



CONNIE FISCUS

SUNFLOWER PEOPLE & CULTURE SOLUTIONS, LLC

The Attitude Advantage Leadership Playbook

Evidence-based leadership behaviors that influence human performance and
workplace culture



Learn ~ Apply ~ Grow ~ Thrive!

The Attitude Advantage™ Playbook

Welcome to The Attitude Advantage!

Leadership is not just what you do. It is what people experience around you.

The Attitude Advantage Leadership Playbook is designed to translate leadership science into practical behaviors that strengthen workplace culture, elevate trust, and improve team performance.



Research in neuroscience and organizational psychology shows that leadership behaviors directly shape the emotional and psychological climate of a workplace. Every interaction from a leader signals either trust or threat to the people around them.

How to Use This Playbook

This playbook is designed to be both a learning resource and a practical leadership tool.

As you move through each section, you will find insights, strategies, and visual tools that can be applied directly with your team. Leaders are encouraged to reflect on the concepts and intentionally introduce them in their daily interactions.

Creating a positive workplace culture is not the responsibility of leadership alone. When leaders and employees work together to apply these practices, they create an environment where people feel respected, supported, and motivated to perform at their best.



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The Attitude Advantage Play-by-Play

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Gallup research shows that managers account for at least 70% of the variance in employee engagement across teams, reinforcing that leadership behavior is one of the strongest drivers of workplace culture and the employee experience.

Source: Gallup, State of the American Workplace



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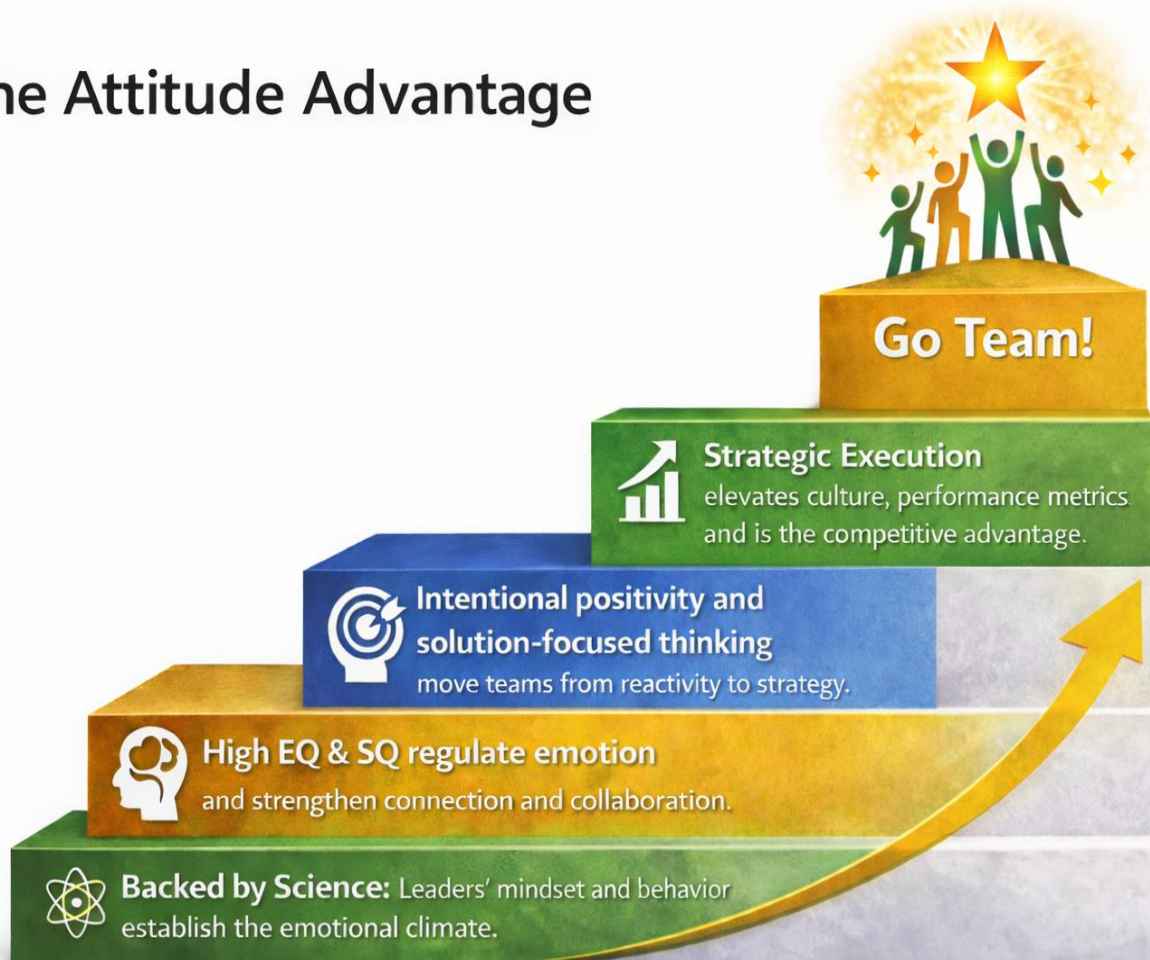
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The Attitude Advantage Leadership Model

Evidence-based leadership behaviors build upon one another to strengthen leadership effectiveness and workplace culture.

The Attitude Advantage



Each step builds on the one before it. When leaders strengthen awareness, relationships, and decision-making; and align their execution with intention, they create cultures where people and performance thrive.

1. Backed by Science

Just as every sunflower begins as seed, every positive workplace culture begins with a foundation. In *The Attitude Advantage*, that foundation is science.

Leaders must first understand that their mindset, behaviors and emotional presence directly shape the climate of the workplace. Research in neuroscience and organizational psychology shows that leadership behavior influences whether people experience trust or threat, connection or withdrawal, engagement or disengagement.

This first step helps leaders recognize that culture is not built by chance. It is built by consistent behavioral signals.



2. High EQ and SQ

Once the seed takes root, growth begins beneath the surface before it becomes visible above the ground. That is what emotional intelligence and social intelligence do for leadership.

