

# CHAPTER 1

# Leadership mindset

In this chapter, I help you work through uncovering your personal values, and show you how you can combat imposter syndrome and have greater control over your environment.

Importantly, I discuss not just how to control your environment, but also why you should in order to effectively manage your own head space sustainably. Did you know that chronic stress over a long time from a chaotic environment can actually make your brain start to shrink? This leads to all sorts of mental health issues. With all the challenges that women face in business, the best thing we can do to give us the greatest chance of success is have our own head in order, and a clear view on the direction of our lives. This chapter gets you started.

## Value alignment

Do you truly know your values—that is, the beacons that guide your life? Are these values aligned with your business or workplace?

Knowing and staying true to your own values is important because they permeate many facets of your business and your actions within it. They can also help identify if you are compatible with your new or existing workplace. Values cascade to influencing your recruitment strategy and business strategy. Ultimately, they should be what your culture is built on.

When I bought into my franchised business only a month after it opened, I quickly uncovered some fundamental cultural issues that needed to be overcome. Unfortunately, the issues stemmed from the previous management. Another issue was that my staff were not having fun, so they naturally were not happy or upbeat—and in a service business, this presented a major problem. Trust was non-existent and so people did not feel secure—another major problem in the fast-paced retail environment where high productivity is needed. Having staff members who were unhappy and insecure subsequently meant focus, productivity and success were all reduced.

I had invested my life savings into this business, so I had to turn these problems around. I quickly aligned my own values to what the business needed to succeed: being upbeat, and having a sense of fun, happiness, trust, security and focus. These became what we called our ‘fundamentals’—that is, our values.

Every team meeting and every strategy we undertook for approximately the next 18 months centred on reiterating these six words. Eventually, these values fully aligned with the new team I hired and the culture that followed. From there, we prospered to the point of becoming the 2021 Franchisee of the Year in Australia, and what I’m most proud of is that we are known throughout the network for our great team culture.

If you aren’t already clear what your values are, the following list provides a guide to help you on your value finding mission. From the list, select three to five (maximum) attributes that you feel are most important to you. (More extensive lists of possible values are available online— see, for example, [brenebrown.com/resources/dare-to-lead-list-of-values/](http://brenebrown.com/resources/dare-to-lead-list-of-values/).)

Authenticity	Faith	Individuality
Beauty	Family	Loyalty
Career	Financial Security	Peace
Compassion	Freedom	Spirituality
Education	Fun	Stability
Energy	Growth	Travel
Entrepreneurship	Health	Uniqueness

Write your chosen three to five values down somewhere you can see them every day—perhaps put them on the fridge or your bathroom mirror, for example. Let them sink into your subconscious so they become a true centre point of your life.

Whichever way you decide to uncover your own personal values, I recommend this as the first step in your leadership journey. Knowing who you are and what you value most in life allows you to remain in a more aligned, focused and productive space.

## Combating imposter syndrome

Here's how authors Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey define 'imposter syndrome' (in their *Harvard Business Review* article 'Stop telling women they have imposter syndrome'):

Imposter syndrome is loosely defined as doubting your abilities and feeling like a fraud. It disproportionately affects high-achieving people, who find it difficult to accept their accomplishments. Many question whether they're deserving of accolades.

Now consider these women:

- Sheryl Sandberg, former COO of Facebook and Meta Platforms
- Lady Gaga, singer, songwriter and pop icon
- Tina Fey, actress, comedian, writer and producer
- Jacinda Ardern, former prime minister of New Zealand.

All these amazing women have spoken publicly of suffering from imposter syndrome.

A KPMG study has found that 75 per cent of high-achieving women have reported experiencing imposter syndrome — 75 per cent! That's huge! That figure increases

to 85 per cent in corporate America. Imposter syndrome is a massive problem across the globe, so if you have experienced it, you are certainly not alone.

For years I did not speak up as much as I should have in large corporate meetings, for fear of being found out as a fraud. I feared being made to feel stupid. Or watching an idea I had thoughtfully crafted in my mind and then not had the confidence to articulate slowly fade, like a dying ember in a fire. When I did muster the confidence to speak up, my idea was often ‘hepeated’ or talked over, so the idea went to waste again. Each time this happened, my confidence corroded a little more.

My mind did not think about the years of accolades that had earned me the right to have a seat at that table. I had earned the right to speak — and not just to speak, but also to be heard. Sometimes I felt I had earned this right more than the blokes sitting to my left and right. Why was it, then, that these male counterparts unwaveringly spoke up time and again, and were heard every time they spoke? Especially (and frustratingly) when they hepeated my ideas. My frustration at times was cry-in-the-office-toilet palpable. (In the toilet, of course, because God forbid a colleague sees us in a state of vulnerability — we have worked too hard for that, right?!) I have also often wondered why women seem to have to start at sub-zero and then work harder just to get themselves to zero — that is, a level playing field. And when we got there, we find out the field still isn’t level due to the gender pay gap. Again, the frustration grows.

