

COMMENTARY

Leading Again for the First Time

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You have been leading for most of your life. You began leading yourself by setting goals, staying on task, and learning self-discipline. As you matured you became more proficient at strategic planning, recruiting talent, and creating the right culture. You constructed from these experiences your own *implicit leadership theory*, a way of making sense of leadership, your own mental model of what leadership is about and how it works [1]. If you are like most people, a dominant component of your mental model thinks of leadership as being about a person in charge who leads “out there” by wielding power, providing answers, and standing apart [2]. One of the corollaries of this thinking is that if the leader pulls the right strategic levers, turns the right operational dials, and meshes the right procedural gears, the organization will change for the better, and individual change will follow [3].

The premise of this article is that this thinking is backwards. Sustainable success begins with transforming people first by changing their mental maps and thought patterns. Behaviors will then change and organizational transformation will follow. This new way of understanding leadership requires that leaders spend much more time learning about and leading themselves.

Peter Block wrote, “If there is no transformation inside each of us, all the structural change in the world will have no impact on our institutions [4].” To lead more effectively—to constructively change our organizations and our world—we must begin by changing how we think about leadership because our thinking ultimately influences how we perform. This new way of thinking begins on the inside. When we make this shift, for many of us it will be like leading again for the first time.

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EXERCISING LEADERSHIP ON THE INSIDE

As a sequel to previous work [5], this article further explores the deeply rewarding but invariably challenging journey of leading yourself so you can more effectively lead others. Changing people is no easy task and the only person you can truly change is yourself. Most of us don’t want to change and we won’t unless we’re open to change. Leaders play a critical role in creating these openings, which gives us an entrée to the personal journey we must embark upon, sooner or later.

Be Mindful of Your Mental Hard Drives and Maps

Researchers in neuroscience and psychology have taught us that the way we make sense of the world is based less on what we “see” and more on the mental maps that already exist in our heads [6–12]. Writer and diarist Anais Nin said, “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.” In an attempt to make sense of the millions of sensory inputs we are bombarded with every second, we only process a small fraction by selectively filtering them and integrating them to fit our understanding of the world [13, 14]. From a practical standpoint, this prevents sensory overload and confusion but only as a result of a jaundiced eye.

The brain works hard to make sense of nonsense by distorting and discarding inputs that don’t complement our existing models of reasoning. As the French philosopher Henri Bergson said, “The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend.” Ponder the following paragraph, which showed up on the Web a few years ago:

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn’t mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer are in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs



is because we do not read every letter by itself but the word as a whole and the brain figures it out anyway.

In 1943, Kenneth Craik [15] introduced the concept of mental models when he proposed that “the mind constructs small-scale models of reality that it uses to anticipate events, to reason, and to underlie explanation.” These mental constructs are built from deeply ingrained and internalized assumptions, generalizations, or even images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action [16]. Whenever we perceive anything it is filtered through a set of background assumptions and beliefs about what to look for, what is important to us and what is relevant to our survival. Indeed, the brain is wired for survival more so than for reality.

A mental model is our belief of how the world works. We say, “This is the way things work around here” or “The reality is...” Mental models are useful because they simplify and organize our lives and our options. We have mental models for how to get a grant funded; mental models for how to raise our children; mental models for chairing a committee. Much as a road map shows you how to get from city A to city B, mental maps provide direction and guidance on how to deal with problems and get things done. All maps reflect the mapmaker’s bias [9, 17].

We accept our mental maps as external reality—as truth—and we act on them as such because they make sense to us. Our thinking, our behaviors, our actions and our performance are all affected by our cognitive maps. Our mental models are not so much views and beliefs that we hold tightly as they are views and beliefs that tightly hold us.

People do what makes sense to them and their mental maps provide that sense-making. The Al-Qaeda terrorists hijacked four commercial airliners and deliberately crashed two of them into the twin towers of the World Trade Center because it made sense to them. It may not make sense to you and me but it made sense to the terrorists. You submitted your grant to the NIH because, in your mind, it made sense. It may not have made sense to the study section reviewers.

The problem is not that we have mental models—indeed they are necessary for survival. If our mind didn’t have a “cruise control” option, we would spend much of each day just getting ready for work. The issue is that we don’t recognize that we have mental maps and that they are our unique reality constructs [3, 9]. We think “this” is how the world works. But, “this” is not how the world works; it is merely our perception of how the world works, built in our mind. Once a map becomes etched, we often distort external inputs so they validate it [9, 18].

The more our mental maps have worked in the past (the more success we think they have given us) the

more difficult they are to revise and the more likely they are to cause selective perception [9, 17]. Leading constructive change, whether at a personal or organizational level, begins with unfreezing the mental maps we carry around in our heads. This involves not just new learning but unlearning of some belief that is already there and potentially in the way. This process can be disorienting and awkward.

Helping others tackle their outmoded ways of thinking that are no longer relevant is where leaders can play a critical role. First, however, they must confront their own outdated mental maps before they can help other people “see” differently. But there’s a potential glitch, which Senge [19] points out, “Deep change comes only through real personal growth, through learning, and unlearning. This is the kind of generative work that most executives are precluded from doing by the mechanical mind-set and by the cult of the hero-leader.”

We are not talking about changing people in some sort of schizophrenic sense. Rather, we are talking about changing how they “see,” how they make sense, how they think. To change your world and your life, you first have to change your thinking. As Albert Einstein famously suggested, “Without changing our patterns of thought, we will not be able to solve the problems we created with our current patterns of thought.”

Consider for a moment that three hard drives reside in your brain (Fig. 1). One of them is labeled the present, one the past, and one the future. Like the hard drive in your computer, these mental hard drives store information. Data inputs only occur in the present (our senses only operate in the present) but are almost instantaneously stored in the past because the present is over as soon as it happens. Thus, the present hard drive is really more like a central processing unit where inputs are decoded, made sense of, and deleted (as necessary). The interpreted information is stored in our past hard drive. By definition, this warehoused information reflects our inherent biases and shapes our cognitive maps.

We don’t register or remember the vast majority of the experiences, events and incidents that occur in our lives [5]. Those we do store in our memory (past hard drive) are those experiences we ascribe meaning to because of the feelings (positive or negative) they evoked in us when they happened. The brain gives them meaning in the form of an interpretation—a constructed “story” [5,20–23]. For example, you may remember your grandfather’s belly laugh from 50 years ago and the feelings of joy and affection it produced in you back then and even today. Or, you may recall that mediocre performance evaluation you got 10 years ago and the feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, and defensiveness that are triggered when you think about it.

