

**'When Vanessa's energy and curiosity for exploring leadership team potential is applied, the results are truly extraordinary.'**

*Kevin Gallagher - CEO Santos*

# UN REASON

**Renegade  
thinking for  
leaders to create  
impossible  
change**

# ABLE

# AMBITION

**VANESSA VERSHAW**

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REASON  
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AMBITION**

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leaders to create  
impossible  
change

**VANESSA VERSHAW**



I have seen first-hand the passion and drive Vanessa brings to every project, opportunity and coaching engagement. Her unwavering commitment to her own personal growth and development has inspired so many, myself included. Vanessa's move from North America to Australia was a loss to leaders in this country, but a big win for business thinking in Australia.

This book offers valuable lessons and insights that will help you clarify your aspirations, set ambitious targets and stay focused. It's a treasured resource for anyone seeking to make their dreams a reality.

**- Jeff Melanson, Partner, Stratagem and Unity Technologies,  
Jury member, Cannes Film Festival**

Vanessa Vershaw helps leaders understand the inner fears and barriers that are holding them back from being the best they can be. When her energy and curiosity for exploring peoples' ultimate potential is applied to entire leadership teams, the results are truly outstanding. Everyone touched by Vanessa through her work is ultimately better for the experience.

**- Kevin Gallagher, CEO, Santos**

Vanessa Vershaw is a true inspiration; her energy infuses all those around her. She's like adding truffle to your olive oil, taking your leadership to an entirely new level. Vanessa took me on a journey to level up my thinking and showed me that a world can exist beyond the one society chooses for you. I am forever transformed because of having her in my corner.

**- Dino Otranto, COO, Fortescue Metals Group**

Vanessa dares you to lead differently. Her work celebrates the unique skills of every individual, but ultimately manifests itself in a more positive mindset, more deeply engrained organisational values, greater cohesion and higher performance.

**- Chris Rodwell, CEO, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia**

Vanessa's gift is her ability to help individuals and organisations flourish. Her success is built on her ability to win and hold trust. She provokes and guides positive change. She has inspired me to be true to my soul. She is the 'voice inside your head' that helps build leadership clarity, confidence, resilience and purpose.

**- Stephen Quantrill, Chairman and Non-Executive Director, McCrae Investments**

I have witnessed firsthand the long-lasting positive impact Vanessa has on those she works with. Under her skilled guidance she has helped us unlock our key people's potential and improved the culture of our business. Her guidance also helped our team to successfully navigate difficult post-GFC market conditions as she supported us through a period of significant growth.

**- Frank Cooper AO, Chairman and Non-Executive Director, Woodside Petroleum, South32, St John of God Health Care and the Insurance Commission of Western Australia**

Vanessa combines her extensive experience with an infectious energy that is rare to find in people. She can challenge and drive you to be the best version of yourself. Her empathy and love for people shines through in everything she does.

**- David Fyfe, CEO, Synergy**

Vanessa has had a long-lasting and very positive impact on Arc Infrastructure leading to a significant increase in individual and team performance, and the business's bottom line. Vanessa's style and energy make her a wonderful human being to spend time with.

**- Paul Larsen, former CEO, Arc Infrastructure; Non-Executive Chairman and Director, Perron Group, Centurion Transport and Kimberley Ports**

Vanessa has a differentiating and rare talent of creating breakthrough learning experiences for leaders, teams and organisations, generating the energy necessary for true and sustainable transformation.

**- Pat Reed, former Executive Manager, Walt Disney Corporation; Adjunct Professor, University of California, Berkeley**

Vanessa is an intellectually smart and savvy professional who understands that for businesses and people to survive and thrive in our ever-changing landscape they need tools beyond hard skills. We have forged an enduring partnership centred around our love of seeing organisations realise their unreasonable ambitions to become gamechangers. With Vanessa, anything is possible!

**- Fabian Ross, CEO, Hockey WA**

Vanessa was the catalyst to send me on my journey of self-confidence and growth and I haven't looked back. She helped me see myself for who I am – the strengths I never knew I had, and the weaknesses I didn't know how to tackle.

**- Mriganka Jaipurkar, Head of News, Asia, S&P Global Platts**

Vanessa's style is infectious. She took me on a journey of discovery about myself, without which my career would not have reached the heights it has. Even through tough economic downturns I have maintained our work with Vanessa, recognising the massive value she brings to individuals and ultimately our organisation. Put simply, Vanessa gets it.

**- David Lewis, Managing Partner Tax – Energy, Utilities and Resources, PricewaterhouseCoopers London**

If you ever lose the key to yourself, Vanessa will unlock you to help you discover your true potential. With the power of positive reinforcement and unstinting belief, Vanessa is an extraordinary coach who released my true potential and enabled me to turbocharge my career aspirations.

