



## THE HABITS OF NATURAL LEADERS

By Lew & Ann Frees

The dictionary definition of Habit is ....An acquired behavior pattern regularly followed until it becomes natural and almost involuntary. The habits of a natural leader are not unique to natural leaders but have been the practice for centuries by those who are empowered to live life to the fullest.

The goal is practice the five habits listed below until they become easy and automatic. Accompanying each habit are several bullet points that help to define and clarify your deeper understanding of the habit.

### 1. **Live Deliberately**

- Anticipate the future you want
- Make choices that move you toward what you value
- Believe it is possible
- Know that your focus drives emergence
- Let it unfold and come to you
- Appreciate
- Build relationships with others who inspire your Journey

We anticipate the future every time we predict how it will unfold, experience fear about what might happen or hold any opinion positive or negative about what it looks like. So the question is what kind of future do you want to anticipate? No doubt it is one that is fulfilling, happy and full of events and circumstances that bring satisfaction and joy.

**It's not the mountains  
that we conquer but  
ourselves"**

**Sr. Edmund Hillary**

The habit of living deliberately, as the word 'deliberately' implies means living purposefully and with intention. It requires that you anticipate the future that you want to pull toward you and release your attachment to old thinking patterns that anchor you to your fear and concern about the future. If you want to consciously create your life then the habit of living deliberately will serve you well. By the very nature of this habit you move from reacting to choosing, from letting your life sweep you along to paying attention and focusing on what you want to move toward.

To live deliberately means that you understand that your life is the essence of what you think and pay attention to. Living deliberately is the practice of moment to moment attention on the characteristics of you and your life that you value and want to draw closer to you. This habit is about appreciating the novelty and rich context of each moment and making choices that are aligned with the outcomes you most want to achieve; choices that fulfill your value and that of others. When you make the right things matter most, even the smallest event can be experienced within that context.

All of the choices that you make, from simple interactions with patients to complex career choices... from the small to the grand... move you toward or away from the realization of your aspirations. So living deliberately involves continuously clarifying and refining the choices you make and the thoughts that you think.

The technique behind this habit is to picture, feel and experience the future you want to achieve as though it were occurring now.... in the present.... and then continuously aligning your thoughts and behaviours to that vision of the future. Using this technique you set into motion a dynamic called emergence. The term emergence refers to a phenomenon in which your attention draws or pulls toward you the circumstances, people, behaviours and all manner of manner of unforeseen events that are aligned with your intention.

It is deliberate intention that drives emergence. So this habit requires both trust in the dynamic of emergence and continuous focus on what you want, rather than what you don't want. Trust, is involved with this habit because you are pulling the self-organization of events and outcomes that you cannot yet see. It is tempting to fill in the empty space with information of your own creation because we always seek to understand. This filled in information can include your worst fears, concerns and doubts. In that moment you are undermining the natural emergence that is pulled by the outcome that you seek. Living deliberately requires the habit of being self-aware of the vision

in every moment even when you cannot see the events that are about to emerge to make it happen.

Living deliberately requires knowing the end result, outcome, desire or vision that matters to you and following through to make it happen. It means that you make choices that stay true to that vision, your desired outcome, as you experience the nature of that desire, trusting and acting on the natural instincts that move you in that direction and letting it unfold and come to you. You may even be surprised by the ways it reveals itself. This is the essence of trusting emergence. Living deliberately also requires you to be present, understanding that each moment is unique has never happened before and will never happen again....it requires experiencing each moment with wonder and appreciation. . . .knowing that the present is the point of power... and that the way you approach this moment determines your ability to create the next moment and the future that you are reaching for. The way you pay attention to and anticipate the future defines the quality and very nature of your experience moment to moment

Living deliberately is not about having arrived. It is about living both consciously and with purpose and staying on the path. It means being deliberate about making the path fun, fulfilling and joyful as you develop mastery. Mastery of this and the other 4 habits is a continuous process. A music critic once observed to Jascha Heifetz, one of the greatest violinists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that his mastery of the violin was beyond the ability of critics to find flaws. He responded that he hears the flaws and never stops improving because it is in improvement that he takes his greatest satisfaction. Live deliberately and you will find your greatest satisfaction.

**“You don’t see things as they are. You see things as you are.”**

**The Talmud**

## **2. Be aware of the “observer that you are”**

- Pay attention to what you think, feel and do
- Pay attention to what you make it mean
- Stay present
- Be open and interested
- Listen for intention
- Use your feelings to fine tune the “observer that you are”

It was Robert Anton<sup>1</sup> Wilson who observed: “We say, ‘seeing is believing’, but actually we are all much better at believing than at seeing. In fact, we are seeing what we believe nearly all of the time and only occasionally seeing what we can’t believe.” A core habit of a

natural leader is being aware of the “observer that they are”. In every moment through the focus of your attention and the meaning you make of what you see and experience, you determine the observer you are. Practicing this habit means paying attention to the patterns of assumptions and beliefs that you make about yourself, the world and other people (this includes types, groups, classes, levels, beliefs, ethnicity, habits, and competency...on and on the list can go), the meaning of events and both your own and others’ behaviors.

