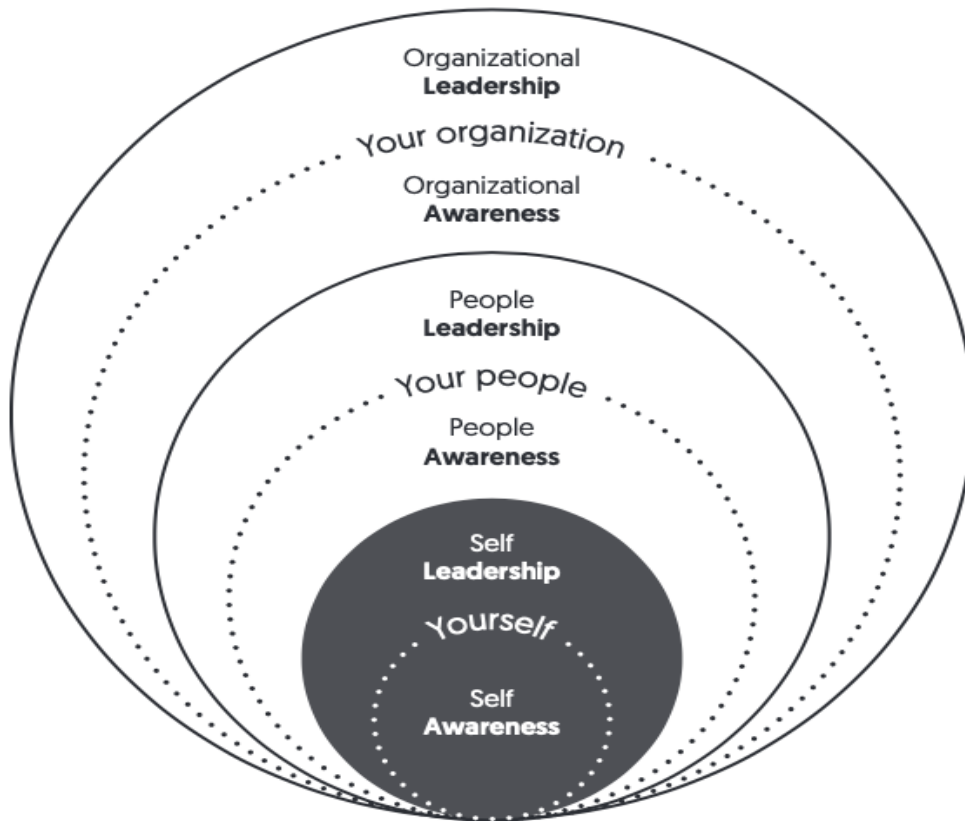


PART ONE

Understand and Lead Yourself



Imagine this scenario: A researcher brings you into a room with a chair. There are no windows. No pictures. No TV. Just you and the chair. You're asked to sit down and think. For a time ranging from six to fifteen minutes, you'll be on your own. Could you sit and be by yourself, or might you prefer painful electric shocks as a distraction?

Astonishingly, this experiment, published in the journal *Science*, reported that 67 percent of men and 25 percent of women found being alone with themselves so unpleasant that they ended up self-inducing electric shocks.¹ One man even shocked himself 190 times. People are so uncomfortable with their own thoughts that they'd rather have any distraction—even a physically painful one—than spend a few minutes being on their own. On the flip side, that's how few of us have the focus, discipline, and restraint that define self-leadership. When we truly lead ourselves, it manifests itself as strength, determination, control, and balance.

Simply put, self-leadership is the ability to manage your own thoughts, behaviors, and actions. Self-leadership is the foundation for effectiveness and productivity, and for living a life according to our values and aspirations. It's about having the mental strength to delay gratification and instead work toward long-term solutions. Self-leadership is about managing ourselves, so we can better lead our people, creating more meaning, connectedness, and a more people-centered culture.

Self-leadership starts in the mind. As an ancient Chinese proverb says, "Observe your thoughts as they become actions. Observe your actions as they become habits. And observe your habits as they shape your life." Our minds shape our thoughts, and our thoughts shape our lives and the lives

of those we lead. If we're unable to lead our minds, then to a large degree we're unable to lead our lives—let alone lead others.

To lay the necessary foundation for self-leadership, part 1 opens with a chapter on self-awareness. Self-awareness is the ability to monitor the mind so we can lead it better. Self-awareness is the foundation for self-leadership. We must understand our mind before we can lead it. This includes understanding how our mind works, the importance of values, and what truly makes us happy.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 then focus on three core elements of self-leadership: mindfulness, selflessness, and compassion. Self-leadership requires focus (mindfulness), humility (selflessness), and the discipline of self-care (compassion). These three qualities—that is, MSC leadership—combine to provide a basis for effectively leading yourself—and in turn, your people—for stronger connectedness, increased happiness, and ultimately, increased productivity.

Understand Yourself

Vincent Siciliano, CEO of California-based New Resource Bank, shared with us the story of how he started with the bank. He was brought in to turn the bank around and restore it to its founding mission. When he showed up, all the other members of the executive team resigned, giving him the opportunity to rebuild with people of his own choice. Within a few years, under Vince's leadership, the bank was back on track in terms of profitability and mission alignment.

The leadership team decided to take the pulse of the organization and launched the bank's first employee survey. The results revealed low levels of engagement and criticism of senior leaders. Vince assumed this was left over from the many changes the organization had gone through and chose not to take any action.

A year later, the bank sent out another employee survey. This time, the results were more specific: morale was a significant issue and the majority of people, including members of the senior leadership team, identified Vince as the root cause.

Vince was crushed. His mind oscillated between anger, indignation, defensiveness, and blame. He wondered, "How could they say these things about me? Don't they understand how far we've come under my leadership?" He could have stayed in this negative mindset, wallowing in self-pity and searching for excuses. Instead, he decided it was time to

take a hard look at himself. Despite being a high achiever and successful throughout his career, Vince came face to face with an uncomfortable truth: he wasn't the great leader he thought he was. He was leading by the book and trampling over the concerns of others who were not ready to move so fast or didn't understand reasons for changes.

In our conversation with Vince, he said: "There was a gap between my internal reality and my external behavior. My ego had run amok. I was leading from my head and not from my heart." He realized that despite all the skills he had developed through his years of management education and professional development, he'd never been directed to take a long look in the mirror and ask questions about who he was, what he valued, and what it really meant to be a leader.

Bill George, a Harvard leadership professor, former CEO of Medtronic, and author of *True North*, says that self-awareness is the starting point of leadership.¹ Self-awareness is the skill of being aware of our thoughts, emotions, and values, moment to moment. Through self-awareness we can lead ourselves with authenticity and integrity.

Vince's experience is not unique. Self-awareness is not standard curriculum in most management education programs. The majority of MBA degrees focus on strategy and profitability—the things Vince excelled at. But this focus blinded him to what was actually happening in his organization.

Approximately 40 percent of CEOs are MBAs.² Many large-scale studies have found that leadership based solely on MBA-trained logic is not enough for delivering long-term sustainable financial and cultural results, and that it often is detrimental to an organization's productivity. In one study, researchers compared the organizational performance of 440 CEOs who had been celebrated on the covers of magazines like *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, and *Forbes*. The researchers split the CEOs into two groups—those with an MBA and those without an MBA—and then monitored their performance for seven years. Surprisingly, the performance of those with an MBA was significantly worse.³ Another study published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* looked at the results of more than five thousand CEOs and came to a similar conclusion.⁴

To be clear, we're not saying MBAs are not useful in leading an organization. But if the linear MBA-trained logic becomes the sole focus—at the cost of other skills, like self-awareness—the leadership approach is out of balance.

That was the case for Vince. He had all the numbers right. His strategy was clear. But people didn't like working with him and were increasingly unhappy. He was managing based on prevailing business theories, but he didn't know or understand himself. Because he lacked self-awareness, people found Vince inauthentic. Subsequently, they weren't keen to follow him or support his leadership. Luckily for Vince, he was open to change and through a journey of mindfulness and coaching toward developing self-awareness, he was able to become more of the leader he wanted to be.

Self-awareness is where leadership starts. We must have awareness of ourselves to lead ourselves. In this chapter, we start by exploring self-awareness, examining how our mind works, and introducing how you can gain better self-awareness through mindfulness. Then we explore the importance of values, followed by a look at what it means to truly be happy. Finally, the chapter ends with practical tips for increasing your self-awareness.

Self-Assessment versus Self-Awareness

Many leadership development programs start with some form of self-assessment. But what do you actually learn from these assessments? In truth, most assessments just scratch the surface of who you are. Sure, they might provide you with insights into dominant traits and behaviors. But is that the real you?

Take a moment to consider the last assessment you did. What did you learn? Perhaps you discovered that you are a visionary thinker and it's hard for others to keep up with your innovative strategies. Perhaps you learned that people find you unapproachable and you need to work on engagement.

These types of insights can be valuable; they can help you understand yourself and how you work with others. But they don't necessarily provide you with the tools needed to solve difficult or complex leadership challenges. To do that, you need real self-awareness.

Take Maura McCaffrey, CEO of Health New England, a US health insurer. Like many CEOs, she's passionate about her work and driven to get results. In her early years as a leader, this passion could occasionally create challenges. As she described it, "I would enter a meeting with a clear strategic plan and, without taking the time to engage others, move

forward. I felt so strongly about it, no one could stop me.” Call it passion-bias. Her drive for results would lead her to steamroll the group into following her plan, regardless of objections or suggestions.

A 360-degree assessment illuminated this issue. The assessment was clear, but how to move forward was not. The assessment itself didn’t provide the tools to fix the problem. Instead, self-awareness did. With the help of mindfulness, Maura gained a new level of self-awareness and started to understand the downsides of her passion-bias. She began to understand how this drive was not always beneficial for her relationships, team engagement, or alignment with her values or organizational objectives.

Self-awareness is what enables you to translate the insights from an assessment into action. Self-awareness is getting to know yourself, moment by moment. Self-awareness is knowing what you are thinking while you think it and what you are feeling when you feel it. It’s the ability to keep your values in mind at all times. Self-awareness is the ability to monitor yourself so you can manage yourself accordingly.

In Maura’s case, self-awareness was what enabled her to monitor her behavior and change it in the moment. Self-awareness allowed her to notice when her passion-bias was about to manifest itself and take a pause. She learned to become more inclusive in her ways and engage others at their pace. Yes, it could sometimes take longer to put strategies into action. But in the end, those strategies showed much better results, because the people on her team were more engaged and better able to follow through on a vision they helped create.

A general lack of self-awareness, like Vince and Maura experienced in their early leadership years, is one of the key factors in many of today’s leadership issues and leadership failures. But to have better self-awareness, we must first understand how our mind works.

Welcome to Your Mind

Who manages your mind? The answer may not be what you think—or hope—it is. Here are a few facts all leaders should know about their mind:

- You do not control your mind.
- You are not rational.

- Your mind creates your reality.
- You are not your thoughts.

The first point: *You probably don't control your mind as much as you think.* To test whether that's true for you, focus on any word in this sentence for a full minute. Don't think about anything else. Don't get distracted. Just focus on one word for a full sixty seconds. No cheating. Okay, go ahead.

How did it go? Were you able to maintain complete focus for a minute? Or did you question the purpose of the exercise? Did you debate which word to focus on? Did the word catalyze new thoughts, leading you to think of other things? The point is that if you strayed from complete focus on that one word, you failed in leading your own mind, even just for a minute.

If you failed, don't worry. You're normal. Most people fail this test. Why? Researchers have found that on average, our mind involuntarily wanders nearly half our waking hours.⁵ While you think you're managing your mind, you're not. Think for a moment about the implications of your mind being distracted from what you're doing nearly half of the time. How might it impact your effectiveness? How could it affect your ability to be present with others? How might it impact your well-being?

The second point: *You are not rational.* Sure, we like to think we're rational beings. But in truth, we make choices based on emotions and rationalize them afterward. For example, numerous studies confirm that our decisions are influenced by how options are framed. In one study, faced with making a medical decision, subjects chose the riskless option when outcomes were positively framed in terms of gains, and the risky option when outcomes were phrased negatively in terms of losses.⁶

The third point: *Your mind creates your reality.* Consider the last time you believed you led a meeting where everyone was perfectly aligned, only to later find out that some participants perceived it differently. This type of situation happens all the time. We all have unconscious biases that influence and filter everything we experience. Put more succinctly: we don't perceive things as they are, but as we are. Literally, our mind creates our reality.⁷

The fourth, and final, point: *You are not your thoughts.* In the vast majority of cases, thoughts arise randomly in the mind.⁸ But they're not you. Instead, they're just events playing out in your mind, as if your mind

is arbitrarily flipping through TV stations. We often identify with our thoughts, believing they are true and believing they define who we are. And that's a problem, since we have thousands of random, repetitive, and compulsive thoughts every day. They're random because they often come out of nowhere, and for no reason, such as thinking about a meeting you attended earlier in the day while you're trying to be present with your family. They're repetitive because we often repeat the same thoughts again and again, like a childhood memory that comes to mind thousands of times throughout life. And they're compulsive because they just keep coming, flowing like a waterfall, even if we try to stop them.

Think about it this way. Have you ever had a bad thought? Does that make you a bad person? Of course not. But when you identify with your thoughts, you become their victim. This is especially true if you tend to be critical of yourself. Then every mistake means you're "stupid," "lazy," "incompetent," or a "failure." To avoid being victimized, don't believe all your thoughts.

These mind facts should be concerning, especially for leaders. If we as leaders don't manage ourselves, how can we lead others effectively, and, ultimately, lead our organizations? This challenge is best faced by first understanding more about the mind, how it works, and how it can be trained.

The mind and the brain are not the same thing. Your brain is the 85 billion neurons, between your ears, as well as the 40 million neurons around your heart and 100 million neurons in your gut.⁹ In contrast, your mind is the totality of your experience of being you—cognitively, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. When we speak about the brain, we refer to the physical collection of neurons in our heads and bodies. When we speak about the mind, we refer to the bigger perspective of being ourselves.

Neuroscientists have found that by training our mind, we can change our brain.¹⁰ Physiologically, we can change the structure of our brain by training our mind. When this happens, we can become more focused, kinder, more patient, or any other qualities that we train for. Simply put, what we do is what the brain becomes. Focus for ten minutes every day for two weeks, and our prefrontal cortex—a part of our brain that contributes to focused attention—is strengthened.¹¹ The brain is taking shape according to how we use it. Scientists and researchers call this *neuroplasticity*.¹²

Neuroplasticity is great news for all of us. It means that we're not limited by the faculties and aptitudes we've already developed. On the contrary, we can keep learning and growing and can effectively rewire our brain throughout our entire lives. And as leaders, we can learn to better manage our mind.

But here is an important caveat for neuroplasticity. Just because our brain is constantly changing doesn't mean that it's automatically changing in ways that are helpful to us. In fact, in our distracted work environments, we tend to rewire our brain to be more distracted. If those sentences make you think about your smartphone or meeting schedule, you're on to something. If we're constantly asking our brain to shift from one task to another, our brain's ability to focus on a single task will diminish. And if we allow ourselves to be constantly impatient and not particularly kind to others, these two characteristics can become the default operations of our brain. In this sense, we get the brain we get based on how we use it. Which means we should all place greater value on creating and managing our mind in ways that are beneficial to us as leaders and the people we lead.

But make no mistake: this process is not easy. It requires training. It requires effort. It also requires a deep understanding of yourself, your values, and your behaviors. But how do you begin to know yourself more deeply and gain this type of self-awareness?

A Mindful Path to Self-Awareness

The starting point for self-awareness is mindfulness. In a busy, distracted work life, focus and awareness—the two central characteristics of mindfulness—are the key qualities for effective mental performance and self-management. As we become more aware of our thoughts and feelings, we can manage ourselves better and act in ways that are more aligned with our values and goals.

Focus is the ability to be single-mindedly directed in what you do. Focus is what allows you to finish a project, meet your goals, and maintain a strategy. When you're involved in an important conversation, focus is what enables you to stay present and not mentally wander off.

Awareness is the ability to notice what is happening around you as well as inside your own mind. When you take part in a conversation,

self-awareness allows you to know what you're thinking, recognize how you're feeling, and understand the dynamics of the conversation. Awareness is also the quality that informs you when your focus goes astray and helps you redirect it back on track.

Our previous book, *One Second Ahead*, is an extensive manual for developing mindfulness at work and being in the upper right quadrant of the mindfulness matrix presented in chapter 1.¹³ The book provides practical tips on how to enhance effectiveness and well-being in daily work life by bringing mindfulness to tasks like email, meetings, prioritization, and goal setting. We won't repeat all the directions for developing and maintaining a mindful practice here; instead, in this chapter, we'll look at the mindful characteristic of awareness and how you can cultivate self-awareness as part of your own leadership practice. Chapter 3 will look at how mindful focus enables more effective self-leadership skills.

Shut Off the Autopilot

We all have the powerful illusion that we're consciously in charge of our actions and behavior at all times. But in fact, scientists estimate that 45 percent of our everyday behaviors are driven by reactions below the surface of our conscious awareness.¹⁴ This may sound like bad news, but it's necessary and extremely valuable. Imagine trying to drive a car if you consciously had to remind yourself to push the pedal to speed up or ask your hands to move when you needed to turn the wheel. You'd be overwhelmed—and you probably wouldn't get very far. In certain circumstances, these autopilot actions, reactions, and behaviors are vital. These unconscious processes allow you to perform tasks without having to think about them. But not all your autopilot actions and behaviors are useful in leading yourself or others.

As leaders, we impact the people we lead. They pick up on every subtle cue we send, whether we send it consciously or unconsciously. And many of the cues we send can be discouraging, distancing, or confusing. This is not necessarily due to bad intentions, but rather because the behaviors, actions, or reactions happen while we're operating on autopilot. Therefore, gaining greater awareness of our subtle actions and behaviors, and eliminating autopilot behaviors that are detrimental can be highly beneficial.

Mindfulness training enables us to expand our awareness of what's happening in the landscape of our mind from moment to moment. It also helps us pause in the moment, so we can make more conscious choices and take more deliberate actions. These are powerful skills to have as a leader.

Fortunately for all of us, awareness can be enhanced. We can change the ratio of our conscious to unconsciousness behaviors, which can make the difference between making good or bad decisions. But what is awareness really? Do you know what awareness feels like? Take a moment to experience it:

1. Let go of this book. For one minute, sit still.
2. Whatever comes into your mind, be aware of it. Simply notice it.
3. Let go of any inner commentary of why you are doing this exercise.
4. No analyzing, no judging, no thinking.
5. Simply be aware.
6. Just be.

That is awareness. A direct experience of what is happening for you, right now. And paying attention to it helps us understand ourselves. Did you become aware of anything about yourself that you were not aware of before the exercise? Did you find that maybe you're tired? That you perhaps felt tension or stress somewhere in your body? Or that you have a lot on your mind? What did you discover?

If you didn't actually do the one-minute exercise, go back and actually try it.