**- Colin Campbell, Sales Director, ANZ, Adobe**

Vanessa has been an influencer in my own success and a much-appreciated confidant, always challenging for deeper thought and pushing the creative boundaries. Her insight, counsel and guidance has not only been valuable, it's been a core pillar of enabling business change and improvement. *Unreasonable Ambition* is a treasure trove of Vanessa's rich experiences which will leave readers reaching for more of that wisdom.

**- Andrew Broad, mining executive and CEO**

Vanessa Vershaw is a fireball of energy, enthusiasm and expertise. She is without peer when it comes to helping individuals and businesses to remove barriers, induce capability, plan actions and fast track ambitions. Her laser-sharp personal insight means that she is able to assist her clients to shine an ultra-bright spotlight on what matters most when pursuing goals of personal or strategic significance.

**- Emeritus Professor Gary Martin, CEO, Australian Institute of Management WA**

Vanessa has been a steadfast companion on my brave journey to starting my own organisation after several decades in executive-level technology roles in international organisations. She helped me articulate and realise new directions for the next exciting phase of my working life. I am so grateful to have met her.

**- Hiroko Sakaguchi, global technology executive**

Vanessa Vershaw is a professional without rival in her field. Working with her and being inspired by her helped me to grow exponentially as a leader. She remains very important in my life today.

**- Raphaël Lapointe, banking and finance executive**

Working with Vanessa Vershaw over many years and numerous projects, she has always demonstrated laser-focused thinking and listening skills to get you to the crux of the issues quickly. She's a tough taskmaster who brings out your best thinking and holds you to your delivery commitments.

**- Kevin Brown, CEO, St John Ambulance**

*'Come to the edge,' he said.*  
*'We can't, we're afraid!' they responded.*  
*'Come to the edge,' he said.*  
*'We can't, we will fall!' they responded.*  
*'Come to the edge,' he said.*  
*And so they came.*  
*And he pushed them.*  
*And they flew.*  
– Guillaume Apollinaire

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# PREFACE

*I believe in human potential. I believe that people have the answers within them. As a coach, I seek to develop people beyond the limits of their own knowledge.*

– Vanessa Vershaw

**I found him.**

**Curled up in the corner of his office,**

**rocking back and forth, sobbing.**

**A wreck.**

I still don't know how I ended up in the penthouse suite of a downtown skyscraper in Perth, Western Australia holding a middle-aged man crying in my arms. My life has always been like this: a series of serendipitous moments and encounters that have placed me at the epicentre of human trial and triumph.

That morning had started just like any other. The birds were chirping and the flowers were in full bloom on a gorgeous spring day. I was on my way to work with a well-known mining magnate at his ultra-sleek, well-designed office in the city. I really enjoyed going there; there is nothing quite like being in luxurious surrounds to make you feel successful and on top of your game. My energy was super-charged. The organisation was going through a sea change, and I had been engaged to help them transition into a reimagined future during a state of severe economic upheaval.

As context, the resources sector had just entered a bust phase and many companies were fighting to keep their doors open, which was

causing panic throughout the business community. To put this into perspective, in Australia the resources sector (mining, oil and gas production) contributes around 10 per cent of GDP (US\$150 billion), and about the same amount to export income, which amounts to around 50 per cent of exports.<sup>1</sup> So, there was no question that we were at a major fork in our economic road, and it wasn't looking great.

This wasn't just an Australia thing. Globally, we had entered a state of recession considered by many economists to have been the most serious financial crisis since the Great Depression. Most banks had been bailed out by government to avoid bankruptcy and millions of people had lost their jobs. Fortunately, we were not hit as hard in Australia compared with the rest of the world.

So, why was this man so distraught?

I consoled him and coached him 'off the ledge'. He had enjoyed years of abundance and profit without much effort as supreme market ruler. His arrogance had built a company culture of entitled jerks who had grown fat from greed. Their shaky relationships with customers could best be described as one-night stands. In a few months, he had gone from feeling like master of the universe to wondering whether the company would survive to trade another day. He was on his knees, and he didn't know how to get up.

The atmosphere was intense and heavy. Manic and surging. It was exhausting.

Later that afternoon, I visited another client just up the road. I still felt the weight of where I had been. I quickly noticed that the birds were still singing, and the skies were a magnificent powder-blue, cloudless, and stretched as far as the eyes could see. It was as if, outside of this bubble, time had stood still. I was reminded that life goes on, and so must we.

The next office was as impressive as the last. Yet, this time, I was met with very different energy.

