1

Introduction: Greatness Requires A Personal Commitment

"You must have chaos within you to give birth to a dancing star."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

It's 7 p.m. on a Monday. Andrew has just sent off his last email for the day. He shuts his computer and leaves the headquarters office of OCBC Bank (the second-largest banking group in Singapore). But Andrew doesn't head home. Instead, he walks down the block and turns right onto New Bridge Road. Making sure no one is following him, Andrew slips into one of the shophouses. He spends another three hours here creating modifications to the bank's system.

No, this is not a real-life version of *Fight Club*. This is The Open Vault, OCBC Bank's fintech lab. And who's Tyler in this story? Pranav Seth, head of their e-business and business transformation division. He has been

tasked with driving corporate innovation for the bank as competition heats up in the industry. Competition is no longer just coming from the other banks. OCBC Bank is going head-to-head against unconventional competitors, from tech giants like Alibaba, Apple and Google to the hordes of nimble fintech start-ups that are looking to disrupt the banking industry and eat the most delectable part of their lunch.

The Open Vault has been quietly taking in incredibly clever maverick bankers like Andrew who slip into the lab after office hours to try out different ways to solve big, deep problems of banking. And it's working. Andrew succeeded in building a pilot blockchain payment transaction between the bank and its subsidiaries.[1] A first for a Southeast Asian bank. The Open Vault also incubated the birth of Emma, a home loans chatbot, that helped close more than S$10 million in home loans before she turned six months old.

1. Safehouse for rebels

With such breakthrough success, why the need for secrecy?

While everyone pontificates about the importance of innovation, in reality, most managers are not in favor of pursuing the ideas, and may even be totally opposed to new innovations. People risk losing out on promotions, even their jobs if they try to do things that displease their bosses. In theory, they may have received their managers' blessings. However, their night-time shenanigans can't affect their day jobs — they still have to hit their KPIs (key performance indicators).

Other managers are not as supportive. They see mavericks like Andrew as troublemakers, rebels, terrorists. That's right — corporate terrorists. And I'm not using that word for dramatic effect. In 2013, a technical glitch

brought down the entire online and ATM networks of another bank. There's a lot at stake here. As a leader, how do you encourage disruptive behavior without disrupting the business?

And so The Open Vault is a quietly brilliant idea. It's a simulation center, a digital twin to the banking system, to allow for system enhancements and testing to be done offline without disrupting service. Innovation only happens from engaging with reality. In this case, it's a digital twin. The Open Vault is a safe house in the sense that it provides a secure environment that allows Andrew to tinker safely without the risk of bringing down the banking system. It's also a safe house where Andrew can go to work on his radical ideas without the risk of losing his day job. In essence, Pranav, Andrew and the organization have created a secret garden where wild ideas have a fighting chance.

Let's be honest here. To the rest of the organization that value order and control, transformational leaders like Pranav and Andrew are seen as saboteurs. These rebels create mayhem, rock the boat, and even burn the ship once they reach the other shore. All to support a breakthrough idea. Slaughtering sacred cows — processes and products that made the organization successful but are becoming less relevant today — may be repulsive. It's certainly alienating. But it does not stop transformational leaders from pursuing better innovation. And the results are marvelous. But make no mistake. They move against the institutional grain in a way that makes the rest of the organization twitch with nervous anxiety.

2. At the edge of despair

Every day, we are under immense pressure to perform at the top of our game. But perfection is such a fragile thing. In the chase for greatness,

sometimes you can come very, very close but still not get into the perfect rhythm. Instead, you end up overwhelmed and burnt out. Somehow, somewhere, you got derailed.

No matter how hard you try to keep your career, team and organization on the straight and narrow, they just don't seem to cooperate. They constantly misbehave. Like the morning mist, perfection is ephemeral, not something you can grasp or cling to. One minute you are on a rocketship trajectory to rockstar-CEO-dom, and the next you are being told that your job has been made redundant. One minute you are the darling of the venture capital world, the next minute your start-up has run out of cash. Despite your best efforts, you still end up in utter, cataclysmic disaster.

Understandably, we try our best to avoid such crises at work. But no matter how much money and time we throw at them, something will still go wrong. We live with this constant fear that something unpleasant is going to happen. It can feel like the edge of despair. But what if this is also the edge of greatness?

3. Blame the scapegoat

Peter (*not his real name) is the station manager on duty at the Ang Mo Kio train station. It's the evening rush hour and the train has just pulled into the station like clockwork. Peter monitors the closed-circuit camera as people pour out and board the train. Soon the train is ready to move off to the next station. But it doesn't. A fault signal lights up — a train door fault. Peter leaves the station control room and goes to the platform to inspect.

The standard operating procedure would call for him to disembark all the passengers before attempting any intervention. *But this is a simple fix. It's rush hour, and we don't want to cause any trouble.*

Peter goes inside the train to try and fix the door. He makes a mistake, and before he knows it, the train is moving off. With the door still open.

Peter immediately goes into disaster recovery mode. He tells the commuters to stay away from the door. He uses the in-train intercom to inform all the other passengers to keep clear of the door area and hold on to the grip poles.

After traveling around 200 meters, the train stops and returns to Ang Mo Kio station, where all commuters disembark safely. No one was hurt.

Peter acted heroically. His thousands of hours of experience and training to prepare for situations like these kicked in. He should be celebrated as a role model who survived a crisis safely. He didn't freak out, held his composure the entire time and kept everyone safe. In the personal development world where the likes of Tony Robbins are worshipped, they would package Peter up and send him on a roadshow to emphasize the importance of the (dreadfully boring) safety drills and how to stay calm during a crisis. But how did Peter's employer reward him?

He was suspended from his job with immediate effect. He was awarded the Cone of Shame for his bravery. Not only that, the whole country got to know about the shame the next day on the front page of the national newspaper.[2]

When things go wrong, people are quick to blame a scapegoat. According to McKinsey,[3] 70% of transformation programs fail, largely due to employee

resistance and lack of management support. As managers, we find it easier to blame our employees for resisting our transformation programs. As employees, we find it easier to blame our managers for not supporting our grand ambitions. You can see how natural it is to blame people when things go wrong. We like to turn it into a people problem. **And that's the first leadership challenge today: what looks like a people problem is often a growth problem.**

4. Cone of shame

Nobody likes uncertainty, and corporations rarely tolerate it at all. The organizational structure, strategic plans, annual budgets, traffic light scorecards and standard operating procedures (SOPs) all serve to add a sheen of certainty to what is, in its glorious truth, an uncertain world.

Intellectually, we know that we can't completely eliminate risk. No matter how well you plan, there will still be a risk that things won't go according to plan. That's reality. Intellectually, we know we should accept some risk, just like we accept the weather. But organizations have a severe intolerance to risk. They talk about managing risk, but that can be a misnomer. Leaders *manage* risk. Pranav manages risk by creating a safehouse where innovators like Andrew can carefully test their daring and radical ideas. Management and corporate bureaucracy seek to avoid risk altogether. In their minds, failure is interpreted as incompetent risk avoidance — Peter failed to prevent the mistake, so he was seen as incompetent.

How will employees behave if they work in an environment that punishes them for failing to prevent a mistake?

For starters, employees will stick to what they already know. *This is how we've always done it.* They'll pursue ideas that serve customers they already know, using infrastructure and skills that they already have. Play it safe. *Just shut up and collect your paycheck.* In other words, be a RHINO: Really Here In Name Only.

A RHINO may not be actively impeding innovation, but they're not helping much, either. Now, the WOLF is a different story. WOLF: Working On Latest Fire. A WOLF will analyze all potential risks, imaginary problems that might occur in the future, and apply avoidance measures. To them, everything — and I mean *everything* — is a potential fire that must be put out before it even starts. They call this "scenario planning." It's not. It's creating pretend solutions to solve imaginary tragedies, dressed up as "scenario planning". They see every little potential fault as a looming crisis and deploy such nitpicking counter-measures, which interrupt people from actually doing their jobs.

The last thing a RHINO or WOLF will do is take a risk to try something different. *What if it bombed?* That will be a deliberate display of incompetence — at avoiding risk.

