The Root Cause of Exceptional Government Leadership

Evolving technologies, decreasing face time, limited resources, and global uncertainty are changing the way we work and redefining the role of government leadership.

This year, government leaders from around the world gathered in Singapore at the Global Government Forum to discuss this transformation and agreed that "the new tools available to civil servants – notably digital technologies and 'big data' – require collaborative, iterative approaches to project development that sit awkwardly with established processes. The innovation necessary to adapt to an ever faster-moving environment calls for both fresh approaches to risk and new forms of public engagement….to get results, leaders must empower rather than direct employees"[1]. As a result, many forward-thinking leaders are interested in personal and interpersonal skills training for themselves and their employees.

However, deciding what training is most effective for each team can seem daunting. Understanding why these skills are needed, breaking these skills into learnable steps, and defining ways of putting these skills into practice will help organizations develop leaders who have the personal and interpersonal skills to lead with agility, inspiration, curiosity, and communication.

---

[1] *Global Government Leaders' Forum 2024*. (2024). Global Government Leaders' Forum 2024. Retrieved October 27, 2024, from https://gglf.globalgovernmentforum.com/

The Current Landscape - Why Interpersonal Skills Are Needed

In the past, leaders gained their positions through technical skills and specialized training. It's not surprising that many, therefore, took a tactical, top-down approach to leading. Now, these leaders find themselves needing interpersonal skills in order to motivate collaboration, communication, and innovation within their teams.

As an example, consider Ann, an information technology project manager for a mass transit agency who had moved from hands-on lower-level roles to higher levels of management thanks to her technical skills and performance. Ann has Azure Data Engineer certification and some management training under her belt. Despite her years of experience, she was struggling. Her team complained about:

- A perceived lack of direction
- Unreasonable project creep
- A work culture of blame and mistrust
- A need for feedback and accountability

Ann was concerned that her team was missing deadlines and her stakeholders were unhappy. She sought coaching help. Here is a snippet of that coaching session:

> **Ann**: "They are totally unmotivated and don't follow directions. At the next team meeting, I plan to jolt them into action with some tough language. Stop complaining and start meeting deadlines. I hate to be a hard-ass, but what are my options?"

> **Coach:** "Have you asked them why they are struggling?"

> **Ann:** "Not really. How would I do that?"

Indeed, Ann did not know how to have an exploratory dialogue in which she listened and learned from her team. The rest of the coaching session focused on breaking down the interpersonal skills and the mindset Ann needed to do just that. In the next coaching session, Ann was delighted with her success:

> **Ann:** "It worked! All I did was ask them what was challenging them, and then I listened without criticizing or advising. I almost lost it a few times, but I remembered my commitment to staying curious."

The team told Ann about the obstacles unique to their region and roles. In the absence of threats and judgment, everyone in the team generated ideas for project timelining, defining expectations, creating accountability, and sharing resources. The conversation was honest, collaborative, and highly

productive. The project started to flow, and Ann didn't have to threaten anyone; in fact, she felt supported by her team.

Ann's story is common. Now, more than ever, leadership skills are different from technical skills.

The Data Confirms the Need for Interpersonal Skills

The 2020 MIT Sloan management review asked 4,394 global leaders from more than 120 countries about the future of leadership and "found that many organizations are suffering from a series of blind spots and are holding on to leadership behaviors —such as command and control — that might have worked in the past but now stymie the talents of employees throughout their organizations"[2]. So, what are the skills needed to thrive in the work world today?

