

SEPTEMBER 2019



# Leaderonomics

*The Science of Building Leaders*



**FINAL  
ISSUE**

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# Effective Communication

**How are you conveying your messages?**



## Editor's Note

**C**OMMUNICATION – it's something all of us have been doing for years, and continue to engage in on a daily basis. With all that experience, one would think we'd be experts in this by now...right?

However, communication is actually quite a complicated process, and getting a message across is not as simple as we think it is.

It's not just about you and how well you articulate your thoughts; it's also about your non-verbal behaviour, how well you listen to and understand the other party, whether your message is right for your audience, and a host of other factors.

Communication is listed as one of the basic leadership competencies in Leaderonomics' *Science of Building Leaders* framework, and mastering it is a process that takes a significant amount of time and refining over the years.

This month, we examine the various aspects of communication and what you can do to become a better communicator at the workplace and in your personal relationships.

Check out these pieces: Dr Eugene YJ Tee on crisis communications by organisations, Laveenia Theertha Pathy on what you can do to make your message stick, Chong Sook Leng on the levels of listening, and many more.

This will be the final issue of our digital magazine as we focus on taking the digital experience on **Leaderonomics.com** to the next level, in line with our mission to create and curate thought leadership content that inspires you to become a better version of yourself – and ultimately, a better leader.

Our extensive collection of past digital issues will always be available to everyone on Leaderonomics.com (visit [bit.ly/ldrEmag](http://bit.ly/ldrEmag)) and we will continue to deliver insightful content to you via Leader's Digest, our weekly newsletter.

So, subscribe to us at [bit.ly/subscribeLD](http://bit.ly/subscribeLD) if you haven't already done so, follow us on our social media channels, and you will hear from us soon. Thank you for your ongoing support!

**CHRISTIE CHUA**

*Editor, Leaderonomics.com (English)*

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### What makes a great team?

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By ROSHAN THIRAN

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**T**WENTY-FIVE years ago, I joined General Electric (GE) and was assigned a role in a specific team with specific deliverables. I was also assigned to another project team where I had to work with others to execute a project. Both teams ran simultaneously but with different leaders and members.

I loved working in one of the teams, even though the work was hard and sometimes challenging. However, working in the other team felt suffocating and I honestly wanted to throw in the towel at times.

Oddly, the members of this 'horrendous' team were all extremely talented and competent, much more than my other team. Yet, work felt tedious. After three months, the project failed miserably and the team gladly disbanded. I always wondered why we had two very different team experiences despite being in the same company.

In 2012, Google embarked on an ambitious project designed to answer this very question, one I had left unresolved since 1995: What makes some teams thrive while others crumble?

### Project Aristotle

Code-named Project Aristotle, the project called on the top statisticians, organisational psychologists, sociologists and engineers to analyse hundreds of teams within Google, with the hope of finding the key to building top-performing teams.

The name was a tribute to a quote by Aristotle: *The whole is greater than the sum of its parts* (Google researchers believed employees can achieve more when they collaborate).

The brilliant boffins made their way through half a century of research on teams, and they also took a number of psychosocial factors into account to see if they could spot any emerging patterns amongst the 180 teams they studied (115 project teams in engineering and 65 pods in sales), which included a combination of both high and low performing teams.

Did the best teams socialise together? Were they driven by incentives? Did team members have similar personality traits? Did they share similar educational backgrounds? What kind of hobbies and interests did they enjoy? These were the many questions raised by the researchers.

As it turned out, no matter how the researchers looked at the different factors, there was no evidence to suggest that any particular combination made for a successful team.

The Project Aristotle team went on to discover that top-performing groups aren't about the 'who', but rather the 'how' – what this means is that who is on the team was not as important as how the team worked together.

### The findings

The team of researchers found the following five findings, ranked in order of importance, that was critical to having successful teams:

#### 1. Psychological safety

"If I make a mistake on our team, it is not held against me."

Psychological safety is an individual's belief that a team is a safe place, and no one will be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. They don't have to worry that they would be seen as ignorant, incapable, negative, or as a disruptor.

In a psychologically safe team, members would feel comfortable taking risks around each other and be confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish them for mistakes made, asking stupid questions, or offering 'crazy' ideas.

#### 2. Dependability

"When my teammates say they'll do something, they follow through with it."

# Building the Best Team

## What leaders can learn from Project Aristotle



In dependable teams, each member of the team can completely depend and rely on each other. Work gets done well and on time, and team members are accountable to each other and do not shirk responsibilities.

#### 3. Structure and clarity

"Our team has an effective decision-making process."

Each team member has clarity and understanding of their role and the expectations to fulfil deliverables. They understand the consequences of their performance and have effective team structures and processes in place, especially to make decisions.

At Google, the best teams use objectives and key results (OKRs) to help set and communicate these goals and establish clarity for everyone.

#### 4. Meaning

"The work I do for our team is meaningful to me."

Each person's meaning of work may differ but everyone in the team finds a sense of purpose, in either the work itself or the output produced.

#### 5. Impact

"I understand how our team's work contributes to the organisation's goals."

The impact and result of work done (although it may be subjective) matters significantly. The best teams have members who feel that their work is making a difference and is contributing to the overall organisational goals and vision.

### What does this all mean?

As the Project Aristotle team discovered, a team's success had little to do with personality, education, gender, or any superficial factor. Rather, top-performing teams were the ones who were able to establish healthy group norms.

Additionally, the researchers discovered that top teams demonstrated two behaviours that led to stronger bonds and deeper cohesion.

First of all, the best performing teams gave space for everyone to share their ideas. The researchers referred to this as "equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking". In teams where only one or two did most of the talking, creativity, innovation and overall team intelligence dipped.

Secondly, strong teams contain people who show high levels of social awareness; that is, they are sensitive to how other people are feeling through how they communicate, and they work to include those who might appear to feel left out.

Conversely, teams that perform less well tend to be made up of people who have below-average social

awareness. They might be filled with 'smart' people, but group norms will likely discourage equal contribution; there will be little or no personal sharing within the team, and social awareness is also likely to be low.

### Key takeaways for leaders

So, what can leaders learn from the findings of Google's Project Aristotle? There are a few practical key takeaways that can be immediately implemented in your organisation:

#### Ensure psychological safety in your teams

Firstly, a revision of the 'seniority complex' that exists within organisations would be considerably helpful. Grey hair, titles and years of experience don't necessarily equate to wisdom in leadership.

As any effective leader knows, everyone in a team has ideas to share, from which a leader can learn. Therefore, leaders should openly encourage and solicit input from their people, talk less, lean in and listen more.

Secondly, create bonds in your team by sharing information about personal and work style preferences, and encourage others to do the same. Finally, create structures that allow your team to discuss subtleties and other issues in safe and constructive ways.

#### Build emotional intelligence

Although it's been the case traditionally that emotional intelligence is seen as an irrelevant luxury within business, studies into leadership have shown that leaders who score high on emotional intelligence tend to lead the most effective teams. How do we ensure each of our team leaders have a high degree of emotional intelligence capability?

#### Bake in impact communications frequently

Reinforce how each team member's work directly contributes to the team's and broader organisation's goals. Also, have frequent reflection sessions with the team to reflect on the work done and how it impacts users or clients or the company.

#### Establish a common vocabulary

Clearly define your team's behaviours and norms that you want established. Additionally, ensure you give your team members positive feedback when they exceed expectations on these behaviours and offer to help them with areas they may struggle with.

### In summary

Focusing solely on results, key performance indicators (KPI), and the bottom line increases the chances of demotivation, presenteeism and disengagement. To build an engaged, top-performing team, leaders should focus on all five elements – psychological safety, dependability, structure and clarity (yes, the KPIs and OKRs matter too!), meaning and impact.

It's not easy to do, and many times, these things are paid frequent lip-service in leadership. The key is to actively ensure that the company culture embraces the behaviours and practices that Project Aristotle highlighted as being necessary for great teams to flourish. But it can be done – and is already being done in the best teams in your organisation.

Let's try to get this incorporated into every team in your company. All the best!



Roshan Thiran is the founder and chief executive officer of Leaderonomics – a social enterprise working to transform lives through leadership development. He continues to struggle and learn about how to build effective teams, sharing his findings through videos and other great content on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. Follow him for more insights into business, personal development and leadership.





By **CRYSTAL CHA**

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**O**VER the span of around three years, I've worked with over 30 clients big and small, in Malaysia, the United States, Philippines, and Australia. I've been fortunate that some of my earliest clients started off as three-month projects evolving into year-long collaborations (yay for stable income!). One even turned into a summer internship at the centre of New York City!

Many people have asked me how I managed to do this while pursuing a demanding MBA which involved 40 hours per week of face time with professors and classmates (not even counting homework hours!). And I know people who have tried freelancing only to return to employment after deciding that it wasn't for them.

Now that I've ventured back into the stability of a 9-to-5 job, I thought it would be a good time to reflect and share some of the things I learnt along the journey.

### But first, a preface

I don't believe in any of these absolutes: freelancing is better, working 9-to-5 is better, people who work in an office job are risk-averse, freelancing will give you more time and freedom (you may have more flexible time, but you may be working just as many hours – if not more – than a corporate job!), and freelancers are commitment-averse people who cannot be tied down to one thing.

None of the above is true. There are freelance one-(wo)man agencies out there who are as professional as any other large-scale agency. And there are office warriors out there who are 'intrapreneurs', starting every Monday with as much purpose as someone who is his or her own boss.

Freelancing, like any other career choice, is not just a choice about the work you will do or the kind of money you can make – it is very much also a lifestyle choice. There are trade-offs I've made in exchange for the flexibility freelancing gave me while I focused the bulk of my time on achieving my Master's dream.

As a freelancer, I've met people who are sceptical about remote work ("Can it really be productive and can you truly build connections with someone you've never met in person?") and others who are envious ("It must be so nice working out of a cafe every day!").

The point of this article is not to glamourise or criticise life as a freelancer – it is simply to share my experiences. Hopefully, as you read this you'll come away with a useful nugget or two!

## 1 Understand that what the client is asking for is not always what they really want

I've had many quotation requests start out with asking me to write blog posts or social media posts. As I began to ask more questions and dig deeper, I found out they needed help with public relations, brand direction, or even with their entire marketing strategy.

I was able to tell them, "Hey, maybe you don't really need to be churning out one new blog post a week – here are some quick ways you can have a more active online presence."

You are the expert, so don't just do what you're asked to do. Ask more questions. Understand their business goals. Explain the difference between long-term investments (SEO, branding) and short-term gains (ad campaigns, store traffic, conversions), and help them align your work with their business.

## 2 Seek to understand before being understood

Although you may be the expert when it comes to your field of work, always maintain respect for the client. If you cannot respect a potential client, then politely turn down the opportunity and say "I don't think this is a fit", or if you want to be a bit subtler, say "I don't think I have the bandwidth to give this project the commitment it deserves".

As a creative person, I have been guilty of assuming everyone has the same marketing background and experience ("How can this person be running a company and not even know how to set up a Facebook page?").

However, when I began to ask questions unrelated to the work I was doing, such as about their business goals and their biggest challenges, I began to learn



# The Gig Life

## 10 ways to thrive as a freelancer or independent contractor

more about how I could really add value, rather than just prescriptively telling them what I should do.

## 3 Build a collaborative relationship – trust is everything

This is all about mindset. Don't think "I'm just a freelancer, I can't tell my client that his or her strategy may not be working. I just need to do what the client tells me." A good client will value your feedback.

There are times when clients will pay you late, or get back to you with feedback late. You could get angry and think, "Well, all clients are like that – typical." Or, you could be understanding and patient, and also expect them to do the same for you in return.

There are times I've asked for deadline extensions, and the clients were completely cool with it when I explained I was rushing to meet MBA deadlines. They know they've been late in getting back to me with approvals as well.

Some freelancers may prefer to keep their distance from clients, but my ideal working relationship is one where my client trusts me enough to say they're running late for a call because they need to pick up their kids and where I trust them enough to ask for an extra day to work on something because I have an exam tomorrow morning.

## 4 Factor in time and money for prospecting

As a creative person, I didn't like to think about sales. And I never really consciously or intentionally set up 'sales meetings' or 'exploratory chats'. But I found myself doing it quite intuitively by having the mindset I described in point one of wanting to share and educate people about the work I do.

Often, referrals would come in the form of "Hey, I have a friend who was looking for some help with his social media – maybe you could have a coffee with him and see how you can help."

These chats would consist of half an hour to an hour of just learning about their business and learning what makes them tick as a founder. These chats have costs associated – costs for expensive Starbucks coffee, costs for travel and parking, and so on. Factor that in!

## 5 Have a list of questions prepared when you meet a potential client, and be curious

During my early coffee chats, I used to bring along a printed questionnaire with questions about what their business goals were, whom they see as their biggest competitors, which brand's voice they most admire, and what were some style references they'd like for me to emulate.

Over time, these questions became more natural to ask so while I didn't carry them around, I would go over them in my head before every meeting.

Meanwhile, I have been on the other end of the table trying to hire a freelancer, and many have just sat there waiting for me to tell them about the job, without having a single question to ask me about why I want the work done that way.

That doesn't look good!

Always ask questions – not just to show you are interested, but because you are actually curious!

## 6 Don't be afraid to talk about payment terms, and be firm

When I first started out, I was very 'green', and so desperate to close every potential client that I did not press them enough for details about

Freelancing, like any other career choice, is not just a choice about the work you will do or the kind of money you can make – it is very much also a lifestyle choice.



whether they would be able to pay me on time, what time of the month they usually paid clients, and making a confirmation payment mandatory before work started on the first project.

Have black-and-white payment terms, but don't just expect to read it in the fine print of a quotation – bring it up again in conversation (not in the first meeting but when you get close to talking about details).

Chasing people down for money is one of the most stressful and time-consuming things you can do as a freelancer, and the best way to not do that is to learn to spot a bad paymaster.

There isn't a checklist of tell-tale signs, but if a person takes forever to even respond to one email (without any apology whatsoever), or if the person seems that they aren't on top of their accounts (for instance, if they haven't even seen your invoice or realised that you've sent it in), that is a sign.

There are times people forget, but usually, people are apologetic about it. Someone who couldn't care less about whether you get paid does not respect your services as a freelancer, and as a result, over time you will not be able to add much value to them.

## 7 At the same time, be flexible

A new relationship with a client is a bit like dating. At first, it's important to establish the boundaries – hence my point about payment terms above. Over time, the trust builds and things don't need to be so rigid.

