

Unlocked

TRANSFORM YOUR BARRIERS INTO STRENGTHS
AND BECOME THE LEADER YOU WANT TO BE



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YOU WANT TO BE

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All case studies referred to throughout this book are fictionalised composites of real-life individuals.

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Acknowledgement of Country

I respectfully acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation, who are the Traditional Owners of the land on which this book was written.

I pay respect to their Elders, past, present and emerging.

Why this Book?

After nearly 20 years of practice working with hundreds of leaders as a psychologist and leadership coach, I found myself at a personal tipping point. I knew I was as committed as ever to my work. I was also becoming increasingly aware of a consistent set of patterns I was observing in leaders. These patterns had almost nothing to do with the technical part of how these leaders were operating; rather, they had everything to do with the way they were thinking and their behaviour.

As I went about helping my clients address these patterns and transform their working lives, I couldn't help but wonder about the many leaders outside my circle who may be looking for guidance. Writing a book like this was something I wanted to do, but I held back because it was also a very daunting prospect (more on that later!). In the end, I was driven by something much greater than fear or discomfort. Specifically, the desire to help you (and hopefully many other leaders) become more deeply aware of how you operate as a leader now, and to give you the tools and insights to make positive changes in line with the leader you want to be.

I believe we all need to access our full leadership potential to successfully navigate the world we live in. I've seen firsthand what happens when leaders become stuck. Not only does it affect them personally, but it also impacts those around them. When I've worked with leaders to grow their understanding of who they are and how they operate, using the principles in this book, I've seen them go on to thrive in ways they could not have imagined.

The first and key message of this book is that your team, organisation and the people around you need your leadership. They need you to step into your role as a leader; they need you to overcome any of the internal barriers we'll explore in this book that are getting in your way. The good news is that this act of leadership is not just on your shoulders. The people around you can help you to reach your full potential.

This book is not a technical manual, a book on 'how to do leadership' or a to-do list of actions claiming to make you a brilliant leader. It is a guide to help you go within, to start the critical work of growing your self-awareness, so you can also lead others brilliantly. This book will help you reflect on the leader you want to be. It will provide you with practical, evidence-based strategies to overcome the most common internal barriers that leaders experience.

You already have everything within you to be a great leader, the type of leader the world needs right now. It's just a matter of unlocking your potential.

Let's get started.

CHAPTER ONE

The World Needs Your Leadership

Whether you are in a leadership role at this moment or you're about to move into one, your potential is firstly determined by how you see yourself. When you have the self-awareness and tools needed to unlock your potential, you become an essential part of the world's collective leadership. The world has never needed great leaders more than it does right now. We're all looking for a path through some of the really big challenges we collectively face, and we need leaders to help show us the way.

This chapter is my call to action to all leaders and potential leaders; to those with the ability, commitment and heart to take on a leadership role (of any kind). Whether it's leading in the workplace, the community or your personal life, your leadership is needed. It's not about setting lofty or unrealistic expectations beyond what you seek or are capable of achieving; it's about

recognising the value you can uniquely contribute, and acting on that for the greater good.

Your unique leadership is needed to help make decisions, support others, create positive change and provide guidance towards future – and better – outcomes. An important first step to unlocking your potential is recognising that you already hold a number of leadership roles and you've done so for some time. In appreciating this, you will start to see the potential you have to make a difference as a leader in many different ways.

Technology can do lots of amazing things, but it can't do the work of leadership. Emotionally connecting with others, empathising with them, developing a vision, communicating a message, creativity, imagination and generating possibilities can only come from human beings. Your perspective is a unique source of all of that. No one can create those outcomes in the same way you can.

Consider the roles you play in all parts of your life – at work, in the community, with friends and family and in your wider social networks. Do you try to create positive change? Do you work with others to achieve outcomes? Think about the projects that you are or have been involved in, the skills and knowledge you pass on to others. Consider the outcomes you are trying to achieve and your ability to develop a vision or hold a point of view on how things could be, working with others to achieve those outcomes. My message here is to start to see yourself as a leader in the broadest sense possible, because this is where your biggest potential for impact lies.

