



Leadership



Leading in the Flow of Work

How to tap into the right intentions, words, and actions when you need them **by Hitendra Wadhwa**

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Mary Haasdyk Vooy's

Conventional wisdom holds that leadership can be developed through extensive study and training. Many organizations invest a tremendous amount of time and money in programs that teach executives how to influence, inspire, and coach others; build trust; have crucial conversations; give feedback; change people's behavior; and more. Many aspiring leaders comb through books, attend seminars, and seek out mentors, all in an effort to understand leadership's intricate nuances.

My research shows that another approach can complement and accelerate those traditional, competence-focused efforts. It involves tapping into neural pathways in the brain—into faculties everyone already possesses but might not be consistently using at work. Rather than a trait to be acquired, leadership is a state to be activated, my work suggests. And by shifting the emphasis from learning on the sidelines to leading in the moment, executives can achieve real breakthroughs.

This leadership model, which has become the basis for a popular course at Columbia Business School, grew out of work that my consulting firm, Mentora Institute, my team, and I did. In 2006 we began building a repository of more than 1,000 moments of transformative leadership, capturing instances when individuals notably exceeded expectations in critical situations. In 2022, I detailed our insights in a book, *Inner Mastery, Outer Impact*, in which I introduced the main tenets of exemplary leadership and argued that leaders can embody them by tapping into their inner core—the space of highest potential within them, their best self. The presence within us of such a core—of a state of peak performance in which we’re calmly aware of our inner and outer conditions and able to adapt our behavior as needed—is being substantiated by scientific studies in a range of fields, including cognitive behavioral therapy, positive psychology, and neuroscience. Yet the idea of it isn’t new; across the ages, people have engaged in contemplative practices in an effort to connect with what they have intuited to be their spirit or soul and to express its qualities in their outer pursuits.

My firm has found that executives can tap into their inner core with just 10 to 15 minutes of preparation before a big event. In our research and consulting work, we’ve validated our approach, which we call *leadership-in-flow*. At SAP, for instance, managers trained in it performed twice as well (at increasing their ratings on leadership trust)

as a control group of managers did. And in a cross-organizational study spanning diverse industries, roles, and levels, more than 100 executives who adopted leadership-in-flow saw their ability to achieve successful outcomes—measured by whether they attained their performance goals—rise by an average of 135% within six weeks. Our findings reveal that people have an innate capacity for exemplary leadership far beyond what many realize.

How exactly do you activate your inner core? In this article, for the first time, I introduce a playbook of quick actions people can use to tap into it and unlock peak performance under real-time pressure—precisely when it matters the most.

Before diving into the specifics, however, let’s examine the fundamental shift that leadership-in-flow entails.

A Dynamic State

It’s a common organizational practice to evaluate people along a bell curve, rating every individual as a low, average, or high performer. In fact, each of us is the whole bell curve. As a wave of scientific findings shows, the personality and behavior of someone will change with the context that person is in, the thoughts and feelings that individual is experiencing, and who else is present. Someone may be extroverted in one situation, introverted in another; agreeable in one, disagreeable in another. That’s why leadership is not a static trait—it is a dynamic state.

But one thing remains constant: When we’re “triggered”—emotionally upset—we tend to underperform. Conversely, when we’re “centered”—calm, attuned, and open—we’re more likely to achieve high performance. This happens when we’re connected to our inner core. We transcend ego, attachments, insecurities, impulses, and everyday habits

—like interrupting others or appearing agreeable while actually feeling resistant—and act in a way that’s best for the cause we’re serving.

But a number of things can prevent executives from achieving this state. First, they often walk into pivotal moments feeling stressed—either about other things going on in their lives or about the very situation they’re confronting. Second, they simply don’t see the greater possibilities their situation offers—to build trust, resolve conflict, inspire a beaten-down team, and so on. Third, once they’re in a situation they react in habitual, fixed ways instead of observing the dynamics among people and responding agilely. And last, they focus all their preparation for key events on functional and technical details while paying little to no heed to the human dimension—to adapting themselves to the needs and styles of the people in the room.

Leadership-in-flow is designed to overcome those obstacles. Through it people activate the inner core not just in themselves but also in those they work with, by drawing on energies they already possess.

