



CREATIVE SPIRITS UNLEASHED
INSPIRING LEADERS TO SEE THE WORLD WITH NEW EYES

LEADING UNDER PRESSURE

A MENTAL MODEL FOR LEARNING

**IMPROVING
VS
PROVING**



INTRODUCTION

While facilitating a team working session, one of the team members sputtered out a question to me that everyone in the room was thinking but afraid to say. This team had been through the wringer, with major regulatory changes, stronger community oversight, increasing turnover and hugely difficult negotiation challenges. Several members of the team had just been promoted, and all were being asked to perform at a higher level than previously in their career. To top it off, our working session was designed to help them prepare for a comprehensive software project that would touch every part of the firm. Just as they were coming out of one set of challenges, they were facing even bigger unknowns than ever before. The pressure was palpable.

In many ways, these were the “*chosen*” ones who had worked hard to be here. They had proven their abilities and been given the nod to take the organization into its future. From the outside looking in, you would have expected this to be a confident, capable group of people, who were excited to be playing at this new level. And they were.

But this pressure might be too great for their skills and everyone knew it – they just weren’t saying it.

The question in the back of everyone’s mind had many facets:

What if I can’t do it? I’ve been in countless conversations with clients who wonder this – and almost never voice it, even to me in the context of a coaching engagement. This question has probably caused more sleepless nights than having a teenager miss curfew.

What if this is a bridge too far for my skills? Code speak for fear of failure. Another way people see this is something like “I should have quit while I was ahead!”

Am I up to this job? Yes, I can do the job from a skills perspective. I have what it takes – and it will take a lot out of me to do it. At this stage of my career, who needs this s\$3t?

Do I even want this job? We are supposed to want promotions and more status and more money. It’s hard to look at someone who has made you the new VP of Special Wonderful Things and tell them – nope – give it to someone else.

Here's the interesting thing – at least to me. The person who spoke the big question carefully worded it in corporate speak:

“Lynn, what is your guidance for me in showing that I am prepared to handle my new responsibilities?”

If he knew what everyone else was thinking, he might have spoken up sooner. He might have even voiced the real questions in the room. He was not alone. Everyone in the room started nodding their heads and they were very interested to hear ideas on how to prove themselves up to the challenge of their roles. They were relieved to be in a conversation that dealt with what was really going on rather than keeping up the façade.

When we try to prove ourselves, we worry incessantly about what people think. Our monkey mind starts chattering at us about whether we are good enough, worrying that people will see us for the frauds we are and all that nonsense about how

we will be homeless next week if we don't hurry up and prove we are worthy and awesome!

The coaching I gave them that day surprised everybody. What I said was something like this *“Stop trying to prove yourself and start learning. Assume you don't know everything and get very good at asking questions, being curious and checking out your assumptions. Allow yourself to not know. It will require you to be much more present to what is happening, you will have to listen more and worry less about what people think about you. You will have to build a set of inner tools that help you be less reactive and more creative. Learn to really know your value and what only you can bring to the table. In the end, you will be much more uncomfortable and you will be much more effective.”*

I was describing skills that this team had – when the pressure was moderated. They just weren't sure how to operate when so much was at stake.

What they really needed to do was raise their pressure threshold.

Things are moving more quickly in the business world than ever. We must learn to learn at a pace that makes our schooling look like a walk in the park.

Learning is THE skill for the times we are living in and learning under pressure, while performing in context of doing your job is an absolute necessity to stay relevant. Work IS school.

I have worked with hundreds of leaders in Corporate America over my 20-year coaching career. Whether they are trying to move on, move up, or move out, they all come face to face with the adage of *“The more things change, the more they stay the same.”* As the world moves ever faster, we must grow with it or get left behind. We can be better tomorrow than we were today if we face the forces that are keeping us stuck and the same. Those forces are both



external and internal. You can control and change some and others are like the weather. You learn to dress for it.

What I've found is this: People who operate from a proving mindset (Carol Dweck calls it a Fixed Mindset) keep writing the same story for their life over and over again. People who operate from an improving mindset (Growth Mindset) break free of their past and are able to truly reinvent themselves. As one client put it

"I am finally able to operate as a free person who trusts my own judgment. It's like I set my true spirit free."