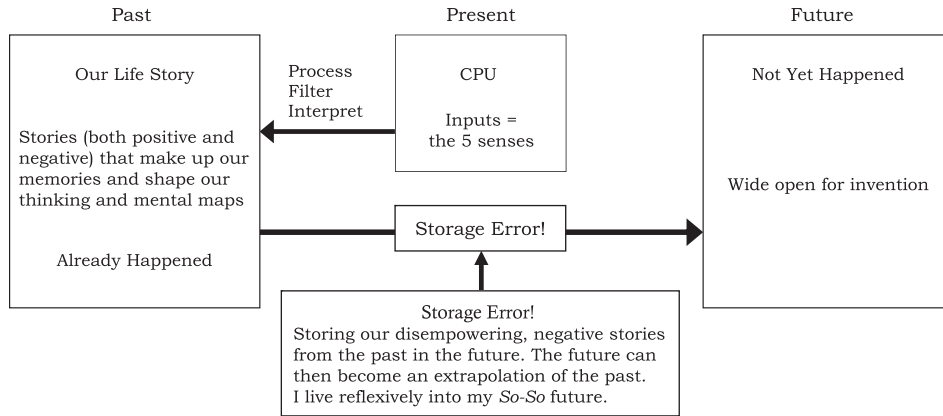


FIG. 1. Our three mental hard drives: present, past, and future. The most common and potentially serious storage error we make is transferring our disempowering stories from our past hard drive and storing them in our future hard drive [26].

We “consult” our life story, consciously or unconsciously, in everything we do. We tend to package our various stories into short, easy-to-recall “interpretation-based” truths (not evidence-based) that inform our thinking and shape our choices and behaviors. For instance, our storied interpretations that question our competence, adequacy, and acceptance are often edited into a belief that says, “I’m not good enough.” Or, as another example, if you perceive your job to be a battleground where you have to fight for everything you get, you probably have a chapter in your life story that’s a version of, “Watch your back; you can’t trust the administration.”

Analysis, sense-making and interpretation of inputs are always after the fact, in hindsight [17, 24, 25]. In the case of those not so pleasant experiences, our interpretation is invariably different from what really happened [5]. Maybe that boss that gave you that mediocre employee appraisal was really providing you with well-intentioned, honest feedback so you could improve your performance at work.

We all have empowering and disempowering stories that are tucked away in our past hard drive (Table 1). The memories of the positive ones are powerful; they provide us with a reliable blueprint for living our lives. The problem is with our unhealthy stories; they can

hold us back [5, 23]. These negative chapters in our life story—the ones that question our competence and adequacy—can become hard-wired to our DNA and buried in databases in our past hard drive, making it difficult to empty them into the trash. They can become engraved into our mental maps and become our reality. From these stories, we may learn to be defensive, controlling, manipulative, judgmental, and/or disrespectful, behaviors that certainly are inconsistent with good leadership.

It would be naive to think we could keep all of our stories that hold us back in the past, “out of sight, out of mind.” All human beings make mental storage errors. The most common and potentially serious storage error we make is transferring our disempowering stories from our past hard drive and storing them in our future hard drive [26]. When this happens, the story can “live on” and become an enormous weight in our lives, limiting relationships, and sapping our energy. The future becomes cluttered with all sorts of historical baggage and burdensome memories such that it becomes, to a significant extent, an extrapolation of the past [5]. We keep doing things the same way time and again. “Insanity,” said Einstein, “is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

TABLE 1

Stories from the Past that People Transfer and Store in Their Future Hard Drive

Examples of empowering life stories	Examples of disempowering life stories
I have much to be grateful for The work I do makes a contribution to others I am part of something larger than myself I appreciate what others do for me When I’ve put in the effort, it has paid off I will seek out the best in others I will commit to leading responsibly in my life	I’m not good enough; I’m out for myself It’s a zero sum game; I’m right/you’re wrong She will never be a team player My boss is a jerk and he won’t change If we had their resources we could be great too My marriage will suck until my spouse changes Watch your back; you can’t trust the administration

Transformation of individuals and organizations includes putting those misplaced files and folders back in the past so that the future is not constrained in terms of what we create, allowing ample room for reinvention. This is no simple feat. It begins with changing our thinking. Because changing our thinking requires tackling our deeply engrained mental models that we are not aware of, we usually need help. Good leaders help us “see” our filters and blind spots by creating insights that make revision of our mental maps possible. This opens the door to constructive change. In a few pages, we’ll explore how this happens.

Don’t Confuse Role with Self; Take Your Stand

Think about the numerous roles you have in your life. They may include parent, spouse or partner, physician, teacher, scientist, volunteer, musician, mechanic, friend, mentor—the list goes on. Roles are the relationships and the responsibilities that we have in life. Associated with some of your roles is a position or a formal title. In your role as a doctor, you may have the title of division chief, residency program director, or chief of staff. In your role as a parent, you may serve as president of the parent-teacher association at your child’s school. Roles can be permanent, temporary, assumed, or acquired.

When we’re asked by a new acquaintance, “Who are you?” we tend to answer “I’m a professor” or “I’m a center director” or “I’m a neuroscientist.” Generally, the answer is not really who you are, but what you do or how you see your function in life. If you are like most adults, your self-identity is, to a large extent, “located” in your job, your achievements, your education, your income, possessions, and your hobbies. Who you are to yourself and how you perceive yourself to be viewed by others is very much wrapped up in your roles and the things you know, have, and do.

How did we come to “see” or “identify” ourselves largely as what we know (intellect, expertise), what we have/possess (a big house, a prestigious title, a sizeable salary), and what we do (work hard, parent, watch sports)? The process of acquiring an identity begins in childhood [27, 28] as we adopt ways of being and acting that work for us. We may discover that if we pout or show off that we get attention. We may learn that if we yell people back down. We learn to deal successfully with things that didn’t quite go the way we thought they should. Perhaps your grades didn’t live up to your parents’ expectations; perchance you didn’t turn out to be the athlete your father wanted you to be. As a consequence of those perceived shortcomings, you may have learned to be industrious; maybe you learned to be controlling or cautious. By the time we reach adulthood, we have assembled a set of thought

processes, behaviors, and ways of doing things that seem to give us a certain measure of success. These attributes contribute to and shape our personality and our persona—how we “see” ourselves and how others “see” us.

Roles—male/female, gay/straight, black/white, boss/subordinate—are social constructions. To a great extent, we let the roles we understand ourselves to play in life define our identity. They tell us who we are and what we might become. As a man, you tell a story about how you are the breadwinner. As a woman, you may tell a story about how you have dinner ready in the evening. These stories are a result of the roles that society has conferred.

Consider that your roles are not really who you are. You have them but they are just roles. The essence of who you are is not your title, your job, your income, your power base, your age, your marital status, your weight, your possessions, your hobbies, your religious affiliation, your habits, your body or your accomplishments. You have all these things, and they shape your identity, but they are not really who you are.

