

THE  
8

Cornerstones

OF

GREAT LEADERSHIP

(and how to cultivate them)



SUZI McALPINE

# INTRODUCTION

**B**eing a leader can be incredibly rewarding.  
It can also be tough and bewildering.

If you sometimes feel a little overwhelmed with the ever-increasing demands of leadership, or if you're confused about what great leadership looks like (or how to cultivate it) you're not alone. Many leadership theories and practices developed in the last fifty years are now outdated. They no longer suit the world in which we lead.

Technology (in particular social media), increased global connectedness, the growing volatility and complexity organisations are experiencing - not to mention the sheer pace of change - means leadership is more challenging than ever before.

**But, here's the good news...**

Effective leadership has the power to have more of a positive impact, on more people around the world, than ever before in history.

This eBook outlines the 8 cornerstones of great leadership and provides you with simple, practical tips and tools you can start implementing - right now - to improve your leadership.





## Cornerstones of **GREAT LEADERSHIP:**

- 1** Self-Awareness
- 2** Listening
- 3** Stillness
- 4** Collaboration
- 5** Authenticity
- 6** Courage
- 7** Compassion
- 8** Self-Discipline

# 1 SELF-AWARENESS

**The talent show contestant who thinks they can sing, but can't hold a tune to save themselves.**

**The skinny friend who thinks she's fat.**

**And the extreme? Hitler, who saw himself as a prophet and Messiah.**

These may be radical cases of low self-awareness, but for many of us, how we view ourselves is often distorted. Either we're too harsh or we overestimate our current performance. Warped or inflated self-perception is a widespread problem in leadership. One poll found 90 percent of leaders believe they are in the top 10 percent of performers (Church, 1997)!

## **These are the NEMESSES of good leadership:**

Blind spots.  
An unwillingness to seek and acknowledge feedback from others.  
A lack of awareness of your impact on others.  
Not knowing yourself.

## **These are the ANTIDOTES good leadership:**

Self-awareness is a crucial factor in high performance and potential. It's also a darn good indicator of long-term leadership success.  
Make time to get to know yourself better.  
Take the advice of Socrates who said simply "Know Thyself".  
See yourself as others see you.

Here are

# FIVE

**simple ways**

**to increase your self-awareness:**

1

**Although I have mixed views on 360 degree reviews**, as I think they are sometimes fuel distrust, they are better than nothing in terms of garnering a true picture of how others see you. If you get the opportunity, participate and reflect on what positive change you can make as a result of the feedback.

2

**Better yet, regularly conduct a face-to-face interview** with those you lead, your boss and your peers and ask them to honestly give you their feedback on your strengths and areas for development.

You can do this by simply asking:

What do you want me to keep doing?

Stop doing?

Do more of?

Do less of?

Start doing?

Thank them. Don't be defensive. Act on the feedback in a positive way by choosing one or two areas you want to see positive change in. Enlist a coach, mentor or trusted peer to help you make those changes.

3

**At least twice a year, ask your direct reports:**

- What can I do in order for me to lead you better?
- What do I currently do that enables you to perform better in your role?
- What can I change to support you more?

See [here](#) for more on why 'how are we going' conversations are so important.

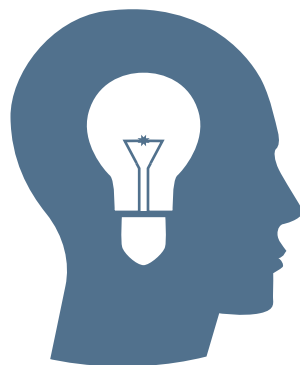
Once again, act on the feedback. Like company engagement surveys that never go anywhere, the worst thing you can do is ask your direct reports these questions...then do nothing.

4

**Get an executive coach.** Skilled coaches hold a mirror up to you and give you feedback on your patterns of behaviour, which are both helpful and limiting. They hold you accountable as you travel the often difficult journey of positive change and they are an objective sounding board.

5

**Reflect.** Make space in your diary every day for reflection or thinking time. Meditation or mindfulness, journaling and exercising in solitude are all ways to help you tune into yourself and your world more effectively – ergo increased self-awareness. Even 15 minutes at the beginning or end of your work day where you ask such questions as, “What is the most important thing for me to focus on today?” or, “What did I learn today?” helps to improve self awareness.



