

BE BETTER

*An 8-Pillar Framework to Tame Executive Stress, Obtain
Clarity, and Master Your Life and Work.*

BY JEFF SAARI

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Introduction

From Suicide to Success

On December 16, 1995, I made my final suicide attempt. Several earlier attempts failed, as a quiet voice inside me wanted to live.

I grew up on a quiet street, where I had space to play in the woods with my brothers and our dog, Brandy-Bear. The setting was idyllic, to be honest. But at age nine, my mother's divorce led to our relocation to Manchester, New Hampshire. Completely uprooted from my country home, I moved to the inner city and left our dog behind, which made me struggle. The urban environment was rough, and, weighing only 100 pounds, I endured consistent bullying from neighborhood boys and at school.

This move was a pivotal moment in my life. I learned to become a people pleaser to survive. My mother married her third husband soon after, and unfortunately, he was abusive. I adapted further to survive under his control. As I entered my teen years, I developed feelings of worthlessness. These insecurities manifested as reckless behaviors and outcomes like stealing, getting arrested, failed relationships, and alcohol abuse.

At 18 years old, I left home permanently to attend a university in Rhode Island. But my struggles persisted. I lasted only a semester due to heavy drinking. Realizing this wasn't my path, I left college and returned to Manchester, New Hampshire, where I lived with my best friend, Scott, and brother, Chris, in 1991.

I had developed an early passion for drumming, which then led me to attend music school in California. In 1992, I moved to Hollywood, California, to pursue my dream of becoming a professional drummer. It was an overall amazing experience, but the crime and violence there were intense, for instance, like during the Rodney King riots. Witnessing despair, homelessness, and drug use daily was overwhelming. I faced

further challenges: being shot with salt pellets while walking home with my groceries, being chased, and being yelled at by a woman who hit me while I was riding my bike. After graduating from the one-year music school, I returned to Peterborough, New Hampshire, to live with my second dad (stepfather), Bill, whom I called Pops.

By age 21, my worthlessness deepened, and this is when I decided I was going to kill myself. Still, I had drumming to motivate me, so it kept me going on fumes. I moved to Salem, New Hampshire, to audition for Berklee College of Music's drumming program. I did get in, but never enrolled because my depression got too loud. I had isolated myself so much that my depression spiraled.

As I mentioned, I had many earlier failed suicide attempts, and on the night of December 16, 1995, I had my last attempt. I had sleeping pills, a loaded handgun, and a bottle of whiskey by my side. I decided to try to take the 50 sleeping pills first. The next morning, my roommate, who was rarely home, came home serendipitously to find me in a dazed, disoriented state. The next thing I remembered was waking up in a hospital after being filled with delusions.

Eventually, in that hospital bed, clarity emerged. Surrounded by my family, I vowed, "I won't let this happen again." A light switch went on. Some people have traumatic impact events, and this was a big one for me. I returned to my mother's home briefly to recover, then relocated to Swanzey, New Hampshire. There began my personal renaissance. I explored new jobs and hobbies and rediscovered myself. At that time, a friend shared Buddhism *Plain and Simple* by Steve Hagen, which transformed my perspective. I began to study philosophy, psychology, began to meditate, and started seeing a therapist. I went to every church in town. I sought to understand how I transitioned from a happy-go-lucky person to someone convinced life wasn't worth living.

How Me and My Mission Found Each Other

In 1999, I sold everything, left my then-girlfriend, and moved from New Hampshire to France, seeking something more profound. As you've seen, I was grappling with a fair amount of trauma, perhaps running from or toward resolution. I enrolled in a three-week retreat with Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh at Plum Village in southern France. Two weeks into the retreat, a senior monk invited me to become a monk, another moment that would forever reshape my life. After deep meditation on which path to follow, a realization struck me like a meditation bell: my purpose was to return to the U.S. and help others. I called my ex-girlfriend, who is now my wife, and asked if she would travel across Europe with me. She agreed!

I moved back to NH and went back to school while working at an orphanage. After graduating from college in 2005 with a B.A. in psychology, I sought a career blending psychology and spirituality. Having practiced meditation for years, I was an avid student of the mind. Having experienced severe depression in my early twenties, understanding my mind was crucial. I initially aimed to become a therapist, but it didn't resonate, as I was too focused on problems and the past.

So, I searched online for "careers that bridge psychology and spirituality," and I discovered "life coaching." In the past, I had gained coaching experience from my role as a tennis coach in the late 1990s, and the more I researched coaching, I realized that it aligned perfectly with my passion for vision, goals, obstacles, support, and listening. I enrolled in an online coaching program and became a certified life coach in 2006. That certification process led to business coaching and the organizational culture work I do today.

Since 2007, I've coached thousands across various industries, including manufacturing and other trades, banking, nonprofit, education, fire service, retail, and finance. I focus on strategic planning, management training, leadership team development, culture building, leadership coaching, and life coaching. It's been an honor to work with so many remarkable people.

This book distills my coaching experience, philosophy, and lessons learned across personal and professional contexts. I'm excited to share, and am confident it will transform your life and leadership! I have had the immense honor to facilitate numerous excellent outcomes for my clients because my clients have invested in doing the hard work of change.

Who This Book is For

As an owner, CEO, or other high-level executive of a small to medium-sized business, you face relentless stress and potential burnout. This book is for you. My mission is to guide you from dread, turmoil, and exhaustion to a state of power, connection, and joy, to help you reclaim your career and life. With my proven Pillars of the Be Better Framework, you'll rediscover meaning, purpose, and a legacy worth building. Your life, metaphorically and perhaps literally, depends on it. We all know life is short, so let's craft a configuration of healthful practices that energize and fulfill you, your team, and your family. This book shows you how to rewrite your story to create a thriving future self.

Friction, Burnout, and Evolution

You've just read part of my story, the years where the pain was loud, obvious, and impossible to ignore. Surviving that season changed me. It forced me to confront my thinking, my identity, and the stories I was telling myself about worth, success, and control. I rebuilt from the inside out.

What surprised me many years later was this: The same internal patterns that nearly took me out in my twenties show up in quieter, more socially acceptable ways, in high performers and leaders all the time. Not as a crisis all the time, but as friction, feeling drained and feeling discomfort.

Different environment. Different stakes. Same underlying misalignment.

I've worked with founders who weren't suicidal like I was, and they seem successful. They've built companies, teams, families, and reputations.

From the outside, everything looks strong. And yet internally, something feels off.

They're exhausted in a way sleep doesn't fix. Irritated by things that used to energize them. Quietly resentful of the very thing they worked so hard to build. Questioning what they're doing, even if they would never say it out loud.

If that's you, hear this clearly: you are not broken. You are not weak. And, you are not uniquely flawed.

I didn't know this in my depressive state; I thought that what I thought and felt was law.

What you're experiencing is common among founders and leaders of all kinds. Friction shows up when who you are no longer matches what you're responsible for. If that friction goes unexamined long enough, it turns into heat. And heat can turn into burnout.

Burnout forces a decision: You either shrink your life to match your current capacity, or you evolve your capacity to match the life you want to create.

Most leaders misinterpret burnout as a personal failure. They try to manage stress better. They take a vacation. They install a new productivity system. They push harder. But burnout is rarely a problem of time management, it's usually a design and structure problem.

Over the years, in my own life and in the lives of the leaders I have coached, I've seen that friction shows up in four predictable places.

Not fifty. Not one hundred. Four.

1. Energy Friction

You're always on. You can't rest or vacation without guilt. You're buried in work that someone else should own. You fantasize about quitting, not because you hate what you built, but because you're tired of carrying it.

You feel negative feelings and think negative thoughts consistently.

This isn't laziness, it's misalignment. You're operating with a nervous system that is paying for a structure that hasn't evolved.

2. Authority Friction

You avoid hard conversations and the wherewithal to address conflict. You absorb other people's emotions. Drama resurfaces in slightly different forms.

You don't hold others accountable to a standard (because maybe there are none). You feel responsible for how everyone feels.

You are the go-to for problem-solving, especially around people issues. You tell yourself you're being supportive. But often, you're over-functioning.

When standards are unclear and boundaries are soft, friction multiplies.

3. Identity Friction

Your company grew. Your role expanded. Your workforce increased.

But internally, you still feel like you're proving. You replay past mistakes. You wonder when people will discover you don't have it all figured out. You feel like an imposter.

Success scaled, but your self-concept didn't. And that gap is exhausting.

4. Structural Friction

Too many things run through you. Decisions bottleneck at your desk. Meetings feel busy but not decisive. You're overwhelmed but unclear what matters most.

You've created a strategy but have issues with people following through.

You built something impressive, but you built it on your energy, not on architecture. Energy has limits, structure scales.

You have to pay a tax, but not for long.

Here's the confronting truth: If stress is chronic in your leadership, it isn't random. It's not bad luck, and it's not just the market, your team, or the season you're in.

Somewhere along the way, the structure, communication, mindset, or boundaries that once worked stopped working, and you kept going anyway.

Burnout is the tax or bill coming due.

That's not condemnation, it's clarity. The version of you who built this cannot be the version who leads what's next. That isn't failure, it's growth demanding redesign.

This book is not about coping with stress alone. It's about using friction as feedback. You don't eliminate friction—you respond to it. And when you respond correctly, burnout stops being an ending. It becomes the moment you stop surviving your success and start redesigning how you lead, so you're energized by it.

This book is full of stories from real people (names changed for privacy) that have done the hard work of leadership and organization redesign.

The Consequences of Burnout

- Unaddressed, these friction points can lead to devastating outcomes:
- Desire to sell your business or exit/change your career.
- Increased turnover and loss of talent.
- More medical issues, mental exhaustion, and memory issues.
- Fatigue, anxiety, frustration, or apathy.
- Disconnection from staff, family, or purpose.
- Reduced productivity, missed deadlines, and more mistakes.

- Damaged relationships, addictions, or depression.
- Negative impacts on customers and organizational culture.

Burnout takes an immeasurable toll on your health, vitality, and success.

Life's challenges are universal. As humans, we crave connection, mastery, and fulfillment, but often seek it in fleeting distractions like social media, shopping, food, or substances. In my estimation, the most valuable real estate you own is your mind. Yet, negative thinking often controls you.

This book teaches you to master your mind, directing it toward healthy, transformative outcomes. Growth lies in embracing discomfort, resisting defensiveness, integrating blind spots, and building resilience. It will help you normalize the discomfort of change and guide you toward a life of growth and excellence.

Through stress audits, communication mastery, mindset shifts, coaching conversations, listening skills, work-life recalibration, meeting facilitation, and conflict navigation, you will learn how to:

- Master your energy instead of it mastering you.
- Replace over-functioning with clear standards.
- Upgrade your internal narratives to match your external responsibilities.
- Build a structure that carries weight, so you don't have to.
- Create a life that feels healthy, engaged, and connected.

My Framework

The framework I created inspires a growth mindset and holds you accountable to become your best self. It's built on a simple premise: anyone can improve at any time through awareness, practice, and

feedback. It guides you to excel in self-awareness, stress management, and communication—skills that increase well-being and help you overcome barriers.

As you grow, you create a life you love, breaking through barriers like procrastination and negativity. Blame transforms into learning, fostering positivity and a more profound sense of success. You'll build better home and work cultures, leading to a renewed sense of mission and purpose.

Let's face it: as you get older, time is your most precious resource. You can't rewind the clock or get it back. You waste it in avoidance and negativity, and you know that what you resist persists. My framework pushes you to maximize your time without being pushy. Change doesn't happen out of obligation, but out of the freedom to make choices that create excellent outcomes. You'll need to take your commitment to the next level.

You Can't Go It Alone

You're not alone. The content of this book supports you with practical tools and a community of leaders, empowering you to rise above doubts and to embrace a brighter future. By following the principles outlined in this book, you'll transform, confront mental and emotional obstacles, and build sustainable habits for lasting success in your work and life.

Strong relationships are central to life—with yourself, family, colleagues, and teams. Mastering them requires skill to navigate their complexities. Dysfunctional relationships drain productivity, increase stress, and foster disconnection. Both tangibly and intangibly, relationships affect your bottom line.

Most people crave connection and to be valued, but relationships don't thrive automatically—they require effort, skill, and practice. In organizations, a strong manager-employee relationship boosts engagement, driving efficiency and innovation. The reverse is equally true: a poor relationship is the number one reason employees leave, according to Gallup. It doesn't have to be this way.

Leadership at the top can be isolating. Daniel Goleman called this "CEO disease"—a phenomenon where executives receive less feedback because people hesitate to speak truthfully across the hierarchy. It's challenging to give honest feedback upward to your boss. This book empowers you to overcome this isolation and burnout by fostering vibrant relationships and congruent communication throughout your organization.

This book equips you with skills to build strong relationships, creating a coaching culture where honesty and appreciation thrive across all levels.

You'll learn practical skills—listening, feedback, emotional management, coaching, balance, and mindset mastery—that drive innovation, sustainability, and collaboration. I call them skills because anyone can learn them. They just take practice.

How to Use This Book

Each chapter is designed to stand alone. You can pick and choose which one resonates with you and dive in. But I also wrote them to flow into one another, building on each other. Read them in sequence for a powerful framework for changing your work and life.

Let's begin the journey of transformation...

I

Mastering Stress and the STAR Model

"If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it, and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

—Marcus Aurelius

I met John, a 50-year-old CEO and owner of a \$6 million high-tech company that his deceased father founded. He was in a deep state of irritability, unhappiness, and funk, what he called a total clusterfuck! John was relying on a toxic executive under him to develop the technology in the business. He was also unsuccessful in trying to work with an aging mother, the majority partner. Additionally, John had a strained relationship with his long-time wife. He knew he needed help and wanted to surround himself with a team of upbeat, open-minded, and forthright people; this team included me. John also sought to establish a professional, healthy, and safe work environment for his employees. In our first session, we identified his various stressors and began to address them. We worked on my stress inventory exercise, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Over the next couple of months, John began to feel a 'healthy me' emerge. We worked together using the pillars of this book, and his fog of stress started to lift as he found newfound energy. He realized he wasn't a victim of circumstance—he was living in fear. Because he didn't fully understand the technology as well as his chief technology officer (CTO) did, he worried that if the CTO left, he'd take the technology to a competitor. Before adopting my framework, he felt at the whim of this CTO. But after using the frameworks in this book, he gained control. He

began to show up and have different conversations with the CTO, holding him accountable for negative behaviors in the workplace. Essentially, John took a risk and focused on what he wanted to create, rather than a perpetual negative future. This subordinate would often yell at people or cajole them to work harder. Negative leadership behaviors were unacceptable, but John had enabled them out of fear the CTO would leave and take the technology with him.

John became what he tolerated, and his tolerance level went to a higher standard in our work together. Miracles happened as we looked at what he wanted to create in his life and worked towards that vision. John took some risks to try to right the ship.

In a stroke of magic, the CTO decided to leave the company and retire. Sometimes, people leave an organization when their expectations are raised. Most will get on board, but since this person was so toxic—even narcissistic—he couldn't handle the accountability.

John then hired a new CTO who fit his ideal culture, which has made a massive difference in the growth of his business.

When your energy is stuck, it holds you back. You tend to stay safe in dysfunction, even if you know there is a different way, because you don't know how to change. We made that change, and John now has newfound freedom in his mind and body, a great culture, increased his revenue, and has a stronger mindset. It was an epic turnaround, to say the least.

The Stress Problem

Let's face it: it's not a matter of if stress will happen, but when. Work and life can be challenging, even downright precarious. Situations arise—like John's example—that make you feel anxious, frustrated, overwhelmed, scared, and a range of other difficult emotions. In short, you feel stressed. These feelings sometimes overtake you and lead to actions (what I call negative team behaviors) that don't get you the results you want in your organizational and personal relationships. Why is this so? And what, if anything, can you do about it? This chapter presents a unique model for

stress management I've developed, one that can help you stop reacting to life and maintain control over your outcomes.

Before being plagued by constant stress and burnout, you gave your best to the job, felt good about your work, and life overall. In John's case, stress built up over time and caused a significant drain in his life. He felt that he couldn't make a change and was severely stuck.

The four frictions at the beginning of the book are these types of pain points that, left unchecked, can cause havoc. These situations leave you feeling drained, upset, demoralized, and powerless. For example, trying to manage people's problems, like drama in the workplace, makes you nervous just by thinking about seeing them at work that day. This trigger before something happens is what I call *anticipatory stress*.

When you feel stuck and powerless, things tend to worsen because that's what you're focused on. This leads to paralysis, overcompensating behaviors like yelling, and countless other ways you try to resolve your issues. But they don't go away, and you wish they would. My chiropractor had a plaque on his wall that said, "The five worst words you can say are: 'Maybe it will go away.'" We need to make them go away.

Another stressor you may have is that workers in the past have been more responsible and committed than today's younger generation. The younger generation is perceived as being more entitled and less hardworking than their predecessors.

The feelings you experience and thoughts you think in *response* to a non-ideal stimulus, such as the situations above, are what I call being in a triggered state, which is another term for stress and eventually, burnout. In the first case, drama in the workplace is the stimulus, and the trigger is anxiety or frustration. In the second, the lack of work ethic is the stimulus, and frustration is the trigger. Our unmet expectations, desires, and needs collectively contribute to a propensity to feel triggered.

- Some other routine situations that may cause you stress are:
- Organizational power dynamics and politics
- Too much work to do

- Unclear direction
- Lack of communication
- Technology woes
- Differing personalities and perspectives
- Poorly run meetings.

Burnout is a unique kind of stress that builds upon itself over time, a phenomenon I refer to as *trigger stacking*. Repeated situations can produce unresolved triggers and build up, which then gradually diminish your care and energy. This ultimately leads to feelings of depletion, defeat, apathy, and overreactions. Many owners and executives I have coached who have experienced burnout have been ready to sell their businesses or change their careers, often throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater. You may be in a similar place.

As I mentioned earlier, when you are in a state of continuous unresolved stress, burnout can occur. I liken your energy to a cell phone battery. You want it fully charged, and if the battery runs low, you know how to recoup your energy and recharge it. Burnout drains the battery completely, leaving you in a perpetual state of exhaustion—energetic and mental—with no coping tactics or hope in sight.

To illustrate the propensity for burnout, I'll examine two fascinating dynamics I work on with my clients: the '*bottle-up syndrome*' and the '*bottleneck syndrome*'. They work hand in glove as well, feeding off each other.

The *bottle-up syndrome* can occur if you have no productive avenue to offload your stress. If stress doesn't get resolved, it will remain inside you, repressed. You may know what this feels like: you have something to say, but it doesn't feel safe to share with others, or that it will make a difference. You may also feel powerless in your ability to solve the problems that are plaguing you. So, you become the stress bottler.

