



## Leading From Your Best Self: Develop Your Executive Poise, Presence and Influence to Maximize Your Potential

**By Rob Salafia**  
**McGraw-Hill**

These excerpts contain highlights from McGraw-Hill's forthcoming *Leading From Your Best Self: Develop Your Executive Poise, Presence and Influence to Maximize Your Potential*.

### From the Prelude:

If you are reading this book, the concept of being your Best Self and the topic of executive presence has caught your attention and interest.

## About the Author



**Rob Salafia, MS**

Rob combines two decades of experience as a top leadership development executive with a well-established career in the performing arts. He has a passion for coaching leaders to develop their presence, tell compelling stories and establish authentic connections. He assists leaders to build emotional and narrative intelligence and share vision and strategy in a compelling and relevant way.

As a speaker, learning partner and workshop facilitator, Rob has worked with Fortune 500 companies including, Sapient Consulting, ING Bank, NN Group, News Corp, American Express, Sony Music Entertainment, Thought Ensemble, Metro AG, Philips International, Alliance Bernstein, BASF, Abbott, Merrill Lynch, Fidelity, and Royal Bank of Scotland.

In his work as an executive coach, Rob finds great satisfaction in guiding leaders through transitions to more senior roles, as well as coaching senior executives and leadership teams to enhance team effectiveness and prepare for strategic presentations.

Rob is a lecturer at MIT Sloan School of Management and a member of the coaching cadres for MIT's Sloan Fellows, AMP and EMBA Programs.

What's unique about Rob is that for the first half of his career he was a performing artist where he traveled the globe delivering his unique, one-person variety show.

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Maybe...

- You have been passed up for a promotion—even though you are clearly smart enough and technically competent. **No one can put a finger on exactly what the issue is, but it's enough to hold you back.**
- You're a manager and someone on your team has the potential to shine, but is struggling to **find their voice.** You are looking for a way to initiate to a deeper conversation.
- You have a burning desire to make a difference. It's not about the money any longer. **You are seeking guidance and an inspirational spark.**

If you identify with any of these statements, you are in luck. This book is designed to help you recognize, develop, and channel your most natural and gifted parts of yourself into your work and personal life.

### **Why is developing executive poise and presence important?**

It's simple. Externally, we are evaluated by how well we show up and navigate the work environment and culture. Those in charge of making promotion decisions need to confidently answer questions such as “Do we see this person as promotable?”, “Do others listen to his or her ideas?”, and “Will this person be a good fit on the team and able to influence the decision-making process?”

More important, however, are the intrinsic motivations and deep-seated needs we have to live an authentic life. By cultivating executive presence, we not only improve how others experience us, but enhance our capacity to lead a life that moves us toward the ends of our own choosing.

### **From the Introduction**

#### **“Rooted in the Theater and Performing Arts”**

Psychologist Albert Bandura, in his work on social cognitive theory, asserts that theater is a powerful way to build self-efficacy, or a belief in one's ability to accomplish a task or succeed in specific situations.

In the world of business, this is described as self-confidence, and it is a critical characteristic for career success. In this book, I will bring to life many lessons that I have learned as a theater professional turned executive coach, how you can apply these lessons in your roles at work and in life.

#### **On Becoming a Natural**

When we meet a person who shows up with a natural and confident presence, we assume that they were born that way. In truth, some are. Most, however, have learned that it takes training, preparation and experimentation to achieve this level of confidence.

For the actor or well-trained performer, we learn that it is the nuance of how we say what we say that makes the difference. We learn that to appear natural in front of others, and for our messages to land well, it takes discipline and practice. We focus on developing our minds, hearts and bodies. We learn to develop vocal and physical flexibility and range. We learn to prepare for our parts, inhabit our roles, land on stage, hit our marks and deliver our lines. We learn how to relax inside of ourselves, get focused and connect authentically with our fellow actors and our audience. We learn that being present is both a choice and a necessity.

### **From Chapter 1: The Art of Being Extraordinary**

As human beings, we are all born with a unique set of natural gifts and talents. Maybe we have a knack for numbers. Maybe we naturally bring people together to collaborate. Maybe we possess a killer sense of humor that puts people at ease. No matter what, it's a wonderful part of human experience to really see someone in their element. Finding a way to draw upon our intrinsic gifts and talents can make the difference between having a good career and a great one. Moreover, cultivating our gifts and utilizing them at the right moments and for the right reasons can also deeply enrich our personal lives.

