

The background is a vibrant teal color. It is filled with numerous question marks. Some of these question marks are printed on white rectangular pieces of paper or sticky notes that are scattered across the frame, some overlapping each other. The overall effect is one of a cluttered, questioning environment.

STOP DOUBTING START LEADING

LEONIE GREEN

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1 Communication: How the stories you tell yourself make (or break) you

AS A HUMAN BEING, you are wired to communicate in one way or another. You talk, wink, smile, yell, argue, or laugh. This is the world of communication which occurs with others. It's the outer world of communication.

When it comes to confidence, the world of communication that makes the biggest difference is the communication you have with yourself – the inner world of communication. The stories you tell yourself. The stories to which you listen – sometimes without realising it.

Stories we tell ourselves sometimes feel like advertisements for movies which we never want to see again; yet, we can't seem to turn them off. They play in our mind's eye with all their vibrancy, trying to remind us of something while often trying to scare us into taking action or running away.

I love the way *The Holiday*, a romantic comedy, highlights this. Throughout this Christmas family favourite, Amanda Woods is a movie trailer producer (movie preview producer if you live in Australia). As a self-proclaimed workaholic, it's only natural that she thinks in movie previews! As she heads off on a holiday escape, we see one of her 'movie preview thoughts.'

'Amanda Woods is proud to present...her life. She had it all: The job. The house. The guy. This holiday season, find out what Amanda doesn't have.'

We then see Amanda's reaction to her thoughts: an *arrgh* and a cringe; and, that get-me-out-of-here look.

I have this same look when one of my movie preview stories plays. I don't have a great poker face. I am sure people see the look (often a cringe or a severe frown) when one of those stories flashes across my brain. I know my body language gives it away as I catch myself in it. I am either slumped or my shoulders are tensed up around my ears – or both!

Consider when you last replayed a movie preview to yourself. Was it a story that highlighted how amazing you are? Or, was it a story that pulled you down? The stories we tend to repeat are the ones highlighting what is *not*, rather than what could be or even what really is.

We can catch ourselves doing it, but often we are already in the downward spiral when we do. That can result in us getting stuck. Stuck as in 'I suck.'

The 'I suck' stories

I love kids' movies. I learn from them all the time. Often I am laughing and crying alongside my daughter as we learn (and re-learn) the salient life lessons that children's movies contain. *Kung Fu Panda* is a favourite, and one of my favourite characters is Po Ping. In part, the concept of 'I suck' stories was inspired by Po.

In *Kung Fu Panda*, Master Oogway announces, '*The universe has brought us the dragon warrior.*' Standing before him is Po Ping, the most unlikely of dragon warriors. The dragon warrior is supposed to be a prodigy and the one who will unlock the secret to the dragon scroll. The famous *Kung Fu Furious Five* assume it will be one of them, most likely Tigress. But instead, Master Oogway points directly to Po – cuddly, rotund, loveable, food-loving and kind-hearted Po Ping. Po was not convinced that Master Oogway had made the right call. Po knew he loved Kung Fu, but still felt inadequate. Indeed most of those around him tended to believe his

version of inadequacy. All except Master Oogway.

After an arduous (and fairly embarrassing) day of training, and after over-hearing the Kung Fu Furious Five making fun of him, Po escapes. He tries to block out his feelings with food. On this occasion, he accidentally stuffs his face with peaches from the ‘sacred peach tree of wisdom.’ Master Oogway finds him, and gets him talking about what’s happening. Po reveals: *‘I probably sucked more today than anyone in the history of Kung Fu, in the history of China, and in the history of sucking.’*

This phrase stuck with me. I have found myself using similar phrases at times. Do any of these sound familiar to you:

- *‘I really don’t think I was cut out for this. I am making a fool of myself.’*
- *‘Why did I ever think I could do this? I don’t know what I am doing.’*
- *‘Did I really say that? They must think I am a complete idiot.’*
- *‘If they haven’t worked it out already, then they are soon going to work out that I am not up to this.’*

We are only saying to ourselves: I suck.

