

LITTLE STEPS to BIG CHANGE



How mastering micro skills can change your
perspective, your health and your work

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Intro

By Gillian Livingston

If you stopped and thought for a moment, I imagine everyone could come up with a few things in their life they would want to change. But change can be daunting. Just the thought of what you have to do to make certain changes stick can stop you before you've even started.

Making changes is what this book is about.

Big change is big. But all change starts with one small step. This book outlines the first small steps you need to take to make big changes in your life to benefit your health and wellness – both physical and mental – to help you in your life -- both at home and at work. Employees have a personal responsibility to themselves to take care of their physical and mental health. That means trying to eat right, get some exercise and take action if their stress levels become unmanageable. It means taking some time out for themselves, to do those things that help soothe both the mind and body, and to reach out if they feel they need help.

Employers have responsibilities, too. This book also examines what steps

leaders and employers can take to help their employees be at their best. If employers care about their staff and want them to perform their best at work, then they need to create an environment that fosters health and wellness. Employers also need to recognize that problems at home are not left at the door the minute an employee walks in the office. Employers that work hard to create a safe and uplifting work environment, and provide tools to employees so they have the best chance to stay mentally and physically healthy, will see the benefits in their staff morale and their bottom line.

Employers can help staff by cultivating a positive work culture, ensure managers have the training that will help them lead effectively, and by offering programs that help bring out the best in employees.

This book has two parts. The first section lays out step-by-step changes employees can make to address certain areas of their work and home life. The second section looks at what leaders can do to be most effective and help their staff in their roles. We hope this book leads to great and lasting change.

Foreward

By Bill Howatt

Are there parts of your daily life you want to change? Do you feel that only a big massive change will make a difference, and that that's just too difficult of a challenge?

Sometimes, it's not a big change you need, but a number of small consecutive changes that can set you onto the pathway to success.

If you focus on making small incremental changes to your actions – micro skills – you can make a real difference in how satisfied you are with your home and work life, as well as your health and well-being.

This is the first article in a series that will focus on micro skills: One set will be aimed at employees, another set aimed at managers.

The series also aims to bring attention to the [Employee Recommended Workplace Award](#), created by The Globe and Mail and Morneau Shepell, Canada's largest human resources organization, to honour companies that are focused on improving the health and well-being of their employees. Employees take a unique online survey and their score determines whether their workplace wins.

When employees or managers make changes or focus on mastering key micro skills each day, these micro skills can have a positive effect on employees' health, engagement and productivity. But it works best when both employees and managers are putting forward the effort to make positive changes.

Micro skills are the conscious decisions we make each day to achieve a desired outcome. Like pebbles tossed into calm waters, they start out small and grow outward. They are typically small, focused decisions, such as deciding to drink a glass of water instead of a can of pop to decrease your sugar intake and improve your hydration. It seems insignificant, but this can have a big impact on your health. For example, this micro choice can reduce your risk of developing **type 2 diabetes** by 24 per cent.

Employees can make changes to improve their own health, and managers can make changes to improve life for their entire work force. Management's daily approach to employees has a dramatic impact on workplace culture and employees' motivation and feeling of worth.

Employers can enhance feelings of worth by consistently providing **motivation** through authentic compliments – such as noting good work and saying thank you – for contributions by their employees. This supports employees' basic need for **recognition**.

Each day, employees and managers make hundreds of small decisions, so it's not hard to get lost in the complexity of demands that inundate you from both home and work.

There is no expectation that an employee or manager will be perfect.

But by making small changes to improve the micro skills listed below, employees and employers can make changes for the better.

It's long been said that you can be guaranteed of two things in life: death and taxes. Well, there are actually three – the third is stress. Every employee has two life flows of work and home, where stress originates every day. How you deal with those pressures defines your stress load, health, engagement and ultimately your productivity.

External stressors can be the root cause of stress both in the workplace and at home. These stressors include change, job security, manager-employee relationships, culture, trust in leadership, work demands, bullying and working conditions. How effectively employers develop organizational competencies, strategies and programming ultimately impacts their success at curbing these stressors that can have a negative impact on employees' psychological and physical health.

All employees at times have some degree of external stressors that can stem from interactions with their spouse, children and family members, as well as work relationships. Stress can also come from financial pressures and gaps in employees' physical and psychological health. How effectively an employee is able to cope with these

stressors ultimately affects their quality of life and fulfilment.

The following issues will be discussed in this series to promote employee micro skills:

- **Physical health:** fuel, sleep, steps/activity
- **Mental health:** gratefulness, peace, coping
- **Financial/relationship/life health:** spending, time, distraction

Employees who practice each of these nine daily micro skills over time increase their opportunity to manage the complexity of their lives and improve their health and reduce stress.

In addition to adopting the employee skills for themselves each day, managers can also consider the benefits of the micro skills that they can add to their management approach. These include workplace experiences of:

- safety
- listening
- honesty
- framing
- compassion
- acknowledging
- direction
- prioritizing
- humility

None of these micro skills is complex, and they do not require formal training. When practiced they can positively affect the employee-manager relationship that can also have a positive impact on employees' health, engagement and productivity.

The more consistently that managers demonstrate each micro skill daily, the better their results. No manager needs to be perfect, just committed to start each day with the intention of improving each micro skill.

Life is complicated. Many things can be outside your control, but these nine micro decisions and skills are within the control of both employees and managers. Life success and fulfilment are achieved one small decision at a time. Micro skills are one way to slow down, focus and do things well each day. As the old adage goes: inch by inch, life is a cinch.

SECTION 1

EMPLOYEES



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HEALTHY LIVING

By Bill Howatt

HEALTHY LIVING

Getting fitter one step at a time

When we hear that the recommended **minimum standard** of physical activity for adults aged 18 to 64 is 150 minutes, or 2.5 hours, of moderate to intense exercise each week, most of us think of physical activities such as working out at the gym, going jogging or some other structured sport or activity.

But it doesn't need to be that way. One proven alternative to boost your activity level is to pay attention to the number of steps you take each day, the length of time you are active or moving, and the degree of intensity of activity – such as a brisk walk, which would be moderate, or a jog, being high intensity.

The new thought is that sitting is the new smoking.

The focus of the micro skill of tracking your daily steps is to increase your overall physical activity and reduce the amount of time you spend sedentary – sitting on your tush either at work or at home. The new thought is that sitting is the new smoking. That's because long periods of sitting increase **health risks** such as high levels of blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar; excessive fat around your midsection; cardiovascular disease; cancer; and premature death.

A note of caution though: Before you make changes to your daily physical activity it is advisable to get guidance from your doctor on your readiness and starting point if you are unsure about your current fitness level.

1. Get your baseline score

For the next five days, track your daily steps, total minutes of activity and level of intensity (such as low, moderate, or high). You can also use a Fitbit or smart phone to record your progress. If an app is not built into your device, you can download a **pedometer app**.

2. Create a daily steps log

This log will need to track the following three factors:

- total daily steps taken
- total minutes of activity and level of intensity (low-moderate-high)
- total awake time spent sedentary, such as sitting or lying down

3. Take a five-day average

Calculate the average number of daily steps you took, total minutes of activity and intensity, and determine the baseline zone you are starting from:

Green Zone: More than 7,000 steps; 150-300 minutes (2.5 to 5 hours) of moderately intense activity or 75-150 minutes (1.25 to 2.5 hours) of high intense activity.

Orange Zone: 3,000 to 7,000 steps; 75-150 minutes (1.25 to 2.5 hours) of moderately intense activity

Red Zone: Fewer than 3,000 steps; less than 75 minutes (1.25 hours) of low to moderate activity

Motivation and commitment

Adding micro skills, which are really new positive habits, to your daily routine requires commitment and follow-through. For a skill to become an

ingrained habit, it requires motivation. If you can't answer, "How will adopting this new micro skill help me over the next 12 months?" there's little chance you will stick with it and be successful. The value and future benefits of this new skill needs to be important and clear to you – such as increased fitness, reaching weight-loss goals, decreasing your risks for disease.

To transform a micro skill into a habit requires daily focus and tracking of progress. This can help hold you accountable, show progress, give you reasons to celebrate, and curb your risk of relapse.

For this micro skill, it is necessary to start with realistic daily goals. For example, if your baseline shows you are taking less than 5,000 steps a day, then challenge yourself to improve your daily steps by 500 steps each week, which is only 100 extra steps each weekday. Small, steady progression is an easy way to lock in a new daily habit.

The average person who takes 2,000 steps walks about 1.6 kilometres; 10,000 steps equals about 8 km. More than 300 research studies note the benefits of taking 10,000 steps a day.

This recommended minimal target is to stay in the green zone five days of the week.

Maintenance and relapse prevention

Life happens and it's normal to get distracted and lose focus because of some other pressing priority. It's also normal to slip back to old habits. Don't beat yourself up about it though. Realize that this is likely to happen from time to time, and it means you need to have some daily discipline to help curb the risk of falling back into your old lethargic patterns.

By tracking your daily movement, it can provide you with a positive feedback loop that can inspire you to keep going. This practice trains the brain on the benefits of the new action and shapes a habit that will become ingrained.

If you slip up, don't judge yourself as having failed overall. Realize that you've slipped from your goal and use it as an opportunity to learn and to improve.

By accepting that you may not be perfect every day, it will help you refocus on your goals and the benefits increased activity will have on you. That can help boost your motivation so you restart your commitment to reaching your daily steps target.

HEALTHY LIVING

A six-step plan for employees to improve their health

Do you set daily physical and mental health goals?

Beginning each day with a clearly-defined set of micro health goals is an effective way to achieve your optimal health. However, not until you see the value of setting these daily goals is there a chance you will consistently follow through with such a plan.

Last week, while speaking to a group of employees on the topic of physical and mental health, we were discussing program impact and why many one-off health programs (such as a walking challenge) fail to achieve their desired impact and long-term results.

During this discussion, I was asked, “I get it in theory, health and wellness programs are good for the employee. But what’s in it really for the employee and why would they want to participate?”

I paused for a moment and responded with, “I 100-per-cent agree that the value link must be made clearly. Hopefully through conversations we can help employees see the

value of being healthy and happy. If we cannot, it is highly unlikely they will participate in programs that directly benefit them.”

In the end, people focus on what’s most important to them. If it’s being healthy and happy, then focusing on daily micro health behaviours is an excellent way to achieve this outcome.

The purpose of the micro skill of six-stepping is activating a **SMART** goal.

One popular model for designing personal goals is using a process called SMART goals. This acronym stands for: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time bound. The purpose of a SMART goal is to obtain clarity on what you will do, how and when. When a goal is clear and simple, it’s easier to follow and measure. Being able to see success and results can create a positive feedback loop that facilitates motivation and adherence to follow-through.

Six Stepping uses SMART goal logic. The following steps outline the six micro goal health behaviours. You can set your own schedule for when you will do each. You just need to complete each step once a day. You can earn up to six points each day. Track your daily points and your weekly average. The target is to keep a weekly average over 5.4. After you get rolling, you may start to see results within 60 days. If you can six-step 90 per cent of the time you will be improving your health.

1. Healthy hydration Drink 2.5 to 3.0 litres of clean, pure water daily. Avoid all drinks with sugar in them. You can drink two eight-ounce black coffees each day. Limit alcohol to one drink, no more than three times per week.

2. Mindful eating Eat a minimum of three meals, following the usual healthy eating plate. Consider the nutritional value of everything you put in your mouth. No night snacking after 7 p.m. – ever. Make a daily goal to eliminate all junk food.

3. Sleep plan Set a target bedtime to get a minimum of 7.5 hours of sleep each night.

4. Sedentary shake Every 60 minutes, move for a minimum of five minutes

(such as walk to fill up your water bottle, stretch); make no exceptions. Commit that you will never sit in one place, working at your desk for more than 50 minutes at a time.

5. Motion making Set active **daily motion goal** before sitting down; then ensure you have moved at least 60 minutes each day (exercise, walk, or sport). The target is a minimum of 9,500 steps a day and stretch goal is 12,000 steps a day. There are lots of apps to track your daily and monthly averages.

6. Cognitive hygiene **Focus** on what you are most proud of each day. Challenge any negative **self-talk** so it doesn't allow negative thinking to roll in your head. If you can't stop on your own, this is a sign that you could benefit from learning how to **cope better**. If you have **unresolved conflict** or another problem that is creating stress, plan how you will deal with or resolve it; avoiding it is not a healthy option. Finally, before you close your eyes each night, state what you are **grateful** for.

HEALTHY LIVING

Is a lack of sleep hurting your productivity at work and at home?

How many hours of quality sleep do you typically get each night? If you are getting much less than six hours you could be putting yourself at undo risk, and leaving yourself unable to get the most out of your day at work and at home.

One study in the [United States](#) showed that drowsy drivers were responsible for an average of 1,500 deaths a year and at least 100,000 car accidents.

[Sleep](#) plays a critical role in promoting physical and mental health. A recent study found that one in three [adults](#) are not getting enough sleep, based on the recommended minimum average of seven hours per night.

This micro skill focuses on how you can improve your sleep, if that happens to be a challenge for you, so you can be happier and more productive in your job and your personal life.

[WebMD](#) reports that the benefits of getting at least seven to eight hours of sleep each night include: improved health; less pain if you suffer from chronic pain; lower risk for injury;

better mood; easier weight control; improved sex life; clearer thinking; stronger immune system and enhanced memory.

Sleep plays a critical role in promoting physical and mental health.

On the other end of the continuum is [too much sleep](#). Scientists have found that people who have developed the habit of sleeping longer than is required (such as 10 to 12 hours) typically feel less well than a person who sleeps well for seven to eight hours.

If you're having difficulty getting enough sleep, there are a few simple

things you can do. Don't expect improvement the first night, but within one to two weeks most people report some improvement in the quality of their sleep.

Examine sleep detractors and remove them

If you are struggling to sleep well, the first step is to take a look at what may be sleep detractors and remove them. Taking long naps during the day, ingesting too much caffeine, or eating, drinking, watching TV, reading social media, and surfing the Internet before going to bed all can create stimulation. Removing detractors creates an opportunity for you to get a better sleep.

Create a sleep zone

This is a space where you will sleep. Things that influence your ability to sleep include noise, light, temperature, the comfort of your bed, pillows, covers and your psychological comfort when sleeping with another person (if you have a partner). When designing a sleep zone, the goal is to create a dark, quiet and comfortable space – not too hot and not too cold.

Design a sleep game plan

Develop your **sleep hygiene** pattern, which is the daily practice and structure around your bedtime routine. Write it out and follow it. For example:

- Commit to a defined bedtime through the week and if possible stick to it on weekends, too (such as 11:00 p.m.).
- Turn off the TV 30 minutes before bed. This is a period to reflect and start to wind down to get ready for sleep, get washed and changed for bed.
- Check your wakeup time and alarm, make any notes for the next day to free your mind from worrying. This period is not for checking e-mails or doing tasks. It's only to set up the next day.
- Prepare the room temperature, window blinds, bedding and pillow.
- Get into bed around the same time every night.
- Once the lights are off and you're lying down, say to yourself at least one grateful thing. Focus on these positive thoughts, close your eyes and drift off for the night.

Monitor daily sleep duration and quality

Keep a sleep journal to monitor your sleep duration and the number of disturbances that occur during the night. That can include the number of times you wake up; number of trips to the bathroom; the time it takes you to fall asleep; the quality of your sleep; whether you woke feeling rested and how long you actually slept.

You can add value to your sleep journal with a sleep tracking app such as a Fitbit or other device that can help shape and build your discipline around sleep. This practice can also uncover risks that may be due to a sleep issue like sleep apnea, or an unrelated issue such as diabetes or depression. Low blood sugar at night can disturb your sleep. If your sleep routine is not getting you to sleep, there may be a reason that is worth investigating. Take your sleep log and evidence to your doctor; your journal will help your doctor help you.

HEALTHY LIVING

Do you have the right fuel to make it through your workday?

Today, most of us depend on some type of machine to get to work – usually an automobile. Cars have evolved into high-tech machines, but most still require gasoline to fuel the engine, along with other fluids such as oil, transmission and brake fluid to operate other systems.

*What we put
into our body
will impact
how well we
run each day.*

The human body is also a high-tech machine that requires elements such as protein, carbohydrates, fat, minerals, and water to work properly. Similar to a car, what is put into the body impacts how well it works and

performs, whether at home or at work.

The difference between a car and the human body is that the car has more advanced warning systems, and will not operate if fuelled incorrectly. This creates the discipline that if you want a car work correctly you need to add the proper fluids in the correct places and in the right amounts.

The micro skill of fuelling explores the importance of providing the body with the right ingredients every day. Similar to the car metaphor, what we put into our body will impact how well we run each day.

People who eat healthy every day consider food as a fuel instead of a pleasure or escape. For people who struggle with their weight, food is often associated with an escape or pleasure, not just nourishment. In other cases, some people just don't pay attention to the volume or types of foods they consume and how that affects their body.

The [World Health Organization](#) actively promotes the link between diet and disease. Many diseases such

as diabetes could be avoided by better dietary habits.

Just as habits are created by one choice at a time, your body's energy and health can be defined one meal at a time. Following are a few tips to help develop the micro skill of fuelling so that you can improve how you feel, and how much energy you have, during the day both at home and at work.

Discover what fuel types and portion sizes your body needs

Take a few moments and explore the [Eat Well Plate](#) provided by Health Canada. Every nutrient has a purpose and too much or too little over time can cause problems to your long-term health. Use this as a guide in designing your daily meal plan. The more structure you have around your eating, the more likely you will eat with purpose.

Practice asking, "How does this food choice help me?"

It's good to enjoy food; however, when learning to eat healthier and in the right amounts it's helpful to simply ask how a food choice is helpful so the why is clear to promote purposeful and healthy eating. This action can help curb poor choices, such as those high in sugar, salt or fat. The goal of

this question is to focus on the fuel and nutrients your body needs first.

Understand the link between food and feeling well

One example is protein-based foods like fish, chicken, eggs, meat, milk and almonds. All these foods support an essential acid that impacts well-being. Simply using a [protein calculator](#) can help you define how much protein you need each day to help you feel good, be strong and have enough energy to be productive while at work and when you get home.

Understand how your machine stores and burns fat

One pound equals 3,500 calories. If you burn on average 1,800 calories a day and take in 2,000, in a month you will have gained about two pounds. Repeating this pattern for six months will result in a 10-pound weight gain. Purposeful eating suggests knowing how many calories you need each day and tracking them. Weigh in once a week and monitor your progress. Monitoring calorie intake and body weight will reinforce purposeful eating over time, which will help you control your weight and improve your health.

HEALTHY LIVING

How to stick to your healthy goals, and why that matters at work

If you're not in the physical shape you want to be, then why?

One factor that may be holding you back is health fatigue. This is when you have a feeling of pressure and stress associated with adopting and learning new physical health habits. If left unchecked, it sneaks up, weakens your resolve and shuts down your healthy commitment and actions.

Changing your habits to achieve a desired level of fitness and health takes mental energy, focus and self-discipline. Without having a plan to help you manage the mental challenge of shifting your habits, and a way to fuel your mental reserves, you may fail to reach your physical health goals. Why? The mind often quits before the body.

The purpose of this micro skill is to manage and prevent health fatigue. There's no program, device or book; only you can do it for yourself.

Your health has a direct impact on your work. Employees need to be physically healthy in order to have long-term success in the workplace.

Without their health, employees can't do their jobs to the best of their abilities. Employers who facilitate wellness programs understand that employees' physical health impacts employee productivity and how well the company performs overall.

Enjoying being physically healthy and being free of illness, or able to effectively managing chronic disease, has no price tag. A person only has to get ill to understand how important it is to be healthy. The health choices we make today impact our tomorrow.

Here are tips to manage and prevent health fatigue.

