Getting to Gutsy: Using Personal Policies to Enhance (and Reclaim) Agency in The Workplace

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Abstract

*This article introduces the concept of personal policies defined as simple rules based on one's values, priorities, principles and preferences that guide one's decisions and actions. It illustrates when, why and how women leaders can rely on personal policies as an effective mechanism to enhance and reclaim agency in the workplace and advance themselves both professionally and personally. It introduces the **D**iagnose – **R**eflect – **E**stablish - **A**ct - **M**onitor (DREAM) framework to inspire and empower women leaders to develop their own set of personal policies that can shape how they lead, and live.*

> *"Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women."*
>
> – Maya Angelou, American poet and civil rights activist (1928-2014).

Stand up for yourself. Lean into opportunity. Speak up. Stop apologizing. Be gutsy. Although this is advice women hear on a daily basis, many recognize that they naturally tend *not* to do these things. For the past six years I have led the Women in Leadership Initiative at the Bauer College of Business at the University of Houston. During this time, I have systematically translated my research on personal mastery and self-regulation into actionable insights that facilitate the professional development and advancement of women leaders. A key pillar underlying this leadership program is to teach women leaders the practice of acting with agency to achieve professional success and personal happiness and well-being. Agency

is simply the purposeful drive to pursue what is important to you. But, why is becoming more agentic an important goal for women leaders?

Compelling evidence from numerous surveys and research studies show that women tend to be lower in agentic motivation compared to their male counterparts. In this article, I will present evidence for what I have dubbed "the agency gap" to illustrate how low agency plays out in the workplace with consequential negative outcomes, not only for professional advancement, but also for personal well-being and happiness. But I will not leave you with this dismal picture and no viable solution. The central purpose of this article is to illustrate that agency *can* be enhanced and reclaimed through deliberate practice and is most effective when it is grounded in one's values and reflects one's authentic self.

I will introduce the concept of personal policies – simple rules that are grounded in one's values, principles, priorities and preferences that inform one's decisions and actions - as a means by which to enact or reclaim agency. I will introduce the DREAM (**D**iagnose – **R**eflect – **E**stablish - **A**ct – **M**onitor) framework that I have developed to help establish and implement personal policies that can shape how one leads, and lives. Using numerous examples, I will illustrate how women in the workplace can develop the mindset and tools to become more agentic without compromising the other traits that characterize their leadership style like empathy, humility, compassion and communality.

It is my goal that this article will empower and inspire women leaders to accept and embrace leadership positions, to build confidence and self-worth, to consistently communicate evidence of their competence and value, and to do this with emotional intelligence, grace and authenticity.

Personal Agency in the Workplace
What is Agency?

Agency is defined as "assuming strategic perspectives and/or taking strategic actions toward goals that matter."[1] Agency reflects a person's "ability to make powerful and purposeful choices"[2] in pursuit of the goals or values [they] regard as important.[3] Simply put, agency is a purposeful drive to wholeheartedly pursue what you deem to be meaningful and important.

Research posits four pillars of personal agency: (1) intentionality (creation of goals, vision), (2) forethought (visualizing the consequences of ones plans), (3) self-reactiveness (regulation of action) and (4) self-reflectiveness (reflecting on thoughts and actions).[4] As such personal power,[5] which encompasses autonomy, freedom, independence and being in control, is a closely related aspect of agency. Autonomy in an individual is described as "when [their] behavior is experienced as willingly enacted and when [they]

fully endorse the actions in which [they are] engaged and/or the values expressed by them."[6] Agency in a leader often manifests itself as acting in accordance with one's values, principles, priorities and preferences with focus and commitment. But are all leaders equally agentic?

