply replace what is broken with impenetrable new structures rather than creating living, changing, and evolving systems—systems that don’t just survive critical questioning, but thrive on interrogation and use it as fuel to grow, challenge complacency, and drive collaborative performance. We are not good at replacing certainty—even malfunctioning certainty—with uncertainty. And by we, I mean humans.

The goal of a transformation should be a rock-solid core that is functional, highly adaptable, agile, and strong. Transformations will last as long as you keep going to the gym; building functional, evolving systems; and nourishing them with feedback.

While I was writing this book, I came across a definition and an example of transformation that align with my experiences and research. Both of these offer beautiful interpretations of the breaking process. Interestingly, one comes from a poet and philosopher, the other from an F1 racing boss. A little something for everyone—except those who don’t like breaking things.

David Whyte on Transformation

“Transformation is to hit present reality at high velocity and watch it break apart at impact.”

Nailed it.

James Vowles on Transformation

In this interview, F1 Atlassian Williams Racing Team principal James Vowles talks about his transformation strategy of sacrificing short-term success leading up to the significant F1 regulatory overhaul that's coming in 2026, which will have a huge impact on the cars and how they perform. This strategy is all about breaking everything that may have led to their years of underperformance so they can learn, create, and win.

I don't care about '23, I don't care about '24, and I really don't care about '25. Sounds strange, doesn't it? But that's not what's of interest to me....

'23 and '24 I don't care about. We can finish last.

Break everything.

This is an opportunity you'll never have in your lifetime.

Break everything.

You have carte blanche from me. You have a free pass. If we can do it better, let's do it better. Let's talk about it. Don't carry on with the same way we've been doing it for twenty years. And we'll go backwards as the result of that.

Break everything.

Learn and use the experience.

So for example, how we approached racing was, we highlighted before the season starts...these races we're going to do good at. All the other ones, I want to do learning on those weekends. It is about learning.

Try something you haven't tried before. Doesn't matter if it's a setup direction, it's a driving style, it's how we do data, it's building performance engineers, it's how we use the factory. Learn on those weekends.... You'll never get this opportunity again.

Break everything.

I'll confess that I am an F1 fan, and I'm cheering on James and the Williams team from Texas. I love a courageous carte blanche! I respect the rare foresight that transformation almost always involves going backward before speeding forward.

The Transformation Sets

How do leaders know whether changing completely in form and/or structure is the solution, and whether a transformation is the level of change required?

Here's how I think about that question. I see transformative change in terms of six change sets: Assessment Sets, Mindsets, Skill Sets, Tool Sets, Coaching Sets, and System Sets.

ASSESSMENT SETS—Most change efforts require a current state assessment, a future state definition assessment, and a gap analysis. This is also true of transformations; however, before the current state assessment, we start with a rigorous readiness assessment at the C-suite level.

You want us to develop daring mindsets and build courage skills across the organization. You also want us to reduce the way people are self-protecting with armor that gets in the way of innovation, creativity, and smart risk-taking. Great! Our first questions are going to sound like this and will be asked of people at every level, including those with the least amount of formal power:

- Why is armor necessary and/or rewarded here?
- What makes it difficult to speak out and challenge ideas or strategies here?
- How often are you receiving feedback and coaching?
- Can you tell us exactly how what you do every day allows this company to execute its mission?
- How many conversations about trust have you had with your manager or leader? What about in a team setting?
- How openly can folks talk about power here?
- When there's a failure or setback, how openly do people discuss the learning and how quickly is it embedded across the org?
- Who is giving you cover when you're encouraged to take risks? Have you seen that play out?

CEOs who are curious and excited about the answers to these questions start to look like a good fit for us. Going back to the Stockdale Paradox, we trust leaders who have the grounded confidence to “never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the

discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

For the C-suite, we want to know if they’re going to attend every single session, come prepared, model the behaviors they want to see in others, share mindfully, listen passionately, and participate fully.

Are they going to talk openly about why the transformation is essential to the vision and invest the time and energy to make sure all leaders and managers can help the people they lead understand how their contributions are central to the vision? Are they willing to build new systems that reinforce and integrate the changes?

And we’re just getting started.

It’s critical to the success of transformations that assessment sets be more than just the place we start, that they be threaded through the entire change effort. Depending on where we are in the process, we are assessing weekly or monthly and creating continuous feedback loops to guide the transformation. Transformations are living, breathing systems that give and demand constant evaluation.

MINDSETS—We are not just changing *what we’re doing*, we’re changing *how we’re thinking*. Mindsets are our mental models for understanding the world and what’s possible. These are difficult to assess and change because our mindset is how we make sense of who we are, our environment, and how we work.

SKILL SETS—Assessing existing skill sets and building new strengths and abilities require time, teaching, reflection, and practice. The unlearning required is often more work than the learning. And because the fear of irrelevance is the strongest shame trigger in our professional lives, there is an emotional lift here too.

TOOL SETS—What external tools can we use to support change? I say “support” because there is no dashboard plug-in or app for building strength and skills, changing how we think, or changing how we feel.

COACHING SETS—This is the ROI maker on our transformation investments. Without coaching and other integrated systems that give us opportunities to practice new cognitive skills and continue to challenge the new systems that we are building, we will either default to our old ways or build new systems that are replicas of the old ineffective ones we just tore down.

In 2024, after numerous offers from consulting firms who were interested in partnering with us or acquiring the Dare to Lead organization, I decided to partner with BetterUp. Having invented virtual coaching over a decade ago, they are an international coaching platform backed by behavioral science, analytics at scale, and evidence-based coaching.

It was clear to me that our impact was limited without an empirically based way to deepen, embed, and integrate the mindset and skill set work we were doing. To add to this conviction, I've had a coach for years, and I can't imagine my personal or professional life without one. Leaders are the only high-performing professionals who are expected to do their work without coaches. Can you imagine supporting a sports team or athlete who had no access to coaching?

Over the past two decades, a substantial body of high-quality research has accumulated demonstrating that coaching has meaningful impacts on both personal and professional outcomes. In large-scale multinational observational studies published by the International Coaching Federation in 2009, individuals who have received coaching report improvements of up to 80 percent in areas ranging from self-confidence and interpersonal skills to job performance and management effectiveness. Importantly, rigorous research indicates that these benefits are broadly accessible—not simply the result of self-selection biases (e.g., individuals opting into coaching being more optimistic or growth-oriented to begin with).

Understanding the “active ingredients”—or mechanisms—by which professional coaching facilitates growth remains a major gap in the field and one of the primary unmet goals of coaching science today. To address this need, BetterUp Labs has conducted foundational research using a bottom-up approach, analyzing natural language responses from more than sixteen thousand members to the question “What have we done during our sessions that has been the most helpful for your growth?” Using a combination of expert human coding and AI analysis, the research identified five consistent elements associated with transformative coaching experiences:

- Understanding and Connection
- Inquiry and Reflection
- Designing Goals and Actions
- Guiding the Process

Expanding Possibilities

These findings make sense to me. I still roleplay hard conversations with my coach, I talk through difficult decisions, and I set leadership goals for me and my team (they do group coaching as well as individual coaching). In my experience, coaching is a difference maker.

SYSTEM SETS—In our office in Houston, we have a three-foot-square framed poster of this quote by James Clear, author of *Atomic Habits*: YOU DO NOT RISE TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR GOALS, YOU FALL TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR SYSTEMS.

Organizational systems have to support new mindsets and skill sets. In our work building daring mindsets, we help organizations build brave systems. For example, after a failure or setback, it's important for all stakeholders to work through and identify what happened and why, so the learnings can be embedded and not repeated. No one, including me, looks forward to that meeting. And if left to our own devices, we might not come together, or we might wait too long and let some of the learning slip away. In our organization, those meetings are always intentionally set within forty-eight hours. It's not a personal goal, it's a system.

Another example: In many of the orgs where we do Dare to Lead transformations, internal HR leaders redesign recognition and performance systems so that daring behaviors are recognized and rewarded. That's a powerful, integrated systems set that reinforces a mindset change and a skill set investment.

So, given these six change sets, let's go back to the question of identifying transformational change, adaptive change, priority/strategy shift, evolutionary change, a skilling or reskilling initiative, or incremental change.

1. If you do need a serious mindset shift, if winning requires that folks change *how* they're thinking in addition to *what* they're thinking and doing, a complete change in form and structure should be considered. If shifting mindsets and creating new ways of thinking is **not** foundational to the change you need to deliver against your vision and execute on your mission, you probably don't need a full transformation.

First, mindset changes require shifts in behaviors, emotions, and thinking. Second, without question, new skills are necessary to support shifts in mindset. A simple example: A daring mindset means having more productive and tough conversations, taking strategic risks, and building collaborative trust. This is a significant skills-building lift. The same level of skills building comes behind trying to develop a digital mindset, a founder's mindset, or a rethinking mindset.

Once you trigger the need for skill sets, then tool sets, coaching sets, and systems sets are activated for reinforcement and integration.

2. I often get this question: Can I transform the team or unit or organization I lead if my entire organization isn't an active part of the transformation? The answer is *Yes, and*. Most of us who are trained in this work have done transformations with teams and orgs inside larger orgs.

If the transformation is successful, you'll probably face one of two outcomes:

You and your team will experience some tension when interacting with teammates who have not shifted their mindsets and skill sets. Or, you and your team will experience some tension *and curiosity* when interacting with teammates who have not shifted their mindsets and skill sets.

Mindsets are mental models and *skill sets* are powerful tools for problem solving and decision making. When you show up to meetings with a new mental model and new skills for looking at problems and solutions, people will notice.

In one instance, I worked with a leader at Microsoft who was passionate about taking her entire organization of nine thousand people through a Dare to Lead transformation. She was 100/100 on the readiness assessment. She wanted it for performance reasons, but mostly she did it for her nine thousand employees who were hungry for a new way to work together, build connection, and win in the midst of the pandemic.

They blew their performance expectations out of the water, and they definitely met with some tension and curiosity when working in teams outside their org. Over the following two

years, we received more than ten requests from other organizations within Microsoft. This has been true across many orgs, including the military, who work in very segregated departments. They don't call because of us; they call because people who transform their mindsets and mental models, and who build new skills, are tough not to notice. Transformation is observable change. And it's contagious.

3. If you have a team or organization in which the majority of people have the right mindset, but you need to do specific skills building in a couple of areas to support the existing mental model, I think that's possible. It's just rare. I'm not going to get into the chicken/egg question with regard to the mindset / skill set debate. Suffice it to say that most of us develop mindsets and skill sets that are inextricably connected.

Today's leaders are looking at the environment and thinking *Here's how we need to start thinking, and here are the skill sets we're going to need to match that thinking*. This is the formula for transformation.

Adaptive change, priority/strategy shift, evolutionary change, a skilling or reskilling initiative, or incremental change are vital in organizations. They are often exactly what you need. In my experience, success comes down to accurate diagnosis and grounded, frequent communication and information sharing with the people who are engaged in the changes. And all levels of successful change require relational leaders at the helm.

The Three Toughest Paradoxes of Transformation

Transformation Timing

When performance is strong and leaders feel confident, it's hard to muster the courage to start breaking things even though the pace of change in the world is screaming *Break it now! Take more smart risks! Force controlled destabilization so you learn where you need to get stronger. Do it now while people are focused and energized*.

Unfortunately, we rarely listen to these voices that say “Go now!” even though we intellectually know that waiting to take a big leap until we’re under duress is not the best idea.

On the other hand, when leaders are beaten down from underperformance, or markets have shifted so radically that existing strategies no longer serve (e.g., AI, tariffs), they are often more willing to scrutinize existing structures and to “hit present reality at high velocity,” as David Whyte says. However, fear and exhaustion drive self-protection and armoring behaviors in these periods, which leads to moderately shoving systems around and maybe bruising a few old assumptions, but not to real transformation.

Halfhearted transformation is the worst-case scenario. People are tired, riddled with uncertainty, and destabilized, but there’s not enough real breaking to drive change and create hope and excitement. And halfhearted transformations almost always end up buttressed by new impermeable systems built on cracked foundations. We often stand back and think, “We should have broken this horseshit as we built it.”

So, what’s the best time for transformation? When you’re ready to break things because not breaking them is even more daunting—even if it means sacrificing short-term success. This approach is painful in a world where success is often measured in greedy quarters. Transformation requires strong alignment at the top of the organization that recognizes:

What got us here is not going to get us to the next level of performance.

What got us here is going to continue to drive us into the ground.

“Everything Must Change in This Transformation. Except Me.”

We have a large set of assessments that we use as part of Dare to Lead transformations. You know the saying “In God we trust. Everyone else bring data.”

There are two assessments that are related directly to courage building. The first is a personal assessment of the four skill sets of courage. The second is an assessment of your team or org culture around the eleven elements of Daring Leadership. Consistently, with no exceptions, when you

look at the results of these two assessments across a large cohort of leaders, you get the same thing:

1. I'm daring as hell.
2. Everyone around me is a big chicken.

Obviously, the stats don't work here. Less obvious to the folks taking the assessment is the Big Chicken bias: Everyone thinks that the problem is everyone else. This bias is normally reality-checked in short order. It takes only about two sessions before the majority of folks start saying, "It's possible that I overestimated my abilities on that survey."

Seed Planting to Radical Change

We know the variables that predict success in Dare to Lead transformations. One of the variables is the team at the helm of the transformation. In most cases when I'm involved, it's a team that includes me and my team, the CEO and their team, the CHRO (Chief Human Resources Officer, sometimes also called a CPO or Chief People Officer) and their team, and a strong comms leader. There's normally about ten of us leading, even when the transformation might include tens of thousands of employees. Of course there are numerous folks who work behind the scenes on transformations; however, in terms of taking full accountability for the success or failure of the process, that team is normally small.

Without exception, there's a moment about six weeks into the transformation when people start to get really anxious about the level of change they're observing. The anxiety shows up in a range of comments like:

- We're not seeing people trying on the new skills as much as we'd like.
- Oh, man. People are really trying out these new skills and it's freaking out some folks.
- Some of our folks are too tentative when it comes to this new feedback approach.

- Wow! Can you slow down some of these people who are really hyped up on this new feedback approach?
- When are they going to start being more open and forthcoming?
- Holy shit! I think there's too much openness. It's daunting. Can we dial it back?

The solution? No solution except to set this expectation with everyone involved before you start a transformation: *Some of you will experience this work as seed planting. You will learn it, process it, think about it, try it on slowly, and process it some more. Others will experience radical change in the first two weeks and get very impatient about why everyone's not using the language or "rumbling" in all of the meetings. This is normal. This is what we want and expect. Chart your own course. Challenge yourself. Get in the reps, don't compare the gains, and don't expect everyone's experience to be the same as yours.*

Transformation Is Deeply Personal

If the only thing that the Dare to Lead work accomplished was increasing shareholder value for investors, or even helping NGOs fulfill their mission, I would not have invested thirty years of my life in this work. I love what I do because it changes people's lives at work *and* their experiences at home.

I have always believed that leadership and organizational interventions designed and implemented well should make people, work, and the world better.

It can, no doubt, be disheartening to spend your life building a body of research about daring leadership when so many people in leadership positions across the world are exercising power that's based on fear and maintained by cruelty.

The solution for me is finding my own strong ground and focusing on building my foundation. I can either get strong and operative from my own values and groundedness, or I can shift my focus and become reactive to how people are working through their anger or fear of powerlessness and lose my contact with ground. I'm going for the tush push—I'm going to

fight for what I believe by keeping my feet planted, seeing the turf below me flying, and pushing toward the next one yard.

I'm fueled by the extraordinary stories that people have shared with me, my team, and the fine folks who facilitate this work. They're stories about how courage building changed their lives—inside and outside the office.

Recently, a woman who was a leader in a tech company sent me an email sharing that she was devastated when her younger sister, who had struggled with mental health issues, died by suicide. After a year building trust with her team during a Dare to Lead transformation, she bravely shared her loss with them. It was a daring move because the team was functioning poorly when they started. They were highly distrustful of one another.

She wrote that she couldn't believe that they all attended the funeral, including two remote colleagues who flew in just to be there. What was also extraordinary about this experience was their support when she returned to work. In the team's first meeting, one of her colleagues asked, "What does support from us look like? If you want to talk about how you're feeling, that's okay. If you want to not talk about anything, that's okay. Just let us know. We can flex when you need it."

"What does support from us look like?" is something we teach in Dare to Lead so that leaders who are anxious about asking how people are doing can follow up with a genuine offer of support and not have to guess what people need. Her team was practicing the work. And I love "We can flex when you need it." If you know grief, you know we all need the flex.

Just a few weeks ago, a man approached me after a training session and said, "I shared the empathy misses from the workbook with my wife. We had a long conversation. It was really hard, but I feel hopeful about our marriage for the first time in a long time. Turns out I'm fixing, not really listening, and she feels alone."

We had a twenty-minute conversation that ended in a hug.

This is why I do this work.

Transformation Fails

The transformations that I look back on with the most regret are those where leaders tapped out when it got hard. I hold myself accountable for

potentially missing something in the readiness evaluation or in other parts of the assessment sets. In these situations, there is rarely any valuable change—if you plan on transformation and quit early, you don’t get the consolation prize of incremental change. They’re completely different approaches. Incremental change times 5 is not transformative change. It’s just incremental change times 5.

Again, don’t get me wrong, we have done incremental change work with teams and orgs, and it can be exactly what a team or organization needs. It’s got its own slog—the lift is significant and the depth of change doesn’t always make it feel worth it—but sometimes it’s the exact right thing to do. The slog can be lightened with the right communications strategy. Never underestimate connecting and communicating.

When you prematurely tap out of a transformation, you end up with a spotlight on broken systems that will refuse to dim just because you’ve decided to move on. You’ll also be looking out on a collection of exhausted, bruised, and distrustful people who are on the verge of despair. I say “despair” because the start of any transformation requires a rigorous inventory of what’s working and what’s not. And a good inventory will include the voices of the folks with the most influence and power in the organization, the folks who have the least, and the folks who are secretly sitting on a stash of actual power or proxies for power, including resources, access to decision making, and tenure.

All of these fault lines will be examined and spotlighted, power will be made visible, and the mandate for change will be crystal clear. Making the invisible visible, naming what no one has named, and saying the unsaid stuff are the tools of transformation. Really tough to do that and then, as my grandmother would say, “turn tail.”

This is why our assessment sets and readiness inventories have become even more rigorous since we started this work. We now have a process for identifying senior leaders whom we observe as too transactional to lead transformative change.

The Fire

Since the beginning of time, transformation has been a story of death and rebirth. There is no consultancy PowerPoint or team of strategic advisers that will deliver you from the reality that transformation means walking through the darkness of the tomb and the darkness of the womb. The tomb is the dying of old systems and ways of working, and the womb is the darkness before rebirth. The challenge is that darkness is darkness, and it's sometimes impossible to tell where you are in the process.

Anyone who is not preparing you for that journey, who is not willing and capable of walking it with you, or who is trying to convince you that it's a well-lit and knowable path should be approached with caution. And if someone tells you it's easy, they are either uninformed or dishonest. To paraphrase David Whyte, hitting present reality at high velocity and watching it break apart at impact is an act of sacrifice, discipline, and courage. And deep care.

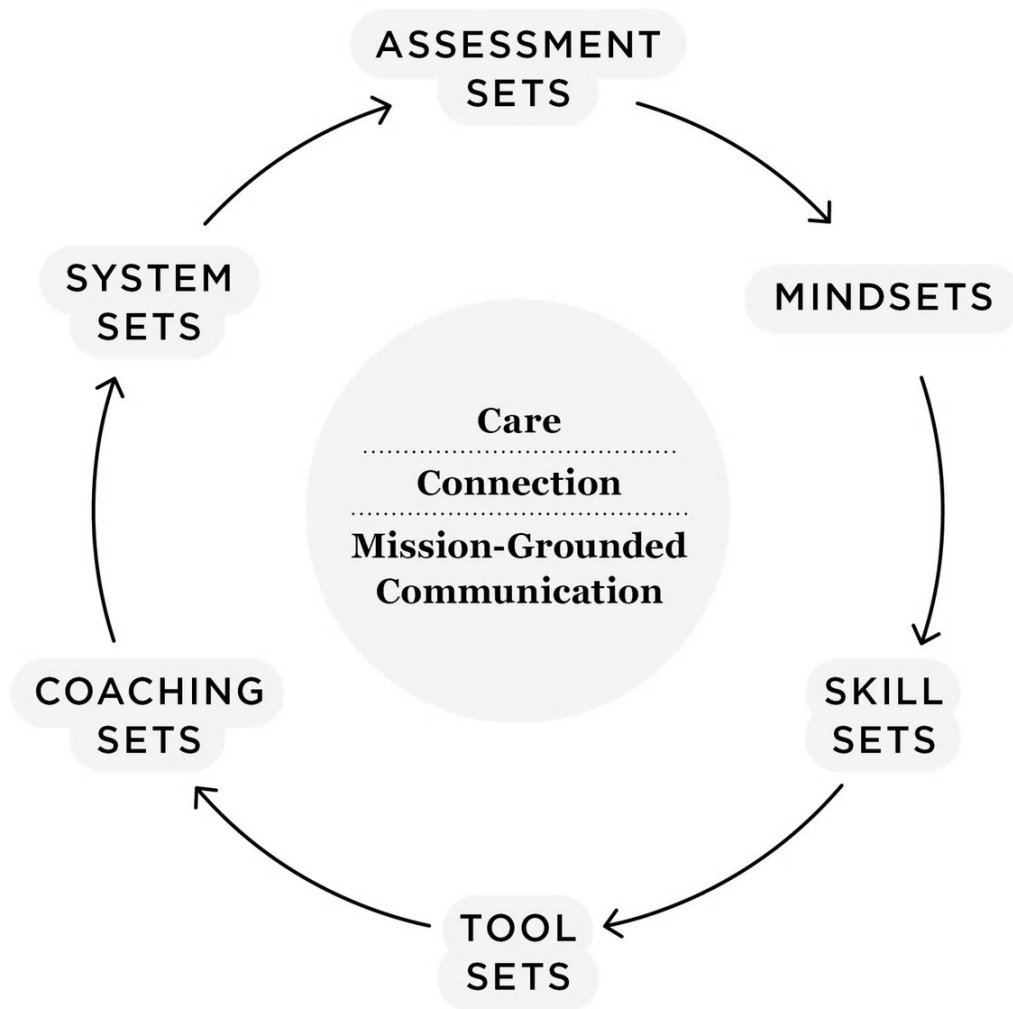
About a month ago, a CHRO and I were having a conversation about the death-and-rebirth aspect of transformation. She said, "If we're the phoenix, are we about to go up in flames, or are we already ash? I'm worried about surviving the fire."

I have a weird obsession with old maps featuring sea monsters and other mythical creatures. I started a collection of these maps when I was writing *Atlas of the Heart*. One of the scholars I love to read is Joseph Nigg, a researcher who studies mythical creatures and the cultural history of fantastical animals. I actually started a lovely email conversation with Joe as I was writing this book.

Nigg's latest book is *The Phoenix: An Unnatural Biography of a Mythical Beast*. It gave me a new perspective on the phoenix rising from the ashes and a new understanding of why transformations are so beautiful and so tough.

I always thought the phoenix's rise was the transformation and the fire was just something to survive. I was wrong. The fire *is* the transformation.

ANATOMY OF TRANSFORMATION



Brené Brown, *Strong Ground* (2025)

CHAPTER 9



Ginny Clarke

On Managing, Leading, and Why We Need Both



I'LL NEVER FORGET THE FIRST time I saw one of Ginny Clarke's posts on Instagram. I remember it well because it led me down a three-hour rabbit hole, which kept me up two hours past my bedtime, thereby requiring two days of recovery. When Ginny first came up on my feed, I was immediately struck by her combination of warmth and directness, expertise and

accessibility, and her ability to talk about the need for more accountability and deeper empathy as if the two were peanut butter and jelly. I get it—I love that sandwich too—but the world resists the idea that holding ourselves and others accountable is an act of care.

As I watched her videos, I was immediately smitten with Ginny's paradoxical mind and her no-bullshit loving-kindness. As fate would have it, we met several months ago in person at a healthcare leadership conference where we were both speaking. I'll sum up that first meeting like this: We should change the saying "Never meet your heroes" to "Pick the people you look up to very carefully." She was all of the things I respected and admired. And more.

I called her when I started writing this book because I knew we disagreed about a big topic, and I wanted to record our debate for a chapter in the book. The subject is one that more and more people are discussing in this AI-driven environment: Do we need managers? Would work be better with more leaders and fewer managers? Are managers underdeveloped leaders? What's the difference, and do we need both?

Without hesitation, Ginny responded to the request with a resounding "Oh yeah. Let's do it!"

Once you read the chapter, you'll see why. I hope the level of my realization, regret, and revelation comes through on the page.

Before we jump into the conversation, here are some important things to know about Ginny's background. She has thirty-five years of experience in executive recruiting, talent management, and financial services. She was a partner at the executive search firm Spencer Stuart, where she recruited senior leaders across sectors and functions, and she served as director of executive recruiting at Google. She is as comfortable in the trenches as she is in the boardroom.

Ginny is the creator of Fifth Dimensional Leadership—a transformative approach that empowers individuals to lead from a place of higher consciousness and authenticity. She's also the author of *Career Mapping*, a comprehensive guide designed to assist employees at any stage in their professional life in navigating the constantly evolving workplace.

Here's how Ginny describes her work: "I am committed to developing more conscious, empathetic and inspired leaders for the 5 percent of you who hold those formal positions. For the other folks, the ones I call 'the 95 percent,' I intend to empower you to participate in reimagining a workplace

that supports the needs of not only our families, but our communities, our civilization, and our planet.”

After getting to know Ginny, I have no doubt that she’s making good on her commitment every day.

A Conversation Between Brené and Ginny

Brené: I have this hypothesis that we’re moving toward organizations that have more leaders than managers. It might be my own personal bias, given the season of my career and my life, but I do not want to manage people, nor do I want to hire people who need to be constantly managed. I’m finding the level of oversight increasingly difficult. So, let’s start with what you think the difference is between managing and leading—or is there one?

Ginny: Oh, there absolutely is one, though I think we conflate them all the time. I’m a big dictionary person, and if you consult the dictionary, it’s very clear. I will read for you. This is managing: *The process of dealing with or controlling things or people. Organizing and coordinating activities to achieve specific goals through planning, organizing, and overseeing resources.* Now let me assign a couple of additional words—delegation and problem solving—to that, just for anchor words. So, for managing, the skills are: planning, organization, delegation, and problem solving.

Now the definition of leading: *The action of guiding, directing, or influencing others through a common vision or goal. Inspiring and motivating people to achieve something greater than themselves.* So the skills are: vision, influence, empathy, and risk-taking.

And an article from *The Economic Times* referred to the four skills that overlap: communication, decision making, interpersonal skills, and adaptability.

Using this skill differentiation model, let’s dig into the difference. At Google, I had three separate teams concurrently. I had to manage those three teams through people. I had six direct reports whom I managed, but I led the thirty-person team overall. I identified individuals who would be the point people for operationalizing and making sure that we were getting

things done right and there was a solid communication loop. We rarely met as individual groups, mostly as one whole group. And I would set forth my vision, what I knew, and what I would and wouldn't tolerate. Is that clearer?

[Big pause from me. Wheels turning.]

Brené: Yes. I'm thinking hard. Can you see it in my face?

Ginny: I can. When I became an executive recruiter, I was trained to think like a management consultant. Meaning, *What does the business need? How does that align with the specific competencies, leadership and functional, that one should have?*

I thought to myself, *Oh, I get it. This is how we're going to be assessing people.* And then, in practicality, I watched as our clients cast that approach aside and said, "But I like this person. I've worked with them. They have a great pedigree. They have amazing experience."

Experience is probably one of the worst predictors for future success, because you could have done your prior work poorly.

Brené: That's true. And the combination of experience plus "I know you" is the double nightmare.

Ginny: The relationship one is horrible. And it's so offensive in the context of the whole DEI versus merit discussion, because "I know you" is not a measure of merit.

Brené: Right.

Ginny: The Diversity Practice that I co-founded and led at Spencer Stuart had nothing to do with giving special consideration to people who weren't qualified. That was an old affirmative action model from the seventies. A Gallup poll from 2015 said only 18 percent of leaders—and they're using "leaders" and "managers" interchangeably—are considered good at leading. I've often reflected on how few leaders I've had who were really strong.

Honestly, we have an alarming number of unskilled leaders and managers in the workplace.

Brené: That was nine years ago. I wonder if, through COVID, the recession in the U.S., and geopolitical volatility, it's plummeted further.

Ginny: I'm sure. Think about this additional statistic also from Gallup—82 percent of companies choose the wrong people for management roles. 82 percent! Many of them just don't have the skills. So, whose fault is this? We've got people leading and managing who have never been led by anybody who's good at the job. We have no accountabilities in place. The bad behavior is being tolerated because no one's saying anything. This is where we find ourselves in a demoralized, disengaged workplace scenario. It's serious.

Brené: I'm stuck on the way you talked about your teams at Google, because I'm picturing a Venn diagram. So, on the leadership side, you have inspiring, motivating, empathy, risk-taking. Shared skills are communication, decision making, adaptability. What are the management skills that make up that side of the Venn?

Ginny: Planning, organization, delegation, problem solving.

Brené: The statistics on how poorly we're doing make me question what I'm getting ready to say, which is this: I want someone leading the teams in my organization who can motivate, inspire, be empathetic, take smart risks, and communicate well, who is a good decision maker, who demonstrates good adaptability, good planning, delegation, organization, and problem solving. I want all those skills in a single person. I want to call them a leader, and I do not want them managing.

Even when I was a newly hired customer service representative at AT&T, taking calls in Spanish, I did not want to be managed. I wanted to be led.

I want leaders who coach at every level, and I want employees who are coachable. That's my pie in the sky. I don't want managers or people who want to be managed. I associate compliance and control with managers.

And I associate commitment with leadership. So I want committed people, not compliant people.

Ginny: When I'm saying "control," I don't mean it in the militaristic sense. I want someone as a leader who has enough presence that when they say something, I'm going to do it.

Brené: That's what I'm looking for right there.

Ginny: Call it control, call it respect. Now we're getting into what's actually missing. Integrity is missing. Respect is missing. Honesty, transparency. All the reasons why things break and stop working. Because we have not insisted that either one of these individuals, whether they're a manager or a leader, have these as cornerstones of their being, of who they are. This, to me, is the biggest problem.

Brené: Oh my God! This is it!

Ginny: We can work through the structural stuff and the names associated with it as much as you want, but if you don't have those things in place, you've got what?

Brené: True or false: Our aspiration is to have leaders, not managers. But in the absence of individual self-awareness, metacognition, integrity, these basically human skills, we've created a category of folks who need to command and control a little bit.

Ginny: False.

Brené: Whoa. So, if we had an organization together, Ginny and Brené, Inc., and all the people had incredible self-awareness and metacognition and communication skills and integrity and courage and respect, we would still have leaders *and* managers?

Ginny: Yes.

Brené: No! Why?

Ginny: Simply because there are some people in managerial roles and that is what they want and what they are good at doing. That is their gift—their skill set. Managerial responsibilities can give way to leadership capabilities and competencies. But they're different. Managers generally aren't going to be the ones who are going to take the risk, set the vision. But they can certainly make sure that the trains arrive on time and that the people show up and do what they're supposed to do.

Brené: You are a realist!

Ginny: I'm also seeing the future, and something's got to give. We expect all this stuff to magically go away. We want to push a button, send a prompt, and have AI do all these things for us. The reality is you still need a smart and strategic prompt, the ability to vet the information, and the skill to communicate the information you've collected with the right people, in the correct context, for the right reasons.

Brené: As an AI user, you really do need to know enough to understand the validity of every single piece of data you get back. And the GPT is not going to tell you how to strategically connect the data to existing initiatives.

Ginny: All of this requires a level of understanding. Interpretation of the here and now in this dimension, not in AI. There must be accountability. Who's going to be the one accountable for that? So, when you look at the senior-most leaders from a distance—for example, Satya Nadella at Microsoft—he seems to be a pretty strong leader from where I'm sitting.

Brené: Agreed.

Ginny: In contrast, did you read this book about Jack Welch by David Gelles, *The Man Who Broke Capitalism*?

Brené: Yes. I get in trouble every now and then when I challenge the platitude that *What makes us human will save us* because we've lost touch with a lot of the skills that make us human. The subtext of Welchian leadership, which is still operating in many orgs, was *Everything that is human about you is a liability*. So that scar runs really deep across humans managing or leading people. We're not great at what makes us human because we were told for decades that humanness got in the way of productivity and performance.

Ginny: No, we're not. I came out of business school right when Welch took over as CEO at GE. At Spencer Stuart, the big question was: *Did they work at GE?* GE had produced something like sixteen Fortune 500 CEOs.

Brené: Oh, yes, and I still to this day work with a ton of GE people, some of the best leaders I work with, who have managed to take what was great from that experience and add humanity to it. Others have had to fight like hell to break some old "fear and shame" leadership habits.

[Big pause while Ginny watches me get reflective and more emotional than I thought I would.]

Brené: I have undervalued and underappreciated some really stellar managers of people because I was testing them for their love of poetry.

Ginny: How would you characterize the poetry?

Brené: I'm thinking of James March's quote, "Leadership involves a delicate combination of plumbing and poetry." March explained that leaders need to be able to cast a vision that is so compelling we want to follow it, and to be able to build systems that deliver on that vision. I want everyone to want to cast incredibly complex and beautiful visions.

Ginny: That's not what managers are supposed to do.

Brené: I know. And I've known some excellent managers of people. Their people loved them, there was mutual respect and trust, and their teams got great shit done on time. And I'm contradicting my own theory. They were not compliant. They worked *from commitment*, not *to compliance*. They also led teams of junior people who worked from real commitment, not compliance. I think about my time leading customer service rep teams. When I was a customer service rep, I was a union steward. I probably got promoted into management because I was a big pain in the ass as a union steward.

Ginny: Management used to be a wonderful thing to be. Now it's dreaded.

[I'm back in deep reflection and it's a little painful. Ginny is watching me with empathy but zero rescue energy. She's a badass.]

Brené: It was really beautiful, actually. I ended up doing some very high-performance work as a manager. This was a group of people who, when they go to the bathroom, they log off. There are people and computers tracking the minutes they're away from their phones. And their breaks and lunches were timed to the second, because in call centers, everything is about time on calls, customers served, and problems solved.

Ginny: Here's that control we were talking about.

Brené: Yes. Tons of control. It was militaristic in many ways. I do a lot of work with the military, and I think there's a place for command and control in that leadership, and there's a place for commitment and connectivity. And I think there's a place for poetry in the military. You just have to be clear when and why you need what.

[More pausing and unlearning and relearning. It's uncomfortable.]

Brené: I think I diminished and dismissed the value of management work. Those are the two words that are coming up for me that are hard, feeling

words. I diminished and dismissed the value of that work, because it's not what *I* wanted to be.

Ginny: But no one was talking to you about the difference. No one was developing you. Having a conversation, giving you feedback, communicating to you by saying, "Brené, you actually show some great leadership competencies in addition to being a great manager."

Brené: I actually did have someone, and she was one of the very few Black senior leaders in our office, Jacqui. And she did put me up for promotion into a very extensive leadership program. She said, "Are you accepting the position?" and I said, "No, I'm quitting." She actually laughed and said, "Can I guess? You're going to be a lawyer for the ACLU or a VJ for MTV." And got up from her desk, hugged me, and said, "I think you've made the best decision you could make. But it's not great for AT&T."