Normalize failure

When we fail, we are living. Failing is evidence of trying; trying is a commitment to a particular outcome. Some say there's no such thing as trying, only success or failure. That's not really true. The education system has taught us that someone who gets 51 per cent in Grade 12 math can still go on to achieve success, with persistence

and hard work. It's not the slip or failure that's as important as how we define it. Thomas Edison took 10,000 attempts to invent the light bulb. He kept trying to reach success. As you aim to improve your health, remember that each day is a new chance to start again with a clean slate. Health happens one small decision at a time. A few poor choices are just that: they don't define your health forever. The sum of your individual choices will. So if you get off track one day, stop yourself, recalibrate, and aim to keep to your goals the next day.

Be clear on your 'why'

When you wake up each morning, ask yourself, "Why is being physical healthy important to me today?" To fuel your commitment to physical fitness each day, be clear on your 'why.' For example, "I want the energy to be able to go to work and then come home to play with my 12-year-old son." Only you can define your commitment and why it's important to you. To achieve physical health, you need to value it and understand at your core what it means to you. This is the fuel that can give you the **grit** – the internal drive to achieve your goals amid many challenges – to tune in to when you open your eyes each day. This mantra can help prevent

mental fatigue and push you harder to reach your personal goals.

Set realistic expectations

Before you make a plan, have a picture in mind of your desired outcome and the time and effort it will take to achieve this goal. Be clear on the amount of mental energy you will need to commit, and pace your plan accordingly. For example, if you're not exercising and are 30 pounds overweight, making a plan that includes walking four times a week for 60 minutes, eating more salads, filling your water bottle three times a day, and being in bed by 10:30 p.m. sounds good in theory. But all those changes at once can be too much of a challenge. One minor slip, when left unchecked, can burn mental energy that can quickly sidetrack a well-intentioned plan. If you're looking for long-term change, less is more. Pick one or two things at a time and incorporate them into your daily routine. When they're more of a habit after a week or so, add in a new one. As well, set your targets to support and reinforce success – such as defining success as following your plan 70 per cent of the time. Try for 100 per cent, but build in a buffer. As you succeed with your goals, increase your targets and adjust your expectations.

HEALTHY LIVING

How ‘mindful hydration’ can reduce stress and boost productivity

Two factors that impact our overall health are water and mental calm. Without water, our health is at risk. Without mental calm, our mental health is at risk.

If you're at work, stressed out and feeling the effects of dehydration, you are not going to be doing your best work. Your health, and your productivity will suffer.

This micro skill introduces a concept called mindful hydration – the daily practice of meditation while drinking water.

Here are some facts:

- The [Mayo Clinic](#) suggests that an acceptable target for a man is drinking around three litres of water a day, and a female, 2.5 litres.
- The [amount of water you need](#) each day is defined by additional variables such as exercise, body weight and temperature. You can

use a [hydration calculator](#) to find out your minimal target.

- [Dehydration](#) can contribute to fatigue, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, digestion disorders, skin conditions, allergies and asthma.
- Science has found [meditation](#) slows brain activity processing, and the benefits of meditation are better focus, less anxiety, better sleep, memory, and reduced stress.
- A person needs only [10 minutes](#) a day of meditation to obtain many of these benefits.
- This micro skill provides two benefits in one action called [Mindful Hydration](#). This skill was developed by Darren Steeves and myself. We are publishing the scientific evidence to show the positive impact on employees' [total health](#) and work force productivity.

Preparation:

1. Self-evaluate your current situation.
Are you having a hard time coping with life stress and demands?
Complete the [Your Life at Work Survey](#), done by Howatt HR and The Globe and Mail, to get your baseline.
2. If you're motivated to find more calm and health, you're now ready to practice.
3. Try this daily for six weeks and then redo your survey to measure the impact.
4. Get a water bottle or glass you can use as your anchor for this activity.
5. Complete your water calculator to be clear on how much water you need a day to obtain the benefit. Measure your daily water intake to ensure you hit this number daily as well.

Ninety-second mindful hydration

Below is a mini version of the Mindful Hydration micro skills program that has been adapted for this article.

Instructions: Read each section and follow the directions until you have the process memorized. The first two sections will take around 30 seconds; the practice session is 60 seconds.

Create intention

Decide that you want to take a mental break. Get up and find a safe place where you can pay no attention to other things and are 100-per-cent safe. Get water in your bottle or glass (which is also your 'anchor'), sit, and get comfortable. Bring your attention inside and give yourself permission to take one minute for yourself. Take three deep breaths and exhale slowly for each breath to empty your lungs, and on the last breath put your hand on your bottle (your anchor).

Clear your screen

After your third breath, shift your gaze to the water. Notice the water.

Examine it (e.g., how pure and clear it is, how calm it is). This helps to prepare your mind for your practice. If your mind is jumping around throughout any step, it's okay. Be patient; this is normal. This step is to be used to transition your mind from the busy world to the now. Allow yourself to be present in the now moment.

Practice

It's now time to practice. Take the water to your mouth slowly and take a mouthful. Pay attention to the water and the space it fills in your mouth. Allow the water to go down your throat slowly. Notice the slow, clear, peaceful water falling down your throat with each drink. Between each mouthful, take a deep breath and exhale. Focus on the water. When your mind jumps around, simply refocus on this simple activity and notice the water – nothing more.

By simply practicing this 90-second mindful hydration activity – with intention – you have an opportunity to positively impact both your physical and mental health, one mouthful of water at a time. Once you master this micro skill, each drink of water is a found opportunity.

HEALTHY LIVING

A 10-step routine to reduce work stress one breath at a time

How often do you feel that stress is winning?

Extended periods of high levels of stress can have a negative impact on both the mind and body. If you're not sure **how much stress** you have in your work and home life, take a few moments to complete the **Your Life at Work Survey**, done by Howatt HR and The Globe and Mail.

Research from this survey indicates that on a typical day about 60 per cent of employees go to work under stress. This stress may not be only work related; it may be partially due to life issues such as financial or relationship stress.

Unhealthy, **bad stress kills**. When unchecked, this kind of stress can damage the body, causing deterioration of the gums, heart disease and cancer. It can weaken the immune system, resulting in increased risk for common colds and other illnesses.

This micro skill promotes the health benefits for stopping for a moment and taking a breath – a proven way to curb and reduce the negative impact of

stress. **Deep breathing**, often referred to as diaphragmatic breathing, facilitates bringing oxygen into the body.

The optimal time to use this micro skill is when you're feeling stressed and need to take back control. There's also a benefit to adding this practice to your daily routine as a tool for promoting mental health.

Stop and breathe

There's little learning and practice required to gain the benefits of adding a new micro skill. The first action is to read the following steps a few times. One easy way to get started is to record the instructions on your personal phone, speaking slowly in a relaxing tone and pace, and then follow along as you play it back to yourself.

1. Get comfortable in a quiet spot. It's fine to be seating comfortably or lying down. If you choose to lie down, ensure your head is comfortable, and you're flat on your back with your legs pulled in and your knees bent up.

2. Rest one open, flat hand above your belt line and facing palm down and the other palm down on your upper chest. Your hands are guides to show you which parts of your body are moving up and down. When doing deep breathing, the top hand is not to move.
3. This deep breathing exercise begins with a gentle exhale. There's no need to empty your lungs. This action is meant only to prepare for the deep breathing exercise. As you lightly exhale it's helpful to let your body relax by allowing your neck and shoulders to relax.
4. After you have exhaled, close your mouth and pause for a second. Think about being relaxed.
5. When you're ready to begin, slowly breathe in through your nose and fill your lungs. Focus on bringing the air in deep into your lungs so that your belly and bottom hand rises. When this exercise is done right the upper hand will not move, only the bottom hand will as you breathe in and out deeply. Bring in as much air as you can comfortably.
6. Hold this air in for a minimum of five seconds. The length of time will be determined by your level of comfort.
7. Once you're ready, it's time to move to the next step.
8. Slowly and gently release the air through your mouth. Continue to do so until you have released all the air that you can. As you breathe out, imagine all your stress is riding a wave away from you, and feel the tension leave your body.
9. Once all the air is out, pause and close your mouth. Prepare to repeat the deep breathing cycle.
10. Repeat steps five to nine one breath at a time. Do this five to seven times with each practice session.

At the end, you'll feel less stressed and more relaxed. It will help you gather your thoughts to proceed to the next steps in your day.

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MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

By Bill Howatt

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

How to have an ‘attitude of gratitude’

Research suggests that there is a link between the benefits of gratitude, which is the practice of counting your good **fortune** — such as having good health, feeling safe, having loving family and friends — and your well-being.

Your mental health is influenced by what you focus on — if you focus on the positive, most likely you’ll feel more positive, too. I have coined this as the **98-2 theory**. Here’s what that means. It’s common for a person to report that 98 per cent of their day is going well and two per cent is not. Oftentimes, as a result, 98 per cent of their focus is on the two per cent that’s not going so well. This can then cloud their perceptions, and instill a negative bias, as to how well their life is going right now. It can also affect their level of stress and sense of balance and calm.

Whether you perceive that your day is going well or not, the vast majority of people can still find things to be grateful for if they look.

So, what are you grateful for? Have you thought about that recently? Your mental health is shaped by stress as well as by the good things you have in your life. For some people, learning to be grateful takes practice.

This micro skill encourages you to take a few moments each day to reflect and acknowledge what you have to be grateful for. This reflection can be done inside your head or in writing. I like to call it “an attitude of gratitude.”

The benefits of having an attitude of **gratitude** are wide ranging, such as improving your relationships, physical health, psychological health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental health.

This daily practice can quickly help a person shift their focus from complaining about what they don’t have or think they deserve to what they know they have that is positive and a benefit to them.

Practicing gratefulness

Here are some simple ways you can start to practice gratefulness.

Awareness

For seven days, take a few moments at the end of each day to reflect and acknowledge what you are grateful for and why. Consider all the people with whom you interacted and the ones you thanked and acknowledged.

This activity is a first step towards discovering what you are indeed grateful for. The vast majority of people who stop and think will find little and big things to be grateful for each day.

Gratitude comes in many forms. Expecting your car to start on a minus-35-degree Celsius Canadian winter night may seem trivial, until your vehicle refuses to start.

It's helpful to learn how to not allow expectations to blind us from being grateful for both the little and big things that we have and that are working well in our lives.

Get a daily boost

Gratitude can fuel life satisfaction and contentment. Through daily reflection and practice, gratitude can become a positive boost. When practiced regularly it can provide a positive reserve to draw upon in those moments of life when you feel stressed and challenged.

The daily practice of acknowledging at least one positive action, person

or thing, will charge your gratitude battery.

There's something to be grateful for every day if you give yourself a chance to look. Whenever you are focused on something positive you are giving your mind a break from negativity, and that can improve your mood and outlook.

Evaluate daily

Once a day is over, you can't get it back. You can, though, enjoy the journey. Taking time each day to focus on what you are grateful for is a discipline that takes practice. If you are alive each day you have something to be grateful for. Being grateful is a decision. Making it daily is a positive action for your long-term mental health.

Gratitude research suggests that practicing gratitude over time can help you learn how to better deal with adversity, create positive emotions and energy, and learn how to enjoy life better.

Research sources promote the value of adding a daily dose of gratitude to promote your overall health.

It costs nothing to acknowledge yourself or others each day. When done authentically it will make you feel good.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

Ways to find peace of mind during a busy day

Though often brief, moments of peace of mind are often intense, rewarding and enjoyable. They often happen in short, powerful bursts.

When was the last time you felt peace of mind? And what were you doing when you had this feeling?

How you answer these questions can indicate your levels of happiness and fulfilment with your life at home and at work.

Moments of internal peace and calm can be elusive.

Peace of mind can be influenced by simple actions such as going for a walk that uncovers a breathtaking view, creating a moment of pause and sense of calm and peace. At such a moment,

the world stops and life is pure.

In the age of the 24/7 media cycle dominated by the world's current economic and political uncertainty, many people's minds are cluttered and filled with stress and anxiety. Too many people are living their lives on autopilot, and days and weeks fly by. Some people are caught on a treadmill and are simply trying to get through each day and keep up with the daily grind. Moments of internal peace and calm can be elusive.

The micro skill of peace introduces the notion of paying attention to internal conversations we have with ourselves daily at home and at work. Life moves fast, so when we can stop and enjoy what we have, we are better able to experience peace of mind.

Mental health is shaped by what we think and do daily. Actively seeking peace of mind is one proactive way to positively affect our mental health.

Some of us **under stress** are looking for peace of mind in the wrong places, such as through alcohol, drugs and gambling. But there are healthy

alternatives that require only intention and daily focus.

Nurture your peace of mind

Nurturing peace of mind can help fuel hope, a feeling that influences the belief that things will be okay. Peace of mind can be nurtured through mindful small actions each day. Take time out of your day to stop for a moment, to find two minutes of quiet both at home and during the day at work to calm and refocus your thoughts.

Find a mental anchor

Envisage some magical sunsets or memories of when you were inspired, awed and at peace. What were you doing, how did you feel, and how did you know it was an awesome experience? These memories and feelings are anchors. The goal is to open your mind to previous experiences or the possibility of how these moments resulted in brief periods of pure peace of mind.

Take an inventory

Take an internal inventory of things you can do today that can nurture peace of mind. Some people practice daily [meditation](#). For others, a walk in nature is an excellent gateway. Pick

one thing you do or are willing to learn or start that opens the door to moments that nurture peace of mind. There are many options; your mind just needs to be open. Each and every day there is a sunrise and a sunset. They're free and they bring moments of peace of mind for many.

Make a commitment

Achieving peace of mind on a daily basis requires intention, planning and follow-through. One universal truth for every human being is the desire for peace. Life is short and we can't change the past. What we can do is live for today. In a world with lots of noise, stimuli and information, finding moments of peace of mind can help us feel contentment and reduce our stress at home and at work.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

Experiencing distress? Here are some skills to help you manage it

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What is the one thing you want to accomplish over the next 90 days?

With goals come the pressure to achieve them, and with pressure comes stress. Not all stress is bad. Good stress, also called **eustress**, is the kind that helps motivate you to achieve your goals.

Your mental health is shaped by how well you cope.

However, if stress moves from eustress to become painful, where you feel you can no longer cope, you are experiencing **distress**. This is unhealthy stress, and the longer you experience it, the more you are putting your physical and mental health at risk.

Your mental health is shaped by how

well you cope. **Coping skills** are trainable skills that can help you better manage distress.

This micro skill focuses on coping skills. Coping skills are **tools you can develop**. There are both positive coping skills (such as **good distractions**) and negative ones (such as snacking at night) that can have an impact on your long-term health. Below are a few actions you can take to improve how you cope at work and at home every day. Like any skill, developing coping skills requires focus, practice and patience.

Pause

When you feel you are being challenged, pause before responding. When you get a troublesome e-mail or someone challenges you in person, give yourself permission to slow down. The goal is to avoid thinking errors. A rapid response without facts often adds more stress and complexity to a situation.

Nobel laureate **Daniel Kahneman**

reported that rapid decision making increases the risk of personal bias that often is not accurate. To reduce bias, slow down and get the facts, get your emotions under control and write out your thoughts. Then, in an hour or so, read what you wrote. This self-editing step will often help change the tone and message of your communication so you can get to a solution based on facts and a desirable outcome.

It helps ensure that the decision is based on your beliefs and that you are comfortable with it. This can help you maintain control and reduce the urgency that some e-mails often create when they are perceived as being undesirable.

Keep score

Most of us experience moments of distress in the workplace. It happens. But consider the following example: In one eight-hour shift, a person reports they experienced 30 minutes of distress and 7.5 hours of positivity. How would the average person report this day?

Too many people put more value on negative events than positive ones.

In an eight-hour day, there are 480 minutes. Thirty minutes divided by 480 suggests that about 6 per cent of the day was negative, but 94 per cent

of the day was just fine.

If, at the end of every day, you completed this simple equation, it would help give you perspective.

There's no perfection. The purpose of this exercise is to keep the perspective that if more than 90 per cent of a day is good, that's excellent.

One coping skill, called **resiliency**, helps you develop the ability to look for the positive path in situations when it may feel hard to do so, and believe through your actions that you will be okay.

Use a journal

Keep a daily personal journal for 90 days. One way to support and develop your coping skills is to measure where you are at the beginning of the period and remeasure after 30 days. Also, monitor your daily perceptions for 90 days, using a personal daily journal template.

Keeping a journal helps you take a moment each day to write out your thoughts and to put the day into perspective with respect to how you are doing and feeling.

Consider the example of putting on 20 extra pounds over six months. In this case, the person's waist expands from 36 inches to 44. This doesn't happen overnight. It's caused by daily

microdecisions that result in the person ending up wearing pants that are eight inches bigger.

It will take time to change your habits and coping skills, so keeping a journal can help you keep track and keep perspective as well.

Distress can have a negative impact on your mental health when it's rationalized and not dealt with.

Awareness and taking actions to curb your distress can reduce your mental-health risk. If you don't address distress and its effects, it can evolve into a chronic mental illness. The process of keeping a journal can help determine whether you are having trouble improving your day-to-day stress. In that case, you may benefit from getting professional help.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

Do you know how to manage your mood at work?

How often does stress negatively impact your mood at work?

Workplace stress is a major issue in North America. In fact, in the United States, **workplace stress** is estimated to be adding \$190-billion (U.S.) in health care costs, and it has been attributed to more than 120,000 deaths.

Mood management starts with awareness.

The frequency, duration and intensity of stress you perceive in the workplace can influence your mood, and how you respond to stress impacts your emotions.

This micro skill focuses on daily mood management. The better you manage your mood, the better you will be at curbing negative thinking and

behaviours that negatively affect productive work time.

Mood management starts with awareness. Similar to driver training, where it's valuable to have some basic insights so you know how a vehicle reacts when it hits ice and why it loses traction, mood management assists in preventing emotional spinouts.

Here are some useful insights:

- Our “old brain” is unconsciously constantly scanning for danger. It houses and processes memories and emotional reactions. One source suggests that the old brain **operates** at four million bits of input per second, and when it perceives a threat it can quickly attach **powerful emotions** such as fear and anger.
- Our “new brain” is much slower and needs time to catch up to the old brain. This conscious brain moves at just 8,000 bits per second, so it is always playing catchup in order for rational thinking and problem solving to be used.

Because of this difference in speeds, the risk in times of stress and pressure is to become **emotionally hijacked**; our thinking gets overpowered by our emotions, which can result in poor decision making that can make things worse. Think of a loving couple having an argument and saying things they really don't mean.

Here are some ways to manage your moods:

Mood management coaching

Mood management is defined by our ability to keep powerful emotions in check so that we can make rational decisions that are in our and others' best interests. The better we are able to stay calm under pressure, the less likely we will overreact and make poor decisions in the workplace.

Build your mood management foundation

Most of us took driver education, and had to pass a written and practical test to get a licence. Like driving, the more we practice, the better we get. The more we practice managing our emotions, the more likely we will succeed. However, it's helpful to have the basics. Get your **emotional intelligence (EQ)** baseline and evaluate the benefits of learning more.

Practice pausing

Powerful emotions create urgency and the drive to make a decision and act. One simple rule: Don't make any decisions when you are upset, such as angry, hurt or scared. Pause and resist making a decision until you have calmed down and your conscious brain catches up. Sleep on it, or if it's a Friday afternoon, leave it until Monday. And don't send e-mails when you're upset. It's okay to write one, but put it away for a few hours and re-read it before hitting send. Delay as long as you can, so you have time for your thinking to catch up, to ensure you are not making decisions based on emotion and not facts. It may not change the outcome, but it can help you get yourself in a better position to manage your mood.

Monitor your mood management ability

Daily monitoring and tracking are effective ways to objectively evaluate how well you are managing your emotions and mood at work. A daily journal that tracks your emotions, mood and outlook can help you determine the skills you may want to develop to add to your mood management foundation. A free, **daily personal** online journal can be used to track your mood day to day.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

Do you know how to press the reset button at work?

Each day suggests a new opportunity and a fresh start. Some employees believe this and others do not. Our experience in the workplace can be like Bill Murray's movie *Ground Hog Day*, when each day plays out exactly the same. This is fine when it's positive, but when it's not, it's stressful.

