



HONEYBEES
ON COCAINE
WOODPECKERS
WITHOUT
HEADACHES
AND
DRIVING
GOLDFISH

UNCONVENTIONAL LESSONS IN
LEADERSHIP

KORY M. CAPPS

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Kory M. Capps

*From the Fray
Publishing*



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*For my Commanders, SELs
and front-line supervisors.*

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Introduction

THE ELEPHANT AND THE MIRROR

In 2006, researchers placed a giant mirror inside an enclosure with an Asian elephant named Happy. At first, she did what most animals do—she approached cautiously, tested the glass, looked behind it, even tried to touch the “other” elephant.¹

But soon, something remarkable happened. The researchers had placed a white mark on her forehead—only visible in the reflection. Happy paused. Looked. Then she raised her trunk and began to touch the mark. Not the mirror. Her own head.

That small gesture stunned the scientific world. It meant she recognized the reflection as herself—a trait once thought limited to humans, apes, and dolphins. This wasn’t just intelligence. It was self-awareness. The ability to see oneself from the outside, and act on what is seen.

That moment with Happy isn’t just fascinating science—it’s quietly instructive. It reminds us that the foundation of growth begins with recognition. The mirror didn’t give Happy new information; it simply revealed what was already true—but previously unseen.

The same is true in leadership. Good leaders practice the discipline of the mirror. They carve out space to pause, reflect, and ask the hard questions: What do others see in me that I don’t? What patterns have I stopped noticing? Where am I off course—and would I even know if I were?

But self-awareness isn’t enough on its own. Effective leaders don’t just look in the mirror—they hold it up for others. Not as a weapon, but as a gift. They help people see clearly, grow intentionally, and change meaningfully. The elephant and the mirror remind us that true

¹ Joshua M. Plotnik, Frans B. M. De Waal, and Diana Reiss, “Self-Recognition in an Asian Elephant,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 103:45 (2006): 17053–17057.

leadership begins with knowing ourselves—and extends to helping others see themselves as well.

Leadership books often draw from boardrooms, biographies, and battlefields—but what if some of the most insightful lessons are hidden in the most unexpected places?

This book explores exactly that: the strange, the mundane, and the wildly unconventional as a means to uncover fresh perspectives on leadership. From scientific experiments that sound too bizarre to be true to animal behaviors that mirror the complexities of human decision-making, these ideas hold valuable insights—if we're willing to look closely.

Some of the studies and concepts explored in this book sound like they were dreamed up at 2 a.m. in a college dorm. Scientists blasting Skrillex at mosquitoes. Measuring if woodpeckers get headaches. Mapping how London cabbies grow their brains. Teaching a goldfish to drive. Giving bees cocaine—for science. And yes, even contemplating the logical implications of unicorns.

They're ridiculous. They're real. And they all made it into this book for a reason. Leadership wisdom doesn't always wear a suit. Sometimes it has wings, fins, feathers—or a trunk.

So, let's step outside the usual leadership frameworks and dive into the unexpected. We might just find that the best leadership lessons are hiding in the most unconventional places.



Chapter 1

SKY DIVING AND TREAD MILLS

You can fake a smile. You can steady your voice. But your sweat doesn't lie. In a groundbreaking study published in *Nature Neuroscience*, researchers discovered that the body broadcasts emotional distress through chemical signals in sweat—signals we can't consciously control, and others can't consciously ignore.²

To test this, the researchers collected sweat samples from two groups of participants. The first group was experiencing extreme psychological stress as they prepared for their first-ever tandem skydive. The second group, acting as a control, ran on a treadmill at an intensity designed to induce physical exertion but not emotional distress.

The sweat samples were then presented to a separate group of participants, who smelled them while undergoing functional MRI scans to monitor their brain activity. The results were striking.

When exposed to the skydivers' sweat, participants exhibited increased activation in the amygdala, the region of the brain responsible for processing fear and emotional responses. When exposed to the treadmill runners' sweat, there was no such reaction, even though both

² L. R. Mujica-Parodi, E. K. Strey, L. Frederick, G. Savoy, C. Cox, M. Botanov, C. Tolkunov, C. Rubin, and G. Weber, "Chemosensory Cues to Conspecific Emotional Stress Activate Amygdala in Humans," *Nature Neuroscience* 12:10 (2009): 1228–1229.

types of sweat contained the same basic chemical composition from exertion. This indicated that there is something unique about fear-induced sweat—a chemical signature that, even without conscious awareness, triggers a fear response in those around us.

In other words, people were absorbing the stress of the skydivers without realizing it. The brain, on a deep and unconscious level, responds to the emotions of others—even when no words are spoken.

What This Means for Leadership and Influence

This study has major implications for leadership, teamwork, and human connection. It confirms something we already sense intuitively: stress, fear, and anxiety are contagious—even in ways we don't fully understand.

A leader who walks into a room with tension and anxiety doesn't have to say a word—people will feel it. A team that operates in a climate of stress and uncertainty will unknowingly pass that stress along to one another, reinforcing a cycle of worry and tension.

Conversely, this also means that calmness, confidence, and resilience are just as contagious. Just as stress can subtly spread from person to person, so can stability, composure, and reassurance.

How Leaders Can Use This Knowledge

If leaders want to create environments where people perform well, think clearly, and feel supported, they must be conscious of what they bring into the space. Here's how:

- *Manage Your Own State First* – If stress is contagious, then self-regulation is a leadership responsibility. Before stepping into a room, meeting, or decision-making moment, take a deep breath, assess your emotional state, and adjust accordingly.
- *Model Calm Under Pressure* – Just like skydivers' sweat triggered fear in others, a leader who remains steady in chaos provides a stabilizing effect. Your team will unconsciously take their cues from you.
- *Foster an Emotionally Aware Culture* – Encourage an environment where stress isn't suppressed but addressed. People should feel safe to name their challenges and have tools to manage them before they spiral into a culture-wide problem.

The most important takeaway from this study is that we are influencing those around us, even when we think we aren't. Stress, fear, and emotional tension are not just personal experiences—they have social consequences.

But if stress can spread, so can resilience. Self-aware leaders are those who recognize that their presence, demeanor, and emotional state don't just affect themselves—they set the tone for everyone around them.



Chapter 2

FLIGHT 1549: THE MIRACLE THAT WASN'T

It was a Thursday in the middle of January, 2009. Just an ordinary day for Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger. On his way to the plane, he bought an \$8 tuna sandwich, planning to eat it at cruising altitude. After stashing it in the cockpit, he and his crew prepared for takeoff. Five minutes and twenty seconds after leaving the ground, however, everything changed.

A flock of geese collided with both engines, rendering them useless. The plane, carrying 150 passengers and five crew members, became an unpowered glider over one of the most densely populated regions of the United States. Capt. Sully made a split-second decision to attempt a water landing in the Hudson River—a feat almost unheard of in commercial aviation.

Minutes later, he successfully brought the plane down, saving every single person on board. The media dubbed it the "Miracle on the Hudson." The public celebrated Sully as a hero. But for Sully, he saw it differently. "It was no miracle," he said. "One way to look at it is that for 42 years, I've been making small, regular deposits in this bank of experience: education and training. And on January 15, the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal."

The story of Flight 1549 is famous, but the backstory? That's the most remarkable part of this story—the moment where the miracle is

deconstructed, revealing the preparation that made flawless execution possible in that fateful moment.³

Rewinding to 1958

The seeds of Sully's success were planted long before that momentous day. As a six-year-old, he was already obsessed with flight, building model planes with an almost obsessive curiosity. By eleven, he was devouring every book and article on aviation he could find.

At sixteen, Sully took his first flying lesson. By twenty-two, he had graduated from the United States Air Force Academy as a member of the Class of 1973. From there, he flew fighter jets for seven years in the Air Force before transitioning to commercial aviation.

But his journey wasn't just about logging flight hours. Throughout his career, Sully immersed himself in the science and psychology of aviation. He joined accident investigation teams, analyzed past disasters, and poured himself into studying ways to make air travel safer. Water landings, in particular, fascinated him. He pored over every case study, every shred of research he could find, becoming the subject matter expert in the field.

By the time Sully was piloting Flight 1549, he had been flying for 42 years. He had safely flown over 20,000 hours and carried more than a million passengers. And, though he could never have predicted it, all those years of preparation led him to that critical moment over the Hudson.

The Power of Preparation

Sully's reflection on that day demonstrates that greatness is rarely spontaneous. What looked like a "miracle" to the world was the result of decades of intentional preparation. Sully's story captures the essence of readiness perfectly: it's about making consistent, small deposits in the bank of experience and training, so that when life demands a large withdrawal, you're prepared to deliver.

³ C.B. Sullenberger and J. Zaslow, *Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters* (New York: William Morrow, 2009). W. Langewiesche, *Fly by Wire: The Geese, the Glide, the Miracle on the Hudson* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009). National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), *Loss of Thrust in Both Engines After Encountering a Flock of Birds and Subsequent Ditching on the Hudson River, US Airways Flight 1549, Airbus A320-214, N106US, Weehawken, New Jersey, January 15, 2009*, NTSB/AAR-10/03, 2010.

But preparation doesn't stop at the professional level. Sully's story reminds us that readiness extends into every aspect of life—mental, spiritual, and relational. Those daily investments in your mindset, your character, and your relationships? They're the foundation that supports you when life's turbulence comes.

The Role of Humility and Curiosity

Sully wasn't just prepared because of his training. He was prepared because he embraced humility. He knew the gaps in his knowledge and worked tirelessly to fill them. He didn't assume he already knew everything about flying, nor did he rely on past experience alone.

Curiosity was another hallmark of Sully's approach. He sought out new information, challenged himself to learn more, and never stopped asking questions. This combination of humility and curiosity became a defining feature of his career—and, ultimately, saved lives.

Sully himself reflected on the importance of both principles: “Because a commercial career can feel routine, I truly didn't think I'd face a situation as dire as Flight 1549. On reflection, however, I realize this: Though I never saw battle, I spent years training hard, paying close attention, demanding a great deal of myself, and maintaining a constant readiness. I survived my own close calls and carefully observed the fatal mistakes made by other pilots. That preparation did not go to waste. At age fifty-seven, I was able to call upon these earlier lessons, and in doing so, answer the questions I'd had about myself.”

Making Your Own Deposits

Sully's story challenges us to reflect on our own lives. Are we making consistent deposits in the "bank of experience"? Are we preparing ourselves—mentally, emotionally, and professionally—for the challenges ahead?

Readiness isn't about predicting the future. It's about equipping yourself to handle whatever the future brings. That means investing in your skills, nurturing your relationships, and cultivating resilience.

It's also worth noting that preparation isn't flashy. For Sully, it looked like countless hours of reading, training, and studying—none of which drew public attention at the time. But when the moment came, those seemingly mundane investments paid off in a life-saving way.



Chapter 3

DO WOODPECKER'S GET HEADACHES?

The backyard hummed with familiar sounds—rustling palms, chattering mockingbirds—until a sharp, rhythmic tapping cut through. Tap, tap, tap. It was relentless, echoing through the trees behind my home in Tampa, Florida. At first, I thought it was distant construction, but as the sound persisted, curiosity took over. After spotting the bright red and black bird outside, a quick Google search led me to the Pileated Woodpecker, a marvel of biology and resilience—one that even modern technology struggles to replicate. Let me explain.

The Pileated Woodpecker doesn't just hammer at trees. It slams its beak into solid wood with forces up to 1,400 times the pull of gravity—the equivalent of going from 26,000 miles per hour to a complete stop. And here's the astonishing part: it does this up to 12,000 times a day, with no headaches or apparent signs of brain damage. In fact, scientists have spent decades studying the woodpecker, hoping to uncover its secrets and apply them to human engineering—everything from car safety systems to better helmets for athletes.⁴

The key lies in its unique design, a literal crash course in nature's engineering:

⁴ L.J. Gibson, "Woodpecker Pecking: How Woodpeckers Avoid Brain Injury." *Journal of Zoology* 270:3 (2006): 462–465.

- Its thick, spongy skull functions like a shock-absorbing football helmet, dissipating the energy of each strike—much like the shocks on a bike that let you roll smoothly over bumps.
- Its strong neck and jaw muscles contract milliseconds before impact, creating a braced, cushioned structure.
- Its strikes are perfectly perpendicular, eliminating damaging torsion forces on the body.
- A super-thick third eyelid slams shut just before impact, protecting its eyes from debris and, astonishingly, stopping its eyeballs from popping out of their sockets.
- But the true showstopper? Its tongue. The woodpecker’s long, flexible tongue wraps around its skull and brain, acting as a natural seatbelt that keeps everything secure upon impact.⁵

Each of these adaptations works in harmony, transforming the woodpecker into a living anti-shock machine, capable of absorbing 99.7% of the impact from each strike. But here’s the kicker—these adaptations aren’t just about brute force. They also demonstrate balance. The woodpecker doesn’t hammer endlessly. The repeated impacts generate heat inside its head, so the bird knows when to pause, cooling down before continuing its work.⁶

The woodpecker isn’t just a wonder of nature—it’s a blueprint for resilience and high-impact leadership. In both nature and leadership, the greatest successes don’t come from avoiding pressure but from building the right systems to withstand and thrive under it. The woodpecker’s design isn’t just about brute force; it’s about absorbing impact efficiently, knowing when to push forward, and when to pause. So how does this apply to real-world leadership and personal growth?

⁵ L. Wang, J.T.M. Cheung, F. Pu, D. Li, M. Zhang, "Why Do Woodpeckers Resist Head Impact Injury: A Biomechanical Investigation," *PLOS ONE* 6:10, (2011). Ivan R. Schwab and Philip R.A. May, "Woodpecker Head Injury Prevention: A Biomechanical Analysis," *British Journal of Ophthalmology* 91, no. 12 (2007): 1515–1517. Schwab and May’s article received the annual Ig Nobel Prize—an award that celebrates research both humorous and thought-provoking.

⁶ S. Hauserman, "Why Don't Woodpeckers Get Headaches?" *Ask A Biologist*, Arizona State University (2012).

Design Your Shock Absorbers – Every high-performing leader, athlete, or professional faces stress, setbacks, and high-impact moments. The ones who thrive aren't the ones who avoid challenges, but those who build shock-absorbing habits to minimize damage. Just as the woodpecker's skull dissipates force, we need systems—mentors, routines, self-discipline, and recovery strategies—that help us absorb life's inevitable collisions. If you lack these, the impact will hit harder.

Brace for the Blow, Don't Flinch – When the woodpecker strikes, its muscles contract before impact, bracing for the force. Wise leaders do the same. Before difficult conversations, before high-pressure decisions, before stepping into unknown territory—they prepare mentally and structurally for what's coming. Instead of reacting in the moment, they anticipate, brace, and meet challenges head-on.

Know When to Rest – The woodpecker works relentlessly, but it also knows when to pause. The heat generated from thousands of impacts could be damaging, so it instinctively stops to cool down. High performers in business, athletics, and leadership must follow the same principle. Relentless effort without recovery leads to burnout. The best don't just grind—they balance intensity with intentional rest, allowing them to sustain peak performance over time.

The woodpecker doesn't avoid the collision—it is built for it. We can strive for the same. Whether in leadership, personal challenges, or professional ambition, impact is inevitable. The question isn't whether we'll face pressure, tragedy, setbacks, and high-stakes moments—it's whether we've built the right systems to absorb them without breaking.

Leaders who prepare like the woodpecker don't crumble under force. They strike, they absorb, they adapt, and they keep going.



Chapter 4

THANKING VOLCANOES

Volcanoes don't usually get thanked in academic articles. Peer reviewers, mentors, maybe even someone's dog—but a volcano? That's rare. Yet in *Resilience Thinking: Integrating Resilience, Adaptability and Transformability*, the authors tip their hat to an Icelandic volcano.⁷

“We thank the volcano Eyjafjallajökull for reminding us of what is important in life and for bringing us together in Stockholm in April 2010 when all flights were grounded.”

At first glance, this seems like an odd inclusion. Eyjafjallajökull was no small inconvenience—its eruption disrupted air travel across Europe, stranding thousands. Conferences were canceled, travel plans ruined, and daily life was thrown into chaos.

And yet, here was a research team, pausing to acknowledge that this unplanned disruption actually led to something meaningful—bringing them together in ways they hadn't anticipated. Without the volcano, this research paper, or at least the way it came together, might not have existed. It's a striking reminder of how the very things that seem to disrupt our lives might also be shaping us in ways we can't yet see.

⁷ Carl Folke, Stephen R. Carpenter, Brian Walker, Marten Scheffer, Terry Chapin, and Johan Rockström, “Resilience Thinking: Integrating Resilience, Adaptability and Transformability,” *Ecology and Society* 15:4 (2010): 20.

The Overlooked Architects of Our Lives

How often do we pause to recognize the unexpected forces—sometimes even disasters—that have shaped who we are? A failed job opportunity that forced us into something better. A painful relationship that taught us resilience and self-worth. An unforeseen setback that redirected our path toward something richer.

We tend to thank the obvious things—the mentors, the opportunities, the successes. But what about the hidden architects of our growth? What about the difficulties that, though painful, set the conditions for something new?

Gratitude has a way of reframing what we think of as good and bad. It forces us to look at disruption, discomfort, and even disaster through a different lens. Maybe what seemed like a loss was actually a pivot. Maybe what looked like an obstacle was actually a redirection.

