

CHAPTER 4

Freedom From the Crowd

BY RICHMOND WONG

t HIS CHAPTER IS FOR entrepreneurs, senior leaders of tech companies, and those in professional services (consulting, law, finance, and accounting) to accomplish more on their own terms. In doing so, you can live lives of the greatest personal and professional freedom using self-leadership concepts that perhaps are quite different from ones you've encountered before. By reading this chapter, you will learn how to live a business and personal life full of productivity, achievement, enjoyment, and freedom according to your own standards—not ones set by others.

More specifically, we'll be discussing the concept of leadership over your own mind and how not to mindlessly follow the dictates of ideas you've assimilated via osmosis that may not be that appropriate for you as an individual and businessperson.

I'm sure you've read many typical leadership books that recommend

actions such as setting KPIs, conducting regular strategic reviews, developing your teams, and keeping your office door open.

All of these are completely valid, but what has always bugged me about these types of mass market business titles is that they almost always seem to just skim the surface of leadership by superficially focusing on mere action. What these books fail to achieve is to go one necessary level deeper by giving you insight on how leaders should think and be.

As you know, merely mimicking action without an understanding of the psychology of self-leadership is no recipe for long-term sustained success—particularly as your life and business becomes more complicated.

What I will instead share with you in the following pages is a general mental framework that has driven specific, sustained, and directed action to create and surface ongoing opportunities in all areas of my life.

The components of the mindset are:

1. Permanently free yourself from the ‘wisdom’ of the crowd
2. Bring what feels impossible into reality by creating it
3. Never again be held hostage by make-or-break situations by increasing your options
4. Consistently beat your competition by leaning into your killer instinct
5. For true control over your future, fine-tune your life stages
6. Discover how to live congruently with yourself using principles and purpose

These mindsets have allowed me to conduct myself in my internal and external worlds (including with clients, peers, and subordinates)

so that I have found success in different competitive industries (journalism, law, and tech) in both North America and Asia.

As background, I got my start in journalism at one of Canada's largest media companies, then moved to practicing corporate law at one of the world's 10 largest law firms in their Hong Kong and Shanghai offices. I then became a tech manager at several multinational B2B software firms, running teams and overlooking key projects in developed and emerging markets across Asia before joining the start-up world back in North America.

I've since transitioned to running my own consulting business: this time counseling start-up founders from around the world, along with their senior executives, in both the software and hardware spaces on their highest ROI growth and product management initiatives.

Feel free to adopt some or all of the ideas I present in this chapter. I encourage you to try what works for you while discarding what doesn't. One of the main takeaways from this chapter is personal choice; that is, you choose how you want to best live your life for yourself and for those most important to you—whether they are from your personal or work life.

If you follow all or some of these ideas I share, you can expect to:

- Be more productive and motivated
- Make more money
- Generate challenging new opportunities that meaningfully enhance your business and personal life
- Become more preeminent and distinctive in your niche
- Live a business and personal life in ways that are most congruent with your important personal values.

My hope is that you will find value in these mindsets and that they

will benefit your life in the same ways that they have greatly enriched mine.

Ultimately, the end result you will achieve is a new way of thinking, being, and doing to help you live a life that is not a compromise between freedom, enjoyment, innovation, and accomplishment. Put simply, by unnailing your foot from the floor, you'll have much more freedom to maneuver in your thoughts, actions, and plans for the present and future.

Wherever you are in the world and in your life right now, my sincere hope is that these self-leadership concepts will positively transform the way you lead yourself and along with it, everyone you touch.

FREE YOURSELF FROM THE 'WISDOM' OF THE CROWD

Most people live in a box. Every day they go about their professional and personal lives in ways that have already been chosen for them by external ideas and dictates from those still alive, barely alive, or long dead.

These ideas come from a variety of seen and unseen sources: our parents, friends and colleagues, our culture or schooling. It also includes experts, the media and society at large. Because of this, we by default spend most of our waking hours operating on autopilot. Some of these ideas positively influence our lives while others

needlessly inhibit our personal development as leaders in our professional and personal lives, causing us to stagnate. Others are even more dangerous because they actively harm us.

Breaking out of this invisible box is important because you as an entrepreneur, senior executive, or professional, will at some point need to make difficult decisions that are in the best interests of yourself, those closest to you, and your business (and the people within it).

In this section, I offer a way of thinking and operating that gives you the possibility of living your personal and business life free (or as free as possible) from the expectations and constraints imposed by the spoken and unspoken expectations of your surroundings and individual history.

In this way, I am defining “breaking out of the box” beyond what is commonly and stereotypically thought of as innovation and creativity. Instead, what I want to introduce to you is a way of operating in the world that maximizes your decision-making latitude and vastly increases the number of options available to you in a rapidly moving, transforming, and competitive world that is only speeding up, not slowing down.

