Leading above the Line Mindful Self-Leadership for the Age of Disruption



A WHITE PAPER BY

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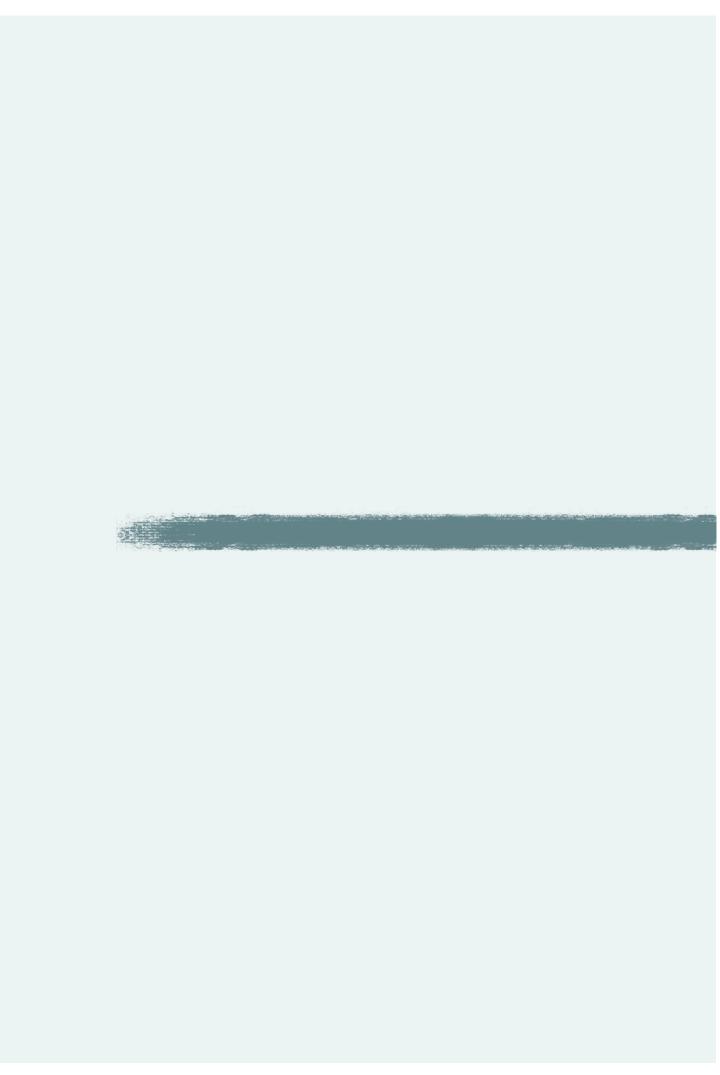
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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to lead above the line?

Imagine a line. This line is the foundation of mindful self-leadership.

Below the line are the attitudes, habits and behaviours that keep us stuck and drag us further below into disfunction and languishing.

Above the line are attitudes, habits and behaviours that are energising and enabling, and that help us to flourish.



When stuck below the line, we live in a state of inattention and unawareness; we are driven by the circumstances and the force our conditioning. Living and leading below the line is characterised by helplessness and reactivity - we struggle with afflictive thoughts, moods and emotions; most of our habits are not beneficial and we tend to procrastinate and are easily distracted; we often feel doubtful, anxious and unsettled which leaves us feeling stuck and helpless. We are prone to blaming others and finding excuses, thus not taking the full responsibility for our predicament.

Self-awareness is the foundation on which we can build leadership above the line.

Once we become more self-aware and attentive, we can take more responsibility for our state. As we begin to rise above the line, we feel more resilient, engaged, and feel energised to take control and begin to make changes. Our habits, attitudes and behaviours are in alignment and more life-affirming and consistent. We begin to flourish and move ever closer to self-mastery and the enlightened style of leadership.

The case of the sandwich generation leader

Working with senior leaders and their teams over the past decade, I have found that most are struggling to stay above the line. When we find ourselves stuck below the line, we feel empty, exhausted, and entangled.

