



# Lift: The Fundamental State of Leadership

*By Ryan W. Quinn, Robert E. Quinn*

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**NEW EDITION, REVISED AND UPDATED**

## **Harness the Science of Positive Influence**

Just as the Wright Brothers combined science and practice to finally realize the dream of flight, Ryan and Robert Quinn combine research and personal experience to demonstrate how to reach a psychological state that lifts us and those around us to greater heights of achievement, integrity, openness, and empathy. The updated edition of this award-winning book—honored by Utah State University's Huntsman School of Business, Benedictine University, and the LeadershipNow web site --includes two new chapters, one describing a learning process and social media platform the Quinns created to help people experience lift and the other sharing new insights into tapping into human potential.

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## **Editorial Review**

### **Review**

“While it is commonly thought that influence is some political force that we exert upon others to get our way, the Quinns show how truly effective leadership begins with a selfless and positive influence that radiates from our inner core—our best self.”

—**Thomas Glocer, founder and Managing Partner, Angelic Ventures, LP, and former CEO, Thomson Reuters**

“The psychological state required for ‘lift’ encompasses the very essence of leadership in the public domain: a sense of being purpose centered, guided by values, caring for others, and focused on what can be done to improve programs, conditions, and services. *Lift* is all about making a difference—the spirit of public service in the 21st century.”

—**Mary Ellen Joyce, Executive Director, Brookings Executive Education**

“*Lift* presents rigorous science in an accessible way and imparts practical wisdom that keeps the title's promise: it will lift you and the people around you.”

—**R. Edward Freeman, Elis and Signe Olsson Professor of Business Administration, Darden School of Business, University of Virginia**

### **About the Author**

Ryan W. Quinn is associate professor of management at the University of Louisville College of Business.

Robert E. Quinn holds the Margaret Elliott Tracy Collegiate Professorship at the University of Michigan and serves on the faculty of Management and Organizations at the Ross School of Business.

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### **CHAPTER 1**

#### **THE FUNDAMENTAL STATE OF LEADERSHIP**

Ron, a colleague of ours, became a bit of a legend in his company after only a few months of working there. Like many of the executives in his company, Ron got projects done well and on time. Unlike many of these executives, Ron's employees loved working together and were excited about their projects, even if they began the projects disagreeing with each other. Some executives managed to push their projects through in spite of problems and disagreements; some executives managed to work well with people but did not accomplish quite as much. In contrast, Ron's leadership always increased harmony while bringing exceptional results. He became one of the most influential people in his company.

One day Ron walked out of a staffing meeting and said something that surprised his coworkers. The meeting had occurred in a stuffy, windowless room at the end of a long week; Ron and everyone else in the group had felt grumpy. They had discussed whether or not people from other units in the business should be moved into Ron's department. He did not want anyone else transferred in, so Ron argued his point and won; it seemed like a normal business meeting. Yet when Ron walked out, he told his coworkers, “I have given away my power.”

Ron's coworkers did not believe him. He was one of the most influential people in the company, and he had gotten what he wanted out of the staffing meeting. How could he have given his power away? Even Ron

could not answer this question, but he could tell that something had changed and that his ability to lead had changed as a result.

### A Different Kind of Power

When Ron was one of the most influential people in his company, his leadership did not depend on a position of authority. And when he “lost his power” his formal authority had not changed. Leadership may be exercised by a CEO who is trying to implement a strategic change in a multinational corporation, but it could also be exercised by a player on a soccer team who inspires his teammates to play less selfishly, a teacher who motivates the children in her class to exceed all standards of academic proficiency, a father who stirs a desire in his children to cooperate with each other, or an employee who convinces her boss to change a policy that impedes her colleagues from giving their best performance.

Many scholars agree that leadership does not depend on position. They define leadership as a process of social influence that involves determining collective goals, motivating goal pursuit, and developing or maintaining the group and culture.<sup>1</sup> We agree that leadership is a process of social influence and that it often involves setting goals and motivating people to pursue those goals. However, we also propose one implicit difference and one explicit difference from this definition. Implicitly, this definition of leadership suggests that leadership is intentional. In this book we show how leadership also involves motivating people without intending to, and sometimes even involves motivating them to do things that we never intended to motivate them to do. Sometimes our leadership is intentional, but it may not always be so. For example, Ron sometimes took action in which he intended to create productivity and harmony, but other times the people he inspired came up with ideas of their own that were much better than what Ron thought they would do.