When we take the time to develop an understanding of the strengths, talents, qualities and gifts that we bring to various situations and what others

appreciate about us, we begin to form a portrait of our Best Self. We gain an understanding of what is remarkable about us and the value that we bring to our roles. What makes us extraordinary.

### **Take Your Best Self with You**

It was July 2017, and I was attending the Leadership Forum at Silver Bay in upstate New York. Inside a century-old stone meeting hall, I sat at a table having a conversation with Hope, an early-career woman. After completing an exercise, Hope said to me, “the director in my office told me that I need to improve my executive presence.”

As she shared this I noticed her shoulders slump and her voice weaken. She looked at a loss. I acknowledged her feelings and invited her to talk more about it. Hope explained that she really loved her job, but that there was a senior manager in her department that was being excessively hard on her. When she was in front of this person, both Hope’s posture and voice would automatically grow weak, and she would lose her confidence.

She’d been entrusted with an important presentation to the senior team in a couple of weeks and was understandably very concerned.

I paused and asked her to tell me about a time in her life when she felt her best, most alive, and confident. After considering for a moment, a gentle smile came on her face. She’d played flute in an award-winning high school marching band. --a band so good that they consistently won at Columbus Day Parade in NYC! I asked Hope to show me what she looked like when she got ready to play. Immediately her posture and presence transformed. She sat up tall and confident as she lifted her arms into her playing position. She exuded joy.

Hope wasn’t just a talented contributor either. She led the whole flute section and expected excellence from them. She emphasized to her team the importance of staying focused and in-sync at all times—even when they were just marching and not playing. If the judges noticed even one person looking away or being out of formation they would deduct a quarter point. This was the margin of winning or losing as a key principle for winning.

As Hope spoke, I noticed that she was no longer overwhelmed and depressed. Rather, she was energized, hopeful, and confident. We discussed how she could take this re-discovered confidence with her to work. It was a perfect sense memory to guide her behavior under stress and find her way back to her Best Self. Together, we created a plan to take her Best Self to her upcoming and critical presentation in front of the entire senior team.

### **Hope Discovers Her Keys to Being Extraordinary**

As a musician and member of an award-winning marching band, Hope had developed a system for learning and a mindset of excellence. She knew what it meant to perform under pressure. Now it was time for her to step into a leadership moment in front of the senior team. From our coaching conversations, Hope discovered four keys for getting into an optimal state of body, mind and spirit.

### **Find Your Signature Stance**

Through her flute training, Hope was taught to stand tall yet relaxed. Her arms needed to be raised with her hands placed on the flute in a comfortable yet optimal position. This was likely uncomfortable when she was first learning this posture, but through years of practice it became second nature. Then, under the stress of playing in front of audiences she learned how to maintain and utilize the form to bring out her best performance.

By getting back into this posture and visualizing herself performing, she sent a clear and positive message to herself: a sense memory of confidence. She felt more focused, more engaged, and more physically present. Her body, mind, and spirit were in sync.

This was her *Signature Stance*. I saw the changes happen before my eyes and I experienced her as being natural, confident, and powerful.

### **Play to Be Heard**

Hope had expressed that in certain situations at work, she would lose her confidence, and her voice would get weak. However, when she took on her flute playing posture and visualized herself playing in the band, she noticed that her body relaxed and her breath became stronger. Developing breath control was part of her training as a flutist.

She was taught to “play to be heard.” When she spoke about playing to be heard, the cadence and tone in her voice became stronger, more relaxed, expressive, and clear.

We discussed how she could more easily access this power in her voice while speaking in front of others. This was her second key to being her Best Self.

### **Mindset of Excellence**

The third key for Hope was recalling her role as a leader in the band. She held a strong vision of excellence for herself and her fellow flute players. We discussed how she could hold this vision of excellence and lead herself. Could she be her own coach and demand the very best from herself? Could she put into practice the same principles that she had reinforced with her fellow flute players? How could she enlist others in her development and hold herself accountable? Once she discovered the answers to these questions she felt more in control of the presentation.

### **Find Your Groove**

The fourth key for Hope appeared when she started humming her favorite song that the band played. This sense of rhythm, tempo, and timing created a fluid state of mind for Hope. In this state she experienced a sense of physical, mental and emotional congruence. She felt the strength and confidence she’d earned from years of training.