To make things worse, at the time imposter syndrome was coursing through my veins, I didn’t know what it

was — I don't think many of us did. Imposter syndrome had barely surfaced in academic literature, and certainly wasn't known in broader business circles. Without being able to put a name to it, I just felt like a fraud. I couldn't even articulate what it was that I was feeling, let alone devise a strategy to combat it. For quite some time, I simply stumbled through life with it weighing me down.

How did I eventually combat this crippling imposter syndrome? Well, I reached a stage in my career where, even though I knew I was on point with my instincts, I was still having trouble articulating business ideas and influencing colleagues or team members to turn my thoughts into action. I also felt I lacked confidence in making bigger, more important business decisions. I was a younger leader too — around 26 years old — so while I felt my instincts loud and clear, I did not yet have the confidence to trust them like I do now. I wish I would have, though, because looking back, every time I had strong instinct on something, it was perfectly on point.

I went to my amazing and thought-leading boss at the time and told him my dilemma. We discussed doing a short course at Auckland University, and I completed this a short time later. This course progressed into completing a three-year Master in Business Administration (MBA) degree. This turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made.

Did the MBA help to allay my imposter syndrome? In part, yes. It gave me the confidence I desired to speak up and back myself. It taught me how to think critically, so I knew what I was saying had depth, intelligence and logic. However, the

main driver in my journey to control imposter syndrome was a biennial reading (and putting its teachings into practice) of a book that has been a bible to me since the age of 23 — *Mind Power into the 21st Century* by John Kehoe. I just did not know at the first reading that this book was the answer to my plight.

You likely know the Buddhist phrase ‘what you think, you become’, or some other variation of this sentiment. Well, that sums up Kehoe’s book. If you can control your thoughts, you can control imposter syndrome. Will it ever go away? Maybe, maybe not. But it can be controlled. I do feel, though, as we move into our forties that the amount of f\*cks given does tend to dwindle, so perhaps it does get kicked to the curb eventually. However, through my corporate career in my twenties and thirties, I certainly had it in spades. So, if this is where you are at right now — 75 to 85 per cent of women are with you! My hope is that by realising your worth and building your leadership ability, you will be one of the women helping this statistic decline sharply in the coming years.

### ***The antithesis of imposter syndrome: inner peace and confidence***

Imagine, just for a moment, that you are looking at your life through someone else’s eyes. What would they see? A well put-together woman who is articulate, smart, driven, strong, organised, kind, loving, a great friend, and an amazing mother? We need to find an inner peace from embracing these attributes and have confidence in them, rather than focusing on the things our mind conjures up as a mutated version of the truth, leading us to cut ourselves

down before others have the opportunity to. Yes, I know. As a modern woman with a career, social life, maybe even a young family, you likely have a million things on the go, and you can feel downtrodden and exhausted — the opposite of those positive qualities just mentioned. But that is through your eyes, in your head. Again, I ask: what would someone else see? We are so full of kindness and love for everyone else, why not turn that attention to ourselves every once in a while?



### PRODUCTIVITY TIP

List 10 positive attributes about yourself right now – grab a pen and paper or a device and physically write them out so you have them in front of you in black and white. Even if you do not fully believe them, list them anyway.

What did you come up with?

Tell yourself these attributes every day while waking up or as you drift off to sleep. During the day, be aware enough to catch yourself if you find you are sinking into a negative thought pattern, and replace those thoughts with one of your positive attributes, and just repeat it to yourself. Do this daily and you will be training your mind to control the type of thoughts you want to entertain.

Read *Mind Power into the 21st Century*. Better yet, read it every other year for the rest of your life. Doing so will keep more in check than just imposter syndrome. Your journey

to realise your self-worth and your true value to others, supplemented with great resources that edify and uplift you (such as Kehoe's powerful book), is also the path to unlimited opportunity, and the charmed life you may currently feel is out of reach.

Everything I have truly wanted in my life has been achieved using the techniques in Kehoe's book. For the record, though, you do not get there by simply thinking about what you want, and it magically coming true — if that were the case, we would all be millionaires with model bodies. Sometimes when people put time and effort into visualisation and controlling their thoughts, the important step they often miss is taking action and walking through the metaphorical doors that open. This is called 'alignment'. You need to be consciously aware of your behaviour and actions, to ensure these align to your new way of thought. You will be surprised by how efficient and effective you can be when your visualisation and alignment come together.