If you found the exercise difficult, you're not alone. In our busy lives filled with constant distractions, our mind is often racing. The flood of activity can feel like a waterfall pouring down on us with a million bits of information. As a result, we're less aware than we should be. Simply because our mind is too full to be aware. Mindfulness can address that. At the end of this chapter, you'll find simple tips and reflections for mindful awareness training. This training empowers you with greater awareness throughout your day. How? By helping you get one second ahead of your autopilot reactions and behaviors.

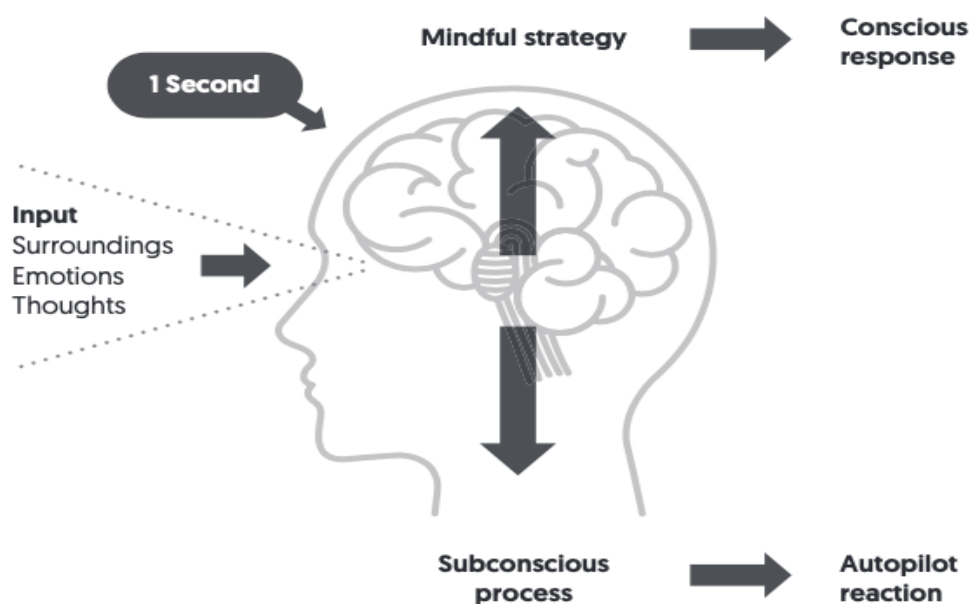
Jacob Larsen, vice president of The Finance Group, explained the power of getting one second ahead in a clear way. After he completed one of our ten-session mindfulness programs, we asked him what he had gained. His answer: “One second.” He explained that mindfulness gave him a one-second gap between his thoughts and his actions, between his impulses and his reactions. And this gave him greater control over his decisions and his responses. In any given situation, he said, he could better manage himself—all because of a single second. In this way, mindfulness can provide the moment-to-moment awareness needed to make better choices and take more productive action, as figure 2-1 illustrates.

One second can be the difference between making a good or bad decision. It’s the difference between saying the words that motivate an employee and the words that disengage him or her. A second is the difference between lashing out at someone for an error or turning an unintentional mistake into a learning moment. A second matters. Especially for you as a leader.

Mindfulness training—and utilizing this one-second mental pause—is what helped Maura McCaffrey, whom we met earlier in this chapter,

FIGURE 2-1

The one-second mental gap



control her passion-bias. Through mindfulness training, she was able to become aware of the initial signs of her passion-bias and pause before reacting. With this pause, Maura began replacing her passion-bias with inclusiveness. After a little practice, it became natural for her to get buy-in from the group instead of forcing her own agenda.

Our survey results found that leaders at the highest levels tend to have better self-awareness than leaders further down the hierarchy. This could be because stronger self-awareness accelerates the promotion process or because, like Maura, we're nudged toward enhancing our self-awareness as our leadership responsibility increases.

Take a moment to consider which automatic behaviors you have that sometimes hinder your leadership. What interferes with your team member's feelings of engagement? What decreases the willingness of others to take your lead? What makes people feel insecure or disregarded? Ask yourself these questions from time to time to gradually increase your self-awareness and spur changes in your automatic reactions and responses. Doing so will not only make you a more effective leader, it will also help you better understand, align with, and act on your own personal values.

Calibrate Your Value Compass

In competitive business environments, it can be tempting to compromise our core values. The history of business is littered with leaders who have caused scandals, destroyed companies, wrecked economies, or ruined the lives of thousands of people because they strayed from a strong moral basis. Just think of companies like Enron, WorldCom, or Tyco. Or consider the 2008 financial crisis, BP's *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill, and Volkswagen's emissions fraud. These are just a few more recent examples of a broader trend. A national business ethics survey done by the Ethics Resource Center found that of the US workforce, 41 percent of workers have observed unethical leadership behavior in the previous twelve months, and 10 percent felt organizational pressure to compromise ethical standards.¹⁵

It's easy to look at these cases, feel righteous indignation, and label the responsible leaders as evil. But it's not that straightforward. Few people truly want to hurt others. According to extensive neurological and social

science research, we're genuinely good beings with positive intentions. We all want to contribute to the well-being of others.¹⁶ Some studies find that one of the only consistent neurological traits across cultures and races is that we are predisposed to kindness and altruism.¹⁷ Other studies indicate the general human impulse is to help and support others in need.¹⁸ We are truly good beings.

But if we are genuinely good beings with good intentions, why do we witness corporate leadership scandals one after another? Because intense pressure to increase revenue or make the quarterly numbers can erode our sense of self-awareness, which can lead to letting our values slip.

The rise of technology has also contributed to the weakening of our value compasses. With the rise in distractions, it has become increasingly difficult to keep our values in mind, simply because our mind is so busy with ever-increasing flow of information. With a heightened level of self-awareness, however, we're better able to identify, acknowledge, and communicate our values. These values can help us navigate ourselves, our people, and our organizations in a more ethical manner and align our actions with what we want to offer to the world. In this way, awareness of our values becomes a compass, indicating instances when our choices don't align with our ethical and moral standards. This, in turn, keeps us from cutting corners and helps us sleep better at night.

Thomas, an IT director we worked with at a global pharmaceutical company, shared a story with us about how he once found himself in an ethical dilemma. Two vendors were bidding on a major contract he was overseeing. One offer was slightly better than the other, but the vendor of the lesser offer had subtly offered a kickback to sweeten the deal. Pressured by a tight timeline, Thomas struggled with his decision for most of a day, constantly changing his mind.

To clear his head, he decided to do a few minutes of mindfulness practice, hoping to find clarity. As his mind calmed and he gained an increased level of awareness, his value compass clicked into action, pointing him in the right direction. While the kickback was attractive, he knew it was wrong to take it. He chose the other offer instead.

Reflecting on the dilemma, Thomas acknowledged that if this had been presented as a classroom ethics simulation, he never would have considered the offer with the kickback. But, as he explained, "With the

complexity of the deal and the intense pressure to make a decision, it was hard to focus on the idea of right and wrong. Sometimes in business, with all the pressure, decisions don't seem so clear-cut."

Thomas's experience is not unusual. Research has found that mindfulness practice enhances our ethical decision making.¹⁹ But if we lack the self-awareness necessary to have a strong value compass, we have a much greater chance of making the wrong choice or doing the wrong thing. This is especially true in morally ambiguous circumstances or high-stakes situations. And in the end—regardless of money or success, regardless of stature or fame—making unjust decisions or taking unethical actions will have a detrimental impact on our sense of self. And ultimately, it will negatively impact our happiness.

True Happiness—It's Not What You Think

Self-awareness helps us answer one of life's big questions, one that is foundational for leading our people: What makes us truly happy? This question should be front and center for any leader. Being self-aware of what constitutes true happiness helps in better leading people and tapping into what really drives them. True happiness bolsters feelings of fulfillment, engagement, and commitment. Because of this, it's time for the practice and science of true happiness to enter basic leadership knowledge.

Take a moment to consider the following question: How often do you wake up in the morning *wishing* for a stressful day?

Now ask yourself another question: How often do you have a stressful day?

The point is, we humans do a great job of messing things up for ourselves. We hope to have great lives. We desire lives with few worries, with harmonious relationships, with balance and joy. Lives with fun and meaning. And in our developed world, we have the means to make this happen. We have advanced systems of education. We have state-of-the-art health care. We have enormous financial means. We have plentiful food. We have safe environments. We have resources and amenities that our ancestors could only dream of. Yet we manage to fall short of creating deeply meaningful, satisfying, and joyful lives.

What's wrong with us?

We'll get to the answer in a moment. First, on a scale from 1 to 10, how important is it for you to be happy, fulfilled, and satisfied with your life? Close your eyes and take a moment to consider the question. Don't feel a need to come up with an answer. That's not the point. Instead this should be a question you occasionally reflect on throughout your life. Now consider: Is your happiness more important than your professional achievements? Is your happiness more important than your wealth? Again, don't feel a need to come up with rushed answers. These are questions for thoughtful reflection.

Frankly, we as humans have one go at a good life—and it's a short one. Our childhood sometimes feels like yesterday. In thirty or fifty years, we may look back on today as yesterday, and our lives will almost be over. Life passes quickly. Think about how many people around the world went to bed last night, just like yourself, expecting to wake up this morning to another day in their lives—to another go at being happy. But instead, they didn't wake up. They passed away in their sleep. Their chance at a day of happiness was lost forever. The difference between being alive or not exists in a flash, in a brief moment of transition. And we never know when that moment will arrive.

Having a happy life should be important. If we exit life without having tasted true happiness, without having experienced meaning and fulfillment, then what did we do? We missed the one chance we had.

We Don't Know How to Be Happy

Now the answer to the earlier question: What's wrong with us? Why do we fall short of being happy when we have so much? Quite simply, because we don't know how to be happy.

From a leader's perspective, understanding happiness and its roots permits us to create more meaning, purpose, and fulfillment for our people. This in turn can unlock great productivity. But as leaders—and as humans—we're generally mistaken about happiness. It's like we're chasing it blindfolded. The things we generally look to for happiness don't actually provide it. Research conducted at places like the London School of Economics and Political Science, Harvard Business School, and leading neuroresearch centers around the world and brought together by the United Nations in its annual World Happiness Report shows us our biases

about happiness. We're generally mistaken about happiness in two ways: (1) We believe happiness comes from the outside, and (2) We mistake pleasure for happiness.²⁰

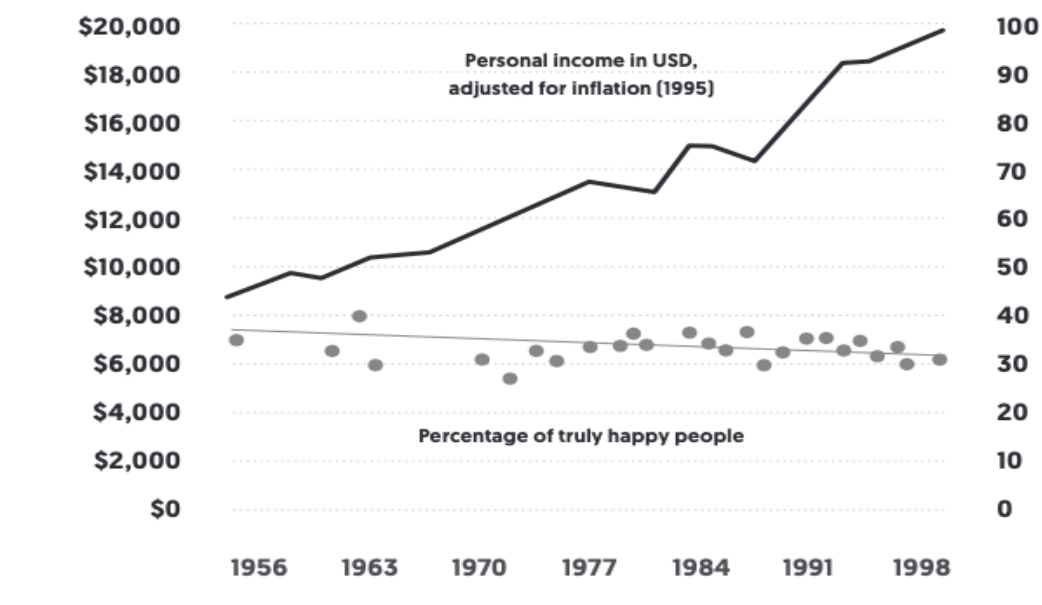
You Can't Buy Happiness

Major research studies show conclusively that true happiness doesn't come from external sources. This is particularly true of external factors like money (see figure 2-2). For more than fifty years, researchers have looked at the correlation between happiness and wealth in the United States and other countries. Wealth has more than doubled, but the happiness level has decreased.

A separate study found that winning the lottery increased participants' mood significantly, but after a while they returned to their normal baseline of happiness. Another study showed that while experiencing difficult situations, such as a job loss or major illness, participants' happiness decreased significantly. But eventually, they also returned to their original baseline.²¹ In each of these instances, outside events—gaining wealth, winning the lottery, or losing a job—had a short-term effect

FIGURE 2-2

Income and happiness



on happiness but didn't influence people's long-term sense of happiness (see figure 2-3).

The message? External events and experiences do not create true happiness. Nor do difficult events and experiences create lasting unhappiness. This should be considered great news. It means that we as individuals can be in control of our own happiness. We may not get the desired promotion, the fancy car, or the magnificent house, but our happiness is not dependent on those types of things. It doesn't depend on our status or wealth.

But our happiness does depend on the wealth of our neighbor. Consider the following two scenarios:

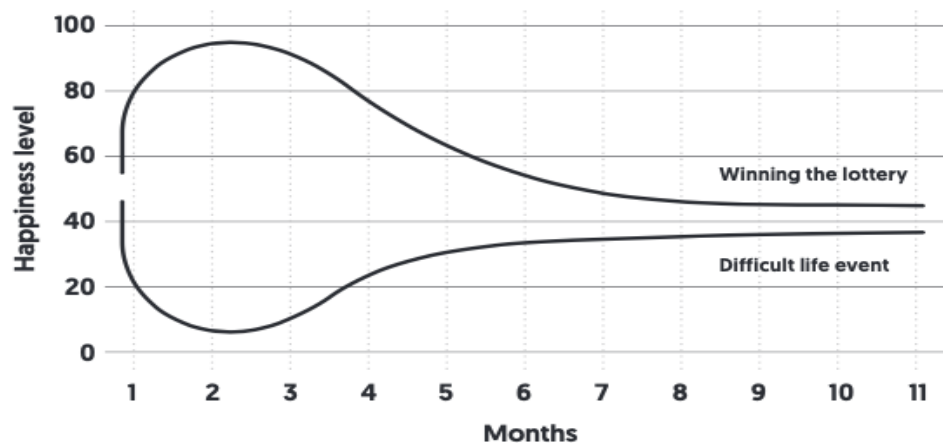
- You live a life in which you earn \$50,000 a year while other people get \$25,000 a year.
- You live a life in which you earn \$100,000 a year while other people get \$250,000 a year.

Which of these two scenarios would you prefer?

A joint study by researchers from the University of Miami and the Harvard School of Public Health found that the majority preferred the first option.²² This illustrates a paradoxical fact: when people become

FIGURE 2-3

Happiness and life events



richer compared with other people, they feel happier. But when whole societies become richer, they don't. Our happiness is relative to the wealth of our neighbors. Again, happiness does not come from the outside, but from how we relate to what we have. Happiness is an inner state deeply influenced by how we relate to what others have.

Pleasure Isn't Happiness

We generally equate pleasure with happiness. We think that if we get enough pleasure, we'll be happy. But we're wrong. The two experiences are completely different.

In a way, pleasure is pure chemistry. When we get or do something we like—a promotion, praise, a new car—dopamine is released in our brain, giving us a sense of pleasure. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter that helps control the brain's reward and pleasure centers. It enables us not only to see rewards but also to take action to move toward them. However, dopamine can lead to addiction.²³ The more pleasure we allow ourselves, the more we risk becoming addicted to it. The final result is a constant rat race in which we're continually looking for that next rush of dopamine. Pleasure is a momentary experience that quickly fades as the neurochemicals subside.

True Happiness Is . . .

True happiness, in contrast, can't be so easily located or pinpointed in the brain. It's not in a specific region, and it can't be found in a single hormone, neurotransmitter, or molecule. True happiness is an experience of fulfillment and of lasting well-being. True happiness is a long-term experience of a meaningful, purposeful, and positive life. It's a deeply felt existential experience that can be maintained irrespective of the ups and downs of life, not a fleeting sense of gratification like pleasure.

We're chasing pleasure in new business successes, more praise, and better pay, hoping it will make us happy. But it doesn't. It just puts us on the treadmill of wanting more and more. This is not to say pleasure is wrong. Pleasure is great. It adds flavor to life. But pleasure is like eating honey from the blade of a knife. It tastes great, but if we're not careful, we may hurt ourselves by craving more.

And never mistake it for happiness.

Take a moment to consider how these facts about true happiness might inform your leadership. Are there things you could do differently to help your people be happier and more engaged? Just think about this for a few moments. We'll dive into these questions in more detail throughout the book.

Awareness Training

Mindfulness training helps you increase your self-awareness and thereby become more aware of what makes you truly happy. It helps you avoid your compulsive reactions and replace them with more useful behaviors. And it helps you stay true to your values. These are foundational skills for effective leadership, for being authentic, and for increasing team engagement.

But awareness training does more than that. The more time you spend training your awareness, the more you'll come to fully appreciate that you are not your thoughts. Your thoughts are not you. The training helps you create a healthy and realistic distance from your mental activities. You start to observe your thoughts as fleeting events that have no real substance or importance. They're just like clouds in the sky: they come and go. And they only have an impact on you if you allow them to. So many of our thoughts and feelings spark emotions or action. But really, many of them are random and insubstantial. We don't need to react to them. We can simply let them be.

Bring this insight to how you perceive yourself, and you will be more at ease. Bring this insight to how you perceive others, and you will find it easier to lead them. Bring this insight to how you lead your organization, and you will find that you need to exert much less effort and control. As much as we like to think of ourselves as important because we are leaders, a realistic, self-aware, hard look will show that we are less important than we think. And the most appropriate response to that is to develop a realistic, selfless view of ourselves, as we explore in chapter 4.

The mental strength and freedom you develop through awareness training cannot be overstated. Through it, you come to know yourself in the moment, to know what you think, what you feel, and what is important to you (see "Training for Mindful Awareness").

