



How To Build A Strong Mind

Terence Mauri

What is it that enables leaders to persevere through seemingly insurmountable challenges that at first seem to exceed our limits?

Make a list of leaders you admire and who have made a difference in the world. They could be living or dead. The chances are they all have one outstanding quality in common: they are bold.

A strong mind excels at speed, creativity, and decisive action. They are risk takers. It's not the only factor that drives success, but perhaps it is one of the most important in the age of overload. We all face the twin problems of deciding what to do and what to tune out. Creativity enables leaders to imagine different solutions to a problem and can help you “cut through the noise and focus on the signal,” as high profile entrepreneur Elon Musk describes it. If you want to make an impact, you need to act boldly, especially when the going gets tough.

Adversity is a natural part of the leadership journey. I have discovered that at the core of a leader's mindset is an attitude, rooted in an ancient Nordic belief system called sisu. Sisu refers to "extraordinary determination, courage and resoluteness in the face of extreme stress or adversity." Every leader I have studied overcame battles that seemed insurmountable at the time and yet they did not give up.

At some point we will all open the door and face our own Mount Everest. It could be finding the strength to tackle a failure or bouncing back from a personal tragedy or setback.

Mine came when I was seven years old—a driver sped out of control, mounted a curb, and crashed into a shop where my family and I were standing. We nearly lost our lives. Ever since that day I've understood that part of the power of sisu lies in its hope-inducing nature. Hope is the sparkplug of all action, according to the world's leading researcher on hope, Dr. Shane Lopez. It's in that split moment that you have a choice either to accept defeat or push past barriers. As the late British prime minister Winston Churchill once implored, "never, ever, ever give up."

The Sisu Lab

[Emilia Lahti](#) heads up the Sisu Lab and is a distinguished researcher of the Finnish construct of sisu. She holds an applied positive psychology Masters degree from the University of Pennsylvania and has been mentored in the fields of grit, self-control, and positive psychology by world-renowned thought leaders Dr. Martin Seligman and Dr. Angela Duckworth.

Lahti is the embodiment of sisu. Her work stems from a traumatic experience that made her rethink her whole life and ultimately find her true calling: helping others. In the long term, she wants to identify practical ways for the cultivation of sisu within various contexts, from being a leader to recovering from traumatic experiences. She writes: “Evolution comes before survival only in the dictionary. We are creatures of reason, programmed to preserve energy and maintain equilibrium. However, in order to not merely survive but to thrive, we must occasionally crank our comfort-o-meter to the red zone. Having an ‘action mindset’ will help you bear the initial discomfort and reap the ultimate rewards.” (Watch [her captivating talk](#) about the power of sisu at TEDx.)

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In an interview, I spoke with Lahti about sisu's role as a hidden driver of a leader's mindset around the world.

TERENCE MAURI: What is sisu?

EMILIA LAHTI: Sisu refers to our ability to go beyond our preconceived physical and mental capacities. It is the ability to take extraordinary action and stay determined when all odds are against us. One of its underlying premises is that there is more strength to us than meets the eye. How sisu differs from perseverance and grit is that it's more about the short-term intensity than about long-term endurance. It is our ability to take action against impossible odds, transform barriers into frontiers, exceed ourselves, and see beyond the limitations of the present moment. One could define it as the second wind of mental endurance or the sixth gear of tenacity. It's not something you would tap into all the time but a force that allows you to push through the unimaginable.

I think Harry Potter author J. K. Rowling is a prominent example of sisu. She was rejected more than 130 times before she got noticed. According to legend, one publisher even told her "not to give up the day job." We know what happened after that. The Harry Potter series became one of the most successful film franchises ever, grossing more than \$6 billion. On receiving an

honorary degree from Harvard University, Rowling gave a heartfelt commencement speech titled “The Fringe Benefits of Failure, and the Importance of Imagination”. She told the audience: “Ultimately, we all have to decide for ourselves what constitutes failure. But the world is quite eager to give you a set of criteria if you let it. Failure means a stripping away of the inessential. I stopped pretending to myself to be anything other than what I was, and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me. Had I really succeeded at anything else, I might never have found the determination to succeed in the one arena where I believe I truly belonged. Rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I built my life.”

Rowling is now a successful role model for millions of people around the world. They draw strength from her courage and unflagging determination to not give up.

TM: What is the main benefit of sisu?

EL: All of the great advancements of humanity and the progress of modern society are based on our ability to expand our psychological horizon, take a step into the unknown, and make a path where there is none. What this means is that we have to go beyond our comfort zone, try out new skills, and become learners. Whoever is able to tolerate this can become a leader and inspire those around her or him to replicate the same behavior.