The Agency Gap

Research finds that men and women differ on a crucial ingredient for personal and professional advancement: personal agency. A meta-analysis of public opinion polls that assess the attitudes of 30,000 U.S. adults from 1946 to 2018 on three sets of traits — competence (i.e., intelligent, creative, good at your job, well-trained), communal traits (i.e., emotionally intelligent, warm and caring, good listener, empathetic) and agentic traits (i.e., ambitious, confident, self-focused) sought to determine whether participants thought each trait was truer of women or men or equally true of both.[7]

As one might expect, communal stereotypes viewing women as more compassionate, caring and sensitive than men remained strong over time. Where the needle shifted the most over this period of time, however, was in terms of competence stereotypes. There was a dramatic shift in attitude in which women who were seen as lagging in competence in early poll years were now seen as equally, or even more, competent than men. The authors report that "The direction of the competence stereotype reversed over time; for instance, 34% of respondents indicated that women are more intelligent than men in Gallup's (1946) poll, but 65% did so in the 2018 poll." This is corroborated by other indicators of women's competence in the workplace such as their superior scores on a number of competence-related leadership dimensions from problem-solving to being able to set stretch goals and drive results.[8]

Overall, the combination of high communality and high competence is very good news for women in the workplace. The researchers observe "These current stereotypes should favor women's employment because competence is, of course, a job requirement for virtually all positions. Also, jobs increasingly reward social skills, making women's greater communion an additional advantage."

But here is the not-so-great news. Not surprisingly, where women lag behind men lies in agency stereotypes. Men are more ambitious, confident and self-promoting than women. Despite being equally or more competent, agency perceptions for women did not significantly change over time. What this might imply for women is that *while women might get the job and be able to do the job, their careers are likely to advance more slowly*. The authors conclude, "On a less positive note, most leadership roles require more agency than communion. Therefore, the lesser agency ascribed to women than men

is a disadvantage in relation to leadership positions." This is what I refer to as the "agency gap".

Characteristics of Low Agency at Work

How does low agency play out in the workplace? In this section, I will highlight five ways in which women tend to display low agency in the workplace and lay out the negative consequences this has for career advancement, professional success and personal happiness and well-being. Integrated in this discussion are the numerous reasons for *why* women might display less agentic motivation: they are people pleasers and "too nice,", they fear the potential consequences and expect negative backlash from colleagues, they do not know how to effectively refuse a professional request, and/or they genuinely believe that competence and communality are enough to get you ahead.

1. ***Lower confidence:*** There is evidence that women tend to be less self-assured and less confident than their male counterparts.[9] In their book *Womenomics,* Claire Shipman and Katty Kay find that the problem of low confidence amongst women is rampant in organizations, even among women who "you would assume brim with confidence."[10] Data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, Women's Report finds that in virtually every economy sampled, "women had lower capability perceptions and greater fear of failure compared with men."[11]

   Research finds that under-confidence amongst women can decrease career aspirations and thwart professional advancement in the career that they choose. Studies reveal that when a job opportunity is made available, men apply for the job when they meet only 60% of the job qualifications compared to women who will apply only if they are able to check all the boxes.[12] According to a 2018 PwC survey, when it comes to job promotions, only 39% of women said they would put themselves forward for a promotion if they met *all* of the job criteria and only 17% of women, a much smaller margin, would step up even if they didn't think they met all the criteria.[13]

   Unfortunately, displays of under-confidence are conflated with low competence and a hesitancy to act.[14,15] The Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, noted for her unique combination of compassion and agency, recently posted the following reflection on Twitter: "One of the criticisms I've faced over the years is that I am not aggressive enough or assertive enough, or maybe somehow, because I'm empathetic, it means I'm weak. I totally rebel against that. I refuse to believe that you cannot be both compassionate and strong."

2. ***Not asking for what you want or deserve:*** Women are less likely to ask for what they want, or even deserve, in the workplace.[16] Whether it is a promotion, a raise, a new job or even time off, women are less likely to ask, and consequently get lower access to critical resources. Take salary negotiations, for instance. Studies show that men are four times more likely to initiate salary negotiations than women are, and that when women do ask for a salary increase, they ask for 30 percent less money than men do.[17] Another survey by Randstad in 2020 finds that 60% of women report that they have never negotiated salary with an employer and an astounding 72% of women would rather leave their job to get a salary bump elsewhere than negotiate a raise at their current job.[18] One interesting finding from the research, however, is that if women are told that they could negotiate salaries, they were more likely to do so.[19]

Consider mentorship as another example. Even though women know that finding the right mentor or mentors can provide them with a resource to help deal with challenges and provide a supportive network for professional advancement and growth, getting access to mentors can be challenging for women. Research finds that women do not know how ask for a mentor and set up a mentoring relationships. They might even avoid asking for help or guidance for fear of being refused.[20]

