

# HACKING LEADERSHIP

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THE **11** GAPS  
EVERY BUSINESS  
NEEDS TO CLOSE  
AND THE SECRETS  
TO CLOSING THEM  
QUICKLY

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**MIKE MYATT**

**Forbes** Leadership Columnist

WILEY

# PRAISE FOR HACKING LEADERSHIP

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“The ideas in Mike Myatt’s *Hacking Leadership* will challenge you—but they are achievable and waiting for you to put them into action. Read this book, apply its concepts, and prepare to move light-years ahead in your leadership journey.”

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—**Jim Kouzes**, Coauthor of *The Leadership Challenge* and *Executive Fellow of Leadership*, Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University

“Mike’s insights are logical, entertaining and well outlined. Deep experience with a myriad of leaders enables him to understand the landscape, and his passionate pursuit of innovation lets him crack it open. *Hacking Leadership* is a fresh take on what it means to be an effective leader and take action.”

—**Thomas X. Geisel**, CEO, Sun Bancorp, Inc.

“Every leader I know, including myself, has leadership gaps, and all of us need a resource and framework for not only identifying the gaps, but also a practical roadmap to help close those gaps. *Hacking Leadership* is an essential tool for every leader to have in their toolbox for working on their own leadership, and thus improving the team and overall organization. Mike reminds us all to not settle for the status quo, and the important role each of us have to be the change we seek. True leaders do something about it, and are willing to mix things up and hack away at their leadership, with the constant pursuit of excellence, and thus their true leadership potential.”

—**Brad Lomenick**, President and key visionary, Catalyst, Author, *The Catalyst Leader*

“*Hacking Leadership* is a thought-provoking, status quo shattering jolt of leadership wisdom that can propel anyone in the direction of their full leadership potential. At a time when scores of people are content settling for What Is, Mike challenges us to ask ourselves, What If? Instead of simply writing another book on leadership, he’s penned a powerfully persuasive narrative that reminds us the only limits to our leadership are those we impose on ourselves. *Hacking Leadership* is a must read for everyone!”

—**Brigadier General John E. Michel**, Commanding General NATO Air Training Command-Afghanistan and author of *(No More) Mediocre Me: How Saying No to The Status Quo Will Propel You From Ordinary to Extraordinary*

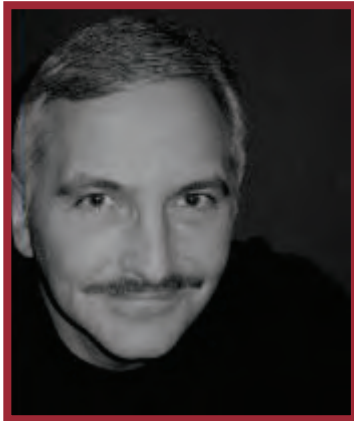
“Tremendous! Mike Myatt has written a superb book on leadership that is exceptionally timely and relevant for our world today. This book is both deeply insightful as well as intensely practical—a rare combination. I will highly recommend *Hacking Leadership* to leaders everywhere, at every level, and in all walks of life.”

—**Stephen M. R. Covey**, Author of The New York Times and #1 Wall Street Journal bestseller, *The Speed of Trust*, and coauthor of *Smart Trust*.

# ABOUT

# MIKE MYATT

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Mike Myatt, is a leadership advisor to Fortune 500 CEOs and their Boards of Directors. Widely regarded as America's Top CEO Coach, he is the author of *Leadership Matters...The CEO Survival Manual*, a Forbes leadership columnist, and serves as Chief Executive Officer at N2growth. His new book, *Hacking Leadership* (Wiley) will be in bookstores everywhere on December 16th, and is available for pre-order now.

Mr. Myatt is commonly regarded as one of the world's most recognized authorities on leadership, having been consistently recognized by Thinkers50 and other organizations as one of today's preeminent leadership thinkers. He has worked directly with more than 150 public company CEOs and his representative corporate clients include: AT&T, Bank of America, Deloitte, EMC, Humana, IBM, JP Morgan Chase, McGraw-Hill, Merrill Lynch, PepsiCo, and other leading global brands.

As an executive, Mike Myatt has held numerous C-suite positions, as an entrepreneur he has been a principal in 4 successful ventures, and as a professional advisor he has worked with clients ranging from successful CEOs & other public figures to Fortune 100 companies. Some of Mr. Myatt's accomplishments prior to serving as Managing Director and Chief Strategy Officer at N2growth include serving as President and COO of a commercial real estate investment bank, Managing Director of a law firm, Director of Internet Strategy for the country's largest web enablement firm, and he founded what was prior to its sale one of the country's Top 50 interactive advertising agencies.

