

“A masterful contribution to the landscape of leadership development, as well as a practical, hands-on manual for personal and professional growth.”

—MARSHALL GOLDSMITH, AUTHOR OF THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER *TRIGGERS*

LEADING FROM YOUR
**BEST
SELF**

Develop Executive Poise,
Presence, and Influence to
Maximize Your Potential

ROB SALAFIA

PRAISE FOR ROB SALAFIA AND LEADING FROM YOUR BEST SELF

A masterful contribution to the landscape of leadership development, as well as a practical, hands-on manual for personal and professional growth—as seen through the eyes of a consummate performing artist and executive coach. A compelling read that will leave you wanting more.

—**Marshall Goldsmith, author of the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Triggers***

Leading from Your Best Self is an incredible playbook for developing executive presence and influence. Rob is a consummate storyteller and relies on his background in the performing arts to teach us numerous techniques like “landing” and “expanding.” Great lessons that will immediately make you a more effective leader.

—**Kevin Kruse, CEO, LEADx.Org**

The majority of books on executive presence say, “Here’s what I think works for most people. . . .” Rob Salafia’s says, “Let’s find out what will work for you.” *Leading from Your Best Self* is a customized development plan for becoming the best version of you as a leader.

—**Paul Smith, author of the bestselling books *Lead with a Story* and *Sell with a Story***

In his new book, Rob will show you how to discover, appreciate, and take your Best Self with you. He reveals the secrets to building a powerful executive presence by tapping into your natural strengths and gifts. He will also guide you on how to sustain these behaviors in your daily work lives.

—**Anne Molignano, SVP, Head of Human Resources NA, Sony Music Entertainment**

Any rising leader who works with Rob is in great hands, and now this book gives you Rob’s wisdom and coaching, and your full potential, at your fingertips.

—**Joshua Margolis, Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School**

Rob's central messages are a priceless guide to the art of truly connecting with others. Though compelling stories and courageous examples, Rob gives us guideposts to living—and leading—with greater authenticity and purpose.

Leaders at all levels can benefit from these clear and straightforward tips for enhancing your impact, starting from the core of who you are as a person.

—**Julie Staudenmier, Vice President, Talent
Management and Development Pfizer, Inc.**

If it's true—as Shakespeare famously wrote—that “all the world's a stage,” then Rob Salafia, through his brilliant and captivating new leadership book, *Leading from Your Best Self*, has come along to help us take center stage . . . and to shine. A masterful storyteller, Rob draws on his unique background in the performing arts, while sharing many powerful lessons from his own personal leadership journey, to captivate and entertain the reader from start to finish. In so doing, we are instructed on, and inspired to, uncover and explore our own stories . . . leading us each to discover our own very best selves.

—**Todd Cherches, CEO of BigBlueGumball, Adjunct
Professor of leadership at New York University, and
Lecturer on leadership at Columbia University**

With a wealth of experience in both theater performance and corporate learning, Rob Salafia brings a perspective few executive coaches can match. In *Leading from Your Best Self*, he has developed a blueprint for success from which leaders at all levels—regardless of field—can benefit. Follow his advice, and you'll not only grow as a leader, but you'll also excel at creating environments in which everyone around you can do the same.

—**Steve Curtis, Vice President, Olympic Marketing,
Toyota North America**

As my coach, Rob motivated me to work hard and guided me to develop the skills necessary to deliver an engaging and relevant presentation to 500 credit risk officers. His dedication to my development and his ability to challenge at just the right time enabled me to bring my story to life.

In his book, *Leading from Your Best Self*, Rob merges his deep experience working with leaders at all levels with a solid background in theater and the performing arts. By using the tools provided in this book, you will be better equipped to step into any new situation with poise and confidence.

—**Darryl Fess, President, Brookline Bank, Boston, MA**

In his book, *Leading from Your Best Self*, Rob Salafia delivers authentic stories with a twinkle in his eye that makes them unforgettable. For me, this book provides an easy reference guide of reminders on how to make every connection personal and enduring, both onstage and through the camera lens.

—**Steve Aveson, News Anchor, KRON4 TV,
San Francisco**

If you have ever received feedback that you need to improve your executive presence, but no one was able to tell you how, this is the book for you. Rob describes in vivid detail a full range of capabilities and skills necessary to stand tall, find your authentic voice, and deliver your message with impact.

—**Mike Figliuolo, Managing Director of thought
LEADERS, LLC and author of *One Piece of Paper*,
Lead Inside the Box, and *The Elegant Pitch***

Rob Salafia is an authority on executive presence and influence. In his book, he shows us that “being present is both a choice and a necessity.” You will learn highly-effective, easy-to-remember techniques that will help you become an authentic and confident leader. A must read for those who want to have an impact.

—**Will G. Foussier, CEO and cofounder @Ace-Up, Inc.
Cambridge, MA**

In an incredibly rich field book for personal and leadership development, *Leading from Your Best Self* is both hugely practical and enjoyable. Rob’s first act as a performing artist enables him to bring a unique perspective to the “art” of personal growth. Highly recommended.

—**Jean Gomes, coauthor of the *New York Times*
bestseller, *The Way We’re Working Isn’t Working***

We are living in a time where so many people feel like impostors at work. Their work persona has separated from who they really are. This book provides a way for us to see ourselves as others see us and use that knowledge to hone the leadership skills that are so elusive in our organizations. It is time well spent to read, practice, and share Rob’s story to be your best.