Ginny: True leaders develop other people. Strong managers do it too.

Brené: So at Ginny and Brené, Inc., when we somehow put together this pool of people who have integrity, kindness, respect, and self-awareness, we'd still have managers and leaders.

Ginny: We would.

Brené: And we'd honor both of those roles because they're different. A manager is not an undeveloped leader.

Ginny: No.

Brené: Tell me more about that.

Ginny: A manager's focus is on the execution, but not in the absence of an awareness of the vision. Right? So they have to interpret the vision every

damn day to figure out, *Okay, well, what does this mean to me now? What does that mean for the team? How do I connect their work with this vision?*

Brené: That's a hard job, to operationalize a vision, much less constantly moving priorities.

Ginny: Oh, yeah, it's hard. In a place like Google, where things are always changing, where they reorg every other week, that's why I needed my managers interacting with their people so that it didn't feel like we were operating underwater.

Brené: Oh my God, for sure!

Ginny: In these situations, I may be treading water as a leader, but my team feels like they're underwater. I'm pulling them to the surface and giving them air cover so that they can stay focused on what needs to get done today, next week, and next month. That's my job as a leader, right? To interpret, to filter all those things, and to keep having to move and change. Sometimes the entire vision has to shift. We may not have a choice.

The world of managing and leading is in crisis right now, and if we don't stare it in the face and acknowledge what's happening in the workplace, we're going to end up with multiple generations of people who are damaged because the workplace has become oppressive. It's breaking people down instead of building people up.

Brené: I actually write about that *breaking down* and *building up* in the first chapter of the book, and I'm not talking about functional subject matter expertise, but about training leaders and managers. If the way we work with people and the way we invest in their learning is not making every part of their lives better—not just their jobs—I'm not interested in doing it. So, when the senior supply chain manager, who leads an organization of four thousand people, says to me, “Yeah, I'm really enjoying *Dare to Lead*, but I've got to say the best part of it is reaching out to my sister for the first time in five years”—for me, that's a win.

Ginny: This is part of what I'm trying to get people to understand. You don't have to be beholden to this system, and I think, as a Black woman and the descendant of enslaved people, *I want us to wake up*. We're not leveraging the agency and the entitlement that we have as human beings in this country to exercise our free will. And I've had people say to me, "Well, I need my job to survive." All right, then let's make a plan, because there are employers out there who are worthy of you. And unless you say something to the employer where you are, and I understand it might be at the risk of losing your job, you are arguably complicit in the dysfunction.

Brené: That's tough when you're trying to keep your paycheck and your insurance.

Ginny: I'm not saying leave at any cost, but I am saying, *Wake up*. And there are options. You absolutely can make a plan. We deserve humanized workplaces.

Brené: A lot of this book is about a recommitment to the human spirit. As we think about these heady things, we just can't lose sight of the incredible power of love and joy, agency, freedom, and the human spirit. And one of the things I'm thinking about right now is that I don't see the exertion of power and control as the problem. I see the ramifications of deep feelings of powerlessness as the problem. I just wonder, if we have this critical mass of leaders and managers who wake up in the morning to alarms that sound like the birds that they're never going to see in nature and get to work and open up their laptops to see the screen savers of the places they're never going to visit, are they themselves too disembodied and disconnected from their own humanity?

Ginny: Lots of exhausted zombies, yes.

Brené: They're not out to exert power and control over people. The disrespect and the lack of trust and kindness is coming from their own sense of smallness and powerlessness. I mean, that's when I'm at my most dangerous.

Ginny: And I think, as I said, most people have not been managed or led well in their careers. So they find themselves in these roles because they did a good job on a task or project. Or maybe it was just by default because nobody else wanted it.

Brené: I've talked to several CEOs in the last year who told me they were shocked to find themselves in their positions. When I asked why, several of them said, "I care about the people here and no one else wanted to take it on."

[I look right at Ginny and she has a huge smile on her face.]

Brené: Why are you smiling?

Ginny: Because this is an example of what I witnessed as a recruiter. The selection criteria? They had nothing to do with anything. *Do we like you? Will you do it? Can we pay you enough to do it, because you check some of the boxes and you seem healthy...?*

It can be a shit show. It's unbelievable. Think about it. Think about, you're reporting to your board, "We got a CEO." "Well, tell us about him or her." "Well, they're willing to take the job. They've done it before somewhere else. We like them, and they have a great pedigree."

No one's scratching below the surface. No one's looking at the fact that this person might have done some really bad or even creepy things. Or they may be lacking the skills that are actually required for this company right now. Has anybody assessed their record in the context of this person taking over this company at this moment? Where's that alignment?

Brené: Especially in terms of radical transformation. What expertise is there in transforming culture or performance?

Ginny: Let's talk about functional and domain expertise. When I got to Google, there was a list of sixty leadership competencies in addition to functional competencies. I thought, *That's kind of too many*. So, I eventually helped them get it down to twenty. From that list, the hiring managers

would select three to five of these leadership competencies to help us recruiters narrow selections.

I define competencies two ways. One, which I'm borrowing, is *skills plus knowledge plus ability*. Because you can teach somebody a skill, like how to run a machine. Do they have the knowledge or the context of the system within which they're working? Do they have the mental, physical, emotional ability to get it done in the way that it needs to be done in the moment?

That's being compromised right now, if you think about poor mental health affecting so many people at all levels, and at a higher percentage for people in leadership and managerial roles.

The other definition of a competency is mine, and it's simply *the deconstructed elements of how you do something*.

It's so vital to remember that it's not just that you've done something, because, again, you could have done it poorly. Incompetence is chronic. We often find ourselves asking, *How did somebody incompetent get into this role?* Too often the answer is, "Because you were looking at their experience, and you didn't ask the right questions."

Competency-based questions or prompts are very simple: *Give me an example. Here's a hypothetical situation. Tell me how you did something*. When you stay curious and start asking these types of questions, you'll quickly be able to evaluate someone's actual competency in specific areas.

Brené: That's so interesting because we use a lot of scenario-based questions when we interview folks, and it's shocking how the quality of the answers doesn't always align with the experience on their CV.

Ginny: Right. Maybe they did what's on that CV, or maybe they're taking credit for something their team did. An accomplishment may deserve to be on your résumé, but I still want to hear about *how* it got done.

Brené: Okay, last thing. I'm writing about this, and there's no one I'd want to talk to about it more than you: the mass firing of Gen Z. They're just not keeping their jobs. I have a theory, as a mother who's raised two Gen Z kids, but I am curious about the intersection of this generation's struggle to

find their footing in the workplace and the onslaught of threatening news that AI will be coming for their jobs first. I'm curious what your position is.

Ginny: I feel for them because I think their generation was not built to be resilient. I don't know if it was in your book or elsewhere, where it was talking about how this generation was used to having things done for them versus doing them. We had to go, *Get on that bike with the training wheels and do it until you can do it by yourself*. I think this generation has been coddled. And it's unfortunate. Couple that with a generation that has had absolutely shitty managers and leaders who were not giving them feedback. The big thing is feedback.

Brené: Right.

Ginny: Few people give it, and give it well, in the language of competencies. The obligation of a leader and a manager is to give this feedback. How are you supposed to do it well if you don't know what good looks like? *You hired me because I'm smart. You never gave me training. You haven't given me any feedback. What do you want me to do?* So who are we blaming? We didn't set them up for success.

Brené: That's very much aligned with my theory.

Ginny: We have ourselves to blame. I think training could be something to help people get there. But the feedback thing, you've got to give people feedback, and that requires that somebody is standing close to you observing some of the stuff that you've done. The best feedback is real-time feedback from a manager who cares. This was something that I had. When I was at Google, I had two people—both happened to be women—who cried during their performance evaluations because the rating I gave them meant that they would get less money. I explained, "This isn't the first time we've talked about this. We talk about it every other week." The next day each of them came back to me separately and said, "I'm sorry for crying." And I said, "It's okay, I understand." But they each said, "I know that you gave me that feedback and rating because you care."

Brené: That's key. That's it. That's a whole different kind of coaching.

Ginny: Make it count. How else was I going to get their attention? I told them what behaviors I wanted to see. In addition, they were performing well. But I told them, "I want you to do these other things that will make you better. I want to see you get better. I want you to expand your world. I want you to go on beyond this role and beyond this company and do something that's meaningful. You haven't done it. So I'm not going to reward you fully because you haven't done these things that could help you be better."

Brené: It's so powerful, and it's so complicated, because the givers of feedback privilege their comfort over other people's growth and then pretend that we're protecting people by not making *them* uncomfortable. Our motto is "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."

Ginny: That's what I'm always telling people. *Stop being nice and telling me what you think I want to hear, and start being kind and telling me what I need to hear. I'll respect you more. I'll trust you more.*

CHAPTER 10



Mission Critical? Mission Clarity

ACROSS INDUSTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS, LEADERS struggle with how to build operational precision and excellence while also cultivating a culture of personal agency, risk-taking, and creative problem solving. The “structure *and* freedom” paradox most often plays out on the plumbing side of James March’s “leadership as plumbing and poetry” metaphor. There are some areas that we naturally think of as the plumbing—technology, engineering, manufacturing, finance, project management, supply chain, transportation, and logistics, to name just a few.

However, in today’s organizations, every part of our work needs both plumbing and poetry. Areas like marketing, communications, HR, and public relations need plumbing. You can send out a press release that is inspirational, but if there’s a typo or a wrong fact, it’s a debit for your org—it’s not neutral. Engineering and technology need poetry if they’re going to change the world. I share a couple of examples to illustrate this point at the close of the chapter.

One place where the hard boundaries between plumbing and poetry are disappearing in this environment is within sales functions. Highly relational salespeople who have been successful at building trust and providing services that are then delivered inside highly operational systems of customization, integration, and delivery are finding themselves in new territory. I’m no longer calling you and saying, “Hey, I need four cooling systems for my new facility—what model do you recommend and when can your team deliver?”

I’m calling you now and saying, “Shit. Here’s what we’re trying to do. I have no idea what we need, and I’m under pressure to get it done now.” In

every example I've seen of this scenario turning out successfully, the answer requires a new and complex way of working collaboratively. Here are some examples:

1. We'd love to be your partners on this. I'm not just selling products, I'm selling thought partnership and ideation, problem identification, problem solving, and ongoing assessment and adaptation. We're in it together now.
2. Enter the cross-company collaboration. We're going to quickly build a team; we need to establish trust and productive ways of working around very difficult topics like data governance and any new IP that is born of this collaboration. Read more about the new challenges of cross-company collaboration from Amy Webb in Chapter 11.
3. We're going to need people at the table who deeply understand and feel connected to their org's mission from sales and operations and who can straddle those demands and the potentially conflicting demands of this cross-company collaboration. Make no mistake—there will be tension here.
4. Regardless of your industry, there will be no successful outcome here without both plumbing and poetry. Everyone will need to understand and contribute to both relational and operational excellence.

In short, operational excellence determines whether an organization will or will not deliver against their poetic and bold visions. Without trust, relationship, and poetry, the plumbing is irrelevant.

Most experienced leaders have developed some level of confidence in leading operational teams by narrowing the expectations of people and teams to technical rigor, accountability, standardization, and compliance. But if we want them to solve big, fast-moving problems, we need to develop and encourage new types of creative and design thinking. In addition to their logical and analytic expertise, people need the freedom and the courage to play with wildly implausible ideas. This means working from a place of agency and self-belief.

On the other side, people on the non-operations side no longer get to do their work without deep attention to operational excellence. Building the

type of culture that can provide solid enough grounding to hold these tensions is more difficult than one might think.

Under revenue and growth pressure, and with technology advancing every day, individuals, teams, and entire organizations armor up, self-protect, and stop experimenting. This is human nature. I may go out on a limb on a calm day and ask questions and make suggestions that feel outside my subject matter expertise, but when the wind starts whipping around, I'm hugging the tree trunk. So what do we do, given that we can't control the wind? We normalize the tension between compliance and creative experimentation, between operational excellence and ideation. The paradox becomes the trunk, not the limb. We understand and trust the stability of the trunk, but every day, we work from the limb.

This Doesn't Happen Without Me

Over the past five years, the organizations that I've seen succeed at navigating these paradoxes and building nondualistic thinking (Jim Collins's "Tyranny of the OR") into their cultures have one thing in common: mission clarity delivered through disciplined communication. Everyone, across levels and positions, was deeply grounded and fluent in the mission and strategy driving their work—they knew what they were doing, and they knew the why beyond their daily job. Individuals and teams knew the desired outcomes (beyond their deliverables), they were coached on how their outcomes were related to bigger strategies, and they were clear about the operational parameters of the projects (cost and consequences). As with transformation, you can never underestimate the power of internal comms.

The ability to connect what we do every day, in all positions, to a broader and deeper contextual understanding is the stabilizing factor when it comes to straddling these paradoxes. My observation is that folks on the plumbing side of the house get less visibility and coaching around the big picture because of the compliant and focused nature of their work.

High-value, high-impact communication does not overwhelm people. It helps them find meaning and make invaluable connections. What does overwhelm *and* destabilize people is not knowing the full context in which

they're working. When we're separated from the big picture, we get small and we get territorial. That is simply human nature. And it's how systems work.

The graduate-level courses that social-work students normally dislike the most are courses on systems theory. Studying Talcott Parsons and structural functionalism as the basis for sociological systems theory is not why most people come to the profession. I loved it, and it changed how I think. One learning that has really shaped my lens on how organizations work is the fact that thriving systems have permeable boundaries. Information and energy flow in and out of these healthy systems. Impermeable boundaries in systems lead to atrophy.

When teams have impermeable boundaries, when they don't seek information and learning outside their own system, the first thing that happens is that they become self-referencing systems. The lens through which they examine challenges is very narrow and the consideration set of solutions is even smaller. This is how teams become increasingly irrelevant, especially today.

Without information and understanding about context and connective tissue flowing in and out of systems, discipline becomes rigidity. Without information and understanding about the cost and consequences of strategies and decisions, our technical precision morphs into myopic thinking. Impermeable boundaries lead to smallness in our mindsets: *Eyes down on what I'm doing. I'm going to get this right even if the big picture is wrong, because I'm not read in. That's not my job. This is my job, so I'm just going to focus on this.* Sound familiar?

I've seen these frustrations play out across individuals and teams where information is not free-flowing:

- If I don't have a full strategy brief, then I don't understand the limits and guardrails of what's possible. Without that understanding, I can't be creative in my problem solving. It's too risky.
- If I don't understand the bigger picture—especially beyond what I do every day—I can't assess whether my solutions are relevant and whether we could be doing better, stronger work.
- My technical excellence or subject matter expertise, which may be seemingly narrow, is limited by how much my leader is

willing to invest in my understanding the world outside the work of my immediate team.

- The more I can connect my plumbing work with the organizational poetry, the more poetic my work looks and feels. I want this for me and my team.
- I understand that sometimes information can't be shared across the organization, but too often "need-to-know only" is an excuse for a leader who doesn't have the time and/or skill to communicate what my team can and should understand while also protecting sensitive information.

Let me give you an example of what it can look like when people understand the relationship between what they do every day and the broader mission of an organization.

In 2011, I traveled to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Even though this was more than a decade ago, I'll never forget what they taught me. Their mission today is to advance cures, and means of prevention, for catastrophic pediatric diseases through research and treatment. Consistent with the vision of their founder, Danny Thomas, no child is denied treatment based on race, religion, or a family's ability to pay. In 2008, they were designated a National Cancer Institute Comprehensive Cancer Center, the only one devoted solely to children at the time, and their primary focus was on pediatric cancer.

When I got to the hospital, I jumped on the elevator, and it was just me and a woman in her sixties who was wearing a uniform and a hairnet. She was pushing a double-decker cart of desserts wrapped in protective paper. I said, "Wow! Those look delicious. What do you do here at St. Jude?"

She looked at me and without hesitation, she said, "I cure cancer."

She said it with such conviction that I knew it was true. I think my face conveyed emotion more than anything. She said, "Patients, families, doctors, nurses—people need to eat. What we do is hard work."

I introduced myself and told her it was great to meet her and that I appreciated her candor about the difficulty of curing cancer. She got off at the next elevator stop and I did some deep breathing. When I got off on my floor, a volunteer from the hospital met me. We chatted for a minute before I asked her how long she'd been volunteering for St. Jude. Her answer? "I've been curing cancer for two years now."

What's mission critical? Mission clarity.

Why? Because when leaders are disciplined in their approach to helping us understand how our work is connected to bigger strategies, and why our contributions transcend the tasks that are right in front of us—we feel braver and bolder. We have a stronger sense of agency. We are strong enough to leverage the tensions of paradox to make stronger contributions and more meaning.

Imagine if everyone in every organization was able to say *and* mean this:

At _____, our mission is _____□

_____.

My specific job is _____. I'm critical to the mission because _____.

The 5 C's and Mission Clarity

—

The 5 C's that I explain below may look like a tool set of questions, but they are driven by deep curiosity and a commitment to mission clarity. They can be used when developing or sharing strategy, delegating, building project plans, operationalizing new processes, developing new collaborations—they work across all situations where we need clarity on intention and the why as much as the what.

Once they are embedded in your team and your culture, the ROI on the 5 C's is huge. Asking and answering the questions that make up this “grounded communication” tool set will sharpen our situational awareness, spatial awareness, and temporal awareness. The habit of using this tool also deepens systems thinking, strategic thinking, critical thinking, anticipatory thinking, and symphonic thinking.

Context, Color, Connective Tissue, Cost, and Consequence

1. **Context:** No one has optics on everything that's going on in an organization. What's happening in other areas that will impact or be impacted by this decision or deliverable? Is there history or previous experience that we need to understand? Is there a broader context we need to discuss (geopolitics, supply chain, unspoken expectations)? Do we need vettings or briefs on partners, etc.?
2. **Color:** You need to set a clear intention and paint the fullest, most detailed picture you can. Can you describe your vision of what this looks like or how it works? How would you assign the level of importance, seriousness, and urgency? Is this ideation and brainstorming, or are we going to do this? If this is ideation and "throwing out ideas"—how will we know when or if it becomes a serious strategy or deliverable?
3. **Connective Tissue:** Pull the thread! How does this plan/strategy/decision/deliverable connect to other plans/strategies/decisions/deliverables? Do we think what we're doing solves or amplifies what's already happened or what's happening now? Or, how does it lay the groundwork for what hasn't happened yet but is part of the vision for the future? Using anticipatory thinking—what will be the ripple effect of this decision?
4. **Cost:** What will it cost us to do this in terms of money, time, bandwidth, focus, priority shifts, etc.? Is this cost tolerable? Expected? Agreed upon? Controversial? Communicated? Does everyone involved understand the cost AND how we're going to deal with the money, time, and energy spend?
5. **Consequence:** Are there consequences for not doing this, and if so, what are they? What's at stake? What are the consequences of getting it wrong? Are there any unintended consequences that we can anticipate and plan for now?

When the list of mindsets and skill sets related to grounded confidence first emerged (see Chapter 15), I thought, "No way, it's too much." But this single tool set is an efficient muscle builder across grounded awareness, grounded confidence, and grounded thinking. Another kettlebell routine, if you will. Going back to Chapter 1 and my trainer Tony's sage advice: *Our*

work here is going to be functional, dynamic, and adaptive. You'll also need to change how you think. We're looking for intentionality and consistency over wild intensity. Winning in here will be a focused and systemic change across your life.

The 5 C's are a functional, dynamic, and adaptive tool. Here's an example of the 5 C's at work:

Project lead: Team, I'd like for us to pull together the following data by two o'clock today. I have a meeting with our CFO and I need to present this to her as part of a cost assessment.

Daring team member: Can you give us the 5 C's on this?

Project lead: Sure. We're seeing much higher costs than anticipated here and the speculation is that it's driven by the transportation group due to fuel costs. [Continues...]

Daring team member: Can I play back what you want to do with the data, why it's important, and what you're hoping to solve?

Project lead: Sure. Go for it.

Daring team member: [Plays back problem identification as described.]

Project lead: That's it!

Daring team member: I don't think you'll get your answer from the data you're requesting. These data we have on costs don't take fuel into consideration. That's tracked separately by the stores, and I don't think we're seeing the cost increases there.

In this example, the 5 C's process redirected the entire conversation from an individual looking for data to support an answer to revealing that the individual was asking the wrong question. Now they've moved to a team problem-identification effort. This is smart, because we're often asking the wrong questions or defaulting to action bias (*Fix it and fix it fast! Fix what? Who knows? Just fix it!*). To make sure the team has more context and they don't get stuck on preconceived ideas or too fixated inside their own system, they invite someone from transportation and someone from the stores accounting team to join the meeting remotely.

It turns out that the requested data would have been irrelevant. The cost problem was two-pronged: A shift from contract drivers to full-time drivers

and overtime issues, and a new tire vendor who provided tires that had to be replaced three times more often than tires from the old vendor.

As a founder and CEO, I rarely ask folks to support me with any kind of deliverable without immediately hearing, “Can you give me the 5 C’s, please?” About 30 percent of the time, before I’m done walking them through my thinking, I’ve noticed a flaw in my logic or some faulty assumptions. We’ve shared this tool with many senior leaders and one piece of feedback we often hear is that in simply pausing to offer someone the 5 C’s, people find themselves rethinking their approaches.

In our organization, the team members most interested in the 5 C’s are the Gen Zers. I love that!

As both a proud member and survivor of Gen X, I was raised with a healthy dose of water hose drinking and parents who gave me the “Be back before dark” warning as I left the house at six-thirty A.M. on my bike for swim team practice. Just to spare you the math, that translates to *I’ll see you back here in fourteen hours, don’t do anything stupid*. The buck fifty they handed me on my way out the door would cover a muffin, a Frito pie (a small bag of corn chips, opened at the top with canned chili poured into it), and a cherry Slurpee from the 7-Eleven.

My generation was also raised with a healthy dose of “Because I said so.”

Gen Zers love the why. They demand the why and are suspect of “I said so.” I respect this, and I’ve learned from them.

The 5 C’s and the Gen Z energy (more than half of our folks are Gen Zers) make us smarter and slow us down just enough to go faster doing what counts. That energy also empowers our people to ask questions and to get excited about how their work matters today and in the long term. The structure part of the “structure *and* freedom” paradox is understanding our job and how to do it; the freedom is believing in our mission enough to try new things, take risks, sometimes fail, and then learn and embed the learning.

I don’t want to make out like this is easy. I’ve had many tough conversations with my team that start like this: “We are packing parachutes, folks! It’s not good enough that ninety percent or ninety-five percent are packed correctly.”

When I get to this place, it’s more than likely driven by the fact that I am a terrible public person. I don’t enjoy it. And when something public-

facing goes wrong, there's no organization between me and the insanity online. My name is right there in the name of the organization (Brené Brown Education and Research Group). For us, freedom doesn't mean we're not packing parachutes, it means that I want people to use their creativity and experience to challenge our systems and our ways of working that are leading to avoidable mistakes. I want people to have the freedom to say, "If we're packing parachutes on this project, we're setting ourselves up for failure. Here's why..."

In our organization, and in orgs I work with, I've seen the 5 C's help teams feel stabilized and connected to something larger, while supporting individuals in feeling a sense of agency. This in turn shifts thinking from *Keep my head down—this is my job and all I need to do is get it right* to *Heads up! Part of my job is getting this right and the other part is problem solving and making us stronger*.

We've never needed this approach more.

Below are four examples of organizations where mission clarity has allowed them to build cultures grounded in the paradox of structure and freedom. The examples are especially fun because the organizations are all near and dear to my heart. Let's start with Liverpool Football Club. If you need help placing them, they're the 2024–25 Premier League champions. Go Reds!

You'll Never Walk Alone

In 2024, Arne Slot was named the Liverpool FC head coach. He had to fill the big shoes and gigantic hugs of Jürgen Klopp, who led the team for close to nine years. If you want a very short primer on the soulfulness of these two coaches, here it is:

Klopp led the fans in chanting "Arne Slot, la la la la la" at Anfield Stadium during his farewell speech after his final game as Liverpool manager.

Slot sang "Jürgen Klopp, la la la la la" at Anfield, as Liverpool celebrated winning the Premier League title.

Both of these coaches are daring, bighearted leaders and fierce competitors. The team's ethos, "You'll Never Walk Alone," is a song

originally from the musical *Carousel*. An early 1960s cover of the song by Gerry and the Pacemakers captured hearts and minds at the football club, and it's been sung at Anfield Stadium and by Liverpool fans around the world ever since.

The song and the ethos capture the mission of Liverpool FC and their official charity, the Liverpool FC Foundation. The club's broader mission encompasses sporting excellence, sustainability, inclusivity, and providing a safe, welcoming environment for all who interact with the club.

The Liverpool FC Foundation mission is more focused: "To harness the power of the LFC Family to create life-changing opportunities for the most underserved communities home and away." The Liverpool FC Family is the lifeblood of the club, and it's clear to me that their sporting excellence is always in service of something greater.

When Slot started leading the team, I watched the games and the postgame film reviews with equal enthusiasm. I saw something developing in Slot's approach that was intriguing. In addition to building incredible physicality in the players in terms of running endurance, the ability to turn on a dime, and a passion for getting on the ball, you could see a level of tactical complexity emerging. Yes, the formations were different, but the type of play was also different.

As I read and listened to interviews with Slot, I realized that he was actively grounding the players in the paradox of structured discipline *and* creative freedom. Slot explains that for the team, this duality ensures that the players are encouraged to interpret space and innovate, *and* that their creative expression is always grounded in tactical discipline and collective responsibility.

Slot is passionate about tactical understanding driving technical precision (mission clarity is mission critical). To make sure that the players develop tactical and strategic understanding, Slot invests considerable time at the Anfield training ground developing the players. In addition to the mental and psychological frameworks that underpin performance, the players are coached on football's very own version of the 5 C's: complex formations, tactics, technical advantages, stats, film, and how the larger game model and game plan will come together to support the club's overall strategy of possession, possession, possession! Good football is poetry in motion—this is how and where it starts.

The next three examples take us from Premier League football to NASA, the Rice360 Institute for Global Health Technologies at Rice University, and my hometown grocery store H-E-B.

Ex Binarii Cognito

Aerospace engineering and biomedical engineering are two sectors where technical precision and creative problem solving come together to produce the highest levels of innovation. Both NASA and the Rice360 Institute for Global Health Technologies demand that all aspects of their work meet exacting standards, because even the smallest errors can result in mission failure or patient harm. And in both institutions, human discovery depends on the highest levels of creativity. The complexity of the problems tackled by these organizations requires both exacting technical standards and audacious ideation, and cultures that support big-picture thinking and clear communication of mission and strategies.

One of the great privileges and highlights of my career has been working with NASA over the past decade. From taking forty-one astronauts through the Dare to Lead transformation work and collaborating with NASA's human resources teams on leadership development to the thrill of being on the bleachers for the Artemis I launch at Kennedy Space Center—I've loved every minute of it. Sadly, the launch was scrubbed, but pulling an all-nighter was worth it. The lead-up was a wonder to behold.

In my experiences across the organization, I've been able to observe how cross-functional teams come together, review broad mission strategies, transition to highly technical briefs, ask and answer fifty questions, then get wildly creative in their problem solving. It's math and science collaborating with the 5 C's and leading to *Alice in Wonderland*. I've watched people introduce ideas that seemed absolutely impossible, but rather than being met with criticism or cynicism, the ideas are met with curiosity. One time, after hearing an idea that sounded like something from *Star Wars*, I actually paused the group and said, "Wait. That's not actually possible, right? That can't be real."

The answer was such a great example of symphonic thinking. "No," replied one of the engineers. "That's not real. But if we can dream or

imagine what could solve it, and figure out why that made-up thing would work and what problem it would solve, we can get closer to understanding what it's going to take. It's possible one person at the table will hear something outrageous and think, 'Wait! We have something that does a micro version of that, and here's how the physics of that works. What if we...'"

At some point in the middle of one of the meetings, I considered offering up the idea of a giant crane (the heavy lifting machine, not the bird) hanging upside down from four blimps. But I was pretty sure I didn't fully track the 5 C's—especially the tactical mission brief or the technical parameters. Or the general stuff on gravity. And I'm even more sure that whatever these extraordinary engineers designed to fix the problem was wilder than my idea, and that it worked.

EX BINARII COGNITO is the motto of the Mission Operations Directorate at NASA's Armstrong Flight Research Center. It loosely translates to "From Binary: Knowledge and Understanding." This motto reflects the center's core mission—transforming raw binary data from flight research and test operations into actionable knowledge and scientific wisdom. From ones and zeros to kids wearing NASA astronaut pajamas and staring at posters of rockets on their bedroom walls—that's plumbing and poetry!

Salad Spinners and Mousetraps

I'll never forget when Steve came home from work one day and said, "You won't believe it! A salad spinner!"

I was unloading the dishwasher and watching Charlie work on a school project.

"Yes, we have one," I said. "It's in the pantry."

Steve smiled. "No. At Rice. They're using a salad spinner as a centrifuge that medical clinics can use to separate blood when they don't have electricity. This is huge for diagnosing anemia."

Steve is a pediatrician at the Texas Medical Center in Houston—the largest medical center in the world. While I am totally biased, it is also true that our research hospitals and universities are producing unbelievable innovations on a weekly basis. After I slowed him down and asked him to

elaborate on the salad spinner, he told me about the Rice360 Institute for Global Health Technologies—a multidisciplinary institute at Rice University whose mission is to innovate for global impact by developing highly effective, low-cost healthcare solutions for underserved communities and to educate future leaders to innovate and implement solutions.

In this instance, undergrads Lila Kerr and Lauren Theis were challenged to find a way to diagnose anemia without electric power and without the solution being expensive, and, because those parameters were not tough enough, their device also had to be portable. The salad spinner worked. A Rice University representative wrote, “When tiny capillary tubes that contain about 15 microliters of blood are spun in the device for 10 minutes, the blood separates into heavier red blood cells and lighter plasma. The hematocrit, or ratio of red blood cells to the total volume, measured with a gauge held up to the tube, can tell clinicians if a patient is anemic. That detail is critical for diagnosing malnutrition, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and malaria.”

Steve eventually volunteered with Rice360 as a judge at one of their Annual Undergraduate Global Health Technologies Design Competitions, and he joined them on a trip to Malawi, where they tested low-cost incubators for hypothermic infants. The incubators were designed and built at Rice’s Oshman Engineering Design Kitchen using a pair of heating pads and a double-walled plywood box to keep an infant’s body temperature stable.

It turns out that inside many hospitals in resource-poor areas, you can find graveyards of old equipment that is either too expensive to fix or for which the parts are almost impossible to obtain. A hospital incubator costs more than \$35,000. Parts for the Rice360 device average between \$300 and \$400, and the incubator can be flat-packed and shipped at minimal cost.

It’s impossible to choose among the many examples of innovation, but I have to include Mary Seifu Tirfie, who graduated with a degree in biomedical engineering from Addis Ababa University. She’s a recipient of a Rice360 Global Health Fellowship, and she’s currently working on designing a low-cost neonatal gastric suction device—a lifesaving tool for newborns who suffer from fluid buildup in the stomach, which can cause aspiration and death if not treated promptly.

Mary explains, “We started by brainstorming, prototyping and testing. Tubing turned out to be one of the biggest challenges. The kinds used in

U.S. hospitals are expensive and hard to get in low-resource areas, so we had to identify safer, more accessible alternatives.” Mary is now working on optimizing the design for usability studies and exploring manufacturing partnerships to bring the device to market.

The institute is co-directed by Z. Maria Oden and Rebecca Richards-Kortum, both professors of bioengineering. When I asked Rebecca about straddling paradoxes at the institute, she said:

At Rice360, we are solving complex problems with a mission of global impact. We must approach challenges knowing that some variables will be known and constant, while others are unpredictable and always changing. That’s the reality of our world. Here we have a culture made up of individuals and teams who support excellence in engineering, ambitious creativity, and dedication to making impact now.

While our students come from all over the world and bring importantly diverse experiences, they all bring really fresh perspectives. They don’t have rigid ideas about what is feasible, so what they propose can initially sound like a crazy solution, for example, turning a mousetrap into an IV-flow regulator. But this way of thinking helps dial up the creativity for the whole team and can lead to real solutions. Our faculty, staff, and students understand the mission and know that it takes operational excellence and bold ideation to deliver solutions the world has never seen before.

Stay Humble. Stay a Learner.

One of my favorite teachers and learners is Dr. Donella “Dana” Meadows. Meadows was a pioneering environmental scientist and systems thinker, earning her B.A. in chemistry from Carleton College and her Ph.D. in biophysics from Harvard University. As the lead author of the groundbreaking book *The Limits to Growth*, she brought global attention to the challenges of sustainability and the interconnectedness of ecological,

economic, and social systems. Her visionary work, blending scientific rigor with optimism and accessible teaching, remains foundational in environmental science and systems theory. I highly recommend spending time learning about her at the Donella Meadows Project website, donellameadows.org.

The heading of this section is pulled from her paper titled “Dancing with Systems.” It’s the perfect way to close this chapter. She writes,

Systems thinking has taught me to trust my intuition more and my figuring-out rationality less, to lean on both as much as I can, but still to be prepared for surprises. Working with systems, on the computer, in nature, among people, in organizations, constantly reminds me of how incomplete my mental models are, how complex the world is, and how much I don’t know.

The thing to do, when you don’t know, is not to bluff and not to freeze, but to learn. The way you learn is by experiment—or, as Buckminster Fuller put it, by trial and error, error, error. In a world of complex systems it is not appropriate to charge forward with rigid, undeviating directives. “Stay the course” is only a good idea if you’re sure you’re on course. Pretending you’re in control even when you aren’t is a recipe not only for mistakes, but for not learning from mistakes. What’s appropriate when you’re learning is small steps, constant monitoring, and a willingness to change course as you find out more about where it’s leading.

That’s hard. It means making mistakes and, worse, admitting them. It means what psychologist Don Michael calls “error-embracing.” It takes a lot of courage to embrace your errors.

—

IN THE NEXT CHAPTER, you’re going to meet Amy Webb, my favorite strategic foresight researcher. Before you meet Amy, I want to share a quick story about one of my favorite organizations and the convergence of mission clarity, learning, humility, and strategic foresight.

H-E-B is a privately held supermarket chain based in San Antonio, Texas. It’s renowned for its deep community ties: Texans helping Texans. Founded in 1905 by Florence Butt as the C.C. Butt Grocery Store in

Kerrville, Texas, H-E-B now has more than 340 stores across Texas and several locations in northern Mexico. The company has consistently been recognized as the top grocery store in the United States, earning the number 1 spot on the Dunnhumby Retailer Preference Index for customer experience, value, and quality for three consecutive years as of 2025.

With annual revenues exceeding \$38 billion, H-E-B is celebrated not only for its impressive business performance, but also for its dedication to community engagement and innovation. The company donates 5 percent of its pretax profits to charitable causes and is well-known for its disaster relief efforts and support of local initiatives.

H-E-B is my grocery store and I've had the opportunity to bring Dare to Lead to their organization. While working with them in very early 2020, I heard about an "outbreak in China" for the first time. This was before it was news in the U.S. How? H-E-B's forecasting teams are among the most sophisticated I've ever encountered, across any corporate or government agency, and they have maintained a year-round, full-time emergency preparedness team since 2005.

When I asked senior leaders why forecasting and preparation were so important to them, there was no hesitation across the numerous senior leaders I asked: *It's our job. It's our mission. This is our community. We take our responsibility very seriously.* At H-E-B they like to say, "We're in the people business. We just happen to sell groceries."

