

Art and Leadership

You may have heard the phrase “leadership is an art,” referring to the nature of leadership as something that cannot be learned just through theories and memorization. In 1989, Max De Pree embraced this phrase when publishing his book *Leadership is an Art*, opening with this quote: “Leadership is an art, something to be learned over time, not simply by reading books. Leadership is more tribal than scientific, more weaving of relationships than amassing of information.” And indeed, leadership is more than just reading books and technical knowledge. It takes effort, engagement, and passion to move from “manager of people” to “leader of people”.

However, where De Pree is talking about leadership as a skill acquired by experience, study, or observation (Merriam-Webster, 2023), we will use art in its more literal sense: the conscious use of skill and creative imagination, especially in the production of aesthetic objects. (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Our focus is not on a rhetorical term but on the benefits of tapping into our creativity and imagination when it comes to developing as a leader. Like art, leadership has the capability to stretch us beyond our comfort zone and take us to new experiences where yesterday's solutions may not be the best answer to tomorrow's challenges.

Insights and Senses

Art creates an opportunity for the intangible concepts of leadership to be represented tangibly. Like artists, leaders need to be able to rely on their senses when interacting with the world around them. Not that I am recommending going about and taste-testing your

employees! As a leader, you need to be able to be present in the moment and respond to the world as it is rather than jumping to conclusions and assumptions. This involves being willing to listen to others, creating space for dialog, and being able to shed assumptions when necessary.

There is a tendency in our modern world to move quickly. From rapid response times to measured performance based on how long it takes to complete a task, the world around us seems to want us to reduce the space between stimulus and response to the point of reflex. And while this may hold some value in specific scenarios, when people react without having the time to think, it is a reflexive reaction based on habit or emotion *not* on careful thought.

Viktor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist who founded logotherapy, a school of psychotherapy focused on how the search for life's meaning can act as the central motivational force for people and the foundation of positive psychology in general. Practicing and publishing works beginning in 1930, Frankl and his theories had a significant impact on psychology that can be easily seen even today. But perhaps he is better known for his indomitable spirit and the impact of his life experiences more than his studies. Frankl was more than just a researcher: as a medical student, he organized youth counseling centers to address high levels of teen suicides in Vienna, drastically reducing the number of student deaths coinciding with final report cards through a city-sponsored free counseling program. As a doctor, he worked first with suicidal women and later with patients to help them avoid Nazi euthanasia programs targeting the mentally disabled. He worked to help others up until he and his family were sent to Nazi concentration camps in 1942 when he was 37 years old. Over 3 years, Frankl was sent to 4 different concentration camps including Auschwitz. His father, mother, brother and wife all

died of sickness or were murdered in the gas chambers during this period. (Viktor Frankl Institute of America, 2020)

After the war with this experience as a survivor of the Holocaust, Frankl went on to write several books and develop his theories of logotherapy and existential analysis. His first book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, is widely considered to be one of the most influential books in the United States. (Fein, 1991)

Stephen R. Covey, an American educator and author, best summarizes Frankl's work through his quote, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." (Viktor Frankl Institute of America, N.D.) Take some time to explore your own reflexes regarding leadership: How do you react when someone on your team approaches you with a problem or situation? Do you tend to offer suggestions based on your knowledge or experience quickly? Do you react according to the intense emotions in and around you? Is there a tendency in your workplace to react and respond to issues rather than explore prevention and cause, or a culture where everything always feels like an emergency? Rather than allowing yourself to reflexively react, practice noticing and leaning into this space between stimulus and response. Sometimes, reflexive action is called for. However, often, we can create the space to allow ourselves and others to grow, change, and become more aware of what pressures and systems are at play before our reaction.

Reflection

What is something that you struggle with that causes you to react reflexively?
It may be receiving an email from your supervisor, reacting to perceived disrespectful comments, mirroring another's emotional state, or something else entirely.

