



# **LEADING IN THE GRAY:**

**The Executive Art of Collaborative Adaptability**



**SIERRA**  
COLLEGE

**Willy Duncan, Superintendent / President**

**Rebecca Bocchicchio, Vice President Instruction**

**Lucas Moosman, Vice President Student Services**

**IN LEADERSHIP, THERE IS NO BLACK  
OR WHITE – ONLY SHADES OF GRAY.**

**- Dr. George Hibbard**

# WHAT IS THE “GRAY SPACE”?



- Individuals usually prefer to operate in black and white
- Institutional “black and white” structure comes from law, regulations and policy
- The “gray space” lives around the structure – and is where work, teaching and learning happens
- Gray space is influenced by many factors including internal, external and personal

# COMPLEXITY IN THE CCC SYSTEM

Funding Formula Changes	Labor Negotiations	Title IX Changes
Enrollment Fluctuations	Credit for Prior Learning	Shifting Student Needs
Common Course Numbering (CCN)	Part-Time Faculty Lawsuit	State Budget Volatility
Changes to State Mandates	Enrollment Cliff	AB 1705
TOP to CIP Code Transition	Accessibility	Federal DEI and Other Policy Shifts

**DECISIONS ARE REQUIRED DESPITE:**



**Incomplete  
Data**



**Stakeholder  
Disagreement**



**Ambiguous  
Policy**



**Time  
Constraints**

**LEADERS CAN'T LET UNCERTAINTY OVERWHELM THEM.**

## EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP



**Exec Team: Action-oriented group working towards a shared goal (student success).**

- Superintendent / President
- VP Admin Services
- VP Human Resources
- VP Instruction
- VP Student Services

## KEY QUESTIONS FOR DECISION MAKING

What is legally required?

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What aligns with our institutional values?

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What relationships need to be preserved?

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What decision will keep the institution moving forward?

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### **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATION:**

In what order do actions need to happen?

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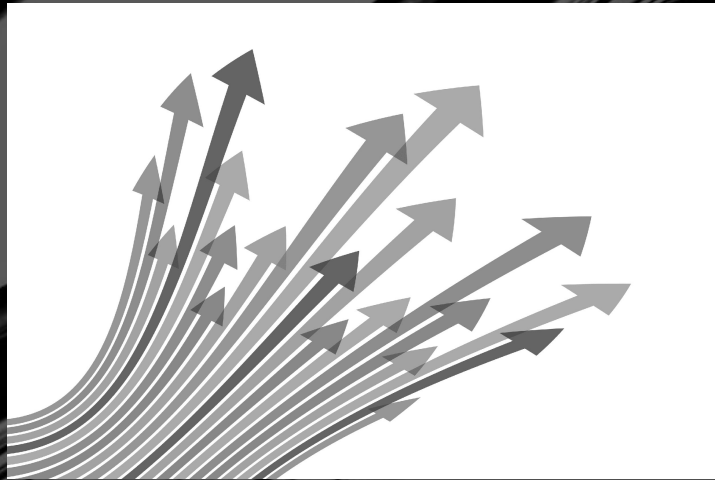