Today, when there is an emergency in Texas—a hurricane, a violent community tragedy, a flood, or a fire, it's only a matter of hours before you see mile-long convoys of H-E-B 18-wheelers driving straight toward people in need.

Mission critical? Mission clarity.

CHAPTER 11



Amy Webb

A Strategic Futurist on Steering into the Slide



SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST (SXSW) is held in Austin, Texas, every year and is best known for its conference and festivals that celebrate the interesting and sometimes weird intersection of tech, film, music, education, and culture. As a regular over the past few years, I experience it as an inspiring mix of creatives, artists, techies, innovators, taco lovers, and middle-aged “out-of-

towners” who shouldn’t be riding electric scooters. Stick to the self-driving cars, folks.

For the past several years, one session draws participants who are so anxious to get a seat that they actually start camping out in line at three in the morning. The woman behind that session is Amy Webb, the founder and CEO of the Future Today Strategy Group (FTSG), a professor of strategic foresight at New York University’s Stern School of Business, and a visiting fellow at the University of Oxford’s Saïd Business School.

Amy, an expert in strategic foresight, pioneered a unique quantitative modeling approach and data-driven foresight methodology that identifies signals of change and emerging patterns very early. Using that information, Amy and her colleagues identify white spaces, opportunities, and threats early enough for action. They develop plausible scenarios, along with executable strategies, for their global client base.

I want to share three things from Amy with you:

1. Some key takeaways from my conversation with Amy on the *Dare to Lead* podcast. Her insights shaped my personal and professional approach to managing the pace of change, while simultaneously validating my feeling that we’ve collectively hit a patch of ice and we’re spinning out of control. Her answer is counterintuitive and spot-on.
2. Amy’s letter that serves as the Executive Summary of the *2025 Tech Trends Report*. I was a little breathless when I read the letter this year. The tone is different from even last year’s report and very aligned with what I’m hearing from leaders all over the world: cautious optimism and more caution.
3. Where I’m experiencing exactly what Amy forecasted over the past couple of years in terms of leadership development and culture.

From the *Dare to Lead* Podcast

—

Amy on Steering into the Slide

Where I grew up, we had terrible wind and cold, and when you learned to drive, you had to learn to drive on ice and snow. You had to be able to prove that you could drive on ice. If you're driving and you hit an icy patch, everything in your body is telling you to slam on the brakes. That is your instinct. *If I slam my foot on the brake right now, I will stop.* And the sensation of spinning out of control will cease. But physics, of course, tells us that that is not what you should do, because when you slam your foot on the brake, you don't stop the car. In order for that equation to work, you would somehow have to know the exact gradient of the road and the tread on your tires. You would have to know exactly how much ice there is. You would have to have an omniscient viewpoint on every single data point around you.

What you learn to do is steer *into* the slide, which is another way of saying *embrace the uncertainty*. You whip your steering wheel in the direction that you're sliding, and then as you start to move in a different direction, you whip it again. And basically you are slowing down time, and you are reducing uncertainty by making a ton of tiny decisions while remaining as calm as you possibly can. That's what everybody needs to be doing right now, whether we're talking about artificial intelligence and GenAI, or the thing that's coming next, which is going to make everybody even more concerned, and that's generative biology, which will impact every single industry sector, every business, every CEO. You have to learn to steer into the slide, because there is no "if this, then that" equation that works out at this stage in human history. There are too many variables that you're never going to have control over.

Amy on Hope

Things can be bleak, but things can also be pretty great. If we zoom out, we can see that we've entered a technology supercycle. In economics, an event can trigger economic growth followed by a crushing resource demand that can last a few years or even a decade. This period of unprecedented productivity and economic development is called a *supercycle*. Usually there are good outcomes on the other end, although it does require a transformation. Typically they get started by some type of big innovation or

development, like the steam engine, which kicked off the Industrial Revolution. There's the catalyst, then the supercycle.

What's happening right now is not just one technology, it's three: artificial intelligence, advanced sensors, and biotechnology. They don't seem to be related, but they are, and each one plays off the other, which means that we've entered a technology supercycle. The good part is that there are a lot of kids who have varied interests or who have been told they have to focus on just one thing, but they don't. If you're somebody who's interested in biology and robotics, you are going to have a bright career ahead of you, because there's going to be a ton of opportunity and lots of new types of jobs, new types of work. There's risk, of course, but the positive note is that it's going to be a cool time to enter the workforce.

Amy on Dealing with the Velocity of Change

Everybody alive today is going to go through an unprecedented amount of change faster than we are capable of managing. The reaction is going to be to think very short-term and to not be a futurist, but to be a nowist. This will lead to short-term decisions that feel comfortable right now but could turn out to be a mistake. So the trick is to be like the cognitive psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman and engage both sides of the mind—think fast and slow.

You have to be willing to think through the next-order impacts of your decisions and what things might look like, even when those things are scary. And simultaneously tie the future back to today. Every company right now is shortening their planning cycles to extremes. This is the absolute worst time to be doing that.

You have to be willing to champion three-year and five-year corporate planning cycles. You have to model and write long-term scenarios. You have to do visioning work, and you have to recalibrate that vision and those scenarios as the supercycle spins up, or I can assure you, you will get left behind. So, if I can encourage everybody to do one thing, it's just to recognize and acknowledge that this is the situation that we are all in together. And everybody is in it: every leader, every HR department, every C staff, every company, every individual. We're all in the same boat. It is not an excuse not to do long-term planning. You can't put it off anymore.

Amy's Executive Summary Letter for the FTSG 2025 *Tech Trends Report, 18th Edition*

BEYOND THE RUBICON: NAVIGATING HUMANITY'S POINT OF NO RETURN

In the past year, humanity crossed multiple points of no return. This didn't happen gradually, but in sudden, irreversible leaps that have fundamentally altered the trajectory of civilization. We've moved beyond our mental models, beyond biological constraints, beyond social norms—into territory we can neither fully explain nor comprehend. Just as the first telescopes revealed the vastness of space, today's science and tech advances are revealing how much we don't understand about our own potential.

Yes, AI has made daily headlines, but it's just one piece of a larger transformation. Two other areas of technology—advanced sensors and biotechnology—are quietly advancing and converging as they evolve. That convergence is creating what we call “living intelligence”: systems that sense, learn, adapt, and evolve. Living intelligence will drive an exponential cycle of innovation, acting as an accelerant for technologies that had previously stalled, from quantum computing to robotics.

For some organizations, this will unlock unprecedented opportunities in everything from drug discovery to energy production to financial services. For others, it will trigger overwhelming disorientation as they struggle to adapt to change occurring faster than their ability to process it. The gap between leaders and laggards will widen dramatically, not over decades, but months.

Let me be clear: The decisions we make in the next five years will determine the long-term fate of human civilization. This isn't hyperbole—it's the sobering conclusion drawn from our best available data. The convergence of tech isn't just changing how we work or live; it's changing what it means to be human. We're building systems that can reprogram biology, reshape matter at the atomic level, and process information in ways that defy classical

physics. The implications extend far beyond quarterly earnings or market share.

This report isn't designed to predict the future. Its purpose is to help you navigate it. While individual trends aren't useful in isolation, when combined with scenario planning and strategic foresight, they become powerful tools for decision-making.

In a world that has moved beyond traditional boundaries, the goal isn't to get the future right—it's to get your decisions right in the present.

Amy's sign-off: Welcome to the beyond.

My idea: I'd cue Guns N' Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle" right here. Amy's a rocker—she'd cosign.

The Tech Trend Report and What I'm Seeing Inside Organizations

FROM AMY AND THE FTSG 2025 TECH TRENDS REPORT, 18th EDITION:

While companies eagerly invest in AI, they often overlook crucial investments in change management and employee support. This oversight could lead middle managers to view AI as a threat rather than a tool, fostering resistance that may dramatically slow implementation and adoption.

FROM BRENÉ'S EXPERIENCES WORKING INSIDE ORGS RIGHT NOW:

Decision makers are not investing in upskilling or the necessary culture change efforts to support performance. The threat of irrelevance is the biggest shame trigger at work, and it's leading folks across industries to armor up and resist learning, thereby ensuring irrelevance. The lack of investment combined with the resistance to learning is creating deep and unnecessary anxiety and exhaustion at every level. I think there's a fear of having to break stuff (as we discussed in Chapter 1). From my experience—that's

intimidating, but less exhausting. Unless you just push stuff around and leave it the same but bruised.

FROM AMY AND THE FTSG 2025 TECH TRENDS REPORT, 18th EDITION: The era of tech companies operating in isolation is ending, as AI's demands create complex networks of interdependent partnerships. These strategic alliances will fundamentally alter how technology is developed and deployed. Cross-company collaboration will become the norm, with shared infrastructure, data, and research accelerating innovation. However, this consolidation raises concerns about market concentration and competition. Organizations will need to navigate complex partnership networks while maintaining their competitive advantage.

FROM BRENÉ'S EXPERIENCES WORKING INSIDE ORGS RIGHT NOW: I see this across every organization. Especially in sales right now. You're not selling products—you're selling thought partnership and collaborations. People aren't asking for SKUs and then shopping for the best prices across vendors. They need help understanding what they need and a partner who is in it with them. I see three interconnected issues across organizations that, in my experience, create the most significant performance and culture problems when it comes to becoming irreducible partners:

1. The inability and/or unwillingness to shift from transactional leadership to relational and effective leadership. Transactional leadership adds gasoline to the fire of uncertainty in organizations. Relational leadership, including care for and connection with the people we lead, requires self-awareness and introspection. That's not easy. We're never done; we keep learning. And if you're a leader (or simply a person who is looking for connection and meaning)—it's your responsibility.
2. The inability and/or unwillingness to talk openly about trust and engage in deliberate practice to earn and build it in relationships and on teams. Make no mistake—what I mean here is to explicitly state: “We don't know each other and we're going to

be engaging in tough problem identification together, making big decisions together, and holding each other accountable. Let's talk about what trust means and looks like for each of us, and let's get crystal clear on what drives distrust for each of us."

3. The inability and/or unwillingness to have honest, difficult, and productive conversations.

The type of deep collaborations and partnerships that Amy and her team are describing in the tech trends report are going to require all three of these things at levels far beyond what I see today. When you think about shifting all three of these ways of working, you're talking about a serious transformation in terms of mindsets, skill sets, tool sets, practice sets, and system sets. Breaking and challenging and rebuilding.

Note: You can easily search and find Future Today Strategy Group's *2025 Tech Trends Report* online. Then you can ask your AI agent to read it to you or merge it with your latest strategy document and highlight areas of risk and opportunity specific to your organization. I will be listening to Guns N' Roses and saying a little prayer for you.

Note #2: If you're really worked up and anxious after reading this, the next chapter will help. We're going to explore what I believe is one of the most effective tools I've ever used or taught for developing and deepening self-awareness.

CHAPTER 12



The Above/Below the Line Practice

IN OUR WORK, THERE ARE three or four tool sets that consistently receive the highest feedback from Dare to Lead participants. Again, in our strength training metaphor, these are definitely the kettlebell workouts—the ones that strengthen many areas at the same time.

The Above/Below the Line Practice is a highly praised tool, and it builds strength across every single one of the grounded confidence tool sets and mindsets discussed in Chapter 15. It also facilitates accuracy in the grounded thinking tools. Too good to be true? I thought so too. But now, after using it for the past year, embedding it in our organization and teaching it to hundreds of leaders, I believe it's that good.

I was introduced to this idea by my coach, Courtney. She is an extraordinary coach, thinker, and potentially somewhat dangerous mind reader. Often when I say, “Nah, that's not the important detail of the story, let's focus on this other part,” she'll pause and smile.

There will be an awkward silence until I concede and say, “Okay. We can go back to that detail for just a second if it will make you feel better.”

Again, nothing but a slight smile. I will finally give up and acknowledge that the moment I'm dodging is not a small part of the story—it's the entire story of why I was proud of how I showed up or why I needed to circle back and apologize.

On one such occasion, I told her about a really terrible meeting I'd had earlier that day, and she said, “It sounds like you were below the line.”

I asked her what she meant, and in the course of ten minutes, she reorganized how I show up at work, with my kids, and in my marriage. Again, I'm not exaggerating one bit. I was even weepy when we got off the

call. When she asked me why, I explained, “For two reasons. One, this is going to help me every day. It’s going to make me a better partner, mom, leader, and person. And I’m sad that I’m just now learning this. I’m sad I didn’t know about this sooner.”

I teach it the way that Courtney taught me and how she’s taught it to our senior leaders.

The line is fear. When we’re above the line, we feel fear and we acknowledge it, and we’re not unknowingly acting from it. We’re feeling it and we’re able to maintain the wheel. We’re driving with awareness.

When we’re below the line, we’re acting from fear and our behaviors are mostly outside our awareness. Fear is driving.

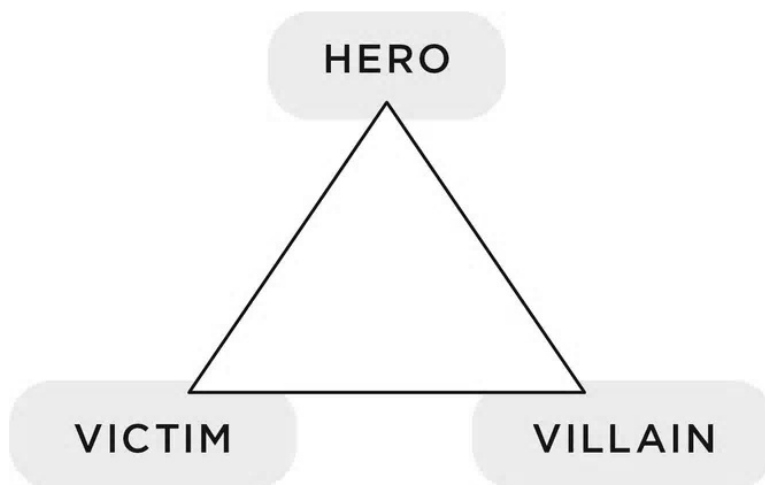
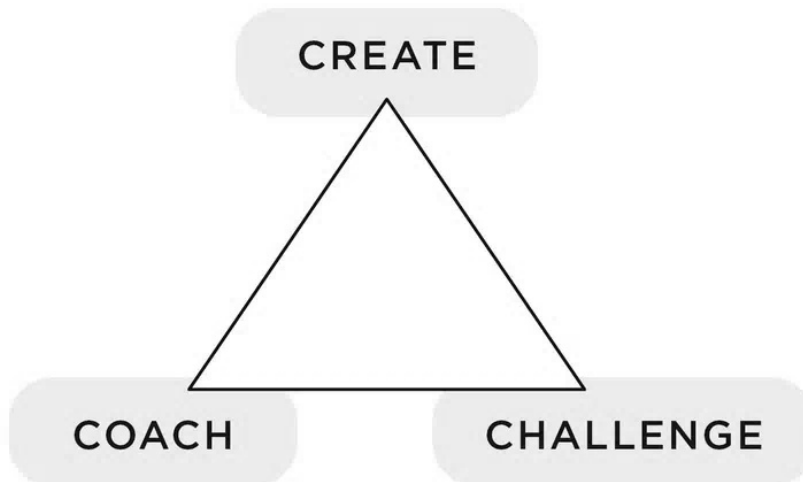
Below the line, our behaviors typically fall into one of three roles—the hero (rescuer), the villain (persecutor), or the victim. These align with Stephen Karpman’s model of the Drama Triangle developed in 1968.

Above-the-line roles are creator, challenger, and coach. These are based on David Emerald’s 2005 Empowerment Dynamic.

This framework has evolved over the years and I’m keeping it very clean and straightforward in my explanation, but please see the attribution note on the image below so we can give credit where credit is due.

ABOVE / BELOW THE LINE

PRACTICE



ATTRIBUTION: It appears that the concept of “above the line/below the line” originated with Robert Kiyosaki, the author of *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*. In Carolyn Taylor’s book *Walking the Talk*, Taylor acknowledges Kiyosaki as the source of her introduction to the idea. She goes on to explore the “above the line/below the line” concept in depth, applying it to leadership and organizational culture. The Conscious Leadership Group (Jim Dethmer, Diana Chapman, and Kaley Warner Klemp) popularized the framework among coaches and leadership consultants in their book, *The 15 Commitments of Conscious Leadership*. They also advanced the concept by adding Stephen Karpman’s Drama Triangle and David Emerald’s Empowerment Dynamic.

To breathe some life into this concept, let me give you some examples that are hard to share because they're real.

—

MY TEAMMATE: We accidentally copied the wrong person on an email, and there was some information about Josh's new book in the email. The new book is under wraps, and we're not sure how to handle it.

ME [BELOW THE LINE]: This is not the first time this has happened. No one understands how shitty I look when we do this. People trust me with early drafts, and this is how we treat them? From now on, I'll do it myself. Clearly no one knows how hard this is on me. It doesn't make y'all look careless. It makes me look bad.

Hero— I'll do it myself.

Victim— No one understands.

Villain— Someone needs to take the blame for this!

ME [AWARE AND NAMING WHAT'S HAPPENING]: Holy shit. This puts me way below the line. I'm going to need a minute.

ME [BACK IN FIFTEEN MINUTES]: Okay. These situations are rare, and I know people are very careful. I can go below the line in a second with this because people trust me, and I take it very seriously. I also know that your team takes it seriously. Can we dig into how it happened and how we can put systems in place that will protect us against its happening again?

Challenger— How do we fix this?

Coach— We should look for patterns.

Creator— We need to build systems that support people we trust in doing good work.

What's critical to understand is that the awareness, naming, and pause are the big win. Taking the time I need is my strength and courage. This is a practice. And when a critical mass of people start practicing this strategy—it's a culture changer.

Let's Call a Time-Out

Just a few days ago, on a call with more than ninety senior leaders, one of the most senior leaders shared a story about going below the line while giving hard feedback to a direct report. He said to the entire group, “I just stopped us and said, ‘I’m below the line. This is not productive. Can we pause and circle back in an hour or so?’”

He told the group that his direct report responded with “I’m below the line as well. I appreciate the time-out. An hour will be great.”

This exchange sounds simple, but it took courage, vulnerability, and skill. Such exchanges create trust, respect, and honesty.

This is what transformation looks like. This is what it means to break old ways of communicating and risk trying something new. This is what it looks like when a critical mass of people are building new muscles at the same time.

This is how organizations create strong ground.

Fear and Friends

I’ve found that I’m the most challenged to remember this practice when I don’t immediately recognize that I’m in fear because fear has shown up as anger. Anger is a powerful emotion that is often ignited by a sense of injustice. It can serve as a powerful catalyst for courage, love, change, compassion, or justice if we tap into its power to transform. But when we just hold on to it, it’s crushing.

In most cultures, it’s more acceptable, and even safer, to be angry than it is to be in fear or sadness or vulnerability. When it comes to my kids, 90 percent of my frustration turns out to be fear. *What if they get hurt? What if they’re not safe? What if they can’t pull off this thing that’s important to them?*

I grew up in a family in which being pissed off was fine. Being in fear was not. It’s taken a lot of unlearning, and my Above/Below the Line Practice has helped me in an unexpected way. I recognize the

hero/villain/victim language before I even know what I'm feeling sometimes.

As soon as I hear myself say something close to one of these, I know I've got a below-the-line problem:

I'll do it myself.

I'm on my own.

Nobody gets it.

It's harder on me than it is on other people.

I care more.

I don't give a shit whether you like me or not.

I'll be the bad guy. I don't care.

From here, I can say something to myself, like: *Yikes, I'm in some fear or I'm pissed—I must be in fear*. Or, my favorite, *Easy does it, Brené. You can be really scary when you're scared*.

Building Up and Breaking Down

If you've ever practiced anything—playing the guitar, making free throws in basketball, yoga, a new language, drawing—you know it's hard and requires deliberate practice. That uncomfortable stretching and failing and learning and moving forward a slow inch at a time. As adults, so many of us are torn between the achiness of muscles that are atrophying from not trying new things and the reluctance to subject ourselves to the vulnerability and awkwardness of not being good at something.

This practice transformed my life. I've seen it help many, many people. I have never, however, seen anyone master it from the get-go. It's a practice.

As a former competitive swimmer and someone who fell in love with her husband a lifetime ago when we were coaching swimming and lifeguarding together, I loved Bonnie Tsui's beautiful book *Why We Swim*. As soon as I heard she had a new book, titled *On Muscle: The Stuff That Moves Us and Why It Matters*, you can imagine my excitement.

As we think about our Above/Below the Line Practice and how it can be a part of finding our strong ground, I find these words from Bonnie's new book inspiring:

The way you build muscle is by breaking yourself down. Muscle fibers sustain damage through strain and stress, then repair themselves by activating special stem cells that fuse to the fiber to increase size and mass. You get stronger by surviving each series of little breakdowns, allowing for regeneration, rejuvenation, regrowth. Building up and breaking down: We exist in this constant cycle. In fact, it is the cycle that allows us to exist. When it ceases, so do we.

In the next chapter, you'll meet Dr. Sarah Lewis. Including her as one of my teachers in this book was an easy decision because you'll find her thinking, fingerprints, and heartprints across the chapters.

Over the next couple of pages, I'll introduce you to her and her work on failure, which I find myself rereading and sharing. You'll see her work again in Chapter 15, where she walks us through the meaning of mastery and the power of aesthetic force.

CHAPTER 13



Sarah Lewis

On Mastery, Creativity, and Failure



DR. SARAH LEWIS IS THE founder of Vision & Justice and the John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Humanities and associate professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. She earned her B.A. from Harvard University, her M.Phil. from the University of Oxford, her

M.A. from the Courtauld Institute of Art, and her Ph.D. from Yale University. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The first time I had Sarah on my podcast, we talked about her breathtaking book *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*. This book radically shifted my thinking on what it means to fully give over to the passionate pursuit of becoming better. I find her storytelling and research, along with her ability to hold the tension of paradox and nuance in her work, beautiful and, at times, daunting. I can also say with great assurance that her research on the history and power of aesthetic force helped me understand why I've always believed that images and visuals shape our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in ways we barely understand.

Because Sarah's work spans so many areas, rather than putting all of the teachings that have moved me together in a single chapter, I've added them to the specific sections where her thinking has changed mine.

Dr. Sarah Lewis on her book *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*

This book is about the advantages that come from the improbable ground of creative endeavor. Brilliant inventions and human feats that have come from labor—an endeavor that offers the world a gift from the maker's soul—involve a path aided by the possibility of setbacks and the inestimable gains that experience can provide. Some could say that what we call “work” often does not. “Work is what we do by the hour,” author Lewis Hyde argues, but labor “sets its own pace. We may get paid for it, but it's harder to quantify.... Writing a poem, raising a child, developing a new calculus, resolving a neurosis, invention in all forms—these are labors.”

A division line often positions creativity, innovation, and discoveries as a separate, even elite, category of human endeavor: chosen, lived out by a few. Yet our stories challenge this separation. If we each have the capacity to convert the excruciating into an advantage, it is because this creative process is crucial for pathmaking of all kinds.

What we gain by looking at mastery, invention, and achievement is the value of otherwise ignored ideas—the power of surrender, the propulsion of the “near win,” the critical role of play in achieving innovation, and the importance of grit and creative practice.

Sarah on Failure

This book rarely uses the word *failure*, though it is at the heart of its subject. The word *failure* is imperfect. Once we begin to transform it, it ceases to be that any longer. The term is always slipping off the edges of our vision, not simply because it’s hard to see without wincing, but because once we are ready to talk about it, we often call the event something else—a learning experience, a trial, a reinvention—no longer the static concept of failure. (The word was, after all, not designed for us, but to assess creditworthiness in the nineteenth century, a term for bankruptcy, a seeming dead end forced to fit human worth.) Perhaps a nineteenth-century synonym comes closer—*blankness*—a poetic term for the wiping clean that this experience can provide. It hints, too, at the limitlessness that often comes next. Trying to find a precise word to describe the dynamic is fleeting, like attempting to locate francium, an alkali metal, measured but never isolated in any weighted quantity or seen in a way that the eye can detect—one of the most unstable, enigmatic elements on the Earth. No one knows what it looks like in an appreciable form, but there it is, scattered throughout ores in the Earth’s crust.

When we don’t have a word for an inherently fleeting idea, we speak about it differently, if at all. There are all sorts of generative circumstances—flops, folds, wipeouts, and hiccups—yet the dynamism it inspires is internal, personal, and often invisible.

It is a cliché to say simply that we learn the most from failure. It is also not exactly true. Transformation comes from how we choose to speak about it in the context of story, whether self-stated or aloud.

More about Sarah, whom I consider a friend and who is always an inspiration:

Sarah Lewis, Ph.D., is the author of *The Unseen Truth: When Race Changed Sight in America*; *The Rise: Creativity, the Gift of Failure, and the Search for Mastery*; and the forthcoming book *Vision & Justice*. Lewis is the editor of the award-winning volumes “Vision & Justice” by *Aperture* magazine and an anthology of the work of Carrie Mae Weems (MIT Press). In her role as founder of the catalytic civic and cultural initiative Vision & Justice, she is the organizer of the landmark Vision & Justice Convening and co-editor of the Vision & Justice Book Series. Her awards and recognition include the Walter Channing Cabot Fellowship, an honorary degree from Pratt Institute, the Infinity Award, the Andrew Carnegie Fellowship, a Cullman Fellowship, the Freedom Scholar Award (ASALH), the Arthur Danto / ASA Prize from the American Philosophical Association, and the Photography Network Book Prize. Her writing has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Artforum*, and *The New York Review of Books*, and her work has been the subject of profiles in *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. Lewis is a sought-after public speaker, with a mainstage TED Talk that has received more than 3 million views to date.

CHAPTER 14



Pocket Presence

“H E LEADS AN ORGANIZATION OF almost forty-five hundred people. He has really strong executive presence. People listen to him. Do you think he can do it?”

It’s never good when I’m working inside an organization doing Dare to Lead work and a member of the C-suite or a human resources leader asks me a question like this. It happens fairly often (in the beginning of our relationship and normally just once) and the conversations always go something like this:

Me: I have no idea if he can do it. I don’t have enough information on his history, how he’s doing related to your expectations, his track record and how he contributed to the accomplishments attributed to him, how he builds trust, how he thinks about his teams and how they think about him, how he responds under pressure, et cetera.

And I never know what people mean when they say “executive presence.” I know a lot of people who can command people’s attention and even get them to listen. I’m more interested in what he’s saying and how he’s thinking. And even if those things are on point, is he getting people to act together to make good work happen in a way that would make you and other stakeholders proud?

Asker: Well, you’ve seen him under some pressure in these meetings and you’ve observed him doing the Dare to Lead work—that can be tough learning and practice.

Me: Yes, and he's shown up really well in the Dare to Lead work. He's leaning in. He's listening. He seems to be very engaged with his group. He's asking great questions. He's openly sharing about his wins, losses, and learnings. But I don't know how this translates to other contexts.

Asker: You saw him handle a very difficult competitor situation.

Me: Yes. And if you want to know how I think he did in that specific situation, I can offer you some very specific positive feedback on what I saw. And that's a single observation. Maybe he was treed.

Asker: In a tree?

Me: No. It's a tennis term. It's when you're surprisingly playing way above your skill level and you're hoping that it's permanent and that your new abilities apply across all court situations and opponents, but unfortunately, nothing scales. Over time or in different contexts, your level of play retreats back to where you were before your streak.

Asker: What would you need to see to know if he's got what it takes to do the job?

Me: I'd probably want to know why you're asking, first. Then I'd need to know what you believe success looks like for him and why. Then I'd want to see him in the pocket five or ten times.

Asker: In your pocket?

Me: No. I'm talking about *pocket presence*, a football term. I'm saying I would need to see him under pressure in several different contexts and up against a lot of different variables. And in the metaphor, being good in the pocket is an evaluation of many different skills and mindsets and thinking abilities developed over years. It's also a measure of a leader's ability to build trust, courage, self-awareness, humility, discipline, and emotional regulation in a team.

Asker: He's not a quarterback.

Me: Bummer. That would be easier. In leadership, we still need to understand the same things—a person's skill sets, mindsets, awareness levels, thinking abilities and strategies, and all of the other things I mentioned. This means observing him, building relationships with him, challenging him, coaching him, and developing disciplined feedback systems. It takes as much time to build these abilities in a leader as it does in a quarterback, but unfortunately, we don't make these investments. The leader doesn't benefit from multiple coaches, significant investments in their training and development, strategic challenging and feedback to develop mastery, and sophisticated recovery and reflection mechanisms. If they had that level of support, they'd be unstoppable. And we'd have great data on their strengths, abilities, and areas for growth. You wouldn't have to ask me to guess the abilities of someone whose success you depend on in a very substantial way.

Asker: [normally pretty quiet]

Me: I can't answer your question, but I can ask you if you're willing to make these kinds of investments in your people so you won't have to ask anyone to guess. You'll know.

Three Seconds and 1,200 Pounds

In American football, there are two teams of eleven players on the field—an offensive team and a defensive team. Across college and professional teams, quarterbacks are universally recognized as offensive leaders. They call the plays and make critical decisions on all of the offensive movements. In the vast majority of cases, the team quarterback is also one of the team captains and holds formal and informal leadership roles.

During a game, when the team is on offense, the quarterback's main job is to start each play by receiving the ball and then to decide, very quickly, whether to throw it to a teammate, hand it off, or sometimes run with it

himself. As soon as the quarterback gets the ball, opponents from the defense basically try to demolish him, and hopefully in the process knock or strip the ball out of his hand so they gain possession. To protect the quarterback as he initiates the play, his teammates form a protective U-shaped wall around him—the area inside of which is called “the pocket.”

Pocket presence is the quarterback’s ability to sense what’s happening around him inside the pocket while keeping his eyes downfield on teammates who are running routes and looking for passes. Quarterbacks with the best pocket presence are said to “feel” where the defenders are and move around inside the pocket using a complex set of highly developed skills.

To understand the pressure, consider that college defensive players—the ones coming after the quarterback—typically weigh between 250 and 300 pounds. In the National Football League, the average weight of a defensive tackle is around 310 pounds. In both college football and the NFL, usually four defensive players—known as the defensive linemen—are primarily responsible for breaking through the pocket. For a quarterback, that’s about 1,200 pounds of fury coming their way.

How long does the pocket protection last? In both college and professional football, the quarterback has about 2.5 to 3 seconds before the pocket collapses—meaning until those defensive linemen get through the protective offensive line. From the comfort of our couches, it feels much longer.

My dad played football in high school and college, so we learned about pocket presence at about the same time that we learned our ABCs. My dad was a pulling guard (a quarterback protector), so he really appreciated good pocket presence. Growing up, we watched games together, and my dad would always test my football IQ with questions like “Good pocket presence or no, sis?” or “What’s the call?”—which was how he challenged me to identify why a penalty flag was thrown before the referees made their signals. I would shout out “Holding,” or “False start on the offense—they’ll be backing ’em up five yards.” My dad would smile proudly and pump his fist in the air.

Fast-forward to December 2024, when I was standing on the field at Darrell K Royal–Texas Memorial Stadium at the University of Texas at Austin with my friend Emmanuel Acho, watching the Longhorns play against the Clemson Tigers in the first round of the college football

playoffs. Emmanuel, now an Emmy-winning broadcaster and *New York Times* bestselling author, was a linebacker for the Longhorns. In 2012, he was drafted into the NFL by the Cleveland Browns, and he also played as a linebacker for the Philadelphia Eagles.

As we stood cheering on our alma mater while they beat Clemson in their first ever matchup, I asked Emmanuel how he would define *pocket presence*. I was fascinated by his answer. He said, “Pocket presence is being able to read the entire field without being able to see all of it, trusting yourself and the people around you, and being a decisive leader under pressure.”

Weirdly, my very first thought was *Damn! I like pocket presence. These skills are so much more valuable than executive presence.*

As you can probably tell, I’m not a fan of the term *executive presence*. First, in my experience, the term is often used as code for *You don’t look or sound like what a leader is supposed to look or sound like*. Second, the research is all over the place and it’s still difficult to come up with a solid definition and an agreed-upon list of characteristics, behaviors, or traits that support the concept.

Last, while I appreciate the ongoing debate over whether executive presence is how you’re perceived or based on your actual skills and abilities, I think there’s still too much emphasis on old stereotypes of how command-and-control leaders are supposed to dress, walk, talk, and demand attention. We’ve all seen terrible and ineffective leaders who can command and demand a ton of attention. *You’ve got our attention, now what in the hell are you talking about?*

When I texted my friend Adam Grant, saying “I’m going to talk about the problems with executive presence in this book” and asking his thoughts, I got the dreaded three-dot iPhone text response for a solid two minutes. I was thinking, *Oh, shit. Maybe that’s sacred ground in the leadership world.*

Finally Adam’s text came up, and it read “YES, please. Executive presence is cover for discriminating against women and introverts.” His follow-up text read “While you’re at it, could you do a smackdown of charisma too?”

His texts capture exactly what I don’t like about the concept of executive presence. I’ve had many personal experiences that exemplify my concerns with how people use the term and how we evaluate people as having it or not. Recently I was in a room with a group of leaders who were

mostly men. All of the leaders were younger than me, and in terms of power structures, I held no formal authority, but my experience level was recognized by most of the people at the table. The strategy conversation was tough, respectful, and productive. On a break, one of the only other women in the room came up to me and said, “You have such strong executive presence. How did you develop that?”

Flagged by her use of that term, I asked her what specifically she had observed in me that led her to think that I had executive presence. She thought about it for a few seconds and said, “You know all about the company we’re discussing—even small details about their history. You’re pressing us with all the right questions. You keep slowing us down and asking if we’re sure about the assumptions we’re making.”

I replied by asking her two questions: “How did you prepare for the meeting today, and how long did it take?”

She paused and said, “I familiarized myself with the agenda, and I took notes on questions I wanted to ask. It took me about twenty minutes.”

I said, “I read articles and blogs on the company’s performance and strategies for at least two hours. I listened to the last two earnings calls, and, including the time it took me to look up some of what I was hearing on those calls but didn’t understand, that took me an additional two hours. I also watched an hour of interviews with the new CEO. Don’t confuse preparedness with presence. I’m not an executive commanding attention at the table, I just believe preparation is a form of respect, both self-respect and respect for others, so I invest a lot of time in trying to do it well.”

It’s important that we don’t confuse the mystery of presence with the power of preparation, or what drives preparation for many of us—curiosity and the passionate pursuit of learning. In my experience, the most compelling leaders are those who show respect for others by being prepared, who show courage by demonstrating a learner mindset, and who show confidence by demonstrating humility.

Like quarterbacks after a snap, leaders need to be able to read and understand context and positioning that we can’t always see. We need high levels of awareness across many dimensions, we must trust ourselves and the people around us, and we need to make tough calls under pressure. Mercifully, there’s not 1,200 pounds of clobbering pressure roaring toward us, though it can definitely feel like that some days.

Based on the data we've collected over the past seven years of transformation work, I don't see the traits and characteristics that are often referenced in the executive presence research, like gravitas, style, and appearance, as predictors of daring leadership. I see training, discipline, and mastery. Case in point: During the meeting I just described, I was wearing jeans, sneakers, and a Liverpool Football Club baseball hat. Yes, the mighty Reds certainly command some love, but I was not wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and a power tie, or an expensive hoodie, or any other prescribed outfit that is supposed to convey executive authority.