# 2 LISTENING

**If you want to be a talented leader, become an awesome listener.**

If you've ever been the recipient of someone giving you their full, undivided attention, you'll know what a gift this can be. And if the person offering you their attention is your boss, or someone who can influence your career success, the response can be even more significant. Unfortunately, the simple act of giving one's full attention to another person is a very rare jewel in organisations.

**Here are 4 reasons why giving people your full attention  
is worth its weight in gold:**

1

We hear what is being said. It seems obvious, but if we are preoccupied with checking our phone, glancing at emails, or if our eyes are constantly skirting the room, we can miss subtle (but vital) clues. We may also not fully comprehend what the other person is trying to communicate.

2

It makes people feel heard and valued. I won't teach you to suck eggs as to why this is good for your team to feel this way – not to mention the benefits to you and the organisation.

3

It is a practice of mindfulness. Train yourself to be fully present in each moment and you will instantly become a better leader. [Click here](#) to see why practicing mindfulness is the bomb.

4

It builds relationships. When we know someone is listening to us with full intent, it builds trust - the lifeblood of all relationships. Building a culture of trust is even more vital in today's ever-changing corporate environment – [click here](#) for more on this topic.

# HERE ARE 4 WAYS YOU CAN BECOME A BETTER LISTENER TODAY:

## Put. Down. The. Phone.

Or at least stop looking at your computer/report/hottie in the next door cubicle. Look at the person who is speaking to you. Just by giving another person your full attention and looking them in the eye is the first rule of good listening.

## Pay attention to what's NOT being said

Gestures, facial expressions, even the flush in someone's face tell us more than the words people say. Learning to read non-verbal communication leads to better listening.

## Listen to understand, not to reply.

Paraphrase. Repeat back 'loaded' or emotionally laden words. Ask questions to understand the other person's perspective.

- "When you said X, what did you mean?"
- "Tell me more about that?"
- "What I hear you are saying is that you...is that right...?"
- "Say more..."

## Shut up.

Sorry for the bluntness, but if you're always the one talking, interrupting others, or even constantly playing in your head what you want to say next, you ain't listening, period.



# 3 STILLNESS

**In business, we tend to value action over stillness. Like soccer goalies, we are predisposed to value leaping from side-to-side over remaining still or waiting, even when that is more effective. But stillness is our friend. Especially in leadership roles.**

## Where is stillness present?

**When** we pause before pressing the reply button to an email when we are angry or triggered.

**When** we block out time in our calendars regularly for 'thinking time.' And then stick to it.

**When** a leadership team takes a day out of their busy schedules to connect and explore how they are currently operating as a team, how they can operate better - even (and perhaps especially) when they are extremely busy.

**When** a leader practices mindfulness.

**When** we adopt the 'overnight test' on an important decision instead of a knee-jerk reaction to a problematic situation.

Make no bones about it, stillness can be an uncomfortable place to reside. It can seem empty, boring, lacking in results. It can make us feel 'ants in our pants' impatient. Or, it can lead us to a place where our deepest intuition can be heard. Even though we might not like what it is telling us. If we are constantly 'doing' without hitting the pause button, we miss the gifts that 'being' can bring.

**There is so much value in learning to be still in a life that is constantly changing.**

As Martin Crowe, the famous Kiwi cricketer,  
wrote when describing the gap between balls in a test match:

“This is the space between thoughts, between breaths, between fielders, between balls. They say to experience the gap wholly brings ultimate joy in what we do. In the gap there is nothing, and it’s that nothing space in which lies the secret to our purpose...”

## Here are 5 ways to cultivate stillness:

Get meditating. Yep, you heard me. Not convinced on the merits of meditation. [Read here](#) for starters. Even five minutes a day can yield better results in, well, pretty much every area of your life.

Book ‘thinking time’ into your diary, daily if possible. Even ten minutes over your morning coffee will do it. This might be to write down your top 3 priorities for the day or ask yourself, “what’s the one thing I need to do today to get us closer to our vision?”

Breathe. We breathe 15,000 to 35,000 times daily. Over 90 % of our energy comes from our breathing. But most of the time, we are not breathing deeply enough. Take a few moments, whenever you are aware and take 4-5 deep belly breaths. This engages the ‘rest and digest’ part of our brain (parasympathetic nervous system) which is our thinking part of our brain.