We also propose an explicit difference from the standard definition of leadership. In particular, we propose that leadership occurs when people choose to follow someone who deviates from at least one accepted cultural norm or social convention. If a person complies with accepted norms, that person is not blazing a new trail but is simply following convention. And even if the person breaks cultural norms, if no one follows that person there is no leadership. Leadership challenges convention and inspires others to follow. The impact of such leadership is most positive and effective when cultural deviations inspire people to enhance their ethical contributions and the welfare of the people who hold a stake in the situation. We often saw this in Ron—before the grumpy staffing meeting—when he would take action that defied what people accepted as possible, appropriate, or real. Defying accepted conventions can offend or alienate others, but when people understood the intentions and effects of Ron's actions, they often contributed to his efforts, rather than feel offended or alienated.

Most of us, when we want to lead, use rational arguments, appeals to duty, rewards, punishments, or any number of other tactics to try to persuade others.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes these approaches succeed, and if they succeed we often feel satisfied. But most of us have also experienced moments of exceptional leadership—moments such as Ron's—even if these moments were fleeting. And because of these experiences our intuition tells us that more is possible even if it feels elusive. This elusiveness is the feeling Ron experienced at the end of the staffing meeting.

Ron got what he wanted in the staffing meeting, but he did not feel satisfied. He struggled to explain his feelings. The tactics he used in the staffing meeting worked, but he also began to see that he had created “collateral damage.” In contrast with his usual experience in the company, at the end of the staffing meeting people felt hurt and relationships had suffered. People felt weighed down rather than lifted up, and because they did not feel committed to the decisions made in the meeting, the same problems may reemerge. Although Ron had wielded influence successfully, he wanted to be a leader again. He wanted the kind of social influence that comes from challenging a cultural norm in a way that inspires others to want to

participate in pursuing a meaningful, collective good. He could tell that he had “lost” the ability to do this because something had changed inside him, but he could not explain why. All he could think to say was that he “was in a different place.”

### Psychological States

Ron learned later that the different place he was in was a different psychological state. A psychological state is a current, temporary condition of our mind. It is the pattern of thoughts and feelings we experience at a given point in time.

A person's psychological state can be simple or complex. A simple psychological state, for example, could be described by a single emotion, such as “happy” or “sad.” A complex psychological state can include many thoughts and emotions at the same time. For example, if a teenager receives an invitation to take the last spot on the school soccer team but received the invitation because a good friend was kicked off the team, then that teenager's psychological state might involve a complex blend of happiness about the good news, a resolve to succeed, concern for her friend's feelings, fear of the challenge, and guilt for accepting the position.

Scientists who study psychological states seek to understand what kind of states people experience, what leads people to experience particular states, and how these particular states influence other people. This last question is particularly important; as researchers come to understand the answers to it, they are discovering that our psychological states can influence other people in surprising and sometimes even dramatic ways.

Bill, a colleague of ours, told us a personal story that is a good example of this. Bill and his mother did not get along, let alone enjoy each other's company. It had been this way for a long time. In any situation Bill knew what his mother would say, he knew how he would respond, and he knew how the argument would unfold. He hated it, but he could not stop himself.

Bill went to a retreat and ended up working with a counselor. The goal was to improve his relationship with his mother. After much effort he began to feel more positively toward his mother. By the end of the retreat he was anxious to see her. He reports the following experience:

I took a deep breath and walked into the kitchen. I saw her before she saw me. I thought about the sacrifices she made and how much I loved her. She turned and looked at me. She opened her mouth. My stomach tightened and I thought, “Here it comes.” She paused and smiled. Then she went on with what she was doing. I was stunned. That was not what she was supposed to do. I was different and now she was different. From then on the relationship totally changed. I had not said a word, but I was different, and somehow she sensed it.<sup>3</sup>

Bill's relationship with his mother changed without his saying a word because Bill was in a different psychological state. At the retreat he had worked hard to consciously appreciate her positive characteristics and the sacrifices she had made over many years. This less angry and more loving orientation was probably communicated in his facial expression, his posture, and other nonverbal ways. These nonverbal signals of love and appreciation provided Bill's mother with a new set of cues to interpret. When people receive unexpected cues from others—particularly unexpected emotional cues—they have to make sense of them in new ways.<sup>4</sup> Thus, without saying a word to his mother, Bill had begun to construct a new relationship. The change in his relationship began with a change in his psychological state.