I became deeply curious whether three seconds of critical decision making in the midst of crushing pressure on a football field might be able to teach us valuable lessons about leading at every level in organizations. I think the answer is a resounding yes, but only if we slow down those three seconds and thoroughly dissect the mindsets, skill sets, tool sets, coaching sets, and system sets that support that level of leadership excellence.

It Starts with Courage. Then Comes Confidence.

To get into the nitty-gritty of pocket presence, I interviewed Steve Sarkisian, head football coach for the Longhorns. Coach Sark is widely recognized in the college football and NFL communities as an elite quarterback coach, having served as a quarterback coach and offensive coordinator for programs like the University of Southern California (USC), Alabama, and the NFL's Atlanta Falcons as well as head coach at the University of Washington and USC. At the University of Texas, he's brought the team from a 7–3 season in 2020 (a pandemic year with a shortened season) to a 13–3 season, including a conference title. And under his direction, UT had twelve NFL draft picks in 2025 (a university record) versus three, which is the number we had the year before he started.

Not only is Coach Sark great at winning games, he's a deep believer in culture and dedicates significant time and effort to building a team that is strong in spirit and mind, in addition to developing tough competitors on the field. Coach Sark and I agreed that Emmanuel Acho's definition of pocket presence was a great starting point: "To read the entire field without

being able to see all of it, trusting yourself and the people around you, and being a decisive leader under pressure.”

When I asked Coach Sark to name the skills underlying this definition, he smiled and, without a second of hesitation, said, “It starts with courage.”

When I asked why, he explained, “You can’t see it all. You just can’t. You’re standing in a space surrounded by the unknown. And, in a stadium of a hundred thousand people, the biggest, toughest, and meanest guys are coming after you. They are coming *right for you* and *right at you*. In that moment, you must look and act beyond that immediate threat. It really starts with courage. Then comes confidence.”

As I tried to imagine that pressure, I asked, “How does that even work?”

Our conversation was an exhilarating back-and-forth with him describing behaviors, telling stories, and giving many examples of successes and failures, and me playing back what I was hearing to make sure my field notes were accurate. Before we ended our conversation, Coach Sark hit with me with two big insights:

1. “The enemies of pocket presence are fear and arrogance. When you get into fear because you don’t trust yourself, your teammates, our process, our plan, or your training—you play small. When you get too arrogant and you think this is easy—which it is not—you get careless. Playing small and being careless both lead to serious problems. In game play, the problem is turning over the ball. The bigger problem, however, is getting injured. Both fear and arrogance will get you hurt. You can’t play small and you can’t be careless.”
2. “How a quarterback does in the pocket is just one part of their job as a leader. Their leadership abilities with the team off the field matter as much, and actually dictate how much trust they have from their teammates on the field. With our team, we’re talking about love and connection. These are the real drivers of high-impact leadership.”

Pocket Presence and Grounded Confidence

Using grounded theory methodology to code data from my conversation with Coach Sark, from Emmanuel Acho's definition of pocket presence, and from publicly available interviews with football analysts, I came up with a list of mindsets, skill sets, and general abilities that are critical for pocket presence.

Then I used the same methodology to code data from the Dare to Lead evaluations we've collected over the past five years, the CEO and CHRO intake forms we use to assess fit for Dare to Lead work, and a qualitative content analysis of questions and comments I receive in the online "office hours" I facilitate for senior leaders across organizations where we work.

The leaders I work with personally are members of the C-suite or their direct reports. Their questions and comments track with shifting pressures in organizations in real time. From AI adoption and integration and decisions about localizing supply chain in the face of unpredictable tariff policy to hiring challenges and intergenerational work conflict, these data accurately reflect what's on the hearts and minds of leaders right now, and how their thinking and behavior must shift to meet the quickly changing demands.

In the end these two lists were almost identical, with the exception of the physical demands placed on quarterbacks, especially their footwork skills. I'm not saying that organizational leaders wouldn't benefit from some fancy footwork or tricky wheelchair maneuvers, but it's fair to say that the metaphor doesn't reach down to our feet. Most players and coaches believe that footwork skills are central to strong pocket presence. The Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Marino reportedly said, "Show me the film of my footwork and I'll tell you how I played."

What we call *pocket presence* on the football field is what I call *grounded confidence* in life. Some of these skill sets and mindsets were included in the original list of grounded confidence skills that appeared in *Atlas of the Heart*, but many are new and reflect the change and complexity that define how we live and work today. We'll go through all of them in the next chapter, but I wanted you to see them together here first.

Grounded Confidence

OUR CORE:

Self-Awareness • Metacognition • Emotional Awareness + Regulation •
Mindfulness • Systems Thinking

OUR STRENGTH:

Vulnerability • Courage • Trust • Compassion + Empathy • Connection •
Humility • Deep Curiosity • Mastery • Discipline • Power • Accountability
• Adaptability • Lock-In and Lock-Through Power

OUR AWARENESS:

Situational Awareness • Temporal Awareness • Visualization + Mental
Rehearsal • Multicultural Awareness

OUR THINKING:

Anticipatory Thinking • Strategic Thinking • Critical Thinking •
Paradoxical Thinking • Intuitive Thinking + Pattern Recognition
• Creative and Design Thinking • Symphonic Thinking

OUR COMMUNICATION:

LEGO+DUPLO • Emotionally Resonant Language • Chekhov's Gun •
Aesthetic Force • Communicate All of the Changes • Invisible Armies and
Bullshit Disclaimers • Metaphors, Analogies, and Stories

Building Muscle for Life, Love, Parenting (and Leading)

If we go back to Chapter 1 and the strength training metaphor, I'm not daunted by what it takes to develop these new muscles. Based on my experience, the tools I'm sharing in this book will give you a solid foundation on which to build. Again, one or two of the tools in here are like the kettlebells of the exercise world—with the right form, they're going to strengthen five or six of these areas at one time. I also don't doubt anyone's capacity to find their strong ground and get their reps in, as they say in the gym. If you want it, you'll do it.

As the elements of grounded confidence became clear, I realized that these are not leading tools, these are living tools. It would be easy to stay in the leadership lane, as I'd planned. But honestly, behind the scenes, as soon

as this list emerged, I didn't think about my org or the leaders with whom I work. I immediately thought of my kids, who are twenty and twenty-six years old. I thought about the undergrad and graduate students I teach and how I want to integrate this learning into the classroom.

Yes, many of these mindsets and skill sets are already part of the leadership transformation work we do, and we'll go wider and deeper to make sure we're covering all of the new skills that emerged from this data. But what struck me was my first instinct to "protect my kids" with these skills, and my second instinct was not to be like the increasing number of people whom I've recently witnessed creating two groups of people: those who don't need to get smarter and those who do.

While my team and I are very selective about who we partner with for the Dare to Lead work, I end up in a lot of rooms where tech CEOs and senior leaders are speaking honestly about their lives and their personal use of the technology they're creating. What I've heard over and over is exactly what Nick Bilton shared about Steve Jobs in *The New York Times*. When asked how much his children love the iPad, Jobs responded, "They haven't used it. We limit how much technology our kids use at home."

Bilton explained in the article that Walter Isaacson, the author of the book *Steve Jobs*, spent a lot of time at Jobs's home, and Isaacson told him that the family didn't pull out gadgets; they constantly read books and talked a lot about history and art. I can confirm that the vast majority of tech leaders I've met have very strict rules about what devices their children can use, when they can use them, what apps they are allowed to download, and how much time they're allowed to spend on technology. What these leaders seem to have in common is a commitment to raising children who are voracious readers, who understand history, who study languages, and who are steeped in the liberal arts.

In the right rooms, many of them will say that they safeguard their own children against the products their companies make because they understand how the algorithms work and the emotional and cognitive toll on users. They know that the fight is on for eyeballs, attention, and money, and the best way to win sounds very much to me like creating dependency and addiction.

The other behavior that I find alarming is how many tech CEOs talk about the technical skills our children need to succeed while attributing

their own success to a much broader education. I'll share an example that I've seen play out over and over.

Early this year, I heard a founder of a multibillion-dollar tech company rattle off a list of technical skills that young people today need if they're going to be successful. Then he spent twenty minutes attributing his success to his deep study of stoicism, starting in college. I don't doubt that his technical skills contributed to his success, but it's clear that his study of philosophy was equally critical. Either this guy is incapable of straddling paradox, or, as I fear is actually the case, he believes that producers of tech and the holders of power need both, but it's better business that the consumers not worry their pretty little heads about stuff like philosophy, history, theology, sociology, psychology, mathematics, poetry, and literature. *Just keep scrolling.*

How do restricting technology and studying more widely across the liberal arts relate to our big list of critical mindsets and skill sets?

Reference sets and pattern recognition.

These constructs are considered fundamental because they are the cognitive engines that we use to organize, interpret, and apply knowledge across different contexts and domains. These are how we use metaphors and analogies, how we develop self-awareness, how we use diverse perspectives to think critically and strategically. Both reference sets and pattern recognition are the jet fuel for cross-disciplinary innovation, effective decision making, and creative problem solving. Last, both of these cognitive abilities help us to counter our cognitive biases and to think like scientists, not ideologues (as we heard about from Adam Grant in Chapter 6).

So, how do you develop deep reference sets and strong pattern recognition skills? Reading. Exposure to new ideas and new ways of thinking. Studying philosophy, history, theology, sociology, psychology, mathematics, poetry, literature.

Time and energy are finite. Sometimes we have to make choices between books and scrolling. Between passive watching and uncomfortable, deliberate practice in areas where we want to learn. I actually find myself expanding my reference sets and increasing my pattern recognition skills through several people I follow on social media. Yes, I have a saved file of my favorite haircuts and shoes, but I also follow philosophers, historians, and a wild group of linguists at Oxford who have

really interesting debates about history and language. It's not all or nothing. But it is intentional.

In the next chapter, I'm going to break down each of the grounded confidence mindsets and skill sets. Our attention and our thinking are hot commodities right now. If we're going to maintain our personal autonomy, not to mention our democratic society, we're going to need some muscle.

CHAPTER 15



Grounded Confidence

I FIRST INTRODUCED THE IDEA OF grounded confidence in my 2021 book *Atlas of the Heart*. At that time, I explained that it was still developing and that we were still collecting data. Given what we've collectively experienced over the past four years, I'm glad I didn't pretend like it was final.

I define *grounded confidence* as a brand of confidence that is built not on arrogance or posturing, but rather on the solid ground of self-awareness, courage, and practice. Grounded confidence is accepting and embracing learning and unlearning, practicing and failing, and, at its core, is driven by discipline and the joy of mastery.

Once we witness how courage can transform the way we lead, we can trade in the heavy, suffocating armor that keeps us small for grounded confidence that lifts us up and supports our efforts to be brave and connected.

After incorporating new data from our Dare to Lead work and what we've learned over the past four years, the heart of grounded confidence remains the same. However, as you can see from the previous chapter, the pressures and expectations have changed, and this has added to the list of mindsets and skill sets that make up grounded confidence.

Grounded confidence is its own collection of paradoxes.

- It's the boldest kind of confidence, *and* it's never arrogant.
- It's rooted in deep curiosity about ourselves and the world, *and* it requires some baseline knowledge about ourselves and how we move through the world.

- It's about mastering these mindsets and skill sets *and* knowing we'll never get there, we'll just get better—there is no arrival.
- We can learn how to accurately define the concepts on the list, but if we're not practicing the skills, the concepts mean very little.

Richard Rohr teaches that we grow spiritually much more by doing things wrong than by doing all of it right, and I've observed this to also be true when it comes to grounded confidence. Trying to put these mindsets and skill sets into practice and failing will be the most vulnerable part of the process *and* these experiences will teach us the most.

On a personal level, I'm looking for these mindsets and skill sets when we bring new folks into our org, *and* I've never hired anyone who has them all—only folks who are hungry and excited to learn them.

I am sharing this research with you, *and* I'm still very much a work-in-progress.

—

Note: In *Atlas of the Heart*, I provided a detailed mapping of eighty-seven human emotions and experiences. Our understanding of those essential emotions came from more than three years of research that combined what we learned from the academic literature with my own research, making connections between these often layered and complex experiences. When possible, I've borrowed many of the definitions for this chapter from the research that we did for that book. When there was new data to challenge, refute, or add to what I wrote in *Atlas*, I've included that here as well.

Also, I've made a small “you are here” map and included it at the top of the page whenever I introduce a new category of grounded confidence skills. My hope is that it's helpful, like the arrows painted on the floor inside the giant IKEA stores.

Grounded Confidence

OUR CORE:

Self-Awareness • Metacognition • Emotional Awareness + Regulation •
Mindfulness • Systems Thinking

OUR STRENGTH:

Vulnerability • Courage • Trust • Compassion + Empathy • Connection •
Humility • Deep Curiosity • Mastery • Discipline • Power • Accountability
• Adaptability • Lock-In and Lock-Through Power

OUR AWARENESS:

Situational Awareness • Temporal Awareness • Visualization + Mental
Rehearsal • Multicultural Awareness

OUR THINKING:

Anticipatory Thinking • Strategic Thinking • Critical Thinking •
Paradoxical Thinking • Intuitive Thinking + Pattern Recognition
• Creative and Design Thinking • Symphonic Thinking

OUR COMMUNICATION:

LEGO+DUPLO • Emotionally Resonant Language • Chekhov's Gun •
Aesthetic Force • Communicate All of the Changes • Invisible Armies and
Bullshit Disclaimers • Metaphors, Analogies, and Stories

Our Core

CORE | STRENGTH | AWARENESS | THINKING | COMMUNICATION

Self-Awareness • Metacognition • Emotional Awareness + Regulation
• Mindfulness • Systems Thinking

Let's go back to Chapter 1 and the hard but important news that my trainer Tony shared with me: *You have a weak core and that's why you're getting hurt. You're using compensating muscles on the court, and they're not efficient or sufficient for what you're doing.*

As you can see from the overview at the top of the page, there are five skill sets that make up our grounded confidence core. And, as mentioned in Chapter 7 and Chapter 14, developing these skills is the kettlebell workout.

These mindsets and skill sets are the large muscle groups that need to be strong so we don't default to inefficient muscle groups that weren't engineered to compensate for a neglected core.

Self-Awareness

As explained by Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of the bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence*, “Self-awareness means having a deep understanding of one's emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs, and drives. People with strong self-awareness are neither overly critical nor unrealistically hopeful. Rather, they are honest—with themselves and with others.”

I have not seen evidence of people being able to develop high levels of self-awareness without two things: a deep curiosity about their internal lives, and outside support. When I say *outside support*, I mean a coach, therapist, or mentor.

Our curiosity can show up as questions such as:

Why does this person piss me off every single time we interact?

What is it about fishing that makes it feel like the antidote to all my stress?

I did not like how I showed up with my team/partner/child.

What's going on?

I don't understand what's going on with me, but it's getting in my way.

I really appreciated how I handled this situation. How can I draw on this thinking and these skills in other situations?

Basically, we want to know what's going on under the hood. It's not enough for us to gas up the car or plug it in and go. We want to understand how we work and why. While the Above/Below the Line Practice is a tool you can use on your own to make good headway in developing self-awareness, I and other leaders have found that using the tool and being able

to talk about what you're learning (the reflecting part of change) is even more powerful.

A daring leader who has created a strong feedback culture may be one of those outside support people, but normally doing a deeper dive with someone who doesn't have influence over your job is better.

As I mentioned earlier, we learn as much as we teach when it comes to our interns, and we often hear that our professional feedback is the first an intern has received, possibly in their life. For the majority of our interns, it's also the first time anyone has suggested that they dig into what's driving certain behaviors. That can sound like this:

One behavior I've observed is that you have high levels of engagement in meetings until one of your peers disagrees with you or challenges one of your ideas or explanations. When that happens, you get very quiet and stop contributing. I'd like for you to think about what's going on for you when that happens. Your contributions are too valuable for you to stop making them when someone disagrees. Our internship program is a learning environment, and you might find that your eventual workplace is even more debate-oriented.

I'm happy to work with you to come up with strategies, and this may be the type of issue that requires some excavating. That's normally more helpful with a coach or therapist, depending on what's driving it. Every leader here leverages outside support. Just like the best athletes and teams have coaches, so do we. And as an organization, we are believers in and supporters of therapy as a way to dig deeper into our personal work.

I have to give a huge shout-out to our team members who run our internship programs. The vast majority of our interns have told us that the feedback they've received about increasing their self-awareness has changed their careers and lives. And to date, the vast majority of them have had the courage to ask for help from coaches or therapists.

Metacognition

I really wish there was an easier, less off-putting word than *metacognition*. I know it makes sense (cognition = thinking and meta = self-referential) but it's tough. I think about it like a book about writing books or a movie about making movies. Metacognition is thinking about our thinking.

According to the University of North Carolina Learning Center, metacognition is “thinking about how you think and learn” by using self-reflective questions to assess what you know, how you learn, and what you still need to work on.

One of the primary reasons that metacognition is imperative is demonstrated in persuasive research showing that it’s our best defense against cognitive biases—those seductive thinking patterns that fuel our confidence about being right and our arrogant ideological thinking, when, in fact, we are actually somewhere between misinformed and dead-ass wrong. When we can analyze and evaluate our thinking, we are more likely to recognize and correct the bias.

In Chapter 6, where Adam Grant taught us how to think like a scientist, he walked us through three biases:

- The confirmation bias: seeing what we expect to see.
- The desirability bias: seeing what we want to see.
- The “I’m not biased” bias: We believe we’re more objective than others. (This one is Adam’s favorite.)

If I have a favorite bias—the one I really love to hate—it’s for sure the Dunning-Kruger effect, named for researchers David Dunning and Justin Kruger. The title of their 1999 paper says it all: “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments.” In their work, they have found that people with low ability or knowledge in an area overestimate their competence and don’t recognize their own lack of skills, and, conversely, people with high levels of skills may underestimate their competence and assume that what is easy for them is easy for everyone. If you want to add insult to injury, the Dunning-Kruger effect is part of a larger bias family called “illusory superiority” bias.

This one is sensitive for me because I get hooked when I see it in others, and I can see it in myself. When I catch myself, I literally say out loud: *Think about your thinking here.*

A good example of the Dunning-Kruger effect is my guitar playing. One commitment Steve and I made to each other when I was pregnant with our first child was a simple one: *They will know the classics.* They will recognize “Beast of Burden” by the Rolling Stones in less than five notes,

they will understand the complexity of Willie Nelson, they will know the genius of yacht rock, and they will know the compelling story of the Sugarhill Gang and be able to recite the poetry that is “Rapper’s Delight.” And everything in between.

We taught these lessons every day on the way to and home from school. We made good on our commitment. Both of our kids love music, and they regularly make us playlists to introduce us to their favorite bands and songs. Charlie has even become a great guitar player and his teacher, Leland, is an incredible musician whom we consider a part of our family.

One day, when Charlie and I were listening to the song “Cult of Personality” by Living Colour, I said, “I love the guitar in this song. Gimme your guitar, I think I can play it.”

Charlie smiled and said, “No doubt. But you’ll need to learn how to play the guitar first and maybe spend some time with Leland. Forty years of air guitar is not going to translate.”

I’ve never played a chord on an actual guitar in my life, but when I love a riff, I’m 100 percent confident I can play it—fueled by nothing but rebellion and CBGB energy. When Charlie hears a riff, he’s thinking about chords, and the accuracy and timing of technical things.

Metacognition (paying attention to my thinking) has taught me that I mistakenly and perilously maintain confidence about different talents by never, ever actually trying them. It’s dangerous to think you’re great at something you’ve never done. It’s the same problem we see in keyboard warriors who have solutions for every conflict and complex problem, yet have never once in their lives had the authority or responsibility to negotiate or solve anything of substance. Everything is easy until you do it.

For a long time I thought the cure for the Dunning-Kruger effect was humility, but it’s not. It’s metacognition. Thinking about how we think has to come first. It’s how we get to humility.

I think I know for these reasons.

I actually do not know.

I need to practice humility. (More details to come about humility.)

The flip side of overestimating our talents is the equally problematic bias of underestimating our skill. I’ve seen leaders get absolutely

exasperated by the inability of certain team members to think strategically about issues or to communicate more effectively about big ideas. I can't tell you the number of times I've sat down with a leader and drawn a map of their skills based on how I've seen them develop overall strategy or create a comms strategy.

I'll end up with a list of eight or nine skills that they tapped into to deliver a message or solve a problem. These leaders are often shocked to have their "natural abilities" and "flow" reduced to skill sets.

To help them make sense of this process, we'll go through each of the skills one by one, and I'll ask them to tell me about how and when they learned these skills. Most of them remember. If they're curious and open, they normally feel pretty frustrated and a little shitty. They're frustrated because they're starting to understand how much skill it takes to do what they're asking other people to do.

They can feel shitty because they have NOT invested in the skills building that their employees need, *and* they've spent hours, days, months, or years attributing the "lack of skills" to their employees' attitudes, interests, or levels of concern.

Again, the answer here starts with metacognition. *I don't understand my own thinking. I don't understand the skill sets that underpin how I think.*

I want to try to tie it all together here with a parting example of what metacognition is and how it works. Imagine that you're preparing for a history exam. You pause and ask yourself:

Do I understand this chapter well enough to explain it to someone else?

What strategies have helped me remember dates in the past—flash cards or timelines?

Should I quiz myself or reread the textbook?

When you do this, there are several of the grounded awareness tools being activated:

You are reflecting on your own thinking (metacognition and self-awareness).

You are evaluating your understanding (metacognition and self-awareness).

You are shifting your learning strategy (self-awareness and self-regulation).

The ability to understand and shift your thinking processes is the essence of metacognition.

Emotional Awareness and Regulation

We are emotional beings. And our emotions are layers of biology, biography, behavior, and backstory.

Biology: Understanding how emotions show up in our bodies and why.

Biography: Getting curious about how our families and communities shape our beliefs about the connection between our feelings, thoughts, and behavior.

Behavior: Examining our go-to emotions and behaviors when we're experiencing specific feelings.

Backstory: Recognizing the context of what we're feeling or thinking. *What brought this on?*

For this section on emotional awareness and regulation, I want to go back to the introduction in *Atlas*, starting with my reflections on our data that found that most people can identify and name three emotions—mad, sad, and happy. Here's what I wrote:

When I think about this data, I think back to a quote from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein that I came across in college: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." What does it mean if the vastness of human emotion and experience can only be expressed as mad, sad, or happy? What about shame, disappointment, wonder, awe, disgust, embarrassment, despair, contentment, boredom, anxiety, stress, love, overwhelm, surprise, and all of the other emotions and experiences that define what it means to be human?

Imagine if you had a shooting pain in your left shoulder that was so severe it actually took your breath away. The pain kept you from working, sleeping, and fully engaging in your life. When you finally arrive at the doctor's office and she asks what's going on, there's suddenly tape over your mouth and your hands are tied behind your back. You try yelling through the tape and freeing your hands so you can point to your shoulder, but there's no use. You're just there—inches and minutes from help and possible relief—but you can't communicate or explain the pain. I would imagine in that situation most of us would either fall to the floor in despair or fling ourselves around the room in uncontrollable rage. This is not that different from what can happen to us when we are unable to articulate our emotions. We feel hopeless or we feel a destructive level of anger.

Language is our portal to meaning-making, connection, healing, learning, and self-awareness. Having access to the right words can open up entire universes. When we don't have the language to talk about what we're experiencing, our ability to make sense of what's happening and share it with others is severely limited. Without accurate language, we struggle to get the help we need, we don't always regulate or manage our emotions and experiences in a way that allows us to move through them productively, and our self-awareness is diminished. Language shows us that naming an experience doesn't give the experience more power, it gives us the power of understanding and meaning.

Additionally, we have compelling research that shows that language does more than just communicate emotion, it can actually shape what we're feeling. Our understanding of our own and others' emotions is shaped by how we perceive, categorize, and describe emotional experiences—and these interpretations rely heavily on language.

Language speeds and strengthens connections in the brain when we are processing sensory information. But newer research shows that when our access to emotional language is blocked, our ability to interpret incoming emotional information is significantly diminished. Likewise, having the correct words to describe specific emotions makes us better able to identify those emotions in others,

as well as to recognize and manage the emotional experiences when we feel them ourselves.

Our ability to accurately recognize and label emotions is often referred to as emotional granularity. In the words of Harvard psychologist Susan David, “Learning to label emotions with a more nuanced vocabulary can be absolutely transformative.” David explains that if we don’t have a sufficient emotional vocabulary, it is difficult to communicate our needs and to get the support that we need from others. But those who are able to distinguish between a range of various emotions “do much, much better at managing the ups and downs of ordinary existence than those who see everything in black and white.” In fact, research shows that the process of labeling emotional experience is related to greater emotion regulation and psychosocial well-being.

These benefits seem to be related to the additional information we learn from recognizing what emotion we are feeling. David states that emotions “signal rewards and dangers. They point us in the direction of our hurt. They can also tell us which situations to engage with and which to avoid. They can be beacons, not barriers, helping us identify what we most care about and motivating us to make positive changes.” Work by other researchers substantiates David’s thinking, indicating that our emotions help us make sense of our surroundings and provide needed input for managing ourselves and responding effectively to others.

Emotional Awareness and Nervous System Stewardship

If you’re like me, you’re not interested in rolling out of bed and bungee jumping off a cliff first thing in the morning. But, given our current political climate, that’s exactly what it can feel like to check the news when I wake up. I’m so sick of “Breaking News” and “In an unprecedented move...”

Our nervous systems are on overload and the ability to understand and care for them is critical to our individual and collective well-being. To manage our nervous system, we need to understand how our body and mind react to stress, overwhelm, and anxiety, and how *nothingness* and *calm* are tools of deliberate recovery. I feel so strongly about building these skills that I’m sharing them here.

When it comes to stress and overwhelm, it's important to remember that naming emotions doesn't give the emotions power, it gives us power—the power to move through them, to make meaning, to make new choices, and to learn about ourselves and the world.

Before writing *Atlas of the Heart*, I used the terms *stress* and *overwhelm* interchangeably and without discernment. I no longer do that. The field of neurolinguistics is teaching us that language doesn't just communicate emotion, it *shapes* how and what we're feeling. I don't want to create overwhelm when what I'm actually feeling is stress.

For me, stress is barely managing the Whac-a-Mole game at the carnival. Overwhelm is leaving the carnival in tears *and* not being able to find my car.

The definition of overwhelm that I could *feel* the moment I read it is from Jon Kabat-Zinn, professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School and founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic and the Center for Mindfulness at the UMass Memorial Medical Center. Kabat-Zinn explains that overwhelm is the all-too-common feeling that “our lives are somehow unfolding faster than the human nervous system and psyche are able to manage well.”

That unfolding feels like mind, body, and spirit quicksand to me. There is growing evidence that the antidote to overwhelm appears to be nothingness, mindful play, or no-agenda “non-doing” time, as Kabat-Zinn describes it. I've now trained myself to couple the terms: I'm overwhelmed, and I need some nothingness. If the recovery doesn't demand nothingness, it's probably stress.

My team will know if I'm feeling overwhelmed because my commitment to myself is to immediately leave my office and head to the parking lot for a walk. Overwhelm = walk. What's turned out to be really wonderful is that I often return with a beautiful flower in my hand. There's a flower shop in our office complex. Sometimes when I'm walking, the door to the shop will open and someone will stick their hand out holding a single flower stem. No talking, no nothing. When I finally went in the shop one day to pick up flowers for the house, I asked them how that started. They answered with “You have a really serious face when you walk the parking lot. We know you love flowers and it couldn't hurt.”

ANXIETY

Anxiety can be both a state and a trait. This means that some of us feel anxious mainly in response to certain situations (state), while some of us can be naturally more predisposed to anxiety than others (trait).

Generalized anxiety disorder is different from both trait and state anxiety. According to Johns Hopkins Medicine, generalized anxiety disorder is “a condition where you worry constantly about everyday issues and situations.” It lasts longer than six months, and in addition to feeling worried, “you may also feel restlessness, extreme tiredness (fatigue), trouble focusing, grouchiness, increased muscle tension, and trouble sleeping.”

Approximately one-third of U.S. adults will be affected by an anxiety disorder in their lifetime; however, it is estimated that fewer than half of people with diagnosable anxiety disorders seek any type of professional treatment. It’s very difficult to work through an anxiety disorder without professional help.

I’ll add here that a lot of the data we see regarding Gen Z folks navigating the workplace is pointing to increased mental health issues, especially anxiety. We can question the lack of resilience demonstrated by these young folks *and* we should think about what it means to grow up on active-shooter drills, a global pandemic, the twenty-four-hour broadcasting of violent conflict, social media, an AI revolution, and adults engaged in vicious polarization.

Think about that reality combined with the fact that those of us who are generally uncomfortable with uncertainty are more likely to experience anxiety in specific situations as well as to have trait anxiety and anxiety disorders.

Our anxiety often leads to one of two coping mechanisms: worry or avoidance. Unfortunately, neither of these coping strategies is very effective.

WORRY

Worrying and anxiety go together, but worry is not an emotion; it’s the thinking part of anxiety. Worry is described as a chain of negative thoughts about bad things that might happen in the future. Worriers, like me, tend to think it’s a helpful coping strategy—it is not. We also believe “I can’t help it

—worry is how I’m wired.” This is incorrect. We *can* actually learn strategies to reduce our worrying. Again, help is important here.

AVOIDANCE

Avoidance is not showing up and often spending a lot of energy zigzagging around and away from that thing that already feels like it’s consuming us. And avoidance isn’t benign. It can hurt us, hurt other people, and lead to increased and mounting anxiety.

In her book *The Dance of Fear*, psychologist and writer Dr. Harriet Lerner writes, “It is not fear that stops you from doing the brave and true thing in your daily life. Rather, the problem is avoidance. You want to feel comfortable, so you avoid doing or saying the thing that will evoke fear and other difficult emotions. Avoidance will make you feel less vulnerable in the short run, but it will never make you less afraid.”

CALM

The bad news is that anxiety is contagious. The good news is that calm is also contagious. We all know (and have probably been) that person who ignites an anxiety firestorm in a team meeting. We also know (and want to be) that person whose mere presence brings a wave of calm to a hard situation. The good news is that calm is a skill set and a practice. We can get there.

I define *calm* as creating perspective and mindfulness while managing emotional reactivity. When I think about calm people, I think about people who can bring perspective to complicated situations and experience their feelings without overreacting to heightened emotions.

In my research for my book *The Gifts of Imperfection*, when people described themselves as calm or talked about other people describing them as calm, I asked a lot of questions about their habits, practices, and wiring for calm behavior.

What emerged from the data was so interesting to me. First, there are behaviors specific to cultivating and maintaining calm that include a lot of self-questioning.

The process seems to be centered on breath, perspective taking, and curiosity: Calm is an intention. Do we want to infect people with more

anxiety or heal ourselves and the people around us with calm?

As Harriet Lerner says, “Anxiety is contagious. Intensity and reactivity only breed more of the same. Calm is also contagious. Nothing is more important than getting a grip on your own reactivity.”

Do we match the pace of anxiety, or do we slow things down with breath and tone?

Do we have all the information we need to make a decision or form a response?

What do we need to ask or learn?

As someone who has to work on calm as a practice rather than having it as a trait, I’ve shortened the above to two quick questions I ask myself when I feel fear, panic, or anxiety rising:

Do I have enough information to freak out? The answer is normally no.

Will freaking out help? The answer is always no.

I’ve included a list of the emotions and experiences we explore in *Atlas*. We’re working on new research to expand this in 2026. We’ll post it for you on our website.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL LITERACY

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

PLACES WE GO...

WHEN THINGS ARE UNCERTAIN OR TOO MUCH

- Stress
- Overwhelm
- Anxiety
- Worry
- Avoidance
- Excitement
- Dread
- Fear
- Vulnerability

WHEN THINGS AREN'T WHAT THEY SEEM

- Amusement
- Bittersweetness
- Nostalgia
- Cognitive dissonance
- Paradox
- Irony
- Sarcasm

WHEN WE SEARCH FOR CONNECTION

- Belonging
- Fitting in
- Connection
- Disconnection
- Insecurity
- Invisibility
- Loneliness

TO SELF-ASSESS

- Pride
- Hubris
- Humility

WHEN WE COMPARE

- Comparison
- Admiration
- Reverence
- Envy
- Jealousy
- Resentment
- Schadenfreude
- Freudenfreude

WHEN WE'RE HURTING

- Anguish
- Hopelessness
- Despair
- Sadness
- Grief

WHEN THE HEART IS OPEN

- Love
- Lovelessness
- Heartbreak
- Trust
- Self-trust
- Betrayal
- Defensiveness
- Flooding
- Hurt

WHEN THINGS DON'T GO AS PLANNED

- Boredom
- Disappointment
- Expectations
- Regret
- Discouragement
- Resignation
- Frustration

WITH OTHERS

- Compassion
- Pity
- Empathy
- Sympathy
- Boundaries
- Comparative suffering

WHEN LIFE IS GOOD

- Joy
- Happiness
- Calm
- Contentment
- Gratitude
- Foreboding joy
- Relief
- Tranquility

WHEN IT'S BEYOND US

- Awe
- Wonder
- Confusion
- Curiosity
- Interest
- Surprise

WHEN WE FALL SHORT

- Shame
- Self-compassion
- Perfectionism
- Guilt
- Humiliation
- Embarrassment

WHEN WE FEEL WRONGED

- Anger
- Contempt
- Disgust
- Dehumanization
- Hate
- Self-righteousness

Mindfulness

Let's revisit the definition of mindfulness from Chapter 1. Jon Kabat-Zinn provides the following definition of mindfulness: "Awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally...in the service of self-understanding and wisdom."

Every grounded confidence mindset and skill requires us to pay attention. Mindfulness is paying attention. On purpose. The challenge for most of us when it comes to paying attention is the pause. The breath. Taking one minute—sixty seconds—to shine our flashlight of attention on ourselves.

I love that *attention* is from the Latin word *attendere*, meaning "to stretch toward." Mindfulness is stretching toward self-understanding. And it requires a pause. Speaking, responding, texting, processing, making decisions, and learning something wonderful or something hard all require space—a moment of pause—to do well.

In a recent interview with a journalist, I had a conversation that went something like this. They said, "I've heard people refer to your podcasts as pause-casts. You're not afraid of blank spaces."

I, of course, had to pause to think about my response. "No," I said. "When we don't leave any space between what people say to us and our response, it's normally because we're formulating our response while others are talking. There's zero learning in that. Zero connection. Zero elevation of ideas."

Additionally, not adhering to other people's timelines is an example of me "stretching toward" something different. Specifically, creating space in a suffocating world. I love the pause.

I'll admit that the pauses on the podcast can be so long that I have to give the wonderful producers and engineers specific instructions to not fill the space, to not shorten or shrink it. I'm probably overcompensating, because I'm a recovering breath-holder and fast talker. But I've come to appreciate what my friend Aiko Bethea says: "There is no growth or transformation without expansiveness."

Systems Thinking

In Chapter 10, I talked about my affinity for systems theory and I introduced you to my favorite systems theorist, Dr. Donella Meadows, a pioneering environmental scientist and writer.

Dr. Meadows explains systems thinking as the practice of seeing systems as wholes—focusing on the patterns of relationships, feedback, and purpose that connect the elements, rather than merely analyzing the parts in isolation. She wrote an incredible article titled “Dancing with Systems.” I probably read it at least once a month, when I find myself drifting toward the illusion of being able to predict and control the unpredictable and uncontrollable. Dr. Meadows defines systems as having three parts:

Elements—the individual parts of the system

Interconnections—the relationships that connect the elements together and determine how they interact

Function or purpose—the overall goal that the system is organized to achieve

This means that the systems in my life include teams, organizations, families, friend groups, communities, the environment, and so on. This is why I reread her work for professional *and* personal guidance.