This environment of avoiding risk is the antithesis of the growth mindset. It's a sort of deception when the Human Resources (HR) department rolls out "growth mindset" workshops across the organization. Only the most ignorant, gullible and clueless will heed the call to prime for growth. But they will learn the lesson fast — when the swarm of corporate sentinels pulverizes any semblance of childlike curiosity and awe left in them. Like a sugar cane press, this is how the juiciest part of disruptive ideas is

squeezed out as it goes through the corporate mill. We place boundaries around our thinking before we even begin.

5. The learning edge

I'm not suggesting that organizations throw caution to the wind and break loose. That would be flipping to the other extreme, where anarchy and chaos reign. But there needs to be some courage to do the things that make us feel uncomfortable.

Michael Jordan is touted to be the greatest scorer in the history of the NBA. This achievement didn't come about just because he succeeded more often than other people. Michael missed more than 9,000 shots in his career. He lost almost 300 games. He has failed over and over again. He simply took more shots at the goal and that's why he succeeded.

So, what does this mean for you and your organization? The more shots you take at the goal, the more likely you are to succeed. And this is important to note: you miss ALL the shots you don't make. It's simple mathematics. Being a winner doesn't mean that you never lose. You are simply prepared to shrug off more failures.

Herein lies the real challenge. As over-achievers, our instinct for loss aversion is violently intense. Just thinking of an idea that has the slightest possibility of failure makes us twitch with anxiety. *That won't work! How stupid is that?! You'll embarrass yourself, and all of us!* Anything that threatens to disrupt the warmth and safety of the cocoon will be met with deadly malice. We erect defenses — the Great Wall of innovation — to protect ourselves from the wild ideas that we think will embarrass us in public. We install complicated mechanisms to prevent people from making

mistakes, reward people for avoiding mistakes and punish people when they make them. That's how we stop the future from emerging. We don't take the shot. We play it safe. We end up holding on to the past for dear life.

Here's the thing. On the other side of the Great Wall of innovation, there might be all those wild ideas, including some interesting and worthwhile ones. And what if one of the hidden ideas could be THE BIG IDEA that would be really exciting for your organization?

I often hear leaders complain about the lack of innovative ideas in their organizations. The real problem is not the lack of innovative ideas. There is a bottom swell of ideas from innovators like Andrew that can help their organizations tackle real industry problems, but the Great Wall of innovation keeps these wild ideas out… until it can't. And the Great Wall comes crumbling down. Risk-averse leaders get attached to the successes of the past and react negatively to every new initiative. They resist and resent everything and everyone that does not fall into their neat little boxes. But by denying the emerging ideas — trivial ideas that will become so obvious in hindsight — they get left behind in the past. That's how multi-billion-dollar giants fall.

Things change, disruption happens, as they do. With change comes the need for adaptation, for fresh thinking and sometimes a total reboot. What looks like a people problem is usually a wicked growth problem, which will require your best ideas. To get your *best* ideas, you want access to *all* your ideas. It takes a strong dose of courage to lower the Great Wall of innovation. That feeling of fear is intense and real. It can feel like the edge of despair. But this is also the edge of greatness because beyond the Great

Wall is a plethora of wild ideas, promising tantalizing and ingenious possibilities.

The edge of despair is also the edge of greatness if you hold the space to manage the risk instead of avoiding it.

Lowering the Great Wall of innovation is not easy. It can feel scary, but it is not dangerous. It may be the safest thing for your organization to stay relevant. Avoiding risk is the real danger. Pretending the risk is not there does not make it go away. As leaders, we want to celebrate when people manage risk. I find the most inspiring example of this leadership behavior at skateboard parks. When a skateboarder is learning a new trick and he fluffs it, everyone claps! When he fluffs it again, everyone claps again. No one tells him that he's not good enough. No one tells him to give up. Instead, they continue to applaud his attempts. Now, this is a safe place where taking risk is celebrated. And it does not need to be confined to skateboard parks. The Open Vault proves you can bring this into corporations, too. **When you provide a safe environment where people can experiment without the fear of being punished, their innovative ideas then have a fighting chance to create seismic shifts in the industry, without disrupting your business.**

6. The dream factory

Joe (*not his real name) was loading baggage onto the plane at the Cebu airport when his CEO picked him out of the rest. The CEO thought he showed potential and asked him whether he aspired to be a pilot. Seven years later, Joe became a captain of a brand new A320 Airbus.[4] The CEO is Tony Fernandes, and the organization is AirAsia, the largest low-cost airline in Southeast Asia.

AirAsia doesn't see itself as another airline. Instead, they consider themselves a dream factory. Tony's self-proclaimed job is to turn raw diamonds into polished ones. Tony saw a future pilot where others saw a bag carrier. When he said, "Now everyone can fly," he wasn't only talking about the passengers. Tony relies on his instinct for spotting leadership qualities in others. His instinct for talent is so uncanny that he can spot them in the most unusual places.

A dream factory does not happen on its own. It's a deliberate decision to build a company where people can be creative and passionate about what they do. It requires the organization to have a personal commitment to develop and optimize all the talent they have in-house. Every CEO says that people are their greatest assets. So why aren't there more "dream factories"?

7. The corporate machine

Modern corporations are built for scale. It's all about efficiency, cost-cutting, profit maximization and winning at all costs. Processes are compartmentalized and standardized to fit a neat workflow. Managers operate in their own functional silos. They break big problems into smaller chunks and then assign employees to handle each piece. Here's an example. A sales manager carries a sales target of $400,000. The sales manager has four salespeople. So you divide $400,000 among four people. Each salesperson has to deliver $100,000. Better still, make it $110,000 each, in case someone falls short. It's simple maths.

What happens if they don't hit their targets? The sales manager needs to show his boss that he's doing something, so he launches into problem-

solving mode. The sales manager sees the delinquent salesperson as the problem. So how do you solve the problem? By removing the problem. *No delinquent salesperson, no problem*. It becomes a witch hunt to prove the person's incompetence, lest the incompetence is pinned on the sales manager himself. Rather inhumane, perhaps? Well, it helps if leaders think of people as objects to achieve their goals, not humans with real feelings.

8. Treating people as objects

People in senior leadership positions are goal-focused. Logical, objective, they do what's necessary to accomplish their goals and achieve results. But maybe in the pursuit of performance, leaders lose sight of something. They stop thinking of people as people, humans with values and emotions. Instead, people are seen as objects or concepts to achieve the organizational goals.

Power blinds us to other people's perspectives.[5] Treating people as people becomes harder the more power we have. Power does very specific things to the brain, and it happens below the conscious level, without you even realizing it. It's not a gender thing; both men and women are afflicted by it. If you have a functioning brain, then you've got the propensity for power blindness.

When things are going well or in nice social settings, leaders smile, they say the right things: *People are our greatest assets*. But when the business is under intense growth pressure, that's when they're more likely to go power blind. The inner tyrant emerges; military orders ensue. They assume people will fall in line. *We just don't have the luxury of time or money to deal with everyone's concerns. Just get on with it.* When the business is in a crisis, leaders fall back to their Excel sheets. At a time when there is a

need to upskill people, to empower people to do things differently, leaders do the opposite. The first thing they cut is the "people" budget. This behavior happens like clockwork.

Every CEO says: *People are our greatest assets*. But that can be a misnomer. You invest in assets, and they give you a healthy return over time. The modern organization is designed to extract value — now. Take our performance management system, for example. The dreaded annual performance review is, in essence, an exercise in assessing people's contributions. It's more focused on what the organization extracted from the human "resources", rather than helping them grow.

To understand other people's thinking and feelings, you need to have empathy. Putting yourself in other people's shoes is a very active task. Tony literally puts himself in his employees' shoes. He has worked all the jobs in the airline. Tony has changed aircraft wheels, checked passengers in, carried bags and served food and drinks on flights. He has even flown a plane — albeit in a simulator.[6]

Sometimes it's not safe or practical for CEOs to literally put themselves in their employees' shoes. There are other ways to put yourself in your employees' shoes. Within a few months of taking the helm as the CEO for Singapore train operator SMRT, Neo Kian Hong visited train stations in the day and walked the tunnels in the night. He talked to as many employees on the ground as he could, asking questions about their jobs and suggestions on how SMRT can do better.[7]

This is a very active task. Employees on the ground are not trained in "boardroom speak" or "spinning the truth." A supervisor might try to intervene and answer on behalf of the ground staff. The CEO needs to

exercise great diplomacy to gently interrupt the supervisor and revert the attention to the ground staff. This is how you avoid getting second- or third-hand information. "Showing face" is not enough.