The impact of the I suck story

The challenge of the I suck stories is their stickiness. It’s easier to put ourselves down than to build ourselves up. So, we see the movie preview train wreck and we play it on repeat. We ruminate. Over and over. We get stuck; stuck in I suck. Yuck.

Over time, what happens is that we begin to suck – for real. We get stuck in a story that becomes self-fulfilling. We repeat, rather than learn, from the experience of ‘sucking.’ For example, we worry that people will judge us if we speak up. So, we don’t. We worry that we will look like an idiot if we ask a question. So, we don’t. We worry that what we have is not perfect, and so we hold off. We hold back; we wait. And then, we fail to deliver. The I suck stories

can be so sticky that we just don't know how to stand up straight again to get out of the mud.

Evidence of I suck

We tend to filter out evidence to the contrary when we are stuck. Confirmation bias then affirms what we believe. Confirmation bias is when our subconscious looks for evidence that what we believe exists. It actively filters out the stories which suggest otherwise. So, we only see the evidence that corroborates our story. Our brain doubles down and hurts us – not just with the story it plays on repeat, but in seeking out evidence to confirm our suspicions.

What this means is that we store up other stories about how we suck. We ignore the stories that would shine a light on why we may have been appointed to the role in the first place. Dragon warrior, human resources manager or general manager: whatever the role, you were appointed because someone believed in you. Perhaps not everyone, just like with Po; but, someone. The question is really whether or not you back yourself.

Does everyone get stuck?

In a word, yes. Everyone gets stuck in 'I suck' from time to time. We filter out the evidence that others can be stuck in their own stories too – their own internal narratives of 'I suck.' This is a common theme with seasoned executives and new leaders alike. We can all fall prey to the sticky I suck story.

I hear the same stories from my clients and have for some time. Clients tell me: *'I feel like I'm not up to it. I feel like everybody else knows what they're doing but I just don't know what I'm doing. I feel like I'm not cut out for this role.'* There's a kind of pain in my heart whenever I hear these stories. I know from personal experience what that feels like. And, I know how tricky it can be to get out of the story.

I told myself an I suck story long enough to have me burn-out,

ultimately fail and then escape a role that I was (in hindsight) more than capable of performing – that is, of course, if I had managed to get myself unstuck. I'll tell you more about my experience later, but for now, I want to talk about the link between evidence and feedback.

Feedback: Fact or fiction?

A key theme in employee surveys over the last few years is the need for more feedback. Better feedback, feedback that helps identify areas for improvement and feedback that makes employees feel valued. In the absence of positive feedback, we fall into the trap of filling the void with our stories based in self-doubt: stories that are harmful and more often than not, unfounded. We tell ourselves the I suck story in the absence of evidence. This is dangerous territory. It's a tendency we need to understand in order to catch ourselves before feeding the I suck story and, eventually, getting stuck.

The upward trend in the need for feedback has occurred at the same time as a transition in our economy away from manufacturing. In manufacturing, a product was either successful or a fail and such feedback was easy to obtain. In the new 'knowledge economy' we all seek to improve one way or another, but it can be difficult to judge what improvement looks like or where to get helpful feedback. This transition has occurred at the same time as a transition to the use of social media. Here we can get immediate feedback by way of 'likes', shares and comments; or, we receive an absence of the same. It's all feedback.

Feedback comes in a variety of forms. Effective feedback, however, is feedback that is accurate and truly enables us to grow. It can be rare and hard to find.

The challenge is that feedback is everywhere. So, we can easily pick up the unhelpful feedback through our confirmation-bias filter. We get feedback from someone who smiles at us or someone who doesn't smile at us. We get feedback from someone who says, 'Great work', whether or not they meant it. We get feedback from the person who

says, ‘I don’t agree with you’. (And, we can make that mean all sorts of things.) We take an email as feedback, even though it hasn’t been returned. The call that hasn’t been returned. The social media comment or post that isn’t ‘liked’.