Meadows writes:

People who are raised in the industrial world and who get enthused about systems thinking are likely to make a terrible mistake. They are likely to assume that here, in systems analysis, in interconnection and complication, in the power of the computer, here at last, is the key to prediction and control. This mistake is likely because the mindset of the industrial world assumes that there is a key to prediction and control.

I assumed that at first too. We all assumed it, as eager systems students at the great institution called MIT. More or less innocently, enchanted by what we could see through our new lens, we did what many discoverers do. We exaggerated our own ability to change the world. We did so not with any intent to deceive others, but in the expression of our own expectations and hopes. Systems thinking for

us was more than subtle, complicated mindplay. It was going to Make Systems Work.

But self-organizing, nonlinear feedback systems are inherently unpredictable. They are not controllable. They are understandable only in the most general way. The goal of foreseeing the future exactly and preparing for it perfectly is unrealizable. The idea of making a complex system do just what you want it to do can be achieved only temporarily, at best. We can never fully understand our world, not in the way our reductionistic science has led us to expect. Our science itself, from quantum theory to the mathematics of chaos, leads us into irreducible uncertainty. For any objective other than the most trivial, we can't optimize; we don't even know what to optimize. We can't keep track of everything. We can't find a proper, sustainable relationship to nature, each other, or the institutions we create, if we try to do it from the role of omniscient conqueror.

For those who stake their identity on the role of omniscient conqueror, the uncertainty exposed by systems thinking is hard to take. If you can't understand, predict, and control, what is there to do?

Systems thinking leads to another conclusion—however, waiting, shining, obvious as soon as we stop being blinded by the illusion of control. It says that there is plenty to do, of a different sort of “doing.” The future can't be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. Systems can't be controlled, but they can be designed and redesigned. We can't surge forward with certainty into a world of no surprises, but we can expect surprises and learn from them and even profit from them. We can't impose our will upon a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone.

Regardless of the system—our speaking and events process, our new collaboration with a partner, how we run daily stand-ups, how we run our social-work internship program—when I'm coaching on systems thinking, I

rely on questions that are based on what I've learned reading Donella Meadows:

1. How would you define *system*?
2. Can you identify the parts of this system?
3. How do they work together?
4. How do they impact each other?
5. How do information and feedback flow between the parts of the system?
6. Is there a place where feedback is getting stuck or not flowing?
7. Is the system output what we need or what we were hoping for?
8. If you had to predict where something was going to go off the rails in our system, where would it be?
9. What's something you'd change?
10. Walk me through exactly how that change would affect other parts of the system.

Systems thinking is core because without it, we can't even begin to understand ourselves, our teams, our organizations, and how the mindsets and skill sets on this list work together.

Our Strength

CORE | **STRENGTH** | AWARENESS | THINKING | COMMUNICATION

Vulnerability • Courage • Trust • Compassion + Empathy • Connection •
Humility • Deep Curiosity • Mastery • Discipline • Power • Accountability •
Adaptability • Lock-In and Lock-Through Power

I DISCUSS VULNERABILITY AND COURAGE in Chapter 7, “Lessons from Daring Leadership.”

Trust

Essential elements of grounded confidence include the ability to develop self-trust, to be trustworthy, and to be capable of building trust with others. In Chapter 7, I share the BRAVING acronym that we use for trust. What I think is helpful to add to this are two definitions that we use and share with the leaders with whom we work. Both come from Charles Feltman's *The Thin Book of Trust: An Essential Primer for Building Trust at Work*.

Feltman defines trust as “choosing to risk making something you value vulnerable to another person's actions.”

He defines distrust as a general assessment that “what is important to me is not safe with this person in this situation (or any situation).”

These definitions perfectly capture what emerged from our data on trust and mistrust. Charles and I had a great conversation about his work on the *Dare to Lead* podcast, if this is an area where you want to dig deeper.

Trust is more of a cognitive assessment than an emotion. But, as we all know, conversations about trust can bring up a lot of emotions, especially hurt and defensiveness. It's difficult to talk about trust in our personal or professional relationships, because it's such a big concept. If someone says “I don't trust you,” it feels like a general assault on our character. This is why we use the acronym to help identify specific elements and behaviors. Specificity can help us frame the conversation and start the building or mending.

Compassion and Empathy

The relationship between empathy and compassion is an important one to understand, especially right now, as they both seem to be misunderstood and preyed upon by folks who don't think it's a good idea that we practice either.

In *Atlas of the Heart*, I define compassion as “the daily practice of recognizing and accepting our shared humanity so that we treat ourselves and others with loving-kindness, and we take action in the face of suffering.” In the research literature, compassion is defined similarly, as a “virtuous response that seeks to address the suffering and needs of a person through relational understanding and action.”

In our research, we saw compassion emerge as a daily practice and empathy as a skill set that is one of the most powerful tools of compassion. What the majority of definitions across the research literature share is that compassion includes action. It's not just feeling, it's doing.

Compassion is fueled by understanding and accepting that we're all made of strength and struggle—no one is immune to pain or suffering. Compassion is not a practice of “better than” or “I can fix you”—it's a practice based in the beauty and pain of shared humanity.

I think there are several reasons why empathy has come under attack recently. First, people who are intent on using power-over and maintaining that power by periodically exercising cruelty to keep people fearful need to diminish the importance of empathy. If there's too much compassion or empathy, there will be resistance to the cruelty.

The second reason is because people don't understand the critical differences between two types of empathy: cognitive empathy and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy, sometimes called perspective taking, is the ability to recognize and understand another person's emotions. Affective empathy, often called experience sharing, is one's own emotional attunement to another person's experience.

Cognitive empathy drives connection and trust. *I can draw on my own experiences and my knowledge of emotions to recognize what you're feeling and I'm able to see you.* Affective empathy drives burnout and enmeshment. *I'm going to feel what you're feeling. Now I'm unable to help and we're both in a hole.*

Theresa Wiseman's attributes of empathy (plus one element from Kristin Neff's work) align most closely with our work:

1. Perspective taking: What is that experience like for you?
2. Staying out of judgment: Just listen, don't put value on it.
3. Recognizing emotion: How can I touch something within myself that helps me identify and connect with what the other person might be feeling? Check in and clarify what you are hearing. Ask questions.
4. Communicating our understanding about the emotion: Sometimes this is elaborate and detailed, and sometimes this is simply, “Shit. That's hard. I get that.”

5. Practicing mindfulness (from Kristin Neff): This is not pushing away emotion because it's uncomfortable, but feeling it and moving through it.

The most common question I get about empathy is “Do I need to have experienced the exact thing that someone has gone through to practice empathy?” The answer is no. Empathy is not connecting to an experience, it's connecting to an emotion. We may not have experienced _____□_____, but most of us have experienced a full range of human emotions, including grief, rage, confusion, joy, overwhelm, fear, disappointment, etc.

Interestingly, having experienced something similar to what someone is sharing can lead to an empathy miss because we relate to the experience versus the emotion and then over-identify or center our own experience, and our subsequent emotional experience, over what the other person is going through in the moment.

Empathy is a skill set that allows us to connect with people's struggles without taking on those struggles. In our Dare to Lead work, one of the highest-rated lessons is one that focuses on empathy misses (see [this page](#)). Again, this is one of the lessons that can be best taught by realizing where and when we get it wrong. Which we all do!

Connection

Here's the definition that emerged from my research on connection over many years: “The energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”

EMPATHY MISSES

1

I feel sorry for you.

SYMPATHY VERSUS EMPATHY

The person who responds with sympathy (“I feel so sorry for you”) rather than empathy (“I get it, I feel with you, and I’ve been there”). The subtext of this response is distance: These things don’t happen to me or people like me. If you want to see a shame cyclone turn deadly, throw one of these at it: “Oh, you poor thing” or “Bless your heart.”

2

You “should” feel shame!

JUDGMENT

The person who hears the story and actually feels shame for you. The friend gasps and confirms how horrified you should be. Then there is an awkward silence. Then you have to make this person feel better by convincing them that you’re not a terrible person.

3

You’ve let me down.

DISAPPOINTMENT

The person who needs you to be the pillar of worthiness and authenticity. This person can’t help you because they are too disappointed in your imperfections. You’ve let this person down.

4

This feels terrible. Who can we blame? You?

DISCHARGING DISCOMFORT WITH BLAME

Because shame is visceral and contagious, we can feel it for other people. This person immediately needs to discharge the discomfort and vulnerability of the situation by blaming and scolding. They may blame/scold you: “What were you thinking?” Or they may look for someone else to take the fall: “Who is that person? We’ll kick their butt.” Caution: Parents can fall easily into this when a child shares a shaming story with them. “How did you let this happen?”

5

Let’s make this go away.

MINIMIZE/AVOID

We minimize and avoid when we want hard feelings to go away. Out of their own discomfort, this person refuses to acknowledge that you’re in pain and/or that you’re hurting: “You’re exaggerating. It wasn’t that bad. You rock. You’re perfect. Everyone loves you.”

6 *If you think that's bad!*

COMPARING/COMPETING

This person confuses connecting with you over shared experiences with the opportunity to one-up you. "That's nothing. Listen to what happened to me one time!"

7 *Don't upset people or make them uncomfortable.*

COMPLIANCE VERSUS HARD CONVERSATIONS

This person thinks you should stay quiet and small rather than holding people accountable for language, comments, or behavior that marginalizes or dehumanizes others—especially if it creates discomfort or conflict: "I can't believe you said that to your boss!" or "I can't believe you went there!" or "You can't talk about that stuff with people" versus an empathic response of "That must have been hard—you were really brave" or "It's hard to stand up for what you believe in—thank you."

8 *I can fix this, and I can fix you.*

ADVICE GIVING/PROBLEM SOLVING

Sometimes when we see pain our first instinct is to fix it. This is especially true for those of us whom people seek out to help with problem-solving. In these instances, rather than listen and be with people in their emotion, we start fixing.

We have all experienced these empathic misses, AND we're all capable of being "these friends"—especially if someone tells us a story that gets right up in our own shame grille. We're human, imperfect, and vulnerable. It's hard to practice empathy when we're struggling with our authenticity or when our own worthiness is off-balance. That's why we have to commit to practicing empathy, screwing it up, and circling back.

Connection is why we're here; it is the strong ground from which we can stabilize and find solid footing in an unstable world, and it provides the foundation for us to grow, push, change direction, and leap.

In the absence of connection, there is always suffering. When we lose that contact with our strong ground and the shared strong ground of community, we lose parts of our humanity.

Humility

There's such power in contrasting the word origins of *humility* and *hubris*, which is an inflated sense of one's own innate abilities that is tied more to the need for dominance than to actual accomplishments. The origin of the word *hubris* is Greek and was used to describe pride and ambition so great that they offend the gods and lead to one's downfall. *Humility* comes from the Latin word *humilitas*, meaning "groundedness." Yes, groundedness!

"Humility is openness to new learning combined with a balanced and accurate assessment of our contributions, including our strengths, imperfections, and opportunities for growth," I wrote in *Atlas of the Heart*. I can sum up *humility* in one sentence that emerged from the research that informed the Dare to Lead program: *I'm here to get it right, not to be right.*

What humility isn't: downplaying yourself or your accomplishments, which according to researchers is modesty, not humility. It's also not low self-esteem or meekness or letting people walk all over you.

The emotion of humility involves understanding our contributions in context, in relation to both the contributions of others and our own place in the universe.

As I explain in *Atlas*, "the term 'intellectual humility' refers specifically to a willingness to consider information that doesn't fit with our current thinking. People who demonstrate intellectual humility don't lack confidence or conviction. They may hold strong views, but they are also open to hearing other points of view. They are curious and willing to adjust their beliefs when faced with new or conflicting information. Humility allows us to admit when we are wrong—we realize that getting it right is more important than needing to 'prove' that we are right."

I was recently a guest on the *Men in Blazers* podcast with Roger Bennett. Rog is one of my favorite people, and as a wonderful Scouser and an Everton FC fan, he's very supportive of my love affair with Liverpool FC. At one point in the interview he asked me if I thought that Arne Slot, the Liverpool coach, was an egoless leader. I had to think about it for a minute, but I responded, "no." I think Slot is disciplined in his humility. And I think that's different.

No one is fearless. They're disciplined in their courage. No one is egoless. They practice humility—they're disciplined in their humility. These are choices.

Deep Curiosity

Curiosity came up often as I was writing this book, and it is strongly related to mastery and what I call passionate pursuit. "Curiosity is recognizing a gap in our knowledge about something that interests us, and becoming emotionally and cognitively invested in closing that gap through exploration and learning. Curiosity often starts with interest and can range from mild curiosity to passionate investigation."

I like this definition that we used in *Atlas* because it captures both the feeling and thinking investment in exploring and learning new things, but it's not enough. What we need today is deep, chase-it-down, "I absolutely ~~need~~ want to know" curiosity. We need the kind of curiosity that makes chasing down the answer as exciting and fun as actually finding the answer.

Deep curiosity requires courage and humility for the simple reason that choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable. It's a surrender to uncertainty. We have to ask questions, admit to not knowing, risk being told that we shouldn't be asking, and, sometimes, make discoveries that lead to discomfort.

The future belongs to those who passionately seek understanding and learning, and who enjoy it.

Mastery

You were introduced to Dr. Sarah Lewis in Chapter 13. Her research and insight into mastery is a touchstone in my life, and she has provided strong ground for the leaders with whom I work.

Sarah writes, “Mastery requires endurance. Mastery, a word we don’t use often, is not the equivalent of what we might consider its cognate—perfectionism—an inhuman aim motivated by a concern with how others view us. Mastery is also not the same as success—an event-based victory based on a peak point, a punctuated moment in time. Mastery is not merely a commitment to a goal, but to a curved-line, constant pursuit.”

In all of my research across the decades, we have found that perfectionism is “What will other people think?” versus striving for excellence, which is driven by “What do I want?” Perfectionism is one of the most insidious forms of self-protection because no matter how we excel, we can never control other people’s perceptions of us.

What I find so important in Sarah’s description is her ability to capture the critical role that intrinsic motivation plays in mastery. In the pursuit of mastery, we keep learning and pursuing because it brings *us* joy and meaning, versus because we get external praise or validation.

Sarah also writes, “The mental discipline and flexibility required to sustain excellence is different, and often harder, than the exertion it took to get there in the first place. When the ground is too level, high-level performers can manufacture mountains, creating the experience of a not quite, the thrust forward of the incomplete.”

The way Sarah captures this defining characteristic of mastery is genius to me. You have to read the sentence a couple of times to feel it, then when you do feel it, it pierces the emotion that drives mastery directly. Mastery is about being a student of the game—whatever your game might be. When we achieve some level of confidence about our competence, we want a new climb—a new challenge. We seek out the feeling of “not quite.” We seek to experience the sense of incompleteness so we have something to charge after in passionate pursuit. We’re willing to sacrifice short-term achievement and we’re able to find the discipline for the new climb.

This is why mastery is, in Sarah’s words, “a curved-line, constant pursuit.”

Discipline

I'll confess that I find playing under University of South Carolina women's basketball coach Dawn Staley to be tough. She pushes me in ways that no one else can. She'd probably be surprised to hear this given that we've never met. This may seem like an important detail, but to me it really doesn't matter. What matters is that she lives by two mottos and, since the day I read them in an article she wrote for *The Players' Tribune* titled "The Secret," I repeat those mottos to myself many times a day:

A disciplined person can do anything.

Dare to do what you don't want to get what you do want.

This is what she yells at me from the bench when I want to quit or break a commitment to myself that's for myself.

I define *discipline* as the courage and commitment to do what you need to do in order to achieve what you want to achieve, even when you're not feeling motivated or inspired, and especially when, in the moment, you have to sacrifice the experience of short-term gratification for long-term achievement.

Courage is an important word here because discipline is brave and requires massive amounts of vulnerability. You have to sacrifice without assurances and guarantees. The commitment is equally important. Discipline is never about compliance, it's about commitment. It's about daring to do that thing you don't want to do to get what you want, when no one is looking.

Coach Staley's daring discipline is also a part of how she leads off the court. In this same article, she writes about her experience as a native Philadelphian coming into South Carolina to coach:

When I got to South Carolina, I didn't know anybody except the people who I came to work with. I didn't recruit most of the players that were there when I arrived. Culturally, South Carolina was different. My guard? Immediately up.

But after seven years and after building personal relationships with these players—relationships that require reciprocal trust and vulnerability—that guard is down. They're seeing more of me—

who I really am—than any other place I’ve been. I’m more myself now. That feeling of letting my guard down allows me to give my all. I credit our players for allowing me to coach the way I do—I don’t have to censor anything. I don’t have to put on airs. I feel what I feel when I feel it, and then I express it. That’s what the people and players of South Carolina have done: help me be myself.

You can’t ask a player to let you in if you don’t do the same.

Coach Staley capped off the 2023–24 season by guiding South Carolina to a historic perfect 38–0 record and its third NCAA national championship, earning her a fourth Naismith Coach of the Year honor as well as sweeping major coach of the year awards from the Associated Press, the U.S. Basketball Writers Association, and the Women’s Basketball Coaches Association.

In the 2024–25 season, she led the Gamecocks to a 35–4 overall mark, securing a share of the Southeastern Conference regular-season title, winning the SEC tournament for the ninth time under her leadership, and reaching the NCAA championship game.

This is such a powerful reminder that leading teams from a place of trust and vulnerability and letting ourselves be seen is also an act of disciplined leadership.

In Coach Staley’s words, “A disciplined person can do anything.”

—

I DISCUSS POWER WITH/TO/WITHIN in Chapter 7, “Lessons from Daring Leadership.”

Accountability

In *Dare to Lead*, I identify accountability as one of the key elements contributing to trust. In that context, accountability simply means that you own your mistakes, apologize, and make amends when necessary. You hold yourself and others accountable in respectful and productive ways. We’re not good at accountability because it requires vulnerability and discipline.

We're much better at blame, which is simply the discharging of anger and pain. Blame feels better (for a moment) but changes nothing. Aiko Bethea's work (see Chapter 17) is the most innovative and promising approach to creating cultures of accountability that I've seen in a long time.

Adaptability

Standing pat never works.

—FORMER SAN ANTONIO SPURS HEAD COACH AND LEGEND,
GREGG POPOVICH

Speaking of basketball coaches I love, let's talk about Coach Popovich or "Pop." As a San Antonian raised by San Antonians and married to a San Antonian, my feelings run deep for the Spurs.

Pop retired from the NBA as I was writing this, and it pained me to write the word "former" in his description. But I'm pretty sure he'd say, "Get over yourself, Brené."

Standing pat is actually an old draw poker term that means keeping the cards you've been dealt and not drawing any new cards to try to make your hand stronger. However, rather than conveying confidence, lately it's taken on more of a "take no risks" meaning.

The full quote from Pop in an interview with *The Washington Post* is exactly what leaders need to hear:

"You got to keep up with it, because teams change, players' careers change and the makeup of the team changes. Standing pat never works."

Adaptability has been core to the Spurs mindset. Not only have his players changed, the game itself has changed since he started coaching twenty-nine seasons and five NBA championships ago.

Those of us who follow the Spurs have seen Pop's commitment to culture and learning, his openness to diverse ideas and opinions, his disciplined approach to hard work and the fundamentals, his deep connection with his players and team combined with his ability to hold everyone accountable, and his courageous willingness to experiment.

He brought Euroleague basketball coach Ettore Messina to the coaching staff. Messina wrote this about Pop on his blog:

“What’s interesting is that he always pushes his coaching staff to argue with him. Sometimes he reminds me [of] one of those Greek philosophers, the sophists, who tried to find the truth through arguments. He really encourages discussion and variety of opinions, seeing them as a means to improve as a unit.”

Pop also brought on Becky Hammon to be the first full-time paid female assistant coach on an NBA coaching staff. That turned into an eight-year career in San Antonio, with Hammon becoming one of the top assistant coaches in the league. Yes, she is an absolute baller. She’s on my coach-love list! The WNBA Las Vegas Aces hired her in 2021, and that first season, Hammon led them to their first WNBA championship.

There’s a quote attributed to Jacob Riis, an early-twentieth-century Danish-American social reformer, journalist, and photographer, that’s hung in the Spurs locker room for close to three decades. The quote reflects Pop’s commitment to discipline and hard work, and it’s been translated into different languages for his players. It reads:

When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it, but all that had gone before.

What leaders often struggle to understand is that adapting *and* agility are hard skills, and, although it seems counterintuitive, they’re built on a strong foundation of very specific commitments, including commitments to:

1. Building a learning culture
2. Seeking out diverse ideas and opinions
3. Focusing on discipline, hard work, and the fundamentals
4. Connecting with the people we lead in a way that includes both care and accountability
5. Daring experimentation

Like my trainer Tony told me, you’re not going to build on dysfunction. Athletic stance, find the ground, then start.

I DISCUSS LOCK-IN AND LOCK-THROUGH POWER in Chapter 18.

Our Awareness

CORE | STRENGTH | **AWARENESS** | THINKING | COMMUNICATION

Situational Awareness • Temporal Awareness • Visualization +
Mental Rehearsal • Multicultural Awareness

As I was reading about the different types of awareness we need to develop, I started getting curious around two observations that have consistently surfaced over the past several years:

1. One reason relational leadership is a linchpin for successful transformation is that deep awareness requires relational thinking. Leaders who are strongly transactional in their thinking struggle with awareness skills because they value functional expertise over other forms of knowing rather than “in addition to multiple forms of knowing.” Everything is causal, which, as you’ve read from numerous teachers in this book, is not the thinking that moves us forward today. The danger is that the lack of flow from different forms of awareness leads to impermeable system boundaries and the creation of self-referencing systems, which in turn sustain the false belief that knowing is more important than learning.
2. Diagnosing strengths, underdeveloped skills, and necessary mindset shifts in organizations very much depends on understanding the intersection of awareness, systems thinking, and paradoxical thinking. Yes, that intersection is relational, but there’s something more there—it’s also where intuition fueled by pattern recognition meets empathy and design thinking.

Can we see, hear, or feel where the existing foundational systems are causing pain? Can we see how those fault lines impact other systems? Can we see or predict the compensatory injury? Are we seeing patterns in the system responses that we've seen before? What are the conversations that people are or aren't having about the pain points?

The ability to ask and answer these questions comes from observation and awareness, not functional expertise or the giving and withholding of rewards that defines transactional approaches.

Situational Awareness

Researcher Mica Endsley defines situational awareness as “the perception of the elements in the environment within a volume of time and space, the comprehension of their meaning, and the projection of their status in the near future.” She also explains that situational awareness requires higher-level cognitive processes, including working memory, pattern recognition, and experience-based intuition if we want to be able to take in this level of information and use it to anticipate what is likely to happen next.

A young woman we hired right out of college asked me an interesting question when she first started. She said, “When you talk about situational awareness, do you mean *read the room*?”

I smiled. After thinking about it for a minute, I said, “Yes. That's a really great example. What are the things you're reading?”

She responded right away with “The vibe. The people. The mood. What people are saying and how they're acting?”

I looked at her and moved my hands from being pressed together in front of me to spread out as wide as I could get them. “Then you go from reading this room to questions about how what's happening in our room is connected to what might be happening in other rooms in our organization, and in the organizations that we're collaborating with, and what's going on in the world, and so on. It's read-the-room plus everything you need to understand to put what's happening in our room in context and relate it to our operational goals and objectives. And, at the highest level, to use what you're seeing and understanding to help us predict what's coming next.”

Her last set of questions impressed me as well: “Is it my job to understand all of these things or your job to tell me? And, what if I get it

wrong? What if I read the room and my prediction is wrong?”

I said, “The answer to that first question is *both*. It’s your job to be curious and learn what you can about the world and how it connects to what we do; it’s our job to make sure you understand the parts of the business that you don’t see or have access to. It’s both of our jobs to make sure our organization builds and maintains the mindset of situational awareness. And we’re all responsible for building systems that encourage, even require, the right kind of situational awareness thinking in our meetings and our communications.”

Temporal Awareness

Temporal awareness in college and professional quarterbacks is essential. As mentioned in the previous chapter, they have 2.5 to 3 seconds to figure out what to do with the ball before the pocket collapses. Coaches and analysts talk about the best of the best having insanely accurate “internal clocks” that gauge the pressure timelines. These skills are measured by several different metrics including sacks, turnovers, and the ability to get off seemingly impossible throws.

When it comes to organizational leadership, I think temporal awareness is dangerously overlooked—so much so that we don’t even name it in leaders who do it really well.

Let’s look at four different ways temporal awareness supports daring leadership.

First, we can think about temporal awareness in the context of temporal leadership as discussed by researchers Bei Lyu, Xiaoyu Liao, and Yanchao Yang: “Temporal leadership is a behavior in which leaders help construct, coordinate, and manage the pace of task completion in teams. Strong temporal leadership can assist to rationalize the time schedule and needs, based on task characteristics, and to integrate employees with different time traits into a unified team time process.”

This is no easy feat, especially the piece on integrating employees with different time traits. This research team tackles the issues of how innovation tasks often create difficult paradoxes in allocating time resources, including tensions between quality and speed, and long-term and short-term goals. They write, “For example, in the different processes of the same innovation

task, some need to be carefully polished, and some need to respond quickly to market demand. In addition, team members' time characteristics show diversity, manifested by different time pressure, pacing rhythm, and time focus. Different time characteristics can bring about conflicts in work scheduling and affect the overall innovation process.”

I think we're witnessing one of the most dangerous unresolved time paradoxes in modern history when it comes to AI, and it's basically framed like this in the United States: *We can't slow down and worry about ethics and safety, we need to beat China*. The risks and rewards of putting untested technology into the market have never been more serious, and we're not seeing the level of daring leadership we need to address these paradoxes related to AI.

Second, I think leaders with strong temporal awareness can help their teams with discernment when it comes to urgency. Productive urgency is important. But trying to match the pace of change is “below-the-line” leadership behavior and leads to burnout. In today's complex and stressful environments, I'm seeing many leaders push their teams for action rather than impact.

Third, leaders with strong temporal awareness can help people who have no obvious sense of urgency develop productive urgency. It's one of the hardest skills to develop in people, because it's tied to hardwiring issues and individuals' processing time, self-awareness, and emotional regulation, and other more skills-based issues like good communication, prioritization, anticipatory thinking, and situational awareness.

Last, temporal awareness is very helpful in identifying horizon conflict on teams. In *Dare to Lead*, I write:

Our role dictates where we should set our lens in terms of the organizational horizon. As a founder and CEO, I'm expected to plot a long-term course for the company. I try to bounce back and forth from a ten-year horizon to the current state of affairs. Other leaders on my team have responsibility for different horizons. An operations leader may be focused on a six-month horizon because of a huge launch schedule.

To lead effectively, we're responsible for respecting and leveraging the different views and staying curious about how they can often conflict. When rumbles start to get tough, we know to

check in on horizon issues. And while we may have different perspectives and may not share the same level of knowledge about every detail of the organization, we must have a shared reality of the current state of the organization. Horizon conflict doesn't give us permission to lose focus on the organization as a whole. I can't be so concerned with the five-year goal that I don't know about a culture issue that we need to address.

As leaders, we may not have three seconds to run a play before 1,200 pounds come crashing down on us, but we do have an increasing amount of pressure around time issues and conflicts.

Visualization and Mental Rehearsal

Michael Phelps is the most decorated Olympian of all time, winning a record twenty-eight Olympic medals—including twenty-three golds—across five Games while breaking numerous world records and redefining the sport of swimming. In the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, during the 200-meter butterfly final, Phelps's goggles began to leak almost immediately after the start. By the 25-meter mark he couldn't see at all. Instead of panicking, Phelps relied on his visualization training. He counted his strokes, just as he had rehearsed countless times in his mind and in practice. He knew exactly how many strokes it took to complete each length of the pool and when to turn.

Phelps explained, "I was taught at a very young age to visualize. So for me, it was visualizing a race. It's how I wanted it to go, how I didn't want it to go, and how it could go. So, in 2008, when my goggles filled up with water, I was relaxed because I reverted back to my training. I swam blind for 175m out of a 200m fly, won gold, and broke the world record."

Bob Bowman was Phelps's coach and has always championed the philosophy that visualization and mental preparation are as critical as physical training. Bowman's approach differs from others' perspectives in that he believes that using mental rehearsal for both ideal and adverse scenarios in competition is essential.

When I first learned about this more than a decade ago, I put it into practice, and it's been a significant factor in my successes, especially in speaking and facilitating difficult conversations and meetings. And I don't just visualize success, I visualize obstacles and adversity. If I'm going to talk to ten thousand people from a stage in a convention center, I have the schematics, I walk the stage before the doors open, I visualize no problems, and I visualize my deck turning off after five minutes and never coming back on.

In meetings, my visualization technique includes "guess and address." I guess where we might get stuck and how we can address it. As I'm mentally rehearsing, I often become aware of opportunities to do it better, or questions pop up and I seek help for the answers. Just last week, I was visualizing what I predicted would be a tough meeting. When I rehearsed it going bad, I realized that I wasn't really sure where one of the central people stood on certain issues.

I jumped on the phone and called him. I simply asked, "Tell me what's on your heart and mind around this issue?" He shared very authentically, and it changed the entire trajectory of the meeting. It wasn't an easy meeting, but it was successful in that everyone felt seen and heard, and we came up with a solution that left everyone feeling satisfied.

I also role-play difficult conversations with my coach. For me, this goes back to what I said about coaching. Like all the leaders I know, I'm in a high-expectation/high-performance job. Why do athletes get coaches and leaders don't? It makes no sense.

I'm grateful that Coach Bowman introduced me to this concept of mental rehearsal for both expected outcomes and unexpected ones. I'm also grateful that, in 2024, Bowman was named director of swimming and diving and head men's coach at the University of Texas! Bowman took over a Longhorn program built by the legendary Eddie Reese, who retired after forty-six seasons at Texas.

In 2025, the Texas Longhorns won both the men's and women's SEC Swimming and Diving Championships. Hook 'em Horns!

I've got to give one more shout-out to a great visualization teacher, Coach Pete Carroll. Several years ago, I got to spend some time with Coach Carroll and the Seattle Seahawks football team. Coach Carroll has been innovating in sports culture for decades, and his work on visualization has tremendous transferability to leaders and aligns with Coach Bowman's.

Coach Carroll taught me two valuable lessons:

1. Visualizing the step-by-step process is as important as visualizing the outcome.
2. Visualizing only works if it's coupled with discipline, hard work, and preparation.

Multicultural Awareness

“Multicultural awareness refers to the ability of leaders to understand, respect, and effectively manage cultural diversity within an organization, fostering an environment of inclusion and collaboration.”

I love this quote from Dr. Adenike Kudirat Shittu, an academic business educator in Nigeria. I particularly appreciate how she frames a leader's responsibility as fostering an environment of inclusion and collaboration. This is our job. And, it requires a disciplined commitment to self-awareness, learning, unlearning, and curiosity.

I split my time between Austin and Houston—two cities I love in a state that I also deeply love and, more often than not these days, sadly have a hard time seeing as the brave and loving home it could be. Houston is the unsung hero of the two cities, with a diversity score of 95/100. It's one of the most diverse major cities in the United States, with no single ethnic or racial group holding a majority. It's a marvel.

When my oldest attended our neighborhood public elementary and middle schools in Houston, more than fifty countries of origin, first generation, were represented at the schools. This experience gave her and us an incredible opportunity to develop cultural awareness. She attended her friends' older sisters' quinceañeras, she went to bar and bat mitzvahs every weekend during seventh grade, and she spent many lunches in the library with her BFF so her friend didn't have to go to the cafeteria while she fasted during Ramadan. But it was more than that. There were real conversations, hard ones about identity and power. About history and healing.

Our neighbors taught us how to make my favorite Indian dish, chicken 65. We had honest conversations about race and class over dinner with our

families, and we learned a lot about cricket. One of my favorite pictures is of my son and four of his friends during the Houston rodeo. There are five kids in the picture, and none of them share the same ethnicity, but they're all wearing cowboy hats. The picture was taken when the kids were pulled out of school so they could line the streets to welcome the Prairie View Trail Ride Association to Houston—a group of Black cowboys whose history the kids also studied, including the exclusion of their history and contributions.

As leaders, we have a responsibility and a tremendous opportunity to learn, unlearn, and explore. And not on our terms, but in community with others. Caring for and connecting with the people we lead is an irreducible requirement of courageous leaders. We've seen it throughout this book, in every single example. If we don't know the stories and values, the strengths and struggles of our people and their communities, we don't know them. And, if we don't share ours, they don't know us. This means no care and no connection. No team.

Our Thinking

CORE | STRENGTH | AWARENESS | **THINKING** | COMMUNICATION

Anticipatory Thinking • Strategic Thinking • Critical Thinking •
Paradoxical Thinking • Intuitive Thinking + Pattern Recognition
• Creative and Design Thinking • Symphonic Thinking

Anticipatory Thinking

The ability to anticipate or, as I say when I'm teaching it, play the movie to the end, is a linchpin for success in today's environments. And when we invest time to develop this mindset and skill set in people, I find that they pick it up very quickly. Let's start with a definition and then walk through two very different examples.

Psychologist and data scientist Michael Geden and colleagues created a research tool to measure anticipatory thinking. They used the following definition to create the measure: “Anticipatory thinking is a critical cognitive skill for successfully navigating complex, ambiguous systems in which individuals must analyze system states, anticipate outcomes, and forecast future events.”

Two notes on this definition:

1. There’s an assumption in here that we understand systems. That’s why systems thinking is part of our grounded confidence core at the top of the chapter.
2. I don’t think a skill set of anticipatory thinking is enough today. We need it to also be a mindset—how we think about everything.

Here’s one of my favorite sports examples:

In July 1985, just after he won Wimbledon at seventeen years old, the *Los Angeles Times* described Boris Becker’s serve as “rocket-like.” His power and accuracy were daunting for many of the experienced pros. Andre Agassi, after losing his first three tennis matches against Becker, identified Becker’s unique, explosive serve as the key to successfully defeating him on the court. Agassi then spent countless hours watching tapes of Becker’s serves, studying every aspect of his behavior on the court.

Agassi eventually noticed a small behavior, immediately prior to Becker tossing up the ball to serve, that predicted where the ball would land. According to Agassi, Becker would stick his tongue slightly out, either straight, indicating a mid-court serve, or to the left, predicting a wider serve. In subsequent matches against Becker, Agassi was able to use this information in the moment—he would observe this subtle cue, understand what it meant, and accurately predict where Becker’s serve would land. Agassi was so good at anticipating Becker’s serve that he purposely missed some so Becker wouldn’t know that he had figured out his tell.

Years later, over a beer at Oktoberfest, Agassi shared his strategy with Becker. Agassi recounts the conversation going like this:

“We went out...and had a pint of beer together, and I couldn’t help but say: *By the way, did you know you used to do this and give away your serve?* He about fell off the chair.” Becker replied, “I used to go home all

the time and just tell my wife, ‘It’s like he reads my mind....’ Little did I know, you were just reading my tongue.”

The second example is a great lesson on how time pressure can kill anticipatory thinking. Our team was under extreme pressure to get an email out to one of our coaching communities. We were past our deadline of when we told them they could expect a policy decision from us, and we knew that half of the group would feel supported by our decision and the other half would be disappointed. When the email draft showed up on my desk, I was concerned. It lacked clarity and specificity, and it had the potential to create major emotional churn in the group.

