The Power of Fear in the Workplace
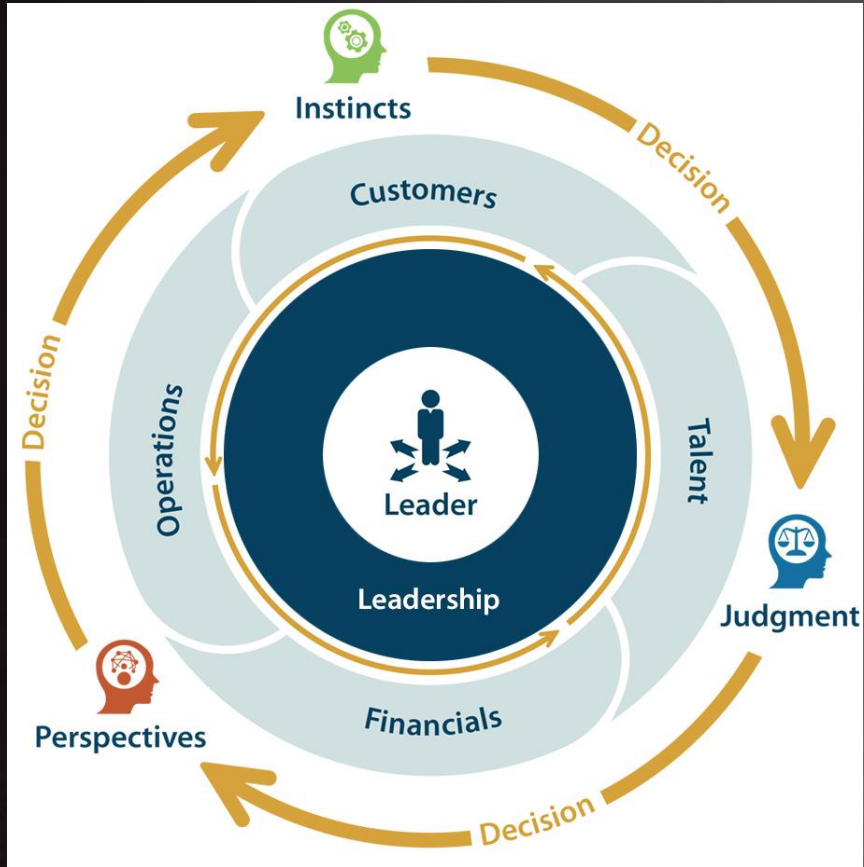
Jacqueline Wales

Leadership
Vistage Decision Model

01 Recognize when fear is influencing decisions and provide strategies to manage and mitigate these effects, thereby improving overall decision-making quality and organizational outcomes.

02 Implement strategies to help manage fears of loss, abandonment, rejection, success, failure, and humiliation; improving well-being, performance, and fosters a resilient, innovative workplace culture.

03 Develop initiatives that encourage viewing fear as a catalyst for growth, including self-reflection, setting achievable goals, mindfulness practices to manage fear effectively, reframing fear from a barrier to a motivator.

VISTAGE

Agenda

Courage is one step ahead of fear

Moneyball – "Biggest Fears"

Why Do We Fear?

Fear is a natural, essential response designed to help us survive.

Fear is imagination based.

Fear is the stories we tell ourselves.

