DISRUPTION
LEADERSHIP
MATTERS

lessons for leaders from the pandemic

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Chapter Two

Start by assessing your mental models

How do you know if you are a 21st century leader? First, you must assess your core beliefs about leadership. What do you believe are the characteristics of an effective leader? What are the factors that you think will hold you in good stead? What are the three most important behaviours that you believe a leader must possess to be effective? If you are struggling to identify these behaviours, identify someone you know who you think is an example of a good leader. What are their leadership characteristics?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

The behaviours you have identified depend upon your mental models. A mental model is a theory about how the world works. They are formed throughout your life and are a culmination of your various life experiences. These include, but are not limited to:

- Your family situation
- Your education
- Your national culture
- Your language
- Your religion (or no religion)
- Your work experiences
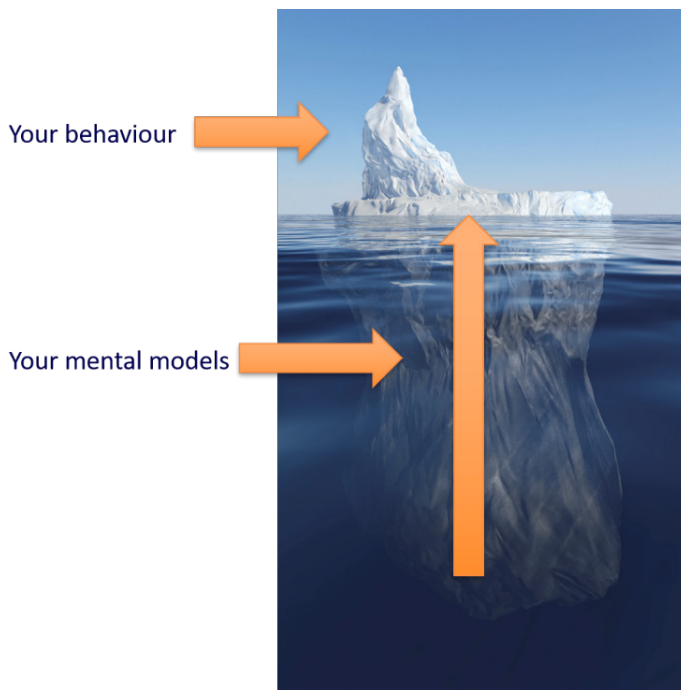- Your exposure to different cultures

Figure 1: *The Iceberg Model*

Mental models are enormously powerful. They cause people to behave in ways that can appear irrational. Mental models are often "layered," which means one mental model influences another.

Consider an iceberg. Above the waterline is your observable behaviour. Below the waterline is your mental models. These are your theories about how the world works, some of which you will share with other people; in other words, you will share the same views. The challenge is that you are highly likely to be unaware of your theories until you learn about a concept such as mental models. You see, your mental models are not explicit. Yet, they have a direct influence on your behaviour. What if your mental models are flawed? But you aren't aware they are faulty, so you keep using them? Let me illustrate.

As a first-time manager at the age of 24, I led a team of eight staff, the youngest of whom was eight years older than me. All the staff were either part-timers or casual staff. I was the only full-time employee.

I was earning the big money of $23,400 per year. I had the title "Manager." I *thought* I had to have all the answers. When a team member came to me with a question, and I did not know the answer, what do you think was my most probable behaviour?

"Fake it until you make it!" I hear you say. That is precisely what I tried to do. I tried to "pretend" that I knew the answers instead of engaging with the team and working with them to discover the best solution. I did not tap into the experience and knowledge of the group. Sometimes, I would avoid the question and use my positional power to deflect the conversation to another topic.

Fortunately, this behaviour was observed by the organisation's general manager, who explained to me what mental models were and how I was behaving because of my subconscious theories. My general manager explained that mental models were not right or wrong; instead, it was their usefulness that mattered. Were my mental models influencing me to behave in a manner aligned with

the type of leader I wanted to become, or were they influencing me to behave inconsistently? To answer this question, I had to become aware of my mental models.

Through reflection and reading, I discovered that it was likely I was behaving in this way because of a combination of several mental models, including:

- I am the manager, earning the most money of anyone in the team, so I need to demonstrate that I am worth that money and am therefore worthy of my salary
- Managers are the most intelligent people in their team; otherwise, they wouldn't be the manager
- Competent managers know a lot about a lot; therefore, I need to demonstrate how much I know, at all times if I am to be identified as being a competent manager

I had no idea why I had these mental models. My general manager suggested I read a book by Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline – The Art & Practice of The Learning Organization,* and start with the chapter on mental models. He then suggested, *"What if you adopt the mental model that you are a learner. Someone who is open to learning and will work with the team you lead and learn together, over time, and make this work better and better?"*

Without question, the single most influential lesson in my life has been the understanding that the more I am aware of my mental models, the more effective I can be as a person across all my life's roles. Mental models are so powerful they will overrule your values. Even though I believed in integrity, when my mental models about what I thought a leader ought to be were challenged,

I acted consistently with my mental models, not my value of integrity. As a leader, raising your awareness of your mental models is essential if you wish to be effective throughout the pandemic and beyond.

One of my favourite leadership books is Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. Nelson doesn't reference management theory, and he certainly doesn't talk about mental models. But he does describe significant changes in his thinking and mindset. In simple terms, Nelson shifted from believing that violence was the only way to rid South Africa of apartheid to practising peaceful resistance. His story is full of reflection and deliberate changes to his thinking that impacted his behaviour. One example includes a story that occurred after his release from prison, and he had become President of South Africa. While in a restaurant, Nelson invited one of his previous captors to share a seat at his table. The man was trembling. When one of his soldiers asked President Mandela why he would do such a thing when this specific goaler used to urinate on him after beating him up, Nelson replied, "The mentality of reprisals destroys states, while the mentality of tolerance builds nations."

