



# Building Organizational Elasticity



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# Introduction

Throughout my career I have worked in over a dozen companies. Some were highly successful, well-oiled machines. Others were messy and dysfunctional; treading water and ready for a turnaround. However, most were somewhere in between. I have worked for large multinational companies, as well as “mom and pops.” Well-known publicly traded companies, and tightly held private ones. For-profit and non-profit. Upstart start-ups and well-heeled incumbents. In that time, I have sat in every seat from unpaid intern to the C-suite. Mailroom to the boardroom. That experience, all of it, has given me tons of time, opportunity, and perspective to think about why some teams and organizations continually rise to meet new challenges while so many others flounder at the slightest disruption.

In order to be sustainably successful, a team needs more than competence, collegiality, and good intentions. It needs leaders that are willing to do all that they can to build a culture and environment that can support and sustain the ideal conditions for high performance and continuous improvement.

We call such teams, *elastic* teams because they can literally stretch to meet any challenge where others might bend, fold, or even break. This coursebook is a *very* brief overview of the concept, culled from the work I have done throughout my career building several high-growth organizations as well as work I have done with clients to help them do the same. It is, in essence, the core of my leadership and personal philosophy and I am excited to share it with you.

Lastly, as you read this, be sure to suspend your disbelief. Because, as they say, if you don't keep an open mind, new things can't get in.

## Law of Elasticity

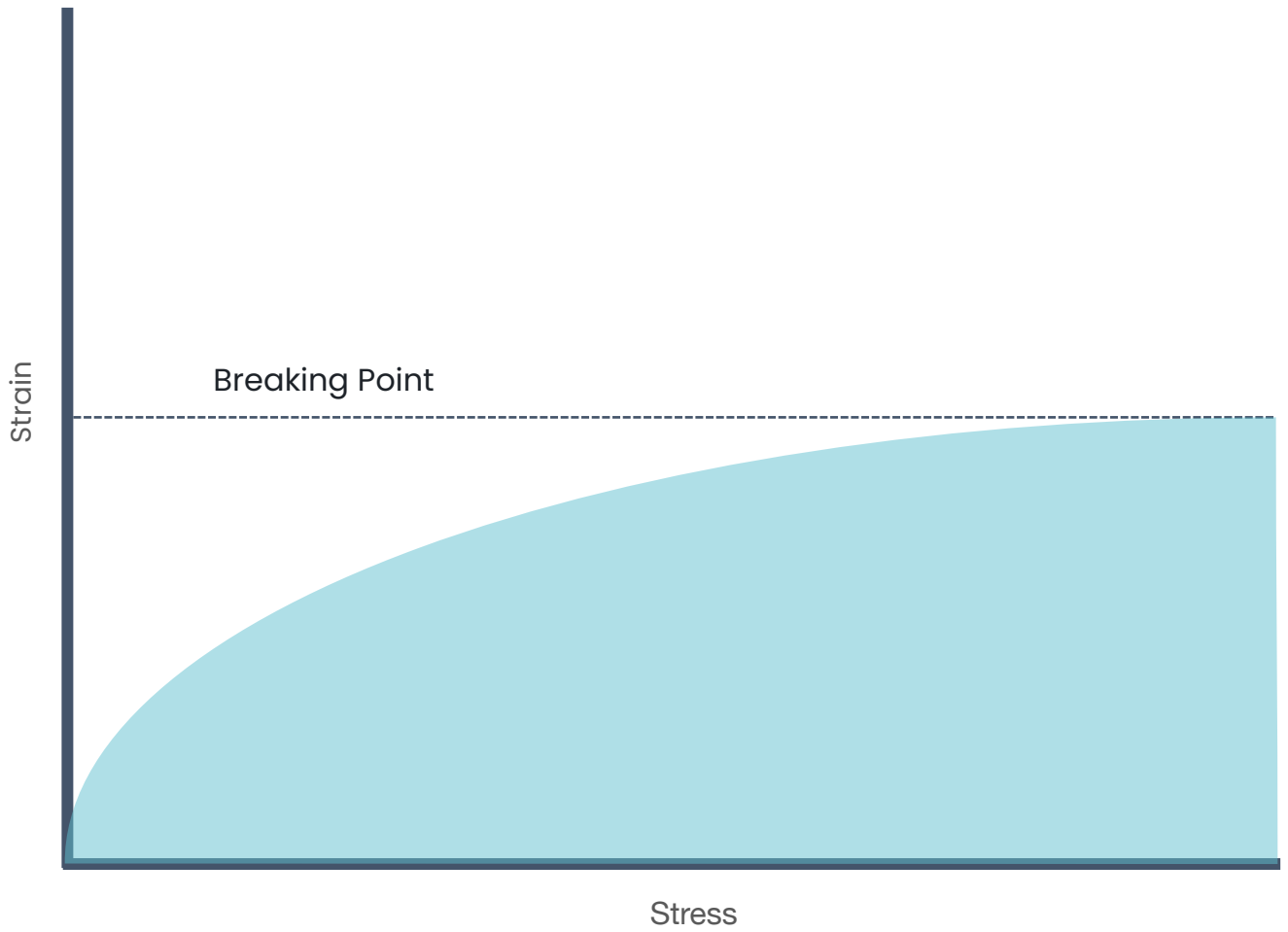
In physics and materials science, *elasticity* is the ability of a body to resist a distorting influence and to return to its original size and shape when that influence or force is removed. In other words, it's a thing's ability to bend and stretch before it breaks.

This is an instructive metaphor for organizations as well. Imagine that an organization or team has a certain amount of innate elasticity, or flexion, before it reaches a breaking point. Then, given the stress, uncertainty, complexity, and overall pace of our lives, it would intuitively seem that an organization would need a very high elasticity in order to be successful.

In fact, over the long run it can be said that whatever level of elasticity a company has had to get to where it is, it will *always* need more because what got you here, cannot get you there. Extrapolate this point and you quickly realize that to be successful in the long run, an organization's elasticity would have to approach infinity!

