



## CHAPTER 1

# THE POWER OF SURRENDER

Eight minutes into stoppage time in the 2022 World Cup soccer quarterfinals, Cristiano Ronaldo locked eyes with his teammate and stabbed his finger toward an open space on the pitch, his teeth clenched and his body tense. One last urgent command. One final attempt to seize control before it slipped away for good.

Down by a single goal to Morocco, Ronaldo's Portuguese national team threw everything forward in a desperate push for an equalizer, while the Moroccan bench—in a blur of frantic gestures—implored the referee to end the match. The ball moved in the other direction, out from Ronaldo's reach and away from his control. He sprinted forward, but before he could make his move, the referee's whistle pierced the air.

The game was over.

This wasn't just another World Cup. It had been billed as the final showdown between Ronaldo and Argentina's Lionel Messi—the culmination of a decades-long debate. For years, fans had

argued passionately over who was the GOAT (the greatest footballer of all time): Ronaldo, with his staggering career goal count, physical dominance, and relentless drive, or Messi, who was smaller, quieter, and often in Ronaldo's statistical shadow yet unmatched in assists and as a builder of team cohesion. Neither had won a World Cup, and a victory in this tournament would be seen by many as the defining accolade. In the end, they never even got to face each other.

As Ronaldo walked off, shattered, the contrast had never been clearer.

Ronaldo knew, as did the rest of the world watching, that this was likely his last chance at winning a World Cup. This one crowning achievement, the one glaring absence in his decorated career that had always been just out of reach, had slipped away for good. That's what made what happened next so hard to watch.

His gait slowed, his eyes dropped to the ground, his jaw clenched, and he walked—not toward his teammates but straight for the tunnel. When he finally did look up, you could see his lips were pursed tight, as if holding something in—his emotion in that moment, perhaps.

A Moroccan player wrapped his arm around Ronaldo's shoulder and reached out for a handshake. Ronaldo extended his hand and nodded as if on autopilot. For a second, it looked normal, a standard postmatch embrace, but his emotions betrayed him. His body stiffened, caught between two versions of himself—the Ronaldo the world expected to see and the Ronaldo who could no longer hold it together.

For a fleeting second, he was still in control. The handshake, the nod, the composed exterior—it was all instinct, years of conditioning forcing him to maintain the image of a man unfazed.

But beneath that carefully maintained surface, something was breaking. He had spent his entire career mastering control—of his body, of his image, of the game itself. But now, at this moment, he didn't know how to lose control. And he didn't want to.

He pulled away, subtly but firmly freeing himself from the first embrace. But before he could escape entirely, another Moroccan player approached. This time, Ronaldo had to speak. He muttered something—just a few words, but enough to make it clear: *Leave me alone.*

And that's when it happened. The momentary effort of forming words, of acknowledging reality, was enough to crack the thin layer of composure he had left. His voice betrayed him, and if you watch that moment closely, that is when he begins to cry.

He did not look at his teammates. He did not acknowledge the Portuguese fans still watching in stunned silence. He barely seemed to notice when a fan ran into him before getting tackled by a bodyguard. He stayed laser-focused on the dark tunnel ahead of him—his escape from the chaos of the field. When he finally reached the darkness, he fell apart. You can see him let go the second his body is in the shadow of the tunnel.

For two decades, Ronaldo had commanded the field, the cameras, the world's attention. His presence was larger than life, his control absolute—every moment calculated. But now, as he stepped into the tunnel, he wasn't just leaving the pitch; he was leaving his lifelong dream behind. It was the end of an era for Ronaldo. He had clung to the belief that if he just did more, he could force the outcome he wanted. But when the final whistle blew, the weight of that belief came crashing down. The truth was undeniable: Effort alone hadn't been enough. His strategy, the one that had defined his entire career, had reached its limit.

Eight days later, Messi stood on a podium in the center of the same pitch, a triumphant smile illuminating his face, as he lifted the World Cup trophy—his dream finally realized. Today, Messi is the most decorated player in the history of professional football, having won six Golden Boots, forty-five team trophies (including twelve Big Five league titles), four UEFA Champions Leagues, two Copa Americas, and—most importantly—one FIFA World Cup.

The contrast with Ronaldo couldn't have been sharper.

For Ronaldo, winning had always been about his personal effort in creating results. "I've never seen anyone better than me. I have always thought that," he once declared. "There's no player more complete than me. I play well with both feet. I'm quick, powerful, good with the head. I score goals. I make assists."<sup>1</sup>

But unlike Ronaldo, Messi's pursuit had never been about personal accolades or chasing the title of the greatest. He didn't win by controlling every detail, dictating every move, or forcing the game to bend to his will. He won by letting go—trusting his team, playing within the flow of the game, and surrendering the need for personal validation.

