

# Renewing and Sustaining Leadership

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In recent years, we have seen a disturbing change among leaders with whom we work: they are finding it very difficult to *sustain* their effectiveness over time. Why does this happen among leaders with vision, talent, and emotional intelligence—leaders who truly understand what it takes to craft great organizations and who build healthy and transparent relationships?

Many busy executives place little value on *renewal*, or on developing practices—habits of mind, body, and behavior—that enable us to sustain ourselves in the face of unending challenges, year in and year out. In fact, it is often just the opposite. Many people and organizations confuse short-term results with long-term effectiveness and tolerate destructive behavior, discord, and mediocre leadership for a very long time. Then there are the very real pressures: increased scrutiny of financial details, omnipresent and vigilant constituencies waiting and ready to pounce, leaner organizations, and simply more work to do. Many leaders find themselves fighting just to keep their heads above water.

## Power Stress and the Sacrifice Syndrome

In researching our recent book, *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting With Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion*, we found one clue for why leaders lose effectiveness—a phenomenon that we call *power stress*: the unique brand of stress that is simply part of being a leader, especially today. For leaders today, choices are rarely crystal clear, decision making is incredibly complex, and we must influence others through ambiguous authority. Add to that the loneliness that comes with being the person at the top, and you have the formula for power stress. In the last several years, we have observed leaders experiencing power stress day after day, fighting fire after fire—and then scraping themselves off the floor each evening.

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We have watched as these leaders became increasingly dispirited. They live with stomach problems, high blood pressure, or heart disease, or they eat and drink too much and exercise too little. Some people lose sight of everything other than their work, or the trappings of success. They lose sight of what's really important to them, even sacrificing relationships

Take the example of Niall FitzGerald, chairman of Reuters. Niall gets results—he is powerful, positive, and compelling. But it has not always been that way. For a time, Niall was caught in what we call the *Sacrifice Syndrome*. (Information presented here about Niall FitzGerald is drawn from personal conversations and correspondence with the authors.)

Niall's success was marked by meteoric rise in his career at Unilever. Over the years, he gave his all—with great results—in the service of building the business. He put the organization's needs ahead of his own and took his responsibilities very seriously. He faced challenges and threats creatively and, more often than not, successfully. Niall's life was on track and the future looked bright.

Or so it seemed. Many of us have learned (the hard way) that you do not have the kind of business success Niall had, or pursue that success as single-mindedly as he did, without it taking a huge toll somewhere in your life. The constant sacrifices and stress inherent in effective leadership can cause us to lose ourselves and strain relationships at work, at home, or both.



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For Niall, the result of the situations at home and at work was extreme pressure. Niall attempted to deal with it, of course, and for the most part he continued to be successful at work and to maintain things at home. He coped, as most of us do, through doing more of the same, working harder, and attempting to deny the signs that he was facing real problems. Ultimately, though, coping mechanisms ceased to work very well. Niall had become trapped in the Sacrifice Syndrome.

The Sacrifice Syndrome shuts down our ability to see possibilities because the effects of anxiety, fear, nervousness, and the physical damage to our brains are very real. So it was for Niall, and his first response was to deny most of the problems, on both the work and personal fronts. And although Niall tried to revitalize himself through vacations and the like, he was beyond tired. He was exhausted, and it was beginning to show in the decisions he made.

At one point, while directing Unilever's businesses, Niall and his team launched a new and seemingly revolutionary laundry product. It looked great on paper and the marketing campaign was nothing short of brilliant. Championing this product was an oasis for Niall and a wonderful escape from his growing unhappiness.

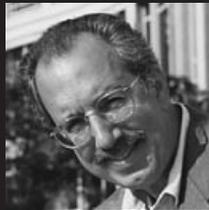
At first, things seemed fine. The product was welcomed by the market, the numbers looked great, and everyone was very excited. Then, a few warning signs popped up: there were more than the usual number of complaints about the soap; employees who tried it reported that it seemed to be harsh and

that it was actually damaging their clothes. For months Niall led his team in a fight against what he thought was bad press brought on by the competition's dirty tricks.

