

LAURA FREEBAIRN-SMITH

ABUNDANCE LEADERS

CREATING
ENERGY, JOY, AND PRODUCTIVITY
IN AN UNSETTLED WORLD



WILEY

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This book is dedicated to all my teachers in all the forms they have taken in my life, who helped me discover that questioning, knowing, and seeing are endeavors of the highest order, made truly useful only by the addition of soul and compassion.

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Foreword

When Laura Freebairn-Smith walked into my class 40 years ago she was a fiery, red-headed, passionate activist enrolled to learn about management. She has gained some gray hair and a great deal of experience and wisdom while remaining a passionate activist. This book presents what her life has taught her about leadership and effective organization. It has been quite a life. Laura grew up within a family committed to political and spiritual change. Before she came to the management school she had spent years (not days or weeks) working in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodia border. She has led an organization development department in a large university and now leads her own consulting firm with the daily reality of bottom-line responsibility. As a result, the book is filled with a wealth of ideas, suggestions, and examples for anyone in a leadership role who aspires to inspire.

But there is more. Laura's book is about a fundamental value proposition: her belief, supported by her own research as well as that of others, that the key to a healthy organization and to effective management is a mindset. She contrasts a view of the world (and the people in it) that focuses on *scarcity* with one that focuses on *abundance* and makes a compelling case that viewing organizational life through the lens of *abundance* yields significantly greater personal and professional health and well-being. In Laura's view, organizational health is itself a complex and nuanced concept that includes everything from employee satisfaction and joy to financial stability and growth.

Part of the power of this book is the idea of a mental model. Not long ago, many of us would have scoffed at the idea that organizational effectiveness rests on the mental model that its members, and especially those in leadership positions, carry around in their heads, preferring to put our faith in financial and statistical models. But this book extends a 40-year exploration of precisely this idea, tying together work on optimism and pessimism in the field of organizational development and

economics to make the argument that indeed our mental models have a profound influence on our capacity to lead and inspire.

The other source of the book's impact is the energy and professional life of the author herself. Since that day years ago when Laura walked into my class we have stayed in touch. During the last decade or more I have repeatedly referred individuals and organizations to Laura's firm, Organizational Performance Group, because, quite frankly, she is one of the few practitioners whose integrity and honesty I trust. Throughout the book Laura offers examples from her practice and from the ways in which she leads her own organization. You can take these examples to the bank. They are valuable and trustworthy, fully deserving of the reflection that the book invites each of us to do. And, in addition to the concrete examples from her work, Laura provides us with a glimpse of her own mind, rich with insight and possibility but also filled with the same struggles, personal and professional, that we all recognize.

A book that lays out a new mental model for approaching organizational functioning and leadership action will challenge every reader in some way. A therapist of mine once offered me a simple and different way of viewing the world, one that he was confident would bring me a greater measure of peace. I was aghast at his suggestion that I merely choose to see the world differently because such a choice seemed to me to be supremely difficult (given, of course, that I had already chosen and held tightly to the worldview I already had). In the face of my protest about how hard and perhaps impossible his suggestion was to implement he replied, "I said it was a simple choice, not an easy one." The same could be said of Laura's Abundance Leadership model. Her suggestion to us is that if we can be successful at making this choice to think about the work differently than most of us do now, our capacity to lead others toward a collective goal will be enhanced. And she presents evidence to support her suggestion.

Anyone with responsibility for the work lives of others will learn something important and valuable in this book. The section on abundance behavior in leadership roles, the section on team development, and the section on microlevers for change are chock-full of concrete examples. The book is notable for what a colleague once called *actionable knowledge*, insights and ideas that translate into everyday practice (check out the section on the daily, weekly, and monthly rhythms of a work group, for example).

This book is not the equivalent of being with Laura for a day or working with her organization for a morning. No book could substitute for the experience of interacting with her mind and with the organization that she and her colleagues have created. But it is quite a good approximation, worth the time and energy required to take the deep dive Laura hopes we will take and then to adapt our reflective understanding to the challenges each of us faces in our leadership roles.

David Berg
Yale School of Medicine

Preface

What we think, we become.

—BUDDHA

We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

—KURT VONNEGUT JR.

Power doesn't corrupt, it reveals.

