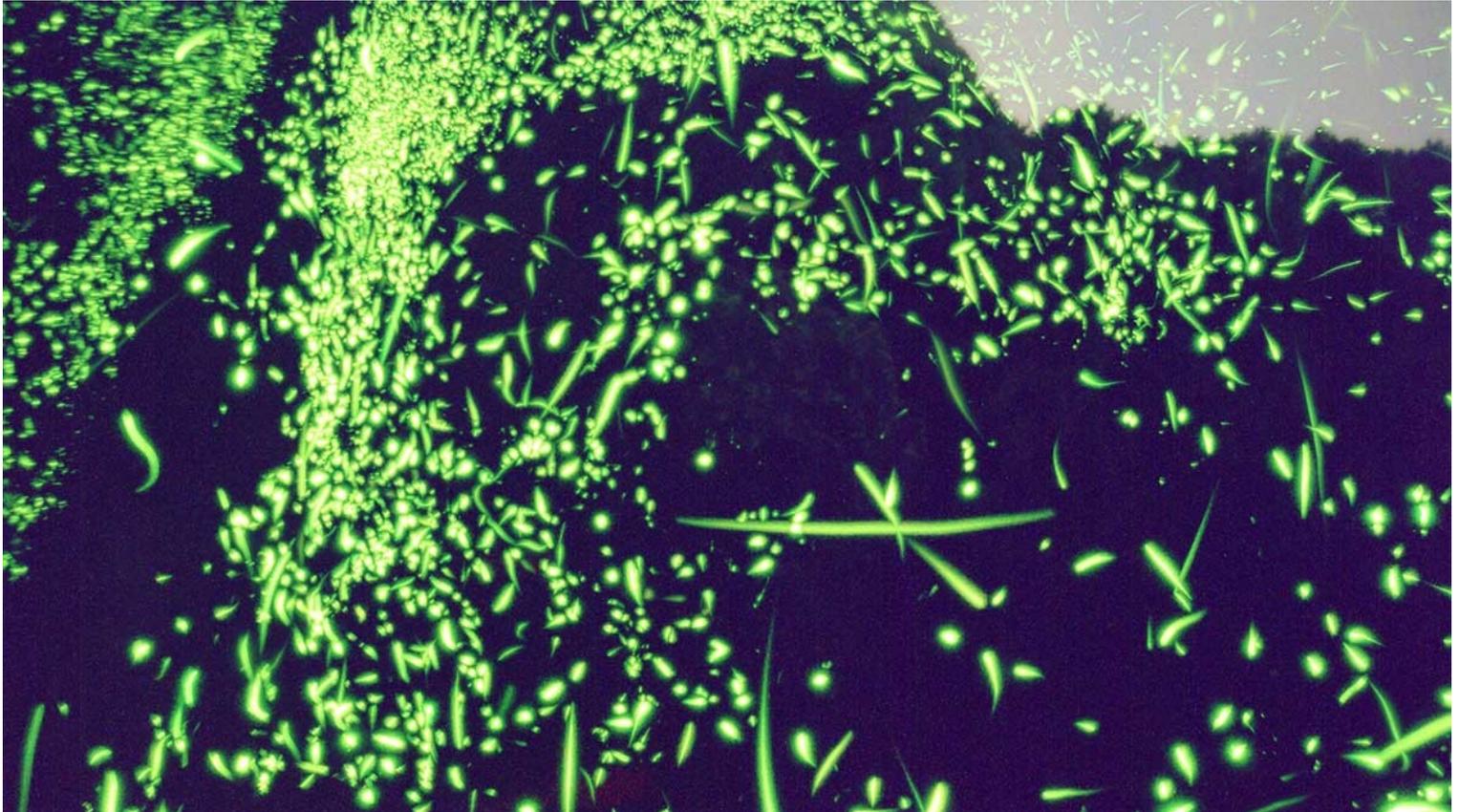


MANAGING YOURSELF

# Emotional Agility

by Susan David and Christina Congleton

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**S**ixteen thousand—that’s how many words we speak, on average, each day. So imagine how many unspoken ones course through our minds. Most of them are not facts but evaluations and judgments entwined with emotions—some positive and helpful (*I’ve worked hard and I can ace this presentation; This issue is worth speaking up about; The new VP seems approachable*), others negative and less so (*He’s purposely ignoring me; I’m going to make a fool of myself; I’m a fake*).

The prevailing wisdom says that difficult thoughts and feelings have no place at the office: Executives, and particularly leaders, should be either stoic or cheerful; they must project confidence and damp down any negativity bubbling up inside them. But that goes against basic biology. All

healthy human beings have an inner stream of thoughts and feelings that include criticism, doubt, and fear. That's just our minds doing the job they were designed to do: trying to anticipate and solve problems and avoid potential pitfalls.

