



The Six Attributes of a Leadership Mindset

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Joe Britto



Crown House Publishing Limited
www.crownhouse.co.uk

First published by
Crown House Publishing
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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First published 2019.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN: 978-178583406-6

Mobi ISBN: 978-178583430-1

ePub ISBN: 978-178583431-8

ePDF ISBN: 978-178583432-5

LCCN 2019937537

Printed and bound in the UK by Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

For Ruth. Friend. Confidante. Teacher.

Foreword by Gill White

History has given us many leaders who have no power, no team, no title, no money – nothing. Yet they motivate thousands to follow them, and to change laws, beliefs, countries, and governments. The list is long: Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mother Teresa, among many others. What do these leaders possess that drives them to such greatness, and how do we all get some of it?

In this book Joe Britto helps us to understand that leadership is a mindset. It's not a title, a role, a rite of passage, or something that's bestowed or inherited. Leadership is a way of behaving and a way of thinking. It's a way of being in the world. Once we understand this, we can lead from anywhere – in any situation. Benjamin Zander, in *The Art of Possibility*, teaches us that an orchestra needs a "leader in every chair", because a lack of ownership for one's own notes, and not holding other musicians to account, could lead to the entire piece being played off key.¹

Joe helps us to practise and build a mindset that enables us to lead better. But reader be warned: just reading this book will not turn us into awesome leaders. This takes work, practice, effort, and consistent application. And like anything worth having, it will take time and we will fail along the way. An old boss of mine used to say, "Failure is glorious because it means you were reaching further than you ever have before. And it comes with a beautiful jewel – a new pearl of wisdom." So, as you'll hear Joe say soon, treat this book as a manual: dip in, try it out, and explore what the six attributes mean for you both in your professional and personal life.

Before you continue with the book and follow Joe's explanation of the six attributes, a word on what those attributes have come to mean to me.

Mindfulness is a particular passion of mine. As Joe suggests, mindfulness is effective in "slowing down the world" – and it's true. I began to study transcendental meditation in 2008 and it was transformational for me; I

¹ Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2002 [2000]).

had more time in my life than I had dreamed was possible. I know it's not easy to find the time to devote to gaining mindfulness, but I've found that if we do, we feel more in control, calmer, and less anxious about everything.

I love the fact that Joe emphasizes the "genuine" in genuine curiosity, the kind of curiosity we had as kids: not seeking information to necessarily gain something, just being "genuinely curious". As parents, how many of us have been driven to the edge by our children's charming yet insatiable curiosity? "Why is the sky blue?" "Why is the sea green here and blue there?" Why, why, why ...? Somewhere in the process of growing up we can lose the innate desire to seek to understand for no other reason than because it's fascinating.

Thinking differently, flexibly, isn't easy – but it is a choice. This is where flexibility of mind comes in. So if mindfulness helps us to wake up and become conscious, and genuine curiosity leads to interesting answers, it's flexibility of mind that helps us to creatively combine ideas into a bigger one.

I read the chapter on resilience first because I've always been worried that I won't have what it takes when my mettle is truly tested. I once went on a week-long fitness bootcamp, and on the third day we were running around a field pretending that we were in a war zone: saving imagined victims and hauling them to safety. My "victim" was a baby, and on the third round of the course I couldn't breathe any longer. But I kept going. When we focus on what we truly believe is important, we often find we are capable of much, much more than we might at first think.

The chapter on creating leaders reminded me of the advertising tycoon David Ogilvy, who used to send every new office manager a Russian doll with a note inside that read, "If each of us hires people who are smaller than we are, we shall become a company of dwarfs. But if each of us hires people who are bigger than we are, we shall become a company of giants."² As Joe says, great leaders "know that those they lead will come up with bigger and better ideas than they ever could. And they understand that that's a good thing."

2 David Ogilvy, *Ogilvy on Advertising* (London: Prion Books, 2007 [1983]), p. 47.

My favourite chapter is the one on enterprise thinking. Thinking for the whole company and setting personal interests aside is not easy. Perhaps because enterprise thinking can seem counterintuitive it is one of the toughest of all the attributes. The challenge is to understand and not just know the old adage *a rising tide raises all boats*. That's possible when we feel the connection to our business that Joe talks about. If we, as leaders, can take the step toward enterprise thinking, we can then help our teams feel connected too.

It's my sincere hope that, as you turn the pages, you'll find as much to gain from the insights Joe has shared in this inspiring manual for leadership and life as I did. Enjoy the ride.

