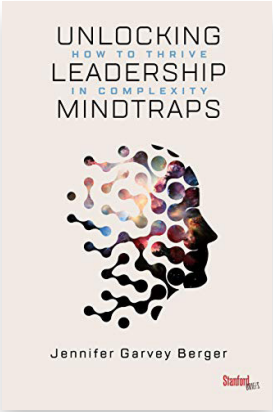

Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction

In all of my research, writing, teaching, and learning over the last three decades, I have found that we humans are brilliantly designed for an older, less connected, and more predictable version of the world. In today's highly interconnected, fast-changing world, we need to take some of that brilliant design and purposefully reshape it to be fit for the unpredictable future that is unfolding. When we do this, we find that not only does the complex world of today seem less overwhelming, but we also solve problems more effectively, our relationships improve, and we even like ourselves better.

Chapter 1: The Five Quirks and How They Become Traps

Leaders today are busier than they've ever been, and they are falling behind. It's not only that the demands on them are so much more time consuming than they used to be (although that seems to be true). It's that the nature of the challenges has changed in such a way that the tools and approaches of the past simply don't work. In the past ten years, I have worked with thousands of leaders around the world on how to lead in complex, uncertain environments. I've become fascinated by what gets in our way, and particularly fascinated by one particular phenomenon: those times when our reflexes are exactly wrong. Such times seem to clump together in particular ways and create

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a perverse and seemingly inescapable trap: our human instincts, shaped for (and craving) a simple world, fundamentally mislead us in a complex, unpredictable world.

You see, our experience isn't always the helpful compass it once was. In the past, when things were changing more slowly and we were less interconnected, we could rely on our experience to tell us what would probably happen next. Today there are so many things we deal with on a daily basis that are unpredictable, and there's no way of telling how these unpredictable pieces will interact.

It's the interactions of all these unpredictable things that create complexity. The more interconnected we are, and the faster things are changing, the more complex our world is. This shifts formerly straightforward professions into confusing complex ones. Frustratingly, the fact that our reflexes lead us astray in complex and uncertain times doesn't seem to make us less likely to use them. The cognitive and emotional shortcuts honed over the course of tens of thousands of years of evolution are so automatic that we use them without even noticing whether they're helpful or not. Part cognitive bias, part neurological quirk, part adaptive response to a simple world that doesn't exist anymore, they are "mindtraps."

Perhaps the trickiest thing about these mindtraps is the way they combine to mislead us about the fact that we're in traps at all. Unwittingly stuck in a trap, we tend to believe we should simply try harder rather than try something else. We need help to find the traps and then escape from them. In my research into leadership and complexity, I've found five of the most pernicious and pervasive of these mindtraps. They answer the question I am often asked: *what is the most important shift I need to make if I am going to lead well in complexity?* You'll see that:

- We are trapped by simple stories.
- We are trapped by rightness.
- We are trapped by agreement.
- We are trapped by control.
- We are trapped by our ego.

Understanding new ways to notice and escape these mindtraps turns out to be a kind of superpower that allows you to see new opportunities, create new solutions, and move forward with more finesse and less angst. These ideas will help you at work or at home or anywhere your life has gotten more complex.

As the science and research improves, we learn more about ourselves and what humans do really well and what we don't. There's this funny paradox, though, because much of what our sophisticated science—augmented by computers and machines that peer into our bodies and brains—tells us is about what we cannot change about ourselves, what we just get with the package of being human. "What's the point of that?" you might be thinking. "How could knowing that we cannot control something be a help to us? Doesn't that mean we should just give up?"

Convene

Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps

Okay, admittedly, when I first started learning about the ways our biases and reflexes and irrationalities were unfixable, I wanted to go take a nap. After all, I wanted to polish us all up, make us shiny and new and ready to face all the complexities life has to offer, and what I discovered is that we're just not built that way. The complexity of the world requires that we understand the grays, that we resist black-and-white solutions, that we ask different questions about the unexpected and options. But alas, we humans are built to simplify and segment, and it goes against all of our natural pulls to take another person's perspective or to see a system in action.

Yet, as the behavioral economist Dan Ariely says, we humans know about our limitations in the physical realm, and we find ways—using machines and medicine and other supports—to overcome them. If we knew about our limitations in the way we make sense of the world and therefore act, we could figure out ways to overcome those limitations too. Behavioral economists know we need to understand what traps we might fall into as we make tricky financial decisions like saving for retirement or figuring out how much to pay for our dream house. It's just as important to understand our leadership mindtraps and why they are not helpful to us as we lead in a complex world. So let's take the lessons we're learning from fields across the study of human thinking and action, and let's see how to identify the most common mindtraps in order to sidestep around them.

