



# What You See Is What You Get

This may come as a surprise to you, but we see with our brains, not our eyes. Almost instantaneously, your brain transforms sensory input into thoughts about what you see. Within a few milliseconds of perceiving something, you make meaning out of it.<sup>1</sup> There will always be more than one way of making meaning out of what you see, even if you are convinced you have a clear perspective on what is happening.

The value of searching for the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, facets of what is happening was driven home by New York mayor Rudy Giuliani in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. On the afternoon of the attacks on the World Trade Center, Mayor Giuliani and Governor George Pataki held a joint news conference at the New York City Police Academy. Asked about the number of people who had been killed, Giuliani said, “I don’t think we want to speculate on the

number of casualties. The effort now has to be to save as many people as possible.”<sup>2</sup> By ten o’clock that evening, so many had shown up to help with the rescue operations at Ground Zero that no more volunteers were needed at that time.

In the days to come, Mayor Giuliani used his press conferences to emphasize the courage of the first responders, the generosity and resilience of the citizens of New York City, and the unilateral support of people from around the globe. His focus on what was admirable and heartening was far greater than his focus on what was terrifying.

Note how Giuliani saw and focused on amazing acts of heroism amid the horrific aftermath of the attacks. More important, he communicated the importance and value of that heroism to the world. By biasing his attention toward the positive and possible, Mayor Giuliani led the effort to “turn the worst attack on American soil into the most successful rescue operation in American history,” and helped to save an estimated twenty thousand civilian lives.<sup>3</sup> Giuliani instilled hope for the future in millions of people, accelerating the rate at which New York recovered.

## **The Power of Perceptual Sets**

In any situation, from ordinary to extraordinary, leaders can exercise the option to see more of the assets—what is good, useful, and beneficial—than they do the deficits—the bad, useless, and even harmful. That both ends of the spectrum are always present is the truth. What is also true is that each of us (whether we are leading or not) hardly ever sees the whole

picture. Instead, we pay attention selectively, zeroing in on only certain aspects.

If I ask you to see the color green right now, you might scan your surroundings and begin to notice green leaves, green hats, green pillows, green accents, and the like. Before I asked the question, the color green was present, but it probably did not stand out in your mind. After I made the suggestion, you likely saw green almost immediately in multiple manifestations. My question altered your perceptual set.

You can think of your perceptual set as your mental predisposition to perceive one thing over another—in this example, the color green over, say, the color red. You can also think of perceptual set in the psychological sense: the expectation that a person will see or perceive something based on prior experiences.

Your perceptual set is one of the most powerful sources of influence when it comes to shaping your selective attention. Many factors can trigger a perceptual set, such as feelings, needs, prior experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations.

Test your own ability to overcome your perceptual set with the following exercise, which I came across in one of my favorite leadership textbooks and have adapted for our purposes here:<sup>4</sup>

*Step 1:* Read the following sentence several times:

FINISHED FILES ARE THE RESULT  
OF YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY  
COMBINED WITH THE  
EXPERIENCE OF MANY YEARS

Make sure you have read the text several times before going to step 2.

*Step 2:* Go back to the text and count the number of times the letter F appears.

How many Fs did you count? Three? Four? Six? Most people do not get the correct answer (six) the first time. The most frequent answer is three. If you did not count six, go back and try again until you find the six Fs.

Why is this counting error so common? The answer is perceptual sets. People most often overlook the three Fs in the word “OF.” This happens for several reasons. One is that the letter F in the word “OF” makes a “V” sound in English, not the soft “F” sound as in the words “FINISHED,” “FILES,” and “SCIENTIFIC.” This is an example of an auditory perceptual set: many people hear the words as they read and listen for the sound of a soft F rather than searching for the shape of the letter. People also overlook the word “OF” because it is a “little” word that does not stand out. We ignore the word because of our perceptual set about which words are most important for understanding what we read.