—**Anne M. Hunnex, MS, Organizational
Change Consultant**

In the world of business, the ability to connect and create followership for your ideas is what distinguishes leaders from managers. To do this effectively, one needs to look inside of oneself and start to understand that “you are your message.” I had the privilege to work with Rob for a number of years and behind his humble yet strong appearance, is someone who is a master at unlocking the potential in others—this book is a strong testament of the valuable work that he delivers and comes highly recommended!

—**Alex Klein, Sr. Director, Talent & Organizational Effectiveness, Lumileds**

Some books change us. Their powerful, personal messages move us to discover an entirely new potential within ourselves. Rob’s book is one of those. His masterful storytelling and fun, easy-to-read way of sharing insights, advice, and tips for improving one’s leadership presence and communication effectiveness make for delightful and near-instant personal growth. Every leader . . . every person . . . will benefit from Rob’s messages and wisdom.

—**Dave Kruczlincki, President, High Peaks Strategic Business Advisors**

We all have a story. Some of us are better at sharing it than others. Rob is no ordinary executive coach. Most coaches follow some script—and most insightful leaders have heard the script before, provoking some short-term inquisition, at best. Rob finds a way to have you ask yourself the most difficult yet basic questions—the questions that can define every leader. Rob gets to the heart of what makes us tick, of what defines us, and what we are most passionate about.

Leading from Your Best Self is not about Rob—it is about you. It is about what is within you, and how you turn your experiences, your passions, your own stories into your Best Self.

—**Kosta Ligris, Esq., CEO, Ligris Entrepreneur, Philanthropist, Storyteller**

Leading from Your Best Self is a PAGE TURNER—and once you start reading this incredible book—you will NOT be able to put it down. Rob Salafia’s unique leadership methodology offers not only sage advice—but a step-by-step recipe for any leader to traverse from where they are now to where they NEED to be.

—**Bobby Maher, former CEO, St. Christopher’s, Dobby Ferry, NY**

Rob has opened my eyes to things of which I was totally oblivious. His reverse career path, from a traveling theater and tap-dancing artist to a businessman, has given him wisdom that we can all gain from.

We know Presence when we see it in someone but we can't quite always pin it down. Rob explains it: As in theater, Presence is about how you enter and how you exit, how you land and how you free the limits of your breath. How you listen with your eyes! How you engage an audience by making every cell in your body speak out with you.

Leading from Your Best Self will be a manual and a friend. It shares the wisdom of a traveling performer who was a keen observer of himself and others, who connected with his audience through breath, and who spoke not to talk but to be heard. The book speaks intimately to our internal silence and wisdom and calls it out to be our partner in life and in performance on our life's stage.

—**John Prot, CEO, Stromasys**

In *Leading from Your Best Self*, Rob Salafia, brings the reader to the reality that most leadership books skim over; that the fabric of who we are, what we experience and the stories we hold dear can help us become the leader we want to be, or rather, have had inside us all along. Through insightful exercises and questions, each chapter brings you closer to the leader you are capable of being. This is the book I've been looking for, and I am so excited to put it into action—with my best self forward.

—**Donna Scarola, Sr. Manager, Global Performance
& Development, Johnson & Johnson**

"Poetry" said Novalis, the 18th-century German philosopher, "heals the wounds inflicted by reason." Paraphrasing Novalis, today we need the arts in order to activate our deep human creativity to heal the wounds inflicted by our old leadership and management paradigm. Rob's book is a key contribution to the new leadership that is called for today. He speaks from his personal experience and highlights many of the new principles and practices. Highly recommended.

—**Otto Scharmer, founder of MITx u.lab and author
of *The Essentials of Theory U* (Berrett-Koehler, 2018)**

Rob's knowledge of business and theater enables him to coach, energize, and challenge a room of senior executives. He shares his insights with you in this book, making it the next best thing to having your own personal executive coach.

—**Gloria Schuck, EdM & EdD, Harvard
Lecturer, MIT (from the Foreword)**

I was at the Silver Bay leadership conference that Rob speaks about in Chapter 1. What was extraordinary was watching Hope become herself, as Rob says “her best self” right in front of us. Rob has a gift for bringing out the strength within people and helping them use it and access it in times of challenge. In that way he exemplifies one of the core principles of coaching: leveraging the strength of the coachee and helping them shine their light on the world.

—**Erica Schwartz, Leadership Coach**

There is an art and science to leading. There are countless authors who can write about one or the other. I can think of no one better qualified than Rob Salafia to share the secrets of both the Art & the Science of how “showing up”—fully and powerfully—maximizes our potential. I have worked with Rob for decades in countless programs where our common goal is to help participants gain greater clarity (self-awareness) and comfort (self-acceptance) with who they are. If you want to learn how to become more of who you are, who you are meant to be, this is the book for you!

—**Scott Snook, Senior Lecturer of Business
Administration, Harvard Business School.**

Rob Salafia, a master alchemist in the art of leadership transformation, joyously translates the laudable premise of *Leading from Your Best Self*, from aspiration to practice.