The Core Energies

Our leadership model, which builds on both ancient wisdom and contemporary science, focuses on five types of energy:

- **Purpose** (committed to a noble cause)
- **Wisdom** (calm and receptive to the truth)
- **Growth** (curious and open to learning)
- **Love** (connected with those you work with and serve)
- **Self-realization** (centered in a joyful spirit)

Across all the exemplary leadership moments we studied, people consistently used a small set of actions to tap into one or more of these five energies. The actions were swift and straightforward, often taking

just seconds. Our analysis revealed that 25 actions—four to seven for each type of energy—showed up regularly. (I’ll describe some of them in the examples that follow, but you can find a complete list in the sidebar “How to Achieve Leadership-in-Flow.”)

By taking these actions, leaders can break free from rigid behavioral scripts. One profound moment in the history of the Cold War illustrates how.

On December 16, 1984, British prime minister Margaret Thatcher hosted Mikhail Gorbachev, a member of the Soviet Politburo who was seen as a potential future leader of the country, at what ended up being a five-hour lunch at Chequers, the prime minister’s country home. Thatcher wasted no time in firing the first salvo, stating, “I want there to be no misunderstanding between us....I hate communism.”

“Very quickly, the argument between Margaret and me became very heated,” Gorbachev later recalled, according to Jonathan Aitken’s book *Margaret Thatcher: Power and Personality*. “She was accusing the Soviet Union of all sorts of unfair things. I did not accuse Britain of anything.” The two turned their backs to each other in the middle of lunch, and Gorbachev’s wife, Raisa, stunned by Thatcher’s attack, indicated to her husband, “It’s over!” For a moment Gorbachev thought they should leave.

And then something remarkable happened. Gorbachev centered himself and considered his intentions in meeting Thatcher. “We are guests here; the conversation must continue,” he thought. He reframed the situation in his mind from “She’s attacking my government!” to “She’s promoting her principles.”

“Mrs. Thatcher,” Gorbachev said. “I know you are a person with an acute mind and high personal principles. Please bear in mind that I am the same kind of person.” She responded with a nod. He then continued, “Let me assure you that I have not come here with instructions from the Politburo to persuade you to become a member of the Communist Party.” Thatcher burst into laughter. “The tension was broken,” recalled Gorbachev, “and the discussion continued, although it soon [heated] up again but in better ways.”

The meeting proved to be a turning point in the Cold War. It convinced Thatcher—and subsequently, the U.S. president Ronald Reagan—that Gorbachev, in contrast to past Soviet leaders, was a man they could work with. “I actually rather liked him,” Thatcher later told Reagan.

Gorbachev himself reflected, “It was then, during that talk in Chequers, that the special relationship was born....We worked closely and fruitfully together to advance the important processes of that time—curbing the arms race, European developments, German unification, and reversing Iraq’s aggression in the Middle East.”

Was Gorbachev in that pivotal moment of impasse at lunch having a crucial conversation with Thatcher? Influencing her? Inspiring her? Giving feedback? Building trust? Changing her behavior? He was quite evidently engaging in all those traditional leadership activities. Yet in that moment, he was focused on one thing—activating the inner core in himself and in Thatcher. He did so with a few simple actions.

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First, he established a positive intention and tapped into purpose by *reaffirming and reexpressing* his reasons for meeting with Thatcher and deciding to stay and reengage with her. Second, he showed wisdom by *creating the right frame*—by looking at the situation more constructively. Third, he evoked love by *showing appreciation* for her acute mind and her high personal principles and *establishing an affiliation* with her—stating that he was the same kind of person. Last, instead of criticizing her for trying to convert him, he showed her how amusing it would be to her if he were trying to convert her, *sparking joy* (self-realization). Those actions instantly changed the tone of the meeting and helped him switch his leadership style from arguing to bridging.

Like Gorbachev, we all have more than one style. By drawing on our core energies, we can pull away from a limiting identification with any particular style and adapt to the present moment. It is worth noting, however, that leadership-in-flow does not work by faking it. If Gorbachev hadn't first truly felt admiration for Thatcher's acute mind and her principles, Thatcher probably would have sensed from his demeanor that he wasn't being genuine and would have responded much more coolly.