There are strong parallels between this perceptual set activity and the perceptual sets that come into play when you lead. The first lesson in leading positive is to remember that you are always operating out of a perceptual set. The second is that your perceptual set necessarily biases your attention and causes you to perceive only select aspects of a situation.

The clearest example I encountered of the power of operating out of a specific perceptual set occurred several years ago when I was consulting for a division of a large technology

company. My assignment was to help prepare engineers with new ideas for products or services to present to an internal panel of executives from the company's Innovation Hub. The Innovation Hub was established to evaluate the merits of new ideas and allocate funding for the development of promising innovations.

*So far, so good*, I thought to myself as I listened to the general manager explain the evaluation process to me. But what she said next caused me some real concern. She explained that the panel engaged in a process of evaluation that they called "rude Q&A." In this context, being rude meant to "ask as many tough questions as possible to surface any problems or shortcomings associated with the innovation being presented." In addition, it was required that they ask their questions in a tone of voice that was simultaneously "belittling and condescending." This negative tone was designed to test the innovator's internal resolve and ability to withstand harsh scrutiny from a demanding group of high-level executives.

I could hardly believe my ears as I listened to the negative nuances baked into the rude Q&A process. The internal logic of this process and the perceptual sets that were in use went something like this:

- Assume there will be significant problems and flaws that must be surfaced to prevent failures and risky investments (i.e., adopt the perceptual set "interrogate to find the flaws").
- Be sure your tone is rude enough to throw the presenter off guard as a test of his or her gumption and commitment to the innovation (i.e., adopt the perceptual set "intimidate to evaluate").

The rude Q&A process exists in stark contrast to *design thinking*, a more asset-based innovation process developed by the global design consultancy IDEO. Tim Brown, president and CEO of IDEO, defines design thinking as a “human approach to innovation that draws from the designer’s toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success.”<sup>5</sup> It relies heavily on the initial step of prototyping to develop and test the potential merit of new ideas.

The design thinking prototyping process requires innovators to adopt the perceptual set of “conversation and collaborations produce the best ideas.” This is in stark contrast to the “intimidation” and “interrogation” perceptual sets that underlie the rude Q&A process. Interrogation and intimidation produced anxiety and a win-lose mentality in the minds of the innovators. The innovators I worked with felt vulnerable and uptight as they presented their ideas, and I had my work cut out for me coaching them about how to turn their anxiety into energy. It was as though they believed that this was their one and only chance to have their idea accepted. I believe that this negative dynamic was so unnecessarily stressful that it prevented some staff from stepping up to present their innovations.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of the perceptual set you commonly operate out of, it is entirely possible to shift in order to perceive the multiple facts that make up any situation. This is exactly what Mayor Giuliani did in response to 9/11: he widened his perspective beyond the obvious acts of terrorism so he could also see the tangible acts of heroism. This was a truly incredible act of leadership—incredible because our brains have a

built-in negativity bias that operates in ways that exaggerate the danger or problem, especially in high-stress and high-alert situations.<sup>7</sup>

## **Our Negativity Bias at Work**

Have you ever noticed that you respond faster and more intensely to problems than you do to possibilities? Leaders and followers alike are much more likely to be playing defense than offense. One explanation for this bias toward the negative is that the neural circuitry in the “avoid harm” parts of our brain is triggered faster than the neural circuitry in the “pursue rewards” parts is.<sup>8</sup>

The negativity bias is set up to protect us from harm and provide for our survival. From the perspective of survival of the fittest, it offers a great evolutionary benefit. However, rarely in everyday life do we truly need these emergency, survival-oriented responses. In fact, the fight-flee-or-freeze reactions to situations often put us on the wrong path altogether.

The emergency reaction system is our brain triggering feelings of fear and rage that can make a bad situation worse. Fear prevents the creativity and determined effort it takes to work our way out of a stressful situation, no matter how desperate the circumstances. As President Franklin Delano Roosevelt said in his 1933 inaugural address to a Depression-ridden America, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

When a leader is caught up in negativity bias and is blind to the assets and advantages inherent in a stressful situation, it can trigger a downward spiral. But if, like Giuliani, a leader

can see the downsides and the upsides of a traumatic event, danger can be thwarted and progress can be made.