There he was, another resources Titan standing up and looking out the window with a huge smile across his face. He welcomed me into his office with eager anticipation, walking over to open the door to let me in (what a gentleman!). He was bursting at the seams with

excitement. He had built the prototype of a new technology product that was set to revolutionise the mining sector. If all went to plan, he would create a new market space. His vision was that mining companies were no longer going to be operating purely in the business of mining; they were going to be technology businesses. Mr Titan was a force to be reckoned with – you could feel it!

In truth, while I was delighted to be met with such enthusiasm, it also felt mentally jarring after spending the morning with the other man – Mr Magnate, who felt his empire was crumbling around him.

Why was this man so happy? The world was supposedly blowing up and this guy was smiling, ready to step into battle and take on the war.

How is it that two people going through similar experiences could respond so differently? Both men would be considered clever, famous and wealthy beyond measure. From the outside looking in, they ticked all the boxes in terms of the popular definitions of success. But there was actually a huge difference between them. One that, at the end of the day, would result in a winner who would keep winning and a loser who would be left behind.

\*

After two decades' work in helping leaders shift their mindset to be resilient and adaptive to change, I have realised that a clear difference exists between those who thrive on the edge of the precipice and those who fall into the abyss. In the areas of psychology and human performance, there are distinct qualities, characteristics and ways of working that separate people's success levels and life enjoyment.

And it's this: unreasonable ambition.

I believe ambition to be the most primal and sacred foundation of our human essence. To feel ambition and act upon it is the calling of our souls. It's a deep stirring that when acted upon puts us on our unique life path. To resist the inner calling is to risk living a life that is less than we are capable of, and to deny ourselves the gift of living our

best lives. Being ambitious is to be *driven by a higher calling*. I describe it as having a raging fire in your belly that fuels you to overcome fear, doubt and resistance and drives you to action.

Perhaps you know this feeling?

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**Being ambitious is to be driven by a higher calling.  
I describe it as having a raging fire in your belly that fuels  
you to overcome fear, doubt and resistance and drives  
you to action.**

---

Mr Titan was living an ambitious and inspired life. He was focused on leading from the edge to realise his craziest dreams, and taking everyone along with him. He was energised by adversity; the loftier the challenge, the more driven he became to succeed.

Mr Magnate, on the other hand, had become a victim to his own self-limiting beliefs. Immobilised by fear and a need for control, he had low expectations, set goals below his capacity and had limited his potential for ingenuity and growth. He was on a fast track to mediocrity.

But being ambitious is not enough. Great leaders must also be unreasonable.

Think about William the Conqueror, one of the greatest kings in history. William was ambitious, yes, but he would never have led the Norman invasion of England and become the last foreign conqueror of the country if he had been reasonable. He set unreasonable goals that set his sights beyond British shores. And, let's face it, William the Reasonable doesn't have quite the same ring to it, does it?

Being unreasonable is about having a pioneering world view. It's about renegade thinking for big and beyond.

Here is the simple truth. The secret to leading today for a successful tomorrow can be reduced to three principles:

1. To be *ambitious* is survival.
2. To be *reasonable* is dangerous.
3. To be *unreasonable* is necessary.

By the end of this book, you will have everything you need to access the greatness inside you that is waiting to be unleashed onto the world. It's then that you can step into your full potential and lead a life of unreasonable ambition.

– *Vanessa Vershaw*

# INTRODUCTION: YOU WERE BORN FOR THIS

*The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems.*

– Mahatma Gandhi

We are in a catalytic era. A tornado of change has descended and humanity is caught in the maelstrom. Business leaders are facing an unknown future trying to figure out how to navigate the way, armed only with an outdated roadmap, bad intel and obsolete operating systems.

Wherever we are, we are witnessing extreme reactions at both ends of the spectrum. Some leaders are energised by the adventure of what lies ahead. Others are straining under the burden of confronting a future that is largely uncharted, with no rulebook or guardrails. The only way to step into the future as it emerges is to create the future for ourselves.

You'd agree that this is not a time to be reasonable.

Circumstance has given us carte blanche to reimagine the world we want to live in. But to bend the world to our vision for a brighter future, we must have unreasonable ambitions for what's possible. We must hold relentless optimism about the prospect of changing the world, and confront brutal realism about the obstacles to doing so.

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**We must hold relentless optimism about the prospect of changing the world, and confront brutal realism about the obstacles to doing so.**

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Your ability to flourish in an ever-morphing world will be fuelled by:

- the drive of your higher ambitions
- your preparedness to set unreasonable goals
- your willingness to believe that you are capable of far more than you believe
- your ability to unearth the greatness you were born with to achieve the impossible.

It is time to stop running from the storm.

It is time to *be the storm* and become the entrepreneur of your own life.

