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*actionable* **STRATEGIES TO**

**ACCELERATE**

*- YOUR CAREER -*

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**ART PETTY**

**This e-book is for you** if you're a professional looking to advance your career, and you're currently dealing with any of the following:

- ▶ You're motivated to do what it takes to take charge of your career, and **you're looking for the tools and approaches to help you get ahead.**
- ▶ You are someone who is interested in promotion and taking on increasingly complex levels of responsibility, but **have learned that it takes more than just being great at your job to get there.**
- ▶ You want to gain an edge and **stand out from your colleagues.**
- ▶ You know that you were meant for more, yet your daily work doesn't fit your sense of purpose. **You're ready to level up and be inspired again!**

**If you're driven to earn more money, find increased career satisfaction, change your circumstances, or pursue something big and audacious for you or your organization, you're in the right place.**

Career ownership is challenging and potentially costly. It takes hard work and sheer tenacity to identify the best situations to apply your superpowers. You need to know yourself, and you need help finding what it is you do that creates magic for others. You also need to remember, it's OK to be selfish about what and where you apply your talents and for how long. If you don't manage yourself, no one will.

Too many of us wait for someone else to create the circumstances that allow us to be happy in our work. Expecting someone else to lift us up from our current situation is a fool's errand blended with a real life frustration dream. **No matter how much we sulk or complain about our lot, the only person responsible for changing the situation is the one staring back at us in the mirror.**

**You own your career.** Not your firm.

You own your professional development. Not your boss.

If you have to focus your hard work and energy for learning somewhere, focus on the following difference makers.

Let's get started!





# LEARN TO RECOGNIZE YOUR STRENGTHS

# To the extent that we struggle to see our own weaknesses, we are naïve and blind to our strengths.

This gap in our own view-of-self is in my experience more detrimental to career success and personal-professional satisfaction than the issues surrounding our alleged weaknesses.

Sadly, most of our developmental and feedback discussions focus on the weaknesses. While it is instructive and eye opening to learn about the quirks and oddities of our behaviors that make people around us nuts, the real gold that often goes un-mined is all about our strengths.

The strengths give us locomotive power...they put the vertical in our climb up the corporate ladder. The weaknesses create resistance and noise, but the strengths fill our sails and propel us forward.



## 4 REASONS WHY WE STRUGGLE TO SEE OUR OWN STRENGTHS:

### ▶ **Too often, we define our view-of-self around our position or title...**

Sales Manager, Marketing Manager, Executive etc., and not around the skills and behaviors that make us valuable in a wide variety of roles.

Professionals who have struggled through an unexpected career

interruption will often describe one of the key challenges they faced as having to let go of the position or title and instead focus on identifying, cultivating and marketing transferable strengths. You are not your title.

- ▶ **When feedback is available, it tends to focus on the constructive or negative.** When positive feedback is provided, it's often not very specific and definitely not described in clear, business-focused behavioral terms. How many times have you sat across from a manager who offered, "You are remarkably talented at..., and we should find opportunities for you to apply and further develop this talent."
- ▶ **The biases have it.** There's a whole litany of cognitive biases that all of us march around with and that distort our view-of-self. When we look in the mirror, we don't see our strengths or our "professional beauty," we see the flaws.

For whatever reason, we're wired to focus on the blemishes and mistakes and not the true value that we bring to a picture. I shadowed a coaching client who was preoccupied with the negative feedback in a recent 360-degree review. What he didn't know was that in every setting I observed him, his primary value was one of guiding a team through a messy problem to a clear-cut approach. He did it by facilitating and using framing tools and helping the team focus on the right issues, and he had no idea that this was his true superpower! Many years later, he is an outstanding and successful strategy consultant.

- ▶ **We don't ask for input on our strengths.** When was the last time that you asked for feedback on what you do really well?



### 3 AREAS TO TUNE INTO TO FIND YOUR STRENGTHS:

In the Self-Discovery phase, you are challenged to tune in to three key areas:

#### **What it's like to be you at your best.**

We are exploring those moments in your life—personal or professional, where you were exhilarated and where you achieved moments of flow. We look at the circumstances, your role in the process, and the individuals or types of individuals involved to find clues to situations that draw out your best.

#### **How others perceive your superpowers.**

It turns out, not only are we blind to our weaknesses, we are blind and deaf to our superpowers. In this activity, you work with colleagues from your present and past (including adversaries) to better understand what they perceived as your strengths and value-add. We also strive to understand how you impact others in their lives through your workplace collaboration.

*The findings in this phase are always profound and often emotional.*

#### **Your Backstory**

Every one of us is an outcome of our environment, culture, upbringing, and family history. Tuning in to your backstory, ranging from family history to your professional life and the milestones along the way, is a powerful means of better understanding yourself.



You can spend a lifetime not overcoming your weaknesses, or, you can spend a lifetime cultivating your strengths. I opt for the latter. Now, all you need to do is clear your mind, screw up your courage and face reality. You are truly remarkable at something! Find it, ask about it, and then start tuning out the noise you are hearing from your weaknesses and focus on the good work of applying and developing your strengths.





# STRENGTHEN YOUR SELF-ESTEEM

# The single limiting factor I observe in those who under-succeed is a lack of belief in their abilities.

One definition of self-esteem reflects, “confidence in one’s own worth or abilities.” Another source, psychologist and author, Dr. Nathaniel Branden, offers: “**Self-esteem is the experience of being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and being worthy of happiness.**”

While typically not a topic discussed over coffee, many professionals struggle with issues of low self-esteem. They question their abilities to cope with the problems at hand, they often doubt they are worthy of the position they occupy, and they most definitely agonize quietly over much of their professional existence. Others manifest their low self-esteem with over-the-top aggressiveness and strong controlling behaviors.



## NINE IDEAS TO HELP STRENGTHEN YOUR LEADERSHIP SELF-ESTEEM

- ▶ **1. Recognize that you’re not alone.** The greatest historical figures and leaders throughout history struggled with self-doubt, and many of the most outwardly confident leaders battle this same issue in private. You are most definitely not alone.
- ▶ **2. Cultivate “bigger purpose” thinking about your job.** The focus on a large and compelling mission promotes action and helps set priorities. It also sets the stage for self-esteem reinforcing behaviors and achievements.

- ▶ **3. Small victories count!** Keep tabs on yours. Keep a list of the small victories to reinforce your growing self-esteem and good attitude. And remember to share the wealth by celebrating or praising the positive accomplishments of others. Your positive praise helps others build their own self-esteem.
- ▶ **4. Read something inspirational.** My own doses of self-esteem fuel come from biographies of historical figures who battled overwhelming odds, only to succeed. It's amazing what looking at a truly bad situation faced by someone else will do to put your own situation in perspective.
- ▶ **5. Trust feedback from trusted sources.** Not all feedback and not all feedback providers are created equal. The comment from an audience member recently regarding a concept that I "failed to develop" on one of my slides was interesting but frankly irrelevant. The talk had been a success however, it clearly bugged this guy that I had not expanded upon the issue he felt so passionately about. I suggested he make it a self-study topic.
- ▶ **6. Pull out of a stall.** Take action. Actions...and movement are important steps in building self-esteem. An internal preoccupation on your supposed negatives coupled with no action is truly self-reinforcing.
- ▶ **7. Focus your actions on your strengths.** Just for a few moments, forget about the weaknesses that you believe are holding you back. Preoccupying on your weaknesses reinforces low self-esteem thinking.
- ▶ **8. Don't overlook your physical appearance.** Focus on getting in shape, losing weight, getting a better haircut and/or improving your style of dress. Much of our self-esteem flows from how we feel about our looks and physical presence.