WHAT LEADERSHIP IS ... AND IS NOT

Leadership is ultimately about behaviour and ways of thinking. It's not a role that you are appointed to or a badge that someone pins to your chest. Think of it this way: there are so many appointed 'leaders' who are pretty terrible human beings and don't care too much about the impact they have on others. At the same time, there's an incredible amount of people that I've met (and I'm sure you have too) who are truly great at achieving outcomes with other people. They have colleagues and team members who would do anything for them, largely because of the person they are and how they interact with others.

By necessity, good leadership also lacks ego. I like to think that leadership is about acting for the collective, and being able to observe what's happening as the collective acts around you. Great leaders try to take themselves out of the equation. They don't think of themselves as a sole central figure trying to control all the outcomes and solve all the problems. These leaders place great levels of trust in those around them. When they do, the benefits always follow.

Leadership is about acting for the collective, and being able to observe what's happening as the collective acts around you.

Not everyone must or will choose to take up the role of leader. That is completely okay, so long as that choice is not influenced adversely by fear, assumptions about your own potential, or others' negative and critical voices. And if you are here reading this book, I'm assuming you are already motivated to lead! You alone should determine how you see your own identity, including how you see yourself as a leader.

THE COMPLEXITY GAP

In every conversation I have with leaders across all walks of life, the story I hear is consistent – the role of leadership is both deeply rewarding and challenging. In particular, the pace of change and increasing complexity we face means you need to continuously grow as a leader. By change and complexity, I'm talking about technological and sociocultural change – how we live our lives, how we use technology, how we engage with each other and how we experience the world. In many ways, the current pace of change is greater than the ability our brains and bodies have to adapt. As a society and as human beings, we are struggling to keep up. We can't rely on the practices of old or the ways of thinking we've always held. As the world changes around us, we must too – especially if we seek to lead the way.

As I write this book in early 2022, we are still recovering from more than two years of the global COVID-19 pandemic. There is horrific destruction in Ukraine at the hands of Russian invaders. We're seeing devastating images of one-in-1000-year floods in Queensland and New South Wales – the direct result of the climate disaster we all face. Of course, I'm not saying that any one person is charged with fixing these huge, complex issues, but I argue that all of these events could be considered a result of deficits in leadership. They are all examples of how we need more effective leadership in the world.

Some may argue: 'If we're being outpaced by complexity, what will it matter if I change or not? Even if we're changing and growing, won't we still be behind?' I feel this argument deeply and have wondered the same. But as leaders we *can* make a difference. We can show others the way forward by understanding ourselves better, taking the opportunity to learn and develop, and building

our capacity to lead through challenging times. If we do that, we can better access the collective potential of leaders to help face these complex challenges together.

LEADERSHIP EXISTS IN THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PEOPLE

Leadership is at its core what psychologists describe as dyadic – it exists only as an interaction between (at least two) people. You cannot be a leader in isolation of everyone and everything else; it is a deeply human experience. You must be perceived as a leader by others and achieve outcomes through others in order to ‘qualify’ as a leader. And because leadership exists through the relationships you have with others, who you are as a person is inextricably linked with how you lead. Who you are includes how you think, your values and beliefs, your background and experience, your personality, your assumptions about the world, and your behaviours.

Knowing this about leadership means you cannot escape from yourself as you take up your role as a leader. You are more effective as a leader when you have a deep understanding of who you are and how you bring those qualities directly and authentically to how you lead. It’s also what makes your leadership unique.

My study and practice in organisational psychology over the last 20 years has shown me that the study of leadership and management is grounded in the science of human behaviour – understanding what ‘makes us tick’. Those fields tell us that without human interaction, there is no leadership. Think about the interactions you have had with leaders in your own life, whether those interactions were fantastic, good, neutral or terrible. What made them so? Was it the leader’s technical ability

and knowledge? Was it what they achieved in their role? Or was it more related to who they were as a person and how they interacted with you? When I ask people these questions, most refer to the latter. Echoing a favourite Maya Angelou quote:

'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.'

Reflecting on how much of our leadership is shaped by who we are as a person might be pretty confronting. You might be thinking, 'But I've spent a large chunk of my work life with my "work mask" on. Showing who I truly and fully am as a person would be too risky.' I distinctly remember feeling like this, especially early on in my career. As a young female working in the corporate world, I would be hyper-conscious of how I dressed and the mannerisms I used – especially around older, male clients. I would go out of my way to appear way more 'serious' than my family or friends would ever recognise me to be, in an attempt to build credibility. It was exhausting!

