

Kick-start your Team's Flow State...



and watch your strategy take hold.

Achieve massive productivity gains
by applying high leverage inflections

How to Share this White Paper

You are welcome to share this whitepaper in whatever way you want to – on- or off-line, and at no charge.

My request is that you do so without changing or editing it in any way.

This is well-researched and well-meaning advice. It is intended to provide practical insights. I'd love you to test it out and see how it works for you.

Reading a white paper is one way to up skill yourself, but when it comes to commercial success, you are encouraged to select your own advisers for their specialist advice about your specific situation.

This is just a beginning, and hopefully one that stimulates you to explore the exciting realm of neuroscience more extensively.

Enjoy!

Bruce

Introducing Bruce Ross

Leadership and Culture Coach Bruce Ross is skilled in helping business owners and leaders navigate growth and create positive change.

He skillfully blends a variety of disciplines (Appreciative Inquiry, Self-Intelligence, Positive Psychology, Strengths) to shift leader behaviour to create more positive outcomes plus enroll and align teams in times of change.

Bruce's extensive business consulting experience has seen him directly develop the leadership capacity of literally hundreds of business leaders / owners across New Zealand.

He also delivers an MBA-level 'Executive Leadership' course through the Auckland Institute of Studies plus a number of leadership-related courses through Auckland University Short Courses.

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Introduction

There are four modes in business growth:

1. Vision mode
2. Strategy mode
3. Implementation mode
4. Reflection mode... leads back to re-vision mode

Implementation is when the rubber *actually* hits the road; it's the moment of truth where your intention meets the real world of [your team's readiness](#) and marketplace conditions.

Ideally have your team *actively* engaged in each of these four stages; this has multi-layered benefits:

- Participation raises energy (enthusiasm, engagement, buy-in)
- Participation lifts self esteem ('*My input is valued. I matter. I belong.*')
- Participation enhances insight (essential precursor to behaviour change)
- Moves team members towards thinking like the business owner (broadens perspectives, improves decision making).

The Implementation stage is where their intent is most apparent. Either your team engages enthusiastically (generously sharing their discretionary effort) or compliantly (reluctant acquiescence or worse, sabotage by neglect).

This white paper is about how to connect with your people in ways that ensure they're inspired to take action. And we're going to examine this through the lens of neuroscience.

Accessing Your Team's Natural Flow State

There are two key players in accessing our natural Flow State – the brain's Threat system and its Reward system.

Experiencing the ease of 'flow' (enthusiastic and purposeful activity) occurs naturally when the Threat System has been settled and its Reward System has been activated.

Think of releasing a beach ball that is held under the water – it can't not rise to the surface; it possesses a natural buoyancy. So too, we have a natural buoyancy, an eagerness to '*get on with things*'. This occurs when our inbuilt Threat system has been calmed and our Reward system has been fired up.

Understanding the subtle interplay between these two systems is crucial to overcoming procrastination and releasing the urge to make things happen.

Leader Insight:

The Brain's Threat System focuses us on what you *don't* want

The Brain's Reward System focuses us on what you *do* want

The Brain's Protective Threat System

The brain is a highly sophisticated pattern maker; it rapidly discerns and creates patterns – for everything. There is simply too much outer-world information for the conscious brain to assimilate so, for efficiency, it identifies markers and discerns patterns.

It then applies the Threat system to highlight any pattern exceptions (i.e. things that don't fit the pattern). If something is inconsistent with a pattern, it really stands out (e.g. a spelling mistake). This system scans five times a second for potential threat (real or imagined); it's our hardwired alarm system that never sleeps, ever vigilant.

When any change occurs (something outside the comfort zone of established patterns), we feel threatened – hence the name of "Threat System". We feel uncertain to some degree; we experience levels of discomfort or anxiety. This in turn causes a diminishment of perspective and a stronger focus on the negative.

This also applies to learning something new: It's hard... *until it's easy*. It takes effort and determination – focus, to create then embed a new pattern. It's a clever set up – the effort you have to consciously exert to overcome your own status quo (Threat system) proves you have to really want it.

Learning something new is outside our regular thinking patterns but with repetition, reflection and support, it becomes established as a habit. As habits are engrained patterns, they've become low energy processes – i.e. now easy.

The Threat system is centred mainly in the mammalian brain, particularly the limbic system – where our 'flight, flight, freeze' impulses come from. This is also the part of the brain that experiences feelings and controls behaviour.