Nelson Mandela could be excused for treating his captors with disdain. His biases toward them would be understandable. Yet, he made conscious decisions to keep his biases at arm's length and do what was necessary for his entire country, including his previous captors. Nelson was aware of his mental models and how they influenced his behaviour. When he discovered a mental model that was no longer useful, he adopted a new mental model and changed his behaviour. This lesson is extraordinary. It is not easy to change your thinking, yet if you want to be effective as a leader, you must be open to changing your mental models

and resultant behaviour if you desire to be the best leader you can be.

Unconscious bias, diversity, and inclusion

In his book, *The Excellence Dividend - Principles for Prospering in Turbulent Times* from a *Lifetime in Pursuit of Excellence*, Tom Peters highlights that most boards and executive teams in corporate America do not reflect their customers' diversity. He asks a simple question, "Why not?" Suppose company boards and leadership teams do not reflect the diversity of their customers and the people they serve. In that case, they will not even be aware of the collective biases that influence their decision-making.

The challenge with our biases is that most are unconscious. Recognising that you have them is the first step, then having the courage to do something about them is the second. One of Australia's most successful boutique culture and leadership firms, Leading Teams, identified a challenge recruiting women. Only 7% of job applicants were women. How would they increase the number of female staff in the organisation if only 7% of respondents were women? What was stopping women from applying? One of Leading Teams' facilitators, Shelly McElroy, led a process where they discovered some research from Harvard University that highlighted that men would apply for jobs if they met 60% of the criteria. In comparison, women would apply if they met 100% of the requirements. Here was a clue.

Another clue was employee benefits such as flexible working rosters, parental leave, bonus structure, travel allowance, and car allowances were essential to women. Despite offering these benefits, they were not being included in their advertisements. They also ran a scan over the language used in their advertisements.

It was 92% male dominant. After just a single round of job advertisements where they corrected their language and included all essential benefits, their female application rate soared to 47%.

No one at Leading Teams had deliberately structured their advertisements to reduce the probability of women applying. Instead, the team at Leading Teams dared to challenge themselves to identify what they were doing that contributed to the problem. When they discovered the answers, they immediately addressed them and achieved an outstanding turnaround in just a single round of advertisements. What is your response to that challenge if you are in an organisation or industry with little diversity? Is it as simple as people from the underrepresented groups don't want to do that job? Or is there more to the challenge? What is in your control that you have not yet considered? Shelly and her colleagues dared to challenge themselves to be true to their purpose and remain open to opportunities to improve. With focus, attention, a willingness to be honest and to challenge themselves, Leading Teams discovered a solution that provided immediate benefits to the organisation.

Nutrien Ag Solutions Australia (Nutrien) is Australia's leading agricultural retailer employing more than 4,100 people in 700 locations throughout the country. Managing Director Rob Clayton recently celebrated the commencement of the second Women In Leadership program in June 2021. The first program was launched in 2020 because, as a male-dominated industry, Nutrien's leaders recognised they needed to take deliberate action to improve the ratio of women in senior leadership roles. The organisation formed the Nutrien Diversity & Inclusion Gender Working Committee, including Rebecca Staines, national seed category manager, whom I was coaching at the time, to

identify a range of initiatives to develop female leaders throughout the organisation. Despite the pandemic having commenced, Rebecca and her colleagues set targets and initiated programs.

The committee's target, approved by Nutrien's Executive, was to have 18% women in leadership positions before the end of 2021, which has already been achieved. A longer-term target is to have a minimum of 32% women in leadership positions by the end of 2026. These might look like they are just numbers, but that is not accurate. A significant amount of work to attract women into the industry and identify and provide networks and pathways for them to develop their leadership skills, if that is what they choose to do, is available for them. The Women in Nutrien Mentoring program has matched emerging leaders with mentors both inside and external to the organisation. A surprising benefit of the pandemic and pivoting to online-only activities increased the program's reach beyond Australian shores, enabling the 23 women in the two Women In Leadership cohorts to work with successful men and women within the industry.

Kristina Hermanson is the managing director of FMC Australia – New Zealand (FMC ANZ), a subsidiary of FMC Global. FMC is an agricultural sciences company that has 95 employees in Australia and five employees in New Zealand. Kristina is passionate about enabling more women to have the opportunity to develop into senior leadership roles within the agricultural industry. Despite the pandemic, in 2021, FMC launched the FMC LEAD Scholarships Program. Aspiring women aged 18 to 35 from across the agricultural sector in Australia and New Zealand were able to apply for two scholarships valued at more than AUS$12,000 to enable them to progress toward senior levels of leadership. When announcing the inaugural awardees on 8th July 2021, Kristina said,

"Seeing more young female graduates entering the sector is promising, but the key is bringing that diversity through the ranks to senior management to continue building diversity in decisions and strategic direction." A unique aspect of the program is that anyone who entered the program will continue to participate in a series of ongoing networking events. Initially, these events will be online but will move to in-person as soon as possible.

Leading Teams, Nutrien, and FMC ANZ have continued their essential journeys on this topic throughout the pandemic. They didn't stop because other things were more important. They have continued with their efforts because this type of work is fundamental to future success. The disruption caused by the pandemic has forced organisations to identify and focus on the essential issues. Like many others, the fact that Leading Teams, Nutrien and FMC ANZ have continued to focus on enabling more women to enter their industries and support them to advance their careers indicates they are serious about this issue and are taking deliberate action to improve.

