



LEADERSHIP
BUOYANCY
INFORMS
CULTURAL
BUOYANCY
AND WHY THIS MATTERS

PERFORMANCE FRONTIERS



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AND WHY THIS MATTERS

You're running late for the meeting. The last one ran over time and things didn't go to plan. You pitched an idea you thought your colleagues would love; however, you hadn't predicted their reaction. At best they were lukewarm, at worst, completely indifferent. You're battling your emotions as you enter the next meeting. The voice in your head is full of self-recrimination and to make matters worse you didn't get time to read the pack. You're under pressure. You want to do a good job. Others are looking to you to perform. What you do next will mean the difference between a good outcome and a poor one.

What will you do? Will you let circumstances drag you down and keep you there for the rest of the day, or will you find a way to resurface to be your best self?

BUOYANCY

If the answer is yes to the latter, you will have practised buoyancy in self-leadership.

By being aware of what was happening with your emotions, your thoughts and behaviour, you took a moment and a few deep breaths and made a choice to reset and go again. You found a way to return to a preferred state of being: one that is afloat and able to 'right itself' in all-weather.

To act with buoyancy, you acknowledge what is happening in such a way that the situation is understood and being met for what it is; not catastrophised and not underplayed. You take responsibility for your part, adjust, and navigate accordingly.

The practice of 'seeing things for what they are' is arguably one of the most helpful ways to develop buoyancy. In his work on Resilience, [Martin Seligman](#) identifies three questions, the 'Three P's', as helpful prompts to see things more clearly when dealing with failure or adversity. We can ask ourselves:

- Is this **Permanent** or temporary?
- Is this **Pervasive** across all areas of my life or just specific to this situation?
- Is this entirely **Personal** to do with me or are there external factors?

Buoyancy requires us to see setbacks as temporary rather than permanent, specific rather than universal, and external rather than just personal. The Three P's help us appraise failure factually and accurately, so we can move through it constructively. However, to get to a place where you can ask the Three P's, you first have to reset your emotional state, which is likely to be heightened during any setback.





To be more present, our first response should be conscious breathing and the mindful placement of attention. From a neuroscience perspective, this method engages the Parasympathetic Nervous System – known as applying the Vagal Brake. When we are stressed or compressed in our thinking and emotions, we can move ourselves out of a Threat State – where we are sitting in ‘flight, fight or freeze’ territory – toward a Reward State – where our capacity for discernment and responsiveness lives. We can, at any moment, practise buoyancy and seek to rejuvenate ourselves through the power of the Vagal Brake.

To train your Vagal Brake, [Dr Sven Hansen](#) from the Resilience Institute suggests the following relaxation principles:

- A. Lengthen your spine – sit light and long
- B. Inhale gently and bring your attention to your belly
- C. Breathe out long and slow with a slight pause (5 sec or more)
- D. Inhale low and slow (3 sec)
- E. Refocus on your intention

Taking care of our own health and well-being is the first enabler in being able to help others. In leading ourselves towards buoyancy and responsiveness, we can take the first steps in leading others to be buoyant and have a positive impact on the larger systems with which we engage.

LEADERSHIP BUOYANCY

As a leader: What do you stand for in the way you address challenge and adversity?

To demonstrate leadership buoyancy, we invite you to take a stance of optimism. Nowhere is optimism more important than in leading organisations. Optimism, the ability to remain realistically positive despite setbacks, is a crucial leadership differentiator; one that touches almost every aspect of leadership, from motivating and inspiring others to achieve beyond what they thought possible, to helping people persevere when challenges arise.

Our personal and working lives will always bring their fair share of challenges. And when they do, we can adopt an optimistic stance and choose to see them as catalysts of growth and the ultimate source of great accomplishment. Consider the story of Jessica Watson – you may remember Jessica as the 16-year-old solo Australian sailor who circumnavigated the globe over a decade ago in 2009. Jessica’s resolve and the sailing metaphor are doubly useful here.

Alone in the middle of the pitch-black waters of the Atlantic Ocean, Jessica experienced a violent 12-hour-long storm that repeatedly knocked her boat down. A knock-down is when the mast goes below the horizontal into the water. She recounts in her blog how she rode out the violent storm that brought hurricane-force wind gusts of at least 70 knots in a swell of up to 10 metres.

She described the second of several knock-downs in which the mast was pushed 180 degrees into the water: “Actually, pushed isn’t the right word,” she wrote. “It would be more accurate to say that Ella’s Pink Lady [the boat] was picked up, thrown down a wave, then forced under a mountain of breaking water and violently turned upside down.”





The boat ultimately righted itself with Jessica strapped into a special seat for just such circumstances.

“It was certainly one of those times when you start questioning exactly why you’re doing this,” she wrote. “But at no point could I not answer my own question with a long list of reasons why the tough times like that aren’t totally worth it.”

Jessica went on to become the youngest person at the time to sail solo and unassisted around the world. Her experience and, in particular, her ability to assess the situation for what it was while working through her own mental challenges highlights the point for us: that the practice of optimism and all-weather buoyancy is possible, both metaphorically and literally. To draw on this illustration further – it would also be true that her preparation as well as her attitude contributed to this result.