Unresolved and unmitigated stress can cause burnout to occur over time, much like death by a thousand cuts. It can leak out in unproductive ways, or you try to deal with it inefficiently.

For example, you may do what psychologists call displacement: taking your negative energy out on something or someone other than the person causing you angst. In the above example, John became very good at bottling up his tension with his subordinate. It was tense. It caused fights with his wife. It would make him drink too much. His stress lived inside him, never seeing the light of day. John couldn't find a safe place to dock the boat and offload the goods until he met me and started following the principles in this book.

The *bottle-up syndrome* can also lead to what I call the *volcano syndrome!* Sometimes you can't hold your stress in, and as in the case above, the volcano blows on an unsuspecting person, usually someone who feels safe. The volcano erupts, leaving a charred landscape in its wake. So, bottling up becomes a shaken Coca-Cola; when the cap comes off, the soda goes everywhere, making a mess.

Are You a Bottleneck?

The bottleneck syndrome is the feeling that you have to do everything or take care of things for people. After all, if you didn't, they wouldn't get done right, efficiently, or at all. It's about control, but also your lack of trust in others. You don't fully trust others, so you take on tasks or projects you shouldn't be doing at your level.

Early in the life cycle of a small business, an owner often assumes a significant amount of responsibilities out of necessity. However, if you and your team don't look at and continually evolve job descriptions, which I refer to as an aspect of org chart development, you can become the bottleneck. Lack of clarity about who does what in an organization can cause a significant buildup of stress for you and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A story that exemplifies the bottleneck syndrome is the day I met Jason, the CEO of a precast concrete factory. During my initial meeting to determine if I wanted to accept the job and if he was willing to hire me, we addressed some of his concerns. He recounted that he found himself

driving the forklift in the factory and yard instead of attending to his CEO duties. When I asked him why he was doing such a 'low-level' task, he replied that he enjoyed it. Of course, there is no shame in doing what you like and want to do, but it was at the expense of other high-level CEO things he could have done. So, I looked at him and wryly said, "Oh, so you are the bottleneck." Upon hearing this, he sat back in his chair, took a pause, and said, "You're hired." After working together for two years, they had a strategic plan and regular well-run leadership team meetings, implemented a LEAN philosophy to operations, and invested in hearing employee voices to create a kick-ass culture, to name a few high-level things.

My Signature STAR Model: a way to put stress in context

Before outlining my STAR model, I would like to describe its creation. Years ago, I was hired by two brothers who owned a cleaning business because they were at odds, and the tension between them spilled over to the employees. Their administrative assistant told the guys that if they didn't seek help, she would quit. They knew they had a problem and wanted to get help, to which she told them, "I know a guy." After about a month into our engagement, they had a fight that rivaled Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield, except it did not involve throwing fists (it was close though). Before the fight broke out, I could feel the temperature rising. Sometimes, I let things build up to experience it in real time, but this one blew up!

At one point in the tension, the older brother said to the younger brother, "You've always been a mama's boy!" This comment angered the younger brother so much that he stood up in a knee-jerk reaction, stuck his finger in his brother's face, and said, "Oh yeah, well, you've always been a dick like Dad!" A melee ensued. They pounded fists on the table, slammed doors, stomped down the hallway, and spat chicken out of their mouths (we were having a working lunch then). I even rang my meditation bell to have them go to their separate corners. No such luck!

Eventually, they came back together, calmed down, and worked it out. Their toxic tension was the reason I was there in the *first place*. I helped the brothers realize they could be more in control of their negative feelings and reactions because there was a bigger game worth playing, such as achieving success, fostering employee engagement, and maintaining a strong family bond. Today, they report that this fight was seminal for them to come into alignment and carry forward the family business.

I left the meeting, sat in my car, and asked myself, "What just happened?" Then it hit me. "*Oh my gosh*," I said to myself. I realized their story and experience is everyone's experience (maybe not to that level, but similar). You undoubtedly know what it's like to feel angry or enraged with someone and blow your top.

Then the acronym **STAR** floated into my brain, like a gift from the leadership gods wafting from the ether. I sat and feverishly wrote about the STAR model, and to this day, I have used it thousands of times with clients and tens of thousands of times on myself. There is a well-known STAR method for interviewing, but this is much different.

I created the STAR model to combat stress and burnout and explain how triggers work. It's my signature emotional management technology, and it works like a charm. STAR is an acronym for Situation, Trigger, (re)Action, and Result. You've already seen that when your needs, desires, or expectations aren't met (a situation), you feel a negative emotion and tell yourself a story about it (you become triggered). Put another way, you enter adverse emotional states and engage in obsessive thinking. Your body can also react, manifesting as tight shoulders, a clenched jaw, nail biting, an acidic stomach, and headaches, among other symptoms. This triggered state leads to knee-jerk reactions—passive, passive-aggressive, or aggressive. These unharmonious behaviors create unwanted results.

↓ [Download the free "STAR Model Worksheet" at .](#)

The STAR model explains a lot. For example, unresolved people problems may manifest as chronic complaining. So, *complaining* is the

stimulus, and *anxiety or frustration* is the trigger. Along with the triggered feeling is a story of how you might interpret the coworker's complaining ("He always does this" or "Here we go again," for example). You avoid the person, tune it out, roll your eyes, and walk away. These negative behaviors are your reaction to deal with the feeling or trigger. The Result is a poor working relationship and feeling disconnected from the coworker; this is your Result. This whole situation occurs, creating a pattern. And, to put the icing on the cake, you blame the coworker for your stress and complain to others about them, thus repeating the behavior you disdain in them. Psychology calls this projection. You need to take responsibility for your side of this dynamic—more on this in the next chapter.

- Negative team behaviors (reactions) fall into three categories:
- **Passive:** avoidance, judgmental thoughts, dishonesty, and procrastination.
- **Passive-aggressive:** sarcasm, gossip, snarkiness, and complaining.
- **Aggressive:** bullying, yelling, name-calling, and fighting.

All of the above behaviors serve a purpose and appear to be justified reactions to various situations and emotions. But there is another way.

Let's take a classic example of stress gone awry: procrastination, a passive reaction. You know procrastination—I can certainly relate. I recently discovered why I'd been procrastinating on my "Be Better" book. Before I landed on the name "Be Better," I wanted to share my coaching experience online, potentially reaching thousands of people. Initially, I called it "Jeff Saari Leadership Training," which felt stale and flat. It made sense I'd procrastinate—I wasn't fully connected to it. But it was deeper than that. Because I'd been dragging my feet for several weeks, I realized I needed a sounding board or coaching. (More on this in Chapter Five.)

In a moment of wisdom, I had three of my clients coach the coach (me) in a group setting, and I gained a fantastic insight. I realized I was afraid to fail—again—so why try? I'd started several projects in the past, only to shift gears after a while. As someone not adept at online marketing, I'd often ask myself, "Where is this going?" and start to feel

frustrated. I'd then spot a shiny new object and dive into that, repeating the same pattern. The gem I discovered through coaching was a subtle, self-limiting belief holding me back. Once I saw it, I reframed it and set a new, more conscious belief.

There is power in knowing what is holding you back, and for me, I couldn't 'see' it until someone helped me figure it out. You will have the same experience.

- There are many reasons why procrastination occurs, which I refer to as *situations* (The
- S in the STAR model). Here are a few examples:
- The task or project takes too long to do
- Feeling obligated (you have to do it=resistance)
- Feeling drained/tired (don't have the energy to do it)
- Forgetfulness
- Boredom or not wanting to do it
- It is not a priority as other things are vying for your attention
- There's a lack of accountability; someone is not holding you accountable for a deliverable
- There's a lack of a timeframe
- Fear of a negative outcome, like failure
- You feel that it has to be perfect
- Confusion or vagueness about where to start or how to proceed.

These bullet points are problematic because there are repercussions to procrastinating, what I call the *Result* (R in the STAR model). Tasks or projects often don't get done, linger, or get rushed, resulting in poor quality. It makes your job harder because you must follow up or wait for others. And then there's your reputation on the line!

In another example, let's say you have conflict to address with someone. The perception of confrontation produces anxiety—the outcome is unknown. So you push it off, fearing the consequences.

Because you've avoided it, the problem persists or worsens, and you still get a negative outcome. It's curious how we sometimes create the very results we're trying to avoid.

You are in Charge

In my coaching work over many years, I have asked hundreds of individuals and teams of people a rhetorical question: Do you want to experience stress and negativity in your lives? Most people say an emphatic "No!" I do make the distinction, however, there is productive and unproductive stress.

The productive type of stress, known as 'eustress', enables you to perform constructively in certain situations. An example of productive stress is lifting heavy weights, which is a passion of mine. When you get under a barbell to squat a heavy rep, there's a fair amount of eustress. Still, it guides you toward good form, proper breathing, and effective execution. In short, it's scary to lift heavy weights, but the stress is beneficial. It creates a focus on performance and form. The key here, too, is that the weight needs to be a believable and achievable amount; otherwise, you set yourself up for failure and injury.

Distress is different. Distress is intense, negative stress that remains unresolved, leading to an adverse reaction. I often ask people, "Who is in charge of your well-being?" Of course, everyone *claims to be* in control of themselves. Rationally, we know we control ourselves and are in charge. Still, when the rubber hits the road and you are triggered, all bets are off! You act in ways that don't support your desired outcomes while blaming others for your misfortunes. John Yokoyama, author of *When Fish Fly*, said, "Blame is a lousy teacher."

Fortunately, acting from triggers isn't your only option. You can take control of your inner world, even if you can't always control the outside world. And that control is worth pursuing—after all, you don't want to feel stressed.

What is Your Desired Result in Certain Triggered Situations?

Your triggers are messages in a bottle for you to take out and read. They show you what an ideal situation would look like. Once you understand what you're doing in reaction to a stimulus, you can ask yourself what result you actually want.

Is it for your coworker to stop complaining to you? Instead of actions that undermine your desired result—tuning out, avoiding, eye-rolling—you could take one inspired action: provide them with feedback about their behavior.

Delivering feedback itself can be scary (another trigger!), but the unwanted situation will persist if you don't act. Remember the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over, expecting a different result? This is your chance to show up for what you truly desire, take a risk, and speak up to create change in your world. Believe it or not, when feedback is given well, people are generally receptive to it. I'll explore feedback in Chapter Three.

You get to shake hands with your triggers and thank them for showing you what you want. One client, Tom, was avoiding giving feedback to a negative team member on his team. Through our coaching, he realized he was afraid to address it due to his fear of conflict—a pattern rooted in his difficult childhood. His dad had mental health issues, and Tom walked on eggshells a lot as a boy. When I suggested to Tom that he thank the employee (at least in his mind) for helping him confront his fear of conflict, he paused. Tom suddenly saw that the dysfunction wasn't with the employee—it was within himself, in his inability to address the issues.

Essentially, you get to learn about yourself amidst your triggers, as well as put your triggers to work for you, rather than against you. Having triggers in life and work may not stop, but putting them to work for you can begin now. Once you become proficient in a learning mindset, you shift the narrative inside your head from who's to blame to what you are looking to create. This reframing ability enables you to live more positively, build excellent working relationships with others, and transform the manure of pain and suffering into the flowers of change.

However, it doesn't always work—and that's a valuable lesson in itself. I've been accused of being a Pollyanna, seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, even like Mr. Rogers. Guilty as charged! I believe in the goodness of people to a fault, but I've learned that sometimes feedback simply doesn't work.

Case in point: my neighbor's barking dog. Years ago, the dog started barking more in the mornings for no reason. It triggered me because I cherish quiet mornings to read, reflect, drink tea, and meditate. This howling animal was disturbing my peace. I felt triggered. For two weeks, I complained to my wife and daughter about it. Then one day, my wife said, "Hey honey, timeout. Aren't you the coach? Don't you teach this stuff? What are you doing about it?" That hit me like a ton of bricks. Oh my gosh—I was doing exactly what I'd been telling my clients not to do. I was stuck, feeling justified in my complaining. But as I mentioned earlier, stress creates a bigger wake. My wife and daughter were now affected too.

So I decided to confront my neighbor and give him feedback. I wrote out my message first and practiced it with my daughter. Later, he was walking down the street with his dog. As he approached my house, I felt nervous. I didn't know how he'd react. He has a reputation for being a curmudgeon, but I had a good relationship with him. I almost chickened out, but my daughter pushed me out the door and, with a twinkle in her eye, said, "You got this, Daddy." (She was 10 at the time.)

I walked up my driveway and gave him feedback. His reaction was unforgettable. After telling him how I felt and how his dog affected me, he quipped, "Talk to the dog." Talk to the dog? Are you kidding me? Well, his comment triggered me more than the barking ever did. I wanted to say, "Well, fuck off then," but instead I got on my knee, looked straight into the dog's eyes, and said, "If you could stop barking in the mornings, I'd appreciate it." I stood back up and told my neighbor I hoped it worked. Then he walked away. I was stunned. The lesson: sometimes feedback alone isn't enough. Other measures may be needed to achieve your desired results.

Other Ways to Think about Stress

When stress hits, it can take several paths. Remember, stress *is inevitable*, so you need to be prepared for it. Here are some options available to us when it shows up:

- 1. Act negatively, feel justified, and hope it solves the problem (this actually creates more problems).
- 2. Mull it over, think about it, take a beat.
- 3. Let it go genuinely.
- 4. Address the issue through feedback.
- 5. Leave the situation for good (out of what I call honorable closure and not out of a triggered reaction).

6. In certain situations, organizational power can be beneficial, such as implementing progressive discipline or placing individuals on a performance improvement plan.

Trigger Stacking

Another way to think about triggers comes from Alcoholics Anonymous: H.A.L.T. (hungry, angry, lonely, tired). If you're caught in one of these states, your susceptibility to further triggers increases significantly. For instance, if your spouse yells at you, you'll probably feel angry about being disrespected. That feeling lingers as you drive to work, making you irritable with other drivers or coworkers. Something that normally wouldn't bother you now triggers you because you're already in a heightened emotional state. You become vulnerable to more triggers. The accumulation is what I call trigger stacking.

The Energy Dip

I created the energy dip concept as a visual tool for understanding triggers. Each trigger has a shelf life defined by three factors: frequency (how often it happens), duration (how long it lasts), and intensity (how strong it is).

↓ Download the Energy Dip handout at .

Robert, a client, takes things very personally when he makes a mistake or when people leave him out of the loop. As the medical director of a prominent hospital, he manages his staff, works in operations, and strategically plans the department—all while keeping his supervisors and colleagues informed through reports and meetings. Yet because communication is often poor in organizations, his managers sometimes hold relevant meetings without him, inadvertently leaving him out. Being excluded triggers him intensely because he feels they're doing it on purpose. He makes assumptions and turns small slights into big deals.

For Robert, the trigger is powerful (intensity: 7/10), takes time to fade (duration: roughly a day of overthinking), and happens repeatedly (frequency: usually once between our bi-weekly sessions). By showing him the energy dip model in the context of the STAR model, he learned to shorten the duration by having coping tools ready (like calling me for support). As we've explored deeper, we discovered these triggers trace back to his parents—how they failed him as a child. He experienced significant trauma, which I'll discuss more in Chapter Five.

Inspired Action Step: The Stress Inventory

By treating your triggers as line items on an emotional budget, you'll see which ones you handle well and which ones derail you. This inventory matters and will change over time. Life is dynamic—new triggers emerge constantly as your business grows, employees outgrow their roles, your child enters adolescence, or the economy shifts. Here's the process to identify your current and past stressors:

Step 1: Get a piece of paper and write down as many stressors, issues, or triggers as possible in work and life.

Step 2: Take this paper around with you for a week or so and add to it. Put all of those small, medium, and large things that annoy, frustrate,

overwhelm, and make you feel anxious on the list. Take the list with you over a week or two and write everything that comes up.

Step 3: Once it's 'done,' you will know what triggers you are up against, and there is power in knowing!

Step 4: Now, for each trigger, write down how you dealt with it. Was it effective? Was it working? Did your reactions fall into the passive, passive-aggressive, or aggressive camps? Be honest; this is for your eyes only (unless you want to share it with someone who can give you feedback on it).

Step 5: If your reactions create adverse results, consider alternative ways to address the issues. Brainstorm ways to respond to these triggers rather than react.

Step 6: Pick one or two of the most viable options and execute those actions!

Think of it this way: you want to ride the horse, not have it ride you. Stress is the horse. You must get to know it and tame the beast. Fortunately, the calming tactics you'll develop in the next section will help you do exactly that.

Negative Team Behaviors and Managing From the Inside Out

As we have seen, being a leader is a challenging endeavor. You are asking your staff to:

- do more
- be committed
- be more efficient
- get along with each other
- be better time managers
- be more productive

- be better problem-solvers.

Managing this can be a frustrating and daunting task. Why can't your staff understand this and make your life easier?

I've explored how triggers work. If you aren't aware of your triggers or don't handle them well, you'll react—and not productively. Sarcasm is a perfect example. You get frustrated by a missed deadline or mistake and use sarcasm to signal your disapproval. But sarcasm isn't direct—it's indirect and leaves people feeling attacked and resentful. It's another seed of negativity taking root in your workplace culture.

Don't Be a Bully

Bullying is another negative team behavior, sometimes starting at the top. Remember John's story? He experienced "bullying from below," as I call it—aggression from a toxic subordinate. Bullying involves threats, insults, intimidation, humiliation, and yelling. Every behavior serves a purpose, and bullying communicates dissatisfaction with results or reflects clashes in values, personalities, beliefs, or resources. At its core, bullying is a power grab—an attempt to dominate others so the bully feels in control.

Most employees tolerate bullying, especially from their manager. They fear standing up for themselves, losing their jobs, getting demoted, receiving poor reviews, or losing pay. The bully feels justified—after all, the person made a mistake, missed a deadline, or appeared weak. "Why wouldn't I be angry?" But there's another way.

Creating a Positive and Engaged Workplace

One famous leader and founder, John Yokoyama of Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle, whom I respect and admire, calls the bully leadership style "Command and Control," or "It's my way or the highway." He knew this firsthand as he was a bully boss until he realized *he* was part of the problem of poor results and high turnover in his business (he realized this as he began working with a consultant). He then began to practice 'inside-out' leadership and brought this new awareness to his team. He started to

turn his eyes inward and look at the negativity and dysfunction he was perpetuating due to not managing his triggers well.