# DECISION-MAKING

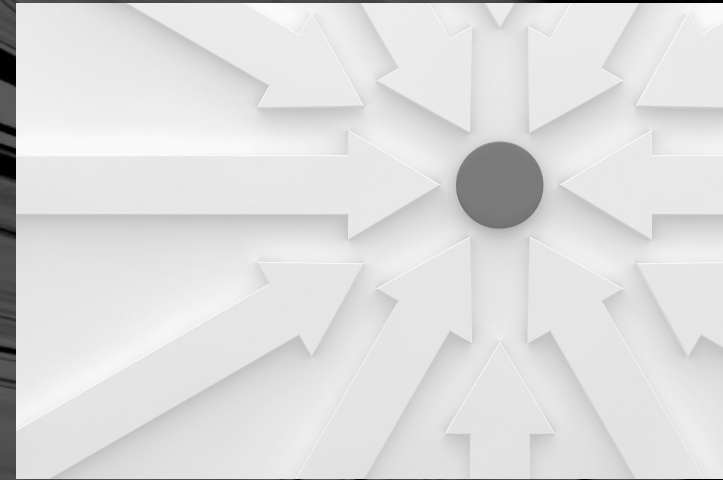
# ALIGNMENT VS. AGREEMENT

## ALIGNMENT



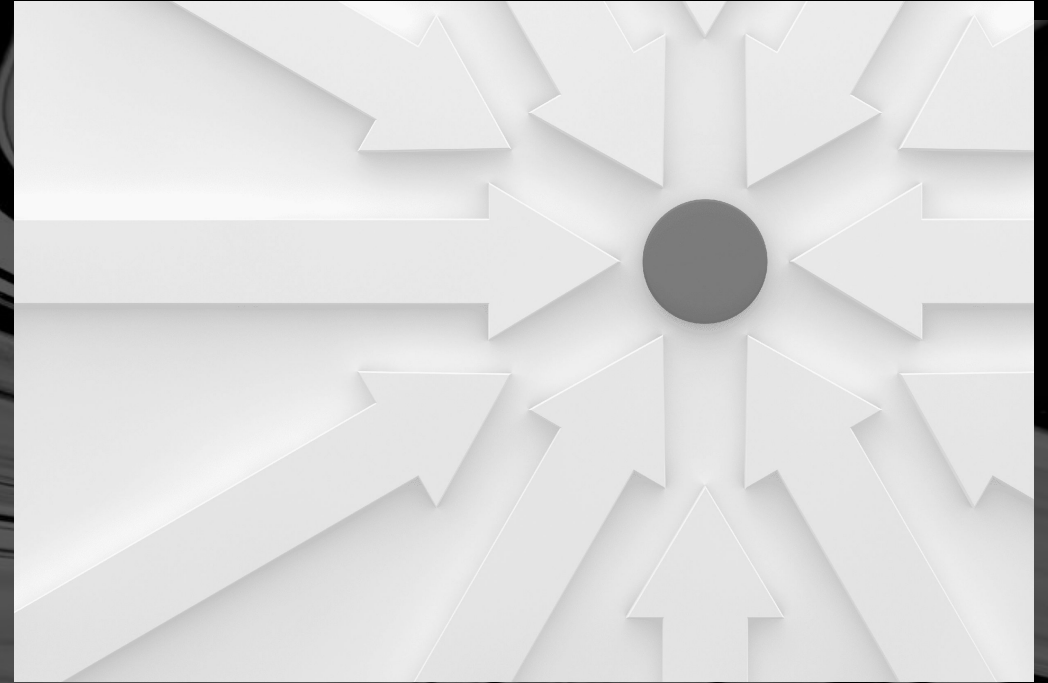
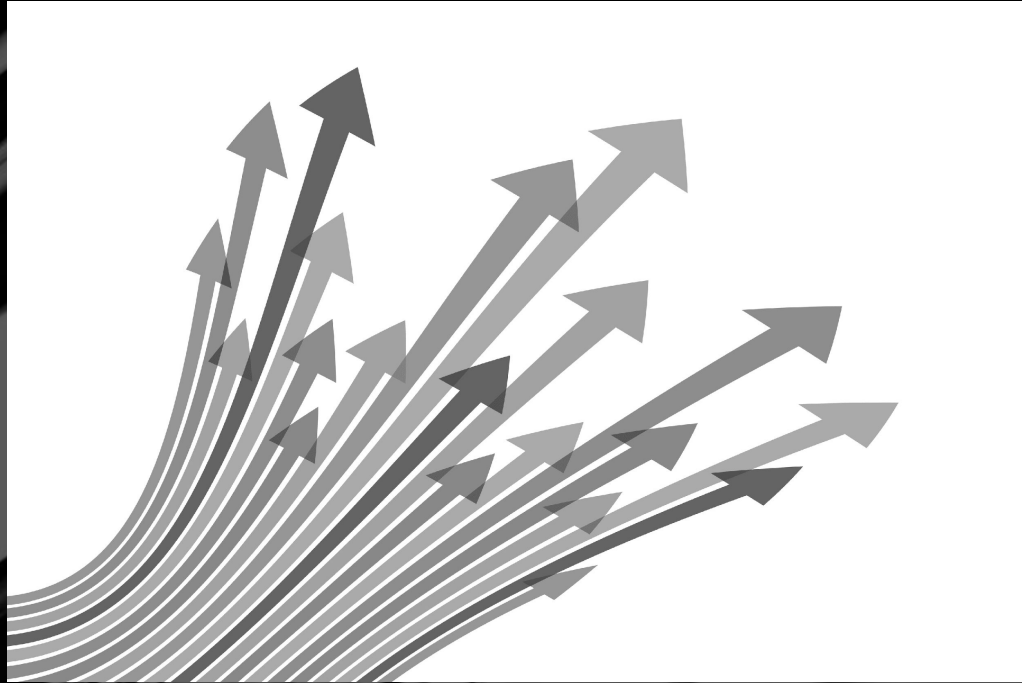
Requires unity in purpose and action

## AGREEMENT



Consensus of opinion which may not lead to forward momentum

**DEBATE PRIVATELY; ALIGN PUBLICLY.**



# ALIGNMENT VS. AGREEMENT

## LEADERSHIP PITFALLS

## BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

- Searching for perfect clarity
- Escalating issues too quickly
- Protecting your silo
- Breaching trust
- Trying to “fix” everything

- Slow down!
- Bring the right people into the room
- Separate positions from interests
- Manage up
- Rely on your team

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# DO'S & DON'TS



**GRAY IS NOT CONFUSION –  
IT IS WHERE LEADERSHIP HAPPENS.**



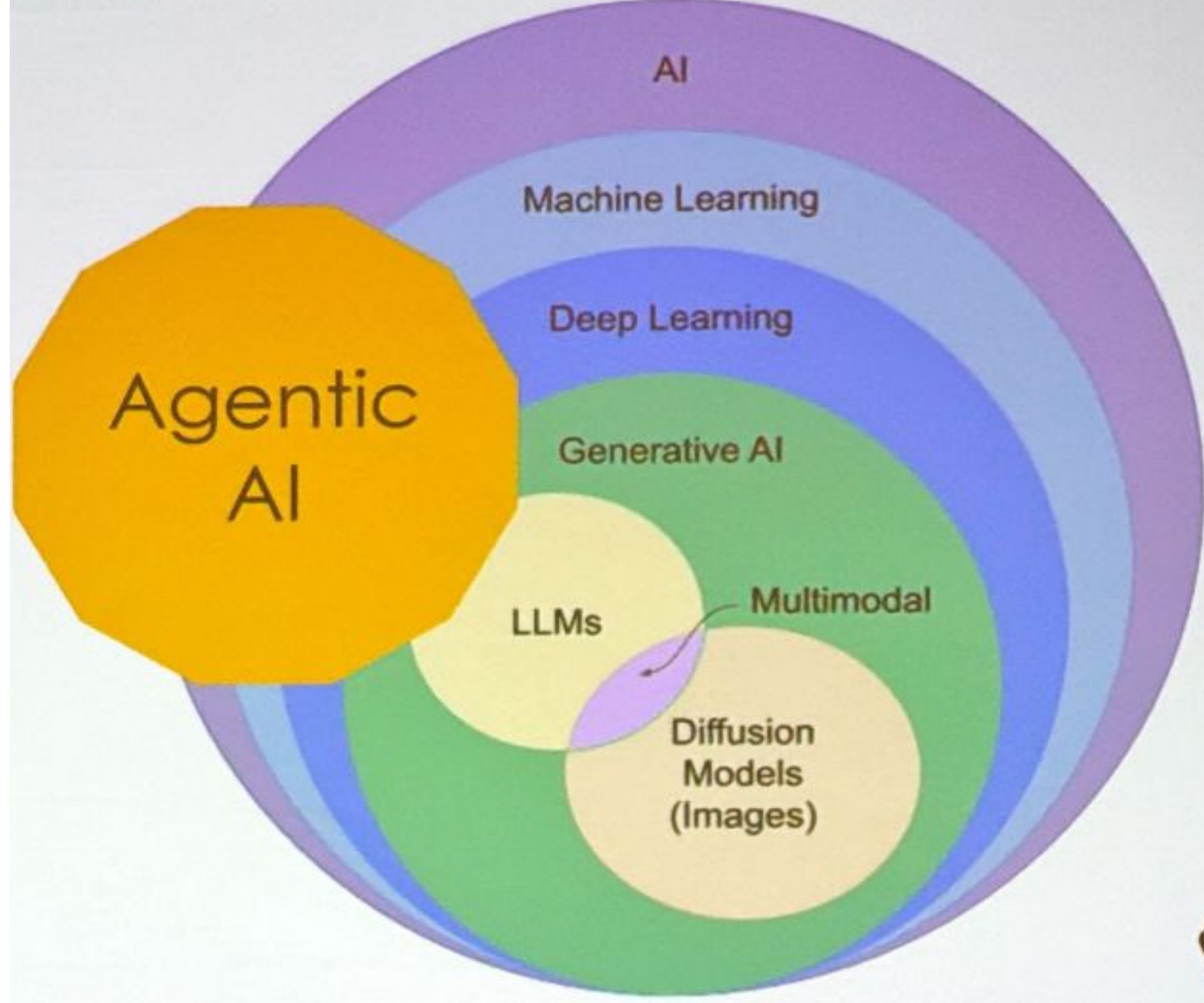
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# Ethics, Judgement and Responsible use of AI for Leaders