Seeing the Volcanoes in Your Organization

The lesson here isn't just personal. It has profound implications for leadership. Every leader faces their own Eyjafjallajökull—an unplanned crisis, an organizational shake-up, an unexpected obstacle. Teams experience disruptions that feel like setbacks—budget cuts, key personnel losses, unforeseen industry shifts. Entire organizations get grounded by metaphorical ash clouds—plans halted; visions delayed.

But what if the very thing we resent is setting the conditions for something better? Humble leaders don't just endure setbacks—they mine them for value. They ask: What unexpected opportunities are being created in this disruption? How is this crisis forcing us to rethink, adapt, or innovate? What might we look back on in five years and be strangely grateful for?

Learning to Thank Your Volcanoes

The next time you face something that disrupts your life, pause before you curse it. Maybe it's not just an inconvenience. Maybe it's the very thing forcing you toward something better. Transformation often comes from the least expected places. And sometimes, the wisest thing we can do is stop and thank the volcano.



Chapter 5

UNEXPECTED LEGACY

Michelangelo never wanted to paint the Sistine Chapel. In fact, he actively resisted it. Michelangelo Buonarroti, celebrated today as one of history's greatest artists and sculptors felt that painting was not his forte and was reluctant to undertake such a vast fresco project. Fresco, being a technique in which paint is applied to freshly laid wet plaster, allows the artwork to become a permanent part of the wall itself. In addition, he suspected that his rivals had suggested him for the commission to see him fail, given his limited experience with frescoes.

Despite his protests, Pope Julius II insisted, leaving Michelangelo with little choice but to accept. He signed the contract on May 8, 1508. And rather than dragging his feet or half-heartedly complying, he attacked the work with everything he had—pouring four years of his life into what is now considered one of the greatest artistic achievements in history.⁸ And that raises an interesting thought: What if the legacy we leave isn't the one we would have chosen?

⁸ Andrew Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009).

The Myth of the Perfect Opportunity

We like to believe that legacy is something we intentionally craft, that our greatest impact will come from the things we feel called to, prepared for, or inspired by. But history tells a different story.

Some of the most significant contributions have come from assignments people never wanted. Some of the greatest breakthroughs were the result of people embracing what they initially resisted. Some of the most enduring legacies were born out of a “voluntold” moment.

Michelangelo’s ceiling wasn’t his dream project. But his willingness to engage fully in the work given to him—rather than the work he would have chosen—changed history.

What If Your Legacy Is Hiding in the Work You Didn’t Ask For?

Most of us will face moments where we are handed responsibilities we didn’t sign up for. A task that feels beneath us. A job that seems misaligned with our strengths. A challenge that disrupts our plans.

The temptation is to resist. To give the bare minimum. To treat it like an interruption rather than an opportunity. But what if this is the thing that will shape you most? What if the task you’re avoiding is the thing that will refine your skill? What if the assignment you didn’t want is the one that will build your credibility? What if the responsibility you resisted is where your deepest impact will be found?

Embracing the Tasks We Didn’t Choose

Michelangelo could have done the job resentfully. He could have approached it with just enough effort to avoid punishment. Instead, he leaned in. And because he did, the world was left with something breathtaking.

The same choice is in front of us. We can resent the unexpected tasks. Or we can engage them with excellence. Because the truth is, legacy isn’t just about what we choose to do—it’s about how we choose to do what is given to us.

Whether you chose the task or not, give it everything you have. In the end, the things we resist may just be the things that define us most. Legacy is often unexpected. But how we show up for it? That part is up to us.



Chapter 6

BOREDOM IS NOT REAL

It starts before the moment even arrives. The meeting you assume will be a waste of time. The conversation you predict will go badly. The event you're convinced will be dull before you even step through the door. Long before reality unfolds, the story is already written in your mind.

A study published in the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* explored this phenomenon and found that anticipating boredom actually makes us more likely to experience it. In their research, students who expected a lecture to be uninteresting felt significantly more disengaged and dissatisfied, even when exposed to the same material as others who entered with an open mind.⁹

The study states: "When people expect to be bored, they engage less with their environment, and as a result, their actual experience aligns with their expectations." In other words, the boredom wasn't caused by

⁹ Erin C. Westgate, Timothy D. Wilson, and Daniel T. Gilbert, "Boredom in the Classroom: When Boredom Is and Is Not a Problem," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 87:3 (2017): 456–477. Katy Tam et al., "Boredom Begets Boredom: An Experience Sampling Study on the Impact of Teacher Boredom on Student Boredom and Motivation," *Educational Psychology* 43:2 (2023): 123–135. This Ig Nobel award winning article reveals the relational nature of boredom, showing that teacher boredom is also a predictor of student boredom and reduced motivation.

the lecture itself—it was created by the mindset the students carried into the room.

This isn't just about boredom. It's about how we unconsciously shape our experiences before they even happen. The way we frame a moment in our minds determines how we will feel about it, how we will engage with it, and whether we will find success or failure.

A leader who expects resistance walks into a room braced for battle. Their tone shifts, their posture stiffens, and their words carry an edge of defensiveness. And just like that, they create the very pushback they feared. A person who assumes an idea won't work might hesitate just enough to undermine its success. Someone convinced that rejection is inevitable may withdraw before they even give the opportunity a real chance. We are not just passive observers of reality—we are participants in shaping it, often before we realize what we're doing.

The hardest part about negative anticipation is that it disguises itself as wisdom. It whispers that we're being realistic, protecting ourselves, preparing for disappointment. But more often than not, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, not because life is predictable, but because we unconsciously find what we're looking for.

What if, instead of walking into moments already convinced of how they will go, we entered them with a posture of curiosity? What if we stopped deciding ahead of time that things will be tedious, pointless, or doomed to fail? Westgate and her colleagues' research suggest that simply adjusting our mindset—choosing to engage rather than expect disengagement—can significantly alter our experience.

Expectation is powerful enough to change the way we experience reality. If we're not careful, we don't just live our lives—we pre-decide them. The real question is, what kind of story are we writing before we've even lived it.



Chapter 7

THE MIRROR OF GUILT

If guilt were a currency, good leaders would be rich. Not because they seek it, but because they feel the weight of responsibility deeply. Guilt is often framed as something to avoid, something that drags us down, an emotional tax on decisions that cannot be undone. But what if, instead of seeing guilt as a liability, we understood it as a measure of conscience?

Tom Hodgkinson suggests that guilt isn't just a burden—it's a way we "express to others that we are a person of good conscience." That changes the conversation entirely. If guilt is evidence of moral awareness, then feeling its weight isn't a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength. It's proof that we care, that our leadership is not indifferent, that we still wrestle with the weight of our decisions.¹⁰ And that is a good thing.

The Hidden Value of Guilt

Most leadership books will tell you to shake off guilt quickly, to press forward, to avoid dwelling on past mistakes. And while it's true that guilt can be paralyzing if left unchecked, there is also an important reality hidden within it: Guilt is evidence that you still hold yourself

¹⁰ Tom Hodgkinson, *How to Be Free* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006). Herant Katchadourian, *Guilt: The Bite of Conscience* (Stanford: Stanford General Books, 2009).

accountable. It means you have a moral compass that still registers direction. It means you recognize when something could have been done differently.

And those are not signs of failure; they are signs of a leader who is still awake, still aware, still shaping themselves as they shape the people around them. The concern is never the presence of guilt—it's the absence of it.

When leaders stop agonizing over the weight of their decisions, when they stop feeling the sting of regret or the tension of moral conflict, that's when real danger sets in. Indifference is a far greater threat to leadership than guilt ever will be.

Sitting with Guilt: A Leadership Exercise

The next time guilt pulls you into an alleyway for a beatdown, don't just brace for impact. Instead, take a seat. Ask it questions. Let it be your teacher rather than tormentor.

1. *What does this guilt reveal about my values?*
 - If you feel guilt, it means something in your internal framework is being triggered. What principle is being challenged? Is it integrity? Fairness? Responsibility?
2. *Is this guilt productive or punitive?*
 - Some guilt is useful—it calls us to make amends, to do better, to grow. Other guilt is just self-inflicted punishment for things we can't change. Learn to distinguish between the two.
3. *What action can I take from this feeling?*
 - Leadership is not about perfection, but about response. If guilt is pointing to something that can be repaired, take the step. If it's pointing to something unchangeable, let it inform how you lead moving forward.

Guilt, at its best, is not an anchor—it's a mirror. It reflects back to us who we are and what we value. The strongest leaders are not those who never feel guilt but those who know what to do with it.



Chapter 8

BIG-BRAINED TAXI DRIVERS

London taxi drivers don't just learn the city—they become it. A landmark study found that these drivers, after years of memorizing London's intricate maze of streets, develop physically larger posterior hippocampi—the part of the brain responsible for spatial navigation and memory. The longer they drive, the more pronounced the growth. Their brains literally reshape themselves to meet the demands placed upon them.¹¹

It's a striking example of something easy to forget: the brain is not fixed. It changes in response to what we do, what we focus on, and what we repeatedly ask of it. And if that's true, then the question isn't just what do we know? but what are we shaping?

Growth Follows Attention

The taxi drivers didn't just wake up one day with a superior sense of direction. They built it, turn by turn, repetition by repetition. The brain strengthens what we use and lets go of what we neglect. The skills we

¹¹ Eleanor A. Maguire, David G. Gadian, Ingrid S. Johnsrude, Catriona D. Good, John Ashburner, Richard S. J. Frackowiak, and Christopher D. Frith, "Navigation-Related Structural Change in the Hippocampi of Taxi Drivers," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 97:8 (April, 2000): 4398–4403. This article was also a recipient of the annual Ig Nobel Prize.

practice, the thoughts we dwell on, the habits we repeat—these are the things that take up space in our minds.

If we're frustrated by where we are, the first place to look is where our attention is going. Are we reinforcing what we want to grow? Or are we unintentionally deepening patterns that hold us back?

Mastery Requires Restructuring

As the posterior hippocampus of the taxi drivers expanded, the anterior hippocampus became smaller. This wasn't just about gaining something—it was about reallocating resources. The brain made room for what mattered most.

Real growth often requires the same. To develop expertise, something else has to shift. To master a new skill, we may have to unlearn old patterns. To prioritize what's most important, we have to let go of what's merely familiar. Expansion is not just about adding—it's about reshaping.

Deep Work Changes Us

The study's findings highlight that sustained effort over time doesn't just improve our abilities—it alters us. The way we think, the way we solve problems, even the physical structure of our brains is shaped by what we consistently engage with.

This is both freeing and sobering. It means that no skill is truly beyond us if we're willing to invest deeply. But it also means that if we aren't intentional, our minds will be shaped passively by whatever we allow to dominate our time and thoughts.

Who We Become Is a Choice

The taxi drivers didn't stumble into their brain growth by accident. They submitted to a rigorous process—years of training, testing, and refining their mental maps. Their growth was a direct result of deliberate effort.

We may not all be learning to navigate London, but we are all moving through life in a way that shapes us. The challenge isn't just to passively experience things but to actively decide what kind of brain we are building. Are we developing clarity, depth, and wisdom? Or are we reinforcing distraction, surface-level thinking, and reactionary habits?

The Brain We Build Is the Life We Live

The taxi drivers' story is remarkable not just because their brains changed, but because it shows us something universal—our minds will adapt to whatever we consistently do.

If we want to grow in a certain area, we must be willing to put in the time, embrace the process, and trust that transformation will follow. In the end, who we become isn't just about what we know. It's about what we've trained ourselves to become.



Chapter 9

DUBSTEP AND MOSQUITOES

We usually think of good leadership as a calming force—steady, composed, in control. The kind of leader who quiets the chaos and keeps everything in rhythm. But sometimes, the most powerful leadership move isn't to smooth things over. It's to change the frequency entirely.

In 2019, researchers discovered something bizarre: when exposed to Skrillex's dubstep track "*Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites*," *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes—the aggressive, disease-spreading kind of nuisance—became noticeably disoriented.¹²

They stopped feeding. Mating behavior broke down. Their instincts—normally precise and automatic—got scrambled. What they couldn't shake through instinct, biology, or repetition... they lost to noise. It wasn't destruction. It was disruption. And that's the leadership takeaway tucked inside this strange study—and a strategy I'll be bringing along on my next camping trip.

Every team, organization, or culture develops patterns—habits, assumptions, rhythms that hum just beneath the surface. Some are productive. Others are not. Not loud enough to call a meeting about.

¹² Giovanni Benelli, Valentina Romano, Beniamino Caputo, Fulvio Danieli, and Francesco Messina, "Mosquitoes Avoid Dubstep: Sound Disrupts *Aedes aegypti* Host-Seeking and Mating," *Acta Tropica* 193 (March, 2019): 146–152.

Not bad enough to spark immediate action. But they slowly drain focus, sap energy, and dull momentum.

You don't solve those problems by keeping the peace. You solve them by interrupting the pattern. That's what wise leaders understand. They know when stability is helpful—and when it's just enabling stagnation. They sense when things aren't broken... but aren't growing either.

And in those moments, they do something others won't: they drop the metaphorical bass. They introduce dissonance—just enough to shake loose what needs to change. Because not all change begins with a bold vision or sweeping speech. Sometimes it starts with a note no one expects. A frequency that shifts the air. A move that breaks the trance.

The goal isn't noise for noise's sake. The goal is clarity. And sometimes, the most strategic thing a leader can do...is play the one sound that cuts through everything else.



Chapter 10

GREATNESS LOOKS LIKE TUESDAY

In the summer of 2016, the world watched as swimmer Katie Ledecky redefined dominance in the pool. Race after race, she didn't just win—she destroyed. In one world-record performance, the next swimmer touched the wall seventeen seconds after her. If you saw it on television, she was so far ahead that no other swimmers were in the frame—it looked as if she were swimming alone.

That level of dominance didn't fade. In the years that followed, Ledecky added eight more Olympic medals between the 2020 and 2024 Games, bringing her career total to fourteen.

To many, it didn't seem fair. It didn't seem human. It felt like she had discovered some secret code to success. Naturally, the question followed: What's your secret? Ledecky's answer was disarmingly simple: "The secret to my success is no secret."

After the 2016 Games, a swimming website published an article titled, "*40 Must-Do Katie Ledecky Training Secrets*." Her coach replied with a tweet that said it all: "Tip #41: Just do the damn work."¹³

And there it is—the truth no one wants to hear. The path to excellence isn't glamorous. It isn't hidden behind magic formulas or motivational slogans. It isn't exclusive to a chosen few. It looks like a

¹³ Olivier Poirier-Leroy, "40 Must-Do Katie Ledecky Training Secrets," *Swimming Science*, (September, 2016).

Tuesday—just another ordinary day. The road to greatness is paved with repetition, discipline, and the willingness to show up every day, even when no one is watching.

The Myth of Extraordinary Talent

There's a persistent illusion about greatness. We watch someone at the peak of their craft—a world-class athlete, a groundbreaking artist, an industry leader—and we assume they have something the rest of us don't. Natural ability. Raw genius. A secret strategy that separates them from the rest of us.

But sociologist Daniel Chambliss shattered that myth in his 1989 study *The Mundanity of Excellence*, which examined Olympic swimmers and what truly made them elite. His conclusion? “Excellence is accomplished through practicing ordinary actions consistently and carefully for a long period of time—the compound effect of this is excellence.” Not superhuman ability. Not divine intervention. Not a rare, one-in-a-million gift. Just ordinary actions, done with precision and repetition, over and over again. Greatness isn't unreachable. It's just boring.¹⁴

Why We Resist the Mundane

There's something deeply unsatisfying about this answer. We want excellence to be dramatic. We want a breakthrough moment, a revolutionary insight, a defining shift that transforms everything overnight. We don't want to hear that it's the 5 a.m. practices. The hundreds of laps. The refining of technique over years. The grueling, repetitive work that isn't exciting or inspiring.

We assume greatness must be wrapped in something dazzling because we refuse to believe that something extraordinary could be built from something so painfully ordinary. But that's exactly the point. The difference between average and world-class isn't found in a single, massive leap—it's in the accumulation of thousands of small, intentional steps.

The Compound Effect of the Mundane

Excellence is not one big thing; it is a thousand small things, done well, done often, and done consistently. It's the leader who refines their

¹⁴ Daniel F. Chambliss, “The Mundanity of Excellence: An Ethnographic Report on Stratification and Olympic Swimmers,” *Sociological Theory* 7:1 (1989): 70–86.

communication skills not in the big moments, but in the daily conversations that no one sees. It's the musician who doesn't wait for inspiration but drills scales for hours. It's the writer who doesn't chase flashes of brilliance but simply sits down and writes—every single day.

The problem is that we crave results without process. We want the reward without the repetition. We admire the product but resist the work it takes to build it. And so, when we see someone like Katie Ledecky effortlessly outpacing her competition, we assume there must be something behind the scenes—something beyond just doing the work. But there isn't. There is no secret. There is only doing the work.

Excellence is Not a Feeling—It's a Habit

The most liberating realization about greatness is that it isn't reserved for the few. It is available to anyone willing to embrace the mundane. If you can commit to the ordinary, you can achieve the extraordinary. If you can be consistent with what others overlook, you can create what others never will. Because in the end, excellence is never out of reach. It's just a question of whether or not we're willing to keep reaching for it.



