



IT'S ALL ABOUT YOU

Step 1. Reveal Your Prevailing Context

Leaders Create Fields of Influence

Awareness of my leadership presence and its impact on others allows me to expand my influence and effectiveness.

Why REVEAL?

- Authentic expression
- Increased awareness
- Increased courage and vulnerability
- Enhanced community and partnership

Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood.

—Marie Curie

Knowing others is intelligence; Knowing yourself is true wisdom.

Mastering others is strength; Mastering yourself is true power.

—Tao Te Ching

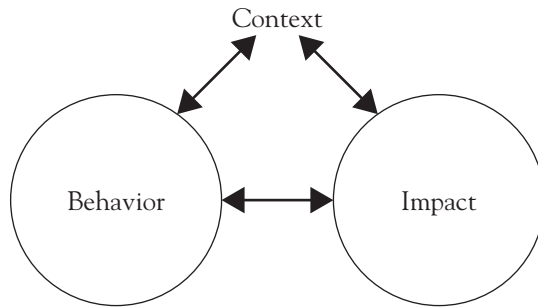
As a leader who aims to make a difference in the world, your most important job is to reveal and shift context, starting with your own. In this chapter, you will learn the fundamentals of revealing context (Step 1 in the five-step process) and gain an understanding of how to apply the practice of revealing and shifting contexts to your life. We'll go beyond an examination of your own factory-loaded operating system to explore how you can reveal and shift context in other individuals and even in organizations. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the people who come to me are either experiencing pain that is worth getting rid of or having a vision that is worth going for. That's what motivates them to break it all down and build it back up again.

The simplest way to think about revealing your context is to put all your beliefs about what is true in life on loudspeaker. Because our contexts are conclusions that exist for us as the truth, we don't question their validity. If I have a context that "I'm not good with numbers" I don't think of it as a context, I just operate from that belief system. It isn't until I say it out loud in front of someone else that I can be challenged as to its validity.

Your context is your presence, your belief system, your purpose. There is a set of behaviors that comes from that context as well as an impact produced by the overall system. *Revealing* is a process of looking inside to discover your unconscious beliefs and understand the interrelatedness of context, action, and impact.

Shifting is the act of changing or redesigning. When you shift context, you change your fundamental point of view about what is true. In other words, you trade your previous frame of reference for one that is more empowering or useful ... hence the phrase, "Trade up!"

Revealing and shifting context requires some heavy lifting (see Figure 1.1). It can be daunting and even anxiety inducing to consider moving the heavy boulders that cover the caves and tunnels that lead to your inner self. You may be reluctant to explore or expose

Figure 1.1 Reveal and Shift Context

the fundamental beliefs you hold; and it can be painful, upsetting, or even flabbergasting to see how those views affect your life and those who share the world with you. The tools you gain in this book will make that heavy lifting easier—you'll acquire levers that you can learn to apply with increasing agility whenever those boulders get in your way.

Awareness of your automatic context is critical if you want to understand how people experience your personality and your leadership. We work on revealing context because it is the key to authentic self-expression; it helps us become more courageous about what we believe in and more open (and vulnerable) with others in the service of building relationships, partnerships, and community.

You may already be cognizant of what you care about and what has meaning for you—but few of us have the level of self-awareness necessary to perceive how we affect others. Because we are trapped in our own conclusions, we assume that everyone sees the world the same way we do, and we can't understand how reality can be interpreted so differently by other people. Is it any surprise that our relationships contain a string of unintended consequences?

Most people who make a genuine and well-intended attempt to change how they come across to others work on something simple and manageable, like their way of communicating. But while changes to the way you talk and listen help significantly,

such changes are rarely sustainable. Beyond your words or facial expressions, it is your overall energy and your physical body that create the presence that impacts others at every moment. That energy derives out of your context—in other words, the “who you are being” in every encounter. As you will learn in this book, once you gain awareness of what your presence feels like to others, you can learn to modulate your power so that people receive you in a way that’s helpful rather than hurtful, blocked, or misinterpreted. Once you learn to master that awareness by internalizing it, the practice of revealing and shifting context becomes your new default setting, allowing you to create positive change and forward progress in all of your relationships, whenever you choose.

Leadership and Horses

Prepare yourself for an idea that might seem strange or even bizarre, but that will help illustrate the point that your “personal energy”—“your way of being”—as directed by your context has a real physical impact on others. In this section of the chapter, you’re going to see that a horse can not only lead you to water, it can even make you drink.

In my career, I have seen few methodologies for revealing context have as much impact as does the work of Ariana Strozzi-Heckler. Ariana, a pioneer in the field of equine education, created a body of work called “Leadership & Horses™,” whose primary goal is to give people a fresh, innovative way to see how they are perceived as leaders. Before you start running out of the barn, let me provide some context on the history of horses and humans as “training buddies.”

Humans and horses have worked together for a long time. In transportation, work, leisure, or entertainment, horses serve humans in exchange for food, shelter, and love. Horses don’t care about a person’s title or status, but they do insist on being led with a confident hand and they are inspired by clarity of purpose. As anyone who has tried to lead a horse knows, horses can act like enthusiastic performers

or resentful employees. The response that a horse offers the person in the lead comes across as a highly visible form of feedback.

Ariana explains the connection best. As she puts it, leadership is not the sole purvey of human beings; “it exists throughout the animal kingdom as a practical way for social animals to communicate, negotiate, and collectively contribute to the survival of the individual and the whole.” That fascinating observation tells us a lot about the reasons for leadership and the dynamics between those who lead and those who follow. Leadership is not a black-and-white case of command and control versus submit or resist; it is a subtle negotiation in the service of common goals, an interplay between the leader’s vision and influence and the follower’s level of commitment and contribution.