Fear is a conditioned response.
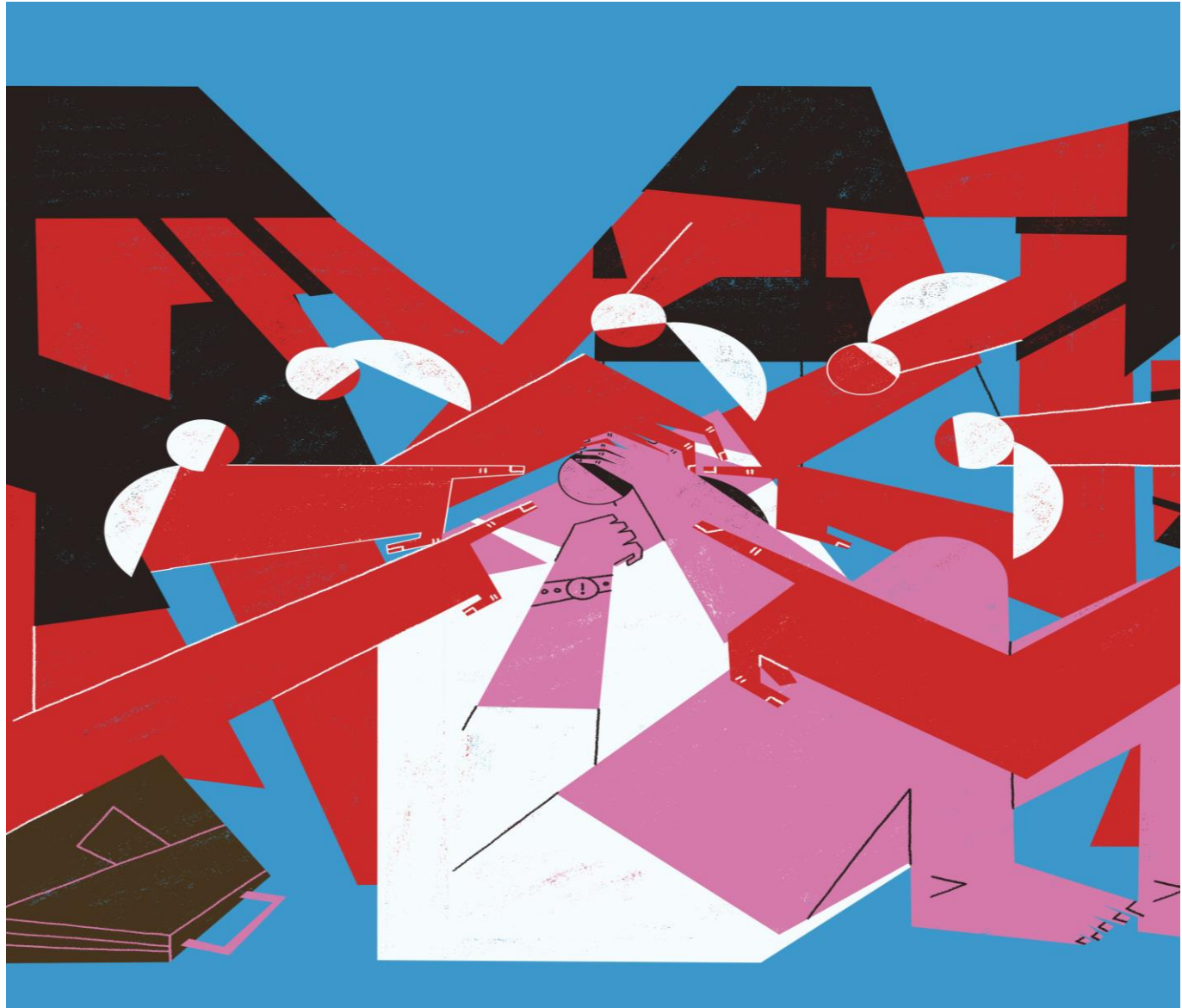
How I
Learned To
LOVE
Fear!

What Do YOU Fear?

Identifying Personal Fears and Their Influence on Daily Decisions.
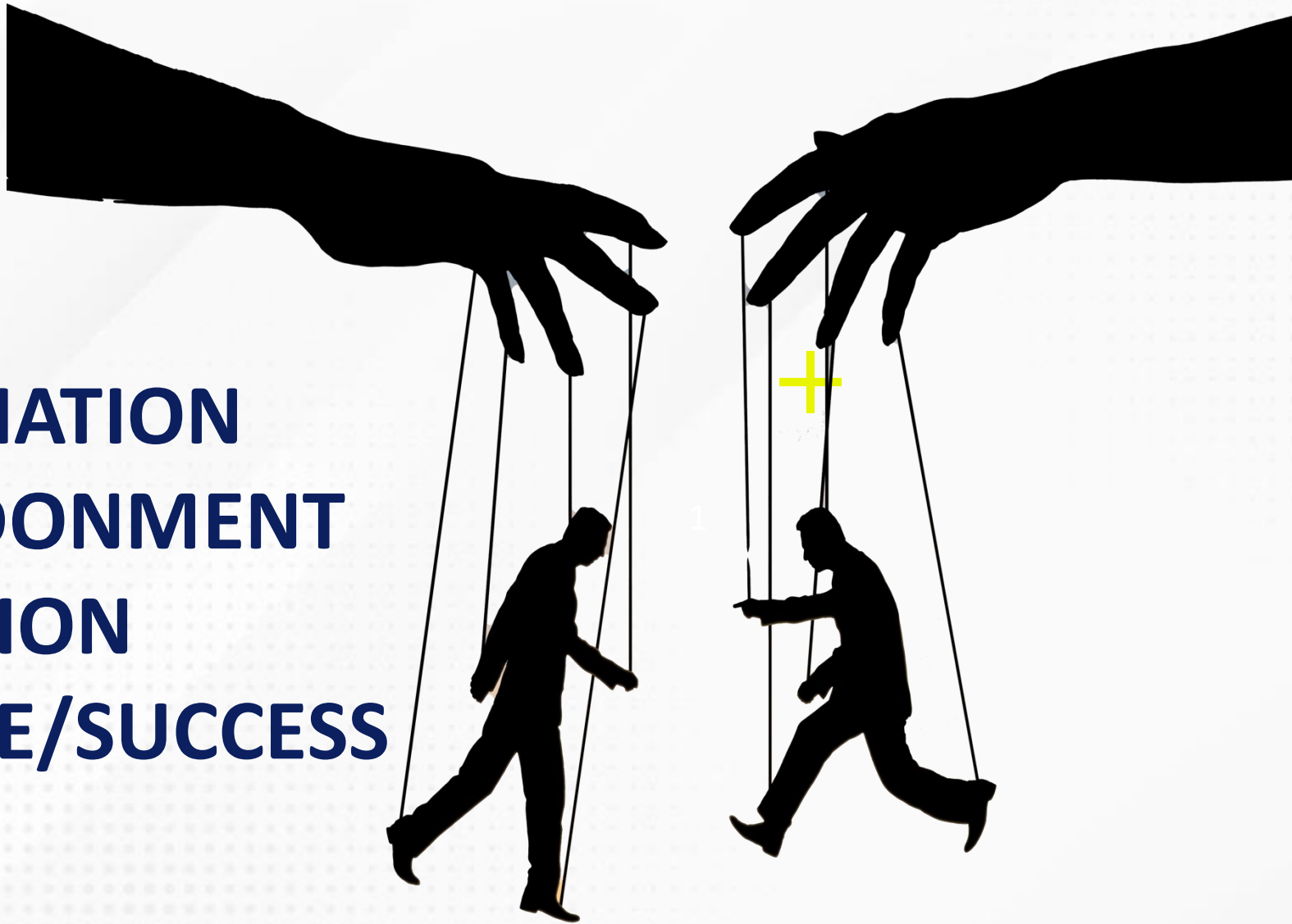
Exercise 5 mins