"It doesn't change anything for me to be the best or not," Messi had said just a year earlier. "And I never tried to be, either." Instead of fixating on proving his superiority, Messi focused on the game itself, on moving the ball, on making his teammates better. "When you look at which sides earn success in football, it is always those who work together as a group, who fight for each other—and every single member holds value and importance."<sup>2</sup>

His career was not built on force but on flow—an unwavering belief that the greatest success isn't something you can force but is something you create with others. And now, with his teammates surrounding him, lifting him on their shoulders, the world could see the

truth clearly: Messi's surrender to the team, his belief of the strength of all above any one person, had brought the ultimate reward.

Messi's approach wasn't just philosophical—it showed up in the numbers. He played for the team. Messi had 381 career assists, compared to Ronaldo's 257. He made more key passes, created more scoring chances, and facilitated more goals for those around him. Meanwhile, Ronaldo scored 927 career goals but needed 182 more games than Messi to reach that total. Ronaldo was more dominant individually, but Messi's impact on his team's overall success was greater.

What differentiated these two legendary athletes wasn't just skill—it was their entire approach to success. Messi trusted the game, the team, and the process. Ronaldo fought it. And in the moment that mattered most, that fight consumed him.

Ronaldo was trapped in a faulty belief that if he just controlled his teammates and the flow of the game, he would win. When the final whistle blew, the weight of that belief came crashing down. The game had moved on. Time had moved on. And he was still clinging to air, unable to change what had already slipped away.

Ronaldo was caught in what we call the Action Trap—the all-too-common belief that if you simply push harder, control more, and demand more, you will eventually get the result you want. But as he eventually discovered, the more you try to control everything, and everyone, the more they end up controlling you.

## The Action Trap

In business, many leaders become stuck exactly where Ronaldo found himself—exhausted, frustrated, and fixated on control as the solution.

Having a sense of control is undeniably seductive. It feels powerful. It feels productive. It feels like the way things get done. From the moment we take our first steps, we learn that effort creates results. Work hard, study hard, train hard—success is always within reach if we try harder.

The Action Trap is in part so seductive because it works—to an extent. If you push hard enough, demand more, and implement enough new strategies, you will likely see some improvement.

In 2023, we engaged in a research project with a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business to measure what drives growth in business. The study analyzed 243 companies, assessing their purpose, their strategy, their culture, and their results. What we found was that companies with bad culture and who were stuck in the Action Trap were able to drive 10.1% growth during the three years of the study. That is nothing to dismiss.

This is also where the Action Trap becomes most dangerous: It creates the perception that control, that teeth-clenching grit, yields strong, lasting results.

But companies that dug deeper—focusing on the underlying drivers of people's actions—and had a strong culture grew by 42.2% in that same period. More than 4X the growth.

Leaders who push harder and force more structure may see short-term improvements, just like Ronaldo's relentless effort made him one of the most dominant goal scorers in history. But over time, control creates ceilings. It caps growth, suffocates innovation, and burns out the very people it depends on. Ronaldo's career was proof of this. He won plenty. But he never won the Big One.

Leaders caught in the Action Trap don't realize they're stuck. To the contrary, it feels like they're doing everything right. They double down on effort, micromanage people and details, demand

urgency from their teams, and stack calendars with meetings to “drive alignment.” But instead of generating momentum, they create bottlenecks. Instead of inspiring ownership, they breed dependency. Instead of scaling success, they exhaust themselves and their teams. They question why younger generations won't follow their example, baffled when relentless pressure doesn't inspire. The harder they try, the more control slips through their fingers.

The instinct to fall into the Action Trap isn't so deeply rooted just because it works for a while—it's because it taps into something far more fundamental. A primal belief, buried deep in our subconscious: If I can control the world around me, I will be safe.

We don't just seek control for power. We seek it for protection.

I (Jessica) spend most of my workdays doing keynotes at conferences. I have the same routine every time: I walk the halls to see what kind of audience I'll be talking to, I find my way to the ballroom, I do the sound check, and then I find a seat and wait to take the stage.

While I wait, my nerves start to build. It doesn't matter how many speeches I've given—I get nervous every time. I start thinking about all the things that aren't quite right.

The spotlight is too bright. The room is too cold. The confidence monitor is broken. The audience looks like they're not particularly open to hearing a blond chick tell them about leadership. Of course, none of this is in my control. And some of it isn't even true. It is just my perception. In reality, I have one job: to get on stage, give the talk I was hired to give, and go home. But in my head, it would be better if I was running the show. If only the lights were turned down just a little. If only they turned up the thermostat. If only the audience was a little more open-minded. These thoughts are all manifestations of my ego. I am afraid.



We all have that in us. That belief that if things could just be the way we think they should be and if only people would do what we want them to do, everything would be better. Maybe we would be less afraid. And we tell ourselves that we're just trying to make improvements. We're optimizing, or fixing inefficiencies. We're problem-solving, bringing order to the chaos. But other times, we're not being so altruistic. There are also those times we just want things to be better for ourselves, even if it comes at someone else's expense.