—ROY HEATH

There are so many models for leadership, so much written. It matters so much to us as human beings who our leaders are. Our well-being, our safety, our ability to reproduce—all primal needs—are in the hands of leaders. Leaders of our countries, companies, religious organizations, schools. How hard this is these days to feel safe in the hands of our leaders. There are so few beacons of light in leadership roles.

Leaders are also feeling the crush of expectations, as is everyone, to be perfect. These expectations have hit an absurd level. People judge others and their leaders in ways they would never want to be judged.

Even so, can't we expect better and more from our leaders? Can't we have leaders who are able to control their egos, manage what power does to them, and find creative ways to transform our organizations, which have been functioning under the same paradigm (a hierarchical capitalist one) for the last few millennia? Can't we do better?

Maybe. I'm not sure.

I've led small organizations or departments for most of my professional life (over 40 years now), starting at 21 in the Khao-I-Dang refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border, where I spent four years working in the International Rescue Committee's Education Program. I left there after serving as the education coordinator for the camp, and

another camp called Sakaao, with a staff of 10 to 20 expatriates and up to 1,000 Cambodian staff members.

My management and leadership journey found me at Yale next, in its master's in public and private management program (later changed to an MBA). The program changed many of my basic understandings of how the world works, layering these ideas on top of an idealism bred by a family of radical social justice activists. I always imagined my father must have thought I was going to the dark side to get an MBA, but it was at least better than becoming a lawyer in his eyes.

After leaving Yale, I became a managing director, chief operating officer, and the head of organizational development for Yale, leading different size staffs at each moment. As I write this book, I'm a managing partner at a small consulting firm, Organizational Performance Group, with a staff of ten who work with leaders of organizations, ranging from Brazilian presidential candidates to three-person nonprofits, trying to improve reading in the inner city.

Throughout my career, I have been a leader who creates strong, often polar, reactions in staff members. *Nice* is not a term that is used to describe me. Not *mean*, but exceptionally direct and quick-witted, expecting those around me to keep up. Having served as a COO and managing director, and focusing on accounting and finance at Yale, then getting a PhD in organizational systems, my mind works quickly. *Demanding* is a term often applied to me, as well as *inspiring* for those who find working with me meaningful. As one of my former staff members said over lunch a few years ago, "Every day, I ask myself, 'What would Laura do?'"

I share this personal journey because I don't think it's easy to be a leader. I have former staff members who hate me, ones who love me, and very few in between. I say things that many leaders might not; I'm open about my opinions and beliefs, and I don't suffer ill-informed comments easily. I studied philosophy at UC Berkeley for my undergraduate degree and excelled in the course on logic, so I want solid arguments, not mush. However, I would say that I have opinions but I avoid judging unless it is called for in a situation.

Most leadership models paint an idealized, walk-on-water type of person as the ideal leader, which leaves us feeling inadequate. The Abundance Leadership model, offered in this book, paints this picture as well because the research shows which leadership behaviors produce

better outcomes for organizations. Models are often ideals, not reality. In our immersion program, the instructional staff spend a great deal of time working with participants on how to accept and work with their “perfect imperfections,” as John Legend says. We also work on how to surround yourself with people who complement your skills and with whom you resonate. I have never seen a reason why a leader should keep someone around if they don’t get along. Really, why? Why spend all that energy navigating a difficult interpersonal fit?

Of course, stating the obvious: we want people around who disagree with us, who question our logic, our math, our impact, but that doesn’t mean we can’t get along with those people. And we certainly don’t want people disagreeing with us all the time.

One of the takeaways of this book is don’t feel bad about populating your top team with people with whom you have a synergy. Just be careful that they represent diverse functional and worldviews.

So leading is a bear. My experience from leading my own teams, and teaching and consulting with thousands of leaders, is that only about 10% of people take to leading and managing naturally, a combination of their innate character, life experiences, and training. This is not based on a rigorous study (which would be an interesting one), just my experience. I’d say there’s another 25% of leaders and managers who learn to enjoy it and get better at it. They study hard, seek out feedback, work on changing their behavior, go back for more feedback, and keep growing. They don’t take it lightly, and they bring their heart and soul to it, leading with compassionate and visionary direction.