EQ helps leaders regulate their emotions, **increase self-awareness**, and respond thoughtfully **rather than react impulsively**. SQ helps leaders read the room, strengthen relationships, and understand how their words, tone, and actions affect others. Together, these abilities create the early structure that supports healthy leadership growth. At this stage, leaders begin developing the skills to regulate emotions, understand others, increase empathy, and lead with greater awareness and relational insight.



3. Intentional Optimism and Solution-Focused Thinking

When a sunflower blooms, its presence is visible, strong, and energizing. This step represents the visible leadership behaviors that influence the day-to-day experience of a team.

Leaders and teams who model intentional optimism and solution-focused thinking help move people away from reactivity, negativity, and blame. Instead, they create a tone that is more constructive, hopeful, and forward-moving.

This does not mean ignoring problems or pretending everything is fine. It means choosing thoughts, language, and actions that are more helpful, accurate, and productive. At this stage, leaders and teams thrive!



4. Strategic Execution

A single sunflower is powerful, but a field of sunflowers reflects multiplication, alignment, and lasting impact. That is what strategic execution looks like in leadership. When the science, self-awareness, relational intelligence and intentional mindset are consistently applied, they begin shaping the larger culture of the team or organization. This is where leadership moves beyond individual behavior and becomes a collective experience.

Trust grows stronger. Communication improves. Engagement rises. Performance becomes more sustainable.



The Neuroscience of Leadership

This is not just another leadership framework.

The Attitude Advantage Leadership Playbook is grounded in evidence-based neuroscience that helps explain how leader behavior influences trust, stress, motivation, and performance.

Leadership Behavior Shapes How the Brain Responds

Leadership is not only about communication and strategy. It also shapes the biological environment in which people work.

When leaders create clarity, fairness, encouragement, and connection, people are more likely to experience trust and psychological safety. When leaders create criticism, confusion, exclusion, or hostility, the brain is more likely to shift into a stress and threat response.

Workplace culture is not separate from biology. Leader behavior influences how people experience their environment and those experiences shape how they think, feel, and perform.



When people feel trusted, their brains release oxytocin, a chemical that facilitates bonding and cooperation.”

“Employees at high trust companies report 74% less stress, 106% more energy at work, and 50% higher productivity.”

Zak, P. J. (2017). *The neuroscience of trust*. *Harvard Business Review*, 95(1), 84–90.

Key Brain Systems Behind Behavior

Three brain systems play an important role in leadership and daily workplace interactions:

Prefrontal Cortex

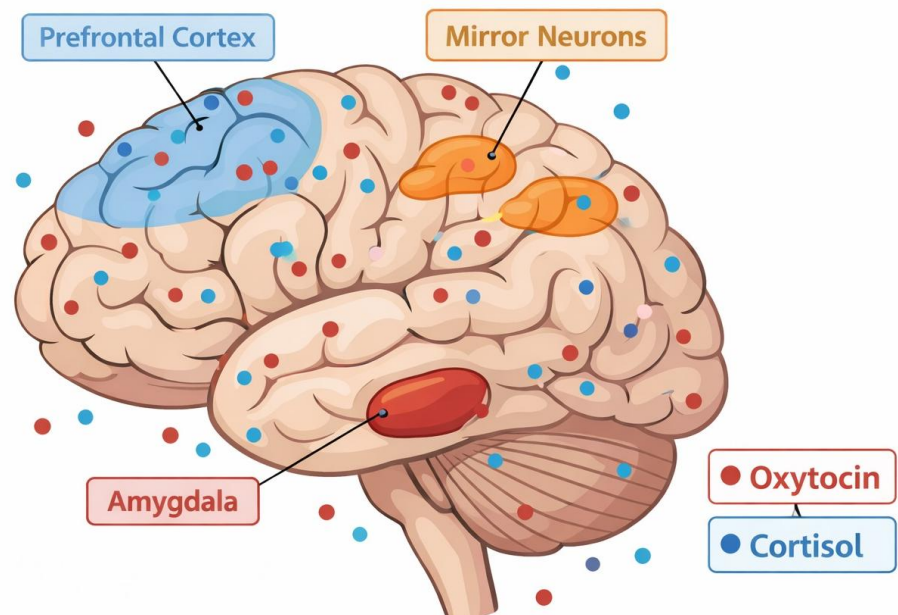
Supports reasoning, problem solving, self-regulation, and thoughtful decision making.

Amygdala

Part of the brain's threat detection system. It scans for potential danger and can trigger fast emotional reactions when people feel unsafe or under pressure.

Mirror Neuron System

May play a role in emotional contagion, helping explain why leader tone, energy, and behavior can quickly influence others.

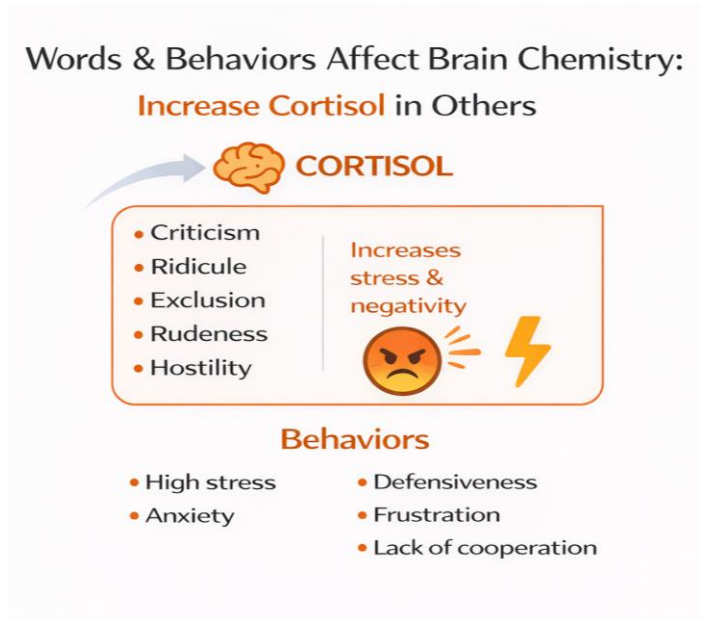


Behaviors That Influence Stress in Others

When leaders rely on criticism, ridicule, exclusion, disrespect, or hostility, the body's stress response is more likely to activate.

Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, is associated with this response. Elevated stress can reduce access to clear thinking, increase defensiveness, and make collaboration more difficult.