To be anything other than yourself as a leader comes at too great a cost. To live and work while keeping parts of who you are in separate realms takes an inordinate amount of energy. You're likely to get caught out at some stage. You will inadvertently drop the mask. Furthermore, wearing a mask is dishonouring all that is really great and unique about you as a person. It's not an easy task to start bringing more of who you are to how you lead, but in this book I'll guide you on how to do that safely.

To what extent do the people in your work life know who you truly are as a person? I'm not talking about knowing every

intimate detail about your life! But if they were to describe you, would they describe the person that you know yourself to be, and that your family and friends know you to be? A first step might be to talk about this with a trusted friend or colleague. Are there any ways in which you are keeping your true self out of the way you lead? What is the impact or cost of that to you, to the people around you, and to the work that you're doing?

You might hold concerns about the risk of bringing more of who you are into how you lead. It might invoke feelings of vulnerability. That's perfectly understandable. You don't have to overcome this challenge at a moment's notice. For now, just become aware of how much of your true self is showing or hiding in how you lead.

WHEN WOMEN LEAD, ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIETY BENEFIT

This chapter is also a call to unlock the leadership potential of more women. We continue to see a gender imbalance in many countries, industries and facets of society, particularly at senior leadership levels in organisations. This imbalance comes at great cost to those organisations and workplaces, as well as to women themselves who suffer from bias and inequality of opportunity. The world needs leaders everywhere to unlock their potential, but we especially need more women to do this. If you are someone who identifies as a woman, this is a particular call to action for you to unlock your potential – fully acknowledging the systemic challenges that many women face in their work lives. If you are someone who does not identify as a woman, being aware of the gender imbalance is key as you consider the opportunity for you to advocate for women in leadership, and demonstrate inclusive leadership yourself.

I've read dozens of studies over the years that provide evidence of the benefits to organisations and society when women lead. The Australian government's Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) aims to promote and improve gender equality in Australian workplaces. In its 2020 research paper it stated:

More women in key decision-making positions delivers better company performance, greater productivity and greater profitability. Increasing the representation of women across each of the key leadership roles in an organisation added a market value of between AU\$52 million and AU\$70 million per year for an average-sized organisation.

Enough said!

There are many external barriers (such as bias, discrimination and systemic issues) that prevent or slow the progress of women in leadership compared to men. I fully acknowledge those external barriers exist, and have experienced some of them directly myself. I haven't written this book to arm you with silver bullets for destroying those barriers. What I have focused on is what I believe to be 'step one' – control the controllables. My aim is to support you to understand and overcome any internal barriers you experience, so you are in the best position possible to navigate those external barriers as and when you face them.

Ultimately, I'm not intending to generalise. We are all individuals and those individual differences are what make us human. I'm also not saying that women are broken and need 'fixing'! I am saying that we need more women to lead with their full potential. The tools and ideas I share in this book will hopefully be of service in helping more women achieve that.

We all recognise and acknowledge that the external barriers we've talked about will not go away anytime soon. Culture, society and

other people can at times negatively reinforce messages about your potential and your place in leadership. As a result, you might forget the messages I'm sharing here that your leadership is needed, in which case I encourage you to come back to this book as you need to.

STEPPING INTO YOUR LEADERSHIP

This book is designed to give you space to think about your potential, what you want to achieve and the impact you want to have as a leader. I will encourage and guide you to invoke the curiosity needed to learn how to think and behave in slightly different but powerful ways, while staying true to who you are at your core. As an individual, you have within you the potential to make a valuable and significant difference through your leadership – whether that is at work, in the community or in your personal life. While the world continues to change and become more complex, you can lead from a place of knowing who you are as a person while continuing to develop and grow.

This chapter may feel like a big call to action – and it is. But the world faces many challenges and opportunities right now, and leadership is the resource everyone is looking for to help find their way through. We need as many capable people as possible stepping up as leaders, and you are one. I encourage you to start noticing all the ways and opportunities you have to lead already. And to consider, with curiosity and openness, the many ways you could lead in the future.

Now that you have embraced the idea that your leadership is needed in the world, it's time to focus on the factors that are always within your control: the way you think, behave and make sense of the world around you. It's time to look within.

