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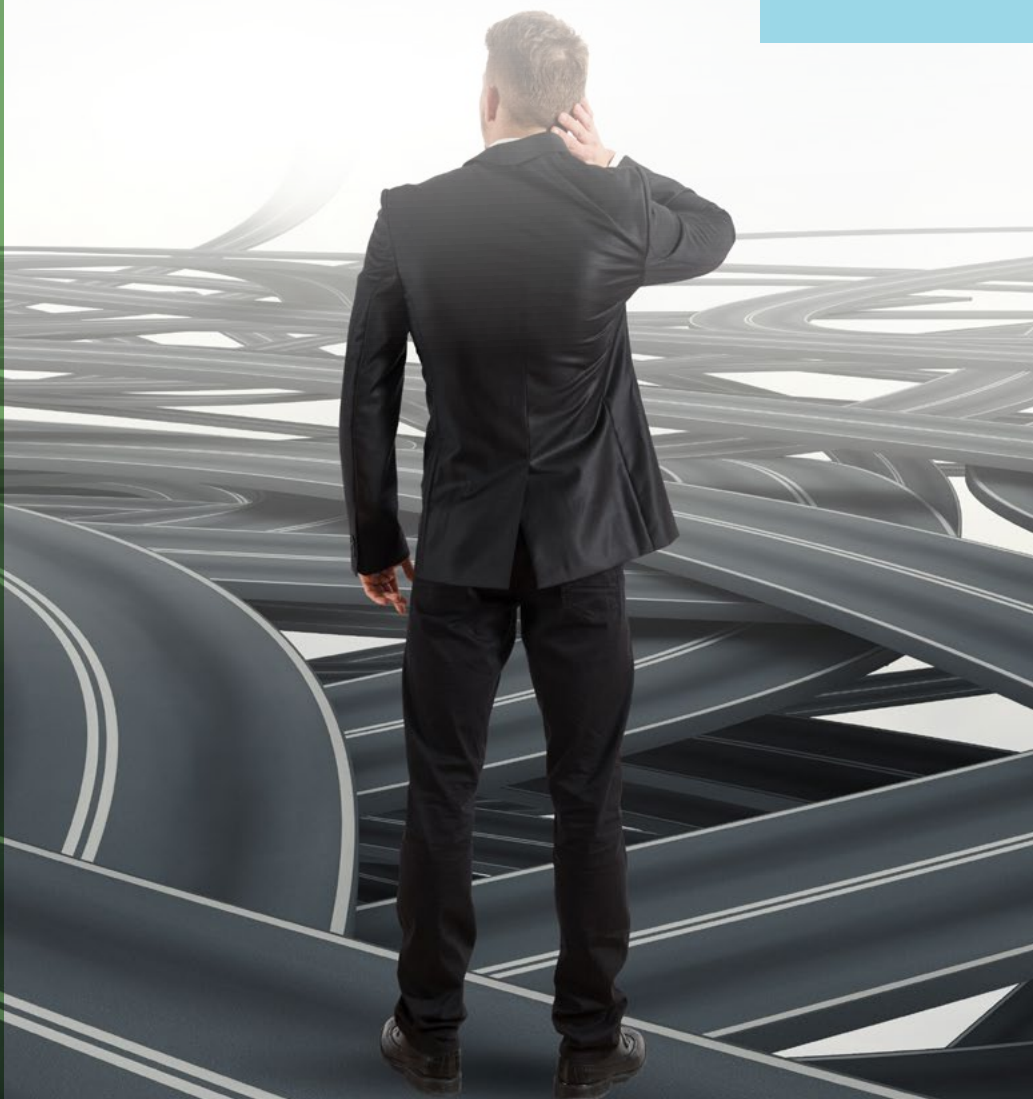
by David Cooper

LEARN HOW TO BE PROSPEROUS IN CHAOS

It's the New Norm

There are generally three types of leaders running companies in today's volatile and chaotic business climate. Which type of leader and organization do you represent? Wherever you are in the spectrum, you're not alone and there are exciting ways to harness chaos and make it work to your advantage.

■ **LAGGARDS:** A lot of leaders bristle and balk at the word chaos, despite that chaos overwhelmingly characterizes our current and projected business environment. These leaders are resistant to change and operate in denial of the realities impacting companies everywhere. Their organizations are recognizable as those lacking current technology, having difficulty attracting and retaining talent, and



failing to understand, engage and keep customers from defecting to the competition.