Horses, like humans, are natural belongers, intuitively sensitive to the dynamics of the group (or herd), ready and willing to make a contribution on behalf of anyone who demonstrates the capacity for providing clear direction. Because horses and humans have worked together for so many centuries, there is a special bond between us, one that helps amplify the sometimes invisible dynamics between leader and follower. As Ariana notes, the word *manage* comes from a Latin root meaning “to direct or train a horse.” When a horse and human come together, the horse is super-sensitive to the relationship that gets established, focusing not on language—the strength of so many leaders—but on more subtle clues about how the leader is directing her energy, holding her body, and making her presence and intentions felt. As Ariana says, horses “listen to energy, intention, direction. They don’t listen to stories.” When the horse responds to the person holding the reins, it is not judging or criticizing the leader but rather evaluating the degree to which the person is in charge, the clarity of her goals, and the gap between what she says and what she is really communicating.

In a group setting, when I want to vividly demonstrate the very real influence a person’s context has on her life, we spend some time at a ranch participating in equine-guided education. Each leader is asked to stand before the group of participants, hold the

horse halter, and articulate what they are committed to as a leader. Then the leader proceeds to walk the horse around the corral, giving it three simple commands: walk, trot, and stop. What the leader will learn about herself in a 7- to 10-minute exercise will last a lifetime. Unlike humans, horses are not impressed by educational pedigree, financial wealth, or other common forms of stature. The horse is reading the leader's "way of being" and reacting to whether or not the leader is a strong, reliable leader who knows where she is going, will keep the horse safe if danger should arise, and will command respect throughout the duration of the exercise.

Even experienced horse lovers sometimes balk at this dubious proposition. What can horses teach us about our inner selves, let alone about our approach to leadership? And yet, everyone who has shared the experience with us expresses amazement at how clearly the horse provides feedback about the person leading it around the ring. It's one thing to have another person tell you that you are indecisive, pushy, frantic, passive, obsessively driven, dreamy, coldly pragmatic, or full of B.S. When a horse gives you the same message, in full view of witnesses, the truth is hard to ignore or repress. For many, it's the first epiphany on the road to a fundamental shift in being.

Some leaders can't get the horse to pick up the pace. Others can't get the horse to go in the direction they want. Some can metaphorically lead the horse to water, others can't make the horse drink. I've seen horses refuse to budge while the leader gets more and more flustered. I've seen horses race uncontrollably around the ring while the "leader" runs along behind. I've seen a horse listen to a leader's profound and meaningful statement of purpose and immediately poop, then do it again just as promptly the next time the leader speaks up. It's not a coincidence or an amazing feat of mass psychological transference—instead, the horse is surfacing and exposing the energy that everyone else feels in that leader's presence but can't consciously articulate. When you see how the horse reacts, you nod and think, "That's exactly how I feel, too, even though I didn't recognize it." For the leader, when the impact of her presence is revealed, that awareness can catalyze some deep and profound

self-assessment. It can be uncomfortable at first, but it is immensely rewarding and worthwhile. It's the beginning of a journey, not an inquisition.

Learning how to reveal context is the critical step forward. Context influences everything. There is abundant scientific, sociological, and economic evidence that events (behaviors) and information (impact) change with changes in the environment (context). Children who are raised in loving environments have greater self-esteem, which tends to produce different behaviors and results than children raised in abusive environments. Companies that undergo reorganizations or major process redesigns like Total Quality Management or Six Sigma quickly revert to the old way of doing things if the environment or culture of the organization does not shift in context. Take an executive out of an organization, work on changing her, and put her back in the same organization, and the changes will fail to hold—or the executive will quit the organization. The same goes for a partner in a relationship. Without understanding the context we operate from, meaningful change doesn't have a chance.

When the people I work with become aware of their own contexts, the knowledge has a dramatic impact on their lives. You might think that top executives and high-energy entrepreneurs—women of significant education, great social standing, and tremendous accomplishment, successfully juggling partnerships, marriages, and children as well as careers, employees, and organizations—would be confident and clear of purpose all of the time. But every human being struggles with the same basic problem: each of us is trapped inside our own experiences, a condition that filters what we see and believe to be true and even possible. Complicating matters, the strengths that got us where we are today can severely hamper, blind, or block us going forward. It's not fair that we need to learn new skills and develop new strengths despite everything we've overcome or accomplished already. But it is within our capacity to do so, and it's up to us to make the effort when the outcomes really matter.

Work Hard, Be Nice

Sally Crawford is one of the leaders who experienced a revelation about her own context with Ariana Strozzi at the ranch. A highly successful chief executive officer, Sally has consistently put in hundred-hour weeks in building up a multimillion-dollar business she founded in her Chicago basement twenty-five years ago. Despite her forceful energy and passion, Sally does not resemble the stereotype of the hard-driven entrepreneur who demands the maximum from everyone around her. In fact, you couldn't meet a nicer, more articulate and caring person. She has a gentle sense of humor, great self-awareness, and empathy for others. Her high-tech consulting firm is one of the top women-owned businesses in Silicon Valley, serving a host of prestigious global clients. She has won awards and recognition, and she has taken on important leadership roles in helping other women in the technology field. What could be wrong with this picture?

In her unofficial biography, Sally says, "I have days when I long to bag groceries at Whole Foods, when the toughest decision I have to make is, paper or plastic?" When we met in our group, Sally admitted that in twenty years she hadn't taken off a single Thanksgiving holiday. Even in a room full of overachievers, this was a shock, and also a moment of guilty recognition. Everyone in an executive or leadership position knows that the demands of the job often go hand in hand with some kind of intense inner motivation, creating a leak among work, family, and me-time. Nevertheless, Sally's level of self-sacrifice was extreme.