The trouble is, elasticity is difficult to assess because leaders are likely to equate the mere fact of an organization's existence to its inherent elasticity. But surviving and thriving are two wholly different things. Some animals are on the endangered list while others are completely unthreatened. While you may be able to see both animals side by side in a zoo or even nature today, it doesn't mean that in a generation you still will. The same is true of organizations, which is why we need to assess forward. How well our organization has responded to past challenges should give us some confidence that we can respond to future ones, but it's not the same. If you've ever seen a balloon expand greatly before it popped, you understand this idea.

# Law of Elasticity



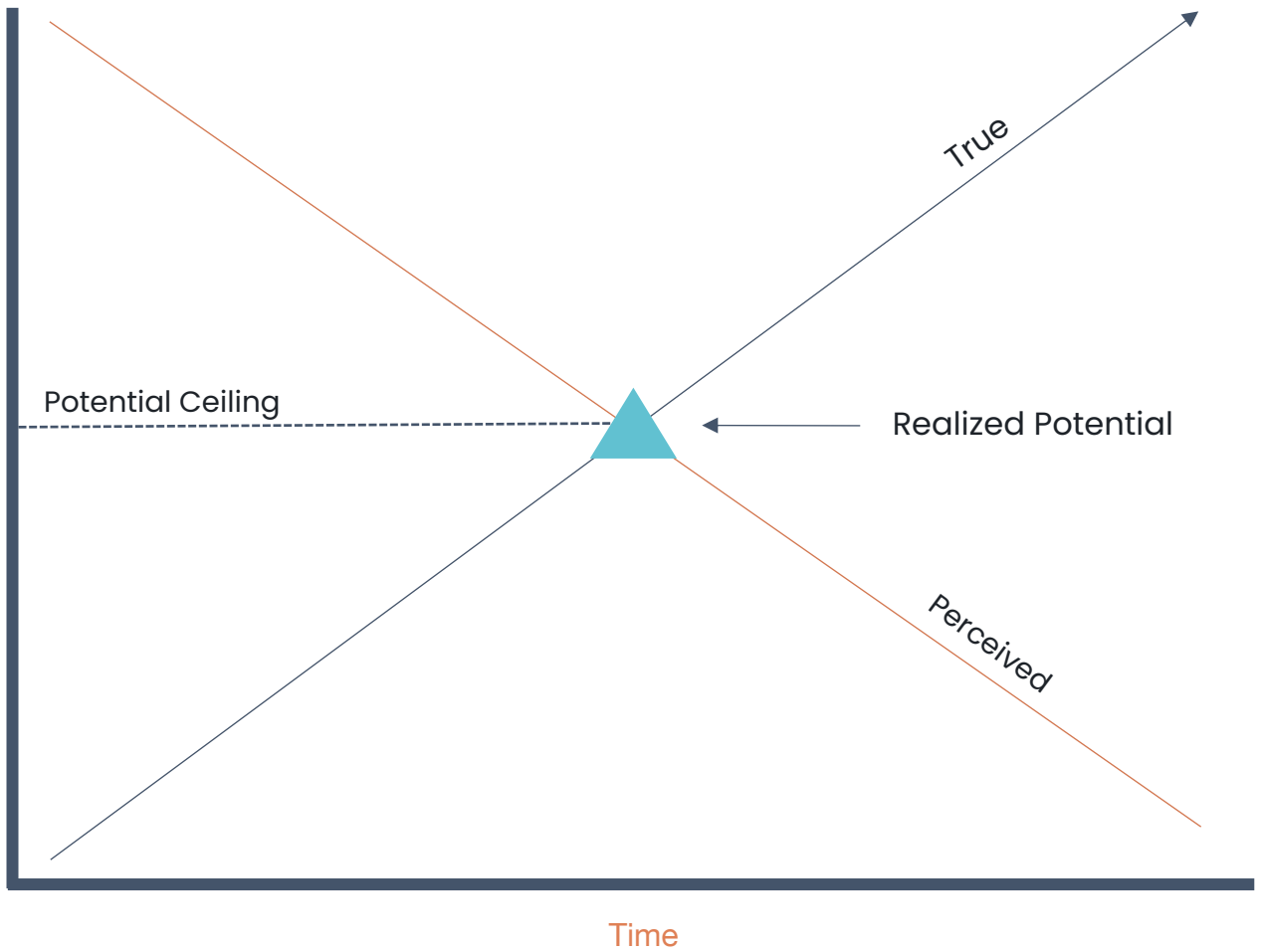
## Law of Fulfilled Potential

For an organization to increase its elasticity, its leader, or more importantly leaders, must believe in the same concepts on a personal level, which brings a very similar metaphor to mind. We use elasticity to talk about organizations because, like materials we would study in physics, organizations can and do break once they have reached their limit. It may be evidenced in attrition, burnout, lower morale, or ultimately total shutdown, but they do break. At the organizational level, the breakpoint is more observable because there are many more clues. But individuals hit their breakpoints too, though the clues are less obvious and the result, therefore, more insidious.

While individuals don't break down in quite the same way as organizations, they may find that over the long-run they have unfulfilled potential which can show up as resentment, unambitious goals, fear of failure, and imposter syndrome among other things. The longer you live below your potential, the lower you perceive your potential to be. And the lower you perceive your potential, the longer you live below it. Your lowered performance and your perception of it will essentially erect a false ceiling over your *true* potential. This is especially tragic because typically, over time we develop more skill, expertise, and wisdom than we had initially, which should *increase* our capacity or potential. But if we don't perceive it as such, our true potential will only grow wider and wider from our perceived or observed potential.

