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Leading as a Way of BEING™

Five mindsets and five practices for sustainable leadership in turbulent times.

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An evolution of The New MBA: Mastering BEING and Awareness (Romano, 2018)

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The case for this work, in this moment.

The conditions leaders face have outpaced the conditions their development was designed for.

Compounding crises — climate, geopolitical, technological, generational — are arriving simultaneously rather than in sequence. Leader burnout is at sustained highs and has not recovered. Artificial intelligence is changing both the leader's job and the leadership development field itself, pushing the value of distinctly human capacities — presence, judgment under ambiguity, embodied wisdom — into higher relief. And a quieter, longer-arc shift is also underway: a growing portion of serious leaders are asking what leadership owes to a wider set of stakeholders than the ones this work has historically been built to serve.

Across these forces, one pattern is visible. The work of leading has changed faster than the work of developing leaders. The development methods most leaders received were sufficient for a slower, more stable world.

That world is gone.

What has changed is not just the volume of demands but the pace at which they arrive — and what that pace does to a leader from the inside. When change is continuous rather than episodic, the nervous system never fully resets. Decision fatigue compounds. The reactive, contracted mode of operating that might once have been temporary becomes the default. Leaders who are technically skilled, deeply experienced, and genuinely motivated find themselves running on a shortened internal runway — less capacity for reflection, less access to their own judgment, less able to be fully present with the people they lead.

This is not a skills gap. The leaders we work with have the skills. What has been outpaced is the inner infrastructure — the mindset and the daily practices — that allow those skills to function under sustained pressure. The pace of change has not just raised the bar for what leaders must do. It has raised the bar for who they must be.

A different way of leading.

Traditional leadership development trains skills and knowledge. It is not enough — not because skill and knowledge are unimportant, but because the bottleneck has moved upstream. The leaders we need now — the ones who can sustain themselves and their impact over time — have done something different. They have developed the mindsets that allow them to lead from the inside out.

The challenges facing today's leaders are not new in kind, but they are new in intensity. Pace, complexity, ambiguity, and the volume of information demanding attention have grown faster than the development methods most leaders received. The result is a familiar pattern: highly skilled, well-trained leaders who are stretched thin, reactive, and operating from a depleted center. Skill and knowledge alone do not solve this. The bottleneck is upstream of skill. It is at the level of mindset — the underlying way a leader sees, decides, and shows up.

This paper introduces a working framework for developing the mindsets that sustainable leadership requires, along with the methodology used to develop them. It is grounded in over twenty years of coaching practice, in doctoral research conducted at Antioch University, and in a more recent study of over 400 leaders across industries conducted in partnership with Dr. Dani Chesson. It is offered as a practitioner-scholar's synthesis — not as the final word on what leadership requires, but as a coherent and defensible map of what we have found to actually produce change.

What this paper presents

The Five Mindsets of Sustainable Leadership describe the leader the work produces — whole-systems, values-driven, relationship-focused, grounded, and adaptive. Together they shift a leader from reactive and stretched thin to grounded and intentional, guided by an internal compass rather than the noise around them.

Leading as a Way of BEING™ is the methodology used to develop these mindsets. Five research-validated practices — Breathing, Energy, EQ, Navigate, and Listening — build the inner capacity sustainable leadership requires. Research with over 400 leaders demonstrates that these practices significantly predict resilience: the capacity to stay clear and effective through change and uncertainty.

"Leadership is a way of being that is reflective and thoughtful about self, that values relationships and the present, that is connected to others, that is not narrowly striving or ego-driven, and that is liberating in its effects."

— Sinclair (2007), *Leadership for the Disillusioned*

The model presented here is the 2026.1 edition of work that began with *The New MBA: Mastering BEING and Awareness* (Romano, 2018). The earlier framing — Two Pillars, Triple Loop Listening, and a six-point coaching model — remains alive within the current model. The methodology has evolved through six years of additional research, coaching practice, and refinement into a more empirically grounded five-dimension framework. A later section in this paper traces that evolution explicitly.

What follows in this paper

The Framework — the Five Mindsets in detail. The Methodology — the five BEING practices that develop them. The Research — what 400 leaders showed us. The Evolution — how the work has matured from 2014 through 2018 to today. And practical guidance for the leader who recognizes the description and wants to begin.

Why skill is not enough.