- ▶ **9. Selectively take action to strengthen weaknesses.** As the small victories pile up, and as you build upon your strengths and refocus your efforts around your priorities, selectively identify weaknesses to strengthen and take action. Buy and read and apply the lessons in a self-help book, take a course or seek a mentor to guide your efforts and offer reinforcement.

Your self-esteem is an intensely personal issue that impacts others and affects your ability to succeed. A strong sense of your own self-worth is important for building self-confidence, and self-confidence is an important ingredient for success in your career.



# DEVELOP YOUR PROFESSIONAL VALUE PROPOSITION

# A well-developed Professional Value Proposition is an essential tool for differentiating yourself from the herd, pack and the flock!



## WHAT IS A PROFESSIONAL VALUE PROPOSITION?

Don't let the fancy strategy and marketing words get in the way of a straightforward concept. Your Professional Value Proposition (PVP) is simply a central message that describes how you as an individual uniquely create value for your customers, companies, co-workers and stakeholders.



## WHEN DO I REFERENCE MY VALUE PROPOSITION?

In short, all of the time. Your PVP is the core message that needs to come through in your marketing materials—your resume, cover letter and other supporting materials. It also defines the core message that you will reference and support during interview processes.



## OK, I STILL DON'T GET THE VALUE PROPOSITION PART...

In strategy terms, a simple explanation of the concept of "Value Proposition," is: Why people buy. Firms and hiring managers will buy you because you very uniquely solve complex problems for customers and stakeholders.

Of course, the devil is in the details of describing why you are unique and providing evidence to substantiate your claim.

Another way to relate to your PVP is as **your personal elevator pitch**. If given the chance to pitch yourself for a job during a ride from the lobby to the 14th floor, how would you effectively communicate why the hiring manager should consider you.

Last and not least, your PVP is not a single sentence statement, but rather **a concise message map with a core message at the center and supporting messages and evidence hanging off of that core message**.

## **HOW DO I DEVELOP MY PVP? QUESTIONS ABOUT YOU.**

I'll offer a series of questions for you as thought prompters. By thinking through and answering the questions, you will have the materials needed to finalize your PVP.

## **WHAT DO YOU DO THAT CREATES VALUE?**

For example:

*As a leader, I am uniquely gifted at identifying and developing talented professionals and teams that fuel growth and create positive change in organizations.*

*I connect strategies to execution and guide teams to innovate, experiment, learn and adapt tactics and strategies to better solve client problems.*

*As a sales manager, I create operationally excellent and innovative sales teams that work relentlessly on developing high quality business by solving specific client problems.*



## WHAT EVIDENCE SUPPORTS YOUR VALUE-CREATE STATEMENTS?

This is the part where you need to clearly and succinctly substantiate with numbers and examples. Include answers to what you did that drove results, how you did it and how you impacted your team and organization.



## PVPS CAN'T JUST FOCUS ON HISTORY...YOU NEED TO LOOK FORWARD

While your past experiences define where you have come from and what you've accomplished, the hiring manager is looking at today and the near future at that need solving. **A good PVP will incorporate both the historical examples and data points and then offer a forward-looking component.** You need to connect the dots on how your past adds up to creating value in the future. Otherwise, you're just offering a personal biography.





## WHAT QUALITIES, SKILLS, APPROACHES, AND OUTCOMES CAN YOU DESCRIBE THAT SHOW WHY YOU ARE UNIQUE AND DIFFERENT FROM TYPICAL CANDIDATES?

Remember, I didn't say this was easy. **What are your unique skills and experiences and how do they help you create value?** If you reach this point in your exercise and you cannot confidently state why you are unique and distinct (talents, skills, successes, evidence, go forward abilities etc.), then you need to keep working. If you get stuck, ask a valued professional colleague for help.



## WHO'S YOUR BUYER? TAILORING YOUR PVP TO YOUR BUYER:

This sounds dirtier than it is. It's actually good marketing. The CEO seeking an executive hire has one set of needs, HR another and prospective peers have their own. Your absolute core message does not deviate, but you may emphasize different skills and experiences to better match with the needs of your immediate customers.

Describing who you are and what you bring to a firm and a team is remarkably important to your success. If you're interested in creating a meaningful and memorable impression, you must be able to articulate your professional value proposition in conversation, in writing and on your public profiles.





# PUT YOUR PASSION ON DISPLAY

# There's something infectious and likable about someone who displays passion for their work.

This is particularly true when the enthusiasm is anchored in fixing, improving or innovating around something meaningful to others and to the firm. For professionals climbing the rungs of the organizational ladder or navigating boundary crossing in highly siloed organizations, **visible enthusiasm for your work will serve you well during your journey.**

What you project about yourself, your attitude and your enthusiasm for your work are all important components of your professional presence... how people perceive you as a professional. Since others must choose you for more responsibility, it's important to have your presence working hard for you and not against you. Putting your passion for your work on display is one way of projecting a stronger, more positive presence.

**Managers appreciate employees who show how much they enjoy their work.** (Perhaps more than you will know.) Executives are hard-wired to notice people who seem to thrive and enjoy their work and new challenges. And peers and other resources tend to rally around individuals they perceive as genuine in their interest to right a wrong, fix something that is broken or do something new for the greater good.

Your showcasing your personal passion for your work is an admission ticket to the early stages of that precious asset we seek from others, known as trust. Your enthusiasm excites a similar emotion in others, something that is

sadly often dormant in your many un-engaged co-workers who have grown accustomed to accepting the status quo. Armed with the trust and support of others, you can move mountains.

Alternatively, a dour demeanor or one that seems to project a constant aura of boredom or worse, righteous indignation laced with I'm just here to do my job and by the way, I'm right and you're wrong, has the opposite effect of the positively passionate individual. I've known, managed and coached plenty of both of these individuals over my career, and without a doubt, the individuals who showcased genuine interest in others and authentic enthusiasm for their work and their firm's work have grossly out-distanced their often very intelligent but less excited peers.

While putting a smile on your face and ginning up some halfhearted enthusiasm won't get you too far...people will see through your attempt at a façade. **Those striving to grow and advance in their careers will be well served by discovering (or re-discovering) what they love about their work and putting it on display.** And by the way, if there's nothing left in the tank that resembles passion for your work, it's time to consider a new direction.



## 5 IDEAS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR PROFESSIONAL PRESENCE AND PUT YOUR PASSION ON DISPLAY:

- ▶ **1. Start with shifting your attitude from "I'm here" to "You're here!"** One of the great role models of professional presence in my career was an incredibly successful business owner who was widely

viewed as the patriarch of his industry. He was a marvel to watch as he arrived at a conference or entered a room. Some people project the aura of “I’m here and I’m important, please acknowledge it.” His approach projected “You’re here and I’m honored to see you and I acknowledge you.”

Whether you were a senior executive or someone fairly low on the ladder, he sought you out, engaged with you and left you feeling like he appreciated you. Needless to say, that approach earned him widespread respect and massive cooperation for a number of his industry initiatives. The “I’m here” attitude projection is a derailment factor and the “You’re here” showcases interest and enthusiasm for being in the presence of others. It is indeed a powerful approach to leverage.

- ▶ **2. Execute on social blocking and tackling.** The basics count! Smile more, engage with people with the “You’re here” attitude suggested above and practice and employ active listening techniques. The latter emphasizes listening more than talking, striving to understand the views of others by asking questions and then working hard to offer supportive ideas or direct help.
- ▶ **3. Seek first to understand.** While much about passion is you putting your enthusiasm for your project or work on display, it’s imperative that you understand how your ideas fit with the interests and initiatives of others. Too often in the workplace, people are at cross-purposes over approaches. They focus and argue on “The What.” They fail to understand that they completely agree on “The Why.” No one loves a pontificating blowhard who fails to listen to the views of others. Everyone appreciates someone who can listen and understand interests and blend ideas.

