

# Soft Tools, Solid Results

The most essential leadership practices involve some actions and ways of thinking that might surprise you. **BY SARAH LEVITT**

One of my clients – I'll call him Jim – was promoted to the elevated leadership role of vice president about this time last year at the Fortune 100 where he'd steadily been building his career. Since then he has blown all performance measures and metrics out of the water. He's regarded as an outstanding leader and is poised for unlimited success. This is not my evaluation of him; this is what his superiors are saying.

Recently, we were reviewing the tools he's used to accelerate his learning and trajectory. We might have discussed how he has positioned himself as a strategic leader who brings creative, nuanced thinking to problem-solving and is brave enough to share his opinions even when dissenting. He's also led, influenced and overseen key organizational initiatives; addressed difficult situations and conversations, and is known as the person you'd want to send in to resolve just such matters.

As if that's not enough, he has captured the attention and respect of leadership at the highest levels of the organization; handled with dexterity many, many unexpected fires, and has won both the hearts and the efforts of his team.

However, these are not the things we discussed. Instead, we reviewed the tools that I'd shared with him that would help him lead himself. Here are six of them:

*A keen observation of the narrative he was telling himself, particularly during challenge* – Jim was able to notice what he was thinking about during difficult situations, whether that was a conversation with a direct report who wasn't performing as expected, or a company crisis that required a quick pivot and skillful communication. He found that by watching his narrative, he didn't get overwhelmed, or stuck in

negativity. Instead, he was much better able to problem solve and respond rapidly.

*A meditative practice of some kind that connects him to calm, center and knowing* – He pursued activities that helped him link to



**Jim pursued activities that helped him connect to the calmest part of himself, the part that knew that he would weather the storms.**

the calmest part of himself, the part that knew that he would weather the storms. Sometimes that meant listening to a meditation app on his phone, and sometimes that meant going for a walk outside.

*An abiding knowledge of his values and the leader he wanted to be* – No matter how rocky the road, Jim remained connected to, and guided by, his internal compass of values. Fairness and being a genuine, honest and responsible leader were all very important to him. By identifying those essential values, it helped him not to waiver, even when the winds around him were picking up speed and strength.

*A mantra that he knew to be true that would help him reframe difficulty to see a bigger picture* – He had a phrase about becoming stronger and better no matter the challenge, and he relied on it whenever things got rough. It gave him a sense of purpose, calm and vision. And he kept it posted in his office where he could see it.

*An awareness of his reactions so that he could choose them rather than be run by them* – Jim became aware of his go-to reaction, which could sometimes be too accommodating when a situation called for bolder leadership. We role played so that he could gain practice in responding and developing language in advance. It was so effective, and became so natural, that colleagues and superiors took notice.

*A regular physical activity to drop out of his head, clear his mind and ground himself* – He explored activities that relieved the stress of his role, where he could let off steam and feel refreshed afterward. With a tight schedule, he initially found it difficult to make the time, but he soon found that he was better for it. So he scheduled it in.

How do these seemingly soft tools create hard results? They help leaders bring the best of themselves to the substantial rigors of their roles. When someone rises to these levels, there is no doubt about their technical proficiency. And they've given themselves a launchpad for leadership.



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