



The Paradox of the Limitless Leader (and her 8 Disciplines)

By Michael Brainard
[Brainard Strategy](#)

There are leaders, and then there are **Limitless Leaders**. You will surely recognize the latter when you are in their presence.

The Limitless Leader's Mindset - The average leader often focuses too heavily on “what” they are doing. The Limitless Leader, on the other hand, is conscious of “*how*” she is thinking and “*how*” she is getting things accomplished. While the average leader is often centering her energy on the end target, the Limitless Leader is using her energy to exercise discipline around the behaviors which will help her reach the intended goal.

Simply put, the Limitless Leader recognizes value in the journey as well as the destination and is **disciplined** around both.

In his book [Good to Great, Jim Collins](#) discusses his observation that the best leaders are highly disciplined. They are disciplined in how they think, they are disciplined in how they act, and they impress discipline upon others. It is this commitment to discipline that has time and time again set the most successful leaders apart from their peers.

But, what is a Rose by Any Other Name? If you look up discipline, you will likely see “to control”, “to regulate”, and “to restrain” as descriptors. How then, can self-regulation, self-restraint, and self-control lead to becoming “*limitless*”? Herein, lies the **paradox**.

The idea of being disciplined in how we behave is quite abstract, and at times, frustrating, because the steps required to become disciplined are vague. At its center, however, this nebula of discipline has 8 crucial, very specific, and highly impactful practices which every leader must master to become truly limitless.

1. The Discipline of Finding your Voice to Develop Culture and Vision - Executive leaders are accountable to set the feel or environment of the workplace; culture is created top-down. The Limitless Leader consistently establishes an environment where performance, culture, and engagement thrive. When we align our team’s culture to the vision and values of the organization, we find engagement at its peak. Then, comes the discipline to turn that engagement into performance.

2. The Discipline of ENABLING Productivity and Performance - Where the average leader might see productivity and performance as synonymous, the Limitless Leader notes the distinction between the two — with productivity being defined as *how efficient* one is, and performance being defined by *how effective* one is. Once the two are differentiated, we can segment our team’s (or an individual’s) performance at a macro and micro level. Only at this point can a Limitless Leader enable coaching as a *superpower*. By engaging in coaching conversations (in real-time) and asking a series of smart questions, you have the power to change behavior and impress discipline upon those you lead.

3. The HARD Disciplines of Building Great Teams - To be an enterprise leader means to be an expert in understanding group dynamics. The Limitless Leader must configure and develop high performing teams. The discipline of shedding your occupational expertise and seeking to be an expert in assembling groups and teams separates these leaders from the pack. The Navy Seals are exceptional examples when it comes to building high performing teams. They are malleable; they break teams apart, change their roles, and change their responsibilities based on the mission at hand. Even the leader herself is not spared the change in role or responsibilities.

When leveraging this discipline, an aspiring Limitless Leader must also ask herself: “In my organization, am I a *performist*? Am I maxing out my A-performers again and again at the expense of withholding development opportunities for those whom I also have the responsibility to lead?”

4. The Discipline of Influencing and Not Transacting - We can all fall into the management pit from time to time — trying to meet a deadline or reacting to fire drill situations. In these moments, leaders need to remind themselves that they are dealing with human beings. Especially in these situations, leaders tend to revert to a transactional interaction and, unfortunately, lose their ability to influence and affect followership; a consequence that could be easily avoided. In contrast, the Limitless Leader influences through LBI (language, behaviors, and incentives), [the Golden Circle](#), building relationship equity, and distributive negotiating. These behaviors and constructs enable limitless leaders to become significantly more impactful, influential, and effective.

5. The Discipline of Thinking Strategically - The discipline of thinking strategically is the primary differentiator of a highly effective, industry-leading executive. The reason a market for innovative and strategic thinking exists is because thinking in these ways is not organic or natural. As humans, our brains need to process information and reach decisions quickly and efficiently. The Limitless Leader removes the blindfold that often comes with complacent or overused decision-making practices. Instead, she disciplines herself to slow down and leverage skills such as divergent thinking and scenario planning, asking herself: “What is it that I am not considering — and why not?”

6. The Discipline of Becoming a Change Leader - Whenever a client brings us in to support and, at times, save their organizational transformation efforts, we will inevitably be asked, “Why do so many change efforts fail?” Almost always, the answer is poor leadership. This is where we see well-intended leaders make mistakes, as they rely on common sense rather than focusing on the discipline required to lead change.

In our ever-evolving economy — and with the onslaught of technological advancements on the horizon — the discipline of becoming a change leader is amongst the most important for today’s Limitless Leader. Leaders who cannot lead change in the 21st century *simply cannot lead*. We implore you to review and utilize [Dr. Kotter’s award-winning 8-Step Process for Leading Change](#).

7. The Discipline of Building Executive Presence - Building your executive presence does not mean becoming comfortable talking about yourself. It is understanding how to incite followership — or becoming someone others can engage with. Having an executive story, solid values and principles, and a known vision are all crucial aspects of executive presence. However, the most important component in establishing your executive presence is the ability to clearly articulate each of these aspects to those around you.

8. The Discipline of Introspection and “Intro-Action” - Whenever you come across this discipline, it is important to think about three developmental pillars: (i) self-awareness, (ii) self-critique, and (iii) self-development. To do this, we start by looking inward to identify our developmental gaps. But, the Limitless Leader doesn’t stop there. She solicits feedback. She solicits

feedback from her colleagues, her boss, her direct reports, and even her partner or spouse! Most importantly — she is specific — knowing that asking for non-specific feedback will give her non-specific responses. To become a Limitless Leader, ask others how you handled a certain situation, a specific part of your presentation, or a specific portion of your report.

It is here, **Discipline #8**, where you must start, and always continue, the never-ending pursuit to becoming an effective leader. As you aim to become a Limitless Leader, take a moment and ask yourself these questions:

- ⇒ Am I aware of how others perceive me?
- ⇒ Do I regularly think about how my behavior shapes my company's culture?
- ⇒ Am I able to frequently influence others, rather than using my formal power or authority to get things done?
- ⇒ Does my behavior directly enable individuals and teams to be more productive and perform to a higher level?
- ⇒ Am I consistently measuring and driving my teams against the model for a high performing team?
- ⇒ Do I take the time to think long-term and consider the “bigger picture”?
- ⇒ Do I readily listen to and accept new ideas that can help us work more efficiently or competitively, even when they may be burdensome to implement?
- ⇒ Do I think about the impact I have beyond my company and in my industry?

A truly disciplined and effective Limitless Leader may not always answer “yes” to all these questions. However, she consistently exercises humility and, like an all-star athlete, seeks out opportunities to practice, practice, practice, and develop her effectiveness in each of these disciplines.



Michael Brainard possesses a Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology and brings over 20 years of experience as a management consultant, senior executive, executive coach, entrepreneur, and researcher. As CEO and Founder of Brainard Strategy, a management consulting firm specializing in leadership, organizational, and strategy development, Michael has worked with Fortune 500 executives across industries, blending a strategic, behavioral, and experiential learning approach.