

LeaderSHOP

Workplace, Career, and Life Advice from
Today's Top Thought Leaders



Exclusive interviews
by Rodger Dean Duncan,
bestselling author of
CHANGE-friendly LEADERSHIP

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- Volume 4 -

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Exclusive conversation with
Sean Covey

7 Habits: A Classic That Somehow Gets Better with Age



By Rodger Dean Duncan

There's a lot of talk nowadays about "uncertain times." It's a phrase often denoting the harsh and burdensome changes wrought by a global pandemic.

But "uncertain times" seems to imply a lack of control. I prefer the term "*unscripted* times." To me, that conjures up images of the people we see in business, science, medicine, education, and other fields who are knuckling down to make the most of a

really rotten situation. Rather than succumb to victimhood, they take charge. They work with what they have. And then they imagine—and create—what they don't.

My friend Stephen R. Covey would be impressed.

Stephen, you no doubt know, was author of the colossally popular book titled *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. In addition to selling tens of millions of copies in more than 50 languages, the book has been touted as the “#1 most influential book of the 20th century” (*Chief Executive* magazine) and *Forbes* named it “one of the top 10 most influential management books—ever.”

When the book was first launched three decades ago, some skeptics may have regarded it as just the latest “dare to be fabulous” scheme. But the *7 Habits* book has stood the test of time. And it's not just about “management” in the typical sense of the word. Yes, it certainly applies to the challenges of managing a business. But I think it's mostly about managing ourselves. Its timeless principles, when properly applied, can literally change the trajectory of people's lives. Millions of people around the world can attest to this.

Today, many of his ideas have shaped much of the business lexicon. He may not have invented terms like paradigm shift, think win-win, abundance mentality, and sharpen the saw, but he certainly brought them into the public consciousness.

Now the 30th-anniversary edition of the *7 Habits* book is out. It contains the same content that's become the hallmark of effective leaders, extraordinary results, and winning cultures. But this edition has a bonus: Stephen Covey's son Sean, himself now a highly regarded thought leader and bestselling author, adds his own insights after each chapter. I confess that I was a bit skeptical when I first heard about these additions. How can a classic be improved? But the younger Covey's perspective does indeed provide enrichment that is well worth digesting.

Rodger Dean Duncan: Your father said behavior change can lead to modest improvement, while a paradigm shift (a change in fundamental assumptions) can produce quantum improvements. Give us an example.

Sean Covey: Behaviors represent what you do. Paradigms represent your perspective and view of things, the lens through which you see the world. From our experience, changing paradigms is far more powerful than changing behavior. In fact, behavior change usually doesn't stick unless you change the paradigm that accompanies it.

For example, there was a time when I saw my 8-year-old son, Nathan, who had extreme social anxiety, as being insufficient and incapable. And my behaviors flowed out of that paradigm. Even though I tried my best to be positive and affirming in my behavior toward him, my son could still feel my deeply held paradigm, and he acted in accordance with it.

Then one day I had a dramatic experience that completely shifted my paradigm toward Nathan. I suddenly saw the greatness within this little boy and got a glimpse of what he

could become. Because of that new perspective, it was easy to be positive and affirming toward him, and he could feel the difference. As a consequence, Nathan, over time, overcame his social anxiety and blossomed into a confident and outgoing young man.

We are all full of paradigms and are largely unaware of them. We hold paradigms toward other people, paradigms about ourselves, and paradigms about life in general. Truly, finding ways to shift our paradigm, to think differently, and to change our perspective, is 50 times more powerful than trying to make a behavior change.

The best ways to shift your paradigms come through new learnings, changing your role, challenging traditional ways of thinking, dramatic experiences, and often through personal setbacks. For example, think of the paradigm shift that a new mother or father experiences and the impact that can have on their behavior.

Duncan: We live in a world where many people insist on regarding themselves as victims. How can the 7 Habits help them get out of that self-defeating pattern?

Covey: Victim-itis is rampant and it's an easy trap to fall into. We all love to blame other people, outside circumstances, the weather, our boss, our ex, "the man," our spouse for our problems. It is just how we humans are built.

Habit 1, Be Proactive, teaches that we are responsible, that we have the power to choose our response to whatever happens to us. As humans, we have four unique human endowments—a conscience, self-awareness, an imagination, and independent will—that we can tap into whenever we have a decision to make. We don't have to respond to life in a reactive way. Yes, our genes, our upbringing, and the environment we live in all influence us. But they do not determine us.

In his research, my father discovered that effective people have the habit of taking responsibility for their lives, their circumstances, and their happiness or unhappiness, while ineffective people tend to be victims and blame outside forces for their conditions.



Sean Covey

Duncan: During times of stress (like a pandemic or economic downturn), in what ways can being proactive help businesses prepare for the future?

Covey: Just remember that although we are not free to choose what happens to us, we are free to choose what to do about it. This applies to individuals and to organizations. Although this coronavirus pandemic has caused a lot of stress and chaos, there are also silver linings. If businesses are proactive and take initiative, they can find ways to mitigate the effects of a downturn and survive and in some cases even pick up market share.

Duncan: Can you give an example?

Covey: We have a client in Thailand who is a great example of this. A few years back, Thailand was experiencing the heaviest rainy season in 50 years. Immense floods drove 13 million people from their homes, and more than 800 people died. It was reported to be the fourth most expensive natural disaster in world history.

Particularly hard hit was our client, a world-class maker of data-storage systems. Their vast manufacturing facility went under nearly six feet of water, devastating an operation that required a zero-dust environment. It was an epic calamity. Experts estimated it would take a billion dollars and at least seven months of cleanup to get even a part of the factory back online. Some market reports even predicted the end of the company, which would leave nearly 35,000 workers without jobs.

Our client's leaders refused the notion that it would take years to get back to work, and they were not going to wait to be rescued. The leadership team had been trained in the 7

“ Although we are not free to choose what happens to us, we are free to choose what to do about it.

Habits, and they had worked to make the principles their “core operating system.” So, drawing on years of practicing, they put Habit 1: Be Proactive, to the ultimate test.

They immediately spread the word that there would be no layoffs—their employees were like family, and they would get on their feet as one. The safety of their people was their first priority. Crews were organized to help the most stricken

employees in their flooded homes. Next up, they hired Thai Navy crews to salvage irreplaceable equipment and get it to dry land for refurbishing.

While the plants of other big companies in their industrial park rusted in the mud, their workers laid off, the work at our client's site continued nonstop. Surely it made a difference to keep everyone on the payroll, but rebuilding the business as a team came naturally to these remarkable workers. Tens of thousands, many still trying to cope with crises at home, showed up to revive their plant. Some traveled miles each day from refugee centers, often in small boats or on water oxen for hours a day, determined to help.

Duncan: So, what was the result?

Covey: They reopened the plant only 15 days after the waters receded. Within a year, it had reclaimed the number-one position in the market. The firm remained profitable and even managed to acquire one of its top competitors. Observers were astonished that it hadn't taken billions of dollars and many years to recover. All it took was a superb team willing to wade through mud for each other. That is the power of a proactive culture.

Duncan: What can an organization do to foster a proactive culture?

Covey: As in the case of the company I just told you about, it starts with the leaders. So much of the culture of a company is a result of the collective behavior of its leaders.

Other things you can do is be transparent and face reality. Don't try to hide the truth of the brutal situation you may find yourself in. Transparency and facing reality build trust in the organization.

As well, learn to focus your time and energy on your circle of influence, rather than your circle of concern, or things you can't do anything about. Instead of focusing on how hard hit your business is because of the coronavirus and all the things you can no longer do, think about what you *can* do. Get creative. Think outside the box. Ask yourself, "Sure, we are in bad conditions. But what can we do? What is within our control? What new opportunities are out there?"

When this pandemic arrived, because we do so much live training as a company, it really hit us hard. But we kept asking ourselves, "What can we do about it?" Within a few

“Learn to focus your time and energy on your circle of influence, rather than your circle of concern.

weeks we converted all of our live training workshops into live-online training, or training done with organizations through teleconferencing.

At first, we and our clients were somewhat uncomfortable with it. But we've now found that it can be very effective, and in some cases, even more effective. As well, our clients are loving it. And it's saving our business! Once

we get back to normal operations, I believe we will be doing lots of live training like before, but we will also be doing lots of live-online teleconferencing training.

In a matter of two months, because we took a proactive approach, we have literally created a whole new delivery channel. This never would have happened without the challenge of the pandemic.

Duncan: Many people seem to measure (or try to demonstrate) their status by how busy they are. In fact, busyness seems to have become a badge of honor. How can the habit of putting first things first help people avoid (or recover from) an addiction to urgency?

Covey: Busyness and productivity don't have much in common. It is true that being busy is a badge of honor. But the real question is what are you busy about?

Most people are addicted to urgency, that is, addicted to things that are proximate and pressing and in your face, such as many texts and emails, other people's minor issues, and pressing reports that no one reads. Have you ever completed a very busy week and said to yourself, "I feel like I was spinning my wheels all week but didn't get much done?" I think we all have. That is what happens to you if you are simply responding to all of the urgent things in your life.

The alternative is to make "importance" the key criterion, rather than urgency. Make time for things that are important but not necessarily urgent, such as building

relationships, preparation, prevention, exercise, planning ahead, and proactive work (work that isn't in a crisis yet).

To do this, you will need to plan ahead and block out time for the things that matter most to you. Learn to plan weekly, instead of daily. Spend 20 minutes each week before the start of the week blocking out time for the key items you need to accomplish in the various roles you play.

Duncan: How does an abundance mentality help people practice the habit of win-win?

Covey: An abundance mentality is the idea that there is enough success to go around and to spare. A scarcity mentality, on the other hand, is the belief that there is only so much success and the more you get the less there is for me.

Sometimes it's hard for people to see others become successful, especially close friends or siblings, because it makes them feel less successful themselves. This is a common occurrence.

On the other hand, people who think Win-Win care about themselves and they care about the other person. "I want to succeed, and I want you to succeed, too."

Win-Lose is competitive and is all about getting ahead of the other person. Lose-Win is where you play the martyr—"Step on me. Everybody else does." Both of these are weak.

Think Win-Win is the only real solution. To do this you have to adopt the abundance mentality and not be threatened by the successes of other people. Instead, you know that there's more than enough success to go around. "I'm okay. You're okay." You do this by balancing courage for what you want with consideration for what the other person wants.

When you're around Win-Win people, you can feel their spirits. You can feel that they have your interest at heart, as well as their own. It's the power of an abundance mentality. It produces good feelings and breeds abundance in others.

“Balance courage for what you want with consideration for what the other person wants.

Duncan: Our current political culture suffers from a serious deficit in reasonable dialogue. What's your elevator speech in advocating adoption and practice of Habit 5 (seek first to understand, then to be understood)?

Covey: We are taught how to speak, how to write, and how to think. But we aren't taught how to listen, which is the most important communication skill of all. If you watch the political dialogue or TV show conversation, there is only monologue. No one is listening to the other person. Instead, they are preparing their response to what the other person is saying. As a result, we get contention and we miss out on so much of what could have been.

Just think what could be accomplished if people were to practice this habit and seek first to understand before expressing their viewpoints.

Most of us have poor listening skills. We probe, we advise, we interpret, and we give autobiographical responses, from our own heads. “Yeah, I know how you feel. I remember when I had a similar circumstance and this is what I did ... blah, blah, blah.” We don’t hear what they are saying because they never took the time to understand us.

Empathic listening is where you truly seek to understand where the other person is coming from. You figuratively stand in their shoes, with no agenda other than wanting to understand. The best way to do that is to repeat back in your own words what the other person is saying and feeling. “So, if I understand you correctly, Susan, you feel really upset about how John is always taking credit for the work you’ve done. It makes you feel betrayed. And it’s causing you to want to get off the team. Is that it?”

Habit 5 is the habit most people think they do well—but actually do the worst. “Yeah, I think I’m a pretty good listener,” they say. But in reality, they’re listening from their own frame of reference and not from the frame of reference of the other person. They listen with an agenda and with the intent to respond, not to understand. They never get into the other person’s head. And they miss out on so much, including not uncovering core issues and never fully engaging people’s hearts as they could.

Duncan: How does this apply to leaders?

Covey: Listening empathically gets even harder when you’re in a leadership position because people tend to defer to authority. That’s why so many senior leaders are poor listeners and do most of the talking anytime they’re in the room.