Sally told us she had her wake-up call a few months before our gathering. She was working in her office over the Christmas holiday, clearing some paperwork away to get ready for the new year, when she discovered a yellowed note with a list of goals. Holding the note brought back a lot of memories. She'd made it a long time ago, only four years after founding her company. She'd always been a goal-oriented person. Looking at the list, she realized she had met all of the goals on the page except for the one that said,

“Work less hard.” She couldn’t help but sit there in amazement and wonder, “Why is this goal so elusive?”

The question brought with it some hard feelings. Her company had been extraordinarily successful. It had outlasted all its original peers. It had reinvented its business several times over, as was necessary in the high technology industry. Since 1982 they’d experienced two recessions, two market crashes, two wars, and four presidents. Despite it all, Crawford & Associates International had only downsized twice. In a near-superhuman exhibition of strength, resilience, and perseverance, Sally had put the company on her back repeatedly and had gotten everyone through the tough times and guided them through the good times. But after twenty years, she was coming to the realization that the effort wasn’t sustainable anymore, for herself or for the organization. Sally was feeling something she’d never experienced during all those hundred-hour weeks and missed Thanksgivings: she was starting to feel resentful.

Sally understood that the impulse to do the heavy lifting and the hard pulling was deeply ingrained in her personality. “Like any type A person,” she said, “you think you can do it by yourself. A leader has a helium-filled hand. It’s always being raised into the air whenever something needs to be done.” Unable to refuse a challenge or problem, Sally found her attitude was taking a toll. She was feeling, as she put it, like the jailer and the jailee—simultaneously in charge, but also imprisoned; the boss, but also the servant. Her days were a constant scramble to stay on top of everything that was going on, catch mistakes, help the business, and give others everything they needed to feel committed and happy. I’ve seen that approach and attitude toward leadership many times before, particularly among women leaders. Although Sally would never use these words, I call it being “the big Mother in the sky.”

At Ariana’s ranch, when Sally had her turn with the horse, the “presence” she brought to work became readily apparent. Weighing less than 100 pounds, Sally seemed tiny next to the huge beast. Holding it by the reins, she couldn’t get it to move, so she

started stroking it, touching it, petting it, all while saying pleasant things to it. To those of us watching, the message was clear. Sally wasn't able to lead the horse around the ring, so she put all of her emotional energy into being nice to it.

No dummy, Sally immediately understood the significance of this approach. It was such a clear analogy to what she did at her organization, it wasn't even funny. Over the ensuing days, she began to create more clarity around that epiphany. She realized that "carrying people" was something she *did*, not something she was *forced* to do. Most of her people were extremely hard working and extremely nice—just like her. But the organization paid a price for this. Sally was willing, for example, to employ some people who were not pulling their own weight. It wasn't their fault; it was hers. They were good people, but they weren't suited for the job. She was hanging on to them too long, or failing to encourage or empower them in ways that would allow them to carry more of the load. Instead of letting them go, Sally put all of her energy into making payroll to keep the organization's roof over everyone's head. It was not good for the organization, and it was certainly not good for Sally. Even more enlightening, Sally realized that her "carrying people" approach was not good for those she was helping along. There's an expression in the horse world: "leading a horse straight to the glue factory." It's a brutal acknowledgment that horses are working animals with upkeep that's too costly to justify if the horse is not pulling its weight. If you fail to give a horse a meaningful job—whether that's winning the Kentucky Derby or pulling a plow—you're not doing the horse any favor; instead, you're leading it to the glue factory. Sally was doing the same thing with some of her people, and that realization hit her hard. Sally ended up reorganizing the company in a way that relieved those burdens. It was not easy to let people go, but it was the right thing to do for the business.

Over the ensuing days of the program, Sally worked hard to put all of these revelations into words. She came to understand her default context: "In order to survive I must work extremely hard and be extremely nice." Once articulated, it wasn't difficult for her to figure out where that context came from. She's a twin but

was never the equal. As the smaller, more sickly, and unexpected child, she had to fight hard to be healthy, and then she had to keep fighting as she grew up. For example, her sister was a naturally gifted student who got all A's throughout school. Sally got C's until she kicked into gear and worked harder, obtaining straight A's in college except for a single B. As for being extremely nice, her home life growing up was no bed of roses. She was always the peacemaker, the conciliator, the one making things better for everyone else. She learned strategies for helping people get along while avoiding conflict.

Was there anything so wrong with Sally's approach to life? In fact, working hard and being nice had served her extremely well and gotten her far; it was a terrific way of dealing with the world, filled with optimism and kindness, that had enriched her personally while helping others as well. She'd accomplished a lot, made a difference in many people's lives, and her company was very successful. But by the time she saw the list of goals from twenty years before and read the unchecked item, "Work less hard," she knew inside that her approach was no longer sustainable. Being indispensable to others gets old after twenty or more years. She'd been there and done that, and she wanted a change while still remaining committed to her organization and her people.

To shift her context, Sally tried to think about work in a different way, hoping to prove to herself that it didn't always have to be so hard. She wanted to enjoy her days more and have more space in them. Her initial changes in that regard were simple but very effective. She resolved to begin each day with a hike and end each day with yoga. She'd been practicing yoga for thirteen years, but she still found it difficult to be "present" while holding a pose rather than thinking about a hundred other things. That multitasking mind-set was symptomatic of the way she operated in general, always doing more than one thing at once, checking e-mails while talking on the cell phone, going over papers while riding in the back of a taxi. She made a deliberate effort going forward to center herself and be in the moment, practicing the art of giving her full attention to the person or task in front of her.

Sally knew that any personal change she made could not take place in a vacuum. As the leader of her company, she'd created a culture of people who were also very hard working and very nice. Because they were in the consulting business, it was easy to bend over backward for every client, take on more than was humanly possible, overpromise and then work like the devil to deliver on those promises while exceeding expectations. Her organization, in order to be sustainable, needed to develop a sense of self-respect and self-appreciation that would allow each person working there to set boundaries and avoid going overboard with clients all the time. In other words, everyone in her company had to learn to shift context, too. They needed to understand that a day doesn't have to be totally filled up—that it's okay to have some white space in life, that you can still feel satisfied when work is not brutal, taxing, and exhausting.