We called a team meeting and invited everyone involved to join. I had one visualization request and one question: Put yourself in the headspace of the intended recipient, and read the email from their point of view; then, play the movie to the end. There was a minute of silence while everyone read, followed by a collective “Oh, shit.” Then people started throwing out potential movie endings.

We’re going to get inundated with emails asking for clarification.

We’ll meet the timeline but we’re not really answering the question.

They’re all going to be pissed off at us.

Then, staying in the mindset of the community members, we wrote the movie from the end to the beginning. Our goal was to be proud of what we sent in terms of clarity and communication, not to control the response.

If your organization is community- or customer-focused, you will live and die by anticipatory mindsets across all teams. Our job is not to move things off our desk and our to-do list, but to think strategically about systems and to anticipate. Just like Becker and Agassi, our win is for the people we serve to say, “Wow! It’s like they’re reading my mind.”

Strategic Thinking

First things first: Buy Jim Collins's book *BE 2.0 (Beyond Entrepreneurship 2.0): Turning Your Business into an Enduring Great Company*. The book is an updated and expanded version of Jim Collins and Bill Lazier's classic, *Beyond Entrepreneurship*. It combines the original text with new chapters and essays, and it will make everyone who reads it a better strategic thinker, not just entrepreneurs or those working in that environment. If you want a primer, Jim and I recorded a *Dare to Lead* podcast episode about this book.

What I've learned from Jim about strategy and strategic thinking has shaped my career. Here's my summary of what I've learned:

1. Strategic thinking is more about asking the right questions than finding perfect, static plans.
2. Great strategy requires people who trust each other coming together and engaging in really hard rumbles. Great strategy is the product of debate, challenge, and disciplined thought; it's iterative and never about "a plan" that's untouchable and unmovable.
3. Everyone in that room has to believe in gritty facts as much as gritty faith, otherwise you're in trouble (as a reminder, this was our organization's takeaway from the Stockdale Paradox that I shared with you in Chapter 4).
4. Directly from Jim: "Sound strategy is impossible without clear vision. Muddled strategies flow from muddled vision; clear strategies flow from clear vision. If you want to have a good strategy, you need to first understand with piercing clarity what you are trying to achieve. A good strategy determines how you will achieve your BHAG [Big Hairy Audacious Goal], guided by your purpose and consistent with your values. Vision then strategy then tactics."
5. Last, I'm so convinced of the wisdom of Jim's hedgehog metaphor from his book *Good to Great* that my office key is on a hedgehog keychain and we have a hedgehog cookie jar in our work kitchen. I need the reminder because a lot of bright and shiny opportunities come our way, and sometimes I can get into scarcity and say *yes* when I mean *hell no*. And sometimes I want to say *yes* when our hedgehog says, *No, ma'am*.

The hedgehog metaphor starts with an old Greek parable that describes how the cunning fox has many different skills and strategies to win over its prey, while the cute little hedgehog only knows how to curl into a spiky ball. Of course, despite the fox's speed, agility, and other talents, the hedgehog wins.

Jim uses this metaphor to illustrate how great companies and leaders deal with complexity by focusing relentlessly on a single unifying idea or principle. Rather than scattering their efforts across many initiatives, hedgehog leaders achieve greatness through disciplined focus and clarity, not scattered and inconsistent strategy.

The hedgehog is driven by three questions:

What are you deeply passionate about?
What can you be the best in the world at?
What drives your economic engine?

Collins argues that true greatness comes from identifying and operating within this “sweet spot,” where passion, unique capability, and economic sustainability overlap. This is not about setting an ambitious goal or simply aspiring to be the best, but about developing a deep, realistic understanding of where your organization can truly excel and then consistently making decisions aligned with that insight.

In all of my work with organizations, I've never seen Jim's thinking on strategy proven wrong. Quite the opposite, in fact. What I mostly observe are people not being strategic for the same six reasons (which is where my work intersects with Jim's):

1. Challenging is a function of trust. Lack of trust within teams prevents the rigorous debate necessary for smart strategy.
2. Fear of uncertainty and no negative capability (see Chapter 5) mean people reach for certainty and create “plans” that soothe their nervous systems rather than respond strategically.
3. There's no strong ground for people to anchor into, so leaders chase whatever seems hot at the moment. Vision and mission creep are driven by fear, and all information is seen as valuable to guide strategy, versus discerning what's helpful and what isn't.

4. Weak core skill sets and mindsets mean strategy is developed that leads to organizational compensatory injury.
5. Leveraging the organizational core to meet new challenges requires developing new muscles. When people are afraid, they build strategy around what they know versus what they need to learn.
6. The leaders at the top are transactional, and they lack relational skill sets. Strategic thinking is deeply relational and mission grounded. Transactional leaders move very quickly to operations and plumbing before there is adequate framing and strategy. They build smart systems that move things around, but to no strategic end. Lots of action, no real impact.

These six barriers to strategic thinking are why I believe all these types of thinking are connected. One way to challenge the barriers is by using critical thinking.

Critical Thinking

The heart of critical thinking is applying a rigorous analysis and evaluation of information that is presented as fact. I can't imagine a time when this has been more challenging or more relevant. Just a year ago, when I reviewed a graduate student's paper from a critical thinking perspective, I would challenge the way the student was using cited studies to support their argument. I'd even ask the student to challenge the efficacy of the study and the findings. Just recently I was looking at an academic literature review on a topic I know fairly well, and I was surprised to see two studies referenced—one in the *Harvard Business Review* and one from MIT Sloan. I may have missed the articles, but it was strange that I didn't recognize the researchers. After spending an hour looking for the studies, I realized that they were AI hallucinations, meaning that the citations were not real, but made up. AI researcher Kate Crawford told me that people call those hallucinations. Funny term—dangerous practice.

Classes on critical thinking were threaded through my entire graduate school curriculum. One of the most valuable tools I learned was a simple

but powerful question: *Who benefits from me believing this information is true?* If you can answer this question, you're on your way to critically examining the information.

When my mom's dementia was at peak destruction, I struggled with bouts of serious anxiety about my own cognition. As one of her primary caregivers, I was exhausted, scared, grieving, angry, and vulnerable. My social media feed was often full of "Do you want to avoid dementia?" posts. One night, I ordered a supplement straight from the social media link after listening to a woman my age talking about her commitment to stopping the generational curse of dementia. She was wearing a white doctor's coat and scrubs.

When the bottle arrived a week later, I researched the supplement on the internet, only to find that there was zero evidence of efficacy. There was no medical research. The fake doctor was nowhere to be found. I can't tell you the depth of my rage. There is a special place in hell for grifters who prey on our grief and fears.

I share this with you because I taught a graduate class on media literacy and critical thinking. But what I know was no match for my fear and grief. Our critical thinking skills are no match for our emotions. And research shows that the less susceptible we believe we are, the more vulnerable we actually are. When we acknowledge our vulnerabilities, we are more critical and careful.

So often do we vote against our best interests that we inexplicably find ourselves supporting ideas that are misaligned with our values, and we turn into preachers when people challenge our ideas because there are parts of us that can't even explain our thinking (because we're mostly making decisions based on "below-the-line" feelings).

One of my favorite quick teachings on critical thinking comes from Adam Grant, which makes sense given that thinking like a scientist is all about examining the validity and reliability of information. Adam writes:

How to be a better critical thinker:

1. Be 10% more skeptical of people you agree with—and 10% more charitable to people you disagree with.
2. Look for flaws in ideas you like—and strengths in arguments you dislike.

3. Learn from sources that engage with competing ideas.

I DISCUSS PARADOXICAL THINKING throughout the book, especially Chapter 4, “Paradox and the Human Spirit.”

Intuitive Thinking and Pattern Recognition

Everything you read adamantly insists that pattern recognition and intuition are key to decision making, communicating, and leadership. But why? And how? It makes sense to me, but before digging into this research to write this book, it felt like a mystery. Which was weird because I know I rely on both every day.

Because the research methodology I’ve used over my entire career is based on pattern finding and because I love being a student of that game and that way of learning, I’d rate my pattern recognition skills as fairly high. Until this research, I never connected these recognition skills with the fact that I constantly depend on and trust my intuition. At work, people often defer to my “spidey senses” when we’re torn on a decision. And mine are generally very dependable. I’m also quick to seek help and mentorship when I have no idea and no gut on something, so that helps. Digging into this topic for this book has felt like a revelation for me.

To better explain, I want to start with a definition of intuition from Herbert Simon. Simon was an American scholar whose contributions shaped a variety of fields including cognitive psychology, computer science, economics, and AI. He was awarded the Turing Award in 1975 for his contributions to artificial intelligence, and he won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1978 for his work on decision making in organizations. On intuition, Simons explains, “The situation has provided a cue; this cue has given the expert access to information stored in memory, and the information provides the answer. Intuition is nothing more and nothing less than recognition.”

In Simon’s work, he’s challenging the idea of intuition as a magical “gut” feeling and helping us understand that intuition is rapid pattern recognition based on our prior experiences. He explains that when experts

face familiar situations, they unconsciously recognize patterns and bring forward relevant knowledge from memory. This in turn allows them to make swift and smart decisions without conscious analysis.

In some ways, this unconscious pattern recognition process is like a mental puzzle. The brain makes an observation, scans its files, and matches the observation with existing memories, knowledge, and experiences. It puts together a series of matches, and we, not so miraculously, get a “gut” on what we’ve observed. The connections we make can show up as an immediate sense of knowing or a sudden “aha” realization. Either way, it emerges quickly and without a clear explanation.

The big questions that researchers are still trying to resolve are basically: How much expertise is needed and when can we trust our intuition skills and when can’t we? Researchers Daniel Kahneman and Gary Klein spent many years rigorously debating these questions and eventually collaborating. The paper they wrote together has one of my favorite titles: “Conditions for Intuitive Expertise: A Failure to Disagree.” I’ve read the paper, and I don’t think they disagreed. It’s equally clear they didn’t fully agree.

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman writes:

The early experiences that shaped Klein’s views of intuition were starkly different from mine. My thinking was formed by observing the illusion of validity in myself and by reading Paul Meehl’s demonstrations of the inferiority of clinical prediction. In contrast, Klein’s views were shaped by his early studies of fireground commanders (the leaders of firefighting teams). He followed them as they fought fires and later interviewed the leader about his thoughts as he made decisions.

In their joint article mentioned above, Klein explains that their research team:

investigated how the commanders could make good decisions without comparing options. The initial hypothesis was that commanders would restrict their analysis to only a pair of options, but that hypothesis proved to be incorrect. In fact, the commanders usually generated only a single option, and that was all they needed.

They could draw on the repertoire of patterns that they had compiled during more than a decade of both real and virtual experience to identify a plausible option, which they considered first. They evaluated this option by mentally simulating it to see if it would work in the situation they were facing.... If the course of action they were considering seemed appropriate, they would implement it. If it had shortcomings, they would modify it. If they could not easily modify it, they would turn to the next most plausible option and run through the same procedure until an acceptable course of action was found.

Kahneman and Klein ultimately agreed on several things that I think are important to share as we consider when and how to depend on our intuition:

1. “The confidence that people have in their intuitions is not a reliable guide to their validity. In other words, do not trust anyone—including yourself—to tell you how much you should trust their judgment.”
2. They agreed that there are two basic conditions for acquiring a skill:

The first is that a leader is working in an environment that is sufficiently regular to be predictable.

The second is that a leader has the opportunity to learn these regularities through prolonged practice.

3. They agreed that they are still very different people with different approaches. Kahneman writes, “Klein still winces when the word *bias* is mentioned, and he still enjoys stories in which algorithms or formal procedures lead to obviously absurd decisions. I tend to view the occasional failures of algorithms as opportunities to improve them. On the other hand, I find more pleasure than Klein does in the come-uppance of arrogant experts who claim intuitive powers in zero-validity situations. In the long run, however, finding as much intellectual agreement as we did is surely more important than the persistent emotional differences that remained.”

In *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Kahneman ends his chapter with this list of critical questions. As someone who leans toward the middle of this debate, I find them very helpful when evaluating pattern recognition and intuition skills:

1. How much expertise does she have in this particular task? How much practice has she had?
2. Does he really believe that the environment of start-ups is sufficiently regular to justify an intuition that goes against the base rates?
3. She is very confident in her decision, but subjective confidence is a poor index of the accuracy of a judgment.
4. Did he really have an opportunity to learn? How quick and how clear was the feedback he received on his judgments?

My team and I thought through some of my recent spidey-sense intuition calls—even the ones that we allowed to override data. What they all had in common was me operating in my areas of expertise. What I think works for me is the clarity I have about whether I have a gut on something or not. I only try to manufacture intuition when I'm anxious or scared. I think relying on pattern recognition and intuition skills is best done when we're "above the line" and in an area of mastery and deep practice.

Creative and Design Thinking

Several years ago, when I reviewed data from multiple Dare to Lead intake assessments that we collected at the beginning of our interventions, it was clear that leaders across organizations were desperate for more creativity on their teams. In the assessment phase of transformation, leaders often ask me to pay special attention to any barriers to creativity that I'm seeing across teams or the entire organization. It's tough sledding for the C-suite when the answer to that question almost always includes variations of "Many employees believe that perfectionism and performance pressures are so great and that failure is so stigmatized, that armor is required and often rewarded. These are not the conditions for creativity or innovation."

Creativity and innovation, by definition, demand failure, iteration, and constant learning.”

Even when creativity-focused leaders have worked to create cultures that support innovation, there is often a waning commitment to the consumer or end-user. When we get locked into creating, it’s easy to lose focus on the people we serve and allow our own wants and needs to drive the creation.

I had such a challenging *and* fun time trying to figure out if there was a mindset, skill set, or combination that would address both of these issues, because I had the opportunity to reverse engineer the answer by spending time with people, teams, and organizations who do this really well. These were highly creative folks working in cultures where failure, iteration, and learning were understood as part of the process, and whose work was inherently customer- or user-focused. What these teams and organizations had in common were creativity-centered cultures, along with design thinking mindsets and skill sets.

It was at that point that I started studying design thinking methodologies and using that approach to create organizational transformations and change projects. There are two elements that make design thinking so powerful for me:

1. The approach aligns with the ethos that defines social work:
Start where people are.
2. Empathy is at the heart of the process.

In a 2008 *Harvard Business Review* article, Tim Brown, the CEO of IDEO at the time, proposed that design thinking was a descendant of Thomas Edison’s holistic innovation process. Brown proposed that, unlike traditional problem-solving methods, design thinking places human needs at the center of innovation. Brown’s article included five characteristics to look for in design thinkers: empathy, integrative thinking, optimism, experimentalism, and collaboration.

He writes, “My experience is that many people outside of professional design have a natural aptitude for design thinking, which the right development and experiences can unlock.”

In an article for MIT Sloan Management School, Rebecca Linke explains:

At a high level, the steps involved in the design thinking process are simple: first, fully understand the problem; second, explore a wide range of possible solutions; third, iterate extensively through prototyping and testing; and finally, implement through the customary deployment mechanisms.

The skills associated with these steps help people apply creativity to effectively solve real-world problems better than they otherwise would. They can be readily learned, but take effort. For instance, when trying to understand a problem, setting aside your own preconceptions is vital, but it's hard.

Creative brainstorming is necessary for developing possible solutions, but many people don't do it particularly well. And throughout the process it is critical to engage in modeling, analysis, prototyping, and testing, and to really learn from these many iterations. Once you master the skills central to the design thinking approach, they can be applied to solve problems in daily life and any industry.

Like every other one of these small sections in the “Grounded Confidence” chapter, this is not even an appetizer; this is a look at the menu. If this is an area where your team or organization needs help, you'll need to dig in deeper. As you can see from the list of characteristics provided by Tim Brown, a daring mindset is the right framework for creative and design thinking, but there are very specific methodologies and skills that are necessary to be successful.

As organizations attempt to use new technologies to solve human problems, I can already start to see the mission of human-centeredness slipping to the back burner. The bright shiny AI technologies can shift the thinking from “What do people really want and need?” to “What can these cool tools do?” I wish AI developers would have used design thinking and asked me what I wanted from an AI agent. My answer would have been: “I'll do the thinking and creating; let the agent unload the dishwasher and mop the floor.”

Symphonic Thinking

Daniel Pink came up with the idea of symphonic thinking (or what he refers to as the aptitude of symphony). He explains it as “the ability to put together the pieces. It is the capacity to synthesize rather than to analyze; to see relationships between seemingly unrelated fields; to detect broad patterns rather than to deliver specific answers; and to invent something new by combining elements nobody else thought to pair.” The next chapter is an excerpt from his book *A Whole New Mind* that walks us through symphonic thinking. You’ll find that this concept pulls together so many of the skills we’re discussing here.

Our Communication

CORE | STRENGTH | AWARENESS | THINKING | **COMMUNICATION**

LEGO+DUPLO • Emotionally Resonant Language • Chekhov’s Gun •
Aesthetic Force • Communicate All of the Changes • Invisible Armies and
Bullshit Disclaimers • Metaphors, Analogies, and Stories

Professional communication from a place of grounded confidence is measured by both impact and value. I have seen internal communications tank a transformation effort, and I have seen internal communications elevate a transformation beyond what we thought was possible. I’ve seen it slightly diminish our effort and slightly contribute. What I’ve never seen is net neutral communications. We’ve come to the point in our work that our initial assessment includes understanding how an organization invests in and thinks about their internal communications practices. It’s critically important.

Confident and mission-grounded communication should be:

- Accessible
- Anticipatory
- Clear
- Compelling

Consistent
Economical
Honest
Reliable
Timely
In the service of connection, never deception
In support of strategy, mission, and vision

This is a long list, which is why consistently communicating with grounded confidence is extremely rare. It's been shocking to me to see how organizations working so hard to transform their culture slide backward in their efforts simply because their communications miss the mark.

From overwrought and tortured PowerPoint decks to twenty-page briefs that say three things, people are overwriting and undercommunicating. It's the communications version of action over impact.

Below we'll explore seven principles that can help guide how we communicate.

LEGO Complexity? DUPLO Simplicity
Emotionally Resonant Language Matters
Chekhov's Gun
Become a Student of Aesthetic Force
Own and Communicate the Changes. Yes, All of Them
Beware of Invisible Armies and Bullshit Disclaimers
Metaphors, Analogies, and Stories

LEGO Complexity? DUPLO Simplicity

In the mid-1960s, LEGO recognized that their standard bricks were too small and posed a choking hazard for young children. The company, led by Godtfred Kirk Christiansen, sought to create a version for younger children that would still fit into the broader LEGO "System in Play" philosophy. The bricks they created were twice the size of "normal" bricks, hence the name DUPLO—a mix of *duplus* (Latin for "double") and LEGO. But the 2:1 ratio

was also significant because it meant they were compatible with the original LEGO bricks.

Several years ago, I was working with a CEO who was at the beginning of her tenure with a company and gearing up for a serious rebuild of her organization while disrupting an entire industry. From her deep engineering and leadership background, she wrote pages on what it was going to take. Her North Star document was smart, exacting, and as ambitious as anything I had ever read. When I asked her whom she wanted to read the document and really understand it, her answer was simple: “Everyone. Our rebuild and disruption will start with our people.”

I looked at her and said, “I believe you. This needs to be one page. Clean, simple, inspiring, memorable, and readable. This is LEGO complexity. I need DUPLO simplicity.”

Within two days, she had a one-pager that blew me away. I understood every word, I understood how everything fit together, and I was inspired. People would need the nitty-gritty communication—all of the LEGO pieces—as it related to their jobs, but this was not that document. This was a “Fight’s on! Let’s go!” call.

I knew it was effective when we were standing together a year later in a dispatch center talking to installers, and one of them asked her a question that started with, “On our North Star paper...”

That’s high value / high impact communications.

Emotionally Resonant Language Matters

We are emotional beings. Think of the quotes that inspire us and the poetry that moves us. Think of the speeches that bring us to our feet.

William Wordsworth wrote, “Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.” We don’t need to wax poetic in a memo, but we do need to remember that every communication is an opportunity to acknowledge our shared humanity, to make someone smile, to earn one of those nods that convey, *I get it. We can do this.*

When we come up with concepts or terms that we want to cascade across an organization, we need to think about what will move folks, what people will remember.

I often ask CEOs to come up with rally cries for transformation efforts, and I appreciate that it sometimes takes them weeks. They want their motto or cry to connect to the organization, to reflect their leadership approach, and to capture the spirit of what they're trying to create.

Think about the rally cry, "Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose," from the *Friday Night Lights* television series. That was nearly twenty years ago, and my friends and I still say it all the time. Think about Liverpool's "You'll Never Walk Alone."

One caution that's important to note about emotionally resonant language is how quickly people internalize the words and make them their own. That's a great thing, until the moment someone takes a feedback ethos like "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind" and turns it into "Clear is kind, dude. You're an asshole."

With Dare to Lead transformations, language changes first across the culture. People start using shared terms and phrases. It's powerful and builds culture with intention and a sense of belonging and team. But people sometimes weaponize language—especially when it's emotionally resonant. A couple of months ago, a leader asked for some advice about how to coach an employee who was misusing some of the Dare to Lead language. When I asked her to give me an example, she said, "Well, you know how we check assumptions by saying, 'The story I'm telling myself is...'"

I nodded.

She said, "My lead project manager told someone from marketing, 'The story I'm making up is that you're a damn liar.'"

I tried not to laugh. It's not funny, but man...I love people. We're so great. And so weird and hard sometimes.

With emotionally resonant language, it's important to define *what it is* and *what it is not*. What something means and what it absolutely does not mean. For example, when we share the story we're making up, it's an invitation and a demonstration of vulnerability. It's saying, *I'm not sure what's happening, but here's how I'm making meaning right now*. It is *not* permission to attach any insult or shitty thing you want to say to someone.

Don't confuse an honest feedback culture with *The Purge*. Neither this cultural commitment to increasing our feedback skills nor anything else we do here gives anyone permission to be hurtful or disrespectful.

Chekhov's Gun

If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there.

—ANTON CHEKHOV

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) was a Russian playwright and short story writer who is considered one of the founders of theatrical realism—a genre that emerged in the late nineteenth century, characterized by its commitment to depicting everyday life, ordinary people, and believable stories.

Chekhov's gun is a principle that argues that every element introduced in a story must serve a necessary purpose or be removed. When it comes to focused organizational communications, I agree. While many writers have disagreed with Chekhov, arguing that the gun could be an important symbol or that a long description of the clock on the mantel sets a mood, we don't need symbols and mood setting in organizational comms.

The examples I often see related to extraneous information in comms include things like a whisper of an existing program or strategy that we don't want our folks to forget, or a quick preview of a resource or program that gets no further explanation than “in our new Town Hall app.” Our attention is already fragmented and it's easy to fixate on what we don't understand.

With practice and muscular editing, communications can be simple, emotionally resonant, and focused.

Become a Student of Aesthetic Force

No one has taught me more about the power of aesthetic force than Dr. Sarah Lewis. As you know, she's one of the featured teachers in the book (see Chapter 13). I have this quote of hers framed in my office:

“How many movements began when an aesthetic encounter indelibly changed our past perceptions of the world?”

This quote invites me to acknowledge how many times my heart and mind have been opened, changed, and convicted by a powerful visual.

Sarah explains:

The words to describe aesthetic force suggest that it leaves us changed—stunned, dazzled, knocked out. It can quicken the pulse, make us gape, even gasp with astonishment. Its importance is its animating trait—not what it is, but what it does to those who behold it in all its forms. Its seeming lightness can make us forget that it has weight, force enough to bring about a self-correction, the acknowledgment of failure at the heart of justice—the moment when we reconcile our past with our intended future selves. Few experiences get us to this place more powerfully, with a tender push past the praetorian-guarded doors of reason and logic, than the emotive power of aesthetic force.

In June 2025, I moderated a panel with Ken Burns and Sarah Botstein on their new six-part, twelve-hour series on the American Revolution on PBS. Prior to the event, I got to view part of the documentary. For me, this war always felt like a ghost of sorts. It was far away and unrelatable—cue the fife and drums. Unlike other war documentaries I’ve seen, there are no photos and no grainy black-and-white video footage to transport you.

The filmmakers did a masterful job of pulling us into the film with a sense of place and music and incredible narration. There was one scene where the camera was sweeping over a gorgeous valley, and you could hear the birds chirping and watch the clouds moving. I burst into tears. I know my history well enough to know what was going to happen in that peaceful valley. It was the first time I had thought about the brutality of that war—a war fought with bayonets and hand-to-hand combat, where entire villages were wiped out and neighbors were killing neighbors.

After the panel event, when we were saying our goodbyes to each other, I told Ken about my experience with that scene and the birdsong. He told me that they work with a team of bird experts to get the birdcalls right based on history, geography, seasons, etc. On the drive home I thought about the intersection of two concepts that I’ve learned from Sarah: mastery and aesthetic force.

The examples of aesthetic force that Sarah shares in *The Rise* are direct hits to the heart:

It was an abolitionist’s print, not logical argument, which dealt the final blow to the slave trade—the broadside of *Description of a*

Slave Ship (1789). The London print of the British slave ship *Brookes* showed the dehumanizing statistical visualization with graphic precision—how the legally permitted 454 men, women, and children might be accommodated (though the ship *Brookes* carried many more, up to 740).

The contrast between reality and the image it conjured in the mind was intolerable enough to abolish the institution and was the evidentiary proof of slavery's inhumanity used in Parliament hearings.

Many credit the awe over *Earthrise*, the photograph taken from Apollo 8 orbiting the moon in 1968, with galvanizing force for the environmental movement.

Seeing images by Carleton Watkins of Yosemite Valley's granite cliffs convinced Lincoln to sign legislation in 1864 that would lead to the establishment of the National Park Service.

When we're overcome by aesthetic force, a propulsion comes from the sense that, until that moment, we have been somehow incomplete. It can make us realize that our views and judgments need correction. It can give these moments "elasticity" and "plasticity"; as Elaine Scarry writes about the force of being moved by beauty—"momentarily stunned by beauty, the mind before long begins to create or to recall and, in doing so, soon discovers the limits of its own starting place, if there are limits to be found."

A birdsong warning: Using the power of images to change or capture hearts and minds is a soulful practice. One whiff of emotional manipulation or appropriation of an image of hardship to sell something and you've lost us. Not only are we not buying what you're selling, we no longer trust or respect you.

Own and Communicate the Changes. Yes, All of Them

If you're wondering if you should communicate a change of direction or strategy, the answer is yes. If you've changed direction and you're hoping

that no one will notice, you're in trouble. They're noticing that you've changed. And they're really paying attention to the fact that you're not telling them. Decisions to not own and communicate changes breed distrust, burnout, and frustration.

Every organization in the world is shifting strategies and reprioritizing. A ton. If you had a company-wide, red-curtain reveal of a new strategy—a *We Mean It This Time—This Is Really It!* strategy—and now, five months later, you're changing course, communicate that ASAP. Even if there was a famous band and an ice cream sundae bar at the reveal.

Hi, everyone,

We appreciate the support for our “2025–2026 This Is Really It” strategy launch earlier this year. We've seen your disciplined work to integrate the new KPIs into your teams and to start re-skilling across departments. We are impressed and grateful.

To meet the new demands of our customers, we are changing direction effective immediately, and we are going to need the same level of support and discipline from you to make this pivot successful. If we're going to win, we must do this together. Winning means your buy-in and our transparency in explaining why we're changing direction.

Here's what's driving the change:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Here's what's changing for all of us:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Here's what is NOT changing:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

We'll have a series of town hall meetings on the following dates:

You can submit questions at this link no later than:

We're committed to answering every question we can. And we're working on another sundae bar. The pivot will be a lift. We'll do it together. We'll win together.

Beware of Invisible Armies and Bullshit Disclaimers

Invisible Armies

We don't think this is a good idea.

We don't like the direction you're taking the project.

We think that decision is unfair.

Come at me with an invisible army and expect my response to be simple:

“You got a mouse in your pocket?”

1. Unless you are representing a consensus opinion shared by people who are happy to be identified, stick to *I*.
2. If you hear this often, work with a coach to figure out why people are feeling pressure to use it.
3. Ban mice in pockets.

Bullshit Disclaimers

The Bullshit Asymmetry Principle: The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it.

— ALBERTO BRANDOLINI, SOFTWARE ENGINEER

Understanding the disclaimer device would be so easy if they'd add it as a function to Google Translate. Because they haven't built it yet, I'll do it for you.

What people say: I don't mean to be critical, but...

What they mean: I'm going to be critical, but I don't want to be held accountable for my behavior.

What people say: Not to be rude, but...

What they mean: I'm going to be rude, but I don't want to be held accountable for my behavior.

What people say: I'm not trying to tear you down, but...

What they mean: I'm going to tear you to shreds, but I don't want to be held accountable for my behavior.

As Brandolini proposes in his asymmetry principle, you're going to need some energy to address this. And you're going to need to be quick and have a high tolerance for interrupting others.

What people say: I don't mean to be critical, but...

YOU INTERRUPTING: Great! That's never helpful. Do you need some time to think of a reframe that's more productive?

What people say: Not to be rude, but...

YOU INTERRUPTING: I'm so glad. Rude is not okay. Do you need some time to think of a reframe that's more productive?

What people say: I'm not trying to tear you down, but...

YOU INTERRUPTING: I'm so glad. I don't think we have a relationship where we tear each other down. Do you need some time to think of a reframe that's more productive?

Metaphors, Analogies, and Stories

At this point, I don't need to tell you that I'm a big fan of metaphors, analogies, and stories. You've been in them with me for many pages. As a teacher, which is my favorite professional role, I find this set of tools to be the most effective way to share information. Not only do metaphors, analogies, and stories let people see us and know us a little better, they are

neurobiologically powerful because they engage our brains in ways that literal or abstract information does not. A good story or metaphor activates multiple sensory, emotional, and cognitive systems at one time. They bring clarity and meaning to complex topics, and they help us remember new information.

Pick topics and subjects you love—things that really light you up—and use them as stories, metaphors, and analogies to explain things to your teams and colleagues. It's a wonderful learning mechanism and a peek into who you are. We love that. Those connections with other people are the source code for strong ground.

I was teaching an undergraduate class at UT Austin to engineering students who were earning their minors in business. The students had to submit a form that explained a tough feedback conversation they needed to have with someone with whom they work, intern, or collaborate. A young man came up to me after class and explained that he needed to tell one of the guys in his project group that his outbursts and criticism were upsetting the team members and causing poor performance. After he and I worked together for half an hour, he said, "I can't do it. I don't think I'm a leader. I don't have the language."

After taking a ten-minute break, we sat back down and I asked, "Have you ever had to give this kind of feedback before?"

He thought about it and said, "Oh, yes. I lead an e-sports team and one of our coaches is a maniac. He yells and screams at our players and they all go on tilt."

I asked him what "on tilt" meant and he explained that it's a gaming term for when players "get emotional and can't get out of their heads. They lose it."

He paused for a second and said, "That's exactly what's happening. This guy in our group is criticizing and putting people down and everyone is going on tilt."

His homework was to look up the origin of the word *tilt* and come back with a plan to use it as a metaphor with the guy in his group. The next day, he told me that *tilt* originated from pinball, when people would tilt the machine to manipulate the ball. Then *on tilt* became a poker term for when people got overwhelmed or angry or made bad choices and couldn't recover.

His script was great and went something like this: “I lead an e-sports team and there’s a guy who coaches for us who gets really frustrated with the players when they’re not winning or being smart. Within minutes of the criticism, everyone on our team is *on tilt*—that’s the term we use for falling apart—and they can’t recover. When you criticize people on our team, everyone goes on tilt. And they don’t want to contribute. You’ve got good ideas but we’ve got to keep people from being on tilt.”

The feedback session went okay. The guy got really mad, and my student said, “This is what I mean. I’m having a hard time not going on tilt right now.”

His peer connected to the metaphor and realized that no one benefited from a team on tilt. After two weeks, the team adopted “on tilt” as code for “This is not productive,” and they shared their experience with the class as part of their project. It was a big win for them!

Grounded Confidence: Let’s Run It Back

OUR CORE:

Self-Awareness • Metacognition • Emotional Awareness + Regulation •
Mindfulness • Systems Thinking

OUR STRENGTH:

Vulnerability • Courage • Trust • Compassion + Empathy • Connection •
Humility • Deep Curiosity • Mastery • Discipline • Power • Accountability
• Adaptability • Lock-In and Lock-Through Power

OUR AWARENESS:

Situational Awareness • Temporal Awareness • Visualization + Mental
Rehearsal • Multicultural Awareness

OUR THINKING:

Anticipatory Thinking • Strategic Thinking • Critical Thinking •
Paradoxical Thinking • Intuitive Thinking + Pattern Recognition
• Creative and Design Thinking • Symphonic Thinking

OUR COMMUNICATION:

LEGO+DUPLO • Emotionally Resonant Language • Chekhov's Gun •
Aesthetic Force • Communicate All of the Changes • Invisible Armies and
Bullshit Disclaimers • Metaphors, Analogies, and Stories

It's probably helpful to close this chapter by revisiting the definition of *grounded confidence*:

Grounded confidence is a brand of confidence that is built not on arrogance or posturing, but on the solid ground of self-awareness, courage, and practice. Grounded confidence is accepting and embracing learning and unlearning, practicing and failing, and, at its core, is driven by discipline and the joy of mastery.

There have been many books written on each of these individual skills, and picking one or two areas for the focus of your development is smart. I also think it's important to think of *grounded confidence* as a system of interdependent skills that are inextricably connected. As Dan Pink captures in the next chapter on symphonic thinking, they grow together and each skill makes the others stronger.

Another thing to remember is that we have our kettlebell strength-building tools that build many muscles at one time. These include the 5 C's,

the Above/Below the Line Practice, and the rumble starters from Dare to Lead.

Again, as I mentioned in the last chapter, I don't think these are just leadership skills. Yes, leaders need to build these muscles, and they need to work to stay strong. But as companies compete for our attention and AI seduces us into believing it can do our thinking for us, we need to double down on our understanding of who we are and how we think. We will desperately need these skills to navigate the world and protect what is important to us—our families, our communities, our organizations, our environment, and our democracies.

In the previous chapter, when I asked Coach Sark about the skills and training that support pocket presence, he said, “It starts with courage. Then comes confidence.”

This is true of grounded confidence as well. A daring mindset is where this work starts.

CHAPTER 16



Dan Pink
On Symphonic Thinking



I READ EVERY BOOK DAN PINK writes. I love the stories, the learning, and how weirdly and wildly excellent he is at meeting big moments in the zeitgeist

before the rest of us get there. He's an intellectual and cultural scout who is early to just about everything. When I first read his book *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, I immediately knew it was one I'd return to many times. Looking back, I believe the core messaging in the book was absolutely prophetic.

When I first started interviewing people for this book and was consistently hearing terms like *making connections*, *metaphors*, *analogies*, and *pattern finding*, I immediately thought, *Holy shit. This is that orchestral thinking that Dan Pink talked about two decades ago—in that orange brain book!* I was one for two. The book is orange with a drawing of a brain on the front, but his term is *symphonic thinking*, not *orchestral thinking*.

