

EXECUTIVE EDGE

“A” Player Human Capital Leadership by
HUNT EXECUTIVE SEARCH

Volume 16, Issue 5



For twenty-seven years, the Executive Edge has been a valuable service to support our employers and candidates in their Personal & Professional Development.



The Inner Game of Leadership

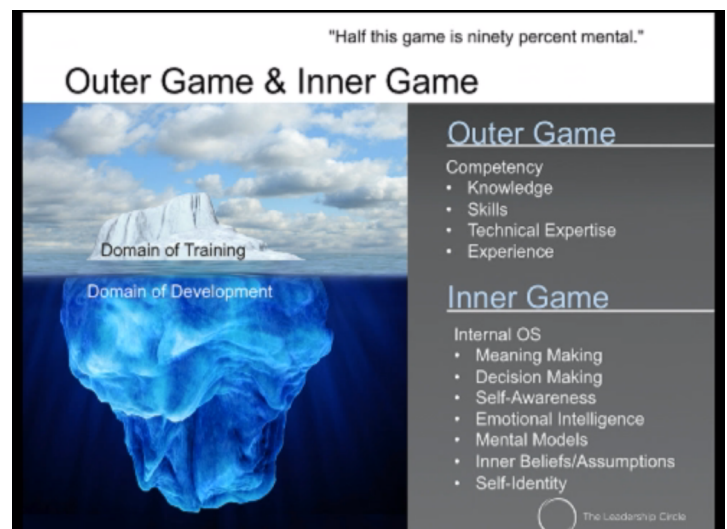
By Joe Hunt

Effective leaders master the C-suite competencies: setting strategic direction; communicating an inspiring mission; understanding financial data; planning and coordinating resources; and ensuring that processes, systems and people achieve results.

Most leadership-development efforts focus on these responsibilities, but they're ultimately insufficient. Great leaders must address the inner game of leadership.

The inner game consists of character traits like honesty, passion, courage, self-awareness, compassion, vision, authenticity, collaboration, humility, risk-taking, intuition and wisdom. This lengthy list may seem daunting for training and development programs, but it represents the absolute essentials for authentic leadership.

The “inner game” concept became popular 15 to 20 years ago. Sports coach and consultant Tim Gallwey coined the term in his series of books: *The Inner Game of Golf*, *The Inner Game of Tennis* and *The Inner Game of Work*. His ideas have proved to be timeless, as they remain relevant today.



Inner Mastery Required

The results that we produce in the outer world are driven by what goes on inside our heads. The mental models we create for ourselves are based on our own limited experiences, often erroneous beliefs and even fears. We don't know what we don't know, so it's hard to think beyond the boundaries of our current knowledge.

When we learn to change our thinking by improving our inner game, we modify our behaviors and the results we achieve.

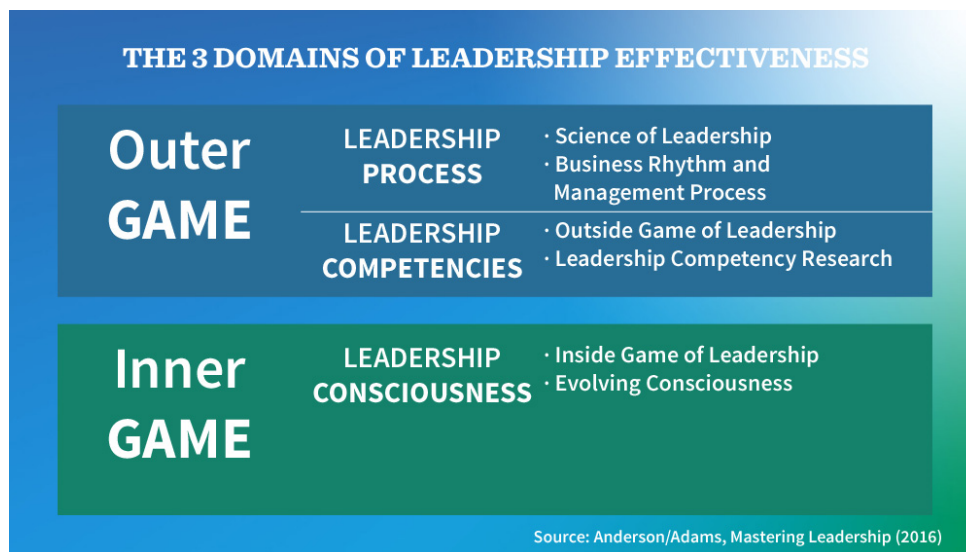
A fear of failure, for example, interferes with your ability to take risks. You may wait until you have enough data to assure certainty. But in today's business world, waiting for certainty may mean missing the boat. When you avoid risk and play it safe, you fall victim to missed opportunities.

