

# Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps

## How to Thrive in Complexity

A book excerpt by Mobius Senior Expert Jennifer Garvey Berger



We are honored to include an excerpt from this important body of work and to have **Jennifer Garvey Berger** as faculty for the 2019 Next Practice Institute. Together with her colleague, Mobius Senior Expert and McKinsey Director Emeritus, Zafer Achi, they will lead the immersive learning track Complexity Outside-In and Inside-Out. In this track, Jennifer and Zafer will grow your “complexity fitness” – offering you learning tools and approaches to handle the challenges of our changing world. To learn more about Jennifer’s and Zafer’s work please visit the Next Practice Resources section of the website for a collection of their articles and recorded talks.

### Introduction

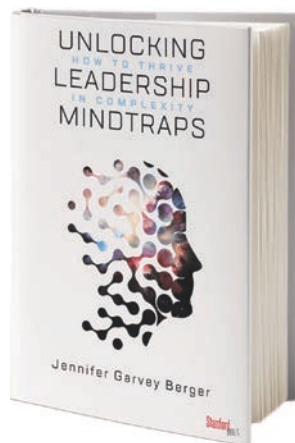
This book was born at a party in Seattle, when two smart women told me that my first two books had mostly taught them that complexity was too hard for them to understand. Epic fail on my part. Over the next months, I had dozens of leaders, breathless with overwhelm, ask me if I could synthesize everything I had learned about thriving in this increasingly complex world into something fast and pithy and easily consumed. The challenge was set.

I reread my notes from thousands of hours of individual and group meetings in organizations. I pulled out every book and journal article I have read for the last decade, and I ruthlessly began to prune down to the most helpful ideas and practices I could find. I was surprised and delighted when they all began to take form as the five mindtraps which are

the focus of this book. I found that our mistakes in complexity, while various (and variously debilitating), coalesce in these five ways that our biology conspires to mislead us.

The book you hold in your hands is meant for you, no matter what kind of leader you might be. It doesn’t matter whether your leadership position is entry or executive, if it’s formally recognized or whether you’re just leading your life. If your life is feeling more complex, less predictable, and more confusing than it used to, and if you’re finding that your reflexes are sometimes leading you astray, this book is meant to help you understand why—and how to make changes that will make your life easier, that will make the increasing complexity your friend rather than your enemy.

If you’re one of the readers who needs to hear the main message of a book in order to decide whether



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**“Unwittingly stuck in a trap, we tend to believe we should simply try harder, rather than try something else.”**

it's for them, here goes. In all of my research, writing, teaching, and learning over the last three decades, I have found that we humans are brilliantly designed—for an older, less connected, and more predictable version of the world. In today's highly interconnected, fast-changing world, we need to take some of that brilliant design and purposefully reshape it to be fit for the unpredictable future that is unfolding. When we do this, we find that not only does the complex world of today seem less overwhelming, but we also solve problems more effectively, our relationships improve, and we even like ourselves better. Come see how.

### **The Five Quirks and How They Become Traps**

Leaders today are busier than they've ever been, and they are falling behind. It's not only that the demands on them are so much more time consuming than they used to be (although that seems to be true). It's that the nature of the challenges has changed in such a way that the tools and approaches of the past simply don't work.

In the past ten years, I have worked with thousands of leaders around the world on how to lead in complex, uncertain environments. I've become fascinated by what gets in our way, and particularly fascinated by one particular phenomenon: those times when our reflexes are exactly wrong. Such times seem to clump together in particular ways and create a perverse and seemingly inescapable trap: our human instincts, shaped for (and craving) a simple world, fundamentally mislead us in a complex, unpredictable world.