In the rest of this article, I'm going to outline the important distinctions between a Proving mindset and an Improving mindset, how we get conditioned to prove ourselves, why it makes a difference, especially in the face of pressure and what you can do about it.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROVING MENTAL MODEL

The proving mindset puts the power in the hands of everyone else. **The improving mindset keeps the power in your hands.** We all operate with some of both mindsets, depending on the circumstances and the pressure you are facing. The more pressure you feel, the more likely you will operate from a proving mindset.

For the team in the story above, at the very time they needed to be able to learn at the highest level was the time they were most likely to default into a proving mode that made them play small.

Our ways of dealing with pressure start forming from the time we are born. We learn from watching our parents and other family members, teachers, peers, and other authority figures. We learn from our experiences and how we handle what happens to us. As we are growing up, we are like little scientists, studying the world and deciding who we are and how we fit in it. This becomes our "**conditioning**". We make up rules for how the world works.

We document those discoveries in our bodies and our ways of being in the world. That conditioning becomes our rules and patterns for dealing with the pressures of life. Feeling betrayed? You've got a rule for that. Not getting what you want? You've got a rule for that.

Some of our rules are super useful. That instinct to hit the brakes when something rolls in front of your car? Useful. That

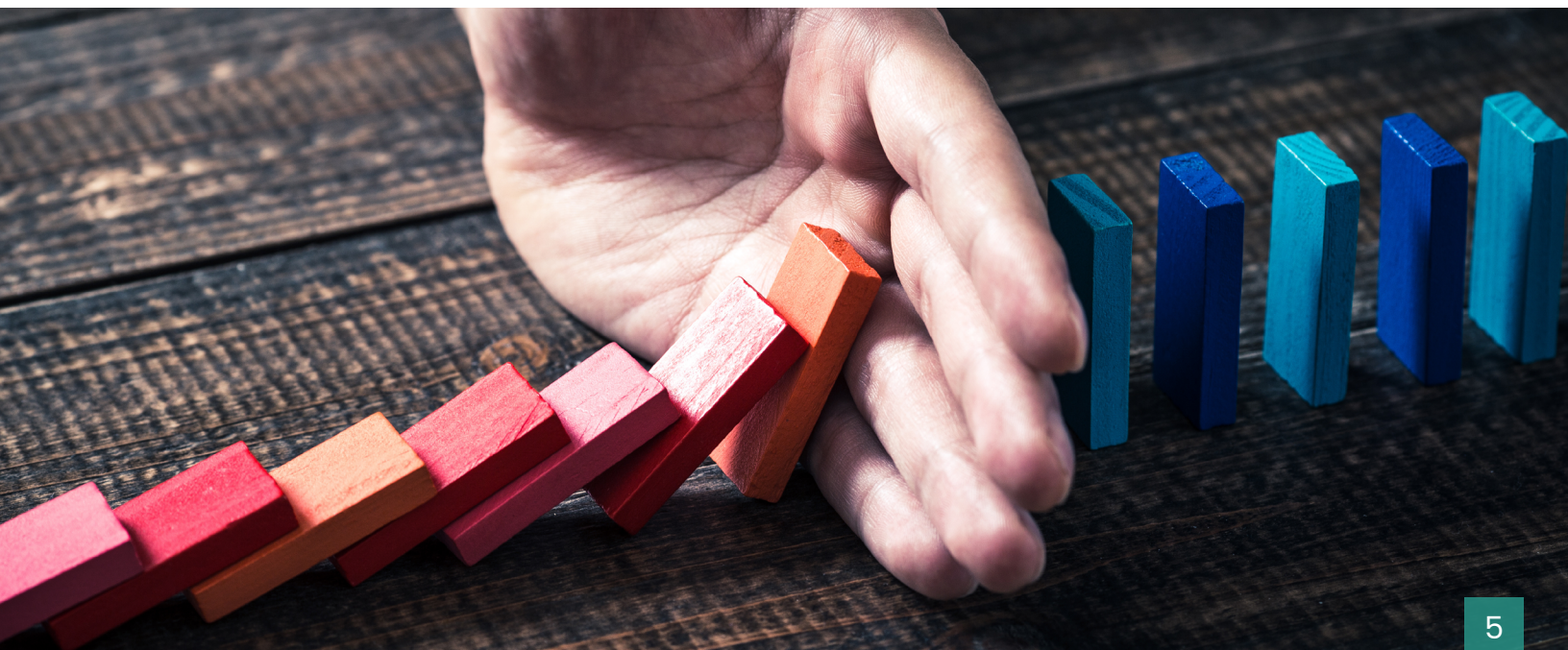
instinct to hit someone that just took something you wanted away? Not so great, especially in corporate life.