University of California professor Dacher Keltner coined the term “the power paradox” to describe how leaders gain influence through empathy and other practices that serve others, but lose those skills as they gain influence and power. In fact, the farther you go up the ladder, the less empathy leaders tend to have.

If you’re in a leadership role, do a gut check. The next time you’re in a team meeting, ask yourself, “What percentage of the words spoken in this meeting today came from my own mouth?” If there were six people in the room, and 80% of the words came from you, that is a problem.

Duncan: Empathy is a critical component of genuine connection between people. What effect have email and texting had on that, and how can people balance the need to be effective in their relationships while being efficient with their time?

Covey: Email and texting are fine and efficient when it comes to communicating on quick and easy things, but they don’t work well when emotions are high.

I’ve seen this happen on my team. Someone gets upset and sends a pointed email. The other person writes back a novel. It gets contentious. Then they start copying people ...

and more people. And I'm like, "For crying out loud, just get on the phone and talk it through."

The use of technology strips out the tone of voice and facial expressions that help us empathize. So, any time you're dealing with an important, emotional issue, do not email or text. At some point, meet face-to-face or at least talk it out over the phone. An emoji just isn't going to cut it.

Duncan: Habit 6—Synergize—is the culmination of all the previous habits. The benefits of synergy seem so self-evident, yet some politicians are criticized by their supporters when they talk about “working across the aisle” with people of different views. What mental blocks seem to prevent the adoption of a habit with so much potential for the common good?

“Listening empathically gets even harder when you're in a leadership position because people tend to defer to authority.

Covey: You are right. There is so much potential for the common good if we can learn to work across the aisle, so to speak. The mental blocks getting in the way are clear.

First, we don't value differences but are threatened by them. If someone thinks differently or looks different or has different friends or affiliations, we too

often see that as a negative and not an advantage. The reality is that differences are good. If two people think alike one is unnecessary.

Another mental block is the belief that there are only two alternatives when people have a conflict. That is, it is my way or your way. And nothing in between. Again, in reality, there are almost always third alternatives that are better than what either side had in mind to begin with, if they are willing to talk and be open and brainstorm.

After working with tens of thousands of organizations, this is what my colleagues and I have learned about synergy—Synergy works. It's not just a nice theory or an ideal. Life is a team sport, and with the right attitude and skills you can find synergistic answers to complex problems most of the time. Not necessarily all of the time, but most of the time.

To find third alternatives, you have to believe that they exist. You have to believe in the idea that by working together we can find a solution that's better than what either of us had in mind. If you don't believe this, if you're thinking that synergy is unrealistic and that it's either your way or my way, you will never master it.

A key to finding third alternatives is to set aside your ego and acknowledge that you need the collective intelligence of everyone involved to find the best solution. Every individual is smart in different ways and everyone can contribute. Increasingly, science is teaching us about how complex intelligence is. Howard Gardner, a psychologist at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, proposes nine different types of intelligence and suggests that individuals possess one or more of these attributes, including such kinds

as special, linguistic, logical-mathematical, intrapersonal, interpersonal, musical, special, and kinesthetic.

So, the next time you have a difference with someone, say out loud, “Good, you see it differently!”



Personal application:

- In what ways can you use the 7 Habits to help you be more effective in your relationships?
- Which of the 7 habits seem to be most challenging for you? Why? What can you do about that?
- How can a faithful adoption of the 7 Habits help you expand your Circle of Influence?



Exclusive conversation with
Frank Sonnenberg

Your Choices Are the Hinges That Open Future Doors



By Rodger Dean Duncan

At the beginning of each new year I find myself—like a lot of other people—considering what I want to do with the next 12 months. Sure, I have some goals. Some of them I even expect to reach. Like reading.

Most years I read at least 100 books. Do the math. That's about two books per week, or one every three or four days. Maybe not a lot by Bill Gates standards, but, hey, he's a billionaire and apparently has a lot of time on his hands. Yet still a respectable effort.

Reading, I learned at an early age, is good for the soul. If, that is, you read things that are worthy of your soul.

Satirist P. J. O'Rourke gave this further perspective: "Always read something that will make you look good if you die in the middle of it."

Good advice.

In addition to stacks of books, my reading includes articles, news reports, opinion pieces, and various blog posts.

The blog posts run the gamut on subject and viewpoint. One venue that I've found to provide a daily dose of uplift is a blog by Frank Sonnenberg. Its focus is on character, personal values, and personal responsibility. Like I said, something good for the soul.

Nothing syrupy here. Sonnenberg, who serves on several boards and consults for companies you would know and respect, writes about issues important to your success. His content comes across as a favorite uncle talking to you across the kitchen table. No ram-it-down- your-throat lectures. Just straightforward (and brief) observations and advice on matters that matter.

FrankSonnenbergOnline was named one of the "Best 21st Century Leadership Blogs" and is among the most frequently shared items on the Internet. Sonnenberg has written several books, including *Soul Food: Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life*.

I reached out to Frank to learn more about his approach to personal development.

Rodger Dean Duncan: In one of your essays titled "You Get What You Expect" you write about Roger Bannister, the great runner who proved that a four-minute mile is possible. How common do you believe it is for people to allow "conventional wisdom" to hold them back? What's a good antidote for that?

Frank Sonnenberg: Did you ever notice that when you're in the market for a new car, you seem to notice car ads more than usual? The same is true for preconceived notions. When you expect a particular outcome, you look for evidence to support that view. That can have a significant impact on your behavior and on results. For example, if you believe *you're going to be successful*, you're going to view your prospects differently than if you think *people like me never stand a chance*.



Frank Sonnenberg

It's very easy to get caught up in groupthink. The problem is, what makes you think that others are wiser than you? Maybe they have a chip on their shoulder or a hidden agenda. Follow their lead at your peril. *Be your own person*. Garner the strength and courage to stand alone and determine your own destiny. *Believe in yourself and your ability to be successful*. Your mindset matters more than you think. *Invest in your personal growth*. Everything you learn is like money in the bank. *Meet challenges head-on*. Prove that you

can overcome tough challenges. That will give you the strength and determination to meet challenges that lie ahead. *Make good choices.* Your life is determined by the sum of the choices you make.

Duncan: Your messages are typically brief—often only two or three paragraphs followed by a short list of action steps. In coaching others, what hints can leaders take from this approach?

Sonnenberg: I've spent as much time thinking about how to communicate as what I'm going to say. People have different preferences for how they like to receive information. For that reason, I construct my messages in several formats: a quote of the day, free downloadable posters, blog posts, and books. My essays run approximately 650 words, by design, so they take no longer than five minutes to read.

In addition, rather than lecturing everyone about moral character, values, and personal responsibility (boring), I weave those principles into real-world scenarios to make each lesson relevant. I incorporate bullet points for skimmers and links for those who want to learn more. I also make sure that every essay contains actionable advice. Last but not least, before I write each piece, I arbitrarily select three people and mentally write to them to keep the writing style personal.

“Your mindset matters more than you think.

Contrast this with how some leaders communicate in business. First, they isolate themselves in closed-door meetings and

pontificate their strategy. They prepare elaborate PowerPoint presentations that go into exhaustive detail about how and why they should embark in a new direction. Then, without much forethought, they send out a tedious memo or video (that's so long it can be made into a miniseries) to employees. Leaders sometimes assume that employees will stop what they're doing and review the materials. Furthermore, they assume that employees will understand the rationale even though it's never presented. Then they're surprised when the initiative lacks commitment and employee buy-in.

Duncan: You suggest surrounding yourself with positive people because their energy is contagious. What advice do you have for someone who, at least in the short term, works in an atmosphere where relationships are toxic?

Sonnenberg: Toxic waste has a tremendous impact on the environment. Now consider the impact that toxic people have on your life. They can strip you of your confidence and influence you to lower your standards or compromise your values.

When you were a kid your parents influenced your behavior. When you grew up, your friends filled that role. Now it's time for you to take the baton and live a life that makes you proud. Don't let your behavior be influenced by others who do not share your values. Hold yourself to a much higher standard—your conscience.


People can't make you do things without your permission. Set high standards, be true to your values, and listen to your conscience. That's why you have one. At the end of the day, it's your life to live. Own it. You have to live with yourself for the rest of your life.

Duncan: Criticism, you point out, is not the same as feedback. What do you see as the most effective way to offer candid, user-friendly input on someone's work performance that needs improvement?

Sonnenberg: Some people view feedback as a gift. Others view it as a slap in the face. The truth is, it's not a weakness to have shortcomings, but some people get defensive and view feedback as an attack.

The first rule of order is to ensure that your feedback is timely and in person, if possible. When giving feedback, give prior thought to what you're going to say. Provide advance notification rather than blindsiding the recipient and respect the individual's other priorities.

Build up the person rather than tearing him or her down. There's no need to embarrass people or make them feel bad. For that reason, compliment people in public, criticize them in private. In addition, make your feedback constructive. Critique the act rather than demeaning the person. Give actionable advice rather than speaking in broad

 **Consider the impact that toxic people have on your life.**

generalities. In addition, be honest and straightforward, provide your undivided attention, encourage meaningful dialog, and most of all, confirm that your message is understood. Finally, establish an action plan and follow up to ensure that progress has been made.

Duncan: Healthy relationships are nurtured by good conversations. What have you observed to be the keys to good conversations?

Sonnenberg: Even though we don't always find time to have a proper conversation, we always make time to fix the misunderstanding, repair damaged feelings, or mend a wounded relationship.

Some people define communication as talking. They believe that if you choose the right words and speak with a proper tone of voice, you've covered all the bases. Effective communication requires more than choosing your words carefully. Words, after all, have at least two meanings: what you intend to say and what the listener thinks you mean.

If you want to have effective communication, the best option is a face-to-face conversation. In addition, set aside an appropriate amount of time, choose your location wisely, avoid distractions, make the person feel special, be genuinely truthful, and never respond emotionally. The truth is that communication is the rich give-and-take of ideas in an open and honest manner. Some people don't communicate. They just take turns talking.

Duncan: Harry Truman famously kept a sign on his White House desk that read "The Buck Stops Here." How can that philosophy of personal accountability be applied by people who don't happen to be president?

Sonnenberg: Some people view personal responsibility as a burden rather than a gift. But you get to choose your path in life, how high you'll set the bar for yourself, and how much effort you'll put into clearing it. You get to choose who to surround yourself with and who will influence you most. You get to choose how hard you're willing to work, what sacrifices you're willing to make, and whether you'll light up the world or allow yourself to flame out. The truth is, you have the freedom to choose. But you're not free from the consequences of those choices. That's your responsibility.

Be proud of who you are and what you stand for. Stand up for your beliefs and the values you hold dear. Remain true to the promises and commitments that you make. Be

“You get to choose your path in life, how high you'll set the bar for yourself, and how much effort you'll put into clearing it.”

proud of the way that you carry yourself and the way that you treat others.

Finally, protect your reputation and your honor like it's the most important asset that you have—because it is. Personal responsibility can't be delegated or outsourced. If you're not responsible for your actions, who is?

Duncan: What's your advice for people who are tempted to take shortcuts on ethics?

Sonnenberg: I hear people say, “I'd like to conduct business the right way, but I don't have that luxury. I'm responsible for hitting my numbers.” That drives me crazy. The fact is, there's a direct correlation between integrity and success.

What's the cost of distrust? When you have a toxic business environment, how much time and money is wasted looking over peoples' shoulders, second-guessing decisions, or plotting how to gain the upper hand? Such an environment encourages game-playing, destroys individual initiative, pits people against each other, and reduces competitiveness. Wouldn't you rather do business with someone you trust?

Trust is more than a platitude. It's critical to make honesty and integrity your guiding principles. That means delivering on your promises rather than sidestepping them for short-term gains; creating win-win relationships rather than trying to gain the upper hand; achieving compromises rather than winning at all costs; and doing what's right rather than what's convenient.

Most importantly, don't do these things because it's good for you. Do them because it's the right thing to do. Trust me. It'll come back to you in spades.



Personal application:

- If you suspect one of your mental models is holding you back, what can you do to replace that model with one that will serve you better?
- If you're not currently satisfied with the course of your life, what adjustments can you make in your day-to-day choices that could put you on a different path?
- How can you take more personal responsibility for the success of the work you do, the conversations you have (or need to have), and the relationships you want to enjoy?