This section of this chapter guides you through the initial step of living a life that most precisely reflects your truest values by first helping you realize just how much of our thoughts and beliefs are not really ours to begin with.

Then for the remainder of this chapter, we will delve into ways to build your own unique life via a set of mindsets, planning tools, and ways of operating in the physical world that will allow you to live in ways that are most congruent with your truest values.

So, to begin, what keeps us trapped is that deep down you (like everyone else) have a need to feel safe, to be right (“I told you so”),

and to be liked (approval seeking). All three of these unnecessarily restrict us to dogmatic ways of thinking and acting.

For example, this could include the emotional rush you get when your family shows off your high-status job to relatives which causes you to stick with it despite it not being a good fit for you. It could be you insisting that colleagues in your new job do a project a certain fixed way because it's "supposed to be done that way." Or you stay in a bad relationship since "good people are supposed to tough it out" even when things aren't working and because you're afraid you won't find someone more suitable.

As you can see, this is an incredibly dangerous way to sleepwalk through life and to spend a lifetime living on terms not our own.

However, just being aware of the fact that many of your long-held assumptions and beliefs are neither yours nor to your long-term benefit, means you open yourself to the possibility of living more freely because it will allow you to break through and consciously sculpt your life.

Next, realize you have the ability to control what goes on in your head, meaning you yourself are ultimately responsible for generating, managing, and policing your thoughts. This means that once you're aware of externally induced thoughts influencing your mind, you alone are responsible for deciding whether or not you want to break out of your box. It's not a question of whether you can break through (you can), but a question of whether you want to.

In other words, being able to see ahead down the road will allow you to preemptively avoid the metaphorical potholes in our life. With awareness and newfound sight, you can make the conscious choice to navigate so that you avoid any obstructions that would damage or slow you down.

Of course, living outside the box also means that none of your ways

of thinking and acting should cause you to do anything that is illegal or harms others. In other words, living free from the expectations of your surroundings does not mean you have an unconditional and unrestrained pass to act in ways that violate your society's laws or tramples on the rights, security, and safety of others.

Beyond that, however, there is plenty of flexibility in how you conduct yourself so that you can live a life most compatible with your principles and purpose (which we'll discuss in this chapter's final section).

Another compelling reason to break out of the box is not simply because it is a quality of life issue, but because, quite pragmatically, it is a competitive advantage for your business life.

Thinking and acting the same as everybody else confers no competitive differentiation. The reason clients and customers choose their product and service providers is because these providers offer something that is different and better to the buyer that nobody (or few others) can.

If you have trouble freeing yourself from your ingrained patterns of automatic thinking, I encourage you to really think about the ultimate costs you are imposing on yourself at this very moment.

More specifically, each of us only has a limited time on this planet and every moment that has passed is lost forever. We can always find another job if we lose our current one. We can make more money if we lose what we have, and we can recover our health from illness (barring the most serious ones), but we can never get back lost time. This is as true for billionaires as it is for paupers.

Therefore, why would you waste your life living in a way that is not congruent with your most closely held values, beliefs, and ambitions?

I'll use my own life as an example. Most ex-lawyers transition either

into legal recruiting or legal editing when they leave the law. (Out of the four traditional professional service segments of finance, consulting, accounting, and law, the last one by far has the narrowest exit opportunities.) However, I wanted something that could better take advantage of my skills in management, operations, and marketing as well as my interest in software. Of course, I had people in my circle tell me that I should stay in legal-related roles because that was “how things worked.”

I’ve always had an independent streak, so I ignored them.

Even though at the time I hadn’t formalized the mental frameworks I describe in this chapter, I let my predilection for independent thinking guide me. I knew I didn’t have to do what everyone else had done in the past or what those around me opined was in my best interests. Put simply, I didn’t need to follow past precedent, nor did I have to submit to societal presumption of what ex-lawyers could do.

Eventually, persisting with what I knew suited me best over the long-term led me to working at multinational tech firms and start-ups, which then led me to my current role advising international start-up founders and senior executives.

Meanwhile, the vast majority of my law school classmates remain lawyers because they are trapped by dogma (e.g., they don’t want to disappoint their parents, or they are afraid of how their social circle will judge them if they no longer have the perceived prestige of being a lawyer.) Yet, they hate their jobs—to the detriment of their own lives and of those closest to them in the form of bottled up resentment and regret.

Another way to push yourself out of the box is to think about the ultimate price of inaction (or insufficient action) that you will pay in your business and personal life. For example, if you continue to think and act as you currently do, what will your life look like one year from

now? How about two years? Five years?