As humans, we don’t filter our feedback in an effective way. We don’t test out feedback as fact or fiction. We take all feedback as if it means something about us personally – often in a negative narrative sense. By way of confirmation bias, we connect these little bits of feedback to our story, which is our I suck story.

If someone doesn’t smile at us in the morning, doesn’t acknowledge us, or doesn’t reply to our email, then we start to play the negative narrative of thinking: ‘Oh my God. They mustn’t believe that I can do what I do.’ Or, ‘They really think that I’m failing at this job.’ Or, ‘They really think I am an idiot.’ Whatever narrative we are telling ourselves, we use that tiny bit of ‘feedback’ as evidence that our I suck story is accurate.

After 40 years of research in classrooms, Professor Graham Nuthall – author of *The Hidden Lives of Learners* – identified that 80% of verbal feedback students receive is from other students. And, most of this feedback is incorrect. ‘Well done.’ ‘I don’t think that’s right.’ ‘This is how you do it.’ All of this is feedback; most of the time it’s wrong.

In my experience, the same is true in the workplace. We receive so many forms of feedback, verbal and otherwise; formal and informal. Some of this is accurate, helpful and effective. The vast majority is unhelpful and sometimes harmful. This is particularly true when it confirms our biased negative narrative of I suck.

We need to learn how to filter the unhelpful feedback, seek the feedback that matters, and recognise the difference between the two. Then, our I suck stories are challenged rather than charged.

Can the I suck story lead to self-confidence?

This book is about building self-confidence, and so it might seem counter-intuitive to focus first on I suck stories. But here’s the

thing: if we don't recognise what we are telling ourselves, then we are going to think that the mud in which we are stuck is real rather than imagined.

The negative narrative is just a story. For now. We risk it becoming our reality if we don't recognise the story for what it is.

The story we tell ourselves becomes the story we tell others; and, over time, it becomes the story others see. Whether we realise it or not, and whether we want them to or not, it comes out subconsciously. It comes out in how we hold ourselves. It comes out in regard to what we contribute in meetings (or don't). It comes out in what we deliver (or don't).

New leaders often focus on communication: communication with their team, with their boss, with their peers, with the wider organisation and with key external stakeholders. This is important; no question. At the same time, what is critical as a starting point is how we communicate with ourselves. If we are unclear on our internal narrative, we will struggle to communicate in a way that is clear, congruent and connected – regardless of the audience.

Start with identifying the stories that need cleaning up. It's a little like getting rid of cobwebs. Give your subconscious a spring clean to get rid of the I suck stories. They will come back, just like dust and cobwebs. But the cleaner you are when you start a new leadership role, the easier it is to identify the early signs of the story coming back. So, start with getting clear on where the I suck narrative currently exists. That is critical. If you fail to do this, you will end up communicating in a way that is inauthentic and incongruous. Overall, it projects the story you really don't want others to see.

Remember that the words you use to communicate only provide a small portion of how that communication is received. The tone you use, the body language you display, and the very nature in which you communicate tells part of the story. You may subconsciously tell a story of I suck if you are not managing your internal narrative.

Henry Ford was a founder of the Ford Motor Company, a pioneer and a futurist back in the late 1800s. He is believed to have said (or at least said something like): *‘If you think you can do a thing or think you can’t do a thing, you’re right.’*

You can set yourself up to fail when you tell yourself the I suck story. It becomes self-fulfilling. So, step one on the path to self-confidence is identifying the I suck stories. Step two is the spring clean. Step three is replacing the story. We will cover steps two and three later in the book. For now, take some time to reflect on the stories you say about yourself. Start to uncover the I suck stories.

I used to tell myself that I sucked at running. I grew up asthmatic and was never really that athletic. I carried my Ventolin puffer wherever I went. I never trained in running. I often came close to last in school races. It just wasn’t my thing; that was how I justified the I suck story.