Journal. Journaling is called ‘free writing’ and it’s a great tool for reflection and problem solving. See [here](#) for why it’s a leader’s best friend and how to get started.

Schedule regular ‘pause and reset’ days with your team. Review progress towards your goals and what needs adjusting. Whenever I facilitate these workshops with executive teams, they almost always comment on the value of connecting with each other without an urgent task related outcome or ten gazillion agenda items.

# 4 COLLABORATION

**Many of us carry the image of leaders as the all-knowing superhero archetype. This notion of a leader stands, commands and protects his or her followers, tells them what to do, how to do it and has all of the answers, all of the time.**

I don't know about you, but I feel exhausted and intimidated just reading that description of leadership, let alone trying to emulate it!

This superhero archetype just won't cut it in the world we lead. Command-and-control approaches place too much responsibility on too few leaders.

Sure there are times when "I decide" is appropriate, but it's less often than you think.

In today's volatile and uncertain world, adopting a collaborative leadership style the majority of the time is crucial to your success.



Here are

# FOUR WAYS TO BEGIN

developing a collaborative leadership approach:

## BE AWARE OF (AND SUBJUGATE) YOUR EGO.

Almost always go last with your idea or opinion with those you lead. Or at the very least, rarely go first. Have regular “what if” creative brainstorming sessions. Scenario planning without boundaries is a great collaborative approach.

Be the recapper only. Give no input.

Ask a powerful question to your team, then... leave the room!

## CULTIVATE DIVERSITY: IN GENDER, AGE, PERSPECTIVE AND IN EVERY OTHER WAY. DON'T LET YOUR PROCESSES KILL DIVERSITY.

Be as transparent as you possibly can with those you lead.

Share information and implement approaches such as crowdsourcing.

Ask, “what information am I currently holding to myself, that if I was to share with my team or even broader stakeholders, could unleash innovation, creative problem solving or increased productivity?”

## ENSURE YOUR MANAGEMENT APPROACHES HELP, NOT HINDER, COLLABORATION.

Be a great coach.

Ask powerful questions more often than you tell people what to do.

Listen more than you speak.

Get skilled and comfortable at giving and receiving feedback. Do it every day and avoid the ‘annual [dump truck](#)’ appraisal.

## ENSURE MANAGERS (ESPECIALLY AT THE TOP TABLE) ARE REWARDED FOR COLLABORATING RATHER THAN PROMOTING THEIR INDIVIDUAL AGENDAS.

A collaborative mind-set at the top table will cascade down to the rest of the organisation.

Do you currently have competing agendas at the ‘top table’?

Ask yourself, “how can I unify my direct reports’ goals towards common goals?”

# 5 AUTHENTICITY

I remember when (as a relatively young and inexperienced manager), I was struggling to find my feet as a leader within a large US multinational. Struggling to find the balance between fitting in and being authentic, I made a silent pledge to move towards being more of myself every day.

For me, this meant embracing my slightly goofy self. It meant little things, like dressing in what I believed demonstrated my personality (whilst still being appropriate to the environment). It meant big things – like understanding and leaning into my strengths – a knack for empathy, listening, creativity and my positive attitude. It also meant being clear about what I was not good at and either delegating or working to improve on those things.

In short, I became more of myself. And when I did, I found my groove as a leader. When we get tied up trying to be what we think a “great leader” looks like, we can end up chasing our tails.

**Being a skilful leader means being the best version of yourself.**

# FIVE

## ways to tap into your authentic self:

### 1

Who are you when you are at your best? I bet the answer somehow connects to when you are being authentically you. Write down the answers to this question and don't stop at the first sentence. See if you can fill a page. Think back over your life to those times when you were on fire, in flow and when you 'shone'. What was present? What were you doing during those times? What did it feel like? Who was influential? What challenges did you overcome?

### 2

What is your personal purpose? This might seem a little bit of namby pamby exercise, but when I spent time writing down [my purpose](#), it was much more impactful than I would have thought. Even more so, when I look at it regularly. It's like my anchor to what I do, why I do what I do, who I need to be to achieve this and how I want to 'show up' in my professional and personal life.