Diversity and inclusion are not just about gender. The Diversity Council of Australia defines diversity and inclusion as:

> ***Diversity*** *refers to the mix of people in an organisation – that is, all the differences between people in how they identify in relation to their:*

- *SOCIAL IDENTITY e.g., Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, age, caring responsibilities, cultural background, disability status, gender, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity, intersex status, and socio-economic background.*

- *PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY e.g., profession, education, work experiences, organisational level, functional area, division/ department, and location.*

These aspects come together in a unique way for each individual and shape the way they view and perceive their world and workplace – as well as how others view and treat them.

__Inclusion__ refers to getting the mix of people in an organisation to work together to improve performance and well-being. Inclusion in a workplace is achieved when a diversity of people (e.g., ages, cultural backgrounds, genders, perspectives) feel that they are:

- *RESPECTED for who they are and able to be themselves;*
- *CONNECTED to their colleagues and feel they belong;*
- *CONTRIBUTING their perspectives and talents to the workplace; and*
- *PROGRESSING in their career at work (i.e. have equal access to opportunities and resources).*

It is only through inclusion that organisations can make the most out of diversity.
(https://www.dca.org.au/di-planning/getting-started-di/ diversity-inclusion-explained)

Recognising and acting on these issues is essential for organisational success. Research from Deloitte indicates that diverse teams produce 2.3 times higher cash flow than non-diverse teams. Improving diversity is great for human beings, great for leaders and great for business. Why wouldn't you do it?

The knowing-doing gap

Leaders often believe they know how to execute their skills. For example, the leaders I usually coach think they're good listeners. They think they know how to listen and believe their behaviour matches their view of themselves. Yet, when I observe them interacting with their colleagues, they talk over the top of them, ask poor quality questions and don't execute the listening skills they believe they possess.

This is the Knowing-Doing Gap. In their seminal book, *The Knowing-Doing Gap*, Pfeffer and Sutton wrote about how smart companies turn knowledge into action. You believe you both know how to execute a skill and are competent when you do it. However, when your behaviour is observed, a gap exists. You are not behaving as you believe.

Of course, I am fortunate to work with many excellent listeners. They are concerned about maintaining the quality of their listening and wish to focus on keeping the gap as small as possible. It is always one of the main goals of the work we do together. They understand that if they take their eye off this skill, even for a moment, their competence will quickly recede.

Frank Catalano, principal at Glen Waverley Primary School in Melbourne, Australia, is one example. When Frank commenced as principal in July 2010, the school had 320 students and ranked within the 60th percentile for performance for the state's 1,600 public primary schools. Today, the school has 911 students and has maintained its rank in the 95th percentile for performance since 2014. The school is one of only eight schools throughout Australia to have achieved and maintained registration to the Council of International Schools (CIS) membership standards. Without question, Frank and the 85 staff he leads are high-performers.

The pandemic has tested every element of their high-performance mindset. Throughout the past 20 months, the school has switched from on-site to remote learning more times than anyone can count. Each time the school has pivoted to learning from home, Frank and the school leadership team have challenged themselves to remain consistent with the school's core philosophy, which is:

- The students are at the centre of everything we do
- Building staff capacity is paramount
- Everything we do is based on research and a whole school approach

Frank has consistently challenged his leaders to use the pandemic as an opportunity to reassess how the school does what it does to remain consistent with its philosophy. There is no point in having a philosophy if all it does is sit on the walls of the school buildings. In January 2020, the school had 80 students who required special needs. This was just under one-tenth of the student population. That number has swelled to more than 350 students throughout 2021. Using the lens that the school philosophy provides, Frank and the leadership team have worked with their colleagues to identify students who need extra support from a well-being perspective – listening to students, parents, and each other has been the cornerstone behind creating more support for students.

One of the school's popular bi-annual events is its production. Usually, the production results in the whole school community working and creating a special event. That cannot happen in 2021. The current laws won't allow the school community to gather as

they did in 2019. Instead, each class prepares their video-taped performance when on-site learning is possible, and the main cast records their parts. The school's media team will create a video version of the production. An evening will be scheduled where the show will be streamed into the school community's homes for everyone to witness the final product together, as if they were together, in person. Relevant teachers have been provided time away from their standard classes to prepare for the event. Once again, Frank, the leadership team, and staff were guided by their school philosophy to "find a way" to enable the bi-annual production to occur, despite the constant uncertainty associated with lockdowns and the return to remote learning.

A school philosophy exists for a reason. It exists to inform action, which can take time to build into your culture. Frank and the team at Glen Waverley Primary School have become masters at closing the Knowing-Doing-Gap. If your organisation has a set of principles or a philosophy intended to guide and inform your actions, how big is your gap? What is your evidence?

Push through the learning curve

In Seth Godin's book, *The Dip*, he explains that the world doesn't progress in straight lines. Instead, the world moves in curves and circles. Learning is the same. When you start to learn something new, typically, you experience a slight improvement at the start. Then you become stuck. Either you persist at this point with what you are learning, or you quit. Throughout my experience, I have learned that professional people have an inflated perception of their ability to learn something new. Not all people have this increased perception, but it is more common than not.

When asked to rate themselves out of ten for the statement, "When I learn something new, I master it very quickly," most respondents in my workshops have scored themselves seven or more out of ten.

The rating does not match how many of you learn. Instead, you start at three or four out of ten. Initially, you are further from mastering the new technique than you like to admit. As a professional, your mental model is that you are a quick learner. It is what separates you from everyone else. It is a crucial differentiating factor. To admit that you must put extra effort to learn something new, such as a conversation technique, is paramount to realising that you aren't as competent as you like people to believe.