**Gill White, Director of Business and Markets Development,
Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)**

Preface

An Insight

2009 wasn't a good year for me. While the rest of world was reeling from one of the biggest financial meltdowns in recent history, I was dealing with a meltdown of my own. I'd been a psychological coach, trainer, and management consultant for nine years by then, and I was in the middle of a nervous breakdown. It wasn't a lot of fun – in fact, it's not something you'd wish on your worst enemy – but for me it was a turning point.

I re-evaluated everything in my life and one of those things was what I was doing professionally. You know that old adage *if you give a person a hammer, every problem they come across is a nail*? Well, I saw clearly how that applied to training and management consulting and, in doing so, I began to lose faith in the ability of both to create long-term change. I began to lose faith for the simple reason that training gives people hammers in the form of techniques, and although those hammers may work in some instances – when your problem is a proverbial nail – they aren't flexible enough to work beyond the situation they're designed for. I lost faith in consulting because it's mostly about imposing a business model on an organization. That works for the immediate problem, or for as long as the consultant's there, but tends to slip when the consultant goes or the circumstances change.

So I stopped working for a while and tried to find an approach that would create long-term change. One that would be flexible enough to address not just current challenges but problems coming down the road – ones my clients couldn't even see yet.

What I did during that time was think. A lot. I thought about what clients really want. About why, in a multibillion-dollar training and consulting industry, clients are willing to accept that their investment won't create long-term change.

I began to think about successful change in all its forms. What makes some people successfully quit smoking, get fit, or pivot quickly into a new career? I wondered what happens before a business can create a culture change, or before a senior team can align around a common strategy.

So there I am in the middle of a nervous breakdown, thinking that this was the worst thing that ever happened to me, cursing the circumstances that led me to it, and wondering how to make what I did for a living work better. In case you're wondering, the irony did elude me at the time. But eventually I saw it: the question I was asking of my work was the answer I needed in my personal life. I saw clearly that before I could get out of the breakdown, I needed to think differently. The thought was as simple as it was obvious: that before we can make any change – personal, professional, or organizational – we need to think differently about the challenge we're facing.

Enter leadership mindset stage left.

Mindset because before anything can change, we need to think differently. *Leadership* because before something can change, we need to be willing to take personal responsibility for making that change happen. Because mindset can be a nebulous concept, I worked to identify the attributes of a leadership mindset – the qualities and behaviours that embody this way of thinking. Looked at like that, solving personal or professional challenges becomes a two-step process:

- 1 Grow the six attributes of a leadership mindset.
- 2 Apply that shift in thinking to the challenge you're facing.

By doing that, we not only develop a new way of thinking; when we apply the six attributes to our challenges, we come up with revolutionarily different solutions because we see different possibilities in those challenges.

It would be disingenuous of me to say that it's easy to embed the six attributes. It happens with effort and practice over time. For

some it may be an easy shift to make, for others it may require a 180-degree change in perspective.

The point of this book is to share the ideas that make up the six attributes: what they are, how they work, and how to use them to grow our own leadership mindset. I've developed these ideas through observations of the people and businesses I've worked with. I've used this approach in the consulting work I do, helping leaders shift their thinking to address the challenges in their teams or businesses. But because I started thinking about the approach in the middle of a personal breakdown, I'm also offering it as a way to navigate through life. Maybe that's not so different. After all, businesses are run by people.

The promise of the six attributes is that we can create real, meaningful, and self-sustainable change. But the benefits don't end there. Perhaps the real gift of the six attributes is that we can all grow our mindsets. Do that, and as we lead our way through life, we make a difference to ourselves and to the lives we touch.

My hope is that this becomes a handbook of sorts. In the following pages I'll begin by defining a leadership mindset and looking at some of the challenges to living the six attributes. From there I'll go over the behaviours of each attribute and offer a few challenges you can use to grow them. That's what I mean about it being a handbook: it doesn't have to be read in order. Each chapter explores a different attribute. Begin with the one that most interests you, try out the challenges and develop that attribute in yourself for a while. When you feel you're making headway, pick another one. Read that chapter and give those challenges a go.

There's no rush. Like I said, the six attributes build with effort and practice over time. This book will still be here, so feel free to take it at your own pace.

Take care,

j.

Acknowledgements

Books aren't a one-person endeavour. I'm grateful for the help of the whole team at Crown House Publishing, especially David and Karen, without whom this book wouldn't be what it is. Tom did a great job on the cover, and Louise's edits gave the book a much-needed polish. Daniel's proofreading made everyone's reading experience much better. Thanks also to Rosalie for her marketing prowess.