- ▶ **4. Accept and project that you are there to solve problems.** Too many professionals display a sense of righteous indignation over the problems they encounter...and of course these problems are always because others are too ignorant to get their part right. That's bull. Your job is to enthusiastically seek out and engage with others to make things better (improved quality, reduced time or cost, improved effectiveness etc.). Stop thinking and projecting that you are the only smart one in a sea of idiots and start recognizing and displaying through your actions that you are here to help fix and strengthen.
- ▶ **5. Turn the volume up but remember, it's not about you!** Many good professionals struggle with articulating how important they perceive their work is and how excited they are to be engaged in it. And when they do find the courage to share their enthusiasm, the message comes out muddled or it seems self-serving to others.

Do find or create opportunities to share your genuine excitement. Project review meetings, executive updates and even workplace social situations are all appropriate venues to showcase your enthusiasm for your initiatives. Make certain however, to **anchor your excitement in why the initiative is relevant/helpful/germane to creating something new, fixing something that needs fixing or doing something important more effectively.** It's not about you!

Showcasing your passion for your work sends a strong message to everyone around you. It screams, "I'm engaged, I'm here to help and to solve, and let's do something great."





# INVADE THE GRAY ZONE

# Every organization has gray-zones

These are the spaces that exist somewhere between functional, divisional, or positional boundaries. It's no one's land, yet the issues spanning the gray-zone are visible and often vexing to all parties. Gray-zone items include process or communication problems, cross-functional collaboration challenges, and any strategic or change initiatives that demand coordination across different groups.

**Your challenge and your opportunity are to cultivate the communication, networking, and political skills essential for success with gray-zone issues.**



## GRAY-ZONE ISSUES HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT

You don't have to look too far or too hard to find gray zone problems. They're hiding in plain sight in most organizations. A few examples include:

*Opportunities to collaborate across functions or business units to increase sales or customer service quality.*

*Opportunities to share technology across business units where different development teams are often creating complementary or even redundant offerings.*

*Preparing an organization to succeed with a new service or product offering.*



*Coordinating strategic initiatives that require cross-functional execution.*

*Eliminating or improving long-standing cross-group processes that are no longer essential or effective.*

*Communication and coordination issues of all sizes and shapes.*



## **BEWARE THE POTENTIAL PITFALLS WITH PURSUING GRAY-ZONE ISSUES:**

**Whenever you are proposing something new or different, you run the risk of tripping all over yourself.**



## **HERE ARE A FEW OF THESE PITFALLS TO SIDESTEP:**

**Don't pick on a perceived inefficient or obsolete process or way of doing things without recognizing someone in a position of authority is invested in that methodology.** A key stakeholder might see your good idea as an indictment or attack.

Your idea to bring different groups together to collaborate might steps all over some manager's view of their turf and boundaries. Suggesting a change to these boundaries might be met with fierce resistance.

Your noble idea to do something jointly might fly in the face of how people are measured and compensated. They might agree with you, but shrug their shoulders and then revert to what feeds them.

That grass-roots support you hear from your peers will likely disappear once an executive pushes back at what is perceived as a distraction from the “real priorities” of the team.



## 10 TIPS FOR WINNING IN YOUR ORGANIZATION’S GRAY ZONE

Some of the best gray-zone leaders I’ve encountered draw upon these ten essential approaches for success:

- ▶ **1. They cultivate a track-record over time that shows their focus is on strengthening the organization**, not grandstanding for personal gain.
- ▶ **2. They choose opportunities that move the performance needle** in the right direction.
- ▶ **3. They do their homework to understand the background and context of current systems, processes, and approaches.** Armed with these insights, they uncover interests and engage others in building toward these interests.
- ▶ **4. They focus on understanding and supporting the priorities of their up-line managers.** They don’t go off chasing dragons without enlisting sponsorship.
- ▶ **5. They approach every opportunity clear in the understanding they must gain support**—often from multiple stakeholders and power-brokers. They use empathy and positive persuasion to gain support.
- ▶ **6. They grow comfortable engaging at all levels of an organization** and across functional or business unit boundaries.

- ▶ **7. They tune-in to strategic and executive imperatives** and identify gray-zone issues that will accelerate the pursuit of these items.
- ▶ **8. They work as network connectors**, striving to bring the right talent to bear on the issues.
- ▶ **9. They create a reciprocity deficit with others, offering help before asking for it.** (This common-sense approach is one of my favorite great habits of successful leaders and contributors at all levels.)
- ▶ **10. They make heroes out of the individuals around them**, increasing loyalty, and growing their influence in the process.



# CULTIVATE CLEAN POWER

# How did the three most powerful people in your firm arrive at their current positions?

**In most cases, the answer is the same: they “got stuff done” and they did it by drawing upon the skills and energy of others.**

**That’s it.** No backs stabbed...no fingers stepped on during the race up the ladder. They grew their power by identifying the vexing problems that needed solving and they figured out how to get the best and brightest around them to help develop and implement the solutions.

While the formula is easy to decode, the art and act of growing your power in an organization requires you to focus your efforts on a few key activities.

## **CONSIDER THE CASE OF BOB:**

*Bob joined a major software firm as a front-line manager in the support organization. The firm was just entering what would become a period of remarkable growth and there were more challenges and stress points than there were people to deal with them. Bob recognized this situation as an opportunity and very quickly established an understanding of the top priorities of his direct manager and worked to help her succeed with those challenges.*

*Bob's manager quickly developed confidence in his ability to solve larger issues and she assigned him to lead a number of visible strategic initiatives (projects). Bob recognizing the size of the challenges and the need for help from across the organization worked tirelessly to extend his network of contacts and to draw upon this network for resources. And Bob did everything in his power to ensure that these were career enhancing opportunities for his colleagues. In particular, he worked hard to give visibility to team members and to dispense credit and accolades widely. He made certain to shine the spotlight on others at all times.*

*As the successes piled up and Bob was given the opportunity to lead ever-larger boundary spanning initiatives, his powerful network continued to supply the know-how necessary to successfully complete the initiatives. Bob's reputation with his senior executives as someone who knew how to lead teams and execute on the key issues put him on a fast promotion path. His reputation with his colleagues as a leader worth following helped his cause. Bob maneuvered from the role of manager to the role of a VP within 4 years...a meteoric rise by this firm's standards. Importantly, Bob could still look at himself in the mirror and be comfortable that no backs were stabbed and no fingers stepped on as he raced up the ladder. To the contrary, he carried people with him.*

I love this story for all of the lessons it offers to us as we strive to help our firms and to grow in our careers.



## **6 LESSONS FROM BOB TO HELP YOU GROW YOUR POWER:**

- ▶ **1. Rethink your view on power.** It's not about the bigger office, better parking spot and invitation to meetings in mahogany furnished

conference rooms. It's all about you developing the freedom to work on the issues that matter while helping others in the process. It's the freedom to act.

- ▶ **2. Calibrate your priorities with the priorities of your boss.** In coaching situations, I ask participants to describe their boss's priorities. In too many situations, the boss doesn't tell and the employee doesn't ask. That's a problem you should fix today.
- ▶ **3. Learn to connect networks!** Power resides in your access to talent. The most powerful people in your firm are those who can tap knowledge, insights and support from a variety of sources depending upon the situation. The work of growing power and contributing more to your firm cannot be achieved by remaining in your silo. Not only do you need to expand your network across your firm (and industry), but you need to learn to connect disparate networks to solve the big issues.
- ▶ **4. Mind the gap!** The real meaty issues are the ones that exist in the gray areas between the silos. Every firm has a variety of big challenges that exist somewhere between functions. Learn to pick those up and draw upon your extended network(s) to tackle them.
- ▶ **5. Power is there for the taking.** Again, I'm not emphasizing a dark view to power. What's there for the taking are problems that require solutions. I've observed cultures where I'm certain if there was a garbage can on fire in the corner, people would notice it and talk about it and wonder whether it would get any worse...but since it wasn't their responsibility, do nothing to put it out. Those are your opportunities! Seize them.