Challenges in business are inevitable. By being negative and pushing people around, John was not maximizing his team's creativity in solving business problems. They were more like numbers to him, rather than creative human beings. When his mindset shifted, he became more of a coach and a listener. He sought to empower his people, and his business began to get dramatic and world-class results fast. Read John's book, *When Fish Fly*, to gain a comprehensive understanding of his transformation.

So, what does this have to do with you (or the people with whom you work)? Your business may be doing well, and your turnover may be low. Does this mean there is no negativity in your culture? What is the impact or effect of workplace bullying and other negative team behaviors? What would it mean to manage your triggers (and help others manage them) better so you can practice a different behavior that could potentially unleash a positive and creative environment, as John Yokoyama did?

Taking responsibility for your outcomes means examining the results and relationships within your influence, being open to self-reflection, seeking feedback, and committing to growth. It requires curiosity, vulnerability, and humility—qualities that counter our natural tendency to see ourselves favorably. Most leaders rate themselves higher than their employees do. It's uncomfortable to recognize you've been negative, or worse, a bully. It took John several years to accept this and practice differently. It may take you time too. But this journey is worth the effort.

Did You Use an Egg Beater to Brush Your Hair?

One way to build awareness is to check your intentions when your words have a negative impact. Sarcasm, for instance, sometimes aims to be playful banter that builds relationships. Other times, it's meant to be hurtful—to correct, shame, or punish someone for a mistake. Good-natured sarcasm often works and strengthens teams. Someone in a bad mood might be

upset by sarcasm they'd normally laugh off—that's situational. But mean-spirited sarcasm breeds negativity, volatility, and stress. Is that the workplace you're building? Imagine converting all that negative stress into positive energy. What would that mean for your business?

As we saw in the introduction, negative team behaviors, such as sarcasm and bullying, tend to lead to discontent, stress, health issues, and so much more in an organization. Still, there are many other negative behaviors, including gossip, stonewalling, avoidance, and micromanaging. In an ideal work environment, employees and management have an opportunity to articulate their negativity and challenges with each other in more respectful and constructive ways. To overturn the tides of a negative, start with yourself first and then coach others. Done right, it will transform your culture. You create a new norm: "We don't act that way around here!"

Take a Breath, Beat, or Pause

The space between being triggered and reacting is your escape hatch. That pause—or calming tactic—comes before you roll your eyes at your spouse or snap at a subordinate. Deep breaths, stepping away, walking to the water cooler, saying a phrase in your head—these are tools to keep you centered. Pick one that works for you and use it immediately. You probably do this already; I'm just making it conscious so you recognize when you're using it. This pause gives you room to think clearly and choose actions that support your desired outcome. You calm your nervous system enough to engage your rational mind.

When you are triggered, you react out of emotion and become irrational. People often report to me that reacting negatively wasn't a great way to proceed. I know this firsthand as a parent, husband, and business owner. A second mess gets created, comprising the original unresolved issue and the aftermath of reacting to it. Just like a boat leaves a wake, so do unexamined triggered reactions.

↓ Download the calming tactics worksheet at .

Breathing 101

I want to emphasize the importance of breathing as a calming technique. Breathing has been used for thousands of years in religious and spiritual traditions like yoga (they call it meditation) as the premier way to calm the mind and body. It's immensely powerful, and I encourage you to add this to your bag of calming tactics.

Inspired Action Item: Meditation Instructions

Sit in a chair or on a meditation cushion (a pillow called a zabuton or zafu) and place your hands comfortably on your lap. You can cross your legs, sit on your knees, or sit on the edge of your bed to be more comfortable.

Once you are in your seated position, take a few deep breaths through your nose and feel your abdomen rise and fall. Just breathe through your nose and expand and contract your belly as the air goes in and out.

After a specific time, you will find that your thoughts begin to take your attention away from your breathing. A wandering mind is entirely natural. The point of this exercise is that once you catch yourself drifting, you refocus back on the breath.

Make an intention to be more interested in observing your breath than the contents of your mind. As you repeatedly return to the breath, you will begin to experience a sense of calmness and serenity.

If you experience discomfort in your seated position, acknowledge the discomfort and return to your breathing. Pain and discomfort will subside; resist the temptation to move in an attempt to alleviate the pain. It is fascinating to observe numbness or an itch and let it change without you moving, complaining silently, or changing it.

As you focus on your breathing as the primary focus, eventually everything else will recede into the background and become less prominent.

Practicing breathing or meditation effectively will develop your ability to remain calm on demand. When you find yourself in a stressful situation, remember that breathing can help calm you down, allowing you to think more clearly. Just ten minutes a day can work wonders in helping you develop this calming tactic over time. You can also use a meditation app to give you guided instructions.

Box Breathing

Another breathing tactic is box breathing. In this practice, you breathe in for four seconds, hold for four seconds, exhale for four seconds, and then hold for four seconds. Just a few minutes of this will calm you sufficiently to activate your rational mind to focus on the challenging situation you are working with.

Zones of Breathing

I think of breathing as happening in two zones. Zone one is chest breathing—shallow breaths that elevate your heart rate. When stressed, this happens automatically. Zone two is belly breathing—your belly expands as your heart rate slows. Zone two is where you need to be, especially under stress. It's your body's natural calming mechanism. The best part? It costs nothing. You just have to remember to do it.

CHAPTER ONE TAKEAWAYS:

- It's not a matter of if stress will happen, but when.
- Stress won't magically go away; you need to deal with it productively.

You have more control over your stress than you think.

- Anticipatory stress is different from in-the-moment stress.
- Avoid the bottle-up, volcano, and bottleneck syndromes.

Use the STAR model to beat your stress.

- Blame is a lousy teacher; your justifications don't make changes happen.
- There are different ways to think about stress, including HALT, trigger stacking, and the energy dip.
- Do the stress inventory and calming tactics activities.

Learn how to meditate; it will be a game-changer for you.

II

Mastering Conflict Resolution to Release Stuck Energy

"Peace is not the absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means." Gandhi

When you look conflict up in the dictionary, you get this: “a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted (lasting duration) one.”

When conflict arises between two or more people, it can feel scary, tense, or produce apathy. I’ve done dozens of workshops on conflict, and 90% of people describe conflict with negative adjectives. Conflict can produce stress, and if not managed well, can create havoc, like I wrote in chapter one.

On the other hand, when conflict is resolved, it creates more harmony, better systems, and an experience of being more confident and able to address it head-on. Sometimes you need a facilitator to help ensure clarity between the parties.

It’s important to think of conflict as an opportunity for growth for the participants and the organization overall. And, it’s essential to be ready for it, because it will befall you.

Conflict has many potential sources: personality differences, a clash of values and beliefs, competition for resources, differing styles or strengths, disagreements about money, and struggles of power and status.

Here's a general framework for coaching conflict that you can use the next time it surfaces (whether that is conflict you are having with someone, or it is conflict other people besides you are having):

1. Emotional safety is paramount. If people don't feel they're in a respectful, safe, and confidential space, they will be less apt to share their honest thoughts and more vulnerable feelings. You can create safety by being explicit about it and staying true to the ground rules and agreed-upon protocols. Conflict is a normal part of any relationship, even working ones. Actually saying this can help people feel more at ease.

2. State the purpose of the meeting: "This is a coaching-for-improvement session to see if we can move through the disturbance you've had, and collaborate on the challenge(s) you're facing."

3. Make it clear that you're providing an opportunity for growth, both personal and organizational, by carving out time and space for the conflicting perspectives to hear one another out. Express the delicacy, challenge, and significance of the situation, and show confidence that the conflict can be resolved.

4. Start off by asking each participant to find one thing that they appreciate about the other person. It starts the meeting on a positive note and allows people to realize that even through the conflict, they do appreciate or care about the other person.

5. Establish ground rules. Ask what people need to be able to handle themselves during the process. Field some of their responses and add some of your own. Some examples are: listening actively and not in defensiveness, appreciating the good intention of the other person, working to understand the others' points, being open to learning about one's own responsibility for contributing to the situation, taking a break if things are getting too heated, and using "I" statements to stay away from blame. Make sure to get agreement from both parties on the ground rules before you begin.

6. Ask one person to start by recounting, from their perspective, what happened or what the problem is. Help the speaker by paraphrasing

periodically to check for meaning, and coach them to talk about the impact they have experienced and what they need now. Offer some clarifying statements to identify the heart of the disagreement for them (perhaps a lack of respect, or too much micromanaging, or a negative impact on their team).

7. Next let the other person speak, and frame their concerns similarly.

8. Encourage some cross-talk between the two parties. This is where it can get tricky. I let conflict come out respectfully without squelching it. Sometimes it heats up, and it becomes your job to step in calmly and supportively, pointing out that people are getting triggered and ceasing to listen for information and understanding. Invoke the ground rules and help each party to craft nonjudgmental feedback, as well as to take it in with openness and curiosity rather than anger and defensiveness. Typically people who see through a conflict in this way learn something important about themselves and how they unwittingly contributed to the issue.

9. Uphold any awareness the participants have gained, and any hints of resolution that have emerged. Usually a conflict happens because one person triggered another and it got out of hand, perpetuating negative behaviors. Once the triggers are addressed, resolution can typically be nurtured along.

10. Garner any action items or next steps and check for agreement.

11. Appreciate the process and hard work each party just underwent. Let them know that they made some headway and collaborated on an issue that is not so emotional now, for their own good as well as the good of the organization or team. Let them know that they have internal indicators to alert them if they're getting off-track again, into negative behaviors.

12 Check in as needed periodically after the session ends.

Conflict with Yourself

Every single one of us has conflict with ourselves at times. These conflicts are fundamentally about who we are and what we are doing as a human. Are you in the right profession? Do you have the right spouse? Will you be successful? Is it safe to tell others your truth? What about your hidden desires? What decisions to make? And the list goes on.

Some periods of life are a deeper burn than others. Consider the midlife crisis, or what I call the midlife re-evaluation. You question who you are, what you are doing, who you are with, and where you are going. And, it all seems dark at times.

To navigate these conflicts you need to be highly self-aware of them first. You may have signals that conflict is brewing: a tight chest, shortness of breath, tight jaw or shoulders; there may be physical signs. Prolonged negative emotions like anxiety or overwhelm are another signal. And, excessive, discursive thinking is yet another symptom.

The big three of burnout: unruly thinking, feelings, and bodily sensations. These are your harbingers of something being awry; more than a passing negative storm.

When you become aware of one or all of the above, you can take a pause and figure out what you need to do to reset, rejuvenate, and potentially change things up. One example from a client recently: at the end of 2025, he lost a couple of big clients, had cash flow issues, and his marriage was strained. An ordinarily upbeat and positive guy presented himself to me as sullen, withdrawn, and depressed. Upon coaching him, he realized that he needed to get his butt in gear with his finances and new client acquisition, and talk to his wife about their relationship.

I'm proud to report that by seeing the early warning signals in himself, he was able to reach out to me in a "Jeff 911" fashion and resolve his plight, warding off a full fledged burnout situation.

The Whiteboard in the Garage Effect

One day, I was helping my wife clean out the garage, which is full of her antiques for her part-time business. She has commandeered the garage, which I'm fine with, and I help her reorganize it periodically. On this

particular day, she pointed to my portable whiteboard and asked what it was doing in the garage. I made a little quip about having a tiny portion of the garage amidst her wares, and we had a good laugh about it, still to this day.

But tonight, as I am writing the chapter on conflict in this book, I experienced the whiteboard in the garage effect in a different way. For the past few days, I have been helping my wife process the end of the semester for our 17-year-old daughter, who is a senior. It has been a slog to get her to pass her classes, and she is in danger of failing one or two classes, putting her graduation in jeopardy. It's a real-time situation that, as parents, we are trying to handle the best we can.

My wife did a ton of work behind the scenes today (which I appreciated her for), and when my daughter came home, she was feeling grumpy and negative, which triggered my wife. We ended up sitting down with our daughter and working it out, but it was tense at times.

After the dust settled, I was heading out to do some work and started sharing some good news about a new client I'd acquired after a lot of effort. Within a minute, she told me it was all overwhelming and that she couldn't take it in. Take it in? Are you kidding me? After all I'd done for her—being her rock while she processed her struggles raising our teenager—she couldn't give me even two minutes? I felt hurt and pissed, honestly. It was the energetic equivalent of the whiteboard in the garage.

I had a moment in time. What was I going to do with this inner conflict? Treat her passive-aggressively? Walk out? Feign that it didn't bother me? None of those. I realized that the conflict was there (felt pissed and hurt), and chose to tell her about it. She heard my feedback, apologized, and we were back connected. It doesn't always work out like this, of course, but it's a big win when it does.

Burnout is Special

Burnout is a special kind of inner conflict because it has a lasting effect. You just can't seem to shake it off. It may ebb and flow in intensity, but it's

there, almost feeling intractable. But, it's not. Your burnout is a launching pad for your future success. You will look back at yourself in some future time and take stock that you went through this eye of the needle because it made you stronger. You just need the skills to pull it off.

CHAPTER THREE TAKEAWAYS:

Conflict is inevitable—and neutral—until you decide how to engage with it. Conflict isn't a sign of failure; it's a natural byproduct of relationships, growth, and differing perspectives. When handled well, it becomes a catalyst for learning, trust, and better systems.

Emotional safety is the foundation of productive conflict. People will not speak honestly or vulnerably unless they feel respected, heard, and protected. Explicitly creating safety and setting ground rules dramatically increases the odds of resolution.

Coaching conflict is about growth, not blame or winning. The purpose of conflict conversations is improvement, personally and organizationally, not proving who's right. Framing conflict as a shared problem to solve changes the entire dynamic.

Listening for emotional impact and not just the facts reveals the real issues sometimes. Most conflicts persist because people feel unseen, disrespected, or misunderstood. Helping each party articulate impact, needs, and triggers gets to the heart of the disagreement.

Self-awareness turns inner conflict into course correction. Physical sensations, emotions, and runaway thinking are early warning signs that something is off. When noticed early, internal conflict becomes a signal to pause, reflect, and recalibrate before burnout sets in.

Burnout is unresolved conflict turned inward. When thinking, emotions, and bodily stress stay activated for too long, burnout emerges. While painful, burnout is not a dead end, it's feedback pointing toward necessary change.

Courageous communication restores connection. Naming conflict respectfully, whether with others or yourself, often defuses tension faster than avoidance ever could. The willingness to speak truth, even imperfectly, is what rebuilds trust and forward momentum.

III

Mastering Appreciative and Constructive Feedback

"Good communication is as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after."

– Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Reversing Burnout and Toxic Culture

The CEO of a small excavation company, named Mike, didn't know he needed coaching until one of his (much younger) leadership team members told him, "You may need a business coach." He was not resistant to the idea, but he was hesitant because he thought he should be able to solve his numerous problems on his own. The trouble is that sometimes you can't *see yourself* when you're *in your own skin*. Mike was severely burned out and ready to sell the company his father had built to a larger company. He cites his inability to deal with people's problems or workplace drama as the main culprit of his unease. Workplace drama led him to avoid conflict and refrain from holding people accountable. Then, of course, avoidance feeds on itself, and a toxic culture happens from the top. He also had a subordinate who directly reported to him who was emotionally inconsistent, often being hot one moment and cold the next. This staff member constantly harped on how much better things used to be. Today's workforce was a consistent issue of this subordinate, and the lack of addressing conflict and not holding accountability were consistent problems he had with the CEO.

During one of my coaching sessions with Mike, we experienced a remarkable breakthrough. I noticed he periodically said, "I'm done," and asked him about it. I asked, "Are you really done? If so, be done!" To which he quipped, "I'm not really done, I just don't know what else to do!" So, I asked him to start saying words to match his feelings. If the people around him heard him say "I'm done" all the time, that wasn't very inspiring, to say the least.

Mike and I started to focus on what he wanted to create in his business. He wanted a culture where his leadership team could collaborate to support his foremen (the next level down from the leadership team) in leading their crews more effectively. It took him several months to focus forward and learn the skills of collaboration outlined in this book. Mike's number two couldn't get over the past issues and decided to leave the company, which happens sometimes. I facilitated a session of what I call "honorable closure," so he didn't leave the company out of spite. After all, they had at least ten years of working together, which is a long history to honor.

As Mike began to change and hold people accountable to a higher standard, his people started to change. There was a lower tolerance for bickering and gossip in his culture. "See something, say something" became a moniker of the business. Mike created a culture where it was safe for his team to share their input on ideas and issues, such as safety, and to provide constructive feedback. His foremen also became better leaders after working with me, one-on-one and as a team. We also began holding whole-company retreats to discuss culture, communication, coaching, values, and key issues. Today, Mike and his business are stronger than ever, and he takes pride in his business and creating an open and positive workplace culture.

Building the Confidence and Skills to Give and Receive Feedback

Giving and receiving constructive feedback is essential for a positive organizational culture. It certainly benefits an organization; after all,

people can't read our minds. If you don't speak up and provide feedback about something that frustrates you, for example, nothing will change. But sometimes, you lack the confidence, skill, or motivation to give and receive it.

Feedback is twofold: appreciative and *constructive*. To me, feedback is the art of providing information about past behavior in the current moment so that you can influence future behavior. Positive reinforcement happens when you point out the good things people do (*appreciative feedback*). *Constructive feedback* occurs when you point out something you would like to be different.

In Chapter One, I wrote about the *bottle-up syndrome*. If the bottle gets too full, the cork can blow off, and destructive feedback happens. The *volcano syndrome* occurs when the bottle top gets blown off. You need to be careful not to let the pressure of stress build up to the point where it becomes destructive. You can resist this by first calming down your triggered state, refocusing on the actual outcome you want, and engaging in an adult conversation. You can't pull this off if you are apathetic, afraid, or avoidant. When you are conflict or confrontation-avoidant, for example, you will hamper your ability to make changes and give constructive feedback.

One example was a high-level bank manager, Cindy, who struggled with a negatively emotional subordinate. The person she supported was constantly taking things personally and wondering when the next shoe would drop, and she might get fired. My client worried about upsetting the employee by bringing up relevant, meaningful, and timely things, so Cindy stuffed them. Upon coaching her about this, we decided enough was enough. By being unable to provide feedback, change was not occurring in the woman's attitude and performance, so Cindy was perpetuating the situation. This non-ideal situation had been ongoing for a year until I arrived on the scene. This dysfunctional dynamic was like a dance, and the woman knew Cindy would go away if she played the victim. It was a manipulation strategy.