[A SECTION HAS BEEN REMOVED  
FROM THIS SAMPLE CHAPTER]

## **GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THIS BOOK**

*It's never too late to be who you might have been.*

– George Eliot

I am someone who like things organised, grounded, simple and clean. Anyone who works with me will tell you that I cut to the chase and keep it real (whether they like it or not!).

So here it is. There are loads of books out there that provide great thought leadership about how to build the mindset and skillset to tap into your innate stores of unreasonable ambition, natural agility and resilience.

But here's the thing: it's easy to say 'go and develop unreasonable ambition' or 'go and build your resilience', but these states of being are difficult to define and even harder to achieve. Yet, there are specific ways of thinking, being and doing that will power your bounce-back; simple ways to hack your hardwiring, fast.

I'm a big believer in using real words, not big words, so that you get the most out of this book. No psychobabble or consultant-speak in here. I promise.

I am committed to demystifying things for you and challenging prevailing myths about what it takes to achieve success in life and at work. In this book you will find the golden ticket to a meaningful and exciting life where *you* call the shots.

I'll be sharing my 20 years of global experience and psychological techniques to prepare you for your best life. I'll be showcasing the inside stories of some of the most unreasonably ambitious leaders I have been privileged to spend time with – the shooting stars, the unsung heroes and the angels among us, weaving their threads through our lives without fanfare and yet deserving of our utmost gratitude.

These are extraordinary humans, and many have come from nothing. They're ordinary folk from everyday – sometimes impoverished – beginnings who have transcended their designated station to achieve amazing things, jump s-curves and build empires without supernatural powers or the support of a genie in a bottle. They've made full use of their gifts and talents to lead a purpose-driven life.

It's all about futures that know no boundaries. Happy lives fulfilled. Legacies that are built to last.

The book is divided into four parts:

- I. Motivation
- II. Mantra
- III. Mindset
- IV. Momentum.

Any great adventure starts with *motivation* – the fire in your belly that compels you to care. So many leaders I have worked with describe motivation as an overwhelming urge to take action that forces them to make a change. Understanding your new operating context and being driven by a greater purpose is what we will be uncovering in part I. To make unique contributions that have big impact you need to understand what the world needs from you and what unreasonable ambition looks like in practice – the good, the bad and the ugly.

Then, in part II, it's about setting your *mantra*. This is your commitment to being the best version of yourself – knowing who you are and keeping it real. We'll look at the power of self-awareness, and how to tap into your bigger life purpose and invest in your future self to set up a blueprint for the work and home life you crave. This will give you clarity around where to direct your intentions and your efforts.

Part III is where the rubber hits the road. Pruning, cultivating and growing an unreasonably ambitious *mindset* is the secret to sustained happiness and high performance. I am going to take you through eight adaptive challenges to elevate your gifts and support you in leading your life with courage, clear intention and absolute focus. Think of these as mind hacks to accelerate your ability to jump from darkness to possibility. Part III is not for the faint-hearted. It will stretch your mind and provide a pathway for you to accelerate your leadership impact at work and at home.

The book concludes with part IV – *momentum*. Being able to reinforce and sustain all that you have learned requires deliberate practice and adaptive action. I will do a wrap-up of everything we have learned and prepare you for what's to come.

By the end of *Unreasonable Ambition*, you may feel a bit jibbed. You may ask yourself the question, 'How come no-one has told me this before?'

And then you will know. You are forever altered – seeing the world with fresh eyes. You're ready to be more. Create more. Do more.

Not everyone has crazy life dreams and ambitions to make a dent in the universe. Not everyone wants to be a changemaker, a rainmaker or a modern-day revolutionary. But if you're one of those who does, it's time to clear the path to blaze your trail and lead the world better.

It's time to stop running from the storm and *become* the storm.

So here is my invitation to you as we begin our intrepid journey together. I invite you to drop the anchor on old stories on repeat.

I implore you to turn your back on a past that does not define you.

I encourage you to stay open and curious.

I ask you to trust your intuition.

I dare you to lead with unreasonable ambition to create your own future.

I urge you to take the road less travelled, and become the leader were born to be.

So, what are you waiting for? Let's get started.

# PART I

# MOTIV ATION

**Ambition is the path to success.  
Persistence is the vehicle you arrive in.**

**- BILL BRADLEY**

One of the most confronting experiences I have ever had was while doing my psychologist training at a local hospital in Western Australia. I had been placed on the children's ward in the psychology unit. The ward was divided up into two key areas – one for the kids with relatively common mental health challenges, and the other for the more complex cases.