### 3

What do you value, and in what order? One person might have honesty at the top of their list, another person might have compassion. Try writing down the top five things you value. That's not enough though. You then need to write down how you intend to specifically manifest these values each day as a leader. One of mine is compassion. In my coaching practice, this means never holding back a genuine, valuing statement about someone else if I notice it in them. Or, withholding judgement, when compassion is the better route.

### 4

Surround yourself with people who will tell you when you aren't being authentic - and who will call you on it when you are trying to impress or be someone you are not. My friend (and the other half of The Leader's Digest) Amy, is SOOO that person. She's even got it down to "The Look" if she sees me trying to be someone I'm not in order to impress others or make up for my lack of self-belief.

### 5

Be prepared for not being everyone's 'cup of tea'. It's better to be the best darn cup of tea you can be. Being liked is overrated in leadership. It is far better to strive for being respected and to lead with heart. Know that the more you are yourself, the more you give permission for others to be themselves. And that's a pretty cool thing to do. Trust is vital for a leader/follower relationship to flourish. People's "Bulls##t Monitor" is more finely tuned than you think.

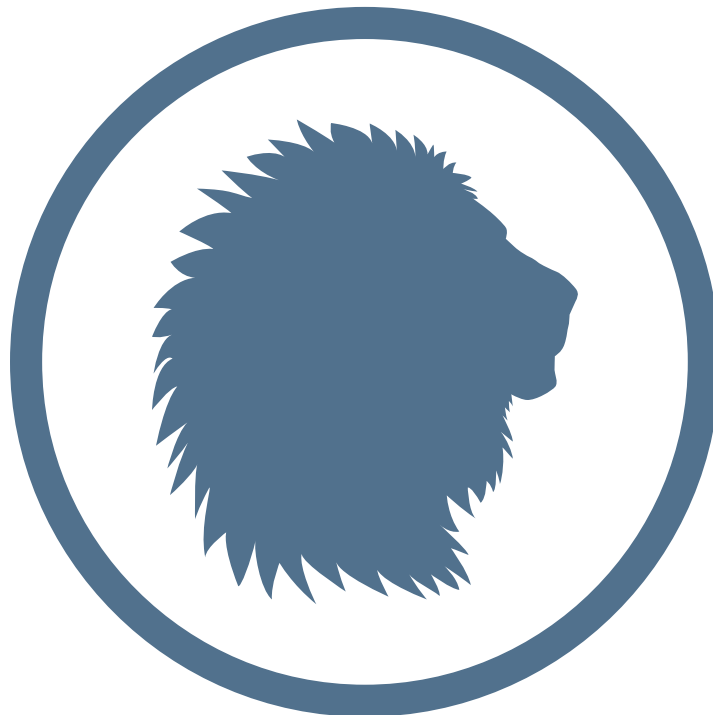
Today is the day to start being more yourself.

# 6 COURAGE

**“Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.”  
Mark Twain**

Aristotle named courage the first virtue, because it makes all other virtues possible. As important themes go in leadership, courage is perhaps the most significant – either by its presence or its absence.

Courage is something all the greatest leaders throughout time have demonstrated, without exception. Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Malala, Ghandi - these are people who have showed grand acts of courage throughout their lifetimes



**Let's face it, it's riskier to be a leader than a follower but it's impossible to be an effective leader without being courageous.**

## Being courageous is pivotal in leadership because it:

**Helps** us to grow personally and professionally.

**Widens** our circle of understanding and experience (refer to my [Pushing Through the Red Zone](#) blog for more on why this is beneficial).

**Enables** us to speak for those who have a limited voice, or who are vulnerable.

**Helps** us to stand up for what we believe in.

**Models** what we want to see in those we lead. If a boss is courageous, we are more likely to follow suit.

**Encourages** us to become the person we want to be.

## How can you cultivate courage?

Get to know what you are afraid of. Merely naming our fears enables us to examine what being courageous in response to that fear looks like. Journal or free write what you fear in a work situation. When you are courageous, take note, jot down what you learned from that act of courage and what the benefits to you, your team and the organisation were.

Start with small acts of courage. For example, do you feel reluctant to give difficult feedback? Practice giving feedback to a trusted colleague on a minor matter, before moving into more challenging feedback situations.

[Sometimes just standing still and not backing down is all that is required to show courage.](#)

Take more risks. Expand your comfort zone. Get into the [red zone](#). Manage a group through a significant crisis. Put your hand up for a challenging assignment. Do a post mortem on a failed project.

