

MY METACOGNITIVE JOURNEY

THE POWER OF UNDERSTANDING YOURSELF

Dave Mitchell



People have always fascinated me.

More specifically, it is their behaviors that capture my attention. The origins of this fixation can be traced to my experiences as a boy. My mother was a caring, funny, smart woman—when she was sober. Unfortunately, most days her behavior would devolve from her better self into a state of unpredictability, volatility and—well—just plain meanness. My mom was a mean drunk. To escape her wrath, I would head to the woods that surrounded our house with my dog Red and engage in metacognition—the fancy term for thinking about the way you think. It would be many years before I would learn the meaning of the term, but I was a practitioner before the age of 10.

I feel fortunate that my mother's struggles became the catalyst for growth for me. There are many examples of the damage that alcoholism and drug addiction have on the family of the person with the disease. In my case, learning to navigate her behavioral changes developed both an interest in, and an acumen for, understanding how people think. What began as an effort merely to survive a turbulent home transitioned into a career of educating others on the nuances of human behavior.

Shortly after I started the educator/author stage of my career in 1995 with the foundation of the Leadership Difference Inc., I identified a simple vision: "To positively affect the life of every person I meet." The genesis of that mission statement represents an important moment in my life that I will explain later. A large percentage of the work I perform is helping people understand the behaviors of their co-workers, family and friends. This effort generated the book *Live and Learn or Die Stupid*—inspired by the personal attributes that promote success and happiness in our lives and dedicated to my father who passed away in 2005.

Eight years later, my most popular seminar—*The Power of Understanding People*—became my second book. It was in this book that I provided a model for readers to appreciate why we behave differently and why some people are easier for us to communicate with than others. It was an Amazon Editor's Choice for Best Business Book of the Month upon its release and continues to sell well as a guide for leadership, selling skills, customer service and personal relationships. In this era in which civil discourse is becoming increasingly rare, I am proud to have contributed a book that promotes a better understanding of each other.

After the release of *The Power of Understanding People* in 2013, I continued to deliver the keynote and seminar of the same name to over 100,000 people. It was during this period that I discovered something that had not occurred to me. While people are interested in better understanding the behaviors of others, they are even MORE interested in understanding themselves. It hadn't occurred to me that the long-term value of my long walks in the woods with Red and honing of my metacognitive skills would be to provide guidance for others to do the same. My mom's challenges had provided the impetus for me to ponder my own feelings, behaviors, tendencies and attributes. I was surprised how many others had not spent time "in the woods." While the reason I was there may have been toxic, the result of the trips was anything but.

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The muse for the book *The Power of Understanding Yourself* arrived when my lovely bride and I moved to the Walla Walla Valley wine region in 2015. Surrounded by the wine culture, I experienced the beauty of grapes being transformed into fine wine. As a certified advanced sommelier, I was already educated on this process, but witnessing it first hand inspired an epiphany in me. The journey from vine to wine was analogous for our own journey to understand ourselves and pursue a path to becoming our best Me. A winemaker is responsible for extracting the juice of the grape and creating a wine that expresses its essence in the best possible way. Metacognition is the critical component of identifying the qualities within us and extracting the best Me. That was the purpose of *The Power of Understanding Yourself*. I not only wanted people to have a better understanding of themselves, I wanted them to aspire to be the best possible version.

It was not just my immersion in the wine world that served as a catalyst for this book. My M.Ed. is in Global Human Resources Development from the University of Illinois—Urbana Champaign (Go Illini!). Global Human Resources Development involves a large dose of organizational development and between my educational background and 12 years working in the corporate world in human resources development, I have substantial experience in leading change. Many of the same best practices used to help companies create a high-performance culture are applicable to our own transformation as individuals. To that end, *The Power of Understanding Yourself* includes numerous exercises designed to help the reader identify and appreciate their unique gifts, tendencies, preferences, strengths and vulnerabilities. The key to transformation is deceptively simple: identify your current state, aspire to a desired future state, develop a strategy from moving from the former to the latter. That is the core process behind *The Power of Understanding Yourself*.

Perhaps the most satisfying development associated with writing a book is when you as the author stumble upon a revelation in the middle of the process. For this book, I came to understand the answer to a question that I am often asked and have struggled to answer for many years. So many times, I am approached by an attendee and asked, “Can people change?”

I always wonder about the motivation behind that inquiry. Are they asking because there exists something in themselves that they want to change? Is there someone in their life for whom they hope change is possible? After I speak, there is rarely enough time to sufficiently explore the context of the query, so I am left to a short response. Before writing this book, my answer was, “Theoretically, yes, but pragmatically, it is relatively uncommon.” In retrospect, that was an insufficient response. It hardly does justice to the complexity of cognition and context. While creating *The Power of Understanding Yourself*, I arrived at a better—and more hopeful—understanding of the prospects of a person changing.

The fact is, we ARE changing, even if we don’t recognize it. Most of this change is so gradual it is like tracking the progress of a glacier. This form of personal change may be hard to detect without utilizing some formal metacognitive exercises over the span of your life. Still, I think most of us would agree that who we are, what we are most proud of relative to ourselves, what we are working to improve, what we value and what we aspire to be have changed significantly over time. The way I would have defined myself today, in my fifties, would have been nearly inconceivable to the twenty-four year old version of me. The realization of this type of change wasn’t the new insight that I experienced in writing the book, and it probably isn’t the type of change that most people are referencing when they ask me those questions after an event. My sense is that they meant, “Can people change quickly?” I have now radically amended my waffled response to a resounding, “YES!” But there are still conditions.