He is also a syndicated columnist and contributing editor on topics of leadership and innovation. His theories and practices have been taught at many of the nation's top business schools, and his work has been noted in several publications including: *Forbes*, *Psychology Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Entrepreneur*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *Success*, *Washington Times*, *Chief Executive Magazine* and others.

Mr. Myatt also frequently lectures and keynotes on topics of leadership and innovation. Mr. Myatt has been married for nearly three decades with two married children and three grandchildren.

# **Hacking Leadership**

Sample Chapter

# **Hacking Leadership**

**The 11 Gaps Every Business Needs to Close  
and the Secrets to Closing Them Quickly**

Mike Myatt

**WILEY**



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*To my family – they inspire me to be better.*

*To my friends – they challenge me to do better.*

*To my clients – they require me to think better.*

*To my co-workers – they motivate me to lead better.*



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# PROLOGUE

In my office hangs a plaque given to me as a gift. It originally read *It Is What It Is*. After a few weeks of reading that phrase several times a day, what I once regarded as a harmless saying began to challenge my thinking and poke at my convictions. It became clear to me this seemingly innocent phrase embodied much of what's wrong with leadership today. So I did what any good leader would do – I took action.

I rummaged through my desk drawer and found my whittling knife. I then proceeded to carve the following inscription beneath the original statement: *Until You Decide To Change It*. What once served as a statement of defeat now reads as instructive encouragement; the text no longer lulls anyone who reads it into a state of complacency – it now propels them forward.

This simple piece of wall art (prior to my modification) is sadly representative of many who hold positions of leadership. Burdened by common practice, busyness, and an aversion to change, many leaders today suffer from an acute case of mental numbness. They have fallen prey to the slow seduction of status quo. As time has passed, they have succumbed to accepting *what is* instead of pursuing *what if*. They make safe choices instead of smart choices - they have forgotten what it is to be a leader.

There is no shortage of debate surrounding leadership when it comes to philosophy, style, definitional distinctions, nuances, complex theory, etc. That said, I believe most reasonable people would agree leadership is nothing if not personal. Leadership can represent a pursuit, discipline, practice, passion, calling, skill, competency, obligation, duty, compulsion, or even an obsession. I've known those who have worshiped at the alter of leadership as a religion, and a bit of reflection will reveal more than a few leadership revolutions dotting the historical timeline. My goal for *Hacking Leadership* is to challenge your thinking and your perceptions with regard to the state of leadership. So, my question is this; what's next for leadership?

In my first book *Leadership Matters* (2007), I made the following statement:

“Whether through malice or naiveté, those who trivialize the value of leadership place us all at risk. Poor leadership cripples businesses, ruins economies, destroys families, loses wars, and can bring the demise of nations - Leadership Matters.”

On an individual basis, a person's perceived leadership ability, or lack thereof, will in large part determine their station in life; the schools they're admitted to, the jobs they hold, the family life they create, the influence they acquire, and the financial security they achieve. On a collective basis, the quality of leadership has a ripple effect (positive or negative) that can impact generations. Leadership, good or bad, is a contagion.

Nothing impacts our world like leadership, and sadly, the practice of leadership is broken. We live in a society where the pace of change has never been faster and more dramatic, yet our leadership practices have remained painfully stagnant. Using 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Century leadership practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century simply doesn't work. It's time for a fresh perspective – it's time to begin "Hacking Leadership."

Core leadership principles of have largely remained the same since the dawn of time. The problem with today's leaders is they don't understand how to integrate time-tested principles with evolving leadership practices built for 21<sup>st</sup> Century success. The world in which *you* attempt to implement previously successful strategies and tactics has changed and is ever changing. Organizations, their employees, and the various constituencies they serve are far different today than they were centuries, decades or even a few years ago.

Here's the thing - these core leadership principles need not be abandoned, but outdated and ill conceived practices must be hacked in order to reestablish leadership equilibrium. Hacking Leadership puts the practice of leadership under a transformative lens for the purpose simplifying the complex, while not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

It's important for leaders to embrace the practice of change as it applies to their own tradecraft. I've spent much of my adult life committed to the belief and practice there is always room for innovation, development and improvement. As much as some don't want to hear it, this applies to leadership as well. When leaders hold themselves to a higher standard of rigor, discipline, accountability, and transparency everyone wins.

I've often said the rigidity of a closed mind is the first step in limiting opportunity. So let me ask you this question: When was the last time *you* changed something about *you*? Not someone or something else, but *your* thinking, *your* philosophy, *your* vision, *your* approach, *your* attitude, or *your* development. Most leaders are quite skilled at embracing change – except when the focus of the change initiative happens to be on them. Show me a person that never changes their mind and I'll show you

a static thinker who has sentenced their mind to a prison of mediocrity and wasted potential.