Chapter 2: Trapped by Simple Stories

Humans have been elevated and connected by stories; our stories have been a source of meaning and solace for us at least from the times our ancestors drew pictures on the walls of caves. Stories about our creation, about our path in life, about our gods—all of these have brought us comfort and purpose. They have freed us from anxiety and from the existential questions about the larger meanings in our short lives. They may even be a core part of how we made it to the top of the food chain in the first place. The good news is that we are now perfectly wired for stories; the bad news is that our automatic stories are probably too simple for a complex world.

Our brains have developed to create patterns of beginning, middle, and end for us, and when those patterns are not satisfied (as with a postmodern play, for example) we experience it in our bodies as stress and confusion. This is fine when we are in a theater (and the author is taking care of the narrative arc for us), but it becomes a problem in real life where there are rarely full beginnings or endings to anything. We take what we've learned from the past and project it into the future. We crave these simple stories so our brains fill in the missing pieces. Like the rest of the mindtraps, this happens without our even noticing.

We are constantly projecting from the things we have seen in the past to what the future will be like. This is the reason for much great literature and art, and it's also the reason for our conspiracy theories. If there are random dots scattered somewhere, we'll create patterns, name them, and create stories about them. We call them constellations if they're in the sky, and these days that feels like mythology. We call them evidence if they're in our lives, and these days that feels a lot like the truth. It leads us to a kind of "Oh, I've seen this before" feeling, when we absolutely have seen this exact

situation before. So because we believe in cause and effect, we also fall into thinking that the same causes will have the same effects this time. Imagining the order that comes with the story line, we see signs everywhere we look. ("When he cleared his throat before saying he'd get right back to me about the job, I think that was him saying that he wasn't going to get back to me at all. My last boss always cleared his throat before saying something soothing but untrue.")

To create our simple stories, we pick and choose the data we remember, and we add in little bits of data if it makes for a better case. This has been shown in everything from the research lab to the police station. Once again, we don't do this on purpose—it happens in the background, and then we can't tell the difference between what we've made up and what we saw as it all feels like a memory to us.

Now I don't know if you're paying real attention here, but this is kind of wacky. You look for patterns from the past that you project into the future; if you can't find enough data, you make it up; and then you believe that you know what's going to happen next in your story! Then (if you're like me) you can start getting anxious about it and whipping yourself into a froth. Not good. In fact, as Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman tells us: "It is the consistency of the information that matters for a good story, not its completeness. Indeed, you will often find that knowing little makes it easier to fit everything you know into a coherent pattern."

The bad news is that there is no way to stop experiencing the biological pulls toward simple stories. This all happens without your noticing it, so you cannot stop it from happening. You'll make simple stories and believe in them; you'll project the past forward onto the present; you'll create character roles that are based on very little; and you'll select data to reinforce the simple stories and characters you already have. This is all going to happen hundreds of times every day. Like all of the mindtraps, these happen because they mostly work for us. They probably used to be even more effective in a simple world with fewer possibilities and interconnections. You don't need to stop using these stories; you just need to interrupt yourself when you start to believe in them and they constrain your world. Here are two keys to help open the trap.

Key question: How is this person a hero? When you realize that you're carrying a simple story about a person or a group of people, it can be useful to name the role you think they're playing and then intentionally switch the role and see what that allows. Do you believe that your colleague is always undermining you and trying to make you look bad in front of the boss? See if you can reframe her actions as the hero in her story rather than the villain in yours. She doesn't go home at night and cackle over her cauldron about the ways she screwed you today. She tells herself she is doing things for the greater good and that she is acting in a heroic way. See if you can take her perspective, even for a moment. Perhaps she sees you undermining her and she's trying to show your boss her hard work, or perhaps what you call undermining she calls critically examining, or whatever.

This is not to say that there aren't those in your life who are villainous, who aren't mishandling responsibility. It's just to say that you can't trust what your brain automatically tells you about those people without really exploring alternatives. In complex settings, your simple stories will dramatically limit the range of thinking and feeling about what's possible. Using this question as a key will unlock your simplistic framing of others and help you live more into the world of bigger possibility.