We are human first; we all have our own unique challenges, both at home and at work: difficult colleagues and team members, aging parents and dependent children, partners, deadlines and logistics. We are juggling so many balls – it's no wonder that people in leadership positions at this time have been called the sandwich generation!

During a recent Mindful Leadership Webinar, I was deeply moved and inspired by the sharing from one senior leader. I find it invaluable to hear people's real life experiences; the ones who are actually in the arena, fighting every day to stay above the line. Christine gave me permission to share her story and described the challenges she faces being a sandwich generation leader:

She shared that she feels pulled between aging parents and young children; between the desire to deliver high output, excel at work and make things happen, and the need to manage her health and wellbeing and maintain balance in her life. Christine also spoke about having a partner who struggles with depression and the demanding relationships at work that need her empathy and presence, even when she feels like she has nothing left to give.

Dealing with these conflicting needs and challenges often leaves her feeling empty and exhausted, teetering on the edge of burnout. An insidious feeling of failure creeps in – leaving her feeling she is not doing enough, that she can't fix it all no matter how hard she tries, and that she is simply not enough.

I feel Christine speaks for so many senior leaders who are struggling every day to stay above the line.



Daring Greatly: Choosing to lead above the line

Brené Brown's book *Daring Greatly* opens with this quote from Theodor Roosevelt

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. **The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena**, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while **daring greatly**, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

Leadership requires us to dare greatly. It invites us to conquer challenges we face every day and, in spite, or precisely because of them, to find the energy, the grit, and the vision needed to rise above the line and lead the way.

Leading above the line starts with the brave choice to become aware of our predicament. It begins and ends with self-awareness. To rise above the resilience baseline and shift from merely surviving to thriving, even under challenging circumstances, we need to dare greatly and accept radical responsibility.

The mindful self-leadership journey begins with becoming curious and willing to step outside our comfort zone. It ends in taking responsibility for our state of being; our thoughts and emotions, and for the way in which they impact our resilience and wellbeing, our mindset and our ability to lead with excellence.



"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning

Pictured: Wanderer above the Sea of Fog, 1818, Caspar David Friedrich (detail).

Three Big Challenges: Leading above the line in the age of disruption

1. Pace of change

Winston Churchill once famously said: "History is one bloody thing after another." The same could be said about work.

Our working environments are becoming increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA).

The pace of change is increasing and at times, can feel overwhelming - just as one transformation nears completion, the other one begins. It's hard to imagine that the iPhone is only 12 years old.

So fast, in fact, that **85 per cent of the jobs that will exist in 2030 haven't even been invented yet**. These estimates come from a report authored by the Institute for the Future (IFTF) and a panel of 20 tech, business and academic experts from around the world.

Dell Technologies recently predicted that the pace of change will be so rapid that people will learn in the moment using new technologies such as augmented reality and virtual reality. They stated that the ability to gain new knowledge will become more valuable than the knowledge itself.

This level of unpredictability and uncertainty can trigger our sense of safety and throw us into flight/fright mode.

We become prone to catastrophising and engaging in unintended rehearsal for disaster. All of which further inhibit the higher cognitive functions required to thrive in the age of disruption.



- Alvin Toffler



2. Cognitive overload and attention deficit

The World Economic Forum has recognized cognitive load as one of the major threats in 2020 and beyond.

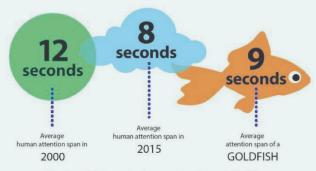
The amount of information we have to digest is mindboggling. The onslaught of emails, the information we ingest via our browsers and social media feeds, endless meetings, and agendas we have to attend to is making our minds overfull.

A 2012 McKinsey study found that the average knowledge worker now spends more than 60 per cent of the work week engaged in electronic communication and internet searching, with close to 30 per cent of a worker's time dedicated to reading and answering email alone.

Research tells us that we check our devices around **200 times a day**. If we divide that into an eight-hour working day, it seems that we shift our attention **every 3 minutes**.