*

Discuss

LOSS
HUMILIATION
ABANDONMENT
REJECTION
FAILURE/SUCCESS

FEAR
IS A
REACTION
COURAGE
IS A
DECISION

*

TAKEAWAYS

Transforming FEAR Model

*BE   *DO   *HAVE

1 – Current "Having" Results
2 – Current "Doing" Behaviors
3 – Current "Being" States
4 – Future "Being" States
5 – Future "Doing" Behaviors
6 – Future "Having" Results

What
specific
behaviors
will I do?

What will I
have?
Is it what I
want?

Who will I
be?

⑤

④

⑥

Transformation

Who am I
being?

①

③

②

What do I
have?
Is it what I
want?

What
specific
behaviors
am I doing?
Is it what I
want?

"Be" – "Do" – "Have"
Matrix
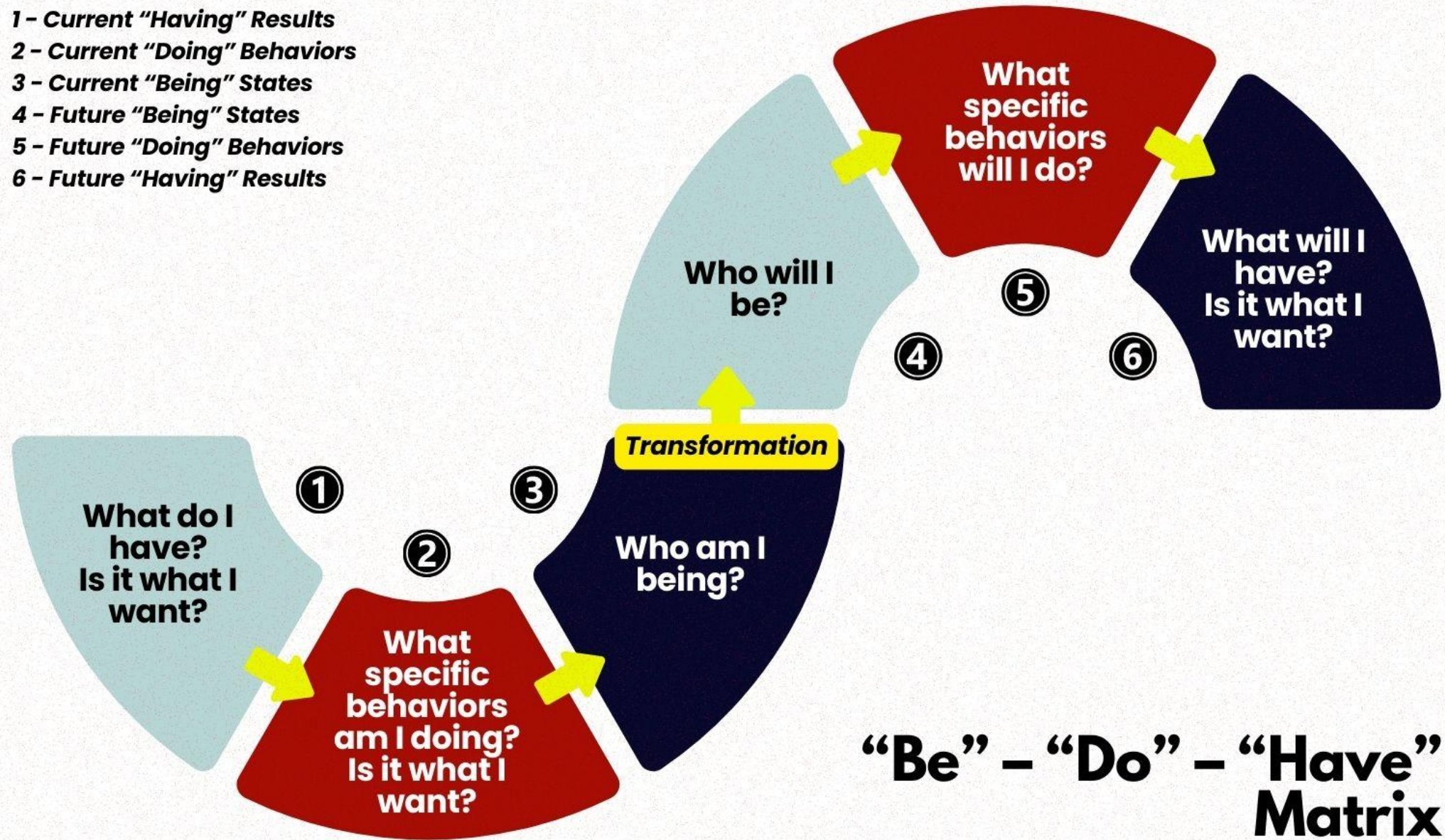
Current State