All told, these elements became her four triggers with which she could recreate a state of positivity, focus, and confidence in the face of the most intimidating of situations. In other words, these were her keys to being extraordinary.

## **From Chapter 2: The Art of Landing**

### **Signals of Presence**

From the perspective of an actor or performing artist, the development of executive poise, presence, influence and leadership agility begins with how you show up and the message you send without saying a word. Whenever we interact with others we give off signals.

These signals are coded into our voice, facial gestures, emotions and body language. Let’s look at these from the receiver’s point of view. In their minds they are looking for certain signals from you

that, depending upon the situation, will resonate authentically or not.

- They are fully present and engaged. They have excellent posture. They stand tall. They exude confidence.
- They are relaxed and comfortable in their own skins. They are composed.
- They have a steady, open and personal gaze. They don’t have any extraneous movements.
- They fill the room with their presence. It is palpable. It has an impact on you. And yet they seem approachable, not guarded.
- When they speak, their communication is congruent—in other words, their face, body, voice and emotions all send the same message.

### **Cultivating Poise and Composure**

It’s one thing to maintain composure when times are easy and everyone is amicable. But what about when everyone at the conference table is sniping at each other and reasonable discussion’s gone out the window? Or when a coworker throws you a curveball? In such high-pressure and contentious situations, it can be very easy to become reactive—or acting in response to a situation rather than creating or controlling it. When we’re in reactive mode, we’re more likely to get swept up in the emotional heat of the moment and fly off the handle. That rarely helps anyone on a personal or professional level.

This is where breathing techniques can be exceptionally helpful. That might sound strange, but practicing your breathing can help you relax, focus and stay grounded even when the heat is on.

Commitment to a breathing practice can’t be understated. You don’t need to move away to the mountains and immerse yourself in a breathing boot camp. Even just practicing 10 minutes a day (every day, mind you) can make a huge difference.

Over time, you’ll notice something amazing happen. You’ll get used to making the most fundamental of choices: to breathe. That will have a ripple effect, and you’ll begin to notice all the other small but significant moments in your life when you have a choice. Your everyday awareness will widen. You’ll be able to stay composed and above the fray, rather than getting sucked in and getting defensive. You’ll remain composed during tense moments and

capable of observing the behaviors of your coworkers. By not getting emotionally invested in a squabble or tense moment, you'll be free to take control of the moment and advance the conversation to more productive outcomes.

### Leadership Agility

We are able to maintain poise, access our critical thinking skills more quickly, and remain objective and regulated during the most stressful interactions and decisions we make.

Now, we are better able to:

- *Read our Audience* - interpret the facial expressions and mannerisms of others.
- *Connect the Dots* - analyze and infer the meaning behind the words and read between the lines
- *Suspend Judgment* - pause and gather more data before jumping to biased conclusions, decisions and actions.
- *Change our Point of View* - take on multiple perspectives and see the implications and consequences of our actions more clearly.

All of these skills form the basis for building critical thinking skills and leadership agility. The **Agile Leader** is one that is poised and responsive to an ever-changing business environment, and able to make clear and rational decisions in a timely manner.

### From Chapter 3: The Art of Expanding

#### Have any of you ever felt small in someone else's presence before?

I would imagine, yes. It could be that moment at a gathering when you walk up to a senior leader that you have always wanted to meet, and he looks right through you like you don't even exist. Or, when you finally summon up the courage to speak at the team meeting, only to have your point reiterated by your boss with no reference to or acknowledgement of your previous contribution. How did this make you feel? Undervalued, insignificant, or even worthless? When we feel small it is very difficult to access our Best Self.

Whenever we find ourselves feeling small or crumbling in the presence of others, we have a choice. This is precisely the time when we must take a risk to go beyond our self-limiting thoughts and step into the fire. The choice is to expand.

#### Have you ever felt large in someone else's presence?

I would also expect the answer is yes. Can you describe the feeling? Do you feel engaged, respected, and valued for your contributions? What did the person say or do that made you feel this way?

When we feel large, we experience ourselves as expanded, confident, and open and we are better able to access our Best Self.

One day I had to make an introduction to a class in executive education program at Harvard Business School Executive Education program. I stepped up in the back of the auditorium and caught the attention of the professor. He was the faculty chair of the program, a finance guy, and someone who was funny and a bit nerdy. He saw me in the back of the room and waved.