■ **FAST FOLLOWERS:** These leaders are galvanized by chaos, knowing that if you can't beat it, you must join it – and they do so in a robust although reactive fashion. At the very least, these leaders know that the status quo and outmoded ways of operating are a mandate for improving operations and finding ways to stay relevant and drive new revenue. Their companies are identifiable through actions and communications that show how they are improving their offerings, company cultures and customer service levels.

■ **RAINMAKERS:** With their deep love of invention, entrepreneurship and strong values, these future-forward leaders and their fiery teams are always chomping at the bit to crash the gates of mediocrity. They heartily embrace chaos and even create it by instigating industry change. They deliver solutions to problems their customers don't yet know they have. They topple traditional concepts (including their own) with novel products, services and enhancements. And they devise unique business models that defy the norm and ignite progressive change.

While every organization has constraints, positive change comes from big and small pursuits and the courage to change. What's interesting is that some constraints are more often perceived than real, and even more often, it's the smaller, ongoing efforts that yield the most meaningful results. The key is to be intentional, focused and committed to breaking down barriers to growth.

Are you ready to level up? If so, this article is for you.

First off, let's put chaos in proper context

The chaos we are experiencing in business today is largely due to influences outside of our control. These factors are economic, geopolitical and social changes, and they are occurring more frequently and with greater intensity.

Global systems and scenarios, such as the supply chain, pandemics, wars and the impacts of climate change are directly or indirectly impacting business everywhere, creating an unpredictable environment with wild fluctuations in availability, costs, labor and demand. It doesn't matter if a business is local, regional, national or international. Our business environment is irrevocably global. Just like water wicks in the ground, turmoil seeps into every business.



Since chaos is here to stay, as leaders, we must adopt a new mindset to lead our organizations forward.

A game-on mentality starts with a culture of strategy

Leaders with a winning mentality are constantly asking themselves and their teams, "How will we make a positive difference and real

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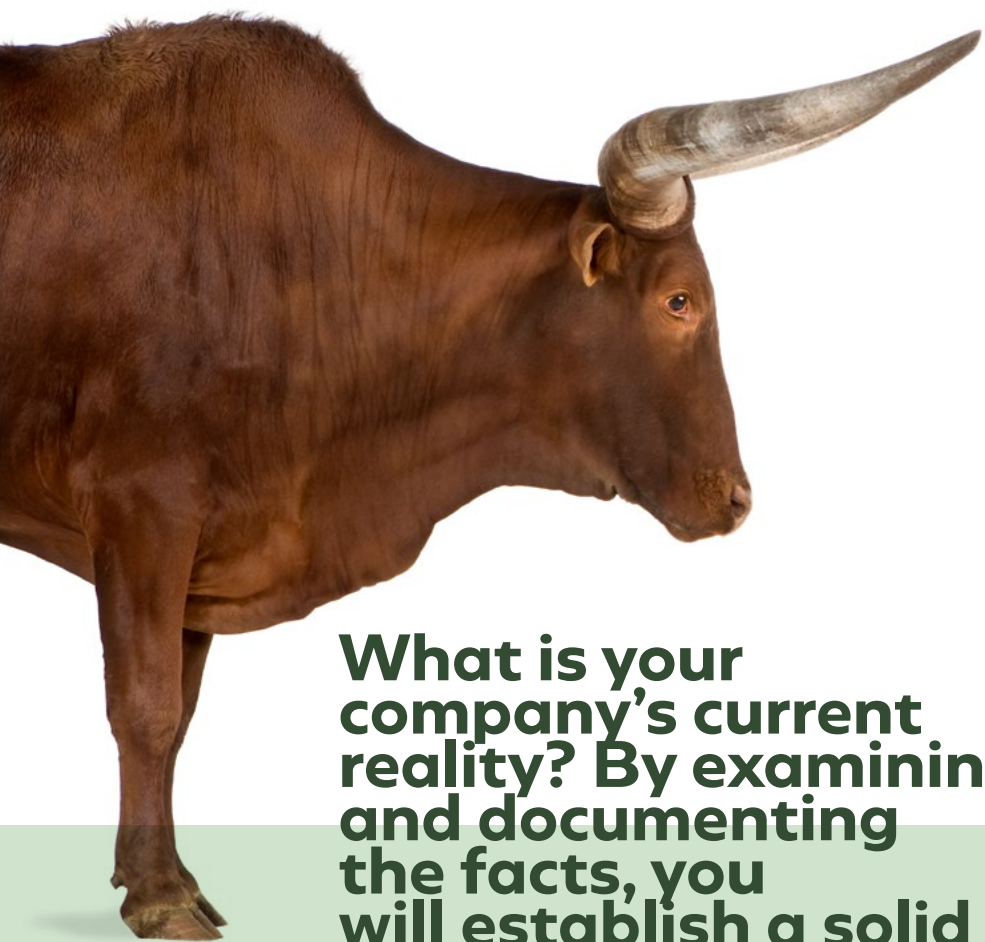
progress with what we have?" By asking how, what they are really calling for is strategy.