In this fine book, steeped in story, lessons drawn from a life in the theater and decades of teaching leadership presence, you will find inspiration and skillful means for developing the art and cultivating the lifelong craft of discovering how you can lead from your own best self. Rob's book is a bar-raising gift to the field, but more importantly, it will help you hone what's best in you and share it vividly with the world.

—**Marc Zegans, Creative Development Advisor**

LEADING FROM YOUR

BEST SELF

Develop Executive Poise,
Presence, and Influence to
Maximize Your Potential

ROB SALAFIA



NEW YORK CHICAGO SAN FRANCISCO

ATHENS LONDON MADRID

MEXICO CITY MILAN NEW DELHI

SINGAPORE SYDNEY TORONTO



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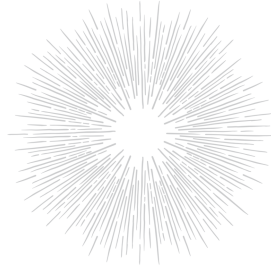
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INTRODUCTION

“ROOTED IN THE THEATER AND PERFORMING ARTS”

In his work on social cognitive theory, psychologist Albert Bandura asserts that theater is a powerful way to build self-efficacy, or a belief in one’s ability to accomplish a task or succeed in specific situations. In the world of business, this is called self-confidence, and it is critical for career success. In this book, I will bring to life many lessons that I have learned as a theater professional turned executive coach and show you how you can apply these lessons in your roles at work and in life.

Act I

For the first half of my career I was a performing artist traveling much of North America delivering a unique, one-person variety show. Storytelling was always at the heart of my work, and I was fully captivated with this artform in 1977 while attending the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling Conference in Jonesboro, Tennessee. I was enthralled by the power of these amazing performers who could capture the imagination of their audience and create lasting and vivid images in their audience’s minds. My first and fondest memory at the festival is of Doc McConnell standing in front of his medicine truck pitching old-time snake oil and telling tales as tall as a field of cornstalks (Figure I.1). You just got lost in his stories.



FIGURE I.1 Doc McConnell and his Old-Time Medicine Show

Dance, mime, and circus were also areas of interest and specialty. The image of me in Figure I.2 was taken during the main stage performance at the Edmonton Street Performers Festival. The image in Figure I.3 was taken in 1979 during my first year as a performer.

I studied the art of tap dance with renowned dancers including Gregory Hines, Leon Collins, Steve Condos, Jimmy Slyde, and many other legends from New York City, Los Angeles, Boston, and Philadelphia. And, in 1989, I was awarded a residency with the celebrated tap dancer Honi Coles. There was a culture of excellence, self-determination, and courage. One of my most memorable moments was in the early eighties, taking a cab with some friends to Smalls Paradise, a nightclub on 125th Street in Harlem, and being invited by the late Buster Brown to dance in front of a 16-piece jazz orchestra. Smalls Paradise was second only to the Cotton Club in its heyday. It was unforgettable.

I also became a wire walker (Think Philippe Petit, who walked across the World Trade Towers . . . only not that high!) and learned to challenge and conquer my fear of heights.

The Road Less Taken

My journey into performing started in 1978. I was fresh out of college and had just begun to explore the world of theater and performing rather than pursuing a career in political geography. That winter I had learned to juggle and started to do a bit of performing in front of small audiences.

I wanted to learn more and found out about a gifted teacher, Tony Montanaro, who held summer classes in Maine for professional performers. I enrolled

INTRODUCTION



FIGURE I.2 Rob, tap dancing at the 1990 Edmonton Street Performers Festival, Edmonton, Alberta



FIGURE I.3 Rob, Street Clown, Faneuil Hall, Boston, MA 1979

in his three-month mime and storytelling workshop. This was a huge commitment, and I was eager to prove myself.

One morning I stood facing a wall in the large red barn where we had our classes, juggling three Indian clubs. These were crude, homemade instruments, heavy and a bit unwieldy. I was quite proud of the fact that I could handle more than just three juggling balls and hacked away at trying to perfect a few basic moves with the clubs.

Without any announcement, Tony entered the barn and started to walk past me, when he stopped, looked at me, and made a comment: “Salafia,” he said, “you just don’t look like a juggler.” And then walked away.

Maybe I was just trying to get his attention, but when he said these words I was shocked at first, then dismayed, and eventually thrilled that he had actually noticed me. His comment has stayed with me to this day. It didn’t matter that I was capable with the Indian clubs—or at least, not as much as I’d hoped. Tony still didn’t *see* me as a juggler. His comment captured an important part of my initial training, and, at the time, got me to realize that I had some work to do. Looking back, I now realize that with this simple comment Tony opened a door to self-discovery. He got me to start thinking about what I wanted and inspired me to create a vision for myself as an artist.

. . .

When was the last time you received feedback about your presence? Was it specific and actionable—or was it vague, like Tony’s? How did you react? Did you get defensive? Did it shock you? Did it make you want to dig in deeper?

As an artist, I was determined to find my way in this new world of performing. There was an inner drive that kept me coming back for more. I sought out various teachers, joined a tap dance company, became a street performer, developed a theater show, acquired new skills, failed often, learned a lot, and developed my own unique style. It was one continual learning process, and when I look back upon my time in the theater, there are many lessons that I draw upon daily:

- Be a learning machine.
- Cultivate patience.
- Practice humility.
- Do what you love.
- Take all your experience with you.