There are numerous reasons proposed for why women hold themselves back and not ask for what they want. One key reason uncovered by research is the backlash they might receive, as some authors observed, "because female leaders are seen as gender norm deviants who threaten the gender status hierarchy, the backlash they encounter more likely constitutes a motivated process whereby perceivers' negative evaluations stem from a desire to maintain the status quo (i.e., gender inequality)."[21] This problem is a real one. Recent research that analyzes 2,500 negotiators finds that as a woman rises up the ranks in an organization, she faces a greater backlash if she negotiates salary assertively.[22] The study found that that women who acted with agency in a negotiation were more likely to obtain worse deals or no deal at all. The authors emphasize that the answer is not to tell women not to ask for what they want, but to "reimagine the negotiation process."[23]

Many organizations are gendered workplaces[24] that embody and reward values and traits that are more characteristic of men, resulting in fewer women being afforded opportunities for advancement and leadership. To remedy this, a popular solution that has been offered is the use of gender quotas to enable women to occupy leadership roles in government and in organizations to accomplish what does not happen organically. However, this is not a perfect solution. It turns out that

backlash and workplace sabotage against women is not perpetrated only by men, but also by women against other women, the latter occurrence often described as the "queen bee phenomenon," especially in organizations that assign explicit or implicit quotas or limits on female participation in leadership.[25] Much more research is needed to identify how organizations and leaders can prevent agentic women from experiencing backlash in the workplace. Research shows that backlash is reduced in corporate environments in which there are a significant number of women in leadership positions who advocate for other women,[26] in organizations that recognize and value unconventional or atypical forms of leadership[27] and those that create an environment with plentiful resources so that there is enough for everyone[28] and those that train employees to recognize and fight against implicit biases.[29]

3. *Undervaluing your contribution:* Studies consistently show that women are harsh critics of their own capability. Research show that women frequently talk down their accomplishments and commonly undervalue their contribution when working alongside men in a successful team.[30] These researchers find that this undervaluing effect is exacerbated when the woman is working in an explicitly male dominant role, unless some form of positive reinforcement or proof of individual contribution is provided.

    In some early research with highly successful women, researchers uncovered what we now commonly refer to as the "imposter syndrome" – the extent to which successful women struggle to internalize their success and attribute achievements to external factors, even in the presence of evidence to the contrary.[31] These women held on to the belief that they were unworthy of promotions, recognition and rewards and saw themselves as frauds. Even today, successful women experience self-doubt, guilt, unworthiness and feelings of intellectual inadequacy. A recent article on the imposter syndrome notes that "famous women — from Hollywood superstars such as Charlize Theron and Viola Davis to business leaders such as Sheryl Sandberg and even former First Lady Michelle Obama and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor — have confessed to experiencing it."[32]

    Several researchers have attributed this devaluation by women of their own abilities as one of the reasons why incompetent men are increasingly taking on leadership positions,[33] especially in competitive environments.[34] Driven by the belief that they are not good enough, women accept and find themselves in lower status and lower paying jobs compared to men.[35,36]

4. *Inability to say "No" to non-promotable tasks*: Research finds that women are more likely to say yes to a workplace request.[37] In every work environment there are promotable tasks (those that drive revenue, are challenging and valuable for the organization and rewarded in performance evaluations) and non-promotable tasks (those that do not drive revenue, are time-consuming but not challenging and not recognized or included in performance evaluations). In other words, non-promotable tasks are the housekeeping tasks that include chores like cleaning out the breakroom fridge, organizing the office picnic, bringing in coffee and bagels for the Monday morning meeting, planning a retirement party, etc. Researchers find that women are more likely to be asked to perform non-promotable tasks in the workplace and are more likely to say yes to performing these tasks.[38] One common explanation for this is that women do not say no to workplace requests because they feel that they need to be helpful and supportive of others and that they feel guilty if they do not. The challenge in this regard is to say yes to the "right" things and in this way be both communal and agentic. Importantly, we need to recognize the downsides of saying yes to things that are "wrong" for you.