Our psychological states, whether they influence others positively or negatively, do so in at least four ways:

1. Our facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice send new and unexpected cues that people interpret and react to in new and different ways.
2. The emotions that are part of our psychological states are contagious. In other words, people often unconsciously mimic and then adopt our feelings.<sup>5</sup>
3. Psychological states sometimes lead us to make different decisions or act in different ways than we would if we had been in a different psychological state, and other people are influenced by these decisions and actions.<sup>6</sup>
4. When we take different actions and perform them in different ways, we also generate different results—results that may be more or less effective, creative, or beneficial. People pay attention to and try to make sense of unusual results.<sup>7</sup>

Ron's leadership exhibited all of these forms of influence. For example, when Ron felt positive, his coworkers had to make sense of his positive feelings—especially when Ron was positive during difficult times. The energy he brought to his activities was contagious, and it lifted others. Because of how he felt toward others, he might listen carefully in situations where others would feel compelled to argue their points. And because he achieved exceptional results, people wanted to learn from him or be a part of his team.

Our psychological states influence other people, and their psychological states influence us; we are relational beings.<sup>8</sup> Our psychological states are the sum of who we are at a given moment as we play out the stories of our lives in relation to others. Therefore, who we are at any time depends on who the people around us are, and who they are depends on who we are. The psychological state that Ron experienced in the staffing meeting affected how he experienced himself and acted as a manager, a coworker, and a friend. It also affected how positively other people experienced themselves in similar roles.

Typically, the influence that we exert upon each other tends to reinforce the conventions and norms to which we are already accustomed. However, if we experience a positive psychological state that defies some convention or norm, we may lead people into entirely new ways of relating and performing.

Our purpose in this book is to propose a specific psychological state that can make us a positive influence upon those around us in any situation. We call this the fundamental state of leadership. When we experience the fundamental state of leadership, we tend to lift both ourselves and those around us.

#### Learning to Lift with Mason

When people experience the fundamental state of leadership, they are purpose-centered, internally directed, other-focused, and externally open. To understand each of these characteristics, we share a story about Ryan and his son Mason that illustrates both what the fundamental state of leadership is and what it is not. Ryan begins this story in a normal psychological state. A normal psychological state is not bad; it is simply common. Sometimes a normal state leads to negative influence, and sometimes it does not, but it does not achieve the same type of influence that comes from the fundamental state of leadership. In this story Ryan experiences a change from the normal state to the fundamental state of leadership.

Ryan: Shortly before Mason turned six years old he and I fell into an unhealthy pattern. Mason would do something wrong, such as provoke his sister or refuse to clean up. In response, I would tell him that I would put him in a time-out. He would scream, "I hate you! I wish you weren't part of our family! Go away and never come back!" I would then try to calm him down and explain why he should clean up or leave his sister alone and why the time-out was the consequence. In spite of this, Mason would scream more and sometimes

even hit me. Often I would have to pick him up and take him to his bedroom kicking and screaming. I had no idea how to break out of this pattern.

One reason Mason and I were unable to break out of this pattern was that I was treating Mason's behavior as a problem; I did not like Mason's tantrums and I wanted him to behave the way he had before. His old behaviors were comfortable for me: I was comfort-centered. This desire to stay comfortable is a characteristic of a normal psychological state. In my desire for comfort I never considered that perhaps Mason was behaving differently because of changes that had happened in his life, such as starting kindergarten. If his circumstances were different, that meant that my circumstances were different as well. Trying to make people behave the same way under new circumstances is often not the most appropriate way to influence them.

Eventually, I decided to become more purpose-centered with Mason. This focus on purpose is one characteristic of the fundamental state of leadership. Instead of trying to make Mason behave as he had before, I asked myself what result I wanted to create. I decided that my purpose was to help Mason learn how to make responsible choices of his own volition. Once I made this decision, I was no longer interested in whether he was behaving in a way with which I was comfortable. Instead, I was wondering how I could help Mason learn to make responsible choices.