The reset button micro skill facilitates shifting your mental state from negative to positive thoughts so that you can restart your day or ensure tomorrow is a new one. New, by definition, implies pure and good, which is the opposite of what Albert Einstein taught as being less desirable: "Insanity – doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

What we focus on – whether positive or negative – can expand and can take over our thinking. This is why negative experiences and interactions can be all-consuming. One consequence when this type of thinking is not resolved quickly is **unresolved conflict**. For example, a peer doesn't invite

you to a meeting. This upsets you and you decide it was rude and unfair. This starts a negative loop and influences your behaviour, and you might just avoid interacting with that individual on any level.

This type of negative looping can have a further compounding effect because it can take over your mind and lead to distraction. This can lead to mistakes, delays and disruptions that can negatively affect your workplace experience and performance.

When something happens and you begin to notice distractive thinking and you know the root cause of your frustration is some minor incident, honestly consider whether the real issue is that you simply didn't get what you wanted. It's in these types of situations that we always have choice to continue our negative loop or press our reset button to change our focus. The old idiom – making mountains out of molehills – has taught for generations that there is little value in letting minor issues become bigger than they need to be.

Once you master this micro skill it can help you create a mental shift on demand that can influence your attitude and outcomes in the workplace.

Preparation

Training your reset button will take some practice. This micro skill leverages a skill from [neurolinguistic programming](#) called anchoring that can link a positive memory to a stimulus. To develop this anchor, find a quiet spot and think of something that has always been a wonderful and positive experience. Recall all the wonderful smells, sights and sounds. Once you have this vivid memory at its peak, set your kinesthetic trigger (for example, press your left thumbnail). This anchor can typically be developed within a few days. The more you practice, the stronger it will become. You will know it's working when you feel a minor frustration, trigger your anchor and notice what you begin to think about and feel. (To learn more about this skill, watch [Tony Robbins'](#) video on YouTube.)

Press your reset button on demand

Acknowledge that you are looping on a negative thought. When something minor happens and you begin to

notice it's creating disruption, delays and distraction, decide that it's time to stop this loop. When you fire off your trigger, you change the negative loop to a positive one. Like a goldfish swimming around a tank, within one lap you're ready to leave the past and move forward. Only you can determine if you want to release your frustration and move on. When ready, trigger your positive anchor to help create a positive mental state that can help you move forward.

Determine what, if any, action is required. Evaluate your facts in a more positive state. Why did this event really bother you? What action, if any, do you think is required? Many times there is no need for action, just awareness that what's bothering you is some preference or insecurity that can be left behind through personal growth. Whether you decide to act by talking to a peer to resolve a concern or gain a personal insight, the goal is to move forward, thinking positively about your day.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

How to clean out your negative thoughts

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When you lie down to go to sleep at night, is your mind clear and ready to rest?

Negative thoughts can grow and when left unchecked can hurt our total health.

It takes 10 to 20 minutes for most of us to fall asleep. For people struggling, there are sleep best practices a person can develop that can help them get a better night's sleep such as designing a bedtime routine, to shift gears at the end of the day to help them settle down and turn off their mind.

Cognitive hygiene – basically a way

of positively managing your thoughts – is a micro skill that focuses on the daily action of cleaning out unhelpful thoughts. This skill supports both mental health and sleep.

The average person has 50,000 to 70,000 thoughts per day; that's around 35 to 48 per minute. With this much mental activity, it's normal to have moments where you feel overwhelmed and distracted.

More problematic are negative thoughts about ourselves. When these thoughts are left unchecked and become repetitive and ingrained, they can negatively impact our perceptions, decisions and actions both at work and at home.

Here are three steps to clean out unwanted thoughts and practice better cognitive hygiene.

Awareness

Be clear of the value and reason that it's in your best interest to practice cognitive hygiene every day. Did you have any negative thoughts about

yourself today, such as, “I’m weak; I’m a failure; I’m no good; no one likes me”? Sadly, these kinds of automatic thoughts are quite normal. It’s what we do with them that’s important. Negative thoughts can grow and when left unchecked can hurt our **total health**, which includes our physical and mental health.

Accountability

We own our mental health, which can be influenced by genetics, life and work experiences and daily thoughts. Cognitive hygiene is the daily action of cleaning out thoughts that are not helpful.

Similar to brushing your teeth each day, it’s much easier to deal with one day’s worth of bacteria than ignoring it and dealing with the consequences six months down the road.

Accountability is owning what you can directly control: your thinking. Begin by flagging negative thoughts and acknowledging that they are not helpful.

Once you do this, practice making the self-statement, “This thought is not helpful to my health and happiness so it can go.” Many unwanted thoughts are automatic and with practice they can be removed as quickly as they form. Owning your thoughts puts you in a position to

move from being an observer to the driver of what you think.

Action

The more you practice cognitive hygiene daily, the better you will be at dismissing unwanted thoughts. If you struggle with negative thoughts, you may benefit from taking a course in **copied skills** that focuses on managing negative thinking.

The following approach may help you get on track to turn off stubborn, unwanted thoughts:

1. Write out the thought on a piece of paper.
2. Ask why you are having this thought now (such as someone said it to you, it’s based on personal or work experience or you’re not sure).
3. In a safe and quiet spot, read the thought out loud.
4. Write out the emotions that are associated with this thought.
5. On a scale of one (low) to 10 (high), how true do you believe this thought is?
6. Try to understand how the thought is impacting you.
7. Is there anything stopping you from turning off this thought and

accepting that it's not in your best interest?

8. For stubborn thoughts that you believe you can't simply turn off, repeat the above process for three days, using a [coping journal](#).
9. If after three days you can't remove the unwanted thought and it's causing you stress, [anxiety](#) or [depression](#), you may benefit from professional support. It's normal to feel apprehensive or to feel the [stigma](#) related to these thoughts. One in five Canadians are at mental health risk. Of the individuals at risk, only one out of three seeks professional help. Bring the work you've done to your professional counsellor to help him or her understand your experience and challenge.

The ultimate goal of daily cognitive hygiene is proactively challenging negative thoughts to reduce their impact on your total health.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

How to add happiness to the treadmill of life

What is your daily healthy happiness formula?

It's not uncommon for a person to wake up and mindlessly jump on the treadmill of life. They go through their morning routine, commute to work, complete their day's work, commute home and go through their evening routine. They put more emphasis on getting through the day versus enjoying it.

This mindset takes energy and focus.

If you can relate to this example, then you may agree that the primary goal is to avoid being late, conflict with others and other types of stress. This mindset takes energy and focus. Many who feel stuck on this treadmill are not happy or positive about their life or current circumstances. This can

impact their mental health by feeling trapped and not experiencing happiness and physical health. They don't exercise and develop a poor diet that puts on excess body fat.

Breaking this trend can start one thought at a time, by learning and practicing daily with the intention of creating positive, healthy happiness that can have a profound effect on your attitude and outlook on life. Harvard research reports that 70 to 80 per cent of all heart attacks could be avoided through improved lifestyle choices that can be reinforced through creation of positive emotions. As well, people who practice happiness have the potential to curb their risk of chronic disease, saving billions of health-care dollars.

The purpose of this micro skill is to adopt the act of creating positive actions that can contribute to happiness. This skill is grounded in the study of positive psychology that promotes the benefits of being mindful and focusing energy on what's going well in your life versus what you're not happy with.

Like a small plant, happiness requires attention, feeding and nurturing to grow. Happiness isn't a destination as much as a process of what you choose to focus on and do daily. Some people look for happiness in the wrong places, such as drugs or alcohol, but it's impossible to find healthy happiness under the influence of various substances.

Healthy happiness is a state of pleasant emotions that range from strong feelings of joy to inner peace that provides a feeling of contentment. Here are some tips to help you foster happiness in your day-to-day life.

Healthy happiness generator

Awareness

The first step is to become aware of your happiness baseline. One option is to take the happiness quick survey. Regardless of your score, it will be up to you whether you'd like to have more positivity and happiness in your life. If so, proceed to the next step.

Accountability

Positive psychology suggests that we all can focus not just on what's not working in our life but what is

working. Turning on the happiness generator requires the decision and motivation to experience more positive than negative events and emotions in your life. Through daily focus and awareness of where you're focusing your energy and attention you can, in time, add more positive.

Action

Practice turning on your happiness generator. It requires only awareness and accountability and the decision to focus more energy and intentions on what's good in your life. Here are a few exercises to consider:

- Write out your top three strengths, such as personality traits and skills, on a card and post them by your computer. Scan these before you check your e-mail. Small positive thinking can bring moments of good feelings and when that's done repeatedly it can have a positive impact on your overall feeling of happiness.
- Practice creating your beautiful week each Sunday evening before you go to bed. Book three positive focus periods that require a minimum of three hours a week, and ensure they fall on separate

days. Pick activities that you enjoy (such as a recreational activity, spending time with family, helping your community, volunteering) and schedule these times as priorities. Of the 168 hours in a week, this three-hour commitment equals 1.8 per cent, so time is not an issue; it's making it a priority. It's not only the doing that feels positive, it's also thinking about the activity and the anticipation.

- Consider adding the following micro skills: practice the [attitude of gratitude](#); improve your emotional intelligence through [mood management](#); and practice [mindful hydration](#). Each can help you increase intention and meaningfulness each day to add positive feelings versus just riding the treadmill.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

How to boost your confidence at work with good thoughts

What do you say to yourself when you look in the mirror first thing in the morning?

Whether your response is positive or negative, the science of **self-talk** suggests that your inner voice's opinions and evaluation will have a major impact on how you think about yourself. This ultimately will have a direct impact on your confidence in personal and professional situations.

Your inner voice's opinions and evaluation will have a major impact on how you think about yourself.

The goal of the micro skill of self-talk is to increase the positive conversations you have with yourself that can positively impact your mental health at work and at home.

Self-talk can be destructive or constructive. Individuals with destructive self-talk are critical of themselves: "I'm a failure; I should have figured out how to get the agreement done." This type of constant negative self-talk that devalues your self-worth can have a negative impact on your mental health.

Constructive self-talk focuses on facts and looks for the positive: "We didn't come to an agreement this time, but I'm pleased I held my position. There will be another opportunity."

Self-talk **research** suggests that the more you put yourself down, second guess yourself and view change as a negative, the less likely you will be able to cope and solve problems under pressure. This research also suggests that individuals with active destructive self-talk are more likely to quit and have more stress than those who

practice positive self-talk.

One consequence of destructive self-talk is **confirmation bias**. In the example above, after the person quits and if no one challenges their decision, this confirms their hypothesis that they are unable to find an agreement and there's no sense in trying again.

Shaping self-talk

Awareness

Shaping your self-talk starts with understanding the kinds of internal conversations you have on a typical day. Getting a baseline requires keeping score of your self-talk. For each negative thought give yourself a minus one point. Each time you say something positive, give yourself a plus one point. At the end of the day, your score will be either positive or negative. Get your average over three days.

Accountability

If your self-talk mercilessly judges you negatively, this is not helpful for your overall mental health. Only you can decide if you want to impact your positive self-talk. One way is to work from an internal **locus of control**, believing you have power over events in your life. If you're not clear on your current

locus of control, complete this **Locus of Control Quick Survey**. You may not be able to control your environment but you can control what you think about it and what you think about yourself if you practice.

Action

Learning how to turn off negative self-talk and replace it with positive statements doesn't happen overnight. It takes focus, persistence and patience. The good news is that with practice it can become a habit that can have a positive impact on your mental health.

Catch and release

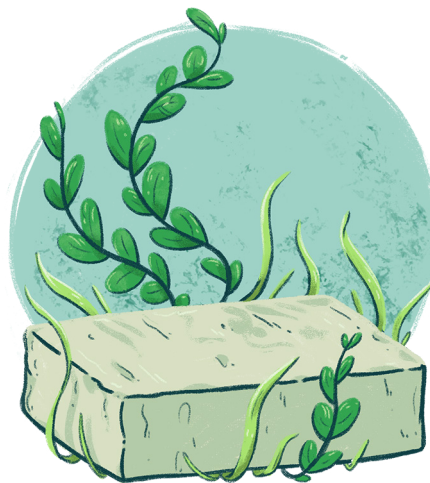
When you catch yourself saying something negative, ("I'm stupid; I should have known she wouldn't ask me to be a part of the project") challenge it ("What are my facts that she doesn't like me? Why else could I not have been picked for the team?"). Once you challenge the thought, you're ready to release the destructive self-talk and replace it with constructive self-talk. You can create the story you want: "I would like to have been picked; however, I'm sure she has her reasons. I'll keep working hard, she will notice and maybe I'll get picked for the next project."

Smell the roses

Life moves fast. When you notice something simple that you enjoy, practice acknowledging with your internal self-talk what's positive, why and how fortunate you are to have the moment. Whether what you notice is perfect is not the point; find the good and enjoy it for a moment. Look for one of these moments each day. It's OK to give yourself permission to smile outside and inside during these moments.

Anchor positive self-talk

Recall positive personal experiences that inspire you. Positives are all around us, we just need to notice: from the clean air we breathe and water we drink, to family and friends. When you have time, such as while commuting, pick and play a positive story or event that makes you feel good and proud of yourself. Focus on this moment as long as you can. The more you do this, the more anchored this story will become in your mind.



MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

A laugh a day can chuckle the stress away

How many minutes of laughter do you get every day?

Typically, this would be the type of question you might get asked about physical activity. Like physical activity, laughter impacts your physiology by increasing your heart rate and oxygen flow. In fact, laughter is good for your health, and that's good for your life both at home and at work. Did you know that 15 minutes of laughter burns 50 calories? That's equivalent to a mild workout. Laughter is associated with happiness, which is linked to good mental health.

The purpose of this micro skill is adding laughter to your day to promote happiness – a mental state with the absence of negative emotions, the presence of positive emotions and a feeling of life satisfaction. When you feel happier you'll be more productive at home and at work and reduce your stress.

Awareness

How happy are you most days? If you're not sure, take a moment to get

your happiness IQ baseline. Happy people are more likely to laugh, which can create positive emotions. Track your happiness IQ score every 30 days for 12 months. You might be surprised that with focus and intention you might be able to increase your happiness one laugh at a time.

Accountability

Regardless of your level of happiness, there are things you can do in the short-term to increase your happiness and improve your long-term happiness.

One example of a positive action for long-term happiness is paying attention to your mental health, which is directly influenced by the strength of your coping skills. As well, finding and maintaining healthy partner relationships can boost your level of happiness. The London School of Economics found that good mental health and having a healthy partner relationship had much more positive impact on creating happiness than doubling your income.

The positive thing about focusing on laughter is you don't need to have everything worked out. Each healthy laugh has positive benefits. All you need to do is see the benefits and make a commitment to add laughter to your life every day. The benefits of adding **humour** are well supported in research with sick children regarding the direct health benefits of laughter and fun for healing, relief of pain and mental health improvement.

Action

It can be difficult to sit down and create 15 minutes of belly-busting laughter, but it's possible to find positive memories that get you smiling from insight. As you replay the memory, you may recall events that made you laugh. It's a bit easier to create a laughter framework that you can leverage daily.

Laughter framework:

Following is a simple framework for designing, facilitating and enjoying laughter daily.

1. Define your laughter factors

These are the things you do to increase the likelihood that you will laugh. The first action is to pick three things that you know can make you laugh, such as a TV series or bloopers, YouTube videos, comedians, a friend who makes you laugh, games and other activities you find fun. Don't pick any activities that involve drinking or drugs; this micro skill's focus is to leverage your natural brain chemistry. Once you pick your three things, you have defined your laughter bank. Since this is your bank, you can add and change what you pick. The key is to always be clear what's in your bank, so you can draw upon it. Keep in mind that the goal is to pick things that get you laughing.

2. Determine your daily need and time to engage in your laughter factors

Everyone is busy, but scheduling an exact time, like going to the gym, is not necessary. Schedule zones of time in your day that are flexible. For example, if you finish work at 5 p.m., haven't had a day of laughter and fun and want to

add some, you know that after dinner you have a few hours to take some time for intentional laughter.

3. Turn off distractions and engage in your laughter factors

When you decide to engage your laughter factors, turn off the world and just be in the moment. The sole purpose is get a break from the world and demands of life and to take time for you to enjoy and laugh.

4. Evaluate your laughter experience

At the end of a planned laughter period, determine if the laughter factor you picked worked. Typically, give something two to three tries before you remove it from your laughter bank and replace it with something else.

The goal is to bring some laughter to your life to give you a release, promote happiness and mental health. This micro skill is by no means a cure for mental health, but it is good medicine. Our happiness will, in the end, be defined by what we think and do. Happiness is subjective and can change. However, the more we laugh healthily, the more likely we will perceive we are happy. Happy people are typically productive and attract others.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

What will you do well at work today?

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What's one thing I want to ensure I do well today?

Sounds like an easy question, but it's one that many of us simply don't answer. We wake up and get on the treadmill of life that shapes our day. The demands of life and work influence decisions and actions that often result in changes to plans and priorities. This can leave us feeling fatigued and not quite sure what we accomplished, other than having survived the day.

If this sounds familiar, this micro skill may be of interest to you. It's based on the concept that less is more. The intention is to focus on one thing you want to ensure gets completed well each day. This might be spending quality time with your partner, eating dinner with family, having a good day at work, solving a conflict with a peer or completing a work task. The key is for the activity to have a clear beginning, middle and end, and be able to be completed in one day.

Awareness

Pick one thing you'd like to accomplish that's within your direct control and is not dependent on anyone else. It can be a work-related or personal activity. You may find you will pick something you have wanted to do but for several reasons have not.

One reason could be procrastination. It's not uncommon to pick a task we struggle to accomplish with the hope that by naming what we want we will get, such as eating healthy. At the core of procrastination is a struggle for [self-control](#) and not considering how failing to complete a task today will impact how you feel tomorrow. If procrastination is a potential roadblock for you, it's helpful to get a baseline by completing the [Procrastination Quick Survey](#). If you find procrastination is a barrier this may be something to focus on to improve. Ultimately, what you pick should be something you can do with the resources and skills you have right now.

Accountability

Confusion around the difference between hoping and doing can prevent you from accomplishing even one thing each day. Hoping for a result puts the expectations for success on others or the environment. Doing is taking control and being motivated to complete a task. For this micro skill to work you need to pick one thing each day that you're ready to act on with a specific plan. The benefit is that you can be sure you have accomplished one thing every day. With accomplishment comes good feelings that can promote self confidence and improve your mental health.

Action

An action plan's success depends on being clear on what, how and when it will be done.

My one thing action plan

1. Today my one thing will be:
_____.
2. Quality check – Require three yeses to move on. If you don't get three, change your one thing:
 - a. I have the knowledge and skills to complete my one thing – Yes or No
 - b. My one thing's success is totally

dependent on me – Yes or No

- c. Completing my one thing is a positive accomplishment – Yes or No
3. Time requirement – Validate that you have time to complete your one thing.
 - a. It will take me ____ (minutes/hours) to complete.
 - b. I plan on starting at ____ and being done by ____.
4. Evaluation of benefit – at the end of the day, reflect on your accomplishment. Acknowledging and recognizing accomplishments helps to reinforce habits. There's no work here except to take a second to recognize that you did what you said you would.

Finding the moments where we accept and acknowledge that what we have done for ourselves is of value is important. Many spend a great deal of energy focusing on what they're not doing or don't have.

When practiced daily, this micro skill can help you take control of your life one decision at a time, doing one thing at a time. Mental health is influenced by what we think and believe. Believing we can do one thing well each day is a foundation that can be built on.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

Learn to calm your stressed mind with visualization

On most days, are you worried or calm?

I often ask this question during one of my coping crisis workshops. To manage the demands of life and work, coping skills have become a topic of discussion to reduce employees' risk for mental illness, as well as to positively impact their engagement and productivity.