The shift was a challenge for all involved. The work-hard-be-nice context was incredibly ingrained in Sally and her organization. She was used to relying on that approach to get through tough projects. She realized that she needed to replace her old context with one that was equally compelling and useful. That's when she understood she didn't yet have a clear vision about what she wanted to accomplish, and the lack of that vision was an obstacle going forward. She came back to us for more work, focusing on learning the power of holding a clear vision. This time, standing with the horse, she became very present and mindful of what she wanted to do. Clicking twice, she began walking forward, reins in hand. The horse stayed with her shoulder to shoulder all the way around the corral. It was a remarkable change from her previous experience, one that confirmed how important it was for her to work on being deliberate and clear of purpose.

The Power of Shifting Others' Contexts

Sally formulated her new vision and brought it back to work. As a leader, she would now be extremely focused on building organizational capability—in terms of systems, people, processes,

and strategy—in order to make the organization more sustainable. In order to accomplish that vision—as she learned with the horse—she would need to be clear in her direction at all times. Sally had an old habit of openly waffling and debating decisions, bringing a wide array of people into the leadership conversation. Going forward, she worked diligently to be more mindful and focused about her vision and direction in every interaction, presenting her employees with clear leadership decisions. She noticed her people relaxing as a result and saw that they required less hand-holding and cajoling. It was tangible evidence that supported her new context and helped make those efforts more sustainable for everyone in turn.

Soon, an opportunity to solidify the break with old patterns and exert new leadership arose. Sally's team was working with a client on a big project. On the client's side, there were two leaders in charge, creating a series of crossed signals and lost time. Eventually, after one of the leaders left, the way forward seemed easier. Sally was elated. "Finally," she thought, "we've got clear line of sight and clear direction. It's time to knock this one out of the park." But when she checked in with her team, she found them devastated. They were stuck on the fact that they only had two weeks left to do the work.

If Sally had not undergone her training in context shifting, she might have pushed and pulled, petted and cheered her people to no effect, before doing the brunt of the work herself. Instead, she was able to recognize the context the group was operating in—a collective belief that the situation was hopeless, without enough time to pull a winning solution together—and concentrate on changing that view. She focused on her team leader first, a young woman with tremendous leadership potential. Sally helped the team leader look at the situation in a different way. The young woman came to view the circumstances not as a hopeless and imminent failure, but as an opportunity to rally her own team. In turn, the team leader helped the other members of the team understand that their belief the project was hopeless was not a prophecy written in stone, but a preformed conclusion limiting their chances for success.

To complicate matters, the deadline fell on the Tuesday after a holiday weekend. Everyone wanted to be home with their families. The team leader rallied the team and got them to see that it was possible and worthwhile to accomplish their goal, while acknowledging openly that it was just as important to meet family and holiday obligations. They would each take turns at home, in accordance with their individual situations, coming up with a balance or trade-off that everyone felt comfortable with. For her part, Sally stayed in the background, resisting the instinct to jump in, knowing it was important to be present but to not be the one pulling the load. She took the opportunity to be a role model more than a leader, using humor to improve everyone's spirits, and taking her own time off that Friday to bake cupcakes for her children. Likewise, everyone else managed to fit in family time with work time too.

In the end, the project was such a tremendous success that the client organization gave the team a standing ovation. Just as important, the team saw that family time was valued, even during a crisis, and that getting through a tough assignment could be enjoyable rather than exhausting and draining. It was an episode that showed a culture change was taking hold, and everyone was achieving a more sustainable way of working.

Shifting Team Contexts

Let me give you two examples of how this can happen in a team environment. I was a professional softball player. When my daughter was seven, I was asked to coach her Peppermint Patty team. If you've ever seen seven-year-old girls engaging in competitive team sports for the first time, you can imagine the challenge I was in for. We started off slowly, doing drills and exercises, practicing fly balls and grounders. By the third day, I was ready to teach them how to bat. I lined up each girl at home plate, showed them the proper stance, got them to hold the bat on the shoulder, and taught them how to swing. Then I told the girls that I was going to toss a soft squishy ball lightly toward the plate, and asked them to hit the ball with the bat when it got close.

The first girl was ready. I gave the ball a baby toss from 8 feet away. When the ball neared the girl she screeched and ducked. I didn't want to scare her, so we went on to the next girl. I gave the ball a gentle baby toss. The second girl screeched and ducked. I knew then it was going to be a long practice.

Obviously, nothing I could say or teach them about holding the bat or keeping their eye on the ball would produce nicely hit singles. Being in the context-shifting business, however, I knew that focusing on behaviors or impact was not the answer. I had to step back and change their context first.

To me, that context was clear. An object tossed their way was something to be feared, more like a bullet than like a ball. So I went to the trunk of my car and retrieved a package of whiteboard markers. Then, I drew a different color smiley face on each panel of the soft squishy baseball. When I was done, I told the girls that we were going to stop playing "hit the ball." This time, I wanted them to stand in the box without the bat and name the color of the smiley face that went by when the ball passed them. The first girl stood at the ready, I tossed the ball, and she called out, "Blue!" This was a lot more fun. Each girl got into line for her turn, squealing out the colors. Next, I asked them to try the game again, but this time with the bat on their shoulder. Again, they were able to yell out the colors as the ball went by. Finally, on our last turn, I asked them to continue to watch for the color of the smiley face but also reach out with the bat and touch the ball as it went by.

Over and over, the tossed balls came back to me, hit by the bat. We played our first game the following Tuesday, and beat the other team 29–0. As a leader, the only thing I did was shift the girls' context from baseball as speeding bullet to baseball as floating beach ball.