For Niall, that first wake-up call—trouble in the business—was drawn-out and painful. Even as Niall began to recognize that the situation was serious, he continued to ignore some of the signs that his leadership was slipping. This is common. Many leaders—especially strong leaders—just don't get the truth from the people around them. This dynamic (called CEO disease) is magnified when leaders seem distant and unreachable, making even business discussions difficult.

When the product failed, Niall looked around for support and found that many of his friends had disappeared. The turmoil in his personal life had hit the boiling point as well and people who had supported him for years simply stopped calling. This was a big shock; it had never occurred to him that people would abandon him when the going got tough.

Then Niall had an extraordinary experience that finally, once and for all, woke him up. His best friend, Peter, had become very ill and had moved back to London. Despite his busy life and the stress of his current situation, the two friends spent many hours together during the long months of Peter's illness. One night as the two friends talked, Niall found himself asking, "Peter, are you afraid of death? Are you afraid of what is to come?" Neither man had any way of knowing it, but it happened that this would be Peter's last night on earth.



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Peter answered that indeed he was not at all afraid, because he had made peace with himself. Then, Peter turned to Niall and said, "I have finally come to realize that what they say is *true*: life is not a rehearsal. This is all we have, this is it. I have realized this too late, and I have had to find peace with this. But it is not too late for you. You are not living the life you want to—not in your personal life, not in your work. If this is not the life you want to live, then you *must* change it. You must promise me, you owe it to me to take this realization of mine and act on it."

Peter's words shook Niall to the core. Peter was right. In that moment, Niall looked at what he most values—integrity, authentic relationships, and intimacy, and he committed to putting them first, once again.

He describes this awakening as a huge release. He was opening up to reality—first, the reality within himself, including his emotions, honest reflections about his life, and the toll his current situation was taking on his mind, body, heart, and spirit. He also saw how his decisions at work and with his family and friends had contributed to broken personal and professional relationships. As he became more aware, he found he could direct his attention more consciously, and he began seeking real solutions instead of Band-Aids and compromises. He began to see things that he had missed for many years, giving him deeper insight, more choices, and the beginning of wisdom.

## Waking Up to Renewal

We have seen many leaders who, arriving at the point that Niall had reached, simply rationalize or ignore all signs of problems and numb themselves to the consequences of their actions. In fact, this is common. Many leaders experience a slow, steady decline in effectiveness, health, and happiness. It happens over many years, simply as a result of the constant pressures and the need to give so much of oneself. The trouble is, the subtle messages that tell us something is not right are often just whispers. It is easy to miss them. Then, one day, we find ourselves waking up to the fact that we are worn out, tired, or just unable to give anymore—simply burned out.

But some people, like Niall, hear and recognize wake-up calls. These calls can be a first critical step to dealing with the Sacrifice Syndrome. Niall ultimately realized that he needed more than just rest and relaxation. He needed *renewal* to sustain himself. The effects of chronic power stress do not allow the mind, body, or heart to flourish, and as a consequence even the spirit may wane. When we engage in personal renewal, we are better equipped to deal with the challenges and sacrifices inherent in leadership. Let's look at why this works.

Recent research shows that renewal invokes a brain pattern and hormones that change our mood, while returning our bodies to a healthy state. This sets into motion a chain reaction that evokes changes in perception and eventually in behavior. Renewal begins as certain experiences arouse a different part of our limbic

brain from the one involved in stress responses. This in turn stimulates neural circuits that increase electrical activity in our left prefrontal cortex, leading to arousal of the body's parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS). A different set of hormones is released into the bloodstream than when the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is aroused. These activate another set of hormones that lower blood pressure and strengthen the immune system. A person then feels a sense of well-being—elated, happy, and optimistic. Once in this emotional state, we are more likely to perceive events as positive rather than negative or threatening, further enhancing the condition that we call *renewal*.