As I thought about this I realized that Mason was already making many responsible choices. He often made responsible choices, for example, when he was clear about what the consequences of his choices were in advance. He was also better at making these choices when my wife Amy or I had spent quality time with him that day. Based on these insights, I changed the way I interacted with Mason. I tried to anticipate opportunities for Mason to make decisions—such as when bedtime was approaching or when it was time to clean up—and I made a point of helping him understand his options and the consequences of each option in advance. Then I would let him make his own decisions. I also made an explicit effort to spend more quality time with him.

My efforts to help Mason understand his choices and consequences and to spend more time with him improved the situation somewhat. He appreciated the time I spent with him, and in some cases made better choices. But, there were still times when I was not able to anticipate decisions ahead of time, when he made poor choices even when he understood the consequences, or when I was not able to spend as much time with him as I would have liked. In situations such as these he threw tantrums when he had to do many of the things I asked him to do.

Another change came to my psychological state one day when Mason started to badger me about something while I was changing his little sister's diaper. I was fully occupied and told him to wait. Suddenly, it occurred to me that I was not willing to let him interrupt me, and yet when he was doing something, I had no problem telling him to stop what he was doing. Sometimes this was legitimate, but often there was no reason why I had to insist that he stop what he was doing at that moment. It became clear to me that my impatience was the cause of many of his tantrums. This lack of patience and respect was a sign that I was externally directed. External direction is a characteristic of a normal psychological state. When people are externally directed, they let circumstances (such as the drive to interrupt Mason to get him to do what I want) drive their behavior instead of their values (such as patience and respect).

When I realized that I was being externally directed, I decided that I would become internally directed. Internal direction is a characteristic of the fundamental state of leadership in which people experience the dignity and integrity that comes with exercising the self-control necessary to live up to the values that they expect of others. In Mason's case I became internally directed by showing him and his activities the same

respect that I wanted from him. For example, when it came to interrupting one of his activities, I would ask him how much time he needed to finish what he was doing, and then ask him to do the chore that I wanted him to do after he had completed the activity. As I showed Mason increased patience and respect, his tantrums decreased significantly.

One day while I was making dinner for Mason and his sister Katie, I offered to read him a book while he ate. Mason was excited. When I put the meal on the table, though, Mason started hoarding the food, leaving Katie with none. Katie started to cry. I asked him why he was hoarding the food; I tried to help him understand his choices and the consequences that would result from each choice. Even so, he just screamed at me, saying that he would not be my friend anymore. I was shocked by the intensity of his reaction. I was planning to spend time with him; I was trying to help him see his choices and consequences; I was trying to show him patience and respect. I did not know what to do. In spite of all of my efforts, Mason was screaming again. Bewildered and exasperated, I almost told Mason to stop immediately or I would put him in a time-out.

When I was about to threaten Mason with the time-out I felt self-focused and internally closed. Focusing on ourselves and closing ourselves off to feedback are characteristics of a normal psychological state. When we are self-focused, we are concerned only with our own needs, feelings, and wants. We see other people as objects that either help us or impede us in our goals. In my case, Mason was an object that was preventing me from my goal of showing that I was a good father.

When we are internally closed we ignore and deny feedback, such as the feedback that I was getting from Mason that said all my efforts to show that I was a good dad were not working. We ignore or deny feedback out of fear that the feedback says something about our worth as human beings. Because of this fear, and the frustration I felt, my first instinct was to get angry.

In my anger I was about to threaten Mason with a time-out. Before I did, however, I remembered my purpose: to teach Mason how to make responsible choices. I also remembered that in my previous efforts with Mason I thought I was doing the right thing and yet I was not showing him the respect I wanted him to show me. I had been at least somewhat wrong in those situations, and I could be wrong here as well. So, just as I was about to react, I caught myself and considered the possibility that I might be wrong here as well. And as I opened myself to that possibility, I also opened myself up to what Mason was feeling, and to what his needs might be. I became other-focused.

A focus on others' needs and feelings is another characteristic of the fundamental state of leadership. When we focus on others we feel empathy and desire to be compassionate. When I focused on Mason, I realized that Mason's screaming was rather extreme. He must be hurting, I felt, to have such an extreme reaction. Maybe his lashing out was the only way he knew to deal with some pain he felt inside, and if Mason was hurting inside I wanted to know why. I was no longer interested in proving I was a good father. Instead I wanted to understand why Mason might be hurting. And once I realized this, my desire to avoid feedback disappeared; I wanted feedback so that I could learn why Mason was feeling this way. Instead of being internally closed, I became externally open.

