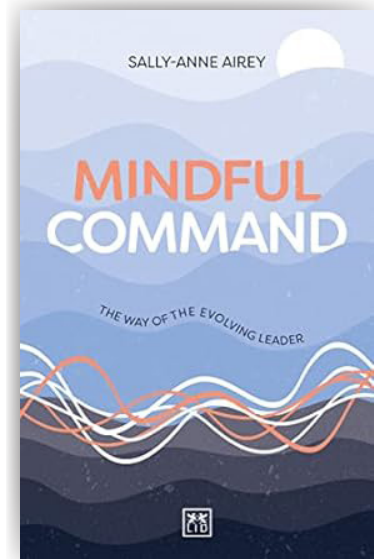


Mindful Command

The Way of the Evolving Leader

Sally-Anne Airey

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Mindful command* focuses on leaders gaining confidence to make the right decisions. It requires *balanced awareness, inner stability, fearless compassion, and clear purpose*.
- A skillful leader learns how to slow down, see what matters most, build connections, embrace ambiguity, and hold space.
- In moments of stress, the *pause tool* will help leaders focus on their breathing.
- Leaders should be aware of their own thoughts and feelings. When leaders know themselves, they can see situations from others' points of view.
- Everyone experiences fear, but when leaders find courage to embrace it, they'll have more compassion for themselves and those around them.

OVERVIEW

Skillful leaders are able to remain calm under pressure, find clear purpose, and act with confidence. In **Mindful Command**, Sally-Anne Airey teaches leaders how to find their inner stability, embrace fear, practice compassion, and learn to pause. Embracing these tactics will help leaders enhance their impact on their teams and the world around them.

WHAT IS MINDFUL COMMAND?

Mindful command sounds like two contradictory ideas. The concept was inspired by Airey's naval career and combines a commander's *intent* (a statement of the desired outcome) with *mission command* (intent plus freedom of action, initiative, responsiveness, and flexibility).

Mindful command provides you with the skills to show up, regardless of the circumstances, and remain calm, centered, and confident that you're doing the right thing. It comprises four elements:

1. *Balanced awareness* helps you see things as they really are.
2. *Inner stability* allows you to calmly stand for what matters.
3. *Fearless compassion* gives you the courage to do the right thing.
4. *Clear purpose* helps you determine what really matters.

Even great leaders struggle at times because they're human. By focusing on your inner peace and being one with yourself, you'll begin to see things the way they truly are and have the courage to do what's right. With mindful command, you can find the skills to create space for yourself and for others.

FIVE SIGNS OF SKILLFUL LEADERSHIP

A skillful leader should know who they are and how to get things done the right way. Everyone's leadership journey is different, but people can learn from one another's experiences. There are five steps to skillful leadership:

1. *Slow down.* Leaders often feel overworked and overwhelmed. Take time to pause, look, and listen. Focus on the *now*, which is where you can make the greatest impact. Because your impact should be felt, you need to be fully present. Learn to slow down so you can get to know yourself and become a better leader.
2. *Find what matters most.* When there's a difficult challenge, it's the leader's job to make the right decision. Sometimes the task feels impossible, and there's no real winner or loser. Consider all the people involved. Mistakes can still occur, so be ready to course correct if needed. Develop a clear vision of what matters most and have the courage to act on it.
3. *Build connections.* Though many people want to divide and conquer, many more want to unite. Human compassion almost always prevails. Realize that everyone is human and flawed in their own way. When you build strong relationships, anything is possible. Without these relationships, it's difficult to accomplish your goals.
4. *Embrace ambiguity.* When dealing with people, it's usually not about right or wrong. A good leader can evaluate all aspects of a situation, even a complex or ambiguous one, and make the best decision possible. Our world is becoming even more complex and ambiguous, but a skillful leader can respond with care and compassion for the people involved.
5. *Hold space.* Leaders need to know how to hold space for both themselves and others. Stop and take a moment before you react. With practice, this will become easier. If you continue to stay calm in challenging situations, it will develop into muscle memory. When you pause, calm your mind to truly focus on what the other person is saying. Help them feel heard. Be sure to listen without judging or offering advice.

PREPARING THE GROUND FOR MINDFUL COMMAND

Evolving is part of a leader's journey. Obstacles can make anyone stumble or fall, but evolving will help you learn to navigate with more skill. When you encounter obstacles, learn to work with them, not against them.

Notice the things you repeatedly think, say, and do. Repetition strengthens the pathways in your brain. If the things you repeatedly say and do don't align with who you are as a leader, change them. Your brain will adapt and form new neural pathways, also known as *neuroplasticity*.

However, the *amygdala*, the part of the brain responsible for regulating our emotions, can make this difficult. The amygdala helps us react to fear and threats. Fear can affect rational thinking. You might snap, recoil, or freeze when presented with a threat. Later, you might wonder what you were thinking, but the rational part of your brain was not involved. Regret often follows, which is the cycle of the reactive self. However, this cycle can be changed.

