



Choose Your Impact, Change the World

Mindy Hall, PhD

# In the late '80s, I walked into an auditorium filled with bright-eyed young professionals looking to make their mark on the world.

We had been called together for what we thought was going to be a slide presentation by one of our most senior vice presidents. We settled in and assumed “reception mode” (we all know what that looks like—passive listening and sometimes not even listening), and prepared to hear an hour’s worth of content. What happened next has never left me. The vice president leading the meeting walked to the front of the room, flipped the front page of a flip-chart pad over, and there, written on the paper were two words: “Be Here!” He didn’t go into any depth about what was on the page but left it there the entire meeting as he talked through the latest developments of an acquisition the company was making.

It got me thinking: how many people were “there”? Who was “present”? Who was not? What choices were people making and what was the impact of those choices?

In the years since, I have come to believe that every moment we have is a moment of choice: an opportunity to consciously decide how we will show up. In my work with leaders across continents and organizations, I see a common thread. No matter what level of leader I am working with or what part of the world I am working in, once leaders begin to intentionally choose who they want to be and the impact they want to have, their effectiveness exponentially rises, both in their leadership and their lives. The most wonderful part of this fundamental truth is that this choice rests entirely with the individual; the power to show up any way you would like rests in your hands. Every interaction provides that opportunity; every moment is a choice.

Who do you want to be as a leader? What impact do you want to have? How do you want people to experience you? No matter where you fall in the organizational structure, your ability to shape both the organizational culture and how others perceive you is a direct result of the level of intention with which you operate. What does it mean to operate with intention? It is consciously deciding to lead by design rather than by default; being mindful of who it is you want to be and then living into that picture twenty-four hours a day. It is about seeing opportunities every day, in every interaction, to shape the tone, the experience, and the outcome of those interactions. It is being aware that everything you do sends a message: what you say and how you say it, what you do and how you do it, even what you choose not to say or do. It is realizing that the system you work in does not tell you who you get to be; you decide who you get to be.

Seeing your “self” as the primary tool for achieving high-level results is a concept that may seem like common sense, but it is far less commonly practiced and even less often developed in professionals as they grow in their careers. Over the course of my twenty-five-plus years coaching leaders and shaping organizations, I would say nearly 80 percent of those I have worked with did not lead intentionally. They were bright, capable leaders that operated out of intuition, pattern, and reaction. Mind you, some did so with very strong results, but those who made the decision to be more self-aware and intentional achieved higher-level results in terms of both the positions they’ve held and the impact they’ve had than those who continued to operate primarily from intuition.

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Here's an example: a young professional, about three years out of a very prestigious MBA program, asked my opinion about a leadership topic while we were on a break at a meeting. As I began to answer her question, she pulled out her phone and started texting. When I paused, she stopped texting and looked up with a quizzical expression on her face as if to say, "Well, go on, I'm listening." After spending the next ten minutes talking to her about the unintentional impact of her behavior, namely that my response to her question had been seemingly ignored, it was as if a light bulb had gone on. She began to see, in a whole new way, that what she was choosing to do out of habit was not positioning her in the way she wanted to be perceived. When she decided to share her learning with others in the meeting, they all commented on how useful they thought it would be to develop this way of thinking more explicitly in leaders: to teach them the concept of how to lead with intention, how to make conscious choices about their impact on others, how to use themselves more profoundly, and how to integrate this mind-set into their way of viewing themselves and the world. Imagine the impact if this sort of learning was not the exception but the rule.

Developing this aptitude is possible, and begins the moment you look in the mirror and reflect on the process of understanding how you show up, how you affect a room, and what environment you create.

But how do you get started?

- Identify the words you want to live by. How do you want to be known? Try to use as few words as possible (certainly no more than ten). Ask yourself, “How does this philosophy show up in my actions? Is there more I can do to bring these words to life?”
- During key interactions, ask yourself:
  1. What is happening now?
  2. What am I doing, feeling and thinking about what is happening?
  3. What am I trying to achieve?
  4. What am I doing that might prevent me from achieving it?
  5. What am I choosing now?
  6. Then, make a deliberate choice about your next action. “I choose to...”
- Think of the last three meetings you attended. How did you show up? What did you signal with your behavior? What did you contribute? What did you diminish? How could you have operated more intentionally?
- Think of someone in your career who made you better at what you do. Have you let them know? How could you have a similar impact on someone else?



Operating with this level of awareness is counterintuitive to how we live our lives, which is why it is so easy to lose sight of its importance. However, with this awareness in place, success becomes a matter of intention: recognizing who you are being and choosing consciously and deliberately who you want to be. Put more plainly: notice yourself. Be in the moment and watch yourself in the moment. How would you experience your actions if you were on the receiving end? Create a moment-to-moment awareness that allows you to pivot, shift, and adjust. While simple in theory, it requires tremendous self-discipline.