Who Am I BEING?

- Operating from fear-based mindset
- Reactive to perceived threats
- Self-protective and risk-averse
- Dwelling in self-doubt
- Assuming worst-case scenarios
- Seeking absolute certainty

What Specific Behaviors Am I DOING?

- Avoiding challenging situations
- Procrastinating on important decisions
- Overanalysis leading to paralysis
- Seeking excessive validation
- Creating elaborate "what-if" scenarios
- Defaulting to familiar but limiting patterns

What Do I HAVE? Is It What I Want?

- Limited professional growth
- Missed opportunities
- Strained relationships due to fear responses
- Unfulfilled potential
- Persistent anxiety about the future
- Reduced leadership effectiveness

Future State

Who Will I BE?

- Operating from a growth mindset
- Responsive and thoughtful
- Confidently vulnerable
- Trusting in capabilities
- Embracing uncertainty as opportunity
- Accepting imperfect action

What Specific Behaviors Will I DO?

- Taking calculated risks
- Making timely decisions with available information
- Setting and pursuing stretch goals
- Seeking feedback for growth
- Creating action plans with contingencies
- Practicing new behaviors outside comfort zone

What Will I HAVE? Is This What I Want?

- Increased professional growth
- New opportunities pursued
- Improved relationships through proactive responses
- Fulfilled potential
- Reduced anxiety about the future
- Enhanced leadership effectiveness

Transforming Fear Model

Transformational Strategies

Mindset Shifts

- From **"What if I Fail?"** to **"What if I Succeed?"**
- From **"I'm not ready"** to **"I'm learning as I go"**
- From **"This is threatening"** to **"This is challenging"**
- From **"I need certainty"** to **"I can handle uncertainty"**

Measurement Criteria

How Successful Will I Be?

- Number of new initiatives undertaken
- Reduction in decision-making time
- Increased comfort with uncertainty
- Improved relationship quality
- Enhanced leadership effectiveness
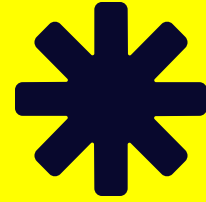- Achievement of stretch goals