## Presented by:

- Amy Schulz, Executive Dean Workforce and Strategic Initiatives, Sierra College
- Fabio Zampieri, Chief Technology Officer, Sierra College

# AI: Up-Close and Personal



# AI Is a Management Issue, Not an IT One

- AI influences:
  - How decisions are informed
  - How work is prioritized
  - How staff interact with students
- Technology teams manage systems, security
- Managers manage:
  - Appropriate use
  - Behavior and workflows
  - Outcomes
- When expectations are unclear, staff fill in the gaps on their own

AI changes *how* work gets done—but leaders decide *why* and *under what conditions*

# Appropriate Use: What Managers Need to Set Clearly

- **What is AI allowed to support?**
  - Drafting
  - Summarizing
  - Idea generation
- **What must remain human-driven?**
  - Final decisions
  - Sensitive communications
  - Evaluations affecting students or employees
- **What requires review or approval?**
  - Decisions with legal, equity, or safety implications

AI may assist the work—but it does not replace judgment, authority, or responsibility.

# Guardrails Create Clarity, Not Bureaucracy

- Guardrails are not about stifling innovation
  - Protect staff from unintentional misuse
  - Protect managers from unclear accountability
  - Protect the institution from reputational and legal risk
- Examples
  - No confidential or student-identifiable data
  - No fully automated decisions affecting people
  - No “black box” outcomes without explanation

Guardrails = clarity about **where** the line is

# Potential Misuse: Where Risk Typically Shows Up

- Most misuse is **unintentional**, not malicious. Common risk areas include:
  - Using AI outputs without verification
  - Sharing sensitive information unknowingly
  - Letting AI influence decisions it shouldn't
  - Assuming AI recommendations are “objective”

Convenience should never outrun responsibility.

# Institutional Integrity and Public Trust

- Community colleges operate in a **high-visibility, public trust environment**.  
Decisions must withstand:
  - Questions from students and families
  - Board scrutiny
  - Public records requests
- AI-assisted decisions must still be:
  - Explainable
  - Defensible
  - Aligned with institutional values

# Governance: Protection Through Consistency

- Governance exists to prevent:
  - Inconsistent practices across departments
  - Managers being left to make risk decisions alone
- Governance answers:
  - Who sets expectations
  - Who approves exceptions
  - Who supports managers when issues arise

Governance is not about control—it's about **clarity**

# Managerial Judgment Is the Guardrail

- AI can flag patterns or suggest actions.
- Managers must decide:
  - Whether the output applies to the situation
  - Whether it aligns with policy and values
  - Whether the outcome is fair and reasonable

# People, Culture, and Anxiety

- Staff concerns often come from:
  - Uncertainty
  - Fear of evaluation or replacement
- Managers set the tone through:
  - Transparency
  - Clarity of expectations
  - Emphasizing augmentation, not replacement

**support and clarity**, not surveillance or punishment

# What Good Leadership Looks Like in an AI-Influenced Workplace

- Effective managers:
  - Ask better questions, not just faster answers
  - Understand where AI is being used in their area
  - Insist on explainability
  - Intervene when outcomes don't align with values
- The goal is not perfection—it's **responsible stewardship**



# AI as a Leadership Amplifier: Expanding leadership capacity in complex work

**ACCCA Think Tank**

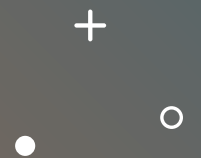
# What if we do nothing?

AI is already shaping students,  
workforce, and competitors



# Table talk

What concerns you most if we do nothing about AI for the next two years?



# Equity and Capacity

Who  
benefits?

Who is left  
out?

Leadership  
responsibility

# Guiding Questions

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WHO IS MOST READY TO  
LEVERAGE AI ON YOUR  
CAMPUS?

WHO MIGHT BE LEFT OUT?



# AI as a Leadership Tool

EXPANDS  
CAPACITY

SUPPORTS  
BETTER  
THINKING

ENHANCES  
IMPACT

# Effective AI for leaders Requires:



KNOWLEDGE



EXPERIENCE



ASKING RELEVANT  
QUESTIONS

# Table Talk

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How are you currently using AI in your work to expand your capacity?

How would you like to use AI to be more efficient?



# The Nature of Our Work as Leaders

Strategic

Relational

Complex

Not  
repetitive

# AI as a Thought Partner

Prepar  
e

Prepare for  
difficult  
conversations

Explor  
e

Explore  
options

Clarify

Clarify  
thinking

# Guiding Questions

Where could AI help you prepare for complex situations?

How might it strengthen your leadership?



# From tasks to AI-Enhanced Leadership

Reflection  
Tool

Scenario &  
Simulation

Decision  
Framer

# Guiding Questions

Think about a current challenge you're facing (personnel, funding, enrollment management).

