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LEADERSHIP

How being a cancer survivor has shaped my leadership coaching

Listening to your inner voice and understanding why you want to lead can help you become a better manager.

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is an executive coach based in Brisbane, Australia, who has pioneered the use of neuroscience principles in working with business leaders.

I look at leadership as a calling. When I think of the people I know who have genuinely moved an organization or a group forward, they all have one thing in common: Their role is not just a job for them. It's an expression of their true self. They wear no mask at work; they don't pretend to be anyone other than themselves. They consistently express authority and command, but as much over themselves as over anyone else, and always with the intent of contributing to a greater good. This is leadership as service.

This orientation affects how these people think, how they behave, and what they do every day. Most of us who aspire to be great leaders have this orientation in mind. Yes, we want to be successful and have impact, but we primarily want our impact to be lasting and positive. It isn't always easy to figure out how to do this. It requires cultivating internal disciplines that manifest themselves in the way every decision is made.

In my own professional life, I have spent the last 20 years helping people in leadership roles cultivate these internal disciplines so that they may become transformational leaders themselves. I draw heavily on two bodies of knowledge: formal study of the neuroscience of leadership, and my experience as a two-time survivor of late-stage cancer.

Neuroscience enables me to help people understand how the brain works and strengthen their leadership capabilities. We focus on what I call high-ground thinking, which uses a specific part of the brain for complex thinking, rather than the low-ground thinking, which uses the part of the brain that encourages expedience and short-termism. Some neuroscience research shows it is possible

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to “train” the brain to think through problems in a more profound way using high-ground thinking. I have coauthored a book on this, [*The Wise Advocate: The Inner Voice of Strategic Leadership*](#), with Jeffrey Schwartz, a research psychiatrist, and Art Kleiner, editor-in-chief of *strategy+business*. The title of the book comes from the locus of mental activity, often experienced as an inner voice, that is more accessible with high-ground thinking. It gives people the calm courage, clarity, and capability to overcome even the most difficult challenges.

The insights I've had as a cancer survivor are very personal, yet also extremely relevant to leadership. Anyone facing a life-threatening experience is confronted with a profound choice in the way they respond: either with bitterness and despair, wondering why this has happened to them, or with the resolve to dispassionately face whatever the future may bring. This latter choice provides people with immense power, even under the most difficult circumstances.

I am not saying that you can beat cancer or other serious threats purely through the way you think. But when you make a choice to think adaptively — as a survivor or as a strategically oriented leader — it becomes a critical factor in surviving any serious threat to yourself or your organization. You don't need to get sick to access this kind of thinking; however, there is very little training available on how to develop it. A combination of neuroscience insight and crisis experience suggests that almost anyone can learn how to think this way.

Beyond obligation and duty

In 1991, when I was 24, I was catapulted into a shocking new awareness of

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cancer. Like many of my friends, I had an entry-level job in a large company — in my case, at a global mining company in my native Australia — and I had married young, in part because most women in my culture and generation did. My husband and I had not yet had children.

Around August that year, I had a faint discomfort in my throat, and I could feel a little lump on the side of my neck. I ignored it for several weeks, and when I eventually visited the doctor, he said he thought it was glandular fever but suggested an ultrasound to be on the safe side. The ultrasound revealed a tumor in the right lobe of my thyroid, and surgery was scheduled quickly. “You’ll rest for a week at home, and then get on with your life,” the surgeon said.

That turned out to be wrong. The lump was malignant Stage 3 cancer. In the 48 hours following the biopsy, they removed the lump. I needed another operation to stop the cancer from spreading. My husband, unable to face the situation, walked out on me. Somehow, I did not panic. It felt surreal; I knew that my life and the lives of those around me were about to change.

The eight hours waiting for the second surgery were the longest of my life. I let my guard down, and the calm I had felt before vanished; I allowed myself to feel the chaos, confusion, sadness, fear, and uncertainty. I prayed to the God that I believed in: “What’s going on? Have I not been a good person?” I felt as if I were being punished. That night, I tuned in to a voice that I now know as the Wise Advocate: That voice has been present, informing every day of my life, since then. How I discovered it and how I was able to benefit from that discovery are the lessons that I now pass on in my leadership coaching.

The second surgery took all day because the tumor had spread. I was then in intensive care for two weeks. I knew nothing about near-death experiences, but I experienced two of them, in which I was aware that an aspect of me was up on the ceiling, serenely looking down at my physical self. I could see the monitor with the flat line and the nurses racing in, trying to revive me. I was in a state of complete bliss: beautiful, clear; I felt no emotion and no judgment. I had an awareness of my awareness: I knew I was experiencing something that showed me I was bigger than just my physical body. Each time, I heard the stern male voice I had first heard during my night of panic say, “It’s not your time yet.” Each time, I was catapulted back into my physical body.

Every ounce of focus

The document I received explaining the surgery actually contained the words “six months to live.” I simply looked at the doctor and said, “How do you know that for sure?” He admitted it was just an estimate. There was a window of opportunity for me.

