

LORI MICHELE LEAVITT

PIVOT TO CLARITY

Get Clear, for You.
Be Clear, for Others.

“Clarity ensures that everyone in your organization is aligned with the shared goals. Clarity also is for you. Leavitt offers up ways leaders are gaining clarity and orchestrating successful pivots in their organizations, leadership and lives.”

—**CHIP CONLEY**, *Founder, Modern Elder Academy
and New York Times bestselling author*

Praise for *Pivot to Clarity*

“In the era of extreme uncertainty in which we’re living, when so much of what once seemed solid now seems to be on shaky ground, Lori Leavitt’s *Pivot to Clarity* is a book we all need to read. It offers a clear, straightforward path past our fears and into a place where we can caringly make our life and leadership dreams come true. Referencing many of the world’s best-known leaders, Lori offers practical tips, insightful ideas and a call for increased consciousness and creativity! Take a couple slow deep breaths, settle in, take notes, and get ready to get yourself heading towards health and happiness.”

— **Ari Weinzwieg**, founding partner of Zingerman’s, author of the Zingerman’s *Guide to Good Leading* book series.

“Clarity ensures that everyone in your organization is aligned with the shared goals. Clarity also is for you, as you live your best life, and be your best self. In *Pivot to Clarity*, Lori Michele Leavitt offers up ways leaders are gaining clarity and orchestrating successful pivots in their organizations, leadership, and lives.”

— **Chip Conley**, Founder, Modern Elder Academy,
New York Times bestselling author.

“Without a clear purpose, you risk spinning your wheels following other people’s agendas rather than our own. Spend time with this inspiring book so you can take charge of your own life and lead others with clarity and compassion.”

— **Anne Janzer**, author of *Get the Word Out: Write a Book That Makes a Difference*.

“Leaders lead. The best leaders lead with clarity. They know what they have a passion for—what they really care about. *Pivot to Clarity* is about finding clarity for yourself, to get clarity for everyone. It is a ‘must read’ for any leader looking to take their organization to where it can be in the future.”

— **Dan Barnett**, CEO, The Primavera Company,
International Speaker/ Consultant,
former President of Van de Kamp’s.

“Influencing without authority is a must-have but often elusive leadership skill. You can’t just share your big idea and expect others to start behaving differently to help make it happen. You need to orchestrate a pivot to clarity, and Leavitt’s new book will show you the way.”

— **Karen Catlin**, Leadership Coach,
Author of *Better Allies*.

“Personal clarity begins from within, secures its roots, then branches out to touch those around us. Leavitt explains how each of us must lucidly communicate to ourselves and others in order to reach individual and team objectives. And she does so with clarity.”

— **Robert Spector**, author of *The 120-Year-Old Start Up: The Nordstrom Way to Embracing Change, Challenges and a Culture of Customer Service*.

“Leaders who communicate clarity in vision, purpose and values create a singular, intense focal point that inspires confidence, empowering motivation and resilience in themselves and others. Lori Michele Leavitt, in *Pivot to Clarity*, describes how shifting step by step toward greater clarity can help you pivot from where you are today to greater success tomorrow.”

— **Michael McIntosh**, CEO 21 Triangles.

“Clarity is key to making good risk choices and navigating uncertainty. *Pivot to Clarity* helps you to be clear about your intention and direction, build your courage, and find calm when you need it most to achieve well-orchestrated changes over time. Lori Michele Leavitt combines compelling stories, key insights, and actionable ideas to make this book an important tool on your own journey to clarity.”

— **Michele Wucker**, author of
The Gray Rhino and *You Are What You Risk*.

“We focus so much on the work and getting the job done...but outcomes can end up less than we expect. We may begin with a vision, but at times we get caught up in the weeds and aren’t noticing how people are doing, if they are clear, or if we are all working together well. The vision gets neglected. In *Pivot to Clarity*, Lori Michele Leavitt reminds us to find balance with our vision and mission (where and why) and the who.”

— **Jay Julius**, President of Se’Si’Le,
former Chairman, Lummi Indian Business Council.

“To LEAD is a choice. HOW to lead is a choice. How TO BE as a leader is a choice. WHO to lead is a choice. WHAT to lead is a choice. WHERE to lead is a choice. A leader or aspiring leader can ignore or be victimized by so many choices...or they can make the choices that are right for them. In *Pivot to Clarity, Get Clear for You. Be Clear for Others*, Lori Michele Leavitt shows how.”

— **Peter DiGiammarino**, CEO IntelliVen.

“The most effective leaders have self-awareness. Their values are well-grounded, which helps them make better decisions. In *Pivot to Clarity*, Lori Michele Leavitt describes the journey of many successful leaders as well as those who were less successful. Clarity of purpose, tone and culture were major drivers in all cases. I highly recommend Leavitt’s book to all current and aspiring leaders to assist them on their journey towards success.”

— **Stan Silverman**, nationally syndicated weekly columnist on leadership at American City
Business Journals,
author: *Be Different! The Key to Business and Career Success*.

“*Pivot to Clarity* is as an excellent book for guiding your search for personal and professional clarity in order to enhance your leadership abilities, accomplishments, and legacy. Lori Michele Leavitt points out that we must be inspired if we expect to inspire others, and that achieving clarity requires us to pause our busy work and personal lives for deep, creative thought. Leavitt shows us how clarity can bring people into alignment, and turn a dream into a strategic vision and that vision into a reality.”

— **Peter Haug**, Professor and Program Director,
Mfg. & Supply Chain Mgmt.,
Western Washington University.

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Be Clear, for Others.

LORI MICHELE LEAVITT



Contents

[Praise for Pivot to Clarity](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Preface](#)

[Introduction](#)

[PART 1. Getting Clear](#)

[CHAPTER 1. What's It All About?](#)

[CHAPTER 2. Clarity Is Personal](#)

[CHAPTER 3. Leadership Clarity](#)

[CHAPTER 4. What Could Can Be](#)

[CHAPTER 5. What Is](#)

[CHAPTER 6. Best, Not Perfect](#)

[PART 2. Being Clear](#)

[CHAPTER 7. Hope & Fear](#)

[CHAPTER 8. Get Out of Your Way](#)

[CHAPTER 9. Get to the Point](#)

[CHAPTER 10. Shared Commitment](#)

[CHAPTER 11. Set the Stage](#)

[PART 3. Pivot](#)

[CHAPTER 12. Next Steps in Your Pivot to Clarity](#)

[Notes](#)

[About The Author](#)

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DEDICATION

To my dear friend and life mentor, Dr. B. You are accomplished, wise...and still learning. You model the way for me. When I am clear, you celebrate. Thanks for encouraging me to celebrate the gift of clarity with this book.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Success increases with clarity.

Pivot to Clarity is your guide to getting clear and being clear, so that your bold vision and strategy can be brilliantly executed through others.

You are a leader.

You are looked to for direction toward an inspiring vision.

Are you clear about where you are headed, and why?

You influence and model the way for others.

Are others receiving a clear message from you?

Successful people have an edge; they are clear about where they want to go.

Great leaders take clarity a step further; they ensure every person shares clarity on the journey to success, together.

Whether you seek greater personal clarity, or to be a more effective leader, this book will point the way.

Find Lori's books at
thepivotbook.com

PREFACE

Clarity is a solo act.

The beach is quiet. The air is calm, yet the waves are crashing. It's a powerful sound that is somehow quite calming. The sun is strong early this morning at my get-away in Mexico. Taking a walk in nature helps me get clear. Today it is a beach. More often it is a tree-lined path around a lake. But I am always alone when I want to get clear. It is up to me to *be* clear so that others can get clear.

You won't always have nature nearby, but you can always pause, anywhere you are. *Getting clear is personal.* There isn't a clarity formula. You're not "solving for x." Getting clear involves getting past the part of your brain that has to know details and control results. You are getting clear about a destination. A vision of what can be. In my case I had to get clear about this book and what you, my reader, will experience when you see it, read it, and share it. I also had to be clear so that you received my gift to you of greater clarity.

The wiring of our own brains can block clarity. It's your defaults, not your faults, that make you blind. The feeling you have when you are blocked is *resistance*, often due to uncertainty. Getting past a block swiftly is what I refer to as being *nimble*. And the pause I mentioned earlier is part of *focus*, which can be focusing on something or focusing without thoughts in order to clear any distracting voices in your head. That's it: *Embracing resistance; being nimble; and focusing.*

Being clear, then, is just as personal. If we seek to help another person get clear, we must communicate with them in a way that helps them get clear—clear enough to take *best next steps*, and preferably clear in a way that *what is needed from them aligns with what they truly want for themselves*. You will be able to better help others embrace resistance, be nimble, and focus so they gain clarity.

Clarity, or lack thereof, stands out in *all* my successes, and failures. We are put on this world to give what we've learned. My hope is to create a ripple—or per my initial book, *The Pivot: Orchestrating Extraordinary Business Momentum*—I'm orchestrating a Pivot to clarity for all who read this book.

This book is written for leaders who are open to being an *even better* leader. Give this book to your developing leaders so that they might grow. Share this book with team members to achieve the power of a shared vision and collaborative action. Let this book inspire conversations and candid dialogue about communication in the workplace, so that this better way becomes, simply, *the way*.

Lori Michele Leavitt
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INTRODUCTION

“What looks like resistance is often a lack of clarity.”

—Chip Heath

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

Whether for ourselves, our families, or for the teams we lead, clarity is a theme in every success.

Clarity is not about having answers; it’s about intention and direction. With this book I aim to help you discover the methods for getting clear and being clear for others that resonate with you, so that you can move *from* “being in your head with what you think you must know, be, do, or have to move forward” *to* “getting clear about intention and being clear about direction.” For an organization, we typically place this into the realm of strategic planning. For an individual it is decision support.

The orchestrated changes to get you or many people making shifts and taking best next steps *from* the present *to* a more desired state is a Pivot. In this case, a Pivot to clarity.

Misunderstandings! Fixed mindsets! Gotchas! (Manipulations, blind spots, unexpected events, etc.) We don’t want these in our lives, yet they are part of being human and individually unique. I aim to experience fewer. Between you and me, I think I’ve had more than my share. Perhaps you feel the same. Let’s both experience fewer misunderstandings, fixed mindsets, and gotchas, and pay our learning forward!

To get blindsided—to not see what’s coming—is natural. What you do or say next in those moments is where you show what you can do. Seek clarity to ensure the best possible outcome.

If you are being complacent about best next steps—if you are not consciously choosing a step to take or choosing to not take it—you are not leading.

When you want to get clear, but are not yet clear, you will feel resistance. When you think you are being clear (communicating clearly) for others, you may sense or get resistance. Embracing resistance is one of the components of getting clear. By the end of this book, you’ll recognize resistance and be surer of your best next steps. You’ll have learned how to get clear and be clear, more quickly.

Allow yourself to be open as you read this book. Each chapter starts with a main point, and then brings in a little chaos, uncertainty, and story to get you out of your head, so to speak. It is only in an open state—without judgment, conclusion, or needing to know what’s next—that coaching is effective, and clarity can start to form.

Clarity involves getting clear for yourself and being clear in your communication with others so that they might also gain clarity.

Is clarity so important that you need a method for it? Yes, if you want momentum and you

don't want to stall. What holds you back—hesitance to move forward with anything in your life—stems from a lack of the clarity needed to choose best next steps. This isn't about knowing exactly what the future holds; it's about staying nimble and having the confidence to move over, under, around, or through whatever or whomever might get in the way.

If you had no fear would getting clear matter? Yes, clarity still matters even if fear is not keeping you from moving forward. Lack of fear allows for speed, but in what direction? With clarity, you gain the nimbleness to avoid a stall, and a directional pull that supports focus on priorities.

If you have clarity for yourself, isn't that enough to realize the results you envision? No, not as a leader and, most of the time, not even if it is personal. When others need to execute, momentum requires alignment. Even if it's just you who needs to execute your plan, other people's agendas may stall you if what those others want from you is not aligned with what you want for you. On the other hand, others can aid your progress if they are aligned. Clarity is critical to gaining and sustaining momentum, for all involved.

Before we dive in, let me bring you into this vision of alignment and momentum. This book references certain concepts from my previous book, *The Pivot: Orchestrating Extraordinary Business Momentum*. Terminology and ideas from *The Pivot* will appear from time to time in this book. Two important terms in *The Pivot* are “Pivot” and “Aligned Momentum.”

A Pivot is a well-orchestrated change over time, where what seems like a single change is most often comprised of many smaller changes or shifts initiated by many people.¹ A Pivot is neither a quick change, the appearance of change which is actually short-term compliance to a command, nor a power play that positions the “leader” as a hero. Mastering the Pivot is critical to being nimble in business, your career, and life. The Pivot is a primary activity in gaining alignment and momentum (Aligned Momentum).

Aligned Momentum is supercharged, uninterrupted forward progress that can happen when everyone in an organization is working together, enthusiastically, toward a shared vision. It happens within a workplace culture that is a great place to work and in a business that stays ahead of the competition and at a high valuation. It's a beautiful thing, and it can happen—and I'd like to make it happen for you. The first step is clarity.

It is only in a state of Aligned Momentum
that performance breakthroughs are possible.
This starts with clarity.

PART 1

Getting Clear

One operates from ‘in here, not out there.’

—Robert Greenleaf

Most of us have two lives. The life we live, and the unlived life within us. Between the two stands Resistance.

—Steven Pressfield



CHAPTER 1

What's It All About?

Gaining clarity feels great. The journey to getting clear, however, can be frustrating. We will never have all the facts about what the future holds. We are getting clear about the direction we are headed. It's worth the risk of a few wrong turns. Sometimes we need to experience the lack of something, or go through something we don't want, to know what we truly want.

I traveled to a quiet location on a Baja beach to start writing this book. By the end of the trip, I was quite sure I'd finish it within the next six months. I was so clear! Yet, something different was in store, and it is now over a year later.

The timing of my drive north from the SeaTac airport to my home in Bellingham was perfect. It was after 8 pm on a Tuesday so the traffic was moving at a steady pace, unlike the congestion that would have been just an hour earlier. But there was enough traffic through downtown on I-5 North that I decided to hop on the express lanes, which would take me well beyond downtown. It works pretty smoothly. Usually.

Not long after leaving the express lanes and entering the I-5 North traffic, a large dark grey vehicle, an SUV I guess, definitely larger than my Boxster, swerved in front of me. It seemed to come from nowhere. Perhaps from the left of me. (I was alert and driving safely. Prior to this SUV, I didn't notice any cars braking or swerving in the distance.) I swerved to the right so that I wouldn't get hit.

Then, directly in front of me was a car bumper. Big. Red. No longer on whatever car it fell from. I don't recall hitting that dropped bumper. I don't know if I did; there's no sign of that. I do recall that my car was then spinning left, seemingly on its own, and crashed head-on into the cement barrier to the left of the HOV lane. I remember spinning. I can only vaguely remember the crash. I don't remember how I moved from the far left of the freeway safely, with a torn-apart front end, without hitting anyone or without anyone hitting me. I was safe. My car never moved again.

The person who had dropped the bumper called the state patrol. The officer would not record info about the SUV because I didn't get the license number (as if). The tow truck eventually arrived, and I made it home just three hours late.

I thought I was okay. I felt some pain from the whiplash. I led an all-day meeting just six hours after arriving home. By the weekend, a post-concussive headache kicked in. This isn't

something one can see. If you use your brain deeply like I do, you know when something isn't right beyond the constant throbbing. My ability to think deeply and creatively dropped for six months. The providers of support, such as insurance and even some medical professionals, were not supportive. And, although I am usually calm, my negative feelings about what all this meant to me likely didn't help my recovery.

“When a negative emotion develops, we cannot see reality.”

—The Dalai Lama

It took five months for my brain to heal enough to think more clearly. But I did heal! Having clarity again feels like such a gift! ...Wait. Hold on...

One does not lose clarity. I never lost clarity; I lost, temporarily, the ability to think, focus, and put together words as cogently as I could directly before the accident. I gained a continuous headache, pain, and a schedule full of appointments that I never had before the accident.

I never lost the ability to be intentional and to get clear about my vision, purpose, and direction. It felt to me as if I'd lost clarity because I allowed myself to become overwhelmed by the distractions, both external (such as the accident, the pain it caused to my head and body, dealing with a difficult insurance company, etc.) and internal (my feelings about this). Clarity was within my reach. I had to change my state of mind—how I felt about the physical setback and hassles—to knowing that my purpose was still worth it, and needed my focus.

You always have the ability to get clear about what you want, why you want it, the direction you will head, and what progress feels like—regardless of what is happening to you or around you that you cannot control.

Clarity generates momentum.

And now as I pick up this book again, we are several months into a global pandemic. Some also faced hurricanes, and others forest fires. All of us experienced the heat from U.S. political fires. Cyberattacks, social unrest and questionable individual integrity are negatively impacting societies, globally. Distractions abound and it may seem impossible to gain clarity.

Just know that clarity is there when you are ready to release yourself from distractions. Orchestrating a Pivot involves choosing best next steps and is comprised of many shifts over time.

Rather than decide that clarity is out of reach, Pivot to clarity by first choosing to not give up on it. Complacency will only leave you more vulnerable to losing sight of what you truly want. While you are thinking about that step, perhaps you need to learn to identify when you are foggy (not about a long-term vision, which actually should be foggy the further out it is, but about what to do *next*), and pause. Lacking clarity about what you intentionally choose to do next will often cause you to move farther away from what you want.

How might you know when your next step is not intentionally chosen, and clear? One way to know is that reasons and excuses keep that step from being taken. Remember, you will give or

get either reasons or results. They don't both happen. Lack of clarity often also triggers fear and fatigue, which shows up as resistance to changing or even to taking steps forward.

Excuses, fear, and fatigue hinder momentum. It's true in business, career, and in life. *Pivot to clarity to re-gain momentum.*

Why Pivot to clarity?

Without clarity of vision (where you are headed) and purpose (why you are going there), there is no directional pull—for you or for others. You'll be reacting to life. You may spend your time on other's agendas that are not helping you realize joy and fulfillment. You'll be stuck until you get clear and then act on your gained clarity.

Even if you are a highly successful person, you can get stuck simply by attaching your identity to what you've done, and perhaps how you have been known, in the past. Your achievements and recognition don't define who you are or how others perceive you. You can continuously create "you."

An article in *The Atlantic* by Arthur C. Brooks describes his experience with identity.² On a late-night flight from Los Angeles to Washington D.C. Brooks overheard a conversation taking place behind him on a plane. An elderly woman said, "It's not true that no one needs you anymore." And then, murmured from an elderly man sounded like, "I wish I was dead." And her response, "Oh, stop saying that." Upon landing Brooks could see the couple. The elderly man was very well known; world famous. The accomplishments that caused him to be famous were decades old.

What will it take to see your past as being part of your journey, but not defining who you are? You are still you. Have the courage to get clear about your purpose now, and take best next steps.

Getting clear requires YOU to notice YOU.

Even if you hold the highest level of authority, you are "the" leader, you cannot lead well if you don't know *you* as you want to be (or think you are, but you aren't) or how *you* show up with others now. Whatever you find about yourself that is not aligned with how you want to be or be seen, you (and only you) have the ability to change. It's simply a choice.

Yet choosing for yourself may feel very challenging. Maybe it feels more comfortable to subordinate to others. Or choosing for yourself may come too easily, and without regard for others.

You may be at one of the extremes in courage to choose: you believe you have no choice, or you believe that you are an island that knows all and controls all. And at either extreme you cannot lead a vibrant business.

If you don't consider *you* in your choices, then you won't be able to make the shifts in yourself and your leadership that are needed to lead a team to a better future. If you *only* consider you and

your desires, and refuse any shifts in yourself that build others, then you can't lead a team to a better future.

Changing *you* isn't easy. We have a default mode that we've constructed for years before noticing ourselves within a context bigger than ourselves, such as leading many to a better future.

It's not your fault; it's your default. A good coach or well-facilitated peer group can help uncover any aspect of you (now) that is blocking clarity (for the future) that you don't see. This is called a blind spot. We all have blind spots—and as leaders we must find them, and improve. Courage to notice oneself, to get help doing so, and courage to change are required to remove blind spots and gain clarity.

Someone who believes in you, and what you can do, can be the catalyst to help you get clear.

Clarity is your catalyst to change.

How would you like people to think of you, and talk about you, when you aren't around, even after you have passed from this earth? Considering this can help spur change.

The term “legacy” is often attached to that which we leave behind. This is not just the money we leave. It's what I started this section with—how we have made people feel.

What if you were to consider living that legacy from today forward? Call it *the legacy you live*. Let it be a direction for you, personally and in how you show up as a leader. For example, the legacy I live includes being a bright light and modeling the way of leadership. Having a legacy I live afforded me clarity during the pandemic, for example.