The class was engaged in an activity and it was difficult for him to focus their attention, so he reached back, grabbed a plastic bottle of sparkling water on his desk, and banged it on the table like a gavel. The bottle exploded all over him. He and everyone in the class immediately burst out laughing. The moment of absurdity relaxed and focused everyone. At this point everyone calmed down, and he proceeded to wave me down with a smile and introduce me. I stepped into his space feeling large and confident when making my introduction.

The professor was fully comfortable with himself and this sense of self-acceptance garnered a deep respect from his students. He took his work seriously, but himself lightly. He had a presence that was both confident and approachable. It also allowed him to create a space for others to feel large, comfortable and confident in themselves as well.

This sense of feeling large is directly connected to our sense of confidence. Many people who struggle with confidence often compare themselves to others. True confidence is honestly assessing your own value, experience, intelligence, and capabilities, while also valuing and respecting the capabilities and contributions of others.

The art of expanding can grow if we look at it as layers of experience:

- How others experience us.
- How others experience themselves when they are with us.
- The story others tell about us when we are gone.

Understanding how you are experienced is important, because how others experience you and the impressions that you leave with others affects their response to your leadership and your ideas.

### **From Chapter 4: The Art of Expanding into Conflict**

In a perfect world, we could easily master the art of expansion consistently across many situations. But as anyone who operates in the working world knows, your Best Self and your ability to expand is constantly challenged.

You might have a coworker who seems to live to undermine you or a superior who only sees what you are doing wrong. You might also work in a culture that promotes competition to such a degree that it pits peer against peer.

Whatever the case, most conflict has to do with difference. These differences can be opinions, backgrounds, gender, leadership style, expectations, motivations, or personalities.

The art of expanding into conflict means learning to expand into difference even when your Best Self feels under threat. The challenge is how to stay large during moments of conflict.

The more we learn how to not only navigate through conflict, but actually expand into it, the more we realize the tremendous payoff in terms of honing reputation, building trust, reducing risk, and improving business results.

“What do dashing Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and comedian Jerry Seinfeld have in common?” Zuri Davis asks in her article, “Justin Trudeau Shot Down A Heckler In A Town Hall, And Jerry Seinfeld Actually Responded.” The answer: “Well, for one thing, they both have the same method for responding to hecklers.”

When hecklers attempted to disrupt a town hall hosted by Trudeau, he didn’t dismiss them, ignore them, or try to fight fire with fire. Rather, “Trudeau artfully engaged his hecklers, at one point asking the audience to give applause to the heckler for sharing their thoughts.”

Many writers linked Trudeau’s empathetic approach to Jerry Seinfeld’s, quoting from Seinfeld’s Reddit AMA: “Very early on in my career, I hit upon this idea of being the Heckle Therapist. So that when people would say something nasty, I would immediately become very sympathetic to them, and try to help them with their problem, and try to work out what was upsetting them, and try to be very understanding with their anger. It opened up a whole new, fun avenue for me as a comedian, and no one had ever seen that before.”

“Seinfeld would say things like, ““you seem so upset, and I know that’s not what you wanted to have happen tonight. Let’s talk about your problem,”” to ease the outburst.”

Seinfeld’s approach is about expanding into conflict. When we feel fear, regret, loss, or some kind of negative emotion, and when it has a tight hold on us, we can easily be triggered and project these unresolved feelings onto others. In most cases, resolution of conflict begins with building an awareness of and releasing our own negative emotions.

This is especially relevant for leaders. Once they have gained a deeper level of self-awareness and have learned how to release negative emotions, they naturally become more empathetic and capable of expanding into the experience of another person. This in turn gives them a much better path to dealing with the conflict.

## From Chapter 5: The Art of Developing Physical and Vocal Presence

### What is the message we are sending without saying a word?

Our physical and vocal presence can send conflicting messages without our awareness. Others are either drawn to or diverted from the energy that we project.

As an actor and performing artist, I have worked for many years to understand how my emotions show up on my face and in my body. As a sales executive, I didn't think about how my emotions appeared. I would often find myself crunched for time. And would walk around the office with a strained expression on my face.

It wasn't until I spoke with some folks in my office that I realized I was frowning. My expression communicated that I was very busy, so they tuned me out. I definitely did not want this to be my signature expression and I realized that I had some work to do on myself.