Training for Mindful Awareness

1. Set a timer for ten minutes.
 2. Sit in your chair, comfortably, with a straight back and relaxed neck, shoulders, and arms. Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.
 3. For a minute, direct your full attention toward your breathing. Simply observe your breath neutrally. Don't try to control it. Allow your mind to stabilize and settle.
 4. Now, let go of your attention on your breath and open your awareness to whatever arises. Whatever arises—a sound, a thought, a physical sensation, or anything else—just be aware of it.
 5. Observe it neutrally. Don't think about it. Don't engage it. Don't try to make it stay or go away. Simply observe it.
 6. New experiences will arise, change, or fade away. Whatever occurs in your awareness, just be aware of it.
 7. If you find it challenging to observe without engaging your experiences, give the experience a label—for example, *thought*, *email*, *task*—and let it go.
 8. If you find you get caught up in thinking about and analyzing your experiences, return your focus to your breath. Then open your awareness again.
 9. When the timer sounds, let go of the training.
-

This practice, and the rest of the practices in this book are all recorded in a guided training app designed for this book. See appendix A for information.

Quick Tips and Reflections

- ✓ Commit to practicing ten minutes of mindful awareness training on a regular basis as recommended in the app.
- ✓ Identify one autopilot behavior you would like to change; set an intention to notice when the old behavior arises, pause, and choose a new response.
- ✓ Write down the values that are most important to you in your work life and as a leader; consider when these might be challenged and how you will respond.
- ✓ Consider what the difference between “pleasure” and “happiness” means for you and what insights this might have for how you lead yourself.
- ✓ Commit to one thing you will start, stop, or continue doing to increase genuine happiness.

3

Mindfully Lead Yourself

For today's leaders, mindfulness—training the mind to be more focused and aware—is becoming a survival skill and a cornerstone of self-leadership. The pressure on leaders is increasing, as are the pace of change, the volume of information available, and the scale of complexity. A managing director of a global consulting firm told us that he had exhausted every tool on the market that promised to help him become more effective. He had applied all of the most popular time-management techniques. He had tried all the newest productivity software. He had incorporated the latest collaborative platforms. And yet he was still working as many hours as he possibly could. No additional apps could help, no more techniques could be applied, and no more minutes could be squeezed into the workday. He had run out of possible solutions.

His last resort: *Train his mind.*

With this realization, he became part of the global movement of leaders who are practicing mindfulness to increase awareness and improve focus.

As we discussed in chapter 2, mindful awareness helps us to switch off the autopilot and get in the driver's seat of our mind. Mindful focus, which we explore in this chapter, helps us to be more effective and improve our well-being. In the first few sections of this chapter, we'll examine the faculties of focus and provide strategies for more focused performance. We'll

then end the chapter with instructions on how to enhance focus through a guided mindfulness practice.

Survival of the Focused

Leaders—and people at work in general—have a problem. Our ability to focus and manage our minds is deteriorating. Research has found that we're distracted from what we do 47 percent of the time.¹ That's an alarming number. Throughout any given day, we're constantly thinking about things that happened in the past and things we need to do in the future. Meanwhile, we've lost focus on what's happening right now. Although this research is a bit depressing, it also presents a massive potential for improved performance.

In our survey results, we found that 73 percent of leaders feel distracted from their current task either “some” or “most” of the time. We also found that 67 percent of leaders view their minds as cluttered, with lots of thoughts and a lack of clear priorities. As a result, 65 percent find that they fail to complete their most important tasks. When asked about the primary challenges to maintaining focus, the leaders answered that the biggest sources of distractions are the demands of other people (26 percent), competing priorities (25 percent), general distractions (13 percent), and workloads that are too big (12 percent). Not surprisingly, 96 percent of the leaders we surveyed said that enhanced focus would be valuable or extremely valuable.²

With the excessive number of distractions we face, attention deficit has become a norm in businesses.³ Thomas Davenport, author of *The Attention Economy*, wrote: “Understanding and managing attention is now the single most important determinant of business success.”⁴ The “attention economy” is an apt term for our current organizational environments. In today's business world—with its seemingly endless distractions—our ability to focus is just as important as skills like financial analysis and time management. If there is one secret to effectiveness, said leadership pioneer Peter Drucker, it's concentration.⁵ In our age of information overload, this is truer now than ever before.

Imagine a standard ten- to twelve-hour workday, with back-to-back meetings, a nonstop stream of emails, and the need to make good decisions in constantly shifting and complex contexts. The ability to apply

calm and clear focus to the right tasks, at the right time, in the right way is what makes a leader exceptional. Even one second of misplaced focus is enough to miss a critical cue from a client during a tough negotiation.

Productivity has traditionally been measured in terms of time and competency: how much time we have for a task and our ability to solve it efficiently. But in an attention economy, focus is now such a scarce leadership resource that it overshadows time and competence. Imagine you spent thirty minutes on a task, occasionally checking your email and dealing with other distractions. The task itself should have only taken ten minutes, but you weren't able to maintain a clear focus. That's a significant loss in productivity. But the problem wasn't mismanaged time—it was mismanaged focus.

In this light, a simple equation for productivity in the attention economy is *Focus × Time × Competence = Productivity*. Without focus, you will spend more time on a task and your productivity will be negatively impacted.

There also seems to be a direct correlation between people's level of focus and the advancements they make in their companies. Of the thousands of leaders we've worked with over the years, the vast majority possess an above-average ability to focus. This is not to say that exceptional focus is a sure way to the top. But certainly, without focus, career success will be much more difficult to attain. For aspiring leaders, focus should be a daily mantra.

Through our research and fieldwork, we've come to a clear conclusion: focus must be at the forefront of any—and all—leadership training. The leaders we interviewed for this book all emphasized their need to cultivate and protect their focus amidst the relentless flow of details and distractions that assault their minds.

And yet, in our view, the business world is not focused enough on focus.

Consider these questions. When were you last exposed to focus training during a leadership development program? When did you last consider a calm, clear focus as part of an effective way to use your time? Just in the past week, how often have you experienced unfocused or distracted people in meetings?

Focus is rarely part of a training program or considered critical to effective time management. And many people are distracted during meetings,

but they are rarely called out on it. This leads us to a great evolutionary irony: for most of human history, being prone to distraction ensured survival. Our alertness to sounds, smells, and movements that could indicate a threat was vital to our continued existence.

But today, the survival paradigm has reversed. In today's distracted office environments, only the focused survive. And certainly, only the focused excel. All of the C-suite executives we interviewed shared stories of the importance of focus to survive and more importantly, to thrive. It was one of the qualities they considered as key to their success and valued for their people and their organization.

But it's not easy to maintain focus. From a neurological perspective, we are wired for distractions. Part of our brain is devoted to constantly scanning our surroundings and reporting any new information of importance that may require our attention.⁶ The tendency to be distracted is deeply ingrained in older parts of the brain like the temporal cortex and the posterior cingulate cortex. Test it for yourself. Stop reading and pay attention to your surroundings. Is your attention naturally directing itself toward movements and sounds?

Distraction is the default setting of the human brain. Focus occurs mainly in the prefrontal cortex, the newest part of our brain, as illustrated in figure 3-1.

The prefrontal cortex is also the home of executive function, which is our ability to deliberately choose our actions and behavior.⁷ When we are

FIGURE 3-1

Where distraction and focus are found in the brain



able to operate more out of this part of our brain, we have greater ability to minimize the noise from our wandering mind, are more focused on the task at hand, and can take more deliberate actions when engaging meaningfully with our people.

The Faculties of Focus

We're all genetically predisposed for a certain baseline of focus. But we can improve on this baseline. For every moment we intentionally focus, our focus improves. Understanding the "anatomy" of focus can help us better develop it. Focus has six distinct faculties: control, capacity, speed, agility, clarity, and durability. The stronger each of these faculties is, the more effective our focus will be. Different situations require different faculties (see figure 3-2). And through well-guided mindfulness training, we can enhance them all.

Let's take a close look at each faculty.

Control

Controlled focus enables you to prioritize your attention and actions from moment to moment. It's the opposite of distraction. It's the quality of deliberately being attentive to one object or task. It's the core of attention.

FIGURE 3-2

The six faculties of focus

Faculties are important for . . .	
Control	Moment-to-moment prioritizing, people contact, task processing
Capacity	Reading and learning, dealing with complex issues
Speed	Information processing, decision making, high-stakes interactions
Agility	Creative processes, problem solving, brainstorming
Clarity	Dealing with complex issues, high-stakes work
Durability	Meetings, facing challenges, long days, negotiations

As you're reading this book, are you fully focused on reading? Or do other unrelated thoughts sneak into your mind?

In a study investigating the neurobiology of what happens when we become distracted, researchers found that during controlled focus, the prefrontal cortex becomes active to sustain attention.⁸ This neural synchronization is critical for getting things done. Without controlled focus, it's virtually impossible to be effective. Without controlled focus when we're with others, it's difficult to make the connection necessary for meaningful communication. But with controlled, laserlike focus, astonishing accomplishments are possible.

For leaders today, there are more issues to deal with than there is time. Trying to focus on many important issues at the same time is a recipe for disaster. Leaders need to constantly focus and refocus, to give undivided attention on the most important issues moment to moment.

Capacity

Focus capacity enables you to absorb and process large volumes of information and cut through complexity. Focus capacity is the amount of data you can consciously be aware of at any given moment. It's like your internet bandwidth, determining how much data you can download per second.

You can get a sense of your capacity right now: stop reading, close your eyes for a moment, then open them and look in front of you for one second, then close your eyes again. How many details can you recall from what you saw in that one second?

Researchers have been trying to measure focus capacity for years, with varying results. An average mind can comprehend between four and forty bits of conscious information per second.⁹ Our research shows that this is significantly *less* than the desired level needed for most leaders, as information overload is perceived as one of the five biggest challenges to their leadership effectiveness.

Loren Shuster, chief people officer at the LEGO Group, shared with us how mindfulness practice helps him absorb and retain many hundreds of pages of briefings before board meetings: "Doing a few moments of mindfulness before reading a briefing or report, calms and clears my mind. It creates the necessary bandwidth to absorb the details I know I'm about to read—and that I know I need to retain." Loren added that by allowing

himself a few more moments of mindfulness practice after reading, he is better able to synthesize and store information. “It’s been a revelation for me,” he told us. “I can recall the facts and figures I need, when I need them most—when the pressure is on.”

Speed

Your focus speed is the rate at which you process the flow of your experiences. Focus speed allows you to think on your feet and make fast decisions. Recall the last time you were in some kind of accident. Did time slow down, allowing you to vividly experience every split second? Of course, time didn’t actually slow down. It was instead your focus that sped up, providing you a close-up, seemingly slow-motion experience of the event. It’s as though a faster data processor kicked in.

Notice your focus speed right now as you read. How quickly are you able to get to the end of the sentence while still understanding the words in it?

Our focus speed varies, depending on how engaged we are, how complex a situation may be, or other environmental factors. During accidents, focus speed can be very high. But when we’ve imbibed alcohol, when we’re tired, or when we’re operating on autopilot, our focus speed is limited. Fighter pilots are known to have above-average focus speed. Imagine flying at more than a thousand miles per hour while having to navigate, keep track of your plane, and coordinate a precise flight path. This is daily work for a fighter pilot and calls for high focus speed.

Sue Gilchrist, regional managing partner for Asia and Australia, of the global law firm Herbert Smith Freehills, shared how she reads the underlying dynamics in client meetings. With mindfulness, she told us, her focus speed increases, whereby the speed of conversation seemingly slows down. “This allows me to pick up on more cues and implicit messages,” she asserted. “And the ability to see more of what is happening moment-to-moment in highly politicized or otherwise challenging environments is an invaluable asset, no matter what industry you’re in.”

Agility

Focus agility allows you to mentally switch from one task to another without lingering on the previous activity. This includes shifting from one meeting to the next or from writing an email to joining a conversation.

In a hypercomplex world, focus agility allows you to mentally move efficiently among multiple complex contexts. It allows you to hold multiple opposing perspectives, values, and emotions and make more holistic decisions with less bias.

Focus agility, like the other faculties of focus, is impacted by internal and external factors. Tiredness, alcohol, mental busyness, and rapid task switching can decrease your focus agility and make you slower.

To test your focus agility, try this: As you read this sentence, abruptly shift your focus away from these words to something in your surroundings and focus on that object or image.

Did the switch happen swiftly or was there any mental lag? How quickly were you fully focused on the new object? Did any part of your focus still linger on the words you just read? If you're not sure about your experience, try again; shift from one object to another object. Then observe the agility with which you transition your focus.

Focus agility should not be confused with multitasking. Extensive research has confirmed that humans are incapable of multitasking. We'll explore multitasking in greater detail later in the chapter. For now, just understand that focus agility is the faculty that allows you to shift or switch between tasks—it is not the ability to perform multiple tasks at once.

Consider the following example from the CEO of Heineken, Jean-François van Boxmeer. As we entered the Heineken headquarters in Amsterdam to interview Jean-François, he was discussing the technical details of a complex acquisition with his legal counsel. In less than a second, however, his attention switched to the context of our interview. He was fully present, fully engaged. When we asked him how he switched his focus so quickly, he explained that his role does not allow for a lack of focus. "I can't afford to be distracted. I must be on point. I have trained my focus while at work for fifteen years, moment-to-moment. I feel the brain is like a muscle, and I exercise it all the time. It's about disciplined presence." His day is packed with meetings from early morning until late evening; even meals are mostly organized as working meetings. In these kinds of extreme conditions, there's little room for lingering on past activities. His well-trained mental agility makes this regimen possible.

Clarity

Focus clarity helps you register the details of your current task or object of attention. This means you experience whatever you focus on in high definition and maintain a distinct recollection of what has taken place in past moments.

Right now, how clear is your focus? Are you fully aware of what you've been reading? Or has reading made you a little drowsy? Take a moment to check in with yourself. How many facts can you recall from the last three pages?

Our research found that 90 percent of leaders believe that more reflection time would enhance their mental clarity. One way to visualize this is to think of the mind like a snow globe that gets shaken up throughout the day. Reflection time—as well as mindfulness practice and other activities—lets the snow settle, making everything easier to see and put into perspective.

James Doty, clinical professor of neurosurgery at Stanford University, describes how mindfulness training improves his focus clarity during surgery. This clarity provides him with a serene perception during the act of operating, including observations of the state of the patient, the state of the supporting operating staff, the granular details of the brain he's operating on, and his own mental and physical state.

Durability

Focus durability is the span of time you can maintain a continuous state of focus on any given object or experience. A well-developed focus durability allows you to stay focused for hours without becoming distracted. But in an age of major technology distractions, our durability of focus is deteriorating.

How long do you think you can maintain focus on one object before becoming distracted? Try this quick test: Start a stopwatch or timer, focus on one object, stop when you first get distracted. Are you surprised by the result? If you managed less than ten seconds, don't worry, that is normal. Having trained tens of thousands of people in mindfulness, we can testify that the majority of people last less than ten seconds on their first try.

Researchers have found a direct correlation between the heavy consumption of multiple forms of media—for example, print, television,

phone calls, texts, video games—and shrinkage in our prefrontal cortex, the home of executive function.¹⁰ In other words, the more we allow ourselves to be inundated with information and distractions, the less brain capacity we have to maintain focus. But remember, thanks to neuroplasticity, with mindfulness training you can improve your focus durability. Even after as little as eight weeks of daily mindfulness practice, your prefrontal cortex gets thicker as your ability to focus improves.¹¹

The next section includes some strategies to help you strengthen the six faculties of focus. After reviewing these strategies, we'll present a mindfulness practice specifically for improving focus.

Strategies for Focused Performance

Based on our research and fieldwork, four strategies are particularly effective for leaders when it comes to focused performance: understanding what impacts focus, avoiding multitasking, thwarting action addiction, and creating focus time.

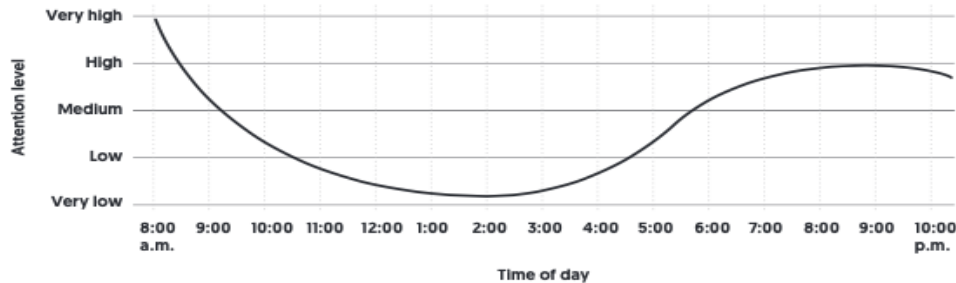
Understand What Impacts Focus

To maintain a strong focus throughout the day, it's useful to know what impacts it, and how good your general focus is at different times of the day. Is your focus as strong at 8 a.m. as it is at 2 p.m.? How about at 10 p.m.? Consider how your focus is impacted by the time of the day, when you eat, what you eat, your mental state, and how many hours you slept.

For example, judges are trained to be neutral and objective in their legal rulings. From a statistical point of view, they should be making balanced, neutral rulings throughout the day. But studies have found that judges rule more favorably in the morning than in the afternoon. This means that it's possible that a defendant may be sentenced to prison rather than set free if he or she enters the courtroom sometime after lunch.¹²

This pattern correlates directly with our research determining when leaders feel most focused. See the daily focus pattern of leaders in figure 3-3.

FIGURE 3-3

The daily focus pattern

With this pattern in mind, consider which activities you do at various times of the day. Make sure your most important activities are planned around the times when your focus is strongest. And plan to do more practical and active tasks during the hours when your focus is weaker.

Our focus and its six faculties are also impacted by other mental and physical factors, including sleep, emotions, and food. For an overview, see figure 3-4.

Consider the mental factors first. Negative emotions generally decrease most of our faculties. Paul Ekman, a groundbreaking researcher in emotions from the University of California, San Francisco, described how difficult emotions create a refractory period that narrows our focus on the object of our emotion.¹³ In contrast, positive emotions generally have the opposite effect, opening up our focus to see the bigger picture.¹⁴

From a physical perspective, relaxation is a prerequisite for strong focus. Relaxation is the absence of unnecessary effort, of both mind and body. When we relax our body, our mind follows. When we relax our mind, we also relax our body. In this way, mind and body are linked. Also, if we care for our body with quality sleep, nutrition, and exercise, our focus is enhanced. Coffee, contrary to what many of us believe, is not useful for focus. The caffeine enhances wakefulness but scatters focus.¹⁵ And not surprisingly, alcohol is harmful in most aspects as well.

What other activities do you do that impact your focus, whether positively or negatively? You're likely facing competing demands most of the time: people in need of your attention, urgent emails, and high-stakes decisions. The automatic response of the brain is to try to focus on them

FIGURE 3-4

Factors that impact focus

	Mental					Physical						
Positive impact on attention	C S	C		C S A G D	C S A C	C S A G D	C S A C D	C S A C D	C S A C D	S		
Neutral	D	S		D						C A G D	A	
Negative impact on attention	C A G	C A G D	C C S A G D							C	C C S G D	
	Anger	Desire	Overwhelmed	Joy	Compassion	Relaxation	Sufficient sleep	Good nutrition	Good exercise	Coffee	Alcohol	

C

 = Control

C

 = Capacity

S

 = Speed

A

 = Agility

G

 = Clarity

D

 = Durability

all at once. By default, the brain wants you to multitask. But multitasking kills your focus.

