

Lead Yourself First: How Self-Leadership Builds Stronger Teams, Cultures, and Burnout-Proof Careers

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Self-Leadership	The intentional act of guiding one's thoughts, behaviors, and emotions to achieve professional and personal goals before leading others.
Why it matters	Engagement is low, burnout is high, self-leadership is a critical driver of resilience, trust, and organizational health.
Today	We'll explore the 8 Cs of self-leadership, their impact, and ways to implement self-leadership with your leaders.

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impactful lives, starting
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The Case for Self-Leadership:

Engagement & Burnout: 2025 Reality Check

The Urgent Need for Self-Leadership:

- **Low Engagement Rates:**
 - Gallup reports 62% of U.S. employees are disengaged and manager engagement has fallen to 27%.
 - Engagement rates are the lowest they've been since 2014
- **Burnout Surge:**
 - 82% of employees are at risk of burnout
 - Burnout is costing \$322B annually in lost productivity
- **Job Insecurity Stress is Rising:**
 - 54% of U.S. workers say layoff fears are significantly increasing their stress levels.



The Case for Self-Leadership:

Business Impact of Self-Led Managers

Measurable Performance & Culture Gains

- **Retention & Performance:**
 - Self-led leaders are 79% more effective and drive higher team motivation and retention
- **Wellness ROI:**
 - 95% of companies see ROI from wellness programs when led by calm, compassionate leaders
- **Learning Cultures Benefits:**
 - Self-led managers promote cultures with 57% higher retention and 80% more workplace purpose.



The Case for Self-Leadership:

Self-Leadership & DEI Outcomes

Empathy, Inclusion, & Psychological Safety

- **Psychological Safety:**
 - Empathetic, self-led leaders significantly improve team safety and innovation
- **Inclusion:**
 - Highly inclusive leaders are 1.8X more likely to lead innovation within their sectors
- **Team Leadership:**
 - Self-awareness and compassion are core to inclusive, high-performing teams





Courage: Speaking Truths & Embracing Risk



Definition:

- The willingness to surface hard truths, take calculated risks, and speak up, even when silence feels safer.

Leader Who Needs It

A department head who spots quality defects but delays telling the COO for fear of looking incompetent.

Behavioral Flags

- Routinely defers to consensus in senior meetings
- Deflects or soft-pedals bad news
- Avoids stretch assignments that might fail

How to Build It:

- Monthly “red-team” meetings, presenting tough critiques of own plans
- Adopt a “reversible” or “irreversible” mindset re: decisions to right size risk
- Seek a truth-telling peer and exchange real-time feedback



Creativity:

Reframing Problems, Sparking Innovation



Definition:

- Reframing problems to unlock fresh possibilities and spark innovation

Leader Who Needs It

A product manager who keeps iterating on features instead of questioning whether customers need the product at all.

Behavioral Flags

- Jumps straight to solutions without examining the problem
- Uses the same brainstorming template every quarter
- Shuts down “what-if” questions as scope creep

How to Build It:

- Practice “frame-storming” before brainstorming: list five alternative ways to define the issue.
- Invite a cross-functional collaborator to ideation meetings
- Schedule one “no-agenda” hour weekly to read outside your specialty



Confidence: Acting Decisively Amid Ambiguity



Definition:

- The self-awareness and belief in one's own ability to be decisive amid ambiguity, to take action, and to pursue goals with conviction.

Leader Who Needs It

A new VP who stalls product launches until every data point is perfect.

Behavioral Flags

- Over-indexes on either/or decisions, rejects gray areas
- Seeks constant reassurance before moving forward
- Reduces scope instead of managing the unknown

How to Build It:

- Rehearse “both/and” questions (e.g. “How can we cut cost AND increase quality?”)
- Debrief the learning, not the win or loss
- Use a decision log to capture assumptions, review monthly to see how many were valid



Clarity: Aligning Priorities with Purpose



Leader Who Needs It

A director who floods the team Slack with competing tasks, leaving reps unsure what matters most.