### When you breathe your audience breathes with you.

This is an essential principle in theater. When you are about to step onto a stage or in front of a group, take a second to pause and take a breath, then smile, connect, breathe out, and land with the people that you will be speaking to. Let them take you in. If you try this in smaller groups you might begin to notice a number of people take a breath with you. This is an important concept to understand. It is based on a psychological term first coined by neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti: mirror neurons. These are a type of brain cell that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action. It shows up as a gut-level reaction to other people's actions. It is how we understand, immediately and instinctively, their thoughts, feelings and

By taking a breath before you speak you will relax and focus yourself. In turn, your audience will take a breath, relax and focus with you.

### Find Your Spark

In a recent program, I worked with a Dutch engineer. He came to my session in Rotterdam aiming to become a better leader and communicator. When the first day was over he gave me a ride back to my hotel. In the car, he shared with me that his kids go to circus school and that he volunteers there a lot. I asked him what he liked about the experience. He said he loved the spirit of the circus performers and he got this wide and enthusiastic expression on his face. He literally came alive!

The next day in the program, when he was about to give a presentation, I reminded him of our conversation and the expression that he had on his face. He immediately got it and used it as a sense memory to give him a spark.

It totally changed his presence, how he engaged with the group and how he brought his message to life. It also changed how we engaged with him. A week after the session he wrote me a note saying that this was the most memorable part of the session, and that he has used it several times as a positive trigger to unlock his energy and expressiveness.

## From Chapter 6: The Art of Transitioning

One of the dilemmas of work and life is the sheer number of tasks that need to get done in a day. Moreover, it appears the more technology introduced to help us get all these things done, the more distracted we become. Learning to navigate transitions in both our work and personal lives is precisely a place where, if we put our attention, we can greatly increase the quality of our relationships, effectiveness and overall contributions.

If we think about it, our days at work are filled with transitions. We are always moving from one thought to another, one space to another, one meeting to another. How we manage ourselves through these transitions is an art.

Any larger transition involves a shift of the following:

- Shift of mindset
- Shift of role and identity
- Shift of behaviors and actions

By developing a sense for the people, environment and systems within your new organization, you can begin to think about the personal adjustments that you might need to make to be successful. What is the mindset that you will need to adopt? What is the most important role that you can play to help your new team or organization achieve its strategic goals? What do you need to stop doing? And remember, your presence has a huge impact on the people and environment. A smile, a pause, and a positive observation can go a long way in paving your path to success.

### **From Chapter 7: The Art of Self Discovery and Authenticity**

It is critical for leaders to know what they are good at, what they want, what they stand for and what they want to be known for. It is perfectly acceptable for a leader to have a bit of a showman in them; however, there needs to be an equal if not more amount of humility, vulnerability and transparency to balance the equation. Otherwise, it will feel burdensome and unsustainable to the leader, and void of substance to the receiver.

In previous chapters, we've reflected upon the moments when we were in our Best Self. These experiences build self-confidence and self-efficacy because they involve overcoming large obstacles that require us to reach down deep and discover qualities and untested parts of ourselves. These moments build resilience.

Taking the time to reflect upon your personal journey is a clear path toward discovering your many identities and forming an integrated sense of self. Think of it like conducting your own personal archeological dig. As a story archeologist, you search for deep narratives within your personal history and then mine for and unearth your most powerful stories. Contained within these stories are the clues to the values and principles that are most

important to you, that describe you at your best. These stories serve to illustrate the challenges that you have experienced in your life, how you faced these challenges and the lessons that you learned. They also serve as an indisputable window into your core identity and validation of principles that underscore your leadership.

### **From Chapter 8: The Art of Relating and Authentic Connection**

At our core, we all want to be seen for who we truly are, for our gifts and talents, for the value that we bring, and for an opportunity to put these to the best and highest use. When we feel seen by another person we feel large inside of ourselves. We feel safe to bring our Best Self forward. This is when we do our best work, when we have our best insights, and when our results far exceed expectations.

#### **Stop Doing and Start Relating**

At the beginning of my performing career I tried very hard to make my audience pay attention to me. I wanted so badly to be good at what I was doing and be successful that I never took the time to understand the dynamics of the relationship between a performer and their audience. As someone whose performance style was based on audience participation, this was not a good thing. It wasn't until I started working with my theater director and coach that I learned how to establish this connection.

#### **Levels of Relating**

How many of your daily interactions are solely transactional in nature? What is preventing you from elevating the way you relate to your clients, employees, colleagues or senior leaders? What question could you ask that will stay with them, that will go to the heart of the matter, and that they will remember and appreciate you for?