- Forgive yourself.
- Simplify.
- Let the audience in.
- Be vulnerable.
- Be the best version of yourself—every day.

Act 2

Today, I am a speaker and facilitator of experiential learning programs, as well as an executive coach within the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's mid-career MBA programs. I have had the honor of working with a diverse and stellar group of global leaders. At MIT, a person comes to the experience wanting *something*. Sometimes it is a clear goal, for others it is less known.

Some say they are looking to sharpen their technical skill set. For others, it is deeper. For most, it is a pause point in their career and the beginning of a personal transformation. My job is to listen and look for clues to figure out where they might be on their journey of personal development so I can give them the right nudge.

I invite you to think of this book as a gentle nudge to pause and reflect on your own development. Let's first begin by setting the stage for learning.

ON BECOMING A NATURAL

When we meet people who show up with a natural and confident presence, we assume that they were born that way. In truth, some are. Most, however, have learned that it takes training, preparation, and experimentation to achieve this level of confidence.

I am always amazed at the amount of time executives typically spend organizing and creating the perfect PowerPoint deck for their strategic communication, presentation, or pitch. They will go to great lengths to create charts that are packed with data—so much so that the slides are impossible to read without a magnifying glass from a close distance, let alone from the tenth row. Then, such executives put all of their materials into their briefcase and vow to practice the rest of their presentation in the cab ride on the way to the conference. How do you think that will turn out?

For the actor or well-trained performer, our approach is the inverse. We learn that it is the nuance of *how* we say what we say that makes the difference.

We learn that to appear natural in front of others, and for our messages to land well, it takes discipline and practice. We focus on developing our minds, hearts, and bodies. We learn to develop vocal and physical flexibility and range. We learn to prepare for our parts, inhabit our roles, land on stage, hit our marks, and deliver our lines. We learn how to relax inside of ourselves, get focused, and connect authentically with our fellow actors and our audience. We learn that being present is both a choice and a necessity.

If you imagine a circus acrobat, you'll likely picture someone who has bright energy, a strong and flexible physique, and clear focus. Acrobats are immediately recognizable. They send the message, "I am here to dazzle you!" And they send it without saying a word!

Think back to the "naturals" you've worked with in your life. How did they send the message of "leader" without saying a word?

The great performers I've known have several things in common:

- They have love and passion for what they do!
- They have a learning mindset and know how to be coached.
- They know the value of practice and create a system for learning.
- Their preparation is impeccable.
- They know how to reach an audience and understand the impact that they have on that audience.
- They are committed to bringing their Best Self to each and every performance.
- They never take a performance for granted.

Develop a System for Learning

Many performers follow a well-worn path to learning their craft by apprenticing with a master. The apprentice model of learning involves four stages:

1. Novice
2. Apprentice
3. Journeyman
4. Master

Everyone enters as a novice. A novice is someone who has shown an initial talent in an artform and is looking for a way to get started. This is the most

precarious part of the journey, and it's also when most people drop out or give up. They put their toe in the water but for some reason do not stay. In this phase it is critical to have the right encouragement and support, to make it fun, and to experience a small taste of success. It is also critical to have a goal and to get through this phase as quickly as possible.

Let me tell you what I mean. In the mid-eighties I was a working performer in the Boston area. I heard about a musical built around a circus theme that was being locally written and produced. I was successful in getting an audition.

To my surprise and delight I was called back to speak to the director and was cast as the lead in the show. The director, Bill Finlay, a former circus wire walker and now chair of the Theater Department at Union College in upstate New York, enticed me with an offer. He said that he had always wanted to put a wire act in a musical, and that if I was willing to learn, he would find a way to incorporate it in the show. I was immediately hooked and took him up on his offer to teach me.

At the time I was living in a loft in Boston. The loft had two large support posts, which were perfect to attach a low steel wire between. I quickly assembled my wire between the two posts about two feet above the floor and spent as much time as possible on it.

In the morning I ate my bowl of cereal on the wire. I read books on it. I even learned how to lie down and relax on it. As a novice, my time on the wire was focused on finding my balance and addressing my fear of falling. Once I became more comfortable and began to learn more complex techniques, I quickly moved from a novice to an apprentice.

Develop a Platform for Failure

The apprentice stage is when one understands the basics but needs guidance. You still need to go to class. You can't really perfect what you're doing without the help of a coach. The teacher reveals to you the nuances of your craft while you build upon your experience and your vocabulary.

I learned to be fully alert and cautious when stepping onto and off of the wire, as these were where most accidents happened. I learned how to breathe through the wire and into the ground to find my balance, where to rest my eyes, and how to change direction.

After about six months of apprenticeship, I felt confident enough to incorporate the skill into my professional act. I entered the third stage of the apprentice model and was now a journeyman wire walker. At this stage it was all

about experimentation in front of audiences. Trial and error. Learning the nuances of the art form. This is one of the benefits of being a street performer. It was the most accessible place where I could experiment, fail, learn, and grow.

It Takes an Outside Eye

Much of my street performing experience took place at Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, as well as at city festivals across the United States and Canada. My show was a blend of physical theater, slapstick, tap dance, and audience participation.

I had just created a new rope balancing routine and began to employ it at the beginning of my show; typically, I started with the less-practiced routines and built up to the stronger and more impressive ones.