If someone already has a good track record of generally paying you on time, and they need to suddenly switch gears and ask you to put that project on hold to start a new project and change the way they are being

billed, be flexible about it!

It may cost you a small amount in the short term but in the long run, future revenue from a happy client will far outweigh the inconvenience.

## 8 Don't neglect your health

If you keep track of your steps (a MiBand is a cheap way to keep track if you don't have a Fitbit, and new Samsung and iPhone models count your steps too), you might realise that if you are not intentional, you can end up walking a pathetic 1,000 steps or less a day.

Ask someone who has worked remotely or as a freelancer and they will tell you this is true. Don't let this happen for more than a few days in a row – your work will suffer and you will exhaust yourself!

Schedule in regular runs or hit the gym. Eat your meals on time or schedule meetings around meals – not only is this important for your health, it's also a nice way to feel less isolated and maintain a social circle by scheduling meals with other freelancers, flexi-workers, or your clients.

## 9 Learn from disasters

A client disappears without paying you despite all your best efforts to contact them using every possible method available. A person you've worked with leaves the company and your monthly retainer is cancelled. Your laptop crashes with all your work saved on it. These are not 'ifs' if you are a freelancer – they are most probably 'whens'. You learn from them.

You learn how to pick your clients instead of jumping at any interested party. You learn to structure your

projects better so there's long-term continuity even if company structures change. You learn to back up all your work on the cloud – and so on.


## 10 Be proactive about staying inspired

Being a freelancer will be downright boring and mind-numbing on some days. Like most other jobs, there are many days when the work feels repetitive and mundane.

You might feel stuck and like you have no new ideas. I would not have survived without subscribing to newsletters such as those from Jeff Goins, Henneke Duistermaat, Copyblogger, Neil Patel, and other practitioners in the field.

Being a freelancer requires a truckload of motivation and inspiration – you need to be reaching for outside sources. It will not only keep you inspired to know what others are doing – it will keep you relevant.

■ This article was previously published in print.

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## BUILD TECHNICAL/FUNCTIONAL COMPETENCIES TO SUPPORT VISION

These competencies would be different for various individuals, depending on the needs of their specific roles at any given point in time, as well as working towards one's plans for the future. This is part of Leaderonomics' **Science of Building Leaders**, a framework which indicates important elements that need to be developed at each stage of one's life, in order to empower the individual to become an effective leader. Head to [bit.ly/SOBLPt1](https://bit.ly/SOBLPt1) to find out more.

Chasing people down for money is one of the most stressful and time-consuming things you can do as a freelancer, and the best way to not do that is to learn to spot a bad paymaster.



By **EVETTE CORDY**  
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**C**REATIVITY is the most in-demand soft skill in short supply according to a 2019 LinkedIn talent report. Most often associated with the arts or design sectors, it is a skill that applies to almost any role. Creativity is the use of imagination and originality in solving problems – a skill that machines can't easily replicate.

Creativity is a skill that can be learnt – not an innate quality. That is, with practice anyone can be creative, not just a privileged few. Here are three tips for getting your team to perform at their creative best:

#### Do a warm-up

Research has suggested that undertaking a creative warm-up such as improvisational games can positively impact both the quantity and quality of creative thinking. Just like athletes warming up their muscles to perform well, we can warm up our brains to enhance creative thinking.

Choose team activities that help free people's brains from conventional thinking, to see things differently, and to generate novel solutions that help form more creative ideas.

##### Creativity starter:

- Ask your team to get into pairs.
- Ask one person in each pair to assume the role of a world-renowned expert – whatever they say can't be wrong. The other person is the novice, and their role is to ask the expert questions. They can ask anything, and the expert will always have an answer.
- Tell the expert their area of expertise is providing therapy to bees.
- Begin by getting the novice to ask the expert questions about this topic. After several minutes of questioning, ask them to swap roles – the expert is now the novice, and the novice is now the expert.

The playfulness of this activity will completely change the room energy. There are no right or wrong answers, and the possibilities are endless. It is a great way to start any creative team session.

#### Defer judgement

How often have you been in a meeting trying to solve a problem when someone attempts to make a suggestion, only to have another person interrupt with "Yes but ... this won't work because of x, y or z"?

If every suggestion or idea is met with critique, it is likely that creative thinking will soon dry up. Edward De Bono once said: "The enemy of creativity is the immediate judgement of ideas." This sentiment has been backed up by research.

Learn to postpone your instant judgement. Create a safe space for people to share their ideas, take chances and even fail. We need to judge ideas – but first we need to separate the 'idea production' from 'idea selection' thinking. Create space for all ideas to be voiced, no matter how wild, and then spend time selecting those with the most potential.

"Yes and ..." is a pillar of creativity – a guiding principle in group work that can help teams to defer judgement.

# 3 Tips for Cultivating Team Creativity



##### Creativity starter:

- Once you have defined the right problem to solve, ask someone in your team to share an idea.
- Respond to all ideas with the sentence starter "Yes and ..." followed by something that builds on their idea with another idea. The "yes" acknowledges an idea without judging it, and the "and" allows you to build on it.

#### Seek analogous inspiration

Analogies are often used to express our ideas or to help explain complex matters. Analogies are also a great way to generate creative ideas to address a problem.

For example, the service experience of the Ritz Carlton has inspired Apple retail stores. A hospital intensive care unit in the United Kingdom has been inspired by the F1 Ferrari race team's pit-stop techniques. Ford's assembly lines were inspired by systems used in slaughterhouses and grain warehouses.

Analogous inspiration will get your team's creativity flowing. It can help isolate elements of a great experience, interaction, product or service, which are then applied to the challenge you are working on.

##### Creativity starter:

- Select a challenge you are trying to solve and consider its key attributes. For example, wait times may be a significant pain point affecting your customers' service experience.
- Pick an experience, interaction, product or service from an analogous area, such as Fast Passes at Disneyland – an example of managing wait lines well.
- Now find or force a connection between the problem you are working on and the seemingly unrelated analogy.

This simple activity can push your team's creative thinking to entirely new levels.

In summary, there are several pay-offs for cultivating team creativity – better quantity and quality of creative ideas, more rapid problem solving, as well as building a more fun and engaging team environment.



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## Gain a better understanding of yourself

Find out how you can assess your strengths and weaknesses at [bit.ly/assesstraits](https://bit.ly/assesstraits)



# Virtually Perfect for Women?

By **MILLIE ONG**

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**W**ITH increasing incorporation of technology in today's workplace, virtual teams are becoming more common.

In a literature review of studies on the virtual team, Powell, Piccoli and Ives defined virtual teams as "groups of geographically, organisationally and/or time dispersed workers brought together by information and telecommunication technologies to accomplish one or more organisational tasks".

With increasing demand for flexible work arrangements, many employees find themselves forming virtual teams – teams not situated within the same location, but working primarily using information technology.

These teams may be temporary or permanent, but are merged together with a common task to complete. Using email, instant messaging and video-calls, individuals can collaborate, share knowledge and work seamlessly.

Virtual teams may benefit or be detrimental to an organisation's productivity. For the modern working woman, virtual teams may serve a larger purpose altogether.

Research by Agnetha Broos has shown gender differences in learning and communication using technology, with women having a more negative attitude towards computers and the Internet as compared to men.

Thus, the question arises – are virtual work arrangements a boon or bane for the 21st century career woman?

## Balancing work and family

The virtual team has the potential to ease working women's efforts to build professional careers while caring for their families as it enables them to do both simultaneously. Without being tied to the office, women working from home have more flexible hours beyond the traditional 9-to-5 working hours.

Virtual teams allow women to be more hands-on with raising their kids while working. Reducing commute time and distractions from the office means more time for women to engage in healthy practices and leisure activities – resulting in happier and healthier employees.

In fact, this could partially explain the findings of a

study which found that women were more satisfied with working in virtual teams compared to men.

## Opportunities for women

A widely espoused advantage of virtual teams is the 'boundary-less' working environment, whereby geography, space and organisational limitations are diminished. This opens many doors for women to engage in opportunities that may not be present in their locale.

Although gender equality has come far in the last few decades, certain countries still have gender discrimination in the workplace. The glass ceiling is only too true for women living in these countries, limiting their opportunities.

However, through virtual teams, women can be released from the working environment of their home countries, which may be rife with discriminatory policies. Instead, they can contribute their talents and expertise to projects by organisations that may not operate in their locale.

## Meritocratic metrics

Due to the unique functions of a virtual team, work performance is measured in metrics that go beyond the traditional hourly-based methods. It is the work output in the form of deliverables that is the key index.

The production of reports, products and the execution of action plans become the key performance indicators (KPIs), leading to a highly meritocratic system. There is little room for non-task related measurements, which allow for a more level playing field for women.

A person's performance is then less likely to be judged by gender biases, such as viewing men as being more suitable for certain positions. Virtual teams allow women to be part of a workforce that rewards talent and performance regardless of gender.

However, although virtual teams seem to be the perfect fit for women, there remain some challenges that are unique to women as well.

## 1 Limited communication

Research by Karima Merchant indicate that women are more relationship-focused than men (who are more task-focused). Given this, some women may find the lack of face-to-face communication a major challenge when working in virtual teams.

The absence of contextual and non-verbal communication may even cause misunderstanding and confusion when sharing information.

Surveys on women who are part of virtual teams show that they often feel that insufficient communication led to unresolved conflicts in teams. Some women may find this a hindrance to their work performance.

Nonetheless, with carefully managed processes, communication can be improved within virtual teams.

## 2 Less chance for relationship-building

Along with the limited communication of virtual teams is the barrier towards relationship-building amongst team members. When everyone is in the same location, it is much easier for rapport to be formed, and there are more opportunities for increasing team cohesiveness.

Instead, in a virtual team, the team is often only held together by the mutual goal of the task. For many women, the process of working towards a task can be just as important as completing the task itself.

Thus, the lack of relationships when working on a task over information technology may dampen the motivation and enthusiasm of women.

However, if a strong focus is placed on facilitating social interaction – particularly at the start – robust relationships can also be developed within a virtual team.

## 3 Managing a virtual work lifestyle

Despite the appeal of a virtual team – flexible work arrangements and the coveted work-life balance – some individuals may find it difficult to adjust to this alternative lifestyle.

Women who juggle caring for their families while maintaining a full-time career may find it difficult to manage their schedule. The flexibility of virtual teams may mean working late into the night, or at odd hours to compensate for any time taken off during the routine work day.

Regardless of whether virtual teams are more beneficial or detrimental to women, its presence in the working world cannot be ignored. Virtual teams may be the best option for some, though less suitable for others. With training and proper management, its challenges can be overcome.

The question is, are leaders willing to make it work?



Millie Ong is willing to advocate for virtual work teams if it allows her to work from home in her pyjamas. To get in touch with her, email [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).



By **DR TRAVIS BRADBERRY**  
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**T**HE further along you are in your career, the easier it is to fall back on the mistaken assumption that you've made it and have all the skills you need to succeed. The tendency is to focus all your energy on getting the job done, assuming that the rest will take care of itself. Big mistake.

Recent research from Stanford tells the story. Carol Dweck and her colleagues conducted a study with people who were struggling with their performance. One group was taught to perform better on a task that they performed poorly in. The other group received a completely different intervention: for the task that they performed badly in, they were taught that they weren't stuck and that improving their performance was a choice.

They discovered that learning produces physiological changes in the brain, just like exercise changes muscles. All they had to do was believe in themselves and make it happen.

When the groups' performance was reassessed a few months later, the group that was taught to perform the task better did even worse. The group that was taught that they had the power to change their brains and improve their performance themselves improved dramatically.

The primary takeaway from Dweck's research is that we should never stop learning. The moment we think that we are who we are is the moment we give away our unrealised potential.

*"Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever." – Mahatma Gandhi*

The act of learning is every bit as important as what you learn. Believing that you can improve yourself and do things in the future that are beyond your current possibilities is exciting and fulfilling.

Still, your time is finite, and you should dedicate yourself to learning skills that will yield the greatest benefit. There are nine skills that I believe fit the bill because they never stop paying dividends. These are the skills that deliver the biggest payoff, both in terms of what they teach you and their tendency to keep the learning alive.

## 1 Emotional intelligence (EQ)

EQ is the 'something' in each of us that is a bit intangible. It affects how we manage behaviour, navigate social complexities, and make personal decisions that achieve positive results. EQ is your ability to recognise and understand emotions in yourself and others and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behaviour and relationships.

Decades of research now point to EQ as the critical factor that sets star performers apart from the rest of the pack. It's a powerful way to focus your energy in one direction, with tremendous results.

We tested EQ alongside 33 other important workplace skills and found that EQ is the strongest predictor of performance, explaining a full 58 per cent of success in all types of jobs. Of all the people we've studied at work, we've found that 90 per cent of top performers are also high in EQ. On the flip side, just 20 per cent of bottom performers are high in EQ.

You can be a top performer without EQ, but the chances are slim. Naturally, people with a high degree of EQ make more money, an average of USD29,000 more per year than people with a low degree of emotional intelligence.

The link between EQ and earnings is so direct that every point increase in EQ adds USD1,300 to an annual salary. Increasing your EQ won't just pad your bank account, it'll make you happier and less stressed as well.

## 2 Time management

One of the biggest things that gets in the way of effective time management is the 'tyranny of the urgent'. This refers to the tendency of little things that have to be done right now to get in the way of what really matters.

When you succumb to it, you spend so much time putting out fires that you never get any real work done. How many times have you left work at the end of the day, only to realise that you didn't move the important things along even one inch?



# The Power to Change Your Brain

## Nine skills you should learn that pay off forever

Learning to manage your time effectively frees you up to perform at your absolute highest level, and it does so every single day of your life.

## 3 Listening

This one should be easy. If we're not talking, we're listening, right? Well, not exactly. A lot of times, we think we're listening, but we're actually planning what we're going to say next.

True listening means focusing solely on what the other person is saying. It's about understanding, not rebuttal or input. Learning how to suspend judgment and focus on understanding the other person's input is one of the most important skills you can develop.

Listening is a bit like intelligence – the majority think they're above average (even though that's impossible). A study at Wright State University surveyed more than 8,000 people from different verticals, and almost all rated themselves as listening as well as or better than their co-workers. We know intuitively that many of them were wrong.

There's so much talking happening at work that opportunities to listen abound. We talk to provide feedback, explain instructions, and communicate deadlines.