Cindy and I realized that constructive feedback and change were needed, regardless of the outcome. So, she took a risk. We used my feedback model to think through what to say to this employee beforehand. We were ready. Cindy and I delivered the feedback with the employee, and the tears began to flow. The employee acknowledged she was an emotional person and was hypersensitive to criticism of any kind, as she had a history of past bad bosses. She felt constructive feedback would have her fired, so she reacted strongly to it. Once we brought this dynamic to her attention, she could see it, paving the way for her to find a therapist and be open to constructive feedback from Cindy in the future. It's not perfect today, but it's far better than it was.

Another example is a quarry manager who had what I call *stretch Armstrong syndrome* (80s kid toy). Jim had two direct managers, in different locations, whom he reported to on various aspects of the business. However, he had five other high-level ranking officials from this corporation who would call him and tell him what to do at times. Jim was severely confused when I met with him, which he held inside very well. In our first session, we threw all of this up on the whiteboard. He was stunned to see that he essentially reported to seven people!

Jim felt intensely frustrated by reporting to several people, some of whom disagreed with and disliked each other, which made the situation even more precarious. However, he didn't speak up, didn't offer constructive feedback, and essentially bore the problem squarely on his shoulders.

Jim and I worked on speaking up to his two direct managers, to alert them to this dynamic. We crafted the words, built up the confidence, and executed together. It was amazing to hear him stand up and speak his truth, respectfully. His bosses were flabbergasted by this dynamic and vowed to rectify the situation immediately, which they did.

If you decide to provide feedback, as in the above anecdote, it may not be an easy task. You may fear giving or receiving feedback. You might get defensive when receiving it. You can also make excuses for not providing feedback: they won't listen anyway, so you ask yourself, *why bother?* You

don't want to upset the status quo and are afraid of insulting, upsetting, or hurting the other person's feelings. In some organizations, caring about others gets equated with not speaking up. This passive approach allows unproductive or undesirable behavior to remain in place.

Taking Risks

As I wrote in Chapter One, the owner, who was being bullied from below, didn't speak up out of fear until he began to hold himself accountable and engage in courageous conversations. Yes, there was a risk that the subordinate would become upset, quit, and take the technology with him. However, it was a bigger risk not to speak up because the toxic culture would persist. Sometimes, when gauging whether to provide feedback, consider the highest value and weigh both the benefits and drawbacks of the decision first. In doing this with the owner, he concluded that speaking up and trying to make a change was a higher value than the fear of negative future consequences.

Another challenging feedback dynamic you may encounter is how to engage the younger generation. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the workforce has become increasingly constrained, making it difficult to find skilled labor or staff. The Great Resignation occurred while people were still working from home in virtual or hybrid work conditions. However, the trades, for example, need warm bodies to work on-site. Middle-aged owners and executives I work with often question the younger generation's poor work ethic (lack of initiative, being late, lack of speed, and being distracted). Because they fear losing someone who at least is doing some work, they avoid giving constructive feedback. Again, it's a matter of taking risks and upholding your values. If the value of speaking up to make a change becomes more important than your fear of losing an employee, then you will become adept at addressing issues as they arise and not let them fester. You raise your standards. As you will see in the chapter on mindset, people genuinely want to be developed, and not doing so is the number one reason people leave a company.

Your fear or discomfort of taking a risk keeps your true feelings and thoughts locked inside (bottled up), which can produce stress. But all of that can change. The key is finding a tried-and-true method for giving feedback that works.

A Roadmap for Successful Feedback

Miracles often occur when I coach business owners and executives on how to provide constructive feedback. The air gets cleared. Good things begin to happen. Sometimes, however, things worsen before they improve! A culture shift, where people tell the truth to each other, will initially feel different, and even unsettling. Not everyone will choose to accept it.

Additionally, it is worth noting that this skill requires time to master, and it won't be perfect from the outset. Your goal should be to create a safe environment where your team can learn and practice this art together. The key is to uncover the hidden issues, so they do not hinder your efforts in the future. You may experience a 'one step forward, two steps back' dynamic. This experience is normal, and it may happen to you.

The roadmap to successful feedback provides a concise approach for executing feedback effectively. You should choose one or two issues at most, rather than presenting a laundry list, which can overwhelm the person receiving feedback. Additionally, it is best to provide feedback in a conducive space and at a suitable time, so that distractions don't cloud the experience.

Here's the model:

Frame the feedback. Let the person know you are providing feedback for improvement (as opposed to punishment); this way, they know what to expect from you.

Find something specific you appreciate about the person. Then say 'and,' not 'but' (when people hear 'but,' it tends to negate appreciation and raise people's hackles).

Be clear about the specific behavior you are giving feedback about. Avoid using general and judgmental language, such as "You are incompetent." Instead, say something like, "The reports you gave me have had several errors in the past two weeks." Again, only one or two items, not a laundry list.

Describe the impact of the non-ideal behavior on you, the team, or the business.

Ask them for ideas on how to solve the problem. You can get the person's perspective by asking, "What ideas do you have to solve this problem?" Alternatively, you may have an idea or two to share with them.

Coach and listen intently. If there is resistance to your feedback, say, "Please repeat what you heard me say", and have them paraphrase you. They may be feeling anxious or worried, which can affect their behavior. Asking them to paraphrase your words can help clarify their feedback if they misheard what you said. Most people have the tendency to take feedback personally because they are feeling criticized. We will explore coaching and listening in a later chapter.

Put steps 1-5 into a short paragraph and practice them in front of a mirror or with someone you trust. Be calm when delivering it. Ensure the space you use for giving feedback is free from distractions, which can maximize the efficacy of your feedback.

↓ The next time you have an opportunity to provide feedback to someone else, use the 'How to Give Feedback' worksheet, which you can download here:

A Note About Appreciation

Appreciation is a type of feedback sorely lacking in today's organizations and relationships. Only 30% of workers are engaged in the workplace

today, leaving 70% of people feeling unappreciated, underdeveloped, and looking to jump ship! Appreciation is central to creating high-functioning relationships and teams. Use it generously. There are many ways to show appreciation, and people often prefer to receive it in different ways. An "atta boy," a handshake, building it into meetings, an award, a lunch, a pat on the back, a gift, an email, or a text are all ways to show appreciation to others. When I managed a team of 25 people in a nonprofit organization, I kept a list of all the individuals I supported. I made it a point to show up and appreciate them in various ways periodically.

Here's a real-life example of the Feedback Model:

***Problem:** A part designed by an engineer has a flaw.*

Frame: "Joe, I want to discuss something with you to help you grow and become a better engineer. This is a feedback-for-improvement session. Thank you for taking the time with me."

***Show appreciation:** "I appreciate the time and detail you spent on the design of the part, and...."*

***Be clear and specific:** "I noticed the part is susceptible to vibration based on its specs."*

Describe Impact: "If a customer has a faulty part, then the products they use will be in jeopardy. Plus, this can have adverse consequences for their business and cause us to lose time and money by doing rework."

Make a request: "So, I would like you to rework the specs and adjust or eliminate the vibration differential. Do you have any comments, questions, or ideas?"

I had my client write down the above points in a paragraph to clarify them, see them as a whole, and practice delivering the feedback paragraph a few times before giving it.

Providing feedback in person is the best way to proceed. Ensure you are in a calm emotional state. If you are triggered, try to calm down first before proceeding. After you give the feedback, make sure to listen to how the person receives it. They may have some valid points that shape your understanding of the situation in a different way. When they hear the feedback, most people accept it and will change. When someone receives and accepts your feedback as is, this is what I call *one-and-done* feedback.

Note: it is ok to feel frustrated or angry, and if you can't truly calm down, it may be better to wait. If you can't wait, make sure in the impact bullet that you use "I" statements. "Joe, the impact of this is that I feel frustrated because it's the third time I've talked to you," sort of thing. Owning your thoughts and feelings is paramount to a healthy exchange and relationship.

Dealing with Defensiveness

We all know what it's like to become defensive in the face of feedback from others. Yet, it's through others that you learn about yourself and have the potential to grow. When you become defensive, you may feel uncomfortable, anxious, or frustrated, and thus fall into a fight-or-flight-or-freeze mentality. From this negatively charged emotional space, you are prone to take defensive action to block the negativity you feel, essentially putting up a shield. But, being defensive hinders your growth.

Here are ways defensiveness shows itself:

- 1. **Denial/lying:** saying something like "I didn't do it" as a knee-jerk reaction.
- 2. **Deflection:** Here, we attempt to shift the blame onto others. "Well, you do it too".
- Or "Jimmy does it too; why are you calling me out?"

3. **Dismissal or gaslighting:** In this scenario, others downplay the feedback or shift the focus. "It's not that big of a deal." "Anyway, let's change the subject."

- 4. **Rationalizing/rebuttal:** Justifications fly here. "I did it because...", or "Yeah, but..."
- 5. **Playing the Victim:** "It's not my fault." "What did you expect me to do?"
- 6. **Placation:** Others try to tell you what you want to hear so you
- [MERGED INTO CH4_P55]

7. **Over-Explaining:** The person goes off on tangents and talks incessantly, leaving you tuned out or confused. After a while, you forget what you were talking about.

Here is a process for you to become less defensive:

- 1. Value feedback. Recognize that you need it to improve. Realize that
- [MERGED INTO CH4_P59]

2. Actively solicit feedback from those people important to you. How do they view you as a manager, a parent, or a spouse? Get the reps in and take the sting out of the bee.

- 3. Keep yourself centered by taking deep breaths as feedback is delivered. Remember you want it.
- 4. Realize that others are talking about your behavior, not you as a person overall. Separate the two!
- 5. If the feedback is unclear, ask for clarification and/or specific examples.
- 6. Keep the end goal in mind: you want to be connected with the person.

7. Decide (not out of defensiveness) whether the feedback applies to you. If it makes sense to you, then you can begin your behavior change journey.

8. If a person becomes defensive and begins to blame you or others, for example, take a deep breath and ask the person what they heard you say. Having them paraphrase you allows them to reiterate from their perspective what the feedback meant to them and what they heard. You may find that they are judging themselves too critically or have some information you haven't considered. Be open to changing your mind, all the while staying firm in the outcome you want. It's a delicate balance. If someone *is* to blame for the situation, explore that.

9. Another thing to consider is the emotional and mental state in which the person you want to give feedback may be at a particular time. For instance, if a person is returning from an absence due to a family death, it might be best to wait before delivering feedback. Giving untimely feedback can elicit defensiveness.

Use the feedback model steps the next time you need to give feedback to someone in your business or personal life. When done right and often, feedback creates a culture that values it.

About Vulnerability

Speaking up to someone can feel vulnerable because it may seem like a risk. Most people can accept feedback without becoming overly defensive. Sometimes, however, as I mentioned, defensiveness occurs because it feels too unsettling from an emotional standpoint. Emotional vulnerability is the willingness to acknowledge and manage difficult or painful emotions, such as guilt and shame, that arise from making a mistake or not doing something right. Feeling vulnerable can lead you to become defensive, so you don't have to face those negative feelings. Or it can lead you to open up and consider the possibility that you may have been wrong in a situation or aren't meeting someone else's standards. Being vulnerable increases your ability to accept and overcome hurt and rejection.

Becoming vulnerable is a high art form where you become, over time, open-minded to anything anyone wants to bring up about you. Vulnerability allows connection, trust, and change to occur. It's a rich and deep

strength every confident leader should strive for and facilitate in their culture.

CHAPTER THREE TAKEAWAYS:

- Feedback can be constructive, appreciative, or destructive.
- Don't bottle your emotions up. Express them professionally.
- Make the fear of conflict or feelings of inadequacy smaller than the value of giving and accepting constructive feedback.
- Practice the tried-and-true, field-tested feedback model.
- Ensure that the physical space and timing are conducive to delivering feedback.
- Defensiveness is a typical response and manifests in multiple ways.
- Practice vulnerability and remain open to feedback.

IV

Mastering the Ten Skills of Listening for Better Relationships

"And so I had him thinking of me as a good conversationalist when, in reality, I had been merely a good listener and had encouraged him to talk." – Dale Carnegie.

Stephan, a 45-year-old interior design firm owner, was overqualified for his clients and felt seriously bored. Unable to set boundaries with clients and employees, he wanted to sell his business or close up shop. Burnout was severe. He was no longer finding joy in the things he used to love—running, gourmet cooking, and playing with his dog.

Stephan was ripe for change and immediately took to being coached like a plant needing water. I listened purely and intentionally. I reflected on and validated what I heard, helped him make connections, and supported him in being more constructive about what he was genuinely trying to create in his life. He wanted to be in a state of flow, joy, and challenge, and to attract higher-end clients and jobs. We focused on this vision and began setting goals. Along the way, he encountered barriers—usually self-imposed limitations or negative feelings. For example, setting boundaries with clients and employees can trigger a fear of perceived confrontation, or worse, losing them.

He also had a complex relationship with money, having lost a significant amount in a previous business venture due to trusting a business partner. PTSD from that experience cast a long shadow over his future—he walked on eggshells to avoid repeating that loss. But by doing

so, he created the very future he feared: no clear boundaries meant others weren't held accountable, and he was working nights and weekends to please them. Much of his stress subsided after we worked together to establish boundaries and accountability.

Today, Stephan has renewed joy, passion, and commitment to his business. He created a pre-screening process to vet clients with whom he truly wants to work with. He's happier than ever, running marathons, playing with his dog, and loving life.

When burnout thaws, infinite possibilities await you. Because Stephan had a safe environment and someone to listen and help him work through his issues, it made lasting changes in his life.

Listening is an *Easy Art* to Learn

We all have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Unfortunately, listening seems to be a rare skill in this world of constant information overload and copious deadlines, all at a hectic pace. One of my clients visualized this hectic dynamic as going down the highway at 100 mph, spinning 12 plates. Yet, listening well is an essential strategy and it just makes good business sense. However, if you are doing all the talking, you are not doing any of this listening.

Listening to others builds trust and makes them feel valued. It helps you to get to know someone's thoughts and feelings about situations and life. In short, you get to know people better. People feel appreciated, valued, and positive when someone (especially a boss!) takes the time to listen. When you listen to other human beings, you can learn what motivates them and understand why they think or behave in certain ways. It is the antidote to many of the challenges you face in your organization. It helps you avoid making assumptions or being a micromanager when you take the time to hear why someone made the choices they did.

The Two Hats of Management

There are two hats of effective management: directing and coaching. I will explore coaching more fully in Chapter Six, and listening is the primary coaching engine.

Directing is about telling people what to do, which can be appropriate sometimes. However, as leaders and managers, if that is the only tool you have to make change, it won't go very far. People generally dislike being told what to do. It shuts them down. They want coaching. Think about this: if people knew what you expected of them, they would theoretically already be doing those things. Coaching addresses the underlying reasons for the breach.

For example, if a report you needed was late, a well-timed question like "Why was the report late?" could get at the root cause, especially if you have created a safe space for them to explore the issue. Telling someone it is unacceptable and can't happen again doesn't get to the root of the matter. It may alter the behavior, but the person may still feel undervalued and walk away with feelings of fear, frustration, or anxiety over the interaction. You may say to yourself, "I don't care" about how they feel, all I want is for the report to be on time. That is undoubtedly a possible perspective to have. Again, as I stated above, sometimes you have to tell people what to do, but use it sparingly. Not being directive is especially true if the behavior is a consistent pattern.

Caring is good business. As a manager who listens, you help people feel valued and appreciated—and appropriately accountable. They become better problem solvers and innovators. The front-line workers know how things break down and how problems get solved. Effective listening leads to engagement and real improvements. Workers with positive relationships at work are more productive, less stressed, more committed, and enjoy better well-being. Aren't those the workers you want?

Inspired Action Item: Practice Your Listening Skills

One exercise you can easily do is to practice your listening skills for ten minutes with someone else (e.g., spouse, teenager, colleague).

Here's how it works:

Set a ten-minute timer, and your only task is to be curious and NOT solve the problem or challenge for the other person. You are there solely to listen and ask questions. Resist the temptation to talk about yourself; keep 100% focus on the other person.

Asking questions like "Why did you do that?" "What happened next?" "Who else was involved?" and "How did you address that?" prompt people to think through their responses with more than a simple yes or no answer. Great listening primes the pump of being a great coach.

Using probing statements like "Tell me more about..." helps you explore things you are curious about. It allows the speaker to flesh out more of what they are trying to figure out, because you effectively serve as a sounding board for them.

Debrief the activity with the person you are listening to. Was the listening impactful?

Below, I outline the ten skills of listening to help you become a listening master.

- These ten skills are critical to truly listening to someone else:
- intentional curiosity
- paraphrasing
- open-ended vs. closed-ended questions
- probing statements
- body language
- timing
- tempo
- silence

- environment
- and barriers.

These skills are essential because anyone can learn them, but mastering them requires practice. It takes time, but it's so worth the trip. Here they are described below:

1. Intentional Curiosity. Doesn't it feel great when someone really listens to you? You leave the conversation feeling refreshed and valued. You can give this gift to others. Listening requires intention. You become hyper-intentional about being fully present. You're not just hearing words—you're seeking to understand by being genuinely curious about another person, paying attention to their words and body language. See a person as a whole: body language, emotion, unspoken thoughts, words. That's what makes you a better listener—seeing them completely.

2. Positive body language. Good body language matters: maintain eye contact, nod, use facial expressions. An upright posture helps you retain information better and signals that you're present—not slouching or checking your phone. By being mindful of your physical presence, you make subtle shifts toward deeper focus and engagement. Looking at your phone or computer while someone talks to you kills the listening environment. Studies show divided attention tanks your retention of information and the social cues that matter for real listening. Missing important information? That's bad business.

Most of our communication is non-verbal. In my workshops, as we explore body language, I ask people to freeze and then have others observe them, trying to ascertain what they are saying through their body language alone. When you are with other people, not only are you communicating verbally, but a significant amount of information is also exchanged through each other's physical presence, which is considered non-verbal.

For instance, I recently had a client whom I asked if she was attending an upcoming event in her niche, and her answer was profound. Her body shook side to side as if to say no, but a yes came out of her mouth. So, I

held that up to her to inspect. Her body, indeed, was more right than her mouth! We discussed the pros and cons of the event she proposed attending. By the end of the meeting, she was clear she would go, and when I asked her again, she aligned her body with her words.

I will often use what I call *mirroring* to relate to my clients. If they stand up, I may stand up as well. If they cross their arms, I may as well. The opposite is true; sometimes, someone will cross their arms, for example, and if mine are crossed, I will open them up to change my body language. Uncrossing my arms is especially true if someone is feeling negative at the time of crossing their arms. I open my arms as if to tell them non-verbally that I am open to whatever they want to feel, explore, and talk about.