My act was solid, but a fellow performer challenged my thinking. He confirmed that the new routine was working great but said it seemed wasted at the beginning of my act. He also said that my audience participation routine at the end was unique, fun, and effective, but something was missing. “What if you blended the two together?” he asked.

And there it was. He was able to see something that elevated my good performance to an outstanding one.

The point is this: I had developed the discipline of practice and a mindset for continual improvement, and I was open to direction. My colleague was not so much telling me what to do but saw an opportunity to create an optimal experience between me and my audience. I encourage you to read this book with the same mindset for continual improvement. I will not be telling you, the reader, what to do, as much as offering ideas on how you can create your own optimal experience of executive presence.

Letting Go

Toward the end of my time in street performing something remarkable happened.

It is 1990 and I am standing in the middle of a large circle of about 300 people in front of the Faneuil Hall building. The sun is shining bright. The sweet smell of sausage and peppers and the sound of Peruvian flute music fill the air. I bend down to pick up my top hat and am about to start my first routine when I stand up, take a deep breath, and pause. I look around the circle into the faces of the audience and see a sense of anticipation and wonder that comes when

something extraordinary is about to happen. I am not in a rush. I am fully in the moment.

In this moment, *I actually “feel” something inside of me drop away.* It was something I had been carrying for many years. The need to be liked. The need to impress. The need “to make something happen.” In the past I experienced this as a discomfort that made me rush through the moment. It made me try too hard. I held on to an image of who I wanted to be and acted out of a sense of desperation rather than confidence. I resorted to cajoling my audience rather than enticing them to join me on a journey.

But this moment is different. From my right, a small two-year-old girl begins to walk out and into the middle of the circle. She is dressed like a princess and has a pink balloon tied to her wrist floating just above her head. She wanders out into the space in that oblivious way that kids sometimes do. The whole audience is captivated by her. I know what is happening. It is not about me at all; it is about the moment.

Two things cross my mind. First, to give the child “her” moment, and second, to return her safely to her parents. I find myself slowly walking toward the child. I put my finger to my lips and signal to the audience to be still. While holding the attention of the audience with my eyes, I put one finger under each of her arms and lightly and carefully lift them up high and give a big Ta-da!

The whole audience bursts into applause. It is in this moment that I guide the child back to her parents. I can see the appreciation in the faces of the audience, which creates a very human experience for all.

This is the essence of theater and what we all crave in our day-to-day work experiences. A bit of sensitivity and acknowledgment, the feeling of connection, and relating in a more authentic manner with each other.

Mastery Happens

Mastery is no mystery, and yet it is. It comes after years of repetition and experience. Mastery happens without you even knowing it. It’s a state of being. It is when the skills that you have acquired over years are set in your bones. When every fiber of your being is finely tuned to the problem that you need to solve or the experience that you want to create.

BRIDGING THE GAP

In my work in leadership development, I have noticed a gap between the areas of building *skills* and the areas of building *self-awareness*. It was only when I

became certified as an executive coach that I began to see a bridge between the two. Building self-awareness asks that we look inside of ourselves. It enables us to see both our strengths and weaknesses, our biases and assumptions, and our purpose. In turn, building skills trains us to develop an experimentation and learning mindset. As we develop and grow we become more self-aware.

For me, accelerated learning comes from this combination of building an inner focus of awareness and an outer focus of skills. One feeds upon the other.

Throughout the book I will present ample opportunities for you to reflect upon your own pivotal experiences and decision points. In addition, I will present to you many skill sets with which you can experiment. If at all possible, I advise you to read the book fully first and then mark those areas that you would like to focus on and develop. While you will find ample information to lead from your Best Self in the pages of this book, I have put together additional resources at www.leadingfromyourbestself.com/resources.

Find someone who will act as a peer coach to go on the journey with you. It is always helpful to have someone who gets you and will keep you energized and focused and hold you accountable for your commitments. You will find satisfaction and insight in doing the same for him or her.

MY INVITATION

Take charge of your own learning. Strive to be the best version of yourself—every day.

So, what are you waiting for?

On with the show!



THE ART OF BEING EXTRAORDINARY

*Courage is the moment when an ordinary person
becomes an extraordinary being.*

—BRIAN JACQUES

As human beings, we are all born with a unique set of natural gifts and talents. Maybe we have a knack for numbers. Maybe we naturally bring people together to collaborate. Maybe we possess a killer sense of humor that puts people at ease. No matter what, it's a wonderful part of human experience to really see someone in his or her element. Finding a way to draw upon our intrinsic gifts and talents can make the difference between having a good career and a great one. Moreover, cultivating our gifts and utilizing them at the right moments and for the right reasons can also deeply enrich our personal lives.

The following introduction from the Center for Positive Organizations at the University of Michigan gives us a framework for the Best Self:

Each of us can recall our own extraordinary moments—those moments when we felt that our Best Self was brought to light, affirmed by others, and put into practice in the world. These memories are seared into our minds as moments or situations in which we felt alive, true to our deepest selves, and pursuing our full potential as human beings. Over time, we collect these experiences into a portrait of who we are at our personal best . . . whether

implicit or explicit, stable or changing, this portrait serves as an anchor and a beacon, a personal touchstone of who we are and a guide for who we can become.¹

The portrait described above is called the Reflected Best Self (RBS). I first came upon the concept of the RBS while leading the delivery of theater-based workshops at Harvard Business School. Participants in the leadership programs of which we were a part engaged in a preprogram 360 assessment based on the RBS. Participants gathered vivid descriptions and narratives of themselves at their best from a variety of individuals with whom they interacted on a regular basis. These narratives and stories described how the participants showed up as leaders, how others experienced them, and the impact they had on others.

