

Perspective on Leading through Uncertain Times

By Michael J. Keegan



Leaders benefit from being grounded, mindful, grateful, and ruthlessly consistent in everything they do.

My goal each week on *The Business of Government Hour* is straightforward: to interview key government executives and thought leaders who are tackling significant challenges and seizing opportunities to lead.

To complement these examples of leadership in action, the show also highlights the practical, actionable research done by some of the most recognized and respected thought leaders. To that end, I have dedicated a series of shows

exploring the qualities, tools, tactics, and mindset that leaders from all sectors may need to navigate unsettling times and transform order out of chaos.

It is from this rich library that I draw on the insights from five authors I have had the pleasure of interviewing over the last several years. These authors—Bob Rosen, Jacqueline Carter, Chester Elton, Michael Canic, and Margaret Heffernan—have helped me recognize and understand that leaders benefit from being grounded, mindful, grateful, and ultimately, ruthlessly consistent in everything they do. This perspective ends with a focus on leadership as a creative act.



Being Grounded

Bob Rosen

Confronted by disruptions such as the pandemic, many of today's leaders find themselves ill equipped to manage the hazards they now face. The gale force winds of change add layers of uncertainty and frustration, but they also underscore the need for effective leaders to be grounded.

Bob Rosen, author of *GROUNDED: How Leaders Stay Rooted in an Uncertain World*, joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to explain the importance of being a grounded leader.

Using the metaphor of a large oak tree, Rosen posits that the only way a leader can withstand the winds of change is by relying on their healthy roots. The roots of the tree



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represent what is inside a leader in terms of values, beliefs, experiences, emotions, and thoughts that define who one is as a person and a leader. Rather than examining only performance outcome metrics, grounded leaders focus on the question “Who are you?” Effective leadership requires a deep, holistic approach to personal and organizational excellence. The bottom line is that leadership is personal, and who we are is a function of how we’re grounded.

When people focus on the roots of who they are, they are better able to align their personal emotions and thoughts with their behaviors. Leaders who pay attention to and develop the roots of their personal health have clarity and honesty about who they are and what they can accomplish. The result is a leadership that is highly personal, deeply grounded, and strong enough to handle the pressures of relentless change.

You can listen to the complete version of my interview with Bob Rosen, author of *GROUNDED: How Leaders Stay Rooted in an Uncertain World*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvXNCdX0Fx4&t=4s>.



Being Mindful

Jacqueline Carter

Leadership pioneer Peter Drucker said, “You cannot manage other people unless you manage yourself first.” Jacqueline Carter, co-author of *The Mind of the Leader*, agrees and joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to affirm how leadership starts with yourself. More specifically, it starts in your mind. By understanding how your mind works, you can lead yourself effectively.

By understanding and leading yourself effectively, you can understand others and be able to lead them more effectively. And by understanding and leading others more effectively, you can understand and lead your organization more effectively—and by “more effectively,” Carter means in a way that is going to tap into your own and your people’s intrinsic motivations and sense of purpose.

Based on the research documented in their book, Carter and her co-author conclusively found that mindfulness stands out as foundational for leaders today. Mindfulness means paying attention, in the present moment, with a calm, focused, and clear mind. Carter says it allows a leader to be present and attentive to what really motivates the people they lead.

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There are two key qualities of mindfulness—focus and awareness. Focus is the ability to concentrate on a task at hand for an extended period with ease. Awareness is the ability to make wise choices about where to focus your attention. Optimal effectiveness is achieved when you’re simultaneously focused and aware. After you have cultivated a greater ability to “be here now,” Carter offers two ways you can apply mindfulness toward enhancing leadership effectiveness: creating personal “touchpoints” and doing less by being more.

According to Carter, it’s about creating human connections to strengthen engagement and increase performance. Leaders have a choice. They can rely on the built-in structures of command and control, or they can facilitate true connectedness, meaningful work experiences that enhances engagement and improve performance. Despite distance, digitalization, and disruption—mindfulness can become the glue that creates true human connections.