Good decisions cannot be made without such clarity. A 2020 Gallup survey of managers in U.S. companies found that less than one in four managers strongly agree that their peers make well-thought-out decisions for their organization.³ And less than one in five managers strongly agree they are satisfied with the speed of decision making at their organization.

Gallup's reporting concludes that the model of decision making in organizations is flawed. I get this line of thinking. I was an excellent decision-support modeler in my earlier career in corporate, for project selection, mergers and acquisitions, major capital purchases, organizational restructuring, scenario planning, pricing and more. Although it is likely true that many decision-making models are flawed, and I agree that modeling is a needed discipline for complex decision making, I disagree that models, or the lack of them, are the main cause of poor decision making. It's people, and what they will do in the future after this decision has been made, that is most important in the decision's outcome.

I find it interesting that managers are finding their *peers'* decision making lacking, and I wonder if the question wasn't asked about their own decision making or if the response didn't fit the marketing message. In either case, it's how people point at others and other stuff (such as models) that gets in the way of gaining clarity. No one can make good decisions, or a useful model, without clarity about a shared vision and direction.

Defining and living your legacy is similar to setting the direction toward a desired future state (the vision), that remains aligned with the purpose or mission (why) and aligned with core values (boundaries/where you won't go even if not doing so is hard). Be the CEO of your life and create a more complete vision for you, including the legacy you'll live. You'll make better decisions once you do.

Not so many years ago I was closer to the lower extreme of not having the courage to choose. I was a powerful, confident woman at the office, who was expected to subordinate my dreams in a relationship. And at the office, we had all bought into the doctrine of "work hard no matter what," with the subtext of "but as a woman, don't be too bold." I allowed myself to get sucked into other's agendas, even if they were not aligned with my own. I appeared courageous and decisive. Yet, I lacked the courage to choose my vision, direction, and best next steps.

"Mental clarity is the child of courage, not the other way around."

—Nassim Nicholas Taleb

I was tired of what kept happening "to" me. And then I realized that I was expanding the wrongs rather than disrupting the wrongs by creating what I wanted. My team and my family deserved a better future, and I was intent on leading in that way. I needed to orchestrate a Pivot!

I had to discover what it was about me that was causing me to lose the courage to choose what would fulfill me and empower me to live—bigger. And I had to identify the gap between my current state and how or what I needed to be, do, have, or receive in order to live in my desired state. For example, I moved away *from* people who I had allowed to negatively influence me, *to* being encircled only by positive, high-integrity people.

If you are at the lower extreme of not having the courage to choose, you also may benefit from making changes in who you keep close to you. Every person deserves the sense of calm that comes from knowing there is a person you can trust, someone who has your back and only wants the best for you, nearby. In a vibrant business, one of these people could be your manager. An outside coach is a start.

I've worked with several people at the other extreme: those on an island of self-centeredness. Many are entrepreneurs. Business founders and executives tend to be near this extreme. If you are at this end, where work is rewarding because you feel in control of everyone, but life is not so fulfilling, there's hope. You can change.

Clarity requires knowing yourself, and choosing the legacy you will live.

Discover how you are—how what you say and how you say it, and what you do and how you do it, lands with others. How do you want to be, and how does that compare to what you've discovered? Knowing you, and how others perceive you, will greatly influence how effectively you communicate.

Get clear, and then be clear so that others can get clear.

If, as a leader, you are not clear in communicating where you want the organization to go, the results will not be what you envisioned. Why? Because without clarity around a shared vision and direction, talented, committed people will do their best—yet, since they are not clear, they can't align with or achieve what you need most from them.

***Breakthrough performance is possible only when a vision is clear to all
sharing the journey.***

As you read this book, tap into what feelings and thoughts are generated in you. Write them down if you'd like. You'll gain clarity. I wish for you the courage to choose what you want. And I wish for you the fulfillment in truly leading—leading in a way that best ensures you can *get* clear about what's possible. And so that you can *be* clear, so others can get clear about how they best fit with what is most needed from them. Every person rises. Breakthrough performance becomes possible.

*Your vision will become clear only
when you look into your heart.
Who looks outside, dreams.
Who looks inside, awakens.*

—Carl Jung



CHAPTER 2

Clarity Is Personal

In order to get clear, you must be aware of who you are and what you want. You must be aware of how your beliefs about the world and your role in it might be influencing your thoughts and decisions. This is the case for every person. *You must get clear for you before you can be clear for others.*

When Alan Mulally, former President and CEO of Ford Motor Company, was first asked in 2006 to leave Boeing for Ford, he said “no.”

Ford wanted Mulally to lead them as he’d led Boeing Commercial Airplanes out of crisis after September 2001, when terrorists hijacked Boeing planes.⁴ And he’d earlier led the development of the Boeing 777, which became a huge financial success for the company.

Mulally understood that getting clear about his fit in any leadership position was critical to being successful in it. What could he offer Ford to get them through a near collapse? Ford Motor Company was going bankrupt.

He stayed curious. First, he asked himself, “Why is Ford losing revenue?” The answer? Because Ford was not building cars and trucks that people wanted to buy. Mulally was not a vehicle expert, so he still was a “no.” And yet he stayed curious, and asked himself, “Why is Ford building cars and trucks that people do not want to buy?” It could be design. It could be fuel efficiency. Wait, could it possibly be quality? Could it be that they weren’t working together? Leading collaboratively and with an eye on quality was interesting to Mulally. In the 1990s, he followed the methods that Ford used to develop the Taurus in order to better lead development of the Boeing 777. The Taurus and Boeing 777 were huge successes, and this was attributed in large part to the Ford Taurus way of development, which was all about working together! He realized the issue could be that Ford’s teams were no longer working together, with quality suffering because of it, resulting in Ford building cars and trucks that people didn’t want to buy. Now Mulally was intrigued, and he said “Yes!” to Ford.

YOU must be inspired if you expect to inspire others.

Your words will only inspire others if you are inspired. This holds true for communication about any matter—serious or light, disappointing or uplifting.

Gaining clarity is not simply an exercise in putting together words that sound like they'll compel those who hear them. Inspiration comes from the inside. So, first, get clear *for you*.

This applies to you as a leader, and to you as the CEO of your life. Can you tell the differences in how you feel and behave when what is in front of you is: a) "should do," b) "seems best to do," or c) "Yes!"?

Get clear. Get to "Yes!"

When getting clear about your vision, make it a "Yes!" Exciting. Inspirational. Motivating. Magnetic. Challenging. You won't be sure right now *how* to get there. But getting there is more than a hope; you *intend* to get there and are committed to defining and taking the best next steps toward it.

"Yes!" will make the hair on your forearms stand up. It is your truth.

Do you want to be inspired? And inspiring? You must shed any need to be crystal clear about a distant outcome, or how stuff will get done, or what others will think. Consider when an objective must be met, and the talent and resources likely needed. Seeing far enough ahead to adapt existing talent to the future can inspire your best people. Planning for the training and resources they'll need is also inspiring. Dictating work details from a position far from the actual work to be done is not inspiring. Perfection is counterproductive in both conceptualizing an inspiring vision and communicating it in an inspiring way.

Shed any need to control the entire journey. Be open to questions that help everyone head in the same direction. Answering others' questions without defensiveness, and descriptively rather than as a checklist, not only helps them get clear in a logical way, it also creates a team-building energy—a stronger sense of being in this together.

Not everyone will feel the same "Yes!" as you do the first time you share your vision. Resist a need to receive the appreciation of vigorous nods of approval and seeming commitment. Most people want to do what you want. But pleasing you is not what powers breakthrough performance. What you are after is a "Yes!" level of commitment to moving together toward a shared vision. Mutual clarity. This requires you to first get clear, and then to be clear in order for others to get clear. Shared clarity is your only possible way to realize an all-in team "Yes!"

Is this a future state you want to experience? Are you willing and ready for the challenges in executing brilliantly so that this vision is met or at least comes within closer reach? A "Yes!" to these is what you feel when that vision is inspiring.

May your life be full, not busy.

How do you gain clarity and a "Yes!" vision? The first step is to stop being too busy.

It is so easy to be very busy all the time. Even a potential pause can be quickly filled with what's available on your cell phone. You may even feel lost if you leave that cell phone behind. If you are consumed by the need to stay busy, you may even find interruptions welcome. If you

are going for a performance breakthrough, which requires clarity, you need to practice gaining clarity. Clarity practice for a leader involves time for thought. Deep thought.

Pause long for clarity.

You may believe you are good at thinking clearly in the few minutes wedged between meetings. You aren't. You may be *thinking*, but *clarity* requires your mind to be fully engaged on only one of two things: a desired future state or discovering what your state is right now.

Scheduling in even an hour during an otherwise packed day is progress toward making time for gaining clarity. Can you close your office door? Can you be still and breathe deeply, to reset? Better yet, can you leave the office? Can you get out in nature? Creating a clear vision and direction, especially in uncertain times, requires you to temporarily (yet fully) step away from tight schedules, urgent to-dos, and problem solving. Why take time away from distractions to think? Your vision gets clearer with deep, creative thought. You also give yourself the space needed to consider *how* to be clear about this desired future state so that those who need to take action—to execute—can do so brilliantly.

A few highly successful business leaders have openly shared how important deep thought is.

Bill Gates, when leading Microsoft, would take a week off twice a year at a secret waterfront cottage with no agenda other than to think and reflect deeply, without interruption or distraction, about Microsoft and its future. One week in 1995 inspired Mr. Gates's paper, "The Internet Tidal Wave," that led Microsoft to develop its Internet browser.⁵ Plans to create Microsoft's Tablet PC, build more-secure software, and start an online videogame business were also catalyzed during Think Weeks. These weeks started in the 1980s. In 2021, Gates' personal net worth was estimated at \$139 billion.⁶ And the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation is considered one of the world's most generous, reported by the Chronicle of Philanthropy as having given \$45.5 billion through 2018.⁷ Bill and Melinda personally gave \$15B to their foundation in 2021.⁸ Warren Buffett was a positive influence on Gates regarding giving (Gates created The Giving Pledge with Warren Buffett, which invites billionaires to commit to *giving* away the majority of their money to charity), and *time*.⁹

Gates recalls when Buffett showed him his calendar. "You know, I had every minute packed and I thought that was the only way you could do things," said Gates in an interview with Charlie Rose.¹⁰ Gates says, Buffett taught him the importance of giving yourself time to think.

What Gates did prior to embracing time to think was what most executives, professionals, and rising stars are applauded for: a non-stop schedule. We so often strive to be busy, and link being everywhere with being important. But needing to be busy and everywhere leads to overwhelm, not awareness.

Warren Buffett, with an estimated net worth of \$114 billion,¹¹ also a major philanthropist, and still active as CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, shared in an interview, "I insist on a lot of time being spent, almost every day, to just sit and think."¹² Buffett is purposefully not busy. By his own estimate, he has spent 80 percent of his career reading and thinking. "That's what created [one of the] world's most successful business records in history. He has a lot of time to think," says

Charlie Munger, Buffett's long-time business partner. "If one were to view Buffet's calendar, they might see on Tuesday simply one entry for a haircut."¹³ The day was for thought.

Jeff Weiner, CEO of LinkedIn, schedules between 90 minutes and 2 hours of uninterrupted thinking time per day. In a 2013 post on LinkedIn, Weiner shares:

*At first, these buffers felt like indulgences. I could have been using the time to catch up on meetings I had pushed out or said "no" to. But over time I realized not only were these breaks important, they were absolutely necessary in order for me to do my job.*¹⁴

Weiner's personal net worth is in the millions, not billions. This isn't just about current wealth. Weiner is one of the top-ranked leaders on Glassdoor, a website where current and prior employees anonymously review companies.

This time away is not just a consideration of, or possibility for, large enterprise leaders. Brian Scudamore, founder and CEO of O2E Brands, sets aside all day Monday for thinking. He shares, "I believe that, whatever your business type or size, you can and should make time for it too."¹⁵ He uses his think time not only for growth of the business but also for his own growth as a leader. When asked about strategic pivots, he answers, "while I've pivoted, it's probably been more in my leadership ability and learning more about myself." Scudamore started 1-800-GOTJUNK with a \$700 pickup truck, and built it to a \$300 million business.¹⁶

A leader (in business and life) gets clear to lead boldly and smartly into the future. Clarity starts with expanding awareness, and this requires observing, listening, and reading with an open mind, and dedicating time to think deeply.

Great leaders model the way so that others also might learn and desire expanding their awareness and pausing to think. To build other leaders, which a great leader is always doing, he or she supports others in carving out this time during their workdays. Empowerment leads to smarter work, not more busy work.

"Awareness is not a giver of solace...It is a disturber and an awakener. Able leaders are usually sharply awake and reasonably disturbed...They have their own inner security."

—Robert K. Greenleaf

The greatest people are self-managing — they don't need to be managed. Once they know what to do, they'll go figure out how to do it. What they need is a common vision. And that's what leadership is: Having a vision; being able to articulate that so the people around you can understand it; and getting a consensus on a common vision.

—Steve Jobs



CHAPTER 3

Leadership Clarity

The pressure is on. You, as a leader, affect many others with your vision, direction, and leadership style. Even as the CEO of your life, what you are moving toward is affecting others. True leaders care about how they influence others' lives with their words and actions.

One leader I bring up when speaking of a model of clarity is Steve Jobs. He is also remembered for, at times, diminishing others rather than building them up. So, while perhaps not a model of true leadership, Jobs is indeed a model of, and remembered for, his ability to create a clear and inspiring vision and be clear and inspirational when communicating that vision. His communications live on in books and online, not only because they clearly make a point, but the listener feels a “Yes!” when he shares his view of the future. In part, what initially draws the listener is that he states what he sees and then he brings those listeners into that vision with a compelling explanation. It's not just that he speaks from what he knows, which most people in command can do. It is that he truly seems to want those he is speaking with to fully understand and join the journey. No leader can be absolutely certain about the future. No human can. Yet, a leader can be absolutely sure that this is the right direction to go. Jobs had clarity that this was the right vision (best possible, that is), the right direction, and the right strategy for his company (and its innovative products). Jobs was clear that the Apple brand must uphold his vision of design elegance and innovation that made the consumer's life easier, often in ways that the consumer couldn't articulate until they experienced it. Jobs was also known for his ability to be clear and to communicate clearly—and we'll get to that in Part II of this book: *Be Clear*. First, consider your own ability to get clear, as a leader.

Leadership is less about what is easily quantified, “the hard stuff.” Leadership is needed for all that is *not* easily quantified, “the soft stuff.” How will you get clear about the soft stuff, which is mostly related to people, such as communication and behavior? To *share* a vision, and experience a fulfilling journey toward that desired state, how will everyone be working together?

To Pivot to a new way of working together, you may need to
refresh.

Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft in February 2014. His vision for how Microsoft would work together, inside their workplace and in their marketplace, was different than how they were

working together now.

The CEO over the prior 13 years, Steve Ballmer, saw the company more as an unrivaled fighter; a competitor, not a collaborator. Keep in mind that a strategy is not bad or good without considering context. A better question is if the strategy *fits the desired future state captured in a vision that is inspiring*.

Ballmer's focus was on building Microsoft, and being the best. His most recent push, before stepping down, was to gain traction (and potentially be the best) in the cellular phone business. He saw a way to jumpstart this, or so he thought, by acquiring the Nokia handset business. Nokia's Lumia smartphone was already using Microsoft software.

Microsoft's Board shared reservations about the Nokia handset business acquisition, yet Ballmer's passion for Microsoft to gain market share in the mobile phone industry won them over.¹⁷

The Board also wanted Microsoft's share value to increase significantly, and they were losing patience; Microsoft's stock had fallen over 40% during Ballmer's 13 years as CEO.¹⁸

It wasn't always that way, and this is a great example of why deep thought is required to shift leadership style and strategy for what is best for the organization's future based on the expected future context, and not the past successes. Competition inside and out had worked for Microsoft in earlier days. This continued to work for Microsoft under Ballmer, with rising revenues and profits to show for it. Ballmer was a master of instilling in his employees a high level of confidence, and he was also able to excite them. But Microsoft's strength wasn't growing, and a 40% drop in share value was chilling. This story seemed similar to the rise of Ford with the Taurus to its drop to near bankruptcy less than a decade later. Ballmer was beginning to grasp that a competitive internal culture was likely inhibiting the collaboration needed for innovation, and innovation was needed to convince the market that Microsoft promised strong future performance.

Ballmer created a reorganization plan, even seeking advice from Alan Mulally who, as CEO of Ford Motor Company between 2006 and 2012, led a successful financial turn-around, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Mulally called his development strategy "One Ford."¹⁹ His "One Ford" vision involved changing the way of working together at Ford. How Mulally led "One Ford" definitely resulted in innovation, and yet it was so much more than that. The more collaborative and transparent ways of working in Mulally's strategy also included collaboration with suppliers, even with a major competitor, General Motors, and addressed how people treated each other day-to-day.

The reorganization at Microsoft was penned, "One Microsoft" and was similar to "One Ford" in the vision of greater innovation.²⁰ My personal read into this is that Ballmer likely held so tightly to the belief of winning, while enemies lose, that the collaborative culture needed would not be possible without a significant change in leadership style. Ballmer did try to calm his volatile, combative style. A start. But was Ballmer too late? Was he prepared to orchestrate a Pivot from a competitive culture to a collaborative one? And did he fully grasp that the market strategy, which was to conquer enemies (mainly Apple and Linux), needed to change?

Something in all of this created a new clarity for Ballmer; he was not the right person to lead

the cultural transformation needed. His leadership style had been a certain way for over 30 years at Microsoft, and people were not buying “the new Steve.”²¹ Ballmer resigned, and the Board replaced him with Nadella.

In April 2014, shortly after assuming the CEO role, Nadella chose to consider more closely the \$7B acquisition of the Nokia Devices and Services business. The acquisition completion had been publicly announced recently. He could have just considered it done and moved on to address other matters. At least, that’s what many new CEOs would do. It was a done deal. Yet, for Nadella, doing nothing was not how he chose to lead. He had to get clear about how he would lead this.

Nadella paused.

He had to get clear about the company’s strategic vision, direction, and game plan. What would Microsoft look like when repositioned as a market leader? Would he keep moving forward with the way things were, or would he “hit refresh,” create a new context for working in and with Microsoft, and orchestrate a Pivot?²²

So, what did Nadella do?

First, he got clear not only about the strategic direction for the company but also about the desired tone for the culture. He summarized this vision in a single phrase: “Empowering everyone and every organization to achieve more.”²³

Then, he clarified three main themes: cloud computing, partnerships, and the ultimate computing experience (augmented reality, artificial intelligence, and quantum computing).

And now, he was clear that he would say “no” to further focus on, or resources for, operating the Nokia handset business inside Microsoft. It didn’t fit. The Board backed him up. The Nokia handset business, acquired in April 2014 for just over \$7B, was written off in September 2015.²⁴

Fast forward five years: Microsoft’s share price had more than doubled. Nadella’s leadership, which is more about creating the context in which others are empowered and inspired to step up as leaders than it is about being a hero or commander, stands out in Microsoft’s performance breakthrough.

Get clear about how you will lead.

You’ve probably experienced them. Maybe you’ve been one. A manager who manages work but is ineffective (or worse) at building up others and inspiring them toward great work together.

Most of us have experienced people in positions of authority who are not leaders. They are either just being themselves, now with more power, but not with any intentional actions or behaviors toward better leadership. Or they are modeling a predecessor, and that style doesn’t fit who they are or what the organization needs right now.

Nadella is an excellent model of intentional leadership. His intention appears to be on how he is leading, not just on what business results will be achieved as the result of his leadership.

First, be a leader. Then do leadership.

In times of uncertainty, opt for choosing the best next steps in the “right” direction, and let go of needing to control or even know the details. Getting clear is not synonymous with knowing all the details. Getting clear is about moving distracting details and disturbing thoughts out of the way in order to choose a way forward.

Getting clear about how you will lead is so important that it merits a couple more examples. For these I’ll step away from business and move to the military, first a real story and then a movie.

From achiever to leader...

The Navy. 1999. Captain L. David Marquet was ready to be named the commanding officer of the USS *Olympia*, the best performing ship (submarine) in the U.S. naval fleet.²⁵ His personal style was to know everything he could about the ship. Captain Marquet defined himself by his competence. An achiever. The best. He graduated top of his class.

Then he was told, “Marquet, *Santa Fe*.” He was needed to take command of the USS *Santa Fe*, the ship with the worst performance in the naval fleet. And he knew very little about that ship.

Captain Marquet had no time to learn everything about the ship. With the little time he had, he contemplated how he would lead. He aimed to “turn the performance of the USS *Santa Fe* around,” and he needed to do so by orchestrating a Pivot as the leader of the ship. He would be in the role of commander without relying on command-and-control. He might have wondered: how can one be in command without being the expert on everything? Everyone comes to the commanding officer for permission to act, that’s just how it works in this (hierarchical) organization. Yet something clearly is not working on the USS *Santa Fe*. What type of leadership brings out my best at work?