It was early morning, and as I strolled down the corridor I peeked into the 'cells', curious to see what the children were doing stuck in their rooms all day. I had never been to a facility like this before and I was feeling quite anxious about it. My deep empathy for children tended to override my ability to keep clinical distance. That's a no-no for psychologists, by the way. Not being able to separate personal feelings from your professional work makes it almost impossible to make decisions for prescribed treatments unclouded by emotions.

As an empath this has always been an ongoing challenge (it's how I ended up becoming an organisational psychologist after coming to terms with my limits!). Being an empath means that I'm highly intuitive. I can easily feel others' emotions. It sounds super intense, I know – but I have quickly become accustomed to it, and the benefits that go with it (so have my clients!). With this gift comes the power of knowing others – being able to tune into others at a higher frequency to sense their thoughts, innermost fears and desires. So, you can understand why I resisted the placement at first. A children's mental health hospital is not usually a welcomed place for an energy sponge like me.

A loud banging sound accompanied by desperate wailing stopped me in my tracks. I looked in through the window to see a little boy, about nine years old, dressed in his pyjamas and repeatedly banging his head against the wall. I noticed that his poor little head was a deep purple, covered in bruises, contusions and perspiration. He was so distressed. Yet, despite the pain he was inflicting on himself he continued to bang his head against the wall, repeatedly, until it bled.

As confronting as the scene was, in that moment I became a better psychologist. I believe that sometimes the worst experiences can spark the greatest insights, and this was one of those times.

Here's what I learned: that there is often tension between what is good for us and what we want to do.

The little boy was compelled to relieve the pain of his suffering by banging his head against the wall. He chose to inflict himself with physical pain to help manage his psychological anguish. He chose the lesser of two evils to cope with his situation.

Here's the problem: as human beings we are creatures of habit. Our preference is usually to stick with what we know, play it safe and live inside the bubbles of our own creation without venturing out – even if it is bad for us.

It's why people stay in toxic relationships. It's why losing weight can be so hard. It's why leaders fail to step up to the plate and lead their organisations into an unknown future.

It's why the little boy continued to bang his head, no matter how much it hurt him.

Our brains trick us into staying the same. They think they're doing us a favour, protecting us from harm.

But they're not. They're preventing us from being able to generate the motivation and focus we need to push through the obstacles, climb the mountains and move in our desired direction.

Let's consider weight loss for a second. How often have you heard someone say they can't exercise because they are too tired after a long day at work? But the fatigue they are experiencing is not physical. They have been sitting on their butts all day! What they are actually experiencing is *mental fatigue*.

Let's face it, we have all been prey to responding to false signals from the brain telling us to stay sedentary, passive and inactive. It's our mind's way of protecting us to maintain homeostasis and settle into a comfortable state of steady functioning. To keep us exactly as we are; not growing, not evolving.

But here's the thing: if you can push past this false survivor state and start exercising, something amazing happens. You'll experience the most satisfying workout of your life. Energy will start to rush through your body. (And you'll be thanking me for getting you out of your chair!)

Keeping your brain in great shape, creating new habits and becoming revitalised needs a lot of motivation and surplus energy. That's why part I of the book is dedicated to helping you get motivated. It's about

finding your greater purpose; your reason to get up in the morning even when you may not feel like it. Finding the urgency to care and act, no matter what life is throwing at you, no matter how painful or frightening the situation.

Every person with unreasonable ambition is driven by an unearthly rumbling to succeed; fuelled by the desire to be more; propelled by an insatiable hunger to create change in the world.

---

**Every person *with unreasonable ambition* is driven by an unearthly rumbling to succeed.**

---

There's science behind being able to generate the energy you need to push yourself forward and block out the noise that makes you want to bang your head against a brick wall. But first, we will work to understand the role of motivation in helping you bust through ingrained habits to get to your bigger *why*. It starts with understanding what the world looks like around you, the size of the challenge the future is setting for you and how you need to respond.

We will also delve deeper into profiling what an unreasonably ambitious leader looks like in the flesh – warts and all – so you can set some personal goals.

Life is goading you with an extreme adaptive challenge to activate the unreasonable ambition that is already in you. So, buckle up and brace yourself. Answer a higher call and deliver what the world needs from you right now – no matter how wild the ride.

It's time to fire up your full potential!



## **CHAPTER 1**

# **THE WORLD HAS CHANGED**

**The future doesn't care how you became an expert.**

**- DAVID BLAKE**

Like the shifting of tectonic plates on the earth's surface, we have moved into an era of seismic paradigm change. We're floating in and out of liminal spaces,<sup>2</sup> caught between two worlds where nothing is certain, nothing is clear and everything we thought was important is on hold.