You can listen to the complete version of my interview with Jacqueline Carter, co-author of *The Mind of the Leader*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9aOsA4WtZI>.





Being Grateful
Chester Elton

For leaders wanting to attract and retain exceptional talent and better engage their people, authors Chester Elton and Adrian Gostick say the solution might be right under their noses. Showing gratitude to employees is the easiest, fastest, and most inexpensive way to boost performance and transform the way organizations operate.

Leading with Gratitude is filled with practical advice and insights on how to incorporate gratitude into how one leads. COVID-19 and the pandemic response along with the personal and economic impacts of both have really changed the leadership calculus with much discussion on the importance of resiliency and flexibility. Along with being flexible and resilient, leaders must also recognize how this “new normal” is affecting their staff. It is about navigating this uncertain time by emphasizing the importance of expressing gratitude towards those who work, day in and day out, to execute a leaders’ vision.

Chester Elton joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to discuss their book and underscore how leading with gratitude can help both leaders and staff make it through uncertain times.

Elton identifies seven ingratitude myths that are holding leaders back from recognizing the power and value of



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gratitude. These myths create what the authors call the ingratitude gap that chasm between awareness of gratitude’s benefits and the failure of so many leaders to show it properly causing them to withhold thanks when it could be a strategic differentiator.

Every small step toward an organization’s goals and values is worthy of acknowledgement. The ongoing, cumulative effect of small outcomes can be significant. Research finds the single most important factor in boosting motivation in the creative process is when employees feel they are making daily progress in meaningful work. One of the most distinctive attributes of great leaders is they notice and express appreciation for small-scale efforts as much as they celebrate major achievements. This allows them to find ways to inspire all their people to stretch and grow.

By checking in with people and helping them see they’ve made appreciable progress each day, leaders can boost energy levels considerably. Frequent gratitude also gives team members perspective that setbacks aren’t the end of the world and can point out achievements—even small ones—they may have overlooked. Rewarded behavior gets repeated. Delaying expressions of gratitude prevents effective positive reinforcement. Gratitude does not get old if it’s aligned with what the leader and the team value most.

The most important take away of all is that leading with gratitude isn’t just about being nice; it’s about being smart—really smart—and it’s a skill that everyone can easily learn. For some leaders, learning to practice the soft stuff like this might feel too mushy and touchy-feely. But making human connections is the job of leaders, and helping employees feel valued and providing a little boost of joy at work can make a huge difference.

You can listen to the complete version of my interview with author Chester Elton, *Leading with Gratitude*, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAy9h-msyQg>.



Being Ruthlessly Consistent

Michael Canic

This year's unprecedented turmoil has put every leader to the test. The need for focus, alignment, and execution is greater than ever. To adapt, it takes more than just the will to win. It demands the will to do what it takes to win. This is no time for wavering or wobbling. This is a time for ruthless consistency.

To be ruthlessly consistent, an effective leader must do three things according to author Michael Canic: Develop the right focus, create the right environment, and build the right team. Most of all, leaders must do all three consistently. Canic joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to explore why leaders should pursue ruthless consistency.

He notes every case of failure he came across could be traced to inconsistency. He saw unsuccessful companies forming quality improvement teams but didn't give people the authority to make changes. They set goals but didn't provide the resources to achieve them. They promoted quality, but if managers hit their financial targets, then quality did not matter. The difference between success and failure was ruthless consistency.

During our conversation, Canic offered the following advice to become a ruthlessly consistent leader:



An effective leader must develop the right focus, create the right environment, and build the right team.

- Developing and sustaining the right focus is key to being a ruthlessly consistent leader. Be sure that everyone in your organization understands what you're striving to accomplish, why you've chosen those goals, and how you plan to reach them. Communicate clearly on what you expect of each of your team members to get there.
- If you create the right environment, you're providing a space that enables your team to perform at their absolute best. An ideal winning environment is one in which employees feel equipped, coached, supported, and valued.
- Choosing the right team is critical to a winning strategy. Focus your hiring efforts on more than just knowledge, skills, and experience. Be sure to look for the traits associated with winning in potential employees—like taking initiative, persevering through challenges, and being resilient in the face of change.