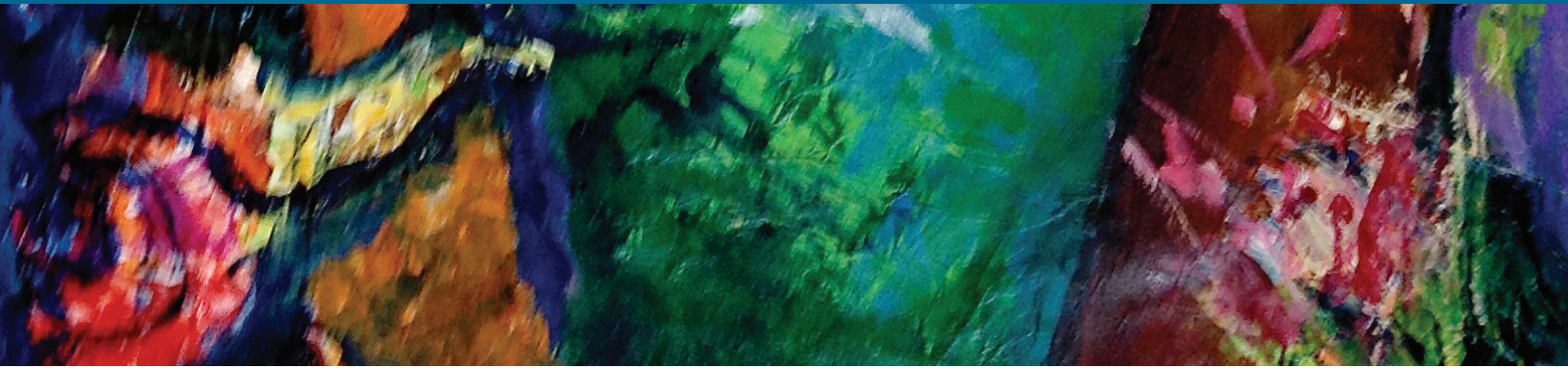
It's like having an old operating system for your computer that opened files when you tried to close them and deleted things when you tried to save them. The operating system of our minds has a

quirk when we are working in complexity, and that quirk sets us on a course of action that is the exact opposite of what the situation really needs.

You see, our experience isn't always the helpful compass it once was. In the past, when things were changing more slowly and we were less interconnected, we could rely on our experience to tell us what would probably happen next. If you were an accountant in your town in the 1950s, you'd know that there were a certain number of changes you could expect—shifts in your client list, fiddles with the tax code, the way the economy of your town was reliant on the price of corn or cars or whatever people produced around you. You would know that no matter what happened, people would require your work, even if the particulars varied from year to year. You'd recognize the patterns from what you already knew, and you'd be able to see a narrow set of fairly predictable future possibilities; you'd have a pretty good guess what five years from now would look like. Today there are so many things we deal with on a daily basis that are unpredictable, and there's no way of telling how these unpredictable pieces will interact.

It's the interactions of all these unpredictable things that create *complexity*. The more interconnected we are, and the faster things are changing, the more complex our world is. This shifts formerly straightforward professions into confusing complex ones. Accountants today wonder whether their entire profession is going away, whether they will be 90 percent replaced by computers (and when?), and what business they should bet on next to keep their firms alive.

They have no idea what five years from now looks like. Their old leadership tools—to help them control, predict, plan—fail them. And worse, their ways of thinking and feeling about the issues at hand fail them too.



Frustratingly, the fact that our reflexes lead us astray in complex and uncertain times doesn't seem to make us less likely to use them. The cognitive and emotional shortcuts honed over the course of tens of thousands of years of evolution are so automatic that we use them without even noticing whether they're helpful or not.

Part cognitive bias, part neurological quirk, part adaptive response to a simple world that doesn't exist anymore, they are "mindtraps." Perhaps the trickiest thing about these mindtraps is the way they combine to mislead us about the fact that we're in traps at all. Unwittingly stuck in a trap, we tend to believe we should simply try harder rather than try something else. We need help to find the traps and then escape from them.

In my research into leadership and complexity, I've found five of the most pernicious and pervasive of these mindtraps. They answer the question I am often asked: *What is the most important shift I need to make if I am going to lead well in complexity?* In this book, we will identify the mindtraps, look at the ways they've served us so far, and consider why they don't work so well anymore. We'll also learn some powerful keys to unlock the traps and escape to new possibilities. You'll see that

- ▶ We are trapped by simple stories.
- ▶ We are trapped by rightness.
- ▶ We are trapped by agreement.
- ▶ We are trapped by control.
- ▶ We are trapped by our ego.

Understanding new ways to notice and escape these mindtraps turns out to be a kind of super power

that allows you to see new opportunities, create new solutions, and move forward with more finesse and less angst. And these ideas will help you at work or at home—anywhere your life has gotten more complex.