Most of us already have experience with the actions that activate the core energies. We all, for instance, show appreciation and build affiliations in everyday life (though it might not occur to many of us to use these actions if we were in Gorbachev's situation). The neural pathways for these actions are present in most people's brains. Since it's much easier to activate existing pathways than to build pathways from scratch, leadership-in-flow is accessible to everyone—people in all roles and at all levels.

Moreover, as Gorbachev’s story shows, the energies and actions can be harnessed to advance traditional leadership skills. Because they’re like a standardized set of building blocks, their use can help radically simplify competence-focused training.

Getting into the Flow

When great athletes are in a flow state their achievements look effortless —yet of course everything in their daily routines (from training to warm-ups to postmatch analyses) is intentional. The same is true with leadership. Indeed, in emphasizing leadership in the moment, I don’t want to minimize the importance of crafting a planned approach beforehand (to increase the chances of reaching the right state) and afterward (to learn from the experience and improve).

I advise executives to begin by targeting a specific upcoming event, like a board presentation or a negotiation, and homing in on a single objective, whether it’s building urgency, gaining buy-in, resolving conflict, or inspiring peak performance. Having no concrete goal or juggling too many goals can hinder a flow state. Executives should then replace any negative emotions or beliefs about that situation with a positive intention. If, for example, you are feeling unmotivated about a proposal-review meeting with your CFO because you believe she’s already decided against funding your request, you could set your intention to be “I will draw out my CFO’s perspective and points of resistance, build greater understanding between us, and prepare the conditions for a strong long-term partnership with her.”

Research shows that our intentions influence our emotions, thoughts, and perceptions, and that those in turn influence our behavior. When you believe other participants in a meeting won’t respect your perspective, or that a subordinate won’t be happy with your feedback, or that one party will have to lose for the other to win, you’ll be less

likely to engage in behaviors that build trust, open people's minds, and deepen understanding.

Next, I tell executives to pick three to five actions they can take to advance their goal for the event. They should base their choices on the energies they're most drawn to and the context they're in. To resolve a conflict, for example, they may activate wisdom by *fusing opposing viewpoints*, or they may activate love by *empathizing* and affiliating. Leadership-in-flow does not require a fixed sequence of actions in any situation; executives should pick suitable actions that feel authentic to them.

Consider how Adrian, a physician, resolved a disruptive situation that occurred at his hospital when the administration suddenly mandated a daily morning huddle for clinicians and staff without consulting them. The clinicians and staff were deeply upset because the huddle was held during patient appointment hours, and they felt it would negatively affect patient care. As a member of the operations committee, Adrian decided to intervene. He asked the administration to put the program on hold for a week. He began with an action that activates wisdom: *understand before you act*. By holding conversations with administrators about their motivations and with clinicians and staff about the complications they were experiencing, he discovered that top hospital systems had implemented similar huddles and found they greatly improved communication and workflow and created a sense of community. He then convened a meeting of the clinicians and staff. He set the tone by expressing appreciation (thereby creating love energy) for the tremendous sacrifices people were making. He then drew on purpose by *appealing to the values and purpose* of those present by reminding them of their collective commitment to providing the best patient care. Next he took two more actions that lead to wisdom: He created the right frame by helping people switch from an "us versus

them” attitude to jointly looking for the best path forward, and he fused opposing points of view by getting the two sides to see the value of not just doing their work well but also coming together to share, learn, and connect. It worked. “I received several text messages and emails,” he recounts, “acknowledging how I had been able to turn around the situation and bridge the divide.”

Once executives have chosen the actions they’ll undertake, they should spend five to 10 minutes before the event reviewing them and the intention they have set and taking time to *center themselves*. (There are any number of practices people can use to do this, such as deep breathing or a brief meditation.) As part of this they should spend two minutes visualizing how they’ll perform each chosen action. Our data shows that people who engage in such visualizations are 70% more likely to succeed at their goals. “It’s like the warm-up that athletes do before a game to perform better and avoid injury,” a key account director at IBM told us. “We executives too need to warm up our minds prior to events to think better and to prevent meetings from going in the wrong direction.”



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Such preparation also frees up more of the brain’s executive system—the frontal lobes—to deal with evolving dynamics, allowing people to adapt quickly as conditions change. They can use whatever action makes the most sense to them, moment by moment, shifting toward different energies as the event unfolds.