STIMULUS

RESPONSE

Now, consider the person you would like to be.
Take time to reflect on the stimulus that you struggle with and what your "ideal" version of a response would be.

IDEAL RESPONSE

Creating Space

This space between "stimulus" and "reaction" doesn't need to be large: even taking a few extra seconds can allow you to identify and begin processing emotion so you can respond more intentionally. Our emotions have a huge influence on how we interpret and respond to things: you have probably noticed how someone displaying extreme emotions such as anger or sadness can impact your own emotions and drive your responses. When we don't regulate our emotions, they can build up and explode on us. Have you ever had one of those days where

everything seems to have gone wrong, you are frustrated at every turn, and at the end of the day when you knock over a glass of water you end up overwhelmed by your emotions? Or maybe dealing with an annoying client, one who just makes you want to grind your teeth but you have to be professional...until one day, you just snap churlishly at them? It's not that they were more irritating than normal or the spilled water causing that reaction – its your brain reacting to your emotions and surroundings.

The amygdala is a small part of your brain with a huge influence. This is where many of your emotions come from, but its also the part that controls your reflexive reactions – fight, flight or freeze. Humans have evolved thanks to our ability to rapidly recognize and response to threats, and that is possible because the amygdala receives and processes information faster than other parts of your brain and can “by pass” the frontal cortex (the part of your brain that has to do with reasoning) allowing you to react without thinking. If you are in a dangerous situation, this can be the difference between life and death. (LeDoux, 1996)

While this rapid reaction is good for survival, the amygdala doesn't have the capacity to reason, and so it cannot immediately tell the difference between “I am about to be eaten by a wolverine” and “Bob will not stop talking during this meeting”. In my house, we call it “letting our lizard brain drive” when emotions are high and we are acting reactively to stimulus rather than trying to work through it.

So how can you manage a survival feature that has been part of human biology for eons of generations? According to Harvard scientist Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor, it requires only that you notice it when it happens. According to Taylor and supported by research, it takes about 90

seconds to identify an emotion and allow it to dissipate enough to ensure your frontal cortex (the reasoning part) is back in control. The next time you are feeling stressed, try this out:

1. Pause, identify your emotions
2. Label your emotions (*I am angry, I am scared, etc*)
3. Observe how you feel without trying to change it and let it naturally pass

It may not take the full 90 seconds to feel like you are back in the driver's seat rather than your emotions in many instances, but often that minute and a half can be critical to disrupting our most extreme emotional reactions. These emotions in the first 90 seconds are a reflex, caused quite literally by brain chemistry. If you are attentive, you can even feel the physical sensation of emotions on your body, and how it feels when those initial chemicals fade. After that initial minute and a half though, you are making a choice to be in an emotional loop. If you notice that happening, then it's time to examine more closely the *why* behind your reactions. (Taylor, 2021)

Reflection

How can you create space between them?

Follow the prompts below to explore three ways to create the space you need for your ideal response. There is no one right way, and each situation may be different.

STIMULUS

Space

REFLEX	CONSEQUENCES	IMAGINE
<p>Think about WHY you react how you do. There is a reason for your reaction, and understanding that reason can help you better understand yourself.</p>	<p>What are the outcomes of your reaction? Being aware of (negative) consequences may provide motivation to change.</p>	<p>Imagine a better response. Think about a better response, imagine doing it, and imagine the outcome and feelings of this change.</p>

IDEAL RESPONSE

Note:

Treat yourself with compassion. Change takes time and effort. Be understanding and patient with yourself.

Mindfulness

Keeping in mind that we are not *stifling* our emotions, just acknowledging them, feeling them, and then moving past them, there are a few things you can do to practice this technique. The best suggestion to help in this? Practicing *mindfulness*.

Mindfulness is defined by Oxford Dictionary as a noun meaning:

1. The quality or state of being conscious or aware of something.
2. A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations.