Beyond the spoken words, there's invaluable information to be deciphered through tone of voice, body language, and what isn't said. In other words, failing to keep your ears (and eyes) open could leave you out of the game.

## 4 Saying no

Research conducted at the University of California, San Francisco, showed that the more difficulty that you have saying no, the more likely you are to experience stress, burnout, and even depression. Saying no is indeed a major challenge for many people.

'No' is a powerful word that you should not be afraid to wield. When it's time to say no, avoid phrases such as "I don't think I can" or "I'm not certain". Saying no to a new commitment honours your existing commitments and gives you the opportunity to successfully fulfil them.

When you learn to say no, you free yourself from unnecessary constraints and free up your time and energy for the important things in life.

## 5 Asking for help

It might seem counterintuitive to suggest that asking for help is a skill, but it is. It takes a tremendous amount of confidence and humility to admit that you need assistance.

This skill is critical because the last thing a leader wants are employees who keep on trucking down the wrong path because they are too embarrassed or proud to admit that they don't know what they're doing.

The ability to recognise when you need help, summon up the courage to ask for it, and follow through on that help is an extremely valuable skill.

## 6 Getting high-quality sleep

We've always known that quality sleep is good for your brain, but recent research from the University of Rochester demonstrated exactly how so.

The study found that when you sleep, your brain removes toxic proteins, which are by-products of neural activity when you're awake, from its neurons. The catch here is that your brain can only adequately remove these toxic proteins when you have sufficient quality sleep.

When you don't get high-quality deep sleep, the toxic proteins remain in your brain cells, wreaking havoc and ultimately impairing your ability to think – something no amount of caffeine can fix. This slows your ability to process information and solve problems, kills your creativity, and increases your emotional reactivity.

Learning to get high-quality sleep on a regular basis is a difficult skill to master, but it pays massive dividends the next day.

## 7 Knowing when to keep quiet

Sure, it can feel so good to unload on somebody and let them know what you really think, but that good feeling is temporary. What hap-





pens the next day, the next week, or the next year?

It's human nature to want to prove that you're right, but it's rarely effective. In conflict, unchecked emotion makes you dig your heels in and fight the kind of battle that can leave you and the relationship severely damaged.

When you read and respond to your emotions, you're able to choose your battles wisely and only stand your ground when the time is right. The vast majority of the time, that means biting your tongue.

## 8 Taking initiative

Initiative is a skill that will take you far in life. In theory, initiative is easy – the desire to take action is always there – but in the real world, other things get in the way.

There's a big difference between knowing what to do and being too scared or lazy to actually do it. That requires initiative. You have to take risks and push yourself out of your comfort zone, until taking initiative is second nature.

## 9 Staying positive

We've all received the well-meaning advice to "stay positive". The greater the challenge, the more this glass-half-full wisdom can come across as Pollyanna-ish and unrealistic. It's hard to find the motivation to focus on the positive when positivity seems like nothing more than wishful thinking.

The real obstacle to positivity is that our brains are hard-wired to look for and focus on threats. This survival mechanism served humankind well, back when we were hunters and gatherers and living each day with the very real threat of being killed by someone or something in our immediate surroundings.

That was eons ago. Today, this mechanism breeds pessimism and negativity through the mind's tendency to wander until it finds a threat. These 'threats' magnify the perceived likelihood that things are going – and/or are going to go – poorly.

When the threat is real and lurking in the bushes down the path, this mechanism serves you well. When the threat is imagined and you spend two months convinced that the project you're working on is going to flop, this mechanism leaves you with a soured view of reality that wreaks havoc in your life.

Maintaining positivity is a daily challenge that requires focus and attention. You must be intentional about staying positive if you're going to overcome the brain's tendency to focus on threats.

Research shows that lifelong learning pays dividends beyond the skills you acquire, so never stop learning.

# 5 Steps to Working with an Organised Mind

THE average person has 70,000 thoughts each day, and if you don't learn to organise them, they have the potential to wreak havoc on your productivity.

When you succumb to the flurry of thoughts running through your head, your mind becomes disorganised, and the more you ruminate on intrusive thoughts, the more power you give them.

Most of our thoughts are just that – thoughts, not facts. When you find yourself believing the negative, distracting, and pessimistic things your inner voice says, it's very hard to slow down the momentum of your thoughts.

In a study conducted at the National Institute on Ageing, it was found that allowing your mind to be disorganised doesn't just feel bad, it's also actually bad for you.

A disorganised mind leads to high stress, chronic negativity and impulsivity. These states stifle productivity and contribute to a slew of health problems, including weight gain, heart disease, sleep problems, and migraine headaches.

Edward Hallowell, a therapist who helps people deal with disorganised minds, describes what happens when someone falls victim to a myriad of invasive thoughts: "They make impulsive judgments, angrily rushing to bring closure.

"He is robbed of his flexibility, his sense of humour, and his ability to deal with the unknown. He forgets the big picture and the goals and values for which he stands. He loses his creativity and his ability to change plans."

An organised mind, on the other hand, falls into a state of flow. Flow is a blissful state of balance, where you are fully immersed in a task, completely free from distracting thoughts.

Flow states enable you to enjoy your work and perform at the peak of your potential. Research shows people working in a state of flow are five times more productive than they'd otherwise be.

Here are five steps that I use to organise and declutter my mind, find flow, and keep myself on track for a productive day.

## 1 Find the right amount of challenge in what you do

When you're trying to get work done, it's easy to lose focus and succumb to intrusive thoughts when the task at hand is too challenging or too easy.

We thrive on a healthy challenge – something that stimulates us without being so difficult that it produces anxiety, or so simple that it induces boredom. When you consciously and carefully choose a task, you greatly increase your chances of achieving flow.

## 2 Take control of your emotions

While it's impossible to control how things make you feel, you have complete control over how you react to your emotions. First, you need to be honest with yourself about what you are feeling and why you are feeling it. From there, it's much easier to channel the emotion into producing the behaviour that you want.

The key is to identify and label your emotions as you experience them. Associating words with what you are feeling makes the emotion tangible and less mysterious.

This helps you to relax, figure out what's behind your emotions, and move forward. If you try to stifle your emotions and tackle your work without addressing them, they will slowly eat away at you and impair your focus.

## 3 Sustain your focus

We all know that frustrating feeling of sitting down to tackle something important, only to quickly lose focus when we expected to dive right into the task.

It takes time for your mind to become fully immersed in an activity. Studies have shown that it takes five to 20 minutes before people start to focus.

If you can force yourself to persist in the activity in spite of any distractions for 20 minutes, the chances are much higher that you will be able to sustain your focus and find a state of flow.



The best way to do this is to put away or turn off all of your typical distractions (phones, email, social media), then keep an eye on the clock until you've done nothing but your task for a good 20 minutes, even if you aren't getting much done.

Chances are that things will really start cooking for you once you hit the 20-minute mark.

## 4 Take breaks

Our brains and bodies simply aren't wired for prolonged periods of work. While it might seem as though sitting at your desk for eight hours straight is the best way to get all of your work done, this can work against you.

Research has shown that the most productive work cycle tends to be 52 minutes of uninterrupted work, followed by 17-minute breaks.

While it probably isn't realistic to structure your schedule this rigidly, for most people, the battle is won by just remembering to take breaks. Just be certain to pepper several short breaks throughout your day.

## 5 Shift sets

Once you've taken a break, you must shift your focus back to your task. No matter how 'in the zone' you were before taking a break, you'll sometimes find that you're back to square one when it comes to focus.

To do a proper set shift, you have to reorganise your thoughts by following steps one through four above, especially if you're having trouble diving back into the task. You'll find that getting back into flow quickly after a break is very doable, but it must be done purposefully.

### In summary

Organising your mind to experience flow isn't particularly difficult, but it does require attention and monitoring. Lean on these five steps anytime you need to get more done.

■ This article was previously published in print.



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# It's a Crisis!

## The good, the bad, and the ugly in corporate communications

By **DR EUGENE YJ TEE**  
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*"Men (and women) are like tea. Their real strength is not drawn out until they get into hot water."*

**N**O fewer than five important figures have been attributed to this quote – the most well-known and recent being former United States (US) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The same is often said of organisations and their leaders. When an organisation faces a crisis, we see what the establishment and its leaders are really made of.

Crises are situations in which organisations experience a severe shortage of resources, an unforeseen challenge that threatens their financial and reputational standing. An organisation's – and its leader's – strengths, character and values, are laid bare under such circumstances.

Crises demand that organisations and their leaders respond promptly and convey a clear sense of direction and purpose that address the trials at hand. Communications to both consumers and stakeholders during this time are make-or-break moments for the organisation.

The ambiguity, uncertainty, and heightened emotions that surround a crisis can rapidly escalate to damaging speculations and accusations. In some cases, these lead to conspiracies, rousing negative perceptions, and long-lasting financial and reputational consequences.

Numerous companies have faced crises and emerged stronger from them. One classic example is Johnson & Johnson's response to the Tylenol murders in Chicago in 1982. Tampered bottles of Tylenol-brand paracetamol were found to be laced with cyanide, which had claimed the lives of seven people.

The pharmaceutical giant acted decisively, making warning announcements to hospitals and distributors and removing over-the-counter bottles of Tylenol from drug stores across the country. The company cooperated with law enforcement agencies and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in tracing the perpetrator of this crime – acts that earned much praise from the US government.

Contrast Johnson & Johnson's crisis communication strategy and response with what was shown by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA).

In 2015, football's most powerful governing authority was investigated on allegations that nine of its officials were involved in a massive corruption case. The officials were suspected of colluding with businessmen and benefitting from bribes and kickbacks from the multimillion-dollar global sport.

FIFA did not deny that there was corruption in the game – but it did stop short of implicating their officials for their involvement in this wide-scale fraud. They then removed the word 'corruption' from its latest code of conduct manual – with the new code stating, "bribery, misappropriation of fund or manipulation of football matches or competitions may no longer be prosecuted after a lapse of 10 years".

Put more simply: "If you fix a football match and we can't find enough evidence to charge you within 10 years, you're free to go." FIFA defended the revised code by claiming that 10 years would be enough for investigations into match-fixing to be complete and charges to be laid.



In May 2019, one year after this creative rephrasing, FIFA restored the word 'corruption' to its code of conduct – but only in response to scathing criticism and pressure from whistle-blowers and other influential authorities.

### The good

These cases provide excellent examples and descriptions of what organisations should and – more importantly – should not do in the face of crises. Of importance is how the crisis is conveyed and managed in the eyes of consumers and the organisation's stakeholders and employees.

Take two recent short-term crises resulting from a less-than-optimal choice of advertisement (ad) as examples. In 2017, Pepsi's 'Live for Now' ad starring Kendall Jenner provoked controversy by inadvertently undermining the Black Lives Matter movement in the US.

The two-and-a-half-minute short film featured Jenner joining a public rally calling for peace, love and acceptance across people from various ethnicities, races and sexual orientations.

Jenner offers a can of Pepsi to a police officer, who accepts and takes a sip from the can. The crowd bursts into fervent celebration.

"If only daddy would have known about the power of Pepsi," came the fittingly sarcastic response from Bernice King, daughter of civil rights activist Martin Luther King. Agreeing with King's quip, critics argued that the ad made light of the plight of African Americans, implying that racism and police brutality can be solved by a fizzy drink.

The ad was pulled 24 hours later, with both Pepsi and Jenner apologising and stating that the video "missed the mark" of what it had originally intended.

Another similar advertising misstep was committed by Dove in 2018. In this ad, a dark-skinned woman removes her blouse, 'transforming' herself into a Caucasian woman. Critics were quick to point out the inappropriateness of the ad; many saw it as blatantly racist and insensitive, insinuating the superiority of fair over dark skin.

In both cases, however, the companies responded promptly. Both ads were removed from their official webpages and social media channels, and an apology was issued by senior representatives of both companies.

While not everyone found the crisis communication and apologies to be sincere or sufficient, the companies responded within hours of the public backlash – with action and apology. In crisis situations, the organisation needs to be prompt, not rash; responsive, not reactive.

Organisations also need to convey their intention to consumers and their employees as quickly as possible. This was what Pepsi and Dove did right. Neither company responded by defending or denying – or further justifying their ads.

What the Pepsi and Dove commercials also suggest is that companies need to carefully consider the necessity, relevance, and appropriateness of portraying contemporary race, ethnicity, and gender-related issues alongside promoting their products or services.

Any corporate communication or messages need to be especially sensitive to the norms of the current times and be inclusive to today's increasingly diverse consumer and employee base.

Internally-circulated crisis communication messages need to inform and update employees of leaders' and the organisation's actions – conveying an apology and setting a course of action for the critical time that follows.

**Crises demand that organisations and their leaders respond promptly and convey a clear sense of direction and purpose that address the trials at hand.**





As far as we can tell, there appear to have been no long-term repercussions – financial or otherwise – on either Pepsi or Dove.

The take-away here? Sensitivity, empathy, and responsiveness to both consumers and employees are essential when communicating during crises.

#### The bad

On Apr 9, 2017, United Airlines Flight 3411 awaited departure from Chicago O'Hare International Airport. The flight was overbooked, so an announcement was made requesting four passengers to disembark the flight to make way for four airline staff.

Such procedures were standard practice – necessary to accommodate airline staffing and roster requirements (a practice called deadheading). Three passengers, randomly called, gave up their seats. One passenger, 69-year old doctor David Dao Duy Ahn, refused.

The airline's response to his refusal was nothing short of brutality. United called in security officers, who aggressively manhandled Dao, dragging him kicking and screaming off the flight.

Chief executive officer (CEO) Oscar Munoz defended the airline's actions, accusing Dao of being "disruptive and belligerent", issuing what many perceived as a half-hearted apology for the airline's aggressive actions. Munoz further defended the security officers' actions, saying that he backed them "empathically".

He then claimed that such an act was simply to "re-accommodate" passengers – a term that was sharply criticised by those following the story. One journalist said the euphemism was as bad as "alternative facts"

– insincere, inaccurate, and a poor attempt at covering up United's excessive use of force on one of its passengers.

Public relations (PR) experts called United's response a "fumbling, clumsy one". Stakeholder backlash to the airline's crisis and its response was swift and merciless – investors devalued the airline's market value to a tune of close to USD1bil following the incident.

There was one major problem with United's response. Dao was in no way disruptive or belligerent. The entire incident was filmed by Flight 3411 passengers on their phones. The videos defended the doctor, and the passengers themselves attested to his good behaviour.