Inspired Action Item: Three Body Language Exercises

Ask someone you talk with regularly to provide feedback about your body language in one-on-one or group settings, such as meetings.

Take note of other people's body language toward you or when you are in meetings.

Try to identify productive *and* unproductive body language. An eye roll, as an example, could be a fun way to roll with a joke, or it can be a sarcastic way to tell someone you disapprove of what they are doing or saying.

For example, I used to watch videos of my early speaking engagements and noticed that I would adjust my belt periodically. It was an odd behavior, maybe even a nervous tick, that I wasn't aware of until I saw it.

3. Paraphrasing: Paraphrasing is putting what someone is saying—or feeling—into your own words. I use "So it sounds like..." heavily in coaching because it syncs me with what they're expressing. The goal is simple: stay on the same page. Most of us fear being wrong, so we avoid checking in. Here's what's great: you don't have to be right! That's the whole point. Paraphrasing clears up misunderstandings

and assumptions. When you reflect back their experience, they think more clearly.

I practice paraphrasing so others can correct me if I'm off base. Reflecting back someone's feelings can calm them down immediately.

I was leading a meeting and noticed Mike looking exhausted—his eyes were closing. Everyone else seemed engaged. So I said, "Mike, looks like you're pretty tired today." He said yes, and that the room was stuffy and it was right after lunch. Good insight for future meetings! If I hadn't checked it out, I might have thought he didn't care. But that wasn't it at all.

Paraphrasing helps the speaker clarify what they're trying to figure out. When you paraphrase and get it wrong, that's actually great! Hearing their words reflected back helps them think more clearly and fill in the gaps.

Inspired Action Item: Paraphrasing Activity

Find someone willing to do this exercise with you.

Have the person talk about something they are excited about or challenged by, and every 30 seconds or so, stop them and paraphrase what you have heard.

- Do this for 5 minutes.
- Intentionally paraphrase the wrong one time to see what the speaker does.

Make sure to listen, because your paraphrasing will help others organize their thoughts and give you more content and context for what they are talking about.

Debrief the activity with the speaker. Ask the person how they felt during the exercise.

4. Open-ended vs. closed-ended questions: Your ability to ask curious questions is everything in strong relationships. You can't

build solid connection if you're hyper-focused on your own story. It takes real intention to go deeper with someone. When you're genuinely curious, questions flow naturally. Curiosity keeps you focused on them—not on pivoting back to you. Here's the trap: when someone shares something, it reminds you of your experience. Then you start talking about yourself and 'drop' them. Resist that urge. You can share your viewpoint, but be careful not to hijack the conversation and leave them feeling abandoned.

The type of question matters. There are two types: open-ended and closed-ended. I lean heavily on open-ended questions. I love questions starting with who, where, how, what, or why because they can't be answered with just yes or no. The other person has to think—and share more. "Why did you do that?" "How did that happen?" "What happened next?" These are open-ended questions at their best.

Inspired Action Item: The Ask Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How Exercise

Find someone willing to listen to you for ten minutes. Your sole objective is to ask open-ended questions beginning with who, what, where, when, why, or how.

- Write who, what, where, when, why, and how on a piece of paper so you can ask one of each.
- Resist the temptation to discuss your experience. Keep generating questions from what you hear the person saying.
- What are you curious about? Be natural in your curiosity about this person, and open-ended questions will come naturally.
- Debrief with the speaker about the activity. Ask how the person felt during the exercise.

5. **Probing statements:** Probing statements feel different from open-ended questions but do the same work. Instead of asking, you invite: "Tell me more about that." In coaching, you'll hear things that intrigue you or don't add up. That's when you probe. A probing

statement is a gentle invitation—it draws someone deeper without forcing. I prefer them because they create space for real thinking and exploration.

6. Silence: Silence is essential for gaining insights. A few seconds of reflection time can be powerful. Sometimes, people need a minute to reflect on a question or insight during the session. Silence can also be uncomfortable, as in awkward silence, but it doesn't have to be. I often say, "Take your time," when I've asked someone a question, giving them a moment to think. It's not a race to the finish line! You can go slower, it's ok.

I recently had a banking client give me a video testimonial. She was nervous about being on camera, but she came through for me. During multiple takes, we noticed she said "um" frequently. Um, like, and uh are filler words—they signal discomfort. Once she saw this pattern, she could breathe, embrace the silence, and the ums dropped significantly.

7. Tempo: Tempo is speaking speed. Everyone has a natural rhythm; when excited, people speed up. Fast talking is hard to follow—the listener can't keep pace. I've struggled with this; I get excited and talk quickly. I have to consciously slow down, especially when presenting. On the flip side, slow talkers can bury the point in long narratives. The fix: ask them to summarize in bullets or set a time limit. "Ok, John, you have 30 seconds." Simple.

8. Timing: Some quick check-ins work fine. But bad timing kills the conversation. Everyone's busy, so make sure the person you want to talk with has real time to engage. Yes, important things come up spontaneously. But for serious conversations, schedule dedicated time. Get a private space—a conference room, an office. Sit down. Give them your full attention. That's how real listening happens.

9. Environment: Choose a space that supports listening. Noise, distractions, or crowded rooms kill the conversation. A client recently asked if we could do the last 15 minutes of our session walking instead of sitting in the conference room. I loved that. Movement

helped her integrate what we'd covered. I spend most sessions in conference rooms, but switching things up can be exactly what someone needs.

10. **Barriers to listening:** Obstacles get in the way. Notice when you're distracted—mentally or by the environment. If you are, reschedule. It's that simple. One technique: ask "Is now a good time to talk?" This simple check helps someone get focused and gives them permission to say no. If it's not a good time, say: "Let's find a time that works better." Respect that boundary. It shows care.

Watch out for these listening killers:

Mental rehearsing: Thinking about your response while someone is talking.

Daydreaming: Not being fully present because you are somewhere else in your mind.

Stealing the thunder: Talking about yourself too much. Your goal when listening is to gather more information, not broadcast your story. If you relate to their story and hijack it with your own, you've killed the listening. This is the biggest barrier offender!

Talking over each other: Give each other space. If someone's a fast talker with lots to say, gently interrupt and ask if you can jump in. In group settings, use a talking stick—whoever holds it speaks. Good facilitation helps, too. It ensures everyone gets heard.

Being tuned into a device or notifications: Put your phone away. Looking at it kills the listening environment instantly. It signals: you're not worth my full attention. Don't send that message.

Your negative judgment: You might disagree with someone. That's fine. But set it aside while you listen. There's a time to share your viewpoint. That time is not while you're actively listening.

Lack of interest: If you don't want to listen to someone, address that first. Otherwise, you'll be checked out when you should be tuned in. Don't fake it.

CHAPTER FIVE TAKEAWAYS:

Pure listening is in short supply these days.

You have two ears and one mouth for a reason.

- There are two hats of management: coaching and directing. Use the directive approach sparingly.
- Listening is at the heart of coaching.
- Great listening fosters engagement of others.

Learn and practice the ten skills of listening.

Leading with a Coaching Approach to Facilitate Change

Excellence is the gradual result of always striving to do better. - **Pat Riley**, former NBA head coach and three-time NBA Coach of the Year.

Peter, a 50-year-old CEO and owner of a construction company, came to me seeking help for his burnout. Construction and other trades have a notorious reputation for being toxic cultures, and his culture was no exception. The norms of his culture were infighting, drinking, absenteeism, and rogue agents. He was so stressed and fed up that he considered firing most of his 15 employees and returning to a smaller team of himself and a few key individuals. He was highly motivated to change and recognized that he had a problem. With my help, he learned how to use coaching to his advantage. Some people don't understand they have a problem because it's their baseline, and they think it's normal.

Peter is a very generous man and employer, as well as an extreme people pleaser. Like Stephan, he let people get away with a lot of the previously stated toxic behaviors. That all changed under our engagement. I encouraged Peter to take an inventory of his stressors and let him know we would work on them until they were all solved. The cool thing is that when you shift your mindset from lamenting about problems to creating options and solving them, a shift occurs. It's not easy, however, because not every employee will magically get on board. He had to fire one key person, and others soon left.

When you turn the heat up, things get real, and not everyone wants to raise their standards to fit yours. However, things began to change; Peter started working on his vision for the company and its culture, and began to execute it. He wanted to break the norm of toxic construction company culture and create a coaching and learning environment in which people are highly trained.

Coaching is in high demand, and for good reason. It's the premier method for making change in yourself, a relationship, and a team. It fundamentally involves a deep, unbiased, and intentional approach that is nonjudgmental, focused on listening (described in the previous chapter) supportive, generative, positive, and open-minded.

Mind the Gap

Coaching is also about identifying what motivational interviewing refers to as a discrepancy, the gap between the current state and the desired future state. When you aren't fulfilling your goals, a discrepancy arises. For example, there is a discrepancy when someone doesn't do what you want them to do.

Here's the punchline: discrepancies are everywhere. In coaching, you can celebrate this because you know life isn't perfect, and the gold is in the gaps. As a good coach, you will need to bring intense curiosity to help the person you are working with figure out why the discrepancy exists as well as figure out how to mitigate the barriers getting in the way.

The main elements of understanding a discrepancy are:

- Assessing the current state
- Articulating the specific future state
- Identifying action items
- Tracking metrics;
- and solving the obstacles that are getting in the way of action.

In Peter's case, I asked him to describe the current state, what it felt like, what was happening, and what he had tried thus far. This fair assessment of what he had tried was essential and served as the foundation for him to make a change. You must know where you are and what you have tried to do thus far; otherwise, you are merely meandering without a plan.

The future state is a 'shot across the bow,' looking into the near and long-term future, so you have directionality. Peter wanted a team environment where his staff treated each other with respect, were committed to learning, and were devoted to the mission. He also wanted to be more of a figurehead in five years, allowing him to build other ventures, such as real estate investing. It all seemed like a tall order and out of reach until we began working together. He realized he had been too soft with the guys out of fear of losing them and because he feared conflict. Peter grew up in a toxic environment and learned construction from a toxic family member. He associated being assertive or being strong with being toxic.

Smarten Up and Set SMART Goals

SMART goals are a powerful way to bring clarity and structure to your ambitions. The acronym stands for **Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant, and Time-bound**. Instead of vague intentions like "I want to be healthier" or "I need to focus more," SMART goals force you to define precisely what success looks like, how you'll measure progress, whether it's realistically attainable, why it matters, and when you'll get it done. This method transforms wishful thinking into a concrete action plan, helping you stay focused, motivated, and accountable. When you set SMART goals, you're not just hoping things will change, you're engineering change with precision.

Of course, in Peter's case, there were also some things holding him back. These became barriers or obstacles we had to overcome on our

journey together. Additionally, you may encounter numerous obstacles on your way to achieving your goals. Here are a few:

- Time
- Money
- Other people
- Low self-confidence
- Lack of understanding technology
- Fear of conflict and confrontation
- and subconscious negative thoughts and beliefs.

You need to identify these barriers in a safe and curious space. Coaching is primarily about curiosity and not needing to solve other people's problems for them. It's collaborative. It's an ask-centric approach as opposed to a tell-centric directive approach. Return to Chapter Four, where I examined the ten listening skills that are at the heart of coaching.

Fostering Accountability

In organizations, progressive discipline typically involves coaching an individual multiple times before resorting to punishment. You give others the benefit of the doubt and check out their discrepancy with intense curiosity. You then have them make connections to how they can overcome the barriers and achieve their goals, while also holding them accountable over time. Sounds easy, but in reality, it's a big challenge.

Suppose you deem that punishment is warranted because coaching and training have not been effective. In that case, you have the authority to issue verbal and written warnings, or to suspend or terminate the employee. Removing unproductive or harmful team members is essential for maintaining high morale. You are only as good as your weakest link.

Accountability is a buzzword in organizations these days. With a lack of accountability, an organization becomes the Wild West. Standards slip and become the new norm. Peter started to hold people accountable. His culture began to shift once he articulated his vision to the team during a

series of company retreats. We created company values together. We discussed the principles of this book and how those might play out in their unique environment. We built relationships and collaboration skills. We played team-building games to illustrate the principles of teamwork. In essence, we did a full-court press to improve the culture.

You should also document your coaching sessions with others to track progress, using something like KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). With all of my clients, I tend to conduct a session recap or highlight the key points we discussed, so that we can refer to them between sessions and when preparing for future sessions. Did they do what they said they were going to do? If so, great. If not, why? Additionally, if any questions arise in the future about the discussion, the proof and information are readily available at your fingertips. It's a good Human Resources practice to document as much as possible when working with other humans.

For example, a CEO of a manufacturing company that I was supporting had to fire his plant manager. I tried coaching his plant manager for a few months, when it became apparent that he wasn't a good fit for the company. The employees complained to me about him, and there was sufficient evidence to justify his termination. So, the CEO and I fired the plant manager. Two weeks later, the state labor commission called the company, wanting proof. Luckily, I had been documenting my sessions with the plant manager, as well as capturing the employee complaints. This anecdotal evidence was sufficient to resolve the issue, and my client was not liable for a potential wrongful termination.

There are Many Takes on the Same Situation

Another aspect of coaching is the coach's ability to offer different perspectives. Sometimes, a client or person you are coaching is stuck and thinking about a situation in only one way. But, as you may know, there are many ways to understand a situation. You get to offer different perspectives on why the person's situation exists, unlocking and reframing the problem.

I lead an exercise with groups, asking them to come up with as many uses for a cow as possible. It's fun, engaging, and very creative. A cow can be a pet, a coat, a meal, someone's morning chores, or a dog's best friend, to name a few things. The power of this exercise, when done in groups, demonstrates the power of collective consciousness. We are wiser together as a group or team. Nobody has a monopoly on knowledge, so we need each other. The next time you're confused about something or have an issue, bring it to your team. Let the collective wisdom in the room generate many different options to resolve the problem. Brainstorming like this can be fun, serve as a good team-building activity, and model humility.

To Err is to Be Human

A coach often says, "What if you thought of it this way? What would that look like?" For instance, if someone is self-conscious about giving a presentation but wants to be more confident, this is a great coaching situation. As a coach, you can help people transition from "What if I mess up?" to understanding that it is normal for mistakes to happen. Nobody is immune to making mistakes. You can prepare to roll with mishaps when they occur, or even before they do. So the question "What if I mess up?" has a whole new meaning. It's generative instead of diminishing.

You can examine a situation that may trip you up beforehand and set yourself up for success. For example, if nervousness causes you to fumble your words or lose your train of thought, deep breathing and speaking more slowly may be an effective antidote when you are on stage. Rehearsing may also be a good practice. I routinely coach people to have ready-made phrases in their back pocket to get them out of emotional hot water.

Coaching is about behavior change. I use a simple rubric for supporting change. If someone wants to create something (goal), this could be useful to use. Conversely, if someone isn't getting what they want in life, one of these elements might be in play:

1. Desire. Desire is about motivation and energy. Do you want it (whatever it is)? Some people think they should do many things, but that's not motivating. Should, could, and would are all quasi-words that denote a lack of full desire, which can block your goal fulfillment. For example, lack of motivation or desire is one of the reasons why people drop off at the gym after three weeks, after setting fitness goals on January 1st.

2. Ability. Can you pull off what you want to do? Do you have the skills to do it? In the gym example above, this may become a barrier if you desire to go to the gym but lack the abilities (e.g., lifting, running, or rowing techniques). To develop ability, you can watch tutorial videos, work with a seasoned friend, or hire a trainer for help.

3. Reminders. When a new behavior is underway, we must schedule it, lest we forget to follow through. With so many competing priorities and actions, this tender bud of change gets squashed if we forget to act. It's as simple as that. Reminders can come in many forms:

- phone notifications
- calendar appointments
- a visual calendar
- a visual cue (like your gym bag being visible)
- a friend calling or meeting you
- a gym bag in your car (where you can see it)
- and meeting regularly with a coach.

Are You Coachable?

Coaching others is a gift you give to them, and being coached yourself is a gift you give to you. I use these statements to assess if someone is coachable. Use one, many, or all of these questions to see if the person you are thinking of coaching is in the ballpark. You can push a rope, but not very far.

1 You want to know more about your strengths.

- 2. You can handle constructive feedback with little defensiveness.
- 3. You want to understand how you positively and negatively impact others.
- 4. You continually strive for excellence in all or some aspects of your life.
- 5. You are willing to be vulnerable with your coach.
- 6. You are committed to taking actions that you and your coach designed.
- 7. You are actively engaged in uncovering and overcoming your blind spots.
- 8. You see coaching as a worthwhile investment in your future.
- 9. There is a gap between where you are and where you want to be in some aspect(s) of your life.
- 10. You connect mental/emotional health to your life outcomes.

If you had to choose one, I would choose number seven. I believe having the mindset to be open to others exposing your blind spots is the fastest way to make change. Blind spots are relevant for individuals and teams. I do a blind spots activity, called the Johari Window, with my clients, and it's gold. This tool has been around since 1955 and normalizes that everyone has blind spots. What you need to do is create a safe space to point out others' flaws or weaknesses. One way to do this is to put yourself on the hot seat and have others point out your flaws to you.

One client, a CEO, had a squirrel mind, or affectionately called shiny-object syndrome. Clinically, he had ADHD. He got distracted, tried to do a lot of things at once, and dropped balls. He also didn't communicate well. He worked on multiple projects simultaneously, often not completing one before moving on to the next. It was immensely frustrating to the people who work under him.

In one leadership team meeting, I put him on the hot seat. I had heard from his leadership team that his ADHD was legendary, and it was irking them. I had each leadership team member express to him, in a safe space with me as the facilitator, how his errant behaviors affected them. This information was enlightening to the CEO, and in subsequent meetings, we worked on improving communication and developing ways to track project progress, thereby holding him accountable.

CHAPTER FIVE TAKEAWAYS

When you raise your standards and expectations of others, coaching is an effective way to ensure they are met.

Coaching helps to uncover discrepancies, the chasm between current and future states.

Obstacles are part of the journey when you are trying to achieve your goals, or others are trying to achieve theirs. Coaching seeks to normalize these barriers, break them down, and resolve them so that you can realign on your path.

Coaching is effective because it's an *ask-centric approach*, as opposed to a *tell-centric one*.

Coaching demonstrates curiosity, open-mindedness, and accountability, which helps make a safe space for you to be transparent. The more honest you are with your coach, the quicker you will make a change.

A company with little accountability is like the Wild West, where anything goes. Standard operating procedures help set the bar for performance and provide a structure against which to coach.

Coaching helps you reframe adverse events as opportunities for learning, self-awareness, and effective problem-solving.