The Brain's Reward System

Here, special neurons release the neurotransmitter dopamine, which gives a jolt of pleasure and makes you feel good. In order to make sure you repeat this behaviour

in the future, the reward pathway is connected to areas of the brain that control memory and behaviour.

If your brain strengthens the connections that allow this rewarding behaviour to occur then it will be easier for you to do next time. Through this reward pathway, our brain has ensured that we will repeat this behaviour in the future!

The Kicker

The Threat system trumps the Reward system – it activates 400 times faster. The urge to avoid pain (applying effort) is greater than pursuing pleasure. In the face of change, we tend towards avoiding the discomfort of the change rather than pursuing pleasure (its benefits).

Herein lies your leadership challenge: Because your team’s brains are hard-wired towards protecting the status quo, how do you settle their omni-vigilant Threat System and enthusiastically take up your new strategy (activate their Reward System)?

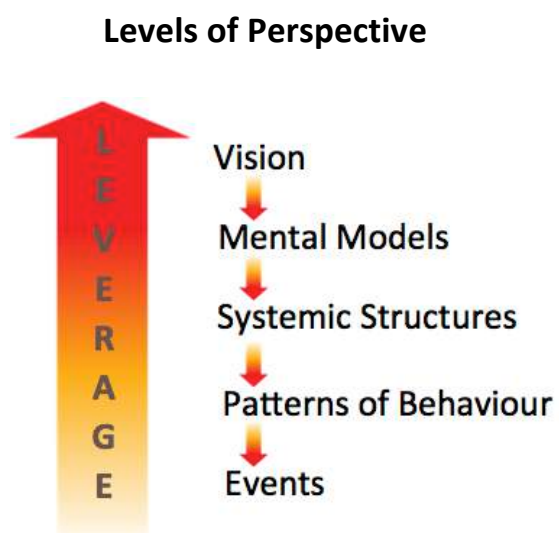
You need an activation formula.

Flow State Activation Formula: *Go High. Then Go Low to Go High*

To explain what I mean by going “High” then “Low” I’m going to introduce a useful model.

Created by Dr. Daniel Kim in 1995, it’s called “Levels of Perspective” and shows the hierarchy of leverage.

His message is that to achieve a vision, you need everything to be in alignment i.e. what mental models (mindsets), systems, behaviours and events are needed to achieve the vision?



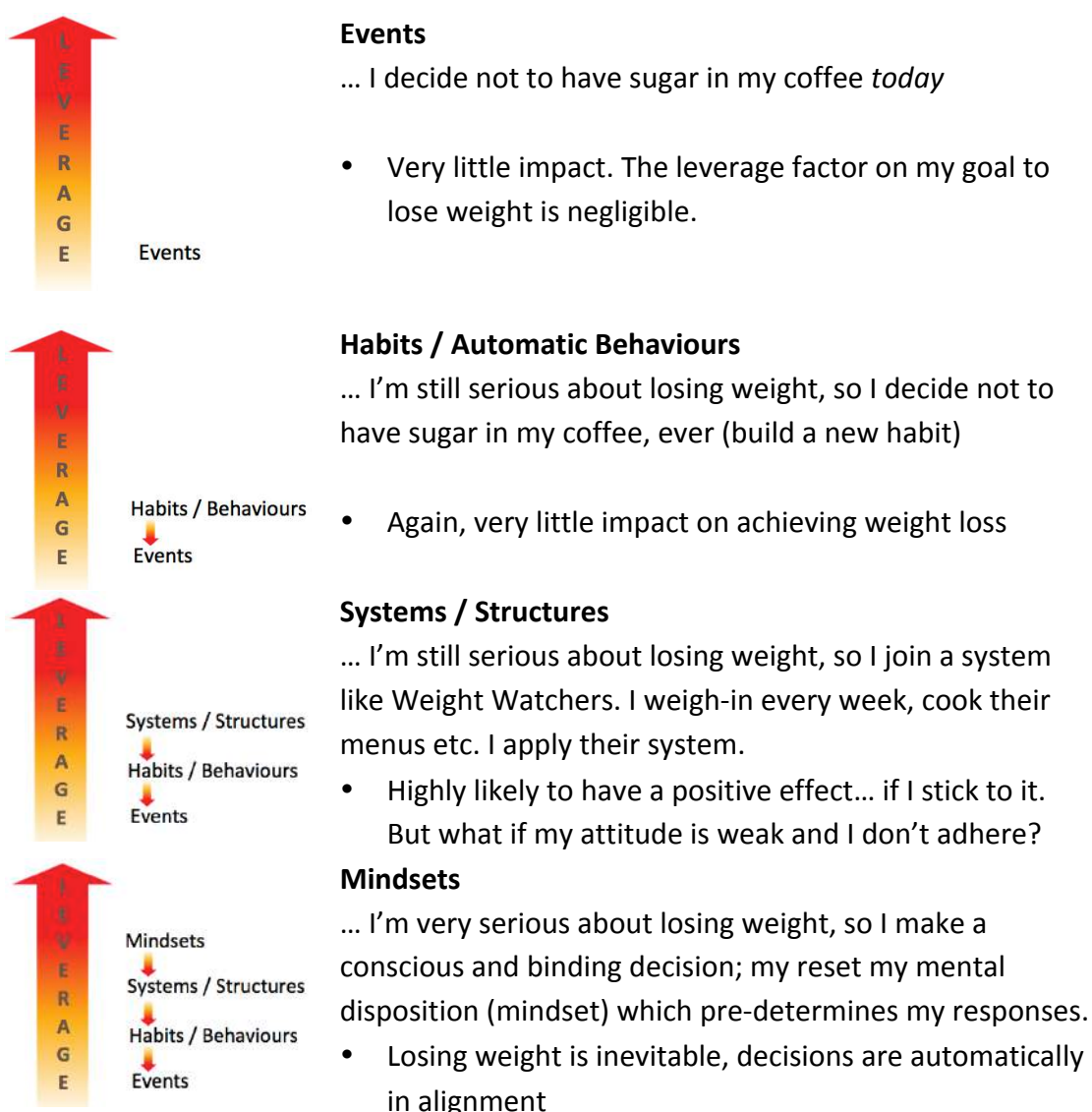
I was first introduced to this model in 2007 and, once I got past the lumpy jargon (Mental Models, Systemic structures) recognised its worth; it has become one of my ‘Go-To’ models – given its simplicity and immediate relevance to everyday leadership issues.