Take a stand on an issue that will require some courage. A good sign is it will be a situation you know you will have detractors. Be prepared by practicing your responses to challenges and challengers. Run it past a colleague and ask them to play Devil's Advocate so you can be prepared for the challenges you'll likely receive.

Become comfortable with our own feelings. Notice when you feel fear and where you feel it in your body. Stress is just a more palatable term for fear, so knowing when we are actually feeling fear (and not trying to run away from it) ironically tends to reduce it. Sometimes, being courageous is examining our own attitudes and perspective to the things we fear.

[Is the worst thing that could happen really that bad?](#)

Practising small acts of courage on a daily basis enables us to flex the 'courage muscle'. As the muscle builds in strength, size, and stamina, we can move towards larger acts.





# 7 COMPASSION

Thupten Jinpa, the principal English translator to the Dalai Lama has one of my favourite definitions of compassion:

**Compassion is a mental state endowed with a sense of concern for the suffering of others and aspiration to see that suffering relieved.**

Specifically, he defines compassion as having three components:

1. A cognitive component: “I understand you.”
2. An affective component: “I feel for you.”
3. A motivational component: “I want to help you.”

**Compassion, unfortunately, is not a word traditionally heard much in the boardrooms of the corporate world.**

Asking, “How can we be compassionate during this restructure?” may well get you a sideways look or a reputation for being “soft”. Compassion may even be viewed at worst, as being irrelevant in business.

We are far more comfortable to pepper our conversations with concepts such as financial results, outcomes, strategy, processes.

What a pity. Practicing kindness and compassion may have no place in the business world, according to some. But I disagree.

Compassion and profits are not mutually exclusive – in fact practicing compassion can actually lead to greater profits and better results [Jonathan Haidt](#) and his colleagues at New York University applied [compassion research to a business setting](#). They found that when leaders were fair and self-sacrificing, their employees would experience elevation. As a consequence, they felt more loyal and committed and were more likely to act in a helpful and friendly way with other employees for no particular reason. In other words, if a manager is service-oriented and ethical, he is more likely to make his employees follow suit and to increase their commitment to him or her. Companies like Google entwine compassion in their culture.

**Consider**

the company who went well above and beyond contractual obligations for the employee who had cancer.

**Consider**

the US venture firm that donates half of its profits up front to philanthropic causes.

**Consider**

the manager who demonstrated a truly compassionate attitude during layoffs in his division.

## Why practice compassion as a leader?



People who practice compassion on a regular basis produce 100 percent more DHEA, which is a hormone that counteracts the aging process, and 23 percent less cortisol — the “stress hormone.”



And if that doesn't convince you, [read/watch this](#).

### Here are 4 ways to become a more compassionate leader:

1

Become more empathetic. [Simon Sinek](#) espouses empathy as being one of the most valuable leadership traits. One way to become more compassionate is to work on your empathy. Try to listen to others without judgement — one way to do this is to consciously turn off your “I agree/disagree” filter. Just listen to understand their perspective.

2

Become a better listener. Sometimes people need to talk it out without loads of advice. Compassion is quiet listening.

3

Be less judgemental. Be honest with yourself, are there groups you don't like or are uncomfortable with? Do you show compassion to one group more than another? Get into the practice of getting into the shoes of others. What do you think they're trying to achieve? What do you have in common? Many of us tune out when dealing with difficult people or groups. If you notice yourself doing this, this is your cue to suspend your judgement.

4

Start with self-compassion. The inner critic is alive and well in most high achieving senior executives. The irony is, the kinder we are to ourselves, the more compassionate a leader we can be with others.

Side note: Being compassionate is not “being soft”. A good leader will make tough decisions — restructures, closures, performance management, letting others down — you can still do these things compassionately.

HERE ARE

# 6 QUESTIONS

to journal on that get you to reflect on  
compassion and your leadership:

1

What would the impact be if I practiced more compassion in our business dealings? With our suppliers? With our customers? With my team?

2

What are some specific ways I could be a more compassionate leader?

3

How could our organisation start demonstrating more compassion? How would that benefit us?

4

What are my own attitudes towards compassion in the business world? What paradigms do I have that I can challenge?

5

What am I concerned might happen if I were to be more compassionate in my daily interactions with others? What could I do to address these concerns?