In our people-strategy consulting practice advising companies around the world, we see leaders stumble not because they *have* undesirable thoughts and feelings—that's inevitable—but because they get *hooked* by them, like fish caught on a line. This happens in one of two ways. They buy into the thoughts, treating them like facts (*It was the same in my last job...I've been a failure my whole career*), and avoid situations that evoke them (*I'm not going to take on that new challenge*). Or, usually at the behest of their supporters, they challenge the existence of the thoughts and try to rationalize them away (*I shouldn't have thoughts like this...I know I'm not a total failure*), and perhaps force themselves into similar situations, even when those go against their core values and goals (*Take on that new assignment—you've got to get over this*). In either case, they are paying too much attention to their internal chatter and allowing it to sap important cognitive resources that could be put to better use.

This is a common problem, often perpetuated by popular self-management strategies. We regularly see executives with recurring emotional challenges at work—anxiety about priorities, jealousy of others' success, fear of rejection, distress over perceived slights—who have devised techniques to “fix” them: positive affirmations, prioritized to-do lists, immersion in certain tasks. But when we ask how long the challenges have persisted, the answer might be 10 years, 20 years, or since childhood.

Clearly, those techniques don't work—in fact, ample research shows that attempting to minimize or ignore thoughts and emotions serves only to amplify them. In a famous study led by the late Daniel Wegner, a Harvard professor, participants who were told to avoid thinking about white bears had trouble doing so; later, when the ban was lifted, they thought about white bears much more than the control group did. Anyone who has dreamed of chocolate cake and french fries while following a strict diet understands this phenomenon.

Effective leaders don't buy into *or* try to suppress their inner experiences. Instead they approach them in a mindful, values-driven, and productive way—developing what we call *emotional agility*. In our complex, fast-changing knowledge economy, this ability to manage one's thoughts and feelings

is essential to business success. Numerous studies, from the University of London professor Frank Bond and others, show that emotional agility can help people alleviate stress, reduce errors, become more innovative, and improve job performance.

## What Are Your Values?

This list is drawn from the Personal Values Card Sort (2001), developed by W.R. Miller, J. C'de Baca, D.B. Matthews, and P.L. Wilbourne, of the University of New Mexico. You can use it to quickly identify the values you hold that might inform a challenging situation at work. When you next make a decision, ask yourself whether it is consistent with these values.

Accuracy	Creativity	Humility	Purpose
Achievement	Dependability	Humor	Rationality
Adventure	Duty	Justice	Realism
Authority	Family	Knowledge	Responsibility
Autonomy	Forgiveness	Leisure	Risk
Caring	Friendship	Mastery	Safety
Challenge	Fun	Moderation	Self-knowledge
Change	Generosity	Nonconformity	Service
Comfort	Genuineness	Openness	Simplicity
Compassion	Growth	Order	Stability
Contribution	Health	Passion	Tolerance
Cooperation	Helpfulness	Popularity	Tradition
Courtesy	Honesty	Power	Wealth

We've worked with leaders in various industries to build this critical skill, and here we offer four practices—adapted from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), originally developed by the University of Nevada psychologist Steven C. Hayes—that are designed to help you do the same: Recognize your patterns; label your thoughts and emotions; accept them; and act on your values.

## Fish on a Line

Let's start with two case studies. Cynthia is a senior corporate lawyer with two young children. She used to feel intense guilt about missed opportunities—both at the office, where her peers worked 80 hours a week while she worked 50, and at home, where she was often too distracted or tired to fully engage with her husband and children. One nagging voice in her head told her she'd have to be a better employee or risk career failure; another told her to be a better mother or risk neglecting her family. Cynthia wished that at least one of the voices would shut up. But neither would, and in response she failed to put up her hand for exciting new prospects at the office and compulsively checked messages on her phone during family dinners.

Jeffrey, a rising-star executive at a leading consumer goods company, had a different problem. Intelligent, talented, and ambitious, he was often angry—at bosses who disregarded his views, subordinates who didn't follow orders, or colleagues who didn't pull their weight. He had lost his temper several times at work and been warned to get it under control. But when he tried, he felt that he was shutting off a core part of his personality, and he became even angrier and more upset.

These smart, successful leaders were hooked by their negative thoughts and emotions. Cynthia was absorbed by guilt; Jeffrey was exploding with anger. Cynthia told the voices to go away; Jeffrey bottled his frustration. Both were trying to avoid the discomfort they felt. They were being controlled by their inner experience, attempting to control it, or switching between the two.

## Getting Unhooked

Fortunately, both Cynthia and Jeffrey realized that they couldn't go on—at least not successfully and happily—without more-effective inner strategies. We coached them to adopt the four practices:

### **Recognize your patterns.**

The first step in developing emotional agility is to notice when you've been hooked by your thoughts and feelings. That's hard to do, but there are certain telltale signs. One is that your thinking becomes rigid and repetitive. For example, Cynthia began to see that her self-recriminations played like a broken record, repeating the same messages over and over again. Another is that the story your mind is telling seems old, like a rerun of some past experience. Jeffrey noticed that his attitude toward certain colleagues (*He's incompetent; There's no way I'm letting anyone speak to me like that*) was quite familiar. In fact, he had experienced something similar in his previous job—and in the one before that. The source of trouble was not just Jeffrey's environment but his own patterns of thought and feeling. You have to realize that you're stuck before you can initiate change.