Stop Multitasking

Our ability to multitask is a myth. Most of us carry around the powerful illusion that we can pay attention to more than one thing at a time. We think we can drive a car while talking on the phone, participate in a meeting while checking emails, or engage in a conversation while writing a text message. To be clear, we can do many activities without paying attention; that is, without conscious thought. For example, we can walk and talk at the same time. Experienced drivers can handle many of the elements of driving, such as changing gears and turning the steering wheel, on autopilot.

But from a neurological perspective, we're not capable of focusing attention on two things at the same time. Multitasking is really *shift-tasking*: shifting attention rapidly between two or more things. For a second, we're aware of traffic; the next instant, we're attending to the phone. Sometimes we switch so rapidly between tasks we have the illusion we're paying attention to both at the same time, but in reality we're not.

In the context of multitasking at work, researchers have found that when we multitask, we become "masters of everything that is irrelevant, we let ourselves be distracted by anything."¹⁶ Perhaps you've experienced losing track of what you are doing even when you have a simple task and clear intentions. For example, imagine that you're looking at LinkedIn for information about a person you're considering for a job. Then you notice a link to an article that looks interesting. You hit that link and start reading and find a link to an interesting video on YouTube. An hour later, you catch yourself still watching videos and have completely lost track of what you started out to do. Sound familiar?

Studies have shown that multitasking lowers people's job satisfaction, damages personal relationships, adversely affects memory, and negatively impacts health.¹⁷ Many of these studies have demonstrated that multitasking reduces effectiveness because it takes longer to complete tasks and leads to more mistakes. This is because when we switch our focus from one task to another, it takes time to make the shift. Depending on the complexity of the new task, that can take anywhere from a few seconds to several minutes. This phenomenon is called *shift-time*. Shift-time saps our mental energy and taxes our productivity.

In addition, researchers from Harvard Business School discovered that multitasking hinders creativity.¹⁸ After assessing nine thousand employees working on projects that required creative thinking, researchers found a notable drop in creative thinking among employees who multitasked and an increase in creativity among those who focused on one task at a time.

When we don't multitask, when we stay focused on one thing at a time, we benefit. We also benefit from not getting trapped in activity.

Avoid Action Addiction

Action addiction is characterized by an uncontrollable urge to be doing something and a discomfort with being still. It includes behaviors like constantly checking emails, texts, news feeds, or social media. Action

addiction keeps us busy and may help us complete many “tasks,” but activity is not the same as productivity.

One could argue that when we’re action addicts—when we constantly answer email, shoot off texts, or take phone calls—we get a lot done. Sadly, that’s not the case. In the 2002 *Harvard Business Review* article “Beware the Busy Manager,” researchers shared findings on managers’ ability to prioritize. After an in-depth study of leaders in companies like Sony, LG, and Lufthansa, they conclude: “Very few use their time as effectively as they could. They think they’re attending to pressing matters, but they’re really just spinning their wheels.”¹⁹ Another study looked at the priorities of more than 350,000 people and found that they spend an average of 41 percent of their time on low-level priorities.²⁰ In other words, they’re doing lots of things but not getting the right things done.

We are so wired for doing things that a survey found that 83 percent of Americans spent no time relaxing or doing nothing in the past twenty-four hours.²¹ When did you last sit without doing anything? Try it out now. Put the book aside and do nothing for three minutes. Observe your reactions to it.

How did it go? Did you feel an urge to check your email, or do something else? If yes, you may be suffering from action addiction.

Action addiction is a very real condition most of us have to some degree, and the cause lies in our brain. When we complete a task, even the smallest insignificant task like sending an email, dopamine is released in the brain. This can make the task addictive. But dopamine is blind and does not distinguish between activity and productivity. This means we get a dopamine hit just for doing something—anything. And this makes us effective at doing a lot of things but not necessarily at doing the right things.

The obvious consequence of action addiction is that we’re constantly chasing short-term wins and losing sight of our bigger goals. When this happens, our ability to prioritize suffers and our performance diminishes. Because action addiction is a mental state, we can overcome it through the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness training improves focus and impulse control. It provides you with the mental strength for observing, reflecting, and doing important things, rather than just doing a lot of things.²² In addition, we can carve out time for focus.

Create Focus Time

Our propensity to multitask and get caught in action addiction are increased with the continuous rise in and reliance on technology. But we have a choice in how we respond to technology. With a well-trained mind, we have a choice of what to focus on and the ability to avoid multitasking and action addiction. We also have the choice of planning our time and activities in a way that facilitates getting important things done.

Arne Sorenson, CEO of Marriott, plans uninterrupted hours of focused meetings with members of his team with no phone, computers, or other devices in the room. Jean-François van Boxmeer, CEO of Heineken blocks out a percentage of his time specifically for tackling important tasks. Dominic Barton, global managing partner of McKinsey & Company, takes a long run every day to process, reflect, and synthesize. In each case, these exceptionally busy leaders are putting aside specific blocks of time designed to increase their focus. For them, disciplined focus is a mantra for productivity. They understand that if they do not plan time to do focused work, they easily end up doing everything that is urgent and not what's important.

Cal Newport's book *Deep Work* describes the need and techniques for focused work for leaders.²³ When we dedicate our full attention, pointedly and without distraction, to any task, we are more productive. We also experience a greater sense of fulfillment as well as a comforting sense of being in control. This experience carries over into the rest of the day, decreasing stress and increasing focus and calm.

Focus time often conflicts with an always-on organizational culture. Focus time therefore requires some principles, discipline, and preparation. To secure focus time, the following steps can be helpful:

- Block out focus time on your calendar. Rather than prioritize what's on your schedule, schedule your priorities.
- Block out one hour—or more—every work day of the week, the month, and the year. Be disciplined about utilizing this hour for focus work. Schedules can change, but do what you can to avoid having other people claim your focus time for meetings.
- Plan your time during the hours when you are most focused. Save email and other activities for times when your focus is lower.

- Share the importance of focus time with your peers and colleagues. Make your closest associates allies in protecting your (and their) focus time.
- As you start your focus time, define clear goals for how you will use it. Then stick to these goals. Don't open your email (unless that is the goal of your focus time), don't respond to texts, don't participate in any other unfocused activities.
- Eliminate distractions. Close your door or find a space where you will not be interrupted. Put your phone away. Keep your desk clean and free of any distractions.
- The challenge is not only external distractions; internal distractions can be even stronger. Other issues may be pushing their way into your consciousness. Compartmentalize them. Right now, you're doing more important things.
- While you're in your focus time, be disciplined. Be disciplined about staying focused, so that you get the most out of the time. Do not give in to a dopamine craving. As much as you may feel like checking email or messages, refrain from it.

All the above strategies have been demonstrated to be highly effective in enhancing performance and well-being. But as simple as they may sound, without having a well-trained, focused mind, they are challenging to implement. The true foundation of greater focus is a disciplined daily practice of mindfulness.

Mindful Focus Practice

Focus is the core of self-leadership. Without it, your mind is like a boat without a rudder. Training your focus through daily mindfulness practice will enhance your ability to be more focused during daily work. The following are instructions on how to do this (see "Training for Mindful Focus"). The practice has four primary instructions: A for anatomy, B for breath, C for counting, and D for distractions. For ease of practice, download the app that you can find in appendix A.

Training for Mindful Focus

1. Set a timer for ten minutes.

2. **Anatomy:**

- Sit on your chair, comfortably, with a straight back and relaxed neck, shoulders, and arms. Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.
- Allow your entire body to relax. Allow your mind to relax.

3. **Breath:**

- In a relaxed way, direct your focus to your breath and observe the experience of breathing in and breathing out.
- Focus on your breathing in a neutral way, without controlling it and without trying to make it different. Simply notice your breath as it is.

4. **Counting:**

- To help you focus on your breath, count at the end of each exhale. Slowly count up to ten, and then backward to one.
- If you lose track of the count, start at one again.

5. **Distractions:**

- You will get distracted. In this practice, a distraction is anything that is not your breath or your count. It could be sounds, feelings, thoughts, or bodily sensations. Whatever distraction you encounter, consider it a friend, reminding you to go back to your breath.
- When you get distracted, be aware of it, and gently return your focus to your breath.

6. When the timer sounds, let go of the training.

In an always-on, distracted world, we shift between tasks constantly. But focus is critical to us as leaders, to improve both our effectiveness and our productivity. With enhanced focus, our self-leadership is strengthened. All the tips and strategies presented in this chapter will help you strengthen your focus—and as a result, improve your outcomes. The next chapter builds on the foundation of focus by examining how selflessness—letting go of ego—is essential in leading yourself effectively.

Quick Tips and Reflections

- ✓ Commit to practice mindful focus training on a regular basis, as recommended in the app (see appendix A for information).
- ✓ Take *Harvard Business Review*'s "Mindfulness Assessment" (<https://hbr.org/2017/03/assessment-how-mindful-are-you>) to assess your level of focus and awareness.
- ✓ Record what impacts your focus and how it changes throughout the day; make a commitment to change one thing to enhance your daily focus.
- ✓ Commit to being more intentional about how you spend your time, and whatever you do, do it with a calm, clear, relaxed focus.
- ✓ Block focus time in your calendar and determine when and how you can mindfully "disconnect" to enhance openness and creativity.

Selfless Self-Leadership

Selflessness is the only appropriate response to knowing that our ‘self,’ our ego, is a mere product of our imagination,” said Steven Worrall, managing director of Microsoft Australia. He is spot on. We have no fixed and solid self. This is a neurological, biological, and psychological fact. Instead, all we have is a brain that constantly refers to ourselves, creating the illusion of a fixed and solid self.

Over the past thirty years, psychologists and neuroscientists have searched for the brain’s control center—the one place where orders come from, the center of our ego, our “I,” our true “self.” Despite there being billions of neurons in the brain, no control center has been identified as the essence of an individual or a self.¹

From a scientific point of view, we appear to be an amazing collection of extremely complex systems and processes. Despite having no control center, we’re neurologically disposed toward the illusion of having an inherently existing self. We tend to experience ourselves as clearly defined, fixed entities with specific characteristics and properties. But according to leading researchers, in reality, the ego is a creation of our imagination.² The ego is a constantly self-referential voice that creates the impression of a solid, stable, and inherently existing *I* that runs the show.

In truth, though, it's just a transitory self-image that changes through neurotransmitters, hormones, and synaptic reactions.

To explore this idea further, take a moment to reflect on your experience with the awareness training introduced in chapter 2. When you were observing your thoughts, who was doing the observation? If you're not your thoughts, then who exactly are you? Take some time to think about these questions and consider the ramifications.

To be clear: this doesn't mean you don't exist. Rather, it means you don't exist in the way you think you do. If this sounds strange, then test it out for yourself. When you're training open awareness and you notice a sensation somewhere in your body, see if you can pinpoint what part of you is having the sensation. At some point, you'll discover what many people have realized—it's impossible to find exactly what part of you is experiencing the sensation. Instead, you'll find a lot of processes. There will be thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and sounds, but you won't be able to localize the owner of the sensation. The logical conclusion is, you're not as clearly defined as you thought.

This may seem strange, but if there's no specific owner of any experience, then it opens up a world of possibilities. If our ego is not fixed and is just something we've created, we can change it.

Nothing is fixed. Everything is potential.

The insight that everything is potential and that there is no solid, isolated self means we can redefine ourselves. We can break free of our own limited definitions of who we think we are, and, equally important, who we think others are. New possibilities open up in every situation we encounter. We have the choice to define all people and all situations based on our perspectives, however narrow or expansive they may be. When everything is potential, it offers each and every one of us an abundance of positive benefits. From a leadership perspective, it means we can be more of the leader we want to be—without our fears, defense mechanisms, and self-limiting beliefs getting in our way. This includes regulating our sense of ego, minimizing the traps it creates, and remaining grounded in the face of success.

In this chapter, we look at the illusory nature of ego, the problems it creates, and how self-confident selflessness is a sound approach to more effectively leading yourself.

The Problem with *I*

Ego equals problems. This could be the short conclusion based on various studies conducted on the role of the ego. One study from the University of California found that the more people use the pronouns *I*, *me*, *my*, and *mine*, the higher the correlation to coronary heart disease incidence and mortality.³ Another study found that individuals with depression and anxiety have a higher-than-average use of first-person pronouns.⁴ A related study looked at poets and suicide and found a staggering result: their increased use of first-person pronouns was strongly correlated with later suicide.⁵ In contrast, a study published in *Psychological Science* found that when we actively start to use other pronouns, such as *we*, *he*, *she*, and *you*, and make less use of self-referencing pronouns like *I*, *me*, and *my*, our health improves.⁶

Let's look at this through a leadership lens. A study from the University of Texas found a clear correlation between leadership positions and the use of pronouns. People with higher leadership positions use significantly more first-person plural pronouns like *we*, as well as second-person pronouns like *you* and *your*.⁷ In contrast, people with lower or no leadership status overwhelmingly tend to use the first-person singular pronoun *I* when they speak. The study further found that individuals in higher levels of leadership demonstrate a stronger "others-orientation" in their way of talking. In other words, people of higher power status seemed to demonstrate greater concern with the well-being of the group as opposed to their own well-being, whereas lower power status people demonstrated stronger self-orientation.

Another study analyzed the use of pronouns in all forty-three Australian elections since independence from Britain in 1901. The more candidates used *we*, *you*, and *us*, the more likely they were to win—and win by a larger margin. Victors used more collective pronouns than their unsuccessful opponents in 80 percent of all elections. Across all elections, victors made 61 percent more references to *we* and *us* and used these terms once every 79 words. Losers only used them once every 136 words.⁸ The study again suggests that successful leaders are more others-oriented and have better ability to engage with and speak to the collective identity of themselves and the people they address.

So caring about others not only seems to be part of our nature as presented in chapter 2, it appears to enable us to be healthier and more successful as leaders. Yet it isn't easy. Try this experiment. Set a timer for two minutes. When ready, start a monologue describing your day from when you got up until this moment without using *I*, *me*, *my*, or *mine*.

Go ahead, give it a try.

If you found it difficult, that's okay. In addition to being hardwired for kindness, we are also deeply programmed to look out for ourselves and see things from our own perspective.

Ego and Leadership

In our interviews with senior executives, we asked the question: "Are there any benefits of having a big ego in leadership?" The repeated answer was a resounding "No." The leaders we interviewed recognized many of the downsides of a big ego: it makes you vulnerable to criticism; it makes you susceptible to manipulation; it narrows your field of vision; and it corrupts your behavior and causes you to act against your values. Let's explore these downsides of ego one by one.

Ego Makes You Vulnerable to Criticism

Our ego is like buttons we carry with us that contain ideas about who we think we are and what is important to our sense of self. These buttons can be things like "I am an engaging leader," or "I am a strategic thinker," or "I am a team player." In daily work interactions, these buttons can be pushed by others if they say or do something that goes against our idea of self. When that happens, our ego is triggered. In this way, our ego is like a target we carry with us and, like any target, the bigger it is, the more vulnerable it is to being hit.

Roy Harvey, general manager of EA Sports, had just overseen the launch of the latest version of the video football game, *Madden NFL*, one of the most popular video game franchises in the world. The upgrade was a significant investment, costing many millions. As with all software, first versions have a lot of bugs. With so much at stake, Roy had an entire team detect and rectify over 22,000 bugs before launch. One bug slipped through the cracks and Roy found himself in a meet-

ing with angry stakeholders. They wanted to know how this could have happened.

Roy shared with us how in the moment, his ego felt under attack. He wanted to fight back, blame others, and deflect the criticism. His ego wanted to shout how thorough and diligent he and his team had been. But instead, as he explained to us, he told the stakeholders around the table: “We found and fixed something like 22,358 bugs this year. And we missed one. That should provide perspective for all of us. That’s the nature of software. And that’s why we have patches and updates.” He didn’t point fingers; he didn’t place blame. Instead, his calm statement of the facts settled people down and refocused the conversation.

Fortunately for Roy, he has been a practitioner of mindfulness for many years. He was able to understand the messages coming from his ego and resist the urge of lashing out or getting overly defensive. He knew that if he responded from a place of a wounded ego, it wouldn’t end well. Instead of fueling the fight his ego was putting up, he created mental space between himself and the train of thoughts and emotions coming from it. Using the mindfulness practice of being an observer of his own thoughts, he was able to step back and effectively disengage from the emotions. This allowed him to see the situation with more clarity. He was also able to take responsibility for what had happened and begin more quickly working toward a solution.

In Roy’s situation, his ego could have made a bad situation worse. It could have made it personal, driven by fear rather than focused on solutions. His protective ego could have directed the blame elsewhere. Mindfulness training combined with an understanding of ego helped Roy make the best of a bad situation.

Ego not only makes us vulnerable to behaving badly in the face of setbacks and criticism, it prevents us from learning from our mistakes. Our ego has a strong orientation to protect us from harm. But in doing so, it creates a defensive wall around us that makes it difficult to appreciate the rich lessons we glean from failure. It can also make it easy for others to take advantage of us.

Ego Makes You Susceptible to Manipulation

Some years ago, we worked closely with the private finance division of a global bank to instill more mindfulness in their leadership team. One of the senior leaders had a very large ego. When he walked into a room,

you could feel the size of it. He had a long list of accomplishments and good reason to be proud. But it was clear to us, and to everyone else, that he took credit for every success and valued himself above the team. It was also clear that when there were problems, he looked for someone to blame. Making himself look good was his primary focus, and he didn't seem to care who he stepped on along the way.

It was obvious to us that others in the organization were aware of his inflated ego. We could see how easily they were able to manipulate him in certain situations. If they wanted a project to go in a certain direction, they would explain to him how it would make him look good—and he would do it. If they wanted to avoid something, they would tell him it would make him look bad—and he would avoid it. They were able to get him to make decisions and take on tasks influenced by their praise or caution.

Because our ego craves positive attention, it can make us susceptible to manipulation. And the bigger our ego is, the bigger the risk of being manipulated will be. An inflated ego makes us predictable, because it drives our behavior in obvious ways. And when people know it, they can play to it and become puppeteers of our actions. When we're a victim of our own need to be seen as great, we end up being led into making decisions that may or may not be good for ourselves, let alone our people and our organization.

Ego Narrows Your Field of Vision

Anish Melwani, CEO of LVMH Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton Inc., North America, shared how ego can narrow our field of vision because of confirmation bias. He contends that if we bring a big ego to work, it makes us search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms our preexisting beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities. "Confirmation bias is often about ego," he said. "We all hate to be wrong and we generally want other people to validate our ideas and positions." As Anish described it, we end up seeing things the way we want to see them, and this confirms our belief in what we want to see. It can become a loop that's difficult to disengage from.

Ego narrows our vision and makes it hard for us to see and accept new opportunities. Because of this narrowing vision, we fall victim to the limitations of our own success.