The experiences of mindfulness, hope, and compassion foster and provoke arousal of the PSNS and the condition of renewal. A positive cycle is triggered: being in renewal feeds hope, compassion, and mindfulness while it counters the detrimental effects of stress. Therefore, sustainable, effective leadership occurs only when we wake up and ensure that the sacrifice and stress of leadership are interchanged with experiences of renewal.

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### *The Sacrifice Syndrome shuts down our ability to see possibilities.*

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## Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion

How did Niall turn things around and begin the process of renewal? To counter the Sacrifice Syndrome, he needed to make renewal a way of life. This requires conscious action and, for most people, intentional change. We have seen, and the research supports our observations, that there are actually concrete ways to achieve renewal. Specifically, renewal involves three experiences—*mindfulness, hope, and compassion*—that we can, with practice, cultivate as a way of life.

## Mindfulness

The first element is *mindfulness*, or living in a state of full, conscious awareness of one's whole self, other people, and the context in which we live and work. We define mindfulness as *being awake, aware, and attending*—to ourselves and to the world around us. Mindfulness enables us to pay attention to what is happening to us, and to stop the Sacrifice Syndrome before it stops us.

People who cultivate mindfulness have more cognitive flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving skills. In other words, leaders who pay attention to the whole self—mind, body, heart, and spirit—can literally be quicker, smarter, happier, and more effective than those who focus too narrowly on short-term success.

To return to Niall: part of the reason for his success was that he *has* the capacity for mindfulness. The problem was, as the pressure increased and as a result of becoming more powerful, he had let his attention to himself and others slip. So, for Niall, the question was, “How can I reengage my capacity for mindfulness?”

He started with a lot of reflection. He built in time to think—and to concentrate on getting clear about what he was feeling and what he was doing. He often did this while running, so the effects of exercise helped him to think clearly while he also took care of his health. He also reached out to one or two people and used them as sounding boards to check on his reflections. He took the risk of being vulnerable with his closest friends—admitting that maybe he was making mistakes that

needed fixing (at work and at home), and he asked for opinions and help.

## Hope

The second element, *hope*, enables us to believe that the future we envision is attainable, and to move toward our visions and goals while inspiring others toward those goals as well. In fact, the experience of *hope* actually causes changes in our brains and hormones that allow us to renew our minds, bodies, and hearts. When we experience hope, we feel excited about a possible future,

and we generally believe that the future we envision is attainable. Hope engages and raises our spirit, mobilizes energy, and increases resiliency. Beyond this, hope and the vision of the future that comes with it are contagious. They are powerful drivers of *others'* behavior. Hope is an emotional magnet—it keeps people going even in the midst of challenges.

In Niall's case, hope was in short supply for a while. At Unilever, the laundry product situation looked bad and it would have been easy for Niall, and then the team, to sink into despair. But two things stopped this slide. First, Unilever's leaders did not lose faith in Niall. Then, as Niall took control—and responsibility—for the situation, he found energy to direct the team's efforts toward the future. Let's look at how this played out.

Even during the worst days of the debacle, Unilever's leadership still believed that Niall could become the next chairman. This both surprised and pleased him, as it was a dream he had had for many years. So even at the low point, he could see a more positive future. This

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gave Niall strength to seriously question his decisions during the product launch. He looked at this situation from different perspectives and let go of the single-mindedness that had characterized his treatment of the problem. He took responsibility, deciding to stay with the business and see it through. He could easily have gotten out of it, moved on, and let someone else clean things up. But instead he asked Unilever's board for permission to stay in the business, to see it through until things began to turn around.

Niall's hopeful view of the future and his actions inspired commitment and ultimately sparked renewal on the team. The image of the future that Niall generated was realistic—difficult, but possible. As Niall began to imagine a different—and feasible—future, his hope became contagious. At work, others began to understand and see his vision and realistic possibilities for the future.

