

Staring Down the Wolf

What's in it for me? Learn leadership skills that let you thrive under pressure.

Nobody ever told you just how much fear would impact your adult life, right? Fear, like a vicious wolf, can hold you back from being the leader you want to be. But that's all about to change. It's time to challenge that fear wolf – and stare it down. Using real-life examples from Navy SEALs training and missions, these blinks unveil what it takes to build elite teams and become a first-class leader. They're your field manual for how to be brave in the face of fear or anxiety, how to communicate with integrity, and how to deal with defeat like a commander. Tested under fire, these proven lessons lead to stronger decision-making in any stress-inducing setting, from Middle Eastern war zones to your workplace. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to bounce back better; what Hell Week is; and why curiosity may kill the cat – but saves the SEALs.

Commit to courage, learn to embrace risk, and train hard.

The Navy SEALs have an acronym to describe the world – VUCA – “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.” Inside each person are two wolves that navigate this VUCA world: the fear wolf of the mind and the courage wolf of the heart. The fear wolf encapsulates all the things that hold you back emotionally – your fears, negative biases, and destructive patterns. This fear wolf also holds you back from accomplishing your goals. If you've ever felt stuck, chances are you needed to confront the wolf to set yourself free. This confrontation is called “staring down the wolf.” It's only by boldly facing your negative patterns and behaviors that you can lessen their impact, blow past your fear, and begin to feed your positive courage wolf. The key message here is: Commit to courage, learn to embrace risk, and train hard. As a former Navy SEAL, Mark Divine knows what it is to be dropped into situations where courage could mean the difference between life and death. But how did he summon his courage? By training – the right way. That involved adopting a risk-tolerant mindset that made him ready for anything. Usually, our fear kicks in during stressful situations. That fear tells us to play it safe. Sometimes, though, playing it safe is the opposite of what's needed – as demonstrated by a UN peacekeeping force in Mogadishu, Somalia. In October 1993, a helicopter went down, stranding two pilots amid gunfire between hundreds of Somali forces. The Pakistani peacekeeping forces decided to wait for backup before acting, but the American forces knew that time was of the essence. Instead of allowing fear of combat to hold them back, they took a calculated risk to face gunfire and rescue the pilots. Their courage motivated the Pakistani forces to join, and together they helped the pilots escape. Now, that was a risk so spectacular that it inspired an Oscar-winning movie, *Black Hawk Down*. But the same lessons apply for your life. The SEALs embrace risk because of their intense training, which recreates real-life battle situations and physically and mentally prepares them for just about anything. In fact, they're primed to stare down their fear wolves when under pressure. With their fear wolves silenced, they can then make informed decisions. They focus on the mission and put it above

everything else. In this case, the mission was to rescue the pilots. The SEAL unit's core principle, "no man left behind," drove them to take the risk. So, ask yourself, what risks do you need to train for – and what's going to drive your courage when it's needed most.

Build trust by committing to transparency, humility, and follow-through.

SEAL Team Three commanding officer William McRaven, one of Divine's mentors, found himself running a beach landing exercise early in his tenure. It was around two or three in the morning when the surf kicked up and became dangerously choppy. The scouts advised against doing the exercise, and the team debated whether to cancel or not. But when McRaven stated his preference to push forward, the team committed. The training exercise ended with everyone thrown overboard and several people in the hospital with broken bones. McRaven made a huge mistake, risking his team's trust in the process. And, for SEALs, trust quite literally has life-or-death consequences. It's also critical to staring down your fear wolf. Without it, doubt creeps in, making it harder to commit to what's needed for success. The key message here is: Build trust by committing to transparency, humility, and follow-through. Luckily for McRaven, he successfully faced his fear wolf of failing and bounced back, gaining even more respect in the process. But why, if the exercise was a failure, did McRaven still have his team's trust? Well, it's not always about success. In fact, how you handle failure counts just as much, if not more. McRaven was transparent about where he went wrong. Instead of running from his mistakes, he took responsibility and acknowledged that he had underestimated the waves. As a leader, being afraid of exposing your flaws leads to inauthentic leadership that starves trust. But admitting your mistakes and moving on fuels it. McRaven was also a humble leader who was openly vulnerable and willing to learn from other SEALs; he happily accepted constructive input without letting his ego get in the way. That's one of the reasons his team trusted him so much – he made them feel like he was among them, not above them. In fact, on that fateful day, he had faced the waves on a boat beside his SEALs, even though, as commanding officer, he didn't have to. Finally, McRaven followed through on his commitment to learn from his bad decision and took actions so his mistake wouldn't happen again. The result? The SEALs developed a class of new, smaller boats that were better able to handle rough waves and risky operations. A bad start led to a better outcome – but this was only made possible through trustworthy leadership that admitted to mistakes and held fast to commitment to learn from them.

Commit to integrity, clarity, and authenticity in order to cultivate respect.