This is why harsh leadership behavior does more than impact morale. It can interfere with how people think, respond, and perform.



Behaviors That Strengthen Motivation and Growth

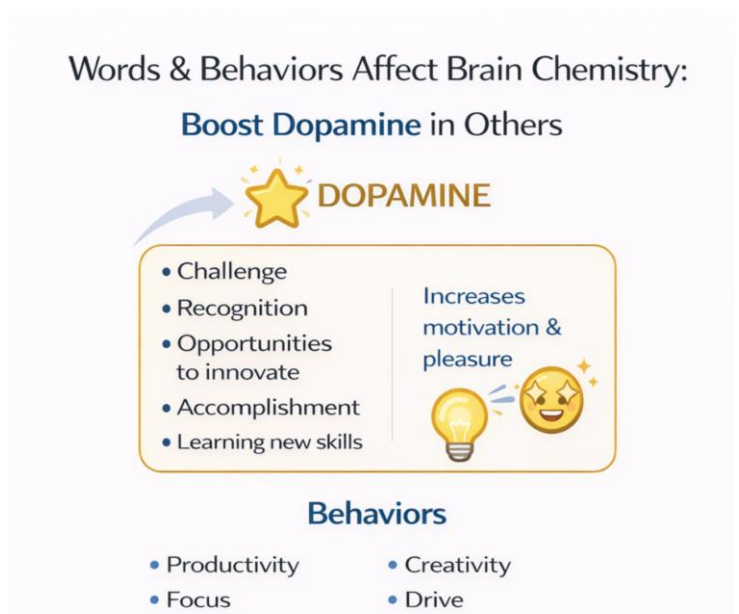
Effective leadership behaviors influence brain states associated with motivation, focus, and growth.

Recognition, meaningful challenge, progress, and opportunities to learn all contribute to this response.

Dopamine is associated with motivation, curiosity, and goal-directed behavior.

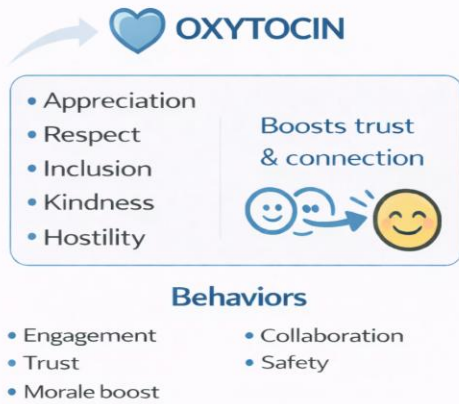
Leaders help create these conditions when they acknowledge effort, celebrate progress, and encourage continued development.

In practical terms, strong leadership helps people feel more engaged, capable, and ready to contribute.



Words & Behaviors Affect Brain Chemistry:

Boost Oxytocin in Others



Behaviors That Influence Trust in Others

Trust and connection are critical to team performance.

Research often links oxytocin with social bonding and trust.

Experiences such as appreciation, inclusion, respect, and supportive leadership interactions are associated with stronger

feelings of connection and psychological safety.

For leaders, this shows up in everyday behavior:

listening, recognizing effort, including others, and communicating with respect.

Over time, consistent leadership behavior shapes environments where trust grows, relationships strengthen, and teams perform at a higher level.

Leadership Behavior Shapes Brain Chemistry



Leadership behavior influences more than workplace culture.

It shapes the psychological conditions in which people work, which are closely associated with biological stress and connection responses.

Research in neuroscience suggests that social interactions at work are processed by the brain in ways similar to safety signals.

When people feel respected, supported and included, those interactions are more likely to be experienced as socially safe and associated with trust and connection.

When people feel criticized, excluded or threatened, the brain's threat detection system, including the amygdala, can become more active. This can trigger the body's stress response, which may involve hormones such as cortisol.

For this reason, leadership behavior consistently nudges the brain toward one of two general states.

Trust

When people feel psychologically safe, research in social neuroscience suggests that oxytocin may play a role in social bonding and trust. These conditions support engagement, collaboration, and connection.

Threat

When people experience criticism, hostility, or social risk, the stress response system can become more active and cortisol levels may increase. Elevated stress is associated with greater defensiveness, anxiety, and reduced collaboration.

Over time, consistent leadership behavior influences which of these environments becomes more dominant within a team or organization.

Leaders shape more than morale. They influence the social and psychological conditions that affect how people experience trust, stress, and collaboration at work.

Leaders often ask, “This all sounds great, but how do I actually get better at it?”

The encouraging news is this: the behaviors that strengthen trust are not personality traits. They are leadership practices. Like any skill, they improve through awareness, intention, and repetition.

When leaders consistently recognize contributions, listen with respect, include others and offer encouragement, those behaviors become more natural and more impactful over time.

Effective leadership is not about being nice all the time or avoiding difficult conversations.

Leaders must still address performance issues, set clear expectations, and hold people accountable. When accountability is delivered with clarity, fairness and respect, it can actually strengthen trust.

People feel more secure when expectations are consistent and applied evenly. When leaders approach tough conversations with transparency and respect, they reinforce psychological safety while maintaining standards.

It is also important to remember that leadership will never be perfect. Leaders are human. There will be moments when stress or frustration takes over and responses fall short.

What matters most is not perfection. It is recovery. When leaders recognize that an interaction may have triggered stress rather than trust, a simple reset, such as acknowledging it, clarifying intent, or offering a sincere apology, can quickly rebuild connection.

In many cases, these recovery moments strengthen trust because they demonstrate self-awareness, humility, and commitment to the relationship.

Leadership Behaviors and Their Biological Impact

Leadership behavior consistently influences whether employees experience trust or threat in the workplace.