### Compassion

When we experience *compassion*, we are in tune with the people around us. We understand their wants and needs, and we are motivated to act on our feelings. Like hope, compassion invokes renewal in our mind, body, and heart. And like hope, compassion is contagious.

If asked about the years of struggle and confusion, Niall would probably have said that he felt tremendous compassion for the people in his life who were hurt by his actions at work and at home. But compassion is different from sympathy, or even empathy, in that it goes beyond understanding. Compassion is a combination of deep understanding, caring, and *willingness to act on that concern*.

Conversely, as much as we need to show compassion for renewal to take place, we also must receive it. When we are in emotional turmoil and especially when we find that some of our life's foundations are crumbling, we need to know that others care, that they are offering us their concern, compassion, and love.

Niall was lucky. Even though many friends had deserted him, a few stayed by his side. They seemed to understand that he was not just a man who had made a mess of things, he was still a truly good person and a good businessman. They saw him as someone who had made some

bad choices along the way—but also as a person who could, and would, right the wrongs of the past and return to more balance. One of those people was Peter, Niall's dying friend.

The dynamic relationship among mindfulness, hope, and compassion sparks the kinds of positive emotions that enable us to remain resilient in the face of challenges, even in the unprecedented climate that leaders face today. Together these elements counter the destructive effects of power stress

and keep us continually in a state of renewal, and thus they help to produce strong relationships and great leadership while helping leaders and people around them renew themselves.

### Personal Renewal and Professional Excellence

Niall FitzGerald is an outstanding leader, and in other, more personal roles in his life, he is living up to his own high standards. We have seen him in action—people in the business world look up to him, and

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he is having an impact on social causes that are close to his heart. And maybe most important, his personal life is now vibrant and happy.

For Niall, getting back in touch with his values—what he truly, deeply believes to be important—was at the center of his renewal. In his moments of greatest self-doubt and uncertainty about the future, he began to reconstruct a life of meaning from his values.

As we have seen in Niall's story, even those of us who *can* be strong leaders will at times lose our way. This is why we need to catch the Sacrifice Syndrome before it starts and do something about it. To learn how to counter the Sacrifice Syndrome and engage in renewal, most of us have *personal work* to do. We need to find our passion, take a good, hard look at who we are and the life we are leading, break old patterns, and get rid of old habits. We need to cultivate mindfulness and learn how to engage hope and compassion even (maybe especially) when we are under extreme pressure.

### So What Are You Going to Do About It?

Great leaders are awake, aware, and attuned to themselves, to others, and to the world around them. They commit to their beliefs, stand strong in their values, and live full, passionate lives. Great leaders are emotionally intelligent and they are *mindful*: they seek to live in full consciousness of self, others, nature, and so-

ciety. Great leaders face the uncertainty of today's world with *hope*: they inspire through clarity of vision, optimism, and a profound belief in their—and their people's—ability to turn dreams into reality. Great leaders face sacrifice, difficulties, and challenges, as well as opportunities, with empathy and *compassion* for the people they lead and those they serve.

We have found that leaders who sustain their effectiveness understand that renewing oneself is a *holistic* process that involves the mind, body, heart, and spirit. But becoming a strong leader does not happen by accident.

People who think they can be truly great leaders without personal transformation are fooling themselves. You cannot inspire others and create the relationships that ignite greatness in your family, organization, or community without feeling inspired yourself, and working to be the best person you can be.

So if you wonder whether you are a leader who can sustain leadership for the long term, ask yourself these questions:

- Are you inspirational?

- Do you create an overall positive emotional tone that is characterized by hope?
- Are you in touch with others? Do you know what is in others' hearts and minds? Do you experience and demonstrate compassion?
- Are you mindful—authentic and in tune with yourself, others, and the environment? ■

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