Instead of putting in the extra work, you blame the technique. "It doesn't work," you exclaim. Then, you find something new and repeat the process. Eventually, you risk developing an anti-learning mental model. "All those techniques are just theory, and they don't work in the real world!" Hmm, isn't that statement itself representative of a theory?

Exponential curves all work the same. At the start, there is a slight performance improvement, even though time is progressing. The curve is relatively flat. The initial effort is providing little to show for it. If you can recall learning to ride a bicycle or have taught someone to ride, you will quickly understand this concept. Attempt. Crash. Attempt. Crash. Attempt. A little success, then, crash! If the person you are teaching is a child, there is usually a few tears (learning doesn't always have to hurt, of course!). Eventually, the successes start to come. Suddenly, the riding technique kicks in, seemingly out of nowhere, and the child rides hundreds of metres without crashing. And, instead of crashing,

they manage to put their feet down when they get the wobbles and stop themselves from crashing. Then, the wobbles start to disappear and off they go, able to ride with you. This process occurs over three days for most children I have trained.
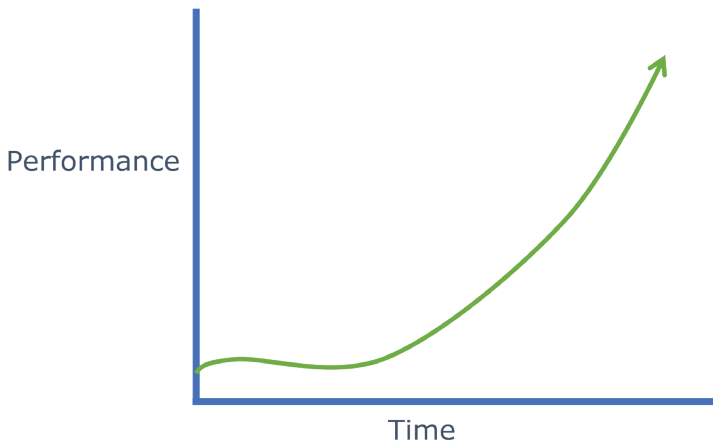
The Learning Curve

Figure 2: *The Learning Curve*

Learning nearly always follows this pattern. The beauty of an exponential curve is that you cannot reach the curved part without first progressing through the flat portion. When you recognise that a skill is something you want to learn because it will benefit your future, learning to "push through the curve" is essential.

Daniel Auld, director at Eric Jones Stairbuilding Group, did something unusual in his industry in the last quarter of 2019. With support from his HR manager, Sandra Marinacci-Orbach, he engaged my services to work with his frontline leaders within his timber staircase division. Unlike most people, Daniel and Sandra didn't want a single workshop that would magically improve their

leaders' skills over three hours. They believed they needed something more consistent, such as a program that would support the development of their leaders over time.

A significant focus was improving verbal communication and ensuring the leaders communicated a consistent message to their colleagues. When the pandemic caused the first lockdown, the business was in a category where it was allowed to continue to operate. Daniel met with the leaders involved in the program, Joe Van Roosmalen, Sam Kane, Matt D'Orazio and Stefano Bianchi, to determine how they would protect themselves and the business from the consequences of a COVID outbreak on-site. They decided to create a split-shift system to prevent the virus's possible spread and reduce the risk of shutting down the entire operation. These conversations were not easy, and the leaders had to engage with the members of their teams to ensure their views were considered. Commencing an evening shift required at least one of the leaders be present, and Sam volunteered, offering himself because he felt that the impact on himself and his family was less than it would have been for his colleagues.

As soon as restrictions allowed, Daniel and Sandra were eager for the program to continue. So, too, were Joe, Matt, Stefano, and Sam. They knew they had learned a lot, but there was more to learn. They wanted to continue to push through the learning curve.

Following COVID-safe protocols, we met outdoors in the car-park. We maintained physical distancing, and I used a mobile whiteboard to share the agenda and workshop challenges as they arose. At the end of the first session outdoors, Stefano shared that he was having a challenge maintaining the performance of

the members of his team who were working the evening shift. While he did a hand-over with Sam every day, he wasn't there during the shift, so they were "without a leader." We then had a terrific conversation. Sam was present for the evening shift, but it hadn't been formalised with all the staff working the shift that he was their formal leader for as long as they would require the shift. As soon as it was no longer required, the team members would return to reporting to Stefano.

The leaders agreed this vital information would be communicated with the evening shift team members. Soon after this session, Stefano reported the performance of the evening shift returned to the expected level. A single question from him led to a conversation that produced a solution that positively impacted performance.

As COVID restrictions allowed, we continued the program in the carpark. During this period, the company moved to new premises. Moving location can be a challenging experience for any company but completing it during a pandemic added another layer of complexity. The leaders' communication skills were tested repeatedly. Various delays outside the team's control resulted in the move finally being completed three months later than first planned. In addition, numerous lockdowns came and went, constantly challenging the smooth operation of the organisation. Never had the communication skills of the leaders been as regularly tested. However, by maintaining the program, each leader focused on the skills they had been taught and continued to utilise them daily. Re-work has reduced, and the quality the team proudly delivers has been maintained throughout multiple lockdowns and a change of premises — what an outstanding achievement!

Words matter

Words have meaning. When you speak with other people, you use words to convey your intended meaning. However, many leaders are not as conscious of the meaning of their words when they speak. Let us consider the question, *"Do you mind if I talk to you about an issue that arose late yesterday?"* On the surface, this sounds and looks fine. A single word can have a massive difference in the **meaning** conveyed in the sentence. As an example, imagine if the question was, *"Do you mind if I talk with you about an issue that arose late yesterday?"*

Did you spot the difference between the two questions?

