

How to **Lead Like a Futurist**
“A Futurist’s Habits of Mind”



A Futurist's Habits of Mind

While brilliant ideas and smart strategies can shape your future, the limiting factor is often the human element. By adopting a Futurist's Habits of Mind, you can lead effectively in an ever-changing world.

More than a generalized mindset, we can use these mantras to develop fluency in a way of being and seeing. These Four Habits of Mind are vertical hinges, and help become the calm in the center of any storm.

As we practice them:

- We grow an inner stability in the face of a world that's quite unstable.
- We cultivate our ability to manage chaotic circumstances without becoming chaotic ourselves.
- We hone a heads-up perspective that moves us out of the weeds and into opportunity-mining.
- And, one moment at a time, we deepen our natural inclination toward wise decisions.

**I can see
and make
good in
anything.**

Optimism

Curiosity

**I lean into
"new"
with
interest.**

**Evolution
is an
emergent
process.**

Patience

Courage

**Honesty
and
humility
anchor
me.**



Optimism

MANTRA: I can see and make good in anything.

It turns out there's something to looking at the sunny side of life: when we see the optimistic view, we can start to build it. An optimistic state of mind is an 'on switch' for curiosity, imagination, and learning. Neurologically, optimism truly opens our circuits, allowing us to quickly absorb and link a wider variety of information.

Rational optimism rests on two assumptions that are incredibly productive when navigating the unknown future: outcomes are unpredictable, yet growth is always possible. It's enormously powerful to believe that no matter what's going on, that there is a way forward and that we have the power to find it. Our agency returns when we can say to ourselves, "I believe we have set the right direction and, no matter the outcome, I will use this experience and make good of it."

Unlike hope, which attaches itself to an outcome (or a desire to be rescued from something we wish to be different), optimism loves reality as it is. The heart of optimism is an inclination toward growth and possibility. There is more to learn and more to become: let's go!

When can optimism help?

With bouts of blahs or ennui. When things are flatly "fine," our thinking gets dulled too. It's not that we should be happy all the time, but a bit of optimism can help you latch onto the things that are, in fact, quite sweet. Such reminders bring perspective and texture back into view and snap your brain back into alertness as well.

In dramatic moments or dark places. A can't-win predicament doesn't mean there's no way out. An acute loss may drop you to your knees, but you will find yourself back on your feet. Because you must. There's a strength to call on in these dark times: you know that change is possible. You have the best chance of finding that light when you actively look for it. That focus is what sees you through.

Feeling of exhaustion, overwhelm, or powerlessness. We carry so much in our lives, and the illusion of "Work-life balance" is just another thing that keeps us striving. We'd design it differently if we could, but, for now, we are doing the bidding of the organization, the family, and other responsibilities that are beyond our direct control. Let the hard times do their good work on you: practice the courageous act of saying no and establishing boundaries wherever necessary while making room for both failure and forgiveness. Change what you can, whether it's a dramatic shift in circumstances or a subtler shift in attitude, an optimistic view supports your continued development and returns the power to you. Invest in the skills, awareness, and relationships that keep you growing. It won't always be this way.



Curiosity

MANTRA: There is always more to understand.

Breakthroughs are sometimes delivered through rare, unplanned events such as crisis or serendipity. But in all other times, breaking through to a new field of possibility rests on a profoundly beautiful capacity that lies in each of us: curiosity.

Learning is exciting—our minds want to do it! Sparked by curiosity, learning is the golden ticket to getting unstuck, whether it be in the organization, in relationships, or within ourselves. When we move away from resistance and righteousness, and toward perspective and potential, we find solutions and opportunities previously out of view. Evolution and adaptation require us to keep getting bigger and more flexible.

Curiosity begins with a humble assumption: every perspective is, by definition, limited. If we understand that every point of view and discipline can *only* be partial, then we become hungry for more perspectives. We experience the truth of the wisdom paradox, “the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know.” In this way, humility is the root of wisdom, and curiosity is its sword.

Curiosity can help when you're...