Marshall Goldsmith, coach and author of the best-selling *What Got You Here, Won't Get You There* calls this the “success delusion.”⁹ Many leaders we’ve worked with suffer from it. Psychologist B.F. Skinner, the first social scientist to identify radical behaviorism, famously found that dogs, pigeons, and all other animals, including humans, tend to repeat behavior that’s rewarded.¹⁰ When rewarded for something once, we unconsciously persist in the behavior that led to the reward, regardless of whether the behavior is functional or dysfunctional. This may sound mundane and simplistic, but it’s the basis of the success delusion.

As we rise up the organizational ladder, our success can lure us into thinking that we’re great. We tend to believe that we’re the sole architects of our success. We subconsciously conclude that our past actions and behaviors led to our success, so those actions and behaviors must be the ingredients of success. As a result, we repeat these ingredients, believing they will bring more success. But there is no causal logic behind this thinking. Instead, it’s just our ego confirming biases through rewards and creating the delusion that we know the one way—the right way—to succeed.

The moment we give in to the ego’s success delusion, we narrow our vision and limit our potential. The moment we believe that past successful behavior will lead to present and future success, we’ve stagnated. We become blinded by our own success and fail to question ourselves and our behavior. We fail to see that the world is changing, people are changing, the organization is changing, and the demands on us as leaders are changing, and past action does not always lead to future success.

The success delusion is a crossroads that many leaders face around the age of forty. In our conversations with leaders, this is the age when some start to feel that they are stagnating. They realize that the strategies that got them to where they are will not take them to where they need to go. They must let go of past behaviors and reinvent their way of leading. But this is easier said than done. Keeping our ego in check is not easy.

*Ego Corrupts Your Behavior and Causes
You to Act against Your Values*

Your ego is constantly looking for ways to improve your status and power in conscious and unconscious ways. And although the ego’s desire to protect us and ensure our survival isn’t inherently bad, if left unchecked, the

ego can cause us to act against our better judgment. It can twist our values. It can warp our better natures. And unfortunately, becoming a leader is not always a good thing for our kinder, considerate selves.

Studies have found that power tends to corrupt our behavior. While people usually gain power through traits and actions that advance the interests of others—such as empathy, collaboration, openness, fairness, and sharing—when they start to feel powerful or enjoy a position of privilege, those qualities begin to fade. The more powerful they are, the more likely they are to engage in rude, selfish, and unethical behavior.¹¹ Studies show that people in positions of power are three times as likely as those at the lower rungs of the ladder to interrupt coworkers, multitask during meetings, raise their voices, and say insulting things at the office. And people who've just moved into senior roles are particularly vulnerable to losing their values compass.¹²

Think of the management teams at Wells Fargo, Uber, or Volkswagen, all of whom have come under scrutiny for unethical behavior. It's easy to look at them and believe they were inherently bad people driven by greed and willing to cause harm to others. But that conclusion is overly simplistic. Remember that human beings are inherently kind. We have positive intentions for one another. But sometimes our intentions are derailed by ego, driving us to take harmful actions. We believe that the members of these management teams did not wake up every morning asking themselves how they could inflict harm on others. More likely, they were in the grip of their ego's desire for more status and power, and they lost touch with their better selves.

When we're caught in the grip of the ego's craving for more power, we lose control. We become slaves of our own ego. And almost unwittingly, we end up doing things that are not aligned with our values. And because we are not always in touch with our true selves and thus our values, it becomes easier to make poor or egoistical choices. This does not excuse bad behavior. Acting in ways that are completely self-serving and causing harm to others is not okay. But with our ego-driven focus of getting more wealth, status, and power, at least we can understand where it comes from. Which, in turn, can help us in reflecting on these examples and, potentially, making better choices.

We're all influenced and easily caught up in our ego's desires. It's just a matter of degree. In the words of Jennifer Woo, CEO and chair of

The Lane Crawford Joyce Group, Asia's largest luxury retailer, "Managing our ego's craving for fortune, fame, and influence is the prime responsibility of any leader." Not only does managing the ego make us better and more effective leaders, it also makes us better human beings.

Having a big ego is a significant problem in leadership. It makes you vulnerable to criticism, susceptible to manipulation, limits your vision, and corrupts your behavior. Unfortunately, getting to the top can often make the situation worse because of a phenomenon known as the "CEO bubble."

The CEO Bubble

A newly appointed CEO we interviewed shared an interesting observation. He noticed that since his promotion, people had started laughing a little harder at his jokes. He also noticed that people seemed to generally agree more often with his comments in meetings and the once-candid conversations he used to have with his pre-promotion peers were now not so candid. When offering thoughts and suggestions, his reports now seemed to hold back. But of course, rising to the top doesn't actually make us funnier or smarter.

Instead, as we rise in ranks, we acquire more power. And with increased power comes increased insulation. We end up in a bubble, where we're praised and supported more often than before. Hal Gregersen, executive director of the MIT Leadership Center at Sloan School of Management, says too many CEOs and executives are in a bubble, one that shields them from the reality of what's happening in the world and in their businesses.¹³ The result is that you can get caught up in a space that's not very healthy for you or for your organization.

When we're in the CEO bubble, we don't get the tough feedback we need to improve our thinking and behavior. Also, we don't reap the benefits of the 360-degree perspectives that a quality team can provide. Consequently, we lose wisdom and perspective. We become more narrow-minded. And we're left with a version of reality that's of our own making. As a result, we may slowly stagnate in our beliefs and strategies. If we don't consider the perspective of others, we're left to unconscious biases, our own inflated sense of self, and fixed beliefs. To be most effective, we must break free from the bubble.

But breaking free from an inflated ego can be hard. It requires selflessness and courage. The first step toward breaking free is to continually question yourself. Question your behavior, your beliefs, and your strategies. Look at yourself in the mirror every day with an open mind. Never assume that you have found the eternal answer to being a leader, because you haven't. Leadership is about people, and people change every day. If you assume you have found the universal key to leading people, you've just lost it.

The next step is to support, develop, and work with people who won't put you in a self-inflated, egocentric bubble. Hire people who are smarter than you are and who have the confidence to speak up when you may be wrong. This, of course, requires that you have the self-confidence needed to respond without ego and fear, a trait we'll touch on later in the chapter. Less self-confident leaders tend to hire people less smart than themselves; people they can influence and manipulate. Anish Melwani shared with us how he hires people based on their courage to speak their opinions. People who have the courage to disagree with the boss help develop a culture of positive dissent and productive openness. This can lead to greater collaboration, improved results, and increased opportunities for self-growth. A significant step in creating this sort of openness—and applying selfless self-leadership—is grounded on fostering a true sense of humility.

Humility

Great leaders are generally not the types of people who publicly pat themselves on the back and trumpet their accomplishments. On the contrary, we've found that great leaders exude a strong sense of humility. Humility and selflessness are closely linked. You cannot be selfless without humility, and humility without selflessness is false humility.

Humility is not just a noble attitude; it's a realistic perspective on individual worth. Because of the delusion of success, we as leaders can create unrealistic perspectives on how much we really matter in the bigger picture. In the scheme of things, even the best CEO is only one out of thousands of individuals contributing to a company's success. Furthermore, the company's success is heavily determined by market trends and large-scale global forces. Any company is merely the result of an interconnected string of events, actions, and intentions.

If you think your company is successful mainly due to your own efforts, ask yourself a few questions: Who trained and mentored you? Who schedules your meetings and manages your calendar? Who built and who maintains the car that takes you to work? How many people in your organization are doing a great job every day? We're so interconnected with others, it's impossible to know who caused or created what. Understanding this reality awakens a healthy sense of humility. And with this humility, a sense of gratitude to those who contribute to our success comes naturally. In this way, humility helps us better recognize and acknowledge others' contributions. It makes us more appreciative and attentive to others, which increases interconnectedness and engagement.

Serhat Unsal, CEO of the global company Dawn Foods, has noticed how humility becomes increasingly important the higher you rise in position or rank. "As a leader," Serhat explained, "your end goal is to succeed as a team. This means you need to give other smart, ambitious people the space to contribute." The more senior you are, the more senior your reports are. And the more senior your reports, the more they expect respect and inclusion. In this case, your role is to be more of a listener and less of a manager. Your role requires being open to various viewpoints and includes a willingness to act as a catalyst for others' success. To do so, you must be able to put your ego aside and embody a genuine sense of humility.

Edouard-Malo Henry, group head of compliance of global bank Société Générale, shared with us how humility is a quality that must be developed by regularly bringing it to mind. Before he enters a meeting, he has created a habit of mentally recognizing the efforts and skills of everybody in the room. "When considering how many hours of work, good intentions and experience my colleagues bring to the table at any meeting, I am humbled and grateful. This short recognition enables me to show up more humble and appreciative and better at listening rather than providing answers."

As Edouard-Malo explains, humility is an inner process. And when exercised, it shapes how you show up. Humility is a direct way of keeping your ego in check and developing a healthy sense of selflessness. It does not mean completely dissolving the self, because every leader needs to have a healthy sense of self and a healthy self-confidence.

Self-Confident Selflessness

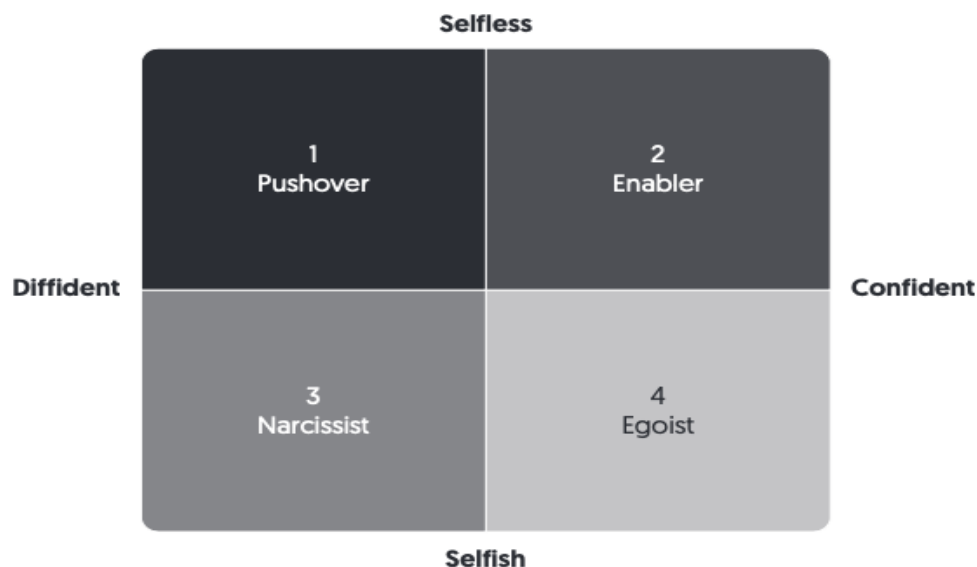
A general concern many leaders have about the concept of selflessness is that it will make them pushovers. That's not necessarily the case. To be successful, leadership selflessness has to be combined with strong self-confidence. We call this combination self-confident selflessness. Self-confident selflessness makes you stand up and follow through with your ideas, while not being hampered by ego-attachment and pride.

Self-confident selflessness is illustrated in figure 4-1. We covered the details of each quadrant in chapter 1, but a brief review may be helpful.

In this matrix, you have selflessness versus selfishness on one axis. On the other axis, you have self-confidence versus diffidence. In the lower left quadrant, you lack self-esteem, yet you're overly concerned with your own interests—it's all about you. In the lower right quadrant, you have a strong sense of self-confidence but you're driven by selfish goals and desires. In this quadrant, leaders can achieve great results, but at a steep cost to team satisfaction and loyalty. In the upper left quadrant, you're a

FIGURE 4-1

The selflessness matrix



pushover, with a strong possibility of burning out or being taken advantage of by others.

The upper right quadrant represents the sweet spot—a powerful combination of selflessness and self-confidence. You're not worried about being taken advantage of, because you have the confidence to speak up for yourself if needed. At the same time, you have a strong focus on the well-being of your people and organization. You lead for the long run. You don't worry about receiving praise. It's not about you—your ego doesn't crave recognition. Therefore, you give credit for achievements to others. This allows you to bring inspiration and inclusion. As an enabling leader, your mission is to contribute to the greater good.

Research by Jeremy Frimer and Larry Walker from the University of British Columbia found that the most successful leaders were the ones who had a healthy balance between selflessness and confident care for themselves.¹⁴ Calling selflessly self-confident leaders “moral exemplars” and “ethical giants,” Frimer and Walker examined the motivations and “personal strivings” of award-winning leaders. Through extensive assessment and analysis, they found that the most successful exemplars lead through what they termed “enlightened self-interest.” That is, they lead with both strong personal ambition *and* strong moral conviction—two seemingly contradictory motivations. Previous studies had seen “the self’s basic interests being fundamentally at odds with the person’s moral compassions,” but Frimer and Walker found that the two worked together to create “brilliance with wisdom” and “power with conscience”—the ultimate combination for exceptional leadership.

Leadership is a journey, and we all change as we go through it. If we don't change, we don't progress. The same is true when it comes to selflessness. Our interviews indicate that many senior leaders have a strong combination of selfless self-confidence, but that they have not always been that way. Selfless self-confidence is a balance that most of the leaders we interviewed found that they needed to develop over the years. Many of them indicated that the self-confidence had always been there, but balancing it with selflessness had been an ongoing journey. The starting point is valuing selflessness not just as something good to do for others but as something inherently good for you as a leader—something that you can do to be healthier, happier, and more of the leader you want to be.

Training Selflessness

Selflessness can be realized and cultivated with training. It's a realization and attitude that we can enhance due to neuroplasticity—our ability to shape our neural makeup. As a result, the more we experience life from a selfless perspective, the more selfless our mind becomes. The goal is to train our mind so that selflessness becomes our default mode. Here's a short practice to get you started (see "Training for Selflessness"). It begins with the basic mindfulness practice you did in the previous chapter and builds from there.

Training for Selflessness

1. Set a timer for five minutes.
 2. Sit on a chair, comfortably, with a straight back and relaxed neck, shoulders, and arms. Close your eyes and breathe through your nose.
 3. For a minute, direct your full attention toward your breathing. Simply observe your breath neutrally. Don't try to control it. Allow your mind to stabilize and settle.
 4. Now, let go of the focus on the breath and instead focus on identifying the observer.
 5. Who is observing the breath? Where is this sense of "I"? Can you find it? Is it solid? Is it changing? Is it static and in the same place all the time?
 6. Continue to search for the observer until the timer goes off.
 7. When the timer sounds, let go of the training.
 8. Take a moment to reflect on your experience.
-

Quick Tips and Reflections

- ✓ Commit to practicing selfless training on a regular basis as recommended in the app (see the appendix for information).
- ✓ Every time you use, or are about to use, a self-referential term, pause and consider whether using a more inclusive term would be beneficial.
- ✓ Consider ways in which your ego gets in the way of your leadership, and think of one concrete step to overcome its limitations.
- ✓ Consider what “humility” means for you; if it is a value, consider one thing you will do to cultivate greater humility in your leadership.
- ✓ Consider where you are in the selfless leadership matrix and where you would like to be; commit to one action that will help you move in that direction.

Lead Yourself with Compassion

The airline industry has got it right: when there are pressure issues in the cabin, they instruct us to put on our own oxygen mask first—to help ourselves—before helping others. This wisdom is equally important in leadership. In shouldering the responsibility of leadership, we take on a great deal of pressure. Self-compassion helps us lead ourselves in a way that mitigates this pressure and increases our leadership performance.

However, in our research and interviews, we have found that many leaders are rather tough on themselves. Their minds can go into a mode of negative self-talk and self-judgment. Noelene Mason, principal of Malibu School, a large special education school in Australia, shared with us how the first years she was in leadership roles were hard. “In my early years, I felt as though the only feedback I received was about my deficits, where I needed to improve, and what I was doing wrong. My perception of myself was that I was good but never good enough. I always felt I had to put on a mask, a coat of armor, because I had to appear strong and in control all of the time.”

Noelene's problem wasn't that she was an incompetent leader. In fact, she kept progressing in her career and being offered more senior positions. Her challenge was her own internal voice, telling her that she wasn't fully competent. But as we discussed in previous chapters, the voice in our head is just a voice, and if we decide to ignore it, it loses its power over us. And this is what Noelene came to realize. Through a mindfulness training program, she learned to stop listening to the negative self-talk, to have stronger self-acceptance: "Today, I am allowing myself to be who I am, and I find I am enjoying being with other people. And people seem to enjoy more being with me. Letting go of my inner voice, has made me a much better leader."

Our research has shown that on average, higher-ranking leaders have greater levels of compassion for themselves than midlevel managers. From our interviews and discussions, it appears that they've had the discipline of caring for themselves and sustaining high performance throughout their career progressions. Our conclusion: leading yourself with compassion is a vital enabler for successful leadership.

Many people dismiss self-compassion, because they think it conflicts with their ambition or hard-driving attitude, which are qualities that they believe have made them successful. But being self-compassionate doesn't imply that you shouldn't be ambitious or push yourself to succeed. Self-compassion is about how you care for yourself to better succeed.

Self-compassion involves taking care of your body and your mind. This chapter includes strategies to help you sleep better, digitally disconnect, and take mental breaks. We then look at how to maintain more balance in your mind, increase kindness, and leverage the power of purpose.

Care for Your Body and Mind

Taking care of your mind and body includes the basics of finding time to exercise and making a commitment to a healthy diet. Being physically active and eating properly are foundations for high performance and improved well-being—a fact well understood by most leaders. Through our own research, we've found three additional factors critical to a healthy mind that are less appreciated by busy leaders: the need for quality sleep;

the need to disengage from compulsive technologies; and the need to make time for mental breaks.

Get Enough Quality Sleep

Although all aspects of good health are important, our research shows that sleep is often one of the first “luxuries” compromised by leaders. When there are not enough hours in the day, they steal some from the night. Many leaders stay up late to catch up on email or finish other tasks. According to our research, this tendency is widespread, regardless of gender and level of leadership. We found that 68 percent of leaders get between five to seven hours of sleep per night, with only 28 percent getting seven or more hours of sleep on a typical night.

This is a problem. Sleep is not a luxury.

According to the American National Sleep Foundation, adults between the ages of sixteen and sixty-four should be getting between seven to nine hours of sleep per night.¹ If they don't, they pay a steep price. Scientific studies have conclusively shown that sleep deprivation is a key issue underlying a long list of mental and physical disorders.² Even light sleep deprivation has been proven to negatively impact logical reasoning, executive function, attention, and mood.³ Worse, severe sleep deprivation can lead to depression, anxiety, and symptoms of paranoia.⁴ In the long run, sleep deprivation is a main contributor to the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease.⁵ Now the most surprising fact: while humans can survive multiple weeks without food and up to a week without water, they can only go a few days without sleep.⁶

Our research found that leaders with a disciplined approach to self-compassion sleep more. In fact, the majority of C-suite executives we spoke with get seven to eight hours of sleep per night. Despite intense travel and demanding schedules, they are all disciplined about not compromising on sleep. Some block their calendars from a certain time in the evening. Others have asked for support from their spouses, executive assistants, and colleagues to keep a healthy sleep regimen.

