



WANT TO BE A GREAT LEADER? LEARN TO
BE THE FULCRUM®

MIKE LERARIO

ARE GREAT LEADERS BORN OR MADE?

I love this question. It ranks up there with “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?”

Watch young children playing together and there are always one or two kids who stand out—they organize (or dominate) the rest of the kids, become the captains and pick teams. They didn’t have any formal training in leadership; it just comes naturally to them when they decide to organize the rest of the playground. But what happens to those kids once they grow up? The ones doing the picking don’t always go on to do great things in life and the ones picked last sometimes become great leaders or great successes (if I had to guess, Steve Jobs was probably picked last most of the time when teams were picked on the playground).

Great leaders are born but only because we were all born—born with different traits, characteristics, and abilities. But not everyone uses their talents to the best effect. We all know talented people who for one reason or another never reach their full potential. It might be that they lacked the drive to succeed or that they lacked a good coach to help them hone their innate skills.

An athlete with slightly above average skill can compensate with hard work and determination to become a great player. Some call this Grit (the Cleveland Indians have even turned it into an acronym: Growth mindset, Routine, Individual mechanics, Team first approach) but there is no doubt that we can all become better, even elite, if we put in the work. Therefore, great leaders are born AND made.

More often than not, what makes a leader great is the effort and energy that they put into their development and the understanding of their situation. But effort alone is not enough. To be truly great, a leader must also find balance. Balance in the situation where they lead but more importantly, balance between their natural tendency as a leader and the tendency demanded by the situation.

If you can imagine two children on a playground seesaw, one child represents your natural tendency as a leader and the other represents the leadership tendency demanded by the situation. When your natural tendency is what the situation demands, there is balance and like the two children riding the seesaw, you lead effortlessly.

If however, one of those children is larger than the other, it throws the whole thing out of balance and the heavier child sits on the ground while the lighter child is up in the air. The seesaw doesn't work and no one in this scenario is having fun unless the heavier child is also a bully.

This presents us with a perfect analogy for leadership. When your natural tendency is too heavy for the situation, you become the impediment to balance and the proper functioning of your organization. If your natural tendency is too light, you are still the impediment, but it's the organization that is keeping you up in the air.

The only solution for kids on the playground is for the larger child to move forward on their seat, towards the other child and the balancing point in the center: the fulcrum. As a leader you always have more options but experience has taught me that if you want to be a great leader you have to find balance and the best way to find balance is to **be the fulcrum**.®

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The Mechanics of Balance

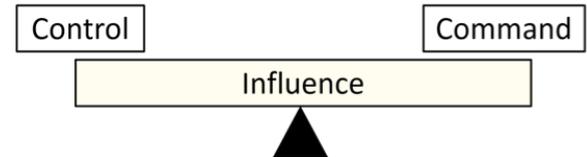
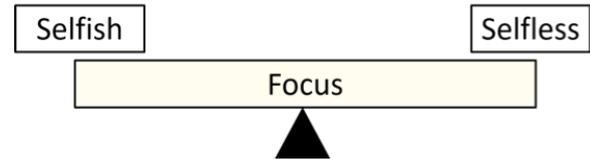
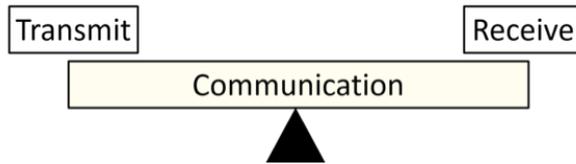
In terms of mechanics, a seesaw is a class one lever. Effort is exerted on one side of the lever to move a load with the help of a fulcrum. The fulcrum also allows for balance when the effort and the load are equal.

In terms of leadership and what I call a Fulcrum-centric Leadership™ model the leader is the “effort,” the situation is the “load” and the lever (the seesaw) is one of the four essential leadership domains. More specifically for each domain in isolation, your natural tendency is the effort while the load is the tendency that the situation demands. When both effort and load are equal, you find balance in your leadership style and everything runs or works in harmony. But if your natural tendency is over-weight or under-weight for what the situation demands, you will find it hard, if not impossible, to have balance as a leader.

The Four Essential Leadership Domains and Tendencies

I believe that when you distill leading and leadership down to the essentials, there are four domains where a leader must find balance in order to be effective: Communications, Adaptability, Focus, and Influence.

Think of each of these domains as a seesaw and the opposite ends where you would normally find a seat are the tendencies that describe the extremes. On the left side of each seesaw are the exclusive tendencies and on the right side of the seesaw are the inclusive tendencies.



“ To be a great leader ... you must be willing and able to shift the balance when the situation demands it.

In each of these domains, we each have a natural tendency—a bias or a preference for how we want to be in that particular domain. If your natural tendency is way out on one end or the other of the lever, it's a strong tendency and if you allow it to dominate in that domain when the opposite tendency is needed, you'll throw your team and organization out of balance.