FOUNDATIONS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Let's take a quick look at the concepts of Best Self and Reflected Best Self (RBS) and where these terms stand in the field of psychology. Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers believed that humans have one basic motive: to self-actualize or to fulfill one's potential and achieve the highest level of "human-being-ness" possible. Rogers believed that for a person to achieve self-actualization he or she must be in a state of congruence.

A starting point for self-actualization is provided by Manuela Heberle:

In psychology, the real self and the ideal self are terms used to describe personality domains. The real self is who we actually are. It is how we think, how we feel, look, and act. . . . The ideal self, on the other hand, is who we want to be. It is an idealized image that we have developed over time, based on what we have learned and experienced. The ideal self could include components of what our parents have taught us, what we admire in others, what our society promotes, and what we think is in our best interest.²

Congruence is a state of being when our real self and ideal self are in harmony and in alignment. How do we get there? We begin by understanding that there may be a difference between how we see ourselves (our self-image), how we want others to see us (our ideal self), and how others actually see us (our real self).

The good news is that the Reflected Best Self process allows us to gather the information necessary to form a clear and accurate picture of our Best Self. The Best Self is the most vital part of the real self. It is how we look, feel, and act when we are at our best. It is a validation of our self-image and a worthy ideal to aspire to.

Through this process we develop an understanding of the strengths, talents, qualities, and gifts that we bring to various situations and what others appreciate about us. We learn to appreciate what is remarkable about us and the value that we bring to our roles.

Again, from the Center for Positive Organizations:

The RBS creates a pathway to becoming extraordinary, in that it involves envisioning the self at one's best, and then acting on this vision to translate the possibilities for the extraordinary into reality.³

TAKE YOUR BEST SELF WITH YOU

It was July 2017, and I was attending the Leadership Forum at Silver Bay in upstate New York. Inside a century-old stone meeting hall, I sat at a table having a conversation with Hope, an early-career woman. After completing an exercise, Hope said to me, “The director in my office told me that I need to improve my executive presence.”

As she shared this, I noticed her shoulders slump and her voice weaken. She looked at a loss. I acknowledged her feelings and invited her to talk more about it. Hope explained that she really loved her job, but there was a senior manager in her department who was being excessively hard on her. When she was in front of this person, both Hope's posture and her voice would weaken, and she would lose her confidence. She'd been entrusted with an important presentation to the senior team in a couple of weeks and was understandably very concerned.

I paused and asked her to tell me about a time in her life when she felt her best, most alive, and confident. After considering for a moment, a gentle smile came onto her face. She'd played flute in an award-winning high school marching band—a band so good that it consistently won at the Columbus Day Parade in New York City! I asked Hope to show me what she looked like when she got ready to play. Immediately her posture and presence transformed. She sat up tall and confident as she lifted her arms into her playing position. She exuded joy.

Hope wasn't just a talented contributor to the band either. She led the whole flute section and expected excellence from them. She emphasized to her team the importance of staying focused and in sync at all times—even when they were just marching and not playing. If the judges noticed even one person looking away or being out of formation they would deduct a quarter point. This was the margin of winning or losing.

As Hope spoke, I noticed that she was no longer overwhelmed and depressed. Rather, she was energized, hopeful, and confident. We discussed how she could take this rediscovered confidence with her to work. It was a perfect sense memory to guide her behavior under stress and find her way back to her Best Self. Together, we created a plan to take her Best Self to her upcoming and critical presentation in front of the entire senior team.

BEING AT ONE'S BEST

What does it mean to lead from our Best Self?

While one's strengths (i.e., competencies, talents, values, personality attributes) lie at the core of one's RBS, the RBS portrait also incorporates a characterization of the state of being at one's best. In this state of being, an individual actively employs strengths to create value, actualize one's potential, and fulfill one's sense of purpose, which generates a constructive experience (emotional, cognitive, or behavioral) for oneself and for others.⁴

The description above can sound a little daunting. You might be wondering, "How does one actually recreate this state of being, especially when faced with a difficult work-related situation?" Let's look again at the example I gave above.

Until our conversation, Hope's upcoming presentation was causing her intense anxiety. By recalling a time when she felt at her best, she unplugged from the anxiety and reconnected with a genuine positive self-image.

TRIALS BY FIRE

We discover our Best Self under pressure, through experimentation, and through risk-taking. Our best qualities, traits, and values are forged in the fires of doubt and uncertainty. It happens when we reach down deep and discover

parts of ourselves that might have been unknown to us or that we had only a glimpse of before. It is in these times that we surpass our previously held self-image and step into a new version of ourselves.

Think of it like this . . .

If we were to witness the making of a legendary Japanese sword, we would at first see a dull piece of metal being plunged into a blazing fire till it glowed red-hot. The master would take it out and place it on his anvil. He would pound and fold the steel upon itself. He would then plunge the metal into a vat of water to cool it.