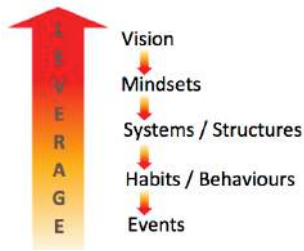
It recognises the importance of mindset within any change process. Unless we adjust our mindset, we can approach a new vision with old patterns of thinking (and behaviour) thus reducing the likelihood of success.

As you see, I have made slight modifications to the model to make it more accessible; I hope you agree.

The 'Levels of Perspective' model – Explained

So let's apply this model to a simple change situation. Let's say, I want to lose weight.





Vision

... Generating a clear image enables single-point (laser) focus. Its specificity enhances simplicity and clarity.

- I can expect accelerated progress (... so long as my vision is not expedient; a convenient intellectualism – *but more on this shortly*)

How to Apply “Go High. Then Go Low to Go High”?

A problem / issue / concern typically makes its appearance from the lower levels of the diagram (Events / Behaviours / Systems). It is a problem because it is outside an acceptable pattern – so the Threat system has been triggered.

Whenever the Threat system is triggered, blood supply moves from the higher thinking brain (Neo-cortex and pre-frontal cortex) to the Mammalian / limbic brain (activating our ‘Homeland Security’ rapid-response teams of fight, flight, or freeze); adrenaline is pumped throughout the system and fear is the primary motivator – effective but short lived, a bit like a sprint.

Depending on the level of threat, as much as 70% of blood supply moves from the higher thinking brain into the limbic brain. The result is that we can’t think (we experience a disbursed sensation); we tunnel vision on the problem, tend towards the negative – particularly blame-orientated thinking.

And all of this can happen in nanoseconds.

The more we ruminate (worry) about the problem (in the mistaken belief that this constitutes doing something about it), our energy drops - which exacerbates the downward spiral... into impotence.

Now multiply this by a thousand for all the problems we have in our lives / see outside our lives and you can see why stress has become such a debilitating influence on productivity.

*We can’t solve problems
with the same level of thinking we used to create them
– Albert Einstein*

What usually happens is we experience a problem and try to address the problem from within a fear-activated or threatened place. This is called a knee-jerk reaction and rarely generates a durable solution.

We need to 'Go High' – go to the Vision level, elevate to a higher level of thinking.

And the way we do this is with the question, *"How would you like it to be?"* Yes, you have the problem, but how would you like it (the situation) to be?

This question redirects attention from the problem (what you don't want / Threat System) to what you do want / Reward system.

Vision vs Resonant Vision

Here's where it gets real.