In addition, what business opportunities will you have missed out on? What are the fulfilling relationships you could have had? Who could you have been?

While it won't be possible for you to know exactly where you will be in the future, you will almost certainly be able to imagine the negative consequences of your unwillingness to change—including the impact on your personal and professional relationships.

Of course, when I say this, I also acknowledge the reality of your skills and abilities and the possession or non-possession of particular talents will allow you (or not) to live in ways that are congruent with you. For example, someone who wants to become a full-time artist likely will have trouble succeeding in a reasonable timeframe if they don't already have the requisite skills. Conversely, someone who has been coding as a hobbyist since age 12, likely has a very good chance of transitioning to becoming a professional software developer.

At the same time, however, remember that you have agency to create the future you want. You already have certain skills, talents, and relationships to set yourself up for the opportunities that best benefit you. You also have the wherewithal to develop new required skills, talents, and relationships if you don't have them already. The next sections will help you best capitalize on your existing assets, as well as help you develop ones you need.

BRING WHAT FEELS IMPOSSIBLE INTO REALITY

Now that you've broken out of the box, the next step is to create your own reality so that you can not only think the way you want to think, but actually live, work, and have the relationships you want in the physical world.

The process of creating your own reality starts with two types of questions—namely (1) the ability to directly ask for something you want; and (2) being able to propose (i.e., create) a new opportunity that benefits someone other than just yourself.

The difference between the two is that an ask generally manifests as a question that starts with, “Can I/you...?” while a proposal often begins with, “How about we...?”

While most people are unafraid to ask for things they perceive as safe bets, most will shy away from opportunities that require them to go beyond their comfort zone. For many people, the pain of potential social rejection outweighs any upside they may gain from securing a new personal relationship, business partnership, or venture.

However, this keeps people stuck at their current level of personal and professional development because they're unwilling or unable to stretch themselves beyond their existing comfort zone. In other words, they are merely asking to participate in sure shot opportunities that either match or undershoot their current skill set and capabilities rather than creating novel personal and business

opportunities that demand feeling uncomfortable (but which will cause them to greatly grow in mindset and capability).

Examples of situations where people could significantly elevate their lives to a new level if they just harnessed their courage and asked the necessary questions, include approaching investors for your start-up, asking a lucrative prospective client account for their business, or creating new professional and personal relationships (or redefining existing ones) that are more win-win than everyone involved could have imagined at the start.

One problem is that too many people underestimate themselves. Specifically, they not only undervalue their own skills, experience, and perspectives, but they also—even in cases where they accurately see their own value—think that others will not recognize their merit. In my consulting practice working with very accomplished founders and senior executives, I've seen this manifest itself as missed chances, stunted professional growth, and above all, regret.

Asking the question rarely causes harm—it is the non-asking of a question out of fear of rejection that causes more damage than anything else.

Instead, many people will try to overly rely on passive signaling and credentialism. This includes getting expensive (and sometimes unnecessary) MBAs or leaning too heavily on showcasing past job experience at well-known brands to try to create new opportunities rather than taking the direct (and more effective) route of just “asking for the sale” even if they don't yet feel 100% qualified. It is of course better to have a track record and formal credentials, but oftentimes we don't ‘feel’ ready, even if we are ready, which leads us to not asking.

I can speak from personal experience as I have a graduate degree in law. Yet aside from the one time I was hired at my previous law firm,

my credential has never ever factored into helping me secure any subsequent employment or consulting opportunity. Instead, what has helped every time is me opening my mouth and asking the other person for the chance to work together.

An example of how my own trajectory was transformed by asking and proposing a win-win arrangement was shortly after I had finished my undergraduate studies (with a degree in economics and English literature) and looking to upgrade my journalism experience to the national level in Canada.

While I had been working for local and regional publications all throughout school, I did not have a journalism degree that was often a formal prerequisite for getting hired at the largest brand name publications.

Rather than try the front door by applying directly with my CV to the top magazines in the country, I instead decided to sidestep the competition by doing what most people (including journalism grads) were afraid of: cold calling.

I intended to ask for, and propose, to create an opportunity on my own terms. I aimed for the top by targeting publications owned by what was then Canada's largest magazine publisher and proposed over a series of cold calls to the editor in chiefs (and their second in commands) of two major business magazines that they simultaneously hire me as an unpaid intern for both of their publications even though neither of them had taken interns before.

It wasn't my writing portfolio (which was decent, though not great compared to journalism grads who had work experience at top publications in Canada, the US, and Asia) that got me in. Instead, what impressed both editor in chiefs was my willingness to contact them directly out of the blue and then to propose a novel arrangement that made it worth their while to say yes to me.