If you are talking *"to"* someone, and that is what you think you are doing, what is the likelihood of you listening to what they have to say?

When you speak *"with"* someone, it conveys the intent of being equal contributors to the conversation. Try it. Notice the difference this **one** word makes to how you behave in a conversation, assuming you do want to speak "with" them and not "to" them!

You may think these are just words, and does it matter? I have witnessed leaders talk "to" people throughout my coaching, and leaders speak "with" people. When they talk "to" people, everyone knows the positional power of the leader. Listening is expected to occur, but those spoken "to" are expected to do the listening. **Not the leader**.

I have had the enormous honour of facilitating leadership workshops with leaders from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Japan, China, Indonesia, and throughout Australia. Listening has consistently been identified as a critical characteristic of effective leadership irrespective of the group I have worked with. Listening

is an essential practice if you want to be an effective leader, no matter your religion, culture, or country of birth.

Words do matter. They have a meaning which is transferred to your behaviour. If you say that listening is essential, but you talk "to" people, what you "say" and what you "do" will not be aligned. Do you think people can spot the difference between what a leader "says" and what they "do"? Yes, of course, they can. What impact do you think this has on trust? Does it increase or decrease trust? The most likely outcome is trusting will go down. Maybe by only one marble, but it will still go down.

Consider, for a moment, the terms *human resources*, *human capital*, and *human assets*. What are the mental models that underpin these words? Are human beings resources? Are they capital? Are they assets? Resources, capital, and assets can be bought and sold. Are we saying humans can be bought and sold? Isn't that slavery, and isn't it against the law? Why have we allowed the meaning of these words to permeate so profoundly throughout organisations?

Part of the reason is that people do not spend much time thinking about the meaning of the words they are using. Just because you might not think too deeply about the words you choose to use does not change the meaning of those words.

Consider the phrase, "My team." Leaders use this phrase all the time. It implies that you own your team. Do you own the people you lead? Of course, you do not, but this phrase is used again, again, and again. What behaviours could result from the mental model that you "own" your team? As a leader, ought you not be considered with the words you use so they reflect the meaning you intend? "This is the team I lead" may better represent reality.

Equally, leaders ought to be "learners." In her book, *Mindset – How You Can Fulfil Your Potential*, Carol S. Dweck explained the science behind a *growth* mindset versus a *fixed* mindset. Her work resonated and made sense to me. A growth mindset means that you are open to learning. Garry Ridge and the tribe at WD40 have deliberately shifted from using the term "*mistakes*" to "*learning moments*." Tribe members learn to own their roles and to take responsibility for them. Unplanned and unexpected events do happen. Those involved take responsibility for the event, identify what can be learned, and assess if the learning will help WD40 improve for both the tribe members and their customers. If the lesson benefits both tribe members and customers, they implement it.

This mental model is encouraged at all levels of the organisation. It is okay for senior leaders to have "learning moments," too. A growth mindset has been deliberately established in the culture at WD40, and learning is expected to occur at all levels of the organisation (which is not as simple as it sounds). A growth mindset is characterised by the statement, "*I haven't learned this yet!*" The word "Yet" is critical. It implies that you will have done what you needed to do to learn whatever you need to know in the future.

A fixed mindset focuses on proving and establishing how great you are based on past performance, driven by your innate abilities. The fixed mindset believes that ability is what it is and cannot be developed over time. Incremental learning is okay because it is built on what you already know. However, suppose learning exposes the learner to something they believe they *should* have previously known. In that case, the fixed mindset will cause the leader to avoid the learning opportunity because

admitting they need to learn something is akin to admitting they are incompetent. This situation is a phenomenon I call the **leader-learner trap**.

The leader-learner trap

Successful people regularly report they are lifelong learners. They espouse that they have a growth mindset.

Shayne Elliott, CEO of the ANZ Bank in Australia, shared a LinkedIn video post that he is *"#always learning."* In it, he speaks about a book that has provided tremendous value over many years, *Execution – The Discipline of Getting Things Done* by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan. It is a terrific book and worth the read.

The ability to learn is essential for success. However, **are followers tolerant of leaders who are learning?** I am not sure they are, which creates a significant problem for leaders.

For example, if something goes wrong at the ANZ Bank and Shayne turns to his shareholders, stakeholders, board, and staff and says, *"Look, I don't know what to do in this situation. I'm a fast learner, and with the amazing people in the team, I'm confident we can work out a solution as soon as possible,"* do you think his stakeholders will be happy?

The odds are firmly stacked in favour of Shayne's stakeholders **NOT** being happy. They would expect that he should already know what to do for the pay he has been receiving.

This problem exists at all levels of leadership. And the more senior you become, the more significant this problem becomes. Followers expect that their leaders, because of their title, position, experience, and most of all, pay, should already know what to do when things go wrong. They believe that leaders should

have previously known what to do first so that whatever went wrong would have never gone amiss in the first place.

The tolerance for leaders to be *#alwayslearning* is extremely low.

This pressure affects leaders in many ways. The most common effect is that leaders subconsciously associate their need for learning to signify they are incompetent. I have never met a single person who wants to be known for being incompetent. The thought of being perceived as incompetent catalyses fear in most people. As Professor Amy Edmondson says, "Interpersonal fear reduces learning behaviour."