It used to be a badge of honor to brag about how few hours you sleep, but many of the leaders we interviewed share openly with their colleagues that they get sufficient sleep. Take a moment to reflect on your own sleep habits. Do you get seven or more hours per night? If not, consider testing how getting more sleep could enhance your performance

and well-being. For the next two weeks, make a commitment to yourself to get at least seven hours of sleep every night. After two weeks, see if you notice any difference in your well-being and focus.

Of course, it's one thing to make a commitment to go to bed early and another to actually get seven or more hours of quality sleep. For many leaders, going to bed is only part of the problem. The other part is getting high-quality, restorative sleep. Fortunately, a good night's sleep is not a random event; it's a trainable skill. The following are some guidelines for improving the quality of your sleep:

- **Catch the melatonin wave.** Go to bed when you're just starting to feel drowsy (usually between 10 p.m. and 11 p.m.). Melatonin, a natural hormone released from the pineal gland deep inside your brain, makes you relaxed, drowsy, and ultimately fall asleep.⁷ If you learn to notice it and go with its flow, you'll enjoy falling asleep and have better-quality sleep during the night.⁸
- **Avoid screens.** Turn off TVs, smartphones, and laptops at least sixty minutes before bed. Why? Each of those screens emits high levels of blue light rays.⁹ That blue light suppresses your pineal gland, and, in turn, the production of melatonin.¹⁰ It's almost like your brain reads the blue light as if the sun is still up, when in reality the sun has probably been down for hours and you should be sleeping.
- **Enjoy only perceptual activities sixty minutes before bed.** Too much thinking is another enemy of late-evening drowsiness. Conceptual activities like intense conversations, replying to emails, working, or reading can arouse your attention and suppress your natural sleepiness. In contrast, perceptual activities like doing the dishes, going for a walk, or listening to music can help you better catch the wave of melatonin as it rises.¹¹
- **Avoid eating two hours before bed.** Most people know to avoid caffeine in the hours before going to bed, but in fact, eating anything can negatively impact your ability to get good sleep.¹² Eating activates the flow of blood and sugar in the body, keeping your body and mind alert and awake. Not the ideal state for a good night's rest.

- **Practice two minutes of mindfulness when you go to bed.** Practice focus training while sitting on your bed, followed by two minutes of relaxed breathing while lying on your back, then turn on your side and let go of your thoughts and concerns.

As you begin to enjoy the benefits of more and better sleep, consider ways you can wean yourself from the compulsive interruptions created by today's most popular technologies.

Practice Disciplined Disconnectedness

The rise of technology in our lives puts us at serious risk of shattering our ability to be present with other people and diminishing our well-being. The dopamine rush released when checking texts, emails, or social media on our phone, tablet, or computer drives us to compulsively check these devices. Without thought or plan, we click through messages, update our status, or read the latest irrelevant factoid. To better understand the scope of the problem, consider the following statistics from Deloitte's annual "Global Mobile Consumer Survey":¹³

- The time it takes for us to first pick up our phones in the morning continues to shrink—more than 40 percent of respondents check their phones within five minutes of waking up.
- During the day, we look at our phones forty-seven times on average.
- Once the day is over, more than 30 percent of professionals check their devices five minutes before going to sleep—and about 50 percent of professionals check their phones in the middle of the night.
- During leisure time, 89 percent of respondents check their phones, 93 percent while watching TV and 87 percent while talking to family and friends.

Keep in mind what we noted in chapter 3: your prefrontal cortex actually shrinks the more often you let yourself be interrupted by disruptive technologies like instant messaging, email, and social media. The fact that we actively choose to check our phone while talking to family and friends indicates that it has indeed become compulsive behavior. If you're wondering whether this applies to you, try this quick test. Turn off your phone and leave it off for the next two hours. While it's off, notice how

often you feel the desire to check it. How does it feel to be disconnected? Are you feeling a little anxious? If not, you're a rarity in today's hyper-connected world. If so, you're like most leaders—too strongly tethered to today's most distracting, addictive tools.

Our compulsive phone habits impact our social relations both at work and at home. Sherry Turkle, professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT and author of the bestselling *Alone Together*, has found that the mere presence of a phone during a conversation creates a “distance” between the people attending a meeting or taking part in a social activity.¹⁴ Even if the phone is not used—and even if it's lying face down—it impacts the quality of social interaction. This raises a number of important questions for you as a leader. How often do you have your phone on the table in front of you when you have a one-on-one conversation? How often is it visible during meetings? How often do you hold or use your phone when you're with family and friends? If you're like many people, the answer to all these questions is “too often.”

We stand to gain by assessing and redefining how we let technology influence our work and life—especially in terms of when we're connected and when we're not. Harvard Business School professor Leslie Perlow, author of *Sleeping with Your Smartphone*, conducted an in-depth study of the effects of digital disconnection at Boston Consulting Group, a global management consulting group. Even in such a fast-paced and high-pressure environment, the study showed that the consultants who disconnected from their mobile devices for a few hours every week experienced better internal communication, increased learning, and improved delivery to their clients.¹⁵

In today's business environment, disconnecting requires discipline and the application of a few basic principles. The following are a few tips for disconnecting from compulsive technologies and more compassionately leading yourself:

- Define phone-free zones at home and at work.
- At work, keep your phone out of sight when you're engaging with others.
- When you're sitting at your computer, keep the phone out of sight so it doesn't trigger compulsive checking. Or simply turn it off for periods of time.

- At home, find a hidden location for your phone; a place you can keep it without it attracting your attention.
- Treat your bedroom like an airline flight cabin. On a flight, your phone must be in “airplane mode” or turned off. The same should go for your bedroom.

As leaders, much of our success at work—and in life—depends on how well we’re able to engage with people, including our colleagues, employees, customers, and suppliers. We need to both hear them and influence them; understand them and guide them. By shutting off compulsive devices that steal our attention, we not only free ourselves from the control of technology, we strengthen our personal and professional interactions in a way that improves relationships and accelerates success.

Take Time for Mental Breaks

Much like a good night’s sleep, taking regular breaks is seen by many leaders as a “luxury.” But in reality, taking breaks is an impactful, simple, and pleasant way of increasing your focus and lengthening your attention span. Air-traffic controllers, more than most professionals, understand the importance of focus and attention. Sitting in their control towers, literally watching over thousands of lives, there is no room for distractions. To maintain this superhuman level of attention, air-traffic controllers are legally required to take fifteen-minute breaks every hour.

In a 2013 *Harvard Business Review* article, “To Strengthen Your Attention Span, Stop Overtaxing It,” best-selling author Daniel Goleman describes the importance of breaks to maintain mental performance throughout long working days. “Top performance requires full focus,” he wrote, “and sustaining focused attention consumes energy—more technically, your brain exhausts its fuel, glucose. Without rest, our brains grow more depleted. The signs of a brain running on empty include, for instance, distractedness, irritability, fatigue, and finding yourself checking Facebook when you should be doing your work.”¹⁶

Chris Schmidt, CEO of Moss Adams, a US-based accounting firm, takes short mental breaks between every meeting or big task. During these breaks, he gazes on the Seattle-area mountains through his office windows for a minute or two, thinking of nothing. This helps him continually refresh his attention during long, stressful workdays.

Many of us are so busy that we forget to take a break. Often, the only break we do take is for lunch. And even that “break” is often only the minutes it takes to grab food and bring it back to our desk. Take a moment to consider two quick questions: How often do you take breaks during a work day? What keeps you from taking more breaks? Interestingly enough, the main barrier between ourselves and taking breaks is not our organizations. In fact, most organizations recognize the value of breaks—many even encourage them.

It turns out that the greatest enemy of breaks is most often ourselves. Here are a few steps for making the most of what little time you have for taking mental performance breaks throughout your workday:

1. Let go of your work activities. Close your eyes or keep them open, whichever you prefer.
2. Direct your full attention to your breath.
3. For three breath cycles: Breathe in while noticing your breath; breathe out while relaxing your shoulders, neck, and arms. Breathe in while focusing fully on your inhale; breathe out while focusing on the exhale. Breathe in while enhancing the clarity of your attention; breathe out while maintaining clarity.
4. Let go of the exercise. Return to your work with renewed relaxation, focus, and clarity.

The benefits of allowing your brain short regular breaks from the stress and rigors of work are numerous. Your brain is re-energized, your mind is more focused and clear, your body is more relaxed, and you break the spell of constant distractions. If you do have to skip breaks, it’s not the end of the world. Just remember, the more you take them, the more rested and effective your mind will be. Think of it this way: a day without breaks is for the mind what running a marathon without water is for the body—unnecessarily exhausting.

Taking care of the basic needs of body and mind should be a priority for every leader. Unfortunately, too many of us compromise our health to meet the demands of our jobs. Although we may be able to sustain an unrelenting pace in the short term, eventually not taking care of ourselves will catch up with us. To avoid this fate, be kind to yourself and make

self-care a priority. From this foundation, the next step is to cultivate more balance in your mind.

Equanimity—a Mind in Balance

We are all bipolar to some degree. We move up and down a scale between euphoric, elated states and depressed, despondent states, depending on the latest results or news. But it's dangerous to get too high or too low based on daily events. This is especially true if we begin to get attached to the states of euphoria or excitement that success can bring. Attachment of any kind has its downside, but a strong attachment to an elated state often means that feelings like sadness, frustration, and disappointment will come more easily. It's like a pendulum—the farther you swing in one direction, the farther you'll swing back in the other direction. Equanimity is a form of accepting the good just as you accept the bad and vice versa: they're both transitory states that will pass.

Does this mean you need to become someone who doesn't enjoy the ups and downs of life? Quite the opposite. It means you can relish the things you truly enjoy without developing an all-encompassing desire or addiction to those things. It also means you can respond more skillfully to things you don't like without becoming angry or aggressive. Remember, you are only letting go of your *attachment* to pleasant experiences, not the experiences themselves.

This sort of mental balance creates an overall state of contentment and happiness that averages out to be much more positive than having peaks and valleys that are euphorically high or painfully low. It also supports strong self-leadership and people leadership skills.

Equanimity is a mental calmness, composure, and evenness of temper. It is a mind in balance, despite both positive and negative events. In this way, equanimity is the middle ground between attachment and aversion to the events, interactions, and feelings we experience in life. It's the art of viewing life's successes and tragedies as ebbs and flows without getting pulled up or down. Equanimity is an important component of self-compassion and in leading ourselves, because it teaches us to be in balance with things as they are, to be clear minded and accepting of life's vagaries.

To better understand how a balanced mind can inform leadership, we talked with Manish Chopra, a senior partner at McKinsey & Company who has trained extensively on maintaining mental balance. We asked him how equanimity has impacted the way he leads.

“As a leader,” he said, “you get your fair share of difficult situations on a daily basis, primarily because other people’s difficult situations are brought to you for resolution.” This is a reality that all leaders can understand. Everyone’s problems become your problems. Manish continued, “Equanimity has helped me find ways to manage difficult situations differently than I did before. So whether it’s the loss of a client, a delay in career progression, or a difficult personal situation with a direct report who needs a more empathetic ear—these are all instances that I dealt with differently in the past by being overly reactive. Now, I’m more balanced in each situation and able to provide more thoughtful, effective responses.”

We then asked Manish if by becoming more equanimous, leaders lose their taste for business success. In other words, does a balanced mind temper the drive for achievement? “If anything, the opposite has happened,” Manish countered. “My aspirations have gone up, not down. I feel more available to myself for trying things that I otherwise wouldn’t have attempted before. Building equanimity frees up mind space for other productive pursuits. And with continued practice, effort and output actually go up.”

The ability to better manage difficult situations—along with an increased degree of ambition—is a benefit to leaders at all levels. But having a balanced mind is not something you can just believe in. It’s not possible to say, “Well, I choose not to be attached to that feeling of being overly elated or excited.” You can’t talk yourself out of feeling euphoric. If you’re feeling elated, that’s what you’re feeling. Instead, your ability to maintain balance is determined by how you train your mind to respond to different situations in life.

A challenge for all of us as leaders comes when we succeed, for instance, in selling a big order or closing a major deal. We naturally get excited. Unfortunately, after we have been elated for a short time, our mind has a tendency to swing in the opposite direction as the enjoyment wears off. Furthermore, after we have tasted that experience, we crave to feel it again. This is due to the release of dopamine in our brain. It’s like trying to drink saltwater to quench our thirst: we just end up getting thirstier.

Another neurotransmitter, serotonin, has a wide-ranging impact on the mind and body, primarily serving to inhibit impulsive behavior and

increase relaxation and clarity.¹⁷ Serotonin and dopamine are closely connected. When they're in balance, we can enjoy good food, or a glass of wine, or a big win at work, without becoming addicted. Serotonin offsets the negative effect of dopamine, enabling us to be more resilient in the face of adversity. The more you train yourself to resist automatic impulses, the more balanced your dopamine and serotonin levels become.

This is important, because we as human beings naturally desire things. A study by Wilhelm Hofmann, a professor at the Booth School of Business at the University of Chicago, found that the average adult spends eight hours a day desiring things they don't have in the moment.¹⁸ Our main desire is food. This is followed by sleep, then media use, then sex, social contact, and leisure. We are, indeed, desiring beings. And when we desire, we're by definition out of mental balance, because we're craving something that we do not have. The following are a few tips for working toward increasing balance in your mind:

- When you feel an impulse toward elation or euphoria, pause for a moment to let your mind find balance and grounding.
- Consciously identify the events at work that bring you instant gratification. Now identify the events that bring discomfort. Be aware of your reactions to these tasks, and temper those reactions by purposefully limiting or delaying the gratification of the experiences you like, while more actively confronting the experiences you dislike.
- Train balance by being aware of your reactions to everything you experience: good, bad, and neutral. Notice the experiences you like and those you do not like; situations in which you experience attraction and situations in which you experience aversion.
- Just being aware of these reactions will lead to change. When you become aware of a desire, the desire will lessen as it's replaced by awareness of the desire. When you become aware of resistance, the resistance will lessen as it's replaced by awareness of it. If something is pleasant and nice, you observe it neutrally without giving it more value or holding onto it. If something is unpleasant, you observe it neutrally without wanting it to disappear.

Maintaining a balanced mind—and, by extension, leading yourself with compassion—requires discipline. Discipline is about having the strength to do what is good for you in the long term. Discipline is about avoiding impulsive behavior that generates short-term gratification but in the long run is not healthy or helpful. In this sense, true happiness is not to be in an elevated state of euphoria, but rather to be in a balanced state that allows you to accept the ups and downs of life. Being balanced eases self-doubt. It boosts resilience. And it increases kindness for yourself and for others. Having a balanced mind means that you are happy with what you have without clinging to it; that you value success without grasping for it. And that is truly one of the most compassionate gifts any leader can give her- or himself.

Practice Kindness

Sue Gilchrist, regional managing partner for Asia and Australia, of the global law firm Herbert Smith Freehills, has been a senior leader in the legal industry for two decades. In this highly competitive environment, people are trained to be critical, and there's a lot of pressure to be "right . . . always." This feeds into a culture where people work very hard for long hours and strive for perfection. People also tend to ruminate on challenges and assume their decisions or actions will be held up to be judged and criticized. This is a common trait in the legal business, as well as in many other industries.

But, of course, we're all human—and humans make mistakes, plus there may well be more than one "correct" approach to a challenge. When we perceive that we have made a mistake, we often hold on to that mistake, obsessing over it and harshly judging ourselves. We let the inner critic free. This can inhibit thinking and in particular, creative thinking.

The important thing to keep in mind is that this inner critic is self-created; it's a construct of our mind. With a well-trained, compassionate mind, however, we can learn to dismantle this critic and reframe perceived mistakes. Understanding this, Sue supported the implementation of a mindfulness program at Herbert Smith Freehills to help her lawyers enhance performance, lessen self-judgment, and create more

self-compassion. Observing her own team, she noticed that the training gave them the insight and tools needed to help overcome their inner critic and reframe perceived mistakes or imperfections in a more productive way. What would normally be a self-critical voice saying, “How could I miss that particular detail?” can be reframed as, “It was important to focus on the substantive arguments at this early stage. We’ll get to finessing all of the details next.” The benefit of a team working on this together is that the compassion quotient within the team increases along with everyone’s feeling of psychological safety.

Reflect for a moment on how you treat yourself when you make a big mistake or experience a setback. If you’re like most successful leaders, you’re probably pretty tough on yourself. And yet, if you dive into self-criticism, hide in embarrassment, or ruminate for a long time on your perceived shortcomings, it isn’t helpful. When things go wrong—and especially when we fail in front of others—we can become our own worst enemy. But with self-compassion, there are other alternatives.

Being kind to yourself is the ability to acknowledge that *you are good enough*. Yes, you are a human being with flaws and imperfection, but you’re doing your best. When you make mistakes, it’s important to stop and learn from them. But once you’ve learned the appropriate lessons and done what you can do to fix any negative consequences, it’s time to move on. It’s time to let go.

Researchers from the University of Arizona conducted a study to find the impact of self-compassion on people who have been through a crisis.¹⁹ “Higher levels of self-compassion,” they wrote, “were associated with less emotional intrusion into daily life.” In essence, people who are high in self-compassion tend to experience distressing events without becoming overwhelmed or stuck. They view themselves and their actions empathetically, which allows them to see both the highs and the lows of life as part of the human experience. More resilient, they’re better able to take responsibility for events and more easily bounce back from a setback.

Self-acceptance, especially of mistakes, is the cornerstone of self-compassion. Take a moment to reflect on how often your inner critic shows up, creating self-doubt and lowering your sense of self-worth. Are there certain situations in which that judging voice is more likely to arise?

Now make a conscious choice to pause the next time your inner critic pops up and try the following steps:

1. Acknowledge that your inner critic has made an appearance.
2. Pause and breathe.
3. Remind yourself that you're doing your best.
4. Pause and breathe.
5. When you're ready, let go of your inner critic and move on.

We all make mistakes. None of us are perfect. But what separates average leaders from exceptional leaders is the ability to quickly move on from life's inevitable missteps.

But the benefits of kindness don't end with defeating your inner critic. Once you commit to caring about yourself, you gain greater capacity to care for the people you lead. And according to research, being kind to others is one of the most effective ways to become happier yourself.

Numerous studies indicate that being kind to others positively impacts our happiness and well-being.²⁰ This was in direct contrast to popularly held beliefs—which are often amplified by our consumerist culture—that when it comes to happiness, we should focus on ourselves. In an extensive longitudinal experiment, researchers found that doing acts of kindness for others consistently makes people happier than focusing on themselves.²¹ The results of this study contribute to a growing research base that supports the benefits of what's termed "prosocial behavior." In striving for happiness, you may be tempted to treat yourself, but treating your colleagues yields even better results.