Exclusive conversation with
Talia Fox

For Maximum Influence with Others, Create a Conscious Connection



By Rodger Dean Duncan

In four decades of leadership coaching and consulting, I've noticed a trend among people who consistently make good things happen.

They often don't have lofty titles, or fancy offices, or the best parking places.

Their names are often missing from the organization's annual reports.

But their positive impact is indisputable. They connect with people and their very presence seems to bring out the best in others.

Talia Fox sees the same thing, and she features the phenomenon in *The Power of Conscious Connection: 4 Habits to Transform How You Live and Lead*. She's CEO of Kusi Global, a Washington-based training organization focused on leadership skills, change management, and maximizing human potential.

Fox's leadership paradigm is straightforward: many people are disconnected from their potential influence. But if they learn to pursue *conscious* connection—and start making more intentional choices about where to focus their ingenuity and energy—they can positively impact the performance of others by leading with purpose.

A conscious connection, Fox says, involves being fully aware of what's happening in our lives, our work, and the world. “This awareness helps us understand the relationship between our actions, habits, and outcomes,” she says. “We aim to be conscious of the system of our lives and connected to our power to make an impact.”



Talia Fox

Today's world is flooded with more communication than ever before, yet many people report feeling isolated and alone. Fox says the illusion of connection and happiness is harming us.

“On social media, we craft personas and build facades, sharing highlights of our lives,” she says. “In the workplace, I encounter thousands suffering from serious anxiety. We feel lonely because we aren't engaging with each other authentically. Additionally, those who describe themselves as 'real' and 'authentic' often make poor relationship choices, perceived as direct by themselves but as rude or difficult by others.”

Fox says the concept of authenticity “has become conflated with lacking professional skills, which are essential for productive and satisfying connections. If we don't improve our connecting skills, we risk feeling disengaged, anxious, and stressed. We need to adapt to our evolving social world as we have with technology.”

“Deep listening,” she says, is a key to mental health and can help someone come across as the smartest person in the room.

“Caught up in our own thoughts, we may be reluctant to consider others' ideas, escalating our anxiety, worry, and loneliness,” she says. “Listening is the foundation of emotional intelligence, which is crucial for wellbeing. Mastering this skill increases awareness and better management of oneself and others.”

She says “strategic listening” can be a form of meditation, bringing awareness, calm, and peacefulness. “It's also a portal to wisdom. In our AI-driven world, listening to values, priorities, hopes, dreams, and ideas gains us wisdom beyond mere information. The ‘I’ll

look it up later' culture undermines our listening skills. When others speak, especially at work, we often misconstrue the objective as data consumption rather than connection-building and understanding priorities. Those who excel in listening will not only appear smartest, but will also be connected to what matters.”

Of course, many people seem to overestimate their own listening skills. Fox offers tips for becoming a genuinely effective listener.

“First, recognize that listening is vital for leadership, professional and personal development, and mental health. It's a lifelong journey. We practice being present and listening to increase both conscious awareness and connection. Second, reconsider your listening habits. Some people listen to relate to their own experiences, others to offer unsolicited advice, and some for entertainment.”

- Set time limits and healthy boundaries. People’s attention spans last about 15-20 minutes. If you struggle to be still and listen, set time limits for conversations with the intention to focus completely.
- Use listening as a form of meditation. If restless, slow your breathing and listen intently for 10-15 minutes, appreciating the shared content without judgment.
- Choose a listening strategy before connecting. Decide whether you need to take notes, appreciate a story, or interrupt for clarity. Sometimes good listening requires interruption.

Fox says true observation sharpens a person’s systems thinking.

“Systems thinking involves studying connections and outcomes. Observing these helps clear assumptions and biases, bringing us closer to reality,” she says. “For instance, consider employees shifting from remote to in-person work. If productivity seems lower

“Listening is the foundation of emotional intelligence, which is crucial for wellbeing.

at home, systems thinking prompts a broader perspective. Questions related to the effectiveness of remote leadership, employee engagement, benefits of virtual work, and the real issues affecting productivity become crucial. By understanding the parts, leaders can make more informed, impactful decisions.”

Fox says clarity and commitment to one’s own personal values can help someone achieve a conscious connection with people who embrace different values.

“When threatened by different viewpoints, we sometimes compromise our values,” she says. “For example, if one values kindness, this value is easy among like-minded individuals but challenging in conflict. Our values guide our choices. When clear and committed to them, we stand firm, being kind amid unkindness, setting boundaries for family time, and prioritizing health. There will always be external factors challenging our values, but commitment makes our choices clear and our lives more satisfying.”

Fox says being present, aware, and responsible are among the keys to effective engagement with others.

“Without presence, there can be no connection, engagement, learning, or growth,” she says. “Consider someone aiming for a promotion. They work hard, but multitask during virtual meetings, missing critical updates. Passed over for promotion, they feel unjustly treated. However, engaging in discussions reveals that the company prioritized morale and culture, areas they neglected. This lack of presence and awareness creates a ripple effect of disconnection and disengagement leading to poor decisions and a distorted perception of reality.”

Fox shares a simple framework of value-based habits she calls L.O.V.E—Listen, Observe, Value, Engage.

“*Conscious Connection* addresses trauma and baggage through a ‘Cognitive Behavioral’ approach, examining how thoughts influence behaviors, and an ‘existential approach’ focusing on life’s meaning and purpose (transforming how we live),” she says. “The LOVE habits align with leadership skills essential for goals ranging from innovation to culture transformation. Mastery in listening improves emotional intelligence, observation sharpens awareness of systems and culture, alignment with values enhances compassion, and engagement boosts communication skills.”

These habits, she says, can profoundly change the way people lead.



Personal application:

- Do the important people in your life feel that you have their best interests at heart? How do you know?
- What are you doing to ensure that your listening habits are helping you genuinely “connect” with others?
- How can you demonstrate appropriate engagement with your workplace colleagues?



Exclusive conversation with
Craig Weber

So, You Can Talk. But Are You Really Connecting?



By Rodger Dean Duncan

In this rush-rush digital age, many people rely on email and text messages for their communication. Smartphones and keyboards can certainly provide *efficiency*.

But if *effectiveness* is what you're after, human conversation is still the best way to connect with other people to reach mutual understanding and solve problems.

Unfortunately, a lot of people still don't know how to talk. Oh, sure, they can fill a void with a lot of words. But many five-year-olds can do that. Real connection and collaboration require more than just the exchange of words.

George Bernard Shaw had it right when he said, “the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

In exploring this all-important issue of how people communicate (or fail to), I reached out to Craig Weber. He’s the author of *Conversational Capacity: The Secret to Building Successful Teams That Perform When the Pressure is On*.

To build their conversational capacity, Weber says, people must subordinate their base, ego-driven impulses to the finer aspects of their humanity. This requires cultivating candor, courage, curiosity, and humility.

Most of us spend so much time at work that it’s bound to affect who we are. The only question is *how*. Will we allow our workplace experience to reinforce the primal, self-centered aspects of our nature, or the more noble, more purpose-driven aspects of our humanity?

Weber says the key to building more skill with conversations is to become less cautious and more candid, less timid and more courageous, less critical and more curious, less arrogant and more humble.

His insights are well worth digesting.

Rodger Dean Duncan: What do you mean by “conversational capacity”?

Craig Weber: Conversational Capacity is a discipline, or a conversational martial art, that I define in two basic ways:

First, it’s the ability—of an individual or a team—for engaging in constructive, learning-focused dialogue about difficult subjects, in challenging circumstances, and across tough boundaries. It’s easy to see this ability in a team. A team with high conversational capacity can accomplish really good work even when dealing with its most troublesome, contentious issues. A team with low conversational capacity can see its performance derailed over a minor difference of opinion.



Craig Weber

So, the more difficult the issues we’re facing, the more challenging the problem we’re trying to solve, the more stringent the differences of personality or opinion around the table, the more important our conversational capacity becomes.

Here’s a second way to think about conversational capacity. There’s a place a team wants to be working when they’re dealing with an important issue or decision. I call this place “the sweet spot”—that place in a meeting or conversation where things are open, constructive, balanced, and learning-focused. The sweet spot is where we don’t just have smart people around the table—it’s where we can readily access their smarts.

Duncan: How can a team maintain focus on that sweet spot?

Weber: What holds us in this sweet spot is balance between two critical things. First, *candor*. The conversation is open, honest, forthright, and direct. But unadulterated candor isn't always productive, so in the sweet spot it's balanced with lots of *curiosity*. People are open-minded, inquisitive, interested in new ideas and contrasting perspectives. This is what holds us in the sweet spot—balance between *candor* and *curiosity*. And when we leave the sweet spot, it's almost always because we've let go of one pole or the other.

We can define conversational capacity, therefore, as the ability to work in the sweet spot in difficult circumstances. A team with high conversational capacity can stay focused on learning and do good work in difficult situations because team members don't allow their defensive reactions to pull them off center.

Duncan: Why else is conversational capacity so important?

Weber: It's a pivotal variable in both personal and team performance. Any team, for example, is a mix of people with different personalities, educations, life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and areas of functional expertise. High conversational capacity coupled with these differences can be a source of strength because the differences can be leveraged for learning. On the other hand, low conversational capacity coupled with these differences can produce a vulnerability to defensiveness and dysfunction.

Duncan: What are the telltale signs that a team doesn't yet have this capacity?

Weber: When conversational capacity is lacking, there are two telltale symptoms:

- **Undiscussable issues.** When candor is low, we avoid or downplay difficult topics and problems. Then they're more likely to come up in the hallway than in the meeting.
- **Unproductively discussable issues.** When curiosity is low, people butt heads, argue, dismiss one another, and stop listening. So, while issues may come up, they're not addressed productively. This means they boomerang around to another meeting, or the issue is re-assigned to the undiscussable list—"I'm not bringing that up again. I'm not stupid."

These symptoms provide a clear signal that the conversational capacity of a team is inadequate. They're important signals to recognize because no amount of technical sophistication or good intentions will compensate for a team's inability to balance candor and curiosity under pressure.

Even if a team is staffed with skilled people who trust, like, and respect one another, and even if they have all the technical pieces in perfect place—strategy, structure, processes, and policies—the team still won't perform if their conversational capacity is too low.

Duncan: Why doesn't conversational capacity come naturally?

Weber: That's a great question. Balancing candor and curiosity is simple in concept but tough in practice for a daunting reason—*human nature works against us*.

We're born with two powerful tendencies—emotional reactions—that throw us off balance in surprising and disturbing ways. And what makes these tendencies so hard to manage that they're grounded in the fight-flight response—powerful, knee-jerk reactions to a perceived threat, be it physical or social. When our need to “*minimize*” the level of tension, discomfort, embarrassment, or risk is triggered, we tend to leave the sweet spot by becoming less candid. When our need to “*win*”—to be right, to get our way, to convince others to see things our way and agree with us—is triggered, we tend to leave the sweet spot by dropping curiosity.

“A team with high conversational capacity can stay focused on learning and do good work in difficult situations.

There are stunning examples of this, such as co-pilots not speaking up when they see a pilot making a grave mistake, or surgeons fist-fighting in an operating room because they disagree over who gets to perform the procedure. But it's usually not that extreme. When conversational capacity is low it more

likely that we'll not address an issue in a direct way or we'll not listen, not be open to other views, or we'll shut one another down. Either way, learning is hampered and performance suffers.

So, the *discipline* of conversational capacity involves learning to recognize when our emotional reactions threaten to separate our behavior from our intentions and then to act more deliberately despite them. The goal isn't to stop being triggered, it's learning to act intentionally even *while you're being triggered*. This is why conversational capacity has been referred to as “operationalized emotional intelligence.”

Duncan: Why does conversational capacity seem to be under-appreciated in many organizations?

Weber: One big reason is that we lack useful frameworks and skills for recognizing the problem and doing something about it. It's hard to appreciate a problem, after all when you don't have a conceptual framework for making sense of it in the first place. My mission in life is to address this gap—to get the issue of conversational capacity front and center on the management dashboards of leaders and teams.

Duncan: If the conversation skills you advocate don't come naturally for most people, how can an “intentional” mindset help in acquiring and practicing the skills?

Weber: A mindset is like a north star, something on which to focus so that even when our defensive tendencies are trying to knock us off the path we can remain on course. With high conversational capacity we're focused on learning, thinking more clearly, and making better decisions. We're more interested in getting smarter than in being comfortable or right.