One of the most powerful influences on the “observer that you are” is how you listen. Listening is a process of taking in information and making meaning of it. Listening is not an act of hearing, it is an act of interpreting. You have heard it said that we listen through a filter. Unfortunately the filter often distorts our interpretation of what is going on. We easily listen out of concern or uneasiness about what the other(s) might be thinking or saying. We often hear from our fear rather than listening for the meaning the other person intended. We can be quick to make a judgment which immediately takes our attention off of the present moment of listening for intention. We continuously evaluate and make meaning of all that we see and experience.

Be present and aware. Notice how you pay attention to and listen to life, others and yourself. Stay open and interested in the possibility that the meaning you are making is not the meaning that was intended.

There are some immediate indicators of how you are paying attention and the meaning you are making. Probably the most immediate is how you feel. Following from your emotions/feelings is your prevailing mood. Both of these are triggered by your thinking process..... the meaning you make. Finally, based on your feelings and thoughts you initiate action. If for example, you lack confidence or feel competitive or inadequate you may respond or interact with others by making them feel vulnerable or in other ways unsafe, or you may approach them with criticism, or devalue them in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

Another of the core dynamics related to this habit is what is commonly referred to as being triggered. A trigger often occurs when we expected one thing and got another. It is often associated with something negative but there can also be positive triggers. This breakpoint in awareness occurs when something happens...someone says something, an unexpected event takes place, you are suddenly aware and attempting to make sense of what only seconds ago you hardly noticed. You are now making your own meaning, having your own response and more often than not your own sometimes powerful

reaction. A core question that you can ask at this moment and one that facilitates transparency and assistance in building this habit is: “What would I have to believe/think in order to have this experience/this response?” Once you can answer this question when you are triggered, you will become aware of the assessments, assumptions, beliefs and interpretations that led you to become “the observer that you are.”

You can apply this question to beliefs about others and about yourself. If you find yourself regularly criticizing others it is a powerful indicator about your beliefs about your own value and worth? This includes those beliefs that assume that in order for you to realize your essential self, it may have to come at the expense of another. The things that you make matter most become the lens through which you see others and see events.

Your feelings are a core indicator about the meaning you make about what is going on around you. It could be a conversation, a brief interchange or an event. Even if you are fully engaged you are also acting as an observer mostly on an unconscious level. Your feelings are the GPS of your thoughts at any point in time. They give you a reading of the degree to which you are aligned with your best natural inclinations or best instincts. If you’re feeling great and you stop to take a look at the thought that preceded your good feeling, you will notice that it was an uplifting thought. It follows that when you are feeling enraged, angry, annoyed, degraded, or other negative feelings, there is always a thought that accompanies that feeling. Your task is to find that thought or collection of thoughts that led you there.

**“Be the change you want to see in the world.”**

**Mahatma Gandhi**

### **3. Be the mirror**

- Have an open heart
- Be the change you want to see
- Focus on and trigger best instincts

Mirroring is a core habit of natural leadership. This dynamic is a neuro biological mechanism through which mimicry and imitation allow us to feel what other people feel. It hard wires us for empathy and cooperation and is the basis for morality, social cognition and self-awareness. We mirror others and they mirror us. We make meaning of all of the input from others including the mirror information.

Mirroring, when combined with our ability to read thin slices creates a process through which we can exchange information, instantly pick it

up and then interpret it. We make amazingly accurate judgements about attractiveness, likeability, trustworthiness, competence and aggressiveness during the first 1/10 of a second according to Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov.<sup>2</sup> In fact, we are so good at reading this information, without even thinking about it, that our instant interpretation can be more accurate than a trained observation. Researchers, for example, have discovered that people who are trained to look for signs of lying don't score as well in accuracy tests as amateurs. The experts were so invested in their analytical ability to detect liars that they learned to ignore their own intuitive interpretation of thin-sliced information instead of leveraging it.<sup>3</sup>

In short, we are hard wired for empathy. Natural leaders welcome the kind of information that helps them understand another. Followers often mirror people that they choose for leaders and the proliferation of cults that have occurred around the world are ample testimony to what happens when a person mirrors another and loses his or her own sense of identity and ability to discern barriers, boundaries and limitations in the precepts that are being offered by the leader. In contrast a natural leader when mirroring understands the limitations of another and gets the purpose of the boundaries, understands what it is behind those boundaries that the other is attempting to protect.