But let's face it. Being explicitly kind to others is not the norm in many organizations. It goes against the grain of conventional wisdom, which suggests that if we want to feel better, we need to treat ourselves to a nice dinner, a massage, or some new gadget. But these types of self-indulgences provide only short-term relief. This is because, as explained in chapter 2, true happiness always comes from within—from what we *give* to the world. In contrast, fleeting pleasure comes from outside—from what we *get* from the world. When we as leaders treat both ourselves and other people with more kindness, we feel better about ourselves, improve outcomes, and create a more humane culture.

The Power of Purpose

An important aspect of self-compassion is purpose. Developing a sense of purpose in what we do makes us get up in the morning filled with energy, passion, and meaning. A sense of purpose provides the drive we need to carry the responsibility of leadership.

But purpose isn't a given. It's something we must create by finding meaning in what we do day-to-day, month-to-month, and through the years. A great example of that is the story of Nand Chaudhary, CEO of Jaipur Rugs.

Founded in 1978, Jaipur Rugs is a social enterprise that connects rural artisans in India with global markets, empowering impoverished communities and preserving traditional craftsmanship. We asked Nand what he saw as the ultimate role of a leader. He answered instantly: "The main role of a leader is to be connected with oneself and to have a sense of purpose. And from that, to bring people within the organization along on that purpose."

He then offered a personal story. When he was in college, he had a very strict business professor. One day, the professor burst into the classroom, called out Nand by name, and told him to stand. Alarmed, his mind raced, trying to pinpoint exactly what he had done wrong. The professor took out a term paper and told the whole class, "See this boy? He's given the best answer in his paper." The question: What is the purpose of business? Nand's answer: "Business is the creator and preserver of civilization."

Nand has carried this strong sense of purpose from college through decades of business practice. About Jaipur Rugs, he likes to say, "We don't sell carpets; we sell a family's blessing." Today, his organization provides a sustainable livelihood to more than forty thousand artisans across six hundred villages in five states in India. While enormously successful, Jaipur Rugs is an inspiring case study in how a purpose-driven leader can catalyze social innovation, foster a disruptive business model, and support marginalized communities.

Many business experts make the case that purpose is a key to exceptional performance, while psychologists describe it as the pathway to greater well-being. Doctors have even found that people with purpose in their lives are less prone to disease.²² Purpose is increasingly being touted as the

key to navigating the complex, volatile world we face today, where strategy is ever changing and few decisions are obviously “right” or “wrong.”

Finding your purpose as a leader is not always easy. Many industries do not have the same inherent “feel-good” purpose like Jaipur Rugs. But purpose should not only be looked for in what the company does. It should also be looked for in what you do. Your way of leading your people has a massive impact on their lives, and with that, the lives of their families. As a leader and as a colleague, you have an opportunity for having big and positive impact on others. And in that, you can look for purpose.

What do you want to bring to the people you lead—and to their families? How can you influence them to be truly happier and more connected to others? How can you help them find purpose in their work and life?

Nand’s company Jaipur Rugs does not just sell carpets; it is in the business of creating societal change. You are not necessarily in the finance or consulting or pharma industry: you are in the people-impact industry. You have the power to influence for good.

Ask yourself frequently: What do you want to bring to your people and to your organization? How can you bring more benefit? And as described in the previous section, by treating your people to something positive, you stand to gain happiness for yourself too. It’s a win-win.

Training Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is something you can practice and enhance. Do it at the end of any mindfulness practice session you do. It only takes an additional minute. Follow the steps in “Training for Self-Compassion.”

Training for Self-Compassion

At the end of a mindfulness practice session, for the last minute do the following:

1. Recall an experience you have had, where you felt deeply cared for and loved.

2. Hold this experience in your mind, without analyzing or thinking about it. Simply sit with the experience that you are cared for.
 3. If useful, visualize that you are filled with the love and warmth from anyone that cares for you.
 4. To end the practice, repeat these words for yourself: May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I bring happiness to the ones I meet today.
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Quick Tips and Reflections

- ✓ Commit to practicing self-compassion training on a regular basis as recommended in the app—see appendix A for information.
- ✓ Commit to one thing you will do to take better care of your body and mind (e.g., get better sleep, set up phone-free zones, take mental breaks).
- ✓ The next time you experience something really good or something really bad, use it as an opportunity to cultivate balance in your mind, as neither type of experience will last.
- ✓ Make a commitment to be kind to yourself and your “inner critic”; consider ways that you can befriend it or reframe it so it doesn’t rule your mind.
- ✓ Reflect on what purpose means for you and how developing a greater and broader sense of it could be beneficial.

PART TWO

Understand and Lead Your People



Catering to the intrinsic motivation of your people is what unleashes the greatest performance. If you help them be happier at work, they will have more energy. If you help them find meaning, they will have more drive. If you help them feel connected, they will have more commitment. And if you allow them to contribute in meaningful ways, they will feel appreciated. When you manage to lead for these foundational human drivers, your people will be more fulfilled, collaborative, and productive.

If you don't lead for people's intrinsic motivation, they will at best lack engagement and fulfillment. At worst, they will be unhappy and actively resist. Without a clear understanding of what motivates people, even technically gifted and well-intentioned leaders can unknowingly create an indifferent—or even hostile—work environment.

MSC leadership enables intrinsic motivation. Mindfulness, selflessness, and compassion are universal languages that are understood by everyone. They are innate human qualities in which status and authority do not get in the way of true human connectedness. Mindfulness makes your people feel seen and heard. Selflessness gives your people space to develop and do what they do best. Compassion helps your people feel safe and connected. MSC leadership is the easiest and most effective way to bring out the best in your people.

But just knowing and understanding MSC leadership won't get you far. You must live it, breathe it, and embody it. It must be more than just words or intentions. It must be translated into daily actions and behavior.

The next chapters and their practices will provide you with a clear roadmap for leading your people with MSC leadership.

Good leadership starts by really understanding your people. You must understand what they think, what they feel, and what matters most to them. Only then can you enable their engagement, commitment, and performance. But this can be a challenge. To help facilitate your understanding of others, part 2 opens with a chapter that will deepen your knowledge of human behavior and motivation. Chapter 6 answers the following questions: How can you better understand your people? How can you manage your mind in a way that creates less unconscious bias and helps you see the potential of your people?

The next three chapters in part 2 explore how to apply MSC leadership to the way you lead your people. Chapter 7 looks at how mindfulness helps to create better presence and trust. Chapter 8 explores how selflessness helps to get yourself out of the way and give space to your people. And chapter 9 examines how compassion—not to be confused with empathy—can create more kind, caring work environments.

6

Understand Your People

To lead your people, first you must understand them. You must understand what matters to them, what they think, and what they feel. Only then can you lead them for more meaning, happiness, and connectedness.

But there are challenges. First, we don't see other people as they are, but as distorted through our own perceptions and unconscious biases. And second, they're not what they say and think, but rather what they experience and feel. Take a moment to test your own unconscious biases. Imagine you receive a message that your company has just hired a new chief technology officer.

- According to your first instinct, is it a man or a woman?
- How old is the new CTO?
- What race is the new CTO?
- How tall is the new CTO?
- What car is the new CTO driving?

Did you imagine that the new CTO was a short Brazilian woman in her sixties, driving a big Ford pickup truck? Or did you imagine a tall Caucasian man in his early forties, driving a Tesla?

We all have unconscious biases. Our minds are constantly creating our perception of reality. And as leaders, that is a problem, because we don't see our people as they are but as we are. To lead others effectively, we must learn to open our mind and avoid mental rigidity and judgment.

To meet the second challenge, we must understand emotions and how to skillfully manage them. Effective leadership is not about addressing reports and team members through their rationality, but instead through their emotions. It's only once we learn to connect with emotions—starting with our own—that we have the potential to become truly inspiring and engaging leaders.

This chapter starts with understanding our biases and how we can overcome them by cultivating a beginner's mind. We will then explore our emotional nature and the dark side of responding with empathy. Finally, we will look at how to manage emotions from an MSC leadership mind. But to start, we look at one of the biggest barriers to understanding others: our unconscious biases.

Unconscious Bias

We all have preconceived ideas, judgments, and biases that affect how we see others. Unconscious bias is a challenge for leaders because it makes us reflexively pigeonhole our people and prevents us from seeing their potential and what really motivates them.

See if you can relate to an experience of a senior director whom we worked with at a global financial services company. She was frustrated with a member of her team who often complained about other departments, the weather, missing information, and so forth. As a result, she had formed a perception of him as a chronic complainer—as a glass-is-half-empty pessimist who liked to focus solely on the negative.

One day, during a team meeting, the individual opened a discussion on how information was shared within the team. Before he could finish his sentence, the senior director shook her head, thinking, "Here we go again." She cut him off and asked to move to the next item on the agenda.

Bewildered, the rest of the team stared at her.

The individual had presented a constructive strategy to overcome a significant issue they were all experiencing. But the senior director dismissed

it out of hand. Certain of her preconceived bias, she'd stopped listening as soon as she heard the slightest hint of a complaint. It was only after everyone at the meeting objected that she realized the downside of her own fixed mindset. She'd almost lost a time- and money-saving solution—one that would benefit the entire team—because she couldn't see beyond her initial judgment of this one employee.

Unconscious biases prevent us from seeing what's right in front of us. For example, studies have demonstrated how unconscious biases impact hiring decisions. In one such study, researchers created fictitious resumes to respond to help-wanted ads and randomly assigned either African American— or white-sounding names. Those with white-sounding names received 50 percent more callbacks for interviews and callbacks were more responsive to resume quality for white names than for African American ones.¹

Unconscious bias prevents us from seeing people as they are and from hearing what people are truly saying. They make us see the world as we are, not as it is. This is an important point. In truth, we don't see others and our world as it is. Our minds create our reality. From a neurological perspective, when we see something for the first time, we create a mental image of it. The next time we see the same thing, or something similar, within split seconds the mind brings up the mental image—and that is what we see.² This is called *habitual perception*.

Our mind loves to put people, objects, and ideas into boxes—neat and orderly containers we can understand in an instant. On one hand, this can be very useful. It makes us effective in navigating a complex reality. Life would be overwhelming if we didn't organize and label things. Think about it this way: you wouldn't get much done if every time you saw someone you had to think about who they were and how to relate to them.

On the other hand, this tendency also has a downside. The way you see your people is much less determined by who they are and much more by your history. In other words, your mind—like the senior director's—has programmed you to interpret reality in a certain way. This includes the people who populate your reality. Clearly, such an approach is not beneficial to your ability to truly understand your people. If you see your people in only one way, your expectations of them will be limited.

Consider what unconscious biases you might have about your team members or other colleagues. What fixed ideas are playing in your mind

when you meet with them? Do you tend to listen more attentively to men or to women? Do you listen more attentively to younger or older individuals? Take a moment to think of five of the most important people you interact with, and ask yourself what unconscious biases you have of them. Once you acknowledge and understand these biases, you can begin to see individuals and problems from a clearer perspective—from what we call the “beginner’s mind.” And this allows you to overcome those biases and more effectively engage your people.

The Beginner’s Mind

A beginner’s mind is the ability to avoid the trap of unconscious bias and habitual perception. A beginner’s mind is the ability to see every person and situation—and ourselves—with fresh eyes. To see what is really there instead of what we expect to see.

With mindfulness, we train our mind to see with fresh eyes, moment by moment. We’re literally training ourselves to be fully awake and alert to everything we perceive and not to give in to our unconscious biases.

Having a beginner’s mind is not easy for anyone, but it can be especially difficult for leaders. Victor Ottati, a psychology professor at Loyola University Chicago, has found that people who perceive themselves as experts in a certain field have an enhanced level of close-mindedness.³ Social norms allow experts to adopt a relatively rigid, dogmatic orientation. As leaders, we’re generally perceived as experts, at least in managing our organizations. This makes us more close-minded—which our people readily accept because of hierarchy. It’s a non-virtuous circle.

John Hansen, senior vice president at the LEGO Group, shared with us how, in the early years of his leadership, he was on a learning curve for avoiding unconscious bias. He applied a beginner’s mind to his people, especially in situations where friction seemed to arise between him and them: “I found that the friction was most often due to misunderstandings, rather than actual opposing points of views.” Out of this insight, he developed a habit to cultivate a beginner’s mind to better see things from the other person’s point of view: “I found that the most effective way of getting on the same page was to ask questions. Now, it is a habit for me; whenever there is tension or misunderstandings, I try to keep

asking questions, rather than giving answers, until there is a shared understanding.”

Mindfulness makes us more open-minded.⁴ Mindfulness training helps us develop the ability to view other people with fresh eyes. When we train our minds in mindfulness, we open our minds to seeing and experiencing more of what is going on both internally and externally, which helps us recognize when we’re putting someone in a box. It also raises our awareness of the stories we create in our mind about other people. Of course, it is essential that we make use of and learn from experience, but we need to balance this experience with an open mind. Facts may have changed, circumstances might be new, and people might surprise us.

To better understand our people, curiosity is an essential and powerful tool. When a team member comes into your office and shares a challenge, force yourself to pause and invite curiosity. Ask more questions; provide fewer answers. And when you ask questions, listen closely to the answers, and then ask more questions.

You can also influence how your people behave through the way you treat them. When we relate to others while expecting them to be a certain way, our expectations can shape their behavior and performance.⁵ In other words, if you choose to see your people as high performers, it has the potential to lead to better performance.

Don’t be misled by how obvious or simple this idea sounds. One of the most difficult things for us to do as human beings—especially as smart, successful leaders—is to alter our views about people and situations we have experienced before. Especially in stressful situations, we all know how hard it can be to take the time to ask questions rather than shoot out answers, because the mind is wired to identify and process information based on pattern recognition.⁶ It takes effort for us to challenge ourselves not to assume that we know what someone is about to say or that we have seen that problem before and the answer is the same. But if we don’t, we can miss information and fail to engage our people.

Arne Sorenson, CEO of Marriott, knows that if he is not present and curious about the people he is with, he learns nothing. In addition, it would fail to convey his genuine interest in them. When Arne tours Marriott hotels around the world, presence and curiosity are what help him to truly understand and connect with people in the organization, the overarching

business, and its challenges. Being mindfully curious helps him overcome the CEO bubble described in chapter 4.

Make it a habit to ask at least one meaningful question of anyone you're with. Not only will you know that person better, she or he will also know you care. But being curious and overcoming unconscious biases is only part of the journey toward better understanding others. The next step is understanding emotions.

Understanding Emotions

Emotions drive behavior in the office, often much more than we're aware of. To be more effective leaders, we need to become more attuned to our own emotions as well to those of the people around us. This may come as a surprise, but as leaders we're not as rational as we think, and we're not leading rational beings so much as leading their emotions.

We all want to believe that we're rational beings, but we're not. We think we react rationally, but we don't. And this means we expect our people to behave rationally, but they don't. They can't. That's not how we're wired; that's not how they're wired. Understanding this enables better leadership.

Emotions steer much of our behavior and daily decision making, often in unconscious ways.⁷ For example, across twenty-six countries, the amount of sunshine recorded on a given day and the stock market performance on that day are positively correlated.⁸ If we were truly rational beings, sunshine would not impact how financial markets operate. But it does, and so do many other factors, some that we are aware of but many that we are not.

It's like an iceberg; the majority of the mass is hidden under the surface. And it's this unseen mass that determines what direction the iceberg floats. Similarly, in situations of stress and pressure, people typically act less rationally, because they're driven by emotions such as fear or anxiety.

Paul Zollinger-Read, chief medical officer at the UK-based global healthcare organization Bupa was a medical doctor before joining Bupa. His experience of working with patients, who are stressed and anxious because of their illnesses, has proven very valuable for him in supporting

his employees when they are under pressure. “I have learned that when conflicts or collaboration issues arise in professional teams, it is often really not about the subject matter, but rather the emotional state of the people in the team. When we feel under pressure, we act with less mental clarity, and problems arise.” Because the problem is not the subject matter, but the emotional state of people, Paul focuses on that rather than on the perceived problem. “Giving people’s emotions space, attention, and care, can solve a lot,” he shared with us.

To be clear, emotions are neither good nor bad. Emotions have a purpose and are essential for normal human functioning and socializing. And as leaders, it’s imperative that we understand the role of emotions, so we can connect with our people, not just on strategy and tasks but also on a fundamental human level. It’s only when we create emotional resonance between ourselves and our people that we enable true connectedness. Whether we’re aware of it—and whether we want to accept it or not—true engagement happens when people feel connected on an emotional level. Why? Because emotions are both universal and contagious.

Emotions Are Universal

Paul Ekman, professor emeritus at the University of California, San Francisco, and author of the best-selling book *Emotions Revealed*, is arguably the world’s leading expert on emotions. For years, he traveled the world while researching human emotions across cultures. He concluded that everyone has five universal emotions—enjoyment, fear, disgust, sadness, and anger—regardless of genes, upbringing, or culture.

In other words, when it comes to emotions, we are all alike.

Ekman spent years developing an “atlas” of emotions to support others in being able to understand and navigate them better.⁹ According to this atlas, the five universal emotions can be experienced to different degrees. For instance, anger can move from annoyance to frustration, exasperation, argumentativeness, bitterness, vengefulness, and end in fury. Additionally, our emotions serve an evolutionary purpose. Sadness is a cry for help. Fear makes us flee, freeze, or fight to avoid danger. And anger provides us with the drive to deal with difficult situations.

Ekman also found that our emotions present themselves in our facial expressions through incredibly rapid facial movements. These

facial expressions, called *micro expressions*, last somewhere between one-fifteenth and one-twentieth of a second and are exceedingly difficult to consciously control. But although these expressions may only last an instant, other people pick up on them and are influenced by them consciously or unconsciously. Thus we carry our emotions on our face, no matter how much we may try to conceal them.¹⁰ These emotions are expressed through the forty-three muscles in our face. Enjoyment requires the fewest muscles and anger the most.

Emotions Are Contagious

In the office, our mood impacts the moods of those around us, whether we're aware of it or not. Research has found that people in the same meeting end up sharing moods within two hours, regardless of whether that mood is good or bad.¹¹ It happens because of a group of neurons in our frontal lobe called *mirror neurons*. Mirror neurons are activated when we see others taking action or experiencing a feeling. These actions or feelings are then reflected inside our own brain.¹² When we see someone smile, we're compelled to smile. When a baby laughs, we laugh. In the workplace, mirror neurons connect us through our shared neurological experiences. When one person in the office is criticized unjustly, everyone feels it. When one person receives deserved praise, we all experience it. We're deeply connected in this way, much more than many of us truly appreciate.

As a leader, your emotions have a bigger impact on others than do the emotions of the people you lead. Daniel Goleman, science journalist and author wrote: "The continual interplay of mirror neurons among members of a group creates a kind of emotional soup, with everyone adding his or her flavor. But it's the leader who adds the strongest seasoning. Why? Everyone watches the boss."¹³ It's no wonder that a moody leader creates stressful and fearful environments, while a happy leader makes the team see everything in a more positive light. An upbeat leader has the most positive impact on productivity.¹⁴ That's something to smile about.