I refer to conversational capacity as a martial art. But the risk in framing it this way is that it some people may think, “Great. I’m going to use it against my colleagues” But in this martial art, the person with whom we’re talking is never our opponent. The conversation, and the person with whom we’re having it, merely provides the mat on which the contest takes place. In this martial art, our opponent is always our ego and the fierce emotional reactions that protect it. When it comes to working in the sweet spot, ego is the enemy of our effectiveness.

“ A mindset is like a north star, something on which to focus so that even when our defensive tendencies are trying to knock us off the path we can remain on course.

In a conversation about something important, rather than let your reactions be driven by arrogance, anger, fear, cowardice, resentment, vengeance—or any other self-centered motives—you rise above your- self and focus on learning. It’s from this learning-focused mindset that your balanced behaviors flow. Your actions are guided by purpose rather than defensiveness because you’re more interested in thinking clearly and being effective than in inflating your ego.

The bottom line is this. If we want to be better leaders and team members we have to become better human beings—less driven by our base impulses and egos and more by the better angels of our nature.

Duncan: Appreciative inquiry is clearly one of the keys to building conversational capacity. What tips do you offer for genuinely inquiring into views that conflict with your own?

Weber: A powerful question to hold in our mind is this: “What are other people seeing about this issue that I’m missing?” That simple question can help us remain more curious, more genuinely interested in the ideas and perspectives of others.

Duncan: What are the steps to practicing the skills of conversational capacity?

Weber: There are three areas of practice on which we need to focus: awareness, mindset, and skill set. So, the questions we need to ask are these: What can I do to increase my awareness? What can I do to cultivate the mindset? And what behaviors do I need to practice so I’m better at staying candid and curious under pressure?

It’s a conversational martial art, and I encourage people to adopt practices in all three domains by treating their workplace as a *learning* place. Every meeting, decision, change, or difficult person provides an opportunity for practice.



Personal application:

- What can you do to help yourself operate with optimal candor and curiosity?
How can you encourage your workmates to do the same?
- What can you do to cultivate the awareness, mindset and skills that will enable you to expand your conversational capacity?
- Which of your colleagues might be a good candidate for peer-to-peer coaching as you work on your conversational capacity?



Exclusive conversation with
Brett Blumenthal

Try This Bite-Sized Approach to Personal Improvement



By Rodger Dean Duncan

Achieving personal goals can be as frustrating as trying to nail Jello to a wall. Lose weight? Get more sleep? Exercise daily? Take a dream vacation? Improve a relationship? Earn a promotion? Read more books? Watch less TV? Cut back on social media? Save more money? Spend less?

The list can go on. Set a worthy goal, then fail to achieve it. Honestly, most of us have been there, done that.

Rather than buy a ticket for another guilt trip, how about taking a different approach?

That “different approach” can be found in the work of wellness expert Brett Blumenthal. Rather than set yourself up for disappointment by setting big goals, she suggests one small change per week for 52 weeks. You might call it the “yard by yard it’s hard, but inch by inch it’s a cinch” approach to personal improvement. It’s a surprisingly simple formula: focus on one small, achievable change every week. Then enjoy the accumulation effect.

Regardless of what’s on your wish list of personal improvement, this research-based practice works.

Brett provides user-friendly guidance in *52 Small Changes for the Mind* and other books that bring sanity—and hope—to anyone who’s serious about doing better and being better.

Rodger Dean Duncan: Your “52 small changes” approach to personal improvement has proved to be very popular. What’s the rationale behind this practice?

Brett Blumenthal: Small changes have proven to be more successful than major overhauls for the following reasons—

1. **One Big Goal = Many Small Steps.** Every big goal, such as weight loss, requires many smaller actions, such as cutting out bad foods, exercising, and eating healthy foods. Breaking a big goal into smaller components makes the process more manageable.
2. **Extremes Don’t Work.** Overhauling our life, or more simply put—going from all to nothing, or vice versa—causes burn out. Taking a step-by-step approach, however, makes change seem less overwhelming.
3. **It Feeds Our Need to Succeed.** Small Changes feed our need to succeed. With each one you successfully make, you fill up your confidence bucket, enabling you to take on more. Allowing ourselves to master small adjustments, gives us an opportunity to feel successful, and the motivation to forge ahead towards the bigger goal.

Duncan: If a person chooses to try the “52 small changes” approach, what’s a good way to decide exactly which changes to pursue?

Blumenthal: The 52 Small Changes concept is to make one small change per week over the course of one year to eventually add up to a larger change. Although the concept is structured, the changes you want to make are really up to you and the personal journey you want to have. In short, the changes should be small, manageable and quantifiable.

For instance, “drink eight glasses of water per day” vs. “hydrate more.” A change like “get fit” does not qualify as a small change. Instead, break it down into smaller ones such as: “Do cardio three times per week for 30 minutes each time.” Then, maybe the next week, “Do ten minutes of weights three times per week.” Take a week to integrate a change before moving onto a new one. But if one change is really easy or already part of your life, feel free to move forward with another change.

Duncan: You recommend a six-step path to personal reinvention. In a nutshell, what are those steps?

Blumenthal: Just like any large corporate transformation requires a structured plan to be successful, so do we as individuals. The six steps I recommend are—



Brett Blumenthal

1. **Identify the Need.** Realize something in your life isn't right and that a change is needed (e.g., you have been miserable at your job for more than a year).
2. **Discover Yourself.** Build self-awareness so when you embark on a transformation you remain true to yourself and set yourself up for the greatest possible success.
3. **Design Your Vision.** What change do you really want to make and what is the end result you want?
4. **Create the Plan.** Think about timeline, smaller milestones and all that is required to make the change happen.
5. **Make it Happen.** Put the plan into action and hold yourself accountable.
6. **Monitor Progress.** Check in and see if things need to be adjusted or if timelines need to change based on your progress.

Duncan: You encourage people to keep a personal “reinvention” journal. What role does that practice play in adopting and maintaining new, more productive habits?

Blumenthal: Studies show that when we write down our goals, we are more likely to attain them. Journaling provides the following benefits—

- **It Makes it More Official.** Putting thoughts, feelings and reactions down in writing makes them more real and official. Your journal is a record so your work is meaningfully captured. It allows you to treat the process more seriously and gives you an opportunity to reference your inner thoughts and emotions later if necessary.
- **It Helps You Keep Track.** There's nothing more rewarding than documenting your plan, reviewing your progress and seeing how you're able to successfully achieve your goals. This will keep you inspired and give you a feeling of continued

success as you go through your journey.

- **It Aids Expression.** Journaling forces us to articulate ourselves in a meaningful and understandable way. It slows down our response time, encouraging deeper thought, and more expansive and thorough expression.
- **It Makes You More Observant.** Journaling gives us reason to look around and observe what is going on around us and in our environment. It helps us to think about things more carefully and seriously than we might otherwise.
- **It Makes You Accountable.** Documenting your process encourages accountability. With every goal, milestone and action step you create, you'll feel more responsible in committing to them and completing them.

Duncan: We live in a world of short attention spans and a demand for instant gratification. What can be done to prevent those tendencies from sabotaging the pursuit of personal improvement?

Blumenthal: Ah, this seems to be true for so many of us, myself included. Thinking back only five to ten years ago, I wasn't nearly as reliant on technology, and I was more willing to wait in line or be patient than I am today. In order to reduce our need for instant gratification, we need to practice patience and disengage from technology. This allows us to slow down and reconnect with what matters most. Getting out in nature, taking walks (without a device), traveling and meditating are all wonderful practices to help free us from the frenetic

“When we write down our goals, we are more likely to attain them.”

go-go-go pace we lead. Also, spending time with animals and kids reminds us to live in the moment and to let go of the constant need to have things happen immediately.

Duncan: Self-discovery and self-awareness are critical to a person's ability to undergo significant personal improvement. But truly honest introspection can be hard for some people. What are some ways to “get more real” in confronting one's self-imposed roadblocks to meaningful change?

Blumenthal: This is one of the most challenging components of self-improvement. Without self-awareness, we can't be authentic to ourselves or to our goals for change. Yet, we all carry baggage and have relationships that can prevent us from being true to ourselves. For instance, in developing a perspective or viewpoint, many of us rely too much on what other people think. This can throw us off course when trying to recognize and listen to our own thoughts and feelings. If people providing their opinions or perspectives don't understand you, your values or your needs, they could give you misguided information or insight. Further, if they're coming from a psychologically unhealthy place, they may have a distorted perspective.

Instead of relying on opinions of others for insight to build self-awareness, it's important to focus on your own thoughts, feelings, memories and experiences as much

as possible. Begin setting boundaries with individuals who tend to give unsolicited advice or opinions. Let them know that although you appreciate their input, you need to reflect on your own thoughts and emotions. If they care for you, they'll respect your wishes.

Duncan: Do you enjoy change and are you dealing with a change in your own life?

Blumenthal: I have gone through so many transformations in my life, and I will tell you that each and every one has been a blessing. Whether change was a choice or imposed, I've always enjoyed the process. One of the best changes I've had to deal with was getting laid off from a job in 2009. My career as an author and a global artist and illustrator would never have happened.

Change can be scary for a lot of people, but your attitude is what gets you through it. Embracing change and the unknown, and trusting that things will work out, even when you don't fully know what the future holds, is an important part of creating an amazing life for yourself.



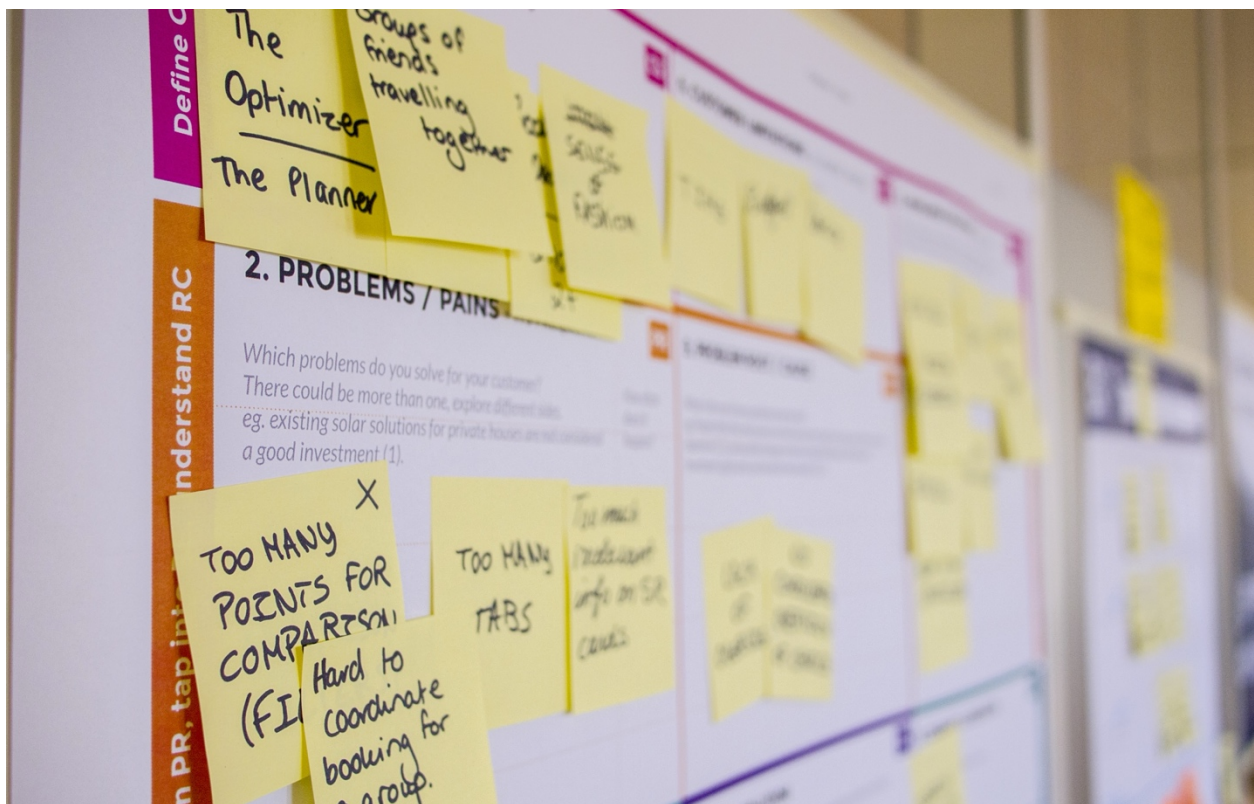
Personal application:

- In what areas of your life can this “52 small change” approach be helpful to you?
- What are some of the small changes that will get your attention first?
- What can you do to become more self-aware?