Then, one night I was challenged by a friend to run a fun-run. It was a bet and, admittedly, I had consumed a few champagnes at the time! I agreed to something that I may never have agreed to while sober. The challenge was that if I ran a five-kilometre fun-run, then my husband, Tim, would run a half marathon – something this mutual friend of ours knew he had been wanting to do for some time. He just needed an extra nudge. So, I agreed. I trained a few times and I found it really hard. I managed to cover about three kilometres at most in my training runs. I was still very much stop and start. It’s safe to say that, while I was out there ‘running,’ an internal story played in my mind: ‘This is really not me. I suck at running.’

Then, the night before the fun-run, Tim changed the rules on me. He said that I needed to run the entire five kilometres without stopping. Otherwise, he didn’t need to worry about the half-marathon. Well, suddenly the story in my mind was replaced with a ‘I will show you! I know you want to do this half-marathon. So, I am going to do everything in my power to hold up my part of the bargain.’

And I did. I ran. A full five kilometres. Without stopping.

I still remember running across the finish line, nearly staggering it's safe to say, but nonetheless still running. Kirsty, our friend, was there to cheer us on throughout the race. She looked at me, saying, 'Look at you. You're a runner.' Wow. I have tears in my eyes just remembering that story.

In one moment, my narrative changed. Suddenly, I LOVED running. Ridiculous. I had missed out on 30 years of running due to thinking it was just not my thing!

Smiling in the face of I suck

When we recognise the I suck story, we have the opportunity to test it out. When I work with my coaching clients, I love seeing their light bulb moments where they realise they don't suck. They smile at the face of I suck because they realise they don't suck at all.

I suck stories tend to be such isolated, small examples of something we did wrong. Or, these stories are something that just didn't work out as we had planned it, such as a single conversation or meeting that didn't go as planned. When we nail it down from where this I suck story came, we have these moments of clarity where we say, 'Oh, that's all that is. It's just that story on repeat.'

One of my clients, a highly-capable and amazing individual, recently fell foul of an I suck story. She was coming up to a performance review and felt concerned about it, feeling as if she hadn't received very much feedback from her boss. She had inferred that, as a result, she was now heading into a poor review. In truth, she had filtered out the positive while focusing on the absence of feedback to infer a negative appraisal.

We discussed what she had delivered, the work to which she had committed and what she had achieved. On most measures, she had excelled: she had delivered what she needed to and she had a highly engaged team. She was liked and respected both internally and externally. We pulled out some examples of where she had received feedback, and the feedback was exceptional.

Her evidence of things not going well was the absence of feedback (or her perception of an absence of feedback). And, it included one conversation that had not gone well. One conversation can be all it takes to get stuck in I suck.

When we broke down that conversation, she was able to recognise that the conversation was not all bad. Her boss had acknowledged her great work at the start of the meeting. She was able to see she couldn't be sure what her boss was really thinking, and so she was also able to recognise the narrative she had chosen. She had placed this narrative over the words and actions which formed the conversation. She acknowledged that she had made the conversation mean so much more than it did. In fact, there was a double-edged challenge here for this leader, and a very common one:

- She perceived her boss as being all-knowing (the perfect leader); and
- She wanted to be perceived as all-knowing (the perfect leader) herself.

The challenge? The perfect leader does not exist. Alas, we are all human beings and not superheroes. So, she was holding a conversation with a fictional leader rather than the real leader sitting across from her.

This fictional leader is one I thought I knew well, so well in fact, that I thought she was real. Let me explain.

Feedback loops that help and hinder

After university, I worked as an employment and workplace-relations lawyer in a law firm. I loved employment law. In my eyes, employment law enabled workplace change for the better. I still feel that way. I was lucky enough to work with clients who wanted to use the law for good – not evil. Employers could see the need to do more than just comply with the law. They wanted their workplaces to be ahead of the game. I left the law firm some years later, joining the corporate world as an in-house industrial relations manager. I got

a reputation for getting things done, great service delivery and for improving how teams functioned. My entry ticket was knowing the law, but the work I did was mostly about improving service delivery and how people worked together. As a consequence, I was thrown new challenges: managing other teams which included the payroll team, a customer-care team and then the human resources team.