Processing Change

Action Steps

1. Start with small, manageable challenges to build confidence
2. Document fear responses and examine their validity
3. Develop specific contingency plans for worst-case scenarios
4. Practice decision-making with incomplete information
5. Seek feedback and support from trusted advisors
6. Celebrate progress and learning from setbacks
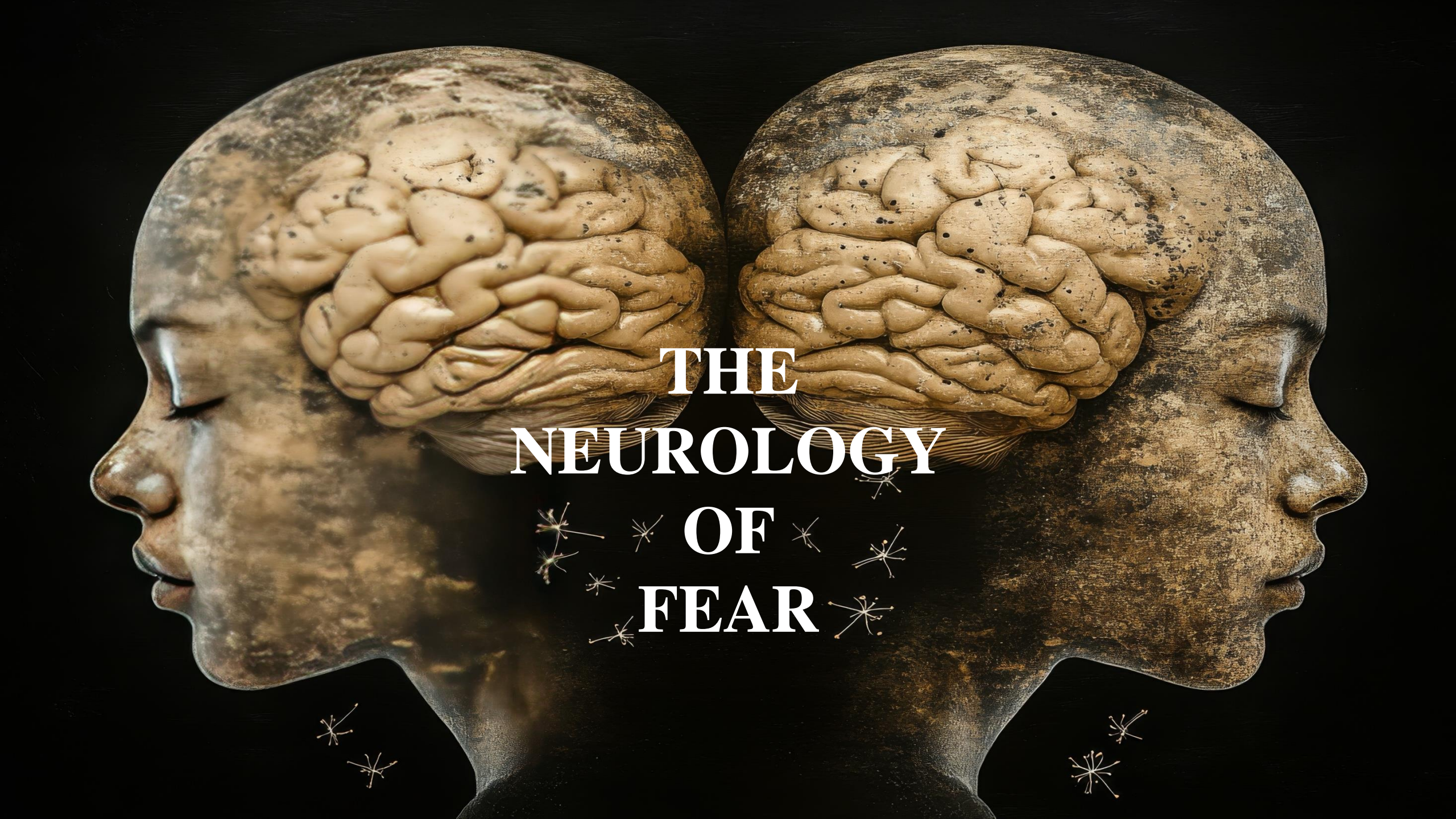
Transforming Fear Model

Jacqueline Wales

The Leadership Blindspot Exercise

THE NEUROLOGY OF FEAR

YOUR BRAIN UNDER STRESS!

Prolonged Fear Destroys Our Minds and Bodies

HOW FEAR IMPACTS YOUR EMPLOYEES

- In 2024 employee engagement dropped to 31%. The lowest in 11 years.

- 6 out of 10 employees feel they are treated disrespectfully at work.

- Employees seeking new opportunities has reached the highest level since 2015 and many are sticking to what they have while underperforming. Called the Great Detachment.

- 87% of employers believe that their organisation currently demonstrates care and respect for their employees.