Exclusive conversation with
Brad Deutser

Chaos in Your Workplace? A Dose of Clarity Can Help



By Rodger Dean Duncan

“We have so many priorities around here that *nothing* is really a priority.”

That’s a complaint heard in many organizations. Especially those whose leaders constantly press for more hustle, more loyalty, more productivity.

Of course hustle, loyalty, and productivity are good things. But when they are reduced to the level of buzzwords, their impact is diminished. They need context. They need a meaningful framework. They need a fertile process in which to grow.

That's what we get with *Leading Clarity: The Breakthrough Strategy to Unleash People, Profit, and Performance* by Brad Deutser.

Brad, a consultant and executive coach to CEOs and board chairs, offers a bold proposal that can change the trajectory of leadership. He knows how people and organizations can get handicapped by competing priorities and the daily press of do-it-now demands. He approaches this common entanglement with a research-based strategy for bringing sanity—and sustainable high performance—to the workplace.

Rodger Dean Duncan: Today's business people operate in a time of uncertainty, ambiguity, change, and chaos. In a nutshell, how do you define “leading with clarity” in such an atmosphere?

Brad Deutser: Simply put, clarity is the process that helps leaders navigate the constant change and chaos they are faced with daily. The process provides a reliable and replicable framework from which to lead and operate. Clarity becomes the leader's antidote to change—it grounds the organization with a shared belief system, cultural framework, and strategic direction.

Clarity begins with a shared understanding of the foundational elements of an organization. When everyone can access the same fundamentals and expectations and belong to the same set of ideals, they begin the critical initial steps of creating the important connections across the company.



Brad Deutser

Instead of *finding* clarity, there is both a form and methodology that can be relied on to *facilitate* clarity, bringing with it a quick and sometimes effortless recalibration of exactly what is needed—for the leader, the leadership and the workforce. In clarity, we can see how the pieces of all interact and how each decision and action ripples through the whole of the organization. Clarity brings deep understanding of what is distinctive and extraordinary about ourselves, our people, our products and the organizations we lead.

The construct of clarity helps us collectively *see* what we need to see, *know* what we need to know, and *understand* how to connect the dots to do what we need to do.

Duncan: You talk about a “natural flow of energy” that a person must maintain to lead with clarity. What exactly do you mean by that?

Deutser: Operating with the understanding that all things are connected produces an optimal environment that allows for energy to naturally flow through an organization and its people. This natural flow of energy is what drives optimal performance of the leader and, subsequently, the organization.

Clarity has an energy around it that we feel when things are connecting without struggle or forced effort. It's similar to a runners' high— where energy is flowing, and the work is seemingly effortless, where everything is in sync and aligned.

As humans, we experience that same natural flow of energy daily— yet there are times that things derail our focus and energy, diverting our thoughts and impeding our progress forward. We work to help leaders understand their natural flow of energy and its impact on them. When a leader's energy is impeded, it slows the leader and impacts people around. We not only consider the energy of the leader, but the energy running through the organization, as well. It's why our model takes into account the balance that exists between the strategic system and culture system of a company. When there is an equilibrium between these systems, it allows for a necessary and proper flow of energy through a company. Energy is vital to leaders as well as the whole of the company.

Duncan: What are some of the “circuit breakers” that interrupt the flow of energy and break a leader's connection with others?

“ Instead of *finding* clarity, there is both a form and methodology that can be relied on to *facilitate* clarity.

Deutser: Energy is fundamental to connectivity. But often, when faced with challenges, we tend to activate our long-relied on coping skills, habits and styles under stress that may no longer serve us and may actually block our ability to thrive. Many of these interrupt or break our connection to our employees, our company, and ourselves.

These circuit breakers include fear, ambivalence, clutter, labeling, doubt, impatience, boredom, conflict, stress, inference, and resources.

When people recognize how these destructive and interruptive forces affect daily life and their effectiveness as leaders, we can help with creative solutions that keep energy flowing. Our team regularly considers each of these circuit breakers and plots them on our “energy obstruction grid” to enhance recognition of them and the impact they have on us as leaders daily.

In my own leadership, I'm constantly recognizing three circuit breakers: inference, fear and resources as things that impede my own energy. I'm now able to catch myself when I begin to infer—and instead of chasing negative thoughts based on inference, I'm better able to stay in the moment and lead.

We have found that leadership teams in different industries and businesses often share the same circuit breakers that are impacting their individual and collective performance. Being able to recognize what is stopping or slowing our energy is fundamental to leadership.

Duncan: You break with tradition by encouraging leaders to “think inside the box.” Why?

Deutser: Leaders have been conditioned to believe that outside-the-box thinking is what sparks innovation. But we have proven that, in fact, it's *inside*-the-box thinking that is the true catalyst for creativity, innovation and sustained growth. Outside-the-box thinking relies on wild creativity that is often disconnected from the reality of the business and its current state. Conversely, inside-the-box thinking relies on

““ It's *inside*-the box thinking that is the true catalyst for creativity, innovation, and sustained growth.

understanding the fundamentals of the organization and driving in unison to a shared future state.

Much of my early thinking around this came from days working at Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Circus, where I studied the

“three-ring circus” and recognized that everything of importance happened inside the rings. It's where performance was driven and where all the focus (internal and external) was placed. That's where the “inside-the-box” performance hypothesis was birthed for me and where nearly three decades of our work and research have been focused. My team has found time and time again that organizations have a much better chance of succeeding when leaders understand the parameters within which they are leading and when employees understand the parameters within which they are working. We call this their “clarity box.”

Duncan: Other benefits?

Deutser: Inside-the-box thinking can increase employee performance, profitability and sustainable success for companies. This box serves as the framework for a company's mission, vision and values and can be amended as the organization evolves. Each of the four sides of the box—direction, operations, people and engagement—plays a vital role in providing the critical definition of the company.

Benefits of the Box:

- Identifies the key elements that drive organizational performance.
- Allows for understanding the company's direction, operations, people and engagement.
- Creates a system for evaluating the balance of the strategic system and the cultural system.
- Ensures clarity around the competitive landscape and greater environment.
- Provides leaders a shared place from which to lead and hold each other accountable.
- Creates a place for employees to belong and a space to encourage responsible creativity.
- Ensures an aligned company.

Duncan: Misalignment, you suggest, is a frequent “derailer” of organizations. What do you see as the most common examples of misalignment?

Deutser: We help organizations create their own “house in clarity”—a simple way to approach alignment across an organization. Misalignment in an organization is one of the most common issues we help clients navigate. There are many things that masquerade as clarity in an organization, but actually, cause misalignment. A common form of misalignment comes from the most fundamental place—the organization’s identity. When there’s lack of clarity around the purpose, characteristics and values, there’s almost always disagreement in the organization.

We see misalignment when organizations become overly politically correct, shunning the truth for expediency and a go-along-to-get-along mentality. We also see this when boards or leaders demand immediate returns compromising long-term performance. This is especially dangerous in safety-related businesses.

There are other examples:

- **Organizational Identity and Brand**—Misalignment between who we say we are internally and who we tell our customers we are.
- **Strategy and Culture**—Misalignment between where we are going and what the organization believes.
- **What leadership says and what leadership does**—Misalignment when leaders say one thing and do another.

Additionally, other things that create misalignment and hold people back from organizational clarity include:

- Lack of a clear and articulated direction.
- An accidental culture untethered from the strategy.
- Psychologically unsafe work environment where there is an imbalance of fear, trust and empowerment.
- Deficit based leadership focusing on the negatives of the organization.
- A focus on best practices of others rather than your own organization’s.

Duncan: What personal characteristics do you look for when hiring people to work in the kind of high-clarity organization you describe?

Deutser: Employees are often hired for their knowledge, skills, and abilities. But when operating in clarity, we’re looking equally for fit, which is a much better indicator of longevity and success.

Emphasis on shared values and behavioral competencies, along with the requisite skillset, will encourage alignment in the short- and longer-term. In our own company, we hire based on a set of five behaviors that all employees are expected to exhibit—including dealing with ambiguity.

Leveraging the organization's identity, we develop comprehensive hiring systems for leaders to make better decisions. They often include various assessments, behavioral interview questions and other things that are unique to the organization. Everything we are trying to do is to embrace the uniqueness of every individual company and to ensure the right talent is the right fit for that company.

Hiring with clarity ensures that every person has a place and role that is compatible with their individual skills and personal traits as well as the traits of the organization as a whole.



Personal application:

- What kind of chaos do you see in your organization? What seems to be some of the root causes?
- Based on what you've learned here, what influence can you have on bringing more clarity to your workplace?
- Where do you see misalignment in your organization? What can you do to help correct it?



Exclusive conversation with
Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler

Steeped in Conflict? Here's How to Break Free



By Rodger Dean Duncan

An eye for an eye, it's been said, will only make the whole world blind.

Unfortunately, some people didn't get the memo. The result is turmoil, conflict, broken relationships, and missed opportunities.

Dr. Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler has a better way. At Columbia University she teaches a popular course on *conflict freedom*. It focuses on ways to liberate yourself from conflict, even when other people don't cooperate.

Her interest in freeing people from conflict arose from her own family history. As a child she was inspired by her grandmother—a “conflict whisperer” who could soothe and diffuse other family members’ frequent rage. Jen is now founder and head of a New York-based consulting firm that counsels CEOs and other leaders on how to optimize organizational health and growth. Her book is *Optimal Outcomes: Free Yourself from Conflict at Work, at Home, and in Life*.

Rodger Dean Duncan: What are some of the most common conflict habits that produce poor results?

Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler: There are four common conflict habits that get us into trouble—blaming others, avoiding others, blaming ourselves, and relentlessly trying to collaborate even when others refuse to cooperate. We often engage in these habits with the best of intentions. But when we use them habitually, regardless of the situation we find ourselves in, they become warped and unhelpful.

Duncan: Because self-knowledge is power, how can people take an honest look at their own conflict habits?

Goldman-Wetzler: To begin to notice your own conflict habits, it helps to take what I call a “proactive pause” or a “reactive pause.”

A proactive pause is when you take a few minutes out of your day to stop and reflect on which of the four conflict habits you might be relying on in any given situation. A reactive pause is when you take a moment to notice what is happening *while it’s*



Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler

happening. You might catch yourself yelling at your kids, blaming yourself unnecessarily, or making yet another collaborative overture even though others are not responding in kind.

When your conflict habits interact with other people’s conflict habits, they form a pattern of interaction that keeps you stuck in a conflict loop. If others with whom you are stuck in conflict also take the quiz, once they identify their own primary conflict habits, you can identify the conflict pattern you are stuck in together. This can give you both (or all) insight and help free you collectively from the conflict pattern.

Duncan: What’s the best approach to replacing harmful conflict habits with behaviors that are more helpful and productive?

Goldman-Wetzler: Research by Dr. Wendy Wood suggests that the way to change a bad habit is to replace it with a different habit that will get you the outcome you’re seeking. I recommend replacing your old conflict habit with something radically different—something pattern breaking—that will help you achieve an Optimal Outcome. However, as the research shows, before you can replace a bad habit with a different one,

you need to become aware of what you've been doing. In order to make a change, the first practice is to raise your awareness of what your habits and patterns have been.

Duncan: Why do some people persist in handling conflict in ways that produce poor results even when they seem to recognize that the results are poor? In other words, why do they resist adopting new behaviors and habits?

Goldman-Wetzler: Half a century of research has shown that conflict begets conflict. It's the nature of the beast. Habitual responses can be very difficult to change, but there are many practices we can use to deal with that reality and learn to free ourselves from it.

Duncan: You're known for your expertise with irreconcilable differences. How often are "irreconcilable" differences actually resolvable, and what are the most important first couple of steps to achieving a breakthrough?

Goldman-Wetzler: Some conflicts *can* be resolved by meeting your own and others' interests in ways that allow all parties to win. But when attempts to resolve conflict have failed despite multiple good faith attempts to generate mutually beneficial solutions, then trying to "solve" these conflicts becomes futile. The best thing you can do in those situations is stop trying to resolve something that has shown itself to be unresolvable.

“Conflict begets conflict. It's the nature of the beast.”