Key habit: Carry three different stories. As you find yourself asking about the characters of others, you can begin to branch out and muse about the whole story you're telling yourself. To disrupt the simple stories you tell, you can develop the habit of carrying multiple stories about the events in your life. The best way I've found to do that is to notice your story and then create another one, and then another, and another.

When you know that if this initiative wins it will be disastrous, see if you can create another story that turns out differently. When you hear yourself saying, "I've seen this before and I know just how it goes," remind yourself that if the situation is truly complex, you haven't seen something quite like it before and you have no idea where it goes. Think of these as the opportunities to do a kind of mental yoga and stretch yourself into a new place. As with real yoga, the practice of doing this over time will make you more flexible and allow you to act more effectively in complexity.

This is a little different from scenario planning, which asks you to imagine a variety of different futures so that you can pick one to work toward—and be prepared in case the chosen one doesn't happen. Here you do not want to settle on a few possibilities to work toward. Instead, you're using the fact that you can come up with different possibilities to increase the likelihood that you'll be ready for any of them, or for another one you can't yet imagine. If you're sure one thing will happen, you'll close down to evidence that points at another thing. If you're aiming at a single story you like best, you won't notice a better one that you might not have thought about. As complexity theorist Peter Coleman writes, "Life, so full of contradictions and surprises, rarely ever makes complete sense. The pieces of the puzzle seldom fit together perfectly. When they do—beware."

The point isn't to avoid telling stories. You can't. The point isn't even to avoid telling simple stories. I think that's too hard as well. The point is to notice your simple stories, remember they're simple, believe in them less, and use this habit to multiply the options you are considering. The point is to understand that in a complex world a simple story is just about always wrong and will just about always lead us to an emaciated, impoverished set of choices. Escape the simple stories trap for a cornucopia of possibilities in a complex world.

Chapter 3: Trapped by Rightness

Your sense of being right about something, the sparkling clarity of certainty, is not a thought process, not a reasoning process, but an emotion that has nothing to do with whether you are right or not. Our brain has evolved to trick us about this. When we feel right about something, and someone asks us why, we'll be quick to offer a reason explaining our actions. What psychologists find time

after time, though, is that those explanations are mostly post-decision justifications rather than a considered decision-making process beforehand. Why? It's because we didn't need to make a decision; we just felt we knew what to do.

I have had to read many, many research studies and books to come to believe that you and I deliberate thoughtfully on only a tiny percentage of the decisions we make each day. The rest of them we just make because it feels right. By now I've read and researched enough to believe that perhaps feeling right isn't the best approach. It turns out that we can't tell the difference between our opinion and the truth, and that shapes what we notice as well as how we treat other people.

Of course, it isn't that feeling right is always wrong. Feeling right feels great because we feel confident and on top of things and know what to do next. The only reason it's a mindtrap is because that feeling of rightness is unfortunately unconnected to whether we are, in fact, right. This means that sometimes you'll feel right and be right and sometimes you'll feel exactly the same way but be exactly wrong. I think of this as the rightness hangover: it feels great in the moment but not so good the next morning. To see whether you're in the rightness trap and to climb your way out, here are a couple of keys for your ring.

Key questions: What do I believe and how could I be wrong? What do I believe is an important question for two opposite reasons. The first is that without it we often believe things without noticing we have a belief; it feels like noticing the truth. Those shoes are ugly. That politician is lying. That new direction for our company is the only way to go. Those feel like statements of truth and not statements of belief to us. Noticing them as beliefs puts just a tiny bit of daylight between what we believe and our sense that it is objectively true. I believe those shoes are ugly. I believe that politician is lying. I believe this is the new direction for our company to go. Naming these as our beliefs opens up the possibility that we or others could have other beliefs and not simply be wrong.

The second reason is the opposite. Sometimes we really don't know what we believe. We spin around, bouncing between possibilities, and lose our way. In this case, *what do I believe?* can be incredibly grounding. Even at a time when the way is unclear and the various forces push in one direction and then another, there are at least some things you believe. Naming them can be like dropping the keel in place on a little sailboat as suddenly you're not quite so buffeted by the wind as you were before.

Either way you use it, this question is most helpfully combined with *how could I be wrong?* It is perhaps the question I have found most useful of all because it busts me out of the trap of rightness. This question has opened up new strategic possibilities in organizations and new career possibilities in executives.