   Oprah Winfrey is perhaps one of the most vocal proponents of the importance of saying "No" to things that do not align with your purpose. Several of her guests from Alicia Keys to Tara Westover share Oprah's advice on saying "No." In an interview, Tara Westover, the author of the book Educated, was asked "First things first: Tell me all the advice Oprah gave you off-stage". Her response: "We talked about how to protect yourself and how to say "no." So yeah, it was a lot of practical advice. I'm trying to figure out how to be useful and do things that are good to do but still have something that resembles a life. It doesn't have to be a full-on life, just a resemblance of a life. And she was saying to me, "No is a complete sentence.""[39]

5. *Little or no self-promotion*: Self-promotion is the act of conveying information about your ability and performance when the invitation or opportunity arises, and research demonstrates a persistent gender gap in the act of self-promotion.[40] Women tend to hold a belief that self-promotion is a negative thing and are even socialized to think that others will look down on them for any self-promotion. In concert with this belief, research finds that women who self-advocate or self-promote can face workplace backlash for not behaving with the stereotypically expected modesty.[41,42] Women may perceive such backlash as more costly than the

opportunities foregone by not negotiating for higher salaries or for failure to promote one's accomplishments to others.

In the book *Brag: The art of tooting your own horn without blowing it*, author Peggy Klaus, dispels the misperceptions around self-promotion and argues that learning to share your achievements with pride and enthusiasm is an essential communication skill to master.[43]

In this section, I have outlined five characteristics of low agency at work displayed by women. Why is this important to recognize and acknowledge? First, it illustrates the real consequences of acting with low agency. Second, it helps explain why, despite women's significant educational achievements and competence, the promotion trajectories and pathways for professional success of men and women remain vastly different in traditional organizations. Third, it underscores the truism that what happens at work has an effect on our lives. If we experience a lack of recognition, a wage-gap or the burden of being overwhelmed with thankless tasks, this knowledge can result in unhappiness, stress, negative health outcomes and diminished subjective well-being. Most importantly, however, recognizing these low agency behaviors in ourselves is the first step in learning how to sidestep them. As Brene Brown observes in her book *Daring Greatly* sometimes we all need a "permission slip" to do bold things.[44] Being agentic can simply be giving yourself the permission to put yourself first once in a while and ask for what you want.

Indeed, this research clearly identifies what we need to do. The benefits of agency, in most cases, can outweigh the costs of backlash. Indeed, research studies are being conducted to identify conditions under which backlash effects can be reduced.[45]

Experience, coupled by self-knowledge, can help individuals get more comfortable with acting with agency while reducing the potential backlash. Research finds that as female leaders gain more experience, they tend to become more confident, i.e., older women (> age 50) tend to report significantly higher levels of confidence than younger women.[46] Research also finds that women who act in an agentic manner but are also high in self-monitoring behaviors (defined by the authors as "individuals' abilities to accurately assess social situations and to project situationally appropriate responses") experience less backlash and receive more promotions than those who were agentic but low self-monitors.[47]

In what follows, I will introduce the notion of personal policies - a scientifically backed mechanism grounded in self-reflection and self-monitoring that can help you, as a women leader, to enhance and reclaim

agency, give voice to your values and advance yourself both professionally and personally.

Using Personal Policies to Bridge the Agency Gap
What are Personal Policies?

Personal policies are an established set of simple rules that we set for ourselves based on our unique identity that guide our decisions and actions. Each one of us is unique and so are the constellation of values, priorities, principles and preferences we have and hold. There are three aspects of personal policies that differentiate them from other related ideas like goals, resolutions and habits. Personal policies are simple rules you set for yourself that:

1. Stem from your identity,
2. Reflect your values, priorities, principles and preferences, and,
3. Direct your decisions and actions towards achieving your unique purpose in a way that works for you.

The philosopher Jean- Jacques Rosseau said, "To be driven by our appetites alone is slavery, while to obey a law that we have imposed on ourselves is freedom". Drawing inspiration from this quote, we might consider personal policies to be rules that we impose on ourselves (or communicate to others) in order to live the meaningful and purposeful life that we want. In other words, a personal policy is simply a course of action that you adopt for yourself as your way of doing things that matter to you. While goals and resolutions are destinations you want to reach, personal policies are your operating manual, personalized for your unique situation - a way you do things, think about things, and make choices and enact behaviors.