This is an exercise of humility in so many ways. Physically, you must strip away your crisp business shirt and don the humble uniform. Verbally, you must drop your impeccable English and sink into colloquial Singlish. Intellectually, you have to believe that the ground staff you are speaking to know how to do their jobs better than you do. This is important. Most CEOs think they know how to do their employees' jobs better than they do. (Likewise, some employees think they know how to do their CEO's job better than they do.) Put simply, you must stop your prodigious and everlasting monologue in order to listen to the other person fully. Emotionally, you have to be vulnerable and deal with unutterably strange and intolerable emotions without judgment.

So this is the second leadership challenge: if you're not actively empowering people, then you're disempowering them unintentionally.

9. The problem with greatness

We say that we want to achieve greatness, but there's this little problem: if you want to achieve greatness, then it must be more than just a job that pays the bills. It must be more than just business. It has to be EXTRA-ordinary. Greatness requires a personal commitment. Put simply, no CEO, athlete or artist has ever reached great heights without putting their hearts into it.

Intellectually, we know this, yet we don't do it. At the moment, our instinct is to protect our hearts. We guard ourselves against feeling any emotions

at work. *It's just business. It's not personal.* Our hearts are closed in the guise of being objective. We have not put our hearts into it.

I know I'm treading on thin ice here, but hear me out for a minute. You might be thinking: *Isn't it enough that I'm working 12 hours a day, six days a week? Or that I'm giving it my best? I'm killing myself here trying to do everything and please everyone, doesn't that prove that my heart is in it?*

There can be a sense when we're at work that going through the motions is enough. This is especially true when you're experiencing the challenges of modern corporate life with its impossible targets and ridiculous timelines. You toil to tick all the boxes in your to-do list, which despite your best efforts, never seem to get any shorter. And yet you keep at it. Every day. You do this automatically, without thinking. You don't question it. You're on autopilot, and there's no off switch. Is it any wonder that you feel so overwhelmed, anxious and scared? Things like "leadership development" and "work tech" which are supposed to make your job easier, instead feel like yet another item on your to-do list. Driven by expectations of blatantly commercial promotion, you forge ahead with sheer willpower. *Grit your teeth. Just get on with it. Stop being lazy.* But no matter how hard you work, you still end up back where you started: overwhelmed, anxious and scared.

This kind of behavior doesn't faze us.

10. Breakdown becomes breakthrough

We are strangers to delight. There is a suspicion of joy, as if experiencing pleasure at work is a sin and tantamount to a lack of rigor. We are more familiar with being hard on ourselves. We are highly trained experts at

beating ourselves up. We wage a silent war every day, and we can't escape because that tyrannical voice is *inside* us. But ultimately, it's not sustainable. Eventually, we burn out. Willpower is not an inexhaustible resource; it runs out. We end up working very hard, going nowhere.

When we're experiencing the challenges of modern corporate life with its impossible targets and ridiculous timelines, we have every reason to feel overwhelmed, anxious or scared. But we run away from acknowledging these conflicting emotions. We ignore these difficult emotions. We think that being a leader means feeling overwhelmed, anxious and scared, and still meeting the impossible targets within the ridiculous timelines anyway. Just browbeat into submission that gut instinct of yours. Go ahead, tyrannize yourself. Because we think that the alternative — actually listening to our gut instinct — will make us lose our edge. We think we will turn into an emotional puddle; we will look weak. This terrifies us. So we stay detached, logical and unemotional. We glorify the busyness of our lives at work. *It's just business. It's not personal.* Burnout is worn like a badge of honor: *See how tough I am*!

As adults, we have learned to bury our difficult emotions and put up a brave front. A tragic gap starts to form between the brave front we put up externally and how we actually feel internally. We deny our difficult emotions, up to the point where we can't, and the volcano erupts. We say something we can't take back. We do something we'll regret later.

Instead, when you stop running away from the difficult emotions and allow yourself the space to acknowledge them, you spontaneously let go of it, just as feeling the hot handle of a cast-iron skillet makes you let go. You feel a moment of huge relief, like putting down a heavy load.

Aaaaahhhhh…… It's like pressing a reset button. The voluminous and blood-flecked clouds dissipate. Your usual sense of confidence and composure returns. You reconnect to your natural power source. This vitality arises from *acknowledging* the difficult emotion, not *denying* it. It's like magic. The breakdown becomes the breakthrough. Acknowledging your difficult emotions can be the kindest thing you can do for yourself.

Acknowledging our emotions is not easy. Difficult emotions can feel unpleasant. It makes us feel vulnerable like we're on the edge of despair. We forget that emotions are temporary; they don't last. Have you seen how emotionally agile babies are? They can switch from crying to laughing in an instant. When you acknowledge the difficult emotions, you spontaneously let go of them.

The edge of despair is also the edge of greatness if you hold the space to regulate your emotions instead of burying them. The simple act of labeling and validating your emotion changes the brain, and helps you to relax. Paradoxically, the more you deny your difficult emotions, the tighter you hold on to it until you can no longer do it and it erupts — usually at the most inconvenient time.

Managing your emotions is not a descent into an abyss of nothingness. It's the confidence to hold yourself as an intentional calming force in the midst of tumultuous emotions. It's those simple moments when you confidently open yourself to the full range of your cosmic emotions — rather than feel rushed, inconvenienced or anxious — that can make all the difference. You don't freeze your emotions; you dance with them. You live fully in the face of everything you have to deal with. Between pleasure

and misery. Between hope and despair. Between greatness and adversity. You're dancing on the edge of greatness.

11. Pure rocket energy

An outdated (yet still popular) view is that emotions make you weak. It gets in the way of making tough decisions. Emotions on their own do not make you weak. Not learning to manage them makes you weak. Staying connected to our emotions unlocks a megatonne of energy. The Latin derivative for the word emotion, "*emotere*," literally means energy in motion. Emotions are automatic responses to dangers and rewards. Emotions prepare us to deal with important events without having to think about them. We don't choose to feel them; they just happen to us automatically.[8] It's PURE ENERGY. The key is to regulate your emotions, instead of being at their mercy. Leading from an open heart makes our mundane day-to-day responsibilities come alive and become a source of joy instead of feeling like an obligation. We have stronger convictions when we encounter unexpected challenges. We are more resilient when we face resistance. We are more forgiving when we experience losses and exhaustion.

Trying to achieve greatness without putting your heart into it is like trying to get to Mars in a horse-drawn carriage when you have a rocket booster in your garage. Without putting your heart into it, you go through the motions using the whip of willpower. *Stop being lazy*. But eventually, the willpower runs out. The corresponding change is superficial. Deep transformation does not occur.

When we don't regulate our emotions, we eat, drink, work, shop or exercise them away. But the change is superficial. Denying our emotions is the real

villain — pretending it's not there does not mean it's not there, or that we don't act on it. Instead, take ownership of your emotions, regulate it and unleash your rocket power. Let emotions touch your heart and allow the magic to happen.

12. A company is not an individual

A company is a team of individuals. It's not about propping up the star player at the cost of the team losing the game. The problem occurs when leaders get that confused.

When employees underperform at work, managers think it has little or nothing to do with how they treat their employees — that it's entirely up to the person alone. *The person is incompetent.* But that's simply not true.

Whether a leader blames people for their incompetence or rescues them from it, it threatens and undermines people's mental ability to be at their best. They develop learned helplessness. When people feel like they have no control over what happens, they tend to simply give up and accept their fate. As a leader, you have to understand that you're partly responsible for your employee's mental state and subsequent inability to do better.

There is also a power factor: emotions are most contagious when emanating from the most powerful person in a group. Emotions are as contagious as the Ebola virus. When denial happens as a group at the leadership level, that anger or fear cascades through the organization unconsciously. You're the fountainhead. Toxic water flows downhill.

But so does clean water. As the leader, you have an incredible opportunity to help your employees manage their emotions and feel good about

themselves. You can help them get into and stay in an internal state where they can do their best work. Tony saw a future pilot where others saw a bag carrier. When you outwardly state that your employees take pride in their work and come to work daily committed to do their best, you are holding the space for them to show up powerfully at work. And they do. Nobody shows up at work to suck at their jobs; everyone wants to do well.