Smart leaders challenge everything – especially conventional thought, best practices, and dominant logic. When I refer to dominant logic I’m referencing existing behaviors/practices, which lock organizations into a pattern of once productive thinking that no longer is (false truths held as real). Anything in business can be improved, everything can be reimaged, and many things can flat out be eliminated. The trick is found in knowing what items to focus on – which items to hack.

I want to pause here and set the tone moving forward by giving you my definition of hacking:

**hacking [hak-ing] – present participle of hack (verb)**  
to discover an alternate path, clever and skillful tricks, shortcuts and workarounds, breaking the code, deciphering complexity, influencing outcomes, acquiring access, creating innovative customizations to existing/outdated methodologies.

Everyone has blind spots, and leadership gaps exist in every organization. The purpose of this book is to equip leaders at every level with an actionable framework to identify blind spots and close leadership gaps. *Hacking Leadership* offers a fresh perspective that will make it easy for leaders to create a roadmap to identify, refine, develop, and achieve their true leadership potential.

Hackers are innovative thinkers who acquire and distribute knowledge, tips, and tricks for solving complex problems – they reinvent strategies, protocols, and practices to create more effective solutions to both existing problems and new challenges. They adopt the mindset of innovating around best practices in pursuit of next practices.

Most of us are all too familiar with the statement “you don’t know what you don’t know” – there’s never been a more dangerous cop-out for leaders than rationalizing ignorance. The fact of the matter is the best leaders are poignantly aware of what they don’t know, and exhaust all efforts to close those knowledge gaps.

In many respects, leadership is nothing more than identifying personal, team, organizational, and market blind spots and then dealing with them in the most effective fashion. Therefore it’s critically important for leaders to understand most blind spots exist in the form of gaps - positional gaps, philosophical gaps, strategic gaps, operational gaps, expectation gaps, knowledge gaps, etc. Gaps exist in every organization, the issue is whether you recognize them, and if so, how you choose to deal with them.

Many leaders choose to be ignorant of gaps and pretend they don't exist. The problem with this methodology is when leaders fall into a gap, it often resembles a crevasse from which there is no escape. Smart leaders proactively seek out gaps in an effort to bridge, close, fill, jump, navigate around whatever chasm they happen to be facing. The better you become at turning gaps into opportunities (hacking the gaps), the better leader you'll become.

I've had the privilege of working with thousands of leaders around the globe. I'm honored to count among my clients many past and present chairmen and CEOs of some of the world's leading organizations. What these men and women have consistently taught me is holding a position of leadership is not the same thing as being a good leader, understanding the basic tenants of leadership is not the same thing as being able to successfully apply them, and that leadership isn't a destination it's a journey.

While many things can cause leaders to stumble, I've found there are 11 specific leadership gaps, which if not properly identified, understood, and addressed can be fatal. In each of the 11 chapters that follow, I address a particular topic by framing it within the context of a leadership gap. I then go on to offer a series of hacks to help you reframe your thinking so you can either avoid or altogether eliminate the existence of said gap.

Finally, I want to share with you my opinions and biases about most business books, as well as offer a few insights for how you can get the most of this work. Most business books are full of fluff, and while they may be entertaining, they often serve no real purpose other than to transfer some of your wealth to the author. In the final analysis, books are only as valuable to leaders as their willingness to discerningly pull the useful concepts off the pages and place them into practice. Books are little more than words on a page unless YOU choose to make them something more.

I would certainly encourage you to challenge the concepts put forth in this book. More importantly, I would encourage you to challenge your own thinking. Don't just read the book; study the material and commit to becoming a better leader. The day you stop hacking leadership is the day you should stop leading. Good luck and good hacking...



# Chapter 1: Hacking the Leadership Gap

“The plausibility of impossibility only becomes a probability in the absence of leadership.”

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## Overview – The Commoditization of Leadership

Whether you believe leadership has evolved or devolved over time, there is no disputing the practice of leadership has become a contentious topic steeped in ethereal, ambiguous rhetoric. Everyone seems to have an opinion of what constitutes good leadership, but if good leadership is so easy to define and identify, why then does it seem so hard to come by?

Society has essentially commoditized leadership resulting in a leadership bubble of sorts. Because leadership has become the latest version of an entitlement program, too many unqualified leaders have been allowed to enter the ranks.

This is not just a business problem – it’s a global leadership problem. The media is littered with daily examples of those placed in positions of leadership who failed to lead. Leaders are often selected, promoted and retained on entirely the wrong basis. When leadership is perceived as little more than a title granting access to a platform for personal gain, rather than a privilege resulting in an opportunity to serve, we’ll continue to find ourselves in a crisis of leadership.