Rather than *fight to not die*, I decided to *fight to live*. That reframing and refocusing was critical for me. It has since become a grounding principle for the way I advise leaders, and also for the advice and support I give to the cancer patients I counsel: *Focus on what you want, not what you don’t want*. When deceptive messages of despair come in from your brain, don’t try to suppress them or push them away: They will just get more powerful. Instead, use your will and every ounce of energy and focus to fight for what you want. Reframing and refocusing attention are key strategies to winning the inner battle of self-defeating thoughts or deceptive brain messages.

For me, fighting for life meant I needed to create different circumstances: to take my focus, my will, and my life to a new space that would allow for my healing. I felt that my decisions were aligned with that higher order, and I would not be swayed. Soon after I left the hospital and went to my parents’ house in Melbourne, I received a recruiting phone call from an HR manager of BHP Coal in Brisbane, about 1,000 miles away. He knew me from a national industry group we were both active in. He asked why I hadn’t applied for the job he had advertised internally. I was working for a different division of BHP at the time. I told

him about my cancer treatments. “That’s no excuse,” he said. “Get up here and have an interview and then make up your mind.”

During the interview, I was offered the job on the spot. It was a hard decision to leave my family, who wanted to care for me, but when I turned to my inner voice, my Wise Advocate, I understood that facing this challenge would help heal me. I moved to Brisbane.

At the time, I read every book I could find on cancer; nutrition; and spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical self-care. I needed to understand what would work for me. I wanted to create a sense of certainty for myself and my brain. I became supremely sensitive to my inner and outer worlds, and the effect that the interplay between them had on my experience of life and my sense of well-being. Today, this would be called applied mindfulness. I became aware of how my body reacted to different foods, to my use of different words, to different environments, to the people around me. I found myself in a new space of heightened awareness. I realized that I knew what wellness felt like because I knew what the lack of wellness felt like. Now I was able to connect with and calmly express my own voice in alignment with the guidance of my inner Wise Advocate. It was a journey of self-awareness and self-reliance that I now draw on to enable business leaders to construct more adaptive, innovative, and creative solutions to their everyday challenges.

Life, leadership, and legacy

My curiosity and need to understand my situation led me to learn about various healing traditions, including reiki, homeopathy, acupuncture, meditation, mindfulness, epigenetics, and later, the study of neuroscience. In 2000, I left my job at BHP Coal and retrained to be an executive leadership coach. In studying the brain, I learned how habitual thinking affects the pathways of mental activity, and how people can refocus those habits to create a sense of well-being and a capacity to navigate the world more adaptively. I learned that our mental and emotional experience becomes our physical experience. And more importantly, I learned that I had charge of this if I paid close attention.

We are all at the steering wheel of our lives, but few of us are taught how to “drive” our brain and our mind — let alone learn what’s “under the hood.”

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I think of the brain as the hardware and the mind as the software, the set of instructions that allows us to act. The brain is the biological organ in which neurons and other cells process and transmit sensations, feelings, thoughts, and emotions. The mind is active: the source of choices and decisions you make about how and where to focus your attention. Even when we recognize our own patterns, we are not always the driver. Under pressure, the brain can kick in with automated or habituated patterns of thought, mental activities, and behavioral patterns that will have us react to our circumstances in reflexive ways. We do, however, have the capacity to deploy our executive brain with applied mindfulness and exercise our “free won’t.”

Megan (not her real name) is the executive director of marketing for a national enterprise in Australia. She came to me for coaching because she felt completely overwhelmed in her position of authority — even though she had the experience to do the job, she was convincing herself that she wasn’t up to it. Through a process of gentle inquiry, she discovered that the inner narrative she was listening to was not only inaccurate but self-defeating, because it related to an early stage in her career and did not take into account all the experience she had gained. By paying closer attention to her thinking and encouraging her curiosity, Megan was able to accept that she now had the capability, knowledge, experience, wisdom, strength, and resilience to succeed at her current challenges, rather than allowing habituated automatic patterns of thoughts and behaviors to kick in. She accessed high-ground thinking, which enabled her to make wiser decisions, which resulted in more balanced, adaptive, successful, and fairer outcomes.

I realized what was working to help me in my difficult circumstances could be used to help others: leadership as service.

My own journey toward greater mindfulness and the benefit of the insights I've gleaned from formally studying the neuroscience of leadership have driven me to educate and empower people to become true leaders of their own path — to help them put themselves in the driver's seat of their own lives. I realized what was working to help me in my difficult circumstances could be used to help others: leadership as service.

I have seen a similar kind of awakening among many leaders I work with. If you have grown up stifling your own creative expression — to appease or please others, to fit in, or to align with others' agendas — when things don't go to plan, you can argue that the circumstances should be different, but that doesn't change anything: You didn't allow yourself to try and find a solution. In fact, a failure like this amplifies your frustration, suffering, and stress — and exacerbates the overall stress in the organization around you. The tide starts to turn only when you accept the circumstances and take full responsibility for shifting your focus, thinking adaptively, and speaking up.

