A Five-Step Process To Help Leaders Make Intentional Choices

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Leadership

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A few months ago I spent a weekend with Dr. Marshall Goldsmith, one of the world’s top leadership thinkers and executive coaches, filming a documentary about his life. I was invited along with several executive coaches to be an advisor on the film that included participation in a workshop on “Best of Leadership Lessons.” One of the topics that Marshall discussed with an audience of about 100 people — global business leaders, entrepreneurs, leadership experts — was the **Wheel of Change** tool. It is a framework for behavioral change by making intentional choices about what we need to create, preserve, eliminate or accept in our lives. Recognizing first what we can actually change is key in applying this tool; all too often, people spend significant time worrying about topics they cannot change.
In my executive coaching practice, I see leaders who are constantly distracted and not always in the position to make intentional choices. They may be distracted by seemingly urgent yet not-that-important issues, or they get bogged down in the many details that come their way or they may ruminate over things they have no control over. Take, for instance, my client Susan (name changed to protect privacy), who was complaining repeatedly to me about her CEO’s hiring practice of recruiting senior executives from his previous company instead of promoting from within. She was dwelling on the perceived unfairness of that; it was becoming a key distraction and consuming her time and energy. This was neither good for Susan nor for her company.

For leaders to be at their best, they need to be intentional about what they say, what they do and how they use their time. The Wheel of Change is a powerful framework for making intentional choices. But how exactly can we help leaders cultivate choice behavior when they are stressed, triggered and distracted?

**Five Steps To Help Leaders Make Intentional Choices**

1. **Shift your focus internally to your attention.** When I coach leaders, I help them learn to pay attention to what they pay attention to. As human beings, our attention tends to wander. Thoughts come to us at a fast speed, and many of them are repetitive. Becoming aware of our thoughts is a prerequisite to our ability to manage them.

   To help leaders become aware of their thoughts, I create the space for them to pause, reflect and notice what’s going on. That helps the invisible to become visible. Paying attention on purpose is a skill set that is particularly important in the complex world we live in today. With so many external distractions and ambiguity around us, it is critical to manage our internal thoughts to become clear and focused.
2. **Label your thoughts and feelings.** Triggering situations often threaten our basic needs, such as needs for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness **(SCARF)**. When that happens, negative emotions arise, making it hard for us to think clearly and logically. Not managed, negative emotions lead to rumination, a mental rehearsal of what’s wrong.

Labeling emotions is a basic mindfulness tool to manage those emotions. According to UCLA’s Professor Matthew Lieberman’s fMRI brain scan research, labeling has a powerful effect on quieting the mental chatter.

I see that clearly when I coach leaders in stressful situations. As they label their emotions, it allows them to create some distance from those emotions and recover some control. This is consistent with the work of **Dr. Daniel Siegel**, who is credited with saying “Name It to Tame It.”

3. **Evaluate your underlying assumptions and interpretations.** We tend to rely more heavily on unchecked assumptions and narratives when we are chronically stressed, our needs are threatened or we feel emotionally charged. In contrast, when we pause to pay attention and quiet our mental chatter by labeling our thoughts and feelings, it opens the space for us to evaluate whether our judgments and conclusions are a product of unverified assumptions and distorted interpretations. Furthermore, when we ask ourselves what we know for sure to be true, we begin to explore the real facts without attaching a meaning to them. As a result, we become better at looking at our thinking critically and considering alternative possibilities.

4. **Set the intention for your mindset.** Ask yourself whether your thinking is productive and helping you versus holding you back. Consider which shifts you can make, and refocus by setting your intention to make even small shifts for a positive impact.
5. **Consider your choice options.** As you become less triggered and more focused in your thinking, you will also become more able to consider clearly all the response options available to you, taking into account what you want to do versus what you can actually do given constraints beyond your control. In other words, you are now ready to apply the Wheel of Change in your life.

Going back to my earlier example of Susan — instead of ruminating, what would be a more productive behavior for her? She can try to influence the CEO (the decision maker) to change his mind. If that doesn’t work, she can either accept his decision, or she can choose to leave the company. By creating the space for Susan to reflect on her own thinking, label her feelings, evaluate her assumptions and set the intention to conserve her energy, she eventually arrived at the conclusion that the topic was not worth dwelling on or fighting for. She chose to accept and make peace with her CEO’s hiring practices.

Some events are beyond our control. Yet, we still have the freedom to choose what we pay attention to and how we respond. Sound simple? Yes and no. This requires attention, intention and the discipline to follow through. Keeping focused attention and holding our emotions in check take skill and self-control. It is a mindfulness muscle we can strengthen with continuous practice to help us live intentional lives that matter.

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