At one financial services company, tensions were running high on the analytics team of an executive called Roger. It was getting a lot of assignments but didn’t have a good process for prioritizing them. Deadlines were being missed, and teammates were blaming one another, much to Roger’s irritation. He decided to bring the team together for a conversation. To put aside his negative emotions, he set

the intention “I will create positive energy and rally the team around my vision.” He started the meeting by showing empathy and appreciation. “I understand how difficult it has been these last few weeks,” he said. “I recognize how hard you all have been working, despite these obstacles.” The love energy these actions released helped put his team at ease. Sensing an opening, he switched to activating growth energy by *soliciting advice*, inviting the team members to share their perspectives on the challenges they faced. Seeing that some were nervous, he gently nudged them and thoughtfully probed. As team members got more comfortable sharing their perspectives, one suggested that they start saying no to new requests, while another pushed back because that would compromise their objective of being a responsive team. Roger fused these opposing viewpoints by proposing that they become better at setting and resetting expectations about deliverables and deadlines with their internal clients. “Every person in the room felt personally accountable, engaged, and invested,” he recalls. As a result, valuable ideas emerged about how the team should prioritize work, and the chronic delays were alleviated.

Sometime after an event, executives should do a postmortem to assess how well it went, how successful they were at meeting their goals and using the chosen actions, and what they learned from it. Even when things don’t turn out as desired, this practice can produce valuable insights. As a vice president of business development at Wilton Re told us, postmortems have helped him “translate instances of ‘failure’ into opportunities for growth,” allowing him to find pride in moments when he honored his intention and tied it to his values.

Building Success upon Success

In our cross-organizational study, we saw that the performance of the more than 100 executives who were practicing leadership-in-flow for six weeks kept improving from one event to the next. As I’ve noted, by

the end their ability to achieve their goals had more than doubled on average, even though the objectives, context, and other parties involved in each event differed. We believe this is because of the consistency of the building blocks—the five core energies and 25 actions. As executives become more experienced at using them, they can effectively apply them in a wide variety of situations.

These findings align with research on expert performance showing that experts are more effective at organizing information—something psychologists call “chunking”—in their disciplines than novices are. Experts recognize structures that novices do not, are able to both take a high-level view and observe detailed nuances in a situation, and can transfer their chunking strategies more effortlessly to new contexts. Similarly, our research shows that executives who are experienced with leadership-in-flow can tune in to the energies in the room while others may only see outer behaviors; can see situations both from the high-level, five-energy perspective and from the more-nuanced actions perspective; and can transfer their ability to harness the core energies from one context to another.

Robin, a senior manager at a professional services firm, was assigned by her employer to take on a challenging client project in which multiple deliverables were due under a tight deadline. In preparing for her first meeting with the clients, Robin decided to focus on activating wisdom by creating the right frame and love by *acting/expressing thoughtfully* (bringing a deep sense of caring to how you make tough decisions and communicate hard truths). Though she had received training on acting/expressing thoughtfully, she learned about creating the right frame in the midst of her preparation, when reviewing the 25 actions.

“The meeting got off to a surprisingly rocky start,” Robin later recalled. “The clients started to give negative feedback on another project, and

that threatened to derail the conversation.” Robin’s normal response to such criticism would have been to defend her organization’s work and to engage in problem-solving on the issues raised. Instead, she decided in real time to draw on wisdom by *disarming* (finding something true in what an opposing party is saying and affirming it), an action she had used in earlier contexts, by agreeing with the clients that their concerns were important and assuring them that her team would look into them. Seeing the clients calm down, she brought them back to the purpose of their meeting, emphasizing how crucial it was to give full attention to the issues they needed to resolve. She positioned it as an opportunity for the two teams to hammer out details now to avoid problems later. She was able to get the meeting back on track and to get agreement on what her team and the clients would do to complete the project successfully.

Leadership-in-flow makes it easy for executives to expand their arsenal of actions over time, as Robin did. Our analysis has revealed that once they start practicing leadership-in-flow, executives perform just as well with actions they’ve picked up during event preparation as they do with actions they’ve been trained on at a workshop. This is because the actions are simple, and the neural pathways needed to use most of them are already present in us.