A big thanks to Ruth, Murray, and Chad for reading early drafts and for the suggestions that followed.

These ideas were honed in conversations with the team at Innate Leaders – Sarah, Louise, Gizem, and Katherine, you guys rock. And of course, Ruth.

Thanks to Amy – love comes in many shapes. And to my family for their support.



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Introduction: On Mindset

What Does Mindset Have to Do with Leadership?

The Toquaht First Nation of British Columbia, Canada, have a word for the traditional territory overseen by their Chief: *Hahulthi*. It includes the land, the ocean, the people, and everything living and non-living that exists within that territory. Historically, the Chief would have seen clearly that, on behalf of his people, his responsibility was to care for his *Hahulthi* for generations to come.

Armed with a version of leadership like that, the Chief had a clear purpose and goal. His mindset was that of a steward. And every decision he made took place against the backdrop of the thousands of people who would come after him.

He thought that way not because he was an enlightened individual – although who knows, maybe he was. I'd suggest he thought that way because of the cultural environment he grew up within. The Chief grew up in a place which taught him to see his role as a caretaker of the land, people, and things in his territory.

What this points to is the importance of how we come to view leadership, because how and what we learn about leadership determines how we lead when it comes to our turn.

When I'm in session with a group of leaders, we begin by defining a leadership mindset. I often offer them the chance to do that by representing their ideas as a piece of art. It's a tough ask because it can be uncomfortable for some. And that's the point. Often a leadership mindset means being willing to operate on the edge of our comfort zone. So the challenge is a chance to live the attributes of a leadership mindset while defining a leadership mindset.

After that work of art is made, we'll have a go at defining what we mean in words. Somewhere in that conversation I'll offer a definition that's something like this:

A leadership mindset is a way of looking at the world borne out of our experiences that leads to a set of behaviours.

That's what the Chief has. In his case, that world view is informed by his culture and history. For us, it can be informed by our personal experiences growing up, our environment as we make our way through life, or the examples of leadership we've seen in our jobs over the years. Either way, just like the Toquaht Chiefs, our ideas of leadership are forged in the crucible of environment and experience.

If we're lucky, we'll have had positive experiences of leadership; but it's just as likely that our leadership world view is informed by domineering leaders who want everything done their way, head-strong leaders who believe that because they're the leader they're always right and need to be seen as such, or well-intentioned leaders who know no other way to lead than by telling people what to do. These behaviours are all attributes of something, but not of a leadership mindset.

The useful thing about the above definition is that from it we can isolate the specific attributes that demonstrate a leadership mindset. Think about it like this: if someone lived a leadership

mindset, there are certain qualities they'd likely have. And here they are:

- ◆ Mindfulness
- ◆ Genuine curiosity
- ◆ Flexibility of mind
- ◆ Resilience
- ◆ Creating leaders
- ◆ Enterprise thinking

It's easy to look at these attributes and see them as separate qualities. That might lead us to approach each attribute as a task to complete. But if we did that we'd be missing the point. The attributes aren't a skill, they're a way of thinking. And the attributes aren't tasks to tick off a list, they're behaviours that emerge from a way of looking at the world – from a leadership mindset, you might say. In fact, each attribute leads to certain behaviours. We'll focus on those in the next chapters, but, for now, the point is a simple one: when we're talking about a leadership mindset, we're talking about a way of leading that's informed by our world view.

We hold that world view not because we learnt it in a book (even this one), but because we've lived the experiences that gave rise to it. These experiences can be anything from the difficult times we've gone through, or the great times we've had. What matters is that the experience presents us with a choice about who we are, what we want to be in life, and – for us in this context – what that means for how we lead.

If we haven't had the chance to live the kinds of experiences that point toward the six attributes, it doesn't mean all's lost. If we want to lead from a different world view, it means finding the courage to put ourselves into situations where we can experience a different way of looking at the world. Because of that shift in

perspective, we begin living the six attributes, and that means a leadership mindset emerges.

The Foundation of Leadership

Perhaps now's a good time to think about where the six attributes fit into that familiar question: are leaders born or are they made? There are camps on both sides, each defending their point of view. Those who feel leaders are born stress that learning how to lead is not only impossible but pointless. Instead, we should make the most of the qualities we have – let ourselves off the hook for not leading because, well, if you don't have it, you don't have it.