Game-changers know that building the agile culture needed today requires business intelligence, focused thinking, effective communication and training – for everyone. In other words, strategy must become a culture – a company-wide process used to navigate turmoil and take control of the impacts and opportunities created by chaos.

5 ways to take chaos by the horns

Building a culture of strategy is accomplished by paying close attention to, planning and operating based on five guiding principles.

1 Become Acutely Aware: Create a culture of awareness by having your leadership team become intimate with the internal and external factors that affect day-to-day operations and long-term planning. What is your company's current reality? By examining and documenting the facts, you



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INTERNAL FACTORS: Identify your company's strengths and weaknesses in these areas:

- Organizational structure: the size, quality and effectiveness of the operation
- Current business model and business plans
- Financial resources and financial forecasts
- The company's core values and value proposition
- Human resources and labor management
- Marketing resources, budgets and plans
- Brand name and brand image, and their equity in the market
- Operational assets (equipment, machinery, office and/or plant infrastructure)
- Employee relations and relationship management
- Customer relations and relationship management (CRM)
- Partner and supplier relationships and relationship management
- IT platforms, architecture, software, remote access solutions, data protection, cybersecurity
- Operating policies, standard operating procedures and codes of conduct
- Company and employee task execution, productivity and performance

EXTERNAL FACTORS: These cannot be controlled but you must

examine them and devise effective and sustainable plans and actions to conquer turmoil they create:

■ **The economy:** Inflation, rising interest rates, weak or strong economies, shifts in supply and demand, tight hiring markets, low unemployment – it's essential for leaders and teams to keep a solid pulse on these trends to stay agile in tweaking business, marketing and hiring strategies and increase demand at the right time.

■ **Local, domestic and international political influences:** Political factors are central to formulating a sound business strategy. No company is exempt from government policies, laws, protections and regulations. These and new legislative bills that are continually passed must be monitored – not only to ensure compliance but also identify opportunities and threats that impact planning. These include but aren't limited to:

- Employment, equal opportunity, antidiscrimination and ban-the-box laws
- Consumer, environmental and safety laws
- Environmental laws around pollution control
- Taxation, tariff and quota rules and regulations
- Import and export laws
- Effects of war on the supply chain and resulting supply and demand issues
- Regulation of fair competition, anti-trust and anti-monopoly laws
- International flow of money regulations

- Intellectual property, patent and copyright laws and protection
- Travel restrictions due to wars, civil/political unrest and pandemics

■ **Greater competition:** In 2021 alone, a record-breaking 5.4 million new business applications were filed in the United States and nearly as many, 5.1 million, were filed in 2022. Today's ultra-competitive business landscape is intensifying at warp speed along with consumer demand for more options, better prices, more rewarding customer experiences

Smart companies are also monitoring and engaging potential trade partners with the goal of co-opting on products, services and fulfillment, which is reducing costs and competitive threats, and creating new revenue streams.

and the shift to online shopping. These trends are compounded by even greater competition from foreign online retailers.

Business leaders must stay current on new entrants and ensure their companies deliver top-notch service and new offerings to remain competitive and profitable. Smart companies are also monitoring and engaging potential trade partners with the goal of co-opting on products, services and fulfillment, which is reducing costs and competitive threats, and creating new revenue streams.

■ **Changing demographics:** Who are your customers? Who are your employees? You need to know so that your culture, strategy and offerings appeal to and satisfy evolving expectations and attract top talent and new customers. Age, gender, ethnicity, income distribution, location, lifestyle, mobility...all these factors and more should guide culture improvements, product development, business objectives, strategy and marketing. Today's workers and consumers also want to work for and buy from companies whose values align with their own and demonstrate good corporate citizenship or corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Conducting demographic research into workforce expectations and target markets is essential to every business strategy. The goal of becoming more people-centric is helping companies resonate more strongly with the values and belief systems of today's workforce and consumers.