There is an inverse relationship between true potential and perceived potential, kind of like the supply and demand curve you learn in Economics 101. We are born assuming we can do everything, but as we age and have setbacks, our perceived potential decreases over time. However, at the same time, our true potential grows over time. As we age, we know more, can do more and have enough context to know when to do it. This inverse relationship is a tragedy because, over time, the delta between what we are capable of doing and what we *actually* do grows wider and wider until all we can do is regret.

# Law of Fulfilled Potential





# Cultivating Growth Mindsets

Raising your perceived potential level to the level of your true potential would have a profound effect on your leadership potential, which would in turn have a profound impact on your team. The idea that you are not only so much more than you have been but will also continue to improve is almost intoxicating. It compels you to do more and to enjoy the journey along the way. This is precisely why leaders need to embrace this concept and model it, to boost the almost viral effects.

The key to making that realization, however, is by embracing a growth mindset. One that views past failures as lessons and sees future potential as unlimited. Success becomes a journey rather than a destination which is what builds the first principle of elasticity. The curve slopes upward toward infinity. It never flattens, and it may even steepen. You simply get more accustomed to the incline and learn to adapt to each new challenge rather than seeking the pleasure and comfort of escaping challenges altogether.

Transitioning from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset is not a suggestion or mere “best practice” for building elastic organizations. It is the fundamental law. If you don’t believe that you can grow and evolve, you won’t. And no amount of clever management tips, tricks, or apps will overcome that fact.

What is a growth mindset? In a nutshell, the belief that a person’s most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point. Resilience, grit, and love of learning are the true essential ingredients for great accomplishment.

Breaking out of a fixed mindset can be hard especially since almost no one realizes the extent to which they have one, but here are some ways to do it:

- View failures as learning opportunities, and challenges as growth opportunities
- Keep the big picture and your purpose in mind
- Incorporate the phrase “yet” in your vocabulary
- Seek constructive criticism
- Reflect on your growth often to cultivate the appetite for more

# Two Mind Sets

## FIXED MINDSET

Intelligence is static

Leads to a desire to look smart and therefore a tendency to...



## GROWTH MINDSET

Intelligence can be developed

Leads to a desire to learn and therefore a tendency to...

### Challenges

Avoid challenges



Embrace challenges



### Obstacles

Give up easily



Persist in the face of setbacks



### Effort

See effort as fruitless or worse



See efforts the path to mastery



### Criticism

Ignore useful negative feedback



Learn from criticism



### Success of Others

feel threatened by the success of others



Find lessons and inspiration in the success of others



As a result, they may plateau early and achieve less than their full potential. All this confirms a deterministic view of the world

As a result, they reach even higher levels of achievement. All this gives them a greater sense of free will.

# Imposter Syndrome

As you embrace a growth mindset and work to build your personal elasticity, you will undoubtedly grow and achieve more. Unfortunately, when that happens (and it certainly will), many of us will start to question if it's real and doubt the validity of the very accomplishments we worked so hard to achieve.

Imposter syndrome is loosely defined as doubting your abilities and feeling like a fraud. It disproportionately affects high-achieving people who find it difficult to accept their accomplishments. Its telltale signs are:

- An inability to realistically assess your competence and skills
- Attributing your success to external factors
- Berating your performance
- Fear that you won't live up to expectations
- Overachieving
- Sabotaging your own success
- Self-doubt
- Setting very challenging goals and feeling disappointed when you fall short

Ultimately, when this happens, we have to work to overcome the feeling that we haven't earned our place or that our accomplishments are somehow "illegitimate". This type of thinking is precisely the type that pulls us below our true potential, and sometimes keeps us there.

Questions to reflect on to help overcome imposter syndrome:

- What skills do I know I have?
- Who am I comparing myself to and why? Is it even a fair comparison?
- What core beliefs do I hold about myself?
- If I were looking at myself as a co-worker, which skills of mine would I most admire?

As you get more comfortable in your own skin and feel that you've earned the success you have, you'll find it easier to achieve your true potential because you will have removed one of the biggest impediments to your success - your own inner monologue. And that alone can multiply your personal elasticity.

## Leveraging Strengths

Many of us grow up believing that success means being significantly better than average at *everything*. It's an unfortunate consequence of our educational system that praises "straight A's" above everything. Generalism is valued earlier and more highly than deep talent or mastery. The problem is that, because of this, a student who got A's in English, Math, and Art would be valedictorian even if they went to school with Shakespeare, Einstein, and Da Vinci. However, in the long run, that student would be forgotten at worst, and at best would be the kid who went to school with Shakespeare, Einstein, and Da Vinci!

In the long run, life rewards mastery. Real, practiced skills outlast mere exposure but many of us don't realize that until we've spent our lives and careers still trying to get straight A's and build well-rounded resumes and gain broad exposure. We think we're polymaths or multi-hyphenates when, in reality, we're just dabbling and wasting time that could have been spent building and refining a core skill (or set of them) that would facilitate our growth in perpetuity.

This might be the most controversial section because it counters conventional wisdom, but our power doesn't lie in our ability to assemble a general set of skills and fit in. It depends on our ability to leverage our strengths and deepen our core skills so that we can stand out. Finding out what makes us valuable and providing more of that is the real key to sustained growth and success.

So much of the anxiety, disengagement, and dissatisfaction in our corporate culture can be traced back to this. We need to stop teaching dogs to be cats, and instead allow people to bring their whole selves and learn to build more of that, starting with ourselves.

# Leveraging Strengths

Ask one family member, one friend, and one coworker to tell you about a time you were at your best. Ask them to be as descriptive as possible, citing as many specifics as they can recall.

1

## BEST SELF PORTRAITS

Research shows that the portrait of who we are at our best is compiled over time based on how we understand the strengths, contributions, and enduring talents that we bring to the situations in our lives, based largely on our perceptions of how others, including family members, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, see us.

2

## BROADEN AND BUILD

The experience of seeing oneself at one's best through the eyes of others unleashes powerful positive emotions such as hope, joy, and gratitude, that are demonstrated to broaden people's mindsets and shift their actions, creating openness to new ideas, new projects or endeavors, and new possibilities for the future.