They also univocally agreed that Dao was undeserving of the concussions, broken teeth and nose that the security officers left him with. Bowing to public pressure and feeling the financial and reputational sting of a poorly handled crisis, Munoz retracted his earlier statements.

A more conciliatory tone followed two days after the incident, with the CEO apologetically stating, "...no one should ever be treated this way...we will take full responsibility and we will work to make it right." United's CEO also claimed that "...it is never too late to do the right thing."

Except that in crisis situations, it can often be too late; organisations do not get a second chance at making that important first impression. The leader may express empathy towards staff, but insufficiently towards consumers, as was the case with United.

How an organisation responds first to a crisis signals what its core values are and where its focus is on. And in United's case, the empathy that was shown to Dao 48 hours later was much too late.

The airline could have responded in a manner that exemplified its claimed values: "We respect every voice...make decisions with facts and empathy and celebrate our journey together." It could have embodied, through its actions, its slogan: Fly the friendly skies.

Instead, it left the incident reeling from a financial repercussion and reputational damage that would reside in the minds of both passengers and investors in the foreseeable future.

Both internal and external parties need to be carefully considered – and the crisis communication message balanced with an understanding of how the organisation's first response shapes these parties' perceptions. When communicating in crises, companies do not get a second chance at a first impression.

**Any corporate communication or messages need to be especially sensitive to the norms of the current times and be inclusive to today's increasingly diverse consumer and employee base.**

#### The ugly...(and a bit more good)

There is no shortage of ugly – terribly handled crisis situations. One, however, that comes to mind is the Volkswagen (VW) Emissions Scandal that was traced back to 2008. Also known as 'Dieselgate' or 'Emissionsgate', the scandal involved VW diesel vehicles being equipped with a 'defeat device' – a piece of hardware or software that tampers with the emissions controls when subjected to emissions tests.

It's a pretty nifty little tweak to make if your goal is to pass emissions tests and certify your vehicles as environmentally friendly, which was what VW intended to do.

In order to meet the stringent emissions standards set by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), engineers at VW equipped vehicles with software that limited the emission of NOx (nitrogen oxide) – a known cause of lung cancer.

Under actual driving conditions, however, the vehicles emitted more than 40 times the amount of NOx. By some scientific projections, the excess pollution caused by these unknowingly approved, heavy-pollutant diesel vehicles would lead to 59 premature deaths and aggravate respiratory problems for many more.

Investigations into this unethical, deceptive practice were only made known in 2015 – eight years after these defeat devices were installed into the VW diesel vehicles. And at least initially, the crisis was handled terribly.

Then-CEO Martin Winterkorn resigned in Sep 2015 when allegations surfaced and investigations commenced. Winterkorn denied any knowledge of the emissions scandal, stating in a video interview that he was "endlessly sorry" for the crisis befalling the company.

Angry customers were 'compensated' with USD1000 prepaid credit in the form of a Visa and dealership card – a response criticised by US Democratic senators as being "insultingly inadequate".

The company posted a loss of €1.7bil in the third quarter of 2015 in dealing with this crisis, and the reputational repercussions from this fallout also spilt over into a loss of trust in the automobile.

Adding insult to injury, investigations then later revealed that disgraced former CEO Winterkorn had known about the cheating as early as May 2014. Instantly, allegations that Winterkorn had known and allowed for the cheating scandal to continue further tarnished VW's image and standing.

Investigations into this crisis and scandal continue at the time of writing, and Winterkorn could face up to 10 years in prison and millions in fines for his corporate criminal role in denying and covering up the scandal.

PR experts criticised VW's handling of the situation – with one calling the web of deceit, lies, "half-truths", and downright denial one of the worst PR disasters since the 2001 Enron crisis.

And yet, there is still something to be learnt from this scandal, and VW's subsequent response.

In the years following this crisis, VW worked almost single-mindedly towards regaining both their employees' and customers' trust. The company took responsibility for its role in the cheating scandal. They reached out to employees to seek their feedback, providing them with the opportunity to vent their thoughts and emotions from this fallout. They kept employees in the loop on any updates, not via internal email, but through face-to-face communication.

Recently, the automobile company even made an ad acknowledging the emissions scandal with the tagline, "In the darkness, we found the light" – presented fittingly, to the tune of Simon and Garfunkel's *Sound of Silence*.

The company owned up to the scandal, paid its dues (a large chunk of them being legal ones), and, while it took some time, VW now sees continued growth in emerging markets such as China.

The VW scandal tells us that PR responses and crisis communications strategies are crucial in helping save and even improve the company's long-term standing.

This case also shows that how companies respond to crises and how they integrate corporate communication into their long-term strategy can determine if, and when they recover from a major setback.



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# The Science of Motivation

Are you still being driven to accomplish something?

By **LIM LAY HSUAN**  
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**H**UMAN beings have a natural tendency to thrive and flourish, and make meaningful connections with others. Therefore, we don't need to be motivated because we already are. The more relevant question to ask ourselves is *why* we are motivated, not if.

We have this preconceived idea that leaders should be held accountable to motivate people. What leaders should be doing is help their people find meaning, contribute to a social cause, and experience healthy interpersonal relationships at work.

## Junk food vs health food

In *Why Motivating People Doesn't Work...and What Does* by Susan Fowler, the author presented the spectrum of motivation model, where we look at six motivational outlooks (see Table 1).

Suboptimal motivational outlook	Optimal motivational outlook
<b>Disinterested:</b> One simply can't find any value in a task.	<b>Aligned:</b> One is able to link to a significant value.
<b>External:</b> One takes advantage of a promise for more money or an enhanced status in the eyes of others.	<b>Integrated:</b> One is able to link to a life or work purpose.
<b>Imposed:</b> One participates to avoid feelings of guilt, shame and fear.	<b>Inherent:</b> One simply enjoys doing something naturally.

**Table 1:** Six motivational outlooks

The suboptimal are considered motivational junk food which reflects low-quality motivation, while the optimal are motivational health food that reflects high-quality motivation.

When we entice people with tangible or intangible rewards ('junk food'), we are only buying their temporary compliance of high-performance. Over time, they are still unlikely to experience positive energy, vitality and a sense of well-being.

We should instead be focused on feeding 'health food' to sustain performance and gain long-term results. This is where one's sense of developed values and purpose at work kicks in.

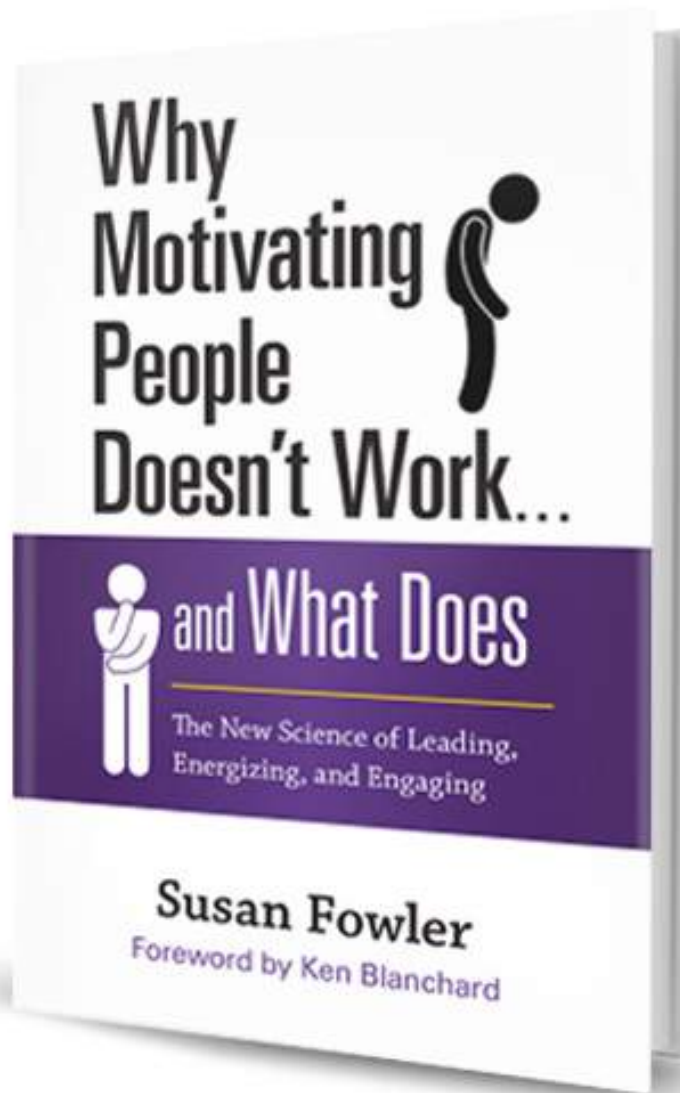
## Human need for A-R-C

To understand the science behind human motivation, we need to understand people's psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence (A-R-C).

Autonomy is our need to know that we have choices and are in some control about the work we do. In other words, we know that we do have influence in the workplace. This doesn't give managers the excuse to be hands-off in any work responsibilities.

Relatedness is our need to be connected to others authentically and know that we are contributing toward something greater than ourselves. So, a manager who puts pressure on his people to hit a certain sales target without regard of how it makes people feel will be seen as self-serving.

Competence is our need to feel effective at meeting our daily challenges whereby we feel a sense of growth. There is a high chance that people might be



affected negatively if they don't feel competent in what they do at work.

Say, as a writer for a career guide, I get to choose my own story angles, while connecting with others and being competent in what I do (i.e. my A-R-C fulfilled). As such, I will experience an aligned and integrated motivational outlook in my work because there is a value and purpose in me writing people's stories.

In this regard, I don't need to be motivationally driven to look out for stories, as I will naturally do it on my own accord.

## Techniques to self-regulation: M-V-P

In experiencing optimal motivation, we need a self-regulation mechanism to manage our workplace experiences. The vital techniques to self-regulation are mindfulness, values and purpose (M-V-P).

Mindfulness is being attuned to what is happening in the present moment without an automatic reaction. When we are not mindful, we often react with uncontrolled emotions like anger and frustration, while diminishing our A-R-C needs.

Our lack of mindfulness may result in one of the three suboptimal motivational outlooks – disinterested, external and imposed.

Values are enduring beliefs one has chosen to accept as a compass for how they work and live their lives.

We are familiar with organisational values, purpose and mission statements. At the individual level, do we take time to develop, clarify and operationalise our work-related values and purpose?

As leaders, you must have honest conversations with your employees to find alignment between their perceptions of their role-related values and purpose,

before coming to conclusions that meet both your people's needs and those of the organisation.

## Shift of workplace beliefs

The following are some workplace beliefs that have long influenced processes, actions, and undesirable leadership behaviours and eroded workplace motivation:

### ● "It's not personal, it is just business."

Employees probably spend more waking hours interacting with their peers and bosses in the workplace than anywhere else. So it must be an irony to think that a leader's actions are not personal. Whether you admit it or not, what you say and do as a leader feels personal to the people you lead!

Embrace the idea that all emotions are acceptable but not all behaviour is. Consider practising self-regulation by listening to your heart and acknowledging the role that feelings play in your work. If it is business, it is personal.

### ● "The purpose of business is to make money."

If you believe that making a profit is the purpose of business, notice how you are likely to focus on dashboard numbers instead of focusing on the people responsible for providing service to your clients.

What if the purpose of business is to serve? The more developed your values and purpose are, the more they will influence how you live and make decisions daily. The nature of human motivation is not in making money, but in making meaning.

### ● "If you cannot measure it, it doesn't matter."

Most parents, when asked their hopes for their children, will hope for them to experience meaningful relationships, contribute to society, fulfil a noble purpose and discover what makes them happy. These are things that cannot be easily measured.

As with traditional and generational recipes, many are prepared with *agak-agak* (estimation) measurements. These dishes are mostly prepared with love, not for perfection, and taste just as good. So, start reframing your belief: If you cannot measure it, it is probably really, really important.

## Conclusion

Motivation is a skill. It is one of the most vital aspects of leadership and one of the most misunderstood ones too. Since motivating people doesn't work, it is time to stop beating your people with carrots and sticks, and embrace more effective leadership strategies.

Remember that what you say, how you say it, and why you say it, makes a difference in the lives of the people you lead.



Lay Hsuan was part of the content curation team for Leaderonomics.com, playing the role of a content gatekeeper as well as ensuring the integrity of stories that came in. She was an occasional writer for the team and was previously the caretaker for Leaderonomics social media channels. She is still happiest when you leave comments on the website, or subscribe to Leader's Digest, or share Leaderonomics content on social media. Get in touch with her at [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).

**MOTIVATION** Understanding what motivates me to do well and feeding this motivation will enhance my growth. This is part of Leaderonomics' **Science of Building Leaders**, a framework which indicates important elements that need to be developed at each stage of one's life, in order to empower the individual to become an effective leader. Head to [bit.ly/SOBLPt1](http://bit.ly/SOBLPt1) to find out more.

Since motivating people doesn't work, it is time to stop beating your people with carrots and sticks, and embrace more effective leadership strategies.



# The Leaderonomics Show



'IT IS A FATAL FLAW, COMMUNICATION IS A HARD SKILL'. - ETHAN F. BECKER



The full interview is available in two parts at [bit.ly/BeckerTLSpt1](https://bit.ly/BeckerTLSpt1) and [bit.ly/BeckerTLSpt2](https://bit.ly/BeckerTLSpt2). For more videos like these, head to [bit.ly/TheLDRShow](https://bit.ly/TheLDRShow).

By **SANDY CLARKE**  
[editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com)

**E**THAN F. Becker believes the number one priority for any business that hopes to thrive in an increasingly competitive market is to create a 'culture of communication' where individuals and groups are able to maximise their connection with each other.

Becker is the current president of and senior speech coach at The Speech Improvement Company – the oldest speech communication, coaching and training firm in the United States (US).

Founded by his parents, Dennis and Paula Becker in 1964, the family-run business is driven by a passion to lead others on their journey to becoming effective communicators, regardless of their background or profession.

## Communicate to sell ideas

Speaking to Leaderonomics chief executive officer Roshan Thiran on *The Leaderonomics Show*, Becker explains that, while communication is often a skill many see as being most useful for sales professionals, the ability to communicate well is a skill that should be central to everyone's skill set.