CHAPTER TWO

Starting from Within

At any stage of career, your inner world (how you think, feel and make sense of situations) can be the single biggest factor that influences your effectiveness as a leader. I've met many incredible people – from emerging through to experienced leaders – who are clever, hardworking and seemingly have it all together, only to discover through speaking with them how much their inner world affects them every day.

It's not just the inner world we have to contend with as leaders, obviously. There will always be loads of challenges and situations we must work through. But you will be better armed to deal with these external challenges when you focus on what must be dealt with first – the barriers within. I see so many leaders trying to push through, working so hard but unconsciously experiencing these barriers at the same time. The image that comes to my mind is of a mountain climber, determined to reach their goal, but also

carrying a giant pack of heavy stones on their back, weighing them down and making every step that much harder.

For example, I see many leaders who tend to focus their energy on uncontrollable factors that they really can't do much about! These include:

- other people's behaviour
- decisions made by those in a position of authority (such as government or boards)
- big macro factors like economic, social and political events that have a knock-on effect to everything we experience.

In his classic book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey talks about circles of control. His philosophy is that the most effective people do not focus their energies on the circle of 'concern' – those things that are beyond their realm of control or influence. Rather, he encourages us to focus our energy on the inner circles – on situations and events that we can either directly control or can at least influence. I've written this book with a focus on some of the most powerful things we *do* have control over; ourselves, our thought patterns and our behaviours. These are the enablers of truly effective leadership, grounded in strong self-awareness.

CASE STUDY: Sam starts to look within

When I first met Sam she struck me as someone who was deeply experienced in her field, as a well-regarded senior manager in the infrastructure industry. Not long after we met, her company went through a restructure as a result of having become acquired. As part of this process, Sam missed

out on a fairly significant promotion she had presumed was coming her way. She was gutted. In our discussions, she expressed her disappointment and frustration. She was convinced the outcome was a result of gender bias and a lack of support from the executive group, including people she thought she could count on. She felt left behind and began questioning her standing in the organisation.

It took a number of weeks and several conversations to unpack how she was feeling and explore what she could do next. After a lot of reflection, Sam realised that missing out on the promotion wasn't the key issue. By focusing on factors that were outside of her control (the perceived bias and lack of support from others), she was failing to work out what would ultimately make her more satisfied with her work.

From that point, Sam started to shift her attention to what gave her the most satisfaction – leading her direct team. As she started to focus her energy in this way, she noticed the frustration and negative emotions she had been experiencing start to ease. She started to make some significant changes to how she was leading her team: addressing some of the feedback she had received in the past, slowing down and listening a lot more to what her people were saying. In the subsequent months, not only did Sam end up getting a promotion to a different role that was more suited to her, but she became far less stressed and much more satisfied in her work as a leader.

This chapter will allow you to acknowledge the real and significant external barriers you may face as a leader, while also addressing

the reality of the internal barriers that may be getting in your way and causing you stress. We will also start to explore some of the most common internal barriers I've observed from working with many organisations and leaders. In doing so, I will help you to understand that these barriers are experienced by many people, that you are not alone and, most importantly, that there are practical ways to do something about them.

WHY START FROM WITHIN?

Some of the challenges you face in your work or personal life are outside of yourself – what I call external barriers. These are challenges that are getting in the way of you being able to achieve what you want, adding to your stress load, or both! They could include:

- global pandemics
- discrimination and bias
- heavy workloads
- crappy bosses
- lack of resources
- irritating or incompetent colleagues
- competing or multiple life responsibilities ... among many others!

This list of external barriers is not exhaustive nor will it apply to everyone. External factors are almost entirely out of our control and are very situational. They come and go, appear and disappear throughout our lives. Privilege (by function of socio-economics, race, gender, ability, education, geography and so on) will also mean that some people experience these barriers less than others.

These external barriers are different to the world of internal barriers – our inner world. When I say internal barriers, I don't mean mental illness or psychological or developmental disorders. I am not saying that experiencing these barriers from time to time means you are broken or that I'm diagnosing you in any way! These are common experiences, part of the human condition that affect all of us to some degree or another. It is important to start from within, because internal challenges cause you some degree of stress, and get in the way of your leadership – whether you are aware of this or not.

We need to start from within so we can be the most effective versions of ourselves as leaders, but not to the exception of agitating for change on important issues that create barriers for other people. Whatever role or background we have, the bottom line is that when we are our best and most constructive selves, we are always going to be more 'match fit' and able to tackle those persistent external barriers ourselves and others face. If we are held back by internal barriers, we cannot hope to make a difference in the world in the way that we would hope to.