This might sound fluffy and delusional, but it isn't an excuse to sweep problems under the carpet. People are not perfect. Inter-personal conflicts will still happen. But your typical adverse response to conflicts and difficult people becomes milder and less disruptive. The villain here is denial. The willingness to patiently witness someone's drama queen antics and imperious power trips without resentment, judgment, or fear may be the necessary means to help the person hit their reset button and regain their confidence and composure.

You also hold the space for yourself to rise as a leader. When a power fault disrupted train services in Singapore on 14 October 2020, Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung — Singapore's top transport official — apologized to commuters in a Facebook post.[9] This is an amazing act of grace by a leader. He's sharing the stress, and not stressing others to make himself feel better. It's a very fine line, but it makes all the difference. When things go pear-shaped, will you rely on having the biggest stick or the harshest voice in the room? Or are you going to hone the connection and collaboration skills to operate at the highest level? This requires emotional intelligence. We think that emotional intelligence is a "soft" skill. Try maintaining your composure while facing the full force of ire from 123,000 commuters. There's nothing fluffy or touchy-feely about emotional intelligence. It is absolutely foundational to leadership.

The higher you climb, the more your success depends on making other people successful. It does not mean you have to be a people pleaser. **If you want people to perform at the top of their game, then it must be much more than just business. Engage your emotional side. It's not just business. It's also personal.**

13. CXA story

When running the APAC business for employee health and benefits consulting company Mercer Marsh Benefits, Rosaline would receive complaints from clients about the escalating costs of insuring their employees.[10] Molly, Rosaline's most demanding HR client, pointed out how her insurance premiums were doubling every three years as her middle-aged factory workers had chronic diseases. She lamented how only the healthy attended her wellness activities, whereas the sedentary and obese never showed. And how despite all the money she spent, she couldn't see the link between her wellness efforts and her insurance premiums!

Molly was the first of many HRs to say to Rosaline: "You're my broker — why can't you help me fix this?"

Rosaline came up with a simple and radical idea: rather than wait for employees to get sick and be hospitalized to benefit from insurance, why not shift part of that insurance money into early detection and disease prevention?

Rosaline didn't stop there. She even figured out how to solve this issue using technology. It just needed an investment of US$10 million. Rosaline pitched the idea to her global bosses in New York. They rejected her idea. She didn't give up. She tried again. And again. And again. After trying for

five years, in 2013, she finally gave up and left Mercer to build it on her own.

Little did she realize that the US$10 million would come from her own pocket. Rosaline ended up investing her family's entire savings of US$5 million and signed a personal guarantee for another US$5 million loan to build the technology and acquire an SME insurance broker.

CXA began by capturing employees' health data — blood tests, lifestyles, claims and activities. With the data, they created functionalities that benefit everyone. Employees are given a personal recommendation on ways to be healthier and a wallet to choose the health benefits that work best for them. HR receives anonymized data and tools to offer targeted interventions, attacking their highest-cost claims, addressing Molly's diabetic factory workers. The insurance brokers use the data to negotiate reduced premiums from insurers.

Molly, of course, demanded that CXA do this without adding work for her HR team. So CXA consolidated all of Molly's vendors onto one platform, thus capturing data at the source and eliminating the paperwork between her company and employees, insurers and all her providers.

And since Molly's such a tough negotiator, like every other HR person, CXA's flex and wellness platform come for free when CXA is appointed as the broker.

CXA was valued at $107 million after its Series B funding round in 2017. As of 2020, CXA was serving more than 600 enterprises and more than 700,000 users across 20 countries in Asia.

14. Analysis paralysis

Note how Rosaline spent five years navigating the corporate bureaucracy in Mercer but getting nowhere. On her own, Rosaline built CXA into a $100 million company in four years.

This is not surprising. Launching a new product in large corporations is laborious and expensive. Corporations spend years in conceptualization to launch a new product. They invest significant amounts of money, time and brainpower to estimate market size, conduct focus groups, scan the competitive landscape, analyze the capacity to execute, draw up a fancy 35-page business plan and go through multiple budget rounds. *Everything must be perfect. You can only rob the bank once.* Approval is by consensus, so the team has to make sure *everyone* is happy. APAC, EMEA and the Americas have to sign off on it. Everyone — Product, Sales, Marketing, Customer Service, IT, Finance, Legal — has veto power over every little detail. By the time they get to launch, they have invested significant time and money on theoretical models. They've cut their own time windows short and created a much lower margin for error. They almost *have* to succeed right away or leave the market. This approach makes it harder than it needs to be to experiment or pivot.[11]

The 35-page business plan provides a sheen of confidence that people actually know what they're doing — even when they don't. This is the Dunning-Kruger effect:[12] a cognitive bias whereby people who are incompetent at something are unable to recognize their own incompetence. Not only do they fail to recognize their incompetence, but they're also likely to grossly overestimate their abilities. Essentially, be a ZEBRA: Zero
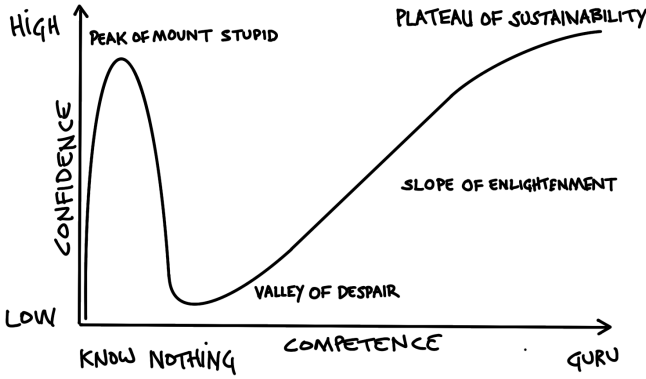
Figure 1.1: Dunning-Kruger Effect

Evidence But Really Arrogant. The Dunning-Kruger effect is typically depicted as the diagram in Figure 1.1.

And here is the third leadership challenge: think big, act big, and you'll grow smaller.

15. Find the bright spots

When developing an idea, transformational leaders like Rosaline move quickly from concept to prototype, which they then test with a *small* group of customers. They get their prototype into customers' hands as quickly as possible, find the bright spots — the first signs that things are working — and then rework the prototype based on that real market experience. They handcraft to find out what works — the bright spots — and then they scale it. **Think big, act small, and you'll grow bigger.**

This might sound ludicrous to you. After all, you are an alpha red leader with global ambitions. Rosaline couldn't possibly have personally invited

700,000 users onto her platform. You might be tempted to think that Rosaline had one brilliant idea, built a fantastic product and customers just poured in, right? Here's the thing. Changing people's attitudes and habits is incredibly complex. It requires trial and error. Not recognizing how difficult it is takes you out of the action, and is *truly* delusional. No theoretical business model survives first contact with reality. Instead of naïve idealism, Rosaline gave her business concept a fighting chance by creating small prototypes and quickly engaging with real situations and real customers. When you engage directly with reality, the solutions that emerge from *within* the complexity are inherently realistic and sustainable.

16. Gravity problems

This might sound contradictory, but in order to scale, you first need to do the things that won't scale at all. When trying to solve big complex problems, it seems logical to seek a solution that befits the scale of the problems. *Big problem, big solution.* But these are gravity problems: problems we can't do anything about because they're just reality, like gravity. Or it's a really, really hard problem that will require significant effort and sacrifice and runs a high risk of failure.

If I analyzed what's causing the escalating costs of insurance premiums, I may deduce that it is a direct result of escalating healthcare costs, of which a contributing factor could be the over-consumption, over-servicing and overcharging of medical services. It may be logical to think: regulate the medical costs, and insurance premiums will drop. But healthcare is one of the most complex industries to manage. This would mean reforming the healthcare system. If addressing escalating insurance premiums

required reforming the healthcare system, then it would never happen. Especially not in four years, and with US$10 million. Reforming healthcare is a gravity problem — it is not actionable for Rosaline. Instead, Rosaline accepted the realities of the complex healthcare ecosystem, which freed her to reframe the problem: Rather than wait for people to get sick and be hospitalized, how do you keep them away from the hospital in the first place?