As the legends go, this process would be repeated 10,000 times. This process creates a sword with true strength, resilience, and integrity. This sword was forged through Trial by Fire experiences. This was the process that I was guiding Hope through.

HOPE DISCOVERS HER KEYS TO BEING EXTRAORDINARY

As a musician and member of an award-winning marching band, Hope had developed a system for learning and a mindset of excellence. She knew what it meant to perform under pressure. Now it was time for her to step into a leadership moment in front of the senior team. From our coaching conversations, Hope discovered four keys for getting into an optimal state of body, mind, and spirit.

1. **Finding Her Signature Stance.** Through her flute training, Hope was taught to stand tall yet relaxed. Her arms needed to be raised with her hands placed on the flute in a comfortable yet optimal position. This was likely difficult when she was first learning this posture, but through years of practice it became second nature. Then, under the stress of playing in front of audiences she learned how to maintain and utilize the form to bring out her best performance.

By getting back into this posture and visualizing herself performing, she sent a clear and positive message to herself: a sense memory of confidence. She felt more focused, more engaged, and more physically present. Her body, mind, and spirit were in sync. This was her *Signature Stance*. I saw the changes happen before my eyes, and I experienced her as being natural, confident, and powerful.

2. **Playing to Be Heard.** Hope had expressed that in certain situations at work, she would lose her confidence, and her voice would get weak. However, when she took on her flute-playing posture and visualized herself playing in the band, she noticed that her body relaxed and her breath became stronger. Developing breath control was part of her training as a flutist. She was taught to “*Play to Be Heard*.” When she spoke about *Playing to Be Heard*, the cadence and tone in her voice became stronger, more relaxed, expressive, and clear.

We discussed how she could more easily access this power in her voice while speaking in front of others. This was her second key to being her Best Self. (In Chapter 2 we will introduce a number of breathing techniques so that you too can master your breath.)

3. **Adopting a Mindset of Excellence.** The third key for Hope was recalling her role as a leader in the band. She held a strong vision of excellence for herself and her fellow flute players. We discussed how she could hold this vision of excellence and lead herself. Could she be her own coach and demand the very best from herself? Could she put into practice the same principles that she had reinforced with her fellow flute players? How could she enlist others in her development and hold herself accountable? Once she discovered the answers to these questions she felt more in control of the presentation.
4. **Finding Her Groove.** The fourth key for Hope appeared when she started humming her favorite song that the band played. This sense of rhythm, tempo, and timing created a fluid state of mind for Hope. In this state she experienced a sense of physical, mental and emotional congruence. She felt the strength and confidence she’d earned from years of training.

. . .

All told, these elements became her four triggers with which she could recreate a state of positivity, focus, and confidence in the face of the most intimidating of situations. In other words, these were her keys to being extraordinary.

Hope said that she took these four elements and shared them with a couple of senior leaders in her department. These were folks who supported and wanted the best for her. She practiced her presentation in front of them and received their feedback and encouragement. She also practiced her four keys to being extraordinary with them. They reminded her to stand tall, play to be heard, and find her groove.

When I spoke with Hope after her presentation, she was elated. She said that she felt calm and confident before her presentation. She took control of the moment, stood tall, and spoke in a strong and confident voice. She experienced a deep sense of satisfaction from the experience. Even the senior person who'd been tough on her approached her afterward and congratulated her on a great job.

DISCOVERING YOUR KEYS TO BECOMING EXTRAORDINARY

To begin developing our Best Self we need to gather information about how other people experience us when we are at our best. This type of feedback is rare and critical in moving toward a sense of equivalence in how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us. For Hope, identifying a Best Self moment came easily. But what if you're not sure when you're acting in your Best Self?

Here is the process I invite you to try.

Identify at least six people who know you well, whom you respect, and who are invested in your success. Send them an e-mail. Let them know that you are conducting a personal development survey and that their observations and input are important to you right now. Ask them the following questions:

1. Tell me about a time(s) when you saw me at my best. Please write a brief narrative that describes how I showed up, how I approached problem solving, how I dealt with challenges, etc.
2. What words come to mind when you think about me in this situation(s)?
3. In what ways did I influence the people and environment around me?
4. What were the qualities, attributes and strengths that I brought to this time that you most appreciated in me?
5. In what new situations could I put these strengths into use?

After you receive the feedback, take the time to sit with it for a while. Identify some of the themes and insights that emerge from the information. Boil down these thoughts and impressions from outside sources into a few simple sentences that inform how you think, feel, and behave when other people experience you at your best.

LEADING FROM YOUR BEST SELF

If you think about Hope's experience as a musician, she developed four keys or sense memories that, for her, triggered a state of positivity and confidence. Each of these represent a physical, mental, emotional, and energetic element. Try this for yourself.

Think of two or three moments or experiences in your life when you've felt in your Best Self. These will be times when you felt most alive, confident, energized, and effective.

What was the physical posture or stance that represented you during these Best Self moments? This is your *Signature Stance*.

How did you feel emotionally at these times? (Examples: Courageous? Playful?)

Describe your energy at these times? (Examples: Calm? Exuberant?)

What was your mindset at these times? (Examples: Adaptable? Generous?)