The deeper I got into creating a taxonomy of skill sets and mindsets that define how successful leaders are creating impact while leading teams through the chaos and uncertainty that define our world today, the more I realized that Dan had artfully and accurately captured a key understanding with that term. The passage below illuminates what we're looking for in leaders, but either we are currently failing to teach it to college students and young employees or it has become a very rare skill due to our decreasing capacities for focusing and building the large reference sets necessary for making connections:

Symphony, as I call this aptitude, is the ability to put together the pieces. It is the capacity to synthesize rather than to analyze; to see relationships between seemingly unrelated fields; to detect broad patterns rather than to deliver specific answers; and to invent something new by combining elements nobody else thought to pair.

Dan, thanks for always being out front and for letting me share this incredible work!

Abridged from Daniel Pink's
A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule
the Future

The structure of our brains offers a metaphor to understand the contours of our times. Some people seem more comfortable with logical, sequential, computer-like reasoning. Other people are more comfortable with holistic, intuitive, and nonlinear reasoning. Call the first approach L-Directed Thinking. It is a form of thinking and an attitude to life that is characteristic of the left hemisphere of the brain—sequential, literal, functional, textual, and analytic. Call the other approach R-Directed Thinking. It is a form of thinking and an attitude to life that is characteristic of the right hemisphere of the brain—simultaneous, metaphorical, aesthetic, contextual, and synthetic.

Of course, we need both approaches in order to craft fulfilling lives and build productive, just societies. But our broader culture has tended to prize L-Directed Thinking more highly than its counterpart, taking this approach more seriously and viewing the alternative as useful but secondary. But this is changing—left-brain-style thinking used to be the driver and right-brain-style thinking the passenger. Now, R-Directed Thinking is suddenly grabbing the wheel, stepping on the gas, and determining where we're going and how we'll get there. L-Directed aptitudes—the sorts of things measured by the SAT and deployed by CPAs—are still necessary. But they're no longer sufficient. Instead, the R-Directed aptitudes—artistry, empathy, taking the long view, pursuing the transcendent—will increasingly determine who soars and who stumbles.

In a sense, we can think of the economy's last 150 years as a three-act drama. In Act I, the Industrial Age, massive factories and efficient assembly lines powered the economy. The lead character was the mass production worker, whose cardinal traits were physical strength and personal fortitude. In Act II, the Information Age, the United States and other nations began to evolve. Mass production faded into the background, while information and knowledge fueled the economies of the developed world. The central figure in this act was the knowledge worker, whose defining characteristic was proficiency in L-Directed Thinking. As a combination of affluence, technological progress, and globalization have gathered collective momentum, we have transitioned into Act III—the Conceptual Age.

The main characters now are the creator and the empathizer, whose distinctive ability is mastery of R-Directed Thinking. In short, we've progressed from a society of farmers to a society of factory workers to a society of knowledge workers. And now we're progressing yet again—to a society of pattern recognizers and meaning makers.

SYMPHONY

During the Conceptual Age, six aptitudes will be most important in professional success and personal flourishing. One of them I call “symphony”—the ability to put together the pieces. It is the capacity to synthesize rather than to analyze; to see relationships between seemingly unrelated fields; to detect broad patterns rather than to deliver specific answers; and to invent something new by combining elements nobody else thought to pair. Symphony is also an attribute of the brain's right hemisphere in the literal, as well as the metaphorical, sense. Neuroscience research conducted with functional MRIs has shown that the right hemisphere operates in a simultaneous, contextual, and symphonic manner. It concerns itself not with a particular spruce but with the whole forest—not with the bassoon player or the first violinist but with the entire orchestra.

Symphonic thinking is a signature ability of composers and conductors, whose jobs involve corralling a diverse group of notes, instruments, and performers and producing a unified and pleasing sound. Entrepreneurs and inventors have long relied on this ability. But today Symphony is becoming an essential aptitude for a much wider swath of the population. The reasons go back to the forces propelling us out of the Information Age. Automation has taken over many of the routine analytic tasks that knowledge workers once performed. That is freeing (and in some cases forcing) professionals to do what computers have a more difficult time replicating: recognizing patterns, crossing boundaries to uncover hidden connections, and making bold leaps of imagination. Meantime, a world teeming with information, individual choices, and just plain stuff is putting a premium on this aptitude in our personal lives as well. Modern life's glut of options and stimuli can be so overwhelming that those with the ability to see the big picture

—to sort out what really matters—have a decided advantage in their pursuit of personal well-being.

SEEING RELATIONSHIPS

Symphony is largely about relationships. People who hope to thrive in the Conceptual Age must understand the connections between diverse, and seemingly separate, disciplines. They must know how to link apparently unconnected elements to create something new. And they must become adept at analogy—at seeing one thing in terms of another. There are ample opportunities, in other words, for three types of people: the boundary crosser, the inventor, and the metaphor maker.

THE BOUNDARY CROSSER

What's the most prevalent, and perhaps most important, prefix of our times? Multi. Our jobs require multitasking. Our communities are multicultural. Our entertainment is multimedia. While detailed knowledge of a single area once guaranteed success, today the top rewards go to those who can operate with equal aplomb in starkly different realms. I call these people “boundary crossers.” They develop expertise in multiple spheres, they speak different languages, and they find joy in the rich variety of human experience. They live multi lives—because that's more interesting and, nowadays, more effective.

Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, the late psychologist who wrote the classic book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* as well as *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, studied the lives of creative people and found that “creativity generally involves crossing the boundaries of domains.” The most creative among us see relationships the rest of us never notice. Such ability is at a premium in a world where specialized knowledge work can quickly become routinized work—and therefore be automated or outsourced away.

Such multifaceted people can often solve problems that flummox the experts. “Many engineering deadlocks have been broken by people who are not engineers at all,” says Nicholas Negroponte, co-founder of the MIT Media Lab. “This is because

perspective is more important than IQ. The ability to make big leaps of thought is a common denominator among the originators of breakthrough ideas. Usually this ability resides in people with very wide backgrounds, multidisciplinary minds, and a broad spectrum of experiences.”

Boundary crossers reject either/or choices and seek multiple options and blended solutions. They lead hyphenated lives filled with hyphenated jobs and enlivened by hyphenated identities. They help explain the growing ranks of college students with double majors—and the proliferation of academic departments that dub themselves “interdisciplinary.”

THE INVENTOR

R-Directed thinkers have an intuitive sense that sometimes the most powerful ideas come from simply combining two existing ideas nobody else ever thought to unite. The ability to forge these kinds of inspired, inventive relationships is a function of the right side of our brains. Cognitive neuroscientists at Drexel and Northwestern universities have found that the flashes of insight that precede “Aha!” moments are accompanied by a large burst of neural activity in the brain’s right hemisphere. However, when we work out problems in a more methodical L-Directed way, this “eureka center” remains quiet. Our ability to activate this right hemisphere capacity has become more urgent as we transition out of the Information Age. In business today, the journey from innovation to commodity is so swift that successful individuals and organizations must be relentless. They must focus maniacally on invention—while outsourcing or automating much of the execution. This requires those with the ability and fortitude to experiment with novel combinations and to make the many mistakes that inevitably come with an inspiration-centered approach. Fortunately, despite what some might believe, all of us harbor this capacity to invent. Most inventions and breakthroughs come from reassembling existing ideas in new ways. Those willing to have a go at developing this symphonic ability will flourish in the Conceptual Age.

THE METAPHOR MAKER

Suppose you're at the office one day and your boss says, "Lend me your ears." Because the literal meaning of those four words computes only in a gruesome way, the left hemisphere will get a bit panicky and look beseechingly across the corpus callosum for assistance. The right hemisphere will then calm its partner, put the phrase in context, and explain that "lend me your ears" is a metaphor. The boss doesn't really want you to pull a Van Gogh. He just wants you to listen to what he's about to say.

Metaphor—that is, understanding one thing in terms of something else—is another important element of Symphony. But like so many aspects of R-Directed Thinking, it struggles against an undeserved reputation. Metaphor is often considered ornamentation—the stuff of poets and other frilly sorts, flowery words designed to perfume the ordinary or unpleasant. In fact, metaphor is central to reason—because, as linguist George Lakoff writes, "Human thought processes are largely metaphorical."

In a complex world, mastery of metaphor—a whole-minded ability that some cognitive scientists have called "imaginative rationality"—has become ever more valuable. Only the human mind can think metaphorically and see relationships that computers could never detect.

Metaphorical thinking is also important because it helps us understand others. That's one reason that marketers are supplementing their quantitative research with qualitative investigations into the metaphorical minds of their customers. But the benefits go well beyond the commercial realm. Today, thanks to astonishing improvements in telecommunications, wider access to travel, and increasing life spans, we come into contact with a larger and more diverse set of people than any humans in history. Metaphorical imagination is essential in forging empathic connections and communicating experiences that others do not share. Finally—and perhaps most important—is metaphor's role in slaking the thirst for meaning. The material comforts brought forth by abundance ultimately matter much less than the metaphors you live by—whether, say, you think of your life as a "journey" or as a "treadmill." "A large part of self-understanding," says Lakoff, "is

the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives.” The more we understand metaphor, the more we understand ourselves.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

In any symphony, the composer and the conductor have a variety of responsibilities. They must make sure that the brass horns work in synch with the woodwinds, that the percussion instruments don’t drown out the violas. But perfecting those relationships—important though it is—is not the ultimate goal of their efforts. What conductors and composers desire—what separates the long remembered from the quickly forgotten—is the ability to marshal these relationships into a whole whose magnificence exceeds the sum of its parts. So it is with the high-concept aptitude of Symphony. The boundary crosser, the inventor, and the metaphor maker all understand the importance of relationships. But the Conceptual Age also demands the ability to grasp the *relationships between relationships*. This meta-ability goes by many names—systems thinking, gestalt thinking, holistic thinking. I prefer to think of it simply as seeing the big picture.

Seeing the big picture involves integrating and imagining how the pieces fit together. This skill has become increasingly evident among entrepreneurs and other successful businesspeople. Michael Gerber, who has studied entrepreneurs of all sorts, has found: “All great entrepreneurs are Systems Thinkers. All who wish to become great entrepreneurs need to learn how to become a Systems Thinker...to develop their innate passion for seeing things whole.”

Both academic studies and firsthand observations are showing that pattern recognition—understanding the relationships between relationships—is equally important for those who aren’t intent on building their own empire. Daniel Goleman writes about a study of executives at fifteen large companies: “Just one cognitive ability distinguished star performers from average: pattern recognition, the ‘big picture’ thinking that allows leaders to pick out the meaningful trends from a welter of information around them and to think strategically far into the future.” These star performers, he found,

“relied less on deductive, if-then reasoning” and more on the intuitive, contextual reasoning characteristic of Symphony.

Many of us are crunched for time, deluged by information, and paralyzed by the weight of too many choices. The best prescription for these modern maladies may be to approach one’s own life in a contextual, big-picture fashion—to distinguish between what really matters and what merely annoys. This ability to perceive one’s own life in a way that encompasses the full spectrum of human possibility is essential to the search for meaning.

Terminal Resistance

Dr. Joy Buolamwini

Withstand the praise and the prison of expectations. Withdraw the temptation to mold yourself into who they thought you should be. Remember the doctor who told your worried mother, a PhD for this child is out of reach. Remember not because they were wrong, but because their eyes were too small to imagine the frail and fading body in their care contained a formidable spirit. Remember their miscalculation is one we can all make when we fail to look beyond present conditions and bleak predictions.

Withstand the pressure and the prism of demands spread across innocuous requests and insistent pleas. Withdraw your participation when you must fold your dignity, lower your stature, or diminish your worth to appease would be kingmakers. Remember the dear ones who took the calls and took the time to remind you of who you are without the crown and why they believe in you. Take the time to listen to the frail fading hearts who have forgotten the strength of their spirits.

Remember the significant small moments of acknowledgement and support. I remember the custodians who opened doors early so I could study longer. I remember the staff who gave me extra portions to show their pride and to encourage me to take bold strides. I remember the coaches who told me the truth lest they cheat me with cheap congratulations on less than my best. I remember the teachers who gave me more than was required, so I could know the elasticity of my capacities. Do not be afraid to reach higher than others dared, to stay longer when seemingly no one else cared, to fertilize the soil of toil before

the vision germinates, before the sprout pushes through the terminal resistance that unleashes your power.

CHAPTER 17



Aiko Bethea

On Getting Anchored, Aligned, and Accountable



I MET AIKO BETHEA TEN YEARS ago, when she attended a Dare to Lead training that I was facilitating in San Antonio, Texas. At the time, she was a deputy director at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. I later learned that she's also an attorney, a C-suite coach, and a faculty member at the Hudson Institute of Coaching. Over the past decade she has become my

teacher, a wicked-smart thought partner, an always willing rumble partner, and a good friend.

One day, after many conversations about shifts away from the terms *safe spaces* and *brave spaces* in the world of culture and leadership development, Aiko shared her Anchored, Aligned, and Accountable framework with me. I was so intrigued that I immediately put it into practice during a hard conversation. It was a game changer. Just a couple of days later, I talked about it with my son as we discussed dynamics at his school. Again, it immediately created clarity and a path to conversation and potential change. Transformation requires intentional table setting—it doesn't just show up at your house, knock on the door, and start improving culture and performance. You have to create the environment for growth and change. Aiko's framework is an invitation and an intention packaged in an actionable and straightforward approach.

While I was trying on Aiko's new model, I was also talking to Ben, my editor at Penguin Random House, about starting an imprint to publish authors whose work I'd like to see out in the world. I was unsure about the imprint until I experienced Aiko's new work on culture and the spaces we need to create to nurture and protect transformation. In early 2026, Aiko's book, *Anchored, Aligned, Accountable*, will be the first title published by BOLD Books—the new imprint. I'm grateful for the opportunity to amplify work that has changed me, influenced the way I lead, and shaped the people I love most—my family. I'm excited to include a sneak peek at Aiko's work here!

Aiko on Anchored, Aligned, and Accountable Spaces

Thousands of hours of executive coaching, thousands more hours of consulting in small nonprofits to Fortune 50 tech companies, and my lived experience have all taught me that solid operations are important for healthy workplaces. But individuals who are willing to lean into the *friction* of interpersonal relationships and self-interrogation are key. These are also the individuals who will live transformative lives: who will reap connection, learning and

growth, and rest and spaciousness. We often lean into the quick and sanitized approach of compliance, mandates, directives, and control, but they will not yield sustainable success. They'll provide short-term motivation, and perhaps quick fixes. But ultimately, what will shift workplace culture and our interpersonal relationships is the intrinsic motivation of individuals.

Transformative spaces will shift workplace culture and our interpersonal relationships. These spaces will yield workplaces that are empathetic, fulfilling, innovative, and not toxic. Specifically, these are places where:

we are **anchored** into our values,
our impact is **aligned** with our values and actions, and
we hold ourselves **accountable** for those impacts.

In transformative spaces, we invite accountability, and we navigate the feelings of discomfort, shame, pain, and even grief that can come with it so that we can get to the good part: being seen, being heard, and being in connection. In transformative spaces, we cannot dismiss ourselves, and we cannot look away from others. Living and leading this way absolutely requires constant intentionality, learning, unlearning, and a vigilant pursuit of our aspirational selves and collective well-being. And that is much easier said than done.

You are not going to escape being vulnerable here. The work involves mapping your inner landscape, looking at what's shaped you and taught you and hurt you, and other factors that will feel raggedy and like a hot mess at times. But you'll also get to experience the transformational change of others as you read through stories, make choices, and yes, squirm uncomfortably as things unfold in various scenarios. The overall idea is that when these funky feelings arise within you, you're not left in the lurch. You don't feel like you're the only person who's ever had this happen, because you can see it happening on the page. You'll see that there's a better way to belong to yourself and be in relationship with others. There are healthier workplaces to build. There is always a clear path forward.

To be anchored, we must identify what we want, who we want to become, and what truly matters to us. We do that by stating our core values, getting clarity on who we truly want to be (and peeling that apart from who the *world* wants us to be), and understanding our own internal emotional landscape.

When you're anchored like this, you decrease confusion and ambiguity about what's acceptable to you—both in terms of your actions and what you're willing to receive from others. You'll be better equipped to live and lead authentically, intentionally, and generously. Your decision making will be efficient and informed. And you'll find yourself navigating professional and personal relationships with more confidence. Real values, meaningful values, become a map to your inner aspirational self, and it's a course well worth plotting out.

Transformational change isn't just about feeling better about yourself and having clarity within. It's not just about my sense of personal peace. It's about stepping up. It's about holding the whole picture together. It's about taking that newfound clarity of *intention* and ensuring it's aligned with the *impact* you're having—on others, in the world, on all fronts. We're not striving to be an island that understands itself. We're striving for a transformational life that provides connection (within and with others), learning and expansion (which necessarily stretch beyond our own internal dialogue), and rest and spaciousness (which give us the energy to creatively explore the unknown and to welcome the resulting friction).

Holding yourself accountable is foundational to becoming your aspirational self. It's what's going to sustain you to keep doing the work. It's going to cause you to look at yourself, and look deeper than just the surface of the words you speak and into the actions you take (or don't take).

Holding yourself accountable is looking at your intentions and your impact. It's asking the question, "Could I be doing better—and how?" and then answering—truthfully. And within that question are some core principles to live out.

We are the *metronome* for change—we set the tempo, and it's time to speed it up. To get the workplaces we want, to be fulfilled,

to live the transformative life that is the result of connection, learning and growth, and rest and spaciousness, we need to move toward creating anchored, aligned, and accountable mindsets and spaces. We need to shift away from this place where safety looks like being a keyboard warrior, where bravery looks like Being Your Own Person (no matter whom you hurt), and psychological safety perpetuates the false idea that vulnerability is the same for all of us (because it isn't). The stakes and the circumstances aren't universal. Think about it: Is it the same for the only woman on the tech team to ask for help as it is for a male? Is it the same for a large-bodied person to share that there are certain foods they are unable to eat as it is for someone in a smaller body? Is it the same for the CEO to confess that he made a mistake as it is for the newbie? Is it the same for someone with an accent to ask for clarification as it is for someone without an accent? We need to shift toward a place of balance, of awareness and self-interrogation, and of constant willingness—eagerness—to readjust.

Just Beyond Yourself

David Whyte

Just beyond
yourself.

It's where
you need
to be.

Half a step
into
self-forgetting
and the rest
restored
by what
you'll meet.

There is a road
always beckoning.

When you see
the two sides
of it
closing together
at that far
horizon
and deep in
the foundations

of your own
heart
at exactly
the same
time,
that's how
you know
it's the road
you
have
to follow.

That's how
you know
it's where
you
have
to go.

That's how
you know
you have
to go.

That's
how you know.

Just beyond
yourself,
it's
where you
need to be.

CHAPTER 18



Lock-In and Lock-Through Power

ON A BEAUTIFUL ENGLISH SPRING day in March 2025, I walked onto a footbridge in Teddington, a suburb of the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames in southwest London. After I reached the center of the bridge, I turned in a full circle to get my directional bearings, then I paused facing east—toward the tidal part of the river—and gave Mother Thames a slight nod. I then turned toward the west and paid the same respect to Father Thames. Having recently learned that the Thames is governed by gods, I figured small, undetectable nods were the least I could do to acknowledge their presence without freaking out the passersby. Not that the English are prone to freaking out.

Father Thames, the patriarch of large groups of travelers, and Mother Thames, a striking Nigerian woman with equally gorgeous daughters—each named after a tributary of the great river—have a contentious relationship that’s always right on the verge of erupting into a full-scale turf war. This is a dangerous proposition, given that a skirmish could create flooding for the 15 million people who live in the river’s catchment area. The Teddington Lock is where the Thames transitions from nontidal to tidal, and it’s where the two gods have agreed to draw the boundary line that determines where their territories begin and end.

As I climbed down off the bridge, I approached a young, ponytailed woman wearing coveralls and sporting Wayfarer sunglasses. I smiled at her and asked if there was really a “lock keeper” who runs the locks. For a fifth-generation Texan, finding an actual lock keeper in this storybook English setting would seem about as magical as the river gods. She smiled back at

me, extended her hand, and said, “I’m Gemma, the lock keeper here. How can I help?”

This is why I believe in magic.

I introduced myself and explained that I was trying to learn how locks work so that I could use them as a metaphor in a new book I was writing on leadership. She was immediately curious. Gemma shared a knowing smile as I explained that I wanted to use the concept of the lock to illustrate the tricky work-to-home and professional-to-personal transitions that we have to navigate with our partners, children, and friends. I explained that the more I understand why, at the end of a hard day, when we finally arrive home, we stay in our cars and scroll through TikTok rather than going inside, the more I think we’ve got a lock problem. Specifically, we have a “locking-through” problem—the term used to describe the process of raising or lowering a boat to match the water level of the adjoining waterway. I told Gemma that I wasn’t sure whether my thinking accurately matched the way locks actually function.

When I was done with my clumsy metaphor explanation, she raised her eyebrows and said, “You mean when it’s bath and bedtime for your two young ones, and you know your partner has been home for fifteen minutes but he’s still not inside the house?”

Relieved that it made sense to her, I said, “That’s exactly it! We’re coming off one depth and either falling uncontrollably to a completely different level of flow, or we’re scrambling to rise and get synced with something more elevated. Either way, there’s a lot of rough water in these transition processes.”

Gemma nodded and said, “So interesting! I’ve never thought about it before, but the work-to-home transition can be turbulent for sure.”

I described to Gemma how the research participants talked about bringing their “I’m locked in” work energy into the house without even realizing it until their frustrated partner says, “Hey, I don’t work for you!” or “Leave that stress at the door!”

There’s also the overwhelm we can experience when we walk into our apartment after a long day of work and discover that home has its own tempest brewing. We’re ready to sink into the couch, only to find that our child’s soccer practice got moved up by an hour and their shin guards have gone missing again. Or, just as we change into our comfy clothes, an aging parent calls because they can’t find their new medication. Or the dog is

throwing up, or the thought of pulling together dinner pushes you to your breaking point.

When we don't make the time for the lock-through process—when we fail to take the time to transition and level up or down with our new environment—we can quickly find ourselves questioning why, just hours ago, when work seemed overwhelming, we were longing to be in the very place that we now find ourselves trying to escape.

Gemma was all in, but before we got started, she asked about my choice of the Teddington Locks, given the number of great locks in the United States. I explained that I was already in London for work and that my British murder mystery addiction had led me to the book *Rivers of London* by Ben Aaronovitch. Before I could go on, she smiled and said, “Ah, yes, *Rivers of London*. I understand that we're where custody of the river changes hands between Mother and Father Thames.”

We laughed again, and I told her I was already on the fifth book in the series.

Lock Lessons

A navigation lock, or boat lock, works by creating a contained, watertight chamber with gates at both ends, allowing vessels to navigate between different water levels by raising or lowering the water within the chamber using gravity.

When the ship enters the lock chamber, the gates behind it close, and a sealed environment is created. The water level in the chamber is raised or lowered, depending on whether the ship is going upstream or downstream, by opening the sluices that allow water to flow into or out of the chamber. Once the water level in the lock chamber matches the level of the waterway beyond the gates, the gates are opened, and the boat or ship can continue smoothly on its journey. A weir, which is often a part of the lock system, is a barrier that is built across the river to control water levels and flow and to help with flood management.

For two wonderful hours that day at the Teddington Locks, I watched Gemma let a narrowboat and a working barge through the locks. I learned the mechanics of how the sluices work, and I got a fascinating lesson on the

various sources of the river. The actual history of the tributaries is as interesting as Ben Aaronovitch's fictional portrayal of Mother Thames's daughters. In the books, each daughter is named after the tributary she oversees. For example, Aaronovitch explains that Tyburn, or Lady Ty, is pompous, lives in Mayfair, and goes to posh people's parties, and that Effra Thames is not only the goddess of the River Effra but also the goddess of Brixton Market and the Peckham branch of the Black Beauticians Society.

After a short lesson in fluid dynamics, Gemma's shift ended, and my magical afternoon came to a close. Gemma the lock keeper liked the fact that I was planning to use an actual lock in my metaphor. And Gemma the mother, partner, and leader, who faces the same stressors that most of us face at the end of a hard day, seemed pleased to have helped with a metaphor that illuminates how hard it is to transition from work to home.

Gemma is the first female Lead Lock and Weir Keeper at Teddington since it was built in 1810. On the drive back to the hotel, I thought about how complex, serious, and sometimes deadly her job can be. When your work is connected to a waterway that serves 15 million people, there are accidents and tragedies all the time. That night as I was going to sleep, I thought, *If being the lead lock and weir keeper at a lock built in 1810 is not plumbing and poetry—I'm not sure what is.*

Locking In

Most of us know what it means to lock in. We may think of it as that moment when we take a deep breath and choose to focus intensely on one thing. Or maybe it's when we summon all of our available internal resources to achieve a specific outcome or to go "all-in" on a specific task.

Locking in is about paying full attention, going "heads down" to get it done, and making a commitment to limiting distractions. My pickleball partners and I probably say it at least two or three times in an hour of playing: "*C'mon! Lock in. Let's go!*"

At work, someone may knock on my door and ask if I'm available. If I'm writing, reading, or coding data, it's not unusual for me to say, "I'm locked in. Give me fifteen minutes."

To better understand locking in, mental toughness, and related constructs, I ran focus groups and conducted interviews with a wide variety of folks, from fighter pilots and military rescue teams—including casualty assistance officers (the courageous and compassionate people who make next-of-kin notifications and provide support to families)—to professional athletes, coaches, trauma-focused medical professionals, hostage negotiators, intelligence community members, and high-level organization leaders. I also watched about forty hours of videos of coaches reviewing game and practice tapes and player performances from competitive sports.

The focus groups and interviews were with such diverse groups and individuals, they allowed me to find patterns that transcended industries and specialties. The tapes were deeply helpful because, as I talked about in Chapter 3, we can observe locked-in moments more easily in athletes than in leaders.

As a grounded theory researcher, when I find myself surrounded by an overwhelming amount of data—which was the case here—I immediately start mentally creating different-sized baskets so I can sort the information into categories and supporting properties—baskets inside baskets.

I’m always asking myself, *What is the relationship between these concepts? How are they related? What’s the hierarchy?* I was once called an “unrelenting taxonomist” by a journalist, but I heard it as *taxidermist* and I didn’t like it, so I developed an enduring aversion to the term *taxonomist*. I guess this is a linguistic sensitivity for a Texan who was raised in deer blinds.

My original hypothesis was that locking in is a function of mental toughness. In other words, I had guessed that if you had to put “locking in” into one basket of existing research, you’d drop it in the mental toughness basket. I was wrong.

It turns out that locking in is not just about mental toughness. We seem to lock in when engaged in four different types of experiences requiring different cognitive, behavioral, and emotional resources:

1. Mental toughness
2. Flow
3. Deliberate practice
4. Deep focus

I think it's worth a few paragraphs to describe how locking in aligns with these concepts.

Mental Toughness and the Lock-In

Researchers Peter Clough, Doug Strycharczyk, and John Perry define mental toughness as “a set of attributes related to how people deal with challenges, stressors, and pressure.” Their model of mental toughness is structured around the “4 C’s” framework, which includes:

- **Control:** The extent to which individuals feel they are in control of their lives and emotions. High control means feeling able to influence outcomes and manage emotions effectively.
- **Commitment:** The ability to set goals and consistently achieve them, demonstrating reliability, focus, and perseverance.
- **Challenge:** The tendency to see challenges, change, and adversity as opportunities for growth rather than as threats. High challenge is associated with adaptability and a drive for personal development.
- **Confidence:** The belief in one’s abilities and the inner strength to stand one’s ground, including both confidence in one’s skills and interpersonal confidence.

As I dug into this research, there appeared to be considerable overlap between concepts like mental toughness, hardiness, and resilience.

Flow and the Lock-In

I could also see the concept of flow in the interviews and the observational field notes I took while watching film. The concept of flow was introduced by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi in his 1975 book, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*, and was more recently defined by the European Flow Researchers Network as “a gratifying state of deep involvement and absorption that individuals report when facing a challenging activity and they perceive

adequate abilities to cope with these challenges. Flow is described as an optimal experience during which people are deeply motivated to persist in their activities.”

The six elements of flow as conceptualized by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Jeanne Nakamura were clear across the “locked-in” research. I’ve added examples under each element to capture how they show up for me and how I interpret these elements:

- Intense and focused concentration on the present moment
I feel focused without effort.
- Merging of action and awareness
I’m one with the work— almost inside it.
- Loss of reflective self-consciousness
I’m not distracted by thoughts of “How do I look?” or “What will they think?”
- Sense of personal control or agency
I’ve got this!
- Distortion of temporal experience
I’m on a different clock— sometimes fast, sometimes slow, sometimes a mystery.
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding
I feel swept away and the outcome is not even in my thoughts, just the moving along.

Adding to this flow work, we also saw a connection in our data to Cameron Norsworthy’s significant contribution to our understanding of flow. Specifically, Norsworthy’s ideas of optimal challenge and flow’s teachability were brought up across the interviews. Here’s a simpler way of thinking about these two ideas:

Optimal challenge requires matching skill levels with escalating demands.

I avoid challenges that are too easy and lead to boredom.

I avoid challenges that are too difficult and lead to anxiety.

Flow isn't just a state—it's a skill.

I can learn to access flow with discipline and practice.

Locking In and Deliberate Practice

The idea of deliberate practice emerged as very significant to how the research participants talked about their experiences of locking in. Anders Ericsson's work helped me understand that while achieving flow in our work can be an enjoyable experience, it's different from deliberate practice. He explains that deliberate practice is a matter of engaging in a "training activity aimed at reaching a level just beyond the currently attainable level of performance by engaging in full concentration, analysis after feedback, and repetitions with refinement."

There was no question that research participants enjoyed the feeling of flow and felt locked in during that experience; however, they also locked in for deliberate practice and developing mastery—which was not as comfortable, but equally meaningful.

I'm a huge believer in deliberate practice. I don't always enjoy the stretch, but I love the growth. I hate drilling to improve technique on the court, but I love when being competitive, which I enjoy, means better ball placement and shot selection. You don't develop these in game play, you develop them through drilling.

Locking In and Deep Focus

Last, and maybe most intensely, the data we collected on locking in drove me straight to Dr. Amishi Jha's work on attention and focus. Dr. Jha, a professor of psychology at the University of Miami and director of contemplative neuroscience, studies how our brain pays attention and how

we can strengthen this critical cognitive function. I interviewed Amishi for the *Dare to Lead* podcast and...yikes. It was a big lesson in accountability for me.

In her words, I wasn't paying attention to my attention. I was convinced that I had ten flashlights at my disposal rather than one. Here are some key learnings from her book, *Peak Mind*, that changed my work and my game:

1. Your attention can be like a flashlight. Where you point it becomes brighter, highlighted, and more salient.
2. Multitasking—or, more specifically, *task switching*—is terrible for our performance, accuracy, and mood.
3. You have one flashlight. Not two. Not three. And your one flashlight can only ever be shining on one thing at a time.... In a day when you do a lot of task switching, you'll start having less integrity in *any* of the states your attention is in.... You're going to become slower, more error prone, and emotionally worn out.

The training that I'm working on from the same book, *Peak Mind*, is the same training used in a study with active duty military service members preparing for deployment. In her studies, Jha discovered that without intervention, attention becomes compromised under stress, and attentional lapses increase. She discovered that with appropriate mindfulness training, attention can be strengthened and protected even in high-pressure situations. I feel a significant difference at work and on the court after practicing her mindfulness approach. In fact, when I'm playing and I tell myself to *lock in*, I even visualize my single flashlight.

Locking Through

During my lock lesson, while I was watching and waiting for the chamber at Teddington to fill up so a very cool narrowboat could continue on its journey, I asked Gemma if the button she was pushing forced the gates open and closed. She told me no, it's all gravity. When the water levels are

exactly the same, pushing the button simply unlatches the barrier and allows gravity to open the gates.

Of course, I was in full kindergarten-field-trip mode and asked if half an inch would make a difference. Gemma smiled and said, “Yes. It won’t open if there’s even half an inch difference in the water levels, because it’s half an inch over the course of a hundred miles of river.”

Wow. Physics is nuts. And, while we unfortunately can’t apply these types of clear science and math rules to how humans work, there is a powerful analogy here that math can help us understand.

The forces at play in our transitions from work to home have their own calculations of:

Cognitive lift: *How much brain power is this taking?*

Context switching: *What does it cost me to change focus from the brief I’m writing for my boss to reading a Slack message that’s unrelated to what I’m doing?*

Domain switching (a type of context switching that often involves shifting between different life domains): *How much energy in my account is being drawn to shift from thinking about the hard feedback I received from my boss about the brief I wrote to helping my mom find her lost medications?*

The investment of deep focus is intense, and while the return is great in terms of our efficiency and even our feelings of satisfaction, our brains end up spent.

Context switching, including domain switching, is more costly than we can even see. When we knowingly or unknowingly switch between tasks or contexts or domains, the demand for cognitive flexibility takes a huge toll on us biologically, inducing chronic stress, emotional dysregulation, cognitive depletion, memory issues, and burnout. Basically, it pulls a ton of resources from our account.

Part of addressing the toll that all of these cognitive demands put on us is naming what’s happening and, in the case of the 6,324 small bullshit disruptions during the day, minimizing them where possible. And you know what I’m talking about with the infuriating disruptions—the email pings, the firefighting when someone’s hair is on fire about something, the

nonsensical meeting schedules, and the swirl of so many shifting priorities that there are actually no priorities at all.

When this scenario is the reality for most of us, the most important thing to know is that we may not just be “in a slump,” and we may not need more sleep—we may be completely overdrawn at the cognitive bank. Insufficient funds. And that’s real.

Researchers who study these issues suggest a two-pronged approach—minimize switching where you can (goodbye to the Slack alerts on my damn watch) and engage in deliberate recovery to heal from the demands that will always be a part of being human. We know a lot about deliberate recovery from athletic training research. Unfortunately for us, when you apply deliberate recovery to cognitive and emotional overwhelm, it leads us to our favorite term: *metacognition*.

The first step in deliberate recovery is understanding the demands on us in the language of cognitive lift and then observing in ourselves what kind of thinking, focus, and switching fuels us and what kind leaves us depleted.

The second step in deliberate recovery is understanding that this type of recovery is not passive—it’s structured and intentional. And often very physical. Part of our recovery is cleaning out attentional residue. Sophie Leroy, associate professor of management at the University of Washington Bothell School of Business, explains, “Attention residue refers to cognitions about a Task A that persist even though one has stopped working on Task A, transitioned to Task B, and is now working on Task B. Understanding the cause and consequences of attention residue is important because people who experience attention residue while performing another task operate under cognitive load due to the lingering cognitive activity. Since working under cognitive load tends to hurt performance...people experiencing attention residue after switching tasks are likely to demonstrate poor performance on that next task.”

I know this all sounds complicated, but there is some serious stuff going on in our brain. Some of it is self-inflicted, some of it is due to the deep dysfunction and greed in our world and at work, and some of it is just part of being human. I think we need to understand our brain given that lots of people are working very hard to leverage it, manipulate it, and use it in service of issues we may or may not support.

I have changed my life with this information. I have protected my time and my thinking in new ways that have not landed well with some people in

my life but have protected my heart and mind. In fact, when it comes to deliberate practice, I've learned a lot about deliberate recovery from Magnus Carlsen, a Norwegian chess grandmaster who is a five-time world chess champion and widely regarded as one of the greatest players in history.

In multiple interviews over the past two years, Carlsen has been very forthcoming about the relationship between being a champion, staying in good physical shape, and deliberate recovery. He runs, does yoga, and still plays on a recreational soccer team in Norway. When he travels to tournaments, he will play pickup basketball and soccer games, and he also runs on treadmills. What I think is really interesting is something he said in an interview for *The Wall Street Journal*. Carlsen explained that in both soccer and chess, "games are lost or won in the final hours due to mistakes caused by fatigue."

