

# Strong Back, Soft Front

Ellen S. Perconti  
[ellen.perconti@gsd404.org](mailto:ellen.perconti@gsd404.org)

## Soft Front, Strong Back

System leadership starts with healthy leaders who understand the impacts they have on the system. This session will engage participants in considering their skill sets in handling difficult situations that often feel like personal attacks. The session will be formatted around maintaining a soft front - compassion, empathy, listening and a strong back - courage, strength, resiliency, persistence.

# My Why

To serve others in their learning journeys so that we grow connections and seek wonder.



# Self-understanding

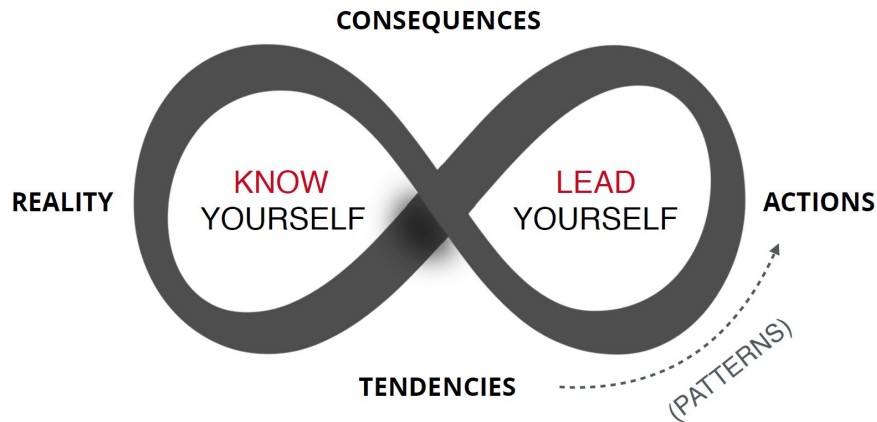
We all have tendencies that create patterns of actions and behavior that generate consequences that ultimately shape our current reality.

If we want to change our reality, we must find the tendencies that form the patterns of action which are generating the undesired consequences.

When we understand the connection, we can intentionally target areas of growth and learning.

*100X Leader*

KNOW YOURSELF TO LEAD YOURSELF



# Reflection

Think of a time when you felt good about your leadership—you felt effective, people were following. Be as specific as possible.

Reflect on

- Context - setting, what led up to it, what was happening
- Feedback - what feedback were you receiving from others and yourself?
- Leadership moves - what had you done that created this feeling?

# Outcomes

Reflect on our skills as leaders to maintain a soft front - compassion, empathy, listening and a strong back - courage, strength, resiliency, persistence.

Consider connection, energy, curiosity, and labels as they relate to conflict and leadership.

Review tools that can assist in communication, maintaining internal strength, and personal health.

# Strong back, Soft front

“For me, that strong back is grounded confidence and boundaries. The soft front is staying vulnerable and curious. The mark of a wild heart is living out these paradoxes in our lives and not giving into the either/or BS that reduces us. It’s showing up in our vulnerability and our courage, and, above all else, being both fierce and kind.”

**Brené Brown, Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts.**

# Strength

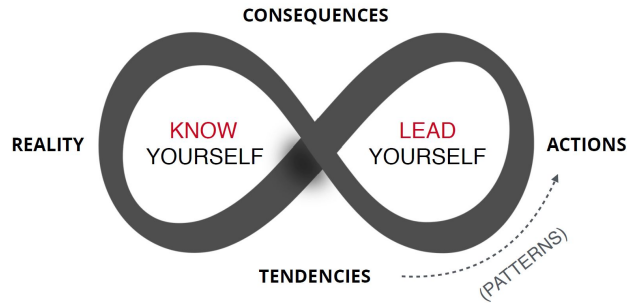
“All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that’s flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that’s soft and open, representing choiceless compassion. The place in your body where these two meet—strong back and soft front—is the brave, tender ground in which to root our caring deeply.” Roshi Joan Halifax.

<https://www.mindscholar.ca/terris-blog/the-buddhist-approach-of-strong-back-soft-front/>



# Healthy Leaders (Kubicek and Cockram)

KNOW YOURSELF TO LEAD YOURSELF



SELF PRESERVATION

1. What am I afraid of losing?
2. What am I trying to hide?
3. What am I trying to prove? To whom?



RELATIONSHIP

INFLUENCE  
IMPACT

# Paradoxes - two seemingly opposite ideas

Strong back, soft front

Be quick but don't hurry (Wooden)

The only constant is change.

