‘Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely that simple and it is also that difficult’  
Warren Bennis

During the Leadership Programme we encourage participants to develop a better understanding of what they do when they are at their best as leaders, to reflect on what their key strengths are and how to leverage them more, culminating in their best-self description and an action plan for leading at their best as often as possible. In this paper we want to encourage leaders to continue developing their understanding of their current strengths that make them be at their best as leaders, as well as sharing another important aspect of leadership: the future best possible self. We advocate a focus on both the current and future aspects of personal leadership because we have learned from participants that this enables them to enter an upward spiral of continuous change, learning and growth.

In essence, during the Leadership Programme we provide a variety of inputs to participants about themselves, using the MBTI and FIRO-B instruments, 360 feedback from work colleagues and the reflected best self (RBS) exercise. The RBS exercise was developed at the University of Michigan and helps leaders to obtain real-life examples of times when they have been at their best from a variety of people inside and outside work – current and past work colleagues, family members, friends, colleagues from social organisations and so on. In organisations there has been a tendency to focus on negative feedback much more than positive – performance reviews and other forms of evaluation and feedback often focus on what is not working well or areas for improvement, and not on areas of strength and how to build on them. The Point of View paper ‘Being a Positive Force in Leadership’ provides further background and insight on this, as well as sharing the finding that a focus on strengths in organisations can be linked to performance improvement. We encourage participants to adopt a more balanced approach and to devote a greater proportion of their time to identifying their key strengths and thinking about how to use them to improve their performance and potential. As they receive feedback we suggest that they ask themselves three key questions: ‘What is this telling me about me at my best?’; ‘Are people experiencing me at my best?’; ‘How can I be at my best more often?’

Early in the first week we give participants an exercise to do where they think of an example of a time when they know they were leading at their best – in their current or a previous job, or even outside of work, for example in a social/sports club. Then we ask them to write down what they did that made them be at their best as a leader – the actions and behaviours they displayed that made them be at their personal best. The majority of participants find this a useful exercise which helps them to focus on their strengths and understand them better. When we ask them how often they do this on their own though, the vast majority say very seldom or never!
We have found that encouraging participants to increase their focus on strengths and to develop an accurate picture of their current best self and action plans to be at their best as often as possible has had a positive impact on their development. This is not to say that we should ignore or deny areas of weakness, just that we should take a more balanced approach to both and recognise the impact a strengths focus has on performance and potential. Knowing your strengths also offers a better understanding of how to deal with weaknesses and helps you gain the confidence to do this. Some weaker areas may need development if they are detracting from your best self, but we should be conscious that too much focus on our flaws may take time away from identifying and harnessing our unique strengths. As Quinn et al suggest in the Harvard Business Review paper ‘How to Play to Your Strengths’, if talented leaders overinvest in shoring up or papering over perceived weaknesses it can detract from reaping the best performance from them. In a similar way, overplaying our strengths can also turn them into weaknesses, for example the leader who builds good relationships but is reluctant to challenge others when needed in case those relationships get damaged, or the leader who develops great ideas but resists ideas that come from anyone other than themselves.

The RBS exercise provides powerful and valuable current feedback about how people experience you at your best. It gives you an ‘inventory’ of your strengths as observed, experienced and remembered by yourself and others. Of course, the better you understand your best self, the better you can pursue it and the more you can make a difference. In the recent book ‘How To Be A Positive Leader’, edited by Jane Dutton and Gretchen Spreitzer of the University of Michigan, there is a useful chapter on the power of cultivating positive identities. It emphasises the valuable psychological and social resources that we can unlock by cultivating positive identities and offers models and strategies for doing this. Dutton and Spreitzer believe that the more positive characteristics you seek in yourself and in others, the more you will find. As their colleague Professor Robert Quinn puts it:

‘The most important way for you or me or anyone else to be extraordinary is to be loyal to our best self ….. it exists only when we are in the process of being more than we are.’

We encourage everyone to practice using their strengths and being at their best, and to learn from doing this. A previous participant recently said this about his experience of understanding his strengths and focusing on being at his best more often:

‘You have to keep practising being at your best and using your strengths in different situations, so that you learn how they can be applied on an even bigger playing field. By doing this you maintain the ongoing focus on becoming a better version of yourself.’

Dr Alex Linley, of the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, in his book ‘Average to A+’ says that when you use your strengths more, possibility and potential seem to exist beyond what you have dreamed and you then learn how to master the anticipation and step boldly into the realms of what can be. The key is to believe in the ‘art of the possible’. He says that if you don’t feel the fear of stretch when you are honing a strength towards its greatest contribution, then it is unlikely that you are using it to anything like its fullest extent.