#### **Authentic Connection**

This level of relating is based on shared values, trust, and the appreciation of someone's talents, capabilities and limitations. When operating on this level, we lead with a sense of transparency, intimacy and vulnerability, as well as with a deep respect for

the differences that lay between each other. It takes courage to step into this type of relating.

### **From Chapter 9: The Art of Story Sharing, Storytelling and Meaning Making**

*Story sharing* is the central means of relationship building and creating a sense of intimacy between people. When we begin to share our authentic stories, we drop all pretenses and get real with one another. Story sharing allows us to get beyond our biases, and to see someone for who they truly are. Story sharing is vulnerability in action.

*Storytelling* for me is the active process of mining for and extracting important moments in our lives. It is the act of polishing and presenting these stories in an intentional manner. Storytelling is the art of a leader.

As humans we are essentially curious beings. We have a deep desire and need to create meaning from the environment and events that surround us. If we want to inspire and motivate others to purposeful action, we need to be able to speak to what moves people.

To be a leader of culture, we need to make a shift in our role and identity to that of chief meaning-maker, cultural protagonist and storyteller. In this role, we learn to develop and draw upon our narrative intelligence and story capabilities and become the advocate, champion and standard bearer for the espoused values and behaviors within the organization. It is our job to seek to understand the intrinsic motivations of the culture and begin to look at where people derive meaning in their work. In doing so, we get beyond our own myopic perspective and learn what it will take to enable change and encourage the adoption of new ideas.

*The why of storytelling* is about understanding the effective and strategic use of a story in a business context to convey complex information, to illustrate values, to teach a lesson, as well as to break through a barrier and galvanize action.

*The how of storytelling* is about knowing both the structure of a good story, as well as having the confidence and ability to actually tell a great story. To be a storyteller.

*The what of storytelling* is about choosing the right story for the right time that will achieve the results you are looking for. If you do this correctly, your story will speak to the “why” in the hearts of your audience.

“The best storytellers make it look easy. As a listener we are immediately pulled in by the glint in their eyes, the cadence and variety in their voice, and the expression on their face. It’s like they are telling the story with their whole body. We are particularly captured by how they make us feel.

Great storytellers are willing to open themselves up and allow us to be in the story with them. We feel what they feel. We see what they see. And, most of all, we gain the realization and insight from the experience that they have had. Their story is our story.”

### **From Chapter 10: The Art of Influence**

#### **The Power of Metaphor**

Our jobs as leaders demand that we be fully present, think beyond the literal, and create meaning. For technical and analytical people, this requires that we retrain our patterns of thinking and be able to transition easily from the analytical to the kinesthetic, visual and emotional parts of our brain.

Getting good at the use of metaphor builds **Leadership Agility**. It enhances our associative powers, builds personal flexibility and responsiveness, and enables us to connect with the thoughts and feelings of others.

#### **The Power of Intention**

In communication, our intention amplifies our gestures, voice and emotion in a way that will have the most impact on our intended audience. This is the primary mechanism that actors use to interpret

the words that they will say, to achieve their desired outcome.

Leaders who rest on “I’m the leader, people should just do as their told” cannot maximize their power and influence. Effective influencers can inspire, motivate, and persuade others to join them on the journey. Each of the people who you hope to influence will be bringing their own experiences and biases to the table--biases that, if not overcome, could thwart your leadership efforts. A clear and precise intention, combined with thoughtful and figurative language, can position you to be at your most persuasive and influential.

### **From Chapter 11: The Art of Leading Change**

The first job of the cultural protagonist and chief meaning maker is to dig into your organization’s history and seek out the most powerful narratives of change, resilience, innovation and leadership – your organization’s story of self. A leader can leverage the power of story to guide innovation within an organization.

**Then** - The leader must first remind others of their heritage. They do this by unearthing and sharing success stories of the past. Where and who were we? What vision did we have for ourselves? What obstacles did we have to overcome to achieve success? The listeners will recognize themselves in the story and be drawn in. This allows them to celebrate their finest attributes.

**Now** - The leader must discover and make sense of the stories of the confusing present. These reside within the people of the organization who are in touch with its customers. What has changed? What is being asked of us now? The leader must collect, interpret, synthesize and validate them for the rest of the organization. These stories include a vivid picture of what could be, as well as the challenges that must be overcome to achieve it.