Humans are an odd bunch. We fight reality. We fight it tooth and nail. Accepting reality can feel like the edge of despair for us. We think that accepting reality is synonymous with surrender and giving up. Our insufferable puffed-up ego has to eat humble pie. **But this is also the edge of greatness if you hold the space to accept the reality of the things you can't change instead of fighting it.**

When you're trying to solve a gravity problem, you're stuck permanently, because there's nothing you can do. Solving a gravity problem is not actionable. No matter how much money and time you throw at it, reality will win. Instead, when you accept the reality of the things you can't change, it liberates you to work around the situation and reframe the problem to be actionable. In truth, it's the constraints we face every day that force us to be innovative. If we want to solve big complex problems, we have to accept the gravity problems (the things we can't change), and find the bright spots (the things we can change). Now that's empowering!

17. How David beat Goliath

You may say that thinking big and acting small only works for start-ups with no encumbrances. It doesn't work for monolithic organizations that are ungovernable and unwieldy, where more energy is devoted to

navigating the labyrinth than achieving results. It may seem like naïve idealism to think that small solutions can solve large complex organizational problems given their scale, legacy systems and conflicting priorities. We want to believe that there is *one* perfect bureaucratic solution that will fix *everything* that is broken in the organization. The panacea to all corporate ills. Sure, with infinite patience, time and money, we could fix anything. In theory. The reality is... we wouldn't. With all that freedom, we would try to do everything, and end up moving an inch in a million directions. *Think big, act big, and you'll grow smaller*. In actually believing there is one perfect solution to fix all your organization's problems, now who is the naïve one?

The modern organization was built upon a production line approach to achieve economies of scale. This works wonderfully when things don't change. But what happens when a large complex organization has to go through change? A lot of things will go wrong. Their leaders will see problems everywhere. If they asked, "What's broken and how do we fix it?", they'll simply spin their wheels.

Instead, think big, act small. In this respect, we can find a bright spot at the SMRT. From the first day taking the helm as CEO of SMRT, Neo brought things back to basics. He set a clear mandate for everyone in the organization: deliver safe, reliable and comfortable train services. Within months, Neo reorganized the organization to bring the focus back to its primary business, which is to manage and operate train services. "Delivering safe, reliable and comfortable train services" is a tangible and measurable outcome. There's nothing subjective about it. Neo provided crystal-clear direction, showing people where to go, how to act and what goals to pursue. It spelt out in no uncertain terms what is most important

to the organization. Let's be crystal clear here. The CEO did not say, "Deliver safe, reliable and comfortable train services, but not at the cost of profit maximization."

This empowers cross-departmental teams to resolve conflicting priorities and overcome stalemates. *Will this make our train services more safe, reliable and comfortable?* If the answer is yes, then they can proceed. If the answer is no, then they know they had better re-evaluate what they're doing.

This also empowers employees to prioritize their work. *Will this make our train services more safe, reliable and comfortable?* Whether they are a janitor, a station manager or a head of the department, they know in no uncertain terms what is most important to the organization. More importantly, it empowers them to say no to requests that will take them away from the primary goal. That's how the entire organization stays focused.

This is a change from the inside out. The changes emerge from *within* the complexity. There is greater accountability. The changes are inherently realistic and sustainable, and thus more likely to stick.

18. Dancing on the edge of greatness

You are an extraordinary force for positive change. You have tremendous potential to make a difference. But this potential does not unleash itself. Greatness requires a personal commitment.

No extraordinary journey is linear. You think a successful strategy starts with the perfect idea, followed by a tonne of hard work and capital flush, and then the straight line slope to enlightenment (Figure 1.1). That's a myth. In reality, the straight line slope of enlightenment is a series of
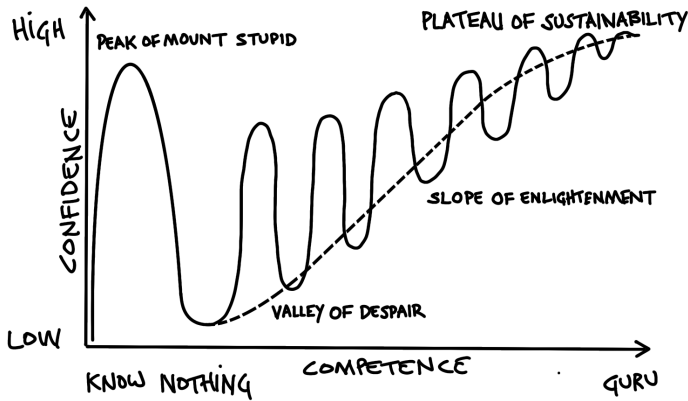
Figure 1.2:   The 14 Peaks

bumps. It's a continuous sequence of peaks and valleys, flush with uncertainty and struggle. It's more like climbing the 14 Peaks (See Figure 1.2).

On the jagged slope of enlightenment, every advance reveals a new shortcoming. You meet the hesitation, unwillingness and raw fear that comes when we go beyond the confines of our conditioning. **It can feel like the edge of despair.** Change is not easy. When we try to change things, we're tinkering with behaviors that have become automatic — we do it without much thinking and feeling. Changing ingrained habits makes us feel uncomfortable. But this is exactly where it becomes exciting. This is the gateway to our next level of performance. **This is also the edge of greatness if you hold the space to learn from your experience instead of running away from it.** By your gifts and under the authority of a higher calling, you are compelled to lead. You can't *not* do it.

18.1 *Open Mind*

An open mind relates to our intellectual capacity to be perceptive to the changes that are happening around us, and to be discerning to distill the disruptive ideas to its simplest essence. We think that solving big complex problems requires big complex solutions that befit the scale of the problems. We develop complicated theoretical models. We go into analysis paralysis. We end up creating products that nobody wants. **Think big, act big, and you'll grow smaller.** Artificial intelligence is such a buzzword these days; everyone is talking about big data. I'm not talking about big data, but deep data. Notice how Rosaline did not try to directly mitigate the escalating cost of insurance, which is a gravity problem. Rosaline accepted the realities of the complex healthcare ecosystem, which freed her to reframe the problem and create a solution that is inherently realistic and sustainable. **Think big, act small, and you'll grow bigger.**

Being open-minded requires us to have the humility to face the uncomfortable truths, rather than perpetuate the comfortable lies. We fight reality. We fight it tooth and nail. **It can feel like the edge of despair. But this is also the edge of greatness if you hold the space to accept reality instead of fighting it.**

18.2 *Open Heart*

An open heart relates to our emotional intelligence and how we feel, which allows us to connect with ourselves and others as social beings. Our instinct is to protect our hearts in the guise of being objective. *It's just business. It's not personal.* We treat people as objects. We go through the motions, driven by the whip of sheer willpower, but it's not sustainable. The corresponding change is superficial. Deep transformation does not occur. **If you're not actively empowering people, then you're disempowering them**

unintentionally. If you want people to perform at the top of their game, then it must be much more than just business. Tony didn't see Joe as just a bag carrier. He could also see the future pilot within him. It's those simple moments when you confidently open yourself to emotions that can make all the difference. *It's not just business. It's also personal.* **Engage your emotional side. Make leadership personal.**

Being open-hearted requires us to drop our corporate bulletproof vest and be emotionally sensitive. This makes us feel vulnerable. **It can feel like the edge of despair. But this is also the edge of greatness if you hold the space to regulate your emotions instead of burying them.** Emotions are PURE ROCKET ENERGY. Not learning to manage them makes you weak.

18.3 *Open Will*

An open will relates to our capacity to make decisions and choose how we respond to a situation. When transformation fails, management blames it on employee resistance. Employees blame it on lack of management support. We play the blame game. **What looks like a people problem is often a wicked growth problem.** But we don't take the shot. We play it safe. We build the Great Wall of innovation. Avoiding risk is not the same as managing risk. Pranav manages risk by creating a safehouse where innovators like Andrew can carefully test their daring and radical ideas. **Provide a safe environment where people can test their ideas without the fear of being punished.** This gives you a fighting chance to create seismic shifts in the industry, without disrupting your business.

Being open-willed requires us to have the courage to confront our fear of the unknown. **It can feel like the edge of despair. But this is also the**

edge of greatness if you hold the space to manage the risk instead of avoiding it.