## **How Your Mind Sculpts Your Brain**

Every time you intentionally shine the spotlight on assets—what is positive, valuable, and worthwhile—you change your brain for the better. Donald Hebb, an extraordinarily influential figure in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, theorized that cells in the brain develop strong relationships with one another depending on what we pay attention to.<sup>9</sup> Hebb’s law is commonly paraphrased as, “Neurons that fire together, wire together.”

Since Hebb’s seminal insight, research in the field of neuroscience has confirmed that our thoughts actually do change our brain by creating neural networks that map to the patterns in our thinking. For example, if you are thinking about the benefits associated with a given situation, the neural networks in the reward centers of your brain will fire and wire together to help you learn from and remember that particular positive experience. If you perceive a similar situation in the future, the reward circuitry in your brain will be strengthened by firing and wiring in a similar pattern.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the same process is involved when you perceive negative experiences. When something we perceive as “bad” happens, neurons located in the “avoid harm” centers of the brain fire and wire together. This is how we remember the telltale signs of problems and signals of danger.

What these findings in neuroscience mean on a practical level and in terms of leading positive is that you can



intentionally strengthen your capacity for asset-based thinking (ABT). Over time, your ability to shift out of deficit-based thinking will become easier and faster. Your brain's negativity bias will always be in gear to protect you from true harm, but once you calculate that a seemingly negative situation is not life threatening—you realize it is simply a thorny problem or setback—you can train yourself to shift at will into ABT mode. In this way, ABT engages your brain to help you make the best of negative situations. This process of using your thoughts to sculpt your brain is called self-directed neuroplasticity.<sup>11</sup>

Asset-based thinking sculpts neural networks in the “good brain,” a term coined by neuropsychologist Rick Hanson.<sup>12</sup> According to Hanson, the good brain's natural state is relaxed, ready for rewards of all kinds, and on the lookout for nurturing relationships. However, the emergency centers of the brain can drown out good-brain functioning, causing us to operate in a stressful, high-alert mode. Given the chaos of our daily lives, by the time we are adults, good-brain activation is limited for many people.<sup>13</sup> But the brains of accomplished meditators have proven that good-brain activity can in fact dominate and trump an overactive, defensive nervous system.<sup>14</sup>

Hanson's research, as well as the research of his colleagues, has proven that anyone can build and strengthen good-brain neural networks with mental exercises that take less than one a minute each. I have included a number of such exercises to prime you for developing an ABT mind-set. You can think of these good-brain exercises that follow as a kind of mindfulness process, a focusing of your full attention on a narrow subject for a concentrated period of time. For the purposes of this book, the subject of attention is something

positive—something you find interesting, rewarding, or encouraging—in other words, an asset. You can put these awareness tools into practice right away to find the assets around you and within you.

## **The See-Think-Feel Awareness Tool**

When researchers Bunker and Webb at the Center for Creative Leadership asked successful executives to list adjectives that describe how they felt when they were able to work through tough experiences, their responses were a combination of positive and negative feelings. I have selected seven pairs of experiences from the center's research that represent the positive and negative ends of the continuum:<sup>15</sup>

<i>Negative</i>	<i>Positive</i>
Problem	Possibility
Pained	Challenged
Fearful	Successful
Frustrated	Proud
Stressed	Capable
Anxious	Growing
Overwhelmed	Exhilarated
Uncertain	Resourceful

Reflect for a moment on the negative and positive pairs of experiences while keeping the following in mind:

- Negative experiences under stressful conditions are normal and natural.

- Positive experiences under stressful conditions are possible and even predictable.
- You can create positive experiences under stressful conditions if you shine the spotlight of attention on what is working and what is possible.