Less is more

Good conflict

# Good vs High Conflict (Ripley)

Good Conflict	High Conflict
Humility	Certainty
Fluidity	Rigidity
Complexity	Simplicity
Spike in stress hormones	Chronic stress hormones
Curiosity	Assumptions
Questions	Advocacy

# Reflection

Think of a time when you were vulnerable and confident, compassionate and courageous, empathetic and persistent.

Reflect on

- Context - setting, what led up to it, what was happening?
- Feedback - what feedback were you receiving from others and yourself?
- Leadership moves - what had you done that created this feeling?

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth, our freedom. (Fankle/Covey)



# Armor or vulnerability

To build courage in teams and organizations, we have to cultivate a culture in which brave work, tough conversations, and whole hearts are the expectation, and armor is not necessary or rewarded. Brene Brown - Dare to Lead

# Sources of Strength

What sources can we tap into when we are in need of strength?

# Connection

“While loneliness has the potential to kill, connection has even more potential to heal.” Vivek Murthy

Loneliness spiral

Interpersonal connection - listen, share, empathy, belonging

Love - “Whether it is possible or not, my job isn’t necessarily to love or like the children; my job is to make them feel loved when they are in my care (which incidentally is much easier if it is genuine).” Graham Chatterley

The belief we have in the inherent worth and dignity of every human being (including ourselves)

“the truth is, every child is the best. Every child is the most beautiful child there is in the world.” Gabriel Sasson





# Dances of Energy

Directing energy rather than being pushed around by it.

Conflict is neither positive nor negative.

How we label the energy is impactful.

When we shield our backs with our fronts, our backs grow rigid and brittle.

Energy enhancers/energy vampires (Jon Gordon)

Energy - competence, confidence,



# Labels

Labels are titles for generalizations or patterns

Our brain seeks patterns and labels with generalizations help us categorize and create order.

Labels can:

- Limit expectations (Behavior kid, Tier 2 kid)
- Otherize (not like me)
- Release responsibility
- Impact identity and agency (I'm the \_\_\_ kid)



# Curiosity

Curiosity is taking the risk to show we don't know in order to discover.

When we wonder we are learning

Ask questions, listen, acknowledge



# Give one, Get one

What are other sources that you lean into for strength?





There's an unshakable system-wide belief and expectation that every learner will succeed. A “never-give-up” attitude pervades the culture, and everyone takes collective responsibility for success of every learner. New approaches are monitored, measured, and adapted to ensure real and sustainable impact.

Measuring Human Return

# Tools

We can grow our skills.

# Tools

## Prepare

If possible be prepared - know what to expect from the conversation, process how you might respond, what obstacles might be presented, and benefits from the conversation. (Duhigg)

- What type of conversation is anticipated?
  - What is this about - decision making mindset
  - How do we feel - emotional mindset
  - Who are we - social/identity mindset
- Goals - yours and others
- What is something you hope to say?
- Ask about feelings and share your own?
- Share identities important to this discussion



# Tools

## Clarify

Ask questions and listen

Deep questions surface values, beliefs, judgements or experiences rather than just facts:

- Where do you work (factual)? Vs What is the best part of your job?
- How long have you lived here? Vs What do you like most about where you live?

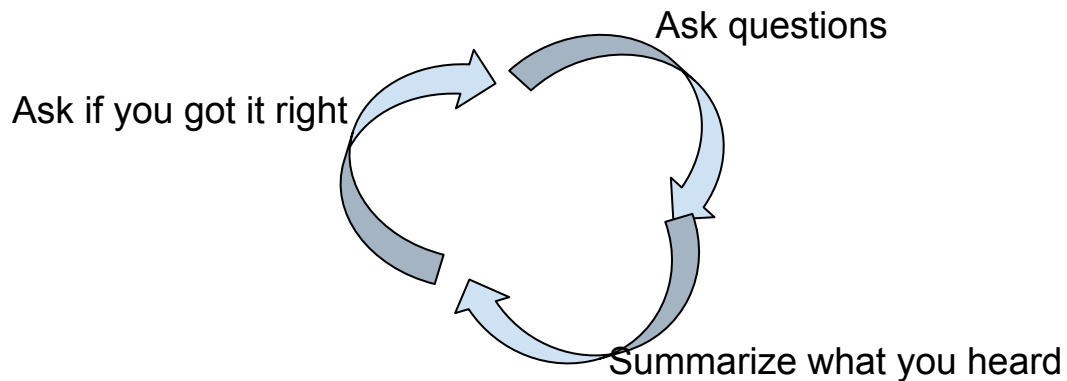


# Tools

## Looping for Understanding (Duhigg)

The goal is not to repeat what someone has said, but rather distill the others' thoughts in your own words, see their perspective. And Loop,

In a conflict, we prove we are listening by looping for understanding



Repeat until everyone agrees we understand





# Tools

## Complexify

Don't buy in to either/or thinking - see the world as less binary - find common ground and nuances

Listen and amplify contradictions and nuances

Investigate the understory

The idea is to uncover the truth - in full

What is the question no one is asking out loud?