Chapter 11

NOT WAITING AROUND FOR TIME TRAVEL

There's something irresistible about the idea of time travel. The chance to undo mistakes, to relive a perfect day, to jump ahead and see how it all turns out. We imagine a future where people might crack the code of time itself—where someone from centuries ahead could step into our present, equipped with knowledge we can't yet grasp.

But a 2014 study put that idea to the test, searching the vast archives of the internet for traces of time travelers. The researchers scoured old tweets, search queries, and digital footprints, looking for impossible knowledge—mentions of “Comet ISON” or “Pope Francis” before either existed in public consciousness. They even issued a challenge, inviting time travelers to send messages back in time, to prove that the future had already arrived.¹⁵

No one came. No unexplained messages. No early predictions. No evidence that anyone from the future was reaching back to touch this moment. And maybe that tells us something.

This Moment Won't Come Again

¹⁵ Robert J. Nemiroff and Teresa Wilson, “Searching the Internet for Evidence of Time Travelers,” *The Winnower* (2014).

If time travelers exist, they aren't using their power to return to this day, this hour, this decision. Whatever happens now—whatever we do with this moment—will stand. We won't get to loop back and make a different choice. There's no version of us waiting in the future, ready to fix what we let slip away. The time we have is the time we have.

If the Future Could Send Us a Message

Maybe no one tweeted from the future because the future is waiting on us. Maybe what matters isn't knowing what comes next, but choosing to shape it. Every moment we hesitate, every opportunity we postpone, every dream we defer—it all adds up to a future that will one day be set in stone. But right now? Right now, we're still holding the pen.

Don't Wait for Another Chance That May Never Come

If a time traveler could appear and whisper in our ear, maybe they wouldn't give us lottery numbers or stock tips. Maybe they'd just say, "Pay attention. This is it. Right here. Right now." Because at some point, the future will become the past. The choices we could have made will harden into the choices we did make. And there won't be a way to come back and tell ourselves to be bolder, kinder, braver.

This Is the Only Timeline We Get

The study didn't prove that time travel is impossible. But it did prove something else: No one from the future is coming to make this moment count for us. That part is up to us. So, if there's a change to make, a risk to take, a conversation to have—this is the moment for it.



Chapter 12

AT THE SPEED OF THE SNAIL

Charles Spurgeon once said, “By perseverance, the snail reached the ark.” It’s a simple statement, almost humorous at first glance. But buried in those words is the reality that progress is still progress, no matter the speed.¹⁶

A snail moves at an average speed of 39 inches per hour. To the human eye, it looks almost motionless. But given enough time, it gets where it needs to go. It does not race, but it does not stop. And somehow, against all odds, it reaches its destination.¹⁷

When Movement Feels Too Slow

There are seasons in leadership—and in life—when it feels like no matter how hard we push, we’re only gaining inches. When forward progress is so small, it’s almost invisible. When we look at others sprinting ahead, and we wonder if we’re even moving at all.

But Spurgeon’s words remind us of something essential: movement is movement, even when it’s incremental. The book written one paragraph at a time. The business built one hard-earned decision at a

¹⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Salt-Cellars: Being a Collection of Proverbs, Together with Homely Notes Thereon* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1889).

¹⁷ Angie Yee, “Speed of a Snail,” *The Physics Factbook* (1999).

time. The trust rebuilt one conversation at a time. The personal growth forged one small choice at a time. It all adds up.

The Lies That Stop Us

The danger isn't slow progress. The danger is believing the lie that slow progress isn't worth it.

Lie #1 – “If I can't go fast, I shouldn't go at all.” But the truth is, persistence beats speed in the long run. The ones who keep going—even when it's slow—are the ones who finish.

Lie #2 – “This isn't making a difference.” Just because growth isn't immediately visible doesn't mean it isn't happening. Roots grow deep before they grow upward.

Lie #3 – “I'll never get there at this pace.” But the snail reaches its goal. And it doesn't get there by sprinting. It gets there by moving at the speed it can sustain.

The Power of Inch-by-Inch Progress

The world celebrates speed. Instant results. Overnight success. But the truth is, most real achievements aren't built that way. They're built inch by inch. Winning leaders are not formed in a single moment—they are shaped through daily perseverance. Strong relationships are not built in grand gestures but in small, steady acts of faithfulness. Breakthroughs rarely come from a single giant leap but from the accumulation of thousands of small, unseen steps.

And so, on the days when progress feels too slow, when the journey feels too long, when all you have to show for your effort is a few inches forward—keep going. Perseverance is not about pace. It's about not stopping.



Chapter 13

SLEEPING WITH ONE EYE OPEN

Sleep should be simple. Lie down, close your eyes, drift away. But anyone who has ever spent their first night in a new place—a hotel room, a friend’s place, a deployment tent—knows it rarely works that way. Rest doesn’t come easily. Sleep is shallow, interrupted. The body is tired, but the brain refuses to shut down.

Science has a name for this: the First-Night Effect (FNE). A 2016 study found that when sleeping in an unfamiliar place, the brain doesn’t fully power down. Instead, one hemisphere stays partially awake, scanning for threats, listening for anything out of place. It’s a survival mechanism, a biological safeguard designed to keep us alert in new environments.¹⁸

And it’s not just about sleep. It’s about transition—what happens when we move from what’s known to what’s uncertain. Because change, no matter how planned or strategic, demands more bandwidth than we often acknowledge. And in a military context, where transition is a constant—new assignments, deployments, returns home—that bandwidth is the difference between adapting well and breaking under the strain.

¹⁸ Masako Tamaki, Ji Won Bang, Yuka Watanabe, and Yuka Sasaki, “Night Watch in One Brain Hemisphere during Sleep Associated with the First-Night Effect in Humans,” *Current Biology* 26:9 (May, 2016): 1190–94.

Transition Costs Energy, Even When It's Expected

The First-Night Effect isn't about conscious fear. It's about the body reacting to unfamiliarity before the mind even catches up. The same is true for any significant transition.

Military personnel are trained to operate in high-stakes environments, to move from one station to another, to adjust to different commands and cultures. But even when change is routine, it still taxes the system. The mind processes new hierarchies, new expectations, new unspoken rules. The body adjusts to different schedules, climates, and stressors. Even the most resilient warriors feel the strain of transition—not because they are weak, but because they are human. Recognizing this isn't a sign of fragility. It's a sign of wisdom.

Staying Alert is Necessary—But It's Not Sustainable

The brain's night watch is a temporary measure. By the second night, both hemispheres begin to trust the environment, allowing for deeper, more restorative sleep. The same principle applies to leadership and adaptation.

There are times when staying “on” is necessary—when heightened vigilance is part of the job. But constant alertness is unsustainable. The best leaders, whether in combat or in command, understand the need to transition from high-alert adaptation to stable operational rhythm. Those who never move beyond the “first-night” mindset burn out. Those who trust the system, the team, and the process find their endurance.

Acknowledging the Cost of Change Creates Stronger Teams

In the military, change is a given. A new unit. A different mission. A deployment. A return home that somehow feels foreign. If we pretend these shifts don't take a toll, we fail to prepare for the adjustment.

Acknowledging the bandwidth that transition requires doesn't make an individual or unit weaker. It makes them prepared. Strong teams recognize the cost of adaptation and build in time for recalibration. They create space for debriefing, clarity, and mental reset. They operate with the awareness that even the best-trained minds need time to adjust.

Transition Isn't Just a Shift—It's a Process

The First-Night Effect fades, but only when the brain learns it's safe. The same is true for any major transition. The more we ignore the

mental load of change, the longer we stay in that “one-eye-open” mode, running on unsustainable alertness.

The lesson isn't to avoid transition—it's to manage it well. To recognize that every change requires bandwidth, that adaptation isn't instantaneous, and that the strongest among us aren't those who ignore transition, but those who navigate it with strategy and awareness. We have to understand that survival isn't just about staying awake. It's about knowing when you can finally rest.



Chapter 14

EVEN MUSHROOMS NEED EACH OTHER

Beneath our feet, in the damp soil and tangled roots, there is a conversation happening—one we cannot hear, but one that shapes the world around us.

A 2022 study found that fungi, long thought to be silent, may actually communicate through electrical signals. Using their sprawling underground networks, they send pulses of information—patterns of spikes that resemble language, messages passed between mushrooms like whispers in the dark.¹⁹ And if even mushrooms need each other, what does that say about us?

No One Thrives Alone

Mushrooms don't grow in isolation. They form vast, interconnected webs, linking trees, plants, and soil into a hidden community. Through these networks, they share nutrients, warn of dangers, and help sustain the entire ecosystem.

¹⁹ Andrew Adamatzky, "Language of Fungi Derived from Their Electrical Spiking Activity," *Royal Society Open Science* 9:4 (2022): 1-15. Emil Brown and David J. Smith, "Uncovering the Hidden Language of Fungi: Electrical Signals in Mycelial Networks," *Fungal Ecology* 55 (2022): 101–112.

We, too, are wired for connection. The strongest among us aren't the ones who go it alone, but the ones who understand the power of deep, unseen networks—the relationships that sustain us, the people who challenge us, the communities that give us purpose.

Communication Is More Than Just Words

The fungi's signals aren't like human speech, but they carry meaning. They serve a purpose. They create relationships. And maybe that's a reminder that real connection isn't just about talking—it's about understanding, responding, and being present.

Some of the most important messages in life are unspoken. A quiet check-in with a friend. A shared look that says, I see you. A simple act of kindness that says more than words ever could. Connection isn't always loud. Sometimes, it's just knowing someone is there.

Strong Communities Are Hidden but Powerful

Mushrooms are just the fruiting bodies of a much larger organism. The real magic happens underground, where sprawling networks stretch for miles, carrying life between trees and soil. Without them, entire forests would struggle to survive.

Communities work the same way. The strongest ones aren't always visible, but they hold everything together. The mentors who quietly guide. The friends who show up in small but consistent ways. The families—chosen or given—who create a foundation that allows us to grow.

Mushrooms aren't just growing. They're supporting. They're communicating. They're sustaining something bigger than themselves. Maybe the best communities are the ones like that—quietly woven, deeply connected, unseen but unshakable. And maybe, like mushrooms, we were never meant to stand alone.



Chapter 15

THE THERMOSTAT EFFECT

Every couple has a conflict they didn't see coming—the battle for the thermostat. It's rarely an argument outright, but the tension is real. One person secretly bumps the temperature up; the other casually turns it back down. One walks into a freezing house wearing three layers; the other is sweating in shorts in the middle of winter.

At first, it seems trivial—until you realize it's not really about temperature. It's about comfort, control, and consideration. Because when one person insists on their ideal, the other silently suffers. And over time, that small discomfort builds into something bigger.

The most successful marriages find a way to negotiate the middle ground. Not because it's convenient, but because winning at the expense of the other isn't really winning at all. This is where the thermostat becomes more than just a dial on the wall—it becomes a metaphor for every leadership decision we make.

What Temperature is Your Leadership Set To?

The same principle applies to organizational success. A study by Tom Y. Chang and Agne Kajackaite, *Battle for the Thermostat: Gender and the*

Effect of Temperature on Cognitive Performance, found that temperature significantly impacts performance—but not equally for everyone.²⁰

Women perform better on math and verbal tasks in warmer environments. Men perform better at cooler temperatures. The performance boost for women at warmer temperatures was greater than the slight decrease for men.

Think about that for a moment. If something as small as room temperature affects cognitive function, what else in your organization is subtly shaping performance? What systems, policies, or work conditions have been set for one group's comfort at the expense of another's success?

Marriage and Leadership: The Hidden Cost of “Winning”

In marriage, the thermostat battle isn't about comfort—it's about consideration. It's about realizing: If I always win, my spouse always loses. If I never adjust, they will always be uncomfortable. Over time, discomfort turns into resentment.

The same is true in leadership: If you structure the workplace around what works best for you, others will quietly struggle. If you never adjust, your team will disengage—even if they don't say it outright. Over time, discomfort turns into underperformance. The leaders who pay attention to these small details create environments where everyone can perform at their best.

The Science of Smarter Leadership

Chang and Kajackaite's research teach us that compromise isn't just about keeping the peace—it's about unlocking potential.

- What if your work environment is slightly “too cold” for someone's best work—not literally, but structurally?
- What if the systems in place give one group an unseen advantage, even if it's unintentional?
- What if a small adjustment could make a measurable difference in your team's performance?

²⁰ Tom Y. Chang and Agne Kajackaite, "Battle for the Thermostat: Gender and the Effect of Temperature on Cognitive Performance," *PLOS ONE* 14:5 (2019): 1-10.

The Win-Win of Compromise

In marriage, winning at the other person's expense creates tension. In leadership, winning without consideration for others creates blind spots. The thermostat battle—whether in a home or an organization—reminds us that good leadership isn't about getting what we want. It's about creating conditions where everyone thrives. So, before you adjust the temperature—or make that next leadership decision—ask yourself: Who else needs a seat at the table before I set the dial?



Chapter 16

BEE STINGS AND VULNERABILITY

There are some places you really don't want to get stung. That's what researcher Michael L. Smith found in a bold (and painful) study at Cornell University. He mapped the pain index of bee stings by body location and confirmed what we instinctively know: not all pain is equal, and where we take the hit matters.²¹

The least painful spots? The skull, upper arm, and middle toe. The worst? The nostril, upper lip, and genitals. Same bee. Same venom. Totally different experience. The difference? Vulnerability.

Smith's research revealed that some areas are more sensitive than others—and knowing those pain points matters. The same applies to leadership. Not all failures, criticisms, or setbacks hurt equally. Some barely register. Others hit like a sting to the face. The more aware we are of where our vulnerabilities lie, the better we can lead.

Know Your Personal Pressure Points

If you knew where the sting would hurt most, you'd protect that area. Yet in life and leadership, we often go in unaware—taking hits in the areas that cut deepest: identity, competence, relationships.

²¹ Michael L. Smith, "Honey Bee Sting Pain Index by Body Location," *PeerJ* 2 (2014): 1-8. Michael L. Smith and Justin O. Schmidt, "Sting Pain Index: Comparative Analysis of Hymenoptera Stings," *Journal of Insect Behavior* 28, no. 4 (2015): 545-55.

Some leaders can handle professional setbacks but unravel at personal rejection. Some endure pressure but break when they feel unseen. Self-awareness isn't optional—it's protection.

Knowing your pressure points helps you anticipate, respond with clarity, and build resilience where it matters most. Leadership isn't about avoiding pain. It's about knowing where it will hurt the most—and being ready.

Know Where Your Team is Most Vulnerable

Every team has its pressure points too. Some are energized by rapid change. Others are destabilized by it. Some thrive under external pressure. Others burn out fast. Strong leaders don't assume every challenge hits the same. They pause, assess, and ask: What's a surface scratch, and what's a deep wound? What's recoverable, and what could rupture trust?

Not All Pain is Equal—So Don't Treat It That Way

One of the biggest leadership mistakes? Acting like every hit lands the same. A missed deadline is frustrating. A breakdown in trust is devastating. We misstep when we minimize what matters, or overlook a festering issue that needs attention. Good leaders don't just push through pain—they study it. They learn where the real damage happens and take it seriously.

Protect What Matters Most

If you saw the bee coming, you wouldn't brace randomly—you'd shield the places that hurt most. Leadership should be no different. Know your weak spots. Know your team's. Don't pretend pain is evenly distributed. It's not. And if you're going to lead well, you need to lead with that truth in mind. Because a sting is coming. Where it lands—and how you handle it—makes all the difference.



Chapter 17

WHAT A YAWN DOESN'T MEAN

We've all done it—looked across the room during a meeting, spotted someone yawning, and made a silent judgment: They're bored. They're disengaged. They don't care. But what if we're wrong?

In 2005, researchers Andreas Sprenger, Peter C. Brugger, and Bruno Laeng explored a radically different explanation. Their study, "*The Yawning Hypothesis*," proposed that yawning may function not as a social cue or emotional tell—but as a biological cooling system for the brain. Their findings suggested that yawns increase as brain temperature rises and decrease when the forehead is cooled. In other words, someone yawning might not be tuned out—they might be working overtime to stay mentally sharp.²²

It's an intriguing insight, not just for physiology, but for leadership. How often do we misread the people we lead? A distant look is taken as disrespect. A lack of contribution is interpreted as apathy. A hard question is seen as defiance. But like the misunderstood yawn, what's visible may have nothing to do with the story underneath.

Leaders must learn to interpret with humility. Don't let surface-level cues become verdicts. Ask questions. Stay curious. Recognize that

²² Andreas Sprenger, Peter C. Brugger, and Bruno Laeng, "The Yawning Hypothesis: The Phenomenon of Yawning as a Potential Thermoregulatory Behavior," *Physiology & Behavior* 85:3 (2005): 535–45.

behind the tired eyes may be someone wrestling to stay present, to contribute, to lead. And when in doubt—assume the yawn isn't disinterest. It might just be someone's best effort to stay engaged. Prudent leadership starts by giving people the benefit of the doubt.