Leading by recognizing, and acknowledging people's emotions allows for true connectedness and following. The question is, how do we do it? In many leadership training books and programs, the answer is empathy. But empathy can be detrimental in leadership.

The Dangers of Empathy

To enhance engagement, many leaders are told they need to be more empathetic. Empathy is the skill of understanding and recognizing others' feelings and perspectives. As a leader, that skill is obviously important. You cannot effectively lead someone you don't understand. You can only motivate and influence a person when you know how he or she feels. There are good reasons that experts like Daniel Goleman have hailed empathy as a core competency of good leadership. Empathy increases life satisfaction, emotional intelligence, and self-esteem.¹⁵ People with high empathy have larger and more fulfilling social networks, are more social themselves, volunteer more readily, donate more to charity, and are more likely to help others in need.¹⁶

Empathy is an enduring individual characteristic that's relatively stable over time and across a life span.¹⁷ It can be increased through mindfulness training.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, Amazon's search engine returns more than fifteen hundred books with the word *empathy* in the title, with many of them also including the words *leadership* and *management*. Research into the neurology of empathy, however, provides a more nuanced picture—at least from a leadership perspective. Empathy has some pitfalls that every leader should understand.

Empathy Can Lead to Poor Decisions

Empathy can be a poor moral guide. Yes, you read that correctly. Empathy often helps us do what's right, but it also sometimes motivates us to do what's wrong. Research by Paul Bloom, professor of cognitive science and psychology at Yale University and author of *Against Empathy*, discovered that empathy can distort our judgment.¹⁹ In his study, two groups of people listened to the recording of a terminally ill boy describing his pain. One group was asked to identify with and feel for the boy. The other group was instructed to listen objectively and not engage emotionally. After listening to the recording, each person was asked whether they would move the boy up a prioritized treatment list constructed and managed by medical doctors. In the emotional group, three-quarters of participants decided to move him up the list against the opinion of medical professionals, potentially putting sicker individuals at risk. In the objective group, only one-third of the participants made the same recommendation.

This study demonstrates how empathy triggers our altruistic impulses, resulting in poor judgment that could harm many people for the benefit of one person. As leaders, empathy may cloud our moral judgment. It encourages bias and makes us less effective at making wise decisions.

Empathy Can Hamper Diversity

Studies find that humans empathize more easily with people similar to themselves.²⁰ Even animals that resemble us receive more of our empathy. Just think of a baby seal with its big round eyes, as opposed to a chicken. Which would you more readily kill and eat? They are both living beings with the instincts to avoid danger and death. Yet we discriminate. We're more likely to kill and eat the chicken with its small, cold eyes and feathers. Similarly, we easily empathize with our neighbor whose car is stolen and less easily with the homeless person on the street.

Much in the same way, we unconsciously empathize with colleagues who are similar to us. We tend to offer them better assignments and better positions, all unknowingly. Empathy can also mislead us to hire and promote those like ourselves. It can create an organization that suffers from lack of diverse perspectives limiting problem solving and creativity.

Empathy Can Be Too Narrow

It's hard to truly empathize with more than one or two people at the same time. Try it. Take a moment to have true empathy with two people close to you. Right now. Feel their challenges. Feel what they feel.

Difficult? Maybe impossible.

The mind—or heart—simply can't hold such different emotions at the same time. Empathy for one can be difficult; for two, even more so. As a leader, we often need to consider the different perspectives and concerns of multiple people at the same time. Empathy is simply too constricting to help us effectively navigate multiple perspectives and concerns.

Empathy Can Lead to Distress

Taking on the suffering and troubles of others is tough. For a moment, imagine being an emergency room doctor, treating victims of traffic accidents, violence, and other horrific injuries. You see people hurt, some even dying. You see the pain of relatives losing loved ones. Hour after hour, day after day.

A well-known reaction to this type of situation is empathetic numbness, simply shutting down our emotional reaction to others. As a result of seeing all this carnage, doctors shut down their emotional life. Too much empathy in some situations can lead to distress. A US study found that 60 percent of medical professionals suffer from or have suffered from burnout. A third of them have been affected to the point of having to take a sabbatical from their jobs.²¹

As leaders, there are many times when members of our team will face tough situations. They may lose a big client. They may not get the promotion they wanted. They may get into a conflict with another member of the team. If we take on the disappointment, anger, frustration, or impatience of the people who report to us, we will become exhausted. Empathy in leadership can drain us.

Empathy Is Fleeting

Empathy can make us passionate and fierce—for a moment. Studies have found that this energy often dissipates before we can take any meaningful action.²² Feelings are fickle. Social media offers a great example of this phenomenon. A photo of a young refugee child washed up on a European shore inspires millions of Facebook users to donate millions of dollars on the day the photo appears. But in the days that follow, something else has captured our attention, and the refugee crisis is all but forgotten. Few took long-term action.

Empathy is good, but it must be combined with constructive action to have real impact. Empathy without the skill and discipline to stand back, judge objectively, and act accordingly is worth little. Supporting an employee who has had a death in his family is important, but it's the discipline to check in, repeatedly over time, that makes the real difference.

So if empathy is not the answer to skillfully lead emotional beings, what is? The answer is MSC leadership.

Managing Emotions with MSC Leadership

Emotions are just energy in motion, in our body and our mind. There is nothing inherently good or bad, positive or negative about emotions. When we're mindful, we're aware of these emotions—this energy—as it

plays out during the day. Being aware of these emotions is the first step to managing them.

A natural human reaction to emotions is to either suppress them or act them out. Suppressing our emotions is like trying to hold down the lid on a boiling pot of water. At some point, it will boil over. And in the process, it drains our energy and narrows our perspective. Acting out our emotions, whether aggressively or passive-aggressively, might feel good in the moment, but in the long run, it usually leads to disappointment, regret, or shame. Think of emotional suppression and acting out as being on opposite sides of a seesaw. Putting your weight on either end throws everything off balance.

Because emotions are fueled by our reactions to them, the greater our reaction, the more energy our emotions build. The mindful approach to emotions is to cut short the reactions of suppression or acting out by developing the ability to embrace emotions as they arise. This means looking our emotions in the eye and not reacting to them. Facing our emotions requires courage and mental strength, the courage to endure the discomfort of raw emotion and the strength to stay with this discomfort as long as it lasts.

This in turn requires a healthy level of selflessness and nonattachment to our emotions. If we can distance ourselves from our emotions, we can observe them more objectively. With training, observing our emotions can be like watching a movie: you're not the movie, and the movie is not you. In the same way, your emotion is not you, and you're not the emotion. You may *have* anger, but you *are not* anger. The anger is just a part of your current experience.

Another core reason selflessness can help us better manage our emotions is because we can avoid taking things personally. When something upsetting happens to us, our ego has a natural orientation to look for someone to blame. But although bad things can happen to us, we are the only one who can control our reactions. You cannot make me angry. You can do something that I react to with anger, but ultimately, how I react is not in your control. I alone can choose how to respond.

If we face emotions neutrally and without ego, they lose their grip. It may take seconds or minutes, but it passes. Managing our emotions like this, over time, dismantles their power.

Mark Twain once said, "I have lived through some terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened." Emotions seem so real, so

concrete. In truth, they're like bubbles waiting to be popped. And when we learn to pop them—to manage our own emotions—we're better able to connect with others rather than merely react to their emotions. And instead of having just empathy, we wisely use it to respond with compassion.

Empathy is the tendency to feel others' emotions and take them on as if you were feeling them as well. Compassion is the ability to understand others' perspectives and use that as a catalyst for supportive action.²³ LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner describes the difference as follows: "To show empathy is to see someone suffering under the weight of a great burden and respond by putting the same burden on yourself. Compassion is the act of alleviating the person from the burden." The two have very different outcomes.

Helena Gottschling, chief human resources officer of the Royal Bank of Canada, shared with us how she uses emotional resonance and compassion to support her people. In the recent past, a leader came to her, upset about a decision that had negatively impacted him. He felt that he'd been treated unfairly—and he was very vocal about his concerns.

Helena could have responded by justifying the decision, offering a detailed, rational argument for the change. But as she explained to us, "In that moment, I knew he wouldn't have reacted well to an explanation. He was caught in the grip of his emotions."

So instead, she listened intently to him. She wanted to understand his perspective and give him the space to feel heard. She was careful not to offer any indication that she agreed with his arguments, while still demonstrating a genuine concern for his feelings. After giving him time and space to express his frustration, she invited him to take some time to look at the situation from another point of view. "I asked him to consider other people's perspective, to think about the team expectations. Then I assured him we'd follow up after he had some time to reflect." By resonating with the leader's emotions, Helena was able to diffuse a passionate, overly charged situation. Then, by applying compassion, she was able to provide him with a concrete next step toward trying to actively address the situation.

Emotional resonance and compassion are invaluable for leadership and relating to others, particularly in challenging work situations. Rather than taking on others' emotions and problems, with compassion you can help them diffuse the issues and move on.

When we manage our own emotions and manage to resonate with those we lead, we enhance connections and engagement. In subsequent chapters, we will look in greater detail at how to lead others with mindfulness, selflessness, and compassion.

Quick Tips and Reflections

- ✓ Consider what biases—conscious or unconscious—you may have about people you work with; pick one that you are going to make a conscious effort to overcome.
- ✓ Challenge yourself to be more curious, ask more questions, and consider other possibilities and perspectives; experiment with having more of a beginner's mind in your daily work.
- ✓ Consider what emotions you regularly bring to the work environment; reflect on how these emotions influence your colleagues.
- ✓ The next time you experience a difficult emotion, pause and face it; find the courage to be uncomfortable with the discomfort until you are ready to consider an appropriate response.
- ✓ Consider the downsides of empathy and how you can be more aware of avoiding the traps you might be susceptible to.

Mindful Leadership

We're social beings. We all want to be connected—not just digitally but in fundamentally human ways. Because of this desire, leadership cannot be a transactional activity. It's about creating human connections to strengthen engagement and increase productivity. As leaders, we have a choice. We can utilize the built-in structures of command and control and engrained power dynamics to enhance productivity. Or we can facilitate true connectedness, meaningful work experiences, and human flourishing to enhance engagement, happiness, and, in turn, productivity. The latter is an enormous opportunity we cannot take lightly.

Consider the experience of Narendra Mulani, chief analytics officer, Accenture Analytics. Narendra joined the firm in 1997 with significant experience relative to many of his colleagues, who had been hired directly out of college. At that time, he noted the strong sense of unity and cohesion in the culture. It was as if everyone knew how to operate in the Accenture mindset to the point that people seemed to know what others were thinking.

But now in Accenture—as with most other large organizations—the days of near mind-melding cultural cohesion are long gone. Organizations today are increasingly digital, global, virtual, and in a state of constant change. As a result, human connection and cohesiveness is deteriorating.

Yet, as Narendra told us, “You need something that gives you a common language and allows you to collaborate, trust, and work together, because we all come with such different experiences. It’s made me aware that everyone wants to connect. Even in this digital world, personal connections are everything.”

We all have an innate urge to feel connected and part of a whole. For leaders, this human need to feel connected is critical to better understanding and managing people. In global teams—despite distance, digitalization, and disruption—mindfulness can become the glue that creates true human connections.

Nathan Boaz and Rahul Varma, global leads of Accenture’s leadership development and talent organizations, are implementing global initiatives to help leaders care for their people like family, with a deeper sense of belonging and connectedness. In our conversations with them, they shared their philosophy and strategy. “We are working to develop a truly human experience within the company, where everyone brings their whole self to work. One of the foundations for this is that our leaders show up fully present, attentive and focused, when they engage with their people and teams.”

In this chapter, we’ll share how you can lead your people with mindfulness to build more effective teams and realize increased levels of engagement, trust, and performance.

The Power of Presence

Some years ago, we worked with a country director of a multinational pharmaceutical company. This director was receiving negative 360 reviews on engagement and leadership effectiveness, putting him under pressure from the company’s board. Although he tried to change, nothing seemed to work. His frustration grew, and so he started tracking the time he spent with each of his direct reports. Every time he received feedback that indicated he wasn’t an engaging leader, he would pull out his data and state: “But look how much time I spend with everyone!” He didn’t know what to do.

As a last resort, he got in touch with us.

We started him with ten minutes of daily mindfulness practice and showed him how to apply it to his everyday leadership activities. After a couple of months, people began commenting on a big change in their experience of working with him. They found him more engaging, nicer to work with, and more inspiring. He was surprised and elated by the results. The real surprise? When he pulled out his spreadsheet that tracked time with direct reports, he saw that he was spending on average 21 percent *less* time with his people.

The difference? He was actually *there*.

He came to understand that being in a room with someone is not the same as being present with someone. He recognized that previously when someone came into his office, he would often be occupied with other activities or thinking about other things. Most of the time, when he thought he was listening to others, he was in fact mostly listening to his own inner voice. This reality was obvious to the people he was with and left them feeling unheard and frustrated.

If you're not familiar with your inner voice, it's the one that often provides a running commentary of what you're experiencing. It often says things like, "I wish he would stop talking." Or, "I know what she's going to say next." Or, "I've heard this all before." Or, "I wonder if Joe has responded to my text?"

To truly engage other human beings and create meaningful connections, we need to silence our inner voice and be fully present.

According to a Chinese proverb, presence is the greatest gift you can give another. It is the intensity of attention you pay to other people. And it greatly determines the outcome of an interaction. Mindfulness stands in stark contrast to being scattered and distracted. A lack of mindfulness comes across as impulsiveness and lack of focus. It doesn't leave a positive impression.

Presence is a universal language with a two-way benefit. According to research from Harvard University, you are happier when you are present, and the ones you are with experience a greater sense of well-being.¹ In leadership, being mindfully present is foundational for connectedness, engagement, and performance.

Bain & Company conducted a large research project to pinpoint key traits of effective leadership.² A survey of thousands of employees revealed

thirty-three important characteristics, such as creating compelling objectives, expressing ideas clearly, and being receptive to input. But the one trait that stood out as the most essential was *centeredness*—the ability to be mindfully present in a situation so that you can bring your best traits to bear, moment to moment.

In this light, it is not surprising that a study by Professor Jochen Reb of Singapore Management University found a direct correlation between leaders' mindfulness and the well-being and performance of their people.³ In other words, the more a leader is present with his or her people, the better they will perform.

In our survey, more than a thousand leaders indicated that more presence would be an optimal strategy to overcome such challenges as stress, complexity, information overload, and conflicts. We all know it, but we forget it in the busyness of work.

Like most senior executives, Dominic Barton of McKinsey & Company has a daily schedule of back-to-back meetings. All of these meetings are important, all include complex information, and most require far-reaching decisions. Under these conditions, being present moment to moment, meeting after meeting, is a challenge. But in Dominic's experience, presence is not a choice. It's a necessity. "When I'm with people during the day, I'm doing my best to be focused, I'm present with them," he told us. "Part of this is because I get energy from being with people. But the other part is because if you're not focused, if you're not present, it's discouraging to the other people. They lose motivation. If you're not present, I think you may as well not have the meeting. It can sometimes be difficult to do, but it's always important."

The person currently in front of you does not know what you were dealing with a moment ago, and there's no reason he or she should. It's your responsibility to show up and be fully present to effectively utilize the limited time you have with each person you are with.

Dominic believes being mindfully present requires discipline and skill. It takes discipline to stay on task—not letting yourself be affected by nagging challenges or distracted by mental chatter. And it requires skill to have the mental ability to stay laser focused and present. When he's present throughout his day, he finds it deeply gratifying. Being present becomes the cornerstone to getting the most out of every moment with each person.

Lead with Mindful Presence

Through our many years of working with leaders around the world, we've discovered a number of strategies that answer the question "how to" with respect to leading with mindful presence. The foundation for developing leadership presence is to practice mindfulness, as described in chapters 2 and 3. Mindfulness practice is the mental gym that trains your neural networks for presence.

Just setting an intention to be more present with your people is not enough. Although you may have great intentions, if you have not developed the mental fitness to let go of distractions and overcome the mind's natural tendency to wander, you will have only limited success. After you have cultivated a greater ability to "be here now," here are two ways you can apply mindfulness toward enhancing leadership effectiveness: creating personal "touchpoints" and doing less by being more.

Creating Personal Touchpoints

When Douglas Conant was appointed CEO of Campbell Soup Company in 2001, he identified presence as his guiding leadership principle. After his ten-year turnaround of the company, it received some of the highest employee engagement levels in the *Fortune* 500. In his decade as CEO, Doug developed rituals for physically and psychologically connecting with people at all levels in the company. He did this by explicitly being present. He coined the term *touchpoints* and later wrote a book of the same name. *Touchpoint* is his word for the short moments of presence you can create with each individual you meet at work.

Every morning, Doug allocated a good chunk of his time to walking around the plant, greeting people, and getting to know them. He would memorize their names and the names of their family members. He would take a genuine interest in their lives. He also wrote handwritten letters of gratitude to recognize extraordinary efforts. And when people in the company were having tough times, he wrote them personal messages of encouragement. During his tenure, he sent more than thirty thousand such letters.

To Doug, these behaviors were not just strategies to enhance productivity, they were heartfelt efforts to support his people. He was being truly present, mindfully present. These efforts can't be faked. Faking

presence—and concern for others—is worse than not being present at all. People will know. In fact, if presence is inauthentic, it will negatively impact connectedness, engagement, and performance. Therefore, cultivating the right intentions is important.

Before taking action, reflect for a moment on why being present is important to you. How do you think it would benefit you as a person and as a leader? Be clear about your intentions, and then consider what steps for being mindfully present with your people you can bring into your daily ritual. It doesn't need to be a big initiative. Start simple. Begin with yourself, your behaviors, and those with whom you directly engage. You may even be surprised at the extent of benefits that arise simply from being more fully present.

Do Less—Be More

Individuals rise up through the ranks of organizations often because they are good at solving problems. Although this ability is very useful, always coming up with solutions can get in the way of connecting with, engaging, and empowering others. Gabrielle Thompson, senior vice president at Cisco, has found that when an employee comes to her with a challenge, sometimes it needs a simple solution. But often, the problem just needs to be heard: “Many situations simply need an ear, not action. Oftentimes problems don't need solutions, they need presence and time.” As leaders, having the ability to be fully present and listen with an open mind is often the most powerful way to solve issues.

As noted in chapter 6, in many instances, mindfulness can help us create the emotional resonance needed for a person to feel heard, understood, and valued. As a leader, our role can simply be to create the safe space for people to air their frustrations and process their problems. Through mindful presence, you become the container in which they have space to process the issue, without you stepping in to solve, fix, manipulate, or control the situation. Presence in itself can help resolve issues. This kind of presence not only has the potential to solve problems but can also create greater connection and engagement.

A simple but effective mindful leadership mantra: Do less—Be more.

The above strategies are specifically derived from a mind perspective, but leadership presence is further cultivated and enhanced when it is embodied.