

Control Freaks Make Great Leaders



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When Tony Dungy became head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1996, the team had thirteen losing seasons behind them, and people were telling Dungy not to take the job. They said that there was no way to win. Dungy went anyway.

When he arrived, he heard lots of explanations for the team's dismal record. Some said it was because the stadium was old and the facilities were poor. Others blamed it on low ticket sales, which meant the team couldn't afford to hire the players that they needed to win. Others said that cold weather kept them from winning, as they never won games when the temperature was less than forty degrees. And then the kicker: Some fans mentioned the so-called Doug Williams Curse. Supposedly, some voodoo-practicing woman who loved Doug Williams, the former quarterback, had put a curse on the team when he left, and the team could not become a winner again until that curse was lifted.

As Dungy reviewed this list of obstacles, he realized something important: the entire list was outside of his or his players' control. He did not have the budget to recruit a bunch of superstars, and he didn't have the ability to build a snazzy new stadium. They couldn't control the weather across the country, and there was no way to get rid of the voodoo woman, whoever she was. Dungy was facing things that he was "helpless to do anything about."

Nevertheless, Dungy didn't succumb to the hopelessness that inevitably accompanies helplessness, and he didn't tolerate an attitude of helplessness in others either. He immediately did something that all great leaders do, and there is no way to minimize the power of this one move. Essentially he asked one penetrating question: **What factors do we control that will contribute to success?**

He immediately went to work analyzing the statistics of the winning teams. He discovered that they shared three characteristics. They had lower turnovers (fumbles and interceptions), fewer penalties, and high-performing special teams (kickoffs, punts, punt returns). The first two characteristics have to do with what Dungy calls “self-inflicted wounds.” Giving the ball to the other team, or having mental lapses or emotional eruptions that get penalized—these are mistakes you cause yourself. The final category, special teams, is one that is often neglected, but when functioning well, they create the big plays that contribute to wins. Dungy’s strategy for winning boiled down to focusing on these three factors, all three of them totally within his and his players’ control. He led them to a turnaround, and then he carried that thinking on to the Indianapolis Colts, whom he led to the championship in Super Bowl XLI .

The lesson for leaders is clear: *Focus your people on what they have control of that directly affects the desired outcomes of the organization.* When you do that, two powerful things happen. Not only do you get results, but you also change the brains of your people so they function better and then get even more results, in a spiraling, upward direction. Both are important.

The Brain Loves Control

A sense of being in control changes people’s brains and affects their performance big time. Help them get a sense of what they can control that affects results and empower them to exercise that control, and you have brains firing with a lot of horsepower.

Here’s what happens. When people’s brains are working at their best, they are more creative, better problem solvers, less reactive, more proactive and goal oriented. They have more energy, and they have a better sense of well-being. The lesson for leaders is this: give people more control and they will thrive. And then, help them focus that control on the things that drive results, and they win, and you will, too.

It turns out that our brains just love control. When we perceive that we have the ability to be in control of things that affect some result, we get amped. It is the exact opposite of what happens in learned helplessness. Instead of powerlessness creeping in, it is intoxicatingly empowering, in a good way.

Neuroscience has shown that the more experiences we have of being in control, the better our higher brains function. It is when we are affected by things outside of our control—and cannot regain a sense of being in control of anything that will make a difference—that we hit a real brain slowdown. You can see why people who feel like they have little choice in life are more apt to give up, and go into negative spirals. But if they can regain a sense of control, great things happen.

This is why *leaders must turn into “control freaks”—just not in the way we usually think of.* Instead of being a control freak by controlling other people, leaders must turn into control freaks about letting others be in control of what they should be in control of that drives results.

Great leaders do the opposite of exercising control over others. Instead of taking all the control, they give it away. They help people take control of themselves and their performance. The popular meaning of control freak is someone who tries to control

everything, and drives everyone around him crazy. What I mean here is a leader who obsessively focuses on helping his or her people get back in control of themselves, to drive their own activities that directly affect outcomes.

The leadership mandate is exactly the same one Tony Dungy embraced: find and focus on the things that you can control that affect outcomes. And the good news is that when a sphere of control is reestablished—when boundaries are set to limit negative thinking patterns, on the one hand, and to identify the factors over which one does have control, on the other—learned helplessness can be reversed.