Learn to use the *pause tool*. Before you pause, you may notice the physical changes in your body—your clenched jaw, tight chest, or flushed face. When you're in this reactive state, your rational brain is no longer working as it should. The pause tool is a three-step process that helps the thinking part of your brain take over:

1. Find your "pause button"—usually the base of the sternum, or the solar plexus.
2. Place your hand on your pause button and press to feel the connection.
3. Focus on slowly breathing in and out.

When you focus on your breathing, you're telling your vagus nerve that you're okay. This triggers your parasympathetic nerve system, which will slow your breathing and heart rate back to normal.

By learning to pause, you can focus on what matters. Many leaders find meditation to be helpful as a way to practice patience, compassion, or courage. There are many forms of meditation, including secular or spiritual. Mindfulness meditation has no goals, but it can help you see things as they truly are. Common to each form is setting your intention, focusing your attention, and focusing on your breathing.

In silence, you can get to know yourself. Many of us are not used to silence. There's always some type of background noise, like vehicles, people talking, or phones ringing. When you're silent, you can reconnect with yourself and learn to be present in your own life. You'll learn to accept things as they are and how you are. When you accept yourself, it's easier to accept others and to make the right decisions.

BALANCED AWARENESS

In mindful command, awareness is key. When you're not attentive, you might see things that aren't truly there and miss what is there. Balanced awareness has three touchpoints:

1. *Awareness of self*. Notice your thoughts and feelings but don't let them determine your behavior. Your awareness of them will help you understand yourself better, which in turn helps you become a better observer. Take time to pause, breathe, and connect with yourself. It will calm your nervous system and allow you to see yourself more clearly.
2. *Awareness of others*. The better you know someone, the easier it is to see things from their point of view. You can learn a lot by observing and listening. Notice a person's body language and tone of voice. Let them speak freely without jumping in. Listening tells people you care about what they have to say. When you listen to others, they're more likely to listen to you. This helps build trust and connection.

3. *Awareness of context.* Context is everything. What's right in one context can be wrong in another. When assessing a situation, take a realistic view. Approach conversations by listening with an open mind and help others feel part of the solution.

Your goal as a leader is to be impartial. Rather than focusing on your own experiences, which can be biased, view a situation as an independent observer. Focus on seeing things as they are and noticing the nuances of the situation. When you see things clearly, you can make better decisions.

CLEAR PURPOSE

Clarity is one of the most important aspects of leadership. Without it, tasks can be done the wrong way or for the wrong reasons.

Find your purpose, or what matters most to you, as it can give life meaning. In business, when a purpose is shared, it becomes clear to everyone involved. A shared purpose will benefit the group and drive better outcomes.

A skillful leader understands what matters to them and to their team. With mindful command, your shared purpose should be simple, clear, and balanced. Team members must find meaning in it or they won't fully commit. If your team members aren't fully committed, revise the purpose statement until you can all agree. Your job as a leader is to unite your team around a shared purpose so they can be at their best.

FEARLESS COMPASSION

Fearless compassion involves embracing fear and finding courage. When you act with fearless compassion, you'll make better decisions, have better self-understanding, and build better relationships.

Fear comes in many forms, such as the fear of rejection, abandonment, or failure. Everyone experiences fear, but we all experience it differently. It can take the form of anxiety, self-doubt, or anger. Acknowledge your fear and understand the impact it can have on you and the people you care about.

Fear is at the root of our negative thoughts and feelings. It can remind you of suffering in your past or the unknown in the future. People can be driven by fear, and when fear is your driver, you'll never feel that you are enough.

Approach feelings of fear with compassion and an inquiring mind. When you are compassionate, you'll be less judgmental, less defensive, and a better listener. You'll have the capacity to see people as they truly are and be able to hear and understand what they need. When you have compassion for yourself, it's easier to have compassion for others.

Courage allows you to listen compassionately, especially when conflict arises. Conflict is normal in relationships, but to resolve it, you need to understand why it happened. Often, conflict arises from misplaced blame. You may feel angry or frustrated and take it out on another person. When that other person reacts, conflict begins, resulting in a cycle of judgment and blame. When you remember that the other person has needs and fears as well, it can help you be more compassionate when faced with conflict.

INNER STABILITY

When faced with uncertainty or chaos, inner stability can help you to calmly stand for what matters to you. With inner stability comes feelings of safety and constancy. You'll be able to hold space for yourself and others. Your inner stability can be improved by practicing self-care in the form of good sleep, exercising, or spending time in nature. Your ability to show up as a calm, centered leader is something you can begin working on now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally-Anne Airey is a leadership coach who has devoted over 40 years to the art and skill of leadership. A Royal Navy officer for 23 years, she rose to the rank of Commander and was the first woman to continue in service as a mother. Later, she worked for eight years in Ukraine and Russia, where she discovered her coaching vocation on a consultancy project in Kyiv in 2007. In 2011, in response to the question “what do we want to wake up to in the morning?” she moved with her family to a small village in the French Alps. There she developed the concept of Mindful Command—now the foundation for all her work with people who care about their impact on the world.

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