Soft Skills

Forbes and Indeed collectively name the following skills as the top skills needed for leaders in 2024[3]:
- Communication
- Interpersonal networking
- Teamwork
- Problem-solving
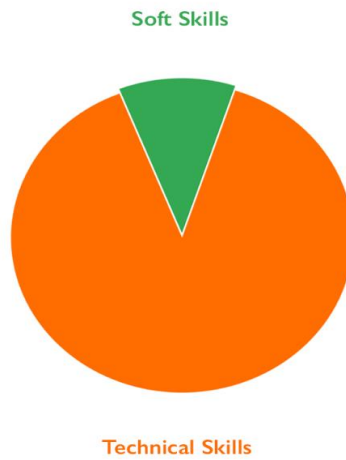- Adaptability
- Self-management

The common denominator is that we need "soft skills" training if we want to stay effective and competitive. Our greatest challenge is that we are coming out of a work era that did not think these skills mattered.
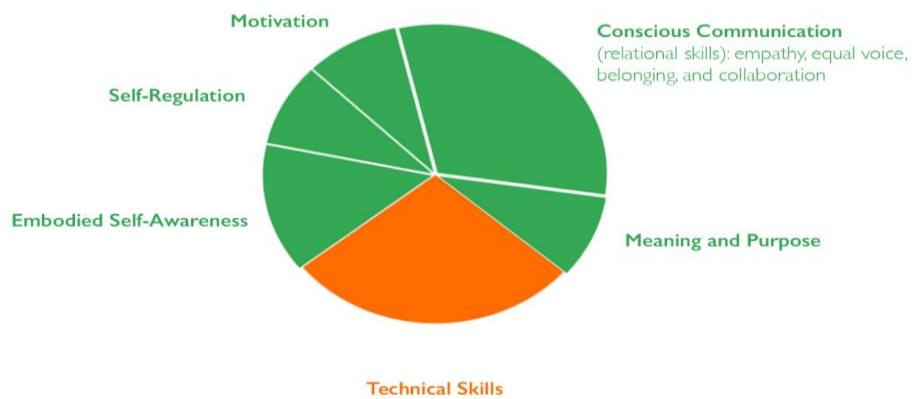
[2] Ready, D. A., Cohen, C., Kiron, D., & Pring, B. (2020). The new leadership playbook for the digital age. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. https://sloanreview.mit.edu/projects/the-new-leadership-playbook-for-the-digital-age/
[3] Wells, R. (2024). *Top 5 Fastest Growing Leadership Skills to Learn in 2024, per research*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelwells/2024/02/18/top-5-fastest-growing-leadership-skills-to-learn-in-2024-per-research/; Brodnitz, D. (2024). *The Most In-Demand Skills of 2024*. https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-strategy/linkedin-most-in-demand-hard-and-soft-skills; *10 Effective Leadership Skills To Lead a Team*. (2024). https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/effective-leadership-skills

What we think matters

Soft Skills

Technical Skills

What really matters

Motivation

Self-Regulation

Embodied Self-Awareness

Conscious Communication
(relational skills): empathy, equal voice, belonging, and collaboration

Meaning and Purpose

Technical Skills

Defining Soft Skills

The fact that soft skills are essential to high functioning at work is actually old news. Over 30 years ago, psychologist and leadership expert Daniel Goleman broke these skills down into teachable skills in the domains of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management, which he called Emotional Intelligence (EQ)[4].

---

[4] Goleman, D. (2007). *Emotional Intelligence* (10th ed.). Bantam Books.

Defining Emotional Intelligence Domains and Competencies

SELF AWARENESS	SELF-MANAGEMENT	SOCIAL AWARENESS	RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT
Emotional awareness	Emotional regulation	Empathy	Conflict management
Mindset awareness	Adaptability	Organizational awareness	Teamwork/ Collaboration
Body awareness	Intentionality/ Motivation	Curiosity	Inspirational leadership
Awareness of purpose and values	Stress management and Resilience	Communication	Appreciation/ Feedback

Goleman's research confirmed that knowing how to manage your feelings and relate to other people would help you succeed at work more than technical skills, industry expertise, and IQ. A generation before Goleman, this suite of skills was often simply called common sense. So, why are these common-sense skills so uncommon?

What Are the Barriers to Becoming Emotionally Intelligent?

Emotions motivate behavior. When we ignore these key motivators, they can wreak havoc in our lives, derailing our relationships, clouding our judgment, and dampening enthusiasm. When we become aware of what we feel and translate this into positive actions and healthy communications, we are able to be agile, resilient, empathic, and innovative. But many of us have been taught to leave our feelings at the door.