The leaders we work with are not lacking in capability. They have advanced degrees, decades of experience, sophisticated tools, and access to more frameworks than they could practice in a lifetime. What they describe, again and again, is something different: a sense of being on the back foot. Reactive. Stretched thin. Operating in mental and emotional conditions that don't allow their actual capacity to express itself.

The leadership development field has, broadly, two paths it can take in response. The first is to add more skills and knowledge — another course, another framework, another book. This is what the literature on adult development calls horizontal learning: adding new content within the existing mindset. The second path is to develop the mindset itself — the underlying way a leader sees, makes meaning, and responds. This is vertical development. It is slower, harder, and more transformational. It is also where the actual leverage lies for the challenges most leaders face today (Garvey-Berger, 2019, 2024; Petrie, 2014; Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Mindset, not skill. Five mindsets distinguish the leaders who sustain themselves and their impact over time. Together they shift a leader from reactive and stretched thin to grounded and intentional — guided by an internal compass, not the noise around them. The mindsets are not stages to pass through; they are integrated capacities that mature together.

Adults make thousands of decisions each day

Most are unconscious. Decision fatigue depletes self-regulation and shapes how a leader shows up — in conversation, in conflict, in moments of choice that compound across teams and time. The leader who has cultivated the mindsets described in this paper is better equipped to make those moment-to-moment decisions from a place of clarity rather than reactivity.

This is what makes the difference between a leader who is competent and a leader whose presence other people can feel. Skill is necessary. It is not what makes the difference at scale or over time.

The Five Mindsets of Sustainable Leadership.

The Five Mindsets are integrated capacities, not sequential stages. Each rests on its own scholarly lineage — systems thinking, authentic leadership, emotional intelligence, reflective practices, vertical development — and together they are informed by the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership, the UN PRME Working Group on Sustainability Mindset, and the vertical development tradition.

MINDSET	ORIENTATION	WHAT IT MEANS
Whole-Systems	Sees the whole picture	Sees how parts connect, how decisions ripple across teams, stakeholders, and time. Takes the long view, even under pressure, recognizing that leadership extends into the broader systems where impact is ultimately felt.
Values-driven	Acts from what matters	Acts from what matters most. Values function as a felt compass — not a poster on the wall — cutting through noise and short-term pressure to a stable internal reference point.
Relationship-Focused	Builds lasting trust	Invests in relationships before they are needed, across roles and differences. Self-aware, attuned to others, able to bring people together when it matters.
Grounded	Stays steady under pressure	Has practices that allow clear thinking and a return to oneself when reactivity rises. Commits to the inner work that builds the steadiness sustainable leadership requires.
Adaptive	Holds tension and paradox	Sits with not-knowing. Navigates complexity without forcing premature resolution, and adjusts without losing self. The capacity to operate in genuine ambiguity — the kind leaders face daily —

Leading as a Way of BEING™.

Leading as a Way of BEING™ develops the Five Mindsets through five research-validated practices.

The Five Mindsets describe who the sustainable leader is. The five practices describe how those mindsets are developed – through daily attention to breath, energy, emotional intelligence, navigation, and listening.

This approach has its roots in *The New MBA: Mastering Being and Awareness* (Romano, 2018), which identified breath as foundational and listening as the most consequential leadership capacity. A subsequent study of over 400 leaders confirmed that these practices significantly predict resilience under sustained pressure and change.

PRACTICE	INNER CAPACITY	WHAT IT DEVELOPS
Breathing	Anchored attention	The foundational practice. Conscious breath shifts physiological state, calms the nervous system, and is the path to operating from awareness rather than reactivity (Porges, 2011; Dana, 2018).
Energy	Sustained focus	Managing personal energy as the foundation for sustained performance. Includes structure, prioritization, and the ability to remain focused on what matters under pressure.
EQ	Values and strengths under pressure	Emotional intelligence integrated with values: the capacity to act from integrity in stressful circumstances and to harness one's strengths when conditions become hectic.
Navigate	Steadiness through turbulence	The integrative capacity. Optimism, the courage to act despite uncertainty, the ability to see opportunity in change, and the capability to achieve results under sustained pressure.
Listening	Deep listening across difference	Listening intently in stressful situations and across disagreement. The capacity to remain open even when one knows the answer, and to reframe conversations toward openness.