As it turns out, intention doesn't matter. Whether we think we're acting for the greater good or purely out of self-interest, the outcome is usually the same: Things eventually don't go our way.

The audience doesn't laugh at my jokes. The project deadline is missed. We didn't get our bookings target for the quarter. The kids are late for school. The dog ate the shoe. Whatever happens, we know it could have been better if it had been different. We double down. We get frustrated and resentful.

But the problem isn't the world. It is our desire for control and the delusion that it can be obtained.

But what is really driving that desire? Fear.

Fear that we'll lose something that we have or fear that we won't get what we need. Fear that if things don't go the way we want, it won't be right. Fear of what others will think. Fear we won't get the recognition we think we deserve.

The irony, of course, is that in our desperate attempt to control everything, we create our own problems. We manufacture stress, resentment, and frustration—all because we're clinging to the belief that we can force reality to bend to our will.

We get so locked into this control mindset that we start believing we are responsible for everything. That if we don't manage it, something will go wrong. We become deluded into thinking we can architect reality itself.

At its core, this isn't about leadership or business or even circumstances—it's about self-centeredness. We see things from our perspective. We want what we want. And when reality doesn't cooperate with what we want, we fight it.

I (Jessica) know exactly where I got the desire for control—and the delusion that I could obtain it by force of will—in my head. When I was eighteen, I joined a cult.

Not the kind with flowing robes, shaved heads, or doomsday predictions, but a subtler breed—one with conference rooms, name tags, and the alluring promise of control over one's destiny.

It was a weekend seminar led by a charismatic businessman who promised limitless success. The message was simple: Your thoughts create your reality.

I remember him saying, “You are the writer, director, and producer of your movie. Your word is law in your universe.” And I ate it up.

I left that seminar convinced that I had cracked the code of life. That I could literally bend reality to my will. Fresh from the seminar, I put my new manifestation skills to work. I visualized \$10,000 in my bank account. I journaled about the money. I visualized spending it on a trip to Europe. I believed in my ability to make it happen. And then, after taking a summer job selling books door-to-door, I checked my balance one day, and there it was, \$14,000.

Across the country, Joe was on an analogous journey—although under a different set of circumstances. He devoured Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich*, absorbing its lessons on persistence, self-mastery, and the disciplined mind. He wasn’t waiting for the universe to deliver; he was building success through mindset and resilience—persistent force of will.

I manifested my way to the C-suite, with a half-million-dollar side hustle as a keynote speaker and a weekly segment on CNN. Joe muscled his way through five CEO gigs with record growth, two exits, fifteen Ironmans, and a stint in the NFL. From the outside, both of us embodied the American Dream, living proof of its promise. We had built our success on the same belief: *Success is a matter of will.*

But what we didn’t see—what our culture rarely warns us about—is what happens when that belief is taken too far. We had molded our lives through will and relentless action, but we

were in the Action Trap—always running, always pushing, never escaping the snare of doing more. Thinking, actually believing, that this was obtaining results. We mistook the effect for the cause.

When you believe success is purely a matter of will, there is no finish line. No moment of arrival. Because the second you achieve one goal, another one appears, demanding even more effort, even more control, even more will.

I made \$14,000 selling books. Could I double it?

Joe finished another Ironman. Could he beat his time?

I built a side hustle. Could I turn it into a full-time empire?

Joe led the company to \$100 million in revenue. Can he get us to \$200 million?

The more we achieved, the more we believed that action was the answer to everything. Not just *any* action—our action. The expression and assertion of our selves. Our personal and singular knowledge or ability could create better results through sheer force of effort. And yet, for all our striving, we were never done. Instead of feeling fulfilled, we were trapped in a cycle of perpetual doing—convinced that if we just worked harder, pushed further, and controlled more, we would finally get there.

But where was *there*? And why were we so desperate to reach it?

## **Fear-Based Beliefs Limit Results**

These anecdotes aren’t just convenient illustrations of a point distinct to us. Rather, they express an approach embedded in business culture. In today’s corporate culture, fear-driven self-will has become a dysfunction. We reward action, performance, and attempts to exercise control at work, even when it compromises or shortchanges results.

Fear breeds rigidity. Fear propels people forward, into the Action Trap.

When people feel unsafe, they don't experiment, they don't challenge assumptions, and they certainly don't take the kind of risks that lead to meaningful change. Instead, they cling to what is known, what is predictable, what won't get them singled out.

Leaders, meanwhile, mistake compliance for alignment. They assume that because no one is vocally resisting, people are taking accountability for driving results. But the reality is that just because resistance isn't voiced, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. It's often just being buried. Not because people don't see the problems, but because they want to be liked. They know the leader ultimately decides who stays and who goes.