From an individual and collective leadership standpoint we can ask: What is our ‘cultural’ boat? And how are we paying attention and contributing to our ability to be an ‘all-weather’ organisation?

When we respond with optimism and buoyancy, when we show up with constructive and considered behaviours, we are leading our culture and organisations towards buoyancy and resilience. Even in those small moments, when you take a breath, reset, and enable yourself to inform a better outcome, in some small way, you are contributing to a buoyancy culture.

As is it is true for us in our personal leadership, being better equipped to handle adversity with a buoyant approach, it can also be said that when adversity or crisis besets an organisation, the way the leadership responds is a tell-tale indicator of its cultural buoyancy.

CULTURAL BUOYANCY

Cultural buoyancy shows up in an organisation’s ability to bounce back, stay afloat, and even rise up stronger than before in the face of change and internal or external pressure.

Through our work at Performance Frontiers, we would identify the following as a selection of tell-tale signifiers that indicate a level of cultural buoyancy:

1. There is candour and rigour in conversation and communication
2. People demonstrate a level of humility and purposefulness
3. There is evidence of the values of the organisation in action
4. Team members and leaders lean in, to any challenge or opportunity
5. People own the problem and seek solutions
6. Team members look to support one another, asking, ‘What can I do to help?’
7. People talk realistically about the facts at hand and make well considered decisions
8. People see the connection between agility, flexibility and decisive action

We want to make the correlation here between personal buoyancy and collective cultural buoyancy; leadership behaviour is pivotal for one to inform the other. Actions will always speak louder than words and what is demonstrated by an organisation and its leaders in response to a crisis will be hugely telling.





One such crisis occurred for Starbucks in North America in 2018. Starbucks found themselves in a predicament of enormous cultural and social sensitivity when the manager of a coffee-house in Philadelphia asked two African American gentlemen to leave because they hadn't made a purchase. They informed the manager they were waiting for a friend and didn't want to leave. When they didn't, the manager called the police. The men were arrested and held for hours before they were released without being charged; no doubt a most upsetting and distressing ordeal.

Public outrage was instant, on a global scale. Everything to do with this incident flew in the face of Starbucks' publicly stated purpose: 'to inspire and nurture the human spirit; one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time'.

Howard Schultz, Chairman of Starbucks, said, "I'm embarrassed, ashamed. I think what occurred was reprehensible at every single level. I take it very personally, as everyone in our company does, and we're committed to making it right."

In addition to the Chairman's apology, Starbucks announced that it would be closing more than 8,000 stores on May 29, 2018 to conduct racial bias training for 175,000 employees. Schultz said, "It will cost millions of dollars, but I've always viewed this and things like this as not an expense, but an investment in our people and our company. And we're better than this."

If we use our 8 signifiers to pulse-check Starbucks' cultural buoyancy, we can make the following observations:

1. The language from Starbucks and Schultz in particular was clear and unambiguous
2. Schultz showed humility, using the words "embarrassed" and "ashamed", and his willingness to speak and act publicly and purposefully were swift
3. Although the incident did not align with Starbucks' values; such as 'Creating a culture of warmth and belonging, where everyone is welcome', Starbucks' response did align, showing their utmost commitment to values such as 'Acting with courage, challenging the status quo' and 'Being present, connecting with transparency, dignity and respect'
4. Instead of hiding from the issue, Starbucks leaned into it as a key cultural challenge
5. Starbucks owned what happened quickly invoking steps to work toward a solution at a significant cost
6. We can't know for sure, however we imagine that many team members would want to 'make right'
7. Leadership addressed the facts, calling it for what it was; the decision to close stores was swift
8. The evidence points to flexibility and agility in response

Returning to the sailing metaphor for a moment; you could say Starbucks experienced a 'knock-down' in a storm of criticism and unpopularity - and 'righted' itself by taking radical action to address the situation and the following backlash. It demonstrated how serious it was by shutting every one of its 8000 stores to conduct racial-bias training, at a trading cost of over 12 million. In taking a strong ethical and pragmatic stance it demonstrated bold leadership, offering us as a poignant case study of how bold, buoyant leadership informs Cultural Buoyancy. Starbucks' position today is also telling in that the coffee company remains in Fortune's top 10 of most respected companies in 2019. It just recently raised its full-year outlook due to stronger than expected earnings, and is enjoying an increase in Brand Rankings in 2019 from a fall in 2018.



BUOYANCY PROPOSITION

When we practise buoyancy in our leadership, we inform cultural buoyancy.

Cultural buoyancy matters in our Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous world because, we become robust and resilient to all weathers. No matter the situation, circumstance or 'knock-down' we're able to 'right ourselves' and return to our natural or true state: one that, while remaining buoyant, is open to learn from the experience, receptive to changing circumstances, makes course corrections and navigates through challenges.

Buoyancy as a leadership practice and a cultural way of being is central to our ability to adjust, learn and respond while remaining true to ourselves, our purpose, our values and our calling.



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