3

## HIGH-QUALITY CONNECTIONS

The RBSE links us with valued others in our lives. Research documents the powerful need human beings have for enduring, affirmative personal connections that provide a sense of belonging and serve as sources of support.

4

## SELF EFFICACY

Seeing who we are at our best unlocks a belief that we can make things happen through our own efforts, fostering our initiative and drive and fueling our sense of efficacy to persevere in the face of difficulty.

5

## PROACTIVE CHANGE

The RBSE helps us see the kinds of tasks, relationships, and places that bring out who we are at our best, making us more likely to proactively seek out and create the situations that sustain us living and working from our best daily.

6

## SUSTAINABLE WELL-BEING

The opportunity to see ourselves at our best through the eyes of others taps into vitality, energy, and engagement that fuels optimal performance, creativity, healthy functioning, and sustained well-being.

Learning

Technology

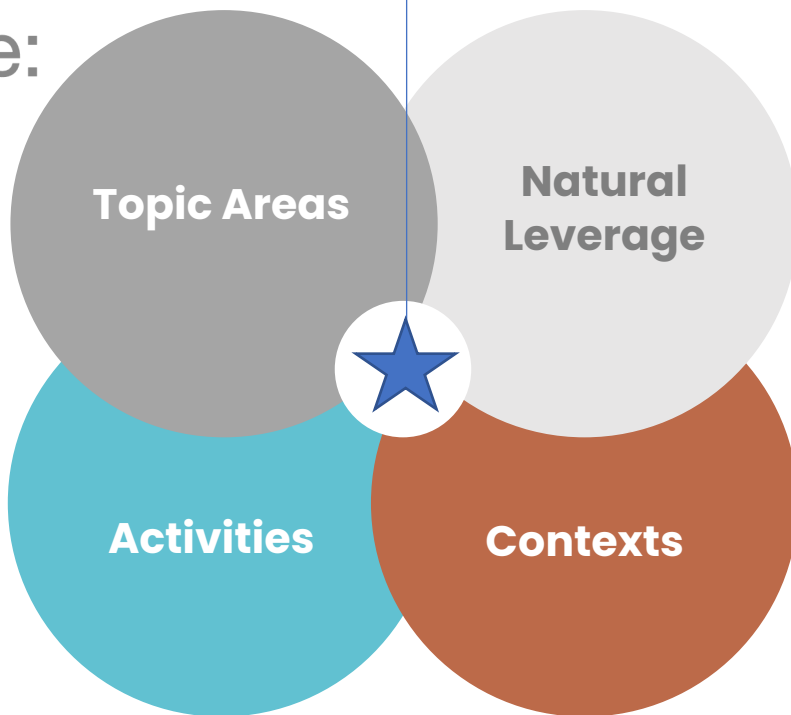
Health

Happiness

Speaking / Presenting

**Best Self**

Example:



Sharing Knowledge

Working toward a vision

Connecting with people

Team Building

1 on 1 / small groups

# Tapping Into Intrinsic Motivation

The path of perpetual growth is not an easy one. Definitionally, seeking growth is to seek discomfort when we are hard-wired to do almost the exact opposite. No amount of money, promotions, or pizza parties will be enough to sustain this without a heavy dose of intrinsic motivation.

As we raise awareness of our strengths, believe in our ability to grow, seek our purpose, work autonomously and build mastery, our lives become fuller and more satisfying, and as a result, we tend to seek more purpose, autonomy, and mastery.

Who am I really? What am I trying to accomplish here? How do I apply my intrinsic motivation to succeed at my goals? Crafting a short and long-term vision is key to avoiding burnout and creating a feeling of purpose. Identifying and using an intrinsic motivation to create a vision makes the pursuit of it more sustainable in the long run. If we learn how we motivate ourselves, we can help others learn to motivate themselves, which helps us align our work with our motivation and therefore accomplish more. Work becomes an expression of who we are rather than a mask we wear that obscures who we are.

As a thought exercise, consider your five most important values or guiding principles:

- How do you currently apply those values to your work and what you are trying to achieve?
- Have you ever set a personal vision?
- What is it and how much progress have you made?
- Whether or not you have been successful, what do you attribute the current situation?

# Tapping Into Intrinsic Motivation

Abundance  
Acceptance  
Accountability  
Achievement  
Advancement  
Adventure  
Advocacy  
Ambition  
Appreciation  
Attractiveness  
Autonomy  
Balance  
Being the Best  
Benevolence  
Boldness  
Brilliance  
Calmness  
Caring  
Challenge  
Charity  
Cheerfulness  
Cleverness  
Community  
Commitment  
Compassion  
Cooperation  
Collaboration  
Consistency  
Contribution  
Creativity  
Credibility  
Curiosity

Daring  
Decisiveness  
Dedication  
Dependability  
Diversity  
Empathy  
Encouragement  
Enthusiasm  
Ethics  
Excellence  
Expressiveness  
Fairness  
Family  
Friendships  
Flexibility  
Freedom  
Fun  
Generosity  
Grace  
Growth  
Flexibility  
Happiness  
Health  
Honesty  
Humility  
Humor  
Inclusiveness  
Independence  
Individuality  
Innovation  
Inspiration  
Intelligence