I had a similar experience in the business world working with a Gillette subsidiary in Belmont, California. Between 1997 and 2000, nearly forty women in the Oral-B Laboratories participated in our Women Leading Change program. At that time, Oral-B was experimenting with rapid new product development processes and dedicated project teams. Using the leadership skill

of context shifting, those forty women led the development of the CrossAction toothbrush.

The CrossAction toothbrush was an outstanding example of breakthrough in product design, development, and manufacturing; clinical methods development; claim support results; consumer evaluation methods; and common effort in cross-functional teaming. The product has been successful in the marketplace and has won numerous design and packaging awards. The breakthrough was based on the questioning of a simple conclusion. It was always thought that toothbrush bristles had to go straight up and down to remove plaque. As a result, every company in the industry produced toothbrushes that only gained incremental improvement, decade after decade. The CrossAction toothbrush not only revolutionized plaque removal but surfaced additional limiting conclusions about dental floss, mouthwash, and even how to develop a mentoring program managed by employees.

Once you pull the string of the most secure conclusions you hold, you will be amazed at what gets revealed.

Not Smart-Pretty-Good Enough

Jeanie Bunker is another example of someone with an incredible track record of success and accomplishment but marred for a long time by secret feelings of inadequacy. From the outside, you would never imagine any insecurity. Jeanie is a force of nature. She's held top executive jobs at E*Trade and Yahoo. She talks quickly and with an intelligence and energy that can be exhausting, as though life in her orbit is a constant whirlwind of activity. We first met when she attended a short workshop I gave called "Leading Through Influence." Jeanie was a clear mover and shaker among the attendees, a status that stood out to everyone but her.

Jeanie had signed up because she'd reached a level in the hierarchy of her global organization where she was working with many business leaders from across functions but was uncertain how to

manage people she had no formal authority over. Jeanie was in charge of the marketing budget during the planning cycle and her job was to decide which general manager (GM) got what in terms of marketing resources. As you can imagine this was not a conflict- or stress-free position to be in. While Jeanie needed to consider marketing from a strategic organizational perspective, every GM pushed hard for her own needs.

“It was a messy communication process,” Jeanie recalls. “People were trying to push and threaten me into doing things, and I felt like I was not in control, and not strong enough to stand up to everybody. I was losing my balance. I was completely exhausted.” Complicating matters, she got no support from senior management, who were just as lost in terms of figuring out how to deal with the complexity of managing resources in a booming organization. But Jeanie applied the salt in the wound herself. She hadn’t had the time to position herself strategically within her own group to share the workload with her direct reports. As a result, she ended up doing all the heavy lifting alone. “I was meeting for nine to ten hours a day. Every hour was booked with someone who had a heated, high-pressure, urgent need.”

In our workshop, Jeanie picked up some helpful tips and tools. Most important, she learned the strategy of listening carefully to the concerns of her business partners. “I was coming to them overloaded with my problems, and telling them what to do.” Rather than alleviating the stressful circumstances, Jeanie was feeding the fire. We helped Jeanie learn to slow down and make the effort to determine where her own concerns and her business partners’ concerns overlapped, as a way of finding a connection in terms of commitment and passion.

Jeanie recalls how well this strategy worked with one GM. Before the influencing workshop, Jan, who was a close friend of Jeanie’s, met with Jeanie to demand additional resources from the central budget pool. Jeanie had to deny the request because Jan’s business was not a strategic priority of the firm. The interaction was heated and both women were under intense pressure. Jan left the meeting

feeling, according to Jeanie, “like I had dumped on her, and wrecked her business.” After the influencing workshop, Jeanie called Jan to talk again about the situation. This time, Jeanie explained the strategic priorities of the firm and promised that if she had any money left over once those needs were met, Jan could have her request. Jan’s reaction was completely different from before. She felt included in the conversation, and she was impressed by the amount of money the firm was investing in its vision. She left feeling that she could support Jeanie because she knew there was a solid rationale behind the decision-making process. Two years later, when Jan was heading a new strategic business, she showed up in Jeanie’s office again. Their relationship was on great terms, and they had an exciting discussion of how Jeanie could support Jan’s venture with resources.

Through an important change in Jeanie’s behavior, she had achieved a much better outcome. This was a good thing, but ironically, Jeanie’s new success at partnering boosted her reputation and got her a fast promotion to vice president with additional responsibilities. Even though she was now a better communicator, she still felt out of control. Her energy output was like a fire hose she could barely hang on to.

Weary from the unrelenting stress of her job and curious about the possibilities of context shifting, Jeanie came back for some deeper work. Used to a frenzy of activity, she found the slow pace of the apparently agenda-less first day almost impossible to stand. Yet the role plays and the exchange of stories with other executives triggered powerful emotions within her. At night, she was unable to sleep, her brain racing, wondering, “Why do I operate the way I operate? Where does it come from? Why am I being insecure in this workshop? What’s going on?”

Jeanie understood that each activity of the day had placed her in a stressful situation that stimulated her fight-or-flight response. The high-energy version of her that kept showing up in the room as a result wasn’t out of character, it was the deepest part of her, put on loudspeaker for everyone to hear. When she worked with the horses later that day, Jeanie saw her presence amplified again.

While the horse didn't move for some people, it raced around the corral for Jeanie. There was no control or direction, just boundless activity, feeding off Jeanie's own barely containable energy.

Soon, she began to put words to the revelations. "I found out I am a doer," she said. "I have that 'I get shit done' mentality." The problem was that she couldn't modulate her energy level. "It was scary. For somebody who is supposed to be leading a team, it was amazing how much stuff I was doing. After the influencing workshop, I was having better quality conversations, but I was still having hundreds of them, micromanaging everywhere, taking care of everybody."

