

Advances in Project Management Series ¹

Being the Best You Can Be

Advancing as a portfolio, program of work, or project professional ²

Iain Fraser & Madeleine Taylor

Introduction

This article offers perspectives that are presented in the book *'The Business of People: Leadership for the Changing World'* by Iain Fraser and Madeleine Taylor. It offers an extract on leadership competencies that should be part of the core skillset of modern business, portfolio, program of work, and project professionals. It is all very well to know what we know, who we are, and what makes us tick however, what happens if you discover that you have behaviors or thought patterns that are affecting your ability to lead? Problems!

Read on and you will discover handy tips on seven areas related to leading yourself, leading a team, and leading an organization.

The Role of Habits

A bad habit can kill you. In a presentation by Australian couple Glen Singleman and Heather Swan, they recalled how, in learning to wing suit base-jump, it went terribly wrong. They were in Italy on a cliff 4,500 feet (1,370 metres) high. When Glen first tried the jump using a wing jump suit he forgot he was in a wing jump suit and his body reacted as if he was in a parachute. He had arched his back like a usual base jumper however, because he was in a wing suit it meant that the suit caused him to be the wrong way round and upside down – falling at breakneck speeding straight towards the ground. His head was centimeters close to the cliff and he had nowhere to fly as the cliff was in his face. He knew he had to change his position in order to flip over and fly out to a safe landing. All the while free falling to certain death. He knew that he had to manage his mind in order to correct his potentially fatal mistake. Clearly, he did this as he survived to tell us the tale. Knowing what he knew about how the brain worked allowed him to recognize the situation he was in and work out how he needed to adapt.

¹The PMWJ Advances in Project Management series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Routledge worldwide. [To view project management books published by Routledge publishers, click here](#). See this month's author profiles at the end of this article.

² How to cite this paper: Fraser, I., Taylor, M. (2020). Being the Best You Can Be: Advancing as a portfolio, program of work, or project professional, *PM World Journal*, Vol. IX, Issue IV, April.

Knowing that you can change old habits can free you to change those things that get in the way of being the leader you want to be and that your team(s) wish for.

Charles Duhigg author of the book *'The Power of Habit'*, offers a definition of a habit as: *"A set of behaviors that are repeated regularly and tend to occur unconsciously."* The human brain creates habits in order to be efficient. Habits can be changed and replaced any time we choose. There are three parts to a habit – a *cue*, a *routine* and a *reward*. Sometimes it takes a little work to uncover what the real cue is. Carefully observe each of the following five things that scientists say might cue the habit: *location, time, emotional state, other people, and what happened just before.*

You have the power to change any habit or behavior you choose. Even very old habits. The key is to learn what the cue is and what the new rewards are and change the routine.

Alan Deutschman in his *'Change or Die'* book, suggests there are three ideas to focus on when you want to change a habit:

- Relate – a deep belief that a change is possible – real hope for a different future.
- Repeat – practice and practice – develop the new habit, the new way of doing things.
- Reframe – new ways of thinking about the new habit.

The really interesting thing about the formation of habits is that they form the same way for individuals, organizations, and communities – this is compelling information for great leaders. So, do you want to change a habit? Answer these questions to explore the habit you want to change:

1. What are the good things about the old habit?
2. What would happen if you didn't change? – Now, in one year, in 5 years?
3. Who wants you to change habit and what are their concerns?
4. What tells you, you cannot make the change?
5. What habits have you been able to change in the past?
6. Do you really want to make a change? If yes, keep going. If not, allow yourself not to change and accept the consequences of your choice.
7. Who can help you to think this through further?

Managing Destructive Thinking

Our feelings are determined by the thoughts we are having about a situation. The way you think about a situation can change your feelings toward it. Taking time to recognize what you are saying to yourself allows a reflection of ‘that awareness’ and enables you to decide how you want to think in the here and now. Being aware of what you are thinking and the meaning you are giving to a situation is an important skill for leading yourself.

Our feelings come from our thoughts. Our assumptions come from the thoughts we have that we are unaware of having. Our assumptions are rooted deep in our view of the world, our frame of reference.

In order to build your self-awareness, you need to be mindful of what you are thinking. How can you notice what it is you are thinking and why you are thinking that? One way is to notice a thought and then to ask yourself – why did I think that? and why did I think that?

Being aware of what you say to yourself daily about who you are and how you unconsciously reinforce messages to yourself is a useful awareness. Notice what these thoughts are saying and then decide if you need say something different to yourself.