The see-think-feel awareness tool is a way to set yourself up for generating the positive feelings you need to stay the course to success. If you are *seeing* the downsides of a situation, then you might *think* “problem” and *feel* “overwhelmed.” But if you see the upsides in that same situation, then you will think “possibility” and feel “exhilarated.” Think of it as a self-reinforcing process that can either create a virtuous cycle that spawns solutions or fosters a downward spiral that only makes matters worse.

You can use the see-think-feel awareness tool to assess how you are feeling about whatever situation is at hand. If your assessment yields results at the negative end of the feeling spectrum, then you know you have a destructive see-think-feel cycle at work and you need to shift your perspective and create a more useful perceptual set. The see-think-feel awareness tool helps you to spot and correct those negative perceptual sets. To create a more useful perceptual set, use the ASA shift. With a new, more constructive perceptual set, you will be able to discover the possibilities and potential benefits of any tough situation.

## **The ASA Shift**

Altering your perceptual set can be daunting. This “good-brain” exercise helps you to shift your perspective just enough

to begin triggering the positive feelings that set a virtuous cycle in motion.

The ASA shift is a mental process with three steps:

1. Acknowledge
2. Scan
3. Act

Think of a situation you are facing right now that fits into the category of challenging or stressful. Maybe an employee is failing, you are way behind schedule on an important project, or the regulators are putting up barriers. Make it a situation you know you could be handling better. Next, follow the ASA steps:

1. *Acknowledge*: Use the see-think-feel awareness tool to identify your negative emotions and trace them back to the negative aspects of the situation that you are focused on. Identify your deficit-based thinking. Acknowledge that the negative aspects of what you see, think, and feel are probably true, but they are not helpful. At the moment, you have a temporary case of opportunity blindness. If you look more closely, you will be able to glimpse some beneficial aspects of the current situation that are also true.
2. *Scan*: Look for the positive side of the ledger. Ask yourself, How can my team or I benefit from tackling this situation head on? Scan for one potential gain or upside. Think about the reward that comes with dealing effectively with the challenge.

3. *Act:* Take one step toward realizing the benefit you now see is possible. Act on that potential gain and feel how it makes the negative thoughts and feelings recede.

Consciously or not, Mayor Giuliani likely used a process similar to the ASA Shift in the earliest hours of dealing with the 9/11 tragedy. His ABT mind-set laid the foundation for the many positive steps to come:

*Acknowledge the negative:* “We cannot speculate about the deaths and destruction at this time. We have losses greater than we can bear.”

*Scan for the positive:* “There must be survivors.”

*Act on the positive:* “We must act now to find the survivors.”<sup>16</sup>

The ASA shift is not about denying that bad things are happening. Rather, it is a tool to interrupt the negative downward spiral before it gets out of hand (acknowledge), reshape your awareness toward the positive (scan), and begin a virtuous upward spiral aimed at productive action (act). This exercise helps you discover the hidden assets in any stressful situation. Even the gravest and most dangerous situations offer assets that can yield some benefit if we have the determination and courage to see them and act on them.

## **Resourcing Yourself as a Leader**

If you are like most other leaders, you tend to take your leadership skills for granted. You don’t often think of these assets,

and as a result, they are not top of mind for you. In fact, your own competencies may be buried so deep within your subconscious that you have trouble tapping into them when you need them the most.

Rarely have I found a leader who stops to reflect on the skills that make him or her effective. To the contrary, most mistakenly focus on their shortcomings. A focus on improvement, of course, is valuable, even essential. Without a sincere appreciation of the leadership skills you already possess, you hold yourself back from making great strides.

A deeply abiding sense of the ways you are already effective is a launching pad. Resourcing yourself with the leadership assets you possess activates the circuits of your “good brain.”<sup>17</sup> When your good brain is engaged, you are more effective and both relaxed and energized simultaneously. You are better able to see and seek the rewards in any given situation, and you are more connected to the people you need to work with.