Putting two and two together, you will quickly realize that goals and resolutions will be more likely achieved if they are transformed into personal policies. For instance, it might be your goal to write more and express yourself creatively in writing. You might frame this as a resolution saying, "This year I will write more". In contrast, a personal policy is a way in which you incorporate your goals into your daily life as part of what you do. Like you brush your teeth, make your bed, you will also write. A personal policy like this one could be translated into a daily ritual "The first thing I do after I wake up is get my coffee and sit down and write for 30 minutes every day". Consider that this might not work for someone who is not a morning person. For that person, perhaps after dinner and some TV, at around 10 pm while everyone is in bed and the house is quiet, is when they settle down with a cup of chamomile tea and write for 30 minutes. As this example illustrates, while a goal or a resolution is generic, impersonal and framed as something you

want to achieve, a personal policy is specific, precise and concrete, and tailor-made to reflect what you value, prioritize and prefer.

Research shows that framing your decisions and actions in a way that reflects your identity conveys conviction and determination and does not invite pushback from others.[48,49] In this research, my co-author and I found that using a personal policy that stems from one's own identity (using the words "I don't...") to say "No" to a request, is more persuasive than one that weakly signals identity (using the words "I can't...."). This research showed that a personal policy that is grounded in one's identity, conveys one's stance with conviction and determination and is less likely to get pushback from others. Try framing your personal policy in "I don't" terms, e.g. "I don't take red-eye flights" or "I don't work on Saturday" or "I don't eat between meals," and you might find that it works effectively to communicate your stance to others, and yourself.

How Personal Policies Work: The DREAM Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the DREAM (**D**iagnose – **R**eflect – **E**stablish - **A**ct - **M**onitor (DREAM) framework to inspire and empower you to develop your own set of personal policies that can shape how you lead, and live. As I describe each of the steps, I will provide illustrative examples of what I mean. As you will no doubt notice, these examples straddle both our personal and professional lives. Research shows that when people develop an identity that integrates both work and home, they feel more authentic.[50] This resonates with Sheryl Sandberg's observation in her book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*, in which she points out "I don't believe we have a professional self Monday through Friday and a real self the rest of the time. It is all professional and it is all personal."[51]

Step 1: Diagnose. Personal policies begin with self-knowledge and reflection. Rather than looking outwards at what the world expects of you, look inwards to identify what you want for yourself. The painter Agnes Martin observed "There are so many people who don't know what they want. And I think that, in this world, that's the only thing you have to know — exactly what you want."

Knowledge of your purpose can help you identify a new habit you want to establish or recognize a pain point that you regularly experience. Some examples I have come across in talking to women leaders include behaviors you want to change (e.g., checking your Twitter feed every few minutes), a new habit you want develop (an exercise regime), some occurrence that you do not like happening and want to change (not having family time during the evening because of work-related phone-calls and interruptions) or a feeling

you cannot shake off (being underappreciated at work). Ask yourself the questions listed under the "Diagnose" step of the DREAM framework (Figure 1) to identify a pain point that you might have in your life.

Figure 1. The DREAM Framework for Setting Personal Policies

Diagnose: Identify the Pain Point	Ask:	- Is there a habit I need to change? - A behavior that is not working for me? - Something I want to happen that is not currently happening? - Something I want to stop happening, but it persists?
Reflect: Look Within with Understanding	Ask:	- Why do I want a change? - What values are not being upheld? - What principles are being challenged? - What priorities are being neglected? - What preferences are not being met?
Establish: Formulate a Personal Policy	Ask:	- What is the target? Do I need an announcement or self talk or both? - What form should my personal policy take? Should it be a decision rule? A ritual or a precept? - Can I benchmark, copy or borrow what works from someone else?
Act: Get Started and Implement	Ask:	- What do I have to say "No" to? - Am I experiencing pushback from myself or others? - Is there something that is holding me back that I need to address? - What do I need to tweak and adjust?
Monitor: Update and Change	Ask:	- What is working for me and what isn't? - Is there a pain point or conflict I need to address? - Have my circumstances changed? Are my expectations (work or life) changed? - Does success look different to me now?