There is one very important caveat I want to place here: if you are in a context that is unsafe for you, either physically or psychologically, *do not* focus within. Do not keep your energy focused on your internal barriers, when your priority should be to get yourself out of that context as soon as you are able to get help and do so. We also have to be aware of issues relating to gaslighting, where those with power and with the wrong motivations will attempt to manipulate your thoughts and cause you to feel as though the issue is with you, when it's actually being perpetrated by someone else who's out to cause you harm or elevate themselves at your expense.

My motivation with this book is to help you feel empowered and to more deeply understand yourself, not think that you are somehow faulty or 'less than'. I aim to help you identify the aspects of your thinking and behaviour that you'd like to develop over time. That point comes with an acceptance that no one has already nailed this stuff. We are all works in progress – me included! Self-awareness and continuous development are the keys to helping you achieve the leadership impact that you want to have.

Genuine self-reflection may bring you discomfort. Like many of my clients, you might find it difficult to look at yourself in the mirror honestly, especially if you are someone who works really hard at getting things 'right'. It can also be a struggle if you know what you want to change but you don't know where to start. Maybe you're worried that it's going to be too hard. That's why I've written this book – to help you learn how.

WHAT IS AN INTERNAL BARRIER?

Your internal barriers include any pervasive pattern of thought or behaviour, whether conscious or unconscious, that prevents you from achieving your leadership potential. These barriers show up regularly and tend to be patterns that are similar or consistent over time. Barriers aren't a one-time-only event where you behave in a certain way or have a particular thought and then it never happens again. The barrier may be conscious – for example, the self-talk you hear in your mind about how you are performing in a new role. Or it could be subconscious – your behaviour when you lash out at a colleague who criticised you unfairly, or unthinkingly taking on more workload than you're able to manage. You're acting without really realising what it is you are doing, or why.

Your internal barriers include any pervasive pattern of thought or behaviour, whether conscious or unconscious, that prevents you from achieving your leadership potential.

We all have these patterns as part of our wiring. Our genetic profile, personality, stage of cognitive development and life experiences shape the way we see and make sense of events. For instance, imagine giving the same feedback to two different leaders, encouraging them to contribute more creative suggestions in leadership team meetings. The differences between those two people might lead them to interpret the same feedback in completely different ways. One person might view that message as a call to action and be motivated to rise to the occasion. The other person, however, might think you don't have confidence in them, which causes them to start feeling anxious ahead of those meetings and even questioning whether they are in the right role. The key to unlocking your leadership potential is noticing and understanding any of these types of thought and behaviour patterns that are getting in the way of your potential. Once you have this awareness, the next step is to have the motivation and the tools to do something about changing those patterns ... all of which we will tackle in this book.

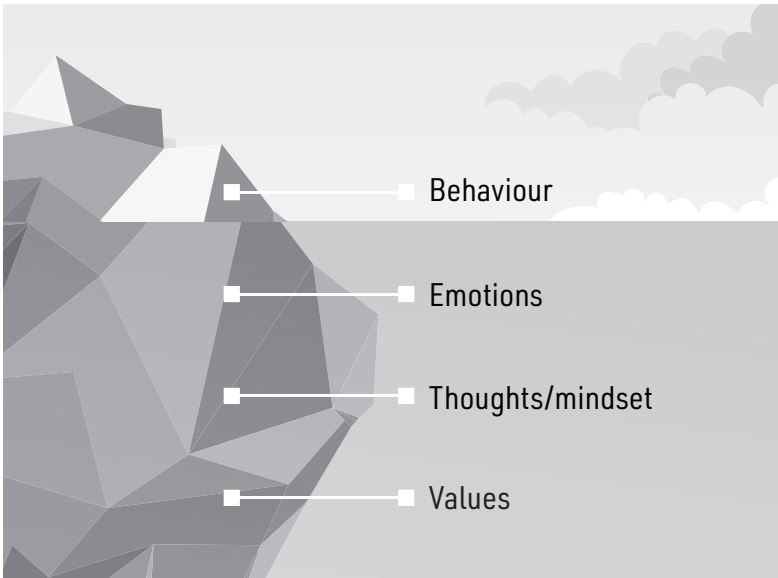
Leaders without self-awareness are unable to develop and grow, and ultimately are less effective because of this. Think about a leader you've worked with who has blind spots and lacks awareness of their thinking and behaviour. Maybe they assume they are strong in certain technical areas or doing really well, when in reality, they haven't earned respect from the people who work around them. If this person is never told they are missing the mark, or if they're given feedback but don't take it on board, the

internal barrier will remain. They will never know that they need to take a different approach, or have the motivation to do anything differently. Development always starts with insight.