If your tendency is close to the center of the domain lever, you have a more neutral tendency but it doesn't mean that you will naturally find balance. In fact, the slightest change in the situation could cause a huge imbalance when your natural tendency is close to the center of the lever. It might also mean that you have a harder time moving towards one of the extreme ends of the domain when and if the situation dictates you to lead in that way.

I categorize the tendencies on the left side of the seesaw as exclusive because they can define a leader who does not seek counsel or inputs from the outside sources. Conversely, the tendencies on the right side of the seesaw draw on inputs from the environment or outside sources and can define a leader who will not act without those inputs, so I have categorized them as inclusive. While I use the terms exclusive and inclusive to describe the opposite extremes, I do not assign judgement to either and I caution against treating one extreme as negative and the other as positive or more desirable. This is a critical point about Fulcrum-centric Leadership™ and central to finding balance as a leader: either tendency category (exclusive or inclusive) can be a positive or a negative leadership quality depending on the situation at hand.

I recently had a young entrepreneur and business owner I coach explain this perfectly in his own words when he sent me a note about my book Leadership in Balance:

“I am 25 pages into Leadership in Balance and I’ve already had an ‘aha!’ moment. My tendency is certainly on the ‘inclusive’ side of leadership. I do believe that I am so terrified of being the exclusive extreme that I error (sic) on the extreme opposite. I am looking forward to finishing the book and putting your approach to leadership to good use. I am determined to be a great leader and I appreciate you sharing your experience and vision with us!”

To be a great leader you cannot rest on your laurels and you cannot stick with your natural leadership tendency when the situation demands otherwise, no matter how well that style has served you in the past. You must be willing and able to shift the balance when the situation demands it. As an example, success as a leader might mean shifting from your natural tendency of being “flexible” to being more “rigid” in how you exercise adaptability with your team.

But there is one more aspect of the Fulcrum-centric Leadership™ model that comes into play here: moving or being the fulcrum once is not enough. You have to be ever ready and able to shift the balancing point in each domain. There are few situations that remain the same for very long; most are changing all the time as the conditions and environment change.

Therefore, as a leader you have to recognize three things in order to maintain balance in a dynamic and fluid environment: 1) Know your natural leadership tendency for each of the four essential domains 2) Recognize when there is an imbalance within your organization and identify the domain(s) that are effected 3) shift the balance between “effort” and “load” and in essence, be the fulcrum.

Knowing Your Natural Leadership Tendency

You can probably guess what your natural tendency is in each domain, but I believe that we have a societal bias against the tendencies on the exclusive side, so much so that few of us would be willing to admit that we have a natural tendency to be selfish. But the Fulcrum-centric Leadership™ model begins with self-awareness and that cannot be left to guesswork or influenced by what we’re willing to admit about ourselves.

Therefore, to help people truly understand their natural tendency in each of the four domains, I developed the Leadership Fulcrum Assessment®. It consists of ten questions for each domain that are scored on a scale of 1-5. All the questions are “behavioral” and ask the respondents to answer based on how they have actually acted in the past, not what they think is the right

answer. The resulting score shows whether you have an exclusive, inclusive, or neutral tendency in that domain.

How does this work in the real world? If your natural tendency is strong—close to one end or the other of a particular leadership domain—and things are working well for you as a leader, changes in your environment could demand you make a drastic shift to go from one extreme to the other. If however, you are having a difficult time leading and your tendency is strong in a particular domain, this might be the source of your problems and a fulcrum shift is already needed.

If your natural tendency is neutral for any domain and things are working well, you have found balance as a leader and you might be comfortable moving toward either extreme, but it may be difficult for you to shift to a strong position when the situation demands it.

The point here is this: there is no right or best tendency for these leadership domains. Your natural tendency is where you have become comfortable or it's what you have developed as a habit. It's right if it's right for you and the situation where you currently lead.

Recognizing the Imbalance

How do you know when you are out-of-balance as a leader? The simple answer is that things aren't working right—you're not accomplishing your goals or you're not getting the results you want from your team. This can be both a subjective and an objective assessment of your team, but hard numbers like revenue and profit will probably be the first things you notice. That said, by the time you see that you are not going to make your “numbers,” you are probably way too late to the realization that you have an imbalance in one or more of your leadership domains.

With **Communications**, the indicators might be that rumors run rampant within your team or that you are not getting the information that you need to make decisions. If you are only hearing good news out of your team, but know from outside sources or other indicators that there are some bad news stories out there, you have an imbalance in the communication domain.

Adaptability imbalances might be indicated by a resistance to change or improvement. If you get the “but that's the way we've always done it around here...” mantra from your people, you might have an adaptability issue, or you might have a situation that demands rigid adherence to policy and procedure.

With **Focus**, an imbalance can be either personal or organizational. Leadership is a team effort by nature, because without the team there is no need for a leader. But you can never forget that the leader is still an individual. Drive, ambition, and desire to achieve are all factors affecting individual performance—sometimes in a positive way and sometimes in a negative way—so these things affect your individual performance as a leader as well. If your personal goals and desires are at odds with what you find at work, you probably have a focus imbalance. Similarly, the problem might be that you or your team members have lost sight of the bigger picture. We've come to calling this "The Why" and we need to know what that is as individuals and as an organization. It's been my experience that a lack of clearly defined values and goals, both individual and organizational, is the most common source for a focus imbalance.