Look at placing boundaries on learned helplessness. Dungy's team felt like they could not win because their stadium was old, the money was short, the weather was bad, and they were cursed. But his leadership boundaries set limits on that sense of learned helplessness by attending to what they could control: turnovers, penalties, and special teams. Likewise he inhibited them from focusing on other things, like Hail Mary passes, getting a new stadium, taking out voodoo woman, and hiring a superstar or some “wow” factor. And he kept working memory alive as he kept his focus on turnovers, penalties, and special teams day after day with metrics ever before them. As they did, they got better. And better. See the formula? *You will get what you create and what you allow*. He created a focused sense of control and did not allow helpless thinking. And they started winning again.

How to Reverse “Learned Helplessness”

Learned helplessness can be powerfully addressed in the context of a small, supportive team or group. This can happen with a few people, or more. Even in companies where I have literally taken thousands of people through a system-wide approach, I usually divide them up into smaller teams to work together, preferably comprised of the work teams that already exist. A group of six to ten works great, but I have also seen performance turnarounds even when two people go through the program together. (Research and experience suggest that sizes in the six-to-nine range are very effective.)

Relational support can change the brain chemistry and get the higher-order brain functions working again as threat decreases. It also helps when people find that they are not alone in facing obstacles, not the only ones feeling that way. It normalizes the struggle for them, allowing them to feel less threatened and defensive as they find out that others have similar feelings and experiences. As one man said, “I feel better already, just knowing that you guys are as screwed up as I am.”

So figure out a structured time and space for people to go through this program together. And don't wait too long between get-togethers so that the impact of the previous session is lost. In my experience, results come pretty quickly, yet many teams like to continue these sessions for a longer time, using them as an ongoing mechanism for solving business problems and staying connected.

But no matter the frequency, it's essential that the tone stays positive in that it is about solving problems. That does not mean at all that negative realities are not discussed; in fact the whole process is about facing those negative realities. But the atmosphere and tone must be safe. Connectedness is built when the environment is safe, and when people are not just parading their strengths, or judging others, or hiding, but are being honest about their struggles. That is when the chemistry of oneness and unity begins to really take over

and create group strength, when people are honest and willing to share their victories and their difficulties with each other. They have to get real and show some vulnerability. We bond with and follow people who are not perfect, yet are overcoming.

As a leader, you may choose to have someone else facilitate these discussions or you may facilitate the process yourself. In one company I worked with, we trained four hundred managers to take about ten thousand people through the program, so it can certainly be scaled, and you do not have to do it all yourself.

But if you are leading your team or others through this process, don't think that you have to be above the fray. Research has shown that revealing some vulnerability increases connections, so don't be afraid as a leader to let your team know that you struggle with challenges as well. If they sense you are too far ahead of them in the battle such that they will never be able to catch up, they may not derive benefit from your insights. It's helpful for them to know two things: that you are overcoming obstacles and winning, but at the same time, that you are not immune or impervious to it all and have some real challenges. Think Indiana Jones: "I hate snakes," and then he wins in spite of them.

Regain Control Through the "Control Divide"

What I am about to tell you is going to sound so simplistic that you might miss the profound value that it has. But you have to just trust me that its effects can be incredible for your business (not to mention other dimensions of your life).

First, take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle of the page, creating two columns. In column number one, write down all of the things that you have no control over that are making your business difficult, such as the economy, the stock market, your customers' finances, the banks, your boss, the parent company, the health care cost increase, the company's overall budget, the board, the elections, the newscasts that hurt your business, etc. Those are the things that you have no control over that truly are affecting you. Get everything in that column that you can think of.

Next, I want you to REALLY worry about these items, even as a group. Obsess over them. Ruminates. Dwell. Think it through over and over . . . FOR ABOUT FIVE OR TEN MINUTES. Then, I want you to set the list aside until the next day when you can do the same thing all over again. The reason I suggest that you do this is that you need to! You need to worry about this stuff, and get into "ain't it awful!" for a few minutes because it is! It is really bad stuff. I do not want you to be in denial. Besides, your brain needs to complete the loop of making sure that you know how bad it is. Otherwise, it will continue to remind you of it, probably in the middle of the night or every time you have some good idea. So, focus on it. BUT. . . only for about five or ten minutes.

Next, after you have had your "worry time," I want you to draw a circle around that time block and stop thinking about that column. Quarantine it. Put a boundary around it. If you find it helpful, put a red STOP sign on it. No more thinking about those things.

Next, and most important, let's go to the second column. In this column I want you to write down everything that you DO have control over that can drive results. This need not be a final list. You can always add more activities as they occur to you and your team, as they probably will change as time goes on. But once you have the list in the initial form, I want

you to focus on it every single day. Make prioritizing and doing those activities the primary focus of every day. Work the list.