You may or may not be ready to be coached. Assess yourself and identify what is holding you back.

VI

Training Your Mind to Regain Power

"Go confidently in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined." – Henry David Thoreau

I first met Jack when he was 55. He was a surgeon at a large hospital, but he loathed every minute of it. Jack was in a state of panic, turmoil, and crisis when he met me over coffee for our first session. He wanted to change careers, but had no idea where to turn or what to look for. He was intensely burned out; he would stay in bed all day on the weekends with the covers over his head. He was in a deep state of lethargy. What was even more intense was that he was also trying to raise two kids by himself at the same time.

Jack had a lot of demons we had to sift through. He had a tumultuous upbringing with an alcoholic mother and absent father. Having this experience led him to develop bad feelings about himself and feelings of unworthiness, haunting him well into adulthood. Events in Jack's life, especially being a surgeon, triggered his feelings of insecurity so severely that he would panic.

Reframing Negative Thoughts is the Cure

Upon hiring me, Jack began to ascertain that he felt a connection to the medical field, but not specifically to surgery. So, we figured out what other positions he could find that would satisfy his love for patient-centric care, leadership, and helping others grow. We found him another high-profile job at another hospital, overseeing a critical department. Today, he is

happy and engaged, continually developing himself and others, and establishing a solid reputation as a trusted professional and all-around good person. His feelings of unworthiness are still present, but less frequent and intense, and they don't last as long.

The biggest thing for Jack to work on was the art of reframing, which is reframing negative thoughts into constructive ones. At first, many things in his life were “terrible.” As we began to work on his mindset, he started to see things as opportunities to grow, to make change, and to understand his trauma. Making mountains out of molehills became less and less over a year of working with me. He began to have more control over his thoughts, feelings, actions, and outcomes.

The greatest real estate you will ever own is in between your ears. You must train your mind to be successful. Mindset training could be the most important thing you can do for your sustained growth and the growth of others. The good thing is that you already have some knowledge of how to do it. I am just making it explicit what it is, and that you need to do it more often.

It may be an urban legend that your brain or mind thinks upwards of 50,000 thoughts per day, which is astonishing. And as you might suspect, not all of those thoughts are positive. In an oversimplified way, negative thoughts appear more frequently than neutral or positive ones. But what is a thought? The jury is still out! Thoughts are so subtle and invisible that they pass undetected through our minds, so we are not aware of them. It seems as if they are wisps of air. You can't actually 'see' your thoughts, can you? However, they are there, and some are stickier than others, which means they are more noticeable than other thoughts.

Thoughts can be faint or strong. If you are really hungry, for instance, the thought “Boy, I'd like a cheeseburger,” might enter your mind as a thought. It's pretty strong because the sensation of hunger is there. Conversely, you may have the thought that “I need to go to bed because I have to get up early,” which may be faint. You notice it enough and it drives your behavior to brush your teeth, get your pj's on and hit the sack.

Other times thoughts are incendiary, vociferous, and unruly. Usually fueled by frustration and anger, these thoughts, such as “That’s the last time he is insubordinate. On Monday I’m firing his ass!” Something like this is a flash in the pan and right behind your eyes. You get consumed by these flashes of negativity and can’t see clearly.

A mindset is a collective or stream of habitual thinking. These routine ways of thinking about situations in life become what we call our mindset: a worldview or a paradigm. If you don’t find a way to inspect your thoughts, you will be at the whim of your negative mindsets, which is problematic because thoughts influence feelings and the propensity to act out through those feelings, ultimately influencing your outcomes.

Some motivational gurus also advise being cautious about the company you keep regularly, as you become a confluence of those influences. So, if you spend a lot of time with people who have a negative mindset, it will affect you and your thinking.

As I mentioned earlier, perceiving thoughts is challenging because they are invisible. But you do have the power to see them and work with them. It’s called self-awareness or mindfulness. There is a metaphor of leaves floating down a river. If you are in the river, you can’t see the thoughts as a whole, only the ones next to you. But if you go up on the riverbank, you can see the leaves float by in totality.

Meditation is one way to foster this mindful and self-aware approach. As you become more aware of your thoughts, you can challenge them, especially the negative ones. Every thought is open for self-reflection, and it’s a fascinating experiment to think of your thoughts as if projected on a TV screen in front of you. Then you can really ‘see’ them.

Meditation helps you sit on the riverbank of your consciousness, allowing you to see your thoughts floating by in your mind. The point is that at any moment, you are conversing in the space between your ears.

Inspired Action Item: Focus on Thinking Exercise

Take a moment to breathe deeply for a few breaths and close your eyes.

As you settle in, you will notice how quickly your thinking becomes clear, just notice.

Shift your focus from your breath to your mind and see if you can spot various words, phrases, or sentences that you are thinking about.

Don't judge or try to change the experience. Just notice what is in your mind.

Use your breath to anchor yourself so you don't get lost in your thoughts. The point is to understand that you think, but not get too lost in your thoughts.

Sometimes, thinking tells a positive story; sometimes not. Take the weather, for instance. I live in the northeast United States, where snow and rain are prevalent depending on the season. Routinely, I hear people lament about how cold it is, how it's been raining for three days straight, or how it's snowing in April. Of course, everyone has preferences, but these lamentations are different. A preference is not emotional; it is just an observation that you would rather have hot coffee over iced coffee. If there is no hot coffee, then iced is fine. The weather in the northeast differs from the preference for hot or iced coffee. People are greatly bothered by the weather! But you can't control the weather. So, if you have no control over something, why think negatively about it?

Do you want to fill your life with negativity towards 'another day of snow,' or do you want to turn that around? The choice is yours. You don't think it is because you haven't learned to do so. Thinking, it seems, is something happening to you.

Socrates said that a life not examined is not worth living. That's a little dramatic, but your quality of life is directly proportional to the quality of your thinking. Thinking is like flexing a muscle; you can work on it, and over time, you can improve and become stronger.

Two of my heroes, Tony Robbins and Dr. Joe Dispenza, discuss the power of thought and the extent of control you have over this mental function. However, it requires a high degree of awareness to achieve this,

for instance, as seen in the weather. I have trained my mind to love all weather. No matter what is happening outside, inside my mind, I am fine, in fact, better, because I accept and love all weather. Is it a Jedi mind trick? Maybe at first. The first step is to recognize and acknowledge negative thoughts or clusters of thoughts. Then, if you decide to do it, you can work on turning the thoughts around.

Earlier, I wrote that thinking falls into three categories: positive, negative, and neutral. As a coach, I support my clients in turning negativity around. Sometimes, people need to vent because things build up, and that's perfectly fine. Venting avoids the bottle-up and volcano syndromes, which I wrote about in an earlier chapter. We take the thoughts in our minds and look at turning them around to be more about learning, creativity, change, and self-awareness. It's a fantastic experience.

Recently, I helped someone who "hates" networking turn it around to see it as an opportunity to meet people, listen, and grow out of her lack of self-confidence. Another client was jaded by being fired from a job and felt like a victim. I helped her turn that around to see it as reality, an opportunity to learn new skills and focus on her next step. And, yet another client felt 'roped in' to come back to a previous job, only to find out that he actually made the choice to do so.

To illustrate the power of reframing negativity, I recently lost 40 podcast episodes from my Focus Coach Podcast, which I started during COVID. Shockingly, I didn't back them up or pay the small fee to keep them hosted. It's my fault because I wasn't paying attention. It burned for a hot minute (an hour or so of shock) until I caught myself. I stopped when I saw what I was doing, lamenting about the situation, and beating myself up. I refocused my mind on learning. You know what? I probably won't do that again! So, the lesson was uncomfortable, but it happened and is what it is. I can always recreate the podcasts if I want.

Death of a Loved One Exercise

I recently lost a dear friend named Aaron, who was a long-time full-time firefighter in the city where I live, to lung cancer. Recently, I was driving and I had an epiphany. I thought that when life gets hard, I can ask the question, “What would Aaron say?” This metaphorical juxtaposition of life and death jolted me into the present moment. He would probably say something to the effect of “don’t sweat the small stuff, and most things are small. There’s always a different perspective and you can solve just about any problem with the right attitude and mindset.” Maybe you have someone that you have lost that you talk to here and there. The next time you are upset by life’s trials and tribulations, ask your deceased friend or family member for counsel.

Turn Lemons into Lemonade

Here are some phrases I have catalogued from my work to help you get out of an emotional and mental pickle. These phrases remind you that perspective is possible, help you flex the inner muscles of the turnaround from negative to positive. Sometimes, when you feel there is no option, you can employ one or more of these bulleted items to help you keep yourself more centered.

- It is what it is
- Reality is reality
- The past is in the past
- Time is my friend
- Embrace the messenger
- Have a gratitude attitude
- This too shall pass
- Failure is learning
- Life is a journey
- I should be in this moment right now
- Everything happens for a reason
- The future is unknown

- Nobody is perfect
- Perfection is the energy of great
- Mistakes don't make me a bad person
- And, discomfort is good.

These are examples of phrases that can foster a positive mindset, helping you think more creatively and clearly. You can and should adopt these thought streams, and more, when adversity strikes. Mull these over constantly, flexing the brain's muscles to remember them, which helps prevent mental and emotional downturns.

For example, when you return home, you may tend to dwell on things from your day for some time. Maybe it's apparent that most of this stuff is out of your control at night, and you couldn't do anything about it anyway. You may have missed something, not had enough time to finish something, bitten off more than you could chew, or you didn't address something you should have. But, the past is in the past. If you can't do anything about it until the next day, you have a choice to make. You have the power to let it all go.

One client would obsess negatively about all the things he may have forgotten, and worried about any mistakes that he made. He feared that the next day he would get a talking to, or worse, fired. But, that never happened. He was a good worker, holding a lot, strained in capacity, and doing the best he could. Worry and anxiety were constant companions, and he loathed the after work two-hour overanalysis. When I showed him the power of his mind to turn thoughts around, and let go of thoughts, he marveled. Literally, within one month he was already happier and not doing it as much as he was.

The Junk Trunk

I created the euphemism of the 'junk trunk,' or the invisible backpack we all carry around, which is full of the traumas we have endured through life thus far. And, let's be clear, we all have some trauma. Trauma has a way of distilling your identity down to feeling not good enough, bad, like a loser, stupid, worthless, unlovable, and a

fuck up, to name a few. These are relics of the past, giving you the gift that keeps on giving in a negative way. As you go through life, things trigger you, thus riling the junk trunk material to feel like crap about yourself, and then you react from that negative place. If you aren't mindful of this dynamic, it will have a hold on you and cause havoc and drama (such as 2-hour self-criticism sessions after work).

Cindy, a 63-year-old woman, was terrified to ask her boss, the CEO, for a raise and a flexible work schedule, as he was an older male. When she brought this to my attention, I mentioned the junk trunk. With a blank stare, as if the deer was in the proverbial headlights, she brought me back to when she was eight years old. In one memory, she was talking at the dinner table when her father looked at her and told her, "Women don't speak until they are spoken to, so go to the kitchen to do the dishes, where you belong." Her dad told Cindy that her voice didn't matter, except when asked.

Some 50+ years later, this was triggered by thinking about asking for what she wanted. As soon as Cindy saw this, she melted like ice in the hot sun. She realized the CEO wasn't her dad, and she was projecting her insecurities onto him. She also learned that the worst that could happen if she asked was that he would say no. So, even though it still felt like a risk, she went in with her head held high and asked for what she wanted. She got everything she wanted and more.

Another client, Rick, was down on himself for being a 'failure'. He lamented feeling like a failure because he had never held a real job in his life (he was 27 years old at the time). Thinking of himself as a failure, he felt embarrassed and ashamed when someone asked him about work, or he saw people his age, such as his friends, who were successful in their careers. He would avoid this topic at all costs because of how he was internalizing the reality of not having a job. But, "reality is reality," as one of my mentors, Robert Fritz, says. By acknowledging that not having a job was a reality and that there were valid reasons for it, I could help him come to terms with it mentally. Rick and I took the heat off the negative emotions and strong thoughts of failure, learned from the past, and looked to the

future. Rick did want to find gainful employment, but he was just unsure what he wanted to do in life. Over the course of some months of coaching, he decided to try his hand at financial planning. Time will tell if it's right for him, but he got into the game.

Your negative identity or negative thoughts are a matter of focus.

What you focus on expands; when you focus on what's not right, who is to blame, or what's wrong, you get more of that. Tony Robbins discusses how negative thoughts intensify when you focus on them. Problems become worse because you are not focusing on the root cause or solution. I want you to reach a point where you can assess what you learn and take ownership of your mistakes, generally speaking. What you focus on is within your control, so why not constantly direct it to learning?

Who is in control of what you think about? Of course, the punchline is that you are. However, you often feel like a victim of circumstance, as if your thoughts just happen to you, and you have no control over them. Most of us realize we want to think more positively, but we don't know how to do so. Perhaps, at times, you believe you have a job, that you don't bring much value, that you are an impostor, that you have overly self-critical thoughts, that you have lowered your standards, that you lack confidence, and that you are self-conscious. These are all possible mindsets to have. It's your job to become aware of these pesky, mental, and emotional gremlins and turn them around as soon as possible.

One way to work with your thoughts is to turn them around to the opposite, or dilute them. For instance, "I suck for making a mistake" can become "I don't suck because I made a mistake," or "mistakes are part of learning." I remember being in a drum solo contest, where in the middle of the solo, I made a mistake, thus derailing the performance. When I finished playing, I immediately felt horrible, as if the mistake reflected poorly on me as a bad person, someone who is not good enough. The fact

of the matter was that I made a mistake and messed up. I didn't realize this at the time because my thoughts had control over me. It took several days of discursive thinking and negative feelings before I got over it. It burned me deep to the core.

Another way to think about mindset training is to use the Stoic philosophy rubric: "What can I control, what can I influence, what can't I control?" Some things we have complete control over, like what we eat. Some things we have influence over, such as discussing a new policy change with leadership. And there are things we have no control over, such as the weather. It's an interesting experiment to ask yourself and your negative thoughts what you can control. If you can't control it, you have no business lamenting about it. Wouldn't it be great if your brain could automatically transform your negative thoughts into neutral or positive ones?

Inspired Action Item: Turn Lemons into Lemonade Exercise

Schedule a half hour to sit and think.

Have a few pieces of paper and a pen, and write down every negative thought you have about yourself or others. Don't censor this; it is raw data for your review. This data represents the current reality, which is what you think about now.

Leave a blank line under each line item.

Once you have made the list, write a sentence to turn that negative thought into a neutral or positive statement. For instance, if one of your items is "I feel like an imposter as a business owner or executive at times," you can turn this into "The imposter is a normal voice inside my head. I know some things, and I don't know other things. I am open to learning and need others to fill out my weak points".

Review the list periodically to assess your progress; consider sharing with someone safe to work it through with.

Creating Your Personal Values

Creating values can be a powerful exercise and help train your mindset. When you craft and seek to live your values, you become more explicit about what you stand for, what you think about, and what drives your behavior. Values are traits or principles that you deem most important to you. Of course, many things are essential, but we try to keep it to five or so values for the sake of simplicity and clarity.

My five values took some time to create and have been consistent guides for me for many years. These are the things that drive my motivation, intention, and action as much as I can. Here are my five:

***Presence:** To be in the moment and appreciative as much as possible.*

***Positivity:** Looking at the bright side, reframing negatives into options and positives.*

- **Curiosity:** Focus on other people's stories; open to different perspectives on many different topics.
- **Patience:** Think before I act; listen intently; have a high tolerance for ambiguity and conflict.

Discomfort: Putting myself in uncomfortable situations on purpose (i.e., cold plunging, weight lifting, rucking, creating a new business, addressing conflict).

I have one story about discomfort. I was leading my college class, "Behavior Change," one day, and we were discussing how change can be uncomfortable. At that time, I had been avoiding calling a high-level CEO of a prominent nonprofit in my city to follow up on a potential coaching engagement. Truth be told, I was scared of rejection. However, we were discussing the fear of rejection, so it was the perfect time to act.

In a stroke of genius, I told the class that I was procrastinating on calling the CEO, and asked them if I could call him in the classroom at that moment in front of the class. The whole class fell silent, except for a few affirmations and head nods for the positive. They were stunned, which I later found out was a rare occurrence for a teacher to be so vulnerable in front of them. I told them the only ground rule was to be completely silent while I made the call. So, I dialed the number, put the phone on speaker, and was put on hold. When the CEO got on the line, I delivered my follow-up spiel, and he declined a coaching engagement at that time. I was effectively rejected in front of my class, thus illustrating that rejection can and will happen in life. We also explored what it feels like to be rejected and how that discomfort can block us from taking action.

Inspired Action Item: Define Your Personal Values Exercise:

Get a piece of blank paper, or a blank document on the computer,

Think about all of the things that are important to you. You can choose your values from hundreds of adjectives or phrases: humility, strength, courage, hard work, responsibility, kindness, harmony, empathy, adaptability, and so many more. Do a free-write of as many qualities that drive you. Consider what you admire in friends or heroes and adopt those values.

You can complete this activity over a couple of weeks; there's no need to rush. I like to have this exercise breathe for a time, so they truly resonate with you.

Once you have your master list, conduct a 'keep, strike, or combine' activity to narrow it down. Essentially, you go through each word or phrase and see if it is a true keeper, you strike it from the list (draw a line through it), or it combines with another word or phrase. For instance, humility and kindness might conjoin to form the word integrity.

You should strive for around five values total.

- Write your list of five values and reflect on it for a couple of weeks.

- Return to the list, ensure they still fit, and if not, revise them.

Once your list is complete, define your values as I did with mine above. How does this value word or phrase get executed in your life?

CHAPTER SIX TAKEAWAYS:

The greatest real estate you own is in between your ears.

You have over 50,000 thoughts every day, and not all of them are positive.

- Meditation is an excellent tool for examining your thoughts and emotions.
- Automatic thinking occurs, but you can control it to a large extent.

You can actively insert a positive thought stream or choose what to think about.

You can change negative thoughts around by thinking the opposite, for example.

Everyone has a junk trunk, that invisible backpack we carry around that is full of our past traumas. Your trauma gets triggered in certain situations in life.

There are many ways to work on a better mindset. Stoicism and creating values are two of them.

VII

Achieving Work/Life Balance for Positive Outcomes

"Time is the coin of your life. It is the only coin you have, and only you can determine how it will be spent." - Carl Sandburg

Jim, the CFO of a beer-distributing company, was running on empty when I met him. He excelled at his job and had a genuine passion for his craft. His business wasn't the problem; his life was. He wasn't exercising or eating well, was a little overweight, his marriage was in shambles, and he had a ton of house projects lying dormant. He spent a lot of time working, and because he didn't have a good marriage, he would avoid going home. He also relied on drinking a little too much to cope with his dissatisfaction.