Captain Marquet’s reflection about others and himself helped him get clear. He really didn’t like command-and-control. He preferred to know the strategic direction and objectives, and have the authority to make decisions rather than be told what to do; to be given control to lead within his role. The crew of a well-performing ship should be able to continue to be well-performing without relying on one person, the leader, for performance on that ship.

Get clear — for the future. Your leadership style may need to shift from what worked for you yesterday.

One other shift in his perspective happened within his first few days, out of necessity: Captain Marquet was now asking questions of the crew about the ship because *he truly didn’t know*; he was not an expert about the USS *Santa Fe*. He realized that in the past, when he thought he was exhibiting strong leadership by asking questions, he was comparing their answers against what he knew.

His greater clarity about being a leader also allowed him to be more observant, not just about

what work was done, but how people were working together. What he observed was blame; “They” did this, which is the reason that what you wanted from “Us” didn’t happen. Marquet created a phrase that he consistently reminded everyone to follow: “There’s no ‘They’ on the Santa Fe.” Everyone soon understood that collaboration, and “We” responsibility, was how to behave on this ship.

As Marquet shifted how he was being as a leader, and changed what he did as he was leading, the confidence and competence of the crew grew higher and higher. By 2001 the USS *Santa Fe* was an award-winning ship. And it remained that way well after Marquet left in 2001. By 2004, the USS *Santa Fe* was the highest-performing ship in the naval fleet.

In *getting clear* about how he would want to be led, what leadership style would help him perform at his best and be self-motivated to do so, Marquet now had a vision of how he would lead. He was able to better choose his words and actions in order to *be clear* so that others could *get clear* and align with the vision to perform at their best, together.

It’s not about you.

The U.S. Army’s eighth Air Force. 1949. This story is fictional, from the movie *Twelve O’Clock High* starring Gregory Peck as General Frank Savage.²⁶

This team was collegial and not competitive. Yet they were not working together in a way that led to high-quality performance. They were bombers, and they were not hitting their targets. Not even close.

General Savage’s natural leadership style was also collegial. He preferred to call people by their first names, for example. He was a strong leader and understood that sometimes one’s style had to be altered to fit what the team needed in order to catalyze change. Sometimes the style needs to differ by individual, in order for each individual to grow. Leaders build up others.

What Savage identified as missing from the 918th bomb squadron was pride in a job well done.

The former leader, Colonel Davenport, was popular with and close to the men of this squadron. General Savage was expected to restore discipline and standards to his new command. He believed that to do so he would need to temporarily shift his leadership style, and do so now, before the men in this squadron knew his more authentic personable style. He decided he’d keep a personal distance from the men, in part to catalyze change in the squadron, but also to be able to live this distanced way of leading that was not most natural to him. He didn’t veer from his values to leverage this leadership style; he was fair to all, and he earned respect.

I recall watching this film a few years ago. My insides were screaming, “This is going to take a toll on him! He is not being who he is wired to be!” And that was true; forcing distance took an emotional toll on him. At the end of the film, we get a hint that he is moving on, and back to leading authentically to his own style, more open and personable, after he had successfully established discipline in the squadron.

Being intentional in how you lead, and staying open to and aware of when others need a different style from you, is important to the health of your organization. It takes a high level of personal clarity and discipline, and should only be attempted as a strategy aligned with a clear near-term objective.

Twelve O’Clock High ends with the 918th bomb squadron having achieved high performance. The ultimate proof of this is when they hit every target on a key mission without the leader dictating from the front.

Knowing yourself and remaining objective about your ability to lead into the future—not falling into the trap of hubris—so that you can sense how long you can change how you lead and when you need to find a replacement, is important to your health.

Leadership clarity only comes with intention. You must move away from all the details that are pulling your attention away from looking inside for your intentions. What do you want *from* people? Perhaps they have targets that they are not hitting, and don’t seem to care about hitting. It may be that there is a lack of taking responsibility for collaborating across department lines, or with customers or potential industry partners. What do you want *for* them? What will serve others such that *what you need from them aligns with what they want for themselves*, including the environment they want to be in?

“Before there’s even a thought or an action, there’s an intention.”

—Gary Zukav

*It's only at the brink that people find the will to change.
Only at the precipice do we evolve.*

—Professor Barnhardt in
The Day the Earth Stood Still

*Effective foresight is both about what might happen to us,
as well as what we commit to create.*

—Jeff Bezos



CHAPTER 4

What Could Can Be

A vision is of the *future*. The inspiration felt from hearing and picturing a vision catalyzes action, starting *now*. When inspired by the vision of a better future, people feel compelled to actively participate in moving toward that vision, even when there is uncertainty, and change. Stating what someone “should do” or “could do” if only they “would do (insert command here)” is not inspiring. Sharing a vision of “what *can* be,” which is a better future for each and all involved, is inspiring. Your vision, then, is of “what can be.”

Discipline yourself to go to the edge of “what is” and look far beyond that, where it’s blurry. You won’t know details or how to get there. This is your vision of “what can be.”

Clarity about “what can be” will move you through even the toughest resistance. Clarity does not mean knowing it all. It’s like success; a challenging, winding journey that involves other people who all commit to creating success, together.

Great leaders look far enough out to create a vision that is inspiring. They push past any discomfort of not knowing today that it is do-able.

But many executives fear showing that they don’t have the future all figured out. They’d rather stick to the near-term future with a structured road map for all to follow. Rather than envisioning the future and “what *can* be,” they attempt to manage what *could* happen. Strategic planning becomes an exercise in judgment about “what is,” comparison to what competitors have done, and analyzing and deciding what can be controlled. It’s not that these areas should not be addressed. It’s that strategic thinking about the future is glossed over and the focus shifts to an exercise in managing details. The possibility of brilliant execution is lost.

This is not to say that the organization should move into the next quarter with no plan at all. Still compile, review, and discuss what the road ahead looks like and how you’ll win (however you define winning). Know and be intentional about shifting out of long-term strategic thinking and into short-term execution planning.

You can’t guarantee a future outcome; predicting setbacks and planning for those is not the same as having a vision. There are too many variables outside of what we can predict. Don’t get stuck in simply thinking about what *could* be if your selected moves are the only changes that the future will bring.

When you go straight to execution planning, you miss identifying a true north star. You miss

the magic of inspiration. There's no directional pull. What is intended to be strategic thinking becomes decision making about who, what, and how, without identifying why or where. That's not leading. Stop trying to manage the future.

“A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within...Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Decisions based on historical facts are hard enough. Most decisions today are not black and white. Or even grey. Most are a muddy brown. Do you know how to mix paints to get brown? You mix several different colors together randomly, and brown is the result. Decisions today so often have many, mixed variables. Your decision becomes part facts and knowing, and part guessing. Planning for the future is about choosing your best next steps. It will never be based 100% on knowing.

Gain clarity about “what *can* be” by allowing yourself and others to be open, vulnerable, and sensing, rather than knowing it all, controlling, and analyzing.

Can vs. could.

A way to compare can to could is in this way:

“We *can* do this! The vision is _____. We’re in this together. Here’s what we see as the nearer-term strategic objectives. We will all work together to define how we’ll get there.” Your words may differ. Key, though, is to clearly articulate the vision with confidence that everyone can get there, to express significant shifts perhaps, but withhold from commanding what each person must do next, and let others know that they are part of defining the smaller, more concrete steps as you all go forward together. You and others will experience a visceral response to this; “Yes!”

Versus “We *could* do this, if this and then this and then this happens. But if those things don’t happen, we’ll just keep on doing what we are doing.” This will be comfortable for the logical mind, ticking off the boxes of a planning session accomplished. It’s tempting to try to predict all the variables that could get in your way and analyze them—to treat strategy like a battle plan. Yet there’ll be no visceral response that catalyzes inspired, empowered people to do the impossible.

What’s possible?

The next return trip from San Jose del Cabo brought me joy. Joy! Giggles even. I felt so in control and yet I was *not in control of anything*. I knew it. I stayed open to possibilities and allowed myself to choose, and then choose differently, all with my desired experience and destination clearly in mind.

I truly *flew* home from Cabo. But it certainly could have been a different experience given

the challenges of an international flight. My flight was departing at 2:20 pm Cabo time, but I was booked on an 11:45 am shuttle to accommodate a range of travel times for passengers from this resort. I was not looking forward to a potentially long wait at the gate. I wondered, *what else is possible?*

As I stepped into my shuttle, I received a text notifying me that my flight was delayed by over 90 minutes. I almost asked the driver if he could pick me up later, but I chose to stay, and considered; *What else is possible? What's my best next step?*

I contacted the airlines from the shuttle. (Even this required a little creativity in finding a local Seattle number since toll free cannot be called on my cell while out of the country.) The service rep said there was an earlier flight, but that there was no way I'd make it in time, and she didn't want me to lose the booking I had. *Ok, what else is possible?*

Security was a breeze. Then I could not find an airlines counter. *Next?* I found the gate for the earlier flight and noticed that it was still boarding.

Yes! I got on the earlier flight. Not only that, I was booked all the way through with an upgrade. Here's where being open to possibilities matters most: when facing other people who might or might not share your vision. How you are being, in my case curious and open, can make all the difference in what the other person chooses to do.

This new set of flights required going through U.S. customs at LAX. I breezed through. I have global entry so that was breezy too (if you have tools that help you proactively advance, by all means use them). I guess I was the first person from my flight with all bags in tow to reach the area where bags are searched, if you are selected for it. I was "randomly" selected. I put quotes on that because there was no one else around so my guess is that this is more part of a procedure to keep the inspectors busy than it is random. But I don't know. And remember, *I didn't need to control anything. I stayed open and relaxed.*

The break in momentum was not long. I wasn't in a hurry, it's just that momentum—that sense of fluid movement—brings me joy. It's especially joyful when things don't have to happen a certain way, they just do, and it seems things are magically falling into place because of being clear about what I want.

At LAX I again found the gate of an earlier flight to Seattle on the same airlines. Is there room, I ask? He said it was \$50. I asked if that was the case even if I was a frequent flyer. *What else is possible?* He looked, and decided that it would be \$0. *Ok.* He didn't have an aisle seat, but he had a window seat. *Ok.* The flight would arrive at 6:25 pm, which might increase the chance of more traffic back to Bellingham. But I liked the idea of being more awake for that drive home. *Ok.*

I bet you've guessed...the drive home was a breeze. *Yes!* If you know I-5 North out of SeaTac before 7 pm, you'll know that the probability of a breezy trip is not high. Completing my trip before sunset and feeling energized were exactly what I desired to be safe (without a car-totalling accident like the prior year). This time I led my day with intention. I got clear, without having to know the details, and orchestrated the best performance possible. *I felt joy!* I wish this for you.

Pivot from being in control of what could be to orchestrating the flow of what

can be.

This story isn't about a situation in which the leader (in this case me) had to muster a lot of courage. If there had been challenges, they would have been manageable. The key to the success I experienced was to stay open and always in a mindset of possibility. To do this, I continued a stream of thought about what was desired, what steps I might take, what would be hard or in the way, and how I might course-correct to stay on the best possible path and not give up.

What will be hard? Or risky?

Allow yourself to envision what's possible—"what can be"—for your life, even if it seems impossible.

A 2019 film from India, *Gully Boy*, set in Mumbai, expresses this beautifully.²⁷ The film is based on the life of rapper Naezy. In the movie the lead character is Murad, about 22 years old, and in his last year of college. His father, a driver for a wealthy Indian family, is paying for Murad's college and expects him to get a respectable office job and support the family. Murad lives in the Dharavi slums of Mumbai, born into a caste destined for a hard life of low-level service jobs.

He wants to be a musician. A rapper. Most would presume this is impossible. His family does not support his dreams. To add to his challenges, he is not considered worthy (due to being from a lower-level caste) to be with his girlfriend, Safeena, whom he's been with since they were 13. Her dream is to be a surgeon. Her father understands, but her mother insists she be married, as arranged, and then serve her husband. Their continued relationship is being kept secret from their family until they can afford to be on their own.

Most people would give up. Correction: Most people wouldn't even allow themselves to dream or take steps toward what they desire. They'd stop at the chasm between the vision and their reality.

Murad recognizes that he has been given a gift, and that he can be the voice for so many who are stuck in the slums. He writes about this life and the beliefs that keep people stuck. He raps in the few moments he can find alone.

As he is following his steps toward what's possible, as challenging as they may be, he meets another rapper who is already popular and who pushes Murad to speak (rap) his words. Murad takes on the name Gully Boy, which means one who lives in the streets.

Murad's father represents all that Murad is trying to escape. His father is so driven by fear and a sense of not deserving respect due to the caste he was born into, that he takes his frustration out on his family. He brings home a new wife, while the first one is reduced to house help. He hits Murad's mother when she protests, and belittles her when she asks for respect. He crushes his son's dreams, tells him to keep his head down, and not dare to think that he is special.

His mother is also driven by fear. She stays in an abusive relationship and pleads with her son to get a job that fits his position in life.

Murad tells them, “Just because we serve, doesn’t mean we do not deserve respect. It means we work hard. Every human deserves respect.” And “I am not going to force my dreams to fit this current reality. I am going to fit my reality to my dreams.”

And he does.

He goes on to win one million rupees, open for famous rapper Nas on a Mumbai stage with thousands in the audience, and is a hit. In doing so, he successfully stepped out of the caste that wanted to bind him, and stepped into his desired future as a professional rapper.

Are others part of your journey, or are you part of theirs?

Each person we meet, whether we have spent only a few minutes with them, do not even remember them, or we have known them over several years, is part of our journey. And we become part of theirs.

A day of travel and one person’s journey toward their far-reaching dream of being a rapper might not seem to be about leadership. They are. Every individual is the CEO of their life, and both stories share a glimpse into the actions one takes when pulled by an inspiring vision. Yet the journey is not made alone. Those we encounter without much notice and those we are connected more closely to are affected by our presence, and vice versa. People may take different actions and make different choices as the situation, or context, changes for them.

As leaders we can intentionally create context, or context can change unintentionally by our words, decisions, or actions. And each person is affected.

A “Yes!” level of clarity only happens when the vision, or even the best next step, feels personal. Yet your future, near or far, is not *just* about you. Even when you feel you are on a solo journey, you are not.

“We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow men; and among those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.”

—Herman Melville

Once you get clear about you, discover what about you now is serving the desired you, and what is not. Are you living the legacy you want to leave? (That is, living how you want to be remembered.) Envision what would be phenomenal and how you might start orchestrating a Pivot toward it. At all times keep alignment in mind; alignment of what you do with the desired you—the legacy you choose to live—and alignment of what others do and what is needed from them for progress toward the vision.

Ultimately, foster alignment between what you desire and what others desire for themselves. Stay sensitive to how your decisions, actions, and words affect and influence others. Communicate to create a pull toward “what *can* be.” And move through life consciously so that your presence, no matter where you are or how solo you feel at any time, generates a positive

ripple across all encounters.

Your choices, and how you lead yourself and others, influence what the future can be.

We can all choose to live more creatively and strategically, rather than acting tomorrow based on what our past dictates or what we perceive others to expect from us. We can choose to expect those on our team to live our organizational values at work, while staying open-minded to how they do work.

Whether at work or in life, maintaining alignment of your desires with others' desires is going to create the greatest momentum toward living in "what *can* be." It is only with alignment *and* momentum that breakthroughs become possible.

You may be wondering who the "others" are in the stories I started this chapter with. In my travel story, others include the shuttle and airline personnel who were directly part of my journey, helping me along. Family and friends were with me in spirit, wishing or praying for my safe arrival home. In the *Gully Boy* story, his girlfriend and fellow rapper were directly guiding and supporting him. His parents, with their limiting beliefs, catalyzed his passion to get away from their life plan for him and inspired him to write lyrics that resonated with so many others. The others that his music inspired provided an energetic pull for him to keep going, to think of what was possible; they felt hopeful when hearing his music, inspired by his courage, and grateful for how he gave back to the community.

As a leader and as the CEO of your life, you orchestrate. This may involve many people. You create a context that allows others to be safe, focused, and nimble. You set a direction, clearly communicate your strategy, and model the state of being that is most open to possibilities and success every day. You focus on alignment, and do not attempt to command or control the details of how others translate best next steps based on their roles.

Predicting details far into the future is not possible. Focus on best next steps, and give control of defining those steps to those closest to the work. If you hold tightly to work being done how you would do it, maintaining control or position, or dwelling on what should or shouldn't be, you'll miss out on the possibilities generated by many people working, and shifting, in concert. You'll also block the strategic view of "what can be."

"Perception is strong and sight is weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things."

—Miyamoto Musashi

The perception of power from controlling everything is a misnomer. Staying open to "what can be" is powerful. When you don't control everything, mistakes can happen. Allowing mistakes as part of progress is critical. Get clear about what level of risk—of failure, loss, or looking bad—you can get through mentally and financially in order to make progress. What context allows you to stay intentionally curious? With a bit of prep, including knowing you, you can clear (or at least have a strategy to move past swiftly) what may get in the way of you staying open to "what can be."

Expect problems.

Problems will occur. If you've planned for problems, you'll be ready to move over, under, around, or through them. That's what being nimble is about. Clarity throughout the workplace will allow problems to be most quickly solved by those closest to those problems. *Do you need every problem brought to you so you can control how it is solved? Do you need to know what problems happened and how they were solved? Or are you a nimble leader who helps every team member get clear about the strategic objectives and values, and empowers them to solve the problems close to them?*

Alignment doesn't mean a straight line from A to B. Expect zigs and zags. Expect problems. Drop the need to manage them. Lead. Orchestrate. Create the context in which problems are solved quickly.

Lead through problems, toward “what can be.”

As a leader, finding out “what is” as you orchestrate “what *can* be” sometimes reveals problems. When a problem crops up, and you know it will, there's always a should be, could be, and can be. Your leadership is needed for “what can be.” Get clear about what being in that role requires of you, and intend to master that.

“What is or just happened” and “What could or should be” are typically addressed with problem solving and forecasting. The causes are discovered, and solutions are judged, inside near-view (and relatively narrow) parameters. These important functions of brilliant execution are best performed by those closest to the work.

“Knowledge workers are ‘people who know more about what they are doing than their boss does.’”

—Peter Drucker

Leaders set the direction toward an inspiring vision, ensure alignment with strategy, and wisely allocate resources. And they communicate clearly. Brilliant execution will not happen without clarity about strategic vision and direction.

If you need to improve your ability to lead, start with clarity: your ability to get clear and to be clear in communicating with others. In this way others can align, and they can solve the problems they are closer to. A leader looks for what might be blocking momentum and moves that block out of the way.

Shift out of the role of fixing problems and get clear about how you will lead toward “what *can* be.” This is a journey, not a project, so expect to be uncertain about exactly how that vision will be realized. The conductor of an orchestra doesn't create the music.

Leaders approach problems from a perspective of opportunity.

—Lori Michele Leavitt

You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards.

—Steve Jobs

Context is everything. People are highly contradictory. The situation or place in which we find ourselves may completely change our perception and judgment.

—Rory Sutherland



CHAPTER 5

What Is

Be open to the possibility that what you think “is,” is not. “What is” needs to be discovered; rarely is it readily apparent.

“What is” might pertain to you personally, such as how people perceive you. Or “what is” may pertain to something outside of yourself, such as why revenues are declining. While it seems it should be simple and obvious to know “what is,” it isn’t. And while we often prefer leaders who are quick to decide, and confident that they intuitively know best, research of outcomes has proven that quick decisions are rarely good ones.^{[28](#)}

Choose to discover. You can guess rather than discover, and if the circumstances are small sometimes guessing is enough to keep moving forward. You can move forward as if there isn’t a problem, or that the problem belongs to someone else. Yet moving forward in the blindness of over-confidence, or hubris, typically ends unnecessarily badly for others, if not also for you. (Decisions based on discovery, including use of algorithms, may also not favor every person impacted. But the decision has been made with greater clarity.)

Timing matters. “What is” (now) is rarely comprised of the same key variables as what might have been experienced previously. Context, which shifts over time, can change everything. Getting clear about “what is” involves seeking to understand. Seeking to understand involves slowing down, asking questions, and considering different points of view. Asking questions, staying open, and understanding what may have led to “what is,” often uncovers flawed past decisions and strategies. This can be uncomfortable. A true leader pushes through this discomfort.

To get clear about “what is” takes courage, curiosity, and tenacity.

- **Courage**, which includes the courage to be vulnerable in uncertainty, as well as a readiness to say “I don’t know;”
- **Curiosity**, which, here, means you may know a lot, but you are not a know-it-all. Instead, you approach every decision with an open mind, and you listen with a willingness to learn. You are growing; and
- **Tenacity**, which shows up in your ability to get through ridiculously

tough situations. You recognize resistance for the progress marker it is when reaching for a desired state. As a leader, you stop activities that are not going to lead in the direction you want to go. You may even drop people who are not aligned. But you do not give up when moving toward a desired state just because it is hard.

