

How Leaders Lead



When I look over the last 20 years of my career, there are three significant events that have shaped me as a person and a leader.

Right out of college with my degree in electrical engineering and a love of building web applications, I grew a successful software development business. Then came the bursting of the dot-com bubble. This crash was a real shock to me, and I wasn't prepared for it.

In 2001 I was presented with an opportunity to support a friend in her business. A partner and I bought in to her e-commerce company, and throughout the early 2000's we saw a lot of success and enjoyed running the business.

Then came the financial crisis of 2008.

Again, this crisis blindsided me. As a leadership team, we weren't prepared for this event and didn't understand how it might affect us. But it did affect us, to the devastating end of losing our company. Looking back, I can see how my reactions were counterproductive and virtually guaranteed losing that business. I wallowed in self-pity. I was disconnected.

Ten years after losing my business is the third major event, and we are all experiencing it together. The global pandemic

has upended businesses worldwide and created endless financial uncertainty.

It has also created an opportunity for leaders to truly lead.

I've learned many lessons through the wins and losses of my career, but none more important than that of mindset. Mindset—specifically outward mindset—almost always predetermines our behaviors and the outcomes we get from those behaviors. I want to share some of the lessons I've learned in three steps leaders can take to move forward boldly.

Get Clarity

First, get clarity. Of course, economic impact and industry indicators are highly significant, but there is an element of getting clarity that is more important than those. The reality is that as a leader—whether formal or informal—you have incredible sources of information that can be tapped into immediately. This information lies in the people you work with, who serve alongside you, who report to you, and who otherwise exist in your orbit.

At Arbinger, we have a tool called “Biggest Headache” that can help you gain clarity in four simple steps. First, meet as a team and devote a small portion—five or six minutes—to focus on just one person. Next, you ask that person, “What is your biggest headache?” What is the thing that is causing them heartburn or keeping them awake at night? While they are sharing their biggest headache, the next step is to have the group start brainstorming. Given that person's challenge, brainstorm specific things you can do to be helpful. Finally, offer that help. Right then and there.



This exercise is helpful to our teams at work and also useful to our families. With this tool, you start to build a map of understanding and gain clarity into what is really going on.

You generate a bucket of ideas of ways to be helpful. This is especially useful in times like now when stress is weighing so heavily on all of us.

Stay Honest

Second, stay honest. The reality is that in difficult times we are invited to go back to unhelpful places with unhelpful perspectives. When I was losing my business, I had an obsessive focus on doing the things that had previously brought success. I kept waiting for my world to come back. I floundered like this for nearly a year, and that was clearly an unhelpful place to be.

At Arbing, we describe something called “Inward Mindset Styles.” (For a deeper dive on these styles, I recommend watching [Cameron Cozzens’ webinar “Distance or Disconnect.”](#)) When we are operating from an inward mindset, we separate ourselves in certain ways, putting ourselves into “boxes.”



We can be “Better Than”, feeling like we’re more important than others or superior to them. Maybe we’re in an “I Deserve” box and feel unappreciated or underappreciated. We might feel “Worse Than” others, which is especially challenging during times like these. For me, I found myself in the “Need to Be Seen As” box.

Because I needed to be seen as smart, I didn’t ask for advice or help when I needed it. I worried about appearing capable and competent. My organization struggled more because of it. Because I needed to be seen as hardworking, I invested countless hours into things that were unhelpful and counterproductive to success. Because I needed to be seen as kind and compassionate, I made decisions that ultimately hurt my company, my employees, and my own family.

Think about the ways these inward mindset styles are impacting

you right now. How might they hinder your ability to lead effectively? Stay honest about the box you might be operating from. By doing so, you can respond quickly and act appropriately to the challenges you are facing.

Be Bold

I recently heard the Edwin Cole quote, “You don’t drown by falling in the water; you drown by staying there.” Back in 2008 and 2009, I found myself staying in the water. Eventually—inevitably—I lost my business.

One of my favorite quotes comes from the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus who said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.” In normal times, this speaks to the need for us to be creative, to innovate, and to think about our situation anew. During these times, that need is only more heightened.

We need to move boldly forward. As we look to build this map of understanding and keep ourselves honest in an outward mindset place, things will occur to us. Opportunities and options that are otherwise hidden will come to mind, and we will be able to move forward.

Twenty years into my career found me at Arbinger, where, like much of the world, our industry turned upside down almost overnight due to the pandemic. It was a familiar feeling for me, having gone through the dot-com bubble burst and the Great Recession.

This time though, things were different. When I lost my business, I wallowed for about a year. At Arbinger, the leadership gave themselves no more than half a day. I would be surprised if it were more than a few hours. They crafted a strategic plan and immediately began to execute it.

The pandemic enabled us to completely rethink the way we do business and serve our clients. By operating from an outward

mindset, we have made incredible changes and significantly improved ourselves. In a very real sense, we are a different company than we were at the beginning of March 2020. That happened because the leadership did not allow themselves to wallow as I had done but instead have been fully engaged in service to create a better way of doing what we do.

Our stated mission is to “Turn the World Outward.” While our mission hasn’t changed and is something we are continually striving towards, our new environment has required us to reconsider and reconceive how to move forward. For us, this meant immediately opening up our virtual workshop schedule and working to serve our clients with varying software, support, and security needs. It also meant upending our product delivery schedule to launch Outward Mindset Online before the end of spring 2020. These ambitious goals pushed us out of our comfort zone and took a level of effort and collaboration that would not have been achievable without an outward mindset. When stakes are high, we must focus on how we can be the most helpful when people need help the most.

I’d like to make a request. I ask that you seek to get clarity around your world and the things that you are delivering. Try to connect with people and learn from them. How can you be more helpful to them in their work? Also, stay honest. Be very deliberate and diligent about keeping yourself from unhelpful mindsets that will cause you to be static. Finally, be bold. The reality is, there has never been more of a need for us to be helpful to each other. There is an urgent need for leaders—formal or informal—to lead out as we move to the next phase of whatever the next normal is.

We need the best of each other.