During the context-shifting workshop, Jeanie started to "excavate her brain," as she put it. "I started to uncover subconscious things that drive me and make me behave the way I do. I realized that while I always think I am choosing how to act, I'm actually on autopilot. Add a little stress to my day, and whatever is habit shows up." Those habits were taking their toll, Jeanie noted in describing her life. "You do not exercise, you do not get adrenalin reduction, you do not get oxygen. You go home late and everybody is mad at you. You go to bed and wake up at 4 A.M. because there are three e-mails you should have sent. The brain of an executive women is on such hyperdrive that there is no rest, and no chance to reengage."

Everywhere Jeanie looked, she saw examples of how her way of being was influencing her life. It felt as though she was standing in a hall of mirrors, staring at her own face at every compass point, unable to find a way out. But once she contemplated her own behaviors, Jeanie recognized where they came from and was quickly able to put words to them. "I started to hear myself," she said. "I'm one of five children, I'm learning disabled, and I have an insatiable critic as a father and an alcoholic narcissistic mom. What did I come out of that with? The understanding that I am not smart enough, not pretty enough, and not good enough at anything."

Naturally, Jeanie has always been relentlessly driven. Despite her perceived limitations, she obtained a Masters in International Finance from Georgetown University. In her career, each job she's

taken has been an upgrade in responsibility and power. Along the way, her father criticized her career moves as dead ends and wastes of time. When she entered a new firm with twice the pay and responsibility, he questioned the move because her title was below the one she'd held at her previous firm. When she quickly made senior vice president, he said, "I guess you were going to catch up at some point." It never ceases to amaze me how much impact a parent's approval can continue to have over a child well into maturity.

In our workshop, Jeanie began to peel back the layers. Like the other executives, she had introduced herself with her happy story—the position of power and accomplishment, the loving relationship, the two wonderful children. But after doing some work on revealing context, she was able to tell the real story. "I'm freaking out," she said. "I feel out of control. My family is angry at me because I'm never around, and I'm doing the work for the money." Her long-standing context had gotten her far, but at what cost? She was always trying to be smarter, more collected, the one with all the answers. It didn't feel good, it wasn't healthy, and it wasn't serving her family or her life the way she wanted.

Jeanie knew she wanted to change, and very quickly an objective came to mind. Even though overpowering energy had always defined her life, she'd also been blessed with an amazing knack for having good things happen magically. It was a quality she recognized in her son. "We call him serendipity boy. He shows up somewhere and has an expectation that something is going to happen—and it happens. And I've realized I have the same thing. It's this sense of connecting all the dots magically, and seeing things converge at the right time and place. That's another thing people like about me and why they like to work with me—I can ask a few questions and we come up with the magical nonlinear solution." She wanted to learn how to draw on that positive capability more deliberately. It became her new context—a trade-up from "Not good enough and never going to get there" to "I bring magic and passion to make dreams come true."

How to get there? She knew she needed to do less and become more strategic about her efforts in order to give herself the time to float and think. Accomplishing that required getting her partner, her family, and—most important—her administrative assistant aligned to her new goal. She asked her admin for help in not allowing her to overschedule her day. She blocked out time for hikes before work and for thinking during the morning. She no longer scheduled meetings after five. Her admin was in shock, since Jeanie typically scheduled every hour of the week, but she also loved being able to play a strategic role on Jeanie's behalf and helped Jeanie be more efficient about preparing for meetings. Her partner helped Jeanie stick to her new goals, establishing an expectation that Jeanie would now be home at a reasonable hour. Jeanie slowed down. She stopped checking e-mails on Saturdays and took Sundays off. She allowed the serendipity to seep into her life.

Leading the Next Context Shift

Revealing context is only the first stage in a larger game—in a way, it's the point at which the work begins. For instance, despite her best efforts and the strong support of those around her, Jeanie began to find it hard to keep her new context going. Within a few months, she had doubts as to whether “creating magic” was the right metaphor for her life, and she continued to have trouble modulating her energy. Sometimes it was working, on other days she felt very disconnected. Eventually, she realized that she was doing the work of context shifting solely in her brain. She needed to go deeper still, and focus on rooting those changes in her physical body in order to help them take hold. We talk about that kind of work in later chapters.

This work is important for anyone, but it is especially critical for leaders. I define *leadership* as the ability to speak, listen, and evoke action on behalf of a compelling future. Leadership, by its very nature, has change as its goal, whether that change is focused on the individual, the organization, or the community. There's no

need for anyone to lead if your group remains headed in the same direction at the same speed. Real leadership gets called upon when you are moving from a state or condition that is no longer acceptable to a future that is new, exciting, and necessary.

As a leader, your job is to illuminate all the conscious or unconscious beliefs, myths, assumptions, and preconceptions that form your own conclusions and the conclusions of the people around you. From there, your job is to jettison conclusions that are limiting, and see that new contexts take root that will allow you and your group, organization, or community to grow. Your ability to see and invent conclusions that empower yourself, your team, or your organization determines what kind of future becomes available. If that ability is limited, it will limit the scope of what can be achieved, putting a lid on the creativity, energy, and enthusiasm of others. When that ability has been honed and exercised, it can be inspiring in ways even the leader can't anticipate.

What's going to happen on your shift? You are 100 percent responsible no matter what. It is up to you to master the art of revealing and shifting context, starting with your own.

Putting It into Words: Cracking the Code

Nothing about Sally Crawford's work-hard-be-nice context surprised her, and yet she'd never put it into words before; as a result, she'd never thought about it consciously. Once she revealed and articulated that context, she was amazed to realize how great a hold it had over her life. I've seen this kind of revelation again and again. We think we are rational beings, more or less in control of the way we come across. But in the ruckus of the day to day, we don't recognize that our attitudes and responses to events and people are based largely on the deeply ingrained way we see the world. If we search for the source of that belief system, we notice how consistently the strata run over time, often all the way to childhood, formed by the emotional pressures of our families and early experiences.