- How could you use AI to explore this challenge ?
- What kinds of questions would you ask AI to surface possibilities instead of just problems?



# Leading through Ambiguity

START  
WITH  
PILOTS

CREATE  
SAFE  
SPACES

LEARN AND  
ADAPT

# Table Talk

How can AI help you identify assumptions you may not even realize you're making?

How might AI help you surface unintended consequences before acting?





# Thank you!

*The future belongs to leaders who don't just use AI...  
but think differently because of it.*



# Psychological Safety by Design

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How clarity, consistency, and accountability form the backbone of trust. Psychological safety is the result of disciplined, intentional leadership practice.

March 2026





## Dr. Emilie Mitchell (she/her)

PhD in Social Psychology; UC Davis

Dean of Social and Behavioral Sciences; Cosumnes River College

Chair of the Social Justice and Equity Committee(ACCCA)

Co-Author of "Queer & Trans Advocacy in the Community College"

Chair of the CCC LGBTQIA2S+ Advisory Committee and Summit

# Agenda



01

## Psychology Safety

What is this and why does it matter?

02

## Selective Vulnerability

What it is, what it is not, and how to use it

03

## Competence and Warmth

Social Cognition and Person Perception

04

## Gottman

Using Gottman's principles to increase psychological safety



# Agenda

05

## Reciprocity Norm

What is this and how to leverage this on our teams.

06

## Conclusions

What does this all mean?

## Questions

What do you still need to know?