And then there's the other camp. It's this camp that churns out book after book dissecting the skill of leadership and offering an eager audience the distilled wisdom on how to lead. This camp isn't content to line our shelves with books; they've also developed skills-based courses that reveal the hard skills of leaders and package them into systems and processes. In their most lucid moments they develop metrics for how to measure the skills they've identified so that their followers can chart their leadership progress.

As you may have guessed by now, I don't side with either camp – for the simple reason that any debate that's been going for as long as that one is self-evidently unwinnable. Instead, I'd suggest there is another way to think about the nature versus nurture argument. What about if both the leaders-are-born and the leaders-are-made camps are built on the common ground of mindset? What I mean by that is, if we feel that leaders are born, then we're saying they have some special quality that allows them to lead. A quality, that I'd say, grew the six attributes and was honed by the environment and experiences the individual has lived through.

If we're saying that leadership is a skill we can learn, then I'd suggest we can learn all sorts of techniques – but if we don't have the attitude to go with it, our skills and techniques become formulaic and that rarely breeds a following.

Like I said earlier, not all of us have had the experiences that may cultivate the six attributes. Not all leaders have had those experiences. But that doesn't mean we can't all develop them. Whether we do comes down to the answers to two very simple questions:

- 1 Am I willing to challenge my world view – to see its limits, and allow it to be stretched?
- 2 Am I willing to reshape my world view and allow that perspective to change the way I behave?

These are personal decisions, and if you answer in the affirmative you'll stand out. Leaders living the six attributes encourage people to be the best they can be. They speak to the best in people and empower them to be their best. The six attributes help people to think; not like the leader, but for themselves. They know that those they lead will come up with bigger and better ideas than they ever could. And they understand that's a good thing.

That's the kind of standing out you can expect when you live the six attributes. And, no, it isn't easy. Where does the courage to stand out come from? Where does the ability to bring others together come from? What's the mysterious quality that allows a leader to take charge of a situation, make a decision, or stand in opposition?

Whatever that quality is, it's my premise that it's borne out of the decisions a person makes. After all, it's a choice to stand out, to bring others together, and to lead. So that quality isn't really mysterious: it takes an initial decision and an ongoing commitment.

That quality isn't demonstrated by answering "yes" to these two questions once – after all, the six attributes are a journey not a destination – but rather by answering "yes" to challenging our world view consistently over time, even when we think we're right (but we'll get to that).

And that's why growing the six attributes is a personal decision. It's the decision we make sitting in a meeting when the topic on the table makes no sense to us. Do we go along, or do we decide to stand out and say we don't understand? What about when it's clear to us that a plan isn't going to work? Do we stand by and watch it fail or do we decide to speak up?

Of course, making that decision begins with the view we take of ourselves and of our abilities. If we're positive about ourselves, and confident in our abilities, we're more likely to speak out than if we're not. One way to think of that is to ask ourselves, "How can we become confident if we're not?" That isn't a road I'm walking down here because there are lots of other books on the subject, and also because I think it's a red herring in terms of leadership. For me, leadership isn't about being confident in what we're doing. Leading when we have all the information is not only rare, it's pretty easy. It's easy to stand out and say difficult things, offer an inspiring vision, or stand in opposition if I have all the information to prove that I'm right.

In the real world we'll more often have an incomplete picture of what we're trying to achieve. The unknowns are many, and our ability to offer a vision, or garner the support to try something, is the challenge of everyday leaders. And, to come full circle, that's why answering "yes" to our two questions is what allows the six attributes to grow. Answering "yes" means we understand that we don't have all the answers. It means we understand that there's more for us to know and that there are greater possibilities than we can imagine. And answering "yes" means we're open to seeing what those possibilities are, knowing full well that the answer will come from outside of us.

Answering “yes” comes from a place of humility. So, if the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the road to living the six attributes is paved with openness. We’re all capable of making the choice to answer “yes”, but that doesn’t mean walking the road is easy.

Why are the Six Attributes of a Leadership Mindset Needed in Business?

Since you know this isn’t going to be an easy journey, perhaps now’s a sensible time to ask why we should take the first step. Along with a shift in mindset comes a change in behaviour. That’s important because thinking differently with no change in behaviour, or tangible effects in the real world, is a purely intellectual enterprise – which, although interesting as a thought experiment, isn’t the thread we’re pulling on. The shift towards the six attributes of a leadership mindset gives us a different way to look at the challenge in front of us *and* a willingness to do something different because of that shift.