The easiest way for leaders to avoid being "incompetent" is to do the very opposite to what they ought to do. They do not share or admit they are learning. Instead, they blame others, seek scapegoats, get angry, persist with strategies that are not working and generally cause the situation to worsen.

An interesting phenomenon is that the more significant the learning opportunity due to the gravity of the error, the less likely learning is to occur. Ultimately, this is not great for the leader, their followers, or the organisation.

One thing to say is that leaders need to be more emotionally intelligent, authentic, and open about their learning. Still, it is an entirely different scenario when something goes wrong, and followers believe that the leader *"Should have known better."*

While most people agree that leaders ought to be lifelong learners, the actual practice of being a lifelong learner often results in followers perceiving that their leader is incompetent. In turn, this drives down learning behaviours and drives up defensive routines. First described by Harvard University Professor Chris Argyris many decades ago, these are behaviours driven by

a subconscious need to be competent. It is a compelling need and will cause good people to behave poorly. Leaders become trapped; while they want to learn, **they cannot be seen to be learning** because that would be a public admission that they did not know what to do in the first place and were therefore incompetent.

Think about it? Are people tolerant of leaders not knowing how to do something in your organisation? What pressure was applied, implicitly or explicitly, to leaders to understand what to do when the pandemic first appeared? As more information has become available, and hindsight has shown that some political leaders' actions should have been different from what they were, are leaders chastised for not having had this hindsight before making their original decisions? As leaders have changed tactics because of new information, how have their constituents responded? Many have been frustrated and angry, accusing the leaders that they "should have known better."

These issues highlight the complexities that underpin real learning at the most senior levels. What can you do about the Leader-Learner Trap? In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, Professor Amy Edmondson from the Harvard Business School advocates that leaders must take responsibility for creating the psychological safety that supports learning at all levels of the organisation. In doing so, leaders will reduce anti-learning behaviours that manifest from the leader-learner trap. There is no quick fix, but here are three interdependent strategies to get you started:

1. Validate learning as an essential element of every person's role, including senior leaders. Have leaders regularly

share stories that highlight what they have learned during crisis-free times. When crises occur, the learning culture established by these stories will help minimise knee-jerk blaming and avoiding action that germinates from anti-learning behaviours.

2. Create opportunities for diagonal slices of the organisation's hierarchy to learn together and be explicit that one's title is left at the door when staff enter the learning room. When people learn together on essential organisational tasks, staff can see the value of learning for everyone, including senior leaders, and their learning tolerance increases.

3. Adopt the WD-40 philosophy established by CEO Garry Ridge: there are never mistakes, only "learning opportunities." This shared mental model requires a commitment to eliminate the word "mistake" from your organisation's vocabulary. Aaah, yes, I can hear you say, "What? Are you suggesting that it would be a mistake to say the word mistake?" No; I am suggesting it would be a learning moment!

Mental models to consider

Employees are human beings, not human resources

Dee Hock, CEO Emeritus, and founder of VISA International, was right. Employees are human beings. They are not human resources. Keep this front of mind when you are making decisions about people. Bob Chapman, CEO of the US$3 billion Barry-Wehmiller group of companies, with over 12,000 people in its employment, says that his main concern during the pandemic is showing that he cares for its employees. The best way to do that is to re-affirm they have a job, and the company will

work with them to keep them employed. To achieve this, a company must have a business model that can sustain down-turns. Economies go up, and they go down. They always have, and they always will. Chapman says that companies ought to continually work on their business model to ensure that it can benefit from the economy going up but sustain periods when the economy goes down. Since 1990, Barry-Wehmiller had experienced eight downturns of various magnitudes. Not once, during any of those downturns, did the company stand down an employee. Bob says, *"Leadership is the stewardship of the lives entrusted to you, to bring out the best in the people we have the privilege of leading. Management is the manipulation of others for your success."* When you lead people, they do extraordinary things. When you manage them, they give you less. If you are a so-called hard-nosed business person, sustained financial success will be achieved by leading people instead of managing them. This mental model underpins all that follow.

Learning and oxygen are equally crucial for human beings

If you cease having access to oxygen, what will happen?

You will die. Equally, if you stop learning in an ever-changing world, what is the most likely impact that will have on your career? Metaphorically speaking, it, too, will die.

Continuous learning is essential for performance and career success. Garry Ridge, CEO of WD40, says that WD40 employees do not make mistakes. As you read earlier, the word "mistake" has been deliberately eliminated from their vocabulary. Instead, they have "learning moments." They have used language to reinforce the mental model that learning matters, not blaming someone when things do not work out as planned.

What are your mental models about learning? Do you take responsibility for it? Or do you consider your education to be the responsibility of someone or something external to you? Anders Ericcson, the author of *Peak – How All of Us Can Achieve Extraordinary Things* and the world expert on expertise, says that no one in the world has become an expert at anything without the willingness to do the hard work that comes with learning and mastering a subject. It turns out that hard work is the key, but a special kind of hard work makes the most significant difference.

Smart, hard work

According to Ericcson, no one achieves excellence without hard work. No-one. Period. And no one achieves excellence without doing *smart,* hard work.

Smart, hard work is discovering and mastering the most appropriate technique related to whatever you attempt to master. The opposite of smart, hard work is ineffective hard work. Ineffective hard work is when you do what you think you should be doing, but you practice the wrong thing because you have not done your research on what you should be doing. Ineffective hard work can feel like smart, hard work. Except, it is not. It is ineffective hard work. Let me illustrate the difference between smart, hard work and ineffective hard work.

When my daughter Sienna was in third grade, she joined her school aerobics squad. She was selected in the third level team. The first level team consisted of seven girls, all of whom were in fifth and sixth grade. The second level team included girls from the fourth, fifth and sixth grades. Sienna's team had girls from the third to the fifth grades.