Step 2: Reflect. Once you have identified the broad area in which you want to implement some change, the next step requires thoughtful reflection of *why* this change is important. A deep understanding of what values, principles, priorities or preferences are not being upheld is a necessary step in becoming more agentic, but in a way that is values-driven and authentic. This step of looking inward will help you understand what underlies your need for change. For instance, your desire to institute an exercise regime could be related to your values of good health, family, personal safety and financial security. Your desire to stop checking Twitter feed could stem from a desire for greater productivity, enhanced mindfulness or simply because

the distraction prevents your focus on work and family. Your sense that you are underappreciated at work could stem from your striving for excellence and drive for good results. Consider the questions listed under the "Reflect" step of the DREAM framework (Figure 1) to develop the self-knowledge you need to establish an effective personal policy.

Step 3. Establish. Now that you have an understanding of why you want to set up a personal policy, the next step is putting one together. This requires two considerations: (1) identify the target for your personal policy, and (2) decide on the form it will take.

(1) *Identify the Target.* A personal policy is a simple rule you set up that is either directed towards others (an announcement), one that is directed towards yourself (self-talk) or one that is both.

Announcements are personal policies that you need to communicate to others because other people are taking you away from your purpose. In other words, when you find yourself being taken off your own path, you need to come up with announcements. If you want to protect family time in the evenings, an example of an announcement would be telling your team at work that you are unavailable between 5 pm and 8 pm because it is family time (You might say: "I don't take meetings between 5 pm and 8 pm" or "I am not available between 5 pm and 8 pm"). If you find yourself spending all day in meetings with no time to do the actual work you have to do, then you need to carve out some time for "deep work". Perhaps blocking out a chunk of time daily on your calendar to get work done or move the needle on a passion project and tell people you are unavailable, as you would for any other meeting on your calendar (You could say "Sorry, I will sit this one out, I have another event on my calendar at that time"). If you travel a great deal but have found that red eye flights do not work for you, develop a personal policy by communicating that you do not take red-eye flights (You might say: "I don't take red-eye flights"). You could also make it a policy that you and your team share and celebrate accomplishments. In doing so, you could make it easier for everyone, including you, to celebrate professional and personal milestones while expressing gratitude for the support received from the team.

You can also use announcements to achieve your personal goals. A middle Eastern friend of mine remarked that she found it hard to refuse to eat the rich food served at family and community get-togethers because the host would take it as a personal offense. She found that sharing that she had decided to become a pescatarian allowed her to stick to the food that she preferred to eat without hurting anyone's feelings.

Self-talk is a personal policy that you need to set up for yourself to keep yourself focused on tasks or behaviors that are important to you. If you want to develop an exercise regime, you could consider the advice given by Gretchen Rubin. She describes how she does not think about it, but at a designated time gets ready, laces up her shoes, steps out of the house and closes the door behind her. Having performed these essential first steps, she finds herself going for a run or heading to the gym.[52] After all, often the hardest part is showing up! Many people lament about not having enough time to read. When this happens, I enthusiastically recommend Laura Vandakam's TED talk and book to these folks. Vanderkam points out that everyone has the same 168 hours and that as such one has time to do all the things that are important to them. If you find yourself saying things like "I don't have the time to read" consider whether you can develop a personal policy by which you can convert some of the time you spend watching your favorite Netflix shows into time to read or find some "fringe time" or short pockets of time within your day (e.g., after lunch or before bed or while waiting in a car or in a line) to read or listen to a book instead of browsing social media. If you are someone who shies away from public speaking and you want to change that, you could make it a policy to volunteer to speak to clients or present work on behalf of your team once a week. This policy could feel harsh at first, but soon the weekly practice could help you overcome your fears and help you build the confidence you need. Research on shaping new goal-directed behavior, specifically of this form referred to as implementation intentions, can be very effective.[53]

Some personal policies need to be both announcements we make to others and self-talk for ourselves. A professor I know works from home on Wednesdays. When she decided to do this, she had to not only communicate to her faculty colleagues and doctoral students that she was not on campus on Wednesdays, but she also had to resist the temptation to drop by the office to get some things done on the day she designated as a work-from-home day. A wise friend once said to me "why would someone take you seriously, if you don't take yourself seriously?".

(2) *Forms that Personal Policies can take*. Based on my research, personal policies take three main forms: Decision Rules (guidelines or heuristics for decision-making), Rituals/Routines (daily practices) and Precepts/Aphorisms/Proverbs (words to live by).