If you're wondering why I proposed to work on an unpaid basis, it was because I wanted to make it impossible for either publication to refuse my offer. In exchange, I got two well recognized brand names on my CV.

Later, I asked again and proposed a new arrangement—that I convert my status as an unpaid intern to that of a paid writer.

The simple act of asking for a chance and then proposing a novel arrangement that benefited people other than myself (in this case, both magazines got a hungry, motivated, young journalist) had a transformative effect on my career when a few years later, I was hired by a global top-10 law firm (which later led to my role as a manager with significant responsibilities for major Asian markets at a global software company).

In bringing me on, the law firm hiring partners commented that they liked my gumption in cold calling two of the largest business magazines in Canada and creatively proposing that they both hire me simultaneously as well as create brand new positions specifically for me. Lawyers, after all, needed the core skill of sales in order to generate business for their firm, and this was a perfect demonstration of creating a profitable opportunity from scratch.

The point I want to make with my career example is that it pays to ask and propose. This is doubly true (and effective) because so few other people do it. Doing the things that other people fear, automatically makes you differentiated and memorable (the very things you need to stand out in this very competitive world).

Understand that most people are more than willing—and in fact—glad to help you. This is provided you make it easy for them to say yes, which most people sadly fail to do.

How do you make it easy for someone to say yes to you? If, for example,

you're asking your boss for a major promotion, come prepared to your meeting with a file containing a complete list of quantifiable outcomes you've produced for the company, testimonials from clients and colleagues, and cost of living calculations along with a crystal clear outline of how you intend to create tangible results for your team in the new role. (I can personally attest to the efficacy of this method.)

Put simply, make it easy for the other person and do the heavy lifting ahead of time for them.

Overall, whether or not you can live a successful life on your personal terms (rather than merely passively accepting what's divvied out to you) is dependent on whether you can do the difficult things that make you stand out.

If this is you, then there's no getting around asking and volunteering yourself for opportunities. As the Pareto 80/20 Rule reminds us, the top opportunities go to only a small sliver of the world's population.

Therefore, there is no trick or shortcut to living a life you dictate; taking action by asking is the shortcut. You need to do the simple, but emotionally frightening, action of "asking for the sale," even in situations where you feel you're not ready. This is particularly important for nonrecurring opportunities which come just once and then disappear if you don't capitalize on it right away. Go ahead and experience the sweaty palms and nervousness—and do it anyway.

If you're so nervous to the point where this feels impossible, you can practice via lower stakes interactions in your daily life to build up your courage. For example, you can stretch yourself by asking your colleagues and friends for small, but somewhat uncomfortable, favors.

The goal of creating your reality is to make possible the previously

impossible by asking for what scares you. For many people, asking is simple in theory, but difficult in practice. This is exactly why you want to do it—it's a competitive advantage in a world where so few others can muster the courage to withstand potentially ego-crushing rejections in order to ultimately generate unique, transformative opportunities.

INCREASE YOUR OPTIONS TO NEVER AGAIN BE HELD HOSTAGE BY MAKE-OR-BREAK SITUATIONS

Now we'll talk about perhaps the most powerful way to ensure that you continue to keep yourself out of the box: by generating optionality in your life so that you can achieve a state of outcome detachment.

What do I mean by outcome detachment? It means having multiple options at your disposal so that you never fall victim to a “make-or-break” situation.

For example, let's say your goal as a business owner is to achieve \$25 million in new revenue. Rather than relying on any one single method (e.g., paid search traffic), you instead diversify across multiple avenues such as content marketing, an outbound sales force, social media, and joint ventures.

You don't sweat things because you have multiple ways of achieving

your goal, so psychologically you're more confident and clear thinking because your mind isn't deleteriously clouded by the fear and anxiety of having narrow options.

If you are an employee, increasing your optionality could mean having a side business and other revenue streams—which means you're able to take greater risks in your day job such as speaking up or taking bold actions that make you stand out as a high potential hire. (I know this from personal experience.)

It's similar to how having multiple job offers means you are more likely to get at least one of them because you are more relaxed, easygoing, and not desperate (which hiring managers can pick up on).

You can also apply this principle to your personal life. For example, instead of having only one identity as a successful businessperson, you also actively cultivate additional identities as a parent to your children, child to your parents, neighbor, non-fiction writer, and marathon runner.

I'm sure you've heard stories of very successful people (including billionaires) who committed suicide because they lost their fortune, business, or job—and with it, their entire identity as a human being. The way to avoid this is to create optionality by diversifying in both your business and personal life.