- ▶ **6. Shine the spotlight liberally on others.** Remember...your goal is to gain the freedom to work on issues that matter while helping others at the same time. It's never about you. You must give liberally to get power.

It's time for you to think differently about growing your power. The work—done properly—is noble and good. Get it right and you'll be able to positive influence your career, the careers of your colleagues, and potentially, even the fate of your firm.





# THINK DIFFERENTLY ABOUT YOUR CONVERSATIONS

# Everything important we do happens via our conversations.



Everything truly important in our lives and careers takes place in one or more challenging conversations. **A simple but not simplistic shift in how you think about every encounter can be the difference maker as you strive to accelerate your career.** It involves seeing situations through the eyes of others.

**Seeing situations through the eyes of others may be the most crucial skill you're not working very hard on in your professional or personal lives.** Since most of our work in this world involves teaming, it's imperative to become a master of recognizing the needs of others.

It turns out when you do this—when you truly actually strive to understand how others view situations—the world takes on a decidedly different complexion. **It's You-orientation versus I-orientation, and it is transformational.**

Most of us approach communication situations with a clear indication of what we're seeking from the exchange. We take the I want approach and are often surprised or shocked when counterparts fail to see the brilliance behind our ideas and rush to sign-on with their support.

Instead of leading with the *I-want*, savvy leaders and workplace communicators **engage and strive to discover how people view situations**. They shift into learning and discovery mode, ask open-ended questions, and like miners, chip-away until they have a reasonable view of the other person's perspective.

**Do a good job striving first to understand**, and the peer resisting your ideas for process changes might be quite open to the ideas, particularly if she sees you meeting her interests or protecting her from risk in the situation.



# LISTEN UP!

# Paying attention and genuinely listening shows respect.

We learn, generate new ideas, solve problems, and help a person “feel felt.” **Listening is the hardest, best work you can do, but it takes practice.** The focus in this article is on ideas to help strengthen your listening muscle.

## AN EXPERIMENT IN FIERCE LISTENING:

In my leadership workshops, I jump-start the module on listening with a fun exercise where there is just one instruction. I ask people to pair off and conduct a conversation where the only requirement is that they must start their next sentence with the last word in the statement given by their counterpart. For example:

*Me: It's going to be hot out there today.*

*You: Today is a big day. I plan on accomplishing one of my important goals.*

*Me: Goals can be a real motivating force.*

*You: Force is an interesting way to look at the power of goals. In my opinion, goals are essential for making forward progress.*

*Me: Progress demands actions.*

... and so on.

Invariably, laughter breaks out as individuals struggle to create a coherent sentence out of the last word used by their partners. Nonetheless, conversations continue. When I debrief the exercise, the one consistent piece of feedback I get is: *"I had to block out all other thoughts and laser focus on what my partner was saying."*

**Imagine having to be laser-focused on the other individual. Perhaps, it's even "fierce focus."**

 **WHERE OUR LISTENING RIDES OFF THE RAILS:** 

Most of us are so busy in our heads while the other person is still talking that listening is almost an after-thought. The number one culprit is forming our answers in our minds while our counterpart is still attempting to make a point. This mental holiday is invariably followed by some version of what Tom references as the "Eighteen-Second Syndrome" (Eighteen-seconds according to one study is the amount of time it takes a doctor to interrupt a patient describing symptoms.)

Whether it takes you eighteen or eight seconds to step on someone's message, it's still a miserable habit that detracts from any hope for effective communication. Some of us do it in the form of completing the thought of our counterpart. And while this feels positive because we are showing we understand their point, it's still stepping on the other person's message.

What's going on in your mind while other people are attempting to communicate with you? Are you processing on what you will say or,

focusing on their message?

How many times a day do you interrupt or step-on the messages from others during a typical day?

I run this exercise to make a point on listening and not to suggest you suddenly adopt the last-word tactic in your workplace conversations. Later in the workshop program, participants generate a listing of approaches they can use to strengthen their listening effectiveness.

## 9 IDEAS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR LISTENING MUSCLE:

Of course we don't have a real listening muscle, but we do have a brain that requires deliberate training over time to channel good practices and overcome bad habits. Here are nine ideas workshop participants identified to help strengthen this metaphorical muscle. (My personal favorite is number five!)

- ▶ **1. Recommit every single morning to strengthening as a listener one encounter at a time.** Taking time to isolating on the importance of listening as part of your morning mindfulness routine keeps the issue front and center.
- ▶ **2. Adopt a Beginner's Mind approach to your listening.** Accept that everyone has something to teach you and make it your goal to learn from the exchange. The best leaders are constantly in learning mode.

- ▶ **3. Use little data.** Channel your inner-Deming and track the number of times you interrupt someone and strive to reduce this number every day. This is a great, data-focused approach to improve as a listener.
- ▶ **4. Be aware of the tendency of your mind to wander and strive to remain in the moment and laser focused.** When you catch yourself drifting, immediately refocus on the other party. Difficult, but you can develop the discipline to recognize the drift and course correct.
- ▶ **5. Develop the discipline to wait two seconds after your counterpart's statement before responding.** I love this simple but not simplistic approach above all others. I use this as a facilitator to control my exuberance when someone makes an excellent point, and I feel this compulsion to jump-in and amplify the point.
- ▶ **6. Ask confirming questions** to understand better the core issue or interest of the person communicating with you.
- ▶ **7. Restate what you think the other person said** and seek clarification.
- ▶ **8. Never multi-task in a setting where people are communicating.** A better rule: never multi-task!
- ▶ **9. Change the medium.** If a flip-chart or whiteboard is present, draw or describe what you perceive the other person is saying. I love introducing a visual component. I used this with a brilliant CEO who was much more comfortable illustrating his points than articulating them.

Stop talking, purge the personal pronoun, "I" from any of your utterances, and focus on what your counterpart is trying to achieve. The listening muscle might be the most important one of all for you to exercise daily.





# PRACTICE SWIFT TRUST

# The most important key performance indicator you're not tracking is Time-To-Trust.

This concept, articulated originally by author, Ken Blanchard, suggests **the faster we gain trust across a group, the faster we move to performance.**

A critical way to grow your influence and accelerate your career is to become visible as someone who brings groups to life, turns them into teams, and guides them to high-performance. All of this starts with trust, and most of us handle trust all wrong.

Our typical approach to cultivating trust is what I describe as "The Walk on Hot Coals" approach. We make people prove they are worthy of our trust. This takes time and ample interaction, and while that is going on, performance suffers.

**Instead, teach and live the value of "swift trust."** Extend your trust immediately in a new relationship via your actions and communications. While a few will betray this advance of trust, the process will weed them out and spit them out of the culture. And in the meantime, you'll have helped accelerate the time-to-performance across your group.



# MAKE DECISIONS OTHERS ARE AFRAID TO MAKE

# Decisions beget actions that drive outcomes.

Ultimately, decisions open up new timelines for people and organizations. Unfortunately, most people struggle with decisions. **You need to develop competence at making big decisions**, particularly those where the outcomes are uncertain and the data ambiguous.

Sidenote: **Someone must always choose us to be successful.** They make that choice because they trust us to make good decisions about people, problems, and projects. Strengthening as a decision-maker is mission critical for accelerating your career.