Remember my point in Chapter One, when I asked you to recall an experience of a great or terrible leader that you've worked with and what made them so. Was it all about what they knew and what they did in their job that made them great or terrible for you? Or was it about how they interacted with you and others that made the biggest difference? Ultimately, your behaviour as a leader and your interaction with others is *everything*, especially when it comes to influencing and motivating your team to do great work.

It's also helpful to remember that our behaviour is driven firstly by our thoughts, which is why it's so valuable to get a good handle on those thought patterns and understand them. Many of us have come across the iceberg model of behaviour (see the figure following). It's a psychological model for understanding the underlying causes of our behaviour in a given situation. The iceberg model reminds us that the behaviour we observe – in ourselves or others – is just the tip of the iceberg. What we don't overtly see is everything that sits below the surface: the emotional, psychological and cognitive factors that ultimately drive that behaviour we see in people. Understanding that there could be a whole raft of reasons for your peer to act like a selfish jerk, or for you to overreact to well-intended feedback, allows you to understand the source of that behaviour. To truly unlock your potential, you have to 'lift the hood' and understand the root cause of any behaviours that are getting in your way.

The iceberg model of behaviour



PEOPLE CAN CHANGE

My grandmother was a pretty indomitable lady who didn't mince words. She used to shake her head at people, look at me with her piercing eyes and say, 'Rearn, some people never change.' Maybe you agree with her. And to be fair, she wasn't wrong! But just because *some* people never change, isn't to say that people *can't* change. People can become self-aware through regular reflection and with the help of others – whether that's a coach, a great boss or a trusted (and honest) friend.

Everything we have learned about neuroplasticity and the ability for the brain to develop tells us that we can and do evolve our thought patterns and behaviours. In his groundbreaking book

The Brain That Changes Itself, psychiatrist Norman Doidge tells the story of a woman who became blind and subsequently developed the ability to speed ‘read’ audio books at an astounding rate. He theorised this was a result of her brain’s auditory processing taking over what was previously her visual processing function. The ability for our brains to evolve – through either conscious effort or ‘rewiring’, as we will explore later, or through unconscious adaptive mechanisms – is a shining source of optimism when it comes to thinking about our potential growth as humans.

Obviously, not all thought and behaviour patterns will get in your way. Lots of them are constructive, and will actually enable your success as a leader. A good example is having a growth mindset, the pattern of thinking defined by American psychologist and author Carol Dweck as believing ‘that our most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work. This view creates a love of learning and a resilience that is essential for great accomplishment’. Obviously this is a thought pattern that will help to set you up for success.

So, how can you work out which internal barriers *aren’t* helping you succeed? Start becoming aware of which thoughts and behaviour patterns are preventing you from achieving your leadership potential *or* affecting your wellbeing. This starts with tuning in to your self-talk – the patterns of thoughts that are going through your mind. Learn to listen to what you are saying to yourself. Is that talk positive, negative, distracting, depleting or lifting you up? As you prepare for that big meeting that’s coming up, as you take on a new task you’ve never done before, as you respond to a frustrated stakeholder: learn to tune in to what you are saying to yourself at that moment. Listen to your self-talk like

a radio station or a podcast, without necessarily judging it at this point or trying to change anything.

A great way to access your thinking is to write your thoughts down using a journal, or even use a recorder tool like Rev to articulate your self-talk out loud and listen back to it. It might be confronting at first, but becoming aware of your self-talk helps you notice where you are focusing most of your mental energy and the impact that has on your emotions and behaviour.

REFLECT AFTER THE FACT

If I had to identify a single factor that most helps leaders to unlock their potential, my vote would be the skill and habit of reflection. As American psychologist and educational reformer John Dewey said, ‘We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.’ I encourage you to build self-awareness by practising reflection, *after the fact*.