By combining the principles of increased optionality with creating your reality in your professional and personal life, you not only spread your risk, but also, more importantly, you are no longer beholden to any one identity, person, partner, or outcome. You become, quite naturally, freer because no single thing has a stranglehold on you. Specifically, you become more free to take risks, try new things, and to fail while being fully aware that you will not be wiped out by any one thing.

The above examples are variations of what expert Jay Abraham in his foundational marketing treatise *Getting Everything You Can Out of All You've Got* calls the “Parthenon Principle.” The Parthenon is an ancient Greek temple in Athens that is supported by multiple stone pillars. This means the structure will not collapse even if several of these supports were removed at the same time.

Having optionality is the same idea—you build structural integrity, strength, and diversification into your life to defend against unexpected (as well as expected) shocks that otherwise would have taken you down. Once you have this structural resilience, you automatically gain optionality, and hence, freedom to live your life on your terms instead of being forced to abide by someone else's agenda because you have no palatable alternative.

Yet another additional benefit of deliberately introducing optionality into your life is that it forces you to think more expansively. Rather than relying exclusively on one method that may be rendered obsolete or ineffective if circumstances suddenly change, you'll be compelled to creatively think of multiple ways to accomplish the same outcome.

We've discussed a few examples above, but what are some real-world practical ways to build outcome detachment for the long-term?

The first thing to note is that you must truly have real options. In other words, your brain isn't so stupid that you can trick it over the long-term into believing it has real optionality. It's very hard to fake having options.

One real-world way to increase optionality and achieve ongoing outcome detachment in your life is to expand your contacts beyond your normal network by cultivating “weak ties.” These are relationships in industries, functions, languages, and geographies outside your usual associations.

If you think back to your own life, you'll notice that many of your biggest opportunities came not necessarily from those closest to you (people such as your family and friends with whom you already share many similar or overlapping skills, contacts, and experiences). Rather, they came from those further outside your immediate circle.

From the viewpoint of these individuals outside your usual professional and social associations (such as the college roommate of your overseas ex-colleague), assets you possess that may be commonplace in your normal circles may instead be highly valuable and rare. Think of it as a form of arbitrage: By simply changing the context, you transform what is an everyday commodity into something scarce and potentially lucrative.

This is why your greatest and most transformational opportunities may come from what either seem to be serendipitous circumstances or from people you may not necessarily be that similar to or close with.

To amplify the effect of weak ties, consider taking a global approach to scouting and identifying your upcoming big opportunities. We live in an increasingly interconnected age, and it would be foolish to artificially restrict our potential by constraining ourselves by geography, time zones, and languages along overly narrow lines.

In my own life, this means I have deliberately designed my consulting practice as one that is well diversified by serving a bilingual (English and Chinese) global client base in both the hardware and software spaces. Unlike many consultants who focus on building their business to only serve familiar time zones, I don't rely on any one industry, geography, or type of client.

This optionality means I'm not hostage to any particular client. I always have the option of maintaining my freedom because I've developed the ability to serve different client profiles around the

world at any one time and in more than one language.

Finally, consider how you can redefine and reinvent existing opportunities by transplanting into the markets you serve what has already been proven to work successfully in other industries or parts of the world, but not yet being used by your competition.

You can also combine what is successful in other geographies or industries with what is already successful in your niche to create powerful new hybrid approaches that have never been seen before by your clients and customers. In this way, you gain access to a stream of novel, high-potential ideas that are waiting to be adapted and introduced as fresh and highly differentiated ways to serve the market.

CONSISTENTLY BEAT YOUR COMPETITION BY LEANING INTO YOUR KILLER INSTINCT

Similar to the concept of creating your reality, approaching opportunities in life with a killer instinct means actively and knowingly confronting things you fear and doing it anyway (rather than running or hiding from them) while also intelligently protecting your downside.

Having a killer instinct is more than what most people think of as

ambition. Instead, you approach things with the mindset of seeing them through to the end at a speed that is at least quick enough to keep up with your competitors (but preferably faster). At the same time, you keep your opportunity antenna up for more promising alternatives you can transition over to if needed.

Put another way, it means assertively capitalizing on opportunities—but doing so flexibly. It means you focus and marshal your energy and attention to play full-out to achieve your desired outcome at speed, but that you simultaneously keep an eye out for alternative ways to accomplish your goal.

Actively look for new challenges that are beyond your current skill set and which will require you to elevate your thinking, courage, and mindset. This discomfort is a positive sign—it means you are growing and challenging yourself in a way that is novel for your brain, causing it to send chemical signals of anxiety, fear, and unease. Realize that it is just your brain doing what it has been programmed over millions of years of evolution to do: to keep you safe, comfortable, and stuck exactly where you are now.