Your early years as a little scientist established a huge repertoire of rules that operate like automatic programs. They run in the background without any conscious thought or help from you – and they take energy, much like an app running in the background on your smartphone.

Think of your rules like the buttons you push to start an app on your phone. Rather than having to open the screen and find the icon, your buttons get pushed by the situation. Here are examples of the types of things that happen that will “*push your buttons*” and cause you to operate from your conditioning (instead of from the actual situation in front of you):

- **Not getting what you want**
- **Feeling betrayed**
- **Making a mistake**
- **Watching someone else be praised for something you did**
- **Getting embarrassed**
- **Feeling treated unfairly**
- **Getting “screwed” by a situation**
- **Wanting to please others**
- **Looking for approval**
- **Wanting to be right**
- **Fearing failure**
- **Feeling responsible for the fate of others**
- **Being told your work is not good**

Your unconscious rules run you, just as surely as if you were a robot running on the programming code of its inventor. Learning to operate creatively and consciously requires MUCH MORE than a simple decision to change.



A MENTAL MODEL FOR GROWTH

If you operate with a mental model of “*proving*” yourself as worthy of your leadership role, it sets up a cascade of actions that can lead decreased effectiveness. If you operate with an “*improving*” mental model, it sets off a cascade of actions more likely to create effectiveness. Some examples of the differences include:

| PROVING | IMPROVING |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal dialogue negative – beats self up | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal dialogue positive – encourages self |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Looks for approval | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seeks the inner feeling of accomplishment |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internally says “<i>look at me</i>” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internally says “<i>let me learn</i>” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wants attention | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wants effectiveness |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wonders “<i>am I enough?</i>” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wonders “<i>how can I be better at this?</i>” |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates stagnation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leads to growth |

We all have some of both mental models operating at the same time. Depending on the situation, you can be in a learning mode or you may go into the proving mode. What I’ve found is that the higher the pressure, the more like you are to fall back on old strategies from the past and operate from a proving mode.

“Picture your brain forming new connections as you meet the challenge and learn. Keep on going.”

— Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*

THE PRESSURE GAP



The “*pressure gap*” is the difference between your ability to handle a situation and the pressure created by that situation. It’s not based on your visible skills, but points to something less tangible. I call it your **Invisible Tools*** When pressure increases, we are more likely to need our Invisible Tools to bring forth our peak skills.

****Invisible Tools:** Invisible Tools refer to the mind/body/emotion tools that enable you to bring forward your best performance under pressure. Not having these tools can hinder your ability to operate at your peak skills. They include a set of practices, self-awareness skills and trainings we use in our Pivot Point to Freedom Coaching that help you*

calm your mind, stay grounded, transform negative thoughts into useful energy, discern the signal from the noise, feel your emotions without them running you, deal with surprises, stay in the moment and more. The more you free your Invisible Tools, the more pressure you can handle.

Here’s an illustration you can test right now. Find a 20-foot span where you can walk comfortably on flat ground. Go ahead. Walk for 20 feet in a straight line. Now, reverse direction and walk the same span as if this were a 12-inch-wide beam. You might have to put one foot in front of the other. Did you fall? Did you even feel wobbly? Probably not. The pressure created by the first task was low – you handle that level of pressure all day

long. The pressure created by the second task was also low, although slightly higher. Keeping your balance along a 12-inch beam is *slightly* more difficult than regular walking.

Now for the next task, you need to use your imagination. Imagine that you are going to walk across a balance beam, like the one gymnasts do flips on. Just imagine being able to walk across that. Chances are that the pressure created by the height of the beam will test your **Invisible Tools** if you really do it. Personally, just imagining it can create the sensation of falling in my body. For me, my pressure gap begins as soon as the beam is far enough off the floor that falling might hurt.

For the final task, again, use your imagination. In this case, imagine that you are going to walk across a 12-inch beam (3 times wider than a balance beam) that is several hundred feet off the ground. We have already established that you have the skills to walk a 12-inch beam without falling over – so this is well within your skills. Just envision yourself walking across that beam several

hundred feet above the Earth. Everything on the ground is very, very tiny – you wouldn't be able to recognize your own mother from this distance. You would be tempted to stare at your feet, even though that's not how you normally walk. But remember, the beam is 12 inches wide! You have the skills to do this all day long. I'm going to take a wild guess here and say that you would love to have something to hang on to while up there. Or better yet, that you would like to be roped in. Or if you are like me, you might say to heck with it – never going there.

