

McKinsey Quarterly

APRIL 2014

Lead at your best

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Five simple exercises can help you recognize, and start to shift, the mind-sets that limit your potential as a leader.

When we think of leadership we often focus on the what: external characteristics, practices, behavior, and actions that exemplary leaders demonstrate as they take on complex and unprecedented challenges. While this line of thinking is a great place to start, we won't reach our potential as leaders by looking only at what is visible. We need to see what's underneath to understand how remarkable leaders lead—and that begins with mind-sets.

As important as mind-sets are, we often skip ahead to actions. We adopt behavior and expect it to stick through force of will. Sadly, it won't if we haven't changed the underlying attitudes and beliefs that drove the old behavior in the first place. Making matters worse, our behavior affects other people's mind-sets, which in turn affect *their* behavior. A leader's failure to recognize and shift mind-sets can stall the change efforts of an entire organization. Indeed, because of the underlying power of a leader's mind-sets to guide an entire organization toward positive change, any effort to become better leaders should start with ourselves, by recognizing the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that drive us.¹

In this article, we'll share five simple exercises adapted from our new book, *Centered Leadership*², that can help you become more aware of your mind-sets. Armed with this knowledge, you can start making deliberate choices about the mind-sets that best serve you in a given moment and learn through practice to shift into them without missing a beat. This allows new behavior that improves your ability to lead at your best to emerge naturally.

1. Find your strengths

A surprising amount of our time and energy at work is focused on our shortcomings—the gap between 100 percent and what we achieved. For many executives, this pervasive focus on weaknesses fosters a mind-set of scarcity: a feeling that there are too few talented people in the organization to help it move the mountains that need moving. Many executives we talk to find it very hard to recognize, accept, and appreciate any other view. The same may be true for you. But what if you could move mountains by starting with strengths, leveraging people's strong desire for meaning?

¹ We aren't alone in this belief; our colleague Nate Boaz and his coauthor, Harvard Law School lecturer Erica Fox, describe a complementary approach to change leadership in their new article, "Change leader, change thyself," *McKinsey Quarterly*, March 2014, mckinsey.com.

² Joanna Barsh and Johanne Lavoie, *Centered Leadership: Leading with Purpose, Clarity, and Impact*, New York, NY: Crown Business, 2014. Five capabilities are at the heart of centered leadership: finding meaning in work, converting emotional reactions (such as amygdala hijacks) into opportunities, leveraging connections and community, acting in the face of risk, and sustaining the positive energy that is the life force of change. See also Joanna Barsh, Josephine Mogelof, and Caroline Webb, "How centered leaders achieve extraordinary results," *McKinsey Quarterly*, October 2010, mckinsey.com.

Try this exercise to learn your strengths. Find a comfortable spot without distraction. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. When you're ready, put yourself back in these three moments, in turn:

- *As a small child.* What form of imaginary play do you like most? What characters or roles do you choose? What games attract you most, and who do you get to be in them?
- *As a young adult.* What activities draw you in so entirely that you lose track of time? What boosts your energy, and what does that say about you?
- *As a working adult.* Look back to a high point that occurred over the past 18 months. What are you doing? What is the nature of the impact you are having on yourself, others, and the organization?

Looking across these moments, what do you value most about yourself? What would fill you with pride if you heard it from your colleagues and loved ones at a celebration for you? Those are your strengths.

Of course, there is no magic in the act of self-reflection on strengths. The magic comes when we learn to integrate strengths into our daily work—a real challenge, since many executives believe that strengths are the words that come before the inevitable “but” in their performance reviews. It is hard work to shift mind-sets in the face of mounting pressures and worries. We adopt the athletically inspired mantra “no pain, no gain,” as if the shift to “playing to our strengths” was unrealistic, yet we overlook the fact that professional athletes always aspire to play to their strengths.