Chapter 18

LEADING WITHOUT A WORD

We tend to think of motivation as something spoken—words of encouragement, pep talks, the classic “You got this!” moments. But a study from Kansas State University suggests something counterintuitive: people work harder, push further, and perform better when their role model says nothing at all.²³

In this research, individuals were asked to hold a plank—a core endurance exercise—for as long as possible. The participants were placed in three conditions:

1. *Without a partner (exercising alone).*
2. *With a partner who verbally encouraged them.*
3. *With a partner who was more skilled but remained silent.*

The result? Participants performed the best when their partner was slightly better than them—but said nothing. This study highlights the power of silent encouragement through excellence. Words are powerful, but actions—especially those performed with quiet mastery—speak even louder.

²³ Brandon C. Irwin, Deborah L. Feltz, and Norbert L. Kerr, "Silence is Golden: Effect of Encouragement in Motivating the Weak Link in an Online Exercise Video Game," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 15:6 (2013): 1-10.

The Subconscious Pull of Excellence

There's a psychological phenomenon at play here: People push themselves harder when they see excellence in action. The presence of a high performer elevates those around them. Encouragement, when overused, can feel patronizing rather than inspiring.

It's why a seasoned leader who remains calm under pressure can influence an entire team to stay composed—without ever saying a word. It's why a disciplined individual in a gym setting makes those around them push harder—even without direct coaching. It's why excellence, when modeled, creates an unspoken expectation that pulls others up.

Why Words Can Sometimes Backfire

This study also highlights the uncomfortable truth that verbal encouragement can sometimes have the opposite effect of what we intend. When a more skilled person continuously encourages someone who is struggling, the message can land wrong. Instead of motivating, it can feel:

- *Condescending* – “You clearly think I'm weak if you have to keep cheering me on.”
- *Performative* – “Are you saying this for my benefit or yours?”
- *Pressure-inducing* – “Now I feel obligated to perform, rather than personally driven to improve.”

This explains why the best leaders and mentors aren't constant cheerleaders—they are quiet standards of excellence. Their very presence raises the bar.

Leadership Without the Megaphone

What does this mean for leadership? It means that your loudest influence is how you carry yourself—not what you say. Good leaders work with quiet consistency. They don't need to announce their discipline—they embody it. They set a standard simply by existing within it. Excellence is contagious, but it doesn't need to be advertised.



Chapter 19

CHASING UNICORNS

Unicorns have never existed—at least, not by any scientific measure. No fossils. No reliable sightings. No ancient stables hidden in some forgotten valley. And yet, across continents, languages, and centuries, the unicorn has endured—not just as a myth, but as a symbol of what we dare to imagine. Leadership often demands the same kind of stubborn, beautiful belief in things that are not yet real.

Leading Toward What Doesn't Exist Yet

A number of studies have explored whether unicorns could have evolved naturally. Maybe somewhere in an alternate history, a horse-like creature with a single horn could have emerged. Interestingly, in 1936, biologist W. Franklin Dove created a real-life “unicorn” by surgically fusing the horn buds of a calf, producing a single, central horn.

The researchers weren't merely chasing fantasy—they were challenging assumptions about what's possible, even pushing its boundaries through bold experimentation.²⁴ That's what leadership often is: creating a future that doesn't exist yet, believing in it before others can see it. Before there was a plane, someone had to believe

²⁴ David Ng, “The Evolutionary Biology of the Unicorn,” *Popperfont* (May, 2012). W. Franklin Dove, “Artificial Production of the Fabulous Unicorn,” *Scientific Monthly* 42:5 (1936): 431–436.

humans could fly. Before there was a map of the world, someone had to believe there was more to discover. Visionary leaders don't just manage the present. They summon the invisible future into being.

Vision Looks Like Fantasy—Until It Doesn't

The unicorn reminds us that not all visions start as reality. Many of the greatest breakthroughs in history looked ridiculous at first glance: Personal computers in every home. Humans walking on the moon. Sending information around the globe instantly.

Good leaders carry a picture of what could *be* even when it sounds absurd to everyone else. They hold steady through the doubt, the eye-rolls, the logical objections—because vision, like the unicorn, often lives in the unseen spaces before it lives in the world.

Chasing What Others Call Impossible

There's something deeply resilient about chasing an idea others find laughable. It builds grit. It sharpens creativity. It strengthens resolve.

Believing in "unicorns"—whatever form they take—requires leaders to tolerate uncertainty, to persist when results aren't immediate, and to stay anchored to a bigger "why." Even if the exact vision never materializes, the pursuit itself transforms the leader and the people who follow.

Real Leadership Starts in the Invisible

At its heart, leadership isn't just about solving today's problems. It's about seeing tomorrow's possibilities. The unicorn may not walk among us, but the idea of it has fueled centuries of wonder, aspiration, and discovery.

Maybe that's the real takeaway: The most important things we lead toward—the futures we shape, the changes we ignite—don't always start with what is. They start with the courage to imagine what could be.



Chapter 20

SMALL NUDGES, GIANT SHIFTS

It turns out that urinals can teach us an important lesson about decision-making and leadership. Richard Thaler's book *Nudge* explores the concept of choice architecture—the idea that people make better decisions when their environment is structured in a way that gently guides them toward the right choice.²⁵

His favorite example? The urinal innovation at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport. In the early 1990s, frustrated by messy, misdirected bathroom use, a cleaning manager at Schiphol Airport had an idea: etch small images of flies near the drains of the urinals. Why? Because men, when given a target, naturally aimed for it.

The result? Spillage was significantly reduced, the janitorial workload decreased, and hygiene improved—all without signs, warnings, or punishments. This small but brilliant intervention nudged behavior in the right direction without forcing it.

The Invisible Force Behind Better Decisions

The Schiphol urinals weren't redesigned. There were no drastic rule changes. Just a tiny, almost imperceptible detail was added—but that detail changed behavior. This is the essence of choice architecture:

²⁵ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: The Final Edition* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

Small, well-placed cues can influence human behavior in significant ways. People resist being forced but respond well to subtle guidance. The best designs don't just block bad choices—they make good choices easier. This applies to far more than public restrooms. Every leader, every organization, and every team operates within a choice architecture. The question is: Is that architecture designed intentionally—or is it left to chance?

Making the Right Choice the Easy Choice

Leaders often assume people will naturally make the best decisions. But psychology tells us that people don't always make rational choices—they make convenient ones.

If healthy food is more accessible in a cafeteria, people eat healthier. If meeting spaces are designed for quick collaboration, people engage more. If work expectations are clearly structured, teams naturally align better. Wise leaders don't rely on willpower alone—they design environments where success is the natural outcome.

Want your team to be more creative? Make it easier to brainstorm, experiment, and test ideas. Want better work-life balance? Normalize breaks, healthy work habits, and set cultural expectations. Want more honesty in decision-making? Encourage structured dissent, where people feel safe to challenge bad ideas. In short, leaders can “etch the flies” into their own environments—small, thoughtful nudges that shape behavior without force.

This is the secret to winsome leadership and shrewd decision-making. Instead of fighting against human tendencies, work with them. Instead of demanding better choices, architect an environment where better choices are the default. Because in the end, real leadership isn't about commanding—it's about designing systems that nudge people toward success.



Chapter 21

WE BECOME WHAT WE CONSUME

In a controversial study, researchers manipulated the emotions of nearly 700,000 Facebook users without their explicit consent. The experiment, conducted by Adam Kramer, Jamie Guillory, and Jeffrey Hancock, tested whether emotional contagion could occur purely through exposure to social media content—without direct interaction or nonverbal cues.²⁶

The results were striking. Reducing exposure to positive posts led people to post fewer positive updates and more negative ones. Reducing exposure to negative posts had the opposite effect—users became more positive. People who saw fewer emotional posts overall became less expressive, posting less than usual.

This was mass emotional contagion on a digital scale—proof that we are more influenced by the emotions of others, even strangers, than we realize. The experiment wasn't without ethical concerns, but its implications go beyond academic interest. If emotions can spread digitally without our awareness, what does that mean for our mental resilience, decision-making, and leadership?

²⁶ Adam D. I. Kramer, Jamie E. Guillory, and Jeffrey T. Hancock, "Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion Through Social Networks," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111:24 (2014): 8788–8790.

Emotional Contagion—The Currents We Don't See

We often assume we are rational, independent thinkers, forming our emotions and perspectives through logic and conscious choices. But this study reinforces that we don't just consume content. It consumes us.

Your mood is influenced by what you see, even when you don't realize it. The tone of the people around you—online or offline—shapes your thoughts and emotions. Negativity, stress, or anxiety can spread through social networks like an invisible virus. In leadership, this is both a warning and an opportunity.

The Culture You Absorb Becomes the Culture You Create

If social media can manipulate the collective mood of hundreds of thousands of people with small content shifts, imagine how much influence a leader has over a team, an organization, or a community.

What you allow in your environment will spread. Negative attitudes, cynicism, or unchecked stress will ripple through your culture. Leaders who model emotional stability, optimism, and resilience set the tone for others. The content we consume is shaping us. Are we taking in more stress, outrage, and division—or intentionally choosing sources that inspire and sharpen us?

How to Guard Against Emotional Contagion

Since we can't control everything, we're exposed to, how do we prevent being unconsciously influenced in ways that undermine us?

- *Filter your inputs* – Be intentional about what you read, watch, and listen to. Social media algorithms aren't designed for your well-being—they're designed for engagement.
- *Surround yourself with the right voices* – Negativity is contagious—but so is wisdom, gratitude, and vision.
- *Lead with awareness* – If your team is disengaged or discouraged, consider what emotional climate they're immersed in daily.

This study wasn't just about social media. It was about how easily humans absorb the emotional climate around them. The best leaders recognize this and use it to their advantage—not by manipulation, but by cultivating environments where people thrive.



Chapter 22

THE LOST ART OF BEING ALONE

We've never been more connected—and never more afraid to be alone. In a culture addicted to noise and stimulation, solitude has become a forgotten art.

In an eye-opening study, researchers from the University of Virginia and Harvard University examined how people respond to being left alone with their thoughts. The results were striking: many participants found solitude so uncomfortable that they preferred administering electric shocks to themselves rather than sitting in silence.²⁷ This isn't just an academic curiosity—it's a reflection of our growing inability to sit with our own minds.

- 95% of adults engage in some form of leisure activity daily—but only 17% report spending time alone just thinking.
- Many participants in the study struggled to focus on their own thoughts, even when in a distraction-free environment.
- When given the option, some people literally preferred pain to introspection.

²⁷ Timothy D. Wilson, David A. Reinhard, Erin C. Westgate, Daniel T. Gilbert, Céline Lemonnier, Shazli Rizwan, Nicole B. Brown, and Jonathan W. Schooler, "Just Thinking: The Challenges of the Disengaged Mind," *Science* 345:6192 (2014): 75–77.

Why Solitude Feels Unnatural in a Distracted Age

Once upon a time, solitude was a natural part of life. Long walks, quiet evenings, and moments of reflection were woven into the human experience. But in an era of instant notifications, endless content, and perpetual connectivity, we've conditioned ourselves to believe that doing nothing is unproductive—or even unbearable.

This study doesn't just reveal that people dislike being alone with their thoughts—it suggests that our ability to do so is actively deteriorating. If we can't sit with ourselves, how can we make wise decisions? If we can't process our own thoughts, how can we develop clarity of purpose? If we always seek external stimulation, how will we ever know what truly drives us?

The modern leader must reclaim the discipline of solitude—not as a retreat from responsibility, but as a crucial tool for insight, decision-making, and emotional resilience.

Leadership and the Strength to Sit in Silence

Historically, the greatest thinkers, leaders, and innovators have valued solitude. Abraham Lincoln was known for long solitary walks where he wrestled with decisions. Winston Churchill regularly retreated to quiet spaces to think through war strategy. Steve Jobs took "thinking walks" to gain perspective on Apple's direction. If some of the most brilliant minds in history needed time away from distractions to gain clarity, why do we assume we can lead effectively without it?

The Cost of Perpetual Noise

When leaders fail to cultivate solitude, they become reactionary instead of visionary. Overstimulation leads to burnout. Leaders who never step away from the noise find themselves exhausted, unable to think deeply or creatively. Constant input weakens critical thinking.

If every moment is filled with social media, emails, and conversations, when do we reflect? Lack of solitude diminishes self-awareness. Leaders who never pause to examine their motives, failures, and growth edges will lead blindly.

Reclaiming Solitude as a Leader

Instead of seeing solitude as a waste of time, we must recognize it as a vital leadership discipline. If people in a controlled study would rather shock themselves than sit alone with their thoughts, it's clear that something is deeply wrong.

Leaders who embrace solitude will find that clarity, creativity, and emotional resilience emerge in ways they never expected. The ability to sit with our thoughts isn't just about comfort—it's about courage. The courage to face what we truly think, feel, and believe. The courage to lead with conviction instead of distraction.



Chapter 23

HONEYBEES ON COCAINE

In January 2009, a group of researchers conducted an experiment that sounds more like the plot of a surreal comedy: they exposed honeybees to cocaine. The goal? To understand how the drug—infamous for its impact on human behavior—would influence insect behavior, specifically the "forager" bees.²⁸

In a typical hive, forager bees are the explorers, the adventurers. Their mission is to seek out areas rich in flowers, loaded with nectar and pollen, and return to the hive to report their findings. And how do they report? With a dance. The more spirited the dance, the more exceptional the find. The other bees trust the rhythm—following their boogying colleague straight to the treasure trove of resources.

But here's where things take a bizarre twist. Add a pinch of cocaine, and the forager bee transforms into a non-stop party machine. It doesn't matter whether they discover a field teeming with blossoms or a sad, wilting flowerbed—they return to the hive with the same unbridled enthusiasm. Their dance becomes electrifying, convincing the rest of the hive that the jackpot has been struck, even when it hasn't.

²⁸ Andrew B. Barron, M. C. Maleszka, G. Helliwell, and R. Maleszka, "Effects of Cocaine on Honey Bee Dance Behaviour," *Journal of Experimental Biology* 212:2 (2009): 163–168.

In almost every case, these drugged-up foragers threw the hive into a full-blown dance party. A scholarly journal even described it this way: “On cocaine, the forager bee overestimates the value of the floral resources it locates.” Yes, that’s a real quote from a scholarly journal!

Now, let’s step back and think about what this means beyond the hive. If a bee’s dance doesn’t align with the reality of the resources it’s found, the hive wastes time and energy chasing nothing. The same thing happens when we overestimate our own abilities, opportunities, or resources. We can pour effort into chasing illusions, pursuing goals without the necessary foundation—or worse, leading others into fruitless endeavors.

This is where humility becomes critical. Humility is the antidote to overestimation. It’s the quiet voice that asks, “Where can I grow? What don’t I know?” It’s what keeps us open to feedback, willing to learn, and aware of our own limitations.

And humility doesn’t exist in isolation. It’s fueled by curiosity. When we listen to others’ perspectives, when we reflect on our habits, when we stay curious about how we can improve, we create space for real growth. Socrates put it best: “True wisdom is knowing what you do not know.” The key to wisdom isn’t knowing all the answers—it’s recognizing the gaps in our knowledge. And it’s in those gaps where the most growth happens.

At the end of the day, leadership—whether in a workplace, a team, or even a beehive—requires alignment. Our “dance” should match our resources, our abilities, and our reality. So, let’s take a lesson from the bees. Let’s challenge ourselves to see things as they truly are, not as we wish them to be. When our perception aligns with reality, we’re not just moving—we’re moving in the right direction.



Chapter 24

THE OPPOSITE OF DÉJÀ VU

Most people have experienced déjà vu—the odd feeling that something new is strangely familiar. But there’s another phenomenon just as fascinating: jamais vu, when something familiar suddenly feels unfamiliar, as if you’re seeing it for the first time.

A recent study published in *Memory* captured this strange phenomenon. Participants were asked to repeatedly write a simple word. After about thirty repetitions, the word—something they’d seen and used countless times—began to unravel. It felt distorted, meaningless, almost unrecognizable.²⁹

This phenomenon, called semantic satiation, shows how even what we know best can lose its meaning through sheer repetition. But it’s not just about language. It happens in our work, our relationships, our leadership. Tasks that once inspired can grow numb and mechanical. Conversations once rich with connection can become hollow scripts. Familiarity, left unexamined, slowly drains vitality from the things we once loved.

Leadership is especially vulnerable to this erosion. When we stop questioning our routines, when mission statements become wallpaper,

²⁹ Christopher J. A. Moulin, Akira Souchay, and Philip Higham, "The Revelation Effect for Jamais Vu: Repetition Enhances the Experience of Unfamiliarity," *Memory* 22:5 (2014): 486–494.

when trusted voices fade into background noise—we lose clarity without even realizing it. Leaders who thrive are the ones who stay awake: constantly refreshing their vision, revisiting their purpose, refusing to run on autopilot.

The danger isn't repetition itself—it's unconscious repetition. It's showing up but no longer feeling it. It's saying the right words but no longer believing them. A marriage where "I love you" becomes a formality. A workplace where slogans are chanted but conviction is gone. A life where habits survive but meaning slips quietly away.

Reclaiming that meaning doesn't always require reinvention. Sometimes it simply takes a break—a step back to see things fresh. Sometimes it requires reintroducing novelty, even in small ways. Sometimes it's about tracing back to the original "why" that fueled the habit in the first place.

Jamais vu reminds us that even the familiar can fade if we stop tending to it. Repetition can erode meaning. But awareness, attention, and a little disruption can restore it—and keep us anchored to the things that matter most.