I argue that having this ability is not a luxury but is a necessity if we are to create a more positive human future. Now more than perhaps ever, we need the ability to imagine a new future and take action. Remaining complacent will stall progress, and it's those with a strong mind that can lead the intellectual quest for our humanity.

I agree. Take FailCon founder Cass Phillipps. She helps leaders to learn from their own and others' failures. The company's motto is "Embrace your mistakes. Build your success." Picking yourself up off the ground after yet another setback gets tiring after a while. FailCon aims to turn failure into a process for instant learning and reflection. In Latin, "reflect" means to refold, which suggests we look backward in order to move forward. As the nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forward."

At FailCon, in the course of a one-day conference, peers share stories of what went wrong and inspire each other with lessons learned to move forward. While most cultures just talk about success, it helps to organize a friendly peer forum to explore failure. FailCon now has a thriving community of locations where FailCon events are held, including Tokyo, Berlin, and Singapore. How could you adopt the FailCon principles in your company? Apple U, the Apple University, was part of Steve Jobs's legacy to not only help future employees live Apple's values but also to learn from past failures and triumphs in a more systematic way.

TM: How can leaders tap the power of sisu?

EL: We can learn from the research in related fields. I would describe sisu as a set of tools or a bundle of strategies that one can use to tap into their inner core strength. Whatever tools work best depends on the individual. There is no one size fits all. Research shows us that for mental strength in extreme adversity, social support, one's ability to remain curious, and the availability of useful mental strategies are crucial. Most of these can be obtained and practiced through conscious effort. One's ability to reflect and pause can ultimately mean the difference between success and failure when the going gets tough. The limits of our thinking mean the limits of our possibilities.

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TM: Is sisu learnable?

EL: Preliminary studies show that people believe it is. This actually plays a part in the process. Stanford University professor and motivation expert Carol Dweck has found that our beliefs regarding our abilities are the biggest indicator of our future actions. Similarly to resilience, I propose that sisu is something that is tied to our experiences, learning, and mindset. I suggest that part of the power of sisu lies in its creativity and hope-inducing nature (hope is the sparkplug of all action, as we know from the research of Dr. Shane Lopez, and creativity enables us to imagine potential solutions to a problem). It invokes visions of one's future self. If we dare to see beyond our present situation and capacity, we start to act and move toward our goals, pushing past our barriers. To expose the mind to a story is to prospect and imagine future scenarios and possibilities.

Furthermore, an action mindset contributes to how we approach obstacles. I would describe it as akin to signing up for a marathon or an Ironman before you have any clue what you are actually doing. It provides a daring "leap before you look" attitude, so we are not paralyzed by the idea of what might go wrong.

TM: What final techniques will help leaders cultivate a sisu mindset?

EL: One of the first steps is to become aware of one's thought patterns and realize that our behavior is malleable. This will require a lot of work, and I don't believe that shortcuts exist. It is about fostering one's character and the result of all the experiences as well as our genetic dispositions.

It all comes down to awareness of our values and actions and making the decision to reach beyond one's capacities. We don't know what we can do before we push beyond our mental barriers. Try to find ways to grow those around you. For example, how am I encouraging the sisu of others? We are all deeply interconnected and have great power to open doors for each other but also close them. Leaders include everyone because I believe it all starts with personal leadership, and we must take responsibility.

Ultimately, leaders should aim to empower others and facilitate the "sisu mindset" for those around them. The greatest things are born from trust. Courage is of special importance when we face obstacles. Malala Yousafzai is a global symbol of courage and also the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize laureate in history. Yousafzai is a Pakistani school pupil and education activist who was targeted and shot by extremists on her way to school for defend-

ing her right to an education. After a long road to recovery, Malala is back and more determined than ever to keep making her voice heard.

Still a teenager, she is a vocal activist for female education, was featured in Time magazine's "The 100 Most Influential People in the World", and speaks at the World Economic Forum and the United Nations, raising awareness of women's rights around the world.

The Sisu Leader

Dominican entrepreneur Jesús Blanco is a sisu leader. He is the CEO of Linktia (www.linktia.com), a group of market-leading companies specializing in content production, talent management, online platforms, and technology solutions. His story is a blueprint for increasing your sisu quotient and overcoming the toughest of battles to survive. When Blanco was seventeen, tragedy struck his family, when his mother was brutally attacked in a local supermarket in Spain, where they lived. It was a big wake-up call. When I interviewed him exclusively for my new book *The Leader's Mindset*, he said: "Time is our most precious gift. It [the attack] changed my life forever." From that day on, Blanco decided to change lives for the better and become an entrepreneur.