‘Realising our strengths provides the single most effective route for making the art of the possible our own reality. It is the most potent means through which we can be ourselves – better.’ Alex Linley

While you continue to learn about and practise being at your best, we would also encourage you to reflect on another aspect of your leadership, one which can be brought into play at the same time and be a powerful motivational force for you: the future possibility of your leadership. Richard Boyatzis emphasises that your best self is who you are currently as a leader and believes that the positive feedback and your best-self description can provide a boost to your sense of hope about the future.
He sees the best self as providing a platform or foundation from which to push off. In his view each person needs a clear image of a desired future and the accompanying sense of hope in that desired future. He sees the ideal self as the driver of what he calls intentional change and has developed a model to support this, which is outlined below.

Boyatzis says, ‘The ideal self is a driver of intentional change in one’s behaviours, emotions, perceptions and attitudes ...... It is the core mechanism for self-regulation and motivation. It is a personal vision or image of what kind of person one wishes to be, what we hope to accomplish in life and work.’

Defining an ideal self helps you create a strong personal vision which promotes the development of your learning agenda, experimentation with new behaviours, feelings and perceptions. It is fuelled by hope and a belief in the possibility that the future desired state may occur.

Sandra Kerka, in her paper ‘Possible Selves: Envisioning the Future’, refers to Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius’ concept of possible selves, which help guide your behaviour and action toward what you want to become and away from what you don’t want to become. They believed that without a vision of what you might become, you may simply recreate the conditions of the past in order to continue to utilise your ‘strengths’ and not experiment with new behaviour. Robert Quinn of the University of Michigan also has a view about this and says: ‘An extraordinary person keeps examining self in relation to some higher purpose and keeps striving to conquer and move beyond the limits of that self’. He believes that we can’t ignite our potential by staying on what he calls the ‘path of least resistance’ and that we find meaning and power when we extend ourselves toward something greater than ourselves, because we are designed to be growing.

Richard Boyatzis also warns us about what he refers to as the ought self, which is a version of the ideal self which is imposed by others, or by our desire to please others. If it’s different to your own ideal self, and if you work towards it, you will eventually feel angry and frustrated at the time and energy wasted in pursuit of something you were never really passionate about.

As mentioned earlier, Boyatzis has developed a model based on his belief that sustainable change results from a focus on intentional change, rather than just developing competencies. In his view, the most effective leadership development begins with self-directed learning; intentionally developing or strengthening an aspect of who you are or who you want to be, or both. This requires gaining an image of your ideal self (who you want to be as a leader) as well as an accurate picture of your real self (who you are as a leader now and how others describe you as a leader now). His intentional change model has five steps:

1. **Identify the ideal self** – this is the motivator that fosters the development of leadership ability

2. **Identify the real self** – this is critically important in mapping out the foundation from which you are pushing off. Realising the discrepancies between your ideal and real selves establishes the basis for changing your leadership style and creating a development plan

3. **Articulate the learning agenda** – these are the concrete practical steps to achieving goals which yield the most powerful improvement.

4. **Experiment with and rehearse new behaviours** – improving what you do by making yourself aware of bad habits and consciously practising better ways, rehearsing new behaviours until they become automatic.
As you follow these steps, remember that if you have completed the RBS exercise you will have already identified your ‘real self’. You are now prepared for the development of an image of the desired future for yourself – one that can become a motivational image for you. We would encourage you to consider what else may be possible beyond your best self, to practise the ‘art of the possible’, envision what might be possible for your leadership, then take responsibility and put in the effort to make it happen!

Developing your future best possible self is best done by deciding on a point in the future and describing what you will have accomplished as a leader at that point. We would recommend choosing a timeframe of 2–3 years, but you should decide what will motivate you most, as well as suit your current development plans. To help you write the description of yourself in the future, the following prompt questions can help:

It is [date], describe your leadership at that time in the future, highlighting the following:

• The leadership breakthroughs you have achieved

• The impact you have had on the business; your business performance ‘footprint’

• How others perceived you throughout this time, what they said, how they felt, how your leadership influenced change in others and what difference they noticed in you

• What has become distinctive about your leadership

It might help to work with someone, or a few people – your manager, trusted colleagues, close acquaintances and/or a coach to help you assemble the insights needed to develop this story. You should include exploration of your best self to help you to identify the gaps between where you currently are and where you need to be to consistently deliver great leadership.