Whether we realise it or not, we all communicate important messages every day that help to shape our reputation and mould our personal brand. When we think about what selling means, we usually think of specific products and services that are exchanged between two or more parties.

However, many of our interactions include an element of selling: whether we're trying to reason with someone, inform them, persuade them of an idea, or present ourselves in front of a group or an audience, we are – more often than we think – selling a particular message, with the hope that people will buy into that message.

## Top priority

Becker makes an excellent point that businesses often see communication as a soft skill to be considered in the aftermath of all else. As he points out, communication is central to everything that we do – done well, communication helps us to establish rapport and build long-lasting relationships.

Most of us know the confidence we feel in a person who can communicate well, while feeling somewhat unnerved by a poor communicator. Effective

# Communication: An Essential Skill Set

## Neglecting it can be costly for yourself and your organisation

communication skills can often be the difference between success and failure.

Commenting on former US President, Barack Obama's communication style, Becker believes the effectiveness of Obama's communication is due to the fact that his delivery comes across as sincere, and his style is able to align with the substance of the message he's trying to get across.

It's often not enough to be an articulate speaker. To be an effective communicator, one needs the ability to engage their audience as well as be able to deliver substance while maintaining that engagement.

## Asian vs American speakers

When asked to make a distinction between Asian and American leaders in terms of their communication styles, Becker believes that while Asian leaders have profound messages to deliver, their style of delivery rarely changes.

Conversely, American leaders are able to change the dynamics of their presentation to get their message across more effectively. One reason for this is that – for the most part – Americans tend to learn English only, and can therefore dive deeper into creative uses of the language.

On the other hand, Asian leaders can often speak two or more languages, and so they perhaps lack the opportunity of time to get into the nuts and bolts of the English language.

## A neglected hard skill

The fact that communication skills is still seen as a peripheral tool is problematic for businesses and educators alike. With business leaders in Asia and in Europe insisting that people often lack sufficient communication skills (despite being otherwise highly-

skilled), it can be extremely costly across the board if investment in driving up the levels of communication skills continues to be neglected.

George Bernard Shaw once wrote that: "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

With that in mind, it drives home the importance of the ability to communicate effectively with others, to recognise that it's a nuanced skill that goes far beyond talking to someone – a misconception many people hold when it comes to interacting and engaging with others.

## Listen, listen, listen

Becker says that often when we listen, we listen from our own perspective, i.e. we look for "How does what you say affect me?"

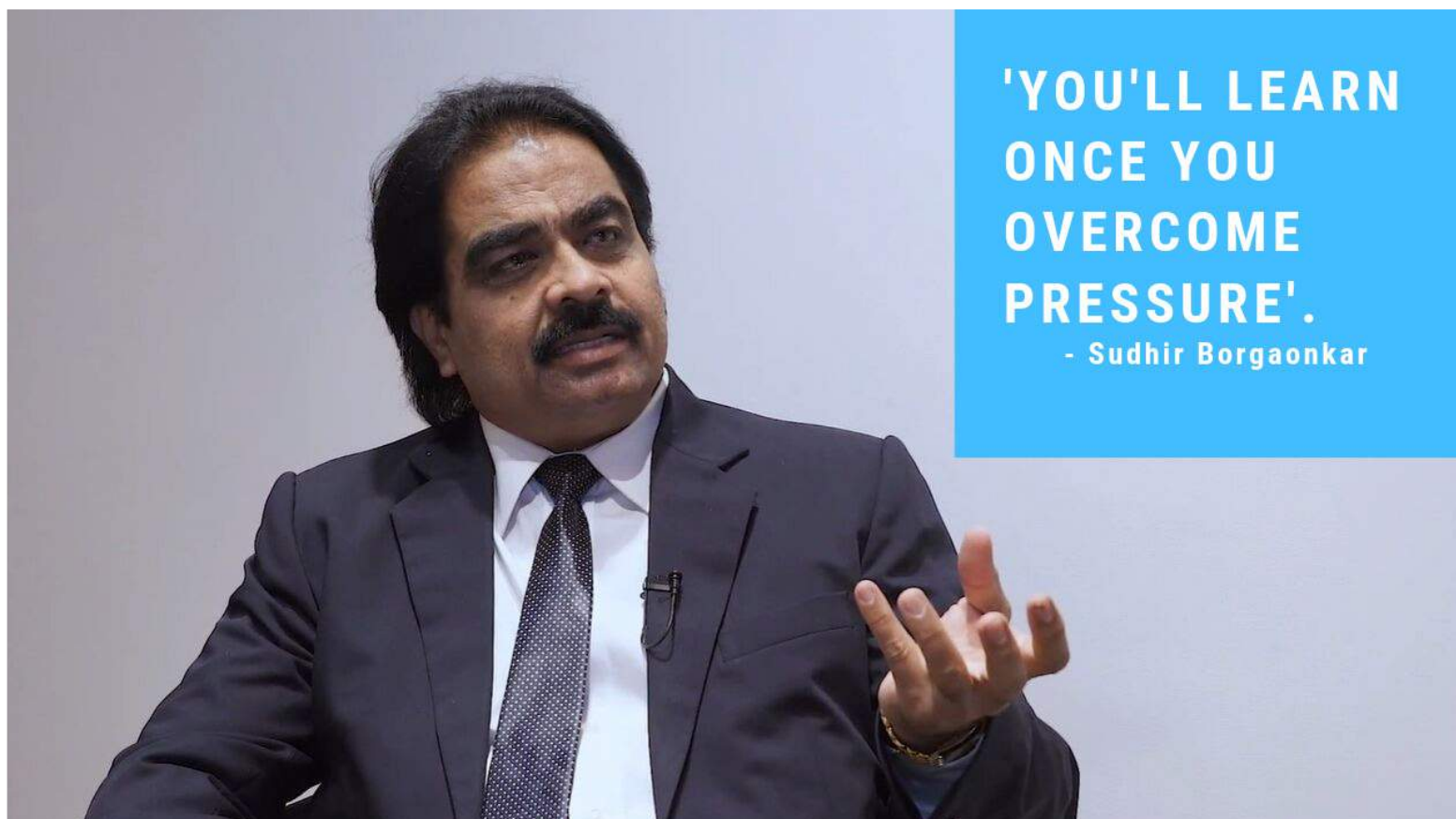
"When you're able to listen from the other person's perspective – which is a higher level – it's much easier for you to gain an understanding of what the person is saying and therefore, you can craft a stronger response.

"This will make you a stronger communicator, which will affect you at a job interview, a performance review session, and generally across the board," concludes Becker.



Sandy is a former managing editor at Leaderonomics, and previously enjoyed 10 years as a journalist and broadcaster in the UK. He has been fortunate to gain valuable insights into what makes us tick, which has deepened his interests in leadership, emotions, mindfulness, and human behaviour. Get in touch with him by emailing [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).





The full interview is available at [bit.ly/SudhirCEOChats](https://bit.ly/SudhirCEOChats).  
For more videos like this, head to [bit.ly/TheLDRShow](https://bit.ly/TheLDRShow).

By **SANDY CLARKE**  
[editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com)

**A**CCORDING to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, a staggering 3.5 million Americans quit their jobs...every month! What lies behind this growing trend of job-hopping?

It's a question that Leaderonomics chief executive officer (CEO) Roshan Thiran has been exploring of late. While in India to oversee the growth of the Leaderonomics expansion there, he caught up with BJR Group Hyderabad CEO, Sudhir Borgaonkar, to get his insights into why more people than ever before are looking to change their jobs.

Sudhir has an impressive track record in business development, spanning 30 years across both Africa and India. Appearing on *CEO Chats India*, he shared some of his views on the job market trends he's seen over the past three decades.

According to Sudhir, one of the challenges facing young people today is developing the ability to deal effectively with pressures that come with the demands across industries.

He said, "What I see with this new generation is they are not ready to take up the pressure. The moment they get pressured, they leave the company. That should not be the case. You move and learn when you work under pressure – that's how I came up in work."

To some, Sudhir's evaluation might sound harsh, but studies have suggested that people in the 18-35 age group today are, generally-speaking, less capable of managing commitment, obligation, and responsibility.

Some research points to overprotective parenting styles, which seeks to protect children from challenges that help to build qualities such as resilience and determination.

Sudhir pointed to a parallel problem in leadership, where today's businesses tend to be less concerned with firing underperforming staff and more concerned with keeping people on board – even if it's at the expense of the employee's growth and the organisation.

#### Are you too impatient?

He also believes that companies who promote those with only eight to ten years' experience to the position of CEO are putting people into a role for which they're not yet ready.

He said, "When you are at the senior level and leading a team, or running a company's operations, your decision making has to be fast and accurate. That deci-

# Hang in There

## To truly make your mark, you first need to persevere through challenges

sion making will come only when you have experience behind you – handling different markets, different segments, and different people.

"Only then will you be able to judge, able to know, and make the decision faster. That is key today, especially within the Indian context – it's a key aspect for a leader."

Sudhir also pointed to the tendency of some young people to work within an industry for a short time before expecting themselves to be capable of leaving their role and taking up a more senior position elsewhere.

This kind of impatience is similar to that described by motivational speaker, Simon Sinek, who suggests that young people become frustrated when they fail to make significant progress in their career within just a short timeframe.

Perhaps tying back to the overprotective parenting where children are told they can be anything they want to be, the reality then tends to hit hard when they realise they have to pay their dues before they can get ahead.

Sudhir said, "Younger generations should understand that, if you want to become a successful leader, you should be able to suck up the pressure – you *have* to be able to handle pressure."

#### A journey of self-discovery and continuous learning

For young people to get ahead and build a more stable career, Sudhir believes they have to first figure out the direction in which they wish to go, whether it be IT, finance, law, or another industry.

One of the pitfalls Sudhir has seen many people in India fall into is entering into industries that don't align with their educational background, such as in the example of engineers working in IT.

This, says Sudhir, means that people are unable to set their personal vision properly and so they are unable to progress in a way that would benefit them the most.

Sudhir also advised that, when setting ambitions, people need to realise that the road to achieve worthwhile goals isn't easy and ask themselves whether they have the capability to reach for whatever vision they have set for themselves.

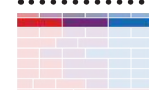
He said, "Once you come out of college, you would think 'What should I do now?' Look at your qualification. If you've studied management, such as an MBA in finance, then you choose a finance line. If you have an MBA in finance and you go into marketing, then there is a disconnect."

"There are people who have done that; they have gone through a difficult path, but they have stuck to it. Today, turnover rates in many companies are very high. It's because the moment people get pressured, they leave the job."

Sudhir insists that, in order to make our mark on our careers, we have to persevere in the challenges we are faced with, which helps to build the resilience and experience necessary to chase the kind of ambitious career goals we set for ourselves. But that, he believes, can only happen when we truly persevere and learn valuable lessons along the way.



*Sandy is a former managing editor at Leaderonomics, and previously enjoyed 10 years as a journalist and broadcaster in the UK. He has been fortunate to gain valuable insights into what makes us tick, which has deepened his interests in leadership, emotions, mindfulness, and human behaviour. Get in touch with him by emailing [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).*



**PERFORMANCE CHARACTER** What sets a person apart and earmarks them for success. These are the traits that take us the extra mile, and includes grit, self-control, optimism and curiosity. This is part of Leaderonomics' **Science of Building Leaders**, a framework which indicates important elements that need to be developed at each stage of one's life, in order to empower the individual to become an effective leader. Head to [bit.ly/SOBLPt1](https://bit.ly/SOBLPt1) to find out more.



# Breakthrough Communication

By **LAVEENIA THEERTHA PATHY**  
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**W**E'VE heard a lot about communication breakdown but is communication breakthrough possible or is it hard to accomplish? Would it matter if it's a simple or complex message?

Let's break it down!

We've all been in situations – personally or professionally – where we thought we had said what we construed in our head rather accurately to someone, but it was still misunderstood, misinterpreted, and resulted in conflict. Why is that?

Personally, I believe individuals don't run far from their own belief system and tend to use their own subjective worldview to comprehend things.

As communication usually happens between two or more people, there is room for ambiguity in how the message is decoded. This is determined by the sender's and receiver's state of mind, verbal and non-verbal cues, and even the type of day they've had.

Is there a way to communicate more effectively? I believe there is, as I've learnt the hard way.

## Breaking down communication

### Knowing your intent

The first rule of thumb is being aware about what you are intending to communicate. Are you communicating with an intent to inform, instruct or clarify? The communication style you may use to do so may be different and is dependent on your role and power dynamics in your present context.

For example, if you were a coach and you were challenging your coachee to broaden their perspective, you may require a combination of directive and non-directive communication methods to help them consider all options.

Whatever your intent may be, spend some time understanding what you want your receiver to understand and what your desired outcome is from communicating your message.

It will also be an added advantage to keep your emotions in check when doing so. Being self-aware about how you are emotionally regulating yourself during a conversation may help you in the outcome you hope to achieve.

If you happen to feel that you are feeling angry or hurt and are responding based on your emotions, step away and take a quick breather. This will help you put things into perspective, analyse things, and respond carefully without the intent to hurt.

### Understanding your audience

It is extremely important to know who your audience is once you are aware about your intent and role. Your methods of communication may vary depending on your role, the type of message you are trying to send, and to whom you are sending it to.

For example, the communication style you use when speaking to someone from senior management may vary from speaking to someone who is working with you on a project.

Someone from senior management may very easily grasp things, so providing leaders with the objective, data, facts, figures and the outcome may be sufficient.

If your role is a project lead and you are speaking to a new project member, you may spend a great deal of time explaining what the project is about, the why, where the team is at in terms of progress, and what their area of responsibility is.

Hence, doing a quick audience analysis before you communicate your message may help in ensuring effective communication for both parties.

### Ascertaining your medium of communication

It's a no-brainer that verbal communication isn't the only form of communication – people also pay close attention to non-verbal cues.

Thus, if a speaker's tone is soft but their body language indicates other subtleties, there is room for conflict or miscommunication. It is best to ensure that your



verbal and non-verbal cues match and the only way to do this is with self-awareness.

Other mediums of communication include emails, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc. This is where there is the most room to misconstrue a written message because of the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues.

Identifying the best medium to use depending on your audience and intent is important. For example, if there is conflict to address and your role is to clarify, choosing to have a face to face discussion will be more effective than email communication.

If the relevant parties are working remotely, consider leveraging video conference calls to resolve potential conflict.