As a leader, you need to have the right commitment to being ruthlessly consistent. For Canic, ruthless consistency doesn't mean robotic repetition. It's not about mechanical activity performed without variation or creativity. He is not suggesting we submit to the tyranny of consistency. It's more important to have a consistency of purpose that's constantly reflected in your decisions and actions. It means that everything you do is consistently aligned with your purpose and your intentions. The relentless alignment of intentions, decisions, and actions is the foundation of success.

According to Canic, a ruthlessly consistent leader has an uncompromising commitment to their stated purpose. Fulfilling that commitment requires a leader to understand, encourage, and reinforce the human spirit, not squash it. Make no apologies for ruthless consistency. It doesn't mean being inflexible or inhuman. It means being committed and effective.

You can listen to the complete version of my interview with author Michael Canic: Develop the right focus, create the right environment, and build the right team, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIXvbT5Klvi>.



Leadership and Creativity

Margaret Heffernan

In her book, *Uncharted: How to Navigate the Future*, Margaret Heffernan noted that the “work of artists endures because they dare to imagine what they can’t see and allow their minds to leave predetermined paths.” I had the pleasure of interviewing Margaret on *The Business of Government Hour* to discuss her book and the many cogent leadership insights it offers. She counsels that though we may not all be artists we need their independence and stamina. Today’s leaders can learn much from such wisdom, especially when leading in uncertain times where independence seems so sorely missing and stamina so integral to long term success.

Heffernan continues that if artists have the capacity to make work that defies time, it is because instead of trying to force-fit a predetermined idea of the future, they have learned to live productively with ambiguity, to see it as a rich source of discovery and exploration. “Instead of trying to reduce complexity,” she points out, “they mine it, undaunted by contradictions and paradoxes.”

I came across an interview with a medical doctor turned sculptor named Dr. Gindi. The insights she shares dovetail perfectly with those outlined in *Uncharted* and resonate more so because they come directly from an artist. I wanted to highlight some of them, all attributed to a very telling interview conducted by Grant Schreiber linked herein.

- Leaders [that] can perceive the world around them with a slightly detached outlook that considers themselves part of a broader reality, in a highly imaginary way. Then, on returning to reality, leaders can—like a sculptor’s



Leaders are like sculptors who give life to an otherwise supine clump of clay.

mold that casts an artwork— authoritatively present bold, new ideas. With regular, critical self-reflection and creative destruction of the obvious, leaders can advance and create real value for many stakeholders—customers, employees, and investors.

- Leaders are like sculptors who give life to an otherwise supine clump of clay. Leadership is always nonlinear in the beginning and transformational at the end. If leaders adopt a combination of thinking and feeling—a process that allows creative intuition into a business—they can achieve ongoing creativity and sustainability.
- Art can shock while it speaks to the observer. When explaining things to a broader audience, leaders should take care not to appear to be promoting a fantasy, but rather, persuading and enlightening.
- Real leaders strive to create value that lasts a very long time—even forever. They should inspire others to launch themselves rhapsodically into the future while remaining predicated in the present. Leaders need to sail ahead, testing the winds, currents, and tides of these challenging times.

Going Forward

Leaders are responsible for envisioning, shaping, and safeguarding the future, creating clarity amidst uncertainty. This is no small feat, and it is made increasingly difficult in the twenty-first century, where rapid, unforeseen change seems to be the only constant. We are in the midst of an exciting, engaging, yet trying period marked by uncertainty, significant challenges, undeniable opportunities, and indelible aspirations. Today’s most effective government leaders can spark the imagination to look beyond the day-to-day urgencies and reflect on the serious problems and critical challenges they face and inculcating these four qualities may help these leaders be successful.

You can listen to the complete version of my interview with Margaret Heffernan, author of *Uncharted: How to Navigate the Future*, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIhJcRcc_w.