Recent data shows that the average person touches their phone 2167 times and scrolls 300 feet!

Technology is addictive and overstimulates our brains. The lack of focus hurts our relationships and impacts the quality of our work.



Having "the attention span of a goldfish" USED to be a bad thing...

according to Statistic Brain Research Institute

"This state of fragmented attention cannot accommodate deep work which requires long periods of uninterrupted thinking."

- Cal Newport, Deep Work

3. Stress and burnout

Extensive research from the workforce consulting firm Life Meets Work, finds that:

"when leaders do not manage stress effectively, more than 50 per cent of their employees believe their leader is either harmful or irrelevant to their job and the entire organization's performance."

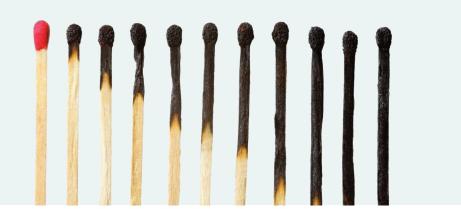
Yet, when leaders are adept at managing stress, only about 10 per cent of their employees harbour such negative opinions.

When asked what has the biggest impact on their level of engagement, 37 per cent of employees reported that it is the quality of leadership, in particular at the senior level.

Work-related stress can also have a negative impact on mental health. It accounts for an average of 23.9 days of work lost for every person affected.

In the U.S., **77 per cent** of respondents to a survey by Deloitte said they had experienced stress from burnout at their current job and almost **600,000** UK workers are suffering from work-related stress, depression, or anxiety according to a 2018 Health and Safety Executive Report.

The report reveals that more than **a fifth of employees** in the European Union have experienced workplace stress, and that figure has reached as high as **57 per cent** in Canada.



Leading Below and Above the Line: From empty to enlightened

Let's unpack these different levels.

Above and Below the Line

	PRESCRIPTION		LEADERSHIP IMPACT
ABOVE the LINE	RESIDE	Enlightened	100%
	REINFORCE	Engaged	70-90%
	RELEASE	Energised	50-70%
BELOW the LINE	RESET	Entangled	30-50%
	REST	Exhausted	10-30%
	RECHARGE	Empty	0-10%

BELOW THE LINE

When we find ourselves stuck below the line, we feel **empty**, **exhausted**, and **entangled**:

EMPTY

When we are running on empty, we have nothing left to give.

We lack motivation and have no sense of purpose; we are not engaged and are just treading water. We feel worthless, disconnected, and alone. Unchecked, this can lead to depression.

When we are empty, our leadership impact is close to zero.

Prescription: take time to recharge, pour some good stuff in, ask for support. Nourish yourself.

"You have to nourish to flourish."

EXHAUSTED

When we are exhausted, we are not safe to follow.

When we are exhausted, we are prone to making mistakes; we have no energy and are highly reactive and negative. We are stuck in old ways of doing things and lack the power and clarity required to innovate. Sometimes we can almost become a martyr, digging deep and pushing through, out of a sense of responsibility and the fear of failure. Unchecked, continuous exhaustion will end in burnout.

When we are exhausted, our leadership impact is very low.

Prescription: rest, take time out; let go, prioritize, and delegate.

"Stop wearing your exhaustion as a badge of honour."

- Brené Brown

ENTANGLED

When we are entangled, we can't see the way ahead.

We feel chaotic and disorganized or stuck like a possum in lights. Short-tempered and highly reactive, leaves us prone to bursts of anger and frustration. Or we may feel sorry for ourselves and doubtful of the way ahead. We become problem-focused and lack clarity, vision, and direction. We can't see the forest for the trees. We tend to keep pushing but end up walking in circles, getting more and more entangled and exhausted. Not resolving this feeling of being entangled generates further stress and can induce anxiety.

When we are entangled, our leadership impact is mediocre.

Prescription: reset/ unplug.

"Almost everything will work better if you unplug it for a few minutes... including yourself."