Those of you familiar with my work know I’m a died in the wool leadership guy... I believe all things begin and end with leadership. In fact, I hold this thesis so dear, I’ve said for years “businesses don’t fail, projects don’t fail, and products don’t fail – leaders fail.”

With principled, effective leadership all things are possible. It’s only when optics become more important than ethics, when profit becomes more important than purpose, when process becomes more important than people, and when politics becomes more important than doing the right thing, that individuals and organizations lose their direction. Sadly, this is where much of the world finds itself today. The good news is by hacking

current leadership frameworks and dynamics we can find our way back to true north.

The best leaders understand leadership is the key to unlocking and realizing limitless potential. I want you to think about leadership like this - the only borders to leadership are those which are self-imposed. The only limits on your personal, team or organizational leadership are the ones you submit to.

So, you have a choice – you can limit your worldview or you can expand it – you can embrace the status quo or you can shatter it – you can follow *best* practices or you can lead innovation around them to identify *next* practices. Real leaders don't limit themselves, but more importantly they refuse to limit those they lead.

Every truly great leader I've had the opportunity to work with has had one thing in common – they have a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. They've learned to check their ego, enhance their level of self-awareness, and understand how others perceive them. They are clear thinkers who understand their role, and are prepared to act accordingly.

This is a foundational chapter – one that sets the tone you can build upon chapter by chapter as you move forward. Therefore, the balance of this chapter will offer some insights into how you can hack away at the self-rationalizations and justifications keeping you from reaching your leadership potential.

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## The Leadership Gap Defined

Those who become what they do not understand will not like the outcome. It's imperative you define yourself on both an aspirational and practical level as a leader in order to lead well. Leadership isn't just a role or a title – it's a choice. The best leaders choose to be better, they choose to be different – they choose to lead well – The seminal question you must ask yourself as a leader is why should anyone be led by you?

Think about it like this – aside from having a job, how are people better off for being led by you? In order to consistently receive the right answer to the aforementioned question, a leader must first gain an understanding of the following 3 critical leadership gaps:

1. **The Development Gap:** This refers to the gap between how you assess your current leadership ability and your true potential as a

leader. An accurate understanding of this gap indicates whether you see leadership as a destination or as a continuum. It will determine whether you grow and develop your leadership skills, or whether you will follow the path of least resistance and rest upon your laurels. Keep this in mind - it is impossible for a leader who is not growing and developing to lead a growing and developing enterprise.

2. **The Influence Gap:** While influence can be generated in all directions, for purposes of this discussion I'm referring to the gap between your self-assessment and the assessment of your leadership ability by your peers. Your understanding of, and willingness to do something about this gap will determine your ability to build a cohesive team. Leaders who don't have the trust and respect of their team, won't be able to generate the influence necessary to perform at the expected levels.
3. **The Reality Gap:** This refers to the difference between how you view yourself and how those you lead feel about you. A leader who loses the faith and confidence of their workforce won't be able to attract and retain talent, will have a culture on life support, and sub-par performance that ensures only one thing – a limited shelf life.

Let's stop right here and do a quick gut check. I want you to rate yourself as a leader on a scale from 1 – 10 with 1 representing the worst in leadership and 10 being the best in leadership. I don't want you to rate your leadership potential, but rather how you are currently performing as a leader. This is a risk free evaluation, as nobody will see your score but you – do this now and write the number here \_\_\_\_\_.

Here's what we know to be true based upon the empirical evidence gleaned from conducting thousands of interviews with senior executives. Regardless of your position/title, you likely rated yourself between a 6 and an 8. Am I right? The reality is regardless of how transparent you tried to be, 90+ percent of all people in leadership positions won't rate themselves below as 6. Similarly, 90+ percent of people in leadership positions won't rate themselves higher than an 8.

While this first set of data might not shock you, here's something else we know about leadership self-evaluations – leaders consistently overrate themselves. How do we know this? Because we have also surveyed thousands of subordinates and peers, as well as those whom the leaders report to. This next set of data will shock you.

When we ask those who work for and with you to rate you on the same scale with which you conducted your self-assessment, they rate you

on average 200 basis points lower than you rate yourself – that’s right, two full percentage points lower. So, if you rated yourself an 8 your co-workers likely rate you a 6. If you rated yourself a 6 then they likely rated you a 4. How does that make you feel?

The difference between your self-assessment score and how others rate you is what I refer to as the leadership gap. Whether the leadership gap is perception or reality doesn’t really matter - it’s nonetheless the gap all leaders must learn to hack.

Put yourself in the shoes of those who rated you – how impassioned and motivated would you be to awaken each morning to go to work for a leader who rates somewhere between a 4 and 6?