Leadership Behavior That Elevate Oxytocin - Trust	Leadership Behaviors That Elevate Cortisol - Stress
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask for employee input before making decisions• Listen without interrupting• Follow through on commitments• Explain the “why” behind decisions• Give credit to team members publicly• Coach privately instead of correcting publicly• Show appreciation for extra effort• Set consistent and predictable expectations• Check in on employee wellbeing• Celebrate progress and small wins• Encourage collaboration• Communicate transparently during change• Admit when you do not have all the answers• Thank employees for speaking up• Invite quieter voices into the conversation• Provide autonomy to solve problems• Support growth and development• Deliver feedback respectfully• Stay present and fully engaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Criticize or embarrass employees publicly• Use sarcasm directed at employees• Interrupt or dismiss ideas• Ignore employee input• Set inconsistent expectations or rules• Show favoritism• Raise your voice in frustration• Micromanage unnecessarily• Blame employees when problems occur• Withhold important information• Make decisions without explanation• Respond defensively to feedback• Use dismissive body language (eye rolling, etc.)• Take credit for team accomplishments• Create unpredictable expectations• Ignore concerns or frustrations• Punish employees for speaking up• Focus only on mistakes• Send urgent or critical messages late at night• Shift priorities constantly without communication

Developing Effective Leadership Behaviors:

Leaders are not fixed in their behaviors. Leadership is not a personality trait; it is a set of skills that can be developed with intention and practice. The brain has the capacity to change through experience, a concept known as neuroplasticity. When leaders consistently practice new behaviors, such as pausing before responding, choosing more constructive language and engaging with greater awareness, they begin to strengthen neural pathways associated with those responses. Over time, with repetition, these behaviors require less effort and can become more automatic.

Leaders can accelerate this growth by working with an executive coach, mentally rehearsing how they want to respond in high-stakes situations, and learning from others who model effective leadership behaviors. Practical strategies include identifying personal triggers, creating intentional pause points before reacting, and replacing old habits with practiced alternatives. Reflecting after key interactions also strengthens self-awareness and reinforces learning. This is not about changing who a leader is, It is about building a stronger, more

effective leadership skill set. Just as leaders invest in developing technical capabilities, strengthening behavior-based leadership skills enhances their ability to influence, connect and lead with greater impact.

Lessons from a Sunflower for Leadership

- ✓ Provide a culture that helps others grow
- ✓ Turn to the light, even after challenges
- ✓ Adapt to changing conditions
- ✓ Firmly root yourself and stay grounded
- ✓ Create an environment others are drawn to
- ✓ Demonstrate resilience through change

Leaders shape how leadership behavior influences whether employees experience **trust** or **threat** in the workplace.



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Leadership Reflection: The Culture You Create is the Culture You Manage



Leadership behavior shapes how people experience the workplace every day.

Each interaction, response, and decision sends signals that influence how individuals interpret their environment, engage with their work and interact with others.

The question is not whether leaders influence their team. The question is how that influence is experienced.

Use these questions to reflect on the environment your leadership may be creating.

QUESTIONS:

- When my team interacts with me, do they experience a sense of trust or a sense of stress?
- How do I typically respond when mistakes occur and what message does that send?
- How often do I intentionally recognize effort, progress or improvement?
- Do team members feel comfortable bringing forward concerns, ideas, or challenges?
- When difficult conversations take place, do people leave feeling respected and heard?
- What signals might my tone, body language, and reactions be communicating?

- Do my behaviors support psychological safety or contribute to uncertainty?
- What is one leadership behavior I can practice more intentionally to strengthen trust and connection?

Small, consistent leadership behaviors shape how teams think, communicate, and perform. Over time, the patterns leaders reinforce become the culture employees experience.

The Trust Test

At the next team meeting, ask one meaningful question about a real issue that affects the team. Then stop talking and allow **8 to 10 seconds** of silence. Do not reword the question, rescue the moment, or call on anyone. Simply observe. If someone responds, asks a clarifying question, or others begin to build on the discussion, trust and psychological safety may be present.

If the room goes silent well past 8 to 10 seconds, with visible discomfort and little willingness to speak, there may be a trust issue. Notice who speaks first, who speaks most, who asks questions, and who stays quiet and protected. Those silent voices are the ones leaders should follow up with privately. Silence does not always mean people have nothing to say. Often, it means speaking feels risky.

Can you pass the Trust Test?



Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Social Intelligence (SQ)

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, and regulate your own emotions while remaining aware of how those emotions influence your behavior and decisions. Leaders with strong emotional intelligence pause before reacting and choose responses that support productive conversations and effective problem solving.



Self-Awareness

Recognizing your emotions and how they affect your thoughts and behavior



Self-Regulation

Managing emotions in healthy ways to stay in control



Motivation

Being driven to achieve goals despite challenges



Empathy

Understanding and sharing the feelings of another



Social Skills

Developing strong relationships and communication skills

Key components of emotional intelligence include self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. These abilities help leaders manage pressure, understand others, and communicate in ways that strengthen trust and collaboration.

Emotional intelligence is closely connected to how the brain processes and regulates emotion. When a person experiences stress, frustration, or perceived threat the brain's threat detection system, including the amygdala, can become more active and prepare the body to respond. This response often occurs faster than the brain's higher-order thinking processes can fully evaluate the situation. Leaders with strong emotional intelligence develop the ability to pause, allowing processes associated with the prefrontal cortex, such as reasoning and decision making, to engage before responding. This pause supports more thoughtful, intentional actions instead of automatic emotional reactions.

Leaders can strengthen emotional intelligence by increasing self-awareness, identifying emotional triggers, practicing reflection, and intentionally pausing before responding in

difficult situations. Over time, these practices can strengthen the brain's capacity for emotional regulation and support more consistent, effective leadership behavior.

Social intelligence is the ability to understand social dynamics, read emotional cues, and respond to others in ways that strengthen connection and trust. While emotional intelligence focuses on managing your own emotions, social intelligence focuses on how you interpret and respond to others.



Leaders with strong social intelligence notice body language, tone, and emotional signals. They adjust their communication style, ask thoughtful questions, and respond with empathy. These behaviors help create environments where people feel respected, heard and valued.

When leaders consistently demonstrate social intelligence, relationships strengthen, communication improves, and teams become more collaborative and connected.

Social intelligence is closely connected to how the brain processes social information and responds to the emotional signals of others. The brain includes networks involved in interpreting facial expressions, tone of voice, body language, and social context. When leaders are attentive to these signals, they are better able to respond in ways that strengthen trust and connection.