From my perspective, three things must exist to create the impetus for immediate change. First, there must be a point of ignition. This is a moment in time that is so compelling that it galvanizes the attention of the individual. It can be a very positive experience, it can be a very negative experience, it can be a deeply emotional experience or it can be just a sudden, powerful realization that is the culmination of a lifetime of experiences. But there must be a distinct moment in time that commands the attention of the individual.

I call it a point of ignition because it reminds me of the moment that a fire is started. In the world of wine, the point of ignition is harvest. Harvest occurs after a lengthy growing season during which the grapes change ever so slowly until one day, one moment, the brix level, the acidity, the taste of the grapes, the texture of the seeds are all perfectly aligned. It is at this moment that a grape is most ready to become the best possible wine. The same is true for the individual. Sudden change begins when the person experiences the point of ignition.

Once a person encounters a point of ignition, they must have the capacity and willingness to engage in metacognition. While the point of ignition is the fuel for self-examination, one must still have the ability. Think of it like this. At some point during adolescence you realized how valuable it would be to know how to drive a car. That is the point of ignition. However, you still don't know how to drive the car. Learning how to engage in metacognition is like learning how to drive a car. It gives you the skills to go places that you could not reach before. It is this part that often becomes a barrier to an individual's sudden change. Even if the person has a point of ignition, there is no guarantee they possess the skills to look inside themselves to determine what they need to do differently.

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Finally, there must be a passionate desire to move to this desired future state. As the cliché goes, “change is hard.” Most of the change we have experienced in life has been forced upon us. And, frankly, much of that change was relatively minor as it relates to its immediate impact on us. These are the types of changes that we experience on that glacial like path. Sudden change is far more difficult and, as such, requires a much greater level of commitment. Every January, my gym is packed with people who have vowed to change their exercise habits. By March, the population has returned to its normal level. The few that remain are those that have a passion for fitness. Changes to your mindset are even harder than changes to your body shape.

So sudden individual change involves:

- **A point of ignition**
- **Profound metacognitive skills**
- **A passion to achieve the desired future state**

My explanation for the non-committal nature of my answer all those years is that I subconsciously realized how hard it is to experience all three of those. Many, perhaps most, people never experience the point of ignition. As Henry David Thoreau famously wrote, “The mass of men leads lives of quiet desperation.” Our society is noisy. Life can seem to be simply a series of distractions (I think I saw that on an episode of The Sopranos). It is hard to pay attention to the most important parts of our life, to engage in metacognition, to generate passion for a desired future state when there are selfies to post on Facebook, Twitter timelines to check and texts in need of reply. It is also quite possible that my previous answer was a bit of projection. I consistently struggle with an over active mind.

I do know that sudden change is possible now. In a case of “physician heal thyself,” this realization was a product of writing the book. As I introduced each stage in the process of becoming your best Me, I also completed the exercises. The planned purpose of this approach was to ensure that the process developed in a simple, straightforward sequence so the reader would achieve the intended results. The unplanned consequence for me was the realization that I had experienced one of these sudden changes back in 1995. In the language of wine, 1995 was a transformative vintage for Dave Mitchell.

Professionally, 1995 was the year that I decided to leave the corporate world despite having had significant success. That alone could be viewed as a point of ignition as it was the culmination of many life experiences pointing me toward radically rethinking my professional journey. Still, that decision wasn’t the result of tremendous and extensive metacognition or even driven by a passion. It was more related to fleeing unhappiness than moving purposely to a desired future state. The evidence for this was clear when I recently found an old notebook full of my ideas for my new company. Twenty-three years later, my work today bears almost no resemblance to what I outlined in my original business plan. That’s because my true point of ignition had not yet occurred. The actual point of ignition would arrive shortly after I started my own company while on a trip with my lovely bride to Romania. It involved a castle, a dungeon, a coffin and... maybe... something supernatural.

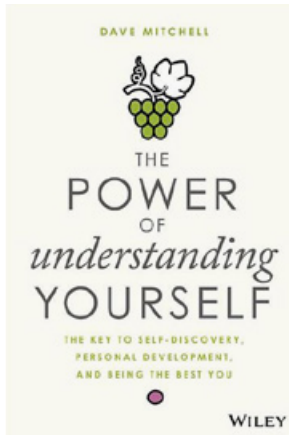
Suffice it to say that I returned from my trip to Europe having had a dramatic point of ignition. I engaged in many hours of intense metacognition and emerged with a passion to pursue a desired future state. The Leadership Difference, Inc. ceased to exist as a business and was born again as a personal crusade—the crusade captured in my mission statement.

All those long walks in the woods with my dog Red, escaping the maelstrom of my home had prepared me for what I wanted to become. But for a moment in time—a point of ignition—in Transylvania, I may have never made this sudden shift. It was only during the writing of the book that I came to understand the power of that single life event in galvanizing my change. This shift, now culminating so many years later with the book *The Power of Understanding Yourself*.

This metacognitive journey never ends—it just veers down new paths. Being the best Me for all of us is a continual process of understanding ourselves, recognizing the impact of life on our current state and aspiring to a better future state. That is the purpose of the book and writing it is a large part of the purpose of my life—**“to positively affect the life of every person I meet.”** 📖



Info



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About the author

Dave Mitchell is an international speaker, trainer, consultant, writer, sommelier and entrepreneur who has been delighting audiences all over the world with his entertaining style, powerful stories and “laugh and learn” philosophy. Since founding the Leadership Difference, Inc. in 1995, over 350,000 people have attended Dave’s “enter-TRAIN-ment” seminars on topics that include leadership, customer service, selling skills, wine education and personal performance enhancement. He has been named Best Speaker of the Year from several organizations and Eagles Talent Speakers Bureau named Dave one of the top 10 best business speakers.



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