This next ABT practice helps to keep your leadership assets in the forefront of your mind:

1. Think about one of your strengths as a leader. Use this list to help get you started:
  - Visioning
  - Strategic thinking
  - Being Decisive
  - Listening
  - Motivating
  - Mentoring
  - Negotiating
  - Problem solving

- Communicating
  - Mediating
2. Recall a specific situation when you demonstrated that skill.
  3. Let your imagination dwell on that positive experience for thirty seconds until you feel the way you felt that day.
  4. Take twenty seconds to visualize that experience soaking into the deepest part of your emotional memory.

I recommend that leaders engage in this good-brain resourcing technique on a regular basis—even daily. I have found that resourcing yourself with your leadership skills not only activates your good brain; it allows you to shift more quickly out of deficit-based thinking into ABT.

When you reinforce good-brain activity, it becomes your home base. Because you visit that mental state so frequently, you know how to return to it when you need to. During stressful times, good-brain activity helps you to muster your best efforts and marshal the efforts of others—in other words, to be a strong leader driving positive change.

## **The Five-to-One Principle**

The work of psychologist John Gottman on what makes for a great marital relationship is by now legendary in the annals of psychological and communications research.<sup>18</sup> Gottman's most robust finding was that in a great marriage, the ratio of positive-to-negative commentary is five-to-one. He and his team of observers were able to predict with 93 percent accuracy

which marriages would survive and thrive simply by counting the ratio of positive-to-negative comments.

Since the five-to-one ratio was such a powerful predictor of great marriages, I wondered if it could predict the outcome of any great relationship. My hypothesis was that five times more positive conversations than negative ones will foster trust, loyalty, and engagement in professional relationships. I asked myself, What if leaders intentionally gave feedback to followers about what was going well, what they saw as their strong suits, and what made them believe in the potential of a person? Then my team and I started coaching leaders to do just that.

For over twenty years, we have coached leaders to spend five times more intention and effort on praising people for their proficiencies and the progress they make than they do on criticizing poor performance. The positive impact of this simple yet powerful form of feedback has shown measurable results in myriad ways.

The most important principle to remember when you implement the five-to-one feedback process is to link your praise to the skills and effort that drive the results you want. For example, if you want to see an increase in customer satisfaction, be on the lookout for the communication skills that make customers feel heard and served. Call centers present particularly challenging conditions for customer service representatives. Customers often call in a bad mood because they have a problem or complaint. In our work with call center professionals, we evaluate what kind of communication techniques already work well. Next, we develop new responses and questions in collaboration with the customer service



representatives so that they feel ownership in the new communication approaches. Then the old and new best practice communications become the focal point for supervisor praise and recognition. In one of our consulting engagements, customer satisfaction ratings increased ninety basis points just three months after initiating a five-to-one feedback process that targeted best practice communications.<sup>19</sup>

The next section offers you insights into how you can put the five-to-one principle to work to increase loyalty among employees and customers.

## **Equifax Workforce Solutions**

Bob Austin, vice president of operations at Equifax Workforce Solutions, a global provider of human resource, data, and analytics services, came to The Cramer Institute with the business goal of increasing client loyalty from 97 to 99 percent. This 2 percent increase in client retention was worth significant revenue to the company annually. Bob also had a goal of enhancing the level of employee engagement. He believed that if employees were more engaged, they would work harder to satisfy their customers, reducing the likelihood that customers would leave. My team and I helped create a Lead Positive process that would simultaneously increase employee engagement and drive customer retention. Here is how it worked.

*Step 1: Share the goals at every level of the organization.* The initial step involved socializing the two goals through conversations with Bob's leadership team and then with people at all levels of the organization. My team spoke with the leadership

team; in turn, the leaders held meetings made up of ten to fifteen employees to communicate the two-pronged effort of raising engagement and increasing client retention. They also asked employees to describe the new behaviors that would be necessary to achieve the goals. The leaders concentrated on being enthusiastic, showing their confidence in the merits of the goals, and listening deeply to the input of the groups.