# Pause

Time and space allow us to regain our control of ourselves, to toggle up our brains, to breathe and think

Most things don't need an immediate solution and in fact are better served with thought.

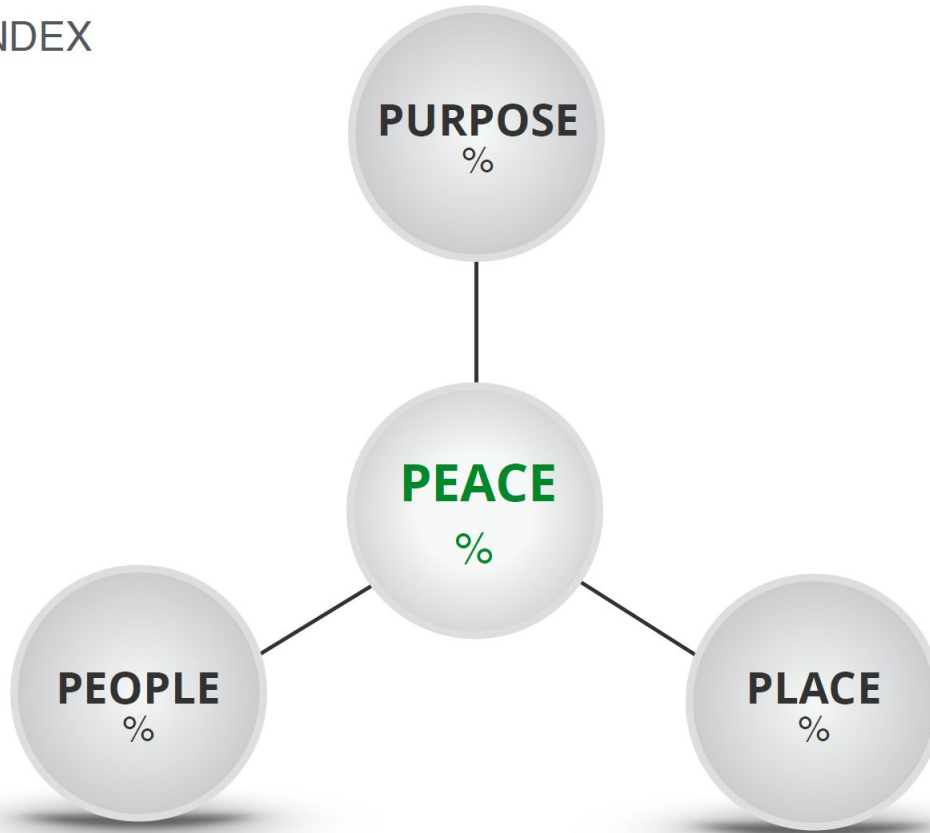


# Reflection

Consider preparing for a conversation that you anticipate will not go well, how might you prepare, clarify, loop, complexify, and/or pause in an effort to maintain a soft front and strong back?



## PEACE INDEX





We do a tremendous amount of work to understand our own instrument before we can effectively help others tune and play theirs. This work is the infinite nature—it's never done.

Leadership is about owning our impact on others, even if that impact was unintended.

Stephen Shedletzky



We build potential

We build the dreams of kids

Every child has the potential to  
become someone beyond our  
wildest dreams.



# Strong Back - Soft Front

Our children need healthy leaders who can maintain a soft front - compassion, empathy, listening and a strong back - courage, strength, resiliency, persistence.

My wish for you as you continue to grow is that you will find connection, wonder, and joy.

# Resources

[Supercommunicators](#): How to Unlock the Secret Language of Connection by Charles Duhigg

[Dare to Lead](#) and [Atlas of the Heart](#) by Brene Brown

[High Conflict](#) by Amanda Ripley

[Together:](#) The healing power of human connection in a sometimes lonely world by Vivek Murthy

[Changing Perceptions](#) by Graham Chatterley

[Energy Bus](#) by Jon Gordon

[When you Wonder You're Learning](#) by G Behr and R Rydzewski

[Measuring Human Return](#) by Joanne McEachen

[100X Leader](#) by Kubicek and Cockram

[Speak-Up Culture](#) by Stephen Shedletzky