While at different levels, each of the three teams competed against each other and all the other primary school teams. The first level team won the state championship, which automatically qualified them for the national championships. Both the second level team and Sienna's team failed to qualify for the national championships.

Later that year, the first level team won the national championship. This achievement meant that the school would be required to compete at a higher level the following year, even though all the girls in the national championship-winning team would no longer be at the school.

Three days into the start of the following school year, while our family was eating dinner, Sienna made a statement. *"I'd love to be in the first level team this year, but it's impossible!"*

"Why is it impossible?" I inquired.

"Well, you know that I was in the third level team last year. And we didn't qualify for the national championships. And, because we won the gold medal, we have gone up another level as a school. Plus, no girl has ever made the first-grade team without being in year five or six, and I'm only in fourth grade this year. Dad, it's impossible!"

"When are the trials?" I asked.

"About six weeks away," Sienna replied.

"Okay, let's imagine you **can** *make the first level team. What could you do between now and the trials to make that team?"*

"Hmm, I could train," Sienna said.

"How often?"

"Every day?" she said.

"For how long, each day?"

"Hmmm, ten minutes?"

"*Yes, that sounds fine!*" I said, smiling to myself.

"*Okay,*" I continued, "*You could train each day for ten minutes. Is there anything else you could do?*" I asked.

"*Umm, I could ask my friends to join me?*"

"*Yes, that sounds like a great plan. Anything else?*"

"*Hmmm, maybe I should ask my teachers what training we should be doing?*"

"*That's a brilliant idea! That way, you'll be doing the correct training, the sort of training that will help you have a chance at getting in the first level team,*" I replied, smiling broadly.

We concluded the conversation.

Importantly, when Sienna went to school the following day, she recruited two friends to train with her. She spoke with the teachers, who were passionate about aerobics, and asked about the sort of training they should be doing to give them a chance of making the first level team. Then, they started training at recess and lunchtime. The teachers, who were also their coaches, would join them at lunchtime and provide extra coaching.

This is smart, hard work. Sienna and her friends were practising the correct technique. They could have just as quickly **NOT** asked the teachers about what training they should be doing and have trained in a manner that matched what they "thought" they should be doing. Equally, given their training commenced six weeks before the trials, what do you think the girls in the second level team the previous year were doing at recess and lunchtime at this time?

Whatever it was that they were doing, it was **not** training. Typically, the girls would start preparing two to three weeks before the trials. Frankly, training for the aerobics squad was not yet on their radar.

Given Sienna and her two friends, all in fourth grade, were training an hour a day across recess and lunchtime, and they were receiving coaching from the coaches of the team, how much do you think they improved before the trials?

In this example, the answer was a considerable amount of improvement. So much so that all three girls were selected in the first level team! Of the seven girls in the group, three were in fourth grade, and the rest were in sixth grade. Some of the girls from the previous year, who were in the second-level team, missed selection in the first-grade squad.

The girls continued to train hard and went to the state championships. Please recall that they were now competing at a higher level of competition compared to the previous year. They won the state championship and automatically qualified for the national championships. This was an extraordinary effort, and the team went on and won the silver medal! The smart, hard work that Sienna and her two friends had done certainly paid off.

There are two essential elements for smart, hard work. The first element is that you are doing the correct work. This means that you have completed some research and found the "correct" work that you plan to master. When I say "research," I don't mean academic research, although, in some circumstances, that form of study may be appropriate. Usually, your research will involve finding an expert and obtaining the relevant information from them. For example, when Sienna sought advice from her coaches about what training she ought to do to prepare her for the trials, she completed the "smart" part of smart, hard work. The second element of smart, hard work is you put the time into practising and mastering the correct work, or as I like to call it, the Technique

That Matters. Practising the proper technique is the "hard work" part of smart, hard work.

Effective leaders help the members of the team focus on identifying and completing smart, hard work. The pandemic has provided leaders with an opportunity to clarify the essential tasks for each team member. Teaching team members to identify smart, hard work will have benefits well beyond the pandemic. And being clear about what is vital in your role is paramount for personal and organisational success.

Cash is king. Clarity is queen.

In the mid-1990s, I was introduced to the term "Cash is King." It means that, in business, you can never forget that accountants and finance rule the day. No matter where we live and work, we exist within an economic reality governed by the mighty dollar.

Everything that we do as leaders, ultimately, will be judged by its economic impact. Yet, I preach Servant Leadership, which is about recognising the full potential of people and enabling them to shine.

How does Servant Leadership align with the "Cash is King" concept?

Whether you like it or not, the number-crunchers rule the world. Period. Your organisation does not have to be "for profit" for this to be true. A not-for-profit government agency, and similar types of organisations also need to achieve their budget. No organisation is immune from this reality. The money that governments around the world have been pouring into their economies to keep them afloat (in Australia, Job-Keeper and Job-Seeker are two examples) is largely borrowed money that will have to be repaid.

I believe that the resourcefulness and capacity of human beings are primarily underutilised within organisations. This underutilisation of people costs companies a lot of money. It costs them the money they did not save because of poor decisions, and it costs them reduced productivity that results from people not working anywhere near their capacity.

Poor decisions and low productivity are both caused by a lack of clarity for employees, including:

- Clarity about roles.
- Clarity about what constitutes "doing a good job."
- Clarity about how their key responsibilities will be measured.
- Clarity about how their part fits with the functions of other members of the team.
- Clarity about how their role contributes to the broader organisation's purpose and why their role matters.
- Clarity about the relationships they need to nurture to perform their role effectively and achieve the results they are supposed to achieve.