## What else can we do to ensure communication effectiveness?

Identifying your intent, knowing your audience and using the right medium might help you communicate more effectively, but are there other tools and tricks to leverage on? Here are a few that has helped me over the years.

### Visual representation

Sometimes, speaking to someone isn't the only way to get a point or idea across, especially in a professional setting. If it is important to get the other party to understand something, especially complex messages, leverage visual aids that may help them with their comprehension.

I once tried to communicate something to a co-worker who just never understood what I was trying to say no matter how many times I rephrased and repeated it.

I then took out a blank sheet of paper and started drawing things out, connecting the dots and asking her questions. It did not only help her quickly grasp what I was trying to say but she was able to contribute new ideas.

Don't dismiss the power of PowerPoint, SmartArt Graphics and other visual tools for only making presentations and reports. They can also be used to break down complex messages and get your point across.

### Stories

People love stories. As there are so many layers of emotions embedded in stories, it's easier for people

to break something down through stories – and even connect with it. In fact, the stories tend to stick and get passed on to someone else who may benefit from it.

If you're a leader and want to tell your team to buck up, tell them that in a form of story that would motivate them and raise their spirits. Paint the picture of clearly defined aspirations and end goals. You'll definitely get a different reaction from using both methods.

### Empathy

I can't stress this one enough. Often, we prioritise our own needs. We think about what we want to get across, especially if someone misunderstood us or showed incompetence. So, we're quick to jump.

Try empathising instead. Before you say anything, very quickly check in with yourself to see how you would feel if you were on the receiving end. If it hurt you or made you feel upset, rephrase your message.

### Positive language

Deliberately try to construct sentences using positive language. Although this may take more work, it is constructive and you will most likely find your receiver responding more favourably to you. It also reduces conflict and defensiveness, and creates room for collaboration – all of which will help you with your goal.

## In conclusion

This isn't an article about increasing your confidence in speaking, but it is about communicating effectively, especially in a professional setting.

The truth is, communication is something simple yet complex because it involves other people and emotions. But with self-awareness, understanding and some self-help tools, one can become better at communicating effectively, no matter how complex the message is.



*Laveenia Theertha Pathy works on leading and developing millennials and the generation Z to be future leaders. Free time is spent writing, painting, and growing in her passions which include people, learning and growth, and making a difference one small step at a time. Connect with her by emailing [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).*



By **SABRINA KAMARUDDIN**  
editor@leaderonomics.com

**S**INCE young, you were frequently asked, “What do you want to do when you grow up?”

Well, you did grow up, and as you enter university and eventually graduate, the answer is no longer as simple as “I want to be an engineer”.

The reality for you now is quite different, and you’re drowning in career options, possibilities and uncertainties, and you still don’t know the answer to that question.

The good news is we probably already know enough about what we want, even if we’re unsure what to make of it. From there, it’s just a matter of probing and uncovering to set up a strong game-plan for life. Read on to know how to do just that.

### Why set goals?

*“Give me a stock clerk with a goal and I’ll give you a man who will make history. Give me a man with no goals and I’ll give you a stock clerk.”*  
– J.C. Penney

A while ago, in a conversation about my own long-term dreams, a friend asked me what my deadline was to achieve it. I had not really thought about it, but I told him: “Maybe in 10 years.”

He responded, “That’s too long. Do it in five.” At that point I was shocked and afraid as it was a daunting and ambitious task. Since then, however, my five-year plan has reduced to three, and I now have a detailed strategy on how to get there.

What I learnt is that most of us have thought about what we want, however vague it looks, but we dismiss it as a faraway dream and seldom prepare ourselves to achieve it.

A 10-year plan is comfortably distant, but when you boil it down to five, it becomes scary and thoughts of fight-or-flight kick in – and that is what you want.

The clearer your goals are, the more you prepare yourself to face it. Here’s why it is important to have clear goals.

- **Focus:** Knowing what you really need allows you to avoid wasting time on things that don’t fulfil you.
- **Motivation:** Clear goals pressure you into action, and makes difficult situations feel worth going through.
- **Accountability:** Knowing your goals makes it easy to tell others (and yourself) about them, which in turn helps you stick to them.

### Forming a SMART goal for yourself

*“The reason most people never reach their goals is that they don’t define them, or ever seriously consider them as believable or achievable. Winners can tell you where they are going, what they plan to do along the way, and who will be sharing the adventure with them.”* – Denis Waitley

# Starting Them **SMART**

## Setting goals the proper way



Let’s do a goal-setting exercise using SMART, which stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound (or a variation of those words).

This nifty tool, commonly attributed to George T. Doran, is worth remembering – it’s a great way to form productive and effective goals, both personal and professional (take note: it is super helpful at work too!).

You will want to start by thinking about **one** ambition (however big or distant), and then ask these questions.

### 1 Is it specific?

Powerful goals are specific. Take time to go into

details.

What does it look like? How does it feel? What are the things you will have?

Who are the people around you?

If it is so specific that you can spend 15 minutes describing your dreams, that’s even better. When it is specific, you will be able to zoom in and focus on attaining the smaller parts of the larger goal.

In thinking about a career goal, for example, think about the ideal work environment, salary range, or position that you hope to reach. Do you hope to lead a large team one day? Does this job entail travelling and meeting people often?

The more specific your goal is, the easier it is to know how to attain it, and what decisions will lead you to it.

### 2 Is it measurable?

What’s the point of setting goals when you can’t tell if you’ve achieved them? Measurable goals allow us to recognise what achievement looks and feels like, so that we can celebrate it when it comes.

Think about how you will measure whether you’ve achieved smaller goals, both qualitatively and quantitatively – is it the size of your paycheck? Do you want to execute a particular scale of project? How many people do you want to impact?

Especially in planning a career, measurable goals help tell you when you have done enough, and whether it is time to push to the next stage.

### 3 Is it attainable?

A good goal-setting exercise should be empowering, and not make you feel overwhelmed. That’s why it is important to reflect and assess whether your goals are attainable at a particular point in time, and whether you have the right set of skills and knowledge to achieve them.

It is likely that your life goal is not easily attained (which is great, because you should be ambitious), so set challenging yet realistic steps towards the larger goal.

Questions to ask: Can I achieve this now? If not, when? And what can I do in the meantime?

Some detours are worth making, yet be careful about making commitments that contradict your goals.

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Sometimes, you may feel overwhelmed by your great ambitions. It is useful to hear from successful people who have achieved something similar, and find out how they overcame smaller challenges to achieve it – I call this the ‘demystifying process’.

## 4 Is it relevant?

Simply put: “Really?” It is easy to be tempted by little wants that distract us from our target. We often want things that take up a lot of energy, but do not pay off later on.

This relates to smaller decisions – the job you apply for, the car you purchase, the new year resolutions you commit to. Having said that, relevant decisions are not always literal; there will be times when you have to make decisions that are not directly heading toward your goal.

Some detours are worth making, yet be careful about making commitments that contradict your goals.

## 5 Is it time-bound?

My mentor once told me: “The effort you put into your work depends on how much you want to achieve, and how fast you want to get there.”

Here’s something you can do: put a deadline to your plans, and then decrease the duration from there until you reach a date so close that it starts making you uncomfortable from nervousness – that is your new deadline.

A tight yet achievable deadline will motivate you to work harder and faster.

A simple goal statement should sound like this: “By 26, I want to create things that the public can see, hundreds of thousands of them, earning at least RM60,000 a year.”

### The other side of SMART goals

While the SMART criteria will ensure productivity, you and I are human beings, not business projects – which is why in the next part of the exercise, I have added a

second SMART filter: Shared, Meaningful, Ambitious, Responsive, and Timeless.

## 1 Is it shared?

Relationships are an important part of your life plan, yet often overlooked. What you want should matter to those who matter to you – family, partner, friends, and maybe even people at work.

Think about the people you want to journey together with, and also the kind of people you want to meet along the way.

## 2 Is it meaningful?

Meaningful goals reflect your personal values, and aspects of your life that matter to you. Smaller decisions lead toward your greater goals, and each of them should matter to you.

Some decisions may be relevant, but will lower your self-esteem because it does not resonate with your values.

## 3 Is it ambitious?

Do not be intimidated by fear, be empowered by it. If your long-term goal does not make you nervous or excited, maybe you are not reaching high enough.

If your goal is a number, double it. If it’s a lifestyle, double the luxury.

How can you test if your dream is ambitious enough? Try telling it to people, and see how many eyebrows you raise.

## 4 Is it responsive?

More of an attitude than a characteristic, responsiveness is key. Allow your goals to grow with you and respond to changes of situation and commitment in your life. Goals should not be rigid, but fluid. In fact, goal-setting should be a creative and liberating exercise.

## 5 Is it timeless?

As it comes from your heart, your goals should be timeless. A responsive and ever-growing goal will sustain your excitement and energy till you are much older, even when a good part of the goal had been achieved years before.

Can you imagine yourself being 50 and still proud or driven by your goals?

By now your goal may sound like this: “I dream of a comfortable life in the future, and an exciting one when I am younger. I will get a job in the creative field that allows me to travel regularly in my youth, but because I want to be there for my kids like my father has been for me, I will need to make career changes and stop travelling before I turn 30. Whatever that job is, I will have created something for the public that has positively affected the lives of one million children around Malaysia.”

### Concluding thoughts

If my own goal-setting journey has taught me one thing, it is this: your goals come to life. If you face your ambitions head-first and spend time to think about your vision, it will grow into something tangible and elaborate.

The experience will give you the strength to achieve it; you will develop a close relationship with it, and it will become something you love, protect and want to nurture to life.

■ This article was previously published in print.



Sabrina has discovered that setting goals is a creative and empowering experience. If you’re interested in having goal-setting workshops in your organisation, get in touch with the Leaderonomics team at [info@leaderonomics.com](mailto:info@leaderonomics.com). What are some of your goals? Let us know at [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).

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# Let Children Be Children

## Why focusing on academic excellence alone does not suffice

By **SANDY CLARKE**

editor@leaderonomics.com

IT'S not often my heart sinks when reading news articles about the stresses and strains placed on students by their education systems.

There are, after all, few countries with perfect set-ups so it's hardly a surprise to find that young people take the brunt of any shortcomings as they make their way through school life.

Some years ago, I read an article highlighting concerns regarding Singapore's education system; a highly-efficient, effective system though it is, the psychological effect it has on students is astounding.

One 16-year-old harrowingly described education in Singapore as being so intense that "one's dreams could be shattered in a matter of seconds if we fail". Another recalled a period of study, revealing that they slept for just three hours per day in a run-up to their exams, inducing a high fever as a result of the stress and sleep deprivation.

Before I left Scotland to come to Malaysia, I had a conversation with a veteran journalist who wished, in a lamenting tone, that "the education system in Scotland could be as effective as some Asian countries, such as South Korea". I wasn't sure how to respond.

An NPR report from 2015 described a horrific trend of teen suicides in South Korea, commenting, "Recently, two 16-year-old girls in the city of Daejeon jumped to their deaths, leaving a note saying, 'We hate school.'"

"It's just one tragedy in a country where suicide is the leading cause of death among teens, and 11- to 15-year-olds report the highest amount of stress out of 30 developed nations."

### Rethinking our education systems

Is this really the best way to motivate young people towards building a successful future for themselves? Is the relentless pursuit to ensure high-achieving children really worth pushing them to the point where, if they bring home a 'B', they feel – at best – like losers or, in the worst cases, suicidal?

Mark Twain offered the *bon mot* that he "never let schooling interfere with my education". Malcolm X advised that "just because you have colleges and universities doesn't mean you have education", and Noam Chomsky holds the view that most education systems are an "elaborate filter" that breeds conformity and discourages independent thinking.

While Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea, have climbed above the likes of Finland, Denmark and the United Kingdom in education attainment, it's sad to think that this achievement has come at a high cost of the mental and physical health of many students who struggle to cope with the pressure.

By Asian standards, the Finnish education system should be a complete flop rather than a respected model throughout the world. In Finland, children don't begin school until the age of seven and their standards aren't measured at all during the first six years.

The national curriculum contains only broad guidelines; teachers spend only four hours per day in the classroom; and reports suggest Finland spends around 30 per cent less on each student than America does on its students.

Thanks to Finland's unorthodox approach to education, it sends more students to college than any other European country, and the learning gap between the strongest and weakest students is the smallest throughout the world.

### How does Finland produce such staggering results?

Here are some reasons why the country's education system commands such a high degree of respect, and what parents – and teachers – can learn from the Scandinavians in terms of positive child development.



### 1 Allow children to be children – let them play

Finnish children begin school when they are suitably developed to do so – and their learning is done through exploration and free play, with over an hour's worth of recess per day, rather than being cooped up in the classroom. As the renowned developmental psychologist Jean Piaget observed, "Play is the answer to how anything new comes about."

### 2 Give children sufficient time to rest

Study after study has shown that having sufficient rest is key for growth and learning. Finnish students normally have three or four 75-minute classes in a day, with several breaks in between. The school day ends between 2pm and 2.45pm.

Conversely, young people who are forced into being 'switched-on' for much of the day are much less likely to absorb useful information. Even those who manage to be successful in such harsh conditions are likely to suffer from high levels of stress and other mental issues.

### 3 Stop equating learning with grades

Why is it children aren't graded during potty training (perish the thought) and yet, as soon as they reach school, it becomes all about the grades?

Somewhere in between, we forget that learning is about exploration, discovery, pleasure and passion rather than achieving set standards for the purpose of future admission into some prestigious institution.

Imagine what students could achieve – imagine their love for creation and innovation – if only they were free from the ever-looming cloud of measurement and examination.

### 4 Kill the homework, foster participation

Finnish children take home the least amount of homework in the world – and they generally don't have tutors outside class, either.

There's no pressure to do any more than the work required of them in school and, as a result, Finnish students are more engaged in the time they spend learning, which means there's no need for the hundreds of hours of additional tuition that many students in Asia receive.



### 5 Have less structure and build more trust

In the business world, many organisations have implemented progressive policies based on trust – such as flexible working arrangements – realising that quality of output is less about the amount of time given, and more about the quality invested in the time spent on projects and tasks.

The Finnish education system is also built on mutual trust between parents, teachers, students, and the system itself. With a focus on results in terms of value rather than attainment, an ecosystem of support, cohesion, and progress trumps those based on rigid structure, stringent rules, and unnecessary burden.