After 9/11, Captain Jim O'Connell, a shining example of how to lead with respect, was called back from retirement as second-in-command of an elite SEAL counterterrorism unit. Although he had a comfortable post-retirement life, he returned because he

believed his country needed him. Little wonder, then, that his team had immense respect for him. You might think that a military leader automatically gains respect just by climbing up the ranks. But, even for SEAL teams, respect is earned – not given. And just like Captain Jim O’Connell, leaders can earn respect through their communication and actions every single day. So stare down the fear wolf of emotional baggage, and reclaim whatever may be causing you to fumble. The key message here is: Commit to integrity, clarity, and authenticity in order to cultivate respect. SEAL team leaders are often faced with making life-or-death decisions in high-stake situations – so they need their teams to act fast and be on point. That’s where respect comes in. While you might not be dealing with the same stakes, the approach to earning respect is the same: positive and accurate communication. Positive communication helps maintain your team’s morale, and accurate communication is the source of integrity – the most important element of garnering respect. Integrity means being honest and consistent while following a strong moral compass. This takes discipline and a willingness to stand up against what is morally wrong, even though it may be easier to just walk away. It can be tough, but when your team sees you standing by your words and actions, they’ll know you’re worthy of respect. Some leaders preach integrity and then act differently depending on who they’re with. But to someone like Captain Jim O’Connell, integrity requires total authenticity. That means showing your true self to everyone, regardless of rank. By treating officers and enlisted men the same way, O’Connell showed he was secure in himself and had nothing to hide. Transparency and clarity can also help build respect. That’s why O’Connell always took it upon himself to make sure his team clearly understood military orders and what was expected of them. Your fear wolf wants to hide behind ambiguity, secrets, and excuses – and it’s not until you lay out clear standards for success and failure that you can see positive change. That’s what O’Connell did. He committed to giving his men the tools to succeed. In return, they gave him respect.

Challenge is a catalyst for growth, so commit to pushing yourself.

One of the most famous rites of passage during SEAL training is Hell Week. It’s exactly what it sounds like – six days of hell designed to break down trainees. It tests physical endurance, mental strength, ability to work under duress, and more. Think strenuous operational training under nasty conditions while sleep-deprived. And since a SEAL should always expect the unexpected, a bit of unpredictability is also sprinkled into the mix. One night, Divine’s trainee class was relieved to get a four-hour break after a two-day session of physical drills and paddling off the coast. They were put in a warm, comfy room and were finally allowed to rest . . . for 40 minutes! Then, sirens and smoke grenades rattled them awake, and they were commanded back out to the surf. The key message here is: Challenge is a catalyst for growth, so commit to pushing yourself. Why do the SEALs endure Hell Week? Because growth only comes through challenging yourself to do what you previously thought was impossible. Moving past a plateau and transforming into something better is never a seamless process; your fear wolf wants you to remain stagnant and avoid the pain of change. But here’s the thing: the temporary pain of transformation is better than the long-term pain of regret. Challenging yourself is hard, yes – but you’ll become a better person for it. To reach your full capability as a leader, you have to embrace the discomfort of this challenge. It doesn’t just teach you new skills; it builds character. You actually become more aware of yourself and what you’re capable of. Think about your lifestyle. What do you want to change? Maybe it’s your diet, your exercise habits, or your tendency to avoid healthy

communication. Whatever it is, challenge yourself to make the change, and get it done! Keep in mind that every challenge has two important components: a good mentor and variety. Mentors are invaluable. Their experience can provide you with much-needed advice – including what to watch out for so you can safely fail. They can also help you get back up if you need a nudge once in a while. And as for variety, that’s in your hands. Be sure to mix things up to avoid falling into unhelpful patterns. SEALs are constantly adjusting their training conditions and routines to introduce new skills. For example, if you’re building an exercise routine, keep things fresh by adding new techniques, locations, or modalities from time to time.

Strive for excellence by committing to curiosity and innovation, but keep it simple!

Navy SEALs aren’t just good – they’re excellent. They go above and beyond in challenging the status quo, solving problems others haven’t even thought of and doing things previously deemed impossible. This commitment to excellence comes from an insatiable curiosity – something Richard Marcinko, aka “Demo Dick,” knows all about. He was one of the most effective operators in the Vietnam War, where he innovated new ways to fight the enemy. He later became the first commanding officer of SEAL Team Six (so named to dupe Soviet Intelligence; it was actually just Team Three). He wanted his team to have maximum impact in the Navy. So he simplified their focus to be more specialized. This led to brilliant insights and successful outcomes – a tradition the SEALs continue to live by today. The key message here is: Strive for excellence by committing to curiosity and innovation, but keep it simple! Marcinko was never satisfied with the status quo. While others were busy commending his unit’s techniques, technologies, and accomplishments, he was looking for ways to improve. This led to innovations like the “red team,” whose mission was to expose security vulnerabilities at US military bases by attacking them. His curiosity became infectious. It got to the point where his entire SEAL unit learned to fly, drive, and navigate any kind of craft so they could be resourceful if they ever found themselves behind enemy lines. It doesn’t matter what the problem is – the curious are always searching for the next big question. They’re always asking things like Why is this being done? What should be done instead? How can we do it better? It’s this constant drive that generates excellence. The other half of the equation is, of course, coming up with viable solutions. Marcinko was legendary for homing in on solutions by looking at problems from different angles. While exploring ways to land troops in hostile areas undetected, for example, he helped develop the HAHO tactic. This “high altitude, high opening” method of deploying parachutes immediately after jumping at commercial-airline cruising heights kept troops under the radar. Innovation doesn’t necessarily mean creating an entirely new technique, though. Sometimes, just a 10-percent increase in performance is all it takes. Less is often more when developing a process, so keep things simple and streamlined – it’ll produce better work and keep your team focused on their tasks.