Openness to external cues—to feedback—is the final characteristic of the fundamental state of leadership. When we are open to these cues we learn, grow, and adapt ourselves to the situation unfolding before us. In my experience with Mason, my focus on purpose, my commitment to act respectfully, my empathy, and my desire to learn from feedback created an entirely new situation. And because I was in a new situation, paying attention to new cues, the unconscious, automatic part of my brain began noticing new patterns in those cues and coming up with new responses faster than the controlled, conscious part of my brain. In other words, I



began to have a feeling—an intuition—about what I should do.<sup>9</sup> The intuition I felt was to read to Mason anyway.

My conscious reaction to this unconscious intuition was to think that reading to Mason was a crazy idea. Why would I want to reinforce his bad behavior? Somehow, though, it felt like the right thing to do, so I took a chance. I sat down and asked Mason if he would still like me to read to him.

My question to Mason was honest. It was not an attempt to bribe him into letting Katie have her share of the food. I could make more food for Katie or find another way to make her happy if I needed to. If Mason said yes and listened to the story without sharing the food, I would have found another solution for Katie. I was acting on how I genuinely felt at that moment.

When I offered to read the story to Mason he melted. He found a piece of paper and a crayon and wrote, “I AM SORY. I AM YOUR FREND. I WANT TO BE YOUR FREND.” He handed me the paper. I told him that of course we were friends. Mason threw his arms around my neck and burst into tears. Then he let Katie have her share of the food. I read him the book while they ate their dinner.

I am not sure why he responded the way he did; I suspect that Mason, who was not even six years old at the time, could not have explained it himself. Perhaps he felt guilty because he knew what he was doing was wrong but he was scared to admit it. Perhaps he wanted to feel he had control over his own life, and once he knew he had control he no longer felt a need to exert it. Perhaps he simply needed to feel loved. Maybe it was all of the above.

Based on the scientific research that we will discuss throughout this book, I believe that Mason wanted to change because I connected with his deepest feelings and helped him work through those feelings in a purposeful, respectful way—even if neither of us could put those feelings into words. What I know for sure is that in a normal psychological state, my intuition was to punish Mason, but when I experienced the fundamental state of leadership, my intuition was to read to him. By acting on that intuition, I changed my relationship with my son. Offering to read to him was only a part of what inspired Mason to change. Offering to read a book, or to do any nice thing, may not inspire any change in another situation. In fact, in a different situation I might have had an intuition to punish Mason for his behavior. The intuition was less about what I did, and more about who I was.

In the weeks following this event, Mason's tantrums ended almost completely. Sometimes he still did things that I wished he would not do, but his behavior improved and so did mine. I still sometimes act in ways that are comfort-centered, externally driven, self-focused, or internally closed, but I am learning how to experience the fundamental state of leadership more often. When I do, Mason tends to be lifted by my efforts, as do I.

The fundamental state of leadership, as illustrated in the story of Ryan's relationship with Mason, is a psychological state in which a person is (1) centered on purpose, (2) directed by internal values, (3) focused on the feelings and needs of others, and (4) open to external cues that make learning, growth, and adaptation possible. We named this book *Lift* because this is what happens when people experience the fundamental state of leadership: they lift their own thoughts, feelings, actions, and outcomes and, in turn, those of others. Lifting ourselves and lifting others are interrelated experiences. We are unlikely to lift others without lifting ourselves, and we are unlikely to lift ourselves without lifting others.

The changes we need to make in order to experience the fundamental state of leadership depend upon our current situation. We may experience the state and lift others in one situation, but then the situation changes

and we, like Ron, suddenly discover that we are no longer experiencing it. New circumstances often pull us into more normal psychological states, where we focus on problems rather than purpose, react to our circumstances rather than use our values to drive our behaviors, dwell on our own agendas rather than empathize with others, and avoid the feedback that could enable us to learn and grow. When we do, we weigh people down rather than lift them up. The circumstances of everyday life create strong pressure to fall back into normal states, even after the most uplifting of experiences. Even so, scientific research and practical experience teach us how to lift ourselves and others once again. Based on this research, we offer four questions that we each can use to lift ourselves and others, becoming a positive force in any situation.