Chapter 25

SWALLOWING SWORDS

There's a reason no one lines up to try sword swallowing at the company retreat. It's dangerous, disorienting, and one wrong move can leave lasting damage. But oddly enough, it's not a bad metaphor for leadership.

At first glance, sword swallowing looks like reckless showmanship—an unnecessary flirtation with disaster. And in many ways, it is. A 2006 study examined the physical toll of the act, revealing that even the most skilled performers walk a fine line between precision and peril.³⁰

Sore throats were common, especially for those who performed too often or pushed the limits with multiple or oddly shaped blades. Serious injuries—perforated esophagi, internal bleeding, and even pericarditis—weren't unusual. One performer suffered a laceration while attempting to swallow a curved saber. Another ended up in the hospital after a parrot on his shoulder distracted him mid-act.

What emerges isn't just a warning about sharp objects—it's a window into how risk shows up in every field that demands mastery, especially leadership.

³⁰ Brian Witcombe and Dan Meyer, "Sword Swallowing and Its Side Effects," *BMJ* 333:7582 (December, 2006): 1285–1287.

The Leadership Parallel

Leading at a high level often means making decisions that carry sharp edges. The higher you rise, the thinner the margin for error becomes.

- *Repetition Can Breed Complacency* – Just like sword swallows develop soreness and strain from overuse, leaders who never pause for reflection can become dulled to risk and fatigue.
- *Complexity Increases the Stakes* – The more variables you juggle—projects, people, priorities—the greater the chances something will slip. Skill doesn't eliminate risk. It just makes you more aware of where it hides.
- *Distraction Is Dangerous* – A sword swallower was hospitalized because a parrot broke his concentration. For leaders, it's not parrots—it's emails, meetings, and endless demands. But the result is the same: when your focus fractures, your effectiveness follows.
- *Subtle Signs Matter* – Nearly every major injury in the study was preceded by small signs—discomfort, a rough swallow, fatigue. Leaders ignore those signs too: tension in a team, misalignment in a mission, exhaustion in themselves.

The Reality of Risk

Leadership, like sword swallowing, is an exercise in calculated risk. There's no version of it that's completely safe. The goal isn't to eliminate danger—it's to stay alert enough to manage it. Sometimes the greatest strength is knowing when to lean in. Other times, it's knowing when to step back, reassess, and rest. At the end of the day, success doesn't just come from knowing how to perform. It comes from knowing when not to.



Chapter 26

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF HARD

The cemetery was silent, except for the crunch of gravel under his worn-out sneakers. Around and around the graves he ran, hours at a time. Most would have found the setting eerie, but for Ed Whitlock, it was just training. No fancy treadmills. No cheering crowds. No music blasting in his ears. Just Ed and the endless loop of the cemetery path.

At first glance, Ed didn't look like a world-class athlete. His singlet and shorts were decades old. His shoes were worn down to their last miles. His gait looked almost too slow, too fragile. And yet, this wiry old man was quietly rewriting the rules of human endurance.

At the age of 70, Ed Whitlock became the first person to run a marathon in under three hours—a blistering 6:40 pace per mile. By 85, he broke the four-hour mark, another first in his age group. The running world called him "the ultra-geezer," a nickname he wore with pride.

And it wasn't just his race times that stunned the world. When researchers measured Ed's aerobic capacity, they found that at 70 years old, his VO_2 max was 52.8 ml/kg/min—an extraordinary number for his age, closer to the levels seen in young elite athletes. His maximum heart rate clocked in at 168 beats per minute, far above the expected range for a man decades his junior. In every physiological marker that

mattered, Ed's body was doing what science said should have been impossible.³¹

But here's what made Ed truly remarkable: he didn't chase optimization. He had no coach, no strength training, no meticulous diet, no high-tech gadgets tracking his mileage or heart rate variability. His training program was simple: run slowly for hours. Alone. Often in circles. Often in the cold. Often when his body begged him to stop.

He didn't even like running. "Do you enjoy it?" someone once asked him. "No, not at all," he replied with a wry smile. So why did he do it? His answer was as unpolished as his training routine. "You have to choose the hard things in life to get what you truly want," he said. "The day I stop running is the end of me."

The best things in life are on the other side of hard. For Ed, running wasn't about medals or records. It was about grit—the willingness to embrace discomfort, to endure, to persist. It was about testing the invisible edges of his own potential, long after others would have stopped. And that mindset wasn't limited to marathons. It applied to everything.

Ed's story challenges us to rethink our own excuses. He didn't have better tools, better genes, or more time. He simply put one foot in front of the other, day after day, no matter how much it hurt. He lived proof that resilience isn't born in moments of ease. It's forged in the fire of hard work, stubbornness, and the daily decision to keep showing up.

We may never match Ed's marathon times or his physiological outliers. But that's not the point. The point is simpler, and more difficult: Choose the hard things. Not because you'll always win. But because the life you want is always waiting on the other side of hard.

³¹ J. Scott Trappe, "Cardiorespiratory fitness and skeletal muscle characteristics of octogenarian runners," *Journal of Applied Physiology* 111:4 (2011): 1239–1245. Alex Hutchinson, *Endure: Mind, Body, and the Curiously Elastic Limits of Human Performance* (New York: William Morrow, 2018). Alex Hutchinson, "How Ed Whitlock Defied Aging," *Outside Magazine* (March, 2017). Amby Burfoot, "Ed Whitlock and the Secrets of Master Runners," *Runner's World* (October, 2016).



Chapter 27

THE PULL OF THE CROWD

In a classic experiment on crowd behavior, researchers Stanley Milgram, Leonard Bickman, and Lawrence Berkowitz set out to understand how people respond to groups engaging in a collective action. Their method was simple.³²

They had a small group of people stand on a New York City sidewalk and stare up at the sky. They measured how many passersby stopped and followed suit. As the size of the initial group increased, so did the number of people who joined them—even though there was no reason to look up.

What they found was clear: people are far more likely to imitate group behavior than they realize. At a certain threshold, following the crowd becomes automatic.

The Herd Instinct—Why We Follow First, Think Later

Humans are wired with an instinct to follow social cues. In uncertain situations, we look to others for guidance, assuming that if enough people are doing something, it must be the right move.

³² Stanley Milgram, Leonard Bickman, and Lawrence Berkowitz, "Note on the Drawing Power of Crowds of Different Size," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 13:2 (1969): 79–82.

A single person looking up had little impact—only 4% of those passing by followed. But when a crowd of 15 people all looked up, nearly 40% stopped to do the same. Even more telling, 86% at least glanced up, suggesting that the mere sight of a group focusing on something was enough to override individual curiosity and decision-making. This study didn't just expose a quirk of behavior—it offered a small but powerful glimpse into how conformity shapes our lives, choices, and leadership.

When We Trust the Crowd Over Our Own Judgment

The herd mentality is often useful—it helps societies function, keeps people in sync, and provides safety in numbers. But leaders cannot afford to be passive followers of the crowd.

The majority is not always right. Throughout history, destructive ideas have gained momentum simply because enough people accepted them without question. Trends and movements gain power not by being correct, but by being visible. The louder the message, the more people assume it must be true. Following the crowd feels safe—but real leadership requires resisting when necessary. A leader who merely mirrors the dominant narrative is not leading—they are following a different kind of authority.

When You're Just "Looking Up" Because Everyone Else Is

The study forces us to ask: Where in our lives are we looking up simply because others are? What decisions are we making because they are truly right—versus what we think will be socially accepted? Where are we staying silent, not because we lack conviction, but because the crowd is too loud? How often are we defaulting to popular opinion instead of critically thinking for ourselves? The pull of conformity is stronger than we realize—and the first step to breaking free is noticing when we're being pulled.

Be Willing to Lead, Even When No One Else Is Looking

If we only look up when others do, we are not making decisions—we are reacting. Real leadership means:

- *Pausing before following* – Just because something is popular doesn't mean it is right.
- *Asking hard questions* – Why do people believe this? Where is this idea leading?
- *Being okay with standing alone* – Many of the notable leaders in history had to defy the crowd before people saw the truth.

Milgram's study reminds us that humans are wired to follow—but we don't have to. Leadership, wisdom, and integrity demand resisting automatic conformity and choosing direction not based on momentum, but on truth. Sometimes, the most important thing is not to look where everyone else is looking—but to have the courage to look elsewhere.



Chapter 28

THE GOLDFISH THAT LEARNED TO DRIVE

If you ever thought driving was reserved for land animals, think again. In a study that sounds more like the plot of a Pixar movie than serious research, a team from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev trained goldfish to drive vehicles across land. Yes, you read that right—fish out of water, steering a Fish Operated Vehicle (FOV).³³

Swimming inside tanks mounted on wheels, the goldfish learned to control their movement by orienting toward visual targets outside the tank. Despite facing an alien environment, distorted visual input, and completely new movement mechanics, these unlikely pilots successfully navigated their surroundings. Their performance proved something deeper: adaptability isn't about the environment you're given—it's about the determination to master it.

Why This Matters—The Universal Nature of Adaptation

At its core, this experiment wasn't just about fish—it was about the brain's ability to transfer knowledge across domains. The fish translated its aquatic navigation skills to a terrestrial setting—a complete shift in environment. It overcame initial confusion, tested movement responses,

³³ Shachar Givon Reich, Uri Lotan, and Ronen Segev, "From Fish Out of Water to Navigators: Goldfish (*Carassius Auratus*) Can Use a Terrestrial Environment to Navigate," *Behavioural Brain Research* 419 (2022).

and adjusted its behavior until it mastered the task. It proved that spatial awareness and navigation strategies are not environment-dependent—they are adaptable. The implications go beyond fish—they extend to humans, leadership, and how we approach challenges.

Leadership and the Art of Navigating the Unknown

Much like the fish in this study, leaders are often thrust into unfamiliar territory: A sudden industry shift. A career move that demands a new skill set. A global crisis that changes how we operate.

The natural instinct is to cling to what we know, to panic, or to freeze. But true adaptability lies in applying old knowledge to new environments, just like the goldfish learned to do.

Phases of Adaptation

Adaptation doesn't happen all at once—it unfolds in phases. In the study, the fish struggled at first. The tank was unfamiliar, the visuals distorted. But it didn't give up. It experimented, adjusted, and slowly began to connect movement with outcome. What started as confusion became clarity. Patterns emerged and eventually, navigation became intentional.

Leaders face the same path. New roles, setbacks, shifting environments—they disorient us. But if we resist the urge to retreat and keep moving, testing, learning, something shifts. What was once overwhelming becomes instinctive. Like the fish, we adapt—not by brute force, but by staying in the discomfort long enough to discover the way forward. Adaptability isn't magic. It's movement, reflection, and persistence. And eventually, it becomes mastery.

The Key Takeaway—Adaptation is a Skill, Not a Talent

This study challenges a common assumption that only certain people are naturally adaptable. The goldfish wasn't inherently prepared for land navigation—but it learned.

Similarly, solid leaders are not born knowing how to handle crises, new roles, or industry shifts—they develop the ability by engaging in discomfort, observing patterns, and adjusting and persevering.

At some point, we all find ourselves in foreign environments—new leadership roles, major life transitions, or challenges we never anticipated. The question isn't whether you belong in that space—it's whether you're willing to learn how to navigate it. After all, even a fish out of water can learn to drive.



Chapter 29

THE SKILL OF WELL-BEING

Flourishing isn't a mystery. It's not something reserved for the lucky or the genetically blessed. In a world where stress and survival often dominate the agenda, new research reminds us that thriving is not about chance—it's about choice. In *Activities for Flourishing: An Evidence-Based Guide*, Harvard researcher Tyler J. VanderWeele shows that well-being is a craft, not a coincidence, built one intentional action at a time.³⁴

The Myth of Passive Well-Being

Many people believe that flourishing—achieving a state of deep well-being, purpose, and joy—just happens to certain people. Some assume it's purely genetic; others believe it is a matter of luck, wealth, or external circumstances. But VanderWeele's research dismantles that myth by showing that well-being is a skill, a practice, and a set of habits that can be cultivated.

The study outlines specific cognitive and behavioral activities, as well as institutional and relational commitments, that scientifically contribute to human flourishing. Among them:

³⁴ Tyler J. VanderWeele, *Activities for Flourishing: An Evidence-Based Guide* (Cambridge: Harvard University Human Flourishing Program, 2023).

- Gratitude exercises that improve happiness, mental health, and even sleep quality.
- Acts of kindness that increase social connection and emotional resilience.
- Job-crafting strategies that elevate satisfaction and engagement in work.
- The power of religious community to enhance meaning, hope, and longevity.

If science tells us how to be happier, healthier, and more fulfilled, then why do so many people remain stuck? We often resist change, even when it's beneficial. We undervalue small, consistent habits in favor of big, dramatic transformations. We prioritize short-term relief (distraction, entertainment) over long-term flourishing.

This is where leaders, organizations, and individuals must become intentional. Applying research-backed strategies isn't just about personal well-being—it's about creating cultures, workplaces, and systems where people can truly thrive.

What Research Teaches Us About the Path to Flourishing

The key findings from the study point to four major areas of focus:

1. Cognitive Practices: Training the Mind for Well-Being

Mindset matters. The research identifies simple, powerful ways to shift thought patterns for greater flourishing.

- *Gratitude Journaling* – Writing down what you're grateful for weekly has been shown to increase happiness and decrease stress.
- *Savoring the Moment* – Intentionally focusing on positive experiences increases overall life satisfaction.
- *Best Possible Self Exercise* – Imagining your ideal future leads to increased motivation and well-being.

2. Behavioral Practices: Actions That Lead to Flourishing

What we do shapes who we become. The study emphasizes that well-being is not just about thinking differently—it's about living differently.

- *Using Signature Strengths* – Identifying and actively applying personal strengths improves confidence and joy.
- *Acts of Kindness* – Engaging in generous actions once a week in a focused way leads to measurable increases in happiness.

- *Volunteering* – Regular service to others has been linked to higher life satisfaction, reduced depression, and even longer lifespan.

3. Relational and Institutional Commitments: The Role of Community

We don't thrive alone. Some of the strongest indicators of well-being come from relational and social commitments. Marriage and strong relationships are highly correlated with happiness, resilience, and longevity. Meaningful work (as opposed to just having a job) significantly enhances life satisfaction. Religious participation is one of the most consistent predictors of lower depression, greater meaning, and improved overall health.

4. Addressing Psychological Distress: When Health Feels Out of Reach

Not everyone starts at the same baseline. The research highlights structured interventions that can help when individuals face struggles. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) workbooks have been shown to help with anxiety and depression. Forgiveness practices reduce anger, stress, and emotional burdens, leading to increased hope and peace. Building resilience strategies helps mitigate the impact of trauma and life challenges.

Leadership and Flourishing: Applying What Works

Flourishing isn't just personal—it's organizational and cultural. Leaders must recognize that research-backed strategies for well-being aren't just 'nice to have'—they are essential for performance, engagement, and retention.

Teams that apply gratitude, kindness, and purpose-driven work thrive more than those that don't. Organizations that encourage work-life balance, job satisfaction, and relational well-being perform better. Leaders who model evidence-based flourishing strategies create cultures that support resilience and success.

If research shows us how to flourish, the question isn't 'Does it work?' but 'Are we willing to apply it?' Human flourishing is not accidental—it is intentional. The evidence is clear. The path to a more fulfilled, resilient, and thriving life is available to us all. But it requires a shift—from passively hoping to actively following what the research says works



Chapter 30

GENERATIONAL HUMILITY

For thousands of years, one complaint has remained constant: "Kids these days..." In their 2019 study, *Kids These Days: Why the Youth of Today Seem Lacking*, researchers John Protzko and Jonathan Schooler found that every generation believes the youth of their time are worse than previous ones. The study examined why people tend to assume that respect, intelligence, and work ethic are in decline. The findings revealed two major reasons for this "kids these days" effect.³⁵

1. *Projection Bias* – People assume that their own skills and values were common in their youth, but are now missing in younger generations.
2. *Memory Distortion* – People compare today's youth to an idealized version of the past, forgetting that their own generation was once subject to the same criticisms.

This research confirms a truth that many leaders miss: our perception of generational decline is often an illusion. The real danger is not with "kids these days," but with leaders who dismiss them instead of seeking to understand them.

³⁵ John Protzko and Jonathan W. Schooler, "Kids These Days: Why the Youth of Today Seem Lacking," *Science Advances* 5:10 (2019): 1-6.

The Cost of Generational Arrogance

Every generation sees itself as the last one that "had it right." But history proves that youth skepticism is often misplaced. In Ancient Greece (600 BC), elders complained that young people were disrespectful and lazy. In England during the 1600's one leader wrote that "youth were never more sawcie" and no longer honored their elders. Today, many assume that young people are too dependent on technology, lack resilience, or don't work as hard as previous generations.

Yet, the same criticisms have been made for thousands of years, despite the fact that each new generation has advanced society in ways the previous ones never imagined. The danger for leaders is believing the illusion—assuming that younger generations are incapable, lazy, or morally deficient. When leaders fail to respect the next generation, they lose the ability to influence it.

Leadership Requires Curiosity, Not Condescension

The best leaders don't scoff at new generations—they seek to understand them. Instead of assuming "young people don't work as hard anymore," humble leaders ask: What is different about the way they work? What are they prioritizing that my generation didn't? What strengths do they bring that I might be overlooking?