Today, still only in his thirties, Blanco is responsible for defining Linktia's vision and leading the group's long-term objectives and global business strategy. He is one of the first Dominican graduates of the UK's elite Saïd Business School at Oxford and a postgraduate of Harvard Business School. How did Blanco harness sisu and transform his fortunes beyond imagination?

“I decided to move to London in order to learn English. My first year in London was transformational. I truly realized the meaning of being poor. I couldn't speak English and had only \$2,500 to my name. I didn't know anyone and had to share one room with four people. I didn't have money to eat properly for two months and lent a friend the only money I had left. I was hungry, alone, and couldn't find a job with a budget of just \$40 a week.

Every morning I'd be the first to arrive at my local Internet café, where I would spend the day sending CVs to potential employers. I literally survived on the soft drink Dr Pepper and a little food every day; the simple things really brought light to my life at this stage in my journey. I'd reached rock bottom. I'd left my family, my friends, and a secure job in Spain to learn English. These are tests, which tell us how much we want something. I knew I had to go through this journey and would survive. I had to draw upon deep reserves of courage—sisu. In one month I sent over 1,000 CVs! Going through hunger changed my life forever. I vowed I wanted to help others to avoid this fate.

When I was at rock bottom, something remarkable happened to me. Sitting in a park, some passersby starting to talk to me in Spanish. It's moments like this that you realize you should always have hope and never give up. It turned out that one of the passersby was leaving her job, which I might be suitable for. As my English was still very basic, I created a script for my CV and memorized it all in two days. A miracle happened. I got my first job opposite the famous Bank of England in the City of London on Threadneedle Street. My hunger period was over, but I can say that without that experience, I would not be the person and leader I am today.

It gave me the belief to continue to break through mental and social barriers. I became one of the first Dominicans to be accepted at Oxford's Saïd Business School, and at thirty-six, I completed my MBA at Harvard. I have a personal formula for success: it's based on what obstacles we overcome. It's about a purpose that is bigger than you, not giving up and losing track of the why. The leader's mindset is a tool to change lives for the better."

Connect to a Higher Purpose

Most leaders in Blanco's situation would have given up and boarded a plane for home. Where *sisu* flourishes, leaders report higher levels of hope (unshakeable self-belief), optimism (expecting good things to happen), perseverance (commitment to the purpose and not giving up easily), and resilience (ability to adapt to obstacles and recover quickly).

To tap the leader's mindset faster, commit to building up all four of these qualities, and don't give up easily. Obstacles are essential to them: they help them transcend self-imposed limitations—all the boxes that we choose to live in.

A new study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by researcher Janina Marguc at the University of Amsterdam supports this hypothesis that obstacles induce strength:

“Daily life is full of obstacles: a construction site blocking the usual road to work, a colleague's background chatter interfering with one's ability to concentrate, a newborn child hindering parents in completing their daily routines, or a lack of resources standing in the way of realizing an ambitious plan.

How do people cognitively respond to such obstacles? How do the ways in which they perceive and process information from their environment change when an obstacle interferes with what they want to accomplish? In the present research, we aim to shed light on these questions by investigating the impact of obstacles on global versus local processing. We propose that unless people are inclined to disengage prematurely from ongoing activities, obstacles will prompt them to step back and adopt a more global, Gestalt-like processing style that allows them to look at the “big picture” and conceptually integrate seemingly unrelated pieces of information.”

It turns out that overcoming obstacles provides an unexpected motivational boost, pushing you to deliver more than is expected. The stakes are higher but so are the rewards. An illustration of this is the story of Drew Houston, CEO of the startup file sharing company Dropbox. He came up with the idea for the company after he forgot his flash drive and could not work on a long bus ride from Boston to New York.

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Failure Pioneers

Brian Chesky, cofounder of Airbnb, is a self-confessed failure pioneer who equally credits obstacles as part of his leadership development. He writes in his personal blog:

“If you want to understand Airbnb, you have to understand our beginnings. Our story started with a problem that those struggling financially know well. In October of 2007, my roommate Joe Gebbia and I were living in a San Francisco apartment, and we couldn’t afford rent. That weekend, an international design conference was coming to town, and all of the hotels were sold out. So we had an idea: why not turn our place into a bed and breakfast for the conference? We inflated airbeds and called it the AirBed & Breakfast.”

Today, Airbnb stands at the forefront of the sharing economy with more than 20 million people using its service and winning *Inc.* magazine’s “Company of the Year” title. If Chesky and his cofounders had given up at the first major obstacle, there would be no Airbnb.

To unlock a strong mind in your everyday role, take the following three actions.