Here is an excerpt from a future best-possible-self description, to give you an example:

5. **Build personal relationships** – the support of others creates a climate that is crucial for authentic learning to occur. Other people facilitate the process of articulating the ideal and real selves, the gaps between them and the learning agendas. Others help build awareness of what needs to be done, affirm the progress that is made, help ensure that outcomes are perceived more accurately and support the modifications needed to produce better outcomes.

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Here is an excerpt from a future best-possible-self description, to give you an example:

**Over the last 3 years I have taken the seed of my purpose – to be a catalyst for extraordinary growth – and stretched the boundaries of possibility for myself and others to deliver this. My ability to be the most authentic leader I could be has secured the delivery of this.**

A key change happened when I became less tentative and more courageous in setting out my vision and then inspired and challenged others to align. I now know I can do this without compromising my naturally inclusive, engaging and consultative style, and that the balance of both is most powerful. Through the relationships I have established I can create cut-through more quickly and recognise and act swiftly when there is not full alignment.

I have made the business strategy my business and am deeply connected with it. I seek out and act upon the possibilities to grow the business. I have guaranteed that all our business leaders view the growth of our people and organisation in the same way. This has led to a transformation in how our values, processes and programmes are owned by leaders, managers and employees.
Once you have written your own future best-possible-self description, see if it makes you feel like this:

- ‘I have a sense of nervous excitement about the performance implications for me as a leader, and for the business’
- ‘I am getting clearer about the leader I need to be to make my future plans a reality, starting now’

Once you are satisfied that you have developed a motivational description of the ideal leader you want to be, you are able to use your current best-self description and your future best-possible-self description as the basis for following steps 3–5 of the intentional change model above.

Past participants of the programme tell us how their continuing work on achieving their future best possible self is providing sustained personal leadership change for them and how it informs the kind of personal transformations that are possible, as well as providing a vehicle for continuing to stretch themselves long after the formal part of the programme is completed. We believe that once armed with both your current best-self description as well as your future best-possible-self description, you will be able to put in place the required actions to practice and learn your way to a better version of yourself and to keep using this approach over and over again as your situation and future opportunities change and evolve and you continue to grow. This way you can ensure that you are always pursuing your best possible self. In this way, we hope you can sense your path to an upward spiral of positive personal development, wonderfully depicted in the image that follows.

My team are recognised as inspirational leaders and respected partners across the company and externally. We now have all the leadership and functional capability embedded within the business teams such that the agenda is led and sustained from there. I created the right levels of stretch and support through inspirational leadership and outstanding coaching. Ultimately it was the individuals who unlocked their belief in what was possible for them to achieve and then went beyond this. This remains the hallmark of my leadership.
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Graham Louden-Carter is a visiting tutor and Executive Fellow at Henley Business School. He is a member of the core tutor team that supports the Leadership Programme. Before joining the Business School Graham had a long career with Diageo PLC. He was a senior human resources executive and a member of business leadership teams in Europe, the USA and Latin America, and also spent periods of time in corporate organisation development and management development roles with a global remit. Graham is originally from South Africa, where he spent 10 years with the South African Breweries Ltd (now known as SABMiller) before moving to the UK in the late eighties.

Graham also runs his own independent coaching practice, which focuses on individual and leadership development, building on his many years of experience coaching senior leaders in the corporate environment. He has a BA Hons in Industrial & Organisational Psychology, is a Graduate Member (MBPsS) of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and a Full Member of the Special Interest Group in Coaching Psychology of the BPS.

Dr Suzanne Pollack is Programme Director of Henley’s Leadership Programme and an Executive Fellow at Henley Business School. She works on many other Henley programmes and coaching assignments. Her expertise lies in helping senior executives and top teams to reach their full potential through coaching and learning programmes/interventions. A strong emphasis is placed on achieving the highest level of personal performance to deliver excellent business, and personal, results. Suzanne adopts a pragmatic approach, drawing on a blend of NLP (an enabler of swift and effective personal change), best business practice, her own senior leadership experience and proven psychological techniques, to enable executives to move forward. She is skilled in using instruments such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, FIRO-B, 360s and emotional intelligence questionnaires. Her PhD was concerned with the experience and management of change.

Her track record covers all parts of the globe and a wide variety of clients, ranging from small companies and NGOs to multinationals such as Shell and IBM. Suzanne has also worked with professional service firms and government departments. She also has a small therapeutic practice.