### The Four Questions

Ron struggled to explain his claim that he had given his power away, but he was unable to do so. He knew things intuitively that he could not explicitly explain. A few weeks after the meeting Ron attended a training program for business executives titled “Leading the Positive Organization.” In this program he learned about an area of research called positive organizational scholarship that examines the best of organizations and the best of human behavior in organizations.<sup>10</sup> It is similar to positive psychology, in which researchers seek to understand positive emotions, strengths, and virtues and how human strengths can contribute to better communities.<sup>11</sup> The professors and participants in the training program that Ron attended discussed topics such as how to create a culture that helps organizations and their people to thrive, tools for fostering high-quality relationships in the workplace, ways to energize the organization, and new ways to think about positive leadership. Ron learned about the fundamental state of leadership in this program.

The fundamental state of leadership drew Ron's attention because he recognized it in his own experience: such a state of leadership was the “place” that he was no longer in, and was the “power” that he had given up. He also recognized that the reason he had experienced the fundamental state of leadership so often in his work prior to the staffing meeting was that a series of difficult life events had pushed him to rise to the occasion and be his best self. This worried him; what if he could only experience the fundamental state of leadership when critical circumstances called him to do so? What about the rest of his work and life? Given this concern, Ron felt empowered when he learned four questions, developed from scientific research, that could help him experience the fundamental state of leadership in any situation:

1. What result do I want to create? When people answer this question they become less comfort-centered and more purpose-centered.
2. What would my story be if I were living the values I expect of others? When people answer this question they become less externally directed and more internally directed.
3. How do others feel about this situation? When people answer this question they become less self-focused and more other-focused.
4. What are three or more strategies I could try in learning how to accomplish my purpose? When people answer this question they become less internally closed and more externally open.

These are not magic questions. There are other questions, methods, or circumstances that can also help you experience the fundamental state of leadership. We offer examples of such questions in table 1.1. But we use these four questions throughout this book because they are carefully worded to reflect the scientific understanding we have of this psychological state. Our purpose for writing this book is to give you these questions. When people ask and answer them, they tend to move out of a normal psychological state and into the fundamental state of leadership, lifting themselves and others.

When Ron learned that he could experience the fundamental state of leadership by answering the four questions, he began using them to experience the state as often as possible. For example, after the training, Ron was supposed to attend a meeting in which he and his coworkers would make decisions about employee pay. These decisions were more complicated than usual because Ron's company had just been acquired by another company. The two companies had different forms and procedures for paying people, but there were no directions about how to handle the different forms and procedures. In fact, these forms and procedures were just one of many problems caused by the acquisition of Ron's company. There were no instructions for dealing with any of these problems, and Ron's boss—who was their contact with the parent company—was afraid to ask for directions. Ron worried that all these problems would make the compensation meeting a frustrating waste of time.

TABLE 1.1

Alternate Questions for Experiencing the Fundamental State of Leadership

Becoming Purpose-Centered

What result do I want to create?

What is my highest purpose for this situation?

What goal would be the most challenging and engaging?

What outcome would be most meaningful to me?

What would be the most ambitious and exciting goal I could pursue?

Becoming Internally Directed

What would my story be if I were living up to the values I expect of others?

What would I do if I had 10% more integrity than I have right now?

How can I live my core values in this situation?

What could I do right now to be more authentic?

If I were not worried about negative consequences, what would be the right thing to do?

Becoming Other-Focused

How do others feel about this situation?

What might be the deepest, unmet needs of those who care about this situation?

How could I explain others' behavior if I assume that they think they are good people?

How would I feel about others if I could empathize with their truest selves?

How and what could I sacrifice for the common good?

## Becoming Externally Open

What are three or more strategies I could try in learning how to accomplish my purpose?

What would I do differently if I were heeding all of the relevant feedback for this situation?

How would I act if I were not concerned about my role, expertise, or need for control?

How might I approach this situation if I saw it as an opportunity to learn?

How might I approach this situation if I saw it as an adventure with challenges to overcome?

How could I reframe negative outcomes as feedback?

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#### Michael Walker:

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