The word 'liminal' comes from the Latin root *limen*, which means 'threshold'. The liminal space is the 'crossing over' space – the space where you have left something behind, yet you are not yet fully in the next thing. It's a transition space, an in-between space heralding transformative opportunity. It's a time to uncover moments of uncertainty that are also ripe with possibility.

## **YOUR NEW OPERATING CONTEXT**

Life is fast and furious. Our operating context has shifted at warp speed, going from VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) to TUNA (turbulent, uncertain, novel and ambiguous) almost overnight in the wake of a global pandemic that no-one really saw coming.

'Black swan' events such as Covid-19 and 'grey rhino' events such as Kodak going defunct and Blockbuster going bust have become commonplace in our daily grind.<sup>3</sup> Even occurrences such as the Great Resignation or Attrition (depending on your stance), where millions of people around the globe are quitting their jobs without necessarily having another job to go to, is part and parcel of the new world order (I'm not sure why employers are so baffled by it!). It's the domino effect of a race going through major disruption and upheaval – and it's not going to let up anytime soon.

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**As a leader, your ability to move with the change will dictate the magnitude of your rise or fall.**

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What is clear is this: as a leader, your ability to move with the change will dictate the magnitude of your rise or fall.

## HOW ARE YOU GETTING IN YOUR OWN WAY?

One of the biggest barriers to success is relying on known ways of thinking to solve life and business challenges. Yet that is what most of us are doing. Driven by fear, our craving for certainty and our need to feel in control sees us setting ourselves up to measure a successful past – rather than building the capability to get in front of the curve and read the signs of today.

Our current ways of doing business are set up for repeatable events and stable market conditions. The human mind is great at identifying patterns, creating short cuts (also known as schemas) and relying on historical data. So, when we are confronted by unknown challenges, our natural tendency is to identify trends we are already aware of.

This is *bad*.

Your standard operating procedures won't work in the face of the unlikely or improbable. They will fail you in situations that are new, or that you are dealing with for the first time. In *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, authors Ronald A Heifetz, Alexander Grashow and Marty Linsky state it well: 'The most common leadership failure stems from trying to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges.'<sup>4</sup>

So, how do you short-circuit your neural programming to move faster through any type of change and become unreasonably ambitious?

## LEADERS CAN BE MADE

A recent study examined the mindsets, behaviours and skillsets of some of the world's most successful leaders, and it discovered something startling: you don't have to be born with the goods straight out of the womb.<sup>5</sup> *You can become a great leader.* You can develop unreasonable ambition.

And that's why this book is for everyone. You don't have to 'qualify' to read it.

As human beings we all have fears and doubts to overcome. But the difference between those who realise their unreasonable ambitions and those who don't is that the former don't let their fears and doubts stop them from taking action. They do it anyway! And that is what this book is about – *becoming*. Unearthing the unreasonably ambitious leader you already are.

It's a deliberate choice and it starts with powerful intention. Leaders with unreasonable ambition are compelled to think beyond the norms of conventional wisdom and logic. They question their default position to explore other options, and then they just get on with it.

Lauded organisational psychologist Adam Grant calls this 'vuja de', the opposite of 'deja vu'. It's when we face something familiar but see it with fresh perspective that enables us to gain new insights into old problems.<sup>6</sup> Let's take a look at what the research tells us about our natural leadership potential.

## THE 6 Cs

A research team set out to devise a winning formula to be a better modern-day leader. They investigated many of the world's most well-known, successful leaders, evaluating the creative ideas of Apple's Steve Jobs, the insights of the Dalai Lama, the business instincts of Amazon's Jeff Bezos, the endurance of ironman Trevor Hendy and the strategic mind of chess master Magnus Carlsen.

After analysing more than 1000 academic articles and mapping psychological, biological and brain patterns, the researchers came up with a list of six capabilities needed to succeed in this age of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.<sup>7</sup> These were capacity, choice, connection, collaboration, change agility and creativity.<sup>8</sup> They're illustrated below.

### Six capabilities for success



Let's take a look at these in more detail:

- **Capacity** is about being resilient and maintaining a driving sense of purpose during tough times.
- **Choice** is an ability to operate with System 2 Thinking – the mind's slower analytical mode, where reason dominates. In contrast, System 1 Thinking is the brain's fast, automatic, intuitive response.
- **Connection** is about relating to others and demonstrating compassion. It was also found to have the highest correlation with productivity and profitability. This was linked to empathy, where the leader's ability to see the world through the lens of another has been deemed critical to internal and external customer engagement and maintaining a competitive edge.
- **Collaboration** is a skill critical to maintaining a performance edge. This requires leaders to move from centralised decision-making models to becoming coaches and facilitators of teams. It also supercharges their ability to learn and generate new knowledge fast.
- **Change agility** is the ability to resist non-value-adding processes, becoming hyperaware, making sense of external trends and high-velocity decision-making.
- **Creativity** is the ability to deliver nonlinear thinking and innovation. An entrepreneurial mindset is a key part of this superpower.