But natural leaders practice an additional habit; that of *being* the mirror. Being the mirror is about living your own truth...and allowing your understanding of that truth to evolve forward as you experience the life's events. We know from the science of mirroring and from research on the influence of social networks that when in the presence of others who fully experience the qualities of safety, value, worth and love... their connection to the essential self... it fosters those same qualities in ourselves...often without a word being spoken. To the extent that you are sufficiently grounded in interpretation of your essential self, then others, when in your presence are powerfully influenced by your beliefs, attitudes, moods and feelings. You are the mirror of the attributes of natural leadership.

This is a core differentiator between natural leaders and followers. Negative influencers are also, obviously, highly influential. But they tend to be blamers. "If only they would change I would be happy." Natural leadership is about moving past: "**if only they would change**" to being grounded in your own value and worth and safety and that of others. Natural leaders know that the one thing over which they have control and absolute freedom is what they choose to think. The habit of being the mirror, therefore, is a path to making the right things matter most no matter what is being mirrored from another person or the environment...even in the presence of a negative

influencer. When that happens you can *have an open heart, be the change you want to see and both focus on and trigger best instincts.*

This form of mirroring fosters a sense of connection that goes far below the surface, breaking down barriers and walls between people. It is a form of transparency that connects people to each other in a far deeper way than anything that can be conveyed simply through language.

Thanks to mirroring, we can't fake the attributes of natural leadership. We all know when a person is faking a compliment a compliment. Because mirroring cannot be faked it can be trusted. Mirroring broadens the bandwidth of openness to divergent opinions. One of the reasons we don't walk in other peoples shoes is because we really don't want to understand their context especially if it diverges from our own. We are not sufficiently grounded in our own worth and value and safety to *be the mirror*. So the temptation is to build our own wall.

Choose your phrase," be the change," "walk the talk," it comes down to this: you can't mirror what we aren't. We can issue dictums and rules and advice. We can proscribe the behaviors in others we want to see emulated in the workplace. But if we don't make the right things matter most, have an open heart, trigger the best instincts in others, create authentic connection and trust emergence...embody the very attributes that we are attempting to instill in others, our mirror neurons will give us away.

Our mirror neurons enable us to see through the static to the essential worth of another. As we practice the habit of "being the mirror" we see past the distortions of self that are presented to the essential self that is there. It is that self to which we send signals of worth and value, safety and open heartedness. The very attention is a trigger. And it is from that self that best instincts follow. It becomes natural to remind another of qualities that they may not see in themselves.

Natural leaders focus on and appreciate the positive inclinations of other people even when they are not self-apparent, rather than thinking of others as objects of critique and competition. This kind of thinking emerges from a well-honed ability to sense and appreciate the very attributes that others most value about themselves ... to see their unacknowledged qualities and potential.

#### **4. Pivoting**

- Use your feelings as a GPS
- Focus on what matters most
- Move toward what you want not away from what you don't want
- Pay attention to the story you tell
- Look for and share the good news
- Reach for a better feeling thought

Pivoting begins as an internal action, reaching past limiting and or toxic beliefs, values and expectations to connect to a higher order of natural inclinations. The resets that follow from pivots can range from deep life changing events to everyday moments during which we make a choice about how to internally message an event. Even the most minor pivots are always moments in which we advance our reading of our essential self...one in which the things that matter most are reframed to more accurately move us toward the qualities of natural leadership

Remember, triggers are those automatic responses that occur when there is a breakpoint in our awareness and we make meaning of something. Triggers often activate already existing natural predispositions. They become our own instant calculation of the array of beliefs, values and expectations that are in play at any moment in time. When you experience a negative trigger you can choose to pivot.

A pivot refers to a technique that allows you to reset a negative trigger that is taking you in the wrong direction and move your thinking in a new more positive direction. The habit of pivoting requires your awareness of your feelings and thoughts, then choosing to focus your thinking on a new better feeling possibility. In fact one way to pivot is to simply reach for a better feeling thought. And then reach again for an even better feeling thought.

When do you pivot? When you are focused on limitations, when you are experiencing feelings that are uncomfortable and negative, when you feel hopeless or helpless, when you are in a breakdown and unable to take action effectively and when you feel a lack of something you want or value. This is the ideal time to use your feelings as a GPS. In fact, your feelings are usually the earliest indicator about when it is time to pivot. If you are not satisfied with how you feel, you know immediately to check back in about what you are thinking. It is probably time to reach for a better feeling thought and start the pivot cycle. Sometimes just finding a better feeling

thought will automatically create a pivot. The GPS of your feelings will continue to give you a reading on how you are doing.