All of these leaders, the 35% who get traction—not in terms of money or power but in terms of positive impact on their staff members, their organizations, and their world—work hard to bring their morality, self-awareness, transparency, and deep generosity to the leadership table. Dedicated managers and leaders continually work to create exceptional ecosystems of energy. This is not an easy undertaking, and there are no simple or perfectly right answers. Compassion and generosity help. The Abundance Leadership model encourages this deep courageous leadership.

This book describes the Abundance Leadership model and how it can help you become a better leader, with impact beyond your own organization. The flow of this book is from my background that created the model, to the model itself and the four meta-competencies, then to

ways to make your organization healthier and more abundant. I then provide a how-to manual with detailed tips and techniques for the behaviors of an Abundance leader.

The tools for making your organization healthier are divided into two types: microlevers and macrolevers. Microlevers are small, relatively easy to implement tactics you can use to signal the culture you want to create in your organization. Macrolevers are larger policy and practice changes that require more lift to implement but can profoundly alter your employees' experience and productivity.

If the Abundance Leadership model doesn't resonate for you, I encourage you to find a model that does or blend many models. Models offer us ways to make sense of our world and ways to improve it.

We can make the world better. Let's change old leadership paradigms. Let's spread the wealth. Let's spread knowledge. We are in this together. Chief Seattle, chief of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes, said in a speech, "This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected" (Seattle 2023).

I hope you find encouragement for your journey in this book.



SECTION

Abundance Leadership

Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON

In this section, I share how I came to develop the Abundance Leadership model, based on both in-depth research and my own experience working for others and being a leader. I share this journey for several reasons. Self-awareness and self-reflection are essential habits of Abundance leaders. More important, I hope that you will find time to look back on your professional journey to discover what types of work, what types of bosses, what types of colleagues, and what types of organizations are creating meaning for you in your life. Which of those give you energy and make you feel you are spending your “one precious life” in a way that matters to you?

Exploring your own journey will help you bring your authentic professional (not authentic personal) self to your role as a leader.

CHAPTER 1

My Journey to Abundance Leadership

Your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart to give yourself to it.

—BUDDHA

One day I was in a conversation with a colleague about our families and work. As I described most of my immediate family's jobs and professions, I realized that all of us worked for ourselves. I hadn't thought much about that conversation until I started writing this book and thinking about leadership and how hard leading is. Because of these discussions with my family and the reasons for their self-employment, I became aware of how hard it is to lead in a way that makes work fulfilling for others, and why the Abundance Leadership model emerged from my work experience and my educational journey.

To help myself better understand how I came to think about why an Abundance mental model could be a driving force in good leaders, I reflected on my own work journey to my role today, as a partner at Organizational Performance Group (OPG). Similar to many of you readers, I started work early, at the age of 12, with babysitting and small tasks for neighbors and friends of my parents.

In my mid-teens I had two jobs that have always stayed with me. The first was flipping burgers in a small burger shack at the beach where I grew up, Muir Beach (see Figure 1.1). The burger shack was in a converted trailer. There was often only one of us working at a time. Whoever was there would not only make the burgers but also take the cash, make the milkshakes, clean the counters, and more. I had to serve in all roles at different moments.



FIGURE 1.1 Laura at the window of the burger shack at Muir Beach in 1974, age 15.

SOURCE: Laura Freebairn-Smith (Author).

I remember the burger shack boss being very trusting and gone quite often. I cannot visualize him any longer, but I remember the general effect of being left on my own, which felt both good and a little worrisome.

This ability to develop staff members, sometimes by pushing them to the edge of discomfort, shows up in the Abundance Leadership model.

The second job that I had as a teenager was working in a factory that produced goods for head shops, for about \$1.65/hour. For those of you who are too young to know what a head shop is, it was a store that sold things like roach clips, bongs, rolling papers, posters, and other 1960s and 1970s weed and hippie paraphernalia. This factory produced the roach clips, the bongs, and other items sold in such shops. The factory took up about half a floor of a big building in the industrial area of Sausalito, one of the towns in Northern California where I grew up. The boss was an older man who was neither curmudgeonly nor nice as I recall; he was matter of fact and focused on productivity. I started out filling orders for stores, walking among the shelves full of bins of paraphernalia.