In the first part of this book, getting clear was not about discovering “what is,” it was about the clarity needed to set a strategic vision and direction that pulls others toward it, like a north star, and to lead toward it. To get clear about “what is” is to get to the crux of the matter, including ensuring that the historical facts gathered are from diverse sources and true, and having an ability (and willingness) to move past biases that drive you to only seek data that confirms what you think or blind you from noticing another person inclusively. A decision that influences what the future holds is part of this, but it is held loosely at first so that you stay open to all possibilities, including finding you were wrong about “what (actually) is.”

If we think we know “what is,” we’ll find only proof of that. Remain in a state of curiosity to find truth.

Before heading into the process of getting clear about “what is,” first put yourself into an *internal* state of readiness to get clear. Courage, curiosity, and tenacity will serve you.

Even just a decade ago it would have been difficult to find leaders embraced by shareholders and media alike who modeled these attributes, and took the time to discover “what is.” Context has shifted, and these less self-focused leaders are showing through results what they can do and what they are made of.

Kat Cole, who rose quickly to a C-level position most recently as Focus Brands’ COO, speaks about how courage and humility aided her in both developing as a leader and executing brilliantly through her team.²⁹ She also has the courage to be vulnerable and question herself. She has created rules for herself that help her slow down to then move with greater momentum. For example, her “hotshot rule” is an introspective process of asking herself: if a hotshot were to take over her role tomorrow, what is one thing they would do differently? What would they find unacceptable? She then asks, “Why can’t that be me?”³⁰

Monty Moran, former co-CEO of Chipotle, shares how staying curious and seeking to understand helped him coach a hard-working manager to be a better leader.³¹ Discovery helped him understand that this manager was commanding and controlling because that’s what she perceived her role to be. That was her understanding of “what is.” When coached on “what *can* be,” in this case what’s possible when people are asked to join in and help toward a shared goal, this manager was able to Pivot *from* command-and-control leader *to* team-building leader.

A.G. Lafley, Former Chairman, President and CEO of Proctor & Gamble (P&G), also showed courage, curiosity, and tenacity.³² He led the company as CEO twice, and both times were considered distressed situations with quick action needed. The first time, between 2000 and 2010, made him somewhat of a business hero. It showed his ability to remain curious and possess the courage for bold moves, all without the bravado we had learned to expect from a “hero” leader. He became a model of how a big corporation can re-ignite innovation through

alliances. Perhaps the most visible move was to reach out of P&G for innovation. In a 2008 interview about his book with Ram Charan, *The Game-Changer*, he shared:

*So in 2000, we decided to stop being Fortress P&G, and move to an open innovation system that could attract innovations of all stripes from the outside. We set a goal, that half of the innovations we take to market should have external front-end partners.*³³

The second time, when asked to return in 2013, he truly showed all three characteristics, including tenacity. He put his reputation on the line to lead a turn-around, this time with an urgency to regain market share lost in emerging markets, such as China. He took flack for moving slowly toward financial results, focusing first on workplace culture. In 2014 the improvements in how people worked together were noticed, but the heat from shareholders was on to meet growth targets. While it is hard to see results in only two years from a longer-term (organizational change) strategy, and there are those who would criticize his leadership for the slow progress, a strategy of organizational change continued under the new CEO, David Taylor. Taylor pledged soon after he became CEO in November 2015, that he would reform the internal corporate culture to be more responsive and agile. “It’s a big intervention, [on] the cultural and organizational side,” Mr. Taylor said in an interview with the Financial Times in February 2016.³⁴

David Taylor, Chairman, President, and CEO of P&G, talks about the courage it takes to be uncomfortable.³⁵ He chooses to stick to values, even when the often-slower financial results are unpopular with shareholders. In Taylor’s case, he believes there is time to do things right.

Mary Barra quietly led General Motors (GM) through a major recall,³⁶ showing courage to admit that she had been part of the problem, and then again by being the first major auto maker to communicate a vision and plan for producing *only* electric vehicles in the next decade.³⁷

Be ready for magic. You lead. You don’t have to know it all.

Readiness isn’t an end point; it is a continuous journey. Always be ready to lead with courage, curiosity, and tenacity. Lead in a way that creates the context for others to also be courageous, curious, and tenacious. Leaders orchestrate a continuous state of organizational readiness to Pivot, which includes ensuring that the workplace shares clarity. One vision. One strategic direction and a few objectives (for any execution period). One set of core values. In other words, one version of truth.

Great leaders understand that orchestrating isn’t about them managing the work. Today, a leader’s role is to set the direction, set and re-set the strategic game plan and objectives based on current dynamics, continuously ensure one version of the truth, and stay open to how the work gets done within this context of shared truth.

Envisioning “what *can* be,” farther out into the future, manifests in stillness. After gathering insight, still your mind from solving problems or seeking answers. Your leadership traits—such as courage, curiosity, and tenacity—will guide you.

Leaders lead. That is what people need most from us. But there are times we also step in to

manage, such as to get major projects or initiatives back on track or to get to the crux of what is causing them to be off track.

Lead for the long term. Manage the short term. In the short term, once you are ready to get clear, you will focus on discovering and closing the gap between “what can be” and “what is.”

The clearer you are about “what is” the better your decisions will be. Another way to express what it means to dig deeper, to truly understand “what is,” is to “get to the crux of the matter.”

Get to the crux of the matter.

There are two types of decisions: decisions that look forward to answer, “What can we be, do, have, acquire, or receive to keep us moving forward toward our desired future state?” and decisions that require looking back to answer, “What happened, and what can we be or do differently so that we fix this problem, and it does not happen again?”

It’s the latter—when you are looking back—that you must use to get to the crux of the matter. This is what Alan Mulally did (as described in Chapter 2) when he, before accepting the CEO position at Ford, considered why Ford was going bankrupt.

Where do you look first?

In the question, “What can we *be* or *do* differently,” the “being” has to do with people. The “doing” more often has to do with a process. This is why you may have heard the phrase, “blame the process not the people.”

When getting to the crux of the matter, process issues are what you look at. If the process in place should be working, but isn’t, maybe people are choosing not to follow it, or are not clear about it. People may choose to work around a process, often with good intentions but sometimes not. Take the time to dig deep into issues with your eyes open to both the process and the people. What if, rather than immediately pushing toward a fix, you stay curious about *why* people might be being how they are being or doing what they are doing? Throughout the workplace (office or remote) create an environment in which others feel safe to speak out, then ask questions. Resist trying to solve anything until people feel safe to speak out, and those speaking out are certain that you are understanding them.

What Alan Mulally ascertained, even before stepping into the CEO role at Ford, was that “Ford was not building cars and trucks that [enough] people want to buy” (that’s about *doing*) and this was likely due to “The people at Ford...no longer working together as they were when they successfully designed and built the Taurus” (this, which was indeed the crux, was about *being*).³⁸

Once inside Ford, Mulally found that people indeed were not working together—including the leadership team members. No senior executive was willing to admit to any issues in their domain.

And yet, Ford was going bankrupt. Clearly there were issues.

To get clear, Mulally took a logical, objective approach, using quantifiable performance metrics. He asked each leadership team member to report on their key metrics, presented in dashboard colors of green for good/go, yellow for alert/watch, and red for stop/at risk. He called this required meeting a Business Performance Review, or BPR. He gave assurance that he wanted to see reality, “what is,” and intended collaborative solutions, not reprimands, for sharing challenges.

Yet, for the first several weeks, all reports showed only green. This obviously did not reflect reality at Ford; Ford *was* going bankrupt. Unless these senior leaders were willing to *be* clear, Mulally certainly could not *get* clear enough to lead the way forward. Mulally didn’t intend to command the way. What he envisioned was this senior leadership team working together and leading their teams. He envisioned “One Ford.”

Clarity and collaboration.

Mulally’s “One Ford” vision was of a collaborative, transparent, aligned organization. With patience and repetition in seeking the truth about “what is,” Mulally withheld from commanding change. After several weeks of a BPR full of all-green reports, the truth showed up in one report. With the expectation that he’d be sacked soon, the head of the Americas division showed red in his report, honestly reporting that an important new car production was behind schedule. The leader was not sacked. Mulally cheered as he promised he would. Then other senior leaders lowered their facades and started sharing. Working together was a critical step in bringing Ford back from the brink of bankruptcy.

At Microsoft, Satya Nadella also has his eye on collaboration, and “One Microsoft.”³⁹ In order to orchestrate a Pivot toward more collaboration at Microsoft, Nadella has done many things, two of which I’ll illustrate for you now. Both of these fall under the strategic theme of “partnerships,” which involved Pivoting *from* the internal and external rivalries that Microsoft had become so well known for *to* being proactive collaborators.

Nadella’s orchestration is different than Mulally’s. While Mulally started with a quantitative performance-metrics approach, Nadella took a more qualitative approach. This made sense for Microsoft’s situation and shows how important it is for a leader to get clear about what’s working and what’s not. Microsoft’s senior leaders already excelled at meeting individual and team-based performance metrics. What was not working was the extreme separation caused by competitiveness between divisions, and between Microsoft and others in their market.

INSIDE MICROSOFT.

One of Nadella’s steps for “partnerships” was to assess the feeling of safety in the workplace. People feeling safe to speak out and step up is critical in order to orchestrate a Pivot, and to make performance breakthroughs possible.

Nadella needed to find out where his senior managers’ minds were as he started this Pivot *from* competition *to* collaboration. Remember that Nadella’s stated vision is, “To empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more.” Even the words he was choosing were words of collaboration. (Notice how different they feel from more typical “motivating”

vision words such as “being first” or “being the best”).

He brought in Dr. Michael Gervais, known for his “high performance mindset” training, to work with Microsoft teams.⁴⁰ The initial work with Dr. Gervais indicated there was work to be done within the culture. Nadella shares in his book, *Hit Refresh*, that when Dr. Gervais asked these senior managers to write down their purpose statements, they wrote. But when Dr. Gervais then asked them to share with others, no one wanted to do so.⁴¹

Competition fuels distrust. Collaboration requires trust. Clarity also requires trust.

You can’t get clear if you are not getting honest input.

OUTSIDE MICROSOFT.

Nadella took a series of steps to get clear (and be clear) about Microsoft’s intention for collaborative external partnerships. He built bridges where, under the former leadership, there was clear separation and even war, such as with the developers of other operating systems. An example is the early and continuous steps Nadella has taken to create a partnership with Linux.

While former Microsoft CEO, Ballmer, referred to Linux as a cancer, Nadella quickly moved toward collaboration. In November 2014, when a journalist asked about the absence of Red Hat (“Linux”), Nadella stepped in and said, “We’d welcome Red Hat in our cloud.”⁴² This was followed by an early 2015 press and analyst conference, where he announced that “Microsoft loves Linux,” and he had a sign put up with those words, including a heart in place of the word “loves.”⁴³ And in May 2019, Nadella was on the Red Hat Summit stage, with Red Hat acquirer, IBM CEO Ginny Rometty, and Red Hat CEO James Whitehurst.⁴⁴

AT MICROSOFT.

Nadella found that in order for all leaders inside and outside of Microsoft to gain clarity and start collaborating, there was more to do than simply share a new vision and strategy. He could not expect people to start behaving differently if everything around them stayed the same. A Pivot *from* competitive *to* collaborative required a refresh. The structural and social context within the workplace and between Microsoft and others in their market needed to change. This Pivot required consistently moving forward in the new direction, inspiring shifts from many people along the way, until the doing (process) and the being (people) were aligned with Nadella’s “One Microsoft” vision.

Know where you are going before assessing “what is.”

To lead Microsoft to significantly grow value for shareholders, Nadella envisioned growth mindsets:

“We’re transforming ourselves from a group who knows it all to a group of people who will learn it all.”

—Satya Nadella

Microsoft stock has zoomed upwards with Nadella as CEO, starting under 40 in early 2014, to over 100 in 2019, and close to 320 in early January 2022.^{[45](#)}

For Alan Mulally, leading Ford so that the company did not go bankrupt, his vision was one of working together:

“It’s about people working together for the good of all of us.”

—Alan Mulally

Ford turned multibillion dollar losses in 2006 into profits starting in 2010.^{[46](#)}

To Pivot to a new way of working together, whether as leader or as the CEO of your life, look with fresh eyes at how you would do this if you were just starting anew. Then get clear about “what is” so that you then can get clear about your best next steps.

The WD-40 Learning (Maniac) Pledge

*I am responsible for taking action, asking questions,
getting answers, and making decisions.*

*I won't wait for someone to tell me. If I need to know, I'm
responsible for asking.*

*I have no right to be offended that I didn't "get this
sooner."*

*If I'm doing something others should know about, I'm
responsible for telling them.*

—Garry Ridge, CEO of WD-40



CHAPTER 6

Best, Not Perfect

Perfection is an obstacle to clarity. You can't take best next steps when you need to be perfect or always be seen as perfect and knowing everything.

You can know what was, and discover “what is,” but you cannot know what is to come.

If you approach communication from a place of knowing all, you are likely not listening. And even though you get to set the vision, you are not an island; you need others to execute brilliantly to realize that vision. You must be always learning to lead an organization that can also continue to learn, and last.

Rocket Chemical Company was established in 1953 and changed its name to WD-40 in 1969.⁴⁷ The company has not only lasted, it learns and grows. CEO, Garry Ridge, shared with me their pledge that you see at the opening of this chapter. How he leads is inspired by a 384 BC quote from Aristotle, “Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work.”⁴⁸

At WD-40 there is no failure; every action, regardless of the outcome, is considered as learning. Ridge's email signature includes the words *Ancora Imparo*, Italian for “I'm still learning.”

Ancora Imparo. You may recognize this phrase attributed to Michelangelo; they are often considered his parting words. He inscribed them in a sketch he was working on at age 87...in the 1500s. What an example of learning and lasting: best, not perfect. His beautiful works, including the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and the sculpture of David (which he carved when he was just 26 years old!) have endured for centuries. He passed at age 88, in itself a miracle of those times, when the average lifespan was between 30 and 40 years.

Your perfection may be respected, but it does not build up others. It is not inspiring. People want to give their best. In order to get the clarity needed to share strategy, take best next steps, and realize the results from brilliant execution through others, stop taking yourself so seriously.

Not long after taking on the role of CEO, Satya Nadella, who had risen through the ranks at Microsoft over the prior two decades, was interviewed at a conference by Maria Klawe, President of Harvey Mudd College and a Microsoft Director. The conference was celebrating women in computing. About 8,000 female engineers from around the world participated. Near

the end of the interview, Klawe asked Nadella what advice he would offer women who are not comfortable asking for pay raises. He responded:

*It's not really about asking for a raise, but knowing and having faith that the system will give you the right raise. That might be one of the initial "superpowers," that quite frankly, women [who] don't ask for a raise have. It's good karma. It will come back.*⁴⁹

Klawe disagreed, and gave herself as an example of being underpaid because she hadn't asked for more.

That same day, Nadella issued a brief memo to all employees with the subject line RE: Empowering Others.⁵⁰ In it, he shared a link to the video, noted his mistake and stated, "I answered that question completely wrong." His memo went on to explain that he believes in equal pay for equal work and that Klawe is right in stating that if any person believes they deserve a pay raise they should ask for it. In his close he stated, "I certainly learned a valuable lesson."

Later that month, in an interview with David Rubenstein, Nadella shared what he thinks happened. It was a blind spot. Nadella explained:

*I gave an absolutely non-sensical answer...I was answering the question literally from my own personal experience without understanding the broader context and the depth of the question... which was what we are doing to address pay equality and not asking about my personal experience.*⁵¹

He also reflects on the incident in *Hit Refresh*, sharing:

*If you want to see what flapping around looks like, do a search for me and karma...In some ways, I'm glad I messed up in such a public forum because it helped me confront an unconscious bias that I didn't know I had, and it helped me find a new sense of empathy for the great women in my life and at my company.*⁵²

Be a humble leader for a nimble business.

Get clear about how you intend to model the way for others. We all have blind spots—we do or say things that are not aligned with our intentions, but we aren't seeing it. Humility is required so that others may help us see. We must stay nimble so that we can act on this new awareness.

Being nimble may conflict with what you see as being consistent. You are who you are, and you may have learned that it is powerful to stand firm in your ways. When nimble, you, and all in the organization, will continuously be asking, "is what we are doing and how we are being moving us forward? Is this vibrant?" (*The Pivot* defines a vibrant organization as one that stays ahead of its competition, maintains its highest value, and is a great place to work.)⁵³ Vibrancy requires strategic alignment out to the edges of the organization, not merely compliance with your commands. Strategy in this sense includes vision, direction, values, objectives, and game plan. The strategic objectives and game plan may be more difficult to apply to every role. Yet, business is a game and every person in your workplace, in fact every stakeholder, is part of that

game. Only when people are clear with the whole strategy can they fully align with it. This may require change, not consistency.

Consistency is often seen as a strength in leadership because it builds trust in that others feel they can anticipate what you will do next (and how it will affect them). Consistency creates routine, and it's possible to generate momentum that way. You feel sure about tomorrow when the plan is to be fully consistent with yesterday. Consistency is "sticky." That's good, right? Not 100% of the time.

Don't confuse consistency for integrity. Yes, always maintain integrity: walking your talk and doing what you say you will do. I ask you to consider disrupting consistency when orchestrating change. Know yourself, set a clear direction, and lead purposefully. Question how work gets done and how people are working together, and be nimble if things need to change.

Get clear about "best."

When Ridge first assumed the CEO role for WD-40 in 1997, the stated strategic vision was to gain market dominance around the world. At that time, the company had some overseas presence but was still known as and operating as a U.S. company. It's one thing to get clear and be clear within a single country footprint. While the product formula wouldn't change, business strategy and marketing had to. Success as a global business would require shedding any micro-management, and taking on the "risk" of change. Change did not come naturally to this focused, risk-averse company.

WD-40 has been in business since the 1950s. They are experts in what they do, and they were experts back in '99. Experts can have a more difficult time keeping up with the fast-changing world. It's hard to get clear about "what can be" when one knows "what is" so well! Change requires being humble and nimble. Humility allows for curiosity.

Ridge understood that he needed to orchestrate a change, including a Pivot *from* know-it-all experts focused only on their own individual performance *to* learning-obsessed experts who did their best for the organization (or "tribe" at WD-40) while excelling as individuals.

In an interview with Bill Taylor of Fast Company in 2016 Ridge explained, "We had such huge growth opportunities, but people were afraid to step out of their roles. The fear of failure is the biggest fear in the world."⁵⁴ One step toward this new way of being was requiring that he and his colleagues became more interested—more curious—in what was possible for the organization, products, and brand.

Over time, Ridge has gotten even more clear that a leader is humble. Because it (leading a vibrant business) is not about you (the leader) being in charge; "it is about you leading those in your charge." In a 2018 conference keynote Ridge stressed the importance of vulnerability:

Leaders need to exercise good judgment. Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from poor judgment (mistakes). Leaders need to show their vulnerability by saying, "Yes, I am showing good judgment but it's because I'm vulnerable, I'm not perfect..."⁵⁵

It's working. In addition to financial and market share success, 93% of WD-40 employees

report they are engaged at work.⁵⁶ In comparison, global employee engagement, according to Gallup, rose to a still unimpressive 36-39% in early 2021.⁵⁷

As a leader, get clear that you are modeling the way for others. If you want the future you envision to be reached, especially if this requires brilliant execution of a strategy that involves significant change, then you must create a context in which communication, collaboration, and best, not perfect, are the norm.

“In times of change, the learners will inherit the Earth, while the knowers will find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”

—Eric Hoffer

PART 2

Being Clear

Hope that a person will do what they won't or can't do is a powerful threat to clarity.

—Lori Michele Leavitt

Fear of loss is probably the single most powerful [influence] in human nature.

—Christopher Voss



CHAPTER 7

Hope & Fear

Be clear to help others get clear. If you are communicating with the expectation of another person getting clear, but you have not taken the time to understand how *they* need to receive it, you will not get what you expect. There are many emotions that a leader's communication can trigger; the most common are hope and fear.

The two faces of hope.

Hope is not always a positive when leading from strategic vision to action.

Hope opens the door for action. Sharing a vision that gives hope to those you lead can create openness to “what can be.” Hope opens up minds and hearts, while fear closes them. But hope is neither a strategic game plan nor an execution plan. If minds stay only on “hoping for,” the “doing what it takes” (for brilliant execution) is missed. Sharing a vision and strategy once (and in only one way) and then hoping those who need to execute brilliantly will magically do so is faulty logic. Motivational talks have their place. But leading is comprised of much more than talking. Insert clear expectations, of others and of you, to do what it takes to bring the vision to life and translate strategy into action. Yes, you too. Communicating hope and then not doing what you say you will do destroys the hope that was built. Destruction of hope often leaves a lasting memory. Communicate with integrity and have the courage, curiosity, and tenacity to continue even if you're uncomfortable.