‘We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.’ – John Dewey

Let’s say you just had an interaction at work and you noticed something particular about your behaviour. Perhaps it was the way that you communicated or how you responded. Perhaps it felt a bit off, or your words didn’t quite land the way you wanted. Reflecting after the fact means to pause and think about your response in that situation, as well as the outcome that followed that response. To help you think about these steps more clearly, the diagram below shows a four-step cycle of reflection that I’ve adapted from the educationalist David Kolb’s model of experiential learning.

Four-step cycle of reflection



Over time, with a regular practice of reflection, you should start to notice patterns, triggers or events that prompt you to behave in a certain way. Another way to become aware of your behaviour patterns is by seeking out and listening to feedback from others. We'll explore that later in the book.

Through reflection and with the help of good-quality feedback, ask yourself: is this behavioural pattern something that you are proud of, that makes you feel good and that is achieving good outcomes? Or does the behavioural pattern feel a bit 'off', going against the grain of who you really are or want to be, or not achieving the outcomes you are seeking?

At this point, maybe you're not quite sure yet what your patterns look like, or perhaps you know immediately what they are but you're not sure you can change them. That's entirely okay. This book will help you pinpoint what those patterns are for you, and show you practical ways to shift them over time.

THE COSTS THAT COME

When you are held back by your internal barriers, it costs you: either in terms of your physical and mental wellbeing – such as stress, worry or ill health – or in your ability to achieve positive outcomes in your work. It can also cost you in terms of the unintended impact you have on those around you when you're not at your best as a leader. Being aware of these costs can help you become motivated to do something about it.

These costs may be immediate and obvious – for example, feeling sick and anxious after someone's critique of you. The costs may be relatively minor – for example, needing to put in longer hours for a few weeks because you unconsciously took on more work than you really should have. Or the costs could be very significant – you could develop a physiological issue or chronic stress, or you may have to step back from leadership altogether as a result of burnout. Burnout levels are higher than ever before, particularly for female leaders since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to McKinsey's 'Women in the Workplace 2021' report, female leaders report higher levels of chronic stress, exhaustion and burnout than men. These levels increase as the women become more senior, with over 40 per cent of senior leaders surveyed reporting burnout and exhaustion.

These barriers don't feel good but, more importantly, they also impair your productivity and get in the way of your optimal functioning. Your mental and physical health should always take priority. It's like putting the oxygen mask on yourself first as a leader. And it's not just you who can be affected. It's also your work outcomes, the impact you have on others and, potentially, your career that can be negatively impacted.

Learning the hard way

Eight years ago I was working in the financial services sector. I had just returned from my first period of parental leave to take on a more senior role in my function. That would have been a stretch in itself, but I was also experiencing all of the common challenges of returning to work as a first-time parent. I was feeling upset about leaving my son in childcare especially as he was experiencing separation anxiety. I was missing him and feeling like I wasn't doing a good job either at being a parent or in my new role. I was also experiencing a number of external barriers – including a pretty tough workplace culture. The thought patterns I was experiencing at that time were telling me that I didn't have what it took to be a working parent, that I didn't know how to do this new job, that I wasn't doing well enough in my work and that I was letting everyone down.

I didn't express any of those internal thoughts to anyone except my husband for many months. While I kept going to work and doing my job, the effect of months of that internal noise was that I started to become sick. I was experiencing headaches. My immune system suffered. I started to lose energy and have disrupted sleep patterns. I became teary and emotional in the workplace, which was very unlike me. After several months, it

reached a point where I fully bottomed out. I had lost all sense of confidence in my abilities.

By the time I finally shared some of the thoughts I'd been having with my manager, they were so shocked to discover this was how I was feeling. I had done such a good job of continuing to show up without giving any glimpse into what I was experiencing internally. As hard as they then tried to help me undo some of that thinking and convince me to stay, the damage was done and I made the choice to leave. I learned a valuable lesson – the internal barriers can be insidious and can do us a great deal of damage, even when we are aware of them.



UNLOCKED TIPS

Even if you aren't yet feeling the cost of these barriers at this point in time, I encourage you to have practices in place to help you self-monitor. Specifically, I encourage you to monitor for when your wellbeing is affected or when you start to feel like work is taking its toll. The COVID-19 pandemic taught us all a lot about self-care. If this is something you occasionally struggle with, you can monitor your wellbeing by keeping an eye on all the signs that show up for you when you are feeling pressure or strain. For many people, the initial signs are often physical. They can include affected sleep patterns; heavier reliance on substances like coffee, sugar or alcohol; a lack of motivation to do the things that you would normally enjoy or that you know are good for you; headaches; colds or other sicknesses; and affected appetite. I always get a sore throat first – it's a sure-fire sign that I'm not in a good space and need to slow down.

