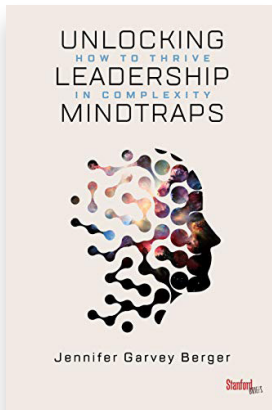


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps

THE NUTSHELL

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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 which is those times when our reflexes are exactly wrong. Such times seem to clump together in particular ways and create a perverse and seemingly inescapable trap: our human instincts, shaped for (and craving) a simple world, fundamentally mislead us in a complex, unpredictable world.

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."

Trapped by Simple Stories

We take what we've learned from the past and project it and into the future. Because we crave simple stories, our brains fill in the missing pieces and like the rest of the mindtraps, this happens without our even noticing. 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.

Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps

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.

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, and then believe in them less. 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.

Trapped by Rightness

Feeling right feels great—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.

Believing we're right narrows and closes down possibilities and 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.

Trapped by Agreement

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. 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.

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. 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.

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Trapped by Control

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.

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. 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. 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.

Trapped by Ego

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. 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.

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. 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.