Effective leaders weigh the risks and decide when to act, despite ambiguity and uncertainty. Their level of awareness allows them to master their inner and outer worlds.

You cannot master the outer game of leadership without inner proficiencies. The inner game has more to do with character, courage and conviction than with competencies. It's an ability to act when situations are complex, volatile and ambiguous. This is the "right stuff" of leadership: wisdom, self-knowledge, social intelligence and solid grounding in personal values.

Coaching the Right Stuff

The "right stuff" of character is the hardest, yet most significant, aspect of leadership development. Professional leadership coaching is the most effective way to approach leadership development, coupled with robust assessments and feedback surveys.



Even the most conservative estimates show a five to seven times return on investment from leadership coaching (Price Waterhouse, ICF study). But coaching success depends on the relationship between leader and coach. The coaching relationship must provide a secure environment to explore character strengths and beliefs.

Whether applied to sports or work, the inner game is where we begin to understand ourselves and make key changes. The concept is neither new nor particularly revolutionary, but based on a profound concept: focusing attention without judgment. When you learn to observe behavior (your own and others') without criticism, you'll start to see where change is possible. Removing judgment facilitates change.

The Coach as Nonjudgmental Partner

Some communication skills, like listening and observing, are automatic and unconscious. Everyone knows how to do them. Yet, we don't always listen and observe well, without judgment. This is a requirement for achieving desirable outcomes from conversations.



Leaders experience ineffective conversations all the time. When people don't respond to their suggestions as delivered, they're repeated louder or with different words. The outcome is resistance.

Few people enjoy being told what to do, especially when the boss is critical or judgmental. As a leader with authority, you'll be perceived as controlling and dictatorial. It doesn't matter how well intentioned you may be.

Battle of the Two Selves

In his books on the inner game, Gallwey introduces the idea of Self 1 and Self 2. These "selves" exist in everyone, whether we're giving or receiving a message. Self 1 is the "big ego:" the know-it-all. Self 1 is judgmental, concerned with winning, being right and showing off.

Self 2 is the "wise one:" the real human being. Self 2 presents inherent potential, including the ability to learn, grow and enjoy life.

When we act as Self 2, we are receptive and neutral. We observe and listen without any preconceived ideas. We are relaxed, focused, and able to take in and use information. We trust ourselves to make appropriate decisions. We extend trust to others because we act from a place of security and safety.

Self 1 doesn't trust. It acts from a place of insecurity and fear because it's always judging itself and others, while focusing on being right and winning. Self 1 uses pressure and high standards to get the most out of itself and others. Because Self 1 doesn't trust natural abilities, it's critical and stressed.

Guess which Self interferes with high performance? In everything from sports and music to work and relationships, Self 1's stress and anxiety prevent high-performance results. With worry and lost confidence, we think about too many things at once, we tighten up, and we hit the ball into the net or hazard. That which we fear foreshadows a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It's a vicious cycle - one that the inner game urges us to circumvent. Doing so involves nothing more than observing non-judgmentally. Don't change anything for a while. Just observe yourself talking, listening and doing. Become acutely aware of feelings and responses. Nothing more. Just watch and learn.