The 6 Cs research provides us with a solid foundation to explore the essence of unreasonable ambition in action. The findings also confirm that the potential to be more lies within all of us.

But the 6 Cs are not enough. They illustrate what is *sufficient* to maintain where you are right now, but *not* what will help you level up to *thrive* (I promise I will take you there shortly!).

Before we continue our journey together, let's take a moment to summarise some key points.

To be an unreasonably ambitious leader is to face the stark truth of disruption today, knowing that if you don't own and drive your own evolution, you will quickly become irrelevant.

Our world – the way we live, the way we love, the way we connect, the way we work – has changed dramatically. Business models are developing faster than ever before, and leadership lessons such as these teach us that we must keep pace to survive and disrupt ourselves to create the lives our souls crave.

And so, as the world continues to rapidly morph, so must you!  
To move with the storm, you must *be the storm*.

## Reflection

- How has the world changed for you? What is it demanding from you?
- What are the benefits of staying exactly as you are?
- How are old habits and ways of thinking getting in the way of your own progress?

## **CHAPTER 2**

# **BE THE STORM**

**There is no shortage of causes in the world, just a shortage of leaders who can inspire us to pursue them.**

**- SIMON SINEK**

We are all being tested.

No-one is immune to the forces that are transforming business and society. We are all trying to figure out how to adapt to the new logic of business competition, create opportunity from uncertainty and prepare to thrive in our lives and at work.

In this environment, it is the unreasonably ambitious leaders who are able to swim through the upheaval with stronger strokes and chart a course, while others are paralysed by fear, unable to dive off the starting blocks.

Your ability to create the life you want hinges on how fast you can lean into uncertainty and resist your natural urge to duck for cover or freeze like a deer in the headlights. It's about getting comfortable feeling completely out of your depth. If you don't, you risk being left behind.

## **YOU HAVE BEEN HERE BEFORE**

Everyone has a story – the story of how they came to be, of the highs and lows of their life's journey that sparked moments of extraordinary growth. Along the way are serendipitous events, milestone moments and other influential humans that changed the course of their life in an instant.

We have all gone through difficult times. Our bodies store these experiences as physiological imprints – especially when we experience trauma, or situations of extreme stress that cause the body to fight, flee or freeze to cope.

Think of your body as a map of every experience you have ever had, good and bad. Your body holds your memories tightly inside you.

To be able to let go of fear and build bravery we must access what we've already been through. We must tap into those moments when we triumphed; when we were strengthened by what occurred. Thirteenth-century Sufi poet Rumi said, 'The cure for the pain is in the pain.' There's wisdom in that.

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**You are more ready than you think to tackle whatever comes your way.**

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It's time to remember that you have been here before. You are more ready than you think to tackle whatever comes your way. To begin your quest means starting from exactly where you are right now.

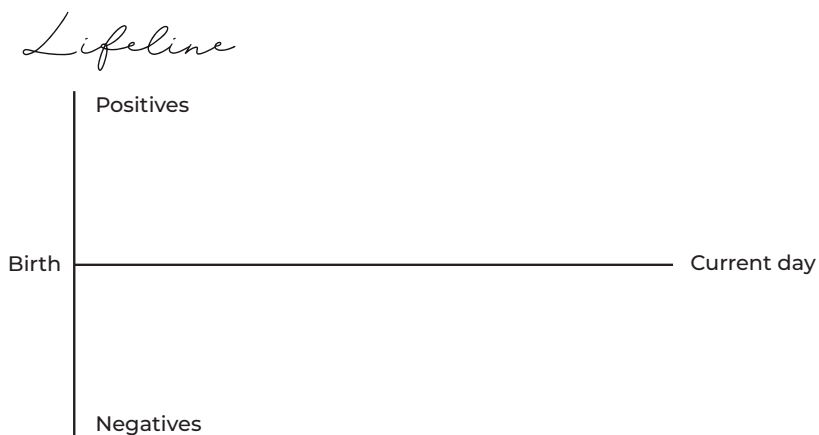
## Reflection

- How has your past prepared you to lead better today?
- What are the internal resources that you have relied on most to bring you success so far?

## UNLEASHING YOUR INNER WARRIOR

There's a powerful and super-simple exercise I run with teams to try to access transformative memories. It's also a formidable way to demonstrate the power of collective strength.

On the lifeline illustrated in the figure below, I ask participants to plot their life as a series of positive and negative experiences in chronological order.