01

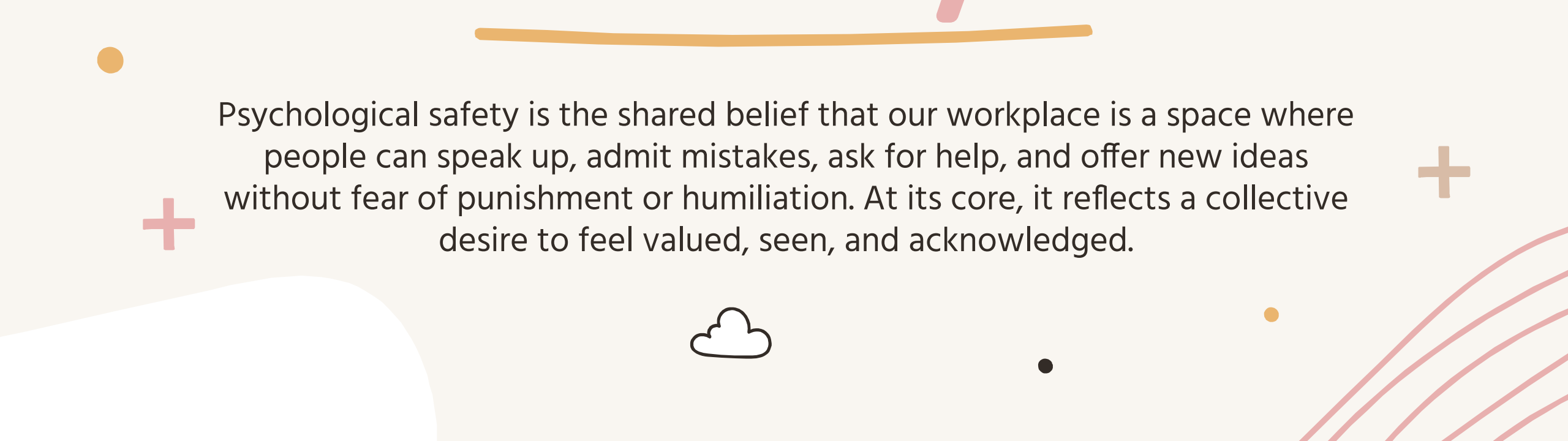
# Psychology Safety



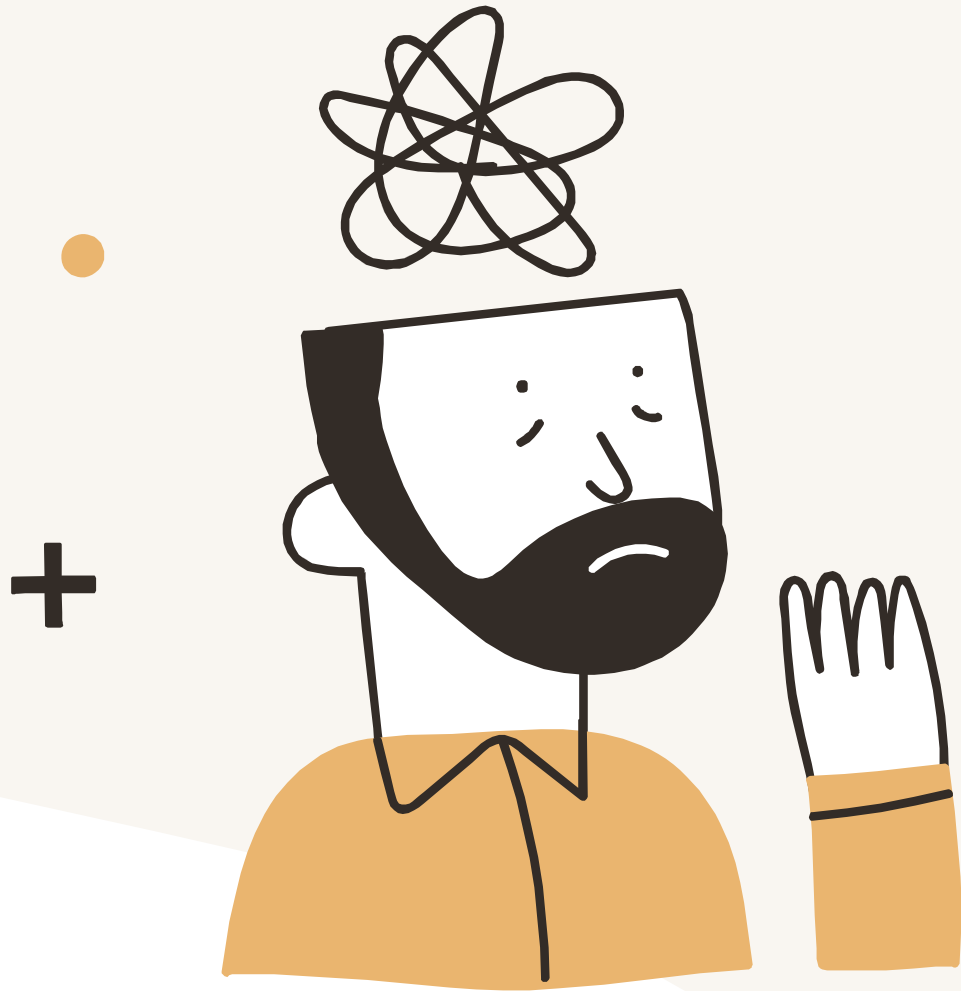


# Psychological Safety

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Psychological safety is the shared belief that our workplace is a space where people can speak up, admit mistakes, ask for help, and offer new ideas without fear of punishment or humiliation. At its core, it reflects a collective desire to feel valued, seen, and acknowledged.



# Why it Matters

Our jobs are complex and demanding — and they become significantly harder when people do not feel psychologically safe. Small issues grow into larger problems

**The Schedule**

02

# Selective Vulnerability





# Selective Vulnerability

A deliberate relationship-building practice in which leaders share brief, authentic, and appropriately vulnerable stories that move beyond transactional communication. This is a “trust generator”

(Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*)



# Why it Matters

Trust calms the brain's threat response. In organizational settings, this translates into increased openness, clearer communication, and more productive collaboration.

**Monday Meditation**

# Educating minds. Managing chaos

SPRING

2026

January 26, 2026

Good morning and welcome to the **late edition** of the Monday Meditation 😊

I am not a winter person, but this season keeps reminding me that part of my practice is learning to find joy in things I don't particularly love—like gray skies and gloomy days. So, in the spirit of making peace with winter, I tried cross-country skiing for the first time this weekend with our friend Jim (easily the most fit 65-year-old I know).

I was not good. At all. But I'm reminding myself that beginners are allowed to be bad—and that patience is a practice too. My glutes are on FIRE, but I'll keep trying. Maybe one day I'll even be decent.

Here's to another week of doing the best we can with what we've got. 💛



# The Key Here is “Selective”



03

# Competence and Warmth





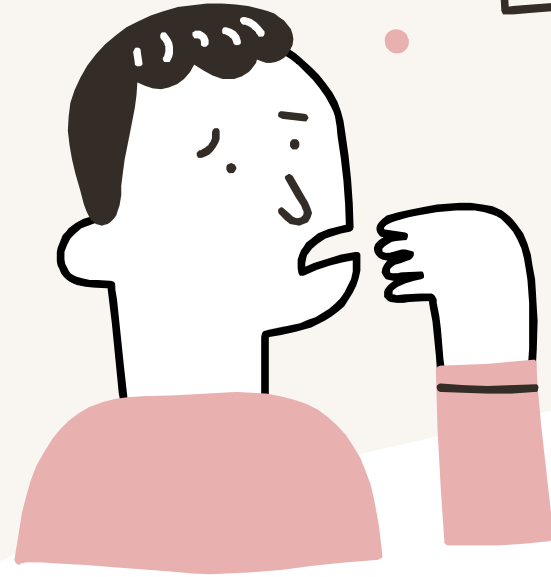
# Competence and Warmth

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People tend to judge others on two core dimensions: warmth and competence. We instinctively ask two questions: Are you for me? (warmth) and Can you do the job? (competence).

04

Gottman





# Gottman

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John Gottman and Julie Schwartz Gottman are world-renowned relationship psychologists. While their research primarily examines romantic partnerships, the insights they have developed about trust, communication, and conflict translate remarkably well to all kinds of human relationships—including those in our workplaces.

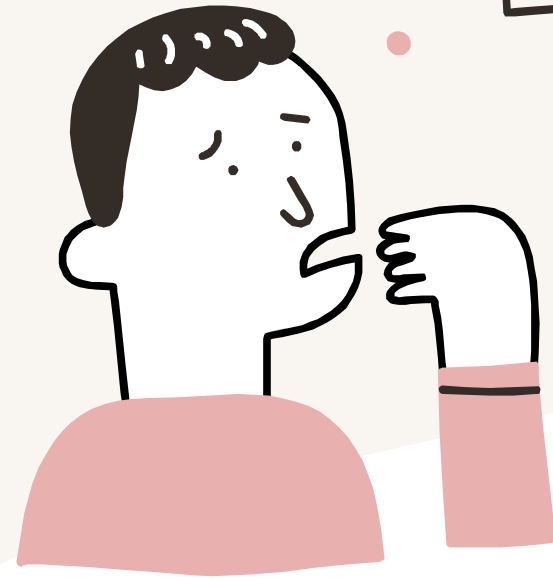


# Basic Principles

- **Person maps**
  - Understanding the inner world of another person—what matters to them, what pressures they face, and what motivates them.
- **Fondness and admiration**
  - Healthy relationships intentionally maintain respect and appreciation for one another.
- **Toward not away**
  - People constantly make small “bids” for attention, validation, or support. Strong relationships are built when others turn toward those bids.
- **Accepting Influence**
  - Healthy relationships allow both people to influence decisions and outcomes.
- **Solving Solvable Conflicts** - not all conflicts are solvable
  - Many conflicts stem from practical issues that can be addressed through collaborative problem-solving.
- **Overcoming gridlock**
  - Some conflicts persist because they reflect deeper values, priorities, or identities rather than simple logistical issues.
- **Shared meaning**
  - Strong relationships develop when people feel connected to a shared purpose and set of values.

05

# Reciprocity Norm





# Reciprocity Norm

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A fundamental, nearly universal social rule requiring individuals to repay, in kind, what others have provided for them.



Life is like a garden, you  
reap what you sow.

Paulo Coelho

“ quote fancy

06

# Conclusion





# Psychological safety is the predictable outcome of how leaders show up every day .

- Psychological safety combines high expectations with high support
- Psychological safety is not accidental — it is built through consistent leadership behavior.
- Leaders build trust through both competence and warmth.
- Relationships are built in small moments.
- Culture follows leadership.