- Anne Lamott

ABOVE THE LINE

When we rise above the line, we are **energised**, **engaged**, and **enlightened**:

ENERGISED

Energy is released by taking away the blocks. It's a bit like removing a damn - the water can now run freely.

The blocks – our unexamined attitudes, behaviours and habits - keep us stuck below the line.

When we become more self-aware, we begin to take responsibility for these blocks; we are better able to observe the choices we make, and we understand the relationship between them and the outcomes, and the impact they have on others. As we begin to experiment and make changes, we feel more energised and inspired to keep going. This creates a positive feedback loop which enables us to continue to lead and live above the line. Research tells us that embedding change depends on consistency.

Adopting a 1% better every day approach is the best way to energise sustainable growth.

When we feel energised, our leadership impact is high.

Prescription: we need to realise what keeps us stuck below the line and begin to pilot new behaviours and build new habits.

"You'll never change your life until you change something you do daily. The secret of your success is found in your daily routine."

- John C. Maxwell

ENGAGED

Empathy improves engagement, engagement drives performance.

Engagement is about our connection to self and to others. Without self-awareness and empathy, there is no genuine connection.

Engagement is not a one-off thing; it's about developing selfawareness and empathy, building relationships, and gaining trust. It requires courage, authenticity, and consistency, which are the markers of enlightened leadership.

When we are empathic, we can genuinely connect with others and understand them. Empathy enables us to get the most out of our people. Nursing scholar, Theresa Weissman defines empathy as being able to:

- see the world as others see it
- be non-judgmental
- understand another person's feelings, and
- be able to communicate the understanding of that person's feeling

When engaged, our leadership impact is very high.

Prescription: engagement needs to be continually reinforced and re-established.

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

- Maya Angelou

ENLIGHTENED

The more we turn up the light, the easier it is to see.

Rather than using this term in a spiritual sense; I mean that we are en-lightened – we feel lighter, clearer, have more brightness, energy, and vigour.

Enlightened leadership is a level of self-mastery in the leadership context.

When at this level, we reside consistently above the line and all the other attributes are effortlessly leveraged. Enlightened leaders can navigate complexity with the combination of insight and leadership presence. At this level, we possess self-awareness and metacognition, empathy, and an agile mindset. We are resilient and know how to self-regulate to be at our best. We are in a state of flow and balance and lead by example. We are guided by clarity and wisdom and our leadership presence enables us to leverage our experience and expertise. People feel that they can trust us and they are inspired by our company. Everyone wins - you, your people, and your workplace. Even society at large benefits from your enlightened leadership.

When enlightened, your leadership impact is close to 100 per cent.

Prescription: reside but don't be complacent – be mindful of what might throw you off.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

- Aristotle

How to Stay Above the Line: The four foundations of mindful leadership

Mindful Leadership is less concerned with tools, skill sets, knowledge and past experience, and more about the ability to access, at will, an individual's natural leadership qualities.

It provides leaders with access to deep and honest self -awareness telling them whether they are on track and learning to observe impartially and with both internal and external wisdom. It bypasses mental ruts and other habitual, unexamined responses to challenges.

Mindful leaders are intuitive, creative, honest, wise, compassionate and deeply resonant with the constantly changing needs and demands of the workplace and surrounding environment.

Mindful leaders are able to navigate complexity with the flexibility of insight and leadership presence.

The four foundations:

This is a holistic approach, where the four foundations work like a clock mechanism, helping and supporting each other to turn smoothly.



We explore these foundations in more depth on the following pages.

1. Learning to find greater clarity and focus

"To pay attention is our endless and proper work."

- Mary Oliver

Without the ability to stay focused and pay attention, we are just following habitual conditioning and impulses which make us reactive, rather than responsive. We are simply on auto-pilot, often distracted and unsettled, lacking clear sense of direction and purpose.

According to research an average human being has somewhere between 50000 and 70000 thoughts a day. Most of them are made up of unexamined assumptions, anxious rumination and limiting beliefs. These add to our sense of confusion, overwhelm and reactivity.