Some executives will use the greater self-awareness the exercise brings to catalyze a career change—drawing on feelings that may have been percolating. The vast majority find that the simple act of peering through the lens of strengths is a doorway to enhance their power, generating positive emotions and energy. One executive admitted that the process of understanding her strengths—among them empathy and love of learning—and then hearing them confirmed and appreciated by her colleagues brought tears to her eyes. Another reported learning more about a colleague during a ten-minute conversation about strengths than he had in the previous ten years' worth of conversations about everything else.

To be sure, everyone has weaknesses to improve. But deliberately shifting to a focus on strengths is a far more inspiring approach; you'll raise the odds of lighting up everyone around you and unleashing enormous energy for creativity and change. Fabrizio Freda, the CEO of Estée Lauder, told us: “You need supertalented people who know they need to do fantastically well. And when

your leadership team takes the same attitude, you create a culture where each one can give his or her best. . . . In particular, you have to find the strengths of each individual and of the organization—and then you can create magic.”

2. Practice the pause

We all face challenges at work: impossible deadlines, missed budgets, angry customers, sharp-elbowed colleagues, unreasonable bosses. When the upset caused by any of these experiences threatens something at stake for you, you are likely to suffer an “amygdala hijack”—that moment when your brain sends cortisol and adrenaline coursing through your body to help you defend yourself. You may lash out in anger, walk out on your colleagues, or simply stop in your tracks.

Instead of that “fight, flight, or freeze” reaction, what if you could pause, reflect, and then manage—creatively and effectively—what you’re experiencing? Here’s a tool to help. Recall an upsetting thing that happened recently but still carries an emotional charge. You were not at your best; you felt fear or anger in the moment, along with unpleasant physical sensations: a racing heart, a knot in your stomach, or even nausea. Put yourself back in that moment now. As you do, keep in mind the metaphor of an iceberg, where little is visible above the surface.

- **In this moment, notice the impact on yourself.** What are you doing or not doing? What are you saying or not saying? How are you acting? What effect are your words and actions having?
- **Below the waterline.** What are you thinking and feeling but not expressing? What negative outcomes are you most worried about?
- **Deeper still, look at your values and beliefs.** What is most important to you? What belief do you hold about this situation, about yourself, and about others?
- **Even deeper, examine your underlying needs.** What is at stake for you here? Are you aware of any deeper desires and needs?

Surprisingly, perhaps, we most often create the outcome we fear. Worried about losing control? When you snapped at your team, you just did. Worried about being heard? When you argued defensively, people turned away.

Pause and ask, “What did I really want for—and of—myself in that moment? By noticing when our attention is focused on needs that we want to protect, and redirecting it instead toward the experience we want to create, we open up access to a greater range of behavior.

A senior executive, for example, was involved with a large operational-change effort. He had been at a team meeting to discuss safety standards, and things didn't go well—he had not created the outcome he wanted. He had hoped for a learning session that generated solutions and empowered the local general manager leading it. Instead, he had remained largely quiet and offered broad-brush advice based on his own experience. The meeting felt like a surface-level discussion or, worse, a top-down audit.

Examining his own motivations, the executive saw he was leery of destroying the general manager's confidence by speaking; he wanted people to rise to the challenge and learn. But he also wanted to preserve group harmony and be liked. By avoiding conflict and not taking a stand, he was creating the outcome he feared—a vicious cycle of inaction, disengagement, and defensiveness.

With this recognition, he could begin to shift. When he felt this same tension rising, he practiced pausing, thinking about his intentions, and then constructively voicing his concerns or asking a question. His example prompted others on his team to do the same, opening the door for more learning-focused interactions—his initial goal.

Further, to help teammates increase their self-awareness, he instituted a “check-in” at every meeting's start. During this step, colleagues would each briefly describe something happening “under the waterline” for them: say, a stressful project deadline. This ritual helped all team members to pause, reflect, and better understand their own mind-sets and those of colleagues. It sparked more honest, productive conversations and encouraged teammates to trust each other—a key factor, as we'll see.