All the transitions into other teams were bumpy and challenging, yet also fulfilling and successful. The move to human resources, however, was just plain awful.

There were three reasons for this:

1. I was painfully aware that my appointment was not unanimously supported.
2. Those that had not supported my appointment had openly judged me as ill-equipped for the role.
3. This judgement confirmed my deeply held doubts about myself. I wasn't equipped and didn't know how to handle this role; so, I was not ready for it.

What made the biggest difference to my confidence? What I told myself: the I suck story. This story filtered the feedback so effectively that I failed to act as I knew I needed to act. I couldn't do the things I knew I must. Rather, I shied away. I played small. I felt small. I didn't stand tall because I felt like I sucked.

My I suck story became self-fulfilling. My performance started to suck. I didn't have the conversations I needed to have. I didn't look after myself physically or mentally. I failed to focus on what I needed to deliver. I got stuck. Completely stuck in I suck.

Luckily for me, I have also had the opposite experience: the feeling of being supported in a role. I have had a positive narrative fed to me rather than evidence for my negative narrative.

I was a junior lawyer when I joined Mark's team, but he did not treat me as 'junior.' He had a confidence in me that far exceeded the confidence I had in myself at the time. He appreciated my professional experience, which I had down-played. Prior to that role, I

had been stuck in looking for evidence that *I sucked* as a lawyer. Seriously. Suddenly, my boss was telling me I was an asset to his team. Wow. The power of Mark's support of me was enormous.

The scary thing is this: in both scenarios, my view of myself was determined by other people.

And this is the crucial thing about feedback, isn't it? If we rely on feedback, we're vulnerable to the views of others. That's fantastic if we've got someone who believes in us, but it can be disastrous if we have someone who doesn't.

So, is there an alternative?

Self-reliant feedback

Mrs. Morrison was my grade six teacher, and Mrs. Morrison was just wonderful. Without question, she was one of my favourite primary school teachers, but not because of anything that she taught me in maths or writing or any other subject. No, I remember Mrs. Morrison for what she taught me about loving myself.

Day one of grade six. Mrs. Morrison asked our entire class to put their hands up if they loved themselves. As grade six kids in the 1980s, it was not the 'done thing' to acknowledge that you 'loved yourself' publicly or privately. Oh no! So, no one put their hands up. Instead, we all sheepishly looked around, sniggered and said, 'Well, no one's going to admit it.'

Mrs. Morrison looked at us all and said, 'By the end of this year, when I ask you that question, you will all put your hands up.' We all giggled, thinking this was ridiculous. Yet, through the course of that year, she instilled in us that we must love ourselves to truly love and appreciate anybody else. Loving yourself comes first.

I wish I could remember how Mrs. Morrison taught us this lesson so well. I have this memory of it being drummed into us, but that is all. And, by the end of that year when she asked us that question, we all put our hands up – all of us with no (visible) reservation.

So, what does this have to do with feedback?

Well, if we are clear about who we are and the value we offer, then the feedback for which we look will be feedback that confirms our belief. We put confirmation bias to work *for* us, not against us. Also, we can then focus on self-feedback, by which I mean testing our achievements against our own measures. For example, living in accordance with our own values.

In his book *Power, Freedom and Grace*, meditation and alternative healing guru, Deepak Chopra, draws on the metaphor of *being in the river*. I find this concept useful when I think about self-feedback. Consider for a moment that you are floating down a river. On one bank there are people who love and appreciate you. They are chanting messages like, ‘You are amazing! You can do anything!’ On the other side of the river, there are people who question your competence or just don’t understand you. They are chanting, just as loud, saying messages like, ‘Who do you think you are? You are out of your depth.’