Key move: Listening to learn. If asking questions of ourselves is pivotal to escaping the rightness trap, the way we respond to others can keep us out of the trap over time. The most important escape move when we are trying to get out of the rightness trap is to change the way we listen. It turns out that much of the time we listen to win. You know the kind of listen that tries to make you right and the other person wrong.

Listening to learn requires that we watch our assumptions that we are right (and we can either make the problem go away by winning or make it go away by fixing) and instead believe that the other person has something to say that we don't understand and therefore immediately help or make the problem go away. Listening to learn requires that we hold off and try to deeply understand for a few minutes. So when you hear, "I'm frustrated that no one really even notices how much I contribute," you could try a listening-to-learn move: "Hmm. So it feels like you're contributing a lot but you don't get any recognition?" (You have to say this in an open and curious voice, like you really want to learn, or else it can come across as snarky.) Then your colleague, partner, or friend might say, "Yes, totally!" or, "Well, that's just it. I'm not even sure that I am contributing because I never get any feedback." Or, "Kind of. I guess I'm wondering whether I rely too much on the feedback of others rather than really knowing in myself what good work looks like," or something else. The point is that if you are careful to mistrust the emotion of rightness from the beginning, you might find yourself hearing things that open up whole new possibilities for solutions.

Believing we're right narrows and closes down possibilities. Mostly we don't even notice we're doing it—that's why it's a mindtrap. If we hold the possibility that we might be wrong, whole new vistas open for us. We become more curious, better listeners, and better problem-solvers.

Chapter 4: Trapped by Agreement

We are taught as small people that when we disagree, we should compromise. You give a little, I give a little, and eventually we meet in the middle. We see this at work and at home. It doesn't seem fair for one side or the other side to win, and so we are drawn to having each side lose a little so that we can come together on a legitimate solution. We are built for compromise. Study after study has shown that we will work against our own best interest as long as we believe it would be more fair (or rather less unfair) and fairness seems to look quite a lot like compromise to our brains. This makes sense evolutionarily, when we needed to live in communities and figure out how to work together, share the spoils from a hunt, and begin to trade with one another. In simple situations, compromise may well be the best option.

So while compromise might feel fair, in complex situations it's often the wrong way to go because compromise tends to merge two options into one. In complexity, having more options is always better, because you can't possibly know beforehand which options will actually pay off. So the urge to compromise in complexity takes you from two viable options to one potentially mediocre one.

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There's another piece to this agreement mindtrap about how our reflexes are not suited for a complex world. We are humans, so this one pushes us in exactly the opposite direction. If we cannot find a compromise, our tendency is to abandon compromise, collect a group around us, and polarize. This tendency is all too real to us after the big upsets of Brexit and Trump. In most intractable and complex conflicts, it turns out that our pattern is to oversimplify the issues (you've seen this mindtrap before) and then believe that people who think like us are right and people who think another thing are the enemy.

This misreading means that hearing counter evidence about a thing we believe in deeply actually serves not to loosen our opinions to allow for new possibilities, but to reinforce our certainty in what we believed before. Hugh Mackay calls this the phenomenon of data "strengthening our cages," keeping us locked in our previous positions and in more entrenched ways. It also makes us a little paranoid, thinking other people or groups are out to get us.

The keys to unlocking this mindtrap are to remake what agreement means, what conflict means. I'm not talking about the way some organizations ask you to remake your connection to your ideas so that when your precious proposal is shredded by the group, you will buck up and take it well. I'm not talking about developing a tougher skin or carelessly telling people what we really think. I'm suggesting that we could understand conflict (carefully handled) as a way to deepen our relationships with one another, and disagreements (carefully handled) as a way to broaden our solution set.

Key question: Could this conflict serve to deepen a relationship? One of the most helpful questions I've ever heard in the conflict space comes from executive coach Catherine Fitzgerald. Her question for helping clients deal with conflict was not about whether the client would win the conflict or whether the conflict itself was worthy; it was about the effect on the relationship. It wasn't about ruining the relationship (like, "Are you willing to risk the relationship on this conflict?"). It was about deepening it. "Confront only to deepen," she used to say. Or, *Could this conflict serve to deepen your relationship?*

This idea is revolutionary to me and others like me who struggle with their deep thirst for agreement. It is a challenge to make conflict about resolution rather than winning. Resolution is about understanding one another more deeply so that you can come to a third way together, a way neither of you had considered before. A conflict that you truly want to resolve is a force for good in relationships.