Your ego is at the root of it all. Fear of losing control. Fear of being wrong. Fear of exposing vulnerability.

And so, we shove it down. We silence uncertainty. We convince ourselves that keeping the machine running—obtaining results through the exercise of personal willpower—is what works. But fear doesn't disappear—it festers.

Then, someone is given an accolade on a team call for working on the weekend, and we have an experience that leads to a new belief: *Working harder will get me rewarded. I should work harder.*

And just like that, we're trapped in a downward spiral.

The more we fear, the harder we work. The harder we work, the more disconnected we become. The more disconnected we become, the more fragile we feel. So we cling even tighter to the very structures that got us here in the first place. For some of us, it becomes too much.

My (Jessica's) father was the CEO of a color separation and printing business called Power Color for fifteen years. Business

was good for a decade, although the growth was slow. But when the Macintosh came out, Power Color began to struggle. His business was being cannibalized by college kids on their new computers. He tried everything to save it. He pulled all-nighters for three nights in a row once a quarter when he was on deadline. He made his team come in on weekends.

As the fear of losing his business grew, he developed anxiety and depression. He became curt with his colleagues, and some left. He didn't bring in enough revenue one quarter, so he stopped paying taxes and skipped a few rent payments. The struggle to control the outcome got him nowhere and sank him deeper into despair. The company was completely dysfunctional, unable to adapt to the changing technology, and before he knew it, he closed the doors.

Fear, in short, is the driving force behind every dysfunctional dynamic we see in business, from departmental silos to quiet quitting to complete failure. It pushes us to clamp down in a desperate bid to protect what we have. It ensnares us in the Action Trap—the more we struggle, the tighter the bind. Fear-based control only breeds more fear. It creates secrecy, mistrust, and disengagement. And it drags results down.

## **Fear Creates Organizational Dysfunction**

This isn't just an individual problem. It lies within the teams and organizations as well.

The number one issue our clients bring to us—over and over again—is departmental silos. Departments that fail to communicate. Teams that hoard information. Colleagues in conflict over who is to blame for missed targets or who gets credit for made targets.

These companies have value statements around collaboration and shared ownership, but despite the language of unity and teamwork, we are all operating inside a corporate structure that feeds competition, not collaboration.

Workplaces are built like pyramids—wider at the base, narrow at the top. The higher you climb, the fewer seats there are. The corporate ladder isn't built for everyone to succeed; it's built for a select few to make it to the top while the rest are left vying for position. In the world we've built for ourselves, success isn't just about rising, it is about rising above. Above the competition, above each other, above our peers, above the people who might take our place if we ever slow down.

The experience of working in the corporate hierarchy shapes a belief that success is not just about achieving but about achieving more than the person in the cubicle next to yours. For me to win, you must lose. There's only one VP position open, and three senior directors are vying for the job. Kumbaya.

Information becomes power. Knowledge is leveraged. Helping others carries risk—even subconsciously. If opportunities are scarce, visibility becomes currency, and individual contribution is prioritized over shared success. The result is a culture where teamwork is encouraged by leaders but constrained in practice. Silos form not because people refuse to collaborate, but because the system creates conflicting incentives.

People aren't the only ones creating experiences. Processes and structures do too. The result is dysfunction.

We worked with a software company that was experiencing growth but struggling to hit its ambitious targets. Leadership sensed that “what got us here won't get us there” and believed the key to unlocking their next level of success was collaboration.

The sales team was organized around products. Each rep had deep expertise in their product and focused on selling that one product. Leadership encouraged lead-sharing. If a client bought one of our products, they were more likely to buy another. This called for more cross-selling, more communication, and more visibility into each other's pipeline. But despite all the messaging from management, nothing changed.

To fix this, the leader of the sales team planned the entire sales kickoff meeting around solving this problem. For three days in Las Vegas, they did training around cross-selling, shared strategy around the product road map, and—of course—did team-building exercises. They took Myers-Briggs tests, talked about their personalities in breakout sessions, and then bonded over drinks after 5:00. But when the teams returned to work the following week, collaboration remained just as stagnant. They slipped back into the Action Trap.

Frustrated, they came to us—hoping another, better retreat might be the answer. Instead of jumping into action, we asked a simple question: *What beliefs does the team hold that are preventing them from cross-selling?*

As we worked with the teams, a clear pattern emerged. Despite all the rah-rah messaging about teamwork, the system itself was telling a different story. Sales reps were ranked from highest to lowest on a public leaderboard. A Salesforce dashboard tracked individual performance in real time. Quarterly awards celebrated top sellers. The President's Club vacation trip was reserved for the top 10% of the sales reps.

These experiences shaped a belief: If I share my leads, I'm giving my teammate a way to beat me.

Collaboration wasn't failing because people didn't want to work together. It was failing because the system made them

compete. No amount of team-building exercises could override the reality that their success was measured individually. Until that changed, no pep talks from the leader would make a difference.