So who are you, really? Consider that, most fundamentally, you are your most genuine and earnest commitments that you make in life. They are commitments that express the real you. Margaret Farley wrote [29], “The history of the human race, as well as the story of any one life, might be told in terms of commitments.” You give your word to these commitments and you bring them to life through your word in action. They give your life purpose and joy.

The trick, of course, is discovering those authentic commitments as it is easy to be seduced by attachments (a big house, a fancy car, a fat salary) that are inauthentic. Real commitments are those that help others, improve the human condition, and move the world forward. If you pledge to growing your hospital margin so your year-end bonus will be bigger, that’s inauthentic. If you commit to increasing its profitability so you can impress others by telling them that you run a top ten hospital that’s not genuine. But if you commit to improving your hospital margin so you can provide more charity care and reinvest more of that profit into translational research that will improve patient care, that’s authentic. Your year-end bonus may be bigger and your hospital rankings may improve as a consequence of putting your authentic commitment to work, but the tail shouldn’t wag the dog.

We call these powerful commitments that each of us has in life our stand. Your stand comes from within and is an outgrowth and expression of these convictions. When you choose to take your stand, you make a promise to be responsible for it. When you live out these deepest commitments, you take your stand, authentically.

Taking your stand may come with risk or at a price. You may have to go out on a limb. You may be tempted

to back down. That's why leadership can be dangerous stuff. Martin Luther King, Jr. took a stand for racial harmony and equality. It cost him his life. Nelson Mandela took a stand for the freedom of his people and ended up in prison for 27 years. If you take a stand for holding people accountable at work, some people are likely to push back, angrily. In his primer on leadership Colin Powell points out, "Being responsible sometimes means pissing people off."

At 5 feet, 4 inches tall and barely 100 pounds in weight, James Madison was the United States' smallest president. He was often sickly as a child and was too ill for military service during the Revolution. He was shy, socially clumsy, and a poor orator. His judgment, however, was superb. He was known for his hard work and careful preparation. Madison took a stand for serving the American people and then lived out his stand in his role as a public servant. Commonly hailed as the *Father of our Constitution*, he had more to do with its development than anyone. Madison's most distinguishing conviction was that the new republic needed checks and balances to limit the powers of special interest groups he called factions [30]. His most important work was the promotion of a Bill of Rights that would form the first ten amendments to the constitution.

Big Stands with a capital "S"—like those taken by King, Lincoln, Madison, and Mandela—can have a far-reaching positive impact. Much more common are the stands with a small "s", the ones that are less public, less visible, and often go unnoticed. They are critical because they represent the vast majority of stands. Cumulatively, they produce leadership in a family, an organization, or a nation. The teacher who pledges to provide her class with the best education possible is taking a stand for her students. The scientist who makes a commitment to report the results of his experiments without massaging the data is taking a stand for scientific integrity. As anthropologist, Margaret Mead wrote, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

When I worked at the Massachusetts General Hospital in the 1990s, I met Eduardo. Eduardo cleaned the patient exam rooms in our surgical oncology suite every evening. Because he was from Central America and I was born and raised in Venezuela, we both spoke Spanish and we became friendly. In his native country, health care was inferior to the kind of care we were able to provide at the MGH. Our conversations covered many topics and he told me how proud he was to work at such a top-notch hospital. I was impressed with the thoroughness of his work and how spotless the floors, sinks, and exam tables were after he finished his shift. I asked him one evening, "Eddie, why do you do such a good job cleaning the exam rooms?" He answered

promptly, "Because they have to be clean for the patients." Now, here was a guy—probably 85 levels down on an organizational chart—who got it. He understood the importance of his work in accomplishing the larger organizational goals, the most fundamental of which was providing outstanding patient care. His role as a janitor was a platform upon which he lived out his stand at work, a stand for cleanliness in the name of quality patient care.

When a surgeon takes on a tough case, she's taking a stand for her patient and her patient's health. But there is danger involved. The patient may have risk factors that increase the likelihood of complications and a poor outcome. The operative procedure may be lengthy. It may require extensive dissection and result in major blood loss. The patient may die. But with no stand on the part of physicians to innovate, fight cancer, tackle heart disease, and enroll patients in clinical trials, excellence in medical care would not happen. Progress would grind to a standstill. Stands are what make real leadership happen, the kind that moves the world forward.

When we become overly attached to our roles, our titles, our rank, and our possessions, and use them to convince ourselves that we look good and impress others, they can become obsessions. Our experience and expression of our true self, our deepest commitments, can become stifled, even asphyxiated. There is no room for our authentic stand. Often, we become so fixated on living the kind of life that television and the media say we should live that we may be unaware of the subtle call from deep within for something more [31].

This is not to imply that your roles are not important—they are. They provide you with a venue to live out your stands by converting them into action to get meaningful results. Think of your roles as platforms from which you can live out your deepest, most authentic commitments in life. They are like a stage in a theater upon which you act out your most fundamental convictions and beliefs. They are the vessel from which you pour out your true self into a world that is in desperate need of extraordinary leadership.

Countless small authentic stands are taken every day. They add up and make a difference. They generate momentum. We need more of them. These small stands provide a direct answer to the question Martin Luther King, Jr. deemed to be the most persistent and urgent in life, "What are you doing for others?" In finding your true stand and taking it, you exercise leadership, and, in so doing, you help make the world a better place.

Confront the 6As

People differ in what they believe they must know, have, do, or be to have self-esteem. Our society places

tremendous emphasis on six indicators of success that are supposed to make us feel worthy and valuable. They are: (1) achievement—the pressure to excel, accomplish, and perform; (2) authority—the need to control, dominate, and have clout; (3) admiration—the fixation with being liked, popular, accepted, and approved of; (4) affluence—the obsession with wealth and material possessions; (5) appearance—the addiction to bodily features and “looks”; and (6) attention—the need to be noticed and in the spotlight.

These 6As, our six Achilles' Heels, are the key measures of looking good and measuring up in our culture. We think they make us attractive and important. We work hard to acquire them because we think they give us status and standing. This approach to living works well if the game we play is governed by rules like, “You only go around once in life” or “It's a dog-eat-dog world.” It's a strategy that isn't very effective if our goal is giving ourselves authentically to all of life. As T. S. Eliot said, “Most of the trouble in the world is caused by people wanting to be important.”