Gallup Research 2025
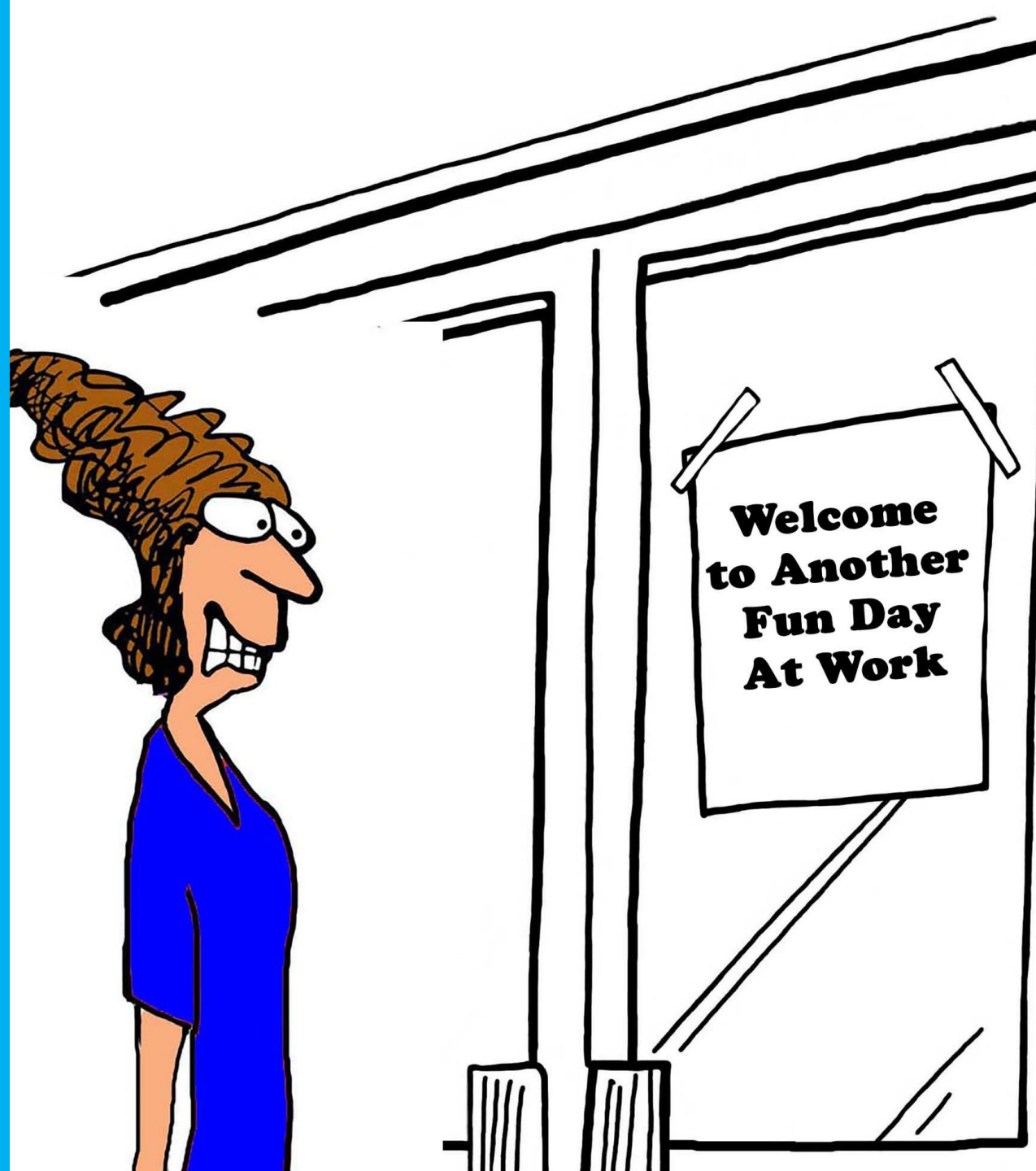
WHAT DOES FEAR COST YOU?

Exercise

LACK OF TRUST

ABSENTEEISM

LOSS OF TALENT

LOST PRODUCTIVITY

INCREASED STRESS

LOW MORALE

44 BILLION IN LOST REVENUE ANNUALLY!

NO ONE LIKES LOSING MONEY OR TALENTED EMPLOYEES?

KNOWLEDGE LOSS

CLIENT TRUST   **BAD DECISIONS**

RECRUITMENT COST   **PRODUCTIVITY**

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) has reported that toxic workplace cultures cost U.S. companies approximately $223 billion over five years due to high turnover and disengaged employees

"
Be ambitious and dream big but keep your feet on the ground so you don't disappoint yourself.

Jacqueline Wales

Jacqueline Wales
Unapologetically Raw & Real!

10 MINUTE BREAK

Harnessing Fear As a Catalyst for Growth:
A Case Study

Company Profile: A software development company specializing in Workday implementation, experienced explosive growth in 2024, with their client base expanding from 50 to 200 enterprise customers in just 12 months. The workforce grew from 45 to 120 employees, primarily in development, customer success, and sales teams.

Initial Situation: The rapid scaling created visible stress fractures in the organization. An increase in reported bugs, customer satisfaction scores dropped from 92% to 78%, and employee surveys revealed mounting anxiety about maintaining standards.

Initial Challenges

Territorial behavior & knowledge silos
Employees were reluctant to share information and resources, leading to inefficient collaboration and knowledge gaps.

Management bottlenecks
Centralized decision-making and approval processes created delays and frustrated employees, hindering responsiveness to customer needs.

Overwhelmed new hires
The rapid growth and complex environment left new employees feeling unprepared and unsupported, impacting productivity and morale.