Mindfulness is often derided as pop-culture psychology or, more colorfully, “hippy dippy stuff,” and research into mindfulness has only really come to the forefront in the past couple of decades. However, the benefits are clearly evident: Being mindful can reduce stress, enhance performance, provide insight, and increase our awareness of both ourselves and others (Mindful Staff, 2020). It is also something that everyone can do and requires no change or specialized training or equipment. And there are many different ways to practice mindfulness, from meditation to art to sports, so you can find ways to incorporate it into your routine however best suits you.

Meditative Drawing: Zentangle

One accessible (and fun!) way to practice mindfulness is through the art of zentangle. Research data has demonstrated that the positive effects of zentangle were similar to the advantages of meditation. Like meditation, zentangle practice can create a calming sensation,

allowing individuals to connect and integrate their feeling of 'self.' In addition to bolstering self-assurance, zentangle can also be viewed as a spiritual or mindful activity with the potential to improve mental, emotional, and physical health. (Kopeschny, 2016)

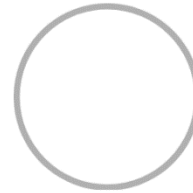
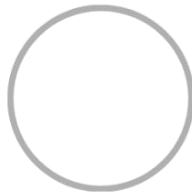
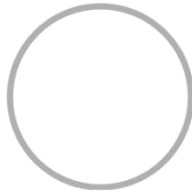
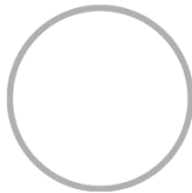
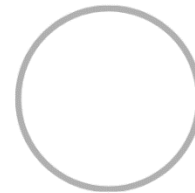
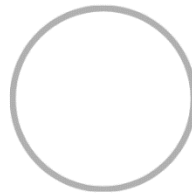
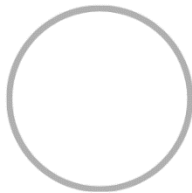
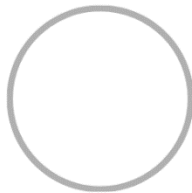
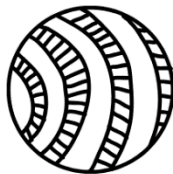
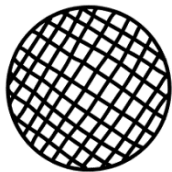
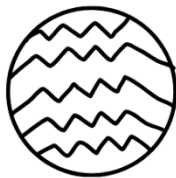
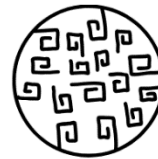
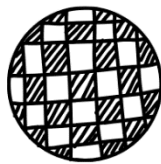
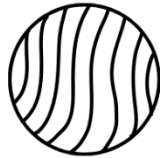
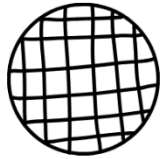
So what is zentangle, exactly? It is art but intentionally designed to be relaxing and without the intimidating elements common in more formal art. You create images using structured patterns (various combinations of lines, dots, curves, and simple shapes). Since the art is unstructured and non-representational, there is no concern about whether it looks "right." The simplicity of the patterns combines into surprisingly complex images, and zentangle can be an excellent tool for experiencing a state of mindfulness and "flow" – flow meaning that feeling of being completely "in the zone" with an activity. (Something we covered in chapter XX).

Try some zentangles of your own on the following activity pages. Allow yourself to be fully present in the moment, and don't worry about creating something specific – just enjoy the process!