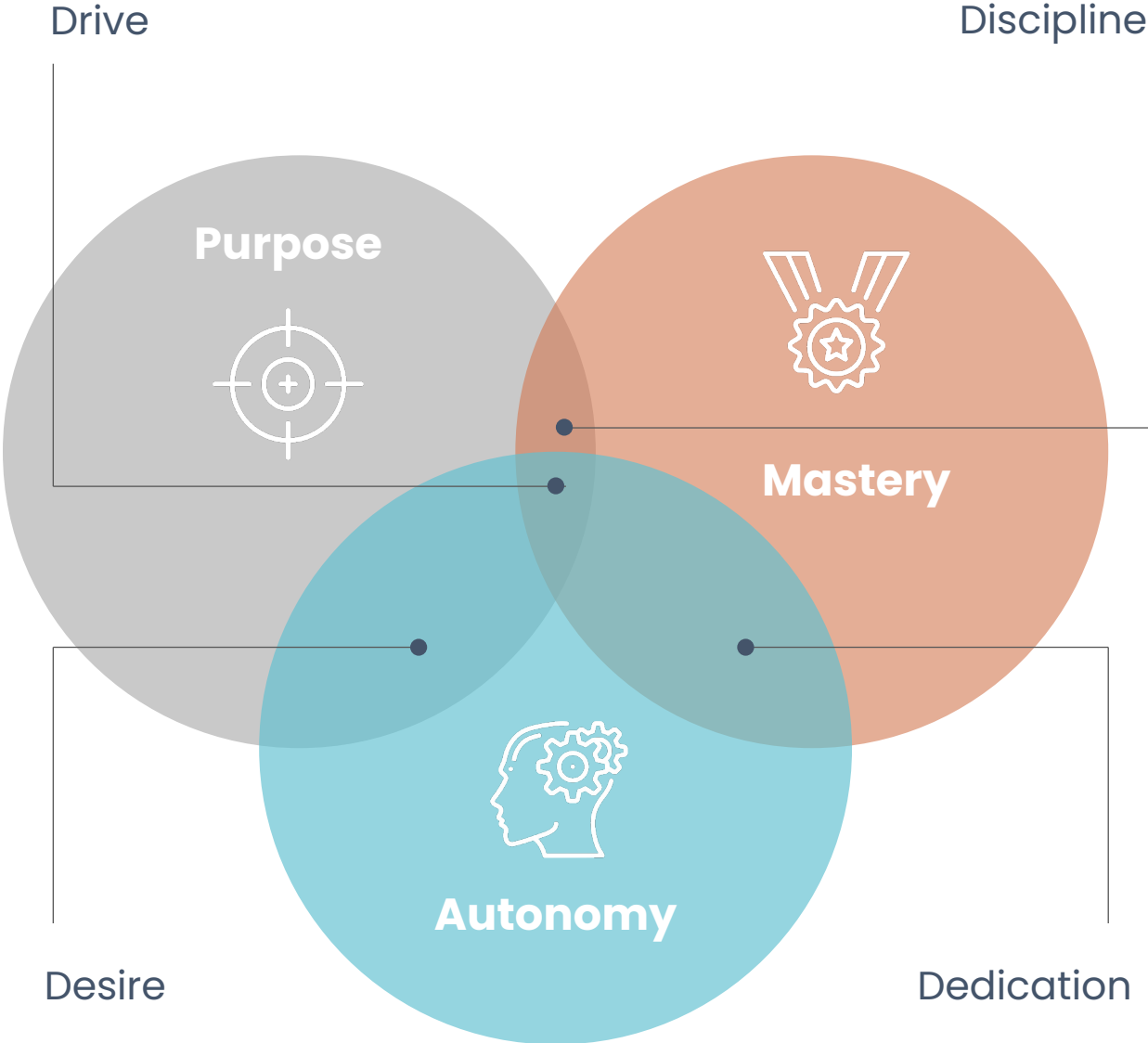
Intuition  
Joy  
Kindness  
Knowledge  
Leadership  
Learning  
Love  
Loyalty  
Making a Difference  
Mindfulness  
Motivation  
Optimism  
Open-Mindedness  
Originality  
Passion  
Performance  
Personal Development  
Proactive  
Professionalism  
Quality  
Recognition  
Risk Taking  
Safety  
Security  
Service  
Spirituality  
Stability  
Peace  
Perfection  
Playfulness  
Popularity  
Power

Preparedness  
Proactivity  
Professionalism  
Punctuality  
Recognition  
Relationships  
Reliability  
Resilience  
Resourcefulness  
Responsibility  
Responsiveness  
Security  
Self-Control  
Selflessness  
Simplicity  
Stability  
Success  
Teamwork  
Thankfulness  
Thoughtfulness  
Traditionalism  
Trustworthiness  
Understanding  
Uniqueness  
Usefulness  
Versatility  
Vision  
Warmth  
Wealth  
Well-Being  
Wisdom  
Zeal



# The Three Key Components of Intrinsic Motivation

Pink's Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose Framework



## Creating and Maintaining Energy

Performing consistently at a very high level requires a ton of energy. Even reading and reflecting on these pages is an investment of time and energy that could have gone somewhere else, which is essentially the tradeoff a leader makes with each and every moment. This means three things – they need a ton of energy in reserve, they need to manage the energy they have well, and when they invest it, they need a high return on that investment.

Aside from your personal journey to build elasticity, in a world plagued by anxiety and burnout, learning how to overcome or altogether prevent these issues is key. Think back to when you were young, or even the original goals you set when achieving your self-motivation. What was your source of motivation before? What is it now?

Often our sources of motivation become driven by imposed urgency or external factors of motivation: praise, salary raise, or social status. What if those factors stopped existing? How would you motivate yourself? What drives you internally vs. what pushes you externally?

Make a list of your drives, and your pushes, and think of ways that you can reconcile both lists.

# Optimizing Touchpoints

Building a growth-minded, success-oriented, elastic organization is, by its very nature, a massive cultural shift that requires a ton of maintenance. During the years I have spent coaching and managing executives I have continually found that one of the biggest missed opportunities is in leveraging their touchpoints with their teams. Most executives have a full calendar of rote meetings – standups, check-ins, updates, reviews – all filled with monotonous noise, typically indistinguishable from one another.