The problem wasn't effort—it was experience. If they wanted new results, they had to create new experiences that shaped different beliefs.

So, they rewired the system.

The leaderboard came down. No more public rankings that pitted reps against each other. Instead, they introduced team-based dashboards that tracked collective wins—how many customers expanded their purchases, how much additional value they unlocked together.

The compensation plan evolved. Individual quotas still mattered, but hitting them unlocked eligibility for team-based incentives. The coveted President's Club trip? No longer reserved for the top 10% of lone wolves. Once targets were achieved, teams could now qualify together.

The sales meetings also changed. Instead of celebrating solo wins, they showcased collaborative deals—where reps worked across product lines to land bigger, better contracts.

The leaders focused on creating new experiences, and the beliefs shifted. Reps who once guarded their leads started proactively connecting teammates with clients. Conversations changed. Pipeline visibility improved. Cross-selling surged. And in the end, the company shattered its revenue targets—not because leadership kept saying “collaborate”—but because they made collaboration the way to win.

This company experienced a common roadblock to growth. Corporate structure often rewards competition while promoting the language of unity, leaving individuals navigating an unspoken

truth: When resources, promotions, and recognition are limited, the instinct for self-preservation—driven by fear—takes over.

This isn't a failure of character. It's a response to the environment—a rational adaptation to a predisposition that is ingrained in us and in a system designed to create winners and losers. And nowhere is this more evident than in the way *layoffs* have become an accepted, even expected, part of corporate life.

The experience of witnessing or enduring layoffs reinforces a painful belief: Security is an illusion.

One quarter, a company celebrates record earnings; the next, entire teams are cut in the name of efficiency. Years of dedication, long hours, and exceeding expectations offer no real protection. That belief drives action. Self-preservation becomes the priority.

And what happens when self-preservation takes over? People stop giving a shit about shared goals. Call it burnout. Call it disengagement. Call it quiet quitting. But what we're really seeing is a workforce shutting down.

When people feel powerless—when they've given everything to a system that only demands more—they don't rebel. They disconnect. Not out of laziness but out of self-protection. Apathy is the only form of control they have left.

Apathy is a slow death for any organization. It is far worse than rebellion. At least when your employees unionize, they're talking to you. The real threat to business is employee indifference. And yet, instead of recognizing this, leaders keep reaching for more control. They do things like forcing people back into the office to “save our culture.” They remain in the Action Trap.

The underlying issue is the belief system that your employees hold. They may fill out your engagement survey, but they know they are still operating within the same system—one where

leaders make me commute to work against my will because they think I lack integrity and am slacking off. One where decisions about promotions, raises, and even job security are made by those at the top. This experience shapes another belief: *Disagreeing with leadership—especially publicly—is dangerous and can backfire.*

Challenging a bad idea, offering dissent, or pushing back on a directive isn't just a matter of principle—it's a calculation. Will speaking up put my job at risk? Will it make me seem difficult?

That belief drives silence. People see flaws in strategies but don't say anything. They anticipate problems but let them unfold. They withhold feedback that could change the course of your team, department, or company because of fear. You can change that.

The antidote isn't another round of micromanagement or top-down directives. It's a whole different way of seeing and leading—one that lets us break free from the fear-driven cycle once and for all. This is where we shift to surrender and discover how releasing the delusion of control can transform our teams, our organizations, and ourselves.

## The Delusion of Control

Control is a misguided belief. It is a fear-based way of thinking that creates dysfunction and limits growth. This book is about shifting from control to surrender, not as a sign of weakness but as a strategy for leadership and growth.

This is a critical point—surrender isn't about giving up. It's not weakness or passivity. It's about letting go of the delusion of control. You may be confused about what you can and cannot control because we've bought into the story of corporate power.

In the business world, we've all bought into the delusion that those at the top have power. It's the foundational principle of the way things work. Your title includes the word manager, or director, or president, or chief. You have people reporting to you. You have goals that you are accountable for. You tell people what to do. You decide who stays and who goes. You are at the top of the corporate food chain.

But strip away the titles, the org charts, the P&Ls, and what's left? A collection of human beings navigating life the best they can before time runs out. Elon Musk puts his pants on one leg at a time, just like you.

Control is a mirage. That is the paradox of leadership in organizations. The strongest leaders aren't the ones who hold on the hardest. They're the ones who surrender to what they cannot control, focus on what they can, and trust in the process that unfolds.

We surrendered. Not by choice but, like many other leaders caught in the Action Trap, by force.

At separate times, in separate circumstances, we each had a personal moment of clarity—the instant we knew the fight was over. Our proverbial tunnel walk. Jessica was fighting her demons. Joe was fighting his attachment to past performance. We were both caught in the Action Trap. One of us had nothing left to lose. The other had everything to protect.

