

Grounding Your Leadership in Real Time

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In 2022, we learned that in unfamiliar times, leaders of the future *must* operate in the moment—in the actual circumstances of the realities they are facing. Then it is possible to get ahead of the curve and anticipate what comes next. They need to develop what our new book outlines as “Real-Time” Leadership, which is about learning to make the most of every moment, whether facing a split-second decision; pursuing a priority for that day, quarter, or year; or even working toward a lifetime achievement goal.

Understanding and practicing Real-Time Leadership is more important than ever. Leaders no longer have a moment to waste with the sensory and data overload we are facing and the many divergent voices surrounding us. To face the challenges of uncertainty and heightened complexity, it’s crucial to step outside of that noisy overload and move beyond common reflexes to hone the ability to explore novel paths and approaches better suited for these completely new circumstances.

Finding the Space to Shift Into Real-Time Leadership

But the big question is: How? How can one initiate this change and start to become a Real-Time leader?

We take as our starting point Viktor Frankl’s famous emphasis on the possibilities in the space between stimulus and reaction. In that space “is our power to choose our response,” he wrote, and “in our response lies our growth and our freedom.” This is the essence of the Real-Time approach.

It begins by creating the space between what challenge is thrown at you and what you decide to do. As busy leaders operating at top speed, this alone is no easy task. To be at optimal levels of performance, leaders need to be Mindfully Alert, which is the first step of our M.O.V.E. model for Real-Time Leadership.

Mindfulness is the ability to notice and absorb what is going on around you, but it needs to be paired with being highly alert. This refers to the capacity to hyperfocus like an elite athlete operating in the zone. In that state, time slows down, and you see choices that otherwise would pass you by. Mindful alertness takes practice. It involves stepping back and out of a situation to avoid launching into an immediate response.

Let’s apply a scenario from one of our clients.

A CEO we call Amanda had been recruited to turn around a Fortune 250 company and was immediately under pressure by her board to grow faster. With her strong action bias, she started off running. We saw she had leapt immediately into default mode, rather than creating the space she needed to sort out the best next move. Amanda quickly concluded that the only way forward was through a major acquisition.

There are many ways to step back and make space. First and foremost, you must defy your default mode by pausing and catching yourself before reflexes take over. Remind yourself what has been your playbook and why that default may be questionable now. Being mindfully alert allows you to become attuned to what is going on around you, inside you, and with others, enabling you to respond in an agile, accurate manner, rather than as you always have in the past.

Your Leadership Response Across Three Dimensions

To make that space, ask yourself three questions.

The questions focus on the three dimensions that each leadership moment encapsulates—the external, internal, and relational elements that are inextricably linked.

1st dimension: *What do I need to do?*

2nd dimension: *Who do I want to be right now?*

3rd dimension: *How do I need to relate?*

We all know one-dimensional leaders who are perhaps good at assessing the external circumstances and requirements, but who lack inner awareness or relational skills to pull it off. Or there are those who, conversely, are super talented and congenial in working with others but who lack the acumen to accurately gauge the external landscape and strategically map out the best path forward. Leaders need to be competent on all three levels, but they often defer to one or two dimensions where they feel they are strongest. With practice, leaders can learn how to catch themselves when their default is triggered and then learn to rebalance themselves across the three dimensions. Let's turn back to Amanda to see how this can work.

1st Dimension—The external can seem obvious, at first. It certainly did to Amanda. And she launched into plans to acquire one large public player and instructed her CFO to run some models on that proposition. When her CFO informed her that the prospects were not as promising as she had deemed, she flatly resisted his assessment. She was laser focused on her goal, and nothing would change that. But where was that pressure coming from? She needed to make the space to assess the larger external demand and not simply allow the demand to take over—to gain a sound, measured assessment of the external terrain. Later, upon reflection, she would recognize that she “had done it again” and gone directly into a habitual mode of leaping into action and “seeing things as she wanted to see them, rather than as they actually were.”