Hope is an opener. Hope is not a strategy. Surround your hopeful energy and words of hope with expectation of action. Expecting the best of others fosters alignment and momentum, and strengthens one's willingness to hope. When you *expect* the best from a person and hold them accountable, you are more likely to get what you expect, even if it is a stretch for the person to reach those expectations.

You will get more of whatever you sow. Both expectations and hope expand their reach (or ripple as I like to say when speaking of leadership) to others who are watching this unfold.

Fear is a closer. Communicating in a way that creates fear in others closes them to whatever you are wanting them to understand and act on. You may get short-term compliance, but your best people will start looking for other opportunities and you'll likely not realize your desired long-

term results.

The production manager was toxic. Rather than building up others, he seemed to pride himself on calling out mistakes. He seemed to relish adding his opinion of why the person who had just made the mistake (or what he perceived as a mistake) was an idiot.

“We aren’t sure what to do,” the CEO shared, “He’s been with the company a long time and we’ve not always done our best by him, at least, he doesn’t think so.” I asked this leader what he intended to do next. He replied, “I’m going to re-organize so that this person is still in charge of work—because he’s really process-oriented and we need that—but now he’ll have lots fewer people to manage, or, er, put down, because we’ll place him over a second shift.” I asked if anything else would change, such as communicating a clear expectation about behavior and holding him accountable to that. If I recall correctly, the answer to that was a nod. That nod indicated a hope, and not a clear and mutually-agreed-to expectation of accountability. “Can *you* talk with him?”

When I talked with the production manager, he seemed to have a chip on his shoulder that dug deep into his heart. He’d been wronged in the past, and he was still not happy. But he was “planning to keep working there until he retires...” in a decade or so from then. He was open about how he felt. He was far from understanding, far from even wanting to understand, his effect on others. He was putting being right over getting results through others. That’s not leadership or effective management within a business aiming to be vibrant.

All my one-to-ones are confidential, so my feedback to the CEO and the new General Manager was this: if they wanted to make this work, it would take more of their attention. A re-org was not going to build his character or improve the culture as they *hoped*. They needed to set clear performance expectations, including how he interacted with his new team, and dig deeper to uncover what might personally motivate him to build others up rather than tearing them down.

Both the CEO and General Manager were smart, capable, and caring. They were, and are, committed to leading a vibrant workplace. But *hope is not a strategy* and, after a few more years, the production manager was asked to leave.

Fear creates a strong negative pull away from change. If change is needed, fear is a hurdle. Be nimble. Change will require something different from you and how you lead, in addition to more tactical contextual changes that may be needed such as organizational structure. Perhaps you need to explore how you might adjust your leadership style, communicate more often and in different ways, be more engaged and engaging, and manage work and lead people (with people, even yourself, teach/learn, lead, coach, mentor, advise, etc.). Choose your words based on your best understanding of what others need in order to understand and commit. Keep in mind that words you feel are clear and appropriate might inadvertently trigger fear in a person—be it loss, blame, or failure. If this happens, the other person will not be listening fully. They won’t even be thinking clearly due to their distracted mind. Orchestrate a safe place to speak out, before change demands it (best to get ready now). Then communicate, in all forms, with authentic curiosity—about people and “what is.”

“Genuine curiosity is the fastest hack to avoid fear.”

—Christopher Voss

Christopher Voss is a negotiations expert. He understands the importance of communicating in a way that is clear to who receives it. His experience includes high-stakes, life-or-death situations as an FBI hostage negotiator. So, what does this have to do with our communications in business, career, and life? Plenty; at minimum, significantly fewer misunderstandings and escalating situations.

Chris' advice is to hear the other side out with the full intention of connecting.⁵⁸ That is, stay curious. This will help turn into a collaboration what might otherwise feel like a negotiation (or blame, or shame) to the other person.

If your aim is to realize desired results (not to simply be right), then learn to stay curious. The second you decide you know it all, you risk being tuned out or misunderstood. Even asking questions, but from a vantage point of already knowing the answer and seeing if they can come up with it, is not truly being in a state of curiosity. And it can lead to a dis-connect from, rather than a meaningful connection with, the person you intend to connect with. As a leader, lacking curiosity will result in not getting the outcomes you expect.

Fear inhibits discovering “what is.”

When people feel fearful, they won't contribute fully to discovering “what is.”

We've seen this too often in business. What keeps us from learning? In order for any business to stay ahead of the competition, or even relevant, the minds of leaders must remain open. Remember, fear is a closer. Every person must feel safe to step up and speak out.

“We had learned to hide bad news [including me].” That's paraphrasing a longer statement from Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, describing what had happened in the GM workplace that ultimately led to consumer deaths and a significant recall in 2014.⁵⁹ General Motors settled with 124 families over deaths resulting from faulty ignition switches that were installed in 2.6 million small cars. By June of that year, 28 million cars had been recalled for the ignition switch and other issues.

Even more shocking is that GM knew about the ignition switch issue since 2003 and hid it internally, possibly because of the cost to fix the issue. Barra became CEO in January 2014. Prior to becoming CEO, Barra served as GM's executive vice president of Global Product Development, Purchasing and Supply Chain. In April 2014, Barra testified before Congress and apologized for the company's actions. “In the past,” she said, “we had more of a cost culture, and now we have a customer culture that focuses on safety and quality.”⁶⁰

Having a cost culture is no excuse for not reporting and fixing issues in vehicles that harmed drivers. At the crux of the matter was fear.

Several studies have shown that employees distort the information they convey to their superiors, communicating upward in a way that minimizes negative information for fear of coming across as ignorant, incompetent, intrusive, or insubordinate, and therefore at risk of losing their job.⁶¹ Employees weigh these costs when considering whether or not to speak up about issues and concerns.

“A virus had been spreading throughout the culture and the company, shielded by our past success, feeding on fear of failure, rebuffing bad news, and suppressing a sense of accountability.” That’s from Risto Siilasmaa, former Chairman of Nokia and author of *Transforming Nokia*.⁶² For anyone tracking the cellular market, it’s clear that Nokia completely missed an opportunity to excel. In fact, they were slow to move away from the outdated operating system (Symbian) they were using. Nokia held to their strategic decision to use a Microsoft operating system in their phones, when the clear market winners for cellular operating systems were Apple’s iOS and Google’s Android. I say “strategic” loosely, however, because what drove their decisions was more fear than strategy.

Executives were afraid to publicly acknowledge the inferiority of the operating system they were still using. Top managers intimidated middle managers by accusing them of not being ambitious enough to meet their goals, and so top management was lied to by middle management who felt that telling the truth was useless.

If you’re a fearless leader, you may still feel uncomfortable in uncertainty. Yet you have learned to discern whether you truly should feel afraid in the situation, where there might be real harm involved, or if the feeling is simply discomfort. Being wrong, looking bad, and all other personal fears are pushed aside by your focus on leading all to a desired future state. You are clear and clear-headed. Now you are ready to *be* clear in your communication so that others can *get* clear.

While you may be fearless, those receiving your communication may not be. You must discover how they need to receive your communication.

First, consider your relationship with each person who you want your communication to land clearly with. How might they perceive the communication when it comes from you? How they have experienced you over time, and also how you’ve experienced them, has created a context.

When communicating, in any form, the words you choose matter. You’ve likely heard the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” But have you considered that your words will translate into actions in the minds of those you are addressing? What images (and fears) will come to their minds? What might they believe you mean, based on their own beliefs? What might they think someone would mean if saying or writing those words? Or based on what you’ve said and then done previously?

“My task which I am trying to achieve is by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel — it is, before all, to make you see. That — and no more, and it is everything.”

—Joseph Conrad

Your tone also matters. It is hard to fake a feeling in the moment, so take time to refresh your own mind before starting. Doing so will aid you in communicating with a thoughtful tone rather than a reactive one.

“We often refuse to accept an idea merely because the tone of voice in which it has been expressed is unsympathetic to us.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche

Remember, *you cannot change a person, but you can change their context*. Start with the context of your relationship with this person, and then consider the fears they may have.

Fear of looking bad.

Fear of looking bad oneself, and fear of causing embarrassment for someone in direct authority, both get in the way of clarity.

If you find that people are withholding their point of view, keeping ideas to themselves until they are absolutely sure they are right, staying silent in meetings, or nodding in agreement despite having an objection, this fear is present.

“Your fear of looking stupid is making you look stupid.”

—RuPaul

The senior leadership team of Ford as described in Chapter 5, when Alan Mulally became CEO, is a good example of this fear in action. Senior leadership team members not only avoided exposing the truth about performance in their divisions or regions, they actually lied about it. They chose to show a progress measure as on track (highlighted with green) rather than show the truth, which would have been colored yellow or red.

Why? Because they didn’t want to be judged and criticized by their peers. They also were used to a context where poor performance would lead to being fired.

It took Mulally several meetings with these executives to change that context, at least during the time he was CEO.

Fear of being blamed.

You’ll find yourself in an endless loop trying to solve an issue if the person you are communicating with has a fear of being blamed. A person with this fear is so caught up in defending themselves that they cannot see the errors made, and they cannot embrace new ways. To them, embracing change means that what was done before was wrong, and that means they can be blamed.

“Great tranquility of heart is his who cares for neither praise nor blame.”

—Thomas A. Kempis

The production manager, as described in this chapter, is an example of this fear in action. Although he was open about his disappointment with the company, he simply would not change. His need to be right was deeply embedded within him.

Leaders shifted him to a position supervising fewer people, but this was ineffective. It did not change the context to one where he felt any desire to change his behavior.

Other changes in context addressed behavior, but were not applied enough to create the required influence. Communicating clearer expectations that involved measuring teamwork improvement, not just quantitative results, and including him in smaller cross-functional teams were not consistently attended to enough for the production manager to choose to change.

Fear of failure.

When a person is caught up in avoiding failure, they won't step up to take on a new project or position. While the fear of failure is similar to the fear of being blamed or looking bad, there is one important difference. Fear of failure is a fear of not being perfect, or of losing what one felt accountable to steward. This fear is more internal and less about what others will think.

“Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising every time we fail.”

—Confucius

An example of this fear in action is indirectly expressed in the CEO examples in Chapter 5, particularly P&G when A.G. Lafley took over the CEO role in 2000. A stall in innovation is an outcome of fear of failure sweeping through an organization.

Lafley needed to work quickly, and led a successful strategy of going outside the company to generate new ideas. We are seeing Satya Nadella do this over a longer term internally at Microsoft, by removing competitiveness, increasing collaboration, and—perhaps most importantly—removing risk by clearly communicating that the company is unafraid of risk, empowering people to move quickly regardless of mistakes that come from doing so.

Fear of loss.

Fearing loss so much that any change seems too risky or costly is going to hold a person back from performing at their best or making decisions that lead to growth.

The fear of loss can be subtle. Leaders know how important it is to not only discover, but also plan ahead for this fear as strategies change. The change could involve changes in pay scales, physical space and environment, team, automation, number and timing of hours worked, and more. If it is not clear how the change benefits a person, it could easily be perceived as a loss. Gaining alignment with a vision and strategy also can fail when those needed to execute fear that the future will be worse, not better.

Fear of confrontation.

Fearing confrontation or conflict holds people back from speaking out. This fear may even be

blocking them from speaking the truth.

*“Constructively debating tough issues and getting somewhere is only possible
when people can speak their minds without fear of punishment.”*

—Andy Grove

*I learned [in leadership] to put away emotions, like anger,
that block clarity.*

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

*Trying to please everybody is impossible — if you did that,
you'd end up in the middle with nobody liking you. You've
just got to make the decision about what you think is your
best, and do it.*

—John Lennon



CHAPTER 8

Get Out of Your Way

It's not all about you. To be clear with others, so that they can get clear, you must communicate *with* them. That is, you truly want others to understand. You are willing to take the extra time and consideration to prepare, deliver, and follow up. If dialogue is possible, create the context for open conversation.

This extra time and consideration will become your *modus operandi*, even when communicating your vision (and the direction that will be a north star for all). To be clear, think of them not you. You'll be rewarded with a much greater probability that others understand what you are saying exactly as you meant to say it, and take those words to heart. What you communicate must resonate individually for each person. Commitment is gained only when a message is translated into what that means for the person hearing it, and it feels positive to them. With understanding and commitment, what people will say and do next is what you most wanted when communicating.

To become skilled in this, be aware of how your communication lands with others. Learn to nimbly recognize diverse communication styles and speak inclusively. Know *you*. And seek to understand how others view you, their relationship with you, their role, and their level of empowerment or safety when interacting with you. Practice how you communicate in every way, including words, tone, actions, expressions, and gestures. Listen, connect, empathize, and choose words that will land clearly with others.

To be nimble is to be skilled at swiftly going over, under, around, or through whatever is blocking progress. Sometimes that block is you.

When your intention is to help others get clear: think of others, not yourself. Sometimes you'll use "you." But for a group, or when including others and yourself, use "we." (An exception is within a peer group or similar and the subject of your communication is you! In that case, use "I.")

Keep your eye on the results you want, and the other person (rather than yourself), and you will stay out of your way when your intention is to be clear; you'll be calm, aware of emotional triggers, and resist being triggered.

To communicate more calmly and clearly, think of others, not yourself; "we" not "I," "you," or "them."

When your mind is on the other person and their understanding, you can gracefully handle what you say, signal, or do, without unwanted emotions taking hold. You are not jumping onto their agenda or trying to coddle them, though. You aren't giving your power away. You are staying in your power and sharing it. You will express your vision, direction, point of view, or knowledge in the way that will most effectively land with them.

Thinking of the other person the minute you open your mouth is something you can start doing right away. Or this may take time and practice if you have formed a habit of taking things personally. If focusing immediately on the other person doesn't come naturally right away, you've developed a habit counter to this. And that habit isn't serving you in how you want to be now. It's not a physical or mental flaw. Any habit, including those that you feel are just part of who you are, can be replaced with ways that will serve you better. How long you've held this habit, what it means to you, how motivated you are to change it, and if you can change the context that triggers the habit, will make a difference in how long the process of this personal change takes. Studies report a wide range in timeframe, from 18 days to almost a year.⁶³ Over time your words and ways will *include* them and *connect* with them, which brings the most power to the outcome of any communication. You'll get through defenses and filters. You'll be clear.

To keep unwanted emotions from inserting themselves into your communications, here are three tips you can start now:

- 1) Practice pausing, no matter how awkward that feels. If pausing does not come naturally, try turning what you are about to say into a question. After asking a question it will feel more natural to pause, observe, and listen. You'll also gain instant feedback on how clear you've been with the other.
- 2) Work on sharing a conversation rather than just talking. Talking is only part of communicating.
- 3) Revisit the words and styles you've been using and find ones that will more likely inspire the actions or behaviors you want from others. If you are complaining, the complaint (and especially your energy surrounding that complaint) is what will most deeply land. You may get short-term compliance, but you are not going to get long-term higher performance. And if you are choosing your words, but you are not *connecting* with others, you won't inspire.

Connecting with and including others in communication improves alignment, momentum, and performance results.

Isn't "alignment, momentum, and performance results" what you want from the power you hold? Sharing power builds up others so that every person is committed to get results. This builds connection and trust. And connection and trust often lead to faster commitment. And when people feel committed, the strategic vision, direction, game plan, objectives, reinforcement of values and purpose, etc., attract others' attention, desire to understand and commitment like the pull of a magnet. A magic magnet.

Seeking power through positional authority, on the other hand, tends to lower others' engagement. You might be pushing (like trying to push a rope) to get your way, even if you feel you are simply managing work and working very hard. If you feel you are managing people, stop

and reconsider your approach. Join a peer group to help discover better ways and safely help you become aware of your blind spots. Learn what leaders who are successful today are doing, and how they are being. For many managers and “leaders” in management who are still managing work rather than leading people, this is a difficult habit to break. We are still in the industrial age of work in so many ways. Learning to orchestrate change takes time, attention, and help.

“Is there not a blind spot in the organ of intellect as well as that of vision — an idiotic area, where ideas are represented but not transmitted to the intelligent center?”

—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

Discovering your blind spots.

One of the following three common blind spots (discovered by other leaders as they grow, examine themselves, and seek feedback) may help you discover a blind spot in you:

BEING AN ISLAND.

As David Pottruck, former CEO of Charles Schwab, was rising in his career, he worked hard and could not understand why his colleagues resented the hours he put in and his aggressive push for results. During an interview for Bill George’s book, *Authentic Leadership*, Pottruck recalled:

*I thought my accomplishments would speak for themselves. It never occurred to me that my level of energy would intimidate and offend other people, because in my mind I was trying to help the company.*⁶⁴

Pottruck was shocked and hurt when his boss told him, “Dave, your colleagues do not trust you.” He explained, “I was in denial, as I didn’t see myself as others saw me. I had no idea how self-serving I looked to other people. Still, somewhere in my inner core the feedback resonated as true.”

It was only after his second divorce that Pottruck was finally able to acknowledge that he’d had a blind spot that kept him thinking he was serving all, when he was mostly serving himself. He shared that while he thought he’d had a wife-selection problem his counselor corrected him with, “The good news is you do not have a wife-selection problem; the bad news is you have a husband-behavior problem.”

Pottruck then made a determined effort to change and has developed better ways of being.

NEEDING TO BE UNDERSTOOD.

This book is about leading with the intention to get clear and to be clear—to be understood. Needing to be understood is different. Needing to be understood (liked, the best, in charge, the winner, right, etc.) triggers unwanted emotions or reactions and often results in misunderstandings. That’s counterproductive to being clear.

Before I became more aware and intentional, when my need to be understood was triggered, I'd launch into overexplaining and, at times, speak more rapidly, with fewer pauses, and raise my voice. Like Pottruck, I thought I had a partner-selection problem, in life and in business. What I had was a boundary-setting problem. I wasn't being clear up front, which inadvertently allowed assumptions to fill the other person's mind. Then when those assumptions were made, I would react to their misunderstanding as described above.

Now that I am more aware and intentional, it is not that I like being misunderstood. I still take the time to be as clear as possible, and can still improve my ability to stay curious and pause when a response indicates misunderstanding. What's different is that I'm not triggered; I don't react instantly and seemingly uncontrollably as before.

What I experienced personally also happens for many in the workplace. Not proactively establishing expectations, even boundaries, up front in a working relationship may seem respectful. It's not. *No one gets you like you get you.* Misunderstandings that may feel to you like disrespect, or crossing boundaries that the other person should have known, are more likely to happen. It's more respectful to first establish how to work together. Not setting expectations limits one's potential. They may think they are being and doing exactly what is desired or required, but they very well may be missing the mark. It is respectful to be clear up front, and again when expectations are not met over time.

TAKING THINGS PERSONALLY.

What people do or say tells you much more about them than it tells you about yourself, or even about what they think of you. But this is hard to remember when you feel attacked. Whether "attacked" for you hits you as disrespect of your authority, demeaning or bullying you, or disliking you, it all feels bad. When you're triggered by what feels personal, you might shut down and stop talking, or you may go on the offensive and lose any chance of communicating effectively.

"Whatever happens around you, don't take it personally...Nothing other people do is because of you."

—Don Miguel Ruiz

It may be hard for you to see your blind spots or know what triggers you. When you take the time to get clear (see Part I) and remain introspective, curious, and open to input, you become more aware.

Context matters. I have found being part of a diverse leadership-level peer advisory group an excellent place where my peers care about me and are ready to confront my words and behaviors that aren't aligned with what I've shared that I want. Confidential assessments, used with learning in mind, are also helpful for better understanding individuals—and also for understanding context, such as norms and networks in the workplace.

Know yourself.

David Marquet (discussed in Chapter 3) was a top student in the naval academy and on a fast-track for leading a ship as a commanding officer. He cared about others and was not arrogant. Yet, his initial way of being a know-it-all held him back from being a transformational leader, until he was forced into a situation—as commanding officer of a ship he didn’t know—before having time to get to know it. This became a catalyst for him to get to know himself and the leader he truly wanted to be.

What Marquet did next is important: He took time to gain clarity—that is, to envision a better future, without a need to know all the details. He got out of his own way and led with true curiosity and openness to how others chose to execute. Within a few years, the USS *Santa Fe* was winning awards for being a high-performing ship. Not only that, but the team kept performing at award-winning levels after Marquet had left.

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.”

—Aristotle

Get out of your own way. Take the time to get to know yourself, ask for help from trusted peers and advisors to identify blind spots, and choose a development path toward better leadership. Modeling how to be clear so that others can get clear leaves a legacy of high performance that starts now.

Leaders: first, get to the point! When someone is reading a poem or a novel, they are positioned to enjoy the journey; they are not shaken if they don't understand the message immediately. Not so for communicating at work. While you are explaining how you got to your point, the other person is becoming fearful, making assumptions, or tuning out. What lands won't be clear.