Leaders stumble when they are paying too much attention to their internal chatter and allowing it to sap important cognitive resources that could be put to better use.

### **Label your thoughts and emotions.**

When you're hooked, the attention you give your thoughts and feelings crowds your mind; there's no room to examine them. One strategy that may help you consider your situation more objectively is the simple act of labeling. Just as you call a spade a spade, call a thought a thought and an emotion an emotion. *I'm not doing enough at work or at home* becomes *I'm having the thought that I'm not doing enough at work or at home*. Similarly, *My coworker is wrong—he makes me so angry* becomes *I'm having the thought that my coworker is wrong, and I'm feeling anger*. Labeling allows you to see your thoughts and feelings for what they are: transient sources of data that may or may not

prove helpful. Humans are psychologically able to take this helicopter view of private experiences, and mounting scientific evidence shows that simple, straightforward mindfulness practice like this not only improves behavior and well-being but also promotes beneficial biological changes in the brain and at the cellular level. As Cynthia started to slow down and label her thoughts, the criticisms that had once pressed in on her like a dense fog became more like clouds passing through a blue sky.

### **Accept them.**

The opposite of control is acceptance—not acting on every thought or resigning yourself to negativity but responding to your ideas and emotions with an open attitude, paying attention to them and letting yourself experience them. Take 10 deep breaths and notice what’s happening in the moment. This can bring relief, but it won’t necessarily make you feel good. In fact, you may realize just how upset you really are. The important thing is to show yourself (and others) some compassion and examine the reality of the situation. What’s going on—both internally and externally? When Jeffrey acknowledged and made room for his feelings of frustration and anger rather than rejecting them, quashing them, or taking them out on others, he began to notice their energetic quality. They were a signal that something important was at stake and that he needed to take productive action. Instead of yelling at people, he could make a clear request of a colleague or move swiftly on a pressing issue. The more Jeffrey accepted his anger and brought his curiosity to it, the more it seemed to support rather than undermine his leadership.

### **Act on your values.**

When you unhook yourself from your difficult thoughts and emotions, you expand your choices. You can decide to act in a way that aligns with your values. We encourage leaders to focus on the concept of *workability*: Is your response going to serve you and your organization in the long term as well as the short term? Will it help you steer others in a direction that furthers your collective purpose? Are you taking a step toward being the leader you most want to be and living the life you most want to live? The mind’s thought stream flows endlessly, and emotions change like the weather, but values can be called on at any time, in any situation.

## **Evaluate Your Emotional Agility**

### **Exercise**

When Cynthia considered her values, she recognized how deeply committed she was to both her family and her work; she loved being with her children, but she also cared passionately about the pursuit of justice. Unhooked from her

Choose a challenging situation in your work life—for example, “Receiving negative feedback from my boss” or “Asking my boss for a raise.”

Identify a thought that “hooks” you in that situation, such as “My boss has no confidence in me” or “My contribution isn’t as valuable as my teammates’.”

Ask yourself: “To what extent do I avoid this thought, trying to make it go away?” A lot, somewhat, not at all?

“To what extent do I buy into it, letting it overwhelm me?”

Identify a feeling that this situation evokes. Is it anger, sadness, fear, shame, disgust, or something else?

Ask yourself: “To what extent do I avoid or try to ignore this feeling?”

“To what extent do I buy into it?”

### **Advice**

If you primarily avoid your thoughts and feelings, try to acknowledge them instead. Notice thoughts as they arise and check your emotional state several times a day so that you can identify the useful information your mind is sending you.

If you primarily buy into your thoughts and feelings, find your ground. Take 10 deep breaths, notice your environment, and label—rather than being swept up in—them.

If you alternate, learn your patterns. Pay attention to which thoughts and feelings you avoid and which you buy into so that you can respond with one of the strategies we describe.

The next step is to take action that aligns with your values. (For examples, see the sidebar “What Are Your Values?”) Identify

distracting and discouraging feelings of guilt, she resolved to be guided by her principles. She recognized how important it was to get home for dinner with her family every evening and to resist work interruptions during that time. But she also undertook to make a number of important business trips, some of which coincided with school events that she would have preferred to attend. Confident that her values, not solely her emotions, were guiding her, Cynthia finally found peace and fulfillment. It’s impossible to block out difficult thoughts and emotions. Effective leaders are mindful of their inner experiences but not caught in them. They know how to free up their internal resources and commit to actions that align with their values. Developing emotional agility is no quick fix—even those who, like Cynthia and Jeffrey, regularly practice the steps we’ve outlined here will often find themselves hooked. But over time, leaders who become increasingly adept at it are the ones most likely to thrive.

A version of this article appeared in the November 2013 issue of *Harvard Business Review*.

which ones you want to apply in the context of the challenging situation you've described.



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7 COMMENTS

Tina Johnson 23 days ago

The same applies to understanding employees. As a manager I've found that by opening up to my team about my frustrations creates an environment where they feel comfortable doing the same. The key is to do it in a way that's productive - "you're feeling this way, how do we fix it?"

I use Friday Feedback (fridayfeedback.com) to understand the ups and downs of my employee's week. Helps me be more empathetic and understanding.

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