

HOW LEARNING TO LEAD LIGHTLY WILL TRANSFORM YOUR MINDSET, PERFORMANCE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Jody Michael

The day I lost everything was not a good day.

In the late summer of 1987, I was 29 years old and one of the first female commodities traders on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. A colleague and I had the audacity to begin building an all-female trading company, Warriors Options Group. We were all in emotionally and financially. Just a few months after we launched, just as we were beginning to trust our growing success, the stock market crashed.

In a matter of hours, we lost everything—more than everything. Thanks to our leveraged positions, we were \$50,000 in debt. And, like so many other traders that day, I found myself instantly out of a job. It was not a good day by any typical measure.

At least, that was how it seemed in the moment. I faced a pivotal choice. I could spiral into deep anxiety, despair, shame, and fear of what the future might bring. Or I could choose to

create something different and alter the course of what would happen next. At this fork in the road of my career and life, I could direct my own experience of these external events. I could be completely devastated—as my business partner and many other traders were. Or, I could be deeply, powerfully energized and focused on creating a different path.

I chose the latter.

In fact, while the day I lost everything was a profound, life-changing experience, it ultimately turned out to be a very good day for me.

And Now, Back to You

You are also, in this exact moment, at your own fork in the road when it comes to your leadership and performance. It's not because you have just received a promotion or prestigious new assignment. It's not that you landed your dream job. Nor is it because a corporate reorganization or acquisition has just pulled the career carpet out from underneath you.

You face this fork simply because you are a leader who has taken responsibility for achieving significant results. Every minute you are not asleep presents you with a decision point:

- What kind of leader are you going to be right now?
- How are you going to align yourself internally right now with what you are trying to achieve?
- What are you going to choose to create right now within yourself and, by extension, within your organization?

What kind of leader are you going to be right now?

*Your options are
deceptively simple.*

Asking these questions should not be a once-a-year performance review exercise. You need to answer these questions every single day. The strongest driver of results—in your leadership, your team, and your organization—is what you choose to think and feel in each moment.

There is an ever-present fork in your leadership road.

What Will You Choose?

Your options are deceptively simple.

The first is to allow your brain to run on autopilot as it rapidly executes your well-worn patterns of thought, mood, and behavior. That's the default path that we all take most of the time without any awareness of it. And we don't think of it as a choice—if we even think about it at all. That default approach can be fine, or good enough. After all, it has gotten you to this point in your life and career. But it locks you into your current ways of thinking. Not only does that make growth difficult, it virtually guarantees that the things that trigger emotional distress for you today will continue to do so tomorrow and the next day, and the next, and the next, keeping you from being the best you can be.

But the other option—always available to you—is much more revolutionary and transformative. You can pause. You can think. And then you can choose to follow a different and better path, when applicable. Your ability to leverage these thousands of choice points throughout each day—to sustainably create high performance no matter what may be going on—is what I call “mental fitness.” Mental fitness increases your capacity, impact, and influence as a leader.

Leadership is about impact and influence. Both grow when you increase your mental fitness.

A First Look at Mental Fitness™

You've likely heard politicians or the news media use the term "mental fitness" to indicate a requisite level of cognitive capability. However, I define it by focusing on optimized performance.

Here's my definition:

Mental fitness™ is your measurable ability to engage constructively in life and work every day, no matter what stressors you encounter. It is your capacity to consistently respond to challenges with optimal performance in the moment and minimal recovery time afterward.

Mental fitness starts with the recognition that the real drivers of your leadership results are the hidden habits of your mind—the powerful, unseen, and entrenched perspectives you hold about yourself, others, and your world. These patterns of thoughts and beliefs (formed by your many experiences in life), whether you are conscious of them or not, drive you to behave in certain habitual ways. And that leads you to produce certain results—for better or for worse.

Mental fitness is most critical and transformative whenever you feel stressed, frustrated, or hindered in any way by your environment or by the people around you. In these situations, you inadvertently become triggered, and you default to behaviors that, to say it kindly, may not be optimal.

What You Need to Know About: Triggers

When you have an intensely negative emotional reaction to something, real or perceived, you have been "emotionally triggered." This means that you are in a strong state of fight or flight. The situation, event, or conversation that you are reacting to is the "trigger."

There is usually a pattern to what will trigger a reaction in any given person. Some people get triggered when they feel that their performance is being criticized. Others get triggered if they feel that they have been misunderstood. For some, it's about perceived encroachment on their turf and possible loss of power. And yet others will get triggered when their integrity is attacked. The nature of a trigger depends on an individual's values, how they see themselves, and their strongest beliefs and biggest fears. Everyone is different.

When you're triggered, your leadership performance suffers because your brain is running an internal script rather than clearly assessing and optimally responding to whatever is actually happening.