These messages have a deep history. Emotions have long been diminished, repressed, discounted, and mislabeled as reactionary, passions, or vapors. As a result, many of us learned that sharing feelings and needs in the workplace is inappropriate, unattractive, and weak. Why practice skills that would label you as weak?

One NYPD lieutenant captured this challenge and his transition to learning to be emotionally intelligent like this:

> I was a sensitive kid, which was not ideal in my home. We were told that boys don't cry. I learned to toughen up to the point where I literally felt nothing. One day, we lost an officer

in my precinct to suicide. I walked around with a constant question about what I had missed. It was like a giant weight around my neck. In a vulnerable moment, I told my wife I was struggling. Instead of patting me on the back, she told me she was grateful I was feeling something, explaining that my normal response to any talk of feelings is a joke or an eye roll. I had missed all the signals my officer may have sent out. I decided, then and there, to let go of the idea that sharing feelings is for sissies and asked her how she felt. "Lonely," was her reply. That hit me hard, but it motivated me to get better. We kept talking about how we felt. Then, I asked my squad how they were feeling. The results were shocking. It turns out they actually really need to talk about this stuff. Now, I initiate regular check-ins at home and at work. Needless to say, I feel better. What is surprising is that we all work better, too. There is an atmosphere of support and cooperation that goes a long way.

The absence of emotional and social intelligence leaves leaders like this lieutenant and Ann stuck, wondering why the hard-earned tools that got them into leadership roles are no longer working. When these leaders let go of the need to appear as the experts in everything and became curious about what they did not know, their direct reports opened up and got more motivated. These stories illustrate the way humility and self-awareness can support a new kind of leadership grounded in empathy, curiosity, communication, and collaboration.

Once we overcome the barrier of past messaging and let go of the need to appear all-knowing, we can develop these soft skills by learning how to notice our feelings, needs, values, and purpose and then learn how to communicate effectively.

How to Develop These Skills

This process can be broken down into four steps that are easily teachable.

Step 1: Develop your self-awareness: Professional development that helps people identify their feelings, values, and purpose builds the emotional fluency needed to work with clarity and motivate others. Consider these steps toward building emotional intelligence:

1. **Start noticing how you feel** about your work, your team, and your future. Learn how to name these feelings and use them as fuel.
2. **Ask yourself what really matters to you**, what drives you to work, who are your heroes, what is the deepest reason you get out of bed in the morning?
3. **Get curious** about how your colleagues, boss, clients, direct reports feel and why they do their jobs. Ask them about their WHY. Start noticing how they feel by paying attention to what they say and how they say it.

As one school leader said after learning these skills, "I realize now that I don't need to 'control' my emotions or those of others. First, I need to recognize, name, and accept them. I need to align these feelings with my values and purpose. Then and only then can I begin to make decisions about how to proceed."

Once we know how we feel and what our purpose is, we have the capacity to pause and choose our response.

Step 2: Develop your capacity to PAUSE:

Our day-to-day experiences influence the part of our brain that is in charge. If we move from task to task all day without pausing, we activate our fight/flight/freeze response, which is governed by the reptilian part of our brain. This is helpful in a life-threatening crisis, but the reptilian brain can't think critically, creatively, or empathically.
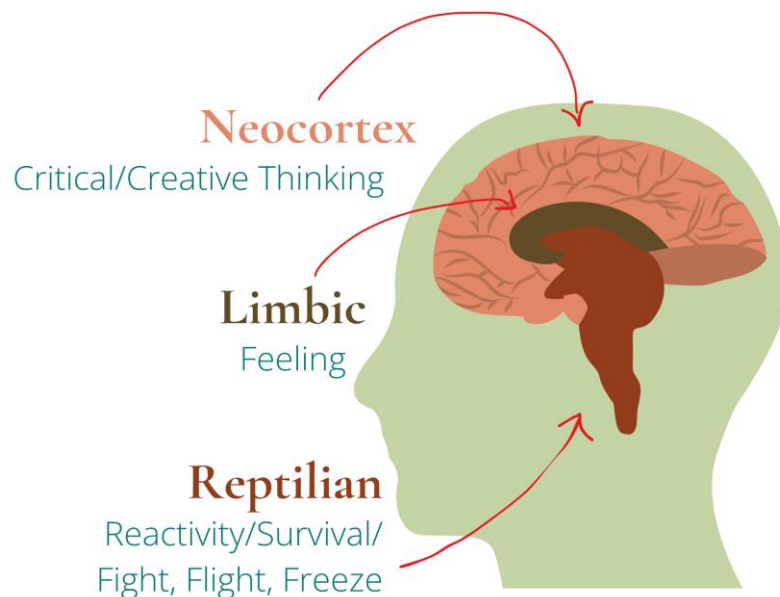