Behavioral Flags

- “Everything is priority one” language
- Meetings end without explicit next steps
- KPIs change mid-quarter without explanation



How to Build It:

- Start each week naming the top 3 outcomes and sharing with the team
- Tie requests to the broader mission/vision/value. If it can’t be tied, question the purpose
- End meetings with “who does what by when,” ensuring collective focus

Definition:

- Aligning daily priorities, resources, and communication to a clear north-star purpose.



Calmness: Regulating Stress, Modeling Composure



Definition:

- Regulating stress responses and modeling composure so others can think clearly in turbulence.

Leader Who Needs It

A project lead whose visible panic during system outages sends the team into fight-or-flight mode

Behavioral Flags

- Rapid, anxious messaging when issues arise
- Micro-management spikes under pressure
- Language that catastrophizes setbacks (“everything’s on fire”)

How to Build It:

- Two-minute box-breathing before difficult calls or when triggered
- “Pause-Label-Reframe”: Acknowledge the emotion, name it, then restate the situation factually
- Implement a “calming ritual” such as a silent 10-minute self check-in at 2:00 for reflection or meditation



Connectedness:

Building Trust Through Authentic Relationships



Definition:

- Cultivating authentic relationships and a sense of shared humanity, the bedrock of trust.

Leader Who Needs It

An engineering manager who only communicates through ticket systems and never learns team members' goals.

Behavioral Flags

- Conversations limited to task status
- Rarely offers or asks for personal context
- Low cross-functional collaboration; information bottlenecks

How to Build It:

- Hold 2X monthly “coffee roulette” pairings across teams
- Open meetings with a quick personal check-in such as “one high, one challenge”
- Map stakeholder network quarterly and schedule 3 relationship-nurturing mtgs with under-invested contacts



Definition:

- Leading with empathy and accountability, showing care while upholding standards. Being kind instead of nice

Compassion: Leading with Empathy & Accountability



Leader Who Needs It

A finance chief who dismisses employee burnout concerns as “part of the job.”

A supervisor who masks underperformance with praise, then calls it a surprise termination.



Behavioral Flags

- Solves problems but ignores the people experiencing them
- Gives blunt criticism without support pathways
- Rewards only outcomes, never effort or context
- Praises the good, avoids criticism, preventing growth



How to Build It:

- Ask the “second question” (How are you **really**? What would help?) before diving into solutions.
- Use a “Care–Challenge” matrix: every difficult feedback session must include at least one genuine validation of the person.
- Spotlight compassionate acts in team stand-ups; normalize kindness



Definition:

- Continuous learning and active exploration of feedback, alternatives, and diverse viewpoints

Curiosity: Continuous Learning & Feedback-Seeking



Leader Who Needs It

A tenured operations director who rejects new software because “the old system works” or rejects a new process because “this is how we’ve always done it”



Behavioral Flags

- Starts suggestions with “Yes, but...” instead of “Tell me more”
- Rarely reads beyond industry news
- Debriefs only successes, not failures



How to Build It:

- Schedule a monthly “reverse mentoring” session with a junior employee on an unfamiliar topic
- Replace status-only post-mortems with “learning reviews” to go over surprises
- Try to ask one new question for every statement you make in meetings.

Tools & Practices for Self-Leadership: Mindset & Energy Management

Real-Time Techniques to Lead with Presence

- **Box-Breathing:**
 - Simple breath technique that takes 2 minutes
 - Lowers cortisol and boosts calm during high-stress
- **Thought Reframing:**
 - Shift internal dialog from “What if I fail” to “What can I learn?”
 - “Pause-Label-Reframe” for emotional situations. Acknowledge emotions, name them, reframe to facts
- **Energy Mapping:**
 - Match focus-intensive tasks to personal peak energy zones for optimal productivity



Tools & Practices for Self-Leadership:

Daily Micro-Habits for Self-Leaders

Embedding Self-Leadership into Your Routine

- **Start-of-Day Intention Statement: (30 seconds)**
 - At the beginning of your day, write one “if-then-because” sentence that links time + action + reason
 - Bonus: say it aloud or post to team channel to model clarity
- **Mid-Day Clarity Pause: (2 minutes)**
 - Set a recurring calendar ping at your personal “slump” (Usually between 1-3pm)
 - Step away from screens, do 4 rounds of box breathing
 - Re-rank your task list: keep, delegate, drop
- **End-of-Day Curiosity Journal: (3-5 minutes)**
 - Capture 1 win, 1 surprise, and 1 question for tomorrow
 - Close the loop by ready yesterday’s question before writing today’s intention statement



Key Takeaways & Immediate Actions

Turning Insight Into Action

- **Self-Leadership Drives Culture**
 - Internal discipline precedes external influence.
 - Modeling matters more than mandates
- **Small Habits, Big Results**
 - Start-of-day intentions, clarity pauses, and curiosity journals compound impact
- **The 8 Cs as Your Self-Leadership Dashboard**
 - Ask: which C needs attention today and build from there



Resources

- [Gallup – Global Workforce Report \(2025\)](#)

Annual research on employee engagement, burnout, and leadership trends

- [Interview Guys – Burnout Stats & Workplace Trends](#)

Insights into burnout, stress, and management impact

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Employee stress and burnout survey findings

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Job market stressors and economic concerns in 2025

- [SpringerLink – Self-Leadership & Mindfulness Review](#)

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- [MultiRater Surveys – Self-Awareness & Leadership Effectiveness](#)

Korn Ferry-cited data on self-awareness and performance

- [O.C. Tanner – 2025 Global Culture Report](#)

Culture, engagement, and emotional intelligence insights

- [Together Platform – Learning Culture and Retention](#)

Learning circles and employee connection studies

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Wellness program ROI, productivity, and participation outcomes

- [Boston Consulting Group – Empathy & Psychological Safety](#)

How leadership behaviors impact inclusion and innovation

- [Flown – Social Accountability & Daily Focus](#)

Tools and research to build daily focus and role clarity

- [Focused Solutions – Microbreak Effectiveness](#)

Productivity impact of short, intentional breaks

- [Apollo Technical – Workplace Creativity & Recovery](#)

Energy recovery strategies to support deep work

- [New York Post – Break Guilt in Remote Work](#)

Stats on employee reluctance to take wellness breaks

- [Harvard Business School – Daily Reflection and Performance](#)

Benefits of journaling for leaders and teams

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Leadership's role in psychological safety and team performance

- [Forbes – Leadership & Emotional Intelligence](#)

Articles authored by Kara Dennison and others on calm, courage, compassion

- [Harvard Business Review – Creativity, Confidence, and Clarity](#)

Practices to improve leadership agility, decision-making, and innovation

- [TalentLMS – Growth Mindset & Engagement Stats](#)

Mindset training, team development, and learning adoption data

- [McKinsey – Growth Leaders Survey](#)

Fail-fast leadership culture and business performance

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How aligning work to energy patterns increases focus

- [Cleveland Clinic – Box Breathing Technique](#)

Simple stress reduction and resilience practices

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Evidence on how breathwork reduces stress in workplace settings

- [British Psychological Society – Implementation Intentions Study](#)

Science behind daily intention statements and habit formation

- [ResearchGate – Meta-Analysis on Micro-Planning](#)

Evidence supporting cue-based behavior change strategies

- [Kinkajou Consulting – Learning Circles Implementation](#)

How to run peer coaching groups for leadership development

- [Degreed – Scalable Learning Culture Strategies](#)

Tools to integrate leadership traits into corporate learning

- [Deloitte – Reinventing Performance Reviews](#)

Research on behavior-based performance evaluation

- [Business Insider – Amazon Leadership Behaviors in Reviews](#)

Live case example of behavior-based evaluation models

- [Global Wellness Institute – ROI of Wellbeing](#)

How embedding wellbeing in leadership drives results

- [Wellable – Wellness Programs & Productivity](#)

ROI data on corporate wellness programs and engagement

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