Many of the pain points that you, your team, and your organization repeatedly have to work through have actually been caused by leaders acting in a triggered state. And when you in turn get triggered, you also inadvertently generate pain for others and your organization. It's a vicious cycle.

Mental fitness will help you to avoid much of the pain.

With mental fitness, you can keep yourself out of unproductive emotional states so that you are leading, as much as possible, from a position of optimal performance—so you can lead lightly. You do this by very rapidly applying a set of learned skills and choices—the five "muscles" of mental fitness—to change your perceptions and internal reactions:

1. Choose Personal Accountability. When I say you need to choose personal accountability, I'm not talking about everyday actions like showing up for work on time or taking your son to baseball practice, although that is certainly part of it. I'm talking about a

*You own all your
mood states.*

Most of us think that our beliefs are truth.

radical level of accountability. You stop blaming other people and/or circumstances for how you feel or what has happened to you. You own *all* your thoughts. You own *all* your mood states. You own *all* your behaviors (including avoidance or non-behavior). And, you fully own your part in your results, even while recognizing other potential contributions to what has unfolded. In other words, with mental fitness, you own exactly what's yours and you hold others to own what's theirs.

2. Choose Helpful Beliefs over Impeding Beliefs

Most of us think that our beliefs are truth. But “my beliefs” are “the world according to me,” and your beliefs are “the world according to you.” Beliefs are a core part of our perceptual lens and thus very powerful in shaping our everyday experiences. But they are not facts. Beliefs are actually a set of assumptions, and as such we can experiment with them: We can probe them, challenge them, and try on new ones. In fact, beliefs are actually a *choice*.

There are all kinds of perceptual lenses, and every person uses different lenses at different times. That said, each of us tends to use, and overuse, our own few personal favorites. For example, when someone has a **competitive lens**, they will relate to almost any situation as though it is a competition, whether or not any such competition exists. Someone with a **binary lens**, something I see a lot in my coaching, will relate to most situations as if there is only one right answer, and everything and everyone else is wrong. There is no gray area, middle ground, or flexibility.

Typically, we each have a few favorites that we apply no matter what the context. Sometimes they are accurate

in a given situation, and inaccurate in another. But the bigger point is that you see what your lens shows you.

If you habitually default to the same lens all of the time, in every situation, then you are not perceiving the actual circumstances and environment around you. You are seeing only what your lens shows you. You are making assumptions instead of gleaning useful data that would more constructively guide your choices and actions.

You can't be human and be without any lenses, but you can be aware of your lens, as well as be intentional about choosing an appropriate lens for any given situation. There is a place for a competitive lens and a collaborative lens, for a problems lens and an opportunity lens, and so on. What does not serve us is to blindly and automatically apply one lens across the board no matter what is actually happening.

3. Accurately Self-Assess Your Internal State

Your internal state is the running commentary in your head—your thoughts. It's also the moods and the emotions you feel and the physical sensations that you have, like a knot in your stomach. Self-assessing your internal state means that at any given moment you can observe yourself and articulate what you find. With mental fitness, you can say, for example, that you are experiencing a combination of disappointment, anger and anxiety, and a pounding headache. You can further identify the voice of your inner critic screaming: “You really screwed this one up big-time! See, you really *are* a fraud!”

4. Hold Multiple, Disparate Perspectives

With mental fitness, we replace either/or thinking with both/and. We acknowledge that two seemingly contradictory things can both be true at the same time. For example, we could be disappointed that our bid on a much-desired house was not accepted, *and* relieved because it would have been a somewhat risky financial stretch. We could be angry to learn that a loved one drove under the influence of alcohol, *and* also grateful that this time he arrived home safely and harmed no one. We move beyond the simplicity of right/wrong, black/white, and either/or. We develop the skill of suspending judgment and embracing the complexity of gray and the potential of the yet-to-be-known.

5. Modulate Your Own Physiology

We typically underestimate the immense power we have over our physical state when we are distressed or upset in some way and to alter it in general. The fact is we can influence our own nervous systems. On the one hand, unhelpfully, we can easily intensify a catabolic state, such as “getting wound up.” But helpfully, we can also calm ourselves, shifting from that catabolic to an anabolic state.

There are many techniques that are wildly effective—such as breathing exercises, biofeedback, and muscle relaxation—that you can use to quickly change your physical state when you are triggered or threatened. You’ll be surprised at how quickly you can learn and apply them.

As you apply these five muscles, you intentionally change your perceptions and internal reactions. With these choices, you seek to see yourself and your environment differently. You break yourself away from those reflexive, automatic reactions that limit potential and possibility in your leadership. With practice, you’ll be able to optimize your performance and consistently create new, much better leadership results.