What if the costs you are monitoring relate more to your career? Notice any signs that could signal that something's getting in the way of your leadership effectiveness. You may not get the performance evaluation that you hoped for, or maybe you were passed over for a new role or an opportunity that you felt confident about securing. Maybe some of your work relationships aren't as strong as they were or could be. These all indicate potential blind spots in how others perceive your leadership at this point in time, and it's critical that you bring them into your awareness. The key to overcoming these blind spots is asking for feedback, which we'll explore later in the book.

When it comes to your wellbeing, you won't always get the balance right. We all experience periods of our lives when we find ourselves in a 'good patch', when we feel confident and seem to be going along well on all fronts. Then we might hit a rough period – we're faced with enormous demands, our health starts to slip, we start questioning ourselves, or we're achieving so much that we actually start overdoing it. There will be cycles of high times and low times, and sometimes the gap between those cycles can last a long time or they can switch up really quickly! The key is to be aware and look for the warning signs that you might be hitting that rough patch, so you can start to do something about it.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Your experience may feel lonely if it seems that you are the only one facing these internal barriers. Yet they exist similarly for

leaders from all walks of life, across industries, levels of experience and backgrounds. A big part of the challenge is that we don't talk much about our difficulties, so you might wrongly assume that others aren't experiencing the same things that you are. There's also cognitive bias in action – the assumption that you're the only one like this and that others are different to you. Knowing that you're not the only one who experiences these challenges helps to normalise them. It can also empower you, because if you know that others can overcome these challenges, perhaps you can too (spoiler alert: you can!).

Through the many conversations I've had with leaders over 20 years, I've seen consistent patterns that have finally led me to write this book. I've facilitated hundreds of sessions with groups of leaders and asked them to share what they find difficult, only to consistently see their surprise and often relief when they learn that others around them are experiencing similar things.

As you explore the patterns I describe in this book, you might feel like your challenges or internal barriers are a bit different to what I describe. I completely accept that you may have specific patterns that don't quite fit with some of the stories and examples I share in this book. If this is the case, I encourage you to use the golden principles that I'm describing, that can apply to everyone:

1. Be clear on the leadership impact you want to have.
2. Become aware of any recurring thought and behaviour patterns.
3. Reflect. Consider how these patterns are impacting you or others. Are they getting in the way? How?
4. Seek support or learning to help you adjust these patterns over time, using the principles of staying unlocked that we will cover in Chapter Eight.

IT STARTS – AND ENDS – WITH YOU

Knowing you are not alone means you are not broken or ‘less than’, and that all of your day-to-day experiences of internal barriers are totally, utterly normal. It makes you human! At the same time, if you truly want to find your best leadership, you must work out if these patterns are getting in your way, and then have the motivation to do something about it. The rest of this book is dedicated to helping you rewire these patterns effectively.

Before you dive into learning about the barriers and what you can do differently, it’s important to remember that you’re a continuous work in progress – as is everyone else. This work of developing as a leader is never really finished, never perfected, never mastered – much like our work as parents, friends and human beings. You will go through cycles of feeling like you are nailing this leadership stuff and overcoming those old barriers, quickly followed by moments when you doubt your growth and feel like the old patterns are rearing their heads again.

Bottom line: when it comes to your own leadership growth, own it. Truly know that this journey starts and ends (but doesn’t really end!) with you. Only you can be held accountable for taking action on what are ultimately your thoughts and behaviours. No one else can do this work for you. But you and everyone around you will benefit when you do.

FROM STARTING WITHIN, TO UNDERSTANDING

Despite the many external challenges you face as a leader, by starting within you can bring deeper awareness to the patterns that are working for you, and those that are getting in your way.

Understand you are not alone in experiencing them, and that you can overcome them by using the tools I share in this book.

What I most want for you is to start identifying which patterns are getting in the way of you unlocking your potential as a leader.

Now that you know you must start within, let's look at how these internal barriers work, so that you can start to do something about them.