6

What small gesture of compassion could I make today at work?

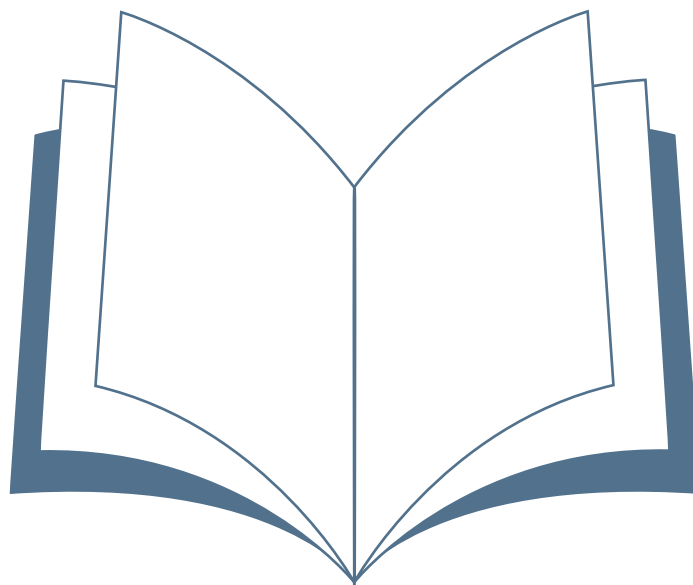


# 8 SELF-DISCIPLINE

**All the other cornerstones of leadership are ineffective if they remain understood but not practiced. This is where self discipline comes into play. Self-control, self-constraint, willpower - whatever you like to refer to it as, successful leaders have it in bucketloads. Delaying short-term gratification for long-term attainment of goals is the 8th cornerstone of great leadership.**

**Self-discipline is a close friend of character and ethics, which are also crucial for great leadership.**

**THE GOOD NEWS IS,  
SELF DISCIPLINE CAN BE TAUGHT**



# 5

## ways you can become a more self-disciplined leader:

### 1

**Regularly (daily if possible)** visualise yourself achieving your goal or demonstrating that desired leadership trait. Focus on the long-term benefits - imagine what it feels like. For example, it might be tempting in the moment to override that 15 minute 'thinking time' you've scheduled in your diary to accept a meeting you really don't want to go to or need to attend. But over the course of a year, that 15 minutes a day of non-interrupted reflective practice will pay off a millionfold, in terms of leadership effectiveness. Picture the effects of that daily 15 minute reflection time to tap into the reward point of your efforts.

### 2

**Become comfortable with discomfort.** Get used to feeling awkward or uncomfortable. Do these things because they are critical components of self-discipline. Self-discipline is necessary in order to get you to do the things you know will lead to better leadership. That means exposing yourself to uncomfortable activities. The more you do this, the more self-disciplined you will become.

### 3

**Start your day with the most difficult and important tasks** - the ones that will take you closer to your goals. Do the things you dislike first - a kind of 'pain first, then pleasure later' approach for leaders! Delay gratification.

### 4

**Regularly ask yourself**, "what are the **consequences of inaction** on this?" If you notice yourself continuously falling off the wagon in a particular area, return to the why - why is this important to me? What will it feel like if I fail?

### 5

**"Perseverance is failing 19 times and succeeding the 20th."** When it comes to cultivating self discipline, it's important to be self compassionate when you fall. Then get back on the trail. The 21 days to form a habit myth is just that - a myth. Estimates have it at more like 66 days. So don't give up if you slip up.

For more free leadership tips, subscribe to Suzi's internationally acclaimed blog -  
[The Leader's Digest.](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOUR



**Suzi McAlpine is a leadership development specialist based in New Zealand.**

**With a background as an international executive search consultant, practice leader, business owner and executive coach, Suzi's passion and skill lies in empowering others to become better leaders.**

"I believe people can find the best outcomes and make progress if you predominantly let them find their own solutions, rather than telling them what to do. The way I see it, most of the time we do have the answers ourselves, we just need the 'space' to reflect and to be asked the right questions. Coaching is such a powerful tool for positive change and professional support. It's one of the coolest jobs in the world to be a part of such a compelling development process."

A leadership coach, award-winning blogger and keynote speaker, Suzi works alongside CEOs, managers and executives, to facilitate clarity, direction and optimal performance in the areas people need it most.