Social intelligence is associated with neural systems involved in empathy and social awareness, which can support feelings of psychological safety and belonging within a team. Leaders can strengthen social intelligence by paying close attention to nonverbal cues, listening with curiosity, asking questions to understand others' perspectives, and adjusting their communication style based on the situation. Over time, these practices improve a leader's ability to read the emotional climate of a group and respond in ways that support collaboration, trust, and strong team relationships.

Emotional Intelligence Self-Reflection Questions (EQ)

EQ Self-Reflection Question

What This Helps a Leader Assess

What emotion am I experiencing right now?

Self-awareness

How might my current mood influence the way I respond to others?

Emotional regulation

Am I reacting to the situation or responding thoughtfully?

Impulse control

Did I pause before responding in this conversation?

Regulation and intentional response

What might have triggered my emotional reaction in this situation?

Awareness of emotional triggers

Am I choosing language that helps move the conversation forward?

Emotional discipline

How can I respond in a way that supports respect and clarity?

Constructive communication

What would a calm and thoughtful version of myself do next?

Self-management

Did my response reflect the leader I want to be?

Personal accountability

What can I learn about my emotional patterns from this situation?

Growth and reflection

Social Intelligence Self-Reflection Questions (SQ)

<u>SQ Self-Reflection Question</u>	<u>What This Helps a Leader Assess</u>
What emotional signals am I noticing from others right now?	Awareness of social cues
Am I paying attention to tone, body language, and energy in the room?	Social perception
Do people appear comfortable sharing ideas and opinions with me?	Psychological safety
Did I ask questions to understand another person's perspective?	Curiosity and empathy
Am I listening to understand or preparing my next response?	Active listening
How might this person be experiencing the situation differently than I am?	Understand their perspective
Did I adjust my communication style for this individual or situation?	Social adaptability
Am I encouraging participation from quieter voices on the team?	Inclusive leadership
What signals might I be sending through my tone or body language?	Social awareness
Did my behavior strengthen or weaken trust in this interaction?	Relationship impact

Strengthening Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Social Intelligence (SQ)

Why EQ Alone Is Not Enough

Emotional Intelligence helps leaders recognize, understand and regulate their own emotions while responding effectively to the emotions of others. Leadership effectiveness requires more than emotional awareness. It also requires the ability to understand how people function within groups, relationships and team environments.

This is where Social Intelligence becomes essential. While Emotional Intelligence focuses primarily on internal awareness and emotional regulation, Social Intelligence focuses on understanding interpersonal dynamics, communication patterns, and how relationships influence collaboration and performance.

Together, these two capabilities shape how leaders influence trust, engagement, and culture within their teams.



What Social Intelligence Looks Like in Leadership

Leaders with strong Social Intelligence are highly aware of how their behavior influences the people around them. They intentionally create environments where individuals feel respected, heard, and psychologically safe to contribute.

Socially intelligent leaders often demonstrate behaviors such as:

- Reading the emotional tone of a room or conversation
- Recognizing early signs of tension or conflict
- Adjusting communication style to meet the needs of different individuals
- Encouraging participation and diverse perspectives
- Building trust through fairness, consistency, and respect
- Navigating difficult conversations with professionalism and empathy

These leaders understand that every interaction can either strengthen or weaken the culture of the team.



The Leadership Impact of EQ and SQ

When leaders combine Emotional Intelligence with Social Intelligence, they create environments where people feel safe to communicate openly, collaborate effectively, and solve problems together.

Over time, these leadership behaviors are associated with stronger trust, engagement, psychological safety, accountability, and team performance. These factors shape the culture of the organization and influence how effectively teams work together to achieve shared goals.

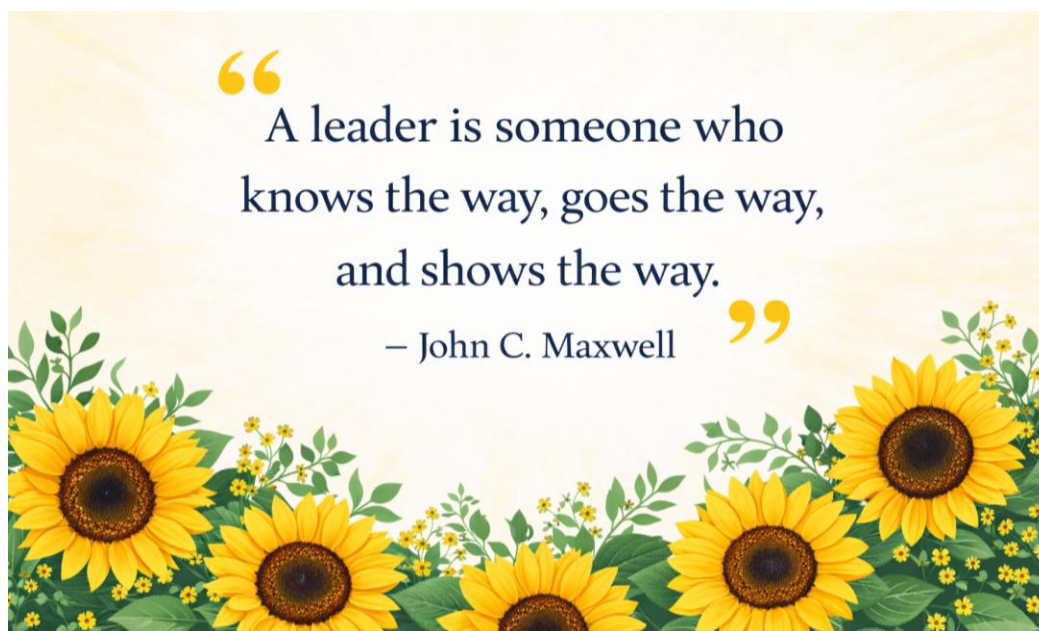
Partnering for Leadership Growth

Developing strong Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence across leadership teams often requires more than individual learning. Organizations frequently benefit from structured development programs, coaching, and facilitated experiences that help leaders translate these principles into consistent leadership behaviors.

Reflection

Which Emotional Intelligence competency is currently your strongest leadership skill? Where might strengthening your Social Intelligence improve the way your team communicates, collaborates, and performs?

Leadership growth begins with awareness and strengthens through intentional practice.