Instead of saying "they have it too easy", wise leaders ask: What new challenges do they face that my generation didn't? What are they navigating that I never had to? How can I bridge the gap instead of reinforcing it? Leaders who approach younger generations with humility and curiosity become mentors instead of critics. They gain trust, rather than losing influence.

Every Generation Needs the One Before It

History shows that progress happens when generations learn from each other—not when they stand in opposition. Older generations bring experience, stability, and wisdom. Younger generations bring fresh ideas, adaptability, and innovation. The best leadership happens when these strengths work together.

Leaders who refuse to engage with younger generations risk becoming irrelevant. Those who remain curious, open, and willing to learn continue to lead well into the future. If history has taught us anything, it's that the world isn't getting worse—it's changing. And flexible leaders don't fear change. They adapt, listen, and stay curious.



Chapter 31

LOVE IN THE FOOTNOTES

Somewhere in the dense equations and technical jargon of a research paper on minimally nonlinear irreversible refrigerators, a hidden moment of human warmth lay waiting to be discovered.

In his paper published in *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and Its Applications*, Rui Long, a Ph.D. student at Huazhong University of Science and Technology, embedded a marriage proposal in the acknowledgments section.³⁶

“Rui Long wants to thank, in particular, the patience, care, and support from Panpan Mao over the past years. Will you marry me?” Panpan Mao did read the paper—and she said yes. The moment is charming, but it also highlights that the most important details in life are often hidden in plain sight.

The High Cost of Overlooking Details

Attention to detail is not just an academic virtue—it is a fundamental skill that separates success from failure. In medicine, a misplaced decimal point can mean the difference between life and death. In engineering, a tiny oversight can lead to structural failure. In leadership,

³⁶ Rui Long, “Optimization Performance of a Minimally Nonlinear Irreversible Refrigerator during a Finite-Time Operation,” *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and Its Applications* 444 (2016): 605–611.

missed details in contracts, decisions, or conversations can unravel years of work.

The problem? Most of us skim. We skim emails. We skim documents. We skim conversations—half-listening, already forming our response. And in the process, we miss things that matter—from critical information to once-in-a-lifetime moments hidden in the margins.

The Leadership Lesson—The Details Are Where the Truth Lives

Leadership requires the ability to pay attention to the details. Discerning leaders notice what their teams aren't saying, not just what they are. They recognize shifts in morale, small inconsistencies, and hidden opportunities. They understand that what's buried in the fine print—of reports, conversations, or culture—often determines success or failure. Ignoring details can be costly. Paying attention to them is a competitive advantage.

Learning to Read Between the Lines

How many moments do we miss—simply because we weren't paying close enough attention? A passing comment from a colleague that signals deeper frustration. A subtle shift in a team's energy that hints at burnout. An opportunity disguised as an ordinary task. The best leaders train themselves to read between the lines. They assume that important things are often hidden beneath the obvious—not just in research papers, but in life itself.

What Are We Missing?

Rui Long's proposal was clever. But had his partner skimmed past it, the moment would have been lost. How many things in life do we miss because we weren't paying close enough attention? Success, insight, and even love often hide in the details. The question is—are we looking closely enough to see them?



Chapter 32

A HEALTHY DISTRUST OF OURSELVES

Most of us trust our own memories. We assume that if we remember something, it must be true. We believe that our perceptions give us an accurate representation of the world. We have confidence that what we think we know is correct. But what if our memories and perceptions are more fragile, malleable, and deceptive than we realize?

A study published in *Sleep Deprivation and False Memories* explored how sleep deprivation impacts false memories. The researchers found that sleep-deprived individuals were significantly more likely to misremember events, especially when exposed to misleading information.³⁷

- Participants who got five or fewer hours of sleep were more likely to claim they had seen a news video that never existed.
- When subjected to a misinformation task, sleep-deprived participants incorporated false details into their memories more often than rested participants.
- Sleep deprivation impaired the brain's ability to distinguish between real and imagined events.

³⁷ Steven J. Frenda, Christina M. Patihis, Elizabeth F. Loftus, Holly C. Lewis, and Kimberly M. Fenn, "Sleep Deprivation and False Memories," *Psychological Science* 25:5 (2014): 1674–1681.

This study confirms a reality we often ignore: our minds are not recording devices—they are reconstruction machines. And like any machine, they can be tampered with, influenced, and led astray.

The Brain's Faulty Hard Drive

The idea that sleep deprivation affects memory isn't surprising. But what's more alarming is that our memories can be altered even when we are well-rested. We don't just forget things—we remember things that never happened. We fill in gaps in our memories with assumptions. We are easily influenced by external information, even when it's false.

In some studies, participants were shown doctored photographs of childhood events that never took place. After multiple exposures, some of them genuinely believed the event had happened—even though it was completely fabricated.³⁸

This has serious implications for leadership, decision-making, and justice. Eyewitness testimonies have been the leading cause of wrongful convictions—not because people are lying, but because they are absolutely convinced, they are telling the truth.

Why Leaders Should Be Skeptical of Their Own Minds

If memory is fallible, if perception is shaped by fatigue, bias, and misinformation—then leaders must develop a healthy distrust of their own thinking. Have you ever made a decision based on faulty recall? Have you ever assumed something was true, only to realize later you were wrong? Have you ever been absolutely convinced of a conversation, an event, or a decision—only to have the facts contradict you?

This isn't an argument for self-doubt—it's an argument for self-awareness. The best leaders fact-check their own memories. They assume their first instinct isn't always right. They seek outside perspectives because they know their minds are capable of error.

A World Built on Faulty Perceptions

The danger isn't just in personal memory—it's in how entire systems are built on flawed human perception. History is often written by the winners, not the witnesses. Leaders make policies based on inaccurate

³⁸ Kimberley A. Wade, Maryanne Garry, Joanne Read, and Stephen J. Lindsay, "A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Lies: Using False Photographs to Create False Childhood Memories," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 9:3 (2002): 597–603.

reports and incomplete information. People build worldviews on half-truths, misinformation, and personal bias.

A leader who understands the limits of perception leads differently. They ask more questions before accepting an easy answer. They double-check assumptions before making a major decision. They create cultures where challenge is welcomed—because they know groupthink is dangerous.

Trust, But Verify

Our minds are remarkable, but they are not perfect. The lesson isn't to distrust everything—it's to recognize that even our most vivid memories and firmest convictions should be held with humility.

Leaders who understand this make better decisions. They rely less on gut feelings and more on cross-checked facts. They know that the brain—like any system—can be hacked, biased, and misled. And they lead with the wisdom to trust—but always verify.



Chapter 33

DR. SEUSS ON LOSING WELL

*“Wherever you fly, you’ll be the best.
Wherever you go, you will top all the rest.
Except when you don’t.
Because sometimes you won’t.”*

Dr. Seuss, the mastermind behind some of the most beloved children’s books of all time, knew failure well. Before his success, he was rejected by 27 publishers. His personal life was marred by tragedy, including the devastating loss of his first wife to suicide.

And yet, resilience is woven through his words. His books don’t just entertain—they prepare. They teach children that life won’t always go as planned, that failure isn’t an anomaly but an inevitability, and that the real test isn’t whether we win or lose—it’s how we respond.³⁹

I see this firsthand in my family. They don’t love this quote, and to be honest, neither do I. Whether we’re playing Minecraft survival, Uno, or our family’s favorite, Dutch Blitz, we are working on this together. Because losing well doesn’t come naturally—it has to be learned. And in

³⁹ Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go!* (New York: Random House, 1990). I owe this insightful leadership lesson from Dr. Seuss to my friend and colleague Bill Mesaeh, who often shares this book with those he mentors.

leadership, as in life, the ability to fail boldly may be one of the most important skills we develop.

Resilience: The Art of Losing Well

As seasoned warriors and leaders, you already know that character is shaped far more in our defeats than in our victories. Success is easy. It validates us. It rewards us. But failure? Failure exposes us. It forces growth, demanding that we confront who we really are.

The question isn't whether we will fail. It's whether we will lean away from it or into it. Do we retreat when things don't go our way? Do we let rejection define us? Or do we get back up, adapt, and move forward?

Lessons from Those Who Refused to Quit

History is full of people who failed forward. Abraham Lincoln lost multiple elections before becoming president. Thomas Edison famously said, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." J.K. Rowling was a struggling single mother rejected by numerous publishers before *Harry Potter* became a global phenomenon. These weren't people who avoided failure. They were people who pressed into it and came out stronger.

Fail Boldly, Fail Forward

No one likes losing. No one enjoys setbacks. But the *way* we respond to failure determines who we become. Weak leaders avoid failure at all costs. Average leaders endure failure but don't learn from it. Excellent leaders embrace failure as fuel for growth. When you find yourself knocked down, remember: your posture toward hardship is the greatest predictor of your future strength.

Final Thought: Lean Hard Into the Hard Stuff

Hardships aren't detours. They are the road. And the best versions of ourselves? They don't emerge from perfect wins or easy victories. They are hammered out in the struggle. In the losses. In the moments where we face the truth, dust ourselves off, and move forward—wiser, stronger, and more resilient than before. So don't lean away. Lean in. Because the person you are becoming is forged in the fire of the things that didn't go as planned.



Chapter 34

RELEARNING TO SUBTRACT

When something isn't working, our first instinct is almost always the same: add more. More tasks, more rules, more effort. But what if the real solution isn't doing more—it's doing less?

A recent study published in *Nature* and highlighted by *Science News* revealed something fascinating about human problem-solving: we instinctively default to adding instead of subtracting. When faced with a challenge, people pile on more solutions, features, and complexity—when often the best answer would be to remove something instead.⁴⁰

Redesigning a structure? We add beams instead of removing weight. Improving a schedule? We cram in more tasks instead of eliminating the ones that don't matter. Fixing a problem at work? We invent new policies rather than stripping away the ones causing confusion. Subtraction isn't our natural instinct; it's a move we have to consciously consider. And this tendency runs deeper than design or logistics—it's wired into how we think, decide, and lead.

We're conditioned to believe that more is better. More responsibilities signal success. More rules promise order. More meetings imply productivity. More possessions suggest fulfillment. But often,

⁴⁰ Gabrielle S. Adams, Benjamin A. Converse, Andrew H. Hales, and Leidy E. Klotz, "People Systematically Overlook Subtractive Changes," *Nature* 592:7853 (2021): 258–261.

more creates noise rather than value. We don't need more productivity hacks—we need fewer distractions. We don't need more work hours—we need smarter energy management. We don't need more commitments—we need clarity about what matters most.

This bias toward addition is so deeply ingrained we barely notice it. And that's the most dangerous kind of bias—the one that shapes our lives without our awareness.

Leaders encounter this trap constantly. When systems falter, the instinct is to introduce more strategies, more initiatives, more oversight. But the best leaders know that progress often comes through subtraction. Steve Jobs revived Apple not by creating more products, but by eliminating 70% of its failing lineup. Skillful military strategists simplify their plans, not complicate them. Effective organizations don't just focus on what to start—they rigorously focus on what to stop.

True leadership requires the courage to cut. Since subtraction isn't instinctive, it must be trained. Before adding anything new, ask: What can I remove instead? When facing complexity, challenge yourself to simplify. Audit your commitments, processes, and strategies—what's adding weight without delivering value?

We think we need more knowledge, more resources, more time. But maybe we don't need more at all. Maybe we just need less of what's holding us back. Sometimes the real breakthrough doesn't come from doing more—it comes from daring to do less.



Chapter 35

THE OSTRICH IN THE OFFICE

Under the gray skies of the British countryside, a team of researchers studied a phenomenon amusing and unexpectedly insightful: ostriches flirting with humans. Norma Bubier and her colleagues observed the curious courtship behaviors of these towering birds—behaviors that, rather than being directed toward fellow ostriches, were increasingly aimed at the farmhands tending them.

In their 1998 study, *Courtship Behaviour of Ostriches (*Struthio camelus*) Towards Humans Under Farming Conditions in Britain*, the researchers documented a consistent pattern of ostriches displaying mating dances, booming vocalizations, and elaborate postures toward their human caretakers.⁴¹

The implications, though humorous at first glance, touched on the social and environmental cues that influence animal behavior. In environments where other ostriches were limited or unavailable, these birds adapted—misidentifying humans as viable partners. The researchers didn't simply laugh at the phenomenon; they explored its roots in animal psychology, domestication stress, and social deprivation. What began as a quirky footnote in the annals of bird science raised

⁴¹ Norma E. Bubier, Charles G.M. Paxton, Phil Bowers, and D. Charles Deeming, "Courtship Behaviour of Ostriches (*Struthio camelus*) Towards Humans Under Farming Conditions in Britain," *British Poultry Science* 39:4 (1998): 477–481.

broader questions about how we raise, care for, and interact with non-human species.

But beneath the surface lies another principle: proximity can distort perception. The ostriches weren't selecting based on compatibility—they were selecting based on availability. In the same way, our human workplaces are full of unspoken dynamics where closeness and familiarity can blur lines, create unhealthy attachments, and lead to misplaced affections.

Emotional connection, left unexamined, can grow in the soil of proximity rather than purpose. The ostrich reminds us that just because someone is near, doesn't mean they're right. In leadership and life, we must discern between attention and intention—and resist the subtle gravitational pull of the nearest option when it's far from the ethical one.



Chapter 36

LEADING THROUGH INSECURITY

If you feel inadequate as a leader, you are in good company. History remembers George Washington as a decisive leader, the first president of the United States, and the general who led an outmatched colonial army to victory against the greatest military force of his time. But Washington himself never saw his leadership as inevitable—or even sufficient.

When he was chosen as commander of the Continental Army, he didn't meet the moment with bravado or self-congratulation. Instead, he admitted: "While I realize the arduous nature of the task which is conferred on me and feel my inability to perform it...I wish there may not be reason for regretting the choice. All I can promise is only that which can be accomplished by an honest zeal."⁴²

He wrestled with his own shortcomings. He questioned whether he was the right man for the job. But instead of letting those doubts

⁴² George Washington, *Letter to the Continental Congress Accepting Appointment as Commander in Chief*, June 16, 1775, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. 3 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931–1944): 302–304.

paralyze him, he anchored himself in honest zeal—a deep commitment to serve with integrity, effort, and an unshakable sense of duty.⁴³

If leadership ever makes you feel unqualified, uncertain, or out of your depth, you're not alone. Some of history's most effective leaders have felt the same way. The difference is that they didn't let it stop them.

The Burden of Leadership Is Meant to Be Heavy

Washington understood something that many leaders today struggle to accept: the weight of leadership is not a sign that you're failing—it's proof that you care.

The people who feel no insecurity, no hesitation, and no deep sense of responsibility may not be the ones best prepared for leadership. It is often those who recognize the gravity of their role, who wrestle honestly with their limitations, and who feel the full weight of what has been entrusted to them—these are the ones who rise. Washington's hesitations were not weaknesses. They were evidence that he was precisely the kind of leader the moment required.

Self-Doubt vs. Self-Defeat

There is a fine line between humility and hesitation—between recognizing your shortcomings and letting them rule you. Washington walked this line carefully. He never saw himself as the best general, nor did he believe himself to be an infallible president. But he did not allow self-doubt to turn into self-defeat.

Instead, he moved forward with the resources he had. He listened to counsel. He made decisions with the information available. He led not because he was certain of success, but because he was certain the cause was worth leading.

This is what separates those who shrink back from responsibility and those who embrace it. Insecurity whispers, "Someone else is better for this." Courage replies, "Perhaps. But right now, the responsibility is mine."

⁴³ George Washington, *First Inaugural Address*, April 30, 1789, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, vol. 30 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931–1944): 292–295. Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010). Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

The Commitment to Honest Zeal

Washington never promised perfection. He never claimed to have all the answers. But what he did promise was honest zeal—to lead with conviction, to serve with integrity, to give everything he had even when he feared it wouldn't be enough.

That same promise is one every leader can make. You don't have to be fearless to lead. You just have to be willing. You don't have to be the smartest person in the room. You just have to keep learning. You don't have to have unshakable confidence. You just have to keep showing up.

Because the truth is, no leader ever feels entirely ready. But the ones who change history—the ones who leave a mark—are the ones who, despite their doubts, choose to step forward anyway.

Lead Anyway

Washington's greatest act of leadership was not in his strategy or his victories, but in his willingness to bear the responsibility even when he wasn't sure he was the right man for the job. If leadership feels heavy, good. It means you understand its weight. It means you are carrying it seriously.

So let the doubts come—but don't let them stop you. Lead anyway. History is not shaped by those who never wrestle with insecurity. It is shaped by those who, despite it, choose to lead.



Chapter 37

FINDING THE LARGEST PLANT IN THE WORLD

The greatest danger isn't what we know—it's what we never realize we don't know. In 2022, researchers led by Jane M. Edgeloe uncovered something extraordinary hidden in plain sight: the largest known plant on Earth. For centuries, scientists believed the seagrass meadows of Shark Bay, Western Australia, were made up of thousands of separate plants. But deeper study uncovered the truth—it was all one vast, interconnected organism, stretching more than 180 kilometers.⁴⁴

It wasn't until 2022 that the largest plant in the world was discovered. This shattered long-held assumptions and served as a powerful reminder that even when we are certain we understand, reality may be far bigger, deeper, and more connected than we ever imagined.