Try to identify three or four memories that trigger a state of positivity and confidence. (Examples: Your bow at the end of your best performance. The breath you take before stepping onto the pitcher's mound.)

Some people may find it easier than others to remember and recapture their Best Self. For others there may be an unidentified barrier that prevents them from feeling fully confident. It's OK if discovering your own keys doesn't come easily. It's really hard to do it alone. But with effort, it can be done. As you'll read next, it takes courage and openness to rediscover and reclaim one's personal power.

HEALING AN OLD WOUND

Setbacks are a part of every artist's journey. It is precisely our formative training and experience that provides us with a place to land, recoup, and reemerge. But what happens when we lose our confidence completely and do not have a road map back to our Best Self?

A colleague and close friend of mine, Christo, is a gifted executive coach in Philadelphia with a unique story. We met at a time when he was searching for something that he had lost, his self-confidence.

While carpooling one day, Christo shared that he sometimes lost his confidence in front of more senior colleagues in the consulting company where he works. Though he was quite capable in his area of expertise, for some reason he would periodically just lose his focus and crumble in front of his colleagues.

I asked him when this all started. He paused, and as he focused and reflected I saw his jaw tighten. Then he got a little choked up and shared his story with me.

Christo grew up in South Africa and was a gifted cricket bowler, a fast bowler to be precise. (This is equivalent to a fast ball pitcher in baseball.) By the time he was 10 years old, he'd drawn the attention of recruiters and was on the track to becoming a professional.

"One afternoon I was playing for fun with some kids at school. The match was close and a big kid from the other team stepped up to bat.

"I was tall for my age, but this kid was taller and larger than me," Christo explained. "It didn't matter, I was unfazed and bowled with confidence. I executed my pitches and successfully 'dismissed [struck out]' the other kid. I was elated."

That's when, in a fit of rage, the other kid sprinted to Christo and savagely pounded his fist into his face, so hard that Christo slumped to the ground, dazed.

By his facial expression, his body language, and the emotion in his voice, I could see Christo was fully reliving this moment in his life.

“I jumped to my feet,” he continued, “disoriented and shamed. I wanted to punch him back, but I had nothing left inside of me. I just turned and ran away.”

He’d repressed this story for a long time, but Christo realized that this was the exact moment he lost his “mojo.” After the attack, he never summoned the same power or confidence as a fast bowler again.

As a young cricket player, Christo knew what he was doing. He was capable, competent, and confident. But when the other kid punched him, it challenged everything he thought he knew about himself. Unconsciously, when he would speak in front of more senior colleagues, that traumatic moment would return to him and he would shrink inside of himself.

When we arrived at our destination, Christo turned to me and, with deep gratitude, thanked me. He radiated relief and a sense of excitement and determination. He knew that he needed to come to terms with this moment in his life, forgive himself, and reclaim his power.

DON'T LEAVE THE BEST BEHIND

Deborah Ancona, Founder of the MIT Leadership Center at MIT, has a powerful question that she asks students: “What is the part of yourself that you left behind to become the person you are today?” How would you answer this question?

Everyone has the potential to be extraordinary. Everyone can reclaim their gifts—even when they feel as though they’ve fallen into a slump or lost their spark. Becoming extraordinary requires looking inward and doing the work. It’s a matter of drawing out and realizing the intrinsic value of that specific part of ourselves. It’s not always easy, but it will always be worth the effort. When we truly understand what it means to be our Best Self, we open the door to endless possibilities. We also begin to see the best in others and strive to create a space for them to be their Best Self.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Driven by a passion to coach business leaders to develop their presence, tell compelling stories, and establish authentic connections, **Rob Salafia** combines two decades of experience as a top leadership development executive with a stellar past career in the performing arts. In his current professional role, he assists leaders in their quest to build sharper levels of emotional and narrative intelligence, transition into higher organizational levels, and share their vision and strategies in compelling and relevant ways.

When Rob was a performing artist, he traveled the globe delivering a unique, one-person variety show. At the heart of his approach to performance was the relationship he built with his audience, projecting a sense of warmth, confidence, and lightheartedness that permeates his work to this day. Now, as an executive coach, Rob takes great satisfaction in helping executives to emulate this type of performance in their leadership roles.

As a popular keynote speaker, Rob enjoys putting his skills to use, galvanizing audiences around critical learning and business topics at leadership conferences and company-organized events. Highlighted speaking engagements include events sponsored by Sony Music Entertainment, Johnson & Johnson, CREW Network, YPO/YPO Gold, ING Bank, MIT Sloan School of Management, Wharton Business School, Schulich School of Business, and the Association for Training and Development.

Rob is also a lecturer at MIT Sloan School of Management Executive Education Programs, and an MIT Leadership Center Master Executive Coach. He has cultivated a lasting partnership with Harvard Business School as well, resulting in the integration of experiential programming within the Harvard

MBA curriculum and Executive Education Leadership Programs serving thousands of global leaders.

As a learning partner and workshop facilitator, Rob has worked with Fortune 500 companies such as Digitas, Diageo, Sapiient Consulting, NN Group, American Express, and Metro AG. He holds an MS in Organizational Policy from Boston University and a Graduate Certificate in Executive Coaching from William James College. For more info, visit his company website: <http://protagonistconsulting.com/>.