Going back to my trainer Tony's sage wisdom: *We're looking for intentionality and consistency over wild intensity. Winning in here will be a focused and systemic change across your life. This is about you making a commitment to body, mind, and spirit, and holding yourself accountable to that commitment.*

Capsizing

When I was observing the lock in Teddington, it felt as if it took a really long time for the chamber to fill up so we could get the narrowboat through. Watching it happen in person helped me get my head around the fact that a ship transiting the Panama Canal typically takes eight to ten hours to pass through the three sets of locks totaling six lock chambers from ocean to ocean. Granted, that's relatively no time compared to the ten to twenty-two days and about 8,000 nautical miles of travel it would take to sail around the tip of South America via Cape Horn or the Strait of Magellan.

When I asked Gemma if there was a faster way to fill the chamber, her answer hit me like a ton of bricks: "No. The transition takes what it takes. If you force more water into the chamber, it will become very turbulent and vessels could capsize."

When I got home from London, I immediately told Steve, “I’m grumpy when I get home because I spend so much time locked in and I’m not locking through when I get home. I’m rushing my transition from work to home—it’s too turbulent and I’m capsizing.”

It sounds funny, but it’s true. Transitions have been a really hard part of our lives. I have an intense and demanding job. I am deeply introverted and for every hour I’m with people, I need a percentage of that in recovery time. And Steve’s day at his pediatric practice can take a very difficult turn in a literal heartbeat. We both come from families in which end-of-day transitions were anxiety-producing and eggshelly. Everyone was doing the very best they could with the information and experiences they had, but there was no self-awareness, no emotional regulation, and no one was above the line. Not a great setup.

Steve didn’t skip a beat when I told him things were too turbulent and I was capsizing when I got home. He was all in to try something new. Steve and my son are avid fishermen, and he got the metaphor immediately. He asked, “What’s your ideal chamber time for the lock-through?”

After thinking about it, I said, “Honestly, I probably need twenty to thirty minutes after a full workday. If I’m coming off a hard thirty-minute call or an hour-long meeting, I might just need five to ten minutes, but after work—I need half an hour.”

I had to trust him enough to ask for what I need. I can’t sit in the car in the garage for thirty minutes. I want to come in and grab a cold sparkling water. I want to put on my sweatshirt, take my makeup off, and pull back my hair. I want a full half hour of alone time—of pure introvert recharge and recovery time.

In my family, this kind of request would have been ridiculed and seen as self-indulgent. But I grew up in a house that felt a lot like the Drake Passage in the evenings. Cue the scary “Yo-ho, hoist the colors” TikTok song they play with the videos taken from oil rigs and ships that make you seasick. No thanks.

Steve and I talked about the things that capsize us the quickest. For me, it’s two seemingly innocuous questions:

How was your day? What do you feel like doing for dinner?

Hearing these questions before my lock-through time or even when I’m midchamber pushes me so far under the water that it can feel like I’m drowning. I get that they’re both thoughtful questions, but I can’t do it. I

can't play back the day I'm actively trying to shake loose. And even though there is zero assumption that I'm in charge of dinner, I can't make another decision until my water level is where it needs to be. As Gemma taught me, there may be only a half inch of difference in the water levels, but it's a hundred miles of that half inch!

Once I'm locked through, I'm ready to talk about my day and cook or order out or make decisions. Steve talked about his locking-through needs (a warm welcome home and a nod to wanting to debrief our days when we're ready), and we committed to trying it. Like all commitments to deliberate practice, it's uncomfortable and vulnerable. *Zero* flow, just awkwardly being new at something. And we all know that trying on new ways of showing up at work or home is hard because it's brave.

Steve and I were both painfully aware of how many times in our past we did not recover in time from the capsizing, and it ruined an evening. In hindsight, that thirty minutes of awkward locking-through would have felt like a split second compared to navigating heavy swells and whitecaps for an entire evening and potentially the entire next day.

The difficult part is when two partners get home from tough days, both ready and desperate for some lock-through transition time, and it's just not viable for both of you to take it at the same time. I think just like the boats at Teddington, we have to prioritize and queue up. That seems to be a better answer than both of us trying to shorten the time we need. You're not going to beat gravity and force those gates open too soon. There's just too much river behind you.

Lock-In and Lock-Through Power

Here are my big takeaways from the work I've done on this over the past three years:

1. Lock-in and lock-through power are core to grounded confidence. I want to work on my own capacity to do both with intention. I am now looking for this capability in our hiring process, and I'm teaching both of my kids about what I've

learned. Last, I'm bringing this work into our leadership, performance, and culture work with organizations around the world, and that's led to hearing great feedback from not only the leaders with whom we work, but their partners and spouses as well. Some of us may intuitively lock in, but understanding what we're doing and the cognitive lift it requires is key to recovering from the lock-in and is part of a deliberate practice to strengthen that ability.

2. A person's ability to seriously lock in is only as valuable as their capacity and willingness to lock through. When it comes to identifying capabilities, the combination of this new research and my work over the past two decades has led me to think about locking in and locking through as a capability set.

Locking in is what we do to achieve a number of different cognitive, behavioral, and emotional states, including attention, deep focus, flow, mental toughness, and deliberate practice.

Locking through is a transition mindset and skill set—it's about integration, which is the opposite of compartmentalization. It's taking the same kind of deep breath that we often use to summon our lock-in power, then using that inhale to shift from deep focus to diffused focus—bringing more things into our awareness than the challenge right in front of us.

This process is about moving from harnessing our internal pool of resources to acknowledging the resource pool's gifts *and* limits. To name the human tenderness inherent in a big cognitive spend combined with a big context-switching spend. This entire integration transition is in service of honoring and sustaining our lock-in power and our wholeheartedness. You can only protect both. Choosing one hurts both.

A Note About Mental Toughness and Emotional Tenderness

Earlier in this chapter, I shared a list of the groups of people I interviewed for this research, from fighter pilots and military rescue teams to

professional athletes and coaches to hostage negotiators and high-level organization leaders.

I knew going into these interviews and focus groups that I'd be impressed with the level of determination and strength these folks display, but...whoa! What took me by surprise were their questions. In addition to generously answering my questions and offering insights into their experiences, they had their own questions. And, across the interviews and focus groups, their questions were related to their very mixed feelings about the construct of "mental toughness."

The research participants were handpicked by their leaders and met two criteria: (1) They were considered respected formal or informal leaders by their peers, and (2) they consistently demonstrated strength and resolve under pressure. My spill question for them was: *What do you think mental toughness is and what do you think it is not?*

Given their backgrounds, they were all familiar with some version of the mental toughness concept. In fact, some acknowledged that they had been trained in it. What was unexpected were their reactions to the term. They ranged from eye-rolling and wary to critical and cynical. This skepticism resulted in their having a lot of questions for me. Specifically, across the interviews, their clarifying questions fell into these five buckets:

1. Are you talking only about big moments? (Examples they gave of "big moments" included buzzer-beater and "center court" competition situations and life-or-death moments.) Then they followed up with some version of "Or are we also talking about small but tough everyday moments?"
2. Are you talking about something you have to draw on for an hour or a day, or for months—like a deployment?
3. Do you want to know about people who can "get hard shit done" and who are good leaders and good to be around, or do you want to know about people who can get it done but "they don't seem okay" or "they're not trusted"? Or do you want examples of people who "get hard shit done" and are trusted by others?
4. Are you talking about personality, or about capability?
5. Do you want mindsets, skill sets, or both?

I, of course, answered their questions with questions (which is annoying, but my job):

1. Are you asking because you think big and small moments rely on different resources? If so, what are they?
2. Do you think we need different internal resources for short-term versus long-term pushes? If so, what are they?
3. Do you think there are differences between people who can be tough and who struggle to lead and be trusted, and people who can be tough and who are strong leaders and trustworthy? If so, what are they?
4. Do you think it's important to separate personality and capability? Are there other things we should be talking about? If so, what are they?
5. Do you think it's a mindset, skill set, or both?

This is how qualitative research works, and it's as exhilarating to me as standing on the Teddington bridge talking to the gods of the River Thames on a sunny spring day.

By the time I got to year three of these intense interviews, some of my thinking about mental toughness had changed.

First, from a leadership, performance, sport, and organizational culture perspective, the concept of mental toughness made up only a small part of lock-in power. Lock-in power is something we all need, and, with disciplined locking-through recovery, it might make us better. Mental toughness is different. The resource draw is huge and, in the extreme, can push us into ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling that cut us off from our humanity. The recovery often involves processing trauma. Experiencing trauma is not healthy adversity.

Second, there is sometimes a place for mental toughness in our lives. But it's not a romantic notion. It takes a serious toll on people. I grieve for this world that often requires a level of mental toughness to survive. It's one thing to celebrate the mental toughness of the surgeon in the eleventh hour of a life-saving procedure, but having to tap into that well of resources to survive everyday moments is destructive to our mind, body, and spirit. And right now, with power-over at play in so many areas of politics and life, more and more people have to live in this constant state of mental

toughness to go about their everyday lives. As we talked about earlier, power-over depends on acts of increasing cruelty, and while cruelty may be the product of mental toughness, it is always born of weakness and fear.

Third, if mental toughness is necessary in a situation, and I believe it can be, we need to get very intentional about our recovery, which happens only when we acknowledge to ourselves and others that we are going to spend major internal resources for a certain period of time at considerable costs. Our capacity for mental toughness should never be separated from our capacity for emotional tenderness. As I peeled the onion in the focus groups and interviews, it became very clear that the research participants' frustration and questions arose from their experience that the investment and interest in mental toughness had in many ways led to the neglect of teaching people reentry skills—how to come out of that toughness.

We know that many groups of people who regularly depend on mental toughness to be successful in their work also experience higher levels of addiction, death by suicide, and death as a result of high-risk behaviors. We need to invest in teaching people how to straddle the paradox of developing the toughness necessary to do hard things along with the tenderness required to thrive in their lives—to create meaningful relationships, to trust, to embrace vulnerability, and ultimately to live a wholehearted life.

If you look at the ways in which the concept of masculinity is being twisted and perverted today, or the way in which empathy and care are being demonized, it's clear that we're missing the big picture. If you can't lock through after being locked in and getting shit done, your lock-in power is compromised and will degrade over time.

The human capacity for finding strong ground depends on the ability to be both tough *and* tender, to be able to lock in *and* lock through. Anything that sees our human spirit as one or the other is halfhearted.

In the next chapter you're going to meet someone who exemplifies what it takes to be mentally tough and emotionally tender. Someone who can lock in and lead from wherever she's standing, and someone who knows how to champion others. My friend Abby Wambach.

CHAPTER 19



Abby Wambach

On Leading, Pointing, and Running



ABBY WAMBACH IS AN INTERGENERATIONAL hero in our house. If you're my age and you raised a girl who played soccer, I wouldn't be surprised to hear that Abby jerseys and posters made all the birthday wish lists. As a leadership researcher, I include her book *Wolfpack: How to Come Together, Unleash Our Power, and Change the Game* on my very short list of

leadership books that every human should read at least twice. I've read it at least five times, I've interviewed her for the *Dare to Lead* podcast, and our family has listened to the audiobook together on a couple of road trips. My kids both played sports, and they found her lessons essential and actionable. I loved Abby on the pitch, and off the pitch her thoughts on being a good human being and leader have changed the way I think about what winning really means.

If you're not familiar with Abby, she is a two-time Olympic gold medalist, FIFA World Cup champion, and six-time winner of the U.S. Soccer Athlete of the Year award. She was the United States' leading scorer in the 2007 and 2011 Women's World Cup tournaments and the 2004 and 2012 Olympics. She is an activist for equality and inclusion, and she hosts *Abby's Places* on ESPN+, in which she showcases what makes her beloved sport of soccer a worldwide sensation. Abby co-hosts the award-winning podcast *We Can Do Hard Things*, and she recently launched *Welcome to the Party*, a podcast on women in sports. Abby is also a founder and part owner of Angel City FC, the first majority-female-owned soccer team in history.

Wolfpack is based on her commencement address at Barnard College in New York City in 2018. All eight lessons from the book are gold—the two I'm sharing here happen to be my favorites. There's always a wonderful moment when I'm in a room with leaders and I put up my favorite picture of Abby looking absolutely joyful after scoring a goal. In the picture, she's pointing at the teammate whose assist made the goal possible. After I teach these two lessons from *Wolfpack*, we do a fun call-and-response:

I say: When you're on the bench...

The room says: Lead!

I say: When you score...

The room says: Point!

I say: When your teammate scores...

The room says: Run!

The lessons are so valuable because they're simple and easy to learn, and they reinforce the idea that being a brave leader is only possible when we're committed to being a loving human first.

Abby on Leading from the Bench

2015 was a big year for me. It would be the last year of my career, and I was planning to go out with a bang by leading the U.S. Women's National Team to a World Cup championship.

After the first few games, it became clear that I didn't belong on that starting roster anymore. At thirty-five, I was one of the oldest players on the team. I wasn't the player I used to be. The team knew it, the coaches knew it, I knew it.

So imagine this: You've scored more international goals in your sport than any human being on the planet. You've co-captained and led Team USA to victory after victory for the past decade. And you and your coach sit down and decide together that you won't be a starter for the remainder of your final World Cup.

This was hard to accept as Abby Wambach, co-captain of Team USA. It was even harder to accept as Abby, the competitive kid who dreamed of finishing her career the way she'd played it, leading her team to victory on the field.

But finishing my career as a starter wouldn't have taught me the most important lesson of leadership, the one I had yet to learn, the one that would carry me into the next phase of my life. I knew how to lead on the field. Now I needed to learn how to lead from the bench.

The second game of the tournament arrived. I was accustomed to walking out onto the field in front of the roaring crowd, in line with the other starters. We'd walk to the center of the field, face the flags, and listen to our country's anthem. But this time I walked into the stadium with the reserve players, stopped in front of our bench—and watched another set of eleven players put their hands over their hearts for the anthem.

I knew that the eyes of the crowd, my teammates, and my fans were on me. They were all watching to see how I would react. I had a choice between pouting and making this moment about me or swallowing my pride and making it about our team.

When I was on the field, what inspired and motivated me most was not the millions of strangers cheering but when my *teammates* paid attention, saw me, and believed in me. So, I celebrated when

goals were scored, and I kept believing in us even when mistakes were made. I knew the women on the field like sisters, so I could predict, in every moment, exactly what each needed from me. Whatever it was—comfort, encouragement, tough love, instruction—I offered it. At the end of that game, I was so exhausted, it was like I'd played all ninety minutes. The starters had left it all on the field; I'd left it all on the bench.

I did that again and again throughout the entire tournament. We won the World Cup that year. We celebrated together—starters and bench players—as one team. I know in my bones that one of the reasons we won the 2015 World Cup was the support of the bench. The pride I feel about how I handled that tournament rivals the pride I have about scoring any big goal.

You'll feel benched sometimes, too. You'll find yourself taken off the project, passed over for the promotion, falling sick, losing the election, sidelined by the kid who doesn't seem to need you anymore. Here's what's important: You are allowed to be disappointed when it feels like life's benched you. What you aren't allowed to do is miss your opportunity to lead from the bench.

If you're not a leader on the bench, don't call yourself a leader on the field.

You're either a leader everywhere or nowhere.

Every woman is the leader of her own life. Do not give up that power. Claim it. Value it. Use it.

The picture of leadership is every woman who is allowing her *own voice* to guide her life and the lives of those she cares about.

Leadership is volunteering at the local school, speaking encouraging words to a friend, and holding the hand of a dying parent. It's tying dirty shoelaces and going to therapy. Leadership is taking care of yourself and empowering others to do the same.

Leadership is not a position to earn, it's an inherent power to claim.

It's not the privilege of a few, it is the right and responsibility of all.

Leader is not a title that the world gives to you—it's an offering that you give to the world.

Abby on Championing Each Other

During every ninety-minute soccer game there are a few magical moments when the ball actually hits the back of the net and a goal is scored. When this happens, it means that everything has come together perfectly—the perfect pass, the perfectly timed run, every player in the precise place at exactly the right time—culminating in a moment in which one player scores that goal.

The bench erupts. Teammates from all over the field rush toward the goal scorer. There are high fives, chest bumps, dances, hugs, and a spontaneous celebratory huddle that disperses as quickly as it began.

It might appear to the crowd that the team is celebrating the goal scorer, but what the team is *really* celebrating is every player, every coach, every practice, every sprint, every doubt, and every failure that this one single goal represents.

You will not always be the goal scorer. When you are not, you better be rushing toward her.

Sometimes you *will* be the goal scorer.

I was that goal scorer 184 times during my international career.

If you watch footage of any of those goals, you'll see that the moment after I score, I begin to point.

I point to the teammate who assisted.

I point to the defender who protected us.

I point to the midfielder who ran tirelessly.

I point to the coach who dreamed up this play.

I point to the bench player who willed this moment into existence.

I've never scored a goal in my life without getting a pass from someone else.

Every goal I've ever scored belonged to my entire team.

When you score, you better start pointing.

When a woman scores, there are only two options:

We're either rushing or we're pointing.

Here's what rushing and pointing look like off the field:

We amplify each other's voices.

We demand seats for women, people of color, and all marginalized people at every table where decisions are made.

We celebrate each other's successes.

We express gratitude and give credit to those who contributed to our own successes.

And when one of us falls, we support her rise.

Championing each other can be difficult for women because for so long we have been pitted against each other for the token seat at the table. Maintaining the illusion of scarcity is how power keeps women competing for the singular seat at the old table, instead of uniting and building a new, bigger table.

Scarcity has been planted inside of us and among us. This is not our fault—but it is our problem to solve.

We believe that love, justice, success, and power are infinite and meant to be accessible to all.

We will take action on behalf of all of us.

We will help each other. We will rush toward each other. We will point to each other. We will claim infinite joy, success, and power—together. We will celebrate the success of one woman as a collective success for all women.

CHAPTER 20



The Big Reward

ONE AREA OF FOCUS IN our Dare to Lead work is reminding leaders that pausing to show gratitude is critically important for the people on our teams. So often we're afraid that pausing to show appreciation or taking time to celebrate even a small win will be perceived as encouraging our team to slow down and take it easy. This is not true—it's a dangerous manifestation of scarcity and "never enough" thinking. Genuine and heartfelt recognition and gratitude feed the human spirit and buffer us against burnout.

As Eric Mosley and Derek Irvine write in their book, *Making Work Human: How Human-Centered Companies are Changing the Future of Work and the World*:

"Purpose is shared. Meaning is personal. And gratitude is the great connector."

In the midst of transformation, we need to be especially thoughtful about recognizing people when they are trying on new ways of thinking and showing up. In our experience, leaders who do this in the normal course of daily work have teams who embrace and demonstrate change at a much faster rate and at a deeper level than those who don't.

Effective examples that we've seen include pausing a meeting to say "I know I've shared my excitement about this approach, which could make challenging the idea harder for the team. I appreciate your willingness to ask these tough questions."

Another example is simply noticing a different way of thinking and responding with "The way you're thinking about this is showing smart risk-taking—I appreciate it."

We can also reinforce with curiosity: “This solution makes a ton of sense. Would you be open to walking us through how you’re thinking about the problem so we can learn more?”

When it comes to recognition and reward, my teacher friends and I talk a lot about our growing concerns that younger cohorts of students expect to be rewarded with high grades for effort, even when there’s no demonstration of excellence or mastery. I’ve taught only one undergrad class in twenty-five-plus years, so my experiences are almost exclusively with grad students, among whom this concern is even more pervasive and grades seem even more inflated. I appreciated Adam Grant’s framing of this issue in his op-ed in *The New York Times* titled “No, You Don’t Get an A for Effort.”

I heartily agree with his point that we’ve elasticized the ideas in Carol Dweck’s growth mindset work to the point that they’re no longer recognizable. Yes, there is tremendous value in recognizing effort, but, as Adam writes, “We’ve gone from commending effort to treating it as an end in itself. We’ve taught a generation of kids that their worth is defined primarily by their work ethic. We’ve failed to remind them that working hard doesn’t guarantee doing a good job (let alone being a good person). And that does students a disservice.”

When it comes to developing mindsets and building skills at work, I take a different approach, and it’s one that leaders often push against: We should absolutely reward effort, not with praise and not by reframing effort as success or mastery, but with our time. *Our* precious time.

When we see someone wrestling to work from a daring mindset and slipping back into self-protection mode, or maybe trying new rumbling skills but not quite being able to stick with it, we should reward that effort with coaching, mentoring, and rumbling. We should sit down with them and share our own experiences of transformation and change.

I think this is the power of Adam’s argument that is missed by a lot of folks. If I see someone working hard to build new skills but not quite succeeding, and I do the classroom equivalent of giving that person an A—which at work might be an unearned evaluation or even a halfhearted “Way to go! You’re nailing it”—I’m not doing my job. I’m protecting my time. I’m avoiding the work and hassle of leading. At work or in the classroom, an unearned A is code for *Not worth my time or the hassle of this person complaining*.

Over the past thirty years I've seen hundreds of classroom and work examples of "passing the person along" and "not worth my time" result in crushing devastation for people. At some point, the ride is over and a daring leader is going to say "No. I don't think you're ready for that promotion" or "I'm sorry, your writing in these deliverables is way off base."

It's painful, and that pain is borne solely by the person who got the fake high grade or the overblown evaluation, not by the people who didn't have the time or courage to say, "I know you want to do well, and I see how hard you're working. Let me sit with you so we can work on this together to see how we can make it stronger."

I agree with Adam's insight that "The true measure of learning is not the time and energy you put in. It's the knowledge and skills you take out." And no one transforms alone. All of us need encouragement and support. In a world where time is seen as the great unrenewable resource, it's often the most valuable gift a leader can give.

CHAPTER 21



The Locked Room Mystery

WE'VE ALL FOUND OURSELVES AT a table surrounded by anxious and dejected teammates, just waiting for the first person to say the thing that always kicks off the dreaded postmortem:

What the hell happened?
How were we so off track?
How did we miss this?
Why didn't we see this coming?

Or, a new favorite from a colleague who started our meeting with this a few months ago:

When, exactly, did this shit break bad?

We call these postmortems *story rumbles* in our organization. We set four intentions for these types of meetings, and we've made them systemic (we're building systems that are braver than people because we are but mere humans and we can be scary when we're scared):

1. Everyone is responsible for the energy they bring into the room.
2. Everyone is responsible for letting the group know when they go below the line. It's okay and human to go below the line; we expect it. Just please let us know so we can call a time-out. Or three.

3. We're not looking for bad people, we're looking for bad systems.
4. We're going to start by surfacing the stories that everyone is making up about what happened. Best to name them rather than have people covertly working from their own fictions, which normally focus on unsubstantiated self-blame or unsubstantiated blaming of others. Either way, fiction is not helpful.

Truth be told, as long as I can stay above the line, I'm pretty good in these types of meetings. Given that the prerequisite is staying above the line, I normally need at least an hour between finding out we've got a "breaking bad" situation and convening the story rumble. I can try to compartmentalize if we're on the clock, but that's not when I do my best thinking or meeting facilitation.

When I'm at my best, I summon all of the great detectives that have come before me—Sherlock Holmes, Nancy Drew, Hercule Poirot, Morse and Lewis, Peter Grant, Columbo, Jessica Fletcher, Mr. T and the rest of the A-Team—you know the ones. I do this because organizational postmortems are best handled like a locked room mystery. The focus should be less on the whodunit than on the howdunit.

Locked Room Mysteries

The locked room mystery is one of the most challenging types of detective stories.

The central premise is the apparent impossibility of the crime. Stereotypically, you have a murder victim in a room that's locked from the inside, there's no visible way in or out, no reliable witnesses, and no obvious clues.

A great example is John Dickson Carr's *The Hollow Man*. Professor Grimaud is found murdered in his study. The study's door is locked and bolted from the inside, the windows are tightly sealed, and fresh snow outside shows no footprints—making it appear that no one could have

entered or left. Moments before his death, Grimaud had been talking with witnesses in an adjoining room, and he had only one mysterious visitor. Shortly after his death, a second murder occurs in the open street, also under impossible circumstances. The combination of a locked, undisturbed room, the absence of footprints in the snow, and the timing of the gunshots all create a crime that feels unsolvable. Enter Dr. Gideon Fell, who meticulously exposes the illusion, one clue at a time. No spoilers here, but it's pretty tricky.

What makes this type of mystery so fun and frustrating is that the stumped detectives in these books often find themselves wondering whether something supernatural might be to blame, and that lures the reader to start making up wild stories about ghosts and people who can walk through walls. The tension arises from the implied but fully binding contract between the reader and the writer that the solution is logical and that in fact the reader has all the clues they need to solve the crime before or with the detective.

This contract is called “fair play detection,” and I’m not sure if it’s actually binding—but if you mess with it, you will lose legions of readers. Sometimes locked room mystery authors come close to cheating, and readers go ballistic in the comment sections of online retailers and blogs. I actually make it a habit to never read locked room mysteries back-to-back because they piss me off and because, along with other mystery nerds, I reread the good ones to spot the clues that I missed, or dismissed as unimportant, the first time through.

Academics who study locked room mysteries tell us that there are several recurring patterns in terms of how the impossible crimes and their solutions are constructed:

1. These stories rely on misdirection, mechanical devices, and/or time gaps in witness observations.
2. Locked room mysteries exploit assumptions. This is true especially when it comes to time, space, and cause and effect relationships. If you’re going to solve these types of mysteries, you have to challenge your perceptions and what you believe is reality.
3. Both to create a sense of surprise and to make good on their promise of a rational solution, the writers give us all of the

necessary clues in what scholars call “embedded texts”— basically, the information is hidden in plain sight. This is why I identified the bad guy in the movie *The Usual Suspects* before anyone else in my family. And this is also why I’m not allowed to talk, point, or make any noises if I’m watching a mystery movie with anyone in my family. I will say that I thought *Knives Out* was a great movie with a fun nod to the locked room mystery genre. It kept me guessing.

Team Detective Work in Organizations

Organizational postmortem detective work requires the same approaches as solving locked room mysteries.

1. We should operate from the belief that, with all of the facts, there will be a logical conclusion to figuring out what happened. Fair play detection stands.
2. We can be sure that the first set of “facts” that each individual brings to the table is rarely the whole truth, nor is it a lie. All of us normally see only what’s in front of us, only what we contributed, only what we have optics on, and, honestly, only what we want to see.
3. A good postmortem will reveal assumptions, time gaps, and unintentional misdirection.

Time and causal assumption: “I gave you those numbers before the sales meeting. You must have used them to create the pitch deck for the client, right?”

Nope, the sales reps requested to review the deck forty-eight hours before the meeting. It was gone before you even gave me the numbers.

Space assumption: “I left the numbers on your desk. If you didn’t use them, it was because you didn’t want to.”

I’m telling you, I didn’t see them. You know I work remotely on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Time gaps: “I asked you to pull those numbers out of the pitch deck because there were some questions about their validity.”

Yes, you asked me to do that—the day after the meeting. The meeting was moved up by the client last week.

Unreliable narration: “You said ‘by Wednesday,’ so I was planning on doing it today.”

I’m pretty sure I said Tuesday, because you talked about bringing them to the all-hands meeting.

“Right, but the all-hands was rescheduled this week for Wednesday, remember?”

4. Not if but *when* you get stuck trying to figure out what went wrong, stay focused on the facts, and reject the possibility that an ancient god will be lowered into your meeting by a giant crane and will solve all of your problems. In literature this is called a *deus ex machina*, and by locked room mystery readers it’s referred to as *The reason this is the last book I’ll ever read by this author*.

The term comes from ancient Greek theater, where a god would be lowered onto the stage by a crane-like machine to resolve the plot’s conflicts. In the context of mysteries, a *deus ex machina* occurs when the resolution to the mystery is a solution that was not foreshadowed, is implausible, or is not supported by clues presented earlier in the story. The author has created a coherent world that the reader inhabits, and all of a sudden, to resolve the crime, someone or something new is introduced. This is *not* fair play detection.

The best solutions and the honest lessons we need to learn are never contrived; they will come from the people most deeply connected to the story. We may not be waiting for a god to be lowered by a crane, but when you’re at the table with the storytellers and the cast of characters, accountability feels vulnerable, and looking outside for answers is seductive. But it’s just not honest, nor does it help us learn and get better.

CHAPTER 22



Between Stimulus and Response

“**B**ETWEEN STIMULUS AND RESPONSE THERE is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.”

I experienced two of the most disorienting experiences in my life when I got sober in 1995 and when I quit social media for the first time in 2022. I use the word *disorienting* because time slowed to a rhythm that made me feel I was walking through quicksand, slow and sinking. I anticipated that sobriety would transport me from dizzying levels of uncertainty to a stabilizing sense of groundedness, but that wasn't my experience.

In hindsight, I'm pretty sure that I was moving from the illusion of manufactured certainty, from an image of myself that I had carefully constructed, to recognizing very little about myself without my armor. For a few weeks I had difficulty answering questions about how I felt or even what I wanted for dinner. Mercifully, I quit drinking from a pretty high bottom, so I didn't have to experience physical symptoms as part of my process. Giving up smoking cigarettes, which I did at the same time, was tougher.

I quit drinking because I wanted something different from my life and my history. While the physical part wasn't challenging, the mental and emotional experience felt like looking in a wavy mirror. I made these changes as part of a search for solid ground and a more reliable view of myself, and what I got was the distortion of a fun-house reflection.

With time and a great therapist, I started to find my stride in the new rhythm, eventually appreciating and syncing to this new pace in a powerful way. I learned that I drank to counteract a level of introversion that was

misunderstood and therefore not tolerated in my family, a lack of belonging that came from being handed the *Good Texas Girl Playbook* that I couldn't abide, and a sensitivity and hypervigilance that developed alongside frighteningly accurate pattern-making and prediction skills.

I translated the quotation from the beginning of this chapter into a formula that looks like this: S()R. I have it written everywhere as a reminder to myself.

When I was growing up, there was no space between stimulus and response. I don't think I even knew that space was an option. In our family, the ethos was either SR or, sometimes, RS (guess how shit is gonna go down and then beat 'em to the punch).

For me, the gift and the superpower of sobriety have been the ability to pry open that space. Over the years, the parentheses between stimulus and response slowly came into focus. At first, the formula looked like this: S()R. Sobriety gave me just enough focus to stick my foot in between the parentheses, like racing to stop an elevator door from closing.

After about a year of sobriety, I experienced the big space maker. It's a line from the *Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book* about sobriety in action:

That is the miracle of it. We are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we have been placed in a position of neutrality—safe and protected. We have not even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us. We are neither cocky nor afraid. That is our experience. That is how we react so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition.

I can enjoy the gift of neutrality *if I can stay in fit spiritual condition*.

While this past May marks twenty-eight years of sobriety, I am still constantly experimenting to better understand what “fit spiritual condition” means for me. I'm sure this will be the case until I die. At the baseline, I try to keep that space between stimulus and response wedged open with sobriety, sleep, prayer, working out, practicing curiosity, a great coach, my Above/Below the Line Practice, and intentional breathing—to name a few strategies.

It's funny because I have a visceral response to the words *neutrality* and *surrender*. I'm not a do-nothing-and-give-up kind of person. In my family these words, along with *vulnerability*, would have been seen as the opposite

of our family ethos: *Be tough. Swing first.* Of course, now I'm better equipped to understand that ethos as *Self-protect, self-protect, self-protect.*

But with age and experience, I've also learned that the gift of neutrality—not running toward or after—is one of the most valuable and unexpected superpowers of my life. And as far as *surrender* goes—well, Sarah Lewis helped me with that one. During a podcast episode about her work on failure, creativity, and mastery, she taught me that surrender is not giving up, it's giving *over*. And for me, giving over is an act of faith and courage, which happen to be my two core values. The grace is that I'm able to keep the parts of me that I'm deeply grateful I got from my family, *and* I've experienced the growth and freedom to make choices about the other parts. Maybe my new personal ethos is something like *Be tough. And vulnerable enough to be brave. Stay curious about wanting to swing and about other emotions. Have the courage to give over when that's the right thing to do. And stay in fit spiritual condition—and physical condition to kick ass on the court.*

Several years ago, I noticed that the space between the parentheses was closing again. What became very clear to me was that maintaining my fit spiritual condition and engaging with strangers and bots on social media were mutually exclusive. I loved talking with folks in the comments, but one day I had 15 million followers, and I was receiving daily messages from the platforms that read *We believe 10,000 of these are bots, please delete right away.* This is not the recipe for community building or real conversation and debate.

So, several years ago, I quit Twitter, and I took a couple of serious sabbaticals from the other platforms. Today, my team and I will post on occasion—mostly amplifying the thinking and creative endeavors of people whose work I respect. I still write for LinkedIn and enjoy that community, but I've invested in building deeper relationships in person, and that's been an unexpected source of joy. And, I'm happy to report to all of my fellow introverts, I am unapologetic about needing copious amounts of alone time. As the saying goes, "Introverts unite! By ourselves and at home!"

I share this story with you for two reasons. First, I know I'm not alone. I know that balancing our family and our work while moving through a world that can seem like an increasingly unforgiving place is hard on our spirit. I know that as leaders, we cannot give what we don't have. And people need us. And we need one another.

Second, I recently started feeling some of the same early warning signs that led me to both my sobriety and my much more intentional and aware relationship with social media. The feeling was one of hollowness, and it crept up on me after an intense month of using and experimenting with different AI large language models. I'm very aware of my cognitive and attentional capabilities and when they're affected by something. I have to be —it's what I do every day. After the month of heavy usage, I felt fuzzy and less creative, and I wasn't maintaining a lot of what I was learning in any meaningful way.

I was working on this project with a team, and there were some shared experiences around the feelings of haziness. Interestingly, this was about six weeks before MIT's Media Lab released its study comparing students' experiences writing an essay without any help from ChatGPT or with only search help, and asking ChatGPT to write the entire paper. The researchers found that heavy reliance on AI writing tools can lead to reduced brain engagement, diminished memory, and less original work, with effects that may persist even after stopping AI use. I was not surprised at all to read the results of the study. I was alarmed, however, about the lingering cognitive effects.

Yes, we have a lot more to learn, but after being in conversation with the AI scholar Dr. Kate Crawford at the Aspen Ideas Festival, and reading her book, *The Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, I understand better why the phrase “hollowed out” was the first descriptor that came to my mind. In her book, Kate explains artificial intelligence as an “extractive industry.” She writes, “The creation of contemporary AI systems depends on exploiting energy and mineral resources from the planet, cheap labor, and data at scale.”

It's not a leap to see why a product made from the extraction of people's labor and data and the planet's resources could leave us feeling empty and excavated. It's too early to know for sure, but my intuition and pattern recognition alarms are ringing, and I'll be approaching AI with the same caution and intentionality that I use with social media.

See You in the Gym

What I hope for all of you is the ability to wedge your foot between stimulus and response and to pry those parentheses open wide enough to answer the questions about what *fit spiritual condition* means in your life. Again, I don't mean religiosity or God, if that's not how you think about your spirit. I mean humility and curiosity about the mysteries that make us human and the connections that sustain us. What makes us cry when we see dog videos or do the wave at ballgames or laugh until our stomach hurts or listen to songs that we know will make us sad. The poetry of being human. When we understand that, and respect it in ourselves and in one another, we don't have to look for strong ground outside ourselves—together we become the strong ground.

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