Another way to pivot is to deliberately shift your focus from what you experience as lack, or when your attention is fixed on what you don't want or don't like. Once you are aware that you are caught in the limitations trap, the question is, "If that's what I don't want, what is it that I do want?" or "what is it that I want that I think I can't have?" Once the answer comes, stay with that new thought until the outcome/ desired end state is clear and you can feel what it feels like to have it "now in the present moment". When you can experience the new desired end state you have made a successful pivot...nothing more that you need to do.

In an organization, pivots are important since powerful negative triggers can quickly become viral unless people know that it is an organizational expectation to pivot and reset them. In fact this skill is so critical that it should be sought during recruitment for new hires and be used as a key criterion for promotion. It begins as in internal pivot, reaching past limiting and/or toxic beliefs, values and expectations to connect to a higher order of thinking.

The measure of a successful pivot is the degree to which it helps you to align with your essential self. Be sure to expand the pivot so you are reaching for what matters most.

## **5. Recognize and fulfill the essential self**

- Stay focused on your own value fulfillment
- Care about and listen to what matters to others
- Let most influence everything else that matters
- Look for greater possibilities in others than they can see in themselves
- Believe in the fundamental value of others and their fulfillment

Each of us has a unique version of ourselves that we are attempting to fulfill... our essential self. We often use the word destiny to describe this awareness of our inherent value and the path that it implies. But destiny seems to distort the principle because it implies that our pathway is already out there in front of us simply to be trod. Actually, we are always inventing the path as we seek fulfillment.

**One should not reach for an abstract meaning in life. Everyone has his own vocation or mission in life which calls for fulfillment. He can't be replaced nor can his life be repeated. Every person's life is as unique as his specific opportunity to implement it."**

**Victor Frankl**

We each have the natural inclination to seek those conditions that are suited to our own fulfillment, and to the fulfillment of others. Certain elements of this essential self are intrinsic: they are our value, worth, safety and love, which exist by virtue of being alive. They don't have to be earned and they are given freely to others as we see in them greater possibilities than they see in themselves.

The essential self is the unique version of ourselves and our purpose that we want to fulfill. Our life's journey is to connect with our inner knowing of this self and to use life's experiences to deepen our wisdom...the wisdom that comes from knowing when we are fulfilling our own value not those that may be imposed from the outside. It is impossible to fulfill our essential self when we fail to honor and listen to what matters to others or when we let them dishonor us.

The journey requires an appreciation of the "rocks in the stream" not as distractions but as opportunities to discover yet another facet of your essential self. The objective is to continuously refine your best sense of your essential self the source of which is internal not a projection of others expectations or desires. Your thoughts and beliefs follow from your experience and form your interpretation of your essential selves. All of life's events that you have drawn toward you from earliest childhood have been opportunities to flesh out and express your unique essential self. We cannot change our history...the events of our lives that are a part of the past. But we can change the meaning we make of those events....the way we used those events to shape our lives. When seen from the perspective of appreciation and thankfulness, all events, even those that would seem to be the most painful and disabling...the rocks in the stream or even the boulders... contribute to the fulfillment of both our wisdom and our awareness of our unique value. We choose life's events in order to find our own wisdom and learning journey. The one consistent thread is the never ending inclination to more fully experience and live your value as you take life's journey.

Your feeling of fulfillment is the GPS for you about whether you are indeed living your life in a way that is aligned and in harmony with your essential self. When you can quiet the noise that you have created as you attempt to make your life meaningful, fulfilling what matters most to you will more easily follow. You can enjoy appreciation and recognition, not simply because you have impressed others but because they are valid reflections of your essential self. The right things are always intrinsic rather than extrinsic...stay focused on fulfillment.

When you are aligned with your essential self you feel fulfilled, content and open hearted. As the famous anthropologist Joseph Campbell after having spent a life time following the heroes journey throughout

history, said, “follow your bliss” which can be translated to “feel the joy that comes when you fulfill your unique purpose and value.” This is where you tap your real source of happiness.

When you wish to continuously improve or change a habit because you are not satisfied with the outcomes you are achieving, you can retrain these neural brain pathways: from habit to choice, to practice, to establishing a new habit. You can choose what you pay attention to. For this reason the most fundamental act of natural leadership is choosing thoughts that trigger your *own* best natural inclinations, then, practicing and reinforcing those thoughts until they become as natural as driving a car.

<sup>1</sup> Play write and Author, As quoted in The Sun, October 2007, p48

<sup>2</sup> Janine Willis and Alexander Todorov, First Impressions: Making Up Your Mind After a 100-Ms Exposure to a Face., Psychological Science; July 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Levy, p 317