Intentional Optimism & Solution-Focused Leadership



Leadership mindset plays an important role in shaping the emotional climate of a team. Research in neuroscience and organizational psychology suggests that leadership behaviors can influence how people experience trust, stress, and psychological safety within workplace environments. These experiences are associated with a range of

biological processes in the body, including systems involving hormones such as oxytocin and cortisol.

To review - oxytocin is often associated with social bonding, trust, and connection. Environments characterized by fairness, clarity, and supportive communication are frequently linked with stronger feelings of trust and collaboration within teams. Research in social neuroscience suggests that oxytocin is one of several biological factors associated with these positive social experiences.

If you recall cortisol is a hormone involved in the body's stress response system. When people perceive ongoing stress, uncertainty, or unresolved conflict, the body's stress response can become more active and cortisol levels may rise. Sustained stress responses can make clear thinking, collaboration, and creative problem solving more difficult.

Leaders do not directly control these biological responses. However, leadership behaviors can influence the environment in which these responses are more or less likely to occur. Over time, consistent patterns in leadership

communication, decision-making, and emotional tone contribute to how employees interpret their work environment.

When employees consistently experience clarity, fairness and respect, they are more likely to remain engaged, collaborative and solution-oriented.

When employees experience ongoing ambiguity, inconsistency or unresolved tension, attention may shift toward self-protection rather than contribution.

This shift in attention influences how teams communicate, solve problems, respond to challenges, and ultimately drive productivity.

For this reason, leadership mindset and communication style can meaningfully influence the psychological conditions in which teams operate, which in turn may be associated with different biological stress and bonding responses.

Leadership Courage and Accountability



Intentional optimism does not mean avoiding difficult leadership decisions. In fact, strong leadership often requires addressing challenging issues such as performance concerns, team conflict or behavioral standards.

When leaders address issues clearly and respectfully, they reinforce fairness and trust within the team. This clarity strengthens psychological safety and can contribute to stronger feelings of trust and connection across the group.

Clear expectations and consistent follow-through are essential components of leadership accountability. When expectations are unclear or inconsistently reinforced, employees are left to interpret what matters, which can create confusion and misalignment across the team.

Addressing performance or behavior concerns early helps prevent larger issues from developing over time. It also communicates to the team that standards are meaningful and applied fairly.

When leaders avoid difficult conversations or allow ongoing issues to remain unresolved, the opposite effect can occur. High-performing employees may begin to feel frustrated, uncertain, or unsupported. This ambiguity can contribute to increased stress responses across the team, which may create tension and erode trust.

Avoidance may feel easier in the moment, but over time it often increases complexity, tension and the need for more difficult conversations later.

Effective leaders recognize that accountability, when handled with respect and fairness, actually protects the health of the team culture.

Intentional Optimism

Intentional optimism is the disciplined leadership choice to acknowledge reality while guiding attention toward possibility, progress and learning. Leaders who practice intentional optimism do not ignore challenges. Instead, they frame challenges as opportunities to learn, improve and move forward.



Intentional optimism is not a personality trait. It is a leadership practice that requires awareness, discipline and consistency. Leaders must actively manage their own thinking patterns, especially during moments of pressure or uncertainty.

This includes recognizing when thinking becomes overly focused on problems, limitations or blame, and intentionally redirecting attention toward solutions, learning and forward movement.

This mindset helps teams remain resilient during setbacks and encourages employees to focus on what can be improved rather than becoming stuck in frustration.

Over time, this consistent redirection helps shape how teams respond to challenges and setbacks.



Solution-Focused Thinking

Solution-focused thinking is the practical leadership behavior that supports intentional optimism. Rather than allowing conversations to remain centered on problems or blame, solution-focused leaders guide discussions toward constructive next steps.

Leaders play a critical role in shaping how problems are approached within a team. When leaders consistently solve problems for employees or focus primarily on what is not working, teams may become dependent and hesitant to take initiative.

In contrast, when leaders guide employees to think through challenges and contribute ideas, they reinforce ownership, confidence, and problem-solving capability.

Over time, teams begin to shift:

- problem-reporting → solution-generating
- dependency → ownership
- frustration → forward movement

Common Solution-Focused Questions Include:

- ✓ What can we learn from this situation?
- ✓ What is one step we can take to move forward?
- ✓ What resources or strengths do we already have available?
- ✓ What outcome are we working toward?



Consistently using solution-focused questions helps establish new patterns of thinking within the team. While this shift may require reinforcement initially, it becomes more natural over time as employees build confidence in their ability to contribute to solutions.

Practical Leadership Application

Leaders can begin strengthening intentional optimism and solution-focused thinking by:

- Pausing before responding to challenges to assess tone and direction
- Shifting conversations from problem detail to next steps
- Encouraging employees to bring ideas alongside concerns
- Reinforcing effort, progress, and learning
- Addressing issues directly while maintaining respect and clarity

Small, consistent shifts in leadership behavior can significantly influence how teams think, communicate and perform over time.

Now that you know all of this, it is time to apply it. Over time, the patterns leaders reinforce become the culture employees experience. Intentional optimism and solution-focused thinking are not one-time actions, but ongoing leadership practices that shape both performance and the overall workplace experience. Developing leaders who consistently practice these behaviors often requires structured development experiences, coaching, and facilitated learning environments.



Facilitator Guide: Teaching Solution-Focused Thinking

Solution-Focused Thinking

- ✓ Turn complaints into improvements
- ✓ Take concerns to the appropriate person
- ✓ Bring two possible solutions
- ✓ Take ownership and act
- ✓ Follow through to completion

Session Objective

Help team members shift from discussing problems to identifying solutions, actions, and forward progress.

Time Required

10–15 minutes

Materials Needed

Put posters in appropriate areas of the department as friendly reminders.

Facilitator Preparation

- Review the five solution-focused practices
 - Prepare one brief, real example where shifting to solutions improved an outcome
 - Be ready to redirect conversation if it moves into complaints
-

Facilitator Opening (Say This)

Today we are focusing on solution-focused thinking. This does not mean we ignore problems. It means we acknowledge challenges and then direct our energy toward solutions, improvements, and next steps.

Why This Matters (Say This)

When teams stay focused on problems, energy often shifts toward frustration, blame, or inaction. When teams focus on solutions, they are more likely to take ownership, collaborate, and move forward.