*Step 2: Identify key behaviors to drive success.* Next, my team and I analyzed the data from the leader and employee meetings. What we found surprised us. Not only was there overwhelming enthusiasm for the goals, there were also remarkable similarities in the recommended behavior changes deemed necessary to achieve them. Five key new ABT behaviors were identified:

1. Appreciate positive effort and outcomes.
2. Reveal the “why” behind the “what.”
3. Build enthusiasm and energy.
4. Shift from negative to positive.
5. Step up with solutions.

In the case of both employee engagement and client retention, the number-one ranked behavior was “appreciate positive effort.” The majority of employees reported that they rarely, if ever, received positive reinforcement for their good efforts; the only feedback they received pointed out mistakes and shortcomings. They made it clear that if managers would tell them when they were doing well, that shift alone would make the difference between “just coming to work” and being excited about contributing to the success of their teams.

*Step 3: Put positivity to action.* The supervisors and managers agreed to make appreciating positive effort a top priority using the five-to-one principle. In turn, the employees agreed to express appreciation for clients' positive behavior—for example, when they met a deadline, or implemented a new process, or returned an e-mail promptly.

After only one month of the five-to-one appreciative feedback implementation, Bob reported on the initial success: “Our managers and supervisors have said they can’t believe the huge, positive difference in attitude and effort initiating this one change has made. And it takes virtually no extra time. It’s just about remembering to say out loud the positive effort and outcomes they see. In several offices, it’s already become a competition to see how much clients notice and thank their employee contact person for their praise!” After three months, the company’s client loyalty metric rose from 97 to 98 percent; within nine months, it rose to 99 percent, achieving the goal of the ABT initiative.

Let’s step back for a moment and reflect on what it takes to be able to give five times more positive feedback than negative. The starting point is in what you see. A leader literally has to be able to see the positive actions, capabilities, and potential in people before he or she can give anyone positive feedback. What you see in others truly forms the foundation for what you get from them.

In part 2, we explore how ABT can help you communicate in positive ways that inspire and motivate. For now, focus on seeing what others bring to the table and giving feedback about what you value most. Try cultivating the five-to-one

habit for twenty-one days. Note what happens as a result. Your ability to focus on the assets present in others is the single most important thing you can do to build a high-performing organization full of highly engaged people.

## **The Third Way**

In the previous ABT exercises in this chapter, I emphasized the importance of:

- Focusing more on what you stand to gain in any situation than what you stand to lose
- Seeing your strengths in greater measure than you see your weaknesses
- Observing the best efforts and attitudes of people around you five times more often than you notice their shortcomings

These are tried-and-true ways of becoming an asset-based leader.

When we encounter something or someone, we tend to make judgments that lean in one direction or another along the continuum of good to bad, pleasant to unpleasant, or asset to deficit. In each exercise so far, I have offered ways of dealing with these polar opposite ends of our thought spectrum. What I want you to think about now is how ABT can also get you out of the bind of interpreting everything along this binary (good-bad) continuum.

Asset-based thinking can help you rise above a specific situation or condition in order to make a positive meta-interpretation—one that supersedes our tendency to make

positive or negative judgments, and creates a third way of seeing something. Think about what you saw or heard about the first debate between President Barack Obama and Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney during the 2012 US presidential campaign. Every pundit, friend, colleague, and family member I know was talking about who won and who lost. You probably have your own opinion about who came out on top, but set that aside for a moment.

The Sunday morning after the debate, I heard commentator Ben Stein make a meta-interpretation—one that rose above the binary bounds of good-bad, right-left, winner-loser: “In a campaign that’s been alternately boring and nasty, this was a night of civility, information, and genuine learning about the men who might be our President . . . No hatred, no talk of punishment, just a wish to make something great even greater.”<sup>20</sup>

Stein did not view the debate in terms of which candidate won. He found a more powerful way of interpreting the event. While everyone else was busy deciding whom they liked or did not like, Stein rose above that plane and landed on a different one altogether. He saw evidence that made him proud and hopeful about the future of American politics.