## **BEWARE THE FALSE NEED FOR CONSENSUS ON EVERY ISSUE**

A great deal of airtime is offered to the drive for consensus, I've always viewed **consensus as the tyranny of mediocrity**. In theory, a group should be able to make a better decision than the smartest individual. That theory is nice until reality, biases, politics, and all manner of filters rise and join the process. Particularly in moments where speed is of the essence.

Humans are messy decision-makers. Humans in groups are potentially disastrous decision-makers. **This doesn't mean you should give up on collaborating on the tough topics.** It just means there will come a time when a big decision doesn't bend to consensus.



## THE PROBLEM(S) WITH MOST BIG DECISIONS

**The struggle over the big decisions is the inherent ambiguity.** The unknowns are overwhelming. Fear of getting it wrong floods our minds and our brains struggle for traction in the muck.

For the most significant decisions in our lives and careers, the outcomes are unknown and the consequences unpredictable. **While we spend an incredible amount of time and money and dance with data-driven decisions, there are no sure things.** Layer on top of that reality that humans make decisions based on emotions, not logic, and you've got a witches brew of potential for misfiring. Nonetheless, **someone has to decide.**



## WHY NOT YOU? STAND UP AND BE PRESENT IN THE MOMENT:

In my ongoing pursuit of insight into how others make the big decisions, there's no precise formula beyond the recognition that a no-decision is unacceptable.

As one senior manager described to me, *"Someone had to make the call. I believed in a direction to my core. All of my experience and logic and emotion said: "go this way." While everyone else was running for cover from getting this wrong, I had to stand up and decide."*

Another offered, *"The political costs of getting this wrong were too high for many to back it. The practical costs of not doing this were too costly for the future of the organization to not take the risk. I decided to bear the political costs for the benefit of the organization."*

Ultimately, **the big decisions we make in our lives and careers prompt tidal waves of implications**—intended and unintended, with the ripple effects continuing across time. The important thing is to recognize the point-in-time for its importance, and then to be present and be heard at the moment.



# CULTIVATE BEGINNER'S MIND

# Our brains are wonderful, vexing instruments that both serve and fight us.

**From Shunryu Suzuki, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."**

During periods of change, our brains fight us. They lock in to the tried and true.

**Our brains are powerful pattern-matching machines, forming deep grooves that drive us to respond to familiar circumstances in a consistent manner.** Yet, when conditions change and the old assumptions don't hold, these grooves and the brain's processes can hold us hostage unless we exert extraordinary effort to think differently.

**Organizations fall victim to the behavior of dominant logic—they base decisions on what happened previously, not what might happen under different circumstances.**

**Individuals succumb to relying on gut instinct, which is much about pattern recognition.** Since our guts don't really think, our brains give us clues and insights based on prior experiences. Again, when conditions change, those instincts are wrong.





## **IT'S IMPERATIVE TO CULTIVATE A BEGINNER'S MIND IN OUR CAREERS**

- ▶ Deliberately approach issues by first pushing out your preconceived notions.
- ▶ View a problem from a child's vantage point, where the tendency is to ask questions and strive to understand the situation from all vantage points.
- ▶ Challenge yourself to frame situations in a neutral manner. It's neither a "disaster" or a "golden opportunity." It just is. And then work with your team members to ask the questions that help you all understand what's going on. Resist the rush to judgment.



# STAY CURIOUS

# Curiosity is a powerful tool to help you and others think differently

**There's something invigorating about working with individuals curious about what makes things work or why things are done the way they are.** And there's something exhilarating in bringing a program or approach to life that is the direct output of a group's collective curiosity.

**Natural curiosity is all about that impossible-to-fake drive to understand the unknown.** It's a personal or team quest to figure out what makes customers and markets tick. It's an insatiable drive to find a different way to do something that is better for someone who gets a vote on whether we succeed or fail.

**In the right environment, curiosity leads to experimentation. Experimentation is the foundation of innovation.**

Francesca Gino's article, [Why Curiosity Matters](#) in the September-October 2018 issue of Harvard Business Review adds some research context to my experience-based perspectives on curiosity. It turns out, according to the author's research, that curiosity results in at least 4 big benefits:

- ▶ Fewer decision-making errors
- ▶ Increased innovation and change across creative and non-creative jobs (OK, what's a non-creative job? My curious self-wants to know!)

- ▶ Reduced group conflict
- ▶ More open communication and better team performance

That's a great listing of side effects from curiosity in a working environment! Of course, the question is: How do we get some of this in our process-driven environments when the toughest critical thinking question of the day is, possibly, What's for lunch?



## FOUR SIMPLE QUESTIONS TO PROMOTE CURIOSITY

It's imperative to encourage everyone to regularly ask four critical questions about everything in our workplace.

These include:

- ▶ Why?
- ▶ How Might?
- ▶ What if?
- ▶ Why not?



All are powerful curiosity stimulators, however, the last one, Why not? is my personal favorite when it comes to crossing the chasm from idea to action. It's the "*I double dog dare you*" question rarely uttered in too many of our organizations. Just hearing it is bound to raise the blood-pressure of caretaker managers everywhere.



# RESPECT, ALWAYS

# The need for respect is intertwined with many basic human needs

Respect doesn't receive...well, the respect that it deserves when it comes to workplace performance. It turns out, just about everything works a bit better when we all respect the respect deficit and deliberately do something to address it. **Importantly, you can harness the power of respect to navigate difficult situations and grow your influence.**

Peel the layers back on just about every challenging situation and conversation at work, and you'll find the respect deficit lurking there somewhere. Your ability to manifest respect in every encounter will serve you well as you move from one challenging situation to the next.

## GATEKEEPERS AND THE RESPECT DEFICIT

I worked recently with a sales manager struggling with a person he described as a cantankerous credit manager. The credit manager was in the words of the sales representative, *"inflexible and an impediment to doing business."*

Now, pause for a moment and think about the life of any credit manager. It's their job to minimize credit risk and to say "no" when something smells off on a deal. Frankly, they say "no" a great deal, and that's good. The best credit managers I've worked with are quick with a "no" but creative when it comes to working within parameters to get a deal done. Said no

one ever, “I’m incredibly appreciative of our credit manager’s diligence and willingness to say no.”

For any person in a role where “No” is a reasonable and common answer, you can expect both appreciation and respect for their efforts to be in short supply. **Armed with this insight, how powerful might it be if you actively (and authentically) fill the respect-deficit with your approach?** Hint: it will be game-changing.



### **OVERWORKED, UNDER-RESPECTED AND IN NEED OF “FEELING FELT”**

Another client, flustered over the resistance from a fellow manager to her proposed process change shared her opinion: *“This manager is the president of the we’ve always done it this way, and it has worked fine club. I don’t understand why she doesn’t see the logic inherent in the new process.”*

I heard both frustration and disdain in her perspective on the situation and manager. Neither are helpful for gaining support and making progress. I suggested a different tactic—**reach out to the manager with a sense of empathy and show some respect and see if the outcome is different.**

It turned out, the manager had just endured a reduction in headcount with an increase in workload and was fearful of taking on anything new, especially a significant change that might showcase the team as ineffective. To top it off, the manager viewed her boss with fear as someone who punished mistakes and didn’t acknowledge good performance.

**Armed with insight into the manager's situation and a new-found and expressed respect for the conditions under which they generated great results, the two found a way forward that met everyone's interests.** A phased approach minimized risks and labor strain on the team. My client capped things off nicely by making sure all of management learned of how hard this group worked and how critical they were to the process change.



## **FEEDBACK CONVERSATIONS IMplode OR EXPLODE WHEN RESPECT IS MISSING**

A supervisor was struggling with feedback conversations that seemed to ride off the rails and always end up in arguments or worse yet, escalations. When I observed him in a few of these settings, I felt like arguing back myself. He conducted his feedback sessions like a prosecuting attorney for the inquisition. Respect was absent, and compliance was demanded.