—Lori Michele Leavitt



CHAPTER 9

Get to the Point

Too often our communication about what we envisioned or understood clearly is not understood by others, even though we think we've been clear. Often this is because we are not getting to a clear point up front. Not getting to the point can create anxiety and assumptions. Be thoughtful and prepared to convey your message, but make sure your point is first, always.

When our point is not understood, what we say or write cannot create alignment, does not inspire others to be and do their best, and so does not help gain momentum.

“The result of bad communication is a disconnection between strategy and execution.”

—Chuck Martin

Sure, there can be great visions and strategies, but without results they aren't going to end great or be remembered as being great. Make clarity a priority. Make time for it. Model it for others.

Meetings are an excellent place to model the way to being clear, to improve communication, including pre-meeting preparation and in-meeting dialogue.

Expect preparation before meeting.

Meetings are more effective when every participant comes to the meeting well prepared, although how to prepare for a meeting may vary. Creative idea generation typically involves only mental preparation, which to some may feel like doing nothing (but is indeed an intentional act). Decision-making meetings, on the other hand, typically involve compiling data, turning that data into digestible information, and reading.

Preparation aids clarity for presenters and others at the meeting. If you've invited someone who has no preparation to do, re-consider. You want to invite people who will be prepared and effectively engaged during the meeting. Also invite only the minimum needed (in head count and role) to achieve the purpose or goal of that meeting. While there is no magic formula for balancing cost and time against the potential outcomes, it's best to default to the lean side then add as needed. All meeting attendees should be prepared in some way (mental and/or

information) and be engaged. Get clear and be clear about the meeting's purpose and you'll be better able to orchestrate the right people to bring together for that meeting. Cut down confusion, complexity, and wasted time by more carefully selecting meeting attendees.

What happens prior to a meeting is a strong indicator of how *effective* that meeting will be. What you want for an effective meeting is for people to enter the meeting with some understanding of what will be presented, and an openness to listen and be engaged in what others say.

At Amazon, perhaps one of the most innovative companies in the world (that continues to grow as if it was a nimble start-up company), participants in a meeting are required to think about what they need to give and take from that meeting before attending it. Those presenting ideas must write them out and distribute the written material in time for it to be on the meeting table when the meeting starts. Then, in the meeting, there is a clear point to get to that every participant has studied prior to showing up.

Before this new way, when a meeting involved PowerPoint presentations to multiple participants with no (or only some) idea of what the point was, people were interrupting with questions without taking time to hear the entire presentation. Former Amazon senior executive John Rossman found that replacing PowerPoint presentations with memos helped meeting participants develop greater clarity about each topic.⁶⁵

CEO Jeff Bezos addressed how they do meetings in his 2017 annual letter to shareholders.⁶⁶ Those attending the meeting must write a six-page memo for any agenda item that they are responsible for. And they are asked to follow a particular format.

During the first 15-20 minutes of the meeting, every attendee reads the memos to themselves and makes notes for themselves. Bezos found this to create a more meaningful and effective meeting. "When you have to write your ideas out in complete sentences, complete paragraphs, it forces a deeper clarity," Bezos told Conor Neill, at IESE Business School in 2012.⁶⁷ "If you have a traditional PowerPoint presentation, executives interrupt. If you read the whole six-page memo, on page two you have a question but on page four that question is answered." He added, "The great memos are written and re-written, shared with colleagues who are asked to improve the work, set aside for a couple of days, and then edited again with a fresh mind. They simply can't be done in a day or two."

Make time for dialogue in meetings.

A similar change to meetings was implemented by A.G. Lafley when he took the helm of Proctor & Gamble in the '80s. In his book, *Playing to Win*, Lafley describes two major changes: *from* the senior person in the room speaking first and most *to* the senior person speaking least, and *from* a full meeting being hostage to slide presentations *to* a limit of only three slides for any meeting and robust dialogue.⁶⁸

"Clarity in language depends on clarity in thought."

—Arthur Schlesinger

To clarify how dialogue would be shared in meetings, Lafley states:

The kind of dialogue we wanted to foster is called assertive inquiry. Built on the work of organizational learning theorist Chris Argyris at Harvard Business School, this approach blends the explicit expression of your own thinking (advocacy) with a sincere exploration of the thinking of others (inquiry). In other words, it means clearly articulating your own ideas and sharing the data and reasoning behind them, while genuinely inquiring into the thoughts and reasoning of your peers.

“Leadership means fostering an environment in which people can produce valid information and choices. All people in an organization should learn to do this.”

—Chris Argyris

Leaders especially must learn to get to the point, no matter how uncomfortable that is, or how much longer it takes to prepare your communication so that your point is as clear as possible to those who you want to understand it, and act on it. Since everyone in an organization should learn this, meetings are a great place to model the way.

In workplace communications, get to the point.

You’ve thought about it. You got clear. You and your leadership team spent hours getting clear. And then, broadcasting out to the edges of the organization fails. Execution is poor. End of month, quarter, and year results are lackluster. Internal change requires being clear. And being clear when broadcasting out beyond the leadership team requires getting to the point up front.

“The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

—George Bernard Shaw

The most common reasons for failed communications at work include the following:

1. Long explanations are given, *before* the point.
2. Stories are told without making a clear point.
3. Jargon unfamiliar to recipients is used.
4. Commands or non-inclusive words are used.
5. Context shows a lack of empathy.

Let’s look at these from what to do:

EXPLAIN AFTER MAKING YOUR POINT.

When the point comes at the end of a long explanation, it will often be missed. Consider a triangle. Right-side-up, its point is at the top. That's what I'm asking you to do when you are communicating in a business setting.

Communication that starts with an explanation, story, or anything but the point, takes the form of an upside-down triangle. Your explanation is at the wide end, and your point is now at the bottom. Leave that form for your next novel.

Your point shouldn't be a mystery or a riddle to solve. A long explanation without a clear point first feels like a puzzle. So your point will be missed and what you intended will be misunderstood.

When you don't get to the point up front, your recipient(s) will make assumptions about what the point is well before you've even gotten to it. If you are physically with the listener, you might notice anxiety, restlessness, or disengagement not long after you've started into your before-the-point explanation.

Even if you are a leader who has established that you care, it is human nature for any person working in that organization to assume what your point is, if you haven't gotten to it yet. By the time they hear or read your intended point, it may be hard for them to shift away from their initial assumption.

And rarely is one's initial assumption a good match with your intention. Your recipient(s) will typically assume something negative is going to be said when a long explanation comes before your point. Therefore, get to the point before your explanation supporting that point.

PAINT A CLEARER VISION AND MORE INSPIRING MESSAGE USING A STORY, AFTER MAKING YOUR POINT.

Explanations, as discussed above, are typically used when the communication is tactical; it is about something concrete that has happened, is happening, or is what you are wanting to have happen in the very near future.

Stories are an excellent way to describe a more distant future vision; a future that is a bit fuzzy when it comes to how exactly it will be realized. Still, make a point first, even if it is as short as stating that you want to share your vision, you know it is in the distance, but you need everyone's understanding and commitment to turn it into a reality. Stories also help to express models of how to be at work, such as living core values or the "why" of work (such as purpose). Use stories to help others visualize a better future, not in communications aimed at brilliant execution and near future actions.

Stories can help make your point clearer, but after you've stated the point. An abruptly introduced story can be great for a book. We, the reader, can enjoy the lilt of the words and the anticipation and mystery it creates in us. We are happy to wait to fully grasp the point. And we can make all the assumptions we want since we don't personally have to act on those words. Not so in business. Leaders, get to the point! Then describe it.

ONLY USE JARGON IF IT IS INCLUSIVE.

Words unique to your organizational culture may seem like jargon to those outside it, but can be glue for your message when used inside. Be careful with this, though. Make certain that every person who needs to act on your message is included. If you are introducing unique words or phrases to create inclusivity, but not all are in-the-loop of this language yet, make sure to get to your point first and then introduce the new language.

Jargon that is unfamiliar to those you are intending to be clear with will not land well. You've effectively excluded them when you intended to engage them. Use of unfamiliar or non-inclusive language will create an "us vs. you" context.

Getting to your point first helps to open up your audience to say they are not clear, which they won't do if they feel they've been separated because they don't understand the jargon you're using. If they have the point of your message, they will feel safer to ask about details (like jargon) they don't know, without feeling like they've been purposefully excluded or aren't supposed to know those details.

STEER CLEAR OF WORDS, TONES, OR GESTURES THAT LAND WITH OTHERS AS A COMMAND.

Commands will neither engage nor inspire. If you aim for others to understand, be inspired, and engage, then test what you plan to say before you say it. Check the tone in what you plan to say or write. And, if live, get feedback about expressions and gestures you tend to use.

Being the leader naturally positions you in others' eyes as the boss, someone "in command." So, if you want to come across another way (while also orchestrating brilliant execution) you need to work at it. You want to exhibit a leadership presence: confident not arrogant, humble not meek, and clear.

Making your point as a command, up front, may gain short-term compliance. Commanding without first getting to a clear point will get action from people desperate to do what they think you want as quickly as possible, but not the action you expect. Other non-inclusive words typically result in compliance from a few, ambivalence and uncertainty from most, and leave some disengaged.

TAKE CARE WITH CONTEXT.

Context, be it social or structural, is critical for clear communication. Context can mute your message or amplify it. Context is often overlooked. If you consider any context for your communication, at minimum consider timing and venue. Make sure the choice of time and venue that is best for you, or simply what has always been done, does not put your recipients in an emotional state that blocks their ability to receive your message. The last thing you want is to have some unintended message stick in the minds of your audience well before you deliver what you intended to communicate.

A meeting time of early Sunday morning may work for you and the leadership team. It is rarely a good choice for most people. Again, you may get compliance, and you may perceive commitment when they show up. They are there, physically, but their minds and hearts are on being somewhere else (in the nearest future possible).

Venue also can make an important difference in the energy—not just alertness, but a state of mind—from those in attendance. Different venues fit different gathering types and groups. For example, you may find that you and the senior leadership team are most effective together out of the office for planning sessions, in order to think strategically and share dialogue without interruptions. For problem-solving meetings, however, meeting where those closer to the work or with information to share can come and go without a major interruption in their workday may be better. Meeting in the office may work best for some, while meeting online from their remote locations may work better for others.

Note that this isn't about being a people-pleaser. It is about getting results. Choose the context that's most likely to result in the clearest communication.

Communicate for brilliant execution.

As you prepare to communicate, in any form, be clear for yourself what the purpose is. As a leader, in most cases, you will be communicating with the purpose of brilliant execution of “x,” where “x” is a strategic objective, initiative, major decision, etc. And in most of those cases, what people do, how they do it, and/or how they behave doing it, needs to change. Your role is to orchestrate the alignment and momentum in your organization such that change becomes more natural; just how things are done in your organization. This starts with ensuring that the stage (for change or a Pivot) is set, with a culture that feels safe for all to speak out and step up, and where every person knows their manager wants them to be successful. Your orchestration will lead to many people making shifts and taking best next steps from “what is” to “what can be.”

To communicate for brilliant execution:

1. Get to the point.
2. Start with a few words that open minds, such as sharing heart-felt appreciation.
3. Pause. Ask for input or questions, and use prepared illustrations to respond.

The CEO shared with me the report-like speech he planned to give to the entire company, which was comprised primarily of unionized machinists. His intention was to describe a change in how pay and bonuses would be calculated, and he believed he was providing them with good news. He was also giving out an immediate increase in pay for that year, and there was a rather complex formula used to do so. The culture was not one I'd describe as trusting of management.

After reading through this two-page all-text report that he intended to read to his mostly unionized workforce, I suggested: Before the speech, boil down what you've written into up to three charts. Start your talk with your mind set on being open for dialogue. The flow would be to first get to the point, then show the charts, and then explain the charts using the core message in the report you have just shared with me.

He was beaming when he shared with me how his meeting went with crew, staff, and management. He sensed that all employees understood “what was,” “what is,” what the future holds (“what can be”), and their role in that future, better than ever in the past 25

years. I sensed that he gained trust.

Be clear so that every person is taking their best next steps.

As a leader, you set strategic vision, direction, and game plan. What you want is for every person to be making day-to-day choices based on what is best for tomorrow, not simply what was done yesterday. You must communicate so that others not only understand, but embrace that bigger picture and direction you are setting and choose the best actions, or steps, to take next.

The head of operations appreciated a capable manager. It seemed that she got along well with her team, and he could see her team members' confidence grow. She played to their strengths as best she could. It also seemed that she was confident. Her words were well-chosen and certain. What he didn't realize was that she did not feel confident in herself; she even felt she was never enough.

The CEO was aiming to grow a more healthy, vibrant culture. He asked his senior leadership team to invite their best candidates to take a seat on a strategic-direction team. His idea for this team was to bring them into the strategic planning process as representatives of the truth, the "what is."

It was with excitement that the head of operations prepared to invite the manager he so appreciated. I happened to be invited by the CEO to a planning session, which also included the heads of operations and human resources. The focus of this meeting was getting the right people into this new strategic-direction team, clarifying this team's purpose, and preparing for the first meeting. I could tell that the head of operations was a bit nervous about how to approach those he wanted to invite. I happened to coach the person he most wanted on the team and knew that she was not as confident in her abilities or value to the organization. She felt the least confident about how he felt about her. She assumed the worst. The perception of the head of operations and others was that she was quite confident—possibly overly so.

Although I could not share her feelings or assumptions with him, I was pleased that he was open to sharing aloud what he planned to say.

He began his planned invitation by explaining what the new strategic-direction team was and why it was a good idea. What he stated was true and well-put, but it was minutes in before he mentioned the person he would be addressing or that the purpose of this talk was to invite her to be part of it. He also never stated his appreciation of her.

I sensed that the likelihood of the manager staying open as she listened was very low.

I thanked him, shared what I appreciated, and asked him to try flipping the order of his words, in order to get to the point (the invitation) first. I asked him to share with me what he appreciated about her, what context would be most positive for her, and to practice looking for signals from her as he presented this invitation to her. He just needed a sounding board (we can all benefit from one). He got to the point when inviting her. She said, "yes."

This situation is all too common. A manager appreciates a team member, but that team member has no idea and assumes the worst. In turn, the manager either misses that this is happening or

feels that the person is not living up to their potential, which only strengthens the team member's feeling of not being enough, or not appreciated, or a threat, or however this vicious cycle of assumptions and misunderstandings manifests for them.

What do you need to be running in people's heads (and hearts) in order to get what you expect? Your main point, stated up front, will create the openness in others that you need to communicate effectively.

“My mother...always valued clarity and simplicity above all else. If someone doesn't understand what you are writing, then everything else you do is superfluous...If any thoughtful, curious reader finds what I do impenetrable, I've failed.”

—Malcom Gladwell

Your ability to come into an uncertain time and an uncertain future and bring about clarity is key. The people who are capable of getting into a situation where there is in some sense panic, and who can bring first clarity on what to do next — that is invaluable.

—Satya Nadella



CHAPTER 10

Communicating to be clear inspires and creates hope. In turn, this opens the door for gaining shared commitment—to align and commit to achieving strategic objectives and goals, together. This takes *continuously* communicating to be clear.

Like the brief exuberance sometimes created by a motivational speaker across a large audience, at your workplace, a single communication from you will have a short-lived inspirational influence. “What is” at a workplace, particularly its culture, can quickly overshadow that influence.

Placing values into documents or on the wall does not generate commitment. Shared commitment is generated from what leaders model and nurture. If leaders are modeling a different way than what is stated in the values, the existing culture, not the stated mission and values, is what will drive decisions and judgments. When individuals who are in the “leader” role are driven by hubris, commitment is often demanded, not earned. Alignment, in these cases, is not generated organically; it is manipulated through incentives and pressure to win.

Lehman Brothers, one of the world’s largest investment banks in 2008, began their mission statement with, “We are one firm, defined by our unwavering commitment to our clients, our shareholders, and each other.”⁶⁹ Whether this was ignored or misconstrued by their leadership could be debated. What leaders seemed to broadcast, and what rang loudest through the company, was to do whatever it took to deliver the highest returns, and make a lot of money doing that.

On September 15, 2008, Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, with \$639 billion in assets and \$619 billion in debts.⁷⁰ At the time of its collapse, Lehman was the fourth-largest investment bank in the United States with over 25,000 employees globally. The housing crisis is pointed to as the cause of Lehman’s collapse. The housing crisis was not the crux of the matter. Dick Fuld had been CEO and chairman for more than a decade and considered himself a Wall Street hero, a risk-taking winner.

The crux of Lehman’s collapse was hubris that spread through the company, starting at the top with Chairman and CEO Fuld, blinding decision makers from getting clear about “what is.” The U.S. treasury disbursed trillions of dollars in bailout funds to banks, insurers, other financial institutions, and automakers, including Bank of America, AIG, Fannie Mae, and GM. The U.S. government chose not to bail out Lehman, calling their failure self-inflicted.⁷¹ Lehman Brothers lived, and left, a legacy of irresponsible hubris-driven risk.

“Unfortunately, part of the hubris among the management was they [felt certain that they] knew better than anybody else.”

—Madelyn Antoncic

Fuld's strategy was too risky, to a fault, and led to poor results. Saying the results were poor is an understatement; the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy was, and remains today, the largest corporate bankruptcy filing in U.S. history.

Hubris is divisive. Winners and losers. It creates blindness to the harm being done. This is not what a vibrant business strives for. Almost a decade after Lehman Brothers' collapse, Dick Fuld was unrepentant about his late firm's culture and its role in the financial crisis while speaking at a conference.⁷² He placed the blame on misguided government and central-bank policy, and irresponsible borrowers. Stated like the hero he sees himself to be, Fuld argued that Lehman was "mandated into bankruptcy" and could have survived otherwise. And that he had no regrets.

Most would agree that mistakes or failures resulting from a leader's hubris, with disregard to the unnecessary harm caused to those relying on the leader, are not ok.

Be clear about mistakes that are encouraged, ok, and not ok.

When a client comes to me with a concern about one or more individuals on their team making mistakes, I first ask, "What type of mistake?" Often these leaders want people in their organization to be innovative, yet leaders have not taken the time to get clear and be clear about what (and when) mistakes are encouraged, what type of mistake is ok, and what type of mistake is not ok. Often innovation and even learning are blocked by a perceived (or real) risk of stepping beyond what is allowed. Leaders may say they want innovation, but send a different message.

Some mistakes are not ok. A mistake that threatens physical safety when working in a necessarily controlled environment, such as manufacturing, is not ok. Standing on a wheel-based swivel chair to change a lightbulb is never ok in any context. Risking your own safety skydiving, and ending up with a broken arm, is a mistake that you might have defined as ok for you and part of your personal growth. But choosing not to follow instructions, which results in a mistake such as breaking a bone, is not ok. And so on.

Keep in mind the workplace context. If people tend to shy away from making any mistake, then a leader wanting more innovation and learning might initiate project teams with clear safety nets to experiment with creation or solutions. A place where mistakes, at least ones made while aiming for improvement, are ok. In some cases, the workplace has become too lax or arrogant, and in these a leader may want to clarify values and principles. In a 2017 interview with PrivCap, Riverside Company co-CEO Stewart Kohl describes one way his company has maintained responsible risk taking by promoting humility, and learning from mistakes.⁷³ They created a poster, entitled "Lessons from the Loo" (because that's where they place prints of this poster), with reminders of their investment deals that didn't work out (and especially the very painful ones). This isn't to demoralize, but to recognize that failure is ok, as long as you do not continue making the same mistakes. According to Kohl, they go through a "pretty tough introspective process"—even if the deal was a winner overall—because there's always something that could have been done better. He adds that, although they are in the business of

taking risks, and taking no risk at all almost never results in a great (turnaround) deal, “We can grow and get better as a firm, but you don’t want your deals to end up in the bathroom.”

You and those who rely on you are the ones to define what type of mistake (and when) is encouraged, ok, or not, and then every participant commits to do their best and to get better over time. In the workplace, leaders set the tone and context, model the way, and find a variety of ways to communicate and gain input on “what is.” What we most want is to not repeat the same mistakes. Promote learning.

“One mistake will never kill you. The same mistake over and over again will.”

—Harvey Mackay

Communicating often and in different ways for different people and in different situations is what creates a more open context and allows your message to get through. People are messy, unlike an automated process that is set up once and will run smoothly as planned until factors external to it change. A process, with machines or technology involved, is designed to guarantee a high probability of perfection. You can’t design people any more than you can change them. You can change their context. For people’s growth, create a context of models, mentors, and experiences.

You cannot design people, but you can create the best context for learning.

Tunnel vision is not shared commitment.

Before Amazon and Walmart, currently the largest retailers in the world, there was Sears, with its mail order catalog. This was before there was Internet, and Sears’ massive presence was not seriously challenged as the largest retailer on earth until the 1980s. Their 3,900 locations have dwindled to fewer than 40 stores.⁷⁴ Although there are many variables to their decline, the crux is clarity. Sears’ top management was unwilling to get clear about what (and who) was going to drive their growth in the future, and failed in their commitment to customers. Inevitably, they lost commitment *from* customers.