The micro skill of mindful visualization can increase the degree of calm you have in your life. Mastering it takes about 10 minutes of focused practice five to six times a week. There are no

There are no shortcuts to the benefits; it takes discipline, patience and intention.

shortcuts to the benefits; it takes discipline, patience and intention.

Awareness

The above question is aligned to a growing line of brain research called neuroplasticity that purports our brain is constantly being shaped by our experiences, thinking and emotions. We increase our success at accomplishing an outcome when we focus on it, whether good or bad for us. In the case of Sam, a chronic worrier, over time his brain adapted and reinforced his worrying. That resulted in increased levels of anxiety accompanied by symptoms such as fear, uneasiness, dry mouth, shortness of breath, difficulty sleeping, restlessness and muscle tension.

Through the power of focus and attention, each of us can influence and re-shape our brain's architecture. Neuroplasticity research indicates that it basically takes the same level of effort to become a worrier as it does to be calm.

In one year from now, would you like to see yourself as a calmer person with all the benefits? If so, and you're looking for a change, proceed to the next step.

Accountability

It's your life, your choice and your brain. You need to understand that it's possible to create calm, regardless of how your life is today, if you truly want to. One proven way to improve your mental health is to adopt mindfulness, where you change your attention from worrying and experiencing a hectic life to focusing on being calm and focus on the now.

Action

Mindful visualization is a structured model designed to facilitate mindfulness that can influence how you view and interact with the world. Based on neuroplasticity, creating experiences that promote calm and happiness can shape the brain so it improves its ability to be calm and happy, benefiting your experiences both at work and at home.

Five steps for mindful visualization

1. Measure your current state

On a scale of one (low) to five (high), how calm are you? Write this number in your daily calendar so you can track it.

2. Find now

Look around and notice five things that you can hear or see: the colour of your shoes, a clock or the sound of a fan. This is a transition step that gets your mind from where it was to now.

3. Take five

Practice being in the moment without judgement for five minutes. Use a timer or go by feel. It's fine to go a bit longer, but not less. To prepare for this step, take a few gentle breaths in and out to relax and then set your eyes on a spot. Allow your mind to be empty and just focus on your breathing or the spot at which you're looking. If your mind wanders off task, that's fine, just bring it back to now and focus on the spot. This mindful step helps train your brain to slow down. It gets easier with practice.

4. Visualize benefits

Some people, when they visualize, can run a mental video; others hear an audio story. It doesn't matter. As above, no judgement: when your mind wanders, catch yourself and come back to your visualization. Visualize yourself being calm in situations you find challenging or worry about. Picture yourself in different situations where you are able to stay calm. We all have seen others stay calm under pressure. Use this as a reference point to fill in the blanks for your visualization. Focus only on success and positives – no negatives. If a negative jumps into your mind, release it. Think about what you did. How did others react? The outcome is experiencing the benefits of being calm and thinking about how a calm person behaves, thinks and feels.

5. Anchor success

On the same one-to-five scale, re-measure how calm you are. Track your progress over the next six weeks.

Once you master this exercise, you can replace calm with any word you choose to add to your life, such as happiness.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

Take control of your finances to reduce stress at work and at home

How many weeks could you go without a paycheque? Whatever your answer, ask yourself, “Why is this the case?”

Some of us have defined and structured monthly budgets, with the discipline as to how we save and spend money. Some have not.

One of the fastest growing concerns for many employees is their financial health.

One of the fastest growing concerns for many young and old employees is their financial health. It’s estimated that 61 per cent cite **finances** as their No. 1 stressor.

If financial health is an area of stress for you, there may be a few things you can do that over time can improve your situation.

This micro skill focuses on how we spend money and the benefits for increasing awareness on our daily spending decisions. If you’re stressed about your finances it can negatively impact your health and your productivity at home and at work.

The typical person spends money in three ways:

- planned spending (such as regular monthly bills, retirement)
- disposable spending (such as coffee, meals out, entertainment, clothes)
- unplanned spending (such as unexpected car or home repairs)

How long you can survive without a paycheque often is defined by your spending choices. Some people use every dollar wisely. Others may not have a structure or discipline around how they spend their money.

If you don't have a financial plan you may be surprised by what you can learn by spending an hour or two with a skilled financial planner.

Too many people don't pay attention to how simple decisions like spending \$20 here and there can impact their overall financial situation over time.

Here are a few ideas to help you establish a financial plan and reduce your stress related to your finances.

Develop awareness of your monthly spending pattern

The first step to improving your financial health is understanding how you are spending money each month. Take your last six months' bank statements and list your spending in three columns. This will help you define what percentage of your income is being spent in each of the three ways: planned, disposable and unplanned.

Here's an example. By analyzing her spending over a six-month period, Samantha sees that of her \$4,000 a month after taxes, \$3,000 goes to bills and savings, and \$1,000 is spent on incidentals. She doesn't have a plan for putting money away for emergencies.

She notices that unplanned spending like fixing her car automatically goes on her credit card, averaging \$250 a month. But she has no plan to pay

off the balance of \$8,000, on which she's paying 19 per cent interest.

Samantha discovers that she's spending around \$12,000 a year on things she doesn't necessarily need but wants.

Upon reflection, Samantha determines that if she restricts her spending to \$600 a month she could put \$300 more on her credit card to pay it off, and \$300 into an emergency fund for unexpected spending. Based on her current income, over the next three years she could pay off her credit card balance and put away some money to cover unexpected expenses, instead of adding to her debt. She sees that if she follows this discipline she will be on track to more financial freedom and less financial stress.

Create a personal spending budget

Create a budget and measure it monthly for each of the three spending buckets. Pay close attention to planned spending. Sometimes, we can live above our means and have no room for emergency or disposable spending. It's important to determine your spending mix; only you can decide what's right for you. What's important is to plan for each area of spending.

Practice conscious disposable spending

There's an old adage that says cash is king. One way to create a discipline for disposable spending is to use only cash. If that doesn't suit you, keep track of your spending daily so you can limit what you buy.

Being more conscious of and taking control of your spending can reduce your financial stress, and less stress can improve your health and well-being overall. Workplaces can also help employees gain more financial control by offering workshops and other tools that help employees manage their money.

MODIFYING YOUR MOOD

Why having a solid relationship helps you at work

Do you have a loving partner you can't wait to get home to see each day?

If you don't, there's evidence to suggest that it would be a positive thing to step back and consider what you could do to make this happen. If you have someone, this partnership is worth protecting. The [London School of Economics](#) found that finding love and enjoying good mental health are critical, and having a loving partner has a bigger impact on overall life satisfaction than getting a pay raise.

The purpose of this micro skill is to discuss the benefits of investing in a healthy and loving partnership to reduce stress, boost resiliency and improve your life at home and at work.

This seems appealing, for too many people having a loving partner is a challenge and may not seem possible. Like most challenges, overcoming it requires a plan and action.

Awareness

Having a loving partner in your life is

not just luck; it takes effort and focus. Most of us know of no better joy in life than the feeling of true love. It's a powerful source of fuel that can give meaning to life as well as a non-judgmental support system.

If you're feeling like you may never find or have a partner who loves you for who you are, this micro skill may be difficult to imagine. Just having a trusted friend is a challenge for the average person. CBC news reported a [Duke University](#) study that found that the average person today has only two trusted friends, suggesting that having caring relationships is a precise and important commodity.

There are other variations, but for simplicity, where are you today: 1) lonely, 2) in a relationship that is not optimal or 3) have a loving partnership?

Being lonely can negatively influence your self-talk, confidence and beliefs about your future. If you feel lonely, the first step to break out of this mindset and be honest with yourself. You can get a baseline of

your loneliness by completing the [Loneliness Quick Survey](#). This can help normalize how you feel and provide a few tips.

Accountability

If you're lonely, you may benefit from relationship building skill development, professional support and peer encouragement to break free so you can build self-confidence to get yourself out there and meet people.

If you're in a relationship that's not optimal, only you can decide what you like and what you want to do. We can work to improve love and our relationships but we can't make someone love us. Once you decide what you want to do with your relationship, it's fine to get guidance on how to act if you're

*What you give
you will get
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in a truly two-
way loving
relationship.*

unsure. Typically, when a person feels trapped in a less than optimal relationship what stops them is a perceived consequence or fear (such as loneliness, finances and so on).

If you're in a loving relationship, perhaps there's no better investment in time than to do something daily to demonstrate your love. What you give you will get back in spades in a truly two-way loving relationship.

Action

Maintaining love requires some partnership mindfulness each day. Ignoring the little things can lead to habits and outcomes that can strain love. Sadly, people can fall out of love as fast as they fall into it. Thus, people who understand this don't take their partner for granted and are committed to keeping the spark and their relationship alive and well. Following are a few tips that can help.

When together, make time for your love zone – life can have lots of issues and pull you in different directions, such as kids, bills, chores and work. Spend time in what you and your partner define as your love zone, where the topics are fun for both of you. This is where you both shut out distractions and enjoy each other's company and talk, play and love. Sometimes a

few minutes' chat to connect, a hug and a kiss and an expression of love can set the anchor for the day when done with intention.

Fix frustrations quickly

There's no way two people will always agree. Get in the habit of fixing frustrations quickly; don't allow them to brew. Creating a foundation and commitment upfront for how you both will fight fair with a few simple ground rules is helpful. The point is to not go to bed mad or frustrated. Talking about what you want is important. People who love each other want to make each other happy. Communication and honesty are at the core of maintaining a loving relationship. It sounds simple, but it's harder to do. Practice helps.

Honour little and big commitments

When we love another person truly it's not hard to make them a priority. Whenever you commit to do something for your partner, do what you say. Don't make excuses. Honour your commitments. Failing to do so seldom leads to a happy ending.

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BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

By Bill Howatt

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

How time management is key for your work and personal life

Each day we have a defined amount of time – 24 hours. A typical day for a working professional can be broken into three blocks of time:

- 10 hours' work, which includes time for commuting, preparation and time at work
- Six to eight hours' sleep
- That leaves six to eight hours for life that includes: chores, hobbies, exercise, parenting and quality time with your partner.

Being able to manage your time with your key priorities is a micro skill that can improve your life both at home and at work. Especially for your relationships.

People fall in and out of love without being aware of how time impacts relationships. When people fall in love they typically make each other a priority – regardless of what else they have going on in their lives – and spend as many non-working hours together as possible.

Life is filled with demands,

pressures, decision and priorities. In [A Relationship Survival Guide](#) I suggested there are three things that define relationship: things done for others, things directed at others and things done with others.

Time with the person we claim to love is the only way to strengthen and keep the bond that fuels trust and intimacy. When one or both partners stop making time for each other, the relationship acts like an hourglass: once the sand stops flowing, so does the relationship.

After 30 years of providing counseling, I have learned that what may save many marriages and relationships is for both people to monitor their quality time together daily. Each couple will define what works for them.

The following three steps frame how to leverage the micro skill of time management.

Awareness

- **Establish time with a base-line.** For one week each person

determines how many quality minutes they spend with their partner daily. Each partner keeps their own private log for seven days to obtain a daily average.

- **Review and compare time baselines.** Each person shares their results. Then the couple discusses what they learned, what they would like to change, what their ideal target would be, with the knowledge that every day may not be the same.

Accountability

- **Find links.** Each person takes accountability for creating communication links to ensure they stay in contact and plan out when they will spend physical time with their partner. Things that can help include writing love notes, texts, phone calls and video chats. Taking time to do this can help your partner know you care and are thinking about them.
- **Be true to yourself.** Time with one another is important if it's what you really want. Love is not an act, and it's hard to fake. If you are in love you will want to be with the other person.

Action

- **Commit the time.** Each couple will have their minimum amount of time they need daily to maintain a healthy relationship. Weekends may have a different expectation.
- **Spend your time together wisely.** When couples are honest and open they can spend their time doing things that support love versus debating or testing it. It takes trust and time with one another to feel comfortable saying what you really want.
- **Monitor your time.** Ensure you both are aware of what your target is and make corrections when you're off course. One daily best practice is to complete a mental check before you close your eyes each night. Did you spend the time you wanted with the person you love? If not, smile and go to sleep, knowing that you have a chance to correct that issue the next day.

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

How to 'find' more time in your day

Do you struggle to manage your time?

It's common for people who struggle with time to ponder how they could manage it better.

In some cases, time management training can be effective. In others, it **doesn't** work because it's not time management that's the issue as much as distraction management.

It's common for many employees' workflows to be interrupted repeatedly, and then the feeling of stopping and starting adds to their perceived work demand. When a person is stressed it's common to feel that they don't have much energy, and this negatively impacts their mental energy and focus.

This micro skill focuses on state management: paying attention to your mental state. The better you're able to manage your mental state, the more hours you will be productive each day. This can help maximize your working time so you can enjoy your off time.

The first step is awareness: note the percentage of time you typically spend in each of the following five states and track it for one week to see what's impacting your time management.

Peak performer state

This is when you feel focused and on task. You're highly engaged and committed to getting the work at hand done efficiently. In this state you're using your time effectively.

Crisis state

In this state you're responding to an issue that requires your immediate attention and you have to focus on it at the expense of other tasks or work you need to accomplish. The longer you're in this state, the more likely you will feel overloaded and fall behind in your core work. The goal is to get out of this state as fast as possible.

Unbalanced state

This state is often the result of feeling stressed and overloaded. To relieve the stress, you look for distractions that help you feel better, both during and after work. The challenge is that some actions may not be healthy, such smoking or over-eating.

Trivial state

In this state, you feel overloaded trying to balance stress and save energy, and as a result you start focusing on small, easy, trivial tasks such as organizing files to feel a sense of accomplishment. The challenge is that core work and tasks are not getting your attention, and this may contribute to procrastination.

Numb state

This is where you look for activities that help you hide and forget the world for a bit. Common actions are searching the Internet, monitoring social media or texting friends as a way to tune out work.

The first state is the most productive and the desired state. The second is how we deal with daily fire drills. The other three are how we can elect to cope. The goal is to spend 80 to 85 per cent of your time at work in the first two states. The more time you can spend in the first state, the less likely you will feel the pressure of time.

So, once you've tabulated how you spent your time over the week, what can you do to make a change?

Accountability

After one week, determine whether

you believe you could manage your state better if you had more time. Accept that you have some control over how you use your time, become aware of how you're coping and determine if you're motivated to improve how you manage your mental state.

Action

Set a daily target for the percentage of time you want to be in peak state and track it. It takes discipline but you may be surprised how this may make you feel that you have more time in a working day and are less rushed.

Create distraction-free work time in structured blocks as much as you can. Put your phone to voicemail and avoid e-mail for 90 minutes when you focus all your attention on moving something specific forward.

When you get a request, don't assume you need to react immediately. Ask when it needs to be done and if it's okay if you finish what you're working on first. Asking if something is a priority can help set a boundary and help manage your workload.

Practice focusing on doing one thing at a time. Doing five things at once often results in distractions, stress and mistakes. Instead, do one thing at a time until all five are done right the first time because it will save you time and energy.

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

Do you know the purpose behind your work?

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What purpose motivates you to work?

Said another way, what incentive – besides money – motivates you to go to work each day?

More employers are focusing on this question as they try to retain and attract millennials. One Deloitte [report](#) from this year suggests that 44 per cent of millennials are likely to leave their current employer in the next two years because of gaps in leadership skill development, work-life balance issues, feeling overlooked and a conflict of values.

It's up to each of us to define our purpose.

Ultimately, each employee defines their own purpose and value. This is what motivates them.

This micro skill promotes the value

of pausing for a moment each day to tap into your purpose and consider “why” you are doing your current job.

A career is one step in a life journey. Not all of us work to get ahead in our careers. Some people’s reason to work is to support their life and family.

It’s up to each of us to define our purpose. What you’re doing today may not be what you want to be doing in 10 years, but it may be a required step. I recall taking a few university courses on topics I was not particularly interested in but through mentoring I was taught to focus on my purpose and end goal – not on what I was doing at that particular moment. If I didn’t, I might have made some knee-jerk decisions that could have delayed me getting to my true purpose.

Here are some issues to think about to develop your career purpose.

Awareness

If you’re looking to develop your career purpose, what you believe you can do will be influenced by

self-esteem. Elon Musk, founder of SpaceX, Tesla Motors and others, had the confidence in himself to create the purpose that's now driving his vision and business. We don't all need to have this kind of grand vision, but unless we can create a vision and believe in it, it will be difficult to define our career purpose or why we do what we do and the meaning we attach to it.

- If you're struggling with your self-esteem this may be holding you back. One action is to complete a quick [Self-esteem Survey](#), evaluate your results and decide if you would benefit from coping skills training or professional support. Through focus and intention, you can develop your self-esteem.
- Your purpose is the spark that can get you through tough periods. By tapping into your purpose, you can push forward. This awareness can help to develop your resiliency to coping challenges on the path to your end goal.
- What is your career purpose today (above and beyond money)? This simple question can shine a light on your why. If you are unclear, through reflection and focus you can lock on to it. Purpose is powerful medicine for living a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Accountability

The average career is around 30 years. We each have the opportunity to live our career the way we want. Some of us use our careers to serve our life (such as support our family). For others, careers are part of what defines their life contribution.

It doesn't matter. What matters is to be in tune with our purpose so we can harness this energy each day. A healthy purpose is fuelled by a vision bigger than ourselves. This may be the awesome responsibility of parenting, the internal reward of facilitating social responsibility or a desire to make an impact through the work we do, such as teaching students how to read.

If your daily actions are not aligned to and support your purpose, you have the choice to change them.

Action

The clearer our purpose, the more we can tap into it to drive our thinking, motivation and behaviour in order to have a good day. The following points work if you're clear about your purpose. If not, then perhaps the first step is defining your purpose.

- My 100-yard purpose check-in:
Each day, as you get close to your place of work, shift your focus on

exactly how your work can help support you. Whether the job is a stepping stone or your dream job, it doesn't matter, as it's only one day. Focusing on this day can support your purpose by dialing in and becoming fully committed and engaged. Days are more enjoyable and rewarding when we have a purpose.

- Doesn't need to be perfect: When we are in tune with our purpose, we are better able to accept that each day doesn't need to be perfect. If you're having a hard day and are feeling stressed, stop for a moment and focus on your purpose. Focusing on why you're doing what you're doing can help you tolerate days when things are not perfect so you don't make decisions based just on the emotion of that day.

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

Is your workplace a good cultural fit for you?

Do you question whether you're a good cultural fit in your current role?

Culture fit influences the degree of comfort and motivation you have for coming to work each day.

Culture is shaped by the people in an organization, and is defined by how the average employee and manager think and behave. Employees who perceive their beliefs and behaviours are aligned with their employer's values and their organization's culture often demonstrate greater job satisfaction and productivity.



This micro skill gives you a plan to follow if you question whether you're a good cultural fit with your organization.

Cultural fit GPS

If you start to question whether you're a good cultural fit with your employer to the point where it's stressful and affecting your ability to focus at work, one option is to turn on your cultural fit GPS.

Awareness – what's bothering you today and why?

It's normal when under stress to react emotionally in an attempt to find a quick resolution, such as, "This place is terrible; I'm going to quit." It's wise to not act on those thoughts as it may not be in your long-term best interests. In this step, focus on exactly what your concern is and why you think you're not a good cultural fit and then decide whether you're going to own what you can control and move on to the next step.

Accountability – are you doing anything that’s contributing to your situation?

Before making any decisions, acknowledge what’s in your control. Culture is influenced by people, relationships, behaviours and values. With the busyness of life, it’s not uncommon to get lost in what we are doing and how we do our jobs. Sometimes what can get us back on track is to tap into our values as to why we get up every day and go to work. The noise of gossip, cliques and other distractions can fade when we focus on what’s most important to us about our work. Sometimes our frustration is shaped by our attitude or preference, such as a perception of a lack of flexibility, openness

*Culture is
influenced
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values.*

and ownership. If you’re ready to be accountable for what you can control, then move on to the next step.

Action – what are your options to resolve your cultural fit issue?