Clarity on the **external** demands of leadership is not self-evident. At times you are free to choose your priorities, but often they are imposed on you. Whatever the context, the question here is: What do you need and want to achieve? You may believe that the goal of a meeting is to make a decision, such as whether to make an acquisition. But it could be that the best approach is to collect more divergent opinions

to open up the conversation and better inform a decision. Mindfully alert leaders can find these alternative goals in the moment. Write down your most important goals. Ask yourself if these are really the most important goals or if you are discounting or exaggerating threats and opportunities. Or are you completely missing the point because of a blind spot?

2nd Dimension—You're in that moment of decision making where the stakes are unimaginably high. Have you invested enough in knowing who you are to draw upon it now, when it's most needed? What could happen then? You'd step into a different state of mind and being, stay centered, and draw on your values to make a wiser choice.

Amanda was able to do this. Upon reflection, she realized she had allowed herself to be railroaded to a strong growth path. This only triggered her predilection toward connecting the dots—at times forcing them—with what she hoped was true. However, when asked the simple question “How much confidence do you have in those projections?” Amanda was jarred out of her automatic stance, and she was able to catch herself. She admonished herself by saying, “I should know that by now.” Her dedication to her own growth and commitment to increasing self-awareness allowed her to not feel defensive to the challenge. She excelled in the second dimension by staying open to feedback. As a result, she was able to pivot and put the situation into a larger context and to think through different, alternative growth plans that were more viable. Amanda allowed her insights to slow her down, and she called on a great deal of courage by facing reality and deciding not to proceed with the acquisition.

3rd Dimension—Often, we say that the golden rule is the highest standard: to treat others as you would want to be treated. In leadership scenarios, however, this frequently (usually, in fact) is not so. Leaders need to apply what we call the platinum rule: to treat others as *they would want* (which may be quite different from what you would want). In essence, this is relational agility.

Amanda had certainly suspended this and pushed her own ideas and agenda over those of her colleague, whose misgivings about the acquisition she had dismissed outright. Later, she went back to her CFO and frankly acknowledged that she had not treated him fairly. “I should not have pushed you so hard,” she admitted. “Wishful thinking is not a strategy, and I should have been able to hear that you were right. This acquisition is not right for us.” In so doing, she exhibited real-time strength in the interpersonal, or 3rd

dimension of leadership. She took accountability for having pressured her CFO and created the conditions for them to analyze and decide next steps together.

Many leaders would have continued with the acquisition at any cost still, for the prestige of it, or to demonstrate decisive action for its own sake, taking what appears to be the easier path in the short term but would likely be a long-term disaster. But Amanda eventually claimed the crucial space between stimulus and reaction that Frankel highlighted. She caught her error, identified her inner challenges, and met them. This is Real-Time Leadership at its most effective.

Making leadership decisions today is no easy task. And it seems to be getting harder as the future grows only less predictable and more complex. Every day we see leaders benefiting more than ever from stepping back and claiming the critical space needed to thoroughly assess the optimal path forward and claim their best moves. Old playbooks need to be archived, and old reflexes need to be reevaluated. New, great leadership stories are going to belong to those leaders who bravely think anew, in real time, and allow themselves and their organizations to better understand and embrace the many emergent possibilities, and to keep growing with them.

David Noble and Carol Kauffman co-authored “Real Time Leadership: How to Find Your Winning Moves When the Stakes Are High”, published by Harvard Business Review Press on February 21, 2023.

David is globally trusted by CEO's and their teams, Boards of Directors, investors and star athletes to help them crack high stakes leadership challenges. David's personal purpose is to help guide leaders to clarity and personal growth where and when they most need it. In addition to his work at Egon Zehnder, David is a Senior Advisor to the Institute of Coaching (affiliated with Harvard Medical School), and in 2021 Thinkers50 named him one of the world's top coaches.

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