The challenge is to float down the middle of the river away from both banks. Chopra believes both forms of feedback take us off course. Instead, you must keep flowing in your own truth, your own strength, and your own path. Both banks are just the perception of others and ultimately unhelpful. If you get stuck on either bank, you miss the action of the river itself. Let’s be clear. Both banks can be persuasive and both banks are easy to lean towards, particularly if they connect with something we believe of ourselves. However, the self-feedback that serves us is found in the flow of the river itself.

The problem is that many of us (me included) spend our time slamming into each bank without realising it. Someone praises our work and we slam with gratitude into the positive bank. Someone criticises us and we slam into the negative bank, believing the worst is true. When we slam into the bank, it can take some work to get unstuck. It turns out the river banks are just as sticky as the I suck stories. And still, they are just as unhelpful – whether it’s

the positive or negative bank. Both banks take away our ability to love and appreciate ourselves, and to confidently travel down the river of life.

The power of stories on our river of life

While we focus on being in the river rather than on the bank, we will still be swayed by the stories we tell ourselves. There are two key types of stories we tell ourselves.

1. There are the small (but impactful) stories, like the horror movie previews about how we failed last time or how we suck; and
2. The stories about who we are in life. This is our overarching narrative about who we are, what we believe, and what we are capable of achieving.

The challenge in the flow of the river is to find a harmony or alignment within the stories we tell ourselves, while ensuring they are moving us forward, not backward, or sideways.

The horror movie previews (the I suck stories) will have you treading water. At best, you are stuck on the negative bank; or, at worst, spinning in a vomit-inducing whirlpool. None of this moves you forward.

To avoid getting pulled to either bank, work on identifying the stories you tell yourself and the way you communicate with yourself.

This is the start. Look at the communication you have with yourself. In the following chapters, I will look at the comparisons we make and our competency levels. But, neither of those concepts will be fully realised unless you first understand this point about how you communicate with yourself. Furthermore, it helps to understand how you, unwittingly, hold yourself back.

Our tendency to live in the past, present or future influences how we talk to ourselves. I will make this clearer throughout the book. For now, it's important to recognise that most of the horror movie

previews are stuck in a past or an imaginary world – something that may have happened once. There is no guarantee it will happen again unless we really, truly take on and wholeheartedly believe in the truth of the preview as a preview, and not a *past* view.

Once we realise that our horror movie previews are a past view of our world (and often far more imaginary than we realised), we can start to work from the present moment. Then, we can start to make the future a world in which we want to live.

So what happens now?

You cannot outsource this work. This is about you. This is the work that you need to do on yourself to be the leader you want to be and the leader you are born to be. This is about being absolutely your authentic self because that is how you will connect with the people you lead. It's your authentic self that makes the difference.

Start with one step. Choose a day – today would be perfect. Through the course of the day, check in with yourself. This could be once an hour or less often; but, it must be at least six times. Ask yourself:

- What am I telling myself right now?
- Am I watching or listening to a horror movie preview of something that happened in the past that I am worried will happen again?
- Have I imagined something could go wrong?
- Is my imagination serving me or is it making me suffer?
- Is there a better story I could be telling myself right now?

At the end of that day, you'll have a list of stories that you've told yourself. Go through this list and consider how often you tell yourself these particular stories. Is there a story that is playing on repeat? Is there a story in which you are stuck? If so, that's the one with which you start. That is the story you need to replace with a story about how you can handle the present moment while moving towards a better future.

As an immediate quick fix, you could try playing the Freeze

Game as developed by Doug Lennick and Fred Kiel. These leadership gurus are authors of numerous books including *Moral Intelligence: Enhancing Business Performance and Leadership Success*. Dr. Wendy Grusin of the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM) at the University of NSW first introduced me to their work. The Freeze Game is one I use regularly and with great impact. It is simply a way of checking in with ourselves with a pre-formed intention. Here's an example.

I was facilitating a workshop with students of the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM) the first time I played the Freeze Game. Before the workshop, I told myself that in order for the students to get the most out of the workshop, I needed to be present (not thinking about something else). This meant I had to portray my authentic self, while bringing a positive energy to the room. My words for the workshop were presence, authenticity and energy. At various times during the workshop, I paused (playing the Freeze Game) and asked myself: *Am I present in this moment? Am I authentic? Am I bringing good energy?* If not, then I had an immediate opportunity to adjust.