The moment we start paying attention and learn how to focus it, our minds give rise to awareness which connects us with higher cognitive and emotional abilities such as clarity, discernment, curiosity, and creativity.

Learning how to pay attention is teachable and can be accessed through mindfulness-based practice.

A 2011 Harvard study showed that participating in a Mindfulness meditation program made measurable changes in the brain regions associated with memory, sense of self, empathy and stress.



"Do you have the patience to wait 'til your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving 'til the right action arises by itself?"

- Lao Tzu

2. Cultivating agile mindset and practicing mental fitness

Mindset is a lens through which we see the world.

Here are some definitions of mindset:

- the established set of attitudes held by someone;
- a person's way of thinking and their opinions;
- a mental attitude or inclination
- a fixed state of mind:

Carol Dweck's model of Growth vs Fixed mindset offers a helpful way to think about this:



When our minds are overloaded with views, opinions, and assumptions, it is difficult to sustain clarity and mental agility and be open to seeing the situation from a different perspective. We are held back with limiting beliefs and are prone to cling to assumptions without challenging them.

Developing mental fitness is about learning to promote greater self-awareness, challenge our assumptions and beliefs, and learn the discipline of seeing things as they are. Agile mindset training involves actively practicing observing and metacognition, being curious, dropping defences, and being able to communicate our experience with others with clarity. It leads to authenticity and makes leaders more trustworthy.

"It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see."

- Henry David Thoreau

3. Developing self-awareness and emotional agility

Recently, I came across research by organisational psychologist, Tasha Eurich. She began by asking the question, 'How self-aware do you think you are?'

Something really staggering emerged – as 95 per cent of the people questioned think they are self-aware. Yet when this was further challenged in relation to actual behaviour and how it is perceived by others, it turns out that only 10-15 per cent of people are actually self-aware!

That means that on a good day, 80% of us are lying to ourselves. It turns out self-aware people are so rare she called them the self-awareness unicorns!

Bill George, a professor of leadership at Harvard Business School, and former CEO of Medtronic, says that self-awareness is the starting point of leadership. Self-awareness is the skill of being aware of our thoughts, emotions, and values from moment to moment. Through self-awareness, we can lead ourselves with authenticity and integrity — and in turn better lead others and our organizations.

Metacognition - the ability to observe and' think about our thinking' is vital in developing self-awareness. Without this agency it is impossible to tackle the unconscious bias we all have, and very difficult to make progress along the path of mindful leadership.

Lack of self-awareness hinders our ability to connect meaningfully with others. Understanding our emotions and reactions fosters emotional agility and enables us to know how it feels for someone else. It helps us to find the appropriate way to engage with them and builds empathy and trust – we feel safer around self-aware people.



"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us"

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

4. Growing resilience and wellbeing

Leading change and managing people is stressful and uses all of our resources – our time, energy, and headspace.

When we drop below the resilience baseline, we are in the survival response. Our limbic brain is in control, and it is difficult to access higher cognitive functions and rise above the line. Stress is a necessary part of life. The problem is that we don't get a chance to restore ourselves fully. Rest is a vital part of the peak performance oscillation cycle. Burnout, on the other hand, is the result of relentless pressure and the inability to find the space to reset and restore.

Mindfulness provides that space - a purposeful pause in which our nervous system can shift from stress to relaxation response, from reactivity to observation and finally to creative response. The ability to pause and get a sense of perspective is critical to developing mental and emotional resilience.



"In more than 30 years of research, we've found that increasing mindfulness increases charisma and productivity, decreases burnout and accidents, and increases creativity, memory, attention, positive affect, health, and even longevity. When mindful, we can take advantage of opportunities and avert the dangers that don't yet exist. This is true for the leader and the led."

- Ellen Langer, Professor of Psychology at Harvard University

Conclusion

We live in a time of great uncertainty and change.

Leading change and the capacity to connect are, therefore, primary leadership competencies required today.

Neither is easy. They require us to level up and develop resilience, agility, empathy, and self-awareness. Change brings up fear, resistance, insecurity, and reactivity.