I started working with Jim to review each of my signature Vision Wheel components (which I will articulate below). I asked him if he could wave a magic wand and describe his future. What poured out of him became the plan for his life. We explained what he wanted to achieve, such as reaching a certain weight, communicating effectively with his wife, and playing more golf (without beer), among other goals. We then broke down his plan to include actionable ways to meet his goals.

As you saw in the mindset chapter, what you focus on tends to expand. He had been focusing on his stress and how bad his life was. Miracles happened as we crafted a vision and began to focus on that. We know starting any new behavior can be challenging, but he had the intense

desire and the skill to pull it off, and I was there to remind him to stay the course; he was accountable to me. Remember that desire, skill and reminders are the trifecta of behavior change.

Throughout a couple of months, Jim's life began to improve. It wasn't easy because his wife wasn't receptive to his feedback about needing to communicate better (when he tried to bring stuff up, she would put the book she was reading up in front of her face). They eventually divorced, and he is much happier as a result.

Change is not a straight line. Sometimes you can't predict what will change when you make a change. Jim's vision was to stay married, but at a different level of engagement, so he began to hold a higher standard with her. But she wouldn't budge. Sometimes, you have to make hard decisions to live the life you want, and not everyone will be on board with your change.

Defining Work/Life Integration

Work/life integration or balance is elusive. But it may be worth trying to achieve for you. It's simple in theory:

First, you need to capture the current iteration of your life to assess what is going well and what is awry.

Next, you need to consider which components you want or need to improve. It's like a puzzle, and as the above quote suggests, you only have a certain amount of time, so you have to be judicious in your approach.

You need to set specific goals based on your true desires.

You need to break down the goals into actionable items so you can execute them effectively.

You may want to have someone, such as a coach or mentor, to hold you accountable and track progress over time.

In my work with clients, I routinely examine life components (not just work) because, although we spend the most time at work, life comprises many facets of our humanity that are worth inspecting and uncovering.

The model and assessment I created is called the *Vision Wheel*, which illustrates eight components you can work on to bring yourself more into balance.

↓ Download the free "Vision Wheel Assessment" at.

The Eight Components of the *Vision Wheel*.

I created the Vision Wheel based on social psychology's wellness wheel. As I practiced coaching with individuals and teams over the years, eight stable themes emerged, so I adapted these into a tool that works. I call it the Vision Wheel Assessment Tool.

Here are the eight components of the Vision Wheel Assessment Tool:

Spiritual: Belief in or connection to a higher power (faith, religion, universe, energy, spirit), personal or company values, or a philosophy.

Financial: Investing, budgeting, income, cash flow, and debt.

Environmental: Organization, clutter management, decorating, and physical space projects (like renovation).

Social: Friends, groups, volunteerism, parenting, and other key relationships.

Intellectual: Learning, logic, mindset training, strategic thinking, hobbies, time management, brain games.

*Emotional: Feelings, emotions, motivation, creativity,
and energy.*

Vocational: Meaningful work in the world, business planning, and professional development; could also consist of creating a side business (entrepreneurship).

*Physical: Sleep, nutrition, exercise, and self-care/
bodywork.*

Of course, you are one person in the middle of all of these eight facets, and they are arbitrary. Call them what you like and add or subtract categories as you see fit. The point is to work on some or all of them simultaneously without biting off too much. It would be ironic to work so hard on balance that it feels unbalanced, so we need to experiment and figure out the best configuration.

How to Use the Vision Wheel Assessment

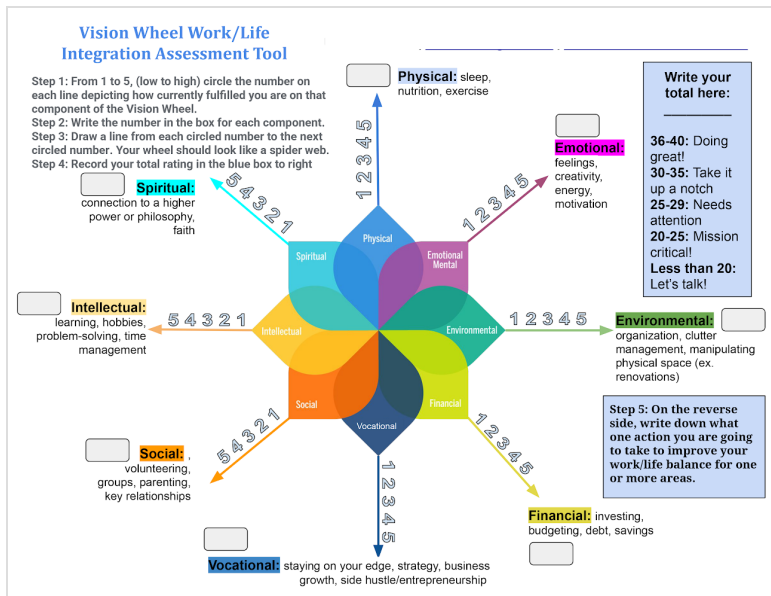


Figure: Vision Wheel Assessment Tool (Download at BeBetterModel.com/resources)

After downloading the printable assessment, you will see that each item has a numbering scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating a complete imbalance and 5 indicating a perfect balance. It's a subjective self-assessment to help you get in the ballpark of identifying your strengths and areas for improvement. Here's how to use it:

Rate each line item with a dot corresponding to a number on the line. The rating is subjective and serves more as a guideline than an exact number. Of course, you may know the actual number right off the bat, but don't get too bogged down in deciding what number it is. Use your gut. You can use half numbers like 2.5 as well.

- Next, join the dots with a line to the next dot; when you're all done, the assessment should resemble a spider web.
- At the tip of each line is a box to put that line score into.

Add up all of the numbers from each box and give yourself a score in the box on the top right of the page. You will also see a grading system that

allows you to compare your performance to a range or others (if they are doing it alongside you).

Assess your state of balance. If your score is low, you can create a plan to improve a specific line item if it is something you feel compelled to do. A current assessment is the point of the exercise. If a score is high, celebrate having achieved balance in that area.

Once you know where you stand, you can set goals in some or all of the components. To set a goal, you want to specifically describe yourself sometime in the future as if it's already complete. Using the physical body as an example, you could say that you are at a certain weight, have attained a certain fitness level, are titrating medications, and sleeping better. Something like this: "In six months, I will weigh 200 pounds, can back squat 225 pounds for 5x5 sets and repetitions, am eating a low-carb nutritional lifestyle (with one cheat day), on a half dose of my medication, and sleeping soundly six hours unbroken per night".

The more specific and realistic your goals are, the better off you will be. Then, you break those down into goals and actionable items to make it all happen. You will assess your progress using metrics as you go so you know if you are on track or not to achieve your goals.

I also include a manual goal tracker in the downloadable version of the evaluation. You can then view your goals and actionable items on a single-page dashboard. For instance, if your goal is to be stronger and more fit, achieving fitness and strength can be accomplished through weight training and high-intensity cardio. The actions you could take may include finding a suitable program to use, hiring a trainer, or enlisting a friend who is knowledgeable about exercise. Seeing it all in one place visually has the added benefit of allowing you to review it periodically, so your goals and actions aren't just floating around in your head.

More about the Eight Components

The eight components of the Vision Wheel are as robust as you want them to be. Below, I unpack them a bit more to give you ideas for potential goals:

1. Physical Body: This is the most foundational component in my experience. The saying goes, "If you are not healthy, how can you help others?" It all starts with how you take care of your body. Sleep, food, exercise, and self-care/bodywork are key factors in maintaining the physical well-being of the body.

For instance, exercise. Exercise can range from walking more to running a marathon to intense CrossFit workouts. We now know resistance training is a key to longevity.

Nutrition is one of the most crucial factors in ensuring your body functions optimally. Stress and burnout can affect what you eat and your eating habits. What does your nutrition look like for you in the future? Are you eating more organically? Eating fewer carbohydrates? Eating regular meals? Intermittent fasting? Taking your vitamins?

There are many 'biohacks' or small ways to change your nutrition. For instance, washing your fruits and veggies with baking soda and apple cider vinegar helps remove toxins. Drinking water with high-grade sea salt like Baja Gold enables you to stay hydrated more effectively. I will show you my daily and weekly routines below.

Sleep. How do you sleep? What can you do to bring better sleep into your life? A new mattress? Less screen time before bed? An eye mask or pillow? Theta-wave brain state music? I just received an eye massager, which has sound, heat, and vibration and I love it!

Bodywork. Chiropractic care, massage, acupuncture, facials, and other treatments are ways to take care of your physical body.

2. Financial: What do you want your finances to look like? Is it saving a certain amount of money in the bank? Is it getting more into investments? Putting money away for your kids to go to college? Paying down debt? Money is an essential aspect that many people often overlook. I didn't realize this until later in life. You spend money, pay your bills, and

go through life. But you may need to focus more on the details, such as budgeting.

Now is the best time to take stock and get a clear picture of where you want to be financially in the future. It also means, as with one client procrastinating on learning a new budgeting software, that looking at reality can be uncomfortable. Retirement is also a consideration that may not be as far off in the future as you think.

3. Vocational: What's next for you in your business and role? Do you need a new certification or training to uplevel your skills? Do you want to create a great company culture? Start a new business? For example, I started a drumming business in 2020 to pivot during the COVID-19 pandemic. As my coaching business lost some of its steam due to the coronavirus, I turned my eye to figuring out how to maximize my drumming talents. I realized I could teach and share my skills online as a business. So, it became a goal and a way to bring more balance to my life.

4. Environmental: How does your physical environment look? Your physical space at home, your office, and your physical surroundings are examples. For me, this involved converting our three-season porch into a four-season room, a project I had undertaken in the past. I have also recently set up a video studio in my office. Perhaps for you, it's revamping your office space, cleaning out the basement, buying a new car, shredding old papers, or decluttering your desktop. These are all things in your physical space.

5. Social: Friends, parenting, spousehood, volunteerism. Your social health is one of the strongest factors that support your immunity, longevity, aging, and vitality. You are a social creature, and your online reality doesn't fully connect you. Making friends, communicating more effectively with your spouse or children, finding opportunities to serve the community, and creating or joining a book club or other social events can be ways to foster your social life. One past client felt uncomfortable about setting a goal of meeting one new male friend, someone he could socialize with and play golf with. He

made it happen after I told him I had the same goal a couple of years prior, and it worked out for me!

6. Intellectual: What are you engaged in mentally? Humans are natural learners; little children absorb information and experiences like sponges. We can not lose that innocent and innate ability. Perhaps it's a college course, reading or listening to books and podcasts, learning philosophy, engaging in brain games, strategic planning, or reviving or discovering your hobbies.

7. Emotional: At any given moment, you feel an emotion, making this component so important. Usually, people want more connection, joy, strength, or humility. What does your vision of yourself look like to you? Meditation, therapy, being coached, listening to music, various psychological techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy, self-coaching phrases, journaling, and talking to a caring friend all contribute to a more robust, energetic, strong, and prosperous emotional life.

8. Spiritual: Connection to something bigger than yourself. Perhaps a connection to god, the universe, energy, mindfulness, religion, your values, and positivity. Whatever words or feelings you use to describe your spiritual life are your preference. Are you more engaged? Do you have more perspective? Are you meditating or attending church? As Wayne Dyer said, "We are spiritual beings, having a human experience." You may want to cultivate your spiritual connection, building a foundation for yourself. Pay attention to what helps you feel more grounded within yourself and your world.

Below is a snapshot of some of my routines, which incorporate components of the Vision Wheel. These are all actions that I take to promote my own balance.

Morning Routine:

- Practice drumming 3x per week.
- Do Joe Dispenza's meditations.
- Take methylated vitamins.

Use the X-39 patch.

Drink hydrogen water.

Nutrition routine:

- Ruck every other day.
- Lift weights/cardio every other day.
- Take a cold plunge every other day (fall/winter/spring).
- Lake swimming 2x per week (spring/summer/fall).
- Working on and in my business.
- Grounding/earthing, weather permitting.
- Walk the graveyard 2x's with my dog.

Daily food routine:

- Olive oil/coconut oil.
- Nuts.
- Meats/potatoes/veggies.
- Sauerkraut/pickles/olives.
- Snacks like carrots and guacamole.
- Greek yogurt with berries.
- Eggs and sausage/bacon.
- Firewater every other day.
- Lemon water.
- Hydrogen water.
- Salt water.
- A little bit of dark chocolate
- Black tea/coffee with honey

Nighttime Routine:

- Read.
- Green tea with honey.
- Yoga 2x per week.
- Listen to theta-wave brain state music.
- Brain games.
- Powered eye massager.

Inspired Action Item: Your Vision Wheel Dashboard

Now that I have covered all eight segments of the vision wheel, use a piece of paper or the Vision Wheel Assessment manual tracker to describe yourself and what you want in a specific time frame. What does the new YOU look like? Write it out, describing yourself and how you will look in the future state using SMART goals that I wrote about in Chapter Six. Include the first round of actionable items. This document becomes the first iteration of your Vision Wheel life plan.

Let a few days or a week pass to allow your Vision Wheel to breathe, then review it and make a few tweaks so that it resonates with you and your purpose. Review your Vision Wheel weekly to ensure you are executing all its components. Perfection is the enemy of great, and we strive for 90% completion. There will be glitches and tweaks you will need to do. Don't be hard on yourself, as your first iteration may not be exactly what you want. Again, you may have bitten off more than you can chew or, conversely, not put in enough stuff to work on. It's a moving target. When reviewing your Vision Wheel every week, ensure that you schedule any necessary actions for that week or month and make adjustments as needed.

Adjusting Your Vision Wheel

I was injured last summer doing intense ocean swimming in Nantucket, so my Vision Wheel shifted from lifting heavier weights to mitigating my

injury. I engaged in regular bodywork, including chiropractic care, working with my trainer, and utilizing the sauna, hot tub, and steam room, among other activities. These activities helped restore my physical health, allowing me to get back on track. Sometimes life happens, and you need to pivot.

If your goal is weight loss or building strength, you may prefer to start working out at home, get a gym membership, or hire a personal trainer. You may begin to consciously watch what you put in your body. Perhaps you adopt a specific diet. Maybe you cut back on sweets, alcohol, or carbs. Perhaps you consider adding more organic and healthy grocery items to your next shopping trip. Some of this might become apparent to you over time, as you reassess periodically and build momentum.

Hiring a coach is a fast-track way to see progress. A coach will hold you accountable in a safe and non-judgmental way for the actions you have crafted and help you overcome your barriers. The first month is a fertile time for you. By enlisting someone objective and compassionate to support you, you can stay solvent on the path of behavior changes. As a coach, I prefer to meet with my clients on a biweekly basis. My clients and I talk about progress, next steps, and momentum. I ask, "Are you on the path?" "What do you need to do next?" and "What is getting in your way?" I aim to maintain the momentum, keep the wind in the sails, and continue moving forward.

I mentioned barriers above, and this is a powerful force you need to understand on your journey to achieving a work-life balance. Unfortunately, the statistics don't lie; by January 17th each year, 92% of goals set for the new year fail statistically. Something happens within those 17 days, creating the thought, "This is hard, I'll do it some other time (tomorrow, next month, next year)." This mindset is what we want to avoid.

That's why coaching is incredible: having an accountability partner to check in on you and the vision you want to create. A coach helps you bust through your obstacles. They will help you examine the mindsets and people that hinder your goals. If you're hitting a

wall, it's possible that the goal isn't right for you. Coaching can be highly beneficial in addressing this issue.

Drilling Down a Specific Barrier

Let's say you are trying to save money. You can see a pot of gold in your future; an action step is creating a budget to help you get there. However, as you progress in life, you may not follow the budget strictly. What's going on? Is the budget wrong? Are you stress spending? Do you want what you want when you want it, a.k.a., you are impulsive? Did you get a little lazy? What's going on?

You can mitigate each barrier. When you write down your barriers, you can work on finding solutions. Just like with my previous back injury, I found ways to facilitate its demise. It just took some time.

Once you have broken down your overall vision and goals into actionable items for each category, you can also identify the barriers and put them on the dashboard. What you see isn't unconscious anymore. You now know, see the beasts that are trying to slay you. For example, knowing that the weather may be a barrier to your running program, you can devise ways to overcome it, preventing procrastination and avoidance from creeping in. Running on a treadmill? Running on an inside track? Buying gear that is weatherproof?

You will periodically assess your Vision Wheel to ensure you are on track. Toward the end of the time frame you set, usually a year or so, you get to look back at your previous year or time frame and acknowledge what changes you have made, how you pivoted, and what results you obtained. How would you rate yourself in the assessment? You get to put your original Vision Wheel up against the new one and bask in the progress you've made. It is an interesting dynamic: change happens slowly or incrementally for the most part, so you don't see it, just like you don't 'see' your child grow taller.

CHAPTER SEVEN TAKEAWAYS:

Work/life balance starts with awareness, not willpower. You can't improve what you haven't clearly assessed. Capturing an honest snapshot of your current life across multiple dimensions is the first real step toward meaningful change.

Your vision must be specific, personal, and emotionally compelling. Vague intentions don't move behavior. Clearly describing the future version of yourself, across health, relationships, finances, and purpose creates focus, motivation, and momentum.

Change is rarely linear, and growth may cost you comfort. As you raise your standards and evolve, some relationships, routines, or outcomes may not survive the transition. That doesn't mean you have failed; quite the contrary!

Balance is built through small, coordinated actions across multiple life domains. You don't fix your life by optimizing one area in isolation. Sustainable balance comes from modest progress across physical, emotional, social, financial, and vocational dimensions at the same time.

Execution beats intention—every time. Goals only matter when they are broken down into actionable steps that are visible, scheduled, and reviewed. A dashboard or visual system keeps your vision from living only in your head.

Barriers are not character flaws; they are data. Resistance, procrastination, and setbacks reveal information about mindset, environment, habits, or goal design. When you identify barriers explicitly, you can design practical ways around them.

Accountability accelerates transformation. Having a coach, mentor, or trusted partner dramatically increases follow-through by keeping you focused, honest, and resilient, especially when motivation fades and life inevitably intervenes.