If we are going to have conflicts that serve to make things better, though, we will have to change our approach. We'll have to "listen to learn" to fully understand the other person's perspective and we'll have to offer our perspective cleanly and without judgment. We'll have to really hold on to the idea that other people can disagree with us and still be right. We'll have to wade straight into the storm instead of dodging around it or pretending that it doesn't exist.

Key habit: Disagree to expand. Just as we can engage in conflict in order to deepen our relationships, we can disagree with one another in order to expand our possibilities. In predictable situations, coming up with the right answer is possible—you can research what others have done and just do that. But in unpredictable times, coming up with an answer that has been tried before is not that helpful because who knows how it will go this time.

The point is that in complex, fast-changing situations, we will not ever be able to agree on the one best thing, because that simply doesn't exist. We also don't want to polarize around conflict and become ever more entrenched in our original perspectives. Instead, we need to work to remember that complex situations have so many pieces and perspectives that each one of us might see a slightly different set of possibilities. And even those with bewilderingly different (and seemingly wrong) perspectives are giving voice to something in the complex system that we probably need to pay attention to. Only in this way can we escape from the trap of simple agreement and use the conflict and disagreement as a way to deepen our relationships and expand our possibilities.

Chapter 5: Trapped by Control

We are right when we believe we are happier being in control than out of control. Our own belief that we have power to control the circumstances of our lives, sometimes called "self-efficacy," has been widely linked to happiness. Like so many of the mindtraps, however, we have a simple story about what that means. We often think it should mean that we can have direct control over all the outcomes that are important to us—we should be able to control when we meet our future partner, when we have our children, how our career unfolds, and so on. As leaders, we believe we should be able to control the culture, or the focus on customers, or the quality of the safety culture. These are all emergent outcomes of a complex system, though, and our belief that we can control them leads to perverse consequences.

Perhaps one of the most perverse consequences is that in the quest for the control that will make us happy, we become unhappy because we are questing for the wrong sort of control. Having a more nuanced set of ideas about which things we can control, and how, helps us create a more robust kind of happiness that has less blame and more effectiveness at creating the conditions we most want, while learning to shape our own responses—even when the world gives us conditions we hate.

Our desire to control uncontrollable outcomes often leads us toward perverse and unhelpful moves as we substitute one element that can be measured for the larger thing we care about that can't be measured. Here the trap is that we get seduced into controlling that piece of the system that seems to us to be controllable. We see that patients aren't getting good enough care in hospitals, so we create a target for the time from entrance to admission, treatment, or discharge. We see that the roads are dangerous after a particularly violent winter, so we create a target for how quickly the potholes get fixed. The problem with these things is that people begin to solve for the small proxy

rather than the larger goal. They take shortcuts on patient care to get folks through on time; they fix potholes quickly and temporarily so that they can meet their targets. As they meet their targets, they organize away from the larger goals and toward these smaller ones.

Instead of craving control, in complexity we have to shift to thinking about influence. We will not be able to make things happen, but we can be thoughtful about how we support the emergence of the things we want. Want to raise a child that can support herself as an adult? You can influence some of her early experiences to make that outcome more likely. We cannot predict the future, so we have to be careful not to have too narrow of an outcome in mind. One of the quirks of control in a complex world is that a direction (like "more self-sustaining") is way better than a narrow destination or target. Increasing options while knowing what's most important gives us more room for influence even as it relinquishes our (false) sense of control over exactly how it will all turn out.

Key question: What can I help enable? What could enable me? One of the most helpful ways to shift away from thinking about outcomes to thinking about influence is to consider what seems to enable the direction you most desire. Thinking about enablers helps us resist thinking about causes—which is what our controlling minds want us to believe in. What caused her stroke? What caused young Johnny to drop out of high school and join a gang? What caused their team's failure to meet that deadline? All of these are tempting but unhelpful questions, particularly if you're using them to try to manage your health, your kids, and your team.

Asking what you can help enable shifts your thinking and expands your view. What sorts of things are inside your control that might enable your team to work together more collaboratively? You can also direct this question to yourself. What would enable you to have the life you most want? You might have an image of a particular destination in mind. ("I just want to live in one of those beautiful houses on the river.") You can notice the craving for a destination that you think you should be able to control and see if you can create a direction instead. ("I want to spend more of my time surrounded by nature.") Then you can ask questions about what might enable that for you.