*Sandy is a former managing editor at Leaderonomics, and previously enjoyed 10 years as a journalist and broadcaster in the UK. He has been fortunate to gain valuable insights into what makes us tick, which has deepened his interests in leadership, emotions, mindfulness, and human behaviour. Get in touch with him by emailing [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).*



By ROSHAN THIRAN

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**R**ECENTLY, I was asked an interesting question during one of the leadership sessions I was conducting with a client: “How can we as leaders set a good example for our children if we spend a lot of time away from them?”

Admittedly, the question caught me a little off-guard. Usually, questions about leadership centre on things like employee engagement, company culture, emotional intelligence, and so on. It was a welcome change of pace to be thrown a curveball.

As I pondered the question, I thought about how the founding ambition that led to the creation of Leaderonomics was – ultimately – geared towards creating a better world for our children.

After all, they hold the keys to our collective future, and so investing as much as we can into developing young people seems to me the greatest legacy we can leave behind. With luck, that investment will be paid forward as each new generation comes along.

Over the years, I’ve talked to many fellow parents in leadership roles that demand much of their time. Different people deal with the struggle in ways that make the most sense to them. Personally, I shy away from ‘advising’ people on how to live their personal lives – after all, what works for one person might not work for the next. Who am I to judge?

#### Show, don’t tell

In my own case, I see parenting as a multi-faceted role that, in a nutshell, is about showing our children how to live life well. As most parents will know, we talk so much to our children about rules – why they should do this, why they should stop that – but we all know that talking about a good example is on the micro-level.

On the macro-level is something more obvious: how we are behaving as parents. What do we do with our lives that our children can emulate and benefit from in their own growth?

So many of us feel that pang of guilt when we think we should be spending more time with our loved ones, and when I was asked the question on leadership and parenting, I could see that pang radiating, as if to say, “I try my best, but it never feels like it’s good enough.”

In my view – and this is just my opinion – it is important to spend quality time with our families, with our growing children. That said, I feel like it’s more important that we focus not on how much time we spend with our children, but on the quality of the example we show.

Our children will grow up to know that what they do in the world matters, and therefore to have a sense of

# Setting an Example for Our Children

## Here’s what you can do as a leader

duty and purpose in life is vital. By spending time with our children, we show them that family is important, but it’s through our work that we show them the power of change that arises through our commitment to serving others.

I recall speaking to a friend of mine some years ago, whom I recently met up with in Cambodia. He had retired early from a lucrative career and decided to embark on building a social initiative based in Cambodia that would demand more of his time, not less, and provide less income rather than more.

Initially, I thought he wanted to leave his high-pressure job to spend more time with his own family. When I asked him why he took up a new role that paid far less, demanded more of his time, and required him to relocate to a less developed country, he said this:

“My kids are at an age where they are starting to understand what I do, and they seem proud of that. I go to work, make money, and provide for my family. But I’ve always had a passion for doing some real good in the world beyond my front door, to make a real difference in the lives of others.”

“I talked about it often enough over the years, but I don’t want my kids to grow up just talking about how to change the world for the better – I want them to get out there and do it.”

#### What message are you sending to your children?

When I pressed him on this concern I had about time spent with children, he replied, “It’s a worry we all have as parents. Am I spending enough time with them? I make sure to spend as much time as I can with my family and let them know that they are the most important people in the world to me.”

“They’ll also hopefully understand one day, through watching me, that there’s time for family and there’s time for putting to good use the knowledge, skills and talents we’ve been gifted as a way of giving something back.”

This struck me, because many people I’ve spoken to over the years have viewed their work as an obstacle to the ‘more important’ things in life, especially time

spent with family. But I realised then that what we do actually serves as a powerful example to our children.

It shows them how we choose to spend the rest of our time, what our values are, and how we align them with our skills and knowledge to contribute to our community and wider society.

At Leaderonomics, we talk about the value of building communities of love – but the values we talk about aren’t left for everyone else to live... We aim to show the power of such values by espousing them ourselves.

I’m convinced that the commitment, care, love and support we show to the young people who come to our leadership camps and through the work we do each week in more than 100 schools across Malaysia, inspire them just as much as the fun they have, the friendships they build, and the lifelong lessons they learn.

The American novelist James Baldwin once said, “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

To set a good example for our children is to be exactly that – a good example. How we behave, treat others, conduct ourselves under pressure, handle criticism, and show care, love and kindness...all of this and more is what children pay attention to, not the clock on the wall.

As leaders, perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves is not “Am I spending enough time with my kids?” but rather, “Am I setting the right example for my kids that they see the kind of life they’d want to live when they’re older?”

I am not saying we do not need to spend more time with our families. We do need time to create strong, familial bonds and to be a strong family unit, but underlying it is how we live our lives. Are we ourselves giving, sharing, caring, and role-modelling the life we hope our children live?

To finish on a personal note to all the fellow parents reading this, I’d say the best example we can begin to set for our children is one of self-compassion, acceptance of our imperfections, and showing that it’s okay to make mistakes – in the end what truly counts is that we try our best with our hearts in the right place.



Roshan is the founder and chief executive officer of Leaderonomics. He believes that everyone can be a leader and make a dent in the universe, in their own special ways. Connect with Roshan on Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter for more insights into business, personal development and leadership.

By spending time with our children, we show them that family is important, but it’s through our work that we show them the power of change that arises through our commitment to serving others.



# What's Your Motive for Listening?

By **CHONG SOOK LENG**  
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The manager asks, "Do you think these documents will make it to the branch office on Friday if they are in this evening's courier?" To which the associate replied, "Yes, that would work." So, the manager says, "Excellent!" and walks off, assuming both parties agreed that the documents will be completed and despatched that same evening.

On the other hand, the associate thought the manager was just enquiring on the lead time for despatch, but not that the documents had to be in that evening's courier!

When the documents are not received on time, who shall take the rap – miscommunication?



1. Listening to confirm – where trust is at its lowest
2. Listening to consider – where trust is conditional
3. Listening to connect and co-create – where the trust level is at its highest

## Listening to confirm

At this level, people are exchanging information, facts and updates. The information given and requested by an individual provides clarity and alignment. There is validation of what is being said and an assessment of the impact of the information being delivered.

There is not a lot of trust here and conversations at this level are not intended to create any long-term, lasting relationships. Conversation is transactional; it is a 'ask and tell' situation and the listening intent is to *confirm* – it is done to further understand and inform me of what I already know.

We should progress from this exchange of information or pleasantries to the next stage.

## Listening to consider

At this level, messages are crafted with the purpose of advocating and defending. Conversation is positional as both people are on different sides and there is uncertainty in trusting others for fear of being taken advantage of.

There are attempts to be a good listener and yet still be cautious of the other side. There are exchanges in the balance of power throughout the conversation, while opportunities to achieve win-win solutions are being worked on. The individual may shift into a more defensive mode when criticised.

Too often, we ask questions to guide people to where we want them to go. This is known as asking leading questions, and it often activates distrust as it causes the recipient to be on their guard. Listening is done with the intent to *accept or reject* the opinion of others as the trust level is conditional.

Spending too long at this stage could lead to an impasse, or at its worst, turn into a conflict situation.

## Listening to connect and co-create

Conversations that are non-judgmental and open to exploring uncharted territories are likelier to encourage more engaging interactions. People tend to get more inspired to discover new ideas, take risks and learn.

While depressing conversations will make people switch to defensive mode and shut down, uplifting conversations foster high levels of trust and collaboration between people who are different from each other, allowing them to establish relationships.

Conversations operating at this level are transformational. Listening is with the intent to *connect and co-create* for mutual success.

## Having transformational conversations

The third level of listening, listening to connect and co-create, is essential in building high levels of trust between two people, which is the basis for transformational conversations that is empowering for both parties involved.

In change management efforts in organisations, unless there is buy-in, participation and commitment from the employees, the change effort is not likely to be successful. We must be open and honest with those whom we lead and focus our attention on the individual, in order to have authentic conversations that will increase engagement levels.

In winning customer loyalty, we have to reach out to customers with an open mind and be willing to accept their frank feedback about our products and services.

When listening with the intention to co-create, we will ask questions which we have no answers for. We listen to what is important to them, seek their opinions, and explore their 'world' for a resolution that is mutually beneficial.

When we listen with the intention to connect, we start off with a neutral mindset, enabling us to really hear what others are saying without putting it through filters that are based on our own transactional and positional agendas. This allows us to discover new insights in the process of connecting and synthesising ideas – a win-win situation for all.

*"In listening lies great power. Many are expert in speaking (while everyone hears), adept in analysing in bits and pieces, very prompt in commenting, and always ready to stamp judgement of 'right' or 'wrong'. Very few are skilled in listening, first, with the ears and, then, with the heart. Those who do; hold true, sustainable, and great power."* – **Ufuoma Apoki**



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## BURGERNOMICS

# WHEN THE GOING GETS HOT, THE TOUGH MAKE PATTIES

## Can your team handle the pressure?

A Teambuilding Programme like no other, come find out in a myBurgerlab kitchen as you and your teammates make real myBurgerLab burgers under pressure!





By **MARK C CROWLEY**  
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ONE of the most popular classes at Harvard University today is a deep dive into the wisdom of the great Chinese philosophers – scholars who lived over 2,000 years ago.

We all know their names – Confucius, Mencius, Zhangzi and Lao Tzu – Eastern sages who devoted their lives to exploring what it takes to flourish in life, and who often landed on counter-intuitive conclusions that stand in stark contrast to traditional Western thinking.

“Your lives are about to be profoundly changed,” Michael Puett tells his students on the first day of class. The professor begins every new semester knowing that the time-tested and spiritually informed ideas of the Chinese scholars will likely fully transform how his students go on to operate in the world.

After taking Puett’s class as a PhD student, Christine Gross-Loh astutely realised that far more people than just Ivy League students needed an introduction to classical Chinese philosophy. She urged Puett to collaborate with her on a book – and effectively, make his research available to us all.

The pair published *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About The Good Life*, and it’s become a *New York Times* best seller.

While nowhere is it clear in the title, many of the book’s most provocative ideas also have direct application to workplace leadership.

After fully digesting *The Path* – and then spending considerable time discussing it with Gross-Loh, I’ve spotlighted three pieces of ancient wisdom that are not only likely to challenge your personal views on how best to excel in the world; they might just send your own life into a positive new trajectory.

## 1 The world is messy and fragmented

Most of us see the world as a harmonious whole – stable and mostly under our control. But in the view of the ancients, this is pure illusion and entirely wishful thinking. Instead of being cohesive and reliable, they saw the cosmos as fragmented, chaotic and very often messy.

“Our lives are messy, our actions are messy and our personalities are certainly messy,” Gross-Loh told me. “We tend to behave as if the world is fully coherent and this assumption affects all our decisions. Consequently, we’re often taken by surprise whenever things don’t work out as we expected.”

Importantly, the Chinese philosophers weren’t offering a doom-and-gloom projection of things; they were simply realists. In their view, once we accept that nothing is ever stable, we’re able to live far more expansive lives.

### Ming and the unpredictability of life

In the Chinese wisdom tradition, the word ‘Ming’ asserts that we live in a capricious universe. Translated into English, the word variously means ‘fate’, ‘destiny’ or ‘heaven’s commands’.

In one sense, *Ming* explains the tragedies and setbacks that befall our lives no matter how thorough our plans or preparations. *Ming* reminds us that our best-made decisions are never guaranteed against arbitrary, sometimes calamitous events.

But while an understanding of *Ming* teaches us to maturely anticipate that difficulties in life will occur, it also tells us to be open to windfalls – the unexpected, synchronistic opportunities that occur just as often in life.

According to the ancients, infinite potential exists in the universe. But when we hold too tightly to a plan, or to rigid expectations of outcomes, we unwittingly undermine our faculties for recognising the unexpected opportunities *Ming* sends our way.

As the administrator for the September 11 Victim’s Fund, attorney Kenneth Fineberg spent nearly two years working with people whose lives were suddenly and irrevocably changed by the World Trade Center and Pentagon tragedies of 2001.

In a PBS interview, he offered this *Ming*-based insight: “Young people come to me all the time with their résumés saying this is what they’re going to do two years from now, four years from now, six years from now.

“I tell them don’t plan so far ahead. Life has a way of changing the best laid plans. You may think you know

# Lessons from Ancient Chinese Philosophers



what you’re going to be doing a year from now or two years from now. I don’t think I plan more than two or three weeks ahead because everybody gets curveballs one day or another.”

## 2 Ask our hearts to weigh in

When it comes to making life’s most important decisions, we’re taught in the West to rely solely on our rational minds.

Aligned to this, businesses have repeatedly chosen the brainiest people for leadership roles – purely rational thinkers who masterfully marginalise their feelings and emotions, and make their ‘best’ choices through careful calculation and hypothesis.

They take comfort in the belief that by reducing experiences to measurable data, they can somehow master chance and defy fate. But according to the ancients, especially Mencius, excluding the heart in decision-making is massively misinformed and self-defeating.

Mencius believed that what truly distinguishes society’s most effective people is their determination to remain closely in touch with their emotional side.

Human beings function as logical and intuitive beings, he asserted – and only when we use both can we maximise our effectiveness.

### Xin and the heart-mind

It’s remarkable, really, that the Chinese word for mind and heart is actually one and the same – ‘Xin’. This tells us that at least two millennia ago, Chinese word-smiths captured a societal belief that the human heart and mind (‘heart-mind’) must work in partnership to be successful.

Our wisest choices cannot come from thinking things through rationally alone; they only can come from a complete understanding of what our ‘heart-mind’ knows is the right thing to do.

Our fear in Western civilisation is that our emotions will hijack our choices. But the truth is that emotions are involved with every decision we make. Consider questions such as, “Where shall I live? Who should I marry? Where would I like to go on vacation?”

It’s impossible to make purely logical choices. “And so, what the ancients advised,” Gross-Loh told me, “was for us to train our emotions to guide us and become our ally. When your heart-mind is developed, you are guided intuitively – and you instinctively make sounder, fuller choices.”

The human heart is a connection to deep insight. So, the next time you have a big decision to make, thoroughly weigh your options.

And right before you make the call, ask your heart how it makes you feel. As Mencius said, “At the centre of your being, you’ll have the answer.”

## 3 Softness – not hardness – creates influence

Traditional management theory espouses that power over people drives the greatest human performance. In many workplaces today, we continue to tightly manage worker activities, and leverage fear and pressure as means to motivating productivity.

But if the ancients were alive today, they’d be insisting we have it all wrong.