What over 400 leaders showed us.

Between 2019 and 2020, the BEING methodology was studied with over 400 leaders across industries and geographies. The five practices — Breathing, Energy, EQ, Navigate, and Listening — were operationalized into a survey instrument and tested empirically. The instrument's five factors loaded strongly, with item loadings ranging from .72 to .91, indicating that the practices function as distinct but related dimensions.

Statistical analysis revealed a pattern of significant correlations with direct implications for resilience under sustained pressure:

EQ Navigate $r = .715$ ($p < .001$) When emotional intelligence under pressure is high, so is the leader's ability to navigate turbulence and change.	Energy Navigate $r = .776$ ($p < .001$) Sustainable energy management is the strongest single predictor of navigating uncertainty — supporting the case for mindful practices that regulate the nervous system rather than override it.
Listening Navigate $r = .476$ ($p < .001$) Deep listening — the capacity to filter signal from noise — significantly supports a leader's ability to operate in complex moments.	EQ Energy $r = .613$ ($p < .001$) Emotional intelligence plays a meaningful role in how leaders allocate their energy.

The pattern is consistent: four of the BEING practices — Breathing, Energy, EQ, and Listening — converge on a single emergent capacity, Navigate, the ability to stay clear and effective through change and uncertainty. This is the empirical core of the resilience claim. When sustainable leaders are described as resilient, what is being named is the lived experience of these practices integrated under pressure.

This research builds on the original doctoral study (Romano, 2014), which followed six leaders through a ten-to-twelve-week period of daily reflective practices. That earlier study established the foundational findings — the relationship to breath is foundational; body stress significantly lessens by week eight; coaching accelerates self-reflection; listening is power — that the 400-leader study has now scaled and tested empirically.

Resilience is the through-line. The capacity to stay clear and effective through sustained change and uncertainty is not a separate sixth practice. It is the integrated outcome of the other five practiced over time.

In their own words.

What follows are reflections from leaders who have engaged this work, drawn from the original doctoral research and from coaching practice over the years since. These are not endorsements. They are descriptions of the felt change leaders report when they have done the inner work.

"I am more deliberate and strategic in my approach. I am less reactive, a mode of operating that was common. I am also less defensive and find myself having more energy and capacity to deal with issues that I previously avoided due to personal discomfort or conflict."

"I feel free from any major stress, and I attribute this to the skills and practices, to listen intentionally, and to open myself to the ideas and perspectives of others — this has made a measurable impact on my leadership."

"I now react neutrally before going into meetings that I don't necessarily look forward to. I am better able to think through emails — my communication is more effective and this has improved my leadership."

"I am more self-aware, particularly with respect to paying attention to others and reaching out and being able to tune into others."

"I am less reactive and can see positions and ideas more broadly. I am more present and adaptable. I am more flexible and in a better position to lead others because I am in tune with myself."

"I have gained clarity about working effectively with others. I have been able to make decisions about the performance of others and the impact that this has on the team without being bogged down by judgment."

Across these reflections, a pattern emerges: less reactivity, more presence, expanded perspective, sustainable energy, and a quality of attention that allows the leader to be fully where they are. This is what the Five Mindsets and the BEING practices produce when they are integrated into a leader's way of operating over time.

From 2014 to 2026: how the model has grown.

The framework presented in this paper is the 2026.1 edition of a body of work that has evolved over more than a decade. The methodology's origins, its earlier expression in *The New MBA: Mastering Being and Awareness* (Romano, 2018), and its current form are best understood as three stages of a single research program rather than as separate models. Each stage informs the next.

2014 Doctoral research at Antioch University Five informal reflective practices tested with six leaders over a ten-to-twelve-week period. Establishes the foundational claim: leadership is a way of being, not merely a series of actions.	2018 The New MBA white paper Methodology operationalized for a wider audience. Framed around Two Pillars (BEING and Awareness), Triple Loop Listening, and a six-point transformational coaching model.	2026 Leading as a Way of BEING™ Five Mindsets describe the leader the work produces; five research-validated BEING practices describe how those mindsets are developed. Empirical validation through a 400-leader study.
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What carries forward

The earlier framing remains alive within the current model. Breathing is foundational across all three stages — the 2014 dissertation's central finding, the 2018 paper's primary lever, and the BEING methodology's first practice. Triple Loop Listening — the 2018 movement from Noticing through Suspending Judgment to Generating New Possibilities — lives within the current Listening practice. Awareness, the 2018 paper's second pillar, is implicit across Breathing, Energy, and EQ in the current model. The 6-point coaching model — Connect, Assess, Articulate, Act, Accelerate, Sustain — continues to inform how we engage with leaders, even though it is not a primary feature of the public framework.