Michelle (not her real name) is the head of an international design brand. She juggles a young family and executive MBA studies as well as a demanding role, leading an enterprise headquartered in Saudi Arabia that employs more than 2,000 employees worldwide. Her greatest challenge was saying “no,” and this was leading to frustration. “I've always been a fixer and a doer, and now I'm starting to resent it,” she told me. “Everyone else seems to have a life except for me. When I realized just how much responsibility I was automatically assuming with my instant ‘yeses,’ I started to get really cross with the expectations I assumed.”

Over the last two years, Michelle also has been battling breast cancer, requiring her to fly back to Australia for extended periods away from the business and her family to have medical treatments. Executive coaching sessions have given Michelle an opportunity to consciously pause and reset. She was able to observe the impact of a habituated “yes” inner narrative. “Saying no and asserting healthy boundaries allows me to take better care of me. I’m more fully understanding what it means to ‘tune in’ and listen to the wisdom of my body,” she said. “I’m not cutting corners for myself anymore. I realize if something doesn’t feel right, it’s because it’s not right. I realized my body has a voice too. My body warned me — not to change me, but to change my priorities — to look after myself, too.”

Michelle has learned to revalue everything she commits to, and will often pause when she receives a request, asking herself, “If I say yes to this request, what am I saying no to?” This enables her to prioritize more mindfully before committing her time and efforts.

As you shift your focus, you are more likely to find your own inner voice: the voice of the Wise Advocate. And you may resolve to use that voice to help others, in your family, organization, and community. In the process of *reframing* your approach to life, leadership, and your legacy, your brain circuits settle into new patterns, aligned with a broader body of values. Those values become part of the fabric of your thinking and how you navigate your life.

A lifelong exercise

In business, the further up the ladder you climb, the more challenging the decisions you need to make: Your problems will increase to match your new proficiency. I saw this firsthand at the end of 2009 when I was diagnosed with cancer again — this time, a brain tumor and bone cancer. At that point, my circumstances were very different. I had remarried and again divorced, and was raising two children, ages 8 and 10, as a single parent. I had been working as an executive coach with my own clientele for a decade.

I had been studying neuroscience for two years, and suddenly I was talking with neurosurgeons about my own brain. I knew just enough to ask them troubling questions, like: “This tumor is sitting on my prefrontal cortex. How will

“If you could have anything or be anywhere by this time next year, what would that outcome be?”

my capacity to think be affected after it is removed?”

The surgery was booked for the end of January 2010, and I chose not to tell my family right away, which meant I had to go through the holidays suppressing a secret that was eating me up inside. I continued to listen to my Wise Advocate, but I was uncertain of the outcome. I got my affairs in order. I bought puppies for the kids to comfort them in case the worst happened. I gave some valuables to my closest friends as gifts if I didn't return.

To my surprise, I opened my eyes on January 29, and began a process of recovery. Having studied neuroscience and especially the concept of self-directed neuroplasticity — the more technical term for training to think in the high-ground portion of the brain — I learned to meditate better and focus my attention on healing. Within six months, I was walking and talking perfectly well, and my bone cancer had disappeared.

Today, when I work with clients, I ask them to focus on the question “What do you really want?” The default answer is typically what they feel they must ask for, which is based on what they feel is possible or the threat they want to avoid. I often have to ask them again, acknowledging what they don't want, but then shifting from threat to reward. “You've just told me about your role in your business — the frustrations you have to navigate and the disappointments you tolerate. But if you could have anything or be anywhere by this time next year, what would that outcome be?”

When Neil (not his real name) came to me for coaching, he was a senior executive with a leading international bank. Initial conversations showed that

Neil's modus operandi was always to minimize potential threats that might affect business targets because he felt this would reflect well on his leadership; his real goal, however, was to try to be an inspiring leader. The coaching showed him how to reframe the situation to be positive rather than defensive, to focus his attention on who he needed to *be* rather than what he needed to *do*. He soon became known within the bank as “the intent man” because he would insist on clarifying what people wanted instead of what behavior would have an impact — the very lesson he had needed to learn.

This subtle shift to reframe a situation makes a profound difference in people's capacity to think in a more adaptive way. It requires them to transcend the limits of their current reactive thinking, and when they do, they give their mind permission to play in a field of unlimited, creative possibility. In this space they can dare to define their future, and they can feel their own energy rising and expanding.

When these people have sight of what they want their future to be, they then have to think through the means of realizing it. Is this something they have direct control or influence over? Does it depend on other people? Is it inspiring? Is it measurable? How will they know when they're getting close? Knowing *why* they want it is vitally important because this connects with their deepest values and helps them remain positive when desire or willpower is not enough. It is when people experience their desired future in this way, as if they're already there, that they can envision a path to getting there and making it possible. Leadership as service is a product of this kind of thinking because of the clarity that it can bring and the imperative for action that it drives. It requires thinking in a different, more focused way, and this kind of attention can impact, for good, the cognitive resources available to any leader.

A focus on what people don't want — that is, “I don't want to fail,” or, in my case, “I don't want to die” — is much less empowering than a focus on what they do want: “I want to succeed as a leader and create something significant and worthwhile,” or “I want to live well.” In difficult circumstances, this reframing helped me (and my clients) see a desired outcome and understand it more clearly — and it also made me even more determined to give my all in trying to reach it. +

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