Consistently training and acting on your killer instinct translates into you having real world impact on a broader and larger scale than before. For example, this could mean working on more geographically diverse projects with larger deal sizes than before. It also raises your ability to deliver within increasingly tighter timelines for more demanding clients and successfully manage larger stakes where the consequences of both failure and success are more consequential in the aggregate.

Doing this over and over means you drive a virtuous cycle where your skill and mental barriers are continually stretched, developing your capacity to take on the next more difficult challenge.

If we use video game phraseology, it means actively and knowingly

choosing to play life “on hard mode.” As has been said before, life is easy when you don’t run from the hard things, but hard when you live it too easily.

To give you a recent example from my own life of facing the pain and doing it anyway, I had only two weeks to write this chapter while juggling my regular international client work and also taking two business classes. However, writing this chapter means I will reap the dividends for many years to come because I will have a book co-written alongside several esteemed co-authors that I can use to differentiate myself to my current and prospective clients and business partners from around the world.

This experience has also helped me develop the skill of writing books quickly within a very short time span, which is extremely valuable as I embark on my journey as a solo author.

However, you need to keep your standards high if you want to continue to play long-term at the highest level. This necessitates constant grooming and sharpening of your mindsets, cognitive thinking processes, skills, and capabilities because your competition is also constantly improving themselves.

Then there is also the danger of you retreating from hard mode once you’ve left the structure of a premade, demanding environment. For example, this often happens when people leave the structures of a top consulting firm, tech company, or bank.

How, then, do you keep your killer instinct? The answer is that you need to deliberately build structures that require you to play on hard mode.

For instance, I kept the same around-the-clock hours from my law firm days throughout my transition into tech. In my current consulting practice, I keep busy by setting an ‘extracurricular’ schedule of

non-fiction reading related to my work, self-development courses, professional associations (such as mastermind groups), and teaching. I continue to work on weekends, evenings, and most holidays. This is what works for me personally and how I express my personal version of playing to win in the areas that are most important to me in my current stage of life (more on this in a later section).

All of these decisions naturally act as a forcing function to keep my instincts and mind sharp, yet they must all be deliberately planned and incorporated into my life. I do not leave these to chance.

An important part of playing to win is minimizing your risk and knowing how to fail fast. It's knowing when to cut your losses so that you're not throwing good effort after bad since your ultimate goal is to invest only in profitable opportunities. A killer instinct is not persisting stupidly and with reckless abandon—it's about applying maximum effort in effective, efficient, and intelligent ways.

If you ever experience a down period where you lose your confidence and will to win, one suggestion is to think back to past successes in your personal and professional life, no matter how long ago. My personal experience is that our brains do a poor job of distinguishing between a success from a year ago versus one from (for example) 10 years ago. To our brains, a win is a win, regardless of when it occurred. Therefore, meditate on and re-experience in your mind and body how you felt when you were successful during those past situations.

Another thing that dampens our killer instinct is doubt. This often happens when we assume we're the only person who doesn't know. In other words, we assume everyone else except us knows what to do or we wrongly think we have nothing (or little) to offer others. Therefore, we don't even want to raise our hand because we don't want to look stupid or incompetent.

This consequently causes us to not actively put ourselves forward for promising opportunities as often as we should. But you shouldn't think like this because you probably do have at least one thing (and possibly more than one) that is valuable to others. This is even if the other person ostensibly appears a lot more accomplished and successful than you.

An example is one of my clients, an experienced professional with several decades of experience. He came to me for help on troubleshooting his sales process for the start-up he had founded. Even though he had an abundance of experience advising, operating, and captaining several already established companies as a CEO and board member, he had very little hands-on experience building a company from scratch and personally pitching his product. The fact that he had at least 20 years of high quality working experience over me, yet came to me for advice, really drove home for me that we almost always have something to offer others from our areas of expertise.

Finally, make the conscious decision to be preeminent. This means deciding to become the most capable version of yourself and to always maintain and cultivate the power of agency around creating the necessary transformation in your life as changing times and circumstances demand.

FINE-TUNE YOUR LIFE STAGES FOR TRUE CONTROL OVER YOUR FUTURE

In business, there is the concept of the owner versus operator mindset. This is, respectively, the difference between working *on* your business (the long-term, big picture strategic plan) versus working *in* it (the day-to-day tactical tasks). You should adopt a similar mindset for your life to make sure you're not just focusing on your day-to-day to-dos but also stepping back to plan out where you want to go from a macro perspective, along with how you'll do it.

To do so, break your life into its key constituent segments. You can define it however you want, but you at least want to consider the key components: professional, personal (family and friends), and health (physical and emotional).