It's the neocortical brain that allows us to think expansively and supports social and emotional intelligence. When we find ourselves becoming stressed and reactive, we need a bridge back to the neocortical brain. Put simply, in order to work well, we need ways to pause, calm down, and center

ourselves. Professional development training designed to help people learn when and how to pause provides employees with new ways to respond to chaos and stress with resilience, adaptability, and creative thinking. **The key tools for such training are mindfulness, self-reflection, and value clarification.** Consider these steps toward increasing your ability to regulate your emotions and use them as fuel:

1. **Pick a *pause* practice**: If you don't know how to pause, start experimenting. Learn a breathing technique, pay attention to how you feel when you work out, and notice the impact of walking, music, and art. Consider how you might pause when you have 3 seconds, 30 seconds, 3 minutes, 3 hours, 3 days. Commit to building short pauses into your day.
2. **Identify your triggers:** What triggers you into a fight/flight/freeze response at work? Is it your to-do list? Your inbox? A challenging relationship? Once you know when and how you are triggered, use your pause practice to calm down and return to your neocortical brain. This is a practice. Most of us could spend our lifetime practicing this skill.
3. **Identify the care beneath the concern:** Every time we are triggered, it is because there is something we care about at risk. Pause and use your self-awareness to get curious about your feelings. Reflect on what you really care about. Use that care to guide your intentions and actions.

Once we are in a calm, centered state, we have the capacity to choose the way we respond to our circumstances. This process of choosing is a skill that we can learn by understanding mindsets.