Instead, in unresolvable conflicts, we need to learn to free ourselves from the mindsets, emotions and behaviors that have gotten us stuck. One way to begin this process is to create a conflict map by writing down and mapping out the people, groups, events, backgrounds, relationships, and anything else that might be relevant in your situation. The purpose of creating a conflict map is to tell a different story about the situation than you have in the past. This gives you new insight and suggests levers for change that had previously been impossible to see.

Duncan: What role does "projection" sometimes play in a person's handling of conflict, and what's the best way to recognize what's happening and shift to a more helpful perspective and behavior?

Goldman-Wetzler: Projection is a psychological process in which we deny certain parts of ourselves and attribute those parts of ourselves to other people instead. We distance ourselves from those parts we are not proud of. Projecting onto other people allows us to maintain a positive view of ourselves. But it can also cause conflict with others, especially when they resent or reject our projections. The best thing we can do is to own our projections and honor them. One way to do this is to ask yourself how you can honor the parts of yourself that you may not be proud of. How can you think about, talk about, or act on them constructively?

Duncan: Some leaders find a discussion of values to be touchy-feely and uncomfortable. How can values be discussed in an open and honest way that helps lubricate conflict resolution?

Goldman-Wetzler: Values can be tricky to talk about, especially when they seem to clash. Ask yourself the following three questions to determine whether, when, and how to discuss values with others.

Question 1—*Is it necessary?* My experience helping hundreds of executives and students is that, much of the time, it is *not* necessary to discuss values explicitly with others in order to free yourself from conflict. What is necessary is for you to free yourself from the situation by changing the way you view it. Ask yourself whether it is necessary

“ Projection is a psychological process in which we deny certain parts of ourselves and attribute those parts of ourselves to other people.

to discuss values with others, or if a change in your own perspective on the situation is enough to free you from the conflict pattern.

If discussing values does seem necessary, then ask **Question 2—*Am I ready to say it kindly?*** Going into a conversation about values when you're feeling resentful or angry creates a high risk of escalating tensions. If you feel confident that you've developed the capacity to speak

kindly, great; move on to the next question. If not, practice in a role-play with a friend or coach. Once you can stay in an empathetic frame of mind for more than a few minutes, ask yourself: Am I saying this kindly? If yes, your risk of escalating the conflict is low. There's one last question to consider, though.

Question 3—*Is the other person ready to talk?* What indications do you have about the other person's readiness to engage in a conversation with you on this topic? If you've asked to talk about it and they have agreed, they are probably up for it. If not, I caution you against moving ahead with a conversation at this point. If you sense that they are not ready, check back in a few days and wait until you get a clear signal to go ahead.

Duncan: To help people transition to more productive conflict habits, you recommend that they write or draw their own “I Have a Dream” speech. How does that work?

Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler: If you're stuck in conflict, you've probably already exhausted a long list of rational solutions. It's time to stop thinking, and start imagining instead. The best way to do this is to use all of your senses, plus your emotions, to imagine an ideal future.

In Dr. Martin Luther King's “I Have a Dream” speech, he does this so well. He says, “Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.” He helps us imagine how the ground will *feel* beneath our feet, moving from “quicksands” to “solid rock.” When he calls out, “This will be the day when [we will] sing...[F]rom every mountainside, let freedom ring,” he helps us hear the tune of the song and the chime of the bells of freedom ringing.

When you're stuck in recurring conflict, I recommend that you write, draw, audio-, video- or otherwise record your own "I Have a Dream" speech. In whatever situation you're in, how would you like the future to look, sound, smell, feel, and even taste? When you can get to that level of detail, you're more likely to be able to create that in the future than if you just said, "I want everyone to get along."



Personal application:

- Which of the types of conflict discussed here can be found in your own life? What will you now do to resolve those conflicts?
- Under what circumstances could a "proactive pause" or "reactive pause" help you with conflict situations?
- How could the "I Have a Dream" approach help you get unstuck from a conflict?



Exclusive conversation with
Aaron Edelheit

Take a Break: Save Your Job, Your Marriage, Your Life



By Rodger Dean Duncan

It was Warren Buffett who said, “the chains of habit are too light to be felt until they’re too heavy to be broken.”

That sentiment perfectly describes the creep in both the amount of time people work and the locations where work is done. It’s an insidious pattern that fools people into believing that more hours worked automatically translates into more productivity.

Aaron Edelheit refuses to buy that myth. In *The Hard Break: The Case for the 24/6 Lifestyle* he makes a strong case for taking a weekly hard break or Sabbath. He's not talking about just lounging all day. He advocates "doing something different that will allow you to test your brain and to potentially achieve some higher insight or understanding."

Edelheit backs up his recommendation with credible (and highly interesting) research. He's also a great storyteller, providing dozens of real-life examples of how to replace deceptively deadly work habits with behaviors that improve both your health and your productivity.

My conversation with Aaron provides insights that every workaholic (admitted or not) should consider.

Rodger Dean Duncan: Although it's counterintuitive, our society seems to bestow special status to people who overwork and over schedule themselves. What brought us to this out-of-whack view of busyness?

Aaron M. Edelheit: Go back in time and you will find the wealthy were not the ones working crazy hours, but the workers and poor. Banker's hours used to mean working 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Everyone aspired for the "good life." But now, the top 20% of earners are more than twice as likely as the bottom 20% of workers to work more than 50 hours a week.

Maybe as more and more of our time has shifted to online, it might be that we need to signal our status another way and that is through busyness. I'm not sure what the answer is, but when the *Wall Street Journal*, whose readers are the wealthy, writes about 4 a.m. being the best work hour, something strange is going on.



Aaron Edelheit

Duncan: For many workaholics, it's easy to steal more work time from family hours. ("They'll understand. After all, I'm doing it for them.") What's the cost of that mentality for both family life and genuine productivity?

Edelheit: If you're a workaholic like me, you get a high that comes from achievement, any kind of achievement. You close a deal, make a sale, even just send an email and you have achieved something. When you go home, your kids may be misbehaving, the dishes need to be done again, there's no real sense of short-term achievement that work gives you.

The problem is that your personal relationships are the key to your happiness and satisfaction in life and they require long-term commitment, even without any short-term sense of achievement.

The long-term cost can be quite high, as marriages can end in divorce, children don't feel connected with parents, and stress levels of failing at home bleed over into struggles at work.

Duncan: You cite a study showing that in one recent year Americans left 662 million paid vacations days unused. On the surface, one might think employers would be okay with that. But what impact does that have on productivity in the workplace?

Edelheit: My book ended up with 200 footnotes despite the removal of dozens of other references. I was worried that my book might turn into a scientific or medical journal. Here's the summary: overworking is bad for your physical health, mental health, productivity, creativity and personal relationships. Basically, you name it and overworking hurts it in the long run.

Specifically to productivity, our cognitive performance (problem solving and creativity) declines as our brain gets tired. And when we are fatigued, we are more prone to mistakes. So, if you want to be less productive, less creative, and more prone to mistakes, just take fewer vacations.

Duncan: For people who resist the notion of taking a Sabbath break from a workaholic lifestyle, what are some of the baby steps to getting started?

Edelheit: I'm just as addicted to my phone and computer as anyone and for me taking baby steps helped show me that I could do it. Try turning off your phone and computer for three to four hours one day during the weekend.

“Overworking is bad for your physical health, mental health, productivity, creativity and personal relationships.

Another is to schedule a shared meal with family and/or friends. During the week, I'm normally shoveling food into my mouth as fast as possible. I call it “panic eating.” I try to have a relaxing meal on my Sabbath. The feeling of relaxation, enjoyment, and satisfaction is something everyone should have after a long week.

But even better are the benefits to your children. Want them to perform better academically, have less involvement in drugs and alcohol and feel closer to you as parents? Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse prescribes having a regular shared meal with your children.

And the shared meal is just part of the idea to make your Sabbath fun and special. Do things you normally don't do during the week. Try reading for pleasure or taking a nap. Simple things like this are transformative.

Duncan: You write about the power of “keystone habits.” What is a “keystone” habit and what effect can it have on a person's ability to take a hard break from daily routines?

Edelheit: A keystone habit is a foundational habit that impacts all facets of life, not just the behavior you're trying to change. The concept comes from the wonderful book, *The Power of Habit*, by Charles Duhigg. I suggest that the key to Chick-fil-A's success is the company's foundational habit of being closed on Sunday. By focusing on the care of

their employees and their families through a company-wide day of rest on Sunday, Chick-fil-A saw a cascade of benefits that then drove the company to act even further.

From the Sabbath, the company went on to start providing scholarships to seasonal employees, caring more about food quality, customer service, the quality of food and even about the care of the chickens they eventually serve to customers.

Every Chick-fil-A is closed every Sunday and this foundational or keystone habit has turned into a key advantage over its rivals. Chick-fil-A did \$9 billion in revenue last year and the average Chick-fil-A did four times the revenue of the average KFC, which is open every day. They consistently have the best customer service rankings, highest cleanliness scores and most engaged employees. The Sabbath has transformed Chick-fil-A into a powerhouse.



Personal application:

- Be honest—do you try to earn status points by talking about the long hours you work? Do you truly have that much work to do, or are you just disorganized?
- Really, now. How serious are you about ratcheting back your working hours and adopting a 24/6 or even a 24/5 or 24/4 life-style? If you did it, what impact could it have on your actual productivity? And on the people you care about most?
- What are some baby steps you could take toward adopting the habit of a Sabbath break from work?



Exclusive conversation with
Bonnie Hagemann

Leading with Vision: A Blueprint for Engaging Your Workforce



By Rodger Dean Duncan

Whether you lead a global company or you're an aspiring junior manager in a small department, a Japanese proverb can provide direction: "Vision without action is a daydream. Action without vision is a nightmare."

Some helpful insight into the subject is found in *Leading With Vision: The Leader's Blueprint for Creating a Compelling Vision and Engaging the Workforce*. To provide a

taste for what it offers, I talked with co-author Bonnie Hagemann, a specialist in developing high potentials into senior leaders.

Rodger Dean Duncan: Business people often produce confusion by using the terms mission, vision, values, and goals almost interchangeably. How do you differentiate vision from those other terms?

Bonnie Hagemann: For us, the definition of a vision is this: a clear picture of a positive future state. For organizations, a vision articulates this view of a realistic, desirable, and positive future state. It's designed to provide people with the compelling reason to make progress toward that state and accomplish the organization's goals. The vision answers, indirectly, the question of where the company is going.

Here are some short definitions that we use:

- Vision: A clear picture of a positive future state.
- Mission: Why are we here? Why do we exist?
- Values: The way in which we will or will not get things done.
- Goals: The bite-size pieces that get the organization to the positive future state. These pieces can be given a timeline, an owner and a measure of success.

Duncan: In the workplace, many people seem to be motivated less by money than by a sense of community, inclusion, and connectedness. What role does “vision” play in that recipe?

Hagemann: Today, we need leaders who can create a compelling vision and engage others around it precisely because money is not the core motivator in the workplace. We want to help leaders create a vision and a workplace that is compelling enough for employees to take the stairs two steps at a time on the way to work. We do this through ensuring that the vision is truly compelling and then linking it with connectivity.

If an organization's leaders can help employees connect their hearts to a vision, then the job takes on a whole new meaning and commitment to the organization increases as a result. Connectivity is, in fact, the glue that ties the intangible and invisible vision to the employees and their actions.

Connectedness, inclusion and community are all closely linked to being engaged and we can measure it through loyalty and the willingness of employees to extend effort to help the organization reach its vision and execute on its strategy.



Bonnie Hagemann

Duncan: What are your tips on how to engage others in developing a compelling vision?

Hagemann: There are specific actions to each step, but here are the high points:

1. Imagine the invisible—paint the picture of a positive future state.
2. Vet the vision—ensure it is the right vision for the organization.
3. Create options—ensure that you will not be made or broken by having only one option on how to get there.
4. Decide for change—a compelling vision will require changes so determine what they are and think through the best method to get there.
5. Communicate thoroughly—make the messaging around the vision as clear as a well-played music note.
6. Foster understanding—ensure that every person understands his or her role in making the vision a reality.

Duncan: You say the courageous leader's job is about empowerment—providing support and challenge, ensuring alignment—rather than making every decision. What are some keys to “letting go” so others can use their own wings to fly?

Hagemann: The first and most important key to letting go is to ensure that you have the right people in the right places. Today a leader's job is to create (or lead to) a compelling vision and establish (or lead to) clear values. These are then the anchors that help ensure alignment.