Facilitator Instruction (Teach and Model This)

Here is what this looks like in practice:

- Bring concerns forward with possible solutions, not just the issue
- Take concerns to the person who can act on them
- Shift the conversation from what went wrong to what could improve
- Focus on what you can influence or contribute
- Stay engaged until a solution is carried through

Leader Note:

If your team is not used to this approach, expect initial hesitation. That is normal. Your role is to guide, not force, the shift.

Solution-Focused Practices (Reinforce Clearly)

1. Bring Two Possible Solutions
 2. Take Concerns to the Right Person
 3. Turn Complaints Into Improvements
 4. Take Ownership and Act
 5. Follow Through to Completion
-

Facilitated Discussion (Guide the Conversation)

Ask one question at a time and allow space for responses:

- What is one challenge we have recently experienced?
- What is one possible solution or improvement?
- What is one action we could take this week?

Leader Tip:

If the team goes back to describing the problem, redirect with:

“What would improvement look like?” or “What is one step forward?”

Key Takeaway (Emphasize This)

Strong teams acknowledge challenges, but they spend most of their time identifying solutions and taking action.

Science Connection (Keep Brief and Credible)

Repeated problem-focused conversations can increase stress responses and narrow thinking. Solution-focused conversations support clearer thinking, better problem solving, and stronger collaboration.

Over time, the patterns leaders reinforce shape how teams think, respond, and perform.

Facilitator Tips (Apply in Real Time)

- Ask for solutions before offering your own
- Redirect complaints into action-oriented thinking
- Recognize when team members contribute solutions
- Follow up on ideas to show that input leads to action

Consistency builds trust and reinforces this as a team norm.

Closing (Optional – If Time Allows)

Now that we have talked through this, I encourage you to start applying it immediately. The way we approach challenges will shape how we perform and support each other as a team.

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INTENTIONAL OPTIMISM™ FACILITATOR GUIDE

Session Objective

This session equips leaders to teach Intentional Optimism™ in a practical, approachable way. Leaders will guide their teams to recognize automatic reactions, pause, and intentionally shift toward solution-focused thinking that improves performance, communication, and accountability.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this conversation, team members will:

- Understand how mindset influences daily work experience
- Recognize common reactive thinking patterns
- Practice reframing challenges into constructive next steps
- Apply solution-focused thinking in real time

Why This Matters

Leadership behavior shapes how work is experienced. When conversations stay focused on problems, frustration increases and progress slows.

When leaders guide teams toward learning and next steps, it supports momentum, engagement, and accountability.

Intentional Optimism™ is not about ignoring problems. It is about directing attention in a way that supports effective thinking, problem solving, and collaboration.

Understanding the Science (Leader Talking Points)

- The brain naturally scans for problems and potential threats
- Under stress, thinking can become reactive and less flexible
- Pausing helps restore access to clearer thinking and better decisions
- Trust-based environments support stronger collaboration and communication

Facilitator Preparation

Before leading this session:

- Review the script and questions
- Prepare a simple example from your own team
- Set the tone for open, respectful discussion
- Be ready to guide, not lecture

Leader Script

Today we are going to talk about something called Intentional Optimism™.

This is not about ignoring problems or pretending challenges do not exist. It is about choosing where we place our attention so we can move forward productively.

Our brains are wired to notice problems first. That is normal. Where strong teams are different is they pause and ask better questions.

Instead of staying stuck in what is wrong, they ask:

- What can we learn from this?
- What can we improve?
- What is one next step we can take?

When we shift our thinking this way, we move from frustration to progress.

As a team, we are going to practice recognizing our reactions and intentionally choosing responses that support solutions, learning, and accountability.

How to Facilitate This Conversation

- Start by setting expectations for open discussion
- Ask one question at a time and allow space for responses
- Avoid correcting participants; guide them instead
- Reinforce solution-focused language
- Keep the conversation moving forward

If the Conversation Gets Stuck

Use these redirect questions:

- What is one step we can take from here?
- What is within our control?
- What would progress look like?

Team Reflection Exercise (Facilitated Activity)

Step 1: Ask the team to think of a recent challenge.

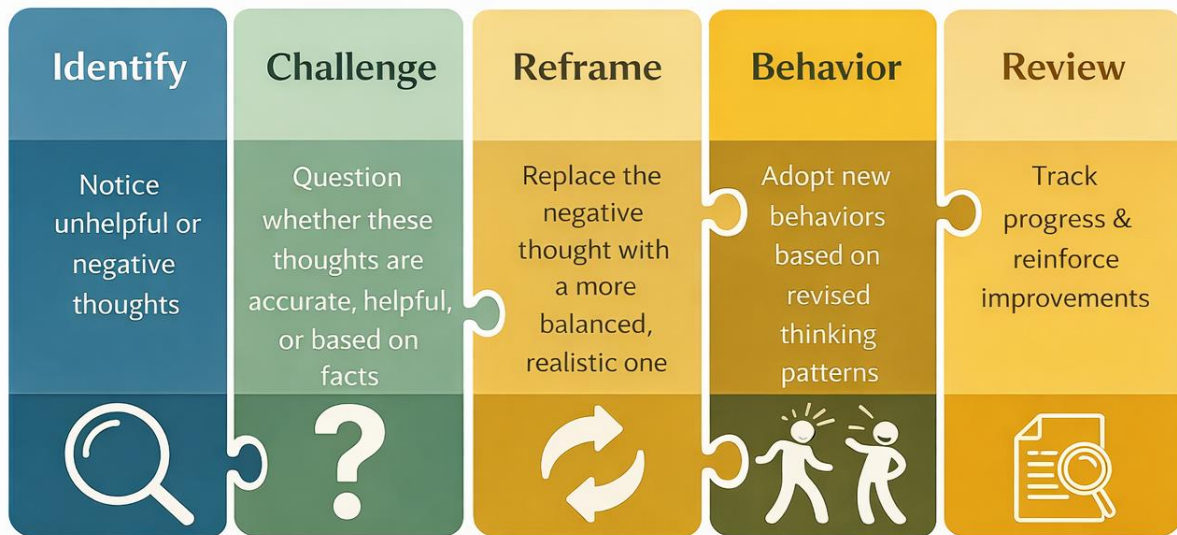
Step 2: Guide discussion using the following questions:

- What was the initial reaction?
- Where did the conversation focus?
- What impact did that focus have?
- How could we reframe this situation?
- What is one next step moving forward?