“

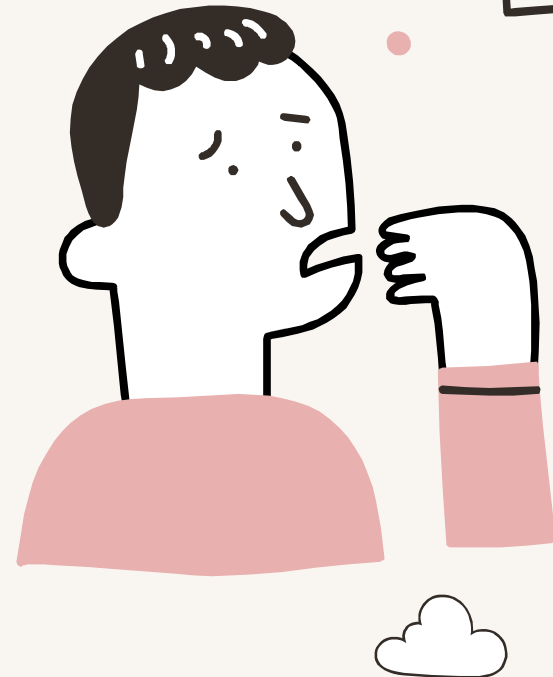


# Questions.

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# Resilience, Grit and Leadership Sustainability

Geisce Ly, PhD

Region 2 Training @ Sierra College

March 27, 2026



# Overview

To equip you with essential knowledge, skills and insights to maximize your leadership potential so that you can inspire your team, expand your influence, mediate conflicts, and manage change while navigating uncertainty and ambiguity.

# Hard Realities Leaders Face



- Wear too many hats
- Manage up, down and across
- “Grind” culture - constant pressure to deliver
- Revolving door and turnover
- Feel lonely and isolated
- Imposter syndrome
- Deal with burnout
- “Other duties as assigned”

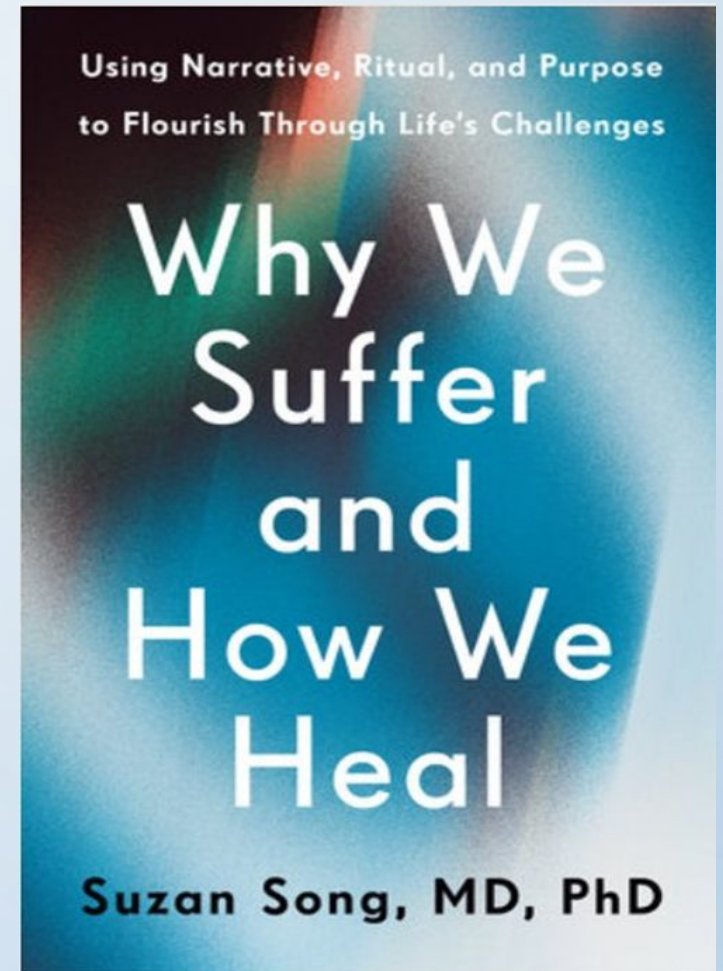
# What is Resilience?



- The capacity to withstand, cope or to recover quickly from difficulties.
- The ability to manage life's unexpected changes and inevitable challenges more easily.
- The ability to be happy, successful, etc. again after something difficult or bad has happened.

# A Different Perspective

- Stress, pressure, discomfort, and suffering are not something we eliminate—it's something we transform through how we relate to instability.
- Three keys that we can use to weather stress, loss, and trauma:
  - Narrative
  - Ritual
  - Purpose





# Key #2: Ritual (Your Practice)



- Rituals act as the bridge between knowing and becoming
- Can be personal (journaling, running, prayer) or communal (family traditions, ceremonies)
- Healing requires action, not just awareness