What makes this simple exercise so powerful is that it speaks directly to our brains' executive functions and our desire to have control. The brain begins to "attend" to the actual activities that it can control (hold on to the football), and it "inhibits" the thoughts, behaviors, and information that interfere with positive actions (worrying and focusing on stadiums and voodoo ladies). The process of doing this, individually and collectively, builds up working memory and creates those positive, action-oriented behaviors that lead to better results, new products, new partnerships, new customers, and a lot more fun. The brain begins to get out of the mud.

Sometimes the initiatives are big and ambitious, but even the simplest initiatives can have a big impact. Consider, for example, one woman I met with at a technology consulting company at the worst moment in the financial crisis. I was doing the initial discovery process to figure out what was working and what wasn't. This person was thriving in the midst of the downturn while almost everyone else in her office was burying their heads and seeing diminishing numbers. What she was doing to thrive was exactly what I am describing here.

Here is how she explained her results: "Every day," she offered, "I come in, sit down at my desk, and look at that little yellow Post-it note on my screen. On it I have listed all the things that I actually can do that I have total control over and will make a difference: It says I can show up with energy and optimism—that is my choice. I can reach out to customers and find out how they are doing in this downturn and show them compassion. I can call them on a regular schedule to check up on them. I can do regular activities to create leads, and then reach out to a certain number of new prospects every day. I can craft an opinion on their consulting needs and communicate that to them, and I can give people a perspective on where this is all going for them to hang on to. I can offer workshops for companies. Each day, I can do all of those things, and when I just focus on those, I feel really good and good things are happening."

She was focusing on specific behaviors that she could control and that drive results, and she had managed to keep learned helplessness at bay. It's especially worth noting that her action steps were not amazingly creative. She was doing very simple activities and behaviors, the fundamentals, and they were working. As a result, she had a positive, hopeful attitude that generated energy that was very different from the kind of vibe her coworkers were giving off. When she talked to clients and potential clients, they were eager to listen and engage with her because of the positive energy she put out.

Optimism is powerful. But its resurrection cannot take hold until a sense of control is regained. Over the course of working with many leaders in the midst of both good and bad times, I've seen all sorts of reversals in performance made possible once the leader and his team were able to reassert their control. One leader in a financial services firm held "town meetings" for clients that helped the firm regain their trust. As she told me, "I cannot control the market, but I can provide some stability with a community of people by consistently being there for them." Her business grew in the downturn as a result of doing this one thing she could control. She could do activities that built stability, and her clients responded.

When you get your people to think about, look for, and take charge of what they can actually control, it has an impact on success. Brains change, and so does behavior. But it is leadership's responsibility to create that kind of realization and culture. Remember: **You get what you create and what you allow.**

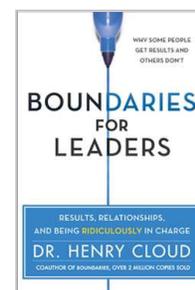
In companies where employees accept a high degree of ownership for the drivers of the business that they can control, you can feel the effect. There are too many forces in the business environment that you cannot control to ever give up the ones you can. Your competitors won't, and you can't afford to, either. No matter what the larger environment, just like in football, both teams have to show up and play on the same field and in the same weather. So take control, bring your game, and show up ready to play. Great companies drive home this message every day and with every employee. They empower people to take control of the things they can control that drive results. The rest is just noise.

Change requires energy, and producing it is one of a leader's greatest jobs. Learned helplessness, and its concomitant negative thinking, suck energy right out of an organization. A leader must set very strong boundaries against helplessness and negativity; he must also provide the fuel to get people moving. Injecting people with energy and a new sense of power and control is a huge part of what leadership is about. You can set values and goals, but if you give your people specific ways to be in control of actions that drive the organization forward, you'll have created a distinct competitive advantage.

Questions for Thought:

1. How much control do you think you give to people in your team and organization that makes them feel empowered to affect results?
2. Where have people in your organization gotten helpless in the way they are working and thinking?
3. How could you implement Dr. Cloud's instruction to create a sense of connection and control that changes your people's thinking and generates action?

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Dr. Henry Cloud is an acclaimed leadership expert, psychologist, and best-selling author. He draws on his experience in business, leadership consulting, and his practice as a clinical psychologist, to impart practical and effective advice for improving leadership skills and workplace performance. To find out more about Dr. Cloud's consulting and training programs for leaders and organizations, visit: www.DrCloud.com