What has changed

The 2026.1 edition reflects three meaningful developments. First, the methodology has been empirically validated at scale: where the original study tracked six leaders, the current research includes over 400. Second, the framework now distinguishes more clearly between the methodology (BEING) and the outcomes (the Five Mindsets) — a distinction that was implicit but unnamed in 2018. Third, the addition of the Five Mindsets gives the framework a clearer language for what the practice produces — the kind of leader the work makes possible — which has been a recurring need in coaching engagements.

Three steps toward a different way of leading.

For the leader who has read this far and recognizes the description, three steps offer a path into the work.

1. Begin with the breath.

The foundational finding of every study we have conducted is that the relationship to breath is the doorway. Not because breathing is a technique that solves a problem, but because conscious breath shifts the physiological state from which all other capacities operate. Three minutes a day, at a consistent time and place, builds the foundation that the rest of the work depends on.

2. Become a great observer.

Notice your styles and approaches to leading. Pay attention to what triggers reactivity. Observe what behaviors you display when you are in your zone and what shifts when you are stretched thin. Build self-awareness through curiosity rather than judgment. The practice is observation, not correction.

3. Get support.

The journey is not solo work. Coaching accelerates self-reflection and provides the safe space for honest practice. Mentors offer counsel. Reading deepens thinking. The combination — coach, mentor, knowledge — is consistently more powerful than any single source. This was true in 2014, in 2018, and in the most recent research. It remains true now.

For organizations. Sustainable leadership is not a personal-development side project. The same principles can be integrated into recruitment, manager development, performance review, and team development. The leaders an organization is willing to develop in this way are the leaders who will sustain its long-term performance.

A continuous research program.

The framework presented in this paper rests on a body of research conducted across more than a decade.

The original doctoral study (2014)

Conducted at the Graduate School of Leadership and Change at Antioch University under the chairship of Dr. Alan Guskin and committee members Dr. Carol Baron, Dr. Elaine Gale, and Dr. Amanda Sinclair (external reader), the dissertation investigated how organizational leaders cultivate focus and calm in moments of uncertainty. The single-subject-with-multiple-subject design followed six leaders across a ten-to-twelve week intervention, applying five informal contemplative practices in daily life. Pre- and post-intervention assessments included the Five Facets of Mindfulness Questionnaire and a custom Mindfulness Survey. The study established seven major conclusions, including the foundational role of breath, the role of coaching as a force for change, and the centrality of listening to leader effectiveness.

The 400-leader study (2019–2020)

Conducted in partnership with Dr. Dani Chesson, the BEING methodology was subsequently operationalized into a survey instrument designed to assess each of the five dimensions: Breathing, Energy, EQ, Navigate, and Listening. The instrument was administered to over 400 leaders across industries and geographic regions. Factor analysis confirmed the five-dimension structure, with item loadings ranging from .72 to .91. Statistical analysis revealed significant correlations among the dimensions, with particular convergence on Navigate as an emergent integrative capacity — the dimension most directly associated with leader resilience under turbulence.

Ongoing coaching practice

Beyond the formal research, the framework has been informed by more than two decades of coaching practice with leaders across industries — life sciences, technology, education, financial services, government, and the social sector. The practical refinements that have shaped the model from 2014 to the present have come as much from this practice as from the controlled research. Both inform the current

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Steve brings more than twenty years of organizational and leadership development experience, including senior roles at Fortune 500 life sciences companies and consulting engagements across industries — life sciences, healthcare, technology, finance, education, government, and the social sector. He founded Olistica in 2017.

Olistica offers Executive and Leadership Development, Team Development, Strategic Planning and Facilitation, Speaking, Programs and Retreats.

Steve holds a PhD in Leadership and Change from Antioch University and is a Certified Professional Coach (PCC) through the International Coach Federation. He lectures at the SDSU Fowler School of Business, where his teaching includes ethics and organizational management.

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