Usually when I ask, *"How do you want it to be?"* the answer is, *"Well I don't want [the problem]"* – but that is not identifying what you *do* want. So what *do* you want?

Eventually something like *"This area to be working well"* emerges. On the face of it, a perfectly acceptable vision type statement... and one that we could build a plan around. But the plan would be of limited effectiveness because this vision is not a *resonant* vision.

There is a huge difference between a compliant (or expedient) vision and a resonant vision.

A compliant vision generates no enthusiasm (no energetic shift) when it is voiced; it sounds and feels flat. A resonant vision, on the other hand, comes out of a person (or team's) DNA – it's what they *really* want. It's so potent that when they say it, there is clarity, certainty, potency – it resonates. It's a 3-4 word phrase captures the essence of what they want exactly.

Real-world Application: Case Study

Situation

Organisation X was a highly successful New Zealand 45-person, data research company (staff were all tertiary educated). They were respected thought-leaders in their field and recognised internationally as such. This was confirmed when they were bought by a significant multinational.

Unfortunately, 18 months into the relationship productivity was low, and there was a general sense of malaise, the source of which not being immediately apparent.

After a workshop, that energetic leakage was found to be a *loss of identity*.

Their edgy, agile and 'daring-do' character had been subsumed into cumbersome bureaucracy and pedestrian processes. They had lost their pioneering-spirit where everyone had taken responsibility for driving the business into its pre-eminent status.

How to rekindle that spirit and re-emerge?

We went through the Resonant Visioning process with their nine executives and eventually came to their unanimous and emphatic 'yes' phrase:

'Sh*t Hot Rock Stars'

Hmmmmn. Definitely not your usual (compliant) vision statement!

This phrase absolutely held piquancy, for several reasons:

- When they came to it, the energy in the room was palpable
- It captured their spirit: unashamedly, irreverently excellent. And its languaging was uniquely theirs - definitely not a usual sanitised (bland) corporate-speak. [Please note: it was for internal use only!]
- It was easy to recall, drew a smile and was distinctive
- I found out afterwards that six of the nine Execs had ben in rock bands in their youth!

They convincingly 'went High' – they identified what they *did* want (activating their Reward system) with this *Resonant* Vision. And they felt '*on a high*' from the dopamine kick.

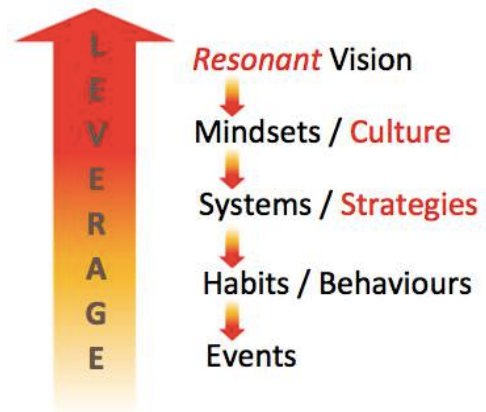
More importantly however, this process accesses your pre-frontal cortex.

The pre-frontal cortex is an evolutionary masterpiece. It's where innovation, creativity, resourcefulness, focus, resilience, insight, and 'the new' is given birth to. It is where your competitive advantage actually lies. Unless this is activated, habitual thinking ('same-old') reigns supreme.

Next step: mindsets need to be consciously aligned to the vision. The sum of the mindsets within an organisation constitute the culture of that organisation – “How we do things around here”.

Unless the mindsets change, nothing changes.

[My tweaks to Kim’s model are in red.]



So the second part of ‘Go High’ is to answer the question, ‘How do we need to be, and how do we need to think, to achieve this vision?’

What mindsets must we champion? What essential threads make up the fabric of our revised culture?

This is another powerful process, enjoyable too.

These are the potent mindset threads from our data-research example:

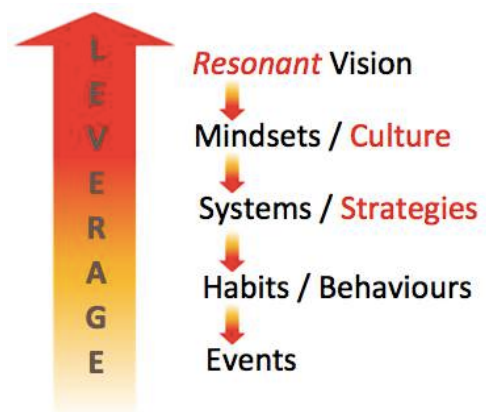
*Organisation X is a place where we all thrive:
 We love what we do, we are energised and confident.
 We dare to create better ways of doing things and do them incredibly well.
 We’re at our best when we play together.
 We’re famous for being refreshingly different.*

Then ‘Go Low to Go High’

Next we move down the model one further step to ‘Systems and Strategies.’