Some executives try to use these meetings to engage, but they do it in one of three ways:

- *The Micromanager*: asking tons of minutiae and derailing the presentation while the team answers every question and tap dances around the ones they can't
- *The Intimidator*: rather than asking questions, they simply make faces and scowl so that everyone is trying to guess what they are thinking rather than focusing on the meeting
- *The Cheerleader*: dropping in just to tell the team they're doing a great job, whether it's true or not, because they're trying to boost morale in the best way they know how

I'd rather take a more deliberate approach to meeting. At any gathering of my team whether 1-on-1, small group, executive meeting, or town hall, I try to do four things – teach, coach, motivate, and direct. I may not do all four in every meeting, but I am deliberate and purposeful about where and when I do each. This reminds me to think before I speak, choose my words carefully, and focus on clarity in my delivery.



## Managing Your Sphere

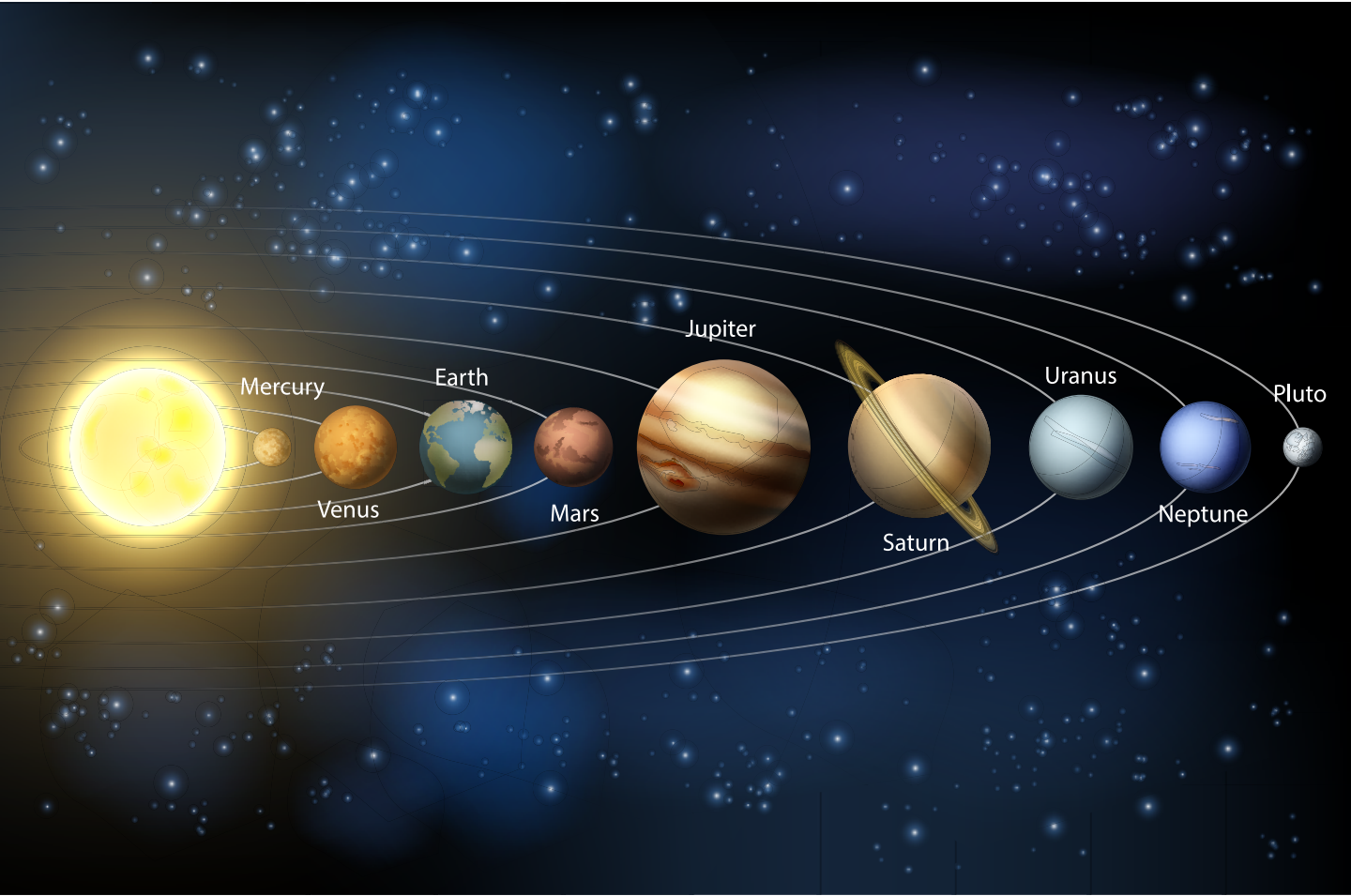
Often, as my clients and teams really begin to embrace these concepts and truly “press in” they see extraordinary growth and change, as well as the potential for much more. Unfortunately, this is also when some fear begins to set in as they worry about how they will scale the culture beyond themselves and a handful of enthusiastic teammates to include the entire organization which can be tens, hundreds, or even thousands of people.

No matter the size of the organization, which will soon be large, it can feel overwhelming to employ these concepts consistently and at scale. This is a high-touch, high-maintenance approach, not for the set-it-and-forget-it crowd that wants to delegate everything and ride on cruise control. You can’t drop this in a memo or an all-hands announcement and “let it ride.” It’s not a new tech implementation or an office relocation. It’s much deeper than that and must be managed as such. So, when faced with the challenge of being present for tens, hundreds, or even thousands of employees, it can feel intimidating to think that you won’t have time for anything else if you assume this approach!

This is exactly why we advocate the solar system approach for managing teams. Recall what you learned from 5<sup>th</sup>-grade science. Our solar system is centered around the sun, it’s massive enough to keep our 8 planets in orbit and each of those planets in turn has between 1 and 82 (!) moons to keep in orbit. So long as the sun (leader) does its job, the planets (team) can do theirs, and so on. Hold yourself accountable to role modeling these concepts, ideas, and practices for your core team, and allow them to do the same for theirs. If you do this well, you won’t have to compel them. They will want it and will be willing to make the same efforts and sacrifice to attain it and may teach you even more in the process.