Revealing Context Is All in the Language You Use

To articulate Sally's context, she first put it into words. The secret to effectively revealing your context is to capture it in the form it typically occurs in your head. In other words, simplify it into a one-sentence motto that describes how you operate on a daily basis. Here's how you can do this for yourself. A contextual phrase often has an "expression" and a "tail." The expression is that aspect of the truth that you are more willing to say out loud. The tail points to the feeling or impression you unwittingly leave other people with—the unintended impact you have. A "bridge word" combines your context to its tail in such a way that it helps you understand the connection between how you are being and how you impact others. Use Table 1.1 to explore versions of your prevailing context. Know that it might not be pretty! Not every default context follows this format, but it's a good place to start.

Examples:

I am self-sufficient . . . *because* (I don't trust people).

I have high standards . . . *therefore* (I am better than you).

I am a master problem solver . . . *so* (you will need me to get anything done).

Table 1.1 Context, Bridge Word, and Tail

<i>Context</i>	<i>Bridge Word</i>	<i>Tail</i>
_____	but	_____
_____	so	_____
_____	and	_____
_____	because	_____
_____	in order to	_____
_____	therefore	_____

Although this can look simple on paper, getting to the essence of your contextual expression and its tail can be a challenge. Before your context gets articulated, it remains abstract and elusive, a force you don't even really know exists. I suggest, therefore, that you think about your context as a kind of genetic code that can be cracked by identifying its components. Rather than a double helix and strands of intertwined molecules, the context code is based on a dynamic system of three dimensions: (1) your presence, or "who you be" with others, which produces (2) your actions and (3) your impact. Figures 1.2 and 1.3 illustrate this.

We can see signs or evidence of your context by looking at the two circles of actions and impact in Figure 1.3. For example, sometimes the impact we have on others is desirable, and other times we produce unintended impact. There are times when I want to impact my daughter by convincing her to get her homework done in advance of the deadline. Obviously I am a conscientious parent and hope to instill a good educational work ethic in her. Instead it is often the case that I produce annoyance and withdrawal from her. While that was not my intention, it was still a clear impact that I produced. I like to say that "if it's happening on your shift, then you've got something to do with it!"

Impact arises from action, which is represented by the left-hand circle. Action can take the form of behaviors, activities,

Figure 1.2 Presence

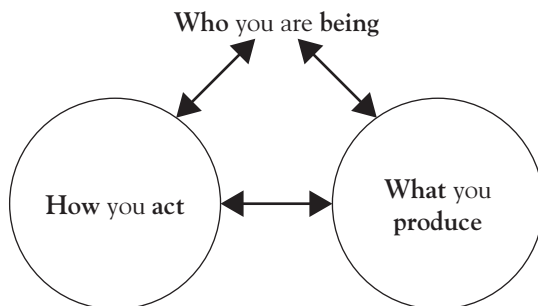
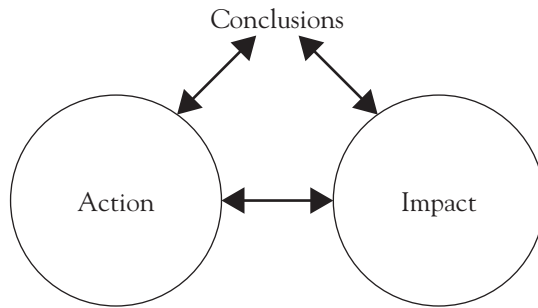


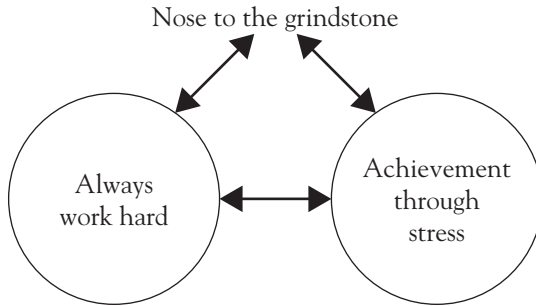
Figure 1.3 The DNA of Context Shifting

speaking, listening, and so on. In the example with my daughter, my actions were twofold. I said, “Chelsea, since you have some free time you should get your term paper done before it is due on Tuesday.” Additionally, I rested my hands on my hips as I was talking and smiling. Seems pretty straightforward and well intentioned, right? Unfortunately I wasn’t successful in producing the impact that I wanted. She barked at me to let her run her own life and promptly shut her bedroom door.

This unintended outcome can be explained via the third part of the figure: conclusions. Remember my context shift in the Introduction? My original context was centered in hard work and 100 percent application to achieve goals, and this point of view was like a physical force getting in the way of my best intentions with Chelsea.

“I’ll never get anywhere in life without my nose to the grindstone” was a deeply embedded conclusion I’d chosen to believe in (see Figure 1.4). In my world, that meant if you didn’t work hard on your term paper, you didn’t get anywhere. It wasn’t until I was able to surface that context that I could see that not everyone shared my view of reality. My desire to shift out of that context arose because I was unhappy with the impact my actions were causing in my life and in the lives of people around me.

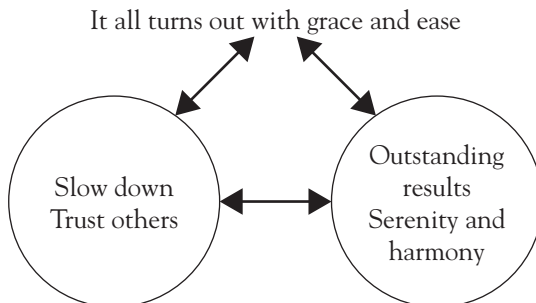
Now, let’s look at how a trade-up in context affected my behavior and impact. When I came up with the conclusion,

Figure 1.4 Nose to the Grindstone

“It all turns out with grace and ease,” I recognized an environment my body and spirit could settle into (see Figure 1.5). That doesn’t mean it was easy to develop my new behaviors. I needed to rely on the discipline of practice, the support of others, and an openness to feedback in order to make it. But having established the right environment or context for my new behaviors, I was able to help them grow and ultimately flourish.