Making assumptions and guessing what something means without all the facts is a common mistake made by employees who are struggling to fit in. When you get to the point that you are questioning whether you fit in or not, it’s wise to take a measured approach before reacting. Determine what’s in your control, be clear about your concern and seek support to unpack what you can do to help your situation versus automatically thinking there are no options. For most employees at this point there are three options: look to find a resolution, start to think about another role within the organization, or quit mentally or literally.

Option one is a good place to start. A few things you can do to help find a resolution.

- Meet with your manager to discuss your cultural fit and what you’re seeing and feeling, and try to understand what they see and consider as options.
- Step back and self-evaluate your

current culture fit. Complete the [Employee Culture Fit Quick Survey](#). The results can provide a baseline and help you explore your style to understand what you could do to adapt or adjust, if appropriate.

- Discuss your concerns with a neutral third party such as a trusted friend, employee assistance family program representative, coach, former boss or a parent. Before doing so, get all the facts and share your understanding of why this is an issue for you, what's in your control, and the options and choices you see. In the end, you may discover that you're not a good cultural fit with your organization. However, the opportunity is there to take proactive action to help you feel better in your current role and to help feel that what you're doing is aligned to your values and style.

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

How to manage your stress load

What is your single biggest source of stress?

When some people answer this question, they respond with: “It depends on the situation.” Situations can vary from a difficult peer or boss to perceived work demands. Ultimately, it’s not the situation as much as how we define it that determines whether it’s good or bad.

When most of us think about stress we think of the bad kind, called distress. However, there’s also good stress, called eustress, that motivates us to achieve.

The purpose of this micro skill is to pay attention to our daily load of negative stress. We can’t change the world, but we can change our optics of what’s happening, by slowing down and focusing on what we can control.

Awareness

The World Health Organization suggests that health is not just the absence of disease; it’s the positive state of physical, mental and social well-being. The longer you experience daily high stress loads, the greater your

risk for physical and mental health issues and accidents.

Accountability

When individuals experience work-related stress it’s common for them to report symptoms such as headaches, difficulty concentrating and tension. It’s not uncommon, under high levels of stress, for the mind to instruct the body to push through fatigue. A person may go days with less than five hours’ sleep, not eating and hydrating correctly and adopting poor habits to cope, such as drinking too much alcohol each day.

The first step to slowing stress is to pay attention to your daily stress load so that you’re less likely to get on the stress treadmill that can break your mind and body. If ignored over time, bad stress can lead to unhealthy choices, behaviour and health outcomes.

One proactive activity is to monitor your stress load weekly by completing the Stress Load Weekly Monitor and tracking your results on a graph. This will provide you with both awareness

and accountability. One option to reduce stress is to build up your resiliency. However, there's only so much within your control. There may be things (such as confronting a bully) that you can bring to your employer's attention to help.

Action

Whenever a situation is creating distress and the stress is negatively impacting your behaviour, thinking and emotions, this can be a sign that it's time to take a stress break. Practicing the following four-step, stress-breaking micro skill can help you monitor and lower your daily stress load.

1. Monitor revolutions This is akin to driving a car that can be comfortably pushed up to 4,000 rpms. Moving above your comfort zone into the red zone, where there are signs and symptoms of stress, can lead to mistakes, accidents and even heart attack.

2. Gear down and get off the ramp

It can take just a few seconds to lower your revs by simply easing off the gas and gearing down. This means getting off the track and taking a moment to pull over and stop. Stopping for a moment to regain

your perspective can position you to create a stress break.

3. Get fuel When breaking stress, you disengage from the work world for a moment to recharge and get your mind and body slowed down. This fueling period allows you to change focus, slow your brain, and get some fuel if you're hungry or thirsty. It's amazing how helpful a five-minute stress-breaking session can be. Take a few deep breaths, read your favourite sports team's score, text a loved one or peer, have a stretch, grab some fresh air, or put some cold water on your face.

4. Get back on the ramp After five to 10 minutes of stress breaking, it's time to re-enter the track with lower revs and more fuel. This can help train your brain to keep your stress at levels you can tolerate, with lower wear and tear.

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

How to build up your resiliency

How effectively are you managing your daily energy reserves?

Each day, most of us are challenged by life stressors from work and home that draw upon our energy reserves. Stressors can come in many forms, such as failure, disappointments, change and disagreements, and vary in size from small, medium to major. How resilient a person is will define how effectively they deal with life stressors regardless of the type and degree.

Resiliency is the ability to stay in control, push through perceived setbacks and see a solution. The higher

these reserves, the more likely you will be able to deal with what comes your way and be able to protect your mental and physical health.

Resilient reserve levels can be thought of like a cell phone battery, which has a defined charge life. If the battery has just 10 minutes' life and you want to do a 30-minute call, you know you need to recharge it. Resiliency levels are similar: when low, you risk losing hope and the will to keep trying; when high you're better able to handle challenges.

Life is wonderful but often has some hard times thrown into the mix. This micro skill focuses on daily energy reserves that define how much resiliency you have to push forward at any moment.

Awareness

Building and maintaining energy reserves starts with awareness of what builds and draws your energy. Resiliency levels are dependent on how well you are **coping**, which refers to how effectively you can overcome, deal with or minimize stress and conflict. It

Resiliency is the ability to stay in control, push through perceived setbacks and see a solution.

impacts how you think and shape your daily activities. The fuel that recharges resiliency levels comes from mental and physical health, work and life (family, social supports, physical fitness, financial health, among others).

Accountability

You own your mental and physical health and are responsible for your happiness and fulfillment. What many are not clear on is how their daily micro decisions and behaviours shape who they become and define how much resiliency they have to draw upon when needed.

Resiliency is not static; it's dynamic, like a battery. Individuals who take care of their physical health (exercise, diet, rest), mental health (develop coping skills), work (get along with peers, current role is a good job fit) and life (maintain good financial health, relationships) are able to recharge their energy reserves.

Most of us have a block of time that we are locked into for work and family commitments. Look at a typical week and establish where your biggest energy drains and energy charges come from.

At the end of a typical day what colour are your resiliency reserves: red (low), yellow (half) or green (full)?

Action

If you believe your resiliency reserves are most often in the red or yellow zones, then you will benefit from focusing on actions you can take daily to build your resiliency levels. The wrong time to prepare for a life crisis is when you're in it.

Identify potential gaps or weak links by considering which of the following areas are more energy drains than charges:

- **Physical health** impacts how well your body moves and feels, and risk for chronic disease
- **Mental health** impacts feelings, thinking and the behaviours you engage in
- **Work health** impacts the degree of benefit, above monetary reward, you get from work
- **Life health** impacts how connected you feel with family, friends and perceived financial health

In the area where you have identified the biggest energy drain, determine if you can quickly pick one thing that can add energy to your system. It can be as simple as not skipping lunch and eating so you feel better each afternoon.

Being mindful each day of what you're doing and not doing in each of the four areas can help you decide what to act on. Don't overwhelm yourself but each day pick one positive action you can take to add energy to your system (such as calling a friend to connect while you're on the train commuting).

This discipline can help reinforce the value of paying attention to your daily energy reserves and making the point that we get fuel from many sources that have a positive impact on our psychology and belief systems.

By tracking your resiliency level daily you will determine whether you're adding to your resiliency energy levels to stay in the green zone or drawing from them and heading toward the red zone.

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

How to tune up your resiliency

How often do you say to yourself, “This is the last time I will ...; tomorrow I will ...”?

Most all of us can relate to creating an excuse as to why we need that extra sugary or salty treat, drink or hour watching TV, all to feel better. However, knowing it’s not good for our long-term health, we rationalize it quickly and make a fleeting commitment to do better in the future.

What will determine if we’re going to take on life’s daily setbacks and demands is a combination of coping skills that define our ability to problem solve and make good decisions, and resiliency of energy and drive to manage and move beyond perceived stress and challenges.

If you don’t find a better way to cope, or have resiliency to push away old behaviours until you can find a new one, your brain will demand to feel better. If nothing better is available, the old, less desirable behaviours turn on and before you know it you’re living in your own version of groundhog day.

The purpose of this micro skill is to

introduce the resiliency tune-up, an activity that can be done once a month to determine whether you’re on track to create the tomorrows you want.

Awareness

It’s wise to be crystal clear of what **resiliency** is. Resiliency can be measured by the degree to which you can push through adversity or a setback. The higher your **resiliency level**, the higher the probability you will be able to get through difficult moments and back on your desired track.

It’s helpful to write out your definition for resiliency and test it with a few trusted sources so you have a clear definition that means something to you.

Accountability

This micro skill’s success is dependent on the notion that you accept that you’re responsible and accountable for what you do.

For this micro skill to have an impact you need to be willing to be accountable for your choices and actions.

Others can help and guide you, but the decisions and actions you take each day influence who you will become.

Action

Implement the following three-step plan:

1. Evaluation

Obtain your **Resiliency Level Monitor** baseline. This activity will take less than five minutes. Print off your report so you can track and compare your monthly risk scores.

2. Create a monthly four-pillar action plan

What are the one or two things under each of the four core pillars of total health you will commit to daily to fuel your resiliency?

This plan should be simple and something you know you can do every day. The goal is to mature your resiliency level. If you're struggling to cope or have a mental health issue, you can get support, take other actions, and simply use this as a supplementary micro skill.

Resiliency levels are built up through daily activity. Following is a simple four-step plan you can use as a model to build your own. Keep it simple so you can successfully complete it each day and gain its benefits.

- **Physical plan:** Eat lunch by 1:00 p.m. Park in the farthest car lot and take the stairs to your floor instead of the elevator to get in more **daily steps**.
- **Mental plan:** Before going to bed, state one thing you're **grateful** for.
- **Work plan:** Focus on **listening** to team members before reacting.
- **Life plan:** For example, honour your commitment to spend a minimum of 15 minutes of **quality relationship time** with your partner each day, reflecting on the day and your life together.

3. Monthly tune-up

Complete this activity on the first or last day of the month:

- a. Complete your resiliency level monitor.
- b. Compare your score to last month.
- c. Evaluate how disciplined you have been to complete your four-pillar action plan daily. If your score has not improved or has slipped, you may not have been following your plan, or you may need to tweak it.
- d. Set next month's four-pillar action plan.
- e. Begin a new month.

BALANCE AND MENTAL STRENGTH

Why you need good distractions in your life

Most employees are bombarded daily by information overload. Some feel like they simply cannot keep up with the amount of information coming at them.

Technology has become a burden – a bad distraction – for many employees because it generates more information than can realistically be processed in the time allotted. One study found the average knowledge worker spends about 20 hours a week processing e-mails.

This article introduces the micro skill of good distractions. Distraction refers to what a person consciously does in order to get a break from the demands of home and work. A good distraction creates a mental break that lets you charge your batteries.

This micro skill's focus is on creating a good distraction from information overload and the demands of life for the singular purpose of creating more mental space.

To master a micro skill, you must make a couple of daily decisions and repeatedly take small actions. Over the

long term, adopting micro skills and turning them into lifestyle habits can positively impact your total health.

In addition to information overload, it is also common for employees to struggle with balancing the demands of home and work. Many employees feel they are on a treadmill that results in them spending most of their energy dealing with competing demands from home or work.

These pressures can result in a sense that life stress is closing in on them. The consequence of an over-active stress response is the person's fight or flight stress response stays on. Not getting a break from prolonged stress or feeling a sense of not being able to cope can negatively impact a person's mental health.

One way employees can create mental distraction is through meditation. Meditation has been found to help employees build their resilience, resulting in better management of life's demands. It provides an opportunity to train and focus the brain to become distracted from – and ignore –

the constant inflow of information and automatic thoughts that flood the brain. It helps a person learn how to turn off their autopilot, become more aware of the present and to create more mental space that can help them cope and focus better.

Whether or not you adopt meditation to facilitate distraction, this micro skill is a way to get off the treadmill for a bit.

Many passions such as reading, writing, gardening, recreation, volunteering and taking part in hobbies create positive distraction. However, some activities can require too much time or are seasonal and can't realistically be done every day. The length of time of a good distraction is not as beneficial as the frequency.

To get the full benefits of a positive distraction, choose an activity you can do at least twice a week.

When picking your activities, test your choices against the following criteria:

- It provides a mental break from the world.
- You look forward to doing it.
- You feel rested after doing it.
- You are mentally charged after doing it.
- You don't worry about work or home while doing it.

- It's your personal time.
- It creates positive emotions.
- It doesn't add conflict or stress.
- It is within your financial means.

The caution of a positive distraction is not to get lost in it. Spending hours on the Internet or playing video games may be a distraction but it can strain personal relationships or cause you to fail to fulfill your responsibilities.

But a healthy distraction can add quality to your life and promote total health.

SECTION 2

EMPLOYERS



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LEADERSHIP SKILLS

By Bill Howatt

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Good managers know how to give clear directions

One of the key roles for a manager, whether in steady times or amidst changes, is to act as a compass that guides employees and gives them clear directions to navigate any obstacles they may face.

Change is a reality for all organizations in our fast-paced world of business. But employees often view change with skepticism, especially since many change management programs – such as new policies, procedures, technology and training – fail to create the transformation for which they were designed. Studies find that regardless of how practices may have improved, only 30 per cent of change management programs are actually successful – that means 70 per cent fail.

Before managers can guide their employees they must be clear on what they and their team need to accomplish each day and why. What creates confusion for employees, in times of change or even in regular daily operations, is a lack of clear direction, information and clarity on what their team

is aiming for and how a change will be implemented. It's a manager's job to remain calm amidst uncertainty, to answer questions and be clear about what is within their circle of control.

Managers need to know the micro skill of direction – regular decisions they make daily that provide guidance and a compass to their staff at all times.

Here are four actions managers need to master to facilitate the micro skill of providing direction.

Pick a destination

Each day a manager has the opportunity to set the day's course. It's important that expectations are clear and realistic. Consider a pilot flying a plane from New York to Vancouver. The pilot must first plan the route and then factor weight, wind and distance to ensure the plane has the right amount of fuel to reach the destination safely. Similarly, it's helpful for managers to gather facts and clearly set the daily direction for their team so

that everyone knows the path they're taking, what is the desired destination and why.

Launch

It's best to set the day's course through some form of communication – such as a morning huddle, call or e-mail checklist. Whatever works for your team. This lets you provide clarity on the team's daily goals and objectives and sets the course. During this process, encourage employees to ask questions when they are not clear on instructions. Clarity is powerful for helping employees feel productive and satisfied in their daily work. Confusion over daily tasks creates unwarranted stress and decreases productivity.

Monitor your course

It is a best practice to regularly check in with your staff to ensure that they're on the right route. When employees feel confused or perhaps a bit off course, checking in will let you know when to provide additional direction and encouragement to get them back on the right path. Asking simple, open-ended questions, such as, "how are things going today?" is an excellent way to find out how the changes are being managed and what

employees are really experiencing. The more a manager engages employees in how any change is impacting them the more likely employees will be open to sharing that information with their manager. It is these open and trusted conversations that can create the insights and opportunities for managers to properly support employees through change.

Acknowledgement

Take a moment each day to acknowledge the successes of your employees. This can help reinforce purpose, mission and goals. A productive day is one step closer to a defined objective. A well-defined course has clear criteria on what success looks like. Each day is treated as important. This can help create discipline and shows the benefits for setting a daily compass and acknowledging results.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Prioritize – or watch your staff burn out

One of the biggest challenges a manager will have with many employees is creating an environment that's free from distraction with clearly defined priorities. Managers want to limit interruptions because research shows that when employees are distracted it can take up to **20 minutes** for them to refocus and get back to the task at hand.

Managers need to know and communicate clearly their priorities because when they seem to shift constantly, employees get confused and stressed as a result.

The purpose of the micro skill of prioritizing is to increase managers' awareness of the issues they need to consider when managing employees' priorities.

As an example, think about what it takes to stack a pile of wood. This task has a clear start, middle and end, and typically a defined time for how long it should take. Imagine Ted is halfway through this task, is asked to stop and is given another task that also needs to be done in the same timeframe. Ted

now feels stress and pressure to get everything done at the same time, and he's more likely to make a mistake, cut corners to get it done or in this case, get hurt.

As a manager, it's common for your priorities to be altered by senior management or customers or due to technical issues, operational problems or a time-sensitive opportunity. If not managed correctly, this can create a ripple effect that can have a negative effect on your employees.

When a manager believes there's a need to shift a priority, you need to first pause, consider the timing and impact on your employees and then consider your best options.

Priority management is how a manager provides guidance to their work force on what needs to be done when.

To help to quickly evaluate your organization's efficiency and how you manage your work force, complete the **organizational effectiveness benchmark** tool.

The key part for leaders to manage priorities is to pay attention to how

your employees are spending their time with respect to core work, project work and ad hoc work. Sometimes, employees are stretched and taken away from core work priorities by less important tasks.

Here are some tips to help you manage your employees' daily priorities.

Set priorities

Ensure your employees are clear on the top one or two priorities for the day. It's important that they are clear on what defines their success and how their success is measured. By being clear and removing assumptions, a manager can help employees manage their daily workload.

Prepare to shift a priority

Before changing a priority, it's a best practice to pause and determine when the new assignment needs to be started, when it needs to be completed and what else gets bumped as a result. As skilled as employees are, they can't do two things at once. Consider the impact of this shift in priority and decide what gets stopped and what gets started, so expectations are clear.

Change a priority carefully

When changing a priority, ensure

employees are clear on the reason why this is happening, the impact to them and your new expectations. There are times when managers ask employees to do the near impossible – pull a rabbit out of a hat and get everything done. Managers can do that occasionally, but need to ensure that's not a regular occurrence. If this becomes the norm and employees' work changes every day – with newly added pressures and priorities – over time your employees will be at increased risk for burnout, it will strain their mental health and decrease their productivity due to mistakes. And it likely means increasing workplace turnover, too.

Do a daily priority check-in

Never assume that as a manager you can read the minds of your employees. The best practice is to check in daily with employees on whether they think the way you are managing your team's priorities is reasonable, and whether what's being asked of them is reasonable. The employee-manager relationship is a critical factor for results and productivity. Managers who work effectively to manage priorities to keep workload and demand within reason, and keep lines of communication open, typically get better results from their staff and have happier, healthier, more productive and more engaged employees.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Are your employees coming to work just for the paycheque?

Does the average employee come to work because they want to or because they have to? Take a few moments and think about what you believe motivates your employees.

As a leader, you may think otherwise, but a significant percentage of employees in many organizations come to work only because they need a paycheque. This is not the most desirable mental state for employees in order for them to feel motivated and enthusiastic about coming to work each day.

Why? Because if your employees don't value what they're doing, why would anyone else? This group of employees sees work as a simple trade of time for money. This mindset often prevents these employees from fully engaging in the culture, learning and career exploration at their workplace.

Some managers mistakenly believe that a paycheque is a motivator. But [research](#) suggests there is less than a 2 per cent overlap between job satisfaction and pay.

The micro skill of motivating relates

to the structured conversations leaders have with their employees to help remind and reinforce the importance and value of each employee's contribution.

When done consistently, motivating can spark employees' intrinsic desire to do a good job and ensure they know why coming to work has value – beyond just a paycheque.

Here is how you can approach motivation as a leader.

Preparation

Before motivating, it's necessary to remove assumptions. Never assume you know what your employees are thinking or what drives them. In a one-on-one meeting, ask this question: "What value do you think your core functions have to the organization's overall success?"

How an employee answers this question will provide insight on her understanding of her function's value, which can be insight on how she also values her role. As the leader, your job is

not to judge, debate or to give a pep talk; it's simply to listen and learn. The goal is to become clear on where you're starting at with this employee. Through motivating, you will be able to not just tell, but also show the employer her value.

Purpose

As a leader, you need to help employees discover how and why their assigned function matters to the big picture. Many employees don't see how what they do matters. Motivating requires leaders to have **effective** communication skills and to be comfortable interacting with their employees.

Take action

Look for opportunities to educate employees on their value. Every day there are opportunities to show employees that what they do is operationally important to making the company successful.