The 6As tell us that unless we look good and measure up, we're unacceptable; we're a loser. Wall Street and Madison Avenue conspire with the 6As to make us feel inadequate if we don't have the right house, income, job, body, clout, status, charisma, friends, car, club memberships, title, haircut, teeth, and clothes—the list goes on. Will Smith, the actor, once observed, “All too many people spend money they don't have on things they don't want, to impress people they don't like.” Everywhere we look we see people doing things inadvertently to be accepted by others as a valid human being. This is not a particularly inspiring paradigm in which we get to be human.

In the context of an inauthentic stand, the 6As are destructive. They always have their roots in fear—fear of not being adequate or acceptable—which drives inauthenticity. Enron's core values included integrity, respect, and excellence [32] but greed enticed some top executives to choose a dishonorable stand. Richard Nixon vowed to stand for honor and responsibility when he took the presidential oath of office, but paranoia and obsession with power and authority led to a deceitful stand, which played out as the Watergate scandal. Bernie Madoff allegedly stood for serving his clients honestly and justly but his infatuation with wealth and materialism compelled him to choreograph a \$50 billion Ponzi scheme [33]. Terrell Owens maintains that he stands for teamwork but his craving for constant media attention created enough disruption for the 49ers, Cowboys and Eagles that he had to move on.

The 6As, however, in the context of an authentic stand, are enormously powerful. Achievements lead to new drugs, better educational systems, and more

efficient use of natural resources, all of which improve quality of life. Mother Teresa's accomplishments, against the background of her stand for the less fortunate, created forward movement by improving the human condition. Admiration, earned by taking a bona fide leadership stand, can mobilize people to confront their most complex challenges. Look at the road Lincoln paved. Affluence and attention, in the context of an authentic stand, are enormously beneficial. Look at what Bill Gates and Warren Buffet have done. Authority, in the context of an authentic stand, can move a nation toward greatness. Read the United States Constitution and its amendments.

How do we create an opportunity for our stand(s) to surface and flourish? We must release those long-standing beliefs and mental maps that are no longer useful so we can redesign ourselves. We must say goodbye to our thinking that says life is about the 6As. We must transfer all those unhelpful stories that we've stockpiled in the future hard drive back into the past. They are the source of unwarranted fears and insecurities that limit us.

Redesigning yourself is like redesigning your home so it works better. In redoing your home, you might give up that old couch or that useless dresser that is no longer functional. That obsolete dresser worked in the past but today it doesn't. You might renovate the kitchen or get rid of all that junk in the closet. Those parts of your house that work well you want to keep, for sure, but features that detract or are no longer working can be parted with. We often become attached to those fixtures that have been so much a part of our daily life. Even though they add clutter and take up space, it is difficult to get rid of them. But once you let them go, you'll create space for new features that are an expression and reflection of the real you. In many ways your home is still the same, but it's been redesigned so it works better for you. Over time, after many revisions, your friends might remark that your home has been transformed.

Renovating your home can be taxing but it is much more challenging to redesign yourself. It's not easy to let go of all those attachments and deeply ingrained ways of thinking and doing things you've become accustomed to. Those kinds of design features are firmly bolted to your genes. It's one thing to disconnect and get rid of an old washing machine that's not getting the job done; it's quite another to let go of a long-standing obsolete story so you can take an authentic stand.

In my own case, achievement and admiration are my primary Achilles heels. When I was in grade school my mother once asked me, “Why did you get a B on that test?” Of course, my interpretation was that I didn't meet her expectations; I had fallen short; I wasn't good enough. Over the years, whether it was serving as president of the student council, attaining the rank

of Eagle Scout, being named valedictorian, attending medical school, being elected to AOA, or getting NIH funding, my parents encouraged me to achieve. So, over the years, I designed myself to be an achievement machine. Why get one degree when you can get five?

For a long time, this emphasis on achieve, achieve, achieve was nearly all-consuming. As noted before, by the time we reach adulthood, we have assembled a set of thought patterns, behaviors, and ways of performing that seem to give us a certain measure of success. In my case, success was wrapped up in achieving and getting approval for it. Excessive attachment to the 6As always results in collateral damage. You run the risk of short-changing yourself, your family, and/or your friends.

Reflection is probably one of my strong suits and over time I realized that a life governed by the As wasn't for me. The process of working through that has been agonizing to say the least. But when you are willing to exit the rat race, it creates a lot of space. I've not lost my results-oriented nature but the emphasis now is on helping others achieve their goals and aspirations. And I've discovered one of my fundamental stands, which is helping others "see" the work of leadership in a different light. Through my roles as a dean, vice-president, writer, mentor, and friend, I do my best to take that stand.

Learn What You Don't Know You Don't Know

Imagine a balloon infinitely large that represents infinite knowledge and wisdom, everything there is to know about everything with all the awareness, discernment, and integrity that accompany such ultimate truth. Inside that balloon are two much smaller balloons, one of which we'll label "what I know." This balloon represents everything you know: your skills, your know-how and know-what, your expertise, your abilities, and so on.

The other finite balloon we'll call "what I don't know." It represents everything you know you don't know such as what your future holds, how to write a marketing plan, how to sequence a gene, how to speak Greek, etc. In order to get ahead in life, most people spend significant energy and time trying to decrease what they don't know in order to increase what they know. They read the latest book on leadership, take another course, get another degree, change jobs, or find another spouse.

There is nothing inherently wrong with these efforts to do better but they miss out on a critically important opportunity: discovering what you don't know you don't know. In our infinitely large balloon of infinite knowledge and wisdom, "what you don't know you don't know" is by far and away the vastest space and it offers the greatest opportunity for insights and learning to become a more effective leader [34].

Probing on our own into this space, which has been dubbed WYDKYDK, is difficult because it includes stuff we are not aware of. Our blind spots reside in this space. For example, you may occur to many of your colleagues as somewhat of a whiner, but you are completely unaware of this. Madeleine Van Hecke [35] observes that it is our hard-wired blind spots that prevent us from understanding other people's perspectives that don't fit our own. She goes on to point out, "People who win the Nobel Prize do so not because their work involves a high level of abstraction but because they overcame blind spots. They saw possibilities others rejected out of hand or grasped a perspective no one else had considered." Because we are unaware of our blind spots, there is a high likelihood that we have never worked on them before, which presents an opportunity for improvement.

At times we acquire insights into our WYDKYDK space on our own through quiet reflection. But the greatest access to this domain comes from other people who serve as our coaches. They provide us with feedback about our filters and blind spots, how they experience us, and how we might better exercise leadership. This is an uncomfortable space to journey in to, for as we navigate it we discover things about ourselves we didn't know or don't want to deal with (often things that make us feel vulnerable or incompetent), which is invariably disequilibrating and distressing.