Then you decide how much time, energy, and resources you want to devote to each of these life segments. It's completely alright if you devote the bulk of your energy to one specific life segment (e.g., your professional life) if that's what you want. The goal is that you are doing this consciously—that is you are choosing the level of commitment based on what you decide is best for you.

The reason you want to break your life down into its constituent segments is so that you can not only see from a high level how you are currently spending your time and energy, but also to know where you can reallocate your resources if you feel your life isn't where it should (or can) be. In other words, you're giving yourself the tools to plan your different life segments in a highly structured and granular way.

Next, break your life into chronological stages where each one can be as long or short as you want. You then allocate percentages to relevant life segments in each life stage you've identified.

A key part of this is to give yourself full permission to focus on as few or many of the life segments as you want. For example, one person may want to split their time 30-60-10 between professional development, family, and their physical health, respectively. Meanwhile, another person may decide to go all-in on their career with an 80-20 split between their career and health (physical and emotional).

Putting things together and looking at this more broadly, this could mean you set a foundational stage running from age 22 to 35 where you focus almost entirely on your career. During this phase, you work hard to acquire the skills and contacts needed to start your own business from age 36 onward. At the same time, in the latter half of this foundational phase, you also start to seriously explore the possibility of starting a family.

Then, in the subsequent stage from age 36 to 50 (let's call this the consolidation stage), you focus on balancing your family responsibilities with working hard at your business so that by 51 you can consider a form of semi-retirement (perhaps called the self-exploration stage).

Choose what you want based on your desired trajectory. It doesn't matter: Choose your life stages and their respective durations based on what works for you.

In other words, you assign prioritization and sequencing to your life's stages based on where you are in your life and where you want to be in the future. Doing so allows you to plan backward from a specific objective so that you can better judge how to apportion your time, energy, and concentration.

And again, as I have emphasized throughout this chapter, we do this so that you can consciously shape how you live your life, rather than leaving it to how your family, friends, business partners, and society want you to live.

Does this mean that things will turn out exactly as you plan them? Certainly not, since it's impossible to know exactly how the future will turn out. As the saying goes, no plan survives contact with the enemy.

But what this exercise does is that it gives you a structure for planning specific chronological phases of your life in the same way that the years starting from middle school to university graduation are typically much more structured with key milestones. For most people, this would be general and specific timelines around key “coming of age” activities such as studying for standardized exams, applying for postsecondary institutions, participating in extracurriculars to bolster their entrance applications, and then finally, attending job fairs toward the end of their college experience.

However, most people will generally lose this type of structure upon leaving school and entering the working world, which leads many of them to drift unconsciously in their personal and professional lives.

This is why it's important to have at least some sort of basic plan in place so that you can set an overall direction to guide your day-to-day actions. This ultimately allows you to move progressively closer toward living your desired life.

In sum, breaking your life down into its key segments and chronological phases means planning things out as you would in business project management by assigning project focuses, activities, timelines, and resource allocations. As I said before, it's impossible to predict where you will be in the next five to ten years, but at least you have a general direction, which is much better than zero planning.

In sum, planning your life in sequenced, timeboxed stages (as well as decomposing each individual stage into prioritized key life segments) means you are able to finetune your life with a degree of detail and granular thoughtfulness that eludes most people—even those very successful by traditional measures.

The edge you'll have over others (and yourself) is that you'll be living your life very consciously instead of completely on the fly and at the mercy of randomness.

You will, in other words, live your life with the power of agency and conscious deliberation, which is atypical in our society.

HOW TO LIVE CONGRUENTLY WITH YOURSELF

The final step is to define the principles of how you will live and the purpose for why you do what you do.

Your principles and purpose are personal to you so when you come up with them, make sure they reflect who you are and what you believe, not what you think you should believe.

Similar to what we discussed in the section on breaking out of the box, the only restriction is that they are not illegal or harmful to others.

As examples, here are some of my personal principles:

- I will always first create value for others in my professional

and personal relationships and will not expect anything in return.

- I will never rely on any one client and will instead have multiple streams of revenue.
- I will walk away from any relationship that is not a good fit for me regardless of how much time, energy, and money I have already invested.
- I cultivate business and personal contacts that span the globe rather than be restricted to any one geography.

Your goal in determining your personal principles is to elucidate the specific, granular values that truly reflect what you believe so that when you go out into the physical world to bring your reality into existence, you are always congruent with who you are.

As for your purpose, another CEO client of mine (this time in the real estate software business) once asked me what question is rarely asked by entrepreneurs, senior executives, and professionals, but which should be raised more often.

I told him that we don't spend the time or effort to find out what truly motivates us on a deep, primal, emotional level. In other words, we don't ask ourselves, "What would I do for free?" often enough. As clichéd as this question is, it's important to find what truly fuels our motivational fire.