It's not just that we are facing more complexity at work. There is more complexity in our lives outside work too. A hundred years ago, most leaders went to work knowing their wives were at home taking care of things, and the divide between work and home was significant. Now leaders are pumping breast milk on their lunch breaks and singing their kids to sleep before a video conference with team members on the other side of the world. That trend toward an unprecedented intersection of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity shows up at home too. There are more choices to make about how we live our lives, and thus fewer ready-made paths to follow. More of us spend more of our time making things up than ever before. This means that we need support coping with the mounting complexity at home as well as work. The bad news is that these mindtraps catch us at home too. The good news is that the ideas about how to escape them hold steady at home or at work, and whether you're leading a company or a family or a choir.

As the science and research improves, we learn more about ourselves and what humans do really well—and what we don't. There's this funny paradox, though, because much of what our sophisticated science—augmented by computers and machines that peer into our bodies and brains—tells us is about what we cannot change about ourselves, what we just get with the package of being human. "What's the point of that?" you might be thinking. "How could knowing that we cannot control something be a help to us? Doesn't that mean we should just give up?" Okay, admittedly, when I first started learning about the ways our biases and reflexes and irrationalities were unfixable, I wanted to go take a nap. After all,

I was wanting to polish us all up, make us shiny and new and ready to face all the complexities life has to offer, and what I discovered is that we're just not built that way. The complexity of the world requires that we understand the grays, that we resist black-and-white solutions, that we ask different questions about unexpected and tangential options. But alas, we humans are built to simplify and segment, and it goes against all of our natural pulls to take another person's perspective or to see a system in action. I would read cheerful books about uncovering and following your intuition, and inwardly I'd be screaming, "Nooooooo! Do not follow your intuition—it is broken beyond belief!" But, of course, that was simplistic too (because, as you see, I am as irrational and biased and simple-making as the rest of the human race).

Yet, as the behavioral economist Dan Ariely says, we humans know about our limitations in the physical realm, and we find ways—using machines and medicine and other supports—to overcome them. If we knew about our limitations in the way we make sense of the world and therefore act, we could figure out ways to overcome those limitations too. Behavioral economists know we need to understand what traps we might fall into as we make tricky financial decisions like saving for retirement or figuring out how much to pay for our

dream house. It's just as important to understand our leadership mindtraps and why they are not helpful to us as we lead in a complex world. So let's take the lessons we're learning from fields across the study of human thinking and action, and let's see how to identify the most common mindtraps—and sidestep around them.

None of the mindtraps catch us when the world is predictably marching along. In fact, they've probably been adaptive for most of our time on the planet—that's why they exist in the first place. Once useful shortcuts, now they turn out to be a problem when your world seems to be changing faster and becoming more interconnected and complex than it has been in the past.

See if any of these sound familiar:

### TRAPPED BY SIMPLE STORIES

Your desire for a simple story blinds you to a real one. One of the things that defines us as humans is our propensity for stories. We love to tell them, to hear them. They carry the answers to some of our most important and bewildering questions. They have bound together tribes, religions, societies. We love them so much that we string together stories with a sort of once-upon-a-time feel, with one thing leading naturally to the next. Looking back at something, we can tell a coherent story about it that makes it sound inevitable and neat,



and therein lies the rub. We don't notice how simple the story is that we are telling ourselves, and we don't notice the ways *the story itself shapes what we notice*. The problem is twofold: first, that past story wasn't so clean or inevitable while it was happening; and second, we try to use that same skill looking forward, which in fast-changing times you can't, because you can't tell which of the many, many possibilities will emerge. We made the past story simple in our memory, looking back, and now we imagine an equally simple plot line going forward. In both cases we're probably wrong. Leaders who put too much faith in their heroic tales of the past and project simplistic versions of the future can be alluring—and ruinous. To escape we need to find our way out of our simple stories and back into our complex real ones.