19. Biggest leadership mistake

Achieving greatness is not easy. It requires a personal commitment. But in today's modern corporate world, it feels unsafe to be personal. *It's just business. It's not personal.* We go through the motions. We don't rock the boat. We turn a blind eye. We're very busy working really hard, but not getting the results that we want. And yet we persevere. We don't allow anything to touch our hearts. We're on autopilot, with no off-switch. In the truly fascinating but nonetheless endless pursuit of profit maximization and winning at all costs, we may lose touch with what it means to be human. We become more machine-like. *Being machine-like is safe.*

Let me make this vivid for you. The three biggest leadership mistakes we're making today:

1. We are not clearly articulating our vision.
2. We are not listening.
3. We are avoiding the uncomfortable conversations.

And the single biggest mistake we're making as leaders today? Well, we're only throwing away something that means so much to us — our *humanness* — just because being overwhelmed and burnt out *feels* safe.

Here's my challenge for you. When working harder is not getting you the performance you desire, STOP. Don't work harder; work smarter. This will require a leap of faith. But do it anyway. Bring your full self to work: open your mind, open your heart, open your will. Engage fully with the world

and drink up its life-giving juiciness. Make leadership personal. The result is magic.

20. What this book is about

The theme of change will pervade this entire book, but this is not a change management book. This is a leadership book, albeit in the non-traditional sense. It's a piece of satirical non-fiction. It's *Basic Instinct* dressed up as *The 7 Habits.*

In its essence, this book is about *you.* Its sole purpose, its whole reason for being, is to unlock the best way for *you* to lead. While there are plenty of captivating books on how to lead, this book focuses on the best way for *you* to lead. To step towards *your* learning edge and lead in the way only *you* can, given your experience. To be the first leader like *you.*

Of course, this seems rather preposterous. I don't know you. I've never even met you. So how can I even begin to write a book about you? One way would be for me to stop right here, give you sheets of blank pages, and ask you to start writing.

In my own experience, staring at a blank piece of paper trying to figure out who I am and what I'm here to do is one of the most daunting things I've ever had to confront. Most people run away from it; they don't think they have the answers. But I believe we already have the answers. No, you won't find it on the internet. It lies within. Our heart already knows what it wants. But it's something else altogether to articulate it. Think about all the things we can do without really being able to explain them. We rely on our non-conscious brain for all our habitual behaviors, from walking to doing our jobs. Ask someone to describe how they walk (or work), and

they will struggle to describe the actual process to you. But they can do it without even thinking.[13] That's why our wisdom does not communicate in words. Instead, it communicates through our emotions and the intestines (those good old gut feelings). It's literally back to basic instincts.

When it comes to making our big career or work decisions, we think that feelings are a nuisance; a distraction that gets in the way of logical thinking. In fact, having an emotional reaction *during* the decision-making process is indispensable. That's the way your wisdom communicates with you: *Hey, this is important to us*. Without emotion, we'd be left floundering; we can't tell the forest from the trees.

And for this reason, I wrote this book for you. I offer up real-life stories with the hope that something will resonate with you and trigger those butterfly-fluttering gut feelings. You may read something that makes you go, "Oh my gosh, that's me!" Tune into your gut; your wisdom center is trying to communicate with you. *Hey, this is important to us*. Hold the space, don't rush, be curious, and you may get an aha moment, a sudden realization, one that you didn't see coming, that you know viscerally to be true. You will have tripped over the truth. Or not. Doing it this way takes some of the seriousness out of it. The heavy lifting has been done for you. You just need to sit back, relax and tune in to your gut. This makes the experience a whole lot more light-hearted and fun.

21. Leadership is deeply personal

The *Harvard Business Review Must Read Series* will have us believe that there is a standard formula for becoming a successful CEO. A model answer for CEO excellence. They make effective leadership look almost effortless. Just add water, and instantly ready to lead.

They are all lies.

Sure, we've come across great leaders who make effective leadership look natural and effortless, like Pranav, Andrew, Rosaline, and Tony. They have that… *je ne sais quoi*. An X-factor. That winning leadership persona. They look so effortlessly confident. Working with them feels easy. They bring out the best in everyone, helping teams and organizations prosper. They're the dream bosses. They achieve extraordinary success, and they make it all look easy. And we want to be like them. But I've learned, from personal experience, that simply copying their behaviors *does not work*.

Here's the thing. What you see — their winning leadership persona and extraordinary success — is just the tip of the iceberg (See Figure 1.3).[14]

We are often inspired by what we see, which are their winning behaviors and results. That lies above the surface of the ocean. But what we see is
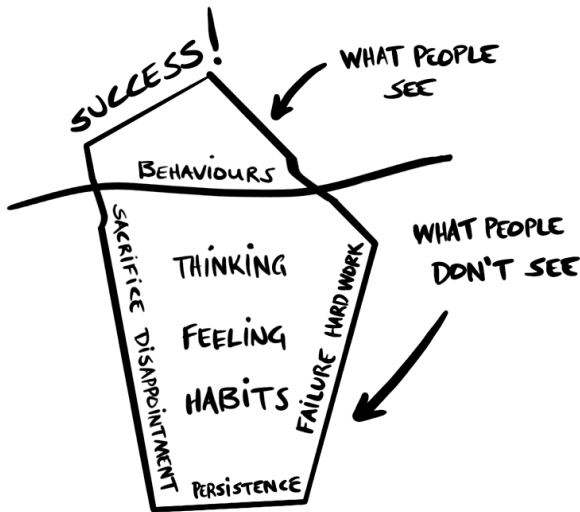

Figure 1.3: The leadership iceberg.

shaped by their mindsets — how they think, feel and make decisions — which lie below the surface of the ocean. We also do not see the sacrifices they made, the disappointments and failures they endured, which brought them to where they are today. It's invisible to us. Making leadership *look* easy is the result of a lot of hard work and careful cultivation of good mindsets over a long period. These leaders have been through the school of hard knocks, and that makes them very wise. They have built a stable, unshakeable inner wisdom through their own direct and personal experience. Wow, wisdom… that elusive genre of knowledge, unlike academic knowledge, which is necessarily acquired through blunders and mistakes, where the most enlightening lessons are recalled with deep mortification and a tinge of regret.

Like it or not, you already have a leadership persona. You have an original and ripe reputation based on how you get things done and interact with others. If you want to have that *je ne sais quoi* like these leaders, simply copying the way they look or speak won't cut the mustard. Wearing monogrammed cuff links or carrying a Chanel handbag does not automatically turn us into an effortlessly confident leader. That's like chipping away at the bits and pieces of ice at the tip of the iceberg. You'll only be going through the motions. Everyone's mindset is different. It's shaped by our experiences and peculiarities. We have distinct personalities, motivations and aptitudes. We're also shaped by the people we work with and the environment we work in. It's not one-size-fits-all.

For deep transformation to happen, you need to shift the lens of discernment from focusing on these leaders back to you. That *je ne sais quoi* comes from within. The practice of leading from the inside out means

that, in every uncertain moment, you turn inward and *feel* for what is true. That's why leadership is deeply personal.

This book is about making that deep transformation journey. And our modern corporate world provides us with many opportunities to do so. We are constantly in conflict with the difficulties we face at work. Our greatest mistake is not recognizing these difficult situations as the opportunity for learning and growth. This IS the learning edge.

This book covers the most common edgy situations that leaders face. The ones that people complain about and lose sleep over. The things that people whisper about in the corridors, but never see the light of day in the boardroom. The stuff that people talk about behind your back, but never directly in your face. It's those parts of ourselves or our organizations that we sweep under the carpet and keep in the shadows because bringing it into the light causes anxiety. This is the 14 Peaks; the series of bumps. The practice of leading from the inside out means that we stop sweeping these difficult situations under the carpet and confront the elephant in the room. **It can feel like the edge of despair. But this is also the edge of greatness if you hold the space to reflect and learn from the experience instead of running away from it.** When you can see the elephant in the room, you can pull the rug out from under its feet. You understand things for yourself, beyond anything anyone can explain to you, and your behavior changes naturally. Deep transformation occurs. You solve your problems *permanently*. You stop chipping away at the tip of the iceberg.