Dr. Robert Bornstein is Senior Associate Dean of Academic Affairs in the College of Medicine at the Ohio State University [36]. In addition to overseeing the promotion and tenure process, one of Bob's responsibilities is dealing with disruptive or problematic faculty. Because this role carries with it a punitive connotation, the people he counsels often come to the table with a fixed and preset view of Bob as a disciplinarian. Indeed, corrective action is sometimes necessary.

Bob was unaware that he was viewed by others as a no-nonsense tough guy. Not surprisingly, the way others made sense of how he came across during their meetings was different than the way he made sense of it. His mental model was that faculty with problems were the problem and the solution, right out of the chute, was to deal with the faculty member rather than the problem. After some feedback, he made the following observation, "I rarely see people at their best and for quite some time I wasn't aware that people viewed me as anti-faculty, the bad cop, a bully. When they get a call from me, it's like being called down to the principal's office."

Bob recognized that he needed to change the way he occurred to others if he was going to be more successful in his role. And he needed to change his thinking about his role and about others. He got some coaching that helped him acquire some insights from his life story.

He said, “For me to be effective, the faculty I counsel have to experience me as approachable rather than intimidating, as caring rather than indifferent. I want them to feel safe rather than apprehensive when they talk to me.”

Bob has been working to increase his self-awareness so that he can acquire a better understanding of how he’s perceived by others. He is committed to revising his more traditional view of his associate dean’s role from one of lawmaker to helper. In constructing his life story, Bob discovered that he had designed himself to have a “hard exterior,” a feature he had built-in from the meaning he made out of a childhood that was lacking in affection and mentorship. He reflects, “I’m trying to let go of all those inauthentic behaviors—toughness, resentment, aloofness—that were an outgrowth of the story I told myself about the mentoring I never got. Those behaviors aren’t really me. I built them in to survive and now I need to let them go. They hold me back. It’s hard work but I’m discovering that I can use my role as an associate dean as an opportunity to take an authentic stand for supporting and encouraging the faculty.”

The goal of coaching is to enhance our self-awareness and provide us with perspectives that we can never fully acquire by ourselves. It is a critical tool that can be used to help us avoid repeated failures and derailment. A great way to start is to identify one or two feedback buddies (colleagues you trust who will be straight with you) and ask them: How could I be exercising more effective leadership? How could I be doing better for our team? It takes some courage, but you will discover that this exercise is invaluable.

EXERCISING LEADERSHIP ON THE OUTSIDE

Without the inner journey we cannot tackle the 6As or our mental hard drives and maps, and we lack the insight, wisdom, and will to take on our personal and organizational challenges. Yet, while leadership development begins on the inside, it cannot reside there alone in isolation. When our inner work is disconnected

from others, it implodes within itself, leading to futility and meaninglessness [31]. It must reach out to the world where there is an agonizing cry for leadership. Like the inward journey, exercising leadership effectively on the outside is no easy task and there are no simple answers.

Reality Is Not Fixed—Help Others Reinvent Their So-So Future

What is reality? How do we know what is real? Reality, as used in everyday conversation, means “the state of things as they actually exist.” We say our desk is solid but scientists tell us it is 99.99999% empty space. We each perceive things differently; perception is people’s reality. The way each of us thinks about the world—the way we make sense of things, the reality we construct—is different because we are different. As individuals, we are each a unique amalgamation of our genetic makeup, experiences, memories, personality, assumptions, beliefs, stories, values, and feelings that creates our sense of identity and our life story. From our life story, we create our mental maps, construct our reality and make sense of the world [5, 17, 23].

When we look around and see things like chairs, lamps, cars, buildings, and mountains, it appears that reality is fixed. Where we can get in to trouble is when we get stuck with a view that says our lives are pretty much fixed. This thinking manifests itself in the various relationships we have at work and at home when we say: “My home life is ‘this way’ and it won’t change; we do things this way at work because we’ve always done them that way; my boss was born a jerk and he always will be one.” Things are fixed and I can’t change them. We call this an *is/fixed* reality and the best we can do is try and maneuver a bit here and there and shuffle a few pieces around as we deal with the realities that we assume are permanent (Table 2).

If this is our view of reality, we can fall into the trap of believing that the only future ahead of us is what we call a *So-So* (same ’ol, same ’ol) future. It’s a future that is largely a continuation of the past. It may be an OK, so-so, tolerable future, but it’s not terribly exciting

TABLE 2
Two Views of Reality

Is/fixed reality	Constructed/experienced reality
Reality is pretty much fixed; I can’t change it much I have little power to change things in my life because reality is already decided I live into my <i>So-So</i> (same ’ol, same ’ol) future Language is descriptive and comparative My views and my thoughts control me so there’s not much I can do to change my life	Reality is not fixed; I construct and experience reality I have a lot to do with reality, which gives me power to change my life I’m not stuck with a future that’s just like the past Language is also creative; it invents new futures Change my thinking...change my behaviors... change my results/performance...change my life

or inspiring. However, we tell ourselves that there are advantages to this *So-So* future. There's an element of security in it. It's a contingency future because we can always depend on it as a kind of fallback; it's familiar, fairly predictable, and relatively comfortable. It may be humdrum but you know that and you've managed to adapt. It may not be particularly challenging but you've lowered your expectations and adjusted. It may be somewhat routine but you've learned to go through the motions. It's not particularly exciting but you've taught yourself that too much excitement can be hazardous to your health. Deep down you hope for something more - a future that unleashes your human spirit in a manner that allows you to experience life as you can only begin to imagine. But, maintains Francisco Flores, "Hope is the raw material of losers [34]," and, alas, hope is not an executable strategy.

In our personal lives, this *So-So* future sounds like, "Most of the time, I draw the short straw in life" or "I have to look out for myself." In our work lives, it sounds like, "Work is pretty much of a grind" or "This place will never change." This *So-So* future provides the thinking construct from which we try to change our lives but nothing much happens. As William James pointed out, "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices." Same thinking, same future. A *So-So* future is limited in terms of what we might invent.

Consider a different way of thinking about reality: as an *experienced/constructed* reality. Reality is not fixed; we continuously construct it and our experience of it continually changes. We do not create this reality in isolation. Rather, it is a product of the relationships and conversations that we have over time, which shape the construction of a reality that makes sense to us [37, 38]. Zaffron and Logan call this *experienced/constructed* reality an *occurring* reality [39]. They explain, "So what exactly does *occur* mean? We mean something beyond perception and subjective experience. We mean the reality that arises within and from your perspective on the situation. In fact, your perspective is itself part of the way in which the world occurs to you."