Sally Crawford’s context shift redesigned her life and organization. When she traded up from “work hard, be nice” to a context that supported her desire for more sustainable leadership, she created an environment in which new behaviors could take root.

Most people, when they try to undergo personal change, focus solely on impact or action because these are more concrete manifestations of context. In my work, we go backward from

Figure 1.5 It All Turns Out with Grace and Ease

impact and action to change context, because then we can transform the entire system.

For the Sake of What?

Why should you want to change your context? We all need a motivation for engaging in deep personal work. I ask each person, “For the sake of what do you reveal?” I’m looking to create the stirrings of a vision, to unearth the passion that is too often buried beneath a lifetime of dead-end conclusions. Analyzing your context just to understand it would not be an empty exercise, but if you lacked significant motivation or a compelling desire to change, I doubt whether you would have the time, energy, or focus necessary to dig deep and stay the course. Most people are motivated because there is some compelling future they want to achieve or some point of pain they want to relieve. The more insistent those needs are, the more likely it is the person will follow through.

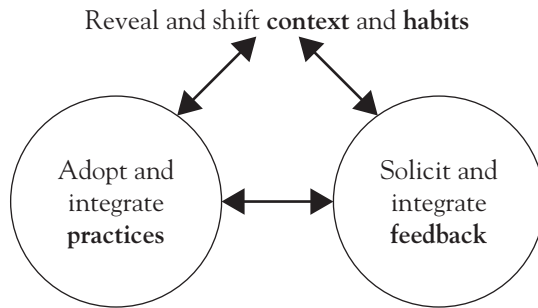
What context are you operating from? It’s difficult to determine without knowing how to follow the right clues. The impetus for beginning your investigation usually arises out of your behavior or the impact you have in the world. If you don’t see the behavior or impact you want, then you work backward from there to change your context, because then you can change everything. You may be concerned about an undesired or unintended impact, or you may be pursuing a desired impact. For example, you may wish to improve a stale relationship with your spouse, or you may envision your marketing team doubling its numbers. In either case, the desire for a different impact drives your efforts at context shifting. Likewise, you can begin your quest because you are motivated by the need to change an undesirable behavior or the need to put in place a behavior you want to include in your personal arsenal. You may wish, for example, that you didn’t always frustrate your son, or you may wish that you could be a more passionate public speaker. The desire for a

different behavior will lead to the source of that behavior: the context from which you are operating.

Giving an authentic voice to that context is critical. We have a tendency, especially when we're talking out loud, to neutralize a context statement by talking about it in the third person or in a way that downplays the emotional impact. For example, one woman I worked with described her context as being one of low self-esteem. I knew, from having listened to her talk about her life, that "low self-esteem" didn't quite cut it. When she came back, later that day, with a new way of articulating her context, the statement really hit home. "I'm a piece of crap," she said. We both understood that the wrenching power of that statement was rooted in its honesty and echoed the way her default setting sounded in her own head all of the time. "I'm a piece of crap" was the reality she lived with every day, the conclusions that served as her operating system in just about every interaction. Articulating it so harshly gave her access to a deep and difficult understanding about her upbringing and relationships; and it helped immeasurably in her motivation to trade up to something worthy of her and the gifts she regularly brings to the world.

Context is a constant connection between "being" and "truth," or who you are, how you come across, and what reality surrounds you. Understanding context requires great perception and vigilant self-awareness. Creating a new context can be rife with challenges. You can't easily divorce what you believe from how you want it to be. But we are language animals, and we can analyze, break down, and rebuild our contexts through metaphor. We are also social animals, and it should not be forgotten that building a new context needs to be done in the company of those who love and support us (see Figure 1.6).

What's below the surface of your complex life? Revealing answers the question, What is shaping or limiting who you are, what you do, and how you learn? That examination can take place at the individual level or in an organization of many thousands of people. What emerges from such an investigation is the choice to achieve new purpose, a new self-awareness about how

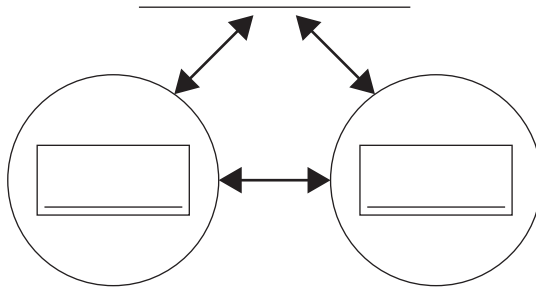
Figure 1.6 Developing a New Presence

you operate and why. If it were possible to fundamentally shift your context, what opportunities would become available? Why do those opportunities matter to you? What different results could you, your team, or your organization produce? Our automatic responses to life are based on the system that we are firmly embedded in. We can choose a different reaction once that pattern is revealed.

Taking the Step

When revealing your context, remember to put it in the form of a conclusion—for example, “If I show them how smart I am they will include me in their circle.” Sometimes it is easier to start from an undesirable situation and work backward to reveal your context. For instance, if you were passed over for promotion and this is a recurring theme, then you may begin to see a pattern or context reaching all the way back to grade school: for example, “Even when I give it my best, I never get rewarded.” The main instruction for revealing is to experiment with different phrases until you reach an *Aha!* moment of recognition. You can use Figure 1.7 to map out your context. It is not as important that you get it exactly right as it is that you recognize the familiarity of the words and feelings.

Figure 1.7 Map Out How Your Context Works



It's exciting to uncover our unconscious beliefs and conclusions and begin to rework them. Oftentimes, though, people want to jump from Reveal (Step 1) to Design (Step 3) without immersing themselves in Step 2: the critical step of owning their context. Let's find out why owning is the essential gatekeeper to real transformative change.