Key habit: Experimentation at the edges. There is a lot of writing these days about being more experimental so that we can innovate our way to a better product, service, mate or future. Let's face it, though, many of our "experiments" are kind of like the ones we did in high school science. We believe that we can tell beforehand just what's going to happen, and if we don't achieve that outcome, we figure we did it wrong.

When we open our horizons to direction rather than destination, and to influence rather than control, we can begin to think about genuinely experimenting—trying something where we really don't know what might happen next to see if it helps us travel in the direction we seek. We also want to experiment at the edges rather than at the very center of the issue. In complex systems the center is the most resistant to change, so it's best to stay away from it.

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Alter patterns, not outcomes. We need to notice the patterns that are creating the circumstances we dislike and then experiment at the edges to change those patterns (and of course we can notice patterns we do like and experiment to amplify those patterns). Then we will find ourselves learning about the system and also influencing it in ways that might just move us in directions that turn out to be better than the destinations we had in mind in the first place.

Chapter 6: Trapped by Ego

We humans have the strangest experience of our own growth and development. We tend to have a stark differentiation between the growing, evolving person we were earlier in our lives and the grown, evolved person we are now. You see this in kids who resist the (obnoxious, patronizing) idea parents have that perhaps the choices you make at sixteen won't really be the ones your twenty-six-year-old self will feel grateful for. The surprise from all kinds of research is that we keep that same perspective throughout our lives. We know that we've changed so much in the past, but—phew—now we have actually settled down, we won't change anymore, and, er, we're always wrong about that.

Jamie Holmes tells us: "We create a sharp division between our present, fixed self, and our past, evolving selves. We always think we've settled into ourselves, and we're always wrong. The most interesting finding is that at every age, we feel like we're done with our own evolution." I think it's really important to notice that we're wired to (wrongly) believe that our big changes are behind us. So many of us don't think of ourselves as growing and changing into the future, we invest our energy protecting the person we have become rather than growing into the person we become next.

Protecting the person we have become turns out to be a nearly full-time job. An enormous amount of hidden energy goes into protecting ourselves from evidence that our beliefs are wrong, that we are needing to show our worth, to receive love from others, or to prove that we're the smartest ones in the room. Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey write about this phenomenon: "In an ordinary organization, most people are doing a second job no one is paying them for. In businesses large and small; in government agencies, schools, and hospitals; in for-profits and non-profits, and in any country in the world, most people are spending time and energy covering up their weaknesses, managing other people's impressions of them, showing themselves to their best advantage, playing politics, hiding their inadequacies, hiding their limitations. Hiding."

A part of the trick is that we hide this effort from ourselves, too. We're mostly not aware when we're protecting and defending our ego. Instead, we tend to think we're "standing up for ourselves" or "doing what it takes" or any other self-justification technique we might offer. We might notice it with the sweating of our palms when someone challenges us about something we feel we should have prepared for. Then we might blame the other person (That guy was a jerk for embarrassing me in public this morning!), or we might turn our wrath on ourselves (Geez, I'm such a screw-up! I never prepare as I should!). We might notice it when we have an argument over something really stupid

and meaningless (You never throw away the moldy leftovers! You expect me to be your servant!) that we somehow can't stop ourselves from escalating (And that's how I know you're the wrong person for me to spend the rest of my life with!). We might notice it when we rely on our clothes or our car or our house to carry the impression we most want to make (We can't drive up to the meeting in that car—the investors will know we're struggling to make it and won't think we're a good risk). Really, though, what we are often doing is fighting against our weaknesses, our unknowing, our confusion or our shame.

The energy that fight takes is enormous. Kegan and Lahey call it the "single biggest loss of resources that organizations suffer every day." Even worse, as we win that fight, we lose sight of the developmental path that is just on the edge of our defenses. The problem is we tend not to have a sense of the way the elements of our lives shape into a beautiful and helpful pattern. In the absence of a map that tells us where we have been and where we might get to next, we figure wherever we are is the last stop on the road and we need to defend the patch of land we happen to inhabit right now.

Each of these treats the symptom of the issue rather than the underlying cause. The symptom is how we show up; the cause might be how we make sense of the world and our place in it. Theories of adult development offer us a new possibility to make sense of who we are and who we are becoming. These theories tell us that our time on the planet doesn't just change our physical shape; it also changes our emotional and mental shape—what I think of as our "forms of mind." Just as a baby becomes more able to handle the complexities of her life when she learns to walk and talk, and a young child becomes more able to handle the complexities of his life when he learns to read, so too do our new ways of being in the world shape our ability to handle the complexities in our life. Unlike our early changes, though, our adult changes tend not to show up with new skills or a new physical growth spurt. Generally, you can see those most easily when you get really interested not just in what someone knows but in how he makes sense of what he knows.