Because reality is socially constructed through multiple human interactions, the language we live inside of and through which we have our conversations affects how other people occur to us (and how we occur to them). Hence, most of a human being's life is an *experienced/constructed* reality that is significantly affected by conversational language. The self, observes Kerby [40], is not a "prelinguistic given that merely employs language, much as we might employ a tool, but rather as a product of language." Language is not only a tool to report and describe objects—it also provides context and meaning, recontextualizes content, and serves as a vehicle of thought [41]. Without language, we would

never entertain many automatic thoughts and a large chunk of our cognitive and public lives would be very different indeed [42–44].

Kegan and Lahey [45] note, "All leaders are leading language communities. Though every person, in any setting, has some opportunity to influence the nature of language, leaders have exponentially greater access and opportunity to shape, alter, or ratify existing language rules.... The only question is what *kind* of language leaders we will be." Language shapes our thinking and the quality of our life is dependent on the quality of our thoughts. Our state of mind, our mood, reflects how we each experience our thinking as a feeling state moment to moment. Thinking can elicit positive feelings such as gratitude, "flow", and optimism, or negative emotions such as frustration, anger, and worry. Emotions, on the other hand, can influence cognitive processes like memory, consciousness, attention, and language.

Duncan and Barrett [46] note that there is no such thing as non-affective thought; feelings play a role in perception and cognition even when we cannot detect their influence. That nasty e-mail you sent (regrettably) was likely a reaction to the anger and/or frustration you felt after reading the language in the e-mail you received. People do what makes sense to them at the moment; language, thinking, and feeling are interconnected [47–52]. As Lindquist [53] said, "Language can no more be removed from emotion than flour can be removed from an already baked cake."

When our emotions move to the foreground of our consciousness, we experience them as pleasant or

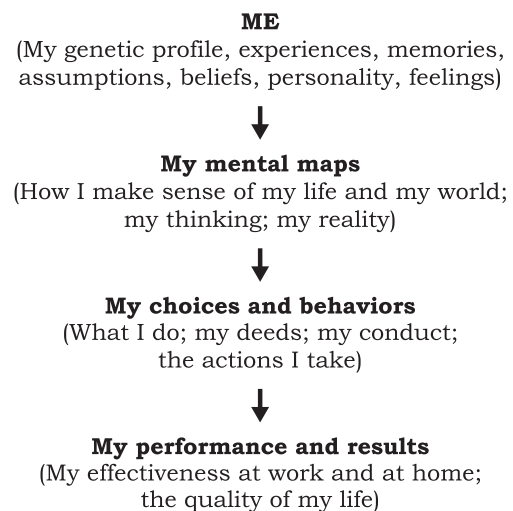


FIG. 2. The human design process. The reality that we construct and experience is determined by our unique genetic makeup and our experiences, memories, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs. This construction—how we make sense of the world—shapes and is shaped by our thinking. Our thinking and sense making control our choices and behaviors, which drive the quality of the results we produce in our lives. Language is a powerful tool that continuously influences this process.

unpleasant, always with some degree of arousal, and they inform our choices and actions [17, 37, 54]. Comments like, “Don’t let your emotions get the best out of you,” have led to the notion that emotions interfere with rational thought. Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist at the University of Southern California, has challenged this assumption by showing that brain-injured patients with an impaired ability to perceive their own feelings are ineffective decision-makers [55]. These patients can spend hours mulling over trivial details, such as where to have lunch or what shirt to wear. Emotions allow us to make up our minds; cognition requires emotion to execute the decision-making process (54, 56).

The construct we’ve been working from, then, is as follows: If you change the way you make sense (your thinking), you change your choices and behaviors; if you change your behaviors, you change the results you get; if you change your results, you change your performance in life (Fig. 2). It works something like this:

Mental model: I have frustrating problems at work that I can’t do anything about.

Resultant behavior/performance: I complain about what’s not right at work. I use whining language that expresses my victimization. I blame our lack of progress on these problems. I live into my *So-So* future.

Coaching distinction: People only complain about something because they care about the value or importance of something else. I can shift the language of complaint to the language of personal commitment. I don’t need to be controlled by a *So-So* future.

New behavior: I quit bellyaching. My language shifts from being cynical and defensive to being more positive and creative. My speaking also shifts from the language of blame to the language our personal responsibility. I live out my stand for going the extra mile and supporting my team.

New performance: My performance at work improves. I experience more purpose. People notice.

The conventional approach to changing behavior uses the extrinsic “carrots and sticks” approach. While this tactic may be of value in some circumstances, a permanent modification in behavior *via* intrinsic motivation is much more likely when the thinking that gives rise to the behavior changes. In leading change, the distinctions we make in our thinking define the limits of what is possible. The power of language lies in creating insights, distinctions, and discernments that nudge us to revise our frameworks and mental maps for viewing the world around us. Those Aha! moments in our lives

when we “get it”—that is, make a thinking distinction—are powerful. The resultant breakthrough or a flash of insight is energizing; it motivates us to take action [56, 57]. One of the most exhilarating feelings in the world is when we see an existing situation from a different vantage point or in a completely new light. In jarring people loose from their long-standing mental maps, leaders are thought influencers, meaning makers, and reality shapers [58–60].

You’re a Coach and a Sense-Maker

“No need is so compelling,” said Willis Harman, “as the need we all feel for our lives to make sense, to have meaning. We will tolerate almost any degree of austerity or risk in this indomitable quest for meaning [61].” The explanation “stuff happens” is generally not good enough. Indeed, people struggle mightily to create meaning. Some people search for meaning in inauthentic places: more titles, a bigger salary, more power. They may come to believe that their work cannot be meaningful unless they get a raise or get more resources.

Organizational members attribute leadership to those individuals who structure experience in a meaningful way. They emerge as leaders because their ability to frame sensibly provides others with a basis for action. Smircich and Morgan [62] stress that “leadership situations may be conceived as those in which there exists an *obligation* or a perceived *right* on the part of certain individuals to define the reality of others.” Official leadership roles and titles emerge when the rights, privileges, and obligations to define the nature of experience and activity are recognized and formalized.

Given the amount of time we spend at work, making meaning out of what we do is imperative. Until people make sense out of why they do what they do together, their work will lack meaning. Until problems are understandable, they cannot be solved. Lee Thayer [63] points out that

“a leader at work is one who gives others a different sense of the *meaning* of that which they do by recreating it in a different form...in the same way that a pivotal painter or sculptor or poet gives those who follow him (or her) a different way of ‘seeing’—and therefore saying and doing and knowing in the world. A leader does not tell it ‘as it is’; he tells it as it *might be*, giving what ‘is’ thereby a different ‘face’.... The leader is a sense-giver.”