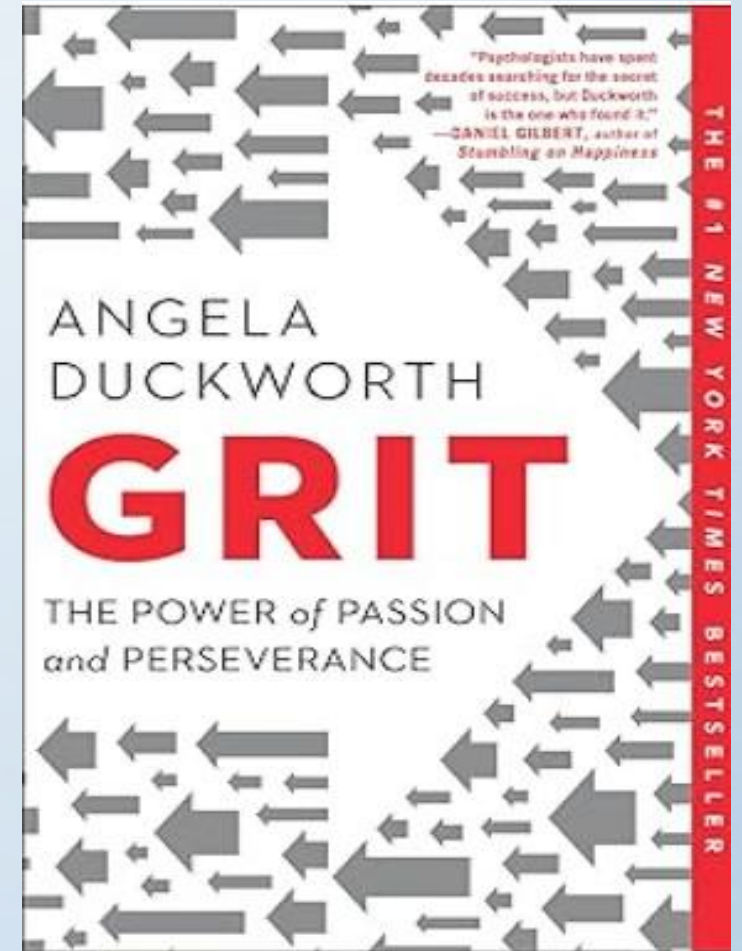
# Key #3: Purpose (Your Direction)



- A sense of purpose helps you move forward despite pain
- Transforms suffering into contribution, service, or growth
- Anchors resilience over time
- Purpose gives suffering a place to go

# Grit is a Personality Trait

- Defined by perseverance and passion for long-term goals, enabling sustained effort despite challenges and setbacks
- The secret to living your best life and doing your best work is not talent, but grit
- True success is about focus, commitment, endurance, and resilience
- “Grit is living life like it’s a marathon, not a sprint.”



# Grit = Passion + Perseverance



- Not intensity, but consistency over years
- Passion = staying committed to the same long-term goal
- Perseverance = pushing through setbacks
- Most people have bursts of motivation—few sustain it

# Passion Is Developed, Not Discovered

- Passion is cultivated over time, not found instantly
- It grows through:
  - Exploration
  - Commitment
  - Mastery
- Don't wait to “feel passionate”—build it



# Long-Term Focus Beats Short-Term Intensity



- Gritty people don't chase new goals constantly
- They organize their life around one overarching goal ("North Star")
- Depth > distraction

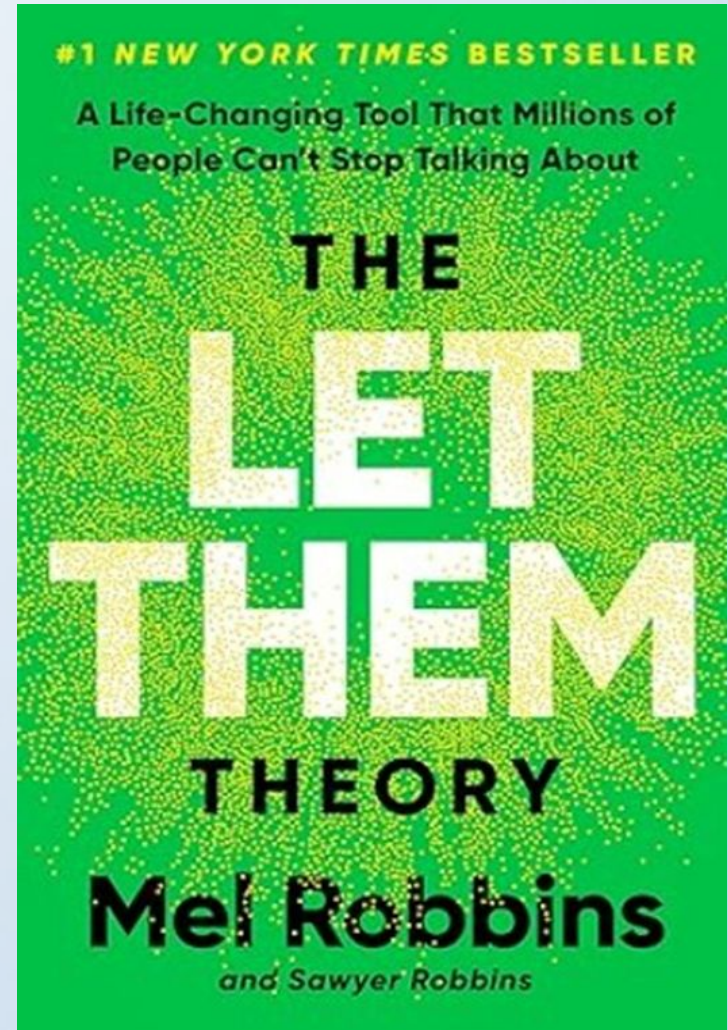
# Purpose Sustains Effort



- Gritty people connect their work to something larger than themselves
- Purpose fuels endurance when motivation fades
- Not just working hard—working intentionally
- Optimism drives persistence