If our default is to defend and protect who we have been rather than reaching and growing toward who we could become, what do we do about that? We see the possible pathway of growth, but that doesn't make it effortless to follow it. Believing that people can change, dramatically, over the course of their lives can be both helpful and daunting. Believing people are more beautiful and connected when they are vulnerable is easy to say and hard to actually act upon. But there are moves you can make and questions you can ask that will help you escape from this trickiest of mindtraps.

Key question: Who do I want to be next? One way we get in our own way is believing that an idea or a value or a hope arises out of who we are, and who we have always been.

Key move: Listen to learn from yourself. Now that you are asking yourself about the person you will become, the next move is to look at the way you are making sense of the world. This, in many ways, is like "listening to learn" from others, except you're turning that curiosity onto yourself and getting

more curious about how you're making sense of the world. This isn't about why you believe what you believe (so you're not trying to perfect your self-justification); it's about how you see the world in such a way that your current perspective is the one that arises for you.

This helps you find your own place on the developmental map, which has the advantage of both understanding yourself better and also beginning to discover where you might grow next. When you find yourself frustrated and confused, you can get a little distance from that frustration and wonder what is really going on. Key questions you can ask yourself are:

- What is at stake for me here?
- What is the hardest part about this?
- What is the best part about this?
- How do I know this is true?

The trick isn't to ask the question just once (that tends to get at justification) but to ask it at least three times. Knowing about where we are in our developmental map and thinking about who we might become next allows us to release some of the pressure of defending where we are and encourages us to look with curiosity at the way life is supporting us to grow into the next version of ourselves.

Chapter 7: Building a Ladder to Escape Mindtraps

In complexity, it is the number and form of the connections in a system that makes the difference. In life, it is the number of deep connections to other people that matters to our health and well-being. A few practices about connection will help us build the ladder to climb out of the mindtraps and feel a little less lost in the uncertainty of it all.

The gift of the mindtraps—the thing they evolved to do in the first place—is to give us a shortcut to make decisions so that we are not swamped by all the complexities around us. The mindtraps are only a problem because each of the shortcuts becomes a trap in an uncertain and complex world. If we're going to stop falling into these reflexive ways of handling our lives, we need a purposeful replacement. Perhaps the most important rule for escaping the traps while not getting blown off course is to connect to a deep purpose and live toward that. It's vital to keep exploring until you find that space that is most meaningful to you, and then continue to explore that purpose as it grows and changes while you grow and change.

Discovering your purpose is not like finding the perfect pair of shoes (although that's no simple feat either), but there are hints that help you look in the right direction. First of all, it's not about money. While having enough money is important to our happiness, it is a means to an end (and only in limited ways) and not an end in itself. Second, the purpose that will help you most is not about your fame or your ego. Those are traps, remember? Third, it's probably not something you

could ever accomplish fully. "Make partner by thirty-one" is a goal. "Create artistic experiences that elevate people from their daily existence and bring them to more joy and compassion" is a purpose. The purpose that is most supportive of our health and happiness is almost always about something bigger than us; it's about making the world better in some way for your having been here. Find that purpose and live toward it and one rung in your ladder is solid.

The second rung on the ladder that helps us climb out of the mindtraps is with you all the time, but you probably don't notice it that much. Our bodies are constantly giving us signals that nearly all of us ignore. We need to be more connected to what they are telling us, because they keep us grounded in what is rather than allowing our minds to trap us with what might or should be.

The idea here is simply to connect to your body and begin to treat it as a source of knowledge and support rather than the vehicle that carries you from meeting to meeting and sometimes breaks down annoyingly. What we have learned about the connection between our thinking and our bodies is surprising—and it is often backward. We think that our stomach tightens up because we are nervous or that our lips curve into a smile because we are happy. Actually, as with so many complex systems, there is no clear one-way causal direction here. Sometimes we become nervous because we were hunching over and clenching our stomachs and that motion released cortisol that our brain translated into anxiety; we become happy because we smiled, and the smile made our body release dopamine.