Where leadership always runs amok is when hubris overshadows humility, and self-serving motives take the place of service beyond self. Leadership is not about the power and the accolades bestowed upon the leader; it’s about the betterment of those whom the leader serves. At its essence, leadership is about people. At its core, leadership is about improving the status quo, inspiring positive change, and challenging conventional thinking.

As long as positional and philosophical arguments are more important than forward progress, as long as being right is esteemed above being vulnerable and open to new thought, as long as ego is elevated above empathy and compassion, as long as rhetoric holds more value than performance, and as long as we tolerate these things as acceptable behavior we will all suffer at the hands of poor leadership.

I think most of us understand at a high level that companies live and die by the quality of their leadership – but how many of you really internalize this deep down at a personal level? If you’re ready to dig deep and get serious about leadership the first thing to understand is how control limits your ability to lead.

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## Hacking The Control Gap

The most common mistake I see leaders make is to attempt to lead through control. As counterintuitive as it might seem, in order to gain influence you must surrender control. The reality is you’ll rarely encounter the words *leadership* and *surrender* used together in complementary fashion. Society has labeled surrender as a sign of leadership weakness, when in fact it can be among the greatest of leadership strengths. Leaders

who fail to learn how to hack the control gap fail to lead up to their potential.

Let me be clear, I'm not encouraging giving in or giving up – I am suggesting you learn the ever so subtle art of letting go. A leader simply operates at their best when they understand their ability to influence is much more fruitful than their ability to control. Here's the thing – the purpose of leadership is not to shine the spotlight on yourself, but to unlock the potential of others so they can in turn shine the spotlight on countless more. Control is about power – not leadership. Surrender allows a leader to stop impeding themselves and focus on adding value to those whom they serve.

If you're still not convinced the art of leadership is learning the focus point should be on surrender not control, consider this: control restricts potential, limits initiative, and inhibits talent. Surrender fosters collaboration, encourages innovation and enables possibility. Controlling leaders create bottlenecks rather than increase throughput. They signal a lack of trust and confidence an often come across as insensitive if not arrogant. When you experience weak teams, micro-management, frequent turf wars, high stress, operational strain, and a culture of fear, you are experiencing what control has to offer – not very attractive is it?

Surrender allows the savvy leader to serve where control demands the egocentric leader be served. Surrender allows leadership to scale and a culture of leadership to be established. Surrender prefers loose collaborative networks to rigid hierarchical structures allowing information to be more readily shared and distributed. Leaders who understand surrender think community, ecosystem, and culture – not org chart. Surrender is what not only allows the dots to be connected, but it's what allows to dots to be multiplied. Controlling leaders operate in a world of addition and subtraction, while the calculus of a leader who understands surrender is built on exponential multiplication.

I have found those who embrace control are simply attempting to consolidate power, while those who practice surrender are facilitating the distribution of authority. When what you seek is to build into others more than glorifying self you have developed a level of leadership maturity that values surrender over control. Surrender is the mindset that creates the desire for leaders to give credit rather than take it, to prefer hearing over being heard, to dialogue instead of monologue, to have an open mind over a closed mind, to value unlearning as much as learning. Control messages selfishness, while surrender conveys selflessness – which is more important to you?

Keep this in mind – we all surrender, but not all surrender is honorable. Some surrender to their ego, to the wrong priorities, or to other distractive habits. Others surrender to the positive realization they are not the center of the universe – they surrender to something beyond themselves in order to accomplish more for others. Bottom line – what you do or don't surrender to will define you. Assuming you surrender to the right things, surrender is not a sign of leadership weakness, but is perhaps the ultimate sign of leadership confidence. I'll leave you with this quote from William Booth: "The greatness of a mans power is the measure of his surrender."

Once you recognize where you stand with regard to the leadership gap and you get past limiting control issues, it's time to identify your blind spots. This requires deep introspection and a heightened sense of self-awareness.

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## The Awareness Gap – Finding The Blind Spots

Leader Beware – ignorant bliss, no matter how enjoyable, is still ignorant. If you're in a position of leadership and don't feel you have any blind spots, you're either very naïve or very arrogant. All leaders have blind spots – the question is what are they doing about them? The reality is most leaders invest so much time assessing the cultural and functional dynamics of their organizations they often forget the importance of critically assessing themselves – big mistake.

I've never understood leaders who make heavy investments in personal and professional development early in their careers, who then go on to make only minimal investments in learning once they have reached the C-suite. Learning and development are lifelong endeavors.

The learning journey doesn't come to an end just because you reach a certain station in life – or at least it shouldn't. It has consistently been my experience that leaders who are not growing simply cannot lead growing organizations. Moreover, leaders who fail to continue developing will always be replaced by those who do. A leader who fails to understand the value of self-awareness fails to understand their true potential as a leader.