# Solar System

# Solar System



## Measuring What Matters

So much of what we have been taught about success was centered around setting and achieving discrete goals. Success was then binary. If I hit the mark, I passed, and if I didn't, I failed. Fast forward to now and nearly all the performance literature is simply hacks on how to achieve more discrete goals faster. But the underlying methodology is still the same. Set a discrete target, aim for it, and fire. If you hit it, repeat. And if you didn't, try it again but maybe this time with a slightly bigger or lower target. What's worse is that whether you hit the goal or not, after a brief assessment you feel empty either way. Whether disappointed that you missed the target, or melancholy that all the goal did was reveal another.

The elasticity principle requires that we abandon this reliance on goals and become less goal-oriented in general. Said another way, we need to abandon all the resolution type goals and replace them with one – growth. As paradoxical as that sounds, goals, while giving the illusion of growth and achievement, can actually be the enemy of real growth. We aim at the wrong things, we get risk averse and fearful, we get complacent, or worse, arrogant. Growth, on the other hand, keeps us humble and hungry. We embrace risk as a part of the process, failure helps us learn and we continually aim higher rather than lower.

Because of this, rather than discrete goals, growth requires that we develop goal *systems* – the patterns, rituals, and exercises that we reasonably expect will help us achieve goals. They are more durable, effective, and important than goals in and of themselves.





Losing 10 pounds is a goal. Working out regularly, tracking meals, and drinking 8 glasses of water a day is a goal *system* that will likely make you healthier than a discrete weight goal.

Becoming a millionaire is a goal. Contributing the maximum to your 401K, living within a budget, and meeting quarterly with a financial planner is a *system* that will likely make you wealthier and more financially literate than a discrete dollar goal.

Breaking 90 in golf is a goal. Going to the driving range twice a week, playing once a week, and working with a coach is a *system* that will likely help you enjoy the game more than a discrete score goal.

Organizations will always have goals, but goals alone are not enough. We need systems that will put us in the position to grow, thereby achieving not only our discrete goals but so much more.

# Example:

Goal	In-Process KPI	Output KPI
 See	Reach > 50% of population Keep Share of Voice 60%	Grow top-of-mind awareness +5% pts
 Think	Reach 100% of people showing some commercial intent	Grow branded searches +10 pts
 Do	Reach 100% of people showing some commercial intent	Grow topline revenue +20% at >0% profitability
 Care	Reach 100% of existing customers	Get .>20% of existing customers to repeat purchase

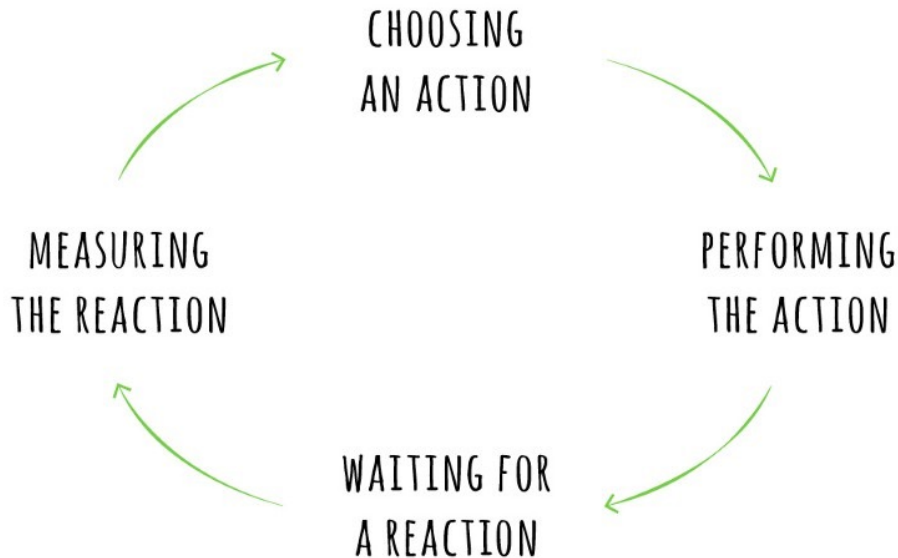
With a clear goal or purpose, and the right in-process metrics, the output takes care of itself.



## Feedback Loops

An effective feedback loop should be a drive rather than a push. For example, how do you ask for feedback in ways that motivate you and create clear guidelines for growth, rather than just a fear of getting fired? Seek out productive feedback so that it's not just pass/fail or good/bad, but a format of feedback that becomes a driver.

You need to:



# Valley of Despair

Whenever we embark on any sort of meaningful change or disruption in our lives, there is an inevitable sequence of feelings and emotions that usually tend to follow.

Initially, we are naively optimistic – only seeing the potential upsides and none of the down. Now, largely, this is probably more a result of ignorance than myopia because at this point we frankly *don't know* the downsides. But even in cases where we might, this trend tends to hold.

After some time, experience will eventually reveal those downsides and our inexperience may make us feel ill-equipped to handle them. After enough of those challenges, it will begin to get harder to see the upside that we initially saw in our naïve zeal. Worse, we may begin to extrapolate our current experience off into the infinite future, ignoring the possibility of anything better or even different. This phase, often called the “valley of despair” is an important one because it is often where exciting new possibilities go to die. This is precisely where many of us quit to try something newer and shinier only to revert to the first stage and repeat the entire sequence all over again.