If we’re talking about a leadership team that isn’t a cohesive unit, that may be struggling to agree and implement a business strategy, one option is to offer them the skills to conduct better meetings. What they’d get from that is a set of tools they may or may not use. Another option might be to tell them what’s possible for the business and offer a plan detailing how to get there. The thing is, if the solution were as simple as telling people to listen to each other or providing a strategy, my guess is they would have worked that out already.

So another approach is to think about why the team isn’t doing those things already. That could be for a whole bunch of reasons, all of which (as we’ll see) have their core in what we’re calling the six attributes of a leadership mindset. If that’s true, helping

the team grow the six attributes means they can develop their own way to solve their challenge. And if they developed their own solution, it'll make sense in their business context – because they know their business better than any consultant would. And because they developed their own solution, they'll be more inclined to put it into effect. And because they've put it into effect, they'll be invested in that solution succeeding.

What the team will get from the process of developing that solution is a different way to think about how they interact, and about what it means to lead, which leads to a change in the way they behave. That change in behaviour leads to different ways of doing things. It means teams don't tend to rely on the same approach and the same solutions they've always tried, and it means they come up with revolutionary ideas to the challenges they face. And they can apply that different way of thinking to any challenge down the road again and again, which means long-term, self-sustainable change becomes possible.

And all that happened because we invested in growing the six attributes in our team.

So the simple answer to the question, “Why are the six attributes of a leadership mindset needed in business?” is because – in an uncertain economic climate and a fast-changing world – we need leaders who can pivot and flex quickly. And that requires a flexible world view.

Before we unpack the attributes, let's think for a second about what might make it difficult to cultivate them.

The Drive to Conform

We're social animals. We like fitting in. Leading often means standing out, which can leave us isolated and alone. Who wants that? The drive to conform is a real and tangible reason why we find ourselves doing and saying things we don't agree with.

Conformity is a human trait American social psychologist Stanley Milgram highlighted in a series of experiments he performed in the early 1960s. The premise was this: Milgram recruited volunteers and told them they were taking part in a study on memory – on whether punishment improved it, to be precise. The truth was, it was an experiment to see how far subjects would obey an authority figure who asked them to act in conflict with their conscience.¹

In the experiment, volunteers would visit the basement of Linsly-Chittenden Hall at Yale University, where Milgram was a professor. They were met by the experimenter – dressed in a white coat for added effect – and a second person, who they were told was a volunteer but who was actually in on the experiment. The experimenter asked the two “volunteers” to draw names out of a hat to decide who would be the learner and who the teacher. Of course, the ballots were rigged and the real volunteer always came out as the teacher.

Then the rules would be explained: the teacher and the learner would be situated in two different rooms. The teacher would be given a list of word pairs to teach the learner. The teacher would recite the first word and four possible pairs. If the learner got the pair wrong, the teacher was told to punish them with an increasingly severe electric shock. The shocks were mild to begin with but went all the way up to 450 volts – enough to kill someone. Of course, the learner never actually received any shocks, but

1 Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience”, *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 67(4) (1963): 371–378.

they did scream in pain and angrily demand to be released from the experiment.

If, on hearing the screams of the learner, the teacher got cold feet, they'd be prompted by the experimenter with standardized phrases that increased in urgency.

At a certain point, the learner would stop making noises, giving the impression they may have been killed. The experiment was stopped when the teacher had administered three consecutive 450-volt shocks or refused to continue.

Milgram's question was this: how many people would go all the way to 450 volts?

The answer may surprise you, and it's why mindset is so important. What Milgram highlighted is that when the authority figure – the experimenter in the white coat – promoted people to keep shocking the learner, 65% of people gave a stranger three 450-volt shocks.² Don't forget, at this point the learner would have gone silent and might be dead.

If you're thinking, "That's fine, we've changed a lot since the sixties," then I've got bad news. The experiment was repeated by British mentalist and illusionist Derren Brown in his 2006 TV show "Derren Brown: The Heist"³ and again in 2009 for the BBC 2 *Horizon* documentary.⁴ The result? Over 50% and 75% of participants respectively went all the way to 450 volts.

I'm describing the experiment to illustrate just how willing we are to conform. Milgram discussed his findings in his book *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* and the title gives us the clearest lens through which to view his work.⁵ What

² Milgram, *Behavioral Study of Obedience*, 377.

³ Channel 4, "Derren Brown: The Heist" (Original broadcast date 4 January 2006). Available at: <https://www.channel4.com/programmes/collections/63-money-money-money/41020-001>.

⁴ BBC 2, "How Violent Are You?", *Horizon* (Original broadcast date 12 May 2009).

⁵ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

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ISBN 978-178583406-6



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