Once we worked on adjusting the supervisor's attitude about the positive purpose of feedback, he was (somewhat surprisingly) able to embrace a new, respect-based approach to guiding feedback discussions. The negative air around these discussions disappeared, and the supervisor learned **how powerful it is to lead with respect.**



## **ADDRESSING THE RESPECT DEFICIT MELTS RESISTANCE**

Dr. Mark Goulston in a book I regularly recommend, "[Just Listen](#)" describes the need for all of us to "feel felt" when engaging with others. Whether we admit it or not, most of us appreciate when others show that they value our insights, ideas, and contributions.



We like to feel felt and understood, particularly when it comes to anything that involves change or perceived risk.



## 8 THINGS YOU CAN DO TO SHOW MORE RESPECT:

- ▶ **1. Choose at every encounter to show your respect for the individual or group in front of you.** Be deliberate about it!
- ▶ **2. Pay fierce attention when someone else is talking.**
- ▶ **3. Instead of constantly restating your case, ask questions and show that you care about someone else's ideas or concerns.**
- ▶ **4. Genuinely show how much you appreciate someone's efforts** and circumstances. Yes, especially for the gatekeepers.
- ▶ **5. Empathize more with someone's circumstances.** Make them feel felt.
- ▶ **6. Recognize that behind every objection is a set of hidden interests and then put the time and work in necessary to uncover those interests.**
- ▶ **7. Give people input and even control into designing solutions** for things you are asking them to do.
- ▶ **8. Make your respect for someone visible to everyone you can,** including their bosses and team members.

The absence of respect breeds toxicity among individuals and across the workplace. It pays to take the time to look, listen, learn, and value the person across the table from you. Address the respect deficit and you'll be pleasantly surprised with the results.



# TRY REFRAMING

“This isn’t a problem, it’s an opportunity” is a cliché.

**It’s a simple, oft-referenced statement masking a powerful tool called reframing.** The essence of reframing is to encourage us to look at situations from different perspectives in search of unique and improved solutions.

For individuals involved in the world of design and design thinking, reframing vexing problems is a standard part of the process. For the rest of us, a bit of design thinking focused on reframing is invaluable in our daily labors. **In my experience, effective leaders at all levels are masters of reframing when it comes to tackling the vexing issues and challenges of organizational life.** Here are some examples you can leverage and build-on in your workplace.



## THREE SITUATIONS WHERE REFRAMING CREATES POTENTIALLY REMARKABLE RESULTS

### ► 1. Challenging Conversations

Most of us dread difficult feedback or performance discussions, or, meetings with managers seemingly resistant to the idea of change.

For many, just the idea of confronting these conversations generates considerable stress that feeds our desire to delay or avoid them as long as possible.

## **Reframe:**

**Accept and internalize that challenging conversations are where problems are solved, and the seeds of innovation identified.** Recognize the sooner you move to tackle these conversations, the faster you create new solutions or uncover opportunities to innovate.

**Approach the challenges in a positive spirit of issue identification and mutual problem-solving.** There's a strong chance the employee with the performance issue doesn't want to lose their job. And there are likely some good reasons your managerial counterpart resists change. Once you've framed these as opportunities, you open up the lines for productive dialog.

## **► 2. A Competitive Threat**

Competitor threats tend to induce a bad case of organizational tunnel vision where everything is viewed through the lens of this threat. Meetings to discuss the threat sprout like dandelions in a June Chicago lawn and many firms respond with what Jim Collins references as, the undisciplined pursuit of more. These chaotic situations burn critical organizational energy in unproductive ways and often work to help the competitor succeed.

**Reframe:**

**One potentially helpful reframe is to recognize the competitor has exposed their strategy** and where they are committing resources, leaving other areas potentially vulnerable. Instead of focusing on the question: “How can we match their strategy?” reframe the question to some variation of: “Where can we solve problems for our customers that our competitors will be too distracted to pay attention to?” Or, “How can we minimize the value of what they are doing by drawing upon our unique strengths and relationships?”

Regardless of the question you select, the one you are likely not choosing is the most common (and weakest), “How fast can we match their offering?”

### ► 3. Talent Selection

Many of us frame talent selection around the question, “Who’s the most qualified for this position?” And while this is understandable, it fails to take into account many important issues, including what your organization might look like in a few years and how you’ll be successful adopting new technologies or shifting to new markets.

**Reframe:**

I unabashedly **encourage organizational leaders to look for the best learners, the most open-minded individuals, and individuals who thrive on exploring new and different as part of the talent selection process.** Instead of asking, “Who’s the best qualified for the job?” where the focus

is on evaluation against some potentially dated or limiting job description, ask: “Who’s most likely to help us move from where we are today to where we need to go in the future?”

This issue of reframing your criteria for talent selection helps you avoid hiring clones and minimizes your risk of hiring individuals who aren’t well-suited to helping you rethink (reframe) and reinvent your organization.

## **4 APPROACHES TO HELP YOU JUMP-START REFRAMING ON YOUR TEAM:**

### ▶ **1. Encourage Solution Development Using Multiple Frames**

When your project teams or functional groups are navigating a tough decision, encourage them to use more than one frame to identify potential solutions.

In working with an engineering team stumped over an important and very technical issue, the manager encouraged them to shift from, “This is a problem” to “This is an opportunity” and develop a unique solution. Using the opportunity form of framing, the team identified a completely different approach that likely never would have emerged with just the negative framing. It involved unpacking some assumptions and rethinking their design, but that’s what reframing is supposed to do.

### ▶ **2. Increase the Field of View**

Often, we get bogged down in the minutiae of a problem, and our thinking becomes constrained to the small, almost microscopic view. Instead, much like playing with Google Earth, zoom out and look at the bigger picture.

An organization struggling with a revenue shortfall focused initially on identifying where sales and marketing were falling short with their execution. By zooming out, they were able to locate a bigger issue with changing customer tastes.

I like to continue to increase the field of view so that I can see the issue in the context of the environment, marketplace, and even world-at-large. Too many of us view the world only through the lenses of our industry and competitors when the real threat or opportunity is likely somewhere outside that field-of-view.

### ► 3. Reframe the Problem by Rethinking the Question

Although implied in these reframing activities, strive to deliberately challenge the question you are asking and either increase the field-of-view or challenge the assumptions behind the question.

I love the example provided by Tina Seelig, a creativity and innovation expert at the Stanford Design School, in this Fast Company article. She uses the question, "How should we plan a birthday party for David?" and the reframe: "How can we make David's day memorable?"

This example reflects a fundamental reframing of the problem. The problem isn't the birthday party, but instead creating a memorable day. Now that you've permitted yourself to look at the problem differently, the ideas can and will flow.

#### ▶ 4. Try “Why?” and “Why Not?” as Powerful Reframing Tools

Most of us have heard of the use of “5 Whys” to help crystalize a problem or challenge a solution. You keep asking yourself or your colleague “Why?” until the situation achieves a new level of clarity (or, they storm off with steam coming out of their ears!). My alternative is the equally simple but not simplistic, “Why not?”

Asking, “Why not?” helps uncover false assumptions and self-limiting beliefs and it is in itself a direct reframe, leading to new veins of idea gold as individuals and teams let go of the constraints holding them back.





# LEARN TO ADJUST YOUR ALTITUDE

One of the abilities that leaders must develop to be effective is the ability to adjust their altitudes.