By figuring out how to pause and reengage our “thinking” brains (the parts governing executive functions, such as reasoning and problem solving), we can make the shift from a mind-set of threat avoidance (a fear of losing) to one of learning and of getting the most out of the moment.

3. Forge trust

Senior leaders need a community of supporters to achieve audacious goals, for communities are built through shared objectives and mutual trust. Yet not everyone views trust in the same way, so as leaders we must learn what others value if we want to inspire trust. At a minimum, the effort leads to greater understanding.

In fact, simply recognizing and embracing the differences in how people perceive trust can strengthen it. Once we are aware of our own—or others'—profiles, we tend to adjust our behavior subconsciously. When we do so deliberately as well, the results are quite powerful. After all, it's our *behavior* that instills trust in others, not our intentions.

Take this test to see what aspects of trust matter most to you. For each of the elements below, score yourself from 1 (I rarely do this) to 7 (I regularly do this):

- **Reliability.** I don't make commitments I can't keep; I always clarify expectations and deliver on promises.
- **Congruence.** My language and actions are aligned with my thinking and true feelings.
- **Acceptance.** I withhold judgment or criticism; I separate the person from the performance.
- **Openness.** I state my intentions and talk straight; I'm honest about my limitations and concerns.

Consider the case of the CEO of a large bank who was dissatisfied with how his company had changed: what had once seemed to be a collaborative environment now felt like the opposite. Executives reported an atmosphere of defensiveness, bureaucracy, and pervasive mistrust. These feelings reinforced a "silo" culture that made it harder to collaborate on launching new products.

The senior team used the exercise above to spark a broader discussion about trust and the company's culture. Fairly quickly, the team recognized that the bank's moves to become more focused on key performance indicators (consistent with reliability) were the source of the tension. Digging deeper, the team learned that the big emphasis on performance had, over time, discouraged managers from raising concerns about the implications of the program for employees and customers. This, in turn, lowered the quality of debate in meetings and encouraged defensive and bureaucratic behavior.

Consequently, the changes were widely seen to be in opposition to acceptance and openness, trust elements that mattered dearly to employees. People were concerned that openness with customers was being sacrificed to "making the numbers." This realization spurred the senior team to find areas where reliability and openness could be seen as complements, not opposites—a shift in mind-set and, ultimately, behavior that helped the bank to improve the customer experience significantly.

When you shift your mind-set from “trustworthy people are a scarce resource” to “I can inspire almost everyone to trust me more,” your community of supporters will expand effortlessly.

4. Choose your questions wisely

What propels leaders to carry out unprecedented, audacious visions? Fear? Foolishness? Ambition? A sense of duty?

Hope. Leaders we admire tend to use fear as fuel for action, but they favor hope. Fear is of value because it gets our adrenaline flowing, sharpens us, and makes extraordinary contributions possible. But it's easy to succumb to fear and feel overwhelmed by downside risks. Fear spreads through an organization like a contagion. Without the counterbalance of hope, fear paralyzes. So how can we find the right mix of both? Start with the questions we ask.

Try this exercise. Find a discussion partner and ask that person to discuss his or her most pressing work problem with you. However, at first use only these questions to guide the conversation:

- What's the problem?
- What are the root causes?
- Who is to blame?
- What have you tried that hasn't worked?
- Why haven't you been able to fix the problem yet?

In a few minutes, stop, thank your partner, and ask for a redo. Restart the discussion, using these questions instead:

- What would you like to see (and make) happen?
- Can you recall a time when the solution was present, at least in part? What made that possible?

- What are the smallest steps you could take that would make the biggest difference?
- What are you learning in this conversation so far?

Five minutes in, stop again and debrief your partner about his or her thoughts and feelings during the first versus the second discussion. What did you notice? What were his or her underlying mind-sets? What were yours?

The difference is tangible. The first set of questions, great for solving technical problems, often prompts defensive reactions and leaves participants feeling drained. By contrast, participants report feeling animated, curious, and engaged the second time around.