Do you know what your core values are? Are they in sync with the organization you lead? While recognizing the imbalance is a key to fixing the problem, the one thing that sets focus apart from the other three domains is that the ultimate fulcrum shift might be getting off this particular seesaw and finding a new one to ride.

Finally, with **Influence** you may have an imbalance if your team is frustrated or bored with day-to-day operations. If they are new to a task or new to the team, do they have the right skills to accomplish what they have been asked to do? If they are seasoned veterans, do they have the opportunity to exercise initiative in accomplishing the task?

Again, some of this situational understanding will come from objective analysis of your team and the outcomes you achieve. Other indicators will be more about intuition and the “feel” of the situation. As a leader you need to be open to both types of indicators in assessing your leadership environment.

Why You Should Learn to Be the Fulcrum®

If and when you recognize an imbalance in your organization, check it against your natural tendency for that domain. In all likelihood, you will see that what the situation demands from you as a leader is different from your natural leadership style.

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Armed with this knowledge, you can now take the steps needed to restore balance. Let me offer an example from my personal experience to illustrate my point.

As an officer in the U.S. Army, any imbalance I had as a leader often happened with the influence domain. My natural tendency is for command over control but that requires having people ready, willing, and able to work with that style of influence. In many cases, the people working for me who were not ready to use their initiative and decide for themselves how to accomplish a task had worked previously for people who were very much in the control side of the influence domain. A controlling style of leadership is, or at least it used to be, very common in the Army. The terms “micro-management” and “zero-defects” describe this environment clearly because with a controlling style boss you are told how—not why—to do something and there is often no room to learn and grow from the smallest mistake.

Having subordinates whose total leadership experience—or their most recent experience—was working for a boss with a strong natural tendency to control should have been an indicator for me. It should have alerted me to the fact that I needed to exert some measure of control until they were ready to operate with less control and more command. When I didn’t do that, the team didn’t perform as well as we could have and that probably had the compounding effect of making my people even more tentative about working with less direct influence. In essence, my failure

to be the fulcrum and shift away from my tendency for command made my team less effective and made the task of getting them to accept more of the load that much harder in the long run.

When I failed as a leader, it was often because I didn't acknowledge my tendency for command (I knew it but ignored its effect), and I didn't properly assess the situation I was in. Together, those two things kept me from recognizing my need to be the fulcrum.

Knowing what I know now and seeing my actions in hindsight, here's what I should have done using the Fulcrum-Centric Leadership™ model:

1. Recognize my natural tendency for “command” in the influence domain.
2. Identify which of my subordinate leaders were ready for a more commanding style of influence and which needed a more controlling style.
3. For the people on my team who needed more control, I should have been more specific with my instructions to them. My focus should have been on telling them how in needed a task done. That said, and because I want to get back to using my natural tendency for influence, I would take the time to make sure they understood why I needed that task done. I'd gradually let up on the control as they became more confident with their ability and more trusting of me and that this was how I wanted them to develop as subordinate leaders.

4. For the people on my team who were ready for less control (direct influence) and more command (indirect influence) I should have done more to present them as the example of how to get things done.

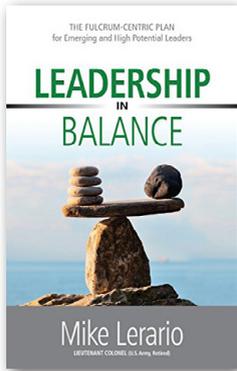
I would have also looked at the other three domains (Communications, Adaptability, and Focus) to see if a shift was needed there to help reinforce what I wanted to accomplish with Influence.

The worst leaders I ever worked for or knew were terrible not because they had an extreme exclusive or extreme inclusive tendency (though most did). They were terrible leaders because they stayed with that leadership style no matter what was going on with the team, mission, or the environment we had to operate in.

I've given this a lot of thought over forty years of studying and practicing leadership and it occurred to me that those terrible leaders stayed with their leadership style because they either didn't recognize the imbalance or they didn't care to change. A failure to recognize the imbalance is just a lack of situational awareness but a failure to shift (to *be the fulcrum*) is leadership malpractice.

Don't be one of those leaders. **Be the fulcrum.** 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Mike Lerario was commissioned as an infantry officer in the United States Army in 1983 following graduation from the United States Military Academy at West Point, and served twenty-three years on active duty. In his book *Leadership in Balance*, he explains all four of the essential leadership domains in greater detail. He wrote it primarily to help emerging and talented leaders become more effective by providing them with a simple but comprehensive approach to leadership. That said, the model of understanding your natural tendencies, recognizing imbalances in your situation and taking the effort to be the fulcrum® can help anyone who aspires to be a great leader. You can take the Leadership Fulcrum Assessment® by going to www.bethefulcrum.com.

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