An example of someone not managing destructive thinking was in 2014 where a New Zealand man was so overwhelmed by his circumstances and so angry with his perceived lack of government support that he got up one morning and walked into a government social service office and shot two of the workers. Clearly an extreme case of emotional distress and which didn’t solve the problem at all. In fact, his actions made his circumstances infinitely worse and caused untold suffering for others.

Being aware of your emotions and destructive thinking can help you to recognize when you are not functioning at your best. Ask yourself what do you already do to monitor your feelings and those background thoughts. Also, what do you do to keep yourself on an even keel? What can you do to stop yourself tipping over the edge?

Remember how you learn best (learning preferences) and think of what you can do to practice and enhance your emotional intelligence skills.

Recognizing When You Are Stuck

Sometimes when we are so overwhelmed or upset by a situation, we get stuck. We freeze both mentally and physically. When this happens, we cannot see that we are stuck. So, to rectify this situation, the initial thing to do is to recognize that you are stuck.

There are four things that we habitually do when we are stuck and according to Stewart and Joines in their international recognized book on '*Transactional Analysis*'.

The four things are:

1. Do nothing. For example, sitting at a restaurant, thirsty and complaining about not having water delivered and not recognizing that you can walk to the water dispenser and get the water yourself.
2. Perfect things. For example, make things look good but without solving the problem i.e. avoiding solving the real problem.
3. Agitate. For example, repeatedly keep looking for a lost passport and not hear another instruction to look in another location.
4. Become incapacitated or numb. For example, we pursue other activities that distract us from the reality such as getting drunk.

These are all forms of self-sabotage. Which is your personal favorite? Think about the last time you had a stuck situation. What did you do?

So what is happening? We cannot see the issue for what it is. Others may well be able to see what we are unable to. The concept is called **discounting**, and it is an unconscious process and a form of denial. It is an internal mechanism that occurs outside of our awareness. It involves us minimising or ignoring some aspect of ourselves, others and/or the situation. We discount in order to maintain and reinforce our frame of reference, our view the world. In order to understand more about what we cannot see, we can take time to explore how we do see the situation.

There are four levels of Discounting:

1. Discounting the *existence* of the problem.
2. Discounting the *significance* of the problem.
3. Discounting the *change possibility* of the problem.
4. Discounting our *personal ability* to solve the problem.

Julie Hay and Anne Tucker developed the 'Steps to Success' tool which is a set of questions to help you become more aware. If you want to overcome discounting, there are different questions to ask at each level.

Level 1: Existence

- What is happening?
- Who is saying and doing what?
- What expressions, gestures, body movements are there?

Level 2: Significance

- What might the situational evidence mean?
- If there is an issue or problem, what might it be?
- How is any of this significant?

Level 3: Change possibilities

- What solutions are available (even small steps that might create some movement)?
- What options might lead to better outcomes?
- What options might lead to worse outcomes?

Level 4: Abilities

- What skills do you need to implement various solutions?
- What relevant skills do you have already (including those you've previously used only in different circumstances)?
- How can you acquire any additional skills needed?

Level 5: Strategies

- How will you plan to implement solutions?
- What help or support might you get from others?
- How might others get in your way – and what will you do about that?

Level 6: Success

- What is your rationale for not acting?
- What are the benefits from not acting?
- What are you afraid may happen when you act – and how will you deal with that?

The unclear nature of the modern world and how that together with other elements of the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) world, suggests that our leadership and people management capabilities need adaption. Ambiguity creates uncertainty and it is

uncertainty that is the greatest cause of reluctance to change. Habits revolve around a certain environment and get exposed and threatened when change is introduced. When there is doubt, uneasiness usually follows.

For example, a leader who is exposed to ambiguous information that is to be used for decision-making is likely to stall the decision and potentially miss an opportunity. Ambiguity is not about each of us scoring on an optimistic/pessimistic scale, it is about relying on leadership courage which includes assessing the ambiguous situation as best one can, setting a direction that seeks to protect or gain some form of value, yet at the same time knowing that the direction may not prove sufficient thereby forcing a change. Dealing with ambiguity is about setting a leadership example which embraces a high degree of flexibility, agility if you prefer, and encouraging others to follow.

The vague, unclear, hazy nature of ambiguity means that high levels of certainty, that were so sought after in the 20th century to minimize risk, are likely not to exist in the VUCA world where speed and nimbleness are the key attributes for success in most organizations.

As a leader you will need to be comfortable with ambiguity and develop strategies to assist your decision-making. Being clear about your values, ethics and boundaries will help you develop direction in uncertain times. These will become the moments that define you as a leader. If you play the long game, knowing your purpose and attitudes, you will create your leadership brand and others will see your value. This will encourage trust in a dynamic world. Ways of helping with this are to be clear about:

- Your values and those of your organization,
- Having clear boundaries,
- Having problem solving strategies,
- Knowing yourself and your vulnerabilities and those which get you stuck.