A key challenge for leaders is to manage the meaning of work [64] in such a way that individuals orient themselves to the accomplishment of organizational goals. In this undertaking, multiple forms of language—conversations, dialogue, metaphor, stories, myths—play a role

in sense-giving [65]. In human interaction, meanings are not simply transferred from one person to another as they converse but “negotiated” as they share individual interpretations of information, reality, and experiences, thereby constructing meaning [66, 67]. In this negotiation process, people must be willing to hear other perspectives and, in listening, be open to revising how they think and how they do what they do, a process that invariably involves loss and fear [68]. Accordingly, sensemaking in organizations often occurs amidst intense emotional experience [17]. That’s what is difficult, confusing, and painful. But Wheatley [69] contends:

“We can’t be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change always starts with confusion; cherished interpretations must dissolve to make way for the new. Of course it’s scary to give up what we know, but the abyss is where newness lives. Great ideas and inventions miraculously appear in the space of not knowing.”

Stamp Out Organizational Silence and Fear

“Drive out fear,” quality guru W. Edwards Deming [70] used to say. “The economic loss from fear is appalling.” When people are afraid of their bosses, afraid of being punished for making mistakes or afraid of being labeled a troublemaker if they speak up, performance suffers.

In virtually every organization, there are forces that cause its members to withhold information. Morrison and coworkers [71,72] refer to this collective-level phenomenon as “organizational silence.” Many institutions are trapped in an apparent paradox in which many employees know the truth about certain issues and problems within the organization yet dare not speak that truth to their superiors.

A key factor that fosters the creation of a climate of organizational silence is top leaders’ fear of receiving negative feedback, especially from subordinates. The unwritten message from the top is, “Don’t rock the boat. We don’t want any bad news.” Fearing retaliation or being labeled a non-team player if they speak their mind, subordinates become silent. Even if they do speak up, they may discover that their feedback is ignored. A culture of silence is reinforced.

People are silent about a myriad of issues. They may be reticent to speak up about information that clearly indicates an individual or institutional performance problem. They may be unwilling to call attention to unlevel playing fields such as favoritism and pay inequities. Not only can organizational silence become a powerful demoralizing force, it can also create a huge barrier to organizational change and improvement. Since people tend to be silent about bad news, positive information is likely to flow up organizational

hierarchies much more so than negative information. This can result in large amounts of information about potential problems never making it way up the information ladder. This creates serious flaws in the knowledge that leaders use to make decisions.

It is impossible to tackle the problems that people won’t talk about [73]. To ensure that people will speak up when they discover problems, it is essential for leaders who are serious about designing learning organizations to realize that the dominant tendency is for employees to regard speaking up about concerns as risky, leading them to withhold information [71]. Leaders must convince others that they truly want to hear about problem issues. In most of our institutions, there is substantial room for improvement in this sphere.

Harness the Power of Conversations and Language

Our society is a society of organizations. Most social tasks are being done in and by private and public organizations, and most societal goals are achieved through them. When we think of organizations, we think of bricks and mortar, balance sheets, strategic plans, leaders, and followers.

Consider a different way of thinking about an organization: as a network of ongoing conversations between department heads, executives, staff, customers, board members, and other stakeholders. Our workplaces “are, among other things, places where certain forms of speech are promoted or encouraged, and places where other ways of talking are discouraged or made impossible [45].” This conversational mix determines what the organization does and how it does it. Organizations are “constituted in and by conversations. Accordingly, producing and managing change involves shifting that network of conversations by intentionally bringing into existence and sustaining ‘new’ conversations while completing (and removing) current conversations. Rather than being simply a tool, conversations are the target, medium, and product of organizational change [74].” Resistance to change in an organization is not so much a personal phenomenon, but a social systemic one in which resistance is maintained by the background conversations of the organization [75]. Dealing successfully with this source of resistance requires distinguishing the background conversations and putting those disempowering stories back in the past.

A language is a system of communicating with other people using sounds and words to express a meaning, idea, or thought. We manage *via* conversations—we set goals, choose strategies, assign projects, troubleshoot, and monitor the results we produce. As noted by Ford [76], “If change is seen as occurring in communication, then the management of change can be understood to be the management of conversations.” This is

what gives conversations their potential power—they are the bridge between the created present and the uncreated future. Jaworski [77] described his insight as follows, “I had always thought we used language to describe the world—now I was seeing that is not the case. To the contrary, it is through language that we create the world.” The most underutilized tool leaders have at their disposal is language.

So how do you change people’s thinking when the handcuffs of their engrained mental maps are too light to feel until they are too heavy to break? Du Toit [78] stresses that coaching conversations are powerful, underleveraged tools leaders can use to help people make sense of the ever changing environment and invent a high performance future. The language of coaching conversations is of a specific type because it has to be creative and future-based rather than descriptive or comparative. It has to produce distinctions that prompt cognitive shifts [79], which jolt people loose from their long-standing and entrenched worldviews. A memo won’t suffice. An e-mail won’t work. A policy won’t cut it.

These coaching conversations are special because they have to evoke feelings in people. They can’t be hollow or sterile or unidirectional or sugar-coated like the kind we usually have. They should be unambiguous and nonjudgmental [80–85] but they must also utilize language that grabs people’s attention. They may require dramatic, vivid visualizations to create an impression that lasts. Changing people’s mental maps that have worked for years invariably requires an insight that influences their emotions [86]. A 15-second reminder at a meeting of the importance of patient quality and safety is much less likely to create an impactful insight than sharing a letter from an angry patient who had a horrible hospital experience.

An insight (colloquially called the “Aha! moment”) is a sudden comprehension that solves a problem, reinterprets a situation, or resolves an ambiguous percept [87]. Flashes of insight often come when we least expect them—in the shower; on the treadmill; while driving to work. Unlike ordinary intuition, which is a gut feeling, strategic intuition is the opposite: it’s thinking, not feeling [88]. When the flash of insight appears, it illuminates a previous cognitive obscurity as a clear, unambiguous thought.

A flash of insight happens in a split second and it appears to come out of nowhere. But it often takes weeks or even months for the neuronal dots that produce the Aha! moment to be connected, suggesting that the wiring of key neural networks occurs unconsciously. In the process old dots (habitual ways of thinking) are disconnected. The “rush” comes from the clarity of knowing what to do with the new thinking.

Take, for example, one of the most common behaviors in many organizations: complaining. Kegan and Lahey

[45] write, “The language of complaint essentially tells us, and others, what it is we can’t stand. The language of commitment tells us (and possibly others) what it is we stand for. Without having our complaints taken away and without giving them up, transforming language enables us to make a shift from experiencing ourselves as primarily disappointed, complaining, wishing, critical people to experiencing ourselves as committed people who hold particular convictions about what is most valuable, most precious, and most deserving of being promoted or defended.” When we make this distinction (have a flash of insight) our thinking changes and our speaking shifts from the language of blame to the language of personal responsibility.