For me, it's learning and mastering (or at least gaining baseline understanding of) challenging and difficult skills that are in-demand by the market. This includes high leverage 'horizontal' skills that can be applied across different industries and life segments including relationship management, writing, public speaking, marketing, sales, and non-linear thinking. There's an inherent joy and flow state I experience when I do what drives me at a deep emotional level.

So, ask yourself what is it that truly drives you on a deep, pre-verbal level that you can't necessarily logically explain with your intellectual mind. A good test of this is if you answer, "I just like it," without being able to explain why you like it. That's a strong sign that you've hit upon something that motivates you at a deep, primal, and emotional level where you don't need to necessarily push yourself all that much using motivational slogans ("Just do it!") or with abundant willpower (which is not sustainable anyway).

For true sustained and long-term drive, you need to tap into what motivates you emotionally (and this is coming from someone who thinks heavily from the left-brain analytical side).

Your purpose is something you devote yourself to working on over the long-term for the rest of your life (or a phase of your life as explained in the life stages section).

One thing to keep in mind is that your purpose and set of principles are not meant to lock you into rigid ways of thinking or acting. Instead, they provide a set of general guardrails to ensure you don't participate in opportunities or relationships that either don't suit you, take you off your trajectory, or which actively hurt you or others.

Be sure, therefore, to keep yourself open to new and unexpected opportunities that were not originally on your radar as long as they are compatible with your principles and purpose. As you may have already personally experienced, some of the most transformational events in our lives stem from the most unexpected—and sometimes serendipitous—occurrences.

SUMMARY

Leadership over yourself and for those in your life, starts in your mind. More specifically, it has to do with understanding that the ways you currently think and act are probably already shaped by ideas and customs implanted in us for better or worse by society, family, friends, culture, and schooling (among other things). These invisible walls have been built up in us over years (and perhaps decades), often via osmosis, without us thinking about the immediate or downstream implications on our life and on the lives of those we interact with. Some benefit us, while others disadvantage us.

Living a business and personal life decided on your personal terms requires that you first recognize these influences and then consciously decide to break out of the box.

Once you've escaped, you need to set about actually creating the life you want in the physical world. To do this, directly ask for the opportunities you want and propose beneficial win-win arrangements that make it impossible for the other person to say no to you.

If you feel anxious, then feel the fear and do it anyway because it's a massive advantage in a world where passivity and taking the safe, easy route is your competition's default behavior. Developing your killer instinct requires that you do the things that scare you so that you can continually sharpen your capabilities to create increasingly better outcomes for yourself and for those around you.

A key way to increase your freedom is to actually have real alternative options for achieving your objectives. In other words, you can't fool your brain over the long-term into outcome detachment. More options results in greater outcome detachment, which consequently means

you'll enjoy greater power over yourself and external situations.

Make sure you have a systematic plan for how you will allocate your time and energy by splitting your life into chronological stages corresponding to where you are right now while also taking into account your future ambitions and goals.

Finally, elucidate your key principles for how you will live as well as your purpose for why you live. What your principles and purpose are as a leader both to yourself and to those in your life are entirely up to you as long as they don't break any of your society's laws or harm others.

More than anything, the set of ideas and ways of thinking, being, and living introduced in this chapter are all about opening your mind to enable you to take bold action to achieve what's possible at the outermost edge of life. In other words, the most exciting part of life.

AUTHOR BIO

Richmond Wong works directly with founders and senior leadership of international start-ups on their highest ROI leadership, product, and growth initiatives.

Having launched multiple complex B2B platforms for Reuters and LexisNexis in 10+ developed and emerging markets including Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and throughout Southeast Asia, Richmond brings both a high-level and “from the trenches” perspective on international leadership to all his client engagements.

His clients include a growing list of software and hardware companies from the US, Australia, Hong Kong, and Canada.

Richmond is also a Teaching Assistant for MBA-level courses taught by handpicked Wharton, Cornell, New York University, and UC Berkeley professors at Section4, a NYC-based edtech start-up founded by CNN’s Scott Galloway.

Richmond has lectured on product principles at Royal Dutch Shell’s LiveWIRE accelerator and at San Francisco-headquartered Product School.

Before moving into tech, Richmond trained as a corporate lawyer with one of the world’s 10 largest law firms, Hogan Lovells, serving Fortune 500 clients on their most mission critical mandates.

Richmond started his career as a journalist with Rogers Publishing, then Canada’s largest magazine group.

Connect With Richmond: For free articles, updates, and case studies on how to improve your personal and professional leadership skills, visit www.richmondwong.com.