“If leaders can help employees connect their hearts to a vision, the job takes on a whole new meaning and commitment increases.”

The leader must then ensure that his/her people know the vision, the values, and the strategy for achieving the vision and that each individual understands his/her contribution and importance. Once these anchors are established, the leader can provide as much information as possible employees so they have the data to make good decisions. The leader must ensure that

employees are trained well and even taught how to be good critical thinkers. All of this is the leader's job of preparing the people for success.

Then, having empowered people with these “tools,” the leader shifts to a stance of pinging for alignment, checking to ensure that people are making good decisions and staying aligned with the organization. If people are not doing either or both, and the leader has adequately prepared them for success, then the leader must determine if the right person is in the job. If not, a change is necessary.

Duncan: Culture is shaped by everything from language and dress codes to beliefs, values, and assumptions. How can assumptions be challenged in ways that minimize anxiety or defensiveness?

Hagemann: We encourage leaders to shape the culture in a way that challenge is both acceptable and encouraged. They can do this by:

- being open to being challenged
- ensuring that everyone knows that when they have a query to start with a positive intent and
- teaching all colleagues to start a challenge with a belief statement, “my belief is...”

Duncan: In organizational performance, clarity is the thread that extends from the vision to the behaviors of individuals. What are some best practices that ensure “vision clarity” throughout the workplace?

Hagemann: Communication is the key to vision clarity, and it must be ongoing. Some of the best practices include:

- Paint a crystal-clear picture so that everyone has a shared vision of the positive future state.
- Standardize the language around the vision and use terms that are clearly defined.
- Involve people throughout the organization through multi-level “strategic conversations.”



Personal application:

- What can you do to help clarify—and distinguish the differences between—your organization’s Vision, Mission, Values, and Goals?
- Are you able to “let go” and allow others to make decisions when it’s appropriate? If not, why? How can you get better at delegating?
- What cultural assumptions in your organization should be challenged? How can you help facilitate the challenge?



Exclusive conversation with
David Nielson

Mindfulness: The Path to a Better You



By Rodger Dean Duncan

It seems that “success literature” has been around for ages. Literally. *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu was written in the 6th century BC.

Walk into any bookstore today, or cruise the Internet, and you’ll find truckloads of advice on how to think, how to get rich, how to make and keep friends, how to earn and maintain trust, how to stay motivated, how to work smarter, how to talk, how to exercise influence. You name the aspiration, and someone has written a book on how to attain it.

Finally there's a book that doesn't promise the moon. It simply offers a straightforward framework for managing your life mindfully—aware of and attentive to the skills and behaviors that produce great results. The research-based book is *The 9 Dimensions of Conscious Success* by David E. Nielson.

David offers a flavor for his research findings and how they can apply to anyone in any area of pursuit.

Rodger Dean Duncan: In your study of successful people, self-awareness emerged as a common foundation. How would you define self-awareness, and how does it manifest itself? In other words, what does it “look” like in observable behaviors?

David Nielson: I define self-awareness as having the capacity for introspection and knowing at any point in time what is going on with you. That means you can consider yourself separate from others and the environment and can focus on your thoughts, feelings, physical state and belief systems.

I believe the manifestation of awareness is when you take it out of the “internal” and make it “external”—that is, you can express it. You might consciously say to yourself “Right now I’m thinking ...” and “Right now I’m feeling ...” A conscious pause is another behavior that can increase self-awareness. Briefly pause before saying or doing something. This provides an opportunity to consider and to really *know* “where you are.”

Finally, I think honesty is a manifestation of self-awareness. Here's a simple example. It's common for people to greet others by saying “How are you?” A common, almost automatic response is “Good” or “Fine.” These may not be an authentic representation of true self-awareness. Without going into a lengthy description that may shock the other person or put them to sleep, a truly accurate, self-aware response might be “A little tired right now but otherwise good” or “Slightly frustrated right now but getting better.” Like many things in life, this could be a strength overused so I caution people to be careful.



David Nielson

Duncan: It might be argued that many public figures—politicians, celebrities, etc.—are woefully lacking in self-awareness. So why are they “successful” by some definitions of the word?

Nielson: There may be plenty of those examples right now. I wonder if some of them are actually individuals who are consciously or unconsciously inauthentic to project themselves as something they are not. Self-awareness ties closely to authenticity and I strongly believe you can deceive yourself and/or others—for a while. I believe others eventually see through it. At that point success is hampered.

There's also the whole notion of *growth*! For people committed to life-long learning—that is, having a desire to continually grow and improve—growth does not occur without some sense of self-awareness (how am I right now?) and/or social awareness (what is the impact I'm having on others and is it the impact I truly want?). As my mentor John Jones used to say, *awareness precedes meaningful choice*. We can see examples of current world leaders who don't see the need for any changes in their behavior. I've coached executives who initially really struggled with the need to change their style—until they received direct feedback.

Duncan: You advise writing a Personal Purpose Statement. How do you suggest a person use such a document?

Nielson: The simplest application is to ensure we are aligned with the work we do. We can all use a Personal Purpose Statement in several ways—

1. as a “touchstone” to keep us living a “life on purpose,”
2. to help others know what we're about, and
3. to ensure we're working in the right space—in the right organization and with the right people.

A good starting point is a realistic assessment of what we're truly good at and what we like doing. That process is a large task to do it well.

Here's an example. I coached a young man who was very committed to launching a business as a management consultant. He had one experience providing advice in a job he had held in a company he had left. On the basis of this fairly flimsy data, he felt launching this business (and relocating his family about 100 miles away) was the right move. I provided some casual observations and walked him through a process of honest self-evaluation. It raised his awareness to the degree he really saw his initial thoughts as pretty flawed. Fortunately, he let go of the initial notion and is now employed with a company doing work much more in line with his Personal Purpose Statement.

Duncan: What role does (or can or should) gratitude play in the mindset and behavior of a person who's sincerely seeking self-development?

Nielson: We can wake up every morning being grateful for what we have—all our personal gifts and skills and characteristics.

Beyond that, gratitude can also impact self-development in two specific ways—

1. In our desire to improve, feedback is often a critical element. It's wise to remember that tough feedback, though hard to hear, is sometimes what we most *need to hear*. The person delivering the feedback is taking a risk. Showing gratitude to that individual helps them see the risk was worth it. Thank them for the feedback even though it might have been hard to hear.

2. Some people really struggle accepting compliments.

In the realm of feedback, a compliment is reinforcement that you've done something that was effective and had a positive impact on another. If/when you discount or "write off" a compliment, it diminishes the person delivering it. They likely won't offer compliments again. When given a compliment, accept it graciously. A simple thank you can go a long way.

Duncan: Personal responsibility is another differentiator you regard as critical to success. In a world where victimhood is so widespread, how do you coach people to take more responsibility for the results they produce?

Nielson: I emphasize the concept of *100% Responsibility*. I believe we should focus on actionable, practical things. For most of us, it's helpful to focus "solutions" or "actions" on behaviors. A behavior is observable and measurable. You either did it or you didn't.

There are three key behaviors on which I focus in coaching others—

1. Stop blaming others for non-results.
2. Stop justifying non-results with excuses.
3. Keep creating options to produce the desired result.

Duncan: Just as views on social customs tend to evolve from one generation to another, so do definitions of "success." On the subject of finding meaning and purpose in the workplace, what can today's up-and-coming workers learn from—and teach—their parents and grandparents?

Nielson: What a great question. I emphasize the impact my father had on me and "how I show up in life".

When we look at different cultures, it has long been acknowledged and documented in native American cultures that "elders" are revered and respected for their knowledge and wisdom. I'm not so sure that pattern is as strong in today's American society.

“We can wake up every morning being grateful for what we have—all our personal gifts and characteristics.

Trial and error is not the best way for younger workers to chart their path in this world. There's a better way. Even though times change, and work practices are different from generation to generation, some practices and behaviors are timeless and universally effective.

One of the 9 dimensions (differentiators) pertinent to this issue is Listening. When I was a young man, my youth, inexperience and exuberance for hearing my own voice often resulted in my talking when I should have been listening. I recall a number of times when my father calmly and gently said, "David, you should try to remember to engage your brain before letting the clutch out on

your mouth.” Those words still echo, and I still work on listening more than speaking. Now, probably no younger person would reasonably say today “You know, I can imagine that listening was important back in my parents’ day, but in today’s workplace it’s really not needed.” Of course, listening is and will always be an effective skill/ behavior.

Another example is Work Ethic and Personal Responsibility. Those qualities will always be valued.

Parents and grandparents have traveled the path of life and their lessons are likely still very relevant. Equally important is the fact that they can deliver those lessons with loving intent. More often than not, their motive is probably love and wanting the best for their children and grandchildren, not harsh judgment or criticism. They want success and meaningful work for their progeny. I think society as a whole would benefit from capitalizing on the lessons and wisdom from parents and grandparents.



Personal application:

- What can you do to increase your own self-awareness?
- Where can you get some honest feedback on your progress with your goals?
- To help ensure your success, what personal habits should you consider replacing with more helpful behaviors?



Exclusive conversation with
Jennifer Dulski

The Power of Purpose: Be a ‘Movement Leader’ at Work



By Rodger Dean Duncan

“When you’re surrounded by people who share a passionate commitment around a common purpose, anything is possible.”

That’s not from a philosopher. It’s from a guy who sells coffee—Howard Shultz, the purpose-driven visionary who built Starbucks into a multinational chain with more than 35,000 stores worldwide.

Jennifer Dulski also knows a thing or two (many more things, in fact) about the power of purpose. She’s filled leadership roles at Facebook, Google, and Yahoo! She was president and chief operating officer at Change.org, and today’s she’s CEO (and founder) of Rising Team, a platform that provides tools and training for leading

engaging team development sessions. Her bestselling book is *PURPOSEFUL: Are You a Manager or a Movement Starter?*

Jen says that when business leaders have a clear and compelling vision, they can motivate employees to feel passionate about their work and see how their jobs contribute to a larger purpose.

“Movements also thrive on community and shared values,” she says. “By fostering a sense of community within an organization, business leaders can ensure employees feel connected to each other and to the larger mission, leading to greater collaboration and innovation. Incorporating the mindset of a movement leader allows business leaders to transcend traditional corporate structures and create organizations that are more adaptable, engaged, and purpose driven.”

Jen says successful movement starters begin with a clear vision for what they want to accomplish, and people at any level within an organization can create a vision for their movement using these steps:

- Articulated future—what the world (or your organization) will look like if you are successful
- Purpose—why this matters to you and others (employees, customers, etc.), ideally with data to support it
- Story—compelling real-world examples of how people are impacted by the issue

“Ideally, you want to gather others to support your cause before you make a proposal or request,” she says. “For example, when I worked at Change.org, our all-team meetings were traditionally held on Friday mornings Pacific time. However, our European team members put together a petition to move the meeting to Thursday mornings instead.



Jennifer Dulski

They explained in a compelling way how morning Pacific time was Friday evening for them and added photos of their children missing them on Friday nights. While they probably could have been successful in this campaign without a petition, creating a petition in this case was particularly effective because Change.org is a petition platform. Overall, it had all the components of a strong vision—articulated future, purpose, and personal stories.”

As most of us realize, the disruptions triggered by the Covid pandemic caused people to re-examine the importance of purpose in the workplace? Jen says the pandemic fundamentally altered workplace dynamics, leading many employees to reflect deeply on both the meaning of their work and how their work fits into the full picture of their lives. She says it also provided a view into both the value of relationships (given how isolated people were) and the value of time (given that people saw how quickly it could be cut short).

With this new appreciation, Jen says, people want to do work that matters to them and they want their work to be flexible enough to accommodate all aspects of their lives. “Employees want to work at organizations where they will feel trusted and valued and can build strong connections with their colleagues whether they are remote, hybrid, or in person. Companies that emphasize purpose and meaningful work will be better at fostering employee engagement and commitment during uncertain times.”

Jen says that what sometimes keeps people from stepping forward to take action is “a misplaced sense that we haven’t earned the right to have a voice in certain movements, that perhaps we don’t belong in particular fights in our communities or in our companies because we are outsiders to those struggles.”

So, what steps can people take to overcome this hesitation and jump in to make a difference in a particular cause?

“It’s more important to support causes we believe in than to be perfect in how we support them,” she says. “For causes that are for communities we aren’t directly a part of, it’s helpful to start with learning—reading, listening, following key influencers—as well as centering and amplifying the voices of those directly impacted by those movements, rather than trying to start or lead those movements ourselves.”