Once a motivating opportunity is observed, follow these three steps:

1. Ask questions. Use an open-ended question to discover the employee's perception on how what they do matters and is of value to the company.

Example: What is your focus for today? Is everything clear to you?

2. Discover the employee's perception. Listen and pay close attention to the employee's words, energy and non-verbal cues as they answer your questions. As you listen, observe the world through the employee's eyes to determine the degree of pride they have in what they're doing. There's no response in this step; simply listen and learn where the employee is coming from.

3. Anchor the motivation. Motivating is not about convincing or debating. It's about listening and learning to the degree the employee is clear on how their role is linked to the big picture. Anchoring shines a light on why their doing a good job matters to the organization's overall success.

Example: I wanted you to know your good work has helped the division hit sales targets 100 days in a row. Together, we are helping this division exceed our customers' needs and our corporate targets.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

How much time are you wasting in pointless meetings?

.....

Most managers call meetings each week for a whole host of reasons. Some meetings are a part of the operations process to deal with quality control and reporting issues. Some are ad hoc to solve a new problem, and others are to support a special project.

The true value to the organization is often not measured or monitored. As a result, many useless meetings are ultimately driven by meeting **cognitive dissonance**, where the notion is accepted that in order to be productive, people must meet, no matter what, even if people feel the meeting is a waste of time.

Having meetings makes sense when they generate impact and results, but when people are in meetings, preparing for or reviewing them, they aren't doing their core work.

Many meetings called by managers are unnecessary. One U.S. statistic indicates the salary cost for **unnecessary meetings** is approximately \$37-billion (U.S.) a year. Forty-five per cent of attendees feel overwhelmed by all the meetings, and 73 per cent do other work in meetings.

This micro skill is aimed at increasing meeting effectiveness. The goal is to ensure meetings that employees are involved in are of value and to reduce useless meetings that add to employees' work demands and stress.

Manage the number of hours your team members are in meetings

Two metrics a manager can track to evaluate the number of hours their team members are in meetings and the risks to their productivity:

- Every meeting costs money and time. A meeting of 12 people with an average fully-loaded salary of \$75 per hour, plus the costs of meeting space and dial-in meeting phone lines, can cost an organization in excess of \$900. Keep a meeting budget to track the number of hours employees are spending in meetings each month, and the number of meetings you are calling. Evaluate the impact to help curb useless

meetings that take away from work force productivity.

- Track the ratio of employees' meeting time to productive time and correlate the results. Simply take the number of meeting hours per week and divide by the number of hours worked. For example, if Jack is spending 20 hours a week in meetings and is scheduled to work 40 hours, this is a 0.5 ratio. Now compare this ratio to one of his key performance indicators. If Jack is 20 per cent below a target, perhaps he needs to spend less time in meetings and more time with clients. The goal is to not assume all meetings have no cost or impact.

Structure meetings using the 75-per-cent rule

This rule promotes the following criteria to be used for any meeting:

- Every meeting will have an agenda that clearly defines why the meeting is being called, key agenda items, and success milestone targets to be achieved by the end of the session, which is the call to action.
- This agenda is sent 24 hours before a meeting so people can

prepare. There are always exceptions; this is the target.

- Every person invited to a meeting needs to know why they are there. Ensure all participants know why they are being asked to attend, and if they don't think they can add value, empower them to opt out. Again, there will be exceptions.
- Every meeting is structured with work time and follow-up time. A 60-minute meeting may have a 45-minute agenda with a hard stop after 45 minutes. Participants' schedules are booked and they are given the next 15 minutes to process the meeting, such as writing out an action plan while things are top of mind. This is to give them time to think between meetings.
- Every meeting ends with a clear call to action, next steps, timelines and accountability. This is sent in a short follow-up note by the meeting leader so nothing is lost in translation.
- Follow up to ensure that every call to action is taken off the action list only when completed.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Why you need to let employees say 'no'

Findings from The Globe and Mail/Howatt HR *Your Life at Work* Survey suggest that nearly 60 per cent of employees are stressed going to work each day. A large percentage of employees struggle each day to feel confident to take on the challenges and demands awaiting them.

With employees experiencing significant stress due to rising work demands, leaders can play an important role in creating a culture where it's safe for an employee to say, "I'm sorry, I can't do that because ..."

The micro skill of giving employees permission to say no lets staff know

Employees [are] experiencing significant stress due to rising work demands.

when and how it's okay for them to say "no," provided they can explain why. This typically provides a leader with insight through the employee's eyes as to why they don't think they can complete a particular request within the timeframe asked.

Understand where the average employee is starting from each day

The first step is to understand why many employees naturally don't say no to a leader's requests, even when they don't think it makes sense or is fair. Many employees don't have the confidence to self-advocate their position. Instead of not saying anything, they push themselves, build up regret, and put their health at risk. This can result in an organization losing top talent who feels overburdened.

Why? Perhaps one reason is the gap in the average employee's self-esteem that reflects their overall emotional evaluation of their self-worth. When I speak on *coping skills*, I often ask, "What is the average Canadian's

self-esteem, on a scale of one to 10?” The average each group comes up with is five. After asking the same question for more than 10 years, it appears likely a high percentage of employee’s have a gap in their self-esteem.

Self-esteem typically grows and is at its peak when the average person is in their late 60s. Leaders who are aware of this know that their actions and words can have a positive impact on shaping employees’ self-esteem and can help influence employees in a positive way. Employees with self-esteem have more confidence and less fear, stress and risk for mental health issues. As well, they are more engaged and productive in their work.

Giving employees the permission to say “no”

Set expectations

Inform your team how important it is to you that every employee takes an active role in managing their workload. Set the expectation that you want and support all your employees to know you are OK with them using the word “no” provided they keep emotions out of it and simply explain their reasons why they are unable to take on an additional task.

This creates an opportunity to start conversations about resetting priorities, and creates a win-win for all.

For example: “I want you to know that it’s okay to say no and I just ask you to explain to me your reasons why. My job is to listen. We may not always agree, but I want us to have that conversation. My intention is to achieve our targets and goals efficiently.”

Embrace employees’ ability to self-advocate

Once you set expectations, you need to be ready for employees to actually say “no.” When they do, the first

response is not to challenge or judge them with your words or body language. Pause, focus on the employee and seek to understand their concerns.

Often, the issue could be something simple like being unclear on a deadline for when a particular task must be completed. When leaders ask for something, many employees think it means right now. When an employee says no, it may end in a simple exchange that makes the timeline clear and releases stress and pressure. In other cases, it may be shifting priorities, or simply a staffing issue that indicates that it's time to add more capacity.

The goal of giving permission to say “no” is to create a culture where employees feel safe to interact and communicate honestly and openly with their leader. The most effective leaders know that one of their most important roles is to remove barriers. One common barrier for many employees is **trust** with their direct manager. Leaders who practice and adhere to this micro skill facilitate a two-way accountability model and create opportunities for employees to own their careers and trust that their leaders care about them personally.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Learn how to be a leader who delegates

As a leader, how often do you feel you are getting buried in details?

One proven way leaders can increase their capacity is through the delegation of tasks they don't need to be doing. **Research** suggests that only 30 per cent of managers think they are effective at delegation. If you're feeling overloaded, one positive action is to take an inventory of what you can delegate and adopt a delegation framework.

This micro skill explores delegation and how a leader can prepare themselves to incorporate delegation into their daily routine.

Perfection can be a leader's worst enemy and result in failure.

Some leaders over-focus on detail and fail to delegate because they get lost in the details. **Perfection** can be a leader's worst enemy and result in failure. With this hyper-focus comes increased stress and risk for failure that can have a negative impact on the leader and their team.

Understanding the value and benefit of delegation is helpful to motivate a leader to learn how to practice and add this micro skill:

- Delegation frees up time and mental energy by off-loading tasks.
- It's an excellent way to transfer knowledge and develop the skills of your team members.
- It demonstrates trust by assigning more responsibilities to others.

Five steps for effective delegating

This section introduces a framework for delegating. It's helpful for leaders to develop structure so that the risk

for mistakes and miscommunication are mitigated.

Step one: Needs assessment

Determine what you can delegate. Review your to-do list and sort the work by asking yourself a series of questions, such as:

- Is this task of high or low priority?
- Am I the only one who can do this task?
- Who else could do it?
- How much authority does this person need to act?

Step two: Selection of a delegate

Once you have developed your list of tasks that can be delegated, determine the appropriate team member to delegate these tasks to. Consider the present workload of the delegate, as well as any training they might need to be successful. Ask the following questions:

- Who has the time needed?
- Who has the best skillset for the task, or could develop the skills needed with some instruction?
- Who would benefit from a new task?

Step three: Engagement

Delegating a task means drawing a staff member outside their normal workflow. The delegate is likely to be tentative at first, trying to orient themselves towards an unfamiliar assignment. It's helpful for the leader to engage the delegate thoroughly by explaining the task, outlining the expectations and offering direction and support. A thoughtful process of engagement will help the leader and team member become comfortable with the delegation.

For example: Discuss the task being assigned and frame how the task will get done as the foundation for the agreement.

Build interest and explore concerns. Explain why the task is important, what it's meant to achieve and how success will be evaluated.

Provide the person an opportunity to express their concerns. This input may help change the framing delegation.

Ask the team member to relay back, in their own words, the expectations outlined for the task in writing. This will serve as the delegation memo and the final agreement that will be measured and monitored by the leader.

Step four: Monitoring Progress

It's psychologically important for the leader to give the person space and a sense of autonomy to own the task that has been delegated. Monitoring should never be intrusive. The point of monitoring is to minimize risk. The leader will always need to be prepared to step in if a task is in danger of going off-course. Along with ensuring the delegate has the resources they need to complete the delegated task, the leader is also responsible for having a fail-safe plan ready in case of emergency. Finally, the leader must acknowledge timelines and show interest as tasks are completed. Anything less sends the message that the task was, in fact, of no importance. Any sense of pride, personal growth or achievement gained from delegation will be lost if the delegate does not feel that the task matters.

Step five: Feedback

One of the leader's most important roles is to be a coach. Any time a task is delegated it's an excellent opportunity for teaching and coaching. As noted before, matching a delegated task to a team member allows the leader to identify and actively grow new strengths and skills within their team. Furthermore, the monitoring

system requires feedback from the leader at each milestone, and feedback is critical to successful learning. As well, the leader will want to ensure they share with their team member any success or acknowledgment from senior leadership.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS

What kind of communicator are you?

What is your natural communication style as a leader?

How we communicate may be influenced by our personality. One often-examined personality trait is whether you are an **extrovert** or an **introvert**.

Extroverts require outside stimuli to gain energy, which helps them function, whereas introverts are more sensitive to stimuli and often need quiet to function.

This one example can explain why some leaders may be more outgoing

than others who are more introverted and naturally spend more time alone – simply because that’s how they’re wired.

Consider how difficult and mentally draining it can be for an introverted leader who has a team of extroverts who constantly want to interact with them.

Leaders who are introverted are not necessarily shy. They just naturally need more quiet time and, as a result, may spend more time in their office where they can reflect. The downside is that some employees may see this type of leader as being less approachable than an extroverted leader who more actively engages with their staff.

Both styles can be problematic for employees, depending on the employee’s own style and personality. The point of this daily micro skill is for all leaders to focus outside themselves first.

This micro skill provides leaders with a framework that will help them focus on the outside so they can better align their communication approach

A leader’s natural communication style may fit better with some employees than with others.

with their employees' natural communication styles.

Awareness

A leader's natural communication style may fit better with some employees than with others. Having a frame of reference for how you communicate is a good start. This Communication Style Survey ([click here to complete](#)) is a quick and easy way to identify your natural communication style. It also provides coaching on how to communicate with others' communication styles. Like extroverts' and introverts' personality attributes, each person has their natural communication preference.

Accountability

Communication style is like being an introvert or extrovert; the style doesn't define a leader's impact. Looking outside themselves first and paying attention to their employees' communication styles is one factor a leader can be accountable for. This demonstrates awareness that not all employees communicate the same way. Only the leader can decide if they care enough to learn how to communicate more effectively with different communication styles.



Action

This step requires a daily commitment and openness to the notion that not all employees have the same communication style. It requires focus, attention and patience. Like any learning, change can be challenging. However, when a leader masters focusing on the outside first they increase their opportunity to be a more effective communicator with their team.

Get a communication style baseline

Seek to understand your team's natural communication style preference. Request team members to complete the Communication Style Survey and bring their report to a one-on-one meeting.

Explore results with your employees

In the one-on-one meeting, focus on discovering how well you have been communicating before and one or two areas you could improve to help your employee and you to communicate more effectively. Be open to sharing your personal style. This is not a perfect science. This activity is meant to uncover some blind spots and reinforce what's working well now or highlight how you might need to change.

Practice matching employees' communication preferences

It takes practice to learn how to adapt to the different communication styles. In the Communication Style Survey results section there are suggestions regarding how to communicate with each different style. The goal is to keep your focus on the outside first and avoid reacting automatically.

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ATTITUDE

By Bill Howatt

ATTITUDE

How managers can improve honesty at work

Honesty is really the best policy. The managerial micro skill of honesty is the daily practice where a manager is transparent and truthful with his or her staff, peers and senior leaders.

There may be no more important action for building trust in an organization than the honest interaction between managers and employees. Trust is an intangible outcome that is critical for any organization's short- and long-term success. The degree of trust employees have in their manager and senior leaders plays a role in shaping and creating a positive culture that directly impacts an organization's **productivity** and results.

Telling the truth requires attention and discipline to avoid getting away from the facts. Dr. Paul Ekman, author of *Telling Lies*, found through his research that the **average person lies** about three times in a 10-minute conversation.

This suggests that **many managers may shade the truth** when interacting with their employees to avoid conflict

or difficult conversations. One of the core reasons why employees do not like or trust their managers is that they simply do not believe their manager is being truthful.

Trust plays a role in predicting which employees will be engaged and disengaged. The benefits of having trust in an organization are measureable. Organizations with engaged employees in **Canada** were found to have 26 per cent less turnover, 20 per cent less absenteeism and 15 per cent greater employee productivity.

The degree of trust between managers and employees at all levels ultimately defines the degree to which employees view their organization as trustworthy.

At the core of **trust** between managers and employees is the degree of communication between them, as well as the managers' openness to answer difficult questions honestly.

Practicing honesty

Integrity check

At the core of honesty and trust is integrity. Developing this micro skill is totally dependent on a manager's integrity. The first action to take is to complete an online [integrity checklist](#) to obtain a baseline of the kinds of actions others use to evaluate a person's level of integrity.

After completing this self-assessment, print and explore your results. If you have any questions it can be helpful to discuss your results with a trusted adviser. Actions a manager can take to improve how others perceive them include doing what they say they will do, sharing credit and following through. Employees filter what they hear by the degree of integrity and trust they have in their manager.

Current approach review

It's common for managers to develop their own style with respect to how they interact with their employees, peers and senior leaders. Improving one's perception of how they are trusted begins with self-awareness and reflection.

Some managers frame their messages to ensure that what they say is perceived as being positive. The

positive aspect of this approach is the attention to the message, and how others may react. One challenge, though, is that this practice can result in a habit of holding back useful information, padding things and leading to a reputation as not being forthcoming. The objective for this step is to catch yourself with respect to style and approach. Only you will know if you are holding things back and shading the truth. To improve, you have to be honest with yourself first.

Honesty foundation

Trust begets trust. To get trust a manager has to give trust as well. Being honest with others may not always be the most popular action. When trust is an issue between a manager and employee this is an opportunity to discover why that is and what can be done to fix it. Making a commitment to being honest and accepting the consequences are at the core of building integrity.

Honest conversations

Managers who are committed to being honest with themselves and others and to telling the truth are prepared to have honest conversations. Perhaps one of the hardest things about being

a manager is maintaining and enforcing expectations. When an employee underperforms this is an opportunity to support that employee to learn what they can do better, not to avoid having a discussion at all.

Honest two-way conversations happen when employees trust their managers. The goal of this micro skill is to make a commitment each day to tell employees the truth, catch yourself when shading the truth and fix when necessary.

Being honest can by times be a lonely road. However, over time it will establish credibility and trust. Managers who are known to be honest become pillars that trust and respect are built around.

ATTITUDE

Why eating a slice of humble pie makes you a good leader

Humility is a key trait for leaders who want to improve the health, engagement and productivity of their employees. Why is this important? It's because employees feel confident and comfortable interacting with a manager or leader who regularly demonstrates humility.

Humility helps employees feel psychologically safe with their manager because they know that they will be treated fairly and honestly. In the context of an employee-manager relationship, humility includes not only a leader's words but also their non-verbal gestures and behaviours.

Leaders who demonstrate humility are by no means weak or pushovers.

Humility can be observed in a leader's ability to ask for feedback, show an interest in others' needs, be open to others' opinions, admit mistakes, accept uncertainty and trust employees to do their jobs.

Being open to learn from **criticism** is at the core of humility and ultimately defines how much humility onlookers see, experience and believe a leader has. Employees want to be around and enjoy interacting with leaders who demonstrate humility.

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great*, found in his **research** that executive leaders in the most successful companies all demonstrated humility. These leaders were regularly observed and known for giving credit to others and accepting blame. Mr. Collins and his team's study of companies' performance over 40 years highlighted the value and importance of humility and how this behaviour played a role in predicting which leaders would have the most success leading their employees.

Accepting versus placing blame may sound somewhat counterintuitive to

new leaders, especially when they are trying to prove themselves and may be afraid to make mistakes. But leaders who are developing their humility are aware of, and accept, their strengths and weaknesses.

Leaders who demonstrate humility are by no means weak or pushovers. Those who demonstrate high degrees of **humility** are often also internally driven for excellence. They achieve positive financial results, are competitive, and are able to perform in high-stakes and fast-paced environments.

Leaders with a high degree of humility hold employees accountable. They typically do this in a respectful way and allow employees opportunities to own their behaviour and improve when possible.

Caring about what employees and peers think and say is a key element in demonstrating humility. So is checking your ego and your need to always be right.

For a leader to adopt the daily practice of humility, and master this micro skill, they need to embrace the benefits for themselves and their employees.

Preparation

In order to test your humility level, it is beneficial to get a baseline as to how

comfortable you, as a leader, are at accepting criticism. One way to do this is to complete an activity called a **360 In Vivo**. This activity challenges leaders to explore how comfortable they are with respect to giving and receiving feedback from others.

Once a manager is clear on the value of and their comfort level in receiving feedback, developing the micro skill of humility requires attention and intention. Here are three steps to help improve those traits.

Awareness

Humility is dependent on a leader's self-awareness with respect to how they deal with and respond to day-to-day challenges and successes. The degree to which a leader accepts blame and gives credit to others influences how onlookers perceive them. Take time daily to be aware of how you handled any problems and successes and whether you gave credit where it was due, or accepted blame for any issues.

Accountability

This is the ability to catch and correct yourself and own your mistakes. Nobody is perfect. It's important to ensure that all employees are treated equally and provided with consistent

praise and recognition when appropriate. Humility has no favourites; everyone is treated with the same fair and equal brush. Being a role model, owning and accepting responsibility for your behaviour can influence others to act similarly. Be aware of your actions as you take them and make adjustments quickly when needed.

Action

Self-reflection at the start and end of the day will allow you to evaluate how effectively you, as a leader, were ready for the day and how well you did during the day. Only an individual leader will know if they consistently give credit where it's deserved and doesn't look to place blame. Instead, leaders with humility take responsibility when results are not achieved.

ATTITUDE

How leaders must admit their mistakes

How do you typically respond when an employee challenges one of your decisions?

This is an important question to think about if you are interested in building trusting relationships. Why? Because how you act when you are questioned or challenged can influence an employee's behaviour and psychological well-being.

When employees have learned that if they challenge you there's a good chance it may come back at them, that they may be judged unfairly. The result is that the employee learns you are not someone they feel safe with or trust to share what they are thinking and feeling.