Each chapter will guide you through a deep transformation journey of going over the edge and coming back, completely transformed. I hope that

some of these stories will come too close for comfort for you. I want you to *feel* that frisson of excitement. It's by design. So a quick word of warning before we continue. In this journey, you may come face to face with inner demons and dysfunctional mindsets that have kept you disconnected and playing small. You can see now where the satirical non-fiction flavor comes from. I don't do this to be sarcastic or critical, or to mock anyone's weaknesses. Especially when there is none. The villain here is denial. When you stop turning a blind eye, the truth emerges. Then the solution becomes obvious. That's wisdom. You will have tripped over the truth. It's a defining moment that changes the way you see the world in an instant. It's like magic.

Of course, this is up to you. But whether you like it or not, those underlying habitual thought patterns are at work. You can pay attention to it and transform it into your superpower. Or you can deny it and have it become your kryptonite.

22. What this book is NOT about

Many leadership development programs today provide model answers based on one-size-fits-all leadership models. Having intellectual knowledge is important, but on its own, it's not enough to move us into action. That's like learning how to ride a bike by reading a book. Knowledge by itself does not change behaviors. You end up going through the motions. Deep transformation doesn't happen.

This book is about bridging the gap between knowing and doing. For deep transformation to happen, you have to make it personal. So you won't find cliched model answers, rules to be obeyed, authoritative claims guaranteeing results, nor over-simplified five-step formulas guaranteeing

success. I personally know how mentally frustrating and worrying it can be not to have a "model answer," and I apologize in advance for not giving you one. We've become so reliant on an external authority to provide us with a model answer. Somehow, somewhere, we lost that connection to our primal need to lead. Instead, we turn outwards and go shopping for model answers, judging and comparing to see which is best. The model answer of model answers. That's how we confuse ourselves.

When it comes to greatness, there are no model answers. It's deeply personal. What this book offers are lots of transformational stories, lots of ideas, within a simple framework. This is the starting point. I hope that this sets you off on your reflection process so powerfully that you can finish it on your own. Your leadership journey then becomes this wonderful deepening of your wisdom based on your experience; the authority comes from within. You're no longer adding more fuel to the fire of self-judgment — *I'm not good enough* — based on some model answer created by some outer authority.

You might ask about the model answers we learn at business school. Case studies, best practices and management models are developed based on reflecting on past experiences and studying the successes of previous leaders and organizations. This is good, we learn how not to repeat the same mistakes. We don't reinvent the wheel. However, there are times when we face challenges that cannot be addressed solely by reflecting on past experiences. Sometimes the experience of the past is not relevant. It becomes the very obstacle that stops us from coming up with a new way to respond to an emerging future. We become A ZEBRA. We work very hard to dig in our crampons on the peak of Mount Stupid (Figure 1.1),

unable to recognize our own incompetence and grossly overestimate our abilities. We end up taking a giant leap… into the past.

I am not disregarding the model answers we learned at business school. You need to know how to read P&L statements accurately to run your business successfully. The mechanics of business management are technical and strategic; they are not personal. It's the same with leadership theories. Theories are systematic and based on general principles; they are not personal. When you experience the most powerful revelations, whether through reading a book or attending business school, that is actually *you* connecting with *your* wisdom. A new piece of information touches your mind, and suddenly, your heart is transformed. It's like magic. In an instant, the way you see the world changes. Your behavior changes naturally as a result. But let's be clear here. The magic actually comes from you. The leadership theory is simply a tool to unlock the magic that is already within you. When you integrate aspects of different leadership theories from a deep place of wisdom and experience, then the theories can support each other dynamically and be incredibly powerful.

So, be prepared to be called out. And to be titillated. That's why this book is *Basic Instinct* dressed up as *The 7 Habits*. This book has been designed to bring your magic alive. But it requires your full existential participation, basic instincts and all. The magic *only* comes from you. Without it, this book becomes just another boring book. Which is my worst nightmare as its author.

23. Structure of the book

Part 1: Born for Greatness

Part 1 covers the theory and science of performance. You may be suspicious of the hubris and delusional thinking in the book, so I've added this section

to allay your concerns upfront. The research findings are unanimous. Making leadership personal is not just the right thing to do — it's ESSENTIAL to unlocking growth and performance in a high-pressure, highly disruptive work environment.

Part 2: Personal Leadership

When you hold a personal commitment to scale your impact in the world, you activate the best in yourself to perform at your peak. As a personal leader, you grow by holding the space to learn from your experience. Each chapter in this section covers a learning edge to stop playing the victim who feels powerless without direct authority. Instead, they become a creative who is committed to scale their impact in the world by partnering with others. Leaders do not need the biggest teams or fanciest tech to deliver results. They know, without question, that the greatest adversary and ally is themselves.

Part 3: People Leadership

When you hold a personal commitment to empower others to scale their impact in the world, you activate the best in yourself to activate the best in them. As a people leader, you grow by holding the space for people to make their own decisions and learn from their experiences. The higher up you climb on the corporate ladder, the more your success depends on the success of others. Each chapter in this section covers a learning edge to stop playing the hero who rescues others and provides temporary relief without dealing with the core issue. Instead, they become a coach who is committed to empower others to scale their impact in the world. Leaders do not become a hero to everyone. They make everyone a hero. Everyone wants to be the hero of their own story.

Part 4: Organization Leadership

When you hold a personal commitment to your vision, you activate the best in your organization to make that vision a reality, at scale. You articulate this vision to everyone in such a vivid and inspiring way that performance follows naturally. There's nothing more exciting than being part of a team rowing in the same direction to win the bigger game. As an organization leader, you grow by holding the space for the organization to start, grow and sustain in the market. Each chapter in this section covers a learning edge to stop playing the villain who blames others for not being smart enough or fast enough to keep up with them. Instead, they become a challenger who feels personally responsible for making the world a better place, and staying committed for an insanely long time. This is a sad fact of innovation: nobody will ever be as excited about your great idea as you are — until you get them hooked, that is.

Part 5: Culture

Whilst organization leadership is about vision, culture balances that orientation with a focus on people. You believe that your people are your organization's greatest asset; people are your secret sauce. As an organization leader, you work with your HR department to build a culture of innovation and continuous improvement within your organization. You create the right environment for people to do their best work, where people come to work every day to make a difference. You role model the desired behaviors you want to see in the organization. With a culture of innovation and continuous improvement, people can take an idea — *any* idea — and make it great. This is an agile organization that can spin on a dime. Each chapter in this section covers a learning edge to stop treating people like

resources to be extracted for profits. Instead, they become a more human organization where people become better off by working with them — happier, healthier, smarter, and naturally, more productive.

Leadership development is a life-long journey of self-discovery, and you transcend through the different stages. In other words, even when you are the CEO, you don't stop trying to be a better personal leader. In fact, being a better personal leader becomes even more important as you transcend. The lower levels are foundational. You're never done with the foundational stages. The higher you climb, the harder the job becomes; not easier. For example, suppose you are joining a new organization as the CEO. You will face a learning edge on all four levels. For example, as a personal leader, you'll be onboarding to a new role (Chapter 6). As a people leader, you'll be reboarding the team to your new leadership (Chapter 12). As an organization leader, you may be scaling the organization (Chapter 19) and trying to reduce employee turnover (Chapter 24) at the same time.

Part 6: Transformation Tools: What Is Your Leadership Brand?

This section offers simple and practical tools that you can use immediately to transform everyday challenges into an unbelievably golden opportunity for learning and growth. These tools were designed and tested to be effective with real leaders in the real world, in their stressful everyday lives. I understand that asking busy people to do more work does not work.

What's much needed but woefully lacking in professional leadership development today is a broad spectrum of social and behavioral skills, which are more complex, emotional and experiential than business management skills. I explain these complex social and behavioral skills in

such a simple way that *anyone* will dare to give it a try. The tools are designed to help you get started so powerfully that you can easily continue on your own. In essence, they are an easy way for you to do hard things. They look deceptively simple, but punches above its weight in terms of impact. Most of these tools are strategically designed to be completed in 15 minutes, the time it takes you to transition between meetings. If time is money, then these tools give you the biggest bang for your buck.

24. Frame the learning edge

In Parts 2 to 5, each chapter covers a specific difficult situation and brings you through a deep transformation journey. Each chapter follows a U-structure to frame the learning edge. See Figure 1.4.