# Why is Leadership Sustainability Important?

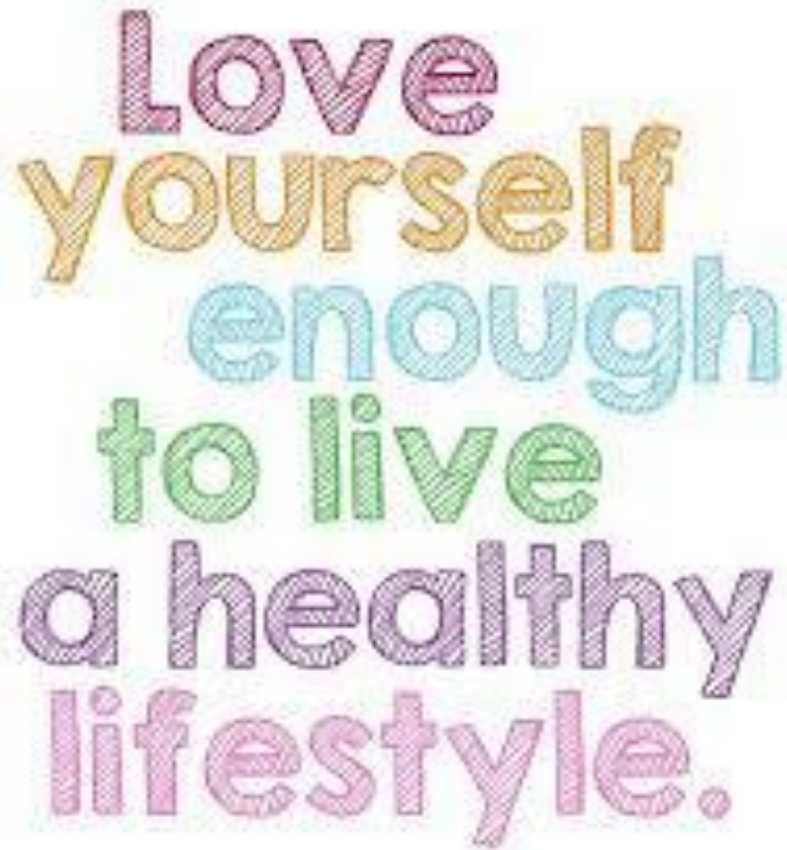
- If you've ever felt stuck, overwhelmed, or frustrated with where you are, the problem isn't you. The problem is the power you give to other people.
- Stop wasting energy on what you can't control and start focusing on what truly matters: Your happiness. Your goals. Your life.
- “Let Them” Be and “Let You” Thrive



# 10 Tips to Build Your Resilience



# Tip #1: Take Care of Your Body



Love  
yourself  
enough  
to live  
a healthy  
lifestyle.

- The better you feel in your 'body' the better equipped you'll be in your 'mind' to face everyday challenges
- Prioritize sleep, rest and breaks
- Resilience is built during recovery, not nonstop output
- Regulate your breathing can help you think more clearly

# Tip #2: Focus on What You Can Control

- You have control of your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and actions.
- Feeling out of control feeds anxiety. Re-gaining it brings clarity and strength.
- Put your energy into what you can influence. Let go of the rest.



# Tip #3: Make “Me-Time” a Priority



- Change the way you think about relationships, control, and personal power
- Create the love you deserve
- Build the best friendships of your life

# Tip #4: Keep One Routine in Place



- Stressors make it easy to abandon healthy habits. But routines keep your foundation strong.
- Stick to one non-negotiable habit each day.
- **Progress fuels momentum.** Even tiny wins help you bounce back from setback.
- End each day by writing down one thing that went well.

# Tip #5: Accept Discomfort



- Resilient people learn to face discomfort and keep going
- Instead of chasing a false sense of stability, **healing begins when we accept that life is inherently uncertain**—and use that as a pathway to growth
- Say “This is hard, and I can get handle it.”

# Tip #6: Reframe Stress as Readiness

- Your body can't tell the difference between anxiety and excitement.
- Reinterpret pressure as fuel, not fear
- Simply saying "I'm excited" or "I'm ready" or "I got this" can improve performance

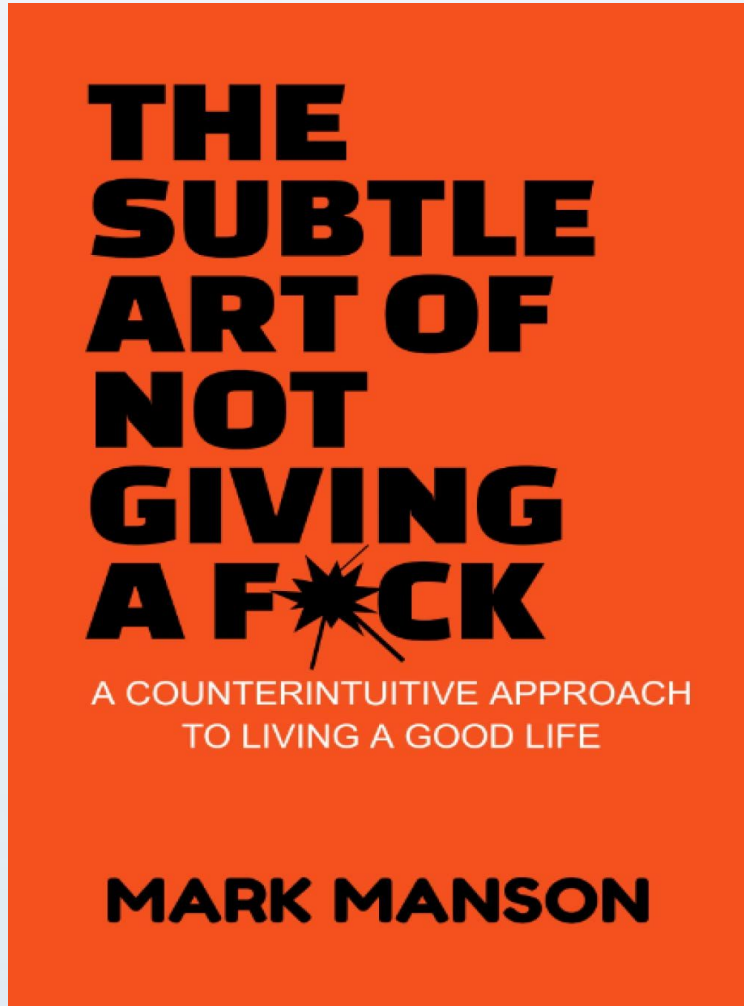


# Tip #7: Stop Comparing Yourself

- Comparison is the thief of joy
- Define your own path to success, joy, and fulfillment
- Pursue what truly matters to you with confidence



# Tip #8: Release the Grip of People's Expectations



Resilience, happiness and freedom come from knowing what to care about—and most importantly, what not to care about.

# Tip #9: Zoom Out to Regain Perspective

- When pressure hits, everything feels urgent and personal. It rarely is.
- Ask yourself, “Will this matter in 10 days, 10 weeks or 10 months?”
- What will your kids and loved ones remember about you in 10 years?



# Tip #10: Build Psychological Flexibility



- Rigid thinking cracks under pressure
- Mental flexibility helps you adapt and recover faster
- Ask “What else could be true?” or “What’s another way to see this?”

# Treat Your Career Like a Marathon

What is Your Long Game?



Questions?

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