When human beings are clear about what they must do, decision making becomes a lot easier, and productivity goes through the roof. Therefore "Clarity is Queen." Organisations need the king and queen working together to be successful.

Recently, the frontline leaders and business owner of an organisation I am working with made some changes to a process they had been doing for more than nine years. All the leaders "knew" the process was flawed and was creating re-work (the extra work that must be done to correct something that could have, and should have, been done the first time correctly). Why did they

keep doing the process that they all (independently) believed was flawed? Because they were not clear that part of their role as leaders is to keep their eye out for flaws in their system and offer suggestions to correct those flaws. And, for that to occur, all of them, including the business owner, must be open to listening to each other's suggestions and not take these personally or as an assault on their competence.

Within four weeks of commencing their leadership program, this error had been corrected and would, throughout the year, cover the cost of the leadership program more than ten times over. And those performance improvements will continue year on year.

Let that sink in for a moment. As a direct result of improving their leadership, their organisation will be making significant year on year savings. From a logical perspective, will those savings increase the job security of the leaders and their team members? Of course, they will!

Servant Leadership is about developing the skills so that everyone is clear about what they must do. Servant Leadership drives "Clarity is Queen." The reality is, whenever there are "cash" problems, they are caused by a lack of clarity.

Whoever receives the output of your work so that they can do their work is a customer

As previously established, not everyone uses the term "customer." Whether you have clients, patients, students, or stakeholders, it is how you interact and engage with those "customers" which is what matters. It is the same for your colleagues.

When you choose to behave as if the recipient of your work is your customer, you will better serve their needs. If you are not

sure what this looks like, think of your experiences as a customer. When you do not get what you expect, you feel frustrated. If you believe that you should have been communicated more effectively than you were, you get frustrated and disappointed. The same is true when you are a staff member.

As a leader, consider the tasks those team members you lead require you to do so they can do their job. Often, you will need to provide them with information to be clear about what they are doing. It may be as simple as providing them with the names of people you would like to attend a meeting they are arranging on your behalf. Maybe, it is clarity about the topics you want to be included in a report. When this information is not provided on time, delays are incurred, or staff submit incorrect work. This leads to re-work, which is a wasteful use of valuable staff talent and resources.

The same issue exists between staff, primarily when they work in different teams or departments. Teaching this mental model to staff within your team, department, or entire organisation will improve communication, improve efficiencies, and reduce wasteful work (and all the frustration that comes with it!).

Take responsibility and own your role, versus blame and excuses

When you have role clarity, it makes it easier to take responsibility for your job. When you do not have role clarity, it becomes easier to make excuses for your performance or blame others for what they did not do. In their book, *Extreme Ownership*, Navy SEALs Jocko Willink and Leif Babin are strong advocates for teaching team members to take full responsibility for their role, including when given tasks they do not understand. Rather than using a lack of understanding as an excuse for not doing

something correctly, Jocko and Leif recommend that you ask questions to ensure you understand why something must be done when you truly own your role.

On their third tour in Iraq, Jocko and Leif were handed an order by their commanders. "*Do not leave the base for a mission without taking some Iraqi soldiers with you.*" At the time, Iraqi soldiers were known as the worst combat soldiers in the world. When a firefight would start in front of them, they would turn, run, and indiscriminately fire their MK40s over their shoulders without looking at what they were shooting. Often, they would attack their own personnel. Jocko and Leif were perplexed. "*Are these idiot commanders trying to get us killed!*" They joined with their platoon members in denigrating their commanders. Although they were highly trained leaders, Jocko and Leif initially did not lead in this instance. Instead, they joined the pack and complained.

Then, Jocko and Leif asked themselves an important question. "*Do we understand **why** this command has been given? We think we understand, but do we **really** understand?*" And they asked, "*Do we believe that command is trying to get us killed? With all the money that had been invested in our training over the years, does it make sense that they would be doing their best to have Iraqi soldiers, not even the enemy, kill us?*"

Mid-level leaders often feel cornered by their senior leaders to undergo tasks that seem downright stupid. Rather than throwing your hands up and saying, "*Well, I don't understand!*" you would speak with whomever you needed to increase your understanding. So, Jocko and Leif did precisely that. They went to their commanders and explained that they did not understand the command. They needed to understand better why the order

had been given. If they understood why the order had been delivered, then they could explain this reason to their team members, who, in turn, would be more likely to understand the command and then be in a better position to work out how to implement the order safely.

Jocko and Leif were told that, rightly or wrongly, their commanders had concluded that if the Iraqi soldiers did not start to learn how to look after their country themselves, then Jocko and Leif would be returning to Iraq with their teams time and time again. Their children and grandchildren (if they were in the armed forces) would also be returning to Iraq for generations to come. The USA had taken on the burden of protecting Iraq without building the capacity of the Iraqis to look after themselves. Today was to be the first day in correcting that error. A line had been drawn in the sand. If the USA was ever going to withdraw from Iraq, the Iraqis needed to learn how to defend themselves. Jocko and Leif's role was to work out, with their team, how they could safely take Iraqis on their missions with them.

While they did not like the order, Jocko and Leif understood why it had been given. When they communicated the reason for the order with their team members, they did not like it, but they understood it. With understanding, Jocko, Leif, and their team members were able to work out how to have the Iraqi soldiers safely join them on missions while also providing the Iraqis with invaluable learning opportunities. When human beings do not understand why they are meant to follow a course of action that does not make sense, it triggers chemicals that flood your body. The more leaders understand how the brain functions, the more they can effectively lead.

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