Most people lead through intuition, using patterns that have worked in the past, versus great intention. Think about the controversy Mark Zuckerberg sparked when he wore a hoodie on the stock exchange floor when Facebook was taken public. It started with a comment by Michael Pachter on Bloomberg where he stated, “Mark and his signature hoodie: He’s actually showing investors he doesn’t care that much; he’s going to be him. I think that’s a mark of immaturity. I think that he has to realize he’s bringing investors in as a new constituency right now, and I think he’s got to show them the respect that they deserve because he’s asking them for their money.” Others shot back with opposing views and quips, some with tongue-in-cheek sarcasm that spoke of disdain for Pachter’s comments. Box CEO Aaron Levie pointed out on Twitter, “After Facebook hit \$1B in profits, you’d think investors would start demanding Zuck wear a hoodie.” He went on to say, “Yahoo CEO: No hoodie; AOL CEO: No hoodie; Facebook CEO: hoodie. Coincidence?”

No matter what your opinion is of the behavior, the bottom line is that it had an impact. For some, it signaled that he was “doing his own thing” and “not selling out to the establishment”; for others, it failed to inspire confidence that Zuckerberg could lead in the bold, new “post-IPO Facebook” world. The question is not so much if he did the right or wrong thing wearing a hoodie but rather did CEO Zuckerberg intentionally choose the impact he wanted to have?

One final story to drive the point home. I was in a local Starbucks for my weekend treat. My usual is a decaf triple grande, nonfat, extra-hot latte (now that’s a mouthful!). However, on this particular day I was leaning more in the direction of a simple cup of black coffee and told the friend I was with that this was all I was going to have. As I approached the counter, the young barista behind the espresso machine looked at me and said, “Triple grande, nonfat latte?” And while he missed a few details of the order (decaf and extra-hot), I was so impressed that he remembered me from weekend to weekend that I said, “That’s right. Wow, that’s impressive. Just add decaf and extra hot and we’ll be good to go.” My friend knows me well and just shook her head and smiled. I asked, “What’s the smile about?” She said, “This is your message in action; this isn’t just about leadership, this is about life. You had every intention of having a cup of black coffee when you came in here this morning and instead you chose to drink something different in order to reinforce what you thought was great behavior by that barista. All of that went through your head in a split second and you consciously chose in the direction of the barista.” She was right.



Now I know that it's an effective sales strategy to know your customers and I know Starbucks trains its employees on creating an inviting, friendly atmosphere. In fact, the opening page of its website says, "It's just a moment in time—just one hand reaching over the counter to present a cup to another outstretched hand. But it's a connection. We make sure everything we do honors that connection." The barista certainly didn't need to act in line with the company philosophy, but as a consumer I'm much more inclined to support a company that makes a personal connection with me and cares about me as a customer than one that does not. So I chose to support not only the barista but the organizational strategy and effort that went behind it. Consumers make the same choice thousands, if not millions, of times a day. It has a very real impact on our organizations and the bottom-line results that are achieved, and it all hinges on individuals and the choices they make.

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When you commit to a new possibility, it alters who you are; when you take a stand, it transforms how you behave. Imagine, if you will, living in a future in which the vast majority of people are mindful of their impact, intentional about how they show up, and conscious of the choices they make about their behavior. How differently would our world operate? Imagine this concept beyond your professional life; imagine it being alive in your family, with your friends, and out in the world. Here are a few examples I've witnessed that illustrate these ideas in life outside of work:

- A mother and father who were out to dinner with their two teenage children and actively engaged with them throughout the meal. No tapping away on smartphones or taking calls. They chose to be present and it signaled to the teens that they were valued, worth listening to, and respected.
- A woman who delivered a tin of cookies to the firefighters at our local fire station to say thank you for what they do, making an intentional gesture to ensure they knew they were appreciated.
- Wawa, a popular convenience store on the East Coast where patrons hold doors open for each other with a consistency I have never experienced elsewhere. I must admit to not knowing how the company cultivated this behavior in its patrons, but no matter which

Wawa I stop in, there is a civility present that I so appreciate. It is as if the culture of Wawa has dictated this level of intention and kindness.

→ The positive impact of a cashier at a crowded airport restaurant greeting me with a smile and a “how is your day going?” when cashiers at other shops were making less positive choices, most likely out of habit rather than out of intention.

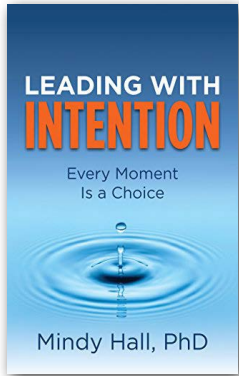
The choices people made in these examples matter. It costs nothing but awareness and choice, and could create a groundswell of difference in how we see each other and treat each other. Imagine members of the US Congress looking at themselves in this way, examining their behavior behind the lens of the impact it is having, consciously choosing to look for the win-win versus the win-lose. Utopia? I don’t think so. Choice.

I have a grand vision of the possibilities that flow from people being intentional in their life, professionally and personally. I remain steadfastly convinced that being intentional can change the world, and I think this world could use a bit of changing.

You choose every day how you engage with the world around you. Don’t waste that opportunity. Don’t allow your life or your career to develop by chance; make those choices with intention.

**The question for you is what are you choosing? 📖**

# Info



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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Mindy Hall is President and CEO of Peak Development Consulting, LLC. Since founding the company 1996, she has worked with clients around the world to create sustainable organization and leadership development solutions: helping leaders create solutions for today's challenges, while growing their capacity to lead future initiatives from within. She counts herself fortunate to do work she loves with people she respects. Her philosophy can be summed up in eight simple words: "I want it to matter that we met."

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