I (Jessica) was at the end of my rope—burned out, exhausted, and numb. I had spent years trying to control everything: my career, my reputation, my success, my relationships. If I just worked harder, learned more, strategized better, pushed through the exhaustion, I would get where I wanted to go. That was the illusion I lived under.

And then I fell apart—trapped inward and unable to get where

I was supposed to be. Shattered.

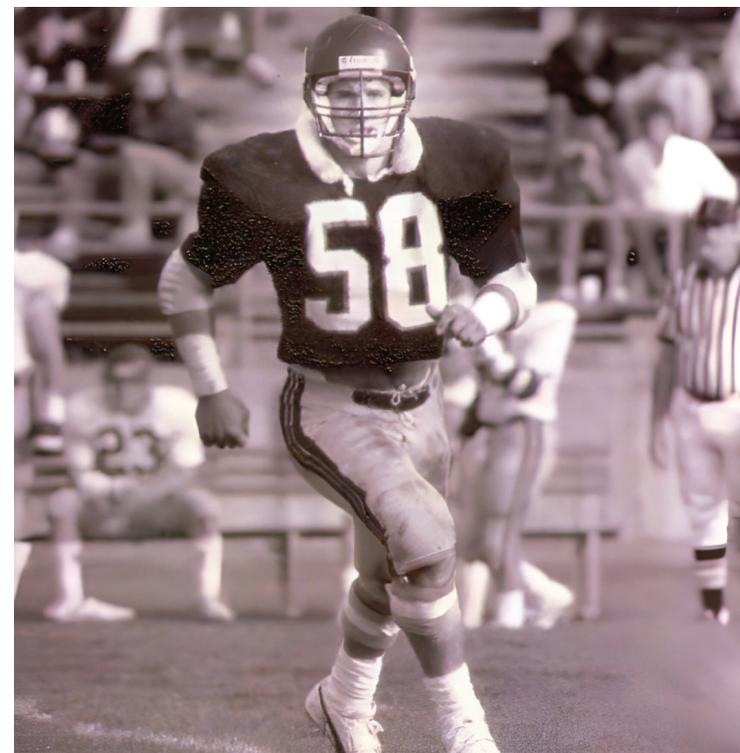
It wasn't one dramatic moment—it was a slow collapse, like a bridge eaten away by rust until it crumbles under its own weight. Drinking became routine, the anxiety unmanageable, and the confusion unbearable. I was torching the relationships in my life while always trying to figure out the next move. I had nothing left to give, but I kept forcing myself forward.

One night I was lying on the ground of my bedroom crying and thinking about how much I hated myself when something cracked. Finally, I surrendered. I can't explain it. It felt like a spiritual experience. A thought just came into my head that didn't seem like it was mine, and I gave up. Not in defeat but in acceptance. Acceptance that I wasn't in control—that my relentless grip on everything was the very thing suffocating me. I didn't have all the answers. I couldn't force my way to peace, to a place of serenity. And for the first time, I allowed something bigger than myself to take the lead. That was the first day of my sobriety and a new way of living.

Joe's inflection point looked quite different.

From the outside, he was unstoppable—the Ironman CEO, former NFL player, a relentless competitor, a family man with two wonderful children and a wife of thirty-one years. He was a leader who thrived in the world of resilience and discipline. He ran the company like he trained for races: all-in, all the time. His schedule was punishing, his expectations unrelenting, and his commitment unwavering. He was a private-equity company's dream of a CEO. He was even inducted into his private-equity partner's Hall of Fame for driving results.

And then, his bike crank broke in the middle of a half-Ironman (a story we'll tell in more detail in the next chapter).



That was the first day of a new way of living for Joe. He stopped micromanaging. He traveled less. He trusted his team in ways he never had before. He made small shifts: Instead of telling his managing partners how to structure deals, he asked them how they wanted to structure them. He surrendered—not to failure but to a new way of leading.

I was at my bottom, and he was at the “top,” but we both were caught in the Action Trap and forced to surrender just the same. Surrender, it turned out, was the only way out.

The result? For Jessica—it was gig after gig, serenity, and success by any definition. For Joe, it was much the same. His

company had its best performance of its thirty-five-year history. That same year, he had his personal best Ironman time (in his fifteenth Ironman, at the age of fifty-nine).

Letting go didn't mean losing control—it meant unlocking something greater than control ever could.

When we realized that, we didn't lose power—we finally stepped into it. This wasn't just personal growth. It was a leadership revelation. And it inspired for us a new definition of surrender and the creation of a new type of leader—the Surrendered Leader:

To surrender is to make a conscious shift from force to flow. It is accepting that you cannot control outcomes, circumstances, teams, not even your direct reports. Surrendered leadership is a strategic letting go of things outside of your control, so that you can fully leverage what you actually do control: yourself.