**Good leaders learn to scale institutional and intellectual heights with ease and comfort, quickly adapting to the audience and situation.**



### **EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL ALTITUDE ADJUSTERS:**

- ▶ There's the CEO that's built a career around being a brilliant strategist and an even better operator. Watch him work a factory floor and you'll see him descend from the lofty level of the boardroom to the critical issues of people and process. He's equally comfortable in the rarefied air of strategy and vision and market forces or as an observer and student on the shop floor where true value is being created.
- ▶ The small business owner that serves customers all day long and drives home with an emerging vision for how her business must change in order to grow.
- ▶ The college professor that translates the philosophical foundations and theories of her specialty into practical, relevant concepts and tools that clarify, stimulate interest and offer some form of sustaining value. This professor offers knowledge and insight designed for use.

- ▶ The Product Manager that is able to move seamlessly from detailed requirements discussions with engineers in the morning to a concise strategy discussion and competitive analysis with executives in the afternoon.
- ▶ The Project Manager that pivots on one foot to resolve a team dispute and then pivots back to the work of helping his team learn to make better decisions.

Regardless of the specifics, these effective formal and informal leaders move seamlessly from the detailed to the general, from the tactical to strategic and from the confusing and complex to the simple and straightforward as easily as you are reading this post. Whether this is an innate ability for some or a learned skill for others, **those that practice adjusting their altitudes are significantly more effective than others stuck at one level.**

Of course, those that are effectively stuck at one level are requiring everyone else to adapt, and that takes energy and breeds stress and strife. These less than effective leaders require both the proverbial attitude adjustment as well as some solid lessons in learning to adjust their altitude.



## 5 SUGGESTIONS FOR ADJUSTING YOUR ALTITUDE:

- ▶ **1. Seek first to understand and then be understood.** I love that saying for its wisdom. I observe many leaders that engage with their team members on issues for just a few moments and then cut them off mid-stream, with an opinion, a decision or an order. Teach yourself to clamp your jaw shut and listen and process on all of the verbal and non-verbal cues that are so generously placed in front of you.

The time you invest in focusing and listening and then thinking about the issue being presented will give you time to adjust your altitude to the right level.

- ▶ **2. Plan your message.** Knowledge workers and individual contributors should redouble their efforts to plan the messages for exchanges with executives. While you may be personally fascinated by the details of your project or product, it is critical to recognize that those in executive roles want you to give them the time...not to tell them how to build the watch. For unscheduled, hallway or elevator exchanges, condition yourself to move into time-teller mode, again resisting the urge to showcase your in-depth command of every detail. Your overall work and results will showcase whether you have command of the details.
- ▶ **3. Recognize that context is key to motivating action.** Assume that no one else has thought through the issue in as much depth as you have. Management teams that vigorously debate strategy for weeks and then become satisfied on a direction and choices must recognize that no one else in the organization has any context for either the direction or the choices. This common communication gap is actually more like a grand canyon of misunderstanding, both in expanse and in height and depth.
- ▶ **4. Learn to see patterns in problems.** In your daily work life, develop the habit of identifying recurring problems and patterns and then suggesting and implementing ideas that eliminate these problems and improve organizational practices.
- ▶ **5. View your role and tasks in the context of a long value chain.** Instead of thinking about what you do as discrete and separate from people in other groups, recognize that your work impacts the performance of others along the chain.

Seek to understand how and why others depend upon you and better yet, develop an approach that emphasizes constantly measuring your own performance against how well you are meeting the needs of others that come after you in the organizational value chain.

**For your own professional development, challenge yourself to understand issues from all levels.** The best leaders and the best employees connect their work to creating value for customers or solving vexing internal issues. These effective professionals learn to scale heights from idea to implementation, from problem to improvement and from understanding to new direction. They strive to become effective communicators at all levels and they constantly focus on understanding what is reality to individuals at all layers of the organization.

While the vertical metaphor of altitude may grossly simplify what is really going on here, it's simple and comprehensible enough to grasp and apply. **For today and every day, make certain that you are challenging yourself to adjust your altitude.** You might just find a lot more enjoyment and success in your work, in the process of scaling the issues.



# RESOLVE TO CONQUER YOUR FEAR OF SPEAKING

A frighteningly few number of people genuinely relish the idea of getting up in front of an audience at work and talking.

**That's too bad, because there are few skills that will take you further and help you more in your career than developing your speaking skills.**



#### **4 BIG BENEFITS IN THE WORKPLACE OF CONQUERING YOUR FEAR OF SPEAKING:**

- ▶ **1. You separate yourself from the herd.** Your willingness to stand and engage coupled with the competence developed through practice puts you in a smaller group and helps you stand out to your senior managers, peers and colleagues across your organization. Of course, people are looking for more than hot air! Message quality, authenticity and supporting actions are essential!
- ▶ **2. You develop a platform for your ideas.** In a culture where ideas to improve, fix, or do something new are potentially worth their weight in gold, you need influence and a platform to ensure your ideas are heard, explored and acted upon. There are few better ways to support developing influence and cultivating interest in our ideas, than being able to describe and advocate for them comfortably and competently in large group settings.

- ▶ **3. You are increasingly perceived as a leader.** While there's no connection between extroversion and effective leadership that I am aware of, people PERCEIVE that you have leadership qualities if you can confidently articulate your views. It's OK to leverage this perception. And remember, there's a reality in the workplace that you have to understand how you are perceived and manage this appropriately, developing comfort and confidence in your speaking skills will aid this cause. Again the health warning that no one loves a pontificating blowhard, so message quality and authenticity count!
- ▶ **4. You develop self-confidence that leads to strengthened self-esteem.** And when that unexpected but much coveted invitation to present at the board meeting or executive offsite occurs, this self-confidence will be one of your best assets in surviving and succeeding in this new setting.

It's time to confront your fear of speaking and make this critical skill a valuable part of who you are as a professional.



## **6 TIPS FOR CULTIVATING COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE IN YOUR SPEAKING SKILLS:**

- ▶ **1. Practice!** Seek out some easy opportunities to practice. Departmental or team updates can be fairly non-threatening. Alternatives include community events, classroom visits, or school committees. *I teach a number of graduate management courses every year. Nothing forces one to up the game more than being accountable to an intelligent group of professionals for quality content delivery and facilitation.*
- ▶ **2. Seek feedback.** Ask your boss and peers for specific feedback on your speaking performance and effectiveness. What should you do



more of? Where do you need to improve. Don't settle for, "that was great!" No one gets better by being told they were great. Ask: *What worked? What didn't? How could that presentation been more effective?*

- ▶ **3. Seek help.** Search on "Toastmasters" and find a local chapter and join! These remarkable groups of professionals all understand the benefits that accrue from strengthening speaking skills and will become your best feedback and support network. In the rare chance you end up in a chapter that doesn't work for you, don't give up...just switch to another one. *I've pushed more team members than I can count into Toastmasters and almost to a person they have prospered in part because of their growth in self-confidence.*
- ▶ **4. Reference a good book or great blogs.** My favorites: ["The Exceptional Presenter"](#) by Timothy Koegel or the books of Dr. Nick Morgan.
- ▶ **5. Engage a Coach.** People use coaches for great reasons. They view us objectively and clinically and can offer the critical input we need to eliminate weaknesses, close gaps, and enhance strengths. Ask your manager if there's an opportunity for your firm to bear the cost. If not, don't let that slow you down. The cost is small when factored over the course of a career and evaluated against the potential benefits.
- ▶ **6. Volunteer.** Yep, you heard me. After a lifetime of sitting in the back row dodging the teacher's eyes, it's time to stand up and assert your great ideas. Once you recover from the out-of-body experience from raising your hand for a speaking opportunity, you'll find it exhilarating.

Don't let a common and irrational fear of speaking in large groups stand in the way of your success. Developing the confidence to stand, deliver and engage is liberating and professionally profitable.