Customer support burnout
Increased customer demand and inadequate resources led to customer service teams feeling overwhelmed, resulting in reduced satisfaction.

Addressing these initial challenges was crucial to unlocking the organization's growth potential and delivering exceptional customer experiences.

Transformation Strategy

Fear Mapping Sessions	Strategic Mentorship Pairs	Cross-Functional Stand-Ups	Small Group Programs and Coaching
Interactive workshops where teams collaboratively map out their fears and uncertainties, then strategize ways to transform them into growth opportunities.	Pairing experienced veterans with newer hires to foster knowledge sharing, confidence building, and cross-functional understanding.	Regular meetings that bring together representatives from different departments to improve communication, alignment, and collective problem-solving.	Online programs and intimate coaching sessions that provide personalized guidance, accountability, and peer support to address individual and team-level challenges.

Managing Emotions in the Workplace

Understanding and managing emotions is crucial for workplace success and well-being.

Growth-Related

- Anticipation
- Excitement
- Pride

Challenge-Related

- Anxiety
- Frustration/Disrespect
- Uncertainty/Fear

These emotions can significantly impact workplace dynamics, decision-making, performance, and well-being.

Recognition
Identify and acknowledge emotions as they arise.

Response
Develop healthy coping mechanisms to manage emotions.

Growth
Transform emotional challenges into opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Implementing Strategies for Success

Pair Experienced Mentors

Match seasoned employees with new hires to share institutional knowledge and best practices.

Navigate Challenges

Leverage mentors' expertise to help new employees overcome obstacles and learn from setbacks.

Collaborative Learning

Encourage ongoing communication to open dialogue, feedback, and knowledge sharing between mentors and mentees.

Accelerate Onboarding

Reduce ramp-up time for new hires by providing personalized guidance and support.

Cultivate Future Leaders

Groom high-potential employees for leadership roles through personal development programs and mentorship.

Enhance Engagement

Boost morale and retention by investing in the professional development of your workforce.

Coaching for Resilience

1 — Assess individual and team stress levels and perceived challenges

2 — Facilitate small group coaching sessions to build emotional intelligence and problem-solving skills

3 — Encourage open dialogue and peer-to-peer support within the coaching groups

4 — Teach techniques for managing anxiety, improving focus, and maintaining a positive mindset

5 — Empower team members to take ownership of their personal and professional growth

6 — Foster a culture of resilience, collaboration, and continuous improvement
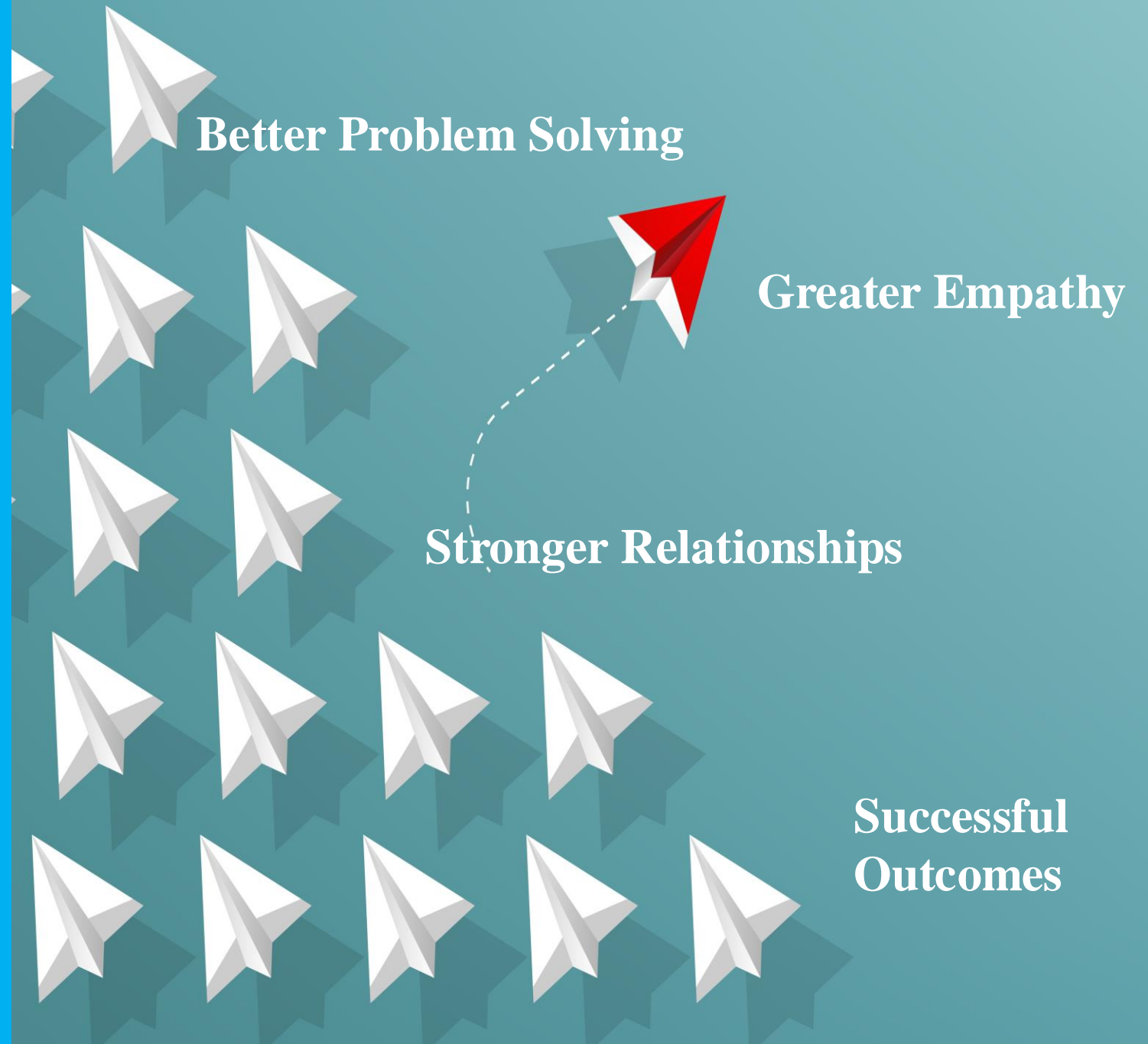
By understanding the profound influence of emotions like fear, shame, and the need for trust, professionals can develop greater self-awareness and strategies to overcome these barriers to success.