Build Your Resilience and Optimism

The changing nature of the VUCA-impacted world is challenging leaders in ways not previously experienced or obvious. Being able to manage yourself and lead others through challenging times is a key skill of great leaders. In addition, recent information highlights the increasing risk to businesses where employees are managing higher levels of mental fragility, this is another sign of the times.

The personal attribute of **resilience** is getting more attention due to it being seen as a skill differentiator. It seems that the challenges presented by the VUCA world require us to be tough

within ourselves, to be springy in our approaches, and to have a strong and robust spirit. These skills need to be applied, not in a foolhardy manner but more of a heroic manner. Examples include making the decision when others cannot or will not, trying again after experiencing a large failure, and changing direction when no one else wishes to or knows how to.

Resilience is a deep-rooted personal attribute that often is shaped by our past life experiences. It gives us drive that is supported with a healthy dose of optimism and anticipation. It also allows us to be assertive in our leadership roles. Knowing that if we initially fail we can bounce back quickly. It is important that resilience is not a single thing, more that it is made up of a collection of personal attributes that might include focus, drive, optimism, and assertiveness. As mentioned earlier our past life experiences will have a significant influence as do our most basic 'flight or fight' reaction choices.

Iain had a series of traumatic experiences as a young child that were to shape his future. Rather than trying to hide from the trauma he chose to fight, not in a physical manner but rather, in a driven manner. Examples of success achieved throughout his life include sporting successes, career successes, and success in his hobbies, family and relationships. Today he admits to still having a desire to do better in everything he does – deep down drive instilled from those early experiences.

As you embark further on your leadership journey, you will experience success and failure. However, it is how you develop resilience that will determine how you manage yourself and how this impacts on people around them and those reporting to you.

If you want to build your resilience here are ten active steps that you can take:

1. Take care of yourself,
2. Connect with others,
3. Take advantage of your strengths,
4. Be active,
5. Use and develop your key skills,
6. Use your sense of humor,
7. Keep a positive outlook,
8. Keep learning,
9. Stay tuned in,
10. Do things for others without expecting a return. (good leaders give more than they expect to receive).

Another personal attribute is that of **optimism**. Being optimistic can change your life. Optimism is often defined as a disposition to expect the best and view events and situations in a positive

light. Knowing that, we see that optimism gives people a sense of real hope and energy to keep trying that allows time for a potential solution to arise. The elements of optimism are hopefulness, anticipation, and a sense of a compelling future.

Research about the benefits of being optimistic has shown that optimists tend to:

- Have better physical health,
- Enjoy greater success at school, work and sport,
- Be in more satisfying relationships,
- Have better mental health, reporting less depression and anxiety, and,
- Live longer than pessimists.

Interestingly, as you can change your habits you can develop increased capacity to be optimistic. In most circumstances, optimism is beneficial but does need to be tempered. People who are excessively optimistic may not have realistic expectations about the possibility of bad things occurring, and so are caught unprepared when they do. They may also fail to take responsibility for the impact of their own behavior, resulting in relationship difficulties.

To explain how optimism develops the following research demonstrates – as a note – these experiments would not be allowed to be performed today. In the 1950's Dr. Curt Paul Richter, carried out a series of experiments that tested how long rats could swim in a high-sided bucket of circulating water before drowning. Dr. Richter found that, under normal conditions, a lab rat could swim for an average of 15 minutes before giving up and sinking. However, if he took the rats out just before drowning, dried them off and let them rest briefly, then put them back into the same buckets of water, the rats would swim an average of 60 hours before giving up and drowning. If a rat was saved, dried off and given a brief rest before going back into the bucket it would survive 240 times longer than if it was not. Dr. Richter's conclusion was that the rats were able to swim longer because they were given hope. That is the rats were able to keep going longer because they were able to predict they might be saved again and that gave them hope which in turn gave them energy to keep going. The rats had a clear picture of what being saved looked like, so they kept swimming for it.

Having and Maintaining Focus

Focus is important in leadership and business generally. It is the process of being able to attune your mind to the task at hand and remove all other disruptions and clutter from your thinking. (Not withstanding that leaders need to have a wide perspective). When we are focused, time disappears and work gets done. When we are unfocused or distracted then time can drag and work becomes tedious.