The concept they all shared was that true strength never relies on domination over others. In their view, leaders who rely on this kind of power build resentment, discontent, and have the inevitable effect of influencing people to work against them.

In his classic text, the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu teaches us that there are irrefutable laws of the universe (he calls them ‘The Way’), and that oppressing and dishonouring the well-being of human beings inherently violates what nature intended.

Helping others to thrive, all of the ancients were convinced, is the surest way of earning their support and commitment.

According to the Chinese philosophers, true leadership strength lies in what we instinctively judge today as being weaknesses:

- Embracing the messiness and complexity of people
- Being sensitive and attuned to others and how they are feeling
- Investing time to learn what makes people tick; what subtleties affect them
- Cultivating an ability to sense what kind of support workers need – and to give that to them in the moment
- Discovering what kinds of responses and communication from you will bring out the best responses in them

“All of these work because it’s attuned to the amazing understanding of human nature that these philosophers mastered and that research is increasingly confirming today,” Gross-Loh told me.

“People instinctively reciprocate when they feel cared for and valued. They naturally want to be on your side, your team – and to commit to the challenges at hand. It is common wisdom turned on its head.”



Mark spent over 25 years as a senior executive in financial services, and now is a leadership speaker and consultant. His book, *Lead From The Heart*, is now being taught at four American universities. Liked this article? Share your thoughts with us at [editor@leaderonomics.com](mailto:editor@leaderonomics.com).





By **PREMA JAYABALAN**  
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**H**AVE you been perceived as a rude person by others, when in reality you are not? Sometimes, we tend to come across as being rude without intending to do so.

Some may experience this in their work life. When in meetings, situations can get heated up due to crises and the manner in which you voice your opinions may come across as offensive to some.

So how do you ensure that people don't mistake you for being rude? Well, here are five tips you can follow.

## 1 Move up and not down

When in a discussion and another person is sharing his/her thoughts, being disdainful by saying things like, "Oh yeah, you always say that" or "That's what you think" may label you as a person who is annoying and outright rude.

This type of condescending tone could imply that you are putting the other person down and it can ruin your relationships with others.

On the contrary, you can encourage the person by saying things like, "That is a very interesting thought" or "I like the way you think", and then follow up with your thoughts by saying, "What do you think if we also did it this way?"

By speaking in this manner, it shows that you respect the person's effort to come up with ideas and slowly ease into adding on to the missing parts, without coming across as a snob.

## 2 Never ever interrupt

If you are in a meeting and your colleague is in the midst of presenting his/her ideas, do not ever interrupt to express your ideas, however relevant it may be. Instead, let the person finish talking and if you really need to voice your thoughts, then you can say something like, "May I please add on something here?"

If the person gives you the permission to speak, then you can thank that person and put forward your thoughts without coming across as rude.

## 3 'I am sorry.'

To avoid being perceived as rude, it's important to master the art of apologising even though at times it may not be fully your fault.

For example, in an attempt to send out a message to a group of people at work, you had slightly mismanaged it and this caused a slight confusion. The first thing to do is to say 'sorry'.

The moment you apologise, you are seen as someone who is accountable and takes responsibility of his/her actions. People see you as a genuine person

# Are You Seen As Rude?

Here are five tips to communicate better



who does work well but happened to make one slight mistake. When you refuse to apologise, you are then labelled as a rude and arrogant person.

## 4 Don't be late

Being rude is not always about the way we communicate verbally. Sometimes, it involves our actions too. One such action is arriving late for meetings. Always be punctual.

If you have given a designated time to meet or the person you are meeting has done so, then be there at that specific time, as this shows that you respect and value that person's time.

In the event that you are going to be late due to unavoidable circumstances, inform the person about your delay. Once there, the first thing to do is to apologise for the inconvenience caused even though you have alerted the person earlier that you will be late. This depicts you as a courteous and respectful person.

## 5 Never ignore

There is another crucial thing you need to learn to do to avoid being perceived as rude, i.e. not to ignore. For example, a new colleague who is meeting up with you is a little over-enthusiastic and wants to share a lot of his/her work with you.

Now, it's understandable that at times, this can

bore you, especially when you are loaded with work. Nonetheless, never ignore the person by fiddling with your mobile phone or checking your emails when he/she is talking. This is downright rude and it's demeaning for the person who is interacting with you.

The least you could do is to stay interested or politely explain to the person that you have another appointment coming up or an urgent task that needs to be completed, hence you would need to take your leave of them for now. Schedule another time to meet up with this person; this will make the person feel appreciated.

## Concluding thoughts

These may seem insignificant but these gestures play huge roles in displaying the type of person you are. Practising these methods elevates you to a genuine, likeable person and ignoring them could portray you to be absolutely rude. So, take your pick!

■ This article was previously published in print.



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By **FREDA LIU**  
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**N**EURO-LINGUISTIC programming (NLP) is an approach to communication, personal development, and psychotherapy created by Richard Bandler and John Grinder in the 1970s.

I took up both practitioner and master practitioner certifications in NLP after completing a coaching course because I was intrigued. It was a great add-on because I learnt new tools. A lot of us already practise elements of NLP unknowingly. Learning NLP has helped me tremendously – professionally and personally.

The basic premise behind NLP and coaching is that we are resourceful (not just in the financial sense) and we are able to create solutions to various issues. Here are some of the tools.

### Anchor

An anchor is really what it is. It is any stimulus that associates an internal response with some external or internal trigger so that the response is re-accessed swiftly and covertly. How do you get to that place where you settle back to a resourceful state? It can be anything really, from a visual to a song.

Every time I feel unsettled or angry about a situation, I go to prayer and meditation. One of my favourite scriptures reminds me to “be still” and know that God is in charge. When that happens, I feel a sense of peace. Although the situation has not changed, it gets me to a point of clarity and I don’t do or say anything in haste.

My friend’s anchor is the song, *I’m Too Sexy* by Right Said Fred. I believe the first line in that song is “I’m too sexy for my shirt!” and I guess that gives him the confidence. To each their own, I say!

### Building rapport

This is probably one of the most important skills in sales or when meeting new people. As I have to interview a lot of people, I usually ask them to come 30 minutes early. Why?

This is largely for me to build rapport with them so they won’t be nervous coming on air. My goal is to get a great interview and not to have them clam up because that just won’t work on radio!

Rapport-building techniques include mirroring their body language, matching their rate of speech, to even breathing at the same pace (that’s why smokers get on really well; they inhale and exhale together!).

Disclaimer here: I genuinely like meeting new people and I always assume I have rapport already. I try to crack a joke and make the person feel at ease. When we’re both laughing together, it removes the tension.

Here’s the thing. I’m like that with everyone I meet – interviewee, new friend, potential client, you name it. I have no hidden agenda. I genuinely want to know a person and their needs. That goes a long way with building rapport.

Now, if you’re an introvert, it doesn’t mean it’s difficult to build rapport or that you have to like the other person. However, you must have a real interest to get to that point of connection and common values.

### Values

The whole study of NLP helps you guide your values. When you know your true values, it makes it so much easier when you do your work, or when you decide which company you want to work for, or the career choices you make.

Two of my key values are actually harmony and learning. This explains why I love what I do, because I learn something everyday. I also like to make people feel at ease because I like harmony. When people feel their values are not aligned, they leave their jobs and even marriages!

### Limiting beliefs

This is a big one with most people. Nay, everyone. I catch myself with limiting beliefs all the time. It’s the little, little things. It ranges from statements such as, “I don’t think I can do this” to “Why is everyone better at this than me?”

These statements can paralyse a person from moving forward. When I decided to do a full marathon in 2016, I injured myself quite badly. It was probably just the body reacting to fear.

# Not Just Another Mumbo Jumbo Tool

## How NLP helps advance you and your career



I changed the words on the day of the marathon to “I am going to enjoy this and take my time. What else am I doing for the next six hours anyway?” Yes, I completed it.

### Reframing

“I don’t like office politics!” Have you heard that one before? Who does right?

I realised that this also limits your career if you assume everything is about office politics. This reframing exercise came to me accidentally when Anne Abraham of LeadWomen was having a chat with me about how she never saw it that way.

Anne said she always saw it as team dynamics. Everyone has different personalities with different agendas and key performance indicators (KPIs). If we communicate to meet the individual’s agenda and KPI whilst getting our point across, then we have ‘win-win’.

Anne incidentally sits on the board of a public-listed company and LeadWomen is an organisation that helps women get to board positions.

### Operating at cause or effect

“I never get promoted” or “How can I get that promotion?” How do these two sentences sound? One sentence sounds like a death sentence and the latter opens the door to possibilities. Catch the words you say.

If you are **at effect** you may blame others or circumstances for your bad moods or for what you have not achieved in your life.

Being **at cause** means you have choices in your life – you can choose what is best for you while ensuring the choice is not damaging to those around you, your

community and your society.

Where are you operating at in different areas of your life?

### Positive or negative state

This was a gem of an advice given to me many years ago before I understood NLP: Do you want to be bitter or better?

Malachy McCourt once said: “Resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die.” Being in a negative state is never a good place. Think about it; a great idea never comes when you’re in a negative mood.

Some ways to counter this are to exercise to release some endorphins, pray, hang around positive people, not accept negativity from others, watch comedy, start journaling, and write five things to be grateful for daily.

### Parting thoughts

These are just some of the key ideas and instruments that I have garnered from NLP.

It has made me more self-aware of my thoughts, words, and actions and how I really can take control of a situation even though the circumstances have not changed. And that is powerful.

■ This article was previously published in print.



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**H**UMOUR has been around ever since the beginning of time. Even chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos and orangutans show laughter-like vocalisations in response to physical contact such as wrestling, play chasing or tickling.

So, what is humour?

The word is said to derive from the Latin word 'umor' which means 'body fluid'. In medieval physiology, our relative proportions of body fluids determine our physical condition and state of mind.

Most think humour is something that exists for mere entertainment. Studies have shown that it is actually an aspect of the human mind in processing information. A lot of research has been done to highlight the importance of humour in our daily lives.

Even Sigmund Freud noticed the correlation between humour and the unconscious mind and pondered upon the question on why we laugh.

If this is so, how does humour impact us?

Here are the three aspects in which humour plays an essential role in our lives:

## 1 Mental health

It's pretty evident that humour can help in improving one's mental health from stress, depression, or even just a bad day.

Laughter reduces mental tension and increases energy, enabling you to stay focused and accomplish more. It also stimulates both sides of the brain, encouraging clarity, creativity and better problem-solving abilities.

## 2 Physical health

Remember the movie *Patch Adams*, directed by Tom Shadyac which tells the true story of a medical student using humour to treat patients?

The real-life Adams, also known as Dr Hunter Doherty "Patch" Adams, founded the Gesundheit! Institute as part of his initiative to change the American

healthcare system by incorporating laughter, joy and creativity as an integral part of the healing process.

Studies have shown that humour does boost one's immunity. A good hearty laugh is said to benefit one's circulation, lungs and muscles, especially those around the belly area. It also helps one deal with pain and physical adversity.

Take Norman Cousins, for example, who was diagnosed with a degenerative disease that caused the breakdown of collagen, leaving him in almost constant pain and prompting his doctor to say he would die within a few months.

He claimed to have recovered from it with just laughter from tonnes of comedies!

## 3 Social health

Unsurprisingly, humour brings people together.

You are more likely to maintain social contact with those who make you laugh and can take a joke. Humour boosts one's communication connection.

Most studies find humour to be a highly desirable attribute, which explains why the acronym GSOH (good sense of humour) found its way into personal and online dating posts.

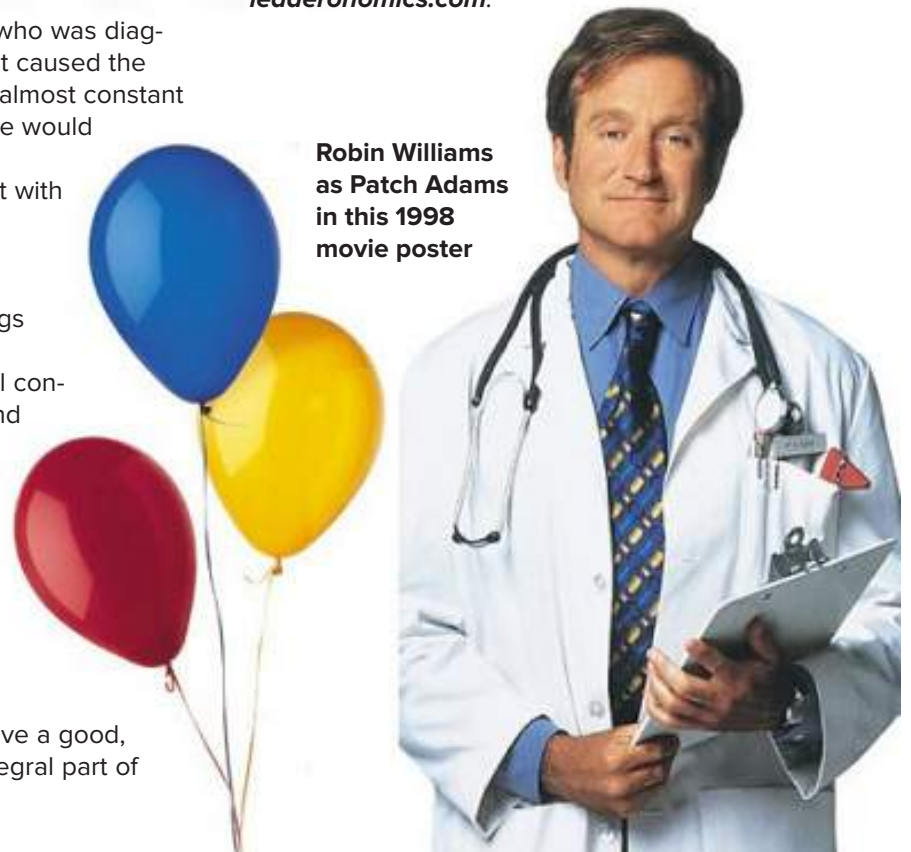
## Conclusion

So, tell a joke once in a while and have a good, hearty laugh because humour is an integral part of human survival.

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**Robin Williams as Patch Adams in this 1998 movie poster**



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*"If we helped grow one person into a leader, he or she would then be able to transform their community and if we kept repeating this over and over, nations will be transformed. And thus the vision of Leaderonomics began."*

- Roshan Thiran, Group CEO and Founder of Leaderonomics