We move through life assuming we see the full picture. Leaders guide teams. Scientists map ecosystems. People navigate relationships and careers; confident they grasp what is happening around them. Yet history reminds us that the greatest breakthroughs—from realizing the Earth orbits the sun to discovering invisible microbes—came not from

⁴⁴ Jane M. Edgeloe, Elizabeth A. Sinclair, Martin F. Breed, Catherine J. Fraser, Matt A. Vanderklift, and Gary A. Kendrick, "Extreme Clonality in a Resilient Seagrass Dominates a Marine Environment," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 289:1977 (June, 2022): 1-10.

certainty, but from questioning. From wondering what might lie just beyond the borders of what we think we know.

The seagrass of Shark Bay invites a deeper humility. What assumptions have we built our organizations, relationships, and self-understanding upon? What vast realities have we overlooked because we stopped asking questions? In leadership, it's tempting to believe we've "figured things out." In life, it's easy to mistake familiarity for understanding. But true growth comes from remaining curious—always willing to peel back the layers of what seems obvious.

The scientists who discovered the world's largest plant didn't just find a biological wonder—they modeled a mindset essential for anyone seeking to thrive in a changing world. What if the things we believe are isolated are actually deeply connected? What if our limitations are not external, but hidden in our assumptions?

The leaders, thinkers, and communities that will shape the future won't be those who cling to their current knowledge. They will be the ones humble enough to recognize how much remains unseen, and bold enough to keep searching.



Chapter 38

THE NEUROSCIENCE OF A LIE

The most dangerous lies are the ones we barely notice telling. Dishonesty doesn't usually start with a scandal. It starts with a small compromise—the kind we justify, excuse, or ignore. But every tolerated lie sets the stage for a bigger one, numbing the conscience until what once felt wrong feels normal.

In a study published in *Nature Neuroscience*, researchers uncovered the biological reason why this happens. Using functional MRI scans, they found that repeated acts of dishonesty dull the brain's emotional response, specifically in the amygdala—the area responsible for guilt, fear, and emotional alarm. The more someone lies, the less discomfort they feel. Over time, dishonesty becomes easier, more natural—not because the situation changes, but because the conscience does.⁴⁵ Lying, in other words, numbs the conscience.

What this study confirms is something history and personal experience have long hinted at: dishonesty is not usually an abrupt collapse, but a slow erosion. A small lie today makes a bigger lie tomorrow easier. A half-truth to avoid conflict today lowers the threshold for deception tomorrow. Compromise is not static—it's cumulative.

⁴⁵ Neil Garrett, Stephanie C. Lazzaro, Dan Ariely, and Tali Sharot, "The Brain Adapts to Dishonesty," *Nature Neuroscience* 19:12 (2016): 1727–1732.

Major scandals almost never begin with a giant leap into corruption. They begin with small tolerated concessions. A leader adjusts a number to meet a metric. A team member hides a mistake to protect their reputation. A culture allows “harmless” exaggerations to creep into its language. Little by little, the standard shifts, and the line between truth and deception blurs until no one can see it anymore.

This numbing effect is especially dangerous in leadership. Leaders set the emotional tone for truth in a community, and when the standard bends at the top, it bends everywhere else. Garrett and his team found that dishonesty snowballs most when it personally benefits the one telling the lie. As leaders become desensitized, their actions teach others to tolerate what once would have been unthinkable. When lies are justified for a "good cause," when truth is trimmed to avoid discomfort, when ethical shortcuts are overlooked because "everyone does it," a culture of deception quietly takes root.

Unchecked dishonesty is not just a moral failure—it is organizational decay in slow motion. But if dishonesty grows through repetition, then integrity must grow the same way. Truth-telling must be a discipline, practiced when it's hard, guarded when it would be easier to look away. Leaders who build cultures of honesty do so in small, daily choices: refusing to shade the truth even when it's convenient, encouraging open dialogue even when it's uncomfortable, holding the line when no one else is watching.

Integrity is never built in grand moments of public scrutiny; it is shaped in thousands of unseen choices when the stakes seem small. It's preserved when leaders listen to the quiet alarms of their conscience—and refuse to let them go silent.

The study on dishonesty leaves no middle ground—we are always drifting either toward deeper truth or deeper deception. If integrity takes effort, dishonesty happens by default. If small lies erode character, small commitments to truth can rebuild it.

Every leader needs to ask: Am I on a slope toward greater truth—or lesser? Are today's small compromises planting the seeds for tomorrow's failures? Am I creating a culture where truth is rewarded, or one where it is quietly sacrificed? No one wakes up one day as a liar. It happens slowly. Quietly. Almost imperceptibly. And if we fail to actively build integrity, one day we'll realize we lost it long before we ever noticed it was slipping away.



Chapter 39

WHEN CHANCE ISN'T COMPLETELY CHANCE

A coin flip is the universal symbol of pure chance. 50/50. Heads or tails. A perfect, unbiased mechanism for decision-making—or so we've believed.

But in a comprehensive study that included 350,757 coin flips, researchers found otherwise. After analyzing hundreds of thousands of tosses, they found that a coin is slightly more likely to land on the same side it started. Specifically, the probability was 50.8%—a small, but statistically real, bias.⁴⁶

At first glance, a 0.8% edge seems insignificant. But it challenges the deeply ingrained assumption that coin tosses are perfectly fair. It reminds us that systems we trust to be purely random often carry hidden patterns. And when you recognize even a slight bias, you hold an advantage that others miss.

This insight stretches far beyond coins. In leadership and decision-making, recognizing where supposed randomness hides predictable forces can be the difference between reacting blindly and moving strategically. It's not about manipulating chance—it's about seeing it

⁴⁶ Persi Diaconis, Susan Holmes, and Richard Montgomery, "Dynamical Bias in the Coin Toss," *SIAM Review* 49:2 (2007): 211–235.

clearly, understanding it, and using that knowledge to adjust your approach.

The question isn't just about the physics of flipping a coin. The real question is: how many other things in life do we assume are left to chance, when they are shaped by patterns we don't yet see? And once we do see them, how does that change the way we operate?

Chance isn't always chance. Knowing the data—understanding the hidden patterns—shifts everything. If you're in a high-stakes game where the margin between winning and losing is razor-thin, that 0.8% advantage matters. In business, companies that adjust even slightly based on data outperform their competitors. In leadership, recognizing behavioral patterns leads to stronger teams and better decisions. In elite competition, micro-adjustments separate gold medals from second-place finishes.

A slight advantage, repeated over time, compounds into something unstoppable. The world is built on small margins. In sports, it's the fraction of a second at the finish line. In investing, it's the slightly higher return compounded over decades. In negotiations, it's the tiny shift in leverage that changes who walks away with the better deal. Those who understand where the edges are—even the smallest ones—operate differently. They refuse to leave outcomes to chance when they don't have to.

The study of the coin flip reveals something powerful: when you understand the pattern, you adjust. If you knew a coin starting heads-up gave you a 50.8% chance of staying heads, would you ignore it? If you knew a competitor had a slight but consistent advantage, would you keep playing the same way—or would you change your strategy? When you realize that randomness isn't as random as it seems, you start playing the game differently.

The best leaders, the sharpest competitors, the clearest thinkers—they don't assume chance governs everything. They look deeper. They search for the hidden structures. They find the slight edges and press into them. Because over time, those micro-advantages don't just add up—they redefine outcomes.

The edge is there. Always. For those willing to see it. The real question is: where are you leaving it on the table?



Chapter 40

THE LEMON JUICE BANK ROBBER

In 1995, a man walked into a Pittsburgh bank with lemon juice smeared on his face. He wasn't robbing the place on a dare, nor was he mentally unstable. He was convinced the lemon juice would make him invisible to the security cameras. After being promptly arrested, he remained baffled—he had tested the theory at home with a Polaroid and was certain the science checked out. That moment of absurd confidence became the strange spark for one of the most cited psychological studies in modern history.

David Dunning and Justin Kruger, psychologists at Cornell University, picked up the thread. They conducted a series of experiments testing people's self-assessments in humor, logical reasoning, and grammar. What they found was equal parts enlightening and unsettling: those who performed the worst consistently rated themselves as well above average. Their ignorance didn't just affect their ability to succeed—it blinded them from seeing how badly they were failing.⁴⁷

The now-famous Dunning-Kruger effect showed that the same skills required to produce a correct response are often the very skills needed to recognize a good answer when you see one. And so, the

⁴⁷ David Dunning and Justin Kruger, "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77:6 (1999): 1121–1134.

paradox emerges: incompetence robs us not only of the capacity to do well but also of the insight to recognize when we aren't.

In leadership circles, this study is no longer niche—it's shorthand. We toss around “Dunning-Kruger” as a cautionary label. But the real value of the research isn't just in identifying others who fall prey to overconfidence. It's the quiet warning to ourselves.

Leadership demands a ruthless commitment to self-introspection. The greatest danger isn't ignorance—its ignorance wrapped in certainty. One of the marks of wise leaders is their ability to assess themselves honestly, seek feedback, and recalibrate their sense of competence with humility.



Chapter 41

UNDERESTIMATING WET UNDERWEAR

It's not frostbite that gets you—it's the wet underwear. A study by Martha Kold Bakkevig and Ruth Nielsen explored the impact of wearing wet underwear in cold conditions. Surprisingly, the findings weren't just about physical endurance—they demonstrated how discomfort disrupts focus, drains energy, and impairs function long before actual failure occurs.⁴⁸

The research showed that even though core body temperature remained stable, participants experienced significantly higher perceived discomfort, stress, and distraction. They weren't freezing to death, but they felt colder, more miserable, and more preoccupied with their discomfort. This is where the lesson emerges: small discomforts may not immediately stop you, but they will quietly erode your effectiveness.

The Slow Drain of Unnoticed Disruptions

Rarely do people collapse under one massive failure. Instead, they are slowly worn down by repeated, seemingly minor issues: The leader who constantly faces small interruptions never has time for deep work. The team that operates under mild but chronic tension eventually disengages.

⁴⁸ Martha Kold Bakkevig and Ruth Nielsen, "Impact of Wet Underwear on Thermoregulatory Responses and Thermal Comfort in the Cold," *Ergonomics* 37:8 (1994): 1375–1389.

The individual who ignores small health habits finds themselves inexplicably exhausted.

Like wet clothing in the cold, these small disruptions don't seem like significant threats—but they create an unrelenting drain on focus, resilience, and effectiveness.

Misjudging What's Holding You Back

One of the most deceptive things about small stressors is that they don't seem worth fixing. They feel tolerable—so we tolerate them. A slightly inefficient process is ignored because “we don't have time to fix it.” A minor unresolved conflict in a team is dismissed as “just how things are.” A leader's constant fatigue is brushed aside because “this is just the cost of success.”

But over time, these small things accumulate into exhaustion, disengagement, and inefficiency. No one blames wet underwear for hypothermia—but it might be the very thing that made someone too distracted, too exhausted, or too slow to react before real danger arrived.

The Fix—Proactively Removing Unnecessary Drains

If discomfort erodes focus, then the best leaders must learn to identify and remove the hidden drains:

- *Audit your energy* – What small things are frustrating, distracting, or slowing you down every day?
- *Check team engagement* – Are people dealing with chronic minor frustrations that are reducing their motivation?
- *Identify tolerances that shouldn't exist* – Just because you *can* operate with inefficiency, stress, or discomfort doesn't mean you *should*.

Most leaders aren't undone by one catastrophic failure—they are undone by a slow, unnoticed erosion of energy, focus, and resilience. It's not always the big storms that take you down. Sometimes, it's just wet underwear.



Chapter 42

THE LISTENING GAP

When we zone out mid-conversation, we're probably not daydreaming about winning the lottery or climbing Mount Everest. We're thinking about tacos. Or that email we forgot to send. Or whether the dog looked sad when you left for work.

Research shows that when our minds drift, we almost always spiral into future planning—unfinished tasks, errands, awkward conversations we still need to have. In other words, most of us don't get distracted by brilliance. We get distracted by grocery lists and guilt.⁴⁹ We think we're listening. Mostly, we're just really busy somewhere else.

Communication takes up 70–80% of our day. We speak, we hear, we respond. Yet, the average person only remembers 17–25% of what they listen to. One reason is that while the average American speaks at 125 words per minute, our brains can process around 450. That leaves a massive gap—mental bandwidth that often gets filled with daydreaming, planning our grocery list, or drafting our next clever reply.⁵⁰ But let's stop and ask: What does that mental drifting cost us?

⁴⁹ Jonathan Smallwood and Jonathan W. Schooler, "The Restless Mind," *Psychological Bulletin* 132:6 (2006): 946–958.

⁵⁰ Phillip L. Hunsaker and Tony W. Alessandra, *The Art of Managing People: How to Build a Better Workplace and Relationships* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 28–32.

The Pain of Not Listening

Stephen Covey once said, “Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” Listening is about more than just words. When someone speaks, they’re offering a part of themselves—their ideas, their fears, their identity. It’s a way of saying, “Here’s who I am.”⁵¹

When we fail to listen, it’s not just words we miss. We send a silent but resounding message: “I don’t value you. I don’t see you. I don’t care about what you have to say.” And that hurts.

In contrast, listening with full attention is one of the deepest acts of respect we can offer another person. It says without words: “I value you. I see you. You matter.”

Why Listening is Hard

Listening is tough because it requires humility. To truly listen, we have to set aside our own desire to speak, to be right, to be heard. We have to place someone else above ourselves. And that’s not easy.

But the rewards of listening are significant. Doug Larson put it this way: “Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you’d have preferred to talk.” Listening isn’t just about the other person—it’s how we learn, how we grow, and how we become better leaders, partners, and friends.⁵²

The Listening Revolution

So, how do we grow in this area? How do we build a culture of listening—in our families, our teams, and ourselves? It starts with small, intentional steps.

- *Be mindful of your mental bandwidth* – Pay attention to where your thoughts drift during conversations.
- *Prepare to listen* – Research shows that mental activity prior to listening increases our readiness to absorb what we hear.
- *Ask for feedback* – Have the courage to ask someone close to you: “How good of a listener am I, on a scale of 1 to 10?”

⁵¹ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Free Press, 1989), 239.

⁵² Doug Larson, quoted in *Forbes Book of Business Quotations: 14,173 Thoughts on the Business of Life*, ed. Edward C. Bursk and Robert H. Parks (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 1997).

A worthy goal for leaders is to become an elite listener. Not just a good one. Not someone who merely nods and offers the right responses. But the kind of person who listens deeply—who hears both what is said and what is left unsaid—and responds in ways that build trust, respect, and genuine connection.

So, here's my challenge—let's make listening a core value. Let's put in the work to become leaders who hear not just with our ears, but with our hearts. Because in a world full of noise, being truly heard is one of the greatest gifts we can offer.



Chapter 43

THE RHYTHM OF THE MIND

There's a reason people say, "sleep on it." Some problems seem insurmountable at night, only to feel more manageable in the morning. A recent study from University College London confirms what many have suspected—our mental health and well-being fluctuate throughout the day, peaking in the morning and declining as the evening wears on. Decision-making, clarity, and resilience tend to be strongest in the early hours, while fatigue and emotional weight settle in later.⁵³

It's not that challenges disappear in the morning, but something shifts. What once felt overwhelming now seems workable. The mind, given space to reset, finds new angles and untapped reserves of patience. This ebb and flow is more than just a curiosity—it's a rhythm worth noticing. Because so much of life, both personally and professionally, hinges on timing.

Timing Matters More Than We Realize

Not all moments are created equal. Just as the study found that mental health and decision-making are more stable earlier in the day, experience tells us that some conversations, decisions, and efforts are more effective when aligned with the right moment. Addressing a complex

⁵³ Lucy Wyatt and Victoria Garfield, "Mental Health Is Worse at Night: Large-Scale Analysis Confirms Diurnal Variation in Mood," *The Conversation* (January, 2023).

issue when energy is high leads to clarity. Trying to force progress when fatigue has set in often leads to frustration. Recognizing this isn't about avoidance—it's about strategy.

The Mind Resets, Given the Chance

It's easy to believe that how we feel in the moment is how we'll always feel. But moods are fluid, and perspective shifts with time. What seems like a breaking point today may look like a solvable equation tomorrow. The study's findings suggest that part of working well with ourselves means allowing space for recalibration—trusting that what feels overwhelming now might feel different with distance.

Structure Supports Resilience

If mental health and well-being fluctuate throughout the day, then structure—how we arrange our focus, work, and rest—becomes a powerful tool. Organizing life around natural rhythms isn't about constraint; it's about optimization. Some of the most effective people don't just work hard—they work with their energy rather than against it. They know when to push forward and when to step back.

Flourishing Isn't Just About Effort—It's About Alignment

Human flourishing isn't merely a matter of willpower. It's also about knowing when we're at our best and arranging our lives accordingly. The most sustainable progress doesn't come from grinding through exhaustion but from wisely placing effort where it will yield the greatest return. Working with our natural rhythms isn't a luxury; it's a strategy for long-term strength.

The Power of Paying Attention

The study didn't reveal a universal rule, just a pattern—a signal worth noticing. Some people feel sharpest at night. Others find their best thinking happens midday. But for most, the early hours offer a clarity that fades as the day wears on. The question isn't just how hard we work or how much we push through—but when we lean in and when we allow for reset.