Focus has been termed the gateway of all thinking. Put simply if you cannot focus you cannot think well, nor make good decisions. This leads to inefficiency and poor outputs. It appears the human attention span is diminishing due to digital connectedness and the search for novelty. Our brains are becoming addicted to the constancy of the ‘endorphin hit’. However, as always there is hope. Elie Vensesky and Patrycja Slawuta, co-authors of ‘*Hack your Brain*’ say that focus is like a muscle and you can grow to increase your ability to focus. Here is how:

1. Make a decision that you want to increase your focus time.
2. Calm yourself before starting a task.
3. Identify what you need to focus on – for the year, month, week, day, hour and now.
4. Silence the email/put away your devices.
5. Take time for short breaks.
6. Rehydrate yourself.
7. Make sure you are in a temperature that suits you – too hot or too cold and you will lose focus.
8. Play music that you like.

Assertiveness

Being able to ask for what you want and stand up for yourself is a key skill in becoming more potent in the world. However balance is required.

So what actually is assertiveness? We could refer to it as ‘standing-up’ for yourself, or a team, in such a way that ensures the rights of others are not transgressed. Using an assertive communication style means that your opinions, feelings and wants are clearly stated without violating the rights of others. The underlying message is: “You and I may have our differences, but we are equally entitled to express ourselves to one another”.

Sometimes we are not sure when we should speak up. However, even if we know we should or want to speak up, we are not sure of the words to use or have the courage to do so.

Leadership Courage

Leadership Courage is a combination of factors that collectively drive action. Factors such as believing in yourself and building your potential, doing what you want and trusting yourself to make the right decision, taking control of your life, making your own decisions and being honest with yourself and others, accepting changes and flowing with them, dealing with your problems and asking others for help, offering your opinions and communicating your fears and doubts, accepting abundance and allowing yourself to succeed. Leadership courage is about trying again and doing new things, and loving yourself and others unconditionally, even when you do not know all the permutations of a given situation.

You can practice being courageous when you feel afraid by identifying the fear, letting it go then do what you really want to do. You can practice courage when you admit mistakes and learn from them and ask for help when you need it. You can do this by recognizing your unconscious self-talk and understand where the fear comes from. Is it a current situation or is it an old story you have been carrying around with you. Next recognize who and what gives you strength and find ways to draw on that even when the chips are down. Take the time to plan for the worst-case scenario and keep on practicing.

Understanding the need for personal courage is about stepping forward even when you are unsure. It's a form of trusting your gut yet balancing with your head and heart.

You will know that you are being successful in being courageous when you do what is right for you even when it is hard and scary. You will notice that you can find strength in your heart even when you are afraid, and you will also notice you are willing to try new things.

References

Deutschman, A. *Change or Die*. New York, NY, USA. Harper Collins, 2007.

Duhigg, C. *The Power of Habit*. USA. Random House, 2012.

Hay, J. and Tucker, A. *Steps to Success*. Self-published Tool: 2010.

Rozin, P. and Richter, C. *The Complete Psychobiologist*. In E. M. Blass (Ed.), *The psychobiology of C. Richter* (pp. xv-xxviii). Baltimore: York Press, 1976.

Singleman, G. and Swan, H. Article from a Radio New Zealand interview.

Stewart, I. and Joines, V. *TA Today A new Introduction to Transactional Analysis*. Nottingham and Chapel Hill UK: Lifespace Publishing, 2002.

Venezky, E. and Slawuta, P. *Hack Your Brain: Secrets of an Elite Manhattan Tutor*. USA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform (1819), 2014.

About the Authors



Iain Fraser

Scotland & New Zealand



Iain Fraser is somebody who truly understands the need for organizational change toward entities that are focused on developing their people to explore and deliver business value. Iain has worked with and led teams around the world in the banking and finance, defense, engineering, government, oil & gas, power, and telecommunications sectors. Today he is a sought-after speaker, trusted advisor and trainer on business value and change. Author of the top-selling business book '*The Business of Portfolio Management— Boosting Organizational Value*' as well as over 25 other publications.



Madeleine Taylor

New Zealand



Madeleine Taylor has worked with people on the forefront of trouble throughout her professional life, including mental and physical health, grief and loss, conflict and organizational challenges. Through that she has connected with people from many walks of life. Taylor provides training, supervision, facilitation, and executive coaching. Of special interest for the past five years, she has been working with parents and educators about the impact of the overindulgent world on children and families.

Learn More

- Buy the book! '*The Business of People: Leadership for the Changing World*'. Iain Fraser & Madeleine Taylor, CRC Press 2019. (www.crcpress.com)
- Engage the authors to speak at your organization or event.