I have many examples of using these techniques to my advantage — including achieving franchisee of the year in 2021, winning national dance competitions, getting my dream job, finding my perfect life partner and perfect house, even buying my dream car. Getting control of your thoughts is important. What you think, you become — whether those thoughts are good, bad or indifferent. Just remember to apply the action to those thoughts!

Enjoy your mind power journey — it is both liberating and fulfilling, and you'll be well on your way to combating your imposter syndrome.

## **Controlling your environment**

Let me paint you a picture: You get up crazy early to get a jump on your emails before the household wakes and the morning routine kicks off. All too soon, you're deep in the kafuffle of kids not being able to find shoes, socks, uniform, lunchbox or homework. Or you're informed homework is due that previously you knew nothing about. God forbid 'book week' isn't sprung on you or an excursion you're only just finding out about. Pets to feed and walk, lunches to make, the list goes on. You finally get to work and commence the daily grind of back-to-back meetings from 9 am to 4 pm, whimpering through a couple of hepeating encounters. You leave the office or finish work around 5 pm and figure out what is for dinner on the way home based on your energy level and what happens to be in the fridge.

Sound familiar?

I did this (or something similar) for years.

While I loved my corporate career and I had clear passion and purpose, I was in overdrive a lot of the time. Always thinking of work or home and what I did or did not do or needed to do; it just didn't stop. A glass or three of wine did tend to help after my kid went to bed, but even then I woke up at 2 am, thinking through my checklist of the day ahead. I didn't realise how uptight I was until I compared how I am now with how I was then.

Now, let's talk about why understanding stress levels is important.

When we are in overdrive or a constant state of stress, we are constantly releasing cortisol throughout our bodies, which is our stress hormone. A little bit of cortisol is good because it keeps us alert and focused, but too much is bad. This leads to what is referred to as ‘allostatic load’, which is long-term wear and tear due to a chronic state of stress.

Too much cortisol running through your body for too long increases the neural connections to the part of the brain called the amygdala. The amygdala is a little almond-shaped part of your brain that’s connected to the fight/flight/freeze response. Men typically have a larger amygdala than women, which some scientists believe explains the role of women as peacemakers in our ancient past. The amygdala enables your body to respond to a threat before conscious thought (that is, thought from the prefrontal cortex). In other words, you’re responding before you really even understand what has happened. Say you’re walking through bushes and see a snake. Your amygdala is what makes you jump out of the way before you can even rationalise what you are seeing.

If the neural pathways to your amygdala get stronger from the increased connections from too much cortisol, the hippocampus deteriorates. Your hippocampus has a major role in learning and long-term memory, but it’s also a plastic and vulnerable structure that can get damaged by a variety of stimuli. So when the hippocampus weakens, so too does our ability to control stress — because your brain is quite literally shrinking and unable to regulate your behaviour from the stress triggers. Over time, the diminished parts of your brain can hamper your learning ability and also lead to chronic

depression. The process can even affect your DNA — passing this on to future generations.

The hippocampus is definitely not an area we want to screw up if we can help it. Long-term regression of the hippocampus could eventually result in Alzheimer's disease. If you think about the way alcoholism results in damage to the liver due to years of alcohol abuse, the same can apply to stress leading to Alzheimer's — where the effect of chronic stress accumulates.

You can control your environment in lots of ways. One of them is by blocking out time during the day to ensure colleagues can't book you back-to-back. You can use this time for emails or just for thinking. Or maybe you can organise the kids' stuff the night before, so you can get some sand under your feet before the day starts. Perhaps it's simply getting the dog out for a walk, so he stops looking at you with those sad eyes that hold you to account in more ways than you care to admit. Controlling your day could also mean just saying the one word we say so much to ourselves, or our kids, but cannot seem to muster the ability to say it to other adults: 'no'. I don't need to teach you how to suck eggs here; ultimately, you know how to control your environment. What is more important to understand in this section is why you should.

Understanding your prefrontal cortex better (also covered in chapter 3) helps you to have more confidence to say 'no', and so avoid taking on too much. Also, understanding why you should limit multitasking ensures you are operating as productively as possible. This is because our brains can only

really focus fully on one item at a time when performing a specific task. This increases to three or four when trying to decide between something or remember something — which is why we tend to chunk things such as phone numbers into three or four numbers at a time.

When trying to make a choice, we tend to only operate effectively when deciding between two or three things; anything more than this and it is easy to get into information overload. A state of feeling overwhelmed can affect our decision-making ability, sometimes stopping us from making decisions at all, and ultimately affecting our productivity or efficiency. It's so easy to be overwhelmed with too much information, especially in the social media world we live in today. Try to simplify life where you can, and give your brain a break.

Taking control of your environment is paramount to your success and wellbeing — otherwise, your environment will control you.