As a leader, however, your role is not just about yourself. You are operating within the context of others. So, if you are not controlling people or outcomes, then what are you doing as a leader? You are making the personal choice to focus on what you can control while setting up the conditions for others to succeed and thrive.

The Surrendered Leader does not manage actions; they focus on creating the right conditions that drive those actions. You can't force results, but you can create the environment where the right outcomes happen naturally. Your role as a leader is to set the conditions that allow people and organizations to reach their full potential.

What are those conditions called? Culture.

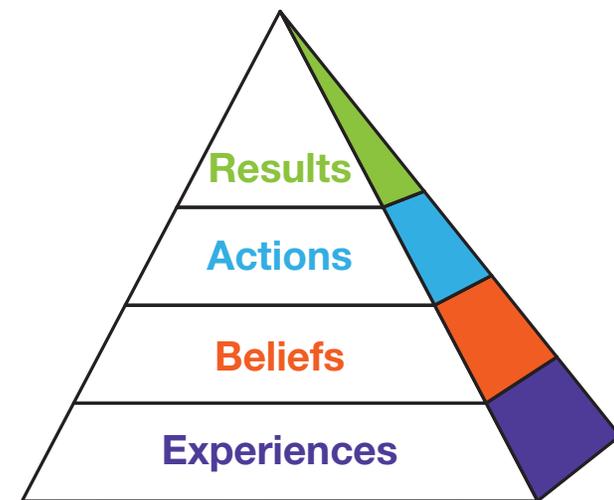
## What Is Culture?

So much gets in the way of understanding what culture really is and what its role is in achieving results. In today's age, many see workplace culture as synonymous with, at worst, Ping-Pong tables and pizza parties and, at best, generational dynamics and employee well-being. But leaders are stuck in the Action Trap of culture creation. It can't be fixed with pizza parties or a lecture about bringing your authentic self to work.

Culture is not a vibe. It is the lived experiences of a group unfolding into shared cultural beliefs that create motivation to act and therefore drive results.

This is the premise of what we call the Results Pyramid, and it is the basis of all the work we have done to help businesses like Southwestern Airlines, Ford, Spanx, and Hilton to achieve breakthrough results.<sup>3</sup>

**Experiences > Beliefs > Actions > Results**



Every action gets a result. It may not be the result you want, but regardless, actions lead to results. This is where most leaders stop. They know what actions they believe will lead to the right results, and so they focus on action. The sales leader checks in with his or her rep and asks about action.

- How many calls did you make?
- How did the sales call go?
- Did you track the call in Salesforce?
- Who are you going to call next?
- Did you have the AI tool listen to your call to give you suggestions on how to improve the call?
- Have you read the book *The Challenger*?

This approach works, to an extent. Recall, the Action Trap is seductive. But ask yourself—what is the lived experience of the sales rep in this scenario? They probably feel irritated and micromanaged. They feel infantilized and nagged. This experience leads them to a belief: “My manager doesn’t trust me,” or “My manager only cares about the numbers, not me.” That belief shapes their mindset and therefore their action. Maybe they start doing the bare minimum to avoid scrutiny. Maybe they get defensive. Maybe they quiet quit. Maybe they get stressed out and the stress lowers their confidence, which affects their performance.

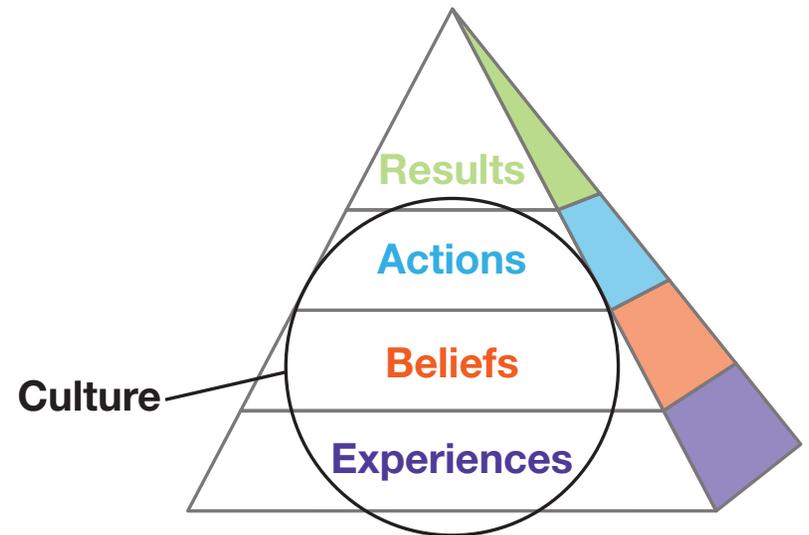
And yet, the manager is confused. “Why aren’t they taking accountability?” “Why aren’t they meeting their quota?” The Results Pyramid goes both ways. The employee is now creating an experience for the manager. The manager develops a new belief: This is a bad sales rep. And they take new action: It’s time to move

on. That leads to a result—six months of training a new hire and the process continues to unfold with little change.

