

MICRO-PRACTICES TO HELP YOU BECOME A GREAT LEADER AND LEARN TO LEAD FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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As McKinsey & Company senior partners, we have worked closely with hundreds of leaders and Chief Executive Officers/CEOs who hail from both Fortune Global 500 corporations and leading nonprofits. Over the years, we've seen that the best leaders learn to become more self-aware and self-reflective. They realize that

what's holding them back is their own psychological conditioning, which is rooted in the habits and behaviors that, ironically, got them where they are.

We first became interested in the human side of leadership after seeing many leaders who had mastered all the right executive skills—financial acumen, strategic and operational management, and systems thinkings—but failed to spark passion in their employees. They would lead their team with a rousing battle cry, only to turn and see that no one was following them or, at best, was following them without enthusiasm and energy.

After a careful analysis of what was holding back these otherwise talented leaders, we concluded that on a deep, psychological level they were not authentically connecting with themselves and, equally important, with others on their team. Everyone knows how to define and acquire the logical, tangible, or left-brained skills of leadership. But when we asked how they could become both a left- and a right-brained leader—one who is more self-aware, humble, reflective, vulnerable, and consequently more resilient and balanced—the pathway to acquiring those personal attributes was much harder to describe.

Becoming a more human leader is a journey often traveled without much help or guidance. Some of the best say they were simply born with those qualities, while others said they were fortunate to meet some great personal coaches along the way, but no one could point to a clear road map to becoming a more authentic and human-centric leader.

That is what our recent book *The Journey of Leadership: How CEOs Learn to Lead from the Inside Out*, from which this article is adapted, attempts to do—to describe, explain, and codify a leader's inner journey, in essence leading from the “inside out.” This is the key ingredient to make a lasting impact as you lead your teams and the broader organization.

This journey is nuanced and complex. It calls for personal growth, which means one has to be constantly learning, listening, inspiring, and caring, gradually reinventing oneself as a leader. Leadership is not only

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about those seemingly endless things you need to do when you're an amazing leader but also about being aware of who you are as a person and always improving as a human being. It's all about how you change yourself and others. It's about adopting a human-centric leadership approach.

The good news is there is a step-by-step approach for leaders to reinvent themselves both professionally and personally. It is a journey that helps a person change the psychological, emotional, and ultimately the human attributes of leadership that can prevent them from reaching the highest levels of excellence. It starts with three dimensions: **leading yourself, leading individuals and teams, and leading organizations.**

While the best leaders each have their own style, they consciously apply a set of universal micro-practices that help them keep improving their personal operating model—the way you see yourself and present yourself to others. These could be rituals that you do every day, every week, or every month that help you become who you are at your best. They help you lead with purpose, clarity, and ever-expanding impact, and some examples are included below.

Leading Yourself

Leading others first requires the ability to “lead yourself” by enhancing your self-awareness. It involves deepening your understanding of what fuels your energy, what you value, and what emotions are easy or hard for you to experience. It requires deep introspection and candid self-observation.

The best leaders develop a sense of true belonging by persuading themselves that they are indeed the right person for the job even if they're harboring some insecurities. They find the courage to overcome their lack of confidence by figuring out what's keeping them back and confronting it. They are also open to frank feedback from those around them so they can learn how to contribute in meaningful ways. It is not about the need to be superior or loved by others but rather about having a shared sense of belonging, anchored in a shared courage to make decisions even if they are unpopular or come with some personal risk.

CEO Wendy Kopp's leadership is defined by her unwavering mission to expand educational opportunities globally. As the founder of Teach for America, Kopp's vision was to address educational inequity in the United States by recruiting top graduates to teach in under-resourced schools. Her determination and strategic thinking enabled the program's expansion, and she later applied these principles to a global context with the creation of Teach for All. Kopp's commitment to her mission and ability to inspire others has driven the organization's growth and global impact.

Ed Bastian was brought on as CEO for Delta Air Lines in 2016, but admits it took a couple of years before he felt comfortable in the role. He dealt with uncertainty and self-doubt by learning as much as possible, and by embracing constant change. Fast learning and iterative action cycles created improving standards and practices that protected Delta's customers and employees, and Delta is now the most-awarded US airline.

Some of our favorite micro-practices to help **lead yourself** include:

1. **Put being before doing:** Remember your purpose and values. Write down your top five values and a

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personal "purpose statement" on a sticky note and put it on your mirror or desk where you will see it regularly.

2. **Pause for productive reflection and solitude:** Reflect in the morning. Go for a walk without your phone and think about the day ahead, your "to do" list, and key priorities.
3. **Seek and embrace feedback from others:** Build a core group of truth tellers. On a regular basis, ask people from both your personal and professional lives what they've observed about your behavior when you're at your best and when you're not. Discuss how your behavior impacts them.
4. **Keep learning.** Set goals. Whether you prefer books, audiobooks, or podcasts, ask others what they are reading or listening to and set targets (e.g., three to five books every month).
5. **Embrace optimism.** Cultivate your sense of gratitude. Start and end each day by reflecting on five things you are grateful for.

Leading Individuals and Teams

Leadership is inherently about relationships. Great leaders are human-centric and deliberately invest in improving the way they interact with others.