Resistant. “That’s not right,” “That will never work,” or “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” Resistance can look like uncertainty, judgment, blame, righteousness, and even fear. We face these feelings all the time; the goal is to engage in possibility despite them—which is the work of building the future.

Overly certain. This is that hands-on-the-hip stance, which usually comes with a seasoning of outrage, condescension, or sanctimony. If you find yourself saying, “I just don’t understand why...,” “I don’t see it that way...”, or “What’s up with that?” That’s a sign. It’s telling you that, indeed, you don’t understand or see things that way. This is an opportunity to get deeply curious about experiences other than your own. The goal is to study, learn, and feel yourself into a state of “I get it.” You’ll find the way forward looks very different from that place.

Overly uncertain. Confusion and overwhelm often lead to paralysis by analysis. Every path feels too risky, and you’re convinced that if you knew enough, you could find the right path that leads to the right outcome. Impossible! You can’t figure things out in advance, so shift from static learning to learning through experience and start with something that’s in the ‘approximately right direction.’ This is where discoveries are made. And, as optimism reminds you, you can trust that doing so will yield insights you couldn’t get any other way.



Courage

MANTRA: I have what I need to embrace risk and be okay.

Whatever future we envision, we can't just wish things into being. We have to take action and make sometimes-difficult choices to craft that future. Once we're on that path, courage gets us to the finish line.

By nature, big decisions and fuzzy futures are full of uncertainty. Forcing a decision, procrastinating, or ruminating about getting it right are different styles of dealing with the anxiety that arises. If we listen deeply, however, we'll notice that there's an inner nudge directing us 'this way...' It's always there.

That inner nudge, and the courage to act on it, are the resources we need to stare uncertainty in the eye and keep moving toward the future we wish to create.

The Wizard of Oz assured the Cowardly Lion that heroes "have no more courage than you have." The lion's suffering came from thinking that courage needed to look like a show of roaring bravado. Instead, he learned that 'the nerve' to take action begins with great gentleness toward oneself, a helpful companion to that fear. Courage puts an arm around our trembling concerns, reminding us that "You can't control this. But it's worth doing anyway."

Enacting courage as a practice has beautiful benefits; it cultivates self-trust, the very essence of confidence. It's how we prove to ourselves that we *can* make good out of anything.

Courage cuts through...

Fear. Courage is needed whenever there's something at stake—your reputation, money, a business, a job, important relationships. There's a sense that it's not safe if things do not go well. Underneath it, you can feel that, even though there's no right answer, there's a direction that feels right. Confessing that you have an instinct about what to do is your first act of courage.

Paralysis. Self-doubt is what spins our heads and guts into knots, often tying us up in analysis paralysis. You wonder if you're making the 'right' decision or what will happen if you do x, y, and then z. Ultimately, you know you must do something, but you're not sure what because you're terrified that you might lose something important. However, if you believe you can make good and that growth is always possible, you're no longer playing a zero-sum game but an infinite game of growth and expansion.

Passivity, complacency, or resignation. When you say, "Whatever, it's no big deal..." you're not actually okay with whatever is happening. It's that you may feel powerless or not quite worthy of asking for what you need or addressing what's really going on. Because the cost to your own vitality (and others) can become too great, courage will ask you to test your assumptions. As you do, optimism and curiosity will be stoked as well.



Patience

MANTRA: The future is not figureoutable, it is only followable.

Intentional evolution involves adding dimensions of complexity to our inner lives so that we can match the complexity of the world around us. It's how we keep up and stay relevant.

So we use evolution's rules for business *and* ourselves: change, grow, transform, innovate. Yet, there's one important rule of evolution that people love to ignore: patience.

If we're after real change, we have to account for the factor of time. Evolution is an emergent process. It needs time, as well as care and feeding, for new form to be realized. The goals of a strategy can't really be pushed either, not without consequence to the system.

Patience is a philosophical act. We have to 'go meta' to see the big picture, to study systems, scan for emerging signals of change, and consider their implications. Patience reminds us that things aren't clear before they're clear, or complete before they're complete.