You'll soon see how Self 1 is active all the time, injecting opinions and criticisms. Self 1 distorts reality because it has an agenda: maintain control and appear successful.

Once you quiet Self 1's voice, Self 2 becomes more authentic. It will know what to say in ways that are much more effective and influential to others. It doesn't have an agenda.

Gallwey's inner game is based on three principles:

1. Awareness
2. Trust
3. Choice

First, nonjudgmental awareness is curative, allowing you to trust yourself and others. Awareness sets up the conditions for primary learning choices.

The next time you need people to act, communicate your message non-judgmentally. Show trust in others. Let people choose what needs to be done to accomplish desired results.

The Growth Mindset of an Effective Leader

What distinguishes great leaders from their mediocre colleagues?

Leaders with a growth mindset use every challenge as a learning opportunity.

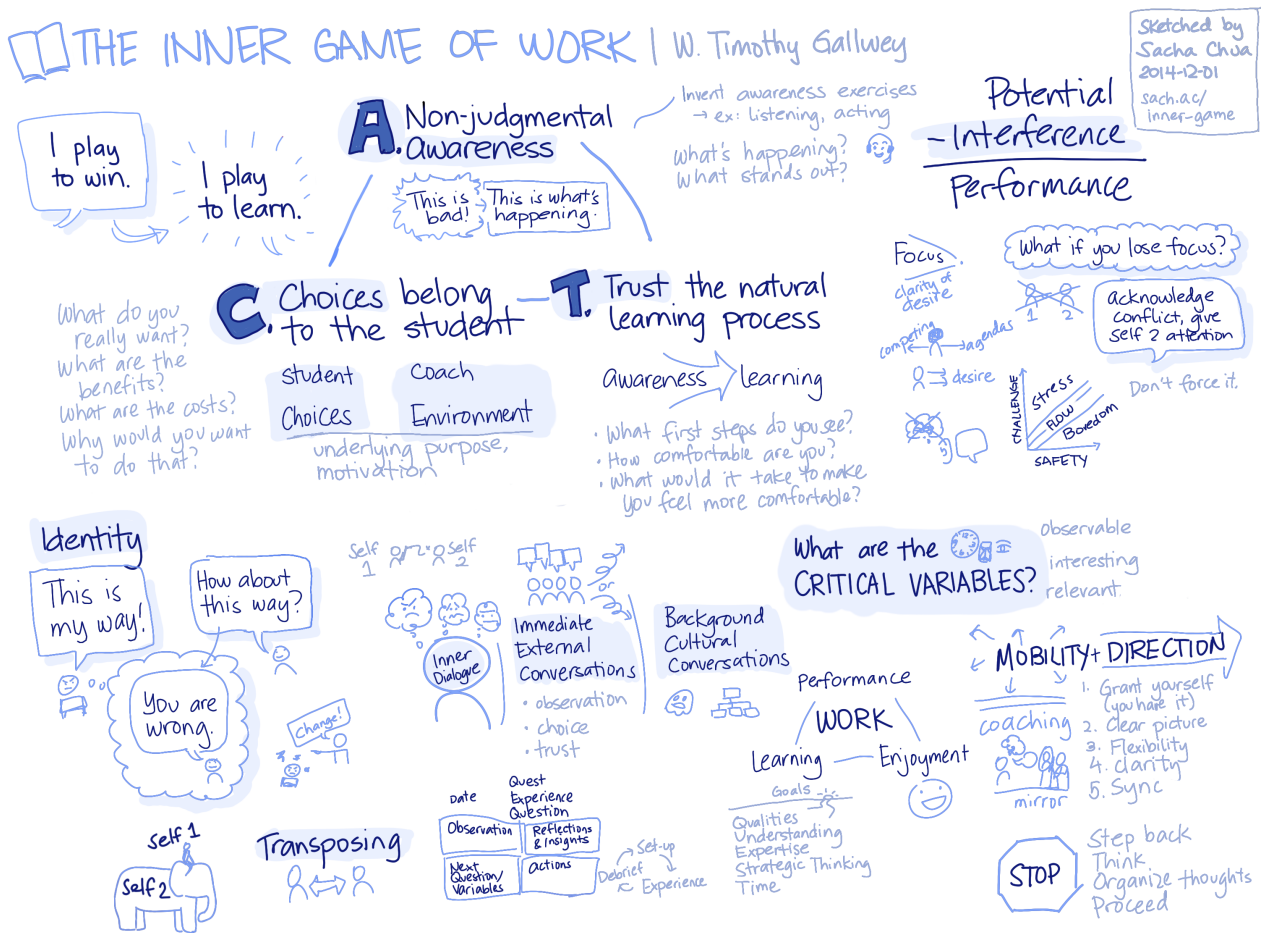
Some leaders focus almost exclusively on performance. Others emphasize growth and learning, as well as results. In a horse race, put your money on the leader who defines both learning and performance goals.