The best leaders understand the importance of flexibility, open-mindedness, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. They know that mistakes are doorways to learning and that making mistakes without learning is failure. They create team learning rituals and trust, giving people a safe space to take personal risk, inviting external perspectives and truth telling, and setting a high bar on character and humility.

They invite healthy opposition and search for missing perspectives to identify the risks and create experiments to test and learn, knowing that fast failure is likely. They create learning rituals like postmortems to harvest the learnings and bounce forward. This requires a foundation of psychological safety that is not at the cost

of accountability—balancing candor and caring. For all this emphasis on top team performance, however, many CEOs forget the cardinal rule of leadership—people yearn to be recognized as human beings.

Lynn Elsenhans exemplified both humility and confidence during her tenure as CEO of Sunoco. Known for her down-to-earth leadership style, Lynn prioritized listening to employees and understanding their perspectives. She then implemented strategies to streamline operations and improve financial performance without losing sight of the human element, which earned respect and loyalty from her team and led to Sunoco's successful turnaround.

These micro-practices are designed to foster more personal and productive relationships with individuals and teams and include:

1. **Be attentive:** Practice active listening. Ask clarifying questions to ensure you understand not only what someone is saying but also their underlying thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and interests. Put aside your quick judgments and engage meaningfully in conversation, focusing on the other person versus getting your point across.
2. **Foster learning and growth:** Become a coach. Commit to a specific number of people with diverse backgrounds who you want to mentor (but not so many that you can't fully commit).
3. **Give feedback.** Keep track of your feedback. For each team member, take five minutes after key events to write down your thoughts about and examples of how they performed to bring up in future feedback sessions.

*Keep track of your
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4. **Build confidence and an ownership mindset on your team.** Encourage dissent. Remind teams at the start of sessions that you value multiple perspectives. Constantly ask, “Where am I wrong?” or “What am I missing?”
5. **Celebrate the big things and little things.** Encourage colleagues to acknowledge achievements. Shift conversations away from complaints and encourage others to share their accomplishments so the team can learn from their successes and become more willing to take risks outside their comfort zone. Ask colleagues what they are most proud of in their work.

Leading Organizations

Leading an organization requires a related but different skillset of micro-practices than leading individuals and teams—your scope is much wider, and your audience can include hundreds or thousands of people. Effectively navigating the complexities of organizational leadership requires a strategic blend of macro-level decision making, cultural influence, and the ability to articulate a compelling vision.

The best leaders find the right balance between control and letting people have the agency to take the initiative and inevitably make some mistakes. They know what decisions must be made centrally to drive consistency, and what guiding principles allow everyone to make the right call without the risk of compromising the organization's purpose and values. By doing so, they can focus on only those things they can control. The same goes for team members.

You can help your team balance the dichotomy between control and agency by having them ask, “What can we control? What must be consistent across the organization? What can we not control but influence? What can we neither control nor influence? And what are those skills, mindsets, and capabilities that we need to become successful leaders?” Creating a fine balance between autonomy and control, however, will only work if you know what's really going on inside your organization.

CEO Stéphane Bancel demonstrated immense courage while developing Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine. Faced with an unprecedented global health crisis, Bancel led Moderna in rapidly advancing its mRNA vaccine technology. Despite skepticism from some and the enormous pressure of the pandemic, Bancel pushed forward with clinical trials and scaled up production at an unprecedented pace. His decisive actions and willingness to take significant risks were instrumental in bringing one of the first COVID-19 vaccines to market, saving countless lives globally.

Our favorite micro-practices to help **lead organizations** include:

1. **Reinforce values and purpose:** Ask others. When meeting with employees, ask them whether they feel that they are working with a sense of purpose and what they value most about being part of the organization
2. **Master clear communication:** Become a great storyteller. Use anecdotes to communicate messages, especially when they are about the values or behaviors you want to promote.
3. **Be a role model for the rest of the organization.** Be open, be human. Share your personal development plan, tell stories of your own professional mishaps or hurdles in the past.
4. **Build capabilities and promote continuous learning.** Ask about learning. Occasionally pose the question "What did you learn last week/month?" to your team and have them do the same with their reports until it cascades through the organization
5. **Engage stakeholders.** Have a personal advisory board. Gather a wide variety of advisers, leadership coaches, senior executives, and mentors, to give you input on engaging different stakeholders.

*A moment of deep insight
can unlock a profound shift.*

Conclusion

Yes, this is all challenging work, but that doesn't mean it has to be hard. Sometimes it is more about trying less hard and doing less. It is more about deepening awareness of our conditioning (how do my patterns show up in my behaviors and body, what feels at stake in the moment, what mindset am I falling into, and who am I in this moment?). It's about having self-compassion and committing to disciplined practice; it's about improving existing skills and leadership attributes but also adding new ones.

Becoming a human-centric leader who truly leads from the inside out is about drawing the right behavioral conclusions and translating them into personal and collective commitments. It is also about creating space for reflection. A moment of deep insight can unlock a profound shift. It is about being present, with yourself and others. Leadership is now all about personal change, about being the change you want to see in the world, and then inspiring others to follow.

This article is adapted from the book *The Journey of Leadership: How CEOs Learn to Lead from the Inside Out*, by Dana Maor, Hans-Werner Kaas, Kurt Strovink, and Ramesh Srinivasan (Portfolio, 2024).

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