On the face of it, this is about standard planning – *Imagine it’s twelve month’s time, and the resonant vision has been fully embodied, what key strategies enabled us to be so successful?*

But an additional ingredient needs to be included to quieten the Threat System.



The ever-vigilant Threat System’s self-talk will already be quietly whispering as a semi-conscious saboteur, *“That won’t happen because of [X]”* or *“We can’t do that because of [Y]”*

Pre-Mortem Planning

So how do we address these toxic viruses? With Pre-mortem planning

A Post-mortem cuts something up to find out why it died. A Pre-mortem considers all the things that could kill an initiative before it starts. It’s a risk-mitigation planning process.

It’s an essential element for robust planning as it provides certainty to the uncertainty the Threat system feeds off.

The following schedule may assist:

What could kill this strategy / initiative?	How We Successfully Counter That
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Returning to our Data Research Company case study...

Over the course of a number of workshops the entire staff worked shared the strategies they believed would make achieving Sh*t Hot Rock Stars inevitable.

These five strategies were identified as likely to be the most effective.

1. People Focused Culture
2. Development – personal / company / IT
3. Internal communication (time together, feedback)
4. Innovation
5. Workflow / Creative time

Everyone then contributed to how the strategies could be broken down into action steps, applied Pre-mortem planning process, formed five teams; each of them taking responsibility for implementing one of the five strategies.

So, did it work?

Success rating after 15 months by the Managing Director: *“Phenomenally successful”*

Hard Benefits:

- 2nd highest internal staff satisfaction rating, out of 87 countries globally
- MD’s time freed up by 20% (one day a week)
- Unplanned staff turnover went from 22% to 8% (huge cost savings as it took 12 months to train new staff)

Soft Benefits:

- Organisational confidence up; the MD no longer heard *‘I doubt my skills and abilities’*
- *“Helped me see the quality of the quieter members of the team.”* Gives people a voice.
- It has legs. We’ll be able to tap into this again and again.

Conclusion

A leader is about change. Change triggers resistance, reluctance or recalcitrance in the followers... unless it is applied with an understanding of neuroscience. In particular an understanding of the brain’s Threat and Reward systems.

The optimal state for followers to be in to successfully implement a strategy is their flow state. This is when they feel fully resourced i.e. when the Threat system has been quietened and the Reward system activated.

This process works equally well when working with individuals or groups.

To summarise how to activate the flow state process:

- Change (or problems) trigger the Threat system – energy drops, blame and negativity increase
- Clarify the actual issue - produces certainty, a relief. (Calms the Threat system, stems the energy hemorrhage)
- Apply Activation Formula: *Go High. Then Go Low to Go High*
 - ‘Go High’ by generating the 3-4 word Resonant Vision – ask ‘How would you like it (the problem) to be?’ or ‘What do we really want?’... until the answer has a break-through, energising quality. (Indicates activation of the Reward system). This can take ~30 mins for an individual and ~ 2 hours with a team. And yes, you can get a shared resonant vision with a large team. My largest was 24 people.

- Reinforce the reward system feelings by deliberately identifying the mindsets needed that would uphold the resonant vision.
- ‘Then Go Low’ by i) clarifying the strategies and strategic roadmap needed to achieve the vision and ii) conducting pre-mortem planning on each of those strategies. (Further settles the Threat system)

So What Next?

Option One: Try it out. Identify a pressing issue then ask “*How do you want it to be?*” Keep challenging the answer until break through occurs. Wordsmith the answer into a succinct 3-4 word phrase.

Here are some examples:

Organisations

- Our Firm. The Firm (Legal)
- *Enthusiasm2Go!* (Legal)
- Epic Futures. Let’s go there (Innovation Incubator)
- Leading the Change (Education)
- Surprising the World (Education)

Individuals

- Centred Knowing. Effective Influencer (Work related)
- Living fully expressed (Life)
- Dream Big. Embrace the small (Life)
- Unified and _____ (Life)

Option Two: [Contact Bruce directly](#) to experience the energising process live – either on an individual level, with your team (as part of an in-house presentation) or at [your next conference](#).

Bruce has an engaging style and all 18 in the team opened up. The energy levels just rose and rose throughout his session. It even remained throughout the rest of the day and even subsequently back in the office!

- Paul Divers. General Manager. Auckland Airport