■ **Leaps in technology:** Companies that prioritize IT advancements are excelling in many ways – business and manufacturing process improvements, increased transactions, faster fulfillment, more online sales, expanded customer bases through global internet reach, product and service innovation, speed to market, personalized marketing, responsive customer relationship management and successful penetration into new markets. Technology is also increasing secure access to internal systems and productivity among remote workers, while simultaneously reducing overhead costs. It's worthy of mention that the work-from-home movement shifts a company's center of gravity from a physical office to a technology platform. Know where to invest your resources!

2 Use Objective Triage: Work with your teams on how to be effective and smart when multiple issues arise at the same time. Let's face it. This is a constant reality! Evaluate each scenario so you know based on facts what (or who) gets your full attention and resources immediately, and then next and then next. Maybe it's a power disruption, a product recall, 50 customers demanding resolutions at once, equipment failure or some other crisis. Objective triage brings sanity to chaos.



Here's a great analogy and outlook from Ai Media Group CEO Sergio Alvarez:
"When an ER doctor faces multiple patients, all with different ailments, they cannot work on a first-come, first-served basis," he says. "By using a process of informed triage, they will immediately know that the gunshot victim needs to be attended to before the patient with the broken ankle, despite the patient with the paper cut screaming the

loudest. ... When we perfect the art of chaos triage, we can embrace the opportunity to implement changes that will minimize mayhem in the future. You learn far more about your business and customers in times of adversity than you do when everything is going swimmingly."

3 Become More Flexible: Preparing a solid go-to-market strategy with data-driven objectives and plans is paramount. But with these in hand, what's really driving success today is flexibility – the ability to be agile, adjust objectives and tactics, and bend and mold short- and long-term actions that work in a chaotic market. Shorter: Be ready and willing to change course. Leverage the creativity of your leadership and marketing teams, employees, business partners and IT platform.

Speaking of flexibility, IBM's report, 5 trends for 2023 – Embracing chaos, taking charge, reveals that hybrid working models remain a top priority for talent in 2023. More than one in three (35%) employees say they would not apply for a job that doesn't offer the

ability to work remotely at least part-time. As worker needs shift and many organizations resist change, employee loyalty is also diminishing. IBM's full report is an awakening for companies that want to thrive in chaos.

4 Know Where You Stand at All Times: Continuous monitoring and measuring of key business metrics is needed to anchor short- and long-term direction and guide daily decisions. This is how you stay abreast of all factors impacting strategy and goals, and to ensure they are working or need adjustments.

Asana shares 27 business success metrics that every business should be tracking, ranging from general business metrics (profit margin, ROI, productivity, total customer base, recurring revenue) to marketing metrics, customer success metrics, sales metrics, developer metrics and HR metrics. As a business and management consultant whose strategy for success centers on data-driven planning, I strongly encourage you to dig into Asana's guideposts linked above.



5 Inspire and Motivate Your Rainmakers: It's imperative to empower leaders at all levels of today's organizations with freedom, support and tools to adjust and make better decisions.

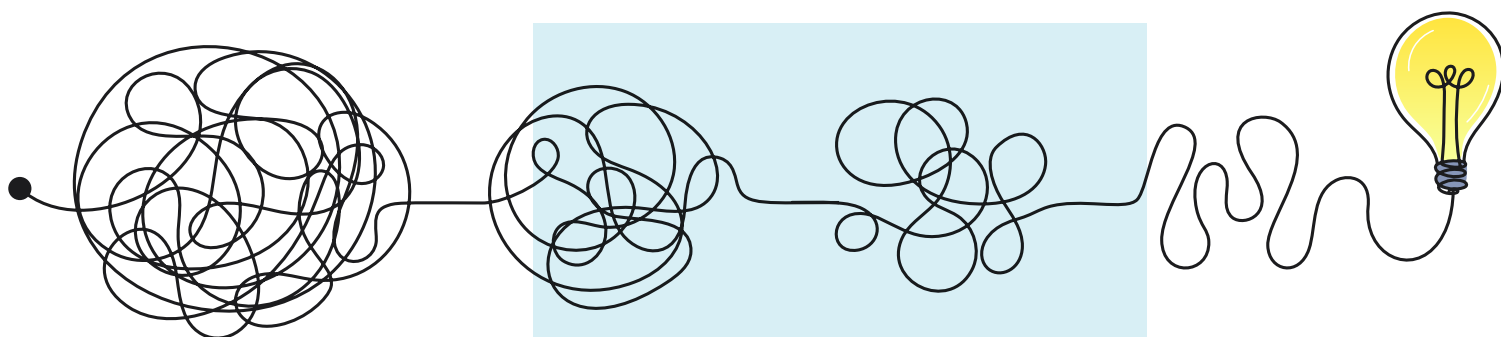
Transformational leadership, a concept first introduced in the early 1970s, is tailor made for today's environment of chaos. The model encourages leaders to demonstrate authentic, strong leadership with the idea that employees will be inspired to follow suit. CIO shines a light on the four main elements that define this type of leader:

Tailor your coaching and mentorship style to an employee's unique needs and contributions.