Much of our thinking (and insights) is based in and shaped by specific conversations that we have had, are having, and will have. O’Shaughnessy [89] contends that coaching is “the most powerful strategic and tactical weapon open to business today.” Three types of coaching conversations serve as catalysts for creating distinctions that lead to new thinking and positive change.

Conversations for Creating Connectivity and Understanding

Conversations for creating connectivity and understanding are intended to build relationships that are grounded in respect, trust, and empathy. They are designed to help us recognize our leaps of abstractions, become aware of the subtext beneath spoken words, balance the skill of inquiry and advocacy and notice the disconnects between what we say we will do and what we actually do [16]. When we listen with candor [90], we learn about the ideas of others, and we acquire new insights.

Conversations for Possibilities and Opportunities

The purpose of conversations for possibilities and opportunities is to generate innovative ideas, opening up channels beyond our *So-So* future that is already scripted. These forward-focused conversations must eventually root themselves in reality, but not before people have entertained blue ocean strategies unfettered by their current assumptions.

Conversations for possibilities should force people to step out of their current interpretations and comfort zones. Goldberg [91] suggests that “a paradigm shift occurs when a question is asked inside the current paradigm that can only be answered from outside it.” The stage might be set with a statement like, “We’re not here to make any decisions today, so you don’t need to represent your department; you just need to be present, listen, and engage.” Higher stakes questions such as,

“What are you willing to risk or sacrifice?” come later when ample trust has been built.

Conversations for Commitment and Action

Conversations for action generate decisions, commitments, and coordination with others. They should be clear about specific deliverables and deadlines—in other words, who is to produce what for whom and by when. These conversations often fall short because the commitment or decision is not clear or not owned. A nod of heads in agreement is one thing, but explicitly defining the actions each member will take to execute is essential to getting results. As Don Berwick said, “Some is not a number; soon is not a time.”

Speech acts are meant to produce intentional action. They include declarations, requests, and promises. Declarations are speech acts that change our reality in accord with the proposition of the declaration [92], e.g., pronouncing a faculty member as “full professor” or announcing that we have an H1N1 flu epidemic. Requests are speech acts that cause the hearer to take a particular action. Promises are speech acts that commit a speaker to some future action.

Sull and Spinoza [93, 94] argue that the primary determinant of successful execution is the promises each of us makes to ourselves and to others both inside and outside the organization. When strategy implementation falters, broken or poorly understood promises are usually the reason.

LEADING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

As the neuroleadership movement [56, 95–98] gains momentum, it will offer opportunities for better understanding the intersection between leadership and the mind. Combining the tools of social and affective neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, and systems neuroscience with management science may provide evidence-based, hard science to assist organizations with the development of those leadership skills traditionally considered soft [95]. In this light, there will be benefits from rethinking leadership development programs through the lens of neuroscience.

Tolstoy once said, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” To lead more effectively—to constructively change our organizations and our world—we must begin by changing our thinking because our thinking ultimately influences how we perform. Building learning organizations requires personal transformations—basic shifts in how we think and interact with others. Invariably this challenge is disorienting and disequilibrating because it involves unlearning and relearning and the clash of mental models. Adaptive work is required when our deeply held beliefs

are challenged, when the values that made us successful are less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge [99–102]. Nothing is more challenging or more humbling than tackling our engrained ways of thinking and deep-seated assumptions. History, however, has shown us that many of our assumptions—the world is flat, the earth is the center of the universe, time is constant, matter is solid—have been proven to be false.

Einstein once said, “I want to know God’s thoughts ... the rest are details.” Allegedly, he was pointing to the enormously powerful influence of thinking on choices, decisions, actions and outcomes. The moment we are willing to reconsider a deeply held assumption or a habitual way of doing something, the possibility of new learning and growth becomes real. Neurophysiologically, this new learning is a process that involves re-wiring of neural networks to produce different thoughts. Emotionally, it involves letting go of the thought patterns, beliefs, and feelings that hold us back and limit possibilities for inventing a more fulfilling future. Spiritually, it is an inward journey of becoming more whole and complete as a person. Practically, it translates into workability, a life that just works better.

As noted by Gardner [103], changing minds is no easy task; even changes in our thinking that appear to emerge in our consciousness dramatically and “out of nowhere” frequently mask the more subtle cognitive processes that have ripened and jelled over a protracted period of time. On both a personal and organizational level, change, learning, and growth invariably produce conflict. Kennedy and Pronin [104, 105] have shown that the conflict-escalating approaches that people take toward those who disagree with them are mediated by people’s tendency to perceive those who disagree with them as biased. Moreover, people who perceive adversaries as biased respond to them with less cooperation and greater discord. This leads to a dilemma, which can mimic working inside a pressure cooker. If the heat and pressure that are generated in the unlearning/relearning process are too high, people disengage, and the vessel explodes. But if the heat and pressure are too low, nothing marinates, nothing cooks, no one learns.

This is not to imply that your organization will not change at all in the next day, week, or year. It will by virtue of the fact that you will hire new people, appoint new committees, change policies, and reallocate resources. But if you’re content with your *So-So* future, the way you go about your business—the thinking behind your decisions, behaviors, and the results you get—is highly unlikely to change. What we’re talking about is bringing into being a transformed organization that has rewired the obsolete circuitry in its cognitive maps. You and I cannot change the way we think without thinking about what that new thinking will be. We cannot change our engrained thought patterns until and unless we think

about those long-standing thought constructs that no longer work and must be let go. And we cannot transform our organizations (and our world) without changing the way we think about how the work of leadership gets done.

Heifetz points to attention as the currency of leadership. Leadership could be defined as getting people to pay attention to tough problems that they would often rather avoid confronting. Leaders help others understand the thinking that causes them to avoid their tough issues and they help them reframe (rethink) their problems so they can tackle them. For example, a problem that organizational members view as a resource problem might be reframed as a prioritization opportunity. This reframing is essential because “we just need more resources” is a technical solution that is often ineffective and not viable. Prioritizing requires new thinking and behaviors (e.g., we can’t be all things to all people), which invariably cause anxiety and disequilibrium. Good leaders pace the rate at which they steer people through change.

The sustainability and “thrivability” of our organizations, societies, nations, and world rest on changing the way we currently think. We must change the way we make sense of health care delivery; we must change the way we think about wealth disparities; we must think differently about the environment; we must alter our understanding of what global cooperation really means. In short, we must change the way we make sense of leadership—what it is and how we make it happen. Helping others revise their outdated ways of thinking that are no longer relevant is where leaders must always play a critical role.

For each of us, this new way of thinking has to come from the inside. When we make this shift, for most of us it will be like leading again for the first time.

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