Activity

Zentangles

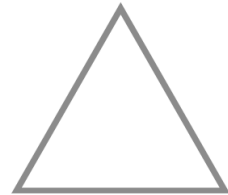
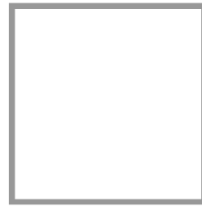
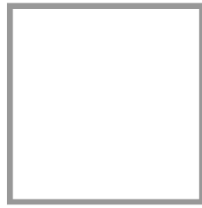
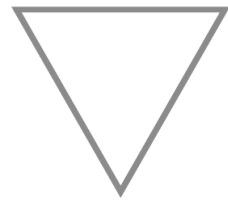
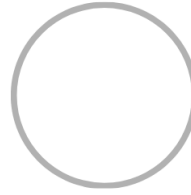
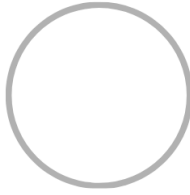
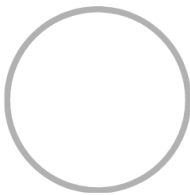
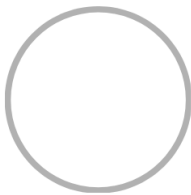
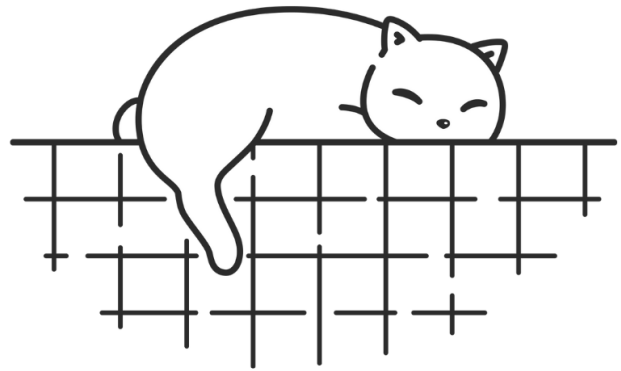
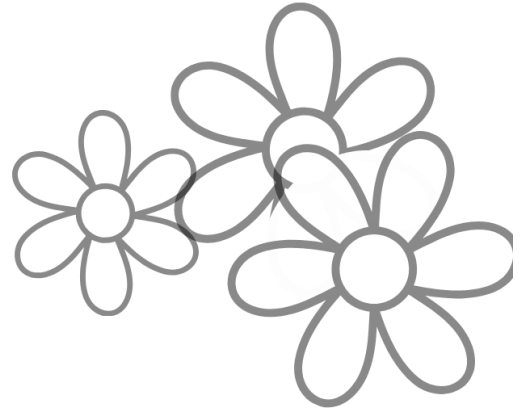
These are examples of Zentangle designs. Practice a few here on this page or find new ones using the internet.



Activity

Zentangles

Using the techniques from the previous page, your own imagination or other inspiration, take some time and Zentangle these shapes (or create your own!)