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In our early years, we associate learning with structured classrooms and set curriculums. Yet as we navigate the complexities of work and life, it becomes evident that some of our most profound breakthroughs emerge when we are “in the flow”—when we immerse ourselves in real-world experiences and challenges, respond in real time as conditions change, and tap into virtues and energies already present in our core.

Losing touch with the five energies amid life’s whirlwind is natural, but rekindling them is within our reach. All we need to do is focus on

a goal, open our hearts and minds to new possibilities, and select the right actions that will activate our inner core—that state from which remarkable performance arises.

How to Achieve Leadership-in-Flow

Leadership is not a set of traits to be learned; it is a state that can be attained by establishing a positive intention and then activating five core energies we all possess, via quick actions that take just a few seconds to execute. Below are 25 actions that you can use to tap your core energies.

Purpose Energy: Committed to a Noble Cause

1. **Appeal to values and purpose.** Discover and understand people's dearly held values and purpose and then tie them to what you're seeking.
2. **Reaffirm and reexpress.** When facing an unexpected change or a setback, find a way to reapply your core values and purpose to the new situation.
3. **Embark on a hero's journey.** Craft a compelling vision that inspires people to pursue a goal despite tough challenges.
4. **Push, pull, pause, pivot.** When you run into resistance, find a way to move forward by refining your idea and then presenting it again; shelving it if the costs are too high; waiting for changes that might renew interest in it; or reimagining it altogether.

Wisdom Energy: Calm and Receptive to the Truth

5. **Understand before you act.** Approach an issue with heightened curiosity, and fully explore it before making your move.
6. **Disarm.** When you encounter disagreement, find something true in what the other party is saying and affirm it.
7. **Fuse opposing viewpoints.** Find a way to integrate contradictory positions into a more nuanced and balanced perspective. For instance, if team members disagree about the quality of their presentation, their manager might point out that while the presentation was analytically persuasive, it overlooked building an emotional connection.

8. **Dial an emotion up or down.** Intensify positive feelings or dampen negative ones to bring out the best in yourself and others. Sensing rising frustration in a team meeting, a manager can shift the conversation to past successes and team strengths before turning people’s attention back to the debate.
9. **Direct emotional energy.** Harness the energy your feelings are producing to advance your purpose. For instance, use the pain of defeat to motivate a team to practice with greater discipline.
10. **Untwist your thinking.** Eliminate distorted thoughts so that you can see the situation in a clear, objective light. No, a presentation wasn’t a “total disaster.”
11. **Create the right frame.** Describe challenges, opportunities, and assignments in a way that brings out the best in people.

Growth Energy: Curious and Open to Learning

12. **Practice a growth mindset.** Recognize the vast untapped potential that exists in you and others.
13. **Solicit advice.** Gain a deeper understanding of others’ perspectives by asking experts and stakeholders to openly share their thoughts.
14. **Acknowledge, apologize, address.** Swiftly acknowledge, apologize for, and correct mistakes.
15. **Learn from adversity.** Use setbacks and failures to help you and others become better—not bitter.
16. **Anticipate, assess, adjust.** Think about the challenges that may lie ahead and plan how you will evaluate and adapt to them.

Love Energy: Connected with Those You Work with and Serve

17. **Appreciate.** Recognize positive qualities in situations and people.
18. **Affiliate.** Find common ground with others.
19. **Deepen human connection.** Create strong emotional bonds with others by accepting and offering bids for connection.
20. **Empathize.** Attune yourself, without judgment, to the emotions and thoughts of others, and make them feel understood.
21. **Act/express thoughtfully.** Bring a deep sense of caring to how you make tough decisions and communicate hard truths.

Self-Realization Energy: Centered in a Joyful Spirit

22. **Get centered.** Step back from your thoughts and feelings and focus on the tranquility deep inside you.
 23. **Affirm a core identity.** Help people see a positive quality as already being present at their core. For example, a manager might say, “Remember how composed you were at your last presentation? That is an intrinsic quality I’ve seen you possess. Tap into it, and this meeting will go smoothly.”
 24. **Cultivate intuition.** Generate creative insights on critical issues by inducing a relaxed state of mind, for example, by taking a walk or meditating.
 25. **Spark joy.** Cheer others up with small uplifting acts.
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