Step 3: Capture key takeaways and reinforce learning.



Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) - Basic Steps



Reinforcing Intentional Optimism™ Daily

Leaders can build this practice by:

- Asking solution-focused questions in meetings
- Redirecting problem-heavy conversations
- Recognizing effort and progress
- Encouraging employees to bring ideas, not just concerns
- Modeling calm, constructive responses

Team Commitment

Ask team members to commit to the following behaviors:

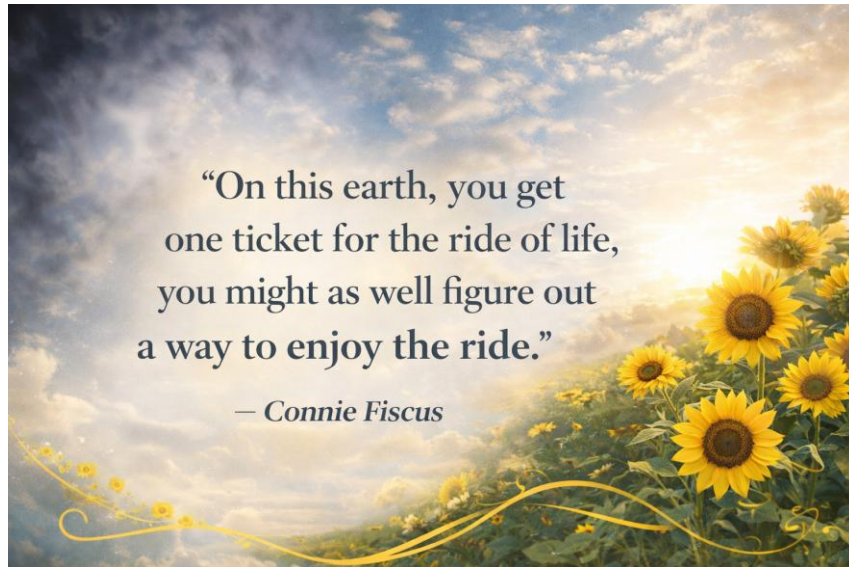
- Notice your reaction
- Pause before responding
- Seek understanding
- Reframe the perspective

- Focus on what is working
- Choose an intentional response

Closing Message for Leaders

Intentional Optimism™ is not a one-time discussion. It is a leadership practice.

What leaders consistently reinforce becomes how teams think, communicate, and perform.



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Let's Elevate Your Leadership Culture!

Reach out to learn how I can support your team and develop leaders who drive positive change.

 **CONNIE FISCUS**
SUNFLOWER PEOPLE & CULTURE SOLUTIONS, LLC

 coach@conniefiscus.com

 coachconniefiscus.com



Dear Intentional Leader,

I am so glad you are here and doing this work.

Leadership is not easy, and the fact that you are investing in yourself and your team matters more than you may realize.

This playbook was designed to be practical, real, and immediately usable. Start where you are. Keep it simple. Stay consistent.

You do not have to be perfect. You do have to be intentional.

Be patient with yourself and with your team. Change does not happen overnight. It takes consistency, repetition, and a willingness to give both yourself and others the grace to learn, adjust, and grow along the way.

There will be moments where it feels easier to fall back into old habits. Stay the course. The small, intentional shifts you make every day are what create meaningful, lasting change.

What you model and what you reinforce will shape how your team thinks, communicates, and performs. That is where real culture change begins.

Gratefully,

Connie



GET IN THE HABIT OF

SOLUTION-FOCUSED THINKING

FIVE STEPS FOR PRACTICING:

1

BRING TWO SOLUTIONS

Before raising a concern, think of at least two possible solutions.



2

TAKE CONCERNS TO THE APPROPRIATE PERSON

Address issues directly with the person who can help solve the problem.



3

TURN COMPLAINTS INTO IMPROVEMENTS

Ask what change could make the situation better.



4

TAKE OWNERSHIP & ACT PROACTIVELY

Look for ways you can personally influence progress.



5

FOLLOW THROUGH UNTIL IMPLEMENTED

Stay engaged until improvements are completed.



**BRING PROBLEMS AND
YOUR OWN SOLUTIONS.**





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Intentional Optimism™

Team Behaviors that
Support Learning, Focus,
and Forward Movement

Team Best Practices



Notice Your Reaction

Pay attention to your initial emotional response before acting.



Pause and Think

Create space between your reaction and response.



Stay Curious

Ask questions and seek to understand different viewpoints.



Find the Bright Spots

Focus on what is working and recognize the small wins.



Look for Solutions

Think forward and focus on solving the problem.



Take Positive Action

Be proactive and engage in steps that help move things forward.



Encourage Each Other

Support your coworkers and celebrate progress as a team.

**THINK AND ACT POSITIVELY
TO GROW AND SUCCEED TOGETHER.**

Intentional Optimism™

Team Best Practices

- 1 Notice your reaction
- 2 Pause and think
- 3 Stay curious
- 4 Practice gratitude
- 5 Reframe to something more helpful and true
- 6 Take positive action
- 7 Encourage and support each other



Hi, I'm Coach Connie!

I help leaders strengthen leadership, develop teams, and transform workplace cultures for lasting success.

- 20+ Years Leadership Experience
- MHA - Master of Health Administration
- Certified Master Coach
- Harvard Executive Coaching Program



TRANSFORM YOUR LEADERSHIP & COMPANY CULTURE.

My Distinctive Training / Coaching Programs Empower Professionals to Reach Their Maximum Potential.



Our Step-by-Step Process for Positive Change

1

Plan & Develop

We tailor a strategy for your unique needs.

2

Train & Coach

We create impactful learning experiences.

3

Assess & Align

We evaluate and realign for success.

“Connie has an exceptional ability to drive positive change and foster a culture of collaboration and success.”

– Jody Jenner

Former President & CEO, **Broadlawns**

Services Offered:

- Leadership Development
- Team Development
- Culture Transformation
- Executive Coaching
- Service Excellence Programs



coach@conniefiscus.com | coachconniefiscus.com