At the core of a healthy and productive employee-manager relationship is open and two-way communication. By building rapport and having frequent positive interaction with employees as well as aligning values and finding agreement on the company's mission, a leader and her employees can form a bond where they both feel safe to disagree, debate and challenge

a point – all with one goal: to get to the best decisions and result for all stakeholders.

The micro skill of admitting mistakes promotes the value for leaders to open themselves up to the fact they are not perfect, that they may be wrong at times and they need to admit when they make mistakes.

To do this, leaders need to involve their staff in an open and non-judgmental manner. You'll know that this is happening by your employees' willingness to question decisions or give suggestions of their own. Of course, this does not mean you automatically agree with them; it means it's an opportunity to test your thinking.

Here are ways to facilitate employees' questions:

Be open and seek input

This is especially important for decisions that are outside the normal decision tree, because that increases the risk for being wrong. It often doesn't take much time or energy to simply

ask for input. You don't have to have all the answers. Ask the subject matter experts, who often are your employees, and get their input in order to help you make the right decisions. However, when you ask, it's important to listen and be open to challenges. As well, realize that some situations – especially those outside the normal routine – often will spark questions. Consider this as an opportunity to get the best solution the first time by involving others' thinking.

Ask to be challenged

If, after you ask others for input and you're not challenged, it can be helpful to facilitate the process by asking a specific question, such as: "Do you see any risks in this decision?" Whether you ask for the challenge or you are being challenged is not the point. Pause and don't defend your position until you seek to understand the other's point of view. Keep asking the why question until you are clear. Ultimately, as the leader it's often up to you to make the final decision. It's important that whatever decision you make – you own it – meaning that whether it is right or wrong, it's because you chose that route.

Admit when you're mistaken

If you change a decision based on the facts and evidence, it becomes your thinking, or your original decision was wrong or incomplete. To gain credibility and support from your team it's best to quickly admit when you are wrong. Acknowledge why and what helped you to change your perspective, and then acknowledge and thank the people involved who gave that assistance. This creates a culture where your employees are committed to support you and are willing to expend the energy and effort to help you do the right thing and make the correct decision. When they trust you and feel safe they will be more comfortable to push back when they believe it's the right thing and that in the end you will be grateful. It will make your decision-making more thorough and well-informed.

ATTITUDE

Leaders need to know the right way to correct mistakes

What do you do when an employee makes a mistake?

How a leader corrects mistakes can impact the degree of employees' fear and their level of concern when they make an error.

Correcting is when a leader reacts by trying to improve performance or results, or to get an employee on track with a defined process, rule or policy.

An organization's culture can often influence how a leader deals with mistakes. For example, a learning culture is often open to employees failing, considering it as a part of growth,

*A leader needs
to be open
and accept
that mistakes
will happen.*

while a command-and-control culture has less tolerance.

In an eight-hour day, managers who are engaged proactively with their team are viewed as leaders who will point out both what's being done well and areas to improve.

How effectively a leader corrects behaviour impacts how employees respond. Some examples:

Compliance

A leader wants an employee to concede and acknowledge that he made a mistake, with no evidence of learning, and fear is present.

Competency

A leader is interested in ensuring an employee understands the why, and has the knowledge and skills to improve their competency to reduce the risk of further gaps without feeling fear.

The purpose of this micro skill of correcting is to provide leaders with a simple game plan for correcting

mistakes that promotes learning without fear.

A leader needs to be open and accept that mistakes will happen. No employee or leader is perfect all the time. Your expectation level and tolerance for mistakes will define the degree of concern you attach to a mistake.

When an employee makes a mistake, leaders are advised to avoid being blinded by **cognitive bias** – automatic thinking errors that can drive unproductive behaviours such as:

Anchoring bias

Accepting the first piece of information heard as being 100-per-cent true. This can happen if a manager hears a report from a peer that an employee made a mistake, accepts the report without checking the facts, proceeds to correct the employee and later finds out that the other manager got the employees' names mixed up.

Confirmation bias

Looking for information that confirms a perception that an employee is late for work due to laziness, but later finding out that the reason for their tardiness was because the employee's father has died.

Before correcting an employee, it's best to get the facts in order to reduce bias and thinking errors, which when left unchecked can strain the employee-manager relationship.

How to correct a mistake

Acknowledge that mistakes happen and are seldom convenient

One of **Edward Deming's** 14 key principles for managers was to drive out fear. It's not the mistake as much as the intention. Most people don't want to fail or make mistakes on purpose. Employees learn and grow when they feel safe to report their mistakes to their manager. Encourage employees to feel free to report their mistakes to you so you can help correct and prevent them.

Look for the 'why' and options before correcting

Before making judgment or correcting a mistake, seek to understand the root cause. Find out whether it's due to a gap in knowledge, skill or attitude. Was it within or outside the employee's control? What type of mistake was it: operational, process, policy, legislation? Based on the facts and type of mistake, what are the options to fix it?

Correcting mistakes can be challenging but it's the leader's job to correct mistakes, not avoid them. Most mistakes are coaching opportunities and are simple to correct. When a complex correction is warranted, it's often wise to discuss the issue with human resources, or even seek legal advice before engaging.

Simple corrections require a conversation, not a lecture

Most corrections provide an opportunity to teach. When correcting a behaviour, start with awareness. Don't assume the employee knows or understands the issue you want to correct. Ask the questions required to confirm whether the employee has the required knowledge, skills and attitude to avoid repeating the mistake. The goal is to not talk at the employee, but with them. The outcome of a simple correction is to ensure the employee is clear, has the knowledge, skills and attitude to proceed, has a go-forward plan and there is follow-up. When done right, employees will often thank a leader for helping them.

ATTITUDE

Are you an authentic leader? Do you want to be one?

Are you clear on what it takes to be an authentic leader?

Authentic leadership is an approach that focuses on building strong relationships by being open and honest and truly yourself. Authentic leaders are positive, for the most part; however, when their ethics are being compromised they push back quickly and passionately.

This micro skill focuses on the practice of daily activities that support authentic leadership.

Authentic leaders are not passive observers; they are committed to influencing their story.

To be motivated to develop this micro skill you need to see the value of authentic leadership and determine whether it's an area you want to improve. The goal is not to practice just another leadership philosophy but to focus on being a real, authentic leader. People who live their lives being authentic are willing to do the hard work necessary and are motivated to improve the lives of the people they support.

Authentic leaders are not **passive observers**; they are committed to influencing their story. They are dedicated to being self-aware and willing to put themselves in positions that are challenging. They are open to criticism and honest feedback.

Here are four accepted attributes found in authentic leaders:

Self-aware and genuine There's a high level of self-awareness with respect to their strengths, weaknesses, emotions and limitations. They are comfortable with who they are and

with others knowing who they are.

Lead with their heart They express and show emotions. They are vulnerable and open in how they interact with their employees. Most days, they create strong connections with people. They are known to be direct when they communicate and critical when outcomes are not achieved. At the core, their people know they have empathy and don't want to cause a disturbance unnecessarily. It's clear to onlookers that they are driven to achieve goals that benefit everyone, not just their own self-interest.

Focus is on the long game They are committed to winning and understand why it's important to look at the long term and not just hyper-focus on short-term goals. They are known as hard workers, with patience, drive and persistence. They understand that with hard work comes large returns, but that that takes time.

Driven to achieve the mission They are willing to put the goals of the organization ahead of their own when they believe in the mission. To them and onlookers their goals are clear and you know why they wake up each day. They do what they do not just for money or power but for a greater good.

How to be more authentic

As a leader, if you see value in learning to be more authentic, the good news is that with the hard comes the good. Being genuine is not always popular. Providing it's authentic and the right thing, your team, clients and you know that any difficult decision is grounded in a higher purpose beyond your self-interests.

Awareness There's value in getting to understand your personality, which is how you filter and interact with the world. One option is to complete a [personality quick screen](#). Study your results and discuss them with two trusted confidantes. The goal is to increase your self-awareness around how your personality may be influencing how others perceive you. It's rare to be able to change our personality. That's why it's helpful to consider how your natural style supports you or how you may need to adapt if you want to be an authentic leader.

Accountability Being an authentic leader can be hard when it's not popular. Authentic leaders are willing to tell senior leaders, peers, employees and clients what they think is right, not what they think others want. Ultimately, being an authentic leader

means taking responsibility for your thinking and actions.

Action

- Read the above four attributes and ask how authentic you believe you are as a leader.
- Each day, pick one attribute to focus on. If you see any gaps in your **coping skills** you may benefit from some personal development or even **executive coaching**.
- For the next 12 weeks, self-evaluate each of the attributes on a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high). Keep a log so you can compare how you are doing.
- Consider including your staff in the process. Encourage them to provide you feedback on a bi-weekly basis on each of the four attributes and compare their scores to yours. It takes courage, but that's being genuine and authentic.

ATTITUDE

Why you need to be an optimistic, not pessimistic, leader

Are you an optimistic or pessimistic leader?

How you act with your employees matters. What you say matters. What you do impacts how your employees perceive you.

Leaders who are pessimistic are quick to conclude why something can't be done, and they tend to focus first on what's wrong. They typically don't acknowledge or appreciate an employee's effort, immediately have a negative view and utter disempowering statements such as, "I should have expected you wouldn't get this right."

Employees perceive pessimistic leaders as being critical, judgmental and negative. [Research](#) suggests that pessimistic leaders have a much harder time motivating their employees to achieve their goals.

The purpose of this micro skill is to support leaders to add more optimism to their leadership style and their conversations with their employees.

Research suggests that optimistic leaders often outperform pessimistic leaders because of their coping skills

with respect to confronting and solving problems. Optimistic leaders are more able to deal with their current reality, accept it and move forward, whereas a pessimistic leader can get stuck.

Awareness

How optimistic you are as a person will carry over into your leadership style. One way to determine your baseline level of optimism is to complete an [Optimism Baseline Quick Survey](#). Print your results for your file. Whether you agree or disagree with your results, it's helpful to get some input on how people see your natural leadership style with respect to being pessimistic and optimistic. Test your thesis and your perspective with five trusted employees and peers. This will show where you're starting from.

Accountability

Leaders must take control over how they want to be perceived by their employees, and own their results.

Research by [Harvard](#) suggests that the future is shaped by highly motivated and positive leaders who believe in their ability and their team's ability to achieve their goals. There clearly are benefits for leaders to own their behaviour and understand how their behaviour and words can shape and inspire their employees to follow them.

Action

Leaders who practice an optimistic outlook are confident, positive and focused on achieving a desired goal. They know there will be bumps and hard work, and they are not over-confident. They are centered and believe in focusing on what they can control, and they see value in being positive and hopeful. They want to provide their employees with the certainty that their leader will remain calm and confident and that together the team can succeed.

1. Define in your own words what optimism means to you Take a moment and visualize how an optimistic versus pessimistic leader would behave in your role. If you are unclear, do a bit of research and reading on the value of optimism and why it's important to be successful (such as watching [Simon Sinek's Ted Talk](#)). Become clear on

how your words and energy have an impact on employees for good and bad. Until a leader is clear on the benefits of being optimistic to their employees and themselves over the long term, there often is no motivation to practice being optimistic.

2. Focus on what's right first An optimistic leader can be tough, direct and challenge their employees' work. However, they will do best by making a commitment to focus on what's right first and why it's important before exploring what's wrong and needs to be improved. This can help give [employees the fuel](#) and inspiration to feel good about what they have done and take ownership to go back and make recommended changes.

3. It's okay for a leader to smile By being aware and open to smiling when you're interacting with employees you are projecting optimism through your [non-verbal](#) communication. This practice can positively impact your [mental state](#). A positive mental state has you better prepared for the challenges that will require your calm, optimistic and steady hand. Some say it takes only 17 muscles to [smile](#) and 43 to frown, so save some energy.

4. Practice developing your coping skills to solve problems Perhaps one of the best skills for developing optimism is having confidence in your ability to solve problems. If this is a gap, you can develop these skills through training, **coaching** and mentoring. The more confident you are in your ability to solve problems, the easier it can be to be optimistic.

ATTITUDE

How to foster a coaching culture at your workplace

How effective are you as a coach to your employees?

One factor that can positively or negatively impact employees' engagement is their relationship with their direct manager. The collection of relationships employees have with management also plays a role in shaping corporate culture as well.

Corporate culture is not a mystical element. Culture is collectively defined by managers' and employees' thinking, which then influences the kinds of attitudes and behaviours that are accepted or rejected within an organization.

Managers who commit to develop and practice their coaching skills can contribute to creating a **coaching culture** that fosters learning and growing. Some by-products of a coaching culture are improved employee engagement, trust and results.

This micro skill of coaching focuses on what a leader can do to promote a coaching culture with their employees.

Awareness

Before leaders can coach employees effectively they must be crystal clear on what success is for all the core functions they oversee. They must also be clear on what it really takes to be successful. This is important, because for leaders to have credibility as coaches, their employees need to be confident that their managers truly understand their challenges, workload and needs. Credibility is earned; it doesn't come with the title.

Leaders can also observe and learn how employees have been corrected before and now are typically corrected, directed, coached and praised. The more leaders see the world through their employees' eyes, the sooner they will be trusted and respected.

Accountability

Being an effective coach with employees demands being a consistent role model who leads by example. There can't be two sets of rules. Leaders

create the standard and expectations they expect for themselves and their employees. Coaching creates a conversation where employees can discover, learn and grow so they can feel better about their roles and more easily achieve results.

Coaching is much more than just trying to reduce risk by correcting behaviour. It's about getting employees to learn to think as well as helping them see things differently. It's impossible to coach others effectively if you haven't experienced coaching yourself or have completed some coaching training for managers. There's no substitute for training and personal coaching experience. Like any skill, coaching requires practice to be effective.

Action

The following tips can you get started towards facilitating a coaching culture with your employees:

Avoid assumptions

Ask employees what they think. Resist the urge to respond and answer your own questions. Instead of guessing how they came up with their answers, get into the habit of asking a follow-up question as to how they came to their point of view or conclusion. This can help you get the true facts and learn how your employee sees the world.

Promote coaching and listening

Introduce to your team the simple coaching-and-listening concept and let them know it's important to you that everyone is heard and understood. Try something like: "When a team member is speaking, our job as listeners is to be curious about what's being said and what the person means. This can ensure we're getting all the facts out in a clear way, keeping the conversation focused, and not making assumptions." Make it clear that you want people to listen to each other versus interrupting or just waiting for a turn to talk. It's okay to correct and remind team members until this concept becomes ingrained.

What would you do next time?

When an employee makes a mistake, instead of just correcting them and filling in what you did, practice the concept that nobody's perfect and we're all learning. Mistakes happen. Your goal is to help employees learn from mistakes and reduce the risk for relapse. To establish whether learning has occurred and the employee has taken ownership of their mistake, ask what they would do next time. The goal of coaching is to ensure the employee has the knowledge and skills to achieve success if they find themselves in a similar situation again.

Spend time with employees one-on-one regularly

No two employees have exact same needs or gaps. Creating a coaching culture requires a routine and commitment to spending time with employees one-on-one. This can be a 15- to 20-minute coaching session that can be shaped by asking questions like: “How can I better support you?” This is not assuming that you’re not doing this now, but challenging norms and promoting continuous improvement, and showing your willingness to learn and grow.

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EMPATHY

By Bill Howatt

EMPATHY

Do you help your employees stay safe?

Safety at work means more than just making sure you don't bump your head on a low beam or trip over an exposed electrical cord. Most workplaces are not active construction sites, and the safety employees need includes knowing they won't get bullied, or intimidated by co-workers or managers and that they'll be treated fairly.

The managerial micro skill of safety can help create a "manager safe zone," defined by the degree to which employees demonstrate comfort and trust when interacting with their

manager on all topics of safety in the workplace.

To develop this micro skill, managers need to demonstrate that they care about their employees' psychological and physical health.

Employees know whether managers care by the degree of effort they put into spending time and interacting with their staff.

A manager's daily behaviour affects whether employees feel psychologically and physically safe in the workplace. Managers get pulled in many directions and it's easy for them to get distracted by other pressing priorities and reduce the amount of time they spend directly interacting with staff. When practised daily this micro skill can curb psychological and physical safety risk for employees.

Managers are the conduit between employees and an organization's vision and objectives. How effectively this role is handled is directly related to an organization's results but also how happy and effective employees are at work.

*A manager's
daily behaviour
affects whether
employees
feel safe in the
workplace.*

Employees' **psychological** and **physical safety** are two factors the majority of employers across Canada are committed to daily. These safety factors are typically implemented in organizations through some combination of policies, training and manager support and enforcement.

The **Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety** explains how organizations benefit financially when they promote and facilitate organizational and employee health.

While e-mails, written policies and group meetings are ways to communicate with employees, there is nothing more powerful than one-on-one interactions where an employee can experience a manager's expertise, energy, commitment and passion for their work. It is in these moments where employees evaluate whether their manager is talking with them or at them.

Managers can self-evaluate the degree to which they are facilitating a 'safe zone' for their employees by how often and how comfortably employees come to them to openly discuss their points of view around psychological safety, which includes concerns about stress, bullying behaviour, work demands and other issues; and physical safety, which includes concerns about equipment, policies and

procedures, and 'near misses' that could have resulted in an injury. The degree of openness in these conversations where employees freely share opinions, ask questions and report issues and mistakes is also a factor.

For managers to create a safe zone requires them to remove all fear and gain employees' trust and confidence by showing their commitment to support staff so they are safe in the workplace.

One way a manager can foster this kind of relationship is to talk about safety and other issues with their employees regularly and not simply assume that employees will always come to them with their questions and problems.

As a start, a manager can ask employees:

"Do you feel safe today in the workplace?"

If a question like this is asked by a managers with a genuine interest in their employees, it can help them learn and discover how their employees are feeling truly, as well as to build a trusting manager-employee relationship.

When first asked this question, employees typically will say, "What do you mean by safe?" If a manager responds with: "What do you think I mean when I say safe in the

workplace?” it creates an opportunity to engage in a conversation that is aligned to the employee’s situation and the kinds of safety issues that are relevant to their personal workplace experience.

If managers aren’t comfortable asking this question then they likely haven’t created a ‘safe zone’ for their employees. Managers can develop this micro skill by asking this question to different employees at least three times a week.

Elements that shape a manager’s ability to create a safe work zone include the level of comfort the manager has in talking to employees about workplace safety topics, employees’ comfort talking with their manager on safety related issues or questions, and how the manager behaves during and after these conversations.

The word “safe” can uncover an employee’s state of mind and their emotions about safety. In Canada, [Bill C-45](#) refers to a manager’s legal duty to prevent bodily harm. In addition, there is a growing focus on protecting employees from [psychological harm](#).

Ideally, if managers add the safety micro skill to their daily routine, employees will feel safe to come forward when they don’t feel safe about something at work. And that’s the best situation for both employees and employers.

EMPATHY

Are you a manager who knows how to listen?

When you're speaking, you're not listening.

Listening requires putting others' agendas and perceptions first. It's also a demonstration of your commitment to understanding not only what another person is saying but also their intentions.

The micro skill of listening is the art of seeking to fully understand the words being said by another, not through your ears but through the person who is speaking. Listening can help strengthen relationships at work and at home.

Perhaps one of the biggest mistakes leaders make is to think that they must have something to say or have to be talking to demonstrate leadership. The paradox is that less is often more and that by listening and asking a few simple, open-ended questions, a manager will be perceived by employees as being credible and trusted.

No leader can be successful without their employees' contributions. There may be no more important skill for a manager than listening. Listening

provides evidence that you are interested in another person's point of view, and it increases the likelihood that you are clear on what they are saying and understand their point of view.

In a 30-minute meeting with your team, what percentage of the time might you be talking versus listening? If you are likely talking for more than 15 minutes, there's a good chance your team feels you are not a good listener.

To become a good listener, the first step is to want to be a good listener and to understand the benefits of being a good listener. Most of us like being listened to by people who report to us, as well as by our peers and leaders.

A manager can take training programs, such as communicating with impact, to develop their communications skills. However, improving listening ability requires a decision and the discipline to listen more with intention.