Step 3: Develop your capacity to CHOOSE your mindset: use your self-awareness and your capacity to pause to choose your mindset and your responses.
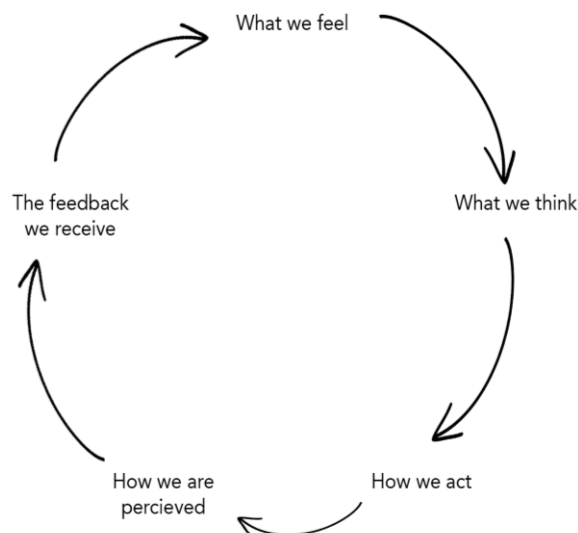
The concept of shifting your mindset was made popular by psychologist Carol Dweck, who demonstrated that we bring a way of thinking to every experience we have.[5] Dweck demonstrated that bringing a growth mindset to our perceptions increases our ability to be open, collaborative, resilient, and creative. She contrasted this with a fixed mindset, in which we believe our ability to learn is limited to a fixed set of aptitudes and talents.
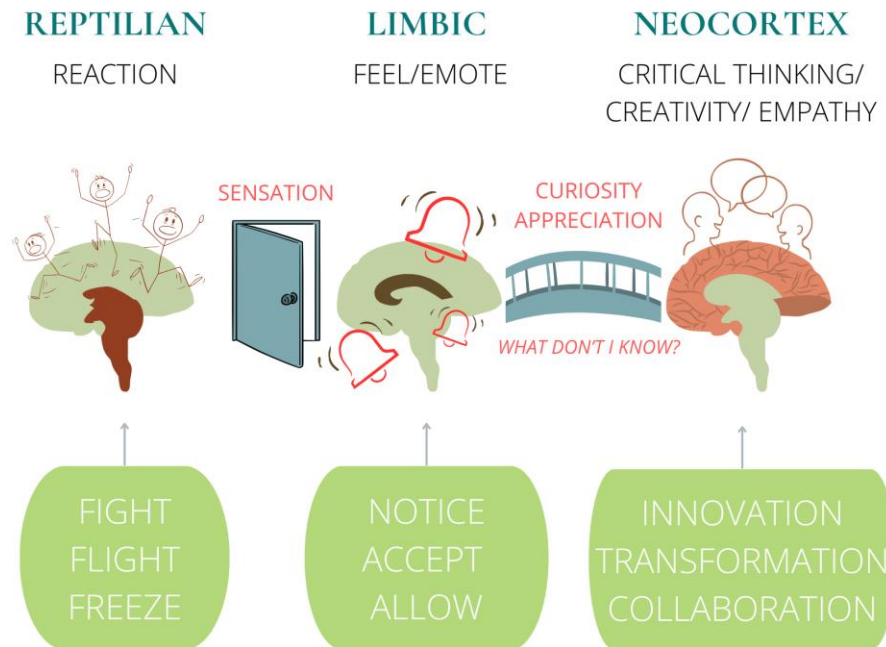
Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
⇥ Whose fault, is it? ⇥ What should have happened? ⇥ Why don't they get it? ⇥ Why did they do that to me?	↑ What did I contribute? ↑ What did we learn? ↑ What don't I know? ↑ How might they feel?

Consider these steps toward shifting your mindset:

1. **Start with Questions:** Begin your meetings with an open-ended question and then listen. An open-ended question starts with what, why, who, how, and where. These questions invite critical thinking and engagement. In her meeting, Ann asked, "What is making it challenging to meet our deadlines?" And then she listened.
2. **Self-Talk:** Notice when you're shifting toward a fixed mindset and ask yourself an open-ended question. Questions like, "What don't I know?", "What would happen if I let go?", "What is our common intention?", "Where does their perspective come from?" can help you regain your innate curiosity and stay open to other perspectives.
3. **Use Gratitude**: Remembering what we are grateful for and expressing appreciation for others goes a long way toward building trust and connection. Studies on gratitude confirm that when we cultivate gratitude, we are able to shift into a more spacious, open mindset and gain a broader, more positive perspective on life.

---

[5] Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset*. Ballantine Books.

Putting these first three steps together creates neural pathways that help move us from a reactive state into a calm, creative, responsive state.

REPTILIAN
REACTION

LIMBIC
FEEL/EMOTE

NEOCORTEX
CRITICAL THINKING/ CREATIVITY/ EMPATHY

SENSATION

CURIOSITY APPRECIATION

WHAT DON'T I KNOW?

FIGHT
FLIGHT
FREEZE

NOTICE
ACCEPT
ALLOW

INNOVATION
TRANSFORMATION
COLLABORATION

From there, we are able to really activate our social intelligence and lead with agility and innovation, using healthy communication and collaboration. The final step is learning communication skills that enable us to express feelings, motivations, intentions, purpose, and conflict in a way that leads to connection and new ideas.

Step 4: Develop your capacity to EXPRESS yourself: Learn how to communicate and collaborate with others well by:

- Sharing perspectives openly without worrying about judgment
- Asking the type of questions that spark new ideas
- Holding each other accountable in ways that encourage and empower
- Using conflict and friction to collaborate and innovate

What does this shift look like in the context of leadership? Consider the story of one leader:

When I first took my role as a leader, I was a closed book. I motivated my staff with rules and deadlines. I thought this was the way to keep it professional. When I had a conflict, I either

delivered a "my way or the highway" message or did what needed to be done myself. I was exhausted and lonely, but things were running relatively well. My only challenge was staff retention.