To think like a futurist is to understand that the future is not figureoutable, it is only followable. Organizations, and human nature, don't easily make space for this. We get antsy for the process to be done, yet we're served best when we allow the process to lead us.

The stereo-vision of perspective (keeping your eyes on the future) and purpose (and your hands on the present) is how you stay on the path, patiently. Perspective is the map, purpose is the compass, and tactical experimentation is how you discover the territory. Steadiness in all three gives us what we need to lead and adapt to change while allowing ourselves to be changed by it too.

Use patience to...

Give 'shoulds' the shove off. Patience is the great detoxifying hack for so much that ails us: shame, blame, self-doubt, loss-aversion, and general anxiety about not being good enough. Whenever you think things should be different than they are, you can cut through the corrosive 2nd-guessing game by regularly refreshing your optimism, curiosity, and courage practices. These habits of mind equip you for staying the course for the long term.

Hold tight to purpose. Play loose with tactics. Remember why you launched this project. Purpose will steer you through murkiness and disappointment on a path filled with experiments. The most valuable insights and discoveries are uncovered by poking and prodding around a purpose-focused hypothesis. Play freely, run pilots, and collect hard and soft data, as you keep purpose both central and sacred to the work.

Allow clarity to emerge. Sometimes the only thing that's clear is that you don't know what to do. Let that be your answer, for now. Summon patience to bear the anxiety that rises in this situation as you shake off the shoulds and hold tight to purpose. Things aren't clear until they're clear, and the way to get there is to stay the course. When clarity does emerge, it rings brightly. You can't mistake it, nor can you force it. In its absence, the path is simply to keep going and keep growing your way forward.

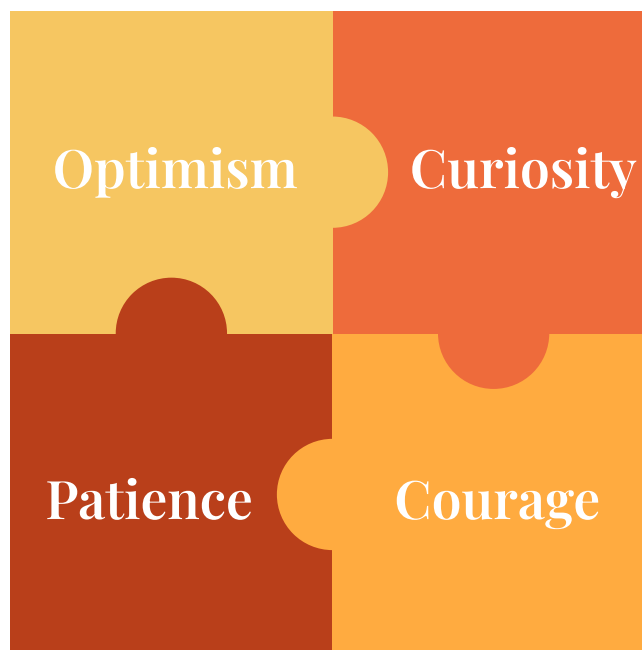


A Futurist's Habits of Mind

YOUR SWISS ARMY KNIFE FOR LIFE

To think like a futurist is to prepare yourself for making wise choices. You learn to zoom-out to a 30,000-foot perspective on complex issues while caring for the very real people and tasks in front of you. You pause to consider many views, appreciate the challenges inherent in the work, and weigh the impact of your actions on others.

The Four Habits of Mind get you there. They are powerful, practical tools for getting unstuck in any situation. From big strategic gambles to everyday irritations, these habits of mind help you stay connected to yourself, to others, and to what really matters. It's the key to staying sane, sober, and smart in a world that is chaotic and uncertain, and is calling to us to lead with the best parts of ourselves.



Ready to engage your Swiss Army knife for life?

[Connect with Cecily](#) to discuss whether a speech, workshop, or training on the 4 HoM, The Art of Reinvention, or Breaking our Addiction to Certainty is right for you.

Learn about the Six Fluencies of 21st Century Leadership at [Lead Like a Futurist](#)