This is the moment to turn risk into opportunity

The degree of change taking place in our world and business environment is extraordinary, and global leaders believe volatility and risks will continue unabated. Yet the show must go on. Not every leader instinctively knows how to turn chaos into growth but necessity is forcing them to learn and share their knowledge with their teams. Everything points to creating a culture of strategy and becoming more agile, flexible and creative, while staying grounded in data-driven facts.

Leveling up in today's business climate is a process. The Cooper Group has been guiding companies and their leadership for 25 years. We are agents of change, ready to help you harness chaos at every level of your organization with confidence, raw energy and ingenuity. Contact us for a free consultation.



- a) **Idealized influence:** Lead by example. Be a role model. Commit to trust, transparency and respect.
- b) **Intellectual stimulation:** Challenge longstanding beliefs. Push the status quo. Encourage innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving. Help employees explore and inject new ideas, opportunities and innovation into the company.
- c) **Inspirational motivation:** Encourage your teams to feel attached and committed to the company's vision. Give them a strong sense of purpose.
- d) **Individual consideration:** Give employees independence and ownership in business goals.

Challenge longstanding beliefs. Push the status quo. Encourage innovation, critical thinking and problem-solving. Help employees explore and inject new ideas, opportunities and innovation into the company.

Don't Let the Unknown Stop You from Making Good Business Decisions

Business leaders are often stumped, even paralyzed, by unplanned and unexpected factors. Compounding the problem is agonizing pressure to make a move before the window closes and time makes the decision for them. When leaders waffle back and forth on an important decision, or simply freeze up, some level of fear or anxiety is usually part of the equation. "There's no precedent for this. What should I do? What if I make the wrong move?"

Being stumped in today's feral business climate is not a sign of weakness, incompetence, lack of creativity or poor governance – not unless action is needlessly delayed. So yes, getting off the dime is crucial, but it's also important to get real. If you're in a position of leadership, it's because you earned it and you're good at it. But you're also human and it's crazy out there. Give yourself a break. Dial down the pressure. And adopt a mindset for the current times.

Here's how to whip uncertainty into focus:

1. The first step is to flip things around in your mind by making this your mantra: In facing uncharted territory, I'm wise enough to assess new variables

before I make a decision.

2. The second step is to recognize the reasons you hesitate or vacillate and replace them with proven, barrier-breaking tactics. This article pinpoints the most common mental roadblocks and ways to tear them down.

Analysis paralysis is a real thing

Leaders can suffer from analysis paralysis, a circular mind trap with no off ramp that leads to nowhere. They do this in search of indisputable evidence to support a decision. Such evidence doesn't exist! But around and around they go in the quest for a guarantee. Why?

Usual causes of analysis paralysis include fear of making wrong decisions and further, not being able to manage the consequences. Leaders also get hung up on perfect timing – anguishing over whether a certain move will be made too soon or not soon enough. The biggest of all impacts is inaction in overthinking what might result from a given decision; hence, paralysis.

Learn how to spot and fix it:

- Understand what anxiety is and be willing to admit when you're



in its grips. Recognition is the first step in conquering it.

- Instead of being overwhelmed by a ton of information, possibilities and potential outcomes involved in a decision, break the decision down into smaller ones, which you can adjust later. For example, whether you're facing an opportunity or a challenge, create a list of three potential but separate approaches to the opportunity or problem. This will minimize the enormity that is plaguing you and put you on a track to choosing the best option.

New challenges are not fixed with old solutions

Recall is one way our minds work when we encounter a problem, and it's natural to gravitate to what is familiar. For these reasons, people instinctively turn to old solutions to address new challenges. We do it because it worked before, and because prior experience tells us how it's done, and because it saves time. And time is money, right?

Unfortunately, in today's business environment, the fastest solutions

is impossible, we must make calculated decisions based on current facts.