How did communication help this leader?

One day, I was sitting at my desk with my head in my hands, about to flip my lid over a technology issue I couldn't solve. One of my team members cleared her throat at the door to let me know she was standing there. I took a risk and shared my challenges with her. (I never did this because I did not want my team to think I was a weak leader.) It became clear that she knew more about the technology than I did. She quickly bailed me out without making me feel stupid. The whole interaction took 10 minutes; it was a small moment, but it taught me a huge lesson. Asking for help empowered both of us. I started to apply this lesson by sharing my feelings, concerns, and questions with others on the team. They responded by sharing their ideas and issues. Our meetings actually got livelier.

The pay-off has been considerable:

Now, the whole team shares feelings, ideas, and the load. This sharing generates ideas. I realized my old way of leading stopped people from feeling safe enough to bring their best ideas forward. Interestingly, this didn't occur as one big insight; it was a gradual change in me that led to a gradual change in my team.

Here are the steps that lead to healthy communication:

1. **Psychological safety**: establish a culture where people feel safe enough to share openly, make mistakes, and workshop ideas. Do this by modeling openness, vulnerability, respect, and curiosity.
2. **Humility**: Suspend the need to appear as the expert and stay open to other people's expertise and ability to lead.
3. **Listening**: Use curiosity to ask open-ended questions and really listen to the answers.
4. **Empathy**: Put yourself in the other person's shoes and try on their reality.
5. **Validation and Appreciation**: Let others know that you see value in their perspective (this is not the same as agreeing) and highlight what you value about their contributions.

Honing our personal and interpersonal skills takes time, intention, and practice, just like the technical skills we learned along the way. But the pay-off is huge. Work, families, and friendships all go better when we increase our emotional and social intelligence. For far too long, we have dismissed common

sense, kindness, creativity, and integrity as soft skills that we deem time-consuming and unnecessary despite the fact that these skills are the very foundation of working well. Investing in effective soft skills training is a powerful way to contribute to the health, well-being, sustainability, and growth of anyone wanting to thrive in the rapidly changing world of work today, and it is especially relevant to government systems.

The mission-driven work of government entities runs on policies, rules, and hierarchies that can obscure the human aspect of why we work. Each person in the system can default to the deadening complaint that the system is getting in the way of their job. But, at every level of organizational life, we *are* the system. Leaders are the system for managers, managers are the system for their teams, and teams are the system for the public. When leaders have the personal and interpersonal skills to value people alongside the processes, the mission, values, and purpose of the work become the central motivators. As technology takes over many of our jobs and roles, the human part of us becomes the essential ingredient and our ability to connect on a meaningful level. This will be the source of exceptional government leadership today and in the future.

Sarah Suatoni
Leadership Coach

Enterprise Training Solutions offers over 150 courses on effective management and leadership and has worked with state training and development offices nationwide to map courses to required leadership competencies. Learn more here.

Bibliography

10 Effective Leadership Skills To Lead a Team. (2024). https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/effective-leadership-skills

Brodnitz, D. (2024). *The Most In-Demand Skills of 2024*. https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/talent-strategy/linkedin-most-in-demand-hard-and-soft-skills

Global government leaders' forum 2024. (n.d.). Global Government Leaders' Forum 2024. Retrieved October 27, 2024, from https://gglf.globalgovernmentforum.com/

Dweck, C. S. (2008). *Mindset*. Ballantine Books.

Goleman, D. (2007). *Emotional Intelligence* (10th ed.). Bantam Books.

Ready, D. A., Cohen, C., Kiron, D., & Pring, B. (2020). The new leadership playbook for the digital age. *MIT Sloan Management Review*. https://sloanreview.mit.edu/projects/the-new-leadership-playbook-for-the-digital-age/

Wells, R. (2024). *Top 5 fastest growing leadership skills to learn in 2024, per research*. Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/rachelwells/2024/02/18/top-5-fastest-growing-leadership-skills-to-learn-in-2024-per-research/