Decision rules are rules we place on ourselves that guide our decisions. As the philosopher Bratman wrote, we are not frictionless deliberators. Every time we have to think about what to do, make a decision, debate and weigh options, deliberate over which way forward, we use up precious mental

energy. This leaves us feeling drained and overwhelmed. This feeling is exacerbated when we are navigating unfamiliar territory. What are some decision rules you can put in now?

During a leadership lecture a few years ago Stephanie Cox, then President of Schlumberger North America, was asked how she managed her time. Among the other practical tips she offered she said, "I don't say yes to a 5 minute meeting request." She went on to describe how people often approach her asking for 5 minutes of her time and she has learned that 5 minutes is never just 5 minutes and that she found herself stressed by these requests. She described how she developed a way of asking colleagues to email her for an appointment giving her a brief description of what they want to talk about. Setting, and upholding, this *decision rule* not only helped Cox manage her time, but also allowed her to be better prepared for the meeting when it happened.

Decision rules are a form of self-discipline. The award-winning novelist and philanthropist, Isabel Allende, has a system in place that places an emphasis on her book writing despite her many commitments. She starts every new book on the same day - January 8 – the day she started her first novel "The House of Spirits". In an interview, she described the rationale for this as follows "My life is busy, so I need to save some months of the year to be in a retreat. I need time and silence, or I will never be able to write. Having a start date is good for me and everybody around me. They know that on January 8, I'm not available anymore."

Rituals are practices and routines we follow on a regular basis. Rituals create ways to maintain self-control, increase the predictability of our days and help maintain regularity in our daily lives. Adopting a set of rituals that infuse positivity into our day can make dealing with hardships easier. Many successful people have morning rituals that inform the mindset with which they start their day. Disney CEO Bob Iger has a morning ritual of waking up at 4:15 am to exercise, read and organize his thoughts. He avoids using his phone and claims that his "firewall with technology" sets him up for success.[54] Meditation, journaling, gratitude and appreciation exercises and reading are some popular elements of a good morning ritual. In his book *Deep Work*, the author Cal Newport describes his "work shutdown" routine that reduces unnecessary worry about unfinished tasks. The five-step process that ends with the phrase *"schedule shutdown, complete" provides both a sense of accomplishment for a good day's work as well as a sense of control over pending tasks and deadlines. Newport recommends finding a way to end each day positively to give each new day a fresh and productive start.*

Ex-chairwoman and CEO of PepsiCo, Indra Nooyi engaged in a yearly activity in which she would write 400 handwritten notes each year to the

parents of her executives to express her gratitude and say, "Thank you for the gift of your child to our company.'" This simple and unexpected gesture went a long way in demonstrating her people-first leadership mindset. The practices and the rituals you enact on a daily basis can go a long way in communicating that you "walk the talk" as a leader.

One Silicon Valley executive set up a practice to use his long commute home as open "office hours". He told family, friends and work colleagues, that anyone who wanted to reach him could call without an appointment between 5 pm and 6 pm on any weekday. He found that this simple act made use of what would typically be down time, was efficient and resulted in a lot fewer meetings to schedule.

Precepts, proverbs or aphorisms are words we live by. Messages like these have tremendous power and can illustrate ideas, convey values or deliver messages of inspiration and advice. Sometimes we might need to use an aphorism to keep our spirits high and to give us the confidence, patience and strength we need. In dealing with failure, one respondent in a study mentioned that when things did not go the way she planned she would tell herself "Sometimes you get the bear and sometimes the bear gets you." Another respondent described her father as a "eagle scout leader and a pillar of the community" and said that whenever she faced conflict at work or was troubled by a decision, she would stop and assure herself of her own value-system saying to herself "I am my father's child, I know what is right." Words like these are powerful and can help us reclaim the agency we need to move ahead, especially in times of difficulty.

"The more you experience in life, the more you have to offer others" is the "life motto" self-made billionaire Sarah Blakely shared in a recent LinkedIn post. She went on to describe the meaning that this *precept* holds for her: "Whenever I'm scared (which is often), whenever someone asks me to do something that's "not me," I stop and say this phrase to myself. "The more you experience in life, the more you have to offer others." It often gives me the courage to say YES!"