Nurture commitment, inside and out.

Sears initially grew because they earned the trust of customers. The greatest visionary in the early years of Sears, General Robert Elkington Wood, became the president of Sears on January 11, 1928. General Wood’s strategy shows us his dedication to getting clear. Wood was diligent about being clear so that every person in the organization shared commitment. In this case that commitment was to customers. Wood understood and respected his customers. They were number one. He made it clear to the entire organization that only the customer could fire them. He made it clear to all stakeholders that it was Sears’ responsibility to discover, develop, and sell to the customer the best products at the lowest possible prices. These were values Wood held for the company as President until 1939 and as Chairman until 1954. Walmart was founded by Sam Walton in 1962. Customer service excellence and best prices are how Walmart grew, while Sears

slipped.

In a forum post discussing Sears' decline and inability to adapt, one former Sears executive wrote in 2018:

Almost every person I worked with at Sears—from division presidents to middle managers to the janitorial staff—truly believed that Sears still deserved to be a leading American brand, and that the rest of the country just hadn't figured that out yet. Things I heard all the time from people at Sears corporate: Customers are being unfair. Customers should just give us a chance. We're just as good as anyone else. Competitors don't have anything we don't have. Amazon is cheating, they should be illegal. Vendors are taking unfair advantage of us.

And:

I think this bizarre cognitive dissonance is the single largest driver of Sears' failure. Sears waited for someone...to notice that the world isn't working the way it should (as evidenced by their unjust decline). A significant chunk of the people I worked with...had been with the company for more than ten years, and held this attitude despite years of no compensation changes and benefits like 401k match disappearing. They kept this attitude as they bought SHLD shares at a slight discount through the employee stock purchase program (for roughly \$25/share in 2015, worth \$0.45 or so today). They maintained this attitude as they paid \$1.25 per cup of drip coffee every morning.⁷⁵

And one last point, which sums up Sears' unwillingness to get clear and then be clear about best next steps: *"If customers just knew what we knew, they would come back."*

"Fixing it" rarely indicates commitment.

Just fixing problem after problem requires a short-term focus on what can be done to move from bad to satisfactory. We feel good about the quick win. For some it is even addictive; we get a hit of dopamine when the solution, the "aha!" comes to us. It's a bit like the feeling of a first date. But it is not shared commitment. Shared commitment is over the long term, and usually involves tough judgment calls to continue to commit when it's easier to stop.

As head of Lehman Brothers, Fuld was skilled at being clear, at communicating his "growth at all cost" hubris-driven objectives. Although, in 1999, Fuld and his management team said they wanted to "fix" their lack of risk management and hired Madelyn Antoncic to lead that charge. Soon thereafter, Antoncic created a comprehensive risk framework. But that risk management rigor did not last. In 2006, Lehman's managing directors and senior executives decided "to start putting the pedal to the metal," Antoncic recalled.⁷⁶ The prevailing mood that drove them was: *We've gotten our act together; we're making a lot of money, so let's take more risk.* Risk management was easy to now disregard because it was never truly committed to.

Empowerment-driven shared commitment: excellence over the long term.

Vanguard is committed to empowering people and gaining shared commitment to a mission that values all stakeholders. They don't just state this and place it on the wall, they live this:

*It's in our clients' best interests to keep a long-term perspective in every business decision we make. We forsake short-term gains if they sacrifice our fund investors' long-term interests—even if that means temporarily closing top-performing funds to better manage the volume of cash flowing in.*⁷⁷

Vanguard invests conservatively, with no complex strategies and with bonds, favoring higher-credit securities. Such an approach steered it clear of 2008 U.S. financial crisis headlines. To be sure, many Vanguard funds lost money, some heavily, but none significantly more than one might have expected. There were no unpleasant *surprises for investors* in Vanguard funds' performance. This takes shared commitment throughout the organization to a purpose that is bigger than any one person. Vanguard's promise to clients to keep a long-term perspective is a shared commitment.

It's not often that those outside of an organization get a peek at the culture inside. We typically experience the internal culture of an organization we are served by from how we are treated as customers and, in some cases, community members, vendors, or alliance partners. During the 2008 U.S. financial crisis, Vanguard "crew member" Mabel Yu gained media attention because she made a decision to not join in on the rush for the high-return mortgage-backed securities.⁷⁸ She simply could not get clear about them, which to her signaled high risk. She's smart; Mabel Yu analyzed bonds for Vanguard, which managed \$400 billion in bond investments. The new deals would land on her desk, all with AAA ratings from rating agencies such as Moody's or Standard and Poor's, which is usually an indicator of low risk. She was skeptical. Yu could never get a straight answer about what the worst-case scenario really was. "I felt so dumb," she says.⁷⁹ She was told she worried too much. She was committed, however, to Vanguard's values and promise to their customers to protect their long-term interests, and she was empowered to decide. She said "no" to these mortgage-backed securities, regardless of the financial short-term wins of her industry peers. Vanguard's leaders backed her up.

Unlike many investment firms and large financial services companies, Vanguard leaders nurture a culture of empowerment and are not driven by personal hubris. Shared commitment is to organization values, not for the biggest financial wins. When Tom Davenport, co-author of *Judgment Calls*, interviewed Vanguard executives a few years after the crisis, they praised Yu's decisions and performance.⁸⁰ It became clear to Davenport that at Vanguard, judgment calls like Yu's are common. One interviewee shared that Vanguard encourages dissent and doesn't hire people who think they are "masters of the universe," adding that they probably wouldn't come to work for Vanguard anyway, because "we wouldn't pay them enough."

Shared commitment does not only include followers. It includes the leaders as well. While other firms were laying off thousands of employees during this crisis, Vanguard didn't lay off any of their almost 12,000 crew members (employees).⁸¹

True leaders *earn* committed followers. People follow because they choose to. True leaders lead because they are called to do so—not for status. And because it is not about them, these leaders choose to build up others, to empower them to share commitment and to lead from where they are.

Creating and nurturing shared commitment.

Bring your courage, curiosity, and tenacity, together with a meaningful purpose, smart strategy, and an intention, to be clear with the right people. Shared commitment will follow.

Wendy Kopp, CEO and co-founder of Teach for All, and founder of Teach for America, supported her vision with a thesis and four-page business plan.⁸² Kopp's vision was a country with less inequity in education. The organization's mission was to significantly lessen the inequity in education, first in America, and later around the world.

It was 1989. She was graduating from Princeton and on track to be an investment banker. What she felt very strongly about, however, was not investment banking. She felt that *her* purpose in life was much bigger than her own smarts or ability to make money. *Her* purpose was to aim her gift of boundless energy at working toward a worthy goal, and to lead this charge.

She had the courage (out of naivety, she says) to express her vision, the purpose for what she wanted to build (to lessen inequity in education), and to ask for help. With financial backing she started building. She knew how to reach students who could be the teachers, the core of Teach for America. In fact, she had 2,000 applicants and chose 500 in the first year (1990) to be teachers.

Her strategic game plan was to marshal the energy of her generation to make this vision real, and gain support from corporations who expressed their support of education equity so loudly in the media but lacked action. Teach for America, and now Teach for All, turned support and energy into real action toward significantly reducing education inequity.

In a 2021 interview with Ryan Hawk, Kopp explains that her tenacity drove her through the tough first decade.⁸³ She felt “a responsibility” to the donors, team, and teachers supporting her vision. She also remained curious, and open to “what can be.” Several years in she “started seeing what it was adding up to.” Over the years, Teach for America and Teach for All have shown tremendous progress in education within underserved communities.

Teachers share a commitment to the vision and mission. They sign up for two years, but almost 50% were staying in those communities for longer. The number of teachers in Teach for America alone grew from 500 to 28,000 in early 2021. Teach For All expanded to 60 global partner organizations on 6 continents. Millions of children have been impacted. This culture, which Kopp still leads, indicates clear and continuous communication throughout the organization. And shared commitment.

“Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans.”

—Peter Drucker

When your values are clear, decisions are easier.

—Roy E. Disney

*People who give us their undivided attention most vividly
manifest presence.*

—Sally Helgesen



CHAPTER 11

Set the Stage

Clarity is critical to orchestrating a Pivot *from* “what is” *to* a better future.

You have learned in these pages the importance of clarity so that every person is moving in concert, on the same page so to speak. What this means to you, as the leader, is that you will first *get clear* for yourself about a desirable future state, or “what can be,” so that strategic direction can be set and a strategic game plan for achieving objectives put into action. Getting clear about the future does not require you to know or control details or people. In fact, don’t do that. What is important is that you care about, and become skillful at, *being clear* so that others can get clear. To realize the greatest success, you must set the stage for clarity.

Context matters, every day, in any venue, for each group of people, with one person or with that same person but in different group compositions, etc. You might be wondering, then, why I am using the term “stage” and not “context.” Context represents the present state (“what is”) of the workplace (or team, family, etc.), both socially and physically. Setting the stage is preparing for “what can be.” Why call it a stage, as if you are performing? Think of it not as performing, but as acting on behalf of others. Rather than performing as a solo act or main character, envision leading others to perform at their best, in concert. How the stage is set, who the players are, and how you lead on that stage are all important, to you and to a successful outcome.

Setting the stage requires more than scheduling a time you intend to get clear, such as the day of a strategic planning session with the leadership team. And setting the stage when wanting to be clear is more than simply preparing what to say.

If there is one most important thing to remember to set the stage for clarity, it is to ensure that you and everyone around you feels safe to speak out and step up. For you, this might mean practicing your courage, curiosity, and tenacity as described in Chapter 5. These skills will help you think of others when needing to be clear, and to get out of your own way (both described in Chapter 8).

How might you know if you need to set or re-set your stage to be a safe place, and most conducive to clarity? The following are three hints for recognizing that the stage is not yet conducive to clarity. These few hints do not comprise all that you might discover when clarity was expected but failed. Looking for these common disconnects will help.

YOUR STAGE NEEDS RE-SETTING FOR CLARITY IF:

1. The bold vision or objective that felt like a “Yes!” to you, loses its strength in the strategic planning meeting (in fact, strategic planning seems more like a checking-boxes exercise).
2. No one is asking questions for clarification (to ensure brilliant execution).
3. Several months after setting the stage, you are seeing no signs of progress toward the future you envisioned or objectives you expected to be embraced.

Holding on to your bold vision or objectives requires the courage and curiosity to look at things from many perspectives. Considering a bold move and determining that it will not lead to a desired future is one thing. That’s smart. Resisting bold moves because it doesn’t feel safe to bring them forward, or because it is uncomfortable to gain commitment from others, is an indication that your stage is not set for getting clear or being clear.

When no one is asking questions so that they understand what is needed most from them to execute a strategy brilliantly, it is quite possible that they do not feel safe to speak out. Don’t wait until the results prove that you aren’t going to get what you expect. Set the stage for clarity.

Perhaps you’ve communicated an exciting vision eloquently, and heads nodded, but your vision doesn’t actually inspire change because what your vision means for others isn’t clear. When statements about the future are not shared with others in mind, assumptions will be drawn. If the stage, the workplace in this case, isn’t one where every person feels entirely safe to speak out, step up, or choose best next steps in their role, assumptions are usually negative. If you are setting the stage for strategic objectives, yet they aren’t well defined and can’t be translated into action, you’ll get similar results. People will be confused. Note that I said *well defined*; I didn’t say detailed. You’re communicating your thesis, not an essay. You (typically with your leadership team) will choose the highest-priority strategic objectives that align with the vision, purpose, mission, and values, and that are clearly defined. You can’t measure what you can’t define, and you get what you measure.

Now that you are prepared to ensure that the stage is set for clarity, let’s move on to how you keep that stage set for clarity as you step onto it as the leader.

First, get clear for you.

What do you envision as a better future? How does this fit the purpose or mission of the organization you lead, or how does it fit you and those close to you, if this is a vision for your life? What is the direction to head given where you are today?

The vision you will share, along with discovery of “what is,” sets the direction for all. Your role is to listen thoughtfully to diverse views from a broad spectrum of stakeholders, not only those loudest voices that demand your ear. This holds true if the long-term vision isn’t changing but nearer-term strategic objectives and game plans are.

Stay curious and adapt as variables change. Be transparent and courageously vulnerable as the path zigs and zags or even Pivots to a new path.

Reaffirm workplace safety.

Clarity about the future means that you see a bright future, and you'll do what it takes to ensure people are empowered to take their best next steps, energized to perform, and included to reach a higher bar together. This is the stuff that defines great leadership. It seems soft, and yet it is critical to performance excellence, even breakthroughs. It requires discipline, vulnerability, and humility. It is about removing fear and building up others to be as successful as they can be.

Set the stage for communicating the future you see so that others are open to see it in the same way. As a business leader, the stage is a workplace where every person (including you) can execute brilliantly in their roles, and even step up to lead from where they are. As the CEO of your own life, the stage is you and all of those who will journey with you toward the future you envision.

“Conveying the idea that there is always a way forward is so important because that is what you are here for — to figure out how to move the organization forward.”

—Alan Mulally

Open minds and hearts to “what *can* be.” Know that context changes more quickly and more frequently than people do. Check to make sure the context you are stepping into is what you want it to be, for clarity. You lead the way. And you model the way.

“A leader leads by example, not by force.”

—Sun Tzu

Now, be clear so that others can get clear.

When we think of visionary leaders, we often think of business leaders of highly innovative companies and wonder how we might inspire and gain commitment in the same way. Many of these leaders *seem* to be able to set their stage without empowering, engaging, or including others. Some seem to skip past leading with vulnerability, humility, or self-discipline, yet they bring a confidence that is (or borders on) arrogance. The innovative, fast-paced, high-growth, in-demand nature of what the company produces or offers perhaps gives them a free pass—for a while. But is this you? If you've reached this chapter, “no.” And these leaders, whom we see so often that they default to be the models for many others, do not need to be *our* models. Any leader of any organization type in any industry can communicate an inspiring strategic vision, direction, objectives, or game plan.

One shared trait of these bigger-than-life business leaders is that they truly believe in their vision, and exude this belief with passion. What isn't as clear is if they are driven for results at any cost to those closer to the work and other stakeholders, or if they are driven to build others up so that everyone wins.

Here's an example of setting the stage for clarity where the drive is clearly toward a win for all, from the non-profit world, a world where mission-driven outreach fuels growth. The leader in this example is James (Jim) P. Grant, former Executive Director (ED) of UNICEF. He served as ED from 1980 to 1995, resigning just a few days before cancer took his life at the age of 72.⁸⁴

In the 1980s Grant had a bold vision that required a Pivot for the UNICEF organization. It required different services and a significantly larger budget. His bold vision was to unleash a child survival revolution, specifically, cutting the number of worldwide child deaths in half.⁸⁵ His vision aligned with the UNICEF mission of preventing epidemics and malnutrition among children. Yet the boldness of Grant's vision was unsettling to many people within UNICEF initially. The progress milestones he set and his strategic game plan involved creating a movement that included asking for support of the cause from top political leaders in countries with the most significant child death rates. Grant got to the point about what was needed for brilliant execution: "I want you to not double your impact, but to increase your impact a hundredfold, and reach children everywhere."⁸⁶

Grant's tireless work ethic, staying aligned with the vision, and having no need for media attention on himself, helped set his stage.⁸⁷ (In fact, after his death he was little known outside of UNICEF until Bill Gates started talking about him years later.)⁸⁸ The way Grant set the stage helped build trust during the tough early days after taking up the ED position, when progress toward his vision could not yet be measured and many in the organization criticized his narrow focus. Jim Grant's son Bill described it as "almost a revolt."⁸⁹ It took Grant two years to build up his internal team, but he did; and together, UNICEF made a significant impact on child survival around the world.

His positive influence on UNICEF is one such impact. Under his leadership, UNICEF's budget grew from \$313 million to \$1 billion. Those who worked with him wrote a book in tribute to him, explaining how UNICEF had seemed an oil tanker that wouldn't turn, but turn it did.⁸⁹ They point to his faultless public health logic and that, despite his grand plans, he was "devoid of self-importance."

Grant set his stage in part by how he showed up; how he was authentically being. His ability to put others and the cause before himself, and to stay curious, served him when seeking to gain commitment to the cause from top political leaders, many whom, shall we say, did not share these traits. His mantra seemed to be: How do we change this "what is?"

Grant's significant impact also shows through UNICEF's achievements around the world under his leadership. Outcomes were significant, even magical. For example, by the time Grant's 15 years at UNICEF came to an end, immunization rates world-wide had risen from below 20% to more than 70%, saving the lives of more than 3 million children a year. Over the same time, the number of children being crippled by poliomyelitis fell from 400,000 a year to under 100,000 a year.⁹⁰

You have an idea of what a bold vision for you or for your organization might be. You need courage to create and share it and tenacity to see it through. You may be questioning what it looks like, or how you might be, to be devoid of self-importance and always curious, so that you can turn your proverbial oil tanker; to transform impossible into reality.

Perhaps the following words from George Bernard Shaw, often repeated by Jim Grant will nudge you:

*This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch, which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.*⁹¹

You will face resistance to your bold vision. Presuming that, as the leader, your vision is truly what you see as best for the organization, your first priority is to be clear in communicating it. What you want is resonating hearts and palpable positive energy, not deer-in-headlight stares and nervous or apathetic silence.

You must continue to communicate the vision.

Opening minds and hearts to “what *can* be” might follow a framework, such as: Yes, we were here yesterday. Yes, this is what happened in the past. But this is where we are going now. We don’t have a perfect set of plans because the world is always changing, but we do have a shared vision, a purpose for being who we are and where we are, and values that keep us connected. We don’t have a perfect road map, although we are committed to this year’s or quarter’s plan if there is no major disruption. We have a way forward, together.

“Our ability to communicate only depends on our ability to create common ground.”

—Uri Hasson

Gain mutual clarity.

One way to help transform visions (or all of the strategic plan) into the right actions—the ones that lead to excellent results—is holding one-to-one future-look conversations with each person you lead. Every manager then does the same with their team members.

The aim of a future-look conversation is to align what the individual sees for themselves with what the organization sees for the future, and to discuss what actions will be needed to get there. A future-look conversation can set the stage for greater clarity for both parties. It is one-to-one, so it offers the best opportunity for safety. Even if you are in a position of power, this is not about you.

As a leader, you want each individual you hold a future-look conversation with to get clear. This means you must listen deeply, create safety, and be as clear as possible about strategic objectives, team goals, or your goals (as the CEO of your life), and to do so with all the curiosity you can muster.

For you to set the stage for your vision to truly live, where every person is on the same page

with strategic objectives or goals aligned, the vision must have meaning for each person and in the way that most motivates them.

A level of clarity that feels personal for each person is not merely an exercise in putting together words that sound like they'll compel buy-in from those who hear them. Getting clear generates a "Yes!" inside a person, and even goosebumps from how the message lands.

Clarity comes from inspiration. Inspiration comes from the inside (it's personal). Others will be open to feel inspired if they trust that you want all to be successful (not just you or not just senior executives). By building a relationship of trust over time, especially trust earned by doing what you say you will do, all those around you will feel safe to speak out, step up, and open up to being inspired by you and your words. You ensure your words and actions in each moment are modeling this way.

By not setting the stage for clarity, you may be unwittingly causing others to "push a rope." They'll get tired, disheartened, and often disengaged. The result is that strategy is not brilliantly executed, you don't gain extraordinary business momentum, and you may find the business soon stalls. So, first, get clear *for you*. Then, be clear enough with others about the future so that they can get clear for themselves. And then, do this in reverse to gain mutual clarity. Future-look conversations are an excellent means for gaining mutual clarity.

No direction often results in a stall or endless loop.

Lack of clarity can lead to moving in the wrong direction, missteps, and more. When well-meaning people are not clear, they will do their best to accomplish what they think they are *supposed* to be doing. The result may not be at all what was expected by managers or leaders.

Continue the rhythm.

Setting the stage for clarity and gaining clarity should become part of a continuous cycle, a rhythm—anything but a one-time project.

You have communicated your vision, set the direction, highlighted the strategic game plan, and asked every individual to commit to taking the best next steps in their role toward that future. You've re-checked that the stage is set. Conversations have been initiated between you and your team, between each of them and their teams, and on through the organization. You may have begun the process of broadcasting strategic objectives out through the organization so that organizational strategy can be translated to team and individual goals, priorities, and actions. If this process hasn't started—if it is stuck due to lack of clarity, resistance, or both—it's time to re-check the context and communicate in different ways.

When you are being clear, consistently and in many forms of communication, you empower others by bringing them to clarity about their role in the execution of strategy. You free yourself to be working more *on* the business than *in* it. And you have freed them to be their best selves at work.

Articulate your vision in a straightforward statement that all employees can understand and identify with time; something to become rather than something you already are.