According to data from Gallup and researchers, employee engagement continues to wane in many organizations. What can leaders do to encourage workers to join forces in championing organizational values? And what can leaders do to ensure that organizational values are worth championing?

Jen says that while shared values are a key foundation for engagement in the workplace, it’s not enough to articulate values. Organizations need to bring values to life or they fall flat.

“At companies where I’ve worked, we’ve found ways to make the values part of the ongoing experience,” she says. “Successful initiatives include ‘Values Appreciations’ or ‘Values Ambassadors’ where people nominate colleagues who represent certain values and recognize them. Making values a key part of evaluating employee contributions to the company, in addition to results, is another way to ensure values are more than just words. By both establishing a set of core values and modeling and promoting those values, leaders can foster a sense of belonging. Employees who feel a strong connection to their company’s values are more likely to be engaged and committed to their work.”

Jen says connection is another key factor in employee engagement. She cites data showing that if employers invest a small amount of time in consistently helping employees feel more deeply connected to each other, even when they work in remote and hybrid environments, significant increases in employee engagement can be produced.

Jen quotes South African human rights activist Desmond Tutu as saying, “Don’t raise your voice; improve your argument.” She says that approach can be used in building support for a cause.

“A key part of many successful movements is persuading people in positions of power to make a decision or change their minds about something,” she says. “One strategy that can help in this effort is to understand the people you are working to persuade. When you understand what matters to your decision-makers you can make a more compelling argument for your cause using data, stories, and relationships that are more likely to make a difference.”

Jen advocates something called “80/20 decision making.” The idea is that people should be able to make the majority of the decisions that are required to get their jobs done. She uses a “traffic light” system:

She says 80% of decisions are green, meaning employees can make them on their own. Managers can give feedback, but their approval is not required.

Another 5% of decisions are red, meaning the employee knows approval is required before moving forward. These are usually “hard to undo” decisions, like hiring people, large budget items, etc.

The other decisions are yellow, meaning it’s not clear who should make the decision. On those, employees and their managers should discuss and agree whether they are red or green.

“The goal is to get 80% to 90% of decisions in the green, and the remainder in the red, and move things out of the yellow for maximum clarity,” Jen says. “Using a system like this helps create trust and autonomy, while also driving speed and productivity. At some stages of organizational growth, the percentages may vary a bit. It’s less about getting the exact percentages ‘right’ than it is about creating clarity around which decisions need approval and which don’t.”

In the post-pandemic workplace, many organizations are mandating their employees return to the office, citing productivity and connection concerns. Jen has some firm opinions on that.

“With return to office (RTO) mandates, companies often ignore the data when it comes to productivity levels and employee-to-employee connection,” she says. She cites research showing that employees on remote and hybrid teams express higher levels of satisfaction with where they work versus in-person employees. In fact, she says, hybrid and remote employees report feeling more trusted, more effective, more appreciated and even a higher sense of belonging than in-person employees.

“Forced and inflexible RTO mandates may have exactly the opposite effect of the intended outcome,” she says. “While executives hope to increase productivity and

connection, what they actually do is decrease trust and make people feel less valued and less engaged.”

As a result of these mandates, Jen says, many workers also experience an “activity avalanche” where too many meetings lead to decreased productivity. “The mandates create a disconnect between leadership and employees, ignoring the flexibility that allows workers to be their most productive selves,” she says. “The companies that will be most successful in this new work environment are those that create flexible return to office policies and focus on intentional connection-building whether employees are remote or in-person.”



Personal application:

- What opportunities for an appropriate movement do you see in your workplace?
- What role could you take to help boost employee engagement in your workplace?
- If you're in a leadership position, how open are you to candid feedback from your workmates?



Exclusive conversation with
Ron Williams

Pro Tips on Building Your Career



By Rodger Dean Duncan

Whether you're starting a new career or working to transform your organization, you can't do it alone. And why should you even try to drive solo—especially when seasoned pros are willing to suggest practices that can help you avoid unnecessary speed bumps?

One of those seasoned pros is Ron Williams.

In *Learning to Lead*, Ron shares the story of his own leadership journey. He was raised on the tough streets of Chicago's south side, surrounded by violence and crime but few role models.

He refused to allow that beginning to be his end. He earned a masters degree at MIT's Sloan School of Management. Today he's best known for his leadership at insurance

giant Aetna, where he transformed a \$292 million operating loss into \$2 billion in annual earnings.

Ron, who served as an advisor to President Barack Obama, is now chairman of RW2 Enterprises, and serves on the boards of American Express, Boeing, and Johnson & Johnson.

I visited with Ron about his views on career development.

Rodger Dean Duncan: For someone who's very early on a career path, what do you recommend as guiding principles in making the most of opportunities?

Ron Williams: I focus on three groups—young leaders trying to figure out their way forward, mid-career managers leading people, and c-suite executives leading organizations.

It's important for young leaders not to feel like they need to know exactly where they'll end up when they're just starting out. I didn't. For me, success was the progressive elimination of failure. I learned a lot about jobs I didn't want on my way to finding jobs I did want. I also learned where my strengths were—passion for the science of designing organizations for success and the ability to fix troubled companies.

I tell people who are early in a career to take every opportunity to learn on the job, and to find jobs that will expand their knowledge base. Regardless of who employs you, remember you really work for yourself, and you are the most important asset you have. Your job is to make that asset as valuable as possible. It's hard to believe this, but it's important to try not to be afraid to fail. Hard jobs are sometimes where you learn the most. If all things are equal, take the job with greater risk. You'll learn more and the rewards will likely be greater.

Also, consider jobs in growing sectors such as health care or technology, and look for roles where results are measurable. Finally, be patient. Sometimes young people just need to grow in their jobs a little before their next career move shows itself. Don't feel like you need to move too far too fast.



Ron Williams

Duncan: What are some good ways to explore possibilities in developing a career?

Williams: I use a technique called reframing. It's a way to look at an issue or a perceived problem in a different light to see if that helps you come up with ways to solve it.

For me, the most important reframing I ever did was to stop thinking that a poor black kid from Chicago who was introverted and occasionally stuttered could never be successful in business. Reach out to others and learn their paths and what steps they

took that you can follow. My education, on-the-job learning, and success in a variety of roles helped me realize that I could be a successful leader by simply figuring out how to bring my skills to bear on problems I could help solve.

Other approaches to reframing include learning about new industries and checking out organizations in different sectors than yours. How do bookstores successfully handle inventory? How do theaters or coffee shops grow and retain customers? If you're in business, go with your team to different businesses. Examine how they do things and discuss with your team whether any of these ideas apply to your own business or sector.

Duncan: For aspiring leaders, you suggest “make your enemies disappear.” We know what the Godfather meant when he said that, but your use of the term is much more user-friendly. What behaviors do you mean to imply?

Williams: I began developing something called Leadership Expectations while at Aetna. I shared them with my leadership team for input, then rolled them out to the enterprise. They are, quite simply, the expectations I have for leaders. One of my most often utilized is “Assume positive intent.” This one sometimes makes people roll their eyes at me, but it is incredibly powerful.

So often, things happen and we assume the worst of others. My point is a simple one: assume that no ill intent was intended, and then respond accordingly. So, rather than immediately getting angry and/or accusatory, be positive and thoughtful. First, the person might be pleasantly surprised and a potentially negative situation is avoided. Second, it might help you both think differently about each other the next time. And if the other person continues to show ill intent, then you'll need to handle that differently and shift to how you manage “jerks” and other difficult people. It will be less often than you think.

Duncan: As you note, Napoleon famously said the job of the leader is “to define reality and give hope.” How does that apply to 21st century leaders at every level and in every kind of organization?

“**Assume that no ill intent was intended, and then respond accordingly.**

Williams: Defining reality means having a strong grasp on the facts of your company's (or department, job, segment) current and future situation, as well as the environment in which you do business.

This requires careful evaluation and assessment (ideally built on well-designed processes and procedures). When I arrived at Aetna, for example, as EVP of Health Operations, there was no way to quickly assess the data required for most effectively closing the corporate books each month with clear insight into each local market's performance, or really understand what our biggest challenges were. So, leaders were always making decisions with significant timing lag and without the most ideal information. I quickly put in place an information system to fix this problem.

But we also needed to understand what was happening with our customers, by customer segment, with brokers, members, participating providers in our networks, regulators who we needed to work with at the state and federal level, and more. Add to that a careful assessment of our sector in its current state as well as future expectations.

With an examination of all of these, and an educated perspective, we put in place a thorough approach to communicating our strategy, mission, vision, values and annual and future goals and business model. We spent a lot of time talking with employees about why we felt we could get there, and we provided updates along the way, including celebrating successes. We involved employees in our successes and our failures.

Finally, we created a program that helped every employee better understand our business model and how each and every role contributed to our success. Every employee went through it and it was a huge success.

Duncan: Good decisions require reliable facts. What fact-finding habits do you suggest?

Williams: At the enterprise level, you need process and infrastructure. It's important that people be in charge of the process and that the process not be in charge of the people.

You have to make sure a good system is in place to provide a solid set of facts. I recommend creating a operating model to make sure the fact-finding mission is routine and systematic, such as regularly scheduled meetings to review, understand and assess the facts including where your current results differ from expected. Very often, these processes need to be backed up with a rigorous approach to accurately and clearly presenting data.

It's important to strip away unnecessary barriers to finding facts and to getting to the truth. As I mentioned before, creating expectations of leaders is helpful here. At Aetna, we needed hard discussions to really get at the facts. We needed to be sure we were

“ It's important that people be in charge of the process and that the process not be in charge of the people.

arguing over facts and not whose facts they were. This helped us solve problems rather than attack people.

You also need to get beyond the numbers. In my case, I instituted practices where I could monitor customer service metrics from my office. I could listen in on phone calls. Few would argue that there are more strenuous

phone calls than customer service calls with your health insurer. I wanted to be able to get at the basis for problems. Listening to calls was one way to do that.

Duncan: Did you solicit ideas from rank-and-file employees?

Williams: Absolutely. Another way was to get input from the front lines when we were creating improvements to our customer and provider service programs. I took

recommendations and guidance from the leaders, but also asked for help from the front lines. They knew where the most acute problems were.

One example, we were using the same phone teams for providers as we were for customers. So, anytime a doctor's office called, they could get someone from anywhere in the country who didn't know them or any details about them. We instituted provider service centers so that doctors' offices could get their problems answered from someone who knew them, knew the products in that area and could make things go more smoothly.

Duncan: Confidence is fine. But, as you note, sometimes the most effective leader is one who knows what he doesn't know. What practices can help a leader fill his knowledge and understanding gap so he can reach solid conclusions?

Williams: To name just a few—

- Listen to many different people.
- Create a clear, simple decision framework that works well for you. And use it.
- Know the value/importance of the information that you don't currently have access to.
- Avoid recency bias (e.g. last person you spoke to).
- Take the level of risk into account, and protect your future flexibility in case the answer needs to change based on emerging facts.
- Disagree but commit (leaders can disagree, but once a decision has been made, the team has to agree to commit and move forward together).
- Don't dither needlessly. Make the decision when you need to.
- Heed your inner voice.

Duncan: Candid, unvarnished communication is of course critical in any organization that is serious about high performance. What can a leader do to encourage and empower people to speak up?

Williams: Three examples of mantras I regularly used at Aetna, and are relevant here:

1. make what you know accessible to others;
2. question the issue, not the person;
3. deliver bad news early and personally.

Share as much information as you reasonably can with your team or staff and seek their input in return. When asking about a problem or issue, direct your questions at finding solutions to the problem itself. Always be prepared to share bad news with your boss, do it thoughtfully and try to have a reasonable solution prepared.

Also, ask questions that can't be answered with a yes or no. Encourage people to provide explanations and recommendations with their answers. Never respond in anger to an answer you get, or people will no longer tell you the truth. If you are treated disrespectfully, deal with that appropriately. But don't be angry just because you don't like the answer. Take a moment, take a deep breath and ask for additional information. Ask if you were queen or king for the day what would you do to improve service for customers or make us a better employer? What would your two suggestions be?



Personal application:

- How can you use “reframing” to consider an issue from a fresh perspective?
- In what ways can you learn things in your current job that will be valuable later in your career?
- How are you honing your own interpersonal skills to ensure that people find you to be “user-friendly” when they interact with you?