Or maybe it’s even worse. Maybe this experience reinforces a preexisting belief (thought) that the manager had that “Young people today just don’t want to work.” This leads to new action, stereotyping generations entirely or avoiding hiring college graduates. In a meeting he says something like, “Young people today are so entitled,” and a young person on the Zoom has an experience that leads them to the belief, “My manager sees me as a walking stereotype. He doesn’t get me.” This leads to an action. And so, you see, the cycle continues.

This is culture. Put simply:

**Culture is how people think and act to get results.**



## From Control to Culture: What Are We Surrendering To?

The real work of leadership is not in managing actions but in creating the right experiences that shape the beliefs (or the culture) in which the right actions happen, and results follow.

That requires surrender. But what exactly are we surrendering to?

We are surrendering to the natural unfolding of beliefs and actions that emerge from changed experiences that result from meaningful contact between people and structures that influence and change beliefs—ultimately yielding results. Instead of forcing results through rigid structures and relentless effort, the Surrendered Leader focuses on transforming experiences to shift beliefs. Once beliefs change, actions evolve organically, leading to the desired outcomes with less friction.

Surrender happens not by giving up on action or results but by letting go of control of how they manifest—trusting that the right actions will follow once people think differently. You are surrendering your need to impose your will and your way on the people you work with, and you are setting the conditions for explosive results that come from the empowerment of everyone's collective will on the team . . . not just yours.

When a leader creates an experience of trust, autonomy, and genuine support, the rep develops a belief that they are capable, valued, and empowered. And when they believe that? They take ownership. They innovate. They feel energized and fulfilled. They become accountable.

Instead of focusing purely on actions, great leaders ask:

- What belief do I want my team to hold about me as a leader?
- What belief do I want them to hold about themselves and this company?
- What experience am I creating for my team?
- What experiences are our processes creating for them?

When you get out of the Action Trap, you focus on what you can control, the experiences you create that shape their beliefs. Rather than just tracking calls and micromanaging activity, imagine if the leader in the scenario above took a different approach:

- What did you learn from that sales call?
- What felt like a win?
- What's one thing you'd do differently next time?
- How can I support you in getting better?
- Are you feeling fulfilled in this role?

This shifts the conversation from accountability through control to accountability through belief-shifting. The rep walks away with a different experience—one that tells them “My leader believes in me.” That belief turns into new action and ultimately better results.

This is the difference between managing actions and shifting beliefs.

The Results Pyramid offers a road map for getting out of the Action Trap. If you are only focused on actions and results, then you stay trapped in a cycle of effort and diminishing returns. The deeper work is in shifting the beliefs that drive behavior, because when beliefs shift, actions shift, and your results

transform. Forcing your will on the team is not effective. You cannot mandate culture.

Take diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), for example. After the firestorm over the death of George Floyd in 2020, companies rushed to mandate DEI with new hires, new programs, and new metrics. But you can't mandate a belief in diversity, in equity, or in inclusion. As DEI became politically unpopular in 2024, it was quickly ripped out of organizations countrywide. But if DEI could be ripped out that quickly, it was never part of your culture in the first place. Companies that had Action-Trapped DEI got the results to match.

As a leader, you have a role in setting the conditions to create results. This involves three key steps:

1. **Clarity**—Create experiences that allow everyone to attain clarity on the purpose, the strategy, and the results you're trying to achieve.
2. **Alignment**—Create experiences that will encourage beliefs to emerge that align with the results you're trying to achieve.
3. **Accountability**—Create experiences that foster a culture of accountability. You can't impose accountability on others, but you can speak the language of accountability and demonstrate it through your own actions, setting the standard for commitment and follow-through.

You'll notice that in all of this work, the only thing you can control is the experiences you create for other people. That's a critical point. These experiences will shift the beliefs of those around you, and those beliefs will lead to action, which will get results. This is how you surrender to lead.

In the coming chapters, we will break this down step by step. The first chapter will explore the surrender shift—why it feels counterintuitive in leadership yet is the key to creating adaptable organizations. Then we explore the role that leaders have in setting the conditions for organizations to drive results. Part 1 will dive into a leader's first task—to create clarity around your purpose, strategy, and culture to get results. This is the Results Equation:

### **Purpose + Strategy + Culture = Results**

Part 2 will explore how to drive alignment around your Results Equation at scale—in particular, how you shift the beliefs of your team so they can adapt to change and drive explosive growth. Finally, part 3 will dig into accountability, the holy grail of results.

Our goal is to create an experience for you through storytelling—one that shifts your belief about leadership. Then you may surrender to lead. We believe that if you do, what you can accomplish is beyond our wildest imagination.

After all, true greatness isn't about controlling every play. It's about elevating those around you. Just ask the GOAT—Messi.