Many managers and leaders are performance-driven. They have lists that highlight what they intend to achieve each quarter, often involving numbers:

- ✓ Exceed sales results by 5%.
- ✓ Increase bonuses by 10% by year's end.
- ✓ Improve team productivity by 25%.
- ✓ Increase shareholder value.
- ✓ Decrease customer complaints.

They judge their worth based on these objective but obtuse goals, and they hold their people to the same standards.

Unfortunately, these leaders are likely missing key factors that restrict their potential: a growth mindset and the ability to set and pursue learning goals for themselves and others.



“The desire to learn is as fundamental to our being as the desire to survive and to enjoy.” Gallwey, The Inner Game of Work

Learning goals include:

- Diminish feelings of stress.
- Enhance listening skills.
- Develop empathy skills.
- Improve coaching skills.
- Facilitate more cohesive team-building.



Performance goals are, of course, necessary for achieving bottom-line results. But keep in mind that the bar is constantly being raised. How do you keep increasing your capacity to perform? If you cannot improve your capabilities, you're unable to keep up. Learning goals represent the inner game you must work on to prevent stagnation.

Performance vs. Learning Goals

Every learning goal contributes to future performance. In a performance-driven culture, achievement is overestimated at the expense of learning.

But it's not easy to set learning goals, as a bit of humility is necessary. You must acknowledge the need to learn and grow. You must clarify which goals have the most leverage.

Also potentially difficult is identifying where and how learning will take place. Obviously, work itself provides the best laboratory. Cooperation from others is also needed.

Ask yourself these questions to refine your goals:

1. What do I need to learn to enhance my performance?
2. Where and with whom can I ask questions and practice these skills?
3. Who can help me?
4. Which resources are available to me?
5. How do I like to learn and grow?

Follow these steps to expand your inner game:

1. Set learning goals with a coach to achieve clarity and develop an action plan.
2. After implementing your action plan, debrief the learning experience with your coach to maximize change.

Inner Leadership

To develop your inner game, keep these points in mind:

- Professional leadership coaching provides a platform for learning inner leadership.
- Self 1's ego interferes with Self 2's inherent wisdom.
- Nonjudgmental awareness is curative.
- Learning and performance goals will prepare you for the future's increasing demands.

By understanding the significance the inner game has on the outer game, one can begin to evaluate success and focus leading on multiple levels. Growth increases the capacity for performance. Consciousness controls competencies. Judgment culls creativity. When these dots are connected, it becomes clear: The inner game of leadership is what separates the great leaders from the average masses.

Joe Hunt is a Managing Partner at Hunt Executive Search/The Hunt Group, a boutique executive search firm that provides human capital solutions to consumer goods, retail, life sciences and diversified industrial markets.

Contact Joe Hunt:

212.861.2680 | 800.486.8476 | info@huntsearch.com

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