We tend to use the first set more often. These *problem-focused* questions work well for technical, linear issues that have “right” answers. As we move up the ranks as leaders and the challenges become more complex, our problem-solving instincts can lead us astray. By contrast, when we develop *solution-focused* instincts, we empower and engage others, deliberately infusing hope. Remember that employees with problems already feel fear. Problem-focused questions only fuel it.

A plant manager we know used this approach to spark better ideas and improve accountability on the front line. He created a pack of cards that shop-floor supervisors could use with line workers in daily operational problem-solving sessions. On one side of the card, the problem-focused questions; on the other, a solution-focused translation. The supervisors quickly found that using both sides of the card brought markedly better results than the traditional questions alone—and that the range and quality of solutions improved dramatically.

The plant manager’s message was simple, yet powerful: look for problems and you’ll find them; look for solutions and people will offer them. By choosing our questions thoughtfully, we can shift our mind-set from “my organization is a problem to be solved” to “my organization holds solutions to be discovered.”

5. Make time to recover

Who wouldn't want to work in high-performance mode nonstop? A desire for achievement and competitive success urges us on—often past our physical and mental limits. Professional athletes build in time to recover, but executives rarely do. Why not? The limiting beliefs are well accepted: commitment is noticed through hard work and suffering; only slackers take time off during the day. People tell the story of a hospitalized colleague with awe: “He worked so hard he collapsed, in service of the company.” Hero? Not really.

If that young executive had the self-awareness to shift his mind-set from managing time to managing and balancing energy,³ he might have remained in good health. The solution is simple: find ten minutes twice each day (morning and afternoon) to recover, stepping back into a zone of low but positive energy to recharge. Consider all four sources: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual activities can each fuel you. Schedule recovery activities, and stick to them until this is your new normal. Here are some examples we've observed:

- **Physical.** A Brazilian exec walks up a few flights of stairs quickly—more flights if she is agitated or upset—and then she slowly walks down, giving herself the time to reflect and come back to center. An Italian senior manager has an afternoon coffee, walking to the lobby café instead of the coffee stand on his own floor.
- **Mental.** When a US CEO needs to recharge his energy levels, he consciously seeks out conversations with employees, so he can learn something new.
- **Emotional.** A Mexican company vice president chooses to recharge by reaching out to friends regularly to send thanks and love. A Swedish entrepreneur reviews an e-mail folder where she keeps compliments, thank-you notes, and warm greetings.
- **Spiritual.** A technology executive turns her chair to look out the window, meditating on nature and life in the form of the oak tree that fills her view. A pharmaceutical executive brings an empty chair, representing patients, to important meetings, to remind everyone why they are there.

Of course, managing energy isn't necessarily a solitary activity; we've seen leaders inject recovery practices into daily business routines. For example, the CFO of an aerospace company


³See Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*, second edition, New York, NY: Free Press, 2005.

found that a weekly meeting he chaired was draining. To energize his team, he changed the format, starting each discussion with the prior week's notable lessons and achievements. The new format was a hit: weekly attendance went up, the meetings' substance improved dramatically, and what had been a pure number-crunching exercise began to generate new ideas the company could use. The meetings were *more* fulfilling for the CFO, too. "I finally feel like I'm a thought partner to the business," he told us, "rather than a cop."

As you reflect on the mind-sets that limit you, consider a shift to "practicing recovery regularly helps me spend *more* time in high performance."



In our work with executives, we've found that tools, practices, and exercises like the five above help leaders understand—and shift—the mind-sets that govern their actions. Trying to change our behavior (what is seen and judged) will fail—the old, hard-wired patterns return when pressure mounts—unless we have first addressed internal patterns with conscious effort.

To make change stick, unwire and rewire from the inside. Start with self-awareness: seeing yourself as a viewer of your own "movie." Once you see the pattern, you have a choice whether to change. Owning the choice creates enormous freedom. And as you exercise that freedom to change your mind-set and practice new behavior, you role-model a transformation—creating what does not exist today but should. And isn't that what leaders do? 

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