If you develop your five muscles of mental fitness you are going to feel lighter. You will feel more in control. You will lead yourself and others lightly. Many of the negative interactions, feelings, and emotions you are currently experiencing will soften and eventually go away. Rather than getting triggered, you won’t take things personally; you’ll counter challenges with adaptability and curiosity rather than defensiveness.

A Proven Approach to Improvement

It’s normal to believe that everything around you—circumstances, events, and other people—create the conditions for your leadership performance. For example, you thrive in the “right” environment. You’re miserable in a “toxic” environment, and your hands are tied when your direct reports “just don’t get it.” With mental fitness, you let go of the impeding belief that everything and everyone else is the main problem.

You come to your leadership role with a different mindset, deeply understanding that when you want different results—for yourself, your team, or your organization—you have to make changes at the root. That means that change begins with you.

The pain that most leaders feel deeply hinders business performance, draining and depleting both leaders and employees. I have had a closer look at the interpersonal and organizational dynamics of these pain points during my past 25-plus years as an executive coach to C-level and senior leaders in fast-moving, highly competitive companies. As a neutral and trusted third party, sworn to confidentiality, I have observed and interacted with top corporate leaders in a very unique, intimate way. These conversations have given me a real sense of the organizational pain and pain points—and their impact—brought about by different types of leaders and their leadership styles.

Here’s how these interactions go: I often work with an entire executive team at one time. As I am taken into their confidence as their individual coach, it is not uncommon for several different executives, individually, to tell me about a single, troubling situation in which they were all involved, one that was detrimental to their organization. This puts me in the rare position to hear, for example, three completely different perspectives, told in three vastly different emotional tones, resulting in wildly different versions of the same story that is causing pain for either them, their organization, or both.

A Lack of Mental Fitness

Leadership pain points drastically hinder company performance. That is the unarguable conclusion I have come to after decades of working with executives. The problem is far more prevalent and impactful than shareholders and investors could ever possibly imagine. Sometimes the order of magnitude is literally billions of dollars, played out over a period of several years. It is easy to see why the cost is so high when you see the kinds of situations my clients typically face:

- Machiavellian power moves, driven by a leader’s distrust or self-interest rather than what’s in the best interest of the organization

- Costly bottlenecks when leaders, stuck in their own discomfort, drag their feet on making decisions; also known as analysis paralysis, risk avoidance, or passive-aggressive resistance
- Disengagement of direct reports (or the workforce at large), driven by leaders who berate and reprimand, emphasizing what's wrong over what's right, and/or who must always show up as the smartest person in the room
- Low morale and impaired productivity arising from a pervasive organizational watch-your-back culture of defensiveness and blame
- High turnover and loss of talent and human capital when the organization's best achievers choose to opt out of the negative relationships and cultures driven by a high-level leader's destructive values and behaviors

Far too much leadership energy gets wasted as people strategize to work around these problems. This interpersonal and institutional friction creates tremendous misalignment and inefficiencies, hindering organizations from moving forward.

If one to three out of 20 top leaders in an organization (and that's a typical number, from what I've observed) exhibit the kinds of detrimental behaviors listed above, then that entire group of twenty wastes time and energy dealing with the resulting pain. This is energy that both individuals and organizations cannot afford to waste; it's needed for building and driving the enterprise. And the waste we are talking about is not just at the top—the inefficiency, damage, and disengagement ripple out in all directions, across and down all functions of the organization.

You Are Good, Mental Fitness Can Make You Great

My executive coaching clients have shown, again and again, that developing mental fitness measurably reduces individual and organizational pain points and optimizes performance. It also becomes much easier to create alignment and move faster. The beneficial results of all this are seen in financial metrics such as reduced

or avoided operational expenses, reduced or avoided risk exposure, increased sales, and the expansion of the business through innovation in products and services.

For some people, increasing their mental fitness is about being the best leader they can be. For others, it is about maximizing organizational performance. And for others still, it is more akin to a personal spiritual path. The commonality in those three objectives is transformation.

As you look at the world in a new way you will stop creating pain; you will start creating performance. You'll breathe new life into your leadership, inspire others, and create the best possible outcomes in a world that very much needs you to be your best possible self.

© 2022 The Authors. *Leader to Leader* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of University of Pittsburgh.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



*Jody Michael is the author of **Leading Lightly: Lower Your Stress, Think with Clarity, and Lead with Ease** (Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2022). She is CEO of Jody Michael Associates, a coaching company specializing in executive coaching, leadership development, and career coaching. She is recognized as one of the top 4% of coaches worldwide and is an internationally credentialed Master Certified Coach, Board Certified Coach, University of Chicago trained psychotherapist, and Licensed Clinical Social Worker. <https://www.jodymichael.com/>*