### TRAPPED BY RIGHTNESS

Just because it feels right doesn't mean it is right. We each look at the world and believe we see it as it is. In truth, we see it as we are, a gap that is as large as it is invisible. And because we believe in what we see, and we don't notice those things we don't see, we have a sense of our being right about most things most of the time. Sure, sometimes we are uncertain, and we notice that feeling, often with discomfort. It's when we are not uncomfortably uncertain that we tend to

assume we're right. "Wrongology" expert Kathryn Shultz calls this "error blindness" and writes, "As with dying, we recognize erring as something that happens to everyone, without feeling that it is either plausible or desirable that it will happen to us." When we are uncertain, we search around for understanding and we learn; when we know we're right, we are closed to new possibilities. When leaders believe they are right in a complex world, they become dangerous, because they ignore data that might show them they are wrong; they don't listen well to those around them; and they get trapped in a world they have created rather than the one that exists.

### TRAPPED BY AGREEMENT

Longing for alignment robs you of good ideas. For much of human history, we have needed to make snap judgments about our tribe. Are you with me or against me? If you're in my tribe, we need to be in relatively easy agreement in order to survive. In fact, connection is so important that our brains have developed so that we experience social pain and physical pain as nearly the same thing. This has been a significant gift; our ability to agree and together create communal outcomes has enabled much of what is great about us. Meanwhile, conflict has often had pretty dire and disruptive

<b>We are trapped by SIMPLE STORIES</b>	To escape we need to find our way out of our simple stories and back into our complex real ones. What data have we ignored in the simple cause and effect version?
<b>We are trapped by RIGHTNESS</b>	When leaders believe they are right in a complex world, they become dangerous, because they ignore data that might show them they are wrong; they don't listen well to those around them; and they get trapped in a world they have created rather than the one that exists.
<b>We are trapped by AGREEMENT</b>	With complexity, we need diversity of experience, approach, and ideas, and we need to learn how to harness conflict rather than push it away.
<b>We are trapped by CONTROL</b>	When we care about big, complex, intertwined issues, leadership requires the counterintuitive move of letting go of control in order to focus on creating the conditions for good things to happen—often with outcomes better than we had originally imagined.
<b>We are trapped by OUR EGO</b>	When we try to defend our egos rather than grow and change, we end up perfectly designed for a world that happened already, instead of growing better able to handle the world that is coming next.

consequences. Disagreement that leads to polarization has led to significant us-versus-them conflicts. In times that are uncertain and changing fast, though, too much agreement, like too much polarization, is a problem. Too much agreement, while pleasant, makes us follow a narrow path rather than expanding our solution space. It makes it harder to create and pursue the wide span of options that will leave us prepared for whatever the uncertain future demands. With complexity, we need diversity of experience, approach, and ideas, and we need to learn how to harness conflict rather than push it away.

### TRAPPED BY CONTROL

Trying to take charge strips you of influence. Humans are made happy by being in control. Leaders seek to keep their hands on budgets and outcomes and behaviors and are often rewarded for doing so (or seeming to do so). In fact, it's the feeling of being (and looking like) you're in control and that you've planned for all the contingencies that has long defined our image of leadership. This means that if we don't look or feel in control, we fear we aren't in fact leading anything—we're just letting life happen to us. In complex times, though, we cannot control what will happen next; there are too many interrelated parts. And because complex outcomes are hard to produce (or measure), people often exchange simplistic targets for the larger goals they are seeking. When we care about big, complex, intertwined issues, leadership requires the counterintuitive move of letting go of control in order to focus on creating the conditions for good things to happen—often with outcomes better than we had originally imagined.

### TRAPPED BY EGO

Shackled to who you are now, you can't reach for who you'll be next. Though we rarely admit it to ourselves

or others, we also spend quite a lot of our energy protecting our seemingly fragile egos. While humans have a natural drive toward change, we tend to believe that we have changed in the past and won't change so much in the future. This leads us to a strong and compelling reactive response to protect the person we think we are—in our eyes and in the eyes of others. Bob Kegan and Lisa Lahey call this protection “the single biggest cause of wasted resources in nearly every company today.” They explain that it comes from the natural tendency people have of “preserving their reputations, putting their best selves forward, and hiding their inadequacies from others and themselves.” When we try to defend our egos rather than grow and change, we end up perfectly designed for a world that happened already, instead of growing better able to handle the world that is coming next.

In each case, the first move to escaping the trap is to notice that the trap exists. The second, trickier move is to realize that you are in one. The next move? Finding the key to freedom.

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