The further up the ladder a leader climbs the more they must be on top of their game as they have the broadest sphere of influence, the largest ability to impact a business, and they also now have the most at risk. It is at this place the leader should make the heaviest investment in refining their

game, because increased performance will pay the biggest dividends. Let me be as clear as I can – the more responsibility a leader has, the bigger their obligation to be on the forward edge of learning, growth and development.

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates had a few guiding principles that today's leaders would do well to adopt: Socrates said, “*Know Thyself*” and “*An unexamined life is not worth living.*” Those leaders who actively pursue gaining a better understanding of themselves will not only reduce their number of blind spots, but they'll also find developing a sense of awareness is the key to increasing emotional intelligence. The better you know yourself the more effective you'll be, and the better you'll relate to others.

To build on the hacks covered thus far, it will be important to evolve your critical thinking. This is best done through the refining lens of extreme clarity.

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## The Key To Clarity – White Space

Here's something you might not want to hear, but you should definitely take to heart; if you're having difficulty ordering your world, it's nobody's fault but yours. I don't care how busy you are, but I do care about what you accomplish – the former doesn't always lead to the latter. Busy leaders are a dime a dozen, but highly productive leaders are not so common. One of the easiest things for leaders to do is to bite off more than they can chew. All successful leaders are accomplished at hacking their schedule to create more time for clear thought.

*Fact:* bright, talented executives with a bias to action will often take on more than they should. These leaders don't understand the value of white space. The reality is maximizing results and creating a certainty of execution is all about focus, focus and more focus. Here's the thing – it's difficult to focus in the middle of chaos. One of the hardest things for leaders to do is to learn to create white space. The best leaders are those who understand the most productive things often happen during intentional periods of isolation used for self-reflection, introspection, and the rigor of critical thought.

See if you can think of anyone you know who resembles the following description... I recently had the chance to work with a leader who is as bright and talented as they come. That said, he had confused being busy with being productive. He was in back-to-back-to-back



meetings from the time he arrived at the office until after 5:00pm. He didn't have any time to think much less do his own work. In fact, the working and thinking all took place after he arrived at home in the evening. This leader was working 70- hour weeks, falling behind, suffering from fatigue, and was becoming at risk.

Everyone in the company wanted a piece of this leader, but they were in effect sucking the leader dry. The leader was complicit to their own demise by not understanding the importance of maintaining adequate white space, as well as maintaining a personal life. If you're honest, more than a few people in your organization likely fit this profile – it may even be you.

While the mind of a leader may be most comfortable being oriented toward the future, he/she can only act in the here and now. The knowledge and skills required to build mastery can only be acquired when we focus on what we're currently doing. This is the definition of presence, and it is only when we operate in the present that real creativity, growth and innovation occur.

The problem with being present is many leaders confuse this with having to do everything themselves. Have you ever interacted with someone who deals with silence by jumping in and filling the conversational void? This same thing occurs with executives who attempt to fill every open slot on the calendar with activity – this is a huge mistake.

All good leaders have matured to understand they can be fully engaged and present and yet still be alone. Smart leaders don't fill their calendars with useless activities. They strategically plan for white space allowing them to focus on highest and best use endeavors. Leading doesn't always mean doing. In fact, most often times it means pulling back and creating white space so that others can do. This is true leadership that can be scaled.

Is your rubber-band stretched so tight it's about to snap? Efficiency and productivity are not found working at or even near capacity. Rather entering the productivity zone is found working at about 60% to 70% of capacity. Operating in excess of that threshold will cause increased stress, lack of attention to detail and errant decisioning.

The old "what if I only had 'x' number of hours to work in a week, what would I focus on?" exercise is a good one. In fact, if you're reading this text, just stop right now and benchmark your activity against your reflective thoughts – Is what you're doing, in alignment with your true priorities, or have you been sucked down into the weeds?

It is important for executives to learn to apply focused leverage to a limited number of highest and best use activities rather than to continually

shift gears between multiple initiatives. Resist the temptation to just advance a broad number of disparate initiatives, and alternatively focus your efforts on the completion of a few high impact objectives.

The simple reality is that if you continue to add new responsibilities to an already full plate, all of your obligations will suffer as a result. Face current challenges *head-on* by keeping your *head down* and applying focused leverage to the task at hand. Leaders who operate without margins usually hit the wall they are most desperate to avoid.

Have you noticed how some leaders are frenzied, stressed, and always playing from behind, while others are eerily clam and always appear to be a few steps ahead? It's been my experience that leaders who fall into the latter category make great use of their thought life, while those in the former category seem to forgo their alone time in lieu of being busy. Savvy leaders crave white space whereas unseasoned leaders feel uncomfortable with open time.