How can a task that we do so easily on the ground become so difficult even a few feet off the ground? Clearly, the guys in the picture don't seem to be struggling with it. Just because we have the skills doesn't mean we have the *Invisible Tools* to exercise those skills in any circumstances. **This is the pressure gap. We rarely talk about it, much less notice it. The pressure gap is the difference between the pressure of the situation and our ability to exercise the best of our skills under pressure.**



THE PRESSURE GAP IN ACTION

Pressure is created by several things. In this case, the height of the beam creates pressure, because the consequences of screwing it up are so dire. Any time the consequences are high, the pressure will go up.

We are all aware of the pressure created by giving a big speech, like a TED talk or other big moments in our lives. Different situations create different pressures, depending on your personal threshold. For some, it's easier to give a big speech than to tell someone that they are losing their job. For others, the thought of giving a speech is completely paralyzing. But how about the regular pressures that seem to be increasing by the day? For example, your job title hasn't changed, but the speed and complexity of it might have grown dramatically. You might feel it's as if your job is growing out from under you.

Or what if you have lost your job and have to go into the job market? You have bills to pay and a lifestyle to support. Or how about telling your brand-new boss, the one you are not sure likes you, that you made a mistake? Much higher pressure than telling your best friend how you handled a mistake at work. That board presentation where you are delivering bad news? That co-worker than you need to confront for talking over you in meetings? That big decision that will establish the direction of your company for the next five years? All of these require you to use skills that you do

all day long (talking and making decisions – how hard can it be?)

What makes it difficult is the pressure created by the situation. If your **Invisible Tools** are not up for that type of pressure, you have a gap between what is needed from you and what you are able to do.

That's why it's critical to build your Invisible Tools. As we have said before, making the shift from a Proving mindset to an Improving mindset doesn't just happen with a simple decision to change. In my experience with myself and in working with clients, it takes much more.

Why? Because emotions lock the original programming into place. Until we access those emotions and then **"rewrite"** the program, we cannot change the pattern.

When we are under pressure, especially in high stakes situations, we have access to those emotions. Whether we like it or not, those old emotions rise to the surface, trying to help us by having us do what we have always done. After all, it worked before!

It's a great recipe for survival – and for staying the same. But what if you could use the pressure to rewrite the program?

It's possible – if you develop your Invisible Tools.

DEVELOPING YOUR INVISIBLE TOOLS UNDER PRESSURE

Invisible Tools are also often referred to as “*mental tools*.” But they are much more than what resides in your brain. Invisible Tools cover the three dimensions of thought, sensation and emotion. Working in the intersection of the three components allows you to develop your Invisible Tools under pressure, as you:

- **Calibrate the true message of the physical sensations (ie butterflies, tensing, falling sensation, etc.)**
- **Redirect your thoughts (ie choose productive thoughts)**
- **Experience the emotion – without acting on the emotion (ie tell a new story about what the emotion means)**

Pressure can come from anywhere, and as we saw before, pressure can take even your strongest skills offline. We have been conditioned and trained to respond to pressure by believing that we cannot make mistakes. We strive for perfection and beat ourselves up when we make even a tiny mistake. Then we over correct or get paralyzed. Then we beat ourselves up more and the cycle continues.

When we change the belief about mistakes, we can change our response to pressure.

Instead of beating ourselves up, we can get curious, start listening, hear the message and let

the situation inform our response rather than the past.

Again, those sound like relatively simple things to do. You know how to be curious. You have listened before. You have heard the message someone was sending. You have let the situation inform your response. You have probably exercised your Invisible Tools many times today.

Until the pressure gets high enough. Then survival mode kicks in. Survival mode makes us fear our mistakes instead of learning from them. Mistakes have a message. Here's mine: *“I’m screwed – and if I don’t quickly fix this, I won’t eat and then I’m dead.”*



It happens in a blink of an eye. You have almost no control over it.

And make no mistake about it (pun intended): when you make a mistake, your Internal Guidance System delivers a sensation of “**offness**”. The sensation, emotion and thoughts of “**offness**” don’t feel all that good. It’s a little like hearing a musical note chord that doesn’t sound right, but your ears long for the next chord, the one that resolves the conflict. I call this sensation the “**Froth.**” It’s like the bubbles in a carbonated drink that has been shaken up, or like the foam at the edge of the ocean.

The sensation of “**offness**” needs resolution. You have a program for that.