Chapter 44

COURAGE AT THE TESTING POINT

Everyone loves the idea of courage—until it's required. It's easy to believe in truth when truth is convenient. Easy to celebrate loyalty when it costs us nothing. Easy to admire love when it demands no sacrifice. But virtues are not tested when life is easy; they are proven when the stakes rise.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, “Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point.” In other words, courage is what makes every other virtue real when it stops being theoretical. Honesty sounds noble—until the truth carries consequences. Loyalty feels effortless—until commitment becomes inconvenient. Love looks beautiful—until it asks for something from us that hurts to give. Leadership, at its core, begins not at the podium or in the spotlight, but at these quiet testing points.⁵⁴

Leadership is not a title. It's a constant confrontation with decisions that reveal who we are when it matters most. And that means leadership is always an exercise in courage—not the cinematic, headline-making kind, but the quiet, stubborn kind that chooses integrity day after day. The kind of courage that speaks the truth even when it risks approval. The kind that stands firm when standing firm makes you unpopular. The

⁵⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 148.

kind that loves deeply even when love costs more than you thought you could afford.

Honesty, for example, is an easy virtue to endorse when it costs nothing. Everyone says they believe in telling the truth. But real leadership faces the moment when truth becomes expensive—when telling it could cost influence, friendships, even a future. And at that testing point, courage steps forward. Telling the truth when it's costly isn't just honesty—it's bravery.

Loyalty, too, sounds admirable until it demands something uncomfortable. It is easy to say we value loyalty until we are asked to stand with someone when everyone else walks away. To defend a principle when the winds of public opinion shift. To keep a promise even when circumstances change. When loyalty is tested, it is courage that decides whether we stay or slip away.

And love—real love—always costs something. To love others in leadership, in relationships, or in service is to accept that sacrifice will eventually be required. Love demands selflessness when selfishness would be easier. Love demands vulnerability when distance would feel safer. Love demands action, not just emotion. Every great act of love throughout history has been, at its core, an act of courage. Because at its testing point, love always carries a cost.

If courage is what carries virtue through difficulty, then courage itself must be cultivated before the test comes. We don't summon courage out of nowhere in moments of crisis. We build it in small, unseen decisions—the tiny acts of truth-telling, loyalty-keeping, and love-giving that prepare us for the moments when everything matters. The leader who practices honesty in the small things won't hesitate when truth is on the line. The one who stands firm in small convictions will remain steady when bigger tests come. The one who learns to sacrifice in small ways will not flinch when love demands more.

The testing point will come. That much is certain. Leadership guarantees it. And when it does, courage is not a feeling—it is a choice. The leader who tells the truth, even when it costs. The leader who stays loyal, even when it is inconvenient. The leader who loves, even when it demands sacrifice. That is a leader worth following.



Chapter 45

NEVER SMILE AT A CROCODILE

We don't just fear animals because they're dangerous—we fear them because of how they look. That's the unsettling conclusion of C. Randolph's 1995 study titled "*Never Smile at a Crocodile: Betting on the Dangerousness of Animals.*" Participants in the study were asked to rate the dangerousness of various animals. What emerged wasn't just a hierarchy of real threat—it was a hierarchy of perceived threat. In other words, we tend to judge threat levels based on visual cues, stereotypes, and subjective impressions rather than actual data.⁵⁵

The crocodile, with its cold eyes and villain-like grin, often topped the list—despite other animals posing equal or greater danger in many contexts. The study exposes the human tendency to fuse danger with demeanor. And that lesson transfers cleanly into leadership.

In organizations, we often overestimate the risk posed by someone with a strong presence or sharp tone, while underestimating quieter forces that may be more damaging in the long run. We may distrust the leader who challenges us directly but give a pass to the person who smiles while undermining trust. We bet on the dangerousness of people just like we do with animals—by appearance, not reality.

⁵⁵ C. Randolph Randolph, "Never Smile at a Crocodile: Betting on the Dangerousness of Animals," *Anthrozoös* 8:1 (1995): 15–24. This article was also a recipient of the annual Ig Nobel Prize. See Appendix 2.

Leadership requires a deeper discernment. It asks us to examine our instincts and test our assumptions. Some of the people who seem “scary” are actually the safest—they speak the truth plainly, challenge dysfunction, and walk with integrity. And some of those who seem safe may quietly erode a team from the inside. Don’t let a crocodile grin—or any other polished exterior—distract you from what really matters. In short, never smile at a crocodile. But more importantly, don’t assume the crocodile is your biggest problem.



Chapter 46:

THINKING DEEPLY ABOUT THE 33%

A third of our lives are spent working. That's a significant portion of time, yet many move through their workday without considering its deeper purpose. Whether you're clocking in for a job, advancing a career, or dedicating yourself to a calling, how you perceive your work profoundly impacts your life satisfaction, well-being, and fulfillment.

At its core, work shapes a large part of who we are. How we approach it—how we connect the dots between the daily grind and something larger—determines whether we feel energized and fulfilled or disconnected and weary. Research shows life satisfaction is strongly tied to work. How you view your work matters—it influences everything from emotional health to physical well-being.⁵⁶

Viewing Work as a Job

Many begin by seeing work simply as a means to an end. It's just a job—something done to pay the bills and enjoy life outside of it. The work itself holds little intrinsic value; the material rewards matter most: financial security, vacations, comfort.

⁵⁶ Amy Wrzesniewski, Clark McCauley, Paul Rozin, and Barry Schwartz, "Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People's Relations to Their Work," *Journal of Research in Personality* 31:1 (1997): 21–33.

Those who view their work as a job often disengage emotionally. They do what's required and then turn their energy elsewhere—to hobbies, leisure, or relationships. For them, work is purely functional—a way to fund life, not a source of meaning.

Viewing Work as a Career

Over time, some move toward viewing their work as a career. It's no longer just about a paycheck—it's a path to personal and professional growth. Skills are honed, recognition is earned, advancement is possible.

Career-minded individuals strive to move up the ladder, seeking promotions, status, and greater responsibility. Achievements are marked by raises, titles, and influence. Pride comes from progress and accomplishment. Yet often, career satisfaction still leans heavily on external rewards—compensation, status, and success markers.

Viewing Work as a Calling

Then there are those who see their work as a calling. For them, work and identity are deeply intertwined. They show up not for financial gain or career advancement, but because the work itself matters. It brings fulfillment, purpose, and meaning.

Originally tied to religious tradition, the modern sense of calling retains the idea of work connected to a cause greater than oneself. People who view their work as a calling believe their efforts benefit others, align with their values, and contribute to the greater good.

This perspective doesn't just affect feelings about work—it shapes the work itself. Those who view their work as a calling are more engaged, motivated, and committed. They find meaning even in mundane tasks and view their work as an end in itself, not merely a means.

The Importance of Moving Down the Spectrum

Most of us don't fit neatly into one category. We move along the spectrum from job, to career, to calling at different stages. There's no right or wrong place to be, and each stage can have merit depending on life circumstances.

We need jobs to survive, and careers to progress. But what if we could find a deeper connection to the work we do? Research suggests that moving toward a calling significantly increases life satisfaction, improves mental and physical health, and deepens purpose.

Studies show people who view their work as a calling miss fewer days of work, are more engaged, and are more satisfied both with their

jobs and their lives. Moving toward a calling fosters greater intrinsic motivation—the internal drive for challenge, growth, and meaning—rather than relying solely on external rewards like pay or status.

The Power of Perspective

One of the most fascinating findings about this spectrum is that perspective—not occupation—makes the difference. Whether you're a doctor, teacher, mechanic, or administrative assistant, your view of your work matters more than your title.

In fact, a study of administrative assistants found that some saw their work as a job, others as a career, and others as a calling—all within the same role. The distinction wasn't title or salary—it was perspective.

People who view their work as a calling are also more likely to pursue further education and receive higher compensation than those who do not. But perhaps more importantly, their deeper satisfaction stems not from status or income—but from how they see the meaning of what they do.

The Takeaway

The key to increasing satisfaction and well-being lies in connecting the dots between your work and a larger purpose. Whether you're starting out with a job, advancing in a career, or striving to make your work a calling, remember: you have the power to shape how you view your work—and to influence how others see theirs.

Moving from one perspective to another takes time, but it is possible. And as you shift, you not only transform your own experience of work but also model a path that invites others to find deeper meaning in theirs. Leadership in this space isn't about pushing—it's about living in a way that inspires.

As you reflect on your own work and its larger purpose, ask yourself: Where are you on the spectrum? Where are those you lead? And where could you help them go?



Chapter 47

CUTTING THROUGH THE FOG

In 1952, Florence Chadwick set out to achieve something no woman had done before: swim the 26 miles from the Catalina Islands to the California mainland. Known for being the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways, Chadwick was no stranger to incredible challenges.

The weather that day, however, was far from ideal. A thick, relentless fog hung over the water, chilling her to the bone and obscuring her view. For 15 hours, she swam, each stroke battling exhaustion and cold. The accompanying boats flanked her on both sides, their presence a small comfort in the endless haze.

But Chadwick couldn't see the shore. The fog blurred everything. Finally, her body weary and her spirit drained, she turned to her mother, who was in one of the boats, and told her she couldn't continue. Her mother encouraged her to keep going, insisting she was close. Yet the fog made it impossible for Chadwick to believe it. She stopped.

Once aboard the boat, Chadwick discovered the heartbreaking truth: she was less than half a mile from the shore. At a news conference the next day, she reflected on her experience: "All I could see was the fog. I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Florence Chadwick, quoted in "Florence Chadwick Fails in Swim," *New York Times* (July, 1952).

What Is Hope?

Hope is the ability to see the shore through the fog, the confidence that there's something better ahead even when it's not immediately visible. At its core, hope is expectation, trust, and belief—an anchor for the human spirit that propels us forward through life's most challenging moments.

Desmond Tutu captured this beautifully when he said: "Hope is being able to see there is light despite all the darkness."⁵⁸ And theologian Emil Brunner emphasized its essential nature: "What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to our survival in life."⁵⁹

The Impact of Hope

Hope is not just a feeling—it's a force that shapes lives. When we have hope, it transforms our mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Research has shown that hope contributes to:

- *Life satisfaction and flourishing* – A hopeful outlook improves overall happiness and fulfillment.
- *Resilience* – Studies, like the one involving participants standing in ice-cold water, demonstrate that encouragement and hope can double one's capacity to endure.
- *Productivity and problem-solving* – Hope inspires action, confidence, and the ability to persevere in the face of obstacles.
- *Health and recovery* – Hope has been linked to better psychological adjustment and recovery from injuries or illnesses, such as spinal cord injuries, brain trauma, or cancer.
- *Relationships and social health* – Hope fosters better interpersonal relationships and contributes to social and emotional well-being.

Research shows that hope strengthens resilience, fuels perseverance, enhances recovery, and deepens life satisfaction and relationships—making it a critical force for human flourishing across every area of life.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, by Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams (New York: Avery, 2016), 122.

⁵⁹ Emil Brunner, *Eternal Hope* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 7.

⁶⁰ C. R. Snyder, *The Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 123-125, 201-205.

When Hope Is Absent

On the other hand, the absence of hope can be devastating. When people lose hope, they face:

- *Depression* – A lack of hope is a common factor in mental health struggles, often contributing to feelings of despair.
- *Suicidal ideation* – Those considering ending their lives are often battling for even the smallest glimmer of hope to hold on to.
- *Distorted viewpoint* – Without hope, perspectives become clouded by negativity and fear.
- *Poor health and productivity* – A lack of hope undermines problem-solving, self-esteem, and even physical health.

Hope is a critical ingredient for success in counseling and mental health support. Studies consistently show that both the counselor's and the counselee's hope levels are among the strongest predictors of successful outcomes.⁶¹

The Building Blocks of Hope

Anthony Scioli, a professor of clinical psychology, suggests that hope isn't something we stumble upon—it's something we actively build. According to Scioli, hope is constructed from five essential elements:

1. *Deep, authentic relationships* – Meaningful connections with others provide a foundation for trust and support.
2. *Skills to endure stress* – Building resilience helps us navigate life's challenges.
3. *Clear goals* – Knowing what we're striving for gives us direction and purpose.
4. *Spirituality or faith* – Exploring deeper meaning and connection provides a sense of peace and assurance.
5. *A life mission* – Pursuing a purpose beyond ourselves anchors us in hope, even when the fog surrounds us.⁶²

⁶¹ Snyder, *Hope*, 165-170.

⁶² Anthony Scioli and Henry Biller, *Hope in the Age of Anxiety* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Seeing the Shore

Florence Chadwick's story reminds us that sometimes the fog—the obstacles, uncertainty, and pain of life—can make it feel impossible to keep going. But hope is the ability to trust that the shore is there, even when we can't see it.

Hope propels us forward when exhaustion sets in. It inspires us to try again, to endure the challenges, and to reach the shore. And when hope feels out of reach, it can be built—one meaningful connection, one clear goal, and one enduring belief at a time.



Chapter 48

FIGHTING BAREFOOT IN THE SNOW

What makes someone successful? Angela Duckworth, author of the seminal book *Grit*, spent 15 years researching the common threads among teachers, athletes, lawyers, musicians, and military personnel. Her conclusion: success is not dictated by intelligence, talent, finances, or connections. It is grit—the unyielding perseverance and passion for long-term goals.⁶³

Grit is what fuels people to push forward through failure, rise stronger from adversity, and make extraordinary sacrifices. But what exactly does grit look like? Let's unpack three essential elements: the ability to transform adversity into advantage, the resilience to bounce back stronger, and the willingness to make great sacrifices.

Transforming Adversity into Advantage

Ludwig van Beethoven is a timeless example of grit. A child prodigy, he composed music that defined an era. But adversity struck as he progressively lost his hearing, plunging him into isolation from the very sounds that gave his life meaning.

Historians categorize Beethoven's career into three periods: his early works when he had full hearing, the transitional period as his hearing

⁶³ Angela Duckworth, *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* (New York: Scribner, 2016), 8–9.

began to fade, and the miraculous final phase when he composed while completely deaf.

“How sad is my lot,” Beethoven lamented, “I must avoid all things that are dear to me... of course, I am resolved to rise above every obstacle, but how will it be possible?” It was not just possible—it became his legacy. His *Ninth Symphony*, composed in total deafness, is regarded as one of humanity’s greatest artistic achievements. As his nephew marveled, “Everyone is astonished... particularly that you can do it in spite of this affliction. If you ask me, I believe that it even contributes to the originality of your compositions.”⁶⁴

Beethoven’s story illustrates that greatness often emerges from pain. It is in adversity that grit makes an appearance and transforms hardship into advantage.

Bouncing Back Stronger

Grit isn’t just about enduring adversity—it’s about rebounding with more strength and determination. Take Buster Douglas, the boxer who achieved one of the greatest upsets in sports history. Mike Tyson, undefeated and seemingly invincible, was expected to demolish Douglas. In fact, Tyson’s trainers were so confident they didn’t even bring an ice pack to the fight.

Douglas was knocked down in the eighth round. No one gets up after a late-round knockout by Tyson—no one. But Douglas did. He got up, dug deeper, and knocked Tyson out two rounds later.⁶⁵ Grit. It’s the refusal to accept defeat, the capacity to come up swinging harder than when you hit the ground.

The Willingness to Make Great Sacrifices

Grit demands sacrifice, often in extreme forms. Few stories illustrate this better than the Continental Army’s winter at Valley Forge in 1777. Under the command of George Washington, thousands of soldiers endured freezing temperatures, disease, starvation, and exhaustion.

⁶⁴64 Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1977), 170–175.

⁶⁵65 Richard Hoffer, *Bouts of Mania: Ali, Frazier, Foreman and an America on the Ropes* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2014), 241–244.

Many had no boots—only bloodied rags wrapped around their feet—leaving red footprints in the snow.⁶⁶

Despite the conditions, they stayed. They trained. They prepared. And they endured—not because they had to, but because they believed in something greater than themselves. Their grit was not forged in comfort—it was forged in cold, hunger, and hardship. It was their willingness to sacrifice, to press on through frostbite and failure, that laid the foundation for a revolution. These weren't just soldiers. They were men with a cause—men whose hope outweighed their suffering.

Knowing Your “Why”

If grit is the vehicle, purpose is the fuel. To understand how Beethoven composed the *Ninth Symphony*, how Buster Douglas got back up, and how the men at Valley Forge fought through all odds, we must uncover their why.

Beethoven's why was to inspire his listeners, to lift them beyond themselves into something eternal. He described the purpose of his *Ninth Symphony*: “To awaken and permanently instill religious feelings not only into the singers but also into the listeners.”

Douglas' why was rooted in love and legacy. His mother, who had passed away just before the fight, believed in him. She told him he could beat Tyson. Honoring her faith in him gave Douglas the strength to get up and swing harder.

The soldiers at Valley Forge were driven by diverse motivations—faith, family, freedom, and duty. They embodied a belief shared by true patriots: that freedom is worth any sacrifice—even fighting barefoot in the snow.

At the heart of grit lies purpose. As Viktor Frankl wrote, “Those who have a ‘why’ to live can bear almost any how.” Purpose transforms pain into power, obstacles into opportunities, and suffering into sacrifice.⁶⁷

What's your why? What beliefs, values, or principles would you bleed for? When you find them—and live from them—you'll uncover your own reservoir of grit, along with the power to rise, rebound, and sacrifice for something greater than yourself.

⁶⁶ David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 259–263.

⁶⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 76.

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