As a leader you may be a passionate communicator. But just because you understand what you intend to communicate, and others feel inspired by *you*, doesn't mean your words are understood or resonate. Even if others understand it, they may not understand how they fit. You must gain mutual clarity and commitment from each person, so they know how their role fits. Skip this, and you may end up with no alignment and no action (at least not action that leads to the outcomes you expect). Communicating your vision effectively requires an adeptly set stage for clarity, and orchestration. You must continuously and in a variety of ways communicate vision, or strategic objectives and goals that align with the vision, in a way that others will stay open to, understand, and keep top of mind.

This is your vision, and your strategic objectives, but it is not *about* you—other than you being all in. Hold off from moving into planning execution detail until you've set the stage for your leadership team to be open to “what *can* be.” And remember that your words will only inspire others if *you* are inspired.

PART 3

Pivot

Throughout history, there's only been one killer productivity app, and it is thinking more deeply about the choices that we are making, to make sure that what I am doing right now, aligns with what I think is most important.

—Charles Duhigg

If I don't practice one day, I know it; two days, the critics know it; three days, the public knows it.

—Jascha Heifetz



CHAPTER 12

Next Steps in Your Pivot to Clarity

It is never too late to orchestrate a Pivot to clarity.

In the prior chapters, you've read *what* clarity is, the two components of clarity (which are getting clear for you and being clear for others), and *why* clarity is desired, for you and all. Now let's look at *how* to Pivot to clarity; first, how to get clear, and then, how to be clear.

Get ready to get clear.

Before you can even start to get clear, you need to clear your mind and space of distracting clutter. If you are like most others, including leaders, distractions get in the way of deep thought. The top three distractions to getting clear that I've encountered when coaching leaders are:

- 1) Being pulled into others' agendas.
- 2) Not prioritizing time for deep thought.
- 3) Negative self-talk.

You've likely read about distractions as they relate to productivity: completing a list of to-dos. If you are goal-oriented, feel free to include getting-clear time on your calendar or other to-do list. If you are more creative, and thinking for you is not just about solving today's problems, then treat getting ready to get clear as free time.

Coaching questions to help you get clear.

Reading my words in prior chapters about what is possible, even reading examples, may have proven helpful (I do hope so!), but also may not have been enough to compel you to take action. Now is the time to be curious and dig deeper. I ask that you consider the following questions that relate to these three common distractions that block clarity. Then allow yourself to feel what comes up for you. Write it in words to create even more energy around a question and what you are feeling about it, and then revisit these questions another day. Repeat until you feel clearer. Do you feel more energetic? Does a "Yes!" bubble from inside? Next, test your clarity by seeing how clear you can be with one or more others about one thing that you now feel clearer about. If

you find you are not clear enough to be clear, revisit the question and process described above.

As promised, here are a few questions to help you get clear. They address the three most troublesome distractions (being pulled to others' agendas, not prioritizing time for thought, and negative self-talk), now flipped to a positive statement for each. There are one to three questions pertaining to each point. Answer one or more:

KEEP TO YOUR AGENDA, BECAUSE IT MATTERS.

How might you shift *from* being reactive in your daily work *to* being discerning in discovering and sharing what matters most?

How might you shift *from* not having a clear vision, purpose, or plan *to* being so clear about what is most important that you know when to say “no,” “not now,” or “not me?”

PRIORITIZE TIME FOR DEEP THOUGHT.

How might you shift *from* holding on to doing or commanding how things get done *to* intentional growth in your effectiveness as a leader?

How might you shift what takes your time *from* always being at the center *to* carving out time to think about what matters most, next, and in the more distant future?

How might you shift *from* living and “leading” on autopilot *to* being more self-aware, vulnerable, and curious?

AVOID NEGATIVE SELF-TALK AND ANY OTHER WAYS YOU HOLD YOURSELF BACK.

How might you shift *from* holding on to ways (beliefs, traits, behaviors, etc.) that are not serving you in being the best leader you can be *to* knowing that what you want matters, and that to lead others effectively you can't take things personally?

When you get clear, you will not only lead better, you will feel better! Clarity generates energy.

Get clear. Get to “Yes!”

Getting clear for you will also aid you in being clear for others, and communicating with others in mind.

Itay Talgam, a former orchestra conductor and now “a conductor of people” gave a TED Global talk in July 2009 about how to lead like the great conductors.⁹² During this talk, Talgam asks the audience what they can see the conductor doing. He points out that what is most noticeable is not *what* he's doing, but *how* he is being. He is happy. He is spreading happiness—not from his own story, but the joy that comes from enabling other people's stories to be heard at the same time.

Pivot to clarity for you, and others. Don't get stuck in finding fault; the misstep was likely due to

a default: a blind spot, bias, or fear. What's the best next step, that small shift, that you might take as you Pivot *from* “what is,” to clarity?

Pivot *from* _____ to _____.

In *The Pivot: Orchestrating Extraordinary Business Momentum*, I first shared The Pivot diagram below (Figure 1).⁹³ It shows the critical stages to achieve in order for everyone involved to be in a state of Aligned Momentum: the only state in which breakthrough performance is possible. In this diagram, you will notice that Clarity is one of the stages,⁹⁴ as well as a Key Aligned Momentum Indicator.⁹⁵ It's that important.

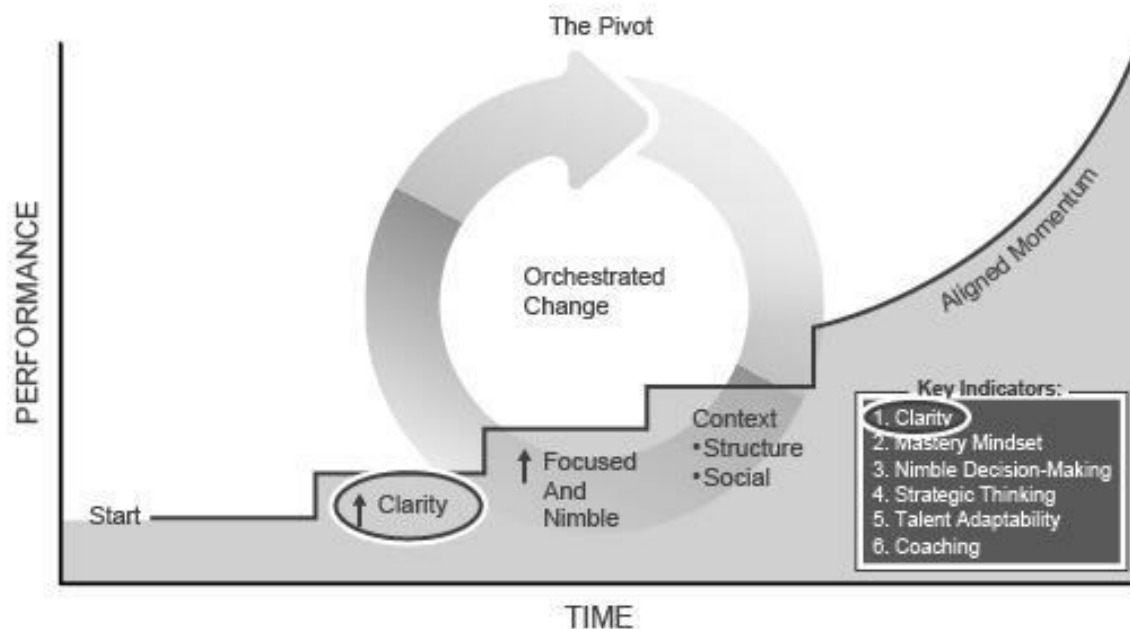


Figure 1: The Pivot Stages and Aligned Momentum Key Indicators

Orchestrating The Pivot is another way of saying that you, as the leader, will be continuously setting the stage and conducting the many small shifts by many people required to Pivot and to be, with as little interruption as possible, in Aligned Momentum toward a better future.

In The Pivot diagram, this orchestration is shown as a moving circle. Orchestrating a Pivot is not a one-and-done project; it doesn't end. Orchestrating a Pivot is similar to the journey we have come to learn as what “success” requires. The Pivot is actually comprised of many small shifts by many people, which do in fact start and end. And these small shifts all have their own *from* ____ to ____.

You are not the one who decides best next steps for each person. You get clear for you, and about your next steps, and you set the stage for clarity for all.

Here's how to set the stage for you and others to get clear:

- Create safety to allow for change.
- Make time to think deeply to get clear.
- Envision your desired future (“what can be”) and compare that to today (“what is”).
- Set a strategic direction, objectives, game plan, and how you'll measure progress.
- Determine what is most important to do next, in the near term.
- Practice by focusing on what you are doing today while staying nimble to do that thing differently, or do a different thing if doing so will drive progress.
- Check to see if social and physical context is aiding or impeding progress.
- Is there both alignment with and momentum toward your desired future?
- Repeat. Continue to orchestrate this cycle to not only maintain Aligned Momentum but also to come to work every day to a vibrant business—one that stays ahead of the competition, commands a high value in its market, and is a great place to work.

Something I've found useful in coaching is to bring people together and ask a question. Each person gives their answer for themselves, but each person's answer often generates a greater connection with everyone else. (If you aim to foster more collaboration in your organization, this is a good way to do it.) The questions I provide in the next section are examples for gaining more clarity, whether for getting clearer or being clearer so that others can get clear. There's one caveat: those brought together must feel safe sharing about themselves with these others, and with you. Create a safe place first.

When you ask these questions, your role is as facilitator, or facilitator and participant. Participants answering these questions show courage (to be vulnerable), which builds connection and trust. This in turn further strengthens the safety of the space you've created.

“A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”

—Lao Tzu

Roundtable questions, to set the stage for shared clarity. First list.

- What's one thing you'd like to be different at work?
- Is there one thing about how you are perceived that you'd like to be different? How your role is perceived? How you in your role is perceived?
- Share a time when you were sure that you had understood another person's communication, but later found out you misunderstood. What did you do next? How did you get clear?
- Has someone in your life, work or otherwise, inspired you? Please share what you found inspiring. Did you then do or act differently?
- If something is important to you, how do you make time to do it, or express it, continuously?

The questions above are samples. You know your organization, so after ensuring a safe place, follow the tone of these, and ask questions that fit your context. What I mean by the tone of these is that they are open, curious, and not about any specific work matter. Questions like these rarely cause defensiveness, interruptions, or judgments. No one other than the person asked would be able to answer for them or talk over them with a “better” or the “right” answer.

How did you do when asking the questions? Were you able to just listen? Were you able to stay open to what each person said, without feeling defensive, interrupting, or judging what and how a person answered? Did you feel other emotions, such as disappointment, with your or another's participation, or how you facilitated? Give yourself and others a break. If you, and any other person, had the courage to be vulnerable, know that connection was fostered. Keep it up.

“Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weakness.”

—Brené Brown

What are you willing to do for shared clarity?

Tactics are important, and, if done well, can help the organization be more effective in strategic planning and execution. A tactic is specific, short term, and most often time bound. It is something you do for a time, and then you are done. In this book, and whenever describing orchestrating a Pivot, tactics would fall into the category of “best next steps.”

One can learn tactics that help *get* clear, such as Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis. To help *be* clear, one can learn skills and tactics to improve written or verbal communication, or to prepare a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), respectively.

Yet too often these tactics remain exercises that end without driving the results desired. Maybe your strategic objectives didn't end up incorporating your SWOT analysis, or they did but that

part of your plan is not well defined or actionable. Or any part of your plan that did not fit neatly into final operating and capital budgets remains on the shelf, so to speak, because no one was clear and therefore no one could *be* clear about how to follow through with aligned best next steps. And perhaps no one spoke up or questioned this because it didn't feel safe to do so. Maybe that SOP was drafted in a silo without gaining commitment and clarity from those who would need to change what they do, whom they interact with, or use a new technology. And so the SOP, no matter how carefully and skillfully crafted, does not lead to the changes required to drive the operational improvements expected. It could be that people are not clear on how to put it into action. Usually, though, it is not adopted because it is easier, and feels safer, to just continue doing what was done yesterday.

Setting the stage for shared clarity will exponentially improve the effectiveness of strategy and execution. It is much more strategic than it is tactical. Setting the stage for clarity, like orchestrating a Pivot, is continuous. It's about how you (and all) are *being* in order to improve what you and all will do for brilliant execution of strategy. It's not just about incremental improvements in work; you're focused on a better future over the longer term. Like teeing up a golf ball while you anticipate the direction and distance you want that ball to go; you're aligning all the parts of your body and centering your mind so that it goes there. Hitting the ball is a small part of the entire orchestration of your play.

As a leader you want to be more effective, and to do so you want to get clear and be clear. And to be clear, you need to set the stage for clarity.

Coaching questions for being clear.

You *think* you are being clear. You may even believe that you have the ability to be very clear with your first communication, yet most of us are not being clear enough for others so that they can get clear—even if we are giving orders or a simple yes or no.

In Chapter 9, I listed five of the most common reasons communications fail in the workplace. Now we are focused on you, and your effectiveness in being clear. So, let's address distractions as we did for coaching to get clear earlier in this chapter. The top three distractions to being clear that I've encountered when coaching leaders are:

- 1) Thinking about you rather than about others' understanding.
- 2) Not listening or observing astutely.
- 3) Bad timing.

Below are a few coaching questions to help you be nimble and move quickly past distractions, to be clear. They are written as positive statements, followed directly by a brief explanation, and then followed by one or two questions for each:

SAY WHAT MATTERS TO YOU IN A WAY THAT GAINS OTHERS' CLEAREST UNDERSTANDING.

Often, we have thought through what we want to say to one or more others. For example, after we've completed a strategic planning session or similar board or leadership team meeting, and now will communicate to managers or all. It is critical to speak (and write) in ways that will gain clarity and commitment. Take time to think about how your words, your tone, and your body language if speaking, will convey that message.

How might you shift *from* thinking about you and how you are expressing what you know (or think you know) *to* staying focused and nimble on them and their understanding?

LISTEN AND OBSERVE, ASTUTELY.

Deep listening (listening to understand) while in conversation with another person helps to create a greater sense of safety and openness for them. This includes hearing their tone and observing their body language. Doing so will help you understand the emotions behind their words, which helps you get clear about their intent. When you seek to understand, you can be more clear.

How might you shift *from* having many other things on your mind, or rushing, *to* intentional growth in your effectiveness as a leader?

How might you shift *from* being overconfident of what you know and “listening for” (which means your mind is on what you “know”) the answer you want to hear *to* staying in a state of curiosity, listening to, and observing others as they speak?

BE CONSCIOUS OF TIMING AND OTHER CONTEXTS.

Context matters—including timing. The social and structural environment at the time you communicate your message is critical to your message being received in the way you intended.

How might you shift *from* sending an important message, verbally or in writing, without considering the effect of timing and other contexts on how others receive it *to* anticipating when, where, tone, attire, etc., will land your message most effectively, and open others up to a meaningful dialogue with you?

Remember, clarity generates energy. And that energy is usually more positive than the energy of assumptions and distracting context. Both you and those you want to truly communicate with will be nimbler—moving through any negative emotion more quickly and effectively—when both (or all) of you gain clarity.

Be clear for another's understanding and commitment. You'll be much more likely to get what you expect, or better.

Test your ability to be clear.

To learn and improve, you need to test. To test your ability to be clear, feedback from others is required.

Keep in mind also that, in this book, I am addressing being clear when communicating a strategic message, such as vision, direction, objectives, game plan, values, or purpose. I am not

addressing how to tell someone a specific action, such as to meet you in your office at noon and you'll head to lunch together. Nor is it tactical, such as to travel by foot rather than on skates. For specific commands, requests, and tactical communications, the expected outcome is near term and well defined. Not so for strategic communications. When communicating a strategic message, you are describing the future in a way that those who hear and/or read it will begin formulating how their role fits the future. Then, they will choose their best next steps based on their understanding. You want their steps to result in brilliant execution of strategy.

You may be wondering how you discover if you are being clear or not, *before* significant time passes. If steps others are taking are based on misunderstandings, you'll at some point find the organization hasn't moved forward in the way you expected. You *thought* you'd been clear, yet that wasn't the case. The answer is measurement. And the best way to measure the effectiveness of communication before waiting to get—or not get—what you expected, is from the input and feedback of others. Input comes before you communicate, and feedback comes after.

Perhaps you are not yet feeling safe enough to ask for help through feedback or input from those around you. Revisit the coaching questions for being clear, this time doing so with a performance coach (one who has depth in leadership, communication, and coaching).

Working with the right coach will help you improve, first in private. Once you better understand your own leadership communication development path, start working with groups. If you still feel too shaky to test with and receive input from your own team, you might join a private peer group for leaders. Here you will also experience what it feels like to be in a safe place, where every peer wants you to be successful and has no other agenda of their own for you. I recommend all of these: one-to-one coaching, development within a private peer group, and growing with your own team.

There is excellent literature available that will help you understand why it's necessary to be humble, and how you might become more so with the help of others' examples. A book I highly recommend for this is *The Road to Character* by David Brooks. He describes what he calls "The U-Curve" often faced on the road to character, and that humility was the trait needed to find one's way forward:

*[The U-Curve is that] They had to go down to go up. They had to descend into the valley of humility to climb to the heights of character...When they were in a crucible moment, they suddenly had a greater ability to see their own nature. The everyday self-deceptions and illusions of self-mastery were shattered. They had to humble themselves in self-awareness if they had any hope of rising up transformed.*⁹⁶

Start now to find the best people, and preferably a diverse group of people, who feel safe to be candid with you, to provide you with feedback (after) and input (before) communicating. If you are not already receiving feedback from your board, seek that too. It is the most challenging, but truly most rewarding, to grow with your team. It is challenging because you must remain humble and curious. It's not all about you. It is not about you training or commanding others. You create and nurture safety in the group, ask questions, and at times participate to answer the questions for yourself in front of others (not answering for others).

Roundtable questions, to set the stage for shared clarity. Second list.

Luckily, a way to improve your ability to be clear for others is to facilitate, and possibly participate as a peer in, the group (participating depending on how this builds or harms others' feeling of safety).

Do you have managers that you lead? If getting feedback and input from others about your ability to be clear seems too big of a step for you and others, try only facilitating (not also participating, i.e., not taking the floor) a gathering of managers so that they become better communicators.

Here are a few example questions you might modify to fit your group:

- When you have been clear for others, how did you know?
- Tell us of a time you were not clear about a message you heard or read, but the person sending it was (or seemed) so confident and passionate about it that you didn't say anything?
- Is there one thing about how you are perceived as a communicator that you want to improve? What have you done so far to improve?
- What's a benefit of being a clear communicator, even when the message is strategic (e.g., setting direction for the future, describing values, etc.)?
- Share with us a communication that went very well. What was it and what made it so effective?
- Share a time when you were misunderstood, and it surprised you. What did you do next? Were you finally successful at being clear?

Do you want to participate with the group? If you can participate without commanding, or being perceived by others as steering toward your point of view, this can be a growth experience for all. Even though I founded and lead private peer groups for C-level leaders (and those in succession to be in that seat), how I participate is still with full attention to how I come across. It's not unusual for a member to say, "You are the leader." And, yes, while I am the leader of each group, I am not "the boss" in these meetings. My role is to create and nurture a safe place, share thought leadership (mostly from selected outside others, but sometimes myself), and aid members in digging deeper. When I participate, other than when stepping in as a thought leader (aka speaker), I am a peer.

You will find that asking others questions—with curiosity and without judgment—builds a greater sense of safety for all, and models the way for being a more effective communicator.

Lead the Pivot

“If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

—Henry David Thoreau

Get clear, and be clear, and your effort will be rewarded with more satisfying results, including stronger alignment with, and momentum toward, shared objectives. *Only in a state of Aligned Momentum are performance breakthroughs possible!*

Revisit the context within your organization. Are you open to hear the truth about “what is?” Do you do what you say you’ll do? Do you live the values and adhere to principles that you expect of others? Is it a place where every person feels safe to speak their truth? Do you have a clear direction, of “what can be?” There’s more to being a leader. Here I am speaking about trust because you will not get through the noise (of assumptions, disbelief, etc.) without it. Trust is required for clarity.

“Speed happens when people...truly trust each other.”

— Edward Marshall

Speed translates to momentum. But momentum alone may not get everyone to the same destination. To get to the same place together requires alignment. Clarity brings people into alignment. Make clarity a priority. Clarity is key in turning a dream into a vision, and a vision into a reality.

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CHAPTER 12. NEXT STEPS IN YOUR PIVOT TO CLARITY

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Lori Michele Leavitt, also known as “The Pivot Catalyst,” coaches leaders around the world to take their best next steps and achieve extraordinary momentum toward their vision.

Through her books and programs she brings her experience and expertise to help leaders anywhere achieve the same. It starts with clarity. Learn more about Lori at thepivotcatalyst.com.

Lori Michele Leavitt is founder and president of Abridge Corp., holding the brands LML Services, 10x!® and Aligned Momentum®. Through these services, programs and software, hundreds of organizations and thousands of employees have experienced greater success at work and in their lives.

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