Under pressure, “**offness**” acts like a big button that gets pushed to run a program of whatever it is you do when you’ve made a mistake. You unconsciously reach for your rules. Beating yourself or someone else up is often part of the program. You may over or under react. You may realize that you are taking

actions that are not helpful, but you cannot seem to stop yourself.

There is another way to experience yourself into a different mode. This mode is a sensation of “**onness**”.

Since “**offness**” feels bad, you might be thinking – great! There’s a sensation that I can turn to that feels good. It will resolve the conflict and I will feel better. Well – yeah – sort of.

“**Onness**” is bringing your Invisible Tools to the situation and using them from moment to moment to resolve the conflict. When your Tools are online, you will be curious and patient, you will listen and hear what’s out there instead of the noise in your mind, you will let the situation tell you what to do. You won’t operate from your auto-pilot response to pressure.

When operating in “**onness**” you will be more in flow and operating from your true spirit. I can’t tell you if feels more comfortable. It doesn’t. I can tell you it’s more effective.

I find analogy helpful to understand abstract topics. And believe me, using your Invisible Tools feels very abstract.

Imagine for a minute that you wanted to learn to catch the balls that are thrown at you. Just for the sake of this illustration, picture a ball throwing machine, sending tennis balls, baseballs and softballs at you. The machine doesn’t have many settings, so the balls will come in three sizes and in three speeds, always from the same direction as the machine.

With a little bit of time and practice, you will get very good at catching those balls. When the machine is set on low and a softball shoots out of the machine, you would have an easy time catching it. When the machine is really cranked up and about to send a baseball your way, you might grab a glove to catch it.

Over time, you will know every signal those balls send. The sound of a tennis ball vs a baseball will land on skilled ears. Your fingers will close differently on a softball vs a baseball.

With enough practice, you will be so good at catching those balls that you will be able to do it unconsciously. You've come to know the pattern and developed your own pattern for success. Rarely would a fastball slip by you and smash your nose. Catching those balls will become an automatic skill. You will KNOW how to catch them each and every time.

Now imagine the machine is suddenly gone. The balls are still coming at you. Instead of three variations, the types of balls are infinite. Imagine everything from a giant blow up beach ball to a tiny ball as thin as a bubble machine might make. It's a world of millions of balls and millions of possibilities and combinations.

In our new world, not only are the types of balls infinite, but so are the speeds. They could be coming blindingly fast, or they may just float just out of reach. They may change speed in the middle of the path. In fact, they could even change their path.

The balls of this second world can come from anywhere at any

time. Because you never know where they are coming from --or when they are coming or how fast they are coming or even whether they will pop if you grab them too hard or hurt if you don't have a glove --you will respond to the balls in this world in a totally new way.

Your observation skills are keener

You pay attention with deeper curiosity

You gain a deeper awareness of the multiple variations present

You can distinguish the sounds of fast and hard or soft and floaty

You are patient for the slow ones and ready for the fast ones

You see, hear and feel the distinctions and respond accordingly

Your ability to tune in and calibrate your responses is enhanced

We live in both the new and old world of my ball analogy. The truth is that both worlds happen simultaneously. The difference between the two comes down to your mental model.

In the ball machine world, we operate from a Proving mindset. We learn to catch a finite set of balls and over time, because those are the only balls we see. After a while, it's not learning anymore. It's just doing what always worked before.

In the infinite ball world, we operate from an Improving mindset. We have to bring our Invisible Tools to bear in order to catch the balls. We become aware of that here is much more than meets the eye – and there always has been.

The pressure takes us out of our comfort zone and into a learning zone. Instead of catching balls the same way over and over again, we let each ball tell us how quickly to move, how much pressure to apply, whether or not we need a glove.

Instead of building tangible (ie visible) skills, we are learning to

apply those skills through our Invisible Tools under increasing pressure. Before we know it, we can catch any ball, walk on any beam or handle the toughest situation at work.

We can look at this analogy through the lens of work. A great example are those situations where you are in a high stakes meeting, like a big sales presentation, or a board meeting or a big negotiation. In these high-pressure settings, both performance and preparation matter. In the days (and maybe weeks) leading up to the meeting, you will work mostly on knowledge and data. It pays to know your stuff.

But once the meeting starts, you will want to bring your Invisible Tools online. Anything can happen. It's important that you bring a relaxed awareness so that you can be attuned to the mood and cues without letting the pressure take you off your game.