One thing that can be a difficult lesson to learn is that not all engagement is necessary or productive. Leadership and engagement go hand-in-hand, but only when engagement happens by design rather than by default. Don't get me wrong, good things can happen with spontaneous engagement, but if you're engaging with others without intent and purpose, it likely serves as a distraction for all parties. Don't interfere with your team just because you don't understand how to use your time wisely. If you do, you'll become an annoyance known for not respecting others – this is not leadership.

I have found the best leaders are harder on themselves than anyone else could ever be. In fact, this is so much the case that the best leaders constantly self-assess and are relentless in challenging themselves. They relish their solitude because it gives them the ability to be alone with their thoughts, to challenge their logic, to refine their theories, and to test the boundaries of their intellect. It's during these quiet moments that leaders willing to be honest with themselves will examine their own flaws and frailties. They are forever in search of new ways of dealing with old problems.

The beauty of leveraging white space is it helps you avoid falling into the all too common leadership rut. It's now time to focus on hacking the status quo.

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# Hacking The Status Quo

Leaders who are bored, in a rut, or otherwise find themselves anesthetized by the routine have a huge problem - **they are not leading.** Leadership is a game for the mentally agile, not the brain dead. Sound harsh? It's meant to. While most of the world has succumbed to a static life imprisoned by the limitations of their own mind, real leaders are always looking beyond *what is*, thinking about the possibilities of *what if*, and acting to ensure *what's next*.

Why then do so many leaders complain about being in a rut? They get comfortable playing things safely, they rest on their laurels, they stop investing in personal growth and development, and they settle, they quit and stay – they become a leader in title only.

At one time or another we all experience the signs of boredom. Here's the thing – boredom is a state of mind. The difference between real leaders, and leaders in title only, is what they do when the creative juices begin to dwindle. Feigned leaders accept the status quo, and real leaders see the signs of boredom as the precursor to needed change.

For most people, the simple truth is excuses come easier than solutions – but who said leadership was easy? Leadership is about acclimation and reacclimation, improvising and adapting, learning and unlearning – leadership is about change.

My observations and experiences over the years have led me to a very simple conclusion: I have yet to see anyone improve their status by maintaining the status quo. If you're going to get comfortable with anything as a leader, I would suggest it be change. Change is a leader's best friend, and the one thing that will propel you forward.

Don't make excuses – make changes. Saying you don't have time for "X" is just code for "X" isn't important to me. Saying you don't have the resources needed for change is just an admission you're not very resourceful. Leadership has little to do with resources, but everything to do with resourcefulness. If you're stuck in a leadership rut, use the following 5 hacks to help you find your path back to real leadership:

1. **Go Break Something:** Need to reinvigorate a stale mind or a less than thriving enterprise? Try changing the corporate landscape by shifting existing roles and responsibilities, or by bringing in fresh talent from the outside. If you want to drive innovation, lead change, and create growth, stir the pot – go break something. Slaughter a few sacred cows, challenge conventional

wisdom, break a paradigm, and inject a little chaos into your static environment. Old isn't necessarily wrong, but likewise, it's not necessarily right either. Overlay a new business model on top of the existing one, and look for ways to create new advantages and make needed improvements. Reengineer a *best* practice into a *next* practice. Ask yourself this question: Is the most tenured person in a particular position, the best person for the position? If not, make a change. Don't be bored; just implement a little creative destruction.

2. **Recharge Your Brain:** A stagnant thought life is not a sign of healthy leadership. A brain is like any other energy source – it needs to be nourished in order to evolve. Whether you stimulate your brain through basic learning activities like reading, taking classes or participating in workshops or seminars, or by just giving it some well needed rest, the important thing is to make a concerted effort in this regard. Some of my best thinking comes when I remove myself from the routine of the office and go for a run. Vacations, sabbaticals, and service projects are also quite useful for creating new thinking paradigms. I'm a big proponent of attempting to carve out new neural pathways by subjecting the brain to new and creative ways of thinking. A few of the things I'm doing this year include going cold-turkey on television (a family project), playing one game of chess each day, and studying a new language. Change-up your routine and do things differently and more productively – you'll be glad you did.
3. **Get Some Help:** Leading in isolation is dangerous. The best leaders surround themselves with wise counsel, and make a habit of seeking out sound advice. Start close to home – ask your family for their candid opinion of your shortcomings, and then listen. Those who love you the most will also give you the respect of candor. In addition to seeking guidance from your family, seek out professional advice and counsel by joining a peer group, hiring a coach, creating an advisory board, or finding a new mentor. There are abundant resources available to leaders resourceful enough to seek them out. Don't allow yourself to be held hostage by your pride, ego, arrogance, or ignorance – go get some help.
4. **Have a Vigorous Debate:** Few things kindle the creative fires like a challenging debate. By seeking out dissenting views and differing opinions, you open your mind to new ideas and perspectives. A developed mind is the result of a challenged mind. Smart leaders take their business logic and willingly subject it brutal assault. In doing so, they often find what they

believed to be close to perfect was in fact flawed. Go find the smartest people you can, and ask them to poke holes in your theories and beliefs. There is value in both validation and invalidation. Don't be afraid of being proven wrong – be afraid of thinking you're right when you're not.