Meditative Drawing: Mandalas

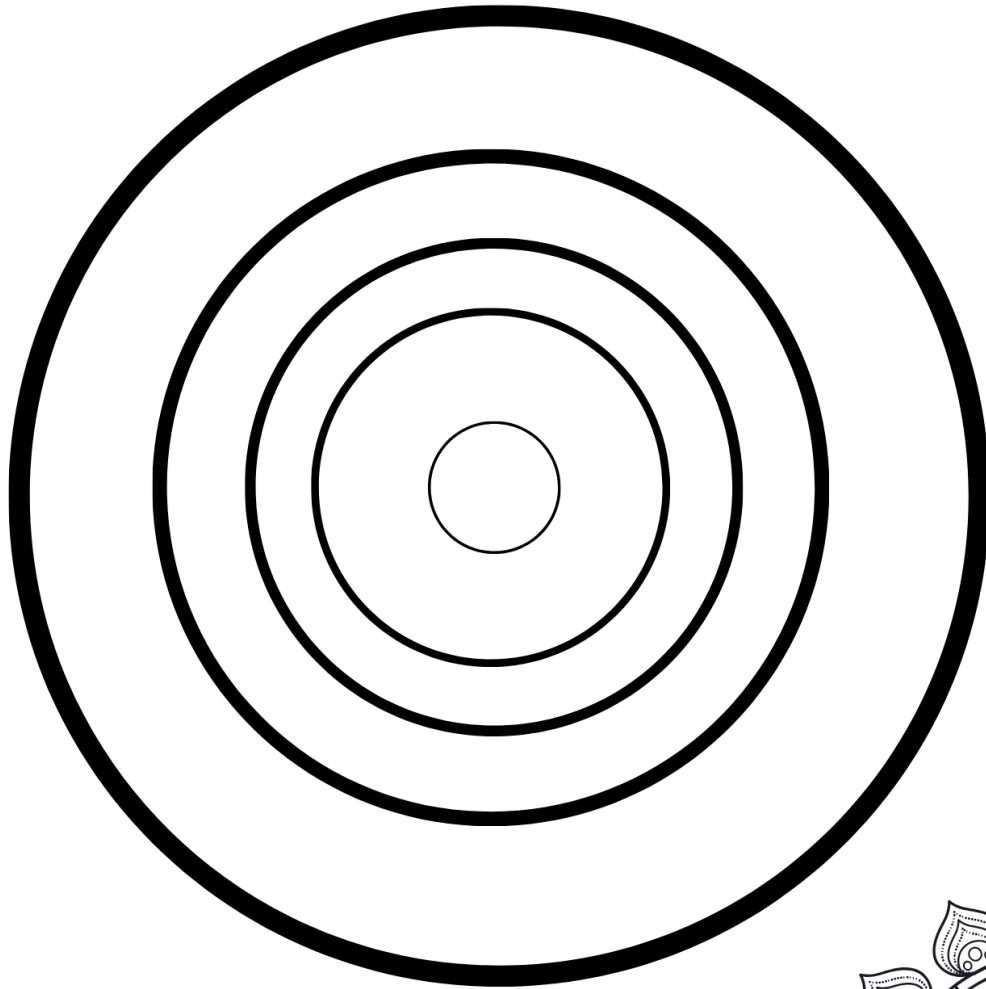
Mandalas come from the Sanskrit word for 'circles' and are geometric designs originally serving as symbolic maps and as part of sacred rituals in religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. These beautiful creations are spiritually symbolic and can also be used to increase focus and decrease stress. Carl Jung, the well-known Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology, believed that the creation of mandalas encouraged personal growth and increased focus, viewing them as a "window to the subconscious". (Slegelis, 1987)

Meditative Drawing methods, like zentangles and mandalas, are tools to help you relax your mind, helping you to relieve stress, and achieve a meditative state. The artwork you create is a secondary outcome, but a pretty great bonus. A bit more formalized than zentangles, mandalas are concentric circles of repeating, often symmetrical, patterns.

Like with zentangles, try creating your own mandala in the following activity. Try creating a simple mandala of basic shapes in each circle, or use lines and dots to create a repeating pattern. If you are unsure about patterns or how to start, a simple web search will give you hundreds of ideas and inspiration. Don't be concerned about the final image: start where you would like, end when you feel it is enough, and just enjoy the process.

Activity

Use the below circles (or draw your own) to create a mandala. Start with drawing some lines to intersect the circles and create sections. Start with drawing one shape in the ring around the center point, repeating the pattern, then continue drawing concentric rings of shapes moving out from the center. Add to this basic template in any way you like: More circles, lines, color, etc.



Reflection

How did this activity make you feel, or what kinds of insights did you gain from it?



Meditative Art: Coloring

Coloring is another technique for achieving mindfulness. In a study conducted in 2021, researchers monitored brain signals of participants while they colored in mandalas to gauge their level of mindfulness. With real-time information and feedback to participants, researchers found that the act of coloring the repeating patterns induced deep states of self-reflection and focus. Participants reported greater acceptance of mistakes and better overall emotional well-being. (Dauden, Sas, & Potts, 2021) Practice this yourself by going back to your zentangle or mandala creations and coloring them in. Even if all you have is a pen or pencil, you can create shading and contrast in your drawings. Observe how you feel and whether this practice helps keep you in the present moment.