Most of us see an expression or hear a comment and think we know what it means. Under pressure, we tend to over or

under react. The beauty of developing your Invisible Tools is that they help you calibrate your response.

Every expression you see, every comment you hear, every nuance you notice is a **“ball”**. You will mostly pay attention what you have been conditioned to notice. You will miss all the other balls, not because there is anything wrong with you. It's just that you are trained for the ball machine of your life's training.

Here's the catch: you will feel successful because you are catching the balls you've been conditioned to catch. You were trained from birth – with all good intentions by your parents, teachers and everyone else in your life – to catch those balls. There's just one problem with

this point of view. Those are someone else's balls. They are not your balls.

They are the balls of everyone who wrote on the canvas of your life – with all good intentions.

You've also been conditioned to strive for perfection in your ball catching abilities. And, at some level, you know perfection is out of reach.

You see someone raise an eyebrow or hear them ask a tough question. You catch that hesitation in their voice at the moment you wanted full on praise. You send an email or text and only get crickets. You ask someone to complete a task and it's a week past the date you expected it. One of your associates makes a mistake.

All of these are “balls” and you have a rule for catching them. Your rules are like old programs. They work for the “balls” of the past. However, they are outdated in the world you are living in now. It's time to rewrite the Rules. It's time to practice reaching for your Tools.

CREATING THE IMPROVING MENTAL MODEL

There are a variety of methods to rewrite the old programs. All start with self-awareness and intention. Some take just a few minutes and others may take a lifetime. In all cases, you begin to develop your Invisible Tools, such as curiosity, listening, hearing, problem solving, patience, synthesis, insight, attention, and so forth. These are the tools that separate the good from the great and are so much more than just mental skills. They are fully embodied when you learn them.

Three Levels of “Buttons”

In order to understand the different methods building your Invisible Tools, you first need to understand the three levels of buttons:

1. Survival Mode: Everyone has ingrained wiring on how to handle threat. With that kind of pressure, our automatic systems kick in and put us into Fight, Flight or Freeze. *We did not create this programming – but we can definitely moderate its impact on our actions.*

2. System/Context (AKA “Kid”) Mode: Everyone has conditioning that is more or less common to all of us socialized in our education system and families. While there

may be variances due to culture, we understand the difference between a parent and a child, a teacher and a student, and other places where we get our power from positioning. The context often decides how we handle the pressure. *We learned this programming from the system in which we were raised and we can significantly moderate its impact on our actions.*

3. History Mode: Significant life experiences deeply establish your patterns for how you handle pressure and threat. The size of the experience is more or less irrelevant. The story you tell yourself about that experience in your younger years determines the way your pattern operates today. *We created this programming through our “little scientist” method and until it is brought into awareness and altered, it likely runs you today. You can significantly moderate the impact of your life events if you are willing to do the work.*



Pivot Point to Freedom

We change the patterns by going to the root of it and then pivoting from the old story to the new choice. **We call this the “Pivot Point to Freedom.”**

Below is a partial list of methods to shift you from operating reactively to creatively, in order of effectiveness and permanence.

- **Breathing methods**
- **Pocket questions**
- **Habit redirect**
- **Thought exercises/journaling exercises**
- **Practice**
- **Meditation**
- **Core transformation**
- **“Live” feedback with pattern interrupt**

The most effective methods for truly rewriting patterns and increasing your ability to operate at ever-higher levels of pressure involve having a second party, like a teacher, coach, or therapist who can ask tough questions, hold up a mirror and guide you through the method of choice. Many of the above methods require the second person, and those you try yourself are often limited by the echo chamber of your mind.

In our coaching work at Creative Spirits Unleashed, we work with the methods that create the greatest change given the time and resources that can be dedicated to it.

For more information on learning to unleash your true spirit, operate with discomfort and grow your Invisible Tools, sign up for The Coaching Digest.

If you don't have the patience to read dozens of articles and want to know more about closing your pressure gap and building your invisible tools, contact Lynn Carnes at lynn@lynncarnes.com to set up a consultation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm **Lynn Carnes**. My official title is Executive Coach, focusing deeply on leadership. My unofficial title is professional **“Unleasher.”** After 20+ years in Corporate America, I decided to wrap my work around my life and started my own leadership consulting firm. I have worked with thousands of senior leaders across all types of industries. The leaders who work with me reclaim their lives while becoming a force to be reckoned with. In working with these leaders over the years, I've learned something very, very important: You can have a successful career AND a great life!



Lynn Carnes