Better Problem Solving

Greater Empathy

Stronger Relationships

Successful Outcomes

Steps To Create A Psychologically Safe Environment to Have Greater Impact on Performance and Innovation

01   Understand and create a psychologically safe environment and their benefits.

02   Foster trust, open communication, and a culture of authenticity within the team.

03   Confront personal fears and lead with empathy and transparency.

04   Create environments where employees feel safe to innovate and perform at their highest potential.

05   Cultivate a high-performance and innovative culture that drives organizational success and enhances workforce engagement.

Fear as a Motivator… Not a Deterrent

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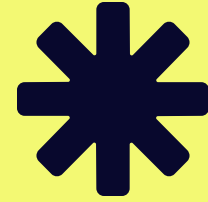
TAKEAWAYS

Foster a Learning Culture:
The Executive Edge

Why It Matters
- 3x higher employee retention
- 40% faster market adaptation
- Clear competitive advantage

CEO Action Step

Start today: Share your biggest lesson learned this quarter

Fear of Failure →
Team Success

Why It Matters

- 35% increase in innovation output
- Better talent retention
- Faster market response

CEO Action Step

Replace "post-mortems" with "project learnings" Include success and setback stories in leadership communications

Navigating Unexpected Challenges

Why It Matters

- 45% faster problem resolution
- Improved team resilience
- Reduced crisis impact

CEO Action Step

Institute "No Surprise Rule": Reward early problem reporting Lead monthly cross-team solution sessions

Uncertainty → Clear Communication

Why It Matters

- 50% reduction in project delays
- Higher employee engagement
- Better strategy execution

CEO Action Step

15-minute weekly company-wide updates. Share both victories and challenges openly

Building Psychological Safety

Why It Matters

- 60% increase in problem identification

- Better quality decisions

- Enhanced innovation pipeline

CEO Action Step

Start meetings with "What's not working?"
Publicly acknowledge your own mistakes

Emotional Intelligence in Leadership

Why It Matters

- 40% better team performance
- Stronger client relationships
- Higher employee satisfaction

CEO Action Step

Begin executive meetings with team pulse check Make empathy a promoted leadership trait

The Fearless Advantage Business Impact

- Faster market adaptation
- Higher profitability
- Industry leadership position
- Greater engagement across all dimensions of the organization

Next Step

Pick one slide. Implement one action. Measure results in 30 days.

SUCCESS FACTORS

Leadership Commitment
- Active participation across all dimensions of the organization
- Visible modeling from senior leaders and management
- Resource allocation toward learning and development
- Consistent and clear communication
- Progress championing with all employees

System Support
- Clear metrics
- Regular feedback during 1:1's
- Recognition programs that celebrate the wins
- Clarity in expectations
- Time allocation to implement changes

Cultural Integration
- Value alignment with company mission and vision
- Behavior standards that are clearly expressed
- Practice reinforcement to help those who are still learning
- Success sharing to create a sense of value and respect
- Challenge resolution to stop toxic behavior

CONCLUSION

www.jacquelinewales.com/
vistage-handout/

Your feedback is important to everyone in the Vistage community.
Please take a moment to share your feedback about today's session.