After they complete the exercise, I ask them to write down the leadership qualities they developed as a result of each experience on their timeline. The revelations are often mind-blowing. Two critical shifts occur.

The first is that people recognise that they have more internal resources and influence within them than they imagined. They are stronger, braver and better prepared for the future than they thought. This is usually a very emotional experience for people as they recall milestone events and significant people in their lives that have shaped them. I often see the powerful impact of teachers and mentors here.

The second shift is with the collective team, as people identify that together they have all the prerequisite capabilities needed to tackle whatever is coming their way. That they can merge as one and confront the future head-on. (Often we get so busy at work that we don't take the time to really get to know one another. When we do, it changes *everything*.)

I encourage you to do this exercise and see where you land.

## Reflection

- What did you learn about yourself and your own strength and capability through this exercise?
- If you did this with your team, how did it alter your perceptions of different team members?

Leading with unreasonable ambition also means recognising the limitations of our own individual giftedness and that the greater power comes from leveraging the brilliance of the collective.

Let me share with you the story about a man who removed the anchor of his past to create new beginnings. He re-wrote his own story to narrate a new one that was even better.

## THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

*At the end of the day, it isn't where I came from. Maybe home is somewhere I am going and never have been before.*

– Warsan Shire

I will never forget meeting Stephen Quantrill. Quantrill was a former banking and finance executive from Durban, South Africa. Our meeting was serendipitous to say the least. I had been scouted by one of his board directors to assist with the transformation of a low-performing manufacturing asset and prepare it for sale. I learned that Quantrill had held several high-level roles at Old Mutual Plc and Nedcor Bank Limited; at one stage, he even reported to South African-born Gail Kelly, well known in Australia as the former CEO of Westpac. After founding several business ventures that had mixed success, and still nursing wounds from a partnership gone sour, Quantrill went on to manage the private fortune of one of Australia's most lauded pioneers in engineering and construction: Harold Clough.

So just how did this quietly spoken South African native go from fleeing a country marked by violence and civil unrest to managing the millions of an Australian business icon?

One fine summer's day in 2013, on a golf course by the sea, Quantrill met one of Clough's family members who introduced him to their 'dad'. After a brief meeting where he formed instant synergy, he was offered an opportunity that became the role of a lifetime (it didn't happen overnight, but eventually materialised into his current role). Part of Quantrill's appeal is his low-key, affable style. He has a serene energy about him that creates a feeling of instant trust and safety. This is in addition to his amazing educational pedigree. (He's very well-rounded. He even shared with me he started to study Arts but ended up succumbing to taking a more 'pragmatic' study route. His life has been anything but.)

I'm wondering if you have guessed where I am leading you right now. Is the power of his story the fact that he scored a 'dream' job, or something more?

## LANDING IN THE WAITING SPACE

Quantrill's story has so many layers. It's a story of multiple life transitions; about moving from what has been to what will be. It's about dancing in perpetual ambiguity and trusting an unknown life path.

Quantrill journeyed from turbulence to safety; from home to a new frontier; from overconfidence to humility; from grit to tenacity; from cocoon to butterfly. He grew up in a stable middle-class family environment, his father a radiologist and his mother a supportive wife. He was the captain of his rugby team and continued to rise into leadership roles once he graduated from university. It was after getting married and the birth of his children that the increasing crime and unrest in South Africa started to play on his mind. He became increasingly worried about his family's safety. When his wife's life was put at risk, he made the decision to leave his beloved South Africa and travel to the distant shores of Western Australia.

Shaken loose from his foundation, Quantrill received an invitation to surrender to his potential, allowing his old self to dissolve to make way for something bigger. His unreasonably ambitious mindset enabled him to create a new future for himself, one new experience at a time, and reinvent himself in the process.

Quantrill's new life began when he let go of the need for certainty and stepped out of his comfort zone to greet an unknown future. In doing so, he jumpstarted his own metamorphosis.

As the saying goes, the magic happens outside our comfort zone. Transformation occurs when we are not in charge.



To become unreasonably ambitious, we must break out of the cocoon enveloping us in old ways of being, thinking and doing that no longer serve us. These cocoons, which represent safety and comfort, can imprison our potential if we don't let go of the fear and control to make way for our genius to rise.

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### **Transformation happens when we are not in charge.**

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That's when the real magic happens. That's when the butterfly emerges.

Quantrill's story is a living example of an unreasonably ambitious leader who was prepared to disrupt himself by blowing up his old life to create a new one.

### **Reflection**

- Which gifts are gathering dust in your leadership toolkit?
- What are you prepared to 'blow up' to make room for opportunity to enter?
- What new story do you need to write for yourself?