Situation: The difficult situation the leader is facing.

Old Mindset: The dysfunctional behavior pattern that has become automatic but is no longer relevant and keeps the leader disconnected.
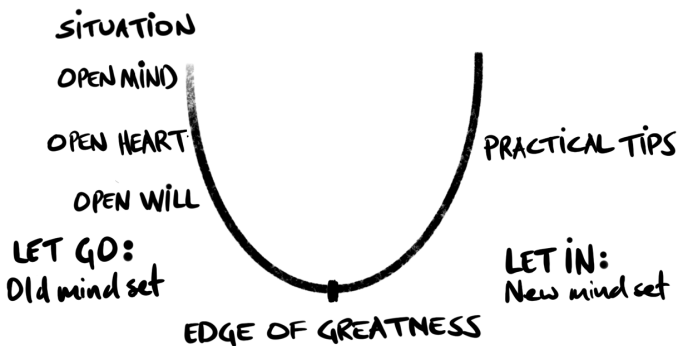

Figure 1.4:   Frame the learning edge.

Open Mind: The leader stops denying the the inconvenient truths that prevent the future from emerging and engages with reality to uncover bright spots that emerge from *within* the complexity.

Open Heart: The leader stops running away from difficult emotions and unlocks the source of joy, love and wonder.

Open Will: The leader stops avoiding making the hard decisions, thus managing the risk of failure instead of completely avoiding it.

New Mindset: The new positive behavior pattern that helps the leader stay connected and make a meaningful impact.

Practical Tips: Practical suggestions on how to apply the new mindset to the situation and do things differently.

Each chapter starts with the external perspective of the situation. This is the tip of the iceberg. We then turn the lens inwards and dive below the surface of the ocean, making the invisible visible. This is where the mindset shift and real learning happen. *Open mind. Open heart. Open will.* We then resurface on the other side, transformed, and end with practical tips on how you can address the situation with the new mindset. Each chapter, therefore, has both breadth and depth. You don't need a big solution to solve a big problem. Using this method, you can identify the micro-changes within your control that you can make *now*, which are too small to fail, but when done consistently, lead to something bigger. Now that's practical AND powerful.

The change frame as shown in Figure 1.4 provides guardrails to guide you through a deep transformation journey. These stories are NOT model

answers. They merely serve as a reference to get you started reflecting on *your* experiences. I hope that these stories trigger some epic moments from your extraordinary life at work. You start off so powerfully that you can complete it on your own.

So sit back, relax and tune into your body. Don't just read from your head. That's like trying to run a 100-meter race with one leg. The story may *look* different on the surface, but the underlying patterns resonate at a deeper level. Remember that our wisdom is made available to us emotionally and intestinally. That magical butterfly-fluttering feeling — that's all from you. That's you unlocking your wisdom. These insights are precious. Write down whatever memory bubbles — thoughts, emotions, situations, people — that arise as you read each chapter.

Another quick word of warning here. It's only natural that you will resist carrying out this instruction. After reading the chapter, you might say:

I agree.
I disagree.
I am confused.
I have nothing else to say.
There's nothing to say.
This is ridiculous.
I don't have a pen.
Let me read another chapter first.

The list goes on, but you get the point.

Hold the space. Be curious. Don't run away from it. Do not censor it. Write it down. Whether it's positive or negative, ridiculous or reasonable, funny or serious, write it down. Because everything you experience — your

thoughts, your feelings — is data. If nothing comes up for you, write it down, too. *Everything* is data. Your task is to defer judgment and simply observe the data.

Here are some prompts to get your creative insights going if you get stuck:

What struck me?
What annoyed me?
What's different here?
How does this make me feel?
How does this validate what I already know?

Remember, when it comes to greatness, there is no model answer. There are no absolute "right" or "wrong" answers. Our wisdom is brilliantly intelligent. It is exquisitely contextual, time-sensitive and personal. And it has its own priorities. It's not interested in being right or wrong according to some model answer from outside. It's only interested in what *feels* true and powerful inside. Hold the space to have that strategic conversation with yourself. Crystallize the intuitive ideas that come up for you and take your best step forward into the future with intention and purpose.

25. How to engage with this book

My wish is for this book to be practical. Read through it once, then keep it handy as a go-to survival guide. The best way to engage with this book is to go directly to the most relevant chapter when you encounter a similar situation — in the moment of need. For example, if you're about to have a difficult conversation with your employee, take 15 minutes to read Chapter 14: Dealing with a Difficult Employee. Then take another 15 minutes to frame the Uncomfortable Conversation (Chapter 35).

Past: As a leader who went through a similar situation in the past, you can use this book to reflect on that experience. Maybe it was a stressful experience at that point in time, but now you have regained equilibrium and it's safe to understand what actually happened. You may gain a newfound perspective about yourself. It helps to know that the experience made you stronger; you're clearer about your values. You may realize that you've forgotten what it's like to do something extraordinary. Maybe you've been playing safe for too long, and your wisdom wants you to reconnect with your authentic power.

Present: As a leader going through a similar situation right now, you can use this book to see things from a different perspective. Stop being a bystander to your life; a gulf of misspent life, lived according to someone else's rules. Not when you are a glorious shining star. Stop going through the motions. Get unstuck and lean into the adversity with calmness and resilience. Center yourself and show up powerfully. It helps to know that you are not alone. You've got this!

Future: As an ambitious up-and-coming leader who has not encountered these situations, it helps to know that this is the royal road to performance. It is not something to avoid. Uncomfortable and distressing as it may be, it is a golden opportunity for growth and self-development. There is a real leadership gap. It does not look like it to you, with so many "senior" leaders ahead of you, but looks are deceiving. Ramp up your leadership skills. Seek out those uncomfortable challenges that most "senior" leaders shy away from and leapfrog in your career.

You can also use this book to empathize with someone who is going through a similar situation.

Employee: As an employee dealing with a difficult boss, this book can help you understand where the boss is coming from. The same applies to

a boss dealing with a difficult employee. Remember, you're on the same team. If you support your bosses, they will pull you up. If you support your employees, they will push you up. Everyone wins.

Friend: As a concerned friend, partner or family member, you may notice someone close to you going through a similar situation, but they may not be able to articulate it. This book can help you understand what they may be experiencing, so that you know how best to support them. Being overbearingly positive without understanding the difficulty is not helpful.

26. Everyone can lead

You may not feel ready to lead the change. You think there is a better person out there who should take the lead. Someone more knowledgeable and qualified. Someone who actually has all the answers.

But how true is that? Why not you?

What if you're brilliant, talented and powerful? What if you have a hidden superpower and you're meant to bring something extraordinary into this world?

At your best, you're a powerful force for positive change: driven, conscientious and highly motivated to make the world a better place. You don't accept the status quo, not when the future can be so much better. You're ambitious, but your ambition is not self-serving. Rather, you feel personally responsible for making the world a better place. This drive gives you tremendous potential to make a difference.

There's an element of greatness in everyone. We all have the potential for greatness within us. We are all meant to shine. It's not only in some of us; it's in every one of us.

27. You have to choose (to engage with the book)

Whether you realize it or not, you are standing at the edge of greatness on all levels of scale: as an individual, as a team, and as an organization. But this potential for greatness does not unleash itself. You have to choose to unleash it. That's the problem with greatness: it requires a personal commitment. In the vile and terminally exciting modern corporate world, it can be a fight to switch off the autopilot mode. It requires you to turn the lens inwards and dive into the unknown depths of your mind. You'll meet the hesitation, unwillingness and raw fear that you encounter when you go beyond the confines of your conditioning. The fight is within. No one else can do it for you. Some will even try to stop you. Change is not easy, but easy is not the goal. Greatness is.

And ultimately that's what this book is about. To help you recognize that you already have greatness within. You simply have to reconnect with it. My wish is that you enjoy the life-changing stories, gain an epiphany or two, and fundamentally change the trajectory of your professional career and your organization.

As you dance on the edge of greatness, people will be inspired by your example, and they will want to do the same. You empower others to reconnect with their power. Like how a rising tide raises all ships, your success brings others up with you. It begins with you.

So take that leap of faith. Don't shy away from ambitious goals. Once you understand what's important to you, you'll be relentless in turning your dreams into reality. The result is magic.