Lennick and Kiel's work is about the idea of 'moral intelligence,' by which they mean living in a way that aligns with your values. The Freeze Game is great for this work, but it can be extended beyond values. It can be a game you play throughout the day, where you simply ask yourself the questions you think will assist you most. For example:

- Am I presenting the best version of myself right now?
- Am I treating myself the way I would treat a loved one?
- What am I telling myself right now? Is it helpful or harmful?
- What am I holding back on right now? And, what am I afraid might happen if I act?

There is power in just playing this game and adjusting your thoughts at any given moment. There is even greater power in writ-

ing down everything you discover within a journal. Journaling can help you identify patterns: stories in which you are stuck. Then, you can realign the next moment or the next day. You may realise there is a particular horror movie preview which plays out at a particular point each day, such as just before a meeting. When you see this pattern, you have the opportunity to address it. You're able to re-write the story if you like. I'll explore more about the idea of re-writing later in this book. For now, just recognise the narrative and see if you can adjust it.

What if I am really stuck in I suck?

Sometimes it's difficult to shake the I suck story. Stories are powerful and convincing. If you feel completely stuck, seek out someone you trust and start talking. Your trustworthy sounding board will test out your thinking. Show you the horror movie preview for what it is: a make-believe story about what may – or may not – have once happened. It is stuck in a loop of replay, replay, replay. To test out whether you might be stuck in I suck, consider:

- Am I engaged at work at least 80 percent of the time?
- Do I feel capable of at least 80 percent of the work I am employed to do?
- Do I have energy left at the end of most days?
- Do I feel like I am contributing value?

If you answered yes to each of these questions, then well done! If you wavered or answered a quick no, then unpack that answer. What is holding you back? What are you telling yourself? What would you prefer to be saying?

We must lead ourselves in order to lead others. We must do this work on self-communication, self-worth, and self-belief. In the same way that Mrs. Morrison taught me that in order to love others we must first love ourselves, in order to *lead* others, we must first lead ourselves. This starts with how we communicate with ourselves.

We spend so much time considering how we will communicate with others, and not nearly enough time considering how we communicate with ourselves. Both types of communication are important, but positive self-communication will wildly enhance your ability to communicate with anyone you lead.

When you realise it's just a story – a horror movie preview that's stuck on repeat – you are free to recognise what's going on in the present. Recognise what you can do right now. Act to change, improve and grow.

But what if you *really* do suck?

The reality is you do suck. We all suck at some things – at lots of things! And that's okay. What's not okay is to let that stop us from taking action that will improve our abilities and have us achieve our dreams. What's not okay is if we are communicating with ourselves in a way that has us stuck in a loop of feeling we suck. In actuality, we may not suck at all. If, after unpacking our story of 'I suck' we still feel that we suck, then chances are it's because we feel incompetent at something. Or, we are comparing ourselves with someone else. Comparison can be a killer; so, let's tackle that first and then we will move on to competency. First, though, take heart... you are not alone, and you are already on the way to improving your confidence.

Everyone is on a growth path. Everyone faces hurdles, curve balls and new challenges. Everyone gets stuck from time to time, and everyone feels ineffective. When we are not doing as well as we could, we will have a story that goes with that. You need to make sure that the story is one that supports you. Remember, perhaps you are a leader who is transitioning to a new role or managing a significant change within an organisation. Or simply that you are human. Yes, human. Give yourself licence to be human. In turn, you will give those you lead the licence to be human, and permission to valiantly fly their Freak Flag!

You are a freak, so be proud of it

I love the idea of a Freak Flag. I first came across this concept in the movie *The Family Stone*, another Christmas favourite. It's the kind of gift of a movie that just keeps on giving.