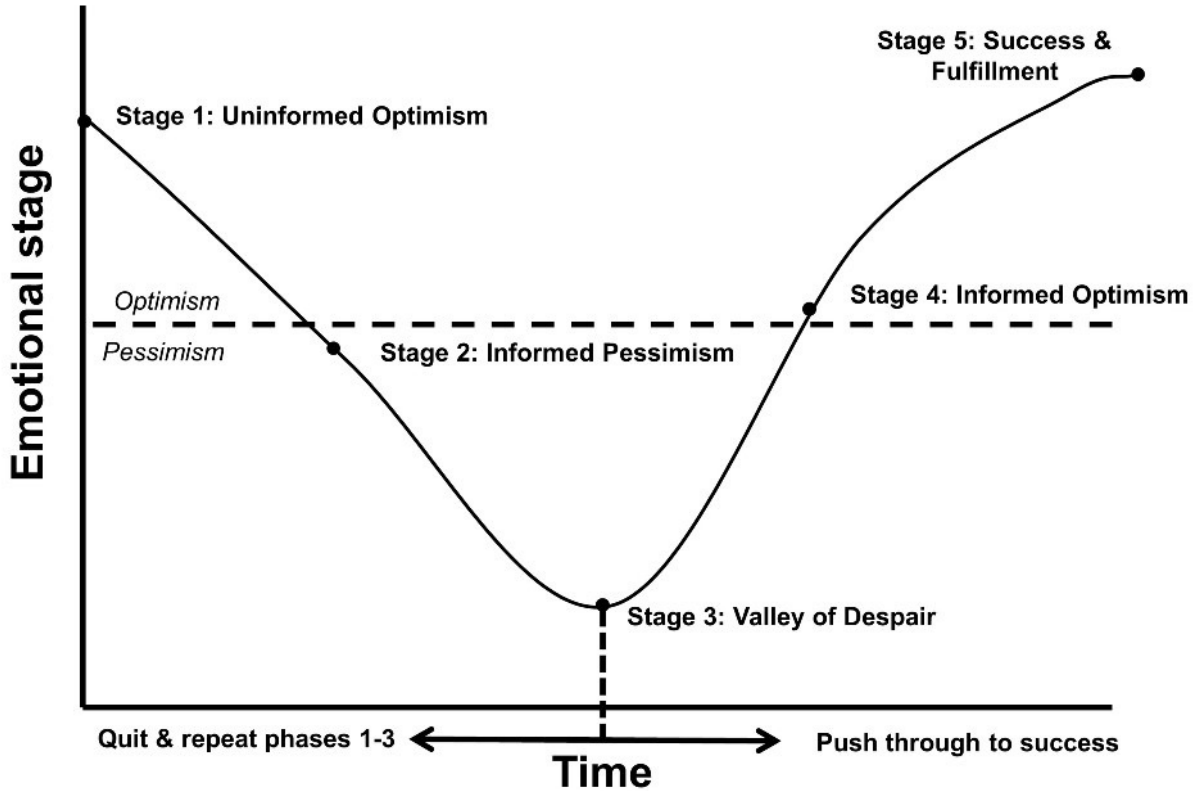
You can see this play out on any high school campus on the first day of school. Freshman are nervous but optimistic. Sophomores are a bit more jaded and somewhat more informed. Juniors are coming out of the valley and beginning to see the hope of being a senior in short order. And seniors have figured out the game and want to milk their last year for all it's worth so that they can go off to college...to start the whole process over again!

A difference is that, in school, the process is mandated to an extent. People tend to ride it out in greater numbers than they might otherwise have and, while every organization will face this phenomenon, not every organization has that same type of leverage. As leaders, we must recognize three things:

1. This is an inevitable phenomenon that every organization must contend with
2. At any given point, people can be at different points along this curve
3. Our role is to be aware of it and to help guide our teams through the valley by focusing them on what is on the other side

# Valley of Despair

## The Emotional Cycle of Change



## Going Forward

Building organizational elasticity is challenging. It is uncomfortable, relentless, and perpetual. If you begin this pursuit, you are, by definition, heading toward a destination that you can never reach. Don't let that discourage you because the benefits of constant growth are endless and well worth the effort. Imagine if every new challenge was met with excitement and optimism rather than fear and anxiety. Imagine all the confidence, trust, and skill you and your team would gain by facing those challenges head-on. Imagine how well-positioned you will be when competing against organizations that don't embrace this philosophy.

Hopefully, that is motivation enough to begin this journey. But even if it isn't, consider this - you really don't have a choice. More than at any other time perhaps in human existence in this world, it really is grow or die. If you aren't growing, you're decaying. Period. I'd rather have that realization, own it, and grow proactively, deliberately, and purposefully on my own terms, than get dragged, kicking and screaming, by the reality of my situation.

I wish you the best on your journey to build more elasticity in yourself and your teams! Email me at [aaron@aaronmontgomery.com](mailto:aaron@aaronmontgomery.com) to share any insights or to discuss any of these concepts further.

# Helpful Resources

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## About Aaron

Aaron Montgomery is the Managing Partner of The Montgomery Development Group, an investment firm. Prior to his current role, Aaron was Chief Strategy Officer of Mission Lane, a *Forbes* Top 50 FinTech, and Co-Founder of CarLotz (NASDAQ: LOTZ), a disruptive innovation in the used automotive retail market. And, prior to that, he was a consultant at McKinsey & Co. and a sales executive at Kiva Systems, a robotics company that was acquired by Amazon in 2012.

In addition to his work as an investor, Aaron is also an author, speaker, and instructor. He recently finished his first book, *Suspend Your Disbelief*, as a giveback to the next generation by sharing stories from his life and career. He also teaches Leadership and Strategy at The PowerMBA, an online course platform that is designed to democratize access to executive education and is a 3X *Inc. 5000* honoree (2018, 2019, and 2020), and a 2X finalist in EY's Entrepreneur of the Year Program (2015, 2019). He was named Executive Partner of the Year by the Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM) in 2013.

Aaron holds an A.B. in Economics from Harvard University and an MBA from Harvard Business School. He has served on the boards of the United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg, and Junior Achievement of Central Virginia. An avid aviator, fitness enthusiast, and hack golfer, Aaron lives in Richmond, VA with his wife, Nimisha, and their daughter, Diya.



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