5. **Fire Yourself:** In the final analysis, if you can't or won't fix yourself, or you can't or won't allow yourself to be developed by others, then it's time to pass the baton. Both you and your organization deserve more than just a leader in title, and if you cannot perform as leader then find someone who can. Whether you transition to a co-CEO role, entrepreneur in residence, Chairman of the Board, consultant, take a sabbatical, or you just resign your position, all concerned parties will be better off by making a move that is likely long overdue.

Now that you're aware, refreshed, have clarity of thought, and have abandoned the status quo it's time to get prepared...

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## Hacking The Preparation Gap

Do you ever find yourself in over your head? If not, I would suggest you don't spend enough time in the water. Creating white space has a dual advantage for leaders – it not only keeps them out of a rut, but it also helps them avoid getting in over their heads.

The truth is all leaders find themselves swimming in rough conditions from time-to-time. And trust me – it will happen to you. The difference between those who drown and those who become stronger swimmers is little more than a combination of attitude and preparation.

It was T.S. Eliot who said, “If you aren't in over your head, how do you know how tall you are?” With all due respect to Mr. Eliot, it's one thing to push past comfort zones and test your capabilities, but it's quite another thing to survive doing so. Here's the thing – good leaders take risks, but great leaders are prepared for the risks they take.

Being in over your head can lead to career defining moments (good or bad). When leaders push personal, team, or organization boundaries one of two things is likely to happen: they'll either exceed all expectations, or fall short of them. The difference between success and failure isn't found in risk taking alone, but in the planning and execution surrounding the taking of the risk. There's truth in the old military saying that “prior proper planning prevents poor performance.”

I remember a time I went surfing in the frigid waters of the Pacific Northwest with my son in law. It was the first time I'd climbed on a surfboard in more than 30 years. I crammed myself into the wetsuit (not a pretty sight) and paddled out to the waves. The truth is, my son in law surfed and I spent two hours trying not to drown. He was prepared, experienced, and in shape. He challenged himself and I was just in over my head – literally and figuratively. He had a great time, and I just had a time of it.

My surfing experience was a great reminder that all the positive thinking in the world won't overcome certain practical realities. I don't regret surfing that day, but I do regret not being prepared for it. While I survived the experience, it was pure luck. Not everyone who takes risk without the proper preparation is so lucky. I'm not suggesting leaders don't take risks, but simply that said risks be prudent ones.

The bigger issue for leaders is not the personal risk they take, but the risks they subject others to. While leaders have a responsibility to those they lead not to take unnecessary risk, they likewise have an absolute obligation to seek out and incur necessary risk. Many leaders take risks, but great leaders inculcate the planned execution of necessary risk as a cultural imperative. When calculated risk taking becomes encouraged at all levels of the enterprise it's an indicator of sound leadership and a healthy culture.

My message here is simply this; rather than fear the rough waters, take the time and effort to prepare your team for them. Then and only then, go in search of the big waves.

Perhaps the most powerful thing about creating white space is that it presents opportunities for others to step-in and raise the level of their contributions. When leaders step back and resist the temptation to do everything themselves their organization is strengthened. When leaders become comfortable being without always doing collaboration flourishes and productivity is enhanced. Whether white space makes you more productive on an individual basis, or you leverage the white space create operational depth and scale, you're better off with white space than without it.

Okay, now that we've laid a good foundation, it's time to address a key leadership concept many leaders have lost sight of, trivialize, or worse yet altogether ignore - Purpose.

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# HACKING LEADERSHIP

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THE **11** GAPS  
EVERY BUSINESS  
NEEDS TO CLOSE

AND THE SECRETS  
TO CLOSING THEM  
QUICKLY

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**BY MIKE MYATT**



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Mike Myatt is one of the world's most respected authorities on leadership, having been recognized by Thinkers50 and other organizations as one of today's preeminent leadership thinkers. His theories and practices have been taught at many of the nation's top business schools, and his work has been noted in several publications including: *Forbes*, *Psychology Today*, *The Washington Post*, *Inc.*, *Entrepreneur*, *Chicago Sun Times*, *Success*, *Washington Times*, *Chief Executive Magazine*, *The Huffington Post* and others.

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