To become more resilient, focus on being adaptable and maintain a positive

attitude.

No matter what, you're going to fail. It's inevitable. Everyone fails from time to time, regardless of expertise, attention to detail, or follow-through. And SEALs are no exception. Yes, they often succeed in the face of insurmountable odds, but they also fail plenty of times. What sets the SEALs apart from others is what happens after they fail. They don't just accept defeat and let their fear wolf in – they bounce back. This resilience makes all the difference. By learning from their mistakes, being adaptable, and refusing to quit, SEALs make the best out of bad situations and learn how to prevent them from happening again in the future. The key message here is: To become more resilient, focus on being adaptable and maintain a positive attitude. Ambitious missions can lead to big failures. In 2005, Marcus Luttrell was in Afghanistan as part of a four-man recon mission. When their location was inadvertently exposed to enemy combatants, they had to scramble to extract themselves. Sadly, Luttrell was the lone survivor. He was injured, but he didn't quit. He managed to escape, and a local Pashtun villager sheltered him until he was rescued a few days later. But that's not the end of Luttrell's story – after he recovered from his injuries, he redeployed with a different SEAL unit. It was only after he was injured again that he was medically retired. So, what allowed Luttrell to push through failure and bounce back even when the odds were stacked against him? In a word: adaptability. Adaptability is the key to resilience. It's being able to quickly get over failure and shift gears when things don't go as planned. Luttrell's mission obviously didn't go as he had hoped, but he didn't dwell on the past or curl up in a fetal position. Instead, he forged ahead, drawing on his training to come up with new solutions every step of the way. With this approach, he was able to not just survive, but to return to combat and contribute further to the larger mission. This also speaks to a core element of resilience: a positive attitude. Optimism is easy when things are going well; the true test of a positive attitude is being able to ignore negative thinking in the midst of bad situations. Don't let yourself dwell on the negative – take a deep breath, focus, and start asking how you're going to get over this next obstacle.

Keep teams aligned through open and focused communication.

Before retiring, Mike “Mags” Magaraci was the most senior enlisted SEAL in the counterterrorism unit. He was a leader of leaders, and many senior officers reported to him. Far from being easy, the job was like herding lions. The very qualities that make SEALs elite – like independence and a willingness to challenge the status quo – also make them challenging to rein in. Mags had one major issue: How could he get all these leaders on the same page? His solution ended up being simple but elegant. He scheduled a weekly videoconference called the “engaged leadership reflection session” to share visions, missions, and big-picture updates. It also gave leaders an opportunity to answer questions that promoted alignment on focus, innovation, successes, failures, and morale. It wasn't rocket science, but the payoff from everyone being on the same page was massive. The key message here is: Keep teams aligned through open and focused communication. Alignment comes from communication, but what you communicate carries a lot of weight. Meaningless meetings don't help align teams – if anything, they add confusion and frustration. So, it's more accurate to say that alignment comes from focused communication that honors transparency and collective

learning. This is particularly important in the military given that it needs to coordinate dozens of teams spanning a range of agencies, organizations, and countries. Getting everyone on the same page is an enormous challenge that is quite literally the difference between victory and defeat. To keep meetings focused, Mags and other military leaders used to kick off with the Navy's overarching mission and vision. This was followed by the goals, or agenda, for the call. After that, they'd cede the floor and let different teams speak. This openness was critical for sharing information – things like challenges, risks, learnings, and opportunities. Good communication involves everyone speaking up. Though many of the SEAL leaders hated the videoconference idea when Mags first proposed it, they quickly found that these reflection sessions became an essential protocol for everyone's success. By regularly coming together, they were able to learn from each other and spot troubling trends before they became major issues. The result? More confidence, new knowledge, aligned teams, and better missions.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Fear, anxiety, and negative thinking can hold many leaders back in difficult situations. To overcome these unproductive patterns, develop routines grounded in courage, integrity, and resilience. Push yourself to practice these positive behaviors before entering any stressful situation, and you'll have them at your disposal when the pressure's on. Actionable advice: Journal every morning. Journaling is a great and easy way to approach problem-solving – so try making it a part of your morning ritual! To deal with a problem, write down five ideas that attack it from multiple perspectives. Don't worry if they're not related or don't seem to make sense. The important thing is to rev up your brain; the solution will eventually follow. That's what innovation is all about. Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Staring Down the Wolf as the subject line and share your thoughts!