The third rung on our ladder is our connection to our emotions. Make no mistake—your emotions are guiding you all the time. We humans are emotional beasts, and there's no way around that power (and really, would we want there to be?) In fact, it's often our emotions that create the conditions for us to fall into the mindtraps in the first place. The practice here isn't to try to escape our emotions in any way, but to simply connect to them explicitly rather than being led by them without our noticing. Paying attention to the subtleties of our emotions and watching for whether we have fallen into a mindtrap helps us climb the ladder into a more intentional way of being. There are two pivotal pieces about being connected to our emotions that will help us unlock our own possibilities.

The first is naming our emotions with nuance and granularity. As Todd Kashdan and his colleagues found, this turns out to be a skill, and an incredibly important one. People who can name their emotions in nuanced ways ("I'm anxious about this job interview but also excited and energized!") have surprisingly better outcomes in a wide variety of places than those who lump everything together. ("I'm super nervous about this job interview!") It turns out that people who name emotional nuance are better able to recover from setbacks, can better manage their anxiety and sadness, and generally cope better with the unexpected difficulties of life.

The second is understanding that the fullness of our emotions is data. A mindfulness practice of some sort allows us to notice emotions, feel for the granularity in them, and then watch our judgment about them, which is probably connected to our need for control. There are emotions

that are more or less pleasant, but trying not to make sense of emotions as inherently good or bad is awfully helpful in a complex world.

Our nervous systems were designed for a much more predictable, slow-moving world. The pace and rate of change will surely activate our nervous systems, telling us that there is danger and threat all around us (and flooding our bodies with cortisol, a hormone that is very helpful when running from lions but potentially toxic when we have large doses of it, day after day). The more we can see and make sense of our emotions—rather than acting out of them—the more easily we can escape all of the mindtraps of complexity.

The first three rungs of our ladder connect us to parts of ourselves. The fourth rung also connects us to one another. If connecting to our own passion to make the world a better place is supportive of our health and well-being in an increasingly complex world, then compassion is the fabric of our social connection. Compassion for others helps us connect to them without judgment and with open, curious kindness. Compassion for ourselves does the same thing—only it connects us to ourselves with open, curious kindness. This creates the conditions for us to learn from the mistakes we inevitably make rather than feel shame about them which is so unhelpful when we are trying to learn.

Each of these connections—to our purpose, to our bodies, to our emotions, and to our compassion for ourselves and others—supports us to climb out of our trap-laden reflexes and into a bigger version of ourselves. There's no way to escape the traps entirely; they have been too useful for too long. But we can build the ladder with our daily practices to help us scamper out of the traps as soon as we begin to tumble in. As we engage in these practices, we find the next versions of ourselves, increasing our compassion for our human frailties while gaining in human wisdom.

There is no way we will ever escape all of the mindtraps that complexity sets for us; the world is moving so much faster than our poor evolutionary systems can manage. We will always be dealing with the massive ambiguity and uncertainty in our lives with some difficulty. Perhaps that's the point. Humans have long thrived on facing the impossible in order to push beyond it: to create fire, to craft cathedrals, to erect skyscrapers, to cure polio. What has changed lately is the size of the stakes. As Johnathan Foley, former director of the California Academy of Sciences, says, "For nearly all of human history, the planet was big and people were small." The stakes through most of human history have been to support and protect a family, a village, a nation. "Now," Dr. Foley tells us, "We humans are big and our planet is suddenly small and for the first time, we are faced with the challenge of protecting and sustaining all life on the planet.

This challenge means we need to find ways to avoid the traps that have become more common and more dangerous. Whether we are building a business or raising a family, we are constantly faced with a world more complex than our inner wiring can easily handle. Our writing of simple stories, our sense that we are right, our desire to get along with others in our group (and rail against those not in

our group), our wish for control, and our constant quest to protect and defend our egos will always be a part of us. These traits have been a part of our greatness, but without work to escape their difficulties, they will be a part of our downfall.

Our biology sends us signals to simplify, to protect, to circle the wagons and keep ourselves safe. These reflexes are natural and helpful in a simple world of frightening foes and obvious dangers. But our world is now too interconnected, too complex, and too uncertain to rely on these ancient drives. We stand at a moment in history when we are being called on to refuse those hardwired traps, to understand and tolerate complexity, to question our reflexes, and to love our humanity. We now need to choose a future that reaches beyond fear and into connection, beyond the safety of the simple and into the bounties and difficulties of complexity. Our ability to grow beyond our reflexes is likely to shape what happens next to us as a species as we reject simplistic reactions and find our bigger selves so that we can solve some of the most complex challenges humanity has ever faced.