VIII

Leading Exceptional Meetings to Maximize Engagement and Outcomes

“You should never go to a meeting or make a telephone call without a clear idea of what you are trying to achieve.” Steve Jobs

Susan, the CEO of a small private school was having big cultural problems. They had a sound strategy to grow enrollment, upgrade their building and IT infrastructure, as well as a host of other high-level things she and her team wanted to create. But, culturally, she was struggling with feeling out of the loop. She didn't have a pulse on her leadership team and couldn't understand why there were so many problems in the organization.

I asked her how much she was meeting with her team members individually and as a team. Sheepishly, she said “Not at all unless there is a problem.” I used to love watching game shows, and when on *The Family Feud*, if someone got a wrong answer, a big red X would appear on the screen. And, being in this business for a long time, I knew it was time to pick on meetings.

The Gallup Institute says that if you manage others, you should be meeting with them at least monthly, one-on-one. According to the book *Traction*, the leadership should meet every week to implement a Level 10 Meeting. These are useful guides and industry standards. You can deviate based on your situation, but there it is.

Susan, seeing the validity of my points, started meeting with her leadership team members to coach them on their role, development, and issues. She also started meeting once per week with the leadership team. Dramatically, because people started to be heard more, engagement and morale went up, which was palpably felt by all.

Meetings are Everywhere!

Meetings, meetings and more meetings. Bad meetings. Badly run meetings. You know what I'm talking about. In the many workshops I have done on the topic of meeting facilitation, nobody has ever told me that they haven't been part of a bad meeting! Why is this so? And what can we do about it?

It is unfortunate that bad meetings exist, but it's also an opportunity, a silver lining in the storm cloud. And, unless you work alone or only with machines, meetings are not going away anytime soon. In this chapter I'm going to give you a roadmap for an effective and excellent meeting. But an important side note first: If you're not leading the meeting but it's being run ineffectively, speak up! It can be a challenge, and you may be hesitant or even fearful if it's your boss leading the meeting, but as a participant you have a responsibility to suggest a constructive change for the sake of the whole. Phrased supportively, your ideas could be a real relief for the leader as well as the participants!

To facilitate a meeting means to preside over and create a good flow relevant to the needs of the people involved, or what I call Gentle Command.

I like to compare meeting facilitation to learning to ride a bike. At one point in our lives, someone gave us the instructions and patience it took to learn to ride: pedal motion, steering, balance, and braking. Unfortunately, this is typically not the case with meeting facilitation skills. It would have been great if we had been instructed in this art early on, but most of us weren't. It's a late-blooming skill that takes study, practice and refinement as an adult. There is hope: good meeting facilitation skills are learnable.

But first, back to bad meetings. How you and I would define a bad meeting is probably similar: a lack of interest in the topic, wasted time, off-topic speakers, negative behaviors such as over-talking or side-conversing, no clear purpose, and the list goes on. On a scale of 1-10, meeting effectiveness and efficiency rate a paltry 2.5 in a national survey. In short, meetings generally suck.

Conversely, a good meeting has a clear purpose and design, engenders appreciation and safety, has good ground rules and the right people involved, has an agenda and effective process, elicits equal participation, deals effectively with challenging behaviors, and gets to desired outcomes. The costs of bad meetings to an organization are legion. It cannot be overstated that it behooves us to insist on high functioning meetings that get results.

Now let's delve into the skills needed to run an effective meeting. Most essential is attitude: in fact, attitude is everything! In my facilitation work I show up to meetings with openness, gratitude, and passion. I'm genuinely excited about meetings! I love meetings because of the power they have to unleash the collective wisdom of the group and solve real organizational problems and keep goals on track. I'm relaxed and appreciative of the honor of being in the lead. So first and foremost is the internal stance of the facilitator. If you're stressed, anxious, upset, or overwhelmed, it's essential that you find a way to center and calm yourself before the meeting begins.

Next to consider is the purpose of the meeting. Meetings that have a clear purpose and agenda help us get at our desired outcomes. Designing meetings well takes a little time, but it's worth it. Make sure to include the relevant people to give input on the meeting design. The purpose could be a one-liner, such as: "The purpose of our meeting Monday is to troubleshoot any problems with production." From there you can create a clear and efficient agenda.

A clear timeframe is imperative. Make sure there is a time limit for the meeting itself as well as for each agenda item. Nobody likes a meeting that drags on with no end in sight. When I lead meetings I make sure to

regularly check the time to make sure I am on par with the agenda. If I am off-agenda I ask the group what they want to do and *get agreement*. If the group decides to keep going on a topic, it's the facilitator's job to acknowledge and manage the element of time. Will the meeting group go longer, will you strike something off the agenda, or will you curtail other items? The group can also help make this decision.

A crucial factor in good meeting facilitation is safety. Most people need to feel there is an emotional safety, in other words, a culture of non-judgment and openness, before they will take the risk to share what is on their minds. The facilitator can create that safety by using working agreements or ground rules. These are norms of behaviors that participants agreed upon at the beginning of the meeting so that everyone is working with the same understanding. Some examples of agreements are: cell phones on vibrate, no phone use during meetings, keep side conversations at a minimum, let quieter people have space to share, etc.

Ground rules help the facilitator keep the group on track with effective behaviors that will serve the group's highest potential, and keep unwanted behaviors at bay. If, for instance, a side conversation between two people emerges, you as the facilitator can say something like: "I am completely interested in what you two are talking about, but it's hard for me to hear Jen's contributions at the same time as yours. Let's have Jen finish up and then we can get to your thoughts."

Another way to create safety is to take time for sharing appreciation. One of the biggest challenges people face in an organization is not feeling appreciated. When you build an appreciation section into the agenda, you grease the wheels of the meeting by eliciting positive feelings of participants for each other or the organization. You can ask something like: "What is one thing that you're appreciating today about your coworkers?" Or "What is one thing you're feeling grateful for about your work?" Or "What is a win that you are celebrating this week?" Appreciation is the engine of motivation, a well-kept secret that eliminates problems and minimizes tensions. Use it liberally.

Lastly, we want to end the meeting well. Instead of just disbanding, throw in 30 seconds of appreciation for the group's process and participation. You can take it a step further and elicit feedback about the meeting to make it better for next time. You can also recap people's next steps or ask, "What is something that you're taking away from this meeting?" Ending well is an important step that most people neglect, but it serves an important purpose in sending people off focused and resolved.

- **1. Chapter Eight Takeaways:**

- 1. Make sure a meeting is necessary and be clear about its purpose.
- 2. Make sure the relevant participants are present. Designate clear roles (facilitator, notetaker, etc.).
- 3. Bring an agenda of relevant topics to the meeting to create a flow and establish momentum and order in the discussion.
- 4. Make sure to have a clear timeframe in which to conduct the meeting.

5. The agenda could include time to strengthen relationships by exploring participants' personal lives, passions and values. Familiarity with one another makes work communications smoother, and with such pursuits even the quietest people get known better.

6. Establish ground rules when necessary as the leader/facilitator, (e.g. not talking over others, being respectful in communications, not speaking for too long, etc.); create a safe place for people to show up with their "full selves".

7. Manage the meeting by gently invoking the ground rules when needed and getting the meeting back on track.

8. Ensure that the content you want to cover is commensurate with the time spent on it, sometimes you will choose to go off the agenda, but it isn't by happenstance, it's an intentional act by the facilitator;

9. Evaluate how the meeting is going and check on others' energy levels. Are they bored, frustrated, or connected? Ask them about their experience of the meeting.

10. Engage in conflict resolution and uncomfortable conversations when needed, you're looking to bring conflicting views to the forefront, to validate all perspectives, to help the participants avoid using blame, and to find common ground that leads to solutions.

11. Ask how the meetings can get better. Elicit constructive feedback; Close the meeting on time, with appreciation for everyone's efforts and engagement, and a recap of any action items created.

IX

Communication Skills Case Study

- KEN ABBOTT, CEO AT ABTECH
- MANUFACTURING, SWANZEY, NEW HAMPSHIRE

Ken's business manufactures precision roundness gauges needed for diverse industries. He and his team custom-make products to fit customers' needs. One such product, just designed by an engineer and assembled by the workers, was being tested, and Ken noticed something: the gauge was susceptible to vibration from other machines, thus compromising the integrity of the readings on the gauge.

In the "old days," says Ken, he would have become frustrated and impatient, issuing an order to fix the problem. After some work to improve his leadership skills, however, Ken now knows that how he acts as a leader in his business sets the tone for the company and even the mood for that day. In working with me to develop his self awareness and communication skills, Ken learned new skills and decided to do something different.

He actually saw this situation as an *opportunity* to teach the engineer and other employees about the product's susceptibility to external vibration. This would enable a leap forward in product quality that would position the company to leapfrog over the competition! Ken's story serves to illustrate how a CEO dedicated to speaking the truth in a respectful way can create a winning business solution with no negative impacts on his employees.

While contemplating the desire to give the engineer feedback about the gauge design, he realized that it might be a sensitive subject because the

engineer had spent a lot of time on the design. So Ken began to set the stage in his mind: how could he deliver the feedback without engendering defensiveness?

Most of us can agree that feedback is a good thing theoretically. But, when the rubber hits the road we avoid it *or* deliver it while being triggered, where we don't exactly exemplify skillfulness! Ken wanted to deliver the feedback via the type of leadership he and I had been exploring, and to do it in a group setting, to make it less personal and more of a group learning experience. Go back to chapter three and revisit the feedback model.

Ken created the environment for maximum success in his mind *before* he went into the meeting. He came up with the feedback statement, as well, so he was prepared. In crafting the statement, Ken followed the "rules" that he and I had developed:

express his appreciation for something he genuinely admires about the engineer's work, be specific about his concern, describe the potential impact on the organization or customer, then make a request for improvement. Then, listen to the response and coach the respondent if necessary.

So Ken went into the meeting prepared to deliver the feedback; he had actually rehearsed it ahead of time with me. His attitude was open and relaxed, and his intentions, not to ream someone out but to improve the product and expand his employees' knowledge, were clear as could be. There was a modicum of anxiety because the outcome of human interactions is mostly unknown. We can do our utmost to elicit a certain reaction in others, but ultimately we can't control them.

So there was Ken, in the meeting with a couple of other employees and the engineer. Here's what he said to the engineer: "I completely appreciate that you have put a ton of time into this design. It's a really beautiful piece of work." (This was the genuine appreciation.) I did notice something that may be an issue, however, that the gauge is susceptible to vibration" (This was the specific problem), "This is an area that we

haven't discussed yet; we have an opportunity to perform a vibration study and improve the stiffness of the system, to reduce the gauge's susceptibility to external influences" (Here was the impact on the customers). "Would you be willing to perform that study?" (This was the request).

Ken basically explained that even though the engineer had done a tremendous job with the design, Ken was issuing an invitation to take things even further, because ABTech always wants to push the limits and gain an advantage over the competition.

Sometimes when you deliver feedback, it's met with: "I didn't even think of that; thank you for telling me," or something along those lines. This is what I call "one and done," meaning that the feedback was taken and course correction will ensue. But...in Ken's scenario, this wasn't the case. The engineer became angry and defensive, and couldn't believe that Ken wasn't happy with the machine or his design, which wasn't true.

Even though Ken had given the engineer genuine appreciation, the resentment the engineer felt actually usurped the positive messages he'd been given. In other words, he took Ken's feedback personally, interpreting the critique to mean he wasn't a good designer and that Ken would never think his work was good enough.

It's interesting what we experience defensiveness when we're triggered around our self-identity, especially in a group setting. We passionately want people to see us as competent, worthy, talented, etc. It's hard to be vulnerable to being less than perfect.

In this case, Ken wasn't even thinking that the engineer was less than perfect, only that he was still young and had much still to learn in design engineering. Ken saw this as an opportunity to teach him something and never intended to attack his work.

While the engineer was becoming defensive, Ken began to have his own negative reaction in his mind. He wanted to lash back, but he didn't. He took some deep breaths and did something novel: he paraphrased the engineer's emotions, thus validating his pain. Ken said, "I can tell that

because you put so much time into this, you're upset that it isn't quite right yet." In essence Ken agreed with the ideas behind the engineer's strong emotions; he decoded the real message in the storm. Ken used a calming strategy to keep himself calm and open when the engineer became defensive, which allowed him to listen more carefully to the engineer's perspective and discern the root of his reaction.

At the same time, Ken upheld the feedback about the vibration and continued to hold the point that the vibration issue needed to be resolved, but that it wasn't about the engineer's lack of skill. The engineer calmed down at this point, but the interaction wasn't fully resolved yet.

So, Ken did something masterful. Instead of plowing ahead blindly, he took an hour to reflect on his experience and decide how to proceed. He asked the engineer if they could talk a bit later about it, just to give it some space. After the meeting, Ken then asked himself a question in the privacy of his office: "Did I do what I set out to do in the best intention and manner possible?" He genuinely answered yes. Again, we can never control the other person's reaction, only what we intend to do. In saying, "Let's talk more about this later," Ken gave himself and the engineer a gift of time and space to calm down the triggers even more (a calming strategy that Ken and I had worked on).

At that point he realized that he needed to go back and give additional feedback to the engineer about his defensive reaction. This was done not in anger or out of a need to shame or blame, but out of wanting to look at the impacts of the engineer's negative reactions on the workplace climate and his colleagues. Obviously it's counterproductive for the organization if someone rejects important information about their work because they're afraid to hear it.

With reassurance about his value to the company, this additional feedback session went over very well, and Ken was even able to discuss with the engineer what it was like for him to get less-than-ideal feedback when he had worked so hard. Once the engineer's fears about Ken's opinion of him were assuaged, he was able to hear the concern matter-of-factly and turn his focus to improving the product.

This case study exemplifies many of the communication and self-awareness skills Ken and I have worked on: being attuned to things that need to be changed, setting the stage in meetings by reflecting on them first, managing triggers effectively in the moment, not bullying or avoiding issues but seeking to create a safe and creative space for the conversation, being as open and relaxed as possible, compassionately managing somebody else's trigger, managing our own triggers via calming strategies, and giving additional feedback (or checking in) after the fact. Of course, there is an additional coaching piece to this: to hold the concept of accountability intact, to make sure negative emotions don't infect the workplace and that performance continues to improve. This is something Ken will undoubtedly navigate further in this situation and many more to come.

Epilogue: Putting it all Together

The eight principles in this book will not happen automatically or through osmosis. If you want to become proficient at golf or a musical instrument, you shouldn't just read about it and not practice. It is no different with your mental and emotional characteristics. To gain mastery over your experience, you need to practice and integrate these strategies and tactics into your life. But how?

Review this book again and do all the exercises and worksheets. I designed the exercises in this book to get you started. These exercises may feel contrived, but that is the point; anything new may initially feel awkward. The first time you manage your emotions differently, it will feel strange. Your first feedback session may be uncomfortable. The lactic acid in your muscles from working out may be painful. Celebrate this as part of the path.

You will build momentum once you understand that pushing yourself out of your comfort zone will make you less stressed and on a path to mastery. From there, you realize you can't return to the person you were; it's the point of no return. This realization will be an exciting moment on your journey!

When you can effectively manage your triggers (using the STAR model), give and receive feedback with ease, listen attentively, coach others, improve your mindset, manage conflict adeptly, lead better meetings, and create a more balanced life, you will reach new heights in both your personal and professional leadership.

You will have gained a solid foundation through the pillars you have learned here, and through practice, you will go to the next level. Although some stressors will arise, they can be dealt with more effectively and promptly, rather than fester. This skill alone will have excellent results for your well-being and vision.

Spread the Love

Because you have renewed energy and passion for your business and your life, it's time to spread the positive energy to others. Cultural change in a company or organization (or in your family) can help you continue developing and growing into excellence. There will be fits and starts as people either get on board or don't. It is an exciting invitation for everyone, from the top down, to learn, practice, and master the skills needed for this cultural transformation. It is a never-ending process, but once the skills are in place, upsets and dysfunction occur much less frequently and resolve much more quickly. Leaders don't have to force others to adopt the coaching method; by and large, most people come to it on their own.

CEOs, owners, executive directors, and other high-level executives can drive this change from the top, which is much more effective in the long term.

When you value the skills and hold a rigor for practicing, you set the tone for the organization to accept and value them. Other senior managers who see the value of a coaching culture can then drive change in their departments. It doesn't always have to start at the top, however. By working with your teams and getting more aligned on culture and outcomes, the rest of the organization can begin to take notice.

A coaching culture is a fantastic place to be! It doesn't matter what the business is; coaching transcends what we do because it focuses on how we do it together. When people band together and practice well, the sky's the limit. Collaboration, innovation, and positivity are unleashed, which is always a good business strategy. It reprograms the minds and hearts of the collective to be accepting, non-judgmental, and kind, while fostering accountability and results. People want to do a good job and feel valued. Accountability with a soft edge works wonders. What an exciting proposition!

Circling Back to the Beginning

If you remember nothing else from this book, remember this: there was a night in 1995 when I did not think I would be alive to write these words. I thought my story was over. I thought the pain, the worthlessness, and the exhaustion were permanent. But life had other plans. What I did not know then was that the hardest seasons of my life would eventually become the foundation of my purpose. The same mind that once tried to destroy me became the mind I learned to train. The same struggles that once made me feel broken became the experiences that allowed me to help thousands of people rebuild their lives, their companies, their teams, and their relationships. Your friction, your burnout, your doubt, and your exhaustion are not signs that your story is ending. They are often signs that your next evolution is beginning.

You do not need to burn down your life to change it. You need awareness, courage, better conversations, better structure, and a willingness to grow into the next version of yourself. That is what this book has been about from the beginning, not just building better businesses, but building better people, better leaders, better teams, and better lives. If a 100-pound bullied kid from Manchester who once sat alone with sleeping pills, a bottle of whiskey, and a loaded gun can redesign his life and find meaning in helping others, then you can redesign yours too. Your story is not finished. In many ways, it is just starting. It's your time to be better.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Saari is an executive coach and organizational consultant who has spent decades helping leaders navigate stress, conflict, and the quiet burnout that comes with sustained high performance. His work with CEOs and leadership teams focuses on strategic clarity, emotional intelligence, and the practical habits that allow leaders to thrive — not just survive.

Jeff's path to this work was forged in personal fire. In 1995, he made his final suicide attempt. The road back — through recovery, a Zen retreat in France, and years of disciplined self-study — became the foundation of everything he teaches. He didn't come to this work theoretically. He came to it because he had to.

Today, Jeff coaches executives across industries, leads strategic planning engagements, and trains leaders in the communication and conflict resolution skills that transform teams. The Be Better framework emerged from that work — tested in boardrooms and coaching sessions, refined through real conversations with real leaders under real pressure.

Jeff lives and works in the United States. Learn more and access free resources at *BeBetterModel.com*.