Be a Failure Pioneer: To achieve greatness you have to fail greatly. Hollywood producer and director Jerry Zucker says: “Nobody else is paying as much attention to your failures as you are... To everyone else, it’s just a blip on the radar screen, so just move on.” Most overnight successes take about ten to fifteen years, and the journey is not a linear path but rather a series of ups and downs with a major dip along the way known as the “test.” A test could take the form of financial loss or one of your top performers walking out the door. Try building risk and resilience into your daily routine. MIT Media Lab’s Joi Ito tells leaders to focus on “Resilience instead of strength, which means you want to yield and allow failure and you bounce back instead of trying to resist failure.”

At times, you might privately think you can’t go on. You must persist. Arianna Huffington, cofounder of the Huffington Post, says it best: “I failed, many times in my life. One failure that I always remember was when 36 publishers rejected my second book. Many years later, I watched Huff Post come alive to mixed reviews, including some very negative ones, like the reviewer who called the site ‘the equivalent of Gigli, Ishtar, and Heaven’s Gate rolled into one.’ But my mother used to tell me, ‘failure is not the opposite of success, it’s a stepping stone to success.’”

Eat Problems for Breakfast: You are bound to fail occasionally. In failure are life's little secrets: you cannot learn to ride a bike by reading how to ride one. James Dyson produced more than 5,000 failed prototypes before he invented his bestselling Dyson Air Vacuum. Embrace failure as your biggest teacher. It's a vital part of the process of growing as a human being. A real failure is when you make a mistake and don't fix it quickly and start over. The formula for success isn't a mystery. It's a conscious choice to learn from failure. Each wrong choice builds character and strengthens your mindset for the next challenge.

Stephen Rapoport, founder of Pact Coffee, started Failboat by gathering startup founders around a table to discuss their failures and what they had learned. In an interview in the Sunday Times, he says: "I'm absolutely convinced you learn an awful lot more when you get things wrong than when you get things right. When you get things right, you don't know whether you've got them completely right. When you get things wrong, you know where the line is."

Rapoport continues: "We have two modes: success and learning. I don't look at learning as a failure, as long as you don't repeat the same mistakes over and over. If you're scared to fail, you will find it hard to make decisions, you will slow down and you won't want to push yourself. In other words, if you're not failing at all, you may not be trying hard enough."

Embrace Constraints: Constraints encourage leaders and their teams to think on their feet and rediscover their creativity. Phil Hansen’s story is a master class in using the power of constraints. His TED talk, “Embrace the Shake”, has received more than 1.7 million views to date and continues to inspire leaders around the world. Hansen, a pointillist, developed an unruly shake in his hand that kept him from doing what he loved best—making art. Devastated, he lost his way, not knowing what the future held. After much soul searching, he decided to see a neurologist, who told him to “Embrace the shake and transcend it.”

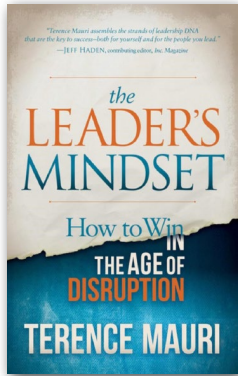
In his TED talk, Hansen explains that **“Limitations may be the most unlikely of places to harness creativity, but perhaps one of the best ways to get ourselves out of ruts, rethink categories, and challenge accepted norms. And instead of telling each other to seize the day, maybe we can remind ourselves every day to seize the limitation.”**

*“Focus in on this one conversation. This one person.
Be the one who cares.”*

A mindset that embraces constraints is a mostly overlooked concept, but is hugely important for a leader's mindset. Scarcity can lead to resourcefulness and an improved work ethic, pushing everyone to think more creatively about finding the best solution to a problem. Next time you give your team or yourself a challenge, remember Hansen's message that limitations can force us to think bigger. Don't assume that having to make do with less is a hopeless challenge. You can pick up more wonderful lessons from Hansen in his book *Tattoo a Banana: And Other Ways to Turn Anything and Everything into Art*.

In the twenty-first century, you must be the CEO of your own life: own who you are and take pride in your craft, no matter how big or small. **A strong mind is crucial for leading in a world where to be successful is to evolve.** 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS | Terence Mauri is an author, keynote speaker, mentor and advisor to some of the world's most successful companies. He has been recognized as an *Inc.* magazine Top 100 Leadership Expert and Top 100 Leadership Thinker to follow on [Twitter](#). Terence serves as a mentor for [Future Ideas](#), an international panel of experts that includes some of the world's biggest thinkers, such as Dan Pink, Richard Florida, and Rita McGrath. He is also a lead host for [9others.com](#), a thriving forum for connecting entrepreneurs around the world. You can reach Terence Mauri at www.terencemauri.com.

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