**Next** - The leader must then tell the story of the innovative future. Are our current beliefs, attitudes and ways adequate to handle the path forward? What attributes must we embody to meet and

exceed the new challenges? This story ties back to the spirit of their beginnings and models the new behaviors necessary for success.

The examples in this chapter demonstrate how one story, one presentation, one approach won’t fit all situations. You must *step back* and get a firm handle on the problem that is in front of you, and then *step into* the role as a leader of change.

### **From Chapter 12: The Art of Making Great Presentations**

As every leader knows, making presentations is an important part of their role. There is an expectation that, as a leader, you are a confident and competent public speaker. But how often is this the case? How many times do we see a leader step up behind a podium and deliver a factual but boring speech? Is it that they overestimate their capabilities? Are they not aware of the impact that they are having on their audience? Is it that they do not see the value of taking the time to prepare and rehearse?

As a performing artist, I have learned to build an open and honest connection with my audience. My purpose as a performer was to lift my audience out of their day-to-day worries for an hour or so, and to feel what it was like to let go and play. It was my strategy to involve my audience to the point where they became not only an invested audience member, but a willing and integral part of the performance. We created it together.

#### **Stepping Back into the Fire**

It was October 1999 and I was working at Boston University. This was my transitional job between being a full-time performer and leaping into the world of corporate learning. My role was as a rehabilitation counselor and career coach for people with emotional disabilities. At the same time, I was getting my master’s in business administration, delivering corporate training programs across campus, and doing some occasional performing gigs on the weekends. Most of my days involved sitting in a chair and talking. This was a big transition from being a full-time performing artist.

One day I got a call from an old performing friend, Tony. He said that he was organizing a holiday show for a large corporate client, 2,500 people, and that they were interested in having a wire walker kick off the show. He said to me, “This is what you do, right?” I paused for a second to take in exactly what he was asking and then replied, “Yes, that’s right!” “Great!” he said. “Are you interested?”

In what felt like an eternity, I had a massive inner dialogue. On the one hand it had been almost five years since I had walked. I said to myself, “Are you crazy?” On the other hand, I desperately missed the excitement and energy of being in front of a large audience. In my mind I said, “I know how to do this. I can do this.” And before I knew it I replied, “Yes!” He said, “Great! How much would you charge?”

This is where it got difficult. I had to put the price up high enough to make it worth it, and that if they said no, I would not be disappointed. Maybe even relieved! He said, “That’s a lot of money, but I will ask them. I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

The next day Tony called and let me know that the client had accepted my offer. In that moment I experienced a blast of excitement, but also felt a small bead of sweat form on my forehead. This was no easy task I had accepted. I had two months to prepare myself for the show. A full eight weeks. I knew what I needed to do and immediately created a plan of action. Two days a week I was in the gym doing mostly leg lifts. Two other days a week I went across the street to the theater department to a small room that had pins in the walls specifically designed to rig up a wire. This is where I had first learned my craft and where I felt very comfortable.

Four weeks into the process I realized I was in trouble. My legs were getting stronger and I felt good at the lower height, but I just could not get my balance and confidence at the higher, seven-foot level. I sat down for a moment and had to figure a way to get this done. Quitting was not an option.

After a few minutes, I knew what I needed to do. I needed to ask for help. So, I called my old friend, Bill, at Union College in upstate New York and told him about my predicament. He laughed and told me to pack up my car with all my equipment and get up

there. He said to me, “Don’t worry, we will get this thing done!” That immediately gave me a sense of relief and confidence. I packed up the car and drove four hours to Saratoga Springs ready for a very long weekend.

As soon as I got to his theater, we put up the wire rig and began working. His coaching and prompting were just what I needed. On the first day, he grounded me in the basics. It felt good to be working together again. On the second day he guided me back into a place of balance and confidence. I regained the sense of freedom that I once felt on the wire but had lost. I was fully energized, and my creativity started to flow. We brainstormed all sorts of different crosses and tricks, but in the end, reduced the routine to five passes across the wire. Each one increasing in complexity and difficulty, but all well within my range of comfort.

He then repeated his most important principle. It’s not about the skill, it about your audience. What do you want this performance to be about? What do you want your audience to feel or do? We agree that the best approach would be the most straightforward, to excite and rouse the audience. Together we came up with a French chef character who would engage with the audience and share his excitement of the culinary experience through the metaphor of the wire.