Recently, Dale, a business leader who had just been promoted, came to see me because he was at loggerheads with a colleague. He described the standoff this way:<sup>21</sup>

I have to have my colleague’s cooperation because our functions are interdependent. If she fails, I fail. If she succeeds, I succeed. This person refuses to work with me on anything. She fights to get control over

my projects and people. She is disrespectful and dishonest. She lies about what I have done or not done to my face, to my employees, and to our boss. I have to fix this, but nothing I have tried so far has worked. My boss is looking to me to fix the situation. He is sick and tired of the infighting and wants me to fix the relationship once and for all.

It is easy to see the bind Dale was in. Just as in the presidential debate, Dale's boss and the employees he managed were looking on and judging. And at that moment, he was convinced that everyone (including himself) thought he was the loser.

To help Dale out of this no-win bind, we started with the see-think-feel awareness tool. Dale described his current see-think-feel cycle this way:

I *see* my colleague telling lies, arguing with me in front of our boss and employees, failing to keep her promises and missing key meetings.

I *think* she wants more power and control. She wants to sabotage my success and undermine my reputation. She will do anything to keep the conflict going.

I *feel* frustrated, angry with her, and extremely disappointed in myself for not knowing how to fix the situation.

As we stepped back to assess the situation, we decided the trap might be Dale's assumptions about what it meant to "fix the situation." Dale's career had skyrocketed in large measure due to his exceptional ability to relate to people. He

saw himself as a people person who inspired his team to do and be more than they ever thought they were capable of. No wonder Dale was stymied by his colleague who refused to relate.

I asked Dale to work with me to redefine “fix the situation,” to find a third way out of the bind. What if “fix the situation” did not mean fix the relationship? What if it meant simply finding new ways of getting work done regardless of how the colleague was behaving? And what if Dale could view his colleague’s inability or unwillingness to relate with compassion rather than with anger toward her and with disappointment in himself?

These new perspectives triggered ABT on Dale’s part; it was his way of finding a third way out of the big bind. Dale’s redefinition of “fixing the situation” helped him zero in on new ways of making progress that did not require relating directly to his colleague. For example, Dale held meetings even when his colleague declined the invitation to attend. In the past, he would have tried to reschedule the meeting. His new way of operating kept the ball moving down the field instead of wasting time by having to reschedule every meeting she declined.

Perhaps even more important, Dale started to think about his colleague’s underhanded techniques to make him look bad as sad instead of as mean spirited and self-serving. He actually began to feel a modicum of compassion for his emotionally challenged colleague. This shift in judgment was just as accurate as his first judgment had been, but it was far more helpful. Now Dale could let go of his disappointment in himself for not being able to relate to this colleague and instead focus on

what really mattered: getting the job done and relating to people who could relate: his boss and his employees.

Highly effective leaders often rely on ABT to find third ways out of challenging situations. Ben Stein focused on the profoundly and uniquely positive nature of the debate between President Obama and Mitt Romney. In Dale's case, he regained his reputation as a highly skilled connector by investing in those who could reciprocate in kind. His third way of viewing what it meant to fix this bad situation kept him focused on making progress toward his goals and became his ticket to success.

## **What You See over Time**

Our attitudes toward the time frames of past, present, and future are often unconscious and automatic rather than conscious and intentional. Leaders, like anyone else, can find themselves held back rather than propelled forward by what was, is, or could be. In fact, many leaders I have met seek coaching because they are held back by past mistakes, exhausted by the current pressures they face, or intimidated by an uncertain future that looms too large.

To help you and your team make the most out of the past, present, and future, the next three chapters provide ABT tools on how to shift from held back, exhausted, and intimidated (deficit-based thinking) to heartened, energized, and inspired (asset-based thinking).