To help move people beyond these regressive states of mind, leaders need to rise above the line and develop their own resilience and emotional intelligence. Fostering an agile mindset will enable them to deal with the complexity and ambiguity of the current leadership climate. The capacity for empathy and the ability to accept their vulnerability around the challenges are critical competencies. They are essential for leaders to be able to meet the demands of complexity and unpredictability of leading change in the age of disruption.

"Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

Václav Havel, President of Czechoslovakia



About Maya

Maya Nova is a speaker, trainer, coach and a mindful leadership consultant. She has over a decade of experience working with leaders and organisations to help them improve their mental agility, resilience and wellbeing.

Maya is passionate about living our lives as if they really mattered, mindfully, one day at a time. Some of her clients include TVNZ, ANZ, Fisher & Paykel and Auckland Council among many others and law firms such as Bell Gully, Russell McVeagh and Chapman Tripp.

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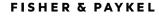






















What Others Say

Maya Nova's experience is available to your organisation through her Mindful Leadership program. Here is what some of Maya's clients have to say about working with her.

Maya has been our Senior Leadership Team Program **Provider** for the past two years. When I arrived in NESTLE New Zealand as a newly appointed CEO I needed to shift the old team dynamic and to integrate two new team players. We were also facing a lot of challenges on the regional level. I decided to apply some disruptive leadership and bring in the practice of Mindfulness to create a cohesive team. The practice of mindfulness helped us a lot, as we were dealing with huge challenges at the time. Very quickly it became natural and there was a recognition within the team that this is something we needed and were benefiting from on many levels. As a result of Mindful leadership training and coaching the old dynamic has shifted and two new team players were integrated. As a team, we became more open, honest and accountable with one another and were more able to set our priorities and to deal with difficult questions, listen deeply and think clearly. The team became more accustomed to deep and honest reflection and able to share it with our employees. As the result of mindfulness training I have also noticed the individual team members changing patterns of behaviour; interestingly the most reluctant players seemed to receive the most benefit from the training and I noticed the whole team aligning and really taking the responsibility. I don't see the disengaged passive attitude any more. For me it was really about deepening into the fundamental principles of leadership beyond mere management."

- Veronique Cremedes, CEO, NESTLE New Zealand

Maya has offered the mindfulness module within our CILTNZ Leaders for the Future Program. The group very much enjoyed it and Maya introduced mindfulness in a way that resonated. They commented as follows:

- Differentiate between the universal qualities that you should hold true. Do not get caught up in the ego.
 Keep hold of curiosity and remain with the open mind rather than a closed mind.
- "The importance of taking time to reflect. It's hard

- to find that time in your day so having to make it is important for you as a person and as a leader. Being tuned in was another big thing for me. An awareness that we have all been in the meetings and left wandering what was said."
- "This session opened my eyes to the importance of relaxation and opening your mind to new ideas and ways of thinking. After being initially sceptical I am now a believer.
- "I learned to believe in one's self, being mindful..to learn to have a relationship with yourself"

"I LOVED the whole Mindful leadership presentation. Great style and speed. I have already used the 5 Step Empathy Practice many times, STOP is featuring many times daily and I'm truly putting focus to the space between the stimulus and my response. I have also taken a lot from the "thoughts are not facts" practice as I am a bit of an over thinker during times when my brain is overloaded, and, I will now refer to the light that I cast rather than the shadow; so simple but very profound."

- Hannah Speedy, People and performance lead, Auckland Council

"I love working with you, Maya. You are so thoughtful and so professional. The types of subjects and the types of concepts and techniques that are discussed might be daunting to some people but you put them at ease with a wonderful balance of care, aspiration, emotion, science and reality. I would 100 per cent recommend these workshops to other leaders and their teams. They would learn a lot that will help them enjoy their lives, enjoy their work and discover many positives along the way. They will also gain productivity and engagement with their teams. I would also tell them that they would be working with an accomplished and experienced professional who is very easy to deal with." Michael Brook, Creative Industries Manager, ATEED

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