Here are some tips to help you better develop your listening skills as a leader.

Talk less, listen more

It's normal for a person to find it difficult to talk less and listen more when they're aiming to impress others. Why? Because most people feel that if they are not sharing what they know they are not adding value or demonstrating their competencies. This urge can create an internal tension and pressing desire to spell out their point of view. As a result, the person is thinking about what they are going to say, rather than listening to what others are saying. To shift this view, you need to accept that the concept that listening is not a sign of weakness but one of strength and respect.

Set listening goals for team meetings

When meeting with employees, a manager's effectiveness can be improved by talking less and listening more. The first thing to do is to notice what percentage of the time you are talking. Once you get your benchmark, set a target for the percentage you want to be listening and monitor your progress over eight weeks. It's a best practice to check in with employees whether they believe that you are listening and understanding their key messages.

Imagine you're being recorded

During any one-on-one discussions, imagine that you're being recorded and evaluate your listening on a scale of one (low) to five (high) after each interaction. The goal is to shape your listening effectiveness. Listening etiquette means not interrupting others, not dominating air time, not making judgmental statements and not assuming you understand what and how others think.

EMPATHY

Managers need to say ‘good job’ more

Influencing and getting the most productivity out of employees is not as complicated as some may think. It all starts with the manager-employee relationship.

The majority of managers in large to small organizations understand the benefits of having more positive than negative relationships and interactions with their employees.

The micro skill of acknowledging employees’ positive contributions is a simple but powerful daily practice of paying attention and recognizing the efforts of your work force.

Managers are in positions of authority, so their opinions matter.

Managers are in positions of authority, so their opinions matter. And because of that they need to be very conscious of what they say. Negative comments often have more influence than positive feedback on employees’ confidence in their value to their organization.

For employees to feel job satisfaction they require clarity on their roles, clear understanding of how their contributions positively impacts the organization’s success, and they need to receive meaningful feedback and encouragement.

What a manager does and says that positively and authentically acknowledges employees’ positive work and contributions can strengthen their commitment and motivation.

Instead of assuming employees should do good work and that it is their job, managers need to recognize that it can be challenging for employees to do their best every day. Effective leaders accept that it is their role is to inspire, monitor and measure quality work, to correct when it’s not up to

standard, and to acknowledge when it's done right.

An employee's day may go fine until they have 10 minutes with some type of negativity. This one session can outweigh the rest of a positive day, leaving the impression that the day over all was not good. It's also too common for this to be the only interaction with a manager for the day.

Employees are less likely to trust a manager whom they believe cares only about finding and correcting mistakes. The micro skill of acknowledging suggests that managers get better results when they recognize their employees' good work more than mistakes.

Managers with the highest level of engagement are known for watching for employees doing good work and quickly acknowledging it. Offering praise can take many forms, such as congratulations on a job well done or



a simple thank you that acknowledges someone's contribution and value.

Some managers have a fault-oriented leadership mindset, putting more value on looking for fault and mistakes than consistently acknowledging employees who do good work. Employees' desire to do a good job is not fuelled simply by compensation. We all want to feel that what we are doing matters and that we get acknowledgement for our efforts.

Employees will accept acknowledgement when they trust the source. This micro skill can help strengthen relationships and positively influence employee engagement and **discretionary effort**.

Here is a game plan for managers to improve their ability to acknowledge employees on a daily.

Accept your opinion matters

Accept the notion that your opinions matter to your employees. Every employee sees the world differently than you, so take time to learn what matters to your employees and what they think good work is.

Watch for good work

Observe your employees and monitor when good work is being done.

If each day you can't find one thing your employees are doing well, then they are not doing their job. Then you'll know when it's time to take some positive, corrective action.

Say something when you see good work

Know when to act. When you see good work, immediately acknowledge it. Most employees don't need a ton of formalities, just the sense that their manager knows they are trying hard and doing their job. Acknowledging can fall on a scale from informational (smile, thumbs up, gesture, simple thank you, a simple phrase, "cool, wow, you rocked it") to acknowledging your staff in performance appraisals, rewards and formal recognition.

Managers who are involved and connected with their employees are in the rhythm of day-to-day events. The more a manager is in touch and in tune with their people, the more likely they will be in a position to acknowledge their contribution and fuel engagement and productivity.

EMPATHY

Are you a leader with compassion?

“I need you to...”

These four words trigger different emotions in employees. For employees with a compassionate leader, they know that what will be asked of them will be reasonable and will be factored into their overall workload.

But for employees working with leaders who have little compassion, these words trigger stress and anxiety regarding the expectation of what will follow.

For example, employees see these requests to do additional tasks as undesirable because they know it will only add more to their heavy workload. As a result, over time employees will conclude that the leader assigning this additional work lacks compassion, as that person doesn't care how hard it is for employees to complete what's suddenly added to their plate, or the impact it has on employees' lives.

This micro skill focuses on using compassion as a guide when assigning employees additional work above and beyond their current work load.

The manager-employee relationship is a critical building block to maximize

work force productivity. Leaders committed to being compassionate when assigning work can, over time, increase **employee's loyalty** more than by how much they pay in compensation.

The degree of compassion the employee perceives their boss typically demonstrates will define the employee's perception of how much the leader values, cares and respects the employee.

Leaders with high levels of compassion consistently demonstrate empathy by showing they care how the additional work may impact employees. They partner with employees to determine the best and most reasonable way to get an additional work request done. They empower employees to be a part of the decision-making process. Their end goal is to simply get the work done without creating unnecessary stress. The leader ensures that employees are clear about why that additional work request is being made and why they, in particular, are being asked to help get it done.

Leaders with low levels of compassion when assigning work often build

resentment that erodes the employee's trust and confidence. The lower the compassion, the greater the risk a leader's actions will lead to preselectionism, voluntary turnover and **unresolved conflict**.

Here is a compassionate checklist for leaders to use to ensure they're thinking of their staff as they make special requests.

Act as though every request is being videotaped

Imagine every time you make a request to any one you are being videotaped and these video are going directly to your boss for evaluation. This mindset can help promote the choice to use positive and supportive language as well as ask questions instead of just making statements. If you are compassionate when you give employees instructions, this can help build loyalty and can help increase productivity. The more positive the interaction the higher the likelihood the **law of reciprocity** will influence the employee's behaviour positively. This law teaches that when a human being treats another well the typical person has an internal drive to do something positive in return, such as complete an assigned task well and willingly.

Think about what one more thing may mean

Most employees when given a request above and beyond their assigned work see it as just one more thing on their ever-growing to-do list. Compassionate leaders pay attention to how many 'more' tasks are being added. It only takes a few seconds to make a request which could require a few hours of work to complete. Asking an employee to do 10 things at once is less effective than asking them to do two or three things well.

Check in how requests are being received

Compassionate leaders know they are often not doing the work – just assigning it. But monitoring how additional requests are being received and their potential impact on staff demonstrates to employees that you care. Checking in and asking how the day or week has gone and the impact the additional assignment is having on them and their workload demonstrates that you care and if the workload being placed on staff makes sense with the company's current resources.

EMPATHY

How to show employees you really care

Does your organization claim in writing that it values its employees?

There's no way any employer would put in writing something like: "We want to be honest; employees are not a priority."

Instead, most employers go to great lengths to craft their message about the value of their staff. Some will even create what's known as their employee value proposition (or EVP) that outlines the organization's promise and benefits that it provides to attract and retain talent. Once this is done in writing, employees begin to judge for themselves whether what was said is or will be happening.

Organizations that have their managers talk about their EVP often are not considering one major challenge: On average, 82 per cent of people don't **trust** what their manager tells them. This gap in trust can fuel a disconnect between what employees have been told and what they perceive to be the truth. In the end, every employee's personal experience defines their

reality. Organizations that are successful at gaining employee trust understand that trust is earned through consistent actions.

This micro skill promotes to leaders the importance of fact checking with employees on how well the organization is keeping its promises to its staff.

Fact checking

To be an effective fact checker, leaders must take action once they have the facts. For example, if you find a gap in the EVP, do you have a relationship with Human Resources to share what you've discovered? Most managers are concerned about their careers and the risks they're taking when they point out these deficiencies. If this applies to you, develop relationships with the people in charge and determine if they really care, or if they're reluctant to raise some issues. This may shape your approach, decisions and the degree of risk you are prepared to take.

The end goal of fact checking is to engage your employees regularly to

get their point of view and perceptions based on their experiences. Many employees will not say anything unless you ask them in a safe and non-threatening way, and that they know you can be trusted. No news is not always good news. This approach is meant to build bridges and trust and to ensure that you are seen as a leader who is committed to serving and supporting a positive workplace experience for your employees.

Pick your theme and form your open-ended question

Pick one theme or action the organization has promoted that it does for employees. These promises are often reported through a core values statement or EVP. Then ask your employees what they think, without any qualifiers. Ask an open-ended question like, “How well is the company providing you with opportunities to learn?” Be clear on what you’re going to ask and why you are asking.

Fact checking

The fact checking approach is to focus on a theme over a few days and when appropriate to check in with employees regarding what they think. The goal is to get in tune with what

employees think and believe to be true, and why. The intention is not to challenge or defend, but to listen. Whatever the employee says can be helpful, whether it’s favourable, unfavourable or neutral. This information can inform your actions.

Take results and determine if action is required

Getting the facts through the employee’s eyes can provide insight on employee perceptions, both good and bad. This information can guide managers and shape their approach on what specifically they can influence and improve. As well, in some cases it can be the impetus to bring forward key findings for discussion. This model is grounded in a coaching approach. The goal is to keep the focus on celebrating what’s working well and to take action to close any gaps.

Managers who consistently engage their employees on their facts and experiences in the workplace are more likely to build trusted relationships and provide evidence that they care about evaluating and monitoring employer promises.

EMPATHY

Why it's a problem if your body language doesn't match your words

How well do you manage your non-verbal communications?

Non-verbal communication is the art of paying attention not only to spoken words but also to all other levels of communication, such as tone and body language, and their impact on others. There's a well-known, non-verbal communication rule called the **7/38/55/ rule**. It suggests that 7 per cent of the meaning of a communication comes from the words, 38 per cent is based on how the words are expressed and 55 per cent is expressed by body language. Based on this rule, understanding the impact of non-verbal communications when communicating with employees is critical in order to be effective.

This micro skill provides leaders a framework that they can use to monitor and manage their non-verbal communicating skills.

Leaders who have not been trained in non-verbal communication are at risk of having communication gaps

that can be a barrier to effective conversations. Leaders with both **humility** and **integrity** are open and care how their communication style can impact employees.

Awareness

Three elements of non-verbal communications impact the communications experience. Each can influence how words expressed in a conversation are received, as well as the overall communications experience. Evaluate how effective you believe you are in each of the three elements on a scale one (low) to 10 (high).

- **Kinesics** represents non-verbal communication, the **body language** used when speaking and listening. This type of communication is the unconscious and conscious **translation** of moods, feelings and thinking. The adage, "a picture is worth a thousand words," is similar to body

language. When words and body language are not aligned, it can create distraction, distrust and stress.

Consider the example of Sam having a conversation with his boss. When Sam speaks, his boss has minimal to no facial expressions. His arms are crossed across his chest, his body is turned away from Sam, he doesn't make eye contact, and he checks his e-mail several times. Sam leaves the conversation feeling as if his boss had no interest in what he had to say. Most employees want to feel they are being heard and respected when they speak to their manager. The key insight is that even when a leader is not speaking his body is always talking.

- **Paraverbals** are what a person does to the spoken word. **Paraverbals** focus on how you say the words with respect to the volume, pitch, rate of speech and tone. Yelling the phrase, "I'm not upset," is incongruent. If you speak in a monotone you may be perceived as uninterested, compared to a person who changes their pitch when speaking.
- **Proxemics** refers to the space between two people communicating. Each person has their own level of comfort and no two

people are the same. Following are the average zones: intimate zone: 2 feet; personal zone: 3 to 4 feet; social zone: 4 to 12 feet; public zone: beyond 12 feet.

Business communications, for the most part, happen within the social zone. If a manager moves into an employee's personal space this can be stressful and distracting.

Accountability

This is understanding that as a leader, your non-verbal communication can impact employees both positively and negatively. Do you think your employees could benefit if you improved your non-verbal communication awareness and skills? If so, then the next step is to take action.

Action

Improving non-verbals in each of the three elements requires awareness and commitment. To develop this micro skill, pick from the following: feedback, training and daily practice.

Obtaining feedback from employees and peers on your communication style through a 360-degree feedback exercise can provide **constructive criticism on how to improve**. Another option is to take a **course** that covers

non-verbal communication. You can also do some self-study using resources easily obtained through the Internet, YouTube and Amazon on non-verbal communication. Mastering this skill requires daily practice to ensure employees receive your words the way they were intended.

EMPATHY

Reducing the stigma of mental health issues in the workplace

Mental health in the workplace is now a regular topic at most HR conferences and professional development [webinars](#). Many operational and HR leaders are exploring what their organizations can do to support persons at risk for mental illness or substance abuse problems.

Mental health in general can be defined by a person's overall outlook on their work, family, financial and personal life. Especially in the [workplace](#), [mental health](#) refers to how satisfied and balanced one is and how effectively they are able to manage their feelings. Mental illness can negatively impact an employee's performance and physical health.

A typical starting place is the development of a mental health strategy, whose design is often influenced by the organization's sector and size. The goal of mental health strategies, in addition to supporting persons with mental health issues, is a commitment to reduce risks such as work demand, safety, bullying, harassment, manager-employee relationships and stigma.

[Stigma](#) is a form of prejudice and discrimination that is damaging to persons with mental health issues. It's grounded in faulty thinking, such as a perception that employees with a mental illness or substance abuse problem are different and not normal. It can compound a person's mental health issues and can fuel actions such as avoidance, fear and judging.

One action that organizations are taking to support employees with mental health issues in the workplace and to curb stigma is training managers on how to support persons with mental issues. Managers play an important role in reducing stigma.

In addition to the humanity and caring for persons with mental health issues, reducing stigma increases opportunities for persons with mental health issues to work in a safe and positive environment. This can positively impact costs and productivity by curbing sick leave, increasing customer satisfaction, attraction of talent and discretionary effort, and slowing voluntary turnover and reducing chances

for human rights violations.

The Conference Board of Canada found one of the most effective areas to focus on to curb mental health risk in the workplace is **training managers** on how to support employees with mental health issues. The board also reported that most managers are receptive to this type of training, especially gaining insight on the signs to recognize mental health issues in employees.

Workplace manager training programs such as the Mental Health@Work Training Program are currently training and providing managers with the tools to better support employees with mental health issues.

One metric that leaders can track to evaluate the impact training is having is measuring the percentage of the workforce who would feel comfortable discussing a mental health issue with their manager or HR.

Coaching tips for managers to support employees at risk:

A manager's first role is to take a personal inventory, looking for any internal prejudices. It's difficult for a manager to have a positive impact on curbing stigma when they are not aligned to the organization's vision and objectives.

The manager's role requires them to evaluate employee performance. When a manager is concerned about an employee's performance, based on observations, it's their role to take action.

Managers who can recognize the early warning signs of at-risk behaviours are best positioned to take effective action to facilitate access to care and/or accommodations. The manager's checklist for employee at-risk behaviour online tool is designed to support managers who are concerned about a particular employee. This tool helps a manager collect their thoughts and to organize their facts to determine their perceived level of risk to help decide whether action is required.

Managers who determine a need for action are advised to be clear on their role. Whether trained or not trained in supporting mental health issues in the workplace, managers are never expected to diagnose or provide psychological counselling. Managers are expected to only support and communicate concern for employees' performance and for their personal safety and that of the other workers. The manager's first priority is safety.

Managers are paid to ensure that performance goals are achieved. When an employee is not performing at standard it is the manager's

role to intervene. The key for a successful interaction with an employee who appears to be performing below standard and displaying behaviours that are not consistent with past performance is to focus on facts. When a manager is faced with an issue that warrants a conversation it is important to prepare their message and facts and to be clear on how to best deliver the conversation. It's often wise to have a discussion with HR on the best approach. The sole purpose of any conversation driven by performance issues and concerns about an employee's health is to ensure that the manager's focus is on performance, concern and safety.

EMPATHY

Do you have patience, or are you stressing out your staff?

As a leader, how often do you feel like you are on the clock and that time is your enemy?

In today's highly competitive and demanding work world, time is often a factor that defines success or failure. Time can be a source of stress, especially when a deadline looms and results have yet to be achieved.

*Like any skill,
patience can
be developed
with practice.*

This constant race against time can be a source of stress and pressure for some leaders. When not managed, tension and fear of failure can result in haste, rushing and pushing employees, and stressing them out. When leaders are focused on outcomes more than people and process, this can result in

increased stress and tension on the work force and culture that often has a negative impact on employees' health, morale and thinking.

One challenge most leaders have when managing time and expectations is to keep three groups of stakeholders happy: senior leadership, customers and employees. Each of these has different needs and expectations.

Leaders who have gaps in their patience and are not able to stay calm under pressure are likely to end up pushing too hard, which increases the risk of mistakes and creates an environment where employees feel stress and fear of failure.

This micro skill is focused on increasing leaders' patience. Leaders who project patience demonstrate tolerance for delays without getting upset. They understand the importance of time and meeting deadlines and how creating stress and pressure seldom helps achieve long-term goals.

Like any skill, patience can be developed with practice. It can increase a leader's **frustration tolerance**; it

projects empathy to employees, which is important for gaining confidence and trust; and it creates the ability to remain calm under pressure.

Patience is an excellent leadership virtue to demonstrate at any time, but especially when under pressure. It helps employees and peers stay calm, thus reducing the risk of making mistakes that waste valuable time.

Awareness

Most of us have a natural style when it comes to deadlines. What's your typical style under pressure as time runs out? Do you speed up or are you able to remain calm? Patience starts with being aware of how your behaviour can impact yourself and others. If this is a micro skill you and your staff would benefit from having you focus on, then continue to the next step.

Accountability

Patience is something we practice consciously. Like any other micro skill, it requires self-discipline and practice to develop. The degree you can demonstrate patience will be influenced by your emotional intelligence. [This quick survey](#) can help you get benchmark of your current level of emotional intelligence. Patience starts with

accepting that you own your behaviour and that you have a choice of how you act under pressure. If you accept this and want to develop more patience, then act on and practice it.

Action

Patience begins with a commitment to be less judgemental, more tolerant and empathic. Here are some micro actions you can take to project patience and to monitor your mindset.

- **Monitor your speed**
Pay attention to how fast you move and talk. When you're moving at hyper-speed it's harder to slow down, think and be patient. Slow your speed and think about what you want to achieve as you walk, versus rushing mindlessly to get from point A to point B. Slow down when talking, so people can follow you; make fewer statements and ask more questions. This can help get the facts and reduce the risk of acting on misinformation. These two steps can help bring down your intensity and create a state of calm that's critical for projecting patience.
- **Anticipate delays**
Acknowledge that there will be unplanned delays. Anticipate

where delays can happen and plan for how to counteract them. Like a game of chess, there are several moves that can be made to recover when trapped. Patience is an asset in planning as well as execution.

- **Maintain firm expectations**

Patience doesn't mean being a pushover. A patient leader doesn't need to be viewed as weak, nor to ignore missed deadlines. Patient leaders find ways to inspire their staff and create the right scenario for them to succeed amid tight deadlines. Patient leaders create workplaces where employees feel safe and comfortable and can fail with dignity. Leaders know they can't make employees do their jobs, nor will they judge themselves for employees' choices.



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The Employee Recommended Workplace Award

The Award, created by The Globe and Mail and Morneau Shepell, recognizes excellence in achieving a healthy, engaged and productive work force. It is the only award of its kind that is based entirely on feedback from employees. Employees take an online survey and this gathers information about their health from four points of view – physical, mental, work and life – to get a picture of their Total Health. An organization's score is the aggregate of their employees' scores. Organizations with strong score can say that they are truly employee-recommended workplaces.

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