In the movie, the eldest son and golden child (Emmett Stone) brings his girlfriend, Meredith Morton, home to meet his family at Christmas. He hopes his mother will give him the family 'stone,' his grandmother's engagement ring, so that he can propose to Meredith over the Christmas break. But, Meredith is tight-lipped and awkward. She has a nervous cough and struggles to connect with any family members. That is, all except Emmett's brother Ben. Somehow, Ben can see through Meredith's veneer. He recognises that she's projecting an image of what she thinks she ought to be, rather than who she really is. Ben sees that underneath her veneer is someone worth knowing, and even someone worth loving. He challenges her to be herself by saying, 'Meredith, you have a 'Freak Flag;' you just don't fly it.'

We all have something that defines our uniqueness: our Freak Flag. Our challenge as human beings is that we try to conform and to be the norm: something we think we're meant to be. We have an innate need to belong. However, conforming or fitting in is different to belonging. Dr. Brené Brown, writer and social scientist, explains this distinction beautifully in her book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*. She writes:

"One of the biggest surprises in this research was learning that fitting in and belonging are not the same thing, and, in fact, fitting in gets in the way of belonging. Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn't require us to change who we are; it requires us to be who we are."

When we try to conform or fit in, we risk silencing something essential in our nature. We're not flying our Freak Flag. And it's our Freak Flag for which, as leaders, people are looking and are yearn-

ing to see. Why? Because this makes them comfortable to express their own Freak Flag. The Freak Flag is about being our authentic selves. Saying 'I love, trust and respect myself.' This is who I am and I am proud to be me. There's the Freak. Fly it proudly.

The Freak Flag is our licence to be human and a licence to be ourselves. But of course, one of the key reasons we tell ourselves I suck stories is because we compare ourselves (negatively) to other people. So, the next chapter is all about comparison. Once we are ourselves and learn to fly our Freak Flag, the only useful comparison is with ourselves and not with others. This doesn't mean we don't aim for better, or that we don't test ourselves. Instead, it means being honest and clear about who we are and what we are trying to achieve. We focus on our human endeavours, rather than comparing ourselves to others – or worse – to a non-existent perfect leader.

FOCUSED ACTIONS

This Focused Actions section is tailored to help you build on new concepts and practices that will build your self-confidence. You will find Focused Actions at the end of every chapter.

These actions require you to put one foot in front of the other and start building self-confidence. Give them a fair go. The more effort you put into the actions, the greater understanding you will have of yourself. Go for it!

Develop the foundation of awareness

Set the timer on your phone to go off at least six times during your day. When your alarm rings, ask yourself: What am I telling myself right now? Am I watching or listening to a horror movie preview of something that happened in the past? Am I worried it will happen again? Have I imagined something could go wrong? Is my imagination serving me or is it making me suffer? Is there a better story I could be telling myself right now?

Your I suck phrases

In Kung Fu Panda, Po Ping felt inadequate and shameful after his day of training. Po reveals, “I probably sucked more today than anyone in the history of Kung Fu, in the history of China, in the history of sucking!” What a clear I suck story!

What I suck phrases do you tell yourself? List all of them.

What's the impact?

When we retell ourselves our I suck stories, ruminating in their darkness, then the I suck story becomes super sticky. Being stuck in the story, it becomes easier to pull ourselves down than to build ourselves up. Our choices begin to reflect our I suck story. Over time, we begin to suck for real.

What is your I suck story? What impact has your I suck story had on your life? What would you like to change?

Feedback filters

Have a look at the I suck stories and phrases you have captured. What feedback, experiences or truths have you neglected to listen to because they don't fit into your I suck story? List them. List your successes, the wins, and the highlights that counter your I suck stories.

The I ROCK story journal

Concentrate each day on a particular story about how you actually *rock*, as opposed to how you suck.

Start an I ROCK story journal. Capture your proudest achievements, big and small. Capture helpful feedback you have received along the way. Capture the small wins, which day by day add up to bigger wins. Your I ROCK story journal is about building yourself up on paper. Filling the blank space with stories that will help counter the I suck stories.