# MAKE TIME EVERY DAY TO JUST THINK

# There's little of that elusive asset called "quality time" on our calendars or in our days.

If your typical day resembles the one that most of us experience in the corporate environment, it's a series of meetings interspersed with a series of transactional exchanges that might be **better described as interruptions.**

The steady drumbeat of deadlines is constantly playing in our minds and at times, it feels like there's a fire to fight around every corner. When we're given the opportunity to be creative, it's often in forced marches through meetings with the labels of "planning" or "brainstorming."

Our days are filled with what has been described as **"unproductive busyness."** We sprint from meeting to meeting letting the Outlook calendar drive our days. And even when we're supposed to be focusing, too many of us are obsessively checking our devices searching for something to stimulate our brains. After all, there must be something more important than this meeting going on in front of us.

*Since when did meetings become excuses to catch up on email?*

Chris Lowney, a former Jesuit priest turned Investment Banker (an interesting career path to say the least), writing in his book, [“Pope Francis: Why He Leads the Way He Leads,”](#) describes what happens when we don’t create the time for daily reflection: *“And so we turn ourselves into hamsters on hamster wheels: spinning, but not necessarily moving forward.”*

**I see the long-term impact of no down-time**...no thinking time in the form of worn-out mid-career managers and exhausted senior leaders who struggle through their days. They’ll describe in private that they no longer feel the same passion for the work they once loved, and they worry that they’ve lost their edge and will be unable to get it back. They are worried and frightened of what this state portends for the balance of their careers.

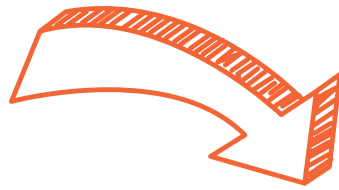
**What we fail to do in our workdays is find time to think deeply.** From unstructured conversations to reflective time on our own roles and our performance in the workplace, the time spent thinking and talking without a deadline is valuable processing time.

This isn’t down time, it’s different time. *Instead of unproductive busyness, it’s productive un-busyness.* **It’s the root source of ideas and connections between ideas.** It’s the time when we see our way forward through complex problems and toward solutions that have been otherwise elusive.

**Productive un-busyness cannot be mandated, but it can be prioritized.** The most successful leaders and managers I know have cultivated a mechanism that helps them recharge by creating thinking time and/or pushing themselves so far from the activities of work that the brain gets a momentary and much appreciated holiday.

Lowney offers the Jesuit practice of [Examen](#): a daily technique of prayerful reflection, as one approach for leaders and professionals struggling to jump off the hamster wheel.

From meditation and prayer to the lunchtime walk-about or workout to quiet reading time, it doesn't matter what you do as long as you make the time to shift gears and let your brain focus somewhere other than e-mail or the noise coming from yet another status meeting.



**Every day.**



**READ.  
EVERY.  
DAY.**

# Read. Constantly. Every Day.

Even if you hate to read. Rededicate yourself to find the people writing about and acting on changing the world and read what they are saying. You don't have to believe their ideas or adopt their ideas, but you do have to think about how their ideas might fit in your own world. **You must always be looking for insights and Ah-Ha moments for vexing challenges in your firm and the work of others will serve to catalyze those moments.**

## SOME READING PROMPTERS:

- ▶ **Read periodicals that cover a wide range of topics.** A few of my favorites: FastCompany, INC., the Wall Street Journal, The Financial Times, The Economist, Forbes, Fortune, National Geographic, Popular Science, Outside, MacWorld, McKinsey Quarterly, MIT Sloan, HBR, a variety of fitness magazines and just about anything else that crosses my path.
- ▶ **Read History.** Given today's geopolitical tensions, it's essential to understand the historical precedents. Those who don't know are doomed to repeat. Read enough history and you will see patterns of human behavior that transcend the times. How might these patterns apply to our own times?
- ▶ **Create an Internal Reading Club.** Leverage all that great reading by talking about it with your colleagues. Always strive to translate the insights into "What this means for us is... ," or, "Here's an idea we can adapt to our own environment... ."

# TYING THINGS TOGETHER—YOUR DAILY LEVEL-UP CHECKLIST



# A Checklist for Daily Success: Ask and Answer

**Leveling-up is a daily activity.** Get it right, and hang-on as you accelerate your career by adding responsibilities, growing your team, and increasingly sitting at the table where the key decisions are made for your organization. However, it all takes discipline.

Here's a simple checklist process I use (and recommend to my clients) to help ensure they focus on leveling-up while avoiding the all activity/no vector trap. It's imperfect, incomplete, and one heck of a lot better than going into your day without a plan.

Some convert this into an excel spreadsheet, others use a journal to answer the questions, and some do a visual or verbal run through the list. My counsel is to write down your answers to each of the questions and return to the list during your day to note progress.

## Beginning of Day Self-Check:

- ☐ Have I clarified my top one or two priorities to focus on today?  
(Do I have an action plan for them? Are they aligned with my boss's priorities?)
- ☐ What are the BIG decisions I can make today that will free people to make forward progress on their priorities?
- ☐ What gray-zone problems are visible to me that I can bring resources to focus on?
- ☐ What issues can I use framing techniques on to promote curiosity and exploration?
- ☐ What's my target for my questions to opinions ratio? (Goes to fierce listening and beginner's mind. Keep track.)
- ☐ Which relationships can I repair, strengthen, or start today? (Pick one from each category every day!)
- ☐ Is there a challenging conversation I must conduct today?  
What's my plan to turn this into a productive dialog?
- ☐ Am I heading into the day with a smile on my face?

## End of Day Self-Check:

The focus is on framing what you learned/did and not on negatives.

- ☐ Did I have fun today?
- ☐ What did I learn today? (How can I apply it tomorrow?)
- ☐ What do I need to learn more about?
- ☐ What victories on my top priorities did I create?
- ☐ What was my actual questions to opinions ratio?
- ☐ Did I shine the spotlight on any person or team?
- ☐ How did I do as a listener?
- ☐ What relationships did I repair/strengthen/start?
- ☐ Did I engage people respectfully and involve them in creating solutions for their challenges?
- ☐ Did I make decisions that allowed others to move forward with their priorities?
- ☐ What worked great that I can do more of tomorrow?

This exercise might take you fifteen minutes at the beginning of the day and about the same at the end of the day. They also report best results if they journal or track their answers and progress. In particular, the questions to opinions issue and the relationships issue merit tracking over time.

Many individuals report tailoring the questions to their unique level-up challenges. I encourage this. **Make this list and make this process yours, and remember to pay it forward.**

**Know that by following this process, you are thinking and working harder on leveling-up than the gross majority of individuals in any workplace.** It's a built-in navigation system for continuous improvement, learning, and growth.



**Now, it's time for you to get to work!**

## About Art Petty



Art Petty is an executive and emerging leader coach and longtime software industry executive.

Art works with professionals from CEOs and emerging executives to front-line leaders and new managers in private and public sectors as a coach and trainer.

Art writes the popular Management Excellence blog and he's written three leadership books and numerous e-books. His books, training development and online learning programs serve as resources for firms in manufacturing, technology, defense, services, healthcare, and for state agencies as well as agencies in the federal government.

Clients credit Art with helping them achieve more than they ever thought was possible in their careers.

# Professional Development Resources



## LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CAREER WRITING FROM ART PETTY

Art shares his unabashed passion and enthusiasm for developing great leaders, careers, and high performance teams.

- ▶ Weekly posts on his blog at [ArtPetty.com](http://ArtPetty.com)
- ▶ Subscriber-only content in the [Mid-Week Leadership Caffeine e-news](#)—ideas to help you survive and thrive the work week.
- ▶ Professional development books—[Leadership Caffeine](#) and [Practical Lessons in Leadership](#).



## ONLINE PROGRAMS

Art supports the development of professionals through his [online programs](#).

- ▶ Crushing It with Challenging Conversations
- ▶ First Time Managers Academy
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