Although personal policies are unique to you, I advocate that you benchmark, copy and borrow practices that successful people use to inspire your own personal policies. Brene Brown (also at the University of Houston) gave a talk to the university community in which she put up a list of her mentors. The audience gave a collective gasp....the people on the list were the who's who... of the universe! Everyone immediately realized that they would likely never have access to such an elite group of people, when Brene admitted, with her characteristic humor that she did not know any of these people herself. The list has the names of people who she is inspired by and admires. All of us have the opportunity to identify people we admire, follow

them on social media, set up a google alert with their name so that you can keep up with their media mentions. The goal is to identify best practices of others and adapt them for ourselves.

Asking yourself the questions under the "Establish" step of the DREAM framework (Figure 1) will help you determine the target (announcements versus self-talk) and form (decision rule, ritual or precept) of your personal policy.

Step 4: Act. It is not always easy to form a new way of operating. Research shows that it takes up to 66 days to create a new habit.[55] Any behavioral change needs to start small (an idea popularized by James Clear in his book *Atomic Habits*) and that it needs consistent deliberate practice to become part of your daily life.

In his book *Essentialism*, author Greg McKeown, makes a case for identifying what is absolutely essential and focusing on doing those things only and saying "No" to everything else to achieve success and fulfil your life's work.[56] In a similar vein, the Pulitzer prize winning journalist Herbert Bayard Swope once said, "I can't give you a surefire formula for success, but I can give you a formula for failure: try to please everybody all the time." I hope it is abundantly clear by now that to implement our personal policies, you have to be able to say "No" to everything else. In his book, *Turning Pro*, Steven Pressfield writes about the resistance we experience when we try to pursue our dreams and aspirations and make them realities.[57] He recommends moving from an amateur mind to a professional mind. He says "The difference between an amateur and a professional is in their habits. An amateur has amateur habits. A professional has professional habits." Having a set of personal policies is about adopting a professional hat and saying no to the amateur distractions that will inevitably come your way. To keep yourself on track, reflect on the questions under the "Act" step of the DREAM framework (Figure 1).

Step 5: Monitor. If you have established a personal policy in a particular form and given it a fair try at working, and for some reason it is not working for you, you should reformulate it so that it fits you better. The most common mishap occurs when a person expects a radical change to occur. In this case, tone down the extreme expectation and start with baby steps. If you want to start a blog, don't set a personal policy to sit down and write a 1000-word blog post a day. It might work better, at least to begin with, if you had a policy to write 200-words or spend 30 mins on the blog. Sometimes, changes happen in our lives that might cause us to revisit our personal policies. These changes might be big, like the pandemic for instance, where the disruption caused

resulted in people needing to modify how they work and live. Other changes might be minor, like a new project that requires you to have a longer or shorter commute which could change your plans on how you spend commuting time. Monitoring on a weekly or monthly basis what is working for you and what is not is good practice. These are your personal policies after all and they should be designed in a way that work for you. The questions under the "Monitor" step of the DREAM framework (Figure 1) will help you ensure that your personal policies evolve along with you as a person and a leader to reflect your current priorities.

Conclusion

At the time of this writing, we are in March 2021, in the midst of a global pandemic as well as what has been dubbed "America's first female recession."[58] We are also in a month designated to celebrate Women's History. Despite the personal and professional setbacks many have experienced (a 2020 McKinsey Women in the Workplace report revealed that one in four women are considering stepping out or stepping back from the workplace for pandemic-related reasons),[59] we can find hope and inspiration in the stories of amazing women leaders featured in newsletters, social media feeds, blog posts and our email inboxes. By looking at how women leaders succeed, you will recognize a singularity of purpose that underlies their success and a dogged determination to realize their purpose. In their book, aptly titled "The Book of Gutsy Women", Hillary and Chelsea Clinton profile women who used "their talent and guts" to achieve remarkable success despite the odds against them.

The Global Gender Gap report from the World Economic Forum makes a sobering prediction that gender parity will not be attained for 99.5 years.[60] Clearly there is much to be done. Yes, we need new legislature that supports women. Yes, we need more women in key leadership positions in government and industry. Yes, we need institutions to put in place policies that promote and support working families (both men and women). But each of us can do something now to propel ourselves forward. As the famous Chinese proverb by Lao Tzu states "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Perhaps for you that step might be to establish a set of personal policies that enable you to lead and live a more purposeful and authentic life beginning now.

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