Anyone who knows me is aware that I'm a staunch advocate of using data-driven facts to plan and make decisions. Ready-fire-aim just isn't my style. It shouldn't be yours, either. Your challenges and opportunities need to be as clearly defined as possible, and these deep insights come from facts. Analytics are your best friend in making informed decisions.

But therein lies the root of evil paralysis – too much data – and overanalyzing it is just as destructive as defaulting to a quick, familiar fix. I readily admit there can be a fine line between data-driven decision making and analysis paralysis.

This is where your other best friend comes into play. Its name is collaboration.

Agile leaders know collaboration is key: Yes, it can be lonely at the top, but the thing is, you're not alone. Other professionals (your management counterparts, your team leaders) appreciate and value being asked their opinions.

Ultimately, the decision is yours, but engaging others in your decision-making process makes them

stakeholders in the outcome, in celebrating success or working with you to deal with consequences (which are commonly foreseen through collaboration and other viewpoints). You also gain valuable insights from others' expertise.

There's an interesting dynamic here. Collaboration kills paralysis. Almost instantly. Confidence and clarity surface with input, ideas and consensus, and quite often, other viewpoints also bring clarity to what you know would be a wrong decision.

Try this. Go to your chosen counterparts or team leaders with the challenge or opportunity that requires your expedient decision. Give them the two or three top options you are considering and spend an hour chewing on the pros and cons of each. If the decision calls for deeper analysis, have a second meeting. Then make your decision and move on to the next hot thing on your plate.

Performance fatigue is a real thing, too

Last year, Deloitte released a report with the independent research firm Workplace Intelligence that explores the C-suite's role in organizational well-being. It examines how an overall poor state of health is affecting retention among workers and executives alike. Nearly 70% of C-suite respondents said they're seriously considering quitting for a job that better supports their well-being.

Today's leaders are under immense and constant pressure to lead teams and companies forward while managing unrelenting challenges. Performance fatigue must be anticipated and dealt with to avoid burnout, poor decisions and impacts on daily life in general.

Fast Company's article earlier this year by Katharine Manning, [Leadership Fatigue Is Real. Here's How to Build Up Your Resilience](#),

It's a fact that quick-fix, short-term solutions lead to business spiking and crashing

are often allowed to supersede the existence of new variables and transformative actions. It's a fact that quick-fix, short-term solutions lead to business spiking and crashing. Foresight is needed, and since predicting the future

defines what's happening and why, and provides five ideas for preserving strength and buoyancy in today's environment.

One of those ideas is to know the warning signs. To illustrate it, Manning shares this anecdote:

One leader said to me recently, "I thought I was fine. I was reading the news and was aware of everything going on, but I didn't think it was affecting me. Then one day I was on a conference call with my team and started screaming at them. I totally lost it."

Manning says, "There are usually warning signs that you are beginning to burn out, and when those signals are missed, they get louder until they're impossible to ignore. The challenge is that the warning signs of burnout can be different for different people. Perhaps for you it's a sore throat, trouble falling asleep, or a sharper edge to your sarcasm. It's important to recognize your warning signs and recommit to self-care when they show up – before they blow up."

Check out the full article. It's a great read and spot on. Here's another resource to explore: [The Silent Impact of Burnout — and How to Overcome It as a Leader](#)

Transformation and making decisions can be exhausting when your operating muscles are stressed or overworked. Whether you're helping your organization rebound from a setback, tackling a challenge, pursuing continuous improvement or changing your business model, the state of your mental and physical wellbeing matters – to you and the teams you lead.

Collaboration kills paralysis. Almost instantly.



Be you in better ways – and remember your ‘why’

Aspiring to land a top job is very different than walking a few miles in the shoes of today's leaders. The weak at heart need not apply! Yet, as evidenced by the Deloitte study, even the smartest and most courageous leaders out there navigating our untamed business world are questioning why they wanted to become heavy hitters in the first place.

If you ever feel like one of those leaders, here's another excerpt from the Fast Company article that might speak to your inner purpose and help retool your thinking: *You may have heard that parable about a traveler who comes upon three people working. He asks*

each of them, "What are you doing?" The first answers, "busting up rocks." The second says, "making a living." The third responds, "building a cathedral." Try to hold on to the reason that you chose your current field and position. What is your reason?

– Katharine Manning

The world needs great business leaders and you have what it takes. If you struggle with the unknown in today's demanding climate, you're in good company. Every great leader is looking for the right answers. Remember that you're wise enough to assess new variables before deciding, and that you can do it with collaboration, strength and endurance for the long haul.

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