The three days went by very quickly. As I drove back home, I felt confident in both my abilities and plan of action.

It was the evening of the event and I was standing next to my fully assembled wire rig, sparkling from the lights that shone down from the ceiling. The audience had just finished their dinner and the noise level was starting to build. Being the opening act, I was anxious and excited.

Then, two minutes before I was to perform, I experienced what I could only call a feeling of dread. All the color went out of my face and I broke out into a cold sweat. This was not good. I started to see images of myself falling off the wire. Fortunately, Bill and I had practiced in case

something like this happened. I took a deep breath and literally shook off my fear. I took another breath and pictured myself standing tall and free on the wire. All the color came back into my face and I reconnected with my sense of purpose. Tony gave me a big introduction, the audience cheered, and I made my entrance.

All I can say is that this was one of my best and favorite performances of my career. I felt solid and playful in my routines and totally connected to my audience. They loved my French chef character. At the end of the performance I did my orchestrated dismount and extended my arms to the cheers, laughter and applause of my audience. I walked back to the spot where I had begun, turned to face the audience once more, took a deep breath and let it go.

When I look back on this event, it always brings me a sense of accomplishment. It was the button on my performing career. I took away some solid lessons that I will carry with me always.

The routine itself was only 10 minutes long, however, I can safely estimate that I spent well over 80 hours of rehearsal time preparing for it. Yes, it was a huge hill to climb, but that is what was needed for this project. These are my takeaways:

- Have a goal and a sense of purpose. Know why you are doing it.
- Create a well-structured plan and stick to it.
- Bring a sense of discipline, experience, creativity, and humility to the work.
- Know when to ask for help.
- Practice resilience and have a plan for emotional sinkholes.
- Have a big vision for what you want to do but boil it down to something essential and achievable without losing the sense of excitement.
- It's all about your audience.

It is no wonder that the data has shown that the fear of public speaking is greater than our fear of death. Public speaking has the potential of playing to one of our deepest fears, rejection. Upon examination, when we walk up in front of any group, no matter if they are known or unknown, there are many

destructive thoughts and feelings that are lurking in the wings. We can plan for these moments, anticipate failure, and train our minds and bodies to respond positively. We quickly regather our forces and achieve excellence.

### **From Chapter 13: The Art of Creating a Learning Organization**

For those of you who aspire to create healthier and more effective teams and organizations, it is crucial to look outside of your business domain for clues to new ideas, approaches and archetypes that will assist in achieving your objectives.

In this final chapter, I offer the metaphor of an ensemble theater company as an inspirational model for creating a learning organization. The characteristics and traits of theater ensembles suggest to us new ways of considering what learning means for the individual, team and organization.

The key to unlocking the brilliance in a team lies in understanding the importance of building the relational fabric among the members. A working group is a collection of individuals contributing their expertise from their point of view. A team is a collection of individuals who share a common purpose and are committed to reaching that goal together.

There are many more activities and tools available that will help you to develop both the cultural mindset and daily practices for becoming a learning organization. It happens person by person, team by team. It is when everyone works in concert, like an orchestra or ensemble, that you will discover the melodies and harmonies this approach can yield.

### **From Final Thoughts**

Leading from our Best Self begins with adopting a mindset of excellence not perfection. It demands that we stop comparing ourselves with others, which will only lead to arrogance, fear, anxiety, and self-doubt. We learn to displace these detractors by developing self-discipline and a commitment to action. We engage in activities that sharpen our minds, open our hearts, strengthen our bodies and broaden our spirits. We commit to developing our

gifts and talents and learn to put them to the best and highest use. This is how we practice the art of being extraordinary.

We practice the art of being extraordinary when:

- When we are present and open.
- When we land fully and give others our full and undivided attention.
- When we expand our presence.
- When we learn.
- When we listen with our eyes!
- When we get to the heart of the matter and truly connect authentically with others.
- When we drop down our guard and allow others to chance to connect with us.
- When we slow down to breathe, connect and land before we speak.
- When we apply the mindset of an artist and strive for excellence and mastery.
- When we share our story and listen to the story of others.
- When we aspire to be our Best Self.

When we take the time to share what is important to us, what we stand for, what our values are, what we would fight for and give our lives for, only then are we truly able to open ourselves up and discover what is important to someone else, to know what they stand for, what they value and would fight for, and why it matters so much to them.